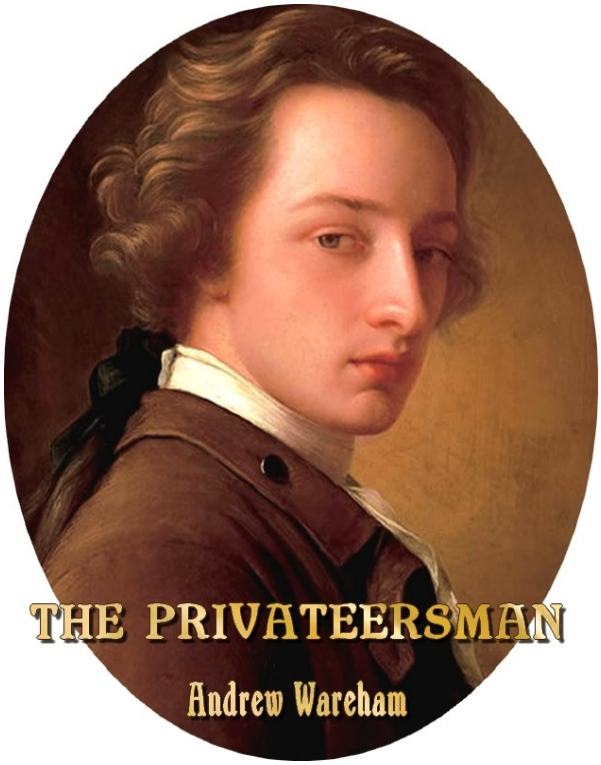
THE PRIVATEERSMAN

Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Andrew Wareham



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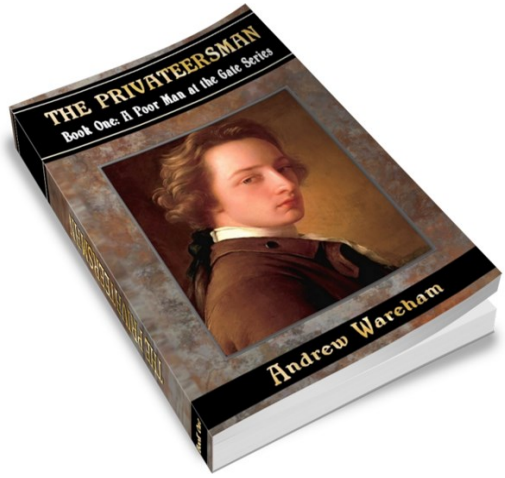


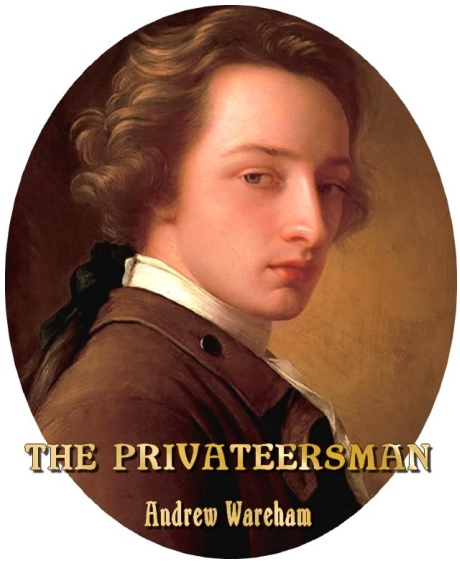
Language: UK English Spellings and Word Usage

Contents:

Introduction

Young Tom Andrews, a small-time smuggler in Dorset, escapes the hangman's noose only to find himself shanghaied onto a privateering ship. The ship plunders its way across the Caribbean, before he and crewmate, part Carib freeman, Joseph, flee to America carrying illicitly obtained booty. They prosper in the vile corruptness of New York - a town destined to be on the losing side in the Revolutionary War. Betrayed and forced to return to England, they seek riches in the early industrial boom. Their shady deals and dubious acquisitions in coal, iron and cotton yield great wealth. Tom relishes the money, but also secretly yearns for love and social acceptance. His hopes rise on meeting the beautiful daughter of an impoverished aristocrat.

Author's Note: I have written and punctuated *The Privateersman* in a style reflecting English usage in novels of the Georgian period, when typically, sentences were much longer than they are in modern English. **Editor's Note:** Andrew's book was written, produced and edited in the UK where some of the spellings and word usage vary slightly from U.S. English.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter One

Running, never stopping, a slow trot most of the time, a little faster where the fields were open and he might be seen; it was easier not to think when you were moving, not to remember the blood and the screams and the smell of a man's guts opened and spilling out of his belly; pushing on and on, never a backwards look, choosing always the quickest, flattest path, left or right as was convenient to avoid villages or isolated farmhouses, making sure only that he never turned back on himself. Eyes wide open and his head turning from side to side, watching to spot every piece of cover in case he might need to hide, ears straining for the beat of hooves behind him – he would have a minute at best from the first sound, time to conceal himself, to hide from the searchers beating every bush or die. They would be angry, their mates' blood still wet on their boots, in no mood to take prisoners – discovery would be followed by a slashing sabre however high your hands might be.

He had to make some miles first, then he could decide where he should go – somewhere far away, a great distance eventually, but he had to make for a mid-way point, somewhere to get himself together, to become inconspicuous. He was a coastal man, known as such, so it made sense to head straight inland in the beginning, but he would have to get back to a port, to some place where he would not stand out. He could not hide himself in a farming village, never having walked behind a plough or dug a ditch or swung a scythe in his short life – he would stick out like a sore thumb on a farm. Make towards Yeovil for the hours of darkness and then he would

have to turn east or west, back to the sea, but only after a day's sleep; he was tired now, two days of hard sailing followed by the ambush on landing, the energy-sapping fight and the panicked, immediate flight had exhausted him. You didn't get to run much on a fishing boat; you built muscles in chest and arms from the ropes and nets, and the occasional loading in a French port, but you would not run for more than thirty foot at most, and his legs were passing that message to him. No matter, if he was to live then he must push a little harder, force himself not to stop till the first dawn and sun enough to see what he was doing when he chose a place to lay up.

He found an area of old woodland just before full light, down in a shallow valley bottom, mostly blackthorn with bracken and brambles under it, good cover, impassable to a horse. He worked his way out of sight, swearing as the briars snagged his skin, heaved bracken fronds up into a nest and disappeared from view, head and shoulders covered by his old leather jerkin in case of rain; he fell asleep quickly, his bruises aching, worrying and grieving his dad, but not enough to defeat the exhaustion and keep him awake.

He was hungry and thirsty when he stirred in mid-afternoon; there was nothing to be done about the hunger, that would have to be put up with, but he could hear a small stream a few yards away. He sneaked through the little coppice, low to the ground, looking around nervously – there could be children playing or out gathering firewood, this would be just the place to pick up sticks for kindling, the ground was always dry under the thick tangle of blackthorn. The woodland filled the little valley but he could just see the hillsides through the branches, chalk downs, the one empty, the other running a flock of sheep – never a shepherd in sight, he would be up high where he could watch over everything without having to walk too far, but his dogs would check out any movement that might be threatening. He found the stream, saw that it ran clear over a bed of gravel; no cattle and no village within sight, with any luck the water would be safe; he had no choice, in any case, he had to drink. He tasted a handful cautiously, there was no taint and he could see half-inch long minnows swimming nearby - no fish in foul water, not as a rule. He drank his fill, knowing that if it was bad then his chance of escape was gone – if the spotted sickness did not kill him directly, he would be laid up for a month, with no food or shelter, dying slowly unless he showed himself in a village and gave himself over to the constable or overseer or beadle, whichever it might be. He glanced in a still pool, winced at the bruise showing across his cheek where a flailing backhand had scraped him; there was blood matted in his hair, contrasting dark red streaks against his light, reddish-brown mane – it wasn't his and he scrubbed hurriedly at it, revolted, stomach turning. For the rest, it was just the face he was used to, square, blue-eyed, heavy on the chin – a typical local appearance – he didn't look any different at all for the men he had killed; nor should he, bloody butchers – they had shot without saying a word, with no warning at all, no chance to put their hands up – they had deserved all they'd got.

He had gone out with his father, no other crew on a thirty-footer, before dawn, as normal, but had headed straight across the Channel rather than south of west to their normal fishing grounds; three times running in the past week they had come in with their small fish-hold less than half-full, the fish weren't about to be caught so they had to make their money the other way. Into a small inlet on the Normandy coast on the second dawn, tying up at the wooden jetty that stuck out into the river, waiting to be noticed; if they were ignored for a couple of hours they would know there was no cargo to hand and would cast off, never a word spoken. A villager trotted out to them in the first ten minutes, glanced at his father's face and nodded recognition; a few minutes after that and a donkey cart appeared, fully laden with small barrels of brandy, a couple of longshoremen walking beside it. Three cart loads over as many hours and the fish-hold and all the other spaces below the deck were packed full, even their tiny cabin taken over. The tide

turned soon after noon and they sailed out, tacking slowly against the on-shore breeze, making a slow offing then a long leg to the south-west before beating their way across almost to the Devon coast so as to pick up with any other boats that were out, to seem to be just another fisherman. As they opened Torbay next afternoon they spotted an inshore crabber, their contact, and his father waved a red-striped jersey three times over his head before tacking a couple of miles out to sea to wait for full darkness; there would be a shore-party waiting to take their load when they ran up on the shingle in the cove below their cottage.

The party was there and so were dragoons and Excisemen, armed and impatient.

It was before mid-summer so the fields would be empty of anything edible, and he did not dare go into a village to try to buy bread – leaving aside that there might not be any sort of shop, was none in most villages so that he would have to knock on doors and ask to buy food, he would be seen, remarked on, possibly questioned, certainly remembered and commented on. It would take at least another day for hunger to weaken him; he had gone longer than this without food in dad's boat several times when bad winds had held them out longer than expected and he knew that a couple of days starvation was a nuisance, no more. The sun was westering and he needed to make distance and a decision; eastwards, in all probability, was best – Poole was not too far away, Portsmouth less than a week's walking, and both were big ports where there would be a way out. West was too long a walk, whether he tried for Bristol or the south coast; Poole was better, not only nearer but home to merchant shipping with a wage and the chance to sign off legally or to buy a cabin passage, he had enough money for that; Portsmouth meant navy, heaved aboard ship willy-nilly and off to fight the war in America for little money and that paid a year late. Getting to America was probably a good idea, but not in a naval ship, if it could be avoided; desertion was always possible, but it could be a damned nuisance to organise from all he had heard. Either way, he had to get there yet and he was probably no more than ten miles from home in a straight line and the hunt would be up, though he suspected they would be after the other four who had taken to their pack-horses and gone off on the highway, making for the Bristol road and hoping to out-distance any pursuit.

"Not a chance! Bloody fools," he said aloud, for the comfort of hearing a voice as he slipped from tree to tree, crouching in the hope of concealing his six foot frame. He was big, even for a Dorset man, and he still had some growing to do, he was only just sixteen. He sat in the last cover, suddenly found tears flowing as he saw his father turning to him in last night's darkness and shouting to run and then the blood spurting from his mouth as he fell and a dismounted dragoon, clumsy in his heavy boots, charging him waving a sabre, mouth open, panting. Wearing light shoes, slipped on as he landed, he was much quicker on his feet, grabbed the flailing arm and snapped it and took the sabre and ran forward at the others stood by his father…

He had no time to weep, not if he was to live.

The woodland came to an abrupt end with a ditch and then rough pasture with a couple of dozen cattle; he could see the roofs of a small village a half mile or so ahead; not large, there were no more than seven or eight cooking smokes visible, and most of the labourers' wives would have the stew pot on by this time of day. He did not know the area, but thought it might be one of the Piddles, not so far from Dorchester. If that was the case then he needed to keep a bit north of the town before working his way cross-country – there was a barracks with dragoons in Dorchester, and it was a fair bet that they would be out, patrolling the highways and maybe poking their noses down the bigger lanes. He was too well-bruised to deny that he had been in a

fight, had obviously been out all of the previous night, sleeping rough, and would be taken up on sight. He stared all round, plotting the route he would take when night fell.

Over the shoulder of the empty down on his right, the bare turf easy to walk on in the dark and just enough of a moon to see rabbit holes; it would probably be possible to see the streak of the roadway down in the valley as well, a guide to follow, to give him a rough direction. That road would eventually lead him to Poole, he thought; he had seen the port, but only from the sea, at a distance when they were following the herring run down the coast. Still, the hills of Purbeck would give him an unmistakable landmark; he could not get lost.

He kept as low on the hillside as he could, just above the rough of the valley, so as not to outline himself against the skyline – there was probably no need to be so careful, none of the locals ventured out at night further than to the beer house and back, but there was no need to take any risks at all, not if he wanted his neck to stay unstretched. Five miles, two hours of slow walking, brought him to the far side of the down where he had the problem of what to do next: the lowland was clay, waste land in an unenclosed manor, left uncultivated by tradition and because it was held in common usage so that it was worth nobody's while to spend out to clear it and make fields. It was covered in blackthorn and sloe bushes and brambles and nettles and patches of boggy reeds and rushes – slow ground to walk in daylight, impassable at night, so he could stick to the high ground and go miles out of his way to the north or follow the track through the middle. The waste would provide plenty of hiding places if he had to run, and he would be able to hear any party of horsemen in the very unlikely case that they were out at night; there would be no picket lying in wait, not on so small a lane in such an out-of-the-way place. He worked his way to the dirt path and stretched out in a fast walk to the south and east.

He was wide awake, alert, watching everything, head never still. After an hour he spotted a black shape perched on a low branch near the track, hunched over, not upright like an owl – a pheasant from its size, strayed a mile or two from a sporting squire's coverts. He cast about him, found a heavy stick, two fingers thick and a foot or so long; a fast throw from five yards and the bird was down, in his hands, neck wrung and tucked away inside his jerkin; it was poaching, in the close at that, but he was not too worried about standing before the Bench for that charge, poaching only carried transportation and they'd be hanging him first,

Just before dawn the heavy clays ended and he moved out onto heathland, the sandy soils much drier and carrying only a waist-high vegetation of furzes and bracken, the gorse bushes just showing their golden flower, dense and impenetrable to horsemen. A man on foot, however, who knew what he was doing, could find dry cover in the foot or two of clear space between the lowest branches and the ground, crawling carefully underneath, pulling an armful of soft bracken fronds to cover the prickles and provide some warmth, looking out warily for the adders who also loved this cover. He slept undisturbed till late afternoon, then plucked and drew the bird, brushing the ants off it, and moved a couple of hundred yards away, still in cover, and pulled together a tiny fire of dead, dry twigs and stems, hot but almost smoke-free. He spitted the pheasant and waited patiently, turning it every few minutes until he was certain it was cooked all the way through; he dared not risk loose bowels, not if he was to keep moving fast.

He ate the tough, dry, unhung meat, forcing it all down despite its lack of flavour, and moved again, a good half a mile away from the fire and smell of cooked food, laid up a few yards back from the road, waiting for darkness and safety. An hour before twilight his caution was rewarded as a large party of horsemen came into view. A full squadron of dragoons trotted slowly by, looking left and right, scanning the verges, coming from the direction of Poole and heading towards their barracks in Dorchester, at a guess. They were heavies, he noted, carrying carbines

in saddle buckets and long, straight swords, not the lights he had met at the shoreline and who had used shorter, curved sabres. That meant at least two regiments quartered in the area, and maybe a dozen squadrons out, sufficient to cover all of the roads, including the highway to Bristol. Fugitives on slow pack-ponies would certainly have been run down, probably within a very few hours. If he was lucky, *very* lucky indeed, they might be content with them, might not even become aware of a fifth on foot; more likely they would question the four they had taken and then offer King's Evidence to one so that he could not only save his neck, but could expect early freedom. The four would obviously blame everything on the fifth, the one who was not there to give his side of the story – not that he had much to offer, nothing that would save him from the hangman – and give his name and all they knew of him. Say one day to catch them and bring them back to barracks and then another day to wring them dry . . . the hunt would be up with a vengeance by tomorrow, the countryside aswarm with militia and cavalry combing the areas they had not covered yet. He needed be lying-up in town by tomorrow noon at latest, so he must run the most direct road tonight, there was no choice; he could not risk detouring inland in the hope of throwing them off the scent, he must get to Poole and on board a ship.

The track quickly led him to the highway, such as it was; it was an old road, not a modern turnpike, which meant that it had no gates to pass but also that its surface was rutted, pot-holed, broken, thickly muddy where it crossed a stream, a dust-bath when it was dry, a quagmire when wet, but it was better than trying to force a slow passage across the heathland or through the river valley. It was a dry night and he was able to make an easy trot under the sliver of a moon and the bright starlight. There was enough light for him to be able to pick out movement at a safe distance, but the road was empty, only his figure moving through the desert of the night, local people had no call to be out of their villages after dark and carriers and carters worked the daylight hours solely; only the Mail coaches ran at night, and there were none of them on this local road.

A tawny owl passed silently over his head, a rush of air its only indication, and a pair of screech owls talked to each other for a few minutes. Once he spotted a bat against the moon. Otherwise he was alone, but that was nothing new, he always had been. He could not remember his mother, she had died when he was two or three, and his father had always been a distant figure – not unkind, protective, making sure there was food on the table and clothes on his back, teaching him the ways of the fishing boats, and the associated trade, but never with much to say, almost never touching him. His father had found the pennies for dame school, had never begrudged them, had insisted that he went to school, in fact, and in one of their very few conversations had asked him if he wanted to go on to the Latin school in Bridport, the dame having said he was bright enough to be successful there; he had accepted his assurance that he would rather go to sea without comment either way. They had lived in their own small cottage, a little removed from the village, with their own short crescent of shingle where they drew the boat up, just far enough out to keep themselves to themselves and to make sure that his acquaintances from school never became close friends. It had the advantage that there was nothing to regret, no kin, no soul-mate to sever ties with; very little in the way of personal possessions either, nothing to cherish for sentiment – he could look forward, there was nothing behind him; he wondered if there would ever be anything in front.

For miles the road crossed the empty heaths before dropping down to the coastal clays, equally desolate at first, the soil unfriendly to farming except after a lot of labour and money had been put into drainage and dung and marl, but close to Poole and its market there was arable land, made fields with smallholdings and hamlets to work them. In the nature of things, the road

would go through the middle of each cluster of houses, and that presented him with a gamble. If he kept to the road he might be stopped in any of the villages – strangers in the night were rare and unwelcome beings, especially close to a villainous set of townies, thieves and rascals to a man; if he moved out into the fields he might wake the dogs, might be chased down by suspicious farmers who would certainly hale him off to the constable for being on their land without reason. On the road he might be able to claim that he was a bona fide traveller, a seaman, say, from Wimborne, who had dallied over-long at home or with his girl and had to make the morning tide; in the fields he had to be a poacher at best. If the hue and cry was up for him then he was lost, but if there was no alert out then he might be able to talk his way through a village.

In the event he was not stopped at all; he walked the road and was ignored, if he was ever seen. The constables remained tucked up warm in their beds and the busybodies occupied themselves elsewhere while the watchdogs were used to foot-traffic on the road and would only raise the alarm for those who strayed off the carriageway.

Soon after dawn he was in Poole, ambling down the High Street to the quayside, lost in the early-morning bustle of the waking working day. He found a pie-shop as it opened, joined a dozen other men grabbing a hot breakfast.

'Rabbit pie', so the board said, 'hot for d1'.

It was hot and it cost a penny, so the shopkeeper wasn't a complete liar, but it tasted unlike any rabbit he had ever eaten.

"Rabbit, mister?"

"Well, what do you expect for a bloody penny? There's a bit of 'orse in it. About fifty-fifty, I suppose."

"Yeah, one 'orse, one rabbit!"

It was edible and he was hungry; he finished it and wandered off, down to the waterfront to see what was about.

The town was old and rich and the port was bustling, the harbour full of coasters and small merchantmen and one big whaler, immediately identifiable by the basket crow's nest. Nothing else bigger than two hundred tons, he estimated, most much less, typical local traffic. A dozen or so of fishing smacks, the larger drifters who would follow the herring run all the way from Newcastle to Penzance, selling at each port along the whole coast; they would work the mackerel off the West Country and then make their way back north before the worst of the winter storms set in; good money, but six or seven months out at a time. A few smaller boats, mostly local crabbers, not many in Poole, they were mostly working out of the local fishing villages, had probably come in to market. Three schooners and a lugger that looked a little too prosperous for working boats, well-kept and smart; smugglers for sure, working out of the Jersey entrepot, bringing in wines for the gentry and thus untouchable by the excise men, their bribes paid at the highest level and willing to be seen in daylight. One brig, somewhat larger than most, pierced for five or six guns on the broadside; not smart enough for navy and too few men in sight; too big to be a Revenue cutter, and probably too slow as well; a trader to Africa, maybe, or a Levanter, needing to defend herself against the Barbary pirates; being Poole, she might well be a private ship of war. Worth thinking about if he couldn't get out any other way, there was money to be made on the privateers, but they were poorly regarded, generally speaking, too willing to turn to slaving in peacetime, and slaving was low. Besides that, there were always rumours about privateers – inconvenient prisoners, such as crewmen and poor passengers who could not pay a ransom, knocked over the head and thrown overboard, worse happening first to the females

amongst them, that was always said; of some private men of war the accusation was made of downright piracy – they were said to take English ships into French ports, French ships into English. It was all possible, even likely, which was why generally speaking fisher folk did not go into privateers, or if they did, never came back to the nets again.

The quayside was lined, alternately it seemed, with boozers and ships' chandlers – Poole was famous for its drinking houses, there were said to be ninety two along the mile of the High Street alone – Saturday night was famous for its drunken rioting. Not so many years back a drunken mob had hanged every Excise man in town outside their own office – though that was regarded as excessive, a one-off jollification which had not been repeated, the redcoats had been sent in afterwards and had been more than usually brutal. The pubs acted as meeting houses and often as ships' agents, places where crew could sign on or passengers find a cabin; it was just a question of finding the right one. He looked up and down the whole quay before determining on the Horseshoes Inn because it was older, bigger, stone-built, respectable-seeming, likely to deal with a better class of mariner, perhaps. He sat and waited for a couple of hours, until the sun was higher – the drinkers of early morning would have no interest in business, would have nothing useful to say; anyone who needed to drink his breakfast was unlikely to be a successful, prosperous, honest sailor.

He did his best to spruce himself up, splashed water on his face and hands and smoothed his hair down, trying to look within reason respectable himself, then walked into the bar and took a pint of mild, the cheapest and weakest of beers. A quick pull at his mug and he asked the potman how he would go about buying a passage out of Poole; he wanted to go to the Americas, he said, and understood he needed to take passage on a Bristolman.

"Or from Cork, young master. You won't be wanting to go up to London, to pick up a cabin there, so the easiest way be to take a coasting ship to Bristol or to the Cove of Cork. There's three Bristolmen in that I know of the while, but whether they be bound east or west, I can't say, off hand, like, young sir. I could find out for thee easy enough, sir. Will you be staying here, overnight, sir? A dinner and a bed and bite to eat in the morning, sir, your own room, all for eighteen pence, sir."

He had to sleep somewhere, did not want to rough it in a back alley – a room made sense.

"Yes, please, I'd not thought of having to stay a night, but that makes good sense."

"Yes, sir. What be the name, sir?"

"Andrews, Thomas Andrews."

As he said it he realised that he should not have given his own real name, he should have invented one, but it was too late now, and he would be gone tomorrow.

"If so be you're wishful to go to the Americas, Mr Andrews, you'll be wanting some clothes for the voyage, I should reckon."

"I suppose I will – I can get them this morning."

"Would thee like to pay for the room, up front, like, sir?"

Tom dug into his pocket, took out his leather drawstring purse, pulled out silver for the room, putting gold back, not awake to the bartender's eyes making a rapid valuation of the contents.

"Thank'ee, sir. If you be wishful, you can pick up warm clothes and a bag and necessities in the shops along the High Street, sir."

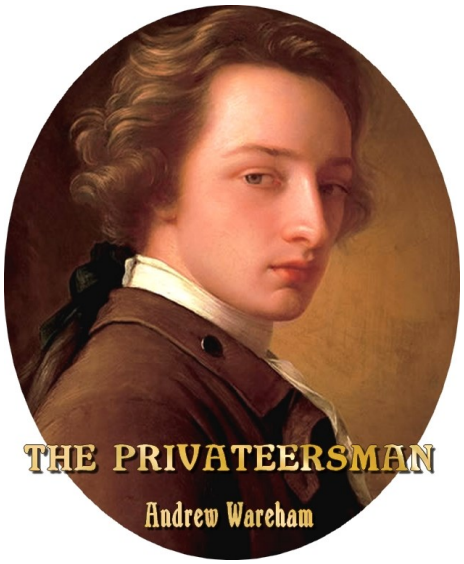
Tom thanked him for his help and obediently went out to make his purchases – a heavy leather valise and working shirts, canvas trousers, thick socks and a warm woolly jumper, a waterproof jacket to go over all; he decided to buy boots as well, found a pair that fitted quite comfortably and would provide him with something to wear on land. A little thought saw him invest in two pairs of flannel drawers to wear week and week about, and then a length of towelling and a bar of soap. Equipped for all of his needs, he took his new kit back to the Horseshoes Inn and stowed it away in the small back room that was his for the night. He ate an early dinner of mutton and greens and new potatoes followed by a big plateful of summer pudding, the strawberries a rare treat. He wandered back down to the quay to look at the sights and ease his digestion, idling in the sunshine. He passed several unaccompanied young ladies, which was unusual in his limited experience; two of them asked him if he would like a good time but he smiled politely and said he was enjoying himself already, thank you.

The barman greeted him in the friendliest fashion when he came back to the Inn and drew a pint for him, on the house.

"The Swallow lugger be sailing on the morning's tide, Mr Andrews, bound for Plymouth and Bristol, and there's an empty cabin that's yours for five bob, sir, if you takes your own grub along, ten bob if you eats at the master's table. The master'll be in later on, sir, and I'll take you over to 'im if you wants."

"Yes, please, that would be very good of you. I'm much obliged to you." Tom could see that he would need to give the man a tip as a thank you, wondered anxiously just what the right amount would be.

Tom leant on the bar and chatted idly for the next couple of hours – it was not busy in the early evening, it seemed. After three pints he found the need to ease his bladder and ambled out into the back yard at the barman's instructions, found the appropriate wall by its smell; he was just adjusting his clothing when a wooden club caught him firmly above the right ear and dropped him neatly to the cobblestones, unconscious but not severely hurt, a very tidy, professional job.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Two

His head hurt; it throbbed; when he felt very gently behind his ear it was tender.

"Some bastard hit me!" The sound of his voice gave him a headache; he closed his eyes again. It put the seal on a bad week, he felt, the whole world was against him, was creeping up behind his back.

Reluctantly, he decided he should make some effort to find out what had happened, discover the worst, whatever it might be – if he was in prison he might as well know at once, and start to prepare his mind for a fairly rapid hanging.

It wasn't as bad as it might have been – he was lying on a wooden floor, not stone, and there was a thin palliasse underneath him and a rough woollen blanket drawn up to his chin. Some effort had been made to look after him, but he wasn't in the room he had taken in the Horseshoes Inn.

He was wearing his new clothes, and the boots he had bought the previous day; knowing it must be a waste of time, he checked his pockets. No purse. Thirty guineas up the spout – six months and a dozen runs it had taken to put that much together, saving every penny his dad had given him, spending nothing, risking his neck, all for some thieving bugger to grab and piss up against the wall! A hundred and he had been going to buy his own boat, then he could have gone out with his dad seining rather than drifting, more than doubling their catch, with a bit of luck. He swore, then shrugged, at least he was alive and what he had made once he could do a second time, easier for knowing a bit more about the way the world worked now; in any case, he wouldn't ever be going out with dad again and it didn't seem likely he would be doing much fishing for a while yet. He stood up and stumbled as the floor pitched.

It was a deck, he was at sea, shanghaied.

Not the navy – if a press gang had taken him and somehow got him on board a man of war then he would be waking up in a crowded mess-deck, not on his own in a cabin or store-room like this. He sat down again to think.

He had to get out of England, that was given, and he had to stay away for a year or two, until the hue and cry had died down; when he came back it must not be to the fishing in Dorset, and it might be better not to come back at all. He had no money now, could not buy a passage out, so he had to sign on as a seaman, as a forecastle hand, which had always been on the cards; he was on a ship already, one that had taken some pains to get him on board and was hardly likely simply to let him go again. Wiser to make the best of it – he'd got some of what he wanted. He just hoped it wasn't the whaler – a three year run to the Great South Sea by way of Cape Horn was not the way out he would have chosen, though he would be a thorough-going deep sea sailor by the end of it.

The door cracked open – he had not bothered to try the handle, it had to be locked and they weren't about to forget him and leave him to starve, nor would they leave him long in idleness.

A cautious voice called in to him.

"You awake?"

"Yep."

"You want to come out, then?"

"On me way."

He walked slowly out of the small cabin, hands showing clear and empty – no knife or bottle or billy - glanced about him. He was below decks, had been kept in a bos'n's store by the looks of things, hard up in the bows, a paint room, maybe; possibly purser's lazaretto, but neither should have been empty, leaving harbour. He could just see a figure in the half light, pointing him to a ladder.

He blinked in the sunlight, his head complaining at the brightness; he wondered if this one was the bloke who had hit him, decided to let it wait – he would find out in time and he wasn't too concerned anyway, what was a thump on the head after all that had happened already this week?

He was on the brig, and a dirty, scruffy, ill-cared for vessel it was! Eight small cannon and two empty ports on each side, there should be twelve all told. Four pound, he estimated. A chaser in the bows, roundshot in the ready-use rack about the size of an orange, probably six pounds. Not navy, as dirty as this. Not a merchantman, they carried stern-chasers for defence, had no use for a great gun in the bows. Not a smuggler – they ran, would fight only as a very last resort, never carried broadside guns which would condemn them as pirates. Must be a privateer, and an unlucky one, at that; profitable private ships turned would-be crewmen away, never had to resort to force to make up their numbers.

He looked more openly about him as his eyes became accustomed to the light. There was a watch of fifteen or sixteen men, which suggested a crew of about forty when he would have expected the better part of a hundred, privateers needing boarders and prize crews.

Stood six feet away, out of arm's reach, was a lean, medium-tall, hard-looking seaman, a man who knew what he was doing. He was unarmed, so he thought he had no need for any weapon; best to take him at his own price, assume that he did know just what he was doing. He was dark-haired, swarthy, brown-eyed, hook-nosed, looked more like a Spaniard or a Romany than a local Englishman, Tom thought.

"Captain wants to speak to you. What's your name?"

"Tom Andrews."

"I'm Jack Smith, prize master, Star of the Avon. Captain's name is Blaine, by the wheel. You coming?"

"Yes, sir."

Smith – if that was the name he wanted – relaxed, turned his back and led Tom aft, happy he would not be attacked from behind, not by a man who had just called him sir – he would have had other names for him if he was after blood.

"New man, Captain. Name is Tom Andrews."

The captain nodded and coughed and sniffed; he stank of gin, explaining, perhaps, the state of the Star. He was skeletally thin, undernourished, the bottle probably his only sustenance, far gone; he was watery-eyed, fair hair uncut and thinning, blowing wildly in the light wind. Tall but stooped, Blaine would have been much the same height as Tom, looked over his shoulder, never into his face.

"How old are you, Andrews? You look big enough to do a man's work."

"Sixteen, sir. Last month."

"Still got some height to make, and a lot of muscle to bulk out – you will be a big fellow before you're finished! By the way you stand you have used the sea, Andrews?"

"Yes, sir. My dad had a drifter, a thirty footer. I crewed with him since I could walk, just about."

"Good. You're here now and you can make a choice – gun crew or boarder, whichever you wish. Ordinary seaman, not a landsman, so that will make you a one-and-a-half share man. If you show you're good enough we'll change that to 'able' and two shares. You don't have to sign on, of course – if you want you can always swim back to Poole."

Tom smiled at his wit – captains always had to be humourists. He had already seen that there was no land in sight, that they were well out into the Channel. He raised his hand, politely.

"I volunteer, sir. Boarder, if you please."

"Captain Blaine knows the sea, Tom, he just had a bit of bad luck which turned him sour a bit," Smith explained. "Beginning of the war, he was doing well, a young man, I don't know how old exactly, say twenty-five or so, but he had his own frigate, Arrow, 28, nine-pounders, was cruising off Chesapeake Bay when the lookouts called a sail at dawn, making out to sea in the fogs you get there, couldn't see hardly nothing. Captain closed her and then made the challenge at a cable, gave her a gun across the bows as a wake up. She made no reply and set her topsails and seemed to swing towards, so he gave her a full broadside and closed and boarded. Kestrel ship-sloop, had taken damage from a big blockade runner the previous day, lost her captain and first and the youngster left didn't know what to do when he couldn't hoist the lights for the reply, thought to come within hail. Anyhow, the broadside killed a dozen of her men, including a midshipman whose mother was a niece of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs! The court found for the captain, but he was beached and wasn't never going to command a King's Ship ever again. I was master's mate on watch with him, stayed with him when he was offered a berth as master of a privateer. He made enough to buy Star in the first twelvemonth, but his luck's been out since."

Smith was resigned, philosophical almost.

"How long has he had Star, Mr Smith?"

“Eight months; long enough to fit her out and take her on two empty cruises. Not so much as a sniff of a prize. Anything we chased ran up English colours!”

Tom nodded; judging by the store-room he had seen this was not going to be a long cruise.

“So where are we bound, Mr Smith?”

“Bordeaux stream, then the Spanish coast if we have no luck. Rich waters, French West Indiamen as well as coastal traffic.”

Tom nodded; he knew nothing of those waters, having previously crossed the Channel only to run directly to Normandy to pick up smuggler’s cargoes from the smallest fishing villages. He noticed that Smith was uncomfortable, had left something important unsaid. He waited, let the silence draw out, dad had always said that the silent man heard most.

“Thing is, Tom, those are heavily patrolled waters, too. Both the French and the Spanish keep an eye open in that part of the Bay. You need to be wide awake in those waters.”

Tom thought of the picture Blaine had presented – he could have described him in several different ways, but ‘wide awake’ was not a term that leapt to his mind.

The Star was a strangely disorganised vessel – there were two watches, but no petty officers to run them, the men splitting the work between them as they fancied, the result being that the least popular jobs simply were not done and the decks grew dirtier on a daily basis while the heads were utterly appalling. Blaine and Smith were the sole officers – there had been two other boarding masters but they had refused to sail for a third cruise on the Star, preferring to earn a living wage instead. The cook had sailed again, and he boiled the ration beef daily and issued them with biscuit and cheese for breakfast and supper; for the rest, there were onions for those who wished to cut them up, and suet and flour and dried plums for anyone who wished to boil up a pudding. Small beer was issued by Smith, thrice daily, a quart pot per man at each issue as the water was somewhat dubious, safe only when well boiled because the barrels had not been scrubbed out before filling; there were no spirits outside of the captain’s cabin. Discipline was relaxed, to the point of being effectively non-existent – the men were almost all volunteers and they could see their own interest as being best served by good behaviour, while there was no such concept as ‘desertion’ as they were all free to resign at any time, in theory, though it might have been somewhat impractical to hand in their notice in the middle of the ocean. In any case, most of the men had a reason to be where they were, at sea and invisible, not on land in their home towns or villages, though, naturally, they tended to keep those reasons to themselves.

Over four uneventful days Tom came to know the names of the men in his watch, the five other boarders particularly.

George and Joby Coles were brothers, either side of twenty, although they did not know their ages for certain. They were Diddicoy, settled travellers who claimed their families to have been Romany, once upon a time. They were short, squat, sandy-haired and kept themselves to themselves; both carried knives where they could be seen.

John Murray was an older man, nearly forty, toothless and balding, lean and slightly bent over; his back ached and he moaned that it was crippling him; he had a very short temper, it was said, with drink in him could explode in anger, blade or bottle in his fist, whatever was close to hand. He was thought to be a Scot who had come south years before; he had little of the accent of the far north, sounded to Tom very much the local man – perhaps he had been brought to England by his parents as a small child.

Dick Smithers was a big, fair Dorset man, much like Tom in appearance and perhaps ten years older, and deeply, fundamentally stupid. He had been a farmhand for years, had had to leave his village near Blandford a few days previously; he had not chosen to say why.

Luke Mundy was from Hampshire, a flash, good-looking young man, forever combing his jet-black hair, always clean-shaven and with a ready smile to show off his white teeth and sparkling blue eyes. He made no secret of the fact that he came from a little village near Southampton, Durley its name, and that he had had to run like hell for getting a leg over the squire's daughter – very frequently, he claimed – and putting her in the family way; they would have called it rape, to save her name, and stretched his neck for his pains, he said, laughing mightily. He did not think he would go home again.

"What about you, nipper? Where's home for you, Tom?"

"Towards Bridport, Luke. I don't reckon I'll be going home no more, neither. Mum's dead these ten years and Excisemen put a pistol ball in Dad's chest last week."

"I heard about that," Smith interrupted. "There was a big fight when they jumped a set of smugglers, Excise and dragoons both. They said a man grabbed a sabre and laid about him, killed three of them with it, a really big bloke. Half a dozen of them got away but they chased down four who had taken pack-horses and tried to run on them. They didn't catch the big bloke, though."

"So I heard," Tom said.

They had all noticed the fading bruises he carried, chose to say no more.

They closed the French coast, somewhere off Brittany, Tom understood, although as he wasn't entirely certain where Brittany was, this helped him very little. They worked their way south through empty waters, not so much as a fishing boat in sight. Smith decided, belatedly, that he should make sure his boarders knew what they were about – he was not used to taking command, still wanted an officer to give him the initial order.

The Coles brothers had sailed with him twice before and sat back and watched the exercise. Neither Dick nor Luke had handled a pistol, but both knew how to load a scatter gun and quickly mastered the essentially similar smaller weapon; accuracy was of little concern, all they needed do was point and pull the trigger as they would never be more than the width of a deck from their target. Tom took his pistol, loaded quickly and expertly, hardly looking at what he was doing, and took a snap shot at a gull flying ten yards off their quarter, reducing it to a heap of bloody feathers on the waves.

"Christ, nipper! Just 'ow did you do that?"

"Dunno, Luke. I could do that first time I ever picked one up. Dad had a pair on the boat, just in case of trouble, he always said – the Channel's full of Frogs and you never know… So long as I can see it, I can hit it."

"What about with a musket, Tom?" Smith asked.

"No good at all, sir," Tom replied. "It's all I can do to hit a barn door at twenty paces with a long gun."

They laughed and shook their heads, said they had all heard of stranger things, but not many.

Smith ferreted about in their little armoury, came up with a wide leather belt with a diagonal bandolier attached, passed it across to Tom with instructions to put it on, right shoulder to left hip. Half an hour's fiddling fixed six holsters, one to each hip on the belt and four to the

bandolier across his chest, one left and three to the right. Two more hours and between them they had selected the six best pistols and checked their springs and flints before handing them across to Tom.

"Good thing you're a big bloke, Tom," Smith commented. "With a cutlass as well it will make a fair old load. By the way, have you ever handled a blade, Tom?"

A furious outbreak of coughing from Luke led him to withdraw the question, very apologetically.

Tom spent the rest of the day sat on the deck with rags and oil, painstakingly cleaning the heavy pistols and then rousting through the gunnery chest to find the tools to file down the sears and reset the triggers to a lighter pull. They were still clumsy brutes at the end of his labours, but he would trust them not to misfire and to put their ball more or less where he expected. He liked hand-guns, always had; he had never used one in earnest but he expected he would now, it was not as if people mattered, not like he had always thought; the Excisemen had taught him that.

While Smith gave brief training to the larboard boarding party Dick and Luke, both possessing farm skills, set up the grindstone and put an edge to the fifty or so of cutlasses and tomahawks they could find. The Coles sat down with their own oilstones and sharpened their knives until they could shave with them; they did not offer to assist any of the others.

Next day Tom was set to the great guns, to check and set the lock on each, one flintlock being much the same as any other. He did his best, replacing two springs and balancing the others as well as he could, but he strongly recommended Smith to find slow match and water tubs for each gun as an almost certainly needed back up.

By the end of their second day on the French coast they were ready for custom, if only they could find it.

The luck changed a couple of days later, off the Isle de Re and the approaches to Rochefort, the Star on a rare north-easterly wind making a comfortable five knots under courses alone, not wanting the increased visibility of topsails, far less the high pyramid of topgallants, never carried by merchant hulls – the small sails added only a little to a ship's speed but required extra, expensive hands to set them. Tacking slowly and laboriously from the south came a fat, slow, round-bowed ship, some four or five hundred tons at a distant estimate. Anxious inspection by telescope showed no row of gun ports – she was not an ancient fifth or sixth rate of the French navy.

"Set topsails," Blaine shouted, wheezing and hacking under the strain of raising his voice.

Their speed rose to eight knots, closing a mile every six minutes until their prey should wake up and try to flee. The Star's crew was too small to consider raising topgallants or studding sails in a hurry, but they did succeed in setting a second jib.

"Hands to chaser!"

Five men ran to the six pounder, cast the gun loose and slowly loaded it.

"Mr Smith, French colours to fore and main, if you please."

They had been flying no flag, private men of war generally did not, in common with most merchantmen; there was always the chance that a commercial sailor might see what he wanted to – three or four hours of flight down wind, even if they escaped, would leave perhaps two extra days of tacking to make their port – and would believe the Star to be a French national ship.

The boarders armed themselves and waited in their two parties, six from the starboard watch and five from the larboard, Smith at their head and giving a running commentary, nervously twitching like a racehorse waiting for the off.

"Blind, credulous, bloody stupid! If we was Frog navy we would be looking to give them sea room, stand at least two, better three, cables off. Surely to Christ he can see we're at a dead run for him! Two miles distant. He's left it too late, it'll take him at least ten minutes to change tack and we'll be closing him before he's round. Ready at the chaser!"

They acknowledged.

"First round across her bows. If you fire a second then hull her, no messing about."

The gun captain raised his hand in agreement – no naval saluting or 'aye-ayes' on a privateer.

Blaine's voice rose again as they came within a mile.

"Strip topsails."

The small crew needed a full five minutes to comply with the order, as he had estimated.

"Lower French flag. Shoot, Mr Smith!"

The flags dropped and the chaser fired the moment legality was restored – to fire under false colours would make them pirates, the navy might risk shaving it, they dared not.

A quick series of helm orders, Blaine seeming alive, alert suddenly, and the Star swooped ponderously onto the merchant's stern as she hovered, irresolute.

"Thinks we might be navy, ready to put a full broadside into her if she tries to run, expects fifty men in the boarding party, so be quick! Grapnels!"

The hooks were thrown up onto the taller ship and they scrambled up the four feet and over her rails. There was the normal thin merchant crew, most of them with weapons in their hands, waiting for orders; the bulk of them very obviously hoping the command would be to surrender.

A minute and it became clear that there was only the small party of a dozen on their deck and a voice called sharply in French. Just three of the armed men jumped forward, unwisely eager for a fight.

Tom fired three shots in less than as many seconds and the remaining Frenchmen froze, then, as one, dropped their blades and raised their hands, each trying to look innocent of intent, unthreatening, demure.

Ten minutes sufficed to disarm all of the crew and make a quick search for any hiding. Half an hour more and their one boat was lowered and they were thoroughly searched and then crammed aboard it, the master relieved of all of his keys and the ship's papers.

"Take her back to Poole, Mr Smith, starboard boarders as prize-crew. Keep in company."

They were too thinly manned to do anything else, and it was wiser to keep enough men aboard Star to man the broadside if necessary, pointless to spread the crew out and have too few men to fight either vessel.

Smith glanced at the ship's papers and manifest, hopefully asked whether anybody could read French, was not surprised to discover that none could, tucked the papers carefully away for the benefit of the prize-agent in Poole.

It seemed possible that they had been observed from shore or from fishing boats, and the French crew would be on land and raising Cain by evening, so they took a course south west to make as great a distance from the coast as they could. The French would not know their home port, would have no clues on which to base a pursuit, so it was most sensible to make their way

deep into the Bay and out of sight before turning their head towards Poole. They set the courses and then the topsails, one by one, the minimum set of sails that they could manage, just, and maintain a steady five knots. The wind was veering, gaining an unusual amount of easterly, much to their satisfaction, but they told each other that when the luck changed it generally did so thoroughly, made a whole-hearted job of it.

They took a glance into the holds, came away quite satisfied with the loading of naval stores for the Atlantic Fleet in Rochefort that filled the fore, not unhappy with the commercial cargo of sheet lead, sacks of flour and beans and rice and barrels of olive oil stored dry in the main hold.

"Could have done a lot worse," Smith commented. "Naval stores will always sell – cables, ropes, cordage, canvas, spikes and nails, pitch and turpentine and tar, powder paint – all will go in Poole or even be bought up by contractors to the navy to send to Portsmouth. Foodstuffs, always in demand just before harvest when the store cupboards are thin. Don't know about the olive oil, foreign muck, don't seem the sort of thing English folks are likely to have any truck with – though they might sell it in London, they're queer folk up there."

Five slow days brought them into Poole and saw Blaine at the office of his prize-agent who was as surprised as he was pleased to see him. After two anxious days the prize-agent confirmed that the Bills of Lading showed that all of the cargo had loaded in Bordeaux, having originated in France, and was consigned to French ports; the ship's papers stated that she was registered in Bordeaux and was French owned – there were no neutrals involved and no reason to suppose that the Admiralty Court would not condemn her as fair prize.

The local officials of the Prize Court had been notified of the capture and had, provisionally, agreed that it seemed to be legitimate and that some or all of the cargo might be perishable; they had therefore authorised the prize-agent to set the cargo to immediate auction and to disburse the funds so generated, the proviso being that, should unforeseen circumstances supervene, the Court might find against him and he would then be personally liable for the whole value of the cargo and hull and for demurrage and damages, not to speak of prosecution for unlawful killing of the crew members. In time the prize-agent would sue the captain of the prize-taker to recover his losses, but the law tended to be very slow.

