

itched to be so close to such wealth. A few arrivals brought their own dogs, bull mastiffs, terriers, and even the occasional greyhound or whippet so as to measure up the opposition.

They all crowded in, gathering around the grease-covered tables or going to stare at the stuffed corpses of other prized dogs who had won the title of 'Champion Rat Killer'. Pride of place was given to the embalmed corpse of a white bull mastiff with black patches around its protuberant glass eyes. A collar about its neck proclaimed the dog as 'The Greatest Champion of all times'. In the centre of the tap room stretched the great pit, still covered over, a broad and very deep whitewashed hole ringed with lanterns and hour candles, the flames of which were already approaching the eleventh ring. Soon the games would begin. Mine host, a great tub of a man who rejoiced in the name of Master Rolles, was already enthroned in his chair of state on a velvet-covered dais

overlooking the pit. He sat there like a king, bawling for more lights to be brought. Link boys hurried up with lantern horns they'd filched from the doorsteps of houses in the wealthier parts of the City. Once these were in place, Master Rolles, his fat, greasy face shimmering in the light, stared petulantly round, small lips pursed, greedy black eyes gleaming, ready to make his power felt. The tavern was filling up. Master Rolles quietly congratulated himself on making a handsome profit. Once the game was over, he'd visit Mother Veritable's House of Delights and, in the morning, light more candles before the Virgin's altar in the Priory Church of St Mary Overy.

Dishes of burning charcoal were also brought up with incense strewn on top. The taverner liked this touch – the incense gave the tap room a holy smell and helped to hide the reeking odours of the slops-strewn floor.

Master Rolles felt a little guilty. One of his maids had stolen the incense from the Priory Church but Rolles quietly promised himself that, in time, he would make compensation. Glowing braziers, their tops capped, were wheeled in from the scullery and placed around the room. More logs were thrown on to the roaring fire, building up the flames under the mantled hearth. Master Rolles bellowed an order and the carcass of an entire pig, only its head and trotters removed, was spiked on a spit and placed on the wheels on either side of the hearth to be turned and basted with spices. The pig had been killed because it had trespassed into Master Rolles' yard. In truth, two of his stable boys had enticed it there, and Master Rolles, knowing the law of the City, had been only too happy to slit its throat. The taverner watched his cooks place the spit carefully, ladling over the spiced oil whilst giving careful instruction to the dwarf who had been paid a

penny, told to ignore the heat, and to turn the spit until the pig was cooked.

‘Don’t go to sleep!’ the taverner roared.

The dwarf, who had once been a jester until he had been mauled by a bear, nodded and sat down, turning his face against the blast of the fire. The air turned sweet with the smell of spiced, roasted pork. Customers were now shouting for ale and beer. Scullions and slatterns hurried across with brimming tankards, stoups and blackjacks filled by tap boys from the great barrels. The taverner rubbed his stomach. In an hour, most of his customers would be too drunk to tell how much water he had added to the beer and wine.

The Night in Jerusalem was now almost full. In the garish light it looked like some antechamber of hell. The underworld was there; the taverner knew each and every one of them: the pimps and the pickpockets, the quacks, the dice-codgers, house-breakers, bully boys and

roaring lads. Where they went, prostitutes of every age and description followed, their hair dyed, faces painted, garbed in cheap finery and smelling richly of the perfumes they used to cover their illwashed bodies. The taverner promised himself to keep a sharp eye on these, as he would the tinkers and petty traders, those who dared to make a profit in his tavern: the sellers of bird eggs, horse bread, old fish, or whatever else they had filched from the stalls in the market across the City. The cranks and the counterfeit men had also arrived. The professional beggars, all surprisingly nimble as they washed off their scars; the leg they had claimed to have lost now miraculously appeared as they undid the straps and heaped their crutches in a corner.

The taverner's own keepers, ruffians from the alleyways armed with cudgels and knives, moved amongst what Master Rolles called his 'congregation' to ensure the peace was kept;