



# *In Another Time*

by

**Bill Brown**

Illustrations by Stephen Phipps

A novel set in the latter half of the eighteenth century with the village of Hanham as its focal point.

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## Chapter One

### The City

Bright moonlight played upon the waters of the estuary, creating rippling stars and forming them into a ribbon of silver which followed the full tide as it pushed the river back up the deep gorge and beyond the centre of the city. The tethered craft rose and fell on the gentle swell, their tall masts casting bent shadowy fingers along the riverbank and on the quiet wharf. Rats and water voles scurried away in search of higher burrows, or explored the many man-made shelters on the riverside as the murky waters rose. Along the quay, large warehouses with their roofs silhouetted against the night sky stood as silent guardians over the city's growing wealth, only the watchmen broke the stillness as they pursued their regular duties. At curfew all the fires in the city had been extinguished to ensure that there was no re-occurrence of the ever-present menace, which had marred its recent history.

Sharp shadows fell across the narrow streets where the timbered houses inclined their heads and almost embraced each other. The shadows were kind to the city, they placed a dark blanket over the hovels of the narrow twisting streets where an open sewer ran down a central gutter carrying away to the river the human waste and garbage of the day. During the night hours these compact dwellings provided a safe haven for the unfortunate beings of society as they plied their doubtful trades amid the shadows. The tavern close by the quayside displayed a warmth of candlelight, the air inside alive with heavy, blue tobacco smoke, twisting its rising path to a nicotine stained ceiling, or curling around a solid wooden beam as it became an integral part of the atmosphere. Raucous revellers were being dispensed cheap ale by a buxom barmaid; it lubricated the tongues luring their owners to express the opinions of muddled minds, liberated by alcohol. So they argued the issues of the day or devised provocative comments concerning their immediate neighbours. These caustic asides provided bait for physical conflict, inducing the drunken individuals to become participants in a bare-fisted brawl with supporters of each faction voicing their encouragement, or adding to the confusion by creating their own eruptions of violence. The female company in the tavern viewed this display of manliness from their ringside seats, or from the comparative safety of the sawdust-strewn floor where some of their number had already collapsed into a gin fed stupor.

A ragged ribbon of men emerged from the darkness of the quay, staggering under the heavy kegs upon their shoulders and enjoying the protection of several batmen armed with stout staves, they moved from shadow to shadow making their way with great caution to the rear of the tavern. Having secured a safe passage from the quay to a waiting, willing taverner, the men faded into the night, thankful once again they had not been apprehended.

Several hours earlier, two male figures both of solid if rather lean stature, were deep in conversation as they walked purposefully from the quay where they had secured their flat bottomed trow. They picked their way through the rubbish of the streets, disturbing the alien livestock endeavouring to find a resting place for the long night hours.

Tom Stafford and his father were wending their way home; he had a prayer upon his lips, and also in his heart, that his dear wife Hannah would have been safely delivered of their second child. He had hoped the news would have reached him during the day, but the hours had passed and no one had sought him out to bring the expected intelligence.

They finally arrived at the door of their rented, ground floor tenement situated a short distance outside the remnants of the old wall that once surrounded the city. The proud castle that at one time had dominated the skyline was now a ruin, taken apart stone by stone, by the citizens of the city. Tom arrived after this

event had taken place, having spent his early years living in the forest that spread to the east, north and south outside the city's limits. It was a vast forest, a King's chase, and home for Tom for more than a score of years.

His family lived within the confines of the forest, in a small cottage constructed from outcrops of stone and roofed with local timbers. It had been completed and inhabited in a day, with smoke issuing from the straight chimney by nightfall, thus giving the family squatters rights and they could now improve their dwelling at their leisure. His father, a miner, had introduced Tom to the pit at an early age; he had laboured with other young boys moving the drams of coal along dark, narrow workings. They pushed with their heads, or pulled using a shoulder harness, the heavy loads. It was exhausting, dangerous and frightening as they laboured in conditions that had already sent many of their kind to an early grave.

