Night came early on Friday, November 1, but Mr. Thomas Smith, King's Messenger, was in no hurry to serve Secretary Coventry's warrant. Shortly after five o'clock, he accompanied a friend to the Rhenish wine house in Channel Row, sat down at the fireside with a bottle, and by a porter sent word to Derby House that he wished to see Mr. Samuel Atkins. Presuming that he was needed on naval business, Sam told his fellow clerk, John Walbanke, where he was going, and sauntered around to the tavern at his leisure. Mr. Smith told him that Secretary Coventry wanted to see him.

Readily enough, Sam agreed to go to Whitehall, but he wondered what the problem was and why a messenger was sent to fetch him. Mr. Smith, a chuckle-headed fellow, refused to explain, but he showed Sam a warrant for his arrest, saying that he had been ordered not to show it unless Mr. Atkins refused to go with him.

"There's no need for a warrant," said Sam jauntily. "I am free to go with you." He was shocked when Mr. Smith asked for his sword. Uneasily he searched his memory for a rule he had broken or a crime he had committed unwittingly, but his conscience was clear.

At Secretary Coventry's office in Whitehall he waited with Mr. Smith until the Secretary returned from his supper. Then he waited again while Mr. Coventry wrote a letter to Lord Shaftesbury. No one would tell him what he was wanted for. Surely there must be a mistake somewhere.
Mystified and apprehensive, Sam got into a hackney coach with the King’s Messenger. The night was bitterly cold. The streets were almost empty and completely dark except for the occasional gleam of a candle-lit window or the flicker of a lantern hanging beside a door. But Sam Atkins knew his city, and in spite of his panic he recognized landmarks—the rumble of the coach wheels on cobbles here and gravel there, the darker loom of a building, or the stink of a lay-stall where night soil was piled to dry.

It was a long drive up King Street and St. Martin’s Lane to Longacre Street, and thence through Great Queen Street to Lincoln’s Inn Fields. The coach turned into the driveway of Winchester House, a big, square, brick-and-stone mansion, standing well back from the street. Its windows, ablaze with candles, were almost dimmed by the flaring torches held by servants in the courtyard, where half a dozen coaches waited. The horses’ breath steamed in the frosty air.

Now thoroughly frightened, his heart pounding, Sam Atkins followed Mr. Smith into the great hall, where they stayed while a footman carried Secretary Coventry’s letter up the stairs. When the servant came down and beckoned, they followed him up the wide stairs to an upper hall. Mr. Smith pushed Sam through a doorway guarded by soldiers and said goodbye—his mission completed.

Sam found himself in a large, warm, comfortably furnished room, redolent of tobacco, wine, and apple wood burning in the fireplace. Six lords, members of the Secret Committee, elegant gentlemen in silks and satins, with broad-brimmed, feathered hats perched atop their great periwigs, were clustered together at a table, examining some papers by the light of a chandelier. In his black cloak, gray coat and breeches, Sam Atkins looked like a magpie among birds of paradise.

Sam recognized the lords: hawk-faced Lord Shaftesbury, seated at the table, a little man, pale and drawn, with his face half hidden by a fair periwig; the burly Duke of Buckingham, still notorious for his scandalous affair
with Lady Shrewsbury, his once handsome visage reddened and bloated by dissipation; Lord Halifax, a dignified gentleman with a lean, intellectual face; Henry Compton, Bishop of London, who, even in his flat hat, silk gown, and cassock, still looked like the soldier he had been before taking orders; the Earl of Essex, a man of uneasy temper, quick to wrath; and the Committee's host, the eccentric Marquis of Winchester, who said very little. Another gentleman, somewhat apart and clearly not a member of the Committee, turned out to be Captain Atkins's uncle, Sir Philip Howard.

It was an imposing display of wealth and power. In spite of his middle-class independence, Sam had learned from Mr. Pepys to respect authority. Quite without thinking, he took off his hat.

Lord Shaftesbury looked up from his papers and crooked a finger at Sam, who stumbled toward the table. My lord assessed the frightened clerk at a glance and smiled. An easy cully, he thought.

"Know you, Mr. Samuel Atkins," said my lord gently, "one Master, or Captain, Atkins?"

Sam found his voice with an effort. "Yes, my lord," he croaked.

