SCARLET TOWN

Also by Leonora Nattrass and available from Viper

Black Drop
Blue Water

SCARLET TOWN

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In Scarlet towne, where I was borne

'Barbara Allen's Cruelty', *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, vol 3, collected by Thomas Percy, 1775

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS NOVEL IS INSPIRED by the true story of an election in the market town of Helston, West Cornwall, in the late eighteenth century. Prior to the Great Reform Act of 1832, Britain's electoral arrangements were a shambles. Qualifications to vote varied arbitrarily from place to place and Cornwall, once the prosperous centre of tin mining, sent forty-two MPs to Parliament while Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham sent none at all.

An educated guess puts the national electorate before the Great Reform Act at about 5 per cent of the adult population. Afterwards, it rose to 9 per cent. More working people got the vote under further reforms in 1867 and 1884. Universal manhood suffrage only arrived in 1918, after the bloody fields of the Somme and Passchendaele, while it was 1928 before women got the vote on the same terms as men.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE DOCTOR AND HIS CIRCLE

Dr Pythagoras (Piggy) Jago, newly appointed surgeon and physician in Helston
Tirza Ivey, his housekeeper
Bitterweed, his cat
Laurence Jago, Piggy's cousin, just returned from America
Marie-Grace Jago, Laurence's mother
William Philpott, journalist and all-round controversialist, Laurence's employer
Nancy Philpott, his wife
Their six children

THE DUKE'S PARTY AT THE ANGEL INN

Francis Osborne, 5th Duke of Leeds, former Foreign Secretary, and patron of Helston
Catherine Osborne, his wife
George Osborne, his son
Sidney Osborne, his infant son
Sir James Burges, Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office and the duke's candidate for Parliament
Charles Burges, his son

Anne Bellingham, stepdaughter of Sir James's former colleague, George Aust, acting as governess/companion to Charles Burges
Thomas Wedlock, the duke's elector
John Scorn, the duke's elector

