



Folly

marthe jocelyn

Chapter Sampler

***Our greatest folly can
lead to our greatest love.***



Mary Finn:

country girl, maid to a lord in Victorian London

Caden Tucker:

liar, scoundrel, and heart's delight

James Nelligan:

*six-year-old foster child,
tossed into a herd of boys*

***Three fates will intertwine in FOLLY,
a new novel from Marthe Jocelyn.***



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MARY 1893



Telling

I began exceeding ignorant, apart from what a girl can learn through family mayhem, a dead mother, a grim step-mother, and a sorrowful parting from home. But none of that is useful when it comes to being a servant, is it? And nothing to ready me either, for the other surprises a girl might stumble over. Let no one doubt that I've learned my lesson and plenty more besides.

Imagine me back then, not knowing how silverware is to be laid out on a table, nor how to swill a stone floor or slice up the oddness of a pineapple; I did not know that tossing old tea leaves on the carpet works wonders toward collecting up the dust, nor how bluing keeps your white things white; I did not know how to write a letter and I had never had one come for me; I did not know

what a man and a girl might do on a gravestone when they are crazy for each other; I did not know the heart were like a china teacup hanging in the cupboard from a single hook, that it could chip and crack and finally smash to the ground under a boot heel. And I did not know that even smithereens could reassemble into a heart. I did not know any of this.

This leads to that, Mam used to say. The trick is knowing where *this* begins and which *that* it might be leading to.

The kiss may not have been the start of things, but it led straight on to the rest of it, me without the slightest idea—well, maybe the slightest—of where it could end up. But one thing is certain: I were as ready for that first kiss as a girl can be. My hair were clean, my neck were washed, and my heart were banging away like a baby's fist on a pile of dirt.

That's jumping ahead of things, so I'll go back and tell what I do know—before and after the kiss, since we won't be hearing anything from Mr. Caden Tucker, will we?

Caden Tucker—scoundrel, braggart, and heart's delight. He'll never be seen again, not ever, so don't you waste your time. The officers claimed they couldn't find him and neither could I, for all I looked till my bosom would split with holding the ache. He'd have nothing to tell you that I can't, that I promise. He were

cocky, but he weren't one to rely on for a true story, as it turned out.

I'll confess there were a part of me that shone bright in the sunshine cast by Caden Tucker as it never did elsewhere. A part of me that were *me*, the true Mary Finn, when I were walking out with him.

MARY 1876



Telling About Home in Pinchbeck, Lincolnshire

Our dad had his vegetables, grown for market or trade, or else he planted others' gardens. Winter times, when the ground were sleeping, he'd cut firewood or dig privies or whatever were asked for. Mam were kept busy with us, and the house, but we all helped, as a family does, you know. Though I suppose you're not familiar with the workings of a family.

We went each week to St. Bartholomew's, me taking the boys out to the graveyard when the sermon got them twitching.

"How many now?" I'd ask, and they'd tear up and down the rows, tapping the tops of each stone, shouting out the numbers, not thinking about Sunday or stomping on bones under the grass. But then it were Mam who

changed the count and the game weren't so merry anymore.

Mam had four of us before birthing Nan, fifth and last. Mam died a week later, leaving me, just turned thirteen, to be mother as best I could. Until our dad went and found that Margaret Huckle a year after and put her in Mam's bed, thinking he were giving us a present somehow. Really it were like drowning nettles in the bottom of our tea mugs so every time we swallowed there were a sore patch, a blister, hurting deep inside in a way that couldn't be soothed.

That were the kind of talk that would have got me thrashed if anyone heard it, so it stayed quiet, right?

It were me, then Thomas, Davy, Small John, and the baby. Tall John Finn being our dad, meaning the one named for him could only be small.

Now, come Sundays, Dad said Thomas and Davy were big enough to stay plunked in the pew with him, so it'd be Small John and Nan in the churchyard with me. John were always coughing, not eager to run around. I devised other games for him. We picked out the letters on the stones, me knowing how to show him that much.

"Here's an A," he'd shout. "I found a B!" And after a while he made sense of the words.

"Crick!" he'd cry, or "M for Mason!" and I'd know he were right because Walter Crick were dead from pneumonia and Pauline Mason were the butcher's wife who died from a lump in her neck that stopped her swallowing.

Mam's stone were small next to some of the others, about the size of the church Bible, dawn-gray granite with pink flecks, traded for a year of potatoes.

Mary Ann Boothby Finn,

it said.

