

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Mutiny On The Bounty

John Boyne

About the Book

Portsmouth 1787

Pickpocket John Jacob Turnstile is on his way to be detained at His Majesty's Pleasure when he is offered a lifeline, what seems like a freedom of sorts - the job of personal valet to a departing naval captain. Little does he realise that it is anything but - and by accepting the devil's bargain he will put his life in perilous danger. For the ship is HMS *Bounty*, his new captain William Bligh and their destination Tahiti.

From the moment the ship leaves port, Turnstile's life is turned upside down. Not only must he put his own demons to rest, he must also confront the many adversaries he will encounter on the *Bounty's* extraordinary last voyage. Walking a dangerous line between an unhappy crew and a captain he comes to admire, he finds himself in a no-man's land where the distinction between friend and foe is increasingly difficult to determine...

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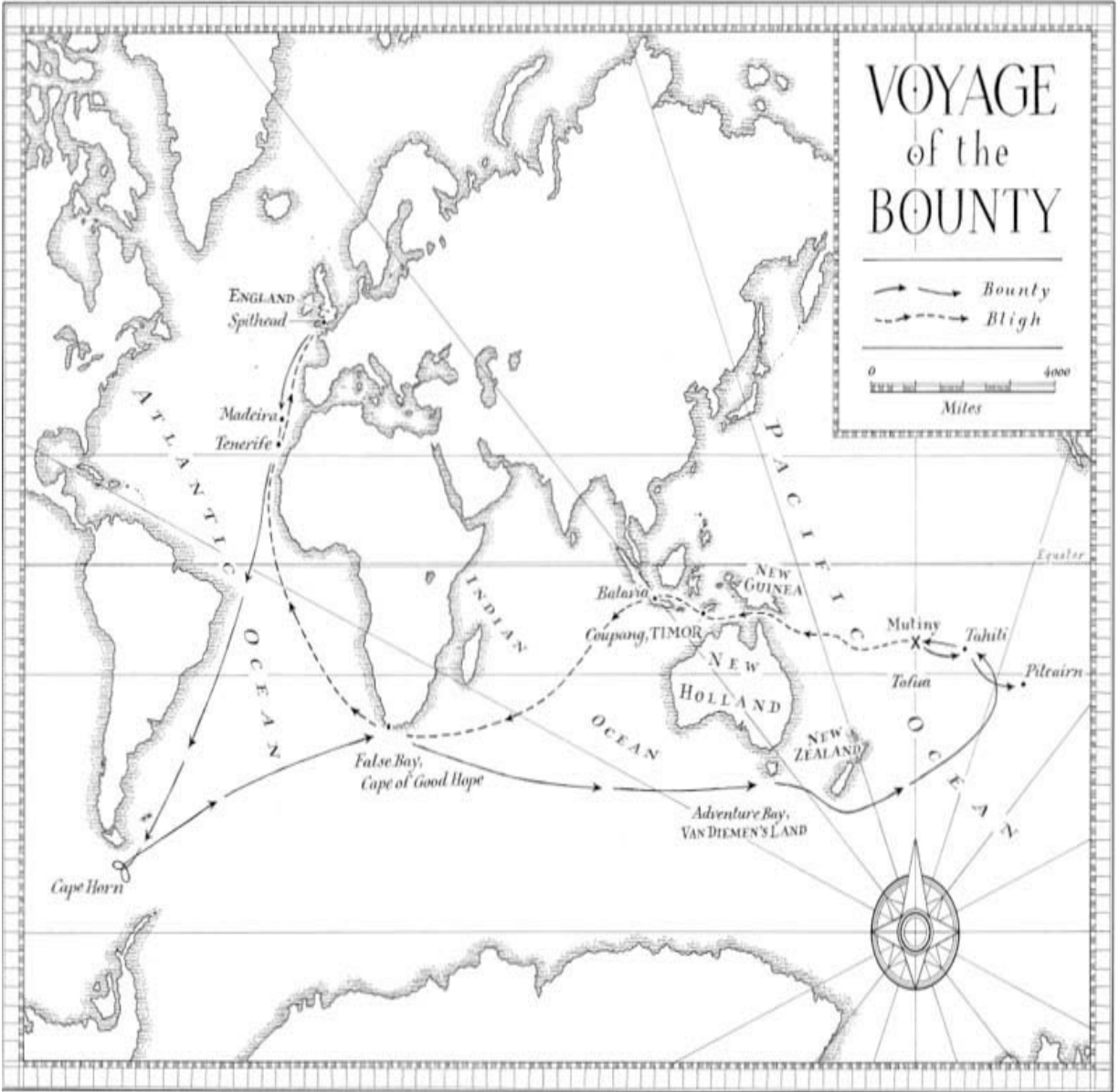
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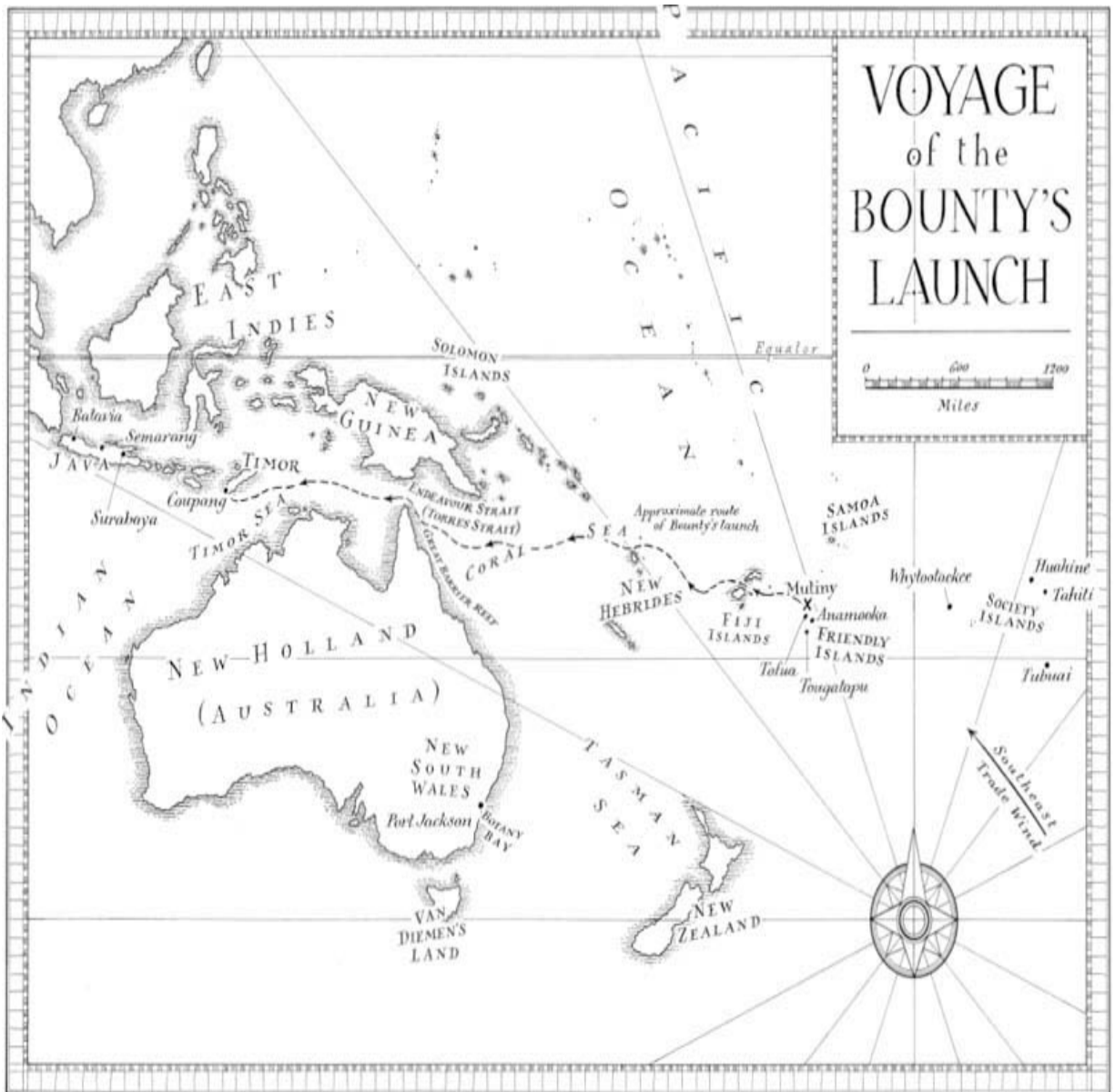
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*Mutiny
on the
Bounty*

JOHN BOYNE

For Con





Part I

The Offer



PORTSMOUTH, 23 DECEMBER 1787

1

THERE WAS ONCE a gentleman, a tall fellow with an air of superiority about him, who made it his business to come down to the marketplace in Portsmouth on the first Sunday of every month in order to replenish his library.

