

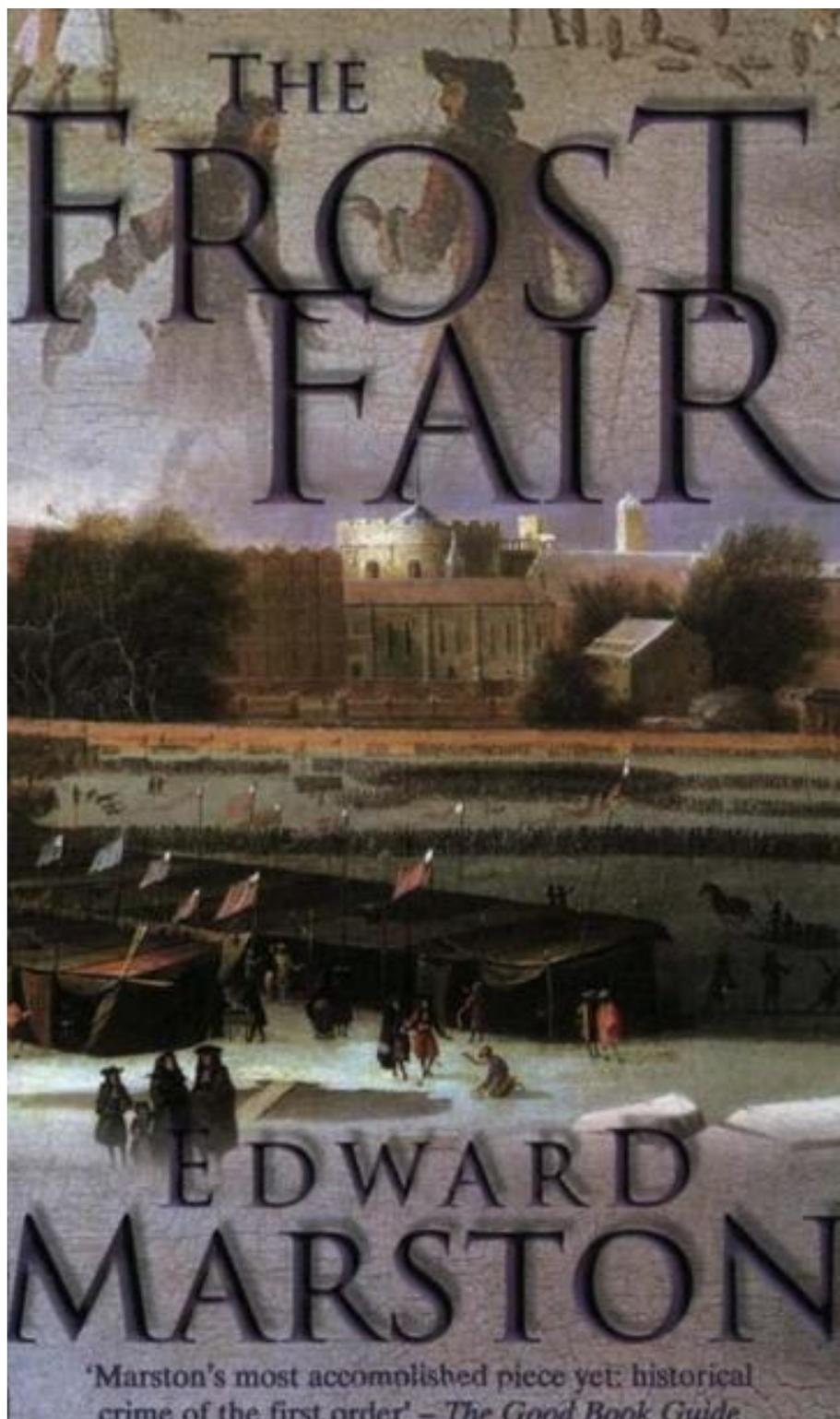
THE
FROST
FAIR

EDWARD
MARSTON

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crime of the first order' – *The Good Book Guide*

The Frost Fair

Edward Marston



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EDWARD MARSTON was born and brought up in South Wales. A full-time
writer for over thirty years, he has worked in radio, film, television and the theatre.
Prolific and highly successful, he is equally at home writing children's books or
literary criticism, plays or biographies and settings for his crime novels range from the
world of professional golf to the compilation of the Domesday Survey. *The Frost Fair*
is the fourth book in the series featuring architect Christopher Redmayne and Puritan
constable Jonathan Bale, set in Restoration London after the Great Fire of 1666.

