



ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

Prue Phillipson



ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

PRUE PHILLIPSON

KNOX ROBINSON
PUBLISHING
London • New York

KNOX ROBINSON PUBLISHING

1205 London Road
London SW16 4UY
&
244 5th Avenue, Suite 1861
New York, NY 10001

Knox Robinson Publishing is a specialist, independent publisher of historical fiction, historical romance and fantasy.

© Prue Phillipson 2012

The right of Prue Phillipson to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Knox Robinson Publishing, or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Knox Robinson Publishing, at the London address above.

www.knoxrobinsonpublishing.com

London

August, 1665

“Run home. You know the way.”

Benjamin Talbert nodded, standing still in the street below the window, not believing this was happening to him.

“Then go, go quickly.”

“You’re not coming?”

“I told you, I can’t leave him. He is too ill. I’ll try to be home before your father returns, but if I’m not –”

He heard a cry of “Lizzie” from the room behind her. She didn’t finish the sentence. She made a dismissive gesture and shut the window.

There were people in the narrow street but he was alone outside for the first time in his life. He looked up at the window which was on the upper storey that jutted out from the one below. He could stand underneath out of sight and wait for her but she could be hours. He could run home. He knew the way but if she was not home before his father there would be a mighty rumpus. He was tired of those. He lay in bed most nights with the pillow pressed to his ears.

He walked to the corner so that he was out of sight if she looked again. Then he stood still to let the

strangeness of the situation sink into his mind. It was true. He was at large in London.

Fear and excitement battled within him. He looked about. People hurried by, intent on their business. Then his eye fell on a huge red cross painted on a door on the other side of the street. The scrawled writing below said “Lord have mercy on us.”

Now fear was uppermost. London was in the grip of plague. His father had forbidden his mother to take him out anywhere. Instead when Pierre had not turned up to give his lesson she had brought him here to find out what the matter was.

“Perhaps he is ill,” she had said. “We will go and see.”

If Pierre has the plague, Benjamin reasoned, Mother will catch it too. Then I will have only Father who is too fond of beating me. Why should I go home?

He heard the rattling of wheels behind him. A cart drawn by a single horse was approaching. A clutch of boys was crowded on its flat top with an old man in the black coat of a clergyman driving it.

“There’s another one,” he exclaimed and drew rein alongside Ben.

“Why are you out alone, my son? Are you from a plague house? Are your parents dead? Where are you going?”

Benjamin wasn’t sure which question to answer.

“How old are you?”

“Nine.”

“Speak up then. We are going into the country. You can come if you have been left alone.”

“I am alone. I’ll come.”

There was a metal step by the front wheel. The clergyman reached out a hand and Benjamin scrambled up. He sat down among the boys who were a ragged bunch. He was conscious of his whole pair of breeches but they grinned at him and asked his name.

“Ben.”

This was something else he had never known, the company of other boys. It was a good feeling. There was a clergyman in charge and he could lose his identity in the group. They were escaping the plague. That was a miracle. As the horse trotted forward again he was only a little frightened by what he had done.

Bouncing along in the cart Ben began to think of consequences. Would his father find out the existence of Pierre? As far as he knew the only reason for his mother’s secrecy about him was his father’s opposition to him learning music. Ben never practised the harpsichord when his father was in the house but it was hard not to sing. If he did his father would appear at the door of his room.

“A pleasing sound but you cannot buy and sell with it. Leave that sort of thing to your mother.” It *was* a

pleasing sound. Ben astonished himself with the purity of his high notes and Pierre longed to see him join a choir and sing to an audience.

What would happen now? If Pierre died and his mother lived his father would be angry because she had sent him home alone. That would be his fault for escaping to the country. But it would also be her punishment for neglecting him for the last two years since Pierre had started his music lessons.

She was out most mornings, absent at the noon dinner hour and only returned with Pierre at two o'clock for his lesson. Ben then had to practise at the harpsichord while his mother took Pierre into another room. Sometimes after a long silence they would sing together which was a joy to listen to if he had not felt so lonely.

Before that, when he was little, he was happy. She spent the mornings teaching him to read and write and do simple arithmetic. On fine afternoons she took him out to places approved by his father. They walked to the river and he learnt the different types of sailing vessels, and they visited the great merchant houses and wandered round the gardens. She squeezed his hand and whispered, "Father says all these buildings with their marble pillars and statues come from trade, which is what he does all day and you are to do as you grow up. So he says, but you and I have other ideas. You can sing and draw like me."

As the cart crossed London Bridge Ben remembered his seventh birthday. His father had given him something in a frame to go on his bedroom wall. He was excited, hoping it was the portrait of his mother that a famous artist had painted. But when he unwrapped it he saw only writing.

