



# By Marsh and By Moor (Marsh and Moor #1)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** Jed Trevithick, able seaman, has just escaped from the Royal Navy, and hes determined never to return. But the war against Napoleon is never-ending, and Naval press gangs scour the coast, looking for cannon fodder.

He meets Solomon Dyer, a London ostler who has his own reasons for avoiding the press gang. Together, they flee across the countryside, quickly coming to rely on each other to survive—and tumbling into bed together soon afterwards.

But Jed still bears the scars from his time in the Navy, and Solomons secret may be the very thing that puts him in danger again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Jed lay flat on his face, fingers digging into the sand. He'd made it. That was dry land under his hands. Those were the sharp pebbles of the beach digging into his palms, and that was gritty, dry seaweed scraping his cheek. It was the most wonderful sensation in the world.

He had swallowed bucketfuls of seawater, and his lungs burned. His soaking wet, freezing cold shirt was plastered uncomfortably over his arse. But he was still alive, still breathing, and not lying at the bottom of the Bristol Channel.

Gradually, he became aware of a voice shouting nearby.

“Hey! Hey! Are you all right down there?”

Jed groaned and rolled over onto his back. He had come ashore at the top of a sandy beach at high tide. Above him, a low line of grass-covered dunes cast a shadow against the rising sun. High up on the dunes, outlined against the pale, dawn-streaked sky, stood a man.

“Need a hand?” the man shouted.

Jed tried to answer and found himself coughing up seawater instead.

The man came scrambling down the dunes in a rush of sand, and then he was standing over Jed. He had a shock of dark hair under a soft felt cap, and a narrow, angular face, handsome in a way that would have won him admirers among a certain section of the Nonsuch's seamen.

As for Jed, he probably looked like exactly what he was: a wet and bedraggled seaman who'd run from his ship. He struggled into a sitting position. A stiff breeze blew across the beach, and he shivered, teeth rattling like a loose belaying pin.

"Are you all right?" the man asked again.

"What does it look like?" Jed growled, amid coughs.

The man raised an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon. I should have realised you were lying there for the good of your health. Sea bathing, en't that what they call it?"

Jed let out a surprised bark of a laugh.

The man's lip twitched. "Give us a minute," he said, taking off the small haversack he carried and crouching to rummage inside it. Soon, he was holding out a dry woollen blanket. "Take off your shirt."

"I'll get your blanket all wet," Jed said weakly.

The man only shook his head. "Don't you worry about that." He proffered the blanket again, more forcefully this time.

"All right. Thank 'ee. Sorry."

The blanket was very welcome. Jed had gone over the side of the Nonsuch in shirt and trowsers, knowing that shoes and other clothes would be fatal in the water.

Now, the brisk sea breeze raised pebbles on his skin.

The sand under his bare feet was cold and damp.

Somerset sand. A Somerset beach. He was in England, for the first time in five years. It was too good to be true.

The beach stretched out to the south, a long, narrow strip of silver sand lapped by the receding tide. To the north it ended abruptly in a rocky headland, the morning sun glistening on wet sandstone. It was beautiful.

It was also bloody exposed, with nowhere to hide.

Out to sea, the last and slowest members of the convoy were straggling along the horizon—slow and ponderous merchant ships bound for the East Indies.

The Nonsuch was nowhere in sight. She must already be over the horizon, at the convoy's head.

But he could see the single-reefed topsails of the Rose , bringing up the rear.

He had jumped from the Nonsuch 's afterdeck at the changing of the watch, dropping into the water as silently as he could, clutching an inflated sheep's bladder to his chest. Even now, the bosun, that vicious whoreson, was probably raising the alarm.

But Jed was counting on the fact that the whole convoy—twenty merchant ships and three men-of-war as escorts—was far too consequent to put about only to send a search party ashore for one deserter.

But there were the signal flags that could send "Man Run" from ship to ship and ship to shore. And on the Rose 's deck stood the officer of the watch, no doubt a sharp-eyed bastard, with a glass that could be trained on the shore at any moment. Jed's skin prickled.

He twisted around to squint up at the dunes.

The Nonsuch had been two hours out of Bristol Deep when he jumped, which meant he must have come ashore somewhere in the Somerset Levels.

Years ago, in another lifetime, he had driven his carrier's cart back and forth over that marshy land.

He could easily find his way across the Levels and over the moors, and thence to the fishing village he hailed from.

Christ, to think he would soon be home! It would be no more than four or five days' walk, weather permitting. Less, if he could hitch a lift.

But on the road he would be at the mercy of every neighbourhood busybody who crossed his path, eager to report him as a deserting seaman.

He'd left his short seaman's jacket on board, but in his wide-bottomed trowsers no one could possibly mistake him for a landsman. Wet clothes, bare head, bare feet, seaman's trowsers and pigtail... He might as well have an anchor tattooed on his forehead.

This wasn't how things were supposed to have gone. He had prepared for this day for years, and then been rushed into it—but there was no point thinking about that now.

"You'll have to get away from the shoreline," the other man said, as though reading his thoughts. "But you won't get very far in them there clothes you wear."

"I know."

Jed climbed to his feet and then nearly pitched face-forward into the sand. The man caught his arm, hauling him back upright. For a moment, Jed thought he was going to throw up again. But the feeling passed.

“Just water in my ears,” he muttered.

The dry land underneath him didn’t help either: it rocked under his feet like the rolling of the waves.

“There’s some bushes up there. Get in out of the wind, eh?” The man slung Jed’s arm around his shoulder. “Come on.”

With help, Jed scrambled up the dunes until they came to a rough, grassy track that followed the shoreline.

Beyond that, the flat and fertile marshland stretched out into the distance, crisscrossed by rhynes, the drainage channels that had reclaimed it from the sea.

A low hedge enclosed the nearest field. Sitting behind it, Jed would be out of sight of both ships at sea and anyone that might go past on the track.

And, just as importantly, sheltered from the wind. He shivered, hitching the blanket around his shoulders as the wind chilled his bones.

“You’d better sit down with that blanket and warm up a bit. I’m in no hurry.” The man held out his hand. “My name’s Solomon, by the way.”

Jed took it, and a warm, dry grasp enclosed his cold hand. “I’m Jedediah.”

“Do you want to cut that pigtail off? I have a knife.”

Jed eyed him warily. With the blanket warm and cosy around his shoulders, he regretted his earlier irritability. But you couldn’t be too careful.

“Why are you helping me?”

“Let’s say I’m no friend of the Navy’s.” Solomon dug in his pocket and held out a small, workmanlike pocket knife.

After a moment’s hesitation, Jed accepted it. He hacked off his pigtail and buried it under the hedge. Impatiently, he pushed aside the strands of wet hair that now fell into his eyes.

He glanced at the other man, who was calmly tucking the knife away. An idea—a dangerous one—floated into Jed’s head.

“You said as how you were in no hurry?” he asked cautiously.

“Well, no, I en’t. I’ve five days’ walk ahead of me, so a few hours here or there won’t make a deal of difference. I don’t mind waiting.”

He dropped onto the grass, giving every appearance of being willing to wait. His haversack was on his knees, and he bent his head over it, setting to rights the belongings he had disturbed when he pulled out the blanket.

Jed sat down beside him, studying him covertly. You couldn’t read a man’s character on his face, but you could judge him by his actions, and so far Solomon had been nothing but helpful. Why? Out of the goodness of his heart? That wasn’t something Jed believed in anymore. He hesitated.

On board ship, he had seen men lose a year’s wages on one roll of the dice. But he never played, no matter how much his messmates cajoled him. That was a fool’s game. For five years he had hoarded any coin he could lay his hands on, with one goal in mind: escape the Navy. He’d never gambled.

He’d have to gamble now.

“If I give you six shillings, do you think you could lay your hands on a pair of breeches for me?”

“En’t you afraid I’d make off with your money and you’d never see me again?”

“Aye, ‘course I am.”

A wry, sympathetic smile crossed Solomon’s face. “A pair of breeches and maybe a hat? You can’t go about the place without a hat.”

Jed put his hand to his bare head. “If you can get ahold of one, yes.”

“All right. You’ll hide here while you’re waiting, will you?”

Jed nodded. He ripped open the little bag he had sewn into his trowsers for the swim and—heart in his throat—counted out six shillings into the other man’s palm.

“I’ll be gone half an hour or more, I think, so don’t fret,” Solomon said. “I’ll be back.”

After Solomon’s departure, Jed spread his shirt on the hedge to dry in the wind, then huddled down on the leeward side under the blanket.

Was he half-witted to trust a complete stranger?

Only because the fellow had been kind to him and had a comely face.

He would probably never see those six shillings again.

He let his eyes fall shut. Six hours ago he had been on the dark, airless orlop deck, tumbling from his hammock, chased by the bosun’s whip. Groping his way in the

darkness, with two hundred other men, towards another day under the sharp eye of the officer of the watch.

Now he was ashore. No lash, no bosun's starter. His spirits lifted.

It was less than half an hour later when Solomon appeared around the bushes, a bundle of clothes under his arm. Jed scrambled to his feet, the knot of fear in his chest finally loosening.

Solomon was out of breath.

"The press gang is out in these parts," he announced. "The word is they came down from Bristol in a tender yesterday and set up their Rony at the Blacksmith's Arms in Minehead. They already pressed ten men this morning, or so I was told."

Jed's heart turned over. He had been worried about the Nonsuch sending a signal onshore to spread the news of an escaped seaman.

But this was worse. Minehead was just across the bay from here, an easy journey in a swift Naval tender.

The shoreline would be crawling with gangers, swarming over the coastline like maggots over old meat.

There would be a midshipman or lieutenant, and a band of strong men with clubs and cutlasses, scouring the countryside for any unwary man who might be said to 'use the sea,' as the law put it.

That was how Jed had been pressed in the first place, five years ago.

Hit over the head while picking cockles on the stony beach of the village where he'd

lived his whole life.

“Where did they press the men this morning?” he asked.

“At Huntspill. Leastways, so the woman who sold me the breeches said. Her own menfolk have already cleared off to her sister’s further inland to lie low until the gangers leave the neighbourhood.”

“They have the right idea of it,” Jed said grimly.

Solomon crouched, opening the bundle and spreading out its contents. As well as a pair of buckskin breeches, worn but clean, there was also a pair of worsted stockings, some broken-down old shoes, and a rough square of brown felt that could be fashioned into a hat.

“You never got all that for six bob,” Jed said, half pleased and half dismayed.

“Well... no. It was a tanner over. But I couldn’t let you go barefoot at this time of year.

There’s frost in the mornings still.” When Jed began to rummage in his pocket for sixpence, Solomon said quickly, “Let’s not linger here so close to the shore.

I feel like the press gang’s tender could heave into view at any minute, and I’ve no desire to fall into their hands. ”

Neither had Jed. He scrambled into the clothes. As he settled the hat on his head, he looked the other man up and down.

Solomon lounged against the hedge, his hands in his pockets. Only the tension around his eyes betrayed the anxiety that Jed also felt.

Jed's gaze lingered on Solomon's frame: tall and wiry, not particularly broad-shouldered but sturdy nonetheless. Even if the man had never been to sea in his life, he was exactly what the Navy wanted: a labouring man, young and healthy—and damned handsome, not that the Navy cared about that.

“You're not from these parts, are you?” Indeed, that much was obvious from his accent. “Where are you bound?”

“Barnstaple,” Solomon said. “I was planning to follow the turnpike road to Bridgwater, and maybe hitch a lift there. But I lost my way.”

“I wouldn't go by Bridgwater, if I were you. There'll be a press gang lurking under every bridge if they're out in force, and Bridgwater is where the high road goes through.”

“You know the roads hereabouts?”

“I was a carrier before I was pressed. Had my own horse and cart. I've been to and fro across the Levels many a time, and up over the moors. I know all the highways and byways.”

“Then it may be as you can set me on the right road?”

Jed came to a quick decision. Barnstaple was only twenty miles or so from his own village.

And travelling in company was usually safer than travelling alone.

“I can do better nor that. I'm going nigh on the same direction as you.

Come along of me, and I'll show you the way. Repay you the service you've done

me.”

Solomon studied him for a moment. His eyes were cool and grey. Then he shrugged, his lips twitching into a little smile that warmed his eyes.

“All right. Why not? Thank you.”

They shook hands on it.

“In that case, you’d best keep the blanket for now,” Solomon added.

“Put it about you in guise of a coat.” His gaze ran over Jed—who had to repress a sudden, foolish wish that he was in his Sunday finery—and his half-smile widened into a warm grin.

“They won’t take you for a seaman, but a vagabond. ”

Jed grinned back. “If any man likes to run me out of his parish for vagrancy, he’s welcome to do it. I’m going back to my own parish.”

And so he was. As they set off walking, his heart was light. He was master of his own destiny again at last.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

“Christ, I needed that,” Jed said, swallowing down the last morsel of pie and examining his handkerchief for any remaining crumbs.

They were sitting on a fallen tree trunk hidden from the road by the hedgerow.

When they stopped to eat, they hadn’t wanted to risk going to a tavern, the press gang’s favourite place to knock unwary seamen over the head.

Fortunately, Solomon had had the remains of a meat pie in his haversack.

They shared it, for which Jed had insisted on giving him tuppence.

The chilly air was heavy with the wet, peaty tang of the salt marshes, and a fine, low-lying mist blanketed the surrounding fields. But Jed was dry and relatively warm, and the pie had filled the hole in his belly.

A twig snapped in the undergrowth nearby. Jed froze, his heart turning over. His whole body had tensed, ready to leap to his feet and run for his life.

A field vole popped its head out from under the hedge. It stared at them for a long moment, its tiny black eyes wide in fear, then swiftly vanished.

Jed breathed out, long and slow. Damn and bugger it. He’d have to rid himself of this nervous tension, or he’d drive himself to Bedlam.

Solomon was sitting with his long legs stretched out in front of him, gazing out across the marsh, a faint frown line between his dark brows.

His hands were wrapped around the gourd he'd filled with water from a stream.

He had long-fingered hands, tanned and strong. Jed wondered what he did for a living.

Jed spread his own hands out in front of him. They were tar-stained and rope-calloused, more so than any landsman's. Instantly recognisable as seaman's hands.

"I do beg your pardon," Solomon said. "I see what I ought to have brung you is a pair of gloves."

Startled, Jed looked up and found the other man watching him with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"A fine kid-leather pair, and a black silk hat," Solomon added.

Jed grinned back. "And a smart cloak and a fast horse."

"I can only humbly beg your forgiveness."

"A messmate of mine did that, as it happens. Stole an officer's clothes and thought he would pass as a gentleman when he ran." His grin faded. "He only got about three miles inland ere they nabbed him."

"Poor devil. What became of him?"

"Nothing. They don't hang men for deserting these days, when we're in such desperate short supply. They only gave him a hundred lashes and sent him back to his messmates with his tail between his legs. He was killed about a week later. Cannonball took his head off." He shrugged. "Unlucky bugger."

He'd been determined not to fall into the same trap.

No rash or hasty action. His escape was five years in the planning, starting from the instant he'd been pressed.

Saving money. Learning to swim. Waiting to return to England, instead of running on some foreign shore where an English seaman would stick out like a sore thumb.

He'd lost his savings several times over, through theft or shipwreck, and grimly started again.

He'd spent twelve months on blockade duty off the Isle of Bourbon, with never a day on dry land.

He'd been halfway around the world and back, and seen dozens of far-flung ports.

And never, ever stopped dreaming of escape.

Solomon was studying him with almost troubling perceptiveness.

"I'm not going back," Jed said fiercely. "I'd rather die."

Solomon nodded in silent acknowledgement.

Jed got to his feet, brushing dried leaves from his clothes. "There's a ferry at Combwich, but I'd as lief not venture so close to the sea. I was thinking of going much further upstream and crossing the Parrett at Burrowbridge early tomorrow morning."

Solomon was still sitting on the log, leaning back, propped up on his hands. He tilted back his head to look up at Jed. "I put myself in your hands."

“All right. Let’s go, then.”

They walked in silence at first, keeping to the back lanes.

Jed’s heart was full. Everything around him was at once familiar and newly discovered: the flat, fertile land; sunlight glistening on water in the long, straight lines of the rhynes; the friendly rustle of the breeze in the reeds; the bittern’s booming cry.

All seen and heard for the first time in five years.

He still had his sea legs, and the solid land under his feet felt odd with every step he took. He marched on. Better get used to it as quickly as possible, because he was never going back to sea. He marched to the sound of the words running through his head. Never going back. Never going back.

Despite keeping away from the turnpike road, they made good progress.

Jed used to cross the Levels two or three times a year in his carrier’s cart; he knew the way well enough, though sometimes he led Solomon down paths which came to an end on the edge of a rhyne, forcing them to retrace their steps.

“I’d never have found my way alone,” Solomon remarked the second time this happened. “I already got lost once today.”

“Last time I took these back ways was...” It was a struggle to cast his mind back to what felt like decades ago.

“Spring floods the year before I was pressed. The turnpike road was underwater.” He had been obliged to leave his cart in Bridgwater and lead a team of packhorses down narrow droves and causeways barely above water level. “I was nigh on—”

He broke off. A middle-aged gentleman on a docile mare had come riding into view: certainly one of the local worthies. The sort of person who would lose no time reporting Jed if he recognised him for a deserting seaman.

Fear froze Jed in place. There was a prickly hawthorn thicket nearby that suddenly looked extremely tempting as a hiding place.

But Solomon's hand was on the small of his back, urging him on.

"Don't do anything suspicious," Solomon murmured. "Just keep walking."

The mare came plodding steadily onwards, closer and closer. The gentleman's gaze fell on them, and he studied them with mild curiosity.

They tipped their hats. The man nodded absently and rode on.

The horse's hooves faded away around a corner. Once they were out of earshot, Jed let out an explosive breath. He wiped a hand across his forehead. "Maybe I do make a convincing landsman, at that. Thank Christ for this new rig you got me."

As they walked on, Jed could still feel the ghost of Solomon's hand lingering on the small of his back.

An hour or so later, they fell in with an itinerant peddler and his son, a sturdy young lad who would make an excellent topman on a man-of-war; Jed hoped the lad would not run into the press gang.

Officially, their warrant only allowed the impressment of men who had some previous experience at sea or in coastal waters: merchant seamen, smugglers, longshoremen, and the like.

But they weren't averse to snatching any healthy young man who crossed their path, and they often got away with it, the devils.

Jed had once heard tell of a parish constable who had himself been taken when he tried to interfere with the unlawful pressing of two baker's apprentices.

The peddler, stooped and grizzled, was much less likely than his son to interest the gang. He seemed a cheerful sort, and he soon engaged Jed and Solomon in conversation as they walked. At first, of course, their talk was of the rumours of pressings in the district.

"My son and myself have only just come to these parts," the peddler said. "We spent last month in and around Bristol. How about you fellows? Have you been many days on the road?"

"I came down from London on the roof of the Bristol stage," Solomon said.

Jed shot him a curious look. If Solomon was coming from London and bound for Barnstaple, wouldn't it have been quicker to take the stage to Exeter, or at least Taunton, instead of Bristol?

The peddler was still questioning Solomon. "And where are you bound?"

"I'll be in Barnstaple by the end of the week, I hope."

"Ah, Barnstaple. I've never been that far west. How do you find the town?"

"I don't know it, I'm afraid. A friend is waiting for me there."

The man chuckled heartily and elbowed Solomon in the side. "A woman, is it?"

Solomon let out a startled laugh. “No, no. Just a fellow I knew in London.”

Secretly, Jed was rather grateful to the peddler. He hadn’t liked to press Solomon with questions; they’d only just met, after all, and a man’s business was his own. But something about Solomon exerted a fascination on him—a desire to know him better.

The peddler turned to Jed, catching him off guard. “And you, friend?”

Jed opened and then closed his mouth.

“He’s come down from London with me,” Solomon said, to Jed’s gratitude.

“I was in London once. Fine place. Very fine place.” And the peddler launched into an account of his visit, with the blissful unself-consciousness of a man who has never wondered whether others like the sound of his voice.

Behind his back, his son pulled a grimace. “En’t we going to stop for the night soon, Pa?”

Dusk had begun to fall, and Jed had been pondering the same question. He had slept in his cart or under a hedgerow many a time before, but he’d rather avoid it while winter lingered in the night air.

“We’ll sleep at Mr Dawson’s,” the peddler told his son. He turned to Jed and Solomon. “We know a farmer who will let us sleep in his barn for a penny apiece. You look like honest fellows—you’re welcome to come with us. It’s just up this lane. I see the lights from here.”

He hurried forward to the next crossroads, chivvying his son along.

“He’s uncommon trusting,” Jed said in an undertone. “Why, we might slit his throat

in the night and make off with all his wares.”

“You don’t know me. I might slit your throat while you sleep and make off with your money,” Solomon said dryly.

Jed grinned. “That did occur to me, I grant. But if you were designing to do me in, wouldn’t you have set upon me while I was lying helpless on the beach?”

Amusement flickered across Solomon’s face. “Very true.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

“Come along, young fellows,” the peddler cried from the crossroads up ahead. “It’s just along this lane.”

Within an hour, they were installed in a comfortable corner of a hay barn. Jed fell asleep almost as soon as he laid his head down.

He woke with a start some hours later, disoriented.

He was not lying in a hammock, gently swaying with the ship’s movement, packed into the darkness with two hundred other men.

Instead, he lay wrapped in a blanket on a bed of hay, with a beam of moonlight falling on his face from a gap above the barn’s door.

It all came rushing back to him. He was free! No more being torn from sleep and chased on deck. No more soul-crushing routine of ship’s bell and cook’s gong, regulating every moment of every day.

A few feet away, Solomon lay asleep in the moonlight. He was almost unrecognisable, his face slack and peaceful in repose. Jed studied him curiously, wondering what caused the tension that seemed a permanent feature of that face in waking life.

Solomon let out a little breath of a sigh, moving in his sleep. The peddler began to snore again, in huge, rattling gusts. His son elbowed him, and he turned over, grunting and settling down.

Jed closed his eyes, drifting off to sleep again. Tomorrow he would be one step closer to home.

“Perhaps we’d have done better to cross the river during the night,” Jed said uneasily.

He and Solomon had said farewell to the peddler and his son upon leaving the farm, and were now skirting the edge of a field shrouded in a thick layer of morning mist. Wrens and thrushes chirped in the hedges, undeterred by the falling drizzle.

Jed had almost forgotten what an English dawn chorus sounded like.

Across the field from them lay the river Parrett, hidden behind the dirt embankment that protected the surrounding fields from salty tidal water.

Beyond the embankment, the roof of a barge came gliding into view, ill-formed and ghostlike in the mist, making its slow, ponderous way up from the sea.

The barge-horse plodded steadily along, head down.

“Come on,” Jed said.

They crossed the field, and Jed scrambled up the embankment to speak to the bargeman leading the horse.

“Heard anything of the press this morning?”

The bargeman scratched his head. “I heard tell they got a handful of merchant seamen in Bridgwater this morning.” The thought didn’t seem to trouble him overmuch. Like all bargemen, he had a letter of protection, the lucky sod.

Bridgwater was only a few miles downstream, and a shiver of unease ran down Jed’s

spine.

He slithered back down from the embankment to relay the news to Solomon, whose mouth tightened. “It’s not that I’m afeared of the press, as such, but it’s of great importance to me that I get to Barnstaple, and not only for my own sake.”

Jed felt a flash of curiosity, but there was no time to ask questions now. “If you en’t afeared, you ought to be. But believe me, I don’t mean to let us fall into their hands.”

Hurrying upstream towards the bridge where Jed meant to cross the river, they soon left the slow-moving barge behind.

It had begun to rain, and the long grass soaked their stockings when they left the road and circled around by the fields so as to approach the bridge cautiously, under cover of trees and bushes.

It was an old medieval bridge, its stones slick with rain.

A row of tidy, white-washed cottages stood on the far side of the river, along with a public house.

No one was in sight. The bridge lay waiting. All they had to do was walk across.

Every pressed man in the Navy had his own story, and Jed had heard dozens of them.

Most men were pressed at sea, taken out of fishing boats and merchant vessels.

But of those taken on land, it had often happened at a bridge.

Jed’s messmate Little Dodd loved to tell the tale of how he had avoided capture for over a month before he was obliged to cross the great bridge at Gloucester, and met

the press there.

But this quiet country bridge was no turnpike crossing.

It wasn't much bigger than the numerous little wooden bridges and culverts they had crossed over the marshland's rhynes and drains the previous day.

No press gang would take the trouble to lurk in the bushes here, surely.

Would they? Uneasily, Jed eyed the thickly growing alders on the river bank.

Nothing moved. Smoke rose peacefully from the cottage chimneys. A woman emerged from the inn, emptied a bucket into the river and disappeared inside the building again.

Jed exchanged glances with Solomon.

They strode briskly across the bridge. Within seconds, they were on the other side and hurrying down a quiet lane. Jed broke into a run, not slowing until they were deep in the marshland, empty fields on either side, and a good mile from the bridge.

He stopped to catch his breath, bending over with his hands on his knees. He cast a sheepish grin up at Solomon, who had kept pace with him easily.

"I'm sorry. Reckon I'm fairly off-kilter today."

Solomon grinned back. Then they were both laughing for sheer relief, their breaths coming in heavy, exuberant gasps. The rain was falling more heavily now, plastering damp hair across Solomon's forehead. He had taken off his cap, and his face was bright with laughter.

At last, Jed straightened up, groaning against the stitch in his side. “Not what you had in mind when you said you’d follow me?”

Solomon wiped a hand across his damp face. “Who do you think is at your heels, friend, the press gang or the devil?”

A rain drop had gathered at Solomon’s temple, and now it rolled down his cheek. Jed watched it, seized by a foolish desire to catch it with his finger, to press his lips to its path.

He shook himself, pulling his hat down over his brow to hide his eyes. “Let’s find some shelter from this rain.”

The tavern’s dim and smoky taproom was almost empty. An old man sat drinking porter by the smouldering remains of a fire in the hearth. The two other guests—they appeared to be travellers, from the haversacks at their feet—were eating at a table, engaged in low-voiced conversation.

Jed and Solomon were seated at another table with two pints of ale between them.

A door slammed against a wall, and Jed flinched, his heart leaping into action. But it was only the landlady, returning from the back room bearing a steaming pigeon pie on a platter. She set it down between Jed and Solomon.

Once she had turned away to speak to the other guests, Solomon said quietly, “We needn’t stay if you don’t want. We can take the pie with us.”

Jed had been reluctant to come here in the first place. He had been planning to avoid taverns, favoured targets of the press gangs. But he’d been cold and damp, and this was an out-of-the-way place, fairly far inland.

He shook his head. “Thank ‘ee, but I can’t spend the rest of my days forever looking over my shoulder.”

As he watched Solomon cut the pie and divide it between them, his thoughts were on the road ahead.

He didn’t intend to take the coast road, as he would have done years ago in time of peace.

Instead, they would go up over the moors, where human habitations were far and few between and the press gang never ventured.

“We’ll be in Cheddon by nightfall, if all go well,” he said out loud.

“I’ve stayed at the inn there many a time.

It’s thruppence a night. And then the next day ‘twill be uphill all the way, I’m afraid.

” To his surprise, a smile twitched at the corner of Solomon’s lip.

Jed was starting to like that little smile. “What?”

“Nothing,” Solomon said. “Only—I hear in your voice that you’re happy.”

“That I am. I spent my whole life roving them moors, till I was snatched away. Now I’m going home. Home to my family.”

He had had only one letter from his aunt and sister in all the years he’d been away, written in the polished hand of a local clergyman. He himself had written to them several times with the help of a messmate who had some book learning, but he didn’t know if the letters had ever reached them.

“Back to the village where I was born and reared,” he said aloud.

“Back to my horse and cart. Back to my old life.” He didn’t know what might have changed in his absence, but for now he was just concentrating on getting home.

He could almost smell the crisp, peaty air of the moorland. “Ever been over Exmoor before?”

Solomon shook his head. “But you are much attached to the country, I think.”

“I am that. I expect you’d be of like mind, were you to return to London Town after years away.”

“No doubt I would, though I’m not a Londoner by birth.” Solomon had finished eating and was slouching in his seat, one arm thrown over the back of the bench. “I’ve loved being in London. I wouldn’t have left if I weren’t obliged to.”

“Oh?” Jed said, his curiosity piqued. “Why’s that?”

Solomon looked as though he had said more than he meant to.

“I didn’t mean—my circumstances changed, that’s all.

” He pushed the pie dish across the table to Jed.

One solitary carrot remained to be eaten.

“Go on. I expect you en’t had much in the way of fresh vegetables these past few years.

Not but what to call this one ‘fresh’ is to make myself a liar, I fear. ”

Jed speared the—decidedly old and chewy—carrot with his knife, studying him thoughtfully. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but then stopped, distracted by the traveller at the other table, who was watching them and perhaps even listening.

He was a youngish man with luxuriant chestnut side-whiskers and a sharply whetted gaze that swept up and down over Jed.

He sat alone at the table—his companion seemed to have gone away somewhere.

When he caught Jed's eye, he leaned over to speak to him.

"I see by your hands that you are a seaman, friend."

Reflexively, Jed closed his hands into fists. The fingertips were still stained black, despite the thorough scrubbing he'd given them. He searched his mind for some other trade that used tar. "No, I'm a roofer."

"Ah, I see. I beg your pardon. My mistake." He turned back to his drink.

Jed shifted restlessly in his chair. The dark, low-ceiling room had closed in oppressively around him, and the door felt dangerously far away.

"Shall we go?" Solomon suggested.

They stepped out into light so bright that Jed's eyes screwed up. The rain had stopped, and sunlight dappled the distant slopes of the Quantocks.

A peaceful midday calm lay over the countryside as they set off, but less than five minutes later, the quiet was broken by shouts on the road behind them. Jed turned to see the whiskered young man from the taproom racing towards them, his face red and sweaty, desperation in his waving arms.

“The press are coming!” He caught up with them and came to a stop, doubled over to catch his breath. “The press gang... They came through the tavern soon after you left. Oh, Lord help me! They’re on the road behind me.”

Jed froze, the iron hand of fear closing tight around his chest.

“Help me!” the man gasped. “Where can I hide? I must hide and let them go past.”

Jed looked around wildly. On the road up ahead stood a cluster of tumbledown old outbuildings. Most of them were in a sorry state, roofs half off and doorways choked with brambles, but the nearest one was still intact. The man raced towards it and wrenched the door open.

“We can hide in here,” he shouted to Jed and Solomon. “Make haste, quick as you can!”

Jed was hot on his heels. He hurried through the door. The interior was pitch black after the sunlight outside, but some instinct made him stop. A shadow loomed up over him.

He’d fallen for the oldest trick in the book.

“Run!” he yelled in warning to Solomon, before something solid connected with his skull.

The darkness was familiar to Jed. He’d been here before, and his stomach clenched, sour with dread. This was the darkness of the receiving ship’s hold, locked in with dozens of other men, prisoners waiting to be assigned to a ship, all packed tightly together, the air thick with the stench of fear.

But no. The air here was clear, and someone was moving around nearby.

“Hold still for a minute.” Solomon’s voice came from the darkness. “I’m just going to—”

He scrambled over Jed. Then, with a splintering crash, a door burst open and light flooded in. Solomon stood outlined against the blue sky.

“Thank God,” Jed breathed, letting his head fall back onto the earthen floor. “Thank God.”

Solomon said dryly, “You won’t be thanking God when you find all your money has gone. At least, mine has.”

“I thought we’d been pressed.”

Vaguely, Jed patted himself down. His breeches had been torn open and the pockets cut off. But he could hardly bring himself to care. He still hadn’t recovered from that moment of terror when he’d thought he was in the receiving ship.

He clambered to his feet, set his clothing to rights, and stumbled out of the byre to join Solomon. Several hours had passed, and it was mid-afternoon. No one else was in sight.

He groaned, rubbing the lump on the back of his head. “I’m sorry. I just...”

“Lost your head?” Solomon said coolly, and for a moment Jed wanted to hit him, until he added, just as coolly, “Well, so did I. It can’t be helped.”

“I can’t go back to the Navy.”

Solomon nodded, acknowledging that without comment.

Jed sank down onto the wet grass, the full extent of the disaster only now sinking in. Four days' journey ahead of them, four damp and hungry nights out in the open, with the chill of winter still in the air. And not a scrap of food to eat, save two hunks of bread.

"Christ. A right simpleton I was."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Better spend our energy on thinking about what to do now."

Jed was not averse to a spot of poaching, supplemented by foraging, but March was not the best month for filling your belly. Nor the best month for sleeping out of doors.

"We'll have to find a few days' work," he said. He glanced up at Solomon. "Leastways, I say 'we,' but I'll understand if you want us to go our separate ways. I en't exactly led us very well so far."

Though he tried not to show it, he found himself caring more than he had expected to about the answer.

Solomon studied him thoughtfully for a moment, then held out a hand to help him to his feet. "Reckon I'll take my chances with you."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Mrs Farley was a short, sturdy woman with iron-grey hair and a sharpness of eye that probably stood her in good stead when buying livestock. She lived in a neat and comfortable farmhouse, set in a yard that gave her every appearance of being a well-to-do tenant farmer.

“We heard you needed two men to clear a rhyne,” Jed said when she answered the door to them.

She looked him and Solomon up and down. They had brushed off the mud as best they could, but no doubt she still saw them for exactly what they were: two tired and hungry men who’d been tramping the neighbourhood all afternoon, and nary a job in sight.

Jed’s feet ached. He’d spent the past five years doing hard labour, but he was more used to walking the deck in bare feet than tramping for miles, and a particularly nasty blister on his left heel stung like blazes. At least it distracted him from the pangs of hunger in his belly.

Mrs Farley’s gaze lingered suspiciously on Jed. But if she guessed he was a seaman, she didn’t mention it. Instead, she said, “You know the press is out in these parts?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I gave the gangers six shillings yesterday not to press my men, then came home and found the two fools had run off anyway. Can’t blame them, I suppose. But in the meantime, my west field is water-logged.”

“You won’t find us wanting, ma’am,” Solomon said.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “It will take you four or five days, I should think. I’ll give you bed and board as long as is needed, and six shillings apiece when you’re done, and”—she nodded at Jed—“a good pair of old boots. What say you?”

Relief flooded Jed. “That will suit us very well, ma’am.”

They shook hands with her on it. She called for another woman, a farm servant who showed them the hayloft where they would sleep, and brought them a bowl of hot broth apiece and a jug of small ale.

They ate in one of the outbuildings, among crates of apples and sacks of potatoes. Jed wolfed down the broth, happy to have something warm in his belly. He set the bowl aside.

Solomon had already finished eating and sat sprawled on the ground, propped against one of the crates. The room was dim, the last of the day’s sunshine filtering in through cracks between the wall’s rough wooden planks. Solomon was staring reflectively into space.

Jed tapped his shoulder, and Solomon jumped, startled. For all that he had been lounging, languid, against the crate, Jed thought he was wound tight as a spring on the inside.

Silently, Jed held out the jug. Solomon shook his head, so Jed drained the last of the ale.

“I’m going to turn in,” he said, getting to his feet.

Solomon looked up at him. His eyes were unreadable in the dim light. “I want to get

back on the road as soon as may be.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on that head.”

He held out his hand, and Solomon grasped it, letting Jed pull him to his feet. They stood facing each other for a second, hands clasped, and then Jed dropped his hand, turning to leave the shed.

In the barn, they clambered up an old wooden ladder to a hayloft that looked to Jed like the most comfortable resting place he’d known in years: dry straw, a watertight roof, and plenty of blankets to spread on the hay.

You couldn’t beat a hammock for comfort, but it came with ever-present damp and mildew, and two hundred other men packed tight around it.

In the hammock on his left, for the past three years, there had slept Bobby Lewis, a short, scrappy Welshman with a ready grin.

On the right slept Little Dodd, who snored like a foghorn and who was always ready to lend a listening ear to his messmates’ troubles.

They must be a hundred miles off Land’s End by now, never to cross Jed’s path again.

Solomon had already stripped to his shirt and wrapped himself in a blanket, and Jed quickly followed suit.

It was now two bells in the first watch.

The officer of the watch would be on the quarterdeck, and Bobby, Little Dodd and the rest of Jed’s messmates would be at the capstan, ready to race aloft the instant an

order came.

“This en’t half bad,” he said, with forced cheer. “And we won’t be woken by that old peddler’s snores.”

Solomon chuckled softly. “My heart bleeds for his poor son. How he ever gets a wink of sleep, I can’t imagine.”

Jed fell asleep as soon as he lay down. He woke a few hours later to the sound of the bosun’s pipe rousing all hands on deck. He tried to jump from his hammock, and found himself sprawled on the wooden boards of the hayloft, tangled in a blanket.

For a long moment, he lay there panting, mind’s eye still blinded by confused memories of a storm at sea, a violent gale lashing the deck, the waves higher than the foremast, and that heart-stopping moment when he realised the man beside him on the yardarm had been swept overboard before his eyes—

The noise came again: not the whistle of the bosun’s pipe, but only the wind sneaking through some hole or crack in the barn below. Jed let out a long, shuddering breath.

The cadence of Solomon’s breathing showed that he too was awake. There came the rustle of blankets in the darkness as he sat up.

“Sorry,” Jed whispered. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Can’t sleep?”

“It’s no surprise, I suppose. I en’t had a whole night’s sleep in five years. On watch, off watch, all hands on deck...”

Solomon made a sympathetic noise in his throat.

It was very calm and still in the hayloft, and something about the confessional atmosphere of the darkness prompted Jed to go on.

“I spent five years dreaming of escape. Vowing to escape. But my mind don’t seem able to accept that I’ve done it...” He broke off. “Sorry, you don’t want to hear about that.”

Solomon said quietly, “You won’t shake off five years in five minutes. No one could.”

Jed grunted. He was already regretting opening his mouth and making a fool of himself.

“I’ve always found that the mind does its own thing,” Solomon said. “And there’s no profit to be had in beating yourself up about it.”

There was something oddly comforting about the cool practicality in his voice.

“I’m going to try to go back to sleep,” Jed said.

He heard Solomon lie back down, and he did likewise, burrowing into the hay. Surprisingly quickly, he drifted off to sleep, accompanied by the comforting sound of Solomon’s quiet, regular breaths in the dark.

The following morning, Mrs Farley’s son, a sturdy lad of twelve or so, brought them across fields of cattle to the silted ditch, a small tributary gulley which led to the larger rhyne nearby.

Even today, after a week with only light rain, the ground around the ditch glistened with standing water.

The ditch was well and truly silted, there was no denying it, but Mrs Farley's estimate of four or five days' labour was a fair one.

Jed and Solomon worked in harmony, digging until they were up to their knees in water and stopping only for a short break to eat the pasties wrapped in wax paper that Mrs Farley had given them.

By the end of the day, they were both covered from head to foot in the loamy marshland soil. They were cold and muddy, but at least they could do something about one of those things. They dipped a bucket in the nearby rhyne, and doused each other with clear, cold water.

"Fuck," Jed gasped, as the icy shower streamed down his neck, the shock making it feel colder than the water he had been standing in all day.

Solomon grinned at him, a full bucket in hand. "Again?"

"No, your turn." He grabbed the bucket and upended it over Solomon's head, grinning as Solomon laughed and spluttered.

Solomon's wet shirt clung to his chest and shoulders, the long, lean lines of him outlined under the thin cloth.

He was the most vibrant thing in all the murky twilit marshland: alive and vital, brimming over with merriment.

Jed realised he had been staring a few moments too long; he turned his head away, scrubbing at his dripping face and hair.

"That'll drain overnight, I reckon," he said awkwardly, nodding at the pooled water in the trench they'd dug.

There was an odd silence. Jed's back was to Solomon, and his skin prickled with the sensation of being watched.

"I reckon, yes," Solomon said, after a few seconds.

In the fading light, a hush lay over the marsh, broken only by the rustle of wind in the rushes.

Jed swallowed. Into the silence, he said, "I don't know about you, but I'm famished. And bloody freezing."

They ran back to the farm as fast as they could, shovels over their shoulders, the dusk turning to night around them.

Mrs Farley let them into her kitchen to dry off in front of the fire. "You'll take a hot bowl of soup," she said, plunging a ladle into the pot bubbling over the flames.

The kitchen was busy with comings and goings.

A male farm servant, stooped and grizzled, sat at the table polishing knives.

A cheery young dairymaid came in carrying a churn and cast a curious look at Jed and Solomon.

Jed bent his head over his soup, avoiding her gaze.

His landsman's disguise was now complete: he wore a heavy linen smock Mrs Farley had given him, and a pair of old leather boots.

But he'd still rather not draw attention to himself.

The maid they had seen on the first night offered them a hunk of fresh bread each. “I’ve not seen you here before,” she said with curiosity. “You’re not from these parts, are you?”

Jed’s hand jerked, splashing soup onto his knees. Some press gangs gave rewards for information leading to an impressment.

“We’re passing through,” Solomon said easily. “How about you? Have you been at this farm long?”

The two of them fell into conversation. Solomon talked readily—though Jed couldn’t help noticing that he didn’t reveal very much about himself. Soon the girl was telling him all about her sweetheart in the nearby village.

“... wish we could move there together ... His uncle has a shop there, you see, but he won’t take Rob on until he’s served out his indentures ... Oh, ‘tis kind in you to say so ...”

Jed ate in silence, content only to listen and watch.

Solomon sat with his head bent courteously towards the girl, his cap on his knee and his legs tucked under the narrow bench he shared with Jed by the fire.

His long-fingered hands were wrapped around the wooden soup bowl, tapping absently against it.

The flames crackled gently. Jed’s clothes had dried, and now he was comfortably warm. The maid was called away by Mrs Farley, and Solomon settled back on the bench. He broke the last piece of bread, handing half of it to Jed. Their fingers brushed.

Jed had had men's eyes on him before, and liked it. And men's hands and mouths. He wasn't pretty—quite the opposite—but he'd never lacked interest, when he wanted it.

But he also knew that sometimes a friendly smile was just a smile.

The new ditch had drained overnight. Jed cast an assessing eye over the surrounding land. Was it somewhat dryer, or was that wishful thinking? In any case, they still had several days' work ahead of them.

Then it was dig and delve, squelch and splash, until the pale, wintry sun was high in the sky, and they took a break to eat.

Jed leaned on his shovel, wiping a hand across his forehead. The chilly air was unpleasant on his sweat-slick skin, but the sun soon warmed him as they climbed a hillock to find some drier ground to sit on.

Today, the marsh was luminous under a clear, blue sky. Placid cows flicked their tails in the fields, and a frog croaked contentedly from his nearby hiding place. After Jed had finished eating, he lay back in the grass, whistling under his breath.

Solomon nudged him with an elbow. "Go on, you may as well sing the words."

Laughing, Jed complied.

"Oh the cook is in the galley

Making duff so handy,

Way, haul away, we'll haul away Joe!

And the captain's in his cabin

Drinkin' wine and brandy..."

He had a strong voice, which had been much in demand on the forecastle, and he let it ring out across the marsh.

Solomon watched him, foot tapping in pleasure.

"You've an uncommon fine voice," he said when Jed had brought the song to a rousing end.

