

The New York Conspiracy of 1741

Introduction

In New York City in 1741 an economic decline exacerbated conflict between enslaved men and women engaged in commercial activity and working-class White colonists who felt their jobs were threatened. This tension boiled over in the spring when a series of fires led White New Yorkers to fear an uprising of enslaved people. Even Fort George in lower Manhattan was burned to the ground. The events became popularly known as the New York Conspiracy of 1741 (also called the Negro Plot or the Slave Insurrection). Nearly 200 people were arrested, including at least twenty Whites, some of whom were suspected of being Catholic saboteurs and spies.

The accused were tried by Judge Daniel Horsmanden, an ambitious British expatriate who turned the proceedings into a Salem-like witch hunt. Much of the evidence was based on the dubious testimony of a sixteen-year-old Irish indentured servant who was promised a considerable reward for her cooperation. Many times during the deliberations Mary Burton was known to “remember” certain facts only when pressed hard enough. The conspiracy was reported as a plot to take over the city government by White ringleaders, assisted by enslaved people who were promised their freedom.

Despite criticism of the validity of the evidence, Horsmanden ordered executions. In total, thirty to forty enslaved people were either hanged or burned at the stake while four Whites were hanged, including John Ury, accused as an undercover Catholic priest and agent for Spain, and John Hughson, Mary Burton’s master. In addition, countless enslaved people and White colonists were deported. In Horsmanden’s conclusion to the case, published in *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves* (1744), he wrote that divine intervention led to the plot’s exposure and ultimate failure, although “we have not been able entirely to unravel the Mystery of this Iniquity; for ’twas a dark Design, and the Veil is in some Measure still upon it!”

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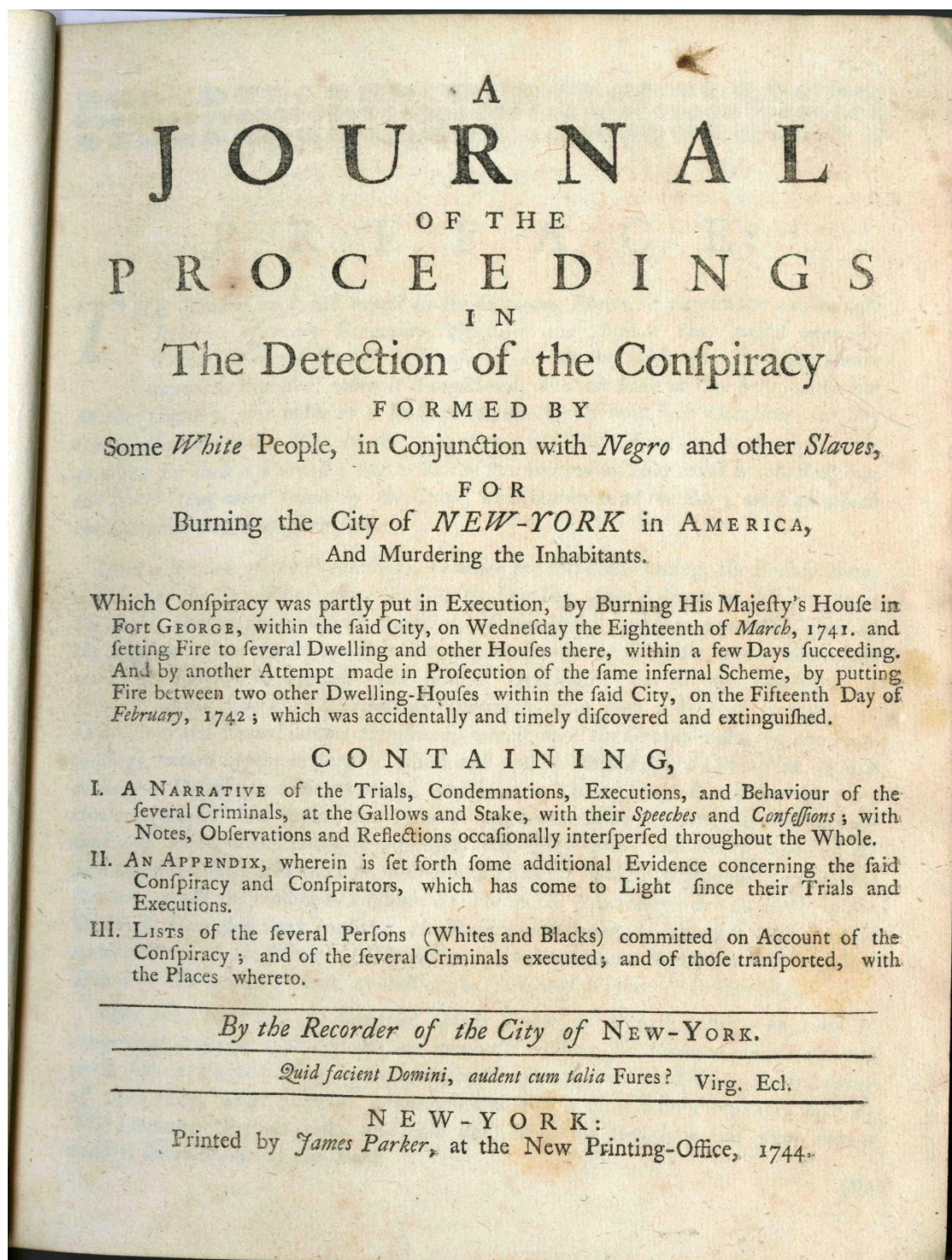
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and view the images of the *Journal of the Proceedings* conducted by Judge Daniel Horsmanden. The pages included here are the title page, the first page of the Introduction, the “list of white persons taken into custody,” the “list of negroes committed,” and the final two pages of the Conclusion. Then apply your knowledge of American history as well as the text of the documents to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the impact racial, economic, and religious tensions had upon the conspiracy trials of 1741.
2. What effect would the knowledge of New Yorkers of a prior rebellion in the city in 1712 as well as Cato’s rebellion in Stono, South Carolina, in 1739 have had upon the accusations and trials of 1741?
3. How do you think the ongoing war between Protestant England and Catholic Spain influenced the charges of conspiracy and sabotage?
4. Why do many historians have serious doubts as to the indictments and the convictions?
5. Describe the various punishments meted out to “white persons taken into custody” and “Negroes committed on account of the conspiracy.”
6. From the evidence available to you, why would convictions of the accused be unlikely in our twenty-first-century courts?

