

MARKUS GASSER

The Conspiracy of the Crows

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

In ROMEVILLE, as the criminal underworld of London once called its territory, there is an underground tunnel system. For a long time, its purpose has remained completely unknown. The great ancient city still rests upon it.

I

Nobody Disappears

1730

IN THE PAST HE HAD LEAPT THROUGH WINDOWS to freedom; now he was on his way to his grave.

This time he would disappear forever, like the first snow that was now falling and disappearing without a trace in the black fields of Kent. On a Thursday night in October 1730 when there was a new moon, a seventy-year-old traveller, his coat collar turned up over both ears, stood on the side step of a stagecoach, clinging to the roof rail and absorbing the jolts with his still surprisingly limber legs. He had climbed out of the stagecoach so that he would no longer be exposed to the suspicious looks from the five other passengers, and there was just one question in his mind: 'When will they finally hold up this cursed cart, as Mendez promised?'

A sleepless crow circled the stagecoach in silence and understood exactly what was going on with this gentleman: his restless character had never tolerated long waits, and this journey to the grave had been far too comfortable for him so far too. But now they entered the wooded area around Sevenoaks, and the horses tackled a hill with determined panting. A gust of wind came to the aid of the exhausted animals; they moved upwards with a sudden momentum. But this did not alleviate his fear.

Even in the miserable nest called Charleton, he thought, he had been recognised, even though the inhabitants got relentlessly drunk on home-made gin most days (not just on fayre days) and shuffled through working days like the undead. And this was despite his hiding out with a like-minded master saddler during the day and only allowing himself a stroll through a few alleys for an hour at night. The green-eyed passenger with the silvery wig looked somehow familiar to him from Charleton. In a stagecoach, everyone was inherently suspicious of everyone else, and maybe he was wrong; but maybe he wasn't and the green-eyed man was a government agent who had been after him for weeks. So it was high time he disappeared, until it seemed to everyone as if he had only appeared in a dream or had been invented by someone, and as if he had never lived at all.

He had written the fiercest pamphlets against the Church and the Crown, had been in prison, had provoked the Queen to the point of bloodshed, and had conspired with criminals. He had covered the entire kingdom with a network of spies and had played fast and loose in

countless newspapers under one hundred and eighty-seven pseudonyms. He had stolen from other authors, plundered their nests like a magpie and declared the spoils his own. He had moved towns to the sea, sunk an island in it and made a new one rise up for a shipwrecked man, with parrots and penguins.

But no-one would be reading his 'Robinson Crusoe' in five years' time anyway; his creditors in London were once again threatening him with Newgate Prison, and Mary and the children probably wished they could disown him. No obituary, not even a gravestone would remain bearing his name, which his persecutors associated with the devil: De Foe, 'the foe', the enemy, the adversary. That is what he had actually been for all of them from the start, he told himself: first with a clear conscience, with impatience and pride and amusement, then full of contempt and anger.

The stagecoach stopped. The horses had passed the crest of the hill and were puffing with pleasure in the snow, taking in the air and thinking of herb meadows in early summer. De Foe was about to climb back inside when seven horsemen emerged from the mist and surrounded the coach. The passengers had no time to hide their watches and purses in their boots. The coachman rummaged in his gun case as if it had nothing to do with him. One of the riders yanked open the left door of the carriage, another shouted from out of the darkness: 'Those who haven't yet experienced it have read about it, and those who can't read, like myself, can hear about it now and perhaps soon tell their wives about it, so out with you all, one, two and three ...' - the rider in the darkness was obviously counting down the disembarking passengers - '... and the venerable grandfather over there too, of course.'

The highwaymen kept their guns pointed at the group like one-armed scarecrows. Their spokesman stepped into the circle of light from the coach lanterns. The passengers fell silent: his eyes were white as milk. This was a blind man who stood before them, legs apart, barely over eighteen, his eyes fixed sternly upon them. He saw them with his ears, saw them better than they did. The government agent regretted his choice of profession; his silver wig was askew. It was really too bad that such embarrassing bad luck should befall him just before he was about to reach his destination. He handed his precious wig to the blind man who ignored the gesture with aplomb.

