

# THE NOTORIOUS COLONEL BLOOD

By  
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THE line between notoriety and fame may sometimes be hard to draw, but the difference between the two ideas is, I suppose, rather clear. "Fame" carries an undertone of permanence and, usually, of worthiness. My generation, when we were children, had drummed into us that

Lives of great [i.e., famous] men all remind us  
That we can make our lives sublime—

a goal by no means ardently desired by us—

And passing leave behind us  
Footprints in the sands of time.

Notoriety, on the contrary, is a passing thing, here today and gone tomorrow, though while it lasts its scope may be very great. Furthermore, it usually means a definitely unfavorable appraisal of the person in point. Notorious, then, was the "woman in red." How many of you remember even what my reference may deal with? For a few hectic days she sheltered that supremely notorious gangster, John Dillinger, and was on the front page of

every newspaper. And what of that lady of color—I have already forgotten her name, but I think it was Snyder—whose modest, and by no means unparalleled, achievement began only by getting drunk to the point of unconsciousness? It was a subzero night, yet she survived, though her temperature dropped to a point supposed to be fatal to all but fish in arctic waters. Speaking of fish, Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel but had an even-briefer-than-normal notoriety when it was discovered how completely Gertrude in a bathing suit was no Miss America. Notorious, too, though here also there is no unfavorable connotation, was the unfortunate Floyd Collins, after whom so many caves in Kentucky are now named. Collins, as you may or may not remember, was exploring a newly discovered cave near Mammoth Cave which, he hoped, might become a rival attraction to that famous cavern. When he was far from the surface, in a passage barely large enough for a person to wriggle through, a stone fell on his leg and pinned him to the spot. Several days later he was discovered, still alive and in fairly good shape. Efforts to release him of course began at once, but his own body effectively blocked a chance to get at the stone holding him fast, and any enlarging of the passage would almost certainly have brought a cave-in and horrible death to Collins and rescuers alike. Only one hope remained—somehow in that tiny, cramped space, to amputate his leg. The next thing was to find a surgeon brave enough and unselfish enough to face the risk of going down and trying to do it. And here, surprisingly, the Chicago Literary Club comes into the picture: a Chicago surgeon, who is now one of our members, Dr. William Hazlett, volunteered. But it

was all to no avail, the operation could not be performed either, and, with the whole nation watching in horrible suspense, Floyd Collins died in his terrible prison, where his body is entombed forever.

Much more likely to achieve notoriety than such sc-date figures as Gertrude Ederle and Floyd Collins, however, are persons of comfortably relaxed morals, and they are probably usually much more interesting too. I have often wished that some member would favor us with a paper on the less-well-known royal favorites—not the great figures like Mme de Pompadour, the Duchess of Richmond, Ninon de l'Enclos, or Diane de Poitiers, but such lesser ones as Lola Montes, the Scotch girl who made her reputation (if you can so phrase it!) in the court of Austria-Hungary but wound up, fairly prosperously, in a Rocky Mountain mining camp, or Gaby Delys, who agreeably taught the facts of life to King Manoel of Portugal. As a wag once put it, she must have been a teacher, since she gave Manoel training!

But it is high time for me to remember that my subject tonight is not one of these glamorous ladies but a person of a very different stamp—a gentleman whom a Yale professor of history called the “most famous and successful of English lawbreakers,” Colonel Thomas Blood. (The “Colonel” was purely a courtesy title.) I propose to sketch a career that even today is largely hidden in mystery and that was crowned by an exploit that set all England agog—but what it was you will have to wait to learn.

Our hero of tonight was born at a date not exactly known but somewhere around the year 1618. The place honored by his birth was a little village in County

Meath, in Ireland, where his father was the fairly prosperous proprietor of an ironworks. The family was Scotch-Irish and of the Presbyterian faith, although Thomas, in that age of mixed religion and politics, was later to be just about everything except a Mohammedan, as occasion made advisable. It is very likely that he began his career as a soldier on the royalist side in the civil war that was just then beginning in England, and he must have distinguished himself somewhat, as a letter has survived, from him to his commanding officer, asking a favor in behalf of an uncle with the remarkable Christian name of Neptune.