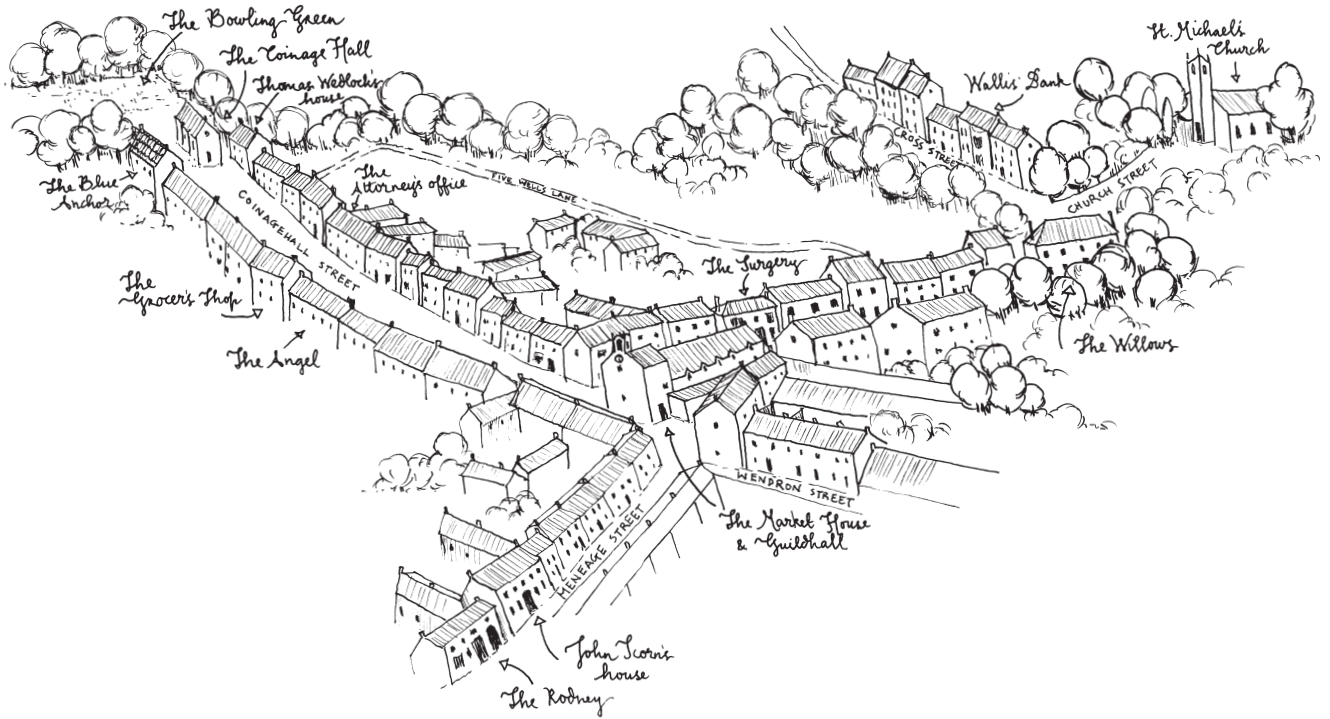
THE HELSTON CORPORATION AT THE WILLOWS

Thomas Glynn, Mayor of Helston
Sarah Glynn, his niece
Stephen Lushington, chairman of the East India Company and the corporation's candidate for Parliament

SUNDRY PERSONS

Richard Hitchens, High Sheriff of Cornwall
Thomas Roskruge, Helston coroner
William Wedlock, curate at St Michael's Church, Thomas Wedlock's grandson
Eleanor Scorn, John Scorn's granddaughter
Cyrus Best, Eleanor's lover
James Julian, grocer, Cyrus's uncle
Loveday Landeryou, the Scorns' maid
The choir of St Michael's Church
Jeb Nettle, choirmaster and sexton at St Michael's
Toby, the Sapient Hog
Mr Nicholson, Toby's manager

Helston, West Cornwall, 1796



Friday 27 May 1796

All in the merrye month of May
When greene buds they were swellin'

I

EVENING

It was gone eight o'clock, and the last rays of sunlight slanted between the buildings on Meneage Street, illuminating a rash of vivid silk ribbons in the hats of the crowd. We were swaying down the narrow road through such a throng it frightened the horses. They jibbed in the shafts and made the whole coach judder in a thoroughly disagreeable manner.

My mind skipped to the coach roof, piled high with our belongings, and I imagined in some morbid detail the top-heavy vehicle toppling over. But I comforted myself with the reflection that though this would be unpleasant for those of us within, it would be far worse for the multitude without, who were pressing against the sides of the vehicle, their faces coming and going as they peered in at us.

But of course, I was alone in such fears. 'Party colours,' was all Philpott was saying, in a marvelling tone. 'Laurence, what the devil is afoot? I can see blue ribbons – and red ones, too, whatever *they* may signify.'

Parliament had been dissolved, we had heard on landing at Falmouth, and a general election had been called. My home

town of Helston being an egregious example of a rotten borough, Philpott had declared an immediate intention to put off his return to London by a week and linger in Cornwall to report on the town's shocking corruption for his newspaper, the *Weekly Cannon*. There were only two old voters left, the rest having died off over a long number of years, and the remaining two were firmly in the pocket of the town's patron, the Duke of Leeds, who told them who to vote for and no doubt paid them some little sum for their trouble. This having been the case for many years – only the number of old electors inevitably dwindling – we had expected to find the town in its usual state of drowsy repose.

Instead, we were arrived in the middle of a noisy political meeting. The blue silks Philpott had noticed were certainly the Duke of Leeds' colours, but the scarlet red of their opponents was new to both of us. And there was something else generally strange about the whole scene that I could not, as yet, quite put my finger on.

Philpott looked entranced by the roar of laughter, screams and angry shouts magnified by the walls of the narrow street, while his wife was busy rebuking William Philpott junior for gurning back at the gawking faces beyond the window. Margaret, Philpott's eldest daughter, was now seven years old and growing dignified. The other small Philpotts formed an undifferentiated mass of shrill voices and writhing limbs, which I generally endeavoured to ignore as best I could.

The crowd was thickening and, thwarted of all further progress, the coach ground to a halt. A moment later the coachman's face appeared at the window. 'I can't get no further,' he said. 'You'll have to get out here. The Angel's only an 'undred yards further on, round the corner.'