*The frost still continuing more & more severe, the Thames before
London was planted with bothes in formal streetes, as in a Citty, or
Continual faire, all sorts of trades and shops furnished and full of
Commodities, even to a printing presse...*

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Chapter One

Snow came like a thief in the night. Quickly and silently it fell over the whole of London, searching every last corner and robbing the city of its distinctive appearance. When they awoke next day, Londoners found that they were in the grip of a raging blizzard. Not only did it smother the streets and coat the buildings in white, the snow was blown hither and thither by a mischievous wind that was determined to cause the greatest possible inconvenience. Heavy drifts leaned against doors, sealed up windows and blocked off lanes and alleyways. Wherever there was a gap in a threshold, a hole in a roof or even a tiny opening in some shutters, the snow blew in unbidden. Those who had slept in warm beds were fortunate. Beggars, urchins and stray animals that had spent the night in the open were destined to slumber forever. Unable to escape from the blizzard, they had curled up in doorways or hidden beneath benches, only to be frozen to the marrow by the chill wind and covered by an ever-thickening shroud of snow.

Fires were lit in grates all over the capital but they only added to the general discomfort. They might bring relief to those who huddled around them but the smoke they produced could not disperse in the cold air. A sulphurous stench invaded the streets. Even when the snow finally abated, the smoke continued to belch from the chimneys, darkening the sky and swirling down to attack the throats and eyes of any citizens unwise enough to be abroad. London was brought to a standstill. Markets were cancelled, trades abandoned, shops left shut. Few visitors entered the city by means of its gates or its famous bridge and none tried to leave. For most people, it was a time to wrap up and stay indoors. Hardier souls took on the task of clearing the streets as best they could so that some movement could take place. It was slow and laborious work.

The snow had a deadly accomplice in its wake. Frost set in with a vengeance. Icy fingers took London by the throat and sought to throttle it. The old, the sick and the very young were its first victims, weakened, tormented, then finally killed off by the freezing temperatures. Even the most robust citizens found themselves prey to the infections that winter always brings. Thoroughfares that had been matted with snow were now glistening with ice, waiting to catch the unwary traveller and send him flying. Broken legs, arms, wrists and ankles were inflicted indiscriminately. But it was the Thames that underwent the most dramatic change. Ice formed first along the banks then, gradually and imperceptibly, extended its reach across the whole river. The water that was the life-blood of the city disappeared from sight. Above the bridge, and partially below it, the Thames was one long sheet of cold, solid, continuous, unrelenting ice.

No ships could sail, no boats could ferry passengers from one bank to another. London was starved of everything that came in by water. The huge trade in coal from Newcastle came to a complete halt. Fuel prices soon soared. The city shivered on. Yet there was no sense of doom. Having endured virulent plague and a devastating fire in recent years, the capital met the latest crisis with a mixture of bravery and resignation. At a time of suffering, it also found a new source of pleasure. They held a frost fair.

'It's wonderful!' exclaimed Susan Cheever, clapping her gloved hands together. 'I've never been to a frost fair before.'

'No more have I,' said Christopher Redmayne, gazing around in amazement. 'A hundred architects could not effect such a transformation. Mother Nature has redesigned the whole city. In place of a river, we have the widest street in Europe.'

'Our pond freezes every year, and so does the stream at the bottom of our garden. But I never thought that a river as broad and eager as the Thames would turn to ice. Still less, that a fair could be set on its back.'

'That is to blame,' he explained, pointing to the huge bridge that spanned the river. 'The piers that support it are set into starlings that restrict the flow of water. Above the bridge, as you see, it freezes more thoroughly.' He smiled at her. 'Shall we test it?'

Susan laughed. 'Everyone else has done so.'

'Then we must not be left out.'

They were standing on the northern bank of the river, midway between London Bridge and the Tower. To keep out the sharp pinch of winter, Susan was wearing a long coat that all but brushed her ankles and a bonnet that protected her head and ears. A woollen scarf at the neck added both warmth and decoration. Enough of her face could be seen to remind her companion how beautiful she was. The sparkle in her eyes and the softness in her voice were a constant delight to him. He escorted her to the stone steps.

'Take my arm,' he offered. 'The stairs are slippery.'

'Thank you.'

'Descend with care.'

'I shall,' she promised.

Arm in arm, they went slowly down the steps and Christopher enjoyed every moment of their proximity. They had known each other long enough to dispense with some of the formalities but too short a time for him to take any real liberties. An aspiring young architect, Christopher was helping to rebuild the city after the ravages of the Great Fire and one of the most appealing commissions that had come his way was a contract to design a town house for Sir Julius Cheever, elected to Parliament to represent the county of Northamptonshire. Sir Julius was a truculent man by nature and not always easy company, but his daughter knew exactly how to handle him. During the building of the house, her friendship with its architect had steadily developed and he was thrilled that she took every excuse to quit her home in the Midlands so that she could visit the capital. The affection between them was unspoken but no less real for that.

'Well,' he said, as they stepped on to the ice, 'here we are.'

She tapped a foot. 'It feels so solid.'

'There's talk of a thaw but I've not seen a sign of it.' He released her arm. 'When you return home, you'll be able to boast that you achieved a true miracle.'

'A miracle?'

'You walked on water.'

'Some people are doing much more than that.'

'Let's take a closer look at them.'

