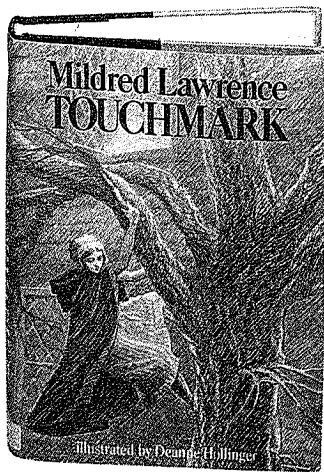


# Touchmark

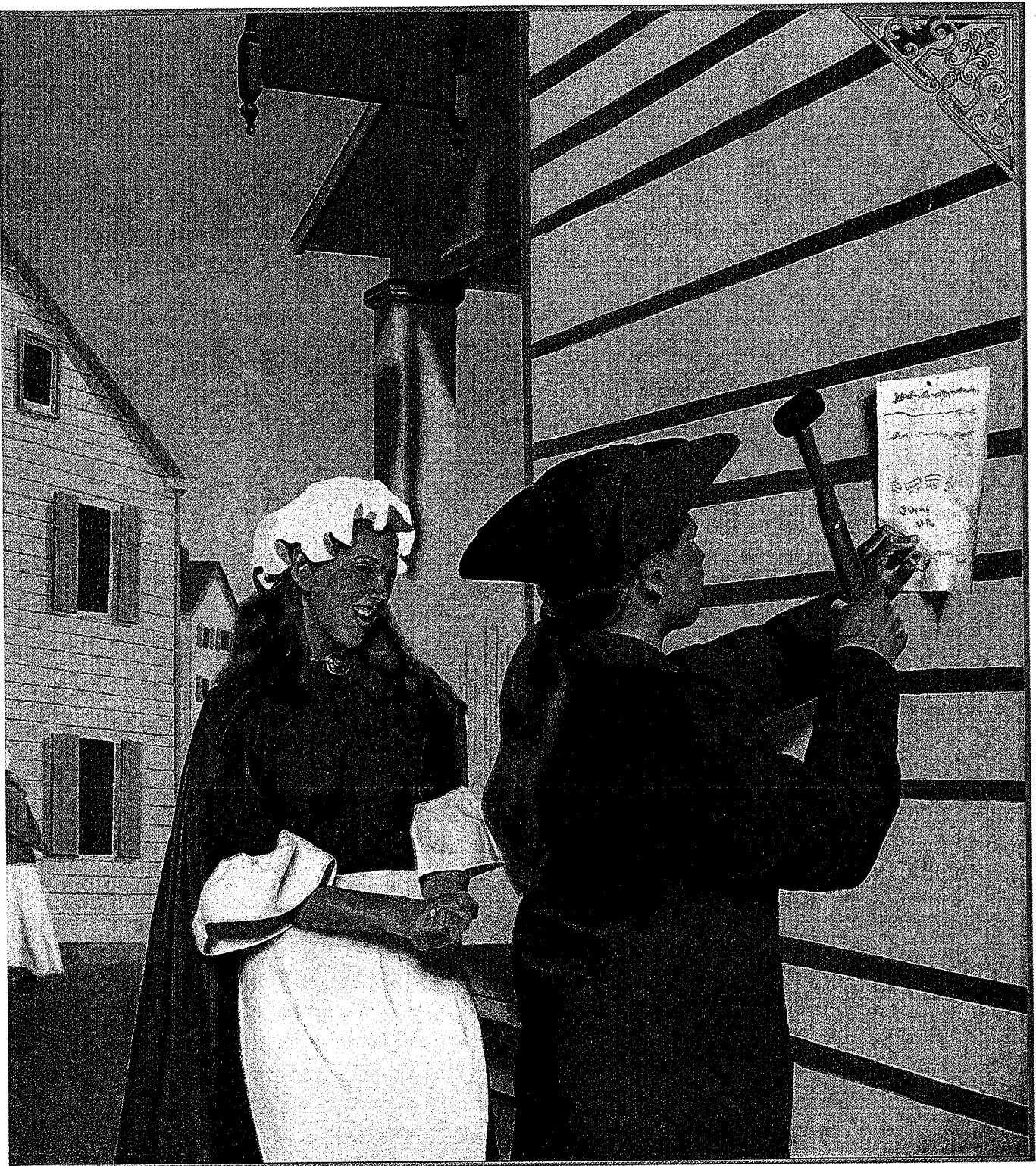
by Mildred Lawrence

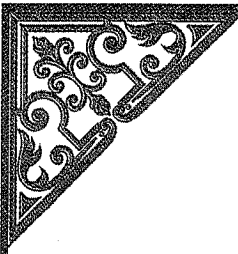


*In 1773, Boston is in an uproar over British taxes and the presence of British soldiers. In the midst of this conflict, Abigail Jonas, known as Nabby, has problems of her own. Nabby wants to become a pewterer—her most precious possession is a pewter porringer that her father, who was lost at sea, had brought her from England. But no pewterer in Boston will take a girl as an apprentice. Left homeless by the death of her mother, Nabby*

*becomes a servant in the household of Tobias Butler, a pewterer with an incompetent apprentice named Lonzo. She is a welcome companion for the Butlers' daughter, Emily, who has lost the use of her legs after an illness. Not the type to sit by the fire, Nabby keeps up with the political happenings in Boston through her friend Will Truax, a printer's apprentice who nails up many broadsides, or news sheets, for the Sons of Liberty. One evening Master Butler gives instructions that no one in the house is to cross the threshold that night. In the following chapter from the novel, Nabby finds that strange events are taking place.*

Illustrations by Mark Elliott





Nabby threw open the casement window, heedless of the blast of cold air that swept through the room. By leaning out perilously far and craning her neck almost out of joint, she could see dark figures rushing down Milk Street from the direction of the Old South Meeting House, whooping as they went.

"Whoever they are, they are bound for the harbor," she said, "mayhap down Hutchinson Street to Griffin's Wharf." She snatched up her hooded cloak. "Pretend to be sleeping, Emily, in case your mother comes to inquire." She hastily stuffed two of the cushions from Emily's chair under her own bedcover. "There, is it not a fair likeness of me asleep?" She blew out the candle and tiptoed to the door. "Why, 'tis locked!"