Together with his father they would trudge home in the evening, blackened by coal dust and bleeding from injuries sustained underground, completely drained of energy and with no desire to resume their labours on the morrow. There was one saving grace appertaining to the pits in the area; they were free from gas and this meant that their badge of trade, a metal candle holder, designed with a spike at one end, could be safely driven into the coal face in order to shed a little light to their advantage; but they found small consolation in this.

Thankfully, the roof fall in the pit occurred during the night and later investigations were to confirm a large fault in the seam. Despite serious efforts to re-open the section it soon became evident the situation was fraught with danger and would never be a profitable concern. Much against the owner's wishes, the area was shut down adding father and son to the growing number of unemployed within the forest.

Over the next few years life for the family was hard. As Tom grew, his mother made sacrifices, denying herself so that her son and his father might have the stamina to take on seasonal jobs, but no permanent situations could be found. There were times when the quarries offered employment, earnings from the spelter works, and pin making all helped to keep the family together, and it was during a spell of the latter that Tom met and married Hannah. Despite their poverty, they had a sense of belonging in the family, hoping against hope that at some point fortune would smile on them. Two years later the union of Tom and Hannah produced their first child, a daughter who they named Emma, she proved to be a bright girl and became inseparable from her mother. The joy brought to the household by the little granddaughter helped to raise the spirits of all concerned, but the strain of maintaining an acceptable standard of living began to take its toll on the grandmother. Gradually she became weaker and as the days passed, her strength was insufficient to ward off an attack of fever, which brought about her sudden death. The distraught family laid her to rest beneath a large beech tree within the forest, marking the grave with a simple wooden cross. Now all were concerned for the future and what it might hold.

Tom and his father desired more fulfilling labours than those found in the bowels of the earth or within the confines of the forest, so their attentions strayed to the concerns of the city. Fortune favoured them both. Fairly sturdy of frame, gifted with innate intelligence and of honest appearance, they made their way into the city on several occasions searching for employment. They were finally successful in securing positions with a merchant in the dock area, whose business was rapidly expanding as the trade of the city extended far beyond its shores.

The vast dock, crowded with tall ships, reached into the centre of the city, it required a number of small craft to transfer cargo from ship to shore, shore to ship and ship to ship. The flat-bottomed trows used for this purpose would settle upstream on the mud when the tide ebbed, until they were resurrected on the incoming flow into a new life and a new working day.

The subject of their conversation as they walked from the quay was the naming of the next generation. They finally agreed on the name Samuel, this being their first choice; provided the new arrival was a son. United in this conclusion they entered the door of the building to be greeted by the news that the birth had not yet taken place. Tom embraced his wife who assured him there was nothing to be concerned about as she did not think the birth was imminent. There was a quick hug with Emma, who then ran to her grandfather to inform him of the happenings of the day and together they prepared the table for the evening meal. Wishing to be of service little Emma placed the dishes on the table then watched with

hungry enthusiasm as her grandfather served out portions of the rabbit stew that had been simmering on the hob for several hours.

Hannah had always marvelled at her daughter's insatiable appetite and today was no exception. With the bowl tipped to her lips, the chattering tongue was made speechless by the taste of the warm liquid, whilst her eyes registered grateful approval as they smiled at her mother. With a small residue of stew remaining in the bowl, Emma proceeded to break off a chunk of crusty bread and with it she wiped her bowl clean. Having decided that further labours on the vessel in her hand would be non productive, she placed the bowl upon the table and looked intently at the faces of her seniors with childish expectancy. There was no reproach on the faces she gazed at, nor was there any offer of further sustenance, just a quiet indication that the hour was getting late and they would all soon be settling down for the night.