Wanting her to take his arm again, Christopher contented himself with the merest touch of her back as his palm eased her forward. Like her, he wore his winter attire, a

long blue coat and a wide- brimmed hat keeping the wind at bay. He was tall, slim and well- favoured with an open face that glowed with intelligence. Peeping out from beneath his hat was curly brown hair with a reddish tinge. As they strolled towards the fair, they made a handsome couple, their reflections walking ahead of them in the ice. Christopher looked down to study her moving portrait but Susan only had eyes for the fair itself.

'Half of the city must be here,' she observed.

'Can you think of a better place to be?'

She pointed a finger. 'What's that they are roasting?'

'An ox, I think,' he said, staring across at the spit, 'and I fancy we'll see a pig or two being turned over a brazier as well. Warm meat sells well on cold days.'

'Will the fire not melt the ice?'

'It appears not.'

'Another miracle.'

'You'll have much to tell them in Northamptonshire.'

'I plan to linger here for a while first,' she said, turning to him with a smile.

He met her gaze. 'Call on me for anything you should require.'

They walked on into the heart of the fair. Lines of booths had been set up to form an avenue that was known as Temple Street since it ran from the bottom of Temple stairs. Every conceivable item of merchandise was on sale and there was loud haggling over each purchase. Large crowds and horse-drawn coaches went up and down the street with complete confidence. In some of the tents, freaks of nature were on display. Lurid banners advertised a cow with five legs, a sheep with two heads and a dog that could sing like a bird. Feats of strength were displayed by a giant of a blacksmith, bare-armed to show off his rippling muscles and seemingly impervious to the cold. Two dwarves in yellow costumes had a mock fight to entertain the children. Puppet plays and interludes were also drawing their audiences. Horse races were being held at regular intervals and sizeable bets were being made. Those who preferred more brutish pleasures flocked to the bull ring that had been erected below the Tower to cheer on the vicious hounds that baited the animals.

Watching it through startled eyes, Susan took it all in, anxious to miss nothing of the phenomenon. She paused beside a booth that housed a printing press.

'Look at that,' she said. 'Someone is actually printing upon the ice.'

'It's a wise tradesman who knows how to create a demand.'

'For what?'

'Do you not see what he is about?' asked Christopher, as the printer handed a piece of paper to a grinning customer. 'He prints but one line to certify that the bearer attended the frost fair and he charges sixpence for the privilege. Here's a shrewd businessman. I dare swear that he'll make five pounds a day at the enterprise.' He put a hand to his pocket. 'I'd be happy to buy a certificate for you.'

'A kind offer,' she said gratefully, 'but one I decline.'

'If anyone refuses to believe that you came here, turn to me for an affidavit.'

'Thank you.'

She gave him another warm smile and they moved on. They passed a woman selling pies and another with a basket of trinkets and dolls under her arm. Strong drink was in good supply and sounds of revelry came from a large tent. Even in the wintry

conditions, prostitutes found ways to ply their trade. Hearing the rustle of taffeta to his left, Christopher took care to block Susan's line of vision so that she did not see the woman was smiling provocatively through a gap in a booth at the men who passed by. An old man selling brooms competed aloud with other pedlars who were trumpeting the merits of their wares. A scarecrow of a ballad singer then claimed their attention, singing of the frost fair and thrusting his copies of his ballad at anyone who came within reach. The man's daughter, a tiny creature swathed in rags, followed him with a wooden bowl in which she kept the day's takings.

Christopher guided his friend between two booths and out into a wide expanse of ice. Sleds were darting to and fro. Skaters were everywhere, some with more sense of balance than others. Deprived of their livelihood, the notoriously foul-mouthed watermen who usually rowed people from one bank to the other, had just cause to turn the air blue with their oaths. Some of them, out of desperation, had harnessed their craft to horses so that the Thames could still yield some income for them. Christopher was glad that Susan never got close enough to any of them to hear their bad language. They came to a halt to survey the scene. It was, in the main, one of joy and merriment. London was defying the elements with a show of celebration. Christopher noticed something else.

'Civitas in civitate,' he remarked. 'Here is truly a city within a city, and one without the constraints we find on shore. Do you not feel the difference?' he went on. 'We are all one on the ice. Degree vanishes and an earl has no more status than an eel-catcher. The King himself was here yesterday to rub shoulders with his subjects and to carve his name in the ice as readily as any child. The frost fair abolishes rank and makes us all the same age. That is the real miracle.'

'I believe it is,' she agreed.

"Thank you for letting me bring you here.'

'I would not have missed it for the world.'

'It pleases me so much to have you here in London.'

'The pleasure is mutual, I assure you.'

Their eyes locked for a moment and Christopher suddenly realized just how fond he had become of Susan Cheever. While they had met as a result of the commission to design a house, it was the murder of her brother, Gabriel, which really drew them together. A bond had developed between them and Christopher was now aware just how strong that bond was. He felt an upsurge of affection for her. He was on the point of putting it into words when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone approaching them. Christopher turned to see two familiar faces. They belonged to Jonathan Bale and his wife, Sarah, who were strolling arm in arm across the ice. Delighted to meet his friends again, Christopher nevertheless wished that they had delayed their arrival by a few minutes. They had interrupted a special moment.