'I sincerely regret that our time is so short. What sins might we confess to each other! After we have relieved you of everything that burdens you, we will let naturally your excellencies pass into our glorious metropolis of Londinium,' the blind man said. 'Only the grandfather over there, the great writer Daniel de Foe' - and he pointed with the little finger of his right hand at the old man, who for some time had been stamping loudly and unnecessarily with both feet out of fear or boldness or panic - 'we'll keep him, we'll see to him later, we'll gut him.' De Foe breathed a sigh of relief.

Only now did he understand Mendez's riddle: 'Let the blind man lead you.' He felt almost obscenely happy. Abraham Mendez had kept his word. It seemed absurd to him that he owed all this to someone like Mendez, the cruellest monster of those years, but what did it matter? The way to the grave was now finally clear for Mr Daniel de Foe. But only Mendez knew where it was - and the crow, of course. It rose, circled for a moment and swung off to tell the others how smoothly the whole thing had gone.

Enemy of the People

1703

IT WAS NOT Daniel De Foe's first escape.

Three decades earlier, in 1703, when he still liked to look in the mirror and had all his teeth and all the hair on his head and could not quite believe that he had passed the magic age of forty, Queen Anne Stuart had published a 'wanted' poster of him in the 'London Gazette': 'a man of medium height, lean, dark complexion, brown hair but usually wears a wig, a crooked nose, sharp chin, grey eyes, a large mole by his mouth, owner of a brickyard.' The Queen had offered fifty pounds for the man with a brickyard, wig and mole – a sum that could support a family of six for well over a year. Then she had called her secretary of state, Earl Nottingham, and for once she did not stammer at all when she gave the shortest order that Nottingham had ever heard from her: he was to arrest this enemy of the Crown and Church and head of a conspiracy, whatever it might cost the Crown and the Church. He could work it out himself.

End of.

Since her coronation, nothing had enraged the Queen as much as De Foe's inflammatory pamphlet that – ostensibly in the name of the highest ecclesiastical dignitaries – called for the extermination of all religious dissenters, such as De Foe himself. To slander her Church, the only true one, the Ecclesia Anglicana, with a disguised voice, was the most insidious trick that she had ever come across.

Nottingham was completely enthralled by Her Majesty's determination and fiddled excitedly with his emerald buttons: chasing conspirators like this De Foe across England and the continent was not the usual poring over documents, but proper work and a prestigious challenge. That same evening, Nottingham met – for a game of badminton - the Treasurer, who also managed the budget of the secret service and had long been informed of the Queen's urgent need to bring the blaggard to the gallows. Surreptitiously, Nottingham let the Treasurer win several rounds, and the miser then secured him such handsome funding that Nottingham would have liked to hug him. He rounded up the most able men in his private militia; for money, they would have tracked down even the devil incarnate. The net was cast, and he could already see the pike wriggling in it.

The pike later spoke often and gladly of his adventurous escapes and claimed not to exaggerate, at least not too much: how he had hidden for a fortnight in his exporter's cellar in Cadiz, where he traded port and sherry on the side, and had almost died of starvation (not of thirst, of course). After a shipwreck, Moorish corsairs imprisoned him on the coast of Morocco; he accepted the Muslim faith as a pretence to avoid being sold as a slave into the gold mines of Brazil and allowed Sultan Moulay Rachid to teach him that religion was nothing but politics and masquerade and that all people had rights and liberties, regardless of whether they were Jews or Moors or Christians like him. Let everyone be blessed or go to hell as he pleased. It would, of course, take the Europeans many more dark centuries to understand that not everything their fanatics believed was good for the whole universe – if indeed they hadn't massacred each other by then.

On the hills around Tangier, overlooking both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, De Foe learned to use a new-fangled handgun from a Scottish baron in exile, MacGregor, who cursed the Queen and her church (in three languages) like the smallpox; but he held the gun as

clumsily as a freshly caught fish, shot himself in the left shoulder and survived only because the Scot was the son of a surgeon.

In Leiden, when Nottingham's scoundrels laid siege to an inn on the Rhine, De Foe set fire to the roof, took advantage of the confusion and made off with the innkeeper through the bushes on the river bank.