It was to be a long night, the little girl and the old man both slept soundly, but for her parents there was no real rest. Tom concerned himself with the welfare of his wife as she was certain her labour had commenced. As time passed and between them they had only managed brief periods of sleep, Hannah implored Tom to seek out her good friend and neighbour. She was a mother herself and lived a few minutes away in the same building, she assured Tom she had every confidence in her for any eventuality. Reluctantly Tom left his wife to comply with her orders, and the good woman agreed to come to Hannah and remain with her until she was confident that it would be safe to leave her.

The curfew had passed; Tom turned his attention to the kindling of the fire and preparation of warm water, then seated himself near the hearth awaiting the birth. He was soon joined by his daughter and his father who demanded to hear an up-to-date account of the happenings throughout the night.

With a good deal of emotion in his voice, Tom explained the events that had taken place during the previous hours and how Hannah required the help and comfort of her neighbour, who was willing to come and in fact was with her now. He was pleased this was so, but he felt ill at ease sitting by the fire unable to be of any real service. Time seemed to stand still and more than once they were grateful for the incessant babble of their young companion.

Without warning, after what appeared to be hours of tense waiting, there came an unmistakable infant cry, it transfixed the three generations producing immobile gazes followed by exclamations of joyful relief. The minutes passed as they waited for a call into the room in order to see this little wonder who had just joined their world, when to their complete and utter amazement a second infant cry became audible. Tom, unable to contain himself any longer, rushed into the room to be greeted by the news that he was now the proud father of, not one, but two sons.

Emma for the first time that day became speechless, but her joy radiated and filled the room when she realised she now had two brothers, whilst her grandfather ruefully informed his son that the conversation which occupied their thoughts on the way home, did not supply them with a complete answer. In point of fact, in agreeing on one name they had only half a solution to the situation. Together they stood by the bedside looking down on the two newly born babes, pink faces topped with unruly black hair emerging from the blankets bound around them. Hannah regarded Tom with an understanding that advertised their great bond, their deep love for each other and their mutual respect. The world was theirs in that wonderful moment of new birth.

His father broke the silence as he playfully reminded Tom the boy's name they had discussed was still applicable, but only to one of his newborn babes. Hannah demanded to have some knowledge of this pre-emptive conversation and Tom readily agreed to fully inform his wife of the deliberations between his father and himself whilst they were walking home from their labours.

Hannah listened with interest and when Tom offered to tell her the outcome of their discussion she whole-heartedly concurred.

"That being agreed," said Tom, he picked up his first-born son from the bed and holding him high in the air, at arms length, he announced; "We name you Samuel, may God bless and keep you."

He then gently kissed his son on the forehead and placed him in the arms of his father. Turning to his wife and daughter he invited them to take on the responsibility of naming their second son who was now nestling in the arms of Hannah. Emma ran to her mother's side and looking at her baby brother being

tenderly nursed began to pour out a series of possibilities, all the while looking at her mother's face for signs of approval. Their combined efforts finally gave rise to the name Joseph, the men nodded in approval and the issue was settled. Tom lifted him high as he had done to his brother, and so Sam and Joe Stafford came into the world.

Tom and his father ate a quick meal, took a final look at the new offspring, and then ventured out into the autumn sunshine. They picked their way through the narrow streets, shielding their faces against the stench from the gutter, the contents of which were still being augmented by fresh loads of garbage descending from the overhanging windows to land on random targets. The dogcarts on their morning missions also vied for a safe passage, their owners breaking into an explosion of oaths if the shower of filth dropped in their vicinity. Reaching the quayside, they meandered to the point where the trow was moored, glad they could breathe the somewhat fresher air of the estuary rather than the putrid city atmosphere. The docks were alive with ships and shipping, several large merchantmen demonstrating the increase in trade from the near and far continents, these provided a full day's labour that gladdened their hearts.