After a flurry of greetings, Jonathan smiled politely at Susan.

'I'll wager you've seen nothing like this in Northamptonshire,' he said.

'No, Mr Bale,' she replied. 'It's a source of great wonder to me.'

'And to us,' admitted Sarah. 'We've had bad frosts before and blocks of ice in the river but I can't remember it freezing over completely like this. It's such an adventure for the boys. We simply had to bring them.'

'Where are they?' asked Christopher.

'Skating over there,' she said, waving an arm in the direction of the bridge.

'*Trying to skate,*' corrected Jonathan with paternal fondness. 'Richard has taken well to the sport but Oliver is too clumsy on his feet as yet. There they are,' he added, jabbing a finger. 'Close by that boy on the sled. Do you see them?'

Christopher picked them out at once. Oliver Bale was moving gingerly across the ice while his younger brother, Richard, was skating with a degree of skill on the skates that their father had fashioned out of wooden blocks and straps of leather. Like so many other children on the river, they were enjoying themselves hugely. The parents watched their sons with indulgent smiles. Christopher liked the whole family but he had a particular fondness for Jonathan Bale.

In character and in background, the two men had little in common. Jonathan was a big, sturdy, diligent constable whose Puritan sympathies made him a stern critic of what he saw as the excesses of the restored monarchy. Dour by inclination, he had the kind of misshapen face, disfigured by two large warts and a livid scar, that even his doting wife could never describe as handsome. For her part, Sarah was a stout, bustling, warm-hearted, gregarious woman who had kept her good looks, if not her figure, well into her thirties. Since Jonathan had played a crucial part in pursuit of the men who had killed her brother, Susan, too, had a great respect for the constable.

'This weather must make your job somewhat easier,' she remarked.

'Easier?' he echoed.

'Yes, Mr Bale. Burglars will have too much sense to prowl the streets on chilly nights. We may put up with more disruption but we have less crime.'

Jonathan became solemn. 'If only it were so. Evil men pay no heed to the cold and they work by day as well as night. The frost fair is a boon to them for they know that so many houses will be empty. And here on the Thames, the pickpockets are still with us, alas. Wherever there's a crowd of people, there are criminals mingling with them.' A great roar was heard from the bull ring. Jonathan's face hardened. 'Baiting a poor animal is a sinful pleasure,' he said. 'Left to me, there'd be none of it.'

'Left to you,' teased his wife, 'there'd be no frost fair.'

'That's not true, Sarah.'

'You hate to see too much merriment.'

'Not if it's kept within the bounds of decency,' he said. 'We are entitled to get some enjoyment out of this terrible frost. What I hate to see are the thieves, rogues, liars, gamblers, charlatans, drunkards and lewd women that a fair will always attract.'

'That's no reason to shun such an event as this,' argued Christopher.

'Nor have we done so, Mr Redmayne. I was only too ready to call on my skills as a carpenter to make some skates for my sons.'

'Yes,' said his wife proudly. 'Jonathan has kept all the tools he used during his days as a shipwright and he can still use them like a master.'

'I wanted Oliver and Richard to have their fun while they could. This weather will not last and they may never see such a frost fair again.'

'I'll certainly not forget this one,' said Susan.

'Nor shall I,' added Christopher with an affectionate glance at her.

'I'm sorry that Father could not be persuaded to join us on the river.'

'How is Sir Julius?' asked Jonathan.

'Fretful.'

'Because of the weather?'

'It has made the roads impassable,' said Susan, 'and that irritates him. We can neither return home to Northamptonshire nor even visit my sister and her husband in Richmond. Snow and frost have kept us in London, though I make no complaint. I'm the happiest of prisoners. I could spend every afternoon here on the ice.'

Christopher grinned. 'We'll have to get Jonathan to make you a pair of skates.'

'Shame on you, Mr Redmayne!' scolded Sarah playfully. 'It's a pastime for small boys, not for refined young ladies.'

'And yet,' confessed Susan, 'I do envy your sons.'

They all turned to watch the progress of the two skaters. Oliver and Richard Bale had now moved much further away to find a patch of ice they could have entirely to themselves. They were engaged in a race that could only have one conclusion. Though they set off together, Oliver was too preoccupied with staying on his feet to move at any speed. Richard was soon several yards in front of him. Putting more effort into his skating, he lengthened each stride and pulled right away. The younger boy was thrilled. Accustomed to being in Oliver's shadow, he had finally found something he could do better than his brother. It bred a fatal arrogance. When he was thirty yards clear of Oliver, and still skating with verve, he could not resist looking over his shoulder and emitting a mocking laugh. Richard soon discovered that he still had much to learn. Losing his balance, he fell forward and skidded crazily over the ice on his chest. He let out such a cry of horror that both Jonathan and Christopher hurried off simultaneously to his aid.

'Dear God!' exclaimed Sarah. 'The poor lad must have broken something.'

'I hope not,' said Susan.

