

# **BLOOD'S GAME**

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**ZAFFRE**

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First published in Great Britain in 2017 by

ZAFFRE PUBLISHING  
80–81 Wimpole Street, London W1G 9RE  
[www.zaffrebooks.co.uk](http://www.zaffrebooks.co.uk)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-7857-6204-8

*Also available as an eBook*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

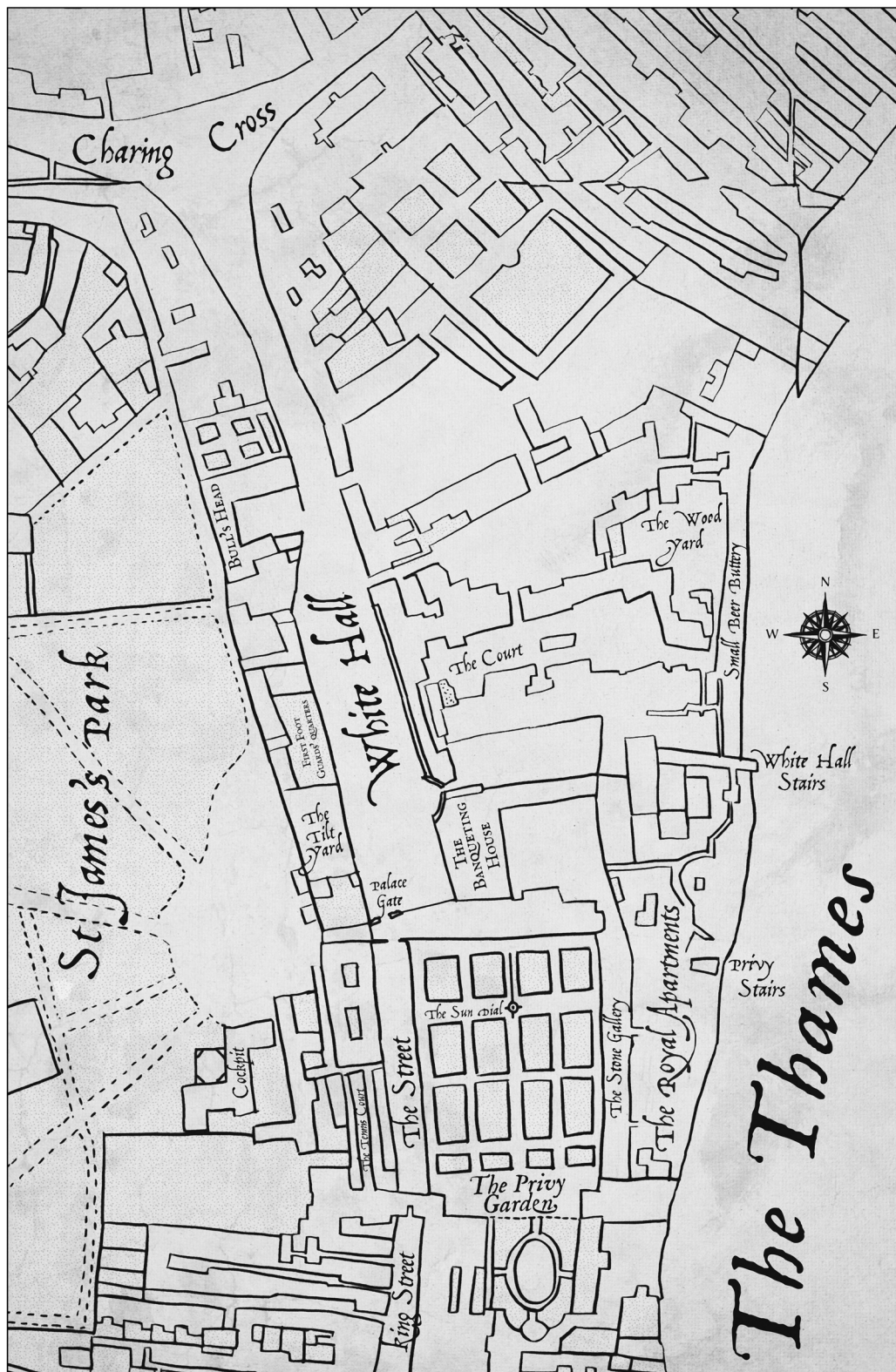
Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC



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a Bonnier Publishing company  
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# *Part One*

## *Wednesday 23 November, 1670*

As he picked his way through the muck and puddles of Cock Lane, Holcroft Blood found himself thinking about the queen of diamonds. She was the best-loved of all the fifty-two hand-painted Parisian playing cards that lay, dog-eared, grubby and tied up with a piece of string, in the pocket of his threadbare coat. She was his favourite; more than that, she was his friend.

She was not as dark-eyed and daring as the queen of spades, nor as honey-sweet as the queen of hearts, but she had an air of amused tolerance on her painted face that Holcroft found particularly appealing. She was attractive, he thought, without being sluttish: tall, slender, with brown eyes and a pile of blonde curls under an enormous black hat. An elegant black velvet choker with a large single diamond at the front enclosed her slim neck. Holcroft felt that she understood him, that she already liked and admired him, that, if only she were a real, flesh-and-blood person, she would truly be his friend – someone he could share his secrets with, someone to laugh with, talk with, walk with, someone who was always at his side.