Wife of John

A Mother on Earth

An Angel in Heaven

b. 1843 d. 1876

Our dad, knowing Mam's favorites, planted bluebells and lily-of-the-valley. Come springtime they flourished so lush and pretty, even after that Margaret Huckle were thistling about at home, that I know he kept tending Mam's stone, though he never said.

I didn't go there often, not wanting to look sappy, talking to ghosts. I were leery too, of telling Mam only our miseries, so I'd wait till I had other news.

"Thomas lost another tooth," I'd say. "He looks a right fiend, pushing his tongue through the front, with his eye-balls crossed over. And Davy, he might be one of those Chinese monkeys that came with the fair, the way he jumps on chairs and swings about on gates. . . ."

Then I'd come to Small John and the worries would start. "He coughs, Mam, all night sometimes, though I

make a warm garlic plaster like you showed me. I don't know if . . . well, I just don't."

My hands would go numb with me praying so hard she'd answer. I'd take a two-minute scolding if it meant she'd be there for two minutes. But the swallows would swoop, and the sun would sink, and the evening would sound hollow as an old bucket. The weight of things were on me alone. Along with our dad, of course.

I wonder now what you'd think of him, he not being like any man you've come across here.

I were little mother and he were keeping us fed and covered, strapping the boys when need be, but also telling stories at bedtime. During the day he were a grumbler, barely having enough words to finish out a sentence. But evenings, the boys would call, "Tell us one!" and in he'd come, and set at the end of the mat, with all of us tumbled together in the dark.

"It were a wild night," he'd start in a whisper meant to give us the shivers. "Rain so fierce it came down sideways. Lightning crackled like fire in a giant's grate, and thunder snapped. . . . There were such a blowing and a dashing of the rain, those poor travelers huddled like lost sheep beneath the lowest branches of an ancient evergreen. . . ." He'd let us picture the turbulent heavens, and the shadowy figures, and the damp needles scenting the air with earth and pine.

"Go on," we'd say. "Who were they?"

"Well," he might say. "It were the young Lord Thomas

Fortune and his servant Davy the Eager." Or, another time, "It were a boy named Bold Johnny with his magic puppy, Nana." Small John would push his best two fingers into his mouth with a happy smack, finally the hero.

Or, "It were the peasant lass, Mary, caught out in the storm, ever waiting for her father, lost while struggling home from a great battle against the Viking marauders. . . ."

Even if we'd had a nursery like I saw later in London for Master Sebastian, even if we'd had a whole bed each, we were used to each other's poky elbows and chill wee toes. We liked it best listening, and then sleeping, in a heap.

We'd have been content, going along like that, even without Mam. It were the arrival of that Margaret Huckle that were the next blow, like a tree through the roof.

I don't know how long our dad had known her or where they'd first met, sly-wise, but how I heard were like this:

"Mary." The boys were down at night and I were trying to mend Davy's shirt where the pig-nosed bully Ben Crick had torn it in a tussle at school.

"Yes, Dad." I bit off the thread.

"I've something to say will change things. Ease things for you."

I looked up, catching a whiff of peculiar.

"Since your mam died," he said, "you've been mother to the baby and Small John. And I thank you for it."

A shiver tickled the back of my neck, telling me *Watch out!* I'd never been thanked yet.

"But it's been more than a little girl should do," he said. "You've already got smudging under those bonny green eyes . . ." Him calling me *bonny*? Now my middle were apple jelly inside.

"I've found a woman who will be my wife."

"Your wife?" I repeated to be certain.

"She's a widow, losing her cottage near the Tumney farm where I go Thursdays." As if that explained. "She'll be a mother too," he said.

"But I'm doing it all just fine," I said. "It were hard when I were thirteen. But now I'm older. I'm better at it. I'll be fifteen next birthday. You don't have to fetch a new mother for us, not now." I could hear my voice go squeaking up. "We don't need a wife."

He patted my hand, lying there, holding the boy's shirt. "Her name is Margaret. Margaret Huckle. She's from over Spalding way. She's been a widow now for about a year. Her husband died, oh, March last, and she needs us as much as we need her."

"We don't need—"

"Think of Nan," he said.

"That's who . . . It's Nan, I'm . . . Nan's got *me*." I tapped my chest. "Me. Since she can't have Mam." But his finger went up, raised like an axe and swung to shush me.

I shook out Davy's shirt, tugged on the collar.

"She's going to live here?"

"I'll bring her for supper one day this week. She can see her new house and meet you all. We'll get ourselves married Sunday next, and have it done."

“Sunday next? But that’s—” I stopped.

Our dad stood up. “It’s your task to make her welcome. I’m off for my pipe.” And out he went.

