

## Chapter 1

### Winter 1638, At Sea

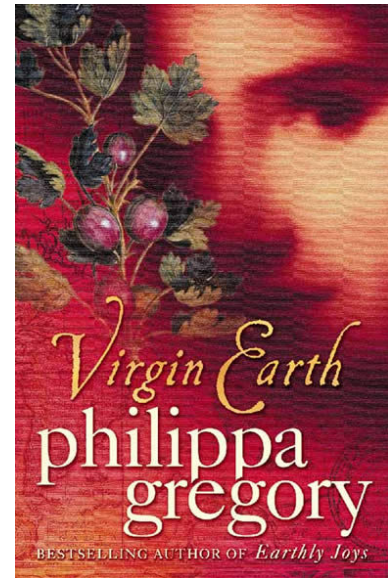
He woke to the sound of the moving ship, the creaking of the timbers and the aching sigh of the full sails spread, the sudden abrupt rattle of a pulley as a sail was reefed in, the drumming of booted feet on the deck just above his face, the holler of an order, and the continual attack of the sea – the bang of the waves against the prow and the groan of the tiny ship as she climbed up one wave and then wallowed and turned to confront another.

He had slept and woken to this ceaseless din for six long weeks and now he found it familiar and soothing. It meant that the little ship was soldiering on through the terrifying expanse of wind and water, still headed westwards, faithful to the hope that westwards would be the new land. Sometimes J imagined their progress as a seagull might see it looking down, the vast waste of sea and the fragile ship with its lamps burning at dusk, headed trustfully towards where they had last seen the sun.

He had set sail in deep grief, in flight from grief. Even now he dreamed of his wife with bright joyful immediacy, dreamed that she came to him on board the ship and laughingly complained that there was no need for him to set sail, no need for him to run off to Virginia alone, for see! Here she was on board herself, and it had all been a game – the plague, her long days of dying, the terrible white-faced grief of their daughter – all a May game, and here she was well and strong, and when would they go home again? Then the noises of the ship were a terrible interruption and J would pull his damp blanket over his face, and try to cling to the dream of Jane and the certainty that she was alive and everything was well.

He could not. He had to wake to the bleak truth that she was dead, and his business half-bankrupt, his father hanging on to their house and their nursery garden and their collection of rarities by the old combination of luck and the love of his friends, while J played the part of the indulged son – fleeing from all of it, calling it a venture, a chance at wealth, but knowing it was an escape.

It was not an enviable escape at first sight. The house at Lambeth was a grand house, set among its own twenty acres of nursery garden, famous for its collection of rarities from all around the world. His father, John Tradescant, had named it the Ark, and had sworn they would be safe there whatever storms rocked the country with king and Church and Parliament all set on different and opposing courses. There were half a dozen bedrooms and the great room for the rarities, a dining room, a drawing room and a kitchen. A little son, Johnnie, to inherit it all and his older sister Frances to insist on her own claims. These riches J had exchanged for a single five-foot, four-inches-long bunk built into the damp wall of the ship. There was no room to sit up, barely room to roll over. He had to lie on his back, feeling the huge movement of the waves lifting and



dropping him like driftwood, looking at the planks of the bunk above him. To his right against the skin of the ship, he could feel the slap of the waves and the whisper of their ripples. To his left was the slatted door for which he had paid extra for the little space and privacy it gave him. The other, poorer emigrants slept side by side on the floor of the 'tween deck like animals in a barn. They had been loaded like baggage into the waist of the ship with the crews' quarters at the stern behind them, and the captain's tiny cabin and the cook's galley and cabin – all in one – in the prow before them.

The captain would not allow passengers out on deck except for the briefest and most grudging spells in fine weather. The crew going on watch trampled over the passengers and, when they were returning to their shared hammocks in the stern, dripped water all over them. The emigrants were always in the way, they were regularly cursed, they were less than cargo.

Their bundles and boxes were piled up among their owners in a careless muddle; but as the days wore on into weeks families established their own little seats and bunks out of crates of chickens and bags of clothes. The stench was appalling. There were two buckets provided, one for washing water, one for excrement, and there was a strict rota for emptying the soil bucket over the side. The captain would not allow them to do this more than once a day and when it was J's turn to carry the brimming pail to the side his stomach heaved.

There was scarcely enough water to drink, and it came warm and tasting of the barrel, there was hardly enough food. A lumpy porridge for breakfast, the same for dinner, and a biscuit and a slice of old cheese at night.

It would have been a nightmare but the voyage was sustained by hope. They were a shipful of gamblers, a handful of families who had thrown in their lot with a land they had never seen and whose dangers and promises they could hardly imagine. J thought they were the most foolhardy, impulsive, brave people he had ever met, and he did not know whether to fear them as madmen or admire them as heroes.