

THE WHITE TOWER

Four men in 17th century England attempt to steal the Crown Jewels from the Tower of London.

A gentle current lapped against the side of the rowboat; the Thames tide was rising. Aboard, three men squatted in the hull, holding their jackets tight over their doublets to brace against the night's chill. They dared not light a lantern, relying instead on the ebbing glow of the shoreside braziers that were lit each morning to ward against the plague.

"He should have been back by now."

It was the smallest man who had spoken; Roland. At least, that was the name he had given, and it suited his West London accent. His pinched features made him look fox-like, and the wispy hair on his pox-marked cheeks only added to the resemblance.

"The tide's turned," said the second man, known as Alastair. His bulk tipped the small boat in his direction, and he had a deep Scottish brogue to match it. "We are missing our opportunity."

The third man, seated in the stern with one arm over the tiller, held up a gloved hand. Thomas, he had called himself. The flickering light revealed that his square-jawed face was focussing intently on the sounds of the night around them.

The other two joined him in stillness, now concerned. No-one moved.

A shadow suddenly jumped in between the three men, rocking the boat. The big Scot was nearly knocked into the frigid Thames.

"Och!" Alastair exclaimed, a dagger now in his hand. "I thought you circus fools were lighter of foot!"

The shadow raised itself to standing. "You would not hurt an unarmed Frenchman, would you?"

Alistair sheathed his dagger, but kept his teeth bared.

The Frenchman, who asked to be called Henri, bowed as though he had completed a triple somersault. "My job is complete. Yes, it took longer than expected, but this is not my fault. The guard was doubled. I believe the King has a special guest in his Tower."

Roland twitched at the revelation. "Wasn't nothing said 'bout this. Don't want to be mucking hen houses for saltpetre me whole life, but I'd rather that than having me 'ead separated from me body."

"We go as planned," Thomas said from the stern. "If they see the ropes come morning we won't get a second chance."

Thomas looked at each man in turn, daring them to suggest otherwise.

“Aye,” Alastair said at last, grabbing one of the oars. “Those jewels ain’t going to steal themselves.”

The rowboat eased away from the wharf, moving slowly against the current. Roland had taken the second oar, but was griping about keeping pace with Alastair’s strong strokes.

“Quiet,” Thomas said evenly. “They’ll hear you.”

All four men looked up at the Tower of London’s front wall, an imposing façade made of Kentish ragstone that rose straight out of the Thames. Fiery brands protruded from sconces at regular intervals, the rowboat skirting the edge of the light they cast on the water. High above, the bearskin hats and musket barrels of the beefeaters could be seen as they patrolled the battlement.

A single brand had been extinguished directly beneath one of the turret windows at the far corner of the wall. Alastair and Roland eased the boat into the slip of darkness, where Henri leaned from the bow and reached for the ragstone. He came back with a piece of rope between his willowy fingers.

“Allow me to demonstrate.” Henri knotted the rope to the boat’s breast hook, disappeared up the side of the turret faster than a ship’s rat.

“The Frenchman can climb,” Roland remarked, and grabbed the rope next. The other two men followed, and soon all had clambered through the narrow turret window.

The room the men found themselves in was decorated in the Jacobean style, with dark wood panelling on the walls and a massive four-post bed. The hearth fire was not lit.

“This way,” Thomas said, striding across the room.

Roland picked up a candlestick from a side table, eyes the size of platters. “I’d be a rich man if I took only ‘alf this stuff.”

“That’s not what we’re here for,” Alastair growled, moving past him with surprisingly light footfalls. Roland followed reluctantly.

Thomas crouched beside the door, ear to the wood. After confirming all was quiet, he creaked the door open and all four slipped onto the battlements.

Next was a tight staircase – probably servant access – that spiralled down to a cobbled street below. The street was lined with townhouses and lit at intervals by oil lanterns in globes atop iron posts. It could almost have been a normal London lane, if not for the fortifications high above.

“Hurry up,” Thomas grumbled, noting his three companions were a little awed by this hidden world. Few had ever been inside the great walls of the Tower of London. Even fewer had lived to tell the tale.

Halfway down the street, Thomas pulled into the shadows. The other men followed his lead – and just in time.

