

A black and white photograph of a cloudy sky over a body of water. The sky is filled with dark, dramatic clouds, and the water below is calm with subtle ripples. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

Convictions

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ships carrying convicts destined for North America ceased in 1776 when the War of Independence broke out in the United States. However, the practice of transporting felons continued to the penal colonies in Australia and New Zealand for about another ninety years, the numbers totaling 162,000 men and women. Exclusively female convict ships were infrequent – 129 out of a total of 806 – but they did sail, especially after facts emerged about the particularly harsh and sordid conditions women suffered on co-gendered transport ships.

One such exclusively female convict ship called the *Mary Anne* sailed in 1840, another called the *Emily* a couple of years later. The fictitious name of the ship in this story, the *Emily Anne*, is a combination of the two, sailing in 1842 for Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), Australia. Real facts, the strife of real people, and the conditions of actual convict ships form the foundation for this story.

CONVICTION

1350–1400; (v.) Middle English *convicten*
1400–50; late Middle English < Late Latin *conviction-*
(stem of *convicti*) proof (of guilt).

DEFINITION:

- *a fixed or firm belief*
- *an unshakable belief in something without need for proof or evidence*
- *acknowledgement; strong persuasion or belief; condemnation*
- *the act of convincing of error, or of compelling the admission of a truth; confutation.*
- *the state of being convinced or convicted; strong persuasion or belief; especially, the state of being convicted of sin, or by one's conscience.*
- *a judgment of condemnation entered by a court having jurisdiction; the act or process of finding guilty, or the state of being found guilty of any crime by a legal tribunal.*
- *the act of proving, finding, or adjudging, guilty of an offense.*
- *(criminal law) a final judgment of guilty in a criminal case and the punishment that is imposed*
- *to prove or declare guilty of an offense, especially after a legal trial: to convict a prisoner of a felony.*
- *to impress with a sense of guilt*

CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 29, 1842

JENNIE'S BARE FEET burned as she stepped down onto the sun-baked cobblestones from the crammed prison wagon, one of many lined three deep next to the Liverpool quay. She swallowed hard at the sudden cloying stench of dead fish, rotting wood and slime. Sweat beaded on her forehead in the glaring noonday sun. She brushed fingers across her face and wiped them on the tattered dress that clung to her thin body.

A guard yanked her by the shoulders. She winced as he cuffed her wrists behind her back. A second guard snapped shackles on her ankles and then thrust her behind ten year old Alice. The girl huddled against Jennie until a third guard chained them to an already-formed line. In silence, they waited for the rest of the female convicts to join the fettered queue. Quaking inside, Jennie ran her dry tongue over parched lips.

Whips crackled overhead, and at last the line of emaciated women lurched forward along the crowded wharf. With slow, uneven steps, Jennie trekked with the other prisoners. Many kept their heads down as they edged past the throng of onlookers waiting with friends and family to board their respective

passenger ships. With each hobbled step toward the ship bound for Van Diemen, the heavy manacles bit into Jennie's ankles.

"Be gone with you, ya thieving women," someone hollered.

"Yeah, good riddance!" yelled a tall man whose head stuck above the crowd.

Jennie tensed as he pushed his way toward them.

"You're good for nothing rubbish, and we're best rid of your kind," he snarled. "If anyone disagrees, they belong on the convict ship with you." His spittle landed near Jennie's bare feet.

"Shut your yap!" someone else bellowed.

"Make me," the tall heckler roared and turned toward the voice.

"It'll give me pleasure!" A young punter pushed his way through the horde.

The tall man lunged, but someone tripped him. Jennie cringed as he caught himself before falling into her. He flailed his fists at those in his vicinity. The crowd cut him a wide berth.

"Leave 'em alone. They're paying for their crimes," a squat man in a top hat harrumphed.

Dissenting shouts rose. A scuffle broke out in the middle of the mass.

"Some of them are only children," a woman near Jennie said in surprise.

"They'll grow up without their families," said another.

The horror of her destiny closed in on Jennie. She stumbled, and the ankle chains bit harder into her skin.

The group of hecklers swarmed closer, crushing past bystanders waving good-bye to loved ones who were boarding a nearby ship. The wooden wharf creaked under the added weight. Amid the shoving and cursing, a well-dressed lady screamed when she was shoved to the ground. As her husband picked her up, their child started crying.

Jennie twisted to see.

“Keep back,” yelled a wharf policeman, charging toward the crowd.

“They’ll push us off,” wailed an older convict farther down the line.

