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Opening Extract from...

The Devil's Acre

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1

Colonel Colt was on his feet a good five seconds before the carriage had come to a halt, pulling open the door and leaping outside. A brisk spring wind was sucked into the vehicle like a mouthful of cold water, rushing underneath the seats, swirling through the hat-racks and almost scattering Edward's sheaf of Colt documents across the floor. He tightened his grip on it, coolly shuffling the pile back into shape, and conducted a quick inventory. Something critical was missing. Looking around, he saw a finely made wooden case, slim and about fifteen inches long, resting upon the narrow shelf directly above where Colt had been sitting. He tucked it under his arm and followed his new employer down into the street.

Colt was issuing orders to the coachman while straightening his broad-brimmed Yankee hat. Behind him towered a mighty rank of Italianate façades, among the grandest in all London, belonging to a variety of venerable clubs, learned institutions and government offices. Edward could not help but be impressed. I've harnessed myself to a real rocket here, he thought; Pall Mall, the seat of power, on my very first morning! This post in the Colt Company was his great chance – an opportunity of a kind granted only to a few. To prove your worth to a man such as Colonel Colt was to set yourself upon a sure path to advancement. He checked his necktie (his best, claret silk, knotted with special care) and caught sight of his reflection in a panel of the Colonel's mustard-yellow barouche. Possibly the largest private carriage Edward

had ever ridden in, it stood out among the clattering cabs of London like a great lacquered beetle in a parade of ants. Upon its glossy surface he was reduced to a near silhouette, a smart, anonymous professional gentleman in a black frock-coat and top hat, his face obscured by shadow.

The Colonel glanced over at him. 'Right here, Mr Lowry – the Board of Ordnance,' he said, nodding curtly towards one of buildings. Then he bounded up the flight of stone steps before it, surprisingly swiftly for someone of his size, and shoved his way through a set of tall double doors.

Edward went after him, feeling both admiration and a little amusement. The American entrepreneur went about his business with a single-minded vigour far beyond anything he'd seen during his six years in the banks and trading houses of the City. This promised to be interesting indeed.

The hallway beyond the doors was every bit as magnificent as the building's exterior, its floors covered with thick carpets, its walls lined with marble columns and its lofty ceiling positively groaning with gilded plasterwork. Portraits of British generals hung wherever one cared to look, their grizzled faces arranged into expressions of proud confidence as they stood to attention or leaned against cannon, conquered enemy citadels burning behind them. Pervading this sumptuous environment was an official hush so deep and still that it was almost accusatory. This is a place of the very highest importance, it seemed to say, where decisions are made that affect nothing less than the future of Great Britain; what the deuce are *you* doing here?

Entirely indifferent to this oppressive atmosphere, Colonel Colt strode up to the main desk and bade the smart clerk behind it good morning. The stare that met this salutation told Edward at once that they were not expected; no appointment had been made, and the clerk's stance in such situations was abundantly clear. Unabashed, Colt went on to ask if he might drop in on Tom Hastings, an old friend of his who he believed was currently the Storekeeper of the Ordnance. He was informed that *Sir Thomas* was fully engaged that morning, and would not receive visitors without prior arrangement in any case.

'So he's in the building, at least,' the Colonel interrupted with a hard smile. 'Will you be so kind as to tell him that Sam Colt is at his door, and wishes to have a word? He'll be interested, I guarantee it.'

The clerk would not cooperate, though, not even after Colt had introduced the possibility of a five-shilling note being left right there on his counter, to find whatever owner pleased God. So this is it, Edward thought. We are to fall at the first hurdle. It wasn't quite the result he'd expected. The Colonel looked down at the carpet for a full minute, still smiling but growing red in the cheek. Suddenly, he barked out an impatient curse and lurched away to the right, cutting across the hall to a stairwell and sprinting straight up it.

Instinctively, Edward fell in behind him, ignoring the clerk's protestations and the heavy footfalls that were soon gathering at his heels. Together they dashed through the corridors of the Board of Ordnance, skidding around corners and thundering down flights of stairs. Colt threw open doors at random, demanding directions to Hastings's office from the startled scriveners within – a good many of whom, Edward noticed, were occupied with newspapers and novels rather than government business. In the end, as the crowd of their pursuers grew in both numbers and proximity, Colt simply bellowed out the name of his contact as he ran in the vain hope that this might draw him forth.

They were finally cornered in a remote lobby. A part of Edward was convinced that the police would now be fetched and they'd be led from that place in chains; but he also found that he had an unaccountable faith in Colonel Colt's ability to rescue them from difficulty. Sure enough, instead of arrest, their detainment was followed by a brief and intense negotiation, during which the Colonel imparted his expectations with considerable forcefulness. A more senior figure was summoned, who in turn sent off messengers to several different regions of the building; and soon afterwards Colt was told that an audience had been granted with Lord Clarence Paget, Secretary to the Master-General of Ordnance, in a mere twenty minutes' time. They were then taken to a vestibule on the second floor and left to wait.

