In the autumn of 1677, partly as a result of Captain Atkins's shameful submission to the Algerine corsairs, England and Algiers were again at war. Few Englishmen knew or cared what the war was about. Algiers was far away, and they had better news to cheer their hearts. King Charles had no legitimate son, and his Catholic brother, James, Duke of York, was heir apparent to the throne. But on October 21, when the King announced the engagement of his niece, Mary, to William of Orange, there was at last hope for a Protestant succession. Over all the land bells rang and bonfires blazed.

The Navy Office had no time for bonfires. In addition to supplying the Mediterranean Fleet, Mr. Pepys had a great project in hand: the building of thirty new ships. The traffic on the Thames and the bustle at Derby House increased. From beleaguered Consul Martin at Algiers came a letter to Secretary Pepys complaining that he had received only £200 for his five years of service and was £1,500 in debt, "for which I must perish here in chains if his Majesty's gracious bounty and your lordship's pity in recommending the same relieve me not." Mr. Pepys had pity enough, but his Majesty's purse was chronically empty.

The seasons changed. The fogs and frosts of winter gave way to the chill rains of spring and the gray skies of a cold English summer. At Algiers, Consul Martin was under house arrest because of popular fury against
England. Later he was moved to a prison, perhaps to protect him from mob violence. He died in prison some time in the late summer of 1678.

That summer Secretary Pepys and his clerks were working still harder, getting a battle fleet ready against the possibility of a war with France. But Sam Atkins still found time for pleasure. Whenever he could take an hour or so off, he was likely to be found at the New Exchange in the Strand. He had two pretty sisters, Anne and Sarah Williams, in chase, and they had a booth in the arcade with finery for sale.

The Quaker was still in the West Indies, and Captain Atkins still tramped the London streets, drank in low taverns, or lounged in the great room at Derby House. He nursed his grudges, turned over all sorts of plans in his twisted mind, and borrowed small sums from his friends, including his "cousin," Sam Atkins.

Typical of his petty schemes was one he proposed to Sam in mid-August, 1678. Accompanied by a crony, Captain Henry Hurst, an officer in the Duke of Monmouth's Guards, Captain Charles hunted out Sam in Derby House, found him at work in the Lords room, and told him that Captain Hurst had an acquaintance, a seaman named John Child, who hankered to become a purser and was willing to give Hurst and Captain Charles ten guineas for help in getting an appointment.

"Now," said Captain Charles eagerly, "let's bring the man to you, and do you promise him to do what you can for him, so Captain Hurst and I shall have the ten guineas. You know five guineas will do well this Bartholomew Fair time for me." Bartholomew Fair in West Smithfield was the event of the year for Londoners. For a fortnight there were puppet shows, vulgar drolls, mountebanks, rope dancers, including girls in tights, tumblers, jugglers, freaks, animal acts, strolling whores, and at every turn a booth selling food and drink. Sam wished the captain well, but his request was a nuisance.
“What is the man?” Sam asked. “Has he been at sea? Does he have good certificates?”

“I don’t know, faith,” said Captain Charles. “We’ll bring him to you, and you shall speak with him.”

“Well—do,” said Sam reluctantly. “But all I can do will signify nothing for him. I can only lay his papers before the Secretary, who, if he appears a good man, will lay them with others before the King when occasion shall offer.”

“That’s enough,” said Captain Charles. Once he had brought the seaman and the clerk together he could claim the guineas. What happened after that was none of his concern.

It was more than enough for Sam’s conscience and training. Mr. Pepys, who in his younger days as Clerk of the Acts of the Navy had gloated over gold given him by favored merchants, had grown rich and honest. Now he trained his clerks to beware not only of bribery but even of the appearance of favoritism. Troubled, Sam called Captain Charles to a window out of earshot.

“Pray,” he whispered, “don’t engage me in this matter to get the poor man’s money. I would not do it for never so much.”

“No, no,” said Captain Charles, “you shall speak with him first.” Then, raising his voice, he called, “Captain Hurst, you shall come and dine with me at my lodgings tomorrow and have the man there.” Turning to Sam, he added, “And you shall come and dine with us.”

“Well—I will. Where do you lodge?”

“I have told you often enough,” said Captain Charles, “but you would never be so kind as to come and see me. I lodge near Wild House, just off Drury Lane.”

Sam promised to come, and the two captains took their leave, well satisfied. But at noon the next day Sam pretended a press of business and failed to keep the appointment. Much to his relief he heard no more about the matter.
In September, 1678, Sam forgot Captain Charles Atkins’s sordid little schemes in the excitement of the Popish Plot, a fantasy dreamed up by a mad Anglican clergyman, Dr. Israel Tonge, and brought to diabolical reality by another clergyman, Titus Oates, the greatest liar in history. He was also a confidence man, a blackmailer, a thief, and a pederast.