"How long have you known him?"

"About two or three years, I think."

"Are you related?"

"No, my lord." Sam hesitated and then volunteered, "Only for names' sake we have called cousin."

Lord Shaftesbury nodded and smiled. His manner was kindly, almost paternal.

"Do you think, or believe, he has any reason to do you a prejudice?"

Sam's memory leaped to the affair of Captain Charles and the seaman who hoped to become a purser, but his judgment quickly rejected it. "No, my lord, I know of none."

"Did you ever tell him, in your discourse about the Plot, that there was no kindness—or a want of friendship, I
think 'twas—betwixt Mr. Pepys and Sir Edmund Godfrey?"

Sam was more mystified than ever. What stuff was this? What was it leading to? "No, my lord, I never mentioned Sir Edmund Godfrey’s name to him in my whole life upon any occasion that I remember, nor ever talked with him about the Plot."

Lord Essex broke in abruptly. "Do you know one Child?" he barked. Child? Sam hesitated; he vaguely remembered the name of Josiah Child, merchant.

"No, sir. I have heard of such a man’s having been concerned in the victualing of the Navy, but to my knowledge I never saw him."

"No, no," said Lord Essex testily. "This is another sort of a man, and one whom you will be found to know very well."

Sam Atkins, who prided himself on his memory, was nettled. He was rapidly regaining his self-confidence. Instead of charging him with a crime, the lords were treating him like a schoolboy, caught out of bounds. "My lord," he replied sharply, "if upon seeing him I shall so, I wont fail to own it."

"Pray, then," Lord Essex said to a footman standing by the door leading to an inner room, "call Child in." In a moment John Child appeared, hat in hand. He was a very ordinary, nondescript fellow, by his garb a seaman.

"Do you now not know this man?" asked Lord Essex.

"No, my lord." Sam replied positively, "I never saw him in my life to my remembrance."

Lord Essex glared at Sam and then turned to Child. "What say you, Child? Know you this person?"

"No, my lord," Child mumbled, twisting his hat in his hands nervously, "I never saw him in my life."

Lord Essex sat back, scowling. Lord Shaftesbury took command again, sent Child away, and called for Captain Charles Atkins, who swaggered in through another door, his ever-present clay pipe in his hand. Sam saluted him, but the captain avoided meeting his "cousin's" eyes.
“Pray, Mr. Charles Atkins,” said Lord Shaftesbury, “what did Samuel Atkins tell you of Mr. Pepys and Sir Edmund Godfrey?"

It was a moment of triumph for Captain Charles. Once more he was a personality, a man of importance. Now he could even the score with Sam Atkins, the mere clerk before whom he had abased himself so often to beg for a loan.

“My lord,” he said smoothly, “he told me there was a difference ‘twixt his master and Sir Edmund Godfrey, and I asked him if Sir Edmund Godfrey were a Parliament man or no, and he said no. I asked him whether the difference was upon the occasion of Mr. Pepys being formerly accused for a Catholic in the House of Commons, and he said no, ‘twas upon this occasion—”

Upon this occasion? What occasion? Sam Atkins was puzzled and angry. He had never had such a conversation with Captain Charles, and he knew very well that there had never been a difference between Mr. Pepys and Justice Godfrey.

“My lord,” he said, keeping his temper with difficulty, “I know not what has led Captain Atkins to say this. I assure you I never told him in my life one word of it, never talked to him about the Plot, or mentioned Sir Edmund Godfrey’s name to him—that I remember—on any occasion. I am sure that I never made him a subject for any discourse.”

The lords lifted their eyebrows and looked their disbelief, but Lord Shaftesbury was still genial, almost coaxing, as if Sam Atkins were a child to be wheedled. “Did you not ask Charles Atkins whether this Child was a man of courage and secrecy, and bid Charles Atkins send him to Derby House to enquire for your master, but be sure not to ask for you?”

Sam was outraged. “No, my lord, not in my life one word like it.”
"You know, Mr. Atkins," said Captain Charles, carefully staring at his pipe, "this discourse was between us in your large room in the window."

