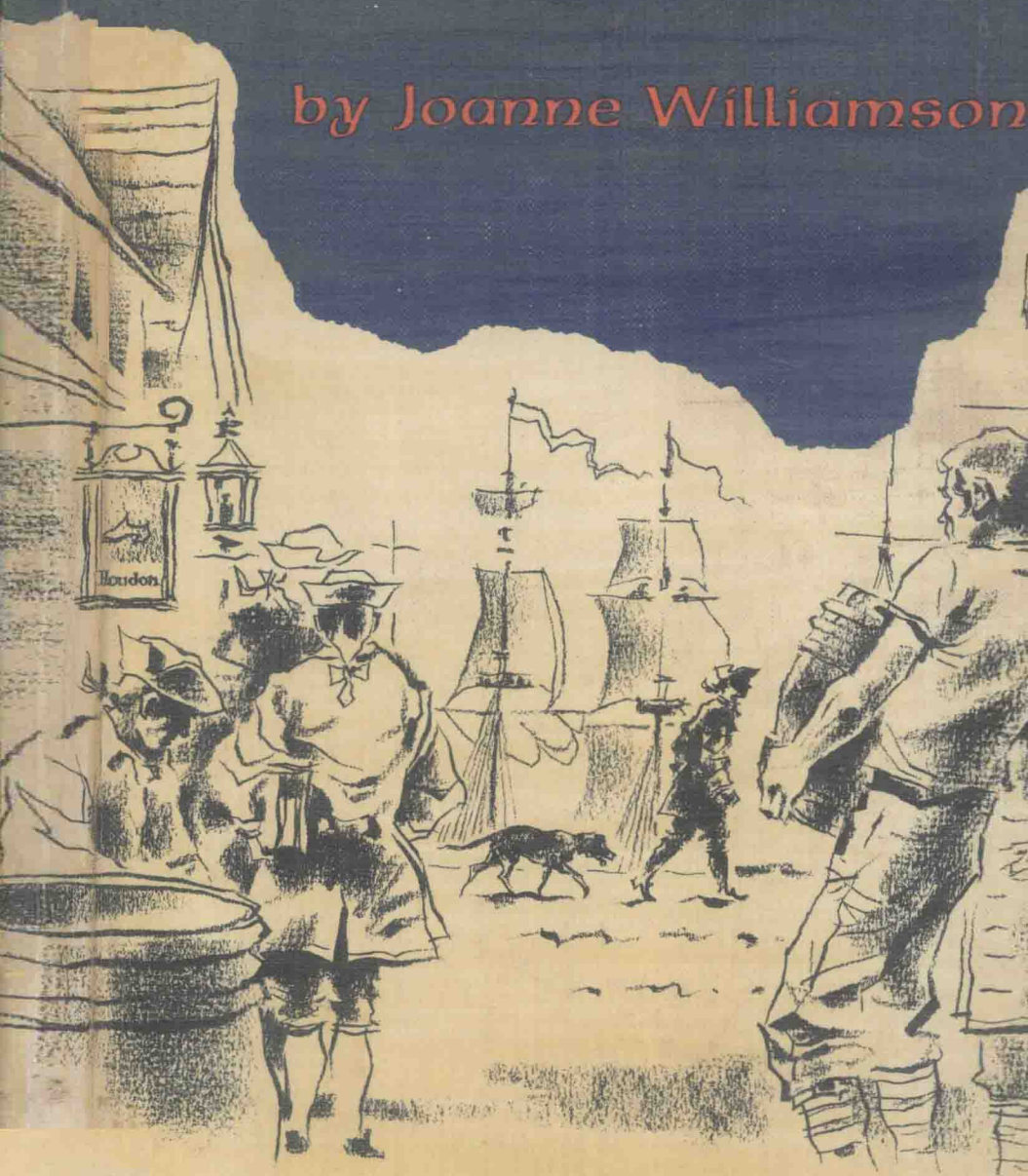


The Glorious Conspiracy

by Joanne Williamson



The GLORIOUS CONSPIRACY

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Joanne S. Williamson

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Fiction

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TO MY NEPHEW,
Barry Carson Williamson

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The Glorious Conspiracy

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I

Gutter Brat

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I AM Benjamin Brown, an American citizen. I was born in England in the year 1780, raised in the city of Liverpool, and like most children I was born one of the poor. In those days, that meant much more than being a little hungry all of the time and very hungry a great deal of the time. It meant minding one's tongue and being very careful to step into the gutter at the approach of a gentleman in a wig, and being looked upon with suspicion if, somehow, one managed to learn to read and write.

