

GREAT and GLORIOUS INTENT

A Thesis

Submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree
of

Master of Creative Writing

in the
Centre for Creative Writing

AUT University

by

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2010

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed:

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank The 12th Viscount Molesworth and his brother, The Honourable William Molesworth (London) for their generosity and support towards my novel. Thanks to Hugh Mayo (Copenhagen) for his support and interest. I also wish to thank Paul Mountford, James George, Mike Johnson and Stephanie Johnson for their patience, support and tuition. Thank-you, also, to the MCW class at AUT University, Auckland for enthusiasm, information and ideas shared. Thanks to Maureen Bolton Thoms and Nancy Bolton Jamieson for support and interest. Thanks to the Campbell family at Brackenstown and Bernadette Marks of Swords, County Dublin. Last but not least, thank-you to my husband Peter for his unfailing support, love and devotion and for putting up with the “genes”. Thanks also to David and Felicity who have shown remarkable patience, tact and encouragement and who carry on the “genes”.

Abstract.

This novel, Great and Glorious Intent is historical biographical fiction fashioned around the early life of Richard Molesworth who took part in the War of the Spanish Succession under the leadership of the 1st Duke of Marlborough. It is set between 1702 and 1716.

The early eighteenth century is an era of a change in the ideology of the English populace. They are ‘hauled’ by the educated, the upper classes and the philosophers (Locke, Butler), the novelists, (Defoe, Swift, Richardson,), thinkers and writers, (Addison, Steele, Swift), and politicians of the time (Sunderland, Harley, Bolingbroke), into an era of new thought that progresses into ‘democracy’ which comes to fruition in the late 18th century in what is now known as The Enlightenment. At the time of these changes England’s trade and colonization aspirations are threatened by France and Spain who own territory in the New World. There is also the threat of Roman Catholicism and the problem of the continuing Protestant succession. France is the culprit; the ‘Pretender’ to the English throne is being protected by Louis XIV’s court. The result is the War of the Spanish Succession, 1702-1712. This is the background of my novel.

Amongst this panoply of history is a story that had to be lifted from background information: letters closely read, shaped into a structure following the traditional pattern for a novel, characters and settings imagined and described, the era thoroughly researched, a “voice” created which resonates with today’s thinking and which appeals to modern readers; justice has to be done to the real character, permission sought from living descendants, and the slotting of the novel into a present day genre and reasons given for this. This is historical biographical fiction, a fashionable and controversial genre ¹.

¹ Margo White, “A New Frame for Frame.” The Listener Archive: Arts and Books. Aug.14-20 2010 Vol.225 No. 3666.
<http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3666/artsbooks/15954/a-new-frame-for-frame.html>

Historical fiction is described as “an amalgamation of accuracy and illusion.... [which] is a defining characteristic of ALL fiction [not only historical fiction]History is always searching for the truth. Fiction is not.”² In the writing of this novel I researched for truth but wrote as fiction.

² Richard Lee, “History is but a Fable agreed upon: the Problem of Truth in History and Fiction.” 2000. Historical Novel Society. <http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org/historyis.htm>

GREAT AND GLORIOUS INTENT

by

Alana Cooke

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“O, pardon me, bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.”

Julius Caesar.

Act 3, Sc. I, 164.

“Mine honour is my life; both grow in one;
Take honour from me, and my life is done.”

Richard II

Act I. Sc. I, 177

List of Characters

Richard Molesworth..... Later 3rd Viscount Molesworth
John Molesworth..... Later 2nd Viscount Molesworth
Robert Molesworth..... Father, Later 1st Viscount Molesworth
Letitia Molesworth.....Mother
Mary Monck Molesworth
Charlotte Tichbourne Molesworth
William Molesworth
Walter Molesworth
Edward Molesworth
Letitia Bolton Molesworth (Letty)
Coote Molesworth
Bysse Molesworth
George Monck.....Mary's husband
John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough
George Hamilton, 1st Earl of Orkney
Prince Eugene of Savoy
Baron Thomas Ashe of Barton Stour
Captain Isaac Jevereau
Ellen de Lacy.....Lady Ashe
Rev. Father Gerard de Lacy SJ.
Lavinia, Countess Melyon
Maura Scanlan

Brian Scanlan
Sean Scanlan
Colonel Thomas Panton
Major Sir James Abercrombie
Major John Murray
Captain Will Tichbourne.....Charlotte's husband.
Richard Bolton of Brazeel and Bective Abbey.....neighbour and former
secretary to Robert 1st Viscount Molesworth
Edward Bolton,.....Richard's son and Letty's future husband
Blake.....Richard's manservant

Dates

England did not follow the Reformed dates of the calendar of Pope Gregory XIII until 1752, therefore the dates referred to in England in this novel, are the Old Style (OS). The dates referred to on the Continent are in the New Style (NS). In the 18th Century, the difference between the two was 11 days.

The beginning of the year OS was March 25th

PROLOGUE

England

Bath Spa

February: 1715-1716

The smell of the town filters into the tight confines of the coach. I smell it before I can see it. A faint whiff of sulphur mixed with the dampness of rain and coal smoke. It clings to the roof of my mouth, coats my tongue and throat like the smell of lingering gunpowder.

Gunpowder. Clouds of it, heavy in the rising heat off the battlefield. Not a breath of wind to make it dissipate. Clouds of the stuff, carrying the stench of blood, guns and musket-shot hang like a dark pall over the scorched earth. White bodies lie under the unforgiving sun. The stench lingers, in my mouth and nose, oozes out of the pores of my skin, penetrates my smoke-stained uniform, splashed with blood and soot.

I close my eyes at the thought and push the memories away.

The coach and six clatters towards the small town of Bath buried within a valley, surrounded by orchards and meadows. Caught in the curve of the River Avon, the town is hardly visible, except for the sight of long tendrils of steam that rise from the springs and snake up through the trees to announce its damp presence. I lean towards the glass window and rub away the thick layer of condensation with my gloved hand. The street, on an incline into the city, reveals itself through the glass, cobbles slick with recent rain. It has been years since I have been to Bath Spa. Father and Mary had been often enough, seeking the waters to cure them of various ills. I have little faith in the cure stories. Even less now.

I had not expected her to die. Not yet. Not Mary, not now, not here in this God forsaken hole. She was supposed to live forever, like I am going to. We had always joked about our immortality. Instead, she has turned out to be mortal like everyone else and I am cheated. I have faced death many times and been lucky. I have come through the fiercest battles unscathed. I thought she would too. She had been ill, but *that* ill? She said to me all those years ago in the woods at Edlington. "I die and live again." But she is not going to live again. She has died in Bath, this horrible tumble of a town.

I have always loathed it.

Peering through the rain I can see the streets are thronged with streetsellers, and merchants, while hackney carriages, coaches, and sedan chairs carried by chairmen, cart nobility and gentry to and from the baths which have been here since the time of the Romans. Such an ancient place, but knowledge of the history of the town is of little comfort to me and means nothing.

Bath is a wretched place for her to die on her own without her family around her.

Everything I look at appears far away as if I am looking at it from a great distance. A surge runs through the pit of my belly and abruptly I sit back in the padded leather seat, startled by my vulnerability. As usual, my gut feels everything for me, while my mind remains detached.

Perhaps I am going as mad as George who sits snivelling and red-eyed opposite me in the coach. We had collected George, in a strained silence from his parent's house in London. When we told him of Mary's death, he had looked at us through disbelieving and vacant eyes then immediately collapsed. His parents, already looking after Mary and George's three children, wept with Father over the loss of his eldest daughter and looked at us in sympathy, three of her white-faced brothers standing beside him. Almost with relief and with little ceremony, George's parents had bundled him and his belongings into Father's coach for the journey to Bath. He had immediately buried himself in the corner, covered his head with his cloak and cried on and off all the way.

Walter, has gone on ahead riding in another coach to Edlington Hall, in Yorkshire, with Coote and Byssie, after taking them out of school at Westminster in London. Mother, and Charlotte and Letty, are coming to Edlington from Brackenstown in Ireland for Mary's funeral. They are most probably on the heavy swell of the Irish Sea right now. We will all arrive at Edlington about the same time in a few days, depending on wind, sea and road conditions.

I had sat through the journey bearing the jolts and jerks of the pot-holed roads of southern England and stayed awake, angry, alert and silent, every nerve-ending raw, listening to the clatter of the coach wheels, the jingle of harness, the intermittent crack of

the whip and the murmurs of the coachmen outside driving the team of horses. Terse and impatient, I did not hide my lack of tolerance and sympathy towards George.

“Richard, you are being rude. Have some pity,” Father remarked, as we climbed out of the coach in a wood to relieve ourselves.

“At least we did not contribute to her death by our madness.”

“Perhaps we did in other ways. Perhaps we were blind to her difficulties and did not help enough.”

The pain in his voice made me wince. I did not argue but stalked off on my own, away from my simpering lacklustre brother-in-law whom I had once truly admired.

Now, once more jolting in the coach, I have to look away from his self-pitying presence. I clench my fists in an effort to suppress an urge to give George a violent shove of anger and hit him over the head. But, just as readily, guilt surges through me, knowing Mary would want me to be kind to him.

I have to be of use to Father who sits opposite me, red-eyed and pewter-faced I have to keep a calm head. It is an easy skill for me to detach myself from Mary’s death, so used to detaching myself on the field, and is easier still because I find it hard to believe we are on our way to collect her body and take her back up north to our home in Edlington for burial. My brothers are useless, either sleeping, snoring or weeping, curled up in their cloaks, their hats pulled down over their faces.

The window steams up again, I wipe away the fog and peer out at the passing streets as we jolt over the cobbled way. The spa town spreads itself around the coach, its streets reaching like tentacles into the early darkness. Mary is here somewhere, within this fetid place which has only slightly improved since the patronage of Queen Anne and her husband, Prince George in the early 1700's. The ideas and building instigated by Richard Nash are a promise foretold by rubble work sites. Half-timbered houses gape with destruction, their rooms empty, open to the weather, revealing imprints of past lives, next to houses being built in streets rough and muddy from old cobbles being torn up as the streets are widened to create sturdy footpaths. It will be pleasant eventually.

Eventually.

Mary's death intrudes and disturbs my thoughts. My older sister, my confidante. I thought we would go through life together, that she would always be there with me, if not physically, then in thought, side-by-side, alive, always sharing adversities and triumphs, supporting each other, laughing together, as we always had done. Our children would grow up close cousins. She promised me I would be her children's favourite uncle. She had been interested in my adventures and ambitions, always asking for more information in my letters, demanding I write more than I did. Now, I realise, I had largely ignored her request. I had not always been there for her. Mary has gone from us, gone for good, dying in this derelict place full of tumble-down houses clustered haphazardly around the stumpy cathedral in the centre of the town.

The coach rumbles to a stop in front of a new stone house, wet and gleaming in the rain. Here, Mary had found lodgings with a few of her servants. Stiff with fatigue from the bone jarring ride, Father and I help George down the steps, as the grief laden husband

seems unable to climb down on his own. The smell of damp streets with their open and clogged drains, combined with coal smoke in the air makes me shiver and shake.

“Richard, you are ill.”

Father alarmed, puts his hand on my back, but the moment passes.

“No, I am all right, Father.”

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. He has enough to worry about.

Shadows stretch across the narrow street. All ready the sun has disappeared behind the hills, and the town, becomes cold and damp as it turns in on itself for the night like a settling animal. I wish I was a million miles away.

Anywhere but here, for this purpose.

A beat carried on the air startles me, a sound I have heard many times before on the battlefields and at Edlington. I glance up at the grey sky. My eyes narrow at the sight. They are close to the wooded hills outside the town. I can recognise them anywhere. A circle of crows, black heavy birds, even in flight, spiralling above the darkening treetops. The early evening signal that night is about to swallow the sky. I turn to follow the others into the house.

Travel-stained, cloaked, bewigged, hats in our hands, leaden and disabled with disbelief, we circle Mary’s bed. The light from three large beeswax candles thrusts our black shadows, long, strange, distorted, temporary, up the wainscoted walls of the room.

Stunned into silence we gaze upon her peaceful sleep. The candlelight softens the hard edge of death upon her face. The sharpness of her cheekbones the only indication of the intense final assault of her illness. Her eyelashes cast feathery shadows upon her cheeks and they appear to flutter as if her eyes are about to open.

The room smells of rosemary, bunches of it strewn over the floor, gathered into vases on a chest of drawers and scattered upon the bed.

I have seen death many times but never someone as close as Mary. If I stare hard enough I can imagine her chest rising and falling. I will it to happen, for her to sit up and recognise us, see her familiar smile. She is all right. They had all really made a silly mistake.

But she remains motionless. Her face, normally rounded and apple-buffed in health, is thin, white and blue-tinged surrounded by the mass of dark hair, grey-streaked and brushed, resting against her translucent skin.

The maidservant holds aloft a candlestick bearing a lit candle. Wax drips down over her reddened knuckles and falls onto the bare boards of the floor.

She pours forth the story of Mary's last hours.

"I did everything for my poor mistress but nothing helped. I fetched the physician who cupped and bled her. She died in my arms."

The maid sniffs.

"She seemed reconciled to dying. Almost welcomed it."

She blows her nose in her kerchief, then fishes in the pocket of her apron and hands George a key.

He takes it from her and stares at it lying in the palm of his hand as if he had never seen it in his life before. Knowing how much attention he has paid Mary in the last months of her life, I am not surprised. “She asked me to give you her papers, Sir.”

George, head bent, is silent. He has not really heard the maid, and is staring vacantly at his open hand, so I step forward, take the key from him and study it. It is the key to her escritoire . Father glances at me as I give the key to him, then looks at the maid.

“Thank-you for being with her when she died and for your kindness to our daughter and sister.”

He takes the key, bows slightly to the maid. She gives him a small bob at his graciousness, then bursts into tears again.

Irritated, I turn away from the scene. I am amazed at Father’s self-control. His thought for others, his grace under such circumstances. She is a servant after all and well paid. It is her duty to accompany Mary.

The need to escape is urgent, to be by myself or with Mary on my own. But the others are not going to leave her side, I can see that. They are of no comfort to me, and as far as George is concerned, he is struck dumb with shock, and I hope, guilt as well. After all, he has not always been mute, in fact his ranting, angry words have caused nothing but anguish for Mary. Most probably, his behaviour has hastened her illness and death.

I ponder the impossible. How can I ever forgive George for causing her so much worry?

I need air. I excuse myself and walk away as Father looks at me sharply, his eyes widening in question. I pass the huddle of red-eyed servants in the hallway, run back down the narrow staircase into the front hall of the house and out into the cold air.

The light drizzle of rain that accompanied us from London has now ceased and the sky is clear, already dark with early evening. Roads shine, gutters run and eaves drip. The cloying smell of coal-smoke, mixed with open drains and cess pits of the old town that crowd around the cathedral, sit like a miasma on the still air. My heart pounds and I stop to take a deep breath trying to quell another wave of nausea which sweeps through me, determined to conquer me, this time stronger than the last. I am about to die and do not care.

The streets are punctuated with black shadows lit intermittently by lanterns placed at the doorways of some houses. Signs of life echo after me, mocking my rapid footsteps upon the flagged pavements as I walk away from Mary's place of death. My face feels the damp evening air while the smell of cooked food drifts through open windows as people dine. Curtains have not been pulled or shutters closed. I can hear the sound of talk and laughter, the clink and clatter of cutlery and china.

Doors in houses open as I pass. I am surrounded by the light of dozens of torches and lanterns, jostled by a bevy of joyous carefree men and women who spill out into the street dressed for parties, card games, masques, concerts or late suppers. The world is discordant and topsy-turvy, like the centre of a theatrical masque, or a crowded field of distorted flowers. I am trapped, there is no way of escaping the throng that surrounds me.

The women's satin cloaks ripple and flow in silver and gold, their feet covered in silk stockings embroidered with clocks that run up the ankle to accentuate the shape of the leg. Beneath their cloak's they wear brocaded gowns and embroidered petticoats with shoes to match. Their heads are adorned with tight curls over which perch lace caps with lappets, or small hats made of feathers and ribbons, gold trimmings and flowers. Fans flutter in their gloved hands or Venetian masks are held to their faces, while necks and ears sparkle and flash with gold, silver, diamonds and pearls. They laugh and talk to each other, all around me, calling over me, through me, as if I do not exist, as if I am a ghost, not amongst them.

Shoving each other in their eagerness they surround me in the street, bustling against each other, heads tipped back, and their smiles wide, teeth yellow, harbouring bright pink tongues set within white painted faces. They call to coachmen, liveried servants and chairmen who dart around them arranging rides to the nearest amusements.

Disorientated, I stand within the crowd and stare as men scurry with the women, escorting them, hands lying possessively around narrow waists or over gloved hands. Their straight forms are covered in embroidered suits of gold and silver lace, opened to reveal lace neck cloths; lace edged sleeves emerge from the deep cuffs of their coats. Their heads are weighed down by long full-bottomed wigs. Dress swords jut between the slashed vents in their coats. They shout, call to each other and the women, their voices and laughter raucous, high and sharp, as they vie for coaches. Some bump into me, acknowledge me with a startled look, a sudden serious bow, then the misdemeanour forgotten, they go on after the women, red high-heeled shoes tap, tap, tapping upon the flagstones of the footpaths like the steady beat of the drum accompanying the cacophony of sound.

The men, too, carry masks, gloves and wear silk stockings with embroidered clocks running up their legs, high-tongued buckled shoes on their feet. Gloved hands trail long lace-edged handkerchiefs or sport tall, gold or silver topped canes which are brandished with aplomb at waiting coachmen and sedan-chair bearers. They give directions and shout instructions. Coachmen eager for a fare draw their carriages up in a continuous line to cater to their needs, the horses' hooves clatter, harnesses jangle, wheels rotate on the cobbled street. Such finery, such decadence I have not seen since I accompanied the Duke of Marlborough's court.

My heart turns a cold somersault. My tongue is paralysed.

I find myself staring into a face I have not seen for some time. The clear skin, blue eyes and the dark moustache over the firm but gentle mouth, one that I have kissed in friendship and the companionship of soldiery. I stutter trying to voice his name, unable to speak with shock, but I shake myself in disbelief, because I know he is dead; he was killed, all those years ago, on the field at Malplaquet. I had seen the result of a French sword myself. Witnessed the seep of blood into the earth.

He does not look at me, even though he passes only inches from where I stand. His blind eye restored, he no longer wears a patch, but he walks away with the familiar limp only to disappear amongst the crowd of revellers. I stare hard into the throng, looking in vain for the tall figure with the well-shaped head beneath his wig and hat, but footmen obstruct his vision as they rush by, torches held high over the head of their masters. They escort people from coaches to houses and from houses to coaches, throwing light which reflects off the wet street and the steaming coats of horses pawing with impatience, snorting and whinnying as they wait to move.

My eyes hurt with the brightness of the scene. I am experiencing all over again, every masque, levee, party, supper, concert, card party and assembly I have ever had to endure as part of my duties as Aide-de-camp to Marlborough in The Hague, in Brussels and in London.

The revellers are so Frenchified in their dress, so superficial, so empty-headed, I am sickened. This is another world, one in which I had once reluctantly participated, now I feel mocked, abused and degraded. The loud noise bounces off the close-set houses in the street, my head thumps, tight with unexpressed grief. Bright colours from the light of the flambeau and the crowd's clothes merge in my vision and shimmer.

In an attempt to ease my eyesight and mind I turn away from the crowd. This French influence, which England tried to free herself from, which I thought had been crushed, is stronger than ever, in revelry, fashion and manners. It is as if the war has never happened.

All those years for nothing.

Memories crowd my mind. Out of the mêlée comes the image of Lady Melyon's body wrapped about my own. My legs dissolve beneath me at the thought and I have to clutch an iron railing to steady myself, ashamed of my own weakness. I could never have told Mary about Lady Lavinia, The Countess Melyon, or anyone for that matter; nor my parents nor my brothers and sisters, anymore than I could tell them about Ellen, the woman I still love. They would never understand or tolerate such a violation of social acceptability. Mary, as tolerant as you were about my faults, you would have been horrified. I would have been lessened in your eyes. I could not have borne that. Mary you mean too much to me.

Music from small orchestras, viols, violins, flutes, harpsichord, spinet in surrounding assembly rooms and drawing rooms reverberate into the street. The air is lively, buoyant, healthy, for a place that is famously linked to ill health. These joyful people are celebrating life not death. I want to shake my fist and shout at them, or beat upon the doors and tell them they have no right to be so happy when one of the loveliest and brightest on earth is now no longer amongst us. But being a gentleman and an officer of King George I that I am, I keep my hands and my voice to myself, skirting the frivolity and skittishness, the raffish sounds, wishing I was somewhere else rather than here in this stinking place.

Marlborough taught me well.

Head down I walk away from the sound of life and the smell of sustenance. The revelry recedes into the mist behind me. A couple drunk with love and wine rushes past me toward an awaited tryst, their anticipation making them rough and careless enough to bump into me in the darkness. There is no attempt at avoidance, no bow of regret. They do not apologise, do not even notice, intent only upon their destination, they disappear hand in hand ahead of me. I am affronted by their coarseness, their rudeness, their indifference. The smell of cheap wine lingers in the air after them and fuels my nausea further. A roaring fills my ears. I stop to catch my breath, fighting the gorge that rises in my throat, filling my mouth with the bitter rush of bile. I get rid of the stuff, spitting it on the road. My head clears.

Somewhere nearby is the sound of water rushing over a weir.

I walk towards it.

Here, by the riverside, away from the lights of houses, the darkness is more intense, despite the pale light from a sliver of moon that hangs on its back above the hills.

It mocks me, this chink of light within the black void, this tiny glimpse of another brighter world which I cannot reach, any more than I can reach Mary. Further to the north rides a staircase of black clouds lined with silver, rising thousands of feet into the air. The distant rumble of thunder is audible, muted but unmistakable, like the faint continual bombardment of besieging cannon. Lightning cuts the sky followed by a clap of thunder, but used to such noise I take little notice. Curls and eddies of mist rise off the river, wrap around my feet entrapping me as Mary is entrapped within her shroud.

The memory of the day crowds my mind and I see again the white face of William, standing in the doorway of the library in our house at St. James's in London, a letter in his hand. He was dumbfounded with shock, unable to speak and instead held the piece of paper out to me.

Nothing has been the same since. The world has become a hostile place. The sickness in the pit of my stomach has resurrected itself, along with the guilt.

A noise startles me as I make my way along the river bank. Oblivious to the mist which sweeps over them, the drunken pair lie entwined in a rumple of skirts, splayed legs and fast moving hands as they groan with pleasure and eagerness. I nearly fall over them in my blind haste to escape and avoid them just in time to see the man's white bare buttocks rise in the air before a flexing thrust between the woman's outstretched legs. Their urgency makes me walk away, eager to find a place in the dark where I can be alone and give myself up to the monster tormenting my gut. I sit on the damp grass within the wrap of my cloak and the shadow of my hat.

Aches and pains from a nervous gut have followed me ever since I left the Duke of Marlborough's service. Leaving had been beyond my control. There was nothing much else I could do given the circumstances. That was years ago, when I had been on Marlborough's staff during the final days of the war, against the French over the Spanish Succession. The Duke had become estranged from all of his staff, me included, when I had been so close to him. The thought of his rejection still makes me ill. Since then I suppress any feelings I might have about anything, distancing myself, not thinking about those last months with the Duke and all that had ensued. Mary's death has triggered the thoughts again. Out of habit I push them aside.

Mary, Mary, are you happy?

I wonder where you are and if you can hear me?

You must be up there somewhere, amongst the complex constellations, icy-cold against the bright ink of sky, yet to be obliterated by the oncoming storm. Somewhere, beyond the moon, somewhere within that chink of light. The God I have doubted for so long is obviously not in his heaven, otherwise he would not have allowed such an innocent to be taken so cruelly from us. I do not believe in heaven or hell, do not believe in God, for that matter, but I believe in something, whatever that is. Mary must be somewhere, she cannot just cease to exist. I do not have the answer but Francis Lockier will know, being the man of God that he is.

The need for Lockier right now, overcomes me, the desire just to be near his strength. My friend, my spiritual advisor, someone to explain to me the intricacies of it all. He will penetrate my disbelief and supplant it with some measure of understanding. He would have the letter they sent to Peterborough by now, informing him of Mary's death,

and I know that he will be grieving, because he loves you, Mary more than George loved you. Francis will come to us in Edlington, he will conduct a burial service in the small church of St. Peter without the gates of Edlington Hall.

Loud moans and heavy breathing from the heaving hump of fornication nearby stirs me back to the present. I close my eyes and ears, unable to move for the anchor in my stomach that fixes me to the ground. A long drawn out sigh causes me to glance at the pair and my eyes, now used to the darkness, sees the rhythmic beat of union wrapped within the women's skirts. The woman cries out and clutches the driving male to her as he increases his pace. The harder and faster they ride, the further it causes me to dive into my own despair. All I can see is you, Mary beneath a driving George. Or Ellen beneath myself. Ellen who will never be mine. Nausea rolls me to my feet and I stagger into the mist away from the pair and the frightful associations of their actions. The disgust, grief, and anger leaves my stomach in a rush and splatters the grass.

Exhausted, the deed done, I sit shivering by the river, a cold sweat running down my face, the water deep and black in front of me. One step and I will be with you, Mary. You are only inches away. I want to be by your side. Let the waters close over my head. The thought is so tempting I am horrified.

How angry you will be if I suddenly turn up wherever you are. You would scold me and send me packing back to life, as you used to when playing little mother. I pull myself to my feet and leave the temptation behind. There is no guarantee I will go to where you are. My lack of belief in a merciful God and an afterlife is the cause of my anguish. My cowardice, my non-existent faith a problem as I lurch away from draw of the river. At least, if there is Faith you have something to cling to. Like Ellen. She clings to the

ephemeral, the spiritual, the non-existent. She builds her life upon it. I have always prided myself on my bravery, but now I decide I am a coward.

The moon has set and the clouds roll above me releasing a steady patter of rain that falls upon my cloak and hat. The lovers scramble to their feet and run away into the darkness. Oblivious to the rain and the growl of thunder around me I walk from the river and the stink of my own despair.

Father is waiting for me, sitting beside Mary's bed, his face drawn in the dim light, his eyes swollen and raw from weeping

Rain splashes against the window of the room.

"Are you all right?" he asks anxiously, as I pull up a chair and sit beside him.

"I have just seen myself and I don't like what I see."

A look of alarm flits across his face and I am sorry I have spoken.

"Death of someone you love can do this to you. It makes you face things you have pushed aside and ignored. Words you should have said, or shouldn't have. Deeds you should have done, or did not do," his Father replied. "We all go through it. Surely you know that?"

"I'm all right now," I nod with a sigh. "Father, you need rest." I look at him with a frown,

Worried, his face is scarred by shadows.

“William and Edward have found lodgings for us for the night, not far from here, they have taken George there and are coming back for us, but I am loathe to leave Mary on her own.”

“I will stay with her for a while. We can take turns throughout the night. But you must rest, we have a long journey on the morrow. There’s much to do in the morning in preparation.”

Father nods as tears form in his eyes. I put my arm around him and rest my head upon his shoulder. I know how much he loves you, his oldest daughter with your quick clever mind, and how much he will miss you. “I have been going through her papers, Richard, and I found many poems and letters she has written.”

Guilt rises in me again.

I had written occasionally, but not often enough. I did not realise how hurt you had been by my silence. I thought you understood. But I had deliberately kept my distance, especially once you separated from George. No one outside the family was to know of the disgrace as it would reflect badly upon my army career, especially in Marlborough’s eyes. John, in Florence, worried about his diplomatic career, had thought the same. We had both distanced ourselves from you, rarely visiting, rarely writing. You had been disappointed about me leaving the Duke’s staff, which irritated me. You had questioned my loyalty to Marlborough during the final campaigns of the war on the Continent, which had offended me. In Spain you had written, sending me poems and family news, but embittered and ashamed I had answered briefly, tersely. It is too late to explain that to you, Mary. You had never known the full story about what really had happened between the Duke of Marlborough and me.

“She told me she thought you did not care when you did not write,” Father continues. “You had always been so close to her, much closer than John, even though he is closer in age. She couldn’t understand your reticence. She told me that she felt you had many secrets you were not willing to share with anyone.”

“I do and did care . But yes, I have secrets,”

“Most of us do.”

“How could I tell her of such happenings?”

“You could write everything down now. Tell her what happened. Write your story, it will help you.”

“But Father it is too late,” I insist, surprised. Perhaps being around George for so long has addled his brain too.

“It is never too late. It will help you to come to terms with her death. Words are powerful and the written word is the most powerful of all. Jonathan Swift says that. Our lives are but a memory and memories fade. Write your memories down while they are still fresh in your mind, while you can still think about them. We must take care of her work. Take her escritoire back to Edlington. I will entrust you with the key.”

“Of course, Father. I will look after it.”

“The least we can do is look after her now. George is not able to.”

William comes into the room. I watch as he escorts Father from the room, his arm about his shoulders.

I throw my outer clothes on a chair, glance over at the still form in the bed, light a small lantern and carry it to your desk and open it. There are piles of various types of

blank paper and parchment, notes and letters, poems, quills, full ink pots, stoppered waiting for the dip of your pen; your seal and sealing wax, ribbons, pieces of silk. The perfume of Hungary water which you always used, like Mother, rises to my face and I bend down and inhale deeply. The scent makes you come alive again, enough to think you are still standing beside me. Childhood memories of growing up together in Ireland at Brackenstown, that lovely seat, as Jonathan Swift calls it, fills my mind. Shaken, I turn and look at you but you are as lifeless as before. Disappointment and loss go through me. The room is cold, rain still batters the window accompanied by low growls of intermittent thunder. I reach for my cloak and put it over my shoulders then return to the task of sifting through letters you have written.

Mary, you have been busy, even writing letters to us all the day you died. There is also a collection of poems neatly tied with a blue ribbon. I untie them and spread the sheets of paper out under my hand. They are recent. Your familiar script and poetic voice are clear in my head. I glance at each one briefly, and find a copy of the poem you have written in celebration of my regiment's victories in Spain, entitled "Moccoli", named after John's villa in Florence. There is a poem for John and also a final poem addressed to George. They lie beneath my hand. I cannot bring myself to read any of them. I close my eyes, weariness making me slump in the chair.

Eyes shut against the glow of candlelight, I decide I will tell you everything. Nothing will hurt, horrify or offend you and perhaps somewhere, where you are now, you will understand. I will tell you about the hardship, the brutality, the long marches, about the battles and bloodshed. I will tell you about the magnificence of Marlborough and his tactics and strategies, about Lord Orkney, and about Ashe, Murray, and Abercrombie; about Ellen and how I loved her and how I still do. How I could not tell anyone about her.

I will tell you about The Countess Melyon and the comfort she provided, and the fact she had meant little to me apart from that. I will tell you about my rescue of the Duke at Ramillies, what really happened and how it went unrecognised and the real reason why I was sent to Spain; about John and his attraction to and success in Florence and why. About his great love for the Countess Camilla. I will tell you my side of the story and I will start at the beginning when I first ran away to join the army. That is the obvious place.

I pick up your quill, Mary, find ink and unused paper and start to write.

Someone shakes me gently and calls me by name and in my befuddled state I think it is you, Mary. Edward's red-rimmed blue eyes, stare at me from a pale face etched with concern.

"Richard, it's my turn to stay with Mary, go and rest. There's a long sofa in the next room."

I fumble for my cloak and stumble by the light of the lantern into the adjoining room, find the sofa, spread myself on it under my cloak and fall asleep.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

London-Holland

Spring-Summer: 1702

Adventure

Pleasure is the last thing on the mind of Lord Orkney, Colonel of the Royal Regiment of Foot, or Orkney's First Foot, as I and the others of my troop stand to attention in the parade ground in front of him.

The short, squat man inspects each one of his red and blue clad, bewigged and three-corner hatted new officers. Behind me in strict formation stand the infantry, in their military red coats and tall mitred caps. All rough men, every one of them, most of them dragged off the streets, out of taverns, rounded up from goals, their sentences forgotten if they honour their debt by fighting for the Queen.

Some of them are a lot older than me and others are still boys under twenty, the hardness of their lives apparent on their faces imprinted with premature lines caused by adversity, their skin stretched over heavy bones, giving their faces a coarse cast brought about by the perpetual struggle to live. At least in the army they are clothed and given a good meal. The Queen's shilling is tempting even though it brings more hardship and

fighting and perhaps death. But at least when they meet death their bodies will be firm and strong and their bellies full of beef and ale, while their pockets will jingle with coins.

The good Earl Marlborough, for that is what he is at this point in time, an Earl, not a Duke yet, that accolade is still in the future, looks after his men well and they are grateful. They fight loyally for him in return and yes, they willingly go to their deaths. Or so I believe, from my smug view-point of twenty-two years of pampered youth standing in front of them holding the regimental colour.

For I am pampered, you see, a callow young man brought up in an Irish country house amongst numerous brothers and sisters. educated at the Middle Temple Law courts in London and prepared for life as part of the gentry. Doted upon by an elegant aristocratic mother and strictly regarded, yet willingly indulged in nearly all things, by a hopeful father.

What do I know about the men who stand behind me, inhaling and exhaling their lives into the soft breeze that brushes the flat fields of Holland? I know very little about them except they scramble to live amongst the majority of the poor within the crowded towns or country villages of England. Some, offered army service in reprieve of their sentences, have been raided from goals, others have been snatched off farms in the country where they have been labouring, unable to run fast enough to escape the recruiters; or without thinking, many have entered the local tavern to find they have walked into a trap that ends in Holland. Their wives and children are left to fend for themselves. No one thinks about them back home other than the occasional hapless fellow who scrapes his coins together and sends them back to England.

The accumulated men of various ages crawl with vermin and are regularly soured by the regimental surgeons in an effort to cleanse them. Their hair is shorn and shaved

close to their heads, their bodies put into breeches of woollen buff, strong linen shirts, red waistcoats and coats of bright red, lined and flashed with royal blue. They are given the necessary musket, bayonet and kit which includes cartridges, knapsack, bed-roll and pot to make their tea. They are organised into regiments, given a standard to follow and orders to obey. Their bodies are bruised by harsh marching and endless drill. Most do it without question, only some find the Queen's shilling not worth the bother. When they rebel they are shown the Strapado, the Wooden Horse, the lash, if they quit their post, the gauntlet and if they run, the gallows.

The men stand at attention under the sun which beats down hot and hard making them sweat profusely, their heads encased in embroidered tall caps, pointed like a Bishop's mitre, which increases their stature by nearly a foot. Orkney inspects them all from head to toe and we also, his officers, lined up in front of them. He is fussy about everything from the angle of the officers' hats, the corner placed slightly left of centre on the head, to the content of our language. Foul speech is not tolerated amongst the officers but the men give vent to their spleen in ripe language out of Orkney's earshot.

Power, that persuader and pervader of men's souls.

The regiment is large, two battalions of five companies, about five hundred men. I am not the only ensign deeply enclosed within the First Battalion of Foot, Thomas Ashe is also here, leading his band of men, colour flying high. We find ourselves serving the same Lord on earth as well as the one above.

The officers parade in front of the men on foot, the Colonel advances readying the men to prepare. The two battalions of First Foot find themselves drilled under Orkney's appraising eye. The formation of the firing platoons is ordered. Drummers divide, right and

left of the platoons, line up with the sergeants, ready for the orders. The language of the drum, ruffle, march, preparative, flam, assaults our ears, penetrates our brains, until we know every stroke, every nuance of the dance and every pound of the rhythm.

We follow the lead of those in front and begin to see when and where each melody of the drum is used in which part of the engagement. The rhythm becomes at one with our heartbeat, our breathing, entrenched in our brains as we anticipate each stage of action. Over and over until the sound becomes one with us, and we answer as one, in our minds, our body guiding the horses beneath us, or our feet if we are upon them; the synchronisation with the lines of men around us. We are all trained for one thing, that is, how to kill the enemy, the French, but we are not taught how to die. That act is to be borne without practice but with commitment, without hesitation or thought, with bravery, whether we feel brave at the time or not and most of us doubt we are brave enough, so we ignore the fact that it might happen. The infantry are disciplined and drilled in musket, pike drill and sword play as much as the officers have been, and the majority have turned out to be good soldiers even though they are rough of tongue and spirit.

Captain John Murray has power. I envy him. I am in awe of him.

“Follow the colours, follow the colours,” Murray shouts and the men I lead start falling in behind me. He rides at first ahead of us, then to the side of us, then behind us, watching every movement, his dark eyes narrowed at Ashe and me and the other men under his command. He seems able enough, this leader of men. Never far away, he leads, guides, watches, reports any lapse of concentration, pulls us up short, loudly, as he thinks fit.

Sweat, caused through heat and fear runs down my face and neck in torrents. I feel my bowels turn as Orkney and his officers, in their inspection, move closer to me. I have made sure, before presenting myself for inspection, that everything about my person is perfect and correct. Orkney stands before me. I ignore the pain in my belly, relax my eyes and stare over the top of his gold-laced three-cornered hat because he is considerably shorter than me. His eyes are all over me as if inspecting vermin. I feel like vermin. No better than the scum that stand behind me. I certainly have not been singled out for special treatment. That pleasant man who had graced the table of my father when I was a boy and youth, has turned into a fiend who now pretends not to know me. I cannot expect favours, his message is clear. Every method of training known to the army has been centred upon my person and Orkney has insisted that his coterie of Aides watch my every move. The whole of the Colonel's quarters seem to have the pleasure of driving me to my limits, intent on breaking me so I can be sent home in humiliation to my father. I am only more determined to be successful. In response to Orkney's close presence my bowels react and I let out a loud whining bodily emission that fills the air with stink.

"Discipline!" Orkney roars, his mouth wide open revealing remarkably misshapen yellow teeth. He stops, startled, sniffs and backs away. Thomas Ashe, not far from me, shakes as if stricken with the ague as he tries to control his mirth. Orkney is a fiend. Seething, he is doused in the wash of my internal organs. I can almost see his horns. He moves away, to my relief, but I still have to contend with the steady gaze of his one of his Aides, the aloof Captain Abercrombie, who stands apart from the others because of his inordinate interest in me.

He watches my progress with the intense interest of a snake ready to strike. He is a handsome devil and he knows it, with his pale colouring, black hair and cunning gaze, his

rounded Roman nose, his straight bearing finished with an arrogant turn of the head. Always nearby, he is unmistakeable in his scarlet coat with blue flashes, edged with gold laced adorned with gold buttons and loops, his chest slashed with the gold sash which proudly denotes his rank as attendant to the highest in the army. The linen edges of his shirt are visible and adorned with lace, arranged just so, beneath the wide cuffs of his coat, as is his neckcloth, or Steinkirk, edged with expensive Brussels lace, neatly turned and folded and startling white against his pale skin. His uniform and that of the rest of the Aides are good examples of how we are supposed to be turned out, and woe betide us if we do not comply. It does not matter that we are highly visible targets on the battlefield, as long as we go out in resplendent perfection. I am, along with the rest of the new officers, trying to establish my place within the passion that governs this army. What drives Orkney to inflict such pain upon men eager to fight for their country?

“Discipline!” is Orkney’s answer in his loud waspish voice. “Discipline is necessary from the highest soldier to the lowest, but especially from you,” he points his marshal’s baton seemingly in my direction. “As officers of Queen Anne, you will lead men by your example. Nothing but the highest standard will be tolerated.” He moves off and takes a large sniff of fresh air, if the air can be called fresh when men are amassed together. Our body heat wraps us in a smelly storm wherever we move.

Orkney’s sermon is as persuasive, strident, his tone scurrilous as any belted out by Jonathan Swift, who presently is riding the political horse in London hoping for a Bishopric. He does the deed very subtly, with his forked tongue, eloquent turn of phrase and skill with his pen. He thinks no one realises what he is about when everyone, including the highest of the most high, Queen Anne, knows his intent. Father says he will be surprised if he succeeds. My father and Swift know and tolerate each other with a grudging

respect, both being born in Dublin, but Father has little regard in general for the clergy, so he treats Swift and all clergymen with wariness and caution.

Orkney, however, now, in front of us, says no prayers and what he says is repeated frequently to all who have to listen, which is, most often, us. Some say he regards the army as his own and not that of his friend Marlborough who is reported to be making steady progress to join us as we prepare for war. The thought of war makes my bowels rumble with anticipation and excitement again, but I hold everything back until Orkney has moved to a safe distance. Instead Ashe comes into the firing line and the shudder of his shoulders at my display delights me.

Marlborough has entrusted Orkney, this veteran soldier, to train the men in his strategies on the fields with the military tricks and cunning he learnt in his years of service in the Royal Navy and the French army under the mighty *Henri de La Tour d'Auvergne*, *Vicomte de Turenne*, *Maréchal de France*. Some say Orkney will be loathe to surrender his power to Marlborough when the time comes, and I believe it.

The five-foot long flintlock musket, eleven pounds in weight, cumbersome and slow to load, is my adversary, and like my treatment of my father, I handle it with respect, caution and a certain amount of diplomacy and discretion. I am used to the clumsiness and strong retort from the matchlock musket, having used Father's when hunting rabbits and foxes in the woods of Brackenstown. The flintlock, with its French invention of the socket bayonet which Marlborough has brought into use in his new English army, has a retort powerful enough to knock a man to the ground. The half pikes and matchlock rifles are still in use but we can see that they will be replaced by this new weapon. We have to be able to stand the superior fighting strength of the enemy, so the challenge is to handle and load the musket as quickly as possible, before the enemy does the same with theirs and kills us. It

is rumoured that the French still use the old matchlock rifle, if that is the case then we are superior.

Over and over, as quickly as possible, we push the wooden rod into the barrel quickly without breaking it so that it does not explode in our faces. Loading and reloading until we can fire at least twelve rounds a minute. We are forced to practice while we are being fired upon as shot flies through the air singeing our hats and wigs, creating a fine mist of smoke around our heads. Hours and hours of it until large calluses appear on our hands, and the veins on our hands and arms stand out in vivid blue as our muscles expand and increase in strength. But we are learning to handle the murderous instrument.

“Stay cool under fire,” the drill sergeant shouts, as he fires musket then pistol, while in the background, the artillery fires so we become used to the visceral shake of the bombardment and ricochet of sound that explodes in our ears and deafens the sense out of us.

The smell of gunpowder clogs our lungs, the ground shudders and the organs in our bodies are jolted from their moorings. My nose lets forth a torrent of bright red blood which floods my necktie, shirt and coat. I look around and find I am not the only one afflicted. The shooting is continual as the Foot forms hollow squares or platoons, the front soldiers are on their knees while the others stand behind letting forth a volley of fire during the attack; another of the Earl’s strategies instilled in us by Orkney. What other schemes and ideas has the Earl thought up to enforce upon us, and when is the great man, favourite of Queen Anne, once-friend-turned-traitor to King James and suspected traitor to King William, going to show himself amongst us? My father considers Marlborough a great example of changing allegiance for survival, ambition and expediency. We know, by the

way Orkney drives us that the Earl's arrival must not be far away. We must be perfect in all things when he does arrive.

We, as officers, must learn to read and lead the men who make up the Foot, chants the Sergeant-Major. Observe their faces for change of colour, their postures for the shake of fear, the shift of their eyes for uncertainty. No doubt Abercrombie is doing his duty observing all that in me. My colours have been given to me by Orkney because my father, in his stubbornness, will not provide me with such an honour until I have proved myself and have shown him that I have what it takes to be a soldier of the Queen. There is some comfort that Orkney must think I am capable.

Capable of being killed, perhaps.

Our immediate concern is to encourage and inspire the reluctant men behind us, and I, as a junior Ensign, staying close to the colour sergeant, carry the staff with its embroidered ensign of the First Foot to lead their way into battle. The Earl Marlborough has thought of everything, including me as a bright red easy target for a sniper, carrying a bright gold and red flag embellished with crown, gold braid and hanging tassels just to attract fire. I have to stay alive for as long as possible if I can manage it, though I wonder how. I wave the flag above my head, deny my quaking legs, shaking body and blood-stained uniform and lead the troop into 'battle' through the smoke and carnage, even if it is just pretending. Musket balls fly around us and the cannons boom, smoke fills the air making us cough, stream, hawk and heave, but without the ensign in front of them the men would be in disarray, disorientated in battle, so my role is important as someone has to carry it and lead them.

“Molesworth, you’re not hanging out your mother’s washing. Hold that ensign higher. It has to be seen by the men behind you,” Orkney screams at me at the top of his voice so the whole regiment can hear.

My face grows hot as I lift the heavy staff higher above my head.

Hang out the washing indeed! My mother would be insulted, she always has a laundry-maid to do that.

I hoist it up high enough for the ravens to get a good view, that is, if they are anywhere near us, with all the noise. But I have noticed they are never far away, always close by, circling, watching, waiting, always ready to pick our eyes.

Dust fills every bodily orifice I possess. My woollen breeches, filthy with soot, smoke and dirt, torment my backside with itch. My arm, calf and thigh muscles, through the continual battle with the musket, sword, staff, and wielding the heavy broadsword, have increased in size over the past few weeks, and now bulge with new found power that before had only been a promise. Blisters rage under, over and upon my feet from wearing shoes and boots that wear quickly through due to endless hours of marching. If Orkney wishes to toughen us up, he is succeeding.

My mind is as blunt as the bayonet is sharp. Blunted through the intense discipline instilled by the constant repetitive drill of training, necessary to cope with the violence of killing. A tiny voice inside me squeals, do I really want to do this? That is what Father is waiting for, me to admit defeat, to fail. Never. I dissect it out, form it into a round glob and spit it into the wind.

The steel bayonets are sharp enough to disembowel a man in one blow or to slice off his head, and we practise doing just that, the bayonets clamped to the barrel of our

muskets. We shred the innards of straw bags as if they are French bellies, striking the bags as if they are French heads, yelling at the tops of our voices emitting the wild cries of madmen, which surely we must all become, which surely we all must be, just to frighten French minds. We thrust, twist and tear at their innards. We beat them, we are triumphant. We are exhausted.

If we are not kicking up the dust in the drill compound we are learning to handle our horses. We must be good horsemen.

“Hold the reins firmly, sense your horse’s mouth, backs straight not stiff, eyes ahead, line up, boot to boot, ready for the charge. Ready. Reeceady! Charge!” yells the cavalry drill sergeant. Move together in line, as one. Trot at the order, canter, fast at the gallop, pull up wheel and turn.

The bugle sounds and we move as one down the parade ground, riding side by side, knee to knee, bucket boot to bucket boot. So close we can hear each other breathing, sweating, grunting. Swords at the ready, rider in charge of the horse, controlled in the midst of exploding cannon, the continual racket of musketry. Bodies flinch, horses eyes roll white, some move back out of line but they are brought up, held, in acrid smoke, flame grenades exploding. First at the trot, then faster and faster, until the ground thunders with the galloping fury of hundreds of charging horses; kill the straw, every imaginary Frenchman dead, killed by our swiping swords. Or so we hope.

We are now immune to the thought of killing and look forward to the day. Kill or be killed in that order. Control is uppermost. Rider in control of his mind, in control of his body, in control of his horse. Horses tremble, heads rear as they shy in fright until steadied by the hand on the worsted reins, the firm pressure of calf muscles on the girth that conveys

the control of speed and command of the rider. There must be trust between animal and man. We ride the horses over and around obstacles amidst the hub-bub and confusion, the disorientation of smoke and noise of men's cries. Deafened from morning till dusk, our ears buzz in protest until we become used to it and no longer flinch at the report that shakes our innards.

My legs buckle with exhaustion as I dismount and I stumble to regain my balance. I try not to let the others see, but they also act like drunk men. Part of the training it seems. The horses are taken by our grooms as I walk slowly back to my tent wondering if I will live to see another day.

Blake, my manservant, stands over me and pours water from a jug which is warm at first then quickly cools. He scrubs me down with fatted soap on a rough cloth and washes the dust and sweat from my skin. The water runs down my body over my back and buttocks and into the large wooden tub I stand in. I enjoy the freshness, the sensation of being cleansed. The friction on my back is not unpleasant as I am washed and scrubbed, and the touch of the other man is gentle and almost tender while the play of the cloth relaxes me.

"Leave me," I say to Blake, without turning to him as he offers me a cloth to dry myself. He has done enough. I take the cloth and wrap it around me until he has gone.

"Prime your pan. Charge your piece. Ram your powder. Guard your pan. Give fire!"

The drill is ingrained in my brain. Hounded into us. With me every moment of the day. When I am not physically going through it, at night I dream about it. The pain and full

impact is felt as I try to sleep in my small camp bed, barely large enough to support my frame. Every muscle I own aches and the whole of me seems to throb with a ferocity that wakes me from my sleep if I move, so I lie awake and listen to the snores from thousands of men around me, enough to wake the dead of a hundred years. Blake joins in with his equally noisy contribution from his camp bed not far from mine.

He will be up before me ready to prepare me for the battle we have been waiting for. My world is constantly bombarded by assaults I have never encountered before. But I am ready for whatever it throws at me. Blake's world is different, he is my manservant, and his training is basic. He can fire a musket, wield a sword, ride a horse and save himself if necessary, but his first duty is to me, knowing how to look after a fledgling officer of the Queen while the fledgling officer is desperately trying to look after himself.

To his amazement and mine, Blake has learnt the art of sewing and my clothes are held together by large sloping stitches which demonstrates he is well on the way to becoming a tailor of note. Through the ongoing necessity of letting out seams and re-sewing, he has learnt to mend and darn, continually replace missing buttons and laces as coats seams have split, and shirts, stockings and breeches have become too small. His bent head and flying fingers remind me of you Mary, sewing for Mother and the family. He has also learnt the art of polishing everything that needs to shine, buttons, gorget that denotes my rank and sits about my neck, shoes, and sword. He has become familiar with the mystery of my uniform dressing me for my performance in the drill yard, from the intricacy of buttoning the gaiters that cover my legs, to the physical challenge of helping me cram my legs into stiff unyielding spurred bucket boots ready for horse drill.

The routine and discipline absorbs me as I become one with this killing machine that is beginning to emerge as Marlborough's army. Swallowed up on a marshy plain in

this flat land of Holland, buried in one of thousands of tents, I fight homesickness and misery, while the damp rises from the ground beneath us and forms ice-cold puddles within the tent as fingers of mist swirl around the tents daring to creep in through the opening unless we fasten it securely. At night when I am pulled out of a dead-to-the-world sleep by my full bladder, my misery surfaces in my mind and attacks me viciously as I lie there, loathe to move, unwilling to stir from the warmth, yet hating the melancholy that sits upon my chest staring at me with its demon eye. It is caused, I know, by the lack of word from my father. No word from Father, or Mother, no word from John only a letter from you my dear sister, Mary, concerned about my state and the fact I am committing my life to war. You paint a vivid picture of life at home in Brackenstown, outside Dublin, and I am almost prostrate with home-sickness wanting to be there, to see every one of my noisy, troublesome brothers and sisters whom I usually try avidly to avoid.

In an attempt to banish them from my thoughts I close my eyes and am immediately confronted by the vision of my brother standing over me as I pack my valise in our chambers in Middle Temple in London.

“You realise he will disinherit you for disobeying him,” John said. We stood opposite one another in the close confines of our chambers staring each other down. He opened his mouth to continue but I found my tongue sooner than he could, which was unusual for me.

“I cannot let that affect me. I must do this for my own sake. You have no right to try and stop me. You know yourself, John, that I’m no lawyer or diplomat,” I answered. “I have no talent for diplomacy.”

We had been transported down river from Westminster to Temple Stairs arguing all the way through the journey, ready to dump each other overboard if necessary. The watermen, glad to be rid of us, called us to be quiet and mind our manners, as if *they* have any idea what manners are as they fight, jostle and swear at each other, vying for trade on the river. At the shout of ‘Oars!’ we waited until the boat bumped against the steps then seized our chance to leap up the stairs. The watermen, impatient to be moving, edged their craft back into the tidal run of the river, their bantering cries mingling with the shouts of encroaching lightermen in their cargo boats. Pushed by the wind, the tan sails bulging, they competed for space and speed with the wherries, as they rowed against the current of the river.

The sounds echoed loudly over the riverbank ringing in our ears but slowly diminished as we ran down the flagged pathways between clipped gardens and hedges, further into courtyards and through narrow alleys between the buildings of the Inns of Court. Rain pelted us as we splashed through puddles, past the pissing fountain adding to the wet misery, over flagstone paths shiny with water. We shouted at each other as we ran, hearing the slide of windows opening roughly above our heads, voices telling us to shut up, the whoosh of the sash and the crack as the windows closed. John was, as usual, ahead, of me. I kept an eye on his flying feet, cloak streaming, clutching my hat to my head, running hard to keep up.

“He will never accept it,” John shouted over his shoulder. “Don’t be foolish.”

“It’s my life, I will do as I want,” I shouted back as we met at the doorway to our chambers. We stopped briefly, faced each other and as usual, I stepped back. He opened the door with a bang, ran ahead of me into the dark timbered hallway, up the stairs and through the partially open door to our chambers with a rush, nearly falling over Blake, my

manservant and his, Nash, who were both kneeling on the floor packing my belongings. Blake and Nash, looked up, startled at our sudden, noisy sodden appearance and stopped what they were doing.

He stripped off his wet cloak and hat and flung them on a chair.

“Blake, Nash, stop packing Richard’s belongings. He isn’t going anywhere .”

I stood panting, dripping, speechless with fury. John was always ready for words, his mind half way ahead of his tongue, sorting, sifting, weighing, digesting what he was about to say to create the best effect.

“Don’t stop. Keep packing,” I interjected, incensed, finding my voice.

Confused, they looked at us then at each other.

My chest of drawers was open and I quickly scrabbled amongst the clothes, grabbing a bundle of shirts, breeches, stockings, I handed them to Blake. My unpacked cases, scattered boots and shoes, stirrups, greatcoat, hats and cloak littered the floor. Blake, on his knees, tried to pack between us and around us, whilst John and I faced each other, neither of us willing to give way. Blake and Nash’s furtive movements around our arguing figures annoyed me.

“Go!” I yelled at them.

They fled, unwilling to witness our row any more, fearing fisticuffs which they knew we were apt to indulge in when things became too heated. At previous times they had put themselves between us to separate us, though of late that happening had become more infrequent. However, we appeared about to revert to our former selves and they were not willing to bear witness.

How dare John tell me I could not follow my dream when all he did was make it his purpose in life to follow his, despite everyone and everything else. At this moment, to the best of my ability, I was out to beat him in his opinion.

“I have difficulty keeping my mouth shut when I should hold my tongue,” I ran on, trying to make him see reason. “And it gallops away with my thoughts before I can think.” I banged my head with the open palm of my hand as if to knock sense into it. “Some lawyer or diplomat I will be. I don’t possess your eloquence or quickness of mind. Words get tangled on my tongue and in my brain before I can spit them out, especially if I’m angry, and anger seems never far away. I don’t have the patience to stop and sort words out before I speak, as you do. What’s in my head is said.” He opened his mouth to say something, but I butted in. “I have only stayed here because you are here, and because Father wants me to do as you do. He rules us like the Generals rule the army, that is why I have nick-named him ‘the General.’ You know our tutors despair of me, and have already written several hundred sorrowful letters to Father about my performance. I have no patience for long-winded discussions on dry subjects that are of little interest. I find the business of politics hypocritical and devious. If I don’t leave this place, I’ll go mad. You may as well lock me in Bedlam. You’ve no right to stop me going.”

This long winded diatribe was enough to silence him for a moment. Perhaps the desperation I managed to put into my voice also helped, but I knew that my quickness to speak with logic and clarity for once had surprised him and he was taken aback. I had contradicted myself, of course, by being eloquent, but the stunned look on his face was my reward. However, as usual, he did not take long to recover.

“You know that this education is not only for knowledge but it is preparation for life at court. You know that Father views our education seriously. He wants us to be of useful

service to England. That's why you're here. It's my right, as eldest son of the family, to tell you that I think your scheme is madness," John fumed, his face red, puffing himself up.

"In the army I will be of useful service," I retorted.

The knotted vein in his smooth forehead rose and pulsed, a familiar signal that he was trying to control himself. Being the eldest son meant a lot to him and he laid upon himself a large amount of responsibility because of it. Father had drummed that into him over the years, but the thought of his inborn rights was also a source of pride that often enlarged his head. I was angry enough and such a sight only increased my anger, so I turned away from his rabid face with its pulsing vein.

The room small and crowded with our belongings and furniture, was the epitome of the boring exercise of learning, cluttered with papers, books, ink bottles and quills scattered over desks and chairs. The light from the candles competed with the smoking fire that leapt in the small grate. I would not miss these dull rooms with the smoke-stained linen fold Tudor panelling, grubby with imprints of hundreds of students over the centuries. The oak floor was covered in rushes which did nothing to hide the heavy smell of tallow candles, coal-dust and sweat-stained bodies and clothes. The claustrophobic effect of the room was further increased by the low carved plaster ceiling which hovered above us making me feel, with my unusual height, that I had to constantly bend to avoid collision with the profusion of hanging plaster fruit and flowers, and other such ephemera pressing down upon me.

Laughter from the alehouse over the road from our quarters forced its way into our chamber and mixed with the rat-a-tat of rain on the mullioned windows and slate roof above our heads. The sound of laughter irritated me. Some people were enjoying life in the alehouse, most probably with my favourite wench, Betty, who worked there and who

usually gave her favours willingly to me when I wanted them. Instead, I was here, in this old room arguing with my obstinate brother who thought he could dictate my life because he was one year older than me. I would be relieved to leave these cramped quarters where John and I shared a bed as we had done as boys at home in Ireland.

“I have every right as your older brother to stop you committing such an act of madness,” John continued, his voice now quiet, studied and deliberately even. His lawyer voice. “You know how Father feels about war with anyone. He will never forgive you. Think what Mother must be going through. She will be overwhelmed with worry and trying to placate an irate husband as well. Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“If you wish,” I answered.

John, up to his old tricks again, brings up the thought of Mother. Manipulation through sentiment. Mother’s reaction had stepped through my mind but only in the hope that she might be able to persuade Father to see my point of view. As to her being upset about it, of course she would be, but I was not going to let sentiment stand in my way. She had relinquished care of us years ago to Father, as was the custom, and from then on we had not needed her approval for anything. It was Father who mattered. John and I had been uprooted by Father’s ambition and sent to London to be taught privately by several tutors. We came home to Brackenstown often then, but after we went to The Middle Temple in the Inns of Court in London, we had returned only occasionally to Ireland usually on Mother’s insistence.

Father made sure our education was well- rounded. Not only was I well versed in Latin, Greek and Literature, but before long I was able to kill a man in a duel, a privilege I have not yet succumbed to. I could also point my toe, bow and twirl in the dance. Such

skills were necessary for a family of our station and if we were to advance in the world, John and I were told, as we grumbled about it. If my father had his way I was to be a smartly dressed lawyer with an able wit, ready to hold my own in the upper echelons of society, willing to be of use to England, able to defend myself and others with words if necessary, and definitely with the sword, and I would also be able to dance divinely. But, I was not going to be a professional slayer of men, if Father had anything to do with it.

“The rank and file are made up of scum; hardened criminals, Irish, wild Scots,” John continued, his anger getting the better of him.

“We are Irish.”

“You know what I mean. The poor Irish. Escaping conditions at home. They would kill you first before the enemy. You cannot serve with criminals and the like. What would Mother think?”

“Mother would want me to have a commission, so I do not join the ranks. Lord Orkney will see to it and persuade Father, I’m sure of it,” I answered, not sure of anything.

Our family in Ireland had increased over the years as child after child was born and we would return to find we had yet another brother or sister, or find one had subsequently been born and buried. Our mother, Letitia, seemed to continually bulge with child which was surprising, considering our parents’ sporadic relationship governed by the tidal vagrancies of the Irish Sea. Mother’s appearances along with our siblings, in London, or Edlington our seat in Yorkshire, were only occasional. They were usually organised during Father’s free time between Parliamentary sittings and Privy Council meetings. The latest arrival of the family was Byssie, called after Chancellor Byssie, father’s grandfather. We wondered if there would be anymore.

The difference between John and I was that John's will was Father's will, whereas my will was my own, but I dared not tell him that. His pride would challenge me to a duel and knowing his swordsmanship was superb, I wanted to arrive in Holland in one piece. Instead, I threw some clothing at him and he threw it back, next I threw a book and that came back just as fast. I swung at him wildly clipping the side of his face with my open hand and he swung back in return catching me on my ear. And on it went until we grappled with each other on the clothes strewn floor, rolling around in the rushes, pushing, shoving, pummelling, locked together in frustration. Back to boyhood where Father, attracted by the grunts, groans and yells would come and tear us apart, a birch stick in his hands.

"You are not behaving like gentlemen. So much for breeding and education." He bellowed. Father was not here, except in spirit. Exhausted, we scrambled apart, scratched and bruised, but otherwise unhurt, and sat near each other panting hard trying to catch our breath, nothing accomplished except the release of angry feelings.

"I suppose it's my duty to tell Father you have run away on a fool's errand, tilting at windmills," he grimaced, annoyed at my intractable determination.

The reference to the madness of Don Quixote did not go unnoticed. John thought, like Cervantes errant knight, that I was deluded. Was I really that crazy to follow a dream?

"I had hoped you would have been on my side, stated my case and supported me," I answered. Even I was beginning to sound like a lawyer, heaven forbid. "My head is not for books. It's for action, for the fight," I placated him, my voice low, sincere, with just a hint of tremor. I even managed a decent size sniff.

Unmoved John glowered at me under the straight line of his brown eyebrows, a spot of angry colour in each cheek above the short bristles of his beard. "I refuse to tell Father," he said. "You can do that, it's your decision."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I might have known I would not get your support," I retorted. "I have already written to him asking for his approval and hopefully for money for a commission."

"But he had already said no to you on that," John said, astounded.

"He will change his mind when he realises I'm serious and already in the army, which I will be, by the time he gets my letter," I answered, pulling myself to my feet, gathering my clothes once more.

"Think of the money he has spent on your education up until now," John persisted, looking up at me. "It's the last thing he wants for you. He is against war of any sort, let alone a son in the army run by Marlborough. He does not care for the man, does not like the way he changes his allegiance to suit the political climate. What he does is almost treasonous. The Earl with his newly raised army is thinking of his own glory. He's a Tory and an opportunist, not a Whig. King William did not trust him and put him in the Tower when he found out he was secretly writing to King James in France when he had already previously betrayed James by supporting William's claim to the throne. How do you explain that? Father does not want you in this infernal machine under such a man, mixing with the rabble."

"As a commissioned officer I will not be mixing with the rabble, I will be leading them," I reasoned. "Anyway, Marlborough is not the only man in this country who has rejected one leader for another to protect his own interests. The country seems to be run

like that. All politicians are capable of changing their allegiance depending on the cause, even Father.”

John raised his eyebrows at me. “Don’t let Father hear you say that. He would not like it. What if he refuses to buy you a commission?”

“Well, I shall work my way up in the ranks. I will not run back here to be your assistant, because, that’s what’s expected of me, and that’s all I will be if I stay.”

John was silent, so I took the chance and continued. “I refuse to follow you around the Continent while you pursue your dream of being a career diplomat. I would be your servant, on the sideline, in the background while you had your career as Father wished. That’s not for me.” My voice was firm, my words harsh but true all the same.

“That really is the problem, isn’t it?” The vein jumped again in his forehead. My words had opened up a wound between us. “You never have been content at being the second son and this is your way of proving yourself. I’m not stupid and neither is Father. We can both see what you’re doing.” The pettiness of my unrest shamed me, silenced my tongue and flooded my face with yet more warmth. “You’re hot-headed and impulsive. Father uses reasoning to reach a decision while you’re only good at reaching for the sword. You’ll be dead within a week. Once a sword is in your hand it controls you. You want to be a hero for a lost cause, when heroism is unnecessary.”

“Rather I die, like that, doing something I want to do, than rot here in chambers letting my spirit die,” I answered incensed by his attitude, but my curiosity was aroused. “Who says it’s a lost cause?”

“Father does, for one, and others agree with him. Anyway, if England does go to war with France, Father for all his protesting will be supportive.”

“Nonsense,” said John. “The French outnumber us by millions. Their army is huge. If war comes we will be overrun. Marlborough’s army hasn’t a hope of beating them.”

“At least we’ll be fighting. We can’t let France bully England into submission, they have to be stopped for the sake of Protestantism and the economy of the country.”

John guffawed but his mood had not changed. He was still irate. “Since when have you been worried about religion?” he asked. “And what do you know and care about the economy of England? As long as Father gives you money in your pocket you spend it.”

Smarting, I lashed out. “And you don’t?”

But he was right. I had never been one for saving money, or going to church, for that matter. It was a mystery to me why so many people were possessed by the hocus-pocus and superstition of religion. The country, however, seemed to be run along religious lines, except, I thought, when it came to politics and diplomacy, when on the surface it was Christian, but as people undermined and destroyed each other, Satan, obviously lurked not far below the posturing and tactics employed. It was almost as if politics and diplomacy was the devil’s masquerade. I could see that, why couldn’t others see the same? As for the economy, I understood little about that, but I did know that the French were a threat to England’s safe passage to the Indies and trade and all the wealth that lay in that area, and it was something England was beginning to depend upon. We had a vested interest and it was our duty to protect our heritage.

I indulged in an angry silence.

Being the true son of Father, John was practising his political and diplomatic posturing. He would not be able to go back to him without saying he had not let me go without a fight.

How could I forgo my dream? From the moment I had been woken by the tolling of church bells which heralded the death of King William and heard the black-capped heralds walking the narrow streets of the city braying “The King is dead! Long live the Queen!” excitement had strengthened my bones.

The Earl Marlborough and his wife, the beautiful Countess, were Queen Anne’s favourites. The Queen was wholly English, her Protestantism was deep enough to push her father James off the throne and claim it for herself and she despised the French and their Catholicism which we all considered a real threat. Not only was France powerful, it was a rich nation that monopolised Spain and its territories, while its ports were now closed to the English and Dutch which curtailed lucrative trading with the West Indies across the Atlantic. We had to join our Allies, the Dutch and Austrians, and fight until France recognised the Protestant succession of Anne and no longer supported James II’s son, protected in France, as King James III of England. It was enough to make any man want to go and fight. Anything for the new Queen.

Standing on the edge of the shouting crowd that watched the Queen ride by to Parliament, I marvelled at the troops accompanying her, marching before and after her coach, bearing pikes and muskets, red-coated, tall mitred hats, officers on horseback riding before and behind, the high fluted sound of the hautbois, the cry of trumpets and the steady beat of the drummers with their painted drums, accompanied by the deep-throated beat of the kettle-drums. I wanted to be amongst them, parading in glory with them. And there in the procession, riding with the Queen and Prince George, in an ornate and stately coach was Marlborough and his wife. The sight was enough to make any man run away to Holland.

Exasperated, John went and left me to my packing. He did not come back that night and I slept on my side of the empty bed. I knew he was with one of his mistresses. Drowning himself in her so as not to think of my strength of will which had dared to challenge his. I listened for his step on the stair but none came and I eventually slept, intermittently woken by the cry of the night-watchman on the hour and the clatter of the nightsoilman's cart as it collected its noisome load from the privies within the Inns.

Before the colourless dawn crept through the window I was up and dressed and sent Blake down to the local stables for our horses. John, had still not returned when Blake reappeared with our mounts. For all our fighting I loved my brother and wanted to give him a proper good-bye. The thought that I may not see him again made me anxious, but each time the fear rose to the surface of my mind I squashed it beneath the layers of anticipation that fed my future role. After waiting as long as possible, and annoyed that John, unlike him, appeared to be bearing a grudge, I mounted my horse as Blake did his.

A cry on the air made me turn quickly in the saddle to see him running towards us over the wet cobbles, crowing my name like a cock to the grey sky. I dismounted and ran to him and felt the warmth of his arms around me and the strong hug of his body. He was not his neat, scholarly self this morning, his hair was matted and hanging around his shoulders and he smelt of love-making and sweat, his nose red and eyes watering with cold or farewell, I could not tell which. "Just come back," he said. "Because if you do not, Father will kill me."

Father's eldest sons diminished by two. I doubted that very much. Father, no matter how angry, would never go to such lengths and John had demanded a promise of me which I could not keep so I did not reply. I had no guarantee that I would return and see him again and well he knew it. So, without a word, I left him standing on the shining road and

when I turned and doffed my hat he was still standing there watching me, his hand raised in farewell. I realised, hurt making itself known in my chest, that it was the first time in twenty-two years that John and I had parted company. Not daring to think too deeply upon that, I turned towards the pool of London lying before us, tall masts of moored ships visible beyond the storied houses on London Bridge. I chose not look back again.

CHAPTER TWO

Holland

Spring-Summer : 1702

Fledgling

So much for brave words. The sea had never been my friend and it certainly proved that it was still my enemy. It flattened me fast to the wooden deck of the bucketing packet that plied the English Channel. Once again I had to lean over the side and study the churn and froth of the sea below me. The ship listed, rose up, pitched and plunged back into the spray before the long accompanying roll overcame me and I generously fed the fish. Twice we were close to the flat shore of the Low Countries only to be caught by a vagrant wind and tossed back towards England again. Death's scythe hovered over me. Fate was reluctant to release me to my future.

Black-backed gulls dived with monotonous regularity towards the sea no doubt attracted by my contribution to the briny, as they had followed the ship nearly the whole way. We had already been one day at sea and had been blown about by a foul wind, but the Captain of the erstwhile bucking vessel, knowing no other will but his own, took control once again as he read the change in the wind. Once more he turned the ship towards

Holland. We therefore had to endure three journeys instead of one and one is always bad enough. I thought I might die if we had to repeat the process yet again. I did not know my stomach could hold so much.

Blake was also suffering, prostrate with seasickness, lying on the deck beside me. The sailors had tied a length of rope around his waist and joined it to the ratlines, so that if he was tempted to jump overboard to escape his misery, as he had already tried to do in the vigour of spewing, he could be pulled in again. At the moment he was sprawled at my feet groaning, burying his head in a wooden pail provided for his use. I was not willing to lower my dignity to that level, instead, at decent intervals, when the deck came up to meet me once too often, with as much dignity as I could muster, I stumbled to my feet and made for the railings. At least they had not tied me to the ship, instead they had dispatched one of the sailor's to look after me, his main duty was to clutch me in a most undignified manner by the full seat of my breeches in case I threw myself into the sea along with the my deposits. It nearly had all of me as it was. Why not? I moaned, my face drenched yet again in sea spray. Such humiliation, the great soldier buried at sea.

All I longed to do was to lie on the cool grass of a flat still English field, beneath a blue sky full of gentle clouds, rather than here, beneath a sky full of billowing, roaring sails that spun, dipped and tipped above me. I found my senses completely taken up with surviving the moment and only that was important, not the future. All I could think of was rock-solid England and strong, sensible, obedient John. At that moment I could have turned and sailed right back to him. This crazy tipsy world was lasting forever.

"I hope ye'll be a better soldier that ye are a sailor, young shaver," said the owner of the hand that claimed possession of my breeches yet again for what seemed the hundredth

time. His accent was a Somerset burr, and he was as grizzled as his clutch was strong.

“There be the coast of Holland. We’ll make it this time. Ye’ll soon be on dry land.”

Saved. I rallied enough to follow the direction of his pointing finger. At first all I could see was mist and sea so I screwed up my eyes against the flying spray and made out a smudge which was the low-slung flat coast of Holland. The land still seemed miles away, but at least it gave me hope as we did appear to be pulling closer. I nudged Blake with my foot and received a moan in return. “Land” I hissed at him with as much strength as I could muster. “Land” I hissed again as I slid down and sat beside him on the sloping deck. The saviour at my rear, taking his burnished face and strong hand, had gone. He was joining his ship mates to bring the vessel safely into the shallows of the harbour, and they ran over the deck and scrambled up the shrouds to release yet more tan coloured sails from the yards to push the vessel through the swell.

The ship caught the calm of shallow sea almost with a sigh of relief and it rolled gently instead of bucking. It had almost broken my will and was now satisfied.

Tilting at windmills, John had said. A long line of thatched-roofed windmills, marched before me, evenly spaced like soldiers on parade along the reed-rimmed canal, their sails turning slowly in the wind, as they drained water from the land. They were numerous, visible in the distance across the flat fields, large cumbersome beasts, monsters in their strangeness, unlike the friendly stocky windmills, I was used to, scattered across the English countryside. In this flat place they were in every field, turning steadily.

Since hitting solid ground and mounting my horse, that had travelled better than I, my stomach had behaved itself, except to growl in protest at its empty state. The clean air

of Holland helped clear my mind and my person. Blake, green with residual seasickness, still suffered as he rode beside me. Now and then he dismounted to stagger into the reeds and sedge to spew yet again.

I sat and waited for him, my eyes on the thin layer of smoke haze from fires and breadmaking ovens spreading over the flat horizon above the marshes where the distant tent city of the army camp was visible. Blake remounted his horse yet again and we fell into line with other dusty men going our way while the sails of the windmills turned with a regular creak and whip-whap sound in our ears. My heart began to do somersaults with excitement and anticipation as the city increased in size the closer we came.

Awe-struck I stared with trepidation at the large compound full of thousands of tents which housed thousands of men. Dug in, well encamped, laid out with precision, tents set out row upon row to reproduce the lines of battle. Artillery and munition wagons were surrounded by guards in a separate camp, infantry in the centre, the colours or standards displayed at the head of each encampment. Horse lines and stables were on the flanks, interspersed with parade grounds and drill yards and the wagons of sutlers outside the main encampment, the baggage train was further removed from the main camp. The whole area was surrounded by guards in sentry posts, and guards under arms patrolled throughout the camp itself. The organisation was overwhelming. Any doubts disappeared from my mind. Was this really tilting at windmills? I felt not and spurred my horse on.

“Your appearance here, young Molesworth, is of profound disturbance to me,” said George Hamilton, 1st Lord of Orkney, a frown distorting his thick black eyebrows. He was

not exactly overwhelmed with joy at seeing me. “I know how your father disapproves of the idea of war, or the idea of an organised standing army. He has made his thoughts clear enough to me and in the Irish Parliament.”

I stood before Orkney clutching my hat in my hand. His tent was bursting with military clutter. This was his world, a mobile one which he carried around with him. There was a large table covered in maps and papers, pencils, quills. Chairs, stood nearby as well as small tables, books, silver plate, candle-sticks, a camp bed, close-stool, and a half-eaten apple. My stomach growled at the sight of the exposed core. It was loud enough for him to hear.

“I take it your father does not know that you’re here. I could send you straight back to him,” he continued, staring at me.

Inwardly I quaked. That was the last thing I wanted. “He would know by now, my lord,” I answered quickly. “My brother John was to go to Ireland to tell him, and I have written.”

That was what I was hoping, whether John had actually decided to go home to Brackenstown I did not know. To get on that unstable packet back to England again was the last thing I wanted and by the sound of it Blake also was not keen. He had taken one look at Orkney’s Aide resplendent in his red and gold uniform, the brim of his three-cornered hat edged in gold lace and a magnificent sword hanging at his side and turned a further shade of green. Used to such ways of the world, the Aide had taken one look at him and shoved him outside the tent where he entertained us loudly. If Orkney heard the barnyard noise it did not shake him.

“You realise that your presence here threatens my long friendship with your father?” Orkney continued as if nothing was happening outside. “If you were killed or injured it would be upon my head. He would never forgive me for allowing you to stay.”

“My father is not an unreasonable man, my lord. I am sure as soon as he realises that my heart is set on it and I am good at what I do, he’ll agree.”

“Not unreasonable!” Orkney snorted. “Everyone knows your father’s tongue is as quick as his mind. He’s incisive and terse, a passionate man. He lets his wishes be known in no uncertain terms. He fled his posting in Denmark because he opened his mouth too much at the wrong time. When he knows you can stand all that the army can throw at you, only then will he be agreeable. What?” answered Orkney acidly.

“Yes, my lord,” I answered with a slight bow and a sweep of my sea-stained hat. It seemed Orkney knew my father better than I thought. His ambassadorial posting in Denmark had indeed come to an abrupt end when he angered the King by riding through his land, but that was years ago. Then Father had made matters worse by writing an account of Denmark which angered the Danes further. But still, I was in no position to argue, and we were a long way from Denmark here.

“Pretty manners, Molesworth. Your father’s son, no doubt, for when he is reasonable, he’s the most tolerable, tolerant and well-mannered of men. However, it takes more than pretty manners to survive in the army, and your father is against soldiering for any of his sons.”

“Only because he was sickened by the affect the Civil War had on his father. He died before my father was born. He never knew him.”

“Your grandfather also provided the Parliamentary Government with supplies.”

“After the death of the King, my lord. He was a Royalist during the Civil War, from a Royalist family.” I added, in case he did not know. “He fought under his brother Guy in the Irish army of the Marquess of Ormond until the end of the Civil War. He bought adventurer’s land but he was not an adventurer. And he was not a traitor, he became a merchant.”

“Diplomatically put. Again, you are your father’s son,” Orkney replied, narrowing his eyes at me. “There was a rumour that he switched allegiance to save his land.”

“Never, my Lord,” I replied. “That’s nothing more than a rumour.”

Is this man truly my father’s friend? He is testing me. He stared at me, his expression stern beneath his raised heavy brows which threatened to become entangled with his campaign wig. The temptation to laugh was upon me but I kept my face straight, his belligerence did not shake me. Even my august Lord Orkney, I suspected, would not be unwilling to save his head if necessary. Earl Marlborough also, if my father’s accounts of him were true. I know Marlborough is reputedly a Whig, his wife, the Duchess, firmly so, but once the Earl had been a Tory and perhaps was still secretly a Tory. My training in law told me that Orkney did not have an argument, but such thoughts remained locked within my head. “Are you likely to switch allegiance so easily for the sake of power?” Orkney asked, still pursuing the subject.

“No, my lord. I assure you my allegiance to the Queen and England is solid. Nothing will shake me from that,” I answered with confidence, but insulted all the same.

“Well said. Cocky, confident, and ambitious. A powerful combination.” Orkney reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and drew out a gold enamelled snuff-box emblazoned with his coat of arms. He placed a practiced amount of the stuff on the back of

his hand and took a resounding sniff up each large nostril. No doubt he was trying to rid his nostrils of the smell of sea and being unwashed which I generously exuded. I did not blink but stared straight ahead as he fished in the depths of his coat pocket and brought out a fine linen handkerchief edged with lace and embroidered with his arms and held it to his nose as his sneeze shook the tent.

“However, you are going to have to prove yourself without favours,” he said, stuffing the handkerchief back into his pocket after a large honk and vigorous wiping. “I will not provide your colours for nothing. You have to earn them.”

My heart raced with joy. He was going to provide my colours. I bit my lip in case I grinned my satisfaction at him.

“Show me your courage, train with the other officers. Prove that you can handle a sword, a pike, a musket, a pistol. Prove you can ride, take orders without question, stay cool under fire. Kill. If you are as good, if not better than they, you may stay. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Then show me, Molesworth.”

I bowed low to him and vowed to myself I would be the best.

He dismissed me and ordered his Aide called Abercrombie to show me where to eat. Blake was nowhere to be seen when we emerged from the tent but the Aide told me he had been carted off to the field hospital to recover. I followed the arrogant straight back of the man as he walked ahead of me. I was utterly delighted with myself.

“Sit”, said Abercrombie, waving with one hand towards the direction of a wooden stool and trestle table under canvas. I sat obediently and was duly presented with the first full meal I had seen in over a week. At least my stomach would be satisfied.

CHAPTER THREE.

Holland.

Summer: 1702

Training.

Clouds of dust rise in the compound kicked up by dozens of feet. The sun is high and hot on our heads and our sweat runs in torrents. Coats discarded we fight in waistcoat, breeches and shirts, our shoes and gaiters covered in dust. Eyes, red and irritated by dust and effort, narrowed in concentration, we execute a spirited jig around the drill field accompanied by the strident clang of swords and the shouts of participants and onlookers. We are all good swordsmen and improving all the time. For some, duelling with the sword has been a regular pastime, for others, just a known necessity, but duelling in the army is not allowed so our frustrations are given free rein as we chase each other around the field. Here we fight with the broadswords that cavalry carry into battle. The swords are heavy and strength of arm and shoulders has to be developed to be able to handle them.

The advantage is mine at the moment, but I will not take my eyes off my attacker for one instant. He is fast and agile on his feet and flies around me like a dancer. He flings

his sword and slices the air with deceptive abandonment yet precision, movement laced with such cunning, premeditation and control that I dare not lose my concentration for one second of time in case he slices me. My opponent is Ensign Thomas Ashe, from Yorkshire, heir to a Baronetcy. He has a large head, a square face and a high beak of a nose. He is taller than me by a few inches, and longer of leg but without my strength of bulk and muscle. He fights like a man demented as if he has been paid to beat me, winning uppermost in his mind, I realise that Abercrombie has put him up to this, deliberately pairing us, knowing we are two of a kind. My eyes are fast upon him as he lunges and parries. The air around my head sings with each swipe of the blade as I dodge and dart, meeting blow for blow in answer. I have met my match.

I am not about to give up.

Our dance in the dust is observed and noted, as everything is, by Orkney's Aides and the ever-present Abercrombie, his spy. Orkney himself stands a little way off and watches the sword-fight. I am conscious of being examined. I have to perform well so my progress can be reported to my father. For, even though Father does not write to me, I know he must write to Orkney as Orkney, no doubt, has written to him, letting him know his dare-devil son has run away to join Marlborough's army. I must not lose this duel.

"I will cut your head off, Ashe!" I yell at long-legs, as he executes his devilish dance around me.

"Fool! Save your breath!" he spits back at me coolly.

He is ready to strike, damn him. He watches and anticipates every move I make. My wig flies off and is trampled underfoot. My shorn head is bared to all, but at least I am spared the indignity of my wig falling into my eyes and blinding me at the wrong moment.

Now, if I can cause that to happen to Ashe I will have a good chance of winning. Ashe dodges my swiping sword and his eyes never leave mine as he parries each blow I thrust at him. However, I am not one to give up easily.

“I’ll beat you, Molesworth!” cries Ashe.

“Shut up and concentrate!” shouts the drill sergeant, edging around us.

Sweat runs down Ashe's face and I sense he is about to break. He is tiring and grunts with each blow of his sword, but he still pushes me back, unwilling to give in, blow for blow, between the other players in the compound. My eyes never leave his face or his fighting sword and we are immediately given room to move and the others disappear from around us as the fight increases in intensity. Apart from the clang of our swords and our blows we fight on in silence. I do not take my gaze off him, to do so would be to lose. I have never fought this hard before. For all my skill I have not scored a point. My arms hurt, my legs hurt, my head hurts, my chest hurts; I cannot breathe. I cannot lose. I must not lose. Yet, I am losing. This madman with his wig flying, but still firmly attached to his head, continues to come at me. I am angry enough to kill him but controlled enough not to. This fight is not to the death. I know if the time was right I could kill him, but for now I remain detached and calm enough as I watch and anticipate his every move. I am standing outside myself watching me do a terrible dance in the dust. But I am not dead yet either. I still have energy.

The onlookers erupt in cries of encouragement, first for Ashe, then for me. He is everywhere I wish to go. I feel the full power of his body behind each blow as he matches me stroke for stroke. We dodge and dart. I am heavier on my feet and air escapes from my

lungs in uncontrollable grunts. He increases his pace but at last I am close enough to swipe off his wig. Shocked by the exposure he stumbles.

If I was not so busy I would laugh out loud at his shaven head. His appearance now somehow renders him insignificant. His wig trampled beneath our feet and my sword raised in defence, I meet his ever-coming blows, unwilling, unable to give in, and my chest heaves for air. My foot slides on his half-buried wig and I slip to my knees.

He has beaten me.

Ashe stands over me, triumphant, his sword, still without mercy, flips mine from my hand. I choke and splutter as the dust billows into my mouth and throat. Humiliation and frustration roar through me blinding me at losing such public battle. Ashe glowers and gloats, his sword at my throat. Only then does he take his eyes off me to look at his appreciative audience with a smile and bow, who respond, with shouts and cheers at my expense.

I have not finished yet.

I grab his sword arm and pull him over me and he tumbles to the ground. I leap to my feet, wrestle his sword from him as I grab up my own. Now, I stand over him and hold both swords at his throat. More cheers and yelling erupts around us. He stares at me from flat on his back, while the yard goes mad. The drill-sergeant yells enough. I pull Ashe to his feet and hand him back his sword.

“You are one to be watched, Molesworth. There are not many who can beat me,” Ashe hisses in my ear, as he regains his balance and breath.

“There aren’t many who can beat me either. Give me time Ashe, and I will beat you and the whole damn army put together,” I hiss back at him.

His demeanour changes and he laughs. "Time is something we do not possess. What matters is now. That is the lesson you should have learnt from the fight."

How dare he think that I cannot reason the meaning for our duel. I am in no mood to be placated. "You will never humiliate me again. I will slaughter you first!" I answer seething with anger.

"We shall see. We shall see," he says with a maddening smile somewhere between malice and respect.

It is official. England and the Netherlands are at war with France and have been since May.

The army has marched from Breda and has been entrenched from Kayserworth through to Fort Schenk. At the moment our regiment of Foot, along with the rest of the army, are encamped beneath the high ramparts that enclose the spires, towers, and windmills of the town of Nijmegen that sits above the River Waal. Here we await the arrival of eight thousand German soldiers who have been participating in the successful besiegement of the fortress of Kayserworth and also the arrival of the Earl Marlborough who is rumoured to be with us any day.

Our numbers have increased to sixty thousand men including the Hanoverian forces and the Prussians. Nijmegen is occupied by the Dutch, led by General Athlone who have been pushed into the fortress by the successful advance of the French Marshal *Duc de Boufflers* and his army between the Maas and the Rhine. Athlone and his army were nearly encircled and destroyed by the French advance and had to retreat in a hurry into the walled city. The Dutch guns bristle from the bastions within the towering walls of the star fortress

that hangs over the river. It rises impregnable, dominating the countryside. We are aware of the presence of the Dutch guards, our allies, with their rifles watching the encampment from the bastions, the tenaille or walls and the covered way and traverse that provide visibility over all approaches. They can see for miles over the countryside from their eyrie and the land and our camp are studied regularly, the glint of the spying glass catching the sun and flashing across the countryside.

The fortresses, I have discovered, are fine examples of parallel French warfare designed by the French engineer and architect, *Marquis de Vauban*. They dominate the terrain wherever they sit throughout the French and Dutch border and one has to decide whether the Dutch are trying to keep the French out or the French are trying to keep the Dutch in. It all depends upon who happens to occupy the fortress at the time. The sight of the high walls above us is awe-inspiring and terrifying, the sloping ground of the covering glacis completely open to fire on all sides from the fortress walls and the easiest place for the attacking soldier to be killed in. How Marlborough intends to penetrate and take these fortresses is a mystery to me but nevertheless one which will be made perfectly clear as time goes by.

In the meantime, I feel I am discarded by my family, forgotten in this dreary place and I am annoyed with myself that it worries me. Every day I wait for a letter and none arrives. Every day, as miserable as I feel, I am convinced the army is my life. I am fraught with melancholy and homesickness and irritated that no one at home can envisage what this life is like and how much it means to me. I have no one to confide in but Ashe. Because of that devilish sword hand of his, I have no further desire to chase him around the drill-yard as I feel I am safer having him as a friend than as an enemy. It is better to join him rather than beat him.

“Companionship and comradeship is what you require, my friend,” he says, as he pulls me from my tent, pushes me into my coat, clamps my wig and hat upon my head then propels me alongside him without more ado. He drapes his arm over my shoulder to keep me on track and prevents me from turning back as he strides along, me stretching my step to match his.

Our pact of revenge has been forgotten in our new found friendship, instead respect is evident. He leads me towards our tent where we, as officers, can cavort, drink and generally relax. It is a mess most of the time and today is no exception as an uproar of loud voices and raucous laughter greets our ears and our nostrils are assailed with the smell of hops from the head-wind of ale and the smell of massed half-washed men in heavy sweat-stained uniforms. Our senses, already brutalised, are becoming familiar with these sights and smells. I am hardly aware of the assault as Ashe shoves me to a table and sits me down as he beckons one of the serving wenches to bring us full tankards.

The wenches are from the town and service the camp, in more ways than one. Although Orkney, according to Marlborough’s decree, has them escorted to their encampment each evening to keep them away from the men, somehow, they manage to infiltrate their way back under the cover of darkness when the camp is quiet, seeking out the men who want favours. They would much rather be here with us, they say, than within the fort with the phlegmatic Dutch soldiers. We know that many of them will follow the train of the army wherever it will go, comforting the men, and nursing them as the need arises.

A tankard of ale is in my hand and the warm liquid slips easily down my throat. Ashe slaps me on the back. I choke, cough and splutter into my drink. We find ourselves miming like mute men to each other as we try and make ourselves heard over the din. We

are so close to facing the enemy that frustration and tension are tangible amongst the men within the crowded tent. We are fitter, heavier, older, larger, more powerful from the constant training and discipline and the mundane diet of gruel, bread, fish, beef, vegetables and the steady supply of ale. Most of all, we are ready to fight. With impatience we await the yacht that carries the Earl from The Hague.

“I can hardly wait to run my sword through the soft belly of a Frenchman,” yells Ashe in my ear. He is already a little drunk, something not encouraged amongst the officers. But we are all excited and Ashe is not the only one with bright eyes, a galloping tongue and slurred speech. Our new found skills are rusting through inaction. I for one, long to prove myself once and for all, in the ultimate test, that is, if it ever comes. Only then will Father know of my serious intent.

“We’ll not move from Nijmegen until Marlborough joins us,” I shout back as Ashe tips his head back and drains his tankard.

The noise in the tent quietens then is silent for a few minutes. I become aware of a shadow that hovers nearby. Abercrombie stands before me, a moustache of ale froth drooping over my top lip. His dark eyes narrow upon mine then swivel towards Ashe, who immediately looks away from him.

“Mr. Molesworth, my lord Orkney wishes to see you. Now.”

Ashe, stares moodily into his tankard of ale as I leave my seat and follow the Aide out into the sunlight. Behind me the silenced tent immediately erupts in laughter and talk at our departure. I trace Abercrombie’s steps back to Orkney’s quarters. Hurriedly, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, straighten my coat and find the button loops and connect them with the buttons, then place my silver-laced hat on my head at the correct angle over

my wig. Abercrombie's white gaited legs stride before me and his highly polished shoes collect a light film of dust as he makes his way down the battened path between the tents. He cuts an elegant figure in his red close fitting dress-coat with its full stiffened skirt that hangs almost to his knees, while his gloved left hand rests lightly on the hilt of his sword at his side, the scabbard visible through the side vent of the pleated skirt of his coat. Beneath his gold-laced black hat, his dark brown campaign wig is divided into three tails that rest one on each shoulder and one down his back in the manner of officers. My wig is also long and caught in three ponytails. I detest it. If and when I like, I tie it back with a black riband and bag or rid myself of it completely to bare my shorn head with its shadow and stubble to the world, that is, except when I am in the presence of Lord Orkney and the other Generals, then I am careful to discreetly cover my bald top.

Orkney's quarters are full of activity which I assume is because of the imminent arrival of Earl Marlborough. Aides hurry backwards and forwards, Generals stand together conferring in small groups, servants run hither and thither. The whole quarters has an air of suppressed excitement which is catching.

"My lord," I salute the General and sweep my hat in a bow, hoping my wig stays on my head and does not land at his feet.

"There is someone here to see you, Mr. Molesworth," he says, without the usual cold appraising look. He looks at me like he used to, as my father's friend, which surprises me. I turn, unaware there is a figure standing to the rear of the tent. My eyes take a moment to adjust and it's a few seconds before I can see that I am staring into the dark eyes of my dusty, travel-stained brother, his black hat under his arm, his dark grey suit covered by his travelling cloak.

My mouth opens in amazement at the sight of such a warm and familiar figure and John smiles at me while Abercrombie smothers a smirk of amusement at my shock. All the memories I have been busily suppressing over the past weeks rise up, confront me, catch me in the throat and silence my cry of joy at seeing my brother. I am relieved when Orkney dismisses us and I can drag John out of the tent and throw my arms around him as if he has come to save me, as no doubt, he thinks he has. Out of the corner of my eye I am aware of Abercrombie, the spy, not too far away with his large acute ears waiting to hear a whisper, especially mine, at fifty paces. Looking over my shoulder, I grab John by the arm and quick march him to my tent.

“What are you doing here?” I breathe hard in his ear, unable to believe it is him.
“Has Father sent you?”

“Of course,” he answers. “You’re setting a fast pace. Slow down,” he adds, bemused at my manner, as he looks at me from the top of my hat down to my polished shoes and buttoned gaiters. “What a sight you make,” he says and I am aware again of the enigmatic, slightly mocking smile that he usually reserves for the emotional outbursts of his younger brother, a personal quirk of his which I had forgotten. He laughs at me. But for all his sarcasm I realise that he is only just keeping up with me physically. I am fitter than he is and desperate to get away from the ever-present Aide and Orkney’s earshot so I walk even faster.

“Has Father bought my commission?” I whisper, thinking that’s why he is here.

“No. Not yet. You haven’t been through a battle, you haven’t proved yourself,” John answers, with maddening accuracy.

“You’ve been sent to spy on me,” I conclude, astounded. I stop and stare at him in disappointment. “After all this time? I have been here for months,” I shout without thinking, wanting to box his ears. Nothing has changed.

“Father has repaid Orkney. Calm down and slow down,” he says, shaking free of my grip and forcing me to walk at his pace.

We are surrounded by tents and roving men. Further out in the drill yards musket practice and artillery fire stutters and grumbles in the air like the distant growls of a storm building up to hit us. A fair wind blows the stench of latrines and stables in our direction and John, ever fastidious to sights and smells wrinkles his nose.

“Father has sent me to bring you back,” he reveals, as we reach my tent, his eyes avoiding my look of shock and surprise.

“What?” I stutter. “Never. Never. Never,” I say, finding my voice and shaking my head in reinforcement. “I refuse to go back. If he doesn’t grant me a commission I will stay anyway. You know that. You’re wasting your time. Go and tell him. This is my life, this is where I stay. I am not returning home under such circumstances. Surely you and Father know me better than that?”

John is still Father’s messenger. He looks at me thoughtfully, one eyebrow raised at my temper and obstinacy. “It seems none of us really know you.”

“Here, in this place, I am me. This is my life. Here I stay,” I answer, almost at a shout. It is the old argument again, the one we had in London. It is never very far away.

Blake emerges from my tent at the sound of my enraged voice and sees John who removes his travelling cloak, which Blake takes, as John gratefully lowers himself onto a

proffered camp stool as if he has been marching for miles. He takes a tankard of ale from the ever obliging Blake then looks at me in silence. I am too upset to sit so I pace instead.

“At the moment I feel I could kill the whole of the French army single handed I am so angry,” I burst out, feeling that’s what it may take to get Father to change his mind.

“For goodness sake, Rich, sit down. I have to talk to you,” John says, downing his ale with a gulp.

“Why? To tell me again I have to return? You know the answer,” I retort and pace some more.

“Sit,” John insists, as Blake draws up another stool for me. I sit reluctantly, frowning. “If you are so happy here, why were you so pleased to see me?”

“You’re my brother, damn it. Sheer joy and relief. I thought I’d been forgotten. I haven’t heard from anyone for some time.”

