

Numbers 20:17

*“Let us pass, I pray thee, through thy country:
we will not pass through the fields, or through the vineyards,
neither will we drink of the water of the wells:
we will go by the king's highway,
we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left
until we have passed thy borders.”*

London, England. February 1839

Sam Davey slung his knapsack over his shoulder and stepped off the deck of HMS *Bengal Merchant* into a chilly English winter. The ship, which had taken convicts to Port Jackson the year before, had put into Greenwich from Sydney that morning after a brutal voyage.

He took a deep breath of English air as his sea legs objected to solid ground. The docks stank of tar, fish, saltwater, and seaweed, and the wind in his face smelled of rain. Men and carts hauled goods along the quayside, and hoists swung backwards and forwards, loading and unloading cutters, sloops, and barques. A warship sat at a mooring farther out in the harbour, its presence a stern reminder of tensions across Europe and the Americas – the *Bengal Merchant's* commander, Captain Campbell, had been a mine of information during the voyage home.

He should have been home before Christmas, but the money Gwenllian had struggled to save over the past seven years of his penal servitude hadn't covered his fare. He'd slaved in punishing heat, carrying cargo on and off boats in the harbour near the penal colony at Sydney Cove, to make up the shortfall.

‘Look out, there!’

He ducked beneath a swinging bale of cotton. Home, or almost home – all he had to do now was get from London to the South Wales coalfields. Home to Merthyr Tydfil, his beloved Gwen, and Delyth, the daughter he hadn't seen since she was born on the prison hulk in Portsmouth Harbour seven long years before.

Would Gwen recognise him? He'd left England a boy of sixteen, convicted of taking part in the Merthyr rising and was returning a man of twenty-three. Delyth didn't even know him.

After four months cooped up on the ship, he was desperate to stretch his legs and aching to hold Gwen in his arms. He'd walk all the way to Merthyr if he had to, and he well might; he'd arrived in England with a scant few shillings to his name, and all he had in the world was in the bag on his shoulders, and it didn't include a warm winter coat.

Standing shivering on the dock wasn't getting him closer to the girl he loved. He headed along the quayside and on into the city, dodging pallid people who hadn't felt the warmth of the sun for months, and avoiding horses and carriages and a mail coach. Merthyr was about two hundred miles to the west; he was cold and hungry, and it would be dark in a couple of hours.

As daylight faded, lamplighters with wicks on long poles lit the many gas lamps that threw yellow circles to light his way. Beneath one lamp, an old man huddled in a blanket, his booted feet sticking out across the road and a tin mug held in his hands. The man cocked his head as if listening to his footfall and turned sightless eyes to him. 'Can you spare a coin for a blind beggar?'

How did a person survive without his sight? 'I have little enough myself, sir, but your need is greater than mine.' He threw a coin into the mug.

The blind beggar smiled at the sound. 'God bless you, sir.'

'And you, sir. Tell me – I'm a stranger in London, newly come from Australia. I need a meal and a place to sleep. I can't afford a room, and I could do with some warm clothing. Is there somewhere I can buy food? And where do you sleep?'

'If you come with me, young sir, I'll show you.' The beggar reached into his mug and returned a coin. 'I think your need may be greater than mine. Come.'

He helped the man to his feet and walked alongside him. 'My name is Samuel Davey.'

The beggar held out his hand for Sam to shake. 'And mine is Jasper. Jasper Cook. Pleased to meet you, Samuel.'

Above the stink of unwashed bodies, horse manure, and human waste rose the smell of food.

Jasper waved a long stick ahead of him and walked forward. 'The Poor Laws outlawed soup kitchens. It's thought they make the poor idle and dependent on charity, but this one survives.' Jasper huffed his disdain and waved him towards the soup kitchen. 'Laws made by those who've never been hungry or down on their luck. They should try being homeless and without means.'

A woman in a thick woollen coat and a black bonnet smiled at them. 'Who's your young friend, Jasper?'

'This is Samuel Davey, just come from Australia. He's cold and hungry, Elsie.'

'Cold? He looks half-froze. Here, this'll warm you.' She ladled soup into two mugs and handed them across a table, eyeing him shrewdly. 'Well, you don't look as if you've made a fortune gold prospecting, Samuel. What did you do to get transported?'

He put one mug in Jasper's hand. 'I was convicted of rioting and attacking some militia.' He took a gulp of hot soup and felt the warmth travel down his body. 'I didn't kill anyone.'