The net effect was that any prize-agent was very unwilling to pay out more than fifty per centum on cargo and hulls generally remained unsold prior to official condemnation. A prize taken in one year might well not be fully paid for another two, and if, for example, some part of the cargo transpired to be neutral then the process could drag on for ten years and the lawyers' fees would eat up the whole of its value before judgement was ever given. It was not unknown for privateers who discovered they had unwittingly taken a neutral to quietly sink ship and crew and sail off to another part of the ocean, claiming innocence and sometimes being believed.

Whatever the end result, a couple of thousand was very welcome to the Star, half going to the ship, half to the crew's shares. It put seven pounds ten into Tom's pocket, which was a good start to making up his losses, but it was only fifty shillings for each man he had shot – life was cheap, it seemed, but it was their own fault, they had asked for a fight and had no business complaining that they had got more than they asked for. It was surprising, really, just how easy it had been, how little it had mattered; he noticed that the others in the crew treated him with an overtly cautious respect now, recognising him as a 'bad' man – one who should *not* be crossed; heady stuff, for a sixteen-year-old.

The Star tied up at the quayside and took in stores; Tom counted ten crates of two dozen bottles of gin going into the captain's cabin. Four cannon were wheeled out of a chandlery and set to the empty ports on the broadside.

"Captain had to pledge them to get anything before we could sail last time," Smith explained.

Tom nodded, leaning on the railing, staring fixedly out to sea, having no wish to show his face in port.

"We've signed on another twenty hands, a boatswain and two prize-masters. And we're properly stored for three months. If you want off, Tom, you're welcome – I never did like getting men from the crimps, it ain't right! If you stay, you're a two-share man; all the other two shares are topmen, but you're to be leading hand of the boarding party, if you want it. Nobody's going to argue, to say you're too young, not even they bloody Coles got any objections, not once they seen you with them pistols. Do you want it?"

"There's nothing waiting for me in Poole, Mr Smith. I'll stay."

"Good. My name's Jack, by the way."

The share-out was not really enough for a proper beano, a shore-run lasting a week, and there was a feeling among the crew that they would be better employed chasing their newly turned luck, for it could not, in the nature of things, last for ever and should not be treated with disrespect while it did. There was no agreement, however, as to where they should go; the owner, and captain in this case, would take the final decision, but if he wanted his crew to follow him, then it had to be a decision they could easily tolerate.

On the one side was the argument that the sea-lanes from Bordeaux to Rochefort had showed profitable once, so it made sense to return there; opposed to this was the school of thought which held that that particular stable door would now be well and truly bolted – there would be at least a sloop on patrol there, possibly a frigate, even two, depending on the amount of noise the aggrieved merchant community had been able to make.

Blaine wanted to go back to the scene of his success, but the gin was slowing his brain, leaving him unreceptive to new ideas – he found it easier to repeat the past. Fast talking by Jack Smith brought him to agree that they should head further south to hover off the mouth of the Garonne for a few days before making for the coast of Spain to look in at Santander and then at Vigo; after that, if they had not made their money, they could think again.

The Royal Navy thwarted the first part of their plan, having itself sent a squadron to blockade the Bordeaux stream and being notoriously unwilling to allow shares to private men of war. The Star changed tack on the instant of identifying the national ships, not wishing to have half of her crew press ganged before being told to bugger off.

They approached Santander cautiously, knowing nothing of the port other than that it served a part of Spain said to be richer in iron and metal-wares than the rest. It was also, they discovered, home to the Biscayan Fleet – they saw a dozen and more of two-deckers and a couple of threes together with a swarm of frigates and lesser craft; there were merchantmen in the approaches as well, but it would have been a very bold, not to say a foolhardy, corsair who made a touch at one of them in such circumstances. They wore ship and came away, slowly and looking as much as they could like a slow, undermanned mercantile sheep who had innocently made a landfall to establish her position and was now on her way home, thank you. They pointedly did not turn telescopes on the frigate that might have been patrolling and was now, coincidentally, they hoped, taking a north-north-westerly course behind them.

An hour later the Star tacked, coming across the wind to a south-westerly bearing; the frigate, which had been slowly closing on them, did the same. The wind was strong, gusting, and they had been content to potter along as a merchant hull would with two reefs in the topsails; Blaine now gave the order for full sail and sent another hand to the wheel. The Star heeled and the noise of the rigging climbed in pitch as she pushed up to very nearly nine knots; the frigate responded with a positive cloud of sail, was very soon nudging eleven.

"Four hours to random shot, Mr Smith and eight hours of daylight, even if the cloud thickens somewhat."

"With her crew she will tack quicker than us, sir. The Star might just point up a might tighter than her, sir? If she has a good point of sailing then it is into the wind."

They set two more jibs and braced the yards as hard round as they would go, bore up as near into the wind's eye as they could force her, found they could lay almost a point closer than the Spaniard. Then for the rest of daylight they sailed the Star as hard as they could, all hands on deck, concentration unbroken, anticipating every fluke in the wind, driving fast out into the Atlantic, the Spaniard hauling up on them, but more and more to their leeward, unable to close the range sufficiently to overwhelm them. The sun dropped slowly in the west, the cloud cover thickening steadily, their rather unreliable barometer dropping slowly, the wind strengthening fractionally. Night fell, the half-moon obscured, black as pitch.

Blaine dithered, the capacity to take vital decisions vitiated by two years of neat gin; if he held his present course, and the wind held constant, then he would be at least three more miles to windward of the frigate by dawn, still well in sight though unreachable, and with another day to run, at least, before they could be safe. Could he trust the wind? Nearly twenty years at sea said 'never'. The alternative was to tack and run almost before the wind, not the Star's strongest point of sailing, to cross the Spaniard's stern unseen and disappear into the wide Atlantic. If they were observed then dawn would find them under the Spaniard's guns, a broadside of twenty, eighteen pound long guns making a fight impossible.

A fluke in the wind, a little stronger and longer-lasting than those before, made up his mind for him – if the wind was veering then Star was lost. They had to tack.

It went against nature to bear up, to brace the yards round, to cross the eye of the wind in absolute silence – shouting was part of the seaman's life, it was the way it was done, it was ridiculous to whisper 'helm's alee!', to sheet home without a bellowed order or insult. They swore quietly to each other, then slightly louder at each other, but whispered profanities were very unsatisfying as well. They froze in utter silence as they picked out a lantern at a mile on the starboard bow and then slowly watched the lights of the stern cabin slide by: not a man went below that night; they sat or napped at the braces, watching the sails anxiously, listening for the first hint of flapping canvas, trimming and resetting them to give every last fraction of a knot and cut leeway to its least possible, and all without a word said.

Unsaid as well, but known to all, was the expectation that the Spanish navy would take no prisoners out of a privateer – they were pirates in Spanish eyes.

As dawn broke they scanned the sea anxiously, taking comfort in the legendary poor seamanship of the Spanish navy – their officers were brave fighting men but rarely paid attention to seamanship, leaving that to the menials who they treated with contempt and who consequently responded with slack idleness. The Spanish ship would have continued on her original course, or returned to port on losing sight of them, they were sure. It helped, a little, telling each other all of this, but their eyes never ceased their anxious watch.

Full light showed a grey, gathering sea, a storm building to their west, but no sign of a sail, not even a hint of topsails to their north. They had lost their pursuer, and it now remained to stay lost.

"Thirty days on this course, sir, and we are in the Sugar Islands. Maybe only twenty-five days, if we can keep the sail packed on. If we change course to a little bit west of north then we will find the south of Ireland in, what, four days? No trade there, though."

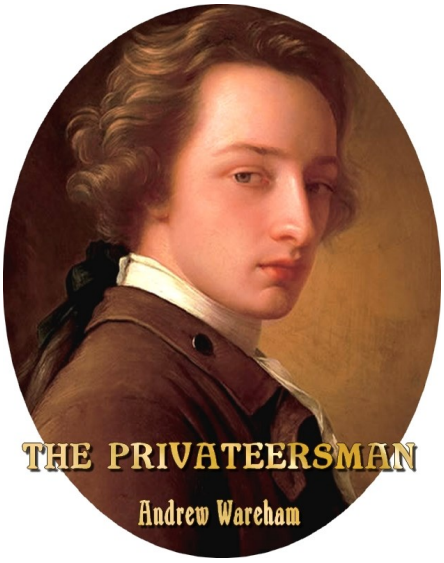
Blaine was exhausted, and thirsty – he had been on deck for twenty-four hours unbroken, his metabolism was short of at least a pint of gin, he could not think. He nodded his agreement, though to what he had no idea, and stumbled down the companionway to his cabin and his bottle.

"Single reef topsails; strip to single jib. Course West-sou'-west."

Smith glanced around the deck, inviting comment, received none.

"Sugar Islands, lads, the West Indies. There are rich cargoes there, and a damn sight less in the way of patrolling frigates!"

They were too tired to argue.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Three

Beef, beer, biscuit and water were all running short by the time they reached the Trinidad, a week of calms having extended their voyage beyond Smith's expectation; gin, however, seemed still to be in good supply – they had hardly seen Blaine on deck since evading the frigate and on those few occasions he had seemed unsteady on his feet, as if he were losing his sea legs.

The month of near idleness had led to any number of second thoughts among the crew, to doubts about the wisdom of penetrating the Caribbean – they knew that Britain was losing the war, that the American rebels and, more importantly, their French allies were winning on land and that the French, Spanish and Dutch were in loose alliance at sea. For the first time in a century the oceans were *not* an English domain; it would not last, that was for sure, the navy would organise itself and restore the proper order of things very soon, but, for the while, the enemy might be found anywhere. Of course, that was why privateering was profitable at that moment – many more French and Spanish merchantmen were at sea than would be the case if the navy was snapping them up whenever they showed their noses outside of their harbours; even so, the possibility of escorts and patrols had to be borne in mind – they might be about to stir up a hornet's nest. In the Mediterranean, for example, the Spanish had to keep a very careful eye on the Barbary pirates whilst watching what the Austrian Empire might be doing in the Italian states; Atlantic waters gave the Spanish another set of problems, the English particularly, the net effect being that they could not devote a great deal of attention to the activities of one little privateer. In the Caribbean they might have nothing better to do than protect their traders…

They closed the coast of a bright afternoon – dawn would have been better but their precise position posed a slight problem – Smith had no navigation at all and Captain Blaine had some difficulties taking a sextant reading with his hands shaking so. It had been thought better to hold well away from where the shore should have been in the hours of darkness.

They spotted eight separate sail of merchantmen making for the port, all unconcerned and pottering quietly along, one man and a dog on watch – evidently sure that no English ships would be about and that the few small pirates remaining would be holding a safe distance from the naval base.

Two brigs and a schooner were of a hundred tons or more, would be profitable captures – Admiralty Court fees in England ate up the value of smaller prizes to such an extent that they were more bother than they were worth. Each surrendered to a single shot across the bows, surprised and indignant to discover a corsair in their own back yard, but certainly not about to argue with loaded guns pointing very directly at them. Star turned her head northwards, towards Antigua, shepherding her chicks in front of her – rations demanded a port sooner rather than later and the manpower for prize-crews was not there.

"Five quid a share, at least, Tom, when we get them to court. The lads will be better for a good piss-up in English Harbour, cheaper there than in Poole."

Tom nodded, not entirely sure why that should be the case but unwilling to argue about anything so unimportant to him.

Dawn off Martinique brought them a bright, clear, sunny morning, the mountains of the volcanic island fresh-washed and black to their west, a large merchantman to their east, hove-to and waiting full daylight to close the coast and signal for the pilot cutter. Blaine was called immediately, staggered bleary-eyed on deck and peered about him in puzzlement until Smith nudged him in the right direction.

"French West Indiaman," Blaine announced. "Far too big for us to handle, except we get lucky. Load all."

Three minutes to cross the stern of the big ship, four times their size, two-decked, her rails at least ten feet higher than Star's, taken unawares for expecting no trouble within sight almost of a great naval base. First stirrings of surprise turned to panic as the three prizes conformed to Star, seemingly a whole squadron of privateers, or, much worse, pirates.

Star fired her broadside, high on the roll, skimming across the poop and spreading a few splinters and a great deal of roaring. A few screams arose from unlucky crewmen, drowned by the howling of shocked passengers, rudely awakened by cannonballs about their ears. Initial panic turned rapidly into whole-hearted chaos as Star thumped alongside and her boarders scrambled awkwardly over the bulwarks, Tom leading them in a charge towards the wheel where a sole, uniformed, officer was waving a sword. Just in time Tom saw he was offering it, hilt first, in token of surrender.

"We do not fight! Do not kill us! There are passengers."

Tom took the sword, a heavy but well-balanced working hanger, he noticed – that was not going back to its owner.

"Everybody on deck, quickly! By the mainmast, for the crew, passengers here. Now!"

The French officer sprinted, shouting, slapping and kicking at his men when they did not move fast enough, galloping below and bursting cabin doors open, bellowing the sleepy into a run. He had all of the passengers in a huddle at the stern, part-clothed or in nightshirts, within two minutes, before the privateersmen could get at them in their cabins. There were half a dozen

of wives and daughters amongst them and the Frenchman knew of the reputation, commonly well-earned, of corsairs.

Tom was concerned only to get the ship under way, well out to sea before any investigation of their single broadside took place – just possibly the French in the harbour might think there had been a thunder clap in the mountains, a common enough event, and one they might ignore. He ordered the French crew to make sail and they ran enthusiastically to their duty, hoping that if they showed useful they might not have their throats cut as an inconvenience to their captors; in the Caribbean the difference between pirate and privateer was often very small indeed and they worked more efficiently than at any time since leaving Bordeaux, to the mordant amusement of their captain.

"They work harder for you than for me, young man," he observed. "Perhaps six pistols are a good idea!"

English Harbour had its own Admiralty Court and prize-agents only too anxious to oblige. The three Spaniards, laden with the produce of the Main, were welcome and sold easily, local merchants having a market on the island for the foodstuffs and contacts in London who would happily dispose of the cocoa and hides and mahogany that made up the bulk of their cargoes. The eight hundred tonner from Europe was fallen on with delight, the merchants bidding each other up, all having customers who had hardly seen any goods from England in more than two years. Wines, brandy, silks and satins, porcelain, made furniture, clocks and mirrors for the genteel; shovels, prongs, axes and hoes, cast-iron cooking pots and thick earthenware for the plantations – all went to auction and were snapped up at vastly inflated prices.

The first share-out was sufficient for a very thorough celebration.

Tom had never been on the spree before, for lack of friends at home, was not at all sure of the procedure; Luke, who evidently knew all about enjoying himself, took him in hand, leading Tom and Dick and John uphill from the waterfront, on the grounds that the drinking houses nearest the quay were no better than rough shebeens.

"Pox-holes, mate – wash yer cock before you goes in there, because it'll be too bloody late afterwards!"

Dick and John laughed uproariously; Tom didn't understand.

They went inside a better looking hotel, cleaner and brighter than the dockside haunts, and the barman, knowing they were from Star, and rich, temporarily, made them welcome with something he called 'rumbullion', a long drink based on rum but with lime juice and guava and sugar and water added. The drink went down well and the four were joined at table by a group of young ladies who seemed inclined, to Tom's eyes, to be surprisingly friendly to men they had not been introduced to; the girls were of various colours from a deep cream to a rich brown, something wholly new to Tom, who had previously not really been aware of the existence of black people, Dorset not being the most cosmopolitan of counties. Whatever their colour, they were jolly girls, laughing and joking and drinking with them and quite rapidly pairing off, one apiece, the extra couple finding other company at another table.

Tom found himself talking in the friendliest fashion to a tall, well-built young lady who said she very much enjoyed big men and would like to see his muscles, inviting him along to an upstairs room for the purpose. To his surprise, and eventual pleasure, she seemed to want to show him her muscles as well, for she stripped all of her clothes off as soon as they were alone together, and then helped him remove his before gripping him in an unexpected manner. He soon

discovered what he was supposed to do, however, and decided that it was really quite a good idea. His young lady, Sally by name, was touched and pleased to discover that she was his first, and threw herself into the task of teaching him, if not all that he needed to know then at least a very thorough introduction. Four days later she led him back to the Star, penniless, very, very tired and with a headache and a singularly foolish grin on his face, handed him over to Smith with instructions to make sure he got a good sleep and the message that he should be sure to come back again after his next cruise.

"He a good boy, that one, Mr Captain – you be sure to look after he, now!"

Smith took Tom's arm, not sure he could stand on his own, and thanked her gravely before pointing Tom in the direction of his hammock, which he slung for him, certain that he would be unable to manage the task unaided.

Tom woke up eventually and sat quietly trying to remember all that had happened in the last few days; he thought he might have forgotten some of the finer details, but most of it was still clear. He checked his drawstring purse thoughtfully, discovered it to be completely empty – twenty pounds from this share-out and all that remained of the first, all gone. His father had always said he was doing well if he cleared a pound a week from the boat, so he had blown half a year's money in four days; good days, mind you, he wasn't complaining, but too expensive – what was the point to risking his neck for four days of fun and then having to go out and do the same again, time after time, with no more than memories to show for it? They *were* pretty good memories, no arguing with that, but it still made no sense to carry on like that – he didn't want to be buried with a smile on his face before he was twenty. He thought that the rumbullion had been good stuff, he wouldn't mind a swig of that now, to clear his head and set him up for the day; then he remembered Blaine and thought perhaps there were better ways of starting, and ending, his days.

He walked out on deck, looked about him at the stores being brought on board by labourers from the chandlers, decided there was work to do; he made his way to the galley and begged fresh, shore-bought bread from the cook, breakfasted on that and a couple of bananas bought from the previous day's market, and then went down to the powder magazine and gunner's shop, started to set them in some sort of order.

Opinion in English Harbour was that the Star was under-manned for her work – she really needed at least another score of boarders and prize-crew. Smith agreed, and was able to persuade Blaine to his view, but being a privateer they thought they should have the agreement of the hands before increasing their numbers and reducing the value of each share. They spoke to the men in small groups rather than having a formal meeting, found that a few had been in the Sugar Islands before and could suggest a useful way of doing things.

"There be few enough of English seamen dockside here," John Murray said, "acos of there ain't no berth for them on local coastal boats if they deserts, them all being owned by local families what crews 'em theyselves, and no work on shore. So, either they goes onto a ship for America, or the navy gets they, and the war being what it is, there ain't many ships for America now, and no bugger in his right mind deserts a merchantman to be caught by the navy. What there is though, and in plenty, is freemen, mostly 'alf and 'alf, like, what 'ad a black lady for mum and a white bloke for dad; they ain't got no land nor no trade so there ain't nothing for them except get took by the navy, which is what 'appens to most of they in the end – they gets 'ungry and volunteers or gets drunk and meets the press gang, one or t'other. So it be easy

enough, Captain, to find a couple of dozen young men what would join us for five guineas cash in hand and a promise of 'alf a share, especially if you was to give 'em Bible oath that you'd pay 'em off in Antigua in a twelvemonth at most, not dump 'em on shore in England or New York or some place."

The word was circulated and Star was besieged – there had to be a hundred at least of young men of various colours unable to find anything other than occasional casual labour and not seeing five guineas in cash from one year's end to the next. Many of them brought their own cutlasses along in token of their willingness to fight. All were ragged, none seemed over-fed; they lined up quietly and hopefully, trying to catch an officer's eye, wanting to seem keen and enthusiastic, not daring to create a stir and be labelled 'troublemaker'.

"How do we choose?" Smith asked.

Blaine shrugged and wandered off to his cabin, to his bottle.

In the end they simply selected the biggest – it seemed obviously fair and liable to cause least trouble among those rejected – they knew there was a reason for the choice made, that it was not whim or favouritism. They took twenty-four, having found that many hammocks tucked away in the purser's stores – not that they had a purser, as such, the cook doubling for one. Small boys hanging around the dock – there were always dozens of them scrounging for the odd penny or crust – were sent to find mothers and sisters to collect the men's down payment of five guineas – it might have been a little too trusting to have sent them off, coins in hand, with instructions to return first thing in the morning, though most of them would have turned up, they thought.

Tom was called to audience with Blaine and Smith later in the day.

"We need a petty officer, as it were, Andrews," Blaine announced. "These new boarders will have to be kept under control somehow. They ain't seamen, and we haven't got the wherewithal to train them – no men, no time – so they can't be watched – best they should be held together, as waisters, like marines, you might say. You to lead them, showing them how to handle their cutlasses properly the while."

Blaine broke off, poured himself a water-glass of gin, almost making eye-contact with Tom as he raised it to his lips.

"Thing is, you see, Andrews, what we have in mind, is for these people to lead, as it were, to be in the front of any boardings, our original boarders to back them up, following on behind, you might say."

"So, if there should be any dying, they can do it, sir?"

Smith winced at such deplorable lack of tact – there was no need to say such things aloud, he believed.

"Quite, Andrews. No need to waste seamen, after all, we haven't got so many to spare."

Tom shrugged – they were volunteers, freemen, had begged, in fact, for the opportunity.

"And you want me to lead them sir, to be your petty officer?"

"Yes, Andrews, exactly. Four shares?"

It was more than fair – the going rate for a leading hand was three shares, he had been told.

"Thank you, sir. When do we sail?"

They left harbour on an afternoon's tide, very publicly in view and heading ostentatiously south down the island chain; with darkness, they turned their head easterly to gain sea room and then commenced a series of tacks to take them northabout, eventually to cruise the coast of Cuba. There was always the chance of information leaking from Antigua – literally dozens of island

boats made port every week, tiny droghers carrying a few tons of sugar or copra or sweet potatoes from who-knew-where and returning unchecked and unnoticed to English or Dutch or Danish or French or Spanish harbours as trade and whim took them – they could not be controlled and they talked, often casually, without malice or payment, and the word of sailings spread quite randomly throughout the whole Caribbean. It was better, Blaine thought, in one of his rare moments of clarity, to act with a little caution.

Unfortunately, despite their care, the waters about Cuba were empty – in the first week they saw nothing bigger than a fishing boat, but the boats saw them; ships big enough to be prized simply evaporated from their view. At the end of eight barren weeks there was no alternative, they turned their head for Martinique and the islands south – despite the obvious risks – they had to earn eating money. The ninth week saw them north of the island and cutting off an eighty ton schooner, very heavily laden and struggling to claw off the lee shore where they had trapped her at dawn.

"Over-burdened," Smith commented, "poorly sailed as well, very amateur, do you see, Tom, tacking a couple of minutes too early – he could have delayed until he was half a cable closer to the point there. If he had just shaved it he could have gained a cable on us because we need deeper water than him. Repeat that and he might gain enough on us to cross our bows and escape. But he won't unless he learns his trade *very* quickly indeed."

They soon decided that the schooner was thinly manned as well – strain their eyes as they might they could see no more than three men handling the sails and a fourth at the tiller. They closed inexorably, at half a cable called for her surrender; she responded with a single musket shot.

"Silly bugger! Chaser! Warning shot, if you please."

Blaine had retired to his cabin, uninterested in a tiny capture without the prospect of a fight.

The six pounder fired and put its ball through the schooner's mainsail which, boomed hard over, ripped itself to shreds in seconds. Star drew alongside the wallowing coaster and Tom led his boarders unhurriedly over the rail – three men were not going to fight two dozen, he believed. Two men were trying to bundle up the mainsail, raised their hands instantly and stepped back to the rail obediently. Tom sheathed his hanger – much more elegant than a cutlass he felt, he was proud of his stolen sword – and walked quietly to the stern, putting a hand out for any weapons they had to surrender. They looked like father and son he thought and then jumped and ducked just in time as the younger slashed overhand at him with the knife he had been holding behind his back; the blade scored his left cheek from eye socket almost to his mouth instead of burying itself in his throat as had been intended. He swore, staggered back as the young man stumbled, dragged out the hanger and lunged forward, straight into his chest, withdrawing and taking a roundhouse swing at the older man as he, possibly equally surprised, started forward. There was a great fountain of blood as the old man's head flopped onto his shoulder, attached only by a rag of skin.

"Over them!"

The boarders obeyed the shout of the youth at their head, a tall man of eighteen or so, standing more than six feet, wiry in build and very fast on his feet, a quick intelligence showing on his tanned face. He had claimed that his grandfather was Carib, his father a captain in the army, his mother a free lady with a small farm of her own; his name was Joseph, he had offered no surname.

The two bodies splashed over the side, followed by the two captives – there had been no distinction made in the order and they probably felt better safe than sorry. The blood spread in seconds, followed by sharks inside a minute; if mistake it was, there was no opportunity to remedy it. The boarders started a quick search of the small boat while Joseph ripped a length of cotton from Tom's shirt and held it to his cheek to stop the bleeding before dipping a bucket over the side.

"Hold still, Master Tom."

Joseph did not bother to warn him that it would hurt, he thought that that was fairly obvious. He washed the wound thoroughly, then bound a brine-soaked pad across it.

"Leave that a few days, Master Tom, don't let no flies or dirt get to it and maybe it don't rot."

Tom said nothing – with bandages across one eye and under his chin to hold the compress it would have been hard to speak anyway.

They both knew that wounds could become gangrenous, often did in the Tropics, perhaps one in five catching the black rot, fewer at sea than on land for some reason; the only treatment for the rot was amputation at the first sniff of corruption, well back from the site of the wound – it was not a practical cure in the case of a head wound.

The boarders came crowding back, shaking their heads.

"Nothing boss, nobody else, but they's two cabins and both got plenty of blood on the deck."

Tom followed them below, glad to be moving – it hurt less to be doing something. He glanced at the stains, spoke thickly to Joseph.

"Three, would you say?"

They nodded and suggested that the four hands had killed the owner and two others in a mutiny the day before, an act of piracy for which they might have been hanged by the authorities of any country – hence the foolish act of the boy with the knife, acting in desperation with nothing to lose.

Tom agreed, but hardly cared – his face hurt.

They put four seamen aboard the schooner and sent her back to Antigua – she was too slow, too heavily laden to remain in consort. They found another pair of island boats, sixty ton yawls, just big enough to bother with, fees being lower in the Antiguan Court, the next day and a larger brig on the third; the brig was only part-loaded, told them that she was on route to a plantation wharf at the north of the island, well clear of the harbour at St Pierre, where she was contracted to pick up a cargo of about eighty tons of sugar. There was no battery in the vicinity, no troops at all within a day's march, the captain and owner of the brig assured them, and if they were to offer him the return of his vessel - his sole livelihood, he was a poor man – he would lead them in, all unsuspecting, to pick up the cargo themselves. The plantation slaves would act as longshoremen, they were used to the task – forty strong young men who could load his hold in two hours.

Blaine agreed immediately, intimating to Smith that when they sailed it might well be possible to take the slaves with them as well – there had been very few traders from Africa in the last year of war, the French having control of the Slave Coast, and a fit youngster could fetch two hundred guineas at the block in English Harbour.

Smith passed the word, observed the avaricious grins spread through the crew.

"Make the shore in late morning, sir?" Smith enquired. "Load before dark and lose ourselves at sea in the night, just in case there should be watchful eyes."

They spent the night hove-to, all four vessels in close company, formed a rough line behind the brig and closed the wharf in bright daylight, innocently open, sailing together for fear of the privateer recently active in local waters.

A small river came down off the mountains to form the bay and make a break in the coral; over many years it had built a rich, flat coastal plain a couple of miles long and extending inland up to half of a mile, six or seven hundred acres of fertile sugar land, the lower slopes behind good for food crops for the people – sweet potato mounds covering wide gardens, pumpkin patches and okra and beans as well. The plantation house, bigger than a typical English farmhouse but not a true mansion, Tom thought, was sat back behind and looking over all, a little cooler, able to benefit from any onshore breezes, probably sheltered by the hillsides from the worst of any tropical storms; the slave cabins were nearly a quarter of a mile distant from the big house, well separated. There was a wooden wharf and jetty extending a few yards out, beyond the shallows, and a pair of warehouses directly behind, open-sided sheds for the sugar boilers beside them. It looked a prosperous, well-run place. The brig tied up to the jetty, knowing from past experience that there was water enough for her; Star bellied up alongside her, decks empty, port-lids closed and hopefully hidden from casual view. The master of the brig started to uncover his hatches, everything as normal, while overseer and plantation owner strolled out along the wharf.

Tom's face was sore and he had a bruised headache; John Murray was taking his boarders onshore this morning, having volunteered, with a little nudging from Smith.

The two men from the shore boarded the brig and were met by a welcoming party of the boarders, pistols shoved in their faces; they surrendered instantly, having very little choice in the matter, were tied and dumped below decks for the while. The boarders swarmed onto the jetty, the freemen heading for the warehouses and the working party of slaves, hustling them into instant activity. The crewmen from port and starboard watches spread out, half a dozen led by the Coles brothers making for the big house.

It took just the predicted two hours to empty the warehouses, the brig's hold quite full and a few sacks packed onto the pair of yawls to finish off the take. The slaves were marshalled in the open yard in front of the godowns, were rapidly sorted into two groups – older men, children, pregnant and old women to one side; the young, fit and healthy to the other, thirty-five men and twenty women.

Quick inspection showed that two of the women were still nursing babies and they were sent back, rejected as unfit for sale; the rest were pushed aboard the Star, hustled below decks in two groups under armed guard. Tom was surprised to see the freemen taking their part in the process – he had thought they might have felt a degree of sympathy for the slaves; tentative enquiry of Joseph gave the exact opposite – the gulf between the servile and the free was so great that there could be no fellow-feeling at all, they were immeasurably superior to the 'African monkeys'. Tom shrugged, it was not up to him to judge, he felt.

"Tom, pull the lads back aboard, we can cast off as soon as everybody's back."

Tom waved an acknowledgement to Smith, walked down the jetty, beckoned to the crewmen he could see. The half dozen led by the Coles had not returned, must still be at the plantation house; he reported as much to Smith.

"Dirty bastards! Making real pigs of themselves, you can bet, Tom!"

Tom looked his ignorance.

“The family, Tom – the wife and any daughters will be there. No way of stopping it happening. Who’s here? John! Go and shout to the Coles to get back here, will you.”

Murray trotted slowly to the house, called from a distance, not wanting to go inside, keeping his hands clean by not seeing what had happened.

The six appeared, slowly, stretching and grinning.

They ran to the jetty, jumped the railing of the brig and crossed to the Star. The Coles brothers walked straight up to Smith, dropped a heavy bag on the deck.

“Bloke ‘ad got a bit of a safe in there, Jack. I reckon ‘e’d got a thou’ in gold there – didn’t count it, though, just put it all in the bag, like, so’s to be fair.”

“Right, thanks, Joby – that was the right thing to do, we’ll count it now, out in sight where everybody can see. Is that what took you so long, putting this in the bag?”

Smith grinned, knowing that all six wanted the chance to brag, to swagger, to boast – to clear their minds of any feelings of guilt by making a parade of their acts.

“Nah – ‘e’d got ‘is missus there, as well, and a girl, just about big enough, she was, old enough to learn what it’s all about. I ‘ad both of ‘em twice, didn’t I, Jarge?”

Tom listened, said nothing, did nothing as the six took their turns in boasting.

They cast off and sailed for Antigua, making a quick passage; the Admiralty Court obligingly condemned their prizes and assumed the slaves to have been on board the largest, for, strictly speaking, a Letter of Marque conveyed to its holder the right to take maritime traders and thus could be argued not to authorise expeditions on land – but there was a shortage of labour on the plantations, for freemen would not work alongside slaves, no matter what wage was offered, and so the taken field hands were too valuable to be the subject of mere legal quibbling.

A single share came out at twenty-five pounds.

Tom sat on deck after the pay-out and looked at the ninety-five golden guineas and the five shillings in silver he had just received, then tenderly felt his face; it was worth it, he supposed, but only just. He tucked the coins into his purse and tied the string in a double knot before hanging it round his neck; this money was too hard earned to be thrown away on whores and rum.

Later in the day he discarded the bandages to his face and nerved himself to look in a mirror, dreading what he might discover – he was still only seventeen, after all. His left eye drooped a fraction at the corner and a clean-edged scar broadened to the width of a finger across his cheek, tapering down to his mouth, which turned up a little now in a lop-sided grin. It was not as bad as he had feared, made him look older, a man not a boy, harder perhaps, but not dreadfully disfigured; he had not shaved in three weeks, for obvious reasons, and was sprouting a moderately respectable ginger fuzz, streaked with white immediately over the scar. He dug out his razor, shaved partially, leaving a pair of mutton chop side whiskers, concluded he looked like a prat and finished the job except for much longer sideburns than had been his wont; he decided that casual acquaintances from Dorset – and he had no other – would be very hard pressed to recognise him now, which was not too bad a thing, as he had no wish ever to be known again in England.

Smith called the boarders to report on the following day, the little boy messengers earning their pennies and bringing twenty of the two dozen back with them. It had been intimated to him that the crew approved of the freemen, believed they had pulled their weight and more and felt

they should be asked to sail again on a regular basis as single share men with a leading hand selected from their number at one and a half.

Joseph led the nineteen who had come back with him, quite naturally taking the front; Smith welcomed them and told them of their new status and money, to their surprised pleasure. Their twelve pounds ten apiece had made them cash-rich in their community, especially when added to their initial five guineas – now they could hope to more than double that over the next few months. The four who were staying ashore had all had girls with a claim to a piece of land, were now settling with their wives and the pair of goats and seed and shovel and prong and hoe and table and chairs for their hut that their wealth had procured for them; those who sailed again had wider ambitions – the stock for a small trade store or the purchase of a few fertile acres on which they could raise a sugar crop of their own, the foundation for a respectable future - if they lived.

Four more young men stood on the quayside, hopefully.

"They's the brothers of the four who gone, Master Tom," Joseph explained.

Smith waved them aboard, acting in the absence of the captain who had used his personal share of the prize money to progress from gin to smoother white rum and who could be heard occasionally, shouting or singing in his cabin. The ship's share had been set aside in a more sober moment, remained in an account at the prize-agents, disbursed against Smith's signature for stores.

Brief discussion sent them south again – the northern waters had proved barren once, would most likely do so in future, there was no point going there. They decided to touch at Guadeloupe first, poorer though it was as an island, then by-pass Martinique and make for the Spanish waters off Trinidad and the Main before looking at the Dutchmen in their little islands; Martinique, obviously rich, might nonetheless be a little hot for them, though they would keep an eye wide open as they crossed its sea-lanes.

Tom set to train up his boarders – he had given a little thought to their performance on the schooner, had decided they had been much too casual and disorganised – even half a dozen men with muskets and pistols firing from concealment could have killed them all. It was an unlikely event, but it might be better not to regret their bad luck afterwards and explain that it really should not have happened. He had discovered four big old horse-pistols in their armoury months before, had put them to one side as too clumsy to bother with, a foot in the barrel and slightly greater than one inch bore, more like small blunderbusses than true hand-guns, but they could be useful he decided, used properly. He selected the four biggest of his men and showed them how to load with three-quarters of an ounce of black powder and two ounces of buck shot, eight big slugs of lead to each charge; they kicked like a mule, but strong men using both hands could keep them horizontal and fired together they would discourage any armed opposition in the narrow confines of a ship's decks.

The boarders talked the matter over and agreed that the four pistoleers should stand at Tom's shoulder, should fire at his command then fall back to reload and be directed by Joseph as needful thereafter. The remainder would be held in three groups, two of six and one of seven, generally speaking to take bows, midships and stern respectively unless they were given other orders as occasion arose. They liked the idea of knowing exactly what they must do – it made them feel like proper fighting men, sea-soldiers rather than amateur roughs hired on for the occasion.

They circled Guadeloupe, saw nothing other than a tiny schooner fleeing south, twenty tons at most, too small and too fast to attract their attention. Smith thought it might have been a government boat, a small despatches carrier, the sort they sometimes called an aviso; no profit in it at all. The cloud was thick, the night pitch-black and they hove-to in deep water, preferring to close the shores of Martinique in daylight – they had to pass the island on their way south and it seemed only sensible to take a look at the shoreline as they went by; additionally, Smith was not entirely certain in his dead reckoning – they had no access to naval charts and could only guess at the nature or speed of any local current between the islands.

Dawn brought a small sloop into their waiting arms, a national ship they thought, for she had a three pound chase gun and a dozen swivels on the beam, although she had only a crew of six, on passage perhaps, transferring from one command to another; she was no more than a forty tonner, but might well be a useful tender in the islands, able to poke her nose into the shallowest of inlets. The officer in command was a young man, a lieutenant at most, maybe a warrant officer, and slack in his duties to be taken by surprise at first light. Be that as it may, he surrendered instantly, put up no fight at all, and told them of a half a dozen or so of island boats becalmed in a small bay just north of Diamond Rock, all waiting for the wind to turn sufficiently for them to weather the headland and make their final leg into the safety of the harbour. He spoke very good English and they could understand him easily.

Smith clapped on all sail, left the sloop with a prize crew of four aboard and instructions to follow in their wake.

They found seven vessels in the bay, six of them heavily laden island brigs and schooners; the seventh, also a brig, inshore of them all and sheltered by them, waited a few minutes until Star was committed and actually in the horns of the bay before clapping on all sail, at least fifty men appearing in the rigging, and heading directly towards the Star. Belatedly, Smith noticed that the wind seemed quite strong just here, and even the clumsiest of merchant hulls could have held a southerly tack. The Frenchman pointed up a little more and disclosed seven portlids rising and a broadside of eight or nine pound cannon running out.

Star could not tack without opening her quarter to that broadside; there was insufficient room in the bay to wear; if she tried to cross the brig's bows she was as likely as not to be rammed, for being too slow. Blaine staggered on deck, assessed the situation and shouted a series of meaningless orders, hopelessly gone.

Smith ignored his captain, called the chaser to shoot and the larboard broadside to run out, hoping to cause enough damage to slow the French sufficiently to scrape past and away, to run, although he doubted it was possible. They had no grape – it had been too expensive – and could not really hope to cut up her rigging sufficiently to slow her, but he could see no alternative. They were unlikely to come out of this alive he feared – the Coles' activities on shore guaranteed that they would be treated as pirates and hanged out of hand if they were taken.

Their own broadside did very little harm that they could see, while the French fired seven aimed shots into their foremast, high and precise and bringing down the foretopsail yard. They slowed instantly.

"Helm over, Jack," Tom called, "ram 'er, get on board before they can hit us. We might do a bit more damage that way."

Smith shrugged. "All hands to board!"

He swung the helm hard over, sails flapping in confusion, crabbed down on the French bows a couple of minutes before her own boarders expected to be in action.

Tom led his party over the rail, hauling out his pistols and firing into the sixty or seventy men milling in the waist, sorting themselves out into an organised defence. He heard the horse-pistols cough beside him and a four-pounder fired from Star's deck. He had just enough time to close the gap, to run into the French before they could get onto the front foot and start to press forward with their superior numbers. He drew his hanger and gripped it in both hands, swinging it like a butcher's pole-axe and roaring.

There was an officer at the head of the French, sword held in classical fencing mode; Tom slashed and missed, ducked, twisted to one side and kicked him between the legs as he lunged and swiped down at his head as he doubled over, a great meaty crunch rewarding his efforts. To his left another swordsman was offering a high parry to Joseph's cutlass; a slash at waist height opened his guts, left him screaming. A matelot not a foot away, a head butt into his face and knee up, brawling, gutter fighting, kick him as he dropped then lunge with his hanger at the half-turned back of another who was cutting at one of the freemen. The French were navy, regulars who knew the correct ways of doing things and expected to be met by formed ranks with cutlasses properly opposed; they were taken aback by the gutter rats swarming over them.

Pushing forward, never letting them get organised, driving them back so that they thought they were losing; kicking, screaming, gouging, clawing just as much as using their swords; never letting them use their numbers and discipline and training.

The horse pistols fired again, from the side, cutting into the French from an unexpected angle, disconcerting them a little more as well as knocking down three men. Another officer, the captain maybe, flashily uniformed with lace and braid, his sword scoring across Tom's ribs as he frantically dodged to his left, hurting; the hilt of his own sword up and into the man's mouth, breaking teeth, him recoiling with the pain, hand going up to his agony, a great wheeling slash cutting him almost in half, blood in a huge gout, men jumping back on either side, horrified. A few hands dropped; one terrified man, his face covered in his captain's blood, blinded by it, shouted for quarter; a dozen others realised they had lost, they must have, joined in the cry, and suddenly the fighting had stopped.

Tom glanced about him, immensely weary, the fight had used up a day's energy.

"Joseph, get them below! Quickly, push them into their wardroom, cram them together so they can't move."

He turned, picked out sailors from the Star, sent them in pairs to take the huddled merchant hulls who had stayed to watch the fun, had been promised a grandstand view of the hangings and now were too frightened to run.

Ten minutes of frantic action, pushing and shouting and chasing their captives into safe custody.

The Star had torn loose from the Frenchman, was threatening the merchantmen, John Murray stood by the wheel and apparently in command; as he watched there were a dozen of splashes at her side – it seemed that some of the French had managed to board her and had been killed there.

They took half of the crew from each of the merchants and set them under guard on the Star's deck; the island boats were almost always crewed by a family together, fathers and sons and brothers and cousins side-by-side and now hostage for each other's good behaviour. They left one man from the Star aboard each as a prize-master, having too few uninjured bodies to do more, and turned their heads northwards. Tom found he was in command, for Blaine and Smith and the two prize-masters had died at the front of the fight, leading their men, as was only right. John Murray told the tale of what had happened behind him on the Star's deck.

"Me and they Coleses was towards the stern when you went over the bows, Tom, and before we could get up to join you there was a couple of dozen Frogs on board. They killed the captain straight off, because 'e didn't know 'is arse from 'is elbow, 'e was that pissed. Smithy got one in the guts at the same time. They Coleses went in with cutlass in one 'and, those bloody knives of theirs in t'other and one of the Frogs shoots George down in the first rush; Joby went bloody mad then. Just run in to 'em, 'e did, swinging knife and blade and going straight through 'em; they stuck 'im with a cutlass before 'e'd made a yard and 'e didn't take no bloody notice, just kept goin'. I reckon 'e killed a dozen before 'e dropped with no blood left in 'im. Dick and Luke was with me, and we all three got our pistols and a blade and we went in behind 'im and finished off the job. Come the end of it there ain't no more than the three of us left on Star, and it don't look like you lot came out a lot lighter, do it?"

"Not as bad as it looks, John. Three of my boys are dead and five more are chopped up a bit, but the buggers knew how to fight, mate – they've earned their money."

They made Antigua in convoy, six merchant hulls and two national vessels making an impressive display and bringing any number of sour comments from the navy, all of whom were stretched to the full on convoy duty and had not had the chance to go cruising for a year and more. The admiral bought in the two national ships and crewed them with promoted young men from his favourites' ships and sent them off to work the small islands and cays, theoretically to suppress the pirates who hung about the shallow waters, but he too was missing his prize money. The cargos of sugar and molasses sold, as ever; the foodstuffs went to the plantations and the hulls themselves were bought up by local merchants, they having lost too many of their own boats to the French in past months.

It took only three weeks to condemn and dispose of the prizes, it being one of the rare occasions in which celerity was to the advantage of the lawyers. None of the few attorneys-at-law on the island specialised exclusively in the Admiralty Court, there was not enough business for them to make a living thus, so they all had clients wanting to purchase the cargo or prizes and whose interests would be best served by speed and who might not continue to patronise a lawyer who caused delay. They were close to the hurricane season and the West Indies convoy to England was due to sail very soon; the merchants wanted their sugars to sell in London this year and the Law, servant always to the rich and powerful, obliged.

Tom, as senior survivor, was forced to deal with the prize agent, an experience which stretched his literacy to its utmost limit and introduced him to the practices of trade, something which he found to be fascinating. He had to give the final approval to every sale of prize goods and accept the price negotiated; it was not easy to calculate what discount should be given for rapid payment or what was the correct valuation to be given to foreign weights and qualities of molasses and rum. He had to learn quickly, and to take advice from the agent, accepting the responsibility for decisions that he did not fully understand. He enjoyed himself.

There were a number of problems to face, not least being that Blaine had left no instructions to apply in case of his death. The prize agent believed Mr Blaine to have been the sole owner of the Star, but he did not know this certainly to be the case and, as well, had no directions for his heirs and assigns.

"It is unusual, Mr Andrews, for the master of a privateer to be sole owner, indeed, it is unique in my experience – normally they have no more than eight of the sixty-fourths - and it will take years to have enquiries made in England. Do you know if Blaine had family?"

Tom was certain Blaine had been alone in the world, such kin as he might have had having dropped off when he was discovered to be an embarrassment rather than a dashing young frigate captain. He knew that Blaine had never married, said as much and added some interesting extra information.

Tom had been thinking hard over the few days since their lucky encounter with the French navy and had decided, amongst other things, that he was too young to die. He had a scar across his ribs now, as well as that on his face, and wondered just how lucky he might be next time – he had got away with it twice now, he told himself and that meant either that he was fireproof or that he was bloody fortunate. He would be eighteen later in the year and wanted to celebrate his birthday, not be the centrepiece at a wake; it was time to say farewell to privateering, which left the question of what to do next. He had a solution, wondered if he could get away with it.

"I believe, Mr Johnson," he tentatively offered the prize agent, "that is, I am pretty much certain from what the captain told me when he was talking, which he did a lot." The prize agent knew that Blaine had been a drunk and that bottle-hounds could never keep their mouths shut, nodded understandingly; he liked young Andrews, a brave and open-faced lad and very bright, too young yet to have learned habits of roguery.

"Go on, Mr Andrews."

"Well, sir, from what he said, the captain wasn't the owner as such, he was the front man, you might say, on a big share, maybe, for three gentlemen who didn't want to be known to be in the business of letters of marque. The Earl, an admiral and a right reverend gentleman, I was told. The Earl thought he should not be getting his hands dirty with our trade, and the admiral and the bishop aren't allowed to, not in public."

Johnson leant back in his chair, thinking quickly in his turn; Tom's suggestion was very believable, made much more sense than to accept Blaine as sole proprietor in his own right, but it created an even bigger problem. He was Antiguan born, second son of an established merchant and set up as an attorney and small businessman on the side; he had no contacts in London who could guide him through the jungles of society and could do himself great harm if he unwittingly offended a figure as powerful as an earl – there were two in Dorset, he believed, one of them, Shaftesbury, politically prominent. Small colonial merchants had no business thrusting themselves to the attention of such people – a word to the Governor and he could be swatted like a fly.

"Do you know just who the three proprietors are, Mr Andrews?"