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Image



Daniel Horsmanden, *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves*, New York, 1744, title page. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04205.01)

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INTRODUCTION.

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SATURDAY, 11th APRIL.

At a Common-Council held this Day at the
City of New-York.

P R E S E N T,

JOHN CRUGER, Esq; MAYOR,

The RECORDER,

Gerardus Stuyvesant,

William Romme,

Simon Johnson,

John Moore,

Christopher Banker,

John Pintard.

John Marshall,

Esqrs. Aldermen.

Henry Bogert,

Isaac Stoutenbergb,

Philip Miniborne,

George Brinkerhoff,

Robert Benson,

Samuel Lawrence,

Assistants.

THE RECORDER taking Notice of the several Fires which had lately happened in this City, and the Manner of them, which had put the Inhabitants into the utmost Consternation; that every one that reflected on the Circumstances attending them, the Frequency of them, and the Causes yet undiscovered; must necessarily conclude, that they were occasioned and set on Foot by some villainous Confederacy of latent Enemies amongst us; but with what Intent or Purpose, Time must discover; that it could not be doubted, but the Lieutenant-Governor and His Majesty's Council had taken the Alarm at this Time of Danger, and were watchful, and anxious for the Safety of the City; and tho' they were of Opinion, that it was highly proper and necessary that a Proclamation should be issued by the Government, promising proper Rewards to such Person and Persons as should make such Discovery of the Incendiaries, their Confederates and Accomplices, as that they should be convicted thereof; Yet it was well known that the Governor and Council had not the Liberty of drawing upon the Colony Treasurer for any Sum of Money what soever, upon any Emergency: And it could not be reasonably expected the Governor should subject himself to pay such Rewards out of his own Pocket, for the Use and Necessities of the Publick; that as the Safety of the City, so immediately concerned, seemed absolutely to require such a Measure to be taken; so the Publick, who were also interested in the Preservation of it,

would reap the Benefit in common with them, by the Corporations laudible Resolution, should they determine to engage to pay proper Rewards, and request the Governor to issue a Proclamation agreeable thereto; which, he was persuaded, the Governor was well inclined to do, and the Gentlemen of the Council to advise thereto; He therefore moved, "That the Board should come to a Resolution to pay such Rewards as should by them be thought a proper and sufficient Temptation to induce any Party or Parties concerned to make such Discovery."