A pair of guards appeared from an archway ahead, foggy breath billowing from their mouths. They looked vigilant, well-drilled.

The four waited in the shadows. Roland’s hand began shaking as the guards neared, so he clutched it tightly to his belly. Just as the guards were about to pass, something jangled free from his sleeve – a candlestick. He caught it just before it clattered to the cobblestones.

One of the guards – a lad barely old enough to grow facial hair – heard the ruffling of fabric and stopped. His eyes searched the patches of darkness the streetlamps didn’t reach, slowly began readying his rifle.

Thomas swooped on the guard, sliding a knife into the young man’s neck while clamping his other hand over the guard’s mouth. Alastair rose behind the second guard, his own dagger quieting the young man just as the boy’s frightened eyes beheld his partner’s fate.

Thomas dragged both bodies into the shadows, whispering an almost inaudible apology as he did so. Then he wiped his gloves on his breeches, walked over to Roland and slapped him hard across the face.

“What was that for?” Roland asked, clutching his stinging cheek.

Thomas thrust a finger in his face. “You’re lucky we still need you to—”

“Quiet!” Henri was gesturing frantically and theatrically above them.

A bearskin hat appeared over the edge of the battlement, looking down into the street. All four men clung to the shadows like a cliff face.

“It’s probably them ravens,” they heard another man atop the wall say. “They give me the creeps.”

“Better than the alternative,” said the first beefeater. “They say the Crown will fall if the ravens ever leave the Tower of London.”

“Some might like that, is what I’ve heard,” chuckled the second man. “See anything?”

From the shadows, Henri brought his hands to his mouth, made a noise that sounded every bit like the rasping, gurgling croak of a raven.

Laughter followed. “Bloody birds. What’d I tell you?” The bearskin disappeared from view.

Thomas signalled them all forward.

A little further along he approached a townhouse door as though to enter. Something gave him pause. The door looked the same as all the others they had just passed, but Thomas’s composure had faltered at the sight of it.

“What’s the matter?” Roland said, anxious.

It wasn’t readily visible in the murky light, but once Thomas had drawn their attention to it, all drew back.

A cross had been slashed across the door in red paint.

“The plague,” Roland said, backing away. “I ain’t going in there.”

Henri was at the next door along. It was also marked with a red cross. “Two crosses,” he said.

“A double cross. I trust this is no omen.”

Thomas ran his gloved hand over the stubble on his chin. He seemed to be struggling with this unforeseen impediment.

Alastair broke the silence. “There’s another way. We can access the roof via the Queen’s House.”

“You know a lot ‘bout this place all of a sudden,” Roland sniped.

“I know what I need to know,” Alastair bit back, and he strode off down the street. Roland and Henri glanced at Thomas. The man simply nodded and followed.

Alastair led them to a series of two storey buildings in the Tudor style: brown brick lower floors, timber upper. The Queen’s House was the central dwelling, used for high-profile political prisoners.

Alastair grabbed the domed knob in two hands, but it was locked. He began shaking it with a frustration that rocked the hinges and threatened to alert the guards.

Henri appeared beside him. “Sometimes the gentle touch can be more accommodating.” He uncurled a hand to reveal an iron key, taken from one of the fallen guards.

Alastair shoved it into the lock. It turned.

Inside was a staircase, plus a hallway leading to the rear of the townhouse. Alastair charged straight up the stairs, which opened up onto a small bedroom that looked out over the interior of the Tower of London.

A pretty young man in nightclothes was sitting on a hard pallet, blinking at the four men who had just burst into his room. His eyes settled on Alastair.

“Hamish!” he said in a brogue as strong as Alastair’s. “You came for me!”

Alastair rushed to the young man, gave him a hug that might have squashed his slight frame if Alastair had not let go and dropped to one knee. “My king.”

“And these men are yours?” Alastair’s young king asked.

“They are here for other reasons,” Alastair responded.

Thomas stepped forward, right up to Alastair’s face. He was shorter and narrower than the Scot, but no less physically intimidating. “What are you doing?” he snarled.

“None of your concern,” Alastair said. “You will still get your precious jewels. I take this man with us, you can have my share.”

A heat like that of a blacksmith’s stove roared between the two men.

“I’ll take that deal,” Roland interjected. “Now can we get this done? Or it don’t get done at all.”