I knew him first on account of the carriage that his man drove him in. The darkest black you ever saw, it was, but speckled at the top with a row of silver stars, as if he had an interest in a world outside our own. He always spent the best part of a morning browsing through the bookstalls that were laid out in front of the shops or running his fingers along the spines of those on the shelves indoors, pulling some out to take a look at the words inside, passing others from hand to hand as he examined the binding. I swear he came close to sniffing the ink off the pages, he got so close to some of them. Some days he'd come away with boxes of books that had to be fitted on to the top of his carriage with a length of hemp-rope so they wouldn't fall off. Other times he'd be lucky if he found a single volume that interested him. But while he was finding a way to lighten his wallet through his purchases, I was looking for a way to lighten his pockets of his belongings, as was my trade back then. Or one of them anyway. I had some handkerchiefs off him from time to time and a girl I knew, Floss Mackey, would pick out the stitching in the monogram - MZ - for a farthing so that I might sell them on to a laundress for a penny, and she in turn would find a buyer for each one at a tidy profit that would keep her in gin and pickles. Another

time, he placed his hat on a cart outside a haberdashery shop and I had it too and sold it on for a bag of marbles and a feather from a crow. I tried for his wallet on occasion but he kept it close, like gentlemen do, and when I saw it emerge to pay the bookseller I could tell he was a man who liked to keep his money about him and determined that one day it would be mine.

I mention him now, right here at the start of this narrative, in order to relate a piece of business that took place on one such Sunday market morning, when the air was uncommonly warm for a Christmas week and the streets were uncommonly quiet. It was to my disappointment that there were not more gentlemen and ladies making their purchases at that time as I had my eye on a special luncheon in two days' time to mark the Saviour's birth and was in need of the shillings to pay for it. But there he was, my particular gentleman, dressed in his finery and with a whiff of cologne about him, and me hovering in the background, waiting for the moment I might make my move. Usually it would have taken a charge of elephants through the market to distract him from his perusals, but on this December morning he took a notion to look in my direction and for a moment I thought he was on to me and I was done for, even though I had yet to commit the act of felony.

'Good morning, my boy,' said he, taking his spectacles off and peering across at me, smiling a little too, acting the hoity-toit. 'It's a fine morning, isn't it?'

'If you like sun at Christmas time, which I don't,' said I, all bluff.

The gentleman thought about this for a moment and narrowed his eyes, cocking his head a little to the side as he looked me up and down. 'Well, there's an answer,' he said, sounding as if he was unsure whether he approved of it or not. 'You'd rather it was snowing, I expect? Boys generally do.'

'Boys maybe,' I replied, pulling myself up to my full height, which was nowhere near as tall as the gent but taller than some. 'Men don't.'

He smiled a little and examined me further. 'I do apologize,' said he, and I thought I heard a trace of an accent in there somewhere. French, maybe, although he disguised it well as was only right and proper. 'I didn't mean to insult you. You are clearly of a venerable age.'

'It's perfectly all right,' said I, offering him a small bow. I'd turned fourteen two days earlier, on the night of the Solstice, and had determined that I wasn't going to be spoken down to by anyone from then on.

'I've seen you here before, haven't I?' he asked me then, and I thought about walking away without an answer as I had neither the time nor the inclination for a conversation, but I held my position for now. If he was a Frenchie as I believed, then this was my place, not his. What with me being an Englishman, I mean.

'Like as not,' said I. 'I don't live so very far away.'

'And might I enquire as to whether I've discovered a fellow connoisseur of the arts?' he continued, and I frowned as I thought about it, picking at his words like the meat on a bone and shoving my tongue into the corner of my mouth to make it bulge out in the way that makes Jenny Dunston call me deformed and bound for the knackers' yard. There's a thing about gentlemen: they never use five words where fifty will do. 'A love of literature brings you here, I assume?' he asked then, and I thought to hell with this and was about to issue a curse on his head and turn on my heel in order to go to find another squirrel, when he let this enormous laugh out of him as if I was some sort of simpleton and raised the volume he was holding in my direction. 'You like books?' he said finally, bringing it down to brass tacks. 'You enjoy reading?'

'I do,' I admitted, thinking about it. 'Although I don't often have any books to read.'

‘No, I’d imagine not,’ he said quietly, taking a look at my clothes, up and down, and I suppose he could tell from the motley garments I was sporting that I was not blessed with an abundance of funds at that precise moment. ‘But a young boy like you should always have access to books. They enrich the mind, you see. They ask questions of the universe and help us to understand our place in it a little better.’

I nodded and looked away. It wasn’t my particular habit to get into conversations with gentlemen and I was damned if I was going to start on a morning like that.