Nevertheless, I did learn to read. My mother died when I was born and my father disappeared one day, never to be heard of again; but I had a young aunt named Betty who lived with my grandfather and me in the loft of Granddad's cobbler shop on Pool Lane. It was she who taught me. There were learned people in our family, such as could

spell out words and cipher what was owed them. And my father must have been well taught and even had some money in his pocket at one time, for he left a store of books in the loft—*Gulliver's Travels*, *Pamela*, and one or two others. Aunt Betty taught me from them, improving herself at the same time. And Granddad did not object, for he had once heard the great John Wesley preach, and decided it was no sin after all for the poor to improve their minds.

All this was before I reached the age of seven. For Granddad believed a boy of seven in my station of life should set out to earn his keep.

"There are many who do it long before," he said, "and not many with the time to set up for a scholar like the young gentleman here."

He might have taken me on as an apprentice in the cobbler's trade, but there was not enough business. Aunt Bet with her home-sewing could keep herself, but that was all. She was twenty now and ought to have been married, but had fancied none of the pasty-faced young chandlers and butchers or the scurvy-ridden sailor boys about. People laughed at her and called her "the Princess."

She had high hopes of life, though, and now said to my grandfather, "Being a scholar will do Benjy no harm, Dad. We can bind him to a merchant. Maybe even Mr. Tarleton, the Colonel's brother, himself. They want boys who can read and write for 'prentices in such places." There was a dreamy look in her eyes and I knew she was thinking of her favorite story, the one about the poor boy who became Lord Mayor of London. "Benjy might become a gentleman and marry a merchant's daughter. Who knows?"

"Stow it, Bet, and get to work!" My granddad was

suddenly very angry. He said some things about new-fangled ideas and getting above oneself only leading to trouble, and I hid out of the way. In such a mood he was likely to give me a blow on the ear.

Granddad had his eye on a place for a fishmonger's boy down by the Custom House dock.

"I don't like the look of that Mr. Tully," said Aunt Bet. "He'd abuse Benjy for sure."

"Tom Tully's a tartar, but he's fair," said Granddad. "A few licks'll do Benjy no harm, and he'd best get used to hard work. It's what he was put here for."

But it turned out that the villainous-looking Mr. Tully had another boy in mind, so my grandfather gave Aunt Betty leave to try the merchants. Only she must take me around herself. *He* would have naught to do with it.

I had never had to do with gentlefolk before. The customers who came to the cobbler shop were low fellows, so Aunt Betty said, pale and pockmarked and porridge nourished. I had seen little, close to, of big, straight men with color in their faces and plenty of good, solid flesh on their bones, who lived on meat and garden stuffs and plenty of puddings and milk.

Because I had had so little to do with them, I had not expected how they would receive us. Aunt Bet had impressed on me to be mightily respectful, and this I was prepared to be. But I had thought that they might smile upon me, as even Mr. Tully might have done, and say, "Likely little lad," or, "What, read and write? He's clever, ain't he?" But this was not so.

We went first to the great establishment of Mr. Tarleton, of the greatest family in Liverpool—he whose brother had put the fear of the King into the American rebels over

the sea; and it was not his fault if England lost the war after all. A high-collared young clerk with shining brown hair came to meet us.

"What's your business, girl?" he said, frowning down his nose at Aunt Betty, though she was twenty and he could not have been more than fifteen.

Aunt Betty's hand in mine was cold and I could hear her voice tremble.

"If you please, sir, if there might be an opening . . . a young boy wanting to be 'prenticed . . . he can read and cipher . . ."

The boy looked at me as if he didn't believe Aunt Bet and as if I had been lying too.

"There's no place for him here," he said.

Aunt Bet's voice was bolder, but I thought I would cry out, she squeezed my hand so tight.

"Perhaps the master knows . . ."

"The master! The master's busy, he don't see such as you. Be off, young woman, we're occupied here. There's a grogshop down the street where you both might apply."

He slammed the big door shut behind us and I thought I could hear the other clerks laughing. So we never even got to see Mr. Tarleton. But Aunt Bet was not ready to admit defeat.

