

"A PAGE-TURNING STORY OF LOVE IN A TIME OF WAR."
RICHARD FOREMAN

THE AMOROUS TROOPER

RONALD BASSETT



Amorous Trooper

Ronald Bassett

© Ronald Bassett, 1968

Ronald Bassett has asserted his rights under the Copyright, Design and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

First published in 1968 by Herbert Jenkins Ltd.

This edition published in 2018 by Endeavour Media Ltd.

Table of Contents

[Preface](#)

[A Note on the Female Dragoon - Kit Davies](#)

[Chapter One - 1702](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four - 1703](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

Preface

This is a story told against the background of the War of the Spanish Succession — the war in which the Duke of Marlborough proved himself to be one of the greatest military commanders the world has known. Millions of words, of course, have been written about Marlborough; we are not here concerned overmuch about him, but with one of his ordinary soldiers — a trooper of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, his life and his loves. Since, also, this is a novel and not a history primer, as few references as possible are made to the political complexities of the time. A few, however, have been unavoidable in order to set the scene in perspective.

A Note on the Female Dragoon - Kit Davies

Mrs Christian Davies (*née* Welsh) enlisted in a regiment of foot during the reign of William III after her husband had been drafted to Flanders. She was discharged as a consequence of seriously wounding a sergeant in a duel, but re-enlisted in the Scots Greys. Wounded at Donauwört, she was successful in concealing her sex, and subsequently fought at Blenheim.

She met her lost husband, Richard Welsh, now consorting with another woman, but continued to serve in the Greys, with Welsh maintaining her secret. At Ramillies, however, she suffered a fractured skull, and in hospital her sex was revealed.

Reconciled with her husband, the marriage was re-celebrated, with all officers of the regiment attending and each giving her 'a peace of Gold, some four or five'. She then continued in the role of sutleress until the end of the campaign.

On her return to England, Kit Davies was granted a pension of a shilling a day by Queen Anne, and lived out her days as an out-pensioner of Chelsea Hospital. She died on July 7th, 1739, being buried with full military honours 'according to her Desire among the old Pensioners in Chelsea Burying Ground'. Three volleys were fired over her grave.

Chapter One - 1702

A FULL TWO DAYS after leaving Leadenhall Street in London the big, red-painted diligence trundled clumsily among the gently rolling hills of southern Cambridgeshire and drew to a creaking halt in the village of Sawston. The horses were sweating, and the driver, fearful that they should take cold and even more anxious to reach the alehouses of Cambridge, showed unusual alacrity in throwing down the box of the solitary passenger descending before whipping up his tired team for the last few miles of rutted road.

Left to himself, Adam Margery, apprentice surgeon, dragged his box clear of the road, then stood, a little stiffly, filling his lungs with air. After almost two years of walking the wards of St Bartholomew's, of the stink of festering gangrenes and cauterized flesh — an atmosphere scarcely less salubrious than that of the filth-clogged gutters of Smithfield and Cheapside — the clean country air was a fragrant balm to his nostrils. He ran his fingers through his hair — no wig for an apprentice surgeon — and smiled to himself. Aye, London had its distractions, and Sawston might be a sleepy clutter of cottages in comparison, but it was satisfying to be back in the village of his birth, even for a short time — and even if the occasion was a solemn one.

There was a mile to walk to the house, but for sure he would find a boy who would carry his box for a copper. In his bespoke London coat, his modish steinkirk and knitted silk stockings it would hardly be fitting for him to undertake the chore himself. He had been tempted to furnish himself with gloves and cane before leaving the capital, but had feared the ridicule of his brother apprentices — who entertained no illusions about the social standing

of a surgeon's assistant. As it was, they had caused him no small embarrassment and brought frowns to the faces of the other coach passengers by chanting a coarse doggerel of the time — 'By the ribands round thy bum, which is brac'd much like a drum, by thy dangling pantaloons, and thy ruffling port cannons —!' There had been more in the same vein, and Adam had been heartily glad when the diligence had rumbled out of earshot. Even now he flinched to think of the episode, then turned as a familiar voice hailed him from a few yards away.

'Adam! Adam Margery! By my oath — it's Adam Margery!'

Staring at him with an incredulous grin and arms akimbo was a young man of about Adam's age — twenty-two years — but as dark as Adam was fair, tanned of skin and handsome, dressed in the shalloon breeches of an ostler and a shirt of rough barras open at the throat. 'Adam Margery, i'faith — and as comely as a May-day queen —!'

'Rupe!' Adam gave an exultant halloo, and the next moment each had grasped the other's hand. 'Rupert — is it the same? Aye, it is! And these two years have made ye into a man —!'

The other took a pace backwards and cocked his head quizzically. 'And of you a fine gentleman o' London, eh? My oath on't — I've never seen such a coat. Is this how the barbers dress in London?'

'Surgeons,' Adam corrected.

'Aye — well —' Both were momentarily lost for words, then Rupert asked, 'Ye're here for the burying?'

Adam's grin faded. He nodded. 'Yes — the old man. Grandfather Ralph. It's odd —' he mused, '— he was eighty-two years old, yet he could sit a horse easier than most men twenty years younger, with his back straighter than a pikestaff. I always thought he'd live for ever.'

'Didn't he fight in Cromwell's war?'

‘Aye — Newbury, Cheriton Wood, and Naseby — and carried three wounds for Parliament before my father was born. I recall every year — on Naseby’s day — he’d take down his old Spanish sword to burnish and oil it, and give us the tale of how he led the 13th Suffolk Horse at the royalist Welshmen —’ He paused and laughed, ‘— aye, and once, he said, he hanged a witchfinder from a tree —’

‘Wait! A quart o’ ale!’ Rupert interjected. ‘Wi’ a quart o’ ale ye’ll tell the tale better — and I’ll wager the taproom ha’ant seen a gentleman o’ your quality in living memory. Besides, the Waggoner has a new brew, and I’ve a mind to sample it.’

Adam chuckled, hesitant. ‘There’s my box —’ he began, but Rupert, with a snort, clapped a broad hand on his back and then swung the box easily over his shoulder. ‘A truss o’ furbelows like this I’ll carry myself,’ he said, ‘and you under the other arm, Adam, if ye say it.’

A quart of new country ale did little more than wash the dust from Adam’s throat. By the third, fair head and dark were bent together and the taproom rang with their laughter. For an hour the purpose of Adam’s return was forgotten. Then, suddenly and gravely, he murmured, ‘He’s dead.’

The Old Soldier was dead. No musket fire, no roar of ordnance, no trumpets, had marked his dying, for it had been fifty years or more since he had galloped his troop of yeomen cavalry against King Charles’ pikemen — but for fifty years he had sat tall and proudly in the saddle of his well-kept cob, scant of words but never discourteous. Until the day he died he had farmed the rich acres of wheat and barley that rolled westward and southward from Sawston to the Granta. He had paid his reckoning in good coin, sung lustily in church, and watched with expressionless features the monthly muster of the red-coated Cambridgeshire Militia on Castle Hill.

He had not been a native of Cambridgeshire, and although he was respected

by many he had been familiar with none. The Margerys, he always claimed, had been Suffolk yeomen since the Conquest. A Margery had fought at Flodden and another at Acre. He — Ralph Margery — had followed Cromwell, and when a squabbling Parliament had disbanded the finest army in Europe he had brought a wife and an infant daughter to the fertile slopes of the Cam valley — and hung his sword over the hearth.

Sara, his wife, had died of the great pestilence of 1665 — which scythed down eight hundred people in Cambridge — scarce a month after her daughter Rachel had wed Edmund Hewar, kinsman of the Huddlestons of Sawston Hall — a good marriage in even Ralph Margery's critical eyes. His wife's death, however, had left the middle-aged Margery lonely and increasingly taciturn, and he had not demurred when his son, John, had married a village wench — pretty enough, but with no better dowry than a Sunday change of clothes and a threadbare nightdress. From the union of John Margery and bright-eyed Jane Dutton had been born Adam.

Suddenly melancholy, Adam said, 'And it was the old man that paid two hundred guineas for my apprenticeship — though I swear he would have sooner seen me in red coat and cavalry boots, and stamping around after Jack Marlborough. I'm the last of the Margerys, d'you see? He was a mite grieved when cousin Francis took a commission in Rowe's Regiment — with me doing naught but lance boils and purge fevers. If there's a soldier in the family, he said, it should be a Margery, not a Tory Hewar.' He sniffed and stared morosely into his tankard. 'Aye — but what happens when there are no wars, eh? I've seen 'em in London, these half-pay officers, wi' their coats faded and patched, and nobody wanting 'em — aye, and lucky if even their half pay weren't a year in arrears —' He hiccupped.

Rupert Dolling leaned forward with a grin. 'Ye'll have the best of it, Adam — mark my words. What can milord Francis expect but a ball to take off his

head? — that's if he escapes the French pox or some other pestilence. But you, wi' a smart London practice, ye'll be having all the fashionable ladies scrambling to lift their petticoats for ye —' He paused, intrigued by the vision his own words had kindled. 'Is it true that London women aren't ashamed to show their shoulders and half their breasts in public?'

'Aye.' Adam waved a careless hand. He did not wish to explain that a surgeon's apprentice did not enjoy access to the drawing rooms of the fashionable, or that his knowledge of the female form was limited to brief glimpses of the diseased and sweating creatures in St Bartholomew's. 'Aye, there are some brazen wenches,' he confirmed.

Rupert nodded, his eyes half closed. 'And they can be tumbled for the asking, I'll wager?'

'Aye.' Adam thrust his nose into his ale. There was, of course, that mercenary slut of a scullery wench in Smithfield, with whom any apprentice or linkboy could vent his young passion for a single copper, who held the coin securely in her mouth until the mawkish thrusting of her patron was finished and then returned indifferently to her greasy dishes. There were brothels in plenty, of which his fellows had boasted, and sluttish old women who would take a lusty young man just for the pleasure of it, but Adam had no experience of either.

'Od's blood,' Rupert murmured. He was gazing at Adam admiringly. 'To think of it —' he shrugged, '— there's naught like that in Sawston, more's the pity. Mind you — there's wenches. Aye —' he sniffed, '— and there's one or two that'd be worth dandling under a hayrick, if they weren't so damned chaste. Wink at 'em, and they're blushing and trembling. Whisper a trysting to 'em, and they throw a swoon. I'd not marvel if I were told their knees were shackled together.'

Adam gave a sympathetic grunt. 'It's a matter of approach,' he explained

pompously. ‘There’s a formula for it. Ye can bed a nun if ye know the formula.’ The ale had gone to his head and he had to speak slowly to control his articulation. He hiccupped again. ‘Show me the woman an’ I’ll show you the formula. There’s not a wench born that’ll not surrender to the right formula — that and a knowledge of anatomy.’ He took a deep breath. ‘A woman, my dear Rupert, is like a harp wi’ the strings stretched in perfect unison. An uncouth hand can produce only a hideous discord, but the caress of accomplished fingers will be rewarded by rapturous harmony and complete submission.’

‘Ye say so?’ Rupert’s eyes were wide with interest. Then he shook his head. ‘Aye, that may be so for a gentleman in a fine coat, but the likes o’ me can’t get close enough to pluck the strings — whatever the melody. That’s the rub.’ He paused, thoughtful. ‘Now take them two cousins of yours — the Hewars —’

Adam sat upright. ‘Rebecca and Mary?’

‘Aye. Now there’s a brace o’ wenches to put an itch into any man’s belly — as high-mettled as thoroughbred Arabs and twice as elegant. D’ye suppose your formula would tame their cold arrogance?’

Adam hid his hesitation behind his raised tankard. Rebecca and Mary Heward, daughters of his uncle, Edmund, and sisters to the Francis Heward whose commission in Rowe’s Foot had recently been purchased, were as haughtily indifferent towards him — Adam’s — existence as they most certainly were towards Rupert’s. They were, after all, akin to the great family of Huddleston — staunch Tories, keepers of the royal forest at Newmarket and among the most influential houses in the county. Imperious, golden-haired Rebecca was six years older than Adam — a seniority that had served to increase her remoteness. Mary, dark-haired and demure, was two years his junior, and when he had last seen her she had only just begun to show the

promise of beauty that adulthood would confirm. Both shared with their equally haughty brother the opinion that the injection of the Margery strain into the Huddleston family was a genealogical accident best forgotten. Adam was coldly aware that the brief but lusty skirmishing that preceded the yielding of a not unwilling Smithfield doxy was hardly likely to impress his patrician cousins.

‘Huh!’ He drained his tankard and signalled for another. ‘There are certain secrets,’ he claimed, ‘that only physicians and surgeons know — and swear never to reveal — for if they did, no woman would be safe from outrage —’

‘Do you mean,’ Rupert asked, ‘that an old dotard like Doctor Hugwick has the power to compel any plump wench into his bed, rich or poor — he who’s never sober beyond noon, and sleeps oftener in a ditch than in his chamber? I’ll wager he hasn’t bedded a woman in forty years!’

Adam nodded owlshly. ‘A surfeit of anything kills the appetite. To a layman a woman is forbidden fruit, and is thus desirable. Do you hunger for acorns, or hedge-berries, which can be had for the picking? Do you burn with craving for a jug of water — unless it is denied you? So it is with women, my dear Rupert —’ He gulped at his ale, slopping it over his chin.

Rupert regarded Adam thoughtfully. ‘Aye, that’s so,’ he admitted finally. He frowned. ‘To think of it — old Hugwick — wi’ a secret worth a king’s ransom!’ He snorted scornfully. ‘ ’tis wasted, I tell ye, on a raddled old toss-pot like him. Have ye seen him give a bleeding? His hand shakes so much, it’s a mortal hazard —’

Feeling decidedly mellow, Adam stumbled on. ‘There’s things in London ye never dreamed of, Rupe. The gentry wear cravats reaching down to their middles, with enough linen in them to make a sail for a barge — and monstrous periwigs that’d make a Laplander sweat under the North Pole. The women mend their faces wi’ patches and Spanish red, and cover their heads

wi' false curls. There's gambling and cock-fighting and playhouses — and most nights a duel in Leicester Fields. There're men, stripped to the waist, who fight with their fists for a crown — and women who fight in their shifts while the gentry make their wagers. Aye, a man could live in London for ten years and never see the whole of it.'

Rupert, however, was unmoved by the vagaries of London society. 'Wenches,' he said firmly. 'What of the wenches?'

'Wenches? Aye, there's wenches,' Adam gushed. He had a fuddled recollection of the Smithfield drab, the thin, unwashed body indifferent to his fumblings, the resigned face on a crumpled, stained pillow, and two brother apprentices impatiently awaiting their turn beyond the flimsy door. 'Perfumed and pomaded wenches,' he asserted. 'Soft and white, and all hot to be unlaced. If ye were so inclined ye could bed a handsome baggage every night for a year and never tread the same ground twice.' He shrugged. 'But 'tis a pastime that quickly palls.'

Rupert pulled himself to his feet and walked, a trifle unsteadily, to the pewter-hung fireplace. He brushed aside an errant lock of his black hair, then he laughed and began to warble:

*'Short under-petticoat, pure fine,
Some of Japan stuff, some of Chine —'*

He skipped a little jig, then, as struck by a sudden thought, halted abruptly, his tongue in his cheek.

'Mind ye, women o' quality would likely be different. I mean — these strings ye pluck — that'd only be common wenches, eh? A lady, now — these pale, cold things ye see in Cambridge wi' their noses upturned at the sight of honest sweat — that'd be different, eh? No rapt'rous harmony there, I'll wager.'

A week earlier an eminent surgeon had turned inclement eyes on a

surrounding knot of students and, with a pinch of snuff to each stained nostril, had rasped, 'Behave modestly and gravely at all times, gentlemen. Do not talk boastfully, 'less you be tripped in your own words. Above all, gentlemen, avoid the company or friendship of laymen — they have an infernal habit of mocking men of medicine.' Four quarts of country ale, however, had blurred Adam's memory and loosened his tongue. He wagged a finger at Rupert.

'A woman's a woman — an' they're all the same under their rouge and ribbons,' he said thickly. 'I could tell ye of a duchess or two —' But this was going too far, and he quickly changed his ground. 'My word on't, Rupe. Duchess or doxy, there's not a shred o' difference.'

Rupert nodded, gazing broodingly through the nearest window to where, beyond its circlet wall, lay the sprawl of Sawston Hall and Vicar Haslop's little church of St Mary-the-Virgin. He pursed his lips speculatively, then muttered, almost to himself, 'I've a mind to try it.'

Adam blinked up at him. 'Try what?' he inquired.

The other was still deep in contemplation, but finally tore his gaze back to Adam. 'Eh?' he asked. 'Try? Aye — well — join Jack Churchill's army, o' course!'

Baffled, Adam shook his head to clear it of an alcoholic haze. 'Army? What the devil are you talking of? A moment since ye were saying that Frankie Hewar had nothing to expect but a ball to take off his head — if it wasn't the French pox — and now you're prattling about doing the same —'

'Frankie Hewar was home from Flanders a fortnight ago, right brave in his regimentals — a scarlet coat laced wi' gold and silver, blue breeches, and a fine cocked hat laced the same. Aye, right brave. Mark you —' he shrugged, '— he's infantry, and for me it'd be horses or naught. There's a captain in Cambridge, recruiting for Wood's 3rd Dragoons. A shilling and sixpence a

day for a trooper, he says, and advancement in plenty for a lad o' spirit.'

'Advancement! Ye think it's all fifes and drums, ta-ra-ra and Lilliburlero?' Adam scoffed. 'Ye'll be a true English hero while there's a battle to be fought — but what happened to the heroes of the Boyne, and Steinkirk, and Namur when the fighting was done, eh? I'll tell ye, Rupe. They were "the plague of the nation, a danger to the constitution and to all honest men"!' He added an impatient snort. 'Do ye even know what the war's about? A Bourbon Frenchman and a Hapsburg Austrian both want to be King of Spain. What's that to do with England, ye'd ask? Nothing, ye'd say — but we have to fight France over it!'

'I never thought I'd hear the grandson of old Ralph Margery say so,' Rupert laughed. 'You who led your Roundheads against my Cavaliers a hundred times when we were boys — and got yourself birched for your grand assault on Milner's orchard — ye recall?' Musingly he went on. 'If the Devil beat a tattoo on a drum, and shouted for England and liberty, English fools would measure swords with Michael and all the angels.'

'King Louis's not an archangel,' Adam quipped, 'but he's got the finest army in Europe — and Jack Churchill and his mongrel brood are likely to be rudely handled when the French put their minds to it — you'll see.' He closed his eyes.

There was a clatter of hooves and iron-rimmed wheels from beyond the window, and Rupert leaned forward to watch a coach turn into the gates of Sawston Hall. 'It's your blue-blooded relations,' he commented. 'The Hewars.'

'The Hewars? S'death!' Adam's tankard fell to the table. 'Edmund Hewar?'

Rupert nodded, amused. 'And your lady aunt — and those high-flown cousins of yours — Rebecca and Mary, looking as though they had the smell of the village midden in their perked-up noses.'

‘S’death!’ Adam repeated. He clambered to unsteady feet. ‘I’ll wager they’ve come for the burying — and likely Edmund Hewart would wish all the Margerys under six feet of earth, to make his family ties the purer.’

Rupert was again gazing absently at the window. ‘Ye’ll need company, Adam,’ he decided finally. ‘I’ll put myself into my Sunday suit and stand wi’ ye. There’s safety in numbers.’ He reached for Adam’s box, swaying slightly. Adam hiccoughed.

Chapter Two

IN THE SHADOW of flint-walled St Mary-the-Virgin the body of old Ralph Margery was laid to final rest, while Vicar Haslop droned solemn incantations at the graveside. The September sun was warm to the lowered heads of the surrounding throng of mourners — the Margerys and the Hewars and a dozen villagers. Edmund Hewar, in a suit of fine ferradine and ruffles of cobweb lawn, stood prominently to the fore, with Rachel his wife dutifully at his side. A pace behind them John Margery, ruddyfaced and ageing, stood alone, for Jane Margery was busying herself with victuals for the funeral gathering. John, for forty years well satisfied with the simple round of ploughing, sowing, and harvesting on farmland that the Old Soldier had governed, had no liking for a big occasion, and sweated in his discomfiture. At fifty-four years his first taste of responsibility was less than savoury.

Rebecca and Mary Hewar stood together, a little apart. Rebecca, beautiful and coldly serene, her tight-laced form cloaked in a dark-hued mantua and her wheat-golden curls captive beneath a loose hood, allowed her eyes to survey the throng about her, to flicker momentarily over Adam and then Rupert, before returning her gaze idly towards the chanting minister. Mary, slightly shorter, her dark hair brushed to the sheen of silk and her sloe eyes lowered to the turf at her dainty feet, remained unmoving.

Rupert nudged Adam. ‘There’s a brace o’ wenches, Adam lad,’ he whispered, ‘that any man’d give ten years to fondle for an hour, what d’ye say?’

Adam, with an aching head and querulous stomach, grunted indifferently. He was aware that Rebecca’s eyes had again flickered in his direction, and

hoped she had not overheard the comment. He had, he vaguely recalled, made some foolish claims under the influence of four quarts of strong ale, and he regretted both the ale and his brashness. His companion, however, was persistent.

‘Aye,’ Rupert went on, ‘I wish I had your silk coat and your knowledge o’ the doxies, Adam. I’ll wager I’d lower one flag or the other before the day was out.’ Adam groaned silently and swallowed at a parched throat. He had no desire to lower flags, and his silk coat had an ale stain on the cuff. Still, Rupert was right. The Hewar sisters were as radiant a pair as one would see in a hundred miles’ travel — and that distance socially remote from a mere apprentice surgeon. If he had to choose — he almost smiled at the thought — it would be Mary for him. Her beauty was softer, less classically perfect than that of her sister, her manner more modest and her dress, although expensive, less extravagant. In Covent Garden or Old Jewry she might not turn so many heads as would the splendour of Rebecca, but a husband would enjoy a greater peace of mind with Mary.

The Reverend John Haslop closed his prayer book with a snap, muttered his last Amen, and turned to depart. It was all finished, and the village would never again see the lean shape of the old cavalryman against the evening skyline of the Cam valley, a silent picquet on the reaches of his own rolling acres of barley. Adam sighed. With the passing of Ralph Margery had died an age — an age of the first King Charles, of Fairfax and Cromwell, of Levellers, Dissenters, and Dry vines. This was the eighteenth century, and Roundheads and Cavaliers and the names of their long-fought battles were only words for the dusty pages of history books.

The mourners were clustered about the lych-gate. Would they disperse, Adam wondered. He hoped they would. He was in no mood to face the patronizing Hewars. But his father was talking respectfully to Edmund

Hewar, and the latter was smiling, nodding, his hand on John Margery's shoulder. Pox take him — he was condescending to dine at the Margery farm, and he — Adam — was wearing his last clean steinkirk. The Hewar carriage had trundled to a standstill and a white froth of lace-trimmed petticoats gleamed in the sun as Aunt Rachel and her daughters lifted their skirts to step into it. For Adam and his father it would be horseback — the Margerys were never carriage people.

There was no avoiding it. Adam untethered his cob, and his father, doing the same, spoke over his shoulder. 'Master Dolling —' he lifted himself into his saddle, '— if ye've a mind to join us for victuals —?'

Rupert, at Adam's elbow, did not hesitate. 'I'd be honoured, thank ye, sir.' He buttoned his coat. 'If Adam's no objection, I'll take pillion behind him. It's no more than a mile.'

Adam frowned. Rupert was excellent company in a tavern, a staunch ally in a brawl with the Cambridge students, but his drawing room behaviour was, to say the least, unpredictable. Then, even as he framed the thought, Adam was annoyed at his own ill humour. He was a Margery, wasn't he, and as good as any in the county? It was all the fault of these damned Hewars, with their fine manners and their arrogance. He pulled his horse around. If he wanted to consort with a one-eyed Patagonian it was his business — and the Hewars could go to Hades.

At the Margery farm a wide, white-scrubbed table groaned under the weight of victuals for the funeral gathering — bacon and beef, fowls and hare, wheaten bread warm from the oven, Portugal wine brought specially from Cambridge and a bever-barrel of ale to meet the thirsty requirements of the casually-employed harvest workers called in from the fields. Jane Margery, her face flushed from both kitchen heat and trepidation, bobbed a welcome to her illustrious guests and then hurried away to hasten the activities of little

Betty Cowper, the parish foundling assigned to kitchen chores. There was a murmur of constrained conversation, the Hewars grouped at the fireplace, the farm people segregated by the length of the big room and uncomfortably eyeing their betters. Edmund Hewar, his well-shod feet apart, was talking loudly. He had given a barely perceptible nod to Adam and ignored Rupert.

‘It’s a fair piece of property,’ he conceded. ‘Old Margery knew his soil. If ye take my advice ye’ll sell, John, while prices are high. With the end of the war there’ll be more land under the plough and it might be a different story. Besides, if the boy, Adam, is set on being a surgeon —’ he sniffed, ‘— he’ll have no use for a farm in Cambridgeshire.’ He toyed with a curl of his periwig. ‘The farm bounds on the Huddlestons’, John. If ye’ve a mind to it I’ll make ye a good offer.’

John Margery shrugged, smiling politely, not committing himself. Edmund Hewar swayed on his heels, surveying the beamed ceiling. ‘I’d pull this down, o’ course — build a decent residence in the new Dutch style, put the fields back to grass and maybe plant some timber — that’s the thing. Given a few years the place might begin to look civilized.’

It was Adam who interrupted surlily. ‘It’s farming land, sir. Grandfather Ralph always said that good land left fallow was like cheating providence.’

Edmund Hewar chuckled, rising and falling on his toes. ‘That was the Puritan streak in your grandfather, boy. All blood, iron, and hell-fire — and devil take the Tories. Would ye have me turn farmer, eh? And Rebecca and Mary milking cows before dawn and churning butter for market?’ He thrust out his lower lip. ‘If ye intend to be a leech, boy, ye’d be better with the money to set yeself up to bleed the London gentry. Ye’ll have lean pickings in Sawston.’

Rebecca laughed, her curls dancing on her faultless white shoulders. ‘Of course, there’s horse-doctoring. There’s a deal of interest in Lord

Godolphin's new Arab stock at Newmarket, Adam — and there might be more guineas in pills and clysters for horses than the hurts and fevers of kitchen-maids and paupers in London.'

There was a guffaw from her father. 'That's it! If the Lord High Chancellor of England can breed horses to race for the Queen's plate it should be a creditable occupation, wouldn't ye say?' He probed at a waistcoat pocket for his snuffbox, his laughter fading. Thoughtfully, he turned to Adam. 'When do ye qualify, young man?'

Adam drew a deep breath. 'In five years I shall be examined by the Barber-Surgeons' Company, and if I satisfy them I'll be granted a licence to practise. There is also a degree of Master of Anatomy and Surgery, and then the Great Diploma —'

'Five years, eh, before ye run amok with your scalpel?' Edmund Hewar mused. He thrust the tips of forefinger and thumb into each nostril, sniffing violently. 'And then ye'll be content with tooth-drawing and boil-pricking? Rebecca's right —' he snapped shut his snuffbox, '— ye'd be better employed doctoring gentlemen's horseflesh.'

'Surgery's an honourable calling, sir,' Adam retorted, 'and more advanced than ye give credit for. There's a great skill in amputation, and cutting for hernia, and the stone —'

'The same is done by sow-gelders and tinkers,' Hewar snorted, 'and usually with greater success.'

Adam felt the hot flush of anger that flooded his cheeks. His father gave an apologetic, uncommittal chuckle, and Rebecca's tinkling laughter was derisive. Aunt Rachel inclined her head in the silent agreement she had given her spouse for thirty-seven years and then transferred her attention to the stitching of her gloves. Only Mary's eyes, suddenly fixed on Adam's face, were sympathetic. Her gaze met his, her lips parting fractionally, and then

melted into a reassuring smile. He swallowed at the anger choking his throat. For a single moment the crowded room was a thousand miles distant, and nothing mattered — nothing save the soothing balm of her smile and the startling realization that Mary Hewar was aware of him — that he was even worthy of her understanding.

And it was Mary Hewar who spoke next. ‘Your jests are unkind, Father, and Adam doesn’t deserve them.’ Her gaze settled again on Adam’s face and his heart leaped. ‘Would you be content for a sow-gelder or a tinker to tend Francis if he were struck down by a French bullet?’

‘Pshaw! As soon that as have some ignorant bungler like Hugwick and his murderous probe —’

‘Doctor Hugwick, sir,’ Adam interrupted, coolly now, ‘is a man of long experience, but it has been a considerable time since he qualified, and it is possible that he has not kept abreast of recent developments in surgical methods. Besides, he has a rural practice, and —’

‘Aha! Ye’re like all the rest of ye’ breed, young man. Ye stick together — like leeches!’ He roared at his own humour. ‘Like leeches!’

Rupert Dolling, who might be expected to hold his peace in such company, had already made free with the ale, and now made his own bid on behalf of Adam:

‘There are secrets that Adam knows of, sir, that we ordinary ones are denied.’ He paused, then went on gravely, ‘If all men knew, no women would be safe from outrage.’ He waved a hand airily. ‘Aye — Miss Rebecca, now, or Miss Mary — think on it —’ He thought on it for a moment and, the idea fascinating him, stumbled on. ‘Secrets worth a king’s ransom, I say. If ye knew, ye wouldn’t let even old Hugwick within twenty miles o’ your daughter.’ He turned to Adam. ‘Tell ’em, Adam.’

‘Anatomy, sir,’ Adam hastened to intercede. ‘In a surgeon’s training there

is much time given to anatomy, that we may know the nature of the conditions we seek to mend —’

‘Aye, that’s it,’ Rupert agreed. ‘Anatomy. If all men knew about anatomy —’

‘Anatomy?’ Edmund Hewar was becoming increasingly irascible. ‘Anatomy is no more necessary to a leech than the knowledge of the nature of wood to a carpenter or stone to a stonecutter.’ He pointed a scorning finger. ‘Ye spend ye’ time in mangling pigs, cats, dogs, and plucks, and then think ye’re qualified to use ye’ damned knife on me, eh? I’d see ye hanged first!’

Rebecca raised her beautiful eyebrows. ‘But you’d allow him, Father,’ she suggested, ‘a pretty hand at carving a roasting capon.’

Before Edmund Hewar’s contemptuous chuckle had subsided, Mary again broke in to deliberately change the subject:

‘Francis has written us from Flanders, Adam.’ She addressed him specifically, almost apologetically. ‘He has been in the fighting around Maestricht, against Marshal Boufflers’ army, and is filled with praise for the Earl of Marlborough, whom he has seen several times — and spoke to him on one occasion.’ Edmund Hewar made as if to interrupt, but Mary persisted. ‘He says that if only the French would stand and fight, the English regiments would drive them into the Meuse.’ She smiled. ‘He also asked that we send him some kersey hose and some shirts of rateen for the coming winter, for ’tis damp, low country, like our Fens, and likely to be filled with miasma when the weather coldens.’

Edmund Hewar, successfully diverted, and anxious to maintain command of the conversation, pounced on the new topic.