It was spoken warmly, and Jed regarded him in surprise.

Unexpectedly, Solomon coloured. But the next thing he said was in his more usual dry tone, with a hint of teasing. "That the only song you know, I suppose?"

"Course not," Jed said, more than willing to rise to the bait. He launched immediately into another song that had been a great favourite among his messmates.

"Our ship she lies in harbour,

Just ready to set sail,

May heaven guard my lovely maid,

Till I return one day..."

There were many verses, some sweet and some ribald. The final one ended with:

"...And she sits in her bower

A-waiting there for me,

A-waiting for her own true love

Returning home from sea.”

“And have you?” Solomon asked when the song was over.

“What?”

“A sweetheart waiting for you. Or a wife and childer, maybe?”

“Oh! No.”

“Good. I mean”—his lip quirked—“not that I wish you a life of loneliness, but that they weren’t left alone without you when you were pressed.”

“No, no, nothing like that.”

Not that Jed had lived the life of a monk. There were places in Exeter he had liked to go, known to men such as himself. But none of the men by the Exeter docks or in far-flung foreign ports knew his name, never mind cared enough to notice that he had vanished.

He raised an eyebrow at Solomon. “Have you?”

“A wife?” He shook his head. “No.”

Jed waited to see if he would say anything else, but he didn’t.

The frog let out another enthusiastic croak. Water splashed in the rhyne as a water-hen disappeared under the surface.

Jed climbed to his feet. “Come on, let’s get back to work.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

The following morning, Jed found Solomon down in the farmyard, with a peaceable bay mare nuzzling his neck over the stable door. He was chuntering to her in an undertone. Jed came to join him, brushing the hay-loft dust from his clothes.

The mare turned her head towards Jed, sniffing and snorting, and Jed rubbed her nose.

“I had a fine bay carthorse,” he said. “I don’t know what became of her when I was pressed.”

He’d probably spent more time with Bess than with any other living creature, driving over the moors in rain and in sunshine. A sudden fear tugged at his heart. Surely Carrie and Aunt Ellen would have kept her—they would need her to keep the business going.

Soon, he promised himself. Soon, he would be sitting on the box once more, reins in his hands and the wind at his back.

“I’ve never been to sea,” Solomon said. “But I don’t imagine you had many horses on board?”

“Pigs, goats, and sheep aplenty, but not much in the way of horses, no. A pangolin once.”

“A pangolin ? What’s that?”

“A sort of gurt beetle, big as a cat. The captain bought it in Madras, and it used to run

about the deck on its tiny legs and make a nuisance of itself. It brung us good luck, or so we decided. Though I don't know how happy it can have been, torn away from its forest and trapped in a floating prison. ”

Solomon said, “Puts me in mind of a gentleman I saw once with a pet monster: an alley-gater, he said it was called. A giant lizard with humongous teeth. It had to be kept chained and caged all the time. That weren't no proper place for such a beast, poor thing.”

“Where the devil did you see that?”

“At one of the big coaching inns in London. I was an ostler there, up until last week.”

Jed whistled. “That's a busy life.”

“Never a dull moment, that's for sure. You get all manner of people on the roads—and all manner of odd things to transport. You must have seen as much yourself, being a carrier.”

“I never had any wild beasts, though. Or no wilder than my neighbour's geese, leastways.”

That got a grin from Solomon. “Will you take up your carrier's route again, when you get home?” he asked.

“I hope so, yes.”

“You're not worried about being pressed out of your village again?”

“A hot press don't last forever. You just have to avoid being struck by lightning when the storm is rumbling overhead. Then the gang pack up and move on to a fresh

hunting ground, and you can breathe again for a space. And I know no one in my village will betray me as a deserter.”

“And the war has to end someday, surely,” Solomon offered.

“Surely.” Sometimes it felt like England had been at war with France almost as long as Jed had been alive. The horse snorted, as if in agreement, and Jed gave her nose a final pat. “We’d best get on. What did we do with the shovels last night?”

The two of them were in such different places, Jed thought as they went to fetch the shovels. Jed would soon be home, but Solomon—as far as Jed understood—was travelling into the unknown. Travelling away from something, perhaps. But that was his own business.

Turn the glass and strike the bell. An endless round, over and over and over.

The ship’s bell tolls. The bosun’s whip cracks. Haul away there. Brace the yards. Man the guns. Get up. Lay down. Fall in. Fall out...

A never-ending hail of orders, and the bosun’s piercing whistle is the worst of it.

“I’d like to shove that pipe up his arse,” Sammy Roberts always says.

He smirks at Jed from his perch on a cannonade in the forecastle, where they’ve all gathered round to while away a Sunday afternoon in glorious, dreamlike sunshine. “Remember how I allus says that?”

But Sammy is dead. Has been for over a year now. Hit by a falling marlinspike and buried at sea off the Azores.

Jed, with a sick sort of puzzlement in his stomach, studies that jolly face. Blood is

trickling down Sammy's temple but he doesn't seem to notice. His eyes glitter.

"Keep your stations, men!" the midshipman shouts, and now somehow Sammy is at the mainsheet. "You there, Roberts, haul away. Bosun, start that man!"

Sammy flinches—and then Jed isn't with him anymore. He's high in the rigging, the deck below the size of a pocket handkerchief. His hands are slick with blood. Grimly, he tightens his grip on the ratlines.

He can't tell where the blood came from. He isn't injured. Indeed the battle seems to be over. Or maybe there never was one. The ship is sailing peacefully across the open, empty sea. Jed is almost disappointed. It's an ordinary day, and there's nothing to do but wait.

Waiting. Always waiting. Not allowed to do anything but wait for orders. The wind howls in his ears, too loud for talking, save in a bellow. He's on the yardarm now, and the next man along is lost in a reverie of his own.

Turn the glass and strike the bell...

Jed woke drenched in sweat. At first he only lay there, heart pounding.

Then he struggled into a sitting position.

Solomon was a few yards away, up to his knees in water, shovelling at a steady pace.

When he saw Jed stir, he stopped work. He dug his shovel into the ground and rested his folded arms on it.

Jed drew in a breath. "Christ, I'm sorry. You should have woken me."

After they'd eaten, he had lain back to rest his eyes for a second. He must have dozed off.

"You don't sleep very well," Solomon observed.

Jed scrubbed at dry eyes. He had slept uneasily every night since he ran, but he'd thought that last night, at least, he'd managed to avoid waking Solomon.

This was getting damned tiresome. In five years at sea, he had always slept like a log. Never troubled by the slightest nightmare.

"Well, you know..." he said with a shrug. "I've not grown accustomed to the idea of getting a full night's sleep. At sea, we could be turned out on deck at any hour of the day or night."

"I wonder if it's more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"You've not had an easy time of it, recently. That's all."

Jed had no idea how to respond to that. Finally, he said, "Next time, wake me up. Don't see why you should labour on alone."

Solomon accepted this with phlegm. He picked up the other shovel and tossed it to Jed. "Here you are, then."

The land around the rhyne was noticeably drier now.

"Mrs Farley had the right of it when she said 'twould take us four or five days," Jed said, surveying their work.

Solomon grunted, a sound that held more annoyance and impatience than satisfaction.

Jed glanced curiously at him. “When is your friend expecting you?”

Solomon looked startled, as though he hadn’t expected Jed to be paying such close attention to his affairs. “He won’t have begun to worry yet about what has delayed me, I don’t think. He left London only a few weeks before I did. Indeed, he may have been delayed on the road himself.”

“You couldn’t travel together?”

“No.”

Jed waited, but no further explanation was forthcoming. Instead, Solomon returned to work, shovelling at an even more determined pace than before.

Well, that was clear enough. And Jed wasn’t one to poke his nose in where it wasn’t wanted. He took his own shovel and followed suit.

Within an hour, however, a heavy fog was rolling in from the sea.

Cold, wet air prickled Jed’s skin, and he put up his shovel. The hedge on the far side of the field was already lost to view. “We’d best get back to the house while the going’s good.”

Solomon frowned, but he could not deny the wisdom of it.

By the time they reached the farmyard, they could barely see three yards in front of them. They ate in the kitchen and then retired to the barn much earlier in the day than usual, lighting their way across the foggy yard with a rush lantern.

The air in the hayloft was chilly, but they had blankets to wrap up in, and the soft, yellow light of the lantern. It was pleasant to be indoors, warm and dry, with a jug of ale from the kitchen. Jed burrowed comfortably into the hay. He was not in the least sleepy.

“Give us a song?” Solomon suggested.

Jed obliged with a rousing rendition of the ‘Stratford Weavers,’ Solomon joining in on the chorus.

“Your turn,” Jed said when he’d finished. He passed him the jug. “Whet your voice on that.”

“I en’t much of a singer. How about a story?”

I heard a good one from a coachman before I left London.

So, there’s this shoemaker, and one day a gentleman comes to him to have a pair of boots made, and pays him with a single gold coin, far more nor the boots are worth.

His wife and mother tell him it’s too good to be true, but he won’t listen—”

Solomon told the story well, his voice rising and falling as the cursed gold coin passed from hand to hand, turning low and thrilling when at last, now orphaned, widowed and bereft, the shoemaker put his hand in his pocket to find... the coin lying there again.

Jed whistled appreciatively. “Don’t know if I can come up with a story to top that one.”

He had plenty of yarns of his own from long Sunday evenings spent lounging with

his messmates on the forecastle.

But home was on his mind, and instead he found himself telling a story from a much earlier time: one that had been popular among the boys in his village, about the notorious smugglers said to frequent the caves below the headland.

Solomon had installed himself comfortably in the hay, lying on his back with one leg propped on the other. His eyes, dark in the lantern light, were fixed on Jed with an intensity that sent a shiver of heat through him.

If they'd been two strangers sitting in a tavern in some foreign port, Jed would already be shifting subtly closer to press his thigh against the other man's under the table.

But this was different. No consequence-free risks here. They still had to work together tomorrow morning.

"...and they were never seen again," he said, coming to the end of the tale. "And neither, more to the point, were the strings of rubies and diamonds!"

Solomon chuckled. "I suppose you spent hours searching for them as a boy."

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“Course we did! Scrambling over the rocks and into the cave as far as we dared.”

“Have you lived in the same village all your life, then?”

Jed nodded. “It’s a little fishing village on the north coast, between the moors and the sea. My father was carrier there before me, and his father before him. How about you? Where were you raised?”

“Oh, everywhere and nowhere. We moved around a deal. I’ve seen every part of England from the Severn to the Fens.” In answer to Jed’s obvious curiosity, he added, “My father and mother were servants to a travelling preacher.”

Jed had been hesitant to press him with questions.

He hadn’t forgotten the reaction he’d received a few hours earlier.

But Solomon seemed less reserved tonight.

Maybe he was willing to talk about everything but the circumstances of his journey.

Maybe it was the drink loosening his tongue, or maybe, like Jed, he was affected by the intimate atmosphere of their little circle of lanternlight in the darkness.

“So you’ve been all over?” Jed prompted. “You must have heard a mint of good yarns.”

“Only if you count the lives of Christian martyrs. Fiction and romance are the work

of the Devil, you see. Or so I was always told.”

“Oh.” Jed had never heard of such a thing. “But, uh, now you live in London?”

“I went up to Town when I was sixteen. Wanted to see if it was all it was cracked up to be: a Den of Vice, a Pit of Sin.” He said it in a light, mocking tone.

“And did you find it to be so?”

Solomon stretched, and there was something about the movement that spoke of self-indulgence and the gratification of the senses. “I’d say so, yes.”

Jed’s low hum of arousal had subsided, but now it flared to life again. He shifted, looking away.

“London, the Capital of the World,” Solomon said musingly. “Ever been there yourself?”

“No, no. I’ve never been further nor Bristol.” He laughed, realising how daft that sounded. “On land, I mean.”

Solomon rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow to see Jed better. “You must have been halfway round the world.”

“I have, yes.” He’d seen more than he’d ever expected to in a lifetime.

It was one of the few things he didn’t regret about those five lost years.

“Most of the time, though, we weren’t allowed to leave the ship in case we should run.

I was never one of the Captain's 'trusted men,' as they say.

I did my damndest to become one—thought it would be easier to run that way. ”

“Maybe he saw right through you.”

“Mm, I reckon so.”

It was quiet in the barn, with only the scratch of some small animal—mouse or vole—scuttling across the floor below them.

“Did you always plan to run?” Solomon asked.

“Yes, always, from the moment they got me.” Jed lay back, closing his eyes.

“It weren't the going to sea that I minded.

I grew up by the sea. But I minded being yoked like oxen to a cart.

I thought I should die of it.” Bits of hay had crept into his blanket, and he tugged hard at a stalk of it, breaking it between his fingers.

“That's not to say that I spent five years bucking against the yoke.

At first I thought I would. I'd refuse to do anything they ordered. But everyone submits in the end.”

“Each for reasons of his own?” Solomon said quietly.

“That's it. Fear of the lash. Dreams of prize money and glory.

And some men, I make no doubt, are truly there to fight the good fight agin the King's enemies and all that.

At first I thought the officers were all there for King, Country, and Gold.

But it's more complicated nor that. Ofttimes, they're afraid too...

not of the lash, of course, but of other things.

Being cast ashore as a penniless half-pay officer, for instance.

"His voice trailed off. "Sorry. You didn't want to hear all my half-baked thoughts.

But I've had a gurt deal of time for thinking, and I couldn't open my mouth when I was aboard ship—not without being labelled a troublemaker. Or leastways, more nor I already was."

He turned his head to see Solomon watching him with an expression that Jed couldn't quite read. "So what was your reason?" Solomon asked.

"Oh, I was in the first group. Fear of the lash. 'Course you don't have to go to sea for that."

He had seen the scars—white, faded welts—on Solomon's back.

Much older than those which Jed knew must crisscross his own back, from the three times he'd been seized to a grating and flogged on captain's orders.

Of course, he'd never asked where Solomon's scars were from.

Such things were not uncommon. Maybe his father had had a heavy hand, or maybe

he'd been whipped for petty theft or vagrancy in his youth, or something of that sort.

"Seems to me..." Solomon said slowly. "That there's another group. Those that submit—only for the now. Biding their time. Until they can escape."

Escape! It was the word that dreams were made of. Jed made a noise of agreement.

A comfortable silence fell between them. The ale jug was almost empty now, and Jed's eyes were growing heavy. But he didn't want to turn in; he wanted to prolong this moment.

Solomon still lay sprawled in the hay, the blanket slipping off his bent knee. The fabric of his breeches stretched tight across his thighs. His gaze was on Jed.

"You've no tattoos, have you?" he said. "I noticed."

When had he noticed that? While they were stripped to the waist and washing at the pump, no doubt. A pleased shiver ran down Jed's spine.

"No, I don't. There's no quicker way to identify someone as a seaman, and I always intended to run."

Solomon's half-smile glinted in the darkness. "And now you have."

"Yes."

They both fell silent. Jed shifted position so that the folds of the blanket better hid his stiffening prick.

Only the lantern and a few feet of hay-strew wooden boards lay between them. The air seemed heavy with the promise of an unasked question—or was it only Jed who

felt it?

Then Solomon leaned forward to pick up the jug, breaking the tension. “Here’s to escape, then,” he said, lifting it into the air. He took a swallow and passed the last of the ale to Jed.

“To escape,” Jed echoed.

By the following afternoon, the ditch was three feet deep, water flowing down into the main rhyne, and the land all around was firm enough to walk on.

Jed tossed aside a final shovelful of mud, then threw down his shovel, straightening up. He met Solomon’s gaze and saw his own satisfaction reflected there.

“Let’s get Mrs Farley to come take a look.”

Their route back to the house took them across the open fields below the farmyard, and past a reed-fringed pond that had formed at the bend of the stream that ran behind the dairy.

They were just crossing the grassy area between the pond and the chicken coops when raised voices reached them, coming from around the corner of the dairy.

“Dreadfully sorry to impose on you, ma’am.” It was a gentleman’s voice.

Solomon stopped in his tracks, grabbing Jed’s arm.

“What—” Jed began.

The colour had drained from Solomon’s face. He dragged Jed close, pressing a hand over his lips.

“It’s the press gang,” he mouthed, almost inaudible.

Jed froze. If they turned back the way they came, they would be crossing open fields, visible to anyone who stepped around the corner of the dairy. There was nowhere to hide, unless they crouched behind the chicken coops.

The gentleman was still speaking. “...heard reports of a seafaring man living up here on your farm.”

Jed looked around wildly. His gaze fell on the pond, with its overhanging bushes screening part of it from view.

Solomon, with the same idea, was already dragging him towards it.

They slipped in among the reeds, as silently as possible, until they were standing immersed up to their waists, clinging to a tree root, hidden from view by overhanging branches of dogwood.

The bare, leafless branches offered only a small space in which to hide, and the muddy pond bed was soft and yielding. Jed almost lost his footing. Quickly, he hooked one hand around a root and the other around Solomon’s waist, pulling him in and holding him in place under the bushes.

How had Solomon so quickly known that the gentleman they’d heard was with the press gang?

But there was no time to worry about that now.

Clinging to the dogwood root, Jed strained his ears to hear what was happening in the farmyard.

The gangers must have come with a horse and cart. How many of them were there?

There came the crunching of feet on gravel, and someone rounded the corner of the dairy. He was a burly man, not in uniform. Through the branches, Jed could just make him out—and the wicked-looking cutlass in his belt. Jed stood perfectly still, Solomon's frozen body pressed against his.

"It's all open fields here, sir," the man called. "No one in sight." He disappeared from view, returning back the way he had come.

Still, Jed didn't dare stir.

Finally, after a painfully long time, Mrs Farley appeared. With a hand above her eyes, she stood peering across the marsh with a worried air. Then she began to search around, poking through the long grass.

"Are you there, fellows? They're gone."

Jed let out a long, shuddering breath. He loosed his hold on Solomon, and they both hauled themselves out onto the bank. Jed found he was shivering: from the cold water or from the shock, he hardly knew.

"Are you sure they're gone, ma'am?"

"My son followed them down as far as Baker's Cross.

They've gone off back to Minehead in their cart.

"She hustled the two of them along. "Come along, come along, let me find you some dry clothes. Oh, those dogs! I thought they were going to press my Alfie, and he's never set foot on a boat in his life. "

She bustled back towards the house, calling to them over her shoulder to hurry up.

Jed hung back, casting a sharp look at Solomon, who was still a pasty white, and shivering even worse than Jed was.

“How’d you know that gentleman was a ganger ere he said a thing about it?”

Solomon didn’t answer.

“Come along, boys,” Mrs Farley called. “Get them wet clothes off. I won’t have you dripping on my clean floor.”

“We’ve finished clearing the ditch,” Jed said as they joined her at the kitchen door.

“We were on our way back to tell you that. And now I’d liefer be gone from here as soon as may be, so—”

“Yes, yes, Alfie will go out there with you as soon as you’ve dried off a bit.

” She disappeared into the house, calling for Alfie, then reappeared shortly afterwards with blankets and old clothes.

She thrust them into Solomon’s hands. “Go on, go and change in the barn. Oh, you are drenched, poor boys!”

As soon as she’d left them alone, Jed rounded on Solomon. “How did you know it was the press?”

Solomon was staring into the distance. He hadn’t spoken since they climbed out of the pond. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck .” His knuckles were white around the clothes clenched in his fists.

Jed was alarmed. “Wait. Come here.” He led Solomon off to one side, to a quiet corner of the yard. Under his hand, the muscles in Solomon’s arm were painfully tense. “Are you all right? What’s the matter?”

“I recognised the officer’s voice. As I suppose is obvious to you.”

This was all bloody peculiar. “Had a run-in with the press before now?”

“No, no. He wasn’t even in the impressment service when I last saw him. But he was a Naval officer: a half-pay lieutenant in London, hoping for a ship.”

Jed gave him a look. “A fellow you knew in London just happens to turn up here. On the far side of the country.”

Solomon’s mouth twisted miserably.

Jed didn’t like being kept in the dark; he’d had enough of that when he was at the bottom of the Naval hierarchy. But there was something very alarming about this crack in Solomon’s usual self-possession. Jed bit his lip. “It makes me nervous to think of you being friendly with the Navy.”

“Friendly is not the word. I promise I want to avoid the press just as fervently as you do. More so, even.” He essayed a smile. “If that’s possible.”

“I don’t think that’s possible, no.” He studied Solomon’s face. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. No. I don’t want to talk about it.” He grimaced. “So... I was thinking of leaving at dawn. I mean, if we’re still...?”

Jed realised they were standing close together, his hand gripping Solomon’s arm. He dropped his hand, stepping back.

“We’re still going in the same direction. Might as well stick together on the road.”

Solomon relaxed. “All right. Good.”

Jed took the clothes Mrs Farley had given them. “Come on, I’m bloody freezing.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Solomon said very little as they set off the following morning. Jed eyed him covertly, wishing he knew what to say to dispel that tight-lipped frown. But he had a feeling that, if spoken to, Solomon would snap like a frayed rope.

They made good time on the road, in part thanks to a dairyman who took them up in his cart and left them six miles further west. By mid-afternoon, the marshy Levels lay behind them, and the road climbed, slowly but steadily, under a clear blue sky.

Jed's heart lifted as the road climbed. He had a sturdy pair of boots on his feet, coins in his pocket, and a haversack laden with food from Mrs Farley. Around them, everything was peaceful. There was no sign of the press gang in these parts. Men worked without fear in the fields.

Solomon had been mostly silent all day, but when they stopped by the roadside to eat, he asked, "Do you know Barnstaple well? What manner of town is it? A place where a man might easily find a situation?"

"It's a fair-sized town. A river port. You'll have no trouble finding work, by my count."

"And the press?"

"The magistrate and aldermen are no friends of the gang. Ran them out of town, I mind, when they came pressing five or six years ago." He studied Solomon with curiosity. "How comes it that you're bound for Barnstaple, if you know nothing about the place? Is it your friend who's a local man?"

“No, no more nor I am. But—we wanted to leave London, and we had heard mention of the town, and it seemed as good a place as any.” He shrugged. “What of yourself? What awaits you at journey’s end?”

Jed eyed him. Two hundred miles was a long way to travel to reach a town that most Londoners had never heard of.

But he recognised Solomon’s question for the redirection that it was, and did not insist. Instead, he said, “I lived with my sister, my aunt, and her son. I expect Carrie—that’s my sister—will have took over my carrier’s route with our cousin Robert’s help.

He must be nigh on eighteen years old by now. ”

They both fell silent. Jed was thinking about Carrie, imagining her face when he would knock on the cottage door.

How had she fared, since last they met? Perhaps she would have married.

She had sometimes seemed to have an understanding with the youngest of the three brothers who had grown up in the cottage next door.

He was impatient to see her again, to lift her up and swing her round like when they were children. To tell her of everything that had befallen him, and hear all her own news.

It was a painful thing, howsomever, to have been away five years and be coming home with only a few shillings in his pockets. When he thought that the King owed him almost thirty pounds in back pay, and he’d never see the colour of it—!

But he couldn’t be downcast, not when he was so close to home.

That night, they stopped at an inn on the far side of the Quantocks.

Jed had slept here before on occasion. It still had the cracked pane in one of the front windows, and the set of three gleaming horseshoes over the taproom fireplace.

Jed let his hand linger on the worn wooden counter where he had often sat and enjoyed a drink after a long drive.

Every day was bringing him closer to home.

And closer to the day when he would bid Solomon farewell. His heart pinched at the thought of it.

They slept comfortably that night, sharing a wide bed with an impoverished curate on his way between parishes, and woke to a heavy downpour.

The yard had been transformed into a sea of dirt, and at the front door Jed met two miserable travellers tracking mud into the house.

Their coats were soaked through, poor sods.

“This is foul weather, God rot it,” Solomon said in greeting when Jed joined him in the taproom. Through the window, he was watching rain pouring from dark grey clouds. “Another bloody delay.” His fingers drummed nervously on the table.

“It’ll only hold us up a few hours, you’ll see,” Jed said confidently. “?‘Twill be dry by noon.”

Solomon only grunted in answer.

The maid had brought them bread and a platter of sausages. Jed speared one. “We

won't get to the Cross Keys by nightfall," he said, deliberately cheerful. "But never mind—I know a farm where we can sleep instead."

Solomon took a deep breath. He forced himself to meet Jed's eyes, and his lips twisted in a rueful smile. "I beg your pardon. I'm in a foul mood this morning."

"It's all right. I know you're in a hurry." He held out the knife. "Sausage?"

"Thanks."

They ate in silence for a minute or two.

Then Solomon said, "My friend was... unwell, you see, directly before he left London. I never liked the idea of us travelling down separately, but it couldn't be avoided. I'd like to be sure he reached Barnstaple all right."

Jed accepted this explanation with a nod, and offered Solomon another sausage.

They spent the morning holed up in the taproom with other travellers in similar straits, and did not set off until the rain slackened—as Jed had predicted—in the early afternoon.

The road climbed steeply after they left the inn, and soon they were crossing open moorland, surrounded by blue-brown hills, bright and crisp in the pure, cold air.

The Levels had been familiar enough ground, but the moors were Jed's home country, the land he had driven across every day.

He had spent hours on these roads, alone with his thoughts, no one to trouble him or hold him to account.

It was all he asked for in life: a horse, the wide open sky above, and the wind at his back.

Solomon seemed more cheerful too, now that they were on the move. They walked steadily, taking only short breaks. Often, two or three hours would go by in which they met no one but the wild sheep and ponies that roamed the open moorland.

Afterwards, Jed remembered those three days as one long, common stream of good conversation and comfortable silences.

Walking through sun and wind and drizzle.

Leaving the road when the winter's ravages had made it impassable, to follow sheep tracks instead.

Laughing over Solomon's anecdotes from the coaching inn where he'd worked—he had a sharp eye and a clever tongue.

Sitting in a crowded taproom with other travellers, their eyes meeting across the table in a private joke.

Solomon's occasional half-smile; his sleep-tousled head in the morning; his wet torso under a courtyard pump, and the heat that coiled in Jed's gut at the sight.

The morning of their last day travelling together, they were overtaken on the road by a farm boy who offered them a lift in his cart. He chatted without cease until he left them at a crossroads some ten miles further down the road, waving a cheery goodbye as he drove off.

“That was a stroke of luck,” Jed said. “Knocked a good few hours off our journey.” Somehow it didn't feel all that lucky.

The time remaining to them as fellow travellers had telescoped down to almost nothing.

“You’ll be in Barnstaple tomorrow. We’ll have to separate today—my village is off to the north, on the coast. But I’ll set you on the right path. ”

“Thank ‘ee.” Solomon opened his mouth as if to add something else, then shut it again.

Some measure of constraint had fallen between them at the mention of their parting. They walked in a silence broken only by the wail of a curlew far overhead.

“Deer tracks,” Solomon said after some time, pointing to the spoors that crossed their path.

“But not for us.” Jed drew a finger across his throat. “Them’s the King’s deer.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, we’re in the kingswood now.”

Solomon looked around at the scrubby, windswept moorland, raising an eyebrow. “This is the kingswood? Chopped down all the trees, have they?”

Jed laughed, the awkwardness between them melting away. “You know, I don’t remember as there ever were any.”

The ground fell away to the left of the track they were following, and at the bottom of the slope, a narrow stream ran through a thicket-filled vale. Jed pointed it out.

“Think the King’ll notice if I make use of his water? I’d as lief not arrive home

looking like a vagabond.”

They left the track and made their way down through low-growing hazel thickets to the stream, there to strip off and wash in the icy water, then dress hurriedly again.

They scrubbed their muddy stockings and stretched them on a bush to dry, while they sat on its leeward side to eat a meal of bread and cheese.

Jed ran a hand over his chin. He had been shaving with a blade Solomon lent him, and, using the same knife, he had shortened the untidy shanks left over from hacking off his pigtail.

How much had he changed in five years? Carrie and Aunt Ellen would recognise him, of course—but his cousin Robert might not.

The sun came out from behind a cloud. Jed had been more than half expecting Solomon to want to press on immediately—he’d made no secret of his hurry to reach Barnstable.

But Solomon showed no signs of moving, so neither did Jed.

A dragonfly swooped over their heads and down to a point where the stream widened.

Idly, Jed watched it flit across the water’s surface.

“This would be a good spot for swimming in summer,” he remarked.

“You can swim?” Solomon said, and then, “Stupid of me. Of course you can.”

“I couldn’t, before. I only learnt in the hope that it would help me escape. And it did.

That was a lucky day.”

“A lucky day for me too.”

There was a weighty note in his voice that drew Jed’s eyes to his face.

Solomon was stretched out on his back in the grass, shoulders propped up on his haversack, one foot thrown carelessly over the other knee. His gaze met Jed’s, and something in its depths sent desire prickling down Jed’s spine.

He’d been picturing it for days now: Solomon sprawled beneath him, those long, lean thighs coming up to wrap around him, the tight little smile slackening in bliss...

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

He'd once thought of showing his colours before they parted—he'd had a feeling Solomon might not be averse to the idea. But these past few days, since they'd run into the press gang, Solomon clearly had other things on his mind. And a friend waiting for him in Barnstaple.

Solomon had dipped his head just a fraction, his eyes no longer visible under the brim of his cap.

Jed got to his feet, turning away from Solomon to take his dry stockings from the bush. "I suppose we'd better get on."

Solomon didn't answer. After a moment's silence, Jed heard the rustle of clothing as Solomon climbed to his feet. Jed picked up his haversack, very aware of the other man's every movement.

They climbed the slope to rejoin the cart track they'd been following.

It was the right decision. The prudent decision. Solomon wasn't some stranger in a foreign port, easily forgotten. These past two weeks had been the best Jed had known in five years, and he didn't want to spoil the memory of those golden days with Solomon's gentle, apologetic rejection. Or worse.

But now the atmosphere between them felt as strange and awkward as if that imagined rejection had taken form in the air between them.

Another half hour's walk brought them to the crossroads where they would part. Jed stopped.

“Well, here we are. My village is down yonder”—he indicated the track on the right—“and for Barnstaple, you need only keep straight on ahead. You can sleep at Goodman’s farm by Leworthy Hill. Tell him that Jed Trevithick of Ledcombe sent you. And you’ll be in Barnstaple the following morning.”

Solomon nodded tightly.

Jed rubbed the back of his neck. There was nothing more to be said, but still something held them in place, tied together, unable to turn away.

“Not but what you’re welcome to come down into Ledcombe with me, if you like,” Jed said abruptly. “?‘Twill take you a mite out of your way, but you’ll have a warm fire and a warm bed overnight.”

He didn’t really expect Solomon to accept. But Solomon said, after only a moment’s hesitation, “All right. Why not?”

Jed was so surprised that he let out a laugh. “Good. Well... come on, then.”

Together, they followed the track downhill until the open, windswept moorland gave way to the steep, wooded combe where, as a boy, Jed had gathered firewood to sell for tuppence a bundle.

There was the stream where he and the other village boys held twig races; and here grew the sycamore trees with their treasure trove of whirligigs each autumn.

The road wound back and forth, and from time to time, glimpses of the sea shone silvery-blue through the trees. High above the tree tops, a seagull floated on currents of air.

Here, now, was the old oak tree Jed had once fallen from, breaking an arm; there, the

clearing where he'd found an enormous deer antler, the envy of every other boy in the village. It seemed impossible now, that he and that boy were one and the same person.

"I'm afraid I'm dreaming and may wake at any moment," he said aloud.

"I'm very willing to pinch your arm."

Jed dodged out of reach, laughing. "No call for that, thank 'ee."

They came level with the first houses, small and grey-stoned.

Smoke rose lazily from the chimneys, promising warm and cozy firesides.

A young woman was returning from the well with two buckets of water.

She'd only been a little girl when Jed last saw her.

She gaped at the two of them with open curiosity, clearly not recognising Jed.

At the cottage where Jed and Carrie had been born and raised, everything was just as it had been: the honeysuckle growing around the door; the rows of hoed earth out front, waiting for spring planting; the wooden post where Jed always tied Bess up.

An inviting smell of onion soup wafted from the half-open door.

He knocked on the door, and got a shock when an unfamiliar face appeared. It was a middle-aged woman, giving him an enquiring look.

"Yes, what do you want?"

A man appeared at her elbow. Jed recognised him as one of a family of five brothers who'd lived beside the churchyard.

"En't you Jed Trevithick?" the man said.

"Yes, that's me."

"I didn't know you at first." His disbelieving gaze took Jed in from head to toe. "We all thought you were dead."

"Well, I en't." Jed craned his head to see into the cottage. "What's become of my aunt and sister?"

"Your aunt is gone from the village these three years and more. Went back to Exeter, I think. And your sister's up at Penwick's." There was something slightly odd in the way he said it.

"Oh. All right. Thank 'ee."

He withdrew, Solomon following him. The man shut the door, and Jed was left standing, bewildered, in the front garden.

"Who's this fellow Penwick?" Solomon asked.

"A gentleman as owns half the land hereabouts. Carrie has gone to work in his household, I suppose."

He spoke absently, staring up at the cottage.

The plank he had nailed over a hole in the door was still there, and so were the lines he'd carved into the windowsill as a child—he'd had a hiding from his father for that.

But at the windows hung bright green curtains he'd never seen before, not the old blue ones that his mother had made up years ago.

And chickens clucked from a new coop somewhere around the corner of the house.

He turned his head to find Solomon watching him with sympathy in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Jed said. "Here I was, thinking I'd be offering you the hospitality of my hearth and home... And instead we have to traipse out to Penwick's house, and probably sleep in his stables." He gathered himself. "Come on, no point hanging around here."

Penwick lived up on the headland, a mile or two outside the village.

The shortest path there would take them through the heart of the village, across the green and past the smithy.

Jed had spent years picturing this moment: the old familiar sights and sounds that would greet him, the childhood friends who would address him by name.

Now he found he was reluctant to take that path across the village.

Reluctant to discover what else might, like his childhood cottage, have undergone some unexpected and unsettling change.

There would be time enough for that later.

Instead, he led Solomon around by the woods. They hiked up the long, sloping road that climbed the headland, the sea sparkling below them. A little boat bobbed in the bay, and two small figures were gathering cockles in the very spot where Jed had been pressed.

They came to a pair of ornate granite gateposts set in a high wall.

Beyond the gate, a manor house was visible through the trees at the end of a short driveway.

As a boy, Jed had sometimes clambered over that wall on a dare, to steal an apple or a plum from the garden.

He had never been inside the house, of course.

“We’ll go round to the kitchen door,” he said, avoiding the main gate and leading Solomon down a side lane which he knew would take them to the stables and the back door.

But before they had gone more than a few yards, they met a well-dressed man about Jed’s age. It was Penwick, the master of the house.

“Afternoon, sir,” Jed said, tipping his cap. He had hoped to slip around the back without running into any of the family.

“Trevithick,” Penwick said. He was staring in shock. “You’re alive.”

“That’s right, sir.”

“You had better come into the house. Your sister will be overjoyed.”

“Into the house?” Jed repeated, puzzled.

Penwick cleared his throat. He looked oddly sheepish. “You must congratulate me, Trevithick. Your sister did me the great honour of accepting my hand in marriage.”

Jed could only gape, dumbstruck.

Penwick's gaze flickered sideways to fall on Solomon. "And, ah, bring your friend."

"My name's Dyer, sir," Solomon said, putting a hand to his cap.

Penwick gave him a distracted nod. "Well, come along, both of you."

He led them around to the front of the house. In the hallway, he murmured something about finding his wife and slipped away, leaving Jed and Solomon to the care of a maid, who showed them into a parlour.

Once they were alone, they exchanged glances.

"I take it this is a complete surprise to you?" Solomon said.

"I'll say it is! What the devil—" He shook his head. This still felt like a very peculiar extended jest.

The furniture in the room was very fine: all lacy tablecloths and gold silk damask. But before Jed could take in much of it, Carrie entered the room and threw her arms around him.

"Oh! Oh my Lord! Jed! We thought you were dead."

She stood back, holding him at arm's length to look at him. Her eyes shone with tears. "Oh Jed, it's really you. I couldn't believe it when dear Mr Penwick told me."

"I couldn't believe it either, when he told me you'd married him. But it's true, I see."

"Yes." She was smiling through her tears. "Yes, it's true."

He took a good look at her. She wore a fine silk gown of deep green, with a sort of lacy shawl. Her thick brown hair was pinned up under an immaculate white cap.

“Are you happy, Carrie? Does he treat you well?”

“Yes, very happy.” Her voice had the ring of sincerity to it. “Oh Jed, I thought I’d never see you again. How came you here? And—?” She cast a curious look at Solomon.

“This is my friend Solomon. Solomon, my sister Carrie. Mrs, ah, Penwick.”

They exchanged nods, each eyeing the other curiously.

“I got your letter, years ago, saying you’d been pressed,” Carrie told Jed.

“But we already knew what must have befallen you. Two dozen men were pressed up and down the coast that day, and when you didn’t come home...

Oh, how we wept, Aunt Ellen and I! Cousin Robert went to Minehead to try and get word of you at the Rondy there, but you must already have been transferred to a ship.  
”

“Where are Robert and Aunt Ellen now?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

“They went back to Exeter when I married.” She put out a hand to touch his arm. “I’ve been so worried— But here you are, delivered to me by the grace of God. Have you been discharged from your ship?”

“I ran.”

“Oh! Oh dear! What will Mr Penwick say?”

Solomon raised an eyebrow. Jed frowned. He opened his mouth to warn Carrie to keep that secret to herself, but before he could speak, Penwick entered the room.

Carrie froze for a moment. Then she gathered herself and turned to him, saying brightly, “My dear Mr Penwick, can you believe it? My brother, returned to us. Sit down, Jed, you must take some tea with us.”

She rang a bell, and a maid entered. Soon, they were all seated awkwardly around a tray of tea and biscuits. The tray was fine polished beech with a mother-of-pearl inlay, and the teacups were delicate little things. Those porcelain handles wouldn’t last long at sea.

Jed sat with his hands on his knees, reluctant to touch anything. His eye fell on a frayed patch on the sleeve of his coat.

It was most peculiar watching Carrie play the gracious host. The fine silk of her dress rustled when she poured the tea.

“Thank you, my dear,” Penwick said, accepting a cup from her.

Jed had never in his life expected nor desired to find himself taking tea in the Squire's parlour.

He wished the man to the devil, so that he might speak to Carrie more comfortably.

He wanted to ask her if she had received any of his letters after the first one.

Carrie couldn't read any more than he could—or at least, she hadn't been able to five years ago.

But a gentlewoman in her position must keep the household accounts.

He studied her, wondering if her position had come easy to her.

“You look well, Trevithick,” Penwick said.

“Yes, sir,” Jed said awkwardly. “I mean, thank you, sir.” He hadn't touched his cup of tea yet. Neither had Solomon.

Penwick cleared his throat. “I take it you were discharged, Trevithick? Paid off from your ship?”

There was a short, pained silence. Jed had some wild thought of lying.

The biscuit Carrie was buttering snapped in half. Its remains crumbled into her plate. With unsteady fingers, she laid down the knife. “Mr Penwick, my dear—”

Penwick studied her, taking in her flushed cheeks. He looked back at Jed.

“I hope you don't mean to say you ran?”

Jed looked him in the eye. “That’s right, sir. I ran.”

“Surely you don’t intend...” Penwick trailed off. “Your place is on your ship. Your duty—”

Solomon shifted in his seat, but did not speak.

Carrie was very still. Jed met Penwick’s gaze.

Penwick looked away, lips pursed. He’d been a nervous little boy; Jed had a sudden memory of seeing him trailing around after his father, the old squire, looking miserable every time he was called upon to speak.

“What duty is that, sir?”

“I mean, defending England’s shores. The threat of invasion... the foreign tyrant...”

“I see. Funny how I spent the past five years convoying merchant shipping in the East Indies, then.”

Penwick winced. His gaze slid away from Jed and fell on Solomon. “And your friend...?” He addressed himself to Solomon. “What was your name again, my good man?”

“My friend is a landsman,” Jed said firmly. “And so was I, once, and wish to be again.”

Penwick frowned. “Your place is on your ship,” he repeated, seeming to take courage from the dictum.

Jed spread his hands on the table. “My place is where I decide it is. Sir. And what I

want to know now is, what's become of my horse and cart? Where's Bess?"

When Penwick said nothing, Carrie spoke up. "I don't know, Jed. Mr Penwick's man of business dealt with all our furniture and so on, when I left the cottage. Mr Morgan, you know."

"Bess en't a piece of furniture!"

"No, of course not. Perhaps your cart is in the carriagehouse?" She looked helplessly at Penwick, who held up both hands, disclaiming all knowledge. She turned back to Jed. "I suppose Mr Morgan will have some record of the sale..."

Penwick cleared his throat again. "When your brother returns to his ship, he won't need—"

"I'm not returning to my fucking ship."

It came out loud and angry, but he didn't care.

He opened his mouth to go on. Solomon touched his arm, and he subsided, swallowing.

Solomon leaned forward to speak to Penwick in a hard, level voice.

"The man's horse and cart are missing. Seems to me you'd best instruct your man of business to look into the matter. "

There was another pained silence.

"Yes, naturally I will do so," Penwick said stiffly.

Carrie was studying her teacup. Penwick would not meet Jed's gaze either. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Jed grabbed his hat and rose to his feet, unable to bear this any longer. "I'll have a look in the stables for my cart, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Jed," Carrie said when Penwick did not speak.

Solomon picked up their haversacks and followed Jed from the room.

Outside the house, Jed aimed a vicious kick at a stone on the driveway, sending it skittering across the gravel. "Can't believe my sister married that prick."

Solomon murmured his agreement. His quiet presence was balm to Jed's nerves.

"I'm sorry, Solomon. I promised you hospitality, not... whatever this is."

Solomon shook his head. "Not your fault. Nevertheless, I think I'd best go. You have enough to worry about without bothering your head over me too. If I leave now I can still reach that farm you mentioned by nightfall, I think?"

Jed's anger evaporated, with the shock of realisation that this was goodbye. The end of things between them. Everything seemed to be going wrong today.

"Yes. Yes, I—" He gathered his thoughts. "Don't leave the village by the road we came down on. There's a more direct route to Barnstaple." He gave Solomon directions to set him on the right road.

They were alone on the driveway. In the distance, the cowbells of a passing herd rang out, faint and discordant. The late afternoon sun was in Jed's eyes, and he squinted against it to see Solomon's face.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be staying in Barnstaple,” Solomon said, “but... maybe you know a tavern there where I can leave word for you?”

“There’s the Anchor. It’s a big place on the riverfront. I hope—” He broke off. “I have to see to this business about my horse and cart first.”

“Of course.”

And then there was nothing else to keep Solomon there. With a final nod, he turned and walked away, soon disappearing from sight beyond the gateposts.

Jed swallowed. Then he cursed himself for a fool. He had business to see to.

At some point he would have to find a place to sleep, for he did not intend to stay under Penwick’s roof. He had plenty of friends in the village, who would no doubt be happy to put him up for the night. But first—

He went to the stables.

The head groom was a man called Charlie Hodges, born down in the village, and with whom Jed had often played as a boy.

“Afternoon, sir,” he said cheerily, straightening up and touching his cap.