"Captain Atkins," cried Sam, finally losing his temper, "God, your conscience, and I know 'tis notoriously untrue. The last time I saw you at Derby House was on Monday, the twenty-first of October, Mr. John Beverly, lieutenant of the Mountague, being there, which I remember because we all three came out of Derby House together about one o'clock and parted in King Street. I went to dinner, and you two went toward Whitehall, Mr. Beverly, to whom I talked all the way going, having invited me to dine the next day at his house, which I did.

"All that passed between us then—our stay together alone being not half a quarter of an hour—was that coming all three out of the little office together you pulled me to the window in the large room and asked me to lend you five shillings, to which I said aye, and so going downstairs I stayed back—Mr. Beverly going down first—and pulled you by the coat and put the crown in your hand to prevent Beverly observing it. This was the last time I saw you. The time before was in August, about the middle, a little before Bartholomew Fair."

Once well under way, with adrenalin flooding his veins, Sam Atkins could not be stopped until he had had his say. He went on to tell the story of Captain Atkins, Captain Hurst, and the seaman who wanted to be a purser. "Possibly you might name his name and it might be Child, but I don't remember it." Sam had avoided going to dinner at Captain Atkins's lodgings, even though at noon, near Wallingford House, he had met the Captain's handsome wife, who told him he was "expected and stayed for at her house," and coaxed him to come. Sam thought he was well rid of a dirty business. "And I did not see Captain Atkins again until the aforesaid twenty-first of October."

There was a moment's silence when Sam had finished. Captain Atkins made no denial, but he moved slowly out of earshot. The Secret Committee refused to comment.
Its members were not interested in the truth. United in their hatred of the Duke of York, they sought a weapon against him. Sam Atkins might be the arrow to fit their bowstring.

“Come, Mr. Atkins,” said Lord Shaftesbury quietly, “you are a seeming hopeful young man, and truly, for aught I see, a good ingenuous one. Captain Atkins has sworn this positively against you, to whom he bears no malice, but has acknowledged several obligations. Besides, to tell you truth, I don’t think him to have wit enough to invent such a lie. Prithee, be ingenuous with us, and tell us whether you said this or no.”

I assure your lordship,” Sam protested, “upon my faith, which I am ready to bind with my oath if you please, I never said one word in all my life like it.”

“Why,” said Shaftesbury, “we believe Mr. Charles Atkins to be a man that has loved wine and women and been a debauched man. but whence would you have us think him a rascal?”

“Why, my lord, this I would offer to you—only submitting it to you—how much a coward is to be judged so.” Then Sam told the story of the Quaker ketch and Captain Atkins’ cowardly submission to the Algerine rovers, an action for which he was still a prisoner on bail. The lords let him talk, two whispering together, one drumming on the table, another turning over papers. Clearly nobody cared what kind of a man Captain Atkins was.

Lord Shaftesbury was beginning to lose his patience; he decided to try a different approach. Perhaps the clerk was popishly affected.

“Pray, Sam Atkins,” he said, “what religion are you of?”

“My lord,” Sam replied proudly, “a Protestant, and my whole family before me.”

“Did you ever receive the Oath and the Sacrament?”

“No, my lord, but I was under an intention to do it on Sunday.”
"'Tis time," sneered Lord Essex.

"Well, now you won't do it, I am sure," said Shaftesbury, with his most winning smile, "You can't forgive Captain Atkins."

"Yes, my lord. I assure you I can and do, and to show you it, I forgive him too the debt he owes me—'twixt forty and fifty shillings—and I am ready to take the Sacrament with a clear conscience. I confess I have not done it, not thinking myself obliged by any employment I had to do it, as being a menial servant; and many thousands of my age—good Protestants—will be found not to have done it also."

"How long have you lived with Mr. Pepys?"

"Four years last August."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one years the twenty-ninth of last August."

"Where did you live before you came to Mr. Pepys?"

Sam Atkins had last lived with Mr. Homewood at Chatham, but he knew that Colonel Middleton, his first employer, and Lord Shaftesbury had been friends. He shaded the truth.

"I lived formerly with Colonel Middleton."

"Well," said Shaftesbury, disappointed of his hopes, "I am sure he was a Protestant. But now you are brought up to business and have access to Catholic St. James's, 'tis to be feared you may be otherwise, for we are apt to suspect people inclining to the sea."

"My lord, I assure you I never had temptations from without or within to alter my religion, I thank God, and I hope I never shall."