"Then you must stay here," Emily said in a relieved voice.

"So it seems, unless—" Nabby looked speculatively at the tree just outside the window. "Emily, if you can close the window behind me to keep out the cold and open it again when I return, I can easily climb down the tree and see what betides."

"Pray, Nabby, do not go." Emily's voice was pleading. "My father —"

"Your father will know naught of it, I promise you, unless you tell."

"I would never tell, but you might fall, and then no one would need to tell."

"I will not fall. I have balanced myself many a time on the deck of the *Boston Traveller* tossing at anchor just opposite our door. Besides, think of what I will be able to tell you—exciting things for your sketches."

"Y-yes." Emily struggled out of bed and reached for her crutches. "You will take care, lest—"

"Lest a wandering bear devour me. Indeed, Emily, I shall skulk from shadow to shadow in my dark cloak, and no one will know I am there."

Through the window and down the tree—it was only a few moments until she was standing on the ground looking up at the white blur of Emily's face. The window closed with the faintest click of the latch. Nabby crept toward the street, keeping close to the wall of the house. No light shone from Master Butler's workroom now. He and his mysterious visitors must have fared forth to see what befell in the street, still noisy with whoops, yells, and whistles.

"Let me out! Let me out!"

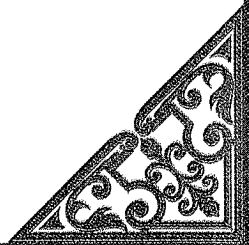
Nabby shrank against the wall as Lonzo's muffled voice came to her from the shed room. So he, too, was locked in, but if he had not wit enough to climb out of his own window, he deserved to stay there. She hoped that he, of all people, had not seen her but was only calling out to anybody who might hear. She shivered from cold and excitement but not at all from fear. She was tall and strong and fleet of foot, and she knew every turn of the streets hereabouts.