Holcroft did not have friends – at least none who were not constructed out of card, linen, lacquer and lead paints. There was a stray dog that lived in the Shambles of which he was warily fond. He had a large number of noisy brothers and sisters, some of them living with him and his mother and the baby in the little cottage at the end of Cock Lane, Shoreditch, a village just north of the City of London. But he had managed, somehow, after fifteen years of life, to be completely without companions. He knew that he was different to other boys and girls – his mother had told him early on that he was special; his oldest brother Tom just called him a buffle-head. He did not like to look other people directly in the

eye, for example, it made him feel they were challenging him; he disliked change of any kind and surprises in particular, and he liked things to be neat and ordered at all times. Mess, even the smallest amount of chaos, was frightening and when he was scared the dizziness would threaten to overwhelm him. As a child, when this had happened, he had sometimes screamed and lashed out at those around him.

It seemed to Holcroft that being special made it impossible for other people to be friends with him, although God knows he had tried. They were not interested in the things he liked doing – counting all the visible bricks in the walls of the houses in Cock Lane, or recording the number and colour of the horses that passed by in the street in a single hour – and they drifted away, looking at him out of the side of their eyes or, worse, called him names and laughed at him. But Holcroft told himself he did not care: he had the queen, who was just as good as a real friend, right there in his pocket. He would talk to her later, when he had completed this errand for his mother and tell her about his day and what he had seen. She would be interested.

The pack of cards had been a gift from his father, Colonel Thomas Blood, on the occasion of one of his rare visits to the Cock Lane cottage. He usually came after dark, heavily cloaked and with his big black hat with the beautiful ostrich feather plume pulled down low. There were bad people, powerful people who wished him harm, he said, and who were best avoided. That was why he did not live with them and only came to visit on special occasions. When he did, the children would be evicted for the night from the big four-poster bed in the cottage's only upstairs chamber and had to sleep curled together like dogs by the hearth-fire on the floor in the parlour.

Holcroft did not mind. He enjoyed his father's visits. The colonel would drink his brandy and tell them stories of his adventures in the wars, when he had ridden at the head of his troop of gallant men in the cause of Parliament, fighting bravely to end the tyranny of

evil men – so many adventures, so many glorious battles, so many narrow escapes from death. Once, when he had come back from a trip abroad, he had given Holcroft the Parisian pack and showed him the four suits, the numbers on each card, and the interesting people painted on the royal cards. His father had introduced him to the queen of diamonds: she was a tough lady, he told him gravely, kind and clever but a little bit dangerous, too. Holcroft liked her immediately.

The Wheatsheaf was surprisingly full that Wednesday morning, when Holcroft pushed in through the door and made his way up to the counter. It smelled of tobacco smoke, old sweat and fresh-brewed ale and a whiff of urine in the mix as well. He stood on the stone flag before the counter, making sure to keep his shoes inside the mortar lines, and waited till the harassed tavern-keeper was ready to serve him. He put his mother's pewter pint pot on the wooden boards and passed the time by counting the small shiny blue-and-white tiles on the wall behind, and had just got to sixty-eight when . . .

'Your ma's usual order, is it, young Holcroft?'

'Three gills of Barbados rum, if you please, sir.'

'As I said, the usual.' The man dipped a measuring ladle into the rum barrel and carefully poured the brown liquor into the pint pot, three-quarters filling it. The sweet, pungent smell of alcohol burned in Holcroft's nose.

'And she's keeping well, is she, your ma?'

'She says she feels a little poorly today, sir. She says she just needs a drop of good Barbados to make her right.'

The tavern-keeper said: 'I'll wager she does. I saw her in here last night,' and gave a nasty little snorting laugh. 'She wasn't poorly then. In very high spirits, she was! Very cheerful. Cheerful as a lord, you might say.'

Holcroft said nothing. He stared at the counter. The man was chuckling.

'Just a joke, youngling – don't take offence.'



A joke – Holcroft wasn't good with jokes. They made no sense to him. The man had not said anything funny yet he was grunting like a madman.

Holcroft had his penny ready, held out in his open palm, and the tavern-keeper, taking his continued silence for a rebuke, took the coin without another word. Holcroft then placed his left hand flat over the top of the pot, grasped the vessel's handle with his right, turned and walked to the door.

'You should try a drop of rum yourself, lad. Do you good. Might put a smile on your face for once.'

Holcroft ignored the tavern-keeper and pushed out through the door and into the bright street. He turned right and began to make his way home. He had not gone more than twenty yards, carefully carrying the pewter pot in both hands to make sure it did not spill, while stepping round the brimming potholes in the unpaved street, when he heard the first cat-calls.

'Hey, jingle-brains, what you got there?'

Holcroft ignored the voice. He stepped over a dead dog and carried on walking down the street. It was only another hundred yards to his home.

'A tot for your cup-shot mummy, is it? Give us a sip, mummy's boy.'

Holcroft lowered his head and kept walking.

'I'm talking to you, blockhead. What you got in the pot?'

Holcroft finally looked round. There were three of them. Tough, lean, raggedy boys about the same age as he was, or a little younger, on the far side of the road. He knew their faces but not their names. It did not matter. He knew the type. He knew what would happen next. He looked ahead to the end of the street where his cottage was. He could run, but that would almost certainly mean spilling the rum. If that happened his mother would scream and weep and pull her hair out. He knew that they did not have another penny to replace the liquor if it was spilt.