‘Aye, and the sooner this damned war is finished, the better. The country’ll be crippled by taxation — and all for the benefit o’ Holland, our biggest trade

rivals.’ He had forgotten Adam. ‘Aye, a fine state of affairs ye’ Whig friends have got us into, eh? If we let French Philip become King o’ Spain, it means that France becomes mistress of half Europe, and if we bleed ourselves white in the cause of Hapsburg Charles the Hollanders’ll sit on their fat backsides waiting to pick our bones. Ye’ll notice the Dutchmen are showing no great willingness to fight, eh? They’ll damn’ well march and counter-march all season while the British are fools enough to do all the fighting. Did ye hear about Opdam’s behaviour at Spikel?’

There seemed no inclination in the surrounding company to dispute Hewart’s proscription as he glanced around provocatively. Fates! Adam seethed, the man’s a canker. If only Grandfather Ralph were here, to shatter this whimpering hum-bug —

‘And if it isn’t British armies it’s British money — Dutchmen, Prussians, Danes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Catalans — bloody jackals, the lot of ’em. Mark you, at least they’ll bide wi’ the same paymaster, which is more than ye can say for the double-faced Irish, who’ll change sides quicker than tip their caps —’

Adam edged away from the throng. The room was warm and his head was still aching. Uncle Edmund would hold the floor now, and none would gainsay him. He would rant about the Whigs, land tax, the Dutch, poaching, the cost of labour, foxhunting, the Pretender, the Bishops, and a number of other matters on which he held strong opinions, until the senses of his captive audience were confused and numbed. His contradictions would become more frequent and his oaths progressively stronger with every glass of wine, and he would brook no disagreement. Adam sidled to the door.

It was early evening, mild and quiet, with the soft September shadows lengthening beneath the sycamores and filtering across the broad acres of shorn stubble-land which reached towards the Granta, towards Whittlesford

and the Royston road. Hosts of gnats hung suspended in the silent air, and swallows were flocking. Adam kicked at a clump of grass.

In a day or two he must be back in London, at St Bartholomew's, back — as Edmund Hewar put it — with mangled cats, pigs, dogs, and plucks on the dissecting table. There would, of course, be a few human cadavers, dragged from hospitals or gallows, to share with his brother apprentices, and the wards of St Bartholomew's provided an inexhaustible supply of broken limbs, stones, tumours, fevers, gangrenes, and cataracts. Five more years of it. He winced. Was this really what he wanted? If Edmund Hewar was brutally unkind, there was a grain of truth in what he said. Surgeons could never claim popularity, seldom respect, and rarely a rich living. They were scorned by physicians, derided by apothecaries, and regarded with scant faith by the sick public. Blood-letting was the main source of their incomes, and there were many charlatans, posing as surgeons, who were capable of providing this twice-yearly service for the port-swilling, gormandizing rich. There were more felicitous ways of making a living.

‘Adam — Cousin Adam!’

He turned, then flushed to the roots of his hair. Mary stood there, her head slightly to one side, regarding him winningly. One hand held a pleat of her skirt, the other a dainty handkerchief.

‘May I join you?’ she smiled. ‘The weather is warm for the season. Shall we walk?’ He stammered a reply, praying that his steinkirk was not grubby or the ale-stain on his cuff did not show. Then her fingers were on his arm and he sensed the fragrance of her perfume.

It was now, at this moment, that he recognized with stinging clarity that he had unconsciously worshipped Mary for years. He could not conceive of any other woman for whom he might nearly desire so desperately. Aye — he must have loved her as a child, as a slip of a girl, a ripening maid — and he

loved her now. It was as absurd as it was hopeless, but it was true. Mary, for certain, was beyond his reach, but he would be content with none else.

‘I am sorry, Adam, for my father’s remarks — and Rebecca’s. They were thoughtless and unkind.’ She was so close to him that she must, he thought, hear the galloping of his heart. He gave a depreciatory shrug, but gently, so that she would not remove her hand.

‘It was of no importance.’ He risked looking into the deep hazel of her eyes. ‘What they said was justified. There’s no great distinction in being a surgeon, nor profit — and it must seem a droll thing to them —’

He had the satisfaction of seeing her eyes widen and her colour heighten slightly. ‘Od’s blood, he thought, she’s the most exquisite thing I’ve ever seen. How is it that a man like Edmund Hewart —

‘Droll?’ The sheer intensity of her gaze was so intoxicating that he dropped his own eyes to a ringlet of raven hair which lay on the nape of her neck, then to her smooth, ivory shoulders, and finally to the whisk of gossamer lace which cradled the twin mounds of her up-thrust breasts.

‘Droll?’ she repeated. ‘Is it droll to save life, to mend pain? What sort of humour is that?’ He watched the white orbs swell alarmingly above the tight lacing of her stomach until it seemed that the flimsy retaining lute-strings would burst asunder, then sink to shapely quiescence. Her concern could be nothing but genuine, and he was desperately anxious to foster it — to provoke her further sympathy, to bask in her soft beneficence.

He laughed, shrugging again. ‘Do ye know what the physicians call us? Corn-cutters, bath-house-keepers, urinarians, itinerant abortionists, mechanic fellows — and runaway husbands turned satyrs!’ They had reached the stream which chuckled westward to the Granta, and the house behind them was hidden. There was no sound save the hum of insects and the music of the water at their feet. ‘Wouldn’t ye say that was droll?’

She shook her head, and the ringlet on her neck frolicked, taunting him. She was a goddess, he resolved — a beautiful, bewitching goddess. He had an irrepressible desire to take the ringlet of glossy hair between his fingers, to crush it in his hand. He swore mentally. Was a man ever more tormented? He eased his steinkirk, tight about his throat.

‘No,’ she asserted. ‘Only the minds of those who say it, dear Adam.’ She pressed an embroidered toe into the soft moss, eyeing it carefully, and then looked up at him, amused. ‘Do you really believe those that slight you, Adam — or are you simply seeking comfort?’

‘Sdeath!’ he choked, the blood filling his cheeks. She laughed softly, standing so close to him that again the scent of her was in his nostrils. When he spoke again his voice was hoarse. ‘Words of comfort are cheap enough.’ He paused, then, ‘Would you marry a man who was a surgeon?’

She did not reply for several moments, but again the white curves above her bodice swelled, ebullient, and her lips pursed. ‘I would marry any man,’ she whispered, ‘that I loved.’

‘In spite of your father?’ he asked.

She frowned. ‘In spite of anyone,’ she confirmed. They stood, staring at each other until, suddenly and inexplicably, Mary giggled. She raised a warning finger. ‘Before you say what I think you’re going to say, Adam, I would suggest that a surgeon’s apprentice is hardly in a position to propose marriage — to a Hewar or anyone else.’ Her eyes were very gentle.

Adam was clenching his fists until his nails bit into his palms. What was she saying? Could she mean that he, Adam Margery, might — at some future date —? The very possibility stunned him with its piquancy. He took a deep breath. ‘If I were a surgeon, would you marry me?’

She turned away from him to gaze into the stream, where, even in the failing light, the pebble-strewn bed could be clearly seen. Adam followed a

pace behind her. 'I said that I would marry any man,' she said, 'that I loved.' She was choosing her words very carefully. 'If I loved you, Adam, I would marry you if you were a Newgate pauper.'

He wetted his dry lips with the tip of a cloying tongue. Dusk was falling swiftly but, inches from him, her shoulders gleamed, rising and falling so slightly as she breathed. The errant ringlet of hair lay against her neck.

He lifted his hand slowly. The ringlet curled about his forefinger, a silken black whorl, swansdown soft. She did not move.

'Mary,' he breathed. There was a bitter-sweet, scalding taste of magnificent victory on his tongue. His knees were as water. 'You're the most beautiful woman —' He halted, aware of his fumbling inadequacy. He had achieved so much — he must not hazard the situation by fawning like a moonstruck ploughboy. He hesitated, then, lowering his head swiftly, pressed his lips to her shoulder.

She turned instantly with a rustle of silk. 'Adam —' she began, but he had abandoned all remaining caution. 'I must say it,' he blurted, 'if it makes a fool of me — aye, if the whole county laughs at me for an upstart clod — if your father takes a horsewhip to me.' He groped for words. 'I must say it!'

Her face was in shadow. 'Then, in heaven's name, Adam,' she suggested, primly, 'say it.'

'I love you, Mary.' He raced on. 'All that I have, I lay at your feet. I'll be your groom, your lackey, if you wish. Whatever you command —'

'No.' She had raised her face, and her eyes were shining. 'To love is enough.'

He reached for her clumsily. Passively she allowed his hands to caress her cool shoulders, smooth her arms, to settle uncertainly at her slim, pleated waist. Then her lips surrendered, warm, soft, her breath sweet in his mouth. Against his chest her breasts thrust arrogantly, defiantly. He felt the swell of

her belly against his, the hardness of her thighs. His lips moved hungrily to her neck, her eyes, then back to her impatient lips. There was a writhing in his loins, and he moaned with the rapturous agony of it.

His craving was infectious. Mary's hands cupped his face, her teeth fastening on his lower lip, her body arching, goading, demanding. The whisk of lace tore in his trembling fingers and the warm, firm bulb of her breast was in his hand. He lowered his lips, thumbing the pouting nipple until she whimpered.

She was limp in his arms now, submitting, expectant. He lowered her to the grass, and she lay with her head cradled in the crook of his arm, her lips apart, her eyes obedient.

He lifted her skirt to her thighs, hot with lust and his own lips wet and loose. Above her gartered stockings his probing fingers met warm flesh, and the heated odour of her banished the remnants of his restraint. She whimpered again, her legs splaying involuntarily. 'Adam —!' she pleaded.

Adam rose to his feet, Mary staring at him from the ground. He released his waistband and pushed his breeches to his knees. Mary sobbed.

The next moment, before he had taken a pace towards her, she sat upright, glared at him, and frantically pulled her skirt over her legs. 'Dear God!' she cried. 'What are we doing?' She clambered upright, smoothing her dress. Adam stood, his breeches lowered and his steinkirk awry, gaping foolishly.

'What are we *doing*?' he repeated. 'Sblood —!'

She cut short his protest. 'Adam — in heaven's name cover yourself. You look like a schoolboy bared for birching!' She was adjusting her crumpled bodice and patting some semblance of order into the wreckage of her lace wisp. 'It will never be the same,' she murmured. Adam, deflated, reached for his breeches.

'Mary —' he began again, puzzled and his pride stung, 'I don't see —' He

shook his head. 'Is this some hoax to give ye amusement?'

She was once again Mary Hewar, haughtily patrician. 'Hoax? You suppose that ravishing a maid is a hoax? Or that I am some gutter wanton?' Her repairs were almost completed. 'If my father, or Francis, learned of this they would kill you, Adam.' She was ordering her curls, a pin between her teeth whilst examining him critically. 'Straighten your cravat,' she ordered, 'and brush the dust from your coat. Then,' she went on, 'I will return to the house — and you will follow five minutes later. On your honour you will say nothing — *nothing* — of what has happened. Do you understand?'

Adam nodded morosely. 'Sdeath, he swore to himself. The bitch had coaxed him until he was as rampant as a stud stallion and then denied him. His Smithfield scullery wench gave better value than that. He swore again. No, that wasn't true. Only minutes ago he had been telling himself that Mary Hewar was beyond his reach and that his love for her could meet only with frustration. Then, at a glimmer of encouragement, he had lost his head and behaved like an animal, probably disgusted her, and likely wrecked any slight chance he possessed of inspiring her regard.

Mind you, she had shown no reluctance to submit to his love-play, had she? Had it amused her to allow him a fleeting acquaintance with an unattainable prize? His shame for his behaviour was balanced by a surge of resentment. His pride had been stung.

The night air was chill to his damp skin. There was no moon yet, but the sky was clear and the stars showed well. Aquila he could see, and Pegasus, icily bright. He shivered. Five minutes, did-she say? Plague on it — he was not her puppet. He would decide for himself. He walked back to the house, scowling in the darkness.

Inside, he blinked in the sudden light of the flaring candelabra. The room was warm and the air slightly acrid with candle-smoke and wine fumes. A

small group of farm workers still clustered about the ale barrel, determined to see it drained. Edmund Hewar was there, red-faced and vociferous, his wineglass slopping, with John Margery still in obsequious attendance and Aunt Rachel nodding incessantly. Rebecca stood, a golden Minerva, serene and elegant, with clasped hands and cool eyes. Rupert swayed gently in mid-floor, humming, his handsome features slightly flushed.

Adam had entered only seconds behind Mary, this moment rejoining the group at the fireplace. His gaze rested on her sullenly, his resentment still burning. Then he stared sharply, drawing in his breath with a nervous quaver. The ribbon bow which terminated the lacing of Mary's bodice was torn from its stitching, and the crumpled condition of her lace wisp was glaringly apparent to all save a cursory glance. There were, too, strands of grass in her hair and clinging to her skirt — and she was blissfully ignorant of it.

He searched his wits desperately, his recent indignation dissolved. Should he somehow try to tell her? But how? Only moments could elapse before someone noticed — and calculated —

He glanced down at himself — and cringed. There were green moss-stains on the knees of his breeches and his shoes were muddied — shreds of grass, too, on his coat. He brushed at them quickly, furtively — but he was too late.

Rebecca's cool gaze was already resting on her sister. There was a fleeting second of incomprehension, and then she frowned. Adam prayed that the floor might swallow him, but there was no escape. Rebecca's eyes, perplexed, searched the room — and found him, fastened to him like a steel claw. He felt like a man naked as she examined him — his hastily-tied cravat, his trailing queue-ribbon, the stains on his breeches. He watched her face flare with colour, her eyes blaze and her fingers clench together, saw her chest heave furiously as she turned again to stare at the still unsuspecting Mary. Ye gods, Adam choked — and I didn't even take the wench.

‘Ye bawdy dog, Adam!’ It was Rupert, at his elbow, surveying him with unconcealed admiration. ‘The two daintiest mopsies in the county — and ye’ve already drubbed one of ’em!’ His voice was uncomfortably strident. ‘That’s anatomy for ye —!’

‘Not so loud!’ Adam hissed, but Rupert was not to be silenced. He clapped Adam on the shoulder and leaned forward confidingly. ‘I’ll tell ye, Adam lad. I had some doubts about these secrets ye spoke of —’ he laughed, ‘— but any man who can strip Mary Hewar of her maidenhead must have the knowing of a right vigorous potion —!’

Twenty feet away Edmund Hewar, rocking on unsteady legs and insensible to his immediate surroundings, was calling for his coat and his carriage. Rebecca stood close to Mary, her face contemptuous. ‘You little whore!’ she breathed. ‘Do you think that you can lust in a field with an upstart apprentice — and nobody will know of it? Have you forgotten that you are a Hewar — to let some lecherous, lick-spittle ploughboy defile our name, to boast of his conquest from every dunghill in Cambridgeshire?’ She curled her lip. ‘If I had a whip I would take it to your buttocks, trollop!’

Mary returned her sister’s gaze brazenly, her colour equally high. ‘If I want to lust with a leper’d beggar in the middle of Cambridge on market-day,’ she said quietly, ‘I shall do so without consulting you, Rebecca.’ She smiled. ‘Is it my virtue you’re really concerned for — or is it envy?’ Her voice was like a dagger thrust. ‘Can it be that the beautiful Rebecca Hewar is twenty-eight and has never known the warmth of a man’s arms about her — and is rankling because her unripe young sister is preferred to her?’ She tossed her dark curls triumphantly. ‘There’s a thing or two I can tell you — about lovers!’ She turned and followed her reeling father to the coach.

Rebecca stood rock-still for a long moment, her splendid bosom rising and falling. From across the room Rupert’s voice came to her distinctly. ‘This

anatomy, Adam — I'll trade ye the finest little ferret f' forty miles if ye'll explain the matter of it. D'ye know what? There's another well-bred Hewart jade as'd make sweet breaking to harness — and I swear she'll make as sweet a saddle as her sister —'

Adam curbed him with an angry retort. 'Ye'll find yeself at the wrong end of a flogging if those sentiments reach Edmund Hewar's ears, and there's no profit in fishing in the air, Rupe.' Rebecca and Aunt Rachel, he noted with relief, were donning their mantuas — Rebecca outwardly once again as graceful and composed as ever before, and Aunt Rachel's fan fluttered madly.

'The night's oppressive,' Aunt Rachel complained. It was the first opinion she had offered all day. 'We must have our casements open. We'll expire else.' She nodded vaguely in the direction of Adam, who bowed from the waist with a muttered, 'Aunt Rachel.'

Rebecca's demeanour was frigid. 'Goodnight, Adam.' He bowed again, formally, his gaze on the floor. There was a pause, then her eyes flickered to Rupert, reflectively. 'Goodnight, Master Dolling.'

Astonished, Rupert made a clumsy leg. She studied his inclined head indifferently for a second, and then both women were gone.

Rupert whirled on Adam. 'Did ye hear that? She bade me goodnight! "Goodnight, Master Dolling," she said —'

Adam gave a shrug of disdain. 'It was only a courtesy, Rupe.' He surveyed his stained knees dejectedly.

'Perhaps — but she's never been me a courtesy before,' Rupert snorted. He hummed musingly for a few seconds, then, 'Adam lad — this anatomy —'

Adam groaned wearily. "'Od perish it, Rupe! Anatomy's got nothing to do wi' it! Anatomy's just the study o' the body — the structure o' organs and tissues, the functions o' muscles and limbs.' He drew a deep breath, looking

at the other dourly. 'It's nothing to do wi' the persuasion o' wenches. Likewise ye'd best forget all about Rebecca Hewar. Ye might just as well whistle a jig to a milestone.'

'The functions o' muscles and limbs?' Rupert repeated. He considered this carefully, frowning, then shook his head. 'I know that already — and I don't see as it would charm a doxy, 'less she had three legs.' The possibility amused him, and he laughed, patting Adam's shoulder again. 'Ye' right, Adam — and I'm for my lonely bed. I'll stick to poaching — and dairymaids behind the cowshed.' He made for the door. 'That reminds me, the timber over beyond the Huddlestons' is crawling wi' partridge. It'll be worth our while to stroll that way wi' a cudgel and sack one evening.'

He paused at the door, eyeing the dark sky. 'Aye, the night's oppressive, as ye' Aunt Rachel said —' He halted, his brow suddenly wrinkling with concentrated thought, his tongue in his cheek. Then he grinned slowly, mischievously. 'And,' he murmured, out of Adam's hearing, 'there'll be casements open.'

Left alone, Adam reached for a pair of bottles and, for an hour, drank himself steadily into melancholia and self-pity. He would return to London on the morrow, he decided — dirty, convivial, lusty London — where a man could lose himself and his cares among the roistering congestion of taverns and brothels, coffee-house, cockpits, and playhouses where two quarts of ale and a codling pie were an ample exchange for the privilege of sharing the bug-infested mattress of any Holborn strumpet. He sniffed sulkily. Plague take the Hewars. He could do without 'em.

Tired, fuddled, and irritable, he clambered his way up the unlit stairs to his bed.

*

Over the wall, Rupert approached the house with a poacher's stealth,

without haste, sensing rather than seeing his path through the trees. He stood in a black shadow, listening, for what seemed an age, then moved quietly forward a dozen paces. The faint noise of Edmund Hewar's voice had faded and the house was a tomb of silence.

Suddenly he drew in his breath sharply, but he still did not move. Beyond the rose garden, only thirty feet from him, a window showed the yellow glow of candlelight. Rupert's eyes puckered speculatively.

Another age passed. Then, when it seemed that the whole world slept, the stillness was broken by the faintest sound of creaking woodwork. Rupert smiled.

Framed by her open window Rebecca stood, reduced to her shift and her unbound hair cascading golden to her waist. She remained, motionless, haloed by the candlelight behind her, gazing into the garden.

Rupert stepped out of the shadows, several paces, and halted, his hands on his hips. Rebecca's face turned towards him. For an interminable minute they gazed at each other, then Rebecca turned and walked slowly from sight. Rupert moved soundlessly towards the open window. 'Anatomy!' he muttered contemptuously.

Chapter Three

‘AND THAT, GENTLEMEN, is that.’ Mr Roper wiped his knife on his coat, already filthy with dried blood, pus and putrefying tissue — and much admired by the students. ‘Remember, a long incision in the region of the groin — as quickly as ye can accurately cut. Then, dilate the neck o’ the bladder — *dilate*, ye understand, not cut — grapple the stone wi’ forceps, and extract.’ The porters were lifting the mangled, whimpering patient to a handcart. ‘Ye’ll need to search for the stone — and, when ye’ve found it, apply a deal o’ force to withdraw it, for the bladder embraces the stone wi’ great strength.’ He paused, cleaning his sticky fingers with a bloody sponge. ‘Sew wi’ waxed thread, and append a good poultice and bandage.’ He surveyed the respectful faces of the surrounding apprentices. ‘The whole operation should not take above an hour and, if performed skilfully, the patient’ll have an even chance o’ recovery.’

The surgeon peeled off the fouled garment, handed it to a student, and slipped his arms into his street coat, held by a second. ‘Now, gentlemen,’ he smiled, ‘I trust ye’ll have a good Christmas — and ye’ll bear in mind, no doubt, that the result of prolonged excesses of food and drink is a stone in the bladder — and lithotomy. Goodday to ye.’

The apprentices filtered away, in twos and threes, already, in their third year, adopting the typical stance of a practising surgeon — hands clasped behind back, head lowered to chest, an unhurried, dignified step. They were, after all, well advanced in the mysteries of surgery; they had seen much — herniotomy, lithotomy, amputations of all kinds, and operations for fistula, goitre, aneurysm, sarcoma, hare-lip, and the repair of wounds and fractures

by suture and cautery. The instruments of their chosen profession were no longer regarded with awe — scalpels, cauteries, specula, saws, scissors, hooks, forceps, trothars, catheters, sounds, and needles — and their conversation was well salted with surgical terminology. Apprentice surgeons, they were fond of reminding themselves, were actually practising, in the field, with Marlborough's army.

Adam Margery hurried across frozen Smithfield to the blackened walls of Newgate, across Fleet ditch to the Black Friars Watergate, where his lodgings lay. A fortnight earlier Marlborough had ridden in triumph here, on his return from the Continent, to be voted the thanks of the Commons, created a duke by a grateful Queen and awarded £5,000 a year from the revenues of the Post Office. Despite the lethargy of their Dutch allies, British troops had been remarkably successful against King Louis' vaunted legions, and had culminated the campaign of 1702 by taking Liège. As the *Postman* had quoted,

*And every town from Maestricht down
Our army now hath won,
We took in all both great and small,
And we made the French to run.*

Their year's studies completed, and released from daily discipline, several of Adam's fellows had announced their intention of spending a carousing night among the stews of Alsatia, the notorious habitat of pimps and prostitutes, footpads and pickpockets. There would be ale flowing in plenty, with drunks in every gutter, bawdy revelry — and there was talk of a fight between a 'bald-faced dog of Middlesex against a fallow dog of Cow Cross' on which many a purse would be wagered. It would be a fine excursion — and who deserved it more than a surgeon's apprentice after the long months of St Bartholomew's stinking wards?

Adam, however, to his companions' surprise, had declined the opportunity. He was to board the Cambridge coach at the King's Arms Inn, in Leadenhall Street, at five on the morrow, and he wanted no reeking head with which to start the journey — if he even survived the night in a condition to travel.

For the hundredth time he felt for the letter in his pocket — a letter whose folds were now so worn that it was in danger of rending apart between his anxious fingers. But he knew every line of its contents, every word, every twist of the pen that wrote it. He had read it repeatedly, fervently, until its message was burned indelibly in his memory.

Adam Margery Esquire,

at the Poulterers opposite the Three Cups by the Temple.

Adam: I have three times written a letter to you, and each time lacked the courage to send it, for I am as much the coward now as when you were in Sawston last. This, however, I must tell you. With all my heart I am sorry, not for my refusal of you, but for my manner following, for what passed between us was equally of my making. We were both at fault, but I the deeper for my unwarranted ill courtesy. I ask that you forgive me and, if it is so your wish, that you do not withdraw from me the devotion you once claimed.

Rebecca believes the worst of us, and is seldom civil to me, but this does not distress me. The Granta is frozen, but the cold has hardened the roads and, if you come at Christmas, your journey should not be long delayed. I await you with little patience, pray believe me. M.

He had thrown his cap in the air with a joyous howl when first he read it, and that day his trembling fingers had made crimson chaos of his dissection subject — the arm of a drowned bargee — and earned a reprimand from his tutor. He had penned a letter in return, filled with gallant protestations of love, but it was doubtful whether it would reach Sawston before he did. Life had become suddenly rapturous; he walked on air, with the vision of Mary's

face constantly in his mind. Of course, he swore, she was not to blame. It was he, Adam, who had played the seducer. He had been coarsened by the shameless habits of London and he had attempted to breach the chastity of an unsuspecting, innocent maid. Her manner? It had been more than charitable. He deserved to be flogged for his impudence and indelicacy.

He had tossed aside his surgery notes and dreamed of new, golden horizons. Mary — wonderful, beautiful Mary — was it possible that she loved him? Dare he even think that she might, one day, be his wife? No, it was incredible. His soaring spirits would plummet and he would once again fumble for the letter, to read its every word, to build again his hopes. One moment buoyant with glee, the next fretting with despair, he waited for tomorrow's dawn.

Adam paused at the Three Cups for a mug of mulled ale before retiring to his unheated lodgings. A recruiting captain was there, holding court before a throng of idlers and offering the Queen's shilling to any lads of spirit who would share the glory of the 3rd Dragoons. Resplendent in laced red coat and cloak, white waistcoat and blue breeches, cockaded tricorne and polished buttons, he presented a gallant picture as he harangued his audience, tankard in hand.

'Colonel Wood's 3rd Dragoon Guards, my lads — the proudest regiment o' horse in Corporal John's army. A fine scarlet uniform and victuals provided, and a spirited horse to boot — what more could ye ask, eh?' He winked. 'Aye, but there's more. A shilling and sixpence a day for a dragoon, the best-stocked sutlers i' the lines, and an opportunity for promotion, to see foreign parts, and to strike a brave blow for Queen and England!' He clapped a hand on his sword hilt, then peered at the faces about him.

'And if that's not enough for any man, there's still more,' he went on. 'If ye suffer the misfortune to lose an eye or a limb in defence of ye' country, ye'll

receive a whole year's pay — other wounds in proportion.' He drew himself up. 'And the army'll take care of ye' dependants if ye die a soldier's death — eleven months' pay to a widow, or a mother if she's above fifty years or a widow herself, or one third to unmarried orphans. Now I'll ask ye where else ye'll find such prospects, and ye'll not tell me —!'

Adam sipped at his steaming mug and thought of Rupert Dolling, then of Francis Hewar, and frowned. Francis Hewar was another problem — but the recruiting captain was still talking.

'The transport *Resolution* lies at Harwich, intending to depart for Rotterdam in three weeks wi' recruits and remounts — and I'll be here every Thursday at six o' the clock.' He jingled a fat purse of silver. 'Now then, my masters, the Queen's shilling and a gallon o' ale for any bold fighting-cock who'll seek glory wi' the 3rd Dragoons and flutter the heart of every handsome wench from London to Luxembourg —'

Adam finished his ale and left. He must find a nightwatchman who would rouse him at three, for he was obliged to carry his box to Leadenhall Street for the mail-coach to Cambridge. Fired by his letter from Mary, he had scorned the slow-moving but economical diligence and reserved a place on the prodigiously expensive post-chaise — at sixpence a mile — destined to arrive in Cambridge, God willing and the weather fine, at eight at night. A week earlier such timing would have been impossible, for there had been several storms which had reduced the roads to morasses, and there had been talk of postboys, horses, and mailbags disappearing completely on the Edinburgh journey. Several days of severe frost, however, had bound the mud to iron hardness and, until the inevitable thaw, vehicles would travel at a reasonable, if cautious, speed. He might expect to arrive before midnight.

At five precisely the mail-coach clattered out of Leadenhall Street into deserted Cheapside, the breath of the horses steaming in the cold air, past the

dark clutter of Gray's Inn and threading slowly through Holborn — here to turn northward among the fine houses and gardens of Bloomsbury. A mile further were the wide, frost-laden fields of St Pancras and, not yet visible, the hills of Hampstead and Highgate. The coach swayed and creaked, jolting painfully over the frozen ruts as the driver urged his team to a smart trot, eager to earn a shilling or two from his muffled, shivering passengers for reducing the period of their martyrdom to a minimum.

By nine they were among the oaks and beeches of Enfield and took sustenance at Waltham Cross. Bishop's Stortford was reached by two, and at the sight of the frozen Cam at Newport they began to congratulate themselves on a well-run journey — amazingly swift for the season. On the Cambridgeshire bounds, however, they were reduced to a walk by the icy treachery of the road — which several times threatened to propel them into a ditch — and by crawling strings of pack-horses, similarly embarrassed by the ice and difficult to pass on the narrow causeway. Cramped and aching with cold, Adam alighted in a murkily dark, silent Sawston at eleven. The coach lurched on into the blackness behind the puny glimmer of its lanterns, and he was alone.

He glanced about him, blowing on his fingers. In a lower window of the Queen's Head, a few paces away, a light burned and, hopeful of a measure of rum before he began his mile tramp to the farm, he rapped with his knuckles on the mullioned glass. In a moment there was movement from within, a shadow grotesque across the window, and a rattle of bolts.

'Is that Master Adam Margery?' The face of the taverner, under a woollen nightcap, peered through a narrow gap between door and doorpost. 'Master Adam Margery?'

Surprised, Adam agreed. 'Aye, it is.'

The man grunted, pulled the door wider to allow Adam to enter, then closed

it again hurriedly against the cold. ‘Your coach was late,’ he complained, ‘but I was told to wait. Ye’ll want a draught?’

‘Rum,’ Adam nodded. ‘Ye said ye were told to wait? For me? It was a kindness — but who?’

‘I’ve a letter for ye, from the big house.’ The dark brown rum chuckled from its jar, then the taverner pushed both tankard and envelope towards Adam.

Intrigued, he broke the wafer with his thumb. ‘Adam,’ he read. ‘I would that you came to me as soon as your coach arrives. I am alone save for the servants and they will be abed. The buttery door is unchained, and my maid Elizabeth will guide you.’ There was no signature.

Adam read it a second time, then thrust it into a pocket. Mary, then, had received his own letter, for she could not otherwise have known of his impending arrival. He gulped at the rum — the fiery liquid tearing at his throat and bringing the blood hot to his face. ‘Od’s blood! She wanted him to come — now? It was an odd petition — but what suitor would be so ungallant to deny it — or indeed would wish to? He drained the tankard and hurried into the icy darkness. Behind him the bolts slammed and the flicker of light beyond the window faded.

Minutes later he had skirted the churchyard, clambered its boundary wall and was standing at the buttery door of the Hall. He tried it gently, tentatively, and it swung open easily on oiled hinges. A woman sat at a table, sewing by the light of a candle. ‘Elizabeth?’ he whispered.

She put down her sewing, took up the candle and rose to her feet. ‘You’re late,’ she scolded, ‘but she still waits.’ She looked at him curiously, then shrugged. ‘Follow me, but quietly, for there are servants sleeping on the other side of the house.’ She led him through the kitchen, along a short hall, and across the foot of the great stairs, turning again into another hallway, heavily

carpeted. A dozen paces further she halted, tapped quietly at a door and, without waiting for a summons, opened it. Adam entered and the door clicked shut.

