

They found her searching for scraps on the quay. Mr Walker had taken the family to watch the opening of the East India Docks, had bought Sarah a bag of sugared almonds and carried her high on his shoulders. She marvelled at a large ship adorned with flags – Mr Walker had listed the nations they belonged to – and felt she could touch the sails that billowed like clouds, if she just stretched her fingers.

One of the almonds had dropped; Mr Walker let her down. Sarah had pushed herself through the crush, chased it to where it bounced between a crate and a frayed net that still held the corpse of a fish between its teeth. The fish had rotted, guts dried to string in the sun. Too far gone, even, for the flies. As the first echoing chorus of ‘God save the King’ travelled over her head a filthy arm had flung out; attached to this, a filthy little hand. It fisted the almond and, having found purchase, retreated. It got caught in the net.

There was no sound from behind the crate, but like oystercatchers trapped in fishing tackle the arm had flailed and wrestled, becoming further and further entangled until it simply ceased its struggle and lay still. Sarah, who had by this time cried out, was being pushed aside and scolded for dirtying her new dress for the sake of lost sugar. But Sarah had pointed and Mrs Walker had frowned, peered over the crate. Then, as if speaking to a simpleton, her mother murmured words low in her mouth and, very gently, freed the arm from its trap.

She does not much remember what happened after that. The owner of the hand – a little girl, it transpired – had tried unsuccessfully to flee. Anyone else, Sarah thinks on reflection, would have let the urchin run. Mrs Walker though ... Mrs Walker had taken one look at the waif with its frightened black eyes, saw the rags, the bones protruding through paper-thin skin, the lice-riddled matt of hair, the hatching of wounds at her wrists, and promptly taken her home.

In the warmth of the kitchen Sarah had watched, saucer-eyed, how the girl – now bathed and wearing one of Martha’s old slips, hair shorn close to her head – struggled to eat the broth Mrs Walker had laid out for her, how the grease slipped

down her chin and made her coffee-bean skin shine. Sarah tried not to stare but what she thought had been dirt was, in fact, the natural dye of her; Sarah had had no idea at the tender age of six there was variety such as this in the world.

That night, as Mrs Walker rubbed goose fat onto the child's raw wrists, she named her Maria.

Sarah often wonders why the girl trusted them enough in those early days not to run. Now, as Sarah and the housemaid turn onto the teeming flats of Durham Yard, Sarah is glad she did not. What horrors she had endured Sarah will never know, but they must have been enough for the girl to recognise she had been done a kindness. Her loyalty has never once wavered.

The morning wind picks up, whistling through the masts. The girls look to the river. Ships have pulled into Durham's three wharfs, the sounds of chains and gulls mingling with the barked orders of merchant sailors. A group of dockers are unloading a schooner, passing crates down a line into a waiting cart.

Sarah and Maria edge past them to Ivy Bridge. They climb the narrow stone stairway, step over a mangled haddock lying at the top, its scales gleaming silver. Their sights are set on the oyster seller, a pale woman with white-blond hair who wanders every day up and down the bridge, her call 'Oysters, penny a lot' a gravelly catch in her throat. They wait patiently to be served, the usual clamour for a fresh morning catch; hers are the fattest and juiciest, well worth the wait.

A young man brushes past them, a pallet clutched to his chest. He brings with him the sharp smell of the oysters, a strong tang of wood smoke. It is such an odd combination Sarah stumbles; he steadies her. Their gazes lock briefly. Sarah is struck at how deeply blue his eyes are. He murmurs an apology, bows his head, moves swiftly on. Everyone in London is always in a rush.

Purchases made the girls wander down to the far end of the pier. Sarah sits, tugs at Maria's skirts. The maid rubs her bottom lip with her teeth, sinks down beside her. Pallets wetly heavy in their laps, they watch the brown stretch of water

as it laps lazily at the muddy bank. A low haze hangs over the Thames like a gauzy blanket. If she squints, Sarah can see the timber yards on the other side of the river.

‘Here,’ Sarah says. ‘Mama will hardly miss a couple.’

She opens her reticule, takes out a pocketknife, the one she carries with her always when she ventures outside; she has heard Cajah’s stories, the reports in *The Times*. Only last week a woman had been found with her throat cut just off Litchfield Street, left to steep in her own blood, torn skirts hitched up around her knees. It does to be cautious.

Maria watches as Sarah angles the blade into the seam of her oyster shell. It opens with a slick sucking noise. She hands it to Maria who takes it gingerly.

‘Come on. You know what to do.’

With a small smile the housemaid tilts her head back, slips the fleshy innards into her mouth, gives a satisfied hum.

Sarah cracks open her own shell, detaches the oyster from its home with her nail. Popping it into her mouth she savours the taste of salt.

A larger boat sails past, its hull smattered with molluscs that cling like white pox, the wood slick with black slime. The girls watch it skid quietly through the water, murky waves breaking at the base. Maria sighs. It is something, Sarah thinks, to simply sit, to watch the world go by. She glances at Maria’s wrists, long-healed, the scars now fleshy ribbons against her dark skin. Some people do not have that pleasure.