"Captain Blaine gave me their names, sir, and told me that they knew me to be one of his junior officers, having approved my name when he gave it to them."

The second big lie, the first having been accepted.

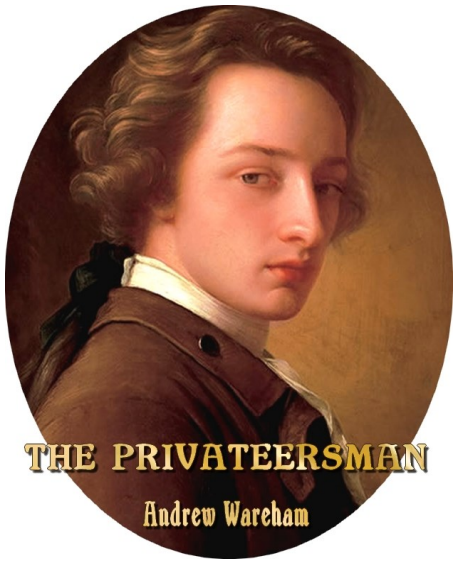
"Good! They do not know me, and have no reason to place any trust in me, but you can, as it were, vouch for my probity, Mr Andrews. What I would wish to do, Mr Andrews, would be to beg you to act as my messenger and courier. I would wish to transmit the ship's share, less my commission, to these gentlemen, would normally place the transfer in the hands of my bankers – but that is a very public process, involving much naming of names! Was I to convert the sums involved into gold and trade bills drawn on London, then it would be possible for my messenger, well feed, to carry them to the gentlemen, all anonymously, assuring them that I do not even know their names."

Over the period of an hour Johnson explained the nature of trade bills, drawn and discounted, often third or fourth hand and effectively untraceable without great effort, and set about

persuading Tom to carry such a vast sum for him. They agreed in the end that Joseph should be asked to travel as well, as paid escort, and that Tom should receive the sum of two hundred pounds in addition to, of course, all the costs of a passage to Poole. The sum involved was about twenty thousands of pounds, fifty per centum of the total value of their prizes, the ship's share.

Two more weeks, Tom on tenterhooks, and the cash and bills was all to hand, in two heavy leather valises, and Tom and Joseph took passage north, to Savannah in the first instance, the convoy having sailed. The survivors of the Star were paid their full shares, the mothers of the dead freemen receiving theirs, much to their surprise – they did not expect honest treatment from white merchants. John, Dick and Luke stayed with the Star, for lack of anything better to do, and Johnson announced that he would find a master and officers and a full crew for her, pro tem, until instructions arrived from England, and send her out again; there were naval officers on shore and seeking employment, beached or wrecked and superfluous to the establishment and he was sure that he could man her.

The made their farewells, reached Savannah and found that they had been directed wrongly, they should have gone to Charleston. In Charleston a few days afterwards they found two convoys about to sail, the larger to London, a much smaller group to New York; to Joseph's surprise he found himself in a cabin on the largest of the New York bound merchants, Tom having bought space on a London ship, very publicly, but sailed on another as the two convoys left harbour together. They reached New York ten days later, unannounced, unknown and rich.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Four

New York was vile, rotten, corrupt, a town under sentence of death, the seat of government for the losing side in a war that still had a year or two to run but whose eventual end was clear; it had no future as far as building a business was concerned, but it provided every opportunity for short-term enrichment. The soldiers could talk of their expectations of winning next season's battles, and the navy was slowly regaining control of the seas, but the reality in civilian eyes was that the Americans and French would win the war, and have no interest in the frauds and corruption of the previous regime, being too busy establishing their own, possibly using the same people at all except the very topmost level.

Profits were to be made from treachery and spying, looting, smuggling, theft and fraud; government funds were open to every peculator; licences to trade could be bought from the most junior of clerks; blind eyes were more expensive, but every general, customs officer and excise man sold them. For those who already had money, the grease to smooth their way through the maze of officialdom, New York was an *Eldorado*, a *Golconda*, the source of unlimited wealth. There was no police force, and the military provosts were few and untrained in the role, their rank and file sometimes honest, their officers – careers finished and seconded to the duty because they were inefficient or cowardly or simply disliked in their regiment - invariably hungry; the sole limitation on the criminal endeavours of the ordinary man was the existence of other criminals with their snouts in the trough and no great desire to share, and opportunities were so great that it was not too difficult to find one's own, exclusive swindle. For a young man with money, no scruples and fewer morals, New York was a paradise on Earth; the hooked grin on

Tom's face turned into a smile of pure delight. Joseph, ever at Tom's shoulder, had been brought up to Bible and Hellfire and disapproved, sometimes loudly, but he found himself able to accept a share in the profits, though sometimes wrestling with his conscience as he closed the drawstrings of his purse.

They landed on an autumn morning, looked about at the expanse of crowded, bustling wharves, a hundred times greater than English Harbour or Poole, men and horses, wagons and handcarts intermixed, crates and sacks and packing cases in heaps on the waterfront, moving into and out of warehouses and ships' holds, a shouting cacophony, an apparent chaos. First impression said it was wide-open, an uncontrolled shambles; more careful observation disclosed two pickets of soldiers, acting as provosts, and dozens of armed men stood watching over individual warehouses and gangplanks, private guards hefting clubs and pistols and cutlasses in casually professional fashion, as ready to kill as to say 'good-morning' and as little moved by the one as the other. The presence of so many on police duty meant there was no law and order – as young as he was, Tom knew that the dragoons and excise men were only to be seen when smuggling was rife, when control had been lost – a peaceful countryside needed no armed men to keep it down, an orderly dockside required few visible policemen. The Second Mate from their ship passed by as they stood watching, exchanged a casual nod, and Tom asked him what he should do for accommodation, could he give a recommendation.

"You'll have to take a hotel room for the while, sir – and very expensive that will be, too, because it will have to be one of the big places, the ones that will have quarters for your boy."

Joseph scowled and shuffled a pace backwards to a place of subservience.

"Down at the Battery, sir, Robertson's has a cook who can do more than burn a steak, but 'tis a guinea a night, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Jones. It will do for the while, till I can find a place of my own."

Jones smiled politely, waved and whistled to a four-wheeled carriage drawn by a pair – suitable to the dignity of a man who could afford a guinea a night - and gave the driver directions. Joseph picked up the bags and heaved them aboard before climbing up onto the roof, hissing at Tom when he made to protest that they had to fit in, to do it properly. Joseph, coming from Antigua, knew that he was free, but had no illusions that that meant equal, readied himself to bow and scrape in proper humility, consoling himself that he was going to be richer than most of the whites surrounding him and sneering; one day he would take his money and buy some land and be *truly* free, somewhere, in some country where a black man could dare to be rich.

Robertson's was perfect for Tom's needs – Mr Jones had judged him well, it seemed - it was expensive but not genteel, no sprigs of the English aristocracy, actual or would-be, were to be found inside its doors, it catered exclusively for merchants and polite criminals, those who wore collars and washed their shirts quite often. He laid down fourteen guineas in advance, ringing each coin on the mahogany counter, and took a bedroom and sitting room for himself and a separate cubicle in the quarters for Joseph, not a bunk in the common servants room, meals included. The bags were sealed with quantities of wax and placed in the strongroom, itself under permanent armed guard and generally reckoned to be secure.

On the first evening he came to an amicable arrangement with one of the several unattached young ladies to be found in the public rooms of the hotel, a pretty blonde-haired girl about two years his senior in age, a lifetime in experience; apart from the obvious reason, he had noticed

that none of the men were unaccompanied – a complaisant young miss was a necessary accessory - a statement of success. Jenny knew everybody as well, was able to steer him towards a number of useful contacts, found him an attorney who knew of a warehouse with its own living quarters on the docks and was able to arrange its rental at very reasonable terms, for coin in advance – gold was in short supply, most transactions being made in various forms of paper. Tom presumed that she took a cut on each deal, but *nothing* came for free in this town and she had a living to make, a future to secure in a very uncertain world.

It took a week to close the lease and furnish the living quarters, Joseph doing the actual work of purchasing and moving furniture and equipping the kitchen, again a statement of wealth and position – young Mr Andrews kept his own black, did not get his own hands dirty. Joseph carefully referred to himself as 'the Andrews' servant', implying that he had been a house slave and was still in servitude – freemen were distrusted but slaves were assumed to be stupid and docile – he overheard to their profit many a conversation for being treated as a dumb animal.

Jenny also was able to introduce Tom to Mr Robert Chawleigh – 'call me Bob' – an 'agent' and 'trader in bits and bobs, ho-ho' - who, she said, knew everybody and could be relied upon to point his clients in the right direction and, most importantly, stayed bought, never a whisper of a double-cross from Bob, everybody knew he was straight. Bob was looking for a man with a warehouse, a discreet gentleman who could buy and store a few tons of tobacco and then arrange to ship it out without any fuss. There was a planter 'down the coast' who had a consignment he wanted to move urgently – he needed the money, could not wait the months involved in shipping his crop to London and selling it.

Tom showed very interested, wanted to know more, arranged to meet a representative of the gentleman in question, the meanwhile discovering all he could about tobacco growing; it was soon clear that the nearest tobacco plantations were all well south, firmly in rebel-held lands, deep in the colonies, their ports blockaded. The English newssheets were available, with prices of goods at auction – Virginia tobacco was in increasingly short supply, its price rising every month in London; there was scope for profit. Customs could be squared, trading licences procured at little cost, but it might be wiser to attempt to conceal the tobacco in another cargo, give an appearance of legitimacy; rather than buy hold space it would be better to charter his own vessel.

Joseph set to work to discover a legitimate cargo, bought in best-quality seasoned timber for furniture making – oak and maple and walnut – and beaver skins for the hatters, commodities always in demand in London. Tom demanded two hundred tons of tobacco of Bob, disconcerting him, for he had been trying to move a river-boat load of fifteen tons.

"Can't slip that much through the patrols, Tom, it ain't possible."

"Can't be done then, Bob?"

They were sat to dinner in Robertson's, both enjoying the change from the well-done beef that was all that was normally available elsewhere, as well as taking advantage of the unusually widely spaced tables that ensured privacy.

"Can't be done the way I was first thinking, Tom. The tobacco warehouses are jam-packed full though, so it is merely a question of seeking another way, we could find a thousand tons if we wanted. If we cannot sneak the goods through, then they must come openly, preferably in an official convoy run by the military. We will need to buy papers and permits to load our goods onto military wagons - Major Jackson of the Commissariat who has an unfortunate taste for slow horses and fast women, could well be open to persuasion; settling day comes in two weeks and

his credit is at an end, I know. Only yesterday an acquaintance begged me to pass him the hard word, in fact."

The expression was new to Tom, he asked what he meant.

"Pay up, on time, or go for a swim in the Hudson, wearing lead boots."

"Ah! That could be a very short dip – sounds like a very fair alternative, though. How much is he in for?"

"Only two hundred, but it's not the first time he has had to beg for credit and he's run out of friends – he could be topped with very little fuss, as an example to others."

"Two hundred is always available to a friend, Bob, and more, perhaps. Could I meet the Major, or should everything be done at a distance?"

"I shall arrange for you to meet him, Tom."

Tom relaxed as he left the hotel – Jenny had suggested, very strongly, that he should learn to talk like a gentleman, it would enable him to meet them on equal terms, and she had been teaching him, correcting his aitches and broadening his vocabulary – she said her father had been a curate and had wanted her to become a governess, but she had found more congenial ways of making a living, coming out to New York with an officer when she was no more than sixteen. It was still hard work though, the Dorset burr very hard to shift from the tongue – but, he accepted, he needed to talk 'like a gentleman' if he was to fleece the gentry, and they had the most money.

Major Jackson was plump, self-indulgent and a fool – not unintelligent, not unwise in the ways of the world, but convinced that life should be easy, that he should not have to work for a living, that he had a right to the comfort he had been born to. He was a second son, his late father a baronet, his brother settled on the family estates in Huntingdonshire on five thousand a year, and himself having inherited only a very few thousands from his mother; he ignored the fact that his brother had bought his commissions for him, for that had been no more than was right for the head of the family, merely deplored that he should be expected to keep himself and his family on his pay. His family was now no more than a daughter, his wife and son having been taken by typhus a year before, and he regretted bitterly that he could not send his girl back to England, to live with his brother, but he could not afford the cost of a passage for her and a maid. His expenses were the least a gentleman could consider, and his gambling losses just one of those unfortunate burdens the well-born had to bear; nothing was his fault, nothing was in his power to amend – he was sure Mr Andrews could appreciate his position.

Mr Andrews appreciated only too well, so much so that he offered a 'temporary' loan to tide the major over his current difficulties – a mere monkey, five hundred pounds. As for terms, unimportant, it could be repaid as and when the major might find it convenient – the major could discuss that with Bob, at his leisure. There was no mention of anything so unsubtle as a bribe, not even a hint that the major might wish to offer a favour in return – they were merely gentlemen together.

It took two months, but on a cold January afternoon a military convoy pulled into the yard of Tom's warehouse, fifty of the largest artillery wagons discharging two tons each of wrapped bales of tobacco – the wrapping to disguise the nature of the goods, although the smell was pungent and unmistakable at fifty yards; the wagons returned a week later with the second half of the consignment. Bob had arranged for the leaf to be brought by small coastal boats - tiny yawls and cutters and ketches that normally carried no more than market gardeners and their vegetables from village to local town - in consignments of five or ten tons at a time to a jetty a few miles

down coast; the boats would have stood out in New York itself, obviously out of place, so the last stage had been made overland.

Another five days and Tom's chartered ship docked at the wharf opposite to his doors and his cargo was loaded, clean and dry and bilge-free. She sailed into the storms of winter, her master quite without apprehension – she was a new ship and well-found, would stand up to anything short of a hurricane, and there were fewer hazards in the cold months – cruising men-of-war less often to be found and private ships of war, never.

The convoy from England docked in late June and Tom received a packet from his correspondents in England; his goods had been received and put to auction, the tobacco, best snuff, particularly well-received, as the discounted Bills of Exchange enclosed would testify.

Tom sat to his account books, all payments made and commissions paid, and calculated that he had cleared eleven pounds on each ton of tobacco, thirty shillings a ton on the furniture wood and eighteen pence on each of the four hundred beaver pelts, a little less than three thousands, which was good money, but only a quarter of it from Joseph's legitimate trading. It was obvious where his endeavours must most sensibly be directed. Bob was asked to lay his hands on another four hundred tons, at least, of tobacco, as quickly as might be.

"Less easy than last time, Tom – the coastal waters can't be used, due to the navy getting efficient in its blockading. It would have to be overland all the way – American wagons north to the extent of their influence, then ours across the debatable areas and through the English controlled lands. They would have to be escorted – a troop of irregular cavalry, I suspect – they have no uniforms and can belong to either side at need. It would demand more of cash down, I think."

"Who needs be paid, Bob?"

Bob reeled off a list of names – a general and three lesser officers on the British side, four Americans and one Frenchman to the south and west and the 'colonel' of a troop of militia operating in the forest lands to the west of the colonies.

"An unpleasant man, Tom, one who has fought for both sides, occasionally at the same time, but he has some control of the larger of the backwoods trails, and if he did not escort our convoys, he would raid them, so there is little choice. Colonel Henry J. Miller will cost us some three hundreds in gold, I believe, but will provide us with sixty men for a month, them to see a guinea a week, him two guineas a day. We can use river-boats for part of the journey through the colonies, ox-wagons for the run north, fifteen miles a day they will make. It will be best if you see Miller yourself, for otherwise he will have doubts – there are those in the Army who might wish to do him down. Major Jackson will provide us with passes through the British areas, if he is still available – he lost every penny of the five hundreds you dropped him - fortunately for him, paying off his most pressing debts first. I believe he has begged his brother to arrange his transfer to the Ordnance Board in England – where fortunes can very easily be amended, they having control of all of the Army and Navy's contracts for great and small guns and powder and ball; but he will remain here for at least another six months, even if he is successful in achieving his wish."

"Will he survive so long?"

"Not without access to at least another thousand, Tom."

"He will need to provide a lot more than a safe-conduct for so much, Bob."

Bob nodded, said that he would broach the question with the major, endeavour to discover what he could offer, if anything.

Major Jackson was desperate, having become aware, belatedly, of just how insecure was his hold on life; he was willing to promise anything for the chance of even a few hundreds of pounds; neither Bob nor Tom trusted him to be able to deliver, however.

"Gentlemen, I can arrange to buy wheat and corn from the farms down the coast, as well as consignments of beans and brewing barley and best hay and wheat-straw. There will be five hundreds of wagons moving every day, in all directions, and insufficient cavalry squadrons to escort each convoy. It should not be impossible for you to bring a consignment to a given farmstead and for my wagons to pick it up in the ordinary nature of things. The areas where we forage are, in the nature of things, separate from the main theatres of war, and there are no more than troops of irregulars to be found there."

They accepted his proposals, but arranged for half of their consignments to be run under the aegis of Colonel Miller – he would be slower, but they suspected he might be more reliable.

Joseph continued to buy in timber and furs and a few hides, a legitimate cargo to provide cover again.

Harvest came home and the Commissariat wagons went out to buy grain, as Major Jackson had promised, and after a week, five or ten wagons a day turned up at Tom's warehouse, offloading as scheduled. A fortnight of profitable activity came to a sudden halt when the Major appeared, unheralded, at Tom's office door.

"We have a problem, Mr Andrews!"

Tom sat him down, signalled to Joseph for refreshments, quietly told him to stay in hearing range to listen for anything the Major chose not to say.

"Forty of my wagons, Mr Andrews, held at a farmstead just half a day, eight miles, north of the city, carrying the last of your tobacco, sir. A greedy young man of the Provosts, Mr Andrews, who has decided to take a share in our profits – five guineas a wagon, he is demanding!"

Tom's first reaction was that the Major had himself become greedy, wanted another two hundred in a hurry: no doubt he would ask for the coinage and volunteer to carry it out himself to pay off this certainly imaginary Provost officer.

"The young gentleman demands to see my principal, Mr Andrews, would not accept cash from me, why I do not know, am unable to imagine! I think it would be best for you to ride out with me immediately."

It stank – there was something badly astray in Jackson's manner and, besides, he should have gone to Bob Chawleigh, not come directly to Tom. There was false paper enough to cover the stocks in the warehouse already, but the loads on the road were obviously contraband – a nasty, suspicious mind might wonder whether Jackson was setting him up, bringing him into direct contact with goods that he admitted to be his – it could make a very tidy arrest and conviction, one that all of Bob's array of bought interest would be unable to overturn.

"You will have to wait a few minutes, Major Jackson, I am promised to the master of my ship on the hour, must make my final arrangements with him if he is to bring his hull to my wharf tomorrow. What is the time now? Ten of the clock? By half past eleven, Major Jackson, I will be your man. I have no riding horse of my own, could you hire a buggy, do you think, from the livery?"

Jackson trotted off to make the arrangements, not even begging for the monies in advance so anxious as he was to secure Tom's company.

"Joseph? Do you know where Bob Chawleigh is likely to be this morning?"

“Here, Master Tom, I sent the boy running for him ten minutes since. I been looking out the pistols I gotten hold of as well, Master Tom, thinkin’ you might have a need for such some day. It cold enough for a big frieze coat on, Master Tom, and I bring your belt along from the old Star. Six big hand-guns, Master Tom.”

Chawleigh appeared, listened briefly, swore and left at a run to fetch his horse from the stables he used, was waiting a furlong up the road when the Major drove up, the reins in his own hands, no boy from the livery. Chawleigh was wise in his trade, set off up the street in front of them – no man looked to be followed from in front – the guilty-minded always checked their back trail, very rarely took note of the travellers up the road from them. Joseph accompanied Tom, causing no upset to the Major – a ‘body servant’ made no difference one way or the other, less significant than a pet dog for being unlikely to bite; he assumed that the bag Joseph carried contained a snack and a bottle for the road, never demanded to see inside it.

The buildings of the city, still relatively small and confined to the island, ended abruptly and gave way to the lines of a camp of Hanoverians, garrison troops and little concerned with apparent civilians travelling out; their sentries at the roadside demanded passes of the trickle of traders coming in, but seemed lackadaisical, as if they expected no attack and really cared nothing about smugglers. The area had been cleared of civilians in some past time of greater emergency, houses and small farmsteads that could have covered a besieger burnt down, hedgerows grubbed out – it was waste, barren, empty, flat and offering no concealment for nearly five miles. They came to a scattering of small farms and woodland and Jackson turned off the road onto a track leading to a barn and small, broken-down house, derelict seeming but with a two acre paddock hidden by the trees and now full of wagons. Upwards of eighty men, the drivers and their mates, Tom presumed, were sat in a huddle, guarded by a half a dozen of dismounted dragoons. The troopers’ mounts, a dozen all told, were tied up to rail by the barn; eleven carried carbine buckets, the twelfth, a slightly better looking horse, had a richer saddle, was probably the officer’s charger.

A captain, a young, slender, smartly turned-out gentleman, seemingly very bored, escorted by a big sergeant and four men, walked out of the open barn doors, nodded to Jackson.

“Is this our man, Major Jackson?”

“Yes, Captain Dawson, this is Mr Thomas Andrews.”

Dawson turned to Tom, looked him up and down dismissively - a mere civilian.

“You are owner of the contents of these wagons, Mr Andrews?”

“I am,” Tom replied, jumping down from the buggy and loosening his overcoat.

“Then, Andrews, I arrest you for carrying contraband goods through the blockade and for treasonable dealings with the enemy. Carry on, sergeant.”

The captain half-turned away, distancing himself from the trash he had to deal with, wholly un-alert. Tom killed the sergeant first, expecting him to be the more dangerous man; Dawson screamed once but made no attempt to fight – he probably did not know how to. Joseph pulled the old horse pistols from his bag and shot at the four troopers, clustered together; Tom finished the job and watched as the wagon drivers swarmed their guards under. The drivers were civilians employed by the Commissary but were subject to military discipline; Dawson had made the error of informing them that they were a bunch of traitors and could expect five hundred lashes apiece at minimum and they were taking their own measures to avert that crippling punishment.

A rattle of hooves behind him alerted Tom to the presence of Chawleigh; he glanced up as he reloaded.

"Can we lose the bodies and the horses, Bob?"

"Provided the boy had made no written report of where he expected to be today, yes. If he's under orders from his colonel, or if he's working with other patrols, probably not." Chawleigh turned to Major Jackson, sat unmoving, open-mouthed, horrified, having made no attempt to draw pistol or sword. "Well, Major Jackson? Was your friend on his own, or was he under orders, sir?"

"He was not my friend, Bob, not at all. He forced me to do it! He said he was sure my wagons were carrying contraband, would have them searched officially and would see me broken. He said he would arrest Mr Andrews and have him shot when he resisted being taken up or 'attempting to escape', afterwards, and then he would make a big fuss of the wagons full of smuggled goods, bringing himself to the attention of his seniors, while I sold off everything in the warehouse and shared it with him. I had to do it, Bob, had no choice."

"I'm sure you are right, Major Jackson." Chawleigh's voice was deeply sympathetic, understanding of the poor man's problems; Tom caught Joseph's eye; they winced in unison and turned away as he spoke again.

"So, Major Jackson, did Dawson say there was anyone else in this with him?"

"No, not at all, I'm sure there is not – I met him at the Club and he spoke to me there twice, and he said nothing of anyone else. I know he is somewhat embarrassed for funds and I am certain he would not have wished to share with another, it was all his idea, though I am not sure how he knew about me."

"I expect it was because you told him, Major Jackson, you conniving little shit!"

Jackson looked quite indignant for the second or so before Chawleigh shot him.

"I have never been able to tolerate dishonesty, Mr Andrews – men such as he bring out the Old Adam in me, I fear."

They buried the bodies below the floor of the barn, the military saddles with them, then set to pulling dry timber out of the woods; with eighty men working busily it took very little time to half-fill the old building and then set it afire, hopefully concealing all traces of their activities for the immediate future. A dozen of the wagoners tied a riding horse behind them, a not uncommon practice, and they set off into New York, offloading before darkness fell.

"Jackson had a daughter, I believe, Tom?"

"Hell, yes! What do we do with her, Bob? Her father's dead but I'll be damned if I kill a young girl out of hand just for being inconvenient."

"Move her into your place, Tom. Your Jenny can look after her, keep her safe, I don't know how old she is, until you can put her on a ship back to England. You can't leave a young girl on her own in this town."

Miss Amelia Jackson was sixteen years of age, sheltered, uncertain of herself, alone; told that her father had had to 'go away' and that she must stay temporarily at the home of one of his acquaintances until she could be sent back to England, she nodded and set about packing with the aid of the single female servant of the household, a combination of nurse, housekeeper and general factotum.

"Have you been long with the Jackson family? What is your name?"

"Bennet, sir." She curtsied, nervously, having no wish to be cast off in New York after twenty years in service. "I did come as nursery maid to the mistress before Master George was born, sir, and stayed with Miss after they died, sir."

There was room in the quarters for more staff and a maid would be useful, and would make life easier when it came to putting the young girl aboard ship.

"Pack your own traps, Bennet. I would wish you to stay with Miss Amelia until we can arrange for her to go to England. Do you know of any family the Major has in England? Could I send to them to take her?"

"Sir George would give her houseroom, sir, in Huntingdonshire."

"Good. A letter will take six months, I expect, to get an answer. It would be better to simply send her off on the next convoy."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but do you expect to see the Major again, sir?"

Tom weighed her up – she seemed not unintelligent, almost certainly knew enough about the Jacksons' affairs to be able to put two and two together. He shook his head.

"Poor lamb! On her own in the world at her age, with not a penny of her own, I suspects, sir."

"Nothing, I imagine, Bennet." Tom responded to her hint, soothingly. "I will see to your money while you stay here and until you have taken her home, but after that I don't know."

"My brother got a little bit of a farm over towards Thrapston way, sir. So long as I gets back to England, there's a bed for me to lay me head while I looks for a place."

"Look after Miss and I will make sure you get home, Bennet. Can I give you the money to get fares on the stage in England, to make your way from Bristol to Huntingdon? Will you know how to go about it?"

"I been there, sir, to Sir George's big place. Us can go cross-country, to Cheltenham and then Oxford town and on to Northampton. The old Cambridge Flyer passes through Huntingdon, sir, and a gig from the inn will take us to Sir George. So long as 'e be in residence, sir – in the Season 'e'll be in London, and 'e might be off for the shooting later on, but in 'igh summer and dead winter, 'e'll be at 'ome."

"August convoy, into Bristol for the beginning of October at latest. There'll be a ship of mine to take passage on, so that will be no problem. Look after her for the next few weeks, if you please."

"We ain't safe here no more, Master Tom."

"Why, Joseph?"

Tom was unwilling to listen to any prophecy of doom – he liked New York, loved the profits it held out to him and the easy way of life of most moneyed people, outside of the uppermost English classes, with whom he had no wish to mix. There was an imitation of London 'Society', for those of birth and breeding, but he had no wish to become part of that.

"The word will be out soon enough, on how the Major Jackson died, Master Tom. Eighty men on them wagons, they ain't all goin' to keep their chaffers shut. Some'll get drunk and some'll just naturally have to shout they mouths off and some'll talk to their ladies. Come the end of next month, maybe earlier, and the army people are like to be hearin' just how their man come to disappear."

"There won't be any proof, Joseph."

"They won't look for no court case, Master Tom. They maybe not got much time for that Captain Dawson, but he army, and you ain't, and they looks after their own. They has a quiet word with the other sergeants in they camp, and says as how you was the one topped their brother … well, I don't reckon either you or me lives too long after that."

"Colonel Miller makes his delivery in, what, three more days?"

"He do, and the ship makes her berth the day after that."

"What do you think then, Joseph? Should we go back to England on her?"

"No, boss, the word might go soon after. I bin' lookin' at maps and talking about. We takes cabins up to Halifax in Lower Canada, and then we changes ship there and goes to Glasgow in Scotland, not to London or Bristol at all, they's a lot of Scots men in Canada, always got ships on that run, and from there we buys a little carriage of our own and we drives south to someplace where we starts up again in business, trading or whatever – we disappears from New York and then we vanishes from Halifax and then we ain't no place to be seen in Scotland – it'll need some real bad luck to find us after that."

"What about the money from this season's trading, how do we lay our hands on that?"

"Sell it in New York, Master Tom – 'assign it', the cargo that is, while it's still on the sea – they's two or three men would take it off our hands for say a cut of ten parts in the hundred. We take their Trade Bills and lose about five per cent discounting them and we're away clear."

Tom took up his pencil, never as fast with his arithmetic, even on paper, as Joseph was in his head.

"Gives us about five thou' gross on the deal. Time we've paid Miller and got clear it leaves us with about twenty-six thou' cash in hand."

"You reckon Miss Jenny wants to come with us, Master Tom?"

"Doubt it, Joseph, I reckon she likes America too much – back in England she'd just be a whore, here she's got every chance of turning respectable if she wants."

"When you goin' to tell her we goin', Master Tom?"

Tom met Joseph's stare, challenging him; after a couple of seconds he nodded.

"The morning we go, I think, Joseph. The rent on this place is paid up till next spring, she can take it over till then. What do you reckon, drop her a couple of hundred out of our money?"

"That enough to keep her comfortable till she picks up with another man, Master Tom, and she won't have time enough to sell us out if she don't know nothing."

"Right. Same for Bob, I think, nothing to be said. No need to pay him anything, he's made his cut, fair and square – perhaps he'll take up with Jenny, they seem friendly."

Joseph laughed, shook his head at Tom's naivety. "He a friend of hers because she knows he won't never try to get a hand up her skirts, Master Tom – he got a young feller about the same age as you what keeps he bed warm at night."

"What, you mean …?"

"Yep, just that!"

"Well I'm buggered!"

"Not if you's careful about turnin' you back on him, Master Tom."

Slowly, reluctantly, Tom began to chuckle, not particularly pleased to have appeared to be a youthful innocent.

"What about Miss Amelia, Master Tom?"

"Convoy's not due for another month. She'll have to come with us and sail from Halifax, I suppose. Damned nuisance that will be!"

"Pretty little girl, Master Tom."

"No, not for me, Joseph, don't fancy her."

"I do."

"But…"

"Suppose I learns to speak like whitey do, Master Tom?"

"You ain't *that* black in colour, Joseph – say your mum came from Italy or Spain, the Mediterranean somewhere – by the time we're in Scotland, they won't know any different."

"Sounds right to me, *Mister* Andrews – slave in New York, free man of colour in Halifax, Mr Joseph Star in Glasgow?"

"No reason why not, Joe – my name's Tom, by the way."

"Not in New York it ain't, Master Tom, nor in Halifax."

"Better not get a leg over the girl in New York, Joseph – they'd hang you for sure if the word got out, or even the suspicion of it for that matter. Will she be willing?"

"She surely got a nice smile if she ain't, Master Tom!"

It promised to be a complication, Tom felt – it could be avoided by getting rid of Joseph, easy enough to do in New York, the merest mention that he believed his black servant to be annoying the young orphan girl staying with him while waiting for the convoy, and there would be a lynching party. But he valued Joseph, and liked the man; he was clever, possibly more so than Tom himself, he was honest and reliable and, above all, grateful for being taken out of Antigua, and he was useful – Tom's back was always safe with Joseph there. If he was not to be a servant and was to remain with him, then he must be a partner, junior, though, not equal.

Miller sent word of his presence to Bob and they went out of town to meet him – he seemed rather unwilling to venture inside the lines, within sight of the garrison.

At some point he had transhipped from the ox-wagons and had put the cargo onto drays pulled by heavy horses, teams of six with four and five ton loads.

"Looks like it's all local, Bob, using drays – they don't never go out of town, usually. Two hundred tons, thereabouts, of tobacco. Good stuff, one of my boys checked it out – he comes from down on the James River. Got some beaver pelts and buffalo hides as well, picked 'em up from a warehouse up country a ways."

Tom nodded agreement, he would take the extra – there was no way he would consider arguing with Miller or the teamsters he had with him – dressed in rough-cured hide, frontier fashion, bearded, dirty, mean-looking, and every one of them with a rifle or musket at his side, a knife in his belt, at least two pistols holstered. Fifty-five wagons, five horsemen and Miller himself, each of the wagons with a riding horse tethered on a loose rein – he would bet on them against a battalion of redcoats.

"There won't be any questions asked, about the extras, I presume, Colonel Miller?" Bob enquired, straight-faced.

"None, Bob, not for at least three months."

Bob caught Tom's eye, nodded.

“Initial agreement was for three hundred guineas, gold, Colonel Miller. You will find that in this bag, sir. What of the wagons and dray-horses, have you a purpose for them, must you take them back to their owners or will you wish us to dispose of them for you?”

“They go back, thank’ee, Mr Andrews, loaded with flour, at least, I trust, Bob?”

Bob nodded, it could be done, gunpowder as well and other necessities of rural existence.

“What of the furs and hides, Colonel?”

“A hundred, sight unseen?”

Take his word for the deal? Or refuse and demand to inspect the goods, implying that he doubted their quality, and by implication, Miller’s integrity. He would be gone within a week, but he could be dead inside five minutes; Tom grinned and stretched out his hand.

“Done, sir.”

They shook and waited a few minutes while Joseph counted out the coins.

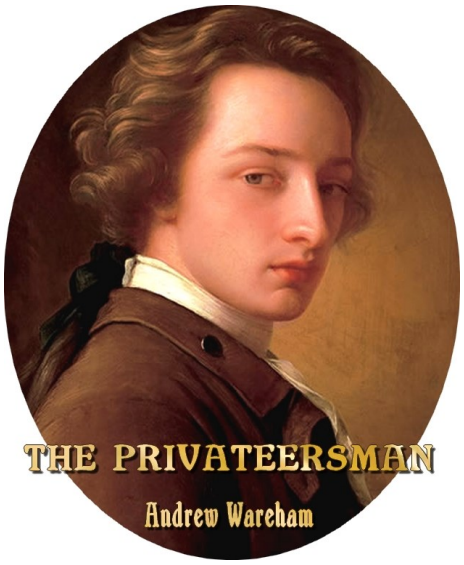
Miller’s men left and Bob took an hour to rustle up drivers for the run to the dock.

Everything was aboard ship next day, bills of lading agreed to be true and countersigned by a respected New York attorney, the cargo sold on almost immediately. Four days later Tom, Joseph, Amelia and Bennet boarded a trader for Halifax, joined the regular monthly convoy north, well escorted by the navy. Jenny waved them goodbye, shrugging as she turned her back and looked for her next meal-ticket – it was still better than being a governess and drudge in some little squire’s house in the sticks in England; mind you, she was late this month, which could turn out to be an inconvenience, but that could be dealt with as well - one way or another.

Five days in a hotel in the back-water that was Halifax, little more than a naval base that also exported salted and smoked cod by the thousands of tons; the town stank of fish, fresh, cured and rotting; the people were little better, the great bulk of them Scots and unintelligible and smelling remarkably like the fish. Then the tedium of an Atlantic crossing – there was simply nothing to do as a passenger other than play cards, talk, read or drink too much. Tom was no gambler – he had never learnt any card games and had just enough sense not to try to pick them up, in the company in the big cabin. There was a pair of army officers off on furlough and another who had sent his papers in, was home to take up his inheritance, to live the life of a gentleman of leisure, so he said. In addition there was a merchant who had come out to negotiate a contract for salt fish to Portugal and another who had come to buy straight timbers – no longer to be found in England - for his shipyard; besides them were the families of three other officers, returning to England from America before the shambles of the inevitable hasty retreat. Tom had little in common with any of them, but was able to borrow books and practice his ‘genteel’ speech – he let it be known that he had been representing his family in America, trying to recover or sell up what he could of their tobacco interests in the south, with little success, he regretted to say. He had brought away his warehouse manager, for fear that he would be taken for a man of colour and put into bondage – he was from a family of Mediterranean origin, long expert in tobacco, settled in England since King Charles’ day, very respectable.

The story was accepted and Joseph’s obvious friendship with Amelia caused no eyebrows to rise; Bennet, who had known Joseph as a black man in New York, said nothing – she quite liked the man and the master had offered her a permanence as housekeeper when they set up for themselves in England, much safer than having to seek out a place as a maidservant and possibly ending up working in a pub or hotel rather than respectably in service with a place for life and a pension.

Glasgow with winter coming on, still a small town but growing rapidly, the first smokes rising from steam engines, the docks crowded with foodstuffs and timber and cotton and tobacco and sugar coming in, textiles and iron goods for export. There were shipyards, many of them newly built, along the Clyde, all the evidence of a thriving, booming city – but it was very Scottish, an English accent would be out of place in business here, and, in any case, they would be wiser to disappear from sight again here as they had originally planned.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Five

They took places in the stage coach leaving from the Post Office at dawn, the ancient faded green rattler - fifty or more years old, nearly ten feet wide and twenty long, a farm dray with a body roughly slapped on, a pair of bench seats and a big wicker basket at the rear for bags and parcels, and traditionally the poorest of passengers, the basket scramblers - expecting with ordinary good fortune, the agent said, to reach Carlisle before nightfall; if it was delayed then they would have to put up at any wayside inn that had beds.

"Ninety miles, Tom, and ten hours of daylight – not a hope in hell!"

Joseph was unimpressed by the coachman's promises – they might make the run in one day at the height of summer when there was fifteen hours of light, but approaching the autumn equinox there was no chance. He knew little of coaches but had hired enough wagons to estimate what sort of speed they could make and the voyage down the Firth and into port had given him an idea of the countryside and its hills.

The coachman chirruped to his six horses and they set off at a sedate walk through the unlit, shadowy streets, stopping less than a mile away at a small beer house to pick up five more passengers, all of them going up onto the roof although there would have been room for four of them comfortably inside.

Bennet sniffed and said she had thought so.

"Thought what, Bennet?"

"Shouldering, Mister Andrews, sir. Thruppence a mile, you paid the company for us, sir – two bob in the driver's pocket for them, you can bet, sir."

"What about the guard?"

"He gets a cut, that's for sure, sir."

The road was in better condition than most in Britain, having been rebuilt after the Jacobite rising and maintained ever since against military need, and the coach was able to trundle along at a steady eight miles an hour on the flat and up the lesser slopes; as soon as the gradient became noticeable the pace dropped to a walk, a plodding four or five miles an hour.

They stopped to change horses and seek refreshment after three hours and twenty miles, the outside passengers quietly disappearing and being replaced by half a dozen more; Tom stood next to the coach driver, in front of the malodorous wall that served the men's needs.

"How far do you expect to get today, driver?"

"Moffat, sir, probably. Good inn there, sir, rooms for the four of ye."

Fifty miles, a little more than halfway.

It rained that night and they made Carlisle at dusk on the second day, the landlord of the posting inn seeming to think they had made good time and certain that they could reach Lancaster in no more than three more days, Liverpool or Manchester on the following afternoon.

Another Accommodation Coach next morning, like the first, ancient, stale-smelling and apparently, unsprung. The leather upholstery was original, cracked, sweat-stained, stuffed with old, matted horsehair and lacking any vestige of comfort – passengers were few and the company made its money on the carriage of mails and small parcels that could not be sent by sea. It seemed that most people who had to travel any distance rode or hired a post-chaise or, better still, went by sea, although not in the autumn or winter months; the great majority simply stayed at home, nine out of ten men and women never travelling more than ten miles from their birthplace in their whole lives and most of the rest mobile only because they had been caught by the press or forcibly enlisted into the army by the local Bench of Magistrates.

Southern Scotland and the Borderlands seemed to be empty – a few sheep on the uplands, rare farmsteads in the sheltered valleys, a very few fields showing stubble of rye or oats from the recent harvest, villages far apart and uniformly poor – rarely a curtain in a window or a larger house to show a doctor or even a shopkeeper's residence. It was a wasteland, compared even with Tom's memories of rural Dorset, itself not a rich county by any means.

The lowlands of Lancashire, when they eventually reached them, were a thriving agricultural country with a busy population and heavily cultivated fields. There were dairy cattle and herds of beef, very few goats, flocks of sheep on all the hills and a mass of small fields surrounding the many large villages and small towns.

"Spuds and turnips and greens more than wheat and barley," Bennet commented, the only one of them bred to the English land. "Selling to the townies, they must be, Mister Andrews – markets in the local towns, close to 'and, like, because it costs too much to travel far. Got to be money in they towns, or they wouldn't do it."

Advice from the landlord of their inn in Lancaster sent them to the old borough of St Helens, situated midway between Manchester and Liverpool and in the centre of the new industrial towns that were just starting to grow. Cotton, iron and glass, they were told, all being made in huge new manufacturies, often employing as many as one hundred men under a single roof, while the old coal drifts were being turned into underground mines producing thousands of tons a year. There were canals, as well, and even, so mine host had heard, new engines worked by steam, though

mostly it was watermills that supplied the power, so much so that some people were calling the new places ‘mills’.

“Should be openings for merchants there, Joe,” Tom said as they sat themselves into the post chaise they had decided to hire from Lancaster – so much more wealthy seeming than a mere stagecoach, it would make a far better impression of financial probity, and at four shillings a mile it damned well ought to, Tom reflected.

“Why stick to merchanting, Tom?” Joseph replied, the short name still sticking in his mouth but forcing himself to the sign of equality that was necessary in the new country and in his new identity.

“Because I don’t know anything else, Joe?”

“Then we can learn, can’t we. It’s all new, Tom, none of them can know a lot more than us, because they must be making it up as they go along.”

It was a good argument, Tom had to admit.

“What do we do first, Joe? We need to make the decision now.”

They had talked about little else over the days of travel, had still no firm plans.

“If you please, sir,” Amelia made a very rare contribution, having been well brought up and understanding that young misses should not intrude upon their elders and particularly should not involve themselves in men’s business. “If we had a house of our own, then we would seem to be settled and respectable. And you would have to talk to lawyers, and Papa always said that they know everything that is going on in any town.”

It made sense, it would all add to the appearance of worth that would be so important to them while they were starting out and making contacts and building their new business, whatever it might be.

The landlord of the posting house was happy to oblige them with advice and information – his business was growing every month, it seemed to him, all on the back of the new firms starting up. He kept another chaise now and had recently bought another dozen of horses and had the builders in to extend the yard and the premises – eight more big bedrooms, and a bathroom with a cold water tap and a drain, only the hot water needing to be bucketed up in so modern a convenience. He was considering one of the new water closets as well, but was still not wholly persuaded of so daring an innovation, nor was he sure that his customers would know how to use one.

“Three rooms, sir, one each for Mr Andrews and Mr Star, a double for Miss Jackson and her maid – your ward, you say, Mr Andrews?” This was a respectable house – there would be no goings-on here.

“In effect, Mr Smithers, though not in law – her father, the major, died in New York earlier this year and begged me almost in his last words to escort her back to England, her mother long deceased. The major had been unlucky in an investment, I understand, and had little in the way of funds to leave her and it had been my intent to take her to an uncle who lives in a small way in the south country, but it seems to me that there is an understanding growing between her and Mr Star and I rather suspect she would far rather be wed and independent than a burden and a drudge in an unknown relative’s house. She is a pleasant young lady, and he is a man of respectable birth, and it seems to me to be a good thing for them both.”

The landlord agreed – there was little future for an undowered young miss dumped out of the blue on her relatives, much better a respectable marriage. Tom consoled himself that he had been telling the strictest truth – Joseph had told him that his Carib grandfather had been a chief in his

tribe, thus qualifying him as an aristocrat of sorts, at least the equal of an English baronet in his own land.

"A house, Mr Andrews? Buying over on the west side of town, upwind of the smells and smokes, of course. All the fires are coal now, you can't get firewood for love or money and the air gets thick in winter, sir, and there are even steam engines at some of the pits now, smoking all year round. They drive the pumps, I am told, necessary now that some of the mines are cutting coal a good one hundred feet underground! The iron foundries are mostly at the eastern end of the town, and the glassworks is out on the sands, of course. The cotton spinners are spread all through, in the sheds at the back of their cottages, though one or two larger places are on the streams up the valley over towards the Wigan side. Weavers are all small men, working out of their own houses all over the place. Everybody who is anybody lives upwind of the smell, better yet out of town if they possibly can. For a house, the attorneys of the town can act to point you to the sellers, and, of course, they must draw up any contract in real estate – purchase of land must be recorded in written contract, is not lawful otherwise. I could give your name to my own lawyer, sir, recommending you, as it were?"

"That would be very convenient to me, Mr Smithers, please do so."

Smithers' attorney was ancient, grey, desiccated and highly respectable; he sat behind his desk and listened gravely to Tom as he announced his desire to buy a house of appropriate size, to be his base whilst he found his way into the local business community.

"I, myself, Mr Andrews know nothing of, ah, 'business', hardly the preserve of the genteel, I understand. Of real estate, however, I believe I have some slight acquaintance, and can represent you to your advantage. There are a number of properties to be sold in the better part of town and the immediate locality and my junior clerk will be pleased to escort you to the viewing of several. I understand that young Mr Clapperley, the son of my late partner, himself an attorney with his own practice, numbers some of the, ah, 'business community' amongst his clientele, and may be aware of opportunities for investment, for cash, money being short at the moment."

Tom noted that young Mr Clapperley had not succeeded his father in the partnership, which was unusual, he believed; even in New York the attorneys he had dealt with had been members of old family firms. It was possible, likely indeed, that there was a lack of respectability to the young man – which could make him a very useful gentleman to know, bent lawyers were always a potential source of profit.

"I have, Mr Satterthwaite, a number of counter-signed Bills of Exchange which I would wish to discount. Perhaps a local bank could assist? Or must I take them to London? They are twelve month Bills drawn on London Houses with between two and three months on them. I would wish as well to make a deposit of some reasonable amount in Bank of England notes, retaining the coin for my own outgoings, and the purchase of my house – I presume there is a premium on gold in England?"

Gold was more highly valued than paper, in England as it had been in New York; Satterthwaite was able to assure Tom that five or six hundred gold guineas would purchase him the largest property on the local market, the coins valued at not less than ten parts in the hundred more than their face. The American War had driven gold out of circulation, the thrifty hoarding the metal and passing on the paper money that might, conceivably, become worthless in the event of the collapse of government and trade consequent on humiliating defeat and invasion.

