On July 23, 1676, His Majesty’s Ketch Quaker lay hove-to in the sun-drenched Mediterranean off the southern coast of Spain, east of Velèz Malaga. A cable's length away, the Quaker’s convoy, the two hundred ton Dutch merchantman, John and Peter, rolled stolidly in the swell. A fat sheep guarded by a shepherd dog half her size. A long gunshot to the east, two Algerine galleys with their sails furled were rowing slowly toward the little English warship and its convoy. Beyond them and around the vast horizon the sea was empty.

A light breeze fluttered the Quaker’s sails; without a strong wind escape was impossible. In a battle the odds would be formidable. The Quaker mounted ten guns, the John and Peter twelve. One of the Algerines had twenty-four guns, the other sixteen, and both galleys were crowded with fighting men, a hundred or more in each. Captain Charles Atkins had a crew of forty in the Quaker, and Captain Dixworth had no more in the John and Peter. Nevertheless, both ships had their guns loaded and run out, with gun crews standing by, slow matches smoldering.

Captain Charles Atkins, a tall, military figure in plumed hat, tucked-up periwig, buff jerkin, and red breeches, stood on the after deck of the Quaker, listening to the arguments of his warrant officers. Captain Atkins was sweltering in the heat; he longed for a bottle of Canary in the shade of his cabin, but he had to make a decision. It was nearly an hour since the Quaker and its convoy had met the corsairs who barred the way. The Algerines, piratical scourges of
the Mediterranean, had sent a boat to the Quaker to learn what ship it had in company and to demand Captain Atkins's pass. By the Anglo-Algerine treaty of 1671, English merchant ships had to carry Admiralty passes in the Mediterranean; English ships of war did not.

Captain Atkins's lofty reply, "This is his Majesty's ketch Quaker. My pass is in the muzzles of my guns, and all the ship's company are resolved to die every man rather than go to Algiers," had failed to impress the corsairs, who refused to believe that so small a vessel could be a ship of war. No wonder. The Quaker was only fifty-four feet long and eighty tons burden, one of the smallest ships in the English Navy. A hot argument had ended with an ultimatum shouted by a renegade Englishman in the corsair's boat, "Surrender, or we'll sink you!" Now the two galleys were closing in for the kill. ram bows pointed ominously, long oars flashing in the sun.

A brave captain, or at least one with a clean conscience, would have had no reason to hesitate. The Algerines were notoriously poor gunners. A bold front and a couple of volleys from the Quaker's guns might have convinced them of their mistake. If it came to a full engagement, the Quaker and the Dutch merchantman might be lucky enough to cripple or sink the frail galleys. At the worst there was honorable death, a sailor's grave, and the satisfaction of knowing that Sir John Narbrough and the Mediterranean Fleet would exact ample revenge. Surrender meant almost certainly the slave markets of Algiers.

But Captain Charles Atkins was neither brave nor honest. At Cadiz, for a fat fee and in defiance of Admiralty orders against "plate carriage," he had taken on board forty thousand dollars in silver and gold for transport to Marseilles, plus fourteen French passengers, whose passage money had gone into his own pockets. In addition he had agreed, for a price, to convoy the Dutch merchantman, now sailing under the English flag, in spite of the fact that the Netherlands were formally at war with Algiers. If he fought, he risked the loss of all his profits, and Captain
Atkins valued profit far above duty and honor. Surely it would be better to take his chances at Algiers, where the English consul, Mr. Samuel Martin, would look after his interests. Captain Atkins, a "gentleman-captain" of aristocratic family, owed his rank to Court favor. He had never sailed before the mast; he had no seamanship; and in his four undistinguished years as a naval officer he had never been in battle.

The Quaker's warrant officers wanted to fight. Jethry Bowman, the sailing-master, John Clange, the boatswain, Edward Alloway, the gunner, Robert Francis, the carpenter, Thomas Wilton, the cook, and Giles Naylor, midshipman, all derided the brown-skinned barbarians in their turbans and flapping gowns. One Englishman, they argued, was worth at least a dozen Turks. Some of the Quaker's crew might die, but even death was better than the stripes, toil, and slow starvation of slaves chained to the oars of Algerine galleys, or the bread-and-water diet, hard labor, and bastinadoes of Moorish farmers. Captain Atkins chewed at his pipe stem nervously. The corsairs, at short range, were turning, bringing their broadsides to bear. Their red gunports opened, showing black muzzles.