‘I only ask ...’ he continued as if he was the Archbishop of Canterbury and was in the process of delivering a sermon to an audience of one but wasn’t about to be put off by the lack of numbers in attendance. ‘I only ask because I feel sure that I’ve seen you around here before. At the marketplace, I mean. And by the bookstalls in particular. And I happen to hold young readers in high regard. My own nephew, why, I can’t get him to open a book to so much as the frontispiece.’

It was true that the bookstalls were my regular places of business, but only because that was a good location to trap a squirrel, that was all, for who else can afford to buy books, only them as have money? But his question, although not an accusation, gave me the resentments, so I thought I’d play along for a little while and see what a farce I could make of him.

‘Well, I do love a good read,’ said I then, rubbing my hands together and sounding for all the world like the well-schooled son of the Duke of Devonshire, all dickied up in his Sunday best, clean ears and polished dentals. ‘Oh, yes, I do indeed. In fact, I have a mind to visit China myself one day, if I can afford the time away from my present responsibilities.’

‘China?’ asked the gentleman then, staring at me as if I had twenty heads. ‘I beg your pardon, did you say China?’

'I most certainly did,' I replied, offering him a slight bow, imagining for a moment that maybe he would take me on as his lad and keep me in finery if he thought me educated; a change in circumstances, of course, but perhaps not a disagreeable one.

He continued to stare and I fancied that I might have got this wrong somehow, for he appeared to be entirely confused by what I had said. Truth to tell, Mr Lewis - him as took care of me in those early years and in whose establishment I had lodged for as long as I could recall - had only given me two books to read in my life and they both happened to have their stories set in that distant land. The first concerned a man who had sailed there on a rusty old tub, only to be set a multitude of tasks by the emperor himself before being allowed to marry his daughter. The second was a saucy tale with pictures in it and Mr Lewis would show it to me from time to time and ask me whether it gave me the motions.

'In fact, sir,' said I then, stepping towards him and glancing at his pockets to see whether there might be a stray handkerchief or two springing out, seeking liberation and a new owner. 'If I may be so bold as to say so, I have a fancy to become a book-writer myself when I'm of age.'

'A book-writer,' he said, laughing, and I stopped where I was, my face like granite. Gentlemen like him, that's how they all behave. They might seem friendly when they talk to you but just you try to express a desire to make something better of yourself, maybe to be a gentleman yourself one day, and they take you for a fool.

'I apologize,' he said then, observing the disapproving look on my face. 'I wasn't making jest, I assure you. If anything, I applaud your ambition. You took me by surprise, that's all. A book-writer,' he repeated now when I said nothing, neither accepting nor rejecting his apology. 'Well, I wish you well with it, Master—?'

'Turnstile, sir,' said I, bowing a little again out of habit – and one that I was trying to break, I might add, for my back didn't need the exercise any more than gentlemen needed the adulation. 'John Jacob Turnstile.'

'Then, I wish you well with it, Master John Jacob Turnstile,' said he in what I suppose was something approaching a pleasant voice. 'For the arts are an admirable pursuit for any young man intent on bettering himself. In fact, I devote my own life to their study and support. I don't mind admitting that I've been a bibliophile from the cradle and it has enriched my life and provided my evenings with the most glorious companionship. The world needs good story-tellers and perhaps you will be one if you pursue your aims. You are familiar with your letters?' he asked me, turning his head to the side a little like a schoolteacher awaiting response.

'A, B, C,' said I in as posh a voice as I could muster. 'Followed by their compatriots D through to Z.'

'And you write with a fair hand?'

'Him as looks after me said my lettering recalls his own mother's and *she* were a wet-nurse.'

'Then, I suggest you acquire as much paper and ink as you can afford, young man,' said the gentleman. 'And take to it at once, for it is a slow art and requires much concentration and revision. You hope to make your fortune from it, of course?'

'I do, sir,' said I ... and then the strangest thing! I found that in my head I was no longer making a farce of him at all but was thinking what a fine thing that would indeed be. For I *had* enjoyed the stories I had read of China and I *did* spend most of my time by the bookstalls in the marketplace when everyone knew that the squirrels ran wilder around the fabric shops and the public houses.

The gentleman looked to be finished with me now and replaced his spectacles on his nose, but before he turned away I made bold enough to ask him a question.

‘Sir,’ said I, the nerves coming out in my voice now, which I tried to control by deepening it. ‘Sir, if I may?’

‘Yes?’ he asked.