Seeing the handwriting on the wall, young Blood opportunely moved over to the other side and by the time of Cromwell's victory was a commissioned officer in the Commonwealth army. Like most of his associates, he then reaped a rich reward in the form of estates confiscated from the Royalists and in due time became a staid country gentleman and a justice of the peace. Then, after seven years, came the turn in the political wheel that ultimately brought Blood, not fame, but boundless notoriety, in place of the obscurity of a law-abiding country squire. This political turn consisted, of course, in the restoration of King Charles II and in the prompt ejection from their hands of all the beneficiaries of the earlier confiscations. The Duke of Ormonde, as the royal Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, saw to it that no exception was made in favor of our hero, the one-time turncoat from the royalist side. Then and there began a career of many years of intertwined politics and plain lawbreaking, whose political and criminal elements will never be untangled from each other.

Blood's first appearance in the records of crime bore no hint of future greatness, however. Ignominiously enough for a former country gentleman and justice of the peace, he was charged by one Dolman, a butcher of Dublin, with appropriating "one cow and one outlandish bull." There is no hint in the charge of how or why the bull was outlandish. The charge, however, never got into court, as before it could be reached, our hero was involved in far more serious matters. To put them into their proper setting, it must be remembered that the defeated Parliamentary party took their fate in far from a passive way. To us in retrospect it is apt to seem that King Charles was restored, everything was settled, and that was that. Actually at the time the future was anything but certain, and the whole kingdom was seething with plots, real and imagined. It need hardly be said that Ireland was no oasis of tranquillity.

Blood was living at the time with his brother-in-law, a Presbyterian minister named Lecky, who was likewise a fellow of Trinity College. I mention this only because of the curious coincidence that Lecky, the great Irish historian of the nineteenth century, was also a Presbyterian minister and a fellow of Trinity College in Dublin. Politics and personal hatred of the Duke of Ormonde for the confiscation of his estates combined to make Captain Blood—this was the title he now gave himself—the chief figure in a formidable conspiracy to assassinate the duke, seize Dublin Castle, and, it was hoped, set off a chain reaction that would completely destroy the whole royal power in Ireland. The Reverend Mr. Lecky became his second in command.

The plot was very elaborate. It was the custom that on

stated occasions the Lord Lieutenant must in person receive petitions for the redress of grievances. A large group of plotters was to get into the castle as pretended petitioners. Some eighty or ninety others, disguised as workmen, were to hang around the entrance. A pretended baker's boy, with a basket of bread on his head, was to enter the gate, apparently on his way to the kitchen. As he passed the guard, he was to stumble, lose his balance, and scatter his bread all over the ground. At least some of the guard, it was assumed, would scramble for the loaves, the baker's boy would resist, and everybody would rush to see the fun. In the confusion the loiterers and petitioners would overcome the guard, seize the castle, and send out in all directions previously prepared proclamations announcing the end of the royal government. It was a good idea, and it might have worked—to the considerable recasting of history, perhaps—if it had not been for one factor to be found in almost every one of the conspiracies of that time—the presence of an informer. Ormonde was warned that something or other, of a nature not known, was to happen on May 9, 1663. What he did not know was that his informer was impartially acting in the same capacity for the plotters and had promptly notified them that their plot had been "discovered." With more bravery than judgment, the latter merely advanced the date four days, a rescheduling that was, of course, immediately reported to the duke. Arrests were at once ordered and were, in fact, made of almost everyone except Blood, who somehow escaped (it is not known how, but may we guess it was with the help of the inevitable informer?). The unfortunate Lecky was caught and put to such torture that he lost his mind. Ef-



forts of his wife and the faculty of Trinity College to secure his release produced only the grim joke that he would indeed be turned over to them—after he had been hanged. But the fear of Blood was so great that when Lecky was standing under the gallows, with the noose already around his neck, a hysterical rumor arose that Blood was coming to rescue him, and the guard and even the executioner fled in wild panic. Lecky was left all alone, awaiting the denouement. This was grim enough. The rumor proved false, the guards and executioner returned, and in due time the promise to return Lecky to his wife was kept, exactly on the terms made.