Abruptly the captain made his decision, gave an order, and the English Jack fluttered down from the masthead, to a chorus of triumphant yells from the corsairs. The English officers were dumbfounded. Smoothly Captain Atkins explained, "I think it would be a very bad action of me to break the peace at this juncture of time, when so many merchant ships are abroad without convoy. It is better to go to Algiers and dispute it there with the government and the English consul." As the nearest corsair sent a boat with a towing hawser, Captain Atkins found it difficult to meet his officers' eyes.

Fifteen days later, when the galleys towed their prizes into the Bay of Algiers, Consul Samuel Martin learned what had happened and bestirred himself vigorously. His salary was only £100 a year, but there were fees and many chances for lucrative trade on the side. He would not like
to lose his post, and he knew that he would be judged in England by the measure of his success in such a crisis. Immediately he made strong representations to the Dey and the general Duana, but in diplomatic terms, careful not to arouse the savagery latent in barbarian breasts. His predecessor, Consul John Ward, had lost his temper and pistolled a Jew in the Dey's presence. The palace guards had promptly cut him to pieces.

Mr. Martin protested as strongly as he dared, even hinting at war, and managed to get the release of the two captive ships and their crews—but not the bullion (which the Algerines insisted was Dutch money) or the fourteen French passengers, who were sold as slaves. On his own authority, Consul Martin removed Captain Atkins from his command and sent him to Tangier, England's military outpost at the entrance to the Straits of Gibraltar. From the officers and crew of the *Quaker* he got the whole story, which he wrote out in detail in a long letter to Mr. Pepys, including with his packet the sworn depositions of the *Quaker*'s warrant officers.

At Derby House, Westminster, Samuel Atkins, an Admiralty clerk in the last year of his apprenticeship (no relation to Captain Charles Atkins), opened a packet of letters from Consul Martin at Algiers. The packet looked harmless enough. Sam had no premonition of evil, no sixth sense to tell him that it dealt with the first of a series of events that was to place him in the shadow of the gallows. Reading the contents of the packet was merely a duty, a job to be done. To save his master, Secretary Pepys, from the eyestrain that had forced him to close his shorthand diary seven years ago, Sam Atkins read all incoming letters, winnowing the weighty from the trivial.

It was a sunny afternoon in the autumn of 1676, and the breeze through the open windows facing on the Thames was heavy with the scent of wood smoke and burning leaves. Sam's mind was not on his work; he longed to be
out and away. He was wondering how to ask Mr. Pepys's permission to meet some jolly blades for a bite of supper and a merry evening at the Blue Posts in the Haymarket. If he could get away early, he would have time also for a short ramble through Whitehall and St. James's Park, where the beauties of the Town would be on display.

Derby House was in Channel Row, on the bank of the Thames. It was just a step from Derby House to Whitehall, a rambling brick-and-stone palace on the riverbank, where King Charles II lived in regal splendor with his ministers of state and a buzzing swarm of servants. One of his mistresses, the Duchess of Portsmouth, had apartments in the palace; the others had houses nearby. Buck-toothed, childless Queen Catherine lived in Somerset House in the Strand, farther down the river. Now and then the good King paid her a visit.

Whitehall was the center of the Court—a frothy mixture of officeholders, great lords and ladies, country gentlemen, bishops, lawyers, army and navy officers, gamblers, painted courtesans, pickpockets, and politicians. Fashionable London flocked to Whitehall daily to watch the King eat his solitary dinner in the Banqueting Hall, to stroll and gossip in the great stone Gallery, or to idle in St. James's Park beside the canal with its waterfowl or on the banks of Rosamund's Pond. At nineteen, Sam Atkins was still young enough to enjoy the show: the scarlet tunics and bright halberds of the guards, the silver and gold lace of periwigged cavaliers, and the bright satin gowns of bare-shouldered ladies with their hair done in curls and ringlets. Like his master, Sam Atkins loved ease and liberty and had an eye for beauty.

At Derby House everybody worked. Mr. Pepys had his offices and lodgings there, and, as an indentured apprentice, Sam Atkins lived there with his master. Mr. Pepys's regular household consisted of a housekeeper, a butler, a cook, a couple of maids, a footman, and a coachman. Caesare Morelli, a young Fleming and an excellent linguist and musician, was a recent addition to the house-
hold. Because he was a Roman Catholic he was looked upon with suspicion by paranoid Protestants.

The Secretary's mistress, Mary Skinner, a young woman of wit and wisdom, was much about the house and helped with the housekeeping and entertaining, but she had private lodgings nearby. She was the daughter of a broken-down merchant, Daniel Skinner, of Mark Lane. Mr. Pepys had begun his affair with her in 1670, a year after the death of his beautiful but trying wife, Elizabeth. Everybody knew about Mary's function and accepted it without question, even her own family and Mr. Pepys's strait-laced friend John Evelyn, who once described Mary as Mr. Pepys's "inclination," and again, in a forgetful moment, as "Mrs. Pepys." It was all very well for the great Mr. Pepys, Secretary to the Office of the Lord High Admiral of England, to keep a mistress openly, but his clerks dared not follow his example. They risked his displeasure by the slightest slip from virtue.