She never could have done it for herself, but for me she was always ready to persevere. So we went to two other merchants. The first one would see us no more than Mr. Tarleton had done, though his office and his clerks weren't nearly so imposing. The second one we caught coming out the door, a big, heavy man with a powdered wig. He looked at me once and then quickly away as if he didn't like what he saw and said: "Read and write? That's not

likely to be of use to you people. Shouldn't he be taught to make rope?"

We came at last to a draper's establishment, prosperous enough looking though not very grand.

We stood in the street while my aunt straightened her shawl and tried to keep her chin from trembling.

"Aunt Bet," I said. "Aunt Bet, I won't mind learning to make rope or be a tavern boy." I heard my voice quiver.

"Benjy," said Aunt Betty in a strange, soft voice, "if you start sniveling now, I will slap you so hard you will never forget it."

She had spoken to me that way one or two times before, so I knew she meant what she said. So I did not snivel and we went in to where Mr. Coffin himself, of Coffin's Cloth Goods, was straightening some shelves, his clerk being off on an errand.

Mr. Coffin didn't look away from me, but stared right at me with bright little black eyes while Aunt Bet counted off the things I could do. When she was finished he kept on staring, with the little smile he had always on his mouth.

"Well," he said at last. "I might take on a boy. Shilling a week. Live at home. Get his own meals and clothes. Come in tomorrow at five."

When Aunt Bet got her breath she said, "Shouldn't there be a paper? 'Prentice's articles? He can sign his name."

Mr. Coffin shrugged. "I'll draw somewhat up. Be off, now. I'm occupied."

That night Aunt Betty gave me a special treat for supper—some of the bacon boiled with greens that she had made for Granddad's midday meal, and which he wouldn't get again for a week. She had saved it out for me for a

celebration if we met with success, and to console me if we were disappointed. I had never tasted the likes of that before, my great treat being the pot liquor from such a dish to soak my bread and potatoes in once a week. And yet, in the middle of it, I suddenly burst into tears and could eat no more.

"Benjy, Benjy!" cried Aunt Bet. "What's to do?"

My teeth were chattering. "I'm afeared, Aunt Bet," I sobbed. "I don't want to go to work early and be away from you so long, and I'm afeared of that Mr. Coffin and all of them grand folk."

"But Benjy," said Aunt Bet, her eyes full of tears, "every boy your age in your station of life must earn his keep, and most do it sooner than you. And grand folk are not to be frightened of. It's a great thing for such as you to be taken in by them."

"They don't like me," I whispered. "That Mr. Coffin don't like me."

"He'll like you if you work hard and keep to your place."

She was holding me in her arms and stroking my hair; and I hung tight around her and cried till I felt warm and comfortable again and could even eat more of the bacon and greens. After all, I was not being sent away. I would be home at night.

Promptly at five, I was at Coffin's Cloth Goods. I waited a long time before I pushed open the door. I wanted to run away but had no place to run. Granddad would beat me for sure if I went home, and then just send me back again.

Mr. Coffin was not there. He didn't get in till seven. A young man was there, Mr. Coffin's clerk. He was standing at a high desk in a cubbyhole in a corner.

"New boy?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir" I answered. The young man had a nice voice, not like Granddad's or the sailors' or Mr. Coffin's. He didn't look away from me; but when he looked at me, he didn't even seem to see me.

"Sweep up," he said. "There's a broom in the back."

I knew how to sweep up and where brooms were generally kept. I started slowly toward it.

"Stop," said the young man. "Here's a thing for you."

There was a paper on his desk that he was holding toward me.

"Move along, move along," he said. "Brown, you call yourself, don't you?"

I nodded, though I had never called myself Brown. Only Benjamin or Ben or Benjy.

"I've written your name—see, here—and you must make a cross below it. Can you hold a pen?"

"I can sign it my own self," I said. "I can read what the writin' says, too."

But I made the cross on the paper as he had told me, so as not to get into trouble.

"You can read what the writin' says?" said the young man, and I knew he was making fun of me. "Well, then, Brown, you had better do so."

I spelled it out slowly. The writing was hard. It said that I was bound to Mr. Josiah Coffin for seven years, with consent of my aunt, was to go nowhere without my master's consent, nor to contract matrimony within this term, etc. And that Mr. Coffin—well, nowhere could I find what Mr. Coffin's duties were to me, though Aunt Bet and Granddad both had said that a master always had such written down in articles of indenture.