Eyebrows raised in a quizzical fashion, John looks at me. “You are unrealistically hopeful. You know how father feels. But you do look well and hardened,” he says, head on one side as he studies me. “The life obviously suits you,” he says calmly, finishing his drink, folding his arms. “Orkney wrote to Father and said you had the makings of a fine officer and to send you home would be a disservice to you and the army. He is obviously impressed with you and is loathe to give you up. He told me that you’re a born soldier. I suppose I’ll have to tell Father that,” he adds, reluctance in his voice.

“Give me up?” I latch onto the words that threaten me, the complements given by Orkney not even registering, or only a little, perhaps. I jump to my feet again. “Give me up!”

“It seems Lord Orkney has great sway over Father, but all the same, he has sent me to judge for him. Lord Orkney accepts that.”

Astounded I ask. “Father doubts Orkney’s word and has sent you to check up on me? Has he taken leave of his senses?”

“Orkney has agreed that I can stay with the army for a week to judge your life and your progress, though he assures me it is unnecessary, as you have adjusted and settled very well.”

“Of course it’s unnecessary. Why didn’t Father write to me himself instead of sending his envoy as usual?”

“Richard, calm down,” John urges, trying to placate me, shifting in his seat, aware that other men turn towards the sound of my voice. “He wanted someone here, to see what was happening. Don’t be angry with us, Rich. Papa has your welfare in mind. He wants a decent career for you, not fighting and killing. He hates bloodshed. Cheer up. I can see the army is the life for you, though Lord knows why?” He says, as he looks around him at the hundreds of tents, the milling men, the obvious organisation and lack of personal freedom and privacy. Everything he cannot tolerate.

I calm down a little, sit again and study my brother. He hasn’t changed, still refined and bookish, his face pale and aesthetic looking, a little pinched from travelling and poor food. He looks out of place amidst these burly men that roam around before him

His brown eyes travel over the vast tented compounds that house the men of various regiments, I can tell he is impressed, though John being John, would never give me the pleasure of saying so. “Here, I have letters for you,” he says, leaning down and rummaging through his leather bag.

The feeling of joy at having letters from home overwhelms me as he places the bundle in my hand. I have not had a letter from anyone for months and I scan through them quickly and find they are from Mother, you Mary, Charlotte, and little Letty with her childish scrawl. Even my brothers William, Walter and Coote have decided to write to me, but there is nothing from Father.

“It seems Mother has instructed them all to write to you and Father has instructed them not to. I am caught between the two of them. One giving me letters and one telling me not to give them to you, one giving me orders and one rescinding them,” John explains, exasperation in his voice. “Mother can be very persuasive, as you know, and she has been tirelessly pestering Father and Lord Orkney for a commission for you. She succeeded. She even made the journey to England rather than trust the mail across the Irish Sea, and when Father would not give in she did the best thing she knows how to annoy him, she locked the door to her bedchamber.”

Despite myself I laugh. I could just imagine her locking him out of the bedchamber in our London house at St. James’ and how irate he would be.

“He was in a sorry state at being denied his marital pleasures, I can assure you,” says John with a grin. “I too am deceiving Father by giving you these letters. I have been sworn to secrecy by them all. You just have to prove yourself to him. Fortunately Lord Orkney understands the situation.”

I look down at your letter, Mary, my name written in your familiar hand. My sister Monck, about to be a new mother, newly married to George Monck. An arranged marriage yet one you, Mary, had welcomed, because you knew George well and greatly admired

him. I long to open and read it but I will wait until I am on my own and away from John's searching glance.

"We expect Marlborough any day," I tell John with enthusiasm. "Wait until you see the power of the man and that which is within his grasp before you report to Father."

"I know what is within his grasp," John answers, with a declared snort, as if he is the bearer of all important news which he is not going to share with me. "The Earl's yacht was being readied in The Hague when I left there. He should be here either tomorrow or the day after."

Excitement at the thought of the Duke's arrival fills me. Perhaps the pomp and splendour that accompanies the man will be the only thing to convince my wary brother. I know it would never convince my father.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nijmegen

Summer: 1702

Initiation

Marlbrough's red uniform, flashed with gold and gold lace, catches the rays of the afternoon sun. He is glorified like the Sun King himself. He is carried high, made visible to all as he sits eighteen hands off the ground, astride his white charger, a great white stallion with powerful head, neck and shoulders. He surveys his newly formed army and touching his Marshal's baton to the tip of his hat he salutes us.

Marlbrough is brighter than the sun.

The ensign flaps above my head in the late afternoon breeze that drifts off the river, while cannons erupt with ear-shattering booms, shaking the ground beneath us. The Earl Marlborough, Captain-General of the English and Scottish forces in the Netherlands, Knight of the Garter, Master of the Ordnance and Ambassador-Extraordinary to Holland, accompanied by the Dutch and English Generals, including Lord Orkney, rides between the ranks of battalions as the kettle-drums roll continuously and trumpets blare in salute.

John is watching the spectacle of the massed and presented men from a distance away. He is becoming used to the ways of the army, not staying in the camp but in the civilian camp nearby, observing all that is happening within the encampment and deciding that it is not the life for him. My brother's introduction to army life has been a revelation for him, far different to the hallowed rarefied atmosphere of The Inns of Court. He too has been caught up in the excitement of preparation for this moment and despite all, has been impressed with the organisation that now presents itself in precise and ordered fashion to its chief of command. John will be introduced to Marlborough and if I am lucky, I will be also. But I want my brother to return home without me so I can live out my dream. As well as a diplomat, John would make a good spy, he practices on me and who says that training for one is not training for the other?

We, Marlborough's infantry, are lined up in formation within our regiments. Most of the infantry are single battalion regiments except for us, Orkney's First Guards, the Royal Regiment. We are Marlborough's regiment looked after by Orkney and we are made up of two battalions of twelve companies amounting to about five hundred men altogether. We, the First Battalion stand at attention in disciplined silence, dressed to perfection. Swords, pikes, muskets, bayonets and cuirass light up the field in flashes of gold, reflecting the sun that shines on Marlborough, acknowledging him as we stand at attention in parade. The sight must be magnificent from the fortress and we know that more than likely we are being observed by French spies from somewhere in the surrounding countryside.

The Earl and his cavalcade slowly pass before each line of Foot, Horse and Artillery who stand, eyes straight ahead not daring to look at the man. For their efforts they receive a glimpse of the raised gold topped Marshall's baton when he touches his hat in salute as he rides past them. Ahead of me in our regimental line-up are Lieutenant-Colonel White and

Major Hamilton, mounted on their horses, and my Captain, John Murray, stands in front of me stiff and straight at attention; further along on the other side of the regiment is Thomas Ashe bearing his ensign as I bear mine. This regiment of Foot is Marlborough's pride, and he knows Lord Orkney will make it the best in the army. Now Marlborough will take over as Colonel and I am proud to be part of his regiment.

"A sight to behold," John remarked about my uniform. I stand resplendent in my red frock-coat, lined with Royal blue, laced with the silver of Ensign and worn over royal blue breeches and waistcoat of the Royal Regiment. A crimson scarf encircles my waist and the brim of my three-cornered black hat is edged with wide silver lace and caught with a silver button and loop. A silver gorget that bears the Royal Arms and my name and rank of Ensign lies heavily around my neck over my linen neckcloth. My sword is at my side and my gloved hands hold the heavy staff bearing the gold, red and blue embroidered ensign of the regiment. The display is completed by white gaiters over white stockings rolled over my breeches above my knees and my highly polished leather black shoes with high heels are adorned with large silver buckles. I look bold enough to impress and frighten any enemy, except I know the French are also impressive in their blue, white and gold uniforms. When we meet on the battlefield we will proclaim our glory in vivid colour as we fight to the death.

The kettledrums beat in a steady rhythm and the trumpets blare, hautbois warble, while muskets crash in salute. I hear the jangle of horses' harness and know that the Earl's cavalcade is close-by. He is upon us. He is before us. Quite close. Closer than I had expected.

The thunder of the horses' hooves matches the thunder of my heart and my mouth is dry. I stare straight ahead between the men before me and I see the Earl for a few seconds

as he passes. He sits higher and straighter than the others, upon his horse's gold and red furniture, as if he wants to make sure he can see everything and everyone. His gaze looks sharply over the men of the regiment and misses nothing or no one. His eyes meet mine for a fleeting second and in that time I feel he has read my character and knows me personally. Stirred, I find myself shaking with excitement. In the proud and noble lift of his head beneath his full wig and hat, the straight profile, firm full mouth, the calm controlled manner, I have seen my future.

At this moment I am willing to die for the man and all he represents.

He is as handsome as they say, even-featured, fair-skinned, still unlined though he is in his fifties. His face is flushed with high colour from the heat. He is one of the most powerful men in England.

At this moment Marlborough is England.

He passes from my vision and I am left breathless. He is my future, he may be my death, and he is certainly my glory. Mad fool John will say. Mad fool I say to John for he cannot see it.

The sun disappears and the river turns from gold to slate as dusk begins to cover the sixty thousand men on parade. A sound rises from thousands of throats and reverberates off the walls of the fortress as we shout our welcome to the Earl. The Commander-in-Chief sits solemnly and impassively upon his white horse and waits as the huzzahs subside. He salutes us with his Marshal's baton then with his Generals, rides to his quarters.

"What a show. What a spectacle!" crows John afterwards in my tent his eyes alight with delight at what he has witnessed. "But remember Rich, he is a man like any other. Have patience," he says, sensing my excitement. To me, in my hero-worship, he is a man

like no other. I reveal my ambitions, it seems, without opening my mouth. “Do you think that he has not already been told about you? That he does not already know about you?”

John asks surprising me.

Astonishment, for once, silences my tongue. Father has been busy without me realizing.

John and I have been, to my surprise and delight, summoned to Marlborough’s quarters by Orkney to meet the great man, much to Abercrombie’s chagrin when he spies me entering the Generals’ quarters and heading towards Marlborough’s tent. His black eyes narrowed at my appearance tell me all I need to know, that he recognises at last I am not to be tarried with. The deferential bow that hints of mockery when we leave, however, warns me I must be wary of him.

John, the moment we are introduced to the Earl as Robert Molesworth’s sons, falls into practicing his diplomatic skills with aplomb. Unlike me, who is so overcome with bashfulness that I have difficulty stirring my tongue into action. Except when Marlborough asks me of my ambition, then it is let loose and runs away with me, nearly becoming my undoing.

“To serve you as an Aide, my Lord,” I answer, my feelings caught in my throat, my heart galloping like the hooves of my horse, my voice high, sounding more and more like an overeager school boy than a brave soldier of his army.

I am desperate to be at his side, be one of his Aides with their bright red and gold uniforms, their expensive horse furniture and horses, their confident and superior air that comes with serving and mixing with the high and mighty. Only when I am one of them will I be satisfied.

His face is impassive, as is his custom, so we are informed, but I can see by the slight crinkle around his eyes that he is amused by my impetuous statement of adoration. He also recognises raw ambition, because he too knows how it feels. To my chagrin I feel myself colour hotly and bite my tongue to shut myself up.

“I have heard about you Ensign and shall keep you in mind,” the Earl replies in a clipped court accent similar to Father’s, his bright blue eyes smiling at me though his expression is serious.

Dismounted from his horse he is shorter than I reckoned, being of average height. But a great many people appear short to me, even though the required height for the army is five foot five inches. I seem to look down upon everyone these days, Father, John, everyone except Ashe who is slightly taller than me.

John is impressed with the Earl but not with my behaviour and takes me aside as the Earl and Orkney move off to speak with others.

“For goodness sake, control your tongue, didn’t you learn anything at The Temple? He is not going to have anyone close to him who gabbles like a school-boy,” he whispers. “Now, all we have to do is persuade Father.”

For my brother to be so impressed is a miracle. But I realise he is not only concerned about my ambition but also about his own.

“However, Rich, you must use caution in dealing with such power. Don’t run like a hot-headed fool. You have many skills to learn before you can even be considered to be part of his staff and you have yet to prove yourself in battle and come through in one piece.”

The fact that the great Earl knows about me is enough, I am willing to wait. Father would not be proud of my rampant feelings about the man. He favours and expands upon John Locke's theories of rationality and logic based on scientific reasoning which set feelings apart, rather than intuitive instincts, preconceptions and wild notions based on emotions, in which I am inclined to indulge. John is of Father's persuasion and character, not easily swayed or governed by feelings, he holds onto his logical reasoning as if it is a life raft, to his detriment, I think. He stodes his way through life,

"Just remember, young brother. I will tell Father everything I have witnessed and how impressed I am with your commitment to your new life, but if you are killed in this up and coming battle I will never forgive you and Father will never forgive me," John says with emphasis. If I was not so elated by my brush with greatness and the vision of my future destiny, I would cuff him.

"Don't worry," I answer. "Dying is the furthestmost thing on my mind. I intend to prove myself a hero."

The hero will face himself in the morning.

Up before dawn to ready ourselves for our first battle, in what may be our last battle. In the early hours of the morning before the camp stirs, I pull myself from my narrow bed, my shoulders still protesting from the weight of the staff I have been carrying for hours in drill and fumble for the pot under the bed. At least this function can take place in my tent and I do not have to negotiate the trek through the darkened tents to the latrines.

The intimacy of relief eases me and brings to mind the warmth of Betty in the alehouse near the gate of Middle Temple. My longing for her is acute and all I can see

against my closed lids are her wet eyes and mouth, obliging arms and burgeoning breasts ready to wrap themselves around my face and find their way into my mouth. I always went to her in times of need and she always obliged me, pulling me into the upstairs room at the inn, quickly unbuttoning buttons and untying laces until she could get at me. I realise in my haste to leave London I had not said good-bye to her and I wonder at this moment if I will ever see her again? While John changes mistresses often, I only indulge in Betty, who obliges me just as often within her warm arms. I roll back into bed and lie for a time with her on my mind, slipping in and out of a dream where Betty is mixed with musket drill.

The beat of the drum calls me from the lost world between sleeping and waking, one in which I have no control. Reluctant to release the dream of Betty I surrender to all remembered pleasures.

“Prime your pan. Charge your piece. Ram your powder. Guard your pan. Give fire!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Fort St. Michael

Summer: 1702

Baptism

Time disintegrates and everything stands still except for the crazy scene I find myself in. My belly is a knot and sweat pours off me with the effort of exertion. I am wrapped and bundled in flame, sheathed with smoke in a nightmare that is never going to end. Shrouded, surrounded. Trapped. Captain Murray shouts and urges us on, calmly leading us into the killing.

We follow him. Climbing, hauling ourselves through the maelstrom of musket, shot and cannon fire. My ears buzz with the closeness of the shot raining down on us from the parapets above. The wall of the fortress of St. Michael, has been breached after days of cannon bombardment and now we storm the citadel. Up and over scarps and counterscarps, scrabbling over fascines laid in ditches, sliding into, clambering out of glacis, somehow I avoid musket shot all the way while those around me fall. A mine explodes throwing mud and blood all over us. Those left on their feet join us as we storm the covered way and take the ravelin. It is impossible to hear drums because of the fire around me and the cries of

men fighting, screaming and dying. We scale the breastwork, fight our way over a bridge and clamber through a hole in the wall of the fortress, a great cavern of a mouth leading to Hades and there at the entrance breathing venomous fire is Cerberus in the form of French soldiers. Running into my own hell, I fight like a madman from Bedlam, my ensign trampled into the ground in the effort of killing for survival.

Death makes itself known in the wide surprised eyes of a slain Frenchman. He dances on the end of my sword as he teeters on the edge of eternity. He slumps to his knees at my feet. Another takes the dead man's place. I swear I kill the same man over again. They all have the same look of wide-eyed surprise as blood spurts and showers me. A sound hums through the air and the sound vibrates in my ear, quickly I step aside just in time to avoid the lethal swipe of a sword. Smoke-filled air stifles my lungs. My chest is full of pain in the effort of staying on my feet. The Frenchman returns again and again. Everything in my vision turns red. I quickly dodge his blow again and scoop up the ensign half buried in the bloody soil at my feet and throw it over him blinding him. Bringing up my sword I run him through the thick silk of the flag. I feel the give of his body on the end of my sword as it passes through material, flesh and muscle. The sound and feel of metal on bone tells me my blow is lethal. One final twist and I shout in triumph as with a groan and final expulsion of air from his lungs the soldier falls in front of me. I release my sword and lift the torn and bloody ensign and wave it above my head for the others to see.

A glint of steel raised above Murray grabs my attention. My Captain turns in fright at what is about to happen. I run towards him and whip the ensign in the Frenchman's face before his sword finds its mark on Murray's throat. Murray glances at me his face white with shock and relief, his concentration broken. But only for a moment. He lunges with his sword and kills the man struggling before him. There is no time to stop.

Silence descends broken by the crackle of fire and the acrid smell of smoke, followed by the cries and moans of the dying. My uniform is black with smoke and soot, dust covered and stained dark crimson with shed blood, not my own. I have lost my ensign, my hat and my wig but I am still alive, my sword smeared with blood up to the hilt. I hear the drums start to beat the parley and the French in surrender crawl from the rubble emerging shocked and wide eyed as the trumpet blasts bounce off the broken walls. My legs refuse to move. I shake with delayed shock. Murray is yelling orders at me I cannot understand. He comes up to me and gives me a shove which makes me stumble and fall amongst the rubble of the masonry. My hands come up from the stonework covered in torn intestines, scattered faeces and blood and I retch painfully as the stink of lacerated flesh and the hot metallic smell of freshly spilled blood, fills my nostrils.

The French soldiers sneer and jeer at my antics as they are rounded up but Murray gives me a kick in the backside and hauls me to my feet and yells an order at me to help him sort out the remainder of his men. Dumb and numb I follow Murray and search for those of our regiment still standing. To my relief Thomas Ashe has come through unscathed, clutching Orkney's standard and we look at each other in amazement and exhaustion that we have survived. We stumble half dead to regroup with our regiment so we can return to camp.

Murray appears before me again. "You'll get used to it." He says over-emphasising his words as if to push them through the roar besieging my ears and dumbing my addled brain. "You will get used to it," he repeats, in reinforcement. Perhaps I look deaf, or dead. He looks at me with a strange expression, but then everyone looks at me like that, as I look back at them.

I have emerged from the nightmare, whole.

A shout goes up. “St. Michael!” someone calls. “St. Michael!” We all echo, shouting to the flying flags of smoke still filling the sky. “St. Michael!”

Blake is waiting for me and when he sees me dragging myself back to camp amongst the returning men he breaks into a run as we are dismissed and greets me in over friendly fashion for a servant, putting his arms about me, hugging me with relief, as filthy as I am. He gets a whiff of my state and steps back but still supports me as I stagger as if drunk towards my tent.

His reaction at my reappearance amazes me, but I am too exhausted to tell him to behave and act within his station. I am just relieved to be alive. He shoves me unceremoniously onto the stool and bends down to remove my blood-soaked gaiters, shoes and stockings, gabbling non-stop about the battle. He strips me of my coat, waistcoat and breeches, washes me down and pushes me onto my bed. My heart thumps with exhaustion as my small tent tilts on its axis and spins like a top. I think I am dying and hear a small boy call out for Mother before everything turns black.

CHAPTER SIX

Ireland

Brackenstown

Winter: 1702-1703

Homecoming

“Father, such pain you cause me.”

“My son, not as much as you cause me.”

“It is, Father, an unquestionable right for every man to want to fight.”

“It is, my son, the unquestionable right of every father to say no to the son that wants to fight.”

John and I stand on the rolling deck of the packet plying between England and Ireland nursing our fragile stomachs. Most of the passengers are below deck prostrate with seasickness but we have escaped into the fresh air only to find we are in the smelly, squealing company of penned pigs, neighing blindfolded and tethered horses, staggering to keep their footing on the pitching deck and squawking chickens penned between carriages tied to the deck. The wind roars in the sails and the ship’s timbers creak loudly

accompanied by the slap of the sea as it surges around the ship. But the air is fresh and helps my queasy stomach.

John appears even more bookish to me after a short absence from his company. He lacks the sheer physical force, animal fire and cunning of the men I have been with for the past year. In comparison he appears overly refined and of delicate constitution, his hands fine and soft, his body slim. My army friends' sturdy brutality, born from being constantly close to the earth and out in the open air for weeks at a time, is absent in the well cultivated sophisticated diplomacy that John presents. His gentle manner, studied words and actions depict his deep thinking mind, but he strikes me as being completely self-conscious about his person and the impression he is making upon everyone around us. It is his world only; I will never aspire to it. I am glad I have left it behind. My advantage is my honesty and physicality, which John cannot compete with, any more than I can compete with the sharpness of his mind, tongue and natural affinity for music, art and literature.

Dublin Bay stretches its arms to the small ship as it glides over the sea. The ship hesitates, caught between the ocean and the shelter of the coast until the wind changes and fills the sails again. With the surge of the swell, the craft rolls over the sandbar and into the calm of the bay.

This land always moves me. My native Ireland. A mellow, melancholy land, conquered easily, yet for all that, strangely unshackled, always aware and waiting to escape, no matter who the conqueror. It rises raw before us, full of haunting songs, despite its earthly turbulence. Its memories half-sung, half-told, half-remembered, its soul embedded within the land itself and in the raw-boned people who inhabit it. Their high cheekbones, blonde, red and black hair, and fair skin declares their Celtic, Viking and Spanish origins still evident after many centuries. Ireland is what I have longed for during

those long nights in camp in the flat fields of Flanders. Not for the grassy knolls, green copses and open fields of England, as beautiful as they are, but for the green fields, especially the windy sea-swept land and coast around Brackenstown. My birthplace, my home.

After the crowded smoke-filled camp, the close pressure of many men, the fortresses along the Rhine, the mounds of dead, some buried, some waiting to be buried, the battles along the border between the Netherlands and France we had supported or participated in, the thought of Brackenstown was like a soothing balm to my soul. It had not taken much persuasion from John for me to travel home after the campaign, even though I knew the invitation home was a ruse to persuade me not to return to the army. I knew I was stepping into a trap. But I was willing to take the chance.

The sight of the large square Palladian house at the end of the carriageway lined with high Wych Elms fills me with relief. Surrounded by acres of land lying within the shelter of long established trees now almost bare, it welcomes me back. This house had belonged to my father's grandfather, Chief Baron of the Exchequer, Chancellor Byssie. Solid, welcoming, and familiar, the tall windows in its seven bays glint in the pale sun. The circle for the turning carriage is covered by a three bay colonaded portico, crowned by a balustrade that shelters the front door. The coachyard and stables around the side of the house are full of horses and several of Father's hackney carriages and coaches, looked after by grooms, stable-boys and coachmen. The house has servants and the garden has a bevy of gardeners who do my mother's bidding on my father's instructions. There is a full dairy supplied by three house cows and a walled kitchen garden full of sage, bay and thyme, lemon balm and rosemary and the last of the summer vegetables, along with a noisy chicken coop, a duck and goose pen. The apple orchard, the branches of the trees twisted

and knobbed with time, are visible over the orchard fence. Bared for winter, sporting crowds of mistletoe their branches rise in skeletal anticipation ready for the crowd of blossoms in the spring and the weight of heavy fruit in summer. Sheep graze in the outer fields visible through the trees and I can hear the soft clink of cowbells and the bleat of the goats in their run near the kitchen garden.

This lovely house within its setting of mysteries and magic, according to Fingal legend, is not far from the village of Swords with its medieval castle, within a few hours ride of Dublin. The acreage is not large. In comparison to some that belong to landowners in Ireland, it is a small holding, but the demesne itself is one of the most charming and pleasant to live in. Local people are often permitted to come to the house and wander through the grounds in spring and summer. The sight rouses a ferment of emotions in me as Father knows it will. Father and John know how to manipulate human feelings especially mine, so recently starved of life's luxuries.

Father is not with the family. When everyone calms down a little and I divest myself of my belongings, I ask Mother where he is.

"He is in the garden, Richard, with one of the gardeners," Mother says, fussing about me, patting my arm with her hand, her eyes up and down and all over me, as if seeing me for the first time, judging whether I have been eating or not, as is her fashion. "My, you do look fine, son," she says with pride. "Go outside and greet your father. He has been waiting for you with impatience, although he will never admit it, of course."

Mother shoos the younger ones from me and I walk through the drawing-room and step outside through the tall open windows that lead out onto the south terrace. The

grounds, green and closely cropped, stretch before me to a distant vista of trees that surround the acreage around the house. Below the terrace, down the centre of the grounds to the distant border of oak trees, runs the long pond, cold and icy looking in the dull autumn light. Gardens beds turned for winter line the broad walks that disappear through shrubberies and arbours in the grounds. Large fish ponds bound by boxed hedging, lie in shadows cast by the tall yews and the Cedar of Lebanon, an old and grand fixture of the garden dating back to the time of great-grandfather Bysse. Summer colour has disappeared, the sky pale grey, the land bare but the loveliness of it is still apparent. I walk over the flag-stoned terrace and out onto the lawn. Further down the garden Father is in deep conversation with a one of the gardeners carrying a rake and hoe. In the distance a bonfire consumes leaves and dead branches with gusto, the smoke curling upward through the branches of the trees.

With slow and deliberate step, mainly to calm myself as I had seen Marlborough do during times of stress, I make my way towards Father, heart pounding. He must have heard the sound of the carriage arriving in the drive but did not come to the door to greet us with everyone else. Despite myself, the dear familiar form of his person standing in the deep green place he loves, affects me. The fact he has not given me approval even yet, annoys and upsets me. There is nothing I want more than his blessing for my enterprise, and there is nothing he wishes to give me less.

The gardener glances in my direction as I walk down the gravel path towards them and he points me out to Father who turns, arms akimbo and looks at me, his face expressionless, though I see warmth in his eyes which he cannot hide.

Drat the man! Even now, after all I have been through, he still scares me.

He was always good with the birch and strap, punishing us if we disobeyed him and now, in front of him, I am thrust back to boyhood expecting the strap to reappear, or to be banished to my bedchamber for wrongdoing. By the time I am beside him, my heart is doing somersaults and my fond feelings at being home have been overrun by belligerence.

“Well, the prodigal son returns,” he says, and smiles at me with reticence, as if I am about to turn and run again.

“Even the prodigal son was forgiven, Father. Have you forgiven me?”

“I have always thought that there was something wrong with that parable.”

“Is forgiveness wrong, Father?”

“Who says I have to forgive you so easily?” He answers, his blue eyes running over my person, his head on one side. “We shall see, Richard. Welcome home.”

I feel the pull of his embrace around me and his lips upon my cheek. At least he still greets me as a father should. The meeting is more benign than I expect. I am not fooled by him and treat him with due respect. The gardener doffs of his hat to me, and disappears into the garden, leaving Father and I to walk together back towards the house.

“Well, you certainly look fine. You have grown up and out. The life must suit you.”

“It does, Father.”

His tone changes, his manner now abrupt. “I want no talk of the army or war in this house. The army will not be discussed at any time, and if any of the younger boys press you for information you will greet them with silence,” the ‘General’ of Brackenstown orders firmly. “You must behave like a gentleman in your father’s house. No bad language or bad habits. I will not stand any crude or rude behaviour, or talk of death, mutilation or dying in

front of the family as a result of your occupation.” I answer with silence, prudent to be wary of him.

“As you wish, Father.”

“I do wish it, Richard,” he emphasises, nodding and looking up at me. “I also wish that you reconsider and do not return. The Army is not my desire for any of my sons that is why you must not speak of it to the others. I do not want them following your example. I have never approved of the military and certainly not of a standing army.”

I stop and look at him. Why am I amazed that he is so forthright when I have barely stepped inside the house? Nothing has changed.

“Then we are still at odds over this,” I reply, and he nods again. “But this is the way of the world at the moment, Father.” The idea of not returning to the army is preposterous to me. “This is just the beginning. England must challenge France for its own good. I can’t consider not going back. And surely, Father,” I continue, perhaps not out of wisdom or in my best interest. “Even you will support England and not France?”

He stares at me, his eyes never leaving mine. A grim expression, a frown of annoyance. Where is the father who is supposed to love me? Or, is he treating me like this because he loves me?

We turn once more toward the house which is closer to us now. Light glows from the windows as candles are lit for supper in the parlour. A large interested audience is gathered at the tall windows of the drawing-room watching our greeting. This stay is not going to be easy I can see. Already I am beginning to regret my weakness in coming home.

“How long have you been here, sir?” I ask, willing my voice to stay steady and to change the subject, knowing until recently he has been in England.

“One month. Your mother was in such a state at the reports of the battles and sieges that she implored me to come to Ireland to make sure you came home too. I wish I could spend more time here but duty calls in England. I am frequently in Yorkshire at Edlington. The tenants need attending to, though Mr. Westenry does much of that for me, and the house needs constant fixing and repairing. The woodland needs thinning and replanting, but it is handy for future finance. Milling the wood, you know,” he muses.

The details about Edlington, with its fifteen hundred acres of land and three hundred acres of woods wrapped around the Hall and village, I had not thought much about. It was some time since I had been there. “Perhaps next time I am home I shall go up there instead of Brackenstown,” I say thinking of the rough passage over the Irish Sea

“There will be a next time?” He asks, turning to look at me.

“All being well,” I answer. He does not reply and in silence we continue our walk to the house.

Everyone reacts with forced gaiety and laughter in our presence and I realise that my actions at disobeying my father must have caused them all grief. When they are not joking and laughing in the attempt to drag me back into family life, they are silent and disappear in reaction to the invisible barrier as high as a stone wall that has risen between my father and me. Even John, usually garrulous and confident as the eldest son when he is in the midst of family, is subdued and unwilling to be drawn into any feud.

Silence reigns over supper in the parlour. The atmosphere, however, is welcoming as mother always makes it so, and the table is laden with glasses, silver cutlery and candlesticks which shine in the light of a dozen candles to celebrate my return home. Warmth and comfort creep over me and I appreciate mother’s good table, but my father is

unusually silent and terse with his brood. It seems my reappearance within the family has only reinforced the distaste he feels at my opposition to his will. I eat my way through Mother's soup, roast beef with bread, followed by sweet tarts, and Father's best claret. A wonderful meal after the repetitive food of the army. There is no mention of my experiences in the bright family conversation that ensues. They are all obeying the orders dictated by the 'General', Father.

We are at an impasse. Everyone has left the table and Father and I adjourn to his study. He obviously wishes to speak to me privately. We stare at each other, our eyes unflinching, our wills locked, each one unwilling to give in.

We are alike yet unlike. He has this formidable will that wishes to mould his sons into something that he wants them to be. He knows and I know that I am too much like my grandfather, the one that rode and fought for King Charles I, to be moulded by anyone. To Father war is something that tore England apart, and then grandfather's merchant activities aided Cromwell, which puzzled him even more, though it was well after the army had been disbanded, the King arrested and taken to Scotland. Grandfather and Great Uncle Guy were Royalists and fought bravely for King Charles and Father does not understand how grandfather, after serving so loyally in Guy's regiment as a Captain, and participating in so many battles, could seemingly turn and aid the enemy. After the Civil War in England grandfather moved to Ireland and became a merchant supplying the army of the conqueror, Cromwell. Father feels some shame in it, despite his Whiggish inclinations, which he has inherited from the Republican cause, he is still a Royalist. Everyone is capable of changing allegiance for survival, for ambition, for expediency. Hasn't Father said that of My Lord Marlborough?

Father had travelled to Northampton, where the Royalist Molesworth family originated, in an effort of kinship with his cousins and also those cousins also who lived in Pencarrow. He was an occasional visitor at Althorp, a guest of the Earl Sunderland, and felt a strong kinship to this part of England, but generally my father was only vaguely recognised by the English branch of the family. They had been proudly Royalist for centuries, one of them had even bankrupted the Northampton estate in accommodating Elizabeth I and her extravagant touring court in the sixteenth century. The Molesworths' had never fully recovered from that either.

“My main concern is that you are playing at soldiers,” Father says.

The insult wounds me.

“Father, you are wrong about me. I have experienced battle. I am not playing at soldiers,” I answer, my face hot. My voice shakes. It takes me all my time to stop shouting at him.

He looks at me through a haze of pipe smoke his expression closed to me. I feel like walking out of the room. I am so angry I could strike him, something I have never felt before. Such a thought horrifies me. It is something I would never do. Such an action would not only please him but it would give him more reason not to accommodate my wishes. I take a deep breath and steady myself.

“I was hoping Father, that once you heard from me personally how much I love the army life that you would consider buying my commission, especially now I have been through the experience of battle.”

“You are defiant and persistent, Richard. You try my patience.”

“And you mine, Father.”

The familiar smell of books, sealing wax and pungent tobacco, vellum, paper and parchment, ink, and candles, in his study or his library, as he calls it, assails my nose. Boyhood memories of hours reading or studying old maps and deeds, days of dry Latin and the classics, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, languages, Italian, French, rush back into my mind. Long winter nights spent beside the fire with Father, John, and William, as he taught, lectured and discussed politics, philosophy and history. No wonder my views and ambitions annoy him. He wants thinking sons; philosophers, politicians, lawyers, scientists, physicians even, not soldiers mixing with the rabble.

The fire in the grate sparks and leaps up the chimney, candles flicker in the wall sconces. Great-grandfather, Chancellor Bysse in his red, ermine-edged robes smiles down at us with a knowing smile from his large portrait over Father's desk. I move to the fire and spread my outstretched hands to the warmth. The overpowering Chancellor used to terrify me as a child because it seemed his brown eyes followed me everywhere and even now, as I look up, I can feel his calculating gaze as I stand before his grandson. However, now the Chancellor looks a lot less threatening, his face impassive with a cunning look of studied statesmanship, a look John attempts to assume most of the time.

Although the room's ambience of knowledge, learning and stability is reassuring and familiar, such a scenario is also to my disadvantage. It brings back times of enforced learning and discipline which now only adds to my present insecurity. My father is seated in his secure coven of scholarship where he can dictate, direct, punish if need be and humiliate for wrongdoing. I feel I have not progressed much further from boyhood in his eyes. He does not ask me to sit down. I have stood before him in obedience and at attention, my hands behind my back, like this, countless times in the past and I am still doing so. My pride is hurt and I cringe in humiliation because he is loathe to give me credit. He sits

beside the fire in his tall winged chair, draws deeply upon the long stem of his clay pipe and studies me in silence. His voice breaks me out of my reverie.

“It seems, Lord Orkney, is pleased with your performance in battle and recommends I buy you a Captain’s commission,” he says and hands me a letter from the small side table next to his chair.

My heart leaps with hope as I open it and read what Orkney has written. Nothing but praise and a commendation for rescuing Captain Murray during the breaching of the fortress of St. Michael, also a recommendation of promotion to Father. I am grateful to him. The tight knot that has formed in my stomach since being at home slowly unwinds itself in relief. Murray must have told Orkney of my action. A Captain in Marlborough’s regiment, the First Guards. I am elated at the thought but careful to keep my face expressionless as I know Father is studying my reaction.

“What Orkney fails to appreciate is that you have already wasted much of my money through your time spent at The Temple. I could buy you a commission and find you are killed in the next battle and that will be a further waste of money.”

I bite my lip to keep my temper and stay my tongue from saying something hasty I will regret, but I am unable to hold back for long.

“I have endured the hardest year of my life and come through it better off and unscathed, no one, not even my father can take that away from me and for that alone I deserve respect,” I answer firmly, controlling my voice, holding onto my conviction. Father knows that he is the only one who can break me, we have that much understanding between us. “I can do this, it is what I expect to do. The army is my life and I am going to stay, whether you support me or not.” He holds up his hands either in horror or to stop me from

speaking, I know not which. "I am with the officers and there is camaraderie between us. I enjoy their fellowship. I am obliged to them and to Lord Orkney."

"You have an obligation to me, your name and family," he insists. "Your honour is our honour. The army is a waste of time for you, a waste of your life and intellect. You have always had a strong sense of direction in life and you must take pride in that, but to go this way is a mistake. You are deserving of much better things than participating in such brutish activity. You are as clever as John, only you will not settle and do as you're told, as he does.

The French are powerful, Lord Marlborough's ambition will make the most of any situation."

"He is a brilliant soldier, he will lead England to victory."

"More than likely into ruin. How long can England tolerate such madness? Will he care? I doubt not, unless his ends are served."

"It is either that or invasion. The English Papists and the Pretender are strong in the French court. There is a strong case amongst many for the Pretender on the throne instead of Queen Anne. The threat is very real. England has to fight for its survival."

"You think I don't already know that?" he asks and turns away from me and stares into the fire.

My Father's will is strong but mine is also. The wall between us is as high as Vauban's ramparts. It seems impossible for me to climb or conquer let alone sit on the top and see over the other side towards my future. He wants to stop me from even attempting the climb let alone jump down on the other side toward a new life. Yet, I already have done so in reality. The awareness of that gives me courage, if I can storm a bridge and ravelin of

a fortress then I can do the same with this one, even though it may be higher and take longer. I see a side of him I have previously only glimpsed before, that of an iron will underneath the veneer of conviviality, generosity and reason which he normally presents to us, his family and friends.

“In aspiring to this life you are going against everything that I believe in. If a man cannot improve and rise above his basic instincts, such as killing, the world we live in will be forever doomed.”

“Such a life is in my blood, father. Think of your uncles, your own father; Sir Walter Molesworth who went to the Crusades with King Edward II when he was a prince,” I answer, talking of our much prized ancestor, the one held up through all our childhood for our example. “I am only doing what they did.”

He shakes his head at my argument. “The army is a machine in the hands of powerful men who have no qualms about sending men to the slaughter to satisfy their own ambitions,” he ignores my plea. “The Earl Marlborough is one such man who looks to his own glory, never mind England’s. I have never had time for the military mind who seeks satisfaction through the sacrifice of others. There is no glory in war and it is no place for a son of mine.” He pauses in his lecture only to take a breath, gathering his words ready to spit them out before me like a lawyer stating his case. I have heard enough and feel like turning on my heel and walking out. To give into my anger would only please him. I stare straight ahead of me so I do not have to look at his thick grey brows knotted above his long nose, his normally pleasant mouth now contorted with reserve and anger, and dare I imagine it, disgust at his second son.

“Because promotion is through purchase, only those with wealth achieve, unless some stroke of fortune comes their way,” he continues. “My financial support is not as endless as you and John seem to think it is. I have this estate to uphold, our townhouse in London, and the Edlington estate. I have a family to educate, to provide for, and daughters who will require dowries for good marriages. Is it right that you rely upon me to advance you in a life that I disapprove of?”

“You advance John, sir,” I venture, knowing that by saying it I am further testing his patience and entering dangerous territory. John is already openly planning his journey to Italy to establish himself in the court of Tuscany as ambassador. I know Father will help him in his ambitions and provide his living as a plenipotentiary, as the government which has little money for such matters will not do so. Most diplomats have to fend for themselves these days.

“John does as I wish him to do, he does not rush off to war and he does not put your mother and me through months of worry by chasing a foolish dream. This war is not going to disappear overnight as everyone seems to think. Marlborough, of all people, will not want it finished quickly before he has time to achieve his personal goals. He wants power. This war will last some time as France is mighty and powerful with three times the population of England and both nations will not give in easily.”

“But, is that not reason enough to challenge France? England needs protection,” I continue, determined not to submit to his argument.

“It would be better fixed by diplomacy. There is much conflict in Parliament over the war. The Whigs are for it, the Tories against it. But I am not for it, even though I am a Whig. The Tories desire victory by sea power, as they think this war will be long and

economically tiresome to England. Of course, many of them are Jacobites, or that way inclined, or they are High Church, which to my way of thinking is just as bad. The Whigs, however, believe that victory by sea power is unrealistic and we will only beat the French on land, however, the thought of war is anathema to me personally. So I support the country but have not, at this moment, cast my vote either way. You're not listening to me, Richard," he says, his voice terse, his visage scowling. "I never had the benefit of a father to advance me in life. I never knew my father as you have known yours. I have had that experience and you should take notice of me."

"Perhaps if you had known your father, sir, you would be more tolerant of my wishes," I answer, still eager to wallow in dangerous territory.

Father rises to his feet before me but I look down upon him which must only add to his annoyance.

"Drat your impertinence. If that is what the army teaches you, I am not impressed. What about the effect of your actions on the rest of the family? On your mother and sisters? On the younger boys, especially upon Walter and Edward who talk of nothing but sieges and battles? They are impressed by you and want to follow your actions? I do not want to lose these fine young men that I have brought up and am still bringing up. I do not want them or you to die for the country which will hardly remember you or even be grateful for their service and sacrifice. I am alarmed for you and your brothers. They know that you have deliberately gone against my wishes. What sort of example is that? There are safer professions you could enter which are more useful to society — law, politics, the Church."

"The Church?" I ask in astonishment, with a laugh. "Me? In the Church? I never go to Church, except when I have to."

Father's unfavourable opinion of the clergy and High Church are well known and it has influenced me. He tolerates the Tory, Jonathan Swift, and treats him as a friend because he is impressed by his intellect, but that is all. He disagrees heavily with the politics of the man and his take on religious issues. I doubt any of my brothers will enter the Church and I realise how desperate my father must be even to suggest I consider such a thing.

“Which church do you suggest I join, Father? High, Low, or Papist?”

His silence indicates I have gone too far. The Church, indeed.

There is no use arguing further. I wish to fight for England. That is how I leave him. Our wills still locked. I walk out of the library. Something I have never done to my father before. I close the door behind me and pause for a moment to gather myself.

Everyone awaits the outcome of our meeting in the drawing-room and it is the last thing I feel like doing, going into their midst, facing their enquiring, gentle, indulgent glances, but I do. I have to behave normally. I feel crushed, powerless, and struggle for a moment as the child within me is almost overwhelmed, the child father knows is still there and tries to keep there. Such is his power over all of us, his children. Yet, where would we be without him?

“Well?” asks Mother, looking up from her sewing as I enter the room. They all look at me expectantly and I do the impossible. I smile at them.

Chapter Seven-Synopsis

Ireland

Brackenstown

Winter, 1702-1703

Fingal Magic

After weeks at home Richard is no further ahead in persuading his Father to buy him a commission in Orkney's regiment. He has a conversation with Mary, the only one he can really talk to about it. He goes with his father and John into Dublin city to view the Molesworth Fields. His father tells him that to provide money for his career in the army and for John's career some of the land must be sold. His father is not pleased about this. Richard observes the city and landscape as well as the village of Swords near Brackenstown. He is troubled by nightmares after experiencing his first battle at the fort of St. Michael. He and John ride through Brackenstown's land towards the estuary on the coast. He recalls a youthful dalliance with a daughter of one of their tenant's, Maura Scanlan. He also remembers the antagonism of her brother's, Sean and Brian, towards him. The theme of Irish landownership and tenancies is commented upon. Richard sees the Scanlan's land is poor and sea-blown with little yield.

Chapter Eight-Synopsis.

Ireland

Brackenstown

Winter, 1702- 1703

Maura

Richard meets Maura at the market in Swords. They find they still care for each other but their lives have changed from idealistic childhood to mature reality. Maura's father is ill, and Letitia sends Richard to the Scanlan's cabin with some goods to give them. He is met with hostility by Maura's brothers, though Maura is pleased to see him and grateful for the gift. He finds that their Father has died. The brothers take him captive inside the cabin and he meets a mysterious stranger whom he gathers is an unregistered priest. Richard tells them to appease them that they can have some land further inland which will give them a better income. They let him go and he returns to Brackenstown to tell his father about his promise. His father is annoyed even more and Richard feels his commission is even further away.

CHAPTER NINE

Ireland

Brackenstown

Winter-Spring: 1702-1703

The Parting.

My mind has settled. I feel at peace and I have had no further nightmares.

The afternoon warmth in the drawing-room, caused by the sunshine flooding in through the tall windows, lulls my mind. I crave sleep which I cannot seem to get enough of these days. I feel warm, comfortable, satisfied, almost happy, except for the unresolved issue of my commission. I walk to the door intending to go to my bed, when I hear voices in the hall and realise it is Mother and Father talking.

“You really must do this Robert,” Mother says, her voice low and urgent. I dodge back behind the drawing-room door where I can hear them but they cannot see me. “You must approach Orkney about Richard’s promotion. It is close to his heart.”

“Letitia, you spoil the boy,” growls Father.

“Nonsense. Robert, you must have seen the change in him. He has grown taller and broader. His face has filled out. He looks most manly. And enthusiasm for army life shines out of his eyes. He has changed so much, I can scarcely believe it is Richard. You must see that the life suits him. He must go back as Captain in Lord Orkney’s regiment, Robert, he must,” Mother insists.

My heart bounds away like an excited colt. I know that Father rarely denies Mother, but strain as I might I cannot hear Father’s reply, as Bysse, whom Mother is obviously holding, lets out a wail of protest at being restrained. I can sympathise with him. I wish I could wail in the same heartrending and voracious manner at my restriction. I dare not make my presence known. Silence fills the hall and I realised that they have stopped talking. I hear Mother’s footsteps coming towards the door, so I make for a chair grab a book on the table and pretend to be reading, as she walks in carrying Bysse.

“Richard, look after Bysse for me for a few minutes will you? Your father has gone to fetch Richard and Edward Bolton, he wants to discuss farming business and their estate with them and he is bringing them back here. I have much to do before they arrive.”

Her face is flushed. The Bolton’s are our neighbours, we know them well and they are only gentry. She thrusts Bysse into my arms and leaves me.

He has never been overly impressed with me and I am wary of him. I hold him askance remembering sudden wet patches on my coats, but he lets out an enraged yell, his small legs kicking wildly as he struggles to be put on the floor. He runs away his long gown tucked into voluminous napkins as he negotiates his way around chair legs and table legs with astonishing skill.

Lightheaded and excited by the conversation I have overheard, I remove my waistcoat to assist my passage, drop to my knees and negotiate the furniture on all fours like my little brother. I dare not let him out of my sight in case he does something he is not supposed to do, like put something in his mouth, performing somersaults on the furniture or falling over and knocking himself out. I have watched all this before and taken note as Mother and my sisters' look after him, making sure he does not come to any harm. I wonder where my sisters are right at this moment as I scramble around after him. They are much better at brother-minding. Mother must be desperate to leave him with me.

Bysse stops his running, turns to see where I am, looks at me and gives me a wide grin at me before he continues on his escapade, squealing with glee as he goes. This time he negotiates the small space around the back of the double settee near the wall into which my large frame cannot fit. We begin a game of cat and mouse as I try and lure him out. He chortles, hiding and crawling from me at a great rate, while I try and catch him.

"Richard, what are you doing?" Asks Mother, puzzlement heightening her voice as she finds us both on our hands and knees, only half visible behind chairs and tables. I climb to my feet feeling foolish.

"Keeping him amused, Mother, as you asked me to," I answer, brushing myself down and rearranging my clothes.

"So I see," she answers, going to her youngest and scooping him up into her arms. He yells and kicks in protest, he has been enjoying our game. But Mother is firm and adamant, it is his rest time.

"Brought back a few memories, Mother?" I ask. She smiles at me, rubbing her hand fondly over Bysse's dark curls.

“Indeed it has, Richard. Just a few,”

“It won’t be long and he will be breeched, Mother,” I say, knowing she is dreading such a momentous occasion. It will not happen until he is about four, another eighteen months away when long coats have become a menace and are a nuisance to a small boy.

“I suppose there must come a time, Richard,” she says, with such sorrow that I laugh, which in turn causes her to frown at me. “Really, you could show more sensitivity towards your mother’s feelings. Bysse is my baby, I doubt there will be another, therefore this is serious business and no laughing matter.” Indignation is rife in her voice. “As soon as he is breeched your father will want to whisk him off to some strange man-filled school as he does with all you boys. The next time I see him he will be fully grown and hardly remember me. So I may delay it as long as possible.”

“You exaggerate, Mama,” I say with a laugh. “We were breeched at four and did not leave you until we were eleven and really, how could we forget you?” I put my arms around her and Bysse and give them both a hug. She stays there for a moment then pushes herself away from me, straightens the lace cap on her head and clears her throat.

“You only write home or come to Brackenstown occasionally, and it seems only when you want something,” she says, in mock hurt.

“Edlington is easier to get to than Brackenstown. Why don’t you go there more often?” I ask.

“Because there is an emptiness and lack of voice about the Yorkshire countryside that makes me melancholy.”

“How can a countryside have a voice?”

“The countryside has a voice. You men don’t know anything,” she enlightens me, her head on one side, her forehead creased in a frown. Father must be exasperating her too, I think. “Ireland sings, it has a soul, therefore a voice,” she informs me.

“Oh,” I answer, thinking of our beleaguered silent country.

She disappears out the door with Bysse already drooping on her shoulder.

The weather is improving and spring is nearly upon us. After my strenuous exertions I lie full length on the mat covered wooden floor in the sun, close my eyes and feel the warmth flood through me. Sleep creeps up easily and for a moment time is lost.

A poke in my ribs startles me out of my snooze.

“Are you dead, Richard?”

Another smart prod is aimed at my ribs from the owner of a small, square-toed determined slipper. Harder this time.

“Are you dead?” Letty, small and sweet touches me on the face with her hand.

“Papa says that soldiers die sometimes.”

Not this soldier, I think as I open one eye and look at her.

“You’re not dead you have one eye open!” She squeals, jumping to her feet.

I leap up and grab her, bringing her crashing down on top of me. I tickle her as she shrieks, kicks and laughs all at once. She breaks free of me and we chase each other around the room, calling to each other, knocking furniture over until I catch her again, this time swinging her off her feet in a graceful arc and twirling her around, an act, I have discovered, she loves.

“In God’s name, Richard. You’re creating such a din. What are you doing?” Father asks, appearing in the drawing-room window that opens onto the terrace, his mouth agape at our antics, Richard and Edward Bolton, behind him, peer over his shoulder at us, their faces full of curiosity.

Letty collapses against me in a fit of convulsive giggles. Laughing, I lower her gently to the floor. Her white linen cap, lovingly embroidered by Mother, falls off her head freeing her brown hair which tumbles down her back and glints red in the sunlight. Father ushers an amused Mr. Bolton and Edward into the room from the terrace. Edward looks at Letty and I in our laughing dishevelled state and grins at us.

A youth of seventeen, he has his Danish mother’s fine looks and fair hair. He is dressed in country fashion, buff coloured breeches beneath a plain brown fustian waistcoat and frockcoat, his blonde-red hair tied back at his neck. His father is more formally dressed, knowing he was to be visiting us, his suit of dark grey wool, a grey bob wig on his head.

I greet the two men and exchange pleasantries. It is some time since I have seen them. They both shake my hand and smile at Letty and me.

“Letty, run to Mama and tell her that Mr. Bolton and Edward are here,” Father says to the blushing child, who is suddenly aware that all eyes are upon her.

Well taught by Mother and her sisters, aware that Father expects it of her, she remembers her manners and gives the visitors a small bob, then runs out the door minus her cap which I bend down and scoop off the floor.

“You must forgive Richard,” adds Father, turning to the astonished smiling pair.
“Rather high spirited, as you can see.”

I grin, bow, make my retreat and follow Letty. The men laugh together in high good humour as I disappear. Letty, hides from me behind the tall winged chair in the entrance hall, then jumps out at me so we can resume our chasing game. Once again, feeling excited at my future prospects, I catch her and pick her up twirl her around in the air to her giggling, squealing delight. Father, in disbelief, pokes his head out of the drawing-room door to still our rowdy game as Mother comes running down the stairs.

“Stop it. Richard act your age. I have just put Bysse down to sleep. We have company. Put Letty down.”

Obediently I comply while Letty, helpless with giggling, collapses on the floor in a heap of dishevelled skirts and petticoats.

“Letty, behave, yourself. You’re a young lady now,” admonishes Mother as I run up the stairs two at a time, away from them both. “Richard. You should have more sense,” she calls after me as I disappear onto the upstairs landing.

You appear out of your room, Mary, wondering why there is such a loud discord of shouts, laughter, calls and squeals downstairs.

“Letty you stay downstairs with me please. Leave your brother alone,” I hear Mother call as Letty attempts to follow me.

“What does Richard think he is doing?” Mother asks you, when you join her downstairs after passing me with an amused wry smile.

“Oh, Mama. Have you forgotten? It is just high spirits. Richard is back to his normal self,” I hear you answer before I disappear.

You are quite right, Mary. I am.

We sit quietly in Father's company, John, William and I, and George, our brother-in-law, who has returned to us for dinner, glasses of claret in our hands while Edward and Walter are given light ale. The time is approaching for me to leave Brackenstown and return to the Low Countries. Father still has not made any mention of my commission and if I mention it he dismisses me. I am affronted by his attitude but there is little I can do. I have spoken some length to Mother about it and despite her urgent pleas to Father she cannot give me good news. Instead she kisses me, puts her arms about me and tells me not to worry, to have patience, but nothing has happened.

'General M' runs us like an army. He holds us, his troops, by his oratory skill, used to speaking above the noisy rabble of Parliament, his words are as powerful as his literary skills, and he is well known for both. Here is the man who can help me advance in the army through the influence of his brilliant political and humanitarian mind. But for some reason that mind will not listen to me. At this moment, before the fire, we are his silent captive audience, his men of various years, our lives still before us as we sit obediently and quietly listen.

He voices his opinion on the Spanish war and I wait for him to ask my opinion, seeing I have already experienced the preparation of the army and battle first hand, but he ignores my presence and stares at the logs burning fiercely in the fire-grate. Wind-blown rain showers against the long windows covered by heavy damask drapes and shutters.

We know Father has the knowledge of what is discussed in the Cockpit in London, and from meetings of the Privy Council. Nothing is discussed outright, everything is

implied, we gather for ourselves from his statements the truth of the matter. We are informed without being told the gossip of Parliament. He expects what he says to be treated in confidence. Nothing is to be repeated outside the walls of Brackenstown. It is an unwritten rule, but one we know is part of the privilege of being included in such discussions. His experiences in Dublin, Whitehall and Westminster, which seethe and writhe with competition, fighting, jealousies and intrigues between factions, which he considers lowers standards in the functioning of government, is something he is not proud to convey. But to me that is what politics is about. I am relieved that I have no part of it, though John longs to be in the thick of governmental business.

“The Queen is in two minds,” Father continues, drawing on the long stem of his pipe and exhaling a long curl of grey smoke into the air.

We watch and listen. John sits near me, relaxed into the depth of his chair, his long legs crossed at the ankle, his arms folded across his chest, his thoughts enclosed within his mind, his square pale face enigmatic. Father sits within the midst of us in his tall wing-backed chair, closest to the fire. He is the centre around which the family revolves.

“Queen Anne knows the power of the Whigs and bends accordingly for the good of England. We, the Whigs, hold that power. Sarah Churchill has great influence over the Queen and she is a Whig, ambitious for herself and for the Earl. It is rumoured that the Queen is about to make him a Duke.”

“They say he is a Tory rather than a Whig,” I comment, remembering the talk amongst us in camp.

Father draws his breath in, bites the stem of his pipe, does not look at me or reply. Everyone looks at my face as it flames with embarrassment. Only the fire sparks and spits in answer, otherwise it is as if I have not spoken.

“Marlborough wants support from the Whigs,” he continues. “He is not political, though he does understand the political mind. He is first and foremost a soldier, personal politics seem to come second to him. He can be as expedient as the rest of us. The Whigs will support his military campaigns, for the glory of England, and he is the only man that can lead us to that glory, despite what we may think of him privately. But how long is this war going to take and at what cost? There are men alive now who will not be here next Christmas.”

Mother’s indrawn breath of dismay is audible. I feel the sudden thud of my heart against my ribs. She is thinking of me returning to the seat of battle and not returning home. The silence is as dense and deep as the rain muffled world outside the windows. Not one of my brothers meets my eye. Father serves to remind me of my arrogant youth, my mortality, which I have already faced, unbeknown to him, because he is not interested enough to find out. I refuse to think such thoughts too deeply and cast them aside. My brothers exchange looks in the silence. Father makes an ardent study of his pipe as the words sink in. I refuse to be bothered, as Marlborough is unbothered. He is at home with his Countess at Holywell, his house at St. Albans, deeply involved in the preparation for war. Life is life, death is death.

“Marlborough is magnificent on the battlefield,” I intercept, steering the conversation away from the thought of men dying, wanting them to know the man I have witnessed and who John too has witnessed, a man who is an inspiration to his troops. “He is

there right at the head of the army, leading them,” I add with enthusiasm, eager to go on, if questioned, to reveal the brilliance of the man’s tactics. But my brothers, are quiet in front of Father, which irritates me, because out of his presence they pester me.

The Ensign has no place to speak to the ‘General’. The Ensign is ignored and the ‘General’ pretends he does not care. I am not deterred. I see Mother’s head rise from her sewing as I continue. “He anticipates what the enemy is about to do, his foresight is amazing and his strategies have proved too drastic for the Dutch. They are brilliantly planned. The Dutch could not cope with them during the last campaign. He plans a new form of warfare.”

“What I cannot understand,” John says, looking at me. “Is how we have reached this point without further diplomatic action with the French king? How can the war to be successful when the odds are against us? However the presence of England within the alliance is necessary, and there is only one man who can lead us and that is Marlborough.”

Father raises one eyebrow and sucks on his pipe, then opens his mouth without looking at me.

“He knows the twists and turns of the French military strategy and he will put this to good use as he attempts to outwit them. That will be his strength,” Father says. “But the French greatly outnumber the English and the allies, how can we sustain our army when the population is so much less? That is the worry,” He says.

“We are better prepared than the French,” I answer. “They have been fighting wars for about thirty-five years and the army and the country are tired. Everyone knows that King Louis did not want this war initially. He made a pact with King William recognising him as the legitimate King of England. We have been trained in the latest warfare

techniques and French tactics that Marlborough has borrowed from the French and improved upon. We are highly organised and disciplined, our morale is high and Marlborough looks after his men.”

Silence greets my outburst. Father frowns at the fire. John and the others exchange wary glances.

“The financial burden of supporting a war will be through taxation. The government will tax the landowners. The allies will provide as well. They are in this too.” Father nods in agreement. Father, however, knows another side of Earl Marlborough and is unconvinced.

I chip in, determined to have my say. “The French are aggressive and arrogant. The threat of invasion is very real, not only for us but definitely so for our allies, the Dutch Republic. England is vulnerable and the French King knows it. We cannot do anything else but defend our rights and those of our allies.”

My brothers are left pondering upon a world they know little about. They look at me with new eyes, all except John, who pretends he knows all, yet knows only part of my world. Once again I am ignored.

Father does not nod in agreement with my statement as he does with John. “There is the added threat of religion and the chaos it would cause England if the Papists were to govern again,” he says, drawing on his pipe then exhaling, causing long curls of smoke to drift up towards the ceiling. “This threat is in the argument that the Pretender is the rightful heir to the throne and the fact that he is recognised as such by Louis,” Father says. “It is rumoured that the Queen has pangs of conscience about her father being usurped from his throne by her, even though she is strongly Anglican. However, it seems she is troubled by

how she yielded to pressure to get rid of him, despite the necessity of it for the sake of the country. There are those that say she believes herself divinely punished because she cannot produce live children to provide succession. It was a pity her son the Duke of Gloucester died, but he was a weak sickly child. She has tried hard enough, poor thing, seventeen children in all.”

We wonder how much Father really does know. Once more these are words from the centre. He has walked through the long rooms of Kensington House and Hampton Court, when William was King. He has been in the presence of Queen Anne, bowed over her hand in his low and courtly bow, stood with other Irish Privy Councillors, been at meetings at the Cockpit in Whitehall, seen the squat Queen crippled with gout, assisted to her dais by her ever-present attendant Sarah Churchill, to address and consult her council.

“Sarah Churchill is a tall, beautiful woman, her golden hair always perfectly coiffed. She is full of grace and uses the language of the fan. Whatever is conveyed in that presence goes straight back to the Queen and the Earl,” Father continues.

Marlborough. The deep sense of ambition imbibed within the overwhelming conviction of England’s greatness, embedded deeply to direct and spur all of his ambitions, all of his actions, towards one goal. Father knows how I view him. He brings me back to reality from my dreaming. “Marlborough’s ancestors were sheep farmers, when ours were kings and crusaders,” he says, setting any thoughts of admiration filling our heads into their realistic proper place.

Father’s views seem far removed from the army and my experiences, yet in another way they are tightly bound with my life, as I am so dependent upon his good will.

“You have to go, so go. Why procrastinate?” Father says as he stands before me outside the house while the coach waits in the carriageway, the horses harnessed, the coachman sits high on his perch, reins in hand waiting for John and I to depart.

The morning is clear and fresh even though the promise of the sun is a soft glow in the eastern sky. The trees surrounding the house are bursting with bright green buds and filled with the full-throated birdsong of early spring. The cool light creeps over the lawn and touches the newly planted flower beds. In a few weeks they, and the damp spaces beneath the trees, will be bursting with colour from bluebells, tulips and crocus, but I will not be here to see them, I will be back in camp in Holland.

The family are up and have been well before the crow of the cock and now they mill about the carriageway and wait our departure. Our belongings are packed and the horses paw the ground with a jingle of harness ready to take off down the carriageway as soon as they are given leave. The pesky rooks, swoop in to perch on the branches of the elms as if to make sure I am going. They caw and screech loudly and for once I understand why Father is willing to take the musket to them. I look up at their black presence and feel like doing the same myself. My state of mind is affecting me, I reason, as I hate farewells and am in agony as I stand here in front of Father, Mother and the rest. For all of Mother’s pleading, cajoling and pestering, Father still has not relented to my wishes. I am tired of asking and have not mentioned the problem for some time. My heart is laden with disappointment and I am loathe to leave, yet I feel the urge to get away as soon as possible from his constant disapproval.

The servants run in and out of the house carrying baggage in readiness of our departure and Father says we must go if we want to catch the tide, and yes, as usual, he is

right, I am procrastinating, hoping he will tell me I have my commission at the last minute. The thought of his intractability tears me in two because I have not been able to convince him of my sincerity.

Everyone crowds around me to say good-bye. I find it hard to leave this lovely place. I do not know when or if I will be back or if I will ever see them again. The possibility that I may not return is there and we all know it. Father pulls me to him in his familiar firm embrace and I feel the quick brush of his lips on my cheek. He releases me just as abruptly to allow Mother to put her arms around me, she holds me, kisses me tenderly, tears on her face, wishing me well. Then you Mary wrap your arms around me.

Letty buries her face in the skirt of Father's coat, unwilling to say good-bye to me, this brother she has only just become aware of. Everyone, except Father and John, weep copious tears, which makes it difficult for me not to weep with them. John says his farewells and I cannot stand it anymore. I walk away and climb into the coach in an effort to compose myself.

John climbs into the coach, the door closes and he turns and waves to the family out of the window. He is his usual composed self, he knows that he will see them again more than likely. I avert my gaze from his amused smile and watch the flock of family, standing close to each other, gathered in support, waving to us as the coach trundles down the carriageway.

I have made up my mind that I will not return to Brackenstown for some time, the comfort and cossetting have almost been my undoing. It is almost impossible to leave once entrenched. John leans forward and hands me a sealed letter addressed to me in Father's hand. I take it from him and stare at it, hardly daring to hope.

“Why didn’t you give me this before?” I ask, breaking the seal quickly and reading the contents as the coach jolts up the carriageway.

“I wanted to, but he told me not to, not until we were on our way,” Father’s messenger smiles.

I lean out the window before the house disappears at the turn of the drive and wave to them all, the paper in my hand. Father stands apart from the family on the top step under the portico. His hand is raised in quick farewell.

“He could have told me before I left?” I say, exasperated and relieved all at once, sitting back in the seat, incredulous that he would have put me through so much pain.

“Pride, I think. He knew your joy would be hard to reign in and he did not want the other boys to know he had given in to your wishes. Not yet, anyway. They will know in due course. Mother knows. Let it rest,” John answers, as the coach rumbles down the road and away from Brackenstown, the gardens, the trees, the fields, the woods, the magic.

I read the letter again, just to make sure that I have read correctly. There is no doubt. I return to Holland a Captain in Marlborough’s regiment. Father, with the urging of Lord Orkney, and Mother, has bought my commission.

CHAPTER TEN

The Continent

Spring-Summer: 1704

“Over the Hills and Far Away”

The morning air bites my nose and lips and even finds my ears though I have my hat pulled well down and the collar of my coat pulled up. Dawn lightens the sky and the birds, roosting in the dark and mysterious trees in the fields, are beginning to sing. We have been

marching since three in the morning, a long line of silent men, still half asleep.

Marlborough's army going somewhere, we know not where.

“Keep moving,” growls Ashe, riding beside me as those near him walking at a normal pace slow and falter.

They do not respond. He turns his horse and nudges into the line and rides behind

them forcing them to speed up. Some run, some stagger, others balk and fall back behind his horse.

“Keep in line,” he bays, pointing to them with his riding crop. They think he is capable of riding over them. I know he will not do that, but they do not.

Unwilling to say good morning to the day the men closest to me shuffle and dawdle with inertia under the weight of their fifty-pound kits. I shout at them to wake up and keep moving. Dismounting from my horse and giving them a shake and shove if they stop.

“My Lord Duke wants you to step out, not go to sleep. Move!”

They move off and take up their lines with the others, grumbling under their breath about the time of morning, the soreness of their feet, their empty bellies.

“You’re marching in the best time of day,” I yell over their heads after remounting my horse. “Before the sun’s up and scorches you.”

They murmur, a few of them moan. Some shout back at me and I stare into the mass of movement below me trying to figure out who would commit such an affront to an officer of the Queen. They retreat into silence, no one looking at me, their eyes glinting in the torch light.

“It is all right for you high on your horse, young Captain,” offers an Irish accent. I turn in my saddle to find the owner of the voice, an older voice, one that is been recruited from an Irish jail, I am guessing. In the darkness I cannot make out one from the other. They are well camouflaged in the flickering torchlight. There are many Irishmen in their midst.

“Due to the good grace of My Lord Duke, you will soon have your bellies filled,” I tell them.

There is a murmur of agreement and approval amongst them and a hurrah goes up from some within the ranks. They settle into walking at ease as the drummers, the drumsticks held loosely between their fingers, beat the steady insistent tap of the drum. The men know that after about ten miles, when the sun has climbed higher, it will be time to stop and rest, eat and sleep and fortify ourselves for the march tomorrow. Scouts and hired civilians have already ridden ahead and will have commandeered the help of farmers, bargained with them for the use of land and shelter, plied houses and villages for food, oats, fodder, water for men and horses; prepared fires, set up ovens and started baking the bread and cooking the gruel. It will not be long before we smell the bread on the wind and our stomachs will growl with hunger and anticipation of hot food. My Lord, Duke of Marlborough, thinks of everything concerning his soldiers, the march is well-organised and thought out, the morale of the men high.

Ashe hawks and coughs the morning from his throat and spits deftly over his horse. He bursts into a marching song,

“Courage boys, ‘tis one to ten that we return all gentlemen,

While conquering colours we display,

Over the hills and far away.”

His strong baritone startles the men around us, waking them from their sleep-walking, joining the racket coming from the trees in the fields.

“Come on, sing!” he calls to them.

They lift their heads and one or two of them join in.

“Hurrah!” shouts Ashe, and I grin at his enthusiasm. In the torchlight ahead I can see John Murray, the back of his red coat streaked with dust, riding ahead of us, leading our battalion. He turns in the saddle and looks back at us.

“Why all the noise?” he calls.

“Waking them up, sir,” I reply.

“Keeping them moving, sir,” Ashe responds.

Murray turns from us, a black silhouette, riding in the torchlight into the brightening sky.

Ashe and I had been welcomed by Murray, now a major, in the officer’s tent, when we returned to camp.

“It seems General Churchill has been made Commander of the British Infantry and Captain Molesworth and Captain Ashe are to ride at the side of their own companies of men, instead of beside me, getting in the way.” Murray said, turning to others, raising his tankard of ale. The men crowding the tent laughed.

“Another round of toasts for these two,” Murray exulted. “To the success of the campaign, and the guidance of General Churchill. May his leadership be as great as that of his Grace the Duke, and our two young Captains. Molesworth, of great and glorious intent, saved my life in the fortress of St. Michael. Under such grace where can we go wrong?” He asked, downing his drink in a gulp while Ashe and I looked on in red-faced surprise.

The others guffawed into their drinks, laughing at our bewilderment and embarrassment. I had not heard of such a welcome before. But that had been over a year ago.

This march is a mystery. We doubt Murray knows any more than we do about our destination. He gives the orders he receives from the Lieutenant-Colonel and we follow. The Colonel does not know either. We, a vast parade of twenty-one thousand men, thirty-one battalions and sixty-six squadrons English and Dutch troops, have left Bedburg and are heading south-east, further away from the flat monotony of Flanders. We have not been told of our destination. The Duke of Marlborough has something planned, that is obvious, but just what it is, is not our business for the moment.

We, the officers of the Regiment of First Foot, under the command of John Churchill, his brother, ride in pairs beside our battalions of men.

The long line is well protected. Out on the flanks the train is screened from enemy attack by riding dragoons. The cavalry units ride in front and behind the long line of infantry, while the pioneers and the pontoon train are up ahead. The artillery guard, artillery train, guns and carriages bring up the rear. Further back, before the baggage train, are cartloads of civilian workers and women, maids from previous camps, some wives, women of fortune, sutlers and camp followers, ready to strip the shirt off a dead soldier's back and sell it still warm to the next. They call, cry and bawl loudly to each other and to the men as they march. The soldiers, given the chance, in good humour call, cry out and bawl back at them.

"No women to the front of the train," Marlborough orders.

His orders are obeyed. The women stay at the rear of the long line behind the artillery train where they should be. The comfort they provide for the men must be discreet when the army is camped. Any woman found near the officers or in Marlborough's quarters results in the officer being punished and the woman banished without mercy.

"Come, Molesworth, sing!" urges Ashe, loud enough for the whole battalion to hear.

I clear my throat and sing with him. The men near me join in until everyone in the line is singing, which, for the moment, is now only partly visible ahead of us and behind us in the flickering light of torches.

The sound starts as barely a whisper on the air, but caught on the wind it starts to soar with song, followed by a more resounding volume of collected voices in changing register and timbre, close to us with a faint echo in the distance, and a repeated chorus, until, with the rise and fall of the land it settles into a returning canon. Lyrics occupy tongues to divert thoughts and lessen the monotony. Some drone in the bass, others intone tunelessly, some sing in tune in pure tenor voices. I sing along somewhere in between tenor and baritone, sometimes both. The sound of the soldiers' mingled harmony becomes louder then diminishes with the length of the line, so much so that those marching in the front of the train find they sing the first verse of the canon with the soldiers at the rear of the train. The result is a discordant cacophony of sound, synchronisation only apparent to those close within the line, but still they sing, voices carrying over the miles of land setting the air humming with intensity.

Ashe, looks at me with a face spreading grin from under the brim of his gold-laced hat.

The dust of humanity, for that is what we have become, rises into the still morning air kicked up by thousands of marching feet. The sun appears in a blaze of gold over the horizon and the troops become a cheerful lot, no longer tired but full of talk, ribaldry, laughter and a few choice words when they are not singing.

All this activity is hard to miss with so many men on the move. If the enemy cannot see the dust, and to miss that they must be blind, they will certainly hear the noise. A flash on the horizon tells us we are being spied upon by the French who must wonder where we are heading and for what purpose

Ashe reaches over and nudges me in the ribs with his riding crop to pull me out of my daydreaming. I must have been singing out of tune.

“You’re better off at soldiering than singing. Be quiet, you’re giving me a headache.”

I shut up while he sings in his tolerable voice along with the long serpentine line which winds its way into and over the hills, becoming more visible as the sky lightens.

Fingerlike rays of promised heat from the sun stretches around corners and across streams, divides through the branches of trees laden with bright green of summer. It touches our heads, faces and hands, gilds our colours, the lace on our uniforms and hats, the tall mitred hats of the infantry. Everything that is gold shines. The mist that lapped at our feet in the dark, curls up and sweeps away as we move between fields soon ripe for harvesting.

The aroma of baking bread heralds the camping area and with the sun well up we march in and disperse. After we have taken our fill of bread, gruel and ale, most rest and fall asleep. Ashe and I make for our tents out of the penetrating sunshine and fall onto our campbeds, only to rise for a meal later in the day.

Every day is the same, one after the other, about ten to twelve miles covered in a march after an early morning start, then we rest. Our destination is still a mystery. We think we are going to meet the French on their own territory for a battle but the march takes us further south and we find we are heading down the border of Saxony and Lorraine towards Bavaria.

The men's woollen regimental coats are turned inside out to protect the colours against dust and rain. The long snake that travels for miles over the undulating farmland is now coloured mostly buff. French spies follow us at a distance, black silhouettes on the horizon, a flash of light from a spyglass signalling their presence. They have not left us.

"We are heading into Germany, I think" Ashe says, screwing up his eyes and squinting against the glare of the sun that sends a heavy odour of unwashed bodies and heat into the air. "Or perhaps we are heading the long way around to strike at the centre of France," he adds.

I frown at that. To double back would surely test the patience of the marching men. Rumours are rife. The idea that we may be going to confront the French on their own soil is one of them.

The earth shakes and the sound of pounding hooves grows louder. We turn in our saddles to see the advance of the Duke's coach with its six horses, entourage of coachman, and guards, accompanied by eight mounted Aides, resplendent in their bright red coats with gold lace, scarves and flashes which denote their rank.

How proud they are. Straight backed, they do not turn their heads or acknowledge the long line of men swearing, singing and talking their way into Bavaria as the coach

rumbles by. Some ride in front, some behind, others are near the Duke at the side of the coach. They form a formidable protection. We salute the Duke. They pass, kick up the dust in our faces without a glance at us, mere officers of the Foot, or at the trudging men. I glimpse the straight handsome profile of Marlborough settled deeply within the dimness of the coach. A shout goes up from the men in the line.

“Corporal John.”

The cry is taken up by others as they glimpse their Commander-in-Chief in the coach and raise their hats and shout their allegiance to him.

His influence and magnetism is such that they are ready to do his bidding, ready to march in all weathers along these rough, rutted, dusty roads. They walk together in comradeship forced upon them by the man who has taught them discipline and soldiering, who has given them a sense of honour, filled their bellies and their purses, made them “gentlemen”, for a cause they can barely understand, except that they march for England and for the great General who rides ahead of them. That is enough.

The coach takes the rise and fall of the land with ease carrying him to the head of the line where he will join the cavalry and ride with them. The cavalcade becomes small and insignificant disappearing into the distance alongside the long line of marching men.

The proud ride of the Aides excites me. I am hardly content yet, though I have my commission. There is only one place I want to be and that is beside him.

Marlborough, wearing the black band of mourning on his arm, a travesty against the red of his uniform, had returned as a Duke to his army the previous year. Rumours had quickly spread throughout the camp about the death of his only son, The Marquis of Blandford, aged eighteen, from Smallpox one month before.

The waxen-faced Duke inspected our regiment, the only scars obvious to all were the deepened lines around his mouth and the black rings under his eyes that emphasised the pallor of his face. His slightly protruding eyes only occasionally revealed his clash with cruelty and sorrow through failed fortune, an even bigger blow because fortune was usually kind to him, or he was able to manipulate it to suit him, but this time he had no control over fate. Perhaps, the revelation of failed fortune was the premonition of his demise and that was having an effect. The Queen had made him a Duke and he had lost his male heir. His dynasty was important to his ambitions, Father had told me that, as it was to all men, and now his dynasty seemed without a future as his other children were daughters.

Ashe is right in his observation, we appear to be heading even further south, towards the Moselle, because the countryside has changed into valleys that accompany long rivers.

“This time we may see real action instead of all those tiresome skirmishes we had to go through last year,” I comment. “They were a waste of time and brought no victory.”

“But they did give us access to the waterways to transport the guns,” says Ashe. “We are trudging miles to nowhere which is somewhere in the Duke’s mind. So last year was not completely wasted.”

Tiny hamlets and villages with their black and white timbered houses dot the countryside. The men reverse their coats to reveal their colours and fall into step as they march into the towns to the rhythm of the drums and the high fluting music of the *huitbois*. Clapping, cheering, shouts and calls, the clatter of horses’ hooves and wheels over

cobblestones, echoes off the houses as the line compacts itself and squeezes through the narrow streets. The villagers run alongside us, hang out windows, swing on gates, stand in doorways, arms folded, or hands to their faces, shocked, surprised, scared, excited at the sight of us. “Where are you going?” they cry in German. Families call and wave, young girls blush as some of the men answer them and say they know not where. Children laugh, run and march with us, imagining themselves part of the glory to come. Old men watch the slow advance of sacrificial youth through veiled and cautious eyes. So many men, going somewhere. They know not where. We know not where.

Teutonic femininity cascades into the streets. Giggling, the young girls and women call to us, throw flowers in our path, which are crushed beneath the horses’ hooves and the men’s feet. The petals lie bruised, devoid of colour, flattened on the cobbles.

It is difficult to keep our eyes on the road ahead as fair-skinned beauties dressed in long skirts and embroidered aprons, blonde hair covered in lace caps, caught in swinging plaits, wave, smile, clap and cry out to us. Ashe has difficulty restraining himself, his face flushed, his eyes bright, his smile splitting his face as he gazes down at the bright upturned faces that look at us with admiration, fuelling our pride. In response, we ride taller and more proudly, and the men march straighter and with a livelier step. I make a study of maintaining a cool exterior. Femininity, after the all male world that we live in, is refreshing and dangerous.

“Such beauty!” exults my friend, his eyes shining, voice tight with feeling as he catches a rose, raises it in homage of the thrower and kisses it, tucking it into the band of his hat. His teeth shine brilliantly white in contrast to his sun-browned face. “Do you realise we may never see such beauty again?” he asks me, thinking of what must lie ahead. The thought has passed through my mind, but I do not linger on what may become of us; there

is little we can do to affect the course of time. “Skin like porcelain. Enough to drive a man wild,” he continues, still looking at the girls who are now running beside our horses looking up at us, keeping up the temptation .

“Precisely. Yield the sword with frustration. Just what my lord Duke wants,” I reply, but he does not hear me.

“How much further? How much longer? I want to yield the sword now,” he cries. I laugh. He turns to watch the waving populace while we clatter over yet another bridge and out of the village onto a dirt-tracked road. “All this ripe womanhood ready for the picking,” he sighs.

The camp settles into sleep. Against light and darkness, shadows creep through the cluster of tents as the women camp followers slink into the men’s arms. They laugh, sing, dance, talk and drink with them in the eating tents during the day. At night they appear like dreams. I watch with secret envy from a distance the reflected shadows of love, the undulating hump of lust and release. I dare not go anywhere near them, but I wonder at them, so carefree and reckless in their behaviour, different women to those I am used to.

A larger shadow enters my vision and distracts me, moving fast, following a smaller shadow. In the darkness I screw my eyes up in disbelief trying to discern if the chasing figure is who I think it is.

Tempted, Ashe follows a sprite as she flits from tent to tent. Doubled up, so he cannot be seen, he grabs her mid-flight. She lets out a scream which he promptly stifles, his hand over her mouth. They roll on the ground, skirts wrapping themselves around his legs as he fumbles through the yards of cloth to the place where he must not go.

“Ashe, stop. If you are seen by anyone you will be put out of the army. Sent home. Or put upon the wheel and lashed. What are you thinking?” I hiss at him, dragging him off the surprised woman, lying fully stretched on the ground, skirts up, a shapely pair of stockinged legs, spread-eagled, on show, enough to stir the coldest man. Even I am tempted, but not here, not under the nose of Marlborough. I want to advance in the army, not destroy my career. Why the occupants of the adjoining tents are not investigating the noise, I am not sure. She was heading for some tryst. I suppose they know if they show interest, they will be punished as well, not to mention the woman.

“She will be lashed and banished without mercy. So will you for bad example,” I admonish him, sounding like a schoolmaster with an errant schoolboy.

I clamp his hat back on his head, turn him around and push him ahead of me away from her while she scrambles to her feet and runs quickly in the opposite direction out of sight, hiding, no doubt, only to return when we are gone.

Ashe looks about to burst with frustration, his face suffused a bright red, his eyes bloodshot with disappointment and the realisation of his loss. He cannot speak for anger which distorts his face and he turns and gives me a swipe of his fist in resentment. I avoid the blow but my recoil throws me off balance and my rump hits the churned up mud between the tents as I watch his disappearing back. Quickly, I scramble to my feet and run after him, catching him near our quarters.

“How dare you, Molesworth,” he spits at me in fury and pushes me away. “I need some relief, damn you.”

“We all do Ashe. But you know the consequences. You would be disgraced. Do you want that?”

“There was no one around.”

“But there was likely to be. The guards are on patrol. You know the rules.”

The misery in his eyes is acute and I almost feel sorry that I have rescued him. What harm would it have done, I think. He may not have been seen and he would be a much happier fellow in the morning to ride beside. “There are other ways, Ashe.”

“Only one way,” he says, looking at me.

“Toss yourself off,” I answer, as I walk away. “How else can we survive?” I say over my shoulder.

“True,” comes a voice from a neighbouring tent as I walk towards my own.

“That is not enough for me,” he shouts at my back.

“Then save it for the sword,” answers the voice.

I leave him be.

It is best that we, the Officers of Abstinence, those that have no accompanying women, do not think on that which we cannot enjoy and are not supposed to want for. After all, these women are not of our class. But despite our station, we are only men and easily stirred by sight and imagination.

Marlborough would have us abstain as he himself does, though the rumour abounds that the Duchess was keen to follow him on this campaign. No doubt she would have been a great distraction for him and perhaps even may have softened his resolve. Perhaps he knows that. She is a strong willed woman and Father says she knows how to manipulate the Duke, which is unimaginable to me. How could this man, this great General, be manipulated by anyone, let alone a woman? His refusal of her is an indication of how

seriously he views his profession as a soldier and he is an example to us. We need no distraction from our task on this long march. We have our future to think about, or lack of it, to sober us. We need to prepare for what is ahead and to provide a good example to our men. We cannot participate in such behaviour. Marlborough has his reasons. Abstinence sharpens the sword.

Ashe, still smarting from his lost opportunity in camp, has been silent and morose with me the further south we go.

“It is your fault I have had no relief,” he badgers me. I had not been forgiven. “It is so long since I had a woman.”

“It’ll be sometime further yet. Look there is the river, the Moselle,” I say, pointing through the trees at the rapid run of the river nearby, the reflection off its surface mirror like in the sun.

Ashe, his longing forgotten, looks at the river in amazement. “We must be heading into France.”

“No,” I insist. “We are too far south to head back into France.”

“The Duke’s fooling the French?” Ashe queries, looking at me with raised eyebrows.

“Maybe. Perhaps. We’ll soon see.”

Murray, in a brief moment of introspection, observes that this battle we are heading for will be a large one. There is little doubt about that by the growing numbers in our train.

We relax in our afternoon camp. The wind stirs through trees and we are gifted intermittently with the stench of the stables, horses and latrines, then it drifts the other way and we are saved again and can breathe more easily. The hot, hazy sun induces sleep and many of the men nap and doze the hours away. The fields that surround our large encampment are full of blue, purple, red and yellow wildflowers, red poppies and the turning faces of sunflowers. Our camp is visible to all for miles around. The French still watch us. The Marshals Villeroy and Boufflers, witness our slow and dusty progress, from a safe distance.

Marlborough keeps everything to himself, for even within his army there are men who will stoop to the lowest for the passing of gold. He, himself, must have spies in the French court and even in the French army.

“The Duke takes a risk with our exposure,” Murray comments, looking out over the fields towards the purple haze of early evening covering the distant horizon, “The French could attack us anywhere here. Why is he doing this?”

“He seems to know the French mind. Surely their formal methods of warfare come into account,” I answer.

Murray is unconvinced and uneasy.

“The whole enterprise disturbs me. I have never experienced such a long march as this and through country surrounded by the enemy. We are headed into an unknown, the likes of which we have not seen before,” he pauses, and looks at me sitting opposite him, the expression on his face as troubled as his mind. We know what he is thinking but nothing is voiced. Instead, we lapse into silence.

Survival is uppermost in my mind, a state of mind which I take for granted. I rarely think of death and if I do, the thought is immediately banished in case it lowers my courage. I certainly do not discuss it. Survival hovers over me like an ever-present bird, always there. I am a survivor. There is no need to dwell on something one had no control over. However, I am determined to return, to live my life out as I planned to. To think of our demise, no matter how possible, is tantamount to tempting fate, only the future must be thought of. For me that future means survival. Death plays no part in my plans.

The Moselle and the Rhine join. Here, at Coblenz, everyone in the line thinks we are going to confront the French, even the French think we are going to confront them. Rumours have run through the battalions that they are on the march, heading towards us here, led by Marshall Tallard who had once been the French ambassador at the English court. Now, he is our enemy and his spies are more obvious, closer to our train, but then, so are Marlborough's spies close to Tallard, and his army watches them watching us.

The tall spires and houses within the walls of Coblenz beckon us on. The French have arrived and are waiting for us to turn north into France. Supplies are gathered and our numbers are boosted by a large number of, some saying, five thousand Hanoverians and Prussians. The snake has become blue, green, yellow and red.

At dawn, we set out. The advancing party of engineers construct boat bridges over the rivers and the long line of infantry break step, followed by the guns and wagons, to cross to the other side. The bridges bob and shake with the swiftness of the current that runs beneath the glowering fortress of Ehrenbreitstein perched on its hill. We dismount and lead our horses over the bridges and the men balance carefully to keep their footing. We

march past the castle, move on through the city, turn south towards the Rhine then continue on away from the French. Sometime in the early morning, they will realise, we have disappeared from their sights. We can only imagine the annoyance of Marshall Tallard. We are smug, pleased and excited. We are out-thinking the French and we are not going to confront them in France.

Deeper into Germany we go. The German princes, Marlborough's allies, want this massive army upon German soil.

The countryside around us during the weeks of marching, has evolved slowly into wooded slopes terraced with vineyards that step down towards the River Rhine. The activities of our long line are overlooked by castles perched precariously on towering cliffs, points and escarpments. Our bellies are full of rich wine, easy and sweet on the palate. It deadens the pain of the long march and warms our innards. The road disappears and we head inland up through the wooded hills beside the river into the Taunus mountains. The sky, once so immense, blue and sun-filled, grows heavy and descends in layers of grey clouds towards the trees. Mist sweeps over the tops of the forest until it envelopes us and the clouds release torrential rain.

We falter, slip and slide in the mud and the ranks of happy marching men disappear into a miserable, drenched lot who no longer sing. Our breath comes in pants adding clouds of moisture to that already around us. Our bodies ache with the fatigue of battling the mud- bath of the terrain; the constant onslaught numbs our minds. Our cloaks and hats no protection, we wade up to our knees. We lead and cajole our horses to take the steep slopes and heavy mud. My horse's pelt runs with rain, steams, drips, and stinks. Men fall to their knees and cannot get up unless hauled up by those around them. The hospital set up at Heidenheim fills up and still men are carted off each day in Marlborough's especially

designed carts for such a purpose until the hospital overflows and taverns and churches have to be found for shelter.

In camp Ashe and I sit with Murray and listen to the constant tattoo of rain upon the temporary cover of a make-shift canvas shelter. We have lit a fire under the protection of canvas but the wet wood spits and smokes sending showers of sparks scattering in the burner. We gather pine cones as we march and keep them covered so we will have some warmth at least when we stop. The stench of wet wool, clothes and horses is suffocating as the men sit huddled around fires.

“There is an intensity of purpose about this expedition I find disturbing,” comments Murray. “We may arrive at our destination after all this to find that once again there is a stand-off with the French,” he turns from looking at the rain and looks at us.

“I do not think so. This confrontation is going to be important. The Duke would not have brought us this far for nothing. He is going to bring France to its knees once and for all,” I reply.

“We aren’t here to question,” answers Ashe, aware as I am that other men are close-by. “Is it not our duty to obey orders without thought and not ask questions?”

Ashe and I look at each other warily. I look around to make sure that our conversation cannot be overheard. Abercrombie, still Orkney’s eyes and ears, for once is not near us, being entrenched with Marlborough’s entourage further ahead of the main train, however, it is still risky to speak freely.

The competition and rivalry for promotion amongst the officers is intense, I have discovered, and much talk goes on unchecked to the detriment of some careers. Resentment of social rank increases fervour for promotion by those of lesser rank, who

wish to laud it over them. No doubt that is the reason for Abercrombie's inordinate interest in me. He wants to pull me off my high perch, or one that he regards as high.

Murray turns back to the rain. "We have come so far. When and how will we return?" He asks looking out over the muddied ground of the camp, the pools of water lying inches deep around us.

"England does seem a world away," I answer, as I lean forward, my arms folded, elbows on knees. We have sent letters home and been told not to reveal our whereabouts or where we were heading. That demand was easy to carry out as most of us had no idea anyway, except now we knew that we were heading into Germany.

"Marlborough defends the right of England to remain Protestant and prevent the French from expanding further, becoming stronger, isolating us in a sea of French strength. We need to be here," Ashe says. "Not to mention the added complication of Louis' support of the Pretender," I continue. "He vowed to uphold the faith of the Church of Rome during his Coronation. An oath like that is taken seriously. Perhaps Marlborough wants to clear the way to Vienna. Perhaps his plan is not to attack the French but their supporters, the Bavarians. Why else would we be heading into Germany?"

I raise my eyebrows at him. He has told me something of his family history. I know He is a Yorkshire Papist despite his silence on the subject. He is descended from an ancient Catholic family who had isolated and embedded themselves deeply in the Yorkshire countryside during the time of Queen Elizabeth, when their faith had been threatened. In doing so, they had kept the faith within themselves and their neighbours. They were also adept at concealing their true allegiance and this, born through survival, was an easy instinct in them, as it is in Ashe. He does not fool me. Such idealism and faith lies still

within him. Old Yorkshire families had their faith entrenched in them over centuries. I cannot imagine Ashe discarding such heritage that easily, though with the politics of the moment I can understand his silence about it.

His contribution to this battle confuses me. In being part of it he is fighting with himself. He has assured me that he fights for the right of England, Protestant, Catholic or otherwise. But despite his Popish sympathies he is still my friend, and a good true man. I do not hold his faith against him as some might, and as far as I am concerned I will not question him about it. His secret is mine.

Murray has had enough discussion. He says he does not want to hear more and pulls his cloak about him, bids us good-night and runs through the rain towards his tent.

“Moments like this make me realise how much I want to live,” Ashe comments watching Murray disappear into the rain.

“Surely, that is good, for it means we shall?”

“No one can be certain,” Ashe says grim-faced.

“It is best not to dwell on it.”

“I am also beginning to realise what my father meant when he said I was ‘playing at soldiers,” Ashe adds thoughtfully. “At this moment I feel I am.”

“Your father, too?” I ask in surprise as I look at him. “Then your father must be a brother to mine. My father also thought I was playing at soldiers. His opposition to my commission was monumental in its capacity. When will they realise that we’re not playing games? We’ll prove it to them by coming through unscathed and returning home,” I answer, trying not to think too deeply about Brackenstown. I close my eyes briefly and banish the thoughts.

Ashe sighs into the waterfall pouring off our shelter and takes a deep draught from his mug of wine. "Home in Yorkshire seems quite desirable at the moment, even farming life attracts me."

I laugh. "It would never attract me. I am no farmer. Be careful Ashe you do not prove your father right."

He looks thoughtful. "I rebelled against my father as you did yours. I cannot prove my father right, anymore than you can prove your father is."

"But our fathers' still control us, we cannot help but acknowledge that for good or ill," I conclude.

"Perhaps this battle will prove it once and for all."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bavaria

The Schellenberg

2 July 1704

The Red Danube

The hill looks innocuous enough. Covered in woods at its base it has a large oval plateau on its summit. From our campsite near the River Wörnitz, fifteen miles away, the Hill of the Bell shimmers in the heat haze. We narrow our eyes against the sun and study it. Our camp is on high ground and we have the advantage of being able to see for miles around. Not far from the hill lies the walled town of Donauwörth, occupied by the French. Around its base winds the River Danube.

“You can see it is bell shaped,” Murray says, pointing to it.

“We are going to fight the French there?” Ashe asks, hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

“On the morrow,” answers Murray. “French and Bavarian troops are entrenched in the fortress.”

“They have the advantage being on top of the hill,” I add.

“Yes. They will be able to see us when we cannot see them. It is not going to be an easy fight.”

Marlbrough has led the long train all through the march. Altogether the Allied force numbers sixty-eight battalions, one-hundred and seventy-one squadrons and forty-eight guns. The villages slipped by becoming closer and closer together, Weinheim, Ladenburg, Heidelberg, Wiesloch, Sinzheim, Eppingen, Lauffen. One after the other we marched through them until we arrived here at this large high campsite overlooking the surrounding countryside.

The Duke's quarters are abuzz with activity. Aides charge back and forth, generals rush to and fro. The Duke is ensconced most of the time within his campaign tent with Prince *François Eugène of Savoy* who joined him at Mundelsheim. Their heads together they pour over plans of battlefields and exchange views, planning strategy.

Marlbrough had welcomed the Prince with military splendour and a lavish banquet, as only the Duke can provide, then later the Prince accompanied the Duke on the day's march to Gross Heppach where a parade of nineteen squadrons of the English cavalry was presented to him. By all reports, Marlborough's pride had been immense. The Prince had nothing but praise for the demeanour of the troopers and the state of their persons. The Duke and Prince also met the other allied commander of the army, at Gross Heppach, Louis, Margrave of Baden, amidst welcoming ceremonies and yet another banquet.

The Prince comes into my vision briefly but long enough to notice the short, slightly built swarthy man. His face is pock-marked with small closely set eyes in a jutting lower-lip Hapsburg face. His obstinacy, boldness, cunning and experience as a soldier and commander are well known, and he and the Duke have become good friends. Thirteen

years younger than Marlborough, his presence is forceful. He reminds me of a trapped animal intent on survival, a view, of course, which I keep to myself. He is the complete opposite of the restrained and handsome Duke; and unlike Marlborough he is quick to show his feelings and startles everyone with his outspokenness, everyone except the Duke, it seems. Otherwise he is approachable and courteous, as much as Princes can be. Everyone knows where they stand with him. His is a military presence as strong as the Duke's. Together they are a powerful team with one goal in mind, to oust the French.

Tension runs high amongst us and we check and re-check that everything is in order before we march into battle. Ashe and Murray are as busy as I am and we have not spoken much or in any depth about what will happen, but closer to evening we are given our orders by Murray who later seeks us out.

"If anything should happen to me, will you give my wife this?" he says, handing me a folded and sealed letter. I nod and take it from him.

"Of course," I answer, frowning at him. "I hope that you will do the same for me, regarding my parents, if anything should happen to me."

"Same here," adds Ashe, and Murray nods to us both.

The seriousness of his words brings the enormity of what we are about to face directly into our thoughts. We all look at each other in silence. None of us know whether we will return.

"We will return," I say with a laugh to try and lighten his mood. "We will all look back on this and think how foolish we were to worry so much."

Murray smiles at me. "Dear Molesworth, thank-you, and good luck to you Molesworth and you Ashe," he says, shaking our hands, then he leaves us. I watch him stride away into the evening dusk alight with fireflies and smoke shadows from the fires.

He has come to terms with whatever is going to happen tomorrow, but the fatalistic streak in the man disturbs me. The letter rests in my hand like a dry and delicate withered leaf. I look down and see the fine sloping scrawl of his hand on the page. I put the letter amongst the papers and look forward to giving it back to Murray after all this is over and laughing with him about our fears.

The camp is hushed as the ritual of evening progresses, for we know that for some of us it is our last. The low voices of the regimental chaplains' intone prayers for strength and victory on the morrow over the rows of bent heads. Some soldiers kneel on the turf, others stand staring at their own mortality behind closed eyes as thoughts turn to God, or home, or the forthcoming battle.