Derby House had private studies for Mr. Pepys and his chief clerk, Will Hewer. Above stairs were "the Lords' room," where the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty usually met, two or three small offices, and "the great room," where Mr. Pepys's clerks—Atkins, Lawrence, Lewis, Roberts, and Walbanke—usually labored, casting up accounts, checking and filing reports, filling out forms, reading letters, writing letters, and copying letters into "the day book." The large windows of "the great room" overlooked the Thames, the highroad of London, with its bustling traffic of scullers and wherries, the gilded boats of Court officials, barges bringing fruit and vegetables to market, and sloops and hoys loaded with wheat, beef, lumber, and "sea-coal" from Newcastle. The colorful scene was distracting to a bored young clerk with itching feet.

Reluctantly Sam Atkins began to read Mr. Martin's letter. Almost at once he realized that it was truly important; the consul reported an event so horrendous as to be almost beyond belief, an incident that could easily lead
to war in the Mediterranean. Hastily Sam skimmed through the letter, glanced at the enclosed depositions, and then hurried to Mr. Pepys's study. There he handed his master the packet with a curt "From Consul Martin, sir."

Little Mr. Pepys, autocrat of England's far ranging navy, sighed wearily, wondering what that fellow Martin had to whine about this time. He was a good consul, but his letters were always prolix and plaintive. Formerly a ship's purser, Mr. Martin owed his appointment as consul to Mr. Pepys—or rather to his own wife (once Betty Lane, one of Mr. Pepys's former mistresses). To salve his conscience, Mr. Pepys always provided well for his cuckolds. He had provided well for himself, too, as his richly furnished study testified: his tapestried chairs, his polished desk and silver standish with pens and ink, and his bookcases with rows of books bound in gleaming calf and stamped with his arms in gold. He was truly in a handsome and thriving condition, with a salary of £500 per annum, plus fees.

As he read, Mr. Pepys's face darkened, and under his brown periwig the permanent frown lines in his forehead grew deeper. Sam Atkins, a fair young man with a pleasant face, stood by, awaiting orders. To judge by Mr. Pepys's growing anger this was no time to ask for leave. Briefly he thought about slipping away without permission; perhaps he would not be missed.

Consul Martin's letter concluded:

I hope Captain Atkins and all the English will do me the justice to acquaint your honor that nothing hath been wanting in the performance of my duty, to the hazard of my life and ruin of my family, and without vanity I may tell your honor that if my life would have ransomed this disgrace I had not been now to tell you so... I expect to be made a sacrifice among these people, which I shall embrace with all
humility and content so I die but as I have always desired to live.

One of your Honor's most obliged and Obedient faithful servants,
Sa: Martin.

Ordinarily Mr. Pepys dictated his letters, but now his wrath demanded more direct expression. Selecting a fresh sheet of paper and dipping his pen, he wrote a short, vitriolic letter to Captain Charles Atkins at Tangier, ordering him to come home at once to face a court-martial, and informing him that his cowardly action had resulted in "such an affront done to his Majesty's flag as cannot, I think, be remembered to have ever been offered to, much less borne by, any other." Shameful!

Certainly the Secretary's wrath was justified. An English warship had tamely surrendered without firing a shot, and had submitted to a tow, as if it were a helpless hulk! Shameful, indeed! Unless there were extenuating circumstances, a court-martial would surely sentence Captain Atkins to death by a firing squad.

But weeks went by without a word from Captain Atkins, who, of course, considered himself innocent and injured. The Secretary's arm was long, but Tangier was far away, and gentleman-captains had a convenient habit of disobeying orders when they chose, sure that easy King Charles would forgive them. Captain Atkins, a libertine much given to wine and women, was in no hurry to return to England. Tangier was a garrison town noted for drunkenness, fornication, gaming, and gluttony, where more soldiers were killed by the pox and brandy than by the besieging Moors. It was much more to the captain's taste than London and a court-martial which might order him shot. By one excuse or another he managed to delay his return for months, meanwhile catching a virulent case of the pox in a Tangier brothel.
At last, too sick to think of more excuses, Captain Atkins returned to England aboard the *Yarmouth*, arriving in February, 1677—eight months after the date of his crime. Of course he could not face his accusers when he was "greatly indisposed by sickness." Generously Mr. Pepys turned him over to the tender care of a chirurgeon and the captain's wife, a lady with a bold and roving eye. Four months later, when the captain had several times been seen walking the streets of London, obviously in good health, the Admiralty Lords asked Mr. Pepys to prepare a court-martial.

