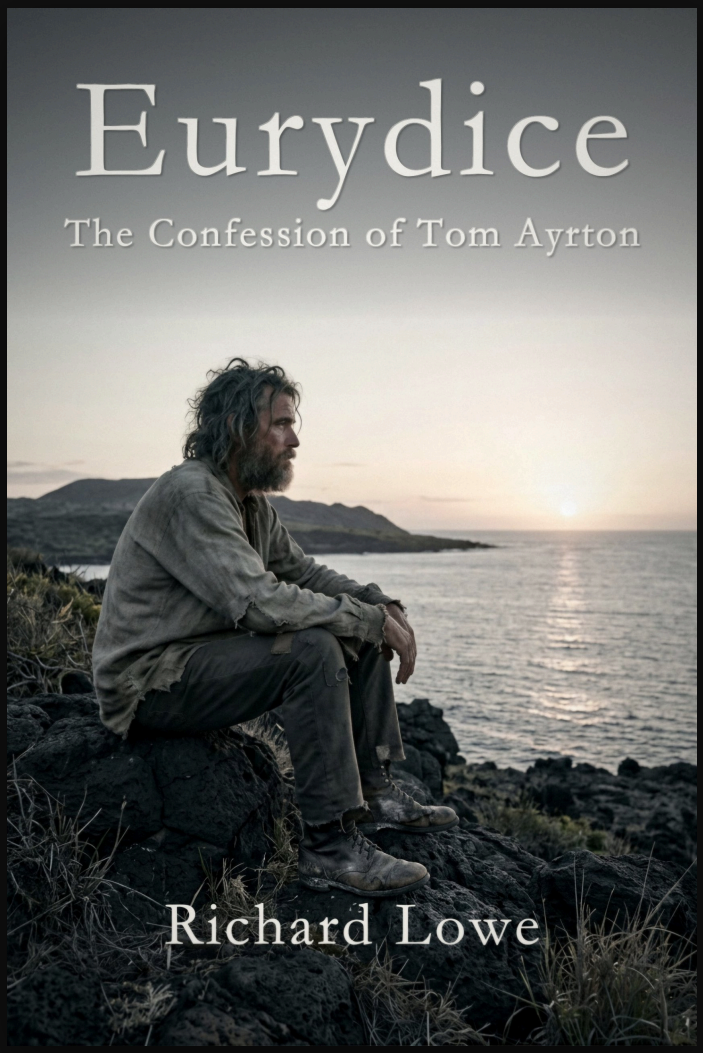
A FREE COMPANION TO EURYDICE

Carried by Hand

Bristol to London, 1843: a new husband packs his wife's china like cargo, and she carries one cup on her knees.



RICHARD LOWE

Carried by Hand

Her mother wrapped each piece in a page of the Bristol Mercury and handed it to me without looking at it. I set the pieces in the straw the way you set casks in a hold, the heavy ones low, nothing touching anything it could knock against. The crate stood in the yard behind her parents' house with its lid propped against the wall, and the yard smelled of the harbor at low water, of mud and tar and the malt from the brewery up the hill.

Twelve plates. Twelve saucers. A jug, a sugar bowl with its lid, and eleven cups, all white, with a blue pattern around the rim that looked like a rope worked into a chain.

Her mother had given the set to Eurydice on the morning of the wedding, three weeks before. It had stood on a shelf in her mother's front room since then, because we had nowhere of our own to put it. Now we had a house in Marylebone that neither of us had seen, and a railway that would take us there in a day, and a crate.

"The twelfth cup," her mother said.

She was holding it in both hands. It was the same as the others. White, the blue chain around the rim, a small chip on the foot where it had been set down hard at some point in its life.

I had a half hitch in my hands that was not lying the way I wanted, and I was looking at the half hitch. Her mother talked. She talked about her own mother, and a morning, and a sill, and I heard the shape of it the way you hear rain on a deck below you: there, steady, not addressed to you.

I have tried many times since to get back what she said in that yard. I have the yard. I have the straw dust on my sleeves and the brewery smell and the gulls working the mud below the wall, and a dog barking two gardens over at nothing.

I do not have the words. I was looking at a knot.

Eurydice came out of the house with her shawl over her arm. She took the cup from her mother, turned it once in the light, and wrapped it in the shawl. Then she put the shawl in her own bag, the carpet bag with the broken clasp she had carried everywhere since before I knew her.

"It will ride better in the straw," I said. "I have stowed glass before."

"It will ride with me," she said.

Her mother looked at the crate. I looked at the crate. The crate was a good crate and the straw was clean and the eleven cups were bedded in it so that you could have rolled it down the hill and heard nothing, and I said so.

"Don't roll it down the hill," her mother said, and went back inside.

* * *

Her father was on the quay at the bottom of the hill in the last of the light, with his hands in his coat and his back to the city. He watched the water. He had watched that water for forty years, and he watched it the way a man watches a dog he does not entirely trust.