There was a row of chairs against one wall, but as Colonel Colt showed no inclination to sit Edward felt it best that he remain on his feet as well. The two men removed their hats, and for the first time that day Edward was able to take a proper look at his employer. The Colonel must have been about forty, fifteen years older than Edward himself. He stood in the centre of the vestibule with his feet placed apart like a Yankee Henry VIII; he also shared the famous king's imposing, barrel-chested build, and had the same small, sharp features set into a broad expanse of face. This was combined in Colt with the mottled, scarlet-shot complexion of the serious drinker, a reddish, close-trimmed beard and a head of dense brown curls which a generous lashing of hair oil had done little to order. His clothes were all the very best, and new. The bottle-green coat he wore was square-cut at the bottom in the American fashion, and had a lining of thick black fur which evoked something of his enormous, untamed homeland; of bears and buffalo, of great snow-capped mountains and rolling plains, of gold-panning and Red Indians; a place of fortune-seeking and wild adventure, very far indeed from the mud and grit of grey London.

Colt started to shake his head slowly, his mouth forming the beginnings of a scowl. They had done astonishingly well, in Edward's opinion, but the Colonel was clearly far from pleased. Adjusting the case beneath his arm – it was rather heavy, in truth – he asked if anything was amiss. The gun-maker took what appeared to be a twist of tarred rope from his coat pocket, along with a small clasp-knife. Opening the blade, he cut off a piece about the size of a thumbnail and pushed it inside his lower lip. It was chewing tobacco, Edward realised, the great Yankee vice.

'I know Paget of old, Mr Lowry,' he muttered, his jaw working away ill-temperedly. 'This'll come to nothing.'

Lord Clarence Paget was in the later part of middle age, long-limbed and plainly dressed with a large, squareish forehead. He was seated behind a desk, finishing off a letter with a fastidious air. His office had two wide windows that looked out over the treetops of the Mall and St James's Park; the

branches, bare a fortnight earlier, were now dusted with budding leaves. The room was sparsely furnished – just a white marble fireplace, a couple of chairs and some mahogany bookcases – but it was packed with evidence of the work conducted within it. Framed prints of artillery pieces lined the walls, mechanisms from a multiplicity of firearms were arranged along the mantelpiece and the bookshelves, and scale models of cannon stood upon the desk, weighting down piles of official-looking documents and incomprehensible technical sketches.

Paget did not stop writing as they entered. 'You have forced this conference upon me, Colonel, so you must forgive my ignorance of what brings you here today. I don't claim to know how things are conducted in America, but in Great Britain it is customary to write first and arrange a meeting time that is convenient for both parties.'

'Guns, Paget.' Colt drawled out the name, biting off its end – *Paa-jit* – a pronunciation that had a distinctly belittling effect. The man's high birth clearly meant nothing to him at all. 'That's what brings me here. What else could it be?' He took a seat without waiting to be offered it, indicating that Edward should sit in the chair beside his. Then he extended a hand for the case, waving it over with a twitch of his fingers. 'This here's Mr Edward Lowry, my London secretary.'

Paget put a flourishing signature on his letter, scattered some sand on the ink and then laid down his pen, finally giving them his full attention. 'Your *London* secretary, Colonel?' he asked pointedly.

Colt did not answer. Instead, he flipped the catch on the front of the case and opened it up. He paused for a moment, an expert, showman-like touch; Edward caught a glimpse of mulberry velvet inside, fitted around a piece of polished walnut. Almost reverentially, the American gun-maker lifted out a revolving pistol, raising it before him for Paget to inspect.

Edward shifted slightly, feeling his pulse quicken. This was the closest he had yet come to one of the Colonel's creations. It was a fine thing indeed, beautiful even, over a foot long

with a sleek shape very different from the artless contraptions that cluttered Paget's shelves. Some parts around the trigger had been cast in bright brass, but the main body of the weapon was steel, finished to a hard, lustrous blue so full and dark that it was close to black. An intricate pattern of leaves and vines had been pressed along the barrel, curling onwards into the corners of the frame; and a line of ships, sails full, cruised in formation around the cylinder.

'The Navy,' declared Colt with great satisfaction. 'Named for the Texas Navy, my very first customers of any note, who used my guns to crush the Mexicans at Campeche. This here's the third model, and the best by some distance. Thirty-six calibre – it'll punch a hole clean through a door at five hundred yards.'

Paget regarded the gun for a moment or two and then looked back to his letter. Edward could scarcely believe it: he was unimpressed. 'The British Government is perfectly aware of your revolvers, Colonel. I fail to see why this warranted my attention so urgently.'

