

Fresh Start

The evening before John Gow was to be hanged he had a visit from the Reverend J Gaynam. Gaynam led the pirate captain from the condemned cell to a small room with a mouldy, low, vaulted ceiling, measuring just nine feet by six. Its walls were lined with oak panels studded with broad headed nails. "You are now given the opportunity to repent your sins." The grim churchman instructed Gow before leaving him there; locked in solitary confinement. A candle dimly lit the room. Gow spotted a bible on a bench at the far end of the room under the narrowest of windows. Rain hammered on thick glass.

His arms and legs free, Gow could now struggle into the clean clothes he carried with him. With that done, he sat on the bench and picked up the bible. Perhaps there would be a few words in the good book which may help to clear his mind and give him some rest, he thought as he thumbed through the pages. He considered his responsibility for the upset to so many young lives and the deaths of others. He thought of his parents and, with a sore heart, he thought of his young wife. Through the months since he had last seen her he had tried not to think of her, but her beautiful face was there each time he closed his eyes; and her sweet voice. He had not even bid her farewell. Fumbling with the book, he had no idea where to search. Repent! He had done nothing but repent since his ship stuck on that confounded island. Gow sat on the bench and watched the candle flicker. He watched his breath in the damp air. This was a fine quiet place. He felt ready for death.

Mrs Hawkins had sat chatting to the boy into the small hours of the morning. Finally, he had given up and gone off to his bed. He emerged just before midday to find Captain Wise and Oly already in Mrs Hawkins' kitchen. "How are you this day Peter?" the captain asked.

Peter didn't really know how he felt. He decided that he would concentrate on what was to come the *following* day.

"I will be fine," he reassured his friends.

"Good enough. Better eat a bit of late breakfast then and we will be off."

"Captain Wise here has done everything he can to make the young captain's ordeal swift. Remember to think of all the good things and be strong for that man." Mrs Hawkins gave Peter a hug as they left her home.

As she watched them walk out of sight, she noticed how pale and thin Peter looked again.



By one in the afternoon huge crowds were already gathering as final touches were made to the gallows. Small boats, packed with spectators, jammed the river at Wapping Dock. The gallows had been erected on the mud where the tide would make room for the afternoon's hangings between two and three o'clock. Oly, Captain Wise and Peter nudged their way into a position near the bottom of the stairs which had led them down to the river from the thronging crowds on the street above. The young boy studied the simple gallows; steps up to a wooden platform below one single wooden beam held in place by two vertical beams. Underneath the platform Peter could see short, stout posts, strong enough to hold up the condemned men, the executioner and a couple of churchmen. These posts would be jerked out at the appropriate moment allowing the platform to drop. Peter's knees trembled as the cheering and jeering, which could be heard approaching, became uproar all around him. Three carts brought the

condemned men to the top of the stairs. As was the custom with pirates, a silver oar was carried ahead of the procession.

Peter watched Peter Rollson and John Winter descend the stairs. He wondered where he would be today had he not been introduced to them in Amsterdam. James Belbin and John Peterson followed along with others due to hang on this occasion. Gow and Williams were in the last cart. Williams was completely drunk and had to be assisted. Gow stood straight and pulled his waistcoat into position. His eyes seemed glazed, but he walked perfectly upright and walked down towards his three friends. Peter called out his name to let the man know they were there. Gow carried on past them across the mud towards the platform, breathing in the salt air and eyeing ships' masts in the distance. He looked beyond the crowds which he ignored. Daniel Macaulay and

William Melvin had to be carried down the steps. These two men, having acquaintances in London to give them cash for the Newgate Tavern, had spent the last two weeks in a stupor. They were already in another place.

The business proceeded.

As Gow stood on the platform his voice rang out, "Brother sailors," his eyes met Peter's, "if ever it should be your fortune to be taken by pirates, suffer yourselves to be shot rather than join in their villainy which has been the cause of my ruin." Peter remembered the warning Captain Kidd had called before his hanging. "Beware false promises made by greedy men." Both fine warnings in retrospect.

The condemned men in position and the church having played its part, the crowd hushed as the hangman made ready to yank the blocks from under the platform. Behind Peter there came a surge and a roar as the platform dropped. The hangman, as instructed and paid to by Captain Wise, pulled heavily on Gow's legs to swiftly put the man out of this misery, but the crowd gasped when Gow's rope broke and he fell to the ground on top of his hangman. "This is God's will!" Oly shouted. "Let the man go free."