"Not, Mr Andrews, that there is great likelihood of any successful invasion, but the Jacobite army from Scotland passed through here less than forty years ago, looting and destroying – many of the older residents have memories of the event, and believe that what has occurred once, may again. The fear is there, and fear commonly defeats rationality, I believe. I bank with Mr Martin of the St Helens and Wigan, Mr Andrews, and am confident in his probity; he is perhaps the smallest of the local banks, but he is not the least sound, in the main because he is content to lend very carefully, with great prudence, taking only those customers who come recommended. I would be very happy to introduce you to him, sir."

Tom wondered why – he was unknown to Satterthwaite and had no local connections; he had merely said that he had been resident in America and had judged it wiser to come away, sole survivor of his family and bearing the last of its fortune with him.

Satterthwaite had had three sons, two of them midshipmen, both lost to storms when their small ships had foundered off the New England coast, the third commissioned into the militia and then exchanged into the regular army by the ordinary route of bringing in his own company of volunteers – he had gone to America and had died there of a camp fever before ever seeing the battlefield. Two daughters and their children remained, but he had a regard for any young man who had survived that appalling country and had had sense enough to return to the motherland. There was no need, he felt, to mention any of this to Mr Andrews, his personal life was not a matter for public delectation, let him just assume that it was all part of his professional services; he wondered, in passing, just how Mr Andrews had come by his scarred face – perhaps it partly explained why he was the last of his family, poor young man!

"One house or two, Joe?"

"One large, one small, next to each other, if it's possible, Tom – newly-weds should have privacy!"

They gave their instructions to Satterthwaite's clerk, were driven out by him in his gig three days later a couple of miles down the road towards Manchester, into open countryside, then another mile up the hills to an area of small farms and moorland on the road to Billinge. He stopped at a small country house, seven or eight bedrooms at a glance, not particularly distinguished architecturally, constructed of the local yellow stone by an unimaginative builder of half a century before, square and dour, but solid. A drive of a couple of hundred yards led down from the road and a lodge cottage. There were large ornamental gardens beside the drive inside a wall surrounding six or seven acres in all.

"Smallpox was rife last year, Mr Andrews. In the way of disease, sir, some escaped untouched, some families lost one or two, a few were wiped out. Old Mr Keighley and his son and his wife and their three children – all gone in the space of a week. Probate has just been granted to a nephew who has no wish to leave his own house for one as unfortunate to his family as this. Seven acres, at twenty pounds; the lodge cottage at eighty; the big house and stables at the back, four hundred and twenty. Six hundred and forty pounds his asking price, sir."

Tom had made enquiries of house prices in the locality, had a fair idea of what was normal. Twenty pounds an acre for the gardens was steep, the cottage was fairly priced, the house was a hundred pounds less than might have been expected in the area. Of course, the house was unlucky, would not be well thought of amongst the local people – it might be very difficult to find a purchaser.

Tom nodded noncommittally, let the clerk unlock the front door and usher him inside. Hallway, stairs, reception rooms, kitchen and pantries, a pair of cellars; eight bedrooms, two of them of a good size and with dressing-rooms, on the first floor; attics with rooms for six staff reached by a back stair. A block of six boxes and a small carriage house at the rear, groom's quarters above. Tom had seen houses like it near his old home in Dorset, had never expected to have one like them of his own. They walked over to the lodge, found it to be somewhat larger than it seemed from the front, with four bedrooms and three big receptions.

"It served as a Dower House, sir, a generation or so back, was extended then."

Tom caught Joseph's eye, questioningly, received a nod.

"Five hundred guineas, gold?"

Five hundred and twenty five pounds and the premium of gold on paper, at least ten per centum, brought the offer close to six hundreds, in cash immediately to hand – no loans, no Bills, no time to pay – it was a good offer.

"I will take your proposal to Mr Satterthwaite, sir, and he will wish to take instructions. I would expect at least a week before any answer can be forthcoming, sir."

A man with five hundred golden guineas in his pocket was worth a 'sir' in every sentence, it would seem.

The offer was accepted within four days and a tentative date for exchange of contracts was arranged for the following month, the gold coins lodged for the meanwhile in Satterthwaite's safe, token of Tom's probity. They met young Mr Clapperley on the next morning, he evidently having been given the word that there was real money in Tom's pocket and bank account, not just hot air.

Clapperley was a nasty little man, was Tom's first reaction, not perhaps especially under-sized but hunched up into himself, secretive and sly, closed away, as it were. He met them, shook hands and leered ingratiatingly; Tom realised it was in fact a courteous smile of greeting, as well as he could manage such.

"Mr Andrews and Mr Star! A pleasure to meet you, gentlemen! My good friend Satterthwaite tells me that you wish to become established in business in this locality?"

No courtesy title for Satterthwaite, trying to imply that they were close associates and boon companions, which seemed somewhat unlikely.

"Yes, Mr Clapperley, that is our intention. Possibly to set up new for ourselves, perhaps to buy into an existing firm as partners, maybe even to buy out a gentleman seeking to retire."

"Buying into an existing concern it is many ways the best course, in my opinion, gentlemen. Money is short, and I know of three firms in the iron trade, for example, who could benefit from an injection of cash, and there are several cotton factors who are hand-to-mouth at the moment."

Tom stopped him in mid-flow, before he could get to the proposition he was evidently about to make.

"'Cotton factors', Mr Clapperley? Not a term familiar to me."

Clapperley smiled, changed tack – Andrews was not to be rushed, it seemed.

"The Putting-out system, Mr Andrews, the old way that has done good service for many years. Cotton must be washed and carded and spun and then woven before going to be dyed and worked into dress lengths or whatever. Weaving is done on the hand looms, by the men in their cottages, sometimes in a shed attached, at most three or four looms together where there are adult sons or sometimes younger unmarried brothers in the family. Spinning is sometimes done in

factories using water-frames powered off the mill-wheel, more commonly at home on a spinning wheel – the old distaff is almost never to be seen nowadays; often the weavers' womenfolk are the spinners. The weavers and cottage spinners in the nature of things have very little money – they could never afford to go to the auctions and buy bales of raw cotton off the ships, hence the factors. The factor buys part or all of a shipload of cotton, stores it in his warehouse and breaks bulk and then sells raw cotton to the spinners; they sell thread and yarns back to him the next week or fortnight, and he then sells on to the weavers, who sell their cloths back to him and then on to the dyers and finally to the tailors and cutters and dressmakers and haberdashers and whoever wants cloth to work."

"So the factor is out on the roads as much as he is in the warehouse, it would seem."

"He is, sir. When I said 'sell', by the way, Mr Andrews, there is not in fact a lot of cash involved – being poor folks almost all is on credit – sell twenty pounds worth of cotton, buy back twenty one pounds worth of yarns, one pound cash actually changing hands."

Joseph was interested – he knew of cotton, they grew a little of long-staple, the highest quality, on small farms in Antigua, and was sure that he could talk sensibly to the spinners and weavers, make himself a trusted business partner in a trade that must depend on mutual respect. He questioned Clapperley a little further, particularly about the financial aspects.

"Cotton is still essentially the province of the little man, Mr Star, though that is changing. Two thousands would purchase a half share, a full partnership, in any of half a dozen concerns I know of. Ponies and traps or vans, a dray, even, a bulk purchase at auction, possibly the buying of handlooms to set up half a dozen men on wages. I could make some contacts for you, perhaps?"

"Possibly, Mr Clapperley, it is one of several lines of enquiry at the moment."

Tom nodded, took over the discussion.

"What of the iron trade, Mr Clapperley? I have heard tell of iron works and foundries."

"There are a number in this area – every coalfield has some, though there are more to the south in Birmingham and in Yorkshire around Sheffield. Coke firing for cast iron and steel making has enabled much more to be made, though coke is still not so effective for the production of good wrought iron, I understand, but even there we hear a whisper that a gentleman named Cort is close to perfecting a new technique. Even though output is rising, gentlemen, the demand for iron is climbing faster still."

"Then the trade should be profitable, sir, should not need too much of cash from new investors, one might think."

"Normally, yes, Mr Andrews, but where a proprietor has, for one reason or another, failed to keep on top of the job, then problems arise that may lead to a need for more cash and a better organisation."

Tom raised an eyebrow, attempted a complicitous smile which his scarring turned into a menacing grimace; he noticed Clapperley's cringe, put it down to his general peculiarity – a very strange little man!

"I should imagine that you will be able to put me in contact with some local proprietor in cotton or iron, or coal perhaps, who needs to sell all or part of his concern, Mr Clapperley?"

Clapperley was sure that he would be able to, at a very reasonable price, he expected.

"Then Mr Star and I need to discuss our plans fully and come to you with our final instructions, sir. Shall we say tomorrow morning, at ten would be convenient?"

The rest of the day was committed to Bennet and Amelia, promises having been made to take the two out to the new houses they would be responsible for so that they could make plans for their housekeeping. In reality Bennet would take charge of each at first, Amelia watching and, hopefully, learning; the first need would be staff and for that Amelia had no idea at all. It seemed to them all that it would be sensible for the wedding to take place as early as was possible, so that they could move in immediately after contracts were signed. Bennet had a feeling that there had to be Banns of Marriage, she was sure such were needed these days, but she had no certain idea of what they were. They sought out the parish church and the rector who explained the formalities demanded by English law and was a little surprised at their ignorance of them; long residence in America sufficed as explanation, reference to Satterthwaite established their bona fides.

"The marriage of a minor, of course, demands the consent of parent or guardian, Mr Andrews."

"I am guardian, appointed by her father at his death, sir."

A guardian had to be of age, and the rector was not entirely sure that Tom was twenty-one; he was, however, more than six feet tall, built like a bruiser and heavily scarred on his face and the reverend was a man of peace. The Banns would be called. Fees were paid, time and date confirmed and they would be married within two days of the houses becoming theirs; it was very convenient.

It occurred to Joseph, belatedly, that he had never actually proposed to Amelia, but she brushed that aside as the merest triviality, they both knew that they wanted to be wed, she said.

Observing, and saying nothing, Tom suspected very strongly that young Miss Amelia wanted a husband and a house and a settled life at least as much as she wanted Joseph; considering her father and his erratic circumstances he could hardly blame her. Thinking on the matter, he would not mind settling down himself, one day – but there was too much to do yet.

"You want to go for the cotton factoring, Joseph?"

"For a start, Tom. I think I want to look at the chance of a spinning mill, though – like the little weasel talked about. I don't see moving the cotton from one place to another and paying for its transport and letting it get dusty or muddy on these roads. There's no sense to it. Best would be just one big place with machines – but weaving's all hand, he says, so we have to keep with what the weavers will do. One day."

"Two thousand, Clapperley said, that would leave a fair bit in hand to build your mill. What I reckon is that we are partners, you to have a quarter."

"Partners? Working together, not employed by you?"

"Why not? Andrews and Star – we can get Satterthwaite to register us, or whatever he needs to do. The houses separate, our own property."

"Why? Why give me this?"

"You did a lot of the work in New York, more than me if truth be told. You fought beside me and you watched my back and I'd probably be dead if you hadn't. I'm boss, because I pinched the money, but with you backing me still I reckon I'll do better than I possibly could on my own. So it's only fair that you make money too. Anyway, we're friends, not master and man."

"Thank you, Tom." Joseph stretched out his hand, the greeting of an equal, believing it for the first time.

"What are you going to do, Tom? Iron?"

"And coal and steam engines as soon as I've got the first place up and running. I've been talking with Smithers of an afternoon, sharing a quiet glass in his slow time while you've been out in town with Miss Amelia; running a big inn like this he gets to meet people and hear everything that's going on. He says that iron's the way it's going to be for the next century – iron bridges, iron ships even, big iron pillars to hold up the roofs of these mills, iron drain pipes and gutters and sewers. On the small side there's kettles and pots and pans; door knobs and knockers; knives and swords and guns; axles and wheels; nails and screws and needles and pins! There's no end to what you can make out of iron, Joe, and that means coke to smelt it and coal mines and the engines to drain them and turn their big wheels to lift the coal up and down."

Joseph grinned at the younger man's enthusiasm – it all sounded too smoky and fiery and dirty for him, he would keep to the cleaner world of cotton.

"Another thing, Joe, Smithers passed on a bit about Clapperley; he don't like him at all, says he might be useful but we need to watch the little bugger, a really nasty piece of work. There are rumours about him and a young girl, the daughter of his landlady when he was in rooms, only just grown up and not very willing – all hushed up and paid for, but you can never keep that sort of thing completely quiet in a small town. Word as well is that he cuts corners and ain't at all fussy where his money comes from, but he knows everybody and everything."

"Nasty! I'll make good and sure he gets nowhere near my Amelia, Tom. He's going to be handling a good bit of our money, one way and another though. Not much we can do about that, other than go to another lawyer, and who's to say he'd be any better?"

"We need to watch him then, keep him honest. Not too honest, of course, but bent on our side!"

"Wear the big greatcoat, Tom, when we take the money to him, and let him spot the belt underneath it – undo a couple of buttons in the warm."

"Frighten him?"

"Just that. He's yellow, Tom – every time he looks at that mark on your face he shits in his breeches. He's a greedy little man, so we'll keep him greedy for us."

Clapperley took Joseph down to the new wharves at Liverpool later that week, brought him to a red-brick warehouse and introduced him to Mr Abraham Marks, cotton factor and carter, a short, skinny, worried-looking gentleman in his thirties, at a guess.

"Mr Marks is actively seeking a partner, Mr Star – I gave him your name yesterday. He appreciates that you are newly returned to England and hence unknown as yet in the business community."

Joseph was vaguely aware that the name was Jewish, there had been quite a number of Jews in the chandleries in Antigua, more in business in New York, but it mattered little to him – he was not a chapel-goer or a member of the Church of England and had not had their prejudices hammered into him. They shook hands and were ushered inside.

It was a large warehouse, more than a hundred feet in length and nearly as wide, clean and modern, and it was almost empty; a dozen bales of raw cotton sat on racking at one end; there were yarns along ten feet of shelving, a couple of bundles of undyed cloths, a tidy stack of dress-lengths at the very end.

"Mid-week, Mr Star, the bulk of the materials move on Saturday."

Joseph nodded, glanced out of the rear doors at the stables block, saw only two of the boxes to have straw down; there was a single set of cart tracks in the mud.

"How many men do you employ, Mr Marks?"

"One lad, at the moment."

Joseph raised an eyebrow to Clapperley – this shoe-string operation wasn't worth ten bob – why was he talking of two thousands?

"Mr Marks suffered a misfortune recently, Mr Star; a dishonest carter – Irish, of course – who made off with a full dray load of dyed cloths, and the dray itself and two horses. The cloths had been sold already, contracts signed, and he had to pay his buyer's consequential losses as well. The insurers are unwilling to pay in full, as always, and demand proofs and this and that, as ever, and the matter will drag on for another two or three years I expect. The effect was to destroy almost all of Mr Marks' working capital at a blow."

Joseph nodded, waited silently for more – the man who talked first was at a disadvantage in this sort of situation.

"Mr Marks knows the trade and the people and the prices; he can keep his spinners and weavers in employment and loyal to him – but he must have the wherewithal: another dray and pair, a closed van and a light horse, a part-load of cotton, two drivers and a warehouse hand. He would wish to advance wages to spinners and weavers so as to keep them beholden to him. The meanwhile, of course, he would make all of his knowledge available to you."

"Two thousands? Expensive horses and wagons, they must be, Mr Clapperley."

"Well, in fact, of course, Mr Marks has had to finance himself as well as he could the while, there are sundry debts…"

Joseph shook his head, cut him short.

"No. I do not believe I wish to be fairy godfather to Mr Marks. Too much money for too little return, I am afraid."

Joseph nodded farewell to Marks and turned on his heel, walked quietly outside leaving Clapperley with no option other than to follow him.

"What happens to Marks now, Mr Clapperley?"

"He will be taken up for debt, warehouse and his goods sold out from under him, his own house as well, family out in the street. Actually he has a brother who will take the wife and children in, but he will not, cannot, pay his debts."

"How much does he owe?"

"Five hundred or so. The warehouse will go for one fifty; stock, cart and pair of ponies, about another fifty. House and furniture, a hundred at most, and that will include his wife's jewellery. He will be down a long hundred, possibly two."

"You know his affairs in some detail, it would seem."

Clapperley was silent a few seconds, reluctantly then admitted that he was Marks' chief creditor.

Joseph waited in his turn, let the silence drag out long enough to make Clapperley thoroughly uncomfortable.

"Do nothing until he is locked up, Mr Clapperley, in the sponging house, but before there is a judgement against him. Then, before his family is turfed out of house and home, buy up the warehouse and pay off all of his debts – including those to yourself – and then offer him a pound

a week to work for me, two parts in ten of the annual profits to be his as a bonus at the end of each year. You may wish to point out to him that I have bought up his debts and own his house."

"So, sir, should he not wish to work for you, or be unsatisfactory in the performance of his duties, it will be back to clink for him until he has paid you off, which he will not be able to do from his prison cell! Of course, a couple of years and he should be able to pay you from his bonuses."

"By then I shall not need him – I cannot imagine that I will take too long to learn the trade, Mr Clapperley."

A few days later Clapperley brought Tom to the attention of Mr Roberts, sole proprietor of the Roberts Iron Works, an establishment conveniently on the Manchester side of the town. The works sprawled over the better part of twenty acres on a hillside overlooking the canal and the high road, was obviously long established, the cobbled yard at the base of the hill dating back at least a hundred years. There was a stream on the left-hand, western, edge of the property, running into a header pond and then away, presumably eventually to reach the River Mersey. The other side of the hill was deeply quarried, the source of the iron which had led to the establishment of the furnaces here. There was a turning pond and loading bay at the canal and a heap of coal out in the yard, a larger supply of coke, fifty or sixty tons in a ten feet high pile, in an open-sided warehouse with a wooden trackway running to the pair of furnaces. Next to the highway was an old forge and smithy, no longer in use, beside a large thatched house; running up a lane were a dozen or so of small cottages, presumably home to some at least of the workers. The modern works comprised a pair of long sheds on either side of the two furnaces, the right hand section fairly new, that on the left perhaps twenty years old and including a waterwheel that was slowly turning under the jet from the header pond.

Both of the furnaces were smoking and there was a general banging coming out of the sheds together with a very solid regular thumping that spoke of a machine rather than a human hand.

Just inside the gates was a small single-storey brick building, a pair of rooms that were obviously the offices. Roberts was there, accompanied by his daughter, sat at what appeared to be her own desk; she was still a girl, of about Tom's age, dressed very plainly in a grey, high-necked gown without ornamentation; there was a smudge of ink on her sleeve. She was, or could have been, very pretty, Tom thought, soft brown hair, blue eyes, a high forehead, good, regular features, well formed; a pity she did not smile as she gave him good morning. He noticed a black mourning band on her arm.

"My daughter, Margaret, Mr Andrews," Roberts brusquely stated, swaying just a little as he rose to make his greetings. He stank of gin and stale sweat, the latter forgivable if he had spent the early morning in the foundry.

"Mr Roberts is intending to retire in the near future, Mr Andrews," Clapperley announced. "Hence his wish to take a partner now with the expectation of being bought out in a year or so."

"I would prefer otherwise," Margaret interrupted. "I think it would be better that Papa should remain as a sleeping partner, drawing an income annually – it would be a more secure provision for our future."

Clapperley had talked of three thousand now and a further payment on nine or ten when the old man retired; the girl was obviously afraid that he would drink himself to death in short order, wasting the ready with a drunkard's abandon and leaving her destitute. She was probably right.

"We could vary the initial proposal to that effect, of course, ma'am, though I have to say that I would prefer to be sole owner of the firm with the freedom to make any changes that I personally pleased."

"It's none of your damned business, girl!" Roberts' speech was slightly slurred, not sufficiently for him to be aware of it, but clear to the alert ear. "Jonathan is dead, and business is no business of womenfolk, so there is no further family interest in the works. I shall sell and be damned to it!"

She subsided into silence, aware that she would gain nothing other than a slap round the face from argument; Tom watched her covertly over the next few minutes as Roberts gave a rambling exposition of the firm's activities, could see hatred in her eyes – it was a good thing there was no pistol to hand, he thought.

"Thank you, Mr Roberts, for your explanation. Would it be possible for me to take a look at the premises?"

"Of course, you'd be a fool to buy in sight unseen!" He turned to his daughter. "Get Mason!"

She came back in five minutes accompanied by a middle-aged man dressed in working clothes – brown corduroy trousers, open-neck, collarless flannel shirt and thick-soled short boots – and wearing a long, heavy leather apron. His bare arms were covered in small scars and burns of varying redness, his cheeks the same; he wore a heavy cap pulled down over his eyes.

"Mason is foreman, in charge of both sheds, with gangers to the furnaces and hammer under him. He can show you all you need, he's got a good three hours before the new furnace pours - plenty of time."

Roberts seemed to be a stranger to common courtesy, to lack the most basic good manners; Tom mentally knocked a thousand off any price he might be inclined to offer for his firm – the man was a drunken pig. At least Blaine had behaved like a gentleman when he was in liquor – Roberts behaved like an animal all the time he suspected

"Good morning, Mr Mason. Would you lead the way, please?"

Mason showed surprise, not expecting decent treatment in this office, silently held the door for Tom and pointed him towards the canal. Ten yards from the door and he glanced across and gave an apologetic smile.

"Master don't have no time for talk, like, sir. Do you know 'owt of iron, sir, or do you want to see it all?"

Tom smiled waved a hand generally, inviting him to lead on.

"My name is Andrews, Tom Andrews, Mr Mason. I know nothing of iron yet, and I will need a man who does know if I am to buy these works. I know a little of the sea, and a little about fighting, and now I want to put the money that came to me to useful work, and myself, too. I would wish to do a man's work, Mr Mason, but I will need advice and assistance from a skilled and experienced source. By the way, who was Jonathan?"

"Mr Jonathan, only son to Mr Roberts, thirty or thereabouts. Master was married twice, both dead now, young Miss Margaret daughter to the second, her mother barely surviving her birth by a week. Mr Jonathan was found in the canal here, two months since, with a big bruise across his forehead, like as if he's fallen and hit his head as he went in… maybe."

"Or…"

"Like you says, sir, it might have been t'other way round. Never married, Mr Jonathan didn't. Very friendly with any number of the young lads hereabouts, often you'd see 'im with two or

three of them, boys of sixteen or seventeen or so, some of them sons to the local farmers and gentry. The word was that some of their dads was none too happy; two of them got gamekeepers, used to dealing with poachers and such…"

"Enough said."

"So I reckons, sir. Now then, sir, canal side, loading bay, coals and coke in, piece-goods out, you'll see a narrow boat here most days. Thirty ton of coal at a time, less of coke, of course, it being lighter. Six men with shovels working here, sir."

"No crane?"

"No, sir, though I reckons it would be better if we did 'ave. Maybe a steam engine, even, especial if we gets busier."

"Not very busy at the moment?"

"Short of contracts, sir, two of those we've got close to an end. Mr Roberts has hardly been out at all since Mr Jonathan died – nobody drumming up business for the firm."

Mason led the way to the first, newer shed, opened a side door to give an overview of all that was happening inside; it was noisy, gloomy and very hot.

"Windows get smutted over as fast as you clean them, Mr Andrews – no way you can get any daylight in. We poured yesterday, about half going straight to Number Two to charge with scrap and stir and burn off to make wrought. The stuff that went to the sand-moulds is mostly cast guttering and cooking pots and pans. It's cooled off now and they're breaking it out and cleaning off the flash in this half of the shed, finishing off the moulds for the next pour on the other side – big job, trusses for the roof of a mill, each one to exact size and shape to fit in its proper place, good money, there's only a few concerns in this area can do that sort of job."

Tom asked the obvious questions, made the obvious comment about the heat.

"Wait till we pours, sir – if it's hot now, it's boiling then!"

"Twenty-four men and five boys"

"Are they apprentices?"

"Not as such, sir. Learners, improvers, you might say, but not working towards a trade."

"Do you need more hands?"

"No, not in here, sir. Needs be a better organisation of what we've got, sir, that's all. Make some changes next door, and a lot in the quarry, but not to so great an amount in 'ere, sir."

They went to the other side, round the two big furnaces, stepping over the trackway.

"Wooden rails, Mr Mason, do they break often?"

"All the time, sir, we ought to make 'em out of wrought, but the master says it would cost too much. Ought to be laid out as far as the quarry, too, but 'e won't 'ave it – never was that way, no need for it ever to be so. Steam engine in the middle 'ere, with a big windlass and a long rope, pulling the trucks up from canal and quarry both, make a sight more sense, sir. Good iron in that quarry yet, sir, but it's getting deeper and needs more labour to get it out – an engine makes sense, sir."

"So it seems. What would it cost, do you know?"

"I got all the figures, sir, I kept my copy even when master threw 'is in the bin as a waste of 'is bloody time."

"Good, keep it all to hand, if you please."

"This is the wrought iron shop, sir, mostly beating out shares for ploughs – big call for them, sir, but a bit of plate as well, for boilers. Not the best quality, our wrought, sir, but good enough for what we do."

"Why is it not the best, Mr Mason? You do not strike me as a man for the second-best, if I might say so."

"I ain't, sir. That's why I come up north 'ere, because the trade down in Kent were dying for lack of quality iron. Thing is, sir, coke just ain't the right stuff for wrought iron, it don't burn quite 'ot enough, you got to 'ave charcoal melted iron for the best wrought. You can stir it in the furnace and burn it careful, but it ain't never quite so good. However, master wants to make it, so we do."

They walked the whole site, spent the better part of two hours, Tom fascinated by his first sight of anything bigger than a blacksmith's forge, drawing Mason out and gaining the impression of a self-educated intelligent man with ideas of his own, one who could be of great use to him, not just in the early days but as a long-term manager and assistant, a first lieutenant, as it were.

When they returned to the office, Roberts was waiting but his daughter had been sent away.

"Well?"

No greeting, no courtesy, and this was the Age of Manners!

"A very interesting and thorough tour, sir. Your Mr Mason has been very good."

"So 'e bloody should be – that's 'is bloody job!"

Clapperley winced, uneasy in the presence of bad temper and aggression, fearful of an argument, fisticuffs even, doubtful that young Mr Andrews would tolerate such cavalier treatment.

"Have you formed an opinion of Mr Roberts' business, Mr Andrews?"

"I have, Mr Clapperley, am fairly impressed by it. A pity that trade seems slow at the moment, but, no doubt, you have new contracts ready to come in, Mr Roberts?"

Roberts failed to meet his eye, shook his head after a moment.

"That would be an early need, then. It seems to me best that you should take your retirement at an early stage, Mr Roberts, if you agree to sell, sir. I am prepared to offer you twelve thousand pounds, cash, for the equity – lock, stock and barrel - works, quarry, land, cottages and house. I presume you live in the house, sir?"

"I do."

"Tenancy rent-free for your lifetime, sir, on condition that you do not enter any other part of the premises."

Tom waited for Roberts to demand the tenancy for his daughter's lifetime, a reasonable request that he would instantly accept, but he sat mute for a while, fiddling with a pencil at his desk, finally looking up to half-shout a refusal.

"Paltry! Twelve thousand? I could get twenty anywhere!"

Tom was not prepared to negotiate – Clapperley had told him there were two other iron works for sale in the area, though both were smaller and less well-known than Roberts.

"Then clearly you must find another buyer, Mr Roberts. Thank you for your time, sir. Good day to you."

Mason was waiting outside the offices, papers in hand.

"Thank you for your help, Mr Mason. It seems that I shall not be purchasing here, but now that I have seen a manufactury I shall elsewhere. When I do, may I call upon you, sir?"

"I shall hear of it if you do buy one of the others, Mr Andrews – ours is still a small community – and I might well come knocking at your door, sir."

"You may be very sure of a welcome if you do, Mr Mason."

He made a point of shaking Mason's hand before he turned away.

"Good man, that one, Mr Clapperley. What would he earn?"

"I don't know, Mr Andrews, but probably not much more than hundred a year – Mr Roberts has no name for generosity as an employer."

"Mr Roberts is a drunken little shit, sir." Clapperley winced again, looked round anxiously in case they had been overheard. "How would I go about getting new contracts, if I was to take the works?"

"First, a newspaper announcement that the firm has a new proprietor and that Mr Roberts has no further connection with the works. A few pounds in the editor's pocket and there will be an article about the 'new man of enterprise who has come to town and is revitalising one of our oldest firms in the iron trade, intending to make it one of the biggest and most modern in the whole of Lancashire'. I can see to that, sir. You have no objection to your name being published, sir?"

"None at all, Mr Clapperley – it is a sufficiently common name, I believe."

"That should steer some contracts back to the works, sir – local firms who have taken work elsewhere and would be glad to bring it back close to home, now that the cause of the initial friction is gone. There are still only a very few big trip-hammers, sir. Some new contracts might come your way, too, as a result of the news, but very few. You should employ a traveller, sir, a man who will go from firm to firm, town to town, knocking on doors and soliciting trade; he must have a knowledge of the business and be able to talk prices and delivery times, and he must be able to speak well, to hold his own in polite company. Mr Jonathan Roberts was used to perform the role, I believe, and did it quite well for a time, until he became, shall we say, *persona non grata* in this area."

"That is the young man who died recently?" Tom kept quiet about the word he had had from Mason, interested to hear the gloss that Clapperley might put upon the matter.

"Drowned in the canal, sir, the body smelling strongly of brandy – an easy mystery to solve, and so the coroner held. The young man never drank, sir, not more than a glass or two of wine and port with dinner, never ardent spirits."

"Ah! A conundrum!"

"I might prefer to call it a murder, sir, whilst accepting that he might well have given a number of gentlemen very good reason to murder him. An unfortunate affair, sir, but not necessarily a tragedy."

"You would seem to have had very little liking for the young gentleman, Mr Clapperley."

"Without breaching any confidences, Mr Andrews, I can say that I had been consulted about his, behaviour, shall we say, with some of the local youths and had had to say that I knew of no remedy at law that would permit action to be taken without a concomitant public scandal. Discreet soundings of young Mr Roberts found him very unwilling to mend his ways – indeed, he announced his willingness to stand up in court and name names, very loudly, rather than do so."

Tom shrugged – the young man would seem to have provoked his own end; another care-for-nobody who had discovered that nobody cared for him – no great loss to the wider world.

"What should I say if Mr Roberts should come back to me with an offer to negotiate, sir? I believe that he has already tried to sell out locally, but has found none who wished to talk to him."

"I will not increase my offer, Mr Clapperley. The firm has much in its favour, I would, in fact, like to possess it, but, regrettably, I can find very little in Mr Roberts' favour. He can go to Hell, and the works with him, before I offer him so much as another penny, sir."

Clapperley appeared at Tom's inn two days later, begged the favour of private speech with him.

"Strange news, Mr Andrews! Miss Roberts visited my chambers this morning, not an hour ago, dressed all in black. Her father was seized of an apoplexy in his sleep, was found dead in his bed yesterday morning! Miss Roberts has spoken to her father's attorney, and has discovered herself to be sole beneficiary under his Will, as is only to be expected, and wishes to sell. Probate cannot be granted for some months, of course, but precedent in plenty exists to allow a business to continue to run; she would lose almost all of her inheritance if the firm shut its doors and she can seek a court order to permit the sale. Your twelve thousand to be placed in trust in the court's hands and you may walk in immediately. There are no known relatives with a legitimate interest – no uncles, cousins, nephews, the Roberts running to few children in the past two generations, so you should be quite safe, sir."

"Miss Roberts to retain the house?"

"Life-tenancy, determined on her marriage, if such should occur. Her twelve thousand invested carefully will be worth at least four hundred a year, sufficient for her to keep up the house."

"Then it should be so, Mr Clapperley. I would be very glad to buy, sir."

"Good. I can apply to the court for an immediate interim order, the Roberts' attorney consenting, as he will, and you should be able to enter the premises on the day after tomorrow. I will pass word to Mason that wages will be paid on Friday, as normal?"

"Yes, very definitely. Tell him that all is well in hand and ensure that he knows he can spread the word."

"He will undoubtedly be pleased to do so, Mr Andrews. He will be glad to see stability returned to the firm."

"Yes, the Roberts family has been unfortunate this year."

"Short-lived indeed, sir – one trusts no bruises will be found on Mr Roberts' brow!"

"You think, perhaps…"

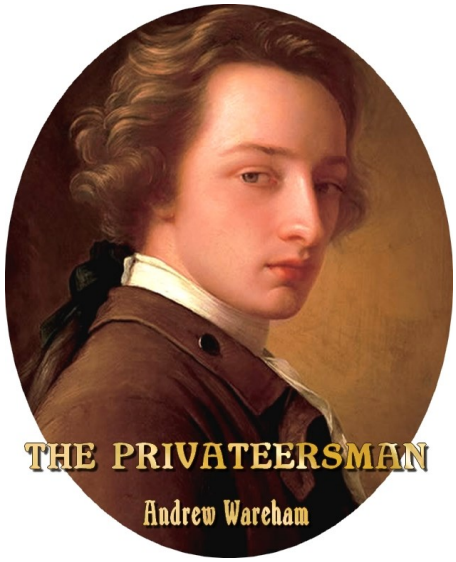
Clapperley cut him short.

"As a lawyer, I am no friend to idle speculation, sir; equally, as a lawyer, I have a profound disbelief in coincidence, particularly when it is so convenient to the interests of a family member."

"One would have thought the family to be above suspicion in such a case, surely, sir!"

"Mr Andrews, murder is no light matter! Most people have to hate very thoroughly before they will kill, and that means they must know their victim well – and who do you know better

than your own papa, or brother? Good day to you, sir, I will send you a note as soon as may be telling you exactly when you may enter the premises."



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Six

It took Joseph a month to realise that the putting-out system was no longer sensible or necessary for spinning but was an unavoidable evil of weaving.

The demand for cotton had outgrown the old methods of supply, the market was unbalanced, out of kilter, had no stability, needed to be modernised. Weaving was insoluble, for the while, in the absence of workable powered looms that could be operated by semi-skilled hands in a factory, but the major problems of spinning had been solved – the manufacturer had a choice of the older water-frames that could be run by unskilled women or the new mules that produced a finer thread but demanded the strength of men.

At the moment raw cotton was taken out to the cottages and came back, eventually, as thread or yarns, no two cottagers producing at exactly the same thickness and strength or in the same time-span. 'The cotton was of poor quality or too dirty or adulterated or was still on the wheel' – the excuses came every Saturday, the finished goods came back less frequently. Joseph suspected that some of his yarns went out the back door, sold against cash to other factors, but he could not prove it. The weavers were worse, being mostly men – cloths that came back were often too loosely woven or stretched beyond belief in an attempt to get something for nothing, quality was take it or leave it. Where the weavers were good in quality they were too often wholly irresponsible, working just enough to live and pay the week's bills; Saturday morning was pay-day; Saturday afternoon and evening and the whole of Sunday was drunk; Saint Monday was for recovery, too often hair of the dog, meaning that Tuesday went to recuperate from the excesses of Monday. Work for many started for the week on Wednesday and then the men pushed sixty hours production out of the three days, quality disappearing from sheer fatigue.

Quality, quantity, reliability, all demanded the new manufactury, yet the great mass of the men hated the very idea of giving up their freedom, of surrendering to the discipline of the knocker-up rattling his pole on their windows before five to get them to the mill-gate to sign in for six o'clock. The few weavers who were prepared to work in a mill were almost invariably feckless drunks or ham-fisted bodgers, unable to make their own way and sacked within a very few days.

The only answer was to get the spinners under control and then slowly pressure the weavers into responsibility and pray for the power loom to be perfected so that unskilled labourers could take their place and consign the feckless drunks to the gutter and then, as they died, to the history books.

Joseph paid a visit to one of the few spinning mills, sat up bold on its hillside, a pair of waterwheels powering at least a hundred of frames, clattering and clacking deafeningly. The owner was proud of his enterprise, was only too pleased to boast of it, unworried by competition because he could sell at least twice his output without any effort – but he was rich already, was not concerned to expand his own premises. Joseph nodded and smiled and looked intently – the organisation was obvious enough, the machines known to him and, as he had heard, the work-force was almost entirely women and children.

"They queue up to work here, Mr Star! A housemaid in service gets her keep, and half a crown a week, paid quarterly; a chambermaid in a hotel or an inn gets a few pennies more, and the chance to earn extras if she's pretty and willing; both will work twelve hours a day, at least, six days a week with a half-day on Sunday, if they have a good employer. My girls get eight bob a week, cash in hand on Saturday morning when they go home at midday, and they get all of Sunday off, and I give them half an hour for dinner, free and gratis! The children are off the Poor Law and from the Foundlings Hospital, and they work no more than eight hours a day and they get a breakfast and dinner, and a good meal, mutton and spuds each time – no bread and scrape here, sir; they don't get any money, of course, that goes to the Vestry, but the girls can come back to work here when they are twelve and we put the word out for the boys if they have shown willing, can normally find them a place."

Slaves were treated worse, Joseph knew, but mostly they did not have to smile and say thank you to their masters; this country was *not* the heaven on earth he had imagined when he was a little boy wanting only to get out of Antigua. However, it would do…

"Land, Mr Clapperley, on a good, year-round stream that will take a header-pond. Twenty acres, at least, more if you can get it at a sensible price, waste ground or moor, for the best. Where can I find an engineer? Can you put me in touch with reliable builders who can throw up a good, solid mill?"

For his fee Clapperley could provide any and all of Joseph's needs, and in quick time. A fortnight and he was inspecting two hundred acres of poor land backing onto the Manchester road, within a couple of furlongs of the canal and not three miles from Lodge Cottage. The soil on the hillside was acid and grew little and the bottom was boggy. Enquiry disclosed that the area belonged to no parish and so paid no Poor Law rate.

Four hundred pounds bought the land from the farmer whose family had held the acres for years and had never been able to make sensible use of them other than to run goats whose milk was unpopular and meat was spurned. Three thousands would build the mill and the waterwheels and put fifty frames inside for the carding and spinning. That left nearly two thousands for his

working capital, enough to buy a part-load at auction and pay wages for six months. He expected to be selling thread within three months, splitting his output, some to go to his own weavers, more to go onto the market – there was a demand for good yarns from the hosiers and the glovers, both wanting strong, coarse threads for their knitters.

Two successful years and he would be looking to expand – the profits were there because cash-money was not. The banks would not lend to new firms, and preferred to put their money out to old-established merchants rather than manufacturers, not understanding the new industry; private investors were few and far between, most wanting security, unprepared to take any risk at all with the inherited wealth that was their status and their power in the land. For those who would take a risk, the rewards were high and taxation was non-existent; a fortune could be made *very* rapidly, provided there was a lesser fortune to invest in the first instance.

John McKay, a young Scottish engineer – English schools produced none - appeared, introduced by Clapperley as an expert in his field and drawing a very pretty plan of his proposed mill; hired on for three hundred a year he stood over the builders as they brought bricks to the site and burned their clay and lime to make mortar, and then watched them cut footings down to the sandstone, finding it to be solid and unfaulted. The design was quickly amended and the natural stone formed the floor to the mill, saving money and adding strength; the spoil they cut out was carted straight downhill and tipped into the edge of the bog, helping it to firm up more quickly. As an experiment, McKay built large windows into the roof and upper walls of the big brick box that was the mill, hoping to save on lamp-oil and make it easier to watch over the machines; there would be no openings in the lower ten feet, of course, the operatives not to be encouraged to waste time looking at the scenery.

It was a busy few months for Joseph, teaching himself the cotton trade whilst setting up house and learning how to make a life with a young wife of a very different social order. Fortunately for both, Bennet – and where she had gained her knowledge they did not enquire, though Joseph had some suspicions of the major – had very carefully explained a wife's marital duties to Amelia and had led her to expect to thoroughly enjoy her husband, thus bringing a very smug expression to the faces of both newly-weds; it made the give-and-take of marriage much easier for both.

They concentrated on the coarsest yarns at first, it being much simpler to spin them and achieve a high standard in their output, and meet all of their orders on time. In a year or two, when they had the expertise, they would go for the higher prices of the finer threads but they preferred to walk first, run later, a sentiment Clapperley applauded as well-expressed, mindful of his commission.

Marks acted as buyer at the auctions and continued to work with his weavers, men who had known him for some years and had a tenuously friendly relationship with him, when they were sober. The dyers were all larger firms, fairly long established and reliable enough and, again, knew Marks and found it easy to deal with him. Joseph worried about Marks – he had shown himself to be a good worker, a reliable employee who gave of his best, and that was not a natural state of affairs for a man who had been treated as he had been – he should have been harbouring a grudge, surely could not be so docilely obedient as he showed. Joseph had no knowledge of 'respectability', the new god of the middle order of people, and of the horror of debt and stigma of imprisonment that had broken Marks' spirit and left him terrified and cringing.

The girls who worked in the mill were all that had been forecast – obedient beyond belief, they walked their two or three or four miles from their parents' cottages or terraces in town, almost none coming from the villages, and queued up to be ticked off on the paymaster's register and be at their places ready for the six o'clock start, and then they worked, silent, heads down, hands busy until the belts stopped for their dinner when they filed out into the fresh air, and very often the rain, and unwrapped the piece of cloth from their bread and cheese, or dry bread alone at the end of the week, and ate it quickly and neatly and queued up at the necessaries and then trotted back to be ready for the wheels to start turning again; in the afternoons they worked up to the second of six o'clock and then quickly swept up round their machine before making their number on the roll again and setting off home in twos and threes in the cold and darkness of winter or the long evenings of summer. And they competed for the privilege! They would beg to write their sisters' names into the books for any vacancy that might arise and chance that could occur.

It was years before Joseph fully understood the girls' desperation to get into the mills, realised just how slight were the opportunities open to them. They could go into service, rise perhaps to cook in a middle-class house, unwed and always fearful of losing their place and having nothing and nowhere to go; a few could take employment as counter-jumpers in the big new shops just starting to open, eighteen hours a day, six days a week, living-in under discipline, badly paid and worse fed; more could go to the mills. The rest must either stay at home, unpaid drudges contributing nothing to the family budget, or, as perhaps a quarter of them did, they could go on the game, making a precarious living walking the streets in regular or occasional prostitution until age, disease, desperation and the gin bottle brought them to the river. A mill girl numbered herself amongst the aristocracy of the unwed working class, earning enough to save six pence a week, every week, so as to bring a very respectable sum with her on marriage in her mid-twenties to a husband with a trade of his own, an end which many actually achieved. As a result the workforce in the mills was both grateful and obedient, and highly profitable, bringing the mill well into the black inside six months.

Roberts Iron Founders returned a profit from the very first, but it was a tiny, miserable, inadequate trickle of cash; even allowing for the low price Tom had paid, it was a poor return, less than he was earning from the funds remaining in Martin's bank.

Within three months Tom had called George Mason into conference, asking the single question.

"Why, George?"

"Like I said when first I met thee, sir, we still ain't got enough contracts – we work flat out for three days of the six, potter for the other three, and I'd like to go to seven day working, never let the furnaces get cool, except when it's time to change the linings, save a load of coke that way. Second thing, most of our cast goes to low price jobs, we don't do sufficient of the big, expensive stuff, the trusses and pillars for mills and bridges in particular. Third problem is the wrought iron – we just didn't ought to be doing it, Mr Andrews, not using coke. If I had my way, sir, we'd shut down on wrought and turn to crucible steel, making parts for steam engines and factory machines and forging hammers and presses – skilled, top of the line stuff, where the money is."

"Can you do it?"

“I know how, and I knows where to lay my hands on four good blokes what have worked at Huntsmans before moving on to another master who tried to cut their wages when times got a bit hard last year. They told ‘im where to stick ‘is wage cuts, and came on down here when they found every door in Sheffield was closed to ‘em, they being marked men, you might say. Two pound ten a week, they’d cost, and worth twice as much in profit to us.”

“But, George, they’re stroppy buggers, be forming a combination and calling strike at the drop of a hat.”

“Best we don’t drop our hats then, master. Besides, they’ll be taking home twice as much as any other man in the works, there won’t be any wanting to listen to them if they calls for a strike, and they’ll ‘ave too much money to lose by going out. As well, if we builds on four more cottages up the lane we can give them to ‘em while they works for us, like a farmer’s tied places, only decent; all four are married with wives and little ‘uns back in Sheffield living with their mums for the while. On the one hand, we keeps them grateful, on the other they’re out in the road if they shouts their mouths off, and they’ll know it.”

Carrot and stick – it worked for donkeys, it should work for foundrymen.

“Do it, George. I’ll contact our customers for wrought and tell them we shall be ending production. They’re mostly one off jobs, I believe, apart from the ploughshares.”

“Ploughshares are month on month, sir, just a word of mouth for how many are needed. Give them good notice – it will take at least three months to build the crucibles, so we can keep them sweet.”

“We need a traveller if we are to get more contracts, especially in steel, where we aren’t known.”

Mason stirred uneasily, almost for the first time in their acquaintance seemed unsure of himself.

“I ain’t certain that I’m doing right by this, sir, but I’ve got a young brother, twenty years between us, almost. He went to the Grammar School, being as how I could find the cost of clothes and books when he passed the examination what gave him free entry, so he has the knowledge and speaks right. He can learn about our costs and prices quickly – he’s a bright lad, no question, sir – and he could travel for us, if it’s not an imposition, sir, me putting his name forward.”

“I had rather employ a man I know – and any brother of yours is likely to be a good worker. I know I can trust you, George, so I reckon I can trust your family. What do you say to offering him a small wage, say a pound a week, and his expenses – hotel rooms and such, buying a horse for him as well, and then give him a share of the profits he makes. Say ten parts in the hundred of the money the firm makes on every contract he brings in?”

“He would be making big money after five years or so, sir – I reckon he could be raking in damn near a thousand a year in the end!”

“So the firm would be making nine thousand, George – sounds good to me.”

“It’s a lot of money, sir!”

“It is. You should be doing the same, of course, except that your ten per cent will be of all the firm’s earnings, not just the contracts your brother brings in. Later, when Roberts has got big enough, I may well leave the whole management of the works to you, George, while I do something else – coal mines, maybe. When that happens you will get a share in the firm as well as more of the profits. I don’t believe in something for nothing, George – I want a lot from you, so it’s only fair to pay for all I take.”