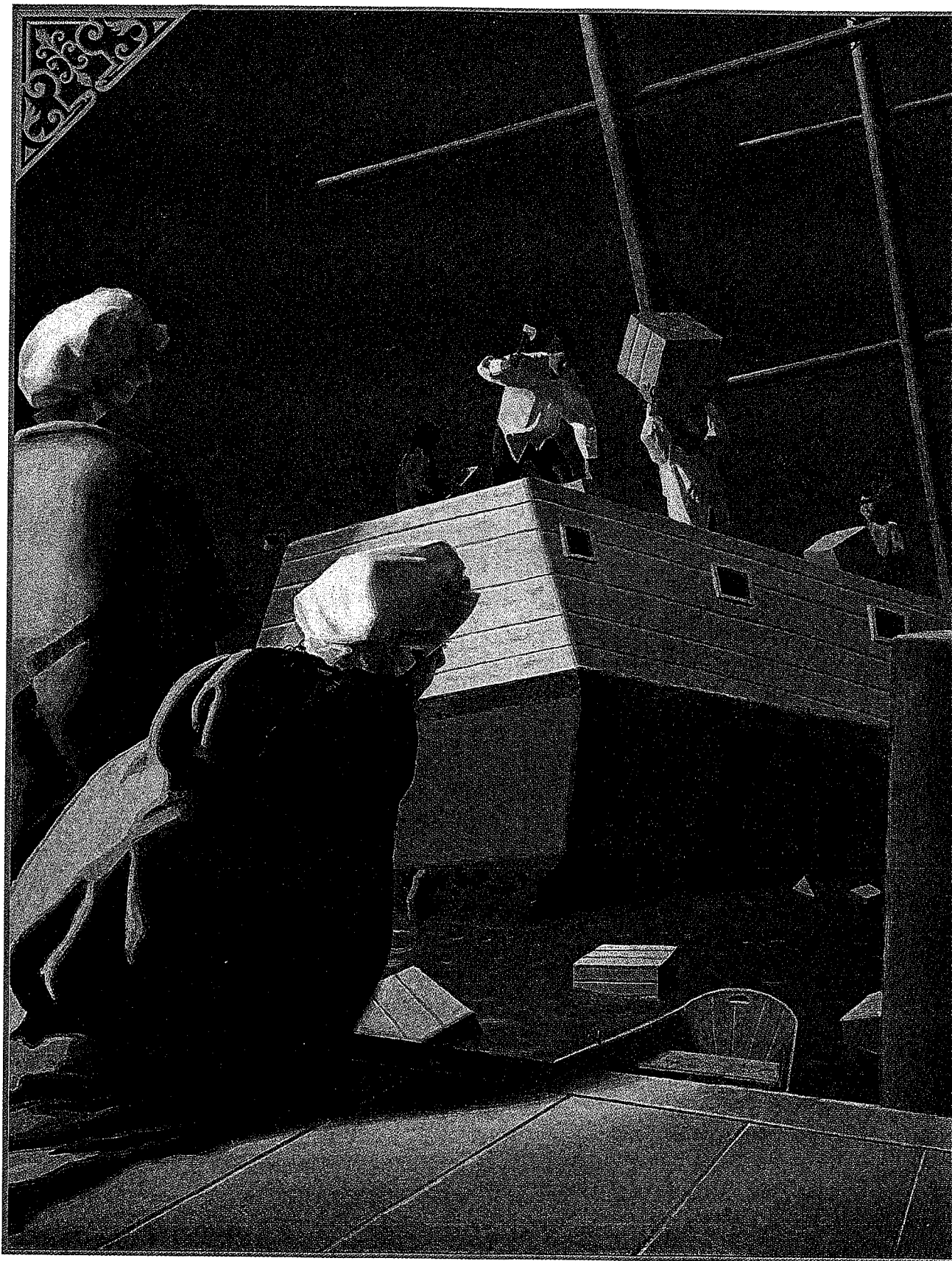
She peered cautiously around the corner of the house. She was just in time to see, by the pale light of the waning moon, an apprentice climbing down from a nearby roof, apparently smearing soot from the chimney on his face as he went—a strange thing to do, but there had been many strange happenings in Boston of late.

Trying to be invisible, Nabby dodged along the darkest part of the street toward Fort Hill, where the shouts seemed loudest. There a squad of men, ghostly in the shadows, marched smartly past, to be joined by clumps of hurrying stragglers from the lanes and byways. Nabby followed to Griffin's Wharf, aswarm with indistinct figures milling around the tea ships—three of them, now that *Beaver* had been moved out of quarantine to join *Dartmouth* and *Eleanor*. Nabby melted into the shadow of a warehouse to watch in silence with a gathering crowd of men, women, and a few children.

By the flare of scattered torches, whose flames flickered in the wind, Nabby could see that men in outlandish attire were clambering aboard the tea ships. Bandannas, hoods, mufflers, and knit caps were pulled well down to disguise grim faces striped and smeared in black, red, and various shades between. Master Butler would have used charcoal from the forge or the red ocher with which he prepared his molds, if indeed he were here at all. Somehow Nabby could not imagine him whooping like an Indian, with his face streaked with war paint. The light caught the shine of hatchets, and an occasional pistol was stuck pirate-style in a sash or belt. Nabby edged to leeward of a large woman whose bulk would shelter her from a freshening breeze with a feel of icicles in it.