As for Blood, he was outlawed and a price was set on his head, but he succeeded in escaping, disguised in a variety of ways, including that of a Catholic priest. For the next four years or so there is little certain record of his movements, but apparently he left Ireland for a while and divided his time between England and the Netherlands. As these two countries were then at war with each other, the latter was a popular refuge for persons in Blood's situation. But from time to time he turned up in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and always when he did so the fruit of his arrival was some plot or other. Some of these were discovered by the authorities in very mysterious ways and even have led to the suspicion that, when his funds were running low, he himself was not at all above replenishing them by doing a little profitable informing on his own account.

However that may be, it was almost exactly four years after the Dublin Castle plot when he again took the spotlight, this time in a very different type of exploit. A close friend of Blood's, a Captain John Mason, was deeply in-

volved in a plot in York and had been arrested in London. In July, 1667, orders were issued that Mason and another prisoner, one Leving, were to be taken by a body of troops to York, where they were to stand trial. Blood heard of this and determined to effect a rescue, for which purpose he recruited an equally large troop of his own supporters. The soldiers with their prisoners moved northward in a leisurely fashion, the only incident being that they were joined by an itinerant barber, one Scott, who naturally felt considerably safer traveling with an armed escort than all by himself. When they had been several days on the road, they were fairly near a country inn where Captain Mason had spent many pleasant hours with Major Blood. (Blood had by now promoted himself to that rank.) So Mason offered to stand treat there to everybody, a fortunate piece of generosity for him, as will shortly appear. Meanwhile Blood and his gang had greatly overestimated the speed of the government force and had ridden rapidly almost the whole way to York, only to find no trace of those they sought. Discouraged, they started back, but decided to detour for a stop at the same inn of which Major Blood, too, had such pleasant memories. By sheer chance the two parties arrived at about the same time, the Blood forces fell on the troops, and a bloody battle—no pun is intended—followed. As to details there is great difference in the various accounts, but all agree that the first person killed was poor Scott, the itinerant barber who had wished to play it safe. Blood's own, but unsupported, version of the fight casts him in a Cyrano de Bergerac role of all against one, with the one of course completely victorious. However that may be, the fight was certainly violent enough, with

numerous deaths on both sides and with Blood seriously wounded. Certain, too, is Blood's complete victory, as in due time he and his men fled with Mason in their midst. The other prisoner, Leving, hid and, when the battle was over, emerged and gave himself up again to the troops—conduct completely amazing to them but now quite clear to us. He knew that Blood knew that he was the informer who had squealed on Captain Mason in the first place! A word or two more on the unfortunate Mr. Leving to bring out the depth of the duplicity and double-dealing prevalent in the Merry England of King Charles's time. A few days after he was securely locked up in York Castle, he was found dead in his cell. On his body was a partly finished letter recanting his disclosures as to some persons. There are two theories as to who killed him and why. One is that the authorities realized that he was double-crossing them in his informer's role and were resolved to give him no chance to escape punishment as a crown witness. The other—more complex but supported by strong evidence—is that the Royal Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Buckingham, was at that time himself so deeply involved in antiroyal intrigue that he did not relish having doubt thrown on the guilt of others, since this might be followed by embarrassing further investigations.

But to return to Blood. A price was again set on his head, but, as before, he disappeared, this time, remarkably enough, to become a peaceful physician and apothecary named Allen in a small English town. Then came three years of apparently genuine quiet before the next, and third, exploit. There were to be four of them in all, and, when I have done, you will, I think,

agree with me that they set a magnificent crescendo.