I stood beside him. He did not look round.

"The glass is falling," he said. "You'll have rain by Bath."

"And London?"

"London does as it likes," he said, and worked his jaw. "I've never been, but I hear it's large."

Behind us a cart came down the hill too fast with a load of barrel staves, and the carter swore at the horse, and the horse ignored him. Out on the water a lighter was being poled across toward the far

quay with a boy in the bow holding a lantern that was not yet needed. The air smelled of coal smoke and the river.

"I'll not be at the station," her father said.

I had expected this, and it caught me all the same.

"She'll want you there."

"She'll want a good many things." He took one hand out of his coat and pointed down the harbor toward the gorge, where the river came in between the cliffs. "There's a brig to come up on the morning tide, and somebody has to bring her up."

"Somebody else could bring her up."

He turned his head then and looked at me. He had pale eyes in a face the weather had been working on for a long time, and the eyes were the only part of the face that the weather had not got to.

"Aye," he said. "Somebody else could." He looked back at the water.

We stood. The lighter reached the far quay and the boy jumped ashore with a line and made it fast to a bollard, badly. I watched him do it badly and wanted to go across and do it properly, and did not, because it was not my line and it was not my quay.

"I looked at your crate," her father said. "When I came up at midday. You'd gone in for your dinner."

"It's a good crate."

"It's a good crate, and you stow like a man who's been to sea." He spat into the water. "Glass in straw isn't casks in a hold, though, and a hold doesn't get dropped off the back of a cart by a boy who's thinking about his supper."

"The knots will hold."

"I don't doubt your knots," he said. "They'll hold the lid on all the way to London, and they'll hold it on while the boy drops it. Knots don't stop a boy."

I did not answer. I was twenty-five and I had been at sea since I was not much more than a boy myself, and I knew how to stow a crate, and I was not going to stand on a quay in Bristol and be told otherwise by a man who had never been further east than Bath.

He knew all of that. I could see him know it.

"There's a thing I'll tell you," he said, "and then I'll go home to my supper, and you'll go up to yours, and in the morning you'll be gone."

I waited.

"She'll ask you for a thing once," he said, watching the water. "She'll ask you plain, the one time, and then she'll wait. She'll not ask twice, and she'll not stop waiting, either."

The light was going off the water now, the color draining out of it from the far side first. The boy on the far quay had lit his lantern.

"Her mother's the same, and her grandmother before her," her father said. "Mind you hear it the first time."

"I'll mind it."

"You'll say so," he said. There was no unkindness in it. He said it the way he had said the glass is falling.

He took his hands out of his coat and put one of them on my shoulder, briefly, the way you test whether a spar is sound. Then he went up the hill without saying goodnight.

I stood on the quay until the lantern on the far side was the only light on the water. The boy's line had come loose from the bollard and the lighter was drifting off a yard at a time, and nobody had

noticed yet.

* * *

The station at Temple Meads had a timber roof like the inside of a church turned to a different use, and the noise under it was the noise of a church on fire. Steam, iron, porters shouting.

A goods engine somewhere out of sight was letting off pressure in long shrieks that made the horses in the yard outside throw their heads.

The crate had gone the afternoon before. I had taken it to the goods shed myself on a hired cart and watched two men put it on a truck, and I had told them it was china, and one of them had written CHINA on the side in chalk, under the label with the Marylebone address. I had felt better for the chalk.

Her mother had come, and her sister, who was fifteen and had cried at the wedding and was crying again now with her face turned away so that nobody would say anything about it. Her mother had brought a parcel of bread and cheese and two apples tied in a cloth, and she gave it to me and not to Eurydice. I took that as an instruction.

Eurydice stood with the carpet bag on her arm and looked once down the length of the platform, toward the end where the roof stopped and the gray daylight came in. Toward the river, if you knew which way the river lay.

She did not look a second time. She turned back to her mother and fixed the collar of her mother's coat. It did not need fixing, and her mother let her do it.

"Write," her mother said.

"Every Sunday."

"Write on the Saturday, so it comes on the Monday."

"Saturday, then." Eurydice kissed her.

Then she kissed her sister, who said a few words into her shoulder that I did not hear. Eurydice said, "I know. I know," and held her for a moment longer than the platform allowed.

A guard was calling. We got in.

The carriage was second class, with two hard benches facing each other and a draft that came from everywhere at once. We had the seats by the window on the side away from the platform, and Eurydice set the carpet bag on the bench between us with her hand on it.

When the train jerked and the couplings banged down the length of it like a row of doors slamming, she did not look out at her mother. She looked at the bag.

I looked out. Her mother was standing straight, and her sister had her face in her mother's coat.

They got smaller, and then the roof was gone and we were out in the gray, and then they were gone too.