Oates was a squat, bandy-legged man with a harsh, nasal voice, a broad, red face, and a chin so long that his mouth seemed to be precisely in the middle of his face. He was nearly thirty. He had been expelled from school; sent down from Cambridge University; charged with perjury; put out of his vicarage at Bobbing, in Kent, for drunkenness and theft; dismissed from a post as naval chaplain for sodomy; and kicked out of a Catholic seminary in Spain and a Catholic college in France.

In London, pretending to be a Catholic, Oates had become acquainted with a number of disguised Jesuits whose mere presence in England made them liable to execution. Some of them had relieved Oates with food and money in his necessity, but Oates had no room for gratitude in his brutish mind. He was motivated by greed, malice, and naked lust for power, partly covered by the loin-cloth of sanctimony.

After several attempts to get attention from skeptical authorities, Oates appeared at last before the Privy Council on September 28 and gave a long, remarkably detailed account of a hellish Jesuit conspiracy to murder King Charles, replace him with his brother and heir-presumptive, the Catholic Duke of York, and bring England back to the Church of Rome by fire and sword. York, too, was to be murdered if he failed to live up to the Jesuits’ expectations. Two lay Catholics, Pickering and Grove (said Oates), had already twice tried to assassinate the King, once in January, 1678, and again in March; and Father Coniers, a Jesuit, planned to stab him with a consecrated weapon, a knife with
a foot-long blade. There were twenty thousand Catho-
licals ready to rise in arms the moment the King was
dead. The Jesuits had appointed five Catholic lords to
head the insurrection, and a French army was poised to
invade Ireland. Oates gave the names of a hundred
priests and lay brothers involved in the conspiracy,
plus some two dozen Catholic noblemen and gentlemen.

Oates's account was so circumstantial, and he named
names with such assurance, that only the most skeptical
could doubt him. At his request, the Council gave him war-
rants and sent him with a file of musketeers to arrest those
he had accused and seize their papers. For the next two
days and nights, in pouring rain, Oates was busy routing
out and carrying to Newgate Prison dozens of concealed
priests and known Catholic laymen, including the Duchess
of York's secretary, Edward Coleman. Cynical King
Charles, rightly convinced that Oates was a liar, refused to
take him seriously and went off to the autumn horse
races at Newmarket. There, on October 11, fortunate Mr.
Pepys joined him for a long weekend.

Had it not been for sheer luck, Oate's fragile structure
of lies might have collapsed under its own weight. How-
ever, among Coleman's confiscated letters were some with
phrases that could easily be construed as referring to a
Popish Plot. English Protestants speculated and stirred
uneasily. They all knew about the fires of Smithfield in
the reign of Bloody Queen Mary and the Gunpowder Plot
of 1605, celebrated with fireworks and "pope-burnings"
every November 5, Guy Fawkes Day. They remembered
the massacres by Irish Catholics in 1641 and the Great
Fire of London, presumably set by Catholics. Moreover,
they were constantly aware of the menace from Catholic
France, whose king, Louis XIV, believed himself to be
divinely appointed to drive heresy from all Europe, and
whose armies now threatened Protestant Holland.

In October speculation turned to certainty. On Saturday,
October 12, a date to remember, Sir Edmund Bury God-
frey, a melancholy, conscientious justice of the peace,
left his London home and was seen no more alive. Five
days later two rustics stumbled on his body in a ditch at
the foot of Primrose Hill, north of London. He had been
beaten and strangled, his neck had been broken, and his
own sword had been thrust through his heart after death.
He had not been robbed.

Now it so happened that three weeks before Oates re­
vealed his Plot to the Privy Council, he had taken a
written "Narrative" to Justice Godfrey and had sworn to
the truth of his statements. When this fact became known,
the truth was clear as daylight to a suspicious and
frightened nation—Godfrey had been murdered by Papists
because he knew too much. Nations, like men, are sub­
ject to spasms of mindless hate, during which they will
believe anything, no matter how incredible.

Strangely enough, omniscient Titus Oates did not know
who had killed Justice Godfrey; at least he accused no
one. To this day no one knows who murdered the magis­
trate—perhaps mad Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke,
who owed Godfrey a grudge. No matter. Every English
Protestant knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the
Jesuits, fiends from hell, were guilty. Oates had told the
truth about the Plot; suddenly he was "the Savior of the
Nation."