Jed scowled. “Knock it off, Charlie.”

“Well, you are the master’s brother-in-law now, en’t you?” Charlie said with a smirk.

“Do you know what became of my horse? A bay draft. She’ll be a ten-year-old by now.”

“Sorry, Jed. Don’t ring a bell.”

“Or my cart?”

They looked around the carriagehouse and the other outbuildings together, without success.

Charlie scratched his head. “I reckon you should take a look out at Blake’s farm. I mind as how he bought some of our old ploughs and harnesses a few years back. And the Williams brothers have a bay draft, I think.”

Jed spend the next few hours traipsing around the district in a fruitless search. He returned to Penwick’s house, hot and tired, and went round the back again. Crossing the stableyard, he ran into the same maid who had fetched tea and biscuits earlier.

“Mrs Penwick has been looking for you, sir. She would like to see you.”

Carrie was waiting for him in the parlour. Something in her expression reminded Jed of all those times when they were children and she was about to say something she knew he wouldn’t like. As soon as the door had closed behind the maid, she burst out, “Jed, you must leave.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m afraid... there’s a press gang has their Rondy at Minehead, you see. They’ve been there a week already. What if they were to discover there’s a deserter here in Ledcombe?”

“And how would they discover that?”

“Anyone might tell them.”

He gave her a long, hard look. The old Carrie had never hesitated to tell the truth.

“Oh, Jed! I tried to reason with him, I did!”

Damn Penwick. He’d punch his lights out. “Where is he?”

“Gone to Minehead himself to speak to Lieutenant Vaughan.”

“On horseback? When did he leave?”

“Immediately after you left the house.”

With a good horse, it was only a few hours to Minehead along the coast road.

And even quicker, of course, to come here by sea with a tailwind.

How long had Jed been walking around the neighbourhood, looking for Bess?

He had lost track of time. One thing was certain: if this Lieutenant Vaughan put to sea instantly, as he might well do for the tempting prize of an able seaman, he and his men could round the headland at any moment.

“You could have warned me before Penwick left the house, that I might stop him.”

“Oh no, how could I? To see you two fight— No, you must leave here and not come back.”

Jed gave her a hard look. “I suppose it wouldn’t be convenient to you to have your brother around the place, reminding everyone you came from dirt, for all you’re a fine lady now.”

“No, Jed, that’s not true, and you know it.”

Jed studied her. She’d always been such a forthright person, never backing down from an argument. But they’d usually been on the same side in any serious argument.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be too convenient for Penwick neither.”

“No, that’s not— He believes this is something he is honour-bound to do. He says every man must do his duty.”

“Easy for him when his duty is so pleasant.”

“Oh, Jed, we can’t talk about that now. There isn’t time. You must hurry!”

He’d like to stay and face Penwick. Give him a good left hook to the jaw. But he couldn’t hold off the entire press gang with his fists.

Carrie stood there, red-faced but determined.

Have we become strangers to one another, Carrie? Jed wanted to ask. But there was no time.

He turned and walked from the room.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Jed left the house in a hurry, stopping only to warn Charlie Hodges to spread the word about the press gang. Then he was out on the road over the headland, walking fast.

He felt heartsick. Other men ran from their ships and managed to settle down quietly. Why couldn't he? But other men didn't have the local Squire for a brother-in-law.

A bend in the path brought him within sight of the river mouth far below. The harbour was strangely deserted, save for the men climbing from a fore-and-aft rigged vessel moored along the east pier. The press gang tender!

Jed stopped short. They'd come even more quickly than he'd feared. He couldn't go anywhere near the village. But if he made for the wooded slopes below the moors, and if the gang came directly up the headland to Penwick's house, and if Jed's luck held—

He left the road and headed across the fields, away from the sea. Soon, he was in the woods, running headlong and not stopping until he had gone all the way around the village and was on the far side, on the road to Barnstaple. His breath was coming in gasps, and he slowed to a walking pace.

This road climbed away from the sea, following the course of one of the many steep-sided combs that wound their way down to the Ledmouth.

The river banks would be a luxuriant green later in the year; even now, they grew thickly enough to hide the sea from view, thank the Lord.

Jed rounded a bend in the road, and there was Solomon, coming down the hill towards him.

Jed stopped in the middle of the road, overcome by a rush of pleasure mingled with disbelief.

They hurried to meet each other.

“Didn’t like the look of your brother-in-law,” Solomon explained. “Kept thinking I’d better turn back, and so—I did.”

Jed blinked over eyes that felt oddly damp. Probably it was just the sight of a friendly face. He had to suppress an urgent impulse to throw his arms around Solomon and kiss him.

Solomon raised an eyebrow, lips quirking. Jed’s gaze rose from Solomon’s lips to his eyes and read amusement there, and perhaps a welcome, but no hostility.

Jed swallowed, heart turning over.

A creaking and rumbling from further up the hill recalled him to his senses. A farm cart pulled by two horses came into view, making its slow and careful way down the rocky, pitted road. The old man on the box tipped his head to them as he rumbled past.

“What’s happened?” Solomon demanded. “I hope you found your horse and cart?”

“Ha! Chance’d be a fine thing.” In a few words, Jed told him what had happened.

Solomon’s mouth thinned into an angry line. “I would offer to hold him down while you kick him in the teeth. But instead, I suppose you’ll have to run in the opposite

direction.”

“I don’t even yet know where I’ll run to.”

“Come to Barnstaple? You said it was a town where a man could easily find work. Where the press don’t come.”

The hilltop offered an unimpeded view for miles around. In the distance, the sea sparkled pink in the setting sun. At Jed’s feet, the moors spread out gold and brown, shading into dusk.

The moors had always been synonymous with freedom for him. Freedom had a bitter taste today.

He heard a pebble roll across rocky ground, and turned to see Solomon climbing the hilltop to join him. Behind Solomon, down where the open moors met the woods, lay a handful of abandoned mine buildings, their crumbling stone walls overgrown with ivy and creepers.

It had been too late in the day to reach any of the farms or inns where Jed usually slept on the road to Barnstaple, so he had brought Solomon to this old pithead where he used to come as a boy; one of his uncles had worked here when the mine was open.

Solomon picked his way across the rocks, slowly coming closer. Like Jed, he had taken off his hat and tucked it under his arm to save it from the westerly wind that buffeted the hilltop.

“I found an old tin bucket in one of the buildings,” he said when he reached Jed. “Fetched more water from the spring.”

The familiar routine of setting up camp had been a comfort to Jed: finding a building with its roof still intact, fetching water, gathering wood for a fire. But all the while, anger simmered at the back of his mind.

The sun had almost disappeared behind the hills. Wild ponies on the slopes below were dark brown specks that cared nothing for the troubles of man. But closer by there was Solomon, who'd propped himself against a rocky outcrop, hands in his pockets, a steady presence.

Jed took a few restless steps back and forth. Penwick was probably sitting comfortably in his drawing room at this very moment, filled with the righteous warmth of the good citizen and loyal subject.

"Every man must do his duty," Jed repeated. He spat on the ground.

Solomon's lip curled. "I'd like to give that fellow a taste of his own medicine."

"It's not even Penwick I care so much about, in truth. But Carrie—" His voice broke. "My own sister!"

"It hurts all the more when it comes from someone you love, don't it?" Solomon said quietly.

Jed turned to face him. Solomon was still lounging against the rock, but Jed knew him well enough by now to see the little lines of tension around his mouth. His gaze met Jed's, sympathy warming the cool grey of his eyes.

Jed could lose himself in that gaze. Pretend, at least for a time, that they were alone in the world, and no one else mattered but them.

Then Solomon grimaced and looked away. "I'm sorry. This is rotten for you. You

thought you were coming home to family and friends. Instead you've a poor substitute in me, I'm afraid."

Jed took an involuntary step forward. "No! Don't say that. I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have here with me."

Solomon's eyes widened.

They were very close now. If Jed reached out, he could touch Solomon's face, tip up his chin. Trace a finger over his parted lips.

He felt again the rush of surprise—of joy—that had filled him when he saw Solomon coming towards him down the combe.

"You came back for me."

"Yes." Solomon's voice was low, with a hoarseness to it that made the hairs rise on the back of Jed's neck.

It was almost dark on the hilltop now, and the final rays of the dying sun fell on Solomon's face. A challenge, an invitation, seemed to gleam in his eyes.

Solomon was taller than Jed, but from where he sat, propped against the rock, he had to tilt his head up to meet Jed's gaze.

Jed leaned in, and Solomon rose to meet him, their mouths coming together almost cautiously.

Then Solomon's hands were on Jed's head, gripping him, and they were kissing with wild urgency, open-mouthed, tongues touching, breath mingling.

Solomon made a soft, needy noise in the back of his throat, and something loosened in Jed's chest. He didn't think he could have taken another rejection today. But he was here, and Solomon was here—he wasn't alone in the world. Solomon wanted him.

Jed had both arms braced on the rock, on either side of Solomon's hips.

Solomon's gaze flickered down, and Jed's followed it to where their bodies were pressed together.

Jed's thigh was between Solomon's legs, against the long, eager length of his prick, and he moved experimentally, raising his head to watch Solomon's eyes flicker shut, his face go slack and blissed.

Jed shifted his weight to one hand. With the other, he traced a line down Solomon's front to press a hand to the placket of his breeches. "Can I—?"

Solomon's eyes blinked open. Now, amusement sparked there. "Not in this wind. What I have in mind involves rather less clothing than we're wearing now."

Jed laughed, another surge of joy bubbling up in him. "You'll hear no argument from me."

Stopping often to kiss, they stumbled back down from the hilltop and into the pithead building where, earlier, they had built a fire in the hearth and laid out their blankets for sleeping.

Jed leaned against the doorpost, waiting impatiently while Solomon crouched to light the fire. Tinder sparked, and soon the dry leaves and twigs were blazing up.

Solomon sat back on his haunches, hands on his thighs, looking up at Jed with

firelight in his eyes. “How do you want me?”

“God, every way. What do you like?”

“I’ve generally found my tastes to be quite broad.”

Jed let out a strangled laugh. “Thanks to London, the School of Vice?”

“That’s right.” Solomon’s eyes glinted with amusement. His mouth was level with Jed’s straining prick. He came forward onto his knees, nuzzling at Jed through the cloth of his breeches, rubbing his cheek against Jed’s stand.

Jed bit his lip. His head had been emptied of blood, and his knees didn’t seem to want to hold him up. He put out one hand to steady himself against the wall.

Solomon looked up at him, no wry twist to his face for once. His lips were slack, eyes dark with desire.

Jed wanted those lips on his again. He sank to his knees, and they were kissing again, less frantic now, deeper, slower. Jed’s heart soared. The life that had been beaten out of him over many years came flooding back; spreading, needle sharp, along his spine, throughout his body.

With clumsy hands he fumbled at Solomon’s breeches, wanting skin on skin. Solomon put a hand to Jed’s neckcloth, but instead of tugging it open, he traced one finger up the line of Jed’s throat, tipping Jed’s chin up so their eyes met.

“You are a wonder, Jedediah Trevithick. I knew you would be.”

Jed grunted, turning gruff. “Get this shirt off, why don’t you?”

They hurried each other out of their clothes, shivering in the cold air, moving to kneel closer to the fire. But it was worth braving the cold to lay eyes on Solomon's lithe, sinewy body, tall and thin and hard-packed. His skin was red and gold in the firelight, prick standing proud, eager for Jed.

Jed knelt, motionless, feeling almost lost for a moment.

He wasn't used to having the luxury of time to stop and look, and he wasn't used to being on display like this.

He knew he was no oil painting, but he thought he must look good enough, all hard muscle from years in the rigging.

Solomon's appreciative gaze certainly seemed to agree.

Jed laid a hand flat on Solomon's chest, so that he could feel Solomon's heartbeat under his fingertips. He had noticed earlier how readily Solomon went limp beneath him. Experimentally, he gave a gentle push, and Solomon sank back onto the blankets they'd laid out earlier.

"Just you stay there," Jed said. "I reckon I'm calling the tune."

He raised an eyebrow, wanting to be sure Solomon was on board.

A flicker of surprise crossed Solomon's face, soon to be replaced by a pleased look, and he nodded mutely. The trust in his expression gave Jed a strange, tight feeling in his chest.

Jed crawled over him, shivering at the first touch of Solomon's skin, the first brush of Solomon's prick against his. He pressed kisses everywhere: shoulder, tendon, jaw, relishing the feel of the long, lean body quivering with impatience under his own.

He'd been waiting for this forever, and he wanted to take his time.

The oddness of the thought struck him, and he let out a huff of laughter.

At Solomon's interrogatory noise, Jed lifted his head to explain.

"Just thinking—if we were in some back alley, we'd already be buttoning up and slipping away by now. "

"Mmm. Glad we en't."

Solomon licked his lips in a seemingly unconscious manner, his eyes on Jed's prick. But Jed ignored that inviting mouth and moved down, pressing kisses to the lean stomach, then paused, hands gripping Solomon's hips, and looked up to meet Solomon's gaze.

"This all right?"

Again that flicker of surprise. But Solomon nodded. "Reckon so. You needn't ask twice."

Jed bent his head and swallowed down Solomon's prick, full and heavy in his mouth until he groaned with it.

He'd always loved this, and doing it to Solomon— It surpassed every daydream.

Soon he was sucking him and teasing his hole in a rhythm that had Solomon whimpering, hands scrabbling for purchase in the blankets.

It was a rush of blood to the head, the intoxicating feeling of being at the helm, of making Solomon's lithe body arch against him. Of finally breaking through that cool

reserve.

Jed was painfully hard now, balls aching in a delicious anticipation. He didn't lay a hand on himself, letting the pleasure-pain build. Instead, he pulled back for a moment, just to get a good look at Solomon: head thrown back, eyes closed, lower lip caught between his teeth.

Solomon groaned. "Jed. Christ. You can't stop now."

Jed wanted to say something smart, but what came out was, "I knew you'd be beautiful like this."

Solomon let out a sound that was almost a sob. Jed bent his head again, working with lips and hand, hard and fast, until Solomon's seed flooded his mouth.

He swallowed and sat back on his heels, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. Solomon lay sprawled on his back, panting, spent prick nestled against his thigh. He was thoroughly dishevelled, Jed saw with satisfaction.

After a moment, Solomon stirred. "Jed. My God." He struggled to sit up. "What do you—"

"No, stay there," Jed ordered, his hand on his own yard. "Let me—"

Solomon let his head fall back again. His hooded eyes met Jed's. "Do your worst," he murmured.

His low voice seared through Jed, raising pebbles on his skin. It took only a few swift strokes, and then he was coming all over Solomon's chest, watching Solomon's lips curve in a satisfied smile.

Jed collapsed on him, limp and wrecked, and felt Solomon's arms come around him.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

A beetle crept over the crumbling shaft of the abandoned waterwheel. Jed watched its progress among the vines and weeds coiled around the wood. Only twenty years ago that crushing mill had been brand new.

A hollow feeling had settled uncomfortably in his stomach. He had thought that this morning he would be lying snugly in bed in his childhood cottage, not standing at the old pithead among the smelting works' scattered remains.

Behind him, a twig cracked. He turned to see that Solomon had emerged from the building where they'd slept and was coming across the grass to join him, haversack on his back.

The knot in Jed's chest loosened. Not everything had gone badly yesterday. They had woken tangled together, closely entwined. It was something Jed had known only a few times before in his life, and never with someone he expected to see again after that morning.

"Ready to leave?" Solomon asked when he joined Jed.

"Not really, no. Wouldn't mind staying up here forever, to tell the truth."

Solomon's expression softened.

Jed settled his haversack over his shoulder. "Best get on, though, hadn't we?"

They entered the woods and tramped through the undergrowth until they reached a dirt track that wound its way past isolated moorland farms.

Last night already felt like a fading dream, chased away by the harsh light of the morning. Jed wished he could let his mind dwell on the memory of it. Savour it. But instead, his thoughts kept circling around to his damned troubles.

“I can’t fight Penwick,” he said abruptly. “Much as I’d gladly see him in hell. Even if he weren’t the Squire, he’s my brother-in-law. And... I think Carrie is happy. I think he’s good to her.”

Solomon murmured in agreement. “He is a sanctimonious prick, though.”

Jed had to laugh. “He is that.”

They stopped talking to ford a stream, picking their way across slippery rocks.

Once they were on the other side, Jed added, “But I bloody well want my horse back.”

“Penwick said something about his man of business. Do you know who that is?”

“I reckon it’s Mr Morgan of High Bray. As soon as may be, I’ll go there and see him.

” There was something else on his mind, but he had been hesitating to bring it up, suspecting it was a subject Solomon would sooner avoid.

“There’s another thing. My sister mentioned a Lieutenant Vaughan of the Impress Service.

Is that the same fellow as nearly caught us at the farm? ”

Solomon stopped walking. “Where is he?”

“She said as how the gang have set up their Rony at Minehead, so I expect he’s there.” He stopped walking too, turning to face Solomon.

The lines around Solomon’s mouth had tightened. “How far is it from Barnstaple to Minehead, would you say?”

“By sea? Or over the moors? Minehead is thirty miles that way, and”—he turned and pointed in the opposite direction—“Barnstaple is ten miles that way. It’s a fair long journey overland—”

“—and a quicker one by sea.”

Solomon’s voice had an edge to it that made Jed want to move mountains to solve his problems for him.

“I wouldn’t fret. The gang won’t stay at Minehead forever, now that everyone in the district knows they’re there.

They’ll move away to some other hunting ground where they’ll have the element of surprise.

Or maybe their Lordships up in London will recall them.

” Solomon looked unconvinced, and Jed added, “And anyroad, every step takes us further away from Minehead.”

Solomon was still frowning, and Jed would have liked to lift a hand to Solomon’s face, to brush his thumb over that line between his brows and smooth it away. But it was easier to do such things in the dark than in the light of day.

“All right, then,” Solomon said finally. “Let’s just get to Barnstaple.”

They reached the town by mid-morning. It was market day, and the streets were thronged with traders and villagers from the surrounding countryside.

“I need to find the riverfront,” Solomon said. “I told my friend Wallace to leave word for me at the first tavern south of the bridge.”

“That’ll be the Anchor. I’ll show you.”

Jed spoke briskly, but in truth he was both curious and nervous to meet this friend who seemed to mean so much to Solomon, and about whom he had said so little.

He led Solomon through the streets towards the river. There was one good thing about this, at least: it was a relief to have something to do. A clear goal, instead of floundering in the fog of uncertainty that had been threatening to choke him since he fled his village.

Barnstaple was much as it had been when Jed had last seen it.

The first time he came here, he’d been a little boy crouched in his father’s cart, gaping open-mouthed at the sights: the busy streets, with their motley hodge-podge of crumbling medieval buildings and prosperous merchants’ new townhouses; the well-dressed shipowners’ wives; the delivery boys weaving through the traffic; the forest of masts rising above the rooftops where fishing boats and merchant ships were moored along the river bank.

At the Anchor, the landlord stopped polishing glasses long enough to answer Solomon’s enquiry.

“You’re Dyer, are you? Your friend said you’ll find him at the sign of the Boar.”

Solomon looked relieved. “At least I know he made it here from London all right,” he

said when they were back out on the street.

The Boar was five minutes' walk away, a busy inn on the town's main thoroughfare, with a carrier's yard attached. In the taproom, a dark-haired woman was serving drinks to the market-day crowd.

When Solomon asked for Wallace Acton, she eyed him curiously. "You must be his friend from London. He's out back—go on through."

The door she indicated led to a back alley. A burly young man, as tall as Solomon and much broader, was stacking barrels against the alley wall.

"Wallace!" Solomon called, and the man turned.

He had fair hair framing a pleasant, open face, with melancholic blue eyes that lit up at the sight of Solomon. In a few swift steps, they came together in the middle of the alley, enfolding each other in a tight embrace.

Jed watched them, taking an odd sort of pleasure in the sight of their joy. At least one of them, out of him and Solomon, had something going well in his life.

Finally, Solomon stepped back, holding the other man out at arm's length to look at him. He was blinking, eyes suspiciously bright. "Thank goodness you got here all right. Are you well? You look well."

"Now, Solomon, I told you not to worry about me."

Solomon said nothing, but only gave him a searching look.

The other man squeezed his arm. "Yes, I'm well. Very much so. What about you? I've been looking out for you this past week. Did you have trouble leaving Town?"

“No, but I had a few adventures on the way. And... I have good news and bad. I’ll tell you everything, but first—this is Jedediah Trevithick. We met on the road.” Solomon turned to Jed, smiling. “Jed, Wallace Acton.”

Wallace was examining Jed with friendly curiosity. He offered his hand, and Jed shook it.

“Jed’s a carrier,” Solomon added. “He took pity on me and showed me the way here. Meeting him was a rare stroke of luck.”

Jed grunted, rubbing the back of his neck. “Pleased to meet you,” he said to Wallace.

A brewer’s cart rumbled into the alley, and Wallace was obliged to move away to speak to the driver. Solomon turned back to Jed.

“I’ll be off now,” Jed said to forestall him. “Let you catch up with your friend. See you around, eh?”

“Wait. Won’t you stay? Have a drink—?”

But it was all too much. Carrie, Penwick, his horse, the press gang...

His head ached, and a chasm separated him from the other two men and their smiling faces.

He was pleased for Solomon—pleased to see him so happy.

But for his own part, he just wanted to get away from here. To hide away and lick his wounds.

“I can’t stay. Got some business in town I must see to.”

Solomon looked alarmed. “Wait! Where can I find you?”

“I don’t know... I’m not sure.”

“Meet me at the Anchor at seven this evening?”

The easiest thing to do was to nod in agreement.

Out in the street, Jed let himself be carried along by the market-day crowd. A fishmonger elbowed him out of the way. A carter cursed him for not getting out of the horse’s path quickly enough. Jed scarcely noticed.

He had nothing in mind. No destination. No plans.

A deep, instinctive part of him shied away from making any.

He did have acquaintances in Barnstaple—people he’d done business with in the past, who might be able to help him to a job.

But he didn’t want to think about that. To think about it would be to admit that he might not be able to return to work in Ledcombe.

He would, at the very least, need to find somewhere to sleep tonight.

There was a lodging house in one of the narrow streets around the merchants’ exchange, a cheap, clean place where he used to sleep when he was in Barnstaple too late to return home to Ledcombe before nightfall.

The woman scrubbing the front step stopped her work long enough to promise to keep a bed for him.

“You can come any time after nine o’clock. ”

That done, he wandered away. It was late afternoon by now, far too late to think about trying to get out to High Bray to see Penwick’s man of business. Jed went to the Anchor and sat over a pint of ale, ignoring anyone who tried to engage him in conversation.

Solomon arrived at seven. A flicker of something that looked almost like relief crossed his face when he saw Jed. But it was gone before Jed could be sure.

He sat down opposite Jed and pushed a fresh pint across the table to him. “How did you go on today? Get your business seen to all right?”

Jed shrugged. “Some of it.” He had found a place to sleep, at least. That counted, didn’t it? He picked up the full glass and raised it in salute. “Thanks.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

For the blink of an eye, he was just a carrier having a drink with a friend, his horse and cart waiting outside. But that man—that carefree fellow who’d never been to sea, never knuckled under to an officer’s orders... That man was dead and buried, six foot under.

He met Solomon’s eye with a grimace. “I confess, I did nothing all afternoon but sit here and drink.”

Solomon’s mouth twisted in sympathy. “Listen, I called in at the carrier’s yard behind the Boar to see if they might be looking for hands. And indeed they are. We’d have to go back tomorrow morning to see the proprietor, a Mrs Drake.”

We? Jed thought.

Solomon went on, “I spoke to Mrs Steele—she’s the landlady at the Boar.

She’s well acquainted with Mrs Drake, of course, and she said she’d put in a good word for me as a friend of Wallace.

You too, if you want.” His voice trailed off.

Probably he had been hoping for a more enthusiastic response from Jed. “Maybe you’ve other plans?”

Jed was touched and a little overwhelmed. Not knowing what to say, he settled on, “So you mean to bide here in Barnstaple, then?”

“Yes. Me and Wallace, we talked it over, and we’re staying for the now.” He eyed Jed, still waiting for a real answer.

Jed ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck. He didn’t get the impression that Solomon was a man who often put his head over the gunwale, risking being shot down. Jed felt like he’d been offered some rare gift.

But coming to Barnstaple had never been part of his plans, and he couldn’t shake the feeling of being adrift, unmoored, in dense fog. These past five years, he’d doggedly followed the same heading, and now he was dangerously off course.

“Listen, I—I have to think about it.” The change in Solomon’s expression was subtle, but it made Jed hurry on, trying to soften the blow. “I’m setting to be my own master again, you see. Don’t want to be following orders from some Mrs Drake and her head yardman.”

It wasn’t the whole truth, but it was the only part of the truth that he could manage to put into words.

“Of course. I understand.”

Silence fell between them.

Solomon leaned back in his seat, one arm stretched casually along the back of the bench. “I’ll be outside the Boar at seven tomorrow morning.”

Jed nodded. For a moment, they just looked at each other.

Then Jed got to his feet. “I’m going to head out. Get some fresh air.”

Outside, night had fallen, and the street was painted in patches of light and darkness.

Jed stood motionless in the shadows outside the Anchor, not knowing where to go. A passing watchman stopped to shine his lantern in Jed's face.

"Evening, friend," he said. "Any reason you're loitering in the shadows there?"

Jed grunted and moved on down the street.

When Jed was a young man, he'd lived from day to day, never needing to plan far ahead.

It was clear he'd take over his father's route, and beyond that, he didn't need plans.

He had a life that suited him perfectly: long, pleasant hours alone on the road with his horse for company, and a welcoming village to come home to.

A decent livelihood, with enough work to live comfortably.

And an excellent excuse for travelling to towns where he could enjoy the anonymous company of other men of his kind.

The sea had taught him that life was a series of hard knocks you couldn't see coming: impressment, shipwrecks, friends killed and maimed, being turned over from ship to ship like so much cargo. But throughout it all, he'd always clung to the idea that his home in Ledcombe was there waiting for him.

He drifted through the dark streets, past bursts of talk and laughter from open windows. Two young women stood giggling in the light spilling from an alehouse door. A group of drunken seamen went stumbling by. To Jed, they were all figures in an eyeglass, small and far away.

He wished it was two days ago, and he was up on the moors with Solomon, with

everything to look forward to.

Down by the quays, the tide was low in the river, and the briny smell of the mud flats met his nose.

The vessels moored there were small merchant ships, fore-and-aft rigged, much smaller than anything he'd served on.

His eye rested on two men aloft on a lugger out in the middle of the river.

As he watched, two other seamen came to the river bank and hollered to their shipmates to send them a jolly boat.

It was a bloody peculiar world: seafaring men could walk the streets without fear here, merely because the local J.P. happened to be a wealthy shipowner with no love for the Impressment service, while twenty miles away, the press gang scoured the coastline for victims.

That was decidedly an argument in favour of staying in Barnstaple for the moment, at least as long as the press gang remained at Minehead. And as long as Penwick and Carrie were ranged against him— But the thought of Carrie was a sore spot in Jed's heart that he could not yet bear to poke at.

He turned his back on the river and walked uphill. Where was Solomon now? With his friend Wallace, most likely. Jed's cheeks heated. What on earth had Solomon thought of him this evening, running off like that?

In another, happier, world, they could be lying now in some private place, Solomon's skin warm under his fingertips and Solomon's mouth hard and eager on his.

The shudder of desire that ran through him was so melancholic as to be almost

painful.

At the top of the street, he sat on a low wall, some way apart from the people going by in the dark. He sat there for a long time, turning things over in his head.

In the Navy, they sometimes withdrew from an engagement, the better to regroup and live to fight another day. Jed came to a decision. He would be at the Boar tomorrow at seven. He'd work for this Mrs Drake, if she was willing to take him on.

But only until he could lay his hands on his horse and cart again.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

The following morning, Solomon was waiting for Jed outside the Boar, lounging against the wall. He tilted his head in greeting. “There you are,” he said easily, but something in his manner told Jed that he hadn’t been as carefree as he seemed, waiting to see if Jed would turn up.

Jed felt a prick of guilt. “Sorry about last night.”

“Nothing to apologise for.”

“Well, then—thank ‘ee. This will be just what I needed. Even if it en’t for long. Only until the press gang leave Minehead and I take up my old route again.”

“Of course.” Solomon pushed himself away from the wall. “Come on. Mrs Drake said to be there at seven.”

“Wait,” Jed said, catching his arm. When Solomon turned back, Jed hesitated. “Up at the pithead, what we did—” He searched Solomon’s face, seeing wariness in his eyes. “I wouldn’t be averse to a repeat.”

Solomon relaxed. “Neither would I.”

There had been other men Jed saw on the regular. They sought one another out if they happened to run into each other in the dark alleys around Exeter docks where men of their habits met. But most of the time he hadn’t even known their names. He had no map for this situation.

“But, just—I can’t offer you anything besides, well, my prick.”

Solomon laughed. “That’s all I’m asking for.”

“Well—that’s all right, then.” Still, Jed had more to say.

“And I need you to be clear about one other thing. This friend of your’n, Wallace—”  
He scratched his head, wondering how to put this.

“Nothing wrong with fooling around with more than one man at once— without one of ‘em had expectations as how he were the only one.”

“And you’re asking if Wallace has such expectations of me, or me of him?”

” Solomon shook his head firmly. “No, nothing like that. I’ve warmed his bed on occasion, but that’s all in the past. Indeed, these past three years, Wallace has been”—he seemed to hesitate over the right word to use—“involved with someone else.”

That sounded complicated, but Wallace’s affairs were none of Jed’s concern. “Good enough for me.”

They stood there for a moment, just looking at each other. Solomon was smiling his half-smile, and Jed wanted to reach out and cup his face, run a thumb over those crooked lips—

But this was neither the time nor the place; and even if they’d been in private, he didn’t know what Solomon would make of such a mawkish little gesture.

“Come on, better not be late,” he said gruffly. And indeed, a nearby clock was just striking seven.

Next to the Boar, a narrow lane led to a cobblestoned yard where two men were

carrying sacks of grain from one cart to another. Solomon asked for Mrs Drake and was directed to the office at the far side of the yard, where a stout, middle-aged woman was speaking to several different people at once.

“If I say it’ll be there on Friday, then you can count on it.

Ask anyone in town.” This to a wizened fellow with the air of a prosperous farmer.

She turned to an old lady with a parcel.

“My clerk will take care of that, ma’am.

Toby, take the lady’s parcel. Now, Mr Dalley”—this to the farmer—“when I say Friday, it’s only if you have that worsted here by this afternoon, mind. ”

She and the farmer shook hands on the deal, while Toby—a scrawny, red-haired young man—made a note of the old lady’s parcel in a ledger that lay open on the desk.

Mrs Drake showed her two customers out the door, then turned to Solomon.

“You’re Dyer, are you? Mrs Steele tells me you’ve come down from London. Worked as an ostler, she says. You know how to handle a horse, I take it?”

“I was head ostler in one of the biggest coaching inns on the Borough High Street. Worked there eight years.”

“Hmm.” She was a square-faced woman in her fifties, grey hair pinned under a neat black cap. Her expression gave nothing away. “And who’s this?”

Jed returned her gaze, chin raised. He was a carrier too, even if he’d never owned a

yard with a dozen carts and strings of horses as Mrs Drake did.

“This is my friend, Trevithick,” Solomon said.

Mrs Drake’s gaze raked Jed from head to toe. He had the uncomfortable feeling of standing to attention on deck during Sunday inspection as a sharp-eyed captain, keen to find fault, examined him for spots of tar. “There used to be a family of carriers of that name in Ledcombe. Any connection?”

“Michael Trevithick was my father. My name is Jedediah.”

“I thought you looked familiar. You have your father’s face. You don’t work out of Ledcombe anymore?”

Jed shook his head without offering any explanation.

“I remember your father as a decent fellow, God rest him. Lord, it makes one feel old.” She fell silent for a second, then became all business again.

“Well, I’ll take you both on, on a trial basis.

A penny a mile, regardless of carriage, and paid on return.

No deductions for spoilage, without it was by your negligence. ”

Solomon directed a questioning look at Jed. They were reasonable terms, and Jed nodded.

Mrs Drake looked satisfied, and they shook hands on it.

“You can start at once. I’ve twenty bales of cotton for Adamson’s mill and the regular

string of packhorses for Clifton.” She turned to speak to the red-haired clerk. “Toby, tell Bill I’ve found someone to go with him this morning. We can send Old Abe to Exeter instead.”

The young man put down his pen and hurried to the door to whistle for Bill.

Solomon caught Jed’s eye, and they shared a grin.

Bill turned out to be a heavysset, square-jawed fellow with his cap set at a rakish angle.

“The cart is for the mill, and the packhorses are for the Clifton run,” he explained in an irritatingly patronising tone of voice. “There’s no getting a cart up the Clifton road at this time of year.”

“I know,” Jed said, bristling instinctively. “I’ve been up there myself many a time.”

The smug bastard didn’t even seem to be listening to Jed. “You’ll walk with the lead horse,” he went on. “Your friend there will take the rear, and I’ll be in the cart. You see to the harnesses, now, and mind you test everything twice.”

Jed had to bite his tongue. “Aye, aye, sir,” he said sourly.

But that sourness soon cleared when they set out.

It was impossible for him to remain in a black mood when they were on the road.

The cart rumbled along at a walking pace, pulled by four strong draft horses.

Behind it came the string of packhorses, sacks and boxes strapped to their backs.

Whenever Jed looked over his shoulder, there was Solomon at the far end of the string, his cap tilted back so the sun fell on his face, his long legs eating up the miles. He smiled whenever Jed caught his eye.

Jed had kissed that mouth. Wrung from it strangled moans that had gone straight to his own prick. Brought a flush to that narrow face and turned those grey eyes dark with desire. If they were alone on this journey—

“Mind your horses,” Bill called back. “Keep them moving there. Hey up, hey up!”

Jed gritted his teeth.

The road wound its way across low-lying farmland.

The cart got stuck in the mud more than once, and they had to stop to put down sacks before the wheels and haul it out.

It was something Jed had done hundreds of times before.

Back in the old days, he'd never thought he'd be happy to be struggling to haul a cart out of the collection of muddy ruts that passed for a road.

But today he welcomed every moment of it.

With the open road ahead and the jingle of the harness in his ears, he could almost forget that he was working for Mrs Drake instead of himself.

By mid-morning, they had covered half the distance to the mill.

They stopped by the roadside to water and feed the horses and break their own fast. A copse of sycamore trees on one side of the road sheltered them from the wind.

The sun had come out, but a mist of rain still shrouded the high moorland in the distance.

The three of them ate their bread and cheese while the horses chomped peacefully. Bill launched into a long monologue about a girl he had hopes of in Barnstaple.

Solomon reached for the bottle of cold tea, and Jed handed it to him. Their hands brushed, and their eyes met. Solomon's gaze dropped to run over Jed's body, and a shiver of desire shot down Jed's spine.

Bill leaned across between them to snag the last apple in the food basket. "How are you liking the work, friend?" he asked Solomon. "Different from what you're used to?"

"It's all right," Solomon said easily.

"They said you came down from London?" Bill said. "Bet you don't do much walking there."

"Oh, you'd be surprised."

But Bill had already lost interest in London. "I can't believe Old Mother Drake sent us to Clifton. I was sure I'd be on the Taunton run this morning. There's a cock fight there this evening. Last month I won nearly two pounds on a fine grey bantam—"

Solomon sat sprawled against a tree trunk, legs tucked up under him. Jed let his gaze linger, tracing the lines of his body. When his gaze reached Solomon's face, he found Solomon watching him, eyes dark. Heat prickled on Jed's skin.

Bill tossed his apple core into the bushes. He lay back and draped a handkerchief over his face. "Wake me up in half an hour or so."

Soon his snores filled the air, the handkerchief fluttering as he breathed heavily in and out.

Solomon jerked his head towards the woods, one eyebrow raised. Jed climbed to his feet, blood pounding. He was already half-hard.

Beyond the hedgerow that had been sheltering them from the wind, the trees grew closer together. They went further in, pushing their way through the undergrowth, then Jed turned, reaching for Solomon.

Solomon's mouth opened under his, welcoming him, humming with a low moan that could have come from either one of them. The kisses were sweet as fresh water, with a growing edge of urgency.

"Let me—?" Solomon fumbled for the placket of Jed's breeches.

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*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Jed was aching for it. He stuck his hand down Solomon's breeches, pushing clothes out of the way, finding his cock rock-hard, eager and waiting for him.

Solomon groaned. "Christ, Jed. Fuck—"

Jed closed his eyes, savouring the heavy length of Solomon's yard in his hand, the grip of Solomon's long fingers wrapped around him. Solomon's hand gave a clever twist, and Jed bit his lip over a groan.

He braced one hand against the broad trunk of the nearest tree, and pressed closer to Solomon. They brought each other to the edge with swift, hard strokes.

"Christ, I wish you were driving into me," Solomon gasped.

Lust flared, firelike, in Jed's belly, and he came off, unable to stop himself, long, hot waves of pleasure rolling over him.

Solomon dropped his head onto Jed's shoulder, with a soft, breathy laugh. "God, I needed that."

They stood there for a long moment, arms about each other, propping each other up. Jed's pounding heart slowly returned to its usual rhythm. He shut his eyes, breathing in Solomon's smell, letting himself relax. He found his hand was stroking Solomon's back, slow and rhythmic.

It was strange to stand here, holding each other, instead of quickly buttoning up and moving away. Strange but good. Funny how well they fit together, like they were

meant to be.

Solomon stirred, lifting his head. His lip twitched. "I don't know about you, but I can't bring myself to hurry back. Think Mrs Drake will object if we tell her that in future, every delivery will be delayed by a quarter of an hour or so?"

"If I have my way, we'll need a mint more nor a quarter-hour next time."

Solomon's smile broadened. "Is that a promise?"

"You may consider it so."

Reluctantly, they stepped apart, then found a small stream to tidy up in. As they knelt there side by side, Solomon asked, "Where are you sleeping? It's a penny a night at the Boar, and there's plenty of room for another person."

Jed enjoyed a sudden, pleasant vision of the two of them waking together, as they had at the pithead... But it wouldn't be fair to Solomon. His head was not in the right place, and he had already taken his temper out on Solomon more than once. Better to be alone.

He realised Solomon was still waiting for an answer.

"Nah, I reckon I'm all right. I've a bed at a boarding house."

"All right," Solomon said easily, after only a moment's pause. "Come on, let's get back before Bill wakes up."

After they had unloaded the cart at the mill, Solomon and Bill took the packhorses on up into the hills, while Jed drove the cart, laden with reams of broadcloth, back to Barnstaple. The spring sunshine was warm on his shoulders, and he hummed under

his breath as he drove.

At Mrs Drake's yard, the weekly carrier's cart from Exeter had just come in. Jed drew up alongside, but did not immediately climb down from the driver's seat. He watched the people gathered around the Exeter carrier, clamouring for the goods and messages they were expecting.

When Jed used to return to Ledcombe with Bess and his cart, half the village would turn out to greet him, eager to collect a parcel or just hear the latest news from the outside world. That evening, Jed always dropped into the village alehouse to share the news he'd picked up along his route.

That happy-go-lucky young man hadn't had a care in the world. He'd never been started, never been flogged. Never felt a ship's deck list as the hull filled with water. Never heard the great guns roar, never seen cannonball crash into wooden decking and send splinters flying, raining down death.

Every man must do his duty.

He'd already given five years of his life. Five years of blood and sweat.

He chewed his lip, turning things over in his head. He wanted to dream of Penwick apologising, saying Carrie had convinced him not to have Jed pressed. But he couldn't even begin to imagine it: the idea that the Squire would kowtow to a man from the village.

Everything seemed rather hopeless. He was counting on the press gang leaving Minehead someday soon, but even after that happened, his troubles would not be over.

Penwick might still find a way to set the law on him, or simply prevent him from

finding his horse and cart.

And other carriers had probably expanded into some or all of the routes he used to drive.

A voice intruded into these bitter thoughts. “Here, you, what’s-your-name! Trevithick!” It was the head yardman. “Don’t just sit there. Get that cart unloaded.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Jed muttered under his breath. He climbed down from the seat and trudged around to the horses’ heads.

The first thing to do was visit this Mr Morgan and discover what had become of his horse and cart.

The following day he had a stroke of good luck.

“Trevithick, you’re going to Heasley Mill,” the head yardman said as soon as Jed arrived at the yard, and raised his voice to call to the man who had just emerged from the stables leading a sturdy piebald packhorse. “Norris, here’s Trevithick to go along o’ you.”

The road to Heasley would take Jed very close to the village where Mr Morgan, Penwick’s man of business, lived. That had to be a good omen, surely.

He and Norris—a taciturn but not unfriendly fellow—set off with a long string of packhorses. After they’d made their delivery, it wasn’t difficult to persuade Norris to stop in High Bray for a drink.

“I have some business to see to,” Jed said. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He left Norris sitting on the grass outside the alehouse with his mug of porter, the

packhorses grazing peacefully beside him.

A village boy gave Jed directions to a smart brick house on the green, where a housemaid showed Jed into a room filled to overflowing with books and papers.

Behind a desk piled high with ledgers, a middle-aged man sat writing.

The young clerk at the corner desk was also scribbling away at something.

“A Mr Trevithick to see you, Mr Morgan,” the housemaid said.

The middle-aged man glanced at Jed. “Take a seat, my good man,” he invited, his pen still moving over the page.

Jed dropped into the chair, settled his hat on his knee, and looked squarely at Mr Morgan.

“I’m here to enquire about certain goods sold when you had Mrs Henry Penwick’s cottage cleared out on the occasion of her marriage.”

Mr Morgan laid down his pen and looked Jed up and down. “Who are you again?”

“My name is Trevithick, sir. I’m Mr Penwick’s brother in-law.”

Mr Morgan raised an eyebrow. “I see.”

Was that a hint of disbelief in his voice? Jed pressed on.

“My horse and cart were sold when my sister married. A draft horse, a bay Clydesdale, fourteen hands, and a four-wheeler with a fixed axle. I’d like to know what became of them.”

“Mr Penwick has said nothing to me about this.”

Jed’s heart sank.

“Can’t you just tell me what happened to my horse and cart, sir? You must have it wrote down in one of your books here.” Surely one of the incomprehensible rows of black-inked loops and lines must hold Bess’s fate.

“No doubt we do, yes.” He made no move to open any of the ledgers. “I’m afraid I can’t be of any use to you, my good man. If I had received word from Mr Penwick, or if you had a letter from him, it would be a different matter. But as things stand—”

Jed gritted his teeth, forcing himself to stay polite. “I beg you to reconsider, sir. It would be a great kindness on your part.”

“I won’t take up any more of your time.” Mr Morgan rang a little bell. “My housemaid will show you out.”

With difficulty, Jed swallowed the angry retorts that rose to his lips. He needed to keep in this fellow’s good graces.

Reluctantly, he stood up. “If you should change your mind, sir, you can find me at—” But he was unwilling to give out his exact whereabouts. Instead, he named an inn whose landlord he was acquainted with from his younger days. “A letter left at the Royal Oak on the Taunton road will find me.”