Upon Consideration whereof, it was "Ordered, That this Board request his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor to issue a Proclamation, offering a Reward to any white Person that should discover any Person or Persons lately concerned in setting Fire to any Dwelling House or Storehouse in this City (so that such Person or Persons be convicted thereof,) The Sum of One Hundred Pounds, Current Money of this Province; and that such Person shall be pardoned, if concerned therein: And any Slave that should make Discovery, to be manumitted, or made free; and the Master of such Slave to receive Twenty-Five Pounds therefore; and the Slave to receive, besides his Freedom, the Sum of Twenty Pounds, and to be pardoned; and if a Free Negro, Mulatto, or Indian, to receive Forty-Five Pounds, and also to be pardoned, if concerned therein: And that this Board will issue their Warrant to the Chamberlain, or Treasurer of this Corporation for the Payment of such Sum as any Person by Virtue of such Proclamation shall be intitled unto. And that the Mayor and Recorder wait on his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, and acquaint him with the Resolution of this Board."

The Mayor and Recorder waited on His Honour accordingly, and a Copy of the Order was also delivered to him.

Many Persons in the Neighbourhood of the several Fires beforementioned, thought it necessary to remove their Household Goods for Safety; and in their Consternation, as was natural, suffered any Body who offered their Assistance, to take them away; by which Means, some Villians had the Cruelty to make Prey of them; for there were great Complaints of Losses upon those Occasions, which the Magistrates took this Day into their Consideration: And it being much suspected that there were some Strangers lurking about the City, who had been the wicked Instruments and Occasion of these Fires; but upon the Supposition only, that by those Means, they might have Opportunities of Pilfering and Plundering. A Scheme was proposed, that there should be a general Search of all Houses throughout the Town, whereby it was thought probable Discoveries might be made, not only of stolen Goods, but likewise of Lodgers,

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Daniel Horsmanden, *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves*, New York, 1744, page 9. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04205.01)

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A LIST of White Persons taken into Custody on Account of the Conspiracy. 1741.

Names of Persons.	Occupations.	When committed.	Arrested.	Convicted.	Executed.	Discharged.
Margaret Kerry, alias Salingburgh.	Shoemaker and Alehouse keeper.	4 March.	2 & 4 June, for receiving stolen Goods.	4 June.	12 June.	
John Hughson,		18 April.				
Sarah Hughson, Wife to John Hughson,		18 April.				
Sarah Hughson, the Daughter.		6 May.				
5 John Romme,	Shoemaker, and Alehouse-keeper.	18 May.		8 July,		Pardoned. Discharged on Security for his departing the Province.
Elizabeth Romme, his Wife.		8 May.				
Peter Connolly,	Soldier.	23 June.				31 Augst.
John Ury,	A Priest.	24 June.			29 August	
Edward Kelly,	Soldier.	25 June.				31 Augst. Enlisted for December. (West-Indies.)
William Kane,	Soldier.	4 July.	15 & 24 July	29 July		
John Coffin,	Pedlar.	6 July.			5 July,	
Edward Murphey,	Soldier.	8 July.				
Andrew Ryan,	Soldier.	9 July.				31 Augst.
David Johnson,	Hat-maker.	9 July.				
15 John Corry,	Dancing-Master	13 July.				
Thomas Hughson,	Yeoman,					
Nathaniel,		12 and 13 June.				Pardoned, on Condition of depart- ing the Province.
Walter,						
William,	Hughson's Yeomen,					
20 Richard,	Sons.					
Corker,						
Fagan,						
Plummer,						

mentioned in Kane's Evidence in Ury's Trial, and in his Examination, never found.

Daniel Horsmanden, *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves*, NY, 1744, page 11. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04205.01)

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A LIST of NEGROES committed on Account of the Conspiracy.