Now the burly Duke of Buckingham came around the table and loomed over the clerk; his breath was heavy with the fumes of brandy. "Well, Sam Atkins," he said, with a finger on Sam's forehead, "I never saw you before, but I'll swear you're an ingenuous man. I see the working of your brain. Pray, declare what you know of this matter, whether you did say these words or no."

The other lords—all but Shaftesbury—gathered around Sam, urging him in friendly fashion to tell the truth, to
confess everything, to admit that Captain Atkins had quoted him correctly, that he had indeed sent word to Child to come and see Mr. Pepys. But the clerk's blood was up. He realized now that the Committee was after Godfrey's killer, and that in some obscure way Captain Atkin's lies pointed to Mr. Pepys as the suborner of murder—a ridiculous notion. Stubbornly Sam declared his inability to say what the Committee wanted him to say. Again and again he declared that Captain Atkins had lied. Sam's conscience was bolstered by love for his master and by fear of what Mr. Pepys might say or do. The mixture was unbeatable.

At last Lord Shaftesbury ordered Sam and Captain Atkins out of the room. Sam had barely time to catch his breath and try to steady his whirling brain before he was called in again. Cajolery had failed; now the Committee would try threats. The lords were ominously silent and gloomy. Lord Shaftesbury wore his grimmest look, a look to strike terror into the hardiest criminal.

"Mr. Atkins," he said, "we are to be plain with you. Here's a positive oath against you." He paused to let the significance of his statement sink in. Sam Atkins knew what he meant. Fundamental in English law was the belief that no Christian would swear falsely; therefore, a positive oath sworn against a prisoner at the bar of justice was taken as proof of his guilt. Juries considered the accused guilty until he could prove his innocence. If the lords did not accept Sam's denials, how could he hope for credit with a jury? How could he prove Captain Atkins a liar?

Watching his victim's face keenly, Shaftesbury continued, "We can't answer to Parliament the doing less than committing you to Newgate."

Newgate! Rebuilt since the Great Fire of 1666, Newgate Prison, a foul and noisome rabbit-warren of cells, common rooms, and underground cellars, was the terror of evil-doers. No doubt the lords could commit Sam; behind them was the crushing power of Parliament. For a
moment Sam was dismayed, but his sturdy courage met the challenge.

"What your lordships please," he said. "If you send me to be hanged, I could say no more, or otherwise."

Again the lords pressed him to tell everything he knew. He would not be harmed if he did so—he was not himself involved—he was in no danger unless he concealed information about a crime—there were certain rewards. But their words broke on the solid rock of Sam's integrity.

"My lords," he said, a little pompously perhaps, "the telling a lie will do me a great deal of hurt, and I trust I never shall. But I must tell a lie if I say otherwise than what I have already said."

Sir Philip Howard made a last appeal which was also a threat. "Mr. Atkins, you have not lived so long in an office but you know the laws of the nation to be such as will bring you under severe punishment if you be found to conceal or cloak anything of this nature. You bring yourself in accessory to it by doing so."

True enough; it was a hanging matter. Well, so be it. Sam's early Puritanism had taught him fatalism, to accept martyrdom at the hands of the wicked. "Sir," he replied, "I very well know it, and I know also the laws of God bring me under a worse guilt if I tell a lie, which I must do if I say anything in this matter different from what I have done." There was a higher law that said "A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall perish." Sam Atkins knew his Bible and could always find an apt quotation to bolster and sustain a heroic pose. Beset, harassed, and frightened as he was, such is the contrariety of human nature that he could find joy in defying his accusers, come what might.

Lord Shaftesbury saw that further threats would be useless. Let the foolish young man have time to consider his plight, time for the fear of death to overcome his scruples. It would be best to treat him gently; it would never do to throw him into a dungeon in irons, and torture would merely stiffen his Puritan stubbornness. Besides, Mr.
Pepys, a man to be reckoned with, would make the welkin ring twice if he learned that his favorite clerk was being ill-treated.

Shaftesbury called in Captain William Richardson, the Keeper of Newgate, who waited in the hall with John Child in a warder's custody, gave him instructions and a warrant committing Samuel Atkins to prison for "felony in concealing the murder of Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey," and turned to more important business. The hour was late, but he was thinking of delivering a speech at the next day's session of the House of Lords, demanding that the Duke of York be dismissed from the Privy Council. He wanted to consult with his colleagues.