We are pulled from our beds by the drums in the early hours of the morning. The camp swarms with activity. The cavalry and pioneers have already been sent ahead. A contingent of nearly six-thousand infantry, the Imperial Grenadiers and squadrons of horse have marched into the night led by General Goor, the only Dutch General who is sympathetic to Marlborough and one whom the Duke likes. Our regiment of Foot led by Lieutenant-Colonel White, lines up, waiting for orders to march with the other English and Dutch troops, about twenty-five thousand allied soldiers altogether. We step out into the night and make our way in two long columns over pitted rough roads towards the Schellenberg.

The Boschberg woods at the base of the steep and wooded hill are fresh, cool and silent after the heat of the day's march. Our battalion falls into line behind others already lined up within the dense shelter of the trees to await the arrival of the rest of the infantry who are marching behind us. Above us upon the northern slope of the hill are the old fortifications from a previous battle in the sixteen hundreds. We cannot see the top of the hill as it is shielded by a high parapet.

The steady beat of the drums is the only sound ahead of us and around us. We are all tense and silent. I sit upon my horse before the mass of men behind us, in front of the group that I will lead into battle, while Ashe, further over from me does the same. We glance at each other across the lines of red but there is no other communication between us. Up ahead, Colonel White waits on his horse at the head of the regiment for orders to come from General Churchill for us to move. The hour moves slowly and we think we are never going to leave our wooded spot. The last lot of infantry have no sooner fallen into place than the first wave, under the cover of fire from Colonel Blood's artillery, is ordered up the hill. We watch as they begin to move through the trees and into the clearing on the way up towards the summit.

We watch and wait.

The sound of cannon reverberates down the hill. The shock quakes the ground beneath our feet. My horse jumps in fright, his shanks shivering beneath my legs. He throws his head back and I pull on the reins as he attempts to back away from the noise. His skittishness worries me as he never usually behaves in such a manner. Perhaps he can sense the tension in the air around us or my nervousness upon his back as he moves his head and his eyes roll white. I have to concentrate hard, press my knees to the saddle to keep my seat

and bring him under control. Concentration eases my tension. He stands still at last, his ears pricked back, listening to the rumble of sound around us.

Cannonade erupts from Donouwörth and the ground shudders in response. The enemy can see us rallying and massing at the foot of the hill, though many of us are hidden by the woods. They fire down upon us at will but we stand our ground. We can see nothing except the moving mass of ranks of men and officers on horses before us. Men start to fall even before we have moved from our assembly point. The intent is to hold our fire and to get to the top and break the barricade. Shouts from the first wave echo down the hill. They climb higher. Black smoke billows down the hillside and sweeps through the woods. The familiar acrid smell fills our nostrils. My eyes sting and my stomach ties itself into a now familiar knot.

The ground quakes beneath us again as the great guns fire and cannon answer from the town nearby. The screams and cries of men dying and injured near the parapet seem louder, though they are far above us and we cannot see them. We are oblivious to everything except that which overwhelms our senses. Cannon, foaming fire, the explosion of impact, the sharp crack of musket and pistol fire, the smell of cannon smoke.

The now familiar feeling of anticipation, eagerness combined with fear, tenses every muscle in my body. My mouth is dry, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth and my heart pounds. I sweat under my woollen coat, wig and hat and try and block out the sounds coming from the top of the hill. I glance over the group of men by my side. They stand shoulder to shoulder as they have been ordered, waiting their turn to move. Silently they stare ahead, their faces white and uncertain. Some shake and sweat, occasionally glance at me, others stare into the foliage of the woods listening. The village church bell

tolls, accompanying the sound of cannon. We know that the Allied soldiers have already overtaken the town and the townspeople have fled.

My heart beats at such a rate I think it will stop. I hate this waiting. We are about to enter Dant  Alighieri's *Inferno*. The sooner we do so the better. I want to move, have something to do, put off thinking, I want action. My horse senses my tension and eagerness. He prances and rears. I rein him in and bring him under control.

Black smoke rolls down the hill, through the trees and over us. I clamp my gloved hand to my mouth so I will not choke and breathe deeply into the leather in an effort to calm myself. The sound of drums changes and is louder, the gunfire and cries of the men up ahead increases as the second wave goes in and enters the fray. My jaw aches as I clench my teeth, as does my hand clutching the hilt of my sword. The waiting is the worst. I want to be at the top, tearing at the French with my bare hands. Action is all, nothing less will do.

The second wave gone we are ordered to move up into place to await our turn. Marlborough himself has led the first two waves and rides down the hill through the trees to confer with General Goor, who turns to Colonel White and speaks loudly to him over the din. Murray is up ahead not far behind the Colonel. I see him turn and wave the men behind him onwards as we begin to move. Near the top of the hill the Colonel dismounts and abandons his horse as do most of the officers including Murray. Ashe and I dismount and tie our horses to the branches of the trees, leading our men over the rough terrain and up the steep side of the hill towards the summit.

The Ensigns raise the Colours high. The trees block our vision. The leaders disappear then reappear in and out of ditches and hollows amongst the tree trunks, and surrounding bushes. We slip, slide into and crawl our way out of fascine filled ditches and

trample the dead and injured in our efforts to haul ourselves closer to the crest of the parapet.

Shouts and screams, the clash of swords and the clap of musket fire lead us forward. We are now near the top. I catch a glimpse of White, and Murray not far behind him, then look up and see that the parapet bristles with the muskets and guns trained down upon us from the escarpment, cannon and round -shot, case-shot erupt in streaks of flame and smoke.

Shot whizzes around my head. Men around us fall but still we go on, clambering over the fallen, over the flattened trees and bushes, the injured, scrambling into and out of craters formed by bounding cannon. Most of my men are still moving. To survive they crawl, cling, climb and claw their way as close to the earth as possible to avoid the fire that shoots over our heads. I wonder to myself as we draw closer and find ourselves in a large hollow, the death angle, how we are going to be able to get over the parapet which seems to hang directly above us. The angle is full of dead and injured from the handpicked first advance waves of infantry, Orkney's men. Men I know. They lie at our feet and to reach the parapet we pile the bodies high and use them to maintain our footing. There is no time to think. We know we just have to reach the top and go over. The noise above the parapet deafens us.

Cannon erupts. I flatten myself into a body of a dead infantryman, my face buried in his red coat my nose full of the smell of his freshly shed blood, as the shockwave lifts the side of the hill and ripples through the dead and dying beneath us. Cannonballs bound down the hill at speed near me, decapitating those who are upright and their heads roll away gathering dust. Trees and bushes uproot and topple as the earth explodes, tears out the sides of trenches and scatters soil, mud and fascines over us, those beneath us, and those

further down the hill who struggle to climb up. Blood vessels burst in our eyes and noses. The front of my coat, shirt, Steinkirk and gorget are covered in blood that pours from my nose. My ears ring. I am deafened. The sounds of the battle are muffled and distant. I turn and look behind me. Most of the men behind me rise. I clamber to my feet, shout at them. Lead them on again, as others do around me.

Murray, his fear gone, climbs over the top of the crest. The remainder of the regiment are coming out of the woods up the hill, the standards held high, mass after mass, wave after wave. Murray is over the parapet. He leaps to his feet, looks at the scene. He turns to beckon us on. His sword raised, his arms outflung, his mouth open in a wild yell of encouragement. He is fixed within my vision. An explosion of cannonade rocks us and throws us to the ground again. Murray has disappeared over the top and most of his men after him. The higher we move, the faster time goes. We reach the top. Time slows, stops and collapses in the cataclysm that roars above the crest and on the plateau.

Here hell awaits.

The mist clears before my eyes. I gasp for breath as if I have been run through the lungs. A light rain begins to fall and the ground turns to mud beneath me.

I cannot remember clearing the top of the parapet. I must have scrambled up the side and flung myself over the top. I am on the plateau and hand-to-hand fighting rages around me. The flat side of a broadsword has knocked me to my knees, my face in the dirt, while someone falls on top of me. I roll over and push them off. It is the soldier who was about to kill me. My saviour is fighting above me. I have to help him. Sword in hand I leap

to my feet. I am too late. The soldier who saved me is cut down. My vision suffuses with red.. I raise my pistol and shoot the exultant Frenchman between the eyes.

The cannon have ceased. The land lies still, the silence broken by the sound of moaning and screaming from the wounded and dying. I stand bewildered. The silence as deafening as the cannonade has been. There is some sporadic fighting, but most of the French and Bavarians have dropped their weapons and are running away across the top of the plateau.

The bodies of those on the ground near me shiver and writhe with the thunder of hooves up the hill. I glance around to see the charge of cavalry led by Marlborough. He is surrounded by his Aides and followed by the rest of the cavalry, their swords drawn, bellowing as they charge. They pass me in a welter of thudding hooves, kicking up dust and clods of bloodstained mud as they ride over the bodies on the littered ground. They strafe the plateau without mercy. I collapse back on my knees pistol and sword still in my hands. I have lost my hat and wig but not my head. For that I am grateful. The enemy runs and leaps over the parapet. They slip and slide down the hill into the woods. Some jump into the Danube to try and escape. The cavalry charge onwards through the carnage swiping their swords, killing any Frenchman or Bavarian foolish enough to be still alive and standing, not running.

Marlborough, his triumphant run over, rides back to the plateau, the rest of the French and Bavarian troops still running over the plains below. His Aide holds the bridle of his horse as he dismounts. He walks about the bloodied earth crammed with bodies and gives the order for the infantry to report to their Colours. His Aides and Generals surround

him, still on their horses, sombre and white-faced with exhaustion, covered in blood and dirt, one bleeding heavily from his leg, the blood running over the flank of his horse, dripping on the ground. He's upright but white, he glances at me as I stare at him. Even the cool Abercrombie looks battle-shocked, his sword, red with blood, still clutched in his hand, as if he is afraid to let it go. The Duke dismounts and stands aside from the rest. He is alone. He does not speak or look at them as he inspects the tormented field. The watching men wait. His face never changes. I watch him unobserved while my feet squelch in the blood of our enemies and that of our own.

Murray's not amongst the officers who are rounding up the soldiers still alive and sorting out those who are injured. Ahead of me I see the first and second wave of Foot lying slaughtered to almost every man. Amongst them I recognise Colonel White injured and General Goor killed. The blue and red uniforms of French and English lie together in a general mixing of blood, the toppled gold, white, red and blue standards of the regiments lie crushed and battered. The fight on the top of the parapet has been hand to hand and ferocious. Bodies lie without heads and those who still have heads, have their eyes gouged out. The dead display broken necks from being strangled and open wounds which spill brains and entrails from pistol-shot delivered at point-blank range.

I have fought in hell and now I stand amongst it. The mutilation of the men around me, some of them still alive and in agony, is horrifying. Battling the mist that threatens to blind me I will the world to stop spinning. Some of the men I have led stumble towards me bloodied, battered and bruised with the dazed eyes of disbelief that they have survived such carnage.

We stand together, covered in blood, our uniforms torn and ripped, bareheaded, faces shocked, streaked with dirt and smoke, searching for the Colour of our Regiment. It is found and raised, bloody and mudstained from the earth. Men start to gather around it.

Many of my group have been lost. Others lie injured. I gather together as many as I can and look upon the flat white faces of the dead I recognise, who only hours ago had been alive. Many of my friends are dead. All those men who marched for so long and sang so loudly, who were so full of life, now they are flattened, depleted around me, gone. Not only the Foot soldiers but their Majors and Captains lie lifeless. My stunned mind wonders why and how I have survived.

Ashe had disappeared from sight before we hit the parapet and I have a fleeting stab of fear for him as I look around trying to make him out amongst the carnage. Murray too, is nowhere to be seen. I try not to think as I gather my remaining men and start to move those who can move down the hill, others lie injured waiting for the stretcher bearers. Relief at surviving this carnage runs through me. The fiercest I have experienced yet.

Marlborough glances over at his officers then looks out over the valley of the Danube. The sun hangs below a curtain of black cloud then sets slowly in a display of fire. Below us, the river courses through the fields and turns from blue to red. Gold and crimson light floods the top of the plateau. The polished cuirass on the Duke's chest flashes gold in response to the strike of the sun. The taking of the Schellenberg has achieved the objective of striking down the French in the land of their ally, the Elector of Palatine. Marlborough had struck at the French through their weakness in a place they thought he would never fight. In doing so, he threatens Vienna. The sun disappears. The plain below the hill lies

shadowed while the river flows between the darkened fields and the stands of black forest.
He stares at the distant valley grim-faced, but when he turns to look at his staff, I see a
barely concealed glimmer of triumph which reveals the true nature of the man.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bavaria

The Schellenberg

Aftermath

The height of the parapet astonishes me. I am amazed we have been able to climb up and over it to reach the top. We slip, slide and jump over and clamber over the mounds of dead in the ditches to find our way down hill. I look to see if I can find my horse abandoned on the ascent. Some have been killed, others are still running on the plain below, others are on the hill where we left them. Some nudge their muzzles amongst the dead searching for their masters. I find my horse not far from where I had left him, tied to the branch of a tree which has been sheared off by a cannonball. He is dragging the branch around as he neighs, shaking his head to rid himself of it.

The silence after the constant bombardment of sound which had gone on all day since sunrise, is profound and broken only by calls, shouts, and moans of those left lying. Darkness creeps through the woods as we make our way following the path we had climbed up the hill. I wonder how we managed to reach the top without being killed as it is difficult and exposed. The smell of cannonfire and shot lingers in the air. The sights around us are murderous.

Ashe wanders over towards me. Long lines of exhaustion scar his face. He is still upright, battle-stained and uninjured like myself. He has led his group out of the gloom of the woods and at the base of the rise we greet each other in disbelief. Lord Orkney rides amongst us on his grey charger and watches the gathering as he counts what is remaining of his regiment. I detect relief as his eyes rest upon me as I walk amongst my men, checking them yet again, before he glances away.

The black cloud that had hung over the plain at sunset lowers itself towards the ground and releases torrential rain soaking the men on the hill. Rivulets of water mixed with blood run into small stream-beds that tumble over rocks and between bodies. My uniform is solid with rain, blood and red dye from my coat which runs pink into the mud at my feet. But it is not my blood that runs, apart from the aftermath of my bloody nose, but it is the blood of others I have killed, that is washed from me. My back feels stiff and bruised. I have difficulty taking a deep breath. I begin to shake as the coldness of the rain upon my skin and delayed shock sets in. Orkney calls for one hundred unarmed volunteers to climb the hill and help search for the wounded. I step forward.

The lights flicker in and out of the trees as the hill swarms with movement of torches as stretcher-bearers search and collect the wounded. The serrated edge of the parapet, its great walls gashed, torn and gaping, silhouetted from the play of light on the plateau looms out of the darkness above us. Murray is still up there somewhere. I move off on my own, reluctant to include anyone else in the search upon the hellish summit, but Ashe runs after me and grabs me by the arm. Rain pummels us in the torchlight, he too is shaking, his eyes bloodshot.

“Not now. We will look for him in the morning,” he says.

I narrow my eyes in an effort to see him in the flickering light. His black hair, cut close to the shape of his skull, is flat with rain. “There is nothing we can do. We will never find him in the dark. If he is injured they will bring him down. If not, he will still be there in the morning. We can both look for him at dawn if necessary.” His grip on my arm is firm, demanding that I should leave off my hopeless task. I shake my head at him.

“If the sutlers get there first, anything he may have on him will be gone by the morning.”

“The sutlers will not go up there in the dark and rain,” Ashe answers.

He is most probably right. It does not shake my resolve. “I am going,” I answer, untying my sword, throwing down my pistol.

Ashe swears to himself but throws down his own sword and pistol too, unable to let me search on my own. We grab torches and a shovel from a nearby cart and together head back up the hill. Without speaking I lead Ashe up the steep incline to the spot where I had last seen Murray before he disappeared over the crest.

The climb is hard and we slip, slide and squelch in the mud and rain, clinging to broken branches of trees and bushes to stop ourselves falling back down the steep incline. The stretcher-bearers answer our calls to each man that we find alive and wounded on our way. We are on the parapet looking down at the movement of the mass of men below us at the foot of the hill, torches waver, spit and go out in the rain and are relit again. There is much movement in the town of Donouwörth as it is searched and temporary hospitals for the wounded are found and set up until they can be transported to the field hospital set up seventeen miles away at Nördlingen.

Ashe separates from me and goes in one direction while I go in another as our search intensifies. The rain drums us as if trying to wash our sins away. I hold the torch high and look around me for any movement and prod bodies with my foot. Some stir, others do not respond, my concentration on each face is so intent as I search amongst the dead of the first and second wave of Foot that I do not notice Ashe beside me.

“I’ve found him,” he says and leads me to him.

I hold the torch high and peer at the body through the driving rain, hoping it is not Murray but my stomach lurches with the sight. I recognise him, his uniformed body, the engraved gorget still tied at the base of his neck. His face is blank and white, his body flattened, out of shape, bent and punctured in death, one arm broken by a fierce impact. His uniform bears the marks of deep, muddy hoof prints. He has been ridden over by the galloping cavalry. I hope he had not been alive. Murray’s light blue eyes, half closed stare back at me, his bloodless lips parted as if to speak, his face as white as the moon. His fingers are still entwined around the hilt of his sword. To free his hand from the basket hilt and prise off the ring with his seal, I have to tear apart the stiff fingers devoid of blood. I force my mind to go blank as I do what I have to do, while Ashe stands beside me, one hand holding the torch. The ring slips into my hand and I grab Murray’s sword,

“At least we can bury him whole,” Ashe says. “Not like some of the others around him who have lost their heads.”

I return to my task. I must find anything of value to give to Murray’s wife and I search his pockets and find a watch, letter, a few gold coins, a miniature of a woman and of a small child wrapped in a silk handkerchief. I cut the gorget from his neck and remove the officer’s sash from his shoulder and put the belongings together. I know everything else

will be in his tent in camp. I wrap them in my own kerchief and look up at the wan-faced Ashe holding the torch over me.

“Come, we still have work to do.”

Thoughts surface in my mind but I bury them. I have to in order to function.

“We could leave him here for the civilians to bury in the morning,” Ashe says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing his face with even more blood.

“Do you really want to do that?” I ask, knowing he would be tossed into a mass grave, faceless and nameless.

He shakes his head. “No, we will bury him. We owe him that.”

We carry Murray’s body, to the edge of the crest of the hill and make our way down until we reach a part of the wood near the top. Under the shelter of a tree, I break the soil for his grave. Our job done, we find some broken branches and make a cross, hammering it into the ground with the shovel. We will be able to find him again if need be.

Slowly, light-headed with fatigue and hunger, we pick our way through the dead trying to find more wounded. For the next hour we are fully occupied as we direct the stretcher-bearers until our task is done. We slide, stumble and run back down the hill in the rain as Ashe stumbles and almost falls. I put my hand out and grab him to save him as we splash through torrents of water tinged red with shed blood running off the hill.

Most of the volunteers are back, their work done and they clamber on carts ready to be transported back to camp. The rest of the army, apart from stragglers, have already moved off into the night, the torches in the distance lighting the way. The road is muddy and the rain is unceasing. I wonder where my horse is. The last I saw of it was when a groom appeared at the bottom of the hill and took it from me. It is not amongst the

corralled horses but Ashe has found his mount. He leads it over to me holding up the torch to show the muddied road ahead of us. He mounts his horse and turns and looks down at me.

“Come, give me your hand,” he leans down towards me and I reach up to grab his hand, but stop, unable to move. Pain knifes my chest and side, breath chokes in my throat.

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

“Pain when I breathe,” I answer, leaning against the horse unable to move, my ears ringing with the effort.

“You will have to mount, you cannot walk back to camp,” he says as he dismounts. “Come, put your foot in the stirrup.”

Shards of pain sear through me. He waits until I place my foot in the stirrup and with a massive heave he hoists me into the saddle. The pain is so intense I almost black out. I cannot take a deep breath.

“Hold on, Molesworth,” Ashe says, climbing onto the horse behind me. “We’ll soon be back in camp.”

Chapter Thirteen-Synopsis

Summer: 1704

Bavaria Burns

Richard is recovering from his injuries and is confined from duties until he heals. He becomes aware of troopers leaving camp every morning. He and Ashe see clouds of black smoke rising on the horizon and they realise that Marlborough is burning the villages and towns to try and persuade the Elector to join the Allies. Richard is secretly disturbed by this and wonders about the people of Bavaria, and about the Duke's motives. He still idolizes Marlborough, however. He is summoned by Lord Orkney who tells him he is to ride with him as an Aide to prepare him in riding for Marlborough. He is still Captain of his company of men that he led at the Schellenberg. He is astonished and thrilled with his new status.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bavaria

Summer: 1704

The Hunt

Stunned I stand without the tent, trying to absorb my sudden advancement. Father must have been busy.

Abercrombie emerges from Orkney with a wry expression on his face which I cannot read, but I know that he is far from pleased with my sudden rise in rank. The thought of being closely assigned to him does not please me either. His foul mood, however, cannot quell my excitement. I have to stop myself from bursting into a wild run back to my tent to tell Blake the good news that we will be packing and shifting to Orkney's camp.

"You are under my supervision until you become familiar with your duties and what is required of you as an Aide to the General. I will show you what is necessary, Molesworth, but you will learn as we all do, with trial and error. Do not expect any favours from me," he says, with a sardonic smirk, his hands behind his back, a mannerism adopted by all the Aides, his body turned halfway towards me, his head held high so that to look at me he has to look down his nose and all I can see are two black nostrils.

Oh, how the man loves me.

I return the look. I know he will not teach me anything if he can help it as he leads me to my new dwelling place in Orkney's personal staff's quarters.

"I do not expect any favours from anyone," I answer, with as much acid as I can muster, eyeing him. Be damned if he is going to intimidate me.

"Indeed?" His eyebrows raised, he appraises me with unconcealed disapproval. "Then your rise has been miraculous."

I maintain a calm exterior. He thinks me an upstart, even though he himself started as an Ensign as I did. Abercrombie too comes from a landed family of England, but he knows that Orkney knows Father personally and knew me as a boy. In his eyes, that makes a difference in Orkney's treatment of me. It is no use trying to get along with the man, he doesn't want my friendship. He is aware of my ambition and knows, that more than likely, I will succeed, mainly through influence. The ways of the old army where success comes through whom you know still applies. But I also know, as well as Abercrombie does, that Marlborough will only advance officers through purchase. The situation is not ideal for the poorer more ambitious officer and is bound to create divisions. However, such advancement for those without purchase is still occasionally known to happen.

"I do not believe in miracles," I reply, as I walk with him to the officer's quarters where my tent is to be placed.

"Miracles happen to some of us, especially to those who have influence and wealthy fathers. Others have to work their way to the top without help."

"My father's not as wealthy as some and he is against me being in the army."

“Really? But, he still provides,” the Aide says, as he turns towards me. He regards me with his level stare.

“I have no knowledge other than that of the necessities of what he provides and what he doesn’t. I am not informed if he does,” I answer, staring straight back.

“Innocent, are you?” Abercrombie smirks. “You realise of course that you’re replacing a well-thought of Aide, Captain Seeles, who had been with Orkney for some time. He was killed on the hill,” Abercrombie continues in his crisp court accent.

“You speak as if I personally killed the man. I know I am replacing someone, but I didn’t know Seeles at all, only by sight.”

He is goading me, wanting me to lose my temper. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. He turns away from me and makes a sweeping gesture with his right hand in the direction of a group of tents. “You see that tent? That was Seeles, now it is yours.”

I look towards the tent still standing bare and empty of furniture among the line of tents. I will be living in the space of a dead man. Any joy at my sudden promotion has suddenly disappeared. Abercrombie turns back and faces me, stepping so close I feel the need to step back but I stand my ground.

“Are you frightened of ghosts, Molesworth? Do you think that Seeles will haunt you? Or do you think that history may repeat itself? You realise, of course, that you do not have to answer to me at all,” he says.

I grow hot with anger. He has goaded me into answering him when my advancement and how it has happened is rightly, as he implies, none of his business.

I have no need to respond. I am my own man the same as he is his.

“What have you got against me?” I ask him.

The derision on his face disappears and is replaced by a look of dislike, bordering on hatred. Inwardly I shrink, though I keep the muscles in my face stiff and do not let him see how I feel.

“You’re an upstart Irishman. What? A spawn of the English scum that took flight to Ireland? Or perhaps you’re descended from those running from the law in England, from the Star Chamber, from fraud and cheating. Which is it? The Anglo-Irish are a strange breed. You do not deserve to be with His Grace. That’s what I have against you.” His head is tilted to one side, the smirk is back, playing around his mouth, once more revelling in my discomfit. I am mad enough to punch the man in his teeth, but fortunately, he turns on his heel and walks off, back through the line of tents towards Orkney’s quarters, leaving me seething. I have made an enemy through doing nothing. I look after him annoyed I have let myself be riled by him and I am further embarrassed that he is aware of my discomfit.

My friend Ashe is not himself. He looks up at me almost affronted as with hardly a by-your-leave, I burst into his tent with my joyous news. I greet him and talk on, hardly able to get the news out fast enough before I notice that a deepening frown creases his forehead, while his eyes have a defeated look. He is almost curled into a ball in his chair in an undressed state, full-sleeved shirt hanging out over his blue breeches, neckcloth undone. His face is covered with stubble and his shaven head is shadowed blue with an incoming growth of black hair. He does not look like my ebullient friend at all. But as John says, I gabble on like a school boy and continue without stopping to think. “Well, what do you

say?" I ask, but give him no time to reply before I add. "It is only a matter of time and I will be promoted to the Duke's staff."

"That's what you want, isn't it?" he cries. "Wonderful. Congratulations. You're on your way at last."

His voice sounds as if it is not at all wonderful. I look at him sitting in the gloom of his tent when outside the camp shimmers in the summer sun. He is intense and serious. I have not seen him like this before. He appears to be concentrating on staying in one piece.

"You are unwell? Is there something wrong? You resent my success?" I ask, coming to my senses. I draw in a breath and return his frown as I absorb his mood. I glance down to see his hand clenched around a letter.

"How can you accuse me of that?" Ashe retorts. I am startled to see tears in his eyes.

I realise I have hurt him, but I am surprised at his reaction, that I have hurt him that much. He draws himself to his feet and walks away from me to the entrance to his tent and looks outside.

"Tom, I do not know what's troubling you, but surely it's not my promotion? I didn't ask for it and I'm as surprised as you must be."

He turns and looks at me. "Surprised?"

"Of course. I thought it might come sometime, but not just yet. But you know of my ambition, I have never hidden it, least of all from you," I answer, disturbed that our friendship is troubled.

“Forgive me. I speak out of turn,” he answers. His voice and eyes become far away again and he turns back to gaze at the activity outside his tent. “We’re going to fight again soon, aren’t we?” he says, almost to himself.

“There’s talk of another engagement. There seems to be much activity around Marlborough’s quarters.”

The Duke and Prince, accompanied by the Generals have been out surveying the surrounding countryside especially the five mile long, Höchstädt plain, even climbing the church tower in Tapfheim to assess the land. Here is the site for a great battle, but nothing official has been said. So far, all knowledge is based on conjecture.

“Ashe what is wrong with you?” I ask, worried now.

He is most unlike himself, my jolly friend whom I still had difficulty beating around the drill field. Instead he is a miserable, melancholy, taciturn, stranger. He rubs a hand over his face as if to clear his thoughts and glances at me in apology then withdraws in silence again to gather his words which, I realise as he speaks, must be an effort for him. “I have to return to England. My father has died. My sister wrote thinking the letter would not reach me for some weeks when the campaign was over. She does not realise, none of them do, that we are just starting. I have to return home after the next battle to take over the running of the estate. My military career is at an end. My father has got what he wished for. He was determined to get me out of the army and he has succeeded.”

Bitterness is evident in his voice and the news sobers me. His military career has just begun. I walk over to him and stand with him at the tent opening but he does not look at me. It was only a matter of time before he too would be promoted just as I have been

and I tell him, but he shakes his head in denial at me. “I could buy my commission if I wanted to. But that will not happen now.”

“You have a steward to manage your estate for you while you are away?”

“Yes, he is already doing so, but my father has stipulated in his will that if I don’t return and stay on the land, that the inheritance will pass to my sister’s son. I have two married sisters who live in York and one of my brothers-in-law is minding the estate until I return. But he is not a landowner and knows nothing about it. The burden has fallen upon my mother to a large extent. The land has been in my family for generations, well before the time of Queen Elizabeth, I have to obey my father’s will. I can’t let it go. My father would expect me to return. I owe it to him to return. It is my duty. I just did not anticipate that it would happen so soon,” he stops, struggling with his feelings. “Now I have no reason or no one to prove myself to. He got his way after all. By dying, he got his way.”

Ashe's sorrow alarms me. Such feelings are unusual in my friend. I express my sympathy and grope for words of comfort but for once words fail me. He has not been himself since the Schellenberg, especially in his mind. Physically he is intact but he has complained to me that he is haunted by dreams which still wake him in the night and often leave him sleepless. I seem to have past that stage, which we all seem to go through post-battle to varying degrees. Not that this melancholy is admitted to, talked about or accepted, it is generally ignored until someone kills themselves or rides or walks unarmed into battle. Ashe, like many of us, usually hides his sorrow. I am exasperated at his sense of defeat and with the turn of his fortunes.

“I’m sorry you have lost your father. Perhaps, because of how you feel, it would be better that you returned home before the battle? Under the circumstances Orkney would

allow it. Go home before the battle, Tom. Go safely home,” I say to him concerned for his state of mind, for his welfare. Murray’s pre-battle nerves still haunt me but I have no wish to remind Ashe of Murray, I am sure he remembers.

He shakes his head at me in anger. “In God’s name, do you really think I have travelled all this way to return without experiencing a major battle? No. I shall wait until the next battle then I shall return. I owe it to myself to stay. If I go home now I will never forgive myself. I will fight the next battle first,” Ashe answers.

“Fathers. They control us even in death,” I reply, exasperated.

“More so. We are duty bound. Mind it doesn’t happen to you.”

“We will always be friends, Tom?” I ask and hold out my hand to him. He shakes my hand in his firm grasp.

“Even though you now move in exalted circles?” he asks, with a wry grin, and I glimpse an echo of my friend beneath the morose exterior. The realisation is almost a relief.

“You’ll always be my friend, Tom.”

Ashe smiles wanly in reply and I sense his disbelief with disquiet.

I leave my friend, Thomas, Lord Ashe, for he has inherited his father’s Baronetcy along with the onerous duties of landownership. We wish each other good luck but my news has added to his discomfit and I wish now I had not barged in on him as I had. His disturbance of mind is contagious and physically I have to shake myself to get rid of it. Such a state of mind is not the best for survival and I worry that Thomas may not come safely through the battle we are about to face.

Blake transfers my belongings to the General's headquarters and I find that Seeles tent is larger than my previous dwelling, while Blake is housed in his own tent close-by in the servant's quarters. I also have acquired a personal groom for my horse. Orkney's camp is close to Marlborough's, and the tents, apart from the rest of the Foot, are widely spaced. I immediately feel at home. This is where I belong.

Days later I find myself riding out of the camp beside Abercrombie. We have orders to take a squadron of troops and go on reconnaissance duty into the burnt still smouldering valley and search for five soldiers from the First Foot who have disappeared without leave from the camp. Orkney is no fool and knows his men well. I feel he is deliberately setting me up with the aggressive Abercrombie to experience more misery and test my spirit further. There are other Aides that I can serve under but Orkney has deliberately chosen this man and I wonder just what it is that Orkney wishes me to learn. Tolerance, patience, charity, humility perhaps?

The five soldiers, if caught will be punished by death for such disobedience, but the wish to escape another battle such as the Schellenberg is strong. We ride past the battered hill with its torn trees and pocked earth, its newly dug mounds of earth covering the bodies of so many. Murray enters my mind. I push him away. I cannot think of him too much, any more than I can the others who have died. I have wrapped his belongings his manservant gave me, along with the letter, and his sword in a large piece of linen and put them aside. Ashe and I, both unwilling for the task, have decided we will both return them to Murray's widow, along with the sum of money gathered by the regiment. It is not a task I welcome. I push the thought of the forthcoming ordeal from my mind. It will be weeks, perhaps months before we return to England and at the moment there are more pressing things to worry about.

My hat with its large brim shields me from the heat of the sun which beats upon our heads. Abercrombie is as taciturn as ever and hardly acknowledges my presence most of the time. His manner does not worry me. I reason that my own company is more conducive to me than his and I, for the most part, am happy to ride in silence. I had seen him fighting in a wild tempestuous manner, controlled to the very edge of abandonment, full of daring, oblivious to his own safety, slaying anyone who came within fighting distance with murderous coolness. Now, I ride beside him, and he appears correct and proper, the dragon well hidden beneath his calm exterior, the interior fire for the moment, quiescent.

Isolated farmhouses, farm buildings and barns are scorched, charred smoking stumps of wood emerging from the earth. The valley is worse than we have imagined. Marlborough displays the manners of his class, trampling on one's neighbour then expecting friendship and continued patronage. He has burned the villages then invited the villagers back to their burnt homes to tend the fields so the army can be fed, though many fields lie trampled and bare from foraging. I wonder what they think as backs bent they toil for the enemy within the vicinity of their ruined homes. Marlborough's mind is centred on expediency. Our troops have devastated the countryside. They have killed every living thing they found. I wonder about the state of mind of the Elector. Was he so far removed from his people that he could not understand or see their suffering? He had ignored their pain and deliberately stayed on the side of France. I am puzzled by his obstinacy.

Looting is punishable but we know a certain amount has been taken. Bodies of fleeing enemy soldiers, villagers and horses lie where they have fallen, on the dirt roads, in ditches and in open fields, fly-blown, swollen and ravaged by dogs and carrion. The silence of the valley is oppressive. There is no bird song only the cries and screams of the blue-

black ravens and crows, along with brown buzzards, who black-tipped wings, outstretched, wheel and drift in lazy arcs upon the hot air rising off the plains. Dead meat is plentiful here for them, and their presence constantly reminds us that we too will be their dinner if we're not careful.

Upturned carts, broken wheels and discarded furniture block our path into one village. Abercrombie orders a group of troopers to dismount and lift one cart out of the way. A swarm of flies rises to engulf us as it is righted. The sickening stench of death sweeps over us and some of the men turn away while others white-faced tie their neckcloths over their noses and mouths at the sight of decomposed remains covered in rotting hay. I cover my nose with the sleeve of my coat while Abercrombie barks out an order for the men to bury the dead. His face turns white and he wheels his horse around and moves away from the sight. Several of the troopers unpack shovels from the packs on their horses and start to carry out the gruesome task. I ride over to Abercrombie. Even the stoic Aide is shocked by the amount of destruction around him. His eyes, normally cold and icy blue are dark and dense as he grunts at me. "The least they could have done is bury the dead," he says, turning back to look at the men digging graves and the others dragging the corpses away amidst a cloud of flies.

"Perhaps they did not have time," I respond, knowing that would be the last thing the burning party would stop to do. They had to burn and pillage in as short a time as possible. Marlborough had seen to that.

"Well, we cannot bury all of them. We have been sent in search of the missing men. I'll tell Orkney when we return, he will have to send out parties to do the job."

The sun is high and hot. Our shirts, waistcoats and coats are drenched with sweat and filthy with clinging dust and dirt. Flies buzz and whine around us and torture us with their persistent attentions. I swipe them away with my gloved hand but sweat runs off my face in the heat and attracts them back again. The stench of death lingers around us as we enter the village. Bloated dead float in the waterways, caught in the reed banks and clog the waterwheel of the mill. Flies are thick and busy. I ignore the sights as we ride by and Abercrombie does the same. We dismount and walk through the ruins of the village and find the charred remains of a church complete with burnt congregation. I stand and stare at the mounds of burnt wood and bodies piled on top of one another. Unable or unwilling to escape from their attackers, they had obviously sought refuge in the Church which was half timber and stone and found themselves trapped.

“The deserters have long gone,” Abercrombie concludes after some hours of riding through flattened fields and village after village.

The last village we come to before heading back to camp is not as burnt and we hesitate not to search it. There are many buildings still intact though the place appears deserted, while the stench drifts upon the slight wind that rises off the fields still smouldering under the sun. We realise that the men could have hidden or still be hiding in the abandoned farm buildings and houses. Abercrombie gives orders to some of the reassembled troops to dismount and search the village on foot. They go off, some on foot, some on horseback, in different directions and leave us alone.

A cry comes to us, strangled on the air and startled I turn around to see that Abercrombie is already dismounting.

“The barn,” Abercrombie indicates to me. I follow him and run towards the open door creaking in the wind. The building is a quarter intact and sunlight streams through the broken roof, the half burnt thatch still clinging to the scorched rafters, the smell of charred wood strong in our noses. The light is bright and blinding, full of hay dust and soot which swirls around our sudden movement as we move in through the door. We are momentarily dazzled, but the cry comes again, accompanied by a regular knocking noise. We both follow the sound into a charred corner of the building.

Two white legs are visible spread apart on the scorched earth amidst piles of burnt timber. The feet, covered in wooden clogs, knock rhythmically upon the soot covered ground. The bare rump of the soldier between the spread of white flesh rises and falls in response to the knock of the clogs. He is deeply entrenched and thrusts away, lost in his greedy world, oblivious that he is being watched. The woman is pinned by the soldier’s ruthless force, his hand clamped over her mouth in an attempt to stifle her cries, pieces of bread scattered around her like sacrificial offerings. Her eyes are wide with terror as she peers at us over his shoulder. Her face is scratched and blood runs from a cut in her head and cheek. She is bleeding from the assault, blood smeared down her legs. Her breasts hang freely over the top of her dirty bodice that has been torn from her. She has put up a fight and been overcome, her arms covered in bruises.

Troopers appear through the door behind us and crowd into the barn. Abercrombie and I, without a word, move as one, which later surprises me when I think about it. We bend and grab the humping soldier by the back of his coat and lift him bodily off the woman and drop him away from her on the earthen floor. Eyes wild, he rolls from us clutching his distended self while the woman screams and rolls in the other direction gathering skirts and petticoats over her bloodied legs.

She sobs in fear as I approach her and curls herself into a ball. I realise, she thinks Abercrombie and I and the rest of the troopers, who by this time are an interested gawping audience, are going to follow her rapist's suit and have her for ourselves. I yell at the gathered men to move out and they obey, somewhat reluctantly, while I help her to her feet. She screams at me in a German dialect I do not understand and beats a tattoo on my chest with her fists. Her fire and strength surprise me but I pin her until she cannot move. She ceases to struggle and her sobs become erratic and shivering as she quietens. Abercrombie turns his back on us and concentrates on the moaning soldier at his feet. He kicks him in his rump and orders him to his feet.

"She was askin' for it, Captain, pissin' in the corner. Waitin' for me," the soldier lies as he pulls up his breeches. Abercrombie's dark looks are darker than ever as blood-laced anger rushes into his face. He strikes the soldier across his mouth to shut him up. The soldier's face crumples and he blubs briefly. His uniform is torn and filthy from living in the open for days and he stinks.

"What regiment are you from?" barks Abercrombie.

"Colonel Murray's Foot, sir."

"One of the line regiments, eh?" says Abercrombie, spinning the man around to face me. He thrusts him towards me and I catch him, spin him around and throw him back at the Aide.

"Your Colonel will not be pleased to see you at all, soldier. You know the punishment for rape?"

"Yes, sir," the man whines.

The woman cowers near me, sobbing again at Abercrombie's anger. I tell her in German she is all right but she backs away and snivels loudly as I speak to her.

"Go. Run away," I tell her, but she stares wide eyed at me and flinches as if I am about to attack her. Abercrombie turns and shouts at her to run. She looks at him and at me, her eyes roll up into her head and she falls at our feet.

We drag the soldier outside and the troopers truss him between horses while Abercrombie and I go back for the woman who is lying unconscious where we left her. We are at a loss as to what to do.

"We cannot take her back to camp," I say, looking at the creature lying flattened before us on the stained earth.

"We cannot leave her here either, in such a state. Lord knows what she may say about us if anyone finds her," Abercrombie adds.

The firing of three guns echoes over the land from the camp to tell us and any foragers it is time to return.

We take her back with us. Abercrombie and I lift her and put her slumped in my saddle and I climb behind her. Half-conscious she rides in front of me, my arms around her supporting her. The smell of woman, so close is unnerving, even though she stinks of earth and blood. To tame any irrational rise of desire, I concentrate on her filthy hair and neck, her torn clothes, the fact that she is the enemy. The rapist blubbers and grunts, half-walking, half-running as he is dragged along between horses as the men see fit. His features are coarse, his beard and hair long, his hair dirty and bloodstained. He is scum of the earth, not worth a thought, most probably out of Newgate. The soldier knows his fate.

I refuse to see the man as he is.

I dismount and help lift the half-conscious woman down from my saddle and hand her over to the camp women who rush around us full of chatter and curiosity, putting their arms about her, wrapping her in a blanket and carrying her away. I am relieved to be rid of the burden and head out of the women's camp. I join Abercrombie and we take the soldier to the Provost Marshal.

"Rape," Abercrombie says in triumph to the Quartermaster. "Caught in the act," and we throw the fellow to his knees and stand dirty and sweat-stained over him. Orkney's eyes harden with rage as we give him our report while Marlborough's impassive eyes shield his true feelings as he listens to us. This soldier is from Orkney's regiment so Orkney will be dealing with him and there may be a regimental Court Martial if Orkney and Marlborough think fit. My Lord Duke, on granting the warrant for the Court Martial, will himself want to confirm the death sentence. But if there is any pity and compassion it is not present here, in front of these veteran soldiers. Abercrombie and I are dismissed and told to write a report about the incident and give it to the Quartermaster and to Lord Orkney. We stand outside the General's tent and see that dusk has crept across the valley. Fires in the camp are being stirred while the sun below the horizon spreads the sky with a brilliant orange glow. Abercrombie strips off his riding gloves and hat, wipes his face with his kerchief. "We did well today, Molesworth," he says, without looking at me, then abruptly turns and walks away from me.

Rare praise is praise indeed. Amazed at his brief show of emotion I watch him as he walks towards his tent, then I turn towards mine. Even after spending a whole day with him out in the valley, I still feel no closer to the man. I doubt if I ever will.

The next day in the presence of the Quartermaster, Orkney, Churchill and the other Generals, we both witness the court martial which declares the prisoner condemned to death as an example to the troops. Marlborough, concerned as usual, is informed and confirms the death sentence by putting his name to the warrant. Hours later Orkney's First Foot is assembled and the soldier white-faced and dishevelled is paraded at the head of the regiment before a line of infantry ordered to shoot their own man. Abercrombie and I stand to attention with the rest of the Aides and ignore the sight. I choose not to look at the culprit and I refuse to think too deeply about all of this. The Generals have to maintain law and order. Such punishment must be seen to be done otherwise we would have no discipline within the ranks. The firing squad takes aim, a volley of fire blasts the air and the soldier falls at our feet. I still do not look at him as we disperse though I hear murmurs around me.

Days later as we ride through the ravaged countryside once again in search of the other soldiers, I become aware of a stillness within me as if I am waiting for something untoward to happen. The deeper we ride into the war-torn valley the more profound the stillness becomes. I become aware that I am numb, just a pool of emptiness in which there are no feelings, a void where once there was a soul.

We still have more battles to fight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Battle of Blenheim

13 August 1704

Preparation

In and out of the mist the men disappear and reappear like ghosts.

They move in silence in the dark without the light of torches or the sound of the drums. The only noise is the muffled thump of feet and horses hooves, even the jangle of harness and bit is stifled by wrappings. No one can see them coming or going, they are there one minute and gone the next, their heavy breathing adding to the mist that envelopes them. Marlborough has picked the right conditions for a surprise attack. He is shifting the army, thousands of men eleven miles through dense fog towards the Höchstädt plain.

Abandoning his coach and mounting his charger, the Duke is already well ahead of the main body of the army. As the morning sun lifts itself closer to the horizon and changes the colour of the fog from grey to gold he rides to a vantage point on the rise at the rear of the field above the plain from where he will be able to view the whole battlefield and direct at will.

The time is now. The time is ready for war.

Orkney's Aides follow his coach, me amongst them, still feeling under trial, not really part of the experienced coterie surrounding Orkney and the other generals. I wish I was leading my men, wondering why I had wanted to be in this privileged place beside the General instead of amongst the good-natured companionship of Ashe and the rest of my regimental officers. Abercrombie rides beside me, still watching and waiting for me to make a mistake. I feel under constant surveillance.

Ashe and I met and talked briefly over the last few days. He is in better spirits and ready to give up his life in the army for life on his estate, but the uneasy restless look in his eyes still worries me and reminds me of Murray. Everyone has been preoccupied in the weeks since the Schellenberg. There had not been enough time to spend with him as Orkney kept us busy with errands to and from the Duke, Prince and other Generals.

I ride with the others aware of the steady thump of hundreds of feet of the First and Second Battalions of infantry as they trample the earth behind me. I smell fear again, as I did at the Schellenberg, mixed with eagerness, excitement and resignation at the prospect of confrontation. Feelings rise within me, making my heart beat faster and my palms sweat.

"Tell the men to stop marching and wait where they stand," Orkney orders. We turn our horses and head down the line of men repeating the order.

"They are to wheel into place," he says after the line has stopped. Again we ride, this time giving the order to the commanding officers. We have no idea where we are.

The mist swirls around the men as they start to fall into formation. Others behind us, including the Artillery led by Colonel Blood, also reach the area and they too fall into place. We return to Orkney and find Marlborough and the Prince conferring quietly together, beside him. The area directly around us is visible but we know that within the

mist shrouding the land thousands of men are arranging themselves in battle formation.

The noise, once muffled by fog is now reaching our ears as the mist begins to dissipate. I wonder if the French Army are aware of our movements.

Marlborough sits upon his charger with its gold horse furniture, straight-backed in his red uniform, slashed with gold, and across his chest lies the blue ribbon of the Order of the Garter, recently given to him by the Queen. Slightly apart from the rest of the officers he stares into the mist as if willing it to remain or willing it to lift, I know not which. He is deep in thought, his expression intense. Once again I realise how alone he is. The responsibility of England is his at this moment. Prince Eugene disappears into the mist with the rest of his army to provide cover to the right arm of the field. The army gradually grows and unfolds around the Duke and his Aides. We are all silent as we wait for the sun to break the horizon and pierce the mist.

In front of us is a vast area of land bathed in fog. The sun's rays grow higher and stronger and penetrate the mist. The tops of the dark woods burst into bright relief while the floor of the woods remain in mist as if reluctant to stir itself into this day. The last troops to finish the nine-mile march from the camp, and fall into place. The mist lifts and before us is revealed a five-mile long dark yellow and brown plain covered with hay stubble, long yellow grass, pitted earth, bisected by streams, hedges and ditches. A meandering stream, the Nebel, runs through it deep enough in places to claim men on horseback or trying to cross on foot, and both cavalry and infantry will have to tackle it. The villages of Lutzingen lie far to the right, where Prince Eugene will command, Blindheim or Blenheim, is on our left, where General Cutts will command, and the centre, beyond Unterglauheim and beside

Oberglauheim, will be under General Churchill's command. Further beyond the plain are the villages of Sonderheim to our left and Höchstädt in the distance.

We stare at our glory, we stare at our death.

Soon this day will be a living hell. We have brought ourselves to the brink of an abyss and we teeter upon the edge, swaying, willing ourselves to stay safe and willing ourselves to jump. For some, this day is going to be long, for some, mercifully short. I try not to think that this might be my last day on earth. Am I really prepared to end my life here?

Against the blaze of the scene upon the plain, before the villages, far away from us, yet so close, are the unsuspecting light tan folds of the tents of the French army. They are still sleeping, unprepared, their camp disorganised in false security. Our army, nine columns of cavalry and battalions, four miles of fighting power, is spread out before them filling the whole horizon of the plain from the Danube on our left to the far woods on the right behind Lutzingen.

Wake up. What a surprise. Good morning.

The urge to laugh is upon us. The French come to life in almost comic relief. They run, scatter, shout, emerge half asleep, half dressed, grabbing arms, hastily donning cuirasses, shifting baggage, taking down tents. We have caught them unawares. We watch and wait. The urge to laugh quickly dissipates when we find ourselves opposite a formidable array of arms and men.

The French display, despite their hurried start, is magnificent. Their uniforms of blue, red, green and buff, reflect the allies mostly red, some grey, some green, yellow and buff. The sun has risen high above them and flashes off pikes, cuirasses, bayonets and

swords, while their standards, emblazoned with gold, blue and the white lilies of France, flap in the sultry wind that has begun to rise with the heat off the plain and the mass of assembled men. Kettledrums on both sides beat out their rhythm and trumpets take up their strident call in competition.

Marlborough sweeps his perspective glass across the span of the assembled enemy army then turns to look at his own army. If he is impressed by the assembled French he makes no sign, his face pale, only his eyes reveal the steel and power within the man. The French have more men and more guns, but Marlborough has more ideas.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Battle of Blenheim (continued)

13 August 1704

Triumph

The blast of white heat hits me full in the body and I am transported directly to hell. I ride head down, mouth pressed shut against the black smoke that penetrates nose, lungs and eyes, into the maelstrom of direct fire. I choke and gasp for breath as shot whizzes around me and past me while cannons pounce and bound to find their mark, which I hope will not be me. Already, after hours of fighting, the way to the walled town of Blenheim is strewn with dead, while smoke billows from the burning houses in black gusts high into the air.

The high palisades of the town are fortified with everything the French can muster, wagon wheels, chairs, chests, planks of wood, doors, bales and chests, upturned carts and wagons, anything to provide a barricade and resist the onslaught of the allied troops. From my galloping vantage point amidst the mayhem I see the Foot led by General Rowe advance, rise and fall, reform and attack yet again. The noise deafens me. Cannon, musket and pistol fire, screams and cries, from within the town and the fighting of those without fill the air. The town is well afire and black smoke billows from barns, houses and

watermills. I have seen enough and with relief I turn my horse and race back to Orkney. I am conscious of my horse's strong body and hope in desperation he is not shot from beneath me.

"The palisades have been breached. The French are barricaded in houses, and the graveyard near the church. They have no escape. The Royal Foot are fighting strongly. They have the advantage," I tell Orkney, between breaths, my face dripping with sweat. "The second battalion of Foot are fighting almost hand to hand in skirmishes to keep the French from escaping the village."

He stares hard at me listening carefully. I see a glimmer of relief and satisfaction in his face. He quickly turns to Abercrombie and tells him to relay the news to Marlborough, while I, not yet high enough to speak to the great man, ride back to my post.

Most of the Aides are out on the field somewhere. The fight has been going on for hours and the Aides and fleet-footed runners have been constantly disappearing into the mêlée, into and out of the smoke, relaying and giving orders and bringing back information to the Generals and Marlborough. Some have not returned. James Abercrombie has disappeared into the thick of battle. He emerges sometime later at Orkney's side, slightly wounded in his leg, his dark eyes on fire. He has used his sword well by the look of him, as I know he can.

I pull my horse to a stop, his normally glossy black coat is flecked with foam; he is exhausted. My groom appears as I dismount, takes my horse and replaces it with another. I bend over, hands on knees taking deep breaths, ignoring the pain of my still bruised ribs. I remove my hat and wig, and wipe away the sweat and grime with my kerchief.

The fighting field is huge when we are upon it. There is no shelter and one end cannot be seen from the other. Black smoke billows into the air from villages, hamlets and mills all along the front. From Marlborough's viewpoint the land is undulating and marshy and shimmers in the heat of the sun and battle, like a yellow lake alive with insects, some active, some still as if a giant foot had tramped on them.

Cries, yells and screams, along with musket fire and the language of the drum echoes back to us as the long line of men advance and recede in a blood-red wave along the plain. Backwards and forwards the line sways and with each advance encroaches deeper into the enemy's territory towards the villages that belch black smoke. The big cannon fire hitting their targets with bouncing cannon. Noise, smoke and fire fills the air and the ground quakes continually beneath us. The field below is a mass of swirling dust and smoke clouds. It is only a few hours since the French's rude awakening and their glorious display of power, but now, looking at the maelstrom, it seems like a century has past. They are fighting hard below us on the plain and by the looks of the encroaching red line into their ranks they are losing.

Our intense gaze upon the scene is broken by the rapid thump of hooves upon the ground as one of Marlborough's Aides, I recognise as Captain Thomas Panton, rides up to Orkney.

"My Lord Duke requests the Foot to the centre," he says, bringing his horse to a sudden stop before the General. Orkney turns and waves to Abercrombie who by this time has returned his bleeding self to Orkney's side. "First Foot and Churchill's Foot to the centre," Orkney barks at Abercrombie and then at me.

At the gallop we head down the slight rise towards the waiting troops to relay the order. The wind off the plain hits me like a wall as I draw closer to the tightly packed rows of men sweating, awaiting their turn to fight. The smell of massed bodies of men, horses and horse-dung mingles with the acrid cannon-smoke. The odour of blood and death off the plain and village fills my throat and lungs enough to choke me.

The commanding officer takes the order from me and turns to shout at his troops. As I move off I see them begin their steady march towards Blenheim. They have been waiting at the edge of the field for some time. Between the two regiments of Foot stand the line-up of cavalry, Lumley's Horse, resplendent in their red and blue uniforms, still untouched by forces around them, waiting for their moment to charge. Ashe is amongst the Foot, still on horseback alongside another officer, waiting to dismount and lead his men. He glances at me as I ride by. I salute him, acutely aware that the company of men that I normally lead in the First Foot will soon be in amongst the killing. If it was not for Orkney's regard for my father I would be amongst them. The orders given along the line, Abercrombie and I wheel our horses around and ride back to Orkney saluting the moving troops as we go.

Relief comes upon me again, creeping through me like a canker. I recognise the cowardice that it is and I suppress it. The General greets our news of orders given and sees the movement already underway on the plain before him. Like Marlborough, Orkney is eager to be in on the fight and he spurs his charger on. We ride alongside him towards the moving mass in front of us.

My relief at not being part of the fight is short-lived. We head towards the besieged town of Blenheim, crumbling and black with fire surrounded by the dead and injured.

I glimpse the tall lithe figure of Thomas Ashe as he climbs and leaps over a broken palisade near the graveyard, his sword and pistol clutched in his hands, eager for action, leading his small band of soldiers behind him. The smoke is thick and I strain to keep sight of him and when it clears Ashe and his men have disappeared over the wall.

Furious fighting erupts with force behind it, their cries and calls combine with the rest of the racket coming from within the burning place. The fighting is hand to hand and smoke again sweeps over the battle and obliterates everything, momentarily frustrating Orkney who wishes a clear field so he can send more men into the fray. He sends them anyway, and they leap and run with abandonment, perhaps sensing the battle is at its peak and nearly over. I itch to dismount and run with the Foot, to be part of it again.

A sound of a trumpet goes up and is echoed down the line through the squadrons of cavalry as they wait ready for the final charge. They begin to move at a slow trot. The movement increases until they charge at the gallop, the ground thundering beneath them. Somewhere at their head Marlborough and his Aides charge with them. The mood changes, cries of victory go up. Orkney sees the defeated ragged troops of the French in the village. He knows Marlborough has routed the French cavalry, and gives the order to the drummers to beat the parley.

Fighting and firing gradually dies into ragged outbursts broken by the cries of the wounded and the moans of the dying. Fires in the village crackle in the air, screams echo from trapped French soldiers within the houses.

We are elated and exhausted and can scarcely believe that the fight is won. The French emerge full of anger and incredulity that they have to throw down their arms and

surrender. Ashe is on my mind as we ride with Orkney into the village, but he is nowhere to be seen amongst the gathering officers and men. I turn in the saddle to survey the scene hoping to catch a glimpse of him amidst the land covered in debris but he is not there.

Abercrombie, as if he had won the battle on his own, his blood-lust still rampant, unable to disguise his mockery and triumph, rides amongst the gathering French soldiers collecting the fallen standards. He rips them from the hands of the men without pity. One Ensign clings to his standard doggedly, unwilling to surrender it to the upstart English officer. Abercrombie bends down, grabs the man by the back of his coat and lifts him bodily off his feet trying to grab the staff. The soldier, feet off the ground, turns and slashes wildly with the staff at the Aide. Abercrombie, despite blood running freely from a wound in his arm whips the ensign from the man's hand. He lets go and deposits the soldier in the dirt. Tears of helplessness, humiliation and frustration run down the Frenchman's face as the Aide, with a triumphant leer, waves the heavy flag above his head. Angry with him I turn and look at Orkney who also watches Abercrombie raise his sword and the standard in a salute of triumph. Orkney, his face set in fury, to his credit, does not return the salute. The victory is hollow in the face of the Frenchman's grief. The enemy had fought as bravely as the allies and held the village solidly for hours. Abercrombie's antics do not impress me and neither, it seems, do they impress, Orkney.

The cavalry in the centre of the field is demolished, men and horses lying everywhere. Blue French uniforms are trampled into the dust as we ride by, whereas the cavalry loss of the allies is minimal in comparison. The thought that Marlborough has been part of this bloodthirsty slaughter disturbs me. Once again I repress my feelings, but I cannot help but realise that his bloodlust is as high as the rest. Disquieting thoughts have no place in my mind, after all, he is my hero and this is war. I cannot afford to dwell upon such

matters. As far as we are aware the enemy are still running into the dusk which is quickly turning into night.

Away from the heat of the battlefield, the night air is cool and the silence deep. My limbs and torso, stiff and sore, weigh me down even though I am well used to such activity. After being in the saddle for over twenty-four hours, I feel I cannot ride one mile more. Yet we go on, riding beside Orkney, deeply into the countryside in the dark, away from the slaughter of the battle, torches streaking the summer night ahead of us and behind us. A tight, silent exhausted group riding to join Marlborough who has disappeared ahead with the cavalry.

A camp had been set up in barns, farmhouses and between haystacks in a nearby intact village, well past enemy lines. Ovens are lit and meals prepared. The smell of freshly baked bread hangs heavily in the air. The leap of flames and crackle of fire momentarily disorients me in my tiredness. I think I have returned to Blenheim. Each village looks the same, especially at night. I dismount my horse and my knees buckle with fatigue as soon as my feet are on the ground. My body then sets itself into a shaking fit for the next few minutes and I lean against the saddle for support, my senses numb. We have not eaten or had anything to drink for hours. Along with the other Aides I find a place in a hay-littered barn, but after eating my fill, I fall upon my outspread cloak willing myself to sleep but it evades me. The barn is full of snoring men, some restless, others deeply asleep, almost absorbed into the earth like the dead of the field we have ridden from. Images of the fight regurgitate in my tired brain, everything is clear with added emphasis. Despite my unwilling bones, the overwhelming urge to escape the battle inside my head drives me to my feet.

I gather my cloak about me and make my way between the outstretched figures towards the open door of the barn. The night is warm and star-filled, as I walk around the back of the building, past stacked wood and hay, the heat still emanating from the sun-drenched earth. In the ease of relief, I lean against the back of the barn and look up at the canopy stretching over my head. I find I cannot put a pin between the ancient crowd of bright witness.

A long low sound drifts to my ears, and it is not the music of the firmament. I hold my breath and listen. The noise, rises and falls, carried on the air through the trees surrounding the village. At first I think it is the whine of the breeze stirring the tree-tops. The horror at realising what it is makes me shudder; thousands of voices moaning in pain, the sound carried over fields on hot eddies of air rising off the land. Unable to bear it any longer I stumble back to the barn.

If I lie down I am haunted, if I stand I am also haunted. The pack of sleeping forms who are my comrades is of some comfort, I decide, as I pick my way between them. No one stirs, no one has heard what I have heard. I wonder if I have imagined it. Once again I fall on the hay and, this time, lose consciousness below the wheel of cold distant stars.

Marlborough and his Generals ride over the battlefield, through five miles of death over black blood, clotted and soaked into the trampled turf and stubble of the land. The field lies hushed under its weight of dead and the weight of our consciences, though it seems in war we are supposed to have little conscience. We subjugate our feelings.

This is for England.

The Duke has his rituals and this is one of them, the post-battle observation of the field. Surely he does not enjoy this spectacle of bloodshed? One would never know. Outwardly he is calm, sombre and dignified, but there are rumours that his horror comes later, whereas, ours is with us right now.

My stomach now battle-hardened, I keep my dignity as I ride with Orkney's staff, picking our way through the bodies. The sutlers have already been at their scavenging best, the fallen men stripped naked lying in the shimmering heat off the land. They are white, flattened, trampled into the earth like waxen flowers; exposed mangled forms of once vigorous young men, spread in silent testimony to the power of a few. In silence behind the generals, we guide our horses, trying not to breathe, smell, think, or feel. Red-eyed with smoke exposure, white-faced with post-battle fatigue, filthy and bearded after our day and night out in the open, we do not look too closely at the butchery or at one another as we guide our horses through the mire.

The results are there, like the Schellenberg, between the bodies and over them, amongst them and under them. The stench is heavy and after a few moments when I draw a tentative deep breath, I find my nose is used to it, I can no longer smell anything.

The field from Lutzingen to Blenheim is littered with the results of the cavalry charge, the trail of escape reveals where the horses and men were set upon and cut down without mercy. Marlborough is dignified and pale, conferring with Orkney on occasion, and if he and the others feel anything about the loss of men at their feet they hide it well. Perhaps they feel as numb as I do.

Ravens, on blue-black wings, screech, soar and wheel above us and over the littered plain. Some already have claimed their prey and pick at torn flesh, shorn limbs and dead

eyes. Their beaks and talons bloody, they beat the air with their wings and rise out of our way as we encroach upon their feeding ground. A slight humming sound rises higher and louder as the heat of the sun gathers a storm of flies over the feeding ground, and to me, it seems. My uniform stinks and the flies hover above my hat with its stained gold lace and persist in targeting my face. I swipe them away vigorously with my hand but it is of little use, they are no sooner gone than they are back again. I have not washed for some time, none of us have, the water in our sheltering village being foul. No wonder I am so attractive, but then I am not the only one; I look around and see everyone has their accompanying swarm. I vow to wash when I find the next cleanest water-hole, pond or well, but wonder if I will. The Nebel runs pink with blood and is clogged with artillery carts and bodies of men and horses. The only chance of clean water might be from another village well, and that may not be until nightfall

Blenheim is still packed with dead. Piles of corpses litter the graveyard where the fighting has been fierce. Here, thousands of French soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder within the palisades unable to escape. This was the last place I saw Ashe. The sight of charred bodies amongst the debris of burnt houses is overwhelming. The burnt men are lying on top of one another against blackened walls and doors of houses where they had fought to get out. Orkney reins in his horse and pauses to look around him. His normally firm face is relaxed in sorrow.

My friends of the First Foot, the men he had urged into battle, part of my regiment, are lying all around me, cut down near the palisades they had climbed. The company of men I had led are lying dead at my feet. Not yet stripped by the sutlers they are easily recognisable.

Marlborough comes across the body of Lieutenant-Colonel White, one of his favoured men. He survived his wounding at the Schellenburg, only to die here. The Duke does not react but turns pale at the sight. Ashe's name clamours in my mind. I look around dreading I may see him. Here too, the bodies are piled in layers upon each other and he could be below them all. I despair that he has not survived and my heart plummets.

Shame creeps through me that I have escaped such killing. Guilt grabs my throat almost bringing me down in a fit of weeping, which surprises me, as up until now I have not felt anything. The slap-slap sound of water over wood on the watermill distracts me but even this sign of life carries death as bodies caught between the wooden blades are repeatedly turned and dumped into and out of the stream.

Marlborough manages his feelings the only way he knows how by revealing the fury of them in the tense concentration during the heat of battle, relieved a little by his participation in the cavalry charge, then, almost at once, he buries the rage of battle lust and the guilt of so many deaths, beneath a calm veneer. Even the euphoria of victory is muted. Only later we hear rumours that he suffers severe headaches which prostrate him for days. Crippled and depleted he lies captive upon his bed, locked away from everyone who is not supposed to know, though everyone does. Only his trusted Aide, Major Bringfield and the Surgeon-General, Dr. Lawrence are allowed near him. He rallies after some days and his headquarters return to normal functioning and once again his Generals join him for meetings and meals. It seems we must move on.

The field is quiet, the sun warm upon our bare heads as we kneel or stand in memory of those lost and in thanksgiving of those who have survived. A gentle breeze lifts

the soft smell of summer soil and harvested hay to our faces as we close our eyes and listen to the intoned chant of the *Te Deum*, the service for thanksgiving, for our victory, our lives, for the living, for the dead.

We pray to the God who is on our side, the side of the victors, to the God whom I never acknowledge often, except in passing moments of reflection such as this. We are refreshed, we have survived, we have returned to experience the aftermath and thaw of the catastrophe. With our survival there is much relief but also there is guilt at living when so many have died. However much I rejoice at being alive and part of this victory, I also walk with constant pain. Not physical pain, but that of the mind and heart which I cannot and dare not express. There is no word whether Ashe is living or dead but there are many still missing. There is a chance he has survived. A roll of drums echoes across the great camp of men and the commanding officers give the order to fire. We lift our pistols and muskets and fire into the air. The camp reverberates with the deafening crash of fire in triple discharge.

“For the glory of England!” the toast erupts in the officers’ tent.

“His Grace, the Duke!” goes another.

“The greatest soldier of all time!” yet another.

The toasts go on and on. Mugs are filled and refilled with red wine that flashes as red as blood soaked into the earth over which we have ridden.

Ashe, my good friend has still not been found and is listed as missing. Unable to stand the rejoicing any longer, anxious and worried about him, I escape outside the tent.

Abercrombie, eyes on me as usual, follows me out.

“Most probably blown to bits in Blindheim as he went over the palisade,” he comments, in his usual diplomatic manner when I mention he has not been found. “Don’t look so grief-stricken,” he continues, looking at me. “The names are still coming in from the hospital at Nördlingen. He may still be alive. The numbers are always slow in the tally, it takes days for them to catch up.”

His voice is calm, even, matter-of-fact, as if talking about the weather. “Why don’t you ride to Nördlingen and check for yourself, if you’re that worried. Orkney’s bound to give you leave before we march on.”

The Aide surprises me with his suggestion, perhaps he is human after all. I feel a glimmer of hope because to visit the hospital is the only way I will find peace. If Ashe is not there then he most probably is, as Abercrombie says, blown to bits by musket fire and buried in Blindheim.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Summer: 1704

Nördlingen

The Wounded

The road is pot-holed and dust-filled. The countryside, full of summer fields that the vast army of men had covered, either marching, fighting or fleeing, is now desolate and empty. Everywhere around me are burnt farmhouses, upturned carts and wagons with broken axles and missing wheels lying scattered amidst rows of freshly turned earth containing massed graves. I cannot imagine it ever being the same again.

Every bone in my battlesore body is jolted by the uneven gait of my horse as I ride at a walk, not wanting the animal to peck in the ruts or stumble over the stones and rocks that litter the way. The injured after the battle were carted eleven miles over this road, in Marlborough's carts, jolting and swaying across the River Wörnitz on a bouncing bridge, towards Nördlingen, north of the battlefield. Their misery at being wounded must have intensified knowing they had only a slim chance of recovery. If you do not die on the field, you die in the hospital from infection or at the hands of the surgeon. My anxiety increases about Ashe. He may already be dead but I have to find out, otherwise I will never rest with myself if I leave the area and do not know what has happened to him. Orkney has listened

to my plea and given me leave for two days to visit the hospital. I leave the camp before dawn knowing that when I return we will be moving on to yet more confrontations with the enemy.

The spires and roofscape of the town of Nördlingen, rise untouched from the countryside. I ride into the crowded streets after being in the saddle a good part of the day.

The army has taken the place over and spills from every open door and window in the town. We have filled it to capacity with our men. Those able to walk are billeted in inns or private houses and they mingle in the streets, or watch and call to each other and passers-by from windows in the houses, some black and white timber, others stone. Soldiers sit on stone steps of houses and buildings, others lie on stretchers in the shade of overhung thatch. Others lie on benches in gardens. The army is everywhere.

Townfolk haul cartloads of vegetables, or herd chickens and squalling pigs. Children squeal in competition as they are chased by calling mothers or sisters while geese and ducks quack and honk their way through the throng. Draught horses bearing heavy loads of supplies block the roads. My ears ring with the cacophony of noise after the silence of the countryside. The air is full of the smell of baking and cooking of beef and broth which makes my stomach growl in reaction. Young women, long-skirted, their heads capped, stop and gossip as they draw water from a nearby well, laughing and talking to one another without a care. Above all the noise, the church bells start to toll the Angelus at mid-day and every local towns person stops what they are doing to bless themselves in the Papist fashion, bow their heads, genuflect and intone prayers. Some of the soldiers stop what they are doing and join in.

One soldier, who like me, is not praying (although, perhaps at this point it may have been a good idea, seeing I had come so far in search of Ashe) points me in the direction of the hospital, a stone convent some way down the road, attached to a larger monastery building next to a steepled church whose bell was also ringing.

The porch of the church is cool but overcrowded with men lying on makeshift beds and stretchers closely crammed together. Beyond the porch in the dim recesses of the church I can make out the interior is taken up by a mass of beds. My breath is knocked out of me. The air is fetid, caused by the crowded unwashed bodies, blood, urine, excrement and the sweet sinister smell of putrefaction that indicates gangrene. The stench mixes with the dark and musty smell of wet stone which exudes the odour of centuries-old absorbed incense. As I stand on the threshold of darkness within the place I cannot make anything out after the light I have travelled through.

The interior is so dim I cannot see the floor I stand upon, apart from the distant glow of candles and lamps, and coloured splashes of light filtering through high stained glass windows. The solidity beneath my feet reassures me, however. In the darkness I grope my way, being careful not to stumble over some poor wretch who may be lying on the floor.

Once my vision has adjusted, I can see forms lying on beds crammed together. As one man recovers he is close enough to touch the man next to him who is dying. Between the beds other forms materialise into pondering physicians and powder-toting apothecaries with their potions in carry-boxes. Surgeons with blood stained aprons, and women camp-followers who have been organised or have volunteered to work in the hospital, move between the beds. The men are being washed or changed, beds are being made. The women carry and hold bowls, the dead are being laid out and carried out, feeding cups are lifted to

parched lips. The ever-present chaplains, hover like the crows in the field, saying prayers and intoning, anointing, blessing and holding the hands of the dying.

A high-pitched scream resonates throughout the building. I am transfixed, cannot move. My heart thumps with fright. Everyone stops what they are doing. Men who are capable of noticing, lie still in their beds breath held while the scream continues. The scream is for all of them. It dies away and activity resumes as if nothing has happened. The living start to breathe again.

A figure emerges out of the medieval past shrouded in a coarse linen shift, a string of beads encircling her waist, a brown scapula of linen over the shift, the top of her cream linen veil level with my chin. I presume that within the garment there lives a woman, for it is a woman's voice that speaks to me. She is careful not to lift her head, so all I can really see is the top of her veil and the tip of her lowered chin, her hands are tucked safely and securely within the deep well of her sleeves. She is a Papist nun.

"May I help you, sir?" She asks in French. In less than perfect French I ask her if Thomas Ashe is in the hospital.

"He would not be here, sir. All the officers have been barracked within the convent at the back of the church. You have to go outside and around the side of the building, there you will see the entrance to the convent. Ring the bell and someone will let you in," she answers with a slight bow, still without raising her eyes. Used to eye contact, I find the action disconcerting and annoying, but I lift my hat in salute to her as I make my way out of the fetid quarters of the hospital and out through the crowded porch.

The entrance and hallway within the large oak doorway is full of prostrate figures. Inside the stone-flagged corridors that run beneath rib-vaulted ceilings, lie rows of beds full

of wounded men. Once more I am surrounded by a tumult of suffering and activity I have just witnessed in the church. Another nun lets me in and directs me towards a further stone corridor. As I leave the entrance, the air becomes lighter and contains a particular luminescence which appears to reflect off the stone walls.

The corridor opens into a large amphitheatre of a cloister surrounded by a shaded and cool arched arcade with a high rib-vaulted ceiling. Within the cloister is a bright patch of green grass and scattered statuary, trees and a well. Such peace and civilisation in the midst of such brutality startles me and I stop and stare. There are no wounded here in the cloister, it is empty except for the cooing of doves from their roosts in the stone outcrops of the surrounding buildings. Wild roses edge their way up the sides of the arches and tumble down towards the grass. I wonder if I have been misdirected as only closed doors lead off the open cloister. Anxious voices grab my attention and I investigate, walk towards it, open the door, willing that I will find Ashe.

The smell of rotting flesh and fresh blood, mixed with hot tar and burning tallow candles anchors me in the doorway. Light from the cloister spills past and reveals the interior of a small room. A scream from the victim on the bed, voices my horror. It reverberates off the walls and echoes into the cloister behind me. The room is lit with many candles and light from a high small window in the wall above the bed while the bed is bathed in a shaft of light from the open door behind me. A tumult of blood spills into a bucket under the bed. Two able-bodied soldiers hold down the writhing victim, even though he is already well-strapped to the bed, while the surgeon saws off his leg. I have walked in upon the scene just as the saw's metal touches live bone and the sound grates my senses. The occupants are too occupied upon their grisly task to acknowledge my mute appearance in the doorway.

The surgeon is working fast sawing at the patient's leg as if it is wood, his apron covered in blood, his arms streaked up to his elbows. I do not wish them to acknowledge me. I only wish to escape. I am already brutalized, but this is raw, graphic and nauseating and appears worse because it is happening in a place of peace. The soldier on the bed faints and his restrainers immediately relax. One bends down underneath the bed and reaches for the bucket of hot tar ready to slap the open wound of the stump to seal it. I have seen enough and back out. In the cloister I take deep breaths, trying to rid myself of the stench of tar and blood and the sight of a half-sawn leg.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" A woman appears beside me and speaks to me anxiously in French. I think she is one of the medieval creatures, and turn to look at her. I can scarcely believe it.

A gentlewoman, in a place like this.

I rub my eyes in case I am imagining things but she is solid and standing beside me in this place of misery, death and coarseness that encompasses men at their lowest. She is not a silent forbearing nun or the wife or widow of a common soldier, neither is she a sutler. There is nothing hardened or whorish about this woman.

Her carriage is straight, her features fine and even, her skin white and clear. She has the clear direct gaze of a young woman, much like mother and my sisters, women who have not had to endure the hardship that is experienced in war.

She goes to the well and returns with a pitcher of water and a tankard and hands it to me. Her hands are small-boned but strong, the skin coarsened by hard work. I also see the glint of a gold wedding band on her finger. She has obviously been here for some time. What is she doing here with her gracious sense of breeding?

The shame of being so overcome fills me as I take the cup from her and I drink deeply. “Are you the wife of an officer?” I ask after I have drunk my fill, but she ignores my question which embarrasses me further.

But I am not fooled. Her calm manner betrays her, she is too self-contained and controlled. The gown she wears is of finely woven grey wool protected by a clean white linen apron. Around her neck hangs a gold chain with a cross in the centre of which is a deep red ruby. Her hair is swept up under a linen cap edged with pillowcase lace, something I know of from my sisters. Dark tendrils of hair escape in fine curls over her cheeks and forehead. Her eyes meet mine and sweep over my person. They are the eyes of a knowing woman, aware of her impression on a vulnerable man, livid wretch that I must look, puke-faced, still dressed in my riding cloak, hat and gloves, dust-stained from my journey.

“You have come from the camp, Captain?” she asks in English this time and I detect an Anglo-Irish accent similar to my own. She obviously knows rank and can see the gold lace on my hat and the flashes on my coat beneath my cloak. I tell her my name.

“Yes, I am looking for a friend, Thomas Ashe, a Captain in Orkney’s Foot,” I reply.

“We have some officers from Orkney’s Foot here, Captain, but there’s no Captain Ashe. However, there is one man who cannot remember who he is. He has lost an eye and has had his leg amputated. He has been unconscious for most of the time. When he was found he had been stripped and left for dead. He had lost a great deal of blood and was near death. Perhaps this is your Captain Ashe?” I nod, shocked at her description, half of me hoping it is not Ashe. “I will take you to him. Please, follow me.”

As far as I am concerned, at this moment, I will follow her anywhere she wishes to take me. She is not to know that, yet, anymore than I readily admit it to myself. She leads me back the way I have come, past the room of amputation which has the door closed and is now silent, around the cloister and into another hall, then she stops and turns to me before a wooden door.

“I must warn you, Captain. If this is your friend then you may find him vastly changed. Some of the men are unrecognisable from their former selves.”

The nun’s cell is small with white-washed walls, furnished with only a bed, small table and a chair. Light from the afternoon sun streams through a window that opens out onto the cloister. A crucifix hangs above the head of the bed and a niche in the wall contains a statue of the Virgin Mary, in front of which is a lit candle that gutters in the draught of air from the open door. Below the statue and candle is a wooden *preu-dieu*.

The figure in the bed startles me as it does not look like Ashe at all, and for a moment I think my quest has been in vain. He has one eye bandaged, and his face is drawn, bearded, and lined with pain while the flat space in the bed beneath the covers tells me of his absent leg. The grey nurse bends over him and talks to him quietly. She produces a bottle from the pocket of her apron and measures out drops onto his tongue which I presume is laudanum. One eye heavily bandaged he opens his other eye and looks at me. I recognise my friend.

The grey nurse looks at me. “This is your friend, Captain?” she asks. I nod at her unable to speak or believe Ashe is before me. He looks at me without recognition. The nurse leaves the room and we are alone.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Your friend, Richard Molesworth,” I answer taking the hand he extends to me.

He looks at me puzzled. “Who am I?”

“Captain Lord Thomas Ashe, of Orkney’s First Foot,” I reply. He stares at me.

“I cannot remember me,” he answers.

I tell him about himself, about the recent death of his Father, how he is now a Baron; about his estate in Yorkshire, his mother and sisters.

“I remember nothing. Tell me about the battle.”

“There was a complete victory. We routed the French and sent them packing.”

The blue eye looks at me as memory starts to return.

“I remember you, Molesworth,” he says, at last. “But I cannot remember the battle?”

“Not climbing over the palisade, leading your men?” I ask.

“No. Nothing,”

You came through,” he says, his voice thick with pain. “I haven’t been able to remember anything. I heard Tallard surrendered.”

“Yes. Marlborough offered him the use of his coach. He was seen weeping. He was deeply humiliated and lost his son on the field.”

“Tell me about the battle. I must try and remember. Tell me everything that happened.”

My voice dries up. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. I cannot tell him about the pitiful weeping of the French soldiers as they burnt their standards rather than hand

them over to us, their enemy. Nor tell him about the slaughter of young boys and the decapitation of rows of waiting soldiers by bounding cannon I witnessed while waiting for orders from Orkney. I cannot tell him about the wild bloodthirsty charge of the Cavalry led by Marlborough on the Höchstädt plain; how they slashed at anything that moved as they chased the fleeing French, killing the wounded along the way with no mercy, riding over their own men. I cannot tell him that.

What would he feel if he knew about the endless parade of peasants ordered to dig graves on the battlefield? And the massed graves? I cannot tell him of the men I had killed close up with my pistol if they got in my way, skulls shattering, brains and blood flying; of my sword running deep within the body of others, tearing entrails scattering them onto the dirt at my feet. I cannot tell him that at night, before I sleep, I hear the screams of the wounded on the air, the moaning of the dead and the weeping of angels. No, we are on the side of glory therefore, such things go unacknowledged, just stored within our brains to be resurrected when we least expect it.

“Another time, Thomas. I will tell you everything when you are well. It was a great victory and you were part of that.” I reassure him.

“And you? Are you unhurt?”

“Yes. I spent most of my time running for Orkney. Found myself in a few skirmishes along the way. I managed to dodge the shot. Heaven knows how. I saw you in the thick of it leaping over the palisade. There was no word of you Ashe, except that you were missing as many are. I had to come here to the hospital to find out if you had survived as the army moves out within days.”

“I’m thankful to you, but I’m finished. I will never walk again.”

“You’re not finished. You will recover and return home to your estate.”

Unconvinced and depleted his face crumples and he weeps with his loss. “I can’t even remember my estate, or my family, let alone return home to it.”

“The memories will return, Ashe.”

A sense of shame, associated with guilt and uselessness, surges through me and demands to be expressed, but I know weeping with him is not going to help him or bring any of the dead back. I am ashamed that I was not in the main battle in Blenheim village when so many have died. The thought weighs on my mind, a thought I have been consciously pushing away the past few days.

“I survived. I feel guilty. What happened to the men I led?” he asks.

“Some have come through. They are most probably here in the hospital. Thomas, There’s no need for guilt. We all did what we had to do,” I answer trying to convince myself, as well as him.

“Look what the French have done to me!” he says and throws back the bedclothes.

Once, where there had been Ashe's long straight leg, there is nothing. Above where his knee should have been, is a bandaged stump, oozing blood-stained tar, the rest of his leg from mid-thigh up is bloodied and bruised. The stench and scene I had experienced in the amputation room flashes in front of me.

“I can still feel the leg right down to my toes,” Ashe says, eyeing me for a reaction as might he should. “A ghost leg, one that doesn’t exist.”

My tongue is paralysed, my throat clamped around a lump that threatens to choke me. I gaze at his loss unable to control tears that quicken my eyes. I try to blink them away

but not before the grey nurse enters the room carrying a tray, a jug and two goblets. She gives me a glance, sets the tray on the table and turns to Ashe, holding the cup to his lips as he drinks. I excuse myself and walk from the room into the fresh air of the hallway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Summer: 1704

Nördlingen

Ellen

The stone walls of the cloister are cold against the touch of my hands as I draw deep breaths to gather myself. Singed of soul, spent of spirit, levelled as Ashe is, all my experiences of the past weeks sweep over me from where I thought I had buried them, at the top of the Schellenberg. Yet, I know I should be rejoicing at living, at surviving. I am unsure about why I am affected. I thought by now I would be immune to the sight of injury and death. Perhaps it is because Ashe is my friend.

“Have this Captain. It will make you feel better,” the woman in grey stands beside me and hands me a goblet of brandy which I take with some eagerness and gulp down. As soon as it hits my empty stomach my head detaches itself and the hall spins around me. I make for a stone seat under one of the cloister arches, sit gingerly and wait for the flagstones at my feet to stop tilting.

“You love this man?” she asks, her voice laced with curiosity as she sits beside me, the hem of her gown spreading at my feet. A bold step for such a woman, but then, I

imagine, she has seen much hardship. She is no ordinary woman; no one needs to tell me that.

“Yes, he’s my friend. We have been through much together.”

“Don’t worry, Captain, your friend will live. He will recover. He is much better and over the worst. His leg was gangrenous and had to be taken otherwise he would have died.” She lapses into silence and I glance at her. “This is a mad world we inhabit, where victory and maiming are heralded as glory.”

Her eyes are grey, with flecks of blue, level on mine. A strong gaze which indicates an astute stable mind.

“You choose to inhabit the same world, madam?” I ask, fingering the empty pewter goblet, wishing I could have another to obliterate the pain within me. I feel like getting drunk. It is a temptation with Marlborough not around, but there is bound to be somebody who would see and report me.

“It’s not my choice to do so, but my obligation.”

“I don’t understand.”

The warm light cast by the lowering sun on stone makes her gown darken like a brutish sky about to release thunder, her apron and linen cap glow yellow. “Your husband was a soldier?”

“He was, sir. He was a Captain, killed at Oberglauheim. I felt obliged to come to the hospital to nurse the soldiers, to be of use until I can go home, as many widows are doing. Commissioner Hudson said our fares back home will be paid for. I cannot ask more than that.”

My suspicions are confirmed. “You’re Irish, madam.”

“Yes, sir. Ellen de Lacy, County Limerick. And so, I believe, sir, are you.”

I nod and introduce myself. I recognise the name, de Lacy. It is an ancient one in Ireland, the family was established at the time of William the Conqueror. “You are Anglo-Irish, sir?” she questions. Her accent is almost imperceptible, like mine and her French is impeccable, where mine is not. She had obviously spent time in France. So many questions answered and unanswered revolve around her.

“Your husband’s regiment, madam?” I inquire and watch her, suspicions forming in my mind. There are many Irish troops fighting for England, I presume he was one of those. There is a drawing in of breath as she hesitates, weighing her answer. She shakes her head at me or perhaps at herself as if denying the memory.

“I cannot speak of it here. I will not speak of it. His loss is too much to bear. Here, in this place where men recover and some die, and in my heart, I have buried thoughts and grief. Helping others helps me deal with that loss, but if I speak of it the pain returns,” she answers, looking at the floor. I frown at her.

For one so grief-laden she is well-controlled. I know my own sisters would be in drenched in tears at such a situation. I am certain she is hiding something.

“Forgive me, there is nothing you should know, Captain,” she says, as if reading my mind, her eyes once more upon mine.

This woman fills me with a profound disturbance I have not experienced before. I feel there are many things about her I should know.

“No, it is I who should be forgiven. I shouldn’t have intruded. As you have said, we are living in a mad world,” I answer, thankful that the floor by this time has levelled itself out at my feet.

She leaves me and walks away through the cloister, the tray and goblets in her hand, a small grey form under the glowing arches of the roof. The feeling of disturbance does not leave me. She is not being honest with me and I wonder what she is hiding. I return to Ashe but the mixture of brandy and laudanum has sent him into a deep sleep. I envy him for that. I will return in the morning before I leave for camp. I make my way back through the corridors of the convent a little more immune to sights and smells than I have been when I entered.

A night at the crowded inn oppresses me. The oak floors slope beneath the bulge of the beamed ceiling above my head, so low I have to bend over to walk in through the door of the noisy establishment and bend even further in the tight dark room that is my chamber. At least I have a room and bed to myself. I lift the covers to check the cleanliness of the sheets and lack of bedbugs, before I strip my outer clothes off and tumble onto the rough bed that passes as a mattress. The place is full of noises; snores, coughs, hiccups, laughter, talking, shouts, moans, and somewhere within the bowels of the place, I hear the distant rhythmic knocking of intermittent lovemaking. My belly is full of beef, ale and bread. I welcome oblivion until the cock crows and dawn streaks the sky and I am up, washed, shaved and dressed, ready to say good-bye to Ashe and return to camp.

The hospital stirs with morning ablutions of washing, feeding and eliminating as I walk through it. I notice beds have been emptied through the night. Mistress de Lacy is in Ashe’s cell. I hesitate at the door not wishing to disturb the pair. She stands close to the bed, bent towards him in an attitude of caring as she shaves him. She is well used to such a

chore and I notice she skilfully skirts the bandages around his neck and head with the blade, revealing the trail of blue shadow beneath his skin. She hesitates as she surveys her handiwork, razor poised mid-air before she resumes the task, tilting his head with the fingers of one hand as she shaves his jaw with the other. I have forgotten the power of femininity but now it returns in force as I watch her quiet, confident, measured mannerisms. I become aware of Ashe's eye upon me.

"Meet my future wife, Richard," Ashe says, with a slight smile at me.

Ellen stops her work and looks at him but not without a blush working its way over her cheeks. "You will have to wait in line Captain Ashe, your proposal is the tenth I have received this week," she replies with a laugh, but it is towards me that she turns and smiles. She wipes the blade on a cloth resting on Ashe's chest before continuing with her task.

Ashe and I stare at each other over the top of her capped head. "We are willing to stand in line, Mistress de Lacy," I say with a wink at Ashe. This time she lifts her head and looks at me but does not say anything. "You tease me, Captain," she says and turns back to her task.

"No more than you tease us," I answer with a laugh and have the pleasure of seeing her blush even further.

Envy runs through me as she washes his face with warm clean water. I too long for the gentle play of the cloth on my face, as tender as the touch she gives him. I have forgotten what it is like to experience such gentleness. She gathers her cloths and bowl, nods to his word of thanks and my presence. She brushes past me on her way out through the door and the fresh smell of newly starched linen, soap and lavender washes over me emanating from the rustle of her skirts. Homesickness runs through me so violent and

sudden it shocks me. I watch her departing figure down the corridor and my longing and envy turn to embarrassment and shame as I catch the look of awareness in Ashe's eye.

“You return to camp today?” he asks and breaks my reverie.

“Yes, I must. We move out any day now. North, I think. More battles. It seems His Grace, the Duke, is not satisfied yet.” I move into the cell, draw up a stool and sit beside him.

“Richard, you must promise, if anything happens to me, if I do not come through this, will you visit my sisters and mother in Yorkshire and make sure they receive my belongings?”

“Of course, that goes without saying. But you will come through. Mistress de Lacy said you were over the worst. Anyway, what makes you think that I am going to survive all this?”

Ashe's smile is wry. “I feel it in you. You would think that you are protected by a shield of armour, as if you are being prepared for great things.”

He looks so smug with the knowledge that I laugh, but I am also mortified that he thinks I am singled out for protection, when I know I am not.

“What nonsense Ashe, and you know it. I'm no more protected than anyone else,” I answer chastened. He is aware of my weakness, my ambition, which I thought I had hidden well. I feel uncomfortable and apologetic. Are we all not educated into privilege and all that it can bring? Not Ashe.

“Decadence,” he remarked once as we watched the tiresome wayward antics of some young scions of the upper classes in our ranks as they took and abused privilege as

their due. Surely he does not judge me by them and place me alongside them? I am determined to survive, I know that, but perhaps it is more obvious than I thought.

“Our chances of survival are equal, Ashe,” I say with false conviction. The fever-bright gleam of his eye and the film of sweat upon his face signals he does not agree. He grasps my hand in friendship as I leave him.

“You will be able to beat me in a duel now,” he says, without humour.

“You are the best swordsman I have met, Ashe. Nothing has changed.”

He does not answer, propped in his bed his body hurting, knowing that everything had

changed. I have to leave him and I wonder if I will see him again. Not trusting myself to look back I feel his eye upon me as I leave his cell.

The hospital has quietened with the advance of the hour and I walk the length of the cloister trying to find Mistress de Lacy in one of the occupied rooms. I find her outside pumping water into a wooden pail in the courtyard.

“Captain, you gave me such a start,” she says, in surprise, her hand to her chest. The water in the pail slops over the cobbles and onto my riding boots.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean frighten you. I wanted to see you before I left. I was afraid you might run from me.”

“What made you think I would run from you?” she asks, puzzled, placing the bucket at her feet. I pick it up and accompany her back into the hospital. “No, you’re quite right,” she says at last, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “I may have avoided you, meaning no disrespect, but all nobility frightens us,” she answers.

“Nobility?” I ask. “Us? I’m not sure who or what you mean exactly. You don’t seem to be frightened of Sir Thomas, and he is truly noble. I’m not titled.”

“He is troubled, wounded and defenceless. But you and your kind fight against us.”

I frown at her as we walk along the dim corridor and into the darkness of the church.

“You are talking in riddles, Mistress de Lacy.” I wonder if it has anything to do with the atmosphere of Papacy that fills the place. To me Papacy is a riddle and riddles can be intriguing, contagious and addictive, something to be avoided. I want no riddles in my life, just plain facts. “You are a puzzle to me,” I add and she picks up the annoyance in my voice.

“Is there something else you want from me?” She asks, equally annoyed as she turns to my struck-dumb countenance.

“Mistress de Lacy, I mean no harm to you, but surely my kind is your kind as well?”

“And what ‘kind’ is that? And what interest is it to you, Captain, what ‘kind’ I am?”

“Well, you’re obviously of gentle birth, a lady, a woman of breeding, nobility perhaps. I am puzzled as to why you’re here, in this place?”

She is having the most unusual effect upon me, one I cannot analyse. I feel troubled and do not know why. “I want....” I venture towards her bent head as she listens to me. “I want....” my voice trails off and I am left feeling the inadequacy of my stammering misery not knowing quite what I want.

“What do you want, Captain?”

“Why don’t you tell me the real reason you are here?” I blurt out at last.

She stands beside me, her face serious and drawn, and does not look at me but through me, at someone, perhaps, standing behind me. Yet, I know there is no one there, only the open doorway and the corridor behind us. I am also aware that she knows the impression she is having upon me. She is not a virgin even though she looks like one. She has been a wife, she knows the ways and functioning of men. The colour of disclosure warms my face but because the corridor is dim she may not notice my discomfit, my curiosity, my longing. For that is what it is, I conclude, longing.

“It’s really none of your business, Captain.”

She walks away from me further into the church and I follow, after all I am still carrying the pail.

“I need to know.”

“Why? I have already told you how I came to be here. Leave it at that. Why bother yourself with me? Believe me, Captain Molesworth, it’s better that you don’t know.”

“Why is it better?” I ask. “You’re treating me like the enemy,” I say in a sudden rush of annoyance, sick of riddles. “You’re not French. If Captain Ashe, myself and others like us are the enemy, why are you here? You’re a gentlewoman in a place of brutality and you linger. Why?” I persist.

She takes the pail from my hand with a nod of thanks and looks up at me with her strong gaze. “All men are equal in the eyes of God, Captain, friend and foe alike,” her glance is direct and challenging. She surprises me. Friend and foe? There is no abject femininity, no falseness, no affectation, just a mysterious reply. In her eyes, as grey as her gown, I see the meaning of my existence and the confusion of her religious and moral

stance, for I realise that is her dilemma and I have stepped into that dilemma. "Charity is before all virtues."

"If that is the case Madam, then truly I am not the enemy," I say with a parting bow. She calls me back and I turn towards her. She stands framed inside the gothic doorway leading into the church. I wait for her reply.

"Have you heard of faith, hope and charity and most of all, love, Captain?" Ellen de Lacy asks me. I nod. "That is why I am here, Captain, and I wish all those virtues upon you."

Whether it is her words or the light in her eyes or the small smile that hovers around her lips, I do not know, but my heart does a very strange thing, it leaps.

Despite that I turn away from her. She has bothered me enough.

There is no further time to be self-indulgent. I have to leave. I do not know if I will ever see Ashe or Mistress de Lacy again. I push the thought from my mind. I know nothing about her, I must be out of my mind to be affected so quickly. I am also no wiser as to her background and really, why should I care? My detachment is back as I walk out into the bright sunshine that fills the street. I am invincible again. I mount my horse and ride away.

The strength of my detachment dissipates by the time I near the end of the street. I turn and see her standing in the entrance to the church, her back to the open door, watching me. I know that if I do not see her again, then my life will be forever at a loss. I lift my hat in salute and see her raise her hand in farewell before I turn away. She had waited to see me go. A surge of joy rushes through me.

I am not invincible after all.

Chapter Nineteen-Synopsis

London

Late Winter: 1704-1705

Glory.

London erupts in rejoicing when Marlborough returns. Richard takes part in the triumphal procession through the streets with the army. His father and John witness the parade. His father is finally coming to terms with Richard's career in the army. He visits Murray's wife and child. He gives Murray's wife his belongings and the collection from the officers of the regiment. After the parade Richard returns to his old haunts at Middle Temple and visits Betty in the local inn. She welcomes him joyfully and he has a moment of respite and sheer lust.

Chapter Twenty-Synopsis

Edlington, Yorkshire

Winter, 1704-1705

Time to Rest.

Richard returns to Edlington, his Father's Elizabethan manor-house. He describes the house, land, and woods. He finds he is troubled by disturbing dreams again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Edlington

Winter: 1704-1705

Problems

A streak of midwinter sunlight parts the grey clouds, making me realise that somewhere up there the sun still exists. It is weeks since we have seen it. Light floods through the emblazoned stained-glass windows above my head, depicting the quartering of the Stanhope heraldic shields and paints the oak floorboards with red, blue and gold flags. The warmth of the fire within the grate of the large chimney-piece does not penetrate the size of the hall or reach across the floor to the window as you, Mary and I draw up chairs beside the fire to feel the relief of warmth.

“I love Edlington,” you say. “I was pleased you were coming here this time instead of Brackenstown. It gave the children and me an excuse to come over here with Mama.”

“Why do you like it so much, Mary? All I can see is bleakness,” I ask, full of curiosity.