Mr Morgan’s expression said that he was highly unlikely to be making use of that information.

“This way,” said the housemaid, gesturing at the door to the street.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Mrs Drake's yard was the largest and busiest in Barnstaple.

Jed, who had never aspired to own more than one cart, took a certain jaundiced interest in seeing up close the operation of such a big yard, with its strings of packhorses, three long waggons, and diverse carts.

He might almost have enjoyed the experience—had he been a visitor and not a hired man.

“You're late,” the head yardman said when Jed and Norris returned from Heasley Mill. “Stopped for a drink, did you?”

Jed bit down an angry retort. But Norris only shrugged. “Where do you want these reams?”

Once the rolls of cloth had been unloaded and counted, and the horses stabled, Jed went in search of Solomon. He found him in the tack room, hanging up harness. Bill was there too.

“—come on, I'll bet you have a story or two in you,” he was saying to Solomon as Jed came in. “Left London in a hurry, from what I hear at the Boar?” He winked at the two grooms who sat polishing tack on a nearby bench.

Solomon gave Bill a broad, toothy smile quite unlike the little half-smile he usually bestowed on Jed. “You shouldn't credit everything you hear,” he said easily, but Jed could see the tension in his jaw muscles.

“So who were you running from, eh?” Bill persisted. “An angry father or an angry husband?”

The two grooms sniggered.

Bill was holding one of the large, soft rags used for drying off the horses. Jed eyed it thoughtfully, then raised his voice. “That you as left the mare with the wet legs outside, Bill? Funny way to treat the beast.”

Bill scowled, but he did turn and leave the room. Solomon flashed Jed a little smile of greeting—his real smile, not the grimace he’d given Bill.

“You nearly done here?” Jed said, stepping forward to help Solomon hang up the last of the collars. They left the tack room together.

“Thanks,” Solomon said once they were outside in the yard.

Bill had already led his horse away to the stables, and they were alone.

“I suppose it’s only natural that he should be curious—as you too must be.

Every other man in the yard but Wallace and me must have been born and raised within thirty miles of here. ”

Jed was indeed damned curious; that was no lie. But it had not escaped him that Solomon didn’t like to talk about it. “None of my business,” he said.

Solomon gave him a look, but said only, “Did you manage to see Penwick’s agent?”

“Yes, much good that it did me.” Briefly, he told Solomon what Mr Morgan had said.

“I’m sorry, Jed. That’s a hard blow.”

“Hah, you’ve said it! I would have liked to punch that sour old bugger right in his sour old face.” Oddly enough, though, the worst of his anger had dissipated now that he had told Solomon about it.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t rightly know. I reckon I’ll have to see Penwick again—or better my sister, maybe.

But I daren’t return to the village as long as the press are at Minehead, and Penwick eager to summon them at any time.

I suppose I might get someone to write Carrie a note, asking her to meet me somewhere.

Are you much of a hand at writing, by any chance? ”

Solomon shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

They broke off their conversation in order to skirt the group of townspeople who had gathered to wait for the weekly waggon from Taunton.

“I’m still hoping to find my cart lying around in some outbuilding on Penwick’s land,” Jed said when they came together again. “Because if it’s been sold, and Bess too, there’s no chance I can buy them back.”

“You wouldn’t say Penwick should buy them back for you? Or return you their worth in coin?”

“Well, the thing is...” This was a sore point that Jed had been brooding over.

“There’s also the matter of Carrie’s dowry, you see.

We had some savings put by for her marriage, but that’s a paltry sum compared to the dowry a woman of Penwick’s class would have brought him. And if, then, I go to him cap in hand—”

Solomon murmured his understanding.

Jed made a frustrated noise. “I just want to go back to my village, dammit. Back to my old life!” He exhaled. “I’m sorry. I know I’m not the only one who’s eager for the press to leave Minehead.”

Solomon hadn’t mentioned the press gang lieutenant since they’d arrived in Barnstaple, and Jed hadn’t asked.

But now Solomon said, “He’s the reason we left London. Lieutenant Vaughan, I mean. Bill weren’t so far off the mark when he guessed we were running away from someone.”

They had reached the far side of the yard by now, a quiet corner by the feed shed, and Solomon came to a stop, facing Jed.

“Oh,” Jed said. “I did wonder. So, he’s... I suppose it’s not pure chance that brought him to this part of the country?”

“I don’t know, and I hope never to find out.”

Solomon’s voice was tight. Jed didn’t want to press him on a subject he was clearly reluctant to discuss, merely to satisfy his own curiosity. But there was one question

he had to ask. “You said he weren’t in the Impressment Service when you knew him?”

“No, he was a half-pay lieutenant, hoping for a ship.” Something in Jed’s expression put a wary note in Solomon’s voice. “Why?”

“It’s only that... I’m wondering how he ended up here.

The press gang officers are all men who are washed up ashore, you know.

They call them the Yellow Admirals—because their misfortune might be catching.

So if this fellow threw away any hope of a ship and volunteered for the press gang in this district...

He must badly want to find you, that’s all. ”

There was a long silence.

“Please don’t say that to Wallace,” Solomon said finally. “He’s uneasy enough as it is.”

“All right. I won’t. Indeed, I’m sorry I’ve said it to you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me.”

The Taunton waggon, with its team of six horses, came lumbering through the main gate, and suddenly the yard was a whirl of activity. Jed and Solomon stepped in out of the way of the grooms that came hurrying up to take the horses in charge.

“Speaking of Wallace,” Solomon said in what sounded like a deliberately lighter

tone. “I wanted to ask—why don’t you come have a drink with us?”

“With you and Wallace?”

“Yes. I’d—well, I’d like you to meet one another properly. He’s that curious about you. Says I talk about you a great deal.”

“All right,” Jed said readily. He liked the sound of that. He was equally as curious about Wallace—and also harboured a secret hope that Wallace might satisfy some of his avid curiosity about Solomon. “Not tonight, though. You’re leaving with the mill waggons, en’t you?”

“Yes. I won’t be back for a few days.”

“A drink, then,” Jed said. “First chance we get. And then, perhaps, afterwards, the two of us—”

He met Solomon’s gaze, and the warmth there lit an answering glow in his belly.

They were standing rather closer than was perhaps wise, and Jed was very conscious of all the people around them: the stable boys going in and out of the feed shed, the two men harnessing a string of packhorses, the old fishwife sitting waiting with a trunk and a basket.

Jed wished very much there was somewhere in this busy yard that they could slip away to.

It was only a day since they’d ducked into the bushes together on the road to the mill, but it had already become something Jed craved.

It was absurd: during all those days travelling together, he’d very easily been able to

suppress the occasional inconvenient flash of desire, but now, after only a day apart, it seemed impossible to do so.

Solomon swallowed, and Jed watched the column of his throat move; let his gaze fall to the neckerchief he'd like to tug loose—

“Dyer!” the yardman called. “I’ve been looking for you. En’t you leaving in half an hour?”

Solomon stepped away. “Soon,” he mouthed at Jed before he left, and Jed grinned to himself.

Jed was still sleeping at the boarding house—if you could call it sleeping. The long, close-packed line of beds reminded him uncomfortably of the crowded gun deck, and the men grumbled when he woke them with his nightmares.

After yet another unsettled night, he set off to walk to Drake’s yard.

It had rained overnight, and the streets glistened in the pale light of dawn.

Seagulls flocked around a baker’s cart on the street corner, hunting for scraps that had fallen into the gutter.

Their harsh cries stabbed at Jed’s aching head.

As he crossed the street in front of the merchant’s exchange, something terrifying caught his eye: shiny brass buttons on a blue coat, and the glint of the rising sun on a sword-hilt.

He stopped short, all the breath leaving his chest. There was nowhere to run. It would be foolish to run. Insane. It would only attract attention. But how could he stand here

and risk being taken as a sea-faring man?

But even as these horrified thoughts chased through his head, he realised his mistake. It was no Naval officer, but only a smart young merchant, and the sword-hilt was only a large pocket-watch he'd pulled out to consult.

Jed sank onto a nearby stone step, his hands clenching his knees to stop his fingers trembling.

What the devil was the matter with him? It was several weeks now that he'd been free of the lash. More than long enough to be done with letting every little thing spook him like a road-shy horse.

But it was a long time before he could get to his feet and go on.

The town clock was striking seven as he reached the gateway that led to Mrs Drake's yard.

Outside the inn next door, Solomon's friend Wallace Acton stood on a ladder, cleaning the gutters.

The dark-haired barmaid was holding the ladder, and the two of them were deep in conversation, but Wallace broke off long enough to wave a greeting to Jed.

Jed, his mind still elsewhere, barely managed to gather his thoughts long enough to return the greeting. He turned through the gateway into the yard, stomach still taut with nerves.

A carrier's yard was the perfect place to hear the news from all across the county: three smugglers pressed out of a lugger off Ilfracombe; a seaman arrested in Exeter for killing a ganger; the Minehead press gang seen as far inland as Taunton.

The danger of the press had always come and gone in waves, with the tides of war and decisions taken up in London. But now, after years of war, it seemed to be a hot press all the time, with no respite, and Jed was suffocating.

He and Norris were taking the Ilfracombe route that morning, and Norris was already in the yard, arguing with a man who wanted to send a live goat by the train of packhorses.

“Truss it up by the legs, it’ll be very well. Sure ‘tis only a small goat.”

“No animals bigger nor a hen, them’s the rules,” Norris said. “We en’t drovers, friend.”

He cast an appealing glance at Jed, who stepped in to deal summarily with the man, sending him packing with his goat trailing after him on a length of rope.

Norris eyed Jed. “Taking out all your spleen on him, were you?”

Jed shrugged.

“Well, so long as you don’t take it out on me,” Norris said. “Come on, we’ve any number of parcels to strap up.”

As they loaded the train of packhorses with the parcels and packages for Ilfracombe, Jed’s burst of temper cooled.

“I was a bit short with that man with the goat, weren’t I?” he said finally.

“Just a bit, yes,” Norris said.

Jed ruminated on that. Something must be ailing him, for he never used to be so ill-

tempered. He wished he could find the man again and apologise to him.

“Uneasy about going to Ilfracombe, are you?” Norris said. “Being just along the coast from Minehead as it is.”

Jed looked up sharply.

“Uneasy about the press gang, I mean,” Norris clarified.

“En’t you?”

“Not as such. Even if I do have the ill luck to run into the gang, I’m a carter, not a man who uses the sea.

They’ll see that clear enough. Odds are they won’t bother me, unless they be in desperate great need of men that day.

” He gave Jed a sympathetic look. “Of course, I’m not an old seaman like you. ”

Jed fumbled the parcel he was holding and almost dropped it. He put it down carefully. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, something in the way you walk, maybe. That seaman’s gait.

” At Jed’s look of dismay, he added quickly, “Or maybe I’m just imagining that.

I mean, I already had a good idea you were a seaman.

Mrs Drake’s clerk said you’d been away for years and just come back, and you’re always perking up your ears at any mention of the press gang. ”

Did he really still walk like a seaman? Surely not. Jed shifted his weight uneasily from foot to foot.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t set out to worrit you,” Norris said. “Don’t you fret your head about Ilfracombe. We en’t even going anywhere near the seafront.”

Frowning, Jed stooped to pick up the parcel he’d set down. “Let’s not dawdle here, making ourselves late.”

In the end, the trip to Ilfracombe proved as uneventful as Norris had promised, to Jed’s enormous relief. By the time they returned to Barnstaple, Solomon had left for Taunton. Jed only saw him briefly over the next few days, Solomon driving into the yard as Jed drove out.

But on Thursday morning, Jed arrived at dawn to find Solomon standing outside the office with Mrs Drake and the head yardman. Mrs Drake waved to Jed to come and join them.

“—should heal soon enough, he thinks,” she was saying as Jed reached them. “But he won’t be able to drive for another week at least, I reckon.” She turned to Jed. “Trevithick, I’m sending you and Dyer to Exeter, leaving right away.”

Jed met Solomon’s gaze. Exeter was more than a day’s journey away by the large, ponderous carrier’s waggon used on that route. They’d be overnight on the road together. The glint in Solomon’s eye said that he was thinking the same thing.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jed said, eyes still on Solomon.

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“...and for the labouring man, of course, there is nothing better for the soul than good, healthy work in the fields, as I always tell my parishioners,” the parson finished. “Don’t you think so, good sir?”

This was addressed not to Jed but to the middle-aged travelling salesman who was the only other passenger in the covered waggon making its ponderous way along the Exeter road.

The salesman did not respond, but only shifted to get more comfortable on the bench where he was crammed in between a sack of wool and a parcel of newspapers.

Solomon was on the driving box, and Jed was in the waggon with the passengers, lost in his own thoughts.

What were the odds that he and Solomon would have the waggon to themselves when they stopped for the night?

The parson, surely, would take a room at the White Swan Inn, but the middle-aged salesman looked like the class of man that might want to save his pennies and sleep in the waggon with the waggoners.

“Bishop Stafford reminds us that the working man’s long day of toil is his best protection from life’s temptations,” the clergyman went on. “From drink, idleness, loose women... As a matter of fact, I have a copy of the good bishop’s sermons with me. Perhaps I may—”

“I’m liable to be ill if people talk at me when I’m travelling,” the salesman said. “It’s

the rocking of the waggon, you see.” He put a handkerchief over his face.

The parson glanced at Jed, who quickly turned his head to look at the road ahead. “Hill’s coming up,” he said.

The salesman groaned, but they all got out to lighten the load as the six sturdy horses dragged the heavily laden waggon up the hill.

They reached Copplestone Cross just as the sun was setting.

The White Swan was one of the busiest inns on the Exeter road.

When they pulled into the yard, the ostler who came out to greet them was a grizzled little man known to Jed of old.

“Lord above, it’s been years since I’ve seen you on this road, friend.

I thought you must surely be dead. Weren’t you the Ledcombe carrier, before? ”

“I’m working out of Barnstaple now.”

“So I see, so I see.” He turned to bellow through the taproom’s open window. “Carrier from Barnstaple’s here.”

The clergyman had climbed down from the waggon, and now he addressed himself to the ostler. “Is there a bed free, my good fellow?”

“There is indeed.”

“Excellent,” the salesman said. “I’ll come with you to find the landlord, parson.”

The two passengers disappeared into the inn. Jed met Solomon's eye. They didn't have time to speak—the first people were already hurrying from the inn, clamouring for their goods and parcels. But anticipation shivered down Jed's spine.

An hour later, he and Solomon were in the taproom. They'd fed, stabled, and brushed the horses, and washed the mud of the journey from their own bodies. Now they were sitting down to a hot meal.

Solomon raised his tankard with an ironic tilt of the head. "Here's to a healthy day's labour. I hear it's good for the soul."

Jed let out something that was halfway between a huff of laughter and a groan. "To think we'll have that parson fellow in the waggon again tomorrow."

"So, did your day of toil divert your thoughts from the paths of temptation?"

Jed looked him up and down. Solomon sat lounging back against the wall, head bare and neckerchief loosened, legs stretched out under the table so that his calves brushed Jed's. The corner of his lip twitched.

Jed's mouth curved in an answering smile. "No, I can't say as it has."

He brought his tankard to his lips, thinking of promises of things to come.

In the meantime, sitting here and talking was its own pleasure.

On board ship, he'd been entirely self-sufficient, neither avoiding nor seeking out company.

For five years, he'd clung to the idea that he was only there temporarily; for a man who was just passing through, there was no point making close friends.

But with Solomon, it was different. Over the past few weeks, Jed had found himself telling Solomon things he'd never expected to tell anyone else.

And if Solomon didn't always seem able to do the same...

well, maybe that was something that would come in time.

The taproom was crowded, but they had a table to themselves, a little space of their own. As they talked, they had to raise their voices above the raucous laughter and singing that had broken out at a nearby table, where a group of travellers were in their cups.

"You used to work at an inn like this, didn't you?" Jed said.

"A London coaching inn, yes. Bigger nor this one, even. Upward of twenty coaches a day. No waggons, though."

"And... don't you miss it? I mean, you were head ostler, weren't you? It was you giving the orders, and now you're a hired man in a carrier's yard."

Solomon gave this due consideration. "It don't bother me as such, no. Maybe I'll have a position like that again someday. But maybe someday's a long way away."

"So..."—this was Jed's real question—"you don't expect to leave Barnstaple any time soon?"

"Well, Wallace has become uncommon friendly with the barmaid at the Boar, so he's not keen to leave. And as for me"—he met Jed's eye—"I have reasons of my own to stay."

It was an unlooked for but very welcome gift, and pleasure warmed Jed's innards.

Over the years of his adult life, he had taken many drinks in many inns and alehouses, some of them with carnal intent. But none of those evenings had ever been like this one.

“What are we doing?” he asked abruptly.

“I don’t know, but I’d like to go on doing it.”

Jed swallowed. “So would I.”

Their plates were empty, and the chatter and carousal around them faded into the distance, so that there was nothing in Jed’s world but Solomon and himself.

“Another drink?” Jed said, nodding at their empty tankards, not actually expecting Solomon to say yes.

Solomon shook his head. They left the taproom together. Outside, the cool night air tingled on Jed’s skin. Solomon was inches away, and the back of his hand brushed Jed’s.

They separated, Jed to look in on the horses, while Solomon made the rounds of the waggon.

The horses snickered softly as Jed passed through the stables.

His chest was tight with expectancy. With a light step, he left the stables and crossed the yard to the stony ground behind the inn where they’d left the waggon, nodding to the sleepy-eyed stable boy on duty.

By the light of his lantern, he threaded his way through the empty carriages and carts drawn up there until he reached Solomon.

They climbed into the waggon together, pulling the canvas door shut behind them. Jed hung the lantern from its hook, ensuring that its light would cast no betraying shadows on the canvas.

He turned to Solomon, who was watching him in silence, face shadowed in the lantern light. He looked perfectly calm, save for the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

“Lie down,” Jed said. “Get them breeches off first.”

Silently, Solomon stripped off his clothing. They had cleared space on the floor for their blankets, and Solomon stretched out on them.

Jed put his hands to his neckerchief, but didn’t pull it loose.

Instead, he just stood, unmoving, for a moment.

It was a sight to take his breath away: Solomon lying on his back, head pillowed on his raised arm, his naked body all planes and angles in the dim light, his prick rapidly stiffening, his warm, grey gaze fixed on Jed.

Jed swallowed. Slowly, he began to strip under that intense gaze. He laid his shirt and breeches aside, but then he paused. It was tempting to join Solomon on the blankets, to press his body over Solomon’s, to let the night unfold. But there was something he had to ask first.

Solomon was a man who liked to be obliging. Jed had noticed that about him on more than one occasion: he did what he thought people wanted of him. What assumptions had he made about what Jed wanted?

Jed had a feeling that Solomon would go along with whatever he suggested. And that wasn't going to work between them for more than one night.

"What do you want?" he said bluntly. They were speaking in low voices, even though there was no risk of being overheard.

Solomon gave him an amused look. "Didn't we have this conversation once already? I have broad tastes—I don't doubt I'll like whatever you do."

"You said something about me, driving into you..." Desire shot through him at that tempting thought. Deliberately, he banked it for the moment. "Is that your preference? Or had you lieber take the other part?"

Solomon propped himself up on his elbows. He wore a faintly puzzled air. "I took it that you would... That is, whatever you like."

"I'm quite fond of being on the receiving end of a good rogering myself," Jed said experimentally, his eyes fixed on Solomon. He noted the hitch in Solomon's breath at his words, and went on, "You, sliding inside me. Tight as a glove around you."

Solomon's prick jerked. His throat moved as he swallowed. "Yes. That."

The air in the waggon was heavy with desire.

"All right." Jed knelt over him, straddling him but not touching him yet. "Let me see you frig yourself."

Obediently, Solomon put a hand to his shaft and began to stroke himself, slow and tight. Jed knew, now, what those long fingers felt like. He studied Solomon, noting how he liked it, storing up the knowledge for future use.

Solomon's head fell back, face slackening, eyes losing focus.

"Stop," Jed said. "That's enough."

Solomon groaned, but his hand stilled. He met Jed's eye, his lips twisting wryly.

Jed grinned at him. "I'll need that stiff prick of yours later."

That won him a strangled laugh. "At—at your service."

Jed leaned forward, bracing himself on his hands. He lowered his body over Solomon's, chest to chest, bending his head to claim a kiss.

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Solomon's hands came up, and he took Jed's head between his hands, held him there for a moment just to look at him, then pulled him down for another kiss.

There was a tenderness in the gesture that Jed hadn't looked for, and he felt a warmth in his chest that had little to do with the brush of cocks between them.

Soon, though, their kisses turned harder, rougher, with a building urgency that shot straight to Jed's aching balls. He sat back, looking around for the bottle of harness oil he'd left on top of a nearby crate.

After years of hurried couplings in foreign ports, Jed was determined to take his time tonight. Make it worth Solomon's while. He wanted to give Solomon everything he needed and desired. Wanted to see him lose control. Wanted to open him up and share the secrets carved in his heart.

Solomon was watching him. The undisguised hunger in his gaze went straight to Jed's gut, coiling inside him, hot and thrilling.

Soon, he was ready. He lowered himself onto Solomon's cockstand, feeling Solomon slide slick and slow inside, savouring the burn. He had done this many times before, in all manner of arrangements, but tonight he wanted to see Solomon's face.

Solomon's lips were pressed tightly together, his long frame taut with the effort of keeping still.

"I'll tell you when you can move," Jed said, and felt the shiver that ran through Solomon at that.

Then Jed was fucking himself on Solomon's prick, hard and slow. Solomon was beautiful beneath him, his face transfigured, bright with the flush of arousal. He put out one hand, reaching for Jed's, and their hands entwined, gripping tight.

"All right?" Jed gasped out.

"Yes. Christ. Jed. "

"You're so good. You're doing so well, don't you dare move. God, I've wanted you for weeks."

There was something unbelievably beautiful about this, two bodies made one, cradled by the shadows, pleasure made flesh. Solomon's hand was still in Jed's, and he quivered beneath Jed, thighs trembling. Jed hardly noticed the ache in his own thighs.

"Now," Jed ground out. "Let me have it."

Then Solomon's hips were snapping up into him, sending jolts of pleasure rolling through him. They set a frantic pace, fighting together for the perfect rhythm, skirting frustration and finding ecstasy. Solomon had a firm grip on Jed's arse now, hard enough to bruise, urging him on.

It was a joyful thing to see: Solomon's naked pleasure, his emotion writ large across his face, that bloody reserve finally abandoned. Jed thrilled at every grunt he wrung from Solomon's lips, every spasm of pleasure that racked his body.

"Harder. Make me feel it tomorrow."

They were two sides of the same coin, buckle and strap, hand in glove, fitting perfectly together. They moved together, their ragged breathing filling the waggon, until Solomon was spending inside him.

“Your hand... touch me,” Jed got out, and it took scarcely more than the brush of Solomon’s fingers before he too was spending, pleasure surging through him.

They lay slumped together afterwards, gasping for breath.

“Christ, that was good,” Jed said at last, with feeling.

Solomon laughed softly. He turned his head towards Jed, seeking him in the shadows, and Jed pressed a kiss to his lips.

Next morning, Solomon sucked him off, hard and fast, encouraging Jed to fuck his mouth. Afterwards, they lay panting on their backs, shoulders pressed together. It was still dark outside, and the cock had not yet crowed.

Jed’s entire body felt wrung out. “Christ, you’re good at that.”

“I’ve had a deal of practice.” There was a hint of amusement in Solomon’s voice.

“The delights of London, City of Vice?”

Solomon hummed in agreement. When he spoke, he sounded thoughtful.

“When I was a boy, I heard a lot about the evils of man’s carnal nature.

When I... left home and came to London, I think I felt I had a lot of catching up to do.

” He turned his head to meet Jed’s eye and winked.

“London is a monstrous fine place for a young man looking to meet new friends.”

Jed turned onto his side and put one arm over Solomon's chest to feel him warm and solid under the palm of his hand, to soak up the pleasure of being so close. A long list of tasks awaited them when the sun rose, but for now they could just lie here together.

In the distant stables, a horse neighed.

A glimmer of dawn was creeping around the canvas doors of the waggon.

Jed tilted his head back, examining Solomon thoughtfully by that pale light.

In some ways, Solomon was almost a different person in bed: more open, readier to share his desires in a way he didn't share anything else.

"If you want something, you'll tell me, won't you?" Jed said impulsively.

"Of course." He sounded puzzled.

"It's just... Sometimes I think you have a tendency to... think too much of what other people want."

Solomon gave him an odd look. "I assure you, I wholeheartedly enjoyed everything we just did. And last night. And the times before that."

"I know. I just... I didn't mean in bed, so much as out of it." He realised he wasn't quite sure what he did mean. But he was saved from having to explain further by the sudden crowing of a cock from somewhere nearby.

Solomon groaned and sat up, feeling around for his breeches. "Ugh. Still twelve miles to Exeter, en't it?"

"Speaking of Exeter," Jed said, with a certain reluctance.

“I was thinking of London, and what you said about how easy it was to meet like-minded men there... There are places of that sort in Exeter too, you know. A certain back street. A secluded corner of the quayside. I’d be glad to give you directions, if you want. ”

He made the offer sincerely: he knew the district, and Solomon didn’t. It seemed only right to share his knowledge. But he found himself caring more about Solomon’s response than he had expected.

Solomon regarded him thoughtfully. “I find I’m satisfied enough for the now.”

Something unknotted inside Jed. “Well, good. Same for me.” He got up, feeling oddly lighter. “Come on. Them horses won’t harness themselves.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

“Any word of the press gang in town?” Jed asked the boy at the provisioner’s yard, where he’d come to buy a tub of axle grease.

Exeter, like Barnstaple, was a river port. Jed knew its narrow streets well. But familiarity didn’t breed contempt: a port meant seamen, and seamen might mean the press gang, for Exeter, unlike Barnstaple, didn’t have the advantage of a local magistrate hostile to impressment.

The boy pulled a face. “They pressed four men out of a tavern on the quays last week, I heard tell. But that was a gang from a ship anchored out in the Exmouth, and it’s since sailed, I expect. You want anything else with that axle grease?”

Jed shook his head. He hoisted the wooden tub onto his shoulder and set off through the streets of Exeter, back to the place where he had left Solomon and the waggon. They had arrived in town earlier that afternoon, and he’d been looking over his shoulder ever since.

He was in a narrow lane under the old city wall, uncomfortably close to the coal quays, when he heard a commotion up ahead.

Around the corner marched an adolescent midshipman in uniform, followed by a gang of burly armed men. In their wake came a group of angry women, shouting and throwing stones. They fell back whenever one of the gangers turned to brandish a cutlass at them, then surged forward again.

Jed froze, fear choking off his breath. The lane was almost deserted. A few yards ahead of him, another man ducked prudently into a doorway. But Jed had nowhere to

hide.

He knew better than to run; he'd only draw attention to himself. After a moment of frozen panic, he set down the tub of grease and crouched over it, turning his back to the gangsmen. Head bent, he fiddled with the wooden clasp that held the tub closed. His heart thudded in his throat.

Marching footsteps grew nearer. Then they stopped. Jed held his breath.

"In here, men," the midshipman cried. "The bosun must have cut off the other entrance by now." And Jed looked up to see the gang pile into the doorway of a grubby little alehouse, the women following.

An eery hush filled the lane. No one else was in sight.

Slowly, Jed straightened up, light-headed with relief. With shaking hands, he picked up the wooden tub and hurried back down the lane the way he'd come.

When he finally reached the waggon, after taking the long way round, he found Solomon in conversation with a matronly woman, five children clustered about her skirts. Solomon's eyes widened when he saw Jed's face.

"You go ahead and get the children settled," he told the woman. He ushered the whole family towards the waggon, then drew Jed to one side. "What happened?"

Jed grimaced. "Ran into the press gang."

"What?"

"Gave me quite a turn." His voice was coming out gruff instead of trembling, thank Heaven. "They're probably dragging some poor buggers off to sea as we speak."

“You all right?”

“Yes, I’m all right.” Jed wiped a hand over his face. “It, uh, it weren’t the gang from Minehead, I don’t think. Weren’t the same officer, anyroad.” Maybe they’d come off a ship anchored off Exmouth. “Christ, the whole country is infested with them.”

Only now was it sinking in. He’d run into the press gang. He’d known it was a risk, of course, coming to Exeter. But thousands of men lived out their whole lives in the town without ever getting pressed.

He stood motionless, stricken dumb.

Solomon took the tub of axle grease from his hands. “I’ll put this under the box,” he said briskly. “You get that cider on board”—he nodded at the barrels as he spoke—“and I’ll see to the passengers.”

Numbly, Jed did as he was bidden. As he was loading the last barrel, someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he jumped two feet into the air.

It was the clerk Mrs Drake employed to take parcels and sell tickets at this end of the route. The man gave him an odd look. “Another parcel just came in at the last minute,” he said, holding it out. “And here’s the waybill.”

Jed stared at him blankly, his heart still pounding.

Solomon stepped up. “There’s space for that under the box,” he said, taking the parcel. He murmured in Jed’s ear, “We’ll be out of here in less than ten minutes.”

And, thank Heaven, so they were.

“I tried to run twice in my first month,” Jed said. He still had the scars from the

floggings on his back. This morning, Solomon had traced them with his fingers. “Then I settled down to plan my escape properly. Learnt to swim. Squirrelled away money and supplies.”

It was dusk, and they were sitting on a fallen log at the edge of a field a stone’s throw from the inn where they’d stopped for the night.

They had nine passengers in the waggon for the return journey from Exeter: two farm servants, a down-on-his-luck clerk, and the matronly woman with her five children.

And all of them had announced their intention to sleep in or under the waggon overnight, to Jed’s frustration.

At least he and Solomon had managed to slip away together for a few minutes to sit here in this quiet, out-of-the-way place.

“You were five years at sea, I mind?” Solomon said. Their shoulders were pressed together, and Solomon was warm and solid against him.

“Yes. Something always happened to stop me running. Shipwreck sent my savings to the bottom of the ocean once. Then we spent a year on blockade without ever coming within ten miles of the shore... Sometimes I was so miserable I just wanted to jump and swim to shore, any shore, even if it meant years in a French or Dutch prison.”

The words were pouring out of him now.

“When we made sail for England last summer, I thought we’d be paid off.

I could see Portsmouth from the ship’s deck.

Could see the smoke rising from the chimneys.

But we were turned over directly from the Canterbury to the Nonsuch without being let set foot ashore.

Then the Nonsuch was ordered to Bristol, and we learnt as how we'd be sailing for the East Indies again. ”

Bile rose in his throat at the memory of how it had been, the horror that had settled over him when he realised he was leaving England once more.

“So I knew I had to jump before we were clear of the Severn. Left behind everything I'd prepared, everything that would weigh me down in the water. The landsman's garb, the trinkets I'd thought to pawn... everything. I just jumped. I didn't care if I drowned.”

Between them, hidden by their voluminous carter's smocks, Solomon had slipped his hand into the crook of Jed's elbow, and now his fingers tightened on Jed's forearm. “But you didn't. And now you're free.”

“Yes.”

The trees' long evening shadows darkened the field, chilling the air. In the distance, a fox barked. Jed shivered, his old fears painting a cold trail down his spine.

But, as Solomon said, now he was free. He managed a grin. “Could've been worse. At least I came ashore in a place I knew well. Unlike yourself, lost in a part of the world you'd never before set foot in.”

“I was lost, sure enough. But it en't strictly true that I'd never been in Somerset. I think I must have crossed the county at least once, as a baby, for I know I was born in Barnstaple.”

Jed stared at him. "You were born in Barnstaple?" His voice sounded odd to his own ears.

"Well, yes. But I was a babe-in-arms when my parents left town." His voice trailed off at the sight of Jed's expression. "What's the matter?"

"Just... you never mentioned."

"Well, maybe not..." Solomon sounded uncertain now. He loosened his arm, drawing back from Jed to better see his face. "What of it?"

"Nothing. It's not... Only that sometimes I think I don't know you very well."

There was an odd silence.

Jed thought Solomon was going to brush it off with a smile and a lightly spoken quip. But then Solomon said, "I think perhaps... it has become a habit with me to guard my tongue, in recent times. I didn't mean to take that out on you." He paused. "What would you like to know?"

"Nothing. That is, I didn't mean..." Frustration made Jed's voice come out louder than he intended. Deliberately, he broke off. It was surely the height of stupidity to say he didn't know anything of a man who'd lain naked under him a day earlier. "I spoke without thinking."

"My parents were followers and servants of a travelling preacher," Solomon said.

"I think I've mentioned that before now.

They left Barnstaple to follow him. My father was his manservant, and my mother kept house for him as he travelled about from town to town.

He drew crowds of thousands everywhere he went.

People would flock from miles around to hear him preach. ”

This wasn't what Jed wanted to know. He wanted to know what made Solomon tick, not what manner of life some old churchman had led.

He wanted to know what put the nervous tension in Solomon's face, and what could take it away.

How long he could hope to go on enjoying Solomon's company, and whether Solomon thought about that too.

“Good preacher, was he?” he said instead.

“I suppose.” Solomon's lips twisted in a wry smile.

“I reckon many of them were there for the entertainment of it. He knew how to rouse a crowd. Fire and brimstone and the Second Coming. Better nor a play, I'm sure.

” He shrugged. “I don't rightly know what the crowd thought of him... We weren't allowed to talk to them.”

“We?”

“His inner circle. His twoscore and ten most faithful followers. We were forbidden to speak to people outside of the Converted.”

Jed blinked. That sounded downright miserable—and not a little strange.

“I'm not one of the, ah, Converted,” he pointed out. “But then, you said as how you

left when you were sixteen.”

“I did say that,” Solomon agreed. Surprise tinged his voice, as though he didn’t realise that Jed had noted and memorised every scrap of information Solomon had ever let slip.

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“Well, good for you. Or at least, I mean, that seems to have turned out all right for you.” Despite himself, the end of the sentence rose into a question.

Solomon didn’t answer immediately. Finally, he said, “Sometimes I wish I’d run when I was much younger. Not waited so long. And sometimes...” He broke off. “I left people behind. Friends. I don’t know what’s become of them. I should have made more of an effort to bring them with me.”

His voice was even, but the muscles in his jaw had tightened.

“But that’s hardly your fault, is it? They could up and leave too, had they wanted.”

“It en’t so simple. Sometimes you don’t realise you’re in chains until you’ve escaped them.” He shrugged, and when he spoke next it was in a lighter tone, with a laugh in his voice that wasn’t quite convincing. “Anyroad, then I went up to London, and found paradise.”

Following his cue, Jed said in the same lighter vein, “Paradise in the form of many willing young men, you mean?”

“That’s right.”

It was dark enough now that Jed could safely slide an arm around Solomon’s waist. The rough linen of Solomon’s smock was warm under his hand, and soft hair tickled his cheek.

They sat like that for a while. Jed wished they were curled up together in the waggon,

just the two of them. But this was better than nothing.

“You were never tempted to move to a big town yourself?” Solomon asked after some time. “Not as far away as London, of course. But to Bristol, maybe?”

Jed thought of his first time driving to Bristol with his father, and how long the journey had seemed. No one from the village had ever travelled half so far. Going up to London would have been unthinkable. But since then, he’d been halfway around the world and back.

“I thought I’d stay in Ledcombe my whole life,” he said.

“The village carrier. That was all I ever wanted. My days spent out in my cart, crossing the moors, and then back home to Ledcombe at journey’s end.

I thought Carrie would marry one of the boys next door and set up house in the village.

I’d have nieces and nephews, children around me in my old age...

Maybe I’d take on one of my nephews in the carrying line of work. ”

Carrie was a year younger than him, but when they were children she could hold her own against any boy in the village.

She’d never seemed like a little sister, but always an equal companion and playmate.

When their parents died young, she’d taken care of him as much as he had of her.

He couldn’t understand how she could have changed so much.

Or maybe she'd never been the person he thought she was.

Tomorrow, he and Solomon would be back in Barnstaple, and they'd be meeting Wallace for a drink at the Boar. Solomon had said Wallace knew someone who might help Jed write to Carrie.

Writing to Carrie... It was something he'd been putting off, and he knew it. He was afraid of what her reply might be.

The chilly night air prickled his skin, and he couldn't suppress a shiver.

"I suppose we'd better get back to the waggon," he said reluctantly. They'd given one of the stable lads tuppence to watch over it, but they couldn't stay away forever.

Solomon made a noise of agreement, and they both got to their feet.

The sun had disappeared behind the trees, and here in the shadow of the hedgerow it was so dark they could not even see each other's faces.

On impulse, Jed reached out, pulling Solomon to him, arms about his waist. Solomon's lips met his in the darkness.

Jed had never wanted his life to go this way, but it did bring him here to Solomon. And that made up for an awful lot.

"I'll do that," Jed said, taking Norris's place at the horses' heads. "You just get the harness put away."

He liked working with Norris, but the man had a tendency to dawdle, and Jed had plans to meet Solomon and Wallace at the Boar in a quarter of an hour.

He and Solomon had returned from Exeter late the previous evening, and the head yardman had immediately sent Jed out again on a short delivery with Norris. But fortunately they'd returned with just enough time to spare for Jed to make it to the Boar on time.

He clicked his tongue, prompting the two horses into motion. They followed him into the stables, where one of the grooms came to meet them.

"Evening, Wren," Jed said cheerfully.

"Evening, Trevithick," Wren said, throwing Jed a rubbing cloth. "You take the bay, I'll take the piebald."

Jed whistled under his breath as he worked. He had wages in his pocket, and the prospect of drinks with a man he'd been curious about for weeks now. Moreover, he hadn't lost his temper with anyone in at least three days. Maybe he could finally put those bursts of choler behind him.

And tonight, with any bit of luck, he could catch a few minutes alone with Solomon again—

Behind him, Wren let out a sudden, harsh oath. Jed turned.

Wren was bent over the piebald's near foreleg. A fresh, jagged wound marred the skin, blood spurting with each heartbeat.

"What—"

"Caught on a nail," Wren bit out. "Give me a hand here, would you?"

It was one of those leg wounds that bled copiously. Bright red blood was rushing

down the foreleg, pooling on the floor.

Jed's throat was so tight he couldn't breathe.

His vision swam. He was on board a ship—some French frigate—and battle raged around him.

The rigging above was cut to pieces, and the deck was a mess of splinters, a foot long and more, from the pounding the Canterbury's guns had given this frigate a few minutes earlier.

Ahead of him, a lieutenant urging him on. Behind him, the Marines, ready to shoot any man who tried to hang back.

Jed and his shipmates surged forwards, plunging into the waiting mass of crewmen from the French ship.

Jed swung his boarding-axe, hitting some poor Frenchman's head with the flat of it.

There was a sickening thud, and the unhappy bugger crumpled where he stood.

Jed couldn't stop to see what became of him—he was swept onwards with the rest of the boarding party, inexorable.

His ears rang with the thunder of small arms fire and the bellowing of orders. His clothes were soaked with blood; he didn't know if it was French or English. Among the din, someone was shouting, "For Christ's sake, man, what's the matter with you?"

Dimly, Jed was aware of the stables. The injured piebald. Wren, shouting at him. "What's the matter with you?"

Another groom had appeared, seemingly from nowhere; Jed hadn't even seen him arrive. The man was holding the piebald's head, and Wren was trying to tie a knot in the bandage he'd wrapped around the foreleg.

The second horse, the bay Jed had been rubbing down, reared into the air with a nervous whinny, unhappy at being trapped in a small space with the commotion and the smell of blood.

"Don't just stand there, man, get that horse out of the way," Wren shouted at Jed. "Before one of us gets a hoof to the head."

Jed grabbed the bay's harness, whispering calming nonsense to her, hardly knowing what he said. He led her away into one of the boxes.

Finally, he was alone. He sank back against the wall, then slid down it until he was sitting in the straw.

His throat was still tight, and his eyes stung with unshed tears. What the devil had happened to him? He hadn't thought about that day in years. He'd shut it deliberately out of his head... and in any case, many more like days had come after it.

Jed held out his hands. They were trembling.

No blood on them, only traces of harness oil.

But when he closed his eyes, he saw sand scattered across a blood-slicked deck.

Gunwales shattered by cannon balls, lines of bodies sewn up in sailcloth, and carrion birds circling overhead.

The deathly hush of the evening after a battle, and the stench of blood everywhere.

This wasn't the first time his memories had taken him unawares since he jumped from the Nonsuch , even if it wasn't usually so vivid. What was wrong with him?

He took several deep breaths.

Probably he was a bit unsettled, that was all.

Nothing surprising about that. Everything in his life was up in the air: his missing horse and cart, Carrie's marriage, the press gang at Minehead...

Once he was back in Ledcombe, reunited with his horse and cart, he'd be able to put these nightmares and living dreams behind him.

He just had to keep his head until then.

When Jed finally left the yard and went next door to the Boar, the Guildhall clock was already striking the half hour.

The alehouse was busy but not uncomfortably crowded.

Behind the bar, chatting with a couple of boatmen, stood the dark-haired woman Jed and Solomon had spoken to on the day they arrived.

Nearby, a cheerful group of young men were sharing a plate of herring.

Laughter and song floated through from the back room, where the Honourable Company of Wheelwrights were holding their weekly meeting.

Wallace and Solomon were already seated at a table near the bar. When Jed joined them, carrying a drink, Solomon nudged Wallace to get him to shift over a few inches. Jed realised, with a warmth in his chest, that he'd done it so that Jed wouldn't

have to sit with his back to the door.

“Sorry I’m late.” He didn’t want to mention what had happened in the stables.

“Never fret,” Solomon said. “I was late arriving back at the yard myself.” He had been sent with one of the grooms to fetch a pair of horses that Mrs Drake had bought from a dealer.

“That come off all right?” It wasn’t always easy to back a horse that had been broken to driving.

“We only brung one of ‘em back with us, in the end. The other was colicky.”

Wallace pulled a face. “That’s one thing I don’t miss these days: spending hours walking colicky horses in the rain.”

“Were you once an ostler too?” Jed asked him.

“Yes. Solomon and me, we worked at the same coaching inn up in London.”

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That led to a conversation about horses they had each worked with, extraordinary cases of illness they'd seen, favourite poultices and ointments.

Wallace was a softly-spoken man, his voice at odds with his height and broad shoulders.

He smiled often, with a warmth that reached his eyes. He seemed eager to have Jed like him.

Jed couldn't help remembering Solomon's words: I've warmed his bed in the past... It was odd to sit at a table with Wallace after hearing him so often mentioned, and even odder still to think that he must know, or at least have guessed, what lay between Solomon and Jed.

Despite this oddness, the conversation flowed easily; the topic of horses and horse-keeping was a familiar one for all of them.

Wallace and Solomon were polite enough never to let the conversation drift into a discussion of their life in London that would have excluded Jed.

Nevertheless, he was constantly reminded of how well they knew each other.

It was clear in every laugh they shared, every sentence that Solomon started and Wallace finished.

Some bond seemed to hold them together. A bond forged in adversity, Jed thought. He felt a flash of jealousy of that closeness—not because Wallace had ever bedded

Solomon, but because he probably knew Solomon's heart and mind far better than Jed did or ever would.