The train gathered itself. The noise of it changed from a series of separate violences to one continuous one, and the city went past, roofs and chimneys and the backs of houses with washing out in weather that was not going to dry it.

* * *

There were six of us in the compartment.

A commercial traveler sat across from me, a narrow man in a brown coat with a sample case he had put up in the rack over his own head. He traveled in buttons, and he told us so before we had cleared the last of the houses.

Bone, horn, brass, jet for mourning, and a new line in pressed glass that he expected great things from.

Beside him a young woman sat with a boy of five or six who wanted to see the engine and had been told he could not see the engine. He kept getting up to try to see it from the window, and she kept pulling him down by the back of his jacket without looking at him. She had a letter in her other hand that she had read twice since Temple Meads and was reading a third time.

An old woman in the far corner on our side was knitting something gray. She had been knitting it when we got in and she knitted it without stopping all the way to London. I never learned what it was.

The rain began a little after Keynsham. It came across the fields in a gray wall and hit the carriage side, and the draft that came from everywhere at once now came wet.

"Your father," I said.

"My father said rain by Bath," Eurydice said. "That isn't Bath yet."

"It's near enough."

"He'll be pleased." She watched the rain blowing past the window. "He'll be standing on the quay being pleased about it and there'll be nobody there to tell."

I watched the button man's case. It was sitting in the rack on its narrow end, with its handle out, and the rack was a strip of netting over a wooden rail. Every time the carriage swayed the case leaned a little further out over the rail and came back, and the coming back was a little less each time.

I had spent a good part of my life looking at how things are secured. A man at sea looks at a badly stowed load the way a doctor looks at a cough across a room. He cannot help it, and it is not his business, and he is usually right.

"Your case," I said to the button man.

"Perfectly safe," he said, and patted the rail without looking at it. "I've been up and down this line a dozen times. Have you been through the tunnel?"

"No."

"Ah," he said. He sat back. He had the look of a man settling into his favorite subject.

The tunnel, he told us, was nearly two miles long and had been driven through solid rock by men with candles. A hundred of them had died doing it, or more; he had heard different figures.

There were people who would not ride through it. They got down at Bath and went round by coach and met the train again at Chippenham, and a doctor had said in the newspapers that the air in it would stop a man's heart.

The young mother had stopped reading her letter.

"It has not stopped mine," the button man said, and laughed, and the boy laughed because he had laughed.

Eurydice had not looked away from the window. When the button man began on the tunnel she had lifted the bag off the bench and into her lap, and her hands were folded on the top of it, one over the other.

I looked at the bag. I knew what was in it besides the cup: a change of linen, her hairbrush, two books, a writing case, a paper of seeds she had saved from her mother's garden.

The bag was not large, and the cup was in the middle of it, wrapped in the shawl, held in by everything else. She had packed it as well as I had packed the crate, and possibly better.

The wheels were loud and the rain was louder and the button man was telling the young mother about pressed glass. I leaned toward Eurydice so that the others would not hear.

“We have paid the railway to carry a crate of china a hundred and twenty miles,” I said. “Eleven cups bedded in straw by a man who knows his business. And you are carrying the twelfth on your knees.”

She turned her head and looked at me.

“A shilling cup,” I said, smiling, because I thought she would smile. “If that, carried by hand from Bristol to London. The porters at Paddington will think you are smuggling the Crown jewels.”

“My grandmother's cup,” she said.

She did not say it loudly. She did not say it with any heat. She said it the way her father had said the glass is falling, as a fact about the world, and the fact did not invite any discussion of alternatives.

Then she looked back at the window.

I sat with my smile still on my face for a moment, and then I took it off.

I went back to the yard. I went back to her mother with the cup in both hands, talking, and the half hitch I had been fighting.

A morning, a sill, her own mother. That was what I had, three words and the shape of a story I had not listened to, and I turned them over for the next five miles and they did not become anything more.

The rain came down. The button man's case leaned out over the rail and came back.

* * *

Bath went past in the rain, honey-colored stone gone dark with the wet. The train stood for a few minutes and doors opened and shut along its length and nobody got out of ours to go round by coach. The young mother looked at the platform as if she might, and then looked at the boy, and stayed.

After Bath the line ran in a cutting, and the cutting got deeper, and the walls of it rose on either side until there was nothing in the window but wet rock and the green of the ferns growing in it.

“Here it comes,” the button man said.

The light went.

It went out between one breath and the next, as if a hand had been put over the world, and the noise came in to fill the space where the light had been. The noise of the wheels came back off the rock a foot from the window, doubled and redoubled, and the smoke came in with it, through every crack in the carriage, thick and sulfurous and hot, so that you tasted it at the back of your throat before you knew you were breathing it.

The boy began to cry. The young mother said, “Hush, hush, hush,” in the dark, the same word over and over, and I could not tell whether she was saying it to him or to herself.

I could not see my own hands. I put them flat on my knees so that I would know where they were.