The Colonel took this in his stride. 'I'm showing you this particular piece, Mr Paget,' he replied with heavy emphasis, 'as it will serve as the mainstay of my Pimlico factory.'

This regained the official's interest. His eyes flickered back up to his visitors. 'I beg your pardon?'

'What you see here is a Connecticut gun,' Colt enlarged, chewing on his plug of tobacco, 'hence these bits of brass, which I know John Bull has no taste for. Within the month, though, my premises down by the Thames will be turning out *London* Colts – pistols made by English hands, and from English materials. The machinery employed is of my own invention, and fully patented; the system of labour is entirely unique; and the combination of the two will lead to a gun factory without equal in the civilised world. Certainly nothing this country has at present comes close. It'll be able to produce hundreds upon hundreds of these peerless arms,' here he raised up the Navy once again, rotating his thick wrist to give a complete view, 'in the blink of an eye – fast enough to meet any order your Queen might see fit to place. And you can be sure that my prices

will reflect this ease of production.' Colt sat back, adding carelessly, 'Bessborough Place is the address.'

Edward had seen this factory. It had been the site of his first meeting with the Colonel, in fact, when he'd won his position with some assured talk of past dealings with the steel-men of Sheffield – and a spot of bluster about how deeply impressed he'd been by the Colt stand in the Great Exhibition two years before. His enduring memory of the pistol works itself was of the machine floor, a large, open area occupied by Colonel Colt's renowned devices, smelling strongly of grease and raw, unfinished metal. These machines had a functional ugliness; spindly limbs, drill-bits and elaborate clamps were mounted upon frames in arrangements of mystifying, asymmetrical complexity. Everywhere, laid out across the floor like giant tendons, were the canvas belts that would eventually link the machines to the factory's engine, via the long brass cylinder that hung in the centre of the machine-room's ceiling. A handful of engineers had been attempting to connect one of these belts to the cylinder, cursing as it slipped free and fell away. Edward had overheard enough of their conversation to realise that they were encountering some serious problems in setting up the works. Colt's sweeping claims to Paget were therefore largely false – but the secretary nodded in support of them nonetheless.

Once again, however, Paget would not supply the desired reaction. He was neither intrigued nor delighted to hear of Colt's bold endeavours; if anything he looked annoyed. 'Perhaps, Colonel, you would be so good as to tell me why Her Majesty's armed forces might possibly require your blessed pistols in such absurd numbers.'

At this, Colt's easy charm grew strained. 'My guns are in great demand throughout the American states,' he purred through gritted teeth. 'Countless military trials have demonstrated their superiority over the weapons of my competitors. They are credited by many veterans with securing our recent victory over Mexico. But what might interest you particularly, as a representative of Great Britain, is their effectiveness in battle against savage tribes – against the infernal red men with which my country is plagued.

I witnessed it for myself against the Seminoles down in Florida, and the Comanche have been put down quite soundly around the borders of Texas. Small parties of cavalry have seen off many times their number. And this is to name but two theatres. There are dozens more.'

Images of slaughter came unbidden into Edward's mind. He suppressed them immediately. You are a gun merchant now, he told himself. Such claims are your stock in trade.

Paget was looking back at the Colonel in utter puzzlement, not understanding the connection he was attempting to make. 'What the devil does this have to do with –'

'I'm telling you all of this because of your country's current travails in Africa, at the Cape,' Colt clarified, a little sharply. 'Your unfortunate war against the rebellious Kaffirs. The savage, for all his lack of Christian feeling and mental sophistication, has learned one important thing – our rifles fire *but once*. This is how their tactics against us have developed. They feint, and we shoot; and then, while we scrabble to reload, their main force charges at us from the opposite direction, gutting our helpless soldiers with their spears, or dragging them off into the bush to meet horrible fates in some bloody pagan ritual.'

Edward found that he had something to add here – something that would aid their argument. 'Excuse me, my lord,' he said with careful courtesy, 'but my cousin is serving in Africa with the 73rd. He has written to me at length of the terrors of Watercloof Ridge, and the sore need for repeating arms. He believes that they would force an unconditional surrender.'

Colonel Colt leaned forward. 'There we have it, Paget, straight from a soldier on the front lines. The tomahawking red men, seeing a company of Texas rangers firing at them not once but *six times*, break in crazy panic.' He slapped a hand against his thigh. 'Your Kaffirs could be made to do the same!'

Paget was sitting quite still. He remained unpersuaded. 'Regardless of the experiences of your secretary's cousin,' he began sardonically, 'it is generally understood that the Kaffir war is coming to a close. Both the tribes and the rebels have

been dispersed, and the violated land has been reclaimed for the Crown. There is no need for revolving pistols or any other nonsense.'

