

In which Matthew feels obliged to act the hero

On the day of his son's second birthday, Matthew woke up weeping after a far too vivid dream of permanent loss. He lay for a long time staring at the crumbling clay of the damp wall only inches from his nose, trying to collect his thoughts.

He pulled the threadbare blanket tighter round his shoulders and closed his eyes. It was Sunday, and not even here were they expected to work on the day of rest – not now, in late January. During planting and harvesting it was different, but during these slow months of winter Jones had no wish to leave his own bed on a Sunday. Strangely, these days were the most difficult to live through, far too many hours when his mind lay open to the whispered temptation of drowning in memories only to find himself rudely recalled to a reality he wouldn't wish on a dog.

Matthew sighed and got to his feet. Elijah was already up, probably hanging around the cook house in the hope of wheedling an extra helping of breakfast from the grim Mrs Humphries. Once so rotund, Elijah had shrunk to something resembling a pole with a head, long stringy arms ending in extended, narrow fingers with constantly torn or bleeding nails.

Over the last few months Elijah had become Jones' favourite victim, his sniffling begging making the overseer smile cruelly when he ordered Elijah to one heavy task after the other. Always Matthew and Elijah, but where Matthew had learnt to hold his tongue, Elijah would sometimes weep, falling to his knees and pleading that he might be released from this.

Matthew had just finished his breakfast when Jones appeared in the door of the cook house, his ginger hair standing messily around his head.

"Elijah?"

Matthew looked around and hitched a shoulder.

Jones cursed loudly; no one had ever escaped from Suffolk Rose under his care, he growled, and he wasn't about to have that snivelling wreck of a man be the first one.

"Get the dogs!" he snapped to his eternal shadow, Sykes.

"You think he has run?" The thought was so ludicrous that Matthew almost laughed. Deep inside stirred a sense of admiration at this reckless act. Why had he not tried to? Then he looked at himself, inadequately covered in rags, grimy shins protruding from his breeches and sighed. He didn't stand a chance... No, he was doing the right thing, waiting for her to come and find him. Besides, there were the dogs, huge black and tan creatures that were set free at night to roam the estate. He could hear them baying now, a deep sound that vibrated through the air. Poor daft bastard, he wouldn't get far.

Elijah was dragged back shrieking, clapped over the head until he collapsed and locked into one of the storage sheds. Jones stalked over to the big house to confer with Fairfax, and just after noon he walked back and in his hand he held a coiled flogging whip.

"There, now!" he snarled at the men and indicated the main yard with its stout, weathered post. The silence around the whipping post was absolute. Grey shapes shuffled into line and stood in the cold wind waiting. Elijah was led out, his pale skin breaking out in goose pimples, and was tied into place, hands high above his head.

"This man is a thief," Jones began. "He has attempted to steal himself away from Mr Fairfax, thereby depriving him of years of service for which Mr Fairfax has paid dearly." He sauntered up and down the line, the whip displayed prominently. "Mr Fairfax has no tolerance with thieves, Mr Fairfax dislikes when his property ..." Jones emphasised the word and glanced in the direction of Matthew, who dropped his eyes to the ground. "... I repeat, his property, absconds." He scratched his nose and

looked at the silent, assembled men for a long time. "A thief we hang – or maim - but Mr Fairfax has agreed to be lenient. He will be flogged; one hundred lashes." A collective gasp went up from the men and Elijah's legs buckled under him.

"Sweetest Lord," Matthew whispered to Davy. "One hundred lashes – it would be kinder to kill him outright."

"Aye" Davy groaned, "but this way he brings the lesson home to all of us."

Jones handed the whip to Sykes. He nodded that the sentence be carried out.

It took five lashes before Elijah began to cry out, ten more before he began to scream, and then he screamed and screamed for the coming thirty lashes or so. A further thirty and he barely whimpered, hanging so heavily in his arms that the shoulders seemed on the point of permanently popping out of their sockets.

"For the love of God, please stop! You'll kill him!" Matthew said, sickened to the point of vomiting by this spectacle.

Jones lifted his hand to stay the flogging. "One hundred lashes, are you willing to take the last twenty-five in his place?"

A shiver flew through Matthew. Twenty-five lashes for something he hadn't done, and he knew exactly what it would feel like, how much it would hurt. Fear pooled in his gut and leaked downward, making his knees weaken. He looked at Elijah and the blood running down his back to drip to the dust below his feet. The back was laid open from shoulder blades to waist. Twenty-five more lashes would kill him. Matthew raised his chin and met Jones' eyes.

"Aye," he said, hearing a murmur behind him.

Jones nodded his agreement to the exchange. He bowed and waved his hand towards the post.

"At your convenience, sir."

Matthew pulled off his shirt and used all his willpower to walk straight and tall the few yards that separated him from where Sykes was busy dragging Elijah out of the way. He gripped the ring with his hands, shaking his head when they came with rope, and waited. He waited a long time, and finally snuck a look over his shoulder.

Jones met his eyes and smiled. "I'll be wielding the whip myself. Gentleman to gentleman, like."

Matthew had been flogged before, in gaol. But never like this, never with each stroke delivered at maximum strength, with long, unbearable pauses between them. After seven lashes he gasped. At the tenth lash he bit through his lip, and he leaned his forehead hard against the smooth wood and tried to stop himself from crying out when the leaded tip tore into his tender skin fifteen more times.

His knees were shaking by the time Jones was done and he'd held on so tightly to the ring he was certain his knuckles would burst. But somehow he straightened up and unclenched his clawed fingers from the ring, he even managed to turn and walk back to where he'd thrown his shirt, but if someone hadn't given it to him he would have fallen. He tried to smile a thank you and walked off, every step an act of faith.