

THE STORY OF JACK WHITFORD
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The smell of fresh bread wafted towards me as I prowled down the clean, well-kept street of London Bridge. I knew this was one of the richest places in London. Horses pulled grand carriages down the bustling bridge where ladies were dressed in expensive clothes made of thick velvet and men in rich-coloured stockings and waistcoats strutted about. At the end of the street, at Bridge Gate, heads of dead criminals on stakes glared at me like stuffed animals, their eyes following me when I walked by. I hoped that my head would never be put on the bridge and shown to the people of London. I would need to be careful. People were staring at me. Staring at my ragged clothes and grimy face. I pretended not to notice as people moved aside to let me pass, as they whispered in each other's ears. My gaze trailed off to an elderly man wearing a silk hat and a velvet silk-stitched purse, heavy with coins, hanging off his belt. He was on his own buying some meat off a market man.

I approached him slowly, trying not to catch the man's eye. There was a strong scent of lavender. I was now a few steps away from the man who was just about to reach for his purse when I took my chance and swung my hand out and grabbed the purse. The man shouted at me as I desperately tried to free the purse from the man's belt. People noticed the commotion and started to close in on me. When the belt finally came free I sped away through the crowds of people. Many tried to grab me but I knew I was a good runner so I kept on pounding till I had escaped the cramped streets.

I kept on running hard till I got to my village near the Hyde Park, excited to tell my family about the treasure I'd found. Suddenly I had a memory of my mother dying of childbirth at twenty nine years of age. I was only three at the time of her death but I still had frequent nightmares of the screams of pain coming from her, and my father coming out of the room with tears streaking down his eyes, holding the newborn baby.

I slowed as I remembered my two youngest brothers being abandoned to the streets as the family couldn't afford to keep all four of us children. Two weeks later after the abandoning I heard that the elder of the two siblings had died of starvation...

I came home to a dark and empty house. I was surprised that my sister wasn't there as she usually stayed at home and wove wool to sell. Father was still at the forge. He was a blacksmith. My eyes darted around, hungrily searching for anything to eat but there was nothing. I sighed and slumped on an old rickety chair and soon sleep swallowed me up and I nodded off.

"Jack, Jack, wake up!" said Emily, my sister. Startled, I got off my seat and looked at her – she was holding a whole rabbit! "Dad bought it off a friend at the forge," said Emily excitedly. I stared in disbelief as I felt my stomach rumbling. I begged to eat it. I hadn't seen meat for months. That night we had the best meal I could remember in a long time. Stuffed and happy, I slept well that night on my rough mat, even though it reeked of sweat and dirt.

I woke the next morning feeling pleased with myself as I remembered the look on my father's and sister's faces as I showed them the purse full of pence, shillings and pounds, I slowly got out of bed to prepare myself for another average day on the streets, pick-pocketing.

I felt the scar that stretched across my cheek. I remembered the accident: *Father and I were working together at the forge. I was walking across the room towards Father when I tripped on a piece of metal and my face fell on the scalding anvil ... That's the most I could remember until the next day when Father told me to find another job as he didn't want me to*

get hurt anymore. I searched for weeks but couldn't find a job. My shyness made it difficult for me to ask people. So all I could think of was thieving from the rich. In a way stealing was the perfect job for me – I didn't have to face or speak to people! But it wasn't good and I felt guilty. Sometimes I wished I didn't live like this. All I wanted was to get a really useful, satisfying and fun job.

As I swept away the thought and swallowed my last spoonful of watery pottage, Emily went out to her friend's house to do some embroidery. Father was already at the forge. Suddenly I heard shouts of fear. I froze as the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I felt my heart beat faster as I rushed to the door to see what was going on outside. I saw my friend George, who lived two houses down from me, being dragged from his wrists. He was screaming as a man in royal clothes hauled him along the street. I saw my friend's face twisted with fear. The rest of the people in the street were peering out of their windows and looking on, terrified at the thought that this could happen so close to them, in their street.

No one did a thing as George was roughly pulled along. I decided that I had to help my friend. I rushed out on to the street and grabbed the man who was dragging George along, and hurled him to the ground. I heard gasps from the people in the houses and even some shouts of encouragement.