Negroes.	Master or Owners.	Committed	Araigned, Council Rd.	Confessed.	Burnt.	Hanged.	Transported to	Discharged
Antonio, <i>Spaniards.</i>	Peter De Lancy,	6 April,	13 June,				Spanish W. Indis.	
Augustine,	Macmullen,	1 April,	13 June,				Madaira.	
Antonio,	Mrs. Maynard.	1 April,	13 June,				Madaira.	
Albany,	Mrs. Carpenter.	12 May,	8 June,		12 June,		Madaira.	
Adam,	Joseph Murray, Esq;	1 June,	26 June,	27 June,			Madaira.	
Brasla,	Peter Jay,	9 May,	25 June,	25 June,			Madaira.	
Bailian, alias Tom Peal,	Jacobus Vaarck,	12 May,	10 June,	11 June,			Hispaniola.	
Ben,	Capt. Marshall,	9 June,	12 June,				Madaira.	
Rill, alias Will,	Coenrad Ten Eyck.	12 June,	3 July,	16 June,			Hispaniola.	
Briggswater,	Abraham Van Horne,	22 June,	3 July,	30 June,			Madaira.	
Billy,	Mrs. Ellison,	25 June,	1 July,	27 June,			Hispaniola.	
Bracebo,	Mrs. Kierstede,	27 June,	10 July,	30 June,			Madaira.	15 July,
Burlington,	Joseph Haines.	3 July,						
Caesar,	Vaarck,	1 March,	24 April,			11 May,		
Cuffie,	Adolph Philippe, Esq;	6 April,	28 May,		30 May,			
Cato, a Wench.	Mrs. Constance Lynch,	4 April,						
Curapua Dick,	Cornelius Tiebout,	9 May,	8 June,		12 June,			
Cato,	Alderman Moore,	9 May,	15 July,	22 June,				
Caesar,	Alderman Pintard,	9 May,	3 July,	22 June,			Madaira.	
Cuffie,	Lewis Gomez,	24 May,	6 June,		9 June,			
Caesar,	Benjamin Peck,	25 May,	6 June,		9 June,			
Cato,	Joseph Cowley,	25 May,	12 June,		9 June,			
Cook,	Gerardus Comfort,	26 May,	6 June,		9 June,			
Cambridge,	Christopher Codwile,	30 May,	10 July,	30 June,			Capa François.	
Caesar,	Israel Horfield,	30 May,	26 June,	27 June,			St. Thomas, returned	
Cato,	John Shurmur,	9 June,	16 June,	27 June,			Hispaniola.	
Caesar,	Cornelius Kortrecht.	9 June,	3 July,	2 July,	3 July,			
Cato, or Toby,	John Provost,	9 June,	12 June,	2 July,	16 June,			
Cuffie,	Mrs. Fortune,	22 June,	15 July,					
Cato,	Robert Benion,	23 June,	26 July,					
Cajee, alias Africa.	Mordecai Gomez,	26 June,	28 July,					
Caesar,	Alderman Moore,	29 June,	10 July,	28 June,			Surinam.	20 July,
Caesar,	Dr. Henderson,	29 June,					Madaira.	
Cajee,	Richard Baker.	30 June,						15 July,

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Daniel Horsmanden, *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves*, New York, 1744, page 14. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04205.01)

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A LIST of NEGROES committed on Account of the Conspiracy.

Negroes.	Masters or Owners.	Committed.	Arraigned, Convicted,	Confessed,	Burnt	Hanged.	Transported to	Discharged
115 Scipio, Sam, Scipio, Scotland, Suffex,	Robert Bound. Frederick Courtlandt, Abraham Abrahamie, Nathaniel Marlon, Mrs. Beckly,	22 June, 22 June, 25 June, 27 June, 1 July,	26 June, 26 June, 26 June, 7 July,	2 July, 1 July, 27 June, 29 June,			Cape François, Madeira.	
120 Tickle, alias Will, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom,	Mrs. Carpenter. Winant Van Zandt, Benjamin Moore, Capt. Rowe, Van Zant,	30 May, 30 May, 1 June, 12 June, 29 June,	16 June, 3 July,	12 June, 18 June, 2 July,			Curacao. Hispaniola. Newfoundland.	20 July, 2 July.
125 Toney, Toney, Toney, Toby, Tom,	John Latham, Mrs. Brazier, Simeon Soumaien, Widow Breftead, Hyet,	13 June, 22 June, 23 June, 25 June, 26 June, 26 June,	25 June, 26 June, 26 June, 1 July, 1 July,	2 July, 26 June, 30 June, 27 June, 30 June,	3 July,		Surinam, Cape François. Hispaniola. Madeira. Surinam.	2 July. 23 July. 23 July.
130 Titus, Tory, or Tanie, Tom, Toby,	Robert Livingston, Capt. Phenix. Councillor Courtlandt, Peter Valette, Hercules Wendover, Abraham Marichalk, Bradt,	27 June, 29 June, 30 June, 30 June, 30 June, 15 February	7 July, 10 July, 15 July.	27 June, 30 June, 30 June,				
135 Tom, Venture, Wan, or Juan, Will, a Spaniard,	Cornelius Tiebout, Capt. Sarly, Abraham Filkins, Dr. Nicoll, Capt. Luthi, Isaac Varyan, Anthony Ward, Jacobus Vaarck, Samuel Myers Cohen, Obadiah Hunt, John Tiebout, Lowe.	28 June, 6 April, 6 April, 24 April, 24 May, 30 May, 20 June, 20 June, 25 June, 25 June, 4 July, 12 June,	1 July, 13 June, 17 June, 25 June, 19 June, 25 June, 25 June, 1 July, 1 July, 19 June,	27 June, 22 June, 4 July, at the Stake, 30 June, 1 July,	13 March, 1742 18 July, 1741 15 August,		Hispaniola. Cape François. Madeira. Curacao. Madeira. Madeira. Curacao.	20 July, 30 June, 23 July.
140 Wan, Will, alias Gill, Woreler, Will,	Benjamin Peck, Peter Marichalk, Thomas Thomase, Charles Crooke, Widow Van Rantz, Gerardus Duyckink,	30 May, 9 June, 20 June, 22 June, 1 July, 2 July,	25 June, 16 June, 6 July, 26 June, 23 July,	27 June, 27 June, 27 June, 27 June,	3 July, in Chains with John Hughson.			13 July.