Unfortunately, although the Secretary had plenty of affidavits, the crew of the *Quaker* would have to appear in person, and the ketch had recently sailed for the West Indies. A court-martial was impossible; nonetheless Mr. Pepys had the captain arrested and committed to the custody of William Joynes, Gentleman Marshall of the High Court of Admiralty. Captain Atkins promptly appealed to King Charles, asking to be admitted to bail. Most of his relations were alienated by his cowardly conduct, and his father, Sir Jonathan Atkins, Governor of Barbadoes, disowned him; however, various friends and his mother's family, the influential Howards of Cumberland, pleaded for him. Even Mr. Pepys and Sam Atkins strained the quality of mercy in his favor. On July 21, 1677, Captain Charles Atkins was admitted to bail.

Thereafter Captain Charles (still "captain" by courtesy) became a frequent visitor at Derby House—but not to see Mr. Pepys. For the secretary he had only deep and bitter hatred. He held Mr. Pepys responsible for his present plight—discharged, disgraced, indigent, and in danger of shameful death. Behind Mr. Pepys was the authority of the Admiralty Commission and the King himself, but everyone knew that Mr. Pepys (the son of a tailor!) was the real head of the Navy and made all decisions.

This was the second time that Mr. Pepys had injured Charles Atkins. In 1675 the captain of the war ship *Phoenix* died at sea on his way to Barbadoes. When the
ship arrived at Bridgetown, Governor Atkins, ignoring the claims of the ship’s first lieutenant, appointed his own son, Charles, to command the *Phoenix*. (At the time Charles was only second lieutenant of the *Resolution*.) Charles Atkins brought the *Phoenix* back to England (with two tons of white sugar as his own commercial venture), fully expecting his irregular promotion and command to be confirmed. But Mr. Pepys refused, in spite (he wrote) of his “special regard to my noble friend, your father,” and quite properly gave the command to John Howe, first lieutenant of the *Phoenix*. “Right is right,” said Mr. Pepys, and then, relenting, gave Charles a captain’s pay from the time of the ship’s arrival in English waters to the moment when Lieutenant Howe took command—a mere trifle to Charles Atkins. Charles nursed his grudges and bided his time. His gentlemanly gorge rose whenever he thought of Mr. Pepys, an upstart and a mercenary scoundrel!

However, since Captain Charles was not welcome at Court, Derby House was a convenient place in which to while away the time. Hundreds of people came there daily, usually by water to nearby Westminster Stairs. There were seamen seeking warrants or begging for their long overdue pay; officers bringing reports and asking for orders; captains and pursers with long lists of their needs; and merchants wanting news or taking out passes to protect their ships from North African corsairs—twenty-five shillings to Mr. Pepys and ten to his clerks. In the endless stream Captain Charles was always likely to find an old acquaintance from whom he could cadge five or ten shillings—as a temporary loan, of course. If not, at least he could lounge and smoke his pipe in the sheltered garden in summer or by the fire in the “great room” in winter, chat with the clerks, and ask for news of the *Quaker*, now stationed at the Leeward Islands in the West Indies.

He found an easy mark in Sam Atkins, whom the captain called “cousin” because of their common surname.
To the guileless clerk, now barely out of his apprenticeship, the older man was very attractive with his swaggering ways, his pipe in his mouth, and a long sword clanking at his side. Captain Charles was an expert on the customs of brothels and the wiles of whores. He had the easy, supple manners of a courtier, and he could speak casually of his maternal uncles: Charles Howard, Earl of Carlisle; Sir Philip Howard, a justice of the peace and a member of Parliament; and "Northern Tom" Howard, who had married the Dowager Duchess of Richmond. He could describe Court balls and plays and talk about the madcap doings of the King's cockney mistress, Nell Gwyn, the extravagance of his French mistress, Louise, Duchess of Portsmouth, and the escapades of the Queen's maids of honor. Under his spell, Sam Atkins found it difficult to remember the captain's cowardice. He even lent him money, a few shillings at a time.

Sam Atkins's father (also Samuel), a London merchant and "a Presbyterian or Independent zealot," had lived in Scotland for some years, and had been a colonel in the army of Parliament during the Civil War. He returned to London when his son (born August 29, 1657) was two years old, and settled in Limehouse, then a village on the Thames south of London. Sam's mother died when he was very young. Mr. Atkins sent his son to a good school, Bishophall, in the nearby village of Hackney, where Sam learned his letters, Latin, and "the mathematices" under Mr. Thomas Walton, a feckless dissenting minister.