It were none of my business, I knew that. It were our dad, not us, who’d be sleeping next to her. But there were a lump in my belly like a week of cold porridge.

Wednesday came along and Dad said, “I’ve asked Dick Crebb for an old hen. If you’ll make your cock-a-leekie, that’d be a fine way to show Margaret how we’ve been looking after things up until now. Tonight’s the night.”

Milk slopped over the lip of the pitcher while I poured into the boys’ bowls.

“Spill,” said Small John.

“Dress the chicken nice and make those potatoes with the crispy bits. She’ll like those.”

Small John’s fingers stole to his mouth.

“Yes, Dad.” I nodded while I were thinking up curse words.

So I went by Crebbs’ after I’d walked the big boys to the schoolhouse, with Nan in my arms as always and Small John’s fist dragging on my skirt. We collected the hen and I were relieved that Mrs. Crebb had plucked it.

“Maybe she’ll be a jolly one,” I whispered to Nan. “She doesn’t have to be a disappointment. Maybe she’ll know how to sew right, or make junket pudding that firms up proper. Maybe she’ll sing, or say stories we haven’t heard.”

Maybe she'll be a mother, I thought, which only seems daft now. But not knowing yet, I could still wish. Maybe she'd help with the chores of having five children and there'd be a sliver of each day all my own.

Ha. Not ever did that happen until I were as alone as a soul can be and there's a lesson for you. Don't go wishing for what you know nothing about.

JAMES 1884



Home with the Peeveys

James was sick to be going. His whole six years of life he'd been waiting; they'd *all* been waiting, years. That was what happened to foster children. They had to go back when they stopped being little. But he didn't like it, not one bitty bit, however much they said it would be a new *adventure*. James didn't like adventures. Not then, and not later when he'd had a few.

"You'll be an explorer," they told him, but he knew that explorers met bugs and beasts and cannibals, so they couldn't trick James.

He didn't like new, he liked the same.

He liked the same he could keep account of.

ITEMS GOING WITH HIM:

- 1 shirt
(He did have a second shirt, but Mama Peevey thought it wouldn't be wanted, so it was left in Kent.)
- 1 pair of trousers
- 1 pair of shoes
- A cap
(He'd be wearing all that, so did it count as being taken?)
- A Bible *(from the Reverend Kelly, that he'd never looked at, but he carried it along in case the Good Lord was watching. Maybe a Bible would show them at the Foundling that he was a good and honest boy, though he was pretty certain it was a sin to fib about being honest. He'd felt the strap from Mister P. often enough for what was called devilment, and he knew he fell short of being good, no matter what Mama Peevey said.)*
- 2 whistles, cut from willow by Mister's hand
- 2 pencils from the shop and an account book, Mister knowing he liked to keep account of things
- 2 peppermint sticks from the shop, his favorite. Mama Peevey slipped him a peppermint or a butterscotch on a rainy day. "Sugar is always sweet," she'd say. "But 'tis sweeter when the sky holds trouble." He remembered that.

CHILDREN OF JOAN PEEVEY AND
HER HUSBAND, MISTER FRANK PEEVEY:

Arthur Francis Peevey, who died as a baby
Himself, James Nelligan
Elizabeth Ellen Peevey, called Lizzy
Rose Frey

Joan Peevey never claimed to be his mother. She was nursing Arthur and had milk to spare, so she took James on from the Foundling Hospital and nursed him too. Lucky thing, she always said, that the left-behind babies had women like Mama Peevey who could feed more than one. Then she bore Lizzy, her own, and fetched Rose, a foundling, because she'd shown the hospital she was good at fostering.

"The good Lord saw fit to take Arthur before he'd got his teeth, but that only left more room in my heart for you, didn't it, lovey?" she said to James. "When you try me like this, I tell the Lord you're being naughty enough for two boys. But really, you mean to be good, don't you, Jamie? Aren't you a good boy?"

This was after she'd cut off Rosie's hair because of him. He'd got boiled sweets from the shop and tucked them into Rosie's braids, to see if the colors would glimmer through like jewels. But they got stuck, right close to her scalp. Mama had tried with vinegar, but finally had to snip them out, Rose howling till her face went purple.

"Aren't you my good boy, James?"

Nodding didn't make it so.

"It's only hair!" he bellowed at Rose. "It'll grow again!"

He liked the shop best, where they played, and where he did his letters and his counting. It wasn't a real shop, like the butcher or Gibson's Bakery. There wasn't an awning, or a proper window. Mister Peevey put up shelves in the front room of the cottage, banging all up and down the walls,

and shouting *Damn Jesus* when he banged himself. The coin box sat on a counter next to the stack of brown paper and twine for wrapping up packages.