One of the raggedy boys, the smallest one, ran ahead of Holcroft, and crossed the road barring his path. The two behind him

were closing in. Holcroft heard the litany of familiar taunts about his stupidity: 'Tom-noddy . . . buffle-head . . . ninnyhammer . . . nump-son . . .'

He could see a pair of squat, red-faced women, standing outside their front doors, strong arms folded, looking on with amusement as the predatory boys closed in around Holcroft. He did not like this. These boys were going to spoil his errand. His mother had given him strict instructions: go to the Wheatsheaf, buy the rum and come straight home. And he had tried his best to do just that. But these three were going to ruin everything. He felt sick and dizzy. By the side of the street he saw a mounting block, a waist-high cube of stone, with three steps cut into one side. He walked over to it and carefully placed the pewter on the top step.

Then he turned to face his tormentors.

The leader was clearly the biggest one – as tall as Holcroft, but thicker in the chest, and he moved with the rangy grace of a street cat. He had a shock of ginger hair, a wide grin and a black gap where his two front teeth should have been. The little blond one to Holcroft's left, the one who'd run ahead to cut him off, was of no account. He was a follower, and younger than the others by some years. The redhead's other companion, dark, bull-necked and vicious-looking, might be even more dangerous than the red.

Holcroft was no stranger to bullies. All his life people had objected to him in one way or another. And he had taken beatings with regularity until his older brother Tom, at his mother's tearful pleading, had reluctantly taken him aside and taught him the rudiments of pugilism and Cornish wrestling. Tom had then taken pleasure in knocking him down again and again, day after day, while he lectured his brother in the finer points of the fighting arts.

Holcroft did not think there was any point in saying anything to these three, so he merely jumped forward and pumped a straight left into the redhead's nose, smashing his head back. Then he dipped a shoulder and buried his right fist into his enemy's now-open belly. He hit him a third time, again with his left, and with all his weight

behind it, smack on the right cheekbone. The boy went down. Holcroft whirled, saw the dark boy nearly on him, fist raised. He blocked the punch and seized the boy by the lapels of his coat, pulled him in and crashed his forehead hard into the bridge of his opponent's nose. He felt the crunch of cartilage, and the boy's weight as he staggered, but Holcroft kept hold of him, shifting his position slightly as he brought his knee up smartly into the fellow's groin. Holcroft released him and the boy slid bonelessly to the ground.

The tall redhead was gasping and spitting blood, back up on his feet but tottering. Holcroft took his time and clubbed him on the join of the jaw with his right fist, hard as he could, then followed in with a left uppercut to the chin that cracked his teeth together and hurled him on his back into the mud.

He looked at the third one: the blond child. Both Holcroft's hands were hurting now, and he felt as if he were about to burst into tears, as he always did after a bout. He screamed, 'Haaaaa!' pushing his face right forward and scowling like a gargoyle, and the urchin gave a squeak and took to his heels. Holcroft looked at his two foes, now both curled in the mud, coughing, spewing, writhing feebly. He had nothing to say to them. He turned his back and went over to the stone mounting block to collect the pewter pot of rum. He looked, looked again and saw that the pot had disappeared.

The burly women spectators had vanished, too.

Holcroft's heart sank into his shoes. No rum for Mother now. He felt cold and tearful. He would never hear the end of this.

One eye cracked open: the iris blue as innocence, the white curdled and veined with decades of debauchery. It focused slowly on a fat black beam set in a lime-plastered ceiling. There had been a noise. Raised voices from the parlour beneath the bedroom: anger, a denial, insistence.

The second eye opened. The shaggy grey-brown head lifted from the damp pillow. Full-blooded shouting billowed up from below. Thomas Blood was fully awake now; he swung his long legs off the bed and stood, naked, a little dizzy, swaying, listening to the rumble of feet on the wooden stairs. Two fast strides and Blood stood beside the door, a flimsy thing of elm boards and ash laths. He slid the iron bolt home but knew it would not hold. He looked round the room. There was an empty wine jug and smeared glasses on the dresser; the dismembered carcass of a bird squatting in its own jelly and a basket of torn bread on the table by the window. The stale bedroom air reeked of chicken gravy, sour wine and sex. The girl was still asleep, her bright-auburn hair spread across the sheets like a splash of heart's blood, one pink breast lolling sideways against the ridges of her bare ribs.

He scooped a pair of mouse-coloured breeches from under the bed and was struggling to get one leg inside, his damp skin making the wool cling, when the pounding on the elm began.

'Blood! Colonel Thomas Blood – open up this damned door!' It was an educated voice for all its crude bawling, the voice of a man who was born to command.

Blood's head was encased in his linen shirt. He could smell the rancid funk of a dozen days' wear. But his arms were through now. He shoved the tails roughly into his breeches. *Where in the name of God were his boots?*

'Thomas Blood, open this door or we will break it down. Open up this very instant!'

'What? Who is it? We're trying to sleep in here!' Blood mumbled the words like a man still gripped by Morpheus. But he had found one of his boots and, hopping ludicrously, he managed to get it over his bare foot and stamp it into its proper fit. The girl was awake now, sitting up with the sheet clutched to her bosom, the back of one wrist rubbing her eye. Blood winked at her, gave her his best grin, equal parts big white teeth, lust and mischief.