Before him stood Rebecca. 'You're late, Adam,' she said.

Adam stared at her, then beyond her. She was alone. He looked back at her, puzzled disappointment in his face and speechless for the moment. Then, 'Mary —' he stammered. The room was warm and perfumed.

Rebecca smiled. 'She isn't here.' She reached forward to take his hand. 'Adam — you're cold! A cup of madeira —' His eyes met her blankly and she laughed softly. 'Fie, Adam! Why so dismal? Is it every night you're invited to take wine in a lady's bedchamber?' She was pouring the madeira from a crystal decanter.

Adam halted his chaotic speculations. 'My apologies, cousin, I am uncivil.' He took a deep, steadying breath. 'I thought — that is —'

She placed a brimming cup in his hand, took a second for herself, then studied him musingly. 'You expected a secret trysting with Mary? For shame, Adam! You're a deceiver, sir. What would my father think?' Her white teeth gleamed between her smiling lips.

With the wine following rum into his unfed belly, Adam was now glowing. Rebecca refilled his cup. 'It's a long walk to Margery's farm,' she suggested. He nodded, then, desperate for words, said, 'It was a cold journey.'

She lowered herself gracefully into a couch, the long, loose silk gown she wore parting slightly to reveal several inches of pink calf. 'And you thought to find the warmth of Mary's arms awaiting you. Is that what she promised?' She stretched out her feet lazily, cat-like, watching his reluctant eyes drop to her knees.

'Are they as comely as Mary's?' she inquired. He flushed, tore his eyes away and swallowed at his wine. 'You must be sorely disappointed, Adam,'

she purred on. She was unpinning her hair, letting first one tress and then the other deluge over her shoulders, spun gold, glinting in the candle-light. She ran it through her fingers. ‘Gold, not black — but as beautiful, you think?’

Adam made a resolute decision. ‘I must go,’ he blurted, then laughed apologetically. ‘I’ve a long tramp and a box to carry, and the road is icy.’

Rebecca rose swiftly and came to him. ‘No.’ Her smile was triumphant. ‘You’re my prisoner, Adam — but I promise you’ll not complain of your treatment. Remember —’ she unfastened his coat at the neck, ‘— you have entered the house secretly, you are in my bedchamber, and it is midnight. A scream from me would bring my father with a pistol in his hand —’

‘Your father?’ Adam stared. ‘But Mary’s letter —’

‘Not Mary’s letter,’ she corrected. ‘My letter.’

He pressed a hand to his hot brow. Faith! He was beginning to understand. He cleared his throat. ‘Rebecca,’ he pleaded, ‘Mary and me —’

‘Mary, Mary, Mary,’ she taunted. ‘Why such regard for Mary? Because she submitted to you once — in a field?’ Her face was scornful. ‘Is that your price?’ She curveted before him, the skirt of her gown whirling. ‘Look at me, Adam.’ She halted. ‘Would you not say I was as desirable?’

He nodded, incapable of speech. He could feel the sweat on his chest.

‘But, of course —’ her eyes were wide upon him, ‘— you have seen more of Mary, haven’t you? And how can you compare unless you have seen both?’ With deliberate slowness she loosened the tape at her neck, then paused. ‘Would it please you, sir, to compare me?’

The blood was pounding in his head. He knew his resolve was draining, and he did not care. He nodded again, mutely. She shook the gown from her shoulders, allowed it to fall to her waist, then to the floor. Then she stepped free of it and stood before him, proudly, brazenly, fiercely. ‘There, sir,’ she challenged. ‘Is it to your liking?’

The alabaster nakedness of her stunned him. Rebecca Hewar, queen of women, was shamelessly exposed to him. His hot eyes drank in the intoxicating vision of her milky, candid breasts tipped with bronze cupolas, the stud of her taut navel, the furred cleavage of her bellying thighs. She lifted her arms, leisurely taunting him, her lips pouting. 'Is it to your liking?' she breathed.

'B'God!' he mouthed, hoarsely. His bowels were contorting. Exultantly she moved towards him. 'Am I more beautiful?' she asked.

'Ye're perfection,' he said. She took the empty cup from him, then drew his hands to her breasts. 'Say that I am more beautiful,' she insisted, 'than Mary.'

'Ye're more beautiful,' he yielded. 'Aye — ye're more beautiful.'

There was jubilation in her eyes. She leaned forward to kiss him on the mouth, his cupping hands captive under hers. Her lips were savage. 'I'm hot for you, cousin,' she confessed. 'Have you the humour to quench me?'

He was destroyed, offering himself a vassal to her unsparing dominance — she laughing in his face as he sprawled over her and her nails drawing blood from his shoulders. Swept on helplessly by the floodtide of his emotion, he recognized his own humiliation — that he was being ravished, not she. There was mockery in her laughter, contempt in every motion of her body. When he was finished, exhausted, with his face buried in her hair, he was disgusted with himself, with his own weakness. He lay still breathing hard, for several moments, then began to rise, but she grasped him quickly.

'No — wait,' she ordered. She turned her head, listening, her eyes narrowed. Adam, suddenly nervous, strained his own ears, but could hear nothing save the whisper of their own breathing. The house was still.

He stirred again. 'I must —' he started, but she hushed him to silence immediately, her head still turned. Adam listened again, and heard — the faint noise of horses' feet and carriage wheels grinding on the gravel of the

drive. He gasped, fear choking his throat, but Rebecca gripped his arms tightly. 'Quiet!' she hissed. 'Keep very quiet!' Adam froze.

The carriage had halted. There was an indistinct murmur of a voice, footsteps, and the rattle of a distant door, before the carriage wheels moved again, fading. Then there was silence again, utter and death-like. Adam drew a cautious, trembling breath, the palms of his hands sweating. Beneath him Rebecca lay motionless and tense, her eyes on the ceiling.

Then, from behind him, Adam heard the sickening click of the bedchamber door and the creak of its hinges.

'Rebecca!' It was Mary's voice, enraged. 'What are you doing in my —?' There was a moment's pause, then, incredulous, 'Adam!'

Crushed and nauseated, Adam climbed to his feet. Mary stood at the door, in travelling cloak and hood, staring with unbelieving eyes, her face drained of colour. Rebecca tossed back her hair, then reached leisurely for her wrap. 'La!' she said.

'Adam Margery —' Mary's voice was heavy with disgust. 'I was a fool to think you anything but a mongrel lecher!' Adam was adjusting his clothing with shaking fingers. 'To think —' Mary laughed spitefully, '— that I asked for your affection! How you must have smirked —!'

'Mary — in God's name —!' Adam begged desperately. 'If you will listen - I swear —'

'Listen?' Mary scoffed. 'I don't want to listen to you — or see you — ever again. If it were not for my shame I would have you lashed through Sawston — and that I promise if you enter this house again.' She paused. 'Stay with the London sluts — they'll not question your bawdry!'

Adam made as if to voice another plea, but she turned to open the door behind her. 'Get out of this house,' she directed, 'before I cry for my father.'

He stooped to pick up his coat, crumpled on the floor, and glanced at

Rebecca, but she was unconcernedly tying the lacing of her wrap, her face turned from him. He shrugged, disconsolate, his stomach sickening, and walked to the door. Mary closed it behind him, then whirled on Rebecca accusingly.

‘Once, sister, you called me a whore,’ she whispered. ‘Once you condemned me for lusting in a field with an upstart apprentice — a lick-spittle ploughboy — do you recall? A dozen times since then, to my certain knowledge, you have received Rupert Dolling, the ostler, in your bedchamber at night, making Elizabeth your procuress.’ She stood over her sister, provoked by Rebecca’s shameless indifference. ‘This you did to satisfy your conceit, to prove that you could make a puppet of a man — albeit a simple ostler. And to this I paid no concern, though I despised you for your gloating and your lip-homage to maidenly decorum.’ She paused, breathing hard. ‘But wasn’t that sufficient for you? Did you prevail upon Adam Margery to further gratify your arrogance or, knowing my feelings, to outrage me?’ She paused once again, her eyes filled with abomination. ‘And is that why you performed your stagery in my bedchamber — knowing that I would return at this hour — so that you could flaunt your victory?’

Rebecca sighed. ‘Fie, little sister! What’s one man or another? There is no shortage — half the population of England are men — and all of them hot and willing to play the stallion. I’ll hazard you could have your fill in Sawston alone if you’re itching enough. Adam Margery —?’ She yawned, languidly stretching her arms. ‘He’s a poor substitute for Rupert Dolling. Ostler or no, he’s a masterful lover, while Adam —’ she shrugged, laughing, ‘— but I forget, you’ve experienced his fumbling.’

Suddenly she rose to her feet, her indifference gone and her face serious. ‘No, I do not covet Adam Margery, Mary — but I’m near certain I’m with child.’ Her lips were white. ‘Yes — an ostler’s brat — and if I have to bear it

I'll name a father of higher expectations.' She grimaced. 'Not that a surgeon is a vast improvement, but he was easily managed — and must suffice if none better are quickly available.'

Mary gazed at Rebecca, speechless, the second shock arriving so soon after the first that she was near to screaming. 'You mean,' she gasped, 'you'll tell Adam —?'

'Why not?' Rebecca asked, then, 'Faith, girl, why are you so concerned? You've just expelled him from this house — told him you'd have him lashed through Sawston. His future, then, can hardly be a matter of interest to you. Besides —' she was her sanguine self again, '— don't let's squabble over a surgeon's apprentice. You're young and well-favoured enough to take your choice of half the gentry in the county. I'm the one who's like to be wife to a beggarly leech.'

'And Rupert Dolling? Is he not to know?'

'An ostler? Do you suppose I can acknowledge a stable-boy's bastard? No, he'll not know, nor anyone — and after tonight Adam can never claim that he's not the sire.' Rebecca walked to the door. 'He'll be well compensated,' she added, 'by having a Hewar to wife.'

About to depart, she halted. 'I almost forgot. There was a letter from London for you, from Adam, telling of his arrival, but doubtless you're no longer interested.' She swept from the room.

Left alone, Mary surveyed the closed door helplessly, then sank to her knees, her face in her hands, sobbing. 'Adam —!' she whimpered. 'You fool — you weak, simple fool! Were you blind? If you had to lust — why didn't you wait for me?'

Chapter Four - 1703

IT WAS FEBRUARY, and England stood poised on the brink of a perilous conflict. Less than two years earlier the country had been opposed to, and completely unprepared for, war. The Tories argued bitterly against it and the common public, to whom all foreigners were Negroes, were sullenly indifferent to the vicissitudes of the Spanish succession. The British regular army numbered 7,000 in England and 12,000 in Ireland, with Westminster convinced that any international contention could be amply met by the navy, the first in Europe. When the Spanish Netherlands were occupied by the troops of Louis of France, England remained unmoved.

On September 17th, 1701, the exiled James II of England had died at St Germain. By treaty Louis was pledged to give no assistance to the enemies of England's William, but in a moment of stupid and misplaced chivalry he proclaimed the Pretender Prince of Wales to be James III, King of England, on French soil.

If it had been deliberately planned, nothing could have more savagely roused England than this impertinence of the French monarch. That France should champion England's deposed ruling house, and Louis take it upon himself to make and unmake Europe's kings, was preposterous. Even the English Jacobites, who toasted 'the king across the water', bridled at Louis' patronage. There were far graver reasons why England should check the military ambitions of France, but only Louis' brash but meaningless proclamation was adequate to stir the nation.

The three principals of the Grand Alliance fixed their quotas of troops — 90,000 Austrians, 10,000 Dutch, and 40,000 English, or troops in English

pay. The Earl of Marlborough had been appointed Commander of the Forces in Flanders and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the States of Holland. Nine months later King William was dead and Anne sat in St James'.

In swarming, blustering London, life had achieved an even more colourful tempo. Companies of guards and grenadiers with drums and fifes were everyday spectacles, recruiting officers prowled the taverns and markets, and half-pay officers, once more the darlings of the people, were being commissioned at the rate of two hundred a day. The Thames still swarmed with wherries and barges, and London Bridge, sole road over the river, was choked with vehicles. A tangle of masts smothered the waters below. In the cocoa-and coffee-houses — Lloyd's, Truby's, the Grecian, Will's, St James', White's, the Windsor — Londoners of all classes gathered to read the daily news-sheets, to gossip, to laugh at the latest lampoon. The theatres were always full.

In his lodging above the poulterers, Adam Margery pored over his surgery notes of the previous week by the light of a pair of guttering candles. Graafian follicles, Glisson's capsule, Lower's tubercle, Wormian bones, Ridley's sinus, Wharton's duct — he groaned, rubbing his tired eyes. Somehow, in these past days, his powers of concentration had abandoned him. The words were inked scrawls empty of meaning, and he was compelled to punish his memory to formulate a mental picture of any of them.

He leaned back in his chair. What was the demonstration of that morning? He recalled, vaguely, two porters restraining a terrified, contorting wretch as the surgeon's knife thrust into the thigh. Aye, he remembered — an amputation of a fractured, gangrenous leg — but he could retrace only isolated, irrelevant incidents — the severed limb in the sawdust, the femoral artery tied with ligatures, the stump puckered and sewn. How long had it

taken? Ten minutes? Twenty? He could not remember.

Adam returned to his notes determinedly. ‘Graafian follicles,’ he read aloud, wearily. ‘Spherical ovarian bodies each containing an ovum —’ He paused, his eyes blank of intelligence. Then irritably, he pushed the notes from him, rose to his feet, and walked to the window. It was pointless. He might as well repair to the Three Cups for a quart of ale — or seek his bed.

He gazed idly at the street below him. It was dark, but the night was young and there was much interflow of people and vehicles — stevedores and sailors, vagrant tourists, women of wanton virtue clinging to the shadows that hid the ravages of their profession, hawkers and shop-boys, the rattle of wheels, a medley of street cries, the yelping of a dog trodden on by a horse. Beyond he could see lights on the river, of the countless, criss-crossing ferrying boats, and the barges carrying coal, or cargo for the East Indiamen downstream.

Preceded by a linkboy with a smoking brand, a chair wended its way through the throng from the direction of Ludgate. It passed close to the wall immediately below him and the boy halted. Opposite, an abuse-screeching slattern pursued a drunken, reeling labourer from a tavern doorway. Adam turned away from the window.

There was a hammering of knuckles on his door. ‘Mas’er Margereee —!’ He scowled. What did the gin-soaked old grandam want? His rent was not due for four days and there was naught else likely to bring her laboriously up the stairs. He sauntered to the door and unlatched it.

The poulterer’s wife leered at him from the darkness. ‘Mas’er Margery? There’s a lady t’ see ye —’ she wheezed painfully, ‘— I said, there’s a lady t’ see ye —’ She stood aside, and Rebecca walked into the room.

Adam’s mouth sagged. The poulterer’s wife stood at the doorway, wheezing still and grinning. Adam closed the door in her face and turned

with his back pressed against it, a hand to the unbuttoned neck of his shirt. Rebecca halted in mid-floor, eyeing critically first her surroundings and then Adam. She drew off her gloves carefully. Will you offer me a chair, Adam?' she asked. 'If —' she glanced around, — there is one.'

Adam stuttered an apology, drew his own chair from the table and placed it conveniently for her. 'You catch me by surprise,' he explained. 'I had no knowledge —' he indicated the paper-littered table. 'As you see, I'm reviewing some notes —'

She glanced down indifferently. 'Anatomy?' she inquired.

'Yes.' Adam groped among the jumbled contents of a sideboard, certain that he had purchased a pound of candles only last week. He had an unopened bottle of Canary, but lacked the luxury of glasses. Pewter mugs were adequate for him and his brother apprentices, but for Rebecca —

She waited patiently until he had lit fresh candles from the flames of the first, then sniffed delicately. 'Tallow.' Her nose wrinkled.

'All the students use tallow,' Adam volunteered, then resumed, 'I use a lot of candles, and tallow's cheaper than wax.' He shrugged.

She pushed back the hood of her cloak. Her golden curls gleamed. 'You are doubtless curious, Adam, of the reason for my visit?'

He drew a deep breath. 'It's an unusual pleasure, Rebecca. I did not know you were even aware of my lodgings.'

Rebecca raised her eyebrows. 'I confess I was never breathless with curiosity, nor am I dazzled by the revelation.' She frowned. 'Adam — have you ever considered the possibility of marriage?'

Adam started, staring at her. 'Marriage?' He wetted his lips.

She gave a little snort. 'If you're thinking of Mary, then forget her. She's beyond your reach, and she was a fool to give you any encouragement. There're Cambridgeshire gentlemen enough who'll come a-wooing Mary.'

Her eyes smouldered angrily. 'But I'm with child, Adam Margery — and if you can think back to our last meeting you'll perhaps know the reason!'

Adam crimsoned, reached for the table to steady himself, swallowing at a suddenly contracting throat. 'You're with child?' he echoed hoarsely. 'You mean — mine?' He made a desperate mental calculation. 'How can you be sure — it's barely six weeks?' He passed a hand across his brow. 'There are other conditions, Rebecca — six weeks isn't long enough to be sure —'

She nodded her head firmly. 'I'm sure, Adam. You may be a surgeon's apprentice, but you're not a woman —' she afforded a humourless laugh, '— as you've proven, more's the pity. I'm carrying your child, Adam — that's why I've come to London — and the sooner our marriage is arranged the less gossip there'll be. Tomorrow —'

'Tomorrow —?' Adam gaped. 'Rebecca — it's impossible! I'm an apprentice bound for four more years! Grandfather Ralph paid my fee, but I've naught else save an allowance from my father that's barely enough to maintain myself —' He halted, helplessly, then, 'I haven't the means to even keep you in ribbons!'

'Do you suppose the prospect of marrying you captivates me?' Rebecca retorted. 'To be the wife of a beggarly surgeon, and depend for my comforts on bleedings and cuppings, teeth-pulling and corn-cutting?' She was breathing quickly. 'But it won't be so, Adam. If a Margery disgraced me, the Margerys will pay the reckoning. Your Sawston farmland is among the best in the country, and my father has already offered to pay a good price for it. Yes,' she gritted, 'he'll pay handsomely enough when he learns of our marriage — either that or he'll put a pistol ball through your head. John Margery will commit the money to you, Adam, and you'll take a house — but not in Cambridgeshire. Lud! I'll never lift my head there again!'

Adam strode to the window, but the convulsion of noises from the street

was now only a distant, insignificant murmur beyond the anarchy of his thoughts. He pressed his forehead against the cool of the glass. Was this really he — Adam Margery, apprentice surgeon of St Bartholomew's Hospital — who stood here, named the violator of Rebecca Hewar and — he flinched — the father of her issue? And was this the reward of that sickening, agonizing hour in Sawston? Half a year ago the notion would have been absurd, and his imagination would have recoiled from it. Could this be some incredible dream from which he would presently awaken, trembling and thankful for its fading?

He turned back to Rebecca. 'I can't think —' he pleaded. 'There must be another way, even if there's no doubt — and my father —'

'There's no other way,' Rebecca snapped, 'and there's no doubt. If you're considering denying your responsibility I'll remind you that there was a witness, and I doubt whether you'll want to drag her into the affair when she can also testify that you attempted the same with her.' She tossed her head. 'Your father, you say? And what of mine? Do you suppose he'll shower compliments on us?' She picked up her gloves and rose to her feet. 'I'll return tomorrow, Adam, at noon, expecting that you'll have arranged a minister.' From the door she gazed back at him, silently for a moment. 'You're not badly served, Adam,' she said finally. 'Rebecca Hewar for a wife? It's more than any surgeon's apprentice should dare think of.'

When she had gone, Adam flung himself into his chair. 'Od rot it! How, in heaven's name, could this happen? Was there no escape? He could still hardly credit the situation. He drew a sobering breath and began to analyse his predicament step by step. He had sired a brat — or so Rebecca claimed — and she seemed certain enough. His eyes narrowed. Assuming she was pregnant, could she be lying about his responsibility? He considered, then shook his head. No, Rebecca Hewar could choose a lover from a dozen titled

gentry, any one of whom would be delighted to use his paternity as an excuse for marriage — and plenty of wenches had gone pot-bellied to the altar with their ambitious father's blessings. No, Rebecca Hewar wouldn't waste herself on Adam Margery if a more profitable spouse were possible, that was as sure as the gospel.

Marriage to Rebecca? Tomorrow? She was a matchless beauty, a magnificent, golden prize for any man — any man, that was, save Adam. She was six years older, an irrelevance perhaps, but he had always been in awe of her, of the disdainful, patrician manner with which she had treated him since his barefoot days. How could he husband her? He thought of the incredulous faces of his brother apprentices if they saw his bride — the apprentices who had shared his life, his carousing, his Smithfield kitchen-wench. He thought of Edmund Hewar, of his own father browbeaten into selling the Margery acres — and he thought of the constant agony of being brother-in-law to Mary.

But he was trapped. Mistress Rebecca Margery, he mused, then laughed bitterly. More likely he'd be Mister Rebecca Hewar, a colourless nonentity to be kept in the background while she strove to pick up the threads of the fashionable existence to which she had been accustomed. Aye, and she'd cuckold him shamelessly, make him an object of contempt among the fine-talking rakes she'd gather about her, and give herself to the first titled peacock who offered her social advancement.

Adam swore, loudly and viciously. He'd held Rebecca naked in his arms and known intoxicating passion for the beautiful animal that she was — but marriage to her would be a humiliation. He kicked his chair aside. But he was trapped.

From beyond the window drifted the noise of befuddled singing. Adam snorted. A quart of ale or two might chase away the threat of tomorrow —

and likely it would be his last chance to drink from an honest tankard in a common tavern. He snatched up his coat.

The Three Cups was filled with swirling pipe smoke and bantering conversation — the price of ale, the size of wigs, the bedroom potential of the sweating ale-maids who did not hesitate to add their own shrieks to the communal din, and the progress of the war. In one corner two tar-tailed sailors were singing gravely, their heads together, a dog sniffing at their unsteady feet, while a completely different measure was being brayed by a mellow old crone only three feet away.

There was another voice, resonant above the others, and familiar.

‘The Queen’s shilling and the Queen’s ale, my jollies, for any lad o’ spirit with a mind to serve Her Majesty and pull down the King o’ France. Wood’s 3rd Dragoons — the proudest regiment o’ horse that ever wore scarlet. If ye’ve a shrewish wife or a skin-flint master, too many brats, or Newgate gaol to run from, ye’ll not do better —’

Adam groaned and lifted his tankard. Then he stopped, his tankard slopping, and with calculating eyes stared across the haze-choked tavern at the recruiting captain. The man was still talking.

‘A shilling and sixpence a day, and all found, the best victuals i’ the British army, and a Colonel who treats his regiment better’n his children. Ask any trooper o’ the 3rd Dragoons and he’ll tell ye the same —’ He raised his voice. ‘Who’s for over the hills and far away — for Flanders, Portugal, or Spain?’

Adam elbowed his way towards the red-coated officer. He was a middle-aged man, his full-bottomed wig framing a face tanned by wind and sun, shoulders broad and square, and eyes of a startling blueness which met Adam questioningly as he approached.

‘Sir —’ Adam began. The Captain grinned, reached forward, and gripped his arm. ‘Is it boots and saddle for ye, lad? There’s the look of a dragoon

about ye, and I promise ye'll do no better than Wood's Horse.'

'Sir,' Adam asked. 'If I enlist, can ye take me from here immediately — tonight?'

The Captain peered at Adam quizzically. His voice was low. 'What is it, lad? The magistrates?'

'No, sir —' Adam hesitated. 'It's a woman —'

The soldier's curiosity vanished. 'A wench, eh?' He chuckled. 'Aye, that can be worse than a magistrate, lad — a life sentence.' He rubbed his chin. 'Once ye've 'listed ye're entitled to quarters. Ye'll sleep at the Tower tonight, leave for Colchester Castle tomorrow, and from thence to Harwich. The 3rd's recruits have to be in Rotterdam for the spring mounting, and that'll include you. After that —' he shrugged, '— it depends on Corporal John. But one thing's certain — ye' wench'll need an Act o' Parliament to get her hands on ye once ye've joined the colours!' He grinned at Adam. 'Does that satisfy ye, lad? If so, ye can have the shilling, and my hand on't to wish ye God speed!'

Adam nodded. 'Aye — I'm satisfied. I'll take the shilling.'

Chapter Five

A LIGHT SEA MIST was scattering before the dawn off-shore wind as the Harwich packet glided easily past the line of anchored transports and warships, presented her stern cheekily to the guns of Landguard Fort, and vanished southward in the direction of the Naze and the Channel.

In Harwich harbour the convoy lay, the ships low in the water with their near-finished loading — *Tiger, Dragon, Advantage, Resolution, Portsmouth,* and *Royal Oak*. Low, dipping bows, with sprit masts garlanded by the Union Jack, were counterbalanced by soaring, gilded sterns garnished by the royal arms and decorated lanterns. The painted gunports rose and fell gently in the sluggish swell. A scattering of barges and small boats weaved among them, transferring the last of the warships' stores — salted hogs, casks of biscuit and peas, tobacco, and sea beer. During the previous few days the pressgangs had been scouring Harwich, Felixstowe, and the villages of the Tendring Hundred, but the men of the Stour were experienced and cunning evaders, and the gangs' haul had been small. A detachment of marines stood, at ease, on the jetty.

Adams' stomach, already disturbed by a week of the indifferent victuals of Colchester Castle, squirmed as the great flat-bottomed, overcrowded scow in which he stood rolled and lurched across the harbour towards the *Resolution*. His feet were soaked by an inch of filthy water which swilled the planks, his face and shoulders by the occasional spume exploding over the blunt bows. A few feet away were stationed a sergeant and three marines, their muskets reversed to avoid the spray and eyeing their charges with wooden faces.

Adam, undrilled, nor yet issued with regimentals, was now a trooper of the

3rd Regiment of Dragoon Guards. At the Tower, in London, he had signed his attestation, in which he took oath that he was a Protestant, that he concealed no ruptures or lameness, nor was troubled by fits, had the perfect use of his limbs, and had voluntarily enlisted himself to serve Her Majesty Queen Anne as a private soldier. The second and sixth sections of the Articles of War, relating to mutiny and desertion, had been read to him, and he had taken the oath of fidelity.

His companions were a mixed collection of labourers, abjured apprentices, destitutes and debtors, pickpockets, and artless farm boys anxious for military laurels. There were also the inevitable bounty-jumpers, enlisting and deserting repeatedly for the sake of enlisting money and at least partial subsistence at the Queen's expense, until finally laid by the heels or shot by a dutiful sentry.

Ahead of the wallowing scow the side of the *Resolution* reared. The vessel, a third-rate of 70 guns and 980 tons burden, had temporarily cleared her gun-decks of ordnance to provide more room for her human cargo — recruits for Marlborough's army in Flanders. Many of the men between her cramped bulkheads had been aboard for several months, anchored off Harwich, guarded at their daily exercise and battened below at night, while weekly a fresh trickle of recruits from Colchester gradually swelled their numbers. There had been a number of sicknesses — from musty food, bad water, and the stench rising from the bilges — attended by a conscientious if powerless surgeon's mate, and four deaths, but there had been a diversion in the form of twenty-nine lashes of a cat-o'-nine-tails applied to a seaman for stealing the carpenter's wedding-ring. Another pastime, during the exercise period on deck, was to shout obscene drolleries at the eighty female felons quartered forward but segregated from the men by a barrier guarded by armed sentries. The women were to be transported to Flanders to follow the army.

At the brow of the ladder the sergeant checked the new men's names as they climbed aboard. 'Matthias Spread, Nicholas Howell, Hodder Roberts, Adam Margery, John Archer, Swithin White —' Satisfied, he turned to the dragoon major behind him and saluted. 'Thirty-four recruits mustered, sir. Four officers' mounts to be hoisted.'

The officer nodded, walked slowly along the line of newcomers, his eyes sombre, his lips pursed. Finally he grunted, 'Get them below, sergeant, and listed for victuals.' It was beginning to rain, as the sky had promised since dawn. 'See that the regulations are explained to them, and the punishments for disobedience — and that they know what to do if the ship beats to quarters. I am informed we shall weigh in two hours.'

Adam, relieved to climb from the scow, was scarcely better pleased with the deck of the transport — his first acquaintance with any vessel larger than a Cam barge. He gazed at the great bole of the mainmast rising, iron-bound, from the white planks, the spreading yards over his head, the impossible maze of the rigging, and the nimble-footed, deft-fingered seamen as they wrestled with lifting tackle and the final securing of deck cargo — and a dozen other tasks incomprehensible to his layman's eyes. But a stentorian voice from the quarterdeck was demanding that the 'damned sojers' get to hell from the upper deck before a swivel-gun was turned on them, and the sergeant was ushering them below.

The gun-deck was crowded with men, seated, standing, sprawling — most of them huddled with their backs to the still-open gunports through which the rain was now blowing, but the sergeant did not pause. Down a second ladder and yet a third, he led the thirty-four stumbling recruits through a long, dark cavern to a tiny space weakly lit from a single, grated scuttle, and smelling powerfully of tar and tallow. They could hear the slap of the sea against the ship's side. 'Ye're lucky,' the marine grunted. 'The cosiest berth i' the Fleet

— but ye’ll need to secure yon scuttle as soon as we slip, or ye’ll be flooded wi’ brine.’ He rapped the solid bulkhead with his knuckles. ‘Do ye know what this is beyond?’ The recruits stared at him blankly and he resumed, ‘It’s the magazine, cullies — and that means no lights, no candles, no tobacco — or ye’ll like to blow the ship to kingdom come.’

Several decks above them the ship was being made ready for sea — the horses lifted by slings under their bellies, perishables stowed, the pinnace swung in and the side ladders raised and lashed. The windlass clattered as the vessel was dragged up to her anchor. To seaward the *Tiger*, flying the Commodore’s broad pennant, had hoisted the preparative, and there would be no further intercourse with shore. It was raining monotonously from a sullen, cloud-banked sky.

With the scuttle closed against the sea, Adam and his fellows were in darkness and, deprived of their sole means of ventilation, the mingled smells of their surroundings and the foulness from the bilges became increasingly pungent. Somewhere in the gloom some game heart was singing, but elsewhere another was already beginning to retch — the rosy-cheeked Hertfordshire lad, perhaps, with his quaint moleskin cap and buskins that the others had laughed at. Beneath them the deck heeled slightly.

In the grey, rain-whipped estuary the *Tiger* had fired a gun, the signal to weigh. The windlass clattered again and the weed-festooned anchor chain tautened, straining, while aloft the cocooned sails were breaking into whiteness, taking the wind, bellying. The *Resolution* shuddered. There was a shout from the fore chain-wale — ‘Anchor aweigh!’ A white feather was curling at the bows as the sprit mast rose gently, plunged, and rose again. From below decks came the noise of scattered cheering as the ship, answering at last her helm, moved forward, agonizingly slowly at first, but with Bloody Point astern swinging to starboard as she took the following

wind.

Adam sat with his back hard against a bulkhead, his arms about his knees and bracing himself with every new motion of the deck. He could hear faintly the wash of water and the cries of gulls beyond the battened scuttle, and from above and below a thousand creakings and groanings of the ship's timbers. He gasped as, receiving on her beam the long swell to seaward of Landguard Point, the *Resolution* rolled suddenly and alarmingly. For a heart-sinking moment he entertained a terrifying vision of the vessel upsetting completely and consigning her helpless cargo to a watery grave — a sorry fate for those promised the glory of the 3rd Dragoons. Aloft, however, the unconcerned sailors were swarming the rigging, trimming her canvas as the ship came round to follow astern of the *Tiger*, already a mile to eastward with the wind set fair for Flanders.