“There you are, Benjamin,” his father said. “This is the start of your training for life. You can now read and write passably well so you will study informative books and copy out and learn what I prescribe for you. School would teach useless knowledge like Latin and Greek. *You* will learn what you need for the world of trade.” Here he pointed to long words on the chart which Ben was struggling to read. “Geography, mathematics, natural sciences, French, Dutch, Spanish. Now below, you see the plan of your life. At twelve you start running errands on the warehouse floor. At thirteen you serve the foreman at the docks. At fifteen you work with me in the office. These dates may change as your knowledge and abilities develop but before you are twenty you will be sent abroad to learn the markets and win new trade.”

Then he pointed out the ornamental sign at the foot of the chart and bending his stout body over Ben proclaimed, “Talbert and Son” in a triumphant voice. “That is what I will have on my warehouses for all to see, but not yet. That is your goal. I trust you will work

so well that if the Lord spares me till I am sixty I may be able to relinquish the business into your hands.”

Ben knew enough arithmetic at seven to work out that he would be twenty then. His mother had often told him that his father was forty when he was born. “And I was so young, Ben, at our marriage. My family suffered under Cromwell and I had to be married into wealth. Your father was a childless widower, desperate for an heir. But he wanted an ornament for his house too. Me. Young and lovely, he said, to sing to his guests, to paint pretty pictures to hang on his walls, so that he could attract important people.”

His father hung the chart on the wall by a gold chain.

“Look at it every morning. Your mother will listen to your lessons and see you are word perfect when I come home in the evening. There now, is it not a handsome thing? Not many boys in the city of London will receive such a present on their seventh birthday.”

He remembered saying, “Yes, Father, thank you, Father.”

When his father went to work that day his mother took him on her knee and said, “You and I are two birds in a gilded cage.” They had not long before moved into a fine house in London’s Strand where the best people were building. “People we need to know,” his father said.

“Where’s our cage?” he had asked her.

“Why, this beautiful house is our cage. But we have each other. And you know what birds in a cage do?”

“If they are happy they sing, Mamma.”

“We will sing and *make* ourselves happy.”

“And can I play on your harpsichord?”

“You shall. I will show you a simple tune now. But before your father comes home you must learn the capital cities of ten countries or he will beat you. That is one of your lessons. I will tell him you are too young to learn more than that in a day. We will play at ball too in the garden, so you grow strong and healthy. And when we are tired we’ll sit and draw flowers. You have music and art in you because you are my boy.”

Those were days of bliss but they only lasted for a short while. She decided he needed a music teacher and Pierre came. He liked Pierre at first. He was French and threw up his hands at a wrong note but he was never angry. But after two or three weeks his mother began to disappear for much of the day and she and Pierre left him the moment his hour’s lesson was over.

Lately his father had realised his mother no longer helped him with his studies and this was the main cause of their quarrels.

“You do not support me in the boy’s upbringing. You have nothing else to do with your time. What do you do all day?”

His mother had stuck her chin out at him.

“I oversee your household. I plan your dinner parties. I practise music to entertain your guests.”

What will they quarrel about now, Ben asked himself, if I never go back to them? He began to wonder what he would find at the end of this journey.

After the excitement of crossing London Bridge the boys were growing restless and starting to push each other about. Only he and a very small boy, called Tom, were left alone. The others evidently knew each other. Ben guessed Tom had been picked up in the street like himself. All he had on was a man’s threadbare shirt hanging to his knees, with the sleeves torn out, and tied with string round his waist. He shivered when a cloud passed over the August sun. Ben unfastened the short cloak he was wearing over his doublet and pulling Tom up close wrapped him in it.

The clergyman driver looked round. “Good lad.” He seemed to notice Ben’s clothes for the first time. “You are no stray. Surely you have a home and family?”

Ben shook his head. “I am quite alone, sir.”

The other boys were now fighting over three marbles which one of them had produced from his pocket.

“Come, come now,” said the clergyman. “We are not to quarrel but give God thanks he has saved us from the plague. You have all learnt some hymns since you came to my little school. Let us have one of your favourites.”

One of the bigger lads, perhaps twelve, Ben thought, broke into song in a very rough voice and the clergyman cried out, "Silence. That is a bawdy song picked up in the taverns." The boy rocked himself, laughing, and most of the others joined in.

Ben began, softly, to sing an *Ave Maria* that Pierre had taught him. Finding they all fell silent in astonishment he carried on confidently, enjoying listening to his own voice. People in the street looked up and stood still to listen as they passed. The clergyman peered round and smiled and nodded, obviously delighted at the effect he had produced on the boys. Ben had not been so happy for a long time. When he came to the end of the *Ave Maria* the boys started jabbering at once.

"How did he do that?" "Have you ever heard a sound like that before?" "Hey, Ben, do some more."

For the next few miles Ben sang to them and they curled up on the floor of the cart and lay still. Tom fell asleep against him and ended up with his head on Ben's knees.