"Hast heard, maid, that the fourth tea ship, the brig *William*, is aground on Cape Cod in a gale?" an old man leaning on a blackthorn stick muttered in Nabby's ear. "One less batch of tea for our stalwart lads to deal with!"







Nabby had not long to wait to see how the stalwart lads were planning to deal with the tea. Clearly in undisputed possession of the ships, men were hauling the tea chests up from the holds by slings and cranes. Hatchets flashed as the chests with their burlap coverings were ripped open and the tea flung overboard.

"At 'em, boys! Leave never a leaf!" the old man cackled gleefully. "Tea and sea water will make a brew fit for a king—King George himself!"

The whole operation, guided by quiet orders from the men on shipboard, was as precise as though each man had been drilled in what he was expected to do. Plainly, this was no sudden outburst of anger like some of the riots of recent weeks.

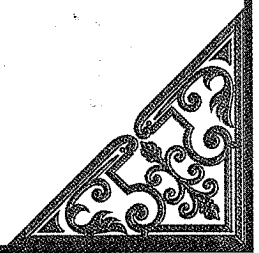
On the deck of the *Dartmouth*, Nabby caught a flash of red hair straying from under a bandanna with a turkey feather stuck jauntily through the knot. Will Truax, neatly striped with printer's ink, was busily flinging the shattered chests into the sea, where they bobbed on the water like wrecks of children's playboats. Nabby's father had once told her that, while Long Wharf could handle the largest seagoing vessels, the harbor at Griffin's Wharf was never more than a few feet deep. Now, with the tide near its lowest ebb, the three ships looked to be almost aground. As the tea was tossed over the side, it began to build up like beehives in the shallow water.

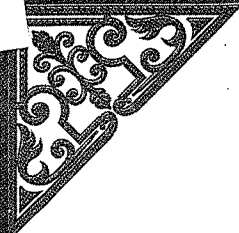
"You, there, boy! Find some of your fellows and make sure the tea is well awash."

Nabby stared, wide-eyed. It was the unmistakable voice of Master Butler, whose face was decorated with slashes of red ocher under a sloppy turban remarkably like the patched old apron that Mistress Butler wore when she scrubbed the wide boards of the kitchen floor. He and his mysterious visitors must have been busy in the workroom the whole time disguising themselves for this foray.

"'Tis ill that it must be done at low tide," the gaffer with the black-thorn stick gabbled on, "but all must be finished by midnight, they say, else the customs men will take possession."

Nabby nodded impatiently at news she already knew. She edged closer to the plump woman, pleasantly scented with cinnamon, while the old man smelled only of tobacco and stale beer. The dim little moon had set by now, and some of the flares were burning out. Still, Nabby could see a group of boys jumping with joyous whoops onto





the piled-up tea in the water and tossing it to the wind. There would be many a case of chills and fever tomorrow, but who paid heed to that on such a night?

In the confusing swirl of motion ashore, on deck, and asea, Nabby lost track of Master Butler and Will Truax. A few men swept the decks, and others saw that the last broken tea chests were pushed well away from the shallows. A brief uproar arose on the wharf as three men wrestled another to the ground, removed his coat, and emptied something out of his pockets into the water.

"Be off with you!" one of them shouted. "And think yourself lucky that we do not replace your coat with one of tar and feathers!"

"A fair return for filling his pockets with tea!" the old man murmured.

Someone called the apprentices in from their chore of drowning the tea in sea water. The "Indians" began to leave, some forming into groups and others slipping away by twos and threes into the darkness.

"A good night's work! December 16, 1773, will be long remembered." The cinnamon-scented woman spoke her first words of the evening and turned to lumber away, leaving Nabby exposed to a wind that was colder than ever. "No doubt we will pay dearly for it, too, but methinks it will be worth the price."

To Nabby's experienced eye, the tide was on the turn now, washing the tea closer to shore—no matter now, though, since it was well soaked with salt water. Enthralled with the scene, Nabby had quite forgotten that time was passing and that Master Butler might already have left for home. Whether or no, she must rush away at once. If she hurried, she would have time to climb safely into bed before he could remove his war paint and come abovestairs to check on his presumably sleeping household.