‘If I *were* to be a book-writer,’ said I, choosing my words carefully because I wanted a sensible answer from him, ‘if I *were* to try such a thing, and knowing that my letters are learned and my hand is fair, where would I begin exactly?’

The gentleman laughed a little and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Well, I’ve never had the creative touch myself, I admit it,’ he replied finally. ‘I’m more of a patron than an artist. But if I was to tell a story, I suppose I should try to locate the very first instance, that singular point in my tale, that set the whole business in motion. I would find that moment and begin my narrative from there.’

He nodded then, dismissing me at last, and turned back to his perusals, leaving me to my cogitations.

The very first instance. The moment *that set the whole business in motion.*

I mention this now and here because the moment that set *my* business in motion was that very meeting two mornings before Christmas Day with the French gentleman, without which I might never have known either the bright or dark days that were to follow. Indeed, had he not been there that morning in Portsmouth, and had he not allowed his pocket-watch to rest off its fob and peep too temptingly from his greatcoat, then I might never have stepped forward and transferred it from the luxurious warmth of his lining to the cold comfort of my own. And it is unlikely that I would have walked carefully away from him in the manner in which I had been trained, whistling a simple melody to illustrate the casual air of a fellow without a care in the world going about his honest business. And I most certainly would never have made my way to the entrance of the marketplace, satisfied with the knowledge that a morning’s money had already been earned, Mr Lewis

would be paid, and a Christmas dinner would surely be mine two days hence.

And had I never done *that*, I would have absolutely been denied the pleasure of hearing the piercing sound of a blue's whistle and seeing the sight of a crowd turning towards me with angry eyes and ready limbs, nor felt the grinding of my head as it met the cobbles beneath when some great lummoX of a do-gooder jumped atop me and set me off my pins and on to the flat of the ground.

None of this might have happened and I might never had a story to tell.

But it did. And I do. And here it is.

2

WHISKED AWAY, I was! Whisked like an egg and beaten just as soundly. These are the moments when your life's not your own, when others grab you and take you and force you to go where you've no business going. And I should know, having suffered more than my fair share of such moments in fourteen years. But once that whistle is heard and the crowd around you turn in your direction and focus their nasty eyes on you, ready to accuse, try and judge, why, you might as well get down on your knees and pray to disappear into thin air as hope to escape without a bloodied nose or a blackened eye.

'Hold off there!' came a cry from outside the scrum, but little did I know who it was, covered as I was by the weight of four separate traders and a simpleton woman, who'd placed herself atop the rabble and was screeching with laughter and clapping her hands together as if there had been no better sport all year long. 'Hold off there! Mind, or the boy will be crushed!'

That was a rare thing to hear, a fellow taking the side of a young villain like myself, and I resolved to pass a nod of appreciation to the utterer of the lines if ever I found myself blinking in the daylight again. Knowing what indignities might be on the horizon, however, I was content to pass a few idle moments stretched out on the cobbles, the peel of an orange pressed against my nostrils, the core of a rotten apple settled by my lips, and a bloody great arse making itself friendly with my right ear.

Soon enough, however, a chink of brightness appeared through the mess of bodies above me and up they stood one by one, the weight gradually decreasing atop me, and when him with the bloody great arse took himself off my head I lay heavily on the ground for a moment longer, looking up as I tried to assess my options, only to see the hand of a blue reaching down and grabbing me, without courtesy, by the lapels.

'Let's have you up now, lad,' said he, dragging me to my feet, and to my shame I stumbled a little as I recovered my balance and the people watching made a farce of me for it.

'He's drunk,' cried one, which was a slander as I never take a drink before lunchtime.

'A young thief, is it?' asks the blue, ignoring whoever had offered the lie.

'There was a young thief,' said I, trying to brush myself down and wondering how far I'd get if he was to lose his grip for a moment and I was to make a run for it. 'Tried to make off with the gentleman's pocket-watch, he did, and only for I nabbed him and called for the blues he'd have had it too. A hero is what I am, only this bloody great mess leapt on me and shoddy well nearly killed me. The *thief*,' I added, pointing in a direction that made everyone turn their heads for a moment before looking back at me, 'ran yonder.'

I looked around, trying to gauge the reaction of the crowd, knowing full well that they were not stupid enough to be taken in by such a lie. But I was trying to think on my feet and this is what I came up with on the spur of the moment.

'An Irish fella, he was,' I added then, for the Irish were hated in Portsmouth on account of their dirty ways and their filthy manners and the habit they had of procreating with their sisters and so were easy to blame for anything that went on outside the straight and legal. 'Babbling away

in a language I didn't understand, he was, and him with the ginger hair and the big buggy eyes as well.'