“I love the peace, the feeling that it is close to eternity. The wide open spaces, the rolling fields, the chasing shadows. This place has always existed and always will. I could

stay here forever if need be. When I come to Edlington, which is as often as possible, I never want to leave, and when I'm away I want to return. I can quite understand why Papa bought the Hall and the land."

"Mama can't." I grin with the memory of Mother growling about the draughts, the leaks, the huge icy rooms, the room where the King slept which she said was haunted, the bleak fields and wide open skies that are usually covered in grey clouds, "I prefer Brackenstown. It hasn't been called magical for nothing." I continue. "Edlington will one day be owned by John and Brackenstown will also be his." I find it hard to keep the envy out of my voice.

"And where will you be?" You ask.

Where indeed, I wonder? The fact that I may not be anywhere goes unspoken.

"In army barracks somewhere, most probably Kilmainham," I reply thinking of the seventeenth century Royal Hospital for war veterans outside Dublin. Vast and rambling it stands in a large acreage and accommodates retired and recuperating veterans, which I will be one day if I am lucky.

"You're likely to become Governor of Kilmainham rather than retire there," you say, knowing that retirement for me will not be idle.

"Anyway, I will be an old soldier."

"I can imagine you old, Richard, with grey hair, wisdom and wrinkles," you tease me, laughing.

"I hope, with any luck, I will live to be old. But who knows with any of us. Only John thinks he's going to live forever. The distant future is always a major preoccupation for him and he always plans accordingly. He's full of talk about his forthcoming sojourn to

Tuscany and the court of Florence, and also of how much Father deserves a title, much to Father's amusement and annoyance."

"Mmm. Papa is not too pleased about that," you comment.

You are right. It is not Father's wish. Titles do not interest him, his Whiggishness plays a part in his opinion and such notions are not high in his priorities, though I know how much they interest John. He wants one himself and the best way to do that is through obtaining recognition for Father. He is ambitious, like me, but in an entirely different fashion, more calculating, and Father, for the life of me, cannot see it. Why are parents so blind? As much as I love my brother, it is a trait I do not admire. And there are many of mine he does not admire, so we are even. If I am ambitious everyone knows about it. John's thoughts of England and family are far from his mind, and Ireland has never been his favourite place. It is too far away from the seat of power in London, and also too far away from the attractions of Italy. There is an availability of willing women in court circles, another major preoccupation of brother John. He thinks of Tuscany as home, especially Florence and lately Genoa. He is as preoccupied as I am with war, but only out of diplomatic interest.

John's non-preference for Ireland will one day matter to Father. Father is paying his way without hesitation, in comparison to his reluctance to provide me with accoutrements for the next campaign. I have not even approached him about it, not wanting another argument and upset household. Bad atmosphere between us soon spreads throughout the family like the plague.

"You are troubled, Mary. I have noticed that George has not wished to stay with the family in Edlington for long," I comment.

You draw your shawl about your shoulders and stare at the fire.

“He has been preoccupied and withdrawn for days at a time. I was hoping that once here he would stay, especially as you are home. He admires your spirit, Richard. But we had no sooner arrived when he became restless and wanted to return to London and his parents. He spends a lot of time with them.

“What is the matter with George?”

“He suffers from melancholy and has for some time. He seems to be worsening instead of improving. Bouts of headaches and ill-temper, then he weeps for hours and nothing makes him stop. Days later he’s back to normal, full of life and enthusiasm and I think he’s well again. But it doesn’t last. I’m at my wits end. We have been to physicians in Dublin to no avail. All they can do is purge and bleed which weakens him physically. Father suggested the physicians at Doncaster. There seems no end to it. His parents have found physicians in London who are treating him, hopefully they will be able to help.”

“Promise me Mary, when I’m away that you will write to me regularly. I need your letters to keep me sane in this world that you think is so insane and you need someone to tell your troubles to.

“I promise.”

“Tell me about the world as you see it. Keep my ideas and thoughts on normal everyday things. Given me reason to return. When in the midst of the campaign it’s easy to forget normality and think that the world of war is the only world.”

“Will you write and do the same for me?”

“Always.”

If only I had done so Mary, if only I had done so.

Father is in his library standing at his reading table, his spectacles half way down his long nose.

“Good, I wished to speak to you. Now that you have come to find a book sit down,” he orders. “The mail has just come from Doncaster and I have something of interest to you. Two letters. One from North Yorkshire and one from Lord Orkney.”

My heart leaps at both. I fold myself into his wing-backed chair near the fire and take the letters he hands me. The one from Yorkshire is from Ashe. I put that away to read later. I am taken up with what Lord Orkney wants as it is addressed to Father. Quickly I unfold the parchment and spread it on my lap, holding it up in the candlelight to read. Orkney has written not to me but to my provider to inform him of my performance on the field during the latest campaign and how impressed he was with my natural soldiering ability, something I doubt Father will be very impressed with. I glance over at him and he is watching me steadily over the tops of his spectacles waiting for my reaction. My heart leaps at the next sentence. There is an opening on Marlborough’s staff and I may be approached to become his Aide but it still had to be discussed and decided upon. If so, was Father willing to support me in this endeavour and buy my commission? I glance up at Father who by this time, hands firmly clasped behind his back is rocking back and forth upon his heels with impatience.

“Well?” he demands.

“I’m astounded. I didn’t think it would happen so soon,” I answer truthfully.

Positions rarely came up on Marlborough’s staff and when they did they were much sought after.

“There are others who would be equally pleased to be offered such a position and most probably are being sounded out right at this moment.”

I nod, thinking of Abercrombie, which brings an anxious twist to my gut.

“It has to happen yet and if it does, I have to find the money to provide for you.”

I bite my tongue as I think of how he provides without question for John. Impatience sweeps over me. I want to know now, to plan, to buy my equipment. I have waited so long for advancement I feel I cannot wait another moment.

“I wonder when I will know?”

“If you’re approved it has to go before the Secretary-of-War first and before the Queen for approval. It may not come through for another year, but I thought I’d tell you about it.”

The thought of going back to the next campaign still on the outside, close but not close enough to Marlborough, appals me. “Another year?”

“All things take time, Richard. Patience has never been your strong point. You cannot expect to be a Field-Marshal in two years. I think you have done very well as it is.”

“I don’t want to be Field-Marshal yet.”

“Yet?”

“Sometime, perhaps. Aide to the Duke will do me for now,” I answer, not without humour.

“You’re hot-headed and ambitious, at times too much so.”

Just like you, Father, I think.

“But I will need money now if it does happen. My bounty as Captain is not enough to set me up as an Aide to the Duke. I will need a new uniform, new horse and furniture and accoutrements as befits the rank.”

“You’re not Marlborough’s Aide yet, Richard. For all your good points you can be quite incorrigible at times. Will you please leave me in peace now?” Father bleats his eyebrows raised, his forehead creased.

I leave him to his books. I cannot help but feel like a chastened schoolboy once again and wonder if John had been in such a position, ready to ride with the great man whether Father would hesitate to give him the money. Then I realise, he most probably has done just that for his sojourn in Tuscany.

Within the privacy of the casement window in the hall I break the seal on Ashe's letter. He has returned to his home, Barton Stour and he waits to see me. I waste no time in organising my journey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Edlington and Barton Stour

Winter: 1704-1705

Thomas

The walls of York tower above the white fields and swallow the coach as it passes through the gate. The coach winds its way through the narrow cobbled streets, between yellow buildings, and black and white cagework houses, clustered around the tall Minster that dominates the town. No sooner are we within the walls than we are without, through another ancient gate, passing the run of the River Ouse and onto the old northern Roman road. I settle back into the coach seat and watch the countryside. There are still miles to go as the village of Barton Stour is further north and east off the main road.

The coach and six moves higher and deeper into Yorkshire through frozen valleys lined with stone fences, and grey, blue and black hills streaked with snow. Snow is piled around villages and upon the thatched roofs of houses. It catches the insipid sunlight and glitters.

Barton Stour materialises out of the countryside. The wheel of the mill stands stationary in the frozen stream and the pond is a blue sheet of ice. The village is quiet and

looks pristine enveloped in snow, but I know there are open drains running through the street and dunghills at the edge of the village, as there are in all villages throughout the land. Father has seen that the villagers of Edlington have privies and there are no open sewers in the street. He insists such practices help carry disease, and waste has to be buried, not left in high dunghills in the surrounding fields to feed the flies.

The manor house comes into view and the coach clatters through the open iron gates supported by stone pilasters topped with carved pedestals shaped like the ash tree. The carriage way, lined with bare trees, runs down a slight incline to the black and white timbered Elizabethan house, similar in age and shape to Edlington, chimneys emitting trails of white smoke into the still air. The house stands before a rise of snow-covered land that drops away and rises again slightly higher like the waves of a large white ocean rolling towards the horizon of pale blue sky. It is tucked into the shelter of a tree covered fields, while before it land stretches into the vale beyond situated within the rise of hills. I can understand Ashe's attachment to this house and land.

He steps through the open door of the house into the covered porch, as the coach comes to a stop and he smiles in pleasure at my arrival. Ashe's smile is the only thing about him I recognise. He is thin and gaunt. His height exaggerates his emaciation but the light has returned to his remaining eye, the empty space of the other covered by a black patch. His face flushes with pleasure as he walks toward the coach unaided with crutches, the absent leg obvious. I am out of the coach as soon as the footman lowers the step and with joy I feel the rough pull of his embrace as he throws one arm around me. He is still strong but I support him as he leans against me. He slaps me on the back, takes my hat, and hands it to the footman as I remove my cloak and gloves.

The hall is dark except for a brace of candles in the candelabra on the table and the flames from the fire in the chimney grate. Our tongues run on in excitement. I do not see another figure in the shadows. She emerges to stand a little away from us. I turn and see her. She is tinier than I remembered her to be, and dressed, no longer in grey, but in the black and white of the second stage of mourning. Her hands are neatly folded in front of her and covered in mittens. She has a woollen shawl wrapped around her shoulders in protection from the cold.

Time stands still. My world is centred upon this moment when the three of us are together in the dark cavernous hall of the old house. My baggage is being unloaded and carted through the door, the coach driver calls the stable boys as they direct the coach to the coach house, the jingle of horses harness, and the clatter of hooves over the pebble drive is audible in the hallway, but the noise retreats. Here, I am conscious only of Ashe, Ellen and myself.

“Captain Molesworth,” she greets me, moving towards me breaking the spell. She curtsseys then holds out her hand to me which I quickly take in mine and bend to kiss.

“Mistress de Lacy, how good it is to see you again. I had no idea you would be here,” I add and turn with one eyebrow raised in query to a grinning Ashe.

“A surprise for you, Richard. Mistress de Lacy is staying with me and helping me to recover. Her ministrations have been most beneficial, as you can see I am almost back to my former self.”

Ellen smiles at him and then looks at me. My heart performs erratically as she levels her gaze on mine. I become aware of approval and pleasure in her appraisal. The moment is fleeting and she drops her eyes as soon as they acknowledge my feelings.

“Come, Richard, my mother is waiting in the parlour. She is eager to meet you, I have told her so much about you,” he says, beckoning me.

The servant opens the double oak doors and he leads me into a room rich in the patina of oak and walnut furnishings bathed within the light of yet another fire that warms the room.

Lady Ashe rises to meet me and gives me a small curtsy while I bend over her hand to greet her. When I look up she appraises me with Ashe's blue eyes from the top of my periwig down to my leather gaiters and shoes.

“You are as Thomas said, Captain Molesworth. A worthy man.”

Thomas grins at me.

She is small and dignified, dressed in mourning still, her hair streaked with grey and pulled up under a lace cap. Her expression is calm and her face carved with high cheekbones and a finely boned jaw; her skin is translucent as if she has never seen the sun. “Come, sit for a few moments and have a glass of wine then the servant will show you to your room.”

We sit around the fire and I feel the warmth of hot mulled wine flood me as Lady Ashe quizzes me on my journey, the state of the roads and weather, Doncaster and the health of my family.

Ellen sits not far from us and I notice her attention to every movement Thomas makes, and guilt, battling with envy, stirs me.

Filled with wine and welcome, Thomas and the manservant show me to my bedchamber upon the first floor. The room is large with a high ceiling and heavy beams, dominated by a four-poster bed with a full tester over it. A fire throws warmth into the

room. We have dinner within the hour and no doubt I shall be in for a quizzing from my host.

After the meal Lady Ashe and Ellen retire to the withdrawing room and I find being alone with Ashe with a glass of claret loosens my tongue. We talk of war, Thomas and I, of Marlborough, the battles of Ulm and Landau and the taking of the fortresses. Here I can talk freely and not feel restricted by my Father's presence or the presence of young ears which might be disturbed by my graphic memories.

The women in the other room come to see what we are doing and we end the evening playing cards until weariness overcomes us and my eyelids can no longer hold themselves up. We climb the wide staircase to bed, Thomas leaning on my arm, and Ellen supporting him on his other side, and only then do I see the pain on Thomas's face and the silent acceptance of his state.

If I sleep I have no memory of it. I wake up when I hear the manservant pull the curtains back from the window. I push the bedcurtains aside letting in the weak morning light. My clothes are already laid out on the chair near the fire and water is in the basin for me to wash and shave. I turn over in bed and looked out the window. The black tops of the trees edge the base of the ice and snow-covered hills. Ellen is in my thoughts, when I fall asleep and with me when I wake. I tremble within as if afflicted with the ague and I know I am not ill, in the conventional sense at least. Excitement fills me, yet at the same time, I dread the next few days. Never good at hiding my feelings, how am I going to stifle them in front of my good friend Ashe and keep them from the woman he loves?

The pretence goes on. I am very good at it, though I know I am no actor. However, I hope I am doing a magnificent job and am not as transparent as I know my emotions could reveal me to be. Ashe carries on our friendship as if nothing is amiss so I judge from that I am convincing him.

Our time together is companionable and easy while Ellen stays on the outside, keeping Lady Ashe company. If she happens to come close to me I am conscious of the lace edged sleeve of her gown brushing against my arm or hand, the glow of the gold cross beneath the handkerchief around the neck of her bodice, the free pile of her hair upon her head uncovered by a cap, the gentle curve of her neck and the flush of her cheeks; all this disarms me. She is a wonder, a marvel. I am overwhelmed and delighted by her femininity after the rough male world of the army.

It is an effort to ignore her and pretend she is a sister. I pretend to be unaware when she enters or leaves a room, apart from the customary rise to my feet and a bow, otherwise, there is a studied indifference on my part. I even withdraw if I find Ellen alone talking with Thomas. With chagrin I see they are lost in each other's presence. They act as if they have not seen me, yet I know they have.

Thomas distracts me with talk about the strategies and tactics employed over the campaign; about the gossip of London, politics and country, about parents and siblings. He tells me the hospital was emptied not long after the campaign closed and those who could not travel home were transferred to another hospital which had been set up in Mayence, but he was able to travel back to England.

My attention is upon Thomas. I do not look at Ellen though I am aware she is sitting not far from us, near the fire, her head bent over a piece of embroidery, sewing stitch after

delicate stitch, needle stabbing in and out of the fabric held within the frame in front of her, listening to everything we say. Her very presence increases the vibrancy in the air. She rarely looks at me, though on occasion I turn and see her eyes upon me in a look of unabashed admiration which vanishes as soon as I catch her eye. Instead, she looks away from me her face red from the heat of the fire to concentrate upon her work again. Her look of emotion gives me hope, but hope for what, I am not sure.

She has just come to nurse Ashe, at his request until he is well and he does not mention marriage. The information slates me with a lightening of spirit that far-outweighs the cause and effect.

Chapter Twenty-Three-Synopsis

Barton Stour

Winter: 1704-1705

Mystery

Ashe's condition has improved enough for him to ride and he takes Richard riding around his estate. They talk about Ellen. Thomas tells Richard that he wants Ellen to marry him but she has not consented. He is hoping she will. Richard is not happy about this though he keeps this from Ashe. He wants her for himself. He is faced with a dilemma, his friendship with Ashe and his love for Ellen. He finds Ellen nursemaids Thomas which makes him jealous. Later he and Ellen meet by accident in the library and discovers she feels the same way about him, though she does not admit it openly. She is mysterious and hides a secret.

Chapter Twenty-Four-Synopsis

Barton Stour

Winter: 1704 1705

Realisation

Thomas and his mother have to go to York to visit his sister who is having a baby and who is ill. Thomas intends to return that evening. Richard and Ellen are left alone in

the care of servants. The weather closes in and they find themselves snowbound. They both find they are relieved to be alone. Richard gets to know Ellen more but is still puzzled by her knowing she has a secret she is unwilling to share. She shows him a priest's hiding hole and a small hidden chapel in the house and Richard realises that she is a Papist. He suspects Thomas is as well. He realises that is why Ellen regards him as the 'enemy', and that the gulf between them is wide because of religion. She has revealed only half of her secret.

Chapter Twenty-Five-Synopsis

Barton Stour

Winter: 1704-1705

Revelation

Thomas still has not returned by the next morning. The house and roads are snowbound. Ellen goes missing. Richard goes in search of her and finds her nearly frozen in the woods. He carries her back to the house where he and the servants work to revive her. She recovers and sleeps. When she wakes she tells him her story. She is a widow of one of the 'Wild Geese' of Ireland. Catholic Irish soldiers fleeing the repression in Ireland and siding with France. He was killed at Blenheim and she and other women helped nurse the soldiers pretending they were English wives. Despite this Richard knows he loves her and they make love.

Chapter Twenty-Six-Synopsis

Barton Stour

Winter: 1704-1705

The Gift

Ashe returns and Richard finds himself in an impossible situation. He realises that he has betrayed his friend and it rests uneasily on his conscience. He decides it is better that he leaves them and tells Ashe he has to return to Edlington. Thomas does not mistrust him. Ellen returns to nursemaiding Thomas again. The night before he leaves she visits him in his bedchamber and they make love again. Richard leaves them both realising that he cannot come between them. As a parting gift, Ellen gives him the cross and chain she wears around her neck. "When you wear this, I am with you," she tells him

Chapter Twenty-Seven-Synopsis

London

Winter: February- March, 1705-1706

Oblivion

Richard, back in London is getting ready for the next campaign. He goes to the theatre and on the way home calls in to see Betty. When he arrives home he is drunk. He 'performs' for his brothers and Father. The brothers enjoy it but his Father is annoyed,

disgusted and perturbed by him. Richard tells them about the army, Marlborough and the 'abstinence of the sword'. He wants to tell them about Ellen and nearly does before he checks himself. The brothers eventually put him to bed to sleep it off.

The next day, hungover and miserable, he finds himself before his father who gives him news that he has been made Aide-de-Camp to Marlborough. He is elated and excited at the news. His ambition is about to be fulfilled. He asks his father for money for accoutrements, uniforms, horses. They argue again, the old conflict still between them. Richard cannot understand why his father provides readily for John yet when he asks for money he complains. His father can sense a change in Richard since his journey to Barton Stour and asks him what happened there. Richard does not answer him and leaves the room.

PART II

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Holland

The Hague

Spring: 1704-1705

Learning

The year of my new life; of being close to the one whom I admire the most.

A year of trying to impress him and have him favour me.

The enormity of what I have become is upon me.

“Do not worry, Molesworth, you will adjust,” says the Aide standing next to me.

I am within the stout walls of Greenwich awaiting an audience with the Duke who is conferring last minute plans with his Quarter-Master General and Chief Staff Officer, William Cadogan and his Military Secretary, Adam Cardonnel. The tall, thick-set capable looking man beside me is Colonel John Armstrong, Marlborough’s most trusted and

invaluable Aide. My nervousness must be apparent though I try and hide it beneath an air of quiet restraint.

Outside the early April morning is cool and the Royal Naval Hospital is swathed in vapour off the river. Sweat runs down my back beneath my shirt and heavy red-waistcoat and coat. My heart gallops in my chest.

The man beside me is as smartly and impressively dressed as I am. The gold sashes that declare our status are swagged over our shoulders while our coats and waistcoats are edged and slashed with gold lace, his uniform more ornate, if that is possible, than mine. My three cornered hat, edged with the flick of white swan's feathers, gold lace and caught with a gold loop and button is tucked under my left arm. My gloved right hand is resting lightly on the basket hilt of my sword at my side. Our wigs are caught at the nape of our necks by a black riband and bagged. I have been summoned to meet the Duke here at Greenwich before the ships to Holland are boarded. He will be sailing in his yacht with his senior staff and officers while his other Aides, such as myself and staff, will follow in another ship.

The last weeks in London have gone by in a flurry of preparation as I have rushed between men's outfitters, gunsmiths and wigmakers. Father waved me off from St. James with relief and not a little pride, I like to think, although it is hard to tell. I know my brothers, and the servants who lined up at my going were awed and silenced by my appearance. I walked out the door, turned, nodded to them, saluted, then climbed into the coach. I turned back and watched the multi-storied house with its canopy over the front door shielding my diminutive father, as the coach rumbled down the cobblestone street and out into the denser traffic of London. The thought that I might not see him again did not enter my mind. My only thought is that of glory on the field beside Marlborough.

Now, as I stand before the tall oak door without the room where my hero resides I shake in the fear that I shall not be able to serve him well enough. This dream I have had for so many years has at last eventuated, but inwardly I quake at the thought.

My eyes do not meet the gaze of Armstrong for fear of betraying myself. It is best to stare at the floor, or the wall, or the tall window letting in the fitful river light. If I glance at this experienced soldier who has served Marlborough well over the past years, I might turn and run. I have seen Armstrong before, when I rode for Orkney, and I noticed that he kept himself near to the Duke along with Colonel Bingham, another close Aide. Both were ready to do the great man his slightest bidding, including the laying down of their lives. I also noticed how reliant the Duke was upon these men. That is my next ambition, to become as close as they are to this great soldier. At this moment my ambition has diminished and I am only conscious of the twist of anxiety in my bowels, every nerve taut with tension, my clammy hands within my gloves and the dryness of my mouth and tongue. Still I stare straight ahead and do not flicker an eye while I plant my feet solidly apart in their buckled shoes and flex my toes so my legs do not go to sleep with standing still.

The door opens and the sound echoes in the long corridor. My heart does a somersault as the men who have been with the Duke emerge. We salute them as they pass and then I glimpse the great man within as another Aide comes out, beckons us in and announces us.

The light is dim, the room cool, at first I cannot see the Duke and when he materialises before me, I salute him, bow and he extends his hand to me. As I grasp his hand, I look up to meet the blue eyes that recognise me as they sum me up, nervousness and all. I have seen him many times before but not close enough to be spoken to.

The other Aides have disappeared but I am aware they are not far away, somewhere out of sight behind my back.

“Ah, Mr. Molesworth. Welcome to my staff. You have come highly recommended by Lord Orkney,” the Duke says, with a welcoming smile.

He is dressed in military red, his hands clasped behind his back. He looks at me with his astute gaze. I am transported back to when I first saw him soon after joining the army. The challenge of serving him is apparent in his gaze now as it was then. Nothing escapes him. His eyes leave mine briefly and quickly run over my person, checking my uniform from the top of my wig to my shiny shoes.

“You will find there is much to learn, though Lord Orkney has told me that you have shown aptitude from the beginning and that you are diligent and learn quickly. Captain Jevereau will tell you your duties as my Aide.” He says nodding to the Aide hovering behind me who had ushered us into him. “I believe you’re a moderate Whig, like your father?”

“Yes, I do lean towards the policy of the Whigs, your Grace,” I answer. “That is the nature of the politics I have been brought up with.”

“You will find that on the field personal politics counts for little as far as I am concerned. The correct running of the army is all important. Though I do like to have people on my side,” he explains with a smile.

He is a little older looking than I remember when I first met him, fine lines etched across his forehead and around his eyes and mouth. I look down on him when I stand beside him. That does not worry him. His eyes are as blue and commanding and reveal he must be treated with respect. He is not one to cross and yet there is a kindness and concern

about him. This virtue is stifled during the ruthlessness of battle, something I have witnessed.

“Well, the support of the Whigs is important for the cause of the war,” he comments with his low voice, each word enunciated clearly. “The Whigs are for us, so we must be for them.”

The power he emanates is tangible within the confines of the room as it is on the field. It is not only his power in the material sense, but it his personal power and the affect he has on those he comes in contact with. Here is a man who can control thousands of men through the sheer force of his mind and personal charm; through his brilliant strategical skill on the field, through shrewdness and restraint revealed in his diplomatic skills, and also his common touch with subordinates.

“You are a credit to your father, Captain Molesworth. A fine big fellow you have become. I am pleased to have you by my side. Captain Isaac Jevereau will introduce you to your duties and your fellow Aides.”

With that I am dismissed. I salute and bow again, then follow Jevereau out of Marlborough’s presence.

My wooden cot swings like a pendulum as the ship pitches, rises and rolls, and lists at a steep angle. The storm around us stirs the waves into mountains which crash over the ship at intervals while it shudders in protest. The ship’s timbers groan and the wind screams through the sails as the sea lashes against the hull. We have been ordered below and the ship battened down. My glorious future as an Aide is about to come to a very wet end. There is not much between us, the raging sea beneath us and shrieking wind around us,

only a few feet of pliable wood. It is better not to think on it as I lie in my cot and try not to ignore my churning stomach. I share a cabin with Jevereau and Panton, another Aide. If we make shore we will be lucky. For once I pray.

The relief of solid ground brings me to my senses and Blake, green still, along with Parsons, my new manservant, his helper, set about their duties of ensuring the smooth transport of my belongings and person. My new groom John Kerry, an Irishman with a wife and family at home, has yet to join us. I make sure my belongings and baggage are in order and check my uniform then climb into the coach for our ride to the The Maritshuis in The Hague.

Later we find that the Duke is behind us rather than ahead of us. His yacht came aground on a sandbank during the storm, and the remainder of his journey took place in a rowboat. Later he appears white-faced and depleted as all the most seasoned travellers of his entourage appear to be. We present ourselves to him and are dismissed while he takes to his bed to recover.

Isaac Jevereau walks beside me as we make our way through the high-ceilinged rooms of The Maritshaus, the large mansion dating from the last century in The Hague. Here Marlborough meets Anthonie Heinsius, the Grand Pensionary of Holland, head of the Dutch Government to discuss war strategy. Our needs and that of the Duke are catered for admirably. We are billeted in fine rooms in the Binnenhof nearby which have painted or ornately plastered ceilings, wainscoting, panelling, springy polished wood floors, and tall elegant windows that overlook the Hofvijver, a large ornamental lake. Outside the sun darts

behind clouds as we walk in the gardens and feel the wind upon our faces, cold and invigorating.

“I remember you,” I say to Isaac as we walk. “After the Schellenberg, on the plateau. You were injured, your leg bleeding.”

“Yes, I remember seeing you too, Molesworth. You looked like death.”

“I felt like death.”

He has talked non-stop since I have been assigned to him.

“Whose place am I taking?” I ask, knowing one of the Aides was killed at Schellenburg.

“Lewis Oglethorpe. He was shot in the leg like I was, but he died from his wound soon after. He was a good man. A newly appointed Aide,” Isaac says with feeling.

His instructions on how to serve the Duke are many and varied, from averting our gaze when the man quits his horse to relieve himself, or to escorting dignitaries to his side and informing them of protocol in his presence; if necessary we even hold the silver bleeding cup if he is bled. These onerous tasks are only some of the things we are expected to handle with diplomacy, tact and the utmost secrecy.

We are sworn, in his presence, not to reveal to anyone what goes on about him, behind the closed doors of his meetings with ministers, generals and princes alike, or reveal to anyone the circumstances that surround the Duke, in case any weaknesses are relayed to his enemies and acted upon. There are well-trusted spies amongst our ranks and we are watched and reported on intermittently, so our behaviour has to be perfect.

“There’s so much to learn. However will I remember everything and everyone?” I ask Isaac, thinking of plans, strategies, Generals, Princes I will be privy to and protocols I will have to follow.

Jevereau who smiles at me in amusement. “My Lord Duke is patient. You will get used to it, Molesworth, but it does take time.” He has been with the Duke since The Schellenberg where he was wounded. But there is no sign of a wound now. He walks upright, proud with confidence.

Jevereau is a dark man, that is, of hair and eyes, his skin the white of France and Ireland and the darkness of his beard a blue shadow upon his face. He wears his uniform of the Grenadier’s. His profile is even and strong beneath his three-cornered hat; he is older than me, by about five years. He is the same height as myself and his eyes hold a steady congenial light while his temperament appears of sanguine nature, much like my own. At Greenwich he had extended his hand to me in welcome and smiled a wide easy smile of acceptance. The Duke, as astute as ever, has matched me up with someone like myself.

Heads down, hands behind our backs, Jevereau talking, me deeply in thought, my mind on the task of learning, we walk the long paths near the Binnenhof. The planting is formal in the Dutch manner, boxed hedging protecting tulip beds interspersed with clipped ornamental trees. The tall flowers stand tightly cupped with the promise of colour.

Women walk through the grounds and as they walk they cluster, talk, parade and converse, then drift apart, only to come together again in the endless pattern of relationships. How frivolous, beautiful and delicate they are, like a bouquet of freshly picked flowers. Their heads nod in the slight breeze which ruffles the lake and lifts the

skirts of their gowns revealing tantalising glimpses of neat ankles clad in silk stockings embroidered with clocks that run up the inside and outside of the leg.

Clocks. The thought of Charlotte, my sister comes to mind, and with it a sharp stab of homesickness. I have been too occupied the past weeks to think about the family, but now they all crowd into my mind. Charlotte loves her embroidered stockings and has many pairs, so much so, that Father has nick-named her ‘Clocky’.

Jevereau looks at me as I stop and watch the women, my mind on my sisters. The women clamp their wide-brimmed hats to their neat heads against the tug of the wind and clutch shawls about their shoulders.

The thought of Ellen comes into my mind, the feeling still raw, not yet lessened by time. A sudden desire fills me with unbearable yearning. One hat sails away from a particularly beautiful creature and I chase it, return it to her with a bow, she blushes prettily and gives me a court curtsy. My mind is distracted by her fresh beauty. Isaac too bows to her then touches me lightly on the arm to draw me back to the present, away from temptation, and suggests we continue our walk.

We are back in the world of Marlborough away from the skittish world of women as he continues his instructions.

“His Aides alternate duties, but Armstrong and Colonel Bingham are with him most of the time. He has to feel he can trust his personal staff implicitly so he can function correctly and give himself fully to the plans he has in mind. We work with him in the strictest confidence. Nothing is written down, we keep all his instructions in our minds, so you have to listen carefully to what he proposes and orders and remember accurately.

Marlborough is very intense while on the field in the thick of battle. He concentrates fully and is one step ahead of the enemy. His strategies are well-worked out beforehand, though he is capable of changing his mind according to what is happening in the battle. When he gives an order it has to be obeyed without question and at once. We are informed of battle strategy some days before the confrontation, but not in detail. We are given a briefing the night before as to our duties and what is expected of us, what area we will be expected to run and what conditions we may encounter. This can change at the last minute, especially if any of us are killed and wounded, which happens.” Jevereau says. He pauses to look at me with black eyebrows raised in case I thought we were protected from that occurrence.

“He keeps everything to himself as much as possible and sometimes doesn’t reveal his full tactics until the battle unfolds before him. He relies on instinct which is usually deep and right, and on us, his Aides, and the runners to carry out his orders. He likes to surprise the enemy and will often change his mind in the midst of battle to suit the conditions and circumstances. You have to be prepared for that; after a while and with experience you come to know, anticipate and be ready. He has an overall strategy in his head and can foresee any change that may occur or may be necessary, no matter how strange or preposterous it may seem to you.” Jevereau stops to draw breath, glances at me and continues.

“He expects accurate reporting of battle conditions and stages in deployment of the troops, otherwise he cannot carry out his manoeuvres and tactics. This is important to him in the thick of battle and can be difficult. He judges you as a person by your performance on the field, as for him, it is the real telling of a true soldier. You ride into the thick of fire to pass on his orders to the commanding officer and very often discover that he is killed or

injured, so you have to know, not only who the C.O's are, but also the officers below them. There is no time in the heat of battle to sort out who is who, not only the individual officers but all the different regiments and where they are placed; you have to know beforehand, observe and report back accurately. If anyone refuses to carry out his orders you have to tell the Duke at once. No one queries you with an order that comes from Marlborough. They carry the order out instantly or face disciplinary measures. Our word is his word and his word is law."

He pauses for the knowledge to sink into my brain. The respite is not for long.

"We anticipate any action or danger that he might put himself into, and that happens frequently. In the heat of the battle he tends to forget his own safety and run with the charge, usually leading it. We ride beside him and charge with him. He likes to show himself to his men and inspire them, lead them, boost their morale, as you know. He accomplishes that easily. On the battle-field he remains quite cool and detached and doesn't suffer fools around him, but he is personally kind and considerate."

Jevereau pauses and glances at me walking beside him. "However, if anyone of his Aides is found doing anything amiss or is disloyal in any way, he is dismissed from the service and sent home. That includes having association with women while on campaign. We must abstain from women and drunkenness. We do not mix with other officers or men in our regiments except with his permission, although we still hold rank with them. We are deliberately set apart and for security must remain so. If you wish to contact anyone within your regiment you must seek permission first from the Duke."

Thomas passes through my mind and I wonder how I can maintain my friendship with him. "He is badly affected by post-battle fatigue," Jevereau continues. "Which is

never discussed or acknowledged just accepted. This usually shows itself the days and sometimes weeks after battle. You will become aware of it.”

So the rumours we heard were true, my hero has weaknesses after all. He is human and mortal like the rest of us, but only slightly so.

The task ahead of me looms larger than the hill of the Schellenburg.

Chapter Twenty-Nine -Synopsis

The Low Countries

Summer: 1705

Frustration

Richard witnesses Marlborough's frustration with the Dutch Generals who thwart his plans and strategies in the field and cause him to withdraw his troops rather than attack. He experiences Marlborough's risky behaviour when leading the cavalry in the charge. The Aides are all around him and fighting for their lives and protecting him as much as they can but he is nearly brought down by the enemy only to be saved by his trumpeter. After the battle Lieutenant-Colonel James Bringfield, Marlborough's senior equerry debriefs and harangues them all for not being closer to the Duke at all times. Richard slowly adjusts to his new role and finds his admiration for the Duke grows by the day. By the end of the campaign Marlborough is so frustrated with the Dutch Generals that he threatens to resign rather than go through that again. He decides against fighting the battle of the River Yssche and gives orders for the army to withdraw and go into winter quarters.

Chapter Thirty-Synopsis

London

Winter: 1705

Respite

Richard returns to London for the winter. He finds the city to be smelly and dirty.

His brothers try and take him to various entertainments but he has little interest. He has a letter from Ashe who tells him that he and Ellen are married and they have a baby son. He does a quick calculation and wonders if the child is his. He still yearns for Ellen but knows he cannot have anything to do with her, even though Thomas asks him to his London home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

London

Winter-Spring: 1705-06.

John's Diplomacy

"It's good to be back," John shouts for the whole house to hear. He steps through the door, removes his cloak, hat and gloves with a flourish and hands them to the footman. "And It is good to see you my father and brother," he announces, pouncing on us, kissing us on both cheeks. "Italy is wonderful."

Father and I look at each other.

He arrives with his usual entourage and servants and his baggage spills all over the entrance hall, sending the house servants running hither and thither in the excitement of the moment.

"You're looking well and refreshed after a strenuous campaign," he says, slinging his arm about my shoulder. He appears to have missed me.

Is he as pleased to see me as he appears to be, or is he practising his usual diplomatic charm? I am never quite sure with John.

His air of sophistication that had previously been a promise is now full blown in its development. He dresses like an Italian nobleman, his coat, waistcoat over plain blue

breeches are made of rich deep blue brocade, well cut, heavily embroidered in silver. The coat hangs elegantly from his tall frame, made even taller by high-tongued, high-heeled and buckled polished shoes worn over white silk stockings embroidered with clocks that run up his ankles to accentuate the shape of his legs. His head is covered in a fine real hair dark wig that rests comfortably on his shoulders, and to complete everything he carries a tall ebony cane topped with an ivory handle. He is the epitome of the great grandee, a well-dressed diplomat. Father eyes him up and down and mentally calculates his expense account. John certainly knows how to spend his allowance well.

With the advent of John my life changes, as it usually does. Once again I am being swept along with the sheer force of his exuberance for life. He is used to being entertained and entertaining and is eager to drag me into his mad round of social, political and diplomatic activities, theatrical interests and concerts, simply because, I suspect, I am on the Duke's staff. Perhaps, basically at heart, I am a farmer and a country person, like Father, I muse to myself, without conviction.

Overwhelmed and somewhat eclipsed by John's arrival, the need for solitude and peace becomes even more important. I regret heartily I have not insisted on going to Edlington, where I can relax in old clothes and not wear the tiresome dress-wig; sleep when I want and get up when I want, and the only noise I can hear are the sounds of the countryside. Instead, I am thrust into the frenetic social whirl of London with all its superficial pleasures. The experience of the battle-field has tamed me, I realise ruefully. There is more to life than social engagements, rich brocades and Italian manners.

John's manners, always refined, have become even more refined with his tenure at the Florentine court. His fine form makes me feel like a weathered ruffian in comparison, though I know I am far from that. But his calculated grace of movement, his long well

shaped legs, the line of his coat and the turn of his handsome profile beneath his peri-wig, along with the easy charm of his smile, and the affected Italian wave of his hand, make me feel I am watching a stage performance from the wings. Even though I am offstage, he is making every effort to drag me on as he too badgers me for company, then has me on parade while he circles me to inspect my dress uniform, makes sure my wig is of the right quality, sits straight and I am wearing silk stockings. One would never think I had been dressing myself to ride with the finest soldier of the land over the past year.

The change in John is remarkable, and even Father has trouble recognising his former son. He is there somewhere, beneath the finely milled white powder he pats gently over his face before he throws himself into the social whirl.

No powder for me. My skin fair and red, much like the Duke's, stays that way, slightly weathered with a few premature lines around my eyes; the fashion for powder is hideous, though more and more men and women are indulging in it after the French fashion. Father eyes John's fastidious grooming ritual and comments "Hummph!"

John has become a dignified stranger in a strange land. His talk of Italy is constant. We know about his villa in the Tuscan hills not far from Florence, a large house called Moccoli belonging to the Medici family which he has the honour of living in. He describes the gardens, the vine covered loggia, the ponds and fountains, the waterfalls, the large rooms with their painted ceilings and frescoes, parquet flooring and tall windows; long aisles of cypress trees, the orange and lemon orchards, grape-vines and olive trees; the endless sun and heat.

We realise for all his social clamouring here in London he cannot wait to return.

William, Walter and Edward have even greater difficulty than I do in relating to this well-groomed, charming yet calculating stranger. It seems Father has been right about him all along; he is a born plenipotentiary, even if it is on Father's expense account. Only now do I detect a glimmer of doubt in Father's eyes.

His restlessness and buoyant mood make me challenge him.

"What is the real reason behind your love affair with Italy?" I ask.

He turns the calculating glance of his blue eyes upon me and grins. "I never could keep a secret from you." He answers.

"Yes, you could, plenty," I answer. "What is it?"

"Love is the right word. I have found it in abundance in the most delightful creature who gives me all the comforts I could possibly want, and you know what that means. She is an Italian noblewoman with Medici blood, Camilla, Constanza Sazienza. The most beautiful creature on earth that any man could wish for."

I know of one other but do not say so.

"Does Father know?" I ask with feigned surprise.

"He does. He has met her."

Father meeting John's latest paramour? I raise my eyebrows in surprise. It must be serious. Father hasn't mentioned it to me, but then he has not seen me very much since my return. "Well?" I ask.

"She travelled to England last summer and they met briefly on my introduction. I was hoping that he would agree to our marriage, but he was not willing then. I doubt if he is now. I want and need her, she's my life, but that does not seem enough for Father. There is

the problem of dowry and title, and of course, religion. Father says it would harm my diplomatic career in the English court if I married a Papist, but it would certainly enhance my standing in Florence. I have somehow to persuade him to accept her as my wife,” John says seriously.

“You surprise me. Such contradictions. You know marrying her would be against Father’s wishes entirely. The Italian sun has addled your brain,” I explode suddenly at him and he looks at me in shock. “He has had your future mapped out for you for some time and a correct marriage, an English marriage, is the only answer to further your career,” I harangue him.

His exuberance disappears and his eyes narrow as his square face clamps into a worried harassed look that takes me aback. I have never seen him like this before. “You sound like Father,” he remonstrates. I smile to myself. How many times have I accused him of that? “That’s all very well, but I am not happy unless I’m with her. I can’t live without her. I will not,” he says turning away from me, the tone of his voice changing.

He is deeply affected. Secretly I am amused.

“But what about religion?” I ask.

“She’s willing to waive her faith for me. She envelopes me with love and passion. I could not live without that now. Bother religion.”

Dangerous talk. Envy fills me. Ellen would not be willing to do that for me despite all her protestations of love. I try a different tactic.

“What of Ireland?” I ask, realising that he is forgetting where he has come from, and the real reason for our fight for England and his destiny, as it had been for his forefathers.

He shrugs his elegant shoulders at me and a distasteful grimace flits over his face.

“Ireland is an impossibility. A backwater.”

“You sound like Jonathan Swift.”

“For once he’s right. The problems it produces are worse than those of France. It will take centuries to build Ireland, if ever at all. They are a poor lot, trodden on enough. The Lords are hammering them again. People are in no state to start an uprising, they cannot organise themselves because of the law. If I had to live in Ireland for any length of time now I would go mad with frustration because nothing can be achieved for the betterment of the people because of England’s problems with religion and territory. Nothing will change for years, if ever. I want to be where I can use my abilities to the full. I love Brackenstown, as you know, but there’s nothing there for me now.”

“But John, you’re Irish, you were born there, as I was,” I say, goading him further.

It is a rare occurrence to see him so impassioned. Despite myself annoyance creeps into my voice. “You speak like an Englishman.”

“And you speak like a sentimental fool. I am an Englishman, for Heaven’s sake. I work for the government, for the Queen. So do you.”

“Then Ireland doesn’t matter?”

“It doesn’t matter, to me at the moment. Perhaps in the future,” he replies.

I curb my tongue but wonder what Father will say to that? A feeling of loss also sweeps through me.

How different we have become; we always were different in some respects but now the gulf has widened further. Our worlds, ambitions and desires make us travel in opposite

directions. Perhaps I am more of my father's son than I thought I was. John can no more understand or like my world any more than I can his.

"Surely Ireland needs men such as yourself and Father. Men who can argue and debate and lead the way for better things. We know the conditions the people suffer under. The penal laws are as cruel as France's dictates with the Huguenot's, if not more cruel. How can the people of Ireland improve themselves if they are restricted so much?"

John looks at me, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "I thought battle was meant to harden you. It seems to have softened you instead."

A sentimental fool and now soft. Caught unawares, I colour hotly. He notices.

"And, little brother, has there been a woman in your life recently?" He asks. I am aware of his scrutinising gaze.

"No one of importance," I answer, but he is not fooled. He sees through me as usual. But I am cautious. Whatever I tell him will go back to Father. "There is never time."

"Then, my dear brother," he says, putting his arm about my shoulders. "We will make time."

John does not have Bonnie Betty in mind and for once neither do I.

The large house overlooks the Thames, its windows alight with candles which cast reflections of ribbed gold on the flagstone courtyard as our coach pulls to a stop. The river mist curls over the embankment and tumbles down the tall Portland stone fence of the house bringing with it the dank smell of mud. Liveried footmen wait at the foot of the steps leading to the house and link-boys stand in the courtyard carrying flaming torches, as coach

after coach disgorges its brightly clad passengers, masked, cloaked and dressed for a masquerade.

John sits opposite me in the coach dressed in his Italian finery, his face powdered, a heavily curled fullbottomed wig on his head and he carries an elaborate mask of gold on an ebony stick, bought in Venice. I have not given into such frivolity and once again resort to my military dress red, gold sash, no powder, wig tied back into a bag, silver hilted dress sword by my side and no mask.

“Don’t frown so much, Richard. You may enjoy the evening,” he says.

I barely answer him, watching the antics of the footmen, opening coach doors, putting down steps, taking a lady’s hand as she descends from the coach in front of ours.

“You know I don’t wish to be here,” I answer churlishly.

“The Duke will be here, to-night, Richard, you will have someone to talk to,”

“The Duke may not wish to speak to me.”

“Nonsense,” John exclaims. “You’re on his staff. Of course he will. You will enjoy the evening. The Earl Melyon is always eager to meet new and interesting people and I am sure you will satisfy him on that account. When I told him you were home he immediately included you in the invitation. Relax, brother, you are not on duty now.”

“I am on duty, John. I am in uniform,” I growl.

John wisely ignores my mood and raises his eyebrows at me. “Well, I did offer you the use of one of my suits and a mask to wear,” he adds.

“Your clothes don’t fit me,” I answer. “And I wouldn’t wear them, they’re not to my taste. And anyway, I have to appear in uniform considering the Duke is going to be

here. He would not be impressed to see me masked. He would think I was trying to hide from him.”

John ignores the insult.

“The Earl Melyon is a friend of Marlborough’s and also my friend. He spends a great deal of his time touring the Continent acquiring art treasures for wealthy patrons and returning them to England. Many of the artefacts he acquires I store in my villa until they’re shipped to England,” John answers, as he eyes me warily.

“By the size of his house he does very well.” I say, leaning against the window and looking up at the brightly lit edifice that towers over us. The strains of viol, violins, flute, harp and clavichord lilt out the windows.

“Inherited wealth, and a wealthy wife of course.”

“No doubt he has met the beautiful Camilla?”

“Of course. He has often been to Florence and I have entertained him at my villa. When Camilla came to London, she stayed with the Melyons’. He is a highly regarded connoisseur.”

“Of women?” I ask.

John scowls at me through his powder. I am not impressed by such a recommendation. I have little knowledge of art connoisseurs on the Continent but I know that often they’re not what they appear to be. Often they are employed by the government as spies, but John, as ever, is circumspect enough not to reveal in any detail the exact nature of his relationship with the Earl. If he is supplied with any information regarding the Jacobite presence in Italy, especially in Rome, by Melyon, who has access to the social

circles during his lengthy travels, then no one would ever know. Our coach jerks forward then stops and the door opens.

The double doors to the house are open, a liveried flunkey on either side waiting to welcome us. We climb the stone steps to the entrance way and see people milling in the brightly lit entry salon. A crystal chandelier reflects the light of flickering candles onto gold framed mirrors on opposite walls. The occupants of the room appear to melt into a golden moving mass under its glow. Once again at John's side I feel like a supporting actor in a play, so much so I almost feel disorientated and displaced by all the frivolity before I am through the door. The footman takes our hats and cloaks and we follow the line into the brightly lit ballroom and wait for our names to be announced at the door. The portly, highly-coloured Earl and his surprisingly youthful, beautiful wife, at least thirty years younger than her husband, receive us cordially.

"Mr. Molesworth has told me so much about you Captain. You have a very proud brother," the Earl says.

I bow to him in greeting and turn to John, my eyebrows raised. I am amused at the thought of him being proud of me. John inclines his head and raises his eyebrows at me in return.

The Earl outdoes John for glory in his dress, his gold coat and waistcoat heavily embroidered with gold thread worn over gold silk breeches, the necktie and cuffs of his shirt ruffled and edged with expensive lace. Even the Queen's husband, Prince George of Denmark, would be underdressed amidst such splendour. John skilfully introduces me to the Countess. I take her extended hand as John has done and bring it to my lips in salutation.

The Countess is beautiful in an artful studied way, dressed in the manner of the French court. She flashes like the chandeliers, diamond pins in her dark hair while diamond pendants hang in the lobes of her ears. A heavy pearl necklace tumbles over her bosom and down the Venetian lace-edged, bodice of her silk gown, the colour of the sea on a soft summer's day. It shimmers under the candle-light as if caught by the sun. Her fingers deftly curl around the sticks of a lace-edged painted fan which she uses for effect as she brings it near her face.

Her superficiality irritates me but her eyes reveal a concealed intelligence, a knowing woman well-versed with the ways of the world and the ways of men, and who now looks at me with unabashed appreciation, enough to alarm and flatter me at the same time. It seems that she too travels with the Earl and John has also entertained the Countess. I look at my brother with concealed amazement at his formidable knowledge of their lives. In what manner of means, I wonder, has she been entertained? I had noticed that the Countess, for all her sophistication, blushed abundantly when John had bowed to her and brought her hand to his lips. That is revealing in itself.

Formalities over we thread our way through the throng and John mixes freely with the other guests introducing me to several more artful people with whom I have nothing in common. I leave him to his incessant socialising with an excuse to grab a glass of wine.

Music leads me into the next room overtaken with dancing masked couples and a crowd of people, some masked some not, orders and diamonds aglitter. My eyes are occupied by the vision of so many gloriously attired women in colourful brocade and silk. Low necklines reveal creamy shoulders and necks, breasts pushed high by heavily embroidered bodices decorated in silver and gold thread, while men wear brocaded and embroidered coats, waistcoats and full-bottomed wigs draped casually over one shoulder. I

find myself standing alone with thoughts of impending escape and a glass of wine. Italian of course. Smuggled, no doubt.

The colour and music dazzle me. The guests are people from another world who could not possibly know or understand my world and most probably do not want to. I am completely out of place. A glance back at John, who for the moment has willingly abandoned me, reveals he is revelling in it.

My sex-starved mind and body are impressed with the quality of female beauty but to approach such delicate creatures, and they all look like porcelain dolls, is beyond me. My dancing skills border on the negligible, despite dancing lessons at a young age and at the Temple. That was years ago. Everything I learnt then has now been forgotten. The small orchestra works hard in the corner of the room and the mass in the centre of the floor moves as one while the other guests rotate on the perimeter lost in gossip. The noise, I decide, is almost as deafening as the battle-field but not as harrowing. The air in the room is becoming heavier, not with the acrid smell of cannon-fire, but with the heavy scent of unwashed bodies, covering perfumes and oils, smoke, candle-wax, food and wine, overlaid with the damp mix of the river mist filtering through windows ajar to the night air.

Earl Melyon's taste is Italian. Candles glow from Venetian glass chandeliers and sconces on the walls, the light reflected back in Venetian mirrors set between tall windows. The pedimented balcony outside overlooks the black and fast-flowing river. The walls of the rooms are wainscoted, gilded and painted in pale shades of blue and yellow and the ballroom opens out into a series of connecting rooms and salons, painted panelling on the walls, lit with candles and fires. Light plays on heavily plastered and painted ceilings, delicate marquetry, polished parquet and carpeted floors upon which

rest finely wrought inlaid tables, walnut commodes and desks and upright carved chairs alongside upholstered settle chairs.

The Earl and his wife must be very rich indeed.

Their home must be as grand if not grander than Kensington House where Queen Anne resides as described by Father who has made many visits there. I wander between rooms lost in the splendour of it all, and find myself back where I started, one glass of wine, particularly fine; the more I drink of it, becoming two, then three.

“You are not dancing, Captain?” The Earl appears beside me. For a ridiculous moment I think he is going to ask me to take the floor with him. The thought of dancing with anyone appals me, but with the Earl? Too much wine, I think, as I suppress a smile.

“I am enjoying the spectacle of entertainment which is sadly lacking in the military,” I answer with a smile. He laughs an ebullient host’s laugh. “After a campaign it comes as a shock to say the least. You must forgive me, I am still recovering from the field and it takes some time to return to the normality of life at home.”

“Yes, yes, a common complaint. However, surely the battlefield does provide some sort of entertainment?”

“Not of this kind. There is no pleasure in it apart from victory,” I lie. There is a perverse pleasure, that of killing. It is not hard now, but I rarely admit it to myself, let alone a stranger.

“The story goes that the Duke was not pleased with this year’s efforts, but then the glory of Blenheim would be hard to beat,” the Earl says, standing beside me and watching the activity before us. I feel he is trying to draw me out on the state of Marlborough’s mind

after the campaign, as if I know. No one knows exactly what he thinks, except the man himself, least of all me, the most junior of his Aides.

“Indeed, My Lord. It was frustrating for all. Perhaps we did not achieve what we set out to do, but still, much was accomplished in the doing and the fortresses we captured are ours for the next year if and when we return.” My diplomatic skills are improving even down to the mask-like expression I assume on my face, due to the influence of the Duke. Many a time I had witnessed him assume such a state.

“There is going to be a return. The war will continue,” the Earl states. “The Commons and the House of Lords have given the Duke further support for the continuation of war and for the supply of men, money and arms. The Tories, are, as usual, divided, but the Whigs are cohesive and logical in their political practice and that is our strength. ‘No Victory without Spain’ is the catch cry. Surely with the Whigs in power, England can only have victory.” He asks.

He is obviously well informed as to what is happening in Parliament. However, he is not going to hear such information from my lips. I am no longer at liberty to express my opinion and do not have any wish to do so. I have not been informed otherwise about returning to Flanders. As far as I know we all return in the spring for another campaign.

“My Lord, you are monopolising the Captain, and I wish to converse with him,” the Countess appears from the mass on the periphery of the dance floor and circles us, studying me above the edge of her open fan, the hem of the wide circumference of her gown sweeping the floor at our feet.

“Better still, my dear, why don’t you engage the Captain in a dance?”

My heart drops and the heat rises in my face despite my improved diplomatic skills, which have now disappeared as fast as they had appeared. I hide my fluster in a deep bow to the Countess. I cannot offend my host, yet my dancing, I am sure, will certainly offend the hostess.

“My Lady, you might regret having me as a partner,” I stutter. “I have not danced for some time and have forgotten the steps.”

“What nonsense, Captain. You’re extremely modest. Your brother told me you are a fine dancer,” she answers, as the Earl takes his wife’s outstretched hand and places it on mine. I silently swear at John as I smile at the Countess. There is little else I can do but lead her onto the floor where other couples are already assembling. To my chagrin I see the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, along with Colonel Armstrong and Bringfield, have arrived in the hall just in time to see me entertaining Lady Melyon, on the dance floor. He greets us both and while I bow to him the Countess sinks to the floor in a court curtsy. I am terrified I will make a fool of myself in front of the Duke. John is across the room and as we turn and take our place in the formation of couples I can imagine his pop-eyed look at me, knowing my dancing prowess, and I dare not look at him. When, eventually my eyes catch his, he gives me a courtly bow. I let my eyes slide away from his so I do not have to acknowledge his glance.

The bodice of the Countess’s gown is low. She curtsies to me at the beginning of the quadrille I glimpse the alarming sight of her full breasts as they push for freedom above the tight constriction of the stomacher on the front of her bodice. It is difficult for me to breath. I dare not lower my eyes below her neckline, resulting in a lengthy time of looking away or gazing into her eyes, which is just as dangerous.

My memory is stagnant and my feet are far too big but the grasp of her hand in mine is firm and resolute, the guiding pressure subtle but definite as we move into the pattern of the dance along with the others in the group who know what they are doing.

“I thought, Captain, as one of the Duke’s Aides you would be expected to accompany him to certain levees and soirees, and to do that surely you would know how to dance?” the Countess says, as we execute a turn and she glides past me with a sigh of silk, her head inclined gracefully, her eyes upon mine, her hand gently leading me.

“Such activities are reserved for the more senior Aides, My Lady,” I answer, concentrating on placing my feet in the right direction so I will not bring both of us crashing to the floor.

“Well, one day you will be a senior Aide and until then you can practise at functions such as this,” she answers. She presses my hand into a turn as I catch the direction of the others and follow her lead. “There you are, Sir, you remember very well,” she adds.

“It has been some years, Madam,” I reply, as we break and join hands into yet again another turn in the dance.

“Once learnt never forgotten, Captain. You have no need to worry,” she says, looking up at me with a smile, disarming me despite myself. Her hand is never long out of mine and her eyes are upon me leading me all the way. The heat is upon my face and the room seems unseasonably warm. The dance ends and I sweep her a bow of thanks and she curtsies to me.

“His Grace will be proud of you,” she comments, as I lead her back to the Earl at the completion of the dance. “Not only a fine soldier but a fine dancer. What more could he want in an Aide?”

“Thank-you, My Lady, but I do not think that dancing is a high priority for the Duke,” I say with a bow, and she laughs and claps her hands at my witticism.

“Very gallant, Molesworth. Well done,” says the Earl, as he takes his wife’s hand from mine and rescues me from another exhibition on the floor.

The music starts up again and more couples move onto the floor. I quickly bow to them both and take my leave, only to be greeted by John, a glass of wine in each hand.

He proffers me one with an amused grin. “I remember at the Temple that the sword-fighting lessons were more popular than the dancing lessons. Where did you learn to dance so well?”

The wine, soft on my tongue and aromatic to my palette, slips smoothly down my throat. I stare at John in disbelief but find he is serious. “The battlefield,” I answer with all the sarcasm I can muster and take another long draught and he laughs at me.

“How long is it since you have danced?” he asks.

“Obviously too long,” I answer.

He takes me by the arm and leads me away from the music. “You managed well. A word of warning. My Lady Melyon has set her sights on you, and once she has done that there is no stopping her. She is well known for it. Do not underestimate her.” John continues, talking in my ear. “She takes lovers likes she takes wine, often and well, but she never gives her heart. She uses. However, such a relationship may be an advantages.”

This time John has gone too far. He has deliberately put me in a precarious position. As far as I am concerned it will be some time before I put myself in the Countess’s company again, if ever. I am grateful I have not fallen in an ungainly lump at her feet in front of the whole gathering or succumbed to her charms.

“For one who rides with the charge into the thick of battle and fights along with the best of you, His Grace dances well, and cuts a courtly graceful figure, don’t you think?” continues John, looking at the Duke dancing in the centre of the room with the Countess Melyon while the Duchess also dances with Lord Godolphin.

John adds under his breath. “The Countess is also graceful, would you not agree? Although if you watch them closely you will see the Duchess does not wholly approve of the display the Countess is making with her husband or the Duke’s attention to it either. Already she eyes them with the suspicion she is famous for.”

The whole room is watching the display on the floor as the couples move in graceful sequence in time to the music. Their movements are measured and time is kept perfectly, and indeed, the Duchess’s eyes do wander to the other pair as she executes a turn and the skirts of her deep blue gown spread out over the floor. She is stirring and beautiful with her fair skin and red-gold hair and it is known that the Duke loves her deeply.

“She has no need for suspicion. The Duke is completely loyal and faithful to her,” I add.

John moves away and leaves me with an empty glass. I watch his departing back; all I can think of is the pleasure of escaping. As far as I am concerned the evening is a trial and I swear to myself that I will not attend any more soirees except those decreed by the Duke as part of my duty. There will be some I will not be able to avoid if I advance in his staff, I realise.

“You have the looks, the wit and are as ready to bed a woman as any man,” John comments as the coach taking us back to St. James’ lurches over the wet cobbled streets. The mist is thick and pierced intermittently by lanterns placed outside the front doors of

houses. “You also have the advantage of living close to the aristocracy through being on the Duke’s staff. Such attributes should take you far. Think of the social advantages. Even Marlborough would be impressed and he should know. He, for one, is very aware of social advantages.”

“You don’t know the man. Your opinion of him is based on hearsay put about by his enemies. But you know the necessity of being careful. I have to be if I wish to remain on the Duke’s staff. He expects high standards of his Aides. My career would be in ruins if I succumbed to the temptation Lady Melyon might offer; especially as the Melyons’ know the Marlboroughs’ so well.”

“I noticed that the Duke and Duchess welcomed you warmly when the Earl told them you were there. And Colonel Armstrong too.”

I nod to him within the darkness of the coach. “He is a warm and generous man to his staff.”

“Even Melyon noticed his treatment of you, you should go far, little brother.”

“Even more reason to keep away from the Countess. Anyway, despite her beauty and charm I am not attracted to her.”

“Do you always have to be attracted to a woman before you have them?” John asked within the darkness.

“Usually. Don’t you?” I ask.

In characteristic fashion, when prying about his private thoughts, he does not answer me and we ride in silence through the dark deserted streets.

“An association with her could be useful, as long as you’re careful and play your cards well,” John says after some thought.

“You have taken leave of your senses.”

“Father said you had changed, especially after your time in Edlington last year. Now I believe it to be true,” he says surprise in his voice.

“I haven’t changed. You are all now experiencing the person I really am, one that you and Father especially, up to this point, have been unwilling to see. I have my own way and I will stick to it.” Annoyance laces my voice at being led into such a position. John may have been in his element in Melyon’s salon, but it was far from mine.

“You have also grown more testy, I will admit,” he answers with a sigh. “But you need to have social graces and experience now that you are on the Duke’s staff,” he protests.

“So I will not let you or Father down?” I ask impatiently. “My experience in life is not yours, it is different. I have social graces when need be, they’re just not your social graces.”

The coach pulls to a stop outside our house. I am determined that John will never put me in such a position again. I am a soldier, not a diplomat, and a soldier I will remain.

Chapter Thirty-Two-Synopsis

London

Spring: 1705-1706

Mistress

Robert disapproves of John's mistress in Florence who is a Catholic noblewoman. He tells Richard. John overhears the conversation, bursts in and there is a confrontation. Richard is amazed how much John is taken by her even though he knows his father is against the match. He reveals that Camilla is expecting his child and she is willing to renounce her faith for him. Richard, having experienced Ellen's strength of conviction is dubious about that. The argument is not solved and Richard is told by his father to try and make John see sense.

Chapter Thirty-Three-Synopsis

London

Spring: Early March, 1705-1706

The Visit

After putting off seeing Thomas and Ellen in London, Richard decides to visit them at home before he returns to The Hague with Marlborough. Thomas has written to tell him that despite his handicap, he has decided to rejoin the army in the cavalry, Lumley's regiment. Richard finds Ellen at home with the baby but Thomas has already left for the Continent to join his regiment. Richard and Ellen are wary with each other, though they

still care for one another. Richard realises that the baby has colouring similar to himself and could well be his. He can even see a likeness to himself and his siblings. He does not stay long with Ellen and realises that seeing her again was a mistake. He decides he will see Thomas once the army is encamped.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Battle of Ramillies

23 May 1706

Ferocity

Death and desire hang in the air, penetrate our beings, merge in our souls.

The men forge ahead without the aid of torches to guide them, concealed within darkness. We are shrouded in veils of mist that whirl and lift as we press through it as silently as possible.

Not even the beat of the drum. There are no songs and no talking. The tramp of feet is light and muffled. Mist clings in gossamer beads on our uniforms, the same mist that touches the enemy. The French are out there somewhere. We do not question where we go, we just follow.

As soon as one row of marching soldiers appear, they disappear. The mist reforms to cover their steps and conceal the path they take. We, his Aides, accompany Marlborough's coach. The steady beat of the horses hooves, dulled by the already flattened turf, the grunts and breath of exertion from soldiers and riders are the only sounds in the cold air. I am aware of the long column of men moving silently to one side as we head, yet again, towards another early morning confrontation. I salute the First Foot and Lumley's regiment as we pass them. In and out of the mist, over twelve miles, marches the endless

train of 62,000 men in four columns of seventy-four battalions and one hundred and twenty-three squadrons, towards a destination known only inside of Marlborough and a few select Generals' heads.

We have been on the move for weeks heading towards this confrontation with the French led by Marshall Villeroi and the Elector of Bavaria. My Lord Duke is determined to confront Villeroi and this time nothing will stop him.

The morning started with the roll of drums at two-thirty. We have been riding since then, now it is now nearly five and we still have some distance to go. Steam rises from the heat of my horse and I am engulfed with the smell of horse sweat. I can feel the powerful muscles beneath me as he carries me, his strong neck and deep chest, his head pushing into the darkness, the ground far below, over seventeen hands down. He is strong enough to carry me over the rough and marshy ground, strong enough to run the battlefield for some hours. But I shall need another and yet another before the day is ended. My groom John Kerry is leading my horses, in the horse train, as are the grooms of all the other Aides.

The land flattens into a vast plain half hidden by early mist. The Duke leaves his coach to mount his horse and Bringfield, by his side, assists him. He holds and supports the stirrup as the Duke swings his leg over the horse. A shaft of sunlight parts the mist and the equerry appears aflame as the light catches his red-coated figure and the flash of gold on his uniform. The Duke recedes into the darkness. The mist thins and the equerry steps up to make sure the Duke is securely in the saddle.

Behind us the army is already starting to fall into line in eight columns ready for battle. The Duke looks through his eyeglass at the sight between the two villages, turns to us and tells us to order the men to press their march. We scatter down the long line of men.

“My Lord Duke wishes the troops to step out!” I order as I ride down the long columns of men and cavalry still approaching the battlefield. “March faster. Your enemy awaits you.”

The Duke waits for our return to his side before joining the rest of the Generals, Cadogan, Overkirk, Dopff, the Belgian Generals and Deputy van Goslinga in a reconnaissance of the field.

We ride the length of the field and find villages well fortified by the French dot the plain. On the right, that of Autreglise; to the left, Tavier; between them Offus and in the centre, the village of Ramillies. Beyond them lies the broad plain of Mont San Andre. The River Gheet runs through the plain in streams and gullies similar to the Höchstädt plain.

The mist thins over the plain before us and the whole area is alive with the flash of sunlight on sword, while the slight breeze whips the colours and larger standards. The mist finally lifts like the curtain on a theatre stage. Before us is revealed the long line of massed French army in all of their reconstituted glory. All around me I hear the collective in-drawing of breath at the sight. A murmur of awe and appreciation ripples through the assembled men.

The army of the Sun King stretches for five miles opposite us, as numerous as they were before the battle of Blenheim. A vast, array of power, greets us; infantry, artillery, bayonets, pikes and swords, cavalry, colours, standards, banners and kettle-drums including the magnificent centre, the King’s own cavalry guard, the mounted *Maison du Roi*. The sun reinforces the sight of the enemy’s glory and empowers them in their blue and white uniforms, red and gold, red and white. The gold blaze of the Lilies of France embroidered

upon their standards and embroidered on their uniforms, flash in the sun along with the flash off sword, bayonet and cuirass.

The dead have come to life again. The French fully restored after Blenheim stare back at us from across the plain their numbers almost equal to ours, except for the belligerent line up of artillery which appears to outnumber ours. The deep sound of the kettle-drums roll across the plain and are answered in turn by the equally deep tones of the allied army's drums.

I am in awe.

This well arrayed army fight for the glory of France. Across from me in this broad and fielded place stands the aristocracy with the Jacobites and their allies, the Wild Geese of Ireland. It is rumoured that James Edward Stuart, the pretended king of England, James III, as recognised by Louis XIV, rides in his army.

A murmur goes up amongst us. This confrontation is to be another Blenheim. The veterans recognise the similarity immediately, only now the French are ready and waiting.

The Duke gazes at the glittering sight and is as composed and confident as ever. He hides his excitement well. He is aware that his army also presents a formidable spectacle for the French. We will fight here; there will be no turning back or disappearing into the night as had happened in the past.

Trumpets call across the plain and disturb my reverie, army answers army, strident in the hot morning air for the sun is now well up and the plain shimmers in the heat. The kettle-drums continue their steady deep-throated beat as Marlborough rides with his Generals amongst the assembled troops. The smell of hot bodies in heavy woollen uniforms, crammed closely together wafts around us. The men look upon us with eagerness

and determination as we ride by, their eyes bright with fervour they stand at attention ready for the order to fight. The Duke's presence builds the moral of the men and gives them courage for their ordeal ahead. They cheer him and he salutes them, touching his marshals' baton to the brim of his hat.

The officers are ordered to carry themselves with cheerful confidence to inspire the men as he does. It goes unspoken that any officer who is cruel and uncaring will more than likely be killed by his own men in the thick of battle. There have been rumours circulating that this has occurred in previous battles. The officers are aware of their vulnerable position. The majority are responsible and care for their soldiers; they do their best.

Ashe is well established within Lumley's Regiment of Horse. I see him amongst the line-up of cavalry, looking straight and dignified. A black patch over his missing eye, his face is white against the red and blue uniform line, black bucketboots conceal his wooden leg, his black three-cornered hat edged in gold set forward over his dark bagged wig. He looks comfortable in his new roll. I know the bravery of the man. He will serve well. He had tolerated the training of the cavalry and now felt at ease and at home amongst them.

I had visited him briefly. He had been his same jolly self. I told him I had called to see him before leaving London but found him already gone. His eyes shone with the memory of his son and he talked at some length about Ellen with pride in his voice. There was no doubt the son was his. I left him with mixed feelings saying I would call to see him again in London after the campaign yet wondering, at the same time, how I was going to accomplish that with ease.

Jevereau, is mounted not far from me and Pitt, also mounted, waits behind me slightly to the left. The others are ahead and around us. Bringfield and Panton are in front of us close to the Duke, within arm's reach if he turns to give orders. I hear a humming noise that fills the air. It is like a physical manifestation of tension around us, the straining of taut nerves, muscles, sinews of everyone on the field as we make ourselves ready to spring on our prey. We anticipate that moment where time stands still only felt within the maelstrom of battle. That sense of surrender to the inevitable.

My senses are heightened to such a pitch I can hear the smallest sound and smell the faintest smell. I am aware of subtle movements around me, talk, whispers, looks, the shift of a man in the ranks to ease himself, a cough, a snigger, a cry. My heart races and thumps loudly in my ears. The familiar feelings of stimulation and controlled excitement fill me.

My whole being is in abeyance.

Waiting.

Time and again, this feeling fills me as I prepare to kill and yet there is no guilt. It is my duty to kill for the Queen, for England, for the Duke. I am no longer sickened and it no longer affects me. I have developed toughness I never thought possible, which alarms me at times. I am now battle-hardened, my spirit saturated by the conflagration that emerges on every battle-field during this whole bloody business. I am now one with the world of war and therefore I cease to think of what I do or what I have become or what I am about to do or about to become.

I am what I am.

Here is the centre of the world. Our world. Here, enclosed within this field ablaze with the risen sun is where we live or die. There is nothing else at this moment. We are a mass of men waiting to experience the storm about to be unleashed. A cataclysm which will reverberate in outflung circles rushing into the air around us.

The product of violence originating in the centre of one man's mind under the guise of civilisation.

It will happen here on this plain long marked out as a scene of a large battle.

Here is the present, the past, the future. Here we stand.

Marlborough, as is his fashion, assesses the situation, his perspective glass to his eye he sweeps the field to observe the mass of men lined up on our side and on the enemies' side.

"They have not learned their lesson," Jevereau says to me looking in wonderment at the French display.

"They're strong enough, but they're not anticipating what the Duke might do," I agree, under my breath.

"Don't they think he will do what he did at Blenheim?" Isaac asks, incredulous at the naive display before us.

We are disbelieving. The French are fools, I think. I can almost sense Marlborough's smugness.

"We're going to slaughter them," Isaac says.

We are startled by a muffled noise behind us and turn in the saddle to see one of the junior Aides, Captain Pitt, dismount in a hurry and run into long grass nearby. Even

Marlborough looks around briefly to see what the disturbance is. Pitt is doubled up groaning in the grass.

“Good God!” Isaac exclaims. “What’s wrong with him now?”

Pitt had not been well since the start of the campaign. He had been suffering from headaches and sickness. Over weeks of preparation and riding with the Duke during the long marches he had done his duties, but had become increasingly isolated from the rest of us. Isaac and I dismount quickly and run over to the prostrate Pitt who by this time is moaning on the ground clutching his belly. We pull him to his feet and find Bringfield has left the Duke’s side and has ridden over to us.

“What’s going on here?” he asks, eyeing Pitt with little mercy.

“He is ill, Colonel. He cannot take part in the battle, he is not fit enough,” Isaac pronounces.

My back is to Bringfield as I support Pitt and I raise my eyebrows in warning at Isaac. Bringfield is not one who takes advice from a Captain.

“That is for me to decide, Jevereau,” Bringfield retorts. “Explain yourself Pitt.”

“Something I’ve eaten, sir. My belly’s aflame,” Pitt answers, weakly and we grab him as his knees buckle.

“Your belly’s yellow, more like it,” Bringfield snaps.

I avoid Isaac’s gaze and he mine.

“He cannot perform his duty responsibly if he is not well,” I say, thinking of the danger to the Duke.

“Molesworth, I know that,” he snaps at me. “This happened before Blenheim. Same performance. He was nearly sent home with despatches then. If he does it again he will be. Get him on his horse. He will recover as soon as the action starts,” Bringfield says exasperated.

The Duke turns and looks at the four of us, then says something to Panton.

“You two, keep an eye on him until the engagement starts. Pitt do not let the Duke down,” he says, pointing a gloved finger at the hapless Pitt. He turns his horse and rides back to Marlborough.

“God in heaven! What does the man expect,” says Isaac, furious. “He can barely stand let alone ride.”

Pitt’s in a sorry state. I feel he is better off field than on.

“As soon s the fighting begins, report to the field hospital,” I whisper to Pitt as we straighten him up, put his hat back on his head and sling his arms over our shoulders and walk him to his horse.

His normally boyish face is whey coloured and he stinks of wine and commits some of its smell to Isaac and I. We glance at each other and read each other’s thoughts. Pitt has been drinking heavily, last night most probably, in his tent, alone. He certainly was not in the Aides’ tent. A groom standing by holding the reins of his horse helps us as we struggle to mount him on his horse and once there, so far off the ground, he sways alarmingly in the saddle.

“This is madness,” Isaac says. “He cannot ride, let alone protect the Duke.”

We both know he is capable of letting the Duke down once again at the inopportune moment. Perturbed, I wonder what Bringfield is thinking. If we tell him that Pitt’s been

drinking heavily enough to affect his duty, he will be dismissed from the service and sent home. Bringfield's idea of duty to Marlborough colours his whole life. You had to be dead before you were relieved of duty. Pitt looks nearly dead now and we have not even started. But then again, if we leave it to Pitt, Marlborough could well be dead.

Not willing to be responsible for that, I run over to Bringfield. He looks at me in anger. "He is a risk to the Duke", I say risking his wrath.

He turns and looks at Pitt who by this time has dismounted again and is spewing wine-coloured vomit onto the turf. Bringfield turns and speaks quickly to Marlborough who looks at Pitt over his shoulder then shakes his head.

"Tell him to go to the hospital if necessary," Bringfield replies in disgust.

We can do without him so I entreat Pitt to be sensible and report sick to the field hospital.

"My father will kill me himself if I do not see action with the Duke again," he says, wiping his face with his kerchief.

"You're a coward," Isaac says, dismissing his excuse.

I agree with him. There is no room for such weakness at a time such as this.

"Marlborough will get rid of you," Isaac reiterates

Alarmed, I realise that the Aide will most probably get rid of himself first.

We put him on his horse again. He is white and shaking. I know his career is over, this will be the last time he will ride for the Duke.

Marlborough gives the order to attack and we are set at a run down the lines. Pitt amongst us.

The artillery opens up. The heavy forty pounders shake the ground with their retort. Pitt rides between Isaac and I. Nursemaiding Pitt is far from our line of duty but we want to keep him near us in case he does something stupid. It is as Bringfield predicted, the Aide seems to have recovered quickly and is occupied with the fight.

The smell makes me recoil and look around. We are still in formation, not far from Marlborough. I glance at Jevereau who looks at me in a startled fashion his face contorted with disgust. Pitt is ahead of us but still between us, sitting astride his horse, white-faced but no longer trembling. His breeches and the back of his coat are saturated with a large stinking stain. Jevereau coughs and splutters and buries his nose in his kerchief.

“He stinks. He has shat his britches,” Isaac says, the look on his face signalling he wants to escape .

“Well, we won’t have to worry about the enemy getting him. He will win the battle all on his own,” I answer, wiping a gloved hand across my face.

Pitt, like the rest of us, disappears into the smoke and occasionally re-emerges to race back to Marlborough, the pallor of his face covered with black powder. He appears calm and preoccupied and seems to be coping, despite his foul smell and appearance which he chooses to ignore. If the Duke notices the pungent odour surrounding his Aide he makes no sign, his mind intent on the battle. Everyone else notices and Pitt is deliberately avoided. The next time I see him is after he has disappeared to deliver orders. I come upon him fighting hand to hand like a madman, on the ground with a downed cavalry officer taking the full blows of his slashing sword.

I ride hard at the gallop, my mouth shut tight against the choking smoke strong enough to rip the insides of a man’s lungs to shreds. The ground is rough and marshy in

places. I pull my horse up sharply, dismount and lead him by the reins, while cannon and shot whistle and scorch the air around me, close enough to singe my hat and wig. The noise of cannonfire, musket, cries, groans and shouts of men deafen me as I stumble over and around the mutilated, the eviscerated, the dead and dying. In the heat and chaos, horses run riderless, stirrups swinging.

A standard appears through the smoke, still carried aloft by a soot covered Ensign and the language of the drum is louder. I penetrate into the mêlée trying to find the commanding officer. The runners dart in and out of the fighting like rabbits running into areas in the fighting fields not accessible on horseback. One of them spies me and runs to me to give me a report back to take back to Marlborough more quickly than he can on foot. He opens his mouth to speak to me and his face goes blank. Blood spurts from his mouth. He falls at the hooves of my horse before he can give me the message.

The runs are endless, I lose track of riding backwards and forwards, taking notes of position of troops, orders, requests, conditions, reports; assistance needed here, cover needed there; how much and in what position and who's requesting it, and exactly what it is they are requesting. The heat is overpowering. Sweat pours off me and runs down my face drenching my Steinkirk, pooling under the gorget at my neck, running down the front of my shirt and waistcoat and coat. My hat comes off in a blast of hot air from a nearby cannon. I slap it back on my head, touch my spurs to my horse and race back to Marlborough, who likes to see his men fully uniformed even if their guts are hanging out.

Marlborough places himself behind the front on a high vantage point where he can see the strengths and weaknesses of the long line of the battlefield before him on the plain. His eyes never leave the field. His face is no longer passive, his expression relaxes and slowly changes to triumph as he watches the vast lines of red-coated men along the plain.

They advance and retreat, advance yet again, a bit further each time, eating their way into the enemy lines like a rabid ulcer, advancing closer and closer to the fortified villages. The battle has been raging for hours since two o'clock when he gave the order to fire. The French are obviously suffering, their lines broken and in disarray, the villages full of fire and fighting, smoke billowing into the air, the French entrapped within the barricades as they were during the battle of the Höchstädt. He watches the advance, his perspective glass to his eye, taking in every change. He is waiting for the right moment to give orders for the bringing up of the cavalry.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Battle of Ramillies (continued)

23 May 1706

Rescue

My horse is tired, foam sprays from his mouth, his coat is flecked. On my last run I call for Kerry, my groom, to bring me another. He emerges from the back of the line of cavalry with a fresh horse saddled ready for me to ride. Kerry gives me water to drink from a tin mug which I eagerly gulp down. He holds the bridle and reins while I quickly remount.

“Tell the cavalry to wheel into line,” orders Marlborough.

Panton, Durell, Jevereau and I, run down the line of cavalry with the order for them to wheel into the long line ready for the charge. We know that Marlborough will lead the charge as he has done before. No one can tell him to do otherwise and if anyone does, as his Generals sometimes try to do, he ignores them.

The cavalry band together closely, bucketboot to bucketboot, on the slight rise above the plain, swords drawn, ready to charge the already weakened French centre. Marlborough has given orders that the cavalry are not allowed to use their long barrelled horse pistols in the charge and they remain in the holsters draped on each side of the

horses' shoulders; the troopers lives depend on their ability with the sword. Somewhere amongst the mass of blue and red rides Ashe but I cannot make him out in the crowd. There is no time to make a personal check. I am happy not knowing where he is placed. I turn my horse and ride back to Marlborough who is already assembling at the head of the line with the rest of the Aides. I join them and take my position. My mouth goes dry and my heart beats faster.

The line of Foot is dispatched first. A trumpet blares and the first line of cavalry starts the charge. They advance at a slow trot still lined up closely together. The pace gradually increases until they are at a gallop. The ground shakes and the air roars with the thunder of hooves. The waiting Foot and cavalry, along with Marlborough and staff, watch as they meet the *Maison du Roi* in the centre before the village of Ramillies. In the fray we see they are instantly dispersed and repulsed.

“Reform again!” orders the Duke.

We ride to the line, give the order and they commence to round up and line up in formation. I wheel my horse around and notice with surprise that the Duke and Bringfield are already amongst the cavalry, making ready to lead them in the charge.

The line of cavalry begins the close slow trot then quickly increases pace. Swords drawn we gather around the Duke and beside him gallop hard into the centre of the French cavalry.

A barrage of fire fills the air around us. The air is quick with the flash of steel and shot. In the mess of the moment I am aware of the Duke nearby, fighting and killing as hard as we all are. I try and keep as close as possible to him. He is in great danger. We fight, charge, recharge and hack our way around him to keep him from being unhorsed, run down

or killed. The *Maison du Roi* fight like madmen. The Duke is in the midst of showers of shot and cannon that rain through the air as men and horses fight, tumble, and die around him. The line of cavalry is in disorder and we are in the thick of chaos. Again the Duke gathers the cavalry together to lead yet another charge, his blood-lust up, his face determined and red with effort. I noticed that Bringfield is riding so close, he can touch him. He is shielding him from harm with his own body.

A sudden shudder goes through me as my horse shivers in response to the shaking ground. I turn towards the Duke. Our cavalry are once again running, by the look of them, blindly in fear from the French who are in hot pursuit. They are riding straight back towards us as we race towards them beside the Duke, in the next line of advancing cavalry. They are about to run him down. I spur my horse on to make sure I keep up with him. The horses burst through the ranks that contain the Duke.

The Aides in the confusion are separated from him, even Bringfield disappears in the moment. I am closest to him but cannot reach him in time. His horse is jostled and pushed by the running cavalry. The Duke's horse pecks in fright, throwing him to the ground. He rolls away into a nearby ditch as the cavalry runs near him.

Alarmed I ride over, quickly dismount and run to him.

He lies prostrate and winded in a ditch. I scramble down the small slope and into the ditch. For a moment I think he is badly injured, but he raises his head at the sight of me and moans, clutching his belly from a hard kick from his horse after the fall. He is not badly injured but mainly winded. His horse has scrambled back on all fours and galloped off. Without a mount the Duke is even more vulnerable. The ground shudders with charging hooves. I look up to see the chasing French cavalry almost upon us. The Duke has

to be horsed if he is not to be taken prisoner or killed. Some of the French galloping towards us recognise him and detach themselves from the main line with the intent to capture him. I haul the stunned man to his feet, half drag, half carry him out of the ditch to my horse who waits nearby. I lift the Duke's foot and place in the stirrup and hoist him into the saddle, place the reins in his hands, turn the horse's head towards the Allied lines and give the animal a slap on the rump.

"Ride hard, your Grace!" I yell and the horse gallops off.

The ground rocks beneath me. The advancing regiment bears down on me and I run hard out of their way. They swipe me across the back with the flat blades of their broadswords, not once but many times, as they pass. Air is knocked from my lungs. I hit the ground, dirt thrown over me and into my face as they thunder past, swearing at me for robbing them of their prize. I raise my head and see the departing rumps of the horses and find my mouth full of dirt. I spit it out and roll out of the way into the ditch as the Albemarle regiment nearly mow me down as they give chase. I am amazed. The French could have run me through. I am still alive.

Panting into the ground, I wait until the charge has gone and I pull myself to my feet and run towards the Allied lines.

"Who goes there?" A Commanding Officer from a line of infantry shouts at me. I have a hard time proving myself over the din. The soldiers in the company aim their muskets at me itching to shoot until they see I am not the enemy.

"Where's the Duke?" I ask the amazed officer.

“I saw him heading in that direction,” he replies as he turns and points in the direction of the village of Ramillies.

I run as fast as I can. On the way I encounter a soldier leading the Duke’s horse by the bridle. I claim the horse, mount him and ride the rest of the way.

Marlborough has recovered and is before the village. The fighting is still fierce in the centre but he, Bringfield, Panton and Durell are with him but are not part of it. I ride over to the Duke. A rare show of feeling infuses his face as I ride up to him.

“Well done, Molesworth. The Duke told me what happened. You saved his life,” Bringfield says, taking the reins of the charger as I dismount.

“Are you hurt?” asks the Duke anxiously, riding over to me, his bloodshot eyes sweeping over my person which is shaken but intact.

“No, your Grace,” I reply ignoring the sting from the rising welts upon my back. I know I am lucky to be alive. My injuries are nothing. I wait as the Duke dismounts from my horse and hands him back to me.

“Thank God, you weren’t hurt. Thank-you for what you did for me,” he says, as Bringfield leads his charger over to him.

The Duke turns and puts one foot in the stirrup as Bringfield bends to help him. The Duke swings a leg over the saddle of his horse as an outburst of fire thunders over our heads taking us by surprise. It is so close I instinctively duck for cover. The enemy holed up in the village of Ramillies has discharged a battery in our direction and we are under immediate fire. Simultaneously, Bringfield, startled by the discharge, brings his head up over the back of the horse. A cannonball shoots under the Duke’s raised leg and smashes into Bringfield’s skull. His head splits and rolls away from his body like a toppled ball.

Marlbrough turns in the saddle horror raking his face as Bringfield's blood spurts high into the air from the arteries and veins in his severed neck, and splatters the Duke and his horse. The body, twitches, falls at the hooves of the Duke's horse. The last of Bringfield's life pumps into the ground. His shattered head lies scattered over the ground, blood and brains mixed with his torn wig and hat.

The Duke, white-faced, looks at the remains of his equerry. He looks on the verge of collapse. He controls himself, then turns his horse's head and spurs him on. We follow stunned and sickened. There is no time to look back.

The battle in the village is well advanced. The Allies with General Slagenberg's forces, my regiment and other English battalions are fighting fiercely. Down the path paved by the cavalry Orkney's troops advance in the centre. The French Marshal Villeroi sees the general attack approaching his troops. They try and line up in some order behind the village of Ramillies, but their efforts flounder and they dissolve into panic at the sight of the cavalry bearing down on them. They turn and run with us fast behind them, Marlborough in our midst.

We kill without mercy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Aftermath of Ramillies

Recognition

Silence wakes me.

The ground is sharp with stubble which digs into my body and finds every bruised and aching bone. The sweet smell of hay and horses drifts through my head. I lie flat on my stomach on my cloak where I have collapsed on the ground hours before, too exhausted to move. With effort I lift my head and return to the earth with a groan, paralysed with stiffness and pain in my back. It takes some minutes for me to realise where I am. Around me muffled snores and deep breathing of the others who sleep the cold night away drifts to my ears.

Slightly apart from us, but still surrounded, the Duke sleeps on the ground, wrapped in his cloak. We had been in the saddle nearly twenty-four hours by the time we stopped our running. In the fury of the pursuit we had ridden deeper into the countryside beyond Ramillies until Marlborough could ride no longer. Confused and exhausted in the darkness we allowed some of the French to escape. The Duke had finally called a halt and unable to find shelter, we had fallen with exhaustion from our horses and made our beds upon the ground.

Pain becomes my universe. I force myself to relax before I hold my breath and turn over. Eyes shut, I wait for the agony to ease. I open them to find myself gazing at a canopy of blue-black sky encrusted with stars. The soft breeze carries the smell of distant death and gunpowder. I hear a faint murmur of moaning, a familiar sound of post-battle, even though we are far from the battle-field, which is twelve miles away. The men around me are lumps upon the ground absorbed in sleep. I need to relieve myself. Wincing with the pain, I roll onto my hands and knees and pull myself to my feet. By the low light of a distant fire which some hardy soul has lit and which gives comfort to a few sleepless men, I walk between the inert bodies to a long shadow of trees at the side of the clearing where we sleep. I can hardly move with stiffness. Some men wander in the dark into the shelter belt of trees or join the others around the fire.

The victory has been as great as Blenheim. The Duke had used all his skill once again to bring about the defeat of the French. He is the greatest soldier of all time, and I had rescued him.

The enormity of my deed runs through my head. I had acted on impulse and had rescued him as I would have rescued any of the Generals in such a position. The sight of Bringfield's headless body enters my head and roots out my sorrow. My body shakes with cold. My second thought is for Ashe. Had he survived that fierce cavalry charge? Lumley's horse had been in the thick of it. I had seen many losses. I dare not think of him amongst them but resolve to investigate as soon as I can.

The victory is complete. The French surrender.

Marlborough stands within his surviving regiments. The losses are not as great as those at Blenheim, though the French have suffered badly. We line up with the Duke on horseback and watch as their standards and colours are laid at his feet. We claim fifty cannon and eighty colours and standards. The Duke sits resplendent upon his white charger. The expression on his face, which is slightly flushed, is inscrutable as he raises his marshal's baton in acknowledgement as the army cheers. You would never believe he had been in the saddle for over twelve hours the day before and spent the night sleeping on the ground. The soldiers break ranks and crowd around him, hailing him as their hero, the greatest soldier of all time.

And I had rescued him.

Marlborough acknowledges my feat and brings me forward on his right side near Panton who is now taking Bringfield's place. The cheers increase in volume as I join the Duke. It seems they all know about my feat. I had saved Marlborough, therefore I had saved England. Marlborough turns and smiles upon me like a fond father as I acknowledge the cheers around me. I know then it is only a matter of time before I am promoted. Perhaps he may even honour me with my own regiment.

The staff quarters are abuzz with the rescue but the senior Aides, Armstrong, Panton, de Nassau, Durell mourn their friend. They sit together talking quietly, their white faces etched with sorrow, their eyes black-ringed. Some mention my rescue of the Duke with congratulations, but the hub-bub in the staff tent with post-battle euphoria covers the sorrow of Bringfield's death and my feat.

Marlborough is alone, his tent lit by lanterns, his campaign table cluttered with papers and maps, lists of regiments, supplies, armaments, casualties wounded and dead. He

has been writing letters as is his custom after an engagement. He looks up at me in the cast of yellow light and beckons me further into the tent. The intense strain caused by the battle is apparent. His eyes reveal his own personal worries, as well as those of the army of thousands of men he leads, and sorrow at those he has lost. He looks drawn and tired, and even though we are victorious, he looks dejected. He has been suffering the onslaught of headaches that appear to plague him after an engagement. The rush of emotion and the discipline of self-control takes its toll upon him. He is depleted, the opposite of the man who a few hours ago saluted his army in glory. To see him so exposed and brought down shocks me. Usually his true self is hidden and denied to us and even to himself. We can rest but he never seems to.

The constant battering of his senses never ceases, the application of his ideas, his attention to tactical detail. No sooner is the confrontation over and he is dealing with the aftermath; the dispatch and treatment of prisoners, the care of the wounded, the burying of the dead, the payment of the soldiers, often out of his own purse, to allow them to return home if injured; and when that is done he prepares for another battle.

I stand to attention before him my hat under my arm but he tells me to stand at ease.

“I am grateful to you, Molesworth. You saved my life. I have written to Bringfield’s widow. He also leaves an elderly mother. They will be heartbroken at his death as I truly am. I will miss him. He was a brave, loyal man, a great soldier. He served me well.”

“Indeed, your grace,” I answer.

“I wish you to accompany Panton, Durell and de Nassau to the place where he fell and bring his body back to my quarters. I want him to be buried with full military honours. It is the least I can do.”

The task is not to my liking but I can understand the man’s sentiments. I should be able to find him. Panton and Durell should also remember.

“Take two men from his Regiment, the Life Guards, to help you. I will make the necessary arrangements.”

The assembled group on horseback waits for me as I ride to join them. Durell is no more enamoured with the idea than I am. His eyes are red-rimmed eyes from weeping. De Nassau frowns at me but returns my salute and Panton stares straight ahead as if he is about to witness his own demise. We ride out of the camp towards the blood-stained field being turned for burial.

The heavy odour of corpses assaults us. Local peasants, rounded up for the job, backs bent, are digging mass graves to bury the hundreds of dead lying around them. The pits already dug are long and deep and contain a collection of dead men piled high, one upon the other, exposed in their nakedness, empty of souls; their limp forms shells of former men.

The workers lift their heads from their task and look at us. I glance at them and see nothing but heavy-eyed blankness in their gaze. We ride past them in procession over the field with two officers of the Life Guards and a cart following. Heaven must be overpopulated I think. How does heaven cope with such a deluge of people clamouring at its gates all at once? I look at the thousands dead but do not feel anything apart from repulsion at the smell.

The village of Ramillies still smoulders in the background. The field where the Duke had been thrown from his horse is littered with French and English dead and fallen horses. The grave-diggers have not yet reached this far with their work. I look around, trying to find my bearings but without the fury of battle the field looks empty without landmarks. I dismount and lead my horse over the uprooted turf while the others wait behind me, but I have difficulty finding the ditch where the Duke fell. I stumble upon it by accident.

The action is upon me again. I tremble at the memory. It has affected me more than I thought. The cries and screams of battle, the heat, noise and smoke of fire are all around me once again. My heart pounds. In my mind I am running again as the cavalry bears down, the drumming of hooves in my ears. I steady myself, knowing the others watch and wait, take a deep breath, turn to them as I mount my horse and beckon them to follow me.

A flap of wings raises my head. Ravens fly from our presence. We have disturbed their feeding ground, while higher above them larger buzzards swoop in lazy circles. Waiting. Just waiting. Their presence is constant.

Flame and smoke swirl around me. The gut-wrenching retort of cannon fire wrenches me. I cringe as a high-fountain of crimson spurts above Marlborough's charger.

My eyes run over the ground until I find what I think are the remains of Bringfield and then I dismount from my horse.

The troopers join us as we collect all that is left of him. Durell goes off a way from us, unable to help much for a fit of weeping. We roll the remains in a linen cloth followed by the standard of his regiment then place him in the cart along with his sword and hat. Slowly we accompany his body back to Marlborough.

Ashe's name is not amongst the dead and wounded in the list of Lumley's Horse that comes through to Marlborough's quarters. My feelings return at long last along with the bruises emerging in blue-black wheals across my back. Relief, along with the now familiar feeling of guilt, fills me with the knowledge that no harm has come to Ashe. I seek permission to visit Lumley's quarters and receive it.

He emerges from his tent in some surprise as his man, Fraser, announces my arrival. He throws his arms about me in his familiar embrace. "I saw you with the Duke tearing backwards and forwards up and down the field. We heard about the rescue, well done. We also heard about Bringfield, bad news. The Duke must have taken that hard. But what a battle! Once again we are victorious!" he says and slaps me on the back with his old vigour. I nearly black-out with pain. The fight certainly had not diminished him, in fact the opposite has occurred. I comment on how well he looks despite our recent adventure.

"Never better, dear M.! Never better!" he says with a large grin. "Come, let's have some ale together," he says drawing up a camp stool for me while Fraser pours ale into a tankard and hands it to me. "Ellen wrote and told be you had been to see her before you left. I am sorry that I missed you, but I hoped we would see each at some stage during the campaign."

"Of course," I answer, still smarting.

"Tell me, my friend, does this rescue mean promotion for you? The rumour has it you will be made a Colonel and given a Regiment."

"Time will tell about that, Ashe," I reply surprised that such a rumour had travelled so far. "The Duke only likes promotion through purchase. I doubt my father will provide

that for me yet. There hasn't been much talk of the rescue within quarters," I say with a frown, staring into the tankard of ale cupped between my hands.

"Why? I thought everyone would be talking. It has been rife here," Ashe asks, leaning towards me, puzzlement creasing his face.

"Lord Orkney has already approached me and told me not to tell anyone details of the rescue because the Duke does not want it known that he puts himself at risk."

Ashe guffawed. "What? I find that hard to understand. Such an act of bravery needs to be acknowledged and recognised. The Duke makes a point of riding with the troops and putting himself at risk. It endears him to his soldiers and creates loyalty in the fact that he is willing to ride into the fray alongside them. He knows that. Everyone knows that. I can't understand such thinking. It's obvious that it works by the way the troops react afterwards with much cheering. Does the Duke and Lord Orkney think we're all blind, deaf and dumb?" I shrug at him. "He was lucky you were there and acted promptly. The enemy would have captured him, or worse, killed him. Your rescue was witnessed by a good many people. The Albemarle Swiss Regiment is full of talk as they witnessed the whole thing."