*

In the forecourt of the Globe, on Harwich Quay, a throng of idlers watched with relief the remaining vessels of the convoy labouring slowly into the seaward rain-haze. There was naught to fear from pressgangs for a few days — until the arrival of five frigates expected from Weymouth, and then the quay would be strangely deserted of able-bodied men. Better the treadmill than the privations and uncertainties of the Queen's Navy, but there was leisure now for a jug of ale and to walk the streets in the reasonable expectation of seeing one's own bed that night. A dozen gulls wheeled, lamenting, over the grey-green waters of the harbour, seeking for offal from the few herring boats against the jetty piles. The sullen shape of Fort Bulwark was black against the overcast sky.

In the yard of the King's Head the London coach was disgorging its disgruntled passengers, having suffered a three-hour delay at Colchester in replacing a cracked axle-tree. A young woman descended, cloaked against

the drizzle, and ignoring her fellows hurrying for the warmth of the taproom, stepped across the puddled cobbles towards the quayside. It was Mary Hewar.

On the jetty she halted, shivered as the chilly fingers of the sea wind plucked the hood from her face, then gazed wanly at her desolate surroundings. A wherry was being poled haltingly across the Stour from the Suffolk side. There was no sound save the faint mewling of sea-birds, the lap of debris-encrusted wavelets and the steady patter of rain. A few feet away a walnut-skinned old boatman eyed her with benign curiosity.

‘The *Resolution*,’ Mary said. ‘They told me she was here —’ She could not control the sob in her voice.

‘Aye, she were,’ he nodded, ‘an hour sin’.’ He rubbed a wet nose with the back of his hand, then pointed towards the estuary, where the topsails of the last of the convoy were fading into oblivion. ‘She’ll be three miles east’d o’ Languard b’now — rot her — wi’ the rest of her brood, an’ aheading f’ Flanders.’

Mary choked. ‘Is there no way of getting to her? A boat?’

He chuckled. ‘God bass ’e, girl — there ain’t no gain in that. Ye’ll not easy find a Harwich craft to chase after Queen’s ships —’

‘I’ll pay,’ she offered.

He sniffed. ‘’Tain’t money, girl. Wi’ a few hours o’ good wind behind ’em. I don’t know a craft hereabouts as’d easy come up to ’em — saving the *Fan Fan* —’

‘The *Fan Fan*?’

The old man chuckled again. ‘Fast sloop, two guns — but a Queen’s ship agin, ye see? Anyways, she’s hauled up and careening, an’ Benbow hisself wouldn’t get her afloat afore three days.’ He peered across at her. ‘The *Resolution*’s filled wi’ recruits f Flanders an’ gaol-bawds.’

Mary was silent, her eyes drawn in disbelief towards the horizon, from which the last tiny fleck of white had disappeared.

‘Sojer or pressed man?’ the other asked. She looked at him blankly, then swallowed. ‘Soldier,’ she said, aching and tired after the long journey from Sawston which had taken her first to the Belle Sauvage outside London’s Ludgate, thence to the Three Cups by the Temple, wherein a middle-aged recruiting captain had recalled the enlistment of one Adam Margery but had declared him safe aboard the *Resolution* at Harwich and secure against magistrates, creditors, or punitive women. It would need an Act of Parliament —

She appealed to the old boatman. ‘Is there no way —?’

He shook his head, his dark eyes sympathetic. ‘I seed ’em afore, and I seed womanfolk and bratlings weeping and crying to Almighty — but I ain’t seed it make a morsel o’ difference to the military, or the Fleet —’

Earlier, it had been Rebecca who had returned to Sawston from London, frustrated and bitterly angry, who named Adam a treacherous runagate, a shabby rake-hell, and a dozen other titles of equal contempt until, suddenly white-faced and frightened, she surrendered to tears. She was with child, and could hide the fact for only a few more weeks — nothing could change that now. Adam had fled, abandoning her, and even Rupert Dolling had long disappeared from Sawston. Men were inhuman animals, seducers, betrayers. The county would snigger and name her whore, and Edmund Hewar would take fire with rage.

‘Mind ye,’ the other was consoling her, ‘if ye’ man comes back, ’e’ll be twice the man ’e went, or —’ he lifted a leg which terminated in a leather-covered stump, ‘—’e’ll be ’alf one.’

Edmund Hewar, thankfully, had been temporarily absent from Sawston, and Mary’s hostility towards her sister had softened — although she could still

not forgive Rebecca's initial duplicity. For weeks Mary's emotions had been turmoiled — and now this. Adam — the simple fool — had fled Sawston and now, it seemed, his London lodging. He'd been easily baited — as were all men — and had earned penalty, but not to the extent that Rebecca had driven him.

There was something else — a constantly stifled perturbation that she had tried desperately to ignore. 'I would marry any man that I loved,' she had once told Adam, 'in spite of anyone.' Well, her fine sentiment had quickly crumpled at its first test, and if she allowed Rebecca to annex without dispute every eligible suitor, she — Mary — would die a spinster. A strange mixture of pity and resentment towards Rebecca, supplemented by that other strange emotion which she refused to identify but could not repudiate, had compelled her to London to seek Adam — yet until the moment she stepped on to the rainswept quayside at Harwich she had not decided what she would say if she faced him. Now, the deserted, cheerless waters of the harbour told her.

The boatman was still talking. 'It were Dutch partridge shot that took 'e off. One minute ye're a lusty boy, a-shoutin' and full o' derring-do — an' the next ye're on the planks, spewin' an' bleedin' —' But Mary did not hear him.

She walked slowly to the edge of the jetty, pulling her cloak closer about her shoulders. She knew why she had come to find Adam. Not for Rebecca, or for Rebecca's unborn child — or even to tell Adam he had been cheated. There was something else she would have him know. Perhaps, now, he would never know.

Turning back towards the King's Head, she found her eyes hot with tears. The inn sign was swinging rustily on its ironwork, jeering at her.

Chapter Six

‘ADAM MARGERY. TROOPER. A crimson coat, blue waistcoat and breeches, one shirt and two neck-cloths, a pair of blue worsted stockings, a hat with blue orris lace and hatband of same, cloak, carbine belt, waist-belt and cartouche box, sword, bayonet and hammer hatchet, a good pair of boots with spurs and spur leathers, bridle, crupper, breastplate and collar, carbine bucket tipped with brass, embroidered housings and a pair of gloves. John Archer, Trooper. A crimson coat, blue waistcoat and breeches —’

Adam, naked and shivering, with the bundled regimentals clutched to his chest, stood in line with the others as a tall sergeant paced before them, his spurred heels jingling.

‘No dragoon, in new or old regimentals with lace on, is to carry any burden, bundles, wear an apron, drive carts, or do any kind of work. He is never to appear in the street wi’out his sword, and his hat well cocked wi’ his hair tucked under. Ye understand?’ The sergeant paused, sniffed, and went on. ‘Wigs are not allowed to be worn ’cept in the case of those men who cannot wear their own hair through age or infirmity — and then they’re to be so like a head o’ hair as not to be perceived.’ He spun on his heel, glaring. ‘Ye’ll appear on parade wi’ ye’ arms clean and in good order — clean linen, clean boots and stockings, ye’ clothes whole and unspotted, ye’ hair tied up in bags, ye’ hats briskly cocked. Ye understand?’

The recruits understood. ‘The punishment f’ failing to obey these orders,’ the sergeant warned, ‘is to be sent to the black hole wi’ bread and water for forty hours.’ If the ‘black hole’ was anything like the ’tween decks of the *Resolution*, Adam resolved silently, he’d take good care to keep his hat

briskly cocked.

With his thirty-three companions he had come ashore at Rotterdam the previous day, blinking in the sunlight and grateful for the firmness of the jetty under his feet. The quayside had been thronged with Hollanders watching the ship's unloading, puritan-clad people, unsmiling and silent, as strange as the outlandish lettering on the brick guildhouses surrounding them and the solemn tolling from a nearby church tower. The loneliness and homesickness of the last few days flooded again into his throat. Then, delighted, he had caught sight of the red coats of a small detachment of dragoons, standing at their horses' heads — dragoons of the 3rd Regiment — and had been surprised at his own sudden glow of pride, of kinsmanship, with the English troopers. It was there that they had made the acquaintance of Sergeant Benjamin Weekes — with an accent blatantly of Southwark and whose savage bark, Adam hoped, was considerably worse than his bite.

Escorted by the troopers, they had marched to the cavalry cantonments in the meadows east of the city, on the banks of the Rotte, where also lay the hutments of the Royal North British Dragoons and Murray's Regiment of Foot. Beyond the quarter-guard and parading ground the men's hutments were formed in long lines, distinguished by standards and guidons and patrolled by sentries at every point. Behind the men's lines were those of the subalterns, followed by the captains', majors' and lieutenant-colonels', and finally the quarters of the colonel and staff officers. Further still lay the grand sutlers, the troopers' kitchens, common sutlers and butchers. It was a complexity, Adam feared, with which he would never become familiar.

Sergeant Weekes' introductory warning had been brief and ominous. 'Reveille,' he informed them, 'will beat at daybreak, and assembly at eight in the morning — when ye'll muster, cleanly dressed and in silence. Retreat'll beat at seven o' night. No gaming's permitted, 'cept by the quarter-guard. No

trooper'll be out of his quarters after tattoo, and any man found beyond the quarter-guard wi'out a passport will be deemed a deserter. Any man convicted o' selling his powder, ball, or ammunition bread'll be punished wi' severity — and any man taking his arms out of his quarters after retreat will suffer death.'

There had been compensations. The steaming mutton stew, rich with fat and generously apportioned, which greeted their arrival, had been his best meal for weeks, and the straw-stuffed palliasse on which he had slept was a heaven-sent luxury after the deck of the *Resolution*. He had sprung from it guiltily at the first rattle of the morning drums, roused the Hertfordshire boy — an uncommonly heavy sleeper — and drawn on his clothes with frantic haste.

Now, with the sergeant watching amusedly, they pulled on the new, stiff regimentals, each eyeing the others with an air of unconcern to gauge his own appearance, walking a few nonchalant paces to set the spurs ajingling and loosening the sword in its sheath, wanting dearly to draw it but daring not.

'Aye,' the sergeant conceded dryly, 'ye're all looking very pretty — but there's a sight more to being a dragoon than strutting a red coat and a lacy hat.' And this, to their discomfiture, they were soon to believe.

A dragoon, they learned, was neither an infantryman nor completely a cavalryman, but a portion of both — a fact which, Sergeant Weekes assured his recruits, made him twice as valuable as either. Dragoons could form hollow square, fire by platoons, advance, engage, or retreat with the foot — or ride stirrup to stirrup with the best horse regiments in the combined armies. They would be trained to perform swift marches, to negotiate rivers and swamps, to always keep equal pace with the cavalry until the foot, at more leisure, should come up. Dragoons provided escorts for supply trains, and were usually the outguard of an army in the field — often clearing

obstacles in advance of the main body, which was why they were issued with hatchets instead of cavalry pistols. They would ride ahead of storming parties, carrying fascines, which they would throw into trenches or ditches for the infantry to pass over. Their muskets were called carbines. They would maintain their horses with utmost care and would feed, water, and otherwise tend them before they tended to themselves. They would never be galloped, and any sickness or injury among the horses would be reported immediately, on pain of court martial.

There were long, weary hours of drill with the musket — ‘carried on the left shoulder wi’ the left hand upon the butt end, the thumb about four inches lower th’n the hollow thereof, wi’ the arm bended and joined close to ye’ side, the lock turned upwards, so’s the lower part of the butt end be right wi’ the middle o’ ye’ body’. Adam’s shoulder was bruised, his arms aching, but he now stiffened expectantly each time the preparatory order was snapped — ‘Dragoons, have a care —’

With, burning feet they faced to their right, faced to their left, wheeled in platoon, advanced in files, in ranks, in skirmishing order — until they almost staggered with exhaustion. They fixed and unfixed bayonets, by word of command, and by ruffles, flams and rolls of a drum — and they mastered the intricacies of loading and firing, biting open the paper cartridges with their teeth, loading, ramming, priming the pan, snapping down the frizzen, blowing free loose corns and standing ready. At night, on his palliasse, Adam’s head echoed with the sergeant’s voice. ‘Dragoons, have a care —’

Sergeant Weekes was a hard, demanding taskmaster, driving the recruits to the very limits of their endurance, lashing them with his tongue, threatening, belittling — yet he ordered nothing he did not do himself. He matched their every step, duplicated every drill movement — and at the day’s end seemed as spruce and fresh as when he began. The recruits’ ears tingled with his

biting sarcasm, dreaded the moment when a fumbled musket or a misplaced foot would attract the attention of his scathing eyes — yet he had singular patience with the slow-learning Hertfordshire boy, Hodder Roberts, and repeated in slow pantomime for his benefit the simplest of exercises. ‘Draw off ye’ right-hand glove, lad. So,’ he would say. ‘Tuck it into ye’ waist-belt. So. Then let ye’ hand fall wi’ a slap to ye’ thigh.’ On an eighteen-mile march along the towpath of the Rutte, it was Sergeant Weekes who took the musket and cartouche box of Swithin White, who had never previously walked farther than from Aldwych to Aldgate Pump.

After three weeks of intensive drilling they exercised passably well as foot-soldiers, and stood their turn of duty as quarter-guard, assembling behind the drum-major and the regimental drums in full view of the Grand Parade, performing the complicated drill movements faultlessly, then marching away behind standard, fifes and drums as though they had done so every morning of their lives. Halting them at the guard-house, Sergeant Weekes kept them standing stiffly for a long minute as he eyed them morosely, almost pityingly. Then his eyes crinkled. ‘Not bad, damn ye!’

Their hearts swelled, proudly, deliriously. The weeks of marching and counter-marching, the sweat, the aching muscles, the blistered feet — all were forgotten. The sergeant’s grudging comment meant more than a commendation from the Commander-in-Chief, and from that moment they would have followed him blindly if he had led them on Versailles itself. They strode off with heads high, newly convinced that the 3rd Dragoons were the finest regiment in the British army, and the British army the finest in the world.

They would have been wiser, however, to have reserved judgement. Free of duty on the following day, and walking now with the confident air of veteran troopers, most of them made for the sutlers’ tents, where there was ale in

plenty, spirits, and wines, and wenches painted and willing — willing, that was, to help a trooper spend as much as possible of his money before he demanded more than ribald conversation. They had as many oaths as the soldiers, knew every twist of camp orders, the hours of guards and picquets, the rights of the provost, the colour of every troop guidon, and the details of every military project long before they reached the men. They were loyal to their regiments and flaunted items of military apparel, but they were what the men were starved of — women.

Mary, Rebecca, St Bartholomew's, and Sawston were all fictions of a quickly fading dream to Adam, unreal and abandoned. He would never again hold a scalpel in his hand, or walk a new silk coat in Covent Garden — and he no longer cared. He was far from the reach of the Hewars and was glad of it. Recovered from his early discomforts, he was beginning to relish the coarse camaraderie of army life, and he was not a whit less eager than his companions to sample the delights of the bottle — with perhaps an armful of plump sutler-wench. It was a man's life, he told himself, which demanded a man's entertainments — and he was no less a man than any. He was a dragoon.

With Hodder Roberts, Swithin White, and the stocky Kentish miner, Tom Croker, Adam was soon acquainting his palate with Dutch beer, agreeing that its quality fell short of English but that it was mightily drinkable, and becoming progressively noisier with every brimming tankard. The waiting wenches had immediately recognized the new regimentals and swashbuckling manners of half-trained recruits, but a recruit's money was as good as a veteran's and easier to come by, and the four troopers were flattered to find themselves the target for a practised bombardment of female charm and cajolery.

Adam's consort was an untidy, tow-haired doxy who introduced herself as

Nell Something, took his arm possessively, and ensured that her own dragoon's coat was sufficiently unbuttoned to provide him with provoking glimpses of her loosened bodice beneath. She kept his tankard continually filled, appealed to his vanity when his appetite began to flag, and coaxed him with expertly calculated winks and caresses, swearing that he was the handsomest and hardest-drinking dragoon to pass through the ranks of the 3rd Regiment.

‘Aye — ye’re a blithe toper,’ she insisted, after two hours, ‘an’ I’ll wager ye’ve not yet half begun, eh?’ Swithin White had already departed with his partner to seek an undisturbed corner. Tom Croker still drunk impassively, imperturbably, long abandoned in disgust by his wench, while Hodder Roberts snored gently with his head in his arms. ‘An’ ye talk like gentry,’ Nell went on. ‘I’ll hazard ye have a fine house in London, wi’ maybe a mistress or two. Ye’ll have had the queans following ye down Ludgate Hill —’

Adam’s head was swimming. The Dutch beer was a sight more powerful than he had anticipated. He had made two clumsy efforts to grapple with the lacings of Nell’s bodice, but she was not surrendering yet — not whilst he had the wit to drink another quart, or count his money, or question the price of a tumble behind the sutler’s tent. ‘I’m not fro’ London,’ he disclaimed thickly. He hiccupped. ‘Sawston.’ She was already refilling his tankard. ‘Sawston,’ he repeated, ‘on the Cambridge road.’

‘Sawston?’ she echoed, then laughed. ‘Ha’ they suddenly taken to raisin’ dragoons in Sawston? I’d never heard o’ the place until Rupe Dolling said the name —’ She rolled ecstatic eyes. ‘Now there’s a man for ye — the handsomest and hardest-drinking dragoon i’ the 3rd Regiment —’ she stroked his cheek, ‘— saving y’self, o’ course, sweet chuck.’

Adam spluttered in his ale, put down his tankard, and sat up. He stared at

Nell, the ale trickling from his chin. ‘Rupe Dolling?’ he was incredulous. ‘Did ye say Rupe Dolling?’

‘Aye,’ she nodded, anxious, however, not to allow conversation to drift into unprofitable channels. Perhaps, she was thinking, it was time. A shrug of her shoulders compelled the opening of her bodice to gape to the waist, and as she leaned towards him deliberately her breasts fell forward, exposed. ‘If ye’re wanting a hot struggle wi’ a wench,’ she whispered — but Adam was unmoved. He struggled to his feet. ‘Rupert Dolling?’ he persisted. ‘D’ye mean he’s in the 3rd Dragoons? Here?’

Exasperated, she nodded again. ‘Aye, Rupert Dolling, 2nd Troop — blister his handsome hide! Owing me fourteen shillings — and this morning ridden wi’ his troops for two weeks’ foraging —!’

Adam sat down again. Rupe Dolling in the 3rd Dragoons? It was incredible! He had seen the blue and gold guidon of the 2nd Troop trot past the quarter-guard that morning, followed by its sergeants and corporals, hautboys, drummers, and fifty troopers — but he’d taken no great notice of faces. Rupert, too, must have watched the quarter-guard drilling during the Grand Parade of yesterday, but the same applied. One dragoon looked much the same as another from a distance. Still half doubting, he turned to Nell Something again.

‘Rupert Dolling,’ he said, carefully, ‘of Sawston near Cambridge?’

She drew a deep breath, her lips wry, then answered him equally slowly. ‘Rupert Dolling of Sawston near Cambridge.’ She snorted suddenly. ‘I’d not forget — seeing that he proposed to me, in his cups — swearing t’ make me squire’s lady o’ Sawston, and not payin’ for a mug of ale for the past two weeks!’ Her wrath was mounting. ‘And me believin’ him! Me — Nell Something! Sweet Nell, he says — wi’ one hand on his ale and the other on my lacings — Sweet Nell, the sweetest angel, he says, wi’ the daintiest

anatomy —’ She halted, her eyes narrowed with uneasy speculation. ‘What’s anatomy?’

‘‘Od’s blood!’ Adam’s fist clenched on the trestle table, causing his tankard to dance and Hodder Roberts to emit a choking grunt. ‘That’s him! Rupe Dolling — damn my eyes!’ He remembered, now — on Grandfather Ralph’s burying day — that Rupert had talked of a horse regiment and a recruiting captain in Cambridge. That was before —

Nell’s resentful mood had passed. ‘But ye’re different, my cockerel.’ She fingered the knot of his neck-cloth. ‘Ye’d not cheat a wench of her ale money, would ye?’ Her lips sought his cheek. ‘Is it more ale — or do ye fancy to lift my petticoat, my buck?’

Aye, Adam mused, he’d been almost a month in the cantonments and had seen nothing of Rupert — not that this was unduly surprising, for the recruits had little communion with the trained troops, who were constantly occupied in and about Rotterdam, or eastward, escorting the stores and ammunition barges on the Rhine and Maas. And a two weeks’ forage was a normal enough duty.

There was a tinge of desperation in Nell’s voice. ‘Well — do ye — or don’t ye?’

Adam stared at her. ‘Do I what?’

Across the table Tom Croker drained his tankard and placed it down. ‘If ye’re going to lift her petticoat, cully, ye’d best be fast about it. It’s five minutes to retreat.’ He hauled Hodder Roberts, protesting drowsily, to his feet, and made for the door with the other stumbling behind him. Adam picked up his hat and, with a bemused glance at Nell, followed quickly in their steps, while Nell, seething with petulance, flung the tankard to the floor.

*

The next morning Sergeant Weekes’ squad of ‘recruits and awkward men’

— most of them with reeking heads — were introduced to their horses. They were sturdy English cobs of some fourteen hands, smaller than the heavy cavalry charger but lightfooted and willing, and in excellent condition. As the troopers eyed their new charges warily, the sergeant jingled slowly back and forth, his hands behind his back.

‘Dragoons, have a care —’ They stiffened.

‘These are ye’ horses. Aye, and from this moment forward they’ll be part of every hour of every day of ye’ lives. Treat ’em better than ye would ye’ brothers — for they’ll do a sight more for ye. Wi’out ’em ye’re naught but foot-stumbling infantrymen. They’ll carry ye through river and timber, rain, snow, and flood — against the musket fire of a French square or the mouths of a flaming battery — an’ they’ll not complain, nor play ye false. They’ll serve ye, and they’ll die for ye, and demand no more than a ration o’ corn an’ a word o’ kindness.’ He paused. ‘If I see a dragoon mistreatin’ his mount I’ll ha’ him tied to a gunwheel and lashed to his backbone!’

Some hours were consumed by matters of harness and housings, the sergeant taking great care that each horse was correctly buckled and girthed, the stirrup leathers of the right length for a dragoon’s seat. They walked their beasts in circles, mounted and dismounted first by command and then by flams and ruffles. They walked on the first day, trotted on the second, and were cantering by the end of the week. They primed, loaded, and shouldered in the saddle. Then, to their disappointment, they went back to mounting and dismounting.

‘Dragoons, have a care. Sling ye’ muskets. Make ready ye’ links. Clear ye’ right foot o’ the stirrup. Dismount an’ stand at ye’ horses, heads. March clear o’ ye’ horses an’ advance ye’ muskets —’ Nine men of each ten tramped forward, complete infantrymen, while the tenth held the linked horses to their rear.

They trotted in three files, wheeling first right, then left, into ranks of close order, desperately trying to maintain twelve feet between the forefeet of the front rank and the forefeet of the rear, while Sergeant Weekes, cantering easily in their wake, cursed them for ignorant ploughboys of doubtful parentage, roared imprecations as they milled in confusion, and declared to the heavens that the ranks of the 3rd Dragoons were soon to be supplemented by a mob of clowns and pantaloons. But the recruits had his measure now, and grinned to themselves. The sergeant's curses carried no malice. It was when his voice sank to a slow, eye-narrowing growl, like warning drumfire, that they sucked in their breaths, and froze.

Many of the recruits were no strangers to horse-flesh. Others were in the saddle for the first time, and paid for the experience with raw hinds. Adam had a passably good seat, but none was more accomplished than Hodder Roberts, the Hertfordshire lad, who was pressed to confess that he had been postilion to the Lockleys of Welwine, and thrice a week had ridden the post from Hatfield to Royston.

They drew their swords at last.

'Dragoons, have a care. Lay ye' right hands on ye' swords. Draw ye' swords. Advance ye' swords —' then, 'Mind ye' horses' ears, damn ye!'

With full cartouche boxes, priming flasks, muskets, bayonets, swords and hatchets, a haversack of bread and cheese, and a day's ration of oats on their cruppers, they trotted out of the cantonments into the flat, open country to the eastward. With them, now, in addition to Sergeant Weekes, rode a captain of dragoons and two subalterns newly purchased into the regiment, and a farrier on his distinctive grey, with his boxes of horseshoes and nails. The regiment was beginning to acknowledge their existence.

They learned that their muskets would be fired when afoot, but never from the saddle. The cavalry, indeed, who carried pistols, were issued with only

three charges of powder and ball, which might be used only when guarding their horses at grass, and not in action. The sword was the only weapon to be used from the saddle. They learned, too, that to charge was not to gallop at full stretch with thundering hooves and whirling blade — but to trot slowly, maintaining their dressing and spacing as on the parading ground, until they were close upon the enemy's position, when they might be permitted to proceed at an increased speed. It was disappointing, but the drill manual was adamant, and the Duke of Marlborough's orders confirmed it. When the English horse struck an enemy formation it would be as a solid phalanx, not as a scattered rabble of men and animals. As with loading, priming, and firing, undue haste led to fluster and errors, and errors could lose battles. Better to be careful and methodical, whatever the distractions of shot and steel, and win.

Ten miles to the eastward, among the water-meadows that fringed the Rhine estuary, the Captain reined, rose in his stirrups and shaded his eyes. Eastward still, in the distant haze of the evening, was a gleam of metal and scarlet among the flat green of the spreading lowland. He grunted.

'Shadwell and his 2nd Troop, returning from forage.' He turned in his saddle. 'We'll give them a greeting, Sergeant, and return with 'em to Rotterdam.' He surveyed the troopers behind him. 'Dragoons, have a care. I'll have ye stiff-backed and silent, and facing front, muskets slung correctly and ye' horses smartly handled.' He raised his arm. 'March!'

The slow-moving forage train drew nearer — twenty-two tented waggons with their Dutch carters, an advance party of dragoons, and picquets riding to either flank and to the rear. Almost a hundred miles from the frontier, the escort had little functional purpose, but it served to discourage the commissaries of other regiments who might be tempted to divert the forage elsewhere, and the exercise was, in any case, good for the dragoons and

horses. A hundred yards from the escort's guidon, the recruits' captain wheeled his detachment immaculately to the side of the track and halted.

'Dragoons, have a care. Unslung ye' muskets and shoulder.' Then, as the guidon fluttered before them, 'Dragoons, advance ye' muskets!'

Captain Shadwell of the 2nd Troop acknowledged the courtesy with a meticulous salute, then, with the recruits relaxed, he cantered towards them to exchange pleasantries with his brother officer. The forage train trundled slowly past, and Adam sat waiting, watching. Then he grinned.

Trooper Rupert Dolling rode with the rearguard, his hat rakishly cocked, whistling softly, with his left hand tapping his sword scabbard. His eyes roved carelessly, flickered over the three files of halted dragoons, over Adam — and then jolted back.

His mouth dropped open and his hat fell over his eyes. He raised it frantically, lost a foot from a stirrup, but remained gaping, unbelieving. Adam winked, raising a gloved hand.

'Spittin' saddle-bags!' Rupert croaked. 'It's Adam Margery!'

*

It was after nightfall before the forage train reached the outskirts of Rotterdam, and the next day before Adam and Rupert could meet — but then only for a few moments, for a quick handclasp and a shouted greeting — for the regiment was in a turmoil of new preparations. The Duke of Marlborough, commander-in-chief of the allied armies, had landed at The Hague from England and was journeying south to inspect the conditions of his forces in Dutch Brabant in readiness for the spring campaign. The 3rd Dragoon Guards were ordered to Maastricht, on the Meuse, in company with the 2nd Dragoons — Lord John Hay's Scots Greys — and the Rotterdam cantonments were to be dismantled.

The recruits' training was to be terminated immediately — a full month

before they might normally be considered fit to ride with the regiment — but they were still to be drilled daily between the hours of three and five until they had achieved proficiency in the use of their arms. In the meantime they would be allocated to those troops which were short-manned, the commanding captains to select their quotas in order of their seniorities.

Of the regiment's six troops, all save the 1st were understrength, and as the recruits exercised before the shrewd-eyed captains Adam was aware that if he were to share the company of Rupert Dolling he must acquit himself sufficiently well to be among the first four selected by Captain Shadwell of the 2nd. He shouldered and advanced his musket with the precision of a foot guard, then loaded, primed, and fired briskly and without a fumble. He mounted, sitting straight in his saddle and grateful that his mount was in a compliant mood, yet stepping out smartly under his hand. His sword drill was faultless.

Captain Shadwell selected three men without hesitation — Hodder Roberts and two others, Daniel Fuller, and Boyle Russell, good horsemen all. Then he toyed with the skirt of his wig, uncertain. Finally he pointed to Adam. 'That one,' he decided. 'The lad fancies himself a Queen's Blue at a St James' review, but wi' a little powder-smoke he'll make a dragoon.'

Six days later the regiment marched behind the Queen's standard of crimson damask and gold, bearing as its device a rose and thistle circlet surmounted by a crown, the Queen's motto, *Dieu et mon Droit*, and a white horse in the first and fourth corners. The drums and hautboys struck up a rousing march, and following them trotted the first three troops, then the sutlers and baggage — the Dutch carters uniformed at the regiment's expense — and finally the remaining three troops of dragoons. It was a bright day, with the gold of lace and brass, the burnished steel, gleaming, bravely in the sunshine, the horses high-spirited and cavorting. Free of the cantonment area

the colour guard wheeled aside and halted, and beneath the swelling folds of the standard the Colonel took the salute of the scarlet column — each troop captain doffing his hat and bowing in the saddle as he passed.

The formalities completed, the dragoons rode easy, their gloves removed and muskets slung, the colours and drums covered. It was intended that they ride the south bank of the Maas, in easy stages, as far as Grave, from where they could then travel almost the entire remaining distance to Maestricht by river barges. Their period in hutments — an unusual luxury for an army in the field, but Marlborough was careful of his troops' welfare — was over, and henceforth they would lie in tents, or billets provided by the civil population. The quality of both bed and rations would depend largely upon how much the Colonel had left in the regimental purse — and how much of it he was prepared to spend.

The column's route lay through endless, flat green meadows, alongside the dyke which flanked the Maas for many miles of its length. It was pleasant country, although monotonous in its regularity, and soon the men were singing 'Lilliburlero', 'The Protestant Boy' and 'Over the Hills and Far Away' to the steady accompaniment of jingling harness and the muted drumming of hooves. There would be periods during which the dragoons would ride in meditative silence, or talked quietly between themselves, but inevitably a man would raise his voice with a new measure, and the others would follow.