I have been in dark before. A ship in a squall at night with no moon has its own dark, and the hold of a ship with the hatches on has another.

This was neither. This was the dark of being underground and moving, the body telling you that you were falling when you were sitting still, the rock on every side, and the knowledge that it was nearly two miles long and you were somewhere in the middle of it and could not tell where.

I thought about the button man's doctor and his heart. I thought about the hundred men with candles.

The carriage swayed hard.

It was a curve, or a joint in the rail, or nothing at all, one of those lurches a train gives for no reason a passenger can know. It threw me against Eurydice's shoulder and it threw the button man against the young mother and the knitting needles in the corner stopped for the first time since Bristol.

Something came down out of the dark.

I had my arm up before I knew why I had it up. Most of what I know has come to me through my arms before it reached my head, and my arm had been waiting for that case since Keynsham. It hit my forearm with its corner and turned and came down on the bench between me and Eurydice, and burst its catch, and the carriage was full of the sound of buttons, hundreds of them, pouring off the bench and onto the floor and rolling away under the seats in the dark.

The boy screamed. The button man said a word I will not write.

I reached for Eurydice.

I did not know where she was. I knew where she had been, by the window, and I put my hand out to where she had been and found the carpet bag, and her arms around it. She had both arms locked around the bag and her shoulders turned into the corner where the bench met the carriage wall, with her back to the place the case had come down, and her head bent over the bag.

She had been sitting like that since before the lurch; I could feel it. The muscles in her arms were set the way a man sets himself against a sea he has seen coming.

She had braced when the light went.

"I have it," she said in the dark.

Her voice was steady. Her arms were not loosening.

I kept my hand where it was, on her arm, over the bag. I did not have anything else to do with it.

The buttons were still rolling. The boy had gone from screaming to sobbing, and his mother was saying hush, hush, hush.

The old woman in the corner said, to nobody, "Well," and started knitting again. I heard the needles.

We came out into the light the way we had gone in: all at once.

The rain was still falling. There were green fields and a farm with a wet dog at the gate, and the smoke went out of the carriage through the same cracks it had come in by, and the six of us blinked at each other like people who have woken in a strange house.

The floor was covered in buttons: bone and horn and brass and jet, and the pressed glass the button man expected great things from. Not all of the glass had survived.

The young mother had a brass button caught in the lace of her collar. The boy had stopped crying and was looking at the floor with the face of a child who has been shown the inside of a treasure chest.

There was blood on my cuff.

I had not felt it. The corner of the case had opened the skin on the inside of my forearm, a little above the wrist. It was not deep and it was bleeding the way shallow cuts bleed, more than they deserve.

"Oh, I am sorry, sir," the button man said. He was on his knees already among his stock. "It has never once come down."

"It's nothing," I said.

Eurydice looked at my arm.

She looked at it for longer than it needed. Then she lifted the carpet bag off her lap, the shawl and the cup inside it, and put it in my hands.

"Hold this," she said.

I held it. She took a handkerchief out of her sleeve, and took my wrist, and turned the arm to the light from the window, and bound the cut with the handkerchief, folding it twice first so that the clean side lay on the skin. She tied it with a knot I would not have used, and it held.

I sat with the bag on my knees and both hands on it.

It weighed next to nothing. That was the thing I had not expected. A change of linen and two books and a hairbrush and a paper of seeds and a cup, and all of it together weighed less than a coil of good line, and I held it as if it might go off.

She finished the knot and looked at me, and then at the bag in my hands. She did not take it back.

The button man was crawling about on the floor gathering his stock into the case. The boy got down to help him and was allowed to. The young mother picked the brass button out of her collar and held it out to him, and he took it, and then she went back to her letter, and I saw that her hand was shaking, and that she was reading the same line over and over, and I did not know what the letter said and never would.

I put the button man's case back up in the rack for him when he had filled it. I laid it flat, on its broad side, with the handle in, and pushed it back against the wall.

“It rides better that way,” I said.

He looked at it. “I'll remember,” he said.

He would not. I could see that he would not. But it was flat for the rest of the way to London.

* * *

At Swindon the train stood for ten minutes and half the carriage went for tea it could not drink in the time. I stayed in my seat with the bag. Eurydice went, and came back with two cups of something hot in thick railway crockery, and handed me one, and the tea was terrible, and I drank all of it.

She did not take the bag back at Swindon. She did not take it back at Reading, where the rain stopped. Somewhere after Reading she fell asleep against my shoulder, with her hands folded in her lap, and I sat with my arm going numb under her and the bag on my knees and watched England go by in the long gray light.

I watched her hands.

I do not know why. They were folded one over the other, the right over the left, loose with sleep, and there was ink on the second finger of the right hand from a letter she had written that morning before we left.

They were not doing anything. I watched them anyway, for miles.