I glance around. No one is within earshot and Fraser has disappeared. Ashe follows my anxious glance with a worried frown.

"You are cautious aren't you?" he says, his voice low. "It's well known, Richard. He can't go charging into battle in the thick of things and think he is invisible and invincible. I am sure that after what happened, the Duke will only be happy when you're riding by his side. He will not forget your part in it and how you saved him."

"I just happened to be there. I acted on instinct, on impulse. Bringfield is the hero, he lost his life."

Ashe, looks at me in disbelief. “He didn’t do anything. He lost his life but he didn’t save the Duke as you did.”

“The emphasis will be placed on Bringfield,” I reply. “It’s the right thing to do because he died in his service. It’s better not known that the Duke was scrabbling around in a ditch, stunned and winded, unable to help himself.”

Ashe is not reconciled to such an explanation and splutters as he tries to find the right words of protest.

“I can’t talk about the matter any further,” I conclude and change the subject. “I’m glad to see you are happy at being back in the army.”

Once more Ellen is in my thoughts and I wonder how he can bear to leave her, but I push the thought of her aside and force my mind to go blank.

I leave Ashe with the promise of seeing him again and make my way back to Marlborough’s quarters.

We ride before and behind Marlborough’s coach on the road to Bavecham in Brabant where Bringfield will be laid to rest. The Duke sits white-faced, deeply swallowed in the rich velvet linings of the coach’s interior. The Regiment of Life Guards ride behind the cortege draped in the regimental standard while the muffled drums beat steadily. Villagers line the cobbled streets as the procession passes through the village on the way to the church. The army crowds the church and spills into the street. Somewhere behind and above us the organ plays as Bringfield is committed to the earth. Sunlight streams through the windows lighting our dusty red forms. Durell, Panton, de Nassau, Armstrong and Jevereau are their former stiff-faced selves, but Marlborough’s steely control has gone. His eyes are full of unshed tears for thousands.

Hell in the form of Pitt has risen amongst us. He removes himself from Marlborough's tent white-faced and shaking at the news. He is to be sent home with despatches. Five minutes later a shot rings out over our quarters and everyone runs in the direction of Pitt's tent. Jevereau and I arrive at the same time and together open the flap of the tent. Pitt is rolling around on the ground with his manservant who is trying to grapple a pistol out of his grasp. He is like a mad thing. Isaac and I run in and fall upon the struggling pair, disarm Pitt and pull the two of them apart.

"He went mad, sir. Went mad. Nearly shot himself. I just managed to stop him," the manservant says, climbing to his feet, vigorously rubbing a bruised arm.

I pin Pitt to the floor of the tent while Isaac runs for the Physician-General, Dr. Lawrence who, along with Marlborough and Prince Eugene, by this time, are on their way to the tent wondering about the ruckus.

The Duke rubs a hand over his face in relief when he realises Pitt is still whole. Dr. Lawrence pours a potion down the man's throat and Pitt splutters over it, spraying half of it in my face but enough has entered his belly to take effect. Isaac and I and his manservant stay with him until he sleeps then soldiers from a foot regiment carry him off to the hospital tent.

Later Marlborough questions us all about Pitt's condition and how we find him. We are about to strike camp and move into the valley of the Senne to take yet even more fortresses. The Duke does not want any useless baggage. I think of Pitt's father and how he would accept Pitt's discharge from the army especially under these circumstances. My pity lies with Pitt.

“Looking after the sick and lonely? Or is it the weak and cowardly?” asks a spectre from my recent past, Abercrombie, who still, occasionally, returns to haunt me. Since joining the Duke’s staff I have been able to avoid the man and my life has been easier for it. He looms over Isaac and I as we sit at a table in the Aide’s tent.

“Your services have been much in demand recently, Molesworth,” Abercrombie continues, his handsome face distorted by a sarcastic leer. He swings his leg over the trestle seat in front of us and sits down uninvited with Isaac and me, when normally we do not fraternise. He usually chooses to ignore me, so, as he arranges his crusty self opposite, I know he is up to no good. He has weathered and thickened throughout the campaign. He is at least ten years older than me and has been in the army for some time which most probably causes him great discomfit seeing I have risen so quickly in rank. Isaac stiffens with tension beside me. He knows Abercrombie’s reputation and the cut of his sharp tongue.

“Be wary,” he murmurs to me, under his breath, noticing the man’s animosity, as John had. I did not intend to answer Orkney’s Aide as I had no need to. “Careful Abercrombie,” warns Isaac. “Is it the Duke you speak of, or someone else?”

“You know of whom I speak, Jevereau,” the Aide says, his head on one side, looking directly at Isaac, the saturnine smirk still present. “Molesworth is perfectly capable of answering for himself and does not need your help,” he says, his eyes shifting to me. “Pitt, of course, I mean. Poor old Pitt. You save him from himself and he goes home with an honourable discharge because of your mercy.” Abercrombie mocks, not quite drunk but

dangerous. “Perhaps it’s sheer compassion that moves you,” he tips his head back and chortles, delighted with himself.

His laugh is ingratiating, his tongue a tyrant. I squirm inside, wary of what he will say next.

“Compassion from someone who enjoys the chase and kill as much as any of us when our blood is up. Your ability with the sword has been noticed. In more ways than one. Even that which belongs to another is not safe.” Aghast I look at him. What is he talking about? Ashe and Ellen? “Perhaps that’s compassion too,” he adds.

Anger floods me. I attempt to stand up from my seat but Isaac, sensing my next move, grabs me by the arm and pulls me down. The din in the tent lessens. Some of the other Aides look over in our direction.

“Ah, hit a raw nerve, have I Molesworth?” Abercrombie jeers.

Despite Jevereau’s firm grip on my arm I am hard put not to leap at the man and box him about the ears.

“There is no call for that, Abercrombie, and you know it,” Isaac says, between his teeth.

“Can the hero not defend himself?”

Silence in the tent.

The hilt of my sword presses deeply into my clenched fist as I strive to control my temper. The desire to punch Abercrombie on his high Roman nose increases. Over on the other side of the tent, Panton and Durell detach themselves from the group of senior Aides and head in our direction.

“Ease off Abercrombie,” Isaac growls, his grip tightening further, as if to get through to my angry brain to stop me throttling the Aide. By the look on Isaac’s face he is ready to do the same. “Even my Lord Duke shows compassion when the time is right.”

But the leering Aide is not done with his tirade.

“Ah, yes, the Duke. Yes, but that is another matter. You are quite the hero, aren’t you, Molesworth? To ask for help is not in my Lord Duke’s temperament, would you say?” He says staring me in the eyes. “But when one puts one’s mind to it, one must not miss an opportunity to promote oneself, must one. Eh, Molesworth? The Duke would have most probably saved himself if left to his own devices. In fact, the story goes that you deliberately set yourself out to make sure you assisted him when he was capable of saving himself. Knowing your sensibilities, Molesworth, you are most probably aware and deeply annoyed that Bringfield is being hailed as the hero,” he taunts. “His sacrifice overshadows your so-called brave action, so I wonder if you will get the reward you so badly crave?”

“You’re out of line, Abercrombie. You’ve had too much to drink. It is better you leave the Duke’s quarters immediately,” Panton says, leaning over him as he and Durell, one on either side, lift him bodily from the seat.

Surprised at their sudden appearance Abercrombie for once is speechless and allows himself to be led from the tent.

“You did well not to react unwisely,” Isaac sympathises, loosening his grip at last.

“I was sorely tried,” I answer, raging inside, climbing to my feet, eager to leave the curious stares and whispers.

Outside the cool air hits my face and tempers its fever. The familiar smell of camp fires and freshly baked bread causes a growl of hunger in my belly. I take some deep breaths and calm down, but my face still burns with anger.

I am not one to be belittled publicly and Abercrombie knows it. He has never liked me and I know I cannot trust him. Does he know about Ellen and Ashe and if so, how did he find out? For as little as this, men fight each other to death in duels. If Marlborough did not forbid it I would be challenging him right now. All I can do instead is ensure that I avoid him as much as possible.

Chapter Thirty-Seven-Synopsis

Brussels-Ostend: 1706

Rejoicing

The people of Brussels welcome Marlborough and his staff as saviours. Richard along with the other Aides witnesses the takeover of Brussels. Richard is still very aware of his deed and it is lauded by those around him. The army move to take Ostend and Richard witnesses the arrival of the naval fleet to help Marlborough take the port. He is reminded that his younger brother Edward is now in the navy. Marlborough is corresponding with London relentlessly in the hope that peace will be forthcoming. But the French are unwilling to give peace on the Allies' terms. The campaign ends in a quagmire of rain and mud before Marlborough quits for London.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

London

Winter: 1706-1707

Acknowledgement

Ashe is right. The Duke does acknowledge me and draws me forward to stand beside him in the packed Guildhall, John and Father in the audience. I bow to the Duke. The Generals and officers and the crowd erupt in cheers and clapping. The sound echoes and bounds off the high-raftered ceiling in a deafening roar. Father's eyes carry a profound look of pride; even John looks pleased with his younger brother.

For all of the Duke's recognition I still entertain doubts, however.

The large hall is a tapestry of colour. The crowded floor a mass of red uniforms resplendent with gold lace. Gold shines on the embroidery of dress coats of the men and the silks worn by women shimmer in the candlelight in the large hall.

No sooner is the ceremony over than I am besieged by people. I signal for Isaac to come and rescue me which he does with great aplomb leading me away towards the Duke saying that he requests my company.

The Duke has joined the Duchess and their daughters on the other side of the room, talking with a mass of people. The Duchess acknowledges my bow to her as I join them.

"Captain Molesworth," she greets me with an inclination of her head.

I bow over her outstretched hand and see upon it the diamond ring she wears commemorating Blenheim. It flashes in the light.

“I hear your quick action was of benefit to the Duke,” she says to me, studying my person from top to toe as her husband does. “Thank God for men such as yourself and Colonel Bringfield.”

She is as beautiful up close as from a distance. Her manner is imperious which must be from being so long at Court and being such a good friend of the Queen.

I am rendered speechless by her attention and feel all eyes are upon us. I am relieved when she turns to the Duke.

Relief on joining the Duke’s party is short lived and I am further perturbed. The Duke re-introduces me to the Earl and Countess of Melyon who request the story from my own lips. After a brief and modest account of the rescue, being careful to make comment that the Duke most probably could have rescued himself, which by the smile on the Duchess’s lips pleases her no end, I bow to the Earl and Countess wishing to escape. But they, like Abercrombie, are hard to get away from; nevertheless, they express their approval, whereas Abercrombie does not know what approval means.

“Your reputation precedes you, Captain,” the Countess Melyon says. “I am sure his Grace is very grateful for your presence of mind and bravery at such a dangerous moment.”

“Indeed I am,” answers the Duke, smiling at the Countess and then at me. “It certainly took great presence of mind.”

“It was my honour, your Grace,” I answer, with a slight bow to him.

The Duke, to my alarm, takes the Earl by the arm and says he wishes him to speak to Lord Orkney. They move off leaving me with this artful woman whom I have become very wary of. Assuming an air of indifference, I look over the heads of the people for Isaac

or even Father and John, but they are not visible in the crowd. I feel trapped and alarmed by my predicament.

“Your rescue was very brave, Captain,” the Countess continues. “There has been much talk of it in London, along with the demise of poor Bringfield, of course. I believe he has left his wife and mother in a very poor way.”

“His death was most unfortunate. He was a good man. I was only doing my duty by the Duke, Ma’am,” I add, looking down upon her, making sure my gaze does not linger too long or lower than the glitter of trapped diamonds at her neck.

“It was strange though, when the news first came through about Bringfield and how it happened, there was no mention of your rescue of the Duke. However, His Grace seems to have made up for that at this function. But there are some people who are saying you put yourself out to rescue him when he could have looked after himself.” I frown at her but keep silent. “Tell me, what is it about the man that has you boys running around madly on the field, risking life and limb, ready to kill and be killed for him?”

“He is a great leader and soldier, Ma’am, but truth to tell, we fight for England. However, the Duke’s fairness and humanity inspire loyalty in even the poorest soldier.”

“Ah, then you do not love him like the rest?” She asks unexpectedly. “I have heard that all Marlborough’s men love him enough to die for him.”

To my chagrin I feel a flush of heat climbing my neck and face, caused not by the overheated room but by the frankness of her words, and the truth in them. I am embarrassed. Of course I love him but I am not going to tell this brittle overdressed creature, her face covered in white powder and patches, her cheeks rouged, feathers and diamonds in her upswept hair.

The ease with which my brother ingratiates himself in their company and the familiarity between them all disturbs me.

Desperation fills me.

“Have I embarrassed you by mentioning your love for the Duke? It is a well-known fact that his men adore him. Even the common soldiers call him ‘Corporal John’ out of deference and affection, is that not so?”

“That is so, My Lady,” I answer, trying to find the right words, trying to think of an excuse to extricate myself, trying to find a familiar rescuing face in the throng of people milling around us.

Where is Isaac? I think, turning around looking for my friend. “I suppose you could say that what I feel for the Duke is love,” I continue, still looking over the heads for rescue. “I certainly respect him and I am willing to give my life for him, as Bringfield did. We all put ourselves in that position, that is our duty. Yes,” I add, turning to her. “Some would call it love.”

“Some would say it is the highest form of love, Captain,” she answers, opening the leaf of the fan in her left hand, fluttering it in front of her face to cool herself in the rising heat. Her face is partially hidden behind a tumult of water-colour and gold-leaf superimposed with fat naked cherubs fighting in a patch of cloud in front of a deep blue sky beneath a rampant rainbow. Behind this shield of frippery she is safe for I cannot read her. Yet, in some ways I can read her very well.

She is a woman of the court and well used to the language of the fan and well aware of the enticement of flirtation it can cause. After the solidity of soldiering and being surrounded by men, she is translucent, made of gossamer in her pale green and silver gown,

a fairy thing ready to fly from me if I near as much look at her too long, let alone touch her. I wish she would fly from me.

Her delicacy is an illusion, I tell myself, as for all her froth, I can see strength in her astute gaze over the top of the fan accompanied by a glimmer of cunning. She is also conscious of her feminine appeal which can be hard to resist, for a sex-starved man such as myself, but my awareness of it is a warning, as feminine charm can be dangerous. Like all conniving women, she knows her femininity is power and wields it when necessary. I have learned that much in the straightforward world of men I usually inhabit.

“You mock me, madam.”

“Not at all, Captain. You are a serious fellow.” Her voice is amused as she goads me. I feel like tearing the fan from her face and marching off. “You were quite dashing at our first meeting, much like your brother John, even though you insisted you could not dance.”

What that has to do with the Duke’s rescue, I am not sure.

“I was taught by the best, My Lady,” I answer with a bow, immediately regretting my statement. She thinks I mean herself when I meant my dancing teacher.

She glances up at me over the top of her fan and laughs. People are already eyeing us standing together talking and I know that if I stay with her much longer rumours are bound to fly through the social circles.

The Countess inclines her perfectly coifed head towards me and closes the fan that hides her face. I see the amusement and cynicism that hovers around her eyes and mouth which she cannot conceal. I look away.

“I can see you are a dedicated warrior to your leader,” she says. “It is a fallacy. He is a fallacy,” she continues.

I turn and look at her in surprise. "Can you not see that, Captain? He knows he has this power to inspire men, that is why they willingly go to their deaths by the thousands. That is why even the French admire him, so we are told. But would you not say that there is little thought of the consequences for the men that fight and die for him. Life means very little, glory means everything and England comes second in the vast and ambitious plan. Can you not see?"

The woman is mad. I cannot believe my ears; this is the same message I received from Mistress Murray. How many more think this way?

"Madam," I say, with as much haughtiness as I can muster. "I witness nothing but consideration and feeling for the lot of the soldiers on the field, and his eagerness for the glory of England. Your opinion surprises me."

The Duke is well aware of his personal power and the feeling that he can invoke in his men and I also know that he uses that power to his advantage, but I am never going to admit that to the Countess. Outraged, I turn away from her with impatience ready to cut our conversation short with a smart retreat.

How dare she speak to me like this when I have risked my life to rescue the Duke, as some would say, England. Although she knows the Duke personally, she surprises me; she has gone too far and is being indiscreet in talking thus to me, one of his loyal Aides. Was she setting me some sort of trap? Testing me, perhaps? If so, why? And who had put her up to it? A warning forms in the back of my mind as I remember how close she and her husband appear to be to John. I must be circumspect in what I tell him.

"Your loyalty is admirable, Captain, but blind, for all your bravery, as you will eventually find out."

He is England, My Lady,” I answer, turning back to her, caution to the fore, my voice brusque.

“Really? I thought Queen Anne was England.” Her voice is sharp. “Your statement could be considered treasonous by some people, as there are rumours Marlborough could be made King if need be. What other person, other than the Queen, could draw London to its feet as happened today?”

My discomfit almost makes me squirm. Of course my statement may be considered Treasonous, but I was talking about the Duke and his affect on the men he leads. However, there was treasonous danger in my words because it was hard not to imagine the Duke being favoured for the throne if the need arose, especially if his popularity grows any stronger than it already is. I had heard the gist of the rumours since returning from the Continent. I curse my loose tongue. But she is right. London had been in an uproar, the streets packed with people cheering the parade of colours, the captured standards, and the Duke and Duchess, and Generals in their gold trimmed coaches and the parade of soldiers and cavalry. I had been part of it and had witnessed the euphoria, the sight such triumph provoked amongst the mass of people lining the route to the Guildhall.

“My Lady, His Grace is far too loyal to the Queen and England to entertain such a notion.”

The lady smirks in a most unladylike fashion at me which only increases my anger and dislike. It is difficult to remain civil.

“Of course. However, the rumours must have arisen from somewhere. His enemies perhaps and there are many of those.”

“Perhaps,” I answer, with a curt nod.

“I see we have reached an understanding, Captain. But I have annoyed you and that in itself is curious. Perhaps you can see the truth of the matter? You are human, after all, that is how he binds you to him. Do not fret. Your secret is safe with me. Not only are you affected by his charm but others are as well. That is how he works, though I do not feel for a moment that it is deliberate on his part, do you? No. I think, like others, that you recognise the greatness in him and are naturally drawn by his nature.”

“You surprise me, ma’am. For one who knows the Duke so well you seem remarkably disloyal.”

“Not disloyal, Captain. I see him as he really is. And I suspect you do as well. You cannot work so closely with such a man and not know the man himself. As for secrets, we all have those. You too, no doubt,” she answers. “If you knew me well, you would realise that I am far from disloyal to the Duke, the Duchess, who is my friend, or the Queen, but I do have a mind which I use and I am not blind as to what goes on around me. I have eyes and ears and can form my own judgements as well as you can. The Duchess, I am closer to, and attend her sometimes at Holywell or at Windsor Lodge. My husband and the Duke are old friends, both of Royalist families; their families, fortunes and heritage date back to sheep farming days. They were boys together in the court of King James when he was the Duke of York. Now the Earl tends to follow the Duke around in adoration, rather like a sheep. A little like you do, though serving him in a different manner. All for the good of England and the Queen, of course.”

“And what is the different manner?”

“Ah, Captain,” she answers, putting on the face of charm. “Now it is your turn to be indiscreet.”

She taps me on the shoulder with the closed tip of her fan.

Too familiar; too dangerous.

“May I lead you back to the Earl now My Lady? I see him with the Duke,” I nod in the direction of where the Duke is still holding forth to an interested audience.

“If you wish, Captain, thank you,” she takes my arm and we walk slowly over to the group. “Our marriage is but a token one, I fear,” she whispers, on the way. “He hopes for an heir, but I may tell you sir that his hopes are small.”

I bite my lip to stop myself from smiling despite the fact that I am slowly suffocating, caught in the web she has woven around me. Once again I take her hand and bow to her in farewell. I hope. She moves closer to me again, my hand still holding hers, she turns my palm and drops her closed fan into my hand in a light but tantalising tap.

Warmth floods my face. The whole room is watching us. I cannot escape fast enough. The Earl rescues me from his wife and with a bow I retreat from the group.

Isaac is behind me holding a glass of wine.

“Drink up, Richard. You look as if you have been through a battle.”

“I have, a battle of wits; that woman is formidable.”

Isaac laughs as I take the wine. “Be careful with her. She’s well known for her jealousy.”

“John has warned me of her.”

“Mmm,” answers Isaac thoughtfully. “Her temperament is usually revealed by her tongue. Once she sets her sights on you, her possession can be toxic. She has singled you out. She has a certain, ‘reputation’, shall we say. She adores heroes and has many friends in high places, not just Marlborough. Some say it even extends to the Queen herself, though I doubt it, not with the Duchess and Abigail Masham in the way. There is also a rumour that

she courts the Duke's enemies. How much truth there is in all of that I'm not sure.

However, it pays to be polite but wary if she comes your way again."

"Is she likely to?" I ask, doubt in my voice, swallowing the wine. A feeling of panic rises in me. "I don't want her anywhere near me."

"My friend, you have a lot to learn. She may if she so chooses. She is not easily shaken off when she sets her sights upon you. That is where you must exercise caution. Avoid her if you can."

"You seem to know her well," I comment, eyeing my friend with renewed interest.

"Through my wife, Caroline, only," answers Isaac, as he holds his hands aloft in self defence. "They have been friends for many years, from before the time we were married. The Earl and Countess have visited us in our house many times. I know her, yet I don't know her, if you understand." I nod. "If you are wise," he continues. "That's exactly how you should know her. She doesn't like to be scorned or ignored, so you have to be careful in your dealings with her."

"It's time for me to disappear," I answer.

"You can try, but I feel you're a marked man."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Edlington

Winter: 1706-1707

Doubt

Edlington greets me with low-slung mist. It hangs over the gardens surrounding the house and hides the woods.

You run to meet me, Mary as I alight from the coach. The high pitched wail of a child comes from the house; a sure sign the family are here. You distract me as you run across the carriage-way through the grey and white starkness of mid-winter, your face flushed, a cloak thrown over your voluminous gown, pattens upon your feet to protect your shoes from the mud of the cobbled yard. How welcome you make me feel.

You throw yourself into my arms and kiss me on the cheek. Remembering your manners, you step back, curtsy and present your hand in greeting. I laugh with the pleasure of your spontaneity. Everyone around me is usually so formal and studied. I kiss your hand and dear face on both cheeks.

“Mama wrote and told me you were coming to Edlington. We had to come to Doncaster for George’s psychic. I couldn’t wait to see you so we left Doncaster and descended upon Mama and Papa. We are so proud of you. What a feat,” you say, clapping your hands like a small girl.

Everyone is here; even Bysse a sturdy, talkative little boy who insists on following me around. Mary's young ones never leave me alone for a moment either, much to everyone's amusement. Mother has to rescue me from time to time from my pesky little brother and his inquisitive cousins.

Father appears well, but then Edlington suits him. He reassures me his bad health is over and now he is fully recovered. I believe him because I want to.

Mother is worried only by Bysse's mischief and she picks up the boy who gives me a quiet look of triumph over her shoulder, enough to equal any Marlborough, as she carries him away.

Father and John had stayed on in London until Parliament closed and then travelled to Edlington, while I had journeyed later, after being with Panton and Durell, at Holywell at St. Albans, with the Duke as he entertained the Generals for a few days. He had informed me that my name had been put forward to the Secretary-of-War for a commission as a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Royal Regiment. It had been a relief to leave Holywell and the constant threat of a visit from the Earl and Countess Melyon whose presence was expected any day.

The Duke himself was invigorated and distracted by the adulation given to him by everyone he met and would be taken up for some time with the celebrations over his success, but beneath all this, the worm of power was beginning to work against him, eating into everything that supported him, undermining him and weakening everything that he had

fought for. I could see it, for even with the warmth of recognition of my rescue, had come the sharp barb of criticism.

Even Father comments.

“You must be aware, Richard there are some who say that you should have left him on the ground, left him to his fate. The war would be then over and done with. ”

My father’s statement silences me. I am shocked that he should voice such an opinion.

“I could never have done that! I would die first!” I blurt out, affronted.

“There will always be those who criticise,” he says, and puts his hand on my arm to placate me. “It rests easily besides praise with those who are envious of another’s success. Of course you did what you had to do, and rightly so. Admirable it was too, but you must realise that there may come a time when some people will openly say to you, without fear of the consequences, that perhaps you should not have rescued him. When that happens you must be on your guard.”

“What makes you say such a thing?” I query, looking at him with a frown, crestfallen that my deed would be taken in such a way.

“The coffeehouses in London are full of talk and the hubbub about the Duke putting himself at risk in the battlefield, and of Bringfield’s death, but there is little talk about your rescue, apart from a consensus that perhaps it should not have taken place for the sake of the country.”

“Obviously Tory coffeehouses,” I retort not trying to hide the disgust in my voice. I had not frequented the coffee houses because I had been fully occupied with duties with the Duke and the endless celebrations and social occasions accompanying the victory of Ramillies.

“Perhaps, but there’s even some comment in the Whiggish ones. However, generally speaking, Bringfield seems to be regarded as the hero of the piece, as the one that saved the Duke’s life by losing his own, not you.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“The Duke knew that his dangerous charge with the cavalry would lead to criticism. It’s almost as if it has been purposely put around about Bringfield taking the shot, making it appear as an act of fate, just to distract from the fact that he was in danger, not once, but twice. To do that it is necessary to downplay your feat. He’s not going to tell the world that he lay prostrate in a ditch with the enemy all around and if you had not been there he would be dead or a prisoner. Bringfield’s fate conveniently detracts from the fact that he was nearly killed. I think the Duke may conveniently forget with time that you rescued him at all. But if you had not rescued him, where would England be now?”

“Perhaps as the critics say, not at war,” I retort. “But Father, he has recognised what I did. You were there, you heard what he said at Guildhall.”

“He can do little else because it was witnessed by so many. However, the Tories are preaching peace and they are using the incident for their own advantage. They say that he is prolonging the war for his own glory.”

“What nonsense.”

“If the war goes on for much longer his enemies will use any excuse to attack him and they’re looking for reasons. If they can’t use their power in Parliament, and at the moment they are hobbled by our strength, they will use other methods to undermine him. The pamphlets that are circulated in the street and coffeehouses are a powerful way of doing that. Many of the Whigs, including myself, are alarmed at the amount of dissension running through the country, even though the army is victorious.”

“But he was praised in Parliament. Sir, did they not say “All praise in honour of the Duke of Marlborough?”

“Indeed they did, because Parliament knew that the public expected him to have recognition. But with success comes the resentment of lesser men; that seems to be the way of human nature. Every powerful man has enemies and the Duke is no exception. He is a great man, I grant you that and I know you respect him. I do admire what he has achieved thus far, but don’t forget, he is human like the rest of us and has faults as we all do. It’s not forgotten by some people that he went against James II, just to secure the throne for the Prince of Orange, when for years he had been one of the King’s trusted men and served him at court. He turned against James because of ambition. However, he is not the only one to have done that in the course of history, but it’s less than honourable. The fact that he is becoming more powerful necessitates the dictates of honour, not only from him but from those around him. His record is blemished, Richard, remember that. All great men have a price.”

The adoration of you, my sister Mary, is always constant and refreshing because I know where I stand with you, in contrast to the fluctuating affection from my brothers who all seem competitive and overbearing, impressed and proud of me one minute and jealous of me the next. You lead me by the arm into the house while the footman and servants unload the coach.

“Father told me that you and George have bought a house in Doncaster to be near Edlington,” I say, as the footman relieves me of my cloak, hat and gloves, but there is little time to answer because the oak double doors leading into the great hall open and I am swamped by Mother, Father, and a swarm of brothers and sisters.

Apart from Coote and Bysse, I have seen the rest of my brothers in London, but I have not seen my sisters for some time. I find they are all women.

Charlotte is beautiful, straight-backed with an erect dignified carriage that belies her years. She has always been conscious that the Queen of Denmark is her godmother and regards herself as a proxy princess. Born during Father's tenure in Copenhagen, the Danish Queen honoured Mother and Father in her graciousness. Charlotte has inherited the white Coote skin and dark brown hair so apparent in my mother's brothers. Letty, is just out of girlhood and grown in height. She is shy and hesitant with me, hardly knowing me. William, short, quiet and bookish, has, to Father's relief, no desire to join the army, only lanky Edward and Walter have been smitten by my tales of daring-do. They soon lead me away to find out all they can about the great battle of Ramillies, the rescue and all that is going on within Marlborough's army.

Edward's experience in the navy has given him a taste for the sea, which to Mother is as bad as the army is to Father, and he is eager to be off again as soon as possible. However, I soon find out that this enforced family sojourn is not popular. The men have been 'required' to come to Edlington while Charlotte was loathe to leave her promised man, our cousin Will Tichbourne, in Ireland.

You, Mary, I find to my dismay, are suffering.

"What's happening with you?" I ask sometime later when we have a moment alone. Apart from our joyous reunion you have been sad and silent, never leaving George's side much, your face pale and peaked looking, and your once brown hair streaked with grey almost as much as Mother's. I cannot believe the change in you since we last met.

"Haven't Mama and Papa told you anything?" you ask.

“Only that George is still unwell.” I have already noticed a change in my brother-in-law. He has lost weight, his once rotund face now thin and gaunt, his clothes now far too large for him. His eyes are preoccupied and his speech a monotone and distant, he keeps to himself, even when we are present as a family. I see you often glancing in his direction, an anxious look on upon your face.

“He has been unwell again for these past few months and we have spent time in London with his parents hoping that the physicians there would provide a remedy, but nothing helps. He has periods of melancholy so profound that he will not move from his bed, then he has bouts of extreme activity going all day and all night which is very stressful and worrisome for both the children and me, because he often wants to include us in his activities despite the time and the hour, and cannot seem to see that the children, especially, need their rest. His temper is explosive; once riled he rants and raves and can be quite violent and frightening. Then later, he’s so remorseful he shuts himself away for days. The doctors have tried everything but nothing seems to help.”

“All the usual treatments, then?” I ask thinking of purging, cupping, blood-letting, with an internal shudder. Physicians are not my favourite people.

“Everything. Nothing works for long. He settles for a few days, sometimes weeks and I think perhaps this time there has been a cure, but it doesn’t last. The only one who has brought peace of mind to us both has been Francis Lockier.”

“Francis?” I answer, in surprise. “Where is he? I haven’t seen Francis for years.”

We were once good friends in our youth, in Ireland, before Francis went into the Church and I went to London to The Temple. I knew Father kept in contact with him over the years and at one stage had provided him with a living. He has since become almost part of the family, a good friend and private chaplain.

“He’s in Doncaster. He has a living in one of the parishes there. I think Father would like him here in Edlington at St. Peter’s and I’m sure he’d be willing to pay his stipend. It has been such a joy and help to us to have him so close. We can call on him anytime. He’s the only one who can give George comfort at times, he draws him out and makes him talk about his fears and feelings which he can’t seem to do with us, not even with me, no matter how willing I am to listen. He has been instrumental in making George take notice of the doctors because sometimes, in his stubbornness, he refuses to do as they say. He says they make him feel worse.”

“I can understand that Mary, sometimes they do make you feel worse.”

“But surely, that is to make you feel better?”

“Perhaps,” I answer, not convinced.

“I think George is heading for another relapse again. It has been months since his last attack and as you have noticed, he’s withdrawing from us. I know the signs now and I am prepared for it.”

You lean back in the chair suddenly revealing a deep weariness. When you look at me with immense sadness I become aware of the despair that is within you. I feel helpless.

“Is there anything I can do, Mary?”

“I don’t think so, Richard. No one can, except perhaps Francis.”

The Hall sits before the snow-bleached woods, its thatched roof weighed down by the latest wintry blast to come over the outlying fields from the north. Mother has fires blazing in every room and the smell of woodsmoke hangs permanently in the air. William, Coote, Charlotte, Letty and Ovid, Father’s white greyhound, have been trailing the woods

for holly and mistletoe and the front door to the hall is decorated along with the interior hallway and the large hall itself. Candles blaze in all the sconces and the fire in the grate roars with approval as it eats the wood, shooting sparks and flames up the cavernous chimney.

Letty takes me by the hand. "Look, brother Richard. We've spent hours decorating, come and see the staircase."

Mistletoe is twisted around the newel posts and travels up the oak balustrade of the stair case to the second and third floor.

"You have been busy, Letty," I answer, with approval and she beams, her round young face turns pink beneath the white of her cap.

"And there's the holly," she indicates over the doors and chimney piece in the hallway and hall.

"Well done, Letty, it does you proud."

She claps her hands with glee and dances around me. One little sister happy for the rest of the day.

Edlington fills me with a lethargy that almost paralyses me. Within the warmth and protection of the Hall, away from the frenetic activity and rejoicing in London, I find I laugh easily and often, as here, the distant battle-fields seem only a nightmare. However, they are a recurring nightmare and one I am eager to get back to when the time comes. In fact, I know, that in a month or so I shall be itching to be with Marlborough again, but for now the discomfit and rigours of the campaign recede in my memory. I feel I have emerged into paradise, albeit a cold paradise.

Christmas is almost upon us and the countryside is frost ridden; icicles hang from every outpost and from the bare branches of trees, overhanging roofs on the village houses,

farm buildings and barns. The only place alive and warm in the village is the forge which demonstrates life with the clang of the hammer on the anvil as the blacksmith works the metal amidst the heat from the fire which glows almost continuously and attracts the village children and dogs. The rest of the village and the woods is a vista of black and white and only serves to remind me of last winter when I was marooned in Ashe Hall with Ellen. The pain lasts only a second or two before I banish it and her from my mind, but it is there long enough for you, Mary, to notice. Not only the pain of Ellen affects me. Here in the warmth and peace I try to forget the thousands lying under snow-clad fields on the Continent, and the sorrow of Bringfield's wife and mother this Christmas.

You jolt me out of it as if reading my mind.

"You must not think too much, Richard," you say, sitting near me in the parlour close to the fire. "You are home with us now and that's all that's important at this time."

The best I can summon is a rueful smile and a nod. "Did you know that Francis Lockier is coming to St Peters to take the Christmas service?" you ask and I notice the brightness in your voice.

"It will be good to see him, Mary."

Ovid curls his long grey form into a tight circle, yawns luxuriously and falls asleep at our feet, his head on his paw, his eyes half closed, his long ears twitching. I envy the relaxation and clear conscience of the dog and the fact that Father adores him.

"You can always talk to Francis if you wish. He's a very good listener."

CHAPTER FORTY

Edlington

Winter: 1706-1707

Lockier

John and I look at each other with new eyes at Edlington. In the family situation we slip back into our old role of close brotherhood. In London it seemed we had drifted apart. There he seemed a different person, bursting with ambition, affected by his status in Florence, full of a false sophistication which irritates me. That is not John. That is the John he is trying to be. This is not the country lad who grew up with me in the lush fields of Fingal in Ireland. But here, in the depths of Yorkshire, amongst the frozen fields and bare woods he has come back to me as the brother he once was.

The fancy clothes have gone and he is in country wool, his hair plain and cut short curling on his necktie, wearing soft shoes in the house and boots without, a woollen hat and cloak about his person if he ventures outdoors. To me he is more like John and more like me. He is no longer the smart sophisticated fop wearing powder and a full bottomed wig.

“Why don’t you come with me to Newcastle?” he asks, unexpectedly one evening when I had no idea that he intended to go there. What other people know and what I don’t know amazes me. Father and John have been discussing this between them.

“There’s no business for me there,” I reply. To go north again would bring back memories I would rather forget, of riding through the northern countryside towards Ellen.

“Well, perhaps not yet, but there may be in the future,” he answers. “I have to see the Duke of Newcastle because he has become my patron, through Father’s influence of course, but the man is willing to help provide a living for me in my post which is a great help. And to procure an even better position in the diplomatic service in the future, it is necessary that I pay the Duke a visit to express my gratitude.”

“The Duke of Marlborough and the Duke of Newcastle are not close. It may be better I did not attend,” I add, thoughtfully.

“You may be grateful in the future for the connection.”

“Perhaps, but Marlborough and what he thinks is my priority.”

From overhearing the Marlborough’s opinion of the Duke of Newcastle, I realise to be seen fraternising with him would do me more harm than good. “If he found out that Newcastle was favouring you and giving you support, and I was in attendance at that meeting, it would not go down well. Personally, I don’t particularly like the idea that you have to depend on him. Is there someone else who could be your patron?”

“There’s no one else and he has agreed. What I do and whom I mix with has no bearing on your career,” John answers, his pragmatism to the fore, but as far as I’m concerned, what we all do as a family has a bearing on each other. Usually he is the first to say that, but now, because it concerns himself, it does not matter. His needs come first.

“I disagree. I need to be careful,” I insist. “There are powers at work surrounding the Duke which are not to his benefit. I did detect a difference, a change surrounding him during the last campaign. He was being controlled by some immeasurable power against which he has no influence, though he tries to convince himself and behave as if he has. I was vaguely disturbed because if he is affected like that, then so are we, his men. It was a

strange feeling considering I am used to taking orders and being at the Duke's beck and call and honouring his power."

John smiles enigmatically. "You're finally beginning to see things as they really are. You're becoming aware of the man, not the hero. The machinations of the army are really beyond his control because he has to answer to a higher power and if the Government goes against him, he has no say. Because of that you also have little control over your future, and yet your chances of promotion are dependent on his favour. However, it would be wise to think of yourself if you wish to succeed; hence my suggestion about the Duke of Newcastle. You may need him one day as I do now. You tread very closely to the seat of immense power which is always surrounded by some corruption. It takes courage and tenacity to be in such a position and stay in favour. There will be others, less than you, who will want to take your power in some way, because you are so close to the centre of it. Be careful. Keep your own counsel and do not listen to others. Listen only to your own reasoning and judge for yourself. Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut. Above all, never waver in loyalty to the Duke. He thinks highly of you."

"You make my life serving the Duke sound like a trial."

"No, I really think that one day you may need Newcastle when Marlborough is no longer around. Remember, I have that connection. I admire your loyalty to him, so do what you think is best."

"Do you think the war will last much longer? Marlborough by this time would be at Windsor Lodge, drawing up plans for the next year, as if unaware of murmurs of peace put out by the French."

"Some say the length of the war is up to the Duke," John shrugs. "There is much debate about it continuing, as I have mentioned. England's position is not yet secure, even

though we have the Union of Scotland, at long last, about to be pushed through Parliament. That alone will help England's security."

"The Whigs want to prolong the war according to Father. Basically, at heart, Marlborough's a Tory, but he knows that the Whigs will continue the war so he sides with the government."

"Marlborough hides his political views well and because it is convenient at the moment to do so, but his Tory background means a lot to him. Also, remember the Duchess is a Whig and she wields great influence over him. As for the Whigs prolonging the war, we want the security of England on our terms. It would be unwise, at this stage, to back away from our principles."

John leaves me to ponder all of this. Father has succeeded again, I realise. He has used me to try and persuade John not to marry Camilla, and now John has persuaded me that my future may be in jeopardy and informed me of the need to be careful. It is Father's way. He knows that neither of us will listen to him but we may listen to each other.

Lockier appears a few days before Christmas. He rides into the carriage way of the Hall on his chestnut horse, well-wrapped in black greatcoat, hat and cloak against the cold. A tall angular man in his late twenties, dressed in black clerical garb, his dark wig bagged at the nape of his neck, his straight profile prominent against the white background of snow covered fences and trees. His long face breaks into a smile of welcome as he dismounts from his horse and I walk over to meet him. He shakes me by the hand.

"Our hero, I believe," he says to me with a smile holding me at arm's length and looking at me all over. I laughed at his appraisal. "Well done, you saved England."

"That's not what some are saying," I answer, raising my eyebrows.

“You had better not tell Marlborough that,” he says. “Is not the Duke, England?”

Lockier surprises me, but I am ready to forgive such a friend any weakness.

He greets each of the family in turn as his horse is led away by the stable-boy. I know that Father thinks so highly of him that he is willing to pay for him to accompany John in his diplomatic missions. Much to Lockier’s delight. I wonder what John thinks of that and I also wonder about Father’s motive?

Mary greets him, holds out her hand for his kiss as she curtseys to him. His features soften in a wide smile of pleasure at seeing her. No one seems to notice but there is much excitement at his arrival. Only George is absent from the little parade of adults and children that lead Francis into the house.

Mary’s face is flushed with delight. I realise there is more to this relationship than is recognised, perhaps even between the two of them. Mary’s spirit, so warm, giving and full of love has been depressed about George, but in the presence of Francis her spirit is uplifted. How George could be bereft and adrift with such a wife to give him so much love is a puzzle to me. Francis’ presence, I realise, is not only for George, but it is for Mary too.

In the soft light of the small church, under the beamed roof, Lockier stands in his church robes before the altar and the highly carved oak altar screen. The angular planes of the clergyman’s face, which normally give him an aesthetic and strong look, are softened by the light from the array of candles in sconces, on the altar and on stands in the church, interspersed with holly, mistletoe and ivy. The young Molesworth’s have been busy here too.

He leads us in singing Christmas hymns in his baritone voice and our voices carry well through the small space. The family are arranged in pews up the front of the church while the villagers are crushed into an anonymous heap in the back. Ahead of me is the Norman stone circular arch which frames the altar and separates the nave from the chancel. The deep silence of centuries is unchanged here as the world continues in its dizzy speed outside. The presence of the Anglo-Saxons and Normans is here too. Once wrapped in their own turmoil, now they are wrapped in peace enclosed within the crypt under the stone floor beneath our feet.

Outside, the wind, carrying shards of sleet, howls around the belfry and graveyard but in here there is a sense of peace and warmth. Lockier's eyes are dark but alive with reflected light. I see him glance at you Mary as you hold the hymn book in front of George so he can read it. You return Lockier's gaze as you sing.

The occasion imprints itself upon me as usual because I never know if I will see another Christmas, though I try not to think of that, instead I am left with a deep sense of happiness and contentment at being amongst the family again.

Afterwards we walk home bent against the wind, cloaks wrapped around us tightly, heads down, our feet squelching through puddles of icy water, eager to be in the warmth of the parlour and to eat our Christmas supper.

Francis seeks me out and sits beside me in front of the fire. The rest of the family have gone into the great hall to play games and we too are expected to join, but for the moment Francis delays me. In the distance we can hear the games have already begun with laughter and shouting echoing into the parlour.

"For all your bravery and joy at being Marlborough's saviour, Richard, I sense that you are troubled. I can see it in your eyes and saw it during the service," he says astutely,

leaning forward and knocking the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe against the grate of the fire, then replugging it firmly with fresh tobacco, drawing on the stem of the pipe between his pursed lips, emitting large puffs of smoke into the air above our heads.

He is like you Mary, I never could fool Lockier either. "At times like this the aftermath of the summer catches up with me as it does with most of us, so much so that many of the officers are reluctant to return to the campaign."

"You have no such temptations?"

"No. I want to succeed in Marlborough's service. I feel, at long last, that is being recognised."

"Are the campaigns as glorious as we are lead to believe?"

"Yes," I answer. But, no, killing is killing.

Lockier draws on his pipe and emits another long stream of smoke, his dark eyes intent upon me.

"It's natural to feel sorrow. War isn't pleasant."

"Here, in the normal world detachment takes a rest and reality takes over. I become aware that the life I lead is not normal. This, here," I say, with a sweep of my hand, which encompasses the room, the house, the village, the land. "This isn't my world. It's a dream I dream in the midst of a campaign and when I'm here, I feel as if I'm living in that dream."

Something to keep me sane, but I do not tell him that or the fact I fear that the glory has gone for me. When we are on the march in the fields we trample the summer country to shreds and spill blood and wade through ordure. We fill the plains with smoke, destroy villages and plunder ripened fields of wheat, corn, oats and barley which the populace needs. We are so intent on destruction that we cannot even see the beauty around us we are about to destroy. We do not see or feel any more. The sudden whiff of fresh grass or the

sight of a field of wild flowers, or the brightness of yellow rape or golden wheat transports me back to Edlington or Brackenstown, back to peace and then I see our destruction for the travesty it is, nothing but a wanton waste in our quest for power. I cannot tell him what I really think but then I find I do not have to.

“You are disillusioned, my friend.”

“More weary than disillusioned. There’s folly in the life I lead and yet without it I would be lost. I exist by suspending my thinking.”

Does he understand ? He studies me, his face serious in the firelight. “When I do think, now, in this place of peace, it’s of snow and fields of bodies, of mass graves, of cries of anguish and tears never shed, and if shed, that never thaw.”

I think of Ellen. How can I tell this man of peace about everything I have experienced? I have put my life in danger to save the highest of the high and that has been recognised, but now I have the recognition, I wonder if it was worth it. These thoughts trouble and disturb me. My future is no longer in doubt, as far as I am concerned, but when listening to John and Father, feelings of doubt creep in and invade my soul.

“Do you go back into the army at the same rank?” Lockier asks, narrowing his eyes at me through the haze of smoke.

“I’m not sure, I’m waiting to hear as my name has gone forward to the Secretary-of-War for promotion.”

“Your future looks safe then, and it means you have achieved much and that in itself is to your credit. Does the family know?”

“Only Father knows.” Though, I knew by now that he would have told John, who has been wise enough not to mention it to me.

“Tell Mary,” Lockier says. “She needs something to be proud of and to live for at this moment. She is proud of you already, but she will be overjoyed at this. She needs your courage to reach out to and grasp and hold onto.”

“But what if something should happen to me, what then? How will she react then. Will she have the strength to cope?”

“She’s strong. She would cope,” Lockier answers.

His words disturb me.

“Am I someone to be proud of? I kill men without thought or feeling. I remember every face. They come to me at night before I sleep or wake me from my sleep? Can anyone be proud of me? Including me?”

Lockier leans forward, close to me, his voice soft.

“She will be proud that you have done your duty. Richard, the war is for a reason. Keep that in mind. If you don’t do your duty then someone else will and you will certainly be killed if you don’t defend yourself. Remember, God is on our side.”

“Francis, do you really believe that?” I ask in desperation. “I see the French praying to their Papist God before the battles, they believe that He is on their side.”

Lockier does not reply but looks at me steadily and that in itself, to my unbelieving mind, is answer enough.

The games over, the family return to the warmth of the parlour, only you Mary and Lockier remain within the great hall quietly talking before the fire. He runs his hand over the carved lettering in the stone above the fireplace describing the ensigns of the Stanhope family.

“It describes the descent of the houses of York and Lancaster, down to the union of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, then to the issue of Queen Elizabeth whose reign was in progress during the time the Stanhope’s owned Edlington Manor,” Lockier explains although he knows that you Mary, having taught yourself Latin, understand the words. You also write poetry as Lockier does, and have sheaves of paper covered in your fine handwriting, most of which you are loathe to show anyone, let alone publish, apart from Lockier. He is the only one whom you do not mind reading your work and he has assured you, then Father, that they are worthy of publication. You will not hear of it.

A side of Lockier I have not witnessed before, emerges as you stand together. A shyness and hesitancy with you which makes me view him with new eyes. No longer the distant professional clergyman spouting upon the high altar, he is instead transformed into a blushing schoolboy. The effect you have on him is wondrous, but also rather dangerous. Your eyes never leave him as you watch his hand almost lovingly caress the cold stone.

Qou Rosa signiferis ornatur punica scutis

Lancastriae haeridi Dux dedit alma suis:

Elizabetha haeras niveaum donum additit Ebor:

Neutra manet sola, ast, utraque mixta manet.

Lockier takes your hand in his and places it over the carved words, running your fingertips over the stone. He glances down and sees the colour of love spread over your cheeks. You read the words aloud.

Splendida nobilum videas expressa nepotum

Stemmatidis egregii symbola nexa

Quorum connubis hinc finibus olim

Propagata fuit, crevit, et ampla Domus

Then together their voices soft and mingled they say:

The splendid symbols united together of an illustrious race.

And turn to one another with a smile. Splendid symbols stand before me in the form of Lockier and Mary.

I cough. "Coffee is being served in the parlour," I announce.

The spell breaks. Nothing will break your union of minds, however. That is where you are gaining your strength of spirit and mind in this your time of trial. Here is the reason for your serenity of soul in the midst of so much personal turmoil.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Edlington and London

Winter: 1706-1707

Disturbance

A large bang echoes throughout the house. I lift my head from the book I am reading and listen. The house is quiet, everyone resting in the darkness of a winter's afternoon, the snow falling steadily outside.

The old restlessness is upon me, so to distract myself I settle with a book in the library by the fire to read without interruption, hoping to relieve my irritation. Now, however, my head is raised and I am listening hard. Another bang and a thump followed by a scream and the distant sound of rapid footsteps in the upper floor sets me running into the hallway. Walter and William also run from the parlour and we meet at the foot of the staircase. We know at once what is wrong and without a word spoken we all leap up the stairs two at a time to the second floor where Mary and George have a small suite of rooms. On the upstairs landing Father stands puzzled in the hallway, his morning gown over his shirt and breeches. Mother pokes her head out of the door of their bedchamber.

"What is it?" she cries. Her face turns white with the realisation of what it must be.

We stand together for a moment then I move off leading the others down the hallway towards where the sound came from. Mary's scream is answered by a large crash. I run to the door and bang my fist loudly on the wood calling to be let in. Shouts and the

sound of falling furniture and crying children can be heard. By now the rest of the family including terrified white-faced Bysse are in the hallway.

“Is there another way into the room?” I ask Father over the din.

“Through the adjoining bedchamber, there’s a connecting door.”

Walter has already thought of that and is trying and pushing the door further down the hall.

“It’s locked,” he calls.

“Through the window.”

John and Walter run downstairs to fetch a ladder with me after them. Servants appear, at the foot of the stairs and at our shout they follow us out the back of the house to Mr. Westenry’s storehouse for the ladder.

“Mary, Mary, let us in. George open the door, we want to help.” Father pounds on the door but there is no answer except tumultuous thumping and crashing from the room and the sound of Mother and the girls sobbing in the hallway. Walter, John and I, carrying the ladder run outside and meet Lockier who has been summoned from the vicarage by Edward. Walter and John prop the ladder against the house, and before anyone can argue, in my anxiety to see if Mary is all right, I clamber up the wooden rungs to get to the window.

Snow is falling heavily. I am clad only in a coat and breeches but my heart is pounding and I am sweating as if it is the middle of summer. I reach the casement window and peer inside shielding my eyes. The light is dim within, only one or two candles lit against the mid-winter gloom. The thought of fire goes through my mind. Panic raises itself within me. If George knocks over a candle in the room it will cause a fire. There will be no escape for them.

The room looks as if it has been hit by one of our mortars; everything is wrecked within it. You lie senseless on the floor, Mary, and the children are huddled together terrified in a corner watching their father go berserk. He is systematically throwing and wrecking everything he can find that is still standing. The window is tightly closed. Mr. Westenry, roused by the need for a ladder, has come running with a hammer and standing below me hands it to me. I hit the glass hard, showering the heavy glass all over me. The leadlights are solid and the glass heavy but I have caused enough damage to be able to reach in and turn the lock on the window and open it. I scramble over the ledge and drop to the floor.

George turns and looks at me in surprise, his face purple, his eyes wide with rage. I am transported back to wrestling with Pitt in his tent. George does not hesitate, head down he makes for me like a bull ready to butt.

“Unlock the door!” I yell at the children and one of them makes for the door. Once open, Lockier, closely followed by John, Walter and William, burst in.

George intent on destruction is momentarily distracted by the onslaught of men through the door and turns towards them. I pounce on him and with all my weight force him to the floor. His strength is immense. He is capable of killing me.

Everyone is around us as we roll around. I try and pin him down. Father and Mother run to you, Mary, while Lockier and Walter come to my aid and tackle George, holding him down to stop him thrashing out. He groans, struggles and shakes against our combined strength and froths at the mouth in rage as I sit on him.

“He’s fitting!” yells Edward.

We release our hold on him as he jerks and shudders, his head thrust back, eyes rolling. A dark stain spreads over the front of his breeches and puddles on the floor as he loses control of his bladder.

You are still unconscious, cradled in Mother's arms. Your head is bleeding freely; you have either been hit or had been thrown hard against the chest at the end of the bed. The sobbing children are led from the room by Charlotte. I climb to my feet and survey the havoc in the room.

The bed has been attacked, the bed curtains torn half off, chests of drawers upturned, contents spilled over the floor, chairs broken and shattered into pieces, mattress and covers half off the bed, shards of wood sticking out of the oak posts on the bed where he had hit them with something hard. Fortunately he does not have an axe. I glance next door and see the furniture in the adjoining room has also been destroyed. We are all dazed with shock at seeing the intensity of his madness. We wait until the fit ceases and Lockier kneels beside him and lays his hand on his forehead.

"Come George, sit up and take some medicine it will help you and you may be able to sleep for a while," he says kindly to the exhausted man.

George looks at him with half-closed eyes but allows Lockier to support his head while Father administers the prescribed drops onto his tongue and makes sure he swallows them. He is now conscious and aware. He looks around with bloodshot eyes in horror and disbelief at you lying unconscious amidst the state of the room. He moans and bursts into tears, burying his head in Lockier's arms.

"We need to get Mary to bed," Mother cries, her face shining with tears. Walter and I lift your limp form, so limp we look at each other in alarm, then carry you down the hallway to Mother's bedchamber and lie you on the large double bed. Dark purple bruises

are starting to raise themselves upon your forehead and face while Mother stems the bleeding with a cloth.

“Send one of the servants to fetch the doctors from Doncaster, Richard; they both need to be seen.”

Father, Lockier, and William are already preparing George for bed, stripping him of his wet clothes, putting a nightshirt on him, rolling him into bed. His intermittent sobs can be heard throughout the house until he finally sleeps.

Francis seeks me out and finds me alone in the library as I try and recover from the latest battle.

“Will he ever get better?” I ask Lockier after he tells me this is one of many attacks George has had over the past year. “No one has written and told me about it.”

“I suppose they thought you had enough to think about. Everyone also lived in hope that each attack would be the last. Instead they seem to be getting worse.”

“He’s mad, isn’t he?”

“No. But he has many demons within him which make him irrational and give him a dysfunction of the higher order of his mind, which he can’t explain or get rid of. I try and give him some spiritual advice to ease him. As you know he’s quite lucid and rational at other times and very aware and remorseful, as you witnessed yourself. I would say it’s not a true madness. Mary brings him to Doncaster because your Father and I seem to be the only ones he will listen to about his condition. He seems to have faith in the doctors here because he refuses treatment at home in Ireland. His parents also provide doctors in London for him and he submits willingly to them. Your father helps with the fees, providing the best doctors and not worrying about the cost, which is a real help to them all.”

“Francis, where would we be without Father’s strength and yours?”

“I do little, Richard. You are all strong enough and can cope admirably.”

“And Mary?”

“She is my strength.”

They appear within a day, two physicians and a barber-surgeon to do the blood-letting. They have the answer, they say as they enter the Hall, black-clad and sombre. Short men, they are rotund from too much good food and wine, their faces red beneath their white wire wigs. Seriously they examine George then confer with Father in his library in droll church-like tones. Yes, he requires further blistering, further bleeding, further purging to rid him of all the black humours he contains. Followers of Galen, they adhere to the rituals of centuries, rituals that obviously are not working in the case of George, even though I have seen them work in the case of Marlborough. But George’s illness is in his mind. He torments us all but even I feel sorry for him. The house for a day echoes with the sounds of George’s treatment. The cupping, bleeding and purging cause him to retch and moan. The sounds disturb us all.

What Mother and Father have said to the children I cannot imagine. They have bundled them into the parlour as far away as possible from the upstairs rooms and are trying to keep them busy and entertained, while the servants have retreated within their doors and have barricaded themselves in against the noise.

John, William and I take you Mary, against your will, outside into the freezing air and walk you through the crispness of the woods away from the strain of being in the house. You want nothing more than to stay and help George, but your presence only makes things worse for him at such times.

You walk well beside us, your footsteps crunching in the snow, but your face is blue and purple with bruises, a large lump on your head covered in bandages protected by the hood of your mantle. Your tears are silent and heavy. My sorrow is intense for you, my sister, who bears this burden, this loss, this clamping of soul, this breaking of spirit. We say little to you, but you say to me as we walk "I love this place. Here I die and live again." I cannot understand, not yet.

You link your gloved hands through John's arm and mine while William trails behind us in silence through the snow covered pathways of the wood. The sky is low and grey with the promise of more snow and the woods are silent, devoid of birdsong.

We walk for an hour or more then head back to the house. We are no sooner within the door than you strip off your mantle and gloves and run from us up the stairs to see how George is. We watch you in silence as we remove our greatcoats.

The physicians and the surgeon emerge from the sick room and confer with Father downstairs in the drawing-room as the maid is sent into the kitchen to tell cook to provide coffee and sweetmeats for the men. They arrange themselves around the table in anticipation as coffee is poured from a silver urn and eye the small cakes, comfits and puffs with undisguised relish. They sit, eat and drink and talk about everything to Father and me, except about George's condition which aggravates us greatly.

"Tell us what we must do to help," I break in at last, annoyed at their empty chatter, avid coffee drinking and gluttonous approval of Mother's kitchen.

The black-garbed men glance at each other, rearrange their faces into a feigned air of professionalism. They peer at Father and me over the tops of their spectacles in a rehearsed look of uniformity. I look from one to the other of them and they appear to dissolve into the one person, they are each so much the reflection of the other.

“Your brother-in-law, Colonel, has a certain distemper of the brain,” says physician one, as if we do not know that already, and he reaches out and takes yet another cake off the proffered plate.

“We know that,” I answer, not trying to conceal my annoyance. Father frowns at me.

“He needs further treatment in London,” says physician number two, an extension of the first.

“We have exhausted all our knowledge and experience, but we can recommend one such physician who along with a barber-surgeon may be able to provide further treatment. They both specialise in such cases, as we do of course, but their knowledge is greater,” says surgeon number three, delicately sipping coffee from one of Mother’s best china cups.

“We are sure this is the best thing to do,” back to physician one, taking yet another cake from the plate.

I do not think much of Galen, no matter how much they swear by his methods of treatment.

My patience disappears. I excuse myself from the coffee drinking.

Later, I watch them climb into the coach and head back down to Doncaster leaving us with George, the mad man, no further ahead and still encumbered with the onerous task of nursemaiding his body and mind, even more depleted by their ministrings. They recommend he returns to London for further treatment.

I peep into his bedchamber and see you, Mary, still sitting beside him while the man himself, if you can call him that at the moment, can barely lift his head from the pillow to take a drink, he is so weakened.

The warmth of the parlour welcomes our spirits and we find Mother, Father, and the rest of the family white-faced and disturbed looking, trying to keep several wide-eyed children occupied.

With a rapid ride down the hill from the village I intercept the messenger with mail from Doncaster. Startled, he hands it over to me. A letter from London addressed to me closed with seal of the Secretary-at-War lies within my hand and burns to be opened. Without waiting to ride home I break the seal. It is my commission, I am still a Captain but now rank as Lieutenant-Colonel in Churchill's regiment, The Coldstream Regiment of Foot Guards. I let out a wild whoop of joy over the fields which startles my horse making it rear and with another loud holler I spur my horse on and gallop up the rise towards the village and house.

One of the maidservants screams thinking I have gone as mad as George. Father opens his study door and finds me doing a dance in the hall. He looks at me with worried eyes.

"It has come through," I cry, waving the paper with the heavy seal in front of him. "It has happened. At last. I'm a Lieutenant-Colonel."

He looks at me with a mixture of relief and joy. I bend down and kiss him on the cheek, and run into the parlour to find Mother and Mary.

"Thank God," I hear him say as he disappears into the library again.

The room is dimly lit, the curtains drawn upon the windows but it is not too dark for me to see Lockier and you, Mary, together in the centre of the room, his arms about you,

his lips on yours. I stand astonished, open mouthed in the doorway. You both turn to look at me as startled as I am.

“Sorry,” I say, backing out.

“It’s not as it might seem, Richard,” you cry, red-faced, close to weeping again. Your relationship comes as no surprise but I wonder how long it has been going on and if anyone else knows, including George.

Francis follows me. “Richard, it’s not as it seems,” he says, worry lines creasing his high forehead.

“What are you talking about?” I ask waving my important bit of paper at him. “It is as it seems. I have my commission; I return to Marlborough as a Lieutenant-Colonel.”

“Oh,” he says, as a slow grin of relief spreads across his face. “Congratulations.”

Parting is still misery and seems to grow worse each time I experience it. You leave, Mary, for London with George and the children, and in farewell you throw your arms about my neck and kiss me. I hold onto you for a moment, sorrowful and anxious about your state.

“Write to me and tell me how you and George are, Mary.”

You nod unable to speak. George shakes my hand with a detached worried air, as if there is something wrong with everyone and everything about him, and he is not quite sure what. We wave you all out of the carriage way and watch the coach turn into the village and disappear out of our lives yet again.

The loss is unbearable for all of us and stays with us for the rest of the day. I am morose. It is not until we all return to London, after another good bye to Mother and the children still in Edlington, that the loss entailed with parting from everyone recedes.

Once again I set about preparing for the next campaign and return to normal.

“I do not need as much money this year, Father,” I reply.

“Really? That’s good, as the only way you will get it is to sell more of your land in Molesworth Fields.”

That news makes me hesitate. “I was hoping to hold onto that for a little longer in case I need to buy a regiment in the future.”

“There you go again, dreaming dreams that may not eventuate. The idea is admirable but you have to be practical. You have your share of that land, use it.”

“Has John sold his?”

Silence answers that question and we stare at each other over the top of his desk.

“Whenever is this competition between yourself and John ever going to cease? John is the eldest son he has to be accommodated.”

“His future is more important than mine?” I ask, my voice rising in indignation.

Once again his attitude affronts me but does not surprise me. Did he not just give John his due so he could rush back to Camilla with the urgency of a starved lover?

John had departed from London days within our arrival, deciding that he could not wait a moment longer without her consolation. He had successfully persuaded Father for money, seen his friends, settled his business in London, presented his credentials to the Queen at Kensington and had headed back to the diplomatic intrigue of the court in Tuscany, well provided for, sufficiently supported by the patronage of the Duke of Newcastle and Father’s coffers. If he had sold any land he had not mentioned it, but then John did many things he never mentioned. Already, I can imagine, he is in the arms of his beloved Camilla.

At his departure the house broods around me in silence while restlessness takes hold of me again. It is my turn to rush about in preparation for my time with Marlborough in the field; fresh horses, accoutrements, furniture, plate, uniforms; it all has to be ordered, executed and done within a few weeks. Father and John's warnings given to me during the soft days of Edlington, have receded into the back of my mind. I can hardly remember them.

The government is not paying John; Father and the Duke of Newcastle are paying John. The government is busy taxing landowners like Father, to pay for the war. His land owning ambitions come at a price, including large taxes. He is also providing John's living, my living and Lockier's, not to mention providing for William, Walter and Edward, Charlotte's dowry and the family in Dublin, and looking after Mary and George.

"When does Lockier join John?" I ask, thinking that would increase Father's expenditure. There had been talk of that too. Lockier's service to John in Tuscany. I wondered what he would think of the arrangement with Camilla.

"Not for some time yet. I want him to remain close to Mary while George is ill," Father replies. "You should mind your tongue, Richard. This war may bring glory for some, but England finances such a venture. If things continue as they are, the ruling class will be ruined and where will England be then? John is his own man and I can't control him any more than I can control you," he says.

But by his open relinquishment of control he controls us even more. For had I not, through the stirring of John's conscience, made him realise that though there was love, he was still his father's son and beholden to him, as I was?

Not that it has made any difference as far as his attitude to Camilla goes. I cannot understand John's persistence with Camilla, anymore than Father can. The relationship worries him.

His eyes hold mine, once again we are at an impasse; he is still as incorrigible as any General, but he can hardly deny me when he has willingly supplied John.

"You exasperate me, Richard. There's many a good man who has ridden into battle without a plentiful purse."

"No doubt, but not beside Marlborough as a Lieutenant-Colonel. John has his trappings, I need mine. I will sell my land if necessary but I need money now."

"How much do you need?"

"About one hundred pounds should do."

"I should think it would do," he replies testily, drawing paper and quill across the desk towards him, the quill making a scratching sound that spelt money.

"You won't regret it, Father."

"That remains to be seen," he answers.

At least, I think, watching him write, it is for a worthwhile cause and not fragrance, frippery and a mistress in Florence.

London.

February, 1. 1706-07.

Dear Letitia,

Dick must be furnished with one hundred pounds or he cannot stir a step. He has both horses and equipage to buy.

My mother's reply from Edlington before she leaves for Ireland is not known.

Chapter Forty-Two-Synopsis

The Hague

Spring: 1708

Close Quarters

The chapter opens with Marlborough's farewell to the Duchess on the quay at Greenwich. The Aides and his staff of generals wait on the ship ready to take them to The Hague. At the Maritshous in The Hague, Marlborough has trouble again with persuading the Dutch Generals. Richard comments that the Duke is 'a visionary locked within a society of limited vision.'

Chapter Forty-Three-Synopsis

The Hague

Spring: 1708

Warning

Marlborough and his staff are entertained by Dutch society. Once again Richard meets the Countess Melyon who repels and attracts him at the same time. She, Panton and Jevereau perform in a play before the distinguished guests in the Knight's Hall in the Binnenhof and despite himself, Richard is bewitched by her. Once again he avoids her after the play is over and not trusting himself he retires into the gardens to be alone. He

cannot understand how he can be so attracted to her when he knows that she is conniving and duplicitous, quite dangerous to know. He cannot help himself.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

The Battle of Oudenarde

11 July 1708

The Ring of Fire

We are carried on the back of the devil to face the French Marshal Vendome.

The ring of fire within the ring of rivers.

The Norken, the Garve and the Scheldt on the Heights of Huyess, close to the town of Oudenarde, half way between Brussels and Bruges. Here we face the enemy and here we surround them.

Marlborough stony-faced and ruthless, supported by Prince Eugene vents all his frustrations of the previous year on the enemy. Days before the battle he had been taken with fever and confined to his tent. Prince Eugene, visited him often, buoyed his spirits, rallied him, gave him hope.

My Lord Duke ridden with melancholy is hard to witness. His appearance changes, is diminished, grey, and he isolates himself with only those closest to him in attendance. He has collapsed with the strain sending us all into a frenzy of concern. Dr. Lawrence tells him to rest. Within days his humour has returned. It is as if nothing has happened.

The armies have fought over rivers, banks, hedges, roads, streams and through hamlets and woods into ravines. Now, in this battlement of encirclement, Marlborough acts out his great performance on stage as he directs the action of his supporting cast of player

Generals around him, Cardogan, Lottum, Natzmer, Rantzau, Lumley, Overkirk, Tilly, Orange, Oxanstiern and the Scot, Argyll. The allies surround the enemy boxing them in until they have nowhere to run.

Night as deep as an abyss envelops us as we fight and the Duke calls a halt because we can no longer see who is foe and who is friend. As the noise of musket and cannon shot dies we find ourselves surrounded by the moans of the wounded and dying lying on the battlefield soaked by the light rain that has begun to fall. Like an ablution it drenches them, washes away dust and mud, blood and smoke, cleanses them while they shake and shiver with cold, fatigue and pain. Torches are lit and lifted over men, sparking and spluttering in the faces of those who have died in the rain or lie injured in pools of bloody water. The French are rounded up to be guarded through the night where they have laid down their arms.

Marlborough gives us orders to deliver, telling the allies to lie on their arms for the night and the army, where they have ceased fighting, bivouac amongst the carnage.

Shadows move and dance, lengthen and disappear only to reappear again beneath the flames of the pitch torches held by those searching for the living. Faces shine in the light laced with pain, distorted in death. We return to Marlborough and surround him, rain pouring off our cloaks and hats, and he in his victory, heedless to the rain, rides around the field, ensuring orders are being carried out correctly, while Prince Eugene, also invigorated with euphoria joins him. Once again they are both possessed with a strange and inexhaustible energy at the realisation that the allies are indeed glorious.

Dawn finds a flattened bloodied field and a concentration of enemy, dead and alive surrounded by the allied army. Dead horses lie in piles between thousands of prisoners caught within the circle on the battlefield. In despair the defeated sag with exhaustion after

a night out in the open, their pride in puddles of blood mixed with rain and mud at their feet.

The Aides, eyes bleared and senses fuzzy with fatigue, white faces drawn and unshaven, ride with the Duke and the Generals to inspect the allies handiwork. We look silently at the mayhem we have caused and the mounds of stripped mangled trampled bodies surround us while Marlborough, up ahead, sits rigid in the saddle of his charger, pale and composed with the cool detachment that rarely leaves him.

The town square of Oudenarde is thronged with townspeople, soldiers and lines of French prisoners. The crowd erupts with shouts and cheers as the Duke and his entourage arrive. We ride behind him and escort him to the *Hôtel de Ville*. The roar of the crowd reverberates off the buildings in the square. A flock of pigeons flaps above us as the Duke dismounts from his horse and walks slowly up the steps to the building. He turns once, his face serious, lifts his head and looks around the square in acknowledgement of the crowd then followed by his Generals and staff, he walks into the building.

The Generals gather in the council chamber of the *Hôtel* after they had time to rest and Marlborough is with them, ready to conduct a council of war and a debriefing of the battle. Panton, Durell and I are in attendance as he spreads maps and plans on the table again and gathers the war-weary men around him. Only the Duke himself seems tireless, but I watch him carefully. We had been walking behind him before he entered the chamber and he had momentarily lost his balance and would have fallen if we had not been there to support him. I offered to fetch Dr. Lawrence, but he brushed my suggestion off, saying he was well, but now as I look at him bending over the maps on the table I notice a hectic flush in his cheeks and his eyes are bloodshot with an accumulation of blood to his head.

Uneasy, Panton and I, glance at each other, as we know him well through our constant attendance on him. He displays all the signs of an impending migraine attack. He leans across the table to point out a strategic place on a map then without warning slumps over it scattering maps and papers all over the floor. The Generals fall back in alarm and Panton and I step forward between the throng of concerned men and lift the Duke off the table, sling his arms around our shoulders and carry him out of the room while Durell rushes ahead to find Dr. Lawrence. The Generals watch in shocked silence as their leader is carted off. There had been rumours circulating in the camp that he had not been well with a general malaise but no one had realised the seriousness of it except those dealing with him closely, and we had been sworn to secrecy. Marlborough, fearful of his enemies, knows that any weakness will be exaggerated and used against him. Now they know the rumours of blinding headaches, nausea, vertigo and weakness are true. I glance back at the group of men as the door closes behind us. The Duke of Argyll watches us, his eyes narrowed like a predator awaiting his chance.

Dr. Lawrence, the Physician-General and his assistant Dr. Gardiner, the Surgeon-General, run up to us anxiously in the hallway and escort us into the Duke's bedchamber where we lie him on his large double four poster bed. His face is suffused with blood, his eyes bulging with engorgement as he writhes about the bed from the pain in his head. He is dwarfed in the bed, barely recognisable as the victor who had acknowledged the roars of the crowd only hours before. He rolls his shaven head in agony and buries it deeper into the pillows as if trying to deaden the pain. Thomas Gardiner, his face furrowed in alarm turns to the Surgeon-General and both confer in low tones as to the best treatment while servants hurry back and forth with blankets, towels, bowls and possets while the man in the bed continues to writhe, locked within the confines of his own humanity. Shaken, more

than I reveal, I watch Dr. Lawrence open his wooden surgical case and produce a blood-letting knife. Panton holds the Duke still while I hold his arm as Lawrence ties a ligature then slices through the white skin over a large blue vein. A thick cord of dark blood begins to roll down his arm into the silver bleeding cup held by a manservant. Another manservant holds the other arm as Gardiner does the same.

The Duke is quiet, and I can see the rapid pulse of his heart beating in his neck, his head bent back in agony, beads of perspiration breaking out upon his head and face, which is now bleached white. The amount of blood pouring into the cups amazes me and I wonder if they are intent on killing him, but as it flows he seems easier and quieter and lies still as a servant puts a cold compress upon his brow. I hate seeing him in such a state and although this is not the first time, there have been other post-battle crises we have been aware of, but I have never had to deal with one so intimately. We stay with him until the bleeding is done then we are dismissed, so the Duke can rest and recover. When we leave him he is sleeping, his colour now pale. Relief makes me shake as I enter the hallway and I have to sit on a wooden bench to recover. This time I thought the Duke was going to die, and if he did so, whatever would I do?

The vigil goes on for days, the Aides taking turns on duty outside and inside the sick room as the doctors use their plasters, bleedings, cupping, clysters and vomits to relieve his illness. At last he arises weak and depleted but back with us again and eager once more to get to his plans. The Generals are relieved. They had milled about the large and empty rooms of the *Hôtel* lost in their own reasoning without the overall leadership and strategies of the Duke to inspire them and fire them up.

Ashe has escaped danger in the battle and I intend to ride to Lumley's quarters to see him as the lack of word between us worries me, but the Duke by this time, is recovering fast and keeping everyone busy as he tries to catch up for lost time. Once again there is no time for anything except that which is in front of us, and we know that the Duke will only be happy again when we are underway to the next confrontation. I send Ashe a message wishing him well but receive no reply. The army, well rested and replenished after ten days in the countryside around Oudenarde, forms into long columns and once again winds slowly towards Wervicq on the River Lye. Before long we are encamped before the high ramparts of the heavily fortified city favoured by Louis XIV— Lille.

Marlbrough, on top of a slight rise, stands legs astride to steady himself, his perspective glass to his eye as he surveys the ramparts that tower over barricades and covered galleries, over ditches and broad double moats of Lille. Here is one of Vauban's wondrous 'warts'. Built with the power and might of French engineering skill it appears as impenetrable as any of the other fortresses we have taken. A rich and important city almost as great as Paris and important to France because of trade with the Netherlands. The Duke wants this city. To Marlborough nothing is impossible.

The lines of contravallation and circumvallation are set and once the trenches open the batteries begin to play night and day upon the vast high walls. The sound echoes over the countryside for miles. The breach is made early in September and we know that is only a matter of time again before Marlborough is victorious. The citadel finally falls and Lille surrenders to the Allies on December the ninth and the whole of the victorious army, standards flying, everything polished and shining, assembles at attention to witness Marshall Boufflers marching out with his troops.

Later, that night, I sit within the shelter of my tent, while the wind howls around our encampment like a thousand demons and I write to Father telling him of the siege and also due to the late closing of the campaign I tell him doubt I will be back in England for some time. As the wind buffets the walls of my tent England and Ireland have never seemed so far away.

Winter sweeps the countryside, glazing the fields around us with hoar frost that form icicles inside and outside our tents, and then persecutes us with snow-showers and icy rain. We wrap ourselves up in all available clothes and fires roar within the camp and the garrisons to fight the cold, while men huddle around them like enlarged bundles of rags trying to keep warm. Ghent and Bruges are taken in weather so severe that some guards freeze to death at their posts, but at last the campaign is over and the army goes into winter quarters, billeted in the captured garrisons while we Aides ride through rain and snow, travelling with the coach-bound Marlborough over rough hard roads to Brussels and then onto The Hague.

Ashe has not acknowledged my letters. What has happened to the man? I know he is still in camp. A feeling of uneasiness I cannot shake settles within me as we enter the city.

Chapter Forty-Five-Synopsis

The Hague

Winter: 1708

Snowbound

The winter is fierce, one of the worst experienced. The Hague is snowbound. The ports close and the sea ices and Marlborough, staff and army are prevented from travelling back to London at the end of the campaign. Richard finds that Marlborough plays to his usual court and once again he meets the Countess as she invites the Aides to her home for a soiree. Richard joins the others but keeps his distance from her. He realises that she is attracted to him and is alarmed that he feels the same attraction. The Aides are bored and restless and Richard, seeking his own company, walks in the gardens and comes across people skating on the ponds. He meets the Countess and she invites him to her home, and against his better reasoning he goes with her. Despite her advances and pleas he leaves her and goes back to the Binnenhof. He finds that the coterie of Aides, in his absence and after Marlborough had joined them for supper, have imbibed well. They are all drunk. He immediately regrets his decision to leave the Countess. Later he returns to her and succumbs to her advances.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The Hague-London

Winter: 1708-1709

Ashe

The world is white and warm, my vision blocked and steaming. Blake has wrapped my face in warm towels preparing for my shave but he interrupts my reverie.

“Lord Ashe is here to see you Colonel,” he says, as he unwraps the binding from my face.

The air, even though warmed by the stove in the corner of the room is still cold and I feel the shock of it against my skin as Blake bows to Ashe and disappears out of the door.

To find Ashe here in Marlborough’s quarters means serious business on his part.

“Lord Ashe. Are you well?” I enquire astonished at his unexpected visit.

“Quite. Thankyou,” he says, his answer abrupt.

I frown at him as I wipe the moisture from my face. Like the unwary French I am at a disadvantage. He has caught me in a state of undress, in shirtsleeves and breeches, spread-eagled in the chair ready for my ablutions. The morning is still young but there has been much activity in the quarters as arrangements are made to return home. It is only a matter of a week or two and we will all be leaving.

“What is it? What can I do for you, Thomas?” I ask, willing him to come to the point instead of standing before me, hat in hand, his greatcoat and cloak still about him, cold air seeping from him like a poisonous miasma filling the room, his face blue-edged and white.

“I have just come from Lumley’s quarters.”

“Sit, Tom, sit,” I beckon him further into the room and to a chair while I hoist myself out of mine, find the bottle of wine Blake has put aside on the commode and hand him a glass. He takes it from me and downs it in a gulp. Surprised I pour him another and look at him, one eyebrow raised in question as he downs that too. “Something ails you?”

He nods at me as the wine settles in his stomach. “I need the Duke’s permission to depart early and return home. I have a letter from Lumley, he has given me leave. The ports are slow and passages are limited. Our regiment will not be departing for another two or three weeks.” He looks at me as I refill his glass and hand it to him. “It’s not easy to gain access to the Duke as you know. I need a favour, a shortcut.”

“What’s the reason? Why the rush?”

He has an aggressive look in his eye which I have not been the recipient of before and a coldness of manner emanates from him towards me; most unlike my friend Ashe. Any attempt to renew the warmth in our friendship I feel will be rebuffed. I have not seen him since Oudenarde and then only briefly amongst the cavalry. He had saluted me but we had not spoken. He has obviously aged during the winter months we had been garrisoned.

“I would not have worried you but I’m desperate. I need passage on the first available ship that leaves port for England and for that I need the support of the Duke. I can’t wait another month. Or wait until the spring for the next campaign without going home to London first. It’s Nell and William, they have both been ill. I have just received a

letter from Nell, written during the winter. I'm beside myself with worry. I can't go a year without seeing them. If anything has happened to them I can't survive on the field. "

His desperation disturbs me, the thought of Ellen and the baby being desperately ill worries me too but I hide my anxiety.

"You will find they are all right," I try and reassure him, knowing that Marlborough will not easily give him leave when there are so many men desperate to catch the first available ship. "Children are tough creatures, believe me, our house is full of them," I answer in attempted humour, but no easy smile crosses his face as once it would have done.

"You do not know until you have a child yourself," he answers, with a frown.

"No, true, but I do understand, Thomas," I placate. "I will see what I can do for you with the Duke. Have you eaten?" His agitation is increasing as I continue to look at him.

"My manservant and I have been on the road since dawn."

"Blake will get you a meal. Wait here and he will bring you something and I will arrange lodgings for you and see the Duke."

"I already have lodgings and I will see myself out and eat elsewhere, thank you. I will return in the morning to see if I have permission," he answers, his manner abrupt again. He salutes me and turns towards the door stumping out in his usual fashion.

"Thomas, wait," I run after him as he limps down the hallway and does not look back as I call him. He continues on as if deaf. Blake, waiting outside the room, looks after him then looks back at me in curiosity. "Get me shaved, Blake. I have to see the Duke."

Blake hands me the mirror and I realise the reason for Thomas's agitation. There before me, reflected in the light shining through the window glows the deep red of the ruby and the flash of gold from Ellen's cross, strung on a gold chain around my neck.

The Duke, after hearing my plea for Ashe, gives him written leave to return to England, before his regiment on the first available ship. I await his return with impatience and when he does, I find his mood has not changed. His face is dark and stiff with suppressed anger as he looks at me and the letter signed by the Duke. He salutes me then turns on his heel to leave me.

“Thomas, you must not go like this, we must talk.

“There’s nothing to say,” he answers, slipping the letter into his coat pocket, his eye upon the door. “I’m grateful to you for arranging this for me. I can now leave for England on the first available ship out of port, that’s all I wanted.”

“Will you write to me and tell me how they are?” I ask, puzzled by his antagonism towards me. He looks at me his facial expression closed. “I would like to know. I would like to come and visit you.”

“It would be better if you did not visit; better that you keep away from my wife and son.”

“Explain yourself,” I demand, suddenly offended and incensed at his rudeness.

“What of our friendship that has been for so long?”

“What of it? It no longer exists.”

“In God’s name, why not?” I explode, barely able to keep my temper under control.

“If I remember rightly you do not believe in the Almighty. But it’s only right that you call on the name of God. It will be to Him that you will eventually answer.”

He leans over with one hand and lifts the neckcloth of my shirt from my chest and stabs me with one finger, pushing the gold and ruby cross into my skin. I grab his arm and hold it fiercely and we stare each other out for a few seconds, our friendship in shreds.

“I have not seen Ellen for quite some time. I have kept away from you both.”

He is so close to me I can feel his breath hot upon my face, his expression so full of anger I think for a moment he is about to strike me.

“I love my wife enough to die for her. She is my life, without her I have nothing. Nothing, do you hear? There is nothing for me except my existence with her, nothing is normal without her. You have taken her from me. You have destroyed our relationship. You are no longer my friend and have not been for some time.”

He is not making sense, the words falling over one another, rushing into each other as they tumble quickly out of his mouth. “My suspicions have fallen into place. You both still love one another. Nell wore that cross when you stayed with us at Barton Stour, it was given to her by her parents in Ireland before she left them for France. I noticed it missing but she did not seem unduly concerned about it which puzzled me at the time. I was blinded by love, if I remember rightly. She gave it to you. I have made excuses because I loved you both and could not imagine you betraying me. I can’t make excuses anymore.” He pulls his arm from my grip and stomps to the doorway of the room.

“It was a long time ago, before you were married and before there was any serious intention of you marrying. She told me she was not committed to you, as you yourself also said at the time, if you remember.”

“I was already married to her in spirit. I thought you were aware of that. You knew my feelings. You deliberately came between us.”

“I have not been near her since. I swear to God above us. You cannot go in such anger, Tom. Ellen and I don’t have anything to do with each other. We both think too much of you for that,” I answer.

He turns at the doorway, his eye blazing at me, his face twisted in anger. “What about William? You cannot deny that the child is not yours, the child that I love as my own son. All you have to do is look at him, he is the image of you. I have even tried to make excuses for that. You have both deceived me.”

My heart sinks at the intensity of his anger.

“You cannot blame Ellen, it was my fault. She needed love as badly as I did at the time. We have not betrayed you since. I have kept away from you all,” I answer. “Nothing has happened.” But there is no appeasing him. I go on before he can stop me. “It was a moment of weakness for both of us and we all have those, Tom. William could be my child but he could equally be yours. I swear, before God, I have not been with Ellen since.”

“Her maid has told me otherwise,” Ashe spits back in anger.

“I told you I went to visit before the campaign, after Ramillies. Ellen told you. I thought you were going to be there too. It was to see you both, but you had already gone. I did not stay long. There was nothing between us. Even when you asked me to visit I had to make the excuse that I couldn’t and usually it was the truth. I was either in Edlington when you were in London or at Brackenstown when you were in Yorkshire,” I answer, the heat of my anger making me shout.

Ashe takes no notice. “You seduced her and she deceived me too. I thought it was a miracle that William was conceived at all because I don’t always function as I should. Yet we produced this beautiful boy. If I could use my fist or my sword against you, I would, but to do that would dishonour me. I would be court-marshalled and you’re not worth that. You have betrayed my wife and me. You don’t deserve our friendship.”

Thomas looks at me briefly an expression of sadness or almost pity pushing the anger from his face. “We have all lived with this betrayal.” Then he turns and limps out the door from me.

“Thomas, we can’t part like this.” He does not answer but limps down the hallway without looking back.

Anger fills me, anger with myself, Ellen, Ashe.

Alerted by the shouting, Abercrombie comes to the door of his room half-dressed and looks at me with sleepy eyes. His face twists into a smirk as he comprehends. I slam the door after Ashe, the sound echoes. I kick my stool, upend my campbed and shove it across the room. I run back to the door, fling it open and run down the hallway, Abercrombie is still at his door watching me, his hands on his hips. I run down the stairway and out into the courtyard after Ashe’s departing figure. But apart from Marlborough’s guards the yard is deserted, Ashe's carriage has gone.

Lavinia takes me to herself again, holds me, caresses me, indulges me, possesses me, exorcises my ghosts of which there are many. Marlborough is ready to go back to England. She too will be leaving but she weeps as if she will never see me again. I feel nothing at leaving her. It doesn’t worry me if I do not see her again. I kiss her all the same and hold her to me, running my hand over her hair, kissing her eyes and lips. Her tears are endless, her attachment to me monumental.

“When will I see you again?” She asks.

I honestly do not know. “Perhaps the next campaign,” I answer, which only makes her weep again.

“Will you visit me in London?” The fact that she has a husband who will be home from Florence soon, doesn’t seem to worry her, or me, for that matter.

“I will if I can, but I will be attending the Duke as he meets with ministers, the Lords, the Queen. I will be truly busy. My family will not see me this leave, let alone my friends.”

I leave her angry and sobbing, but I am distanced and disturbed by my meeting with Ashe. He is constantly on my mind. Walking away from her down the street I am jolted out of my reverie by the approach of a coach. I turn in time to see Abercrombie alighting from the coach and leaping up the stairs to the front door of the Melyon’s house. As cold as I am, I burn hot with indignation and hurt pride. She also entertains Abercrombie and we have just missed each other. It is as Jevereau has said, I am entrapped.

Accumulated mail comes through from London before we depart The Hague. I find one which bears the Ashe coat of arms and Ellen’s seal which I rip open in my eagerness for news. My hands tremble as I recognise Ellen’s hand. I hold it up to the light coming in through the window. She is searching for Thomas, her letters seem to have gone astray or he has not chosen to answer. Her tone is desperate. I sit down on the window seat as I read. She is written to me to ask me to find Thomas and tell him that William has died from pneumonia a week before Christmas.

Misery and guilt overcome me. I force myself to read it again. The slope of her handwriting, the blotches and blurrings of sorrow, the letter written in sadness and distress;

her desperation is all there. Perhaps Thomas was home already, perhaps he knew by now. He is right. I feel nothing but guilt.

“The worst winter in memory,” Father says, to me the evening I return to London and to our house in St. James’. “There was even a frost fair on the Thames, the ice was so thick it went on for quite some time. It attracted crowds of people.”

The remnants of the fair are still there. The large tract of half frozen river, covered in tatters and stains, litter, the run of cats, dogs and rats through the garbage strewn over broad cracks in the slowly melting ice. The river wind tugs at my cloak. I hold onto my hat, my face frozen with cold. I am no sooner back in this miserable squalid city festooned with cold than I am making preparations to return to The Hague again.

“Everyone is tired and weary of this war,” Father says, as we sit beside the fire in his library after supper. “The English countryside has suffered in the winter, but it’s reported that France has been severely hit and the countryside depleted and full of starving people. Thousands have died from famine, cold and disease. The French King must think peace and so should Marlborough. The world cannot go on as it is. The war must come to an end sometime.”

“The Duke wants peace now. He’s tired.”

“Hmm,” answers Father, unconvinced. “The political upheaval in the country is worse and his standing with the Queen has deteriorated. The Duchess is no longer the Queen’s favourite, Abigail Masham has taken her place. The voice of the Tories is stronger than ever. Pamphlets full of wild derision about the Duke are being circulated. I think you have to seriously regard your situation with him. If anything happens to Marlborough, you have nothing except your ranking. With Marlborough goes General Churchill, his regiment

and all who serve the Duke. There's only one way to secure your future and that is to buy a regiment."

Silence fills the room as I take in his statement.

"He would regard that as a betrayal of him, especially considering the current climate that surrounds him," I reply, finding my voice.

Father nods, biting upon the long stem of his pipe. "Perhaps. Bide your time. Be ready," he warns. "The Queen's in mourning for Prince George. She's ill herself. The Whigs are firmly entrenched in power and as far as the party's concerned there will be no peace until the sovereignty of Spain is settled in the allied favour. The peace talks at Gertruyn denberg have reached a stalemate, so for the moment the war will continue. Landowners are tired of losing money and the populace are tired of losing men off the land for the cause of war. The people have started to turn against the Whigs and call Marlborough a war-monger. Consequently, the Duke is showing himself to be more alienated from the Whigs. At first favouring us when it suited him, but now, his views are changing, as I said they would.

"He's far from being a war mongerer," I interject, angry and tired myself. "He is no longer a hero. He is just worn out and wants peace."

"But you must admit, Dick. The country's in danger. The succession is in danger of being past to the Jacobites. If the Queen dies tonight there's the possibility that the throne could go to the Pretender or it could be offered to the Duke. He's popular enough to find support for it. People still think he's a great leader. The idea is circulating and gaining momentum with each passing hour. All it needs is widespread acceptance of the idea."

The thought of the Duke willing to take the throne is ridiculous to me.

I fold my arms across my chest, frown at the fire and think of the feeling of discontent that has circulated around us in camp during the past months.

There are those within the ranks who are starting to make it obvious that the Duke's judgement is slipping. Even his own Generals are grumbling in private, thinking of the scale and the cost in money and in lives. Their ill temper and disagreements have not gone unnoticed by his staff as we are around them all the time and overhear their conversations. Only Prince Eugene seems to be still fully on the Duke's side. "He would never accept the throne," I answer. "None of them, none of them, know the Duke of Marlborough as he really is. He's not a war-monger and he doesn't want the throne of England."

"Perhaps not. But there are some who say the Duchess does."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Battle of Malplaquet

11 September 1709

Murder

“Madness,” mutters Jevereau.

“All I can see is murder,” I reply.

“Rivers, ravines, woods, a plain scattered with hamlets and villages. A fine place for a battle but the devil awaits us in those woods,” Jevereau murmurs, uneasily.

The woods are silent. No birdsong fills the air. Above our heads crows’ circle slowly surveying the scene far below, as they have been for days, eyeing both armies lined up on either side of the great flat plain between the wooded areas, hamlets and villages. I look up at their outstretched blue-black wings and hear the cawing cries. A feeling of dread runs through me. A feeling I have not experienced before any battle before. Usually I am mentally prepared and ready. This time everything within me screams out no, not this time, not in this situation, not this way. Anyone can see it is madness.

We had already run near the woods on reconnaissance and had found they were tightly packed with dense foliage impossible to see through, yet the enemy were making preparations within. I had raced back to inform Marlborough but found him strangely objective and indifferent to the information. However, I was not the only one to inform him, other Aides did the same and Prince Eugene’s Aides also, but nothing changed him.

He was set-faced and florid with the stress of dealing with disgruntled Staff, and the General, the Duke of Argyll, who was not backward in venting his negative opinions about Marlborough's decisions and tactical skill.

I sit on my horse beside Isaac, close enough to hear his murmur of disquiet. A little way from us sits Marlborough upon his charger as he surveys the field with Prince Eugene, whose dark countenance is even darker, if that is possible. He sits beside the Duke, his body taut, upright, his black brows pressed into a deep V shape over his black eyes, as we all wait. The Duke moves off and we follow as he takes up his position behind the artillery, the forty-gun battalions.

"I think he's taken leave of his senses. What is he trying to do? We don't know what lies in the woods," Isaac continues, his brow creasing in tension and worry.

"Argyll's pushing him into conflict," I whisper.

Isaac nods in return, his eyes looking straight ahead through the heat haze shimmering over the plain. The French have been active for days building ditches and redans which we can see from our vantage point, and inside the woods. They are well entrenched.

"They are of equal strength, and there's no stopping them. We will have to pull back sometime," Isaac says, his eyes troubled with the sight of danger in front of us. This is unusual for my friend, his emotions before battle normally unreadable.

"He will never pull back from direct confrontation if it's staring him in the face, you know that," I comment. "It's not in the nature of the man to admit defeat."

"Tournai was murderous, and now this, so late in the year."

Isaac is right. The siege of the fortress of Tournai and Mons had been a living hell, carried out in a sea of mud. The long tunnels built by the French beneath the fortress at

Tournai saw hand to hand combat. They had been laced with mines that exploded beneath lines of soldiers and swallowed them whole. As the siege raged on and little was achieved, malaise had crept through the camp and through the Generals, as debate followed debate with Marlborough.

The war should be stopped, the war should go on. The Duke himself should call a halt. No, it was up to the French.

The Duke listened to the Generals around him and their conflicting opinions and for once let himself down by trying to please everyone. Most unlike the man, I thought.

We had all hoped this confrontation with the French may have been avoided, but obviously he had listened too much to the ranting of Argyll.

Marlborough wants another resounding victory like Blenheim and Ramillies so that his enemies at home, and lately in the camp, rapidly increasing in number, will be quietened and perhaps satisfied that finally the French had been run into the ground. The French King would have to comply with the peace negotiations then, no matter what. However, the discontent growing amongst the ranks sees his need for battle as war-mongering which is disturbing. But as we look at the strength of the French and the position of the field we are worried. The woods are so dense they could hide anything.

“Argyll is right,” I whisper to Isaac, who looks at me eyebrows raised, his brow lined above his strained eyes. “We should have attacked days ago, as he said, before the French became too entrenched in the woods. We did not have to wait for the extra troops to arrive from Tournai. They’re exhausted anyway.”

The disease of disquiet had spread throughout camp and our quarters. The small tightly knit community of staff found themselves polarised in their private and not so private opinions. Tempers flared and discretion, so highly prized, vanished, a sure sign of

low morale. The malcontent alarmed me in that it was overt, everyone behaving normally in front of the Duke, yet behind his back discussing, arguing, without discretion.

Marlborough had become aware of the mood of his officers and began to trust no one close to him. We all felt watched and under suspicion. In response he withdrew further into himself, his only solace was Prince Eugene, who still supported him.

“Argyll would like the Duke’s position,” Isaac comments, breaking my reverie.

“He’s young and his natural enemy. He’s spreading displeasure throughout the camp. We are on the brink of peace and he’s forcing Marlborough into confrontation. How can that be right?” Isaac’s openness alarms me. I do not answer him. “He’s doing much harm with his open grumbling and arguing with the Duke in front of everybody. The situation is becoming dangerous.”

Isaac expresses my own fears. Some officers are moving towards Argyll, favouring his opinions, seeing their future in him. Father and John’s warning words have already reverberated through my head. I do not participate in taking sides, instead stand back and watch, keep my mouth shut. I know whose side Isaac is on and he is my friend. I am naturally associated with the Duke despite my Whiggish background as he leans more towards the Tories. But I find the more I do not take sides the more I am treated with suspicion.

De Nassau, Lord Tunbridge is now the Earl of Rochford and is still closely in attendance to the Duke. He alarms me by seeking me out and telling me he is not pleased at being back in the field again. He is not the only one, many of the men who have served the Duke loyally feel the same, yet they still serve him. Rochford had not been home after the last campaign, as many hadn’t due to the severity of the winter. He is mightily disgruntled at not seeing his wife and family. The fact that he is related to me through marriage alarms

me if he is holding opposite views to the Duke. I greet his familiarity with me with dismay realising he thinks I hold similar views to himself. No one knows of my views and I am left with the disturbing feeling that my loyalty is in question just through association, no matter whom I mix with. I do not wish to be associated with any form of discontent, yet no matter where I turn, my association is noted.