Philpott took this news stoically and, if he showed any

hesitation at disembarking in the midst of such a riotous crowd encumbered by his luggage, his wife and his six children, it was only that of a man set on braving a tiger and calculating the safest way to do it.

'Pass the brats out to me, will you, Laurence?' he decided after a moment, leaning out of the window to get at the door handle. 'Hand in hand, I think will be best. Nancy my dear, you come last and for God's sake don't let go or we shall scatter like shot and the children will all be trampled to death.'

This was not a very encouraging idea to infant minds and they squawked with alarm as I funnelled them through the door and down the carriage steps to their father, who braced himself against the tide of bodies with his stout frame and gathered his brood about him like a mother hen. Mrs Philpott went last, with one infant on her hip and clutching another by the collar. I thrust my eyeglasses more firmly up my nose before stepping down from the coach behind her. A man pushed past me roughly and I staggered back, banging my head painfully on the door handle. Meanwhile, the coachman had scrambled up to the roof and was handing down our luggage, a vast pile of boxes and bags we had brought with us hurriedly from America and which now formed a whole new obstruction in the crowded street.

Though we were out of the coach, we were so hemmed in by bodies there was no possibility of further progress either forwards or back, especially with our luggage and clutch of small Philpotts in tow. And a strange new wave of movement was now approaching up the street, accompanied by shouts and screams that verged on panic. The crowd parted to reveal a posse of running men, mouths horribly agape in blood-red painted faces. They were in some strange ecstasy beyond noticing pain or fear as they bore down on us, wildly drunk.

The Philpott children shrieked again as the running men slammed into the coach, and the coachman shouted an angry reproach from his spot on the roof. One of the front horses reared in its traces and the crowd flowed, perhaps afraid the huge vehicle really would topple. The drunk men bounced off again – one of them now bleeding briskly – and swept into a doorway to our left. It was the Rodney Inn, where I had spent some discreditable evenings in my youth, and I well recognised the solemn naval captain on the inn sign gazing down with disapproval at the turmoil unfolding below him.

It now became clear that the whole crowd was converging on the Rodney and had blocked the street, being far too many to enter. There were shouts coming from inside the inn, and even over the general racket I could hear the dull thuds and thumps of drunken affray. The scarlet-painted men would hardly be welcome but would be equally hard to be rid of. Other men without party colours were hastening out of an alley beside the inn, buttoning their breeches, come from the privy. I recognised one or two of them as my mother's farming neighbours, probably come into town to witness the excitement but only adding to the general disorder.

There were more shouts from inside the Rodney, followed by a sudden and rather bruising exodus. The innkeeper, possibly fearing a fatal crush, was driving everyone out. The crowd around us flowed again and one of the infant Philpotts came adrift from its mooring and was swept away by the current. If I had been as careless as Philpott had proved in the heat of our flight from Philadelphia I might have let it go by. But being a man of more sense than my employer, I scooped it up as it passed me and set it on my shoulders. In front of us, a woman's bonnet was knocked off her head and she gave a yelp of anguish to see it trodden underfoot. Then, finally

driven out of the inn, the group of painted drunks landed at my elbow. Their knuckles were as red as their faces now, and they were clearly itching for another fight. Whether I was to be their next victim was entirely out of my hands for I could not move a step in any direction nor let go of the child on my shoulders.

Next to emerge from the inn were two parties of gentlemen. Or, at least, from their general bearing I would have called them so, but there was something strange about them all the same – the same general strangeness I had already noticed while inside the coach, but which I still couldn't name. I had an uneasy feeling that there had been some kind of revolution while we were abroad, and all our old masters had been deposed. One of these curious-looking gentlemen was being carried in a bath chair, as if it were a sedan, held aloft by a pair of burly labourers one to each of the chair arms. The invalid appeared to be enjoying the turmoil quite as much as Philpott.