She woke at the edge of London and sat up and took her hands out of her lap and pushed at her hair.

“It's stopped raining,” she said.

“Since Reading.”

“London does as it likes,” she said, and I laughed out loud, and the old woman in the corner looked up from her knitting for the second time that day.

* * *

The house was in a quiet street in Marylebone, narrow and brick and three windows high, with an area railing at the front and steps going down to a kitchen door. A cab brought us from Paddington through traffic that would not move, carts and drays and omnibuses and private carriages all jammed together and all of them shouting, and the horse stood in the middle of it as patient as a church.

The agent had left the key with a neighbor. The neighbor was a stout woman with flour on her forearms who looked at Eurydice and then at me and then at the carpet bag, and said that the last people had left a table and two chairs and a bed frame and she hoped we were not particular.

“We're not,” Eurydice said.

“You'll be from the country,” the neighbor said.

“From Bristol.”

The neighbor took this as confirmation and went back indoors.

The rooms were empty and smelled of other people's coal. There was a front room on the ground floor and a kitchen below it, half underground, with a window at the back that looked up the area steps into a small walled garden gone to weeds and a pear tree that had not been pruned in years. Upstairs there was a room over the street with one tall window and a room at the back, and above that two smaller rooms under the roof.

We went through all of them. I did it the way you go over a ship you have joined, every compartment, every hatch.

Eurydice did it the way she did everything. She looked at each room once with her whole attention and then went on to the next.

In the room over the street she stood at the window and put her hand on the sill. The sill was deep, stone under the paint, and the window faced south over the roofs across the road.

“Boxes,” she said. “Two of them. Here and here.”

“The light,” I said. I was looking at the sky over the chimneys. It was the color of dishwater and was going to stay that color, so far as I could judge, for the rest of the year.

“The London light won't entirely prevent it,” she said.

We went down to the kitchen.

There was a range that had not been blacked, a deal table with a burn on it, two chairs that did not match, and a shelf over the table with nothing on it. She put the carpet bag on the table and opened it, and took out the shawl, and unwrapped the shawl, and set the cup on the shelf.

It was white, with the blue chain around the rim and the chip on the foot.

It was the only thing on the shelf. It was the only thing in the house that was ours, apart from what we had on and what was in the bag, and it stood there on the bare board in the gray light from the area window and made the kitchen into a kitchen.

I lit the range with coal the last people had left in the scuttle. It smoked, and then drew, and the kitchen began to warm. Eurydice went out to the pump at the end of the street with a borrowed kettle and came back with water, and when it boiled she made tea in the kettle itself, with tea from a twist of paper in her mother's parcel, because we had no pot.

We had one cup.

She poured it full and drank half and gave it to me. I drank the rest. She poured it again.

We sat at the deal table with the burn on it in two chairs that did not match, in a city where we knew nobody but a woman with flour on her arms, and passed her grandmother's cup back and forth across the table between us until the kettle was empty. Neither of us said anything about there being one cup. It was a practical arrangement and it worked.

Outside, the street went on with its noise, and a man was crying something for sale that I could not make out, and a dog barked at the end of the road at nothing, the same as in Bristol.

* * *

The crate came two days later.

I heard the cart before I saw it, iron tires on the stones, and went up and stood at the area railing. It was a carrier's cart with a tired brown horse, and a carter, and a boy of fourteen or so on the tail of it, eating a pie.

The crate was on the back with three others. I could see the chalk from the railing. CHINA, in a hand I recognized, and under it the label with our address.

The carter got down. The boy finished his pie and wiped his hands on his trousers and got down.

They took the crate between them off the tail of the cart. It was heavy, and they were not careful, but they were not careless either, and they carried it the six steps across the pavement to the top of the area steps without trouble. I went to take the boy's end.

The boy looked at the street.

There was nothing in the street. I have gone over this, and there was a cab going by, and a girl with a basket, and nothing else.

Something in the street took the boy's eye for one second, a sound or a face or nothing at all, and his hands came off the crate.

His end went down onto the top step. Corner first.

The noise from inside it was not loud. It was a short dry sound like gravel shaken in a tin, and then the carter swore, and the boy said, "I never," and I stood at the top of the area steps with my hands out toward a crate I was no longer holding.

I knew. I knew the way her father knew when the glass was falling.

"Knots held," the carter said, looking at the rope. He sounded pleased about it. "That's a tidy bit of roping, that is."

"Yes," I said.

I paid him. I did not say anything to the boy. The boy looked at me as if he expected me to and climbed back up on the tail of the cart, and they went off up the street, and I stood on the pavement looking at my crate with the rope still tight around it and every knot exactly where I had put it.

Eurydice was at the kitchen door at the bottom of the steps. She had heard. She did not come up.

We got it down the steps together. I cut the rope, because I did not want to untie it, and prised the lid off with the poker.