Again Peter recalled Kidd's last moments. The rope had broken; Kidd had fallen to the ground. There had been no mercy given.

"He is innocent! They both were, can't you see! Let him go..." But Peter's shouts were lost in the volley of instructions and abuse from the crowds.

Like Kidd a quarter of a century before him, Gow watched while, overhead, dying men kicked their legs in that final, spasmodic dance before they died. The hangman fetched a ladder and propped it up against an end post. He threw a new rope over the gallows and prodded Gow to the top step. It took just seven minutes to arrange Gow's second and more successful hanging. The crowd cheered even louder. The hangman looked bold. It was over. Peter discovered his face streaked with tears. His voice was hoarse and his throat sore from screaming his goodbyes. John Gow, along with the other bodies would hang there in the Thames as the tide swept over them three times. His body would then be taken down, tarred and hung in chains down river until nothing at all remained of it - a warning to any budding pirates.

Mrs Hawkins set down a jug of ale and the four sat in silence in her warm kitchen.

But the peace was broken by loud banging at the door. It was Rueben, face redder than ever, overheated, out of breathe and fit to burst.

"At last I've found you. Bin asking all over Wapping for you. Come with me. There are a couple of ladies looking for folks from Orkney. They're at an inn, not far."

Oly, Peter and Captain Wise followed the puffing man through a couple of lanes and streets.

"I was at the hangings but must have missed you all. Went for a drink on my way back home and heard these ladies talking. Told them I'd try to fetch you. Seems they were too late. The old lady was weeping and telling folks at the inn about her troubles. Seems she thought her son was a wealthy captain on a journey to the Baltic. All respectable and everything. Had the lad introduced to all her wealthy friends and did all the proper socialising. Then she discovered that all was not well in her little town. Sheep were going missing, homes were being robbed and her son's ship and crew were being blamed. Some captain came to her house shouting that her son was a pirate captain. She was telling everyone how she threw him off her property. But he'd gone to the officials and the whole county had armed themselves against her boy. He had escaped, slipped anchor under cover of darkness, but the ship had run aground and all the crew had been taken off her and were held in gaol in London. That's when I really started to listen to the old dear. What a state she was in. Her son never said goodbye, but left a poor distraught, young wife wailing on her doorstep. Outcast from her own family it seems."

Rueben swung through a low door into the inn and there sat Margaret Gow with Helen Gordon. The women wept quietly now. Someone had gently told them that they were too late. The hangings which had taken place that very afternoon had, indeed, included the old woman's son, John Gow.

Captain Wise stepped forward to introduce himself and the boys. For a moment Helen seemed pleased to see Oly again, but sadness swept across her pretty face. She could not speak.

"We had to come." Mrs Gow blurted. "He was my son; I will always love him whatever happened. But we are too late. He was alone..." the lady cried.

"No, no, ladies. You are wrong." Rueben sat down. "These good people here were with him until the end. He had his friends."

"My grandson. Where is my grandson, William Clouston?"

Captain Wise explained that she had missed the Orkney men by two weeks. "They are all away home. You must have crossed paths on your way south, Madam."

"I have messages for you both from the captain," Peter added nervously. Should he tell them now? Too late, he thought. He'd started.

"Just yesterday I promised your son that I would visit you and your good husband while I am in Stromness." He noticed Captain Wise look sternly at Oly, but he continued. "And Helen, I was to let you know that wherever he is he will always love you. His heart was broken by the way things turned out. He never said goodbye."

The two women held each other.

Peter ploughed bravely on. "I believe he was a good and clever man. Our Captain Ferneau was a bad captain, that's true, but there was a plot to kill the man which I'm sure John was not a part of. He became involved, but was a good captain and master. I think it could all have been different for your son Mrs Gow. He was a good man really." Peter could not say any more at this stage and looked up at Captain Wise.

"Perhaps, madam, we should get you settled for the night and visit with you briefly in the morning before the three of us depart for Gravesend."

"Oh no Sir. There's business which has to be seen to." Mrs Gow straightened herself and suddenly appeared formidable.

Helen sobbed.

"This young girl was betrothed to my son at the Odin Stone in Orkney. This is a binding contract of marriage which can only now be broken by her touching her beloved husband's hand."

The young girl argued and wept bitterly.

"You can see that today she does not wish to go through with this, but some day she will thank me for insisting. She is young and will some day wish to be free to marry again. You must do this dear. Do it quickly. Then we shall go home and try to get over it all. You can start again."