And the two women walked swiftly in the direction of the fallen boy.

Jonathan was also afraid that an arm or a leg had been fractured in the accident and he cursed himself for letting the boys get too far away from him. As they ran past Oliver, he was still having difficulties staying upright. Richard, meanwhile, was backing away on all fours from the spot where he had finished up. Christopher and Jonathan soon realized why. When his father grabbed him, the boy was gibbering with fear and pointing in front of him. A jagged line, first sign of a thaw, was etched in the ice but that was not what had frightened the boy. Through the crack, the two men could see the hazy outline of a body. Two large, dark, sightless eyes stared up at them out of a deathly white face.

Chapter Two

When he alighted from his coach, Sir Julius Cheever used a stick to support himself. A thaw had set in but the streets were still treacherous. On the journey from his house in Westminster, the coach had slid from side to side and the horses had occasionally lost their footing. Sir Julius was a big, strapping man of sixty with the physique of a farmer dressed incongruously in the apparel of a gentleman. If he slipped and fell, his weight would tell against him. The walking stick was therefore a sensible accessory. It was also useful for rapping hard on the door of the house in Fetter Lane that he was visiting. His imperious summons was soon answered. The servant who opened the door gave him a deferential smile of recognition.

'Good morning, Sir Julius,' he said.

'Is your master in?'

'Mr Redmayne is working in the parlour.'

'Then don't keep me shivering out here, man,' said Sir Julius, using the end of the stick to move the servant aside. 'Let me in.'

'Yes, Sir Julius.'

Opening the door to its full extent, Jacob Vout, the old servant who was butler, cook, chambermaid, ostler and everything else in the household, stepped back to admit the visitor. He did not need to announce the man's arrival. The booming voice of Sir Julius Cheever had already brought Christopher Redmayne out of his parlour. Pleased to see his former client, the architect was disappointed that he had not brought his daughter with him. After an exchange of greetings, he conducted Sir Julius into the room where the drawing on which he had been working all morning was spread out on the table. His visitor gave it a cursory glance before choosing the most comfortable chair into which to lower his bulk. He held his hat in his lap.

'You are designing a new house, I see.'

'Yes, Sir Julius. I have a commission from Lady Whitcombe.'

'Whitcombe? That name sounds familiar.'

'She is the widow of the late Sir Peregrine Whitcombe,' explained Christopher. 'In his time, he was a distinguished Member of Parliament.'

Sir Julius was scornful. 'There's no such thing as a distinguished Member of Parliament. They are all such dolts, rogues or charlatans that I can scarce forbear knocking their heads together. Whitcombe, eh?' he went on, scratching a bulbous nose. 'I remember the fellow now. A damnable Cavalier. He fought at Naseby and at Worcester, as did I. On both occasions, I thank God, we gave his army a bloody nose. I'm sorry to hear that you are working for the family of such a despicable creature.'

'The war is long over,' said Christopher tactfully.

'Not to me. It continues in other ways.'

Christopher did not argue with him. Sir Julius was an unrepentant Roundhead who still talked of Cromwell with affection. Knighted by the Lord Protector, he ignored the taunts that came from those whose honours had been bestowed by royal patronage and who therefore felt them to be superior. In addition to the battles he had mentioned, he had also fought at Bristol, Preston and Dunbar, liberally donating his blood to the soil in all three places. Sir Julius carried the scars of battle with pride. In his own mind, he was still a colonel in a victorious army.

'May I offer you some refreshment?' asked Christopher.

'No, no. This is only a brief visit.'

'At least, remove your coat.'

'There is no point,' said Sir Julius. 'The first thing that I must do, Mr Redmayne, is to thank you. Susan has told me what transpired at the frost fair. In keeping her away from the horror that you uncovered, you acted like a true gentleman.'

'There was no need for her to view such a hideous sight.'

'Susan has always been far too curious.'

'Yes,' said Christopher with a fond smile. 'Your daughter was determined to see the body for herself. I had some difficulty persuading her that it would be unwise for her to do so. Most young women would be too squeamish even to make the request. That was not the case with her.'

'She has a headstrong streak, I fear,' said her father, 'though I cannot imagine from whom she got it. Her mother was a docile woman and I am known for my gift of restraint.' He gave a chuckle. 'Except on a battlefield, that is.'

Christopher had never met anyone less restrained than Sir Julius but he made no comment. As he looked into the face of his visitor with its surging brow, its rubicund cheeks, its wild eyes and its square chin, he could see that Susan's beauty had certainly not come from her father. His features were arresting but hardly prepossessing. What she had inherited from him was an iron determination and a sense of independence.

'My real concern was for Richard,' he said. 'Jonathan Bale's younger son. He actually chanced upon the body. It will give him nightmares for a long time to come.'

'Mr Bale is a good man. He fought with us at Worcester.'

'That will not advantage his son.'

'It will,' insisted Sir Julius. 'The boy has his father's blood in his veins. He'll be able to look on death without turning a hair.'

'The poor lad was crying like a baby. It was a dreadful shock for him.'