The clergyman said, "You must rest your voice now, Ben. We have not much further to go. It is my younger brother Martin who has agreed to house my little school in one of his barns. You are gently born. Will you mind sleeping on a mattress filled with straw? Maybe just for a few nights till we find if anyone is missing you in

London, for I must go back there when I have delivered my little cargo. Tomorrow, for the poor horse must rest and my old bones too. My name is Joseph Woodhouse. Now you tell me about yourself. Someone has taught you to sing. I have not heard a boy in the cathedral sing as you did just now. Surely your singing teacher will miss you.”

“He has died of the plague,” Ben said. That at least must be true, he thought. Almost nobody recovers.

“Then you *did* have a singing teacher? You must have had servants also. These boys, I let them sleep in my church crypt as long as they learn to read and say their catechism. The rest of the time they roam the streets and earn a little, running errands or holding horses’ heads. But when the numbers of plague victims grew each week I decided they could help on this farm and learn skills in the good air of the open fields. But you —”

“That’s what I would like to do,” Ben said and he meant it with all his heart.

The drooping horse turned in at a gate. A bronzed shaggy-haired man came forward and greeted the clergyman.

“Why, Joseph, I did never see such a ragged bunch o’ lads. Save that one! Where have you picked *him* up?”

“In the street like the rest. He says he has been left alone. He wanted to come. But I intend to make

inquiries after his family when I am back at St Mary Magdalene. He sings like an angel. Wait till you hear him.”

“He can sing for his supper then. Maybes the village folk’ll pay a few coppers to hear him. It’ll take more than fresh air to feed and clothe this lot.”

“Can they get down then, Martin? They’re weary of sitting.”

A man had come out to unhitch the horse.

“Ay, but they’re not to rush about all over the place.” He lifted his voice. “Hey, you lads, you must do what you’re told. See that barn there. That’s where you’re to sleep. And d’you see the well and the pump. I want you all washed down before you go anywhere for you look the dirtiest, mangiest crew as ever I seen. I don’t want your London fleas in my farmhouse. When you’re clean you’ll be let into the kitchen where there’s a mighty fine supper preparing. My good wife will inspect you at the door before she lets you in. There’s a big fire as’ll dry you off. You go in, brother, and greet Meg, while I line these ragamuffins up at the pump.”

Ben helped little Tom down and took his hand to lead him to the pump.

“Not you, young sir,” the farmer said. “You can go into the kitchen now. We shan’t wet those fine clothes.”

Some of the other boys began jeering. The tall rough boy who had sung the bawdy song yelled, "Under the pump with him."

Tom clung to him and hid his face against Ben's chest.

Ben said, "Thank you, sir," to the farmer, "but I'll be washed with the rest."

He took off his doublet and shirt and laid them on the side of the cart. To be one of them he mustn't be different. If his singing set him apart it must be the only thing that did. He took off his breeches too. They would take a while to dry. He stood in his fine linen drawers which provoked wondering looks. So he pulled them off.

"You shall have these, Tom, to keep you warm when you're washed. Come on. Let's get under that nice clean water."

Some of the other boys began undressing while the most ragged were already submitting to the farmer's ministrations of throwing a bucket of water over them, clothes and all.

Ben gasped at the cold water. There had always been a servant to fetch a copper jug of warmed water at home. Home? Did he want to be home? No, if his mother cared more for Pierre and his father beat him when he couldn't understand percentages, then home was indeed a cage from which to escape.

He found a sunny corner of the farmyard in which to dry off before pulling his own drawers onto Tom so that they reached his armpits. He handed his doublet to another boy whose torn shirt had finally disintegrated in the scrum round the well.

He put on his shirt and breeches and, wrapping his cloak round Tom again, he took him inside where a woman, even larger than her husband, was ladling out broth from a cauldron on the fire. The Reverend Joseph Woodhouse was sitting at the bench down the centre of the farmhouse kitchen and Ben ventured to sit beside him.

“Sir, you said you’d make inquiries for my people back in London, but I want to stay here. I do have a few servants who were kind to me but no one else.”

The clergyman shook his head. “See now, Ben, I help these lads out of my own pocket or from kind people who collect money for my church.”

Ben grasped his meaning. “I’ll sing for my supper, like the other man said. I’ll earn enough to pay for my keep. I’ll work hard. I’m strong.”

“Nay, whatever you earned it could be thought we had abducted you. You must tell me your full name and where you live so I can take you back soon.”

“But the plague?”

“I’ll wager you live in a part of London that it’s not reached.”

Ben was in a panic now. “No, I live in a house near where you found me and there was a red cross in the next street.”

“There are no houses near there that have servants and music teachers.”

They were talking softly as the boys were silent while they ate. Little Tom was eating as if he hadn't been fed for days, dipping hunks of bread into his broth and cramming it into his mouth.

Ben began to see that he had made a mistake in talking to the clergyman. He was piling lie upon lie, as his mother did to his father when she told him she had been at home with Ben all day.

This Reverend is a good man, he reflected. I should have told him nothing at all. I should have pretended to be an idiot.

He bent his head over his bowl and made no reply to him.