*'Come on then, boys, and you shall see
We every one shall Captains be,
To whore and rant as well as they,
When over the hills and far away.
Over the hills and over the main
To Flanders, Portugal and Spain,*

*Queen Anne commands and we'll obey,
Over the hills and far away.'*

Having accepted the coincidence of Rupert Dolling's presence in the 3rd Dragoons, Adam did not question the motive for it. Rupert had, after all, once voiced his fancy for a scarlet coat — and here he was. Adam was more concerned with explaining his own enlistment — he, the son of a well-propertied yeoman farmer and indirectly related to the Huddlestons of Cambridgeshire, now a common soldier of Marlborough's Continental army.

Following an exchange of experiences, Rupert leaned forward, his brow perplexed. 'But what made ye take the shilling, Adam lad? Ye had no reason to — and I'd've sworn ye had no love for the military —?'

Adam took an uncommonly long time in testing the buckle of his carbine bucket. Then he shrugged. 'It was Rebecca,' he confessed.

Rupert glanced at the other swiftly. 'Rebecca? Rebecca Hewar?'

Adam nodded, then laughed with false bravado. 'Aye — Rebecca. She faced me with the fathering of her brat — and demanded marriage.' He laughed again. 'Aye, and faced with the prospect of a lifetime with Rebecca, it was over the hills and far away!'

Rupert's handsome, artless face was a picture of complete incredulity. 'You mean that *you* —?' He stopped, then pushed his hat to the back of his head as he sought for the correct words. '*You* fathered Rebecca's brat? When did ye —?'

'Christmas. Just before Christmas.' Adam was defiant, almost boastful. 'It was the simplest thing ye could dream of — and finished so smartly ye'd have thought she'd rehearsed it a dozen times. Aye —' he pouted his lips ruefully, '— but there's no denying it, Rupe. She swore she had a brat in her belly, and that I put it there.'

Rupert whistled softly as he gazed with pensive eyes at the cartouche box

which bounced on the hip of the dragoon ahead of him. 'Aye', he said at last, cryptically. 'Aye.' It would appear that he had never seen a cartouche box before in his life. Then, after a long minute, he shrugged, looked up at Adam with a wink, and began to sing again.

*'We then shall lead more happy lives,
By getting rid of brats and wives,
That scold us on both night and day,
When over the hills and far away!'*

Chapter Seven

THE FRENCH defence lines ran from Antwerp eastward to Diest, then down to Namur — ninety miles of earthworks, trenches, and redoubts, supplemented by the Nethe, Demur, and Geete rivers. Behind these defences lay the French armies of the Duc de Villeroi — armies which were well-equipped and in good heart, convinced that the successes of Marlborough during the previous year were those of a fortunate amateur, to be quickly reversed by the previously unchallenged superiority of French arms and courage.

Marlborough, too, was anxious to resume the offensive by a swift and paralysing invasion of French Flanders and Brabant, beginning with an assault on Antwerp, the hinge of the French defence works. His army, however, consisted of a mixture of British and Dutch troops, and every move he made had to be approved of in advance by the Dutch deputies who accompanied him — and the Dutch were very nervous. Their army, they pleaded, was the only one they had. It was expensive and, if destroyed, could never be replaced. To march and countermarch was one thing, an occasional quiet siege was permissible, but to fling themselves recklessly against the armed might of Louis' highly professional legions was a possibility not to be considered. Marlborough would have to think of something less ambitious — and much safer.

Disappointed, the Duke agreed to open the campaign with the siege of Bonn, strategically placed on the Rhine above Cologne. With the Dutch unwilling to fight the French in the west, he had no alternative but to consider another theatre — and Bonn might be the first of several gateways to the east,

to the Danube and Bavaria — France's ally-in-arms. Bonn it must be, and the Dutch deputies acquiesced. Bonn was safe enough. They could sit themselves down before the city, make a few demonstrations and fire a few cannon, and after a decent interval — say two months, or three — the city would surrender and nobody would get hurt. It made sense and, besides, it was the traditional way of making war. Marlborough was a radical. That was the trouble with these fire-eating English — they were always wanting to fight battles, and they would have to be carefully watched.

Marlborough, however, had no intention of fighting a traditional war. By April 2nd his army — forty battalions of infantry, sixty squadrons of cavalry, and a train of artillery — was ready to march, much to the chagrin of the Dutch, who were content to defer any movement until the end of the year. He marched on Bonn and immediately mounted a three-prong attack on the city, its outworks, and its protective fort. The outworks were carried on May 3rd, the fort taken on the 9th, and the city capitulated on the 15th.

The 2nd and 3rd Dragoons, now joined by Windham's Carabineers, trotted into Maestricht on the 21st, simultaneously with six battalions of Hessian infantry in English pay. The Duke of Marlborough had reached Maestricht before them, and the town still celebrated his lightning capture of Bonn, forty miles away. Three days later, at the great camp at Hocht, the army drew up for review.

The solid formations of horses, foot, and artillery spread across the plain — the scarlet of the British contrasting vividly with the shabby, dark blue and cross-belts of the Dutch, the paler blue and green facings of the Hessians. On the left was arrayed the ordnance — English and Dutch — demi-culverins, sakers, minions and mortars for the field, behind their heavy draught horses, attended by officers, gunners and matrosses, provost marshals, surgeons, tent-keepers, collar-makers, coopers, and wheelwrights, all in crimson faced with

blue. The ammunition limbers lay to the rear, with carters, pioneers, engineers, petardiers, firemasters and bombardiers, miners and pontooniers, while to the rear still stood the closely-spaced lines of stores and sutlers' waggons.

Adam had never before seen such a vast gathering of troops — one hundred and thirty squadrons, it was said, and fifty-nine battalions of foot besides the artillery train. He could hear the distant shouts of officers, the clatter of musket drill, and see over the serried heads of the infantry the glitter of saluting bayonets as the Duke and his entourage drew gradually nearer. Then Brigadier Wood, the 3rd's commanding officer, turned his horse.

‘Dragoons, have a care —!’

John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough — Corporal John to his English regiments — rode slowly down the line, eyeing the horsemen carefully. His raven, full-bottomed wig fell to his scarlet-clad shoulders, his cocked hat and coat ablaze with gold lace. Fifty-two years old, yet he had the waist of a girl and the vigorous bearing of one twenty years younger. Behind him followed the English and Dutch officers of his staff.

‘Dragoons, advance ye’ muskets!’ There was a thundering crash as the thousand muskets of three regiments of dragoons — the 3rd, the Greys, and Windham’s — rose in salute. Brigadier Wood’s hat was in his hand as he bowed from the saddle, and the Duke was doffing his in reply, smiling.

‘They’re a credit to ye, Wood — I congratulate ye. If they fight as smartly as they look — and I’ll not doubt they will — the French will be a rabble before ’em!’ With a nod he passed on, his eyes seeking every detail of equipment and horses. Twice he reined to speak to a trooper — a veteran face among a hundred others — to inquire his years of service, his battles and sieges, speaking courteously and listening with attention. ‘Now Corporal John,’ Rupert spoke from the corner of his mouth, ‘is someone a man c’n

believe in.’ To their left and rear there was a thundering roar as the batteries of cannon gave their own salute to the Duke with a triple discharge. The troopers’ horses fidgeted. ‘’Od’s blood, there’s enough noise to frighten the French, wi’out needing us!’

Corporal John had no further time for reviews or parades. The French had recently taken the town of Tongres, only twelve miles to the south-west, and now had the impertinence to forage in strength in the open country that the Duke considered his. The camp at Hocht was struck, and with the dragoons streaming towards the enemy to make contact, the army moved forward to give battle.

This would be it — Adam’s first encounter with the vaunted French. A dozen times he felt for the cold hardness of his sword hilt, checked the action of his musket, buckled and re-buckled his cartouche box. It was good cavalry country — flat, low but dry, and only thinly wooded. What was the French cavalry that King Louis claimed was the finest in Europe? The Maison du Roi? Aye, unbeaten, magnificently equipped and mounted, and justly proud of their untarnished record. How would the 3rd Dragoons — these ploughboys and apprentices, bounty-jumpers, and Newgate-runners — fare against the flower of the French army if they met?

Seek, observe, and report. The dragoons’ orders were clear, but the Duke would not object if his redcoats indulged in a little skirmishing just to show the French who were masters in Liège and Brabant — or to hold them in play until his slower-moving foot could come up. There’d be an opportunity, perhaps, at Houtin, where the enemy had last been seen. They rode for Houtin.

But Houtin and its surroundings were deserted. The French, a reluctant native told them, had retreated hurriedly towards Borckworm, otherwise known as Warhem.

The dragoons wheeled, frustrated and spoiling for a fight. The horses had lost their first freshness, but were willing enough. The wide, green plain stretched before them, tree-dotted, until it merged with the horizon. Somewhere on that endless tableland were French soldiers — marching columns of French soldiers — and cavalry, squadron upon squadron of gleaming cuirasses and white cockades, insolently flaunting the lilies of France in the Bishopric of Liège —

They camped in an elbow of the Jaar river, with no fires, but scanning the blackness for the tell-tale twinkle of the enemy's. There was nothing. It was a cold night, with a heavy dew, and they were in the saddle again at three, trotting through the dawn mist towards Borckworm — otherwise known as Warhem. Behind them, they knew — miles behind them — were the tramping infantry of Marlborough — English, Dutch, Hessian — and Marlborough would be impatient to come to grips with the French before they could retreat behind their fortified lines. But they — Wood's Dragoons — had not yet made contact.

The sun rose behind them — a gory ball flooding the eastern skies with golden light and setting the birds into song. The long files of dragoons trotted on, the drumming of their horses' hooves deadened by the dew-sodden turf, the men shrugging themselves into their cloaks, chilled and hungry. There was very little talk.

From the distance ahead, beyond the leading troop, came the sound of a musket shot, then a second. Adam rose in his stirrups, but could see nothing save the three files of red coats as they plunged through the bracken rising to the horses' hocks. Rupert grunted, pulling his hat even further over his eyes.

'We've flushed a picquet!' The information rippled down the lines with the speed of flaring tinder. Then men were straightening in their saddles,

throwing back their cloaks and fingering their swords. A sergeant's voice ordered silence.

The 1st Troop suddenly swerved to the right, mounting rising ground, and disappeared from sight. Behind them the 2nd poured on, climbing, climbing, wheeled into line, and halted. 'Dragoons, have a care. Open ye' cartouche boxes —'

Adam's fingers were trembling, and he swore softly, angry with himself. They linked their horses and dismounted, a little raggedly, but nobody seemed to care. To right and left stretched the long, uneven lines of dragoons, with muskets held ready to present, the men strangely foreshortened by the bracken which rose wetly to their knees. A few yards away Brigadier Wood stood with several officers, calm, his dispatch wallet resting on his saddle as he wrote — he lifted his head occasionally, considering, and writing again.

'Gentlemen,' the Brigadier's voice was as composed and measured as if this were a Sunday levee in Whitehall. 'Ye can order the men to light fires — they've earned a hot breakfast, and we shall be here awhile, I have no doubt. Captain White —' he was folding the dispatch neatly with his gloved fingers, 'I'd be obliged, sir, if ye'd detach an experienced cornet to ride for Vhoigne, where the Duke will be.' He paused and yawned, patting his mouth. 'I hazard the French to muster sixty battalions and upwards of one hundred squadrons, seemingly centred on Op Heern with their right on Borckworm —'

Four hundred yards below them the river Jaar twisted, grey and cheerless, sedge-banked. Beyond, spreading from the river across the opposing grassland, were peppered the tents of the French, the trickling smoke of hundreds of camp fires, waggons, gun-batteries, horse-lines. Trumpets were teetering and, almost on the river's edge, thousands of white-clad infantry were drawn up in battle order, with jostling confusion magically dissolving into rigid, closely-spaced ranks of well-drilled bayonets. To right and left, on

either flank, squadrons of cavalry were wheeling, deploying, pennons fluttering and drums beating, the early sun glinting dully on body armour and harness and a thousand horses' heads tossing. The English dragoons could hear, faintly on the breeze, the shouts of officers and sergeants, the ordered clash of steel — watch the white walls of infantry ripple like wind-blown corn as they loaded, primed, and shouldered. A flying battery of artillery splashed through the shallows, the guns and caissons rearing and jolting, churning the water to black mud as the outriders lashed their teams among the reeds. The ribbons of smoke, now, were disappearing as fires were extinguished, and there was a new splash of brilliant colour as a group of staff officers with horse guards in attendance cantered slowly across the front of the massed formations.

Brigadier Wood, however, was not idle. A troop had been ordered upstream, a second down, to reconnoitre for fords and passes, and to ascertain what French forces, if any, remained on the near side of the river. Picquets were flung to flanks and rear, that the dragoons' position be not surprised by an encircling enemy. Satisfied, the Brigadier stood with his hands behind his back, surveying the opposite bank with professional interest. That the French were aware of the dragoons' presence was very plain, and it could not be long before they would estimate his strength. What would happen then was anybody's hazard. They had stood to arms — which meant that, initially at least, they weren't sure, and were wisely taking no risks. How soon could Marlborough be here? Tomorrow at the very earliest with his infantry and ordnance — although the horse might get here earlier. And would the French wait?

It was going to be a long day, and if the French chose to stand to arms, the dragoons at least could have a less tiring vigil. They folded their cloaks on the damp earth and sat on their haunches with only their heads above the

bracken but ready at a moment to spring to their saddles. The horses were fed, and in small groups watered at a stream to the rear. Then, as a diversion, and to test the reaction of the French, the Brigadier ordered a sergeant and ten dragoons to ride their guidon along the river bank in deliberate view of the enemy, but the French, to the troopers' disappointment, were not to be provoked into wasting powder and ball, or showing any sign of perturbation.

At noon the outlying picquets gave warning of the approach of large bodies of horse, and with the officers ordering 'Boot and Saddle' the dragoons tumbled to their mounts. Minutes later, however, a troop of redcoats on tired greys clattered into the rear lines, followed shortly by the saddle-weary column of the 2nd Dragoons — Hay's Scots. They had scarcely linked and dismounted before a Holstein mounted regiment and the familiar red and white of Windham's Carabineers wheeled in to take up position, their horses showing obvious signs of hard riding. Resplendent in crimson and gold, and accompanied by a troop of his lifeguards, was the Prince of Hesse — and Brigadier Wood's brief period of command was ended. 'The captains and kings are gatherin',' Rupert observed, 'but we found 'em first.'

Reports were being received from the captains of the reconnaissance troops that all bridges, fords and easy places for several miles were in the possession of strong forces of French dragoons. The acquisition of a crossing would have been valuable, but the allied commanders were reluctant to undertake any engagement which might cause the French to take fright and withdraw before Marlborough's arrival while, conversely, their own strength was far from adequate to maintain a bridgehead if the French turned the massive weight of their cavalry upon them. They must wait and watch.

Afternoon turned to evening — a dull, overcast evening with a threat of thunderstorms from the shallow hills that swelled gently towards the valley of the Meuse. Across the Jaar the French were reducing their battle line for the

night, and fires were glowing again, with the smell of wood smoke carried by the westerly breeze to the allied lines. Behind the French tents the sun fell slowly, the blood-painted clouds mirrored by the sluggish river, and the camp fires now like tiny rubies against the black plain. Night came down like blindness.

On picquet, Adam paced slowly between the limits of his patrol, his musket shouldered, his cloak tightly buttoned against the chilling dawn. It was a long watch that waited for the sun to rise, and the most wearying, but he was alone with his thoughts in the quietness of the great lowland plain that the armies of a thousand years had used as a cockpit. His heavy boots were soundless on the damp, springy moss, and suddenly, inexplicably, he thought of the Margery farm and the stream to the Granta — and Mary. He shook the thought from his mind with a grunt. Sawston and Cambridgeshire would be silent and sleeping, the cows in their byres and the sheep huddling together in the lower corner of the five-acre meadow. Bellman, the old farm hound, would be gently snoring with his grey muzzle on his paws, and the tall English oaks would be rustling, whispering —

Tomorrow — no, today — if Corporal John came soon enough and the French willed it, there would be a battle. He sucked in his breath. Aye, he was nervous — at the uncertainty of it. Today. Today. It was unthinkable. What was he doing here — Adam Margery, a surgeon's apprentice of St Bartholomew's? Panic surged through him. God — when those massed, white-coated battalions raised their muskets —!

There was a rustle behind him, and he whirled. 'Halt —!'

A man laughed softly. 'Och, dinna be daft, lad.' It was the neighbouring picquet, a Scots dragoon of the 2nd. 'I'll wager ye' priming's damp anyways.'

Adam chuckled in return, relieved, and grateful for the other's company as

a distraction from his own poltroonery. The Scot, with shoulders hunched, rested his musket. 'Aye, it's blacker than the Cowgait midden-hole.' He hawked and spat. 'Will yon bastards fight, d'ye suppose? My mare's near worn to her shanks wi' chasing 'em.'

Adam shrugged, and the Scot, fumbling beneath his cloak for a stump of a clay pipe, peered at him through the darkness. 'Ye' first battle, laddie?' He turned his back to the breeze to strike flint. 'Aye, I ken how it feels — ye'll be wishing ye were hame in bed an' safe oot of it, eh?' The pipe bowl, cupped in his hands, glowed dully. He sucked meditatively for several seconds. 'But dinna fret, lad. Any mon who says he's nae been sick i' the belly 'fore a battle is a stinkin' liar — or a half-wit.' He spat again. 'When the guns start firin', ye'll be in fine fettle — and dinna forget there's mony a whitecoat over yon that's thinking the same as yesel'.'

The dawn rose golden through the horizon haze and the drums of reveille were beating in the dragoons' lines. Across the Jaar the bugles and drums were also sounding, and through the mist that still clung obstinately to the river the French battalions were reforming. The night-guard platoons were marching along the river bank, discharging their muskets in the direction of the English before retiring behind the fresh companies relieving them. Cavalry troops were already ahorse and the field kitchens to the rear were smoking merrily.

Captain Shadwell and a sergeant farrier inspected the troop's horses, and a subaltern checked muskets, cartouche boxes, and priming flasks — forty-eight ball at sixteen to the pound, heavier than the French at twenty, and thus, it was claimed, carrying further — but there was scant opportunity for proving it. Coarse grained powder in the paper cartridges, fine-grained for priming, ramrods clean and unbent, ring bayonets, swords, hatchets, and eight pounds of oats remaining — though the horses must make do with grass if

the quartermaster's waggons failed to come up with the infantry.

The Duke's orders arrived within the hour. A thousand dragoons were to take and hold bridges or fords across the Jaar between Thys and Lamine, wherein the allied army would form line of battle. Wood's, the Greys, and Windham's climbed into their saddles.

Circling eastward before turning up-river, they sighted the van of the approaching infantry behind its cavalry screen — the scarlet and blue of the Coldstream Foot Guards and of Rowe's, the buff breeches and linings of the Hollands Regiment, the mitre caps of the Royal Irish, and Murray's and Ramsay's Scots. On the far flank marched the blue columns of the Continental regiments — of Osnaburg, Munster, Fagel, Nassau Walon, and the Hessian Grenadiers — and to the rear the cavalry of Saxe Gotha and two squadrons of Schellard's Horse. The thunder of the drums had reached their ears long before, and now they could hear the strains of music, trilling fifes and hautboys, see the regimental standards curling above the heads of the tramping ranks, the flags of England, the United Provinces, Denmark, Prussia, Hesse, Hanover, and Trèves. It was a sight to stir the blood, but the dragoons had sterner business, and they wheeled westward towards the Jaar.

Adam's recollection of the events that followed remained confused for the rest of his life, and he was never able to separate one incident from another with certainty. The bridge he remembered, and the squadrons of French dragoons on the far side, the battery of light guns which belched flame and smoke before the 3rd were nearly within range — and then limbered and withdrew. He recalled Captain Shadwell with sword raised and mouth cavernous with shouting, the seemingly endless advance to the water's edge, and the French firing in disciplined volleys almost, it seemed, at point-blank range, then, incredibly, mounting and falling back. The English dragoons had reached the bridge only to find it destroyed and impassable. They had lost

two men, he seemed to remember, with a third suffering a broken shoulder which the surgeon set well enough. He, Adam, had been surprised to discover the heel of his boot torn away by a French ball, although he knew nothing of it during the skirmish.

Most of all he recalled the river — the river they grew to detest — winding, grey, sombre, and always denying them. They might have crossed, with difficulty, at several places, but none where an army might, and always the enemy dragoons shadowed them, watching and waiting, until the frustrated Englishmen burned to have firm ground between them and their swords at the Frenchmen's throats.

The rains came, drenching men and horses and continuing without pause, with tinder too wet to make fires and the rations uncooked and cold. The river bank was a morass, the dragoons and their beasts mired and shivering. They slept crouched in their cloaks and rose stiff and tired, clammy and dirty, their cheeks unshaven. Many of the horses were suffering from flux — from wet grass, perhaps, or hellebore — and for several days Adam was fevered, riding like one in a dream, swaying, coughing, and not caring whether he lived or died. Rupert tended him, laying him to sleep at night, pressing filched spirits between his lips and helping him to his horse, until the fever passed and Adam, weak and shaken, could fend alone.

He remembered, vaguely, the French deserters they had taken, Gascon cuirassiers in rust-streaked corselets and bedraggled lace, who swore that their comrades were filled with apprehension at the possibility of the English dragoons crossing the river and desired nothing but to retire to the safety of their lines, to dry billets and regular rations. But this was deserters, talk, and not to be allowed credence.

The French army, they learned, had struck their tents, sent off their artillery and baggage, and then fallen back towards Hannut, within a short distance of

their frontier. Marlborough had followed, through Op Heers and Linn. The two armies marched and counter-marched, snarling at each other, with the French retreating as the allies threatened, and always with the Brabant lines close in hand.

The three regiments of dragoons were given no quarter — foraging in the south — within cannon shot of the enemy's heavy batteries, far-flung reconnaissance, escorting slow-trundling waggons and bat-horses, swooping on stragglers from the French columns. In the month since leaving Maestricht they had ridden hundreds of miles, fought a dozen skirmishes, and left the French in no doubt that English dragoons were a match for anything that the cavalry schools of Valenciennes and Charlemont could produce. Their scarlet regimentals were crumpled and their boots scuffed, but their hats were still briskly cocked, and they sat in their saddles with the confidence of soldiers who had never turned their backs on an enemy.

Advancing by forced marches, the allied infantry swarmed past a small French-held village on the St Trond road, allowing its tiny garrison no opportunity to evacuate. It was a simple enough task for the dragoons — a clutter of mean cottages, a half company of infantry cut off from their lines and already contemplating surrender and a quick exchange. Hardly an hour's work, one would think, for three squadrons of experienced redcoats. They surrounded the village, linked and dismounted, and walked forward with muskets advanced. Rupert was singing jauntily. 'Fifty little Frenchmen, sitting all alone —'

There were, however, only twenty-five Frenchmen, hurrying, almost gratefully, out of the village with arms raised. Captain Shadwell motioned them to halt. 'There should be an officer,' he frowned. He scanned the Frenchmen. 'Avez vous an officer, mon soldiers? An officer?' They stared at him.

The officer burst suddenly from an alleyway between two cottages, hatless, his wig awry and his face very angry. He shouted something, defiantly, and then, without further hesitation, raised his pistol and fired.

Adam, amazed, found himself sprawled on the soft earth, wondering how he had got there, and with a searing pain in his left leg. Almost simultaneously a musket and a pistol exploded in quick succession above him. Bemused, he tried to rise, but could not. He heard Captain Shadwell's furious voice. 'Damn ye Dolling! Who ordered ye to fire? Ye'll answer for it!'

They were lifting him. The pain in his leg flared agonizingly, and he choked, aware that his senses were failing. From a great distance he heard Captain Shadwell's voice again. 'Courage, lad. Ye've taken a ball i' the leg, but wee'll get ye to a surgeon.' He chuckled. 'I'll wager ye're not for Chelsea yet!'

Adam nodded. 'Aye,' he said, puzzled.

He was lifted to a saddle, and immediately fell forward over his horse's neck, feeling the warm blood streaming down his calf. His foot was cold, tingling, his thigh and groin aching and throbbing, spitting with pain at every jolt of his mount. God, he thought — an amputation at the thigh, cauterized and sewn, and the near certainty of gangrene to follow. At best, a stump of a leg and a crutch. He groaned. A leg lost — not in battle, mark you, not against a French square and a thousand muskets flaming, or in riding down the cannon of an enemy battery — but in an unknown, dirty little Flemish village that the army had ignored. It wasn't even shown on the map.

It seemed an age before he was lying on his back on a spread tarpaulin with arms and legs restrained, the surgeon cutting his breeches from his leg. The man was humming speculatively, and Adam cursed him. He felt fingers probing, and the sharp prick of a scalpel. Then, without warning, a rending,

white-hot pain seethed through him, shattering, unbearable. He convulsed, his teeth drawing blood from his lips, but a man was spread-eagled across his chest and another his feet. The pain subsided slowly, slowly, and Adam emitted a long, whining sigh of thankfulness.

The surgeon grunted. ‘We-ell, the muscle’s a mite mangled, but the femur’s intact.’ He pushed a small, hard object into Adam’s clenched hand. ‘Likely ye’ll want the ball to show to ye grandchildren, Trooper — or maybe fire it back from where it came from, eh?’

Adam raised his head with an effort. ‘Ye mean — ye’ll not amputate?’

The other snorted. ‘Amputate?’ He laughed. ‘If it’s a pension ye’re after, lad, ye’ve not achieved it this time.’ He was plucking a needle from his lapel. ‘I’ll stitch ye neater than a lady’s furbelow — and if ye keep clear of infection ye’ll be riding again in two months — or three at most.’

Adam gave a sobbing cry of relief, then closed his eyes in a faint.

Chapter Eight

IN MAESTRICHT'S market-place — the Vrijdagmarkt — the drums of tattoo were beating, reverberating like sullen thunder among the surrounding guildhouses, the merchant halls, and the gloomy, medieval masonry of St Pierre's. In a score of taverns among the narrow streets the tavern-keepers were shouting, 'Doe den tap toe!' — anxious not to be caught with the taps still running when the patrols scoured the neighbourhood, and so risk the penalty of prohibition by the military. English soldiers were good customers.

Already the candle-lights in the windows of the thrifty citizens were being extinguished, leaving the twisting, cobbled roads grotesque patchworks of blackness and silver moonlight. Doorchains were rattling and casements closing against the night, and when the last carousing soldier had wended his erratic way to his billet the town would settle down to silence and sleep. The ensigns and sergeants clattered from tavern to tavern, rousing out the lingerers, the drums rolling continuously and a few voices raised in drunken song — soon to fade, to the relief of the Dutch burghers patiently waiting to turn their heads into their pillows.

Adam swirled the last of his brandy in the bottom of his cup and sighed contentedly. He had a problem — a most entertaining problem — which must be resolved within the next few minutes. Would it be Katrin — the plump, flaxen-haired ale-maid — or the more certain embraces of Nell Something, the sutler's wench? It was an intriguing choice.

Nell he was confident of. Her bed above the stableyard, where the sutlers' waggons were lodged, had received him a dozen times — and Nell was a lusty trollop who needed no persuasion to share a tumble. True, he suspected

that she still entertained a yearning for Rupe Dolling — who was somewhere near Antwerp with the 3rd, and whom Nell still cursed fiercely for owing her fourteen shillings — but this did not prevent her from submitting to Adam's attentions with vigorous abandon.

Aye, Nell was certain — but now there was Katrin, the buxom Flemish ale-maid with wide, innocent eyes and lips like ripe cherries, her modestly-laced bodice failing to either suppress or belie the swelling curves beneath it. She was a shy wench and quick to blush when a soldier's fingers pinched her buttocks — a practice only tolerated by the tavern-keeper, her father, in the interests of business. She had blushed when Adam had squeezed her hand several nights ago, blushed when, in the security of the kitchen passage, he had waylaid and kissed her, and soothed her frantic bosom with appraising fingers. She had blushed finally, and most furiously, when, tonight, he had proposed a trysting. Later, she had agreed — when her father had retired, and she left to tend the chores, she would unchain the door —

Well, he could dodge the patrols easily enough — they'd be dismissed to their own beds as soon as the taverns were cleared, after which there would be only the occasional provost guard to watch for, and he could hear their clumsy feet two streets away. He sighed again. No, that wasn't his problem. He glanced at Katrin, busily gathering discarded tankards as the few remaining soldiers drifted into the street, her back turned resolutely towards him. Aye, she showed all the signs of her Brabant breeding — heavy in the hind with broad withers, stout thighs and cannons, and a fine chest. In a few years she'd be running to stoutness, like all these Dutch and German frauleins — but right now she'd be a treasure for any man to plunder between the sheets and — he'd wager — eager enough when roused.

And there was the rub. These Brabanters were a prudish, Calvinist race — aye, even the ale-maids — and he was not entirely convinced that the shapely

Katrin was aware of the consequences of a trysting with a dragoon. If she thought to satisfy him with a few kisses and a little discreet dandling — and then raised a scandalized screech when he lifted her shift — he'd have the tavern-keeper tumbling downstairs with a cudgel in his hand and shouting for the provost. At least Nell was certain.

Six weeks earlier Adam had been brought by waggon — a slow and painful journey — to the army lazaret in Maestricht, which the citizens in their stolid humour named the Vleeshuis — the Meat Hall. His leg had healed well, and he had achieved his discharge from the unsavoury confines of the lazaret at the earliest opportunity, to join the company of invalids who provided local guards and picquets until able to rejoin their own regiments or, if disabled, to take ship to England and Chelsea. With Marlborough's army absent, some eighty miles away, duties were few and discipline lenient — and with sutlers and camp followers remaining in Maestricht while the army moved swiftly and unpredictably, there were women enough and more to satisfy the garrison.

A fine, handsome Brabent wench, however, would be a novel diversion. Adam rose to his feet and drained his cup. The drums were beating only yards away, and he must make at least a pretence of returning to his billet. Katrin looked up quickly at him. He winked and, inevitably, she blushed.

Through the open door an ensign of foot walked, a sergeant following. He spoke briskly. 'Taps off, call's beating. All soldiers to billets.' He gazed about the room, half turned to leave, then paused, frowning. He stared at Adam.

'You're Adam Margery,' he said.

'Aye,' Adam nodded, 'and ye're Francis Hewar.'

With the drums beating only yards beyond the open door, their voices were almost inaudible. 'Od's blood, Adam thought, he's the mirror of Mary — the

same eyes, the same mouth —

Francis Hewar spoke over his shoulder. ‘Take the drums on, Sergeant. I’ll follow.’ As the tattoo retired he looked back at Adam. ‘This is a surprise, cousin. I thought you to be studying surgery in London.’ There was genuine perplexity in his face. He eyed Adam’s regimentals. ‘The 3rd Dragoon Guards? Wood’s? And a trooper?’

Adam was silent, stunned by the realization that this was Rebecca’s brother. Did Francis know of the affair with Rebecca? Of his eve-of-marriage flight? The tavern-keeper was standing a few feet away, hands on hips and waiting for the two men to leave so that he could chain his door and go to his bed. Katrin had disappeared.

‘Aye,’ Adam said at last, cautiously. ‘It was a whim of the moment.’ Francis could not know, he decided, or he, Adam would have the other’s sword at his throat before now — yet Rebecca must be near to bearing her brat, and could no longer be hiding her condition. The Hewars of Sawston, at least, must know —

He veered from the subject. ‘Ye’ll not know,’ he ventured, ‘that there’re three Sawston men wi’ the army. D’ye recall Rupert Dolling, the ostler —?’