It was during the next few days Hannah reluctantly came to the conclusion her body could not bear the strain of suckling both of her sons. Her neighbour suggested that a young mother in the next tenement, having recently lost her new offspring, would be a worthy candidate for wet nursing. The young mother was willing to comply and terms were agreed for her to suckle Joseph whilst Samuel was suckled at his mother's breast.

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The years quickly passed, walks along the riverbank into the forest area cemented a strong bond between Hannah and her daughter, the old man with Joseph and Tom with Sam.

They traversed the path along the river stopping to watch the wild life, the river traffic, and to pass the time of day with acquaintances they encountered on their various wanderings. It was in these couplings they could be found on market day in the city, exploring the various stalls erected to display a colourful variety of goods. Local produce, much of it grown or reared on the fringes of the city, included meat from many kinds of livestock and a variety of fruit and vegetables according to the season; all were available for those who could afford to buy. On other stalls, shining trinkets reflected the sun's rays and rich fabrics caught the eye, but if purchased, emptied the coffers. An array of household items could be seen in the established shops, they offered a better way of life to careful purchasers. Tom would move towards the bakers at the cross roads where the inviting aroma of freshly baked bread permeated the atmosphere, attracting customers from all quarters of the city. Hannah would buy her purchases for the daily meals, discussing them with Emma and passing them to her for safekeeping. Meanwhile, the old man with Joseph, pondered over the bric-a-brac of sundry stalls, where, after prolonged bargaining, they would procure small books or leaflets which provided information on the world about them, or which appeared to be little gems of literature. Despite his austere childhood the old man possessed a love of learning, which he had imparted to his son and was now attempting to plant the seeds of knowledge in his dealings with his grandsons; especially Joseph. Tom, with Sam at his side, explored the areas in the city where the craftsmen held sway. They would search out the wheelwrights, the sawyers, the carpenters, the potters and the smiths, or wander into the shipbuilding yards intent on watching the skill of the men employed in the various trades. Sam, despite his young years, would stand enthralled displaying a mature appreciation and asking questions which at times were beyond the limits of his father's knowledge.

When the mid-summer days were at their warmest, the fun of the fair could be found on the Downs. A long winding hill from the city centre brought the traveller to a large expanse of open greenery set high upon the edge of the gorge. Here the market had been transported from the city, to be set up beneath and between the majestic trees gracing the main area. It was here the crowds flocked to enjoy tumblers and acrobats, or to cringe as bare-fisted fighters fought endless rounds inflicting bloody wounds upon each

other, but there was no submission, until one dropped to the floor through utter exhaustion, or a knockout blow that would have felled an ox. Even then it was not unknown for the seconds of the prone individual to apply copious amounts of cold water and much verbal encouragement in order to get him back on his feet and fighting again, in the faint hope they would still realise some profit on their wager. Later in the day, following a tour of the stalls offering a variety of merchandise and tempting morsels, there would be a taste of pork from the pig roasting.

The atmosphere was infectious as Tom and his family found to their great delight as they rested awhile on the green sward beneath a large plane tree, following, the long climb from the city and an exhausting but enjoyable day at the fair. Here they could espy the young flower girls, dodging in and out of the crowds endeavouring to sell their posies for a pittance. As they watched, the crowd would part as if controlled by an unseen force as a swarthy group of individuals swaggered from stall to stall. Thickset, fierce of eye and of intimidating appearance they made an unhurried approach to the victim of their selection. A fearful stallholder with a look of complete despair, would deftly withdraw a small moneybag from its secret hiding place, passing it with a nervous reaction to the leading thug. The cash deposit became an insurance for the year so that wherever the vendor decided to set his stall within the area; he was safe from being molested or his monies stolen. The gang doffed their hats as they departed towards their next victim, indicating the bargain had been sealed and they would be ready to do business again next year.

On the far side of the Downs, where the ground fell away into scrubland with dwarfed, windswept trees bending towards the city, a slight, weedy individual was hurriedly collecting his belongings. Hoping to make an unseen exit from the scene. Dewdrop was using all his guile in an effort to give his persecutors the slip, unfortunately his activities were noted and he knew he had been seen.