She ran at top speed through the lanes to Milk Street, hiding in the shadows from any other night travelers, although all seemed as anxious as she not to be seen. She clambered up the tree like a cat, tapped ever so softly on the window, and tumbled breathlessly into the room the moment the waiting Emily flung open the casement window.

"Safe," Nabby whispered, "thanks to you!" She rubbed Emily's cold hands with her own icy ones. "You have not caught a chill

waiting for me? I will tuck you warm in your bed again and perch alongside wrapped in my quilt, for what a tale I have to tell!"

She should almost have thought her tale was merely a dream that had vanished with the day except that Master Butler, eating his mush and milk in gloomy silence the next morning, had a small smear of red at the edge of his hair and a pair of damp boots drying by the fire. Lonzo, sullen-faced, sat picking at a torn pocket of his coat, a much-darned castoff.

"Off with your coat," Mistress Butler said in a resigned voice, "and Nabby will mend the pocket for you."

Lonzo muttered something about having a candlestick to deliver.

"You took that yesterday." Master Butler roused himself from a brown study.

Lonzo angrily passed the coat to Nabby.

"I will wait, then, while you stitch it up."

"You will not wait," said Master Butler. "You will go at once and make up the fire in the forge. You will not need a coat for that or for aught else today. We have the final buffing to do on a pair of mugs, after which I will go to the brass foundry to inspect some new molds."

"Molds for what, sir?" Nabby could not resist asking.

"A dram bottle for use," Master Butler said with a wry face, "and a pear-shaped teapot for beauty."

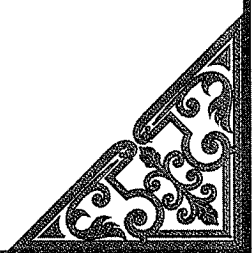
"More teapot molds?" Mistress Butler ventured. "With not a leaf of honest tea to be had in all of Boston?"

"And a pot-bellied creamer," he went on.

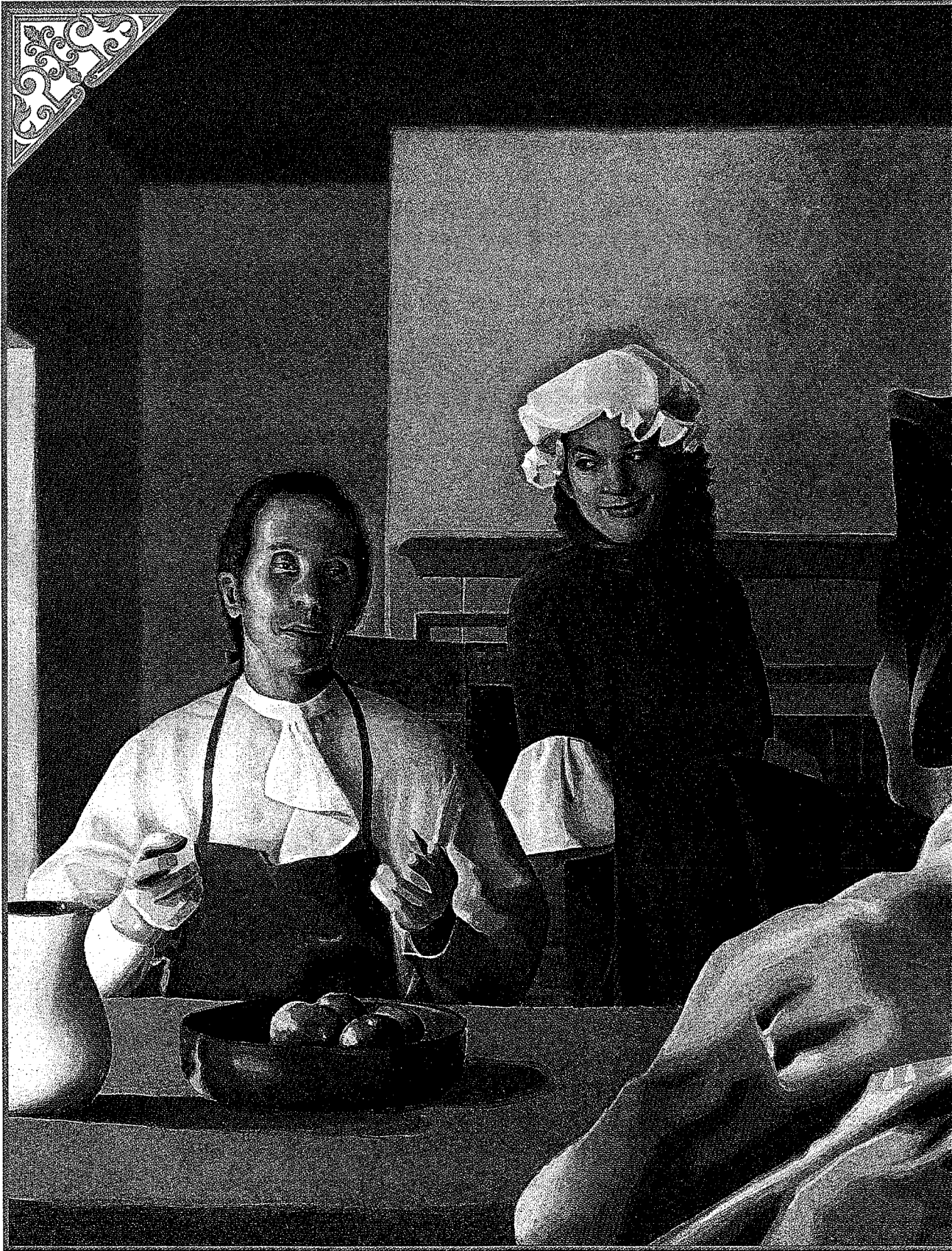
So it was going to be business as usual, as though last night had never been.