In Rotterdam, he escaped at night through a window that God had left open for him but fell into a huge dyer's vat and the only reason he didn't drown in the crimson broth was that he nearly frightened to death the chained parrot, which woke the dyer's family with its screeches.

A secret dispatch that had been passing through the hands of like-minded people for weeks reached him in Delft: his daughter Hannah had fallen ill with typhus. He flew over to the English coast on a Dutch sailing boat under creaking ropes, without paying any further heed to Nottingham's agents. He found Hannah halfway recovered, fled across London's conveniently interlocked roofs, found lodgings with craftsmen he had formerly employed in his brickyard, and only once had to threaten a passer-by with his sword on one of his walks with a phrase that has gone down in the city's legends: 'If you should ever meet me again, my dear, good friend, then please give me half an hour before you call for the so-called justices of the peace. That would be most kind, thank you.'

When Nottingham heard about this, his confidence failed him. He felt small and alone. He was facing another setback in his career. Petty ministers and parliamentarians, courtiers all and sundry, who took themselves more seriously than he did and were after his job, were lurking in every corner. He didn't belong here. He didn't belong anywhere. Over the months he had repeatedly imagined his adversary writhing in chains at his trial, repenting in the voice of a little girl, abandoning his fellow conspirators and finally dangling in a light breeze from the rafters at Tyburn alongside two other rabble-rousers, but now De Foe suddenly seemed to him like a ghost, disembodied and intangible, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Now it was time to calm down and clear his head: he didn't believe in ghosts - he was guided solely by irrefutable facts. And this De Foe was such an irrefutable fact.

At the same time, De Foe woke up in a shipbuilder's attic with a mouth that felt like it was full of earth. He felt as though he had been beaten up, his breaths came in gasps, and the floorboards below him throbbed. He was so consumed with fear that this eternal game of hide and seek would ultimately be in vain that he finally begged his wife Mary to soften Nottingham's hard heart.

But when Mary came to Nottingham with a plea for mercy, the Earl could come up with nothing else but to make her wait for three hours in an antechamber of many antechambers. Then he ordered her to him and asked where her husband was.

'Where he always is, in his brickyard.'

'We've been there.'

'I thought as much.'

Nottingham stroked his inkwell, an owl's head made of gold. 'Are you aware that your husband's life is in danger?'

'I am not surprised. To think just a little differently from yourself, Sir, is already treason. In a state like yours, no-one is safe. England is still quite barbaric.'

He had to restrain himself; laughter rose up inside him and so as not to let it burst out, he pressed his lips together. He pictured himself in the midst of a horde of shaggy Lowland Scots, loitering around a blazing fire at the entrance to a cave.

'You are an angel, Mrs De Foe, who forgives all. I know this because I know that your husband has impregnated a dog-eared oyster seller in Bristol.'

'This slander has been circulated by his opponents to ruin his reputation.'

'His reputation was already ruined.'

'Well then.'

Here his great art of subduing his enemies with benevolence and forcing them to ask him for an alternative failed.

Nottingham looked up at the ceiling as if there were a path to heaven to be found and ran his knuckles along his temples. Suddenly his brain seemed like his late son's inflated paper dragon, ready to soar, on their Sundays in the summer, the two of them. 'Always hold the kite with its nose against the wind, Sid. Yes, just like that. You're doing grand. And now, let it fly!'

He had to get out of here. Sullenly, he lashed out at De Foe with cutting words – 'Loggerhead, public enemy, fat-kidneyed, bankrupter, levereter, crooked-nosed knave!' – and then went to another extreme, grabbed Mary de Foe's breast and, with a gnarly smile, suggested a little barter, although he had already guessed from her resolute step into the room that such a woman would never consider such a barter. She only replied: 'Your Excellency, what you are, you are by chance of your birth. But what we are, and be it crooked-nosed knaves, we are by our own efforts.' She smoothed her dress as if it were sullied, gave him an amused look and an 'if you'll excuse me,' turned and left.

