

CHAPTER 1

The Birth of the Prince and the Pauper

In old London on an autumn day in the sixteenth century, a boy was born to the poor Canty family, who did not want him. On the same day, another English child was born to the rich Tudor family, who did want him; in fact, all of England was overjoyed about his birth. There was much celebration throughout the nation. Everyone, rich or poor, spent several days feasting, dancing, and singing. London came alive with colorful banners, splendid parades, and evening bonfires. The only thing people talked about was the baby Edward Tudor, Prince of Wales, who lay wrapped in silk, unaware of his importance. Tom Canty, however, wore only rags, and he did not give anyone, even his family, cause for celebration.

CHAPTER 2

Tom's Early Life

Tom Canty spent his childhood in a ramshackle neighborhood near London Bridge. The streets were narrow, crooked, and dirty. The neighborhood's houses were built so that their upper stories hung out over the street below. Their wooden beams were painted in different colors, which gave them a certain charm. Shaped like small diamonds, their windows opened out on hinges, like doors.

Tom's family lived in one room of a cramped, crumbling house on Offal Court, off Pudding Lane. Tom's parents slept in a bed in the corner. Tom, his grandmother, and his two sisters, Bet and Nan, slept on the floor. Every night, they made their beds from a pile of blankets and dirty straw. In the morning they threw the bedding back in a heap.

Bet and Nan were fifteen-year-old twins. They were goodhearted girls but unclean, dressed in rags, and extremely ignorant, like their mother. Their father and grandmother were wicked and cruel. They cursed constantly and got drunk whenever they could; then they fought each other or anyone else who came their way. John Canty was a thief, and his mother a beggar. They forced the children to beg, too.

Another person who lived in the house was an old priest named Father Andrew, whom the king had forced to retire with a small pension. Father Andrew secretly taught the children right from wrong. He also taught Tom a little Latin, and how to read and write. He would have done the same with the girls, but they were afraid that their friends would make fun of them for becoming educated.

The other houses on the street were as crowded as Tom's. People drank, fought, and rioted all night, and they often injured one another.

Little Tom was not unhappy. His life was hard, but he did not know it. It was the sort of life that all the Offal Court boys had, so he thought it was normal. When he came home empty-handed at night, he knew that his father would curse and beat him and that his awful grandmother would do the same, more viciously. Later his starving mother would sneak him a tiny bit of food that she had saved by going hungry herself, even though she usually was caught in the act and beaten for it by her husband.

Tom's life went along well enough, especially in summer. He begged only enough to scrape by, because he didn't want to increase his chances of being arrested and punished. He spent most of his time listening to good Father Andrew's charming old tales and legends about giants and fairies, dwarves and genies, enchanted castles, and gorgeous kings and princes. His head became full of

these wonderful things. At night, as he lay in the dark on his dirty straw, feeling tired, hungry, and sore from a beating, he forgot his aches and pains by imagining the charmed life of a spoiled prince in a regal palace. He found himself longing to see a real prince. He spoke of it once to some of his friends, but they teased him so mercilessly that he never mentioned it to them again.

He often read the priest's old books and asked him to talk about them. These readings and discussions made Tom wish for a different life, and eventually his behavior started to change. He began to act like the prince he dreamed of meeting. His speech and gestures became more formal, and he cared more for his appearance. Although he still enjoyed playing in the mud, he used water from the Thames River to wash himself afterwards.

At first Tom's friends laughed at these changes, but gradually they began to admire him for being so educated and capable. They thought that he was full of knowledge and wisdom. The children reported Tom's talents to their parents, who also began to see the boy as something special. Soon adults brought their problems to Tom, and they often were astonished at the wit and wisdom of his decisions. He quickly became a hero to all who knew him except his own family, who saw him as ordinary.

After a while Tom privately organized a royal court. He was the prince; his best friends were guards, lords and ladies in waiting, and the royal

family. Every day, the court performed complicated ceremonies that Tom borrowed from the books he had read. The royal council also met to discuss the kingdom's business, and Tom gave orders to his imaginary armies and navies. Afterward the pretend prince would leave, wearing his same old clothes, and beg a little money. After eating some scraps of food and enduring another beating, he would stretch out on his pile of dirty straw and return to his imaginary world. Tom's desire to see a real prince became stronger with every passing day. Eventually he forgot everything but this goal, and it became his life's one passion.

One rainy January day, during his usual begging tour, he walked sadly up and down the area near Mincing Lane and Little East Cheap. Barefoot and cold, he spent hours looking through bakery windows, longing for the vile pork pies and other unhealthy food displayed there. To him, these smelled like heavenly morsels that he never had been lucky enough to eat. At night Tom reached home so wet, tired, and hungry that even his father and grandmother felt sorry for him. So they hit him only a few times and sent him to bed.

For a while his pain and hunger, and the swearing and fighting going on in the building, kept him awake. At last his thoughts drifted to far-away, romantic lands, and he fell asleep dreaming of jeweled princes in giant palaces, with servants who rushed to carry out their orders. As usual, he dreamed that he was a prince himself. All night

long he enjoyed the luxury of royal life. He walked with great lords and ladies, smelling perfumes and listening to delightful music while acknowledging the respectful greetings of the crowd as it parted to make way for him.

When he awoke from his dream in the morning and saw the misery around him, his real life seemed worse than ever. Then came bitterness, heartbreak, and tears.