

# *The Dukes*

## *Chapter 1*



“THE DOCTOR MAY BLEED THE DUKE NOW,” the duke said. The valet turned to the shadows beyond the reach of the single candle. “You have his grace’s permission to bleed his noble person,” he said.

The doctor cleared his throat and came awkwardly into the light; he held the kidney bowl and scalpel in such a way that they could not touch – for fear the rattle of the one upon the other should betray his terror.

When the duke stood to bare his forearm he presented a vast cliff of damasked brocade; his bald head, at the top of that unscalable height, gleamed like samite. He clearly was not ill. The bleeding was a simple precaution against a plethora. The doctor pressed the kidney bowl to the pale flesh of a once-powerful forearm. The knife flashed a nervous silver as he sought among the scars of recent and more ancient

bleedings. He drew breath to speak.

But the duke, watching those tremulous lips, was ahead of him. “Don’t prattle to me of your leeches, damn your sides,” he said, as if the doctor had already spoken. “Is it sharp this time?”

“It is, your grace.” Again the doctor cleared his throat. “And clean.”

“A pox to your clean, sir!”

The valet smiled, glad to be out of the firing line for once. The blood snaked hot down the duke’s forearm and fell, dark as old wine, into the bowl.

“What’s in that blood, sir? Tell me that,” the duke commanded.

“Why, your grace, er, iron ... ah ... calcium ...”

The duke laughed. “Little you know. Little learning and less sense! ‘The midwife laid her hand on your thick skull, With this prophetic blessing – *be thou dull!*’” He put his mouth conspiratorially close to the ear of the doctor, who stared with terror out into the titanic blackness of the unseeable bedchamber.

“Now listen, sir; hark’ee well and tell me truly. What does ten thousand firkins of ale leave in a man’s arteries, eh? Tell me that. Or a thousand hogsheads of fine claret? Eh? Or a hundred tuns of brandy. Mmm? When a man sees a pleasing wench, what juice passes from his eyes to his blood that gives him no ease, no peace, till he tops her? What’s the liquid that riots in our veins when a thousand guineas rides on a single card or a thoroughbred filly half a furlong out? Or when Charley Fox breaks from covert and the scent screams and the going’s firm. Eh?”

“Why, sir, such excesses must leave *something* in our veins, that’s certain. But what it may be I doubt ...”

The duke was not listening. “Tell me what, Mister Quack, Mister Leeches, tell me what irrigates every corner of a body as big and fine as this” – he squared his shoulders – “yet leaves it barren!”

The valet turned to nip a smoking lump from the candlewick. The doctor bent low over the kidney bowl. Neither man could face that terrible self-accusation.

There was no sound in the room but the fury of the duke’s breathing.

“Riddle me that, you pretender to the crown of science!” the duke jeered.

When they withdrew, he lay back between his cold sheets, pressed the swab fiercely to the new clot on his forearm, and wished he had not lost the gift of easy tears.

“No heir,” he said aloud to the deathly black around him. He thought of Charlotte, his duchess, who had died in childbed long ago, telling him her stillborn son was fathered by another – Charlotte whom he had cursed and harried, year in, year out, for her supposed barrenness, when it was only her faithfulness to him had made her so. He thought then of the wasted years, pumping his sterility into numberless trollops and girls of every low degree, any one of whom he would have married if she had presented him with one undoubted heir. But none had.

Not so long ago any one of these memories would have been enough to release his tears, and, with them, the soothing balm of grief. Now, even on each other’s heels, they had lost that power.

He turned then, as he always did, to the memories of his young manhood, when the dukedom of St. Ormer had seemed as secure as the Tower of London and its extinction was unthinkable. He remembered the days in the field, the evenings at Brooks’s, the nights in the boudoirs. There was a zest in those memories that had vanished from this vile, modern country.

Nowhere now could you smell a winter hedgerow quite so sweet as then; no modern horse would leap as rashly or with half such heart as those mounts of long ago; the very foxes and hounds were palsied weaklings when set beside those red-streaking demons that webbed the landscapes of his memory, and the baying packs that flowed like portions of a magic river, at liberty to stream uphill as easily as down.

Where now was laughter as innocently wicked as the gusts and gales of it that greeted the turn of their cards at Brooks’s? Where now were the men who could command such storms, where the raffish and sinister Henry Frederick, Duke of Cumberland ... where Charles James Fox, the unlauded epicurean and tender cynic, or – above all men – the peerless Prince of Wales? Where was he? The world would never see their like again.

“Oh, my prince!” the duke whispered, an ancient man lost in those most treacherous lands of all.

And at last there was the narcotic of tears.

They woke him at four next morning; from dreams of cataclysm and apocalypse they tapped and pinched and 'your-graced' his full-blooded mind back into its newly anaemic body.