Hannah, with Emma by her side drifted to the main walkway across the Downs, here the gentry paraded with their ladies who were adorned in the fashions of the day. Mother and daughter were awestruck by the display; the arrogant, the proud, the dignified, the demure, were all there to capture the admiration of the onlookers and perhaps just one individual in particular. The sight of a small, dark-skinned boy dressed in western style snobbishness and attentive to every whim of his mistress's pleasure, made our two onlookers turn away in disgust to the stalls where their combined attentions could result in procuring a bargain. The old man, with Joseph probed the grasses, the trees, the bushes for treasures of nature, consulting with their newly acquired literature to glean further knowledge of the wonders of life around them. Tom, accompanied by Sam, was drawn to the far edge of the Downs, where one could look down from several hundred feet on to the dwarfed river traffic leaving the harbour on the evening tide. They stood and stared, man and boy, as the tall ships were coerced to a point of freedom then rounding the bend of the gorge into the full estuary and beyond. Tom wondered what lay before the travellers, what horizons they would see, what wonders they would behold and he would share these thoughts with his son as they made their way back to rejoin the rest of the family. Life for all of them, although not rich in material things, was good in many ways and the two men, by sheer hard labour, were progressing at a good rate in paying for the boat that was the mainstay of their livelihood. They were completely unaware of the change in their fortunes which was about to take place.

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The twins had enjoyed their tenth birthday and the year had reached its festive close when the New Year brought a great change in the weather. A cold, heavy mist hung over the city and filled the deep gorge as if it was solid, the February sun failed to disperse the gloom and the cold, dank conditions prevailed.

“This cold penetrates my very bones,” complained the old man and it came to Tom's notice that as they were working, his father would be fighting for breath, a legacy of his mining days now exacerbated by the prolonged unhealthy conditions. There were rumours of a fever outbreak in parts of the city, which

folk blamed on the visiting crews of some of the ships. A few of these had been confined to the harbour for several weeks and would not be able to sail until the conditions improved with the lifting of the mist. Although there was no real proof of the fever scare, his father was not making progress, and Tom began to wonder if the rumours had some substance in them. His fears were heightened when young Joseph began to mirror the old man's symptoms, a worrying situation made worse when the lad would climb on his grandfather's lap in an endeavour to provide some comfort.

March came in like a lion. The wind blew strongly from the northeast, dispersing the misty fog and replacing it with cold, crisp days as the temperature began to fall. The old man and the boy grew weaker and despite every effort made by Hannah and Tom, they could not prevent the fever taking hold of both of them, it became impossible for the old man to go to work. In the freezing conditions Tom endeavoured to carry on their business single handed, finding the task overwhelming as he fought the ice, the river currents and the heavy loads; all too much for one man. Gradually he had to set his sights on smaller burdens in calmer waters, his earnings dropping to a level which brought them close to the poverty line and like many others in the city they supplemented their income by scavenging from the loose outcrops of coal on the fringes of the forest, or collecting waste timbers in and around the dock area, in order to provide a measure of warmth.

The wind suddenly dropped, an uneasy calm settled on the city and a strange light prevailed. The overcast sky became a leaden grey then, towards evening, the first flakes of snow began to fall, deadening the sounds of the city and creating an eerie silence. The quietness took possession of the city as the snow settled in an even, white covering and the streets became deserted. Joseph and his grandfather, both huddled in blankets, sat watching the changing scene. In the fading light they noticed all sharp edges had become rounded and small landmarks exaggerated.

"If this keeps on throughout the night it will be fairly deep by morning," the old man muttered, as he drew away from the window and snuggled down under the blankets with his young grandson who had not displayed his normal enthusiasm for the snow.