'But if that's the case,' said the blue, towering over me, standing up so tall on his toes that I thought he might take flight. 'What might this be, then?' He reached into my pocket and extracted the French gentleman's timepiece and I stared at it, the eyes fairly popping out my head now in surprise.

'The scamp,' I cried, a note of outrage racing into my tone. 'The vandal and miscreant! Oh, I am done for! He put it there, I swears it, he put it there before he ran. They do it, you see, when they know they can't escape. Try to blame another. What need have I of a watch anyway? My time's my own!'

'Save your lies,' said the blue, shaking me again for good effect and placing his hands about me in such a way that I swear I was giving him the motions. 'Let's just take a look and see what else you have secreted about your rascally person. Been thieving all the morning long, I'd warrant.'

'Not a bit of it,' I shouted. 'I am slandered. Hear me now!' I appealed to the crowd around me and what do you think happened next, only the simpleton woman came up and stuck her tongue in my ear! I leaped back out of her way, for the Saviour alone knew where that tongue had been and I didn't want a taste of her clap.

'Back there now, Nancy,' said the blue and she stepped away, sticking that same filthy tongue of hers out at me now with an air of defiance. What I wouldn't have given for a freshly sharpened knife at that moment and I might have had her tongue from her mouth in a trice.

'Wants hanging,' shouted one man, a fellow who I knew for a fact spent every penny of his earnings from his fruit stalls on the gin and had no business laying accusations at me.

‘Leave him with us, sir,’ shouted another, a lad who’d known a stretch or two inside himself and should have taken my side on account of it. ‘Leave him with us and we’ll teach him a thing or two about what’s belonging to him and what’s belonging to the rest of us.’

‘Constable, please ... if I may?’ said a more refined voice, and then who should make his way through the gathered crowd but the French gentleman, him as had every right to condemn my soul to eternal damnation but who I now recognized as the one who had tried to stop my annihilation under the mound of stinking carcasses not five minutes before. The crowd, sensing a gentleman, parted as if he was Moses and they were the Red Sea. Even the blue loosened his grip on me a little and stared. That’s what a smart voice and a fine greatcoat will do for you and I resolved at that moment to be the possessor of both one day.

‘Good morning, sir,’ said the blue now, bringing his voice to a posher place now, the dirty dog, trying to equal the gentleman. ‘And are you the victim of this here miscreant?’

‘Constable, I believe I can vouch for the boy,’ he answered, sounding as if the whole mess was his fault really and not my own. ‘My pocket-watch was inauspiciously placed about my person and in imminent danger of falling to the ground, where no master craftsman would have been able to repair the damage done to it. I believe the boy was merely taking it to hand it back. We had been engaged in a conversation about literature.’

There was a silence for a moment and I have to admit that I almost believed his words myself. Could it be that I was as much a victim of this unhappy circumstance as anyone? Should I be released without further assault on my character and good name and perhaps a letter of commendation from a person in a position of authority? I looked to the blue, who considered it for a moment, but the crowd, sensing an end to their sport and a denial of due

course and proper punishment, took up the cudgel in his place.

'It's a sham, Constable,' shouted one, spitting the words out so hard that I had to duck to swerve away from his nasty gob. 'I saw him with my own eyes putting the watch in that there pocket of his.'

'Saw him, did you?'

'And it's not the first time either,' roared another. 'He had five apples off me not four days ago and I didn't see a penny for them.'

'I wouldn't eat your apples,' I shouted back at him, for it was a terrible lie. I'd only taken four apples and a pomegranate on the side for a pudding. 'They've weevils in them, every one.'

'Oh, don't let him say it!' shouted the woman beside him, his old hag of a wife, and her with a face on her that would send you cross-eyed. 'Ours is a going concern,' she added, appealing to the gathered masses with arms outstretched. 'A going concern!'

'That boy's a bad 'un,' called another now and they sensed blood, that was all. You don't want to get a crowd against you at a moment like that. As it happened I was almost glad the blue was there for had he not been, they might have torn me limb from limb, French gentleman or no French gentleman.

'Constable, please,' said the very same now, stepping closer and taking the watch back, I noticed, as that blue would surely have pocketed it himself in a heartbeat. 'I'm sure the boy could be released on his own recognizance. Do you regret your actions, child?' he asked me and this time I didn't bother to correct his use of the word.

'Do I regret them?' I asked. 'As God is my witness, I regret them all. I don't know what came over me in fact. The devil, no doubt. But I repent in honour of Christmas Day. I repent of all my sins and swear that I will go forth from this place and sin no more. What God has joined

together, let no man tear asunder,' I added, remembering what few of the Good Words I had ever heard and joining them together to put my devotion on display to all.