"Do not fear," Master Butler told his wife. "If I cannot come by some tin soon, I will be making nothing either for use or beauty." He halted Nabby as, with Lonzo's coat tucked under her arm, she prepared to go abovestairs for needle and thread. "How long before we may expect the *Boston Traveller* to return to port?"

Nabby shrugged. "Wind and weather play a part, sir." This was a fact of which Master Butler and everybody else in Boston were well aware. "The ship is not a fast one, she must often wait long in port for a return cargo, and the winter storms are to be feared." She counted







on her fingers. "She left Long Wharf the second week in November, and 'tis now December 17. Oh, sir, she can hardly return before the last of January."

He nodded gloomily. "So I feared. Well, we must still make do with pewter melted down from old pieces and hope to improve the alloy by adding small bits of this and that. The Worshipful Company of Pewterers in London is happy to ship chests of completed pewter pieces to the colonies to be sold, but they make sure that local craftsmen do not have the raw materials needed to make their own—another grievance to add to the ones we already have."

"Pray, sir," Nabby said demurely, "have you news of what befell last night? There was a great whooping and shouting in the street."

Master Butler gave her a sharp look. "The talk is that a tribe of Indians boarded the tea ships and threw all the tea into Boston Harbor."

Mistress Butler gave a little shriek. "Indians? Oh, Tobias, 'tis well that you forbade us to stir across the threshold."

And locked them in, to make doubly sure. Nabby let her glance stray thoughtfully to Master Butler's face.

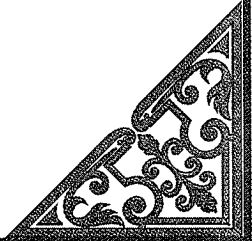
"Sir, I fear you have hurt yourself. There is a red streak just—"

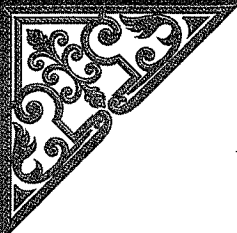
Mistress Butler fluttered to him. "Oh, Tobias, shall I fetch a cobweb to draw out the soreness?"

"No, woman, no!" Master Butler roared his way to the door. "I mislike this fretting and fussing over nothing—a brier scratch, at worst."

Nabby slid behind his back and abovestairs. What ever had possessed her to bait him in that fashion? Curiosity as to what he might reply was part of it, but also a wish to hear his version of last night's adventures. The only thing she had found out was that he did not intend to reveal his presence at the Boston Tea Party.

She sat down on the bed and sewed up Lonzo's pocket, taking care to reinforce the cloth underneath, which had been torn, too, as though caught on a splinter. She also checked the condition of the other pocket, not because she wished to oblige Lonzo but because care on this chore might convince Master Butler that she was a girl who could do painstaking work of other kinds as well.





As she turned the coat about, a sprinkling of something fell to the floor—a few leaves of tea, as she lived and breathed! So Lonzo had attended the tea party last night, too, ripping his coat as he broke out of his room. Nabby frowned. The tea leaves could mean that he had tried to make off with a whole pocketful of the stuff but had hastily disposed of it when he saw what befell the man who had been threatened with a coat of tar and feathers. Why, then, his reluctance to hand over the coat to be mended?