“Are we going to die?” Alice whimpered in front of Jennie.

“Sh. We’ll be all right,” Jennie said. “I have an eye out for you.”

The shouting grew louder as more people joined the fray. Overhead, screaming seagulls wheeled against the cloudless sky, plunging for scraps from a row of waterside fish stalls. Police whistles shrieked.

A sudden volley of gunshots exploded over the heads of the crowd. Everything stopped at once.

Then, as if in slow motion, people righted themselves. Officers pushed through the crowd looking for troublemakers and the injured.

The guards flicked their whips overhead to get the line moving again. The heavy manacles bit deeper into Jennie’s wrists and ankles as they approached their vessel moored farther down the wharf.

Jennie watched as the line of women bobbed along the quay like a string of fishing boats nodding in the wind. Young and old, fit and maimed, some pregnant and some children as young as seven were bound together. Many youngsters and babes in arms were with their condemned mothers, Jennie knew, only because there was no one left to care for them at home. She had spent time in prison with some of them over the past four months. Many more Jennie did not know, as they had been transported from across the whole of Great Britain, some even from Ireland.

The leaden chains and the unseasonably warm weather were almost more than Jennie could bear. The brisk wind mingling with the briny tang of salt water did little to ease her distress. Jennie had no idea which of the three-masted vessels

along the quay would carry her so far from home.

She searched desperately through the throng for her mother. Had she not found a way to come? Didn't she know this was probably the last time Jennie could ever hope to see her?

"Move on!" A burly guard with a bushy red moustache and beard shoved someone a few feet ahead of her, setting off a chain reaction of falling women.

Jennie lurched forward, smashing headlong into Alice. Pain seared her wrists, as other women fell against her. A chin dug into her back, and with her face planted between Alice's narrow shoulders, Jennie couldn't breathe.

"Sorry, dearie," said the matronly woman behind her.

Managing to stand upright once more, Jennie felt nauseated as she gasped and smelled the stench of dead fish and decaying seaweed. She swallowed hard.

"Can you manage?" the stout woman from behind asked.

Jennie nodded, though she felt weaker than she had ever been on her hungriest days. Taking shallow breaths through her mouth, she managed to hold back the nausea.

"We'll soon be out of this heat," the woman added.

Jennie glanced back and murmured, "Thank you."

"Sarah Givens. From London. Chimney sweep's wife. Seven children, youngest nine," she puffed. Wisps of brown frizzy hair clung to her plump face.

Jennie spoke over her shoulder. "I'm Jennie – uh – Mary Jane Lawrence. My family calls me Jennie. I'm most recent from Manchester, before that Warrington."

"You're young."

"Fourteen, last month," Jennie said. She pushed back her shoulders.

"Same age as my Susan."

Through further snippets of whispering, Jennie learned that Sarah Given's sentence stemmed from a false accusation of

stealing a handkerchief. She had been returning it to the owner, who had dropped it as she alighted from a carriage.

“You can be sure I won’t be so obliging next time,” said Sarah. The red-bearded guard stormed toward them.

“No talkin’, you. Eyes straight ahead!”

He prodded Jennie in the chest with a stick. She clamped her mouth shut, her face burned with shame.

Jennie moved along, staring straight ahead for several moments before peeking upwards. Hundreds of masts and spars prodded the sky. She would soon be on one of the tall vessels. This really was the end of the only life she knew. What would happen to her when they landed in Van Diemen’s Land some four or five months from now? A jolt of terror shot through her.

If only her family hadn’t been hungry. If only she had not been so desperate to find something for them to eat, she would never have taken the sack of oats – a discarded mouldy sack at that.

Passengers, sailors, merchants and dockworkers hustled along the pier, dodging Jennie and the long string of women, passing goods over their heads when they couldn’t go around. As the women threaded their way around stacked crates and bales of tobacco and silk, Jennie caught the welcome scent of tea and spices.

Farther along, cows, goats, sheep and horses were prodded from holding pens. Jennie watched dockworkers secure the livestock one at a time into a four-bellyband harness. With a boom that swung from the quay, they hoisted the livestock up and over, then lowered the bellowing beasts through a top cargo hatch into the hold. Jennie knew how the animals felt.

Behind her, the red-bearded guard laughed. “Mates, look at this fat ‘un. Can’t even stand up proper.”

Jennie glanced back in disgust as he shoved his stick into the chains between Sarah Givens’ feet and twisted.

Sarah almost pulled others down with her, but Jennie and

the woman behind Sarah wedged themselves to hold her upright. Little Alice clutched at Jennie.