This threw Colt for a fraction of a second; then he began shaking his head irritably. 'Wars against savages are never finished so easily, Paget – trust me on this. They've chosen to leave off for now but they'll be back. True victory lies only in the complete extermination of the aggressors. You'll have to hunt 'em down, and the revolver is the finest tool for that piece of work. An army supplied with revolvers, with six-shooting *Colt* revolvers, is the only way it's to be done.'

The noble official chose to respond only with resolute, uncooperative silence. This silence lengthened, growing decidedly tense. Edward glanced at his employer. The Colonel was staring at the mantelpiece. Without speaking, he handed the Navy and its case back to the secretary and got to his feet. Rising to his full height, the gun-maker seemed to expand, to fill the office, his wild curly head brushing the brass chandelier and his back pressing against the book-shelves behind him. He crossed over to the fireplace in two crashing steps and scooped something up, a black frown on his face.

Edward twisted in his chair; the Colonel was holding another revolver, hefting its weight with a critical snort. The secretary saw immediately that this second pistol was no Colt. There were only five chambers in the cylinder, for a start, and it was the colour of old iron. It had the look of a mere instrument, rough, angular and artless, wholly lacking the craftsmanship of the Colonel's six-shooting Navy. Also, even to Edward's inexpert gaze, it was clear that the mechanism was different. There was no hammer – this pistol did not need to be cocked before it could fire.

Colt returned his gaze. 'This here, Mr Lowry,' he said, 'is the latest revolver of my chief English rival, Mr Adams of London Bridge. And it is an inferior device in every respect.' He turned to the nobleman behind the desk. 'It pains me to discover such a thing in your ownership, Paget. It seems to suggest that agreements have already been reached, and

government contracts drawn up for our Mr Adams – that I may be wasting my breath talking with you right now.' Angling his head, the Colonel spat his plug into the grate; it made a flat chiming sound as it hit the iron. Then he raised the Adams pistol, pointing it towards the nearest window as if aiming up a shot.

'Colonel Colt,' said Paget, rather more quickly than usual, 'I must ask you to put down that weapon, this instant. It is still –'

'I invented the revolving pistol, Paget,' the Colonel interrupted. 'I *invented* it. Even you must accept that this Adams here is little better than a goddamn forgery, and a second-rate one at that. We went over this in fifty-one, during my last sojourn in London – must we go over it again?'

Paget opened his mouth to make an acerbic riposte; but before he could speak, Colt rocked back on his heel, swinging the Adams's hexagonal barrel about so that it was directed straight at the centre of the official's chest. Edward gave a start, nearly dropping the Navy to the floor. This was a clear step up from bloodthirsty banter. He looked from one man to other, wondering what was to happen next.

The Secretary to the Master-General of Ordnance leapt up from his chair with a shocked exclamation, moving around the side of the desk. All colour was struck from his pinched face. Calmly, the Colonel followed his progress with the Adams, keeping him before it.

'The main spring in these double-action models is just too damn *tight*, y'see,' the gun-maker went on, his manner aggressively conversational. 'It requires such pressure to be applied to the trigger that a fellow's aim is thrown off completely. Now, watch the barrel, Paget, and watch it closely – you too, Mr Lowry.'

The ordnance official lifted up his hands. 'Colonel Colt, please –'

Colt pulled the trigger. There was a shallow click; and sure enough, as the cylinder rotated, the Adams's barrel jerked down by perhaps an inch. To stress his point, the Colonel repeated the action, with the same result. 'You both see that?'

Paget staggered, almost as if he had actually been shot, leaning against his desk for support. 'It is *loaded*, by God!' he blurted. 'One of the – the chambers is still loaded after a demonstration earlier in the week. I was waiting for a sergeant-at-arms to come up and empty it for me. Put it down, sir, I *beg* you!'

Colonel Colt, magnificently unperturbed by this revelation, examined the pistol's cylinder for a moment before knocking out a ball and an issue of black powder into the palm of his hand. 'Hell's bells, Paget,' he growled, 'are you such a fairy prince that you're unable to remove the charge from a goddamn revolver?'

Edward exhaled, the blood humming through his trembling fingertips, trying to work out if the Colonel had known for certain which chamber the bullet had been in. Surely he must have done. He was sauntering back across the room, continuing to act as if nothing whatsoever was wrong – as if he was, and always had been, the master of the situation.

'My point is made, I think,' Colt pronounced. 'If you honestly wish to equip Her Majesty's troops with such an unsound weapon – troops who are battling savage Negroes to the death even as we speak – well, Paget my friend, that mistake is yours to make.'

The gun-maker poured the powder and bullet onto the desk, the tiny lead ball bouncing twice against the wood before disappearing onto the carpet. Laying the Adams revolver stock-first before the still-petrified Paget, he looked at Edward and then nodded towards the door. Their audience was over.