'He'll soon get over it.'

'I beg leave to doubt that.'

'Be that as it may,' said the other irritably. 'I did not come here to talk about a small boy who stumbled upon a corpse. I simply wanted to thank you for the way you behaved towards Susan and to acquaint you with the fact that, as soon as the roads are passable, I will be quitting London.'

Christopher was upset. 'For how long, Sir Julius?'

'Until the King sees fit to recall Parliament.'

'But that may be months away.'

'I do have an estate in Northamptonshire to run.'

'Naturally,' said Christopher, trying to conceal his fear that he and Susan might be parted for a considerable time. 'But I hope that you'll not neglect the many friends you have here in the capital.'

'I entered Parliament to clean up this city, not to sink into its corruption myself.'

'Do not judge the whole of London society by its more wayward members.'

'Prejudice has not made me that blind, sir.'

'I trust that you'll be able to dine here before you depart,' said Christopher, anxious to arrange at least one more meeting with Susan. 'It may be a week or so before the ice has completely thawed.'

Sir Julius rose to his feet. 'It's a tempting invitation,' he said, 'but I'll have no time to take advantage of it. There's too much work to do before I leave. I've letters to write, reports to deliver and committee meetings to attend. Because I consider you one of the few decent men in this cesspool of a city, I felt that I owed you the courtesy of telling in person about my decision.'

'I appreciate that, Sir Julius.'

'One day, perhaps, we can lure you back to Northamptonshire.'

'This commission will keep me in London for the time being,' said Christopher, indicating his drawing, 'but the situation may ease in the springtime. I'd be happy to come then.'

'Our door is always open to you.'

'I'm flattered.'

'A word of advice, Mr Redmayne,' said Sir Julius, tossing a disapproving glance at the table. 'Reject this approach from Lady Whitcombe. You are far too talented an architect to be short of work. Choose clients whom you can respect, not those who bear the names of confounded Royalists.'

'I make no distinctions.'

'You should, man.'

'I disagree.'

'What scoundrel introduced you to this particular lady?'

'You did, Sir Julius.'

'Me?' protested the other. 'But I've never even met the woman.'

'It makes no difference,' said Christopher, amused at his reaction. 'Indirectly, you were responsible for my coming to Lady Whitcombe's attention. When she was driven through Westminster, she was so impressed with the town house I built for you that she demanded the name of the architect. I was promptly engaged to design something similar, though on a larger scale, for her.'

'Do you mean that she's copying my house?' demanded Sir Julius. 'I'll not allow it, do you hear? Is the lady incapable of having ideas of her own?'

Christopher smiled ruefully. 'Far from it. Lady Whitcombe invents new refinements every time we meet. Her house will be no slavish copy of yours. The façade has a superficial resemblance to your own,' he continued, looking down at the drawing, 'but there are features that set the two properties far apart. Between the two interiors, there will be little comparison.'

'I still feel that you should refuse her tainted money.'

'Architects do not make moral judgements about their clients.' 'They ought to.'

'Then our commissions would be few and far between.'

'But you'd have the reward of a clear conscience.'

'My creditors prefer to be paid in coin.'

'I took you for a man of principle.'

'Then you were right to do so, Sir Julius,' said Christopher. 'Nobody adheres so closely to the principles of architecture as I do. The first principle is that an architect must have food, drink and a roof over his head in order to pursue his profession. I'm grateful to anyone who makes that possible.'

'So be it,' said the visitor, putting his hat on. 'I'll waste no more breath on you.'

'I wish you a safe journey.'

'And I wish you a better class of client.'

Turning on his heel, Sir Julius made his way to the front door. Christopher did not want them to part on such a sour note. When his guest tried to open the door, he put a restraining hand on it.

'How shall I know when you leave London?' he asked.

Sir Julius snorted. 'The city will sink back into a morass of depravity.'

'I'd like to be there to see you off, Sir Julius.'

'There's no need for that.'

'I could wish you both God-speed.'

'I abhor the sight of well-wishers,' said Sir Julius, opening the door, 'however well-meaning they may be. Besides, I'll simply go when the moment is right. There'll be no time to advertise my departure.'

'I see.'

'Good day to you, sir.'

'Thank you again for taking the trouble to call.'

'I had to,' said Sir Julius, walking to his coach. He paused at the door held open by his coachman. 'Dear me!' he added with a wry grin. 'I all but forgot the main reason that brought me here. While I will be shaking the dust of London from my feet, Susan will not. She's decided to stay with her sister at Richmond.'

Christopher's spirits were lifted. 'This is excellent news!'

'I thought it might be.'

'I'm doubly grateful that you came, Sir Julius.'

'Then repay me in the best possible way,' said the old man with a twinkle in his eye. 'While I'm away, look after Susan for me. It will bring me some comfort to know that she has such a reliable friend in London. Do I ask too much of you?'

'Not at all. No request could be more welcome.'

'Then let me burden you with a second one.'

'As many as you wish, Sir Julius.'