Money making was easy, Tom had discovered, if you had money already and the country was booming; it occurred to him that one day the country might stop expanding and he wondered what would happen then – perhaps he should start to keep an eye on what was happening nationally, so that he might be able to get a warning of bad times if they seemed likely. For the while canals were spreading apace, there was a turnpike building between every big town in Lancashire, and likely elsewhere, iron was expanding and coal was being hauled out of the ground in thousands of tons while cotton was mushrooming and he still had five thousands sat in the bank, uncommitted, safe but not really earning. Perhaps he could find something for that money, in another field though.

"Mr Clapperley! What should I do with about five thousands of cash money? 'Eggs in one basket', you know, I am unwilling to put it to work with the rest of my money."

"A rational thought, sir, and there are several possibilities. Safest is Consols, Government Loan stock, payment guaranteed from the Consolidated Fund, the Exchequer in effect. Being safe, Consols pay poor returns, four and one half at maximum, three more common. For high returns one must take a greater risk, but even then one can reduce the chances of default; I would suggest that you make two or three loans, Mr Andrews, of one or two thousands to venturers who are unable to borrow elsewhere, who the banks, for example, will not touch. Twenty-five per centum is not unheard of for such, sir."

"Six times as great as Consols, and more than twice the rate most banks would charge. What sort of business makes a profit that can pay that, Mr Clapperley?"

"Black ivory, for one, sir – most of the English trade is Liverpool-based now."

"Slaving? No! I have seen slavery in the Sugar Islands, Mr Clapperley, and I will have no part in it. A dirty business and for dirty people, sir – I have no weak stomach and have killed my man in fair fight, sir, and more than once, but I will have no part in flogging and butchery."

"As you will, sir – I have seen neither slavery nor warfare, can comment on neither. I would add, sir, that no money of mine is involved in slaving, but there is a high profit and I could not but draw it to your attention."

"That was your duty, sir, and you were correct to perform it, however distasteful it may be to both of us."

The awkward moment was over, for the while.

"Horse-coping, Mr Andrews, is a risky trade – the buyer typically going to the Irish fairs and then bringing his purchases across the sea to England, often some dying in storms or losing condition badly, and, of course, possibly simply not finding buyers and having to be kept over winter, at some expense. A client of mine proposes to buy in the northern parts of the country and then take his horses to the little port of Larne, which is only a half of a day's sailing from Stranraer in Scotland, a far out of the way place, admittedly, but with the advantage that the beasts may be walked a quiet month south to Manchester, corn fed and regaining their condition on the road and coming to market strong and healthy. He aims to move six strings of thirty over the summer months, buying for no more than ten pounds and selling typically at eighty to one hundred. He would ask to borrow two thousands and repay twenty-five hundreds at season's end."

"Done, Mr Clapperly, the money to pass through your hands, neither my face nor my name to be seen."

"My fee to be, say, fifty guineas, ten per centum on the interest?"

"Certainly, sir, payable when your client squares up at the end of trading."

"As well, sir, a lady known to me needs a thousand temporarily to cover a run of bad luck on her tables – three times in a week the faro bank has been broken! Unheard of – it rarely happens once a year, and of course, she had funds put aside to cover that eventuality, but not thrice! She would pay fifty a month interest, hoping to repay in three months, certainly in four."

Tom knew nothing of gambling and gaming houses, except that they were illegal but the law was never enforced while they were discreet and allowed no silly suicides or scandals on their premises. In any case, the government had no business interfering with private pleasures – what people did with their own money and out of public view was their own business; to hell with the law!

"By all means, Mr Clapperley, but it occurs to me that collection of such a debt might perhaps raise difficulties – one could hardly go to court, I would imagine?"

"No, sir, one could not, but I can vouch for the lady's probity."

"Good. You might, perhaps, wish to point out that I am capable of making my own collection if needs must."

Clapperley shuddered, he was not a man of violence, was quite content to restrict his assaults to those sanctioned by the law and the courts.

"Two thousands more, Mr Clapperley?"

"By the end of the week, Mr Andrews, I have one or two ideas, will have to pursue them a little further."

Tom visited Martin and arranged to make a cash withdrawal on the following morning and then took his gig back to his lonely house to clean and load his pistols for the benefit of Mr Clapperley's nerves. Greatly to his dismay he had discovered that the local business community was aggressively low church and chapel, committed to thrift, soap and overt sexual rectitude – one could not openly keep a mistress in one's mansion and expect to gain another contract from these men; behind closed doors no doubt all was different – 'out of sight, out of mind' was, he understood, an expression of local invention. Discovering the exact location of those closed doors was not easy, however – they were not discussed here, it was very different to New York where such matters had been boasted of. Clapperley, now, was obviously familiar with at least one gaming house and from gambling table to 'knocking shop' was normally one very short step – he must have a very precise idea of the location of the Lancashire dens of iniquity, could probably offer a detailed, guided tour, but to use his services would be to open oneself to blackmail, he was a lawyer, after all. Better not to take advice in this matter from him; it was, however, becoming a matter of some urgency to locate a source of relaxation.

He entered Clapperley's chambers next morning in a black mood, frieze coat flapping open and pistol butts displayed at each stride. He counted out sixty bank notes of different size and pattern and print and drawn on a mixture of country and London banks, but all of fifty pounds denomination and known and acceptable at face value; notes drawn on obscure, minor country banks might fetch a discount, but the majors were well enough known to be as good as gold, almost.

"Three thousands, Mr Clapperley. Would you wish me to escort you when you carry them out of the building, sir, or have you your own arrangements?"

It was a dangerous sum of money, a long lifetime's earnings for a farm labourer, worth killing for as Clapperley was only too well aware.

"Thank you, Mr Andrews, but I shall send the money by messenger rather than carry it myself. The men are quite well-known in the town, and are never attacked for fear of the consequences, I understand – they tend not to bother the courts of law, according to rumour."

"Sensible – the parish constable is of little value for the apprehension of felons, I understand, Mr Clapperley."

Clapperley left the distasteful topic – he could find nothing amusing or interesting in even the second-hand discussion of violence.

"I have been able to confirm another rumour that had come to my ears recently, Mr Andrews, speaking last evening to a contact who often has specialised knowledge."

Tom nodded, he had heard of paid informants, men who knew everything and everybody like Bob had in New York.

"The Corporation, as is well-known, intends to build an Infirmary, for the betterment of the health of the poor people of the town – the infectious diseases of the slums spread all over if unchecked – and have finally decided on a location. They will build on the hillside behind Chamberlain Street, on the outskirts where there is a healthy wind to blow away the miasmas, a decision recently taken and not to be public knowledge. A few guineas and I can discover the exact plots of farmland they will wish to purchase…"

"How much?"

"Two hundred in golden guineas, coin so much more convincing than paper in these matters."

"And we may then purchase ourselves and discuss the resale with the Corporation, possibly even with the same gentlemen who sold us the information?"

"Just so, Mr Andrews. We may also be able to nominate a builder of our choice."

"And to think that I went privateering in the Sugar Islands when I could have been a pirate here! Yes, Mr Clapperley, I think we should put our money to work for us, it is I believe our Christian duty to do so!"

Clapperley looked a little surprised at this last.

"I remember, vaguely, from Dame School, sir, something about the Parable of the Talents – it is incumbent upon us to set our money to work for the best return."

Clapperley simpered weak approbation for this stroke of wit, finding it somewhat strong for his taste, and enquired, apparently apropos of nothing, whether Mr Andrews had had much contact with Miss Roberts, for her time of strict mourning must be at its end and she would be venturing more into public.

"I have seen nothing of her, Mr Clapperley – I thought it best to build a fence around the house – to maintain her privacy – and she has not strayed out of her acre of garden, to my knowledge."

"One wonders how she will occupy her time now, Mr Andrews – she was always used to be about the works and performed much of the bookkeeping, I believe."

"Her father not doing so for being unable to follow the figures from column to column, they tending to dance about so after the first half bottle."

Clapperley smiled primly, his lawyer's training not permitting him to associate himself with so damaging a comment.

"I presume she will have local acquaintances, Mr Clapperley, young ladies of like age."

"Probably not, sir. Her brother was socially active, and made few friends for the family, and Mr Roberts Senior was of an abrasive disposition, not a well-liked man, even at his best."

"So her existence will be reclusive, you fear, Mr Clapperley, yet a young lady with twelve thousand pounds is unlikely to remain uncourted, surely."

"Normally, I would agree with you, Mr Andrews."

Tom pondered Clapperley's words on his way back to the works, trying to read between the lines, to discover what precisely was the message in them; the little lawyer was not one for idle conversation and his advice, however veiled, had so far been worth listening to.

"George? Miss Roberts, she was used to be busy in the works, was she not?"

"Aye, sir, you could call it that."

So there had been a reason for Clapperley's idle chat, Tom made a note to thank him, as obliquely as he had made his warning, the nature of which he must ferret out for himself.

No need to be subtle with Mason – his loyalty was unquestioning and his mouth stayed closed.

"All right, George, tell me the details."

Mason clasped his hands behind his back, he would never sit in the office, assumed a righteous pose, face stern.

"She were a damned nuisance, Mr Andrews! Flirting around the men, where they was bare-chested at work, and making half-promises she never meant to keep, leading some of the younger men on something chronic, and ready to scream blue murder if ever one was to so much as lay a finger on her. Right pain in the arse, that one! She did some of the paperwork, and did it well enough too, but she would have screamed 'Rape' and had a man hanged before too long. Got to the point that the older blokes would pass the word whenever they saw 'er about and make sure none of the lads was left on their own with 'er."

"Surprising, not what one expects of a young lady."

"That one ain't no lady, that's for sure, sir."

"Best to build that fence of ours a bit higher, George?"

"Better still to build a big moat like they old castles had, sir!"

"Did her father have any idea, George?"

"Who was going to tell 'im?"

Good question – no workman would keep his job for ten seconds after complaining to the master that his daughter was a bit of a whore.

"Strange family, it would seem, George."

"The old man's father was stranger yet, sir, from all I've ever heard. There was just a smithy in his day and the old 'ouse that they built when the family used to have money, way back – the word was that they was Romanists and when King James was thrown out they got fined for being disloyal. Anyhow, sir, the old man worked his forge, would work all hours of day and night for weeks at a time, the story goes, and then suddenly it's down tools, apron and hammer thrown into the corner and 'e's off to the boozers and knocking shops, come crawling back on 'is hands and knees a week later, pick up the hammer and blow up the forge and back to work, not a word said. Died blind and raving mad, so 'e did, Mr Andrews, and everybody guessed the cause of *that*, as you may imagine, sir! They say it passes on, sir, the sins of the fathers, down through the generations."

"So… you reckon she might not be all there, George?"

Mason shrugged, he was no mad-doctor, could not say for certain, but all things were possible, and some were a bit more likely than others.

Clapperley came into the works unannounced, apologised for not making an appointment by letter, but he had preferred to keep this piece of business unwritten.

"Mrs Morris, Mr Andrews, to whom you lent one thousand last month, begs leave to meet you, wishing I think to vary the terms of your agreement."

"Does that mean she *can't* pay, Mr Clapperley?"

"Not necessarily, Mr Andrews – I believe, in fact, that she has a long term proposition instead. As yet she does not know your name, only that you are a client of mine and she would prefer the relationship to be more open if it is to be longer lasting."

Tom shook his head, he was not at all sure that he wanted a longer term relationship with a gaming house with all of the risks of becoming involved with the shadier side of the business world.

"It would be highly profitable, though risky, but more importantly, sir, it could be the opening into any number of opportunities. Men, even the most discreet, will open their mouths and blab in such surroundings – a little wine, relaxing company, the excitement of the tables, can cause the most sensible and hard-headed to talk of affairs better kept quiet. I have no doubt that Mrs Morris would be able to put you onto several profitable little transactions."

"You are very persuasive, Mr Clapperley. They say that Peel has made a million from cotton and general dealing – I wonder if, with your assistance, I might not match him? I presume it has occurred to you, sir, that once I met your Mrs Morris, I would be unable to safely drop the acquaintance, would be in effect part of her world."

"As am I, Mr Andrews."

"So be it. When do we meet?"

"This morning? I have my gig if you are at leisure, sir."

During the cold three quarters of an hour in the gig, hooded but essentially open, wrapped in his heavy coat, scarf up to his ears, hat pulled low, Tom gave some thought to where his life was taking him. The works was on its way to return a thousand this year, would multiply that several times over when they had the steel production and special castings up and running and had built a name for themselves; Joseph's cotton would eventually come in at as much or more, particularly if, 'when' rather, a proper power loom was invented – a dozen men in England, France and the Low Countries were said to be experimenting. Ten years would see them very well off, so why take wild risks? Why not? Risks made life amusing - without them all became humdrum, boring, tedious. Already he was discovering that his daily round had become routine – get up at six o'clock, breakfast and visit the works, take a morning report from George, discuss any minor problems that had arisen on the previous day, make the necessary entries in the books, authorise and agree expenditure, check the bills that had come in then take any payments to the bank. In the afternoon, discuss new contracts, their prices and potential problems and enter them into the calendar, talk over the question of twenty-four hour working, of when they must start a night shift and what they must pay. It was predictable, he knew exactly what tomorrow would bring – it was almost tempting to hand over to Joseph and look for a berth as prize master on a privateer, except that the war was almost at its long-delayed end.

Definitely time to do something – perhaps Mrs Morris would be the answer.

She dwelt in a merchant's house of the previous century, large, rambling, full of chambers, great and small, inconvenient to modern tastes, the sort that commonly became rookeries, a family, or more, of the poorest in every room and paying pennies in rent, dirty, smelly and eventually burning down to a drunken mid-winter's fire. A few of the big old places became offices, sub-divided into attorneys' and doctors' chambers; one or two served other purposes.

The ground floor was given over to the domestic functions, kitchens and such, and visitors were led up a broad, open oak staircase to a first floor landing, a hallway and four large salons – it seemed probable that internal walls had been knocked down, three and four chambers made into one. The proprietress was waiting for them in the largest room, bay-windowed and airy but not, perhaps, spotlessly clean – she lacked the housewife's eye it would seem. She had an abundance of other attributes, however, including a bosom that was quite the largest Tom had ever seen, well displayed and heavily underpinned; she was of uncertain age – if she knew how old she was she had carefully forgotten – a dubious blonde dressed in several yards of glossily purple satin variously decorated with pins and brooches scattered at random and showing stones coloured as diamonds, sapphires and rubies, some of them quite possibly genuine. Her voice was nasal and powerful, overlain with an attempted but ill-taught gentility; she could have done well as foremast lookout in a gale of wind.

"Good morning, Mr Clapperley!" She did not make a curtsey, which was as well for decency's sake.

"Good morning, Mrs Morris. May I present Mr Thomas Andrews?"

They shook hands, no gentle clasp, she had good muscles, which thought took Tom's mind back to Antigua and brought a spontaneous grin. The twisting scar had its normal unfortunate effect, causing her to step backwards.

"Oh, Christ! I 'opes you don't bite, mister!"

The patina of gentrification did not survive shock, it would seem, to her embarrassment. She squared her shoulders, to the danger of anything within a yard's range, smiled determinedly, rebuilt the layers of courtesy.

"I am sure, Mr Andrews, you would like to inspect the property and to discover the details of my little business. Do tell me if you find anything especially interesting." She thrust her bosom forward hopefully, did not seem surprised that Tom did not take up her offer – it had been some years since she had interested a young man without first paying him.

Tom nodded and smiled again, it having worked so well first time.

"The salon we are in is used for welcoming our guests and as a lounge for those who wish to sit and chat for a while over a glass; we serve a midnight buffet on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings."

There were mismatched tables scattered about the room and a long dining table against the wall, presumably where the buffet would be set out. All of the tables, whatever their size, had only two chairs, or, if close to a wall, a chaise longue, variously upholstered in green or gold and all slightly grubby. Tom raised an eyebrow to Clapperley, received an imperceptible nod. It was a knocking shop as well, the men would make their choice in this room, which was as he had expected, betting and whoring tending to go together naturally.

"The Blue Room, Mr Andrews, through here, is devoted to faro and such other games as may be desired, whilst the Yellow Room, on the other side of the hall is kept quieter for the whist

players. The Green Room is not always open but is used normally once or twice a week to stage little entertainments."

She opened the green doors, the only ones closed, to display a couple of dozen heavily upholstered wing chairs in a semi-circle about a raised dais, the walls behind it covered in mirrors and a chandelier directly above loaded with wax candles.

"I am sure you can imagine our little pageants, Mr Andrews."

Tom was not sure he could, or wished to; Clapperley's leer was more than ordinarily pronounced.

They left the Green Room and Mrs Morris waved her hand towards a thickly carpeted stairway at the rear of the hall, said that it led up to the private rooms.

"Do you open for business every night, Mrs Morris?"

"Never on Sunday – we would be closed down within the week if we broke the Sabbath and in any case, the best paying customers are not available then – they are all in church or chapel!"

They chuckled together, all three having an appreciation of the arts of hypocrisy.

Back in the main salon they sat down at the dining table to discuss finance, tea offered and accepted, no mention of alcohol at business.

"I could repay you your cash today, Mr Andrews, with one month's interest, but it would leave me tight for working money. I would prefer to keep it for a twelvemonth, spending some on restocking the wine cellar and a little on furnishings and holding the rest against need. I would meet the interest monthly, and would repay the principal on the twelvemonth day, unless you wished to discuss a further advance then, which I might or might not wish to take – at this distance I do not know."

"That sounds open and above board, ma'am, and I will be very happy to proceed on that basis."

"Mrs Morris tells me that she is putting on a show next week, Mr Andrews, on Wednesday. A five guineas contribution and an audience of twenty or so for an hour or two of fun and gig."

"I rather fear I am already engaged for that evening, Mr Clapperley."

"It is a way of meeting up with other enterprising businessmen, Mr Andrews, breaking the ice, as it were."

Tom promised to have another look at his diary to see if he could rearrange his meetings; a little consideration and he left things as they were – an audience of twenty, not all of them active businessmen out of a community of a hundred or so, big and small together, in the St Helens area, might lead to perhaps ten contacts and work for Roberts from say one half of them. On the other hand, he might easily become known as 'not quite the thing' and be avoided by the respectable. The scar was the problem here, it identified him, which could be advantageous, making him stand out in a crowd, but it also meant that people would notice it, ask who he was and casually comment on having seen him at Mrs Morris' house and create a reputation for him.

Habitual visits to Mrs Morris would be harmful to the firm, but it would be possible to make a more clandestine contact, out of hours, to solve a pressing problem.

"Mrs Morris, a pleasure to see you again. I wonder if we might discuss a matter of some convenience to me?"

"Of course, Mr Andrews, do take a seat!"

The accent was at its most genteel today, Tom noticed, easily matched his own; he wondered if she also recognised the falsity of his dialect – no matter, they were essentially of the same ilk.

"Put simply, Mrs Morris, and to be wholly open, I am new to the business world and to this locality and must establish my name from nothing – I certainly must not gain a reputation for loose conduct, the chapels being what they are. As you may have noticed, my face is not unmemorable, once seen never forgotten!"

She sought for tactful words, realised there were none.

"You mean that bloody great scar across your face, Mr Andrews – it ain't that ugly but it ain't invisible either. People who see it are going to comment and want to know who you are and how you got it; you would soon be known as the ironmaster who can be found at the gaming tables. It would ruin you, for sure, you are quite right, sir. By the way, now that we are talking about it, *how* did you come by it?"

She showed a sympathetic intelligence, and it was a fair question once he had raised the topic himself.

"At sea, Sugar Islands; we boarded a prize, not expecting a fight, and a fool slashed at me with a knife he had hidden. Stupid thing to do – it seemed there had been a mutiny and he had killed the captain on the previous day, expected to be hanged for it and thought he had nothing to lose."

"Stupid of him – I suppose he lost all he had on the spot?"

"He did, ma'am – and he would have been untouched otherwise – why should we care if he had mutinied on a French ship?"

"'The guilty flee when no man pursueth', or so I was told when I was young, Mr Andrews. If I am asked, and I expect I might be because I am thought to know everybody in town, I should say that you were injured in a naval action and left the sea with your prize-monies? A very respectable thing to have done – everybody loves a sailor."

"Why, yes, thank you, ma'am – I had not thought of that, but it will answer questions without their needing to be asked."

"Now then, to business, ma'am. I have little interest in gambling – to be honest, it seems slow to me, lay down your money and see if a card turns up, not much in that. I am, however, unmarried and will stay that way for some time, until the firm is established at least, probably another ten years, and then an advantageous marriage may well make sense, if no other sort occurs. And staying single has obvious disadvantages…"

"So a discreet companion would be a pleasant indulgence, but you must not be seen to frequent this house, for there would certainly be comment, and it would be more than a little unwise to mount a mistress out at your place – the gentry can do that, ironmasters may not. I presume your need is for grown-up female company, sir, but if your tastes run in other directions I am sure that that can be catered for."

Tom blushed, hastened to assure her that his interest lay exclusively with the female sex; it did not occur to him that he needed to comment on the adult specification, never having heard of those interested in small children.

"A little house, a cottage in one of the secluded lanes on the outskirts, would be best, where you can call and stay two or three nights of the week without arousing comment, though it would be best if you did not live there; it will be known, of course, but will be discreet, not flaunting your indiscretions in the public eye – a lot of very respectable men do it. A hundred will buy and furnish a small place; as much again each year would staff it with a cook-maid and a skivvy and

a young lady of discretion, though you would wish as well to spend more on presents and clothing for her, I doubt not. Two weeks or so should suffice, I expect, Mr Andrews, I shall send you a note."

The note came in three weeks rather than two, Tom possessing himself in patience, sure that he had not been forgotten.

"I am so sorry for the delay, Mr A," Mrs Morris gushed, thrusting her massive person upon him – the silk was heliotrope today, embellished with rubies, garnets and jet brooches and pins placed in pleasing disorder.

"Not two days after we spoke, Mr A, I was apprised of the existence of a young lady, newly come upon the town in Birmingham and wishful to move away from her home area where she might be known."

Tom's eyebrows raised, he was not at all sure what she was implying.

"A young miss of respectable parents who made a slight mistake a few weeks ago, Mr A. The piano tutor, it would seem, persuaded the poor girl to play upon his organ!"

She roared at her own wit, inviting him to join in.

"Needless to say", she continued, having got her breath back, "Mama discovered her with her skirts around her waist and raised the household, Papa, it would seem, pursuing the enterprising gentleman down the street with a fowling piece, though with what success I do not know! Miss Mary, being no longer an honest maiden, was put out of the house, onto the coach into town with her ticket in her hand and five guineas in her pocket and bidden to make her own way in life thenceforth – she had brought shame and Papa was a stern chapel-goer, one who truly loves his fellow man. She reached the coaching inn and was stood at a loose end, knowing not what to do, and the landlord, familiar with the sight, sent word to my friend Mrs Jerrold who offered the poor lass the sanctuary of her 'boarding-house for young ladies' for the while. A week or so and she persuaded her to come up here to me, away from the nasty local old tabbies of her home area, not that any were ever likely to meet her in Birmingham, ten miles away from her home. She is 'helping me with the housework' at the moment, dusting in the Blue Room. She is not with child, luckily, and is a well-made girl, quite pretty and knows how to conduct herself in genteel fashion, apart from one minor slip, that is."

They peered through the door at a young girl of seventeen or so who was busily cleaning and setting the room to rights, glad to be useful to the lady who had been so kind to her. As Mrs Morris had said, she had a good figure and an attractive face under auburn hair, for which Tom had a particular weakness.

"She is certainly a pretty girl, Mrs Morris, but from what you say she will hardly wish to go into keeping and I will have no part in forcing her, ma'am!"

"Neither you should, sir, and you would have me to reckon with if you tried, sir. That said, she has no other course open to her – I will talk with her and bring her to a proper frame of mind. She has already discovered that a maid in service must have a character, must be vouched for by parents or by a previous employer, and she has no other skills at all, how should she have? When faced with the alternatives I have no doubt what her choice must be, and then it is up to you to keep her content in her lot, sir. Do you come back here tomorrow morning at ten o'clock and I shall have your house keys and my own attorney – not Mr Clapperley, a good man but inquisitive - to sign up contracts and give you the deeds."

Mrs Morris spoke long to Mary that night, explaining in the friendliest fashion that she could hardly expect to remain in her house, a guest forever, and asking what she thought to do with her life.

"I don't know, ma'am. What can I do?" She fought the tears back, tried to behave like a sensible adult, making her own way in a world that seemed suddenly to be very cold and unwelcoming.

"Well… you can't get work as a maid in service, but you might be able to find a place serving in a hotel or a pub, pretty girls are welcome taking drinks to the men at the tables."

As Mrs Morris had guessed, Mary's sole knowledge of alcohol was the Demon Rum, coming as she did from the chapel; entering a den of iniquity would imperil her immortal soul, working in one would damn her for sure.

"No, no, not that, ma'am! Is there *nothing* else?"

"Not as work, my dear, the only other thing to do is to accept the protection of a gentleman. You could have your own little house with cook and maid to look after you, your man visiting you occasionally, a night or two each week."

"You mean, a husband, Mrs Morris," she offered hopefully.

"No, my dear, I am afraid that girls in your circumstances do not usually get married."

"But… that would be to live in sin!"

"Better than dying in the gutter, my dear!"

Mary found the flat common sense of that comment to be quite unacceptably unemotional – this was tragedy and *should* be treated appropriately.

"It would mean letting him…"

"Do what the tutor did? Yes, frequently."

"But I did not like it at all when Mr Jevons said he would show his love for me – it wasn't very nice and it made me sore!"

Mrs Morris kept her temper and her patient smile with some considerable effort. Just what did they teach these young girls of today?

"After you have had a bit of practice you will find that you quite like it, my dear, and it won't be as if you are just doing that all day, every day – not more than a couple of hours a week, when you think about it."

Mary remained unconvinced – she had a strong suspicion that Mrs Morris might be right, but she must try to find an alternative.

"Is there really nothing else at all, ma'am?"

"Yes, you can go into a bawdy house." She thought that a daughter of the chapel was more likely to have heard the old-fashioned term while the word 'brothel' should never have sullied her maidenly ears.

"Oh! But they are very bad places, they are where wicked girls end up!"

"That is right – they are the worst of places. In exchange for your meals and a few pennies you must 'entertain' every man who wants to pay for you, ten and twelve a day, every day, until you die, worn out, old and often diseased."

"No!"

"Then I shall tell Mr Andrews that you will go with him tomorrow morning, shall I? He has bought a very pleasant little house for you – he has seen you and thinks you are very pretty and

would like you to be his friend, his and nobody else's. Think about it and tell me in the morning, after you have packed your bag."

Mary slept little that night; she thought of running away, but had enough sense to realise that she had nowhere to go and no money to live on – she would end up selling herself, with many fewer advantages than Mrs Morris seemed to be offering. She cried herself to sleep, wondering if Mr Jevons had known what he was doing to her and whether he would have cared; she decided in the end that she had been a fool, a silly child, and now she must make the best of what little she had left. It wasn't fair, even so.

She came to breakfast in the morning in grown-up mood, amazed herself by displaying an appetite for food – she had thought she would have been unable to touch a thing.

"Well, my dear?"

"You are right, ma'am – better one man, in a house of my own. What happens, ma'am, if he grows tired of me?"

"You must save your money, and try to keep him amused, my dear. Mr Andrews is a gentleman, in his own way, and he will look after you properly, will not throw you out into the gutter."

They met and she was appalled by the scar, but then felt ashamed of herself for being so hateful to the poor man – he had gained the wound in battle, no doubt, fighting honourably for his King and his Country, it was a badge of respect. She made her curtsey, a schoolgirl's little bob, and smiled bravely at him, walked out to the gig at his side, going nobly to martyrdom, though sitting several decorous inches from him on the bench as they followed Mrs Morris in her considerably more opulent town carriage to the western outskirts and the cottage where her attorney waited for them.

The 'hundred pounds' Mrs Morris had estimated became one hundred and thirty by the time fees and extras had been paid, but Tom had learnt enough about lawyers to foresee that, had brought two hundreds in gold with him. The cook-maid and skivvy were produced and approved, the one a respectable forty, the other the merest scrap of a child, claiming to be twelve but looking more like eight or nine. Tom placed ten guineas in the cook's hand.

"Housekeeping, Mrs Johnson," she had been introduced by surname alone, the honorific promoted her to housekeeper status. "Buy in the stores and staples you need and set up accounts with a butcher and a dairyman. Will you buy in bread or bake your own?"

"In a small house like this, sir, 'twill be less wasteful to buy than fire up our ovens for baking every day."

"Right, your choice, Mrs Johnson. Accounts to me, of course."

Both knew that the bills would include a few extra pennies for her pocket; looking at the scar she decided that it would be kept on the low side, he was no man to be trifled with.

"Put a guinea of those ten in your own purse, Mrs Johnson, and a half-crown for ribbons and buns for the little one – she looks as if she needs to be fed up, so tiny as she is. You have rooms in the attics, I believe; are they furnished sufficiently?"

"Yes, thank you, sir, though I think Martha might welcome another blanket for her bed, skinny little rabbit, she is, will never keep warm without."

"Buy it for her, and make sure she has warm clothes for winter."

"Yes, sir."

She smiled in satisfaction as she made her way to her kitchen – a place with an open-handed master and a young mistress who did not know her way about was as near to the ideal as she had ever dreamt, would do her very nicely until the time came to retire to a little cottage of her own, no doubt with a pension and a few bob saved. They would get the best service she could manage and the house would be kept spick and span, shining clean, no mistakes. As for the little girl, well, she had never had children of her own so it would do no harm to look after this one, teach her how to work at least and she would be earning her keep within a few months.

The attorney and his clerk left and Mrs Morris patted Mary's hand and gave her a big wink before taking herself off and leaving the young lady in the parlour with her 'protector'; she looked anxiously up as he stood, fully expecting to find herself upended on the sofa next minute.

"Well, Mary, shall we look at your new house?"

"Yes, please, Mr Andrews." Anything to delay the inevitable.

"My name is Tom, Mary."

There were three bedrooms on the first floor, one of them with a made-up and very large four-poster. Mary gulped and averted her eyes from the awful sight. Tom sat down and took his boots off.

"Take your clothes off, Mary."

"What, everything? Not just…"

"Everything, my dear."

She was a stranger to the tender indignities, was unaware of the concept of sexual pleasure for the female and her very limited physical experience had been unenjoyable – two brief encounters on the music parlour floor and a third quite appallingly interrupted – and was surprised to discover herself responding to Tom's gentle, leisurely hands. He left her thoughtful and with half a smile on her face. He swept into his office that afternoon, more relaxed and paradoxically alert than he had been since leaving New York and Jenny's efficient ministrations.

Young Frederick Mason had made his appearance a fortnight before, had shown himself to be a couple of years older than Tom but very much his junior; he was sat at the desk that had been Miss Roberts', busy copying out his reports in best copperplate, transcribing briefly scrawled notes into elegant prose worthy of sitting in the firm's files.

"Mr Mason! How do you do? I see you have been busy."

"I believe I have been very lucky, Mr Andrews, happening to be at the right place at a fortunate time. I was at the riverside in Liverpool, introducing myself to businesses there when I heard that the sugar refiners had met a problem – they are extending their wharf and building a new warehouse and set of boilers. You will know, sir, that sugar imported from the Islands normally comes in as coarse brown or as molasses in barrels; white sugar is refined in England."

Tom nodded – everybody knew that much who had ever been to the West Indies.

"Their warehouse is built, the walls that is, up to 'plate', they called it, waiting for a set of cast iron trusses for the roof beams to sit on. The beams themselves will be timber but it is hardly possible to buy straight and strong timbers to act as joists any more – the navy and the charcoallers between them have stripped the forests bare. Their supplier has let them down, the castings badly made and erratic in dimensions, to the extent that they have rejected his whole delivery and are at a stand. I introduced myself to them as the representative of the *new* Roberts Ironfounders and offered our services; they have agreed that we shall take the measurements and drawings and supply them piece by piece, each on acceptance to be paid at cost and a mark-up –

no contract, of course. I have warned them that to meet their need for urgency we shall have to set on a night shift and probably work the Sabbath as well, and they have accepted that the case is pressing and they must pay for an answer to their problems. Their plight is known to everybody on the waterfront and if we solve it, we shall be known too, and land is being cleared and the river dredged in a dozen places."

"Well done! Have you spoken to your brother yet?"

They visited the docks next morning, Tom making a point of being personally present for so important a task. They inspected the refiners' plans and took measurements from the drawings – twenty roof trusses, each to be cast as a single piece shaped like a flat letter 'A', nearly thirty feet across and ten at the highest, almost at the limits of what could be done with cast iron. They would be made singly, one to each pouring of the furnace and could be transported two to a barge.

The brickwork was ready, the piers built up to height and a pair of wooden cranes constructed to lift the great weights nearly forty feet up to roof level, the lift achieved by capstans turned by two dozen labourers apiece. The warehouse had four bays, would be roofed by five trusses to each.

"Mr Mason, have you your surveyor's chain?"

He had, of course.

"Good! You will oblige me by checking the measurements on the ground – bricklayers may often be an inch or two out when following plans, I am told."

Tom knew that because Mason had told him so.

The Clerk of the Works looked mildly annoyed, assured them they need have no concerns, but the directors, present to a man, overruled him, preferring to be doubly certain. There were twenty-five piers, all except two of them accurate within half an inch and acceptable; of the other pair, one was four and a half inches, the width of a brick, out and the other was seven inches over size and not quite true in line to its partner.

They left to grim assurances that all would be corrected by the date of their first delivery, three weeks hence; they suspected they would be dealing with a new Clerk of the Works.

They had made a good start – it remained only to deliver to time and specification.

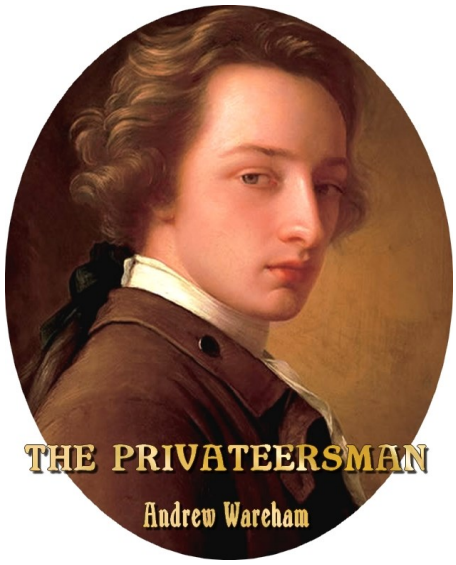
They took a special order of a barge load of best, clean sand, free of clay and gravel, from a quarry rather than dredged from a river, and built their first mould with much anxious calculation of distances the molten metal must flow, of potential air pockets and of weaknesses where flows came together and slag could form in the join. They ran their first pouring, fully prepared to scrap the lot and start again, three or four times over if necessary. All went well and they broke the mould and cleaned off the slag and flash and carried the tons of cold metal out into the open air for an inch by inch inspection, crawling over it like anxious mother hens fussing over their brood. Three days later they placed the first pair onto a barge and met it at the docks the next morning, stood back confident and serene as they were lifted into position and settled neatly and precisely onto the bolts waiting for them.

Nine more loads over four weeks and the sugar makers paid them in banknotes, very publicly, and placed an article in the local paper praising the ironmaster who had saved their project and contributed to their, and the city's, future prosperity; they were fortunate indeed, they said, to

have such a firm as Roberts in their locality. As expected they were contacted within the month by a dozen of Liverpool projectors with demands for roof trusses, pillars, lintels, cast iron window frames and guttering, all of the larger, awkward castings which had been difficult and slow to source.

"Third furnace next year, Master?"

George Mason was deeply respectful – Mr Andrews had earned his title and had made his mark – in the process he had also put Mason in the way of earning a lot more money than he had ever expected, and that was not a bad thing either.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Seven

Tom laid back in the big bed in Mary's cottage, pleasantly tired – he had been away from town for three weeks, off in the North Country visiting a works in Sheffield, in a county where there seemed to be more going on in iron; Lancashire was increasingly a cotton area, iron and steel very big but not quite the leader that it was down in Birmingham or far away in the North East. Clapperley had put the possibility of an investment his way, had told him of a Mr Edwards, a man of vision and ideas with a particular interest in steam but short of funds; the papers Edwards had sent were clear and his proposals were original and, probably, workable. Tom had gone north with high hopes – had come away disappointed; Edwards was an inventor of some genius, but he was a disaster as a businessman, his works a disorganised shambles, his accounts rudimentary and seeming to consist of a running journal detailing cash payments in and out and made up whenever he remembered. The man should not have been let out on his own.

Tom had spoken long with Edwards, had tried to persuade him to concentrate on his inventions and to sell up his works and then come down to St Helens where there would be a workshop and a salary and share of all the profits he made, but he was sure that Edwards would not take his advice. The man had known that his inventions were good, brilliant in fact, and that customers would soon be beating on his door – he must have quoted 'Build a better mousetrap…' a dozen times over – a pity, for he would end up in debtor's prison within a very few months and would die there, his ideas with him. Tom did not regard himself as a great man of business, in fact he was increasingly disenchanted with the life, but he knew how to run his own concern and could tell when another man was failing; Edwards was bound for bankruptcy, would lose all of his own money, but he would take none of Tom's with him.

"Not to worry", Tom murmured aloud, allowing a hand to slip down Mary's breast and gently find the nipple, stroking and teasing and bringing her out of her doze; he grinned in satisfaction as she rolled on top of him and spread her thighs wide, taking him deep inside her. She had learned a lot in four years, and had invented one or two tricks of her own, providing him with all the home comforts he required and pleasantly undemanding as well. She appeared to be content to live very quietly, pottering in her little house, borrowing novels from the Circulating Library, playing on the piano he had bought her two years previously, going out to the market and the town shops and nodding to a few acquaintances but making no friends, no close contacts at all, remaining effectively invisible; he doubted a dozen people in the town knew her name and even fewer associated it with his.

It was very different to the life she must have expected, he thought, a little guiltily because he almost never thought of her at all, she was merely there, a convenience to him, rather like a pet dog would be he supposed. She had told him of the tutor, Jevons, who had ruined her and had wondered in passing how many other silly girls had fallen victim to him; perhaps he should do something about that, he owed her a favour, several, in fact.

"Mr Clapperley, two things, I wonder if you could assist me with some information about an enterprising young gentleman…"

A month and Mr Jevons was found to have left Birmingham and to have been run out of Warwick; he was currently living in rooms in Coventry, still tutoring young girls in their homes. Clapperley introduced Tom to two pugilists of his acquaintance, men who travelled with the fairs in a boxing booth, inviting local hopefuls to step into the ring for free, a guinea the prize for being on their feet at the end of ten minutes, five guineas if they achieved a knock-down. They charged a penny to spectators at the ringside and made a steady profit fighting clean and fairly – they were hard men; they also did not like flash gentlemen who abused young girls and were very willing to earn fifty guineas, gold, for the privilege of putting a stop to this one's capers. They promised to do a thorough job and to explain exactly why while he was still awake, left on the stage in holiday mood.

They returned three days later, job done. Mr Jevons was no longer a handsome young man, nor would he ever be so again with a flattened nose and no front teeth; nor would he teach piano again, they having taken a ball-peen hammer with them and used it very carefully on his fingers – not a bone left unbroken, they cheerfully told Tom, thanking him for his payment and assuring him they would be at his future convenience if he ever needed them again.

Tom saw Clapperley, thanked him for his recommendation, his men had done all that could be asked of them, and collected the results of his second commission before going off to Mary's cottage.

"Mary, I found out the whereabouts of Mr Jevons just recently and have taken steps to assure that he changes his way of life. There were some 'silly young girls' after you, but there will be no more."

"What did you do, Tom? You did not kill him? You cut it off?"

"*No*, not that!" There was a limit to revenge he found.

"Tell me, please."

"I sent two men to beat him and make him ugly and they broke his fingers as well."

"Good! Thank you! Let him make a living now! He has no money of his own – he told me how he had been brought up to wealth but his father had lost all and left him to earn his way – now let him prosper if he can. I doubt he will have the alternative that was open to me!"

She burst into tears, hauling her dress off as she dashed at her eyes.

"I can at least show you my thanks, Tom."

"Wait a moment, Mary. I thought of something else last week. Here, this is for you."

He handed over a large, stiff envelope, sealed with official wax on the tape binding it.

She pulled out the documents inside, standing nude and uncaring to read them, having difficulty with the legalisms.

"Deeds… my name, Mary Amberley, on them. This direction. You have given me the house, Tom?"

"Yes, it is yours, and Mr Martin the banker will pay one hundred pounds a year into an account in your name and will pay Mrs Johnson and Martha their wages and the housekeeping monies. I thought it was best, realising that I might catch the smallpox tomorrow and then where would you be? Now you will be safe and comfortable whatever happens."

"Not comfortable, Tom, never that, but well looked-after by a kind gentleman, and I know how lucky I have been – it could have been much, much worse. I wonder if Mama still thinks of me, whether she worries, or whether she has forgotten me, a sinner condemned? Do you think I could send her a letter, just to say that I am safe and well?"

"You could…"

"But perhaps it would only open the old wounds, you think?"

"I don't know – you must choose."

"Hallelujah, Thomas!"

"'Morning, Joe – have you got religion or is it Christmas and I didn't notice? Or is Amelia increasing, again?"

Three children under the age of four suggested that the last was by no means unlikely; Joseph grinned and said he thought not, but he would really like a second daughter and when there were three in the nursery, a fourth would make very little difference, just another maid brought in to assist Nurse.

"Well, you will be able to give her a good dowry, so why not?"

"A man named Cartwright, Tom, has published that he has a power loom, and the word is that it works."

"Is he selling them?"

"A fee for building to his design. McKay is making our first already."

"Then build the mill, brother – next to the spinners, I suppose? Will there be enough head in the stream to run another wheel?"

"Arranged, Tom. We build a little higher up the hillside and divert another stream across; we have talked with the farmer already, paid for using his land, and can dig a channel across to another header pond, flowing over to the spinning mill stream and away. Costs us precious little because it also drains the farmer's bottom lands, something he could not afford to do on his own, so he has charged us almost nothing."

"Have we got enough set aside, or do we need to put more into it?"

"Five thousand in the pot and that will cover us for this year and with reasonable good fortune for as long as we need. We calculate to make thirty looms this year, add ten or twenty more next, then probably rebuild them all in the third year, with our own improvements."

"What do you intend, run a single shift Monday to Saturday to start with, then go to double working if they are reliable enough?"

"Probably – we think we will be able to sell everything we can make from the very beginning. Kent, the man who makes shirts and chemises, says he could sell five thousand pairs of ladies drawers a week, if he could find the cloths to make them, and Isaacs was round last week looking to buy cotton handkerchiefs and neckcloths rather than import them from India as he does now. Provided the looms are reliable, we can undercut the East India Company and make a good profit the while."

They had banked all of the profits from the spinning for three years, paying Joseph a thousand a year and setting the rest to accumulate at interest in expectation of the day when they built a weaving mill; they had known the day must come – too many intelligent engineering men were working on the question for it not to be solved.

Tom had few questions to ask, little comment to make, for Joseph was far the better businessman, enjoying nothing more than to immerse himself in his mill, talking easily with his people, casting a knowing eye over the quality of their produce, keeping his accounts, bidding at the dockside auctions, selling his yarns and threads, poring over his engineer's drawings and, in the evenings, keeping his vigorous young wife happy. Apart from a necessary extension of Lodge Cottage, and the probable need to build on another wing in a few years, very little seemed likely to disturb the comfortable, and highly profitable, existence he had built for himself. Memories of Antigua had faded and his boyhood was now so alien to him that it might have happened to someone else; his life had begun on the Star and he kept the pair of horse pistols as a memento of that happy, lucky ship, making sure they were safe on a very high shelf, well clear of little boys' hands.

Just occasionally Joseph made plans for his children, though he was normally sensible enough to accept that they would grow up to be their own men and women. His eldest boy, Thomas, would inherit the firm, of course, but young Bob might become a soldier, or a midshipman in the navy and pretty little Jenny would marry a lord!

Tom had given the management of Roberts almost wholly into George Mason's hands – he was much better at it, had no other life except for the chapel which now took up almost all of his few free hours, being single still, and saw the burden as a privilege. They had built a third furnace and casting shed, extended the canalside wharf, fitted the trackway with wrought iron rails and installed a pair of steam engines to turn the winches to pull tubs all the way from the quarry – itself extended by the purchase of the rest of the hillside – to the furnaces and then down to the canal. The ropes that pulled a train of half a dozen tubs at a time - long, long cables bought new from ropewalks that contracted to the navy, the best that could be obtained - were a permanent worry; they were four hundred yards long and the loads were heavy and as they coiled and uncoiled so the coal dust and ironstone particles worked into their fibres, weakening and wearing them through so that they had to be replaced quite regularly – and they were very expensive so it was necessary to get every day's work from them that was safely possible. Cables had snapped and whiplashed and killed and maimed a dozen men at a time at other works, and

that did give a place a bad name, one that Tom wished to avoid – better far for George to make those decisions.

Tom had become somewhat more interested in general finance, investments outside of the ordinary run of trade and the five thousands he had set to speculation a few years before had grown to eleven – the country was booming and more and more people wished to borrow at higher and higher rates, the main problem seemed to be to choose between them.

It was a time of prosperity and the Corporation had shared in it and had built for the benefit of the town; the Infirmary had put a cool thousand in Tom's pocket by way of profit on its land and a thank-you from the builder who had obtained the contract, but the Workhouse, an austere building, had contributed only four hundreds. Tom had great hopes of the new Town Hall, planned to represent the glory of the town and with a wealth, in both senses of the word, of Gothic ornamentation promised. Mrs Morris had shared in the general prosperity, gambling flourishing while men's purses were full; she had bought a second house with Tom's capital and was paying him a share of her profits; she had also gladdened the hearts of the local silk merchants with her frequent purchases as well as hiring on a young and powerfully muscled footman whose duties were said mainly to take place after hours.