'I order you in the name of my father, His Grace the Duke of Ormonde, Lord Steward of the Household, to open this door. Open the door by the time I count to three, or I swear I shall break it down.'

*So it's Ossary, thought Blood, Thomas Butler, Earl of Ossary. Ormonde's eldest. How did that arrogant pup track me down?*

'One moment, sir, the merest instant, if you please. Let me find a gown to cover my nakedness and I shall be with you directly!'

Blood strode over to the bed, swooped down and kissed the girl hard. He snatched up his silver-topped cane and his blue coat from the side table, jammed the black broad-brimmed hat with the white ostrich plume on his head, walked to the window and flung wide the shutters. Golden sunlight streamed into the room. He winced at the brightness of the morning.

'One!'

'I'm coming, sirs – have a little patience for the love of God.'

'Two!'

Blood jerked the sash window up and got one leg out. He blew the girl a kiss.

The girl gave him a languid wave.

'Three!' The elm boards shuddered as the weight of a man was hurled against them. But, astoundingly, the fragile door held.

'I've borrowed a shilling or two from your purse,' Blood told her.

'What! Hey . . . ' The girl sat fully up in her bed, dropping the sheet to expose her sleep-pink torso, naked to the waist.

'Knew you wouldn't mind, Jenny-girl.'

The door burst open. Three large young men in moss-green coats tumbled into the room, followed by a hatchet-faced man of some thirty-five years wearing a fine black periwig and an even finer scarlet cloak. The men froze, staring at the half-naked girl in bed.

'Keep the faith, my darling, we'll all come up smiling yet,' said Blood – and dropped from sight.

Blood landed awkwardly in the muck of the street and a shaft of pain lanced up his left leg. He was a big man, fifteen stones and an inch over six foot, but he was no longer as young as he had once been. There were threads of grey now in his shoulder-length chestnut locks, and his belly was no longer greyhound lean – too many years of drinking and fucking, too many years of fighting and running from the law had taken a toll on his once-endless strength. He felt old, and not for the first time.

He limped down Southwark Street towards the stables, shrugging on his long blue coat as he walked and, looking over his shoulder, he saw a thin angry face thrust out of the bedroom window he'd just exited.

'Halt in the name of the lord steward!' bellowed the Earl of Ossary. 'Halt or I shall give fire!'

Blood caught a glimpse of a pistol, a gleam of silver and polished brown wood. He gave the nobleman a cheery wave and hobbled onwards at his best speed. There was a bang and a splash from a long horse trough a yard to his right. *No one can shoot straight any more*, Blood thought. *If that over-bred dandyprat had been in my troop during the war, I'd have had him flogged bloody for wasting a bullet.* But the war had ended nearly twenty years ago and, despite a victory for Parliament, a King was now back on the throne of England and Royalist lickspittles like Ossary and his thief of a father were once more the most powerful men in the land – even if they couldn't shoot to save their souls.

Nevertheless, the worst shots did sometimes hit the target by accident and Blood did not care to be pistolled in the back by an incompetent lordling on a lucky day, so he limped onward a little faster and rounded the corner of the street with a sigh of gratitude.

Once safely out of sight, he paused for a moment to take stock, then plunged into a wide yard off the main thoroughfare tucked around the back of the tavern where a pair of horses were tied up to the rail and a short bald man in a leather jerkin was brushing

the mud from their coats. He touched the silver wolf's head of his cane to his hat at the startled ostler, gave him a wide easy smile, and walked on past without a word. A dozen steps later he pushed open the half door of a horse stall and called out: 'Up and at 'em, boys. Rise and shine. Barbarians at the gate!'

Two men, one small with a scarred face and a squint in his left eye, the other a great shaven-headed lump of bone, muscle and blubber half a head taller even than Blood, emerged from separate mounds of hay brushing strands from their sleep-creased faces.

'Ormonde's boy got wind of us somehow,' said Blood, reaching out a hand to the smaller of the two, a Yorkshire man who called himself William Hunt, hauling him upright. 'Some grubby little informer, I have no doubt, looking to earn a shilling or two. So, no time to dally.'

The other man, Joshua Parrot by name, lumbered past Blood and peered out of the open half of the stable door.

He said, 'What about the girl?'

'Oh, she'll be just fine. Ormonde might give her a lick or two, but Jenny can stand that; he won't be too savage. The old fool thinks he's in love with her. Jen will have him eating out of her hand by dinnertime.'

A moment later, Blood poked his head around the door of the stables. The ostler was gone. The muddy street was empty but for a burly fellow slowly rolling a vast barrel of beer towards the tavern's open trap door, a square hole in the street, and a scabrous urchin squatting by the wall and drawing patterns in the mud with a stick. The big wooden sign on the corner of the street displayed the gorily severed head of a turbaned Saracen creaking in the foul breeze that blew up the street off the River Thames.

'All clear,' Blood called and stepped out, his two mismatched lieutenants following, one at each shoulder. They had not gone more than five paces when they heard the sound of clattering boot-nails on granite cobbles. Five different men but in the same

gorgeous moss-green coats as the tavern intruders came hurtling around the corner. Blood stopped short. William Hunt barged into his broad back and cursed, 'Jesu!'