As I grabbed George, out of the corner of my eye I saw the man I had hurled to the ground get up and make a lunge for me. I fell to the ground with a thud. I groaned, clutching my head which had struck a rock on the floor. I felt something runny on my forehead and looked at my hand and saw that I was bleeding. I began to feel queasy. Out of nowhere more royal guards on horseback arrived and snatched me and George up, then blackness ...

I woke up and squinted as the sun blared into my eyes. As I became accustomed to the light I took in my surroundings. There was a threadbare straw mat and a tin bucket in the corner. I seemed to be in a cell which was about four foot by two! I looked up towards the light source – a barred window. Keeping me from the outside, keeping me locked away from the world, locked away from my life.

I was filled with curiosity. And dread. I knew where such places could lead to. And my heart started to pound as I remembered Father telling me how Anne Boleyn had been kept in a cell like this, then led from it, and how her head was cut off... Would that happen to me?

I peered out of the window but there was just a wall blocking the view. I felt along the walls and floors for a hollow sound but there was nothing. It was solid. I felt panic slither up inside me like a snake up a vine. I felt enclosed and claustrophobic. I decided that wherever I was, the only escape route was through the thick, oak wooden door. I couldn't remember how I could've got here, I just kept getting glimpses of what happened but I couldn't snatch it up and remember it. I was frustrated and frightened.

A bell rang out and there was a sudden stir of voices in the hallway and the sound of keys unlocking doors. I assumed that it was some sort of break, maybe a chance for us to get some air. My door was finally unlocked as a man glanced up at me. I gave a half-hearted hello, and he replied with a grunt and moved on to the next door. I felt like a caged bear waiting for his food before a baiting game. Tense and hungry.

I followed the flow of people and ended up in a big hall with long benches from end to end. Everyone was taking their places but I soon found an empty bench. I sat down wondering what to do next when I heard a voice behind me. I spun around and saw George standing there looking like he had just fallen in a muddy lake! I felt so relieved and happy to have my friend with me.

That lunch I noticed that people looked resigned to the fact that they had been caught and were never going to escape. I told George that we had to think of a way out. George went pale and he froze, staring into space. I looked at him.

“What is it?” I said, “Tell me”.

George started shaking.

“We ... are g-going ... to ge-get ha-hanged!” stuttered George.

I sat there and let the horrible thought sink in.

That lunch me and George sat in silence and ate our lunch which was a piece of bread with some foul-smelling stew and watery ale.

Later, I lay on my mat looking at the ceiling. I was thinking about only one thing – escape. I’d thought of lots of possible ways to get out, but all of them had some sort of flaw. I’d come to my decision that I would have to escape at night when everyone was asleep. But how would I unlock the door? I glanced around the room and looked at the bucket with a metal handle on it. I got up and picked it up. I suddenly knew of a way to escape and I’d start now

...

As quietly as possible I yanked the rusty hinge off the bucket and tested it out in the keyhole. It fitted perfectly. I decided I should get some sleep and wait for the night to launch my plan. That night at dinner I told George my idea and he said that he would do the same with his bucket and we would meet outside his cell when the church bell rang at midnight.

That night I had the most restless three hours of sleep I’ve ever had. I knew that all public hangings were on Sundays and today was Friday. What would happen if I got caught? Would I get hanged early?

As the clock struck twelve I was twisting the bucket hinges in the keyhole. It took me a few minutes and I thought a guard would hear and maybe catch me. I shivered at the thought and brushed it aside. The door finally gave way with a satisfying click. I peered outside in to the gloom of the hallway. It smelt musty and damp. I heard a rat scuttling across the hallway as I headed towards George’s cell which was around the corner and twelve doors down.

Sure enough, George was waiting there. “You’re a bit late” whispered George. “Yeah” I said, just wanting to get out of this place.

“Let’s go then” said George as he turned. I followed as we headed down towards the Hall where we had eaten only a few hours ago.

We froze as a guard walked into the kitchen. He appeared to be lighting a lamp. I didn’t dare breathe or move a muscle as we crouched under a table. It felt like a year but eventually the man emerged holding a lit lamp and heading for the cells. If we had been a couple of minutes later we would have walked straight into the guard. George seemed to be thinking the same thing as he glanced across to me with a concerned look on his face.