Around Christmas of 1670 England was playing host to a very distinguished visitor, no less a one than William of Orange, the stadholder of Holland. Ostensibly he was merely paying a friendly visit to his uncle, King Charles, now that the war between the two countries was over. But it was a more or less open secret that actually the purpose of his visit was to plan a marriage for him to his eight-year-old cousin Mary, who, it was already thought, might some day become the reigning queen, as did in fact turn out to be the case. Naturally entertainments on the most lavish scale were the order of the day, and the climax of them was a great state dinner in honor of Prince William given by the city of London. Of all the great people there, the principal one, after the royalty, was none other than the Duke of Ormonde, the former Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, now Lord High Steward of England, and probably the wealthiest and most powerful man, excepting only the king, in all England, Scotland, and Ireland. Perhaps even more remarkable was the fact that *his* career was above suspicion and that he had no known personal enemies. Nobody, of course, gave any thought to the fact that some seven or eight years ago he had signed orders confiscating all the estates of an obscure Lieutenant Blood, who was now probably dead and in any event a hunted fugitive. So great a man as the duke was not required to delay his departure until royalty gave the signal, and shortly before eight o'clock he claimed the fatigue of age and left for home, attended by his six footmen, his coachman, and a runner to clear the way. "Home" for him was majestic Clarendon House, still a royal residence today, if I am not mistaken.

A little later the coach clattered at its maximum speed up to the porter's lodge, and the panic-stricken coachman reported that they had been set on by six men, the footmen put to flight, and the duke dragged out of the coach by main force. Bravely enough, the porter and one other immediately set out to the rescue. Fortunately they correctly guessed the direction that the kidnapers had taken. After some distance they came on two men struggling in the mud by the roadside, and at the same moment a lone horseman appeared from the opposite direction. At the sight of the porter and his companion, the horseman disappeared, and one of the struggling men also ran off. The other lay in the mud, too exhausted to speak. Feeling his clothes, their fingers soon touched the star of the Order of the Garter, and they knew that it was the duke. He was carried back to Clarendon House and, strangely enough, considering his years, was soon up and about, none the worse for his harrowing adventure. Tremendous excitement was, of course, aroused by the outrage, and quite in the modern style investigations were launched by everybody in sight. These soon cleared up the facts fairly thoroughly. A dagger dropped by the horseman bore the initials "T. H." and thus was identified as the property of Thomas Hunt, who had recently been arrested on suspicion of highway robbery but released for lack of evidence. What was only now discovered was that Hunt was merely an alias used by none other than the much-sought Blood himself. He had, of course, been the leader in the present crime. When the duke was dragged from the coach, Blood had ordered him tied up and mounted behind another member of the party. With a high sense of drama Blood then informed his victim that he

proposed to do to the duke exactly what the latter would have done to him, if he could; that is, to take him to Tyburn Field, the place of public execution, and there hang him. He then rode off for the purpose of putting the rope on the gallows. What became of the other four men is not recorded, but the duke and his captor followed Blood as fast as possible. Ormonde, however, continued to struggle, got his hands loosened, and finally was able to get his foot between his captor's foot and the horse. He then gave a violent lunge and threw both himself and his captor to the ground. He succeeded in getting his arms around his opponent and then simply hung on. Blood, after waiting a while, returned to see what had happened, and it was at this lucky moment that the rescuers appeared.

For the third time a reward was offered for Blood, dead or alive, and the whole country was in a fever of search. For the first time, too, there seemed to be a good chance of success. On his previous exploits he had, after all, favored the aims of one of the two political forces in the country and could count on its partisans to help protect him. Now he had been shown up as merely a particularly vicious and daring criminal. Again, however, the search got nowhere, and the only result, so far as Blood was concerned, was the rather singular one that, in public reference to him, he was now promoted from major to colonel—his last "promotion," I may add.

Notorious as these exploits made Blood at the time, he would have been forgotten long ago, had it not been for the sensational nature of the fourth and last exploit. This was to consist in nothing less than a daring bid to steal the crown jewels of England. What his success was