Morning dawned, the last flutter of white flakes adding the final flourish to the thick, white blanket which had created a new world, a different world, a world without blemish. Tom looked out on the silent scene and, more by habit than design, he began to rekindle the fire. By some miracle of fate the water pump in an adjoining street was still in use, so braving the elements he made his way to fill two buckets with water for the day's use. Returning to the tenement and ridding his footwear of the clinging snow, he enquired of Hannah how the invalids were fairing, she told him that as they were both still slumbering and the morning was very chill, she did not wish to disturb them. Tom looked in at the sleeping pair but he could observe no movement and he suddenly had a great sense of foreboding. Outside was a silent world, here inside their dwelling was an uncanny stillness and despite all efforts to arouse the sleepers, he was finally forced to interpret the absence of response in the only way he could. The old man and the boy, wrapped in each other's arms, had died peacefully during the night.

The realisation that his father and his son were no longer going to be part of their household reduced Tom to an utterly dejected being, he was unable to control his grief as he looked down upon the still figures in the bed. He could not come to terms with the fact his father would no longer pass onto him the wisdom of his years and that both members of his family would not rise, or see, or speak, or hear, or laugh again. Hannah, Emma and Sam endeavoured to console the new head of the family and shared in his grief, although death was a frequent visitor to the city, the family were heartbroken over the double tragedy. It had always been the old man's wish that he be buried with his wife within the forest, but the prevailing conditions, plus the uncertainty of finding the exact location, made Tom realise that he would not be able to comply with the final wish of his father. He therefore made arrangements for the oldest and the youngest in the family to be laid to rest in one of the churchyards within the city.

The family mourned the old man; his understanding, his knowledge, his patience, all these attributes they had taken for granted when he was with them, his death had caused a vacuum that could not be filled. Gone too was the constant questioning and the bright smile of little Joseph who, during his short lifetime, was forever seeking answers to the perplexities of his lively world. As well as losing his father,

Tom had also lost his workmate and the partnership they had created was now torn asunder. The future would be bleak and unbearable without him. Mother and daughter both shed copious tears and as the family endeavoured to comfort each other they eased their own grief.

Some months later Emma brought a ray of hope to the family when she secured a situation with a seamstress, as well as being taught the trade she would also have a day at school each week until she was proficient at reading and writing. Although her contribution to the weekly finances would be comparatively small, the very fact she had been successful in obtaining the post meant a good deal, and hopefully augured well for the future.

Tom was making every effort to come to terms with his situation and he would sit trying to analyse his position, then discuss the various options with Hannah, both of them knowing full well they could not continue without more weekly income. He finally, very reluctantly, decided to sell his boat and seek work within the city. Hannah gave him her blessing, assuring him she would support him in whatever was required to secure their future together. The news that the trow was for sale was soon circulated around the dock and within a few days was common knowledge. One evening, as he was finishing his day's labours, he was approached by a tall stranger who was well versed in all the circumstances surrounding his situation, and who offered his help in finding a buyer for the trow. He explained to Tom he knew of a possible purchaser and made the suggestion of meeting with Tom and this third party a few days hence. Accordingly, they agreed to meet at the same spot and at the same time, three days from now when the prospective buyer would also be in attendance.

Three days later following the completion of his day's operations, Tom remained at the quayside close to the landing stage where the trow was moored. The evening was fairly calm, a light, offshore wind prevailed and the light had not faded, but for some reason, which he could not fathom, Tom felt ill at ease. The tavern was unusually quiet whilst the quayside was almost deserted, a state of affairs which did not help to bolster his confidence as he waited for the gentlemen he had promised to meet. He suddenly became aware of a presence; a tall, well-built stranger wearing a long dark blue cloak approached him and made his business clear. Yes, Tom had a boat for sale, he had fixed a price in his mind but this could be discussed once the stranger had inspected the craft. Together they moved along the quayside until they came upon a short flight of steps leading to the landing stage where the trow was gently pulling at its moorings. As they descended the steps, Tom began to point out to the stranger the merits of his craft and the qualities he thought made it ideal for the work, which he and his father had undertaken. The two men descended the steps to get a closer view and whilst Tom was extolling the characteristics of his beloved trow, he felt a thundering blow on the back of his head, he then collapsed into a lifeless heap at the feet of the stranger.