The boys broke into chatter again now they were fed. Outside the window the sun dropped behind the stables and the farmyard was plunged into shadow. Meg, the farmer's wife, shooed them all out and into the barn. It was crammed to the roof with hay but there was a space inside the doorway where a dozen straw pallets had been flung down with sacks to cover themselves.

“It'll be dark soon,” she said. “So settle yourselves down. No candles are allowed, so stay where you are

till morning light. And tomorrow you work. If you know how to say prayers you can thank God for the Reverend Joseph who brought you here and for me and Martin what's got the feeding of you."

She briefly filled the doorway and then pushed the door to behind her. It was an imperfect fit and the boys scrambled for the furthest mattresses. Tom kept close to Ben and they ended up next to the door. Ben tucked his cloak round Tom's skinny body before pulling sacks over them both. Tom had not spoken one word since he had said his name but Ben loved sharing his bed. He slept alone at home and was often frightened in the big room in the Strand house. He had never been allowed a nanny, since his father said his mother filled that role, but she was not permitted to sleep in the room with him.

Now the big rough boy whose name, Ben had learnt, was Dick, shouted out, "Hey, Ben, sing to us."

Ben sang till all of them fell asleep.

Elizabeth Talbert woke up in the arms of Pierre. She opened her eyes and looked straight into his. He grinned.

"It wasn't the plague. I've sweated it out with you tucked up close."

She realised her shift in which she had lain down was damp. His shirt was soaking wet. She remembered

pulling his breeches off last night when he fell on the bed almost delirious with fever. She had piled every cover over him that was in his garret room and then climbed in beside him, wrapping herself round him. She had one thought only that if he died she would die with him.

He was alive. She was alive and somehow they must work out how they were to go on living. She looked up at the sloping window.

“It’s light! Dear God, I’ve never stayed away at night before. What can I do? He will kill me.”

“Then don’t go back to him. We go to France. *La belle France!* She adore lovers. We can sing and play and earn money. We will be happy.”

“But Ben!”

“He is a big boy now. He can be his father’s boy.”

“George can be cruel. If Ben doesn’t know his lessons he beats him.”

Pierre sat up and stripped off his wet shirt.

Tentatively he stood up and pulled off his drawers too.

“Wet, all wet,” he laughed wrapping a towel round him.

“I feel weak as water but I am cured. Do not be concerned for Ben. Boys are meant to be beaten. I was beaten for wrong notes so I learnt right ones. He has so lovely a voice he would earn us good money if we took him with us but George would come after us and have me arrested for kidnap.”

Elizabeth began to look in earnest at the thought of a new life with Pierre. Ben could not come. He would be sadly in the way. She loved him of course but the passion with which she loved Pierre had skewed her whole life. Pierre was all that George was not, young, slender, handsome with a beautiful moustache, amusing, tender. His singing moved her to ecstasy. She couldn't live without him.

She lay in the bed watching him dress himself in dry clothes. She wanted him now but she mustn't tax his strength.

"I daren't go home," she said aloud.

Pierre looked round at her. "You still have to dress. We must leave here and find somewhere else till we can take passage for France."

She sat up. "But you should rest a few days."

"Don't you see? Ben will tell his father where we are. How can he hold out? I can't think why you brought him yesterday. We have always kept this place secret."

"I was frightened. When you were twenty minutes late I knew something was wrong. I dare not order the carriage. I thought I might need Ben to go for a physician. I just took his hand and we almost ran here. But when I saw you I thought it was too late. I just wanted us to die together."

“What about your maid Ada and the other servants? They must know what has been going on. They will be forced to tell. Come Lizzie, hurry.”

Have I burnt my boats then, she asked herself. If I cannot go home I will have to do without Ada and all my wardrobe of clothes. We will be poor and London society will for ever be a closed door to me. No matter what goes on at court, a lady who leaves husband and child and elopes with a music teacher cannot be received back by her former acquaintances.

She slid her feet out of bed and stood irresolute. “I have no clean shift. I have no spare clothes at all.”

“Wear what you wore yesterday. See, the sun is shining. That shift will dry on you. Hurry. Have you money?”

She was picking up her stays, helplessly. He snatched her dress from the chair where she had draped it and, feeling in the pocket that hung from the waistband, he drew out her purse.

“There is only silver here. Not even one sovereign.”

“I didn’t stop to look. Have *you* no money?”

“Some but barely enough to get us to France. I owe the rent here. We must slip out silently if the landlord is still at home.”

She held out her hands. “I can sell my rings. They will fetch enough for new clothes and our passage. Help me into my stays.”

He did this often and was adept at it. But when it was done and she was stepping into her petticoat it was he who hesitated. "Perhaps we are being too hasty. If Ben told his father where to find you why was he not here last night? If he is of so ferocious a temper as you say he would not stay a moment. Maybe the boy did *not* tell. You could go home and pretend you stayed at the house of an acquaintance because you saw the dead-cart passing and were afraid."

"But why would I send Ben home alone?"