Francis’ earnest young face suddenly twisted. ‘Dolling? Ye’re saying that Dolling’s here? In Flanders?’ His hand was on the hilt of his hanger as he whirled, searching the room. ‘In Maestricht?’

‘Not Maestricht,’ Adam said, baffled. ‘He’s a trooper o’ Wood’s — wi’ Corporal John. The last knowledge we had —’

Francis paced the length of the room slowly, then turned again. His lips were compressed and his eyes narrow. ‘Rupert Dolling,’ he whispered. ‘I’m going to kill him.’

Adam gaped. No, he couldn’t have heard aright. ‘Did ye say ye were going

to *kill* Rupert Dolling?’ He had not been sure whether Francis He war had even heard of Rupert — a common ostler of Sawston —

The ensign nodded, staring at the far wall. ‘Aye.’ He transferred his gaze to Adam. ‘No man will make a bawd of a Hewar woman and live to boast of it. I’m going to kill Dolling, or die in the attempting.’

Adam swallowed. ‘Cousin, I — d’ye mean that Dolling — Dolling the ostler —?’

Francis laughed contemptuously. ‘Aye, I found it as difficult to believe as you — Rebecca Hewar and a dung-stinking stable-boy — ’Sblood! But there’s evidence enough, and worse — and I’ve no doubt that’s why the mongrel’s run to the army —’

There were several moments of silence, then Adam, trembling, asked, ‘Ye mean, cousin, that Rebecca has confessed?’

‘No.’ Francis was pale. ‘Rebecca died in childbirth a month since. The brat’s Dolling’s — as dark as its sire — and Rebecca’s maid, Elizabeth, has owned to a score o’ meetings between the two.’ He shook his head miserably. ‘I don’t understand —’ Then he took a deep breath. ‘I wouldn’t be telling ye this, but ye’re a kinsman.’

Adam picked up his hat then put it down again, confused and shaken. ‘There could be a mistake —’ he offered. He struggled to calculate. Last month — that was mid-July. July — June — May — it couldn’t be December. He recalled Rebecca on that last evening. I’m carrying your child, Adam, she’d said. But she’d lied.

‘There’s no mistake about a dark-haired brat,’ Francis snarled. The words might almost have been Rebecca’s. ‘And the maid was sure enough — and Dolling ran, hoping for Spain, I’ll wager, or maybe the Americas. Aye —’ he was talking through gritted teeth, ‘— but he forgot that I was in Flanders, didn’t he? And Wood’s Dragoons’ll be one trooper the less when I get within

sword's length of him.'

'Duelling's forbidden,' Adam ventured, immediately aware of the stupidity of his comment. Francis grunted. 'Tattoo's ten minutes past,' he snapped. 'Ye'd best be to your billet before the provost's abroad.' He wheeled and stamped from the tavern.

Adam was in the quiet coolness of the street before he could begin to collect his thoughts — and realize that he had not asked about Mary — or his own family. Not that Francis could have told him much. He had obviously received his news of Rebecca by letter, likely from Edmund Hewar, and there would be little ink wasted on the Margerys.

B'God! Rebecca had lied! And because of it he was a common trooper in Marlborough's army, his apprenticeship lest. She must have deliberately arranged the assignation in Sawston, to compromise him and alienate Mary — simply because a brat fathered by an apprentice surgeon was just to be preferred to one fathered by an ostler! Now Mary was lost to him, Rebecca was dead, and Rupert Dolling — the poor fool — was to be spitted on Francis Hewar's sword — and if that happened, Francis would hang.

Adam was suddenly angry. He was fighting the French for a shilling and sixpence a day — and that was the least of it. One dead, and two more likely to be. Rebecca — well, one in ten women died in childbed from puerperal fever, and the same number from haemorrhage in a dozen ways from clumsy instruments, neglect, and gin-soaked midwives. No, he was unable to mourn Rebecca — she was in part responsible for her own fate, and had left a cruel legacy. He'd wager that Rupert had been baited, even if he'd needed no second urging — yet who could explain that to Francis Hewar, who had every reason to seek satisfaction?

The drums, for several minutes fading into the distance, had now ceased, and Maestricht was silent. If he were apprehended by the provost guard he'd

spend the rest of the night in the guardroom with a charge on the morrow — likely a week on bread and water in the black hole. He thought of Rupert, somewhere near Antwerp and blissfully ignorant that Francis Hewart had sworn to kill him. There, but for the grace of God —

Mark you — Rupert must have suspected something amiss when Adam had appeared in the 3rd Dragoons, and Rupert could count as well as anyone. Even so, for all his sins, he didn't deserve a foot of cold steel in his belly — and Francis, for all his injured pride, didn't deserve to dangle from a gallows. One way or another — plague take it! — Adam must reach Rupert before Francis did.

And that was difficult. If he put one foot outside Maestricht without a passport he'd be posted a deserter, with his description circulated and a price on his head. Moreover, he had been without a horse since he had taken the ball in his leg and, although his wound was healing well, an eighty-mile tramp to Antwerp would be impossible — even if he avoided capture by either English or French patrols — and, anyway, the 3rd Dragoons might be anywhere between Antwerp and Bergen-op-Zoom.

A horse was a necessity. That meant stealing one — and for that he could be shot. A deserter on a stolen horse — he laughed silently — and a likely story he'd have to tell if caught. Cousin Frankie, however, could almost certainly request leave of absence — tomorrow, if his regiment were not committed to the field — and be riding hell-bent and unquestioned to the east. Adam pushed his hat to the back of his head.

There was, of course, a simple solution — to report the whole thing to the military — but he was well aware how slowly the wheels of authority turned and, if Francis were sufficiently determined, he'd dismiss Adam's accusation as a fantasy of a drunken trooper.

Behind him there was the soft chink of a door-chain, and he turned. S's death

— he'd forgotten Katrin! She'd have to wait for another night — if there was ever another night —

Then he froze. From the far end of the street came the noise of iron-shod boots on the cobbles. The provost guard! Pest on't! Did they have to appear at this very moment? To be arrested now would shatter any slight chance he might have of saving Rupe Dolling. There was only one refuge. He flung himself through the half-open door of the tavern and pressed it quietly shut behind him.

Katrin put her fingers to her lips, but Adam needed no warning. The footsteps of the provost guard drew nearer, excruciatingly slowly, and he could hear the murmur of voices. Katrin took his hand. 'You come, ja?' she whispered. He shook his head, but she was urging him across the taproom towards the kitchen and, anxious not to cause a noise, he followed. She pointed upwards at the ceiling. 'Vader,' she whispered again.

The kitchen was warm, a huge stove against one wall and a brace of candles on a table. Copperware gleamed, and there was the soft smell of dried herbs, marjoram, coriander, and sage. He stood still for a moment, listening. The house above them was hushed, but he could still hear, from beyond the taproom, the passing clatter of the provost guard. Katrin was surveying him, coyly, half smiling, her hands clasped between her breasts — fine, peasant-girl's breasts that would surge from their lacings into a man's hand. But he must not be tempted.

'Katrin —' He took a pace towards her. Her lips parted, and she drew a quick breath, her eyes wide and hungry. He shook his head. 'Neen,' he said. The footsteps of the provost guard had disappeared. Katrin stared at him, puzzled, her head to one side 'Neen?'

Adam could feel the heat from the nearby stove. He shook his head again, his few words of Flemish inadequate. 'The provost —' He waved a hand in

the direction of the street. 'I must go, quickly —'

Her face flooded with sudden understanding. 'Ja, quickly. Trek uw jas uit.' She was unlacing her bodice frantically, tugging it from her shoulders. Adam groaned, sweating. 'Neen,' he hissed. Her hoyden, pommel-tipped breasts held his eyes.

Adam wiped a hand across his wet brow. Curse his filthy luck! The modest, blushing wench was hot for a man, and he — pox on't — couldn't oblige her. Francis Hewar might even now be —

'Neen,' he said again, as patiently as his rioting emotions would allow. His loins were rebelling and he knew that he must get to the cold air of the street before his resolution melted. Katrin was flushed, insistent. 'Ja, now, quickly.' She stooped and tore her petticoat upwards. 'Now?' Her stockings were gartered just above her shapely knees, her thighs smoothly plump. She was trembling.

He bore her backwards across the table. God's name — a few more minutes couldn't matter! — and she was a ripe plum. She gasped with delighted pain, clutching him tightly to her and thrusting back with all the strength of her young body, her mouth agape. 'You Flemish bitch!' he gritted, intoxicated and savage. She nodded, her eyes ecstatic, churning beneath him long after he had finished and lay over her, exhausted and dry-mouthed.

He rose to his feet at last. 'Ye're a fire-eater, and no mistake,' he conceded. 'I'd sooner husband ye for a week than a month.' She smiled up at him. 'Ja? A week?'

Above their heads there was a creak of floorboards, a muffled thud, and Katrin's smile vanished. 'Mijn vader!' She struggled upright, her face comical in its fright. Adam snatched up his hat with one hand and, holding up his breeches with the other, ran for the taproom. As he reached the door to the street he could hear determined footsteps descending the stairs from above.

He swore, fumbling with the unfamiliar door-chain in the darkness. Behind him there was an angry shout, but the door was open now, and he was in the street, the night air cold on his sweating face as he ran blindly.

At the end of the street he turned left, towards the quarter where his billet lay, and then, with another oath, stopped. Before him, only twenty yards away, were six soldiers and a sergeant with slung muskets, marching slowly towards him. It was the provost guard.

They saw him immediately. As Adam wheeled, the sergeant was unslinging his musket. 'Halt!' It was an English voice. 'Halt — or we fire!' But Adam had flung himself into the darkness of a narrow alleyway and was scuttling for safety as fast as his half-healed leg would carry him. If the infantrymen did fire, he knew, they would likely aim wide. The redcoats were always loath to bring down one of their own, especially for the relatively petty offence of being abroad after tattoo — but they would have no hesitation, if they cornered him, in hauling him off to the guard-room.

Somewhere near he could hear the soft lap-lap of water, and seconds later the wide, moonlit surface of the Meuse lay in his path. He glanced quickly to left and right, with the clattering feet of the soldiers only yards behind him. The sandstone wharf! He plunged to his right, between the tethered barges and the shadowy mounds of sandstone on the quayside. Just beyond, he calculated, was the stableyard where Nell Something and the sutlers' waggons were lodged. He threw another quick glance over his shoulder, then, relieved and breathless, slowed to a walk. The provost guard had lost him — or they had given up the chase, probably to light their pipes in some quiet corner before resuming their patrol among the streets of Maestricht. He was safe enough for the moment.

The gates of the stableyard were closed and bolted, but he scaled the fencing easily, dropping soundlessly on to a litter of hay. He'd done it a

dozen times before. There were no lights, but he knew his direction, squeezing between the waggons and climbing the rickety stairs to the loft with cautious feet. Nell was sitting upright on her straw-stuffed mattress in her stained and ragged shift, her hair tangled, and a cocked pistol aimed at his chest. Recognizing him, she snorted, and lowered her weapon. ‘Ye must ha’ a powerful itch to be coming here two hours after tattoo.’ She shrugged. ‘One o’ these nights ye’ll run into the provost, and earn ye’self a week o’ dark.’ She reached for a bottle. ‘Ye’ll take a brandy before ye bed?’

Adam shook his head. ‘No. I want a horse. Tonight.’

‘A horse?’ She stared at him, then laughed. ‘Wouldn’t a mare suit ye? Ye’ve been well satisfied before.’

He frowned. ‘The matter’s serious. There’s an ensign o’ Rowe’s Foot swearing to spill Rupe Dolling’s blood — and I’ll lay oath it’s no idle bragging. There’s no time to tell ye the whole of it, Nell, save that I must ride for Antwerp if Rupe’s not to be butchered —’

At the mention of Rupert’s name, Nell had suddenly become very attentive. ‘Rupe Dolling to be stuck? What’s the mischief behind it?’

Adam was impatient. ‘The ensign claims that Rupe made free wi’ his sister, and left her wi’ a brat —’

‘Is that all?’

‘All? It’s sufficient, I can tell ye. I know the ensign — he’s a Sawston man —’

‘Sawston?’ Nell howled. ‘What do you breed i’ this place? Robbing dragoons, betrayers o’ women, cut-throat ensigns —?’ Adam shrugged. ‘If ye can’t listen I’ll go elsewhere. Francis Hewar’ll be on the road, I’ll hazard, at dawn — and wi’ a passport he can make good speed, while I must play hide-and-seek wi’ every damned picquet I meet.’ He turned to leave, but she was rising from her mattress.

‘Wait.’ She was thinking, her brow furrowed. ‘Dragoons were always boot-headed — and ye’re no different.’ She began to pull off her shift, careless of her nakedness, and then groped for a grubby petticoat. ‘Francis Hewar, d’ye call him? Aye — well — unless he wants to be posted a deserter, same as you, he’ll need a ticket o’ leave from his colonel — and he won’t get that at dawn, d’ye see? Ensigns don’t walk up to colonels and demand passports. There’s regulations. He’ll ha’ to ask his captain, then his adjutant, an’ then, if his reasons are fair, he’ll be permitted to request a passport from the colonel. That means he won’t start at dawn — maybe not even tomorrow —’

‘‘Sblood!’ Adam retorted. ‘If he’s going to kill a man, and hang for it, he’s not likely to seek the formality of a passport —!’

‘Not if he’s as muddle-witted as you, he won’t. And that bein’ so, he’ll be lucky to get beyond the town gates before he’s challenged and held.’ She gazed at him scornfully. ‘And *ye’re* not likely to get beyond the first provost guard that sights ye. A single dragoon on a sutler’s horse?’ She threw back her tousled head and laughed.

Adam scowled sulkily. Damn the bitch — she was right. Well — he shrugged — he wasn’t Rupert’s keeper. Rupert had got himself into this morass, and he could get himself out of it. He was no child. As for Francis, well, damn him too. There’d be one less Hewar to plague the world — and Hewars were born to be hanged —

‘Mark you,’ Nell said, ‘*there is a way.*’

He looked up. ‘How?’

She smiled primly. ‘I’ll come wi’ ye.’

Adam groaned. ‘And ye think that’s an improvement? A dragoon and a sutler’s wench riding together? And ye called me boot-headed?’

She was pulling a pair of threadbare stockings over her knees while she glanced about for her shoes. ‘Aye, but nobody’ll see ye. We’ll use a waggon

— the light one — wi' a pair of horses. I'll take the reins, and ye can hide under a few sacks and baskets when we meet a picquet. They'll not concern themselves wi' a sutler's cart that's foraging, and I'll wager we'll make as good speed as any infantry ensign on a hired nag.' She found one shoe under her mattress and the other in a far corner, where she had kicked it. 'What do ye think o' that?'

Adam nodded, grinning. 'But what of the Master Sutler? Won't he see that the waggon has gone — and you? He could have ye hauled back for a flogging.'

Nell laughed. 'That bawdy old goat? He spends half his time rutting wi' his wenches and the other half soaked i' brandy. He was fingering me on the wrong side o' me petticoat yesterday — until I gave him a mouthful o' midden — and he'll not be sniffing around here for a day or two. Besides, Rupert Dolling owes me fourteen shillings — and if he gets himself murdered I'll never have it.'

'Good!' Adam fitted his hat firmly on his head. 'Then we'll go. If ye'll show me the horses I'll get them harnessed.'

'Stab me!' Nell blurted. 'Ye're all spit and side-arms! Even a sutler's waggon don't go foraging at midnight.' She shrugged herself into her faded dragoon's coat. 'But we'll break out the waggon, aye, and fill a brace o' bags wi' oats. There's this pistol — and a musket I've got hidden — and powder an' ball. There's no knowing what we mightn't meet wi'. Then victuals, an' a bottle or three o' brandy.' She chuckled. 'If I don't get my fourteen shillings I'll not starve in chasing it, I'll warrant!'

An hour later the waggon had been made ready, the wheels knocked off, greased, and replaced, lightly loaded with empty sacks and baskets, and the harness carefully checked. Satisfied, Nell nodded. 'That'll carry us to Antwerp and further, wi' the Sutler Master's best pair in the traces. Now —'

she wiped her greasy hands on the skirt of her coat, ‘— there’s about four hours to first light.’ She winked knowingly at Adam. ‘We’ll bed.’

Adam sighed.

Chapter Nine

IT WAS JUST dawn with the streets still deserted save for the town's dirt men, shovelling the gutters' refuse, excrement and ashes, as the sutler waggon took the Hasselt road westward. The Dutch infantryman at the gate gazed indifferently at Nell, yawned, then wiped his watering eyes. 'Sutlers!' Nell shouted, not reining, 'Foraging!' The Dutchman yawned again.

Beyond the gate, Nell whipped up the horses to a smart trot, handling the pair as well as any man. 'Ye can come out now.' She spoke to a pile of sacks behind her, and Adam emerged, spitting corn-husks with an expression of disgust. 'Corn's tolerable,' he complained, 'but I'll not commend the rat foulings.'

The day grew hotter as the sun climbed, the road scorched and dusty. It was a straight road, dipping and rising again only rarely to ford a narrow stream or rivulet, which they could not name. There were woods to their right, endless heathland on their left, running southward to Liège, the Meuse, and the Spanish Netherlands. The waggon groaned and rocked over the hard ruts, with the horses, however, making light work of it, while Nell, in her shabby dragoon's coat, urged them on with an occasional well-placed cut of her whip.

Adam knelt on the floorboards behind her, scanning the road ahead. They passed a few market carts, rolling in the opposite direction towards Maestricht, and a flesher's waggon, laden with carcasses and attracting a black swarm of flies, but there was no sight of redcoats yet.

'When we reach the lines,' Adam decided, 'we'll need to tell the matter to Captain Shadwell. He'll know what's best to do. Likely there's the black hole

for me wi' bread and water, but he's a fair man, and'll not be vicious —'.

Nell snorted. 'And the whipping-post for me, eh? That's dragoon's talk, cully.' She tossed her unruly head. 'Rupe Dolling's coming wi' me. I hear say there's some fine places to the eastward where the military'll never find ye. I've got the waggon and horses — and more'n two hundred guilders o' the Master Sutler's money — and that could hang me.' She shot a triumphant glance at Adam. 'We're for over the hills, m'lad — and right briskly — before your Francis Hewar or the sutler c'n get wi'in a dozen leagues of us!'

Adam rose on his knees. 'Ye mean desertion?'

'Aye,' she nodded, then glanced at him again. 'Ye're not saying it weren't in ye' mind from the beginning? What else?'

He stared back at her. 'Desertion? I hadn't thought of it — but it's not to my liking. If Rupe wants it — well — it'll be his own choosing, but I'll not be a party to it.'

'Then ye're an even bigger fool than I took ye for,' she said. She was silent for a moment, then, 'There's money enough to provide a good sutler stock, and maybe shoes, gaiters, and linens for selling. There's Luxembourg an' Lorraine — I'm not concerned if they're French or no, so long as their silver's good — and a dozen other places where soldiers'll buy ale an' brandy, and maybe dandle a wench.' She considered. 'Aye, we'll need another petticoat besides mysel'.' She chuckled. 'I can't keep two dragoons warm o' nights.'

Adam frowned at a bank of purple teasel which flared among the dusty grass at the roadside. Desertion was a contingency he had not envisaged, nor relished. True, he had already deserted from Maestricht, but with every intention of remaining a trooper of the 3rd Dragoons and of accepting such punishment as his action merited. Rough though the army was, he had no serious quarrel with it and, damn it, was almost beginning to enjoy the

Flanders campaigning — aye — despite the sweat and dust, rain and mud, the indifferent food and long hours in the saddle. If his pay was small, ale was cheap and so were wenches, and his companions — even if they were the dregs of society — lived to a crude code of ethics and were better company than many of their lofty-minded critics could ever be. They swilled and whored, swore and caroused — and were perhaps not slow to dip thieving fingers into a careless pocket — but they could be rigidly loyal, sharing their last crust or pinch of tobacco, and were incapable of abandoning an ill-used comrade. This, perhaps, was why he was jeopardizing himself to find Rupert.

‘No.’ He was not going to consider desertion — not because of Francis Hewar. The Hewars had caused him sufficient trouble already. And it was Rupert’s brat. If Rupert wanted to desert, that was his business, but he would do so without Adam. There was a limit to loyalty.

Ahead, the road curved slightly northward, and beyond they could see rooftops and walls, a church spire. ‘We’re coming to Bilsen,’ Nell warned. ‘Ye’d best go to earth.’ Adam groaned, but obediently pulled the dirty sacks over himself. Nell roused the loitering horses with another flick of her whip.

Only fifty yards ahead a man stepped from the side of the road, his hand raised — a man in a scarlet coat with blue facings and a grenadier’s mitre cap. Nell swore, then peered forward with narrowed eyes at the soldier’s cap badge — a harp and crown surmounting the customary white horse and motto. ‘A bloody Irishman,’ she muttered, reining.

He walked the few yards that separated them, then looked up at her, mildly surprised. ‘Shure — an’ it’s a little darlint. When I seed ye, I thort ye was one of thim blasted dragoons —’ Nell eyed him. His boots were broken at the toes, his breeches mired, and two or three pewter buttons were missing from his creased red coat. Several days’ growth of beard shadowed his cheeks.

Nell’s voice was caustic. ‘And when did ye last see the 18th Foot, cully?’

He grinned, showing blackened teeth. ‘Shure, ye’re a questioning choild, me little darlint.’ His hand was on the bridle of the nearest horse. ‘And whit’s the 18th Foot mean to yeself?’ He cocked his head at the animal beside him. ‘They’re foin beasts ye have, wi’ a hund’ed miles in theer bellies — and whit have ye got in the wee cart, me darlint?’

‘Ye’re a deserter,’ Nell said.

‘A desarter, ye say?’ He showed wide eyes. ‘Indade I’m not, me little jewel. ’tis a Royal Irishman I am — one o’ Parker’s brave Protestant bhoys!’ He sniffed thoughtfully, then sidled a little nearer to Nell. ‘It ain’t daycent for a little lady loik yeself t’be driving alone, loik. Whit’s in the cart, me darlint?’

‘Naught that concerns ye,’ Nell answered. She raised her whip. ‘And take ye’ dirty hands off that horse, cully, before I stripe ye.’

The Irishman lunged forward quickly, grinning, his hand on her knee. ‘Faith, an’ ye’re a saucy piece. The whip, is it?’ He flung a swift glance in either direction, but the road was deserted. The grin was still on his lips, but his eyes were hard. His fingers bit into her thigh. ‘Turn the wee cart off the road, me little jewel,’ he gritted, ‘and smartly. I’ve a mind for a little innocent divarshin loik we might be in the ole Phaynix — an’ if ye’re behavin’ yeself it’s likely I might not cut ye’ pretty whoit throat —’

He stopped abruptly, and his jaw dropped. He was staring down the barrel of Adam’s musket.

Nell laughed derisively. ‘Ye were sayin’,’ she inquired, ‘about cutting me “pretty whoit throat”? And what would this “divarshin” be?’

The Irishman shrugged sheepishly. ‘Shure, I was only jestin’. I wouldn’t be harmin’ a hair of ye, God help me.’ He looked up at Adam. ‘It were a bit o’ fun wid the lady, sorr, and not meanin’ a thing —’

He took a pace backwards, but Nell’s whip was already descending with the full force of her arm — once, twice, three times. The Irishman reeled, then

dropped to his knees with his arms protecting his slashed face. ‘Jaysus —!’

‘Ye filthy, black-mouthed Irisher!’ Nell snarled. ‘A “divarshin”, is it? Then try that —!’ The whip whistled again. ‘An’ a white-livered deserter, eh —?’

‘Wait.’ Adam restrained her, and the Irishman peered through his fingers. ‘The saints preserve ye, sorr —’

‘Protestant, did ye say?’ Adam queried. ‘Ye’ve the tongue of a Papist.’ It was a not unusual stratagem of Irish Catholics to enlist in a British regiment, then subsequently desert to King Louis. Adam kept his musket pointing at the other’s chest. ‘Where did ye leave ye’ regiment?’

The Irishman fingered his whealed face. ‘I heerd say it was Huy,’ he whined, ‘but I’ve no readin’. Shure, it was Huy, wi’ himself the Duke attacking Fort Picard an’ St Joseph.’ He sidled forward again, but Adam motioned him back. ‘Don’t I be tellin’ ye ’tis a Royal Irishman I am — and me separated from me company in the foightin’ —’

‘Huy? Ye say the Duke’s at Huy?’ Adam frowned. Huy was to the southward, and their present route lay away from it. If the Irishman spoke the truth, then he, Adam, and Nell had wasted several hours on the wrong road.

‘Aye — and ye’ own sweet bhoys, the dragoons, I seed a dozen times — and the Devil hisself couldn’t be houldin’ thim —’ His voice was servile. ‘Wid ye have a stiver or two to gi’ a soldier who’s not had soight o’ food for two days?’

Adam grunted. ‘Maestricht’s ahead o’ ye — and ye’ll get bread and water if ye give yeself up to the provost.’ He noticed that the Irishman’s eyes were fixed on his musket, and he looked down quickly. The frizzen was raised from the pan, and if the trigger was pulled there would be no spark — even if there was any priming remaining.

The Irishman’s lip curled but, even as he tensed to spring, Nell’s ominous growl froze him again. ‘Don’t, cully.’ There was a pistol in her hand. ‘This

little serpent's primed *and* cocked — and aimed at ye' black heart —' The other hesitated, glanced swiftly from Nell to Adam, and then, with a savage bellow, flung himself towards Nell with outstretched arms. There was a flash and a roar as the pistol kicked in Nell's fingers, and the Irishman, with mouth agape, twisted and fell with his hands clutched to a shattered breastbone. 'Ye murtherin' spalpeen —' he croaked, his face to the dust. 'Ye've done fer me —!' His mouth contorted silently, then he coughed, a froth of blood on his lips, and lay still.

Adam drew a trembling breath. "'Od perish it!' he muttered. 'He's dead.' He stared down at the crumpled corpse of the Irishman. He had seen many a cold body on the dissecting table, but somehow this one was different. A few minutes ago it had been an active, lusty man. Adam turned the fallen mitre cap with his toe. 'The 18th Royal Irish Regiment o' Foot — the Lions o' Nassau. Virtutis Namurcensis Proemium.' Nell sat silent and pale.

He dragged the dead infantryman to the roadside, then methodically reloaded and primed the weapons. Huy was to the southward, on the Meuse beyond Liège. If they wanted to travel by a road they would have to do so via Maestricht — or they could take a shorter line across country, if the heathland was passable — and it seemed to be firm and flat enough.

He pulled a bag of oats from the waggon and fed the horses. They could be watered at the first stream, but a little time spent now could save a deal of trouble later. He tried to visualize the lay of the terrain to the southward. Huy was not more than about fifty miles as the crow flew — and the plague of it was that any advantage they may have gained by an early departure from Maestricht was now almost certainly lost. Francis Hewart would have access to more accurate information on the army's movements, and even an infantry ensign would not take long to ride fifty miles. He swore silently, then shrugged. It could have been worse. They might have travelled a great deal

further before becoming aware of their error. Aye, they could thank the Irishman for something.

For fifteen minutes Nell had neither moved nor spoken, but as Adam, satisfied, climbed back into the waggon she shivered, brushed her hair from her brow, and took up the reins. ‘Southward,’ Adam pointed, ‘across the heath.’ The waggon lurched off the road into the axle-high grass. He gazed over his shoulder until the tiny scarlet splash which marked where the Irishman lay had vanished from sight, then turned to Nell.

‘If my memory serves me, we’ll strike the Tongres road by noon —’ He stared to see her cheeks wet with tears. ‘’Sblood — I never thought to see Nell Something weep over anything —’

She dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her cuff. ‘Didn’t ye? And I never thought to kill a man. I’d cheat and cuckold one, steal from one, sell one to a pressgang — but ’fore God I’d not kill one!’

Adam uttered a deprecative laugh. ‘The Irishman? He’d have savaged ye, then strangled ye — if ye’d been alone. Even without that, I’ll wager he’d have been beyond the French lines with the Irish Papists by tomorrow — to fight against us.’

Nell nodded glumly and sniffed, then said enigmatically, ‘Aye, but it ain’t the same.’

Adam examined Nell surreptitiously. Beneath her grubbiness, her ill-kept hair and her coarse tongue she was a mightily well-favoured wench. Her features were well chiselled, her skin clear — if unwashed — and she had a body that many a London lady would have given a fortune to possess. The hands which gripped the reins were daintily formed despite their black-tipped nails.

‘Nell,’ he ventured, ‘what started ye —? What started ye with the sutler — and men —?’

She looked at him and sniffed again. ‘Started?’

‘Aye — I mean — ye haven’t always been a sutler’s wench.’

‘Ye mean I haven’t always been a slut of a doxy, don’t ye?’ She laughed bitterly, and fell to silence, her eyes moodily on the heathland ahead. ‘No, I ain’t.’

Several minutes elapsed before she spoke again, when she repeated, ‘No, I ain’t.’ She gave the horses a light touch with the whip. ‘We had a cockloft near Cheapside — wi’ in a spit o’ the Mermaid — my dam and four brats, and Ben Skeys. He weren’t my father. My dam always said my father were gentry.’ She shrugged. ‘It might be so. She looked as though she might’ve been a trim wench. Her other three brats were Ben Skeys’.

‘He weren’t no good, was Ben Skeys —’ she spat over the side of the waggon. ‘He earned a few coppers wi’ portering, or chasing the carriages — but he’d drink most of it, or dice it. If my dam complained, he’d take a strap to her, or his fists, till she were near senseless, then like as not throw her on the mattress and take his pleasure, while the brats squatted in a corner.’

For a further few minutes she was silent, until Adam thought that she had finished, but presently she began again.

‘He never paid no heed to me, till I were gone fourteen years and earning a mite wi’ gutting fish. I were half stripped, washing the fish stink from me, when he shambled in, fuddled wi’ ale — and laid hold o’ me, laughing.

‘My dam grappled wi’ him, but he smashed her mouth. There weren’t no stopping him, and I were only a maid. He put me on the mattress and spoiled me, while my dam squalled.’ She paused. ‘After that she slept wi’ the brats, and me wi’ him. If I didn’t, he swore he’d put me into the street wi’ naught.’

Her hand was clenched tightly about the whip haft, her knuckles white. She drew a deep breath. ‘Aye, it were winter — and no time to be wi’ put a roof — so I yielded. What else was there?’

‘He were an animal in his lusting, but I knew no different then, and after the first few times it weren’t so bad. But there was worse to come. Work were hard to come by, and he owed money for dicing, and when he were desperate for money or ale he’d bring a man or two to lie wi’ us — sometimes as much as a shilling f’ me, or a sixpence for my dam — sailors, wherry-men, ’prentices, aye, and greybeards and schoolboys.

‘But there was no money for us, and when there weren’t a crumb o’ food and the brats crying wi’ hunger I went to Covent Garden, to sell my hair to a wig-maker and my teeth to a leech. It were all I had that were worth silver. At the wig-maker’s door there were a man waiting — for just such as me, he said. He were a sutler, he told me, wi’ authority from King William hisself to provide for the army’s leisure. Four wenches he wanted, maybe five — shapely doxies, clean o’ infection, and willing to dandle wi’ a soldier in exchange for all found and half o’ what they could earn from whoring.’ She met Adam’s eyes unashamedly. ‘That were four years since.’