"Solomon says you have a fine singing voice," Wallace said to Jed, once they had exhausted the topic of the care and use of horses.

"Well... I've a strong voice, at any rate."

"Wallace used to belong to a choir in London," Solomon put in.

As a young man, Jed had been a member of the Methodist choir in his village. He'd loved it: practice in the blacksmith's house, a friendly drink afterwards with the other choir members, and a rousing performance on Sundays. It seemed like another lifetime, now.

"Are you church or chapel?" he asked Wallace. "I ask acause there's a fine choir at the Meeting House on Cross Street."

"Chapel, mostly. Where's Cross Street, then? That's behind the Guildhall, en't it?"

They talked about choirs and singers they had known, those songs that were easiest or most difficult to sing in company, and the particularities of performing in front of a crowd.

"I nearly didn't go along to my first practice, I was that nervous," Wallace said. "I don't know how I worked up the courage to cross the threshold."

"Oh, I know how," Solomon said. "It was in hopes of getting to speak to the pretty choirmaster's daughter."

"It was not! Or... maybe only a little bit."

Solomon's lip twitched. Looking at him, at the laughter sparkling in his eyes and the teasing quirk to his lips, Jed was seized by a burst of fondness.

He felt better now than he had when he left the carrier's yard. Calmer. Coming here was the best thing he could have done tonight. He had, momentarily, been tempted to hide away alone. Thank goodness he hadn't.

The evening stretched out, the conversation flowing over another round of drinks.

Jed found himself watching Wallace, with his ready blush and broad, open smile, so different from Solomon or from Jed himself.

He had noticed that Solomon always seemed to be looking out for Wallace.

Jed understood that. There was something about Wallace's open sincerity that would make any more cynically minded friend of his want to protect him from the world.

One of the taps ran dry, and Wallace was called to fetch another barrel, leaving Jed and Solomon alone.

"I was nervous that the two of you might not get along," Solomon confessed.

Jed had been nervous about the same thing. He shrugged. "You needn't have been. You know, the friend of my friend is my friend, and all that. Don't it say that in the Bible?"

"Hmm... Not in those exact words, I don't think."

"Well, I never was much of a Biblical scholar."

"I know," Solomon said with amusement in his voice. In answer to Jed's raised

brows, he went on, “When I told you my name, back on the beach when we first met, you seemed to think nothing of it. But Jedediah was one of the other names of King Solomon.”

“Was it now?” That resonated faintly with something Jed had heard during his patchy Sunday schooling. “En’t Solomon the fellow as was famed for his wisdom? I must confess I don’t feel very wise myself.”

Solomon grinned. “Neither do I. But I’m happy to be unwise with you.”

Wallace came back carrying another three tankards. Solomon took advantage of his return to rise from the table and step out into the back alley for a piss—which left Wallace and Jed alone at the table.

There was a short silence.

“Solomon talks about you a great deal,” Wallace said after a moment.

“Well, he talks about you a great deal too.”

Wallace’s face creased in a smile. “Not in the same way, I think.”

Jed wasn’t sure what to say to that.

Wallace wrapped his big hands around his tankard, dwarfing it. “You’re, um, only living in Barnstaple for the now, I collect?”

“That’s right. Soon as the press cools off, I’ll be back to my village.”

There was another silence. This was ridiculous. They had been chatting happily not five minutes ago. Wallace was biting his lip. He looked rather like he was trying to

work up the courage to say something.

Jed took another drink.

The dark-haired barmaid stopped at their table. She gave Jed a friendly smile, and then Wallace a broader one. “This the fellow you were talking about, is it?” she asked, indicating Jed with her head. “Solomon’s friend?”

“Yes, this is Jed Trevithick,” Wallace said. “Jed, this is Emma Yates.”

She looked Jed up and down. “So you’re the fellow as wants a letter written?”

“Ah—yes. That’s me.”

“Well, do you come around here any morning before noon. I can even give you a sheet of paper, if you need it.”

“Thank ‘ee. It’s uncommon kind of you.”

“No trouble. Evening, Solomon,” she added to Solomon, who had just joined them.

“Have a drink with us, Emma?” Solomon suggested.

She glanced around. The group of rowdy young men had left by now, and the room was much quieter. “All right. Why not?”

The rest of the evening was spent in cheerful conversation with Emma, who had been born and raised in Barnstaple, and had lots to say about everything.

It was with reluctance that Jed finally left the warmth and cheer of the Boar to walk back to his lodging house alone, through cold and lonely streets.

He comforted himself with the thought that, soon, he would be able to write a letter to Carrie, and that would be the first step on the road back to his old life.

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“Here’s your sixpence back,” the lodging-house landlady said, handing Jed the coin that he’d paid in advance for the rest of the week.

Jed accepted it silently and put it in his pocket. Over his shoulder, he carried his haversack with his spare shirt and stockings done up in a bundle.

The landlady had taken him aside as soon as he came downstairs that morning. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave,” she’d said. “The other lodgers have been complaining about you talking in your sleep. Shouting and sobbing and suchlike.”

It was the truth, and there was no use denying it. Jed left the house with his head held high, ignoring the gazes of the other men, variously curious, sympathetic and judgemental. They didn’t matter. Indeed, they seemed very far away. A sort of exhausted numbness had settled over him.

At Drake’s yard, Solomon was loading crates onto a cart. He saw Jed and came to join him, eying the haversack slung over Jed’s shoulder. “What happened?”

“I’ve been thrown out of my lodgings.”

“Ah.” Solomon’s lip twisted in sympathy.

“Well, you should come to the Boar. There’s a bed or two free.

I’ll speak to Mrs Steele about it, if you like.

” There was something warm like hope in his eyes, and it was the first thing that had

made Jed feel alive all morning.

It was tempting to agree immediately, but he forced himself to be honest.

“I should tell you that the landlady threw me out acause I...” He didn’t want to say he was still having the same nightmares that had plagued him when they were first travelling together. “...talk in my sleep.”

Solomon’s expression softened. No doubt he had guessed the truth. But he only said, “I wouldn’t worry about that. If you turn out to be a bother, there’s even a little room up in the attic that Mrs Steele might give you to yourself.”

Jed hesitated. He didn’t want to reflect badly on Solomon by being a troublesome lodger. But he was so tired, and the thought of being closer to Solomon was so tempting. “All right,” he said. “Thank ‘ee.”

That evening, Solomon led him through the alley behind the Boar and up the back stairs. The inn’s upper floors were a maze of narrow, low-ceilinged corridors and odd corners.

“Mrs Steele has put you in here,” Solomon said, showing him to a room with two beds up under the eaves. “There are two wainwrights in the other bed. They’re only in town for a few days, I think.”

One of the beds had a shirt draped over the cast iron frame. Jed put his haversack down on the other.

“Me and Wallace are directly below you,” Solomon added. “We, ah, thought it better not to draw attention to ourselves by having you take Wallace’s place, and him to go elsewhere.”

Indeed, that was probably wisest. Jed couldn't complain.

Even just to be here was already wonderful: this small, quiet room, a world away from the crowded lodging house with its long line of beds.

And Solomon close by, day and night—Solomon, who had done this thing for him, and was now looking at Jed with hope in his eyes that it would be of help to him.

Something warm uncurled inside Jed's chest.

He couldn't kiss Solomon, not here with the door to the corridor open, but he laid a hand on his arm and leaned closer to murmur in his ear. "Wallace en't in your room all the time, I take it?"

Their eyes met, and Solomon's lip curved in a slow smile. "He en't there just now, as it happens."

There were decided advantages to being at the Boar, Jed decided some time later, with warm skin under his fingers, and Solomon's prick heavy in his mouth.

He loved this. Loved knowing what Solomon liked, what made him gasp and moan, pliant and eager under Jed's hands. Before this, he'd not often bedded the same man more than once, and this growing familiarity with Solomon's body was a heady pleasure.

Afterwards, they lay curled together in the sheets. Jed basked in a feeling of loose-limbed, comfortable satisfaction. They'd put a chair under the door handle, and the only person who might come knocking was Wallace, who, it seemed, knew everything already.

He didn't want to spoil the mood by thinking about why he left his lodgings, or

Carrie, or the letter he planned to send her. Instead, he said, “Your friend Wallace seems to have settled into town all right.”

“Yes, and glad I am to see it. He had a miserable time of it in London, these last few months.”

Jed turned over to face Solomon. “You’re a good friend to him. Always thinking of him.”

Something tightened in Solomon’s face. “I en’t always been a good friend to him in the past, but I mean to do right by him now.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, I’m sure. If he were here to be asked, I’ve no doubt he’d tell me a different story.”

“Maybe.”

Jed lifted a hand to tangle it in Solomon’s hair. He tugged gently. “Come here, you,” he said, and the kiss they came together for was long and achingly fond.

The following morning, Mrs Drake’s clerk, Toby, intercepted Jed as soon as he and Solomon entered the yard.

“Trevithick!” He was waving a folded sheet of paper.

“Someone brought you a letter.” He handed it to Jed, who was too surprised to do anything but take it.

“Also, you’ve to pick up a load from Hensworth’s brewery today.

You too, Dyer. You can leave as soon as Johns and Norris get back here with the

spring waggon. ”

Jed nodded absently, barely noticing as Toby hurried away to talk to another waggoner who had just arrived.

He broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

Black ink covered the sheet of paper, all lines and loops.

With his finger, Jed traced the letters of the signature at the bottom of the page.

The first letter was a ‘C’. For Caroline, surely?

This had to be a letter from Carrie. It was the first time he had ever seen writing from her pen, and it gave him a strange feeling to hold it in his hands.

He ran his eye over the rest of the message, but could do no more than make out a letter here and there.

“Have you any schooling, at all?” he asked Solomon.

“I have the Gospels off by heart. But I don’t think that’s what you had in mind.”

Jed showed him the letter. “It’s from my sister.”

It must have arrived by way of the Royal Oak on the Taunton road. Jed had spoken to the landlord there, a friend of long standing, asking him to pass along any letter that might come for him and stressing that his direction in Barnstaple must not be revealed to Mr Morgan or anyone else.

“I expect Emma Yates would read it for you, if you ask her,” Solomon said. At Jed’s

doubtful look, he added, “You can trust her. We’ve come to know her quite well, Wallace and me.” His gaze flickered to the letter. “Ah... do you think it mentions Lieutenant Vaughan?”

Helplessly, Jed ran his eye over the page again. He was familiar with the shape of the letter ‘V’, but it wasn’t easy to pick it out.

“You can come listen to it, if you want.” Jed glanced around. Johns and Norris were not here yet. “Now?”

Emma was beating a rug in the alley behind the Boar.

“Of course,” she said when Jed made his request.

She sat down on a barrel, letter in hand.

“ Dear brother,

“ I am entrusting this letter to Mr Morgan, who tells me he will see to it that it reaches you.

“ I expect you do not think of me fondly since our last meeting, but I could not let another day go by without attempting my Christian duty to bring about a reconciliation between us.

“ You put Mr Penwick in a very difficult position when you came to see us. How could he, a respectable gentleman who dines with magistrates, ignore the presence of a deserter in the village, at a time when our country has need of every man to defend our shores? ”

Solomon gave a little snort, but said nothing.

Jed's mouth was dry. The hope he'd felt at the words dear brother was rapidly fading, and foreboding was settling cold and unpleasant in the pit of his stomach.

Emma went on reading.

“ Aiding and abetting a deserting seaman is a serious offence, and Mr Penwick has a duty as a gentleman to set a good example to the people of our district.

“ I pray that you will follow his advice and return to the Service. In any case, you must never come to Ledcombe. You will know, I am sure, that the Impressment Service has been established at Minehead this past month, and Lieutenant Vaughan, the officer in charge, often rides up the coast to dine with us. He is a charming gentleman, and Mr Penwick has taken an interest in his charitable works on behalf of retired seamen. Indeed, we had the pleasure of his company only last night. ”

At the mention of Lieutenant Vaughan, Emma glanced up at Solomon, whose lips were pressed tightly together.

“ I hope that you will find it in you to follow your duty and the law. I pray that you remain in good health, and await with impatience our reunion when the tyrant Napoleon has been defeated and the war is over. ”

Emma looked up. Her expression was apologetic. “That's all. It's signed, your affectionate sister, Caroline Penwick. ”

There was a short, pained silence.

Emma held out the letter, and Jed took it. Vaguely, he was aware of Solomon's hand on his shoulder.

If Carrie had slammed a door in his face, she couldn't have hurt him more.

He could hardly believe she'd written those words. Carrie, who had always been his friend and ally, as he had been hers—to send him a letter that could have been written by a stranger! It was as though she'd been bewitched.

“Maybe she didn't write it,” he said aloud. “Maybe Penwick wrote it.”

“It's not a gentleman's hand,” Emma said, sounding apologetic. “Not that I'm any great expert myself, but it looks like an unschooled hand to me.”

“Maybe—at his dictation?” Solomon said.

Jed took a deep breath. He didn't know what to do now nor which way to turn. His old life seemed even further away than ever.

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“I cannot make her choose between her husband and her brother. But I did think she might—” He broke off, crumpling the letter in his fist. He had been planning to write to her, but now he could not even begin to imagine what he would say.

“Thank you, Mistress Yates,” he said to Emma, as evenly as he could, and then, dully, to Solomon, “I suppose we’d better see if Johns and Norris are back. ”

“Want to stop here a minute?” Jed suggested, indicating the coaching inn up ahead. “I could do with a drink.” It hadn’t rained in a few days, and his throat was parched from the dust of the road.

“All right,” Solomon said.

He drew up outside the inn, and Jed climbed down from the cart and went inside.

They were on their way back to Barnstaple from the brewery. It had been a short journey, and a subdued one. Jed spent most of it brooding over Carrie’s letter. Solomon’s quiet presence had been a comfort to him.

In the taproom, it took him a few minutes to get the barmaid’s attention; she had her hands full with the crowd waiting for the Exeter-to-Taunton stagecoach.

When he finally emerged from the inn carrying two tankards of ale, the stagecoach had just pulled into the yard.

Ostlers came running forward with fresh horses, and the passengers piled off the coach, making for the inn to down a hurried drink, or towards the bushes for a piss.

New passengers emerged from the inn and flocked around the coach, fighting over the best places to stow their luggage.

Across the crowded yard, Jed could see Solomon up on the driving seat. He plunged into the crowd, clutching the two tankards to his chest so no one could jostle them.

But when he reached the far side of the yard, Solomon wasn't there. The cart was empty. The horses stood waiting patiently, grazing on weeds by the roadside.

Jed put down the two drinks on the driving seat and looked around, puzzled. Solomon seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and Jed turned. It was a gentleman about Jed's age, dressed in the blue coat and cocked hat favoured by Naval officers. Jed froze.

"Where's the other man who was in your cart a moment ago?" the officer demanded.

Was he alone? Or did he have a gang of men nearby whom he could summon to clap Jed in irons? But they were miles from the sea here, and there was no reason, surely, for him to suspect that Jed was a seafaring man.

"Where's the man who was in your cart?" the officer repeated. There was something familiar about his voice. "A tall, thinnish, dark-haired man."

"Don't know what you mean," Jed said automatically.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Don't play me for a fool, fellow."

Jed had heard that voice before, at Mrs Farley's farm. "Dreadfully sorry to impose on you, ma'am..." Could this be the Lieutenant Vaughan that Solomon was so afraid of? Jed stared at him in shock. He was a short, trim man with hard eyes. Handsome in a

sneering way.

Vaughan returned the stare, giving Jed a long, appraising look.

“Show me your hands,” he said suddenly.

Reflexively, Jed clenched his hands into fists. The tar-stains had worn off after numerous washings, but the distinctive rope callouses were still there. He summoned up an aggrieved voice. “I don’t know who you are to think you can order me around.”

“Show me at once, man.”

Jed twitched, so accustomed was he to obeying gentlemen speaking in that tone of voice, wearing that uniform.

But he didn’t move. Better to brazen it out.

He was an innocent carter, going about his business, and not a seafaring man.

He repeated that over and over in his head.

This fellow Vaughan might have spotted and recognised Solomon, but he couldn’t possibly know who Jed was.

Vaughan strolled around the cart, hands behind his back, and took a good look at the cargo. Jed fought the urge to jump into the cart and hurtle away from the inn, lashing the horses. I’m just an innocent carter... I’m just an innocent carter...

Vaughan returned to face Jed. His gaze raked Jed again, uncomfortably piercing. “I ask you once more—” But he broke off when a young gentleman—the boy looked to be a midshipman—appeared at his elbow.

“Stagecoach is leaving, sir. The coachman says he’ll go without us if we don’t make shift.”

Vaughan made a noise of frustration.

The midshipman cast a curious glance at Jed. “What’s going on, sir? Who’s this fellow?”

“Nothing,” Vaughan said hastily. “No one. It’s of no importance. Come along.”

He turned away, hurrying the midshipman towards the stagecoach.

But before he himself climbed in, he turned back to give Jed another long, hard look.

Then he disappeared into the coach, the guard put up the steps, and the ponderous equipage jerked into motion.

Soon, it had disappeared from sight along the Taunton road.

A sudden hush descended over the yard. No one was in sight save for two elderly women who had left the coach here and were now negotiating the hire of a cart with one of the ostlers. A cat strolled out from behind the stables and settled down in the sun.

Jed sank back against the cart. He couldn’t stay here. He felt too nervous and exposed, even as he told himself that Lieutenant Vaughan would hardly jump down from the stagecoach and come striding back.

And where in buggery was Solomon?

He ran to the taproom and thrust the two full tankards into the hands of the first

person he bumped into. Then he hurried back to the cart and started the horses, urging them down the Barnstaple road as fast as possible.

Half a mile down the road, he pulled the cart up under a tree to wait. He climbed down to pace around, then sat on the grass to brood.

Some time later, Solomon arrived on foot.

Jed jumped to his feet. “Where the fuck were you?” he demanded as soon as Solomon was near enough to hear him.

Solomon didn’t answer. His face was pinched and unhappy, his mouth tight.

Jed was feeling fairly unhappy himself. “That was your Lieutenant Vaughan, wasn’t it? The same man as tried to press us at Mrs Farley’s farm?”

Solomon nodded.

“You saw him coming,” Jed said. His anger was spilling over. “And you just turned tail and bolted. You couldn’t let me know that there was, I don’t know... a Naval officer right there at the inn with me? You could have come into the taproom to warn me, I think?”

“Yes, I could have. I should have. I know. But I couldn’t let him see me. I couldn’t let him know I’m here in these parts.”

“Yes, well, that cat’s already out of the basket.”

Solomon’s face fell. “Bugger. He spoke to you?”

“He asked about you, and had a good look in the back of the cart.”

“Hell and the devil. I thought maybe he didn’t see me.” He rubbed his face.

Jed regarded him sourly. “Well? I reckon you’ve got a mint of explaining to do. Got a good reason for letting me walk into the lion’s den?”

“But he didn’t press you. He didn’t have the gangers with him, I suppose?”

“You didn’t know that, though, did you? I could be in chains in their tender right now, on the way to the receiving ship.

” He shuddered. “And now he knows there’s an ex-seaman working on that road.

He saw we were coming from a brewery. Won’t be impossible to track me down to Drake’s yard in Barnstaple.

” Fuck. He didn’t want to lose this job, much as it grated on his nerves at times.

Would he have to spend the rest of the war running, always running?

Jed took a deep breath. His anger was already draining away, and he was sorry he’d lashed out. He said in a calmer voice, “Just... tell me why?”

Solomon shook his head, a clear refusal.

It was like a punch to the gut. Jed gaped at him. “Why not?”

“I’m sorry, Jed.”

“Why are you like this?” Sometimes he felt like he’d been spilling his guts to Solomon without once stopping since they’d first met. “I tell you everything, and you give me nothing.” His voice came out flat. He didn’t have any energy left for anger

now.

Solomon winced, but he didn't try to defend himself.

Jed swallowed around the bitterness rising up within him. He climbed into the cart and picked up the reins, waiting silently for Solomon to climb in beside him.

It was a long journey back into town in a strained silence.

Restlessly, Jed moved from the bed to the window and back again. There was a shirt he ought to be mending, but he'd tossed it aside on the bed a few minutes earlier.

He was alone in his room at the Boar, the two men who'd shared the other bed having left town that morning. He got up and went to the little attic window again, staring down at the twilit street.

The hollow ache in his stomach hadn't moved since they returned to Barnstaple earlier that day. Restlessness jittered under his skin. He wanted so much from Solomon, but he didn't know how to ask for it.

There came a knock at the door. It was Solomon. Wallace was with him.

"Can we come in?" Solomon asked.

Silently, Jed stood aside. The two of them filed into the room, and they all stood there awkwardly for a moment.

Solomon glanced at Wallace as though asking permission, and Wallace nodded.

"We want to tell you how we met Hugo Vaughan," Solomon said.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Five years earlier

The first time Solomon saw Wallace Acton, they were in the stables at the Crown on the Borough High Street. Solomon was brushing down a post horse, and the head ostler came into the stables accompanied by a large, fair-haired young man with a distinct touch of nervousness in his pale blue eyes.

“This is Acton,” the head ostler said to Solomon. “Acton, Dyer will show you how we do things at the Crown.”

The Crown was one of the busiest inns on the road south from London and employed at least a dozen ostlers at any one time, working around the clock.

Most of them slept in rooms above the grain store, and Solomon showed Wallace where he could lay out his bedroll and stow the little knapsack that contained all his worldly possessions.

“Freshly arrived in Town, eh?” he said. “Where are you from?”

“Epping Forest,” Wallace said in a small, uncertain voice, and then, more firmly, “I worked ten years in the local squire’s stables. I know my way around horses.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Solomon said, hiding his amusement.

Wallace seemed a mere boy, even though he and Solomon were of an age.

As the new fellow, he would be an obvious target for pranks and teasing from the

other ostlers, and Solomon resolved to keep an eye out for him, making sure he got his fair share of the vails that gentlemen travellers tipped them.

At that time, Solomon himself was twenty-four or thereabouts, as far as he knew.

He had been in London for eight years by then, and at the Crown for three of them.

His life suited him down to the ground: the bustle of the coaching inn, the flow of humanity coming and going, the decent wages and dry roof over his head.

He had his eye on the post of head ostler, though he'd have to wait a good few years before being considered old and wise enough.

The ostlers at the inn lived in cheerful promiscuity: sleeping in shifts in one small room, eating in the kitchens with the maids, and sneaking off behind the stables from time to time for a swig of gin or a nap.

Solomon rarely found himself alone with Wallace, and the first time they exchanged more than a word or two in private, several weeks had already passed since Wallace's arrival at the Crown.

It was dawn, just after the departure of the Maidstone stagecoach, and Solomon and Wallace were hitching horses to the private carriage of a gentleman who had arrived the previous day.

The gentleman's coachman was a rakish young fellow who had been overtly attentive to Wallace in the kitchen the night before.

He was a handsome specimen; Solomon wouldn't have turned him down.

Wallace, however, determinedly ignored every attempt made to draw him aside,

though he blushed every time the man spoke to him or even looked at him.

Now, the gentleman climbed into his carriage. The coachman gave Wallace one final wink, then leapt nimbly onto the box and took up the reins. He clicked his tongue, and the carriage left the yard at a brisk pace.

Wallace let out an audible sigh, his eyes following the carriage.

Solomon suppressed a smile. So Wallace had been interested after all. Solomon was not surprised. He hadn't missed the quick up-and-down that Wallace's gaze had done, taking in Solomon's body, when they were first introduced.

He stepped closer to Wallace and spoke into his ear in an undertone. "Never mind. There's plenty more fish in the sea."

Wallace jumped. He spun around, casting a guilty look at Solomon. "I—I don't know what you mean." But the hearty colour in his cheeks betrayed him.

The two of them were alone in the middle of the yard, their low-voiced conversation hidden by the rumble of traffic passing in the street. Solomon gave Wallace a reassuring smile.

"London is full of men who'd be very eager to become more intimately acquainted with you. Or at least, so I've found it to be."

"Oh," Wallace said. The fear in his eyes faded, to be replaced by a glimmer of hope.

"I don't play where I work, though. And neither will you, if you take my advice. I've seen men lose their positions for less. Not to mention the risk of the law being called in."

“Oh, no!” Wallace said in a strangled voice. “I mean, of course not...” His voice trailed off. “But then where—?”

Solomon grinned at him. “Don’t you have an evening off on Thursday? I’ll contrive to be off too, and we’ll go somewhere I think you may find interesting.”

They went to a little Bermondsey alehouse Solomon knew, where men of all sorts came to drink: ostlers and postilions from the coaching inns, lightermen and bargemen from the river, weavers and carders from the garrets.

As he led Wallace through the dark and crowded room, he ran into a group of watermen with whom he had a passing acquaintance.

“Hey, Sol,” one of them called. “Who’s your friend?”

There were three of them, half-full glasses of porter on the table between them. They moved over to make room for Solomon and Wallace to sit with them.

As Solomon had expected, Wallace, with his burly good looks, was instantly popular. Solomon amused himself watching them jockeying to get closer to Wallace, until he was distracted by another waterman who took the seat next to him.

“I’ve seen you here from time to time,” the man said.

“That’s right.”

“I mind you’re a coachman, en’t you?”

“No, an ostler.”

The man let out a mock sigh of relief. “Thank the Lord. That en’t half as bad.”

Solomon chuckled. London's watermen had a hereditary hostility to the use of coaches and carriages within London Town. "You must learn to move with the times, friend."

The other man had a fine head of curly dark hair, and thick muscular forearms that drew Solomon's gaze every time he moved. They talked in a desultory fashion until they'd both drained their glasses.

The man leaned closer to speak into Solomon's ear. "Like to take a walk with me?"

Solomon rarely left the alehouse alone if he didn't choose to. But tonight was different. He had been watching Wallace out of the corner of his eye. A few minutes earlier, Wallace had received a very obvious invitation from his most ardent admirer, but had shaken his head firmly.

"I don't like to leave my friend alone," Solomon said.

"So bring him with us."

Briefly, Solomon considered it. But it wouldn't do to put Wallace in a position of perhaps feeling obliged, out of nerves or an excess of politeness, to say yes. There'd be other nights, other men.

"Sorry, no."

"Your loss," the waterman said with a shrug. He picked up his empty glass and peered into it. "You won't take offence if I bid you farewell?"

"Of course not."

Noticing that Solomon was now alone, Wallace moved closer to him. "I'm going to

head back to the Crown. I'll see you later."

"I'll come with you," Solomon said.

Wallace looked surprised but didn't object.

Outside, the night air was a cold shock after the smokey little room. They walked briskly, threading their way through the dark streets of Bermondsey. Wallace was silent. He seemed to be turning something over in his head, and Solomon didn't force conversation upon him.

"I'm sorry," Wallace burst out after a few minutes.

"What about?"

"I know—you brung me with you tonight because—and it should have been, it was"—he let out a strangled laugh—"it was the moment I've been dreaming of since I was scarce thirteen and couldn't take my eyes off the blacksmith's son."

Solomon made a noise of understanding.

"I just... couldn't work up the nerve, I suppose. You see, I've never—" He broke off.

Solomon stopped walking and turned to face him. "Hey. There's no call for all this. If you didn't want to, you didn't have to."

"I did want to," Wallace said miserably. "Too much so. I'm still stiff as a board."

"Oh." Solomon gave him a sympathetic look. "Want a hand with that?"

Wallace had been looking at his feet—blushing furiously, of course. Now his gaze

flew up to meet Solomon's. After a moment, he nodded.

They were on Crucifix Lane, near a dark, narrow alleyway with no overlooking windows. Solomon had made use of it on more than one occasion.

"This way."

Wallace followed him down the alley. He was vibrating with nerves. He crowded up close to Solomon, fumbling with Solomon's breeches.

Solomon put a hand to Wallace's chest to hold him off. "Wait. Never follow someone up an alley without looking up and down it"—he looked deliberately left and right, even though he already knew the place well—"making sure there's a way out at both ends."

Wallace swallowed, his eyes wide. He nodded.

Solomon had had some thought of giving him a broad education in the many and pleasurable possibilities open to them, but in the event, it was all over after about thirty seconds of a quick frigging—which Wallace did, at least, appear to enjoy enormously.

Then he was stepping back to support himself against the wall, looking overwhelmed. Solomon turned away, making a show of adjusting his own breeches to give Wallace time to recover.

"Should I—?" Wallace said. "I mean, can I—"

Solomon grinned at him. "If you'd like to return the favour, friendly-like, I won't say no."

Afterwards, they strolled back to the Crown together. Wallace was silent at first, but after a few minutes he burst out, “Lord, I am glad I came up to London!”

After that, Solomon made it his business to introduce Wallace to other interesting places he knew up and down the south bank: alehouses with useful backrooms and a congenial patronage, and the wooded areas along the Rope Walks.

They each had only one night off a week, and not necessarily on the same day, so that as the months passed, Wallace often ventured out alone. The next time they were both in the little Bermondsey alehouse together, Solomon was pleased to see that Wallace had entirely lost his initial nerves.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

At that time, Solomon's life consisted of working long, irregular hours and then throwing himself into the pleasures that London had to offer.

If he ever stopped to think about the people among whom he had grown up, it was only to delight in how furious they'd be if they could see him now.

Besides that, he never gave them a moment's thought.

Or, at least, that was the lie he told himself.

Winter came and went. Easter arrived, and then Whitsun and Bow Fair. The Crown overflowed with traders, hawkers and bagmen in town for the fair. Every Londoner who could contrive it had the day off work. Not the ostlers, though—this was one of the busiest weeks of the year at the Crown.

Solomon didn't mind; he looked forward to the day at the end of the week when he could visit the tail-end of the fair, pocket full of tips he'd picked up during the week.

He and Wallace walked out to Bow and wandered over the fair green, where trampled mud and flattened grass marked the places where tents and stalls had stood.

A few stragglers remained, clustered along the road from London.

Solomon and Wallace bought nuts and oranges, then wandered towards Bow Church, where they had arranged to meet some other ostlers of their acquaintance. They sat on the grass to wait.

“When I was a child, Epping Fair seemed like the largest fair in the world,” Wallace said in a tone of reminiscence.

“Grow up in that town, did you?”

“No, in a little village on the edge of Epping Forest.” He dug his nails into the skin of an orange.

“I never thought I’d leave. But the Squire died and his house was shut up, his horses all sold.

So I decided to walk into London and see what I could find.

It’s not that far—five or six hours’ walk. ”

“There was nothing to keep you there?”

“I’ve no family. But there was—” Here he blushed. With his fair skin, it was something he could never hide, poor fellow. “There was one of the Squire’s housemaids I was very taken with. But she married the head groom.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. She must have had prodigiously poor taste.”

“It was entirely my own fault. I’d never dared so much as speak to her.” He smiled ruefully and held out half an orange to Solomon. “What about you?”

“If you’re asking about my marriage prospects, I can’t say I ever met a woman as caught my eye. I’m not like you in that respect.”

“No, I mean, how did you end up here? You en’t a Londoner, are you?”

“Oh. No. But, like you, I thought it would be a good place to come when I left home.” He’d wandered for several months, working at odd jobs.

But after being taken up by the warden of two different parishes and whipped for vagrancy, he’d decided there must be less chance of that up in London. “Look, there’s Henshaw.”

Henshaw was one of the men they were waiting for. He was accompanied by two other ostlers from the same inn, along with their wives.

“You lazy buggers,” he called jovially as soon as he saw Solomon and Wallace. “Where’s the rum and ale? You’ve already drunk it all.”

Solomon laughed. “Lazy bugger yourself. I see your hands are empty.”

Someone was dispatched to fetch jugs of watered rum, and they spent the rest of the afternoon drinking on the fair green, lighting a fire as evening approached.

Wallace, with his powerful bass voice, was persuaded to sing. Some of the others joined in. Solomon lay on his back in the grass, watching sparks drift up into the sky and letting the songs wash over him.

Life was good. Better than he had ever thought it would be when he first ran away.

One of the other men elbowed him, offering him the jug of rum, and he sat up to hold out his mug.

On the opposite side of the fire, a young ostler had pulled his wife onto his lap and she was giggling, loud and joyful, in his ear.

Solomon took a swallow of his drink, wondering idly what that felt like: being in

love.

By the time Wallace had been in London a year, Solomon knew him pretty well. He'd bedded him twice, before they both agreed that the spark wasn't there. They'd spent many happy hours drinking and talking together, or wandering around town on their rare days off.

By the time Wallace had been in London two years, he and Solomon were talking about going into business together, supplying post-horses. It was a pipe-dream—between them, they barely had six shillings to their names—but a pleasant one to talk through over a pint of porter.

But then came the evening that changed everything, though at the time it seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary.

They were at the Bermondsey alehouse they still frequented, deep in conversation with two other friends, when Solomon noticed a man watching them.

There was something vaguely familiar about his face, but it took Solomon a moment to place it.

Then it clicked into place: the man had bought Solomon a drink once and then sucked him off under a tree in Moorfields, perhaps two years earlier.

He had said he was a Naval officer, about to leave the country.

That was all Solomon could remember about him.

Seeing that he'd been noticed, the man rose and came to join them at their table.

"Well met, friend," he said to Solomon, who gave him an answering nod.

“Sit down, why don’t you?”

“Wasn’t sure if you’d remember me,” the man said.

“I don’t remember your name, I’m afraid—if you even gave it to me.”

“It’s Hugo.”

“I’m Solomon.”

The man acknowledged this with a half-bow. “Going to introduce me to your friends?”

He was looking particularly at Wallace as he said this, and Wallace was returning his interest whole-heartedly, as Solomon noted with amusement.

Introductions performed, the man took a seat at their table.

“You were in the Navy, I mind?” Solomon said.

“Yes. My ship’s been paid off. I find myself at liberty for the moment—and cannot conceive of a greater pleasure than to be at liberty in this fair town.” He was well spoken, with rather more of the gentleman’s polish than was usually heard in this place. But lust was the great leveller, after all.

Solomon liked him immediately: he was an entertaining fellow, with self-deprecating wit and a ready laugh. And it was entertaining to watch him and Wallace shift gradually closer as the evening went on.

Solomon soon left them to it. He had his eye on a man who seemed to have been trying to catch his attention for the past twenty minutes. And he wasn’t wrong—ten

minutes later they were in the bushes behind the alehouse and the fellow was treating him to a very enjoyable cocksucking.

The next day at the Crown, Solomon saw off the Brighton stagecoach, then turned to see the Naval officer, Hugo, standing at the entrance to the yard. He caught Solomon's eye and raised a hand in greeting.

Solomon made a wait there gesture, then ducked into the stables to find Wallace. "You've a gentleman caller," he murmured into Wallace's ear. "That Naval fellow from last night."

Wallace's face lit up.

"Go on." Solomon jerked his head at the door to the yard. "I'll cover for you here."

Wallace came back five minutes later, face wreathed in smiles. "We're meeting at the Rope Walks at ten o'clock tomorrow night."

That cheerfulness persisted over the following weeks, but Solomon didn't have a chance to quiz him about it until they were both sent to fetch two horses from the Arbour Inn in Kensington.

Wallace whistled to himself as they set off on foot from the Crown.

"You're in a good temper," Solomon remarked.

Wallace beamed at him. "I think I'm in love."

"With that Naval fellow? You've certainly been seeing a deal of him recently."

"As much as possible." His eyes glazed over with a dreamy cast. "Have you ever

been in love, Solomon?”

Solomon laughed. “No.”

“It’s a most pleasurable sensation. I like it.” Then his voice took on a more serious, thoughtful tone as he went on. “I like... steadiness. Stability. Not change. I’ve always wanted to... settle down with someone, you know.”

“There’s something to be said for that,” Solomon agreed, thinking it would be untactful to point out that Wallace had only known the man a few weeks.

He was, moreover, honest enough to admit to himself that a spark of envy had kindled in his breast. Not that he wanted or expected to ever fall head over heels, as Wallace seemed to believe himself to be.

But it would not be unpleasant to have some steady companion, someone he knew and trusted.

For a start, it might allow him to indulge those tastes that, with strangers, he generally preferred to suppress.

“Well, I wish you joy of him,” he said out loud.

After that, Hugo Vaughan was often to be found at the little Bermondsey alehouse on the same evenings as Wallace and Solomon.

Solomon liked him very much. At first, he’d been inclined to be wary of him. Vaughan was a gentleman, or close to one. Being sucked off by an anonymous gentleman in a dark alley was one thing; keeping company with him was another. But there was nothing supercilious about Vaughan’s manner.

He came from a little village south of London, son of an impoverished clergyman, and had been at sea for most of the past ten years. It was a great trial to him, he said, to find himself on land and on half pay.

“I’m between ships.” His lips twisted in a self-deprecating smile. “That’s the Navy for you. Not enough men and too many officers, even in war-time.”

He had not wished to return to his family—“I don’t like to be a burden,” he said—but preferred to remain in London, close to the Admiralty and to those captains who might soon get a ship of their own and offer him a berth.

“I do wish London life were not so ruinous, however. The Admiralty would have us believe that one may live modestly but comfortably on a lieutenant’s half-pay, but that has not been my experience.”

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Neither Solomon nor Wallace had the slightest knowledge of the Navy, and they were highly entertained by Vaughan's endless fount of amusing stories about life at sea, and the officers and men he had known.

Sometimes, he had a cruel streak to his tongue, but as the people in question weren't present to hear themselves mocked, there seemed little harm in it.

He told them about his life in London: haunting the Admiralty each morning, and talking his way into the gentlemen's clubs popular with Naval officers in the hope that a friendly captain might arrange a lieutenant's posting for him.

"Come, friends, you will know how to advise me," he said one evening. "I am invited to Richmond Park with a party of gentlemen tomorrow."

"I doubt you'll find our advice to be of any use to you for that," Solomon said with a grin.

"Ah, but you see, I must hire a horse to go riding with them. And like many men who have spent their entire life at sea, I know little of horseflesh."

They told him where and how to go about hiring a horse without falling victim to an unscrupulous dealer. He was suitably grateful.

"It is dreadfully humbling sometimes," he confessed. "At sea I am a Godlike figure, answerable only to the captain. But on land I am a mere babe. Tradesmen see me coming, and cry, Here comes a flat. "

It became a pleasant tradition, the three of them sitting around a table of an evening.

Wallace blossomed under Vaughan's attention.

Other regular patrons of the alehouse began to refer to them as an established pair.

Wallace spent every spare moment with Vaughan, whenever he could get away from the Crown.

There was just one other evening he held sacred: choir practice at the Dissenting meeting house of which he was a member, to Solomon's bemusement.

He sometimes thought of asking Wallace how on Earth he reconciled the strictures of religion with the licentiousness and dissoluteness of their life in London—a conflict Solomon dealt with by tucking it away inside of him and ignoring it.

Several times, Wallace had tried to bring Solomon along to choir practice or Sunday morning services at this meeting house. But Solomon had always steadfastly refused.

One weekday evening, while Wallace was at choir practice, Solomon ran into Vaughan at their usual alehouse.

"I see dear Wallace has not managed to cajole you into joining his choir," Vaughan said. "Is it the nonconformity you object to? Or have you simply a general aversion to religious assembly?"

When he left home, Solomon had vowed never again to set foot in church or chapel, but he didn't intend to explain all that to Vaughan. He only said, "I en't much of a church-goer."

"Then perhaps we are kindred spirits. I'm afraid I am a lost sheep myself—to the

dismay of my father.”

“He’s a clergyman, I mind?”

“Yes, who ruled with an iron fist over a little kingdom of eight obedient offspring.”  
He made a rueful face. “Wallace told me you too come from a clerical family?”

“In a manner of speaking. Revivalists, you know.”

Vaughan gave him a perceptive look. “Not a happy family?”

Solomon had nothing much to say against his parents. He remembered them as always being very busy, carrying out the work of the Lord as manifested in the desires of Joseph Crawford, travelling preacher. And Mr Crawford had never said that Man was put on Earth to be happy .

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” he said.

“And yet here you are in London without them.”

“Yes.” Solomon shrugged. After a moment he admitted, “There are some people I miss. Childhood friends. But... it’s been years since last I saw them.”

Perseverance had been sixteen the last time he saw her, but now she was no doubt married to another of the Converted, though she had always said it was the last thing she wanted.

And as for Ephraim, the preacher’s son, with his soft voice and hesitant smile...

It broke Solomon’s heart to think that he had doubtless been browbeaten into following in his father’s footsteps.

The three of them had discussed running away so often, but in the end, Solomon had left them behind.

“I do sometimes wish I knew how they’re keeping,” he added.

“It’s not easy, is it?” Vaughan said. “One has built a life for oneself, happy and flourishing, but one cannot help worrying about those left behind.”

It was almost uncanny how he seemed to see directly into Solomon’s heart, bringing his worst fears to light and making them seem, perhaps, not so bad after all.

“Yes, that’s exactly how it is.”

Vaughan made a little humming in his throat.

“Going away to sea was a great relief to me. An escape, one might almost say. And yet...” His voice trailed off.

His eyes had been on the pattern he was tracing in a drop of split beer on the table, but now he looked up at Solomon.

“One hears a great deal about the duty of filial obedience. But I always felt a greater duty to my younger siblings. A duty that I then shirked.”

It was odd, this thrill of fellow feeling. Vaughan had a way about him that invited confidence. Solomon found himself telling him things he had never intended to share with another living soul, as they talked late into the evening.

Summer turned into winter. The ostlers went about bundled up in multiple layers of clothing, fumbling with numb fingers at ice-cold harness buckles.

The day of the first snow, the stable boys were irrepressible, shirking work to throw snowballs.

Watching them, Solomon was reminded of snow fights with Ephraim and Perseverance, the year they'd spent the winter near Manchester.

Mr Crawford had drawn crowds of tens of thousands, who braved the cold to hear him preach about the fires of hell.

That was the year Solomon had learnt to drive a cart—and how proud he had been. Of course, he'd then had to stand up in the weekly meeting and accuse himself of the insidious sin of Pride.

He shook off those thoughts and went in search of Wallace, finding him on the kitchen threshold. "Ready to go?" They both had a night off at the same time, and when that happened they usually walked out to Bermondsey together.

"I'm not coming tonight," Wallace said. "Hugo has gone out of town."

Solomon regarded him with bemusement. "What has that to do with anything? It don't stop you going without him, surely."

"Oh, I don't think Hugo would like that."

Solomon grinned. "What, you reckon he'd be jealous? Surely not. Not over a drink with some friends. And"—he winked—"you can look but not touch, you know."

But Wallace still refused, and Solomon went off alone, tramping through the snow, feeling somewhat disgruntled.

Vaughan's return to Town was delayed for a few days by the snow, but when he

finally returned he was at his wittiest, full of amusing stories about the house party he had attended just south of London.

“I am what they call a hanger-on, you see,” he confided in Jed and Solomon over a pint. “I am called upon when a hostess needs someone to make up the numbers. Entertain the ladies and show the gentlemen in a better light.”

“Make conversation at the dinner table too, I suppose,” Solomon suggested. “I expect you’re good at that.”

“Well, I am, rather. And what dinners! I am more than compensated for my efforts by the excellent spread. Mrs Jennings knows how to furnish a table.”

“I thought you were going to see a fellow called Forsythe,” Wallace objected.