Three ladies were now coming out of the inn behind the gentlemen, despite the innkeeper's remonstrances that they should stay safely inside – a courtesy not extended to poor Mrs Philpott who was being buffeted about like a piece of imperturbable driftwood in a turbulent sea. She did not deserve such treatment, but I felt little sympathy for the other females present – even the creature still mourning her lost bonnet. Any sensible woman who did not fancy the crush could have stayed safely at home.

There was no doubt as to these three ladies' superior rank, however, being gorgeously attired in the same party colours we could see everywhere else. A girl, dressed in glowing scarlet with shining ebony hair and wearing an expression of barely suppressed excitement, stood slightly apart from the

other two women both dressed in shades of ducal blue. The larger of the blue females was all curls and satin, the other slighter figure was rather dowdy by comparison, though still very respectable. The blue women were clearly not on speaking terms with the red, but one of the gentlemen now noticed them and bundled them all higgledy-piggledy into the marooned stagecoach for safety. As he did so, the dowdier woman in blue turned towards me. To her I would have been only one unnoticed face in the pressing crowd, but my heart straightaway exploded. It was Anne Bellingham to the life. Or now, perhaps, Anne Canning, for she had been on the verge of marrying for a second time when I had quitted England eighteen months ago.

I didn't know if I should first be sick or die of joy; and why she was here in Helston I couldn't imagine. She was wearing blue, which certainly meant she was of the duke's party. He had been Foreign Secretary when I first entered Downing Street, and Anne's stepfather his permanent under-secretary, but she had been only fourteen and I didn't remember any special connection with His Grace that might account for her presence here. Had Canning made himself useful to the duke? I looked for him among her gentleman companions who now all seemed very bent on speaking to the crowd, but he was not there.

The coachman consented to the further requisition of his vehicle without much complaint, having – like the rest of us – nowhere else to go. One party in scarlet cockades climbed up to the seats behind the carriage roof, while the fellow in the bath chair was slid into the compartment we had lately quitted, his chair fitting neatly between the six facing seats so he could look out at the crowd. The ladies within were thrown together in a heap by his arrival, squashed against the

opposite door. Meanwhile, the second set of blue-favoured gentlemen were mounting the front of the coach to the driver's seat, so that the rival parties were separated only by the domed roof of the carriage.

I felt even more perplexed now I could see the men better. One of those wearing the unfamiliar scarlet cockade had a heavy chain of mayoral office about his shoulders, but however self-satisfied his expression, he looked quite unlike any gentleman I had ever seen before. My eye swept over the crowd below, and it occurred to me that, apart from the ladies in the coach, no obvious persons of rank were visible at all. Philpott alone looked like a gentleman among these people, though he was only a farmer's son born and bred like myself. And then, at last, I realised what was strange. Philpott and I were the only men in the street wearing wigs.

I looked back at the mayor, and finally recognised him as Mr Thomas Glynn, a very wealthy man with a fine country estate, and a Helston town house opposite the church. I hadn't recognised him before because he was quite bald, a fact with which I had been previously unacquainted, having never seen him wigless. Some extraordinary revolution in fashion must have occurred since we left England; a revolution that in a crowd like this flattened all social distinctions. That was what had seemed strange. All my life, I had recognised the well-to-do by the merest glance at their heads. Now, the crowd might well be half gentry, but without a closer examination of the quality of their broadcloth, their possession of spectacles or pocket watches, or the amount of money in their purses, it was quite impossible to tell who was who. As a democratical rebel I ought to have been delighted. In fact, it made me feel almost as seasick as Anne's unexpected appearance here had done.

Mr Glynn, the bald mayor, was being handed some notes by an assistant, probably one of the town's serving aldermen. Helston was a borough in the old fashion handed down from the days of Good Queen Bess. There were a dozen such places dotted about Cornwall, little kingdoms amid farmland, moor and sea; kingdoms which were a law unto themselves – and, as I well knew, habitually wracked with violent internal division. It seemed, from the red ribbons pinned to the coats of the mayor and aldermen, that instead of bickering among themselves in time-honoured fashion, they had now taken it upon themselves to challenge the supremacy of the duke's blue cockade.

