



Against the Tide

It was a dark, murky night in London. Fog wrapped around the city walls. It lay over rooftops and wound along dark alleyways, snaking through the city streets. Misting up along the River Thames like a long woollen blanket, it turned seeing men into blind ones beneath its thick cover. It was hard to see your hand in front of your face.

In one corner of the city, in a small, modest, white wooden house, a night watchman looked at himself in the mirror, adjusted his black worker's cap, and brushed the specks of dirt from his dark blue shirt. Just preparing for an evening of night watch, he gave a proud, contemptuous sniff at the mirror.

“Lawbreakers,” he scoffed peevishly at it, a ratty, malevolent gleam in his eye. “If I catch you,” he said angrily, shaking a long, gaunt finger for emphasis, “you’ll be sorry you were ever born. King Henry’s orders,” he added importantly.

Meanwhile, as he spoke, five miles away a boat with books came sliding smoothly up the river. Packed just that morning at the back of the print shop, stuffed in unmarked packing crates, the books now sat on the boat, jammed underneath and in between wooden boxes, cider barrels and an old, crusty, weatherbeaten wheel.

“Thought we were going to get caught last night,” one burly man with scraggly, unkempt red hair said nervously to the man next to him.



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"I feel like that every night," the second man's thick, husky voice replied, as he eyed the banks of the river uneasily.

"Gotta feed the wife and kids," the first said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

"Me neither," the second man agreed, nodding vigorously. "You can bet the king's gold on that."

The boat continued to creep stealthily along, slinking quietly past the dark alleyways and buildings that stacked up against the London banks of the River Thames.

In a short time, it glided through the darkness and slid smoothly by entrances to tunnels that ran underneath London Bridge. Things in the boat were very quiet now. This was dangerous country.

The night had a gloomy half-light, with very little moon. Clouds masked the sky. The city, too, seemed eerily quiet. A lone dog howled in the distance and what little moon there was now whisked behind the cloak of dark clouds.

Slap, slap. Tonight's only sound was the thin ripple of water made by the boat's smooth bow, and the clap of the River Thames beating back against its side.

"Quiet night tonight, eh?" the burly man whispered low to his friend.

"Too quiet," the other whispered back. "I don't like it."

"Shhhh," said a third, very nasty voice. "You'll get us all killed."

They saw the shoreline near. As the boat drew closer, all eyes on the boat now peered intently toward it. Hawk-like, they scanned up and down the long line of misty bank – the streets, the docks, the houses – for any sign of movement, for anything unusual or odd, for anything that smelled of the royal crown. Their cargo was due at port at the scheduled time and seemed like legitimate business.

But underneath cloth and rye and cornmeal and other merchant goods the smuggled books sat. Of course, barrels two and four housed only cloth and cornmeal, if the night watchman asked.

In most of the houses the curtains were drawn, but a light was on in one. From a second storey window, a woman peered out, her glance following the boat's sly movements with interest. The crew eyed one another nervously. Still, you couldn't let your nerves jangle at everything or you would never survive.

Finally the boat pulled up to port, long tendrils of seaweed still clinging to its wooden sides. The captain stepped off and looked around while men unpacked the crates and tried hard to look and act normal, whatever that meant.

Footsteps now approached, clomping along the wooden pier. One of the men started. Rats! It was the night watchman; he was out tonight. The shiphands had been hoping it would be quiet.

"Dark night, ain't she?" he said briskly, coming alongside one of the workers, his thin, gaunt face now yellow-grey in the fog. One worker, a huge man, with arms the size of iron posts, grunted. None of the workers looked at each other.

"So, what are we unloading here this evening?" the night watchman sniffed with an angry scowl. Leaning over the nearest crate, he drummed his fingers on it impatiently and deliberately. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. He had only one thing on his mind, and it wasn't chit-chat.

"Oh, you know, the usual," the huge man now replied, trying to sound very, very casual. "Just cloth and cornmeal. Would you like to take a look?" He was calling the night watchman's bluff, hoping it would set him off course. He tried not to blink too much. Blinking was a dead giveaway.

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"No, that's all right," the night watchman retorted curtly, toying with his victim. "I'm tired tonight..." Still, one could see, even by the moon's stinky light, his purpled face contorted, bulging. He stepped forward menacingly.

"You know," he said gleefully, "on second thought, I really should take a look. After all, the King has not been happy about books that have been coming into our country." He pronounced the word "happy" as if it were a disease. He had a cold, cruel voice. "And when the King's not happy," he paused then pronounced testily, "nobody's happy. Open her up," he ordered, pointing a lean, bony finger at the barrels.

"Sir?"

"Open her up, I said."

The shiphand's stomach lurched but his eyes remained calm. He felt around for the barrel with the wooden edge – barrel two – and prayed he had the right one.

Not a praying man by nature, the shiphand now crammed a hundred thousand prayers into those few long seconds. All eyes were riveted on him, frozen.

Gingerly and slowly, he pried open the crate's lid, using a long, thick iron bar. When he did so, cloth – cloth of every color and kind – rich, ruby-colored damasks, smooth deep plum velvets, and more ordinary white everyday woollens – began to flutter loosely in the night air. The shiphand breathed a sigh of relief inside. His heart thumped back into rhythm.

Outwardly, he never let on a thing. "You see? Just like I said," he groused convincingly back at the watchman. "Cloth. A late shipment. Have to keep the merchants happy, you know." He watched the night watchman's dark narrow eyes closely and spoke with an even, calm voice. "It's going to be all right," he kept telling himself.

“Hmmpf,” the night watchman grunted gruffly, rubbing the back of his neck, still looking suspiciously unhappy. “All right then, keep it moving. Bring it in,” he growled begrudgingly. He turned on his heel and stomped back down the street, the uneven slap of his footsteps receding into the darkness.

Meanwhile, underneath the cloth in other barrels the stowaway books lay undetected - safe for this evening. They had made it – this time, but the men’s future and the future of the books remained uncertain. Why? Why all the fuss about a few spindly little books? Because these books weren’t just any old books. They were the books of William Tyndale.

“I’m sure that they’d love to get their hands on him,” the burly shiphand said, only after the crates had been unloaded and the ship had pulled away from the shore.

“On who?” the other replied.

“William Tyndale.”

“Who’s he, anyway?”

“He’s the one who wrote and translated all these books. He must be pretty important if England is going to all this trouble to find him.”

“And pretty smart, if he can write this much.”

“Well, all I know is I’m just glad we kept our own skins tonight. I’m telling you, my heart can’t take much more of this. I really need to quit and become a barber or something..”

“I know what you mean.”