Uneasiness boiled up to an orgy of mass hysteria as
rumors multiplied. The body of Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey
(said a contemporary, Roger North) "was brought to town
with a prodigious attendance of rabble and laid in the
street exposed to the view of all comers, and all that saw
it went away inflamed." Cannon surrounded Whitehall
Palace, and men searched the cellars under the Parlia­
ment House for concealed gunpowder. The trained bands
of London patrolled the streets day and night; every
Protestant went armed with sword and pistol, and ladies
carried pistols in their muffs. Sir Thomas Player, a London
alderman, voiced the common fear in deathless words,
"I do not know but the next morning we may all rise with
our throats cut."
On October 19, King Charles issued a proclamation offering a reward of £500 to anyone who could discover Godfrey's murderers, plus a pardon if the discoverer was an accomplice. It was all the government could do. The police force of London consisted of citizen watchmen for each ward—decrepit Dogberrys who tippled in taverns instead of patrolling the streets—incompetent parish constables, the City trained bands, the sheriffs' posses, and the King's Guards. There were no detectives, no investigators except for a few energetic justices of the peace who issued warrants, searched for and captured culprits, examined them, committed them to prison, and gave evidence at their trials. The law courts had their bailiffs and the Secretaries of State their King's Messengers to serve warrants on information received. "Thief-takers," who made a trade of recovering stolen goods and were usually in league with the thieves, did a thriving business. Informers, "knights of the post," who profited from offered rewards, were mercenaries willing to swear to anything for a fee. Now, craving the offered reward of £500, dozens of informers crawled out of their holes to pester the Secretaries with "informations."

On October 21, Parliament met, and the Popish Plot took on a new dimension. The party long in opposition to King and Court, called variously "the country party," "the faction," "the fanatics," or "the mutineers," and soon to be known as the Whigs, was a loose coalition of republicans, dissenters, tightfisted country gentlemen, monied merchants, opportunists, and malcontents opposed, they said loudly, to "Popery and Arbitrary Power." The party was sometimes led by "the great little lord." Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury. Physically Shaftesbury was a small man, worn with years and a suppurating ulcer in his side kept open by a drain, or tap, but his fiery spirit overrode his weakness. (Among beggars and thieves a gallon pot of wine with a tap was called "a Shaftesbury.") Shaftesbury was a brilliant orator, an able administrator, and a ruthless politician. He had been great in Cromwell's
government; with the Restoration he turned cat-in-pan and became great in the government of Charles II. He was successively Chancellor of the Exchequer, a Commissioner of the Treasury, and finally Lord Chancellor. Now he was in opposition; his enemies called him "Lord Shaftesbury."

Between Shaftesbury and James, Duke of York, an obstinate and vindictive bigot, there was war to the knife. Shaftesbury knew that he was doomed if the Catholic Duke ever succeeded to the throne. Motivated partly by self-interest and lust for power, and partly by honest fear of a Catholic king, Shaftesbury bent all his energies to his major project: excluding York from the succession to the throne—by any necessary means. Expediency is the last refuge of patriots.

Shaftesbury did not invent the Popish Plot, but he was quick to see its usefulness to his cause. When Parliament convened, it promptly sent to the Tower the five lords accused by Oates as leaders of the Catholic insurrection. Each House appointed a committee to investigate Godfrey's murder and the Plot in general. Shaftesbury and a few of his cronies on the Lords' committee formed a Secret Committee within the larger body to examine prisoners, question witnesses and informers, and read confiscated papers, looking for anything that might tend to incriminate Catholics, but particularly for evidence pointing to the Duke of York as an accessory to Godfrey's murder.

Meanwhile, the London magistrates enforced the penal laws against Catholics, harried them as recusants, ransacked their houses for arms and seized their best horses. Officeholders, fearing they might be accused as Papists, hastened to take the Anglican Sacrament and the oath against the Doctrine of Transubstantiation as required by the Test Act of 1673. In the universal madness, no man was safe.

Merely to doubt the reality of the Plot left one open to charges of being Popishly affected. Mr. Pepys, who had no love for Papists, had his doubts, but wisely said nothing.
Like all extreme Protestants, Sam Atkins believed wholeheartedly in the Plot. When, at Parliament’s request, the King issued a proclamation banning all Catholics at least ten miles from London, Sam was delighted. “By God,” he said to his friend, John Walbanke, “I am glad of it, for now we shall be rid of them.”