A cry of trumpets echoes across the plain and the steady beat of the kettledrums take up the challenge as the sun rises higher in the sky. The answering call from the mass of French army before us on the other side of the plain is strident in our ears. My heart quickens its pace and thumps in my ears. Marlborough turns to Panton, close by his side and the Aide wheels his horse around and races off to give the order to the Colonel of Artillery. The ground shakes as the air erupts in a salvo of guns.

The battle of Malplaquet has begun.

Ashe worries me. I have seen him amongst Lumley's cavalry as I accompanied the Duke on the inspection of the Troops. Normally, on previous occasions, his eye had met mine in silent recognition, and I had saluted him, but when I glanced at him this time, he had stared beyond me as if I did not exist.

I decided to seek permission to visit Lumley's quarters and my arrival at the officer's tent startled Ashe as well as the rest of them. They all acknowledged my rank, then Ashe limped away, balancing deftly with a crutch, out of the tent instead of greeting me as he normally did. I had to walk fast to catch him his gait was so fast. He appraised me with displeasure and a stiff salute, an angry expression on his normally pleasant face.

"What are you doing here, Colonel?"

“Ashe, we must talk properly. This battle is going to be bad, we may not come through it.”

“You will. You always do.” His answer was laced with so much bitterness I almost winced.

“How’s Ellen? I received a letter from her. She was searching for you, she told me William had died. I’m sorry.”

“She told me she had written to tell you that my son, or should I say, your son had died,” he growled at me, his normally pleasant face cold looking, unfamiliar. I was speechless. Men milled around us entering and leaving the tent and we created interest standing outside glaring at one another as they turned and stared at us. Mindful of the chase of rumours I bit my lips to stop my retort and he seemed to realise too that we were being watched so he walked from me and I followed him until we were out of earshot of interested parties.

“You had already left for England when I received the letter.” I explained. “She had written to you but the mail had not come through because of the port closures. She was desperate to get in touch with you, she thought I would be able to help.” I explained. “I had written to Ellen in reply telling her you were on your way home but by the time she received that you would have been there. That’s the truth, Thomas.”

“William died during the last campaign, before I reached home he developed a rash which the physician said was measles and he died a week later from pneumonia. When I returned, Ellen was a changed person. She broke down and confessed to me that the child was yours. A bonny baby walking and talking well, he had even begun to look a little bit like me, his red hair had turned to dark brown and his eyes were deep blue. He loved me and I loved him dearly.” Ashe’s voice broke and his face folded in on itself.

I put my hand out to him but he brushed me aside and he stumped off again away from me. "You have done enough damage," he said over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. It was a mistake and it was years ago."

"Yes, almost three."

"She still loves you," he answered.

"No, Tom. You're wrong. She loves you, not me. She told me so and I believed her. I am not worthy of her and you are. I could never have married her as you did and she and I both know that. Religion drove a wedge between us where it only strengthens your relationship."

"How can you tell me that? It still doesn't stop you from loving each other," Ashe said, his one blue eye staring at me, the black patch over his missing eye.

He was ready for battle, lean, fit and eager to do battle with me too. I was glad he did not reach for his sword, he was angry enough and in a way, I could not blame him. Even as handicapped as he was he could still run me through. His balance was phenomenal. "You were my friend. You came between us. William's death has separated Nell and me even further. It has only served to remind us both that he was your son, not mine, though I loved him as my own. But then, I had loved his father too," he said angrily. "William was my life, but Ellen was constantly reminded of you because of him. We found being with each other hard with the child between us. I doubt if we will ever be the same again, though I pray we will."

"But surely, if you love each other then there must be hope?"

He shrugged in an attempt at nonchalance. "Trust has been broken. It's very hard to build that up again. Your visit to me has been a waste of time, Colonel."

“I had to try. I’m still your friend, Tom. I couldn’t go into battle knowing I hadn’t tried to make amends. We have been friends for so long, to have this animosity between us hurts me beyond measure. You’re like a brother to me. The fact that you now hate me is unbearable. I’m sorry Thomas, forgive me.” It took me all my time to get the words out.

“Would you have done this to your brother?” he retorted. I shook my head.

“It was a moment of weakness. We all have those. Thomas I don’t want to leave you like this with our friendship on such a treacherous footing. Tomorrow’s fight is going to be large and bloody.”

“So be it,” he replied, ignoring my outstretched hand. He turned and limped away from me, his back strong and straight, adamant and unforgiving. Sorrow and anger filled me as I watched him.

I made my way back to Marlborough’s quarters troubled and dissatisfied.

The woods of Taisnieres are on our left and Laignieres are on the right of the crowded plain. They are like monsters devouring everything and everyone that goes into them. Soldiers march into them in formation and do not come out again. They are being eaten alive. If any do escape, they run screaming and crawl back bleeding towards the Allies.

A tight knot of repressed sickness settles itself in my stomach. I see torn bellies and trailing exposed bowels, jagged bloodied stumps instead of limbs. The desperate men stagger and fall over piles of fallen comrades in their panic to escape the hell within the woods. The battle is ferocious, the noise of screams and yells, artillery, shouts, musket shot deafening, the ground shakes with the bombardment of artillery and black smoke pours from the woods straight up into the sky visible for miles around.

The Prince of Orange is ordering his Dutch troops, the Blue Guards and a Scots brigade into the fray on the left of the field near the Wood of Lanières like the devil from Hades. Those few who crawl out of the woods are badly wounded. He is ordering them to their deaths. He has had his horse shot out from beneath him and orders another but leads his troops on foot towards the French line. Cannon opens from the entrenchments in front of him and slates the Scottish and Dutch troops, mowing them down.

The Prince mounts another horse, regroups his troops scattered in the fire and leads them on again.

Marlborough gives me orders to tell him to ease back. I set my horse at a gallop and ride fast, towards the Prince, trying to observe all I can within the mayhem of smoke and slaughter. The Prince, blood-lust up, is urging his troops on as I approach him and he wheels his horse around at me as I draw my horse up close to his.

“Your Highness, desist. My lord Duke wishes you to ease back on the deployment of your troops,” I shout so he can hear above the din of shot and screams.

He stares at me in wild-eyed disbelief and turns yet again to issue orders and urge his men on. I turn quickly in the saddle and see through the smoke-haze that General Tilly, the Dutch general, is already advancing at the head of his Scottish troops. If the Prince doesn’t pull back they too will go to their deaths. I shout at him again over the sound of musket and artillery. He doesn’t comprehend.

The screams from the woods are deafening but from his vantage point, due to the heavy gun-smoke that swarms around and over us, he hasn’t been able to see the men as they stumble from the woods. He cannot see what he is doing or what he is urging them into. I shout into his ear, telling him of the situation the men are facing.

“The front lines are covered by enemy fire. Desist.” I shout.

He ignores me. Marlborough will not be pleased. I tell him that too.

“My Lord Duke says withdraw your troops,” I repeat to no avail.

Desperate, I lean forward, grab the reins of his horse to bring it to his attention and reinforce the situation to make him cease.

He turns to wave more men on. Two of his Aides ride up on either side of me and confront me, ordering me to desist. Cannon fire shakes us. I let the reins go and he glares at my effrontery as his Aides order me off.

“I am here on order from My Lord Duke,” I shout at them. Something they must already know.

Fire erupts in my ears. The Prince hits the ground as his horse is taken from him again. He grabs his standard and leads his Guards on foot straight up to the French entrenchments. He plants it on the edge of the entrenchment urging his troops on. They are immediately rebuffed and fires upon, some running back in disarray to the Allied lines, the Prince with them.

The Scottish troops are already upon us. I race over to General Tilly and inform him of the Duke’s orders. He argues with the Prince. I turn my horse and race back to Marlborough with the report of what I have witnessed. I cannot see how any of them are going to come out of this mess alive.

Marlborough listens with a concerned frown as I pant out my report, sweat streaming down my face. Isaac white-faced and horrified stares at me. The Duke dismisses me and turns to him.

“Jevereau, tell the Prince I insist he falls back,” he orders.

Kerry, my groom comes running with a fresh horse for me, Isaac gallops down the slight rise away from where Marlborough is situated and disappears into the smoke and

noise below. The Duke gives me orders again and I am off again, this time racing towards the cavalry to tell them to advance. By the time I return, Isaac has not reported back to the Duke and he is worried that the Prince's troops are still heading into the woods. I spur my horse on and ride into the smoke in search of Isaac down towards the line where the Prince is leading his troops.

He has not received any orders from Jevereau, or if he has, he has not executed them. General Tilly, tells me that he has been unable to make the Prince cease his advance so between the two of us, at my insistence of the Duke's intent, we ride over to the Prince come up on either side of him and once again repeat the Duke's request that he withdraw his troops. With me on one side of him and Tilly shouting at him furiously from the other side over the bombardment, he hesitates to stop his men; still they disappear into the woods and to their deaths. Exasperated, I glance at Tilly, who looks at me grimly. Relief fills me as I see the Duke and Prince Eugene riding towards us. I wheel my horse around and drop back as they ride up and come about either side of the Prince.

He turns his attention from his marching men. His eyes wide and bloodshot in amazement dart from Marlborough and back to the Prince, back to the Duke as they both order him to withdraw. He calls a halt to the onslaught of his troops. As I ride away with Marlborough and Prince Eugene, I turn back and see the Dutch Prince slumped in the saddle in disbelief and exhaustion, as if the situation has finally dawned upon him, General Tilly beside him, stares into the smoke which is slowly clearing revealing the piles of dead before the woods and the near dead tumbling into the open.

Marlborough tells me to search for Jevereau.

He is sitting on the trampled turf, not far from the rear of the Princes' troops. A musket shot has grazed his head and blood runs freely down his face and neck. He looks at me in pain and puzzlement as how he comes to be upon the ground in the middle of hell.

"Am I dead?" he asks, looking at me in a daze.

"No, I'm alive. I wouldn't be dismounting from my horse, pulling you to your feet and helping you mount your horse if I were dead, so you're alive too," I answer, placing one of his feet in the stirrup and lifting him over the side of his horse as he tries to puzzle this out.

He has no idea what has happened or where he is. He promptly turns white, and faints over the neck of his horse. I hold onto him until he recovers, grab the reins and lead him back to Marlborough who orders me to take him to the field hospital. A short time later he reappears, without his wig or hat, his head bandaged, his senses returned, shaken but functional and eager to return to the fight.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Malplaquet 1709

Loss

The two armies face one another within the centre and the mêlée is a screaming mass of sword-swinging cavalry. The allied cavalry falls as fast as the French. They drive on regardless and slash the French cavalry to the ground until there is hardly any left standing. Riderless horses run helter-skelter in fright over the large plain littered with dead and dying. Isaac and I rein our horses in beside Marlborough. The time is three o'clock in the afternoon.

The breath is knocked out of us with our heavy riding and the constant exertion of killing, as we charge and re-charge with the Duke in the thick of the cavalry. Beyond the river we can hear the fighting still going as the clash of swords, firing of muskets and cries of men echo over the plain. Prince Eugene, his head minus his wig and hat, blood-stained from an injury, joins the Duke. They look at each other with satisfaction, both victorious. The French have been beaten again, but we, look not at their apparent victory but around the littered field with sinking hearts. This time there is no euphoria amongst us, no overwhelming sense of glory and destiny. We are surrounded by death.

This is the worst battle we have experienced. A hundred times worse than any battle I have been part of, the Schellenburg, Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde. None of them, as bad as they were, measure up to this.

For the first time my faith in Marlborough wavers. He is a great man, he treats his soldiers well, he looks after them and respects them yet he sends them unwaveringly to their deaths by the thousands when it is unnecessary. His judgement seems to have deteriorated.

My limbs and head feel heavy with exhaustion and waves of nausea render me powerless, weak and shaken in the saddle. Fatigue makes my head thump with pain and my chest heaves in the effort to force air into my lungs. We have been on horseback constantly for fifteen hours, as we have done many times before, but this time the slaughter all around us is too great. The dead are so thick that we cannot move our horses without walking upon them. The last remains of the cavalry line up at the rear of their fallen comrades, silent with shock and exhaustion, disbelief apparent on their smoke-streaked faces. I run my eyes over the remaining troopers to see if I can see Ashe but he is nowhere in sight.

Smoke-stained, torn, blood-stained, covered in dirt from being trampled into the earth, the enemy standards are piled at Marlborough and Eugene's feet like a collection of rumpled rags. The heavy gold and silver thread shines through the blood and smoke-stains in the weak light of the dying day and trophies are brought to the Duke in his triumph and he looks at them, his eyes veiled from observation, even though he watches every movement around him, his face ruddy with internal heat.

He no longer has the usual look of triumph and victory over the enemy, instead he looks defiant and grim, his jaw set, his normally generous mouth, narrowed and set in

control. The prisoners are rounded up, the wounded collected on carts ready to be transported to the hospital.

Marlborough at the head of the inspection party, watches as walking wounded emerge from the undergrowth in the woods. Some crawl from beneath the stakes of the abbitis, the defences made by the French from tree boughs, cut and sharpened into spears, upended and driven into the earth to stop the advancing men. Men lie beneath them and impaled upon them, the sight harrowing. We are silent and sickened.

The woods have hidden the slaughter of the troops well. Broken humans stumble towards us and fall at our feet as we walk our horses deeper into the woods until we cannot walk anymore because of the mounds of dead. The entrenchments are layered with bodies of soldiers who have fallen one on top of the other. Continuous for miles inside the dense woods is the sight of men driven to their deaths. White bodies startle us in their nakedness. Already stripped by the sutlers, they lie against the green of the trees, strewn and sprawled amongst the downed branches, or in heavy piles where they have toppled into the ditches before the redans, so thick that the ground cannot be seen beneath them. Slowly, one by one, the wounded extricate themselves from beneath the layered bodies and crawl to the surface only to collapse at our feet.

I want to go home right now. Be anywhere, London, Edlington, Brackenstown, anywhere, just away from this display of murder. The desire to be a thousand miles away from this is irrational and madness in itself. I look around at the faces of the other Aides and officers, at Marlborough and his Generals, at Prince Eugene and the hapless Prince of Orange, I can see that I am not the only one feeling as I do.

Stretcher bearers already make their way in a grisly search for the living, their faces covered with kerchief's against the stench of blood, excrement and death which rises

around us in a great overpowering stench. My head pounds and my stomach begins to react as I try to detach myself from the butchery. Silence surrounds us. Saliva rushes into my mouth as I fight nausea. I reach for my kerchief, trying to block out the stench. My doubt at Marlborough's judgement increases.

The Prince of Orange draws his horse to a stop as he comes across the remains of his men, twelve hundred of them lying six deep upon the other in the ditches, their mutilation horrifying. Tears spill down his face. He now realises what he had urged them into, wave upon wave of them. The Prince covers his face with his hands, his shoulders shake with sobs. Marlborough reaches out and puts his hand on his shoulder. All the Generals are glassy-eyed and shocked looking. Isaac, slides from his horse and staggers away to collapse on the bloodstained undergrowth not far from us.

Marlborough turns in the saddle eyeing Jevereau.

"Take him out, Molesworth," he orders.

Isaac needs little persuasion. I help him back on his horse then lead him from the darkness within the wood into the light and air beyond.

We are silent and feel ill. We search for a place free of wounded and dying and sit on the trampled turf at the edge of the woods to recover. Isaac has his head in his hands, his face screwed up with pain. He is wracked with a headache from the wound in his head.

"I will take you to the field hospital," I tell him.

"If I go there I may not come out. No take me back to camp," he insists.

The centre of the field is still littered with fallen men and horses of the downed cavalry. Many of the wounded have been collected by the stretcher bearers but they are still searching and bearing their solemn load.

Ashe is in my mind. I think I hear him call me. I look around the field. In death everyone looks alike, made worse by being naked, their uniforms and accoutrements removed by the sutlers. Only here and there is it possible to see a few piles of uniformed bodies which the sutlers have not yet touched. I rein my horse in and stare at the field while Isaac eyes me curiously as he too reins his horse to a stop.

“Who are you looking for?” he asks, scanning the crowded dead.

“Ashe. Lumley’s horse.”

“He may have come through.”

“I think it’s unlikely. From where we are it seems the whole of the cavalry are down. It’s almost impossible to walk between them. You don’t have to do this, Isaac,” I say to him. He shakes his head at me and winces with the pain of it. “Stay with the horses. I just have to make sure.” I draw my pistol from the holster on my horse then dismount and pick my way carefully amongst the slaughter.

The sutlers have not yet completed their grisly task as far as Lumley’s regiment of Horse is concerned. They lie where they have fallen. Ashe could be amongst them. A feeling of dread comes over me. My heart pounds and my mouth is dry. I have to know one way or another. If he is not amongst them then he has survived.

The ground squelches beneath me as I walk, every step causing blood and mud to rise and ooze around the soles of my boots. One horse pinned beneath another rears its head at me and I see the white flash of its rolling eye. The animal is whinnying in pain, almost dead, its innards hanging from a great gash in its belly. I lift my pistol and take aim. My hands shake and I’m afraid that I will miss and maim the animal further.

Father’s voice is in my ear, “You have brought this upon yourself.”

I shake my head to rid myself of him then take a deep breath, before taking aim again and pulling the trigger. The sound of fire ricochets around the field. Isaac looks towards me. The bearers and sutlers startled by the shot lift their heads from their task while crows, already picking the dead, flap their black wings in fright and rise into the air in a blue-black mass. The sound dissipated they squawk, wheel and dive once more to their quarry on the ground. I have experienced enough killing. I have seen enough. I have to fight the overwhelming urge to run back to my horse and ride away forever.

Instead, I look around me. The fighting here had been fierce. Sword to sword, the *Maison du Roi*, and the Dutch, British and Russian Horse had clashed fiercely. The evidence lies at my feet silent except for the accompanying hum of blowflies that hover and crawl over the dead. My heart beat increases with fear as I continue my search amongst the prostrate men, depleted in death, already one with the earth beneath them.

They are torn, bodies twisted, blank looks upon their faces, headless corpses, decapitated heads, shattered limbs, humans maimed beyond recognition. Hours before they had all been alive. I have contributed to this, beside Marlborough as we fought and maimed and killed. Normally I can detach myself but now detachment escapes me.

The memory of seeing Ashe in the midst of dust and smoke, galloping in the midst of the charge comes back to me, his sword held high in the midst of his blood-rush, yelling his head off, ready to strike. He must be here somewhere, somewhere close to where I now stand.

The sun is hot. I remove my hat and wipe my brow, my wig sticking in strands to my neck, flies buzzing around me attracted by the stink of my uniform. I ignore the metallic smell of shed blood and continue my search, slipping and sliding in blood and scattered brains, the matter splattering over my boots and breeches. I fall and put one hand

out to save myself. My gloved hand comes up covered in the stuff. I lean over and wipe the mess off my glove on the uniform of the dead soldier.

Crouched down on my haunches I look over the bodies near me and see Ashe not far away, draped over the body of another. He is spread-eagled, his body intact, his head bare, his hat not far from his outstretched hand as if he has taken it off in surprise, his one eye upon me. He is alive. Full of relief I pull myself to my feet and stumble over to him.

He does not look at me. I call his name.

He looks past me at some calm and distant place.

His affable face is white, blue-tinged, expressionless in death. His cuirasse is still on beneath his red coat, his sword belt around his waist. To my surprise, his sword in its scabbard when I was sure I had seen it in his hand during the charge. He had not used it. I retrieve his pistol that lies nearby and find it fully loaded no rounds spent. He had not tried to defend himself. He had ridden into battle then put away his sword and waited to be killed.

I collapse on my knees beside my friend and feel the seep of his blood through the fabric of my breeches. His face is cold when I tear off my glove and reach out and touch him. Guilt and anguish battle inside of me.

All the warmth for Ellen and me, and all those he has loved now gone. I am so angry with myself I want to howl like a dog or scream at the sky in rage and pain. The sound stays locked in my body and twists my gut with such force it doubles me up in pain. Instead I sob and splutter, snot, tears and spittle dripping onto his coat as I bend over him.

Apart from a bloodstain on his chest, he seems whole and untouched. I swear out loud wondering how he died. His bucket boots are still on. I tear off his gloves and remove his gold ring with his coat-of-arms, from his stiff and blackened finger. Rifling

through his pockets I find letters both to and from Ellen, a gold locket with a curl of fine blonde-red hair, William's hair; his engraved watch I had so frequently seen him consult and a miniature portrait of Ellen and a linen kerchief embroidered with his coat-of-arms. He had carried them into battle instead of leaving them with his manservant to return them to Ellen if anything happened to him. He did not want her to have any reminder of him. I had pushed them that far apart. Angrily I stuff everything into my pockets.

Everything is for Ellen. If I do not take his belongings the sutlers will. I lean forward and untie the gorget from his neck and find it comes away easily in my hand along with his neckcloth, clean at the front, caked and stiffened with blood from the back. Ashe's head rolls from his body and over the body of the Frenchman lying beneath him. He had been decapitated in one clean stroke. The head had been held by the neckcloth and gorget and the support of the man beneath him until my touch had released the tenuous hold.

The shock of it shoots me to my feet. I stand looking down at Ashe's headless torso in horror. I bend and catch his legs and drag him to the flat earth at my feet. Only then I realise that he had been hit by a round-ball first and then some madman, not satisfied with him falling mortally wounded, had decapitated him in blood-lust. The image of Pitt slashing in murder during battle comes to mind.

On my knees again, I retreat to a great distance and watch myself from the end of a long tunnel.

Isaac is at my elbow, urging me to get to my feet. "There's nothing you can do," he says, pulling me by the arm and helping me to my feet.

"There's something I must do."

Carefully, I pick up Thomas's heavy head, his one blue eye looking at me all the while, and avoiding Isaac's look of disbelief I place it back where it should be, on top of his shoulders.

"Why do that?" he asks in horror.

"Murray. The Schellenburg. Ashe with Murray's head. Something he said. It's what he would want. They will bury him whole." I explain.

"Come, let's leave this place," Isaac says. I had obviously gone mad. I could hear it in his voice. "The Duke's is coming in this direction. He had better not see you in such a state."

I release Ashe's sword and scabbard. The sutlers would not get those either. Isaac looks at me quizzically and I nod to him then follow him back to our horses.

Chapter Forty-Nine-Synopsis

Post Malplaquet and Mons: 1709

Hollow Victory

The army celebrates a Te Deum to give thanks for the victory. Everyone regards it as a hollow victory as the French have lost less men than the Allies. Only Marlborough and Prince Eugene are elated. The Duke of Argyll is creating discord amongst Marlborough's staff and dividing them in their loyalties. Richard is unhappy with Argyll's tactics but knows that Marlborough has made an error of judgement in his strategies and his opinion of Marlborough begins to waver. The news from London is bad, the public and government have reacted negatively to the bloodbath of Malplaquet. Marlborough's influence is waning. Richard also feels undermined by Abercrombie and he is annoyed with himself for giving into the Countess. He is still mourning the loss of Ashe and makes several attempts to write to Ellen.

Chapter Fifty-Synopsis (Part of)

Mons: 1709

Guilt

Marlborough summons his Generals. He wishes to return to the siege of Mons. Richard resumes his duties. He is grieving for Ashe. Abercrombie needles him about a Regiment which has been granted to General Churchill for life. Richard realises that he is

never going to be rewarded with his own Regiment by Marlborough and feels resentful. He feels slighted. But he goes about his duties as usual and makes no difference. (Chapter continued below)

CHAPTER FIFTY (Continued)

Mons: 1709

Guilt.

General Cadogan, Marlborough's Quartermaster-General, who can understand the Duke's broad military plans and ensures everything is prepared, rides to inspect the trenches. Panton, Durell and I accompany him, riding ahead, beside and behind him. Artillery erupts around us. We are deafened as the ground shakes and the sound ricochets off the high walls of the fortress that towers above us. Musket fire and artillery rain down along with flying debris, dirt and shrapnel as we ride for our lives through the entrenchments.

Searing heat blasts over me and my horse shies in fright. Shot pops and whizzes towards us and around us. A retort goes through me the second after it hits. I turn towards the General realising that I have missed the onslaught but someone behind has caught it. Cadogan slumps forward over his horse and clutches his neck as blood spurts in a flood down the front of his coat. Panton and Durell catch and support him before he can fall from his horse. I strip off my neckcloth and hand it to Panton who stuffs it into the gaping wound in the General's neck, then wraps his own around mine to keep it in place to stem the bleeding. Either side of the General they indicate to me they will take him back to the Duke's quarters and supporting him they ride with him back down the lines amidst the bombardment. I turn my horse and continue on with the report then return to Marlborough

galloping behind the entrenchment through the black smoke, conscious as I pass a redoubt, of the fire all around me.

The impact lifts me out of the saddle. I take flight along with clods of earth and the blood and guts of my horse. Some distance away I land with a thump amidst the remains of my horse who has taken the brunt of the explosion. I have ridden over a mine. Black clouds of smoke whirl around me as I am sucked into a rotating maelstrom, down and down with the sound of a thousand celestial voices ringing in my ears. Just as rapidly the drowning gives way to a rising. I am pushed towards a circle of bright light which, when I emerge at the rim, turns out to be not bright but a smoke-rubbed sky shading a world of silence. I wonder if I am still whole and alive.

Activity is all around me but I can't hear anything. Exploding mines, artillery, cannon-fire, shouts of men, sounds of musket and pistol shot, the clash of swords does not exist; everyone around me is performing in a silent pantomime.

I pull myself to my feet and sway like a drunk man, the world spinning around me. I am physically unhurt, but my poor faithful horse is nothing but a strewn bloodied mess lying around me and over me. John Kerry will be upset, this obedient brave animal was one of his favourites and mine. I can hardly believe I'm untouched when I see others who were also caught by the explosion, down and badly injured around me. Officers and soldiers run to me but I wave them away and stagger back in the direction towards Marlborough to give him my report.

It's becoming harder and harder to put one foot in front of the other. Marlborough on his white steed dances in and out of my vision as I stand before him looking up at him as if he's atop a high white mountain. Durell dismounts from his horse and stands beside me holding onto my arm ready to catch me, I presume, if I fall to the ground. The world is

topsy-turvy, everything spins. I'm deaf. In all the mayhem going on around us everyone mimes. I shake my bare head, my hat and wig someplace else, buried under my bloodied horse. Prince Eugene and the Prince of Orange are beside the Duke, their eyes look at me from ringed pools of darkness buried in the white masks of faces that jump in and out of my vision. My ears ring with howling demons. The Duke looks worried. I'm covered in mud from the entrenchments and the blood and guts of my horse. Words tumble out of my mouth telling the Duke about the entrenchments, the mines, the explosion, Cadogan's injury. I stop and gulp as my stomach turns and my heart pounds. I turn in desperation from the Duke and the Princes, pulling away from Durell's supporting hand and stagger away not wanting to disgrace myself in front of them all. The silent world swims around me. I dump my load, not quite at Marlborough's feet.

My anger and humiliation knows no bounds as I realise that I had ridden into an area which I had been told contained mines. Something I should have remembered. My muddled grief-stricken detached brain had nearly cost me my life and certainly has cost me my hearing. I shout at those who dare speak to me, including the Duke who looks at me in sympathy but slightly askance. Even a few good clouts on the head with my open hand does not clear the blockage and only gives me a headache. I am surrounded by a lot of impatient frustrated men, including Blake and Parsons, and Isaac who are all trying to communicate with me and end up avoiding me. Even Abercrombie, in his evil fashion tries.

The roar of anger in my head and chest adds to my deafness. Isaac, much alarmed takes me into the Aides' tent and gives me a bowl of brandy which I dumbly gulp down, wincing as it sears my innards and settles in my stomach in a warm nauseating mass. After

much miming and writing of notes, Isaac, with much sympathy in his eyes, leads me to Marlborough.

The Duke looks at me in some concern and gives me leave to return home as soon as possible as I am a liability to myself and everyone around me. I can't ride into the thick of things as I can't hear anything, let alone take or convey orders. I'm useless, consumed with frustration and sorrow in a silent world.

"This is an order," writes the Duke.

I obey.

Mons retreats. Malplaquet retreats. Marlborough retreats. Within days I am in my coach with Blake, and Parsons atop with the coach driver. Despite the jerking ride in the coach over the rough roads I fall asleep as we head north towards The Hague and then England, away from the blood and roar of the siege that still shakes the walls of Mons and the surrounding countryside. When I am not sleeping I retreat into a grief-crazed silence as the world around me, harshly etched and on fire with the beginning of autumn takes on the surreal quality of a dream. I have reached the base of my being which I find cold and remote, bereft of the reason for living.

My hero is flawed. I have difficulty acknowledging that. Marlborough always has his reasons, how could he have gone so wrong at Malplaquet?

The mist rolls over the flat fields of Flanders where so many of his soldiers lie buried, the land as empty and desolate as my mind. I close my eyes to the recurring vision of mist settling upon the cold, bloodied fields and woods of Malplaquet.

Chapter Fifty-One-Synopsis

London

Autumn: 1709

Discord

Richard visits Ellen on his return to London. She is grieving badly and does not welcome him happily. He tries to explain what happened to Ashe but loses his composure and they end up in a confrontation. She has already been visited by the Major of his regiment with the officers' contribution and she throws this at Richard, calling it 'pieces of silver.' He gives her Ashe's belongings which only makes matters worse. She admits that Ashe was initially hired by Abercrombie to spy on him but he later refused to work for the Aide and was consequently passed over for promotion. Richard is profoundly hurt by Ashe's betrayal. He and Ellen part on bad terms. Once again he feels it has been a mistake to go and see her.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

London

Autumn-Winter: 1709

Reprise

“You must tell me what happened,” Father demands, as usual.

“I will not tell you. You would not like it.

We face each other in our usual defensive position only this time not in his library but over breakfast; oatcakes, gruel, and toast in the parlour. I hate the thought of eating, my outburst with Ellen still worrying me, but eat anyway, filling my mouth so I do not have to talk, forcing the food down.

“London is full of news and conjecture,” Father continues, sitting at the table, shovelling gruel into his mouth. Only the two of us are in the house. “We are hearing much condemnation of the Duke. The Tories are calling him, ‘Marlborough, the butcher’, demanding his resignation.”

I stuff another oatcake into my mouth so I do not have to answer and grunt a reply instead.

“I can’t understand why you will not talk about it. I really want to know if it was as bad as everyone says.”

“It was,” I answer chewing.

He looks at me over the top of his spectacles. "And?"

My mouth full, I shake my head and wave his query away with my hand.

"The Tories want him to resign," he continues, patiently, persistently.

I am annoying him as usual, I realise that. He had been up in his library waiting for me, dressed in nightgown, cap and gown, plainly worried about me when I had arrived home late into the night. I had protested loudly like a recalcitrant child, as he insisted on knowing where I had been.

He can no longer admonish me as if I'm a boy. I'm now twenty-eight and well versed in the ways of the world and have seen far more than he ever has. But he knows me well enough to realise my swollen red eyes were either from sleeping, drinking, lovemaking or weeping or perhaps a combination of all four. But I'm not going to enlighten him, no matter how hard he probes. My feelings are safely locked within me again, the familiar large hard lump situated in the pit of my belly, revived by my outburst. My duty is to the Duke. I'm cautious and do not doubt my reason, even if London is erupting in the slander of the man who leads men to slaughter. The man who some say wishes to be King. The world spins giddily under the power of princes.

"I want and need little to do with it," I proffer, my mouth full, as way of explanation to my adamant father at the opposite side of the table to me.

"Eh? What? What is that you say?" he asks, startled at my sudden volubility.

"I need little to do with slander. They will always blame the Duke."

"But surely with the count of casualties coming in and the report of the conditions of battle, and the toll at Tournai, surely there is reason for concern. Perhaps within the slander there is an element of truth?" He asks, eyebrows raised.

Silence from me.

“Your silence is agreement, Dick,” Father responds. “Don’t you think that if you’re silent about the matter, people will think you’re hiding something?”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, tell me,” Father persists, leaning across the table towards me. “Could it have been avoided as everyone says?”

“Yes,” I answer peevishly, laying my spoon down and staring into my gruel, wishing I was anywhere but here.

“There is much for you to think about. The time has come for you to consider your future,” he says, not without some triumph in his voice. He lays down his spoon and looks at me seriously.

“My future? At the moment I feel as if I have none.”

“Precisely. Marlborough has never truly rewarded you for saving his life. He brushed it aside and made much of Bringfield’s death to cover up what really happened. He will never grant you a regiment. Yet, you deserve to be given one. Memories are short,” he pauses. “That is your answer. Purchase your own regiment.”

I look at Father interested but cautious. “The time is not right. It will never be right now. He will see it as betrayal.”

“Nonsense. Expediency perhaps. Not betrayal.”

“Expediency can mean betrayal,” I answer, remembering Lord Orkney’s words all those years ago about my grandfather.

“The Duke is not above expediency and betrayal himself, as well you know,” he says, eyeing me over the top of his spectacles. “You must be realistic and practical. He’s losing his power. The landowners are grumbling. We are supporting a dead war. A war for war’s sake. We pay land tax, window tax, malt tax, coal tax. Anything that can be taxed is

taxed, just to provide money for the army. Marlborough's days are limited. You must be aware of that."

Anger stops my eating. I close my eyes thinking that will close my ears but he goes on. "There will be time for you to think at Edlington. You are unwell and exhausted Richard. You have lost weight and are agitated. Your hearing is bad. You need some peace. Perhaps there everything will seem clearer to you. Everyone at Edlington waits for you with impatience. Edlington awaits you."

Edlington. Royal Atheling, the place of princes. The very last place I want to be.

There is one more person to visit before we travel to Edlington; some questions to be answered. Days later I stand within the entrance of the Melyon's townhouse as the footman takes my hat, cloak and gloves. He ushers me into the drawing room and the Countess rises from her chair in alarm at my appearance. Not because she did not know I was coming, I had sent a letter which she had replied to inviting me, but because I am shaking with cold from the icy wind that blows through the autumn filled streets of London. If Abercrombie was going to step out of the next room, which I half expect, at this moment I did not care. She comes to me and I take her hand and bow to her and she takes my hands within hers.

"You are cold, come sit by the fire. Are you well? You look so thin and pale? What are you doing home so early? The campaign has barely finished. Has something happened? You did not answer my letters."

So many questions, so many demands. She orders food and coffee for me. I am ravenous and eat everything before me.

“It seems His Grace does not feed his men. You have lost weight and look haggard as if you have been through hell. Hardly like the man I remember from The Hague,” she comments, studying my eating habits.

Standing by the fire I warm my hands not knowing where to start, unable to know if I can tell her everything, but I tell her something of the campaign, my injury at Mons, my occupation with duties for Marlborough. Unable to know how to ask about Abercrombie and Ashe. I am unable to think about Ashe too deeply, let alone talk about him.

Lavinia takes my hand and leads me to the guest chamber where the bed has already been warmed with warming pans and turned down. She undresses me slowly, near the fire, giving me sips of wine from a glass with the removal of each piece of clothing as if in reward. Once more I succumb to her seduction but when I fall into the warm, downy softness of the high four-poster bed I am asleep in an instant. Sometime later, by the light of a single candle at the bedside our shadows grow large and monstrous upon the wall as my form rises above hers, within minutes I ride to the point of oblivion I so desperately seek.

“Such fury,” she comments afterwards as we lie entwined and exhausted.

“Such deprivation,” I draw her to me again, burying my face in the softness of her neck.

“I want you to myself,” she says, her fingers running through my hair, now starting to grow after the campaign. “I’m so lonely. I have not seen the Earl for months as he continues his travels. I can’t follow him though he often expects it, yet at other times he goes off quite happily without me.”

“What of Abercrombie?” I ask, watching her reaction.

“Poof. He’s nothing. A mere messenger for the Duke,” she says, with a shrug. I want to believe her.

“The Duke must not know of this; of us.”

Good sense finally starts to penetrate my addled brain again, along with a vague feeling of discomfit and alarm at my indiscretion .

“He will not know, he does not know. I have heard he’s as possessive with his men as he is with his wife,” she answers, teasing me.

“Ah, but he uses us differently,” I answer, with a smile as I reach up and brush the hair that has fallen over her face.

She laughs. “Your humour has returned,” and she kisses me again.

“What of Ashe?” I ask.

“Captain Ashe was once friends with Abercrombie but he turned against him when he became a friend of yours. Abercrombie never forgave him.”

“How do you know this? You knew Ashe?” I ask astounded.

“Through Abercrombie. Not well, but enough. He was a troubled man, I know that much. Don’t worry yourself about him.”

The disturbance I feel disappears with her kisses. She is insatiable. Guilt fills me again and drags me back to reality. She feels the distraction, pulls back and looks at me.

“What is the matter?”

“I can’t remember,” I lie, avoiding her direct gaze. But she catches my face in both her hands and smothers me in kisses, taking my breath away making me rise to her demands, until, once more, I lose myself within her.

Later, as she sleeps curled in the crook of my arm I realise that my ride to oblivion had not been with Lavinia. I had made love to Ellen.

I regret being with her and vow not to come again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Edlington

Autumn-Winter: 1709

“I die and live again.”

Edlington, place of peace.

Peace escapes me in Edlington, as I knew it would.

Streaks of lightning hit the fallow ground of the fifty-nine acres of Carr Common, the low-lying land in the estate. Fifteen acres of it are partially enclosed and tenanted by Captain Braselly, his wife and their brood of young children. Usually bright with rye, barley, oats, and rape, the land has been harvested by rows of labouring men. The stout country banter, songs and shouts, had rung over the fields. Dressed in smocks, armed with scythes they were accompanied by their women who tied and propped the stooks, gossiped and giggled amidst a gaggle of accompanying children, laughing and playing around them. The land has been harvested. Father is right, I do need the country. But even here the elements conspire against me and release their anger in great claps of thunder.

Low lying veils of clouds release a torrent of rain and the woods are windlashed into a frenzy, the trees tossing leaves in whirlwinds over the grounds of the house. Water streams off the thatched roof and the fields become lakes reflecting the chase of clouds. Mary is here, George is here, so are Charlotte, John and William. I am the only one not

here, not fully anyway, but I have come to the conclusion that I am considerably more present than the mad shadow who represents George.

You, Mary, escape from him as much as you can.

We all do.

George, I notice never seems to miss you unless you have gone for long. The tension that fills the house infiltrates and disturbs our minds. The only place I find any sort of solace is the church, a place I do not normally frequent. But it is quiet for my roaring ears.

I let myself in through the heavy oak door into the nave and am conscious of the stillness of the tomb, an ambience that all churches seem to carry. A mellow light from the stained glass windows casts a muted colour over the flagstones at my feet. The village and house seem far away. The faint murmur of wind through the trees is faint in here and mixes with the soft burbling of turtle doves in the dovecote at the entrance to the village.

When I last saw you at Edlington, Mary, you were feeding the doves. They flocked around you alighting on your shoulders and capped head, gently pecking at feed from your hands as you talked to them, your face bright and alive with pleasure at their closeness. It was a relief to see you happy for once.

I walk down the nave to the family pew, let myself in through the small gate to sit and gaze before the altar. My faith is non-existent. I wonder how I come to be sitting here; when prayers no longer mean anything. What has brought me here? Lockier says that sometimes just presence is prayer. So I sit within a presence. My own, I think.

Nothing has changed within this place from the ancient Saxons or Normans. The turmoil still exists as strongly as faith endures. This church in which I now sit, is

Protestant, but it had been built by the Roman church to worship the Catholic God. I wonder at the endurance of faith, as to whether that faith is not entirely man-made, springing from human existence to give the spirit reason to live.

Gargoyles spring from the edges of the hammerbeam roof, carved by the chisel from the minds of medieval craftsmen. They glare down at me, their mouths' stretched in silent screams

My arms folded against the pew in front of me, I rest my head and close my eyes, only to be confronted with the vision of Thomas's head within my hands. This is my hell, the vision still within me, one from which I cannot escape. Thomas too had glimpsed hell, but hopefully now, he knows the joys of heaven. If there is a heaven.

Mary, your faith in heaven is well known. You stand beside me, a benign and caring spirit. I lift my head. So intent on my own thoughts I have not heard the turn of the door latch.

"Richard. Why are you here now? Are you all right?" you ask, plainly astonished at seeing me in church.

You are a wood-nymph, dressed in gold to match the autumn woods, a light woollen gown and fine linen cap upon your head, a cloak about your shoulders to protect you from the wind. Tendrils of curls play around your face and silver vies for dominance with brown, yet you are only two years older than me. Your eyes are wide, your cheeks flushed with the cold air, your arms full of yellow saffron flowers, white lilies and Michaelmas daises picked from Mother's walled garden. Despite your bright colouring and costume, you seem a decade older, the lines on your face deeper and more intense than I remembered.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you. I thought for a moment you were asleep,” you say curiously.

Everyone is curious about me at the moment, with my intermittent hearing making them shout and my haunted looks making them whisper, guess at my state, and avoid me.

My nights are wild, full of vivid dreams. I sweat and swear fighting in the woods at Malplaquet, killing the bed-curtains. Sometimes I wake at the foot of the bed, gripping the pillow under my arm, believing it to be Thomas’s head. Madness. The family all think so. They witness me in my ignominious glory, a gibbering imbecile in their midst, cowering at the end of the bed, clutching the pillow, talking incoherently. I am woken by the flame of father’s candle and his hand on my shoulder shaking me. Your pale face, Mary, stares at me as if at a stranger. Father’s worried face disappears and you sit beside me until I fall asleep.

How long is this nonsense going to continue? To find an answer, and to let everyone sleep peacefully through the night, I set out on solitary walks in the moonlight over the fields. Laying my cloak on the ground I bivouac in the open, sleep under a high moon on the ground, the sounds of battle roaring in my ears in the quiet of the night.

The only one my behaviour does not worry is George, because my behaviour is similar to his and he is in a world of his own and nothing, not even my restlessness touches him.

You walk to the altar to arrange the flowers in a vase and stand back to survey the effect. Your artistry causes the flowers to climb and droop over the white linen altar cloth, bright against the bare stone and dark oak carved screen behind the altar. Flower arranging over, you join me in the pew and sit beside me.

Our conversation drifts through family, army life, Lockier, brothers and sisters, parents and children.

Layers lie undisturbed, subjects we cannot delve into deeply. The most painful subjects, Malplaquet and George's illness, which hurt our souls, are left untouched, not discussed. The surface of our thoughts are shifted, re-arranged, much said in silence.

Your marriage, Mary, is in name only. The sorrow of it is carved around your eyes and mouth. George's reality is almost non-existent. He does not talk but sits in the same chair day after day. He eats alone and sleeps alone. Outwardly you carry on as usual, to all intents still his wife, but he ignores you, except when you are not there. Then he wanders in his insecurity of finding himself deserted by the one person who seems to understand him. He looks for you in the house, going through every room, then proceeds to the outbuildings, dairy, stables, coach house, grooms' quarters, privy, then lastly the grounds, until someone sees him and rescues him from his torment and leads him to where you are.

You are careful about what you say and do in his presence as the slightest thing sets him raving. You and the children are in grave danger.

John and I half drag, half carry the drugged man upstairs to his bedchamber and lift him onto his bed. We take turns to sit beside him until he recovers from the foul smelling concoction that Father has poured down his throat.

"He's capable of killing Mary, Papa, and harming the children," I say, to Father after he seeks me out.

"Yes, I suppose it may have to come to them living separately," he adds with a sigh. "We have been trying to avoid such a thing, thinking time may heal him. Mary stays with

him because of the family. She does not want to bring disgrace upon us all, or hurt the children.”

“Many couples live separate lives, only divorce is a disgrace,” I add, aware of the weariness in his voice. He has aged since my last visit to Edlington. He too has not been well and has spent some time at Bath again, taking the waters for what he proclaimed was an ‘ague in his waters’, which I could not figure out and did not ask for an explanation. As well as Mary, Father has been worried about Walter and Edward now deeply involved in fighting in the war.

Walter is in Spain and suffering terrible hardships, the scene of war there beyond Marlborough’s control. Men in that arena suffer from lack of adequate supplies and supervision. Edward, in the Royal Marines, has ended up prisoner of war in Lisbon, where he still is and Father has been lobbying intently for his release because he has received word that Edward has taken ill. Father is worried about everyone, including me, with my wild and restless nightmares and the horrors which I refuse to talk about.

No one knows how I found Ashe. I cannot bear to tell them.

You enter the room, Mary, your face red and blotchy, eyes swollen. Weeping you go to Father who takes you in his arms. He looks at me over the top of your head, his eyes shining with tears, as I stand, arms folded, looking at you both with concern. “You must think seriously about separating, my dear,” he says with tenderness.

“Oh, Papa, it is such a disgrace to the family,” you reply.

“What is a disgrace?” Asks John, entering the room and looking from one to the other of us. “George is asleep. His manservant is with him.”

“Mary and George separating,” Father answers.

John looks from one to the other of us, his face pensive.

“You are right, Papa,” you cry. “But to leave him, I fear would be the end of me. It would be like leaving life itself. I can’t live without him, yet I can’t live with him. I can’t understand what’s going on or what’s causing this malady. We have tried everything for nearly four years and nothing works. If I had an answer or knew that he was going to get well then I could stand anything, but there seems to be no end to it. There seems to be some great poison in our souls, in our love for each other. We took vows at the altar before God; he’s my husband and I have borne his children. We all need him yet he is going further from us.”

“Yes, but not as he is. When he’s well you can return to him if you wish,” Father says, leading you to a chair.

“Separation is a bit steep, Papa,” John says. “Such a thing would bring disgrace to the family and perhaps harm our prospects.”

Father’s eyebrows shoot up and he glares at John. “We have to think of Mary and the children,” he retorts. “They can’t go on suffering as they are. I have done all I can.”

A dark frown cuts across John’s face. “Mary is his wife, it is her duty to put up with him and look after him. She has vowed to obey him,” he answers, staring at Father, ignoring his crying sister, his eyes glittering in the firelight.

“That’s quite enough, John. Mary doesn’t have to put her life at risk.”

“He would not harm her, he loves her too much,” John protests.

“When he’s in one of his fits he’s capable of anything. You have witnessed enough. Would you have that on your conscience?” I badger him, thoroughly incensed, feeling anger rising in my chest.

“Lockier is here too much, it disturbs George. He’s frightened of losing her,” John continues.

“Lockier is helpful. He is the only one who can get through to George,” Mary answers.

“Yes, but what of your marriage?” demands John.

Silence enters the room. Father looks at me and I nod in agreement. Their relationship is cause for gossip and the servants must talk

“We still have to think of Mary,” Father replies looking at John and I.

None of us notice Charlotte listening in the doorway, watching you, Mary, sitting exhausted, head in hands. Charlotte, good sister that she is, goes to you and puts her arms around you.

“What are you thinking of John?” she asks, exasperated, looking up at her frowning older brother. “Can’t you hear what you’re saying? Mary’s at her wits end. She needs our help. Arguing about her and George and the prospects of the family is not helping. If it’s best to separate from George then she must do it. We all must help her.”

Our younger sister speaks wisdom and we all look at each other. “He needs the physicians again Papa,” she adds.

“I will send to Doncaster for them. They do help after a fashion,” Father nods.

Yet again, I think. There is nothing much he can do, apart from that. John walks from the room in fury. I disappear and leave Father to it.

Charlotte too is recovering from a recent illness cured by purges, bleedings, blisters as well as Mrs. Westenry’s soup made from snails that is guaranteed to cure any cough.

I do not think too deeply on that, just remind myself to hide from Mrs. Westenry if I develop a cough. We sit together in the great hall, Charlotte's dark head is bent over needlework as the needle flies fast in and out of the fabric and she tries to take her mind off the noisome sounds coming from upstairs in the west wing of the house.

Father is now touting her name on the marriage stakes to which she wrinkles up her fine long nose in distaste at the mere mention of any eligible male that Father has on his list. The mention of cousin Will's name prods some deep secret to the surface and makes her face flame. Father notices the blush and smiles with some satisfaction. At least that is one avenue he can pursue without her protesting.

"My daughters are precious to me. I could not be without them," Father explains.

Charlotte comes to him at Edlington, or you, Mary will come over from Ireland to be with him and escape from George. Letty, now fifteen, begs Mother to allow her to travel to Edlington to be with dear Papa so he will not be alone in the big manor-house on his own.

A particularly animal raucous noise from upstairs brings Charlotte and I back to the present. She throws down her needlework and runs from the room. I frown at the increased activity upstairs accompanied by George's screams and groans. I too leave. I grab my cloak and hat, calling Ovid, the greyhound who comes scampering from Father's library into the entrance hall. He skithers over the oak boards in his eagerness, and jumps all over me as I open the heavy oak door to let us out into the cold autumn air.

The dog bounds ahead, stopping here and there to lift his leg, or snuffle under piles of leaves, his long snout emerging brown and dusty. He returns to me when I whistle to him. I throw a stick, which he bounds after. He picks it up in his mouth and joyfully returns

to me. His long pink tongue lolls from his mouth in the pleasure of the chase, his soft dark eyes beg for more.

Ovid rarely leaves Father's side. He saved his life from a thief who had hidden himself in the privy, of all places. Ovid barked and pulled Father back as he attempted to open the door, saving him from being shot as the thief fired a pistol at him. I am honoured to have this brave saviour of my father with me.

We enjoy our walk together. He is a safe companion who does not ply me with questions that I am reluctant to answer. At least in his dumb world there is no malice, only loyalty. I am no longer unquestioning, and I am certainly not dumb, though at times I feel not far removed from the animal which threatens to devour me, and all those around me, in sheer fury. An animal only tamed by will power. I keep my loathsome state to myself. There are enough demons in the air surrounding the family as it is.

Father appears at the doorway of his library as I enter the entrance hall of the house, his patience with his offspring finally gone. He sees me, an audience to shout at, everyone else has disappeared.

"I do not know what you young people would do if you could not tarry in your Father's house. You are all money-bound," he shouts at me as if at the world in exasperation, then he turns and walks back into the library and shuts the door.

Most unlike my calm, controlled Father.

John has been asking for more money. He is going to see the Duke of Newcastle again for more favours and also plans to meet a woman there that Father has arranged for his marriage. I wonder about the outcome of that.

Not wanting to worsen Father's state, I leave him to himself.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Edlington

Winter: 1709

Dysfunction

Francis is expected and arrives, dismounting off his horse, his long face bisected into a vast smile which reveals the inner warmth of his soul. He greets Mary and I with open arms throwing them around us and dragging us to him in a massive hug. “My good children!” he booms affectionately, then kisses us both soundly on the cheek. He has been asked to conduct a family service with the permission and assistance of the local vicar, Joshua Pearson, to help ease our burdens of which there are many. There is no formality with Francis which belies his solemn crow-like appearance. Nothing sinister stirs within or about this man as his generous embrace shows us.

He reminds me of Thomas Ashe, his warmth and friendship. Loss rips through me like a knife and shows in my eyes which Lockier notices.

“You are suffering, my friend,” he asks, which is nearly my undoing. “Your father wrote and told me about Lord Ashe. I am sorry. But it is such a joy that you have returned to us, after such a horrendous battle. I must admit when I heard about Malplaquet I was worried for you, considering the great losses involved. Then, to hear you were injured at Mons.....?” He looks at me anxiously.

I shake my head at him. “Nothing, nothing!” I protest.

Lockier raises one quizzical eyebrow and glances at you, Mary, still safely ensconced within the comfort his arm. We stand and briefly talk in front of the house. “To have you here is God’s gift, wouldn’t you agree, Mary?” He asks, looking down at you with a smile.

“I doubt my father would agree with you,” I say. But neither of you are listening. Lockier is smiling at you Mary, and you are gazing up at Lockier in frank adoration. There is more than one reason for your visit to Edlington. Lockier, who by the look on his face, does not mind one bit.

John returns from Newcastle richer but no wiser and without a betrothed mistress.

“Well?” Asks Father impatiently, in anticipation that something good has happened for his family at last.

“The Duke arranged for my endowment. He has agreed to be my patron for another year.”

“Good. What about the other?” demands Father wanting to get onto the more serious business of John’s marriage.

“Nothing came of it, Papa. She is a pleasant enough young woman but did not like the idea of having to live in Italy, or me being there and her having to stay in England. So that’s the end of that,” John says, finally with a shrug. He is not heartbroken.

“Her father is so keen for your betrothment,” Father says with disappointment.

“Her dowry is not good enough, Papa, and her family is a middling one,” John adds peevishly, standing before the fire in the drawing room warming his back after the rigours of travelling.

Father almost spits at John in his anger. “Her family may be middling but they are wealthy. You didn’t even try,” he explodes.

“I did try,” John shrugs again and spreads his hands in a most Italianate way. “But she’s not to my liking,” he says, and rocks on the heels of his shoes.

Father is irritated beyond reason. I am too, watching my stubborn brother who is unwilling to give information unless it is dragged out of him inch by inch. I have an almost irrepressible urge to stand before him and anchor my hands on his shoulders to stop his infernal heel-rocking.

“You know how important it is to Papa that you marry an English woman and someone of social standing,” I proffer my opinion.

John ceases rocking and he looks at me, his eyebrows forking his forehead into a deep scowl, the pulse jumping in his forehead.

How dare I judge him and tell him what to do. I can see in his eyes what he is thinking.

“You have no right to interfere with my life, any more that I have with your business with the Duke?”

“But you would like to anyway. How do I know that you have not done just that?”

“It would be best for you and for us if you considered your future with the Duke. Is it wise to stay loyal to him when he is losing power?”

I glance at Father. How much has he told John about me not being considered for Johnson’s regiment? Father looks at me impassively. Knowing Father he has told John everything.

You, Mary and Lockier, who also sit within the room, exchange glances and rise to your feet as one, with the obvious intention of fleeing from the scene of the argument. You excuse yourselves and close the door behind you without a sound, leaving us alone.

“You are right, it’s none of your business,” I retort.

John is not pleased with my ongoing loyalty to the Duke. I am also annoyed that I have fallen into his trap. Family name and honour are at stake with Mary’s problem and, so it seems, with mine. John is determined to further it with me at the helm. He thinks that if I am seen as the Duke’s man then our fortunes will consequently decrease and that is the truth of it. He expects me to suit myself and shift allegiance, to betray the Duke and be disloyal for the sake of the family’s honour. His ambition, always formidable, well outstrips mine, but that doesn’t surprise me as he is always intent in outstripping me in some way.

“It may not be my business, and my marriage is not yours. Your status with the Duke is of equal importance as far as the fortune of the family goes. Where do you stand with the Duke?” he asks.

“Where I always stand, by his side.”

Father looks anxiously from one to the other of us as he raises his hand for peace. I go on regardless as he shakes his head. “You speak as if the family fortune rests entirely upon me. If anything happened to Papa’s fortune you would not have the lavish lifestyle you have become accustomed to. All you worry about is your precious diplomatic career and your grand lifestyle in Florence, not to mention your mistress, Camilla. No doubt you do not stop at one mistress either, if the truth be known. You have no right to tell me where I stand or what I do.”

“I have no other mistress,” John retorts, affronted.

“What about the Countess Melyon?” I ask.

“She’s not my mistress. But I hear she may be yours.”

Anger fills me, more than I have felt towards him before.

“How do you know that? What have you heard?” I demand.

“Do you think she doesn’t talk? Don’t be naive. Most probably Marlborough knows as well.”

Father interjects, almost stepping physically between us, fearing we will come to blows, wondering who is going to cuff who first? He had often had to separate us as boys but never as grown men.

“You are brave, idealistic and impractical,” John adds “It’s about time you faced reality and realised that if the Duke goes down and you are with him, you go down too. You’re too close to him to make a truly objective decision. His judgement was wrong during this last campaign and you know it and a great many men died because of it. The Government will be overtaken and he will be replaced. Your career in the army will be finished because you will have no regiment of your own and you will forever be associated with him. You should have been promoted long ago, when you saved his life at Ramillies, he should have given you a regiment then. With Marlborough gone, there is no hope of you gaining a regiment except by purchase. You should have made your move some time ago.”

“John, let your brother be. He’s on the field with the Duke. He knows the circumstances, let him be his own judge. There are some things he can’t tell us the same as you can’t. He’s bound by loyalty and duty. He has to make his own decisions when the time is right.”

“His judgement is blinded by sentiment for Marlborough,” John retorts.

“How dare you speak about me in such a manner,” I shout at him. “I’m well aware of what is going on around me. I can still hear and reason for myself. Who am I, in the face of things? A mere Aide. Marlborough knows the overall plan of his strategies and tactics. He knows what people say about him. He still wields great power.”

“Yes, for murder and mutilation. You were at Malplaquet. What happened is common knowledge. Not to mention the casualties at Tournai and Mons. You’re having difficulty facing that.”

Father frowns as he looks from one to the other of us. My fury, so volatile and near the surface frightens him but John, cool-faced, is unruffled.

“We have every right to know what happened, what you experienced at Malplaquet,” John continues. “We are your family. Yet you will not talk about it. What are you hiding? It’s something terrible, we can tell just by looking at you. Your nights are disturbed, your dreams are violent. You will not talk about it and we are expected to put up with it.”

“I will not talk about it,” I shout at him angrily. “You have no right to demand any information from me. I know that you spy for the government. I will not tell you anything.” Father gapes at me in astonishment. “Or anyone for that matter,” I add and walk from the room, past Mary and Lockier sitting in the hall. I grab my hat and cloak and let myself out the front door.

The cold air sears my lungs as I take a deep breath in an effort to calm myself. My anger is such I realise, with horror, that if my sword had been in my hand, I would have run my arrogant brother through. I wonder what I have become? As he would have Mary stay in a violent and loveless marriage for the sake of family honour and fortune, he also wants

me to be disloyal to Marlborough and betray him by abandoning him, rather than put the family honour at risk. Be damned if I will.

The woods are silent with winter, only the distant cawing of rooks annoys me as I walk through the undergrowth until I come across a clearing. I do not stop until I run out of breath and out of anger. Panting hard, I do not hear anyone behind me until Lockier comes running into the clearing, sweating with effort.

“Well, you certainly can walk fast,” he says, taking a kerchief out of the pocket of his coat and wiping his face.

“What are you doing here?” I ask brusquely, knowing he is concerned for me, yet wishing he had left me alone.

“It’s all right,” he protests holding up his hands in defence as if I am ready to pounce on him. “Mary sent me; *I am* not spying for the government.”

I find the nearest tree and lower myself to the ground leaning against the trunk. He comes over to me and sits beside me folding his long legs in front of him still trying to catch his breath.

“Are you all right?” he asks, when he can finally speak. “Forgive me, but Mary and I couldn’t help but overhear your argument.”

“I sometimes wonder whose ambition I actually fulfil? John’s, Father’s or my own? I don’t think it’s mine. I think it’s theirs.”

“Mary is in a similar position,” Lockier says thoughtfully. “In a way they are right about your career. From all accounts the Tories are calling for the Duke’s head in London.”

“I know what they’re saying. In a way, John is right, but to buy a regiment now Marlborough will think I no longer support him. It’s like committing treason. I can’t do it

with a clear conscience. He means too much to me and I have fought too hard and too long at his side.”

Francis draws his cloak about him against the cold. “If the necessity arose, Richard, would the Duke abandon you?”

Wearily I lean my head back against the tree and stare up through the bare branches at the grey sky above us. I know the answer to that. It disturbs me. “Of course he would.” I reply with bitterness. “As much as I hate to admit it, I know he would.”

“Sometimes, just sometimes, when there’s no other way out, we have to do what’s right for us,” Lockier continues. “The future doesn’t look good for the Duke. The peace talks are at a stalemate, the Queen is ill, the country is almost bankrupt because of the length of the war. But you are also affected personally, Richard, that’s obvious. Your career is at stake and you have lost your good friend, Lord Ashe.”

I nod. “Killed with a musket shot, along with twenty thousand others.”

Lockier’s face turns pale at the thought. He looks away from me for a moment then when his eyes return to mine they are troubled. “I could not stand such bloodshed, if it were me,” he says, his voice quiet.

We do not move or talk but sit propped against the tree in silence. Lockier does not persist. He climbs to his feet then turns and walks down the woods pathway back to the house. I will return to them, he knows that.

Lockier has decided to leave. He can’t stay too long, he is hurt by your predicament Mary. He finds being near you at such a time has become more of a trial than a joy when you are so duty bound to George. We do not know what you two talk about when you are together, but his love for you is obvious to all. John grumbles and growls about his

presence which annoys Mother and Father no end. You appear happy when he's here, that is all that matters.

"Mary needs some joy in her life," Father comments, as he and John watch the pair of you walking through the walled kitchen garden into the orchard. You sit in the summerhouse and talk for some length of time until you rush back into the house, Mary, weeping.

I go in search of Lockier and find him outside the walled garden in the coachyard near the stables, kicking stones over the cobbled way, his immaculate black-buckled shoes fast becoming dust covered, his face furrowed in thought. He glances up at me as I approach.

"You're worried about your weakness," Francis says angrily. "Yours is nothing to mine. I tell her that I need her as much as George does, even more so. It was selfish and thoughtless of me. How will she forgive me?" he asks, in misery. "My feelings got the better of me. Will you forgive me?"

"As far as I am concerned, Francis, there is nothing to forgive."

"I know she feels the same as I do, but she won't admit it."

"Of course she won't admit it. She's married to George. She will never tell you how she really feels. But I think you already know." His head is lowered as he studies his dusty shoes. One would have to be blind not to see how much he loves you, Mary. "It is very disturbing for us all, knowing the circumstances."

"George possesses her as surely as he himself is possessed. I'm no longer detached from the situation as I once was. I can no longer be of any help to her, that's what is upsetting me. I just want to take her away from the danger she's in but she won't listen to

me. I have messed everything up. He is malingering to keep her close to him, to hold her, even your father has his suspicions about that. But in doing so, he's destroying her spirit. It would be better for her and the children if she left him."

Lockier surprises me. For once he has stepped beyond the role of mentor, spiritual guide and cleric and shown himself as a human being like the rest of us. In doing so, however, he has overstepped his position and is penitent. "I find it very hard to stand by and see her suffering so much. She married a man she did not want to marry, one she did not really love, for her family, her father's choice for her."

"That is the way of things," I protest, surely he knows that. "You surprise me, Francis, being a man of the church you know how these things are arranged."

"Yes, I know, but I do not always agree with society's rules, I see the results. It is a vile practice in which many women suffer at the hands of their husbands who use and abuse them because of the dowry they have brought into the marriage. Why should a good woman be tied to a man who gives her nothing but misery because the social laws state that it is a disgrace if she leaves him? Is that a God-given Christian attitude?"

"But is it not part of God's law, part of the teaching of the Church to which you belong, that a wife stays with her husband?" I ask surprised.

"You must forgive me, Dick. I do have a heart and at the moment it's overruling my reason. This distress that she is experiencing is really harming her, inside, in her heart. It could manifest and kill her. To see her live with so much suffering and torment, when it's undeserved," he says shaking his head. "She is the dearest woman I know and means the world to me. I know she loves George as her husband." He lifts his face and levels his gaze upon mine. "But I also know that she loves me and I her. To lose her would be to lose the world as far as I'm concerned. I can't understand George and his treatment of her." He

pauses and gathers himself. "I'm not in control, forgive me, Richard. I couldn't bear to lose the friendship of yourself or your family, especially when you father has been so generous to me. I have no right to speak so and I don't wish to offend you."

"No offence taken, Francis."

"I have to return to Doncaster. It's better that I'm not near Mary for the moment. I shall be there if you need help with George."

He doesn't stay and I do not press him. He says good-bye to Father and John then puts his arms around me briefly in farewell. I hold the stirrup for him as he mounts his horse and he doffs his hat in farewell as I watch him ride away, his black-garbed back stiff with self-discipline, his black three-cornered hat set forward upon his undressed hair.

You fly out the front door, skirts gathered up as you run, calling to him. He turns at the sound of your voice and reins in his horse then quickly dismounts and runs to you. You wrap your arms around his neck, holding him to you, courtesy and discretion forgotten. He hugs you briefly, then kisses you on the cheek and brings your hand to his lips.

Remounting his horse he rides away down the carriage way as you watch. He does not look back and you stay until he is no longer in sight before you turn and walk back to the house. Only then do we witness the depth of despair evident on your face.

PART III

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Douai

Summer, 1710

Sedition

Dark lines upon the earth which wait to move. Dark lines dug deeply into the earth before the fort.

Dark lines of circumvallation, lines of death.

Rows of heavy guns, monsters that shine in the moonlight, lie resting in place after their long journey down the River Duele. They wait, ready to unleash their wrath at the will of their masters upon the walls of the enemy.

Distant guards look down upon us from atop the high walls of the fortress that hides the mediaeval city of Douai occupied by the French General Albergotti and about eight-thousand troops. The guards can see our flickering campfires and watch us as we watch them. I stand outside my tent on the slight rise where the Duke has his quarters. In the light of a low waning moon I look over the vast plain that stretches before the star-shaped walls

of the fortress. The only indication of the city is a muted glow just visible beyond the high walls.

Peace is close enough to make everyone edgy and restless. Disillusionment is my constant companion these days, stirring thoughts and ideas to emerge unbidden in my mind. Thoughts I take care to stifle before they become a recognisable shape and disturbance, born by doubts I am reluctant to acknowledge to myself, by sanity of reasoning. This siege will be long as it was at Tounai and Mons.

The fortified city is situated over the Rivers' Scarpe and Duele that flow through it and around it. The walls are high and crenellated with bastions and glacis, scarps and counterscarps, the impenetrability of it broken only by heavy gates which lead into and out of the city. Inside is said to be a pleasant place, full of stone and timbered houses on streets and squares interspersed with trees. It is Louis XIV's favourite city, has long been important for trade as well as intellectual and religious learning. The seat of Catholic power in France, it is full of churches, a university, convents and monasteries, seminaries of theology and learning; a well-known centre of training for priests to be sent back to Protestant England and Ireland since the time of Queen Elizabeth. The Jesuit priest that had hidden in Thomas Ashe's house in Yorkshire most probably would have been trained here, within these walls. Here the Douai Bible was printed, the text for Catholic faith and teaching, the printing of which was still forbidden in England. And here Gerard, the Jesuit priest and brother of Ellen would have been taught. Here he lives, teaching at the seminary.

Ellen is within the city beyond the walls. Her letter was waiting for me in London before I left for the Continent. I lifted the seal of the ash tree with my pen knife and smoothed out the fine paper to see her even sloping hand. Her spirit emanated from the words in front of me, strong enough to settle around my heart, claiming it yet again.

Immediately she was before me, standing there, beside me, talking to me, her arms around me again. It was as if we had never been apart, and yet we were so much apart, the walls between us as high as the fortress before me.

Dear Colonel,

Our last parting was painful. I must write even though you may not wish it. I have been to Ireland to see the family of my first husband in Limerick. Thoughts of you have not been far from my mind, so I wish to tell you that I have come to a decision. Father Gerard, my brother, has been in Ireland briefly but has since returned to Douai in France where he teaches at the Seminaire des Irlandais ou de St. Patrice. His spiritual advice for me has been invaluable in my recovery after Thomas's and William's deaths. He suggested that I too go to Douai into a retreat at the convent of the Carthusians or Dominicans. It means I will be near him. This will give me time to think and come to terms with my loss and the question of my future. Here, I hope to find the spiritual solace that I have been seeking for some time. The convents and monasteries in England and Ireland are closed, so it is not possible for me to experience spiritual comfort there. Only in France do we have the freedom to practice our faith as we wish. For once in my life I am truly happy at the thought of what lies ahead. My dear Colonel, I know perhaps, that this news is not what you wish to hear. You will always, always be in my heart. My prayers and thoughts are with you and always will be.

Ellen,

Lady Ashe.

I threw the letter across the table in frustration. There was no way I could warn her about the next campaign. But she must have known the armies would be in the area.

Douai. She may as well be in gaol.

Isaac joins me in my silent survey of the dark hulk that blots out the moonlit horizon. He is the only one on the Duke's staff whom I trust, as mistrust is rife between us all, largely created by the Duke of Argyll who emphasises and plays upon the Duke's so called weaknesses. There are now two definite factions of distinction between the men surrounding both Dukes' which is alarming and trying.

"This is futile," I grumble to Isaac, both of us looking at the ominous black hulk before us. "A waste of money and men."

"I agree, but we had better not let anyone else hear us say it," Isaac warns.

Discontent sits upon our shoulders and weighs us down. We keep to ourselves and do our duty, careful in our behaviour and conversations, as there are spies for both sides within the ranks. One is Abercrombie, now Sir James for his services to Lord Orkney and the Duke, I presume, or his services to somebody for something. His vigil of me still exists, but now he watches everyone, his eyes everywhere, ears always open and quick, ready to pick up the slightest inkling of disloyalty, the slightest doubt or wrongdoing that may be apparent. Working in the General's quarters is like walking upon ice. The tension is high, the slightest foot wrong means instant death, of career at least. Instead, of the usual

close and supportive camaraderie that has always been there, now there is withdrawal and silence with an accompanying low morale.

Cousin Nassau, is no longer with us but sweating under the sun in Spain. After Malplaquet, within quarters, he openly expressed his dissatisfaction about the battle, rashly within earshot of all who would listen and when the campaign resumed we found that he had been banished to Spain. The graveyard of the army.

“The Duke sends all his enemies there,” Isaac remarked at the time. The fact that I was distantly related to Rochford does not go unnoticed. I feel marked. I know I am under surveillance.

“The Duke is privately despondent,” Isaac says. “All you have to do is look at him, let alone listen to what is being said to him by the Generals.”

“Prince Eugene still supports him loyally.”

“He is the only one who understands him.”

My arms folded across my chest, I nod in agreement in the semi-darkness as I gaze at the dark fortress.

The Duke is surrounded by a group of loyal officers including myself, but my disillusionment is becoming strong enough to disturb me. Even I am concerned about the Duke’s increasing indecisiveness where once he had shown firm decision and risk taking capabilities. Marlborough is alone in his responsibility, in this mass of men around him, alone in his ideas and plans, alone in this period of his life after so much success and adulation.

He is estranged from many of his officers and from the Queen who rules England with a crippled viewpoint of mind and body, easily swayed by the Tories, those enemies of Marlborough. Physically she is so bloated and riddled with gout that she can only be

moved from place to place by carriage or chair. Everyone says she will not live much longer. Who will succeed her? Rumours abound about that too. Some still tout the Duke's name. Lord Godolphin is fast losing his influence in Court. The Duke is undermined in every area.

To get through the ordeal of days, weeks, months ahead, however long it takes, my mind must remain clear and untrammelled, I tell myself. My watch is that of the Duke's life and my own, but the worry of my future is constantly in the back of my mind. It jostles with my reasoning, ready to overtake my good sense if I am not careful.

Marlborough paces in one direction within his campaign tent. Argyll paces in the other direction outside the tent. We, their staff, caught up between the restless energy and friction between the two, are stung into a tangible silence as if waiting for a grenade to explode. Tension is ready to erupt between staff on the slightest pretext or suspicion, tearing apart the fragile remnants of friendships already eroded. Our futures are now uncertain, where once we had been in brilliant accord with Marlborough's ideas, now they are threatened by dissension, division and extinction. The Duke is starting to distance himself from the Whigs and that includes the Whig officers, of which I am one, simply through my association with Father.

News comes of the sermon in St. Paul's by one of Marlborough's critics, Dr. Henry Sacheverell which leaves no doubt of public opinion. He has succeeded in stirring up Tory sympathies and riling the Whigs. The Queen appears to be suddenly aware she is a Stuart and a grand-daughter of a martyred king who had been torn from his throne by the Parliamentarians of whom, the Whigs, are considered to be the descendants. For all the Whigs present allegiance to the throne, because of past history, some are of the opinion that

they are capable of doing the same as their Parliamentary ancestors again. It is Tory propaganda, rife within the camp.

Nothing and no one is safe anymore. I am relieved that I have left instructions and money with Father for the buying of my regiment. I have sold my land in Edlington that Father had given me, and the little I had left in Dublin. Not because I have been badgered by John and Father, not because I am betraying the Duke, but because I need to secure my future. I just hope Marlborough sees it this way. Any day now I shall hear that the news will come through from the Secretary-at-War, with the Duke's approval of course. At least I will have that, when the world I presently inhabit, finally disintegrates. The army which I so love for its order, fairness and discipline under Marlborough's command, surely the wisest and most fair of men, has gone truly mad.

Argyll strides up to Marlborough's campaign tent, campaign wig flying, red in the face, he demands to see the Duke, but does not wait for me to seek permission and announce him. He pushes his way in and confronts Marlborough, bellowing bull-like, as usual, for all to hear.

Panton and I follow Argyll and stand beside him ready to escort him out, but Marlborough waves us away.

"Marshall Villars is on his way with his troops and you know from your spies the strength and appearance of them, that they are a real threat, and you wait! What for? If we do not start our attack on Douai now, we will have another Malplaquet. They will find us here and slaughter us. You hesitated too long there, as you are here."

Standing at attention inside the door of the tent, keeping my face impassive, I cringe inwardly at the Scottish Duke's outspokenness. As much as I do not agree with his method

of message giving, I know Argyll is right and perhaps has reason. If the French Field Marshal found the army on the plain before the fortress we could be overrun and the fortress, not taken, would still belong to France. He is only voicing that which is making all of us uneasy. The sightings of Marlborough's spies had been common knowledge for days. The bumptious Scot is capable of taking the command of the army. Marlborough knows that it is in Argyll's mind to do so. He is voluble and strong in command. He has already undermined the Duke in the House of Lords in London, where many respect and take notice of him.

Marlborough listens to him grim-faced then dismisses him and withdraws into himself to think his words over; another delay which will only infuriate Argyll further.

Marshall Villars, within days, has his army lined up on the plain of Lens. They are prepared for battle, his thousands facing our thousands ready for slaughter. Once again, Marlborough mindful of influences back home and the murder of Malplaquet still fresh in his mind, hesitates and the opportunity for battle is lost. Argyll, consequently mutters, paces, curses, swears, talks non-stop to anyone who will listen, rides amongst us, unsettles us, divides us within ourselves with his fiery and persuasive arguments, overrides everyone siding with Marlborough, while the Duke hangs back, calm, worried, indecisive and silent. But, as if in compliance to Argyll, days later the deep trenches between the gates in the walls of the fortress erupt in fire as the bombardment commences. Soon it is constant. It shakes the earth and echoes over the soft summer countryside for miles, changing the face of it from heaven to hell.

Days pass, dust-filled, permeated with the smell of gunsmoke that rises from the blockades and trenches. The ground leaps in response to the throw of mortars and grenades. Underground mines explode and weaken the walls of the fortress. The noise

ricochets over the countryside. Albergotti and his soldiers make the Allies work for the fortress. They know it is only a matter of time, the determination of the Duke's time.

An enemy, besides sedition, stalks the camp with stealth, unwillingly recruiting members, touching all those who are vulnerable — typhus.

Parsons runs to my tent, breathless, his face ashen. "Colonel, Blake's ill. He is delirious."

Blake had not attended to me as usual in the morning, and I wondered where he was as I dressed and made do for myself. I run after Parsons and find Blake thrashing around on his camp bed in his tent, raving in delirium, his face livid with rash. He has gone down with typhus as have many in the Duke's quarters. Marlborough is already suffering from loss of his personal staff, servants, groom and coachman all being ill. The disease is spreading through the ranks down on the plain engaged in the bombardment of the walls, overburdening the field hospitals while killing many men.

Parsons shakes with fear beside me as we gaze at the hapless Blake. I tell him to run for the surgeon. Within the hour I watch my loyal manservant carted off on a stretcher to the hospital. I wonder if I shall see him again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Douai

Summer, 1710

Illness

The fortress stands silent, like a beleaguered man-o-war still smoking from the assault. The collection of stinking weary Aides in dirty uniforms ride behind Marlborough and Eugene, the Princes' of Anhalt and Orange as well as the Generals, towards the plain littered with the aftermath of the siege.

The men line up in formation, companies well depleted within their regiments amongst the debris of blown and tumbled earth, freshly dug graves and mutilated bodies, covered ditches and waterways, silent guns and deep trenches. The procession rides towards the gate of the newly taken fortress. In the distance upon the air I begin to hear the throb of drums and the pipe of the hautbois which gradually increases in volume as Albergotti's men march steadily out through the gate with safe conduct to continue into the countryside.

The French Marshal joins Marlborough and the rest of us as we ride through the *Porte Notre Dame* into the *Rue Notre Dame*, a long street lined shadowed by cool dusty trees. People line the streets in curiosity, their faces pale and dirt-grimed. This time there

are no shouts or tears of joy, just silence. Marlborough has outdone himself in destroying Louis's city. It has almost been reduced to a smoking shell in parts.

The devastation of this lovely city appals me as we ride through. The hospitals are full and the people are hungry and tired from the constant bombardment. For once I feel no pride in being part of this victorious party.

A feeling of numbness, one which has been with me since the campaign started is now fully entrenched in my being and I feel nothing but disquiet and dissension. A deep feeling of weariness accompanied by despair and melancholy weighs me to the saddle. The sea of heads that surround us seethes and pulsates in my vision. I grip the flanks of my horse hard with my knees just to stay seated. He snorts restlessly at the firmness of my touch.

The Duke and his entourage are joined by the governor and bureaucrats of the city and we are escorted to the *Hôtel de Ville*. When I dismount from my horse my legs buckle beneath me. Isaac and I climb the stairs. They are as high as a mountain. Alarmed by my state, Isaac grabs me as I stagger beside him. But I shake off his hand. I do not want Marlborough to see my weakness.

The behaviour of the civilised conqueror is apparent as the Duke puts on a lavish banquet for his enemy Marshall and the officials of the city. The high-ceilinged rooms echo with the high explosion of laughter and talk, in a mix of languages between enemies. The underlying tension momentarily relieved in the agreeable and easy consumption of French wine.

The sound is harsh upon my ears. I feel the effect of standing on my feet for hours after being on horseback all day. My throat is parched, my thirst unquenchable, my head so heavy and aching that I can hardly keep it balanced between my shoulders.

Twice Isaac has looked upon me with concern

“Richard, you look ill,” He states, disturbed by my rapid consumption of wine, at my face streaming with sweat, my shaking body which I cannot control.

“Leave me be,” I reply.

The smell of wine mixed with the crush of unwashed bodies, cooked and stale food, beeswax and bombardment of noise, finally overcomes me. I need air.

I run past all those who stand in my way and head for the door, hoping that fresh air will restore my senses. As I stumble down the stone steps I am aware of running footsteps behind me.

The courtyard is lit with torches that flicker from wall sconces on the arcaded walls. I hardly notice the guards’ posts, the carriages and coachmen, the sedan-chairs, the men milling around the fire, talking, laughing, waiting for their celebrating masters. I run into the recesses of a stone arcade and lean against a column, gulping deep breaths of air as I shake uncontrollably with rigors.

The moon dances above me, the light pierces my eyes and addles my brain even further. Isaac rushes to me, grabs me and turns me towards the light of a torch above my head.

“My God. Molesworth, you are covered in a rash.”

My legs refuse to hold me any longer. I slump against my friend as the world finally races away from me.

I enter a deep dark cave.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Douai

Summer, 1710

Levelling

Pulled, pushed, buffeted, held down, wrenched into place. Somebody else controls my body.

The disease claims my body makes me shudder and writhe with the dance of fever.

My will has gone, my control is non-existent. I am possessed and tormented by the demon that fires up my brain and body. I am jostled and jerked. My eyes cannot penetrate the mist that surrounds me, though I can hear Isaac's voice amongst the babble. He sounds anxious and harsh. Many hands grab me and lay me upon a stretcher. I feel, with surprising objectivity, that I am dying, and I am unable to summon the strength to cry out in protest at the realisation.

Torch lights dance and sway off passing walls, shine in my eyes, the flames shorten then lengthen, irritating me. The ride is rough and urgent.

A bell tolls in the distance amidst the echo of running feet on stone. An iron gate slams with a clang and a white figure emerges through the mist in front of my face as if out of the stone wall behind it, then dissolves and reappears again. Then another, and another and even more stone people come to life before me ready to control my body as I no longer can.

The air is full of the French tongue, fast and indistinct. I cannot understand. The stretcher is tipped. I roll heavily onto the white linen of a bed. Someone lifts my head and then buries it in the softness of a pillow. Firm hands lift and turn me.

The beings of stone strip me of wig, coat, waistcoat and breeches, neckcloth and shirt, my sword clatters to the floor; everything is for burning, I hear one say and I lie naked, hot yet cold, my skin white and blotched with fever. Vulnerable in the presence of these active stone people, I am unable to summon enough strength to cover myself in protection or modesty. A shock of cold water upon my face clears my vision. When I glance down at my naked body I find the deep mulberry rash of typhus has marked me well. Above my head I see a coved ceiling with a river dissecting the stones. It looks suspiciously like one of Marlborough's maps of land, dividing the allies from the enemy who now control me, the division between right and wrong, left and right all around me.

Strong arms hold me down upon the bed. White arms emerge from heavy sleeves that reveal the rough grain of woven linen. Arms like branches from a tree. A stone tree. Men's faces peer at me from the depths of dark hoods. Crucifixes hang about their necks dangling over me. One hangs high above me on the wall below the river that runs through the valley of stone. This is my crucifixion; only I am not on the cross.

These muffled figures wish to possess me. I lash out with fury and once more they grab me and hold me down as I struggle beneath them on the bed.

Sweat and dirt are washed from my skin. They lift my head and put a cup to my lips. Firm hands touch my ravaged body, but the touch is also soft and caring and makes me think of Mother, but she is not here. I wish she were. These men who are my enemies, these Papists who lock themselves away in stone gaols in worship of their Papist God. They have to be crushed for the good of England. I tell them that at the top of my voice, but

they quieten me with kindness. I release myself into their care. I wonder why they should do this for me, their enemy. They pull a fresh linen nightshirt down over my body.

Isaac's face, a worried, featureless orb as white as the moon, hovers over me and talks to me. I cannot understand his words anymore than I can understand the rapid French. I thrash out at him and yell at him, in a delirious nonsensical Irish voice. Someone leads Isaac away. I call for him to come back. Hands push me back onto the bed, my head into the pillow. I am covered in a sheet as if wrapped in a shroud.

My horse has wings like Pegasus. We fly high over the field. Mines explode far beneath us. A long line of undulating red flows below me on the plain. Like the ragged edges of a bloodied ocean it surges and retreats, revealing disintegrated lines and rows of naked soldiers impaled upon yellow spikes in the fields. I am relieved I am not amongst them. Unwilling to witness any more I turn my winged steed and leave them far below to die as I climb into the distant peaceful blue sky.

My skin burns. I am assaulted with hot patches and I let out a yell of pain. The stone people use plasters and clysters to tear the demons of illness from my body. Galen, that Roman sadist; he persecutes me as he persecutes George.

Jesuits in black. Jesuits.

One of them hangs over me, watching me. I am in Scanlan's cabin back in Meath. Once more I think I have retreated back into the world of delirium. The priest's pale aesthetic face is familiar. His voice has a soft Irish burr as he gives orders to one of the stone people to bleed me and apply yet more plasters and cups. Perhaps he is determined to kill me. I know his voice, his face, his steady gaze, his eyes. I reach out and grab the man's arm as he bends over me.

"I know you," I say hoarsely. "You were at Scanlan's in Ireland. You're a priest."

He studies me for a few minutes as if recollecting. “That’s right. I remember you. Richard Molesworth. My name is Gerard de Lacy. You suspected then I was a priest and yet you did not report me to the local magistrate when you could have. I’m grateful for that and the Scanlans’ were too.”

“Why treat me so well, I’m your enemy?” I whisper, puzzled.

The deep grey eyes survey me seriously. Ellen. The same eyes as Ellen. She looks upon me. I am confused. I must still be delirious, or I have gone to hell.

“We are all children of God. We vow to give the best care to all patients. The Jesuit treatments are best. I’m well trained in them.”

His reasoning is off, I tell him. “Ellen?” I ask.

The priest doesn’t answer me. I see a gleam of understanding in his eyes. I cannot say anymore and submit to the power of the priest in the silence of my weakness, hating that I am here, hating that I am under his care.

They force my mouth open as I protest. Foul stuff assaults my tongue and slides down my throat. My stomach turns. I heave repeatedly until exhausted and my vomit turns dark green and bitter on my tongue. After that there is nothing left.

The sharp pain of the lancet upon my arm clears my head. I am held in a vice-like grip as the cut vein releases a rope of blood that pours into a pewter bleeding cup held by the Jesuit. Blood sacrificed in the effort to live. I can only object mutely, my throat raw and my tongue too swollen to speak.

Night becomes day becomes night becomes day. I am hardly aware of how many days and nights have past as they go on forever. The closeness of death sighs at me from the walls. A gust of air shortens and splutters the vigil candle before a small statue of the Virgin Mary in a niche. I wait for the flame to go out but instead it grows and holds its

shape and colour. I keep my eyes upon it until it eventually sinks into darkness only to be replaced by another.

Light, shadow, shade then brightness. Forms, mix, blend and intermix, freeze then dissolve, in and out, sharp yet soft, fixed yet clear, jagged then blurred. Hands turn me, wash, change, freshen and soothe me. Jesuit hands, stone monk's hands, hands from the walls.

I am in the woods at Edlington, beneath bright red trees. In the church where flowers fall freely, covering and smothering me. Strange and vibrant flowers, sharply variegated with colours from places yet undiscovered except in this strange world I inhabit. They scatter and pile on top of me. I shift trying to fight the suffocation of colour and perfume that threatens to overwhelm me. Petals encase me, large, unfolding with long stamens that drip yellow liquid over me which runs down my red skin and seep through every crack, crevice and crenellation of torture that has become my body, the vessel of my soul. That is, if I have one. Despite Father de Lacy's reassurance I am doubtful.

Ellen sits beside me and holds my hand within hers. I hold on tightly to the softness almost crushing it in desperation. If I let go she will disappear like everyone else who disappears into the walls. I wake to find I am clutching the sheet. A weight of emptiness drags me down again. I sink into depths so deep I feel I will never emerge. I hear my name called and see Mother standing at the end of my bed.

"Richard, I am so worried about you. I wish you would come home."

She extends her arms towards me but then as I sit up she is transformed into you, Mary, then Letty who stands before me, her arms full of bluebells gathered from Edlington Wood. I surface briefly into the world I am normally a part of, but there is no Mother, Mary or Letty, only the cold walls in front of me and a shaft of light through the cell

window. The bare branches of stone hold me down as water is forced into my mouth and trickles down my throat. I slip into endless sleep.

The light is clear and cold, soft with evening shadows which fill my cell. I have emerged from a strange land. My bed is a narrow pallet, my feet lie beneath the alcove which contains the statue of the Virgin. The flame still glows. Above that hangs a cross below the river running through the map of masonry above my head. It is the Danube, I decide, that lies before the Schellenburg, the burial place of Murray. It is the plain between the woods of Malplaquet, the burial place of Ashe. The maps are displayed before my eyes, imprinted in the stone roof, clear enough to bring back pain of loss. I close my eyes to stem a rush of unbidden tears.

Night time peels back layers of my innermost being. I am able to recognise the futility of that which has become me. This cell is as barren as my soul. Silence settles in darkness only broken by the one candle and the throw of light from the wall torches in the corridor outside. I can hear hushed voices but cannot tell if they are real or imagined. My world is this stone womb in which my body is cocooned. The crisis has past and I am lucid, disbelieving that I have survived. I am suspended in a heightened awareness of sounds, light and colour, of shadow and shade that make up my restored life. I have climbed from the depths of a great pit and now rest at the top in a well of light.

Ellen is beside me her hand upon mine, her face lit by the candle she holds above my head and for a moment I think that once again I have been overcome by delirium. But my mind is clear and above my head I can see every stone slotted into every other stone, as clearly as I can see the love and relief in Ellen's eyes as she looks at me. She doesn't speak

and leaves me with the tolling of a distant bell. I do not wish to think or reason in the silence that follows.

She is not a dream, she is real and she comes to me time and again as I drift in and out of my new world. Recovery is a priority. My body is unwilling to obey me and I find myself uncomfortably weak. I am wasted physically, my legs and arms thin, my once large face now narrow and gaunt with days of beard upon my jaw. My hair usually close cropped, is a tangled mess upon my head. A monk appears carrying a razor and a bowl of water to shave me. I am not surprised but all the same I protest.

“Surely, I can do this for myself?” I question, the man standing over me in his heavy cream robes.

“You can barely sit up,” he answers, arranging items on the small table beside my bed. He grabs my arm and helps me to sit, piling pillows behind me. “I am well practised at this,” he answers, to allay my fears or, in other words, do as you are told. So I succumb. Such vigorous activity brings on a deep exhausted sleep. I awake to think I am still dreaming. The monk has turned into Ellen who sits beside my bed counting the rosary beads that slip through her fingers, her lips moving in silent prayer.

“I met the Jesuit priest, your brother?”

She nods. “He said that you were very ill and you had mentioned my name.”

Her presence brings peace and healing. I slip in and out of sleep until she leaves me alone again to study the walls and ceiling. We have not exchanged one word of worth between us.

Time, in this place, is regulated by the tolling of a bell, as if on board a man-o-war, only this world does not roll or pitch. Not now. After the sound of bells there is the distant sound of chanting and the singing of voices in prayer, something never heard on board a

ship. I am in a world of organised religion, a monastery or a convent, I know not which, but now I recognise the muffled stone creatures that surrounded me in my illness are monks and nuns. They are silent as they glide in and out of my cell, only speaking when spoken. They practise the discipline of the eyes, especially the nuns who do not look at me when I speak to them. Ellen next appears at my side I question her and she tells me I am in the Monastery of the Dominicans and I have been here nearly three weeks. A groan of exasperation escapes me at the thought of lost time.

“What are you doing here?” I ask alarmed, thinking she has finally gone mad and entered the convent.

“I was in retreat in the convent of the Chartreux. It was destroyed in the bombardment of the city. Many nuns were killed, I was lucky to escape alive. Gerard took me first to the Jesuit seminary for safety, then brought me here to the Monastery where I have been helping the nuns, monks and priests nurse the ill and wounded. Most of the city has been destroyed. The Duke obviously did not want to leave much standing. Typhus has run rampant through the armies. There have been many civilians ill as well as soldiers. The monasteries and convents still standing, are overflowing with wounded and ill. I had to give help where I could.”

“Your brother is helping too?”

“He’s helping the monks as many of the priests are. The Jesuits are trained in medicine and apothecary because they go into the mission fields. There are many Carthusian and Dominican monks who are Jesuit priests.”

“But why nurse me and others like me when we are your enemies?” Such an anomaly has always puzzled me.

“We are Christians, Colonel. Like you are. You are our fellow men whom we love. Christ teaches us to love our enemies.”

I am an enemy again. She is preaching at me as Gerard did.

Silence fills my cell as I digest this philosophy. I have been trained to kill my enemies not love them. The words in my heart do not venture as far as my tongue, as instinctively, I fear she may flee at my mind's disquiet.

“Are you here to stay?” I ask, needing to hear it come from her lips, though I know the answer. It is obvious in the commitment of her manner, the calm of her eyes that reflect the serenity of her soul. That reflection which had attracted me in the first place when she had been nursing Thomas is back and even stronger. In that reflection I recognise, not without some sorrow, the light and shadow of my own life.

Isaac appears in my cell dressed in the bright signal of his uniform which jars my eyesight making me wince. I have to shield my eyes as he stands in a shaft of sunshine that pools about him the stone floor. At least he looks well and clean.

“What news of Blake?” I ask, wondering if my loyal servant has lived or died.

“He is recovered. He is better and back in camp. He and Parson's are anxious about you, wanting to attend you, but Dr. Lawrence has forbidden them until you are completely well. You have both been lucky, so many died with the typhus. The Duke escaped the illness even though many of his servants were stricken. He was relieved when he heard you had come through the worst. He has been concerned for you. I have been dispatched many times to find out and report, but each time you were completely unaware that I was here. He sends his best wishes to you and hopes to see you soon. I really thought that you were going to die, my dear M. I'm relieved to find you recovering.”

“Where’s the army at the moment?” I ask as I struggle to sit up on the jumble of pillows at my back. My head spins at any movement.

“We are encamped between the fortresses of St.Venant and Aire, at the moment attacking the fortress of Bethune. Nothing has changed within quarters.” Isaac, aware that walls have ears lowers his voice to a whisper. “The Duke is being besieged by Argyll. He criticised Marlborough for not taking Arras, which we all thought would have been possible. But Marlborough is under a great deal of strain and is cautious. He is not giving anyone any excuse to try and relieve him of command. You and I know that is what Argyll’s waiting for, any excuse. He is eager to take command. Conditions on the field have been bad. We have been under constant rain for the past weeks. Many officers who were hoping for promotion have been disappointed. It is rumoured that you have your regiment, but I cannot be sure. I have written to your father at Marlborough’s request to tell him of your illness and tell him that you are recovering. He sent me a very anxious letter back. ”

Jevereau stays with me for some time. I enjoy the pleasure of his hearty company again which makes me ever more impatient to get back to camp, even if everything does sound the same, if not worse. He clasps my hand in farewell, advising me to recover slowly so that I miss the whole misguided mismatch of a campaign which Argyll is determined to undermine and to which Marlborough seems determined to fall victim.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Douai

Summer:1710

Recovery

The nuns and monks attend me without malice or prejudice, their manners calm, their voices soft. But I am used to a direct forthright gaze and conversation, not modest aversion and they are starting to irritate me with their ever present humility. However, they do exude a depth of peace, signifying strength of spirit, something I can only aspire to, with no hope of attaining, so it succeeds in overwhelming my weakened senses. How they achieve such inner and outer peace is a mystery to me.

My background provides me with little understanding of the trappings, the richness, the ritual and spiritual possession of Popery. My adherence to the Church of England is superficial and minimal, based on tradition and family honour. But these people seem one within themselves, their wills buried within this place, their habits covered by black scapulars, their heads encased in heavy black veils or hoods.

The bell governs their lives. They stop their tasks and process in pairs, the nuns behind the monks, through corridors into the arcaded cloister towards the vaulted chapel of this monastery. The ceremonies that surround their lives create an intense fascination that I cannot understand in its foreignness. I ask Ellen, as she tends my needs, the meaning of the endless bells and she tells me it is to summon the community to the ritual of Divine Office,

depending upon the time of day: Tierce, Sext, None, Vespers and finally in the evening, Compline. This last bell signals the hush that infiltrates corridors, halls, cells, refectory, rooms, dormitories, the chapter house, as briefly, the monastery sleeps.

I can only guess at the solitary lives of these men and women in their cells and dormitories where they choose to sleep, live and pray.

My observance is a biased and somewhat suspicious glimpse of the ritual and order by which they live, too strange and overwhelming for my simplistic Puritanical background. Their lives of peace and piety are as unreal to me as my life of warring, ambition, the way of the world is to them. I am trapped here, in this enforced peace while war rages outside, nevertheless, I am a willing prisoner for the time being. Despite myself, I find I can understand Ellen's attraction to this place where one's soul, if one has one, has time to regenerate. But, is she too, a willing prisoner?

The small cell whirls around me as I take a few steps from my bed. My legs are weak, hardly holding me. Determined, I try and walk further every day. Soon I find I can walk through the corridors crowded with ill men and out into the cloister with its bright patch of green, playing fountain and stone walls. A few monks wander backwards and forwards along the well trodden paths, their hands tucked safely into the wide sleeves of their habits, their hooded heads bent, unwilling to look up and praise the brightness of the day. Intent on humility, they have forgotten that God has given them eyes to see His glories.

"Colonel, are you sure you are well enough to be out here?" I turn at the sound of Ellen's voice, and though I am dressed in clothes supplied by the monastery, ill-fitting breeches, voluminous shirt and a jacket that swims on me, she covers me with a shawl as if

I am an old man of ninety. I realise that is how I must look to her, old and frail. “The days are drawing in and it’s colder, even in the sunshine.”