'Since that body was discovered in the ice, Susan has taken a personal interest in the crime. I'd like that interest to be firmly discouraged. It's not right for a young lady to concern herself with such things.'

'I understand.'

'Has the body been identified yet?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

'When it is,' said the other, 'confide no details in my daughter. Susan is showing an unhealthy curiosity in the whole business. I trust that I can depend on you to keep her ignorant of any developments.'

'I'll do my best, Sir Julius,' Christopher promised.

But he doubted if he would be able to keep his promise. But he doubted if he would be able to keep his promise.

Jonathan Bale got back from his patrol that evening to find that his children were already in bed. Sarah was in the kitchen, preparing a meal for her husband. Like all the other properties in Baynard's Castle Ward, their little house in Addle Hill had been burned to the ground in the Great Fire but it was among the first to be rebuilt. Grateful

to have their home back again, they treated it with exaggerated care, keeping it spotlessly clean and making sure that their sons showed it due respect. Every night, they prayed that their house would never again be destroyed by flames.

Jonathan went into the kitchen and gave his wife a token kiss on the cheek.

'Are the boys asleep?' he asked.

'No,' she replied. "They are waiting for you to read to them.'

'I'll go up in a moment. How is Richard?'

'He's still very upset. I spent most of the afternoon cuddling him.'

'Poor lad! He was all but frightened out of his skin.'

'I know,' she said, putting the food on the table for him. 'Richard has hardly slept a wink since. Thank heaven that Oliver did not have to see that gruesome sight!' 'I made sure of that, Sarah.'

'If only you'd been able to keep everyone away.'

'Yes,' he sighed, 'but that was impossible. As soon as word spread, the ghouls came in their hundreds to peer at the corpse as if it was part of the frost fair laid on for their pleasure. In truth, it made me ashamed of my fellow men.'

'There were a few women in that crowd as well.'

'They were among the worst offenders.'

'So I saw.' She folded her arms. 'Did you call on the coroner today?'

'I spent an hour with him this afternoon.'

'Does he know how the body got into the water?'

'Not by accident,' said Jonathan sadly. 'That much is certain. There were stab wounds in the man's back, it seems. He was dead before he was thrown into the Thames. What the killer did not anticipate was that the river would freeze over. The ice preserved the body in a better state than might have been the case. Most corpses that are hauled out of the water are bloated beyond all recognition.'

Sarah gave an involuntary shiver. 'So this man was murdered?'

'I fear so.'

'Do they have any idea who he might be?'

'Yes,' he said. 'The coroner has no doubt on that score. The man had been reported missing and, even in their sorry condition, his brother was able to identify the remains. My ears pricked up when I heard that the murder victim had lived in this ward.'

'Who was the man?'

'His name was Jeronimo Maldini.'

'An Italian?'

'Yes, Sarah. A fencing master by profession and one with a fine reputation, I gather. In short, a man who was well able to defend himself. It would have taken a cunning swordsman to get the better of him.'

'Is that what happened?'

'Who knows?' said Jonathan. 'I mean to look closely into the matter.'

'Why?'

'Because I feel involved. It was my son who first saw the body.'

'I doubt if he'll ever forget that.'

'The man lodged no more than a few hundred yards from here. I've probably passed him in the street a number of times without realising who he was. Baynard's Castle Ward is very precious to me,' he went on with a proprietary glint in his eye. 'It's

my territory, Sarah. If someone is murdered here, I want to do everything possible to catch the culprit.'

'Be careful,' she said, putting an affectionate hand on his arm.

He kissed her gently. 'I always am.'

'Sit down and eat your supper, Jonathan.'

'Let me read to the boys first. Where's the Bible?'

'In their bedroom.'

'Good,' he said, moving to the door. 'I must find a passage that will help to still Richard's fears. He needs a lot of love and attention.'

'That was Mr Redmayne's view.'

'Mr Christopher Redmayne?'

'Yes, Jonathan.'

'How do you know?'

'He called in this afternoon to see how the boys were,' she said, her face beaming at the memory. 'Mr Redmayne is such a kind man. He brought presents for both of them to cheer them up. They've grown very fond of him. And so have you,' she continued with a smile, 'if only you had the grace to admit it.'

Jonathan was impassive. 'Mr Redmayne has many good qualities,' he said. 'I respect him for that. But he and I live in different worlds. You may choose to forget that but I'm unable to do so. There is a gulf between us as wide as the Thames.'

'Even when the river is frozen?'

'Even then, Sarah.'

An evening out with friends imposed a whole set of decisions on Henry Redmayne. He had to make up his mind where to go, how best to get there and what to wear in order to achieve the maximum effect. An hour at least was devoted to the selection of his apparel. Henry had a large wardrobe and, in spite of his tendency to leave his tailors' bills unpaid, he was always adding to it, desperate to keep abreast of the latest fashion. No less than four mirrors adorned the walls of his bedchamber and he examined himself meticulously in each one before settling on a particular garment. Thomas, his long-suffering valet, was a martyr to Henry Redmayne's vanity.