I could hear it before the lid was off, the small sliding chime of pieces moving against pieces when the crate was tilted. When the lid was off I pulled back the top layer of straw, and the first thing I found was the sugar bowl, whole, with its lid on.

I held it up. She took it from me.

The plates were under it. I had put the plates low, the heavy things low, as you do. The corner that had hit the step was the corner the plates were in.

We took them out one at a time in their pages of the Bristol Mercury and unwrapped each one on the kitchen table. Some were in two pieces and some were in five or six. Some had gone to the kind of pieces you could not fit back together if you had a year and nothing else to do.

The saucers were under the plates and had gone the same way. The cups were at the top, in a layer of their own with straw between, and the shock had come up through everything else to reach them.

When we had unwrapped all of it there were, on the table, the sugar bowl with its lid, the jug, two saucers, and one plate with a crack running across it from rim to rim.

Eleven cups had gone into that crate. Not one of them had come out whole.

Eurydice stood at the table with her hands flat on it among the pieces. I watched her face.

She did not cry, and she did not look away from the table. She looked at the pieces with her whole attention, the way she had looked at each room of the house, and her mouth was pressed so hard that the color had gone out of her lips.

Her mother had wrapped each of these. Her mother had handed them to me one at a time in the yard.

"I packed it," I said.

"You packed it well," she said. She did not look up.

"I packed it. I told your mother you could roll it down the hill."

"He dropped it. I heard him." She picked up a piece of a plate, a curved piece of the rim with the blue chain on it, and held it.

"You didn't drop it. You packed it well and he dropped it."

"Your father told me he would."

She looked up then.

"On the quay, the night before," I said. "He said my knots would hold the lid on all the way to London, and that they would hold it on while the boy dropped it."

She held the piece of rim and looked at me. I could hear the range ticking. I could hear the girl with the basket somewhere up in the street, calling cresses.

"Did he," she said.

"Yes."

"And you told him your knots would hold."

"Yes."

"They did," she said. "The carter said so."

Then she laughed. It was not much of a laugh and there was not much happiness in it. It came out of her once, short, through her nose, and she put the back of her wrist against her mouth, with the piece of rim still in her fingers, and stood like that for a moment with her eyes shut.

I wanted to say I was sorry. I had the words ready. I had them lined up and I opened my mouth to say them, and she took her wrist away from her mouth and looked at me, and I saw that she knew exactly what I was about to say, and that she was not going to let me make an apology into an event at that table among her mother's plates.

"Fetch me the paper," she said. "From the crate. All of it."

I fetched it. She smoothed each page flat and wrapped the pieces in it, all of them, even the ones no bigger than a fingernail, and made a parcel of them and tied it with a length of my cut rope.

She did not say what the parcel was for. It went into the cupboard beside the range, and it was still there, so far as I know, on the day I left that house.

She set the sugar bowl on the shelf, and the jug, and the two saucers, and the cracked plate leaning against the wall behind them. Her grandmother's cup stood at the end of the row where she had put it the first night, and she did not move it.

"I'll write to Mother on Saturday," she said.

"What will you tell her?"

She considered it. She was standing at the shelf with her back to me and one hand still up on the edge of it.

"That the cup came safe," she said.

I said nothing.

"It did," she said. "It's true."

"It is."

“Then I'll tell her that.” She took her hand down off the shelf. “If she asks about the rest, I'll tell her about the rest.”

I knew her mother, a little, by then. I knew her mother would not ask.

* * *

That night I asked her.

We were at the table again, with the lamp, and the range banked down for the night. She was reading.

She had brought two books in the carpet bag and had finished one of them in the two days since we came. She was halfway through the other, and was going to have to find a bookseller within the week or start on the newspapers.

She read with one hand on the page and the other in her lap.

I had been sitting across from her for an hour mending the clasp on the carpet bag with a bit of wire.

“Your grandmother,” I said.

She looked up.

“Your mother told me in the yard, while I was roping the crate,” I said. “She told me about the cup, and I didn't hear it because I was at a knot.”

She marked her place in the book with her finger. She did not close it.

“I'd like to hear it,” I said. “If you'll tell it.”

She looked at me. It was the look she had given me at the wall of the room above the chandler's shop, the first night, when she said she could not dance either: the whole of her attention, and nothing else going on behind it.

I have never been looked at like that by anyone else. I did not know, that night in the kitchen, that I was going to spend a good part of my life trying to describe it.

“She was a harbor woman, my mother's mother,” Eurydice said. “Her husband had a boat and drowned in it when my mother was four, at the mouth of the river, in sight of the house. She went to work in a coffee house on the quay, carrying cups.”

I put the wire down.

“She bought the set one piece at a time over years, a plate one quarter and a saucer the next,” she said. “It took her most of ten years to have twelve of everything. When she had it she put it in the front room for company: the minister, or the neighbors, or my grandfather's brother on the one day a year he remembered she existed.”

