

THE
MOORING
TREE

by Gertrude Robinson



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

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On Blackwell Dock

For three days a black fog had blotted out London. Now, as Jason picked his way to the stairs at Blackwell Dock, the fog was fading from murky black to dirty gray. It was light enough to make out six wavering blobs—six ships, sitting like waterlogged ducks on the thick stew of the Thames. Of them all, the *Falcon* was the one he hoped to board. It was common talk at the Devil's Tongue, the waterfront lodging house where he had spent the last two nights, that the *Falcon* had a swollen passenger list for the Virginia plantation. It seemed to him that one more boy wouldn't be likely to attract attention—not until the ship was out at sea anyway.

Stiff from his three-hour hiding, Jason had crept out of the stinking alley that lay back of the dock. Though only hours before, at three on this black

morning, Pegleg Pete had set before him a vast breakfast of fried kippers, brown loaf, and beer, he had a grinding hunger. He whacked his stomach resentfully. It had no business making a fuss over lack of good oatmeal porridge and strawberries and clabber.

“Mid o’ the night and a whiff o’ wind to tear at the fog, a wee whiff.” The cry had wakened him from sleep on the hard dirt floor of the cuddy. He was only half awake before the crier had gone on, not giving him time to rush out and ask if the wind had westerned. If it had, Jason knew well that the towing barges would come flocking to the six ships, the oarsmen would soon haul at the sweeps, and the fleet would follow to the mouth of the Thames, where a real wind would fill the dirty brown sails.

He had slept again only to waken when the crier made another round, informing the morning: “All’s well. Fifteenth day o’ May 1609 and the wind western. All’s well...”

At once Jason was up, pulling on boots and tunic. He could see in his mind a clear picture of the six ships hoisting anchors and away. The figure leaning over the taffrail, seeing London for the last time ever, was himself.

He was standing at the top of Blackwell stair. From one arm swung his bag of ship needments. Already it stank. Dried herring, salt pork, black bread, and limes in an oilskin bag made the smell. All were things said to be necessary to piece out the reputedly scanty ration provided by the Virginia Company for each unit of

human freight. The rest of the roll was a rough red blanket, stiff sea boots, and a pair of even stiffer seagoing canvas overalls.

The other burden was squealing. It was in a poke made of canvas thick as a board, with holes cut here and there for air. He was lifting the poke down the second slimy step of Blackwell Stair when there came a tug at his tunic sleeve.

A thief! London was said to be full of rogues and kidnappers. His first impulse was to race down the slippery steps. Then he thought better of it. He might stumble and lose one bundle or the other. Instead, he quickly set down the poke and jerked around, his fist doubled, ready to fight.

Slowly he unclenched his fist. By his side stood a gangling boy, the dirtiest lad Jason had ever encountered—filthy dirt, not good Worcestershire loam. He was covered with rags from neck to knees. Astonishingly, his face was almost clean. Out from beneath a drooping tangle of hair peered two of the bluest eyes Jason had ever looked into. They might have been his own eyes, or his father's, burning with the rancor he now felt toward England.

There on Blackwell Dock, the stench of the river in his nostrils, those eyes took him for one stroke of time back home to Edgehill. Not to the stone cottage that for all the years he could remember had been the home of his father, Silas Ware; instead, he was at the door of the jail cell, hearing farewell words from his father's lips. It was as though he were speaking now and here.

“An English yeoman’s as good as a lord, my son, if he but knows his place and honors his betters,” he had said. Nor had he neglected to add, “Never forget that your betters are only those who respect the rights to which you were born as an Englishman.”

“Whist there,” mocked the ragamuffin in shrill tones, “what be ye seeing? Bide ye a flick. I’ve some’at to say in y’ear.” He sidled closer to Jason. “A-feared to stop?”

Jason wasn’t afraid. Nevertheless he kept on down the steps. He wasn’t going to stop just because somebody taunted him with being afraid to. The tall boy made no move to hold him, but he kept alongside.