The drunk men beside us were chanting something that sounded like *Mohawks for Helston!* while another party were retorting *Cherokees forever!* accompanied by their erroneously Cornish idea of an Indian war whoop. Glynn was waving his hands in an attempt to quieten the crowd, but no one took any notice until Philpott emitted a sudden and doleful bellow, suggestive of a bee-stung bull, and a wave of shushing swept up the street like the sound of carriage wheels through rain. In the ensuing quiet, the mayor's voice resounded off the shops and houses of the narrow street, allowing the huge crowd to hear him even better than a smaller gathering might have done inside the inn.

Glynn smiled down at the multitude of expectant faces turned up to him. For all the noise and tumult, he was in rather good cheer and not at all flustered by the size of his audience or his unlikely allies, the blood-red drunks beside us, who were now growling at their opponents like a pack of mastiffs.

'I hardly expected to see such a crowd,' he began. 'We only meant to have words with the electors, and perhaps we should

have held this meeting quietly in the Guildhall. But in fact I'm not sorry to see such a display of public interest. Those electors here today, with the heavy responsibility of casting their vote on Monday, do well to be reminded of their importance to the town.'

'Electors?' someone in a blue ribbon shouted out. 'Imposters, more like!'

The mayor positively grinned. 'Imposters, you say? And what do you call the duke's electors? I'll tell you what I call them, sir: a disgrace to the town!'

'Shame!' someone else in the crowd shouted. I was pretty sure he was the town's coal merchant since his skin was a strange but recognisable hue of ashy grey. 'John Scorn, you tell 'em.'

There was a movement among the mayor's blue-ribboned rivals on the driver's seat of the stagecoach, and I now saw among them an ancient man, probably eighty, dressed in an old-fashioned merchant's suit. He was scowling with furious intensity as he raised his hand in answer to the heckler. But even as a feeble shout of *Cherokees forever* in the crowd was cut off by the apparent strangulation of the speaker, the mayor was pressing on. 'The Duke of Leeds was not invited to this meeting either, but I'm glad to see him here so he may justify his disgraceful conduct to the town.'

The scarlet ribbons growled as Glynn pointed out another man on the driver's seat with an accusing finger. By God, it really was the duke himself, also strangely naked without his wig. But though he would not recognise me from Adam, his large nose, curled lip and look of general disgust with the world made me feel suddenly nostalgic for those early days in Downing Street when Anne and I had been hardly more than children and had, as yet, done nothing foolhardy or wicked.

Whatever else I might say about him, the duke was well

used to being insulted in public and only shook his head disdainfully as Glynn went on. 'I hear some say I should not be hard on the two old men,' he said. 'And I grant you, they were elected freemen fairly once, many years ago. But how can they take it upon themselves alone to return both our MPs to Parliament? They are only puppets of the duke, who instructs them who to vote for according to his own convenience. One of his candidates, Sir James Burges, was his under-secretary in government, and the other, Charles Abbot, cleaned his boots at school and does not even deign to appear in the town. The duke has no connection with Helston and the whole arrangement is an insult to us all.'

The ancient old man in the duke's party had been quivering with increasing violence throughout this diatribe and now tried to answer. But his voice was too frail to be heard and Sir James Burges, who sat beside him, pressed his shoulder soothingly. Sir James Burges! Under-Secretary of State to the Foreign Office, and my old superior, who had, in his day, made me a very unhappy man. My past seemed all laid out before me: from my smallest childhood spent in this town, through my long and hopeless love for Anne, to these titled persons involved in the circumstances from which I had fled England with Philpott eighteen months earlier. It was an exile from which I was returned a little older, a degree wiser, but vastly more lonely than I had ever been before. So lonely that the familiar faces of the men who had banished me nonsensically warmed my heart.

Meanwhile, Glynn was nodding at the elector's angry old face. 'Yes, yes, of course Mr Scorn don't agree with me, being, as we know, a very irascible man. But I see that the duke's other elector, Thomas Wedlock, is absent altogether. Likely too ashamed to come to this meeting at all.'