The Colt carriage was waiting for them on Pall Mall. Edward climbed inside and recoiled with an oath, almost losing his balance. A man was tucked in the far corner, dozing away peacefully with his hands folded over his chest; woken by Edward's entrance, he stirred and let out a massive yawn. Completely unconcerned to have been so discovered, this intruder then heaved himself up, bending back an arm until he elicited a loud crack from one of his shoulder joints. In his mid-thirties, he had a long, horse-like face, a Roman nose

and languid, greyish eyes. His clothes were fine but worn, and looked as if they had been slept in the night before. There was an air of gentlemanly entitlement about him, despite the clear signs of dissipation and financial hardship. He looked over at Edward and smiled sleepily.

'You must be the new secretary,' he said. A good deal of the polish had been scraped from his voice, but it was still plainly that of a well-born Englishman. 'So pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Before Edward could demand to know who this character was and what the devil he was doing in the Colt carriage, the Colonel climbed in, having given the coachman his directions. 'Alfie, you goddamn wastrel,' he muttered to the man by way of greeting, sitting down opposite him, 'I was wondering if you'd honour us with your company today.' He took off his hat, setting it upon his knee. 'Mr Lowry, this here's Mr Richards, my London press agent. He was supposed to accompany us in to the Board of Ordnance this morning, but clearly did not deem it worth his precious time.'

Edward sat next to the Colonel. There was an old familiarity between his employer and Mr Richards. This was an unwelcome development.

'My apologies, Samuel,' said Richards with a shrug, settling on the carriage's full cushions and refolding his hands. 'My schedule simply would not permit it.'

Colt looked at him disbelievingly, pulled off one of his calfskin gloves and then laid his naked hand against his brow. 'By Christ, my *head*,' he grumbled. 'I could surely use an eye-opener about now.'

Immediately, Richards produced a slim bottle from his frock-coat and tossed it across the carriage – no mean feat as they were moving by now, cutting back out into the traffic. Colt caught it with similar dexterity, gratefully tugging out the stopper and taking a long drink. This simple but well-practised exchange laid bare the nature of their relationship. Both were devoted to drink, and had no doubt shared a series of adventures about the city during the Colonel's previous visits. Richards had thus managed to earn the Colonel's indulgence, if not his trust.

'You still have today's pistol, I see.'

'I was disinclined to make a gift of it on this occasion.' Colt took another slug of liquor, sucking it through his teeth. 'We saw Paget.'

Richards was aghast; he too clearly knew Lord Paget. 'Was no one else available? What of old Tom Hastings?'

Colt shook his head, saying that it had been Paget or nothing. He gave a brief summary of the meeting, failing to mention his practical experiment with the Adams revolver but admitting freely that the door had been pretty much slammed in their faces.

'Mr Lowry here fought his corner, though,' he added. 'A cousin soldiering in Africa, saying my guns would force the savage foe to surrender! Why, he came at it like a seasoned operator. Nothing of the greenhorn about our Mr Lowry! Potential there, Alfie, real potential – like I told you.'

Edward grinned, well pleased by the gun-maker's praise. Colt plainly thought that he'd invented the cousin at the Cape to help win over Paget. This he most definitely hadn't – Sergeant-Major Arthur Lowry was very real, although in truth the half-dozen letters Edward had received from him contained only a single passing reference to revolving pistols and gave no indication of Arthur's opinion of their merits. He decided to keep all this to himself. Why risk spoiling the Colonel's contentment?

Richards was looking at the new secretary again. There was laughter in his eyes, and a certain opposition too. He sees me just as I see him, Edward thought: as a potential competitor, an adversary within the Colt Company. Edward found that he was unworried by this. Let the dishevelled fool try to knock me down, he thought, and see where it gets him.

The press agent stretched out luxuriantly, placing his muddy boots on the seat beside Edward, just a touch too close to the edge of the secretary's coat. 'He certainly seems like a sound fellow – a good London lad.' Richards paused to pick something from between his large, stained teeth. 'Not actually a *cockney*, I hope?'

Edward met this with careful good humour. 'No, sir, I hail

from the village of Dulwich. My father was a schoolmaster there.'

Richards inclined his head, accepting the bottle back from Colt. 'So you are seeking to rise above this rather humble background – to improve your lot under the guidance of the good Colonel. No doubt you expect that before too long you'll be at the head of one of his factories.' He took a lingering drink. 'A Colt manager or somesuch.'

This was exactly the future that Edward had predicted for himself a couple of nights before, while out celebrating his appointment with his friends; he'd declared it nothing less than a blasted *certainty*, in fact, standing up on a tavern stool, liquor spilling from his raised glass and running down inside his sleeve. The secretary looked over at his employer. Colt was staring out of the window at the elegant townhouses of St James Square, oblivious to their exchange.