We headed towards the big oak door. It loomed over me as George pushed and – to our surprise – it opened. We went outside cautiously. A cold bitter wind hit me like a wave. We crept outside not daring to speak. We heard footsteps and dived behind a bush and stayed still, silent. We looked through the leaves as the guard seemed to be heading straight for us. The guard stopped and listened right next to where we were hiding. All there was between

us was a bush! He spun on his heel and began to walk away. I started to relax. He stopped. He had noticed the flinch from me. I froze. He looked behind the bush. His eyes widened. I sprang up and lunged at him but it was no good and he swung his lamp at me and the glass and iron frame smashed against my skull. I heard George yelp as he was also hit by the lamp. I saw stars and then nothing ...

I woke up and squinted as the sun blared into my eyes. I had a sudden flashback of the last time I was in a cell. I looked around and sure enough it was the same cell that I was in what felt like just seconds ago. I started to panic. What day was it? What time?

My door clicked open. A guard walked in. "What day is it?" I said nervously. The guard didn't reply, just grabbed me and yanked me out of my room. I screamed and struggled but the grip was firm and dug into my arms. George was in the same situation. We realised that we were going to die.

We reached Hyde Park, the famous hanging area on the edge of the city near my home. There was a crowd of about one hundred! They hushed and focused on us. I hated it. Hated them. How could they watch this? A person lose their life.

George went first. He looked like he had given up. He was tied to the rope. He shut his eyes. Then suddenly someone pulled a rope and George went plummeting towards the ground. Then stopped. He hung there like a doll. Limp and lifeless. The people still looked on. Like this was normal. I felt sick. Tears welled up in my eyes. I resisted a look at George's body. For the first time in the last couple of days I thought of my father and sister.

As I was put into the loop I felt it tighten around my neck. I was too young to die.

Suddenly there was a shout from the crowd, "Stop! I'm the one who should be hanged, it was me, I pick-pocketed the man!" A little boy came to the front of the crowd and kept on crying out the words. I assumed he was at least ten or eleven. I thought I recognised him. I just couldn't place him. But then I realised – it was Henry! My younger brother who was abandoned by my family when I was three! It was him! The crowd stirred in excitement and anticipation. My brother had planned this brilliantly. We both looked so alike that people could easily mistake us!

Henry rushed over to the hangman who was holding the rope. Henry started shaking the man.

"I did it, I t was all me, hang me!"

I saw my moment and took it. I swung on my rope and kicked out my leg. My boot made contact with the hangman's temple and made an excruciating crunch. His skull shattered and he fell to the ground, unconscious. I felt the grip of the noose loosen around my neck and freed myself.

I ran with my brother through the crowd. People were gasping. Some were even running after me. We ran and ran and ran. Not stopping and not talking till we were at our house. I led the way as my brother didn't know the way home.

When we got home, my father and sister were in a state. They looked up, their eyes widened in disbelief. They held Henry. Then they came over to hug me but I refused it. "I'll explain later. We need to hide. Me and Henry. They're all after us."

My father understood immediately and led us to the cellar and we darted down with a lamp. The cellar was dark and damp. I lit the lamp and we sat there, heavily breathing. Too scared to say a word. I decided to break the silence.

“Thanks back there,” I grinned. My brother just shrugged.

Despite all that was going on, I still managed to get some sleep.

“Wake up, wake up!” my father said. We both got up and climbed out of the cellar. It seemed to be night time as we emerged from the cellar. He embraced both of us and my sister came and joined in. After that we sat down to our usual dinner of pottage. But he had also managed to get a pheasant!

I was exhausted. But our father insisted we told him everything that had happened. So I told him my story and Henry his. He grinned through the whole thing. I wasn't sure why. As we were finishing our meal I asked him why he was smiling so much.

“You'll never guess what,” he laughed.

“Why? Tell us!” I asked, filled with curiosity.

“I've been offered a new job.”

“Where?”

“My brother's setting up a new forge in Potter's Bar, just north of here, and he's asked that I join him – we can all go there, they'll never find us there!”

So without further ado, we started to pack all our things, Emily's loom and weaving wools, and all Father's tools and, in the middle of the night, silently crept out of our house and along the dark, rat-infested streets of London. In the dead of night we escaped the dangerous city and walked miles and miles – all the way to a new life!