A new outbreak of violence in the crowd brought a momentary halt to proceedings and we were all hurled to and fro. The child on my shoulders slipped sideways and clutched anxiously at my face with his small sticky fingers, leaving my spectacles somewhat fogged. When the turmoil showed no sign of subsiding, Glynn made his voice heard again over the din. 'The world is changing and Helston must change with it. We are no longer an old-fashioned place of guilds and petty merchants. Instead, we turn our faces out to the globe, and no man represents that change more than the corporation's candidate Mr Lushington, chairman of the East India Company.'

The fellow in the bath chair inside the coach raised a hand in acknowledgement of Glynn's praise. Remarkably, it appeared that this corpulent fellow with mottled red cheeks was the chairman of the most powerful company on earth, and if such power had not brought him health, there was still something of the street fighter about the set of his formidable jaw. I searched behind him for another glimpse of Anne and saw her pale face listening earnestly to what was being said.

For a short, fortunate spell I had thought I might win her. She had loved me, I was sure, and when my star in the Department had seemed briefly to be rising she had allowed me to kiss her and talk obliquely of a future together. But that was before everything went to the devil. Living and breathing politics far more than I had ever done, she had subsequently meant to marry George Canning for his position in government as much as for love, I had been certain.

The mayor had finished his oration and the duke now elected to make reply. He made no effort to stand up from where he was squashed on the box between the ancient man and Sir James Burges, but spoke from where he sat, in the impatient, rather querulous voice I remembered very well

from former days, and which had always put me in mind of a goose.

'I heard of this meeting this morning,' he honked, and the crowd quietened a little to listen. 'I heard of this meeting this morning, I say, and I hardly need to point out why the mayor has called it.' The duke had never been much of an orator in the House of Lords, but the excitement of this occasion seemed to spur him to some unusual exertion. 'They are afraid their thirty-two so-called electors begin to see the error of this whole proceeding and need nudging to vote at all. Well, they are quite right to be uneasy, for if the mayor's candidates are returned instead of my own, it will be at the expense of Helston. Nothing will be widened to the world except the mayor's own pockets.'

The blue ribbons cheered enthusiastically and the mayor looked indignant. But the East India chairman, Lushington, only smiled from his place inside the coach, evidently quite immune to the unpleasant atmosphere or the duke's jibes. What Anne made of the duke's words I couldn't see, for she had turned her head towards the duchess, but as she was wearing his colours I supposed she must be enjoying his sour wit.

'It is a nonsense to say I have no business here,' the duke was going on in the same squawking tones. 'A nonsense, I say. I have long supported this town just as my father did before me. But if these new imposters vote against me, I will certainly resign my interest in the borough. Mr Glynn will be pleased, but you townsfolk will suffer for it. You will pay the poor rates, and maintain the Church buildings, and all the rest yourselves. There will be no more superior entertainments on election day. It would be a pity to see our comfortable arrangement dissolved merely so that Mr Glynn may have the ear of the East India Company for his own gain.'

The rival groups of listeners being only confirmed in their own opinions by both speeches, the violence was getting worse. Even inside the carriage, the ladies' heads were now nodding angrily at each other like pecking birds. The drunk men kept surging back and forth, causing vast annoyance to all about them, including myself. I was suddenly as thirsty as the devil and my head, where I had banged it on the stage-coach door handle, was aching. The novelty of the meeting was wearing thin and the child on my shoulders had taken to drumming his small heels tiresomely against my ribs.

Just then, as the clock tolled from the crossroads beyond the knots of argumentative bodies, we heard louder screams and shouts coming from the same direction. Everyone, even the gentlemen on the carriage roof, turned their heads to look.

'Fire!' a voice was shouting. 'Fire at the Guildhall!'

And as if God had taken his broom to the gathering, the whole crowd was swept summarily along the street, parting around our heaped-up luggage as Philpott, his wife and I crouched about the children to keep them safe. The coach-man sprang to his seat without much courtesy to the ducal party and took up the reins, seeing his chance to escape even if it meant taking the town's politicians and their women with him. As the coach swept past us I caught sight of the ancient elector's face where he sat with the duke and Sir James on the box. His old eyes were rather confused, but his face was flushed with a strange, violent passion. Ahead, another voice was shouting.

'Will the doctor come to the Guildhall? The elector Thomas Wedlock is dead.'