Sam Atkins stumbled from the room with the Keeper, only half seeing Captain Charles's mocking smile in the hallway. In the frosty courtyard Captain Richardson and Child's warder bundled their charges into a waiting coach. The cold night air was a pleasant shock. Sam could almost feel his mind clearing as the coach lurched down Holborn Hill, across Holborn Bridge, and down Snow Hill to Newgate.

The ill-omened twin towers of the prison, with their sculptures of Justice, Mercy, and Truth, were ghost-like in the glimmer of the jailers' lanterns; the entrance a black, yawning mouth as the gates creaked open. The passageway stank of urine and excrement. Inside, past the lodge where felons were fettered, the air was thick with the stench of decay, mildew, unwashed bodies, vomit, and rotten flesh.

John Child, who had previously paid his entrance fee of eleven shillings and sixpence and his "easement" fee of ten shillings and sixpence to be free of his shackles, disappeared with his warder toward the Felons' Common Side, where there was neither air nor light, coals nor blankets. Sam Atkins was luckier. He was not chained; he was not even required to pay entrance or easement fees. Captain Richardson, a taciturn man, led him past the entrance lodge to the Keeper's quarters, took him upstairs to a spartan chamber with a sea-coal fire, a bed, a stool,
and a chamber-pot, and left him with a curt "good night," locking the door after him.

Sam Atkins sat on the stool by a barred window overlooking the street. Suddenly he was exhausted and aware that he had missed his usual supper of bread and cheese. Deprived of his audience of tormentors, he could give himself up to despair. He was alone with his whirling thoughts, the all-pervading prison stench, the far-off screams of rage and laughter from the Felons' Common Side, and the distant, monotonous voice of the bellman, the sexton of St. Sepulchre's Church, in the street before the prison gate.

"You prisoners who are within," he chanted, ringing his handbell, "who for wickedness and sin, after many mercies shown you, are now appointed to die tomorrow morning—" Was Sam Atkins to die? Surely, but not tomorrow; there would have to be a trial first, and Mr. Pepys would help him. But what chance would he have against the Attorney General and the merciless Committee of Lords? Why not go along with the cheat and let Mr. Pepys look to himself? Briefly Sam was tempted—but, no, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," especially if the neighbor was Mr. Pepys.

"—the great bell of St. Sepulchre shall toll for you in form of and manner of a passing bell as used to be tolled for those who are at the point of death—" Aye, better to die with dignity than face the wrath of God—or of Mr. Pepys, as terrible as an army with banners. But life is sweet. even here in this hell on earth, foul with the pestilential breath of evil. Foh! How it stinks!

"—to the end that all godly people, hearing that bell, and knowing that it is for your going to your deaths, may be stirred up heartily to pray God to bestow his grace and mercy upon you whilst you live—" Grace and mercy indeed! Oh, sinful Sam Atkins! This is your punishment for your wicked way of life, for your fall from grace. yielding to carnal temptation. But, oh, Sally! Sally with the soft white limbs and round breasts like
two young roes! Tender, loving Sally! God forgive me, a miserable sinner!

"—I beseech you, for Jesus Christ's sake, to keep this night in watching and prayer, to the salvation of your own souls, while there is yet time and place for mercy, as knowing tomorrow you must appear before the judgment seat of your creator, there to give an account of things done in this life and to suffer eternal torment for your sins committed against Him—" But surely the King would believe him, the King would save him. Sam had seen him often, a tall dark man with a saturnine face, walking at his wonted large pace through the Whitehall galleries or in St. James's Park, with courtiers trailing after him. King Charles was a good, merciful man, the father of his people. Mr. Pepys would plead for him with the King, and the King would save him from the gallows.

"—unless upon your hearty and unfeigned repentance you find mercy through the merits, death, and passion of your only mediator and advocate Jesus Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God to make intercession for as many of you as penitently return to him."

The sexton rang his handbell for the last time. Torn by grief and fear. Sam Atkins turned to his only comforter. He did not believe in miracles, but he firmly believed in the effectiveness of prayer. Kneeling by the window, he prayed long and fervently. Then he went to bed, but the grimy fingers of dawn had smudged his windows before he fell asleep.