'I have my professional goals, Mr Richards, of course,' he replied, 'but my only concern at present is to serve the Colonel's interests to the best of my abilities.' He cleared his throat. 'I have long been a sincere admirer of both the Colonel's inventions and the dedicated manner in which he conducts his business.'

One of Richards's eyebrows rose by a caustic quarter-inch. 'And how did you come to hear of the position? It was not widely advertised.'

'Through an interested friend,' Edward answered lightly, 'that's all. No mystery there, Mr Richards.'

The secretary thought of Saul Graff, the fellow who'd passed on the tip to him. Graff was like a voracious, information-seeking weed, his tendrils forever breaking out across fresh territories; God alone knew how he'd found out about this particular vacancy, but his timing had been faultless. He was owed a slap-up dinner at the very least – although he doubtlessly had his own reasons for wanting Edward Lowry placed with Colt.

'An *interested friend*. How very deuced fortunate for you, Mr Lowry.' Richards held the bottle up to the window, trying to ascertain how much spirit was left inside. 'Sam tells me that you know a thing or two about the buying and selling of steel.'

'I do, at a clerical level at any rate. I was in the City – the trading house of Carver & Weight's, to be exact.'

This jerked the Colonel from his reverie. 'Goddamn City men!' he snapped. 'Scoundrelly rogues, the lot of 'em. I do believe that I've saved you from a truly ignominious existence there, Mr Lowry.' He gave his secretary a grave, forbidding look. 'A life lived among stocks and shares, generating money for its own sake alone – why, you'd better blow out your brains at once and manure some honest man's ground with your carcass than hang your ambition on so low a peg. You get hold of some steel for me, boy, and we'll damn well do something with it, not just sell it on for a few measly dollars of profit.'

It gladdened Edward to hear this. While at Carver & Weight's he'd grown tired of the abstractions of the trading floor and had felt a growing hunger for what he came to think of as *real business*, where manufacturers innovated and improved, and communicated directly with their customers – where things were accomplished beyond speculation and self-enrichment. He was fast reaching the conclusion that Colonel Colt, with his masterful inventions and determination to win the custom not only of men but of entire nations, was the best employer he could have wished for.

The gun-maker cut himself a fresh wad of tobacco, effectively closing the topic of his secretary's regrettable early life and moving them on to other matters. He'd resolved to send off a letter to Ned Dickerson, his patent lawyer in America, concerning Robert Adams, and began to dictate in an oddly direct style, delivering his words as if Dickerson was seated before him – telling him angrily that the 'John Bull diddler' would not make another cent from his goddamn forgeries, not if there was a single earthy thing that they could do about it. As he took all this down, Edward got the sense that the campaign against Adams had already been a long and bitter one, with no resolution in sight. Alfred Richards, meanwhile, devoted his attentions to what remained of the bottle.

Some minutes passed, Colt's language becoming bafflingly technical as he detailed the precise matters of engineering

that the lawyer was to direct his attention towards; then he stopped speaking mid-sentence. Edward looked up to discover that they were on Regent Street; a long row of shining, plate-glass shop windows offered disjointed reflections of their mustard-coloured vehicle as it swept around the majestic, stuccoed arc of the Quadrant. After only a few moments they turned again, heading off towards Savile Row. Colonel Colt was putting on his hat, preparing to disembark; and seconds later the carriage drew up before the frontage of one of London's very smartest tailors.

'New waistcoats,' said Colt by way of explanation. 'I'm out in society a good deal in the coming weeks, and thought it a prudent investment. You two gentlemen remain here. I shan't be very long.'

The press agent's grey eyes followed the Colonel all the way to the tailor's counter. Edward watched him closely, certain that battle was about to begin. It was only when Colt's arms were outstretched and a tape-measure was being run across his back that Richards finally spoke.

'So how large *exactly*,' he asked, 'were the perimeters of the explosion?'

This was not what Edward had been expecting. He begged Richards's pardon, pleading ignorance of any such blast.

The press agent responded with a small, whinnying laugh. 'Why, Mr Lowry, I refer of course to the explosion of our beloved master when Paget first mentioned the name of Robert Adams!'

Somewhat patronisingly, Richards revealed that throughout the Colonel's previous sojourn in London at the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851, when he had made an initial, more modest attempt to establish a European outpost, Clarence Paget had been an energetic partisan for the cause of their chief English rival. He had (they suspected) encouraged opposition to Colt at every level within the British Government, rigged various official tests and leaked negative reports on the American's weapons to the press.

'Since returning, the good Colonel has not so much as mentioned Adams revolvers before today; but after an unplanned meeting with Paget he's sending vehement missives on the

subject straight back to his legal mastiff in America. It don't take a detective genius to piece it together, Mr Lowry.'

Edward put away the unfinished letter. 'The subject was raised, certainly.'

'And what, pray, was said?'