Elsie nodded. 'You wouldn't be alive if you had. There's been a lot of rioting these last years, a lot of unrest, and people are still starving. You Welsh?'

His accent was strong? 'Yes. From Merthyr in the South Wales valleys.'

'I heard tell of riots in Wales some years back. Wasn't a man hanged?'

'Yes, a friend of mine, Richard Lewis, though we knew him as Dic Penderyn.' Familiar anger clenched his fists. 'He was an innocent man. Others were transported for life. I was lucky I was only exiled for seven years, and luckier still to get home, thanks to my wife, though it cost nearly every penny we had.'

Elsie rummaged through a wooden crate behind her table. ‘Here, will this fit you?’ She held out an overcoat that had seen better years, never mind days, but it was a coat, and he was grateful.

He removed his knapsack and donned the overcoat. It didn’t smell too good, and it hadn’t many buttons. ‘Fits where it touches.’ He smiled. ‘Thank you, Elsie. I appreciate it.’

‘No trouble, Samuel Davey. Poor old Donald has no more use for it, and I dare say the fleas have found a better home by now.’

He resisted the desire to scratch. He was wearing a dead man’s clothing? Not that he could afford to be choosy, and it wasn’t his first brush with fleas or death.

Jasper wiped soup from his beard. ‘Is it dark yet?’

‘Getting that way.’

‘We’d better bag a spot for the night, then. Do you see the bridge?’

‘Yes, I see it.’

‘Then finish your soup and take me to the arch down by the riverbank. That’s where we’ll spend the night.’

‘Under a bridge?’

‘It’s that or the workhouse, and I’d rather be under a bridge. More wholesome – more freedom, and it’ll be dry until the tide comes in.’

He swallowed the last of his soup and huddled into his new coat. ‘I can’t thank you enough, Elsie. What do I owe you?’

‘Soup’s free to those in need. Call by in the morning, Samuel. I’m here early. Mouths to feed.’

‘I shall. Thank you.’

He and Jasper picked a spot on the highest ground for the night and huddled together beneath Jasper’s blanket for mutual warmth. He closed his eyes and hoped to sleep and dream of his Gwenny. A rich man would have spat on him, or averted his glance as if that solved a distasteful problem, but a blind beggar had returned his coin, shared his blanket, and found him food and a coat. Reverend Rees, Gwenllian’s father, would have spouted the Bible at him. Something about good Samaritans, probably.

Reverend Evan Rees reread the letter that had arrived that morning. It would mean a new challenge, but how would he break the news to his family? The chapel and God’s work came first; Elen had accepted that when they’d married, and this would be their third move. The children were old enough to decide their own futures, though with an absent and errant husband, Gwenllian needed their support.

Elen was in the kitchen with her back to him. Silver strands sparkled in her hair, and she was a little thicker around the waist than the slender girl he’d fallen in love with over twenty years before. He walked up behind her and put his arms around her. She leaned into him and angled her neck for a kiss.

‘I’ve had a letter from the chair of the district, Elen.’

She turned to face him. ‘What does he want?’

‘It’s time I was stationed elsewhere. We have to leave Merthyr.’

‘But ...’ Her face showed her concern. ‘I have patients. The women here need me. We’ve put down roots, made friends. Delyth’s grandmother is here...’

She hadn’t asked where they were being sent. ‘I’ve been appointed to the living in Efailwen.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘It’s a rural parish north-west of Carmarthen, on the border between Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire.’

She frowned. ‘How far away is that?’

‘I’m not sure. A day’s travel, I would think.’

‘Do we have a choice, Evan?’

‘God’s ministry and the needs of my appointed parishioners come first, Elen. Mark, chapter sixteen, says “*and he said unto them, go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.*” It’s my duty and my calling, and the cleaner air will be better for Delyth.’

‘I know it’s your calling, but the children have built their lives here.’

‘Taliesin and Morgan will be welcome to accompany us if they wish.’

‘And Gwenllian? Suppose she wants to stay here? She’s waiting for Sam to come home. He could arrive any day.’

He kept his thoughts about Samuel Davey to himself. The boy’s marriage to Gwen wasn’t lawful, even though he’d performed the ceremony himself. It should have been legalised in the Church of England, not in the governor’s cabin on a convict ship, but they were man and wife in the eyes of God. Sam’s arrival would turn all their lives upside-down, and they’d managed very nicely without him; the ruffian had broken Gwen’s heart once, and he’d prefer not to give him the chance to do it again. The sooner he removed Gwenllian from Merthyr, the better.