Mister noticed early that James liked to count and to put the rows straight, so he set him a task each day, keeping records of the stock.

WHAT WAS IN THE SHOP:

- *Barrels of pickles and brown sugar and flour and rice*
- *Bottles of vinegar, bottles of bumpy relish, called "gentleman's," black sauce with too many letters called "wooster," red sauce called "piquant," and so many others, all different colors, Mister said to pour on flavor when the meat was boiled tasteless*
- *Matches, candles, lanterns that need dusting, but only by Mama P., her not trusting children with glass*
- *Rope, knives, hammers, and mallets—the villain's cupboard, James called it; no swords, but several boxes of poison for killing rats*
- *Ink, nibs, pencils, sealing wax, twine, and all what was needed for accounts or school or packages*
- *Sewing needles, spools of thread in every color, buttons, in sets of five or eight, stitched to painted cards that had gilt titles like: JUST THE THING! OR LADIES' LOVELIES.*
- *Pins for sewing and pins for hair, nets and clasps and curved combs made from the shells of tortoises. James hated those combs, thinking of naked tortoises, until one day he sneaked them out and snapped each of them in two. He hid the pieces in the dirt next to the garden steps.*

- *Packets and packets of biscuits, oh, and the best thing! A whole row of huge glass jars, with lids too heavy for James to shift by himself.*

INSIDE THE JARS:

- *Peppermint sticks*
- *Toffees wrapped in gilt twists*
- *Sugar mice*
- *Licorice sticks, like rods of tar*
- *Boiled sweets, like lumps of ruby or emerald in a pirate's cache*

SOME FIRST WORDS

- *Peek Frean Ginger Crisps*
- *Hill, Evans & Co. Malt Vinegar*
- *Original and Genuine Lea & Perrins'*
- *Fry's Cocoa*
- *Epps's Cocoa*
- *Mooney's Biscuits*

Mama Peevey sat on the low stool by the door, just inside for rainy days, out on the step when the day was bright. James leaned against her knee for years, it seemed, with Toby Dog leaning on him, until Lizzy and then Rose took his place.

"Halloo there!" Mama would call to every passerby, and always get a call back. She'd chuckle, and pat a handkerchief against her neck, or her bosom, where he stared in wonder at the size of it. Nothing like his own skimpy chest, rib bones announcing themselves like so many tin soldiers.

James felt his insides wailing, preparing to leave the cottage and shop. She wasn't his born-from mother, but she was the only mother he'd ever known.

*WHAT THE PEEVEYS HAD BEEN TELLING
JAMES ALL ALONG:*

- *In London every building is as big as a church.*
- *In London James will eat meat every day.*
- *In London James will have a bed all to hisself.*
- *In London James will have new shoes every year and brass buttons on his jacket.*
- *In London there is a queen. (Lizzy wanted more than anything to meet Queen Victoria and be adopted as a princess, so it was her who added that bit.)*

They'd had a hundred goodbyes and boo-hoos all week—at breakfast, dinner, suppertime, prayer time, and every minute in between. One or the other of them would be leaking about how it was the last bun he'd be eating out of that oven or the last taste of potato soup sprinkled with chives from Mama's garden or the last time there'd be a boy in the house, how it'd be them still together and him far away . . . one mournful reminder after the next until he put fingers into his ears and held his breath, hoping his eyeballs would pop out.

Finally, Mama Peevey said he'd done his last chore. He was to take Toby Dog outside and say goodbye to Martin. James was more than six but his friend Martin was nearly eight, so he was bigger. He lived over the road

with two brothers even bigger than him. He had a real mother, and a stepfather named Bart who Martin called Fart but only with his brothers and James. Having all those biggers around, Martin thought he knew everything.

Lizzy had been stuck on James like a shadow all day, so she was following close when Martin said, "Hey, last chance to hit the cabbages." They stood side by side at the edge of the porch to see who could pee furthest into the garden, and it was Martin, like always, being bigger.

"That's nasty," said Lizzy.

She wouldn't let Rose come outside to look. There was a struggle with the door and fingers got pinched and more whimpering and what Mister called bellyaching. Martin and James sneaked off and sat on crates next to the shed, whistling some, but quiet after a bit, watching evening coming. The sky was smudged with pink between the gray clouds.

"Last night I listened," said Martin. "When I was in bed. My mother said something maybe you want to know."

"You shouldn't listen to her," James told him. "Your mother is an old gossip, my mother says."

"She's not your mother."

"I know that."

"She had another boy."