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The CONCLUSION.

Ury was indicted upon the Evidence of *Burton* and *Kane*, who corroborated the Testimony of each other, and *Sarah Hughson* the Daughter's Evidence establishes the Credit of both; as to what they say concerning him; so that the Gentlemen of the Grand Jury which found the Bill against him, weighing Matters candidly and ingenuously, saw sufficient Cause to that Time, to credit *Burton's* Testimony; and to do those Gentlemen Justice, 'twas owing in great Measure, to their good Sense, Discretion, and indefatigable Labours, that this Affair was brought to so happy an Issue; and their painful Service, during a Course of about three Months daily Enquiry, ought to be remembered by this City and Country, with the utmost Gratitude.

But it so happened, That for some Time before this Grand Jury was discharged, there arose great Clamour against *Mary Burton*; for so many Negroes being daily taken into Custody (though not solely through her Evidence, but rather principally upon Discovery made by the Confessions of their black Associates already in Custody, and their Testimony corroborated with hers) some People began to be afraid of losing their Slaves; for, as Matters were then like to turn out, there was no guessing where or when there would be an End of Impeachments; every one had Reason to fear their own Negro would be sent for next; and indeed, all Things duly considered, it was most probable, there were but few of them that were not in the Secret; and the Girl had declared, that there were many Negroes concerned, whose Persons she could or might probably remember, but many whose Names she knew not; so that it should seem, at length some Masters of these Slaves, as well as the Conspirators, endeavoured to bring the Witnesses, and the Notion of a Plot, into Discredit, if perchance it might put a Stop, not only to further Prosecution, but further Enquiry and Discovery also: And these Attempts, luckily for some, had such an Effect, that several Whites, as well as Negroes, escaped Justice, who, had the same Evidence appeared against them a few Weeks before, would scarce have been thought Objects of Mercy; nor, from what we may have observed, would *Mary Burton's* Evidence have stood single against them.

However, when the first Grand Jury drew near their Discharge, they were importunate with *Burton*, to discover all the Persons she knew to be engaged in this villainous Design; for about this Time she had suggested to some, that there were White People of more than ordinary Rank above the Vulgar, that were concerned, whom if she told of, they would not believe her: This having been intimated to the Grand Jury, they were very pressing with her to discover all she knew, whoever they were; but the Girl stood mute; nor could the Grand Jury prevail with her to