"Cobblers' boys learn to read," said Mr. Coffin's clerk

sourly. "Wigmakers and mechanics buy parks and manors and set themselves up as gentlemen. What is the world coming to?" He went back to his ledgers on the high-topped desk and I set about sweeping up and polishing the brass.

Promptly at seven Mr. Coffin came in. He didn't speak to his clerk, just hung up his hat and looked about the place. He ran his finger over a bit of shelving and found some dust. He picked up his walking stick, took hold of me and gave me a cut that took my breath away. He turned to the clerk.

"You," he said. "Keep a better watch on him after this. If you can't look after the shop when I ain't about, I'll bring in one as can."

The young man gave him a look that would have given me a turn if I had been the one to get it. But Mr. Coffin just turned away with a strange, triumphant little smile.

Customers began to come in—ladies in chintzes and cottons and some grand ones in silks, with many petticoats and big hats and tight waists and a great deal of hair, some of it white with powder. I tied up parcels and fetched bundles for them to their carriages, though they were much better able to do it than I was, and sometimes they gave me a copper. Some of them, though, had little black boys along with them, so I didn't have to do it, but neither did I get the tip.

Mr. Coffin didn't admire the ladies. He spoke as little to them as possible, and looked disapprovingly at their ribbons, most of which he himself had doubtless sold them. But the young clerk—whose name, I discovered, was Mr. Frampton—stretched his mouth at them and looked boldly into their eyes and was always very polite. He had fair hair and blue eyes and a high color in his

cheeks and was very handsome. He came from Devonshire and had been nourished on rich cream, and though he had no fortune, his grandfather had been the third son of a lord. This was why Mr. Coffin kept him on, and took such pleasure in abusing him.

I admired him greatly and stayed by him as much as I could, though he had never a kind word for me and called me nothing but dull and stupid and a rickety-legged cobbler's boy. Still, he never beat me and had a nice voice and the way he talked reminded me of the books I was beginning to forget how to read.

Mr. Coffin had a daughter named Deborah, who was sixteen. I thought her awfully beautiful. She had dark hair and eyes and was a little plump, and wore beautiful dresses to show off her figure. She had been to a school for young ladies and spoke differently from her father, more like Mr. Frampton. She came in pretty often and Mr. Frampton always talked to her. I supposed he must be in love with her. Anyone would be, I thought. Then too, he sometimes sent her notes. He had me deliver them to a fine house with a fine garden and a handsome wall. A black man that the Coffins had bought off one of the slavers that docked in Liverpool kept the door for them; and the first day I came, looked at me with fear and suspicion, telling me I must use the side door and that "miss" was not at home to me.

"Missis say no mahn come in front door but with fine clothes," he told me. But the young lady heard voices and ran down the stairs, rustling in silk, and promised the black man a beating for trying to keep the note from her. The look of fear in his eyes chilled me, but I forgot it soon, she looked so pretty.

I carried a number of notes after that. She would break

the seals and read them, twisting her locket with a hand as plump and white as a milk pudding with little pink nails and dimples where bones should have been. One of her friends was usually there and would squeal:

“Is it from *him*, Debby?”

And they would whisper and hiss at each other while I looked about me at things I had never seen before—polished wooden floors with rugs on them, over there a room just to sit in and over there one just to eat in; and up those pretty stairs with a rail to keep folk from falling off I knew were rooms just for sleeping—just one or two people at a time! From somewhere in back floated a faint smell, some kind of meat, and I bet that everyone in the family would get a bit, even the children if there were any. I would swallow uncomfortably. I was always hungry but only at times like this was it really painful to me.

It was all this that brought me to my first disaster. I came in one morning at five as usual and found not only Mr. Frampton there, but Mr. Coffin as well. They were standing face to face across Mr. Frampton’s high desk and didn’t even notice that I had come in.

“Married!” Mr. Coffin was saying. He had a stunned look on his face and, for the first time since I had known him, no little smile.

“And surely,” said Mr. Frampton, “you will want your daughter to continue in the style that becomes her, with a house and a carriage and money of her own.”

“A partnership for you,” said Mr. Coffin, “and a house on Castle Street? You come high for a young fool as can’t hardly spell his own name.”

“Come now,” said Mr. Frampton. “It’s my name, not my spelling you’ve been paying for all along—the pri-