Realising that Richards would learn about the incident sooner or later anyway, Edward related what had happened up in Paget's office as neutrally as he could manage.

The press secretary was heaving with mirth long before he'd finished. 'Well, Mr Lowry,' he wheezed at the tale's conclusion, 'that's our Colonel, right there. His defence of his interests is quite unflagging. You'd better get used to such forcible tactics, old chum, if you are to stand at his side.' Richards wiped his eyes; something in his manner told Edward that a card was about to be played. 'The Colt family has an impulsive streak in it so broad that it borders on madness. I'm sure you'll know to what I am alluding.'

And there it was, a veritable classic: the dark secret, casually touched upon to unnerve the callow recruit, to fill him with doubt and prompt a confused re-evaluation of his position. Edward found that he was smiling at this unsubtle piece of manipulation. 'Mr Richards, I assure you that I do not.'

Richards feigned surprise. 'You mean that you haven't heard of John Colt, the axe-murderer of New York?'

The smile slipped a little. 'I – I beg your pardon?'

Richards dug a bent cigar end out of a coat pocket and made a great show of getting it alight. 'Killed a fellow with a hatchet back in forty-two, in Manhattanville,' he said as he struggled with a match. 'There was a disagreement over money, apparently. They were in business together, you understand – and as you've seen already, a Colt will really go the distance when business is involved. Victim's name was Adams, coincidentally enough.'

'Good Lord.'

'And that's not all. Dearest brother John went on to *chop the body up*, if you can imagine such a thing. The mad blighter then stuffed the parts into a packing-case and sent it by steamer to New Orleans.' Richards sucked on the cigar, quickly filling the carriage with smoke. 'But the case started

to pong halfway down the Mississippi. It was an unusually hot summer, I'm told, and the killer had scrimped somewhat on the salt. The gruesome contents of the case were duly discovered, and traced back to John within the week.' Richards stopped his tale here, deliberately savouring his bent cigar.

He has me, Edward thought with mild aggravation; I must ask. It seems that I might have underestimated the Colonel's press agent. 'What happened to him? Did he hang?'

Drawing in his long legs, Richards grinned around his cigar in wolfish victory. 'Ah, well, that's where it gets really good. On the eve of his execution, as they were putting up the gallows in the prison yard, he stabbed himself through the heart. It is said that our own dear Colonel, eager to spare the family the shame of a public hanging – and thus protect his own emergent business interests – both brought him the knife and talked him into this last desperate act.' He took the cigar from his lips. 'These Colts are a ruthless lot, Mr Lowry – as merciless with each other as they are with the world at large.'

Down in the street, a door opened; Richards looked towards the tailor's shop and then quickly opened the window on the carriage's other side, tossing out his cigar. Colonel Colt was coming back.

The yard of the Colt factory was a narrow, cobbled valley between two block-like buildings. A week earlier, during Edward's first visit, it had been almost deserted; but now it positively thronged with people, as many as three hundred of them by his estimation, replacing the empty silence with an incessant, excited chatter. They stood in a ragged line that stretched along the flank of the right-hand building and ran all the way back to the main gate on Ponsonby Street. Of both sexes and all ages, this multitude formed a great specimen box of the London poor, ranging from well-washed working folk keen for honest labour, through the dry drunkard and the hard-up gambler, to various incarnations of beggary. Edward realised that Colt's London machine operatives were to be drawn from this unpromising pool.

Even the best among them seemed a long distance from the skilled artisans traditionally charged with the manufacture of firearms. This, he saw, was the principal secret of the Colonel's revolutionary method of production: his patented pistol-making machines needed only the most ignorant and inexpensive of workers to run them.

The Colt carriage halted next to the stone water trough that stood in the centre of the yard, the Colonel jumping out in what the secretary was coming to realise was his customary fashion. He followed as quickly as he was able; Richards, who had somehow contrived to fall asleep once more during the twenty-minute journey from Savile Row, showed no sign of waking.

Down on the cobblestones, Edward took in the factory for a second time. It was an unlovely place, to be sure, given over completely to the efficient fulfilment of its function. The two buildings – the manufactory itself on the right, where the engine and the machines were housed, and the as-yet vacant warehouse opposite – were entirely undecorated, the walls blank brick, the windows small and grimy, the many chimneys nothing but crude stacks. Yet the enterprise had a sense of scale about it, of sheer purpose, that was unmatched by the other factories that clustered around the reeking thoroughfare of the Thames. Turning to face the gates, Edward looked across the river to the collection of potteries and breweries scattered along the southern bank. These squat brown structures seemed little better than shacks, at once ancient and impermanent, fashioned from the muck of the shore. The premises of the Colt Company, by comparison, seemed a site for truly modern industry – the kernel of a mighty endeavour.