2

We were left abandoned by the receding tide of bodies like a heap of stranded jetsam, and Philpott removed his hat, took off his wig, and threw it down in the gutter. 'God damn me, I have longed to do that these ten years and more. Laurence, take that monstrosity off your own head and bid your nits adieu.'

Though in my recent state of mind I had been generally inclined to dispute every one of Philpott's ridiculous observations, it was certainly pleasant to disentangle my spectacles from my wig, shove the rat-like article in my pocket, and feel the evening breeze tousle my hair. Mrs Philpott stooped down, without comment, to retrieve Philpott's expensive headpiece – which might, after all, still be of service in London if not here – and stayed there to wipe eyes and blow noses among her frightened brood.

'I wonder what the devil is going on,' I said. I meant everything – the tumult, the wigs, and most of all Anne – but, naturally enough, Philpott thought I only meant the politics.

'Perfectly clear, it seemed to me. The mayor has resolved to challenge the duke's old voters, and has named the thirty-two

Freemen of the Corporation as a rival electorate. Parliament will have to decide whose votes should count, and about time too, I should say.' He frowned. 'Though I wish your mayor had chosen another man than Lushington as his candidate. I much dislike these nabobs who earn their wealth from the plunder of the East and come back to lord it over the rest of us.'

Anne's appearance still seemed too much like a dream to speak of. 'And what about the wigs?' I asked instead. Glynn had said that the world was changing, and so it had, quite suddenly, even in my quiet home town, while I had not been looking.

Philpott goggled at me impatiently. 'I dare say that will all come clear when we have had the chance to look about us. But in the meantime we are standing here, jawing about trifles, while a very interesting situation is unfolding at your Guildhall. God damn it, you'll make no journalist if you let such things slide.' He whistled to the innkeeper who was surveying the mess outside the Rodney's doorstep with some despondency. 'Ho, my dear man! Will you give my family a bite to eat while my apprentice and I set about our business?'

As far as I was concerned, he might just as well have gone about his business without me, but when I was with him it always seemed far easier to go along with my supposed apprenticeship and keep my private thoughts to myself. In any event, the innkeeper appeared pleased enough to be distracted from the litter, and took Mrs Philpott, the luggage and the children inside with restored good humour. I thought he would be even happier by the time we returned, since gaunt, practical Mrs Philpott would probably have cleaned up all the mess for him by then.

Philpott set off down the street towards the remnants of

the former crowd, now thronged about the old Market House at the crossroads. It was a Tudor affair with a jutting upper storey which housed the Guildhall, scene of all the town corporation's meetings, and tall barn doors below, which opened into a market hall lit by arched barred windows. A flight of outside steps led to the upper storey, while a square stone tower fronted the market yard, topped by a belfry with a clock on its front face, its hands now pointing to a quarter to nine. Philpott shouldered his way through the onlookers to the flight of steps and I followed him up to the door, where a couple of clerks had been posted to keep out the inquisitive and the unwashed.

To be frank, after our sea-journey and tousling from the crowd we were both of these disagreeable things. But when Philpott puts his mind to something he will not be denied, and after a lengthy period in which I scanned the crowd unsuccessfully for another glimpse of the duke's party in general and Anne in particular, we were at length admitted into the sudden gloom of the squatting old building. This would have been a foolhardy course of action if the place had really been ablaze, but it turned out the fire had been confined to a very small room – hardly more than a cupboard – where the corporation kept its records and insignia of office, the most splendid of which was, at present, safely around the shoulders of the mayor.

'Poor old Wedlock!' one of the clerks was saying, wringing his hands, as we came in. But he seemed as upset by the confusion of the corporation's papers as by the dead body lying among them on the floor of the little room. I knew from my own many years as a Foreign Office clerk that he and his fellows would have the rough edge of everyone's tongue, whether they deserved it or not, poor devils.

The door to the small room had been forced open and hung askew on its hinges as we edged further in, to find a doctor crouching over the dead man. There was something faintly familiar about the broad set of the doctor's shoulders and the way he moved his large paws gently about the dead body, a familiarity explained when he turned around to look at us.

'Good God, Piggy!' I said.