The Irish horse coper had been a disappointment, a rare failure on Clapperley's part that he was deeply conscious of – the man had been hanged for horse-theft in his third season to a loss of five hundreds in cash, partly offset by the seizure of a score of his van-horses, now drawing light wagons around the town

With the surplus from Roberts that he had tucked away, Tom had about eight thousand pounds uncommitted and separate from the speculative funds and he felt he should get into coal to protect his interests in the iron works; the price of coke was creeping up and there had been occasional shortages, possibly due to fluctuations in output, probably due to mine-owners rigging the local market. There was a small mine, no more than a drift, a single gallery cut almost horizontally into a hillside outcropping, not more than two miles from Roberts and close to the canal. A short spur from the canal, needing no lock and costing a thousand at most, would provide transport and there was flat land at the pithead where coke ovens could be built for another couple of thousands. Expanding the mine would cost a thousand or so, at a rough estimate, and then would fund itself from the increase in output. Say five thousands in investment, leaving three for the initial purchase of the three hundred acres of land and the goodwill. The land was rough, fit only for the sheep which could not be run close to a pit – their fleece became much too dirty for practical use; four pounds an acre, at most, leaving some eighteen hundred pounds for the pit itself, a very thin price unless the owner could be persuaded to leave the trade. Clapperley was investigating the possibilities, had so far been discouraging.

"Mr Dakers is a man of uniform virtues it would seem – I cannot discover him to drink, gamble or fornicate, which reduces the normal avenues of approach. He is unmarried and at age fifty may be expected to remain so. He is content with a small income, working his pit with no more than a dozen hands and loading up a couple of wagons each day to sell coals for winter firing to local householders; he has no ambition at all, refused out of hand the possibility of a contract with Roberts for a couple of hundred tons a week."

A pity, tied into a contract it would soon have been possible to refuse to pay a bill on grounds of poor quality and stretch his cash-flow to breaking point.

"What does he do for his amusement, Mr Clapperley?"

"He teaches reading and writing at the Sunday School after chapel, as do a number of other worthy gentlemen, of course, your Mr Mason prominent amongst them. Probably every literate farmhand in the villages learnt on Sunday, and many borrow books from the little library they keep. Improving tomes, I understand. I expect he contributes many of the books, being better off than most. I shall enquire – it may be a possible weakness."

A week later and Clapperley was exultant – his detective work had paid off, his legal training had led him in the right direction to dig up the dirt which he firmly believed could be found in everyone's past and most people's present.

"Sunday School indeed, Mr Andrews! Not quite the three 'Rs' – Reading, Writing and Buggery in this case! He buys a few books for the chapel library, but favoured boys get to visit his house and choose from his own collection – some of them visit twice or thrice a week. I have witnessed statements from two ten year olds, detailing exactly what was done to them and by them, dictated in the presence of my clerk – nothing particularly imaginative, I might add, merely the normal."

"Not being a lawyer with your wide experience of humanity's frailties I am afraid I do not know what 'the normal' might be – and please don't tell me!"

Clapperley sniggered his appreciation – Mr Andrews was such a card!

"I shall pay Mr Dakers a visit this afternoon, Mr Andrews – I should expect him to be knocking at your door tomorrow morning."

Clapperley was wrong – Dakers had saddled his riding cob within minutes of their painful little interview and was stood at Roberts' office door before nightfall.

"Is Mr Andrews at leisure the while?"

Tom came to the door, nodding the boy away. "Mr Dakers, is it not? We met a couple of months ago when I wondered whether you might not be prepared to sell your workings – so close as it is, it would have been very handy. Do come in, sir. Kettle, Richard!"

Dakers allowed himself to be led inside, to take his greatcoat off, to accept the offer of tea and to discuss the unpleasantly wet weather, so typical of recent years.

"You say, 'would have been handy', Mr Andrews? Are you no longer interested in buying your own source of coal?"

"Well, to be honest with you, Mr Dakers, I have committed the bulk of our funds into expansion of our cotton firm – Star Spinners – now that there is a reliable power loom available. I doubt I could lay my hands on more than twenty-five hundreds at the moment, so it is not so much 'not interested' as 'not able'."

Dakers made a little face of dismay – he had no idea of another purchaser and suspected that it might take weeks, months even, to discover one, and the kindly-spoken legal gentleman who had just visited him seemed to think there might be a public furore within days, on Sunday, in fact. The gentleman had explained, so Dakers had thought, trying to follow his mass of legal jargon, that he was in some way the representative of the elders of the chapel who had received an intimation of unspecified wrong-doing on his part; they proposed to hold a meeting of the faithful, after service on Sunday, in the chapel, there to air any complaints there might be and to thrash out the misunderstandings that they were certain lay at the root of the little problem – this, after all, was the traditional way of keeping order in their flock and it was better far to bring everything out into the light of day rather than let grievances rankle and fester unseen.

Dakers, however, felt he would far rather not have to stand and explain himself in public – it was not as if he had done the lads any harm, after all, and they had always earnt a sixpence and

use of his books, but people made such a fuss about what was really a very trivial matter – look at what had happened to poor young Jonathan Roberts, such a nice boy, only five years before.

The office boy brought in the tea tray, with best china cups, and made a performance of pouring, giving a couple of minutes grace, time for Dakers to think, to decide that twenty-five hundred in the pocket was better than a load of buckshot in the belly.

"I find I have to leave England, Mr Andrews. My elder brother married an Irish lady and we lost contact with each other; I now discover she is dead and he is poorly, in a very bad way, and they never had children and he wishes me to visit him and inspect my inheritance while he is still there."

It was a very clumsy lie, Tom thought – he was sure he could have done much better.

"As a result, Mr Andrews, I would be pleased to accept an offer of two thousand five hundred guineas for my pit."

"Pounds," Tom corrected automatically, somewhat dismayed – he had obviously been too impulsive, could probably have screwed him for another couple of hundred; he should not have mentioned a figure at so early a stage – he would know better next time.

They shook hands on the deal and exchanged names of attorneys – not Clapperley on Tom's part, it having occurred to them that it might seem the least bit suspicious to Dakers, even allowing for coincidence in a small town – and they agreed to press for the earliest possible payment. All things were possible when the willingness to oblige was present, and Mr Andrews had a name in town already as one of the wealthiest of businessmen so the attorneys were very willing indeed and Dakers was off to Liverpool on Saturday morning, contract signed, sealed and delivered. By noon Dakers was aboard ship for Ireland, intending, very craftily, to instantly board another bound for Bristol and then to take the Mail Coach to London where he would buy a small house, much less visible than lodgings, and disappear in midst of the teeming hordes of the Metropolis. He lasted three months in London before inviting a very pretty, and available, boy back to his house – so much more comfortable than the back-alley - thus revealing his address to the boy's minder, who extracted his remaining cash with a red hot poker before leaving him naked and dead on the floor; there was no inquiry, the constable and magistrates content that whatever had happened to the gentleman had probably been very thoroughly deserved – the innocent were expected to be less lewdly displayed in death.

Tom made his entry to his pit on the Monday morning, found there was no such thing as a foreman or underman and very little in the way of coal or tools or carts above ground – he should have been there on Sunday it appeared. He looked about underground and found little more than a hole, a large cave haphazardly worked as was convenient – there were a couple of men with a wheelbarrow pottering at the face; neither was much better than half-witted, could answer none of his questions. He left telling them to carry on as normal, promising to be back soon.

"George, do you know anything about mining?"

"No, Master, nor I ain't going to, neither!"

The drop out of acquired gentility and into deep Kentish alerted Tom to the distress his question had created, made him instantly back away.

"Nor should you, if you do not wish, George. How might I find a man for the pit?"

"Not easily, Master, for the pits be growing apace and miners with knowhow are increasingly few. The stannaries, the Cornish tin mines, are about the only place where there are mines closing down and men looking for work, though I hear that the lead and Blue John mines in

Derbyshire are less busy than they were. On t'other hand, the pits in South Wales and the slate in North Wales are snatching up every body they can find and the salt digging down Cheshire way will take men out of Derbyshire, I should expect. Coal ain't that well-loved, Master, for men and women die too easy down the pits and the money ain't so good as to make it worthwhile, so it won't be easy to find a skilled man to do the job."

"Then I'll do it my bloody self, George – it's not what I fancy, but if you buy a place in the game then you have got to play your part."

Mason agreed, quietly, afraid that he was letting Tom down, but even more afraid of going underground every day – he had gone down one of the new pits in a previous year, out of curiosity, and would never do so again, the black and the smell and the dirt and the noises, the creaks and groans coming out of the very rock and the feeling of the roof pressing down on your head… Never again!

"Let's see – Joe's engineer can build coke ovens for us, and we can get a canal contractor to build the spur as a little winter job – a few week's work in the dead season will be welcome, I would think. We can get everything prepared while we look about for a man to run it."

Mason agreed.

"How's the works going, George? Did we get that contract for the mill roof your brother was after?"

"That and three more, sir, work night and day for the next three months and we're turning away customers for steel. I've had to tell him to go easy or we shall be letting people down for date and quality, so he's got time on his hands at the moment, more's the pity!"

"A problem, George?"

"He met Miss Roberts a few weeks ago, sir, and has seen her frequently since."

"Is he thinking of marriage?"

"Maybe… I don't know, because I haven't asked, but it is not a family I would wish to be involved with, Master. I am unwilling to be seen to interfere, for I do not wish to cause a breach between us – no better way of offending a man than criticise his beloved! I have made sure that the stories have come to his ears, but I don't know whether he believes them - she don't look the sort to have killed first her brother and then her own father."

"Who does? Do you think she did her brother, too? I hadn't considered that, I must say, though, I was pretty sure she held a pillow over the old man's face when he was drunk in bed."

Tom was not shocked, he found, intrigued more – it showed a certain determination not to be shackled by the bonds of conventionality.

"Logic, sir! Murder ain't that common and for two in the same family to die by two different hands, all in the same year, suggests a bit more than coincidence to me. If she topped the one, odds are she did the other too."

"You could well be right, George – so if young Fred gets involved there he would be well advised to watch his manners – she's likely to do more than cross her legs if she gets angry with him."

Mason could not approve of such vulgarity but permitted himself a prim smile – the Master must be indulged, he was still very young.

"Perhaps, Mr Andrews, you might wish Frederick to seek other employment in such circumstances?"

Would he? Probably, but he needed George too much to risk losing him as well.

"No! Not at all! Where would I find a man of his worth to replace him? In any case, his private life is no business of mine and I believe him to be man enough to run his own affairs quite satisfactorily. No, what I would do, I think, is offer him tenancy of the house and then set him to work, to use that spare time you say he has. Is he interested in running part of the works? Has he ideas of his own? Is he mechanically minded like you, George? Do you think he could learn coal?"

"Not coal, no, Master. For the rest, well, he has often looked about him and pursed his lips and shaken his head, as if he could do better. Maybe he could…"

"And maybe he's too big for his boots? Find out, George – he's an intelligent man, let's use his brain before he gets up to mischief with it. What about our quarryman, do you think I could talk to him about coal?"

"Shouldn't think so, Master – open quarrying be what he knows, not underground work."

From the works he made a rushed visit to Clapperley, the indispensable agent whose knowledge of the local business world was encyclopaedic, resulting in the opportunity to go more than one hundred feet underground in the largest local pit. It was a necessary experience; it was terrifying and it would have to become a part of his daily round. There had to be another way to spend his life.

"Coal comes in layers, Mr Andrews," his host, the mine manager and part owner, a Mr Collins, told him, a scrawny, bandy-legged, underfed-looking gentleman of thirty or so, a faint overlay of Irish in his voice suggesting childhood starvation as the reason for his size. "It seems to us – and we have been doing this for no more than two years, so we could well be wrong, the long term costs not what they first appear to be, you might say - but it would appear to be the case that it makes a might more sense to cut a shaft down through as deep as we can, in this case through three of the seams, and work out in galleries at each level at the same time. We would go deeper yet, but the pump will lift water no more than a hundred feet or so and the windlass to lower the people and bring the coal up gets terrible hard to turn as it goes further down."

The windlass was no more than a vertical wheel, much like you might see over a well, turned by cranks on either side, and a wooden bucket, maybe six feet across and a yard high on its sides, suspended over the shaft on a single rope dangling from a pulley. The bucket was deeply ingrained with coal dust, the rope not a great deal thicker than clothes-line; as Tom watched a family of man, woman and three children of six years and upwards climbed inside the bucket and waved a hand to a pair of twelve or thirteen year old boys, neither with a broken voice, who released the pawl and jerkily wound the rope down. Ten minutes later they struggled and heaved and tugged at the handles to bring two tons of coal to the surface, swaying the bucket onto an inclined plane and tipping the coal onto the heap below it. A group of even smaller children were shovelling into tubs on a short trackway on the other side. It seemed wasteful to Tom, why not tip directly into the tubs?

"Too much spills onto the trackway and the kiddies are cheap."

Tom nodded.

"Shall we go down, Mr Andrews?"

"In the bucket?"

"There's no other way, sir."

"What will happen if the rope breaks, Mr Collins?"

"Well… leaving aside the obvious, sir, as you might say, I would think that any poor soul underneath would be getting a terrible headache."

It had to be possible to build in ladders at least, Tom thought – a second shaft, one for people, one for coal, would be too expensive, but pole ladders would cost a very few quid. He said as much to Collins.

"Why bother, Mr Andrews? You can't lift coal up ladders, and that's what the pit is here for, after all, not for the comfort and convenience of the hands that work the picks and shovels. They used to dig sloping passages down from one level to the next so that the coal could be dragged up in sacks or on wheelie-barrows, but a shaft is quicker, less expensive on labour, though it's not so good at letting the air down. If we had an engine to work the windlass then we could put a fan on, I suppose, but it would be far too costly – I looked at the figures, do you see, sir, and it would cost fourteen shillings a day in coals, and a machine-man as well, close to four hundred pounds in a year! The boys cost eighteen pence a day apiece – it speaks for itself!"

It did indeed.

They jerked their way to the bottom, Collins making a show of balancing himself, Tom hanging on unashamedly. At the bottom, in the gloom, weakly lit by a single lamp and half a dozen open candles, Tom saw seven separate heaps of coal, children at each, picking them over with their bare hands.

"Cleaning, Mr Andrews, throwing out the shale and the dross – I will only buy clean coal."

"Buy?"

"Winsford, the tally-man for this level, does that for me." Collins pointed to a desk in the corner and a grubby, pot-bellied, bent-over specimen of humanity leaning on a pair of sticks by it. Inspection decided Tom that he was a man of forty or so, broken and grey-faced.

"He keeps a tally of all that goes out, making sure each bucket's clean and not full of dust. There was a cave-in on the first level last year, killed his wife and three boys and the daughter and broke both his legs – he ain't much use but I keep him here rather than throw him onto the Poor Law."

"Good of you, Mr Collins. The families always work together, do they?"

"That's their way, Mr Andrews, I'll show you." Collins was puzzled by Tom's attitude, the apparent hostility and sarcasm of his comments – he had understood him to be a businessman.

"The nearest stall is about eighty yards in – they follow the seam where it is thickest and most level, so that the water can run out to the sump where the pump sucks it up – we use an atmospheric lift, not the old-fashioned bucket chain, you know, that's why it's so much quieter down here without that rattling and banging you get in the old places."

"How long would it take to flood the lower level if the pump failed, Mr Collins?"

"A day or so, I expect – we shut the pump down for no more than two or three hours at a time for maintenance, but we do that every day. It can be a little worrying when the rain falls too heavy and for too long."

A breakdown was inevitable, one day – it must happen, no machine was perfect, however thoroughly it was maintained – and then the lower level at least would be drowned, might take weeks to clear again.

They stumbled bent-over through the murk, the floor uneven, the roof never more than five feet high, passed half a dozen abandoned stalls, one of them collapsed.

“Where the seam takes a dip you can’t stop the water coming in and so you have to give up and move on.”

They came to a working face after a long three minutes, entering a pool of weak light, two tallow dips enabling the family to see what they were doing - just.

Two men were knelt using short-handled picks to lever coal out of a four feet seam, hooking it back behind themselves, working slowly but never stopping; they seemed tired, thin, ill-fed; one of them coughed every minute or so. An old woman, grandmother at least, shovelled the coal back to the entrance to the stall where a girl of twelve or so and an older woman, her mother, presumably, were loading a big wheelbarrow, at least half a ton capacity. Tom watched as the woman grasped the handles and the girl wrapped sacking round her head and shoulders and then put on a set of straps like a horse’s harness and bent over to pull; they staggered off through the darkness to their coal heap and the younger children.

“Four tons a day, that’s the least I’ll accept or they’re out; most do six. They get three bob a ton, clean and delivered to the coal heap at pithead – that’s why Winsford keeps the tallies. They rent the stalls – a good one like this costs eight bob a day, so they can clear three quid a week easy, if they keep at it and don’t waste too much on lights and tools. I own the cottages at the top and let them have one for half a crown a week – cheap, that is. There’s a store, too, where they can buy their food on tick, square up at the end of the week.”

A Tommy shop – Tom had heard of those, of the mill shops and the ‘Tommy-rot’ they sold and the bills that were never quite paid-off from one week to the next so that the workers could never leave. It wasn’t slavery – for bondage was unlawful in England, unlike the Scots mines where the workers were still serfs – but it wasn’t freedom either.

“Seven heaps, so seven families in all?”

“Down here, yes, Mr Andrews. Twelve in the middle, thirty at the top. The shaft, sir, limits the number of times the bucket can go up and down.”

Tom took a last glance about him, noted that the coal was left uncut in pillars of about a foot square every six feet or so.

“Holding the roof up, sir – they cut them out last thing when they abandon a stall. Some places use timber pit-props, but you can’t always recover them, they jam in place sometimes, and that’s terrible wasteful, so it is.”

They passed quickly through the upper, older galleries, there being little different to see, except that the working seams were much thinner, the best having been taken first, and the men mostly lay on their sides on sackcloth pads, hacking away at eighteen inch faces, often two body lengths or more in from the main stall, hopelessly trapped, crushed if there was the least movement of the rock around them. The smell was stronger up here, sulphur from the coal mixed with body odours from the abandoned stalls where the miners relieved themselves.

The above ground pithead needed little inspection – heaps of coal, drays and heavy-horse teams to shift the coal to the canal head two miles away – it was ‘too far’ for the trackway, ‘too expensive’ to cut a spur from the canal.

It was nearly dark when Tom left and the first families were coming up – uniformly ragged, the children stumbling in tiredness, several of the women heavily pregnant, at least a quarter of the miners with hacking coughs, two he saw spitting bloodily. Tom twitched the reins, set off slowly in his gig, looking forward to the hot water Bennet had been warned to have ready, wondering what was for dinner, wondering as well just what he had done in buying a coal mine.

Collins' mine was inefficient, less profitable than it should be and the way of working was no more than an accident waiting to happen; sooner or later two or three of the old stalls would cave-in at the same time and the whole of the gallery itself would collapse. Not considering the dead and the trapped, there would be no coal coming out for weeks, in his case no coke for Roberts after two or three days, leaving him needing to find alternative supplies expensively on a tight market. He needed to do better, but he also needed to keep his costs down to the level of every other producer – he was not in the charity business. Everything must depend on the workers first of all – this selling of stalls to families was no way to run a business – it might be the tradition but it had to end, so it would be easiest if he got his workers from outside the trade, bringing no expectations with them. Men drifted in off the farms every day, ones and twos knocking on the door in the hope of a job most mornings as the old ways changed on the land, but he wanted anything up to a hundred hands all together.

"George? How would I go about picking up fifty or sixty men, unskilled, all at once?"

"First off, you would have to have someplace for them to live, Master, and food for them to eat, because they won't have anything of their own before first payday. Then it's down to the docks, where the Irish boats come in – the families are brought in by the dozen each week, driven out of their homes and dumped aboard ship or hoping to make a better life or running from starvation, poor sods! Sorry, Master! Put up a notice, in English, they're no use to us if they can't talk civilised, and have a wagon ready – they'll be only too pleased to come. Mostly they'll be good enough workers for all you need – a few will take a wage for a week or two then drift and some will drink too much to be any use to you or to themselves, but you find them anywhere; most will stay and do an honest job."

"So, they will be there when I want them, the last thing to worry about. Clapperley is making contact with an attorney in Cornwall to try to get an underman for me – I'll hire on men when he comes. For the while, I can get the place ready."

Tom's favoured builder, knowing from experience that he had the 'in' with the Corporation that would get him the best price for public works, was able to make an immediate start on eighty cottages in a double terrace downslope of the mine on a piece of otherwise useless rough ground. Single-skin brick built they would be two up, two down, depending for their strength on the chimney stack that served each four, centrally positioned to take the smoke from the single fireplace in each house; there would be a privy to each pair, brick built and at least four paces from the doorway, and a standpipe for water to its side. There was a stream not a furlong away and it was quite cheap to build a brick header tank to give a twenty-foot fall to provide water pressure for the taps. For most families one upstairs room would be for parents and the baby, the other for the girls, the boys in the downstairs and all living in the kitchen, the warmest room in the place; the fireplace would be large enough for a pair of pothooks on either side for kettle and stewpot together.

If they made an effort to keep them clean, they would not become a slum immediately and in any case, from all Tom had heard, they would be better than the mud-walled, turf-roofed cabins of a typical Irish village.

The building would take three months, at a cost of a little more than three thousands, extra cash that would have to come from the speculative pot, which was a pity but could not be avoided. Typical rent, Tom discovered, was four bob a week, which for eighty places amounted

to… £832 in a year, on three thousands, that was, quick scribbling and crossings out said a mite more than twenty-seven per cent! Perhaps he should give some thought to speculative building next year.

Building the coke ovens took much the same time as the houses, and the canal spur was no more than a four week job – everything would be ready for spring.

Three months passed but no underground manager appeared – the word from Cornwall was that the bulk of skilled men had gone to the coal in South Wales and the rest had crossed the Atlantic to mines in Upper Canada and the States. None had wished to go 'foreign' to the north of England, and Lancashire was especially anathema; enquiry divulged that the Cornishmen had risen against the Crown a while before, a mere two or three centuries back, with the assurance of aid from the North West, which aid had never materialised – they had long memories in the West Country.

Tom recalled Joseph's words of five years before – it was all new, there were no experts, merely a few men who had been doing it for a longer time and knew a bit more than the others. What they had learnt, he could, must, indeed.

He bought picks, shovels and wheelbarrows and a mile of wrought iron rails for a trackway; Roberts ran cast iron wheels and axles and frames for tubs and he bought deals to make the sides for two dozen. Wincing at the outrageous cost, he bought a ship load of Canadian fir for pit props and sleepers for the trackway. Finally, all in place, money spent and no revenue coming in, he could delay no longer, set out for the docks to find his labour.

There was, yet again, famine in Ireland, in the part called the Midland Counties this year; there was starvation in one part or another most years from all he could gather – not enough rain, or too much at the wrong time, and the potatoes failed – they were not a native crop to Ireland and the conditions were only almost right for them. The potatoes had become the food crop for almost all of the poor and they had only pots for boiling them over open fires; when the spuds failed they could not eat, even if given flour as an alternative, for they had no ovens and no knowledge of dough making, of kneading and proving either. The old died quickly and the young took disease and followed more slowly; the survivors tramped in search of work and reached the cities where there was a little in the way of poor relief until they became a burden on the funds and were bundled aboard ships, mostly to be dumped at dockside in Liverpool or Bristol or Cardiff within a couple of days. A few of the 'lucky' ones ended up in Boston or New York, half of their family typically dying on the way, most often to end up despised in the slums there.

There was little for the Irish in Liverpool; the chapels reluctantly performed good works amongst the Papists and supplied a roof and a blanket and a couple of scanty meals a day; the corporation, not wanting disease to spread, provided a little as well and pushed them out on the road to the Welsh mines as quickly as they could. The offer of work brought a swarm of hungry, pleading men and women to surround Tom.

For lack of any organisation he had gone to the warehouse where a harassed Methodist preacher was providing bowls of stew with the assistance of some of the ladies of his congregation. The nearly exhausted minister had fallen on his shoulders, blessing him for bringing some release from his burden, had happily handed the load over.

“I need eighty men, sir, no more – I have eighty cottages to put them in, and you must have three hundred here, reverend. They must be strong men who can wield pick and shovel, but there will be work for the women and older children as well.”

“Families then, Mr Andrews, no single men. None of the sick or enfeebled.”

“The work would kill them, sir – it is hard labour I am offering, but a roof and a full belly and a living wage besides.”

The minister, a firm believer in salvation through work, had no difficulty with this and was able to make the bulk of the choice for Tom. Some of the men and women had made an effort, helping with the cleaning, tending the cooking fires, nursing the sick, scrounging firewood, and these had come to his attention as worthy souls – a pity they were inveterate Papists, but they might yet save themselves – and he in turn recommended them to Tom. They let the chosen fifty make up the numbers with relatives and acquaintances from their home villages, it seeming likely that they would look after each other and work together more successfully than a random collection of strangers might. They loaded up onto six wagons and set off in holiday mood, their time of tribulation perhaps coming to an end.

They gawped at the big red-brick buildings of the town, the great mass of people in the streets, the shops for the rich people, chattering and nudging each other, dropping silent in awe as they pulled up at a market on the outskirts of the industrial area near the old village of Anfield. There were at least a hundred stalls, mostly foodstuffs.

“So much, sir, and is it all for sale to ordinary folks?”

Tom nodded, told them he had made arrangements with a stallholder here, a farmer, to pick up a little food for them until they had been paid and could get in the way of buying their own in town.

They loaded twenty one-hundredweight sacks of potatoes, eighty cabbages and strings of onions and four flitches of bacon; as an afterthought, a treat, Tom had a bag of apples put up for each family at thruppence a time, an extra pound, but he had not realised just how badly-off they had been, felt a rare compassion for these people who had been less than slaves for not even having a sale value.

It was raining when they reached the pithead and looked about them for their cabins; pointed towards the brick houses with slate roofs, dry and on two floors, they could not believe their luck.

“Get coal from the heap, get your fires lit and put the cooking pots on. There’s not much in your places – a kitchen table and a couple of stools and a bench, pallets and blankets, a stewpot and a kettle and a few plates and knives and spoons and mugs. Anything else you must buy for yourselves.”

There was a couple of ounces of tea and a jug of milk and a teapot as well, George Mason having said that the Irish lived on tea and ‘taters’ and could not function without either.

Every man woman and child was silently outside at first light, waiting to work.

“Are any of you tradesmen – carpenters or masons, perhaps?”

Two chippies and a blacksmith identified themselves.

“Good, that will be very useful! The rest of you get picks and shovels and wheelbarrows.”

They set to levelling a path for the trackway to follow from canal wharf to coke ovens to coal heap and then into the drift itself. The three skilled men set to building a first tub and then cutting sleepers to lay the rails to exactly the gauge of the tub they had made; it was a wooden box on

wheels, about five feet wide, six feet long and a yard high, would carry some three tons of coal, half that of coke, could, just, be shoved along by two or three of the older children. A week and they pushed a first tub along the whole of the roadway they had built, and then they laid rails inside, almost to the working face.

The seam sloped slightly downwards and was, inevitably, wet; they dug a drain, a leet, along the side of the track. Dakers had ignored the problem, cutting his coal only above water level, often leaving half of the thickness of the seam untouched, but that made no sense at all that Tom could see. The ditch, a yard wide and five feet deep at first was run diagonally across the slope to reach the stream below the header pond; it was black and full of dust, but that hardly mattered as long as it was kept clear of the canal.

By the end of the month they were cutting coal, men at the face and the carpenters with a couple of hands apiece measuring and wedging props behind them, the gallery more than fifty yards wide and giving working room for the women and silent children to shovel and sort.

It had surprised Tom at first that the children were so quiet, until he had looked closely, so many of them dull-eyed and listless, starved as babies and never developed inside their heads as they should have; there was nothing to be done now, it was too late for them. They worked, performing the simple repetitive tasks of wheeling the tubs in and out, would probably do nothing else in the whole of their lives – Tom had no religion, was rather glad that as a result he need not examine the condition of his soul, but he had no love for himself at the end of the working day in their company.

Patrick Reilly, the smith, took charge of the coke ovens, it being natural that he should work with fire and things mechanical, soon showed a talent for organising his little domain; two months and he was running all of the above-ground operations, pocketing an extra two pounds a week, riches beyond his previous imagining; the two carpenters, Edward and Michael, naturally became chargehands below ground for they were in a position to see everything that was going on and to direct the hands to where they were needed.

"Frederick! Coal tar, from the coke ovens – how do we get rid of it? Has it any use? Can we sell it?"

Frederick did not know, pledged himself to find an answer, came back in a fortnight.

"Soap, sir. There is one manufacturer over on the Cheshire side who makes toilet soap using the tar, though he does not say how; he will supply his own clean barrels and will collect them – he pays very little, but it gets the problem off of our hands. I visited Baxter's pit where they have ovens and just burn off the tar - I have never seen so much smoke and filth in my life, sir! And at Norton's they throw it away, just dump it, and the stream runs black and the ground stinks and the wells nearby taste of the stuff. We would need to use the labour of one man to fill the barrels and the price we will be paid will barely cover his wages, but I think it will keep us cleaner and healthier. The shipyards will pay four shillings a barrel, delivered to them, us to supply the barrels – too much effort, I think, sir."

"I agree, soap it is. See to it for me, please. As well, can you discover the market for occasional surpluses of coal and coke? Not regular contracts, but it will be best to run the pit at full every week, and Roberts may not need all of our output, when the furnaces are being cleaned and re-lined, for example."

Frederick nodded and noted the instructions in his little journal.

“They have iron coal barges working on the River Severn below Ironbridge, sir; I understand that the iron sides take the bashing from coal being thrown on and off much better than the ordinary wooden narrow boats, require much less in the way of repair.”

“What would the costs be?”

Frederick pledged himself to find out.

A year, during which Tom forced himself underground every working day, and the coal seam dipped sufficiently that they needed to deepen the leet, making the expected discovery of a second stratum, another seam; they began the digging of their first shaft at that point, Tom ordering in a new-built steam engine, powerful enough to run a pump and turn the wheel. Reilly rubbed his hands in glee – he had heard of steam engines, had never expected actually to see, and work, one; he suggested that they build another terrace as well, and then hire on another fifty or so families to make a thorough start on the second level.

“Certainly, Patrick – but I will not be having the running of it,” Tom replied. “You must train up another man to run the ovens and yourself take over the whole pit, above and below ground. Will you do it?”

“A Paddy from the Irish bogs, sir? In charge of everything? And will your customers and suppliers be willing to take that? Will it not besmirch your name, sir?”

“Probably, Patrick – but not enough for them *not* to take my money – and if they say a bloody word, I shall build a bloody church here and hire one of your priests on to say Masses in it – and that would learn these chapel-going buggers a lesson!”

Tom was finding the businessman’s life increasingly tedious; he knew that he ought to be seen in chapel twice on a Sunday if he was to stay in the area and expand; as well, it was time for him to take a wife, a respectable daughter of one of his associates, chosen for her virtue and her portion rather than any personal attributes; he had to *fit in*, to be one of the community, and he did not need the money sufficiently to do so. He was well-off, could easily become rich if he crossed the border from medium-size to big; Joseph wanted to, he did not.

The weaving mill had been a success; despite early teething problems the demand for cloth had been so great as to make them a profit from the first, but Joseph was worried.

“The problem is, Tom, that the looms need the strength of men and a little skill as well, though that can be taught easily, it’s mainly about keeping an eye on quality, not a dexterity of hand and eye like the cottage looms demanded. The hand loom weavers won’t come into the mill still, that has not changed, and they are starting to complain that I am undercutting them, driving their prices down – and they’re right! Next year I shall produce nearly twice as much, going onto double shifts, and the price will fall for sure, more for them than for me because I will guarantee quantity and quality. Sooner or later, they are going to try to do something about it – burn me out, I expect.”

“What can you do about that? Must you hire on watchmen?”

“One for Sundays, yes. The best bet will be to insure heavily. A few guineas in a local broker’s hand and he will arrange for a policy to be underwritten at Lloyds in London for a couple of thousands more than mill and machines together are worth – then if we burn we rebuild better.”

Tom laughed – it made good sense.

“What of your men? If you can’t get local weavers, what do you do for hands?”

"Youngsters who come in off the farms, mostly. A few of the Irish, but not too many."

"I employ only Irishmen at the mine, and they work like hell for me."

"Only because you overpay them, Tom!"

"They produce more for being better paid – only in June I put my wage-bill up by fifty a month by putting a bob a ton into the pot as a bonus for everybody to share; I got a hundred pounds worth of coal more this month, fifty quid straight profit. What I'm doing with that is ordering ten tons of spuds each month – you wouldn't believe how much of them they eat, Joe – because I can get them for a farthing a pound, £2 6s 8d the ton. They will buy them at cost from me, and that's half the price they pay in town and they don't have to carry them three miles home; they appreciate that, but more importantly, they know that we will *never* run short – to men who've starved and watched their children die, that's important, knowing that they're safe."

"Maybe – it's different in coal, of course. I don't think I want too many of them in the mill – you can't really trust a Papist!"

Tom gave up. The argument was pointless because neither could win it, and he did not really care enough to jeopardise his relationship with Joseph, who had taken up chapel-going recently.

He visited Mary that night, found her in contemplative mood, reserved and withdrawn from him, her greeting very subdued.

"Problems, my dear?"

"Yes, Tom."

She would say no more, poured him tea, asked how his day had gone, tried to chat lightly.

"Tell me, Mary."

She sat plump down in her chair at the table, dropped her head in her hands, would not meet his eyes.

"I am with child, Thomas, I am going to have a baby."

It was only to be expected, the surprise was that it had not happened long before; a nuisance, more for her than him.

"That will be a little difficult for you, Mary, but there will be money to bring up the child and keep you both, you need have no fear that you will be turned away."

"If I have a baby here, where some people know me, and know that I am not wed, they will point fingers at me and the babe. 'Nameless', 'Love-child', they will say. The whole neighbourhood will know, they will make sure of that."

They would – there was nothing the old tabbies loved better than to cast the first stone at girls who had sinned and been found out, and the chance to display their hatred and malice to a bastard child would never be missed.

"You must go, then. It would not be fair to you to make you stay here, and it would be worse for the child. Some distance from here, have you any preference for another town?"

"Do you know Dorset, Tom?"

He was taken by surprise, admitted, defensively, that he did, not saying that his ear was always cocked for the sound of the low-pitched Dorset burr on a stranger's voice. He wondered if she had heard something, if there was a rumour doing the rounds and where it had come from.

"My mother came from Dorset," she continued, to his relief. "She came from Corfe, where the castle is, and her mother still lived there when I was little. I expect she is dead now, for I

remember her as an old lady then. We visited her three times that I recall, and I always wanted to go back there, to live there one day because it was beautiful. Was I to put a ring on my finger, I could be a widow, my husband suddenly dead of the fever, leaving me in the family way and living respectably on the income he left me."

She had been brought up to 'respectability', the true god of the new middle classes, and would be able to achieve the status again as a widow. She would not herself be known, but she might hear word of her family – there could be other relatives, unknown cousins, who might befriend her in her need. She had a brother and two sisters, might just get the occasional word of them.

"What if the old lady is still alive? Your parents might very well visit her."

"Then, perhaps, I might just see Mama, at a distance."

He had never realised just how lonely she was – but she had never been more than a convenience to him, it had not occurred to him that she had emotions. He supposed, when he considered the matter, that he was lonely, too – but it was less important to a man. He could, if he wished, make some sort of social life with his peers in trade, he was sure; he wondered vaguely how he would go about it, and whether it would be worth the effort.

He considered how he would go about settling Mary in Corfe – he was certainly not going down there himself, that would be foolhardy in the extreme. Clapperley would do the job, very willingly, but he rather preferred not to acquaint him with the details of his personal life out of a general sense of caution. Blackmail and Clapperley seemed natural friends, and he had no wish to give him what might become a future weapon. He went instead to the premises of his banker, Martin, where he was granted an immediate personal interview, as he had expected without really considering the matter – Andrews and Star commanded the attention of any country banker.

Martin, a quiet, highly intelligent, soberly dressed, unobtrusive gentleman, stood courteously to greet Tom, ushered him to a chair and gave him good morning.

"A correspondent in Dorset? Yes, sir, in the town of Wareham and another in Dorchester, bankers whom I would recommend and who have performed commissions for me, and I for them, in the past."

"Good. I wish to purchase a house of some four or five hundred pounds in or very close to Corfe village, to be put in the name of Mrs Burley. Payments currently made to Miss Amberley to be increased to two hundreds a year, for her life, and made in the name of Mrs Burley at her new address. Staff to be hired on and paid from my account here, separately. The house currently occupied by Miss Amberley to be put into my name, purchased from her."

Martin made a brief note of the instructions, said they would be put in hand immediately. It was obvious why they were being made, but it was equally obvious to him that it was none of his business at all to comment or to query.

"Whilst you are here, Mr Andrews, it occurs to me that you are holding a larger than normal balance in your account, sir?"

"Yes, Mr Martin – I am putting cash together this year in anticipation of a speculation in house building I intend to make next spring. I will put some fifteen thousands into four hundred terraced houses on a piece of land on the outskirts of Manchester, building their roadways as well, and then renting them out and selling them as solid investments, income earners, to folk with a few hundreds saved."

They discussed the figures for a few minutes, Martin impressed and approving and eventually suggesting that eight hundred would be better than four and he would be willing to match Mr Andrews, pound for pound, at the very reasonable rate of eight and a half per cent interest, the risk seeming to be very low. Tom was pleased to accept, having budgeted for a fifteen per cent return.

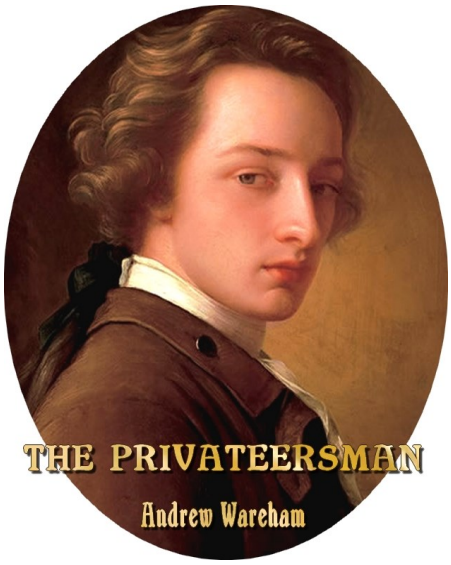
"For the meanwhile, Mr Andrews, it would be better to put your money to work; with your permission I would purchase discounted bills with the spare funds in your account, thus earning three or four per cent safely."

The second half of the Eighties was a period of unprecedented boom, industry expanding massively and families flocking to the towns of the Midlands and North. The new industrial towns were chronically short of roofs, whole families living in a single room and thinking themselves lucky to have any place to lay their heads and house prices rose far above their cost of construction, to the great profit of the few builders who could fight the factory owners for land and capital. Mills were built on every stream that would turn a wheel and the late-comers were forced to the experiment of putting beam engines into their works; the demand for house and steam coals rose massively, as did the price. Roberts was inundated with contracts for cast pillars and roof trusses and built a fourth and then a fifth furnace and worked night and day, unstopping. The steel shop added new crucibles as the demand for machine parts grew every day.

Joseph presided over two hundred looms, most of them worked by Irishmen, despite his prejudices, and he doubled the size of his spinning mill and looked about him for new opportunities.

Frederick Mason married Miss Roberts and she produced a son within the year – he might, indeed, have been a fraction premature if one was very strict about counting the months since the wedding, however none would wish to be so intrusive of the privacy of so respected a couple, not, at least, to the lengths of commenting publicly. He continued to work for Roberts, taking increasing responsibility for the steel shop and its contracts with steam.

Mary had left Tom's life; he intentionally severed all contact with her after he was made aware of her safe delivery of a boy – if she was to be respectable then she did not need his presence in her background – his money would suffice. Mrs Morris supplied a somewhat more commercially minded young lady to take Mary's place, and she was good fun for a year before growing bored with the reclusive life; another had taken her place and a third after that – good girls all, happy and honest and not attempting to demand extra presents or a cut of the housekeeping. They made no demand on Tom's emotions, and very little, relatively speaking, on his purse, and they kept him physically content.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Eight

In 1794, aged thirty-two, rich and increasingly unsettled, Tom sat in Martin's office briefly dealing with business, signing as directed on a series of unread documents; he had long since decided that either he could trust his banker or he could not, and if he couldn't then he had no business dealing with him. He became much more alert when Martin started a discussion of the state of the world. They were at war with France, again, but that was a fairly regular occurrence and one the navy would deal with in its normal fashion; the main effect on the business community so far had been a few taxes, which could be avoided or evaded, and a lot of government contracts for those who wished to pay the bribes. Tom had not moved Roberts into armaments, expecting the war to last no more than a couple of years, and consequently was little affected; he was in fact much more interested in steam and the general expansion of the economy.

"Canals, Mr Martin, that's where the money seems to be at the moment – I was thinking of venturing twenty or thirty thousand in one of these ditches."

Martin, older, greyer, as unobtrusive as ever, raised his voice emphatically, a rare event.

"No, Mr Andrews, definitely not, sir! The best are all gone – London is connected to Bristol, to Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. All of the lowlands, the Midlands and the bulk of the industrial North Country are interlinked now – so what is left? Have you seen the latest great proposal, sir? To link Glasgow, of all places, with Leeds! Have you seen any of that country, sir?"

“I have, in fact – I took the coach from Glasgow to Carlisle to St Helens a few years ago, coming here from New York.” Tom rebuked himself, that was an unnecessary piece of information to let slip, even to a man as discreet as Martin. “Where there are no hills there are moors and mountains instead – they would need hundreds of locks, chain after chain in places.”

“They would, Mr Andrews, there will be a rise of at least a thousand feet to contend with and leaving aside their cost, think how it would slow travelling. Better far to use the coasters, except perhaps in winter when the Irish Sea is an unfriendly sort of place.”

“What cost do they envisage, Mr Martin?”

“The prospectus is seeking to raise two millions.”

“Can they hope to do so? It is a vast sum – add up the cost of every canal built last year and it would amount to less than that in total.”

“No – it is *too* great a sum for the market to bear; I do not believe it is possible with government offering a safe four and a half per cent in Consols and creaming the bulk of funds off of the Exchange to pay for the war.”

“So, they may get acceptances for one half, say, and make a start and then run out of cash and go down, leaving men and suppliers unpaid.”

“I am quite certain that that is exactly what will happen, Mr Andrews. This bubble is overdue for its bust; we have been in a boom, one of the biggest ever, for ten years now and it is *impossible* that it can continue much longer – history is against it! Have you heard of the South Sea Bubble, Mr Andrews?”

Tom had not, listened in growing horror as Martin outlined the events of seventy years before and drew the obvious parallels.

“Paper money from country banks will lose its value as the banks close their doors, so banknotes are no way to save money. Goods will be unsellable. The wise man, Mr Martin, will sell out of everything this year, except his food stocks, I suspect, and turn all of his wealth into gold coins.”

“I agree, sir, and strongly advise you to do so. I am not able to follow my own advice, because I cannot call in time loans, but everything that is at short notice is coming back in already, and I am making no new loans at all, all of my investments are in Consols, not even discounted Bills. I will still be vulnerable if there is a run on the bank, but will survive anything less than a full national panic.”

Tom persuaded Joseph, in the end used his authority as senior partner to order him to follow his example, and sold everything he could, offering no trade credit and allowing no customer any leeway. By mid-June of 1795 they had nearly one hundred and fifty thousands in coin, locked away in a strong room they had cobbled together at Roberts, two men at a time with fowling pieces on guard, Tom’s pistol belt at his desk.

He sold every house except those at the mine, and then he had a brainwave and sold the mine itself to a consortium of speculative investors, men who had no interest in running the concern and were happy to leave everything to the managers in place, intending to take one year’s income and then sell it on at a gain. They were willing to pay a boom price because they saw no reason to expect the boom ever to end – it had lasted for ten years, why should it not last for another decade? A week after he added the twenty-five thousand to his cash pile the bubble burst.

To their surprise, the first intimation of disaster came from the Midlands, not from the north but from Redditch where a small canal was in construction, linking the town to Birmingham and the network of waterways; being short and cheap the principals had cut some corners, especially in their initial planning of the route; the diggings met an un-surveyed stretch of clays and slowed abruptly and the contractor called for an extra couple of thousands from the owners. Just one of them did not have the cash to hand and went to his bank for the loan of a mere five hundreds; the banker demanded that he should deposit some security, ideally in the form of share certificates, but he could not for already having done so elsewhere. More than a little disturbed, the banker made enquiry amongst his peers and competitors in the local banks; they discovered that between them they had lent every penny of the canal's cost – where each had thought he was in for a small percentage, in fact the remainder, offered as assets, had been borrowed from a competitor; even worse, they found that the securities that had been accepted, in the form of shares in other canals, were all part unpaid – they had lent money as a result of false pretences. They refused to lend a penny more and demanded that all of the unlawfully acquired loans be instantly paid back, under pains of prosecution for fraud as well as civil action for recovery. The nimblest of the canal projectors left everything, fled the country with whatever they had to hand; the greedy tried to grab enough cash to make it worthwhile, and they ended up in prison; the stupid, the innocent sheep, found themselves asking what was happening as the bailiffs descended. It took just two days to discover that the canal proprietors had no cash money to hand and that the banks could not recover their loans – their only asset was the canal, and that was unfinished. A day later and the banks' problems were public knowledge and the first depositors came queuing to withdraw their cash and the weakest bank closed its doors - broken. There was an instant run on the other banks in town and those that did not close their doors that day did not open them in the morning.

The news spread rapidly, first amongst the banking community itself, then to the general public. The banks everywhere called in their loans for fear of a run, creating more panic in process, and very nervously begged to inspect the books of their own canals – more than half of the canals in the country were discovered to have been acting fraudulently – borrowing from one bank, then from a second to repay the first, then using the proof that they had repaid their first loan on time to borrow greater sums from a third and fourth bank; as long as there was another banker willing to lend the daisy-chain could continue until eventually the canal was finished and could then be sold, repaying everybody and returning a profit. The closure of just *one* line of credit meant that every other fell as soon as the inevitable questions went unanswered.

The news reached the mass of depositors in London and Liverpool and Bristol overnight and the smallest town banks broke that day, triggering a mass panic over all of the rest of England and Wales; Scotland, its system different and separate to an extent, followed more slowly but it took a very bare week for the whole country to freeze and for confidence to be destroyed. The country banks had almost all issued their own banknotes which became instantly valueless when the bank failed, as more than half did. The banks tried to call in every loan they could, but their customers had no money.