'Watch that blasphemy, Will,' Blood murmured. He saw cudgels, a sword or two, in the gang of Ormonde footmen in front of him. A thin pink-faced young footman in a white wig at the back was waving a horse pistol.

'Colonel, sir,' said Parrot, laying a meaty hand on Blood's right shoulder. He turned and saw three more men in moss-green coats come running around the corner that led to the tavern. A heartbeat later and the glossy black periwig of the Earl of Ossary could be seen behind them.

Five in front, four behind. Blood had faced worse odds and won.

'There!' said Will, pointing at a narrow alleyway on the other side of the street; a dark stinking tunnel, the upper storeys of the houses almost meeting above, blocking out the sunlight. The three fugitives ran across and dived into the square opening, sprinting into darkness. Their pursuers were no more than ten paces behind and hallooing like huntsmen in sight of their fox.

With every step Blood's ankle sent a lightning bolt of pain up into his groin. He caught his foot on something and went sprawling, splashing into filth. Parrot's massive hand seized him by the scruff of his coat and lifted him upright. There was light up ahead, the alley's end, and William Hunt's small frame was outlined in the white square, his arm outstretched towards them. There was a spark, a fizz and crack, then a spear of flame lashed out towards Blood. He could have sworn he felt the wind of the ball as it passed his cheek. A man cried out in pain from behind him, he heard shouts of outrage from the pursuing pack. A horse pistol fired in reply to William's shot, a deeper report, but Blood and Parrot were already out of the alley and following their companion who was running on ahead through the busy streets of Southwark, his head darting from side to side, questing for an escape route.



There were shouts of ‘Murderers!’ and ‘Stop them!’ from behind. But the crowds were thicker here, nearer the bridge. They jinked left into a quieter street, then right into an empty road. And right again. A dead end. Not a street or alley, but a short bay next to a large warehouse beside the river, fenced off from the slow brown ooze of the Thames, a place for carts to load cargo from the river barges before beginning the long journey down the Old Kent Road to the port of Dover. Parrot seized the iron-barred fence between them and the river and shook it with his full, colossal strength. It was like trying to shake a mountain. He looked at Blood and shrugged.

‘Didn’t fancy a swim much anyway,’ said Blood

The various cries of ‘Stop! Murderers!’ and ‘They went down here’ and ‘Watch your feet, you clumsy whoreson’ were very close now.

‘They will hang us for sure if they take us alive,’ said William, looking up pitifully into Blood’s face. He was more than halfway through loading his small pocket pistol, about to shove the wadded lead ball down the barrel with the slim wooden rammer.

‘But they’re not going to take us alive,’ said Blood, smiling boldly at the small man. ‘Not now. Not ever. So – as usual, lads, it’s *sauve qui peut*, God speed, and rendezvous at Romford tonight, yes?’

The two other men nodded: William Hunt miserably, Joshua Parrot wearing a mad, piratical grin. He had a five-foot-length of thick, rounded timber in his hands, a snapped-off wherry oar by the looks of it.

‘Keep the faith, boys, and we’ll all come up smiling yet.’

Blood twisted the silver wolf’s head of his cane, pulled off the black-lacquered wooden sheath and revealed a yard of slim shining steel blade concealed inside. He strode quickly to the exit of the loading bay and walked out and straight into the path of the surging mob.

‘Who wants to die first?’ he enquired mildly.

The crowd of men and women – now swelled to at least thirty strong – was momentarily checked by the sight of Blood’s naked

blade. At the back of the throng, Ossary called out: 'Seize them, you cowardly swine!' But no one leaped forward at his lordly word of command. They stared at Blood and the yard of needle-sharp steel twitching in his right hand.

It was Parrot's unexpected, roaring charge that scattered them. The big man came barrelling out of the loading bay past his comrade, the broken oar swinging. He smashed the wooden club into the head of a bald man in the moss-green livery, knocking him instantly to the floor. Parrot's second swipe knocked two tradesmen flying, sending a half dozen more members of the crowd leaping backwards. His third blow smacked into the belly of a fat, flour-dusted woman and she doubled over coughing. The compact mass had been broken apart; now Parrot was the focus of a semi-circle of terrified onlookers, kept at bay by the sweeps of his oar. Blood slipped in behind his comrade, his sword-stick licking out to skewer the right shoulder of the pink-faced young man with the horse pistol, just as he was about to fire into Parrot's broad back. The man howled and dropped the weapon with a clatter to the cobbles. He heard Hunt's pocket pistol crack behind him and another duke's man fell to his knees to his right, clutching his bloodied chest. Blood slashed at another fellow's face, a tradesman with a cudgel, cutting a flap of bloody flesh from his jaw. The man ducked aside moaning, gore spewing through his fingers. Blood dodged a flung fist, kicked a man in the groin. Now in the general melee, Blood took a hard shove to the back and found himself face to face with Ossary on the edge of the circle. The earl had an unsheathed rapier in his hand.

Blood lunged with the sword-stick at Ossary's right forearm, hoping to pink him and make him drop the weapon, but his opponent danced nimbly away from the steel. He came forward step-stepping and then went into the full lunge. Blood parried, driving the rapier high and wide, and attacked again. Ossary turned sideways, letting the sword-stick slide past his chest. Then the nobleman countered,

the longer blade lifting and lancing towards his opponent's heart. Blood cracked the rapier away to his left with the lacquered ebony haft of the cane, and stepped inside its reach. Ossary was wide open. A dead man if Blood lunged. An easy kill. But Blood hesitated for a split instant, sword-stick poised to skewer, then pushed the blade wide and barged forward, his shoulder and full fifteen-stone weight crashing into the slender earl's chest, knocking him to the cobbles.