She's a tough old bird, thought Captain Wise. "Madam, it is the custom for the bodies of those hung at Wapping Dock to be left to hang for three tides. After that, the body of your son is to be removed." The captain did not expand on the details. "Should the young lady be fit, I suggest the most appropriate time to visit the body, should you wish this, would be during the low tide tomorrow afternoon, between three and four."

"We shall be ready then sir." Mrs Gow replied.

The captain and those around him were amazed how quickly the woman had pulled herself together. Maybe she had had enough of being a mother-in-law. But to be fair, she was probably doing the right thing if this custom was so binding.

Outside, having arranged for the ladies to remain at the inn for the night, the three seamen said farewell to Rueben.

"What would we have done without you all of those weeks Sir?" the captain remarked.

"Thank you for all you did for myself and the Puntons too." Peter added. He could never express how he really felt, but was sure that a man like Rueben would understand his feelings of gratitude.

"You come and see me when you are back in London. Jane will be looking for you," he added as he shook Oly's hand. Oly gave a feeble smile and Rueben took his leave.

"What a day," Peter sighed as they made their way back to the lodgings.

Mrs Hawkins was amazed at their tale. "Fancy coming all that way from Orkney and finding they were just minutes too late. And this business of the young lady touching her husband's hand. Funny custom. Made me all shivery it has."

"So Peter, you're off to Orkney are you?"

"Sorry sir." Oly hung his head. "I couldn't help it. I had to tell him. Peter has had such a bad time."

"It is fine Oly. What do you think Peter? Do you wish to join us and sail to Hudson Bay?" the captain asked.

"Indeed I do Sir. I can think of nothing better."

"What about your mother and family back home?"

"There will be time for that later." The boy laughed, but at the back of his mind he remembered John Gow's regrets and how he felt he had treated his mother in the end. But Peter would find his father first. He was sure he'd find him. Then, together perhaps, they would visit his mother.

Peter awoke on June 12th and remembered that yet another grizzly task had to be performed. In the afternoon the three said their farewells to the kind old lady, Mrs Hawkins. She slipped a silver buckle into Peter's hand. "It is all he left; all he was allowed to keep and he gave it to my husband for the help we gave him until the end. No one but us was allowed to visit that poor man in gaol. This was one of Captain Kidd's shoe buckles. Why he didn't use it to buy himself some comfort in that place during the months he was kept there, I'll never know. He had used the other one to pay for, Dundee, his slave boy's keep in Marshalsea. That boy eventually died in there. Take it, Peter, and keep it and yourself safe. Pass it on to your children". She hugged Peter and they left.

The ladies were ready waiting outside the inn. Helen had given in to her mother-in-law's command and stood, face ghostly white and teeth chattering. The captain borrowed a wooden step ladder from the innkeeper which Oly struggled to carry as they made their way towards the steps at Execution Dock in silence.

Peter decided to remain at the top of the stairs. "I will give the ladies some peace," was his excuse. He peeped round at one stage to see Captain Wise try to steady the young girl who had somehow made it to the top of their rather short ladder which was propped up against one end post of the gallows. Peter knew that the body hanging next to her was that of John Gow. Mrs Gow, tough as ever, was making encouraging sounds for Helen. But once the task was complete and they joined Peter at the head of the stairs, it was plain to see just how distressed both women had become. Mrs Gow thanked Captain Wise for all his help. He refused an invitation to share a meal at the inn with the women but promised to call on them in Stromness next month. The two ladies, Mrs Gow had decided, would return home stopping for a while in Edinburgh with her relatives. "They live in the city," she pointed out. Once the ladder was safely returned, they took their leave of the ladies and headed for the river. It was time to join the *Hannah*.

The ship's longboat, with a crew of six, was waiting for them, as arranged. The men welcomed Peter. "We've heard a lot about you," he heard one remark. He wondered if it had all been good. He felt he had been a huge burden on their captain and also Oly. He wished he had not been so foolish as to think John Gow could have escaped from Newgate. It would only have prolonged the man's eventual death by hanging; and trying to fight off the gaolers as they took Gow to be pressed. What had everyone thought of him? Peter groaned. He was shaking and cold by the time they all reached Gravesend.

"You need some hot milk and a rest Peter," Captain Wise told him as they climbed up onto the *Hannah's* deck. "Oly, see to Peter before you get back to work."