Nabby laid it out flat on the floor and felt over every inch of it. Not much to her surprise, a flat cloth-wrapped packet tied with twine was thrust deep into the ripped lining of the sleeve. She turned the package over and over in her hand, but curiosity was too much for her. She hurriedly undid the packet, which contained more tea, enough for many a cheering cup for those who could stomach the brew these days, mayhap the wives of British officials in town or of officers stationed at Castle William. Nabby stirred the leaves with her finger—bohea, the black tea much favored in Boston before true patriots gave up drinking it entirely.

So now what? In her hand Nabby held the means of ridding the household of Lonzo. Master Butler might overlook his sneaking out to attend the tea party, but he would never forgive his scooping up some of the hated tea and, Nabby felt sure, selling it wherever he might. With Lonzo gone, Nabby might have a chance to take his place, except— Except that she was a girl, and Master Butler was not yet ready to accept a girl as an apprentice, if indeed he ever would be.

Nabby picked up her little porringer, shimmering in the sun, and turned it over to admire the touchmark. Unwillingly she remembered Master Butler's words: "The touchmark is a pledge of my skill and my honor." Of skill Nabby had none, but honor— Her face clouded. Eager as she was to become a pewterer some day, she would never be able to look with pride at the touchmark she had chosen for herself, the sturdy sailing ship, if she got her start by bearing tales against even the shiftless Lonzo.

All the same, she would make sure that he did not profit from his pilfering. She opened the window and tossed the tea into a brisk breeze that scattered it over three rooftops. Then she tiptoed down the stairs, making sure to skip the step that creaked, and peered into the kitchen, where Emily sat alone.

With a finger at her lips, Nabby climbed onto the settle and took down one of the bunches of parsley that Mistress Butler had hung from the rafters to dry, along with various other herbs for medicinal tea and flavoring. Nabby darted back upstairs, rubbed the dark dried parsley between her hands to the consistency of tea leaves, and tied it up in the packet, which she put back into Lonzo's sleeve lining.

"Here is your coat, as good as new!" she announced cheerily at the doorway to the workroom. "You will hardly know it was torn."

Lonzo, turning the wheel for Master Butler, gave her a suspicious look and no thanks.

"Lay it on the bench there," he said.

"Mind your manners!" Master Butler was stern. "A word of thanks ne'er comes amiss."

Nabby did not wait to hear it but went back to whisper the whole story to Emily in the chimney corner, while Mistress Butler, back from a gossip with the neighbors, tended the shop, now more scantily stocked than ever. Master Butler had paid dearly for the hours he had spent at meetings, where Nabby was sure that every detail of the tea party had been readied for use in case the negotiations among the governor, the tea consignees, and the town meeting came to naught. Now, he must devote himself to pewtering again to make up for lost time.

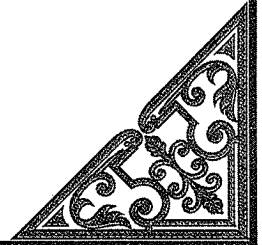
Will Truax came with spare broadsides for Emily's drawings and paused to warm himself by the kitchen fire and relay the latest news.