"Ah, I see what has happened. Ben has not admitted he went out at all. He is a smart boy. He knows his father never lets him out alone so he can say *you* went out he knew not where. Your servants have proved discreet so far. Maybe they just shook their heads and proclaimed total ignorance. Come, that is the best explanation. So go home. George will be angry that you sent him no message last night but that is a slight thing. You can brave that." He looked at the clock on his mantelshelf. "You say he is so regular in his habits, will he not have gone to his office by now?"

"Not knowing where I am? He might. I am no more than a necessary object in his life. But our plan to go to France?"

"It must be done with more forethought. You must get money together and a portmanteau packed and do it when he is at work. Use a hackney so that the servants

do not know your destination. We will meet, but not here. I will not come to your house again. Tell Ben whatever you like. Let him think I died.” He put her short cloak round her shoulders and propelled her gently to the door.

“Go now before too many people are about. My landlord sleeps late abed. He is at the tavern every night and would not know you were here.” He opened the door to the stairway.

She stood in the opening. “Must I go? If it is not as you say – but even if it is – he will be very angry.”

“And you will be very penitent. All life is topsy-turvy with this wretched plague. I am surprised he keeps his regular hours to work. He should have fled to the country with you. Many have.”

“But how will I communicate with you?”

“Do not try. Let us say that I will wait at the south end of London Bridge for you at ten o’clock one week from today. You will tell your hackney cab to stop when you see me. I will get in and we will take the cab to the staging inn for Dover. Bring all the money and jewels you can.”

She took a deep breath. “I will do it if I am still living after another week with that monster.” She flung her arms round him and kissed him passionately.

Ben had breakfasted with the boys who were full of high spirits after their nights' sleep and full bellies. He himself had woken often with the noise of scampering mice but feeling Tom close by him he had slept again. He was anxious now when he saw the horse and cart brought out and the Reverend Joseph Woodhouse approaching him.

"Now, Ben, your family name if you please and your address."

Ben clamped his lips together.

"Oh come, Ben, I am sure you have been brought up to know right from wrong, truth from lies. You cannot build your future life on lies and concealment. And I – I could be accused of abducting you for a reward. Indeed I would take you back with me now but for the plague."

Ben looked away across the fields and made no answer.

The Reverend Woodhouse shook his head sadly, turned and climbed onto the driver's seat in the cart and drove out of the gate leaving Ben looking after him and biting his lip. Had he been brought up not to lie? His mother deceived his father all the time.

Dick thumped him on the back. "Farmer Jo says you and I can watch the cows being milked and try it ourselves if we like."

"Oh yes, I'll try. I'll try anything." He realised Tom was standing at his side. When they went into the

cowshed Tom followed, though he was plainly terrified of the cows. He held Ben's hand till Farmer Jo said Ben could try milking. Then he ran outside and stood pressed to the doorpost watching with eyes and mouth agape.

"Ay," said Farmer Jo. "You have wise hands."

Ben forgot his worries and was happy again.

Elizabeth scurried past the house with the red cross and seeing a hackney cab at the stand on the main thoroughfare she waved to it and with a quaking heart gave her address in the Strand.

George must have seen from the front windows the cab arriving. He was at the door when she had paid the man and made her way, her knees positively trembling, up the short gravelled drive from the gate.

His brows were one bristling line but he was not looking at *her*. His eyes were focused behind her. Then as she came close they switched to her and his face was a mask of rage.

"Where is Benjamin?"

Her whole body shook. She felt the blood drain from her face. "Benjamin? Is he not here?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. Ada was hovering at the foot of the stairs. He waved a dismissive arm at her and pushed Elizabeth into his study which

led off the square hallway. He sat her down in a chair by his desk and stood over her.

“Where have you left him?”

“But – but he should be here.”

“He has not been here since yesterday afternoon. You took him somewhere and stayed away all night without a word.”

She was sick to the stomach. Ben had never reached home. They had not been prepared for this, she and Pierre. She was sunk in guilt. How had she dared to send a young boy home through London streets? He could have been seized, murdered.

She felt a violent slap across her face.

“Answer me, woman. What have you done with him?”

“Nothing. We went for a little walk. I met Lady Cranshaw who asked me to drink this new drink, tea, with her so I told Ben to run home.”

“Alone?”

“It wasn’t far.”

Another sharp slap. Her eyes watered. “The Cranshaws are out of town. You are lying to me.” He hauled her to her feet. “We will see if you lie to a Constable. I was about to send Peter for one believing you and Ben had come to some harm when I saw you coming. If you say you don’t know where Ben is then I

will send Peter now, but you had better tell me the whole truth.”

Her cheeks were stinging. Pierre’s touch was always gentle. How could she possibly tell George the whole truth?

“It was a mistake,” she mumbled. “Not Cranshaw. I know they fled the plague. It was Mistress Crawley. ‘Cr’, you know. An easy slip of the tongue.”