It took a while for Nottingham to recover from his stupor. Unfortunately, there was some truth to these grave insults to his innate highness. On the other hand, this wench could not have known how many intrigues he had had to spin (chance of birth or not) to win the favour of a capricious queen who changed her mind three times a day like her robes. And Mary De Foe's impudent remarks reminded him that she was an enemy of the state, just like her husband. From then on, Nottingham took the matter even more personally than the Queen. In fact, by nature he suffered almost unbearable melancholy – he wept often and with relish, but secretly, after midnight – but he was all the more determined to resemble, in the Queen's eyes, a cannon that could blow a De Foe off the sacred soil of England.

'Once you have his kind, you will eventually have him.' Nottingham scoured his blacklists for politically suspect messengers who took manuscripts to the printers. One of them quickly turned out to be a comrade-in-arms of his adversary, whom Nottingham did not even have to threaten with the branding iron: the messenger needed the fifty pounds because he had just got a maid pregnant and was genuinely in love with her. He told Nottingham the name and address of De Foe's printer, but instead of handing him the bounty, Nottingham locked the messenger up for safekeeping. Then he interrogated the printer, Croome, who felt he was possessed by a monster that he couldn't wait to get rid of. Nottingham held the branding iron under Croome's nose and the demon escaped and spat out the entire Spitalfields district. At last Nottingham was on the right track. Days earlier, an informer in Spitalfields, beyond the northern city wall, had recognised Daniel De Foe as a man with a dark complexion and a hooked nose.

Nottingham was just about to tell the Queen about his breakthrough when an unsealed letter arrived by simple penny post. It was from De Foe. The letter was simple and impertinent. He would hand himself in, it read, if – firstly – he was spared prison and the pillory and allowed to serve in the Queen's army in the Netherlands. And, secondly, if those imprisoned because of him - the messenger Bellamy and the printer Croome - were released today. Nottingham would not consider it. If he had had any idea of all that Daniel de Foe was still capable of, how much trouble he would have been spared! But by the time he realised his mistake, it was far too late.

Because a search of the district would only cause unnecessary turmoil, Nottingham spread the rumour that Scottish Catholics were planning to set Spitalfields on fire, and one Saturday morning in May 1703, the men of his private militia swarmed through the deserted streets of the district, scaring up sleepy cats, until they found De Foe in the house of a silk weaver; he was sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and eating sugared strawberries with cinnamon, his hands crossed, comparing his thumbs. To their amazement, he did not resist. They dragged him to Newgate Prison.

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6

The Conspiracy of the Crows

1725

HE HAD SPENT YEARS trying to hunt him down, and the day the body parts of the 'the knacker', Mr Jonathan Wilde, were found on the banks of the River Thames was one of the happiest days in Daniel De Foe's life.

Shortly before, on the 5th June 1725, he had published an anonymous message in John Applebee's Journal, saying that unknown persons had entered the graveyard of St Pancras and plundered Jonathan Wilde's grave, thus dishonouring consecrated ground. He demanded an immediate investigation into the ungodly act. But his indignation was pure sham: De Foe himself had incited anatomy students to rob the grave.

On the third floor of the Royal College of Medicine, surgeons under the supervision of Sir Thomas Clinch dissected the corpse, reading from the skull and bone structure, like ancient Roman soothsayers, that Wilde had known neither conscience nor compassion, and that he had been a megalomaniac, gifted in the arts, charming, brave, impulsive, imaginative, murderous and all sorts of other things. They sent their two-page report to De Foe, so that his account of Wilde's life and character would be watertight, kept Wilde's head and skeleton for themselves and chucked the remains into the river at the arranged place.

As Mary and Daniel De Foe had envisaged, a cadaver-shaped mound in the shingle was all that had remained of Wilde at the end. As Mary and Daniel De Foe had envisaged, he was buried in unconsecrated ground in Crossbones Cemetery, which was reserved for the poor, prostitutes and murderers. 'Exactly where the monster belongs,' Mary had decided, 'so that the spirits of his victims can finally finish him off.'