Peter was taken below to meet the cook. He looks clean! Peter thought as they shook hands. Peter had never seen a clean ship's cook. Clean clothes and a rough, but pink, hand shook Peter's vigorously.

"This is Jack Hopkins." Oly introduced them.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm always to be found around the food on this ship. I've been with the *Hannah* for seven years now. It's my home. Anything you need to know, you come and ask old Jack. Now, what will we give you to build you up; you'll not last long in the frozen north like that?" Jack Hopkins pinched Peter's thin arm. Peter tried to laugh, but the smell of food was making him feel sick.

"You're as white as a..." Oly stopped abruptly as Peter flopped to the floor.

He came round in a hammock. Others whirled round and round him. He closed his eyes. He could see the gallows. He felt his feet sink into the mud as he stood there on the bed of the Thames. He could feel the cold mud rise up and grip his legs. Water covered him. His eyes opened and the hammocks whirled. He closed them and the mud oozed around him once again.

"Come on Peter, waken up." It was Oly. "That's two days now. Everyone is worried and there's work to be done!"

"Don't worry the boy with work, Oly." Captain Wise stood over Peter. "Take your time Peter, but try to stand today if you can. We'll need to get something other than water in you soon." The captain left and Oly dashed off after him. Peter could hear men working. He could hear them on the deck and he could hear them in the hold. They must have started to load the ship. He lay for a while and then thought about standing up. Someone in a hammock nearby snored. Just a bit of daylight came down the hatch creating a well of light. Peter swung out of the hammock. He swayed and tried to steady himself on his bedding, but everything, including him, tipped down onto the rough wooden floor. He half crawled along the floor to the sunny pool of light at the foot of the ladder.

"Is there a rat crawling around the floor?" A voice chuckled from a hammock.

"Sorry, did I waken you?"

"No, I'll have to be getting up now anyway."

Suddenly four men, ready dressed, got up and stood round him.

"I'm in the way." Peter felt embarrassed. Here he was, supposed to be working for Captain Wise as cabin boy, and he hadn't done anything but be a nuisance since he stepped onto the ship. Now he was floundering around the floor.

"You just get well and strong, boy. We'll be needing you then, but not before you are fit. You've had a rough time it seems.

As another stepped over him and climbed onto deck he said, "We'll have time to meet you properly after we come off watch."

Peter grew stronger each day and he was slowly able to start the chores as set by his captain. At times his mind wandered off. The crew would find him gazing at the water, and, as he slept, he kept the men awake in their

hammocks with his talking and shouting. But this wore off gradually, and by the time the ship slipped its moorings at Gravesend and was finally on its way, Peter was more settled. He loved the fresh salt air of the North Sea. At times, during the past year, he really never believed he would smell the sea ever again. Captain Wise was quietly surprised at Peter's knowledge of navigation and the keen interest he had to learn more whenever there was time.

The ship made its way north towards Orkney with its cargo of supplies; building tools for York Factory, weapons and ammunition, traps, blankets, beads, all kinds of trade goods for the natives, and cooking utensils, dried and preserved food for the company men. Water, fresh provisions and young labourers to work for the company would be taken on in Stromness.

Three days out and the crew were more relaxed. In the main cabin, after prayers that evening, Captain Wise told Peter that the men had something to tell him. Jack Hopkins stood up. "We've heard a lot about you, Peter, from your friend Oliver here. You've been ill and we did not want to get you all excited, but we have news we think you'll be pleased to hear.

Bill here and Tom Bradley and me, we remember your father on this ship six years ago now, heading out to Hudson Bay, just like you today. He was a fine sailor and was to take up a position on one of the company's sloops; a trading sloop."

"You say he was..." Peter was worried.

"What I mean is..... he did take up that position. In fact he will still be there, in Hudson Bay. We know it is definitely him, Peter, because he often talked of you. He wanted to be away home last summer, but his ship did not make it to the rendezvous position."

Again, Peter looked upset.

"But that does not mean too much. Do not worry. The Bay was looking as if it would start to freeze up any day. Our old captain, he was in too big a rush to leave and we were gone some days early. The sloop will be fine. They know what they're up to. You will meet your father, Peter, and he's a fine man. He is going to be so proud when he sees you."

Peter did not know what to say. His friend, William Oliver smiled and nodded to him. He was really on his way to find his father.

"Back on watch," Wise ordered. "We're short handed until we get to Orkney."

The men dispersed and Peter helped Jack to clean up.