"Devil take you!" he shouted, blinking at the dark.

"Your grace! Sir!" It was McKay, his secretary.

Scoby, the valet, slipped a shawl around his shoulders, plumped up the down of his pillows, retrieved his nightcap and pulled it back over his head, and passed him a watered brandy, all in one movement. In one further movement he was holding a candle at the duke's right shoulder.

In its light he saw that McKay was presenting a salver; the letter upon it bore the seal of Elliott & Polkinghorne, solicitors.

"Mister Polkinghorne's found the lost line of the family, sir," McKay said.

The duke grunted angrily, to conceal his joy. The lost line of the family – found!

But how did McKay know? The duke peered closely at the seal to check that it had not been tampered with.

"Mister Polkinghorne wrote to me too, sir," McKay said.

The duke frowned.

"To be sure to wake you, sir."

The frown deepened.

"Your instructions, your grace, were, no matter what the hour or occasion, day or night ..."

"Don't plague me, you ill-kept loon!" the duke thundered. "Don't serve me my own words. I know what I said." He stared at the letter on the silver tray. "It'll keep!" he barked and, blowing out the candle, hurled himself back beneath his counterpane. Over the hammering of his heart he barely heard the secretary and the valet go blundering out into the dark.

He was capricious with them, partly because it was a lifetime habit to be capricious with his inferiors but mainly to hide his terror from McKay and Scoby. While the hunt for the lost line of the family was on, there was all the excitement of drawing a new fox covert: Would it prove blank, or would the foxes break from it like startled crows? And what sort of fox would the ultimate quarry be – valiant or a coward, stouthearted or a misery? What sort of man would be heir to Augustus Clarence Fitzstephen Wrottesley Veitch du Bois, Fourth Duke of St. Ormer, Marquis of Knightsbridge, Earl of Brompton, Earl of Belgravia, Viscount Constantine, Baron Marlow, Baron of Stonor, and Baron Yeo?

Until now, all things were possible of this lost line. Was it the line of John, younger brother of the First Duke, who had fled to Scotland and then to France during the Commonwealth, there to marry into the powerful de Boisigny family? Had part of that line escaped the Terror after all? Or was it the line through Stephen, the bastard son of his grandfather, the Second Duke, who had been brought up at the Hanoverian court and whose son had married a Hohenzollern? Had they indeed been legitimized on the accession of George I to the throne of England?

Or was this all just so much wishful thinking? Would his heir turn out to be no more than a petty baronet – a toadying lickspittle like his neighbour Sir Duncan Kinnaird, bankrupt through four generations? Or even worse – a mere squire? Perhaps with a northern accent and pig dung on his boots? Or had Polkinghorne found descendants beyond those damned third cousins, the detestable Puritan Boyces?

The answer to these and a thousand like questions lay in the stout parchment that he still clutched between his trembling fingers. He could tolerate the suspense no more. “Scoby!” he roared.

At once Scoby came in, bearing the relighted candle; after long years of service this capricious master had become as predictable as the tides at Greenwich.

In a fever of anticipation the duke broke the seal. He hammered the parchment flat and read the neat, crabbed handwriting.

After two paragraphs he stopped breathing. What blood the doctor had left him drained from his face and limbs. He stared at the words on the page.

He looked again at the seal, suspecting a hoax. But it was genuine.

He peered at Scoby’s impassive face, seeking the merest hint of a telltale smile. In vain.

He read to the end, hoping the later half would contradict the opening one. It did not.

One by one the alternatives vanished. One by one the teeming horde of possibilities, from imperial Hohenzollerns down to simple squires, took their leave, until there lurked on that once-vast stage the single, solitary – and hitherto quite unsuspected – figure of ...

The duke, Augustus Clarence Fitzstephen Wrottesley Veitch du Bois, lay back upon his pillow, closed his eyes, and said in utter disbelief: “Alfred Boyce, manufacturer of lacquered metal boxes!”

## Chapter 2

**L**EVIL TAKE YOU, girl!” shouted Alfred Boyce, manufacturer of lacquered metal boxes. “Because a man stays the night away, does he pay less for his room? He does not! So should he get the same service as if he stayed? He should!”

The maid looked around in bewilderment. “But the bed is made, sir. The ewer’s dry. The room’s as tidy as I left it yesterday.”

“We’ll see about that,” Alfred said. And he rumbled the bed, kicked the rug all of a heap, and then, pouring a liberal splash of water into the ewer, threw off his shirt and washed himself.