I shrug off her concern. “The army must be moving on soon. I must join them.”

“When you are well enough.”

“I am now.”

“We will see what the physician says,” she answers, and draws me down to sit beside her upon one of the stone seats within the cloister. To have her so close to me makes my heart beat like a drum.

“What of your plans?” I ask, holding my breath for her answer, annoyed at my physical and mental weakness.

“I’m staying here. I find the peace that I have craved for so long to be here in the convent, but I think that you may already be aware of that,” she answers.

Resentment fills me, a feeling that comes easily to me in my weakened state. Her brother has imprisoned her soul and body within these walls where she cannot be touched.

“You’re controlled by your brother.”

She presses her lips together as if to stop a retort at my outburst. “That’s not the case, I’m ready, at long last to do God’s will.”

“The church controls you,” I persist. “What of your feelings? Your life? What of our lives?” I ask and reach out to take her hand in mine, but she pulls away from me.

Inwardly, I rail against the power of the institution which regards failings of weakness, or feelings of human love in its members, as sinful, if they step outside the laws of the church.

“This is my life,” she explains. “I am already a postulant in the Dominican order,” she reinforces, adding to my inner turmoil.

“No.” A shout rings out.

It echoes around the cloister and startles her as well as myself. I did not realise I had enough strength to raise my voice. Doves roosting in the walls take fright with a flap of wings and spin upwards into the patch of sky above us. Passing monks pause in their tracks, then continue on, with barely a raised hood.

“You must try and understand, Richard,” she continues. “I have prayed deeply about it and have sought the advice of the Mother Abbess and the confessor for the convent. I have talked for hours with my brother. I have always been drawn to this life and now God is putting it in front of me and I cannot walk away. I must obey my conscience and do God’s will.”

Reason and understanding are beyond me in my state. My feelings are on the surface, anger easily expressed.

“But I want you to marry me,” I say, with vehemence, surprising myself.

Ellen’s eyes glow with determination. “I have already told you. I can’t leave my faith anymore than you can leave yours. There’s no future for us. Our convictions are bred into us and eventually they will cause conflict. With a Papist wife you could never advance in the army as you wish, and you know that mixed marriages are against the law in Ireland,” she pauses and looks at me. I am too crushed to answer. “I can’t worship as I wish in England. You cannot be expected to go against the wishes of your family and alienate yourself from them. There can never be anything between us. You know that, deep down you know it. You have always known it. That’s why you did not step up. You let Thomas marry me. My faith is stronger than any love I bear for you. I will stay here, in this place of peace, rather than in a world where there is little peace. You are my sacrifice, my penance.”

“Penance?” I ask astounded. “For what?”

She is turning our love into a sin. Her voice is low and firm, her gaze unwavering.

“For straying, when I should never have done so. For hurting Thomas when he loved me so much. For being weak and loving you as I should never have done, even as I still do, when it cannot be.”

“Your brother has influenced you, brought you here deliberately, played upon your love for me. He knows you love me enough to marry me. He knows you better than you know yourself.” I plead, reduced by her futile reasoning.

“This is my future, there is no other way. In a few weeks I take my first vows and enter the novitiate.”

Despair resurrects itself. She is further from me than I thought.

“What about this?” I ask, pulling at the cross she gave me, still around my neck.

“You gave me this for love and protection. Does it mean anything to you now?”

“Of course, it always will,” she answers. She shakes her head at me and covers her face with her hands.

I am on my knees before her.

“I am not your enemy, Nell.”

She pulls away from me and walks away out of the cloister.

The thought of life without Ellen is life without hope. I sit on the flagstones propped against the stone seat, trying to recover some strength to return to my wretched cell, wondering why I thought there was any hope.

“What are you doing, sir?” The monk stands in the doorway, his mouth agape as he watches me pull on my coat.

“I have spent enough time in this place of inaction. I’m leaving,” I answer. By the look on his face he thinks I am mad. Perhaps I am, just a little.

“You cannot go yet, Colonel, the physician hasn’t discharged you.”

“I must return to the Duke,” I insist, my tone of voice demanding that he let me be.

“But you must be declared fit; it is the way,” he insists, stammering and stuttering under my relentless gaze.

His French has an Irish accent and his eyes are blue and sunfilled when there is no sun. His humble demeanour, punctuated by his insistence, annoys me, damn him.

“Then man, get me the physician,” I order, turning to him and looking at him directly.

He disappears at the run. I am left a raging lump leaning against the bed knowing I have a long journey back to camp but determined nothing will stop me from leaving.

The clatter of footsteps on the flagstones in the corridor outside pulls me up and I straighten myself to look as strong as I can when the physician walks in through the door. He frowns at me from under his short wig and I frown back at him, bareheaded and shaven. I recognise him from when I was blistered and bled, he had watched the monks carrying out the procedure and had then examined me quickly with his eyes but had not come near me to lay his hands upon me. I have not seen him since. Physicians are not my favourite people with their poisonous potions and distant doubtful diagnoses. His mouse-like face twitches and he looks ridiculous in his puffed up importance. If I was not so desperate to be out of the place I would laugh in his face.

“Colonel, you’re not ready for discharge yet, another week, perhaps?”

“I need to be with the Duke now. I’m well enough.”

“The Duke doesn’t need an invalid to carry out his orders. Things are progressing well I believe.”

“If I stay another week I shall go mad. If you don’t give me permission to leave I shall go anyway, never mind what you say,” I answer shortly.

His frown deepens then he turns to the hovering monk and says something in French which I can’t catch. The monk again scuttles from the cell.

The physician and I stare at each other in defiance, then he points imperiously with one finger towards the chamber pot under my bed. I know what he wants. Mercifully he leaves me. For one moment I think he is going to stay and observe me at my most private of functions. He returns a few minutes later to examine my piss and the form of my stools. My private moments have not been mine for some time and his inquisitiveness as to the contents of the pot only serves to disgust me further. He sees the expression on my face as he emerges from his task.

“You’re in a hurry,” he observes.

“I am,” I answer, wondering if he has ascertained that from the contents of the pot as well.

He eyes me up and down, taking in my wasted frame swimming in clothes too large, still keeping his distance, his pudgy hands folded on his waistcoat. He knows men of ambition. I am not the first one he has met; I will not be the last. Always in a hurry, men of ambition. In that respect, I have recovered. He recognises that too. Perhaps that is also in the pot.

“I am reluctant to let you go, but if I try and stop you, you will go anyway. I shall give you a letter for the Duke. You are to have limited duties. You still need rest,” and then, in his medical wisdom, he pronounces me fit to serve my lord Duke.

I bow to him in sheer joy. I will soon be on my way.

I run from her, yet I must see her, and yet I should not, but she comes to me.

“You must not go, it’s too soon, you have not fully recovered,” she says, standing in the doorway watching me throw my few belongings into a borrowed valise. “I was concerned when I found out.”

“I think it matters very little to you, really,” I answer peevishly, picking up a borrowed hat and placing it upon my head. It fits. The rest of the clothes I wear are of various sizes, mainly too large, civilian clothes. My uniform, baring my gorget and sword, were burnt to rid them of lice. A pretty picture I must have presented then and do now also.

She greets my statement with silence and I remove the cross from my neck and give it to her.

“He is your God, not mine.”

She takes the cross from me in silence and looks at me as I make for the doorway.

“I believe God has a plan for all of us. I believe I am doing His will,” she adds, in compensation. I stop and look back at her.

“You may have and keep your philosophy, Lady Ashe,” I answer, and bow to her.

She is composed though her lips are trembling. Her formidable strength amazes me. She comes over to me and looks up at me earnestly.

“Remember that I loved you from the first day I saw you at Nördlingen,” she says.

“But if I have you there is death for me, death of my soul. I can’t live if I can’t love you, yet if I love you, I also die. You must try and understand.”

“Yes I do. You will not risk the death of your soul by marrying me. However, I refuse to relinquish you to your God or anyone else. You will always be with me no matter what happens. You will never belong to the church in my eyes because you have taken up

residency, here,” I say, pointing to the place in my chest where I hope my heart resides. “I vow, to you and your brother, that I will survive, with or without you or him or Marlborough, and my self-worth will survive with me. My honour is my life.”

Not daring to even think or look at her I leave her standing in the empty womb of my stone cell.

I step out of darkness into sunshine, climb into the coach ready for the long ride back to Marlborough. The streets are still littered with rubble from the siege, buildings torn and riddled with shot, gaping with large holes from cannonballs. The roads are rough and the coach bounces and shudders over the destroyed cobbles. The siege has been merciless, Marlborough with his usual thoroughness has seen to that. I do not look back as the coach clatters out through the *Porte de Arras* and heads towards the camp. The destruction had been necessary, I reason, the city now belongs once again to the people of Douai after Louis XIV had taken it from them in 1667. The town full of Catholic institutions now belonged to a Protestant country again. The paradox puzzles me but I refuse to think on it. My ambition had returned, nothing must thwart me. My regiment awaits, encamped within the army between the fortified cities of St. Venant, Aire and Arras.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

St. Venant, Aire and Arras

Summer: 1710

Return

The shadows of the wolves and tigers in London manifest themselves in Marlborough's tent, ready to spring at his throat and tear him to pieces. By the look of him they have been here for some time. I stand before him with my letter from the physician in my hand, and he stares at me in disbelief as if I am resurrected from the dead.

"I did not think you would return, Mr. Molesworth," he says, eyeing me cautiously. "I thought you may have wished to go home and recover. It would have been understandable, but I am so pleased to see you, now that you are here."

For all his kind words there is an uneasy air about him as if he is waiting for an unprovoked attack from the enemy. In the dim light of the tent lit only with candle lamps I can see the deep tracks of worry lines around his eyes and mouth. He is now sixty and his appearance betrays his weariness. His eyes, usually clear and alert are dark ringed and bloodshot, the skin on his face, once fair, now mottled and red streaked.

"It is good to have you back, so many of my men have not returned. My coachman and cook, my dog...." His voice trails off and the strain of repressing his feelings distorts his face. After a few seconds he regains his composure. "You're probably aware that we

are attacking the two fortresses, under the command of Prince Anhalt-Dessau and the Prince of Orange.”

“Yes, your Grace, I realised that as soon as I approached the camp.”

The two fortresses are in sight of one another only six miles apart and the camp is between them on the plain. The noise of cannonfire and mortar can be heard for miles before the fortresses or encampment are in sight, the sound ricocheting over the surrounding countryside; how could I not be aware of it? His eyes sweep over me taking in my thin and haggard appearance, my proud uniform swimming upon my frame where once I had filled it out with vitality and muscle. He takes the discharge letter from me and reads it, glancing up at me from beneath his eyebrows.

“The letter says you are not yet fit for duty.”

“I feel I am, your Grace,” I lie.

He doesn’t comment. I suppose my appearance is enough. He draws himself wearily to his feet and approaches his small console to the side of his map table and unlocks it. Papers, documents and correspondence are piled within the drawers and cubicles. He sorts through them. The stoop in his back alarms me. The last time I had seen him, only weeks ago, he had been straight and strong basking in the glory of the taking of Douai. He has aged years in few weeks.

“I have something for you, which no doubt you have been expecting.” He hands me a scroll of paper, tightly bound with ribbon and sealed with the Queen’s seal. My heart leaps as I take it from him.

“I had no idea that you had bought a regiment until I was informed by Sir Robert Walpole, the Secretary-at-War. Such a thing would not have happened once unless I approved first, but then there are a number of things I am no longer privy too, including the

sacking of my Generals until after they have been sacked,” he says wearily, bitterness sharpening his voice.

Shock renders me speechless. Marlborough never speaks in such a fashion to his staff, but since being back in camp I had heard about the scandal of his Generals. Everyone was talking about it. Men who had openly professed their loyalty to him and supported him through many campaigns, had been taken to task. They had had been ordered back to London and had been cashiered for proposing a toast in support of him in camp. The Duke had not known until orders came through from the Secretary-at-War that they had been dismissed from his service and they had to return to London.

“There are spies everywhere and no one is to be trusted. I can therefore understand you wanting promotion and your own regiment, Colonel. I congratulate you on this occasion. It is a promotion you richly deserve,” he says, reverting to his former self.

He frowns and looks at me. I see a fleeting shadow of suspicion darken his expression as to my motives. I realise with some alarm that my loyalty is under question. I bow to him.

“Your grace can be assured of my loyalty,” I say, but I can see he is wary in his regard.

“Quite so, quite so,” he says, almost nonchalantly, with a shrug and a dismissive wave of his hand. “Make sure your regiment is well prepared for the siege. It is needed.”

“Yes, your Grace,” I answer with another bow.

He dismisses me and I leave the tent, the document dated from 11 July from Windsor safely tucked under my arm but the feeling of uneasiness that was with me weeks ago has returned in full force stronger than ever.

“No one is safe,” Isaac ponders staring into the froth of ale in the tankard in front of him in the Aide’s tent as we drink together.

I nod in agreement swallowing the warm bitter liquid and thinking of my Irish regiment of Foot acquired from Colonel Thomas Allen, which I have already visited and have found to be a tired mud encrusted lot of three hundred men.

Once numbering five hundred they have been reduced by illness, wounding, death and desertion, their spirits and morale as bedraggled and haunted as their appearance. They stood to attention as I inspected them accompanied by my Lieutenant-Colonel, Stephen St. John. Doubt, apathy and boredom was imprinted upon their stiff faces, hardened by months in the field, as they looked back at me, summing me up.

What could I know about such hardship, their eyes questioned, when I had been cosseted within Marlborough’s quarters all these years?

They are a well-seasoned lot with instinctive cunning and finely sharpened senses. They are veterans, well drilled, their reflexes fast. Every one of them knows nothing else but incessant marching, foraging, and discipline, along with the nerve shattering barrage of noise and cannon shot for months on end. St. John had been with them since ‘09 and the men know and trust him as a commanding officer. He will continue to lead them as I am still on Marlborough’s staff.

For all their discipline, as muskets crash and drums roll, while the colour is handed to me in due ceremony, I can see the light of a fighting spirit is absent from their eyes. They are ready for peace, ready to return home. Exhausted and ill, their former Colonel, Thomas Allen, had returned to England.

Disturbed as I am about their appearance and state of morale, I watch them with an increased sense of relief that my future for the moment is secure. If Marlborough goes

down there will still be my regiment, albeit under another Commander-in-Chief. I give St. John money to pay them all and obtain ale, wine, brandy, bread, beef rations and clothes that any of the men need to fortify themselves for the remainder of the siege. His eyes regard me with bemusement as he takes the pouch of coins.

“I want to see a more enthusiastic lot, next time. I will surprise you with my next inspection, St. John,” I tell him, just to check that my orders have been carried out. His youthful face, aged before its time, lined and begrimed with sweat and dust from the endless siege, softens as he holds the bulging money pouch up to the men. They finally show some life and erupt in cheers throwing their hats in the air. At least they have enough life left in them to do so.

“I will look after my men,” I add, watching the joy in the men’s faces. “My Lord Duke has taught me well.”

Lethargy creeps over me, dulling my spirit. I wonder how I am going to survive the remainder of the campaign as I suffer also from weariness of body still recovering from my illness. We are trapped by the beast of sedition that hovers over Marlborough’s headquarters ready to spring and devour us at the slightest wrongdoing. Unwittingly, I find myself embroiled in the machinations of little men in high places and politics, factors I have always despised and avoided. Now, I find it all around me.

No one speaks, or if they do, it is clandestinely, heads together in small groups then the sudden breaking apart at the approach of a Duke’s man, me. Deeply troubled I am isolated, not even Isaac can be trusted, I feel. He too attends the Duke dutifully, his mouth kept well shut against any talk.

The tent is quiet, Marlborough's Aides', sit together in groups but apart. They talk quietly amongst themselves. I look from one to the other and decide to sit alone. Some of them have already approached me. Only days back in the camp. They know about my regiment. They assume I am with Argyll.

"A good move, Molesworth. You have done the right thing. Come join us. My Lord Duke Argyll is pleased to hear of your regiment," says Lord Mark Kerr.

Durell leaves the other group and comes over to us.

"How could you, Molesworth, show such disloyalty to the Duke?" he stands beside Kerr, glaring at me. They both look at each other with dislike.

Neither of them warrant a reply. I push my tankard from me, stand up from the table and walk out of the tent.

"The Duke is finished," Isaac comments sadly with a shake of his head. "The whole time you were ill he too suffered, from headaches and dizziness. Sometimes vomiting. He is just holding onto his position and that is all. The rumour is that the Queen wants him out of the army."

We sit within the shelter of my tent talking quietly. I have taken Isaac aside and demanded he tell me what is going on within quarters. Everyone is suspicious of everyone else and the two distinct factions in the Aides' tent disturb me greatly. One surrounding the Duke and one surrounding Argyll.

"Argyll has been aiming for this, plotting and persuading in Westminster and at court. He may have succeeded in ousting him," Isaac continues. "There has been much change in London. Lord Sutherland, the Duke's son-in-law, has been dismissed from his office of Secretary of State and Lord Godolphin has been dismissed. His Grace took that

particularly hard. Durell found him, head in hands in his tent, in tears. In Godolphin the Duke had a strong and faithful ally and friend. Robert Harley is now the Chancellor of the Exchequer.”

“But the Duke hates Harley,” I reply, thinking of conversations and comments I have heard and what the change may entail.

The news of Lord Godolphin’s dismissal shocks me. Father also regards him as his friend and greatly admires the man who has faithfully served the Queen and Marlborough for thirty years. I have not heard from Father about the state of politics in London; he has written full of concern over my illness and letters have been crossing the Irish Sea and English Channel from most of the family but I have heard little else. Perhaps Father, knowing my position, thinks it best I remain ignorant of the situation in London. Perhaps he does not trust the mail, which is sensible as the seal on letters addressed to me have been tampered with. Fortunately, within them, have been tidings only of family matters, no politics at all, not even from John in Florence. That in itself is ominous, I conclude.

The feeling of being trapped overwhelms me to the point of panic. To be with my regiment in the field would be a relief. That is where I belong, not here, close to the corruption that comes with power. The thought startles me and fills me with guilt. I am shocked that I have come to this juncture, where I wish to desert the man I once hero-worshipped. Disturbed and worried I am tightly strung-up within myself ready to spring from danger at the slightest hint.

“The omens are not good. We are all under suspicion,” adds Isaac. “Anyone who openly expresses their doubts about Marlborough and the campaign has their career under threat. And of course, on the other hand, if you express your support of him your career is also in danger, which has been demonstrated to us recently. More and more are turning to

Argyll, realising that he is the future, he is survival. The taking of a regiment at this time could be considered a disloyalty by some and an act of allegiance by others.”

I feel myself turn cold. Isaac sits beside me, his arms folded, his eyes worried.

“Whose side are you on?” I ask.

“Whose side do you think?”

“Marlborough’s?”

“Of course.”

“And you think I’m not?”

“It matters not what I think. It matters how it appears and what he thinks.”

Suffocation of spirit renders me speechless. I feel betrayed as surely does Marlborough.

“I take it from your statement, Jevereau, that you are quite safe.”

He does not answer me, gets up from the camp stool and walks from the tent.

Sadness is a permanent imprint upon my spirit. Blake and I are still recovering from our illnesses. We share melancholy alike as my leaden spirit infiltrates his. He swears his loyalty to the Duke and to me, but folds himself up to sit in a corner with post-illness weakness at the turn of events.

The Duke has changed personally towards all of us. We are distanced and estranged from the man we idolize. I am sorry for him, the weight of his worry, the loss of his power. I am still willing to give my life for him if need be and attend him when he commands me, respectful in his presence as normal, but if I can escape from his quarters, even for a moment, the relief is enormous.

I surprise my regiment often, escaping into the encampment situated within the mottled fields heavy with hoar frost or drenched in rain that heralds winter. The men line

up on parade as I inspect them, before the fortresses, distressed with the sieges, littered with rubble from cannon-strike, the clouds above laden with encroaching snow. Panton walks with me, talks to me when I do not wish to be seen with him. It is well known he is with Argyll.

“You did the right thing in changing your allegiance, Molesworth,” he says, keeping step with me.

“I have not changed my allegiance, Panton. I have merely bought a regiment.”

“That is not how it seems, Argyll sees it as a change of allegiance. He wishes me to tell you that he is pleased. He would like you with him.”

I stop and look at the Aide beside me. Together we have ridden into the thick of battle for the Duke. Risked our lives for him and the country. Now, it has come to this.

“Thank His Grace for me, but at the moment I am still on the Duke’s staff and remain loyal to him and there I stay,” I reply and start walking, increasing my stride.

“Well said, Molesworth,” he says, coming after me, keeping up. “But you’re a Whig through and through, everyone knows that. Marlborough is wavering in his party politics. The Whigs are losing their power in London. Our time with Marlborough is limited. We are better with Argyll. He is the future of the army.”

“No one knows that for sure. No one can assume whose side I am on. As long as the Duke is head of the army, I am with him, despite politics.”

“Don’t be foolish, Molesworth. You may think that, but when it comes to loyalty, you will be sidelined like everyone else if it suits the politics of the time.

“I can’t believe My Lord Duke would do such a thing,” I reply, astonished that this loyal Aide thinks as he does.

“London will sideline you and any of us, if he doesn’t. Argyll intends to take over the leadership of the army. It is more or less a done thing in London. You were wise in buying your regiment. It means that you will have reason to stay in the army if and when Marlborough goes down. If you come over to Argyll now your future is secured.”

Incensed I stop and look at him.

“Argyll is not the Commander-in-Chief yet; Marlborough has not been put down. I would never betray him, despite what is going on at the moment. The buying of my regiment at this time is nothing but coincidence,” I protest. “I was going to some time, it just happened to be now.”

Abercrombie, the snake, is behind us.

“A foot in both camps, eh, Molesworth?” he butts in and I swing around and face him, angry that he has intruded. “You have proved yourself at last, Molesworth. You finally have your regiment.”

I almost expect to see the spittle of venom issue from his mouth.

“What business is it of yours, Abercrombie?”

“At the moment, such news belongs to all of us. You know the situation. Did you think that buying your regiment at such a time was going to save you?”

Panton’s face twists in a wince.

“My thoughts are my own.”

“So you say. However, if you think about it, the timing is too good. Is it really a coincidence? The Duke cannot help but see it as an act of disloyalty. You know where that leads, Spain.”

“He would never do that to me. Not after all the years of service I have given him. I was only furthering my prospects,” I protest.

Abercrombie laughs out loud. "Of course. You have certainly done that this time. Years of service mean nothing when it comes to self-protection."

Panton frowns at Abercrombie.

"Molesworth's buying of a regiment is to secure his place in the army. You can't call that disloyalty, Abercrombie, many have done that."

"Ah, yes, but the timing, Panton. The timing." He is almost gleeful.

Panton has heard enough. He excuses himself and walks away leaving Abercrombie and I glaring at each other.

Abercrombie's comments irk me. I have a hard time controlling my rage. He is right. I should have bought my regiment after Ramillies, instead of waiting so long for Marlborough to gift me one. I was a fool.

"My Lord Duke will always have my loyalty, no matter what." I answer grimly.

"Even if it means Spain?" he smirks.

"Even Spain," I reply, staring him in the eye.

The only course of action is to keep to myself. Nothing will be expressed or heard from me within this den of lies and deceit that surrounds Marlborough. I seek and assume a mask of neutrality, associating with no one, doing my duty towards Marlborough, as always, until told otherwise.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Camp between St. Venant, Aire and Arras

Autumn: 1710

Banishment

Rain pelts the ground making a quagmire of the encampment. I run towards Marlborough's tent, my cloak clutched about me. He has summoned me to attend him yet again, which he seems to be doing more and more recently. I hope it is because he feels he can trust me. The place is waterlogged, the fortress of Aire taken, the army about to strike camp. My regiment is billeted within the fortress for the winter, with enough money in their pockets to support them.

Marlborough will be travelling back to England soon, albeit rather late in the year. Once again, after the fall of St. Venant, he had bypassed the opportunity to attack Marshall Villars and the French army, who had been watching operations from a safe but close position. His inaction only caused more dissatisfaction in the camp. He could not act as he wished, which many of his enemies refused to accept. To do so was to risk further condemnation at home in London. The planned attack on Calais and Boulogne had been mooted and expected, but not carried out. The large fortress of Arras was still in French hands.

We had successfully besieged and taken Douai, Béthune, St. Venant and Aire, but the sieges, organised by the Dutch, were time consuming and costly, and greatly frustrating to My Lord Duke who could not speed the process up no matter how hard he tried.

News has come from Father in one of the recent despatches from London which adds to my disquiet. Lord Rochford had been killed in action in Saragossa in Spain. That civil gallant man who dared to speak his mind and was summarily dismissed from Marlborough's side. His death plunged me even further into gloom as did the news that my brother Edward had been taken prisoner in Lisbon and he and Walter, who is prison in Spain, were both ill. I wonder if I will see my brothers again.

Marlborough stands to greet me as I am ushered in before him dripping, shedding my hat and cloak in his presence.

"Dreadful weather, what?" he asks cordially.

"Indeed, Your Grace. It is good the campaign is over."

"That is what I wish to see you about Molesworth," he says, as he walks to greet me and extends his hand to me.

This surprises me. As approachable as Marlborough is with his staff, he always maintains a physical and social distance. His affability with us only goes so far and that has been even less of late.

"You wish me to accompany you to Brussels, your Grace?" I know that is expected of me. The Duke hesitates. He does not meet my gaze. Alarm goes through me. I cannot remember his eyes ever being anything but direct and fast upon mine. I hold my breath.

"No. Not this time," he answers. "You may go home to England, Colonel. You deserve rest after your illness. You will not be accompanying me to Brussels. In fact, I have your orders here for next year," he briefly leaves me and goes to his map table, then

hands me a rolled up parchment, the Queen's seal all too apparent. "I wanted to give this to you personally, because you have served me honourably. Your loyalty and discretion have not gone unnoticed. You were a young saviour, who in the nick of time was on the spot to save my life. I had to tell you of this change in person, rather than have you find out through the official channels after your return to London."

Silence looms between us as I digest what he has just said to me. I am not to accompany him to Brussels; even that has been taken from me.

Rain beats against the walls and roof of the tent setting up a din. My heart thumps a tattoo my chest. My tongue has stuck to the roof of my mouth and feels too thick for my throat. I may choke with fear. The news of the paper in my hand can only be bad.

"I do not understand, Your Grace. What you are saying?"

"These are bad times, Colonel. Times which bode ill for the future, for me, at least. You have your career to think of, you have your regiment. It is better that you are with them and no longer serve me. Let's look upon it like that." He turns from me and walks to his chair and sits heavily. "This is very hard for me, Molesworth." Strain is etched deeply into his face. "I return to London to an unknown future. I may not have command next year at all." He shifts awkwardly in his chair bending over on himself as if in pain. He recovers and looks up at me. "The fact is, and it is better that it comes from me, next year you will take your regiment and serve in Spain. I believe that will be better for you, in the long run. You will no longer be associated with me."

His words stun me. I cannot think coherently.

"But I want to serve under you, your Grace," I stammer, unable to believe what I am hearing. "Not in Spain. I want to be directly under your command, as always."

“It is not possible, Molesworth,” he says patiently. “It is better that you do not go down with me. I think you know that all ready. You may read your orders if you wish,” he says, waving a hand at the papers in my hand.

The parchment trembles as I break the seal and unroll it. It is recognition of my service, and it contains my orders for the coming year signed by the Queen and Henry St. John, the new Secretary-at-War. My regiment is to serve in Spain under my command as Colonel.

Thoughts run through my mind as reality hits me. The Duke is distancing himself from me and I am to be distanced from the Duke. But Marlborough has been distancing himself from everyone on his staff he has ever been close to, especially, as Panton said, anyone with a Whiggish background. I am not the first one to be treated so. I thought if I kept my counsel I may be spared the inevitable. But the door has been shut in my face. I am excluded, locked out, not wanted anymore, alienated from the man I have served most loyally, never shirking my duties as many officers have done over the years. I have performed as expected and this is the result. I have ridden through fire and death for him and it comes to this, an agonising farewell, a profound humiliation.

The thought of Spain appals me. Eight years of active diligent service being rewarded by service in Spain, the army’s graveyard. This is my punishment for buying my own regiment, for preparing for the future. Whether he had any influence over this decision I have no idea. They say he has no power over appointments anymore. I look at him in the candlelight and I see sorrow on his face he would normally hide. Perhaps he had no say in this.

Anger followed by sorrow makes me shake. Marlborough, sitting so close to me and looking up at me, seems far away.

The former man is no longer there, instead, in his place sits a tired ill old man, someone I no longer know and perhaps never knew. How much influence does he really have? I cannot reason or think clearly for the loud clamour of disbelief charging through me.

“My loyalty has never been in question,” I blurt. “I have never said or done anything against your Grace. I cannot abandon you now, any more than I could have done years ago at Ramillies. You still need me by your side and I still wish to serve you,” I say, realising I am pleading with him.

“Quite so. Your loyalty is not in question,” the Duke answers, his facial expression drawn as he looks upon me. “But times change and we must adapt. I am grateful, Richard, for all you have done for me but it has come to an end,” he says, his voice quiet and kind, using my Christian name as he does occasionally. “When you were with me, I always felt safe. I will never forget that you were there, when I needed you most.”

He is talking in the past and speaking as if I am no longer on his staff. I realise that this is the moment I had been waiting for, the moment of release, and perhaps the Duke realises that too, only now that it has arrived, I feel only sadness and shame. The hero has gone. The Duke is giving up, this man who never says no, even under the most difficult of circumstances, yet he appears to be giving up on all that he has gained.

“I am tired, Richard,” he continues, as if in way of explanation. “Tired of fighting and being away from my wife and family. Tired of war and the machinations of politics. I want nothing more than peace, and that is what I will work towards; have been for some time, peace and no more war.”

He has been like a father to me. I have adored him. But how can I overcome the barriers of station, of class and talk to him as one man to another?

Stiff at attention I stand before him, closed in upon myself, when all I want to do is express my gratitude and pride I have felt in serving him. I know him so well. He is the most humane of men, even though some have said otherwise, but I have run messages of mercy for the Duke to prisoners, the wounded, the hospitals. Not once or twice, but hundreds of times. The great and glorious battles, triumphs, Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde. The discipline he has instilled in all of us, the attention to detail, always making sure that he was in the right place at the right time, anticipating when his presence was needed even if it was just to uplift the spirits of the fighting men; supporting his Generals loyally and discreetly, honourably. He even supported the rabid Argyll, his enemy, who openly despises him and has criticised his ambition at wanting the Captain-Generalship of the army for life.

Argyll is just as ambitious, ready to take over as Commander-in-Chief if given half the chance. I have grown in strength of spirit through Marlborough's leadership and he has honoured me by having me near him. The evil of politics again affects my life. I am too shocked to speak further.

The small clock the Duke carries with him on campaign sits on top of his console and ticks loudly, its pendulum swinging, drawing attention to the time and space that has come between us. We are separated on a vast field, between where we stand here, now, in this rain drenched tent in the shadows of the breached and fallen fortresses, and far away Spain, isolated from the main theatre of war. The distance is so great. I may as well be in Spain all ready.

"For the moment there is nothing that can be done and no more that can be said except to thank you with all my heart," Marlborough concludes, and coming over to me, offers me his hand again which I take in mine.

My vision webs and splinters. It clears with the release of tears down my face.

“I am honoured to have served you, Your Grace,” I say, and I bow to him.

I salute and leave him.

The expressionless stares of Panton and Jevereau fix themselves upon me as I find myself standing outside the tent, my orders under my cloak, staring over the rain-filled quarters and the sagging tents before me. I know they must have heard the conversation within the tent and they avoid my eyes when I look at them.

The rain turns to sleet as large as gull droppings which fall off my hat and slide down my cloak. Defiled and humiliated, I am no longer a part of this of which I have always been. My soul is as bleak as the silent disintegrated landscape below the encampment, full of scattered debris, departing troops, winding their way around large lakes of water spilling over ditches and spreading in the valleys in the deserted plains.

I hear him. He splashes through the puddles then he bursts into the tent, water pouring off him, a distressed look on his face as he looks at me sitting slumped in my camp chair.

I point my finger at him. I shout above the tumult of rain. “You knew about this. You knew I would be sent to Spain.”

“I heard a rumour, but that was all. I heard him speaking to Eugene and the other princes and generals. I heard your name mentioned, amongst the name of other Whigs. You must know I couldn’t say anything to you. I thought he may dismiss you from his service to take over your regiment, but I did not think you would be sent to Spain. I am sorry Richard, I truly am.”

“Platitudes! I’m being banished.” I collapse on my chair.

Blake his face white with alarm, pours goblets of brandy and gives them to us. "He thinks I'm disloyal? He thinks I side with Argyll?" I gulp the liquid down feeling the warmth rush through me.

"None of us know what he thinks. He appears to have no control over appointments now. Prince Eugene thinks it's disgraceful. You know yourself of appointments and sackings which Marlborough has not known about. But for all that, he is ambitious and therefore an opportunist. His influence may have affected the appointment. Marlborough uses people. He used the Whigs when he wanted support for the running of the army, now they are out of favour in London and the Queen is for the Tories. He has to be seen to be distancing himself. He has turned, just as he turned years ago with King James. So he has turned from everyone connected to the Whigs."

"But Spain?"

Isaac sheds his wet cloak and hat, places them upon the floor of the tent and pulls up a camp-stool to sit beside me. "Surely you did not think that you were exempt from this?"

I shake my head. "No," I concede miserably. "He is all that matters, all that has ever mattered." "I thought loyalty of purpose came before such things. I have never been political despite my background."

"He doesn't see it that way. Despite what he says, he still has some say."

"You mean he deliberately proposed Spain for me?"

"Perhaps. You won't know until you see who else is accompanying you. That hasn't been made known yet. I just know he is fighting for survival and ready to abandon all who might be a danger to him. You aren't the only one. "

"Enough. I do not want to hear such treasonous words. I'm not a danger to him and have never spoken treason about him, yet this is how I'm repaid, Spain! That backwater of

a place where nearly every battle is lost, where the troops suffer for want of supplies and armaments, where men die from disease. He may as well bury me now. He says it's for the good of my career. What hypocrisy."

"Perhaps when you calm down you may find it will benefit your career."

"You knew he would take the buying of my regiment the wrong way," I accuse.

"You knew the risk, Richard. It's known you were approached by Argyll," Isaac says guardedly.

The memory sickens me. Blake frowns and pours us another brandy. He is not keen on the thought of Spain either.

"Some of his men approached me when I returned. I rebuffed them as I did Panton. My allegiance lay with myself, that is all, just with myself. I purposely kept myself apart and neutral. I was determined not to make enemies."

"My friend," Isaac says, but hesitates with discomfit, I notice, as I turn and stare at him. "Just the fact that you were a favourite of Marlborough made enemies, Abercrombie for one. Your ambition and ability, your closeness and loyalty to Marlborough was noted, the influence of your father, your future looked brilliant and was talked about," Isaac rubs his forehead with his hand, searching for the right words.

"But the trouble lies not only here," he continues. "It stems from London where there is much ferment amongst a mass of ruthless men. Harley, St. John, are just two ready to advance their own careers at anyone's expense including the Duke's. Their power infiltrates the camp, not only through Argyll, but through others too, especially when you were absent and ill and not here to witness what went on.

"What would Harley or St. John, in London know about war. Tucked away in their comfortable drawing rooms and lavish lifestyles, they know nothing about the rawness and

brutality we have all experienced and witnessed, or what the Duke has been through. St. John was once his personal friend, how can he, along with others, work against him?"

"Loyalty means little in the face of power politics. News came through of your regiment. Everyone was shocked, including the Duke. It was talked about extensively and considered to be an open act of disloyalty, whether you meant it that way or not. It was immediately assumed that you were on Argyll's side before you came back to camp. The Duke was aware of such talk. By the time you returned falsity was well-entrenched. Everyone was obliged to prove whose side they were on. As far as many were concerned you had already done so.

"What about you?" I ask, smarting.

He shrugs at me. "When all this mess is over I am retiring to my home and orchards in Kensington. I'm leaving the army for good, no matter what the outcome, everyone knows that and it has been my protection. My background is apolitical and that is also in my favour. What is happening here is inevitable. It is been coming all year and is only a symptom of illness caused by all the problems in London."

Anger dissipates within me and is replaced by deep exhaustion. My career, which I had fought so hard to maintain, lies at my feet in a pile of dust. It will never recover, or so it seems. I wave Jevereau out of my life. "Let me be," I say, my head in my hands.

Mercifully, for once, Isaac sensing he is of little use to me in my present state, does as he is told, gathers his hat and cloak and lets himself out into the sleet.

Blake hovers over me. "Colonel, is there?"

I point to the entrance of my tent and he too goes.

Chapter Sixty-One-Synopsis

Douai

Winter: 1710

Renunciation

‘The place looks like a prison’.

Richard visits Ellen in the convent at Douai where she is in the Noviciate. He almost begs the Mother Abbess to allow him an audience with her. The Abbess relents telling him it will be a test for Ellen in her vocation, which disgusts Richard. When he sees Ellen he can hardly believe it is her she is so changed; trussed up in habit, wimple and veil. He tells her he is returning to London and is no longer in Marlborough’s service. He and his regiment are to be transported to Spain for the next campaign. Ellen is shocked and saddened by the news. They part and Richard later enters the church to watch the nuns as they chant the Divine Office. While he is there he is accosted by Gerard de Lacy and they have a scuffle, threatening each other. Richard eventually, with the upper hand, lets Gerard go rather than harm him as he realises it would only cause Ellen more grief, and the man had saved him during his illness. Gerard tells him that at heart he really is a good and honourable man. Richard is sceptical. He leaves Douai and swears he will not look back again.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Voyage to Spain

Spring-Summer: 1711-13

Graveyard of the Army

She rides low and heavily about me. The surge of her body strains against the force that prevails upon her. She rocks me gently as if I am a babe at her breast, asleep within her arms. Her soft movements lull my brain and stifle my thoughts with the transference of my will to hers. I allow her to possess me and go with her movements, my head buried in the pillow beneath me, the covers over me. A sound somewhere below me washes rhythmically, so that in the stupor of half-existence, which I blissfully embrace and drown in, I hear the murmur of her as she moves against me, slowly back and forth, back and forth. I am cocooned, wrapped within her protective covering. My eyes open.

My vision clears and the boards above my head are full of knots and nailheads. Still she moves beneath me. My red coat swings from the hook on the back of the door and the room creaks and sways around me. Hot and sticky, irritated from my arousal of sleep laden desire where the memory of Ellen's gentility has mixed with the memory of Lavinia's lust, a heady mixture, I find myself in a salt-filled world on board a war ship on the way to Spain.

The floor of my cabin tilts as the sails of the man-o-war takes on the stiff wind in the Bay of Biscay, her high and deep hull timbers strained to the limit. Any sailor's skills I may have learnt in countless Channel crossings with Marlborough have now deserted me. I swing hurriedly from my cot across the steep floor to the close-stool. I lift the lid just in time to relieve the pressure of my stomach, as on my knees, I hold my night-shirt out of the way and vomit with precision into the pot. The world tilts the other way and everything slides in accordance, including me across the floor. The wind roars through the sails above decks and bells ring out for the next watch as I stagger back to my swinging cot and tumble in, ready for further deliverance into oblivion.

The normal military world has become that of the navy. Once again my life is dictated by the ringing of bells. The ship is wakened at dawn by the drummer on board, and put to bed, not long after sunset by the call of the ship's bell. The sound only reminds me of one person whom I am constantly striving to put from my mind. Sometimes I succeed, but not often enough for my happiness. Ellen is with me still and yet so very far away. She told me she would never leave me and she is right I discover as time goes by. She hasn't left me, though I am finding it increasingly difficult to recall her face without the memory of the crushing wimple surrounding it.

My senses have decided to become one with the sea. I find I am able to stand. Fully clothed I emerge out of my cabin and climb the narrow ladder up onto the deck to discover the windblown world of the navy at work around me as the three-masted ship, sails full, flies before the wind, spray surging over the bulwark as the bow pitches into the trough of the waves. The huge man-o-war, carrying one hundred guns, with all its crew, contingent of marines and two regiments of soldiers, munitions and supplies is a pitching bucket on a huge ocean.

It is one of sixteen in a convoy, the other ships scattered around us, fore and aft, making steady pace as they dip and rise in response to the sea. We are under the conduct of the Earl of Peterborough, officially our destination unknown. The rush and pace of discipline is all around me, the code of conduct complex and difficult for landlubbers to understand. The sea is churned to a frenzy with the action of these ships of the line, these first rate ships which leave wide and ragged wakes behind them. I wonder about the strength of the elements which, for all their bulk and the seamanship of the sailors, could smash these vessels into matchwood. A scene I do not dwell on for long.

I lean over the bulwark and watch the horizon. The Indies are out there, beyond the horizon. That distant place has been the cause of all these years of constant fighting against nations and men, all in the name of power, wealth and greed. The Indies and the land that lies beyond, a vast continent sparsely populated and only guessed at, penetrated by a few hardy explorers, a land of treasure to the French and Spanish, a land I most probably will never see; a land of the future which, for me, at this moment is beyond my imagination.

In response to a barked order from the Quarter deck, the sailors, dressed in canvas trousers and cropped coats, their hair pulled back in long pigtails or shaved short, run sure footed over the timbered decks then swing themselves into the ropes and climb steadily one after the other above, to the forest of rigging and yard-arms, where they drop into the foot ropes ready to trim the sails. They position themselves high above my head as they balance on the ropes, leaning over the yards to cling like trained insects, knowing that if they let go it is certain death. Their nerve and fearlessness amazes me as the yard arms and masts in my vision sway and dip against the sky in response to the action of the ship on the sea so far below them.

The wind is strong and the men above hold on, furling up the bulky sails pulling them in, the sea too heavy for such sail power. They work without a shout or cry between them, in unison to orders well entrenched. Our speed is good and the weather has changed from the fitful sun of the English Channel to the hot sun of Portugal as we ply the coast. The smell of the oak-timbered deck combined with salt and pitch rises under the heat of the sun and assaults my stomach already made sensitive by the elements.

“Are you feeling better, Colonel?” asks my brother, Walter, joining me on deck. He is pale faced and upright. He has not been as seasick as I have been, unable to leave my cabin for days into the voyage and leaving my men to fend for themselves. Most of them had been incapacitated by the vicious action of the ship and I am aware that the quarters for my regiment below decks are crowded and noisome. My stomach seems settled enough for me to face the closed air and experience the cramped conditions for myself.

Walter is travelling with me as Lieutenant-Captain of my regiment. Both he and Edward had returned to London from their Portuguese and Spanish imprisonments, weak, depleted of spirit and still ill. Father had been able to secure their release and he had sent for Mother, Charlotte and Letty and between all of them, they had made the young men well again. Edward, tall and pale was still thin, his long red-blonde hair lying about his shoulders, his heavy lidded eyes, deeply set into his skull. He still shows the strains of the illness he had suffered in Lisbon as a prisoner of war and has a persistent cough he has difficulty shaking off. Walter, the more robust of the two is in better shape and has recovered quickly but he too is coughing.

Edward, under Father’s persuasion had abandoned the navy and in doing so had come up against much difficulty in being released from his Ensign’s commission in favour of joining my regiment. Eventually he was released, much to Father’s relief. He knew that

I would look after his younger sons if they were fighting under my command. Both brothers had regaled me with tales of heat, hardship, flies, insects, disease, and privation, lack of money, munitions and food supplies which had caused starvation amongst the troops in Spain. The tale was not unfamiliar, we had heard rumours of it in Marlborough's quarters. The Duke had often been worried about the men in Spain, as they were out of his direct care and largely forgotten in comparison to the army in the Low Countries. But there was little he could do to alleviate their conditions as money and supplies were dictated to by Government in London.

My good Lieutenant-Colonel St. John, had also joined my regiment at Father's behest along with Francis Lockier as my chaplain. Father was making sure our spiritual lives were going to be as secure as our military, all being well.

Lockier had been taken from you, Mary, I realised, and wondered about that. He is still your support and gives you spiritual guidance. Father said he had not been in London for some time, preferring to stay in Doncaster and Edlington while you travelled as often as you could to Edlington to be near Father. Lockier always visits you when you are there. Such information comes to me slowly, not freely given, in fits and starts.

"It's the only place, apart from Brackenstown, where I feel any peace of soul," you told Lockier, which he relays to me. I can tell he is missing you. His eyes are often far away, his mind not with us.

Francis, for all his reluctance to leave his small flock in Doncaster and Edlington, proves to be a good sailor and tells me that he had nearly been put in the navy by his father when he was a boy. He loves the upside down world of it, where everything is normal when it is tipped crazily to one side or the other. His love of the sea is a mystery to me, as it is the

complete opposite to his ordered, static life as a minister of religion where his feet are usually firmly planted on solid stone floors.

Once again we are sailing into conflict, only here, so far from Marlborough, it doesn't have reason or end. The conflict is still continuing in the Low Countries under the guidance of the Duke, though his days are numbered, according to the rumours that are spreading throughout London. Walter has described the scene in Spain to me in enough detail to make me realise the extent of my banishment. We have been informed that the Duke of Argyll is in command of the Spanish forces. So Marlborough made sure he was sent to Spain as well, along with all of his followers, including Panton. The thought of me being associated with such treachery appals me. Never returning to Marlborough and his service still causes me sorrow.

"Where's St. John?" I ask my brother who sways beside me keeping time with the action of the ship.

"He's below in his cabin in his bed. Sea-sick like everyone else."

That doesn't surprise me as my second in command periodically appeared in my cabin to give me a report about the men and conditions, his face as green as the sea, a pail under his arm. I wondered at the time at him being on his feet.

If St. John has succumbed as badly as everyone else and was unable to visit the regiment in the creaking hulk below, then it is up to me. I fill my lungs with as much fresh sea air as I can and follow Walter down the divers ladders into the bowels of the ship. The stench on the damp fetid air rises to meet me. We bend over to avoid hitting our heads against the ship's timbers and make our way through narrow corridors into darkness, past the upper-deck, home of the officers, their cabins afore, then down to the middle-deck where our cabins are, towards the stern of the ship. Down we climb, even further, to the

lower deck and into a dim world of loud creaking timbers and the bombardment of the rush of sea against the hull.

The noise deafens us and we have to shout to hear each other. The smell of vomit and urine is overpowering. I reach hastily for my kerchief and cover my nose and mouth as I look around and wait for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. The air is thick. Urine and vomit slop onto the deck from laden pails.

The men are crammed closely together in their hammocks. They swing in unison to the pitch and roll of the ship. I move carefully amongst them, checking them, speaking to them. Most respond, some do not, too far gone in their seasickness to care. The deck has not been cleaned for some time and the state of the men and conditions disturb me as Walter and I make our way through the narrow quarters. A mid-shipman, aware of our quest, has followed our progress below and now accompanies us on our rounds.

"They need air," I shout at the officer. "The closed conditions alone are enough to make them ill."

"We have been unable to open the hatches because of the heavy weather. The gunports must remain closed as we lie low in the sea and the swell is heavy. If we open the hatches the sea will come in and you will not have a regiment at all," he shouts back at me with an insolence I note. "The Captain is already aware of the sick and has the sick list. The ship's doctor and his mate have been attending them."

He stands before me, this young officer, clad in his blue coat and white breeches, stockings and polished shoes, rapidly losing their shine on the dirty deck. For all his youth, he is well used to the sea, having been in the navy since he was twelve. Now, he must be all of nineteen, his air of authority staunch in this unsteady world. He is oblivious to the sights and smells around him. This is his domain, not mine.

His legs astride, his thick body is balanced against the action of the ship, bracing it well as he rides the deck. He is annoyed at having to put up with such ignorance and deal with men of the army. In his eyes the soldiers are not as good as the scum of the ratings on the ship, and his black eyebrows furrow into a knot of ill temper as he surveys the scene and senses the heat of my disapproval. His annoyance only serves to fuel my anger further.

“I will report these conditions to the Captain,” I shout, above the din of roaring water surrounding us, letting my voice reveal my anger. I wonder how this trainee naval officer would fare under siege warfare or during a cavalry charge at a fast gallop into the thick of battle. “These men need attention and fresh air. The pails need emptying and the deck needs washing down, otherwise we will lose half of them on the voyage, not only from seasickness but from disease.”

My stomach finally reacts and to my chagrin, aware of the barely disguised smirk on the officer’s insolent face, I have to remove myself in haste topside into the fresh breeze. Walter, aware of my state runs up the steep ladder after me. For the moment, however, as I concentrate on maintaining my foothold on the narrow wooden rungs of the ladders, the state of my stomach occupies my mind and the fact that I seem to be the only one on deck affected by this swaying see-saw world. Walter’s colour has changed accordingly, no doubt, through experiencing the squalor below decks. The sun, a white merciless orb, hangs high above clouds, and the brightness of the open deck blinds me as I take deep breaths in an effort of control.

The battered-faced Captain of this worthy vessel, Rushbrook, by name, stands not far away near the wheel on the quarter-deck, his first Lieutenant beside him. Both are planted to the deck as if sprung from the boards themselves and they sway with the

suppleness of trees in the time-honoured confidence of experienced sailors, at one with the motion of the ship beneath them.

The fresh air settles me again and I envy them. Both men and the quarter-master at the wheel of the ship, glance over at our sudden appearance. Walter and I move down the ladder away from them into the shadow of the bulkhead, out of the way of governance and their curious eyes. The memory of the smirking naval ensign below resurrects itself in my brain and I turn and run up the ladder to the quarter-deck determined to speak to the Captain. One eye on me and one eye on the running of his ship he listens to me then turns to a mid-shipman and sends him below for a report. Within minutes the man is back confirming my concerns and the Ensign and ship's surgeon are sent for and arrive breathless on deck.

"Have the men below decks been checked lately?" he asks.

"Aye, Captain," answers the surgeon. "But conditions have worsened and I'm beginning to worry as fever has started to break out amongst the men."

"Then clean the quarters," the Captain responds.

"Aye, Captain. We have been doing that regularly."

"It needs doing again, Dr. Porter, clean the quarters again. I shall inspect them myself in half an hour," he says turning away from the two men and dismissing them. The Ensign gives me a look of derision as he turns to follow the surgeon below.

"It will be done, Colonel. Check in half an hour," he says to me before we are dismissed from the quarter deck as well.

Not only our regiment is suffering, but also that of Colonel Joshua Stewart, whose regiment of four hundred also travel on this vessel. They too are enduring the same conditions as my men.

Later, I check again and find the lower decks housing our regiment are washed down, buckets emptied and the sick are separated from the merely sea-sick who are brought up on deck in fine weather for some hours later in the day, while brimstone is lit in the hold and the interior of the ship stinks for hours. The port of Lisbon will be a welcome relief. I just hope I do not lose too many men to fever before then.

The calmer seas of the Mediterranean offer some hope.

The sixteen ships, sails furled to the yard-arms, lie at anchor in the outer harbour and gently sway in the slight swell as we take on supplies and fresh water. The men of the regiments, their rocking world, relatively stable, emerge one by one like moles from hibernation, blinking and screwing up their eyes against the glare of the sun.

We have not come this far without casualties and have left some of my men and Stewart's on the bottom of the sea-bed. Men barely out of boyhood have succumbed, as have others, veterans of campaigns in Flanders, dead from fever and sea-sickness, sewn into sailcloth, weighted with cannonballs at the head and feet by the sail-maker and committed to the sea with accompanying prayers by a solemn faced Lockier, and the Stewart's chaplain, Johnson. Wretched and grim I heard the resounding splash of each body in turn and watched as they sank quickly out of sight. I wondered how many more would join them before we arrive in Barcelona.

Chapter Sixty-Three-Synopsis

Summer 1711

At Sea

The Confessor

It is the last night on board the ship before the troops disembark in Barcelona. The Officers have dinner with the Captain and later Richard and Lockier walk the deck and talk. They discuss Marlborough, Argyll and Mary.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

Spain: Barcelona, Catalonia

Summer: 1711

Adaptation

The land is solid beneath our feet and the men march with lightened minds and bodies in step to the beat of the drums and pipe of the hautbois down the Via Laietana from the harbour towards the city. St. John and myself, my regimental ensign carried beside us, lead them on horseback though the narrow crowded streets of Barcelona along with the other remaining regiments from the convoy of ships.

The Catalonians wave flags, cheer and cry out to us as we make our way through the centre of the city surrounded by high yellow part-Roman, medieval, and Moorish walls and down through the tight narrow streets beneath the overhang of Gothic and Renaissance buildings.

I catch a glimpse of entranceways and loggias enclosed by iron gates. Inside are fountains, set in shadowed courtyards surrounded by cool, recessed archways below high galleries and balconies with iron barred windows and pots of overflowing red geraniums.

Out of the shade of the buildings the sun blazes down and the air is a heavy pall, making us sweat beneath our heavy woollen uniforms. We pass the Cathedral and pause at the *Palau del Roi* which houses Charles III, the King we fight for. I lift my head and see

him step onto the overhanging balcony and salute the assembled army as we present arms to the roll of drums and the blare of trumpets, while the people surrounding us in the square erupt in loud cheers.

The army continues on through the crowded squares and streets, out through the gate in the walls past Roman ruins and the walls dividing the streets of the *Rambles* with its crowded houses and on into the countryside. At a more leisurely pace the army walks into the dry and wild countryside that surrounds Barcelona and leaves the cheers of the crowds and the distant fleet of men-o-war wallowing gently in the swell in the harbour. Before us, high on a hill spreads the high bastions and ramparts of the *Castillo de Montjuic*, which rises above the city of Barcelona nearly a mile away to the south. Here we set up camp.

The sun sets gilding the surrounding countryside, the walled city and the sea. The land plunges quickly into darkness without the pleasure of a lingering dusk. The air is cold enough to wear cloaks, coats and muffs. Large insects and moths hover around the light of candles, lanterns and fires while the air is full of the bleat of crickets in the surrounding trees. Here we await the appearance of the Earl of Peterborough who this night, so we have been told, dines with the king, while Argyll is still on his way, travelling overland through the Continent. Somewhere to the south of us, waiting for us to join him, is the Austrian General, Guido von Starhemberg with twenty-one thousand men.

In this barren place the war is different. Wrapped in my greatcoat against the cold I look down upon the darkened walled city set in the dry countryside far below us. Here the war is fought under different skies, terrain, and circumstances, perhaps even fought to different rules to what we are used to. Time after time the allies have been beaten by the French and their supporting Spanish troops, who bred in the harshness of the land with a touch of their Moorish ancestry, are noted for their ferocity and cruelty in battle.

Before the heat of the sun becomes unbearable I inspect my regiment. I put them through musket drill in platoon formation. I keep them at it until they run with sweat and pant with exhaustion but are fast enough to please me. The experience of many worthy veterans of past campaigns is apparent as their response is eager and quick to the language of the drum. They are obviously pleased to be see action again. They please me greatly, Walter and Edward amongst them. At the end of the exercise I tell St. John to issue extra rations of ale and bread. I tell them I am satisfied and that we will be ready to present ourselves to Argyll and Peterborough when they arrive at the Fort. I am sure that they will not be found lacking.

General Starhemburg arrives in the camp with his entourage of staff to await the arrival of the Generals and when runners tell us that Argyll is on his way, the camp of five-thousand men are assembled in their regiments and ranks and stand to attention in the sun. Accompanied by the roll of drums, muskets crash and trumpets blare across the hot plain from the fortress. Argyll, even more red-faced in the Spanish heat than I remember him, rides in his pride beside the Earl of Peterborough into the parade ground within the fort. General Stanhope, the previous Commander-in-Chief, is now a prisoner of war after the battle of Brihuega in December. Argyll's pleasure at being the leader of the English forces in Spain is all over his arrogant face as he inspects the men lined up in formation. My thoughts towards the man are far from charitable, but once again I know I have to keep my counsel.

Argyll is no sooner settled in his quarters than he calls me to attend him and greets me like an old friend, embracing me as Marlborough never did, introducing me to Generals Peterborough and Starhemburg as a former Aide to Marlborough and as one who saved the Duke's life at the battle of Ramillies.

“See how the Duke treats such bravery?” Argyll declares to the other men as I stand before them. “He sends them to Spain, no matter what service is performed or for how long.”

A look passes between the two generals, as if they have heard of me. I bow and salute them, both surprised and alarmed by my recognition, and Argyll’s outspokenness. Nevertheless, he has sought me out and made me known to these men, but I am still wary, uncertain how to take this newly found camaraderie. Going on past experience I know that the superior may be friendly with the underling but the underling may never be friendly with the superior. Argyll seems more settled at being here and having his own command at long last. This sojourn far from the main theatre of war has not quelled his ambition to take over from Marlborough. He assures me it is only a matter of time before the Duke is disposed of and our careers are back where they were.

“Have no fear, your service will not be forgotten,” he reassures me.

My fears are not that easily dismissed. I leave the illustrious company far from reassured, instead, full of dismay at having been part of such a confidence. Everything within me rebels against my position, yet I have to appear to be impartial. How can I remain impartial if Argyll takes it upon himself to favour me? England seems far away but its politics still surround me.

Within days we march to meet General Starhemberg’s men at their encampment before a castellated fortress and find it is well garrisoned and guns bristle from the ramparts upon the yellow walls.

The waiting men stand to attention, proud enough, but dusty, dirt-covered, their uniforms patched, faded and worn, their thin faces and bodies evidence of starvation. They stare at us, polished, well-shod and fed as if they are witnessing the arrival of a miracle.

We advance upon them, a long line of red-coated marching men and they look at us from sunken eyes as if we are strangers from an unknown land. These are the men Marlborough was worried about, the men left to languish, underfed and underpaid in Spain. They have been here too long without proper supplies and moral support, too long fighting on empty bellies in the surrounding countryside, caught in the open by marauding French troops, who are sustained, fattened and favoured by the populace outside Catalonia. This empty deprived seat of war is reflected in the soulless eyes and empty bellies. These are only some of thousands of men too long garrisoned within scattered fortresses and mud walled villages throughout Catalonia from Barcelona to Tarragona.

Argyll is taken aback by their plight, while my melancholy mood which had lifted these past weeks, resurrects itself again at the sight of them. Lockier murmurs under his breath with dismay as our regiment comes upon them. I turn to look at our chaplain, his face streaked with sweat beneath his wig and hat as he looks upon the hapless soldiers. Marlborough had said that supplies had not been getting through to Spain. Everything appears to be as bad as reported. The Spanish theatre is indeed a graveyard. Once again I feel my career sink into oblivion.

The sun rises with a burst of orange sky to signify the start of yet another day of blistering heat. Our skins are burnt a deep brown from the sun and our bodies, though thinner, are hardened, uniforms abandoned when not on duty. It is hard to stay fully clad in the heat. Rain is a relief when it comes, but then it pours for weeks on end from a deadened sky washing the land and us, running in torrents, creating waterfalls from crevices in hills and rocky outcrops, raising the rivers and settling in large pools that attract mosquitoes. The sun bursts through the clouds again and the fields emerge covered in red, yellow and

blue wildflowers, so bright the eye is dazzled. Fields of wheat dotted with red poppies coat the land. High mountains in the distance with summits as jagged as dragon's teeth shimmer in the heat-haze. Sunset flies an enormous flag of red and pink over the sky then disappears and the land is doused in black within minutes. The intensity of the colours imprint themselves behind closed lids and bore into our frazzled brains as we attempt to sleep amidst a chorus of frogs croaking, owls hooting and insects bleating. Snakes slide through the bracken and gorse, lizards dart, scorpions scuttle, beetles and giant moths flock to the light of fires. At night the air is laden with the smell of wildflowers, lavender, thyme and orange blossom. Our senses are overburdened.

The air is thick with heat and we quickly become dehydrated. Thirst is constant and unbearable and water is drunk copiously by all. Ranks of men begin to fall ill, whole regiments depleted in numbers, including mine, are affected by the onslaught of diarrhoea which causes a constant steady queue of men backwards and forwards to the overflowing latrines, some doubled up with pain, others unable to make it to the latrines in time soil themselves where they stand, others run for the brush.

Privacy, never a great concern in the army, is now non-existent. I order the latrines for our regiment to be filled and more dug to stop the heavy stench and spread of disease. The small hospital in the old town cannot cope. Long lines of tents are full of men, prostrated or doubled up, moaning with cramps in their bellies. If the French decided to attack us now they would have a resounding victory. No one is immune and even though I have avoided drinking water from wells or streams and drink only ale or wine, I too suffer, to a lesser degree, doubled in two with a gripe in my belly before making a frantic dash for my latrine. The Officer's latrine is full and stinking enough to make us gag so I order it filled and another dug.

More rations of ale are distributed and the men told not to drink water. Some of the men are starting to die and the regimental surgeons and apothecaries are exhausted from their work while the chaplains are kept busy with the burying of the dead. Lockier's face becomes thinner, longer and more pale by the day. I begin to worry about my friend, that he too will succumb and I order him to rest, which he is reluctant to do. Men, still mobile, are kept busy with helping the sick but after a hectic month of illness we begin to recover.

The sun beats down on us as we march and countermarch around the dust-filled stone and mud frontier village of Pratz del Rey, with its yellow walls and towers and rough cobbled streets, as the French led by the Duc de Vendôme toy with us. Starhemburg and his army have already been engaged with Vendôme trying to establish a claim on the Catalanian frontier from Barcelona to Tarragona but now the French marshal has a larger army to skirmish with.

The scurries with the French are minor and Marshal Vendôme and his troops seem well-used to this terrain. They appear silently and unexpectedly from behind hillocks or emerge from dents in the surrounding land, ready to engage, then to confuse us, they disappear just as silently back into the countryside they know so well, which seems to shield them. There seems to be no order in this seat of battle and we find we have to be constantly on the alert.

The feeling of being displaced has intensified in the arid, foreign conditions of the country. Melancholia is eager to be my companion. I banish its presence whenever I feel it near me, as the men can always sense a leader not happy in himself. I will not allow that. The quality of their morale is important in this hole, their deprivation hard enough to bear without harnessing them with my inadequacy. I stifle what I feel and try and do my best under the circumstances in this fly-blown hell-hole.

Marlborough is never far from my thoughts. I wonder how the war in the Low Countries is progressing. I miss being in the hub of the inner circle that surrounds him. I may never experience that again. To me that is as bad as death. Night after night he haunts me. I dream of him, riding with him, galloping through the lines with his orders. I awake with a start under the bright stars of Spain. I am unwilling to let the dream go and part with my former life, no matter how intangible. Isaac has written to me, he is still serving Marlborough and tells me that Abercrombie, the weasel, is now a Captain and Lieutenant-Colonel in The Coldstream Guards. It seems he has taken my place. I burn Isaac's letter.

The news from London is sporadic and so old by the time we receive it that we realise it is unreliable. As far as we know we could be still fighting a war that has long been over, and that unsettles us all. In frustration I write long and angry letters to Father in England and John in Florence and demand to know the situation in the Low Countries and England as we are hearing little. When we do have news we don't know if we can believe it. I have no guarantee that my letters are going to reach their destination, as the letters I receive sometime later don't answer any of my questions.

John's letter when it does arrive later is short and full of anguish at his situation. Apparently he was recalled from Florence, not long after he had returned and arrived back in England soon after I had sailed for Spain. He was given no reason for his recall and naturally assumed his career was at an end only to be immediately reinstated, and he returned to Florence. He blames my banishment with Marlborough for being recalled which angers me greatly but doesn't surprise me, John being John. He also blames the separation of you, Mary from George. He thinks that such news cannot help but filter through to Marlborough and others in power. Guilt fills me about this as well for I too have wondered if such news has affected our chances, even though I have not voiced my

thoughts to anyone at home. I throw the letter in the fire where I throw all of my letters, including the family ones from Mother and my sisters.

No full scale military manoeuvres full of honour and glory here in this arid country, nothing but isolated, innocuous, sudden skirmishes every bit as deadly, if not more so, than the great battles we have experienced under Marlborough. The French and Spanish barely give us time to form and fight in retaliation. This war is different to any other; there is no order, honour or reason amongst men.

We feel forgotten in this isolated place which only intensifies as no further news of peace comes through and the year ripens into summer, the heat even more intense, the nights warm and full of stinging insects and prowling wildcats. Progress doesn't exist here. We live from day to day, supplies from England are long in coming and we start to eke out our food supplies as it becomes scarce. Eventually, we resort to scavenging to boost our diet of beef, goats and chicken.

Dust clouds denote the presence of marching troops so when we forage we are aware we must be visible for miles around. The dust of the land rises off every footfall and chokes us, fills every pocket and every fold of our uniforms, settles in our wigs, neckties and under our armpits, lines the inside of our mouths. The sight of beaches in curved inlets, yellow coarse-grained sand shining washed by a clear azure sea are inviting. We are surrounded by headlands of pine forest interspersed with scattered fishing villages with upturned boats lying upon the sea-shore like the shells of dormant sea creatures. We long to strip off our uniforms, feel the cool of the water and swim the dust off our bodies, but we cannot in case of skirmishes and being caught unawares. Afraid of spying eyes upon the shore and being killed in the surf that washes the coarse sand. So, it is only at night that we

walk to the sea, strip naked and run into the ocean, our bodies as white as the sand against the blackness as we revel in the water.

Argyll copes with the reluctant correspondence from England in the only way he knows how, with impatience and rage at the lack of co-operation coming from those at home who know nothing of the conditions we are living under. The money for Spain is being siphoned off and is going into someone's purse, he loudly complains, meaning Marlborough. There is still no news of peace, only of havoc being engendered in London by the Tories. Peace is never coming, we conclude. I wonder if this madness will ever cease. Many of the men are homesick for the cool hills of England as they wait endlessly for letters that never arrive. Lockier uses his skills as he mediates between them, me and God, not quite a blessed trinity but a working one, hopefully of some use. I relish the strength of his company. We are here forever, I decide, we are going to rot and die here. We are forgotten, in this place. Time is non-existent, except for the passing of the day and the discipline we try and uphold as part of army life. Other than that, our purpose here seems of little importance.

Joseph I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire is dead of smallpox. The news comes through to us from Argyll and rumours abound throughout the camp. A hoped for peace is in sight, for the death of this man changes everything as King Charles of Spain, his heir, now has to return to Frankfurt to be elected Emperor by the German Electoral Princes as Charles VI. Once elected he will rule half the world from Vienna. Surely, if he leaves Barcelona, the allies will have to find peace the quickest and most advantageous way possible. I know Prince Eugene will be grieving for his friend Emperor Joseph, as he had

great faith in him and I remember the Prince often talking to Marlborough in admiration of the man.

The camp is alive with the talk of peace. Peace, that illusive state. I can't remember what it is like. We hope that we will soon be returning to England.

It takes some time for the reality to become apparent. Far from weakening France's resolve for an early reckoning at this time of change, the ageing King of France in his glorious palace of Versailles, seems more determined than ever to press his claim. He thinks we are weakened by the demise of the Emperor. He knows that Charles will have to leave Barcelona and if he leaves, his Spanish throne becomes non-existent. Louis XIV knows it is only a matter of time before he leaves and he sees this as an opportunity to grab the whole of Spain and increase the power of France. Charles hesitates to leave for weeks which drag on into months. Peace is as far away as ever.

News comes through at last that Charles has left for Frankfurt. He is unable to keep away from his country any longer and has to return to the Imperial capital. Barcelona is threatened. The French are on the march. We are called to its defence.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

Spain: Catalonia

Summer: 1711

Action

Spies gallop into the camp to reveal the French's whereabouts and we are ordered to strike camp and take up arms in readiness for confrontation. The Quarter-masters ride off with the company of Grenadiers. By nightfall the message is relayed back to us that we are close to the enemy and we are to lie on our arms all night. The army bivouacs. The air is cold. I lie listening to the snores and murmurs of hundreds of men and wonder about the coming battle, wonder if I am going to survive this, wonder if I will return to England.

Dawn reveals we are close to the town of *Pratz del Rey* filled with seventeen hundred German Grenadiers and ten companies of English Grenadiers posted in the mill nearby. We take our positions and the countryside grows still and quiet which is amazing considering how many of us lie in wait. The waiting lines of men watch the distant undulating land for the rise of dust which spells the coming of the French. It rises slightly first, just above the barren mounds of land, then higher and becomes thicker as the enemy move closer towards us in their familiar blue and white uniforms. They line up in battle formation in front of us, stretched across the low plain before the town preparing to wait patiently, until it is time to kill us, as we wait patiently to kill them.

Both armies in sight of each other, sleep on their arms and we know that battle will come at daybreak. The mixed feeling of anticipation and excitement tinged with fear that I had felt before large battles with Marlborough is with me again. I lie wrapped in my cloak on the ground underneath millions of stars and wonder where he is at that moment. I have missed this feeling, this sense of heightened awareness engendered by the discipline and organisation of the army as we all work together.

The bugles wake us on both sides. The sun rises over the horizon and the French line breaks with the firing of batteries, black smoke flowing across the rivulet that runs between us. We answer with our batteries of guns in return. Men go down around us. My regiment lined up with the rest wait grim-faced listening for the language of the drums which will relay my orders, while I wait, in turn, for orders from Argyll. They're not long in coming. I am relieved because I can see that we will have to move forward towards the disappearing and reforming blue lines which are already fast approaching our line. I am ordered to move my regiment down to the rivulet to meet the French in battle while Lord Mark Kerr's regiment and Colonel Edward Stanhope's regiment are to support us.

Was it not Murray, all those years ago, who told me it was my privilege as a commissioned officer to lead the men, my privilege to show them there is nothing to fear, show them I can uphold my honour and in doing so give them strength and courage? I know that if they see it in me, they will find it themselves, even if I fall in the execution of it.

Sword drawn, drummer beating at my side, I urge the men on. Eager to be in the thick of it, they move quickly down to the rivulet amidst a heavy rain of battery fire. The smoke is thick and they disappear into it. I hear a heartening cry go up around me as they fall into platoons ready to fire at my order. The shot is thick about them and many fall in

the waiting, but those beside them close over to take the place of the fallen and remain cool under the barrage while my heart swells with pride and excitement at the sight. As soon as the French are close upon us I give the order to fire.

Through the thick smoke I can see the French falling and rising and falling back again as my men advance, retreat and reform yet again. The French fire seems endless. We lose some men but maintain our stand. The company of Grenadiers come up as our support and the fighting becomes vicious, almost hand to hand

Argyll's Aide is at my side, giving me the order to withdraw. I pass the order on and my men begin to drop back. The fighting is still fierce and in the retreat we lose two Lieutenants and fourteen men. Walter beside his company fights well with the rest. I have lost sight of Edward who is lost within the thick of it. I have no time to look. I don't and can't worry about their safety, as they are at risk like everyone else. Ten minutes later when the fighting ceases the entire brigade of enemy has been broken by our battalion and the six company of grenadiers.

On foot I look over the remains of my regiment carefully as they reform in lines before me, exhausted, soot and dirt stained, some wounded. We have suffered losses but have come through reasonably unscathed. The Duke of Argyll and General Starhemburg ride towards us. They dismount from their horses and greet me. To my astonishment, in front of my regiment, they both throw their arms about me and embrace me, kissing me on both cheeks, elated at the way we handled the confrontation.

Embarrassed pride comes over me as the men cheer, their morale high. The next morning the generals give my regiment an ox and ten sheep to share in gratitude for our part in the battle. The whole engagement has soundly beaten the French and they have retreated. We have stopped their advance towards Barcelona. For hours the mouth-watering

smell of roasting meat and baking bread wafts through the camp. Later that evening I sit alone in my tent at my *escritoire*, by the light of a lantern and write to the relatives of fallen in my regiment. My least favourite duty. I have one regret, Marlborough has not been witness to the bravery of my regiment.

Walter is ill and becoming thinner by the day. He is inflicted with a wracking fever by night and a shaking persistent cough by day. He hides his condition from me until, Edward, alarmed at the sight of him comes to me, his young face full of worry. He too is suffering though not as badly and I feel for my brothers having brought them to this wilderness. Their suffering weighs me down with guilt. It is difficult to detach myself from them as their success is dependent upon mine. The fact that I had been so close to the centre of power and then so easily discarded still weighs heavily upon me. My fortune is their fortune; my failure, their failure. However, I make no outward distinction between them and the rest of my regiment as they are not the only ones suffering. Many of the men are laid low by fevers, diarrhoea and general debilitation due to our circumstances. Edward and Walter both understand my position but Edward is full of anxiety when he comes to me about Walter and he urges me to visit him myself, which I do.

He is prostrate upon his camp-bed, sweat pouring down his face which is hectic with fever. I admonish him for not reporting sick earlier and order him and Edward to the field hospital. With their servants helping, they go reluctantly, knowing they will be found not fit for service. Within days they have returned to camp reporting they are both well again. I tell them at the first sign of illness they must report to me. Knowing my stubborn brothers, especially Walter, they will not. If anything should happen to them I will never be

forgiven by Mother who continues to write me long letters full of anxiety about us all. Father has long resigned himself to losing one of us and never shows his anxiety even though I know he feels it.

The onset of cooler weather causes Walter's ailment to return as we march into Barcelona for winter quarters. Once again he is wracked with coughing and hospitalised, this time, isolated from the rest of us as the physician recognises the signs of consumption about him. He is treated with all the concoctions the physician can muster, including the snail soup, as well as starving and purging him. He lies thoroughly bored and impatient within his small room in the church hospital when I visit him. The surgeon admonishes Edward and I for going near him, in case we too succumb. They have both performed well over the past months and more recently in our battle with the French. I am proud of them both, however, the engagement has been minor in comparison to those fought in Flanders.

Father has been removed from the Privy Council for speaking his mind.

The paper shakes so much in my hand I have to put it on my table to read it. I stare in disbelief at his strong sloping hand telling me of his misfortune. Lockier pays me a visit. He sees despair upon my face.

"The news is bad?" he asks his eyes bright with question. I know his first thought is Mary, when I tell him about Father he visibly relaxes.

"First me, then John recalled and now Father," I exclaim. "He passed a comment at the council meeting saying that the madness in Parliament had found its way to the Privy Council, or words to that effect. He is most probably right. That is enough to banish him, it seems, but to be treated badly after giving so much service over the years, it is despicable."

“It was only a matter of time, Colonel. The way things are operating at home, any excuse and they get rid of so-called ‘enemies’. The Whigs especially. A sign of the times, I’m afraid. The slightest mistake and they are routed,” Lockier comments with a frown after reading the letter.

Other letters lie scattered around me, from Mother, Mary and John. I fully expect John to receive another recall from Florence because of Father’s demotion. John’s mood had only recently lightened in his letter to me since he had been restored to Florence. Not quite his confident self, he finds enough in him to write encouragingly about a forthcoming peace.

Marlborough’s latest strategic victory in Flanders is the reason. The lines of French were forced by the allies so that the two armies confronted one another and then retired without confrontation only to fight for the fortress of Bouchain. Reports were beginning to come through of this, his finest military strategy yet. It was complete in itself, being called *Ne Plus Ultra*. Frustrated at not being there with him makes me pace and though I have not answered any of Isaac’s letters, due to pique on my part, now I feel I must write, as I want direct information from someone who is still by his side, still his Aide, still part of the great and glorious happenings. I ache at the thought of my loss.

Restlessness, as deep and troublesome as ever, takes hold of me with vigour. I know I will never be satisfied until once again I am with Marlborough and trusted once more, but how that is to be achieved I am not sure, certainly not here from the wilds of Catalonia. The hurt of rejection still rests heavily upon me. My nights are often long and sleepless, disturbed by endless thinking. I am buried here in Spain as deeply as if I am entombed.

A letter arrives from Letty. Mother had thought Father needed her gentle care and had put her on the next packet boat across the Irish Sea to join Father at Edlington. She arrived to find him ill, distressed, morose and despondent.

My dear brother, Richard,

Papa has difficulty sleeping and eating. I am trying to look after him and cheer him up but most of the time he wishes to be alone, which, as you know, is most unlike dear papa. His melancholy alarms me. He feels lost and abandoned by all his friends and associates. We are here on our own, apart from cook, the dairy maid, Papa's manservant and Mr. and Mrs Westenry. Bysse and Coote are still in school in London and William also, still working at the treasury. Mama's at home in Brackenstown with Charlotte and hopes to come to Edlington as soon as she knows you are coming home. She has written to Papa urging him to come home to Brackenstown but he cannot face the journey at the moment as he seems far from well. The awful dismissal has been a great shock to him, after all he has done in the service of the country.

Poor Papa, one trouble does not come alone. He was here in Edlington trying to recover when Ovid took ill and died quite suddenly. He was further devastated to lose his brave and faithful friend. We were all inconsolable when he and Mr. Westenry buried him in the woods. We cried over the small grave; Mr. Westenry wept with Papa to keep him company. Papa is going to have an urn made for Ovid and place it in the woods beneath a yew tree. Perhaps, when Mr. Lockier comes home, he will dedicate it. We were all miserable over the loss of poor Ovid and Papa misses him very much.

Mary writes from Chelsea that she is a little better in health and the children are well. She is intending to visit Edlington soon. I look forward to that. George is in London seeing physicians again and living with his parents. He was advised to go to Bath Spa for the waters which he has done but I don't know if it has worked. Mary has found lodgings on her own in Chelsea for a while. She says they are better there, away from the upset that surrounds George, though he does get angry when he can't see the children regularly. An awful state of affairs.

Mary is nervous nearly all the time when she is with him because she does not know when the next attack is coming and how it is going to affect him. She tries to shield the children from his irrational behaviour as they get very upset when they are with him, and equally very upset when they are away from him. He can be very frightening when provoked, as you know. Papa will be so pleased to see Mary, he loves her so much and worries about her constantly. He also feels some guilt, I think, because he encouraged the match between Mary and George. Mary has written a poem celebrating your latest successful engagement at the Pratz del Rey. Mr. Lockier wrote and told her about it. How brave you are, dear Colonel.

The other reason for me being in Edlington, and one which encouraged Mama to send me over to help Father post haste, is to remove me as far as possible from Ned Bolton's intentions, which Mama thinks are becoming too serious. What she has against poor Ned I do not know, and although he is somewhat older than me, we have grown up together and know each other well.

Ned is frequently at Brackenstown which annoys Mama greatly. He writes me long letters which I look forward to and do the same for him. Fortunately, Papa is more agreeable to the idea of Ned being in my life.

The mails are very poor to and from Spain. I do hope this reaches you, my dear brother. Please pass on my love to Walter and Edward and to Mr. Lockier. We miss you all very much and we hope you are all safe and well. You are constantly in our thoughts and prayers.

Your affectionate Sister,

Letitia.

The tone of her letter makes me feel old as my baby sister has grown into full womanhood, and hints of marriage to Edward. Father has most probably arranged the match as he has with Mary and Charlotte. If Ned Bolton has his way, he and Letty will soon be married.

The whole time she has been growing I have been away. I feel I hardly know her, having only seen her in various stages of growth. But now she sounds womanly in her letters. The thought of it makes me feel weary at the age of thirty-one. For all the attentions and bravery of my regiment, my career, is at a standstill and could be for some time if not forever. Not only is Father miserable, his sons in Spain are as well. The letter is passed on to my two brothers who read it and become homesick for family. Lockier also reads it with interest.

Walter is recovering. I want to send him home and apply to Argyll for permission which he refuses to my annoyance but to Walter's relief. As far as he is concerned to leave us now would be an admission of weakness.

The camp is in an uproar and rumours spread rapidly; rumours I have difficulty accepting even if they have one grain of truth to them, which I doubt. But Argyll confirms

them. He summons his officers and staff. We congregate in his large campaign tent, and wonder if perhaps this time it is peace after all, despite the news from England being sketchy and sporadic. He stands before us, General Starhemburg by his side and holds his hands up for silence. The general hub-bub dies down around us. Everyone is hoping for peace but no one dares voice it.

“His Grace, the Duke of Marlborough has been relieved of his command. He is no longer the Captain-General of the Allied forces,” Argyll says.

We stand in silence as he continues. “The new commander of the First Guards is the Duke of Ormonde. The Duke of Marlborough has been accused of the charge of peculation. The taking of money falsely in the name of the army.”

My mouth drops open in shock. Anger paralyses me as I try and digest the news. When Argyll finally dismisses us I find my senses. I flee from the assembled men before I can be dragged into conversation about my knowledge of the Duke’s habits and reveal my fury at such a false declaration against him.

Lockier follows me out of the tent.

“They accuse him of stealing funds and have dismissed him. How can they accuse him of such a crime? He never embezzled money?” I say, almost spitting with anger, slowing my pace so Francis can catch up to me. “They will not be happy until they have killed the man with vicious lies. I have been with him, seen him work, watched him pay men from his own funds when money was slow in coming through from London, listening and helping with tales of hardship. What’s the matter with the government? They take everything from him and then add this to torture him. How could they concoct such a story when he was surrounded by witnesses? What are they trying to do to the man? Destroy

him?” My voice is loud my anger knows no bounds. “They are lying, making up falsehoods, creating a crime to get rid of him.”

Lockier looks around at the men milling around us. “Richard, calm down. You look angry enough to take on the whole of the French army yourself,” he says. He grabs me by the arm and leads me back towards our own regimental quarters. “Everyone is against the Duke. They have been stirred up by Bolingbroke and Swift with his pamphlet, *The Conduct of the Allies*.

“I cannot stand any more from Argyll,” I hiss under my breath. “I was there when he set out to dishonour him. I know what he put the Duke through. He could barely contain his delight at Marlborough’s dishonour, just now. It was written all over his face. And Swift too. What does he know on his high and mighty pulpit?” Lockier drags me behind a tent out of sight of the men behind us standing in groups talking about the news.

“Be quiet, Richard,” he hisses back. “This is not your affair anymore.”

I shake off his grip and march on, but he still follows me back to my tent. He pulls up a camp-stool and sits before me watching me pace within. “Richard. Calm down. Sit down,” he orders.

He sits before me, his long angular face pale and set with determination, his eyes alive with concern. No one commands me except those officers senior to me and he is far from that, but his voice brings me to a halt.

“You must be more careful about what you say, Colonel,” he admonishes.

“It doesn’t matter anymore what I say. I was careful with Marlborough, what I said, who I associated with. It made no difference.”

We can hear the murmur of voices outside my tent. I know I have to tell my regiment the news that the army will never be the same again. The greatest soldier of all

time has been dismissed from his rightful place by a dubious charge. Lockier goes in search of St. John and when he appears I give him orders to assemble the men. It is the hardest task I have had to do.

“We have a new Captain-General, the Duke of Ormonde,” I tell them.

The men, many of whom are veterans and have fought in Flanders under his command, listen to my announcement silent and incredulous.

Walter and Edward come to me afterwards, but I am so bitter and incensed I cannot speak of the injustice of it. The hurt is too deep to express. I feel at my lowest ebb. There is still no word of peace.

Chapter Sixty-Six-Synopsis

Spain

Summer: 1711

Wounding

The troops fight hard in a battle around the town of Cardrona. Edward is badly wounded and Walter comes to Richard in some distress demanding that he visit his brother in hospital. Richard puts duty first, much to Walter's disgust. Later he visits Edward and finds Lockier and Walter with him. Edward is very ill and they think he might die from bloodloss and infection. Richard stays with him throughout the night and he finds himself on his knees praying beside Lockier, something he thought he would never do. Edward recovers and Richard acknowledges there might be a God after all, something he usually dismisses.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

Spain

Barcelona: 1711-1712

Faith

The blackness of night, punctuated by the large and dominating moon, surrounds me as I stand upon the quiet ramparts of the fort of *Monjuic* overlooking land and sea. Beyond the interminable blackness, pierced by the stars and moon, lies the peace of England. Bats that roost in the walls of the fort and in the trees far below flap their wings and swoop up and over the ramparts. They ruffle the still air above my head, and dive so close I feel I have to duck to avoid them hitting me. Dark blue clouds streak the moon. Bulky shadows of the large men-o-war ride high upon a silver path, their movements, from my vantage point, barely discernable in the slight swell of the outer harbour. It is only when I look away down into the darkened drop of the ramparts of the fort beneath me and look back once more towards the sea, that a slight shift of their hulls is visible. The sight of them provokes in me a mixture of indifference and relief. These ships will transport us away from here on the morrow, away from the desert that is Spain.

Barcelona, tightly furled within its fortified walls, is a mass of inky darkness before the harbour. It has been an Allied possession for so long, since the capture by Peterborough

in the early days of the battle and now we are going to abandon it. The army is about to leave the Catalan people who have supported us.

I will not be sorry to leave this place of harshness and deprivation. Memories of nearly ten years possess me, of fighting for a cause that is now non-existent and of dubious origin. Tomorrow we will all be upon the great vessels and we will sail with the tide. The war is over. England is at peace, at long last.

According to the reports, the Allies in Flanders have been abandoned. Ormonde has pulled the British army out of the Low Countries. Isaac has written to me at long last, relieved that he has heard from me. He has told me stories of the final days when the orders were given and the Allies marched away. The march had caused much anguish for the veteran soldiers many of whom collapsed by the roadside weeping after they broke ranks. They had left Prince Eugene and his men to fend for themselves. I wondered what the Prince thought of that and Britain, after his years of loyal support. Ormonde had proved himself not the capable or popular leader that Marlborough had been, but perhaps that had been anticipated back in London and that was why he was given command.

My regiment is to be disbanded, the men are returning to England to civilian lives. The regiment I had bought, looked after, fought for and with, is no longer. I am returning with a nominal career on half pay.

A feeling stirs me accompanied by a wash of loss. I cannot bear to think about saying good-bye to those proud men who have followed me here and fought under my command. Yet, they deserve more than anything, to return home. I feel I am abandoning them, as well as letting myself down, when it is entirely out of my hands. Many of them will be going home to poverty. It is beyond me to help them apart from giving them as

much money as I can. I myself am going home poor, no money left, my land sold for my regiment, no sign of future employment.

Peace will last some time with the final signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, negotiated over in the halls of Gertryndenberg, drawn up by the plenipotentiaries and politicians, far from the bone littered battle fields in the Low Countries. Negotiations for peace have been going on for years, even when we were fighting in Flanders. I remember Marlborough talking about it. I wonder where I would be if I was still with him, but, by the way he is being treated, I would be no further ahead. The cause of strife, the loss of lives, this disruption of government, the purgation of the human spirit, all due to the economic and political power of possessing a land that lies far over the sea. Now we are free, now we can plan our futures.

I am not free. I am imprisoned by memories. I feel perjured of soul, empty. I heave a hearty sigh in the darkness. Peace had to come I know, and it is a relief, but I am at a loss, and I suspect, will be for some time.

Ellen's memory rushes in on me out of the darkness. She is locked within her convent, willingly undergoing submission to the will of God. I have written to her several times but have received no reply, except once from the Abbess, to say she was well and progressing in her vocation. That was months and months ago.

"The war has changed us all, Richard," Lockier has said to me. "But a man of your talent will not go to waste. You were taught by the finest and experienced what few have, you will eventually be recognised, if that is what you crave. Have faith in yourself, my friend."

Faith, it seems, is all it takes.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

Edlington

Summer: 1714

Recovery

The light is blue and cool. Shadows of low-lying clouds chase each other across the brown, yellow and green fields that ripple in waves before the thrust of wind. The softness of the land soothes the ache of my eyes after the bright harshness of Spain. Father's coach carrying his war weary sons from London makes its laborious way up through the centre of the countryside towards Yorkshire as it carries us home to Edlington.

The peace of England is almost tangible but I am jarred back to reality as we pass the occasional gibbet by the roadside with its rotting corpse swinging from a noose, a thief in stocks in a village we trundle through being pelted vigorously for his crime, the constant threat of highwaymen, the noisy but necessary turnpikes and the sight of veteran soldiers wounded and begging, limping, lying by the wayside. I don't look upon them in case I know them. I know where they have been, how far they have marched and how well they served their country and how little they are thanked. I look upon them with pity.

Exhaustion overcomes me and I sleep, only to be jolted awake when I thought I was already awake, my mind playing tricks on me. Walter and Edward, also depleted, sleep most of the journey.

We travel down lanes edged with stone fences and through heavy arches of green leaves on the outskirts of woods, only to break out into open countryside again where roads are lined with hawthorn hedgerows that twist up hills and converge on a village clustered around a church, the steeple visible for miles around. The sight of tower windmills catches my eye, their lofty sails turning ponderously in the wind. Groggy with tiredness, my mind still playing tricks, I think for a moment I am back in the Low Countries. Sunshine flashes off pools of water fresh from recent rain and dazzles me. We pass a pond, a stream, a small lake then a long straight canal with the occupancy of one serene swan. Beyond trees in an open tract of land sits an aloof country house, stolid behind its decorative pillars and portico, surrounded by protective oaks, green lawns right up to its long windows, deer grazing in the parkland.

England.

The land is being harvested and everywhere there are labourers in the fields, their backs bent to the task, their heads shielded by large hats worn against the sun. The scythes swing through the wheat in a wide measured rhythm. Women, in country skirts caught by skirt clips to clear their feet, hats tied by wide ribbons, tie the sheaves and pile them on end into stooks.

Everything about me is etched and coloured with the distinction of unreality. It is with effort that we alight from the coach to spend yet another night in an overcrowded inn in a market village. One more day of travel and we will be in Edlington. I am outside of myself looking in. I am wearing my uniform, as Edward and Walter are, but I feel odd, completely out of place, Colonel in an army, now largely disbanded, and without a regiment of my own.

The returned soldiers are ushered into the dark hall lined with ancient oak panels. The stately house crowds around us. We are home. The darkness returns.

My heart pounds. I sit up in the dark pool of my bed. Ashe slowly disappears from my vision. Between a gap in the bed-curtains a shaft of moonlight streams through the window across the oak floor of my bedchamber. With one movement I thrust the curtains aside, stumble out of bed and take deep breaths at the open window to steady myself.

Ashe comes to me, constantly.

He stands at the end of my bed and smiles at me, his head upon his shoulders. Easily and slowly he reaches up and detaches it from his neck and holds it out to me with a smile playing around his lips that now pour with blood.

Another nightmare, one of many I have been having since returning home, nearly all involving Ashe in some way. I remember doing that after Murray died and after Malplaquet, but this time it is worse and seems to be aggravated by being at Edlington.

The urge to run into the bright moonlight and rid myself of Ashe's memory is upon me. Outside the countryside is quiet and rests in blue light and indigo shadows under a large yellow moon that hangs low in the sky. The urge to run outside into the bright moonlight and rid myself of Ashe's memory is upon me. I find my clothes and dress.

The summer night air is heavily perfumed with honeysuckle, roses and jasmine that clamber over the outside walls of the house as I let myself out of the front door. It has been so long since I experienced summer in England I have forgotten the beauty of it. Silence engulfs me as I walk through the kitchen garden, through the stable-yard and coach yard. The only sound I can hear is the lonely hoot of a barn owl from the woods.

I climb the stile in the stone fence into the open fields and feel the stubble of newly mown hay rough under my feet. I walk until I am far away from the house.

An army of propped stooks surrounds me and the huge moon is coloured a dull orange as it hangs closer to the flat horizon. The earth smells damp and is covered in a light dew, only the hot smell of freshly shed blood is absent. The warmth of a haystack draws me to its centre. My eyes clear in the sharp light searching the night, for what I am not sure.

The stooks around me turn into a long parade of men who walk to their deaths in battle after battle after battle. They line up before me ready to die, every face etched clearly in the moonlight. They fill the field I am in and the next and the next, thousands upon thousands, marching over eleven years to their deaths keeping in time to the bounding beat of my heart, their feet tramping into the earth. I am as insane as George is. George who still haunts Father's house and our lives, with large cavernous eyes, that see all yet nothing but the madness of his mind.

The hay around me is warm and I lie back and stare at the pinpoints of light far above me and wait for my heartbeat and breathing to slow down, my vision to clear. The battle over, I pull myself to my feet and wearily walk back to the Hall.

The whole family are here except for John, who is on his way back from Florence, and Charlotte, who had recently married cousin Will and is in Ireland, staying in Bealieu House in County Louth which belongs to Lord Ferrard, Will's father. Letty said that "Clocky" wore white silk stockings embroidered with silver clocks at her wedding. Nothing has changed it seems.

Still detached from reality, I feel odd, a stranger in their midst, still half on the battle-field which seems more real to me, just outside the door, down the beaten path to the

fields. Family life starts to evolve around me and I find I am not against peace, but my mind is and tricks me.

Coote and Bysse are quite large lads now, too large for such boisterousness, I decide, as they play around me like frolicsome young colts with their long lean bodies and gangly limbs. I brush them away with a wave of my hand, I want peace, not endless badgering and constant noise. They run in and out of rooms, bang doors shut, instead of closing them, tear up and down the great oak staircase, and swing around the carved newel posts like monkeys from Africa, then dart in and out of the front door of the house, not once but several times. I observe them askance and wonder where the gentlemanly sons that Father is so keen on nurturing have gone.

The word 'gentleman' is anathema with this new generation. He succeeded with John and I, but it seems the younger ones are completely different, even Walter and Edward still have their noisy, wayward moments. My patience is tried. I am irritated and cross with their pranks and noise. I snap at them to be quiet. They look at me, resentment clouding their young faces and slink away, heads lowered in disappointment and hurt to find their hero is a flawed human being after all. Mother, never too far away, intervenes.

"You have a very short memory, Colonel," she says, over her shoulder with maternal tolerance as she disappears after the miscreants.

"I wish I had Mother, I wish I had," I reply in exasperation.

She turns around and looks at me, an astute expression on her face, now starting to crease with years. She disappears only to return a few minutes later with a boy either side of her to stand them before me.

“Apologise to your brother, boys, for being so noisy and unruly,” she demands, her arms folded, head on one side watching the pair standing mollified before me.

Hands behind backs, suitably chastened and temporarily quiet they apologise and of course, I accept their apology. No sooner is that done than they are off again and Mother chases them away, clapping her hands, as she does the geese in the kitchen garden. They disappear outside to work off their energy out of harm’s way, and for a few moments the house falls quiet.

The atmosphere of domesticity swamps me. Mother runs the house as Marlborough ran his army, to the clock, everything in its place and everything ordered. She had tut-tutted over us in alarm as she had surveyed our clothes hanging off our thin forms. Now, out of uniform and in country breeches and shirts, all our clothes prove too large and swim on us showing how much weight we lost in Spain, when we put on our waistcoats and coats we are swamped and look rather comical, enticing hoots of laughter from the monkeys.

“Did they not feed you?” Mother demands, turning me around to survey the damage.

“It was difficult to get supplies through to us,” I answer, standing patiently in front of her as she sets to with measure, needle and thread, pulling me this way and that.

“You need a new suit of clothes,” she states, after measuring me. “You will have to go to Doncaster to the tailor. What happened to all the money that was supplied for the troops in Spain?” She pulls another shirt from the trunk of clothes at her feet and thrusts it up against me, head on one side, chin tucked into her neck as she mentally calculates measurements, size and fit.

“It didn’t reach us most of the time,” I answer, looking down at the linen shirt she holds against me. “We had to live off the land a lot of the time, and the land was sparse.”

The shirt is finely gathered at the neck and buttoned, full sleeves edged with cotton lace. I have not worn anything so grand for a long time.

“What a way to treat our young men,” she tut-tuts again, stroking a stray piece of auburn-grey hair out of her eyes and tucking it under her cap. “My Lady Marlborough would have been better spending the money on the troops than spending it on all the fine houses in London that she is reputed to have bought.” Out of habit the mention of Marlborough silences me. “Most of the money came from the Privy purse. Did you know that?” she continues, as I shake my head in silence.