This time he thwacked her on the side of the head. “Go to your room. When the Constable comes I will send for you if I want you.”

She got up, wobbling from the blow, tears of pain and anger running down her cheeks.

When she had crept to the door he cried, “Stay. Tell me where you were when you told Ben to go home and what time it was. That is what the Constable will need to know. I will tell him you are too distressed to be questioned further. The distress is for yourself, I know. You cannot care for the boy or you wouldn’t have abandoned him.”

She sobbed now. “I do, I love him. It was thoughtless. I am so sorry.”

“Where? When?” He advanced his face close to hers.

She swallowed, gasping between sobs. “Near Saint Paul’s about three in the afternoon.”

“Saint Paul’s! That was a long way. He would get lost!” He lifted his hand again and she fled from the

room. She heard him moan, "If she has lost me my son I can never forgive her." Then she heard him shout for Peter.

The Reverend Joseph Woodhouse had returned the cart he had borrowed and was heading to his house for the late dinner his wife would have kept for him when a Constable called to him.

"Reverend sir, we are making some inquiries about a lost boy."

Twenty minutes later, without his dinner, Joseph Woodhouse walked up the drive of the house in the Strand. He could imagine Ben in this place. It had to be his Ben but the Constable had said the boy had two parents. What sinister mystery lurked here that Ben should have denied them both?

He asked for Mr Talbert and a footman conducted him to a study off the hall and introduced him with the words, "Reverend Woodhouse, sir. He believes he has news of Master Benjamin."

A portly man, his eyes red and his periwig awry, leapt up and held out both his hands to clasp Joseph's.

"Is he alive? Oh sir, is he living?"

"Pray sir, be calm. If it is the same boy he is alive and well."

"Thank God. Oh bless you sir. But you say – if it is the same boy? Tell me all you know. Pray sit, sit. You

shall have some refreshment in a moment but as you can see I am desperate for news. He has never been missing before.”

Joseph began warily. “A Constable told me that a Benjamin Talbert aged nine disappeared yesterday near Saint Paul’s about three in the afternoon.”

“Yes, yes, yes, several constables have been sent about the City on my instructions.”

“Well, then, sir, I have to say that I was taking my homeless boys whom I lodge in the crypt of my church out to my brother in the country. I found another, a little ragged boy –”

“Not *my* son, sir!”

“No no, but I had taken him up as lost and strayed when I saw another on his own, standing aimlessly looking about him. And oh sir, forgive me, I saw only that it was a lost boy. I had not observed his clothes. My eyes are weak and the street was shadowed from the overhanging storeys –”

“Man, tell the tale, was it he?”

“I cannot be sure. I questioned him. All he would say was that he was nine years old and quite alone.”

“He is nine. He is.”

“But then he said everyone was dead of the plague, even his music teacher! No, that I learnt later.”

The gentleman's face fell. "*Music* teacher. Ben has no music teacher." He clasped his head in his hands. "It is not he."

"Wait sir, be not hasty. He said his name was Ben and nine years old but all else that he said I later feared was lies. Let me ask you, does your son sing like an angel?"

Mr Talbert looked up and hope gleamed in his eyes. "He can make a pleasing noise. I do not encourage it because his destiny does not lie in such things. He is to inherit my business. If you live in the City you must know of Talbert's the Merchants. My great warehouses by the river?"

"Indeed sir, I do." Joseph was rapidly building a picture in his mind of more than warehouses. "Is your wife able to come and speak with me?"

Having asked the question he studied the broad, hard-featured face before him as the lips pursed and uneasiness crept into the eyes.

"Not while there is still any doubt. She is too upset. You spoke of a brother in the country. Where, where? Is that where this Ben who sings could be now?"

"He is. I told him we were going to the country to escape the plague and if he was alone did he wish to come? I have to say he was eager. Later, when I realised by his dress and his speech that he was of a good family, he did not want to return. I could get

nothing from him of any name but Ben. But pray, Mr Talbert sir, have you no portrait of your son?"

"Only before he was breeched. My wife was painted and I thought I might have Benjamin done when he was twelve and coming into the business with me."

Twelve! Joseph exclaimed inwardly. "Describe him then, sir."

Again Mr Talbert seemed to hesitate. "About so high, brown hair, brown eyes – I think. Just an ordinary boy."

He doesn't look at his son, Joseph thought. He sees only a budding merchant.

"I am almost certain he is your son. If I cannot see your wife may I see her portrait?"

Mr Talbert summoned the footman and the portrait was fetched.

Joseph smiled. "She is very lovely and Ben is like her. I have no doubt now, sir."

"Why would he say we were dead? Why would he speak of a music teacher?"

"I mentioned a music teacher first as I recall because of his beautiful singing and the sacred music that he sang. He just dismissed him as dead of the plague." Mr Talbert, he was thinking, you may be a mature man of business but you are an infant in human relations. "I can give you the name of my brother's farm. It is in the county of Surrey, not far in miles, but difficult to find

among winding by-ways. It would be better if I took you there.”