Blood took a deep, gasping breath, wondering at his own mercy. He saw no one ahead of him, and no one on either side. He began hobbling as fast as his ankle would allow, back down the way he had come. He snatched a fast look behind him and saw Parrot still swatting petulantly with the broken oar at the few remaining members of the mob, but they were clearly beaten, backing into doorways to evade the swinging wood, others actually running down the street in the opposite direction. Two men in green were on their knees, bleeding busily on the cobbles. The fat woman lay curled around herself, vomiting and spitting. Ossary had lost his beautiful periwig and was sitting spraddle-legged on his cloak gaping at Blood. The rapier was four yards away from his right hand. There was no sign of William Hunt.

Blood saluted Ossary with his sword-stick, a flamboyant, sweeping gesture, then wheeled and hobbled onwards. He turned a corner, then another. There was no pursuit. He sheathed his blade. Pulled his wide-brimmed hat lower over his eyes, buttoned his coat up and strolled into the heavy traffic of the Borough High Street, allowing the press of the crowds, carts and horses to sweep him north towards the bridge. He glanced left at the yellow bulk of Southwark Cathedral, then right through the open gates of a coaching inn, and casually spun full circle to look behind him, going up on his toes and using his full height to scan over the bobbing heads. But there was no one – green-coated or otherwise – who seemed at all interested in his movements. As he came onto the bridge itself, under the grim row of rotting traitors' heads and

the ever-present flock of feasting, shrieking seagulls, he looked back one last time. No one following. He prepared himself to cross the brown water and enter the City of London.

His ankle hurt like ungreased buggery, his shirt was sweat-soaked and there were splashes of wet mud and bright gore on the turned-back sleeves of his big blue woollen coat, but the blood sizzled in his veins from the morning's exertions. He felt good. Damn good. His head felt clear and sharp. Which was just as well: he had a deal of business to conduct this day.

His Majesty Charles the Second, by the grace of God, King of England, Scotland, Ireland and (in deference to the long-defunct claims of his ancestors) France, Defender of the Faith, Knight of the Garter, etc., etc., gave another mighty strain. His face glowed, the fat veins in his temple swelled. His abdominal muscles clenched, unclenched, clenched again. Nothing.

'It's no use, Grenville,' he said to the groom of the close stool, a greyish, careworn courtier who stood beside him in the closet, proffering a large wooden box stuffed with lambs' wool. 'I'm locked up as tight as a pair of Cornish wrestlers.'

Sir John Grenville grimaced. As a Cornishman, he did not much like his compatriots being compared to blocked bowels, even royal blocked bowels. He took a tiny step backwards – there was not a lot of room to spare in the closet – and eyed the King, who was sitting naked from the waist down on a large, ornately carved oak box with padded velvet seat, a generous oval hole cut in it and a wide porcelain bowl hidden in the darkness beneath. Outside the closet the King's new mistress, that smart-mouthed whore Nell Gwyn, should be dressing herself after her morning's exertions and preparing for her discreet departure. Indeed, Grenville hoped that she had left the royal apartments in the Palace of White Hall and was

already back in her own lavish rooms. He did not want the King to be enticed into another noisy and prolonged bout once he'd finished his business in here.

'Sire,' he said. 'Perhaps we should abandon this most gallant attempt. The duke has been awaiting your pleasure in the red audience chamber this past hour or more.'

'Let him wait. Which one is it again?'

'Which one, sire?'

'Which duke, blockhead. There are only two who constantly seem to delight in robbing me of what little leisure I am granted: Buckingham and Ormonde. Which one is it?'

'It's His Grace the Duke of Buckingham who seeks an audience with you, sire. He has been waiting more than an hour.'

The groom of the close stool was indulged certain liberties with the King. As well as his more odoriferous duties, or perhaps because of them, he was the King's closest advisor. A man who was privy – in all senses – to His Majesty's most intimate secrets.

'I don't much care if he waits all morning. Buckingham, eh? So what does he want? Tell me honestly, Grenville.'

'Honestly, sire? Honestly, he wants power, as Your Majesty knows very well. He wants to enrich himself at Your Majesty's and the country's expense. He wants more influence and more money. So does the Duke of Ormonde, for that matter. So do the whole pack of them: Arlington, Clifford, Lauderdale and Ashley. They all want the same thing. Every man in your ministry. But what His Grace the Duke of Buckingham *says* that he wants, is to discuss the current, uh, grave situation with regard to the royal finances.'

'Sounds terribly boring.'

'Indeed, sire, I doubt it will be overly stimulating, but it might be wise not to irritate him more than is necessary. He now has considerable sway in both Houses and his influence is growing.'

Charles had returned from exile in the Low Countries ten years ago in a state of near-beggary and Parliament had been obliged to

vote him an annual sum from the Treasury, more than a million pounds sterling, to allow him to live in a suitably regal state. Both Houses considered the amount generous, princely even. The King himself – and his many courtiers, servants, ministers, mistresses, friends, relations and dependants – entirely disagreed.

‘Sire, perhaps we should abandon the struggle for today.’