"I know that. Is that your secret? I know all about Arthur. He died when we were babies. Turned blue, he did."

"There's a part you don't know." Martin picked up a stick.

"What?"

"When Arthur died, Mrs. Peevey was brokenhearted, my mother said. Cracked right in two, my mother said. She was going to pretend to the London hospital that it was you who died."

"What?" said James. "What do you mean?"

"She wanted to tell them it was the orphan baby who died. So she could keep you. She was that miserable, losing Arthur. She just wanted to have you for always, and to tell them a lie."

James's head was wobbly as if he'd been smacked with Mister's big hand. He sat very still, taking in a long breath in case a sob burped out.

"So, you know why she didn't?" Martin was digging with the end of his stick, spraying dirt over their toes.

"Stop that," James told him, shaking his foot. "Why didn't she?"

"Mister Peevey said no. He said the money was needed."

"The money?"

"They get money for you. Don't you know anything? They get *allowance*, my mother calls it. To pay for what you eat and your clothes." He poked the stick into another hole, grinding it in.

James looked down at his trousers, patched with Mama Peevey's tidy stitches. "But now I'm going anyhow," he said. "Tomorrow."

"That's right," said Martin. "Now they lose you *and* the money. But this way, at least, they had *allowance* till you were six."

"But . . ." James rubbed a new worn spot above his knee. "The other way they could have kept me forever, saying I was Arthur."

"Your dad wanted the money."

"He's not my dad."

"Yeah, my mother says Lord knows who your dad might be, but at least he must have been a handsome blighter. She was blabbing all this to my auntie Molly last night when I was in my bed. But then they talked about baking raisin bread, so I went to sleep."

In the morning, James tried to chew a hunk of bread while Mama Peevey dressed him as if it were Sunday. Around his neck she hung the cord with a band dangling from it, his number pressed deep into the tin: 847229. Rose had one too, but she wouldn't be needing it for nearly four years.

Mama Peevey looked at James and tilted her head and clucked her tongue. "Ah, the curls on you," she said. "You should have been a girl. With those eyelashes? You'll be a heartbreaker, mark my words."

He didn't think being a girl was anything to wish for and a heartbreaker didn't sound so excellent either, so he wasn't surprised when Mister stuck his nose in.

"What does he want to be a pretty boy for? He'll be better off knowing how to fight."

"He's only six!" she said.

"More than six," said James.

"Six?" said Mister. "And never had a bloody nose?"

"Don't you dare!" said Mama Peevey, jumping up in a hurry. And Mister laughed, pretending to land his fist on James.

"Never had a black eye? That'll change at the big school in London, you mark my words. You pick your friends with care up there," said Mister. "You'll want to be giving black eyes, not getting them." And out he went to watch for the cart.

"Make me a nice cup of tea, will you, Jamie?" said Mama Peevey. "It'll be the last I get till the girls are growed two or three years."

They sat on the bench by the table, waiting for the kettle to boil, her stroking James's hair with her fingers, counting the minutes of his very last hour.

"I want to stay with you," he told her.

"I've got nothing pretty to say," she whispered. "No way to fix things." Tears rolled across her freckled cheeks. James hid his face in her lap so he couldn't see. He couldn't ask her, either, about what Martin had said.

Then Rose woke up, just what they hadn't wanted, and started her bleary-eyed mewling. Mister scooped her up, pressing her mouth to his shoulder. He pushed Mama and James out into the street where the cart was waiting, sent from the Foundling to bring them in. James winged a pebble toward Martin's window but it didn't get there, just fell with a *thip* in the dust.

They were three to start: the driver, Mama Peevey, and James. They picked up more foundlings along the way, but it was only them at dawn, peering back from the joggling seat, waving goodbye to Rose and Mister till they blurred with the road.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jocelyn, Marthe.

Folly / Marthe Jocelyn. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: In a parallel narrative set in late nineteenth-century England, teenaged country girl Mary Finn relates the unhappy conclusion to her experiences as a young servant in an aristocratic London household while, years later, young James Nelligan describes how he comes to leave his beloved foster family to live and be educated at London's famous Foundling Hospital.

ISBN 978-0-385-73846-0 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-385-90731-6

(lib. bdg. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-375-89451-0 (e-book) —

ISBN 978-0-375-85543-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) [1. Foundlings—Fiction.

2. Household employees—Fiction. 3. Foundling Hospital (London, England)—Fiction. 4. London (England)—History—19th century—Fiction. 5. Great Britain—History—Victoria, 1837–1901—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.J579Fo 2010

[Fic]—dc22

2009023116

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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