Martin in common with every other banker opened his doors to a long queue of depositors begging to withdraw the whole of their accounts in gold and silver, as they had every legal right to do. He responded as every other banker had by counting out the cash very slowly, coin by coin and each cashier checked by a second, while he begged his own creditors to pay everything they could, knowing that they would not be able to and aware that he could not turn to other parts of the country to beg for help, as was normal practice. The meanwhile the depositors grew increasingly panic-stricken – few had more than a hundred in their accounts, but that was often

their whole nest-egg, a lifetime's thrift, their last bulwark against starvation, and they could see the workhouse threatening.

The word reached Tom at ten o'clock, George Mason galloping into the office to tell him that there was a run on Martin's and they needed to get there quickly to try to save the firm's groats.

"Harness up the dray and four, George. Send Richard to Mr Star's mill, put him on the cob, to get there as quickly as possible. Warn the men we have named to be ready. Quickly now!"

"Time to make a deposit at Martin's, Joe?"

Martin had been quite open in his assessment of his prospects – he had made longer term loans to safe firms, keeping out of the short run, high risk, high rates loans, and knew that they would not be repayable in a hurry. The firms had used his money to build mills and furnaces and open mines and quarries, all of which would pay in time, none of which could be sold off, turned into cash overnight. He had estimated that he would be short by some thirty thousands if it came to a national panic in which he could not borrow from untouched banks in another part of the country.

"What do you reckon, Joe – keep back twenty thou' for running money if worst comes to worst and there's civil war and the Frogs invade?"

Both had accepted that there would be some rioting when the banks failed and they could envisage an unlikely set of events turning that unrest into full-fledged revolution – it had happened in France and before that in America, so it was not impossible.

Joseph nodded agreement and they turned to loading the dray – one hundred and fifty strong canvas sacks, each weighing the better part of thirty pounds and containing one thousand guineas. It was amazing just how little space they took up. The pair of guards sat on the pile, shotguns in their hands; Joseph swung his legs over the tailgate, horse pistols on either side of him; Tom lounged next to the driver, pistol belt strapped on, six butts showing prominently.

"Six pistols, Master? Are they loaded?" George Mason enquired.

Joseph laughed, "they're no use if they're not, George – and it won't be the first time, by a long way, either!"

"Stupid of me to ask that question, Mr Star! I have often wondered how Mr Andrews came by that scar – the war in America?"

"We both did our share there, George."

Twenty-four men from the foundry, the biggest and hardest-looking, lined up, a dozen on each side, all carrying cudgels or the iron bars they used for breaking out the castings. They set off into town, Tom wishing that he had been able to hire a band – fife and drum would have been appropriate he felt as they marched on the dirt road of the village and then into the silent streets of the town, their own feet and hooves on the granite setts the only noise.

There was an anxious crowd outside Martin's bank, quiet as yet and unmoving, just waiting; the small square was full of people watching the single door that was open and the snail's pace queue on the steps. Tom stood as the dray came to a halt.

"Let us through, please! If you want your money, let us get it inside!"

The people turned, still silently, and stared and pointed at the armed men. The brightest amongst them realised the significance of the escort, of so many guns and bludgeons, and started to tell the people on either side of them.

"Gold. That must be gold!"

Tom picked up on the mutters and bellowed at the top of his voice.

"It's gold guineas! Martin's gold! There's enough here to pay every manjack twice over. Your money is safe. Martin's is safe!"

The first enthusiast began to cheer as Martin came out and opened both flaps of his main doors and then quietly asked the men at the front of the queue to step aside to allow the gold to come in. He apologised for the delay in its arrival, explained that they had not wished to take the risk of transporting it at night. The word quickly spread and made obvious sense – no one in his right mind moved gold on the roads at night.

"Would you wish to open one of the bags out here to check it, Mr Martin? Easier to count gold in the sunlight."

Martin kept a straight face and opened a sack, displaying it clearly to the fascinated crowd, an audience now, staring at more money than they had imagined in all of their lives. They counted the men going in laden and coming out empty-handed, awestruck.

The show ended and Martin stepped up to his doors again, invited the queue to reform; few of his waiting customers bothered.

"Thirty seven thousand five hundred to Mr Star's account, the remainder to mine, if you please, Mr Martin."

"Certainly, gentlemen. Thank you!"

"My pleasure, sir. I would expect Andrews Pit to come onto the market fairly soon, Mr Martin – if you get word of it put the owners in my direction, if you would be so good. You have the knowledge of high finance that I do not, sir – would you set my money to work for me?"

"And mine," Joseph added.

"I will double it within the month, gentlemen, if I can do no better!"

Every short-term loan in the country was called and more than half of businesses lost all of their working capital, the money that paid their day-to-day bills and the wages and bought their working raw materials while they waited for orders to be completed and their customers to pay up. A month and these businesses had closed down and were doing all they could to avoid liquidation, anxiously trying to sell stock and finished goods and machinery, eventually their premises, anything to keep out of bankruptcy and debtor's prison; many a firm went down with ten thousands in finished goods in stock and one hundred pounds in unpaid bills and unable to find a penny in cash. Some businessmen were wealthy, possessed cash in gold and Bank of England notes, and they profited; many more had been wealthy, their assets in country banknotes and bank accounts, and they left the ranks of the new rich to rejoin the old poor.

Prices collapsed, for lack of demand – there was no cash to purchase anything. Desperate wives tried to sell their jewellery to save their husbands and discovered that diamonds were as worthless as any other asset in the absence of a buyer – there was no such thing as intrinsic value, they discovered, anything was worth only what people would, or could, pay for it. The few who could pay hardly needed to, for money was worth much more than it had been a month before.

Tom bought back his coal mine, paying five thousands in coin for it and being thanked for his generosity; he would not have paid so much had not Clapperley privately pointed out that one of the gentlemen involved was son to the Lord Lieutenant of the County, potentially a dangerous enemy to create. He refused to buy Collins' mine, being able to make his choice of local pits, and

took on half a dozen small, new enterprises, all similar to his own pit in its earliest days, possessing thick, shallow seams that had hardly been touched yet. Joseph bought four spinning mills, deciding to specialise – he did not like the potential for trouble he could see in weaving. Clapperley and Martin were kept unceasingly busy, acting as go-betweens, talking to the three or four other men possessed of gold and interested in buying – there was no sense at all in bidding each other up. Tom bought five steam engines, new and in perfect condition, for less than the price of one the previous month; he picked up ten thousand tons of coke and the yards it was stored in for almost nothing, then added five miles of wrought iron rails for new trackways and four shiploads of Canadian timber for considerably less than cost; almost as an afterthought he bought out Roberts' largest competitor. Joseph the meanwhile attended the dockside auctions, buying shiploads of the best cotton for pennies and then spending a few pounds on drays and horses to move it and warehouses to store it in.

At the end of four frantic weeks they took stock, counted up what they had spent and all that they had got for their money. Between them they decided they were worth well over a million at boom prices, with assets that would actually value at anything from half to three-quarters of that when the market stabilised again, and would grow over the next decade. They were rich beyond any expectation – they decided it was better to recast their partnership – senior and junior no longer made sense to either. The new purchases in textiles would go one hundred per cent to Joseph, coal and iron wholly to Tom, organised in new firms; the old Andrews and Star would retain Roberts and Star Spinners only, more or less for old times' sake. It was important they thought that they should never be brought into conflict with one another – they were too big to risk arguing.

"Friends always, I trust, Joseph, but we cannot work together any more – we're just too damned big!"

Joseph burst into tears and then apologised – the leap in ten years from barefoot half-caste wandering the streets of English Harbour, to rich, respected gentleman in Lancashire was too much for him to think of without emotion, without reminding himself of all that he believed he owed to Tom. Now, to be setting himself up as Tom's equal, that was too much for him – almost.

"The children know that you are the most important man in England, Tom, as far as we are concerned. They will not forget it. I want to take a risk, Tom – do you think I could send money back to Antigua, to my mother? Might it become known if I did? Could I be putting the law onto us?"

"I don't know – let's ask Martin. Not Clapperley, I think, not the sort of thing I want him to know."

Martin had no direct correspondent in Antigua, but he had contacts with Mr Lacey in Liverpool who was banker to the sugar there. Mr Lacey had not closed his doors because Martin had been able to put fifty thousands across to him on the night Tom had delivered the guineas; he had already paid back fifty-five thousands, with his best thanks, and would be able to make an anonymous gift to Mrs Laetitia on the island, the more so because the planters who had sold their sugar through his offices had received their money and knew that they owed him debts of gratitude at least – they would ensure that no nosey-parker asked awkward questions.

Two months into the depression Martin begged the favour of an interview with Tom.

"I know that you are unsettled in the manufacturing life, Mr Andrews, and that mere money-making must seem a little pointless now. I am able to put you in the way of an opportunity that rarely arises. My Correspondent in Kettering, being aware that Martins is solvent, and must have at least one of very wealthy depositors to have kept it so – the whole country in fact, the financial part that is, must have made that surmise – two tons of gold attracts a remarkable degree of attention, you know! Where was I? Ah, yes, Kettering – a very rich iron town, as you will know, one of the earliest in the whole Midlands, finding problems now for lack of charcoal and distance from the nearest coal mine – there was used to be Rockingham Forest surrounding the town, but it is all gone now, every last tree gone to charcoal! Just to the south of the town, across the river, the Ise, there is a large and old-fashioned estate, the Quillers, the family that owned it, said to be Papist, certainly reclusive and out of favour with government and their peers; they died out some five years ago, no male issue, no cousins or nephews; one daughter, a spinster of uncertain years, not in the way of marrying certainly, who inherited and sold, is reputed to have retired to Rome to die in an odour of sanctity – or what passes for it amongst the Papists!"

Tom, who was not entirely certain of the distinction between Papist and any other sub-division of Christianity, and had thought them to be Irish anyway, smiled his sympathetic understanding - very strange and not really English, he implied.

"A Mr Rockingham – my correspondent understands the name to be of choice, not birth – was an ironmaster who was generally held to have made his fortune during the last war, certainly was prominent in the business community; he decided to set up for a gentleman and bought the estate. Quite rightly, he enclosed and began to improve the estate, but it transpires that he borrowed heavily to do so – his fortune stretched to the initial purchase but no further. Unfortunately for him, he went outside of the normal banking houses for his funds, for reasons of secrecy, one presumes; he went to the Jews! He failed to make his payments last month, asked for time, a friendly accommodation, he hoped, and was rapidly taken up and is temporarily held in a sponging house, under arrest but not yet cast into debtor's prison. If he can sell and pay off his debts then he may yet come out of the affair with a few thousands, enough to live upon in retirement. He married late in life and has a son of about eight years, a wife as well, but she is of lesser importance; he had intended to bring the boy up as a country gentleman, it would seem, but must now be content to bring him up at all. If he does not arrange an early sale then he will find himself in court and his assets taken from him and placed into administration, the costs involved wiping out any surplus there may be – he will lose everything and may never be able even to regain his freedom. He has no choice, and cannot hold out for a high price, or indeed for anything more than a bare minimum."

Tom nodded – it was obvious where Martin was leading. Did he want it? An estate, at Kettering, where was that exactly? The geography of England had never been one of his strong points – there was a map on the wall behind Martin, just too far distant to read the small print easily from where he was sat. He stood, grinned an apology and leant across to check the location of the town. Smack in the centre of lowland England, well away from Dorset and a respectable distance north of London.

"Tell me more, Mr Martin."

"He owes perhaps ten thousands to the Jews, probably as much again to builders and road contractors and for drainage and bridges and who knows what else – it behoves the great man of the manor to be open-handed, and he was certainly that, even when his hands were technically empty. Twenty or so thousands in his pocket besides and he would go into his retirement; less than that and he might try to fight, to drag things out for two or three years."

"So, forty thousands that would probably turn into somewhat more with fees and interest and extra debts turning up out of the blue. In exchange a large estate bought cheap. How large, Mr Martin?"

"Precisely, to the last acre, I do not know – indeed, the last stages of the enclosure are still in completion so probably no one knows for certain yet. The farms will be paying no rents this year and there will be money still to spend – enclosed land must be fenced and drained and set immediately to work; roads must be built, drains finished, new farmhouses built perhaps. There could be another ten thousands to go yet this year and three or four a year for each of the next five. After that, enclosed arable pays rent of thirty shillings an acre typically and the Thingdon Estate will be mostly wheat land and will amount to about seven thousand acres. So, an income of about ten thousands gross, but with expenditure to be made each year on improvements and always the risk of a bad harvest or failing prices – over a ten year stretch you would probably expect to net five thousands on average."

Roberts and the mines would be worth at least five thousands this year, probably twice as much next – a clear ten thousand a year that would make him very rich indeed, would mean that he could afford to live a life of leisure, which would rapidly become very boring – he would be able to choose what he wanted to work at – perhaps he could encourage engineers to come to his shops and build new inventions, better steam engines, new ways of mining, of producing iron, or maybe he could improve the world of agriculture – farmers were generally backward, primitive sorts of folks – there would be a lot to do. Maybe, just possibly, he could look about for a wife and set up as a family man, probably he ought to, on an estate that needed an heir. Joseph would be pleased to see him settled in domestic bliss, though not, he rather thought, blessed ten times over.

"I would be able to keep the mines, and Roberts, Mr Martin? I have heard that 'gentlemen' do not approve of trade."

"You would, but at a distance, with managers to do the work for you, you would have to pander to their prejudices to that extent. As well, Mr Andrews, you may not have considered the political implications of your position if you buy – the estate effectively controls the nomination of the local member – he is elected by about thirty burgesses of the old village of Finedon, some eighteen of whom will be your tenants, the estate owning the freehold of their shops or cordwainer's sheds or blacksmith's yards. It is one of the old rotten boroughs, the electorate small local men exclusively and possessing neither political knowledge nor independence of mind and they will be obedient. Your name will be known in Downing Street as a result and the government of the day will always wish to sweeten you if it can be done at little expense; the barracks in Lancashire may well be instructed to go to Andrews Pit for their coals for winter firing for example; as another instance, a minor knighthood would be yours for the asking – not the *Order of the Bath* certainly, but one of the lesser honours – and a baronetcy would be quite cheap, two or three years of good behaviour, a 'loan' of ten thousand to the Prime Minister's personal funds and you could be Sir Thomas Andrews, Bart.."

"A hereditary title, Mr Martin, would not be of great interest to me in the absence of an heir."

"Purchase the Thingdon Estate, Mr Andrews, and your chances of remaining unwed will be very slight indeed! You will be a rich landholder and the hunt will be up – to be an acceptable *parti* to the gentry, Mr Andrews, you must have birth and breeding or lands and riches, ideally both but either will suffice at a pinch."

Tom laughed delightedly, but could not really imagine himself as a fox with a whooping, tally-hoing pack of genteel young ladies at his tail.

"Make the offer, Mr Martin."

It took six more months to make the offer and negotiate the price with Rockingham's lawyers and creditors, a three-way fight with no community of interest between them. The initial demands were outrageous, scaled down to the unrealistic and eventually to the possible in the current economic climate; a year before good fields had sold at twenty pounds the enclosed acre and there would have been competition between a dozen buyers for each parcel of land, the estate split up farm-by-farm. Now there was only one possible purchaser and last year's prices were irrelevant. Rockingham's people found this incredible at first – they were all lawyers and did not believe in change – and then exceedingly difficult to swallow. Clapperley informed them by letter that he would oppose bankruptcy proceedings on the grounds that an offer had been made that would cover Rockingham's debts at twenty shillings in the pound and leave him a surplus; no judge would take action against a solvent debtor and they would have to come back to Clapperley, weakened by their failure at law.

Clapperley travelled to Kettering and made an initial offer of twenty thousands, cash; they countered with one hundred and forty thousands, claiming to have an interested party who was busily putting his finances together. Clapperley smiled deprecatingly, said he would like to meet this gentleman who could find any source for finance in the climate of the day; his offer, he reiterated, was in gold coin. The creditors' lawyers, who were very little concerned with Rockingham's fate, signified that they would have no objections to any offer that paid them in full and ostentatiously rose from the table. Rockingham's attorney, a local man in the company of wolves from London and the north country, out of his depth and aware of the fact, brought the meeting to an adjournment, needing to seek instructions from his principal. Clapperley assented and raised a questioning eyebrow to the creditors' barristers, who obligingly congregated in his room at the Periquito Hotel an hour later.

"My client will be very pleased to make immediate payment of your claims, gentlemen, including, of course, outstanding interest and fees to your calculation. I believe you may have heard of Martin's Bank in St Helens?"

They had – everybody who was anybody had heard of two providential tons of gold coin appearing in the banker's hour of need.

"Your client was the gentleman who came up trumps, as one might say, Mr Clapperley?"

"He was, sir – he had foreseen the inevitability of a collapse and had turned his not inconsiderable wealth into gold – and, I might add, had persuaded me to do the same with my small savings, greatly to my pleasure – and has, of course, been able to make purchases to his own choosing since. I believe it might not be stretching the truth to call him a millionaire, vulgar though the expression may be."

A man in possession of even one hundred thousands was rich, was one of very few indeed; they contemplated a million, and the power it conveyed. Inevitably, they then contemplated Rockingham, a failure, worth nothing except the purchaser took pity on him. It was then simply a matter of disposing of the affair carefully and tidily in lawful fashion – the estate was so big that its transfer must be a matter of public knowledge, so they had to wrap everything up neatly – it would be best to pay poor Rockingham off.

"How old is Mr Rockingham, gentlemen?"

They thought him to be about fifty, too old to make a comeback in business.

"Then if we were to put twenty thousands into Consols, in his son's name, in trust, the income to come to him until his son's majority or inheritance, he would have a respectable income on which he could live quite comfortably, with no grounds for complaint."

"Eminently fair, Mr Clapperley, generous in fact – but might I venture to suggest that five hundred pounds extra would buy him a house and gardens, and another thousand would give him living money for the first year?"

Clapperley agreed, modifying the proposal to the extent that he would buy Rockingham a house, at least twenty miles distant from the estate and town – out of sight and mind.

The lawyers shook hands on the agreement – nothing so vulgar as a deal – and departed, the creditors' people to speak sternly to Rockingham's man, Clapperley to catch the overnight mail coach north to Birmingham and thence to St Helens, so as not to be present at the scene – there could then be no hint of collusion. Once at home he called on Tom, told him it was all over bar the last minute details, that he could make his arrangements with Martin for the payments to be made.

"Joe, I'm getting out."

"What's taken you so long, brother? You've had the itch in your pants these last five years, and even more so since your pretty lady left. If you want to break up the partnership – which may be for the best if you are elsewhere and can't be got hold of day-to-day – then how's about a straight swap? My quarter of Roberts is worth much the same as your three parts in the cotton, I reckon."

"Done! Saves arguments that way, Joe. I will be keeping Roberts, both sites, and the mines for an income. The Masons can run the works between them, I'll put George up to fifteen parts in the hundred on the profits, and Paddy Reilly will take over at the mines except that he can't do the bookkeeping and sales so well, so I have to find a manager I can trust to work with him. At the moment that's a problem, because there will be a hundred men out of work who could do the job and would come begging for the chance, and trying to pick between them will be a real bugger!"

"Easy done, Tom. My junior clerk is the man you want – he's learnt all about running my offices and all he is doing is waiting for old Higgins to drop dead so he can step into his shoes. His name's Paisley and he's an Irishman, so he'll fit in with your people."

Neither man had heard of a place called Ulster.

"What about your house, Tom? Not a lot of sense keeping it on for a couple of weeks a year."

"I hadn't thought about it. Do you want Bennet?"

"I'll take her and the house both, Tom – it will save me building another wing onto the Lodge – we shall need more room."

"She's not!"

"She is!"

"Number nine?"

"That's right – six boys to two girls, so far."

"Take it as a gift, Joe – a wedding present, because I never did have time to get round to a proper one as I remember."

The question of Clapperley arose – what to do about his knowledge of all of their dealings. Joseph had never had close contact with the little lawyer, disliking him from the first, detesting him as he came to hear of his personal habits and amusements; Tom, at a distance and unable to keep an eye on him, was sure he would be put in the way of temptation and the fraud resulting would be both expensive and, eventually, scandalous. They decided after long discussion that they could either buy him or shoot him, and that it was, marginally, better to offer him money, though putting a bullet through his head, or other portions of his anatomy, might be doing the human race a favour. He would be given control of Tom's speculative money, with an absolute freedom to invest where and how he would, and the major firms, Roberts and Star Spinners, would be made into joint-stock companies, ninety-five per cent held by Tom and Joseph respectively, five per cent of each in Clapperley's name, 'in recognition of his loyal service to them'.

Clapperley, easily sufficiently astute to recognise their motivation, showed admirable gravity and gratitude as he accepted their gift, worth ten thousands at the moment and up to five times that when conditions returned to normal. Fifty thousands, an income of two thousands a year, irrespective of his other activities, was a genteel fortune, more than many of the County lived on; it was too much to jeopardise and would keep him honest, as far as Andrews and Star were concerned; he laughed to himself as he came to his conclusions, candid enough – in the privacy of his own thoughts – to know that he was a villain, and not caring in the slightest. He would take a wife, he decided, buy a large house and settle down to father an heir and become respectable; it would mean frequent congress with a female somewhat older than his tastes habitually ran to, but he felt he could make the sacrifice – a few years and he could become a member and then either very wealthy or politically powerful – which amounted to the same thing.

The little house, which Tom had bought back from Mary in exchange for her larger premises in Corfe, and its occupant provided a temporary problem, but one Mrs Morris solved, able to find another gentleman who needed discreet accommodation and could pay for it and would keep Mrs Johnson and Martha in their places – Tom felt he owed them that much.

Tom spent several hours in conferences with Martin, begging his advice, and listening to it. Martin, like many other country bankers, had been born to the County, fourth son, sharing only the tiniest inheritance and obliged to take up a profession. His eldest brother had inherited father's three thousand a year; the next had become a midshipman and was now a retired Rear-Admiral, without squadron, a 'yellow' admiral living on half-pay and memories; the third had become a soldier in a very unfashionable regiment of the line, all the family could afford, and had gone to America and never come back – he had taken up, somehow, a large tract of land in Virginia, a woman involved, they understood, and had changed allegiances early in the War – he was never mentioned; Martin himself, cleverest of the boys, had been bought a place in the bank of a relative, a cousin of sorts, where he had learned the business and married the daughter to keep it in the family, there being no son, in the fullness of time becoming the Martin of Martin's Bank. He was an authority on the *mores* and ways of the County, Tom's sole reference to that unknown class; it was necessary to the running of the estate that Tom should fit in and although he had no particular desire to rub shoulders with the lesser gentry he would have to keep on terms with them, their terms.

He must have a man, Martin said, a gentleman's gentleman, a valet, a personal servant who would ensure that he was dressed correctly, because looking like a gentleman was often more important than acting like one. His valet, Martin warned him, would be a bully and an intrusive,

interfering nuisance, but he would prevent him from making a fool of himself – there was nothing the shabby genteel loved more than mocking the gaucheries of the newly rich. The old landed gentry still possessed the political power that could make a newcomer's life uncomfortable – they were the magistrates, their sons the lawyers and bankers and churchmen, and between them they could be a thorough nuisance – ostracising him socially, cold-shouldering him economically. If Tom wanted to straighten the course of a waterway, to build a new road or canal, to shift a public right-of-way, then he had to have the goodwill of his neighbours, and that meant that he must become part of their community. His valet was a vital part of this process of assimilation, so he should be chosen carefully – a man of much the same age as Tom, so as to have a good thirty years of service in him, knowledgeable in his trade and willing to spend most of his life in the country, for Tom would not really expect to grace fashionable London with his presence. With Tom's permission, Martin would see to the process of hiring this paragon – not easy, but it could be done.

Brown had appeared in December – short, slightly built, silent on his feet, dressed in unobtrusive blacks, he had a slight lisp, faded blue eyes and thinning fair hair, though barely Tom's age, and some slightly effeminate mannerisms. He had been the victim of the local bullies all through his childhood and had been forced out of his village and into service as an indoor manservant at the earliest possible age – he could not have survived on a farm, country folk were vicious to those who did not fit in, who were in any way ambivalent. He had become footman in a larger house and then servant to an elderly member of the family living on the fringes of fashionable life, still remembering his past glories and dressing the part; he had learned the trade with him for three years and had left the family on the old gentleman's death. Now he preferred to take service with a master who would live a country life – in Town a valet was not insignificant, but he was one of many while out on an estate he was the Master's man, his confidant and worthy of respect from the tenantry, recognised and saluted by all. A country dweller of good lineage was his desired employer and Mr Andrews was one half of that, and by the time Brown had finished with him he would pass as a gentleman as well.

Brown surveyed his new master and was not displeased with what he saw – he could make something of him. He was tall, topped six feet, a hand bigger than the average, which was always useful, particularly as he carried himself well, head high; strongly built, but not fat, yet – he would be, of course, in middle-age, but that was unavoidable – fourteen stone at a guess and broad on chest and shoulders, narrower at the hips, a good shape for a competent tailor to work on – he would have to be dressed plainly, severe, military in cut, being so big – Scott would be the man to take his measurements, he dressed all of the soldiers – they must go to London immediately because that frockcoat the master was wearing must never be seen by any discerning eye, it lacked only hayseeds! A pity about the scar across his face, but it added some slight distinction, he would be remembered by all who met him, and they would assume a military background; the hands, big, red and coarsened by work, would have to be covered by gloves whenever possible – a gentleman never performed any manual labour so his hands were pale and delicate, the nails perfect ovals – still, one could not have everything,

"I believe, thir, that you will wish to purchase a wardrobe, thir, from new? In London, of courth."

"I have been informed that I must follow your advice in this, Brown, so I will do so. How do we go? Canal boat, mail coach, post chaise?"

Brown permitted himself a smile – the master had a sense of humour and was not averse to showing it to his servant. The Accommodation Boats on the canals were in fact a very fast means of travel, but indiscriminate in their clientele, never used by the gentry, their single large cabin as likely to contain pigs and geese for market as people and invariably full of snotty-nosed, wailing infants. The Mail was uncomfortable with its rushed meals and halts for the convenience of the driver and no one else. Post chaise and four was the only possible means of travel for the rich, and sufficiently expensive to announce their wealth for them – the best rooms at the inns, good meals for the master and better for the man who would actually choose which hostelries to patronise on future journeys.

"I will ask Mr Martin to write to his correspondent in Town to book a hotel thuite for uth for next week, thir – the Clarendon, I expect – it makes one'th standing clear to the tradesmen if they are directed to make deliveries to your thuite there."

Tom had never heard of the Clarendon, or any other hotel in London, was happy to do as he was bid.

"Do you dance, thir?"

"I have never had occasion to do so, Brown. Must I?"

"Yeth!

"Then I shall learn. How?"

A dancing master was engaged and an elocutionist to remove the few lingering traces of a Dorset burr, to eliminate the odd Americanism and banish the very faint tinge of Lancashire that had crept upon Tom; it was imperative for the genteel and loyal to adopt the new Hanoverian accent that had developed in the past half-century. The old English was still to be heard, but it signified often a Jacobite hankering in its user, was viewed with distrust and must be avoided by newcomers to the ranks of the County.

"Can you shoot, thir?"

"With a pistol, very well. With a long gun, very poorly. Do you wish me to buy duelling pistols?"

"No, thir – not unleth they become needed. What of riding to houndth, thir?"

"I do not intend to – I am not that good a horseman, would only show myself up. The scar on my face will suffice there, Brown – you may let it be known that other wounds make me a weak rider."

"Very wise, thir, I do, very much, approve. I must know, thir, ath your valet, have you other woundth?"

"Not really – a slash across the chest that was little more than a surface cut, less severe than the one to my face."

"Good, it will make my job thimpler, thir, if there ith nothing to cover up. You are to be correctly turned out at all timeth - you may theem conventional and stuffy, even – but that ith better than being rudely improper. You are a big man, thir, tho will dreth plainly – no jewellery other than a pin in the tie-cravat, and that not big. Black and white indoorth, brown and russet out, dull but neat and tidy and very clean and exact. To be blunt, thir, the County will visit you once, out of duty; if they detect vulgarity, they will not return. It ith up to you to fit in, thir. The butler will be of great help here, if he ith awake to hith trade he will know every gentleman within convenient travel of the house and will be able to advise me of their nature."

“And you will then forewarn me, Brown? So be it! Don’t hesitate to tell me when I am making a mistake, Brown – I may not love you for it, but you will not suffer for doing your proper job.”

Tom did not enjoy London, it was a dirty, smelly, cold, wet unwelcoming town, its streets full of whores and pickpockets, its shops crammed full with goods he did not want, its people with a vast and totally unjustified good opinion of themselves; it claimed to be at the heart of civilisation – the same could have been said for Babylon.

The cooking at his hotel was very good, the wines were outstanding, but he had better things to do with his days than spend them guzzling and gutsing at table. The tailor was civil and condescending, and made it clear that he would rather serve the gentry than mere businessmen, but he took Tom’s money although seeming to suggest that Mr Andrews was honoured to give it to him. The boot maker was much the same as he carved a pair of lasts to Tom’s feet and pledged himself to deliver boots, slippers, pumps and half-boots at soonest; haberdasher and hatter sniffed as they sold their best and took their cash – all of them sad little crawlers who did not realise just how weakly contemptible they were, natural born slaves allowed the illusion of freedom and making shackles for themselves. Tom found he had little love for the weaklings of the world, not having mixed with them sufficiently before to realise the fact.

They had to stay at least two weeks in the Metropolis to allow the tailor time to make his deliveries; at Brown’s orders Tom was dressed in his first outdoor clothes and sent to walk in Bond Street and observe the gentlemen on the strut there, particularly to note the smart saunter, so different to his own businesslike march; he would need to cultivate such refinement. He found himself outside Manton’s Shooting Gallery as it came on to rain, ventured inside to see cases of the best-made pistols in the world, discovered that he could have pistols created to his own hand and specification. He wanted a good pair of pistols – not for any particular purpose but because he liked them and enjoyed the practice. The boy at the counter passed him onto his employer, one of the Manton brothers who personally supervised the construction of any specially ordered hand-guns.

“If I may presume, sir, you would seem to have had military experience?”

“A little, Mr Manton, a few years at sea, but they have left their mark on me. I left the sea at the end of the last war and have worked in iron and steel in St Helens since. My name is Andrews.”

Only a few works made steel and it was reasonable to assume that a gunsmith would know them.

“Proprietor of Roberts, I believe, Mr Andrews?”

“I am, Mr Manton, and flattered to be known as such.”

“Your name is known in London, sir – I believe, in fact, that you were mentioned to me recently as a depositor with the famous Martin’s Bank?”

“You hear everything, it would seem, Mr Manton.”

“My clientele includes probably the most distinguished gentlemen in the City, Mr Andrews – not merely the aristocracy – most matters of interest are discussed here at one time or another. I believe this to be your first visit to London, sir – are you expanding your business interests here?”

"No, Mr Manton – my man has dragged me to a tailor – mere provincial cut will no longer suffice he informs me. I am moving out of the world of manufacturing to a great extent, am in process of purchasing an estate near Kettering."

"A wise move in many ways, Mr Andrews – land is cheaper at the moment than for many years and the war is closing European sources of wheat and barley to our traders. I believe that in recent years nearly one half of all the corn eaten in England came from the Germanies, but that can no longer be so."

"So wheat prices must rise, Mr Manton. It will be possible to buy from the States, I believe, but it will be some years before they grow sufficient for all our needs."

"I know that some wheat is being bought from the Black Sea, sir, but not a lot as yet and the Mediterranean is not a safe ocean for our traders. I have a pair of very heavy pistols here, Mr Andrews, ten gauge, the ball one and three fifths ounces. Would you care to try them out on my little range?"

Tom smiled quietly – Manton was obviously making sure he could handle a heavy pistol before manufacturing a pair for him – he would not want complaints that his customer could not hit a target with his pair. They stood quietly near the firing point, waiting for two gentlemen to finish practising with light duelling pieces, shooting against each other on a small bet. Tom stepped forward, loaded and primed his pair.

"On range, Mr Andrews," Manton called, giving him the clear to fire and in passing informing the other two who he was. They glanced superciliously at the heavy, bulky pistols Tom was carrying, waited to see if he could hit the back wall with them.

There were targets the size of playing cards at seven yards; Tom hit left and right from the hip, put the pistols down.

"At twenty, perhaps, Mr Manton?"

Two more wafers were set up at the end of the range and Tom reloaded and brought the pistols to shoulder height before firing this time, right hand then left, hitting both squarely.

"Many years of practice, Mr Andrews?"

"Inborn, Mr Manton – I could do this the day I first touched a hand-gun – how, I do not know. I would add, sir, that I am a hopeless shot with any sort of long gun – was I to go out for pheasants I would be better advised to sneak up upon them and club them with the butt!"

One of the watching men smiled ruefully at that, commented that he had been about to beg the honour of being taught the knack.

"I would do so happily, if I could, sir – but I do not know what it is – I see the target, whatever it may be, and the pistol puts itself upon it. All I can say is that I watch the target, not the pistol, and I rather doubt that that helps in the slightest!"

"A pity, Mr Andrews, is it? My name is Ebchester."

Manton, a pace back, mouthed, 'viscount'.

"I am honoured, my Lord," Tom bowed as Brown had taught him, took the hand offered him.

"Mr Andrews, Mr Cooper," Ebchester said, turning to his companion.

They talked idly for a few minutes and then parted in friendly fashion.

"Chatterboxes, Mr Andrews, fashionable young men with no occupation, they come in here a couple of times each week. They will tell others of their circle of meeting you, will name you as a particularly great shot and an acquaintance. It will do you no harm at all to have your name mentioned amongst their friends."

Manton called one of his boys to come with a pair of soft beech blocks and a sharp knife, trimmed them precisely to Tom's hands, shaping them so that the pistol barrel would naturally follow the line of Tom's forefinger; they would be kept for reference, the mahogany or teak or walnut grips being copied precisely from them.

"A single, rifled, eight inch barrel in ten gauge, Mr Andrews? Three days to produce, for my boys keep themselves busy producing blanks for stock, though only a very few in ten gauge, and my spring maker produces a half dozen a day for the locks. All I have to do is supervise the assembly and truing of the pieces. Can you come in on Friday to test fire them, sir? I will take them to the Proof House in advance but it is best if we make sure they fit exactly to your hand. Will you wish to purchase fowling pieces as well, sir? No great point to building them for you, as you are no shot with a long gun, but guests are often pleased to be lent a Manton."

It was April before Tom finally reached his new home, the lawyers having created repeated delays, mainly relating to the incomplete enclosure, it being difficult to write a contract of sale on land whose boundaries were as yet only partially defined.

The winter had been put to good use – it was naturally a slower time for building and the demand for roof trusses and pillars would always be slacker; this year there was virtually no demand at all, so Roberts was effectively shut down. Rather than dismiss his skilled, loyal hands, Tom rebuilt the furnaces and their sheds, modernising and tidying the rather haphazard collection of buildings that had grown up. The trackway was lifted and its bed was levelled and straightened and realigned and new tubs were constructed. The quarry was surveyed and cleaned up and a stockpile of worked ironstone was built up behind the furnaces. The new steam engines were installed, two of them in the second works, and Frederick Mason persuaded Tom to buy one of the new steam lathes, a great, slow monster that could bore out the barrel of a fortress gun or a piston to tolerances measured in tenths of an inch; they gained immediate orders for cannon, there being few of the lathes and a shortage of great guns of thirty two pounds or more. The navy in particular would snap up every nine foot barrel thirty-two pound chase cannon they could make – they were valuable guns that foreigners had none of. Joseph also took avail of the winter of the Depression, closing three of the mills he had bought, equipping two of them with 'mules' rather than frames to make finer grade threads and expanding the third to make better use of the strong-flowing river it stood on; he simply sacked all of their workers – they were only women and could be replaced on the instant when he opened again.

The post-chaise came at first light and Tom left his old house with barely a pang, his few farewells said, his baggage sent ahead on a wagon; it had never really been a home to him, just a place to eat and sleep in between doing better things. It was a two day journey, the long first haul taking them to Birmingham then seven hours to Kettering and the hotel, a conference in the afternoon with Mr Telford, Martin's correspondent, Thingdon Hall early next morning.

Telford confirmed that all was in hand, payments received and made and Rockingham long gone.

"Wells-next-the-sea, sir, in Norfolk, a very small town and port, sea-fishing and country walks to keep a retired gentleman occupied, sir. I expect he will buy his own boat to amuse himself in the summer months, very popular, yachting, sir."

"Has he connections there, Mr Telford?"

"Why, no, sir, but his lawyer and I felt that he would be more comfortable there, where there was none to know of his fall. Besides, sir, I felt the sea air might be good for him."

He would embarrass none of them at a distance – much better for him to be well out of the way.

"Thank you, Mr Telford. I am obliged to you, sir."

Rockingham had been a great man in the area and now was nothing. He had lost his power and was now as one dead and buried, to be referred to rarely and in a hushed voice – he was in fact less than nothing. It was a good lesson to remember, Tom realised – they lived in a pragmatic world, one that responded to today's reality not to yesterday's illusions of glory – the treatment meted out to their poor, mad king reflected this.

Telford agreed when he commented that 'the king was dead; long live the king'.

"Exactly, sir. The Thingdon Estate survives and awaits its new master and has few memories of the old, other than people he has left behind him. All debts have been cleared, sir, as far as possible; the Jews are satisfied – have sent a polite message thanking you for the speed of your payment, very welcome in these troubled times; the lawyers have been silenced, their mouths gagged by great gobbets of gold. There will be some debts outstanding, however – some of them simply overlooked, oddments here and there, five and ten pounds to this tradesman or that, insignificant to us but important to them. A few accounts will exist but will not have been presented – tenant farmers who have sold a load of brewing barley to the kitchens, or a beef cow or a dozen geese and will tend to be shy of dunning the master, not unreasonably. They must be sought out."

"Will not the bailiff have knowledge of all of these, Mr Telford?"

"He *should* have, certainly, Mr Andrews."

Tom made a mental note that there was a problem with the bailiff.

"There will certainly be some accounts presented by opportunist gentlemen, hoping to make a profit from your ignorance and good will – in the first few days you might be tempted to pay a dubious bill rather than possibly cause offence by querying it. Accounts 'for services rendered' – these more likely to be presented by young women; gaming debts; a horse which Mr Rockingham had pledged himself to buy and which had been kept back for him. Some will be legitimate, most will not be – head groom, agent, bailiff and secretary should know between them."

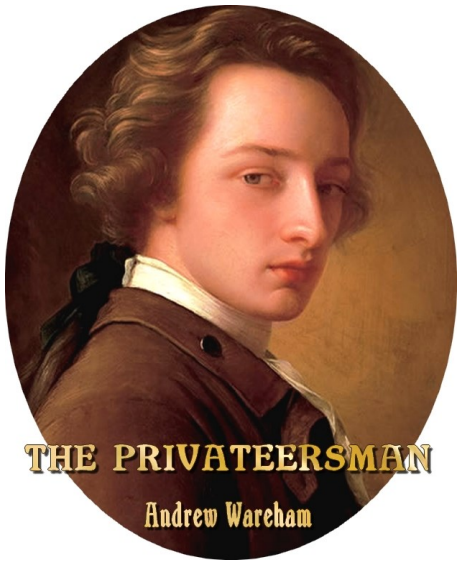
Rockingham had kept ducal state, it would seem, all it needed besides was chancellor and chaplain.

"Was Mr Rockingham a public man? Did he perhaps serve the Lord Lieutenant in some function or was he expecting to become a member?"

"No, no and highly unlikely, sir."

Then why such a plethora of staff? Had the poor man suffered from delusions of grandeur?

Tom left the interview with Telford slightly more puzzled than he had arrived, but quite determined to get to the roots of whatever silliness was to be found at the Hall, and extract them; he had a memory of visiting the dentist a couple of years before – this operation might well be equally painful - but not to him.



Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series

Chapter Nine

South on the Bedford road out of Kettering, onto a wooded spur of the ironstone ridge and looking out across a shallow river valley to the low hills typical of Northamptonshire – an undramatic, understated landscape, wholly undistinguished but not unpleasant – not very much at all, really, when compared with Lancashire, and the Pennines to the east and the Welsh mountains looming in the west. The large village of Burton could be seen as rooftops and chimneys a couple of miles to the south-west; Finedon was due south but not visible over the hill; Irthlingborough, a larger iron town on the River Nene, a couple of miles further south again. A few old brownstone farmhouses and barns dating from the Elizabethan enclosures were set below the crests of the hills, sheltered from wind and rain and scattered thinly over the arc of six or seven miles before them; there were patches of woodland in the bottoms, but mostly the land was down to the plough, dun and empty at this time of year, a week or two before the seedlings of barley and wheat started to green the fields. There were a few sheep on the very tops of the hills, an ironstone quarry directly to their east, but it seemed essentially to be an empty, impoverished land, particularly to eyes that had become accustomed to the bustling industrial landscape of Lancashire where every road and lane had its wagons, every stream a mill, most hillsides a pithead – this was old, agricultural England. It reminded Tom of the countryside behind Bridport where he had grown up and intended never to return – it was *not* nostalgia that he felt.

"Our land, Brown."

"Tho I understand, thir. It will be rich, one day, or could be, thir, properly used."

"So I have been told." Tom was not wholly convinced, began to wonder if he had been sold a pup. "The house, Mr Telford informs me, is on the road between Finedon and Thrapston, to be reached by a newly planted avenue."

No avenue of any sort was visible from where they were and the post-boys clicked up the horses and set off down to Burton and then over the hill to Finedon. The road was unmade, a pair of shallow ditches and a grass verge on either side of a strip of mud just wide enough for two farm carts to squeeze past each other, the deepest of ruts and potholes showing evidence that baskets of broken stones were occasionally thrown in as a crude attempt at road-mending. They bumped and rattled at walking speed, the boys not daring to risk the horses' legs at any faster pace; at the crossroads outside Finedon they turned left onto an even muddier track, no more than a pair of ruts – a young gentleman they assumed to be the village idiot assured them, when they eventually understood what he was saying, that they were on the Thrapston road and that the big house was 'down there quite close'.

"There, thir, the avenue, or tho I presume."

Brown pointed to a double row of beeches set in pairs at fifty feet apart and at intervals of fifty or sixty paces – they would be impressive, marching across the skyline and pointing the way, one day, but at the moment were no more than three feet high.

"My word, Brown, in thirty years time, both of us in our dotage, we can be carried out here to sit in the shade of these magnificent monuments to our glory!"

"Quite probably, thir, though unless I am much mistaken, a number of them theem to be less than wholly healthy, will be at best stunted in their tribute."

Tom grinned – Brown had a sardonic, grudging wit which he was prepared to exercise occasionally, not too often, being much concerned with maintaining the bounds of propriety, but sufficiently to be worth listening to.

They crossed onto the gravel drive between the trees, picked up a little speed, the surface being vastly superior to the road, travelled nearly half a mile along the shallow slope, turned across the shoulder of the hill and saw the house.

Thingdon Hall was sheltered on three sides by the low hills, was surrounded by formal gardens rather than a park, three or four acres laid out in square and circular beds with gravelled paths in between, a man and three boys busily weeding and planting, not a leaf out of place. They looked across to the open side, saw that in fact it merely gave the prospect of another hillside, slightly further distant. The house was immaculate – freshly painted, washed, scrubbed and polished as appropriate, deeply, frequently cleaned, not just given a mere lick and a polish for the occasion.

"Did you notice just how many servants there are, Brown?"

"I did not think to check, thir, but I doubt there is a girl unemployed in all the village, thir."

The post boys brought the chaise round in a slow half circle onto the broad sweep of paving stones outside the front doors, enabling Tom to appreciate exactly what he was master of. The house was about two centuries old, in the Elizabethan style, unusually perfect, unchanged since first it was built; the central block and pair of wings were made of the local deep tan ironstone rather than the more normal red brick of the time, but the tiled roof and tall, twisted chimneys were as expected. It had three floors, two with tall windows, the third servants' attics with tiny dormers. The double front doors were old slabs of oak, almost black against the gleaming white of the two steps below them. A quick count gave six big sets of windows on either side of the

doors and four to each wing, their glass shining brightly, a faint smell of vinegar disclosing that they had been polished that morning.

"How many bedrooms did Mr Martin say?"

"Twenty-four, thir, thix with dressing roomth – a middling thort of house for an estate of thith thize – one might expect larger, a wing or two added in the last one hundred yearth."

"The family has not been rich for generations, I believe. I shall of course, add several wings – when the occasion arises, when I am made duke, say."

Brown permitted himself a small chuckle – it was not, as the master clearly perceived, a very likely event.

The doors were flung wide exactly as the chaise came to a halt and a very visible, officious, loud, formally dressed individual supervised the butler and two footmen as they let the steps down and handed the new master out. Two more men in frockcoats stood at the door with at least eight servants lining the hall behind each of them.

The butler was correctly dressed in black and white, pantaloons, waistcoat over shirt and neat tie-cravat, exactly as one might expect, but the footmen wore powdered wigs and dressed in knee breeches and silk stockings, formal frills above them, more suited to the Court of St James than a minor country house; the maids were in black dresses with white aprons, normal enough but making clear that they were all upstairs staff, that there must be more in the kitchens as well as the men in the stables. With the gardeners that made upwards of thirty servants, which was ridiculous for a house of this size - small wonder that Rockingham had found himself in debt.

"My name is Smythe, sir. I am Agent for the Thingdon estate."

Smythe was of middle height, a head shorter than Tom and seemed to resent that he had to look up at him, his lips pursed in temper; he was plump, soft, white-handed, clearly rarely stirred from his office desk – he was too important a man to dirty himself with toil, it seemed.

Tom nodded, unimpressed by the man's bearing and attitude – there was a superior sneer very poorly hidden.

"Bailiff and Secretary," Smythe waved a hand to the pair, who bowed deeply, obviously well coached; he made no attempt to name them and ignored the butler entirely.

The secretary was a well-fed gentleman of thirty or so, smiling obsequiously as he caught his eye; the bailiff, somewhat younger, was lean, harsh-looking, ill-at-ease, uncomfortable in the company he was keeping.

Smythe was taken aback, almost offended, when Tom stopped by the butler's side.

"You, of course, must be my butler?"

"Yes, sir. Morton, sir."