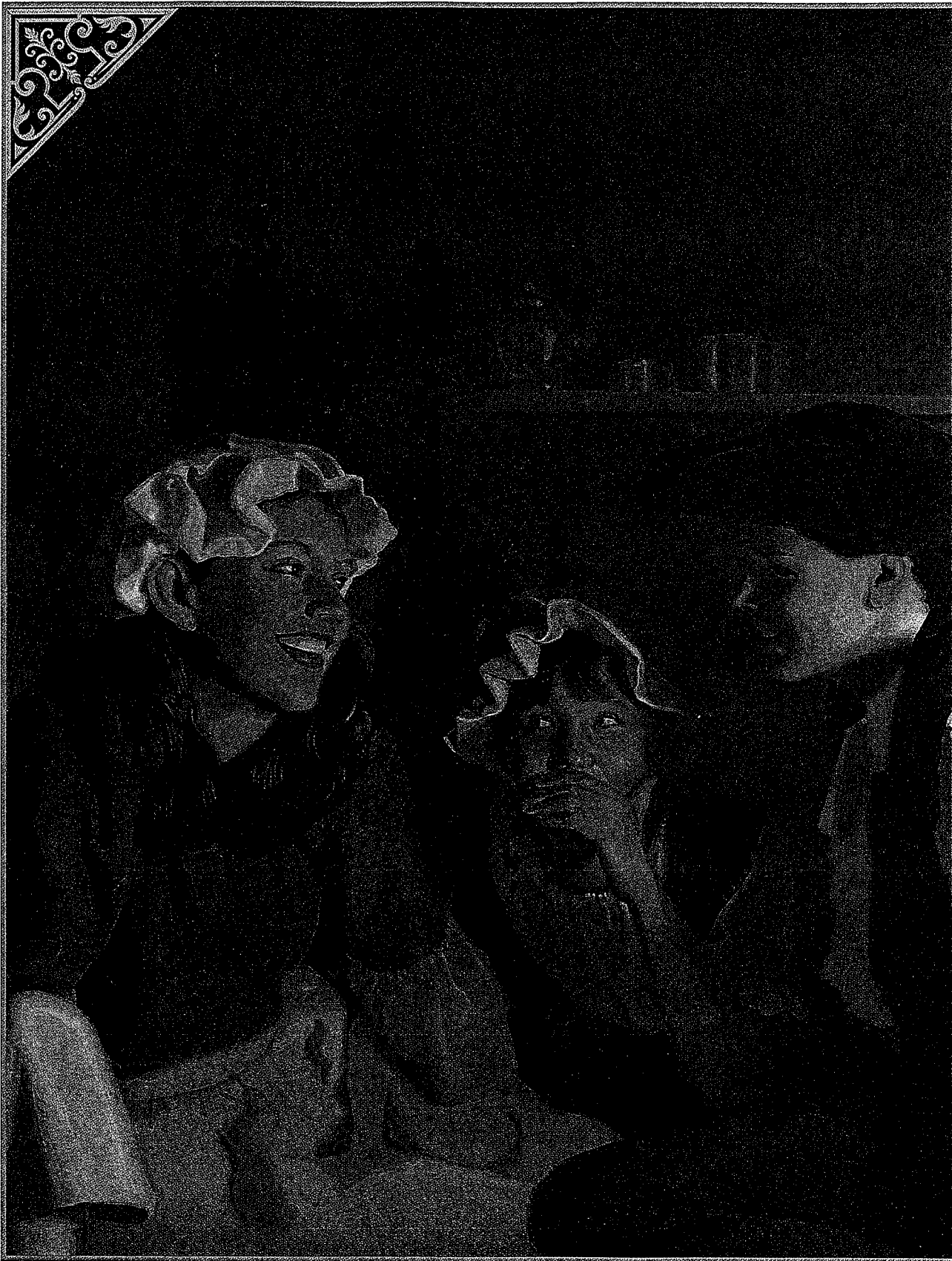
"Master Butler has told you what befell the tea? This morning 'tis a strange sight indeed, for the high tide has washed it down the shore like drifts of seaweed."

Emily smiled. "I shall draw it so, then, as well as making a sketch of you, Will Truax, standing on the deck of the *Dartmouth* tossing the tea chests over the side." She clapped her hands over her mouth and gave Nabby a horrified look. "Oh, Nabby, pray forgive my careless tongue. I forgot that—"

"No matter," said Nabby. "Will will tell no tales, any more than he will reveal who else was there, lest the British take their revenge against all who—"

"What's this?" Nabby turned to see Master Butler, in heavy coat and cocked hat, standing in the doorway. "Methinks, Nabby, you





know a great deal about last night's events for a young maid presumed to be at home asleep." His voice turned cold. "Did I not give orders that none in this household were to cross the threshold last night?"

"Sir, those were your very words, repeated to us by Mistress Butler herself."

Master Butler turned as red as the wattles of a turkey cock. "Do you deny that you were at Griffin's Wharf last night?"

Nabby put on her meekest expression. "Oh, no, sir. I was there. Pray do not think me pert, but I did not cross the threshold. I climbed down the tree beside our window."



Do you think Master Butler should accept Nabby as an apprentice? Why or why not?

What kind of person is Nabby? Use details from the selection to support your response.

Why does Nabby decide not to reveal what she found in Lonzo's coat? Do you agree with her idea of honor?

Why do you think Master Butler refuses to reveal his presence at the Boston Tea Party to his family?

**WRITE** Do you prefer to read fictional or factual accounts of historical events? Write a paragraph or two telling the kinds of things you can learn from each type of account and explaining your preference.