“Well said,” Henri applauded.

Thomas was clenching his jaw so tightly veins bulged on his temples. But he pulled back, turned to Henri.

“This way.” Henri climbed out the window and up onto the roof. From there he led the group across steeply-pitched tiles, the way forward visible only by moonlight. Five houses over he stopped at a brick chimney.

“Voila,” he said.

Barely visible in the silver light was a rope, stretching like a strand of spiderweb high and taut over the guards stationed in the courtyard below. It extended all the way to the great building that sat alone and indomitable at the centre of the courtyard.

The White Tower. A tall, square keep, cornered by four turrets and topped by fluttering pennants.

The home of the Crown Jewels.

“Allow me to show you how it is done,” Henri said.

He placed two delicate feet atop the rope, moved with the nimbleness of a squirrel. He quickly crossed the expanse and disappeared through the White Tower’s highest window.

Roland eyed the others, then followed. He hung upside down and shimmied across, slower than Henri but with a technique the others decided to imitate. Thomas went next, followed by Alastair’s young king – Alastair would not leave him behind. Finally, Alastair tested the rope. It took his weight.

By the time Alastair pulled his bulk through the window, Henri had lit a brand. They were in a small anteroom with a few pieces of ornamental furniture, but not much else. An iron portcullis blocked the way forward, secured by a heavy padlock.

Thomas furrowed his brow. The closer they were to the treasure, the more agitated his mannerisms had become.

“You,” he said to Roland. “Do your thing.”

Roland inspected the portcullis lock like a purveyor of fine jewellery. Cleared his throat and sniffed, came to some conclusion. After pulling out a small gunpowder pouch from inside his doublet, he placed the metal tip into the lock, tapped the bag several times. Once satisfied, he tamped the gunpowder tightly, sealed it with putty, inserted a small fuse. Almost as an afterthought, he placed a cushion on the floor beneath it.

“Stand back.”

The puff of white smoke was far less than the group were expecting; it barely made a sound. The padlock fell neatly onto the cushion.

“Over to you, big man,” Roland said, a hue of pride rising in his pocked cheeks.

Alastair placed two hands on the portcullis, gripping the crosshatch of iron. Planted his feet wide on the ground, bracing himself. Then, with an exertion of supernatural proportions, he

began to raise the gate. The barest movement at first, then a mighty heave that created a knee-height opening. Henri and Thomas rushed to wedge pieces of furniture into the gap, just as Alastair grunted and released the portcullis, spent. The sharp teeth at the base bit deep into the furniture, but it held. The creaking of the wood suggested it wouldn't do so for long.

“Let's finish this.” Thomas knelt by the opening and ushered everyone underneath.

It was dark in the inner room, and much larger than the anteroom. Henri raised the brand, walked to the centre of the space.

It was empty.

“Where are the jewels?” Henri said, perplexed.

“And what's that smell?” added Alastair's young king.

A biting tang hovered in the air, heavy and metallic.

Gunpowder.

“You lot have to see this.” Roland was standing at the edge of the room, his hand running over rough wood. Henri's light revealed it to be a barrel.

The entire room was lined with them, stacked two high.

They turned, looking for answers. For Thomas. But he wasn't there. Thomas was still on the outside of the portcullis, a flaming brand in his hand. The firelight played in his eyes, twinkling with malice.

“Long live the King.”

He placed the brand against a pile of gunpowder by his feet, which sparked, fizzed, then raced towards the barrels.

The explosion was heard as far away as Twickenham. A fireball rose into the sky over London, shattering glass on the far side of the Thames. People feared another great conflagration, but the resultant fire was quickly contained.

Word spread of the failed attack on the King. Catholic rebels had breached the Tower's defences, it was said, seeking to free the Scottish usurper and murder the regent. But the King had survived. After a period of waning support following heavy taxation, the King was once again revered and loved, protected by God himself.

Four rebel bodies were found in the ruins. The Scottish usurper was one, dying alongside a countryman, a French Catholic, and the gunpowder expert who must have driven the plot. Their remains were hung, quartered and burned, then scattered to the four winds. No-one questioned how so much gunpowder could have been smuggled into the heavily guarded White Tower, for the people were too consumed with just one thought.

Thank God the King was safe. Long live the King.