The Opposition Party took over the Plot, pouring oil on the flames of panic. On October 31, six men in long black cloaks carried a coffin with the rotting flesh of Sir Edmund Godfrey through streets lined with roaring mobs, to St. Martin’s Church. In solemn procession before the coffin marched seventy-two clergymen in their robes: behind it came more than a thousand gentlemen on foot, all in deep mourning. Dr. William Lloyd, the eloquent rector of St. Martin’s, mounted to the pulpit, guarded by two stalwart gentlemen in parson’s robes. The burden of his funeral sermon was a violent denunciation of Catholics. “The crowd was prodigious,” said Roger North. “both at the procession and in and about the church, and so heated that anything called Papist, were it cat or dog, had probably gone to pieces in a moment.”

In all the tumult and shouting, Captain Charles Atkins, ostensibly a Protestant, but a man without faith or conviction, looked, listened, and bided his time. Penniless and deeply in debt, he saw “Doctor” Titus Oates, the great informer, now with lodgings in Whitehall Palace, servants, guards, and a pension of £600 a year. Why shouldn’t Captain Charles become an informer and get the £500 reward offered for Godfrey’s killers? At least, by coming forward zealously as a King’s witness, he could win favor at Court and get the King’s ear again. Then all would be plain sailing; he could convince the easy King of his innocence in the Quaker affair and get his command again. All he needed was a plausible story to swear to at the cost of a little perjury—in seventeenth-century law no more than a misdemeanor. Of course, godly people believed that one who swore falsely endangered his immortal soul,
but Captain Charles was sure that God would never damn a gentleman for a few lies.

He thought of his new acquaintance, John Child, the seaman he had asked Sam Atkins to prefer to a purser's place. (Sam's cavalier treatment of his request still rankled; it had cost the captain five golden guineas.) Child was a proper man for a plot. He was a shady character, a desperate fellow with dubious antecedents and some queer friends, among them one Owens, "a captain in the French sea service"—probably a spy. Since their first meeting in August, Captain Charles and Child had often met and drunk together at a tavern, The Three Tobacco Pipes in Holborn.

Cautiously Captain Charles cooked up his "information," let a whiff of it reach the Secretaries' noses, and on October 30 served it to the Privy Council, piping hot and garnished with his oath. (He had no written "narrative," but Secretary Williamson kept notes.)

Early in October, said the captain, very impressive in his best uniform, he met John Child by chance in Holborn Fields and at his request went with him to a shed at the backside of The Three Tobacco Pipes, where they could be private. After the master of the house had brought each a pot of ale. Child remarked that he knew all about the captain's necessities and troubles and suggested that he might undertake a project that would put money in his purse.

"I replied," said Captain Charles, "anything that was honorable I would undertake, or that became a gentleman, but to rob on the highway, or anything of that nature that was base, I would not do it. He answered me that it was a thing of greater moment than that. He told me it was the killing of a man"—presumably Godfrey, although Captain Charles never mentioned the prospective victim's name.

Virtuously, Captain Charles refused to become a party to murder. Child, he said, gave him eight or nine days to think over the proposition, promising him a great reward if he joined with a group described only as "them." Some
days later Captain Charles met Child at another tavern, The Three Cans in Holborn. "He told me," said the captain, "if I would not agree with them to help to murder him, yet if I would conceal it, I should have £100 brought to my chamber; but if I did reveal it, I should not outlive it." At the risk of his life and the loss of £100, courageous Captain Charles was now revealing the plot. Asked if he knew or could say anything more about the affair, Captain Charles replied, "No."

The Privy Council was not impressed. As an informer, Captain Charles was a rank amateur; he lacked the monumental brass of a Titus Oates. Here is vague talk of "him" and "them," but no prominent names, no mention of Catholics and Jesuits, no oaths sealed in blood, no secret midnight meetings, no promises of absolution for murder or of masses to be said for conspirators' souls—nothing, in short, to tie Captain Atkins's little fairy tale to Godfrey's murder or the Popish Plot.

John Child, brought in to confront his accuser, denied everything, asserting that he had been playing cards with Owens and Captain Charles in the shed behind The Three Tobacco Pipes on October 2. The Privy Council threw up its collective hands, thanked Captain Charles, and dismissed him. However, as a precaution, the Council sent Child to Newgate. One never knew.

For two days Captain Charles, aware of his failure, thought things over. He realized his mistake: he had been too cautious, too fearful of committing himself and naming names. Clearly the Council wanted a culprit of more substance and rank than a mere out-of-work sailor. Full of self-pity and brooding over his wrongs, Captain Charles thought of Secretary Pepys, the man responsible for his present plight. Captain Charles could justify anything he did to Mr. Pepys on the ground of simple self-defense. He knew that the Quaker would soon be on its way home, and he would have to face a court-martial. (In fact, the Quaker did not leave the Leeward Islands until Christmas, 1678.)
Surely Captain Charles could think of some way to involve Mr. Pepys in the Godfrey affair, if only to throw him off-balance and stall off the court-martial! He could hardly accuse Mr. Pepys himself of murder; the Secretary had been at Newmarket at the time of the killing. But he could have hired a desperado—John Child, perhaps. Could Captain Charles make a fresh discovery, involve Sam Atkins in what he had already deposed about Child, and through the clerk involve the master? How could Captain Charles plume up his will in double knavery—and win £500?