'How does this look, Thomas?' asked his master, parading in a lime green coat.

'It becomes you, sir.'

'You said that about the red one.'

'They suit you equally, sir.'

'How can they,' complained Henry, 'when they are so different in colour, cut and finish? Damnation, man! Green and red are opposing hues. One must surely flatter my complexion more than the other.'

'Then it must be the green, sir,' said Thomas, ready to agree with him on any choice. 'It makes you look handsome and elegant.'

'Everything I wear does that.'

'It goes without saying, sir.'

'I'm reminded of it every time I court a looking glass.'

Henry preened himself in front of the largest mirror, twisting around so that he could see himself from various angles and adjusting his coat as he did so. Thomas

waited patiently. A short, neat, alert man in his fifties, the valet knew the ritual all too well. The secret was to watch his master get to the verge of a decision before applying the gentle pressure needed to help him actually make it. Having got him as far as the coat, Thomas felt that he was doing well.

'No,' said Henry, clicking his tongue. 'I think that I prefer the blue one, after all.' He held out both arms. 'Take this one off, Thomas.'

'Is that wise, sir?'

'I can hardly put on a blue coat until a green coat has been removed. Would you have me wear two at the same time and be the laughing stock of London?'

'No, sir,' said Thomas. 'I merely question the wisdom of dispensing with the green coat. The colour is ideal for you. Change to the blue and we have to replace both the shirt and the waistcoat for neither will match it.'

'Could we not try the combination?'

'We've already done so three times, sir.'

'Ah,' said Henry. 'In that case, perhaps it's time to settle for the green.'

'It was my choice from the start.'

'Then why lead me astray by letting me try of every other coat in my wardrobe?'

Henry appraised himself once more in the mirror. Now in his thirties, he was tall, slim and striking with a long face that was pitted with the signs of dissipation and hair that was vanishing so rapidly that its remaining wisps were hidden beneath an expensive periwig. Henry Redmayne shared little with his younger brother, Christopher, beyond a surname and one surviving parent. While the architect would spend the evening working on his drawings by the light of candles, Henry intended to sit at a gaming table with his friends and, in all probability, run up even more debts that he could not afford to pay. One brother lived for his profession but his older sibling dedicated himself exclusively and unashamedly to pleasure.

'The green coat, it will be,' announced Henry, fiddling with his wig. 'All that remains is to choose a hat and cloak.'

'I believe that they will choose themselves, sir,' said Thomas.

'Every last detail must enhance the whole.'

'Shall we descend?'

Relieved to have come through another ordeal of indecision in the bedchamber, the valet led the way downstairs to the hall. The house in Bedford Street was large and its ornate furniture and rich hangings reflected the taste of its owner. Some of the paintings that covered the walls were by maritime artists but the majority featured buxom young women in a state of undress. Among ships and nude females, Henry felt supremely at home. In the spacious hall was a cupboard that contained a wide selection of hats, cloaks and canes as well as variety of swords and daggers. Thomas opened the doors so that his master could survey the possibilities. From the street outside came the sound of approaching horses.

'I believe that the coach is here to pick you up, sir,' said Thomas.

'Then it can wait.'

'You were asked to be ready at eight o'clock, sir.'

'I'll not be rushed into a wrong decision, Thomas,' said Henry, taking out the warmest cloak he could find and handing it to his valet. 'Put that around my shoulders so that I can judge its relation to the rest of my attire.'

Thomas did as he was bidden. There was a loud knock at the door. A nod from Henry sent him off to open it. Expecting to see a friend on his doorstep, Henry swung round with a smile of welcome, only to find himself confronted by four officers of the law. Their grim expressions suggested that it was not a social visit. One of the men stepped past Thomas and waved a scroll at the master of the house.

'Mr Henry Redmayne?' he enquired.

'Away with you, man! How dare you enter my home like that?'

'I have a warrant here for your arrest, sir.'

'Is it a crime to choose a cloak that does not match this green coat?' asked Henry, removing the cloak with a flourish and hanging it back in the cupboard. 'For that is the only misdemeanour of which I've been guilty today.'

'This is no occasion for levity, Mr Redmayne.'

'Then take yourself off at once.'

'You have to come with us, sir,' said the man with calm authority. 'I must warn you that we'll brook no delay.'

'Is this some kind of jest?'

'No, sir. I arrest you, Henry Redmayne, on a charge of murder.'

'But that's utterly ludicrous!'

'Reserve your protestations for the judge.'

'Murder?' said Henry with disdain. 'You accuse a decent, honest, respectable, peace-loving, law-abiding man like me of murder? It's quite absurd. Who on earth am I supposed to have killed?'

'The victim's name is Jeronimo Maldini.'

Henry was struck dumb. His righteous indignation was quickly replaced by a mingled surprise and apprehension. His eyes filled with horror, his mouth was agape. Thomas had never seen his master tremble so violently before. When he saw him begin to sway, the valet rushed forward. He was just in time to catch Henry as the latter collapsed in a dead faint.