I almost began to wonder if this whole episode was some kind of elaborate dream in which all those I had formerly loved and hated were to appear to me one by one, like the faces of the dead. But the doctor's own face, which had always put me in mind of a benign St Bernard, was staring back at me with an equal astonishment that did not seem at all dreamlike. Then, recovering from his surprise, he smiled with happy recognition, and I remembered to be more polite.

'Pythagoras, my dear fellow, I didn't know you were in Helston. Mr Philpott, sir, this is my cousin on my father's side, Dr Pythagoras Jago.'

Piggy was a year or two older than I was, a shambling Newfoundland of a man with a look of general good humour that perfectly reflected the benevolent heart within his stout breast. I had always liked him a great deal. Philpott took him in with a swift, observant glance and touched his hat in greeting, seeming satisfied with what he saw.

'William Philpott of the *Weekly Cannon* at your service, Dr Jago. But saving the pleasantries for later, what can you tell us about this poor old creature here?'

'Only that he is certainly dead,' Piggy answered, turning his doggy gaze back down to the body. 'He has been a trifle unwell this past week, and under my care, but why he was here, and what he was doing, I can't possibly say. Perhaps the clerks can tell us more.'

The clerks duly twittered together for a minute until one of them was pushed forward. He was the best informed, having raised the alarm himself.

'I heard a lot of thumpin' and shoutin' coming from inside the room,' he told us. 'But the door was locked and I couldn't get in. I asked what the blazes he was doin' and he shouted out that he was damned if anyone would vote and was determined to burn the poll book. I told him the book warn't in there but he wouldn't listen.'

The clerk had the poll book in his hand and gave it to me. When I opened the marbled leather covers all the elections of recent years were there, the names of the dwindling band of voters written down in neat copperplate hand with a record of who they had voted for in a column beside the names. At the last election there had been only two electors' names remaining, Thomas Wedlock and John Scorn, but the list for this one had sprouted to add the thirty-two new electors Glynn had mentioned. The column beside this longer list of names was as yet blank, waiting to be filled in at the hustings on polling day, when each man would climb the steps to the platform, announce his choice before the whole town, and that vote be noted down in the book.

'A very rash proceeding.' Piggy was turning the body over to reveal another gnarled old face very like that of the irascible old voter on the coach with the duke. If Piggy was a St Bernard, the dead man was an aged and extremely bad-tempered Scottish terrier, having a fine beard with bushy eyebrows and grey hairs curling out of his ears. He had been lying on his stomach when we came in, hands arrested in the act of scrabbling among the papers that were scattered all around him. A large puddle of burnt documents in the corner attested both to the source of the fire and to its speedy extinction with

water. To all appearances, frustrated of the poll book, Wedlock had been throwing other papers at random into the blaze.

'I tried to dash down the door, but couldn't budge it,' the clerk was going on. 'So I ran to fetch the others. When we did finally get it open, a lerrupin' puff of smoke come out which near choked us, then the flames got up and we went to fetch water.'

'Fire likes a current of air,' Philpott said knowledgeably. 'Any man knows that.'

'Then I incline to think he has choked on the smoke, that's all,' Piggy said, examining the body again and lifting arms and legs by turns. 'There is no sign of any other injury. Of course, if he was in such a rage as you say then he could have collapsed from other causes – an apoplexy, for instance, or a stroke to the heart.'

Even as he spoke he was feeling again for the old man's pulse. Though Thomas Wedlock was clearly dead, no doctor wishes to bury a man alive and must scrupulously observe the formalities to the last, a custom of which I must say I heartily approve. But no one could have survived the smoke produced by the blaze in that tiny room for long. I took in the scene again. The dead body on the floor. The papers, the mess, the puddle. Something caught my eye among the scattered sheets and I bent to retrieve a small wooden tinderbox carved with some kind of design. When I opened it to show the others, the contents were all present – tinder, striking steel and flint.

'Well, he had to start the blaze somehow,' Philpott said. 'But I suppose you should keep hold of it, my boy.'

I put it in my pocket as the undertakers came in. Piggy stood up, relieved of his professional responsibilities, and shook my hand warmly. 'Your mother told me you were in America.'