'He repents, Constable,' pleaded the French gentleman, opening his hands wide now in a gesture of magnanimity.

'But he admitted the theft!' roared a man whose stomach was so big that a cat could have rested on it and got a good sleep. 'Take him away! Lock him up! Whip him soundly! He has confessed the crime!'

The blue shook his head and looked at me. Between his two front teeth were the remains of what I believed to be a stew dinner; just looking at it gave me the revulsions. 'You are apprehended,' he informed me then in a serious tone. 'And you must pay recompense for your abominable crime.'

The crowd cheered in support of their freshly crowned hero and turned as one when the sound of a carriage was heard pulling in behind the French gentleman's own fleet and, what was it, only the blue's brougham. My heart sank when I saw another blue at the reins of it and in a trice he was down from his spot and on his feet, unlocking the back doors.

'Come along, now,' said the first one in a booming voice for all to hear. 'And your judge will be waiting for you at the end of our journey, so you may start to tremble in anticipation of his magnificence.' I swear he should have been a sham-actor on the stage.

The jig was up and I knew it then but I dug my heels in firmly to the gaps between the cobbles nevertheless. For the first time I did sincerely regret my actions but not on the grounds that I had committed an error in my personal morality, such as it was. Rather, because I had committed one too many of the same in the past, and even though this particular blue didn't know me, there were others as would where I was going and I was only too aware that the punishment might not entirely fit the crime. I had but one recourse left to me.

‘Sir,’ I shouted, turning to the Frenchman, even as the blue started pulling me in the direction of my hearse. ‘Sir, help me, please. Take pity. It was an accident, I swears it. I had too much sugar for my breakfast, that was all, and it gave me ideas.’

He looked at me and I could see that he was thinking about it. On the one hand, he must have been recalling the pleasant conversation we had been engaged in not ten minutes before and my abundant knowledge of the land of China, not to mention my ambitions towards book-writing, of which he was wholly in approval. On the other hand, he had been robbed, plain and simple, and what’s wrong is wrong.

‘Constable, I decline to press the charge,’ he shouted finally and I gave an almighty cheer, such as a Christian might have offered when Caligula, the dirty savage, gave him the thumbs-up in the Coliseum and let him live to fight once more.

‘I am saved!’ I roared, pulling myself loose from the blue for a moment, but he took me back in hand again quick enough.

‘Not a bit of it,’ he said. ‘You were witnessed in the act and must pay or you’ll be left here to rob again.’

‘But, Constable,’ cried the French gentleman, ‘I absolve him of his crime!’

‘And who are you, the Lord Jesus Christ?’ asked the blue, which made the crowd erupt in laughter, and he turned in surprise at their commendation but his eyes lit up, thrilled with himself that they thought him a fine fellow and an entertainer to boot. ‘He’ll be taken to the magistrate and from there to the gaol, I dare say, to pay for the gruesome act, the little deviant.’

‘It’s monstrous—’ came the retort, but the blue was having none of it.

‘If you’ve something to say, then you can say it to the magistrate,’ he offered as a parting shot, walking towards

the carriage now and dragging me behind him.

I fell to the ground to make things more difficult for him, but he continued to haul me along the sodden street and I can picture the scene in my own head still, my arse going bumpity-bumpity-bump over the cobbles as I was wrenched in the direction of the carriage doors. It hurt; I didn't know why in hell I was doing it but I knew that I wouldn't stand up and make his job any easier. I'd rather have eaten a beetle.

'Help me, sir,' I cried as I was thrown inside the carriage and the doors were slammed in my face, so close that they nearly took my nose off. I gripped the bars in front of me and made the most pleading face that I could muster, a picture of innocence disbelieved. 'Help me and I'll do whatever it is you ask of me. I'll wax your boots every day for a month! I'll polish your buttons till they shine!'

'Take him off!' shouted the crowd and some of them even dared to throw rotten vegetables in my direction, the scuts. The horses lifted their hoofs and off we went on our merry way, me in the back wondering what fate awaited me when I met the magistrate, who knew me only too well from past acquaintanceship to show any compassion.

The last thing I saw as we turned the corner was a picture of the French gentleman, stroking his chin as if thinking what to do for the best now that I was in the hands of the law. He lifted his pocket-watch to check the time ... and what do you think happened next? It only slipped from his grip and fell to the ground below. Easy to see that the glass would smash from the force of it too. I threw up my hands in disgust and settled down to see whether I could find a bit of comfort at the very least on the journey, but there was little to be had in the back of one of those contraptions.

