

A Mother's Vigil

When I was alive, I believed all sorts of tales. Like, too much intercourse will harm the baby. We didn't have proper learning. If we made it to school, it was about punishment and ignorance, not wisdom.

Before my Johnny was born, there would have been no intercourse if I'd had my way. But a poor girl gets no say. Young master in the house wanted his way with me. He told me I was beautiful and perhaps I was, but I was just a poor, unschooled girl. When he found out I was with child, I was dismissed without a reference.

Just fourteen I was when I had Johnny in the workhouse. Things weren't right with him, from the beginning. And not just that he was an unwanted bastard. His head wasn't right for one, and he never stopped crying. Drove everyone in the workhouse mad till I thought we'd be thrown out onto the streets. None of the remedies the women pushed on me worked, except for some gin. That sent him off to sleep, at least for a while.

I did my best, and he really was a bonny baby, despite the head. But as he grew, he was always into mischief. He was a terrible spoon polisher for sure. But what a dreadful job. No wonder he stole.

The first time he was charged, I was that mad. And scared too. The look in his eyes. The lies he told. He'd have crumbs around his mouth, but swear he hadn't stolen the bread. Even though I was his ma, I knew he was the very devil.

By then I was sickening. A cough that wouldn't shift. Too many winters and not enough hope, and at just 26 I left this world. At twelve, he was an orphan with a misshaped head and heart. And an empty stomach.

I watched over him from beyond, saw him taken away from Warwickshire to Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. Just imagine! I'd never left Warwickshire in my life. He cried, but he schemed and wheedled, too. His Parkhurst mates said it best: "He was a shocking boy and by far the worst of us."

The Isle of Wight was just the beginning, though. They chose him to be sent to Australia. It was beyond the edge of what I could imagine, but I kept my vigil.

He was even quite excited by the thought of Australia. Greed sent the white farming settlers there, and sandy soils met them. They needed free help and they signed my lad up for it. They sold it to the boys as a new life, freedom, sunshine!

On the voyage out, as usual he schemed, lied, showed deference to the powerful. After the terrible stormy landing, the spring weather was heaven. Even his skinny limbs had browned and filled out a bit. But by February the heat and flies and dust and loneliness of the Swan River colony must have done him in. Stuck at the end of the earth at Pollard's farm, he was no better at farming than he was at spoon polishing.

My lad sorely tried Mrs Pollard. She was stuck with him most of the time while her husband was off working. Did Johnny have anything to do with the death of Mrs Pollard's girl? You can't make everything out from this side. He was capable of anything and it was just a few months after he got there. Maybe she was hard on Johnny afterwards, but her mother's heart was broken.

That dreadful morning, I helplessly watched Johnny sneaking around, thinking about doing Mrs Pollard in. Then he veered into the bright idea of belting poor George Pollard with the adze so he wouldn't go after Johnny for murdering his ma. George singing, then the silence. My boy, running to drown himself, but he couldn't manage it. He never thought anything through.

I followed him to his small Fremantle jail cell. Saw him cry and howl of his innocence, hoping to save his scrawny neck. Saw him lie and lie through his lawyer. And the Parkhurst Boys minder John Schoales, wracked with the burden of having placed Johnny at the Pollards. He still visited him night after night. He carried my Johnny to the gallows but couldn't watch his last moments. But I did. I had to be there to gather him into my arms. My wicked bairn, with the grace of confession on his lips.