we shall see in due time. The selection of this project shows the same mixture of selfish criminality, on the one hand, and politics, on the other, that had characterized almost everything that he had done previously. Success would obviously mean fabulous wealth and full freedom to enjoy it anywhere across the English Channel, in those days preceding extradition treaties. But there were possible political gains too. Plainly the corrupt royal government, from the king on down, would be shown up in a most discreditable manner. But there was another political consequence not so obvious to us but of real significance in those days. Legal thinking still attached a naïve importance to the actual presence, or use, of specified physical objects. The putting of a seal on a document made it a very different one from what it was without a seal. If the king gave you a charter to do something, he could not revoke it unless he could actually get the charter itself back in his hands; and if you could hide the document in, say, a hollow oak, your rights could not be interfered with. Thus, when in 1688 James II and his court would feel revolution crashing down on them, the first and most important thing to do, in their opinion, was to hide the great seal and thereby effectually stop their opponents from taking over authority. It may seem a rather childish viewpoint to us today, but nonetheless it probably was the one held by Blood and very many of his contemporaries. Steal the crown, the orb, and the scepter, and there really would be doubt in the minds of many whether King Charles and his government could still legally function.

But to get back to Blood and his great plan. He must have worked on the last details of it at the very time

when he was in the closest hiding, after the kidnaping of the Duke of Ormonde, in December, 1670, as it was in May, 1671, that the great venture was made. The jewels, then as now, were kept in the Tower of London, and the official Keeper of the Jewel House was a Sir Gilbert Talbot, a relative of the influential Earl of Shrewsbury. Despite this latter fact, King Charles, chronically hard up because of his costly mistresses, specified, when he made the appointment, that it was no longer to carry the customary emoluments. Accordingly, Sir Gilbert, when he designated an old family retainer, one Talbot Edwards, as the person actually in charge of the jewels, was unable to pay him any salary but directed that for the first time they might be shown to the public, with Edwards keeping whatever fees he could pick up. With Edwards lived his wife and daughter. A son was with the army on the Continent and would probably be gone for some years.

One day toward the end of winter some especially agreeable and friendly sightseers appeared. They were a clergyman, his wife, and a young man, their nephew. The tour of the Tower was climaxed, of course, by the sight of the jewels. Unfortunately the lady was at that moment seized by a violent chill. The clergyman, with considerable presence of mind, made a quick but thorough search of the room to see if there was anything, such as a blanket, that could be used to cover her but, finding nothing, he, his nephew, and Edwards carried her down to Edwards' quarters. Fortunately the fresh air soon revived her, and she was able to assure them that she felt fully restored. A few days later the grateful clergyman again appeared, this time with a gift from his wife—four pairs of white gloves. A message added that she hoped



very soon to come herself and express her thanks. This hope was shortly realized, and the visit proved, even more than before, how congenial the two families were. Further visits followed, with increasing frequency, until, some time later, the clergyman drew Mr. Edwards aside and asked him whether he too had observed the growing devotion of his nephew to the Edwards' daughter. Edwards had indeed noticed it, and the satisfaction that he already felt was increased by his being informed that the young man's fortune was considerably greater than one would expect. In fact it came to almost £300 a year. Only the daughter's feelings remained to be inquired into. Happily she too was favorably disposed. An early day—to be exact, the ninth of May—was fixed on for the formal conclusion of arrangements. On that day the clergyman, his nephew, and a friend who had never seen the interior of the Tower appeared. By a misunderstanding as to the time when they were expected, they were fully an hour ahead of the time when Mrs. and Miss Edwards were looking for them. That interval, therefore, had to be killed somehow, and the clergyman suggested that it be used in showing the friend the crown jewels. Before going to the jewel room, however, he mentioned to Edwards that he greatly admired the pair of pistols that Edwards carried and would like to buy them as a gift for a gentleman, a friend of his in the country. Accordingly he made an offer for them that was so generous that Edwards thought it wise to conclude the sale then and there, lest the offer be withdrawn on reconsideration. No sooner said than done: the money was handed over, and so were the pistols. The party then left for the jewel house. Arrived there, the nephew stated that he

preferred to stay outside, to Edwards' great amusement—obviously he wanted to stay on watch for an early glimpse of his sweetheart.