“And the twelfth cup.”

She turned the book a little on the table, squaring it. “The twelfth cup was hers, and she drank out of it every morning of her life, at the kitchen sill, before she went to work. Company could have the good cups, she said, and she'd have the one she liked.”

“It's the same as the others,” I said.

“It's the one she used.”

She said it without any edge. She said it the way you would tell a man which end of a rope was the standing part, because he had asked, and because it was the kind of thing he ought to know.

“When she was dying,” Eurydice said, “she had it on the sill where she could see it from the bed, and she couldn't hold it by then, so my mother held it for her. She'd drink from it with my mother's hands round it. I was nine, and I used to sit on the end of the bed and watch them do it.”

The range ticked. A cab went by in the street, the horse's hooves loud on the stones and then fading, and then nothing.

"That's what my mother told you," she said. "In the yard."

"That's what I didn't hear."

"You hear it now."

"Yes."

She looked at me a moment longer. Then she opened the book where her finger was and went back to reading, and that was the end of it.

She did not ask me whether I understood and I did not tell her that I did. Neither of those things needed saying, and she had never in her life said a thing that did not need saying when she could avoid it.

I picked up the wire and went back to the clasp.

I mended it properly. It held for years.

* * *

In the morning she was at the table before me.

There was bread from the shop at the corner, and the kettle was on the range, and the tea was in the kettle again because we still had no pot. She had her grandmother's cup in front of her, full, and the book open, and one hand on the page.

The light was coming down the area steps and through the back window, gray, the London light. It lay across the table and across the book and across her hand on the cup.

On the sill of the back window there was a box I had not seen before. She had found it somewhere, an old fish box from the market by the smell of it, and filled it with earth from the garden under the pear tree. There were four small marks in the earth, pressed in with a fingertip, in a row.

"Beans," she said, without looking up from the book. "From Mother's garden. They want staking when they come."

"I'll stake them."

"You will," she said. She turned a page.

I sat down across from her. She poured from the kettle into the cup and pushed it across the table to me, and I drank, and passed it back.

Her hands were steady around it. They were a young woman's hands, with ink on the second finger of the right one, and they lifted the cup and set it down without a sound on the burned deal table, and there was no reason in the world for me to watch them.

I watched them anyway. I had begun to, in the dark of the tunnel, with my own hand over her arms, and I did not stop.

I had teased her about the cup once. I never teased her about it again.

The World of Eurydice

Who's Who

The people of the novel as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Tom Ayrton	The narrator. A sailor who married a Bristol woman, lost her to a long illness, was convicted and transported to Australia, and was later set ashore alone on Tabor Island by Lord Glenarvan. He spends twelve years there.
Eurydice	Tom's wife, from the harbor district of Bristol. A constant reader who ran the house, made bread on Sunday mornings and kept beans and herbs in window boxes. The novel is named for her.
Gideon Spilett	A journalist who records the colony's story and holds the Tuesday and Thursday sessions with Ayrton. He keeps two notebooks: the official account and a smaller one for Ayrton alone.
Cyrus Harding	The engineer at the center of the Lincoln Island colony. He keeps the logbook and the morning observation on the point.
Pencroft	A sailor of about fifty who built the sloop Bonadventure from the island's own timber. He does not drink.
Herbert	The youngest of the colonists, about twenty, who found Ayrton's bottle on the beach. He asks direct questions and listens to the answers.
Neb	Runs the kitchen and the stores of Granite House. He came with Harding from Richmond, and becomes Ayrton's companion of the pre-dawn point and the kitchen at night.
Vásquez	A widow from New Mexico who fought the land courts for years. She tends the colony's hurt bodies and reads people closely.
Joop	The colony's orangutan, who takes to sitting with Ayrton on the rocks above the south cove.
Top	The colony's dog.
Lord Glenarvan	Owner of the steam yacht Duncan, searching the 37th parallel for the lost Captain Grant. A man of genuine certainty about justice.
Mary and Robert Grant	Captain Grant's children, aboard the Duncan to look for their father.
Lady Helena	Aboard the Duncan; she asks Ayrton about his life before the southern waters.
Captain Grant	Master of the brig Britannia, missing. Ayrton once sailed with him.
Culver	Captain of a ship Ayrton recognizes from his years out of Sydney.

In this story only: Eurydice's mother, her father (a man who has worked the Bristol harbor for forty years) and her fifteen-year-old sister; the button man, the young mother and the knitting woman on the train; the neighbor in Marylebone; the carter and his boy.