Clomp, clomp went a pair of sturdy feet in the stout English shoes. *Flop, flop* went a pair of agile feet bound in rags to keep on the old broken leather soles.

Soon Jason was relieved of part of his load. The ragged lad was grinning at him. He had taken into his own hand the heavy sea bag and was swinging it like a mere bundle of lint. In Jason’s hand the poke wriggled; protesting grunts became louder. “Whist there,” said the scarecrow again, “how old be ye?”

“Nigh grown. I’m going to this Virginia...” for a breath there was a lump in his throat, “...in his stead.”

“They’ll ne’er let you aboard.”

“I’m going,” repeated Jason doggedly. “I’ll hold down my father’s grant till he can come. It may hap the next sailing of a supply.”

“Maybe he took sick?”

Jason returned the sharp look. Out came the words he hadn’t intended to say. “He’s put in jail.”

The ragamuffin set down the roll. From somewhere inside his layers of clothing, he pulled out a scrap of crumpled paper and thrust it into Jason's hand.

"They'll ne'er take you for a grown man. Ye want to go. I dinna. Listen while I make it come plain to you. They's got me on a list to be taken, with fifty other bound boys, to go to planters here and there. To a body who'll take on the likes of me, I'm to be slavey for seven years, or till I'm judged to be twenty or so."

Jason saw figures moving down on the jetty. He took a step, and this time the other's hand was on his arm.

"Ye wait till I've made my spiel. Read the name on that chit. I canna read, but the plain man who doesn't wear a robe says it is my writ name. You keep that and go aboard, and when the list is read off, speak up. You say good and loud, 'I'm Amos Wayne.' Amos Wayne, that's me. So be ye'll get over with the great Captain Newport hisself, swearing you're on his list o' spirited boys—the list the minister Mr. Buck made up for him to drain the hangman's own off the streets o' London. Once across..."

Already Jason's brain was milling. He remembered one among several of his father's maxims—"Snatch fortune when she offers."

This was fortune. It made sure his getting to Virginia. If perhaps in another year his father came out to Jamestown on the next ship bringing supplies, he might find his son already at work on the claim. Jason knew well that people were crowding out to this fabulous land with its tobacco fields and indigo plants

and oyster pearls and rumored copper and gold treasures. Already there were nearly a thousand colonists on the way. Eight hundred were said to be aboard these six ships and on the three the fleet was to pick up in Plymouth. Untaken claims would be picked up by other colonists.

He pinched into his jerkin to remind himself again of that document written for his father by Sir Thomas Smith of the Virginia Company. He could feel its stiffness in his pocket.

Amos was right. Without this chit he might have difficulty getting aboard ship. Even while he was tarrying at the Devil's Tongue, waiting for word that the fleet, sitting out the fog, was about to weigh anchor, there had come a rumor that a boy had been tossed off one of the ships into the Thames, a boy who had tried to sneak aboard without indenture papers. He nearly drowned and, coated with river slime, had been dragged forth from the Thames by one of the boatmen returning from ferrying passengers out to the fleet. A stowaway didn't have much of a chance.

Meeting this boy was a blessing. It made certain Jason would be aboard when the fleet sailed, but not too many minutes before, lest he be spied as the wrong lad.

"What's ye goin' to do?" prodded Amos. "Ye'll go?"

Jason nodded slowly and turned to answer, but Amos' heels had been ready. From well down the alley came the soft flip-flop of rag-bound feet. Jason looked down and saw that Amos had left the roll.

He lifted his voice and yelled, "My name's Jason Ware. If ever ye come across, ye'll know me by it."

A single boatman loitered at the foot of the jetty. In the dawn the six ships looked solid, no longer images in the mist. For an instant Jason had a desire to climb back up Blackwell Stair. Instead he whipped up an air of assurance, walked to the dory, and said in a determined voice, "The *Falcon*." Unbidden, he tossed in his packs and jumped aboard.