Mr Talbert jumped up again and summoned the footman. “Order my carriage and bring refreshments to this gentleman here. I know not the hour.” He drew out a large gold pocket watch. “Why, it is long past noon. Has cook kept dinner? Let something quick be served at once. I will just tell my wife our plans.”

“And will she not come with us to Surrey?” Joseph asked.

But Mr Talbert answered nothing to that. He begged him to wait a moment and then disappeared up the stairs.

He had left the study door ajar and Joseph soon heard hysterical cries and almost immediately a young woman came scrambling down the stairs so fast she almost fell the last few steps. He rose as she came running in to him.

“You have found him. He is alive! My husband says I am too excited and must not come but I will. I cannot possibly stay at home. It was my fault he got lost. Thank you a thousand times for finding him.”

Mr Talbert descended the stairs with a thunderous face. “You cannot come, Elizabeth. Mr Woodhouse and I will take some refreshment while the carriage is preparing and then we will leave.”

“I have had no dinner. I was too wretched to eat. I *will* be calm. I will say not a word the whole way but you must let me come.”

“Sir,” Joseph said, “I believe Ben will come quietly when he sees how much you and his mother have sorrowed for him and how eagerly you have come.”

“Why did he say we had died of the plague? Yes, Elizabeth, that is what he told this gentleman. Well, you may come if you are quiet.”

A maid servant came with a little bob to say there were refreshments in the dining-room and how many places should she lay.

“Three, Sally, if you please,” Mistress Talbert said and led the way in.

After that she said nothing.

Joseph watched them at the hastily-taken meal. He could sense the secrets between them. He decided not to mention the words ‘music teacher’ again.

She was not as beautiful as her portrait. Her face was blotchy with red marks and her hair dishevelled.

Her husband set down his glass of wine and said, “We will give you five minutes to make yourself presentable.” She ran from the room. “She is always the perfect hostess. You must excuse her. She was frightened by hearing the dead cart yesterday and stayed the night at an acquaintance’s. I expect the Constable told you the circumstances but to send the boy home was inexcusa-

ble. Women have little judgment however if they are in a panic. It is well they do not have the conduct of serious affairs in their hands.”

To this Joseph made no reply. His own wife was a genius at managing their finances and the charity work of the church. She had accepted unperturbed the news that he might well be going back to his brother's that day and she must deal with any callers herself.

Mistress Talbert descended in a clean gown and shawl and with a feathered hat perched on her combed ringlets. Something had covered the blotches on her face. She must have a very efficient lady's maid, he decided. She was carrying a small travelling bag which her husband grabbed and peered into.

He grunted, “I see, a change of clothes for Ben.” That seemed to meet with his approval and she took her place in the coach with her pretty mouth firmly closed and her eyes demurely cast down.

Inside, thought Joseph, her emotions are in a seething pot but she is keeping the lid on it.

Ben had had an interesting morning cleaning out the pigsty with Tom. Tom was terrified of the pigs as he had been of the cows but they were driven into another enclosure while Ben and Tom shovelled out the straw and dung into a wheelbarrow for Dick, the strongest, to spread it where Farmer Martin told him. Tom had been

given a small shovel but even that he struggled with. His arms were like sticks. Half way through the morning he said, "I can't lift it." They were the first words he had said and Ben was delighted.

He took the shovel from Tom's hands and showed him how to put half the amount on. "There, no more than that. When you've had a good dinner you'll be stronger."

At noon Meg came to the kitchen door and rang a bell. No one needed calling twice.

"Hands and faces at the pump first and you take your dinner outside to eat. You can't wash that stench off your clothes and I don't want it in here."

The dinner consisted of great hunks of bread, a lump of cheese each and an apple from the orchard, freshly picked by some of the other boys who had gleefully climbed the trees and only just been stopped from hurling apples at each other in fun.

There was small beer for the older boys and milk for the youngest.

After an afternoon of work Farmer Jo said he could find nothing more to keep their hands busy and they could go into the fallow field and play with a blown-up bladder. They were soon in teams, vying with each other. Tom never left Ben's side and though he didn't kick the bladder very often he was seen to be laughing when he missed it and Ben caught him up and whirled

him round and he laughed some more. Some of the boys ended up fighting and Ben kept out of that.

Dick shouted out, "Come on in Ben, wrestle with me." Ben began to see there was no viciousness in it, just rough and tumble, so he had a tussle with Dick who threw him easily but then showed him how to trip up an opponent and throw him.

When they were exhausted they sat round in a circle at the corner of the fallow field near the main gate and begged Ben to sing to them. He found he knew some of the hymn tunes that Reverend Woodhouse had taught them and they joined in after he had sung a verse. Then he sang some old songs like *Greensleeves* that he had learnt on the harpsichord. I'll never play that again, he thought with a tiny pang of regret, if I stay here for ever. It felt like forever that he had been here.