"A relic of the past, Mr Andrews – Morton used to be in the service of the Quiller family and Mr Rockingham retained his services although I strongly recommended that we find a man of greater experience of the social demands of a big house."

Smythe looked hopeful, as if he wished Tom to immediately rectify his predecessor's error.

"Thank you, Smythe. I am sure Morton will have much to tell me of this house and of local customs. Brown, here, is my man, Morton – please to see to his comfort."

The allocation of rooms in the quarters was an obvious duty of the butler, especially in the apparent absence of a female manager; Morton was quite sure that he was being asked to talk openly to Brown – he would be happy to do so.

"No housekeeper, Smythe? I would have thought that with such a plethora of staff one would have been appointed."

"She died a few months ago, sir, soon after Mr Rockingham encountered his difficulties; some sort of woman's illness, a thorough nuisance. It was no time to hire new staff, sir, especially when there were more difficulties at Quarter Day last."

Tom noted the absolute lack of concern for the poor woman's fate.

"Have all staff been paid their dues, Smythe?"

"Yes, sir – Mr Telford, the banker, advanced the monies in your name, stating that he believed it to be your wish."

"It was."

"Cook has been performing such of the housekeeper's duties as she can, sir. She, of course, could not leave her kitchens to greet you, sir."

That was nonsense – it was a poor cook who was tied below stairs because she could not trust her underlings, and if she had had time to act as housekeeper then she could certainly find a few minutes to come upstairs.

"Did cook serve the Quiller family, Smythe?"

"Yes, sir."

Tom walked inside, smiled at the maids, the youngest nearly fainting as the twisted grin leered at her and making up her mind to go home to mum at Quarter Day – better no place than working for a scar-faced ogre!

"There will be cold meats in the small dining-room, sir, a refreshment after your journey." Smythe knew he had only come from Kettering that morning. "The head gamekeeper will wait upon you at two o'clock, sir."

Smythe seemed ready to withdraw from the presence, satisfied that he had made his point to the master, made it quite clear that he was here to amuse himself, to play at being a gentleman, and should keep out of the way of the people who did the work; he stopped, eyebrow raised, as Tom lifted a hand.

"Have you arranged for the bailiff to be made available to me, Smythe? I would expect to see him today, to start the process of familiarising myself with my responsibilities."

"Our procedure, sir, is for the bailiff to take his instructions from me; I will present you with the quarterly accounts, sir."

"*My* practise, Smythe, is to become immediately and fully acquainted with the properties that *I* own and *I* run. My managers obey *my* instructions, sir. What is the function of the secretary? What may I expect from him?"

"Mr Daniel assists me with the multifarious tasks that fall to my lot, sir."

"Does he, now! I will see the bailiff in the estate offices at half past two, exactly. You and Daniel will be present. I shall expect a very full explanation of the sights that have come to my eyes this morning, Smythe. The footmen, for a start – get them out of fancy dress and into sensible working clothes and give them to Morton to be made use of. Send cook to me now, in the small dining-room. What is the bailiff's name, by the way?"

"Quillerson, sir!" With an air of sniggering triumph Smythe explained that the young man had grown up on the estate, knew it thoroughly, had been kept on by Rockingham as an agreement of the purchase. "He knows everything and everybody, sir, almost as if he were one of the Quiller family, hee, hee, hee!"

Cook came upstairs, fortyish, scrawny, five feet tall and weighing six stone, with neatly tied back light brown hair, just visible under her white cap. Tom estimated; he wondered if she ate her own cooking.

"Williams, sir. I bin in the kitchen 'ere nigh on thirty year, sir. Started as scullery maid, sir – skivvy, that is – learned off the old cook what was. I bin doin' the 'ousekeepin' this six month, best I can like, but it ain't my trade, sir. Being as 'ow I was never an upstairs, like, I don't know what's what up there, nor I don't know what should be spent. You did ought to get a proper 'ousekeeper, sir, one as can tot up the bills and keep an eye to the accounts, what I can't for never 'avin' got me readin', sir."

A housekeeper who could not oversee expenditure – very useful to a peculating steward but hopeless in the job. Smythe had been a little too obvious in this piece of work!

"That is very good of you, cook – a very honest story. You will not lose any money by it, I promise you."

"Can't nohow, master, seein' as I didn't get none extra for doin' it."

"You will, Mrs Williams, next Quarter Day, my word on it. What's for dinner tonight?"

"Goose, sir, and roastie taters and spring greens and parsmit; pea and 'am soup. I didn't know what you fancies in the way of sweet stuff, so I'm just puttin' up meringues wi' cream and they old macaroons – old Mr Rockingham did love they almond things."

"It sounds very good, Mrs Williams."

"I does what I can, but it ain't easy eatin' proper 'ereabouts. Fish be the problem – if you gets sea-fish, well, they's goin' to be two day old, at least, afore they gets 'ere, and I ain't 'avin' that in my kitchen, sir – like as not you eats they and you ends up shittin' through the eye of a needle!"

Tom had not heard that expression before, exploded with laughter.

"Quite, Mrs Williams – not what we want!"

"Noways it ain't, sir. So it be perch and carp and pike and trout in season, and a feed of crays when us can get 'em, and eels from the pond, but it ain't the way it oughter be, not like what I was told when I were learnin'."

"You must just do the best you can, Mrs Williams – there is simply no way to eat proper fish here."

"Right, sir, that's what I always did say. Anything you particularly likes, sir, you just pass the word to that man of yours and I'll see to it. Cakes and tarts and puddin' and that sort of thing, sir."

She left, Tom feeling that he might well have gained an ally – there was nothing he could do about her fish, though he would have liked to because she seemed genuinely upset that she could not do her job properly, in her own opinion, but it was the better part of seventy miles to the nearest fishing port, and that was two days at least, as she had said.

The head gamekeeper made his appearance, a man of forty or so, small and quiet in his ways, light on his feet, informed him that his name was Jackson and that he had no game to keep this year - he seemed depressed, downtrodden, without hope.

"Mr Rockingham, sir, 'e wanted cocks at walk and a driving shoot, like the gentry do, but 'e never got round to getting they old birds in, or paying for breeding coops and pens. There's me and three lads and bugger-all for us to do like, except for keeping the varmints down."

"Get rid of the lads, Jackson – I shall not be shooting pheasants."

"Don't make bugger-all sense to do it 'ere, sir, not on this land. You shoots pheasants on rough ground, moors and waste and that, not on good wheat land."

"Right! What can you do that will be useful, Jackson?"

Jackson looked more hopeful, the air of gloom leaving him as he was consulted rather than given silly orders.

"Keep the rabbits down, sir. Mind the 'edges and keep the trees up what Mr Rockingham planted and left to get on wi' it. No idea, that man, none at all, sir! There's a few deer what wanders wild, sir, and they might as well be looked after. Be you much for fishing, sir?"

"Not at all, Jackson – I had enough of that as a boy!"

"Good – there be a family of otters what I ought to 'ave shot but didn't like to. They can stay – they'll eat a few fish, sir, but not many. I can keep the river clean of weed and flowing free."

"Right, keep yourself busy and useful, come direct to me if you need to spend money." Tom hesitated, added, "I've never seen an otter that I can remember."

"I'll take thee down to see 'em play of a morning, when the young is out, end of next month, sir."

"I'll look forward to that, Jackson. Thank you!"

Another man who would talk, could pass on the information he would need; he hoped he was better than the last Jackson he had come across.

Smythe collected Tom at twenty past two and led him to the estate offices, quickly showing the various rooms they passed on their way through the house, commenting very condescendingly that it was, no doubt, larger than he was used to but the country was somewhat more civilised than one might look for in coal mines and such - he would soon get to know his way round. He entered the office, oak furnished, west-facing at the back of the house, nearly twenty feet square, two walls shelved from floor to ceiling and full of leather bound folders, some obviously dating back to the earliest days of the house.

"Estate records, sir, all written down – very useful when it came to the enclosure, of course."

"Ah, yes – claims of ancient use for manorial rights which translate into grants of land at enclosure – I understand that all contracts in real estate must be written and therefore any claim at enclosure must have written evidence to back it. Most Commoners are illiterate, I am told, and rely on oral tradition for their rights – which leaves them landless on enclosure."

Smythe did not look pleased to discover this degree of understanding in his new master. He took up a commanding position in the centre of the room, ushering Tom to the single easy chair in the corner.

"As agent for the Manor of Thingdon, Mr Andrews, I alone am responsible for the new enclosed lands and the old tenancies and Home Farm, assisted by the bailiff in the day-to-day routine, of course. I do not propose to bother you with unnecessary detail, sir, suffice it to say that we now total seven thousand two hundred and thirty acres, of which the new lands amount to some four thousands, to be let in five large farms to new tenants, all of whom have been selected."

"How?"

"In the normal way, sir – I have put many hours of work into finding the best and you may safely leave that in my hands. I decided after much thought that it would be better to have a few

large tenants rather than a dozen or so smaller – big farmers are better off, in the nature of things, and become a force for stability in the countryside."

"Mr Quillerson, as bailiff you will be in regular contact with the new tenants – are you happy with them?"

Tom was not prepared to be bullied into silence by Smythe and in any case had decided that he did not trust or like the man and was not going to work with him; better he should be encouraged to dig his own grave and as soon as possible.

"I know three of them to be good farmers, sir, but…"

Smythe overrode Quillerson's words, interrupting angrily.

"And I have told you not to interfere in things you don't understand, boy! Keep your mouth shut!"

Tom stood, stepped a pace forward, drawing himself up to his full height, bigger than Smythe and without his soft edge.

"I instructed Mr Quillerson to speak, Smythe. Any man obeying *my* orders on *my* estate is not interfering. Do I make myself clear?"

Smythe stared him in the eye, stayed silent.

"I asked if you understood me, Smythe."

"I am the agent. I run this estate!"

"Not any more! You are dismissed from your post with immediate effect and will leave these lands today. Hand your keys across to Quillerson. Where do you live?"

"In my rooms in this house – and I cannot be expected to clear them today, not so that some Papist bastard dropped by a village whore can move in!"

"It is three o'clock, Smythe, and you will be gone by five or I shall have you taken, forcibly, to the lock-up. Anything you leave behind will be parcelled up and delivered to you in Kettering; if you have no direction there you will find your chattels care of Mr Telford."

"You can't do it, you need me – the bastard can't read a set of accounts, or write them sensibly, and he doesn't know the half of the estate's business – and you know nothing of the land. A month and you will be at a stand, and it will be no good coming running to me for help!"

"I have *run* businesses twice as large as this, Smythe, and I can learn agriculture and I can read accounts. I will read yours, line-by-line, for the last five years, and if I find so much as a penny has strayed from the estate's funds into your pocket then I will see you stood before an Assize judge – and, Smythe, I shall beg him for mercy, so that you will not be hanged but will go for convict labour on the Gibraltar docks instead!"

Smythe was silent, white-faced suddenly – a hanging commonly involved fifteen minutes of slow strangulation while convicts on forced labour sometimes lasted for eighteen months of flogging and near-starvation before their almost equally inevitable death. If he was charged by a local landholder then any jury would find against him – they would all be tenants of the large estates or tradesmen from Kettering needing their business. He turned and left the room, almost running.

"Mr Quillerson, will you require the services of a secretary in your role of agent and bailiff?"

"No, sir, I believe Mr Smythe's cousin should leave with him."

"So he should. Have a pony and trap ready for five o'clock, please, and a man to take them both into Kettering. Ask Jackson to be present with a fowling piece, two or three men besides, in case we have need to haul either or both off to the lock-up instead."

Quillerson nodded happily, trotted off to the stables.

"Daniel! Your wages will be paid at June Quarter Day, in full, if you come and collect them, in person. Smythe's as well, on the same terms. You may tell your cousin that it will take me two weeks to check the accounts."

If Smythe had any sense he would disappear within the day – a change of name and a move of fifty miles and he would never be traced other than by the worst of bad luck, and a trial would not be a good start to Tom's residence in the area.

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

Quillerson returned, confirmed all would be ready.

"Can you handle the work as agent and bailiff, Quillerson? It will, obviously, involve you in creating and checking all of the accounts for the estate and the house, as well as keeping all of the other records."

"I was educated at the grammar school in Kettering until I was eighteen, sir. I can keep a set of accounts clearly and honestly, and I know more about the new agriculture than he did. The only question, sir, is whether you want a Papist bastard on your land."

Tom thought quickly – he liked the look of the man and it sounded as if he might be a loner, a man with few friends and hence no favourites or allies, liable to give good, unbiased service.

"'Papist' is your choice – you might wish to deal with that, it is your business, none of mine, though it will, I suspect, give troublemakers a handle, a way of attacking you. 'Bastard' is none of your seeking and I would not let it worry you – it does not concern me. What of these new tenancies?"

"Five blocks of land, sir, almost equal in size, most of the Great Field, the old Common and waste, including some boggy bottom land, all to the south and west sides of the manor. The drier lands on the east and north were enclosed in Elizabethan times, when the house was built, for sheepwalks and the Home Farm. Eakins, Bass and Briggs are local men who had a few acres and a bit of spare cash from working the iron and leather and have saved up enough to take on a large tenancy. I know of them and their families, from years back – all three understand the new way of doing things. Briggs has the River Farm and we will be spending some money there on his drainage – the landlord's responsibility in the first instance. Mudge is a southcountryman, he inherited a small acreage from his father and sold it to the local lord – it rounded out his estate nicely, I believe, and he paid over the odds for it – and has the funds to be a very successful farmer; he has some of the best land, close to the village and the road; the only problem is that I know nothing of him, have met him once only, am not even certain I would recognise his face."

"Common name in Hampshire and Dorset, Mudge."

"I did not know that, sir – he comes from Hampshire, in fact, near a town called Wickham."

"Don't know it."

"Nor me, sir."

"Keep an eye on him, make sure he behaves himself; not a lot we can do for the next seven years, is there?"

"Very little, sir – he must keep his tenancy for the whole of the first lease unless waste can be proved against him, and he would expect at least another seven – his first years will involve him in considerable expense starting up."

"So be it. What of your fifth man?"

"Barney. The word is that he is a horse thief, sir. He had a small acreage and bred riding horses – nothing out of the ordinary, cobs was all, cocktails not pure-bloods but very reliable horses – we have a couple of his in our stables. The thing is, sir, that his mares must have thrown an awful lot of foals to account for the number of beasts he took to market. He has said that his grandmother was Romany - his wife is said to be as well, and that his uncles and cousins and his wife's people regularly sell young stock to him, which is not impossible, and there has never been any direct accusation made, even so…"

"He must have the benefit of the doubt, Mr Quillerson – we cannot condemn the man on the basis of rumour and supposition. Will he continue his trade on his new farm?"

Tom could not start out by breaking a man on rumour alone – he had to be seen to be fair and above board in all of his dealings or he would never be accepted by his people.

"He has been given the bulk of the waste, sir, which will mostly turn to pasture land rather than arable – the better part of three hundred acres of it, at his request. I believe he will wish to run horses there."

"Then, again, you must watch him, Mr Quillerson, and let him be well aware that he must be honest and above-board in all his dealings – Smythe is to set no precedent here! We must bring all five together, I think, and talk with them; they must meet me, and they must discover your new status."

"As well, sir, we would wish to discover whether my suspicions are correct – I believe they were forced to pay a 'premium on entry' to Smythe – fifty or so guineas cash which will have gone into his pocket. Entry fees are not uncommon, sir, when leasing houses, but are less so when it is a matter of land. They may also have been expected to drop another ten or twenty at each Quarter Day when they paid their rent."

"If they have then it will be repaid, immediately, with an apology, and it will be made clear to them that there will be no extras demanded in future."

"That last goes without saying, sir!"

"I thought it did – that's why I offered you the job! What is your current wage?"

"Fifty pounds, sir, and free quarters in what was used to be a groom's cottage."

"Are you married?"

"No, sir."

"If you wed you will shift into a larger, more appropriate house, equally free, of course. As a single man you will probably prefer to stay in a small place. Your wage will be one hundred and fifty per annum, to be revised each year in the light of your performance of your duties. Any increase in long term profitability and value of the estate will be to your benefit; short-run profiteering will not be."

Quillerson's face brightened, life suddenly seemed much more attractive to him.

"Understood, sir! The Home Farm, sir - which is very large, due to Mr Rockingham having a number of plans for it and adding to its acreage at the enclosure – is overdue for modernisation; I would wish it to become a Model."

"Which means what, sir? I have been told, and you have already mentioned it, that there is a 'new agriculture'. Explain it to me, preferably briefly in the first instance."

"It will take some little time to understand, sir, and you might be well advised to read some of the many books and pamphlets available on the subject, if you will excuse me for making such a suggestion, sir, I am not attempting to…"

Quillerson suddenly seemed apprehensive again, life not such a wonderful thing any more, his mistake quite likely to be terminal – one should not rub the nose of the uneducated in their inadequacy, or so he understood, they were not puppies, after all.

"I am literate, Mr Quillerson, despite the tales you may have heard of the barbarian manufacturers who have come to infest our country!"

Quillerson sighed in relief; this man was no overweening, self-made bully.

"Yes, sir. As I was saying before, ah… my enthusiasm led me astray, sir, modern practice in agriculture is really all about selling the farm's produce rather than eating it oneself. Working to the market, in fact. To do that one must specialise – you have read Adam Smith, sir? Pins?"

"No – I have been more concerned to *do* rather than to study – I suspect I should remedy that error."

"I have copies of some of the more significant volumes, sir?"

"Have we a library in the house? I have not managed to look over the place yet!"

"Not as such, sir – the Quillers believed that unguided reading was dangerous to the soul and Mr Rockingham was not one for books – he was always one for doing."

"Even when he did not know what he was doing?"

"Oh, especially then, sir!"

"Then we should remedy that lack, I think. I will borrow your books, if I may, for the while. Where would I find a bookshop to patronise?"

"Cambridge, sir, I suspect, or London."

"Then it must wait. Tell me more of this new agriculture – you say specialise – do you mean to grow but the one crop, year in year out?"

"No, sir – that would destroy the fertility of the land; it is necessary to rotate crops. Even though wheat is far the most profitable no more than one third of the fields will grow wheat in any one year. Wheat first, then turnips to clean the land, then beans or peas to strengthen the soil, unless the farmer has a large herd of cattle when he may wish to plant clovers and good grasses for the animals. The meanwhile he must add to the land – if it is clay then he will wish to spread marl, a chalky substance that will lighten the soil; he will wish to spread dung, as much as he can; if there is a slaughterhouse then there will be offal, mostly the guts and their contents; here, where we have iron making, there is the slag which can be broken down almost to dust and is rich in useful chemicals."

"Slag? It is useful, you say? Could be sold to farmers?"

"Yes, sir, very handy stuff!"

"I have a damned great heap of it, getting in the way and growing every year at Roberts – my iron foundry, in Lancashire. I must send a note to my managers to make enquiries in the farming areas. Now, then – rotations, dung and the like – what else?"

"A stock book – a record, sir, of every animal - weight, how much milk they produce, how well they breed, how healthy or sickly they may be – so that the farmer will know which must be permitted to breed and which must be culled in order to improve his herds and flocks. As well, sir, there are new tools invented almost every year – new ploughs, seed drills, harrows, dung carts even – and the Model Farm should always have the best, so that the tenants can see what they should buy when the time comes. Also, sir, it is often the case that the estate will breed its own heavy horses or Berkshire hogs or German cattle that the tenants can buy, or which may be sold to other estates in the neighbourhood – to the benefit of its name, of course."

"It will cost, then."

"Undoubtedly, sir, not less than a thousand in the first setting-up, more in following years, breaking even in five or ten, I expect. As well, sir, I shall have to gee-up Newton, the farmer, on a daily basis – not the most enterprising of men, sir, on a good day, that is."

"I suspect it must be done, Quillerson, but we shall have to watch the costs – I do not like open commitments with no more than a guess of what they will demand of my funds. My name is not Rockingham! A full budget with an indication of cash demands and dates."

Tom saw the blank expression, settled down with pen and paper for a few minutes of brief explanation, not unhappy to display a knowledge that the young man lacked. He was a bright, quick learner, thought that he could produce an outline of what would be required, said that he would come back with his first proposals in two or three days.

Just before five o'clock, Tom strolled out to the stableyard, finding his way by following his ears; at least forty men and women and twice as many catcalling children were farewelling Smythe and Daniel; he leant quietly in the shade of the doorway to watch and listen.

The insults and abuse were unoriginal, he had hear them all before, though the one about the pigs was quite entertainingly expressed; they seemed to revolve around a pair of themes – Smythe was a thief and a swindler who had had his hands in everybody's pockets, down to deductions from the servants' wages as 'fines' for breakages, and that he had been free with his hands, a bully clipping the girls' ears, a dirty old man grabbing their bottoms. Where jobs were few and far between it was a brave girl who made a fuss over anything short of rape, Tom reflected, more especially when her father worked for the estate and needed to keep his tied cottage and his weekly wage. He scowled at a pair of children selecting suitably squishy horse apples – better to keep things short of riot; 'very useful, that scar', he thought as the two little boys fled in horror.

He ate in solitary splendour at the great table in the large dining-room, attended by Morton the butler, taking a single glass of wine with his goose, one of port afterwards, serving notice that he was the lightest of drinkers – all in the house please note! He asked Morton to send a message to cook, telling her what an excellent dinner it was, how much he had enjoyed it.

"What can you tell me of our neighbours, Morton?"

"You will be seen as superior to most, because of the size of the estate and having an income twice theirs, except for Major Hunt, and his money is in the Funds to a great extent, not in land, and the bulk of them will make calls upon you. You will, of course, leave cards with the Marquis."

"The Marquis?"

"Grafham, sir – he owns most of the land between here and Thrapston, though much of it is unenclosed and the bulk of the rest encumbered by debt. Not a rich gentleman, sir, mainly, one understands, due to his father's predilection for the Turf – which has been inherited, I hear, by his son, the Viscount. The Marquis took over only a few years ago, being unfortunate in that his father was long-lived; I am told that he sold a stables at Newmarket and upwards of two score of blood-horses kept there, as well as disposing of almost all of the stud at the manor here. The Marquis has three sons and two daughters, all unwed; the heir, young Viscount Rothwell, resides in London, while the second son is a lieutenant at sea and the third is a schoolboy still. Both daughters are out."

Tom nodded – courtesy demanded he should make a call, but they were socially much superior to him and he would expect to make no further contact with the family except on matters of business such as the upkeep of roads and parish affairs.

"Major Hunt will make a morning call, sir, probably tomorrow – he is punctilious in the extreme in the fulfilment of his duties – and he will see this call as nothing other than duty, unless you can bring him onto friendly terms. He has but one arm, having been wounded in America in the last war – I suspect he experiences pain, more or less occasionally. He has a small estate, only two farms, less than one thousand acres between them, but he is very well-off, I believe, due to his mother marrying very late in life and failing to survive her only childbed, her portion, which was very large, falling entirely to the heir as a result."

Normal practice was for younger sons and daughters to inherit their mother's portion, patrimony going exclusively to the eldest son.

"The major is married, sir, has two sons, both away at school; his wife is sister to Mr Parker, your third neighbour to the east. He is unwed, and rumour insists that he will remain that way – but any gentleman who has no wife will be said to have inclinations, sir – that is the way of the countryside. He is Master of the hunt and will, no doubt, be interested to discover whether you intend to mount your own pack, as was Mr Rockingham's avowed purpose."

"A thousand a year, they tell me, even a local pack will cost."

"I would imagine so, sir. Mr Rockingham was a man of large ambitions and intended to cut a figure in the county."

"Mr Rockingham was a fool, Morton. I am not. I believe – I know in fact – that I am richer by a very large degree than Mr Rockingham ever was, but I would think twice before I committed another thousand a year from my income. In this case, however, I will not need to think more than once – there will be no foxhounds here, Morton!"

"Very wise, sir. Might I venture to suggest that a subscription to the hunt would be very well received?"

"The estate is expected to do so, I presume?"

"It always did, sir – even the last generation of the Quillers, who were very devout and more interested in paying for masses for each others' souls, kept up that tradition."

"What is the correct amount to offer, Morton?"

"One hundred per annum, sir."

"It will be done. What about to our west, are there many of the gently-born there?"

"None who visit in this area, sir. The manor is owned by the Devonshires, who live elsewhere, as no doubt you know, sir.

Tom did not know, listened in silence while Morton explained that the Devonshires owned land all over England, were the most powerful single family in the country, most governments, Whig and Tory alike, tending to have one half or more of their ministers belonging in some way to the clan – they were not to be seen in rural areas, certainly did not visit mere neighbours.

"The villagers, sir, in Finedon, are mostly small tradesmen into cordwaining and iron. There is a doctor there and an attorney resident, a few spinster ladies inhabiting cottages in genteel poverty, a half-pay naval captain retired as far from the sea as he can get as well – none who would presume to visit, sir."

"Iron?"

"Very small, sir – not your sort of thing at all. Charcoal, one understands, forges rather than foundries. There is no canal, sir, and hence no way to bring coke to the iron mines or to transport iron ore to the coal mines."

"You seem well-informed on the topic, Morton."

"In Mr Rockingham's circumstances it seemed only appropriate to inform myself of such matters, sir. He, of course, would not discuss them with a mere menial."

"I believe I mentioned earlier that Rockingham was a fool."

"You did, sir – courtesy forbids me to agree with you, publicly."

"To our south?"

"An unenclosed manor, sir, waste and common down the hill to the river, sir – the Nene. Note, sir, if I may point it out, that the name is pronounced as 'Nenn', not 'Neen' – a local prejudice, no doubt, but not unimportant in gaining acceptance. The few houses near the river look to the south, not to us, would not be regarded as being in our social orbit, as it were. The bulk of those who will visit or leave cards are to be found in the neighbourhood of Burton, where there are some five small estates, all related, cousins and such, and all forever squabbling over boundaries and fields and who exactly was, or should have been, heir to a two-acre field left by great-grandmother Latimer in 1750. They tend to be tedious and tenacious, sir, and, if I may make so bold, you should take great care not to show any sympathy or understanding at all to any one of them."

"I think I understand you, Morton – all it would take would be one smile, one comment that might be taken as agreement, and I would be roped in on one side or another."

"Just so, sir. Cognac, sir?"

"No, not my habit except in company – I have seen men who chose to drink spirits on their own, would not wish to become one of them."

Morton nodded – Rockingham had rarely risen unaided from his dining table and the cellar contained half a dozen bottles of a fine Diabolino for guests, and two casks of much rawer brandy for his own consumption.

"When should I leave cards with Grafham?"

"Between five and eight days after your arrival, sir, would be best. Not on the Sabbath, of course. A Monday or Tuesday will have the advantage that some at least of the family will have seen your face on Sunday. You are Church of England, sir?"

"Well, I'm not anything else, Morton."

"That is a relief, sir, especially after Mr Rockingham. In the absence of any particular faith or set of beliefs then you are a member of the Established Church, sir – and will, of course, fit in admirably with the bulk of the congregation and clergy. Some of the maiden ladies may be fervent in their adherence to their religion – possibly hoping to gain compensation in heaven for the aridity of their earthly life – but the majority of those present are merely stating their willingness to conform to the demands of society, sir. It is expected of any major figure that he shall be seen in his pew on Sunday, sir – every Sunday. Parson Nobbs will be very glad to see you – the glebe of some one hundred and fifty acres which he rents out to one of the Finedon men constitutes the great bulk of his income – perhaps one hundred and eighty pounds, sir, and his congregation is neither large nor prosperous, this being a strong chapel area, especially amongst the shopkeepers and small tradesmen who might be expected to put their shillings in the offertory each week. Your guinea will be very well received."

"That is all very well, Morton, and, it goes without saying, I shall do my duty – but I have never been inside a church in my life, except for one wedding, not of any sort or species! I would not know what to do."

"We shall see, sir – I am sure we can come up with a solution."

The major made his visit next day, as predicted, arriving soon before midday. He was much as Tom had expected – ram-rod stiff back making him seem taller than his five foot six or seven, lean, grey-streaked, brown face and blue eyes – a man who had been out of doors for much of his existence; otherwise he was wholly unfamiliar, which was a minor source of relief – America was a big place and the army had been spread over a thousand miles, but coincidence was always possible and could be damnably inconvenient.

Brown had dressed him correctly in expectation of the occasion – semi-formal country attire, charcoal grey frockcoat, pantaloons, white shirt and black tie-cravat; on second meetings it would be possible to dress in breeches and boots, loose cravat in his shirt, waistcoat and light jacket, possibly in browns or even a light tan, but a first visit demanded the courtesy of a full suit. Morton had ensured that there would be refreshments to hand – cakes, biscuits, Madeira. Both men were hovering within earshot, just in case they might have to come to the rescue, but Tom had learnt his lessons well.

"Good morning, Major Hunt! Welcome to Thingdon Hall, sir. My name is Thomas Andrews, major."

The major had been to the Hall before and he knew Tom's name, but courtesies had to be observed.

"Good morning, Mr Andrews! How do ye do?"

They shook hands, Tom noting that the major had lost his left, which made greetings easier.

"Please to take a seat, major," Tom waved him to sit in the small withdrawing room.

"On your own, Mr Andrews? I have never been here before but that fat fool of an agent was clambering all over me!"

Hunt had obviously heard rumours of the passing of Smythe, was fishing.

"Smythe? He lasted two hours in my employ, sir – we had a slight falling-out almost as soon as we met, and a somewhat larger one soon after, and he and Daniel left the estate as an immediate consequence. He seemed to think that I was a weakling who could be bullied and duped; perhaps Rockingham was, but how he made his fortune if that was the case, I don't know."

Hunt nodded in satisfaction, this was a different sort of man to his predecessor and the whole neighbourhood might well be better off for it.

"I believe Rockingham talked more of his fortune than made it, sir – he inherited from a very active father, whose name seems to have been Potts. Be that as it may, I told him half a dozen times that Smythe was no good, but he would not listen, he knew better than any person who gave him advice of any sort. Be making a lot of changes here, will you, Mr Andrews?"

"Some, inevitably, sir – I doubt that any two men would see exactly eye-to-eye over the running of so large an estate as this. I have been very favourably impressed by young Quillerson, have made him bailiff and agent all in one and intend to keep him on a very loose rein – he has the knowledge and a love of this land. Early days for me, of course, but this is a fine old house and the people here have made an effort to welcome me – to be honest with you, major, and you

know I am what they call a ‘self-made’ man, I have never had a home before, and I rather like the feeling of this one!”

The candour had its expected effect – the major had been waiting for hints of aristocratic connections, ‘kept quiet because the family did not want to acknowledge trade’.

“Good! I am glad to be among the first to welcome you, Mr Andrews, and to say that I look forward to being a neighbour of yours for many years! We are, by the way, to have an election fairly soon, certainly this year – have you a man of your own for the seat?”

“I have not met the sitting member yet, major, can have no opinion of him.”

“Cousin of Rockingham’s – poor and not very bright, depended on his generosity – he has made it clear to me that he wishes to retire into the obscurity for which he is best fitted.”

Tom grinned and shook his head.

“No, I have no man in mind, sir. Do you know of any able gentleman who might wish to be nominated?”

Tom expected the major to put his own name forward at that point, was surprised when he did not, wondered why he had chosen to raise the topic.

“Do you support the government, Mr Andrews?”

“Broadly, yes, sir – we are at war and this is no time for politics! Some of their policies I do not like, and would quite vigorously oppose were the time right – but it is the duty of all honourable men to stand behind the King and his ministers when there is a foreign enemy set against us.”

“I agree, sir!”

Tom had rather expected that the major, gravely wounded fighting for his country, would feel that way, hence the rather vigorous statement of a view he only partially held.

“If it would be convenient to you, Mr Andrews, I could make contact with my cousin, who is a Member for the County, and he might well wish to mention in Downing Street that the borough will need a sound man nominated.”

“Please do so, sir – I would be at a loss to know how to go on otherwise.”

Members for the County were actually elected and were often vastly more respectable than the second sons, wastrels and idiots who gravitated to the rotten boroughs; undoubtedly the major had been primed to raise the topic and Tom was very happy to let his name be noted as one of the right sort. If he was to marry and produce an heir, then a title would be worth having.

They parted after their thirty minutes, the correct length for a morning visit, the major saying that he would look forward to seeing Tom in his house in the very near future – far more enthusiastic than a mere courtesy response.

“Very good, thir! The major will path the word that you are a great improvement on Rockingham and may be treated like any other gentleman.”

“I am glad to hear that, Brown.”

“Mr Quillerson will drive with you to church on Sunday, sir,” Morton announced.

“But, I thought he was…”

“He was, sir, especially while Smythe was here – but he has been easily persuaded of the wisdom of joining the Established Church now that he has received temporal promotion. He is now sufficiently beforehand with the world that he may consider a wife, and that, in this area, and with this young lady, demands respectability – or orthodoxy at minimum, sir. He will be able to lead you through the appropriate procedures, having attended church weekly as a schoolboy.”

"Thank you, Morton."

The church was old, its spire tall, room in the pews for at least three hundreds; there were fewer than fifty there, mostly female, without exception genteelly dressed. The great bulk of the villagers were crammed into a small red-brick chapel a quarter of a mile away, singing lustily, the remainder, all of the middle order, very quiet in a Quaker meeting hall nearby.

"The Church claims them all, sir," Quillerson quietly commented. "The chapel has no licence, so they must come here to be married but are not otherwise seen inside these doors. However, sir, married in the Church of England means that they are part of the parson's flock when it comes to counting heads."

Tom nodded – he was not surprised to hear of the duplicity of the powers that be – it was a corrupt country and the Church was part of the government. He stood, knelt, sat, bowed his head to Quillerson's command, thankful that the ornately carved pew belonging to the estate partially concealed him from the many curious eyes.

"Mr Rockingham was chapel, sir, when he could be bothered at all. It was one of the causes of the unwillingness of the local gentry to mix with him. This pew remained empty. The other one, on the other side, sir, belongs to the Grafhams and will always have the women of the family there, except in the Season or when they are off visiting; the Marquis is less commonly present because he spends the bulk of his days in London where he is much involved in government business, one understands, playing a role on the Navy Board, I believe."

Tom smiled his understanding – the Marquis was poor and a place on a Board should parlay into several thousands a year in bribes and sweeteners from contractors. He glanced across the church, saw three bonnets in the pew, nothing else.

"This is the sermon, sir – Parson Nobbs will never stretch it beyond twenty minutes; the chapel runs to two hours of ranting – Hellfire and Damnation at the top of the minister's voice – but Parson is too polite for that."

Tom listened to the first sermon he had ever heard; he did not understand it, could not follow the Biblical references, obviously, and was deeply unimpressed by what passed for logical argument. He was not much concerned with the niceties of pious behaviour, however, because to his understanding they had got him for theft and fornication, and probably murder, already, so he knew which direction he was heading in after death – he would deal with that problem when it came due, he had better things to worry about the while.

The collection plate came to them first.

"Two guineas, sir – more would be flash, less would be tight on a first attendance."

"Thank'ee, Mr Quillerson." Tom laid the small coins precisely in the centre of the plate, next to Quillerson's sixpence; they both started to chuckle and guiltily suppressed the noise.

"Parson Nobbs will be at the doors, sir, to speak with everybody as they leave. We will be last out, the Grafham ladies in front of us."

They filed out in silence, maintaining the air of reverence until they reached fresh air again; almost all of the congregation had remained outside the porch, busily greeting each other and waiting to get a first surreptitious look at the new great man of the parish. Few of them would presume to intrude so far as to address Tom or attract his attention on this first meeting, but they would expect him to notice them when he inevitably bumped into them about the village over the next few weeks and months. The Grafham ladies were to be introduced by the reverend,

however, they being socially Tom's superior yet of lesser position in the ranks of local landholders.

"Reverend Nobbs? My name is Andrews, sir, as I am sure you will have guessed!"

The reverend, short, fat, benign, long widowed and very close to seventy, simpered mightily – his living was in the gift of the Thingdon Estate and he had a list of repairs to his parsonage as well as the desire to request permission to fee a curate to do the work of the parish while he retired to spend a last few years in a genteel boarding-house at Leamington Priors, taking the waters and living quietly and cheaply. He was, besides, very pleased to have been informed of the discomfiture of Smythe, whom he had heartily disapproved of while being able to do nothing about him.

"I believe you have been described to me already, sir! Have you met the Marchioness and Ladies, Verity and Anne, sir?"

They exchanged bows and smiles, three sets of eyebrows raising as one as Tom's face creased.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr Andrews, particularly in this place, sir."

"The pleasure is mine, your Ladyship. I can only regret that this 'particular place' has not been honoured as it should have been by the estate in recent years and assure you that, in common with a number of other failings, it will be remedied, ma'am."

A few more words, bland and meaningless, and they parted, the ladies to an ancient open carriage, Tom to the modern and luxurious confection Rockingham had had built for his own comfort, still bearing a rather ornate – and wholly spurious - coat of arms.

"Lady Verity is the elder of the two girls, Quillerson?"

"Yes, sir – twenty-one or two, I believe. Her sister is just eighteen, and is generally regarded as the prettier of the two, beautiful, in fact."

"Perhaps, I saw more character in the elder lady's face, and she seemed a very pleasant, friendly girl."

"She always has a word for everyone, sir."

"I thought her very attractive – I am surprised she is not wed. Is she affianced?"

"No portion, sir – she would not come with a thousand pounds, I believe. Besides that, sir, she is said to be educated and intelligent and to possess a quick tongue – the taste is for vapid, simpering misses, sir."

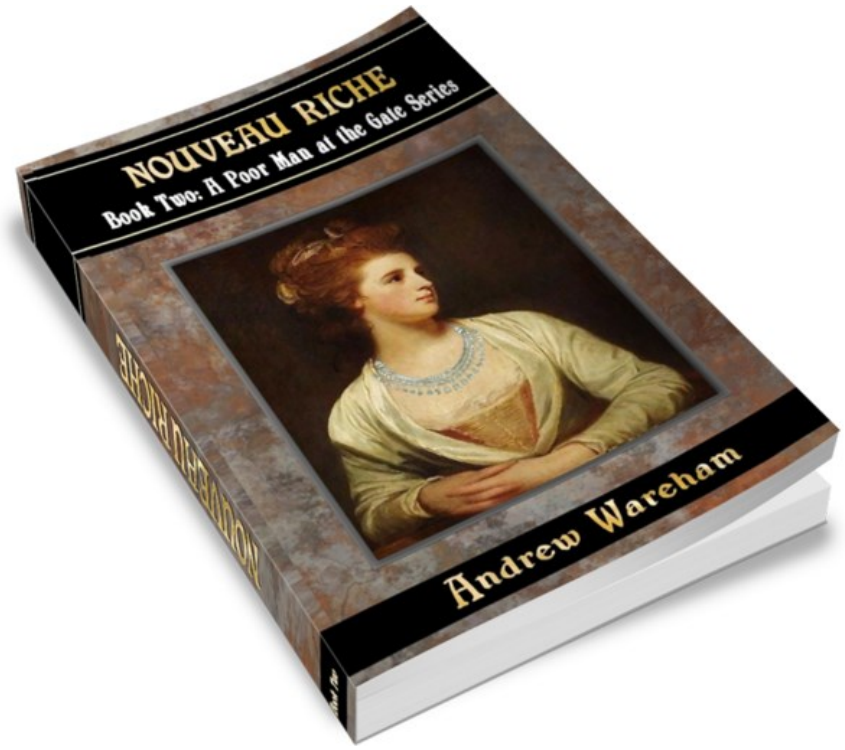
Tom said no more – she was a tall girl and very well made and her face quite charming – blue eyes that would laugh, high cheek bones and a strong jaw, all under a good forehead and a mass of auburn hair, almost a redhead. A pity that she was far too well-born for him even to talk to – he would otherwise have been very glad to further his acquaintance with her. However, perhaps his wealth and new status might one day allow him to cross the great social divide.

Then he admonished himself for daring to fill his head with such flights of fancy.

# # #

Book Two in the Series

(Available in all ebook formats)



The second ebook in the, '*A Poor Man at the Gate*' Series', follows Tom Andrew's rise to the fringes of political power and social respectability. All seems to be going smoothly until a shady character from his dubious days in New York at the time of The American Revolutionary War, unexpectedly turns up in London. This was never a part of Tom's plans. Is his past catching up with him, and will it spell disaster for his love life, and political ambitions?

Here's a short excerpt from the start of *Nouveau Riche*:

"Thingdon Hall's new owner, Mr Andrews, is a change from Mr Rockingham, Mama – not, I think, another in his mould, considerably less of the provincial dandy and definitely not handsome!"

"A welcome change, my dear; well turned out, the London touch to that coat, no provincial tailor cut that cloth, and the scar must have been gained in the American war. Mr Telford told Papa that Mr Andrews had been a sailor then and had made a first fortune from prize money."

The Marchioness seemed inclined to approve of the mushroom, to Lady Verity's surprise, she had never heard her to be in favour of the lower classes before, particularly when they had so forgotten their place as to possess money.

"Which was very respectable, Mama, but he has since become very rich from mills and things - money-grubbing!"

"So we are told – but he is definitely not a vulgar person in himself – well dressed, correctly spoken, courteous and not bumptiously pushy like Mr Rockingham, the previous owner. Certainly no instant invitation to 'come and share his mutton'!"

"Mama, he did not!" Lady Verity was scandalised at this revelation of the depths of Rockingham's uncouthness.

"He certainly did, my dear – your Papa and I passed Mr Rockingham on the road to the village and he waved to us, introduced himself, shook Papa's hand and told us how pleased he was to meet us, now he need not go to all the fuss and bother of calls and cards and that sort of nonsense! Papa was not pleased, especially when he named Smythe, his agent, to him and expected him to be greeted!"

"I was not at all pleased to be given a very friendly smile by that gentleman, Mama! Mr Andrews has at least removed that particular menace from our society. Ridding the place of Smythe was a godsend"

"Yes, and very quickly – another point in his favour. He is, of course, unwed, and must be in need of a suitable lady for his estate."

Lady Verity's eyebrows, and chin, rose in indignation, her shock of auburn hair flowing with her head movement, her normally laughing, blue eyes, glaring in exaggerated outrage.

"He is also nameless, Mama!"

"Quite possibly, my dear – you would certainly not wish to display him in the salons of Mayfair – which you, of course, have never especially enjoyed as an unmarried damsel."

"Are you by any chance suggesting, Mama, that I might wish to display him *anywhere*?"

"Verity, my dear, you will not marry at all otherwise, and that would be a pity, for you would like to be a mother, I believe. We have no money, my dear; you have not caught a suitable husband in three Seasons and will not catch one in this Season, so an unsuitable one is well worth considering! The look in his eye said that you would not have to smile twice at him – he certainly liked what he saw!"

Lady Verity was not flattered to be informed that, after Mr Smythe, she was attractive to another very mere 'mister', one who dirtied his hands with trade, moreover.

"They say he is worth a million, my dear – that being the case he will be Sir Thomas within a year and could be Baron Andrews in ten, provided he smiles at the right people."

"And provided they did not faint at first sight of him!"

"Yes, that is a problem, I will admit, my dear – the scars on his face ensure that he will never be awarded the palm for elegance. I will say that I could name you six young ladies of our order, girls known to you, who have made matches with bankers, merchants, even a manufacturer, in the past three years – men of limited charm in most cases and certainly no more handsome than Mr Andrews. I liked the look of the man, I will confess – he seemed both strong and polite, and probably kind-hearted – and I am sure I would *love* his money!"

"Oh, Mama! Unworthy! He is no gentleman!"

"Not by birth, obviously – he will become whatever his wife makes of him, and his children would be born to the purple, will mix freely in Society. As well, my dear, the benefit to the Family would not be small – your brother Jack wishes to become a soldier when he leaves

Harrow this summer, and will have to be content as an ensign of foot in an unknown regiment and to live on a monkey's allowance. And if Rothwell gambles away any more of our funds there will be no Season for us next year."

"So, I am to sell myself, Mama?"

Lady Verity was becoming more thoughtful than indignant, she was well aware of the advantages a rich husband could offer and had always known her duty to her family.

"Not at all, my dear – I much hope you will give yourself in marriage to a man you esteem and can live happily with. I will not mention 'love', for that is a much overrated emotion, perhaps better suited to the lower orders of society than to us, but affection is another matter. I would recommend you to try to meet and get to know Mr Andrews. If you then find him intolerable, so be it, or, of course, if he finds no great liking for you – the field will then be clear for your sister, Anne."

Lady Anne had been listening open-mouthed and with a frown on her brow.

"Oh, Mama! I could not! Is he very rich?"

Lady Verity stared with more than normal distaste at her empty-headed, beautiful sister, thinking as so often that she would have killed for hair and skin like hers, and committed suicide if she suddenly gained a brain of her order.

"He is worth a million, my dear."

"Yes, Mama, so you said. Is that a big number, Mama?"

Book Two: 'A Poor Man at the Gate Series', *Nouveau Riche* is available on Kindle and ALL LEADING ONLINE EBOOK STORES: Amazon - Kindle Link:

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Books by the same author

The Duty and Destiny Series: Published in 2014, these superbly-crafted novel length sea stories are set in the period of the French Revolutionary War (1793 – 1802). The series follows the naval career and love-life of Frederick Harris, the second son of a middling Hampshire landowner, a brave but somewhat reluctant mariner. Amazon - Kindle links to the whole series:

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Author Bio

I graduated from university in 1968 with a degree in Politics, Economics and Economic History, taught Economics and Economic History for ten years, including a spell in Papua New Guinea, got bored and returned to PNG as a trainer and operational police officer. I remained there with my family, still keeping up my interest in Economic History - including Australasia - then worked contracts in the Middle East until my wife's ill-health and eventual death meant setting up a family base in the UK. History, and collecting Victorian glass, my sole hobbies, apart from looking after three St Bernards.

Published in late 2013, The Privateersman was my first published novel. Since then I have written several more books in this series with more planned for publication. *The Duty and Destiny Series* of books were written earlier, but because of the big interest in the, '*A Poor Man at the Gate Series*,' my publisher urged me to revise the series for publication. As long as people continue to read my books, I will continue to write about history - a subject close to my heart.

If you have a spare minute, please visit Amazon and write a few words about my book in the review section: Your objective feedback will help other potential readers make informed choices.

Many thanks, Andrew

Amazon-Kindle Review Link: getBook.at/The-Privateersman

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