They're not designed for consolation.

3

SWEET JESUS AND his blessed mother, if life isn't difficult enough, the blues made sure to ride the horses over every hole in the ground on the way to the magistrate's court and the carriage was up and down like a bride's nightdress from the moment we left Portsmouth. It was all right for them; they had a soft flush of cushion beneath their arses, but what did I have? Nothing but the hard metal that served as a seat for those who have been taken against their will. (And what of the falsely accused? I wondered. Made to suffer such indignities!) I buried myself deeply in the corner of the transport and tried to maintain a grip of the bars in the hope that they might hold me still, for the alternative was to be unable to sit down for the week that followed, but it was no use. They did it to taunt me, I swear they did, the scuts. And finally, when we reached the centre of Portsmouth and I thought this ordeal might be drawing to an end at last, bugger me if the carriage didn't drive on, directly past the closed doors of justice, and forward on to the lumpy road ahead.

'Here,' I cried, banging like good-oh on the ceiling of the carriage. 'Here, you up top!'

'Quiet in there or there'll be a thrashing in it for you,' shouted the second blue, the one who held the reins, not the one who seized me from my honest bit of thievery that morning.

'But you've driven too far,' I shouted back at him. 'You've gone right past the courts.'

‘That familiar with them, then, are you?’ he called back, laughing. ‘I might have known you’d have seen the inside of the courthouse on many a past afternoon.’

‘And am I not to see it today?’ I asked and I wasn’t too proud to admit that I started to feel a little nervous when I realized that we were leaving the town entirely. I’d heard stories about boys who had been taken off by the blues and were never seen again; all sorts happened to them. Unspeakable things. But I wasn’t that bad a boy, I thought. I’d done nothing to deserve such a fate. Added to this was my knowledge that Mr Lewis would be expecting me back soon enough with the morning’s spoils, and if I didn’t come there’d be hell to pay.

‘The Portsmouth magistrate’s away for the week,’ came the reply and this time he sounded friendly enough and I thought that maybe they were just driving me out of the town and were going to deposit me head-first in a ditch somewhere and encourage me to ply my trade somewhere far from their patch, a proposition I was not opposed to in principle. ‘Up in London, if you can believe it. Being given an honour by the king. For services rendered to the laws of the land.’

‘Mad Jack?’ I asked, for I was only too familiar with that old scut of a magistrate from one or two dealings with him in the past. ‘What’s the king gone and done that for? Ain’t there no one around who’s earned a gong?’

‘You hold your tongue back there,’ said the blue, snapping at me. ‘Or there’ll be an extra charge on the list.’

I sat back then and decided to keep my own counsel for the time being. Considering the road we were taking, I imagined we were headed for Spithead; on my last-but-one apprehension a year earlier (on another charge of larceny, I’m ashamed to admit), I was taken to Spithead to pay my penance. On that occasion, I’d stood before an evil creature by the name of Mr Henderson, who had a mole in the middle of his forehead and a mouth full of rotten teeth, and

he'd made remarks to me about the character of boys my age as if I was a representative for the whole shoddy lot of them. He'd sentenced me to a birching for my troubles and my arse had stung like a field of nettles for a week afterwards and I'd prayed that I would never come before him again. But looking out of the carriage I was sure that this was the very direction in which we were headed, and when it settled in my mind I took fright within and I was glad I'd allowed myself to go bumpity-bumpity-bump over the cobbles and been thrown around this carriage too as there was more than a middling chance my arse would be so numb by the time I reached the courthouse that I wouldn't feel a thing when they pulled my britches down and whipped me raw.

'Here,' I shouted, moving to the other side of the carriage now and calling out to the first blue, since we had established a relationship of sorts during the apprehension. 'Here, blue,' said I. 'We're not going to Spithead, are we? Tell me we're not.'

'How can I tell you we're not when the fact is that we are?' he asked with a bark of a laugh, as if he'd made a fine joke.

'We never are!' said I, in a quieter voice this time as I mulled over the consequences of this, but he heard me nonetheless.

'We certainly are, my young rascal, and you will be dealt with there in a manner befitting young thieves such as yourself. Are you aware that there are certain countries in the world where he who takes the possessions of another without permission has his hand lacerated at the wrist? Is this a punishment you find yourself deserving of?'

'Not here, though,' I shouted defiantly. 'Not here! Scare me, will you? That kind of thing doesn't happen here. This is a civilized country and we treat our decent, honest thieves with respect.'

'Where, then?'