He put the letter down and took Elen’s hands in his. ‘How would Gwen keep herself and Delyth without our support? She must come with us. If Sam wants to find her, I’m sure he will, whether we like it or not.’

‘She’s becoming accomplished as a midwife. She might want to stay with Sam’s mother?’

He released her hands, folded the letter, and replaced it in the envelope. ‘I would hope we can persuade her to come to Efailwen, for Delyth’s health, if nothing else. Bethan Davey isn’t a well woman and can’t help support a child.’

‘Then perhaps Bethan should come with us, too – for her health?’

This conversation wasn’t going the way he’d anticipated. He liked Bethan, but taking her under his wing would bring both Sam and Tommy, Sam’s younger brother, closer into their family. ‘My stipend can’t support us all, Elen. Tommy has employment here. He might not find work so easily in the country. The same goes for Taliesin and Morgan – if the boys come with us, we may be worse off as a family.’

‘Gwen and I can help out. Women need midwives, whether they live in Merthyr or this Evilwyn place. Do you think a rural area would have work for two midwives?’

‘It’s Efailwen, and I don’t know if they even need one midwife, but I’m sure there will be other gainful employment for when your midwifery skills aren’t required.’

‘I hope so. A minister’s stipend isn’t a lot for a family to live on. Gwen and I can make clothes and take in mending. And with luck, there’ll be a garden to grow vegetables.’ Elen sighed. ‘When do we have to leave?’

‘This week.’

‘When? But... We can’t possibly go so soon.’

He waved the envelope containing the letter in front of her face. ‘We leave at the end of the week. There’s not much to pack – most of the furniture came with the house and stays here for the next incumbent. We can make room for everything we need on the coach or hire a cart, and the chapel will pay the fare.’

‘Gwen won’t be happy.’

‘Gwen will have to do as she’s told, for Delyth’s sake.’

Elen raised an eyebrow. ‘She’s a grown woman with a mind of her own, and when has she ever done as she was told?’

‘All the more reason to persuade her the move will be good for Delyth. She’s a wonderful mother, and she’ll see the sense of it.’

‘We’d better tell her then. Evan, leave this to me. It’ll do no good you being heavy-handed with her. Tell them supper’s ready, and I’ll bring it through.’

Elen ladled rabbit stew into bowls. The family took some feeding now the boys were adults, and Delyth was growing fast and always hungry.

He clasped his hands and bowed his head. ‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.’ Once again, God had provided.

Elen seated herself at the table. ‘Dad’s had a letter. He’s been given a living in Efailwen, near Carmarthen, and we leave here at the end of the week.’

There was a stunned silence, and Elen filled it before everyone started speaking at once. ‘It will be good for the family, especially Delyth, with her chest. Clean air and countryside.’

‘I can’t leave, Mum. What about Sam?’

‘Gwenllian, mothers make sacrifices for their children. You know that. Delyth’s health comes before whatever it is you want. Sam will find us when he comes home.’

Taliesin and Morgan were keen for a new adventure, but Gwen was characteristically stubborn. ‘Delyth and I have to be here when Sam arrives.’

Evan huffed his frustration. *A plague on argumentative women.* Couldn’t she see he was trying to protect her? ‘*If* he comes home, Gwenllian. You sent him all that money, and have you heard a word from him since? The scoundrel’s probably run off with it.’

‘Dad, how can you even think such a thing? He’ll be on his way home. You know how long letters take to and from Australia.’

He ignored Elen's earlier advice. 'There's to be no argument about this, Gwen. We are leaving on Friday, all of us, whether you like it or not, and that's final.'

He dipped his spoon into his stew to hide his worry. He hadn't divulged the whole of the letter. *Your experiences during the riots in Merthyr make you the best possible choice for this post. There is much dissatisfaction among the farmers of Carmarthenshire, Cardiganshire, and Pembrokeshire, and I fear there may be serious unrest. God will guide your hand.*

It had been seven years since Elen had taken a musket shot in the arm during the Merthyr rising, and the injury still troubled her. Was he taking his family to a better life or back into danger?

God asked much of him. He sent a silent prayer. *Lord, protect us.*