‘Four —?’ He stared back at her. ‘You mean that you’re — you’re only eighteen years?’

She nodded. ‘Gi’en a few months, aye.’ She twirled an intricate pattern in the air with the whip-lash. ‘Aye — and ye’re thinking I look thirty. And when I’m thirty I’ll look sixty, poxed and gin-sotted, wi’ my hair falling out and eyes red an’ waterin’.’ She thrust out her lower lip sullenly. ‘That’s a sutler’s wench for ye — and I’ve Ben Skeys to thank for it — ’Od fester him!’

Adam could think of nothing else to say. The waggon rolled on, southward, with both sitting mutely and staring at the indefinite line of the horizon ahead. Behind them the roofs of Bilsen had long disappeared. By noon, as Adam had hoped, they reached the Tongres road, crossed it, and lumbered again into the empty heathland. Sooner or later, he estimated, they must reach

the northern bank of the Meuse, which could be followed to Huy — but they would pass close to Liège, the vicinity of which would be crawling with English and Dutch troops. It might be a hazardous journey.

‘I saw a woman flogged once,’ Nell said suddenly, ‘on Tower Mound. They cut off her hair short, and tore her shift to the waist. She screeched like a sow. She couldn’t walk after, so they put her in a cart.’

‘It’ll not come to that,’ Adam assured her, although he knew he lied. She’d be fortunate to escape with a mere flogging — she’d be more likely to hang. Desertion was perhaps, after all, her only salvation — and, come to think of it, for himself, too. Damn everything — he’d left Maestricht on an impulse, and now wished heartily he had not. First the theft of the sutler’s waggon, then the money — to which he would be deemed an accomplice — and then the Irishman. Well, the Irishman wasn’t their fault, but the incident lent a depressing flavour to an already ill-contrived situation. Last night, inspired by a bellyful of brandy, his course of action had seemed clear-cut and simple, but now, in the cold light of sober day, the perspective was somewhat different. He toyed with the possibility of turning the waggon now, of returning to Maestricht, and making a clean breast of it, then decided that, if he were going to hang, Huy was as good a place as any — and he might at least foil Francis Hewart in the process.

Neither of them saw the Dutch dragoons until it was too late — too late for Adam to conceal himself. There was a flurry of dust and a hollow drumming of hooves as the half troop of horsemen in shabby blue coats and white cross-belts wheeled in a wide circle beside them, and Nell drew her pair to a halt with a quiet curse. Adam’s scarlet regimentals must have been visible almost a mile away. An officer walked his mount towards them.

‘Wie is U?’

‘He’s asking who we are,’ Nell said.

‘English,’ Adam offered. ‘Engelschman. The 3rd Dragoon Guards.’

The officer nodded. ‘Brigadier Wood, eh? Welke route —’ he frowned. ‘You travel to Liège or Huy?’

‘To Huy.’

He nodded again. ‘You must watch for Fransch — ruitelij — French cavalry, ja? They are much about, ik geloof. French cavalry, you understand, eh?’

‘Dank U, Ritmeester.’ Adam was anxious to be on his way before the Dutchman became too curious, but the other seemed to be in no hurry and equally determined to exercise his English for the benefit of the two files of dusty dragoons. ‘If you go straight on,’ he persisted, ‘recht uit — first to Liège, you will have no trouble, and there is perhaps English or Hollandsch soldiers on the road. If you go zuiden — southward — you may meet the French.’

‘I understand,’ Adam smiled. ‘We’ll take care.’

‘Ja.’ The Dutchman surveyed the tented waggon idly. ‘Sutler-wagen, eh? The English are fortunate with sutler-wagens.’ He shrugged ruefully. ‘We Hollanders are not so fortunate.’

Nell reached behind her. ‘Here, Ritmeester —’ she held up a bottle of brandy, ‘— a gift from the 3rd Dragoons —’

He beamed. ‘Ah — mijn lief wijnmeisje!’ He doffed his cap. ‘I wish you good journey.’ He turned in his saddle to shout to his sergeant. ‘Wij zijn over onzen tijd, wachmeester. Marsch!’ As the dragoons kicked their horses into motion and Nell gathered up her reins, he grinned at them for the last time. ‘If you hasten you may overtake the young English vaandrig — ensign — who rides ahead of you, also for Huy —’ He spurred away, clutching the bottle.

‘Bloody Brabant pauper!’ Nell spat. ‘They’re all the same. Wi’ their suppin’ and swillin’ it’s no wonder they’ve no bellies left for fightin’!’

‘D’ye hear that — the ensign?’ Adam watched the dragoons wheel again in double file towards the west. ‘English vaandrig, he said — riding for Huy. It must be Francis Hewar!’ The dragoons were a hundred yards away.

‘I got ears,’ she retorted. Her whip snapped and the waggon swayed forward. ‘If I have to flay the hair from these cattle —’ The waggon juddered and groaned, until Adam feared for an axle-tree. He shrugged. ‘And if we overtake him, what’ll we do?’

‘Ye’ve a musket, ain’t ye?’ she asked. ‘And this time ye’ll see it’s rightly primed an’ ready.’

‘Musket? Ye’re thinking I’m going to shoot him?’

‘Why not? Can ye think of something better? D’ye suppose ye can doff ye’ hat and say, “Ye’ pardon, Mister Hewar, sir, would ye mind not stickin’ Rupe Dolling — who’s bilked ye’ sister?”’ She sneered. ‘Put the ball into him, and finish wi’ it.’

‘And an hour ago ye were weeping because ye’d done the same to a beggarly Irish deserter — which was as good as shooting a Frenchman. Now ye’re expecting me to kill an English officer who’s done nothing —’

‘He’s set to murder Rupe Dolling, ain’t he? That’s enough.’

He shook his head. ‘No, I couldn’t do it, Nell.’

She snorted. ‘Then what do ye suggest? That we jog along nice and comfortable behind him, until we gets to Huy, then we get arrested and he sticks Rupe Dolling?’

Adam sat in silence. Kill Francis Hewar — his own cousin? It was an impossible suggestion, and the mere thought of it sickened him — frightened him. Aye — but what else could effectively thwart Francis? He had a momentary vision of Francis’ face — with Mary’s eyes. God! It would be like —

He choked on the thought. He’d already done enough to hang, but he could

never murder a man, and no unprincipled little trollop was going to persuade him otherwise.

‘There he is!’ Nell hissed. Her whip lashed cruelly. Ahead the plain fell gently, dotted with clumps of trees dark against the near-yellow of the parched grass, towards the sinuous course of a river — probably the Jaar. There was a tiny movement — a fleck of scarlet and, momentarily, a glint of metal.

Adam screwed up his eyes against the sun. ‘Sblood!’

‘He’s dismounted — walking!’ Nell exclaimed. She chuckled. ‘Ye might expect an infantry ensign to lame a horse — that’ll make it difficult to cut and run —’

‘Not for fear of me,’ Adam said. ‘I’ve told ye before. I’ll not murder.’

‘Then take the ribbons,’ Nell blurted, ‘and I’ll do it.’ Her face was grimly determined. ‘But wait awhile until we’re upon him. If he sees us he’ll not suspect — and we’ll not give him a chance to use his own weapon, d’ye see —?’

For answer Adam took up the pistol and musket, thrust one into the waist of his breeches and slung the other over his shoulder. ‘No.’

Nell almost snarled. ‘It was you that came to me — ye smock-faced rustic! All hot an’ ready to ride for Antwerp to save Rupe Dolling, weren’t ye? He’s going to be stuck, ye said — and ye wanted a horse — right gallant!’ She curled her lip. ‘But it were the brandy talking, weren’t it, me brave little dragoon?’

Adam’s apparent unconcern provoked her even further. ‘Ye scabby tankard hero! Gi’ me the musket, damn ye — or get off this blisterin’ waggon!’

Adam had his eyes fixed intently on the tiny flicker of scarlet, a half-mile ahead. The ensign, it seemed, had halted, and was standing in a shallow gully — an over-grown, half-healed ditch, with his horse several yards away. It

could be that he had observed the waggon overtaking him. Adam could just determine the shape of the horse in the shadow of a tree, its head lowered, its tail flailing at the flies.

Even as he gazed he heard the pistol shot, and almost simultaneously Nell hauled on her reins. There was a black smudge of smoke about the ensign, dispersed quickly by the faint breeze. ‘The bastard’s seen us,’ Nell said.

‘He didn’t fire at us.’ Adam shaded his eyes again. ‘Why should he? In any case, he can’t be such a fool to think a pistol ball would carry this far.’

‘Ye’ll be saying next he’s shootin’ partridge,’ Nell suggested sarcastically. ‘Can ye see anything else —?’

Before she could finish there came three reports in rapid succession — far distant, and just audible on the quiet summer air. Adam strained both eyes and ears, but could see nothing but the dismounted ensign and his horse, hear nothing save the hum of insects around the halted waggon and the blowing of his own pair.

Then he jolted. ‘There —!’ he pointed. ‘Horsemen — cuirassiers — ye can see their corselets against the trees! Frenchmen, I’ll take oath — there’s none of our cavalry that wears body armour. Didn’t the Dutchman warn us of French cavalry?’

Nell threw back her head and laughed. ‘Tolderollo! And good shift to ’em! All we do, cully, is to sit here an’ watch ’em do our work for us.’ She glanced spitefully at Adam. ‘If, o’ course, ye’ stomach’s strong enough.’

Across the heath the ensign knelt by a bank of bracken, reloading his pistol. His sword, unsheathed, lay on the grass ready to his hand, and he had placed his laced hat carefully out of harm’s way. Satisfied with his priming, he brushed some grains of powder from his cuff and rose to his feet. There was a sharp clap and, a yard from him, a ball splintered the bark of a tree. ‘Pester me,’ he muttered, dropping again to his knees, ‘my damned breeches’ll be

ruined.’ He raised his pistol, took long and careful aim, and fired. From somewhere beyond there came the sound of a yelp of angry pain, and the ensign smiled. ‘That’ll teach ye to keep ye’ head down, Pierre.’ He began calmly to reload his weapon again. ‘Mind ye,’ he conceded, ‘not all infantry ensigns have a pistol made by Coutts o’ Houndsditch.’

Nine French cuirassiers cantered their horses out of range and halted. Two of their original number, including their sergeant, were dead — the result of an over-confident and ill-man-aged tilt with a solitary English redcoat, and they had no clear idea of what to do next. The Englishman, more by chance than design, had chosen to make a stand in a position awkward for horsemen to approach, and he was an incredibly fine marksman. Two shots, two cuirassiers. They didn’t lack courage and they were no strangers to enemy fire, but two cuirassiers dead — if that were to be all — were a poor exchange for one redcoat. The Englishman must be killed or taken — or there’d be the devil to pay when they got back to Leau — but there must be a less expensive way of achieving it.

‘They don’t appear to have seen us,’ Adam said. He snatched up a haversack of cartridges and a powder-horn, then dropped to the ground. His leg was stiff after its long inactivity, and he stamped his foot several times to ease the cramp from it.

‘Ye don’t have to,’ Nell protested, surprised. ‘The French-men’ll do it for ye, I tell ye. Ye’re the most contrary jackpudding I ever met —!’

Adam was tending his primings. ‘I’m not going to shoot Francis Hewar,’ he replied, ‘I’m going to help him.’

‘Wha-at?’ Nell almost screamed. ‘Why — ye dirty, treacherous Judas!’ She raised her whip, but Adam was beyond her reach. ‘Ye murdering scum! If I had a pistol I’d put a ball into ye’ filthy, scheming heart —!’

‘I’ll not doubt it,’ Adam grimaced. He took a quick glance around him to

establish his bearings, then trotted, half stooped, towards a line of birches which would hide his approach from the distant cuirassiers. A stream of vilification from Nell followed him.

Reaching the trees, he paused to draw breath. He could see the ensign more clearly now, hatless, peering over the curtain of bracken at the still further cavalrymen. The cuirassiers, following a council of war, had split into two groups, one of which was now cantering in a wide circle westward intending, obviously, to attack the ensign from another direction. Adam limped on, crouching, his eyes on the flanking group, realizing that when they wheeled — as they surely must — their path and his own would cross.

He found what he wanted — a narrow, dried stream-bed conveniently fringed with a tangle of furze. From here he could cover the cuirassiers' entire movement whilst they could not see him. He was just in time. The Frenchmen had halted and were looking back towards the first group for some prearranged signal. Adam lifted his musket.

Aim at the belly, Sergeant Weekes had always said. Pull the butt into ye' shoulder until it hurts, then squeeze the trigger like ye was coaxing a maid's pap. Take ye' time — maid or Frenchman, ye'll have surer success if ye take ye' time.

Adam selected the leading cuirassier — a tall man with a heavy black moustache who seemed to be haranguing his comrades. Odd, thought Adam, how the French were fond of moustaches. He aimed just below the man's baldric.

The priming flared, and for an awful fraction of a second he expected a misfire, but the musket kicked, his ears sang, and the acrid powder-smoke filled his nostrils. He saw the cuirassier clutch at his middle, sway over his horse's neck, and then, slowly, topple from his saddle.

Adam slid back into the stream-bed to reload, filled with sudden glee.

Calmly, now. Take ye' time. Bite off the cartridge tip and chew. First powder and ram. Then ball and ram. Then chewed wad and ram. Replace ramrod. Powder-horn. One measure. Close the frizzen. Blow off loose powder. Now he was ready.

On the heath the three remaining cuirassiers sat on their fidgeting horses with pistols drawn, staring about them confusedly. From somewhere to Adam's left came the sound of another shot — but whose he could not tell — and a faint voice shouting unintelligibly. Stealthily, through a small break in the furze, he raised the musket again and took aim.

Even as he fired, he cursed. The horse of the cuirassier at whom he aimed had shied. The ball had struck, not the man, but the horse — apparently not mortally, for the beast reared, screaming and snapping, almost unseating his rider, then flung itself angrily across the heathland, teeth bared and head tossing.

This time, however, Adam's musket smoke had been observed. A cuirassier aimed and fired, then holstered his pistol and drew his sword. The ball went wide — the penalty, Adam noted with satisfaction, of firing from the saddle — but he was already loading yet again. There was time, even if the Frenchmen rode straight for him. They would have difficulty in compelling their horses through the mass of furze — and he still had his pistol.

He scrambled along the stream-bed, twenty feet to his right. There was a fusillade of pistol shots, but none came close to him, and he could hear the drumming of hoof-beats. He checked his priming quickly, then cautiously raised his head.

Six cuirassiers were cantering away towards the westward, while a seventh, trailing, still fought to control his wounded, unruly mount. Adam laughed, emerged from cover, and sent a musket ball after them, careless that they were beyond reach. Sergeant Weekes would have disapproved. The wounded

horse took the bit between his teeth and thundered after his fellows. Adam stood, watching them, until they were a distant cloud of dust, then turned to seek Francis Hewar.

The ensign sat on a grassy bank, his right hand clasping an oozing wound in his left shoulder. ‘Od fester it,’ he said, ‘this coat cost me twenty-six guineas from Millerd’s — best quality paduasy. Now it’s ravaged — not to mention a taminy shirt.’ As Adam approached he looked up. He wasn’t Francis Hewar.

‘Damme — a dragoon,’ he observed. He gazed around, mildly surprised. ‘It was you, was it? Ye’re alone?’

‘Aye,’ Adam nodded, ‘save for a sutler-wench and a waggon yonder.’

‘A dragoon, a sutler-wench and a waggon,’ the ensign pondered. ‘That’s as comical as a dancing bear.’ He surveyed Adam. ‘Do ye know anything about tending wounds?’

‘I was a surgeon’s apprentice,’ Adam said.

The ensign grunted. ‘Aye, I might have guessed it. I’ll not ask another tomfool question.’

Adam deposited his musket and gently eased the ensign’s coat from his shoulders, wiped the wound free of blood, and sounded it tentatively with his fingers. ‘It’s a clean perforation,’ he decided, ‘and the humerus and scapula are both undamaged. Ye’ll have lost some blood, but no worse than a cupping.’ The other raised his eyebrows, but made no comment until Adam wrenched a strip from his shirt to make a binding, when he muttered, ‘Faith, it’s the end!’

There was a creak and a jingle as the waggon drew into view, with Nell on the box glaring balefully at the two men. ‘So ye’re still alive, eh? An’ the pair of ye planning to murder Rupe Dolling, I’ll wager. What’ll it be — a pistol in the dark, or do ye have the belly to face him wi’ a sword in ye’ hand?’ She spat. ‘And I’ll hazard ye’ sister’s a whore!’

The ensign peered up at her curiously, then pulled his coat over his shoulders with his undamaged hand. Adam rose to his feet. 'He isn't Francis Hewar,' he shouted.

'No, b'God, I'm not,' the ensign agreed, 'whoever the deuce he may be. Nor am I the Archbishop of Dublin or the third Earl of Peterborough. I am, believe me, the Honourable John de Courcy of Kingsale, Ensign of Her Majesty's 2nd Regiment of Foot Guards.' He put on his hat. '*In propria persona.*'

Nell, having descended from the waggon, examined the ensign with narrowed eyes. 'Ye say ye're *not* Francis Hewar?'

'I've told ye,' Adam said, 'he's not.'

The young officer winced as he pulled himself upright, then looked from one to the other. 'Ye'll forgive me, I'm sure, if I appear somewhat impoverished of intellect, but I fear, damme, that I've involved meself wi' a company of travelling mummers —' He glanced at Adam. 'Though I'll allow for a buffoon ye're mighty brisk wi' a musket, and better than most surgeons wi' a bandage. That being so,' he frowned, 'who are you, and who the deuce is Francis Hewar?'

'I'm Adam Margery, Trooper,' Adam explained, 'of the 3rd Dragoon Guards. This —' he indicated Nell, '— is Nell Something, sutlers wench o' the same. We travel to Huy.' He hesitated. 'Francis Hewar is an ensign of Rowe's Foot — who is also my cousin — who has sworn to kill Rupert Dolling, also a trooper of the 3rd, because he — that is, Dolling — has spoiled his sister — Francis Hewar's sister — in Sawston —'

'Wait!' John de Courcy drew a deep breath. 'Fester me, why must I always martyr meself?' He nodded at the waggon. 'I'm carrying a dispatch to the Duke of Marlborough, and my horse has wrenched a fetlock in a pot-hole — while I, faith, have a hole in my shoulder. I'll unravel this Gordian knot in the

waggon — or the war'll be finished before we reach Huy.'

Nell, plainly contrite, offered him a bottle of brandy. 'Sblood!' he muttered. 'I'd not be surprised if ye brought out a troupe o' dancing girls.' He extracted the cork with his teeth and took a long draught with obvious relish. 'Sutler's dross,' he concluded, 'but I've never enjoyed better.'

Adam tethered the ensign's horse to the tail of the waggon, and Nell whipped up her pair. John de Courcy winced again as the waggon lurched, but then turned to Adam. 'Well, let's start at the beginning of it — but slowly, ye understand. I've no wit for riddles.' He fortified himself with a second swig of brandy.

Beginning with Sawston, and including his own involvement with Rebecca, Adam recounted the series of incidents which had led to the present predicament. John de Courcy interrupted only to clarify an occasional complexity, but made no comment until Adam had finished. Then he leaned back, his brow puckered in thought.

'Hewar?' he murmured. 'Cambridgeshire gentry, ye say?' He sniffed. 'Aye — well —' He shook his head. 'I'd say ye've done the wrong thing, lad — ye're not Dolling's keeper — but I'll not preach. Given the same situation, I might have done the same.' He was silent for a while, pensive. 'This Rebecca — she must have been a scheming jade and no mistake.' He frowned. 'Ye say she died in childbed. What happened to the brat?'

Adam realized that he did not know. He shrugged. 'Edmund Hewar would likely have given a few guineas to some crone to raise it — as far from Sawston as possible. He'll be smarting at the insult, and ye can be certain he'll not want the brat as a constant reminder — to himself or the county.'

The waggon had travelled another mile before the ensign spoke again. 'If it weren't for ye' intervention, Trooper, I'd likely be a corpse,' he said slowly, 'either at the hands o' the French, or yon virago —' he nodded towards Nell,

then chuckled. 'I'd wager the *Postman*'d delight in it — "the 2nd Regiment of Foot Guards were deprived of the gallant services of the Honourable John de Courcy by the pistol of an indignant sutler's wench. *Requiescat in pace.*"'

He went on. 'There's one thing I can assure ye. This — this Francis Hewar —' he spoke the name as though it tasted vaguely unpleasant, '— will not do harm to this crony o' yours. That at least I can manage, always providing the gentleman hasn't reached the dragoons' lines before us. As for the matter of ye' desertion, well —' he pulled a wry face, '— ye'll have to bell ye' own cat, lad. I'll have a word or two with His Grace, but it'll be decided between him and ye' colonel.'

'His Grace? Ye mean Corporal John?'

John de Courcy nodded. 'I believe His Grace does suffer that title.'

Adam was not convinced that an ensign of foot — even of the Coldstream Guards — could exert much influence on the Duke of Marlborough — or Brigadier Wood, or, damn it, Captain Shadwell — but the ensign's words were comforting. As for foiling Francis Hewar, well, it was quite beyond comprehension.

By late afternoon they could see the smoke of Thys on their left — and increasing signs of an army in the field. There were the farm buildings with blackened walls and charred skeletons of roof-beams, fields once ploughed, now choked with weeds, the ditches clogged, fences and walls crumbling from lack of maintenance. As they crossed the road which ran from Thys westward towards Corswarem and the French lines they could see marching infantry, red-coated and blue, and several troops of horse trotting free of the road to avoid the dust raised by the less fortunate foot. By dusk they had reached the village of Vinalmont, only five miles from the fortified town of Huy.

Here, at Vinalmont, they halted for the night — John de Courcy aghast at

the suggestion that they might sleep in the waggon and insisting on seeking out the best-provided inn of the locality. There would undoubtedly be a surgeon near at hand, but Adam sponged the ensign's wound and expressed his satisfaction with its condition. 'A little angry from the travelling,' he said, 'but I think a surgeon will be tempted to cauterize or suture — and perhaps bleed ye — and none, I believe, is necessary. It'll knit well enough without.'

All three retired early, it being John de Courcy's intention to present himself at the Duke of Marlborough's quarters as early as possible on the morrow — a prospect to which Adam was resigned but did not relish. Adam was tired, and his own leg ached from the exertions of the day. He undressed slowly, then slid gratefully into the cool bed — an unexpected luxury. It might be his last. He might be on the straw of a cell tomorrow, or worse. He yawned. Odd, he thought, how he didn't seem to care very much. Perhaps he was too tired to care.

The latch of his chamber door clicked. 'Adam?'

He dragged open his eyes, Nell stood in mid-floor, in her shift and bare feet, her old dragoon's coat draped over her shoulders.

'I came to tell ye,' she whispered, 'that I'm sorry for what I said to ye.'

He grunted. 'I'd forgotten it.'

'Aye, but it weren't right,' she went on. 'And to think I might ha' put a ball into Mr de Courcy. That would've been murder.'

Adam was too tired to point out that her intended shooting of Francis Hewart would have been no less a crime. He yawned again. 'But. it wasn't, Nell. Ye can sleep wi' a clear conscience.'

She fumbled with a button of her coat, showing no inclination to depart. 'Aye.'

Adam's heavy eyes were closing again, but he compelled them open. Nell still stood, almost forlorn, at the foot of his bed. 'Ye must be weary,' he

suggested.

She answered nothing for a moment, then whispered, ‘Adam?’

He sighed. ‘Aye?’

‘I ain’t never slept in an inn before. I’ve got a bed bigger’n a house — and soft like ye’d think it were a cloud o’ thistle-down.’

Adam chuckled.

‘Adam —’ she took two paces nearer to him. ‘I’d like it better to sleep in wi’ you. I ain’t accustomed to an acre o’ bed to meself —’

Amused, Adam raised himself on his elbows. ‘Ye’re an abandoned baggage, Nell, but I’ll not deny ye a bed — and I’ll allow ye’ll make mine even softer.’

She drew a relieved breath and tumbled quickly in beside him. ‘It ain’t natural,’ she murmured, snuggling closely to him, ‘for a woman to bed by hersel’.’

Chapter Ten

THE GOVERNOR OF the town of Huy, strategically situated at the junction of the rivers Meuse and Mehaigne, had sent an equerry offering surrender on the condition that the garrison be permitted to depart honourably to Namur, beyond the French lines. For a week the defending forts of St Joseph, Picard, and Rouge had been under constant bombardment by the English and Dutch artillery and, one by one, had fallen. The batteries had then turned their attention to the town's castle, killing forty men in the space of two hours. Under cover of the fire a feint attack by English infantry had been made, with several ladders placed against the castled walls, and the French, expecting a major assault, had beaten a parley. It had all been very easy, with the Duc de Villeroi and the French army content to watch proceedings from the safety of Wasseiges, twenty miles away.

Corporal John, however, did not wage war in the accepted Continental fashion, which permitted a beaten enemy to march away with drums beating and banners flying — to repeat the whole process at a later date. When he defeated an enemy, the enemy's soldiers marched into captivity — and the governor could expect no other terms. The garrison would be escorted to Liège or Maestricht, where they would be interned until such time as the Duc de Villeroi chose to redeem them with a similar number of prisoners in French hands.

To gain time — perhaps still desperately hoping for news of a French relief column — the governor declined. He had ammunition and provisions sufficient to maintain a spirited defence for a further fourteen days — and in fourteen days anything could happen. *Vive le Roi*, and to hell with

Marlborough.

The Duke's response was a typical one. At dawn the next day the governor of Huy awakened to see the English ordnance drawn up, in meticulous order, within range of his walls. The twelve and twenty-four pounders glittered evilly in the morning sunshine, their lethal mouths gaping. The gunners stood in attendance, in scarlet and blue, as though for a review on Hounslow Heath, with linstocks smouldering in their hands, while at each muzzle two mattresses waited with vellum-packed charges and shot.

In each of the newly-taken forts, from which a man could toss a pebble into the belly of the castle, was a bomb battery of six mortars — the devilish 'cohorn', designed to toss fused canisters over the highest of medieval fortifications. Elsewhere the battlements were lined with red-coated sharpshooters, who could as easily spit on the French as shoot them.

The martial spirit of the governor of Huy wilted. He was, after all, only schooled in the rules of traditional warfare, and if the uncouth English refused to honour the rules, what else was there but to surrender? At evening the garrison of Huy, including two brigadier-generals, marched out to captivity. The English, having lost eighteen men, with thirty-five wounded, marched in.

At Val Notre Dame, on the Mehaigne, a little more than two miles from Huy, the Duke of Marlborough had established his headquarters. Intelligence had reached him that the Duc de Villeroi, apparently anticipating an attack on his own position, was frantically repairing and strengthening the lines between Wasseige and the Meuse in order to dispute the approaches to Namur, employing 3,000 peasants screened by troops. For all Marlborough cared, however, the French could dig ditches all year in the west. He had his eyes on Limbourg, in the east, which he wanted to invest before the autumnal rains made campaigning difficult, preparatory to operations on the Moselle.

Given a few days, therefore, to re-garrison Huy against the possibility of a French counter-siege, he would march for Limbourg, and leave Villeroi to his hen-scratching.

By nine in the morning the night dew that had glazed the cobbles had almost disappeared. From a hundred chimneys and a thousand bivouac fires the cooking smoke was reaching upwards to blemish a clear sky. Scarlet regimentals were everywhere — high-booted cavalymen, tall-capped grenadiers, pioneers and artillerymen, and the buff-faced coats of the Hollands Foot. There was the mouth-watering smell of baking bread and the sickening stench of urine buckets in the air, and the noise of iron-shod feet, of soldiers and horses, everywhere. Urchins pranced behind the passing platoons, miming the fifiers and the stiff-marching infantrymen until scattered by a swearing sergeant or the unheeding hooves of an officer's charger. Army-following women, their faces puffed with scant sleep, peered yawning and dishevelled from doors and windows at the new day. This was Val Notre Dame.

Adam, leading the mount of Ensign de Courcy, suddenly halted and pressed himself against the beast's shoulder. De Courcy, in fresh linen, his left shoulder bandaged behind an empty sleeve and his coat as spruce as temporary repairs could make it, glanced down and grunted.

'What is it, Trooper? His Grace's quarters are in the Stadhuis —' He wrinkled his nose. 'Sdeath, these Flemings stink worse than the Irish.' An ammunition limber, behind four steaming draught-horses, rumbled past within inches, the wheels screeching on the uneven stones.

'Francis Hewar,' Adam said. From behind the bulk of de Courcy's animal he nodded towards an infantry officer thirty yards away, walking unwarily towards them. 'He's here before us.'

John de Courcy sighed. 'Rowe's Foot. Lud — and he'll use his sword like a

hay fork.'

'Sword?' Adam frowned, but de Courcy was already dismounting.

Francis Hewar picked his way carefully past a small lake of liquid, fetid mud, his eyes on the cobbles. He was in an ill humour after a wearying ride from Maestricht on a mutinous, hard-mouthed gelding which had proved insensible to whip or kicks, and had finally thrown him in full sight of the town's quarter-guard. He had not eaten for eight hours, and with a day's stubble on his cheeks felt distinctly shabby. The unsavoury odours of Val Notre Dame did nothing to lighten his mood.

He reached the last few feet of the narrow causeway which skirted the mud-filled road, then looked up to find his passage barred by a tall cornet of guards. They stared at each other.

Francis Hewar sniffed. 'My way, I believe, sir.' He had negotiated thirty feet, the other barely six.

John de Courcy raised his eyebrows. 'Indeed? I'll disagree, sir. By right of seniority I'll suggest ye turn about — or step aside. Unless, of course —' he shrugged, '— ye prefer to be thrown aside?'

On another occasion Francis Hewar might have sensed the deliberate provocation, but both his perception and equanimity were frayed by a dozen minor mishaps. 'Damn me, sir,' he spat, 'if you think I shall stand in a foot of mud to satisfy the vanity of a parade-ground popinjay, ye'd best reconsider. It's my way, sir, and I'll not concede it.'

John de Courcy's lip curled. 'By ye' yokel accent and the rifferaff ye're pleased to call a regiment, I'm not surprised at ye' lack of manners. I'll hazard ye're more at ease with sow-herders than with gentlemen. But I'll not labour the point. Stand aside, sir, retrace ye' steps, or find yeself swimming in Flemish mud!'

For a moment Francis Hewar stared, almost incredulous, his jaw falling.

Then, as quickly, his eyes narrowed. 'I don't know who ye are, sirrah, or what gives ye reason for insolence, but I'll not stand aside for you or anyone else.' He glanced at de Courcy's empty sleeve. 'Ye'd be well advised to stay out of disputes —'

De Courcy laughed. 'Dispute? 'Sblood — with a rustic shavetail o' Rowe's Foot? Ye should have picked the hayseeds out of ye' wig, chawbacon, before ye exchange words wi' an officer of the Guards.' He sniffed. 'Lud, I've wasted sufficient of my time on ye. Stand aside — and consider yourself fortunate I don't insist on ye doffing ye' cap in respect for a gentleman.'

In answer Francis Hewar took two paces backward and then drew his sword. De Courcy threw back his head and laughed again.