He did not need a wash, for he had done the same ablutions at four o’clock that morning – only three hours ago – at the Cross Keys in Hanston, fourteen miles away. Nor was he customarily as mean-spirited as these actions made him seem. He liked the bustle of servants. He liked being waited upon. But today, more than ever, he needed to feel he was still the master somewhere – if only in this narrow, otherwise unlettable room over the coaching entrance of the Midland Hotel in the Cokeley district of Birmingham; for today, unless he could achieve some extraordinary feat of commerce (quite against his recent form), today Alfred Boyce’s little manufacturing empire was going to fall apart. The very girl – Eileen – whom he now ordered about with such uncharacteristic spite would soon, without adding a penny to her name, be a thousand times richer than he. So he seized these last few chances to show what mastery remained to him.

“You’re out of your usual good humour, sir,” Eileen said cheerfully as she bustled about, setting the room to rights.

“Hold your tongue! Have I had any visitors yesterday or last night?”

He almost forgot himself and said ‘creditors.’

The girl went on with her business in sullen silence.

Alfred, invigorated by his wash, made a new resolve, realizing it would do him no good to show the world how bad his affairs were ... and servants have tongues.

“Come on,” he said. “Give us a kiss.” His laugh was so vast and deep you’d imagine he was built around a bass organ pipe, except that he was short and slight enough to vanish comfortably inside such a tube.

The maid was shocked. Mr Boyce had never before suggested such improprieties. His gleaming eyes and the wet mouth that lurked inside his full black beard frightened her as she saw him in the new light of his suggestion.

He laughed again. “It was a jest,” he said. “If I’m out of humour, it’s because that new mare of your master’s rushes at every rut and puddle, shows her heels at every starling, and thinks the dogs between Soho and the Bull Ring came straight from the forests of Africa. Bring me porridge and a nice kipper or three, eh?”

Reassured, Eileen smiled. "You had two callers last night. A Mister Polkinghorne, solicitor, who will wait on you again today."

"Solicitor!" Alfred said, laughing even as his guts slithered down to his boots. "I hope it's that legacy at last."

"And there was Sir Eric Newbiggin."

"Sir Eric!" Alfred was stunned. "In person?"

"Yes, and very eager to see you, too. He left you word – there on the mantelpiece."

Alfred followed the dart of her eyes and saw the envelope propped between two lacquered metal boxes, samples of his wares. As in a dream he crossed the room and took up the paper. *Midland Hotel* was stamped upon it.

"This is not Sir Eric's notepaper."

"He came expecting to find you in, I suppose." She was lingering now, to see his reaction. Suspicions kindled.

The letter ran:

My dear Boyce,

Too long I have put off writing to you. I was overhasty, not to say brusque, at our last Meeting, when you were kind enough to favour Me with the Suggestion of a Private Business Arrangement. I have thought more of it since and have come to realize the Great Merit of your proposal ...

*This is surely a hoax*, Alfred thought. *It can be nothing else*. "Did you yourself see Sir Eric?" he asked the girl.

"No, sir."

"Does anyone else here know him?"

"I'm certain they do. Everyone in Cokeley knows Sir Eric."

"Aye, and so do I."

His eye fell to a later paragraph: 'My daughter Hermione tells me she has for some time been aware of your Glances in Church ...'

*That's a good one*, Alfred thought. He had become a Unitarian for the sole purpose of meeting and forming an acquaintance with Sir Eric. The love that burned within him for Hermione, undeclared and unrequited, had come later, and not as a welcome bonus. She knew of it, he could sense that. And, though she was impossibly beautiful and impossibly beyond his humble reach, she had responded sufficiently, with a glance here, a smile there, to sustain the barest hope. *If she were only free of her parents ...* was a daydream that lulled him to sleep most nights.

And Sir Eric knew of his feelings; there was no doubt of it. He had even sneered about them at their last meeting. And what was he saying now in this letter? 'In your altered circumstances no possible objection could be put in the way of ...'

Oh, of course it was a hoax! 'In your altered circumstances'? What? A euphemism for 'now that you're about to go bankrupt'? It was very likely that the richest man in rich, rich Birmingham should say, in effect: 'I know you've got your

eye on my daughter. Well, now you're going bankrupt you'll have lots of time on your hands, so why not come up to the Hall and court her every day'!

No, it was a hoax, timed with unintentional cruelty by drinking companions somewhere about their fifth or sixth pint of ale. He took up a pen and wrote, 'Well tried, sir!' in a large hand, right across 'Sir Eric's' neat lines.

"Give this to *Sir Eric* – if he returns," he said, handing the letter to the maid with a knowing smile. He did not even bother to fold it back into its envelope. "Now, where's the porridge and kippers, eh?"

By lunchtime everyone at the Midland had read the letter and marveled at Alfred's cavalier reply.

"Was he drunk?" asked Tom Austin, the landlord.

"He was a bit strange," Eileen said. "But not drunk."

"Something's afoot," Tom Austin said, for at least the thirtieth time that morning. "That solicitor cove, he still here?"

"He's not even taken off his coat," she said.

"Something's afoot."