

1. Plymouth Harbour, England

March 15, 1864

At last, the *Eastern Empire* had arrived, and a smile broke over the face of twenty-two-year-old Ben Bowden. The 993-ton wooden sailing ship was anchored just inside the breakwater at Plymouth Harbour. Ben wiped the damp from his mouth and beard. It was a misty day, and the three tall masts pierced the low grey cloud.

Many more emigrants, cheering, crying, and pointing, swarmed around Ben and Emma, but as the rain grew heavier, the young couple ran back for shelter inside the depot.

Later in the evening, the emigrants were told they would board in the morning. It was to be their last night in England.

The next morning, Ben and Emma, with heavy hearts, joined the queue for boarding the *Eastern Empire*, and, in what seemed hours later, arrived at the base of the *ship's* gangway. Ben hauled their traps and bundles, while Emma gripped the ropes and walked up the steep walkway. When Ben reached the deck, he gratefully grasped the rails. At last, they were on-board. He still couldn't believe he and Emma had been chosen.

'Mr Vicary was right,' Ben said, his face almost hidden by his battered felt hat and fine black beard. 'I thought we should be on one of those shiny new iron ships. But this is grand and solid.'

The 380 or so straggling migrants continued to arrive on the deck, pushing Emma and Ben forward slowly, until they could go no further. They eased their belongings down to their feet.

Ben looked up at the neatly rolled sails. 'So easy,' he said. 'No horses to feed. We'll just float our way around the world, for thousands of miles.'

Emma doubted it would be that easy. She covered her nose, as the smells of fish and chloride of lime, clawed at her nostrils. Wondering if her family missed her as much as she missed them, she jumped when a seaman yelled an order to another seaman. 'What are they saying?' she asked Ben, tensing when she felt the gentle tipping of the ship from side to side.

The bellowing continued, from one seaman to another, from stem to stern. She had been used to noise, when she was younger, living with twelve brothers and sisters, but, in the last six years, when she served as a kitchen maid in Nansloe, Mr Tyacke would have none of it.

‘Look, over there,’ Ben said, as the seamen stomped on the downbeat of an old sea shanty. Emma smiled, pushing her tight dark curls from her face, and tightening her bonnet strings against the rising wind. Ben slipped his arm around her.

The constable for the voyage, Isaac Kimbly, rang the ship’s bell. A cool breeze blew the stack of papers in his hand. ‘Attention please,’ he shouted. ‘These are your berth numbers.’ He nailed the flapping list to the hatchway. Ben and Emma squeezed their way towards the list with another young couple, James and Amelia Vicary.

‘Here we are,’ James said, running his finger down the page. ‘Let me see – Ben, you are berth number 45, and Amelia and I are 46.’

Both couples headed down to the between decks cabin.

‘You are so lucky,’ Emma confided to Amelia, ‘travelling with your whole family.’

James Vicary’s brother, John, pulled away from the group. ‘I don’t know about that,’ he said. ‘We signed up to get away from them, and they followed us!’

Emma laughed and said to Ben, ‘That fellow is cheeky, but no worse than my brother. And a bit of leg pulling might be just what we need right now.’

Ben and Emma kept an eye on James’s chocolate-brown cap, and his matching beaverteen jacket. They didn’t know which way to go.

‘It’s quite dark down there,’ Emma said.

Ben took her hand, and Emma trod carefully, her eyes gradually focusing on the roughly hewn deck below. All four walls were lined with rows of double bunks. Down the centre was a long mess table. This area was to be their bedroom, dining, and living room for the next three months. She couldn’t wait to tell her sisters. Then Emma remembered that she wouldn’t be telling them anything, until she learned to write.

Ben and Emma continued across the third-class cabin, apologising as they collided with other passengers trying to settle into their small spaces. When Ben and Emma reached their bunks, they gratefully let go of their bags.

Emma was tired after their travel and goodbyes, but she was also surprised at how weary Amelia looked, as she eagerly lay back on their

bunk, only to land on the handle of a heavy bag.

‘There is no headroom,’ Amelia said to Emma.

‘Here, let me,’ James removed the bag and helped Amelia back onto the bunk.

Amelia was pretty in an English Rose kind of way. Her high-necked gown, although well worn, was adorned with ribbons and lace. She smiled at Emma. ‘Hope I’m not going to be a misery for long.’

Emma smiled back. ‘You’ll be better soon.’

Ben and Emma’s bunk was only three feet wide. Emma opened a bundle and took out a towel, her nightclothes, and a change of clothes each.

Ben suspended the ham and the bag of their remaining clothes and linen on the nails provided. ‘It’s a juggle,’ he muttered, stuffing the tin plates, pickles, and molasses into one corner of the bunk, and his writing materials into the other. He put the Bible under his pillow, and the bowl and marine soap at the foot of the bed – now to hide the chamber pot.

As the ship’s bell rang, Kimbly stood on the hatchway steps. ‘Listen carefully,’ he shouted. ‘Migrant ships only have a skeleton staff. They are the seamen, the captain, surgeon-superintendent, matron, and the water distiller. You, the migrants, are responsible for the rest, collecting, cooking, and serving of food, and keeping your cabin clean. The adult males will form groups of ten, or thereabouts, and make a roster, nominating a sweeper, who will act as your captain for each week. It is your captain’s responsibility to see that everything in your area is done.’