Mary was not wrong this time either: Wilde could not hope for forgiveness from the dead in any cemetery in the city, least of all Crossbones. But one of the spirits whispered: 'Please just don't wake him up,' and so they remained silent for the time being, out of their usual fear and submissiveness. They waited, continued to freeze there under the earth, listened to the April rain as it slapped hollows into the ground above them, listened to the January snow falling thickly and stormily from the sky - the cemetery's ash tree shook off its too-heavy load one night with a shudder because it could no longer stand the monstrous burden - and dreamed of poppies in the cornfields in June; until one day they heard dragging footsteps, a cart struggling to make its way across the bracken and puddles, and scraping shovels digging a new grave beside them. Charles 'Hitch' Hitchin had joined them; high time too. And Hitch was in a hurry. He paid no attention to the peculiar inconveniences of his new position, for all his senses were

concentrated on dragging his oldest adversary before the court of the dead. He briefly spat out crumbs of earth, cursed, then grinned from ear to ear and dragged Wilde from his slumber. 'Jon, you public louse, it's me, the one you owe everything to.'

That was a lie. If Wilde owed anything to anyone at all, it was his first teacher, Mary Milliner. At the time when Harley had Smite killed, twenty-six-year-old Jon, in a village on the border with Wales, wanted to better himself; the drudgery of buckle-making sickened him. He set off for London and made himself so popular with the guards while at the debtor's prison that he was allowed to take the prostitute Mary Milliner with him as a parting gift. She taught him everything he needed to know to survive in Romeville: how to press coins, how to sell stolen goods to which middlemen and at a price that roughly corresponded to the value of the goods; how to place an advertisement in the newspapers letting the owner of a stolen purse, letter or diary know that purse, letter or diary had been picked up in a brothel and could be collected immediately for a finder's fee – which amounted to blackmail. For which citizen of the city wanted to have to confess to his wife that he was casually disporting himself with the whores in Soho Square before dinner? Mary Milliner – not for nothing a butcher's daughter – even showed him the places to kill an opponent in a fight with a butcher's knife, using a pig bedded on straw as a graphic demonstration: you needed to stab him in the neck right behind the ear. If you wanted to force a confession out of an obstinate fellow, you needed to hang him by a hook on the back of his neck, injure his liver with a delicate cut and let him bleed to death very slowly, rather than beating the living daylight out of him. If the cut to the liver was too unsubtle, you wouldn't get the pig to talk – this art needed to be learned. Wilde learned quickly.

But like everyone in Romeville, Mary Milliner paid protection money to Charles 'Hitch' Hitchin, and when Milliner, Wilde and Hitch stumbled across each other in 'King's Coffee House' in Covent Garden Square, Hitch looked at Wilde as if he were already taking measurements for his coffin like a carpenter. He pulled himself up and – bloated, thick-nosed and with a smoky bass voice – acted kind and pleasant: 'My friend, have mercy on me, but I just don't understand how you can pay our sinners such high rewards for their loot. To inherit something? You are what you want,' Hitch continued in his somewhat absentminded way of speaking, 'right now you are nobody - with me you will become somebody. If we join forces, the sinners will have to accept our prices. You stick up for me, I stick up for you. What do you say? I have the city council behind me and more experience than you, and my method is fool-proof, it came from me, after all.'

This was a lie. It was from none other than Sir Salathiel Lovell that Hitch had learned the method of handing over to the authorities any thief who did not give him his stolen goods for a small price. Hitch hired Wilde as his collector – but that was all he did for him. Soon Wilde was also fed up with having to get rid of confidants whom Hitch didn't like or who seemed too talkative. Wilde refused – and the duel began.

Charles Hitchin was a rough sort. He did not possess Wilde's gift of being able to choose between at least five manners, between patience and severity, modesty, gentleness and most refined politeness. Wilde went to every boxing match, every street party and toasted everyone there, too, with a slight, elegant bow; Hitch immediately ducked into the darkness of the nearest pub, downed a glass of wine in one, chucked it at the wall over his left shoulder and ordered another until he was fearfully unresponsive. In particular when Hitchin demanded something from Wilde's best friend Abraham Mendez, he would blurt out his demands in an uncouth way, as if he wanted to silence Mendez for all time and once, he went too far. No sooner had he realised how much more popular Wilde and Mendez had become in Romeville than he himself was, than

he accused them of an offence that no criminal could forgive: they let innocent colleagues be hanged in Tyburn just to save their own accomplices.