‘Wait, wait a moment! I think I might have something.’

The groom of the close stool shut his eyes. The proffered box of lamb’s wool was beginning to feel as if it were filled with lead.

After a painful stretched-out silence, the King let out a long, trembling, eerily high-pitched trumpet-blast.

‘Sire? May we now agree that we are done for today?’

‘Wait, wait, wait. Yes, there is more. Yes, by God!’ He groaned like an exhausted heifer trying to give birth.

There was a tinny sound – a ping like a spent pistol bullet hitting a steel breastplate. Sir John Grenville jerked with surprise.

‘That will do, by God. Pass me the wool box, Grenville, and let’s go and see about this damned impatient, importunate and grasping duke.’

The Duke of Buckingham stared at a huge tapestry that occupied the entire side of the red audience chamber. It must be thirty-feet long and twenty-feet high and by the look of its quality it had been made in Flanders, probably Oudenaarde. It depicted Julius Caesar returning in triumph to Rome having subdued the barbarians of Gaul. The *Imperator* was mounted, his hand raised flamboyantly in the air, as if he were in the midst of declaiming, his officers, all on foot, clustered round gazing up adoringly. In the background a pack of deer hounds gambolled in a forest.

Buckingham hated it. He had seen it a score of times before at audiences with the King and at meetings with his ministers in this

very room, but he had never noticed until now that Caesar had a marked resemblance to His Majesty – the same long nose in a long horsey face, thin moustache and long luxuriant chestnut hair; although he seemed to remember from his long-ago schooling that Caesar had famously been bald, and he knew for certain that Charles's own sparse hair was covered by a shockingly expensive chestnut periwig – a cost of 800 shillings, one of his spies had told him!

Buckingham found himself surprised by his own lack of perspicacity. The tapestry was a metaphor, of course, for King Charles's restoration to the throne. How could he not have seen it before? And how typically crass it was of this beggarly monarch to compare himself to mighty Caesar. The Roman had conquered swathes of the world, had made himself master of the greatest city on Earth. In contrast, Charles had lost a bloody civil war, fled into exile, and scurried back to London nearly a decade later when England had grown sick of the Protectorate's joyless, iron-fisted governance.

The man was a mere popinjay, a mountebank who couldn't keep his prick in his breeches for five minutes, who thought that scattering grand titles, pensions and perquisites to his toadies, mistresses and bastard children was the same as governing his kingdoms. Caesar had always known the value of money, which could scarcely be said of Old Rowley, as the wits called Charles behind his back because of his resemblance to the racehorse of that name. He spent money like a boatswain in a brothel – and would he listen to his closest friends, men who had been childhood companions, on grave financial matters? No, he humiliated them by making them wait for him to finish tugging his latest whore – that actress chit who was no doubt soon to be ennobled as the Countess of Lift-My-Skirts. Or whatever the hell the King was doing that morning besides wasting the duke's precious time.

Buckingham's vitriolic thoughts were interrupted by a door on the far side of the room banging open and the sight of the King

striding long-legged into the room dressed in a vast purple silk robe, matching purple silk slippers with huge purple silk bows and accompanied, as ever, by the dour Sir John Grenville and a dozen floppy-haired, yapping spaniels. A pair of young white-wigged footmen, splendid in scarlet and gold, held the doors wide open to allow the boisterous dog pack to tumble into the room.

'Hail, Caesar,' muttered the duke as he made his low and elegant bow. As he straightened, he unconsciously adjusted his long grey silk waistcoat. He said, much louder, over the sounds of the excitedly barking animals: 'Your Majesty, how gracious it is of you to favour me with your presence this morning. May I say how extraordinarily well you are looking today, magnificently regal, 'pon my word of honour.'

The King merely nodded at him and muttered 'Buckingham' before turning to one of the footmen and saying: 'Bring me wine, and some of those almond biscuits. Oh, and see if there is any of that honeyed pork left from last night – my darlings love it. Yes you do, don't you? Yes, you do!'

The King knelt among the leaping throng of dogs, stroking heads and allowing the eager animals to lick his hands and face. Buckingham struggled to conceal his rising disgust – as usual, he failed.

Finally the King rose and said: 'A little cheese too. A pair of roast ducklings. And oranges. I must have at least a dozen of those sweet "China" oranges! Nell tells me they are particularly good for my bow—' He stopped.

'Sire, pray do not forget, you are dining with the First Lord of the Treasury in less than an hour,' said Grenville.

'I am hungry now – don't you see? Not in an hour. Now. And my little darlings deserve a treat. They have been ever so patient today.'

Sir John Grenville held his tongue and one of the scarlet footman padded away silently to convey the royal command to the kitchens. The King turned to Buckingham, clapped his hands briskly, then rubbed them together in anticipation of the food. He had not been



idle this morning: he had barely broken his fast with a slice of bread and cheese, and then had swum across the Thames and back, twice, before taking his new mare Titania for a hard gallop in St James's Park and returning for a delightfully energetic encounter with little Nell in the royal bedchamber. She was a demanding minx, if ever he had known one. He had earned a snack, he thought to himself, even if there were a tedious dinner to attend afterwards. It was not as if he was overweight. For a man of forty years he was as wiry as a stripling and tall with it, six foot three inches in his stockings, and the royal prick, with a little loving encouragement, could still make itself as stiff and as splendid as the golden sceptre of state.