Once in the jewel room, the scene changed with startling and horrible suddenness. The door was slammed shut, and, while one of the two visitors struck Edwards a heavy blow on the head, the other bound and gagged him. When he continued to struggle and to make some outcry, he was stabbed in the stomach—fortunately not, as it turned out, seriously. He then wisely concluded to feign unconsciousness. The two robbers proceeded to bend the crown into a more compact mass and stuffed it and the orb into their baggy trousers. They then began to file the scepter in two, when an unforeseen and truly remarkable event took place. At that very moment Edwards' soldier son, unexpectedly furloughed from the army, arrived at home, accompanied by a comrade. Both, of course, were fully armed. At the sight of them the so-called "nephew" gave the alarm, and all three thieves started to hurry away. Edwards, Senior, got the gag out of his mouth almost at once and began shrieking "Murder! Treason!" This set Edwards, Junior, and his companion in pursuit, and, as the thieves did not wish to raise suspicion by running past the soldiers, the pursuers were able rapidly to close up on them, whereupon they too began to shout "Stop thief!" as they started to run. It was no use—they were closed in on, and Blood, the pretended clergyman, whipped around and fired both pistols at young Edwards' friend. Both missed fire, and he was speedily overpowered. So was the friend who had wished to see the jewels. Only the nephew seemed for a moment to have better luck. He got to his horse but after a little

ways on the horse was tripped by a long wagon tongue and fell. Before he could get it up, he too was caught. As for the jewels, all were quickly recovered except that in the confusion three of the larger stones—a diamond, a ruby, and a pearl—were knocked from their settings, but these also were eventually found.

And so, it would seem, Blood's career was at last about to be ended by a speedy trip to the gallows. Such, strangely enough, was not to be the case, even though his exploits as a lawbreaker were now over. In fact, his success in wriggling even out of this last scrape constitutes in a way his most remarkable achievement. Of course, in London coffee houses there was little talk of anything but the public hanging that would soon take place at Tyburn, and even in Ireland, a newspaper correspondent wrote, hardly anything else was discussed. All sorts of rumors were in the air that the theft attempt was merely the opening effort of a full-scale projected revolution, and so on. All these conjectures were fanned when Blood, on his preliminary examination, refused to speak to anyone but the king himself. Still more remarkable was the fact that three days later this strange demand was granted. What was said at this curious interview of course will never be known. One version is that Blood "admitted" a cock-and-bull story that, while the king went bathing in a river, he was hiding near by and intended to kill him but that he was so much awed by majesty that he gave it up. This was supposed to be supplemented by the warning that he had several hundred loyal followers who would avenge him, if he were executed. But, whatever was said, the amazing result of the interview is not in doubt. He was granted a full

pardon for all his offenses (including, with the Duke of Ormonde's permission, even the attempt on the duke's life), the restoration of all his estates, and a pension of £500 a year. (Incidentally, poor Edwards, the wounded custodian of the jewels, was promised a lump sum of £200, of which he actually received £100 in all.) Nobody knows the real explanation of this amazing generosity toward Blood. Maybe the reports of the interview with the king have some truth to them after all. Maybe, more prosaically, his case, luckily for him, came up at the very time when Charles was trying to make new friends for himself by a more generous policy toward his one-time enemies. This explanation is backed up by the extent to which Blood was very soon thereafter doing a thriving business in procuring pardons for political offenders. This activity was not at all inconsistent with his simultaneously serving as a particularly valuable informer—which role he is known to have filled. A final explanation of the pardon—not a likely one, but not impossible either, and widely believed at the time—was that the king himself had employed Blood to steal the jewels, with the proceeds to be shared between them. It would have been quite in keeping with "good King Charley's" moral code.

To dwell on the rest of Blood's life would be an anticlimax. For nine years he was constantly at court, known to all as a spy and an informer, and universally hated. In 1679 it was charged against him that he was plotting against the powerful Duke of Buckingham, who, you may recall, had been the double-dealing Lord Lieutenant of York. The charge was almost certainly false. What is much more likely is that Blood knew

more about the duke's doubtful ways than that gentleman liked. Nonetheless, Blood was convicted but again escaped punishment—this time by the drastic means of falling ill and a few days later quietly dying.

And thus ended the career of England's most famous criminal. Or wasn't he a criminal? Was he merely a more-than-normally unscrupulous politician who happened to be consistently on the losing side? This is the final, and the biggest, of the many riddles he has left behind him.

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