'No-one believes him,' Mendez judged. 'But our Ladyship Hitchin is scaring away all our clients and ruining business.'

Wilde nodded; eleven minutes later he had a strategy in mind, dictated it to Mendez and then sent an open letter to the city council and the mayor, inciting them against Hitchin. In a deft mixture of benevolence and contempt, he detailed Hitch's method and accused him of something which he knew precisely was considered the greatest disgrace of all, even though he himself was completely indifferent to it: liking men rather than women and liking to dress as a woman in certain establishments. It was bad, really bad, Wilde wrote, but he really resented Hitch for sending young men to the country's dungeons merely because they would not submit to his advances. In the same letter, he sarcastically promised Hitch that he would have nicer women's clothes tailored for him than those that Hitch had worn to the midnight balls in the gay brothels so far. The scandal columns of the newspapers were filled with insinuations; these went so far as to ask which houses the mayor visited after midnight? And was the entire city authority involved in perversion?

'Moles!' the mayor, who was deeply wounded, called his legal advisor. 'What do we think of this?' And he held Wilde's letter under his nose. He would have liked to throw his inkwell at him.

Moles counted to five to collect himself, his right eye twitching. 'Sir,' he whispered, 'it displeases me to discredit the city council, but apparently it was the city council that tolerated this moron Hitchin as an investigator, against their better judgement or not... correct? I am sure that the city councillors knew nothing of these matters. All in all, however, I fear that Wilde's statements are in the very best order, are sincere and correct. There is nothing of note against him in our files.'

'Who are we talking about?' the mayor asked in confusion. 'Against whom is there nothing in your files?'

Moles squeezed his eyes shut so tightly with concentration that they seemed to have disappeared.

'Against Hitchin. Um – no, Wilde.'

And so it happened that Hitch was wordlessly shown the door when he reported to the mayor, pale and hungry. He retreated to his house, where his will was still law, but could not even find comfort in his housekeeper's excellent cooking. He was most grieved by the fact that Wilde had recommended himself in his place as the chief thief-taker of Great Britain and the extended arm of justice and that, through his open letter, he was suddenly exalted beyond a doubt. The only place left for Hitch to escape to was the cool peace of his wine cellar, but even there he was haunted by the rumour that Wilde had the confidence of this treacherous city.

At seven o'clock the next morning, on the ground floor of his brandy distillery on a street next to Swan Alley, where De Foe had been born, Wilde in his blue dressing gown, received Romeville's most efficient thief and robber. Mendez handed him his hot chocolate; Wilde stirred it in a leisurely way, tapped the silver spoon emphatically on the rim of the cup, looked at the group sorrowfully out of his yellow-grey eyes and proposed a deal that was as simple as it was ingenious. Some of them only gradually understood that he was founding a company.

'Our chances are slim,' he started, 'but they may improve. First the situation. If you manage to pick something up and take it to one of the few fences left in Romeville, then it's ten

to one you'll get busted. You have the choice of starving to death or being hanged, which is no choice at all, if you ask me, and definitely not a life.'

'Surely what you live for,' Mendez interjected from the corner of the fireplace, his back to the flames, 'that is the question.'

'Thank you for your erudite contribution, Abe,' Wilde indicated towards the fireplace. 'It's hissing and burning in there. But...it's burning itself. Wood wants fire and commits suicide in the process. So gorge, shag, guzzle until your dicks rot off – I hope the ladies will forgive me for using that expression – and till your liver's as black as the wall in Newgate, that's not what you live for. You have your life,' Wilde spread out his rather short arms, 'so that you can make something of yourself.'

'That's a problem,' said Mendez, tugging at his necktie.

'Yes, of course it's a problem, Abel! How are you supposed to make something of yourself if you steal things that you can't get rid of? You have to be sure that you steal things that the person you stole from really wants back. If you steal something valuable, you let me know when and where and from whom. I'll make sure that the person who owned the stuff pays a very handsome finder's fee, and you will get half. What I can promise you is a life without fire under your arse. If someone gives us trouble, he will have to deal with me. I forgive no-one,' Wilde tapped his still intact forehead, 'and I forget nothing.'