'As Sir John reminds us, I have a dinner engagement soon and so I regret, Your Grace, that our conversation must be distressingly brief.'

'It is an honour to have even a moment of your time, sire.'

'If you say so, well, then, yes . . . So what was it that you wanted? And, as I say, do please try to be brief.'

'As your loyal Master of the Horse, sire, I have some limited purview over the expenditure of the royal household. And it has come to my attention, sire, that you recently purchased a pretty sea-going vessel for your private use . . .' Buckingham drew a piece of yellow paper from his wide coat pocket ' . . . a ship of eighty-six tonnes, measuring fifty feet in length, designated His Majesty's yacht *Saudades*. And coming in at a cost of . . .'

'What of it?' The King cut him off. 'Did you come here to waste my time with this? I bought a pleasure boat. So what? I prefer to travel by water, if it is at all possible. Is that such a terrible crime?'

'No crime, sire, certainly no crime but . . .'

'What is it? Spit it out, man.'

The dogs were still milling around the King's feet, occasionally a black one would bounce up and lick at his hand.

'Down, duchess, down,' said the King. 'Your little treat is coming soon. Daddy promises. It will be here very, very soon, my love.'

'Since you already own *eleven* royal yachts, sire,' Buckingham continued, 'do you really feel that this purchase was absolutely necessary given the many and varied calls upon the royal purse?'

The King glared at the duke. 'It is to be a gift – a special gift for the queen, if you must know. *Saudades* means home-sickness or sadness or some such nonsense in her native tongue. She wishes to use it when she travels to Portugal to see her family. You surely cannot object to me buying a small token for my beloved Catherine?'

'Sire, I would that you could buy a hundred yachts, even a thousand. But as we have discussed before, there is a lamentable shortfall in the royal accounts. There is a limit to the amount of money that you can spend. The well is not inexhaustible. For example, I have here a receipt for £2,800 for a jewel, another present for the queen, and here I see you spent £6,000 on a pair of diamonds for one of her ladies-in-waiting. There was a banquet last month in which you spent £1,000 on French pastries . . .'

'And they were perfectly delicious. I must eat, must I not? Otherwise I would starve. And I must entertain my friends.'

The King and his minister looked at each other in silence.

'He does have a point, sire,' murmured Grenville.

'Oh, be quiet, you. You're supposed to be on my side.'

'It is not about sides or factions,' said Buckingham. 'You must at least attempt to curb your wild spending, sire, or disaster will surely follow. If you were to return the yacht to the boatyard . . .'

'No, Buckingham, by God, no. I am the King. I must be seen to be generous. *Largesse*, man, *largesse* is the mark of a great King. A certain carelessness with his finances befits a monarch. I absolutely refuse to scrimp and snivel like some damned pauper. I did enough of that abroad.'

The footman returned at that moment with a dozen more servants and began to lay out a large table with food and drink.

'I must speak plainly, sire. There is no more money to be had. This year's parliamentary subsidy is spent. We cannot borrow any

more against the next. Your expenditure far exceeds your revenue, and has done every year since . . . for every year of your glorious reign so far. Even the richest men in the country are balking at making any more advances to the Crown. But, sire, I do have a simple solution. Perhaps if you were to appoint me to the position of Lord Steward of the Household, I might be able to overhaul the royal expenditure and find some—'

'Now we get to the nub,' said Charles. 'Now the meaning of all this nonsense becomes plain. Are you not rich enough already, my lord, that you would seek to mulct me of more? I have forgiven your many crimes, I have forgiven your spying on my every move, your prying into my private affairs, for the comradeship we shared as children. I have raised you up to be among the highest in the land, and this is how you repay me? No, Buckingham, no, I will not make you lord steward. I have one already. His Grace the Duke of Ormonde has the white staff – not that he does me much good in that post. And no, I will not count my pennies like some beggar in the street. You say there is no money – and in the same breath you seek a plum post worth tens of thousands of pounds a year. If you wish to be the lord steward of my household, then you must prove yourself worthy. Find me some money.'

One of the spaniels, reacting to the King's angry tone, stood at Buckingham's feet and yapped sharply up at him. The rest of the pack was distributed around the room, sniffing in the corners and behind the chairs. One red-and-white animal by the window was managing with ease the defecatory act that had so troubled the King earlier that day. The duke ignored the bouncing dog at his feet. He scratched his smooth chin, pretending to think. 'We could go back to Parliament, sire. I have a good many friends there. If we put the facts before them, if we pleaded, if I dropped a word in certain ears then maybe something might be arranged.'

'No, Buckingham, we tried that at the last session. I went to them cap in hand, as you told me to, whining like a workhouse

orphan, and they rebuffed me, a parcel of bloated shire knights, greasy small-town merchants, fox-hunting farmers – and the rogues had the gall to say nay to me. I was humiliated. No, sir, we shall not go again to the Commons. Those fellows, or men just like them, murdered my father. Never forget that. You may be sure they have not. I must have money – very good, I accept that as the bald truth – but you must find it for me. I do not care from under which rock you find it. But find it. And quickly!’

When the Duke of Buckingham had left the chamber, the King turned to Grenville. ‘And you, sir, for your he-has-a-point-sire treachery, you can peel me a pair of God-damned oranges for my poor solid bowels.’