Emma’s brother, William, had told Ben about the cleaning, but Ben only realised now what a chore it would be. The deck was already caked with bird droppings, mud, biscuits, and rubbish. Ben would have to take a knife to it – although William said they were provided with holystone, and broomsticks. Ben grimaced and rubbed his forehead.

The emigrants’ mutterings grew to a grumble.

‘Quiet please!’ Kimbly continued. ‘You will rise at seven and roll up your beds. Wet beds must be aired on deck.’

Ben eyed the narrow steps. He envisioned eternal bottlenecks of passengers trying to go up and down to the deck with mattresses and bedclothes.

Kimbly looked back at his notes. ‘Breakfast is at eight, and dinner at one, but only after the surgeon and matron’s inspections. You will wipe down the tables, sweep out the cabin and throw dirt overboard.

Supper is at six, fires out at seven, and bedtime is ten.' He softened his tone as he spoke to the women. 'Ladies, you will prepare some meals, but you are not permitted in the galley.'

Mrs Temby, mother of seven young girls, smiled at Emma, and whispered, 'The less galley work for me the better.'

The constable's voice rose again. 'And absolutely nobody must tamper with the lamps.' He nailed the list of rules near the hatchway. 'Read the rest at your convenience. Now, choose your sweepers and ready yourselves for the muster.'

Back in the between decks area, James's father, John Vicary senior, sat at the table. He looked world weary, and all of his fifty years, with his greying moustache and beard. However, he put his hand up and offered to be their first sweeper.

Ben stretched his neck and elbows. 'Praise the Lord,' he whispered to Emma. 'I would have no idea where to start.'

Mr Vicary held up two lists and tapped his spoon on a tin mug. 'Hello, can you all hear me? We have enough for two groups. The families that hail from St Blazey are keen to stay together, so that means the Vicary, Hore, Curtis, and Bice families are in one group. The second group is the Breens, Matthews, Tembys, Bowdens, and Sarah Murley. Oh, and the Rowes. Sorry Danny and Rachel.'

Mr Vicary continued. 'Mary-Ann and I will visit upon the purser and prepare your supper tonight. And, it being our first meal on board, everyone will wash their own tinware.' His voice was drowned out when Constable Kimbly shook his brass handbell.

'Everyone immediately on deck,' Kimbly announced. 'It's time for the muster.'

Ben imagined they'd be sitting around on the ship, waiting out the days. Now it seemed the orders would never end. He and Emma followed everyone, cramming for the steps.

The surgeon superintendent, Doctor Isaac Baker-Brown, was barely thirty. He pulled out his gold watch and waited on the poop deck.

'I wish he'd hurry up,' Emma complained, not comfortable with the side-to-side movements of the ship.

Susan Hore winked at her and said, 'The surgeon is quite a looker. I wonder what he's doing on a ship like this. It can't be fun, working at sea.'

'Quiet, please,' the surgeon boomed in his best Harley Street voice. 'I am responsible for both your health and well-being.' He twirled the

tips of his fine moustache. 'We must have strict order. Punishment for infringements will be severe. As Constable Kimbly told you, we are supplied with a minimum of staff on board. And I have chosen the following constables to assist them. Perform your duties well and you could receive three pounds sterling on arrival.' He read the names from his list, and each man stepped forward, proud of his selection.

Ben noticed that John Vicary's sons were listed. Lucky them, he thought. Three pounds would come in handy. After the surgeon finished reading, the passengers began discussing his choices.

'Quiet, please!' the surgeon repeated. 'For your good health, you must spend as much time on deck as possible. However, at no time should single males and females be on deck together.'

This raised a titter and the surgeon glowered. 'Quiet!' he demanded yet again. 'The roster for single male, and female deck times is available from Mr Kimbly. Now, single men to the stern, which is at the rear of the ship, and single women to the bow.'

The first-class passengers now boarded – including the Reverend Mr Stanton and his large family. Emma gaped at their finery. She caught Susan Hore's eye. Susan grinned, as she heaved baby William onto her hip.

Captain George Jury greeted the new passengers. He was splendid in his dark, braided, gold-buttoned suit, and a flat seaman's hat, with the title *Eastern Empire* and its royal insignia embroidered on the band.

Ben was pleased the master was a middle-aged man. They would need his experience on such a long journey.

The customs officer briefed and saluted the master. The surgeon left the poop deck, and the seamen, in a straight line, saluted the captain, and returned to their duties.

Ben found the orderly ceremony of departure reassuring.

Seamen scaled the masts, while others pushed on the splaying handles of the capstan, raising the ship's anchor. They trudged around, singing an old shanty and stomping their boots to the beat.

*'Tis when a Black Baller's preparing for sea
to my way haye, blow the man down,
You'd split your sides laughing at the sights that you see.
Give me some time to blow the man down.*

Clouds of smoke belched from the tugboat, and the *Eastern Empire* moved slowly from the port. There was no propitious wind to fill the sails.