That all sounded a little intimidating, but all in all very plausible and wise. What was also true about Jon Wilde's speech on that morning was that he neither forgave nor forgot. However, he had concealed the fact that he noted down in an account book that had come from a lost property office, the slightest detail that the thieves and those who had been robbed reported to him. If the details matched, he put a cross next to the name of the thief, whom he could prove to have committed a felony whenever he wanted, and added the name, address and special features of the person who had been robbed. Now he had the thief at his mercy, could manage him, promote him, have him caught or drop him, depending on how he wanted to put the thief to use. If he wanted to replace him with a more deserving employee, he asked the thief to come and be a witness for the prosecution, drew a second cross next to the thief's name and delivered him to the Old Bailey for forty pounds. In addition, he kept a book of secret ciphers that he swapped around each week, which only Mendez and the trigger-happy lieutenant of his militia, Quilt Arnold, could decipher. He smuggled the looted goods he could not get rid of to Flanders on his freighter 'Trivia' and on the way back smuggled linen, lace and port wine to London under the benevolent eyes of the customs officials, all of whom he had bribed. Wilde's company grew like weeds, and with it, inevitably, the number of wrongdoers; soon there were more than enough of them, and in any case, Wilde needed to condemn the less efficient ones, in order to polish up his reputation as an expert thief-taker.

'Carry on like this, Jon, and they'll make you mayor,' Mendez joked.

He had a point. But Wilde knew that he would never belong to the upper echelons; he merely wanted to be respected by them and to turn profit. He already had a criminal unit – special in their own way – and personal guard, who did not need to be taught robbery, burglary, pickpocketing and child abduction. But they were no good for dealing with the upper ranks. So he had a special task unit and guards trained by Tom 'wart' Wharton's dance master James Sykes. In Chick Lane, which was actually reserved for interrogation and torture, Wilde's entourage struggled to learn the etiquette of the upper echelons with touching awkwardness – from the stilted, meaningless chit-chat to the appropriate bow, deep here, not so deep there, only an implied bow there. Sykes suffered from the fact that London – in comparison with Paris

– lacked glamour, flair, discretion, aura, fluidity, that certain something that is difficult to name; also, in order to avenge himself on his egalitarian era, this merciless virtuoso of the piano did not even shy away from the new-fangled dances from Versailles: the gavotte, the saraband, the minuet. ‘Imagine you are at His Majesty’s court, my lords,’ he admonished, placing his dainty and slim figure alongside an out-of-tune harpsichord, ‘and assume the posture. Feet out, arms up, grace is everything, grace and impeccable elegance!’

And it was with this – if not always impeccable – elegance that Wilde’s entourage mingled with the upper echelons of London at masquerade balls, Handel’s opera premieres and horse races at Ascot. Wilde was everywhere. Carrying in his right hand a silver flask engraved with a fleur-de-lis, sceptre and symbol of the law, he emerged, with Mendez beside him, openly carrying a bundle of empty warrants. Wilde greeted people pontifically and didn’t take himself too seriously. ‘Have you been robbed today?’ he sometimes shouted to the crowd, and they enjoyed his casual banter. During a break at the opera, he announced that he would only ask God for one thing: not to have to hear a single note of this Handel person after his death – and there were giggles from behind the fans. His gallant special unit followed behind him and swarmed out to protect the assembled ranks of councillors and nobility – at least so the councillors and nobility thought. In reality, the special unit was stealing from the councillors and nobility good and proper, and for Wilde these performances were like theatre shows in which the select spectators acted as extras and were unaware of the fact.

The upper ranks took it for granted that other people were responsible for such looting and that Wilde would soon catch the culprits. Nevertheless, Wilde publicly accused himself after every looting: he had failed. He acted a little helpless, as if he were up against a force of criminals that, despite all his efforts, he was simply no match for. On his urgent advice, King George raised the bounty for the capture of a criminal from forty to one hundred and forty pounds. And with that, war broke out in Romeville.