Timeline

From Bristol to the start of the sessions on Lincoln Island.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
January 1841	Tom meets Eurydice at a dance in a room above a chandler's shop near the Bristol harbor. Neither of them can dance.
1843	They marry. Her mother gives them her grandmother's china. They move from Bristol to a house in Marylebone, London. *Carried by Hand* takes place here.
Later in the marriage	A tremor appears in Eurydice's hands in the mornings. The illness runs four years, and Tom takes her through eight consulting rooms in three years.
After her death	The trial, transportation to Australia, and the colony there.
1851	Ayrton is released in Sydney with no money and no connections.
1851 to 1855	Four years at sea out of Sydney, the part of his life he is slowest to give the sessions.
1855	Ayrton comes aboard the Duncan during the search for Captain Grant. Six weeks later Glenarvan sets him ashore on Tabor Island.
Second year on Tabor	Ayrton's rifle disappears from a shelf he has kept for it. Three weeks later a cache of tools and provisions appears.
March 1865	Harding's party leaves Richmond by balloon on the eighteenth and comes down on Lincoln Island on the twenty-third.
Tenth year on Tabor	A storm puts the low ground under the sea and destroys Ayrton's garden. Weeks later, materials for a bottle appear. He writes one sentence and gives it to the current.
Two years later	Herbert finds the bottle. The Bonadventure crosses thirty-five miles of open water to Tabor Island.
Autumn, the twelfth year	Ayrton arrives at Granite House, speaks his first word on the fourth day, and the sessions with Spilett begin a week after the crossing.
Sydney, 1869	Ayrton writes his note on what the sessions could and could not contain.

Places

- **Bristol.** Eurydice's city. Her father has worked its harbor his whole life.
- **Marylebone.** The district of London where Tom and Eurydice keep house: a kitchen window over a small back garden, a first-floor room above a quiet street.
- **The eight rooms.** The London consulting rooms where doctors told Tom, kindly, that nothing could be done.

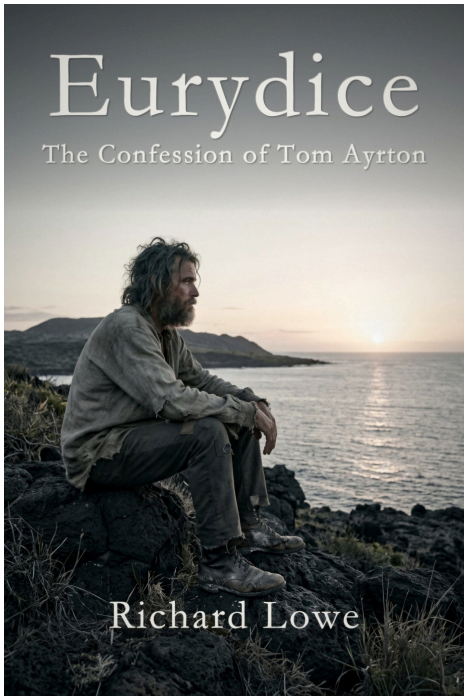
- **Sydney.** The harbor where Ayrton is released, and where the ships begin.
- **Tabor Island.** A mile across, three hours to walk around, thirty-five miles southwest of Lincoln Island. Its places have plain names: the spring, the point, the shelf, the wreck, the grave, and a flat rock on the north beach that Ayrton calls nothing.
- **Lincoln Island.** Twelve miles the long way, with a mountain in cloud. The colony lives in Granite House, a home cut into a cliff face above the beach.
- **The Mercy.** The river of Lincoln Island, with Harding's weir and the southern field along it.
- **The point and the south rocks.** The point is where Harding keeps the morning observation. The rocks above the south cove are where Ayrton sits with Joop, and later with Neb.
- **The passage.** The corner of Granite House where Ayrton sleeps.

Glossary

- **The sessions.** Ayrton's Tuesday and Thursday mornings with Spilett at a rough pine table, somewhere between testimony and interview.
- **The small notebook.** The narrower notebook Spilett keeps only for what Ayrton gives him, apart from the official account.
- **Write it right.** Ayrton's instruction to Spilett: include what the court left out.
- **The old map.** Ayrton's word for the world as he left it in 1855, which the twelve years made wrong.
- **Bonadventure.** Pencroft's sloop, built on Lincoln Island.
- **Duncan.** Lord Glenarvan's steam yacht.
- **Britannia.** Captain Grant's brig, two-masted, three hundred tons.
- **The 37th parallel.** The latitude from Grant's bottle that Glenarvan's search follows.
- **The glass.** In the story, a barometer. A falling glass means weather coming.
- **Area.** In the story, the sunken yard in front of a London house, with steps down to the kitchen door.
- **Lighter.** In the story, a flat harbor boat for moving cargo between ship and quay.

Read the Novel

In 1843 Tom Ayrton packed his new wife's china like cargo and teased her for carrying one cup by hand. Years later, set ashore alone on Tabor Island for twelve years and then rescued, he sits across a pine table from a journalist and decides, one session at a time, what he will tell about her, the ships and the island. Eurydice: The Confession of Tom Ayrton is what he tells.



Eurydice:
The Confession of Tom Ayrton
The Adventures of Captain Nemo, book 2

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