Sam was a schoolboy, untouched by disaster, during the second Dutch War, the Great Plague of 1665, and the Great Fire of London in 1666. In 1670 Mr. Atkins died, leaving Samuel and his sister Susannah orphans and well-nigh penniless. Susannah was fifteen years older than Sam. The registers of St. Michael Bassishaw (in the City) record on October 11, 1642, the baptism of Susannah, daughter of Samuel Atkins, merchant, and his wife Hannah.
At thirteen Sam Atkins was apprenticed to Colonel Thomas Middleton, a sturdy old Presbyterian and Surveyor of the Navy, to be bred as a clerk. A year later, when Middleton died, the boy was apprenticed to Mr. Edward Homewood, Clerk of the Survey of the King's Yards at Chatham. In 1674, at the end of the third Dutch War, Mr. Homewood turned him over to Mr. Pepys's chief clerk, Will Hewer, for the remaining three years of his time, which expired in August, 1677.

Sam Atkins was a normal, intelligent, well-trained clerk, like thousands of others to be found in the government offices and counting houses of London. Even his appearance was undistinguished. He was average in height and build, smooth faced, and, because he could not afford a fashionable periwig, with his hair cut short below his ears. Although he was now twenty years old, a full-fledged, responsible clerk living in private lodgings near Derby House, Mr. Pepys still treated him as if he were an apprentice. He kept a severe eye on Sam and made him account for all his time. He was on call by day and by night.

Sam liked his work and did it well. It was exciting to be at the center of affairs, to know that the letter he was writing for Mr. Pepys's signature could send a tall ship to the ends of the earth or move a fleet into battle. Sam could dream of walking the deck of a frigate in the West Indies under sunny skies with green islands abeam, or along the brown Spanish coast in the Mediterranean in search of Barbary pirates.

Of course Sam had the usual assurance of youth, with a tendency to bombast and fustian in speaking and writing. But he was honest, industrious, and pious. Brought up as a zealous Protestant, he went to church often, usually to Whitehall Chapel, where there was very good music, but occasionally to St. Margaret's Church or Westminster Abbey. Sometimes, like his master, he slept through the sermon.

Sam's parents had been strict Puritans. Since the time
of Queen Elizabeth, English Protestants had harried and persecuted those who still clung to the Church of Rome. Of all Protestants, the Puritans were the most fanatical in their hatred of the grim wolf with privy paw, and Sam Atkins shared his parents’ bigotry. Once, when a young man of his acquaintance took leave of him in the street, saying that he was going to attend Mass in the Chapel of St. James’s Palace (where the King’s younger brother, the Catholic Duke of York, held his Court), Sam Atkins said, “Farewell. Go and damn your soul.” Sam honestly believed that attendance at a Catholic service was a step on the road to damnation.

In one respect Sam’s Puritan conditioning had worn thin. He was inclined to kick over the traces, to be absent from his duties at night without leave, or in the daytime when Mr. Pepys was out of town. At such times he could usually be found with other merry grigs in a nearby tavern, at a playhouse, or at the New Exchange, an arcade in the Strand with booths where comely damsels with smocks cut enticingly low offered for sale linens, gloves, laces, stockings, ribbons, sword-knots, and their own delectable persons. In his best clothes with a sword at his side, Sam Atkins passed for a gentleman.

Once or twice, while he was still an apprentice living in Mr. Pepys’s lodgings, Sam had made the mistake of staying out late at night without his master’s permission, “for which fault Mr. Pepys did, in April, 1677, express his displeasure against him by turning him away.” Friends interceded for Sam, and he wrote a penitent letter, promising his master, “If you please to give me your remission for my past miscarriages and the honor of serving you once more, upon my first ill comportment, or being (on any occasion) found a minute out of your house without your leave, I willingly lay this at your feet as my own act to banish me forever your service, favor, or countenance.” Mr. Pepys, who cherished documents, forgave the sinner and kept his letter.
Sam’s penitence was real enough; nevertheless, London abounded with delightful taverns where one could drink and be merry with gay companions—chiefly fellow clerks and naval officers. It abounded also with tempting wenches. Sam Atkins was never destined for sainthood, but so far his sins were only venial.

Sam was friendly, generous, considerate, and charitable. Envious Captain Atkins found him an easy touch, despising him even while battening on his bounty. In time, following the well-known principle that one hates the man whom he has wronged, Captain Atkins, a hungry, lean-faced villain, came to hate Mr. Pepys’s clerk almost as much as he hated Mr. Pepys.