

Chapter 1 Lagged

Richard looked out at the grey-blue sea. It stretched in all directions around the tiny ship on which he stood, his arms and head resting on the railing. He was looking south over the vast expanse of ocean towards the horizon, trying to imagine the thousands of miles of water going on almost forever until finally trapped in the ice far away to the south.

Richard shivered at the thought and moved around to the port side. He gazed back the way they had come, back to cold London far behind now, back to the coasts of France, Portugal, and Spain, where he had tantalizing glimpses of strange new places. The mean and dangerous streets of London were all he had ever known in his eight years of life and now it was gone forever. He was on his way to Australia by crossing the great ocean that lies at the bottom of the world.

He tried to remember his home in England, but he was eight, and his oldest memories were in vague pictures, not words. Most of them were unpleasant so he had reasons to let them go. Yet it seemed oddly important at that moment to remember how it had been. He tried to remember his mother, who died when he was four. It was easier to remember feelings with his eyes closed, when the love came flooding back. Her body was warm and soft when she enfolded him in her arms. He could feel her warm breath on his head as he suckled and sighed and felt totally safe, totally protected.

After her death, only one person in the whole world cared about him, his Da. But his way was gruff and distant, compared to the soft warmth of his mother's body as she held him close. He tried to hold on to the feeling and the blurred picture of her face, which faded as he tried to grasp it and make it clearer.

He opened his eyes to the endless blue sea and for a moment he saw her. Her eyes had been that same colour. He shook his head in shock and she was gone. He looked down at his feet as memories of cold, hunger, and a terrifying sense of aloneness that never quite went away overwhelmed him. Then he smiled: at least he had his Da. The orphans went to the workhouse, but his father hadn't abandoned him so he had become a lad of the streets instead.

William was a good butcher, but a poor businessman who lost his shop. William laboured where he could and then took to stealing to keep his son fed. He loved Richard with a fierce passion, because the boy was all he had left of the gay lass who had married him, followed him to London from the green hills of Ireland, and borne the hardship of their lives together. She gave him three children but two died. Then she too sickened and died of consumption, leaving him with nothing but the memory of her love embodied in their son.

As the father struggled to keep a roof over their heads, Richard roamed the streets. He grew up with the other ragged urchins who ebbed and flowed like water through the city streets. They swirled around the grownups, surging up and down side streets in endless games: hide and seek, tag, wrestling matches, and ball games, if they were lucky enough to have a rotten apple or something else round to use.

There were other games too: arguing and fighting, picking pockets and stealing food from produce merchants. Richard was quick and smart and he learned them all just as he knew the names of all the young hoodlums – Spike and Pockets, Stubby and Stump. His own nickname was Dicky of course, and was said as rudely as possible, because he was still a child to these streetwise ten- to twelve-year-olds.

Richard sighed and rested his head on his arms again, still gazing back to England, lost in his memories of the streets, the gangs and the games.

“Ho, Boy! Go help with the even'n meal!” shouted a sailor, who belted him and sent him on his way. Richard scurried below after looking with regret at the sails. They wouldn't let him climb the rigging like a real sailor, but at least they let him wander around the decks, because he was registered as a free passenger. His father was not so lucky, riding in the hold as a convict in chains.

No money had been paid for his passage so he was expected to work, helping the cook prepare meals or scrubbing the decks, but he could also walk freely about the ship and get a first serve of the food, though he got no more than the convicts did. He was lucky to be here at all. He was only here because of the mercy of the judge.

William had been caught shoplifting and served a sentence in jail. The boy had survived that time on short rations and spent much of it hanging around the entrance to Newgate Prison since he did not know when his father would be released. At last one happy day, his father walked out and they went back to their hovel, only to find that others had moved in. So they took to sleeping on the streets, with the boy kept warm in William's strong arms.

William was not a thief by nature and preferred to work for a living, but times were hard and no one was hiring street rats, so he was forced back to thieving to feed them. Richard proudly announced to his da that he was happy to help, but that earned him a cuff and a stern warning to do no such thing. Richard bit his tongue and didn't admit to how he had survived during those long months when his Da had been locked up.

It didn't take long for William to get himself arrested again. He spent several weeks in jail before being hauled before the bewigged magistrate. William tried to look contrite but he expected to be found guilty, to be flogged and spend time in prison. If the judge was harsh, William feared he might be hung.

Instead, at the end of the short trial, he heard the judge say, "You are found guilty of all charges. These are not your first crimes and you show no sign of mending your ways. Therefore I sentence you to seven years of hard labour at the penal colony of Botany Bay. You will be free in 1835 if you serve your sentence well, and then you can start life again in a new land."

William's jaw dropped in amazement. He had heard of others being sent to a place called Botany Bay, but it had never occurred to him that it could be his fate too.