"Hey," Dick shouted, "grand people coming!"

They all looked round at the carriage approaching gingerly on the rough farm track. Ben's voice died away.

"Hide me," he cried. "They've come for me."

The boys made a ring round him.

"Who are they?" "We won't let them take you." "Is it the law?"

Ben peeped between two tousled heads. It must be his father and he would be beaten as he had never been beaten before. But the carriage had barely stopped just

outside the gate when the door nearest to him opened and his mother sprang out.

She wasn't dead. She hadn't caught the plague from Pierre. Pierre was dead but she was alive.

She must already have spotted the group of boys in the field beyond the hedge row because she pushed passed the farmhand who had come to open the gate and ran through the farmyard calling, "Ben, Ben are you there?"

He jumped up, leapt over little Tom, and ran to the gap in the hedgerow through which she could see him.

"Mother!"

Their arms were round each other and they were both sobbing.

Then he heard his father's voice and his stomach went cold.

"Look at the state of him. Elizabeth, you are ruining that gown."

The Reverend Woodhouse appeared behind his father.

"I take it that *is* your son, sir."

"It is."

And then Ben saw the strangest thing. His father's face was creasing and crumpling. It was frightening. He didn't seem to know where to hide what was happening to his face. He put up his hands to cover it but odd noises came out. Now his mother had seen it too. She took Ben's hand and took a step towards him.

“George!”

He dropped his hands and burst out, “I thought I had lost my son.”

He was crying.

Ben was appalled. “No, I’m here, Father.”

His father shook away the tears and took hold of his shoulders and then quickly released him. “You stink, boy.”

“It was the pigsty.”

“You’ve put me through hell, boy, don’t you know? What were you running away from? What were you thinking of?” He seemed to be gasping for breath and then he was shaking his head and turning to the clergyman and exclaiming, “My God, sir, I should throw him in the pigsty and let the beasts maul him. Eh!”

This was even more extraordinary. His father was laughing. Ben couldn’t think he had ever seen it happen. He heard it sometimes when his father had men drinking with him in his study. But this was different. It followed tears.

He saw Reverend Woodhouse shaking him by the hand. “I thank God, Mr Talbert, that I see you all three together.”

Farmer Martin and Meg had now approached to greet their visitors. They took his father in to taste a mug of their home-brewed beer.

Reverend Woodhouse turned to Ben.

“I have some bones to pick with you, lad. Do you remember I said you cannot build your life on lies?”

“Yes, sir, I’m sorry sir.” Ben looked up at his mother who was still clasping his hand. “Did Pierre die?” he said softly.

She darted a glance at Reverend Woodhouse who had certainly heard that.

“Will I have no more music lessons?” Ben persisted.

She gulped a little and her eyes were full of distress. “I think Pierre is dead.”

Ben looked up at the old clergyman’s face. “I said he was dead, didn’t I?”

But Reverend Woodhouse wasn’t looking at him. He had taken his mother’s other hand and pressed it gently. “Let us hear no more of a music teacher – but there is a beautiful choir for boys in Saint Paul’s Cathedral.”

“Is there?” She was distracted. “Ben, your father wept.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Nay,” said Reverend Woodhouse. “Be glad, both of you.”

She glanced at him, still bewildered, and then back at Ben. “I must get you into some clean clothes.”

Ben felt a hand tug at his filthy shirt hanging out over his breeches.

“Oh Mother,” he cried, “I can’t leave Tom. He’s my friend.”

She looked down at Tom's upturned face, his eyes large and hopeful.

"You *could* love him, Mistress Talbert," Reverend Woodhouse said.

She dropped Ben's hand and went to the kitchen door. He heard her say, in a high, nervous voice, "George, Ben can't come without his friend."

His father appeared, wiping froth from his mouth, and studied Tom. Ben thought, he is seeing him as an errand boy.

"Clean him up," was all he said and then, "When we have guests in future, Ben, you will sing to them. I wager a young man who sings can still learn business. Elizabeth, I hear there is a hostelry in the village. We will go home now but if the plague does not abate soon I will send you and Ben here till London is safe. The Cranfords and the Crawleys are all doing it, are they not?" His big brows came together, but Ben had not forgotten his tears.

A week later a tall, moustachioed figure waited with a travelling bag at the south end of London Bridge. Several hackney cabs passed. At eleven o'clock he shrugged his shoulders, gazed out over the Thames and smiled ruefully before he picked up his bag and made his way to the stage for Dover.

Visit our website to download more free historical fiction, historical romance and fantasy short stories by our authors. Please feel free to pass this short story on to friends and family.

www.knoxrobinsonpublishing.com

About the Author

Prue was born and reared in Newcastle upon Tyne in northern England. Prue enjoyed writing historical novels from an early age. She trained as a teacher, taught full time for four years and was a freelance writer during this time. She took a correspondence course in creative writing and honed her craft. She is married and has reared five children. Her current occupation is writing articles, short stories and novels.