“Mrs Jennings is his mistress. His wife has gone off to Harrogate, I believe.”

Wallace’s eyes widened. “I didn’t think a gentleman would bring his mistress into his home, never mind have her welcome his friends.”

“My dear boy, you are a perfect innocent sometimes. What a foolish little notion.”

Solomon blinked, taken aback. That seemed rather harsh. But Wallace only smiled, so Solomon did too.

“Now let me tell you about the woman Sir Richard brought with him. A delightful creature—”

Later that night, as Jed and Solomon walked back to the Crown together, Wallace said shyly, “Hugo has asked me to live with him.”

“But... what about work?”

The ostlers had to sleep at the Crown, where they could be called upon at any time, day or night. Some of them were married and had set up their wives and children in rooms near the Crown, but even those men could only visit their families a few times a week.

“Hugo says he has work for me. I’m to help him in his business dealings. And there’s a club he knows as is looking for waiters.”

Wallace loved working with horses. It was hard to imagine him serving drinks to gentlemen and being happy doing it. But what did Solomon know?

“I’ll be sorry to see you go.”

“You’ll still see me in Bermondsey,” Wallace said.

But they didn’t, in fact, see much of each other in the following months. As winter turned into spring, Wallace was at the alehouse less and less often when Solomon went there; Hugo Vaughan, too, was rarely to be seen.

Then the head ostler at the Crown broke his leg, and Solomon was asked to step into his shoes, at least temporarily.

On his very occasional nights off, he rarely had the time or energy to walk as far as Bermondsey.

When he did make it there, he always left a message for Wallace at the alehouse, but Wallace never received it.

“No, he en’t been in,” the barman always said. “Nor that fancy gent he keeps

company with. But you know”—he winked—“they’re very much in love. Everyone knows that. Wrapped up in each other. Don’t need to come here and bother with the likes of us.”

Solomon murmured something noncommittal. He tried not to feel hurt that Wallace seemed to have quite forgotten him. The barman was right: Wallace was in love.

One afternoon around Eastertide, at the Borough Market, Solomon was stopped by a man he vaguely recognised.

“You’re one of the ostlers at the Crown, en’t you?”

Solomon nodded.

“Is Wallace Acton still working there? We en’t seen him at choir practice in months now.”

“Oh,” Solomon said, surprised. He could place the man now: he was one of Wallace’s friends from the Dissenter meeting house.

This wasn’t the first time someone had asked after Wallace—acquaintances at the Bermondsey alehouse had too. But Wallace seemed to have drifted away from all his old friends.

Solomon felt a stirring of hurt and unease. Had Wallace left the neighbourhood entirely, without even telling him?

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

It was almost a year before Solomon saw Wallace again. He was leaving the tack room at the Crown, late one evening, when he caught sight of Wallace standing in the shadows by the stableyard's side entrance. Solomon dropped the empty bucket he'd been carrying and hurried to join him.

"Wallace!" Solomon pulled him into an embrace, then stepped back to take a look at him. "How are you? I thought you must have disappeared off the face of the Earth! How's Hugo?"

"Oh, he's keeping well," Wallace said vaguely.

He wasn't wearing a coat, Solomon noticed with a frown. "En't you cold? It's already November, and you're walking around in your shirt sleeves."

"I had to go out in a hurry, and I forgot my coat, that's all."

"Has something happened? What's wrong?"

"Well... as a matter of fact, I just came to ask if you could lend me a shilling or two? I—I should warn you that I can't tell when I'll be able to pay you back."

Solomon stuck his hand in his pocket, and came up with no more than sixpence.

"I can give you whatever I get tomorrow." The ostlers were only paid their wages four times a year, on quarter days, and tided themselves over in the meantime with the tips they received each day.

Seeing Wallace's face fall, Solomon added, "But you need it tonight, I collect? What's going on?"

Are you stuck for somewhere to sleep tonight?

Something to eat? En't you staying with Hugo anymore? "

"Not—not just now."

"Oh?" Perhaps they had quarrelled. "Well, you can stay here, if you like."

"Won't Bailey object?"

"I'm head ostler now. Bailey broke his leg and wound up retiring." He could not keep the hint of pride from his voice.

Wallace's face brightened. "Congratulations!" He looked genuinely happy for the first time since Solomon had caught sight of him, and Solomon realised that he was thinner than before, with shadows under his eyes that weren't only cast by the lantern overhead.

"You don't look at all well. Are you still working in one of them gentlemen's drinking and gambling hells, and never seeing the light of day?"

Before Wallace could answer, a coachman leaned out of the coach-and-six that had just pulled into the yard. He called to Solomon, "Here, what's the delay, man?"

"You go on through to the kitchens," Solomon said to Wallace. "Kitty and Isabella are still working there, you remember them. Tell them I sent you."

He hurried to greet the coachman, resolving to find a moment to talk to Wallace later

that night. But by the time he could snatch a late supper, Wallace had left the kitchen.

Solomon was working overnight that night. At dawn, just as he was yawning and thinking longingly of bed, Hugo Vaughan strolled into the yard.

“Well met, my friend,” he greeted Solomon, with that little smile of his that invited a man to let himself be charmed. “I expect Wallace is here, isn’t he? Let him know I’ve come, will you?”

Solomon shook Vaughan’s hand. “Good to see you. It’s been too long.” He turned to see Wallace had just emerged from the kitchen door. “Ah, there he is.”

Wallace had stopped short, an odd expression on his face, looking at Solomon and Vaughan together. For a moment all three of them stood there, in a peculiar frozen tableau.

Then Vaughan held out his hand. “Wallace?”

Wallace bit his lip, but he came to join Vaughan.

“Well, what’s all this, then?” Solomon demanded. “Lovers’ quarrel?” They were standing in a secluded corner of the yard, speaking in low voices, quite privately.

“Afraid so,” Vaughan said with a rueful grin. His hand lay on Wallace’s arm in a proprietary way.

Wallace said nothing. He gave Solomon a sheepish look.

Vaughan gazed at him fondly. “Shall we go? We’re keeping Solomon here from his work. I expect to be accosted by an irate coachman at any minute here.”

“Before you go, tell me where the two of you are living these days,” Solomon said. “I’d rather like to see you both sooner nor this time next year.”

Vaughan laughed. “We’re just about to move to new lodgings,” he said before Wallace could reply. “But we’ll be sure to inform you as soon as we know where we’ll be.”

But they didn’t. Two months passed before Solomon saw Wallace again. It was on a crisp, clear winter afternoon shortly after Christmas, and Wallace was waiting by the Crown’s side entrance, as before. He looked worse than he had the last time: tired and worn.

“You all right?” Solomon asked.

There was a pause, and then Wallace shook his head.

“I’m out of work. I need to find a job.”

That wasn’t his only trouble, Solomon thought. But it was one that Solomon could do something about.

“Come on, let’s go see Sykes.”

Sykes was the chamberlain, managing both the inn and the stables. He was a short, balding man in middle age, with the red nose of a gin-drinker.

“Wallace Acton,” he said, looking Wallace up and down, his lips pursed in the sour expression that was habitual to him. “A bad penny always turns up again. But—as Master Dyer so earnestly reminds me—we do need another ostler just now. You can start tonight.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’ll be working nights for the first two weeks at least.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Well, go on, then. Clear off out of my office. I have work to do, unlike some people around here.”

Back outside in the yard, Solomon threw Wallace a smile. “You remember where everything is, I don’t doubt?”

Wallace’s answering smile was half-hearted. He rubbed a hand over his face. “Christ, it’s strange to be here. It feels like when I last worked here, it was in another life.”

“It does?” Solomon wasn’t sure what to make of that. “What have you been about in the meantime?”

“Nothing much. Only... I’ve been living in a fog for I don’t know how long. And now my mind has finally cleared.”

Solomon looked him up and down. “You don’t have any of your things with you, I see. Do you want to borrow some blankets and a clean shirt?”

Wallace winced. “It pains me to be such a burden.”

“You’re nothing of the sort. En’t you helped me out as often as I’ve helped you?” Solomon gave him a friendly punch in the shoulder. “Come with me. I’m working overnight tonight too, and I must get something warm in my belly first.”

Even after dark, travellers could arrive at the Crown at any hour, and there were

always at least two ostlers and a stable boy on duty overnight.

That night, Solomon and Wallace were accompanied by a scrap of a boy called Timmy.

They were kept busy until midnight, but then there came a lull between travellers, and they stepped into the tack room to shelter from the bitter cold.

They were alone; Timmy had crept away to sleep until he should be called.

Wallace sat on a barrel, his head bent. Solomon watched him out of the corner of his eye, not liking to press him with questions.

Finally, Wallace said, "Thank Heaven Sykes was willing to take me back on. I haven't tuppence in my pocket."

"What have you been doing for work? Have you been working as a waiter?"

"Yes, and... other things." He fell silent, but after a moment he went on again, "Hugo has an arrangement with a Camberwell moneylender. He haunts any gentlemen's club he can get into, and befriends naive young men who've been living beyond their means and might need a loan to tide them over.

Young gentlemen as are in London for the first time and don't have over many friends in town—you see the sort I mean.

He sends them to his Camberwell friend and gets a commission on every loan. "

Solomon winced. "At a monstrous rate of interest, I take it."

"Mmm. Yes. And the moneylender, as you may imagine, en't fussy about how he

persuades his debtors to pay up when they start to fall behind.”

“Never thought I’d feel sorry for rich young men.”

“As a general thing, they en’t even all that rich. Younger sons of obscure country squires and that kind of thing.”

Solomon said, slowly, “I would never have imagined Hugo Vaughan being mixed up in such dealings.”

“No. I know. He has... more sides to his person than you see at first.” He had been studying his hands while he spoke, but now he glanced up at Solomon, half-ashamed, half-challenging. “You en’t asked me what my role in all this was.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

“I went down to Camberwell once a week to see the moneylender and collect the money Hugo was owed. But that weren’t the worst of it.

The worst was at the club where he’d got me employment.

While serving drinks I was meant to keep an eye out for likely targets.

Point them out to Hugo.” He hunched into himself, picking at a splinter of wood in the barrel he sat on.

“He taught me to pick out what he called the ‘most likely young cubs.’ He weren’t too fussy about his victims. The younger and more friendless the better. ”

There wasn’t anything Solomon could say in reply to that.

In the stable next door, a horse whinnied softly. A lone carriage rumbled along in the street outside.

Wallace said, “If Hugo comes looking for me, don’t tell him I’m here? Please?”

“All right,” Solomon said slowly. “But—”

“Please. I—I need to make a clean break from him. It will be easier if I don’t see him. Promise me? I know he’s your friend—”

The rumble of wheels on cobblestones told them that the carriage had turned into the inn’s yard. Wallace broke off.

“Hey!” a voice shouted. “Don’t anyone work here?”

Reluctantly, Solomon left off the conversation and stepped out into the yard to greet two young gentlemen who jumped down from their phaeton, complaining volubly about the flooded road that had held them up south of Peckham.

It was after dawn by the time Vaughan strolled into the yard.

The other ostlers had already risen, and the inn was its busy daytime self.

Vaughan stepped around the crowd of people waiting to board the Canterbury stagecoach, and directed a cordial smile at Solomon.

“Would you be so kind as to tell Wallace I’m here? ”

Solomon froze. “What makes you think he’s here?”

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Wallace was nowhere in sight. A few minutes earlier, Solomon had sent him off to bed, where he himself would soon be bound. He prayed Wallace wouldn't unexpectedly reappear.

"Of course he's here," Vaughan said. "Where else would he be? He knows you'll take him under your wing."

He was his usual charming self, his voice light, his smile inviting Solomon to share the joke. Solomon felt like he was being tugged in two directions.

Vaughan stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Please, Solomon. We had an argument—you know how it is. I am most anxious to make it up to him. Let me only see him, and all will be well."

"What sort of an argument?"

"I've always hoped you considered me a friend, Solomon. Won't you help me on this? Haven't you ever had a little falling out with a lover of your own?"

Solomon bit the inside of his cheek, hesitating. Vaughan was a sound man and a good friend, or so Solomon had always thought. But he couldn't forget the strained note in Wallace's voice, saying, I need to make a clean break from him.

"I'm leaving town for a few weeks this morning," Vaughan said. "I must see him before I go."

"Listen, the Canterbury stage is leaving in fifteen minutes. I can't dawdle here with

you.” He held up his hands, palm out, in a gesture of innocence. “I’m sorry. If I see him, I’ll tell him you were here. He’ll know where to find you, I expect?”

Overhead, the yard clock struck the half hour. Vaughan glanced up at it, his expression sour.

“I must go.” He reached out to clap a hand on Solomon’s shoulder. “I count on you, my friend.”

When they both rose that afternoon, Solomon drew Wallace aside into an empty stall and told him about seeing Vaughan. “He said he was going away for a few weeks.”

“Oh, thank God.”

Solomon studied him warily. “I don’t know what you fell out over, but won’t you give him a chance to speak to you? I hate to see the two of you at odds like this.”

“We didn’t fall out. We didn’t have an argument, or whatever it is he says. I can’t even imagine myself daring to argue with him.”

Solomon blinked. That seemed such a strange thing to say.

Wallace slumped back against the wall, his hands in his pockets. “I wish I’d left him long ago.”

Solomon felt like he was groping his way across a pitch-dark room with no idea of where he was. “Well... why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I suppose... I mean, who else would ever put up with me?”

Solomon stared at him, dumbfounded.

“Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say. Let’s just get to work.”

During the following weeks, Wallace was a pale and silent version of his former self.

Solomon managed to arrange things so that he and Wallace had the same night off, hoping to draw him out of himself, but he refused to come out.

That was for the best, as it turned out, for Hugo Vaughan was at the alehouse Solomon went to.

“I was hoping you’d be here,” Vaughan said, neatly cornering him. “I just returned to London this evening, and I’m longing to see Wallace, of course. Won’t you convey him a message from me? Tell him I’ll be waiting for him tomorrow at nine by St Saviour’s.”

Solomon hesitated.

“Come, Solomon,” Vaughan said gently. “Don’t insult us both by persisting in this foolish charade that you don’t know where he is.”

“He don’t want to see you.”

Vaughan’s mouth softened in a fond smile. “He always has been an emotional sort of fellow—always living on his nerves. He needs someone to take care of him. You understand that, don’t you, Solomon?”

Perhaps there was truth in that, though Solomon had never thought about it in those terms.

“So you’ll pass on my message?” Vaughan insisted. “We need you, Solomon. Wallace and I both. And I know you never let a friend down.”

Solomon bit his lip. He could pass on the message, at least. Wallace had the right to make up his own mind, surely.

“Well—” he began. But something about Vaughan’s words bothered him.

He studied Vaughan’s smiling face. “You know exactly what to say to get through to me, don’t you? You’re playing me like a fiddle!”

Anger flashed, very briefly, in Vaughan’s eyes, and then he was smiling again. “Solomon, my dear boy, do be serious. You can’t hide him from me for ever.”

There was an intensity in him that was closer to the surface now. It prickled uncomfortably at Solomon’s skin.

“He don’t want to see you. Can’t you just leave it at that? I mean—this happens all the time. People are lovers until they en’t.”

“It doesn’t happen to me, Solomon.”

Solomon took a step back, disturbed by the look in his eyes. “Listen, I’ll see you around, Hugo.”

And he almost ran out of the alehouse.

“Vaughan is back in town,” Solomon told Wallace.

They were in the kitchens.

“Oh,” Wallace said in a small voice. He put his hand to his mouth. “I’m sorry, I—” He turned and ran from the room.

After a few minutes' search, Solomon found him retching into the bushes behind the inn. Alarmed, Solomon put a cautious hand on his back.

When Wallace finally straightened up, he wiped his mouth with a trembling hand. "Lord help me. My stomach has been in knots all week."

"What happened, Wallace?"

"Nothing. Nothing. You're probably imagining all sorts of dire things. But the truth is—nothing. He just—got inside my head. That's all. I think he's broken me. I'm clay in his hands."

"Here, come here." Solomon got him sitting on one of the crates stacked up against the inn's back wall, and fetched him water from the pump.

They sat in silence for a while. Solomon was thinking guiltily about all the little things he'd ignored: all the warning signs he'd missed, all the times he'd seen Vaughan put Wallace down.

"I'm sorry I came here bothering you," Wallace said after a while. "I wasn't even sure how you'd receive me. I seem to have drifted away from everyone I used to know. Hugo didn't like me to, well... have other friends."

"I'm glad you came here."

"If Hugo comes looking for me, don't let me leave with him?"

"I won't even let him see you," Solomon said firmly.

He knew how it would be if Vaughan got his claws back into Wallace again. Vaughan would know precisely what to say to get under his skin.

Solomon thought back to when they first met. The fellow feeling that had seemed to bind him and Vaughan, and the uncanny insight Vaughan had sometimes seemed to have. But perhaps he had only pumped Wallace for useful information about Solomon, and Solomon for useful information about Wallace.

“I can’t stay here at the Crown.”

“No,” Solomon agreed, fighting his first impulse to keep Wallace close by, where he could keep an eye on him. “What about the Wheatsheaf on the Kensington road? Robert Keller is head ostler there now—you remember that red-headed fellow as used to work here?”

But when Solomon walked out to Kensington two days later to see Wallace, he received a shock.

“Wallace Acton? He en’t here. Some gent came asking for him this morning, and he ran out the back and en’t come back. In debt or something, is he?”

“Something like that,” Solomon said.

He spent the next two hours searching, in vain, every inn and hostelry along the Kensington road. When he finally gave up and returned to the Crown, Wallace wasn’t there, but Vaughan was.

He smiled in greeting. “Morning, Solomon. Do you know where Wallace has got to, by any chance?”

Solomon was tired and angry, and he still hadn’t recovered from the shock of learning that Vaughan had gone so far as to track Wallace down out in Kensington.

“Christ, Hugo, can’t you just leave him the fuck alone?”

Vaughan's eyes narrowed. Sourness came to the surface. "You want him for yourself, don't you?" When Solomon only shook his head, Vaughan insisted, "You do. I know you've had him. He feels so good, doesn't he? That big burly mass, lying over you, pounding into you."

Solomon wanted to put his hands over his ears. "Stop it."

"And so easily led. Why, you can make him do anything you want."

Solomon wasn't a fighting man, but he balled his fists now. "You shut your mouth, you bastard."

Vaughan only smirked. "I know you, Solomon Dyer. You're remarkably like me.

You wear a pleasant smile, but you know how to look out for yourself.

You could have a lot of use for a man like Wallace.

"His voice hardened. "Well, you can't have him.

You'll never have him again. He's mine . I love him and he's mine."

"If you en't out of here in the next twenty seconds, I'll call a dozen ostlers to put you out."

Vaughan's smile was sharp. "I'll find him. You can't hide him from me."

It was the following morning by the time Solomon finally heard from Wallace. One of the women from the pie shop in Fishmonger's Alley came by to say that Wallace was there.

As soon as he could get away, Solomon went to see him. Wallace was sitting in a dark corner with a penny cup of tea. He looked like he had slept in his clothes and hadn't eaten in a day or more. Solomon sat down opposite him.

Wallace raised his head. "He came looking for me at the Wheatsheaf. I ran out the back, like the coward I am." He couldn't meet Solomon's eye. "You must think me a sorry excuse for a man."

His words contained an echo, as though he were repeating something he'd heard said to him more than once.

Solomon's stomach twisted. What had been going on under his nose, without him noticing?

How had he been so blind? He heard a voice from childhood in his head, a voice he'd thought he had learnt to ignore.

Carnal indulgence is a sin that will blind you to everything else.

Lead you to worldly disaster and spiritual ruin.

If he hadn't been so busy getting his wick away with every man in London—

But he couldn't wallow in his own guilt just now. He had to look out for Wallace.

"Don't say that about yourself. It en't true."

Wallace rubbed at tired eyes. "I just can't face the thought of seeing him again."

"Then don't see him again. There's no reason you should."

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It wasn't clear whether Wallace even heard him. He seemed to be in a world of his own.

"He must be feeling so hurt. That's my fault. I've hurt him. He said so himself, the last time I worked up the courage to leave him. Not that I managed to stay away very long. He said I'd broken his heart. I was lucky he took me back. "

"Stop. Stop. Those are all just lies he's told you."

"I don't know what to do. I feel as though I'll never escape. Wherever I go, he'll be there. I'll spend the next three months fleeing across town from place to place until he's worn me down."

"Maybe he'll finally get a ship and go back to sea."

Wallace didn't look convinced.

"Or else... maybe we could leave London."

Wallace's gaze flew up to meet Solomon's. "Leave London?"

"Yes, why not? After all, what's holding us here?"

"We've no families." Solomon could think of several things holding him in London, but he pressed on.

"I know you've never been further than Epping, but I've been all around the country

a dozen times.

Leaving London is nothing to me. We could leave tomorrow. ”

“We?” Wallace repeated.

“Yes, I’d come with you. Unless... you’d rather I didn’t?”

Wallace’s expression softened. But he was shaking his head. “You can’t leave London. You love living here. And you’re head ostler now. You’ve wanted that for years.”

Solomon noticed that he didn’t say, I can’t leave. Indeed, a glimmer of hope had crept into his face.

“Course I can,” Solomon said. “There are other towns. Other jobs.”

Wallace turned this over in his head. “I suppose I could go back to Epping Forest.”

“I think that’d be the first place Vaughan would look for you—not that I’m saying he will,” he added hastily, when Wallace blanched. “But better safe nor sorry, eh? Besides, do you really want to go back to Epping? I mind you said you left for lack of work there.”

“That’s true.”

“Better a large town, anyway.” In the countryside, they’d be hunted from parish to parish as vagabonds.

“Birmingham, maybe? Or Manchester? I’m acquainted with both places.

But..." He trailed off. "Vaughan knows that." At the thought of those long winter evenings, spilling his guts out to Vaughan, his stomach sickened.

"You really think he'd come after me?"

Yes, Solomon thought, remembering the intensity in Vaughan's eyes, the fervour in his voice. And Vaughan had been halfway round the world with the Navy. He'd think nothing of a short trip across England. But... No. Would he really go to those lengths? Surely not.

"His source of income is here in London. I expect he'll just find some other poor fellow to help him in his tricks."

Wallace swallowed. In a small voice, he said, "Will you hate me if I say I'm jealous of that other fellow?"

There was a silence.

Eventually, Solomon said, with cheerful determination, "What you need is a fresh start. How about... Barnstaple, for instance?"

"Where's that?"

"It's a river port on the Bristol Channel. A long, long way from London, deep down in the West Country. No stage coach route goes there."

"If it's so far away, how comes it that you've heard of it?"

"My parents were born there, as was I. I'm sure I've never mentioned it to Hugo, though."

” He turned the idea over in his head. “It’s weaver’s country.

Wool and worsted. There must be work there.

A coaching inn, a carrier’s yard, a gentleman’s stables...

My parents always spoke of it as a prosperous place. ”

Wallace was sitting up straighter now, his shoulders less slumped. “All right. All right! Why not?”

They arranged to meet at the pie shop that same evening, when Solomon should have seen to his affairs at the Crown. But then he ran into a problem.

“No, you can’t have your wages now, Master Dyer,” Sykes, the chamberlain, said. “You’ll wait till quarter day like everyone else. You think I want people running off whenever they please, leaving us high and dry?”

The next quarter day was Lady Day, a little under a month away. It was true that, in the general run of things, Solomon could not expect to be paid until then, but he had thought Sykes might make an exception.

“But I must leave as soon as may be. It’s an urgent... family matter.” And it was, for Wallace was surely his family, as much as or more than the people he had cut himself off from.

Sykes looked skeptical. “This is the first I’ve ever heard of you having a family.

You’ve never mentioned them in the eight years you’ve been here.

” He shook his head. “Now I can’t stop you walking out of here tonight, but you’ll be

going without your”—he consulted his ledger—“twelve pounds, three and six in back wages.”

Solomon’s heart sank. Without that money, he and Wallace had scarcely enough between them for one person to make the journey.

That evening at the pie shop, Wallace looked dismayed when he heard the bad news, but he put on a good face. “Oh well, it can’t be helped.”

“I’ll come and join you as soon as I can,” Solomon promised.

“You needn’t—”

“I’ll be there. I swear, I won’t leave you alone. And I’ll bring your back wages too. Sykes owes you one pound ten on Lady Day.”

Wallace looked happier. “Well, all right then. I won’t deny it’ll be good to have you with me.”

“You’d better take the stage—we’ll have enough for an outside ticket if we pawn some of our things.

I’ll redeem them on Lady Day. Now listen: the nearest stage coach route to Barnstaple runs through Taunton, but don’t get the stage there directly.

If Vaughan makes inquiries... Get the stage to Bristol and then another cross-country.

Or even better, walk out of Bristol and then take a carrier’s cart or something. ”

“All right.”

Solomon tried to remember everything he had ever heard about Barnstaple. “There’s a bridge over the river there. Let’s say you should leave word for me at the first alehouse south of the bridge.”

They talked over their plans again several times, but finally there was nothing more to discuss.

“You’d better get back to the Crown,” Wallace said. “They’ll be wondering what has become of you.”

That was true. It was late, the evening stagecoaches would begin to arrive in less than three hours, and Solomon hadn’t slept yet. But he didn’t move.

“I’m sorry, Wallace.”

“What? What have you to be sorry for?”

“I meant, I’m sorry I never noticed anything was wrong. I’m sorry I let so much time go by and never tried to discover what had become of you.”

Wallace was shaking his head. “Don’t be daft. There’s no call for you to say that.”

They both fell silent—reluctant to take their leave of one another, not knowing when they’d next meet.

After a moment, Solomon said, “Hey, remember that post-horse service we used to dream about setting up together?”

They hadn’t any more money between them now than they did then, but Wallace didn’t point that out. His expression softened. “Yes, I remember.”

He was sitting up straight, looking much better than before, and Solomon was overcome by a wave of optimism. “It’s good to have you back.”

Wallace reached out to put a hand over Solomon’s where it lay on the table. “Thank you, Solomon. You don’t have to do this. If ever I can do the same for you—”

“I know.” Solomon gripped Wallace’s hand, then let go reluctantly. He got to his feet. “I’d better get back to the Crown. See you soon in Barnstaple, then?”

“See you in Barnstaple.”

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

When Solomon finally reached the end of the story, his voice was hoarse. He had done most of the talking, with Wallace speaking up only now and then to remind him of some detail.

“Well... there you have it,” Solomon said at last.

The room fell silent. Jed was sitting on one of the beds, and Solomon and Wallace were on the other, facing him. They were both limp with exhaustion. Wallace’s skin was a wan grey, and Solomon’s features were sharp and pinched.

There was a look that mingled shame and defiance in Wallace’s eyes, and Jed wanted to say something to put him at his ease.

But he couldn’t think what: the whole thing was too big for him.

Instead, he asked the most straightforward and obvious question.

“So how did this Vaughan fellow come to be down here in Devon?”

Solomon and Wallace exchanged glances.

“We’ve talked and talked about it,” Solomon said. “Trying to guess where he picked up our trail.”

“We know where,” Wallace said to him. “You were clever enough to walk out of Bristol, and I was stupid enough to get on a carrier’s cart to Taunton.” He slumped back against the wall. “I never really thought he’d follow me.”

The two of them were sitting shoulder to shoulder, and Solomon gave Wallace a gentle bump. “We’ve slept fairly soundly up until now,” he said to Jed. “Even if he knew we were somewhere west of Taunton, it seemed unlikely that he could find us.”

“I won’t be sleeping soundly tonight,” Wallace said. He gave Jed a questioning look. “Solomon says you thought he might track the cart to Barnstaple.”

Jed rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe. It en’t as though we were on one of Mrs Drake’s regular routes, happily enough.

Nobody can point us out as the Barnstaple carrier.

But... he did have a bloody good look at our load.

If he’s really determined, he could make enquiries at every brewery in the district. And also—” He hesitated.

“What?”

“Well, tracking down people is what the press gang does. It’s their specialty.”

A heavy silence fell between them.

“You must think me a pitiful fellow,” Wallace said abruptly. “Fleeing across the country like this. I suppose you’re wondering why I don’t just tough it out. Put up my fists and knock him down.”

Jed shook his head. “I’m running away too, you know.”

“That’s not the same. Everyone runs from the press gang.”

Jed couldn't deny it.

"He won't be in the area forever," Solomon said.

It sounded like something he had repeated many times before.

"He may have contrived to be sent here on the impressment service, but he won't be at Minehead forever.

He'll get orders to move to another part of the country.

We only have to stay out of his way until then. "

Wallace looked unconvinced.

There came a quick, determined step in the corridor, and then a rap on the door. It was Emma Yates, with an armful of linen.

"You'll have a new fellow in your room," she said to Jed, shoosing Solomon and Wallace off the bed so she could change the sheets. "He's a wool merchant's clerk, in town for a week or so."

She glanced curiously at the other two men as she spoke.

"I've told him," Wallace said to her. "Told him everything."

"Ah." She straightened up and directed a sharp, swift glance at Jed, as though searching his face for—what? What did she expect to see there? Jed stared back, bemused.

"All right," she said at last, and went back to making the bed up. Over her shoulder,

she said to Jed, “So you saw this Vaughan fellow today, I collect? Should I expect to find him on the doorstep tomorrow?”

“I, ah...” So Emma knew the whole story too? Jed glanced uncertainly from her to Wallace. “On my life, I don’t know.”

“What did you tell him?”

“As little as I could. Nothing that’d lead him directly here.”

She gave the sheets a final sharp tug, then turned to study him, lips pursed.

“We can trust him,” Solomon put in. “If he says he told us everything that happened, he did.”

“Very well, then,” Emma said, the suspicion disappearing from her expression. She looked from Jed to Solomon and said in a lighter tone, “So, I’m guessing I was right that you two are...?” She gestured between them.

Jed froze, the breath driven from his lungs. He didn’t dare look at Solomon.

“Sorry, sorry!” Emma put up a hand. “You don’t have to answer that.

None of my affair. Live and let live, eh?

” She gathered up the old sheets. “We’d best get them barrels up from the cellar, Wallace.

The goldsmiths’ guild will be in tonight, and you know how much they get through.

Come and find me downstairs in a few minutes, eh? ”

She went out. Jed drew in a long, shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry,” Wallace said. “I only told her about, well, about myself, but she must have guessed... She won’t make any trouble for you, Master Trevithick, I promise. We can trust her.”

“All right, never mind that now,” Jed said, though it wasn’t at all easy to put aside. “About this man Vaughan—what are the two of you planning to do? I mean, are you staying here in this part of the country, or—” He was afraid of what the answer might be.

They exchanged glances. They’d clearly had this discussion already.

“I’m not going to run anymore,” Wallace said. “I’ve reasons for wanting to stay here. Plans for the future.” He swallowed. “I don’t care if I risk seeing him again.” He sounded as though he were trying to persuade himself of that.

Solomon met Jed’s eye. “I’ll be here as long as you two are.”

The knot of worry in Jed’s chest loosened. “All right, then. Good.”

Jed slept badly that night. Every time he woke from confused dreams of the sea, the merchant’s clerk was snoring away cheerfully in the other bed.

He lay on his back, staring up into the darkness, the clash of steel and the boom of musket-fire still ringing in his ears.

Carefully, he flexed his fingers. They ached as though he really had been gripping that boarding cutlass, the blade still unbloodied.

All he’d ever wanted to do was survive each battle without killing any of the poor

sods from the other ship.

But when it was you or him, when you lashed out and the other man crumpled, and you plunged on, not even knowing whether you'd left him alive or dead—

He tossed restlessly in sweat-soaked sheets. In the dream, he hadn't been fighting. He'd been trying to slip away to some quiet corner. But every time, a hand fell on his shoulder and forced him to turn. And every time, he was looking into the face of Lieutenant Vaughan.

When he'd lain in his hammock on board ship, dreaming of escape, he had never pictured anything like this: the unsettled nights, the nerves during the day, the constant dread in the pit of his stomach.

He felt a sudden sharp longing to be back in Ledcombe, and for none of this to have ever happened.

Abruptly, he sat up in bed, throwing back the covers. He was free, and he had to live like a free man, not like this, a prisoner of his fears.

He rose and went downstairs. At the foot of the stairs he met Wallace, also on his way to the kitchens in search of tea.

"Morning," Wallace said. At first he didn't meet Jed's eyes; then, determinedly, he looked at him directly.

"Morning," Jed said. "Er, listen, Master Acton... I wanted to say how sorry I am I pushed Solomon to tell me everything as happened in London. I was that angry with him... But it weren't his story to tell."

"Oh. No, think no more of it. I couldn't ask Solomon to tell lies on my behalf—and

particularly not to you.” His awkward smile turned into a genuine one. “Solomon holds you in high regard, you know.”

To his amazement, Jed felt himself turn red—something he was not at all prone to do. “He’s been a good friend to me,” he said gruffly.

“To me, too.”

They stood there for a moment, the silence not quite comfortable and not quite awkward.

“You, er, think there’s already tea in the kitchen?” Jed said.

They went in together. Emma Yates was there, busy instructing one of the other maids.

“That’s for the gentleman in the private parlour; these three plates are for the taproom.

” She cast a warm smile at Wallace, including Jed in it too, and waved them towards the pot of tea.

“And mind you go running to the private parlour first, Sally.” She picked up a coffeepot and hurried out, then stuck her head back into the room to address Jed.

“Master Trevithick, I set some paper aside for that letter of your’n.”

Then she was gone.

Jed swallowed. As soon as the shock of Carrie’s letter had lessened, he had begun to think about what he would say in reply, turning different phrases over in his head.

But when he and Emma finally sat down together in a quiet corner, it wasn't easy.

Jed had never composed a letter before. When he had written to Carrie and his aunt when he was at sea, the actual writing had been done by a messmate of his, who had been a clerk before he ended up in debtor's prison, and who proposed exactly the same model of letter to all his messmates.

"Dear sister, I have received your letter," Jed began, pausing to let Emma write it down.

"Since I was pressed, I have wanted nothing more than to return home to my family—" He stopped.

There didn't seem to be much chance of that anymore.

"No, better just put, to Ledcombe." He chewed his lip.

"And then will you put... I know that I could live peacefully and happily there, if only Penwick hadn't took against me.

"He thought it over for a moment. "Better make that Mr Penwick. Have you got that? Thank 'ee, Mistress Yates. And then, um... It seems to me that you are happy in your marriage, and I've no wish or intent to do anything to disturb that. But I must tell you that—"

"Wait up, wait up," Emma said. "...no wish or intent... Yes, go on."

When Jed first heard Carrie's letter to him, a cold, sick lump had settled in his stomach, and now it was back with a vengeance. There were so many things he wanted to say—to protest, to plead. But he couldn't do it like this, with pen and ink, and Carrie twenty miles away.

“ —I must tell you that I’m determined to take up the traces of my old life again, soon as may be...

No, put soon as the press cools off .” He rubbed the back of his neck, watching Emma’s nib scratch slowly across the page.

“And then tell her: Can you manage to wish me well, at least? I don’t like to be at odds with my own sister. It en’t right. ”

They managed to get the whole thing down on paper. Emma folded the sheet over and sealed it with a drop of candle wax. “What’s the direction?”

“Mrs Caroline Penwick at the Manor House in Ledcombe.”

She wrote that on the outside in slow, careful strokes.

Jed reached out, brushing the letter with his fingertips. It was such a poor way to communicate. When would he be able to return to Ledcombe and speak to his sister directly?

Mrs Drake had not given Jed or Solomon a regular route.

Instead, she called on them to fill the gaps in her roster when her other waggoners were ill or delayed.

That morning, Jed was sent out with a cart to meet the Exeter waggon, which had lost a wheel four miles south of Barnstaple and was stuck, lopsided, in the mud.

As Jed helped transfer sacks and parcels to the cart, he had to fight the impulse to look over his shoulder every few minutes.

Until today, he had felt fairly safe in Barnstaple and on the inland routes.

But now, his skin crawled in anticipation of the heavy hand landing on his shoulder.

When Jed arrived back at the yard, Solomon was helping unload the Taunton waggon. Jed caught Solomon's eye and jerked his head towards the isolated corner where they usually met to talk. Solomon nodded.

Ten minutes later, Jed found Solomon waiting for him there, propped against the whitewashed wall, hands in his pockets.

They looked at each other.

"You look like you slept as little as I did," Solomon said.

"Yes. Probably." Though he felt better just for seeing Solomon. He longed to touch him.

Around them, the yard was unusually calm. It was the lull in the middle of the day: the morning waggons had all left and the evening waggons had not yet started to arrive.

"You have to go back out again?" Solomon asked.

"Not for another few hours."

"Come upstairs?"

They went to Solomon and Wallace's empty room and came together in the space between the beds, the afternoon sun creeping in through the narrow window, and the lump of tension in Jed's gut melting a little more with every kiss.

He slid his hands into Solomon's hair, pulling him close, lengthening each kiss.

When they finally broke off, Jed jammed the room's only chair under the door handle, while Solomon began to tug off his neckerchief.

"No, leave that," Jed ordered. "On your back on the bed. I'll see to your clothes myself."

"You're calling the shots," Solomon murmured, flopping obediently back onto the bed.

Jed paused, his hands on the buttons of his own breeches. "Is that—all right?"

"I like it. It's not something I've been able to indulge very often. I mean, if you—?"

"I like it too."

Solomon relaxed. He folded one arm behind his head, looking up at Jed. "Well, then."

A little smile was hovering about his lips. Jed bent to kiss it, a burst of tenderness welling up inside him.

It was a precious gift, he thought. That Solomon would trust him, of all the men in all the world. He wanted to nurture that trust, to embrace it, to be worthy of it. He wanted to hang onto Solomon and never let go.

He swallowed around the tight lump of happiness in his throat, his hands moving over Solomon's body, unbuttoning and untying.

For a few minutes, nothing mattered but the man in his arms. Solomon's body

beneath him, eagerly yielding. Solomon's mouth surging up to meet his. The light in his eyes, the rasp of his cheek against Jed's, the hand that closed tight on his.

Worldly pain and labour seemed far away, here in this hallowed place. At that moment, Jed wouldn't have wished to take any other path in life but the one that brought him here, to this room, to this man's body and soul.

"Jed," Solomon breathed, and they thrust together, moving as one body, until they were spent.

The room was still, the mattress soft, Solomon's arm warm and heavy across Jed's chest.

After some time, Jed stirred. "I'd better go," he said sleepily, though the stableyard clock had struck noon not long ago, and he didn't have to be in the yard until one.

"Stay if you like."

"Wallace—"

"He's with Emma. They've gone out for a walk together."

"Gone for a walk together?" Jed repeated, intrigued.

Solomon stifled a yawn. "I'll tell you about it later," he said, rolling over to pillow his head on Jed's chest and drift off to sleep.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

When Jed woke, Solomon was sitting up in bed, looking out of the window at the wintry blue sky. He noticed Jed stir and smiled down at him: that lop-sided quirk of a smile that Jed had grown to love.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

There was a note in his voice that caught Jed’s attention. He propped himself up on one elbow, eying Solomon. “Oh?”

“Nothing bad! Something good, I hope. You see, Wallace and Emma are thinking of taking over the running of an inn together.”

Jed stared in shock. “Taking over an inn together?”

“Yes. It’s the Jarret Arms out by Jarret Down. I expect you know it?”

Jed hadn’t passed that way since he’d returned to England. He remembered it as an isolated place high up on the moors, though busy enough nonetheless, for it was the only inn along that lonely stretch of road.

“I do, yes,” he said cautiously.

“The previous innkeeper died not long ago, and the lease is available. Emma has been wanting to do something like this for years. Her aunt, Mrs Steele, is lending them the money for the lease. ‘Twas all planned before we ran into Vaughan, of course. But Wallace says he don’t want to let that scupper his plans.”

“Well... the inn is a good way inland, at least,” Jed offered. “It’s a small place, but it’s the only building along that road for miles along, I mind. Must get a fair amount of stopping trade.”

“Wallace is going out to see it on Friday. Sounds like it’s fallen into disrepair of late, but it shouldn’t be too hard to get things up and running. There’s a twenty-horse stables, too, and an Exeter businessman keeps five or six hire-horses there.”

Solomon sat propped against the headboard, limbs sprawled across the sheets. But there was an intensity in his gaze that belied the relaxed lines of his body. He seemed to be studying Jed’s reaction closely.

“Yes, sounds like a going proposition,” Jed said. “But, er... they’re both going to live out there together, then?”

Solomon caught his meaning. “They’re getting married.”

“They’ve only known each other, what, a couple of months?

Scarcely longer than we have. Unless—” Maybe it was just a business arrangement?

People married for all sorts of reasons, and sometimes on the merest acquaintance.

Anyroad, the whole thing was their own private affair. None of Jed’s business.

“You don’t believe people can fall in love that quickly?” There was an odd note in Solomon’s voice.

“I make sure they can, in ordinary circumstances, but not when—” He scratched his head. “I don’t know. I only wonder if... Is Wallace really in a state of mind to be making decisions of such import? Lord knows I’m not, and I en’t been through half

what he has recently.”

“I think Wallace can be happy there. I hope so. I desperately want that for him.”

Jed nodded, still bemused. This was the last thing he had been expecting.

He would have been less surprised to hear that Wallace was running off to some other part of England, and he still thought the decision was sudden and possibly unwise.

But it was Wallace’s business, and Emma clearly knew what she was getting into.

“Well, I hope so too.”

There was a short silence. Jed could tell Solomon still had something else to say.

“There’s a reason I’m telling you all this,” Solomon said finally. “They’ve asked me to come with them and run the stables. But... it’s very much a two-man job.”

Jed sat up, turning so they were facing each other, the sheets falling to his waist. His pulse had quickened. “You mean—?”

“So, what do you think? Would you—be interested?”

Jed was suddenly lightheaded. It sounded like a dream: to be their own masters, working with horses, far from the sea and the press gang. It could be perfect.

But that was all it was: a dream. And to pursue it, Jed would have to let go of the lifeline he’d been clinging to these past five years.

The mere thought of it drove the breath from his chest. He’d said he didn’t think Wallace was in a fit state to be making decisions, and that went for him too.

He knew only that he'd been happy in Ledcombe before he was pressed.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I'm not sure if I can... You know I'm going home. Back to my village, back to my old life. As soon as we get word that the press gang have left Minehead, I'll be able to go home."

The bed was narrow, and they were touching in several places, arms brushing, legs entangled. Solomon was very still. Finally he said, "Of course. I understand."

Jed's gut wrenched with guilt. "I'm sorry, I— You wouldn't be able to rely on me. My head en't on straight. I can hardly keep it together enough for Mrs Drake not to dismiss me. I don't know if I..." He trailed off. "Just give me some time to think about it?"

"Yes, of course."

Jed wanted to apologise some more, but that would hardly do any good, nor change the look on Solomon's face.

Solomon gave Jed a small, unconvincing smile. He threw off the sheets, swinging his legs to the floor. "We'd better go. Mrs Drake will be looking for us."

Darkness filled the waggon, and no one but Jed seemed to be awake. A hearty young farm labourer snored gently in Jed's left ear. On his other side, Solomon slept silently.