On the morning of November 1, Captain Atkins's uncle, Sir Philip Howard, a justice of the peace for Middlesex and Westminster, took his nephew’s Examination under oath. Perhaps Sir Philip, a member of the Opposition and a friend of Shaftesbury, coached the deponent in some particulars, but we must be careful not to take the credit away from Captain Charles. His was the material, the prime motive, and the means. Much later, good Mr. Pepys, in a reminiscent mood, commented that "my endeavor to bring Captain Atkins to an account made him play the rogue against me through my Atkins, and so rewarded me also for my mercy to him in getting him bailed."

According to the Examination, "Charles Atkins, Esquire, saith that in Derby House, being in discourse with Samuel Atkins (clerk to Mr. Pepys, Secretary of the Admiralty), the said Samuel did say "That Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey had very much vilified his master, and that if he lived long would be the ruin of him.' Upon which the said Samuel did ask this examinant 'Whether he did think Child to be a man of courage and secrecy?' To which this examinant did reply, 'That the said Child had been at sea, and had behaved himself very well, as he had been informed.' Upon which the said Samuel did bid this examinant 'Send the said Child to his master, Mr. Pepys, but not to him, the said Samuel, for that he would not be seen to know anything of it.'
“This examinant did endeavor to find out the said Child, but did not meet with him till the day after (this discourse had happened between him and Samuel Atkins) at The Three Tobacco Pipes in Holborn, where this examinant did tell Child ‘That Secretary Pepys would speak with him.’ And the next time that this examinant did see the said Child (after that he had given him that direction), he, the said Child, did endeavor to engage the said examinant to join with him in the murder of a man; the particulars of which this examinant hath declared before the King and Council, Wednesday last past.”

Captain Charles had learned his lesson well. Now, without directly saying so, he implied that Godfrey was murdered by John Child at Mr. Pepys's instigation. Of course, Samuel Atkins could deny that the reported conversation ever took place, but Captain Charles was sure that the clerk was a weak, soft-headed man, easily frightened and as pliable as wet leather. There was no danger from that quarter.

As in duty bound, Sir Philip Howard filed the Examination with Secretary of State Coventry and then hurried to tell my Lord Shaftesbury about it. As he listened, Shaftesbury's thin lips cracked in a smile. Mr. Pepys of the Navy, eh? Excellent! Lord Shaftesbury had an old bone to pick with that gentleman.

In February, 1674, Mr. Pepys had been denied the seat in the House of Commons to which he had just been elected by the borough of Castle Rising. One of the charges against him was that he was a crypto-Catholic. It was reported that a great man, Lord Shaftesbury himself, had seen an altar and a crucifix in Mr. Pepys's earlier residence in Seething Lane. Pressed by a committee of the House to confirm or deny the report, Shaftesbury had hesitated, quibbled, claimed loss of memory, and finally had refused to testify either way. After some trouble, Mr. Pepys's election was allowed to stand. However, Shaftesbury's ungentlemanly conduct had drawn from Mr. Pepys an angry, indiscreet letter, in effect accusing the earl of
malice. Shaftesbury had made no reply, but he had a long memory.

Much more important was the fact that Mr. Pepys, supposedly a good Protestant, had been the Duke of York's favorite when the Duke was Lord High Admiral, before the Test Act had forced York, as a Catholic, to resign his high place. Indeed, Mr. Pepys, though deploiring the Duke's Catholicism, was still loyal to his former patron; and York had a great deal of influence in naval affairs, even though the Admiralty was now headed by Lords Commissioners. If Lord Shaftesbury could get at Mr. Pepys, he could strike a shrewd blow at the Duke through him.

Of course, Shaftesbury mused, Captain Atkins is a coward and a rogue in grain, and his story is pretty thin; it may well be a cheat, a gull, and the members of Parliament may refuse to swallow it. Still, if we can't bring them to swallow worse nonsense than this, we shall never do anything with them. The end justifies the means.

Late that afternoon the Lords' Secret Committee sent a message to Secretary Coventry asking him to send to the Marquis of Winchester's house in Lincolns Inn Fields the Examination of Charles Atkins, the depositions made by Charles and John Child before the Privy Council, and "the body of Samuel Atkins."