Out of the shadows of the bank, a jolly boat glided silently towards the landing stage, the two-man crew raised their oars and threw a rope to the tall stranger who pulled the boat towards the jetty, securing it to the little bollard. Tom was quickly bound and gagged then unceremoniously dumped into the stern of the boat as the seamen, now joined by the stranger, began to pull away from the bank heading for the middle of the river and the estuary beyond.

The cool breeze brought Tom back to part consciousness and as he painfully opened his eyes, he sensed the movement of the boat and saw beneath the long coat of the stranger the unmistakable blue of a sailor's uniform. A deep sorrow overwhelmed him, he was lost, his family might never see him again and would possibly not survive this new trauma that had been thrust upon them. He feared for the future of his loved ones and himself with a dread that tore at his very soul. He had been press-ganged and there was nothing he could do to rectify the situation. He felt a greater swell beneath the boat and realised they were leaving the shelter of the gorge and moving towards a man-of-war anchored in the estuary. He was roughly handled upon to the deck where he lay, an untidy, half-conscious bundle, as the man-of-war became a hive of activity. He painfully turned his head to look back up the gorge where he noticed, with full irony, he had passed the point, which he and Sam had viewed from the Downs and wondered what lay beyond. He now knew that he would soon have the answer to this question. Orders were shouted,

men began running hither and thither, climbing the rigging unfurling the sails, raising the anchor, no-one noticed he was there. He could not look up, he lay utterly dejected and partly oblivious to all that was happening as the sails caught the breeze and the ship began to journey south.

Back at the tavern, which was now showing greater signs of life, a shifty, weedy individual, with a mean face that housed a large, hooked nose was pocketing a bag of money. He sat alone, drinking his own health and fully confident he would be able to pay his tormentors wherever he chose to set up his stall during the next two fairs.

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Hannah sat with her children awaiting the arrival of Tom and hoping he would be the bearer of good news concerning the sale of the boat. They speculated about the price he had managed to raise and how they might use this financial gain to further their lot, whether they would remain in the city or return to the forest. There appeared to be several options open to them, but then they would remember Emma had her situation in the city and Tom would have to find some alternative employment now that the boat was sold. During their deliberations the time had ebbed away and Hannah was beginning to get anxious, her concern deepened when she realised evening had glided into night. The hours passed, there was still no sign of Tom, his evening meal remained untouched and would require re-heating when he arrived. Their discomfort grew as an uneasy silence settled on the family and words seemed to have little impact upon their mood, they sat with heads lowered and hearts full of misgivings as the night passed. Dawn began to break over three tired, unbelieving individuals who could find no explanation for their predicament, nor see any way forward without the guiding hand of the head of the household.

Morning came and as soon as she thought it safe to venture along the quay, Hannah resolved to walk to the spot where the boat was usually moored in order to glean any information concerning the happenings of the previous night. As Emma departed to her workplace, Hannah turned to her son and informed him of her intentions and he pleaded with her to let him accompany her. For several minutes Sam found his mother immovable and he almost gave up the argument, but finally she succumbed to his wishes and together they set out on their mission.

The quay was busy and as she threaded her way through the human traffic of the dock she encountered several of Tom's acquaintances, but their eyes averted her gaze and they gave no sign of recognition to mother or son. Sam noticed the trow before his mother, his keen young eyes searching for clues that might help them to solve the mystery of the previous, fatal night. He jumped down on the landing stage, but there were no indications as to what might have taken place, perhaps at this very spot. The boat was moored as they had seen it on other occasions but there was no sign of Tom or any of his belongings.