Beside him, the two chestnut mares who were pulling the Colt carriage snorted impatiently, eager to be unharnessed so that they could drink at the trough. Edward noticed that a dozen or so of the American staff Colt had brought with him were standing by the large sliding door that opened onto the forge, surveying the line of potential recruits. Dressed in corduroys, flannel waistcoats and squat, round-topped hats, and liberally smeared with engine grease, they

appeared less than impressed by the noisy English crowd hoping to join their revolver factory. The Colonel was going over to them, walking rapidly as if keen for the company of his countrymen after a half-day spent with Edward and Alfred Richards.

A whisper of recognition went up from the queue of applicants as Colonel Colt strode over the yard. All rowdy conversation stopped; every head turned towards the famous Yankee gun-maker. Hats were doffed and curtseys dropped, as if in the presence of a great lord or clergyman. A handful of the bravest bade the Colonel a very humble good afternoon.

Colt ignored them. Reaching the forge door, he beckoned to a huge brute of a man, larger even than he was, with the blunted, leathery face of a prize-fighter; Edward recognised him as Gage Stickney, the factory foreman. A good-natured exchange began, the Colonel asking for details of the morning's enrolment. Soon all the Americans were shaking with hard, masculine laughter. Looking on, Edward became rather conscious of the smart Englishman's top hat and frock-coat that set him apart from both the pack of chortling Yankees and the shuffling mass of aspirant Colt operatives. The pistol case was still under his arm. He wondered what on earth he was to do with it.

There was a colourful curse behind him, the 'r' of 'bugger' slightly slurred; Richards, in descending from the carriage, had caught a button on the door handle, one side of his coat lifting up from his gangling frame like a fawn-coloured bat wing. In a doomed attempt to pull it free, the press agent ripped the button away completely. He grunted with satisfaction, as if this had been his aim.

'Don't know what they're looking so deuced pleased about,' he declared, nodding towards the Americans. 'The last I heard our engine was barely strong enough to animate a sideshow automaton, let alone a sufficient quantity of machinery to occupy this blasted rabble.'

Edward considered the press agent for a moment, thinking with some distaste that this wretched fellow was actually the closest thing he had to an ally at the Colt Company. 'I'm

sure that the Colonel is not given to displays of undue confidence, Mr Richards.'

Richards showed no sign of having heard him. 'You see that Yankee over there,' he murmured archly, angling himself away from the Americans, 'standing a little apart from the rest?'

It was immediately obvious to whom he was referring. The man was smaller and leaner than the others, and the oldest of the group by a clear decade, his skin scored with scar-like lines that bisected his hollow cheeks and spanned his brow in tight, straight rows. He was dressed in a dark blue cap and tunic, creating a distinctly military effect that was augmented by the high shine of his boots and the precise cut of his greying beard. While his companions laughed with the Colonel he continued to regard the ragged assembly of applicants with the fierce focus of a terrier.

'Mr Noone,' Edward replied. 'The factory's watchman, I believe.'

'And a chap with the very blackest of reputations. I've heard it said that the Colonel risked losing several of his most trusted people back in Connecticut when he took the villain on – threatened to walk right out, they did, so low is the regard in which our Mr Noone is held among certain of his countrymen. But the Colonel wanted him – said he was right for the post, a fellow who could be counted on to defend one's interests at all costs.' Richards paused significantly. 'At all costs, Mr Lowry.'

Edward fixed the press agent with a probing look. The scoundrel wants me to beg for more information again, he thought, as I did with the Colonel's axe-murdering brother. Well, I shan't; I won't hear any more of his plaguing stories. He stated that he was going to take the pistol case back up to the factory office, walking past Richards towards the tall sliding door that served as the main entrance to the factory block. Before he'd taken more than a couple more steps, however, there was a flurry of rough shouts from inside the building. Three men, Scots from the sound of it, marched out to the centre of the yard, bawling curses against Colonel Colt and his Yankee contraptions. All three were drunk,

and from what they were yelling had just been turned away by those enlisting the factory's personnel. Seconds later Mr Noone, the watchman, was upon them, backed by a couple of other Americans. They collared the malcontents and hurried them over to Ponsonby Street, administering hard kicks to their behinds as they reached the gate.

This spectacle was greeted with laughter from the line; as more people turned to take it in, Edward noticed a lively-looking young woman in the plain yet respectable clothing of a domestic servant away from her place of employment, waiting in the queue with several others in similar dress. She was smiling wickedly at a remark made by one of her companions – a smile that made him smile as well to behold it. In the middle of her left cheek were two small but distinctive marks, side by side and oddly even. As she turned back towards the factory door, her smile fading, their eyes met. For a single clear moment they both stood in place, contemplating each other.

Then Colonel Colt called out his name, clapping his hands together as he headed back to the carriage. Edward smoothed down a twisted lapel and went over to join him.