"W- what about me boy, Y'r Hon'r?" he shouted. The bailiff cuffed him but the judge raised his hand and said, "Let the defendant speak."

"I've a son, Y'r Hon'r, an 'e 'as no one to mind him, his Mum bein' dead. I stole to feed 'im, Y'r Hon'r, but it ain't 'is fault. His Ma's dead. I'm all 'e's got..."

"Enough!" The judge rolled his eyes, "the last thing we need is another Irish brat roaming our streets. Children do not usually accompany convicts, but as the mother is dead, the boy may accompany you as a free passenger. Give his name to the court recorder and where the boy may be found."

The judge turned to the bailiff. "See it done!" The bailiff nodded and bowed, then marched William back to the cell.

The boy was not easy to find. The constables had to hunt for him and then beat him into submission before he could be taken to the jail. He had the street urchin's instinctive fear of officials, especially policemen. When they put him in the cell with his father, Richard stood at the door in amazement. William rushed over and hugged him, leaving the boy even more confused by the unexpected show of affection.

His father sobbed. The boy had never seen him cry since his mother died. Richard was sure something terrible was happening. He clenched his fists and went rigid in his arms.

“I bin lagged! We’re bein’ transported... to Botany Bay. We’re to go to th’ other side o’ the world. But I told the judge about ya and he’s letting ya come too. D’ya understand?”

Richard didn’t understand. He had never heard of Botany Bay and had no idea of the world beyond the streets where he lived. But he lived each day with the immediacy of a child, like a young animal, equipped solely with the instincts to survive. He was ready to take each event as it happened.

“It’ll be all right, Da. At least we’ll be together.”

Several days passed in the dark and airless prison. The boy child was bored in the darkness but he ate a lot when the food came. The streets had provided poor fare for a growing child. Already he was destined by fortune to a small and wiry frame.

Then the guards arrived, put chains on his father and the other convicts, and marched them out of prison and through the chill and windy streets to the Port. Richard walked free beside his father, holding tight to his hand and looking once more at the familiar lanes and faces watching them, not realizing that it was the last time he would ever see them.

The twisted streets led at last to a wharf. A great ship lay moored a short distance away. A name printed in large letters was written on her side, but unreadable to the illiterate boy.

They stood and then sat around for hours, waiting for the ship to be ready for them. Finally they were rowed out to the great ship and were loaded on board. The prisoners were taken below and chained together. The guards ignored Richard. He stayed with his father for a little while, listening to the sounds of the crew and the soldiers above.

His Da spoke to him in a rough whisper, “Listen, Richard... after we sail, ye’ll be allowed the run o’ the ship, but I won’t. Ye must look after y’rself, for I can’t help you. Stay away from the riggin’, keep out o’ the way o’ the ladders – them’s the sailors - ‘n the lobsters – them’s the soldiers in their red coats. Don’t get swept overboard – come below wi’ me if a storm comes up...”

The boy stared above him at the light from the deck, only half listening. His Da jerked his head around with a firm hand and looked deep in his eyes. “Listen to me! Do as I tell ya. We’re in this together. Run along now and watch, but don’t let nobody catch ya and put ya off the boat. Stay low till we sail!”

The small boy slipped out of his grasp and half ran, half climbed up and out of the hold into the sunlight.

Richard found a huge coil of rope to hide behind and sat there watching the action. It took all day to get the ship ready, the tug in place, the great ship, sails furled, guided down the river by the tiny tugs as the tide surged out. The great ship drifted down the Thames River to the estuary. Then sailors scrambled up the rigging to set the sails. The ship sat high on the water, blown by the cold Arctic winds and, on a bright spring day in 1828, began to sail south.

The day did not seem long to the boy half hidden in the rope coil. The lagers in their white pants and striped blue and white shirts knew he was there but ignored him as they concentrated on the important business they were about. Leaving the harbor was a task requiring plenty of muscle and sometimes frantic action. The 257-ton wooden sailing ship that was floating half-free down the Thames was no tame thing. She was a half-wild ship of the sea. It took a great effort to turn her just a small bit in the confines of the river and not go too far. For once she turned, she persisted. If mishandled, ships her size could easily take out a wharf or run aground.

Richard watched with large eyes and mouth agape as the sailors scurried up the rigging, raced about the deck, coiled and uncoiled massive hemp ropes and prepared to set the great sea-bound ship's sails. The sailors were as eager as their ship, chafing to be free of the city streets, bars, and brothels. Their ship was their own winged steed of the sea, far more horse than that allowed to royalty. Never mind that she belonged to the Crown. For the sailors, she was their beloved ship.

Richard stared with awe at the way they scrambled through the rigging. He hoped he would get the chance to do that someday too.