Still chuckling, the guard continued up the line. Jennie glanced over her shoulder, but another guard was coming up behind them.

“I’m all right,” the stout woman assured Jennie in a loud whisper. Under her breath Jennie was sure she heard Sarah mutter, “Bloody Cockney bastard.”

A whip cracked near Jennie. She recoiled. The line lurched when the guard struck someone with a club. Alice cried out as the guards continued poking and prodding the women.

Suddenly, the progression stopped.

Sarah said, “This is it then.”

Jennie craned her neck to see ahead. Others did the same, whispering.

“Silence!” yelled a scar-faced guard standing near the ramp to the ship. “Your turn to board will come soon enough!”

Beside them, a dark hulk was moored parallel to the wharf. Jennie shuddered. The *Emily Anne* would be her prison for the duration of the sea voyage.

As those at the front of the line began their ascent, the flimsy wooden gangplank rocked. The women shuffled forward a little, then stopped again. Moved. Stopped. The sporadic progress seemed to go on forever under the baking sun. One by one, the guards directed the women onto the swaying gangway. Jennie’s fear increased with each step.

Around her, ankle shackles and chains clanked. Tackles and pulleys screeched as shouting dockworkers loaded the last crates and barrels of provisions onto the vessels. Heartfelt shouts of good-bye from family members all along the wharf merged with officers’ sharp commands to sailors. Warders hollered directions to the convicts. Every sound clanged in Jennie’s head, until she thought she’d explode.

She scanned the crowd again. Had her mother really not come? Jennie's steps faltered. The gangway wobbled as she stepped onto it and pitched against the rope railing.

"Steady," Sarah whispered.

Jennie's legs stiffened with each step up the ramp. She pushed away the tales that had been whispered in prison. Those about harsh discipline and deadly sickness of convicts transported to the colonies. When she spotted the soldiers with guns leaning over the poop deck railing above them, she shivered. She forced images of home to crowd out the horrors she imagined.

She thought of her mother's kind face and the laughter they shared with her two sisters in the tiny room above a milliner's shop. It was not much more than a storeroom that her mother had found after her father's death, but at least they had been warm and dry. The small fireplace offered a place to cook their meagre meals and gave them some warmth from the scavenged coal they burned in the winter months. The family had been safe and together, unlike many others who had lost the main wage earner in the household.

If she hadn't stolen from the rubbish bin, they would all be safe at home now – her mother, her eleven-year-old sister, Beth, and herself – hand-sewing throughout the day with eight-year-old Ann helping as best she could. They would continue long into the night, long after Ann fell sound asleep on the straw pallet she shared with their mother. Jennie would miss cuddling next to Beth for warmth at night. If only they had been able to find another outlet to sell their finely stitched gloves and handkerchiefs – some outlet where the seller would not cheat them out of their pay.

Jennie's footsteps dragged behind Alice's trembling body as she neared the top of the long, narrow ramp. One more step and she'd be severed from her family, perhaps forever. Even if her sentence was only for seven years, how would she be able to

return? What would become of her family while she was gone? Her stomach reeled and her knees almost gave way. What would become of *her*?

She had to see her mother one last time. Jennie pulled up short, causing another chain reaction and groans of dismay. The gangplank rocked.

“Get on with ya!” ordered a thin warder with a face like a wizened apple.

Jennie clamped her toes onto the bare wood, straining to scan the crowded quay. Was her mother there?

Whack!

Jennie’s shoulder flared with pain. The red-bearded guard raised his wooden club to strike again. The wizened-faced warder grinned.

Alice whimpered and crouched down. Sarah stood in shock.

“Move!” the bull-like guard roared, his red beard bristling. He shoved Jennie toward the deck. She stumbled but clung to the rope. She couldn’t go without seeing her mother. Jennie leaned hard into the rope, shaking.

The “Red Bull” pushed her again.

“Wait!” she shouted.

Startled, the guard paused.

In that instant, Jennie glimpsed the distraught figure of her mother, moving a little apart from the others. Her tiny frame seemed shrunken. She clutched Jennie’s dark-haired sisters to her as if they were the only things keeping her upright.

Jennie held her head high and looked into her mother’s eyes. Ada Lawrence spoke to her younger daughters and they immediately stood tall, though tears streaked down their faces. Jennie nodded. Her mother, holding a white handkerchief, reached out her hand in a futile gesture. That was the last Jennie saw of her family before Red Bull shoved her again, and she plunged face down onto the deck.