name any, not with Threatnings of Imprisonment; at length, being tired with her Obstinacy, they delivered her over to two of the Judges, requesting them to endeavour to sift the Matter out; but neither, upon Trial, could the Judges by any Means prevail with her to be explicit to them upon the Occasion; she complained (as it seems she had before done to the Grand Jury) that she had been very ill used; that not only her Life had been threatened by Conspirators of both Complexions, if she made Discovery, but she had also been frequently insulted, and abused by People of the Town, for bringing their Negroes in question, and that People did not believe what she said, and what signified speaking? or to this Purpose she expressed herself; she intimated withal, that there were some People in *Ruffles* (a Phrase as was understood to mean Persons of better Fashion than ordinary) that were concerned, but seemed very unwilling to name any Names; 'til for the last Experiment, she was told, she must expect to be imprisoned in the Dungeon, if she continued obstinate; she then began to open, and named several Persons which she said she had seen at *Hughson's* amongst the Conspirators, talking of the Conspiracy, who were engaged in it; amongst whom she mentioned several of known Credit, Fortunes, and Reputations, and of Religious Principles superior to a Suspicion of being concerned in such detestable Practices; at which the Judges were very much astonished; others again were imperfectly described by her, whose reputed Religious Profession might square with such wicked Designs, concerning whom the Girl had long before given broad Hints, but said she did not know their Names, or what Part of the City they lived in; but it came out at last, that one of them was a Doctor (a professed *Papist*, as common Fame had it) whom she had seen several Times afterwards in the Streets, and who upon Sight of her, always turned another Way, to avoid meeting her: However it was, this Person had the Discretion to remove himself out of this Province soon after; and 'tis said, into foreign Dominions; and it were much to be wished, that such others, as were justly liable to Impeachment, would act with the same Prudence, and follow his Example, for the Sake of their own Safety, as well as the Peace and Security of our selves. But upon the Whole, there was Reason to conclude, that this Girl had at length been tampered withal; might it not be suggested to her, that the Reward offered by Proclamation for the Discovery, she was already sure of; for she was intitled to it; and might she not be tempted to make further Advantage of the Affair? Upon this Supposition, the Conspirators could not have devised a more effectual Means (if they could but prevail with her) to put a Stop to further Enquiry, to procure the Names of Persons to be called in question at last, concerning this Scene of Villainy, whose Fortunes and Characters set them above Suspicion: They
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The CONCLUSION.

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very well knew (for *Papists* or *Priests*, as *Ury* intimated, are "*too wise and too cunning*") if they could but prevail in this; they would thereby not only put a Stop to further Discovery, but likewise have some Pretence, according to their usual Custom, to clamour loudly, *there was no Plot at all; 'twas a mere Dream!* And to serve this Turn, they had luckily with them some Owners of Slaves, who hapened to humour this Artifice, though upon a different View.

'Twas fit this Matter should be stated in its proper Light; that on the one Hand the Evidence of this Witness (but for whom next under the Interposition of Divine Providence, this City would in all Probability have been laid waste in Ashes, and many Families massacred) might have its due Weight, so far as deserving of Credit; and on the other Hand, that where she may be justly suspected to have exceeded the Bounds of Truth, there a Stop may be made, to consider, and conjecture, how it might have come to pass, that she told some Things incredible at the Winding up of this Affair; and weigh impartially also, the whole Current of the other Evidence, remarking how it appears to confirm and establish her Testimony, so far as it has been judged proper and fitting to publish it.

The other White People executed, as well as *Ury*, like true *modern Romanists*, pretended to maintain (and did protest) their Innocence to their last Breath; though *Hughson* himself, soon after his Conviction, seemed to betray

strong Symptoms of his Inclination to confess his Guilt; and make Discovery; but if he was in earnest to have done so, in Hopes of saving his own Life, his Mind was soon changed (as 'twas conjectured) by the Persuasion of his Wife; yet *Kerry* left such Proofs behind her of many of the Particulars of this Conspiracy, and of her own Guilt, as add great Force to the foregoing Accounts of it; and her recanting afterwards, is another irrefragable Instance, how these Wretches do prevaricate, even in their last Moments!

That a Plot there was, and as to the Parties and bloody Purpose of it, we presume there can scarce be a Doubt amongst us at this Time; the Ruins of his Majesty's House in the Fort, are the daily Evidence and Memento of it, still before our Eyes: If the other Frights and Terrors this City was alarmed with, to their great Consternation, are, as to some amongst us, so soon slipped into Oblivion, yet surely others will think we ought once a Year at least, to pay our Tribute of Praise and Thanksgiving to the Divine BEING, that through his merciful Providence and infinite Goodness, caused this inhumane horrible Enterprize to be detected, and so many of the wicked Instruments of it to be brought to Justice, whereby a Check has been put to the execrable Malice, and bloody Purposes of our Foreign and Domestick Enemies, though we have not been able entirely to unravel the Mystery of this Iniquity; for 'twas a dark Design, and the Veil is in some Measure still upon it!



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