Mother glances at me then pulls out another shirt and a pair of buff breeches from the trunk which she hands to me to try. “Your father knows about it. If you ask me, she should be the one tried for peculation, not the Duke,” she says, just as Father walks into the drawing-room.

“Lettygoose, you know better than to say such things,” Father says, with a frown at us both, wondering what we have been discussing.

“I mean what I say, husband. I’m angry at the state of our boys. Look at your fine son, a Colonel in Her Majesty’s army, reduced to skin and bone while Madam Marlborough fills her coffers. For a country to allow such a happening there is something definitely wrong,” Mother sniffs.

Father and I look at each other and raise our eyebrows in unison. “It’s just as well you talk here amongst these four walls, Letty,” admonishes Father gently. “Anywhere else and you may be had for treason.”

“How so? Is it not the truth?” Mother asks indignantly. We both know that once started there is no stopping her.

“You will soon fatten him up with your good pantry, Letty. They will all fatten up, Walter and Ned are looking better all ready,” Father replies, winking at me. I smile at him over the top of her lace-capped head.

“And where, pray tell me, would they be if they did not have a good family to come home to, as many have not?” She murmurs through pins in her mouth as she puts a tuck here, adds another there.

“We are lucky, Mama and we know it,” I agree.

“Of course you are, but there are many poor men out there who are not as lucky as you.”

“Letty, ease up. You will have us all weeping,” Father says and disappears, knowing that she is in a mood not to be reckoned with, and that she was also quite right.

In light of our deprived appearance, the dairy maid is ordered to provide more fresh eggs, cream and milk to build up the wasted bodies of the returned soldiers. At breakfast, as well as the usual gruel and milk, we are eating hot rolls and fresh bread, running in freshly churned butter, honey from Edlington’s bee hives, cheese, chocolate and coffee, and eggs from Mother’s chickens and ducks and bacon obtained from one of Mr. Westenry’s pigs. For dinner the table moans with beef, mutton, lamb or pork roasted on the spit filling the house with appetising smells for hours on end, along with vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, fresh peas and beans, asparagus and cabbage; then comes supper with vegetable and beef broth and sweatmeats to finish. We will be so fat when we come to leave that we will not be able to walk.

But the extra attention has its affect and Edward for one is starting to look decidedly healthy, while Walter, still coughing and under threat of Mrs. Westenry’s snail concoction, is also putting on weight, much to Mother’s relief. She dishes up plates of food for us and

makes sure we eat all that she gives us. As far as she is concerned we have regressed right back to childhood and there we are going to stay.

Letty fascinates me. The little girl I once knew is now a woman. She is practical around the house and the one who helps Mother the most and who is closest to Father. Often I find her in the scullery or the dairy helping the maid churn the milk and cream for butter and cheese, or in the kitchen helping the cook before the great Elizabethan fireplaces with their turning spits; in the garden picking peas, beans or herbs, and apples off the trees in the orchard, the skirts of her gown tucked up and bulging with fruit, wooden pattens on her feet to protect her shoes from the soil.

We walk through the long path of the woods together and she tells me about Brackenstown and Brazeel, the estate of Edward Bolton, and how Edward took her to Bective Abbey near Trim where the Boltons' used to live. They had spent the afternoon exploring the ruins of the old Cistercian abbey and its fortified house, and how Mama did not like it at all that she had spent the hours unchaperoned with Edward, even though we know him so well.

"Mama, can be very old-fashioned in her ideas. Edward is a perfect gentleman and we had a lovely time together," Letty says to me as she walks beside me full of chat, carrying her gathering basket laden with painted lady pinks, white lupins, honeysuckle, larkspur and marigolds. She is going to decorate the house and the altar in St. Peter's, in time for Francis's service on Sunday when he comes from Doncaster. She too will soon be married and from her another family will spring, as you, Mary, have produced your brood, and no doubt Charlotte will too.

The day grows dark when it should be at its brightest. Rooks scream in the trees, curl in flight in the darkened sky above the fields, then soar in waves to settle once more into quietness in the woods that are bathed in premature night.

The eerie silence in the middle of the day disturbs us as the interior of the Hall darkens enough for the lighting of candles. In fear and curiosity we all wander outside and stretch our heads back to look at the darkened sky where stars are visible in the middle of the day. Long shadows of dusk lengthen across the fields as the sun is completely obliterated by the shadow of the earth. People run from their cottages in fright in the village, tipping their heads back and looking at the sky as we do wondering why the sun has chosen to die. Mother and the younger ones retreat inside again, afraid to be out in such a strange half-lit world.

Lockier rides up the hill upon his chestnut horse, like a herald from another world. His flying shadow is long upon the ground, his black cloak flies behind him in the wind, his hatted head low as he gallops the last mile. He would only ride like that if he had some urgent news, I decide, as I watch from the fields where Father, Walter, Mr. Westenry and I walk observing the oddness of the darkening countryside. Many of the villagers have now shut themselves inside their houses fearing the apocalypse or some such happening, while others have resorted to sheltering in St. Peter's.

Father and I exchange anxious looks and I run from the others back towards the Hall to meet Lockier. They too turn and follow me, knowing that Lockier's news must be dire.

"What's the matter, Francis?" I ask, my first thought of you, Mary, as he dismounts his horse and gives the reins to the groom who has emerged from the stables at the sound of his approach.

“Has something happened to Mary?” I ask, fearing the worst. Your news had been sporadic from Doncaster and once again we heard you were not well. Mother had been insisting you to return to Edlington, but you said you were in need of the physicians in Doncaster. I also suspected that you needed Lockier.

Lockier removes his hat and wipes his brow with his kerchief. He has been riding hard, his horse is foam-flecked, a cruelty of which Lockier is never usually guilty. He shakes his head as he recovers his breath. I am relieved.

You are never far from our minds, Mary.

“The Queen is dead,” he pants. “The Queen is dead.”

“Is that all?” I shout, startling him, then I recover myself and apologise. “Sorry, Francis. I thought it was Mary. I thought something had happened to her.”

Lockier eyes me, his brow furrowed in concern at my outburst, just as Father, Walter and Mr. Westenry appear beside us. Mother too must have heard the gallop of hooves through the gate and the sound of voices because she comes running out the door, closely followed by everyone else including the cook and the dairy maid.

“Whatever is it, Mr. Lockier?” she asks, hand on her heart in fright, the others clustering around us. “The day has turned to night. Something must have happened.”

“The Queen is dead, madam, God rest her soul,” answers Lockier, then turns to Father. “The Queen is dead.”

“Long live the...King!” Father replies.

“Yes, but which one?” I ask. Everyone turns and looks at me.

“There is only one King,” Father answers.

“There will always be a threat from the Jacobites while the Pretender is alive,” I answer.

“We have seen to it that there will never be a threat again, with George the Elector of Hanover as King. The succession of the throne of England is now secure,” says Father. “Long live the King.”

Silence comes between us all as we digest this statement. Prince George of Hanover, the Protestant Grandson, has been in line for succession since his Mother Sophia the Electoress of Hanover had died in June. This was now August, but there were rumours that the Queen had carried around documents pertaining to the succession and in her guilt, over usurping her father James II from the throne, wanted the throne to pass to his son, the Pretender. But it seems Father knows all. George will be the new king.

Lockier nods in agreement. “News came through with the death of the Queen that the King has already been declared in London. There were some calls for the Pretender as rightful heir to the throne, but not many. The new King has already accepted the decision.”

“But he is German and many say he has no love for England,” I protest, remembering talk in the camp when the matter of succession was discussed.

The sun is starting to reappear and light of day is increasing in strength around us. The Queen’s death has not been unexpected. She had been ailing for months, unable to walk, completely crippled with gout, her huge frame carried everywhere on a bier.

My eyes dart from one face to the other as the sun returns to us and starts to lighten upon us. We are stunned by the news but feel a measure of sorrow within us that is gradually turning to hope.

Birds sing in the woods again

“You realise what this means for you all?” Lockier asks, glancing from Father and Mother to the rest of us. “It means our lives are about to change and the fortunes of this family especially.” Francis reaches out and puts his arms around Mother and Father as if

they are his own, which in many respects they are. “God have mercy on Queen Anne and her immortal soul,” he says with feeling. His face breaks into a wide grin that makes us all smile in return because we know that what he says is true. “Thank God,” he says. “Now England, now all of us, have a future.”

Father paces his study, deeply in thought while Lockier, Walter, Edward and I watch him wondering what he is thinking. He knows a great deal that has gone on in London concerning the succession but he has not mentioned it or told us of it. He stops pacing and looks at us seriously as we quietly watch him. “We must return to London as soon as possible,” he adds. “There’s no doubt that the Queen’s death means a change in fortune for the family, Lockier is quite right upon that. The Tories will not last now; we, the Whigs will be returned to power.”

“Surely, sir, the Tories are likely to have arranged a Jacobite succession with the Pretender upon the throne?” questions Walter puzzled.

“The Tories are far from organised and they are not ready or agreed upon within their own ranks to ensure a Jacobite succession. No, we have a Protestant King, that’s what we have been working towards all these years.”

Later Lockier takes me aside.

“I thought you would like to know, Richard, that news also came through that the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough have returned from exile in the Low Countries; they returned almost immediately upon the Queen’s death. They are in London. Rumours abound, some say they have returned to claim the throne.”

“My Lord Duke would never do that. He has no such ambitions,” I answer, annoyed that such sentiments were still around.

“Nevertheless, people have thought of it and talked about it and he is popular enough to gather support if he so wishes, but I think they have come back to support the new reign and have their honour restored.”

“No doubt.”

“Perhaps now you will also be accepted back into favour by the Duke?”

“My confidence is not high,” I answer, feeling the heat of discomfit rise in my face. “I still feel demoralised. Only time will heal that.”

“You will be accepted again, my friend,” he says. “The Duke has never been one to bear a grudge, you have told me that yourself.”

“There is no grudge for him to bear. I never betrayed him, no matter how it looked at the time. Marlborough will never be my future again, no one has to tell me that, Francis. I dare not even think it. The last days before the besieged fortresses of Aire and St. Venant are with me still and drag through my mind like remnants of a bad dream, easily recalled, never very far away. It is better I stay away from the Duke of Marlborough.”

Chapter Sixty-Nine-Synopsis

London-Brackenstown: 1714-1715

Fingal

Before he leaves for Ireland, Richard witnesses the funeral of Queen Anne in London. His father and John have both been received in the court of the new King George I. His father has been reinstated and John is ready to take up his position in Florence. All bodes well for the family. Richard travels to Brackenstown in Ireland and finds Maura is now married. The brothers are living on their new piece of land and doing well, though they treat him warily. Richard becomes the first elected member of Parliament for Swords to his father's delight. Jonathan Swift is a frequent visitor to Brackenstown to Richard's dismay. Richard is promoted to Lieutenant- General of the Ordnance in Ireland.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

London: 1715.

Threat

London is abuzz with excitement and once again the streets are full of military. Rumours of a Jacobite invasion run riot in coffee houses and pamphlets. The capital has returned to the fervour that Blenheim and Ramillies had induced.

My passions are stirred. I too am taken by the fever of it. Time has shifted, gone back to when I was serving Marlborough. Here is an opportunity to raise another regiment, to march off to war again, to fight once again for the King and for England.

Whitehall is a jumble of activity, noisy with the cries of street sellers. Bewigged gentry and politicians are carried in sedan chairs or ride by in private coaches and hackney carriages. The drivers whip the horses as they clatter and jolt through the streets, dodging, darting and swearing at each other or at the lesser folk who get in the way. The street sellers on the pavements set up a cacophony of calls, jostled by passersby who are protected from the traffic only by stone posts placed along the edges. I notice many of the men sport the pigtailed wig made fashionable by the battle of Ramillies as I do, or they swagger along the streets in a military way, head high, shoulders back, hand on sword.

Marlborough has summoned me to his presence by a letter bearing his seal. Without hesitation I answer. More than anything I want to prove myself to him, prove that I can still perform as the soldier he had taught me to be. I also need to prove my allegiance

once more and hopefully be accepted back into his favour. In Father's coach, I head away from St. James' towards Whitehall, my heart thumping hard in anticipation and nervousness.

The corridors of Whitehall stretch before me as I walk in and out of the dusty light wells created by the windows that overlook the parade ground. Full of apprehension and excitement, I hear the Aide announce me at the door to Marlborough's chamber and I am ushered into a large room which contains the usual collection of map tables and chairs that always accompanies the Duke.

He rises to meet me as I enter. His blue eyes sweep over my person as they have done countless times before, taking in my appearance from the top of my dress wig to the toes of my black shoes with their silver buckles; my black hat edged with gold lace under my arm, gloved hand on the pommel of my sword, my blue uniform, that of the Ordnance, edged with gold lace. I am impeccably turned out as I know he would wish me to be. My face is impassive as the Duke approaches me.

A familiar surge of kindness for the man fills me as we share memories in a glance. I am now thirty-four and he is sixty-five. He has aged over the past five years; thinner and slightly stooped where once he had been straight and upright. His face, once firm and fair-skinned, is now deeply lined, the skin dull, the texture of parchment, but his eyes as they study me are bright and blue, as I remembered, the mind behind them still quick. His eyes are as steady as ever, his once dark eyebrows now grey beneath the grey wig he wears on his head. He looks every inch the General. My feelings are tumultuous within me despite my outwardly straight and stiff demeanour and are only revealed as the Duke reaches out his hand to me. I bend my knee to him and bring his hand to my lips.

“Come, my dear Colonel, rise. There is no need to kneel before me,” he says, and catches me by the elbow and raises me to my feet. He embraces me, kissing me on both cheeks as moved to see me as I am him. “You have not changed, Colonel. Still as young and vigorous as ever and ready to fight again, I believe,” he says, with a smile. I bow to him again.

“Your servant, Your Grace.”

“His Grace, the Duke of Argyll, is with me. He will be leading the army in the fight against the Pretender.”

Only then do I become aware of the younger man standing in the room. I acknowledge him in turn. Marlborough is no longer capable of leading an army physically. He is about to leave this to Argyll while he advises in the background. Argyll’s previous animosity towards Marlborough, which I had witnessed in camp, seems to have been forgotten. But as Lockier said, Marlborough was never one for harbouring a grudge. He turns from me briefly towards Argyll, who bows to us both and withdraws from the room.

“My lord Duke has told me much about your bravery and action during the Spanish conflict,” Marlborough says when we are alone. “But that is to be expected of such a fine soldier such as yourself. My dear Colonel, to have a man of your ability and experience amongst our ranks is an honour for us, and I am pleased that you have raised another regiment. Once again you will be invaluable to the peace and security of England.” He beckons me to a chair and he sits opposite me. “The Jacobites have certainly organised themselves into a threatening state of cohesion. We are no longer secure in the new reign and there is too much to be lost if the country is overrun. They have to be stopped. Troops are amassed in the north beyond the border and also in the south. The Pretender is ready to march and to fight, though no one seems to know exactly where he is. Some say he is in

Scotland already, same say he is already in England. Perhaps he is still crossing the channel or perhaps he has not even left Rome where he is exiled. Westminster and Whitehall are not waiting until he arrives to find out. He is ready to claim the throne on the grounds of his Stuart blood and he does have a legitimate claim. But he will have to fight for it and once we rise against him, we will not let him win and for that men like you are important.”

“I have raised my regiment, your Grace, a regiment of dragoons. My men are all veterans and eager to fight,” I answer and he nods. “They are already on the march north and I am about to set out to join them.”

The last few days had been taken up with last minute arrangements and meeting my officers : Robert Demoy as my Lieutenant-Colonel, Edward Ridly as Major and Captain, as well as Captains William Bennindine, Anthony La Mellionere and Harry Lord Pawlet, all veteran officers of Marlborough’s army and all eager to be back in the field again. I had entertained them lavishly at dinner at St. James’s and in due course had come to know them all. The house had been filled with military talk and memories of the war. We had assembled some days ago before their journey north towards the Scottish border, our exact destination yet to be revealed. I have spent hours mulling over the latest list of recruits for my regiment, working out the exact number of uniforms, munitions, rifles and horses and how much it is going to cost.

Everything will go well, I am convinced of that. Father had helped me with finance and I feel certain of success. The request I had put forward to the war office to include my brothers had been ignored, much to Mother and Father’s relief, and William and Edward’s intense disappointment.

At last, after years of sorrow and regret, after years of wondering and worrying I am accepted again.

Now is my time. This is my turn.

My regiment will be the finest in the country and once more I will be in command and everything I have learned under Marlborough will be displayed upon the field. I can finally prove myself once more.

Reluctantly, I walk away from him, down the corridor, back the way I had come, saddened, yet inspired and uplifted, not wanting to leave him, not knowing if I will see him again. The urge to write about those momentous days I have been part of, record it for history, is upon me. What Marlborough had accomplished and the manner of deeds he had done; the massive feat of organising thousands of men into victorious battles. I vow to myself that I will. When I return from Scotland the world will know everything about the greatness of this man who once again looks upon me with kindness and favour. I will approach him then. I am sure he and the Duchess will approve, after all, I served him faithfully and saved his life.

My hero, the Duke of Marlborough.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

London: 1715

Mary

The coach pulls up in front of the house. It is respectable enough, fronting onto a street before the river embankment, out of the hustle and bustle of central London, tucked into wide gardens edged in fields. Here, it is almost country, something you, Mary, would like, I decide. You occupy a suite of rooms on the second floor and the maid shows me into the drawing room and I am immediately surrounded by your belongings, chairs, small tables, sewing box, children's toys, your small escritoire overflowing with papers. Your quill lies on your open desk, the nib still wet with ink where you have put it down after writing.

The room is clean and airy with a view of the fast flowing Thames but it is not fitting for my sister. I think of your large house in St. Stephen's Square in Dublin with its retinue of servants and realise that you would not have been there for some time as you have been here in England to be near George, Father and of course Lockier. You come into the room, Mary, and stretch out your hands to me in greeting, giving me a large smile as I take them within mine then bend to kiss you upon both cheeks.

"Dear brother, I have been waiting for your visit, Father tells me you have raised another regiment."

"I have just met with Marlborough and he welcomes me back."

You clap your hands in delight, your eyes glowing with pleasure but in an instant you grow serious again. "It means, Richard, you may be at risk again."

"No more than any other time and I have survived thus far," I answer with a smile. You indicate a double settee and we sit together, you as attentive as ever. "Mary, surely you would be better at home with Mother in Dublin than here?" I ask, unable to conceal the concern in my voice.

"I need to be near George, Colonel. He's well and with his parents here in London. The children need to be close to him. Their needs are important," you answer, with all your old firmness but I can see that you are gaunt, your colour waxen. You are much thinner than when I saw you last at Edlington. A ripple of anxiety goes through me.

Your face is painted, which surprises me, because it is something you never do always relying upon your own natural beauty that needs no artifice. But, I realise, with worry, that you are hiding hollows and shadows and the drawn lines of illness beneath the powder and colour. A creature of skin and bone, hardly recognisable as my healthy sister. "You have not come to lecture me have you?"

"Why should I do that?" I ask surprised.

"I have had various visits over the past weeks from all my brothers. They have expressed their displeasure at me living apart from George, in various ways; letters from John too. He has written from Florence in some concern, lecturing me about my duties as a wife, mother, daughter and sister. He is concerned about the rumoured title being proffered to Father, scared that it may be withdrawn. 'Think of the family' he said.

"Mary, you must not take John's letters to heart. He knows what you have been through. He is not thinking clearly."

She nods at me. "It is not only John, I have heard directly from William, Walter and Edward, especially now, when the family fortunes have risen again. They seem to think that after being so low in favour, my separation from George is a matter which will bring disgrace upon us again, if my circumstances are made known. So I keep apart from everyone. And I have not heard anything from you for months. I presume you are of the same opinion. Is that why you have been so long in coming to see me? I keep away from Dublin and stay here in London, near George, but not with him. I cannot visit St. James' often in case the servants come to hear of our separation. Rumours get around so easily." Pain stirs the depths of your thirty-six year old eyes which look at me from a sixty year old face. The reasoning that consumes you, makes you realise what is happening, but that realisation is too late.

Your frankness brings the colour of shame to my face.

"I have not come to lecture you, Mary, but out of concern. Father is worried about you, as we all are. We really are unconcerned about how your circumstances affect us as a family," I answer guardedly, knowing that the topic of Mary's marriage has been discussed at various times amongst us. Father has tried to reassure us that such happenings have little effect upon our lives, apart from worrying about you. I try and cover my discomfit, but you know me very well. Your eyes never leave mine. You are aware of our concerns. I am ashamed of my feelings, and you can sense that, after all, we are close, and always have been.

"Mary, your arrangements and circumstances disturb me, as you are unworthy of such treatment, but I would be loathe to let it come between us because I know how you have suffered. " I explain. The only thing that has stopped me coming to see you these last

weeks has been the raising of my regiment. You are aware that I move north within the next few days?"

"Yes, Papa told me. Oh, Richard, do you really have to do this again?" You ask your voice tremulous and my concern increases as I realise how vulnerable and unwell you are. "I thought that once the war was over there would be no more fighting and with your position in the Ordnance you would be back in Ireland for good and here you are going off again."

"Not abroad. Still in England, Mary," I answer, with a smile trying to quell your anxiety. "Scotland perhaps. England must remain powerful and this is the only way I know how to help. The confrontation may not eventuate," I reply, trying to ease your mind. "It is madness on the Pretender's part. The Jacobites are organised. The Scots are brave and fearful fighters but their skill and fighting power does not equal ours."

"I just hate it," you say, covering your face with your hands hiding your tears and I realise I have said too much.

"Come, Mary. Do not upset yourself. This battle will be nothing to what I have experienced before."

"You do not seem to realise, Richard, we have spent years worrying about you, and Walter and Edward, but especially you. Thank-God, Coote and Bysse are not old enough to join the army. I think it would have killed Mama," you answer, wiping your eyes with a kerchief. "What of Walter and Edward, are they taking part in your regiment?"

"No. I requested them but they were overlooked. They were eager to be part of my regiment and I was keen to have them. Instead, I have officers I do not know under me."

"That is a relief as far as the boys are concerned. Does it ever occur to you that you may be killed?"

A momentary silence comes between us. "Of course, but I always dismiss it otherwise I would not be able to act. Anyway, Father has other sons."

"Each one of you is important to us. Because he has many sons does not make any of you disposable," you say with passion, fire returning to your eyes. You get up from the chair and move over to the window that overlooks the street. You stand there so long gazing out over the river, that I become concerned. "Mary?"

You turn and look at me startled, as if realising I am still there.

"Forgive me, Richard. I was looking for the children. They went out with the nursemaid to see their father. It seems so long ago I thought they would have been back by now. Sometimes my thoughts wander and I'm distracted." A fleeting smile lights your face and for a moment you look like the Mary I once knew. The woman before me is almost a stranger, the voluminous folds of your gown and petticoat, the short cape over your shoulders do not cover your painful thinness, so thin, I feel I can enclose your waist within the grasp of one hand.

"The children," I muse thoughtfully. "I have not seen them for so long. They must be growing fast." I wonder if they will return while I am still here.

"Henry is twelve now and at school here in London. Sarah is ten and little Margaret is seven. It's such a pleasure to see them grow up from babyhood. They're wonderful children and very fond of their father. That's why I stay here, so they can see him when they wish."

"I would like to see them again soon. Perhaps, once the Jacobite threat is over you will bring them up to Edlington again and I will see them then?"

"Of course. Yes, that would be good. I do intend to travel up there and stay for summer again. I intend to go to Doncaster as well. But first I have to go to Bath to take the

waters. My physician has recommended that I do that several times. He says it will restore my health and spirit again. It was helpful the last time I went.

“Are you going on your own to Bath?”

“George is coming with me this time. He has been before and found it beneficial. I will not be on my own, and I will have my maid and manservant.”

“You aren’t well?” I ask, relieved that you have brought up the subject. You hesitate before you answer which alarms me.

“A minor disposition, Richard. Nothing to be alarmed at. A woman’s problem, minor aches and pains. Nothing serious. My body just seems to be out of humour,” you say with a reassuring smile. The fondness in your eyes for me never wavers. I relax, wanting to believe you. Perhaps my anxiety is unfounded, but the feeling of disturbance niggles at my reasoning. You come back to the settee and sit beside me again as if to reassure me.

“Have you seen Francis lately? I have had letters from him but have not seen him for some time.”

“Not for several months. He is well. Being the Dean of Peterborough, he has many duties and does not come our way so often.”

“Will you tell Mr. Lockier when you see him that he holds a special place in my heart and he is always with me. He has been so strong and helpful to me.”

Alarmed I look at you and blurt out. “That sounds like a farewell, Mary.”

You laugh at me and put your hand on my arm in reassurance. “Hush, Richard. It isn’t a farewell. No, not at all. I just thought that you may see him before I do, as you are heading north.”

“Why don’t you tell him yourself? It would please him. He would much rather hear it from you. I am sure he will visit Edlington or Doncaster once he knows you are there.”

“Dear Richard, I can’t say such a thing to him directly. It would be unseemly of me.”

“I think, Mary, he already knows how you feel.” You lean back in the chair a smile upon your lips but exhaustion is evident on your face. “I will go now Mary, you are tired.”

You rise with effort from the chair to move to your desk. “There are papers here you can take to Papa for me,” you say, bending down and sorting through a sheaf of papers. “They are for him.”

“Surely you can give them to him yourself. He will be coming to see you within the week.”

“Oh, of course. Silly me, I forgot. I suppose because I’m going to Bath I thought I may miss him.”

You hold out your hands to me as I bend and kiss each one. When I lift my head I find tears are in your eyes. “You must take care, Richard and come back to us whole.” I put my arms about you and hold you close to me, feeling the lightness and fragility of your body against mine.

Outside the house I turn and look up towards the window and see you gazing down at me. You smile and raise your hand in farewell. I raise my hat in response then climb into the coach for the ride back to St. James’, when I look back again as the coach moves away you have gone. The window is empty.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

The Battle of Preston

12 November 1715

The Final Battle

This is my last battle. After this there will be no more.

Two hundred men ready to fight for the safety of their country. They make a fine and stirring sight. Uniformed in red, accoutrements in order, carrying basket hilted broadswords, I have had especially shipped from France for them. They ride upon a team of fine horses I have personally chosen, lighter than cavalry horses, yet strong enough to withstand long travel and the rough terrain of England's roads in the north; strong enough to ride into battle and light enough to be manoeuvred easily. My regiment of light dragoons, those who pledge their allegiance to George I, Protestant King of England, is ready to meet the man who calls himself James III, King of England. We call him The Pretender.

The steady beat of drums and piping of fifes stir the people of Doncaster as my two hundred men, with me at their head, my regiment's standard borne aloft, ride through the narrow streets. The townspeople and local villagers out for market day, crowd around us. Cheers fill my ears and those of my men. I am transported back to the fighting days in the Low Countries when we paraded in much larger numbers through various towns and

villages. We are to fight not on the soil of Scotland but on English soil where the Scots already pose a threat. We head north to join General Wills.

Already I find myself embedded willingly in the familiar discipline of army life. I am happy to lose myself in such a world, happy to be away from the sorrow of Edlington. Our progress north is steady. Father, Walter and Edward ride with the regiment for part of the way. We camp in farmers' fields where we set up ovens to bake bread, and where blacksmiths are found to shoe horses. Nights are spent in the open fields, in barns, in farmhouses and inns along the way.

"You have always been honest in your dealings and appointments for the army, Richard," Father says to me the night before he returns home. "You have not taken bribes when raising and supplying your regiment, as some are prone to do."

The three of us sit around our camp fire and talk quietly together as the men around us settle for the night.

"I think that you have been treated unfairly. You deserve much more because of your adherence to principles alone. You are an honourable man and that should be recognised. I am so proud of you."

"Thank you, Father," I reply with a smile. "But I could not have done any of this without you."

"Your regiment is so well trained and appointed it is good enough for Royal Patronage."

He gets up from his seat and comes to me. He puts his arms around me and embraces me. He amazes me, my Father.

I smile to myself at his fatherly pride, but something has gone from me. I find myself on the outer edge of everything. My usual vigour of thought and body has deserted

me. My zeal has dissipated into the effort of living from day to day. The closer we come to the Scottish border the less the thought of the up and coming campaign stirs me. I find I go about my tasks like a marionette whose strings are being pulled by something in the past.

Father and my brothers say their farewells. I salute them as they turn their horses and trot away. When I look back, my father is a small figure on a large horse riding between two large sons.

A milky mist rises off the fields outside the town of Preston and reveals the bedraggled line of Highlanders. The muted colours of their kilts make them recede into the surrounding brown and green hills. The fire of the north is upon me again, only this time it is not Argyll but many of his race. They look like tribal hordes as they line up in rank from the chiefs down to the ‘humblies’, the men of lower quality in the back lines. Well-armed they face the English troops squarely, crowded closely together shoulder to shoulder upon one another, their kilts hitched up around their bodies for easy movement, some discarded altogether.

The Scots are armed with large broadswords and large wooden shields or targes. Some hold the lethal short swords or dirks in their left hands. Their reputation precedes them; they are a fierce lot who can disembowel a man with one thrust of a dirk. From between the lines the dirge of the Scottish pipes starts, the sound wailing on the air. The Scots crowd the hillside ahead of us and as I glance over my assembled dragoons I can sense the rising fear in them at the sight. They are primitive, fanatical and eager for English blood.

We face the rabble in organised lines, well disciplined, armed and prepared, a force of sixteen- hundred troops ready to attack Preston by the south-east and north-west. We

will spare no one in our venture to gain control. General Carpenter is already on his way to join us, marching across the Pennines, while the Duke of Argyll is north at Sherrifmuir. It will be a relief to express my fermented humour on the battlefield.

The drums beat out their message. The Foot in front of my dragoons dissolve before my eyes in a haze of gunfire. They quickly reassemble over their fallen numbers. Their colonel leads them through the smoke on foot as he marches up the slight rise, his sword raised and glinting, the Ensign carrying his standard and his drummer beside him.

Swords drawn, knee to knee, the long line of mounted men in my regiment wait for the moment to charge. Amidst the musket fire, erupting cannon and cries of conflict, tension increases in their bodies, hearts beat fast, their breathing labours, their mouths dry from the smothering smoke, from fear. The order for the charge comes. I raise my sword high above my head and order the dragoons forward. We break into a gallop as everything erupts around us in a frenzy.

Our horses are attacked and many of the men are pulled off them as the Highlanders fight as fiercely as the Spaniards and French in Spain. They slash their way through the lines with dirks and swords, the targes deflect any blows that come their way. Again and again the dragoons at my order reform and charge but the mass of Highlanders appear to increase, not lessen. Fourteen lines deep they are barely penetrated. My men are going down fast, my Ensign is down and my standard trampled into the earth. Demoy is fighting hard still upon his horse, fighting for his life and to protect me, caught up behind him. I call the order to dismount. Hesitation and leaden limbs caused by fear can take my men. Aware of the accompanying paralysis, I dismount and shout at them to urge them on.

Murray is beside me, after all these years, he is fighting to my right hand, I can hear his heavy breathing in the thick of fire, hear him shouting at me:

“You have the responsibility to lead the men through the thick of fire. When everything within them screams for them to stop where they are and not move, make them move. The fear of being killed is stronger than the urge to kill. One must supplant the other. You must show them by your example that you’re not afraid. You have no fear of dying despite all that is going on around you. This is your duty as an officer of the Queen. Push all thoughts in your head aside and lead them to fight again and again. You must lose your life in doing so if necessary. Show them that you are ready to give of yourself, to give your life to lead them to victory.”

He races down the lines to shout at my men. He encourages them to face the horror in front of them, all around them. I chase after him doing the same. The fact that Murray has been dead all these years does not register in my battle-addled brain. Musket fire and shot whizzes around us and over our heads. The cries of those killing and being killed deafens me. Once more I am in the centre of a maelstrom.

Somewhere I lose myself.

A Highlander is in the way. Spewed rage, hate and violence in a volcano of self-loathing erupts into the air. I am lost in space and time in the cataclysm. I become the madman I always suspected I was. For Murray my sword slices through tough skull. For Ashe through hardened skin and muscle. The man, not yet dead, moans at my feet. Through his heart for Mary.

Time stands still. Death comes towards me again and again. I challenge it, fight it off. The wind sings in my ears as a swipe of a flying sword misses me. The Scot on the

other end of the sword materialises a foot away. He lunges towards me. Intention to kill distorts his face. My sword is faster. I feel the visceral spring of his body. The soft squelch of flesh and muscle disappears before the thrust of the blade which scrapes live bone. The Scot falls at my feet, his eyes wide with affronted surprise, his mouth a grimace of pain at the thought of his destruction.

His face is clear now, blank in death. I see he is young, as young as I was when I first rode with Marlborough. I look up. An older version of the man at my feet runs at me sword and dirk raised. His face is contorted. He is ready to murder me in grief. Hatred carries him in one easy lunge towards me. Grunting with the effort, I swing my broadsword to meet the Scot's and at the same time parry the blow from the dirk brought up with one thrust, ready to gut me. The blade pierces my flesh. I feel a sudden release of pressure but no pain. Astonishment that the Scot could have achieved his aim stops me. He stares in triumph as I slump momentarily to my knees in the mud and ordure. Thinking I am done he bends over his murdered son as I calmly raise my pistol and fire into his face.

Father and son lie at my feet, the older man's face a bloodied pulp. Blood and brains run freely down the front of my coat. My left arm is useless, my shoulder and chest sliced through to the bone, my coat sleeve a mass of running blood which pours off the end of my sleeve and down the side of my coat and breeches. My head swims. I turn towards my men to rally them. They are all fighting furiously hand to hand in the dense smoke. It is difficult to stay upright. I stagger and bend over in an effort to maintain my balance. I slip in the Highlander's blood and slide into blackness.

Silence wakes me. I think I am dead. But my eyes, wide open, can see rolling black clouds. I am not buried yet. My mind is clear. I cannot move for pain and sorrow at not being dead like those around me. There is only numbness where my arm should be.

Torches stab the darkness and forms merge and grow in my vision as searchers bend and call to one another between the mounds of carnage. Highlanders and English lie side by side in death around me. A movement is close to me. Someone bends and shines a torch in my face then shouts.

“Live one ‘ere.”

Another form moves towards me. Pain wracks me as I am lifted and placed on a stretcher. Everything goes black.

The sound of moaning penetrates my brain and stirs me from oblivion. I cannot lift my hand and there is a constant buzzing in my ears from loss of blood. I look around through misted vision. The room around me is large and noisy with moans and voices, whispering, calling out, talking. I turn my head and see other wounded being treated by surgeons working by the light of candles, tapers and torches. Screams transport me back to the hospitals in Nördlingen and Douai. My regiment worries me. I have no idea where they are, where I am, or if we have won or lost the battle. I am just aware of intense weakness and constant pain from my shoulder and my left useless arm. I wonder calmly if I am going to die and why I have not.

“My regiment? My men?” I croak at the surgeon, my mouth and throat dry, as he bends over me, his face blood-smeared in the torchlight. The arm of my coat is stiff with dried blood and he slits it with a sharp knife, his hands dirty and bloodstained, the nails filled with crusted blood.

“I have no idea about your men. Worry about yourself, Colonel. You’re lucky to be with us. The sword missed a major artery in your arm by a hair’s breadth. It is held to your bone by sinews and tendons. The muscle is torn. The arm should be taken.”

“Stitch it, do not take it.”

He tells me to open my mouth and drops laudanum on my tongue followed by a stiff swig of whisky. I writhe as he probes the wound with his dirty fingers.

His eyes are cool and distanced as he stops and waits for me to catch my breath then he returns to his task. He searches through the meaty mess of my upper arm and chest. A shock of pain rips through me as he separates muscle, ties blood vessels and cleans bone.

“All this must be for some purpose, all this agony, all this rage,” the surgeon mumbles as he works.

“Did we win?”

His astonished eyes answer me, amazed that I can still talk and reason. He turns away and yells for a bowl of fresh water then turns back to me again.

“It seems we may have,” he answers. “This arm will kill you if we leave it as it is,” he says with a sigh, his voice remote, his face dispassionate.

“Stitch it,” I insist.

The surgeon shrugs at me. “Very well, if you insist,” he answers, drawing up a stool beside my stretcher and settling himself down. I look away from the frown of intense concentration in the man’s face, the blood-smeared skin, two days growth of beard, the yellow teeth that bite his lower lip.

A soldier appears and holds a torch aloft. The surgeon draws up a thread through a course needle. My face is close to his apron spattered with the blood of hundreds. The smell of blood is ripe in my nose as he bends over me. The jab of the needle through

muscle and flesh, the tug of thread causes me to yell with pain. The soldier puts a padded stick of wood between my teeth for me to bite on. The pain is too strong. Overwhelmed, I faint.

The darkness I share with other wounded men who lie as inert lumps in camp beds beside me. My ride is tortuous with the pain from my arm which is hot and heavy as if pierced by a thousand needles but at least it is still there. With my good hand I reach over and touch it to make sure I am not feeling a ghost limb as Thomas Ashe had felt with his absent leg. Faces come and go in my vision and someone lifts my head, presses a cup to my mouth and tells me to drink. Shadows appear and disappear. Some stay beside me in the candlelight which burns my eyes and makes me screw them shut. After some time I am aware that the shadows appear to be familiar shapes. I will my vision to clear and discover Walter hovering over me.

“We have come to take you home,” he says to me. I think I am delirious until he strips the bedclothes off me, lifts me up in the bed and swings my legs over the side of the cot.

The room sways around me. “What are you doing here?” I ask dazed and confused by his sudden appearance.

Walter says little but pulls my breeches up over my legs as Father too appears out of the darkness. I gaze at him in dumb amazement. Every move is agony for me and I groan as Walter swings my good arm over his shoulders and gently pulls me to my feet. My legs buckle.

“Come, Richard, we will soon have you home,” Father murmurs, supporting my body against his as he puts his arm around me on my wounded side and helps hold me up.

“My regiment? What has happened to my men?” I ask anxiously. “I have to know before I leave this place.”

“Demoy is looking after them. You suffered some losses but not many, considering the ferocity of the battle. The Highlanders were safely beaten. General Wills has nothing but praise for his troops,” Father says, as we begin to make our slow way between beds. The early morning air hits my lungs like wine.

The effort of getting into the coach makes me faint. They wait till I recover, give me ale to drink and more laudenam, before they manoeuvre me into the coach. The journey is a blur of pain. I slip in and out of consciousness only vaguely aware of snatched pieces of conversation between Father and Walter. Briefly my eyes open as we rock through York, every movement of the coach increasing my pain as I stare at the towers of York Minster. I do not know if I sleep or die until a flurry of hands and voices stir me, lift me and carry me into the cool entrance way of Edlington.

The crows stand over me with the long beaks and black wings. They nod and caw in a serious manner as they regard me with their shiny black eyes. The faces change and become white, rounded and dough-faced beneath their short white wigs. I am pinned by them to the bed in my helplessness. I am confused, what are they trying to do to me?

“It must come off,” say the wigs.

“No!” I moan.

I watch as they turn back into crows, Someone comes running. Rapid light footsteps, trip, trip, trip over the wooden floor.

“Leave us!” orders Mother. My mind rests easy at the voice of command.

“But Madam, the arm must be removed if he is to live,” they all insist, now wigs again. “Poison is setting in. Gangrene is a real danger.”

“There’s no sign of gangrene yet,” is Mother’s terse reply, escorting the doctors out of my room.

“I don’t want to live,” I mumble to myself.

Mother, not far away, comes into my vision her face close to mine and she shakes her head at me.

“I will hear no further talk of that, Richard. We will make you well. But you have to help us.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Alone she tends me. Removes the stinking dressing and places poultices of herbs and garlic on the wound to draw out the poison. The smell of it makes me gag. She forces water down my throat and wipes my face with a damp cloth. The infection rattles through me. I shake and shiver with fever under her touch, but she sponges me down calmly and with Walter to help, they change my clothes and bedclothes. I reach for her hand and silently bring it to my lips in gratitude.

“Now, Colonel. What’s all this nonsense about not living?” She asks, running a finger over my cheek as she used to when I was a boy.

There are no words in me to answer so sleep claims me.

Walter sits in the window-seat of my bedchamber and gazes out the window across the fields covered in the frost of early autumn. You are standing by him, Mary, smiling at me. You look well and happy as I remember you at Brackenstown. I smile back at you that you have come to Edlington to see us.

“Mary, what happened at Preston?” I ask, then puzzled I watch as you disappear into the walls and Walter looks at me in surprise.

“Mary is not here, Richard. Thank God, you have come back to us,” he says.

“She was here, I saw her. She was standing beside you.” I whisper.

He comes over to me in the bed. “Mary is still in London, Richard.” His face is white. In the dull light of the room everything appears sharp, bright, and fresh to me. A feeling I remember experiencing after my illness in Douai. He pulls up a chair to sit beside me.

“The rebels were beaten. The Pretender left for France long ago. Some of the rebels captured were taken to the Tower and executed. England is safe again.”

The news leaves me feeling deflated instead of victorious. I can summon neither hope, nor joy. My arm is still heavy and immovable but the pain is less, and my mind is clear. It looks as if I am going to live.

“Mary was standing near you when I awoke. I saw her very clearly,” I repeat. For a moment I think Walter may consider me still raving with fever. He nods at me, perhaps to humour me. He smiles, a strange twisted smile as if fighting tears.

“I thought we were going to lose you. I despaired....” his voice trails off and he rests his forehead on the bedcover near my useless arm.

We sit in silence until I drift back into sleep and recovery.

EPILOGUE

Edlington, 1715-1716

Farewell.

England turns out the bright flag of summer and flaps it vaingloriously before our eyes, chilled and incapable of recognition.

Almost as incapable as you, Mary, lying in your oak coffin in the black coach, being driven ahead, pulled by six black white-plumed horses. Our journey through the summer countryside is a nightmare.

It is I who finds inns for us to rest in, and churches to shelter your body for the night. Not one night but four. It is I who walks under lych-gates and through grave-filled churchyards to sit with you in the church, the darkness broken only by a few candles in your loneliness and mine. It is I who remains dry-eyed and detached while those around me break, one by one and weep in turn.

We lie on our beds at night in yet another inn. Our progress is slow, despite the fine weather. Sleepless, I stare into the darkness while Father and the others sleep with exhaustion. I doze off only to be jolted awake by the raucous crow of a cock heralding a streak of light in the sky.

You lead us home, Mary, through the countryside which has decided to weep in sympathy.

Trees drip, steam rises off the ground and passing fields, runs down the coach windows in continual rivulets that mimic Father and George's tears. Edward has decided to ride on ahead to Edlington to prepare the Hall for Mary's arrival and to give extra room in the coach.

The woods are black against the sky. I am momentarily blinded by the brightness beyond the hill.

The thought of Edlington chills me. Mist scuds across the lower fields and the loud croaks of rooks greet us from the woods as the coach climbs the rise to the village. Doves and pigeons from the dovecote erupt in a close-knit circle of panic, flapping their wings in frenzy at the advance of the procession. Villagers emerged from the cottages and stand bare-headed as the coaches turn into the carriage way leading to the Hall.

A silent retinue, awaits us. Mother, William, Edward, Letty, Charlotte, Coote and Bysse. Francis is there too. He stands a little apart, his face white and sorrowful and behind him stand the Westenrys' with a clutch of pale-faced servants in the background, kerchiefs' to their faces, eyes swollen with weeping.

We, your brothers, lift your casket from the carriage and carry it towards the silent group waiting in the doorway of the old Hall.

Mary, you have come home.

Six candles for seven nights. The hall is filled with the pungent aroma of rosemary and candle wax. Your coffin rested on stools borrowed from the vicarage, placed before the fire. Black mourning cloths draped the walls and mirrors in the house, and escutcheons hung upon the mourning drapery. Candles blaze from the sconces and silver candlesticks. We are all dressed in black, even the servants and villagers wear mourning.

The family stands around your open casket. Never again will we hear your voice, your laugh or feel your love. I bend and remove the square of flannel from your face. Letty, a stranger to death, stands beside me, hand to mouth, shocked by the sight of you, so young, so peaceful, so close, yet so far away. I hear a noise and turn in time to catch Letty before she slumps to the floor.

I pick her up and carry her in my arms outside into the bright summer air full of the perfume of flowers worried continuously by buzzing bees.

The day is a travesty. Laden with summer. My head aches with the brightness of it. You, Mary will never see a summer's day again. How you loved summer's clear blue skies and gentle clouds, apple trees heavy with fruit, warm breezes and fields full of rippling wheat. How you loved Edlington. It is good that we have brought you home.

I place Letty on a square of sunlight on the fresh grass near the entrance to the house and fan the pallor from her face with my kerchief. She lies senseless at my feet, a younger healthier version of you, Mary. Mother and Charlotte run out of the front door weeping and fussing over her. I leave them ministering to Letty and return to you lying in the darkness.

You are never alone, day or night. We take turns to sit with you, but everyday brings a change. Everyday you go from us a little more.

The children arrive with George's parents and once again the house is filled with weeping. Letty and Charlotte, their faces moon pallid, play mother to the children, enclosing them in their arms, holding them when they cry, walking with them in the woods trying to bring colour into their faces. The villagers appear in twos, threes or one by one. Mr. and Mrs. Westenry solemn and sad-eyed, enter the Hall, bow and curtsy to Mother and Father, and to you in your casket. The servants stand around the perimeter of the hall,

like professional mourners waiting to answer the family's every whim. Anything to ease our suffering.

Lockier goes from one to the other in turn. He says a prayer for each of us and encloses us in a brief embrace.

He puts his arms around me and holds me briefly. A glimmer of feeling goes through me. I check myself. Apart from that nothing touches me.

The moon now grown into a lemon orb hangs over the Hall. The vision of the other brighter world is clearer and more vivid to my eye, but I still cannot see beyond where Mary might be and it worries me.

We, your brothers, all but John, who is in Florence, how I wish he were here, carry your coffin, covered in a black silk-edged embroidered pall. We process down a path lit by flaring wax torches held by the servants and villagers, to the church. Lockier and Joshua Pearson, the Rector of St. Peter's lead the procession. The family, servants and friends who come from Doncaster, carry rosemary sprigs and follow two by two to the church.

The bell tolls in the still evening air. Six times to announce the deceased is a woman followed by a toll for every year of your life. The sound is strident in my ears. It disturbs the village and countryside, echoes over the fields hazy with dusk.

This is another nightmare. I stand back from the casket and stare at it in disbelief.

The family encircle you in the small church. Here Normans once worshipped. The gargoyles with their mocking grimaces jut from the roof, their faces frozen in silent screams at their vision of eternity. Lockier, pale and composed, in the light of abundant candles, recites the prayers for the dead in his steady, low voice.

I close my eyes, bow my head and listen as Francis preaches a sermon about your short life as a wife, mother, daughter, sister and friend. He talks about the poetry you loved

to write. His voice is gentle and quiet. He stops mid-sentence. Silence penetrates my torpor. I lift my head. I stare in wonder at the run of tears down his face. The words finished, I have hardly heard anything.

The space gapes at our feet. We lower you into the vault of the church. Lockier and Pearson intone the prayers of committal. One by one, we step forward and throw a sprig of rosemary upon your casket. The thought of you cold and lonely amongst Saxon and Norman bones almost overwhelms me as I look at your small home in the bowels of the church. An irrational desire to join you sweeps over me. I want to step into space and be swallowed whole. My only consolation is that you are at rest in Edlington, the place you loved.

The woods surround me. Sun streams through the lattice of leaves above my head. You are here with me, I see your shadow as you bend to pick flowers from the woodland floor and place them in your basket. You stand beneath the tree that protects the memorial to Ovid, and you turn and look at me. I run to you.

Mary, you have not gone from us. It was one of my bad dreams. You are here. I call your name. Lockier runs after me and calls to me, but ignore him wanting only to see Mary.

Lockier hovers over me. His beak open, he screams and plummets, ready for the picking, in a flash of iridescent black wings.

“You can have my soul, it’s not worth much,” I scream back.

Enfolded within the black wings of my nightmare I awake in bed.

The house is quiet around me as I try and calm my breathing to a steady pace. The soft murmur of voices and a muffled sound of weeping reach my ears and I wonder if any

of us will ever sleep normally again. Sleep evades me night after night until I succumb, throwing myself fully clothed on my bed in exhaustion.

George appears quiet and subdued with no more displays of temper, violence, fits of weeping or irrationality after the funeral. Everything that plagued him has disappeared. His new found sanity needles me and causes my anger to fester afresh. I can hardly tolerate his presence. I avoid him when I can.

Perhaps you had deceived him as you deceived us? Why did you want to die alone? Why did you not tell us you were very ill?

Anger takes me to another place of mourning. One where I have been before.

George, his parents, the children and Lockier, return to the living world. The house is quiet and orderly. The realisation that you, Mary are entombed within the church just a few yards away and the sad faces of Mother and Father stir me into reality. Waves of loss sweep through me unexpectedly, jar me in their severity, make me physically stop what I am doing, to catch my breath.

John appears in Edlington weeks after your death. His Italianate form seems diminished as I watch him alight from the coach, his clothes sombre.

“Father didn’t think it necessary that you came, but he’s pleased, nonetheless,” I tell him, studying the drawn lines of his brother’s face. “Everyone’s here, waiting for you.”

“Everyone except Mary.”

“She too awaits, in the church.”

John is silent. He allows me to lead him into the house.

“A life has gone from us and she has taken life with her,” John says later. We sit in the casement window in the Hall. “Nothing is the same.”

“Lockier says such feeling will pass.”

“It’s so long since I saw her. Now I never shall.”

“You did not call to see her in London the last time you were there?”

“No. I didn’t have time. I wrote.”

“She told me.”

“What I wrote?”

“The gist.”

“May God forgive me.”

“I don’t know about God. Mary was forgiving, however.”

Everyone is resting, the house silent, only the song of birds in the woods and the bees working amongst the honeysuckle climbing the house, penetrates through the open windows. The countryside is golden with growing wheat, the trees a bright green, vibrant to my eyes. It is another world out there. I walk into Father’s study and find him bent over Mary’s escritoire, sorting through papers, writing notes, John beside him.

“I thought of doing that, Father,” I say as I pull up a chair close to the desk. “I was not sure if the time was right, just yet. I didn’t like to worry you about it.”

“It has to be done sometime. I feel now is a good time as John has arrived from Florence. It’s good to have him with us. Such comfort you bring, John,” says Father, reaching out to pat John on the arm. John shifts in his seat, his face drawn with guilt.

Father has aged in the past weeks, his cropped hair thinning and grey against his head; he has lost weight, his arms thin under the light linen of his shirt. “It eases me to do

this,” he adds, gathering the papers into a bundle, rolling them, tying them with ribbon.

“Her poems. They bring her close to me; makes me feel she hasn’t gone, she’s still here, with us. It eases my guilt. I feel she understands.”

“There’s no need for guilt, you helped her so much,” John replies.

“There’s every need. She was neglected, not only by George, but by all of us,” Father says. “I should have made sure one of us was with her. I knew how ill she was. Richard’s wounding distracted me. I didn’t think. Your mother will never forgive me. She isn’t speaking to me at the moment. She can’t understand how I could have done such a thing.”

“It was not your fault,” I butt in. “Mary told me that George often went with her. When I visited her she said he was going with her. She must have expected it this time as well. He was still her husband.”

Father sighs and shakes his head. “Even if he had gone to Bath he would not have been with her. I knew that but did not act, did not insist, as I should have done. Their estrangement was deeper than any of you realise. She asked me to hide it from you all. She knew you did not approve and thought it a disgrace. But she told me she could understand how you all felt. She did not want you to know the true circumstances. They had not seen each other for months. He sees the children regularly, but that is all. He only saw her occasionally. No, we are the ones at fault because we are her family. We failed her when she needed us most. I feel nothing but guilt.”

John and I look at each other in silence. “I too am guilty, Father,” he adds. “I should never have written to her as I did. She did not deserve that.”

“She has written letters to all of you. I have sorted them out for you and the others, and some of her poetry for you to read.”

Robert handed us a rolled bundle each and a sealed letter.

John has disappeared. He is nowhere to be found in the house and no one seems to know where he is.

“Perhaps he has gone for a walk,” Robert says, peering at me over the top of his spectacles perched on the end of his nose.

“It’s a little late to be out walking,” I answer, looking out the window at the diminishing light of the day. “I will go and see if I can find him. Perhaps he went into the village.”

Clouds, heavy with unshed rain, run low across the fields, almost touching the earth before they sweep up to cover the hill and the woods. The dampness spreads and curls itself over the church grounds as I walk towards the village. The wind moans through the trees of the woods and in the trees near the house. I pull my greatcoat closer to my body as a chill penetrates my being. My arm is healing well, though movement is still limited, but my strength has returned. I feel well again though somewhat depleted. The battle of recovery is now weeks behind me and Edlington Hall is still harbouring us all. William and John are due to return to London and then John back to Florence.

The thought of you, Mary, buried within the small church still bothers me and I hesitate at the threshold not wanting to go through the covered porch of the south door, knowing that the sight of your tomb will bring another crippling bout of grief. Forcing myself, I turn the latch and push the heavy wooden door that stands under the arch of zig-zag moulding. It yields beneath my hand.

One lonely candle, which Letty lights every afternoon, blazes in the dim light, keeping you company. Once through the door, I feel your presence. I know you are here in spirit with me. The shadows entice me. I imagine you are about to step into my vision.

A noise startles me and I move more deeply into the church.

A large form wrapped in a cloak is bundled and crouched, bent double beside your tomb, his head almost touching the stone floor.

Concerned, I kneel beside John and find him weeping soundlessly, tears running down the sides of his nose and falling onto the stone floor. The fact that you are below our feet, so close yet so far away is unbelievable. I put my arms around him knowing that this eruption of grief will pass and all that will remain will be sharp stabs of grief and loss at your memory.

Exhausted, he sits back against the wooden pews. "I feel nothing but guilt about her," he says, pulling out his kerchief and wiping his face.

The candle beside your grave glows over your stone put in place, but not yet engraved. A nosegay of heartsease, marigolds and geraniums lies beside the silver candlestick, put there by Mother.

"I wrote her a caustic letter, telling her she was putting the family name at risk, putting our lives and careers in jeopardy because she had separated from George. I told her that gossip would ruin us. Why did I do such a thing? That was the last letter she had from me."

"We are all guilty of something concerning Mary," I answer. "I too was guilty of such sentiments."

The shadows, lengthen and deepen over your grave, as the light diminishes outside and the candlelight strengthens in the church.

“None of us are completely free from guilt. I knew she was going to Bath, she told me, I should have insisted that she was accompanied by one of the family, any one of us could have gone with her. None of us realised that she was so close to death. Father did the right thing in bringing her back here to Edlington, a place she loved. It’s peaceful. She will be at rest here.” I answer.

John does not answer me but sits on the cold stone floor, knees drawn up, his arms clasped around them trying to come to terms with everything.

In the silence of the church I reach for an understanding of that which has gone before and that which is to come.

This meeting with you, Mary, beneath our feet, is John’s goodbye and it is also mine. I decided on my future the evening I helped carry your body into the church. I watched your burial, detached, and numb, knowing my future. It has been there before my eyes all the time, only I could not acknowledge it, but now I can. Perhaps, you, Mary have given me that.

“What will you do?” John asks, as we walk back to the Hall over the pebbled carriageway. The windows of the house are lit with numerous candles creating bright patches beckoning us.

“My future isn’t in England,” I answer.

“Where will you go?” John asks, puzzled. To him, besides Florence, there is ever only England and all the country stands for.

“Ireland. Ireland is my future.”

“I understand,” John says simply, but I wonder if he really does understand at all.

John has achieved his wish. The dynasty of the family is assured. Father is the Right Honourable The First Viscount Molesworth and John is now the future Viscount and titled "The Honourable", while my brothers and sisters and I are titled "Honourable." Father and Mother spend a sleepless night pondering their newly acquired status. Father is a reluctant peer and does not really want the title, but John does and is mightily pleased.

I wait until I am alone in Father's library. Mary's letter and poem lie unread in my hands. A knock comes at the door and Letty, taking the corporeal place of Mary, appears, alarm in her voice. "Richard, Mama and Papa are wondering if you're all right? 'Tis almost supper time and everyone's in the parlour."

Logs on the fire spit and spark, sap runs like golden rivers through the crevices in the wood, dropping and hissing in the flames.

I glance at her. Her eyes are full of concern as she looks at me sitting in the chair beside the fire.

"Do you want supper?" She asks.

"I'm all right, Letty. Keep my supper for me; I will have it a little later."

"There is something which I have been meaning to give you."

She crosses the room to Father's desk and opens it. She hands me a small mesh bag containing a parcel heavy in weight addressed to me. "It arrived just before Mary died and Father gave it to me for safe-keeping to give to you but in all the hub-bub, I put it away in my bedchamber and quite forgot about it, until today. I remembered it this afternoon. It has come from France and 'tis important, I think."

The words create a tumult within me. I stare at the parcel in my lap. Letty, leaves the room and quietly closes the door behind her.

The wrapping is plain parchment with the imprint of the Dominican convent in Douai upon it, my name written in an even scholarly hand. The seal of the convent which holds the parcel closed bears a Catholic insignature, as everything in France usually does. I wonder what Father thought of that.

A letter written in French on paper with the imprint of the Convent is inside addressed to me. My heart, already heavy in my chest, beats harder and faster, as I open it.

To Colonel Molesworth,

Seour Marie-Catherine is now professed in the Faith of Christ. She requests that these items be given to you.

Yours faithfully in Christ

Seour Marie-Pierre,

Mother Abbess.

I pull the paper away from the parcel and find a small book in my hands. Ellen's book, The Confessions of St. Augustine. A rush of memories fly through my mind. Memories of snow-filled fields, kneeling at Ellen's feet, of Thomas Ashe and his warm friendship, and the last final, bitter memories of Ashe's death at Malplaquet.

My hands tremble so much that the book and a smaller parcel, wrapped within the first, fall from my grasp onto the oak boards at my feet. I bend down and retrieve them. I bring the cover of the book to my face and inhale the convent smell of parchment, soap,

herbs and incense. Inside the smaller parcel I find the gold locket with a curl of William's hair, the small miniature of Ellen that Ashe had carried into battle with him. Her face, heart-shaped, gold hair piled upon her head, her clear grey eyes shine out of the painting and look at me, the gold cross and chain around her neck. The cross and chain itself, carefully wrapped in the silk covering the miniature, falls into my hands. She has returned it to me.

When you wear this I will always be with you.

I open the book

The page is marked by a card with Ellen's writing on it.

She wrote:

'Everlasting love which is universal and such love is God' on the page of St. Augustine's prayer.

You called to me loudly and made me hear you,

You were handsome and glowing and made me see,

Your sweetness made me draw in my breath and now I pant after you.

I have tasted you and now only hunger and thirst for more of you.

You have touched my being and inspired me to unite with you in your serenity.

It was St. Augustine's prayer of love for God.

I frown. What had Ellen said all those years ago? "I cannot live if I cannot love you, but if I love you, I also die." That statement had puzzled me at the time. Now I understand.

Mary's letter waits to be read.

Sitting back in the chair, her presence beside me, her voice clear in my mind, the words tumble into my mind.

My dear Richard,

Forgive me if I have deceived you. I only intended to spare you the pain of grief. To see you again was a real joy to me in September as it had been some time since our last meeting. You looked so fine and well. I am pleased that your fortune in the army has improved, because, my dear brother, you are so deserving of good fortune. But please, take care and return home once again to Papa, Mama and the family.

I have known for some time that my days on this earth are numbered but I did not worry George with knowledge or details, or tell anyone, how exactly I have been feeling. He has been worried over my deteriorating health and I did not want to worsen his condition. He was going to come to Bath with me this time, as he has done before, but I stopped him. I have had several trips here since I saw you. I have been so ill since I have been here and 'tis an effort to write to you. George would have been in no fit state to witness my illness as he is improving. I would not want to make him ill again.

Please be strong for the sake of our parents and for the sake of my dear children whom it pains me to leave. I dearly wanted to see them grow and to see you married with children of your own. This I will never see. The thought saddens me. Please forgive me for any past indiscretion towards you on my part. I seem to remember some incessant childhood teasing which I inflicted upon you at one stage of our growing years.

To grieve is the natural way of things. I know you must, but please not for long, live your life and go on, do not hold onto me apart from an occasional thought of love. I must be free to go wherever I am taken, but remember, in that freedom, I will be with you always.

I love you, my dear brother, and I have seen the goodness and greatness in you. Remember that.

Your affectionate sister,

Mary.

I turn the letter over and find the poem Father gave me to read.
A poem, dedicated to George.

*Thou who dost all my worldly thoughts employ,
Thou pleasing source of all my earthly joy,
Thou tenderest husband and thou dearest friend,
To thee this first, this last adieu I send!
At length the conqueror Death asserts his right,
And will forever veil me from thy sight;
He woos me to him with cheerful grace,
And not one terror clouds his meagre face;
He promises a lasting rest from pain,
And shows that all life's fleeing joys are vain;*

*Th'eternal scenes of Heaven he sets in view,
And tells me that no other joys are true.
But love, fond love, would yet resist his power,
Would fain awhile defer the parting hour;
He brings thy mourning image to my eyes,
And would obstruct my journey to the skies.
But say, thou dearest, thou unwearied friend!
Say, shouldst thou grieve to see my sorrows end?
Thou know'st a painful pilgrimage I've past;
And should'st thou grieve that rest is come at last?
Rather rejoice to see me shake off life,
And die as I have lived, thy faithful wife.*

Mary, Mary.

The papers drop into my lap. I am unable to bear any more.

The woods are quiet, dark and soft around me. I sit on the wooden seat near the urn in memory of Ovid. The ache I have long suppressed intensifies demanding recognition and expression. Grief surges and erupts within me, creeps tide-like down my face.

I bury my head in my hands and cry.

The yacht, its deep tan sails billowing with a high wind pitches in the toss of the Irish Sea. Bottle green it boils below the hull. Froth floats on the wind around the ship, settles and disintegrates in bubbles upon the oak planks of the deck. The sails pull the small craft away from Holyhead on the coast of England towards Ireland. The gulls soar and swoop in free and joyful flight above the ship, their white black-tipped wings spread on the lift of air. For, with this strong fair wind off the English coast, it will not take long for us to reach the shores of Ireland.

The Viscount and Viscountess are below decks in their cabins. Honourable Letitia is also below nursing her seasickness.

The bounce of the ship does not worry me unduly as I take to the tilting deck and watch with mixed feelings the disappearing coastline of England. The air is keen and whips about me as I look in anticipation for the appearance of Ireland.

No longer do we have to travel in the squeamish Packet boats, laden with coaches lashed to the decks, hearing the panic and scrambling hooves of tied and blindfolded horses, penned animals with their various noises and smells, and sea-sick passengers that spew everywhere without warning. The Vice-Regal yacht is available at all times for our use.

Being titled has its advantages, though I am dubious as to how many. I can only envisage the disadvantages, much to John's annoyance who is revelling in his new status in Florence by the accounts of his letters.

The journey is swift in the light craft. The ship rolls gently in the swell. The sun sets in a yellow haze and turns the sea to beaten gold. The land in front of us folds itself into the brown dusk, mist and hills hiding the raw and dark interior. I gaze at its ancient mystery and recent pain.

This battered oppressed land. I wonder why I always feel such a strong desire to return?

“There is Ireland,” Letty says, appearing beside me, pale-faced and relieved that the motion of the yacht has calmed.

The wind catches her cloak and tugs at her hair so that it floats in dark tendrils around her face outside the hood of her mantle. “Are you pleased to return, Richard?” She asks, turning to me.

She knows this journey is important. She smiles at me, her eyes glowing with the happiness of seeing Ireland again and the realisation of her future. Edward Bolton is waiting for her at Brazeel House, he has been counting the days until her return, she says.

“Yes, I am happy to return.” The land calls me. I watch as it comes closer. “Ireland can be such a desolate place beyond the Pale. Even Dean Swift likens living in Ireland to being in exile. But here I feel my future lies, for good or ill,” I answer.

“And mine also,” says Letty.

The cries and calls, the running activity of the sailors behind us, are in our ears as they trim the sails and bring the ship closer to the shore.

Dublin Bay opens its arms and beckons us into Ireland’s embrace, but we sail on towards the rocky islet, Ireland’s Eye, close to the shallow port of Howth and the long stretch of lonely shore near Swords and Brackenstown.

Mother and Father emerge from the hatchway below the deck.

Mary, never far from my mind, is with me again.

Mary and Ellen, I return to Ireland for you. I have no answer to the deep call that brings me here, except that I am grateful for my return, to this place you loved that is also yours.

I realise I have just prayed, something unusual for me, lifting my spirit in love, gratitude and supplication to a higher unseen power. Perhaps I believe in God after all.

Ireland, land of my birth. I have returned. I have come home.

Ireland does sing. If you listen closely you can hear the song, high and wild upon the wind.

POSTSCRIPT

Robert Molesworth was born on 7 September 1656 in Fishamble Street in Dublin four days after the death of his father, Captain Robert Molesworth, Fish Merchant of Dublin, who served first in his brother Guy's regiment in the Royalist Army in England, in the English Civil War, then went to Ireland.

Robert's mother was Judith Bysse, eldest daughter and co-heir of John Bysse, recorder of Dublin, an accomplished time-server and an Irish judge who afterwards was Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer in Ireland. Secondly Judith Bysse (Molesworth) married Sir William Tichbourne, knight of Beaulieu, County Louth. She died in 1662.

Robert's half-brother was Lord Ferrard.

Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, Graduated B.A. 1675. Robert Molesworth married Letitia Coote, youngest daughter of Richard Coote, Lord Coote, Baron of Calooney.

He supported William and Mary: *"I had the honour to be well received and esteemed by the Prince of Orange."*

In favour with King William he was:

Sent to Denmark as Envoy Extraordinary in 1689.

Unhappy and unwell in the post, loving liberty and freedom of thought he clashed with the Danish King through travelling over the King's land in his coach and consequently, riled by the petty absolutism of the Danish court, he became indiscreet and spoke out with lack of tact, lost favour and was recalled from the post. He exiled himself to Holland in 1692 where he wrote in a fit of impulsive revenge about the corruption of the

Danish monarchy and court, an *Account of Denmark, as it was in the year 1692* published anonymously in 1693 and thereby unintentionally embarrassing King William of England. Because of this when he returned to England he found it difficult to find a political post in England, even though he was quite highly thought of, if deemed a little outspoken. He eventually obtained a seat as Member of Parliament in Ireland.

Maintained seats in both the Irish Parliament and the English Parliament: Member of Parliament for Swords, Dublin, 1695-1700 and Lostwithal and St. Michael's.

Raised to the office of Privy Council for Ireland.

Famous for his writings in the defence of liberty and the constitution and for his strong eloquence in the House of Commons.

Friend of Locke, Shaftesbury, the Duke of Newcastle, Lord Godolphin, Dean Jonathan Swift and respected by Addison.

Author of the Preface to Francis Hotoman's *Franco-Gallia* or *An Account of the Ancient Free State of France and most other parts of Europe before the Loss of Liberties, 1711*. In the preface he defended the right of resistance, attacked standing armies, and reiterated the need for annual parliaments.

Member of the Privy Council in the reign of Queen Anne.

Removed from the Irish Privy Council 1713 upon the complaint against him from the Lower Irish House of Convocation, as he gave vent to his anti-clericalism, being charged with saying in the Presence Chamber: *They that have turned the world upside down have come hither also*.

His views on "Priestcraft", Protestant and Catholic, were well known.

This created much controversy as his remarks had affronted the clergy and the case was taken up by convocation itself and also the Irish House of Lords and by the pamphleteers. He was vindicated by Addison.

Regained seat at Westminster and acquired:

A position on the Board of Trade.

Court spokesman in the House of Commons.

Fellow of the Royal Society.

Faithful and loving husband of Letitia and loving father of seventeen children, nine living. (John, Richard, William, Walter, Edward, Coote, Bysse, Charlotte and Letitia.)

Created Baron Molesworth of Philipstown and Viscount Molesworth of Swords, July, 16, 1716.

Died 22 May 1725. (OS)

John succeeded him as 2nd Viscount Molesworth. John died 17 February 1726 (OS)

Richard succeeds him as 3rd Viscount Molesworth, February 1726.

Robert, the present 12th Viscount Molesworth and his brother, The Honourable William Molesworth are descended from Richard's brother William.

The late Princess Diana was descended from Richard through his daughter Louisa who married Lord Ponsonby. Their daughter, Mary Elizabeth married Charles, 2nd Earl Grey.

Sophie, Countess of Wessex is descended from Richard's brother Edward through her father Christopher Rhys-Jones .

Bysse's descendents live in Australia.

Letitia's (Letty) descendants live in New Zealand.

The First Duke of Marlborough is also the ancestor of Princess Diana.

Molesworth Station in New Zealand is named after the Pencarrow branch of the family. It just happens to be situated south of Blenheim in Marlborough.

The soldiers mentioned by name in this novel actually fought and died as portrayed, except for Murray who died at Blenheim, and Ashe, who is fictional.

My apologies to the descendants of Abercrombie and the pitiful Pitt. However, Pitt was sent home with despatches as stated.

The Royal Regiment of Foot later became known as the Coldstream Regiment.

Finis: November 19, 2010.

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The Country of the Past

An Exegesis

Submitted to the Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Creative Writing

in the

Centre for Creative Writing

AUT University

By

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2010

The Country of the Past.

This is a novel based on truth. It is a lie told around truth, yet a lie which brings the characters and time to life. This novel involved a great deal of research. The writing of this novel, Great and Glorious Intent, came about through a family history investigation. In my father's ancestry is Richard Molesworth who later became the third Viscount Molesworth. I researched to find out more about him. This novel is about and around what I found. The historical events are background.

Introduction.

The novel's focus is on lives lived within and without historical events of the time, which, at the time of their happening were not 'history' but incidents unfolding as time passed. In the depiction of this particular period of Richard Molesworth's life I have chosen the incidents which would have, must have affected him deeply and built my novel around them.

The writing of this novel has been an exploration of the past, the lives of the characters, the present and how it relates to this past, the writing process and the construction of a readable story. Some things had to be added, some things taken away. There was concern about ethics and the consent, for my peace of mind, from living descendants. I wanted to provide a novelistic structure within the vagrancies and rambling of the real story; convey the atmosphere of the times through description and exposition; provide a suitable narrative voice and pace; write in the style of the times but translate it into the style of the present. The trick is to make past history like the present in human perception.

The novel is set from 1702 until 1716 when the thinking processes of people were still in the seventeenth century. The characterisation and plot has been taken from family letters but altered to provide pace and structure. The characterisation presented is gleaned from their letters, only, for fiction, it is exaggerated. This is a novel of composites: characters, real and imagined; incidents, real and imagined; contradictions: how can truth be fiction? How can fiction be truth? And controversyⁱ: Should people who actually lived and who have descendents all over the world, be rendered this way and should readers have to contend with a mixture of truth and fiction? My answer is that many of these people may not and are not, from my personal experience, interested in the history of the times, but they may be interested in reading a novel which may bring this particular character or ancestor to life. To them it may be enlightening and create interest where otherwise there would be none. As for readers being inundated with truth and fiction, most readers wish to be informed, to escape and be entertained by historical fiction, so the mix is generally usually accepted as such.

In the process of writing this novel I wrote to the present day 12th Viscount Molesworth to ask his approval for such a venture. In his letter back to me he writes:

I think what appeals to most readers is not so much the story, which is often just a re-working of an historical event, but the attention to detail, the detailed description of life in those days, the clothes, weapons, ships, hardships, food etc. As well as having a thoughtful protagonist that people can relate to —‘What would I have done in his/her situation?’ⁱⁱ

His brother, The Honourable William Molesworth also writes: “I have... no objection...provided it is clear to the reader that yours is fictional and only loosely based on history.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Seeking Out the 'Voice' to Tell the Tale.

The writing of memoirs in the first person point-of-view in the early eighteenth century was seen as an acceptable practice of the art of writing and was used by many authors such as Defoe, Richardson and Fielding in their novels.^{iv} However, such authors also included the asides of the authorial voice to address the reader directly, so it was not only the character telling the story but also the author. They also used third person narration to describe characters and actions (Lodge, 45). These techniques are usually not employed in first person point-of-view in the present time and I have not used them. If Richard had written his memoir in his time, more than likely, it would have been written in the epistolary method or as a memoir in first person, so it seems natural to use this method in narrating his story. If the novel was written in the style of the period in which it is set, it would be impossible to read for the modern reader. If it was written in the style of today it would be considered anachronistic. So the narrative's "voice" has to span the past and present, convey the ambience of the times but be understandable to the mind of the present day.^v

To tell the story effectively I had to find the right point of view to reveal the motivations of the character. After trying third person free indirect speech I became frustrated because the characterisation appeared weak and unconvincing. After reading Geraldine Brooks's novel, March, in which she uses first person point-of-view to create the character of the absent father from Louisa May Alcott's, Little Women, I decided to try this point-of-view with my character, Richard. This quickly became the preferred method and felt the most natural as it enabled me to enter his mind and "experience" what he must have felt about everything at the time. Leaska describes this as "Direct mental transmission"^{vi}. The narrative becomes immediate and real, the voice livelier and more direct which helps to establish reader confidence (Leaska, 34), something, I strove for in the narrative. Lodge describes transference into the mind of the character as "Theory of the Mind."^{vii} He writes that novelists have the ability to "create characters very different from themselves, and to give a plausible account of their consciousness, [it] is a special application of 'Theory of Mind'.... one that helps us develop powers of sympathy and empathy in real life' " (Lodge, 42). He also writes that "the most common kind of first-person novel is still the fictitious

autobiography or confession” (83),^{viii} and that “the single human voice...the authentic way of rendering consciousness...creates an illusion of reality”, (87). Ian McEwan writes: “Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and the beginning of morality.”^{ix}

The use of first person point-of-view grasps the freshness and immediacy of the imaginary present. To compound this, I also use present tense in the dramatic mode of narration rather than past tense. However, the use of first-person-point of view is limiting in the sense the overall picture is not portrayed and the events and action are seen only from one consciousness. Entering into the mental states of other characters is not possible. This can be overcome to some extent by the narrator-observer, who being on the periphery, can present “his material at any given point, either as summary narrative or scene”, (Leaska, 34).^x This is the method I found to be of most use. Richard is a witness to historic events and he passes comment by his description of them. Another disadvantage of first person is that it challenges the reader’s trust. For conviction the author has to quickly establish the character of the protagonist as being trustworthy.^{xi} This is partly accomplished through tone of “voice”, what the protagonist says and what he actually does, through thorough research of the period, and by the author (me) maintaining a consistent “voice”.

The question about a male voice being written by a woman and vice versa is neatly summed up by Tim Wilson who has recently published his first novel Their Faces Were Shining. His novel is written in first person point-of-view in a woman’s voice and he said he chose this because he thinks “women notice more....they operate on more levels.... and are more nuanced, somehow.”^{xii} Hopefully, this carries over to ‘woman’ as author (me) and helps create depth in the characterisation of Richard and the narrative in general which, according to Wilson, may otherwise not be there.

The Combination of Fact and Fiction.

Writing history into a narrative fabula ^{xiii} became apparent in the time of Sir Walter Scott who was a leading exponent at the time of this style which became “popular” or narrative history, rich in anecdote,” (Anderson, 5). Scott’s main characters were not real characters. If any real characters appear in his work they are portrayed in scenes that are brief, intense and self-contained.^{xiv}

In the writing of my novel I have deviated from the usual conception of historical fiction, for example ‘popular’ fiction, The Other Boleyn Girl by Philippa Gregory, or historical ‘metafiction’,^{xv} The Maggot by John Fowles, by using the life of someone gleaned from family letters and historical incidents. To do this I have had to alter some incidents and include others which did not happen (fiction), but I have also used many real incidents. This novel is therefore under the genre of historical biographical fiction which Margo White calls:

Controversial The fashionable genre on the literary block. The idea is that you take a section of a real person’s life, distil some essence of their character based on their diaries, memoirs, etc, and create a fictional narrative around them. It allows the author to explore a real person in a way that is psychologically and intellectually true to character but not necessarily true to life. ^{xvi}

The settings of the novel are taken from research and imagined to provide a background that is close to how it was. Brackenstown did exist and still does in an altered form. The village of Swords still exists with its church dedicated to St. Columba. Edlington Hall and the village is no longer there but the land and part of the woods are and there is information about Old Edlington and the Hall in the Doncaster Public Library in England. St. Peter’s Church, Old Edlington exists with the graves of Mary Monck Molesworth and John Molesworth inside. The battlefields in Europe continue to create interest for people who are interested in the 1st Duke of Marlborough

and what he achieved. His name is forever associated with the Battle of Blenheim and his palace, Blenheim, is an ongoing tourist attraction.

The basic premise for accepting, reading and enjoying historical fiction is because “it is not wholly possible to obliterate the past or avoid being conditioned by it,” (Holmes, 83). Many people realise that the past is what makes today. Readers who like historical fiction like to escape, be entertained and be informed. Some readers have a deep interest and knowledge of history and relate easily to the historical novel especially if it creates confidence through research, good prose, well structured plot, believable characters and a feeling for the time portrayed on the part of the author which comes through on the page. Other readers may find reading history books containing ‘scientific’ history, facts and figures, to be “dry” and off putting.^{xvii} Instead, to learn about history they will turn to historical fiction.^{xviii} Scott wrote that history is useless if the reader cannot read the past (Anderson, 9).^{xix} So this genre serves this area of the reading public. According to Collingwood,^{xx} historians also require imagination to write their histories despite the fact that they regard it as an accumulation of facts and data and therefore it is a science not an art. However, in order to do this they need to exercise their imagination. Even though there is a reluctance by historians to admit that historical narratives are verbal fictions they have more in common with “their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”^{xxi}

Richard’s persona is manifested by a twenty-first century consciousness and the story is written with hindsight of the present age and a more open, knowledgeable and differing view of history and literary tropes. But because his story is taken from fact it has another dimension, one of authenticity and authority. In studying the family letters of this period, the ‘voice’ of each character comes through relatively clearly. There are subtle insinuations and comments made, which when read as a whole, enable the reader (me) to ‘read between the lines.’ So that although often nothing is said outright, a hastily written sentence or comment, or certain word is enough to give insight into what was actually going on in the character’s lives.

Research creates accuracy which in turn creates writer confidence and reader trust. Ongoing research during the writing of the novel was pursued, even if a lot of it was not used. Sir Walter Scott, in the writing of history, emphasised the necessity of research to

provide detail which even in today's society of post-modern literary techniques may be deemed as necessary. Long descriptive passages in historical narratives are no longer used, however, authenticity seems to be important in conveying the period and only research can provide the writer with enough knowledge to convey that. Research done well creates narrative depth. If it is not done thoroughly, the story standing alone can appear shallow. The description of time, place, customs and mores of the period is obligatory to establish ambience, scene and vividness. Anyone who reads historical fiction likes to absorb themselves in the era but at the same time the sensibility of the present day reader has to be accommodated. Aspects of realism add to the reader's engagement because human nature does not change. Time, places and thought, social mores and order changes but basic human nature and the resulting emotions experienced as part of that nature do not.

In this novel I have searched for the truth. But I have also had to fabulate . The use of fiction in the text freed me to construct a traditional novel,^{xxii} where "truth" is absorbed by fabulation to create a 'whole.'^{xxiii} To convert Richard's 'history' into the structure of the novel, I had to look at the overall story and take out the important parts and build the story around those. Consequently, the story leaps through the years but maintains continuity as I have condensed or collapsed the time frame to create structure. The novel as structure follows the classical shape of rising action to a climax followed by a denouement. I found the narrative naturally divided into three parts and within those parts, rising action — Ashe's death, Richard's illness, his wounding at Mons — up to the first point of climax, Richard's banishment from Marlborough; further rising action until the climax of the Battle of Preston, the final climax of Mary's death followed by the denouement^{xxiv} which includes his father's ennoblement and the family's return to Ireland. The three climaxes in the narrative are reality based.

The narrative is linear in structure apart from the framing device of the Prologue and Epilogue which takes place in Richard's present time, after the war is over

Justice for the ‘Real’ Life Character and His Exploits.

This work bears a resemblance to the actual truth in the dates and events, but not to the innermost workings of the mind of Richard, but it bears witness to how his life at this period must have been. Moments of time are defined and ‘history’ is brought into relief.^{xxv} These fragments of experience are supported by a mesh of incident and action surrounding them. Most stories told in past eras are built around the style of the times which is important, however, I have also tried to emphasise the ‘man’ beneath all the trappings of culture of the age.

Richard and those around him at the time could not foresee the consequences of their action. He and his contemporaries were participants in the chaos of change. Because he is very much a man of his times he is limited and inculcated to his present. Despite this he is aware enough to recognise the Duke of Marlborough as a shape shifter, and an icon, an ‘historical’ figure. Something about the man draws him, and others like him, to do his bidding and willingly follow him. This is because on some level the Duke embodies the means to change in the order of things. Richard instinctively recognises both change and vision as necessary for progress. In that era to achieve or try to achieve such an aim was seen as a means to honour and glory, usually attained through battle victory over those who cling to the old order.

Over the course of the narrative Richard’s account shows a young, naive, idealistic man eager to better himself in the world. He matures and grows in self-esteem and self-knowledge, insight and realism as he participates in and witnesses cataclysmic events amidst the panoply of war. This major public activity is offset by the revelations of the private man.^{xxvi} When he is not with Marlborough on campaign, he enters into a private space of family, friends and home life. He becomes a son, brother, lover and friend. He discovers two sides to his nature, the one which is on ‘show’ in the army, and the other ‘hidden’ from the audience, the real Richard. The reader has the privilege of getting to know the ‘real’ Richard. Eudora Welty writes “Life is lived in a private place; where it means anything is inside the mind and inside the heart.”^{xxvii} It is this private place which I have tried to capture, the inside of his mind and heart.

He is aware he has witnessed events of gravity and importance, but when he writes he is centred in the process of grieving for himself, his career, his friend, his sister. Up until Mary's death he had witnessed death many times but no one close to him had died. With her death he now understands the price of war; what it is to grieve, the loss, emptiness, the thought of never again seeing the loved one or hearing their voice, or experiencing their presence in life again. The finality of death is upon him. By writing down his experiences and thoughts he comes to realise what he has inflicted upon other people through his actions in war, the intensity with which he embraced that, and to what extent he has contributed to suffering.

Richard includes Mary in his story by addressing her directly throughout the narrative as 'you', telling her of his experiences. She is never far from his mind. She has motivated him to write and this brings her closer to him. The act of writing is a catharsis helping himself come to terms with her death and with everything that has gone before in his life with Marlborough and the War. He has already undergone a crisis of identity with his estrangement from Marlborough and his deployment to Spain;^{xxviii} he has just started to regain his self-esteem and being recognised by Marlborough again without animosity, when he is crushed by the loss of Mary. In depicting his character in his memoirs I am consciously making him aware of 'guilt' associated with sacrificing human values of decency, compassion, honour in the expediency of 'behaving' correctly within the social framework.

The "Hugely Extended Now".^{xxix}

The writing of historical fiction is not history subverted but history replaced by a consciousness of the here and now, of the present. This novel is not a post-modern work in the disjointed, fragmented, decentralised sense. Such liberties have not been attempted because this is a story about a real man who actually existed in a past age with all the human feelings and failings of character which resound and abound in the present.

However, the novel is post-modern in that it takes the liberty of writing from life, is realistic in portrayal and does not try and imply that the past is superior to the present.^{xxx} Historical Fiction of the present day “subvert[s] the notion that the past really was superior to the present”, (Holmes, 52).^{xxxi}

Postmodern historical fiction such as John Fowles, The Maggot, which disrupts the time space continuum, is not truly historical in the sense of order and unity imposed by ‘scientific’ history. Fowles is imprinting the “chaos and fluidity of historical processes” in his ‘history’, and “the non-linear qualities of time.”^{xxxii} Whereas Barry Unsworth’s, Sacred Hunger, although written in the post-modern era, is orderly, linear, realistic with characters who, although living in their own time, are depicted in such a manner that they can be accommodated by the consciousness of the ‘modern’ reader, yet the narrative has a distinct post-modern ‘feel’.

Richard is writing as he lives, in the present at the beginning of the eighteenth century, much like Merivel in Rose Tremain’s Restoration, only Merivel is a fictional character during the seventeenth century. The author (me) however, is writing from the post modern era (as Tremain was). So, though Richard is present on the page in his time, his “voice” is not of that era, it is post-modernist because of slant, character and tone of the author’s (my) present. Tremain’s voice of Merival was more intensely of the period than I have created with Richard’s voice, yet her characterisation and narrative held a post-modern slant. Richard was living at the beginning of the modern age, so his voice borders on modern. Richard inadvertently tells the reader that the past he has experienced was not great and glorious but imperfect, disjointed, seemingly meaningless to his existence in his present world. This is a post-modern concept.

In his attempt to write his story his innate sense is trying to put order into chaos, to create a logical and coherent pattern in an attempt of explanation of fragmented occurrences of importance amidst the, and against the, interwoven tapestry of events. He is trying to bring meaning to a world which he participated in a quest for personal ‘glory’, only to find in the reality there was little glory but only bloodshed and destruction. His ‘world’, that he eagerly and willingly entered into and has been a part of for ten years, has evolved to become a maelstrom of violence and conflagration. His idealism has been replaced by cynicism, doubt and disillusionment and he wonders why something so

promising and glorious has now become defunct and jaded. Such moral and ethical attributes or leanings, knowing right from wrong, puzzling over how something so wrong can be seen as right, is subjugated in the experience of his present moment in time. Through the author's (my) intervention his self insight is expressed through post-modernism. The sense of morality and empathy of the human Richard is disturbed and decentralised by the turn of events.

The Question of Time.

Novels, such as Duchess, by Susan Holloway Scott and Brothers in Arms by Iain Gale are two that are set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century period. They are linear and traditional novels without a post-modern 'feel', yet they are realistic in a post-modern sense. During the early eighteenth century England was taken up with the cause of the War of the Spanish Succession, and society of the time was on the cusp of change.

Marlborough's victories opened the way for England's development in democratic change and pre-empted the later French Revolution. This era was the beginning of the Enlightenment.^{xxxiii} At this time the development of the idea of rational thought became a method of progression from the Medieval and Renaissance thought, dominated by the power of the church, to that of individual consciousness and the importance of "I Am" as a philosophical code.^{xxxiv} This era is the beginning of England's expansionism, colonisation and imperialism; the beginning of the modern world leading up to the industrial revolution. Richard, is one of thousands of inadvertent participants in the beginning of this process. To him these are momentous events amidst a barrage of chaos. The War of the Spanish Succession was a catalyst that 'prepared' the 'world' for a revolution, which England managed to avoid. This war initiated the beginning of change in France which culminated in the Revolution. The war also pre-empted the War of Independence in the United States, ironically backed by France. With the advent of these events, the old order was broken, so

Richard's participation in this heralded the breaking free of closed patterns into the open patterns of the new, later order.

As he writes his memoirs, his view is of the past not the future, though he knows the future is out there and somehow his participation in the present is helping to bring this about. He has moments when he becomes aware of this when he walks through the London streets in the mist and finds himself completely alone, in a brief moment he glimpses what may be in the future, an intuitive feeling, one he cannot readily express, (Chapter Thirty-Two- synopsis). He experiences another moment like this when suspended in the elements on the English Channel as the ship carries him yet into another campaign. (Chapter Forty-synopsis). Once again he glimpses the future but because of his embodiment with the present he cannot visualise or understand just exactly what he is a part of.

Conclusion.

The genre of historical fiction is highly imaginative, as is all fiction. Transference of it onto paper in the style of the moment is a distinctive creative skill that goes one step further than creating just fiction; it takes historical fact and interweaves it with fiction after a particular set of structural rules that pertain to writing the novel. The result is that 'history' comes alive. This depends on the talent and interest of the author to write of a distant age with lucidity, conviction and passion.

All writing is passionate but even more so in historical fiction. Many authors of historical fiction, such as Jean Plaidy, Philippa Gregory, Charles Frazier, Hilary Mantel, Tracy Chevalier, Arthur Golden, Barry Unsworth, and Patrick O'Brian obviously research thoroughly and this comes through in the narrative, creating reader confidence which enhances reader engagement in the text. Once the writer has done enough research to commence writing, the stimulated imagination becomes absorbed and embraces the era concerned, expressing itself in detail of that period as the characters, plot and structure come to life. The writer transfers this, wrapped and crafted within plot, and structures it into

narrative on the page. The era ‘jumps’ off the page and the writer’s vision is experienced by the reader, who in turn, becomes absorbed. The reader can immerse his or herself in the time of a past age and discover another world. This has been my aim with the writing of my novel, Great and Glorious Intent.

Endnotes

ⁱ “Historical fiction is a genre of controversy and contradiction,” Sarah Johnson. “What Are The Rules For Historical Fiction?” Historical Novel Society, 2002. < <http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org/historyic.htm>>.

ⁱⁱ Letter, e-mail from 12th Viscount Molesworth, 26 October, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Letter, e-mail from The Hon. William Molesworth, 13 October, 2010.

^{iv} David Lodge, Consciousness and the Novel (London: Random House, 2002), 43-44.

^v “Authors who write literary historical center their tales not on the historical setting but on the plot, which may help us better understand the differences (or parallels) between then and now, and on characters who manage to transcend time and speak to us from their own perspective in a way that we, today, can understand. One definition of literary historical fiction is “fiction set in the past but which emphasizes themes that pertain back to the present.” Sarah Johnson. “What Are The Rules for Historical Fiction?” Historical Novel Society. March 2002.

< <http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org/historyic.htm>>.

^{vi} “Direct mental transmission, that is, by confronting the reader directly with the mental experiences of the character.... The method of presentation... is almost entirely in the direction of the scene, both of an inner view of the mind and of an outer view by means of speech and action,” Mitchell A. Leaska, Virginia Woolf’s Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method (London: Hogarth, 1970) 41.

^{vii} “Theory of the Mind.... is what makes social and interpersonal life possible — the effort to understand what another individual feels and thinks, and to communicate our thoughts and feelings to others when we want to do so”, Lodge, 42.

^{viii} “The majority of literary novels published in the last couple of decades have been written in the first person.... Literary novelists prefer to create character as a “voice”, reporting his or her experience in his or her own words”, Lodge, 86.

^{ix} Ian McKewan writing in “The Guardian”, 13 September 2001, about the lack of empathy of terrorists for their victims, Lodge 42.

^x “The distance or variation in distance established between the reader and the story will be determined by the narrator’s choice and manipulation of his modes of presentation, that is, whether by narrative mode or dramatic mode’, Leaska, 34.

^{xi} “By endowing [the narrator] with special self-evident characteristics such as honesty, perceptiveness, the author persuades the reader the narrator is worthy of his attention and trust,” (Leaska, 29).

^{xii} “I think women are more interesting to write from the point of view of than men sometimes, because they seem to notice more. And they operate on more levels. With men, it’s just meat and war, meat and war. Women are more nuanced, somehow,” Tim Wilson interviewed by Guy Somerset, “Apocalypse Now”, New Zealand Listener Nov. 6-12 2010: 42.

^{xiii} “In terms of Russian Formalism... the *fabula* or story [is] “the sum total of events to be related in the narrative,” ...[or] the *sjuzet* or plot, “the story as actually told by linking events together.” Frederick M. Holmes quoting Chapman Seymour, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978). The Historical Imagination: Post-modernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction (Victoria University, Canada, 1997) 30.

^{xiv} Claire Lamont, "Waverley and the Battle of Culloden," History and the Novel, ed. Eason, 20.

^{xv} "Metafiction is just one form of post-modernism....Contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and... it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins....Framing devices range from stories within stories, characters reading about their own fictional lives and self-consuming world or mutually contradictory situations." Patricia Waugh, Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction. (London: Methuen, 1984) 22,28.

^{xvi} Margo White, "A New Frame for Frame." About Patrick Evans new biographical fiction about Frame and Sargeson, Gifted. White also writes: "the more we know, the more we want to know, and biographical fiction is a novel way of exploring the lives of the legendary." Lawrence Patchett writes: "There is something inexhaustible about biographical stories." The Listener Archive: Arts and Books. Aug.14-20 2010.Vol.225 No 3666.

<http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3666/artsbooks/15954/a_new_frame_for_frame.html>.

^{xvii} "Modern historians wary of using fiction as source material, stress the scientific accuracy of their own discipline, although choice and discrimination work to produce an individual construct. Fiction ... has a strongly historical dimension," Leonie Ormond "Painting, and the Past", History and the Novel, ed. Angus Eason (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991) 1.

^{xviii} This was told to me by the late Dr.L.Ding, who said he disliked history but read historical fiction.

^{xix} James Anderson, Sir Walter Scott and History (with other papers) (Edinburgh: Edina, 1981). Anderson quoting Scott in Life of Napoleon Bonaparte 9 vols. (Edinburgh, 1827) reprinted in 9 vols. in Prose Works vols.viii-xvi (32).

^{xx} R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History rev.ed.1993. ed. Jan Van Der Dissen, (Oxford: Oxford U.P.) 245, quoted by Holmes, 74.

^{xxi} Hayden White, "Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism" (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978) 82. Quoted by Holmes 74.

^{xxii} "Metafiction has been a favourite resource of many post-modernist novelists [for example] John Fowles, Muriel Sparks, Malcolm Bradbury, John Barth.... By openly admitting and ...drawing attention to the fictionality of their texts, they free themselves to use all the conventions of the traditional novel," Lodge, 81.

^{xxiii} "the *fabula* "is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjuzet*, which is all that he ever directly knows." Holmes quoting Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (New York: Vintage, 1985) 13. Holmes, 30.

^{xxiv} This structure was taught to us in the MCW classes by James George and Mike Johnson. A similar structure is to be found in Christopher Vogler's The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytelling and Screenwriters. (Studio City(CA):Wiese, 1992) 18.

^{xxv} Richard is trying to affirm "the power of the mind to order his life stay as desire dictates... to rob rime of its victory by tapping a source of joy and meaning which he had experienced in the past", Holmes, 33.

^{xxvi} "In a sense all novels are about the difference between appearance and reality or the progress from innocence to experience, and this is connected with the ability or the propensity of human beings to hide their real thoughts and feelings, to project versions of themselves that are partial or misleading and to deceive each other," Holmes 41.

^{xxvii} Quoted by Claire Missud, The Guardian 25 July, 2001, Holmes 40.

^{xxviii} “Major characters suffer crises of identity, brought on, in nearly every case by destructive historical forces....Personal identity is the mutable product of transitory historical phases, not an autonomous entity which transcends them,” Holmes 60-61.

^{xxix} “To abolish history, the remove the historical gap between his [John Fowles] characters and his readers and to institute an eternal world, that ‘hugely extended now’ which he claims artists and mystics have the capacity to inhabit,” (Maggot 246) Holmes 82.

^{xxx} Historical fiction of the present day “subvert[s] the notion that the past really was superior to the present”, Holmes 52.

^{xxxi} Holmes, quoting Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (London: Routledge, 1988) 14.

^{xxxii} Holmes, 26 -30.

^{xxxiii} “Reason, even in its Enlightenment mode, is ... seen as part of the impulse to control and subjugate which is the logic of capitalism and which has led to the violent forms of oppression in the modern world: imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, destruction of the environment, automatization of human beings for purposes of efficiency”, Holmes quoting Linda Hutcheon The Politics of Modernism (London:Routledge,1989) 55.

^{xxxiv} “Descartes making consciousness the basis for the definition of man Phenomena such as memory, the association of ideas in the mind, the causes of emotions and the individual’s sense of self, became of central importance to speculative thinkers and writers of narrative literature alike”, Lodge 40.

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