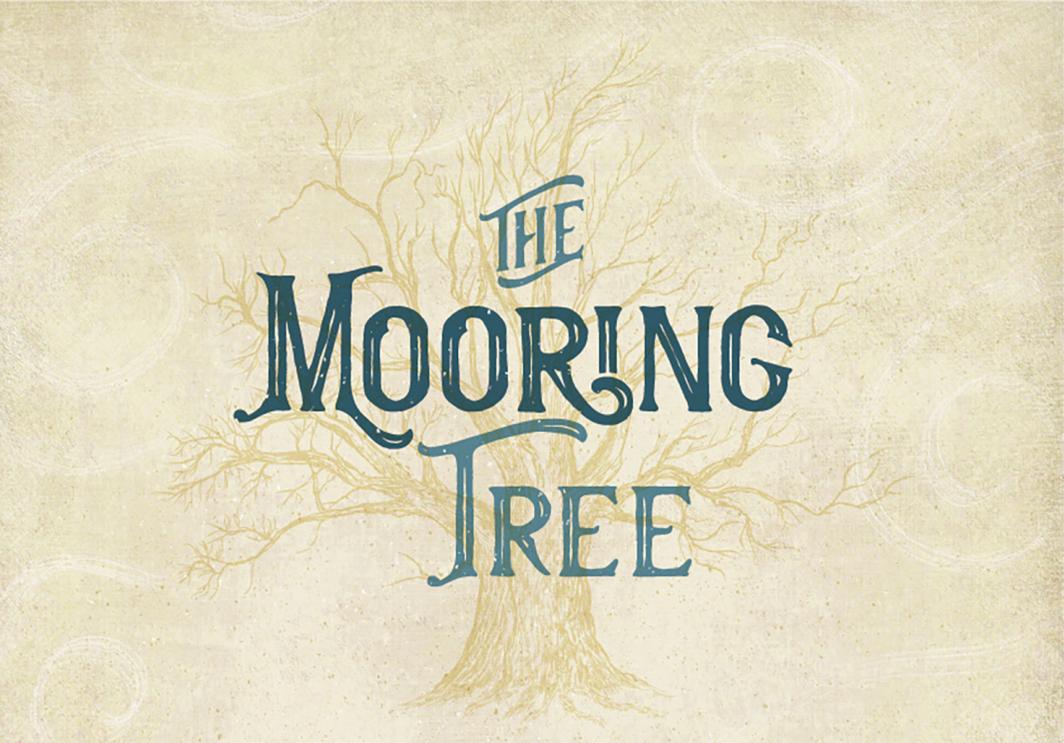
"You there!" bawled the boatman. "What you thinking? A boy all by hisself, going out to yon fleet? Where's your chit and your dory fare? Out and back, if so be ye ain't expected."

"I've my chit," returned Jason. He dragged out a sixpence and showed it to the boatman. "The Company'd pay my fare, but here is your satisfaction once your dory touches shipside."

The boatman wheezed. "I'd enjoy seeing the sailors toss you into the brew. Three I've picked out already."

As they drew near the ships, Jason saw that each of the small boats in the cluster was filled with a crew of ragamuffins. Most of the boats were milling about the *Falcon*. The occupants climbed aboard the ship with reluctance, and it was evident to Jason that these London waifs rated the freedom of their lives as vagrants higher than the chances they were facing as bound boys in Virginia. He tossed the coin to the boatman, passed up the roll to the sailor who was waiting on the float and, poke in hand, scrambled up the rope ladder to the already crowded deck.

It was difficult to believe he was standing on the deck of one of His Majesty's sailing ships. It was dirty. The deck looked as though it hadn't been holystoned



THE MOORING TREE

Silas Ware and his son, Jason, had planned to sail to the New World together to claim the land granted to them in the Jamestown settlement. But when his father is wrongfully imprisoned, young Jason must embark upon the long and lonely journey without him. Upon arrival, the settlers are shocked to find Jamestown mysteriously deserted! While the others lose all hope, Jason remains steadfast. With help from some new friends, Jason is determined to build the life that he and his father dreamed of, hopeful that they will one day be reunited.



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