Dejectedly, they turned away from the trow and began to walk towards a group of folk who were gathered near the tavern, they were talking in undertones and Hannah dared to move closer to catch any snippets of conversation. She heard whispers of a man-of-war being anchored in the estuary but it must have sailed on the evening tide as the early workers on the quay noticed when they arrived that morning, she had already departed. There was a strong possibility a press gang had been at work in the city before she had weighed anchor, because extra hands were in great demand to crew two large vessels being commissioned on the south coast. It was rumoured the vessels would be away on a voyage of discovery for several years, this would take them to the other side of the world, and no man in his right mind wished to be dragged into such a situation. Hannah had heard sufficient of the conversation to confirm her worst fears and without a word to anyone she took hold of her son's hand and began to walk away from the quay and towards the city, her heart at breaking point and her mind in a whirl.

As she walked, with Sam at her side, she began to fear the worst for herself and her children. With Tom as her strength she could endure anything and the last few years had stretched them to the limits, but by some means or other they had prevailed and come through their troubles. Now, with her strength taken away from her, she was drifting on the sea of life without a pilot.

The next few days were lost to all the family; their grief was such they desired to see no one, or to venture outside of their tenement. On the third day, as the family were seated around the fire which Sam had managed to kindle, they were endeavouring to find some explanation for the sequence of events that had taken place, when a sharp rap on the door brought them all to a sense of expectation. As Hannah opened the door she recognised the voice of one of Tom's acquaintances, as he sought permission to enter. The immediate euphoria this friendly contact created was quickly turned to pessimism when the lighterman revealed he had no news of Tom's whereabouts, but he did know he had been abducted on the night the man-of-war was anchored in the estuary.

"The talk in the city concerning two large vessels being commissioned seems to be correct," said the man. "Tom was not the only river man to be press ganged that evening, we are aware of at least one other, but it is Tom we are concerned about and it is his family we have pledged to help."

Hannah's heart sank, this kindly, rough, dockworker had confirmed her worst fears but she was at a loss to know how this man, or any of his colleagues, could be of service to herself and her children. With an awkward gesture he reached into the folds of his outer garment producing a moneybag, which he placed on the table in front of Hannah. Absent-mindedly she lifted the bag from its resting place noticing it was a good deal heavier than she had anticipated. The man continued with some hesitation.

"When we discovered how Tom had been set up whilst trying to sell his boat, several of his friends decided they could be of service on two counts. Firstly, they would attempt to finalise the sale of the boat, several lightermen were interested in effecting a purchase, and secondly, they determined to seek out the individual who was responsible for selling Tom down the river. On the first count, a generous offer had been made for the boat, therefore on Hannah's behalf they had accepted and sealed the bargain; on the second count, several of the dock workers at the tavern, had an inkling as to the identity of the traitor who had made it possible for Tom to be abducted. When the man was taken to task on the issue, he was found to be in possession of a large sum of money and when further questioned, by one of the larger members of the company, he agreed he had arranged for Tom's capture. This weedy, little customer has therefore made a sizeable contribution to the amount in the bag, as he was generous enough to hand over his ill gotten gains, his name is Dewdrop so if you should have the misfortune to meet him, you can treat him with utter contempt, or thank him for the gift."

Hannah stood and stared at the man in utter amazement, she had not reckoned on this turn of events and to be shown favourable consideration by such a rough body of men, robbed her of her reasoning. Finally, she managed to summon sufficient courage to thank the man for all he and his friends had accomplished on her behalf, and for the sake of the two children, who obviously would also benefit from their generosity of thought and deed. She prevailed on him to deliver her grateful thanks and good wishes to his workmates back at the quay. As he departed he wished the family well, adding, "You cannot mistake Dewdrop, he is like a little river rat, with a large hooked nose from which hangs his nickname, but I feel that he may be missing from the area for some time."



The Notice In The Window

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