"You will see some sights as we get to the Bay," Jack told Peter. "You'll never have seen the like before. Walrus, huge, fat creatures which live in the sea. They have enormous tusks. There may be a polar bear or two to be seen swimming for the shore as the ice breaks up for a few months. And you'll see white whales there. They come right up to the ship; ever so inquisitive. Yes, you're going to see a few wonderful sights Peter."

The ship rounded the Ness on July 4th. Peter was back in Stromness. As they dropped anchor he could see scores of people come to the piers to watch and welcome the *Hannah*.

"Look at them all. They will be rubbing their hands in town this day," said Tom Bradley.

Peter could make out John Gow's father on his pier. He would try to visit the man. Not a task he looked forward to.

As soon as he had the opportunity Peter was ashore and making his way up the hill to the Craigies'croft. Running to meet him came his good friends, Peter and James, or Cheem, as everyone called him.

"Hello there Sweyn Asliefson," Peter called.

"I never thought you would remember all that," said Cheem.

"I've had plenty of time to recall all your games and all the fun we had here in Stromness." Peter replied and hugged his friend Peter Craigie.

"Come on up to the house. Mother is expecting you; has been since your ship arrived."

The boys raced to the door and burst in. Mrs Craigie stood, surrounded by noisy, hungry caddy lambs, cats and hens. She was pleased to see the boy safe in her house again.

"Hubbins!" Peter scooped up his purring cat. "He's so big now. Thanks for looking after him Mrs Craigie."

"You've grown a fair bit yourself Peter, and you'll stay for supper?"

"I'd love to Mrs Craigie. I don't have to be back on board until eight tonight."

"You'll tell us all about being in gaol and the pirates..."

"He will be doing no such thing Cheem. Pay no heed to the boy Peter; we have much better things to talk of." The boys' mother scolded the wee boy.

The boys took the lambs outside to give them their bottles of milk. The two Peters fought to hold onto two bottles each and Cheem struggled with one lamb. Hubbins insisted on sitting on Peter's lap.

Peter felt completely happy. It seemed he could not feel better.

Later, as Mr Craigie sat at the supper table he made an announcement. "My older son, Peter, has begged me to let him go to sea, as you can probably remember from your last visit."

"Yes Sir, I remember."

"I would not let him go then and we are all thankful for that."

The family all nodded in agreement.

"But Son, if you wish to take a position with the Hudson's Bay Company, on their ship or on land in Ruperts Land, then you have the permission of both your mother and myself to go on this trip."

Peter Craigie stood up and cheered until he noticed his mother wipe a tear from her eye with the corner of her apron.

He quietened down and thanked his father. The two Peters smiled at each other.

"You can go down to see the agent tomorrow, but there is a place for you at York Factory. I have already enquired."

Time at the Craigie's home passed too quickly and Peter had to take his leave.

"You'll be taking Hubbins," Cheem reminded Peter.

"Can I?"

"You are taking my big brother too," the boy began.

"Pay no heed. He'll come round." Mrs Craigie tied some bannock in a cloth for the boy and called for Hubbins.

Peter made his way back down to the sea with his cat running behind him.

The cat knew its place on board and made his way down to the hold.

Next morning, when he returned from the company agent's office, Captain Wise had Peter prepare accommodation for seven men who would be joining the ship; some seamen, some labourers to work at York Factory, but all working for the Hudson's Bay Company. The weather was favourable and the provisions were almost completely loaded. The longboat had ferried water from a couple of wells in Stromness for the ship's journey. The captain hoped to be away next day when the tide would be in their favour, around mid day.

That afternoon the longboat was sent ashore for the recruits. From below deck, Peter heard the longboat come alongside and soon a shadow was cast over the hatchway. Someone threw a bundle down and descended the ladder.

"Magnus Hewison!" Peter exclaimed.

"Who's that?" Magnus peered as his eyes became accustomed to the dark.

"It's Peter Hansen, remember, off the *George*."

Before he had time to answer Peter discovered that his old friend, William Harvey, had joined them followed by Peter Craigie and four others he did not know. Peter could not take all of this in. He would be sailing on this voyage with some of his dearest friends. They had been through so much together; they would be friends forever. At the top of the day, on 8th July, 1725 the *Hannah* sailed out of Stromness Harbour and into the North Atlantic. With his friends, Peter watched as the island's high, red cliffs disappeared over the horizon. He was on his way to meet his father; a new adventure, a completely fresh start.