They'd left Barnstaple with five passengers the previous day: a lacemaker and her little daughter, two day labourers, and Wallace, who was on his way to see a land agent about the Jarret Arms. When the waggon made its scheduled overnight stop at the Rose and Crown, a village inn halfway to their destination, the woman had paid sixpence to sleep in the inn's kitchen, but Wallace and the two labourers preferred to

save their pennies and sleep in the waggon.

Jed sat up, his arm brushing Solomon's.

Yesterday's journey had been a strain on Jed's nerves.

Solomon had behaved quite as normal, but in Jed's imagination, the spectre of the Jarret Arms loomed between them.

It had been a relief to have the other passengers with them, so that he and Solomon never found themselves alone in a strained silence.

Now, Jed felt for his coat and shoes. Solomon stirred, and Jed bent to murmur into his ear. "I'm going to go see to the horses."

He felt rather than saw Solomon nod.

Outside in the yard, the first light of dawn tinged the sky above the rolling line of moorland hills. A faint mist hung over the yard. They were only ten miles from the sea here. The inn was still in darkness, no lights burning in the windows.

Jed turned to look back at the waggon. For a second, he had thought Solomon might follow him. If he did, it would be the first time they were alone together in two days. But Solomon didn't appear.

Jed stamped hard on the flash of disappointment he felt.

It was stupid of him: he was the one who'd been avoiding Solomon, not the other way around.

He picked his way across the muddy yard to the stables, where one of the inn's stable

hands was mucking out a stall by lanternlight.

Jed gave him a nod of greeting and continued along the line of horses to the six sturdy carthorses that pulled the Barnstaple waggon.

Their water trough had been refilled but their feed troughs were empty.

The stable hand put down his shovel and came hurrying up. “Sorry, I en’t got to it yet this morning. I’ve no oats left in the grain store. I’ll have to go up to the loft.”

“I’ll go,” Jed offered.

“Thanks, friend. Toss down a couple of extra sacks too, will you?”

Jed climbed the ladder in the corner of the stables, emerging into a loft filled with bales of hay at one end and stacked sacks of grain at the other.

Small, paneless windows at either end of the loft let in fresh air and the first glimmer of dawn.

Jed dragged a sack over to a hole in the floor and emptied the sack into the grain store below.

There was probably a loft like this at the Jarret Arms. It was a decent way to earn a living—working in the stables of an inn. Hard work, but with Solomon by his side it could be a good life.

Solomon certainly thought so. Jed heard again the enthusiasm in Solomon’s voice, saw the hope concealed under the feigned indifference.

In another life, it was something Jed could have had. Another life where he wasn’t a

jumble of bad dreams and waking nightmares.

Would they still manage to see each other when Solomon was at the Jarret Arms, way up on the moors?

In the old days, Jed had only gone past the place once or twice a year.

Wallace, telling the other passengers about the reason for his journey, had said it would probably be a few months before the inn could open again.

Jed didn't even know where he'd be in a few months' time.

He couldn't think about the past, and when he tried to think about the future, it seemed to slip through his fingers.

A crow cawed up on the roof, and he realised he had been standing there he knew not how long, an empty sack limp in his hands. He set it aside. As he dragged a second sack over to the hole, he heard faint voices from the stable below: Solomon and Wallace, talking to the stable hand.

Jed's eyes were gritty, his head heavy from his restless night. He tugged sharply on the loose end of the twine holding the sack closed. What wouldn't he give for a peaceful night's sleep?

Then a sudden commotion out in the yard caught his attention, bringing him back to life.

He let the sack fall and hurried across the loft to look down through the nearest window.

The inn's front door stood open, light and people spilling out into the yard.

Lanterns bobbed around, held by shadowy figures.

Women's voices were raised in alarm. Jed caught a glimpse of a kitchen maid he'd spoken to the previous night, her face revealed by the light of the candle she held up.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Was the inn on fire? Jed was about to hurry down to help, but then he saw something that chilled him to the bone: a burly fellow armed with a cutlass guarding the inn's front door.

In the yard, other dark shapes milled around, and Jed caught another glimpse of candlelight on a drawn cutlass.

His breath caught in his throat. The press! A dawn raid!

He ran to the ladder to shout a warning—but then swallowed the words. Two burly gangers had already entered the stables. They stood blocking the main door, looking about them. Jed drew back from the ladder, skin crawling with the sick feeling of being trapped.

He stepped back out of sight, quietly and cautiously retreating into the corner of the loft. Through the wooden boards under his feet came confused noises: stomping footsteps, shouts, horses neighing in alarm.

Through the confusion, Jed heard one sentence, in Solomon's voice, quite clearly. "There's an able seaman up in the loft."

For one long, horrible moment, Jed couldn't move. He stood frozen, crouched under the beams. All the breath had been driven from his body as though he'd been punched in the gut.

Then footsteps approaching the ladder broke the spell.

He turned and ran to the opposite window, the one at the back of the stables overlooking the moors.

He leaned out, heart in his mouth, looking at a sheer drop to the ground twenty feet below.

Movement caught his eye: a tall, fair-haired figure fleeing down the lane behind the inn. Wallace!

Behind him, boards creaked as someone climbed into the loft. In desperation, Jed wondered if he might survive the jump out the window. But the gangers were already on top of him, dragging him back into the loft.

He struck out wildly, flailing with fists and feet, biting any flesh that came near enough.

But there were two of them, and soon he was on his face with his arms twisted behind his back and a knee on his shoulder.

Cold steel was pressed to his neck. A rough hand searched him and took away his pocket knife.

“I’m going to let you up now, and you’re going to climb down that ladder,” a voice said in his ear. “Otherwise we’ll truss you up and throw you down. All right?”

The knee on his shoulder pressed down harder. Jed swallowed around the pain. He nodded.

At the bottom of ladder, he made a break for the door and ran headlong into the guard they’d left there, cutlass drawn.

The two gangers behind him caught him and trussed his hands behind his back with the efficiency of men who spent their days taking prisoners. They marched him out into the yard.

The rising sun lit a scene of confusion. Men armed with cutlasses were everywhere. Three of them guarded a group of prisoners by the stable doors. Solomon was among them, his hands tied behind his back. His gaze met Jed's, his eyes bright with some wild emotion.

Jed's captors pushed him towards the rest of the prisoners. "Keep a close eye on this one. He's trouble."

Jed found himself next to Solomon. By now, he had figured out what had happened.

"Well, was it worth it?" he demanded, bitter bile rising in his throat. "Your little distraction... At least it let Wallace get away. One out of three of us en't bad, eh?"

Solomon leaned closer to him, speaking in a low, urgent voice. "Don't worry, it'll be all right. Just follow my lead."

"Don't talk to me." Jed leaned back against the wall of the stable, letting his head fall against the wooden boards. His whole body was trembling. He turned his head away so he wouldn't have to see Solomon's expression.

"Jed, listen, I promise—" Solomon fell silent when one of the gangers stepped closer.

Besides Solomon, there were five other prisoners: the stable hand, the day labourers who had come as passengers from Barnstaple, and two middle-aged men Jed had seen in the taproom the previous night.

And there were more than a dozen gangers, cutlasses drawn, outnumbering the

assembled crowd of prisoners and bystanders two to one.

The innkeeper was in heated argument with a boy in Naval uniform. With a shock, Jed recognised him as the midshipman who had been with Lieutenant Vaughan at the coaching inn three days ago. There was no sign of Vaughan, however.

“You can’t take him,” the innkeeper was protesting.

“He’s my chief stable hand. He’s never been to sea in his life!

He’s never even been on a riverboat. And that fellow”—he pointed at Solomon—“he’s the Barnstaple carrier, and so is his friend there.

And”—he waved his hand at the rest of them—“those are all guests at my inn.”

“Oh, they are, are they?” The midshipman had the hoarse tones of a boy whose voice was breaking. “And where are the five seamen who are guests at your inn?”

“There are no seamen, you dolt! You come here, harassing honest folk—”

“We have a warrant from his Majesty to press. And a report of five seamen staying at your inn.”

The innkeeper drew himself up and said icily, “If you mean the group of five farm labourers I had here recently, they left two days ago.”

“Where did they go?”

“How should I know? I’m not in the habit of interrogating my guests before they may leave. Now let my stable hand go, if you please!”

The midshipman didn't answer. He was looking nervously in the direction of the roadway, where villagers had begun to appear, drawn by the noise.

At their head stood two stout, muscular men.

They were empty-handed, but they were giving instructions to a little girl, who then went running off into the village.

The midshipman turned to his chief ganger. "Have you finished searching the place?"

"Only other men in the inn were an elderly gentleman and two children, sir. And we got these other fellows in the stableyard."

It was almost daylight by now. The midshipman's gaze fell on Jed, and his eyes widened. He strode over. "Where did you find this one?"

"In the hay loft, sir."

"We're carriers," Jed spat. "That's our waggon standing out in the yard. You can't just haul us off, there are laws against that."

The midshipman ignored Jed and spoke to his underling.

"I have orders to arrest this person and any tall, thin, dark man or tall, broad, fair man found in his company." He ran his gaze over the other prisoners, settling on Solomon.

He gave a nod of satisfaction. "There's one of them, most likely. Any sign of a broad, fair-haired man?"

"We've turned the place inside out, sir."

The crowd out in the road had grown. The midshipman cast another nervous glance at it.

“All right. Get him, him, and those two into the cart”—he pointed at Jed, Solomon, and the two young labourers—“set the others free, and let’s be gone from this place.”

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

The cart jerked to a halt. Seagulls wheeled overhead, and the brine of the sea was sharp in Jed's nose. He sat squeezed between two burly gangers. He couldn't see Solomon, who must be somewhere behind him in the overcrowded cart.

Solomon. Jed let his mind turn to the thought, like probing a painful tooth.

He probably would have been pressed anyway, trapped in the hayloft as he was. But perhaps he could have lain silent. Perhaps he could have escaped.

Jed didn't grudge Wallace his freedom. But he could not forget the way his heart had turned over at Solomon's words. The gut-wrenching shock of betrayal.

He heard the midshipman's voice, shouting to someone down on the beach. "What the devil happened to you three?"

Three voices answered at once. "We were set upon—We've been waiting for you, sir—Hardy is injured sir."

"Silence! One at a time."

"We found the seaman as expected, sir, in the house with green shutters, and took him away with us. But then a mob of his friends set upon us on the road and spirited him away."

"I took a pitchfork to the shoulder," an aggrieved voice piped up.

Jed, stuck in the cart, felt a flash of envy of this unknown seaman who was so

fortunate in his friends.

“And then the driver you hired said this was more nor he was paid for, and he drove off without us.”

One of the gangers in the cart muttered, “This part of the country is getting too hot to hold us.”

“Silence,” the midshipman bellowed. “Bothwell, signal the schooner and have them send us a boat.”

The prisoners were dragged from the cart onto a sandy path leading down to the sea. Two gangers kept a tight hold on Jed. Solomon tried to get closer to him, his feet slipping in the sand, his body thrown off balance by the hands tied behind his back.

“Jed,” he called. “Listen—”

But the gangers dragged them apart. “No conspiring.”

The press gang had set up their Rony at the Blacksmith’s Arms in Minehead. The tender anchored in Minehead harbour, and the prisoners were brought ashore. There were nine of them now: there’d been five longshoremen already imprisoned in the hold.

Jed had been identified as a troublemaker, and was kept under even closer guard than the others during the march up through the town.

Five years ago, he’d been terrified. He’d had no idea what was going to happen to him.

Now, dread sat heavy in the pit of his stomach.

He already knew what came next: temporary imprisonment in some convenient cellar, a cursory examination by a surgeon who was paid a shilling a head.

And then transfer to a receiving ship and off to sea, until the war ended or he died, whichever came first.

He absolutely must escape before he was sent to the receiving ship.

At the Blacksmith's Arms, the gang had taken over one wing of the large and rambling inn. Outside the main room on the ground floor, two Marines stood on guard. Jed's heart turned over. It was months since he'd last seen those hated red uniforms.

This was it. He could feel himself being dragged, powerless, back into the groaning, creaking, grinding machine of the Royal Navy. The machine that forced you to surrender all control, or be crushed.

Between the heads of the prisoners in front of him, Jed saw Lieutenant Vaughan at a table, an open ledger before him. As the first prisoner was pushed towards him, he dipped his pen in an inkpot, hardly glancing at the man. "Name, age, place of birth?"

Behind Jed, two of the longshoremen were conducting a low-voiced conversation.

"Should I give my real name?" one whispered.

"You should if you want your family to know what has become of you," the other whispered back. "Collect your wages, too."

The prisoners shuffled forward one by one. Jed was the next man to reach the table.

"Name, age, place—" Vaughan's gaze fell on Jed and he broke off, upper body

tensing and then relaxing as though he had only just managed to avoid leaping to his feet.

The midshipman stepped forward. "Got two of those men you put a warrant out for, sir. Found them quite by chance at a little inn on the Barnstaple road."

"So I see," Vaughan said, in a voice so calm that Jed suspected he was suppressing some strong emotion. He looked over Jed's shoulder at Solomon. "And their accomplice? Tall, fair-haired, broad-shouldered?"

"?fraid not, sir. No sign of him."

Vaughan's lips tightened. His gaze flickered around the room, doubtless taking in all the listening ears. Jed wondered what tale Vaughan had spun to explain why he was looking for them.

"Seems this one's an able seaman, sir," the midshipman said, indicating Jed.

"An able seaman, you say?" Vaughan addressed himself to Jed. "What ship?"

Bugger off, was what Jed wanted to say. But he knew the consequences for talking back to an officer, and he'd had five years of practice at holding his tongue. He pressed his lips together.

Vaughan raised an eyebrow. "You won't get very far in the Navy with that attitude." He picked up his pen again. "Name, age, place of birth?"

Jed hesitated. If he didn't give his real name... But no. It didn't matter, because he would die before he let himself be pressed again.

He said nothing.

Vaughan scribbled a line in the register, saying out loud, “John Jones, thirty years old, born in Taunton.” He signalled to one of his men. “Take him away. Next!”

The cellar stank of piss and acrid, fear-tinged sweat, the air barely stirred by the draught from the tiny, barred window high up in one corner. There was no furniture. The dozen men held in these cramped quarters were sitting or lying around on the damp earthen floor as best they could.

One lay curled up in the corner, sobbing and hiccuping. Another man, a scrawny, pock-marked fellow, rose every ten minutes or so and climbed the stairs to pound on the cellar door, shouting, “This is all a mistake! I shouldn’t be here.”

“You might as well save your breath, friend,” one of the other prisoners said wearily. He was a longshoreman, one of the five who’d come in the tender with Jed. They’d been snatched from a harbour further along the coast earlier that day.

Jed sat propped against the wall near the stairs, eyes closed, legs bent to avoid the man lying stretched out by his feet.

He had choked down a slice of dry bread the longshoremen had given him, and now he had nothing to do but wait.

The rope around his wrists had been cut, and the raw skin there stung, but not badly enough to distract him from his more serious problem.

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” one man asked.

“Until a ship is ready to receive us,” Jed said. “Maybe today, maybe a week from now.”

“You’ve been through this before, have you?” one of the longshoremen asked.

Jed nodded, and they all stared at him as though he were a fount of wisdom.

“What kind of life is it? Is it true they make you swab the deck every day? Is it true they bring women aboard in every port? Is it true they flog you at the drop of a hat?”

Jed only shook his head. He could not bear to think or talk about that just now.

“At least you get paid,” said one man, a half-starved-looking creature who was probably a volunteer.

Jed let out a bitter laugh. Yes, about two years late, he thought but didn’t say. There was no need to sink the poor wretch’s spirits; he would learn soon enough. Jed himself had only ever received a quarter of the pay that should have been due to him.

“Let’s say, at least you’re well fed,” he said aloud.

There was no sign of Solomon. Was he with Vaughan? Was he in danger? Despite his resolution to avoid thinking about Solomon, Jed felt a pang of sharp, painful worry.

“Did they offer any of you fellows the bounty?” one man asked the room at large. “I heard that’s what they do—let you agree to be a volunteer, and then go halves with you on the bounty. I have to say, I’d go for it.”

“No, but they said they’d let me go for ten pound,” another said.

“Ten pound! They asked me for twelve, the dirty bilkers. Not that it makes any difference one way or the other, for I haven’t even ten shillings to my name.”

“I heard they only give bounties for quota men,” another voice piped up.

“No, that en’t true—”

An argument broke out over the question.

Jed closed his eyes. He needed to plan when to make a break for it.

He knew he'd only get one chance at it; he'd already been labelled as someone to be closely watched.

Should he run when they took him out to be seen by the surgeon?

Or wait till they were marched back down to the harbour?

That way he could disappear down some lane or alley in the town.

He knew Minehead fairly well: it was only twenty miles along the coast from Ledcombe, and he'd come here in his carrier's cart every Monday and Thursday.

Or maybe he should have tried to run already. Maybe it was already too late. He shifted restlessly, his fingers digging into the damp earth he sat on.

The cellar door opened, and two gangers came through. One of them stayed at the top of the steps, brandishing a drawn cutlass, while the other held up a lantern, shining it here and there in the room, peering at each man's face. He stopped when he found Jed.

"That's him. Come on, my lad, you're coming along of us."

In one of the upstairs rooms, Lieutenant Vaughan sat behind a small table that served as a desk. Solomon stood nearby. He had no guard, but his hands were still tied behind his back. He tried, unsuccessfully, to catch Jed's eye.

The room had been turned into a makeshift office. Scattered across the desk were

sheets of paper, an inkpot, an officer's bicorne, and the remains of a fish pie. In one corner stood a locked chest and two valises. In another there lay coils of rope, hemp sacks, and other odds and ends.

"Leave us," Vaughan said to the men who had brought Jed.

"You sure, sir? This devil almost took our heads off when we pressed him."

"Very well. Tie him to the chair."

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

Solomon stirred, shifting his weight from foot to foot, but said nothing. He'd lost the confidence he'd seemed to have when they were first taken prisoner at the Rose and Crown, and now he only looked miserable.

The gangers tied Jed up and left the room.

Vaughan turned to Jed, bestowing a charming smile upon him. "I hope you will forgive me these precautions. Think of it as a compliment, if you will. I know you very much desire to be free—and who knows, perhaps you soon will be. But I must have a word with you first."

Jed had been expecting to face an officer's orders, not whatever this was. He stared in confusion.

"Perhaps you are aware that I'm looking for a friend of mine," Vaughan went on. "Wallace Acton. Solomon here says you know where he is to be found. He has very helpfully suggested that I release you, so that you may lead me to Wallace."

Jed felt the first precious stirrings of hope.

He looked properly at Solomon for the first time since he'd entered the room.

Solomon's expression was full of meaning, but Jed couldn't read it.

There was guilt there, certainly, but also something else.

Some wild idea that, having saved Wallace, he could now save Jed too?

Surely he did not really want Jed to lead Vaughan to Wallace—but maybe he was hoping that Jed would somehow escape on the way there.

Jed wished desperately that he knew what Solomon was thinking—or at least, that he knew what words Solomon and Vaughan had exchanged before Jed was brought to the room. If Solomon did have a plan, Jed wasn't confident that there was anything more to it than wild ideas born of desperation.

“Jed, you're a friend of Solomon's, I understand?” Vaughan said, drawing their attention back to himself. He bestowed another gracious smile upon Jed. “You work together?”

“Ah...”—he shot Solomon an uncertain glance—“you could say that.”

Vaughan leaned forward. “Jed— I hope you don't mind if I call you that?”

Solomon refuses to tell me your surname.

” When Jed made a confused sort of noise of agreement, he went on, “Thank you. Now, Jed, I knew Solomon and Wallace in London. Indeed, Wallace is a particular friend of mine. We shared lodgings in London for several years.”

“Yes, I know.” He swallowed down the sir he had almost added to the end of that.

Vaughan's smile broadened. “Then you'll also know how happy I was to discover that Wallace was here in the district.”

“If you say so.”

“How is he? I've been worried about him.”

Solomon jumped in. “He’s well, Hugo. Jed will take you to him, just as soon as you let him go. Or I will do so. But not while Jed’s being held prisoner.”

Vaughan eyed him speculatively. “You said Jed was a friend of yours. Very close friends, I take it?”

Jed studied Vaughan, an unwelcome suspicion growing in his breast. The brief burst of hope he had felt was fading.

“He’s a friend, yes,” Solomon said cautiously. “Listen, Hugo, do you want Jed to take you to Wallace or not?”

Vaughan didn’t answer Solomon. “You’ve been to sea before, I understand, Jed? I’ve had report of a deserter living in Ledcombe: the able seaman Jedediah Trevithick—I presume you are he? You are quite desperate not to return to sea, I collect.”

Jed regarded him sourly. “Isn’t everyone?”

“So you’d be willing to make a little bargain with me? If I let you go, would you take me to see Wallace? Or maybe just carry a note from me to him? I would be most grateful if you could even help me that far.”

Jed had had enough. “Oh, bugger off, why don’t you?”

“Jed!” Solomon exclaimed, starting forward. “Hugo, listen, let Jed—”

Jed cut him off, his voice flat. “Solomon, he has no intention of letting either of us go. He don’t need us to tell him where Wallace is.

He already knows more nor enough to track him down.

” He could still hear the innkeeper saying, that’s the Barnstaple carrier.

“He’s just trying to find out whether Wallace is fucking someone else now. Me, for example.”

He was looking at Vaughan as he spoke. A split second of white hot anger crossed Vaughan’s face, and then he was smiling again.

“My, aren’t you the clever one,” he said in a soft, silky voice.

Solomon made a small, wounded noise. Jed glanced at him. He looked like the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

Jed swallowed over the sickness in his throat.

Solomon shut his eyes. “Please, Vaughan, let Jed go. Wallace would want that.”

“ You want that, Dyer. And I don’t feel very kindly disposed towards you. You’ve been poisoning his mind against me. He loved me. He loves me. We were happy until you came between us.”

“What do you want from me? I’ll do anything. Only let Jed go.”

“Stop that!” Jed said, afraid to see Solomon make some sort of guilt-driven wild sacrifice.

“I want you out of my way, Dyer,” Vaughan snapped. “As far away as possible. The high seas will do nicely, I think.” He went to the door and opened it, calling down the corridor, “Bothwell!”

The ganger reappeared.

“Take these two men away. And don’t put them together. I’ll not have them conspiring against me. Put one in the cellar and one in the old icehouse.”

As a prison, the disused icehouse was even worse than the cellar: there was no window to help mark the passage of time.

Jed was locked up there with the day labourers who had been passengers on the waggon from Barnstaple, and two other men whom he could barely even distinguish in the dark.

Jed tried to talk to them—he was planning to run as soon as he saw his chance, and he thought he should take these poor sods along with him if he could.

But they all seemed to be sunk in despair, and no one spoke or moved except to try and find a better position on the cold flagstones.

Their guards came by twice to bring them food and water. Jed couldn’t tell how long he’d been there in the dark, but he thought at least an entire day had passed. Then, he was hauled out of the icehouse, tired and grimy, and marched upstairs to the room Lieutenant Vaughan was using as an office.

Vaughan stood by his desk, perusing a letter, while a scrawny child—he looked like some kind of messenger or boot boy—waited for an answer. There was no sign of Solomon.

Vaughan sat down, dashed off a quick note, and handed it to the waiting boy.

“Give that to your mistress with my compliments and tell her that her generosity is much appreciated. The invalided seamen will be most grateful.”

The boy went out, and Vaughan waved Jed and his guards in.

“Minehead is such a pleasant town,” he said in greeting to Jed. “Full of charming and charitable townsfolk.” He indicated the chair in front of his desk. “Sit down, Jed. You’ll forgive me if I have you restrained again. The conversation will flow more freely, I daresay, if we can both be at ease.”

Silently, Jed submitted to being tied to the chair. Then Vaughan dismissed the guards and propped himself on the edge of his desk, looking down at Jed.

“The surgeon will be here shortly,” he said in a conversational tone.

Jed knew what that meant: one step closer to being transferred to a ship, the point after which it would be impossible to run. His stomach lurched.

The room seemed very warm after the bone-deep chill of the icehouse. It should have been a relief, but instead it made Jed’s head swim. Nausea rose into his throat, and he stared fixedly at the buttons of Vaughan’s uniform coat. He could feel Vaughan’s eyes on him.

“My men told me that Solomon set them onto you. To give Wallace time to get away, I presume?”

Jed tried not to react, but some expression must have crossed his face, for Vaughan gave a sympathetic wince.

“That must sting like the devil.”

It did. Jed didn’t admit it out loud.

“I’ve known Solomon a long time,” Vaughan continued.

“He’s a decent enough fellow, you know. But not an easy man to be around.

He hasn't had an easy life." He paused, as though to let Jed respond, but Jed said nothing.

"He cares deeply for Wallace, of course. Why, he's known Wallace as long as I have."  
"

"Longer, en't it?" Jed couldn't help but point out.

Vaughan smiled. Pleased to have got a reaction, was he?

"Longer, indeed. But he's taken against me, Lord knows why.

Got it into his head that I am an injurious presence in Wallace's life, and that he should have seen it.

And so he tries to keep Wallace away from me now to assuage what he sees as his own guilty conscience.

It does seem a pity that you should have been caught in the crossfire. "

It was so close to what Jed had been thinking that it made him jump and stare.

A burst of guilt of his own made him fierce. "Nothing you've done is Solomon's fault."

Vaughan waved a hand. "Oh, Solomon thinks everything that happens to everyone is his fault. It's how he was raised, I suspect." The expression that crossed his face was thoughtful, almost fond—or a counterfeit of those emotions. "I understand him very well. He has told me so much."

It had hurt, rather a lot, to hear Solomon speak of the evenings he had spent spilling

his guts to Vaughan—while later Jed had to scrabble for breadcrumbs. And it hurt even more to hear it from Vaughan’s mouth now.

Jed didn’t know whether he wanted to defend Solomon against Vaughan or himself against Solomon.

“You know nothing about him,” he said shortly.

“No? You know him better, I collect?”

Jed opened his mouth, then shut it again. The only power he had in this moment was that Vaughan did not know him very well—did not know what strings to pluck to play him as he wished. The more Jed spoke, the more that power would slip away.

Vaughan pulled up a chair, its back to Jed, and straddled it so that they sat eye-to-eye. He said quietly, “I know what it is to be in love with a man who has turned against you.”

“I’m not—”

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“Aren’t you?” Vaughan’s voice was soft. He was watching Jed closely, studying the effect of his shots in the dark. “If you weren’t, it wouldn’t hurt so much, would it?”

To his dismay, Jed felt his eyes sting. He blinked hard, wrenching at the ropes tying his hands behind the chair.

“The only thing I care about is getting out of this bloody prison.”

“Yes, about that,” Vaughan said. He straightened up, putting some more space between them, and Jed could breathe again.

“Why are you so anxious to escape? Is it so bad, to be in the Navy? You’ll be fed, clothed”—his gaze lingered on Jed’s shabby and ill-fitting clothes—“paid a decent wage, perhaps win yourself a little prize money...”

Jed said nothing.

“Of course there are the disadvantages of the wind and the rain, storms, shipwreck, perhaps the occasional burst of cannon fire. But you don’t seem to be a man lacking physical courage.”

You’ve left out the chief disadvantage, Jed thought with a sort of sour amusement. The utter powerlessness. “I want to be my own master,” he said aloud. “Is that so strange?”

But he didn’t expect Vaughan to understand. You lord it over me now, he thought, but I bet you come running when a captain snaps his fingers.

Vaughan was watching him, lips pursed. Abruptly, he said, “I’ll be honest with you, Trevithick.

I’m desperately worried about Wallace. He means the world to me.

I love him, God help me. I would forgive him anything.

” His voice rang true—and there was, perhaps, some truth in it. “Only tell me—how is he? Is he well?”

“And then you let me go?”

Vaughan nodded.

“And—” He hesitated, because knowledge was power. “Solomon too?”

Vaughan looked pleased at this little victory—this little confession of Jed’s. “And Solomon too.”

Jed thought of Wallace, on the way to that inn he hoped to run. Of Emma Yates. Of evenings at the Boar. Of Wallace beaming at Solomon, entering eagerly into conversation with Jed.

Would it be so bad to tell Vaughan what he wanted to hear? Would it really do any harm to Wallace?

But it was the first step along a path Vaughan intended to entice him down. A path that didn’t lead anywhere Jed wanted to go.

Jed looked him in the eye. “No.”

“No?”

“I don’t trust you as far as I could throw you.”

Vaughan’s lip twisted in a snarl that he couldn’t quite hide beneath a smile.

“I see,” he said softly.

Jed’s pulse hammered in his temples. This was a man who could have him hanged for desertion in the face of the enemy. But he couldn’t bring himself to submit to Vaughan—and then be sent off to sea anyway.

Vaughan rose to his feet and walked around Jed. Before Jed knew what he was about, Vaughan had cut his bonds.

“Stand up,” he rapped out.

Instantly, Jed was on his feet, responding instinctively to that tone of command. He hated himself for doing it.

They stood facing each other. Vaughan was between Jed and the door.

The penalty for striking an officer was death. Jed felt more trapped now than he had when he was tied to the chair; he had no doubt that was quite deliberate. He could see it in Vaughan’s eyes.

“Where is Wallace Acton?”

“I don’t know, sir,” he said, the sir slipping out instinctively.

“Where did you last see him? Where does he work? Who does he frequent? Who are

his friends?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“Is that how you answered all your officers? My God, they must have come down upon you hard and fast.”

A short coil of rope lay atop the stack of chests by the door. Vaughan picked it up, uncurling it and letting it snap against the chair. It cracked like a bosun’s starter. Jed flinched despite himself.

Vaughan’s lips spread, slow and satisfied. He tossed the rope aside and stepped closer, putting his hands on Jed’s shoulders and turning him so that Jed’s back was to him. Jed clenched his fists, fingernails digging into his palms.

Through the cotton of his smock, he felt a finger tracing one long, slow, horrible line down his back.

“Have you ever been flogged, I wonder?” The finger stilled at Jed’s flinch. “You have, haven’t you? More than once, hmm?” His breath whispered on the back of Jed’s neck. “I wish I’d been there.”

Jed trembled with the effort of not lashing out.

There came a knock at the door.

Vaughan stepped away. “Come.”

It was one of the gangers. “The surgeon’s here, sir.”

A flicker of annoyance passed across Vaughan’s face. Then he shrugged. He picked

up his hat and crossed the room in two swift steps.

“Have this man taken downstairs. He’s of no further use to me.”

The surgeon had set up shop in the same downstairs room where Lieutenant Vaughan had recorded the prisoners’ names upon their arrival. He had laid his instruments out on a table near the window, and was examining a man’s teeth when Jed was brought in.

A handful of other men stood waiting their turn, under the watchful guard of three uniformed Marines armed with muskets. Solomon was among them, and Jed felt a flood of relief. He hadn’t seen Solomon since the previous day, and he’d been worrying that Solomon might already have been sent to sea.

He thought, suddenly, how desperately he wanted to end up on the same ship as Solomon—and then he pushed that thought aside, because he wasn’t going to end up on any ship at all.

Their eyes met. There’s an able seaman upstairs, Jed heard.

But this might be his only chance to warn Solomon of his plans to make a break for it at the harbour, before they were transferred to the tender.

His only chance to take Solomon with him.

Though he could not see how to warn him without being overheard.

“Next,” the surgeon called, as the previous man scrambled back into his clothes.

Under cover of the movement, Jed managed to get close enough to Solomon to murmur in his ear. “Solomon, listen, as soon as ever I can—”

At the same time Solomon was whispering, “Listen, Jed, please don’t try to escape until—”

“What’s that you’re muttering about?” The nearest Marine stepped in to pull them apart. “Heard the word ‘escape,’ did I?”

The line of prisoners shuffled forward. Jed tried to hang back, close to Solomon. But it was his turn now, and he was pushed forward.

The surgeon was a portly fellow with little round eyeglasses. He cast a disinterested glance over Jed, up and down.

“Strip,” he ordered, making a note in his book.

As the surgeon measured and examined him, Jed caught Solomon’s eye, trying to read the meaning there. What did he mean, ‘don’t try to escape’? What had Solomon done? Jed remembered again his fear that Solomon would try to strike some sort of desperate bargain with Vaughan.

“You’re in excellent health,” the surgeon said. “His Majesty is lucky to have you.” He scribbled something on a piece of paper, then waved at one of the guards to take Jed from the room. “Next!”

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The schooner lay at anchor out in the bay beyond the harbour. A jolly boat was waiting to transfer the prisoners to it.

Outside the thatched cottages clustered around the harbour, a few townspeople stood watching the prisoners on their march down to the sea. They cried ‘Shame!’ as the group passed, and a child slung mud at one of the gangers, but nobody dared approach the drawn cutlasses too closely.

“Look lively, there,” barked the midshipman, who was in command of the little procession.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jed watched the ganger marching alongside him, chivvying him along. The man held his cutlass with the ease of long practice. Jed’s heart was pounding. This was it, the moment he had been waiting for. The moment of his escape.

He kept his eyes sharply peeled, paying attention to everything: the position of each ganger, of Solomon, of the midshipman, of the people coming and going around the busy little harbour.

He tested the strength of his bonds. The prisoners all had their hands tied behind their backs, but they were not strung together.

They reached the waterfront. In the harbour, the town’s fishing boats floated at high tide, the late afternoon sun gleaming on their painted white boards.

Two small merchant vessels were moored along the opposite pier, busy unloading,

anxious to put to sea again before the tide turned.

Closer by, two of the schooner's seamen were in the waiting jolly boat.

"Prepare to receive prisoners," the midshipman shouted down to them.

"Aye, aye, sir."

On the quay nearby stood a four-horse waggon. The pile of crates beside it was emitting squawking noises, as of agitated hens. Two men were loading the waggon, casting nervous glances of sympathy at the prisoners.

A few yards further along the quay, a narrow alley disappeared between a tavern and a warehouse. It led up towards the almshouses, as far as Jed remembered. From there, he could lose himself in the town's narrow streets, and then go to ground in the wooded slopes that rose behind it.

The first prisoner was urged into the jolly boat.

Jed sought out Solomon's gaze. They were standing some three yards apart, separated by two gangers. Their eyes met.

"Now," Jed mouthed, still hoping against hope to bring Solomon with him.

Solomon's eyes widened in alarm. "Don't," he mouthed back.

Jed's heart cracked. For one achingly short second, they both stood there, Jed trying to memorise every line of Solomon's face.

Then he stepped back and drove his foot into the stack of crates, toppling it. The topmost crate burst open, and the hens burst out, squawking and fleeing in all

directions. The guards and prisoners scattered.

Jed broke away from the group, racing towards the alley.

For ten or twenty glorious seconds, he thought he had succeeded. He plunged into the alleyway, his lungs burning. But it wasn't easy to run with hands tied. The cobblestones were wet and slippery under his feet. He slipped and almost fell, and then the Marines were upon him.

A heavy weight slammed into his back, and his head bounced against the cobblestones, sending waves of pain through his body.

He was dragged upright. He couldn't see straight, with blood trickling into his eyes and his head spinning.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. Everything seemed very distant, as though it were happening to someone else. He was only faintly aware of hands pushing him down into the jolly boat, of the planks rocking under his feet.

From somewhere far away came the midshipman's voice. "He's been trouble from the start. Don't put him in the hold with the rest. Next thing you know he'll have stirred up a mutiny. Put him on the afterdeck. He can go to the Ossory this evening."

When Jed came to, the sun had already set, and he was chilled to the bone in the night air. He tried to roll over. Pain spiked through his head.

He was on the schooner's afterdeck, legs shackled to the capstan. Solomon must be down in the hold. Jed put his hand on the decking, spreading out his fingers, trying to push his hand through the wood. His heart ached.

The schooner was a small vessel, probably with a crew of less than a dozen, Jed

reckoned. It had been converted to serve as a transport of soldiers or prisoners, and the gratings were all uncovered, letting some air down into the hold.

As Jed lay there, trying to summon the energy to sit up, there came the splash of oars of some smaller boat approaching the schooner.

“Ahoy there,” a voice hailed, followed by the sounds of someone coming up over the side.

Jed heard snatches of conversation. “Evening, sir... Two crates of pease... the captain’s mailbag... Ossory sails first thing tomorrow morning... sign for it here....” And then, a voice raised in irritation, “You’re trying to palm some troublemaker off on me? I don’t want him.”

Jed heard the words able seaman , spoken in a conciliatory tone.

“Oh, all right, then,” the previous voice said grumpily.

Footsteps approached Jed.

“On your feet, man,” a voice barked.

Jed struggled to his feet. He was looking at an officer, a weary-eyed, middle-aged man. This must be the man who had come aboard.

“You’ll do,” the officer said, after inspecting him by the light of a lantern. He looked over his shoulder. “Well, get him unshackled.”

Then Jed was being ordered into another ship’s boat, and rowed away through the choppy waters of the Bristol Channel, towards another ship at anchor in the far distance, its lights only dimly visible through the night.

Closer by, the shoreline was marked by dots of light here and there from the taverns and houses of Minehead's waterfront. Jed twisted round to watch them recede as the gig's crew pulled at the oars. They were already fading into the night—and his last hope fading with them.

The gig rocked gently on the waves. There was something horribly familiar in the sensation. Back at sea. One of the seamen at the oars flashed Jed a quick grin: commiseration and welcome.

Somewhere ashore, a church clock struck midnight, the nighttime land breeze carrying the sound clearly across the water towards them.

Then another noise came across the water: shouts and splashes from the schooner.

Jed craned his neck to see. There was some commotion on board, with cries of alarm piercing the night air.

Moonlight fell on two smaller boats that had come alongside, and dark figures were swarming up the side and onto the deck.

"They're boarding the schooner, sir!" one of the men in the Ossory's gig cried out.

Jed's heart leapt into his throat. Finally he understood Solomon's urgent words: Don't run. A rescue! And he was trapped out here in the middle of the bay.

The officer hesitated. He looked over his shoulder at his own ship, a good twenty minutes' hard rowing away, and then back at the schooner, only a cable's length distant. Jed watched him openly, terrified that he would decide to return to the Ossory for help.

The man pursed his lips, frowning.

“About turn,” he ordered. “Back to the schooner.”

Within a few minutes, they were back alongside the schooner, on the opposite side to the rescuers’ boats. No one answered their hails. On the deck above, shouts rang out and metal clashed on metal.

Indecisive, the officer put his hand on his sword. His men were watching and waiting. Jed’s heart hammered in his chest.

The officer came to a decision.

“With me, men,” he ordered, and soon the seamen were swarming up over the side, armed with oars and belaying pins.

One man was left to guard the gig: the same fellow who had thrown Jed a smile earlier. Jed eyed him. He didn’t like to raise his hand against man nor beast, and particularly not against some poor bugger who was only doing his job, and who was perhaps a pressed man himself.

The man stared back. He was young, little more than a boy, with weatherbeaten cheeks and plenty of muscle.

“Thinking of trying to rush me, are you?” he said to Jed. “I wouldn’t advise it. You go overboard with your hands tied like that, you won’t be coming back up.”

Jed swallowed. He couldn’t stay here, letting freedom pass under his nose.

“Cheer up,” the other man said. “It en’t a bad life. Ossory ’s a good ship. Fine captain. Fine crew. I’ve been with her three years already.”

“I’ve already been at sea five years, and spent every one of them plotting my escape.”

“It took you that way, did it?”

“Yes, it took me that way. I hated it. I won’t go back. I can’t go back.”

The man regarded him thoughtfully. “Got a wife and children, have you?”

Jed’s heart pinched. “A sweetheart, you might say.” Who was, he hoped against hope, currently in the middle of escaping.

“A good trade?”

“I was a carrier. Lived in a village just a few dozen miles from here. And you?”

“I was a sweep’s boy. Hated it. Ran away to sea as soon as ever I could.”

They studied each other. The battle raged overhead, a confusion of shouts and groans, clashes and thuds. Down in the gig, neither of them moved.

“You’re desperate enough to jump me, en’t you?

” the other man said. “What are you thinking, get your feet under you and throw yourself forward, give me a good headbutt in the jaw? And then I wallop you one. And then you lash out with your feet. And if we’re really unlucky, we overturn the gig and we both drown.

” He let out a soft laugh. “There’s no call for us to hurt each other.

” He jerked his head up at the schooner.

“Go on, I won’t stop you. I’ll say you overpowered me. ”

“With my hands tied?”

“Well, you’ll have to get loose first, won’t you?”

Jed jerked desperately at his bonds.

The man made no move to help. Jed looked about him, and his gaze fell on the rough edge of an oarlock. He turned, desperately sawing away, not caring if he cut his wrists at the same time.

The seaman watched him. “Sure you don’t want to stay? We Ossories won ten pound each in prize money last year, let me tell you. What do you say to that?”

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Jed sawed harder. Finally, he felt the rope give way.

The other man picked up the short lengths of rope, looking at the frayed edges in a satisfied way. He shrugged.

“Well, go on, then.”

Before the man could change his mind, Jed scrambled up over the gunwale and onto the schooner—and into the middle of a pitched battle.

Men were pouring out of the hold, running for the starboard gunwale where the two boats awaited them.

Other men were fighting. He saw moonlight glint on a pitchfork, a billhook, a threshing flail—men holding off the ship’s crew just long enough to let the prisoners get away.

In the dark, it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe, but it seemed to Jed as though the prisoners and their friends vastly outnumbered the schooner’s crew.

Who were the rescuers? Friends of the Ilfracombe longshoremen, perhaps? There’d be time enough to find out later. Now, Jed had a more pressing problem: he was on the wrong side of the battle, on the port side of the ship.

A shadow loomed up out of the darkness, slashing a cutlass, and Jed ducked out of the way.

Hurriedly, he began to make his way around the edge of the deck, his head down, ears battered by the familiar clashes and shouts and cries of armed combat. Then a beam of lanternlight fell on something that sent a shock running through him: Wallace, just a few yards away, carrying a pitchfork.

He blinked, unable to believe his eyes, then ran across the deck.

“What the devil are you doing here?”

Wallace gasped. “Jed. Thank God. I’m looking for you two. I didn’t realise everything would be so—confused.” He flinched as metal clashed on metal nearby. From the awkward way he was holding the pitchfork, Jed guessed that he hadn’t made much use of it.

“Have you seen Solomon?”

“Yes. He went looking for you.”

The deck was clearing now. Most of the prisoners had escaped into the boats.

Two men were bending over another near the mainmast. One man was half-carrying, half-dragging his injured friend across the deck to the boats.

Three burly longshoremen were forcing seamen down into the hold at cutlass point.

Jed looked around desperately. And thank God, there he was, abaft the mainmast. Solomon. At the same moment, Solomon saw him. They met in the middle of the near-empty deck.

“God, I thought you’d gone to the Ossory .”

“I almost did.” They were clutching each other, and Jed felt something sticky under his hands. “You’re bleeding!”

“Yes, I think so. I didn’t even notice...”

Solomon’s voice was faint, and Jed remembered the shock of his own first battle. He pulled Solomon into a patch of moonlight. Blood was oozing from a small gash on Solomon’s arm. “It’s not serious. Thank God. Here”—he tore a strip from the bottom of his shirt—“we’ll bind it up with this.”

The deck was nearly empty by now, a stillness as shocking as the abrupt outbreak of pitched battle.

Wallace caught them both by the arm, tugging at them. “This way, this way! The boats are going up the coast to let everybody off in some remote cove.”

“How in heaven did you come to be here?” Solomon demanded.

“Clear the deck, clear the deck!” a man in a fisherman’s cap was shouting from his position on the gunwale. “Look lively there! We’re leaving.”

“I’ll tell you later,” Wallace said in answer to Solomon’s question. “Let’s go.”

They turned to dash across the deck and ran headlong into a man coming up through the hatchway. Jed recognised him as one of the longshoremen who’d been in the cellar with him, a short, grey-bearded man.

“Have you seen the register?” the man demanded. “It’s got all our names in it. We have to destroy it before we go.”

“Especially if someone’s been killed,” Jed said, a chill running down his spine. “Have

they?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. We’ve locked the officers and men in the hold.”

One of the younger longshoremen came running up, carrying a ledger. “I have it! I have it!”

“There’s a copy back at the Blacksmith’s Arms, I make sure,” Jed pointed out, as the man tore the most recent pages from the ledger, crumpled them up around a holystone, and dropped them over the side.

“Yes, dammit, you’re right,” the first man said.

The two longshoremen exchanged glances. “Think you can find your way there through the town, Godfrey?” the older one said doubtfully. They were from Ilfracombe, Jed remembered, a village a good thirty-five miles away along the coast.

“I’ll go,” Jed said. “I know Minehead well.”

“It’s too risky,” Solomon said instantly. “And your name’s not even on the register.”

“No. But yours is.”

“We’re leaving!” the man by the gunwale shouted again.

They settled quickly that Jed, Solomon, and the younger longshoreman—his name was Godfrey—should go to the Blacksmith’s Arms. Wallace would come ashore with them—“Emma’s in Minehead,” he said.

Understandably, he didn’t want to enter the inn or any other place where Vaughan might be.

Jed thought it was damned courageous of him to have come this far.

They hurried to the boats, and soon the schooner, silent now, was receding into the distance behind them.

One of the boats put Jed and the three others ashore near the hamlet of Warren, a mile east of the harbour.

Looking along the beach, Jed saw a cluster of bobbing, moving lights near the harbour—townsfolk drawn by the commotion on the schooner.

With any bit of luck, Lieutenant Vaughan was there commandeering a force to take out to the schooner, leaving the Rondy deserted.

He wouldn't have an easy task of it, for the tide was out and the boats in the harbour all aground.

"Follow me," Jed said, leading the way in the short scramble up from the beach to the low-lying fields. He meant to take them into town from the east, staying well clear of the harbour.

The moon was veiled behind clouds now, and the sleeping streets were shrouded in darkness. Only the occasional light shone through a mullioned window. Jed had to stop every so often to get his bearings on the way to the Blacksmith's Arms.

While in the boat, Wallace had explained how he and the rescuers came to be there.

When he fled the Rose and Crown, almost two days ago now, he had gone directly to Barnstaple and found some fishermen he knew who drank at the Boar on market day.

They had already heard of the pressing at Ilfracombe, and brought him around the

coast to that village, where friends of the pressed men were planning a rescue.

“They got a message into the cellar to warn us,” Solomon said. “We were to be ready to break out at eight bells in the first watch. That’s what I was trying to tell you.”

Jed met his eye, reliving those moments when he’d been in the gig on the way to the Ossory and feared he had missed his chance.

Now, the four of them hurried through the dark and silent town, Jed leading the way. Their footsteps were deadened by the hard-packed mud of the unpaved streets, and the only sound was the distant hooting of an owl, somewhere in the inland woods.

Wallace fell into step beside Jed, speaking breathlessly as they hurried along.

“Emma spoke to your sister yesterday. A Mrs Penwick, I collect?”

Jed was too surprised to do more than nod.

“Emma came with us in the lugger from Barnstaple—we put into Ledcombe to let her ashore there. She said your sister lives there and is married to a man who’s friendly with the local magistrate and might have been willing to intervene on your behalf, somehow.”

“And was he?” Jed asked, already knowing the answer.

Wallace sounded apologetic. “No. I’m sorry. She did say, well, she thought it would probably be something of a long shot.”

Jed grunted. Emma had read Carrie’s letter. She must have known just how much of a long shot it was. It warmed his heart to think that she had tried anyway.

“But Mrs Penwick did mention something about Hugo Vaughan as might be of use to us—” Wallace broke off as Jed came to a halt, holding up a hand. They had reached the end of the street where the Blacksmith’s Arms stood. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Wallace, you want to stay here?” Solomon suggested. “Keep watch for anyone coming up from the harbour?”

Jed, Solomon and the longshoreman left Wallace hidden in the shadow of a gatepost and advanced towards the inn. To Jed’s immense relief, the wing used by the press gang seemed entirely deserted. No lights burned in any of the windows.

They pushed open the front door. The large downstairs room was empty.

“Christ, will we have to search the whole house?” the longshoreman said. Until now, he had seen no part of the building but the ground floor and the cellar. But Jed and Solomon could lead him directly to the room Vaughan used as an office.

It was a matter of a few minutes to break down the door, and then to break open the locked chest where Vaughan stored all his papers. Solomon kept watch at the top of the stairs while Jed and the longshoreman knelt to rifle through them.

Jed found what looked like a list of names, dates and ages.

“Give us a look,” the longshoreman said. He cast a quick glance over it. “This is it. There are about three dozen names here, dates going back two weeks—I think that must be everyone.”

Jed took the candle they had been using to light their way and crouched at the empty hearth to feed the papers into the flame.

“Hey, look at this,” said the longshoreman, who had continued to rummage in the

chest. Jed looked over his shoulder to see the man holding up a locked money-box.

“That belongs to the Crown,” Jed said. “I’m not touching that. We’d be lucky to escape with our necks.”

So far tonight, nothing they had done had crossed the line that was sure to bring the retribution of the law down on their heads. Many other men had fought the press gang and got away with it. Jed had no intention of doing anything that might cross that line.

“You know what don’t belong to the Crown?” the longshoreman said wistfully. “That leather pouch they were putting the bribe money in.”

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In the fireplace, the papers were reduced to ashes. Jed straightened up. “Let’s go.”

Emma Yates burst into the room, panting for breath, Solomon on her heels.

“That bastard Vaughan is downstairs!” she gasped. “I left Wallace outside.”

Jed blew out their candle, plunging them into darkness. He rushed to the door. The light of Vaughan’s candle was already visible in the stairwell.

He ran to the other end of the corridor, but it ended shortly afterwards in a locked door. He fell back into the office, where Solomon and the longshoreman were wrestling with the heavy wooden shutters on the window.

“What a catastrophe,” Vaughan’s voice came up the stairs. “They’ve all vanished into the night. Disappeared into the moors and gone to ground like so many rats. We’ll never find them, and who’s left holding the bag now? Yours fucking truly.”

Another man’s voice spoke in a murmur, and then Vaughan’s voice came again.

“Yes, I know, but—”

Vaughan appeared in the office doorway, accompanied by his chief ganger.

He looked in a bad way: he had thrown his coat on over a nightshirt and wore no stock or cravat.

His skin was grey, his expression bleak.

Even in the midst of his terror, Jed felt a flash of satisfaction.

Vaughan would be facing a court martial for tonight's events. Jed had seen officers broken for less.

For a long moment, they all stood frozen, four facing two.

Vaughan's gaze ran over them, resting on Emma for a puzzled second before moving on to eye the men with satisfaction. He looked suddenly more cheerful.

"Aha! So I'm not left entirely without something to show for tonight. What do I have here? The chief instigators of the mutiny that has caused me so much trouble tonight, hmm? I expect I can make that swing. Make you swing too, perhaps?"

"Go to hell," the longshoreman said, though his voice was not as firm as his words. "You're not pinning that on us. We escaped when everyone else did, that's all."

Vaughan wasn't armed, but the ganger had drawn his cutlass.

The two of them stood in front of the doorway, blocking the way out.

Jed and the others had no weapons, not even their pocket knives.

They hadn't wanted to run through the town with billhooks or pitchforks and risk encountering a night watchman.

But if the four of them rushed the doorway—

Vaughan snatched a length of rope from the crates by the door. "You first, Dyer. Come here and put your hands behind your back. Bothwell, if he makes any sudden moves, run him through."

“Hugo,” a voice said from the corridor, and Vaughan spun around. It was Wallace, standing in the doorway.

Jed stared. He heard Solomon’s gasp, and the two of them exchanged alarmed glances.

“Wallace!” Vaughan’s voice held a tremor. Was it genuine joy? “I knew you’d come.”

Wallace stood there, pale but steady. He was unsmiling.

“My dear boy—” Vaughan took a step towards him, then stopped, frowning sideways at the ganger. “Wallace, come downstairs with me. Bothwell, keep these men under guard in here.”

“You’re outnumbered, Hugo,” Wallace said. “There are five of us and two of you. Let the others leave, and I’ll stay and talk.”

He and Vaughan faced each other. Some deep undercurrent was flowing between them.

The ganger eyed Wallace with suspicion, clearly wondering what effect his arrival had on the balance of power. His cutlass wavered.

They could rush him and take the cutlass.

Jed flexed the fingers of his right hand.

It had been months since he had held a weapon, and he didn’t want to.

But needs must. It would be suicidal, however, to just throw themselves on the blade.

He considered the empty hemp sack lying crumpled in one corner... But it was too far away to grab easily.

Jed glanced sideways at the three others alongside of him. The longshoreman was tense, on the balls of his feet. Emma too was looking sharply around the room. Solomon caught Jed's eye and nodded. Emma hitched up her skirts.

"Bothwell, watch the prisoners," Vaughan snapped, and the ganger turned to face the four of them head on, confounding them.

"Who's this new fellow, sir?" he asked without taking his eyes off the others. "Friend or foe?"

"Never you mind."

It was clear that Vaughan was in a quandary. Reluctant to mistreat Wallace's friends in Wallace's presence. Reluctant to let go of prisoners that might make all the difference for his court martial. Unable to speak freely to Wallace in the presence of so many strangers.

Vaughan said, "Bothwell, give me your cutlass and go fetch reinforcements from the harbour."

The man looked doubtful.

"Do it!"

Bothwell obeyed, and the longshoreman took advantage of this exchange to slip out the door. Vaughan didn't try to stop him.

"You too, woman," he said to Emma, his gaze and cutlass trained on Jed and

Solomon. He jerked his head towards the door. "Get out of here."

Emma looked back at him coldly. She didn't move.

"That's the woman I love," Wallace said. "My betrothed. Don't talk to her like that."

Vaughan spun around, shocked. It was perhaps the first genuine, open emotion Jed had ever seen on his face. "Wallace, what is this nonsense?"

Wallace looked squarely at him.

Vaughan collected himself. He turned to Emma, saying smoothly, "My felicitations. I'm an old friend of your betrothed's. Lieutenant Hugo Vaughan." He made her a bow. "And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I've already told her everything," Wallace said. "So you needn't bother thinking you're going to befriend her and then poison her mind against me."

Vaughan's lips thinned, as Emma flashed him a grim smile.

"Won't you excuse me, madam?" he said, turning back to Wallace. He stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Wallace, let me speak to you alone. Surely you owe me that much?"

"I don't ever want to see you again. I just came to"—Wallace swallowed, his voice wavering—"to tell you that. And to fetch my friends."

"Wallace, please. I've missed you dreadfully. Won't you let me speak to you alone for a moment?"

Jed glanced nervously at the door. Bothwell was probably almost at the harbour by

now.

“We’re leaving now,” Wallace said.

Vaughan had let the cutlass dip, but now he raised it, pointing it at Wallace.

Wallace looked down at the swordtip at his chest. “What’s this? If you can’t have me, no one can?”

His voice was calm, but Jed saw his hands were trembling.

“Wallace, I love you.” Vaughan’s voice was low and persuasive. “I’ve been looking for you for months. I gave up everything for you. My career, my life in London...”

“I never asked you to.” Wallace took a step away from the cutlass, but he was already backed up against the wall.

“If you walk out on me now, I’ll never forgive you. I’ll have your friends pressed. I’ll have them hanged for mutiny!”

They had all frozen when Vaughan pressed the swordtip to Wallace’s chest. Now, Emma caught Jed’s eye. She was the closest to Vaughan, and as he spoke, she began to inch her way around behind him.

Suddenly, she threw her arm around Vaughan, pinning his arms to his sides. The cutlass fell to the ground with a clatter. Jed scooped it up.

Vaughan shook her off, and she stumbled back. Vaughan rounded on them.

“You can’t imagine I’ll let you simply walk out of here. I know your names, employers, place of residence. I know you mutinied on the schooner tonight.”

“I wouldn’t advise biding in town long enough to do anything about it,” Emma said calmly.

“Oh? Why’s that, woman?”

“I’ve been speaking to Mrs Penwick of Ledcombe. Maybe you know her? Her husband is on friendly terms with the Minehead magistrate.”

“What does that signify? I have the law on my side.”

“Well, there’s a few interesting things as come up while we were talking. Most particularly, your good works on behalf of the Naval Hospital in Greenwich.”

A flicker of something—fear?—crossed Vaughan’s face.

“Mrs Penwick and I had a very pleasant chat,” Emma went on.

“I told her all about what you were used to get up to in London. You weren’t always pure as the driven snow, were you?

And that put her in mind of the donations you’ve been collecting for the Greenwich seamen.

She thought it might be interesting to make enquiries as to the monies received by the hospital.

To be sure it adds up to the same as what was collected down here in Devon, you see.  
”

Vaughan made a little noise in his throat. After a moment he collected himself.  
“That’s nothing.” But the strained note in his voice said otherwise.

Emma put a hand on Wallace's shoulder. "Coming?"

They walked out. Jed went last, brandishing the cutlass to keep Vaughan at bay.

Vaughan regarded him coldly. "You won't really use that, Trevithick."

"No, I won't, because I've never done violence to any man or beast without I was forced to it by the likes of you. And you won't come after us, because you have worries enough of your own."

He stepped out the door and pulled it to, leaving Vaughan standing alone inside.

Downstairs, Jed tossed the cutlass aside and followed the others out into the street. Wallace was trembling. Solomon threw his arms around him, squeezed tight, then let him go. Emma put a hand on his arm, and he turned to bury his head in her shoulder.

After a long moment, he straightened up, taking a deep breath. "I suppose I could have saved us all a mint of trouble if I'd done that months ago."

"Seems to me you're the only person as gets to decide the time and place for that," Solomon said.

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“Now who can that be?” Mrs May exclaimed, rising from her seat to answer the knock at her cottage door.

Jed, Wallace and Solomon were at Mrs May’s kitchen table, eating her bread.

It was almost noon now, but in the early hours of the morning Wallace had led them to this little fishing hamlet near Minehead, where Mrs May had let them sleep by her kitchen fire.

She was sister-in-law to the fisherman who had brought Wallace by boat from Barnstaple two days earlier.

The three of them exchanged anxious glances, craning their ears to hear what was happening in the cottage’s front room. But Mrs May’s cheerful greeting put them at ease.

“Good morning, Betty,” she said, and then, “Lord in Heaven, what good news you bring us.”

After a few minutes, she came back into the kitchen.

“That was my neighbour, Betty, as went into town early this morning. The press gang have left the Blacksmith’s Arms, it seems, and their boats are gone from the harbour.” She beamed at them.

“Gone never to come back?” Solomon said, more disbelief than hope in his voice.

“If it be true, ‘twill be a blessing from Heaven. It’s been a nightmare having the press on our doorstep. Never knowing if my Richard will come home each night.” Mrs May lowered herself into the seat she had left.

She was a little slip of a woman, with a ready smile.

“Nothing compared to what you poor boys have been through, howsomever. Have another piece of bread and cheese.”

“It’s very good of you to take us in,” Solomon said. “We’ll be out of your hair as soon as we can.” It had been almost dawn by the time they got to sleep, and they had only recently risen.

“Take your time, take your time,” she said, getting up to stir a pot bubbling over the fire.

The three of them looked at one another. Solomon and Wallace appeared as exhausted as Jed felt. Yesterday, they’d been fed through a wringer and miraculously come out alive, and everything still felt slightly unreal.

“You really think they’re gone?” Wallace said. “Moved on to somewhere with easier pickings?”

Solomon only shook his head. “I don’t know what it would take for me to believe that Vaughan is off our backs.”

“If they truly are gone, then I’m going to Ledcombe to see my sister,” Jed said. “Penwick won’t be able to go running off to Minehead to turn me in this time.”

Mrs May had stepped out with a bucket of scraps for her hens, but she returned just in time to hear this. “If you wait a little, my brother-in-law will bring you down the

coast to Ledcombe by boat this afternoon.”

Jed accepted gratefully. It would save him an entire day’s walk.

“I’ll wait here for Emma,” Wallace said. She had slept in Minehead with a friend who was barmaid at an inn there. “Then we’ll go to see that land agent about the Jarret Arms. I’ll have to beg his pardon for arriving several days late.”

They both looked at Solomon. Solomon’s gaze flickered to Jed.

The two of them hadn’t had a moment to exchange two words in private since they’d been aboard the schooner.

Last night, Solomon had sat silently while Jed stitched his wound and Mrs May held a candle for them, oblivious to the tension that thrummed between them.

Then they’d slept uneasily, with Wallace lying between them.

Now, after a beat, Solomon said, “Maybe I’d better go back to the Rose and Crown to fetch Mrs Drake’s waggon, if it’s still there.”

“Don’t fret, Mrs Drake already sent someone to see to that,” Wallace said. “By the way, she conveys her sympathies to you and Jed, and says pray try not to get pressed next time you’re driving one of her waggons.”

Solomon smiled weakly. “Well, it sounds as though I still have a job, at least. I suppose I’d better go back to Barnstaple and make sure.”

Wallace glanced from Jed to Solomon, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. An uneasy silence settled over the table.

“I saw some wood outside as needs chopping,” Wallace said at last.

He and Solomon chopped wood, while Jed went to fetch water for Mrs May.

From the well, he had a clear view down to the sea, the sun sparkling on its surface. He stood there for a moment just to enjoy it. He’d grown up on the coast, but these past few months, the sea had been something to fear and avoid.

He turned his head to look towards Minehead, invisible around the headland.

Were the press truly gone from the district?

They’d be back someday, as the fortunes of war ebbed and flowed, and the Admiralty moved its pawns around on the high seas.

But maybe that day would be a year or more in the future—or maybe the war might even end first.

Everything that had happened last night still felt unreal, like a dream he might wake from at any moment. And to think that this afternoon he would see Carrie again—But he didn’t know how he would be received.

As Jed trudged back up the lane that led to the Mays’ cottage, he saw Emma in the distance, hurrying towards them.

Wallace was outside the cottage, and he dropped the log he was carrying and ran to meet her, taking her hand in greeting.

They exchanged a few words, then came back along the path together, arm in arm.

“Emma has brung us some good news,” Wallace said. He looked fairly bowled over.

“First of all, the press gang is gone from Minehead, sure and certain,” Emma said. “I spoke to one of the maids at the Blacksmith’s Arms. The little midshipman returned the keys this morning and paid off the gangers.”

“The midshipman?” said Solomon. “But where’s Vaughan?”

Emma grinned. “That’s my other bit of good news. Lieutenant Vaughan was seen at the harbour first thing this morning, not in uniform, going aboard a merchant vessel leaving the country. I had this from two fishermen who saw him with their own eyes.”

Solomon let out an odd sort of sound, half whistle and half sigh of relief.

“So he fled the country?” Jed said. “How much money was he filching off the Greenwich hospital, exactly?”

“The dirty swindler,” Emma said with satisfaction.

Wallace and Solomon exchanged stunned looks.

“I can’t seem to take it in,” Wallace said slowly.

Mrs May came out into the garden. “Who’s this, then?” she said, beaming at Emma.

Soon, they were deep in conversation, Wallace with Emma’s arm tucked into his and a constant smile on his face. Solomon stood alongside, speaking when addressed, though every so often his gaze flickered towards Jed.

Jed watched them, still with that feeling of distance hanging over him. He left them talking and carried his two water buckets through to the kitchen.

He was oddly reluctant to go back outside to join the others. So much had happened since that moment when he stood in the Rose and Crown's stable loft, listening to Solomon betray him. He hadn't had time to stop and think.

He stepped out the back door. Behind the row of cottages, a wide expanse of grass sloped down to the sea. Jed walked out a little way and sat on a rock at the top of the slope.

The distant murmur of the waves rose to his ears, overlaid by the nearby clucking of hens. It was a fine day, warm and dry. Jed closed his eyes.

After a minute or two, he heard the cottage door open, and Solomon came to stand beside him. They looked at each other in silence.

Then Solomon burst out, "Jed, I'm so sorry—"

"Don't apologise." He kept his voice steady with only a little difficulty. "I know why you did it."

"There en't any apology as would be good enough. Any explanation in the world as would be good enough—"

"You'd promised Wallace he'd never have to see Vaughan again."

Solomon closed his eyes, briefly. "Yes." He ran a hand through his hair, tugging sharply. "In the heartbeat of a second I had, there in the stables, that was all I could think about."

"Yes, I know."

"I already let him down once before, in London. I didn't notice what Vaughan was

doing to him, and it was right under my nose.”

Jed had opinions of his own about whether Solomon held any responsibility for that. But this was not the time to talk him out of his guilt.

Solomon went on, words pouring out of him, “And I thought—I know Vaughan very well, better than I’d like to...

We were close once. I thought there must surely be some way to talk or trick him into letting you go, too, once we got to Minehead.

But it all fell apart like a house of cards.

” His voice was urgent, willing Jed to listen.

“I was so sure there must be some way I could save you and Wallace both.”

It might have been better if you didn’t try to save anyone at all, Jed wanted to snap. But that wasn’t true. And indeed, this was one of the things he loved about Solomon: that ever-present impulse to help.

But that didn’t make this hurt any less.

The hens clucked in oblivious contentment. A seagull swooped overhead and dived to land on a nearby rock, fixing them with a beady eye.

Jed tilted his head to look up at Solomon, painfully close and painfully far. He thought of those long, cruel hours in the icehouse, when he’d feared they could be separated for ever.

“I wish I’d trusted you when you told me not to try to escape,” he said abruptly.

Solomon let out a pained laugh. “I can hardly be surprised that you didn’t trust me.” He crouched down by the rock, so that he was closer to Jed, looking up at him instead of towering over him. “Jed, I don’t want to lose you. I want to go on seeing you. Do you think— I’ll do anything—”

He broke off at the sound of the door behind them opening. It was Mrs May.

“My brother-in-law’s here,” she called.

Jed turned back to Solomon. Neither of them moved.

Dimly, Jed saw himself rising to his feet, walking down to the little harbour, perhaps never seeing Solomon again.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t bear to turn away now, leaving things like this between them: affairs unsettled, words unspoken.

If he left, he’d be walking away with an open wound in his chest.

Solomon’s gaze was on him, fear in its depths.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

“Come with me to Ledcombe?” Jed said.

Solomon swallowed, his throat moving slowly up and down. “You mean, just to speed me on my way to Barnstaple, or—”

“Come with me to see my sister? If you will? I wouldn’t mind having someone by my side. And then, maybe, we should talk about... everything.”

The fishing smack glided into the tiny harbour at the mouth of the river Led. Jed stood at the bow, looking landward. Above the houses that clustered along the river, steep wooded slopes rose to the moorland hills and ridges that Jed and Solomon had walked over together, months before.

Jed glanced sideways at Solomon, leaning on the bulwark beside him.

Solomon returned his glance with a cautious smile.

During the journey by boat along the coast, it had felt like they were living through a temporary lull of their own making in a longer running storm: relieved to be together, but conscious of how much they still had to talk about.

“Make fast the lines,” called Mrs May’s brother-in-law, and soon Jed and Solomon were ashore, thanking the men who had brought them here.

A favourable wind had carried them swiftly along the coast, and it was now early evening.

The little harbour was sleepy and calm under the long shadows cast by a pale evening sun.

Two fishermen were scrubbing down the deck on a boat moored nearby.

Another sat on the pier, mending a net. This latter was a middle-aged man with a thatch of thick, sandy hair.

He and Jed had sung together in the village choir and shared many a drink in the harbourfront alehouse.

For a second, Jed couldn't remember the man's name. Then it came back.

"Isaac," he called in greeting.

The man gaped at him for a long moment. "Jed? Jed Trevithick?"

"It's Trevithick's son," someone else exclaimed, and the other men left their nets and came over.

"He used to be the village carrier," one man could be heard explaining to a little boy.

They crowded around him, looking at him with sympathy and curiosity.

But as soon as they realised the newly arrived boat had come from Minehead, another more urgent matter caught their attention. They had already heard a rumour that the press gang had left Minehead—news spread fast along the coast—and they were anxious to learn the truth of it.

Solomon told them everything he knew, with the men of Mr May's crew leaning over the side of their boat and putting in a word of their own here and there.

The Ledcombe men had plenty to say. “Thank Heaven!—We’ve been living on our nerves since February—I can hardly credit it—I thought they’d never leave, the bastards.”

Jed listened but said nothing. A chasm seemed to separate him from the other men. He looked across the river mouth to the stony little beach where he’d been pressed, so long ago. He’d been expecting to be overjoyed, but just now he only felt overwhelmed.

Isaac stepped over to join him. “You’ll be looking for somewhere to stay, I expect? There’s an empty cottage behind the churchyard since my old grandfather passed.”

Jed blinked. He had not yet thought about that sort of detail.

“Are you setting up in business again?” another man asked. “We en’t had a proper carrier here since you left—only the fellow as comes through from Minehead on Tuesdays.”

Jed nodded, but didn’t allow himself to be drawn into conversation. He only had one thing on his mind: to see Carrie. He touched Solomon’s elbow. “We’d better go, or we’ll arrive while they’re at supper.”

When he’d first come here after escaping from his ship, he hadn’t seen much of the village.

But now, coming up from the harbour, they walked through the heart of it.

Everything was just as it had been: the medieval church with its crumbling belfry, the Dissenters’ wooden meeting house, the odd-shaped village green where the young women gathered to get away from their mothers, the smith taking an evening nap on the bench outside his forge.

Jed felt as if he'd been away for decades, and that surely everything must have changed in his absence. But it hadn't.

"You want me to wait outside?" Solomon asked, after they'd climbed the headland and were approaching the Squire's house.

"No, come in with me."

Jed marched up to the front door. The maid who answered was the same woman who had brought them tea on their last visit. Her eyes widened when she recognised Jed.

"I'm here to see Mrs Penwick," Jed announced, and she showed them into the same parlour as before.

Carrie appeared soon afterwards. She was accompanied by Mr Penwick, to Jed's dismay. He had been hoping to see her alone.

Carrie clapped her hands to her mouth. "Oh, Jed, thank God! A woman called here—your friend from Barnstaple. Emma Yates. She said you'd been pressed again."

"I'm all right, as you see. But to tell the truth, I didn't expect such a welcome. Not after that letter you wrote me."

"I know, but—"

She exchanged glances with Penwick, who cleared his throat. "Trevithick, I did not expect you to show your face here."

Jed faced him squarely. "Thinking of running off to Minehead again? I wouldn't trouble myself, if I were you. I've just come from there this afternoon. The press gang

have left town.” He deliberately left off the ‘sir,’ difficult as it was to break the habit of a lifetime.

“Ah... yes, we have heard something of the kind,” Penwick said in an uncomfortable tone.

Yes, look me in the eye and tell me you betrayed me, Jed thought. But Penwick had not met his eye since he entered the room.

There was a pained silence.

Carrie said quickly into the silence, “Your friend from Barnstaple made some shocking allegations about Lieutenant Vaughan’s behaviour in London.”

“If you mean his practice of preying on improvident young gentlemen, it’s perfectly true,” Solomon said. “I knew him in London myself.”

Penwick looked doubtful. “Indeed, Mrs Penwick told me there appear to have been some rumours... But I can scarcely believe— Such a well-bred gentleman—”

“Then it may interest you to know that he fled the country this morning,” Solomon said. “Soon as he found out someone would be taking an interest in the details of his so-called good works in these parts.”

“Good Lord! Well—that is... Well, I’ll certainly have the matter looked into.” Penwick cleared his throat. “Of course, that is no reflection on the importance of his duty in manning our ships.”

But Penwick still wasn’t able to meet Jed’s eye.

Jed didn’t care. He was here for Carrie. She did meet his eye, and he searched her

gaze for the sister he had known. He found guilt and wariness there.

“Carrie—” he began.

He wanted to appeal to her. Wanted her to say something to prove that she hadn’t written that letter. That she didn’t really believe the things she said. That she was still the sister he’d loved.

He looked at her in her fine gown, her hand on Penwick’s arm, and remembered wondering how it felt to be in her position. Commanding a household of servants, entertaining Penwick’s gentlemen friends at dinner... Did she fear Jed would undermine a position in which she already felt insecure?

“Carrie, I don’t want to be at odds with my own family.”

“Neither do I, Jed,” she said quietly.

“Nor do any of us,” Penwick said. “It pains me to see your sister’s distress. But Trevithick, you must see what an impossible situation you put us in. You, a deserter—”

Something inside Jed snapped. “For Christ’s sake, I’ve already given five years of blood and sweat. Other men settle down. Why can’t I?”

“I understand that,” Penwick said unexpectedly. “But you must see that I cannot dine with magistrates and let my own brother-in-law get away with law-breaking.”

“No, you’d rather dine with scoundrels who steal from invalided seamen.”

Penwick flushed.

Jed grimaced inwardly. Perhaps it would have been a better strategy to kneel and lick Penwick's boots. But he was too angry for conciliation.

"Never mind. I'm just here for my horse and cart. I'll trouble you to write me a letter of introduction to your agent, if you please."

Penwick met his eye at last. "Perhaps, Trevithick, it would be best if you were to go away to another part of the country. I would be quite happy to give you a small sum—"

"I don't need your money, thank you. I ask only for my horse." He looked at his sister. "Carrie—"

Carrie burst out, "You needn't go to Mr Morgan. Your horse has been hired out to a man named Harlow, on the Ilfracombe road. The cart too."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

"Yes, it's true," Penwick admitted finally.

"Have you known that all along?" Jed looked from one to the other of them. "Have you?"

Penwick's colour was answer enough. "Your sister didn't," he said. "I only told her yesterday."

Jed bit back his anger. He addressed himself to Carrie. "Then will you give me a letter for Harlow, telling him the horse and cart are no longer up for hire?"

Penwick and Carrie looked at each other, some conversation without words passing between them. Finally, Penwick sat down at the writing desk and wrote a quick note.

He folded it over, then stood up and held it out to Jed. But when Jed put his hand to it, Penwick did not immediately relinquish it.

“It will be better for all of us, I’m afraid, if you don’t come to the house again. We cannot be seen to associate with you.”

Jed glanced sideways at Carrie. Regret and a tinge of pain lay heavily on her face. But she nodded in agreement with Penwick.

Reluctantly, Jed nodded too. Penwick released the letter, and Jed tucked it carefully into his pocket.

Carrie took one quick step forward. “Jed, you’ll get word to me and tell me where you are, won’t you? Promise?”

Jed took her hands, pressing them. “Yes, I promise.”

He stepped back, and she offered her hand to Solomon. “I’m glad he has a friend with him.”

Penwick said awkwardly, “Trevithick, I hope to welcome you here when the war is over.”

He and Jed exchanged stiff nods. And then it was all over, and the maid came to show them out.

The evening air was mild, a foretaste of summer. Bees buzzed from daisy to guelder-rose in the hedgerows. Jed strode along the lane, Solomon at his side. Upon leaving the manor house, they had set off immediately for Harlow’s farm.

“Yes, let’s go see the man now,” Solomon had said when consulted. He was staying

with Jed, of course; that wasn't something they'd needed to discuss.

Every so often, as he walked, Jed put his hand to the letter in his pocket. This was the moment he'd been dreaming of for years. He still didn't know what Penwick would do if he set up in business in Ledcombe, but he would cross that bridge later.

Harlow's farm was at the end of a steep lane. As they drew nearer, they passed a half-ploughed field in which a man was at work. His plough was pulled by a bay draft horse that Jed recognised immediately. He stopped, staring. Bess was in excellent form: her flanks rounded, her coat glossy.

Horse and man were on the far side of the field. If Jed crossed the field, calling out to the man, then Bess would recognise him. She'd lift her head at the sound of his voice, and whinny softly like she always used to.

A boy was walking ahead of the plough, searching the unploughed earth for stones. He noticed Jed and Solomon and came over to them.

"You all right there?" he called. "If you're looking for work, you'll have to come to the farmyard tomorrow morning. But if it's Mr Harlow you want on business, he's up at the house now."

Solomon glanced at Jed, letting him answer.

Jed couldn't take his eyes off Bess. How many hours had they spent together, travelling over the moors? Hours of freedom, of quiet contentedness, in sunshine and rain. Bess meant peace, respite, coming home.

Or so he'd convinced himself.

In the Navy, many of his messmates had had talismans: a lucky coin, a cheap

medallion, a piece of coral.

Something they hung onto, that they took out and looked at from time to time, to convince themselves that everything would be all right.

But that was just an illusion. And in the end, Bess was just a horse.

The boy was looking at him curiously. “I said, if you want to see—”

Jed managed to say, “No. Thank ‘ee. We just stopped for a rest.”

The boy returned to work. On the other side of the field, Bess marched steadily on. The plough reached the end of a furrow, and man and horse turned, moving further away from the road.

Jed stepped away from the hedge. He sank to the ground on the grassy verge, back slumped, head bent over his knees. He heard Solomon sit down beside him.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Jed said at last. “I was sure that if only I could get Bess back, everything would be all right. But it don’t work like that, does it?”

Solomon’s shoulder was solid and comforting, pressed against his.

Jed lifted his head to look sideways at him. “I just wanted to go home.”

“I know.”

The grass was warm and dry under his hands. A cricket chirped noisily—nearby, but somehow distant, like being underwater.

“I don’t think I’m going to see this Mr Harlow.”

The words came surprisingly easily. He wasn't sure how he felt, afterwards. Like coming unmoored—or maybe being set free?

Solomon nodded. In the face of his calm acceptance, Jed felt a little better.

He straightened up, scrubbing his face and taking a couple of deep breaths. He looked up at the sky.

“It'll be sunset in a few hours. I suppose we should go back down to Ledcombe and look for somewhere to sleep.”

“That old pithead where we slept before,” Solomon said thoughtfully. “That's not far from here, is it?”

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:50 am*

They sat on the grass among the pithead ruins, eating the food they'd brought with them from Mrs May's village. It was much warmer now than it had been when last they were here, the spring chill gone from the air.

Jed said abruptly, "Sometimes I see things. As if in a waking dream. Things as happened to me, or as could have happened." He tugged at a handful of grass, tossed it aside, pulled up another.

"It seems so real. As though I'm truly there, on board ship, and not here in the real world.

When it happens... I don't know where I am.

When I am." He bit his lip. "Sometimes I think I'm losing my mind. "

"I don't think you are," Solomon said quietly.

"I thought maybe, if I could only go back to my village and my old life... That was a fool's notion.

" He tugged up another handful of grass, still not looking at Solomon.

"And then there's this other thing... You may think me an ill-tempered, ill-favoured bastard, but I never used to be that way.

I don't know what's the matter with me."

Solomon had been sitting sprawled across the ground, but now he drew himself up, tucking his legs under him.

After a moment, he said, “When I went away to London, when I was a boy... Well, truth be told, I didn’t go away, I ran away.

I’ll tell you about it some other day. But anyroad, when I got to London, I thought all my troubles were over.

But they weren’t. I was miserable, I couldn’t sleep.

And the waking dreams, like you said... Sometimes I couldn’t even breathe. ”

Jed wished he could go back in time to comfort that young boy. “Did it get better?”

“With time. Not entirely.”

Jed thought this over.

“You’re talking about something as happened when you were a boy. I’m a grown man.”

“A man who just spent five years at war.”

“There are a hundred thousand men in the Service. Men who’ve lost arms, legs, eyes... I came away unscathed.”

“I don’t think you did,” Solomon said. “And I expect you en’t the only one. Not by a long chalk.”

It was an overwhelming idea, too big to take in, and Jed didn’t know if he wanted to believe it. If he was able to believe it.

Finally, he said, “I just want to be the man I was.”

“It’s the man you are now that I lo—like. Admire.”

At that, Jed raised his head. They were sitting close together, only a foot or two of air between them. Solomon’s expression was open but wary. Vulnerable, somehow.

Jed looked at him, thinking about how often Solomon had reached out to him over the months, and how often Jed had pushed him away. Not that Solomon hadn’t done his own share of pushing away.

“We en’t always made things easy for each other, have we?”

Solomon’s expression softened. “Maybe not.”

Companionship was not something Jed had ever sought out. Not something he’d ever thought he might want. Now he craved Solomon’s presence in his life, every morning and every night.

The sun was low in the sky now, and the air around them was still and peaceful. A falcon swooped overhead, then dove towards the woods. Ledcombe was somewhere down among those trees, and Jed felt a tug at his heart. But he’d already turned his back on that path.

Perhaps Farmer Harlow would be willing to buy Bess from him. Jed would go to Mr Morgan with Penwick’s letter, and let the man of business handle it. And then... “Is that offer of yours still open? The stables at the Jarret Arms?”

Solomon looked up sharply, hope flaring in his eyes—and then dimming again. “Yes, but...”

Jed felt his breath catch. “But?”

“If I have your mind and body but not your heart and soul, I don’t think I could bear that.”

It was a punch to the gut. Jed fought for words. “Solomon, you can’t think— You’re the only good thing that has happened to me since I ran. You do have me, upon my life. I love you.”

Silence stretched out between them, broken only by the whistle of wind over the hilltop. Solomon’s throat bobbed, fear and startled joy chasing each other across his face. “But do you still trust me?”

Jed couldn’t lie. He had to answer honestly. “I want to try.”

At that, the tension bled from Solomon’s shoulders. Jed reached for him, dissolving the distance between them, pulling him into a kiss.

It was a soft, tentative brush of a kiss, but no less of a relief for all that. After a few seconds, Solomon drew back, searching Jed’s face.

“I love you,” Jed said again. “I don’t know how this will work out—how things will be between us—but I want to try it.”

“I thought I’d lost you.”

“I know. You haven’t.”

Jed leaned in again, and they tumbled back into the grass, Solomon laughing up at him, eyes bright in the setting sun. Jed crawled over him and ducked his head for another kiss.

“Tell me about this inn,” Jed ordered.

“You’re the one who’s been there before. I en’t even seen the place yet.”

“Well, tell me about the two of us there.”

That made Solomon’s smile broaden. “We’ll work together.

No master over us. A couple of stable boys to help us.

Local lads. And we’ll have a room somewhere for sleeping in, just the two of us.

No one will find it remarkable if we’re tucked into some little room in the attics together.

We’ll have coaches stopping at the inn, and carts and waggons...

Every evening, we’ll sup with Wallace and Emma in the kitchen, and then we’ll go off to bed—”

“And I won’t be able to keep my hands off you,” Jed finished, hand sneaking into Solomon’s breeches.

Solomon laughed and squirmed, fumbling at Jed in turn, rolling him over on the grass.

They retreated to the old mine building they’d slept in before and laid out their coats on a bed built of ferns. It was warmer now than it had been the last time they were here; no need to light a fire. They undressed unhurriedly and lay down together.

Jed closed his eyes, soaking it all in: the smooth, hard lines of Solomon’s forearms under his fingertips, the rake of Solomon’s nails across his chest, the warm breath whispering over his skin. Then Solomon rolled onto his back, and Jed sat up on his haunches, looking down at him.

“Take yourself in hand,” Jed commanded.

Christ, but it was a glorious sight: Solomon’s fingers wrapped around his eager prick, his head thrown back, exposing the long column of his throat.

Jed had never felt such joy—such a wave of affection that he ached with it. So this was what love was. He wanted to do everything for Solomon: delight and gratify him, protect and defend him, turn to him for comfort, laugh and cry with him, and just now, make him come so hard he saw stars.

He lowered himself over Solomon and kissed him slowly, open-mouthed—a fiercely joyful kiss. They were free men, their enemies far away, and a new world lay before them.

They could look forward to innumerable days and nights of this: working together, fucking, falling asleep in each other’s arms. They could have this as often as they wanted. Jed’s heart swelled fit to burst with the joy of it.

They broke off kissing to draw breath, and Jed pulled back. “Tell me what you want.”

Solomon looked up at him, grey eyes dancing with affection. His mouth quirked. “To give you the sucking of a lifetime.”

Jed’s cock twitched, heat pooling in his belly. He knelt over Solomon, straddling him. “Like this?”

They wedged a bundle of shirts behind Solomon’s head, and then Jed was in his mouth, Solomon’s lips tightening around him, Solomon’s hands on his arse, urging him on.

Jed was light-headed with the pleasure of it, bones melting, vision blurring. His world narrowed down to Solomon: his hungry mouth, the desire in his eyes.

“Solomon, Christ, the look on your face. Your mouth—you take me so well. Fuck .”

Solomon’s grip hardened on his arse, greedy and insistent, spurring him on, swallowing him down as he spent.

Jed slumped back, gasping for breath. It took him a long time to gather himself.

When he opened his eyes again, Solomon was staring up at him with a dazed expression. “I half think I’m dreaming. Can’t quite credit that you’re here.”

Jed huffed out a laugh. “What, after my prick in your mouth just now?”

Solomon’s lip curled up. “Well, it’s a dream I’ve had monstrous often, that.”

Their eyes met, mirth brimming between them.

Jed lay down beside Solomon, turning serious now. “I’m not going anywhere. I know you en’t either.”

He ran a hand over Solomon’s body, stroking his flank, skirting his weeping stand.

“Want to see you come,” he murmured.

Solomon made a needy noise in the back of his throat. “Kiss me—your hand—”

Jed settled himself so he could kiss and frig him at the same time, bringing him off with firm, steady strokes. He pressed close, tasting himself on Solomon’s tongue, until they couldn’t kiss any more, and they were panting into each other’s shoulders.

This was what he wanted, what he had been looking for all along. This rapture of closeness, of union, of coming home at last.

“Come for me,” he said, and Solomon spent with a breathy sob.

He rolled over, burying into Jed’s arms, and the only sound was their ragged breathing in the last of the day’s light.

Later, curled up together in their coats, Jed told Solomon what he remembered of the Jarret Arms: a neat little inn on the moors, under the wide open sky.

A grey stone stable block, with rows of stalls and two loose boxes.

The road that snaked across the moors, climbing to the brow of a hill, where the inn stood.

The burbling stream that ran across the hillside below it.

“Hmm,” Solomon said thoughtfully. Jed couldn’t see him in the dark, but he sounded as though he probably had his lips pursed. “Where’s the yard pump relative to the water troughs? And what’s the prevailing wind? Is the muck heap—”

Jed snorted with laughter. “I don’t recall any of them details. I’ve only been there a handful of times, you’ll recollect. You’ll have to wait and see.”

“We should go and look over the place together.”

Jed wriggled closer to plant a kiss on Solomon’s jaw. “Yes, together.”