Twenty yards away Adam Margery flung down the reins of the horse he still held. 'Wait —!' But de Courcy's weapon had rasped from its scabbard, its point weaving before Francis Hewar's angry face. 'Will you give the word,' de Courcy asked, 'or shall I?' His lips were still smiling, but the humour had drained from his eyes.

Francis Hewar delivered a savage lunge. De Courcy withdrew a half pace, parried, then made a delicate riposte which slithered snake-like over his opponent's outstretched blade and ripped his sleeve from cuff to elbow. Francis Hewar clambered backward.

'A near thing, chawbacon,' de Courcy drawled. He considered. 'Ye can cry finish if ye wish, but this time ye'll not only stand aside but ye'll kneel in the mud to ask pardon.'

Francis Hewar's reply was a snarl, but before the swords could clash again Adam had stumbled through the mire to stand between them and look from one to the other. 'Duelling's forbidden. Ye're likely to be cashiered — and ye've the damned flimsiest quarrel —!'

'Adam Margery, by God!' Francis Hewar glared. 'What are ye doing —?'

He paused, then his eyes narrowed again. 'What are ye doing in Val Notre Dame? Two nights ago I saw ye in Maestricht.'

'Don't give too much thought to it,' de Courcy said. 'Ye've more important things to worry about.' His blade rose again. 'Shall we continue?'

'Ye'll not!' A fourth voice had suddenly interrupted their discourse. 'And ye'll cover those swords before I have ye shot down!'

They wheeled. Across the road, on the steps of the Stadhuis, stood a tall figure in resplendent scarlet and gold, a raven wig falling to his snowy steinkirk and his hands half hidden by the ruffles below his hound-ear cuffs. His shining bucket boots were placed firmly apart, while on each side of him was a grenadier with a levelled musket. The tall officer stepped carefully into the mud of the street and walked slowly towards them, his face severe.

De Courcy and Hewart sheathed their swords and, with Adam, drew off their hats. The Duke of Marlborough placed his hands behind his back and surveyed them from a distance of six feet. 'Ye're under arrest,' he ordered. 'All three.'

*

Four hours later, in the Stadhuis, the Duke signed a half dozen orders and pushed them to one side for his aide to packet and seal. With him was Lieutenant-General Somerveldt, of Lunebourg, whose fifteen battalions had held the far bank of the Meuse, the Generals Cutts, Churchill, and Lumley, Prince Frederick of Hesse, and the Brigadier-Generals Murray, Wood, and Hamilton.

'It is Limbourg, then, gentlemen — following which, if all goes well, Trèves, and Traerbach.' He leaned back in his camp chair, smiling at them with the charm that had soothed a dozen conflicting emotions and welded an army of international oddments into a coordinated machine. 'Tomorrow we march by easy stages for Liège.'

He toyed with his pen. ‘Reveille will not be beaten, but the troops will dress and prepare themselves at the General. When Assembly is sounded they will strike and pack all tents, call in the quarter-and rearguards, and stand to arms in the streets. When the troops halt to camp or billets, strict orders must be enjoined to prevent plunder or marauding — on severe or capital punishment. We shall gain much in the manner of provisions and intelligence by lenity and good order, whilst looting and other disorders will only persuade the people to leave us a desert.’

For a further hour the Duke discussed campaign discipline, neglecting no detail — of camp duties and regulations, orders for adjutants, for quartermasters, for provost-marshals, guards, and sutlers, the behaviour of foragers. He then turned to the musket fire of infantry.

‘It is of vital importance, gentlemen, that when the line is sufficiently advanced towards the enemy to have received a fire, that commanding officers compel their men to preserve their own fire until it will do certain execution on the enemy. The platoons should be kept shouldered, which will prevent them from throwing away their first loading which, as it is well rammed, will probably do greater damage than any subsequent loading. Soldiers are apt, in the hurry of action, to neglect the ramming down of their cartridges.

‘If the enemy gives ground, and retreats more quickly than our own infantry can follow whilst still keeping order — which must not be broken on any account — all that the colonel can do is to continue firing for as long as his shot will reach them, and then leave them to the horse.’

He changed the subject abruptly. ‘I have today received dispatches from my Lord Nottingham, in London, relating to the 12,000 troops we are asked to provide for the Portugal campaign — a suggestion which I trust will be revoked, since we can ill afford the loss of such a number of trained soldiers

against the replacement by raw recruits from England.’ He paused. ‘The despatches came via Maestricht, by the hand of Ensign John de Courcy of the 2nd Foot Guards.’

General Cutts raised his eyebrows. ‘De Courcy?’

The Duke nodded, then glanced up at the Prince of Hesse. ‘John de Courcy, your Highness, is a young man of considerable wealth, who could, if he were permitted, well afford a colonelcy, but prefers to remain an ensign. He is a skilled swordsman and an excellent shot — being reputed to hit a spot on a playing card at thirty paces. He has killed three men in duels, but has so far avoided penalty. Now, I fear, he may well be planning a fourth — with a certain Francis Hewar, ensign of Rowe’s Foot.

‘De Courcy I am ordering to Williamstadt, where Portmore’s, Stanhope’s, Stewart’s, and Bridges’ will shortly embark for Spain. The hotter clime will doubtless better match the young man’s warm behaviour.’ He referred to General Cutts. ‘Rowe’s, I believe, is one of yours, milord? I would deem it a favour if the ensign Hewar is confined strictly to garrison duties from now until the end of next winter’s quartering, by which time his desire to kill a trooper of the 3rd Dragoon Guards may have dissolved.’ He smiled at Brigadier Wood’s sudden puzzlement, then spoke to his aide.

‘Colonel Parke — we shall have them in now, if you please.’

Adam entered, followed by Nell, and stood before the Duke, who examined them both critically, then picked up a paper from before him.

‘Adam Margery, Trooper, of Her Majesty’s 3rd Regiment of Dragoon Guards, commanded by Brigadier-General Wood, quartered at Maestricht in the territories of the Dutch United Provinces, is charged with desertion, as a perjured defrauder of the public, of his colonel, and his officers —’ He looked up. ‘You are this Adam Margery?’

‘Yes, your Grace.’

‘You accept or deny the charge?’

‘I accept, your Grace — save that it was not my intention to desert the 3rd —’

‘Yes, I am aware of your reasons,’ the Duke interrupted. He read on. ‘Nell Something, bound sutler’s maid, similarly quartered at Maestricht, is charged with the theft of a waggon and two horses, various sundries, and two hundred and twenty guilders — the property of the master sutler of the 3rd Dragoon Guards.’ He paused. ‘You are this Nell Something?’

‘Aye, ye’ Grace, but —’

‘You accept or deny the charge?’

‘Accept, ye’ Grace, but there was only two hundred an’ five guilders —’

‘Your Grace —’ Brigadier Wood protested mildly, ‘if these are two of my people, it is fitting that they should be referred to me for trial. Your headquarters is hardly the place —’

The Duke raised a hand. ‘We are not yet talking of trials, General. I am merely intrigued by the complexity of this particular situation. Have you anything to say against or on behalf of the man?’

The Brigadier shook his head. ‘No, your Grace. He is, so far as I am aware, a competent soldier, and has not previously been charged with any crime, but his troop captain —’

‘A competent soldier?’ The Duke looked down again at the paper. ‘That, General, would appear to be an understatement. It seems that yesterday Trooper Margery, armed only with a musket, fought and routed a body of enemy cuirassiers who had attacked the courier from Maestricht —’ he paused, ‘— Ensign John de Courcy.’ The faces of the officers around him were expressing incomprehension, and the Duke resumed. ‘The courier was wounded, but survived to deliver his dispatches — after his wound had been skilfully tended by Trooper Margery and his journey completed in Nell

Something's stolen waggon, fortified by her stolen brandy.'

The Prince of Hesse hid a smile behind his hand. 'Waarom niet?' he muttered.

'Why not, indeed?' the Duke asked. 'The fact remains, gentlemen, that Trooper Margery has deserted his quarters, and Mistress Something has abjured her bond, stolen a waggon, horses, and two hundred and twenty guilders —' he shrugged, '— or, by her reckoning, two hundred and five.' He examined the well-kept hands beneath his gold-encrusted cuffs. 'I am aware that there are circumstances which tend to countenance their desertion — namely, that they were intent on preventing an affray between an ensign of Rowe's —' he glanced at Cutts, '— and a trooper of the 3rd —' he looked at Wood, '— which might have ended in the death of either, or both.

'An interesting exercise, gentlemen, in causes and effects.' The Duke surveyed his brother officers. 'The sister of soldier A is shamed by soldier B. Soldier A swears to kill soldier B., but to prevent this, soldier C deserts his quarters. In doing so he saves the life of soldier D and prevents important dispatches from falling into the hands of the enemy. Thereupon soldier D, as a mark of his gratitude — and unknown to soldier C — undertakes to fight a duel with soldier A, to foil his attempt on the life of soldier B.' He paused. 'Do ye follow me thus far?'

There was a non-committal silence, and the Duke, unsmiling, resumed. The whole scheme, however, has been exploded by soldier M, who holds a master hand. What, in ye' opinion, should happen to soldier C?'

'Houdt op!' the Prince laughed. 'Ye've made it a conundrum.' He shrugged. 'For myself, the man's earned a pardon — but I'd be curious to know the full story of it.'

'Aye,' Lord Cutts nodded, frowning. 'I'd agree. The dragoon's shown willing — and nobody's hurt.'

General Charles Churchill, the Duke's brother, inclined his head also. 'Aye. A flogging or a hanging'll not serve any purpose save deprive the army of a soldier of spirit — and it would seem he had no intention of remaining absent. Aye, a pardon — and a warning.'

Murray and Hamilton signalled their agreement, while Somerveldt indicated that the matter was one of indifference to him. Only Brigadier Wood, correctly, gave no verdict.

'Very well,' the Duke said. 'I was determined that the majority opinion should be applied, and there seems no reason why the matter should go further.' He addressed himself to Adam Margery. 'You are fortunate, Trooper. Had there been a recommendation for a hundred lashes — or even a hempen collar — I would not have disputed it, but it would seem that the general staff are in a charitable mood today.' His frown melted. 'I understand that you took a ball in the leg on the Jaar, and have been invalided. Are you fit to ride?'

Adam, scarcely able to credit his good fortune, gulped clumsily. 'Aye, your Grace.' Under the concentrated gaze of the group of generals, with their great, curled wigs, gold lace, and immaculate linen, he felt puny and shabby. 'That being so,' the Duke ordered, 'you shall return to your regiment immediately, but with the understanding that another indiscretion of this nature will meet with harsh punishment, d'ye understand?' He wagged his pen at Adam. 'And if ye continue to show the same spirit as ye did against the enemy cuirassiers yesterday, there's a distinct possibility ye'll end the next campaign with a sergeant's sash.'

He turned his eyes to Nell. 'Mistress Something,' he mused, fingering his chin. 'What shall we do with you?' Nell stared back at him, unabashed.

'Ye're a plucky one, I'll own,' the Duke said, 'but you've committed a hanging crime —'

‘Your Grace —!’ It was Adam. ‘If ye’ll allow me, sir —’

‘I’ll not.’ The Duke cut him short. ‘Do not suppose that your recent good fortune allows you the privilege of impertinence, Trooper. You are not dismissed yet.’ He returned to Nell. ‘An abjured bond is not my concern, but the conduct of sutlers and the theft of sutlers’ property both are. I am aware, however, that your misconduct cannot, in all justice, be viewed separately from that of Trooper Margery, who was your accomplice. For this reason alone — that he has been pardoned — I intend to be lenient with you, Mistress Something.’ He paused, pursing his lips.

‘You will return to the master sutler the waggon and horses, two hundred and twenty guilders, and three bottles of brandy —’

‘Ye Grace —!’ she protested, ‘— I swear it was only two hundred an’ five. That thievin’ old kern —!’

‘Enough!’ The Duke’s face hardened. ‘You will return two hundred and twenty guilders, Mistress — and if ever again you steal so much as a pewter button there’ll be fifty lashes to your back. You understand me?’

‘Aye, ye Grace.’ She lowered her eyes, pouting.

‘Good. You will resume your bond with the master sutler, and General Wood will, I am certain, ensure that you suffer no mischief as a result of this.’ He looked from Nell to Adam. ‘You are both dismissed, and are both, I trust, grateful for the indulgence shown you.’ He nodded to indicate the interview ended.

When they had departed, and were well beyond earshot, the Duke threw back his head and laughed. ‘An intriguing matter well settled, I think, gentlemen.’

‘We might agree, your Grace,’ submitted the Prince of Hesse, ‘if we knew the full story.’

The Duke placed his fingertips together. ‘It all began, gentlemen, in

Sawston —'

Chapter Eleven

‘Now ALL THE youth of England are on fire,’ quoted Adam, ‘and silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies.’ He thrust a forearm into a halfboot and, spitting on the toe, began to brush it briskly.

‘Wardrobe?’ Rupert yawned. ‘Whose wardrobe?’

‘Anybody’s wardrobe,’ Adam said. ‘It’s spring, Rupe — the time when kings go forth to war.’

Rupert Dolling, stretched on his pallet, eyed Adam morosely. ‘What’s that to do wi’ wardrobes and silken whatever it was?’

‘I mean,’ Adam went on patiently, ‘that we’ll be taking the field in a week or so. I’ve heard say there’re seven new battalions of foot and one of dragoons just arrived from England —’

‘Aye, and mostly plaguey Irish, so Nell Something says. Rowe’s and Hamilton’s brigades are marching for Ruremond, and we’re to follow wi’ the 1st, 5th, 6th, 7th, the Royal Irish, and the Greys — leastways, that’s what she says. Corporal John’s going for the Moselle, with or without the Dutch, and the war’ll be finished wi’ this year.’

Adam transferred his attention to his second boot. ‘I’ll be sorry to leave Maestricht. I’ve developed an attachment to it.’

Rupert laughed. ‘Ye mean ye’ve developed an attachment to that ale-maid o’ yours. Not,’ he conceded, ‘that I altogether blame ye. She’s a rare handful, is yon Katrin — but that’s the penalty we gentlemen o’ scarlet have to pay.’ He pondered for a moment. ‘And it’s likely, knowing the Duke, that he’ll leave the sutlers at Ruremond so as not to be cluttered. We’ll both be wi’out doxies.’

Adam grunted. 'If there's just one doxy in the whole o' Lorraine, and just one bottle o' brandy, I'll wager a year's pay ye'll find the both of them.' He set his cleaned boots on the floor and stood back to admire them. Then he looked thoughtfully at Rupert. 'If the war's to be finished this year, Rupe, it's certain the army will be disbanded — or most of it. That's what happened after King William's treaty. We'll be back in England, Rupe, a year in arrears and little else save a faded red coat and the curses of our grateful townsfolk.'

'Aye,' Rupert nodded. He sat surveying a large toe protruding from a hole in his hose, whistling softly between his teeth. 'Aye.' Both were silent for several moments, then Rupert suggested, 'We could take service wi' the Swedes or Dutch — that's always supposin' ye don't relish a return to Sawston.' He wriggled his toe. 'Or likely ye could take up doctorin' again, wi' me as ye' assistant. I've learned a bit o' anatomy.'

Adam grunted again. The resumption of his apprenticeship might indeed be achieved after prolonged negotiations with the Barber-Surgeons' Company of London. He had already thought of it. He could plead that he had been pressed into military service — no rare occurrence at a time when recruits to muster the new regiments were becoming increasingly difficult to obtain — and even convicted felons never knew whether they would travel in a cart to Tyburn or a transport to the Low Countries. Many a bright lad had had his apprenticeship suddenly terminated by a knock on the head from an unscrupulous recruiting sergeant.

He glanced up quickly, hoping to surprise an expression of cynicism or amusement in the other's face, but was disappointed and, paradoxically, relieved. When he had returned to the 3rd's lines with Nell Something before the winter's quartering he had spoken only of seeing Francis Hewar in Maestricht and later in Val Notre Dame. Had Rupert shown any concern he, Adam, would have been encouraged to confide further, but Rupert had been

blankly impassive, and Adam, mildly stung, had said nothing more. By unspoken, mutual consent they did not discuss Francis, Rebecca, or Mary — or their lives before enlistment. This was the first time in many months that the name of Sawston had passed either of their lips.

‘It’s half-mounting tomorrow,’ Adam offered, changing the subject. ‘A new hat, shirt, and stockings for every trooper. Did ye see Orrery’s Foot with grenadier caps? I’ve heard there’s eight thousand cocked hats gnawed to pieces by rats through lying too long a-shipboard.’

‘Mind you,’ Rupert insisted, ‘if Corporal John’s taking us for a jaunt in Villeroy’s garden there’ll be a few Frenchmen to dispute our return to England — ’sblood!’ He laughed and reached for his own boots, turning them about to peer at the soles. ‘I’ve been thinking, Adam lad, about Rebecca’s brat —’

Adam’s heart jumped, and he turned away, nonchalantly, to hide any consternation his face might show. ‘Rebecca’s brat?’

‘Aye. It seems to me —’ Rupert had pushed his feet into his boots. ‘It seems to me that one of us might fall foul of a French bullet, or break his neck, or catch some outlandish fever — and likely not see Sawston again.’

It’s my turn, Adam decided, to be impassive. He turned to Rupert inquiringly. ‘That’s so,’ he agreed. ‘As ye say, it’s the penalty we gentlemen o’ scarlet have to pay, Rupe.’ He pulled on his coat, humming. God’s name! he swore to himself. Did Rupert want to discuss Rebecca after all this time? Adam knew who had fathered her brat, but was Rupert aware that Adam knew? It was the one uncertainty that had threatened his regard for Rupert since the meeting with Francis Hewar. If Rupert still considered Adam ignorant of the true situation, then Rupert was betraying him by remaining silent — yet, enigmatically, Adam dreaded the possibility of the other broaching the subject. Rebecca was dead, and Adam wanted her forgotten.

To be reminded of Rebecca was to be reminded of Mary — and of the disgust, the loathing in her eyes as he had run like a whipped cur from her chamber. Neither Nell Something, nor Katrin, nor the obliging bodies of a dozen others — or French shot or drunken carousals — had completely erased the shame of that Sawston episode.

‘So,’ Rupert resumed determinedly, ‘it seems to me that if one of us did make food for crows, the other —’

‘Why talk of it now?’ Adam shrugged. ‘We may not even march with Marlborough. He must leave garrisons — Huy, Maestricht, Liège —’

‘Garrisons are for infantry,’ Rupert snorted, ‘not horse. If Corporal John marches, we march — an’ ye know it. That’s why the 3rd’s been raised to two full squadrons — and anyway, if he leaves anyone, it’ll be Dutchmen. Ye can take it as Bible, Adam — we’ll go where Marlborough goes, an’ we’ll be in the first line.’ He threw his laced coat over his shoulders, then swore angrily as a button tinkled on the floor. ‘‘Od perish the tawdry! What do the damned contractors use for thread? An’ if it isn’t rotten thread it’s the dye running i’ the rain or fading i’ the sun — and boots that fall apart at the seams after a week’s marching!’ He groped on the floor. ‘It’s a wonder they don’t supply us clay muskets wi’ soot for priming!’

From the street outside came a sharp rattle of drums, a pause, and then a continuous, thundering roar. ‘Assembly,’ Adam said, reaching for his musket and grateful for the interruption.

In the street the 2nd Troop jostled into line. A sergeant growled an order, and Captain Shadwell, after a cool stare at his fifty troopers, glanced down at a paper in his hand.

‘Dragoons — have a care. I am ordered to convey to you the following proclamation given under the hand of the Secretary-at-War. Inasmuch as the numbers of soldiers deserting from the regiments of Her Majesty have been

increasing, it shall be known that the reward for the apprehension of a deserter shall be four pounds. It being brought to the notice of the Secretary that a number of English deserters have been cunning enough to pass homeward as exchanged prisoners belonging to the Fleet, it shall also be known that a deserter apprehended in Flanders shall receive one thousand lashes or be shot, and a deserter escaping to England shall receive fifteen hundred lashes or be hanged.’ He folded the paper and looked up.

‘There’s not been a desertion from this troop in three years — since I chose ye meself, God help me. But the recruits from England for the new campaign are likely to be mostly gaol offenders under the Mutiny Act, debtors, and parish levies — so as soldiers that have proved loyal, ye’ll keep ye’ eyes open for the ones with itching feet — and remember there’s four pounds for any ye apprehend.’

He paced slowly before the line of red coats, his eyes flickering from man to man. ‘Ye’ll set a good example for the new men, ye understand — linen clean, stockings mended, and coats well buttoned —’ He paused in front of Rupert Dolling. ‘Coats well buttoned, Trooper,’ he barked, ‘and if ye muster again wi’ a button torn from ye’ coat I’ll have ye run the gantlope!’ His face was only inches from Rupert’s.

‘In one hour,’ Shadwell addressed his troop again, ‘ye’ll Boot and Saddle. We march for Ruremond. All baggage to be piled and mounts inspected by the farrier. Any lameness, flux, or coughing among the horses to be reported immediately, on pain of flogging — they cost twelve pounds apiece. The same is so for any infection or plague among the men. There’ll be no affrays with the civil, and watch out for poxed women and bad brandy. Any men who die will have their names on the muster-roll for a further two months to cover the cost of replacements.’ He paused, then, ‘Boot and Saddle in one hour — and this time there’ll be no torn buttons!’

The men clattered away to billets and stables, with Rupert cursing. ‘The gantlope, is it? That’s what this festerin’ army’s held together wi’ — the lash and the rope.’ He unfolded his embroidered saddle housings ill-humouredly, then turned to Adam. ‘About Rebecca’s brat, Adam —’

Adam drew a deep breath. ‘Ye’d best get that button sewn, Rupe. Captain Shadwell’s a man of his word, and ye’d not ride easily after fifty belt-buckles have marked ye’ hind.’

At noon the 3rd Regiment of Dragoon Guards trotted bravely out of Maestricht, across the Meuse bridge into Wijk, to take the road northward towards Ruremond. The drums, fifes, and hautboys struck up a spirited measure, with the horses, as if recognizing the dignity of the occasion, arching their necks and prancing nobly.

The Maestricht townsfolk thronged the streets, the older people with stolid, expressionless faces, but many a wench with tearful eyes and fluttering handkerchief. Adam caught sight of Katrin standing on tiptoe and waving, her lips framing ‘vaar-wel’. He doffed his hat and rode on, not sure whether he was sorry to leave the tavern-maid’s embraces or relieved to be free of her growing appetite for amorous exchanges — and when a wench began talking of churches and pastors it was time to move on.

Around him there were several new faces among the older, weather-tanned ones of the ’03 campaign. Rupe Dolling there was, and Hodder Roberts, Dan Fuller, and Boyle Russell — who had come to Flanders with him in the stinking ’tween decks of the *Resolution*. There was Sergeant Horobin — lacking, perhaps, the exquisite vocabulary of Benjamin Weekes, but a good soldier and as honest as any other. And there was Captain Shadwell, like his brothers constantly in arrears of pay, burdened with debts, plagued with worries — of recruits, remounts, the dread of desertions, horse-sickness epidemics, and crippling battle losses — yet remaining outwardly composed

and imperturbable in the now established tradition of the English army officer.

Ruremond first, everyone said, then Bedbourg, Coblenz — and down the Moselle valley to show King Louis' conscripts once and for all that Marlborough and his redcoats were masters in Europe. They'd wintered well in the Dutch towns. The men were fit and lusty, the horses sleek and lively, but the wining and the whoring were finished, and it was time to earn the Queen's pittance. A lot of them would be dead by autumn — dead by shot or disease — or mangled wrecks to be spat on like lepers, but others would return, a shade more tanned, leaner, and harder, with a new song, a thirst, and eager for the brothels. They were rough-mannered centaurs, the finest horse-soldiers in sixteen countries — although they did not know it yet. Many of them were illiterate, but they were writing pages of glorious history that would live a thousand years after they were dust.

The road ribboned ahead of them through the gently undulating heathland, dusty, endless. Gloves were off and the men rode easy. Someone was singing 'Lilliburlero'.

Chapter Twelve

BUT CORPORAL JOHN had no intention of marching for the Moselle. To do so would mean only a repetition of the previous year's campaigning, and the year before that — with the French counter-marching and retreating and his own Dutch allies equally content to avoid an expensive confrontation. No, if the year 1704 was not to end in stalemate yet again he must entice both enemy and allies away from the well-trodden Flanders theatre, away from the French bolt-holes and away from the timorous Dutch authorities. No, not the Moselle, but the Danube.

Somewhere near Ulm lay the Elector of Bavaria and his French allies under General Marsin — an army of 45,000 men — waiting to be reinforced before marching on Vienna. It might be possible — just possible if the secret were well enough kept — for Marlborough to march southward as if for the Moselle, drawing the attention of the French armies under Villeroi, Tallard, and the Comte de Coignies towards the Moselle also, and then, at precisely the right moment, wheel quickly eastward to shatter the Bavarians before the French could intercede.

Ah, yes, the French — probably Tallard's army — would come a-running, and they'd strongly outnumber Marlborough, but numbers had never impressed Corporal John. If the French would just stand and fight, then he'd ask nothing more. So it had to be the Danube.

There was, of course, a very necessary provision if he hoped to get even as far as the Bavarians. Secrecy. He must deceive the French, he must deceive his Dutch allies and — Heaven protect him — he must deceive England until the last possible moment. If his campaign succeeded he would be the hero of

Europe. If it failed — and the odds were heavy against him — he would be crucified.

It had to be done. The allies badly needed a victory. In England the Tory opposition was becoming increasingly vociferous and the Scots Parliament exhorted England's surrender coupled with a threat of civil war. Holland, which shared with England most of the cost of the conflict, was reeling under the burden, and Austria, with an ill-organized army, an empty treasury, and distracted by the Hungarian rebellion, was already convinced that the war was lost.

Time was on King Louis' side. He had only to fight a defensive campaign for a little longer and his opponents would crack. Corporal John had to have a victory — a resounding victory — this year.

In the last week of April the British regiments — sixteen thousand horse and foot — had crossed the Meuse by a bridge of boats and stood ready at Bedbourg — Rowe's, Hamilton's, and Ferguson's brigades of infantry and fourteen squadrons. They would be joined in their march by Dutchmen, Germans, Danes, and Prussians — not a man of whom yet knew where they were going. The British redcoats, at least, would not be the slightest perturbed by any change of plans. They would march to India if Corporal John said so; to be sure there'd be brothels and taverns in India. As for the Dutchmen and the mercenaries, well, only time would tell.

Behind the jingling files of dragoons — ten squadrons of English accompanied by the Royal Irish and the Scots Greys — tramped the long columns of scarlet and blue infantry — the 8th, 10th, 15th, 16th, 20th, 24th, and 37th English regiments of the line, the 1st Guards and the Buffs, the Royal Scots, the Cameronians, and the Royal Welsh. Following hard, over an indifferent road softened by heavy showers, came thirty-four field-pieces and four howitzers, the ammunition limbers and the swaying, creaking baggage

waggon — and the inevitable medley of camp followers.

They were glad to be on the march at last. How many of this gallant company would reach the Moselle — or wherever it was — nobody could tell. Sickness and fatigue were more destructive than bullet or sword. Flooded trenches, dysentery, and privation would slaughter as many as the enemy's cannon, but who cared? The redcoats jested, sang, or shouted ribaldries at the grubby wenches who sat on tailboards of struggled gamely afoot, while sergeants roared for silence and good order when the men became too careless. The officers rode in meditative silence, their long wigs bobbing. Would the men's boots last as far as Coblenz? Were the powder kegs dryly stowed? Would there be fuel for the field kitchens and where were the bread waggon? How would the regiment behave under fire? Was this to be another year of arrears and debts — or would the Treasury see fit to end a scandalous situation which had driven so many promising officers into pauperism?

But if the road through the Archbishopric of Cologne was soft and churning beneath the feet of the cavalry squadrons, and the walking drabs already fallen to a sullen, stumbling silence from their weariness, the air was fresh and clean, with the sun shimmering on the nearby Erft river. There were butterflies fluttering above the laced hats of the Guards, and troopers rose in their stirrups to snatch beech nuts from the overhanging trees. Hawthorns and elders were in flower.

'It'll be starting to stink in London now,' observed Dan Fuller, filling his lungs with sweet air as if to dispel the thought. 'It always does in May — and ten times worse in June. I've know'd times when ye could smell the Fleet as far as Chelsea — and what wi' the streets strewn wi' fish scraps an' offal — and the privies emptied in the gutters —' he sniffed again, '— it makes soldierin' a mite more bearable.'

'That's London,' Rupert Dolling nodded sagely. 'Mind ye, ye don't know

Cambridgeshire. It's as sweet as any piddlin' little German province — though I'll allow ye a plague or two o' flies at midsummer — and Cambridge is famous for its bugs.' He laughed. 'But what's in a smell? It's the ale and the doxies that matter. Ye'll agree these juffrouws and frauleins ha'ant the same as a good English wench when it comes to a lusty wrestle 'tween the blankets. Aye —' he sighed, '— gi' me a good woman, a good hound, an' a good ferret, an' I'll dandle and dine better'n the King o' Turkey.'

Dan Fuller shrugged. 'A woman's the same in any language,' he said. 'Just show 'em the colour of ye' coin, an' they're as bold as ye like while ye've the price for another tumble. If ye ha'ant, ye can whistle for it.'

Rupert disagreed. 'Now take Nell Something,' he offered. 'I'll wager nigh every man in the 3rd Dragoons can vouch for her — and likewise ye could blindfold her an' she'd tell from three hundred troopers which one she's embracing. Does Nell ever give ye short measure? Or refuse ye if ye're pinched?' He snorted. 'Compare these Maestricht and Brabant wenches — aye, strapping jades, I'll agree — they're as easy to fondle as an eel in butter. An' when ye get them wi' their petticoats up and their legs open, they pull a face like they were drinkin' vinegar. Leastways — he turned to wink at Adam, — most of 'em do.

'It's all to do wi' anatomy,' he went on. 'You ask Adam there. It stands to reason that English anatomy don't apply to Brabant wenches, or Germans. So if ye want an easy way wi' the Dutch juffrouws ye must learn Dutch anatomy.'

'Anatomy?' Dan Fuller asked, wary of being hoaxed. 'What's anatomy?'

Rupert gave a superior sniff. 'Anatomy? It's the study of the body. In the same way as ye send out a troop o' dragoons to test the ground before a battle, so a knowledge o' anatomy is essential before ye battle wi' a wench — then ye don't waste time and effort, nor march into a sixteen-gun battery ye

didn't know about. That's why there's successful generals and successful gallants, and likewise unsuccessful ones, d'ye see?'

Dan Fuller did not entirely see. 'What's wrong wi' two-pennyworth o' geneva? That loosens their lacings fast enough.'

'Aye,' Rupert agreed, 'if ye're satisfied wi' a drink-sodden doxy in Gin Lane, but if ye've a taste for quality, ye can't do wi'out anatomy.'

The long column tramped on, every hour, every day, taking them further southward, towards Lorraine and the Moselle valley, into the hinterland of Europe where a British army had never trodden before. London and The Hague, satisfied that Marlborough was continuing southward, as he had announced, watched his progress with complacent interest. Paris, now equally convinced, ordered Villeroi to follow the English to the Moselle.

Kerpen, Kuhlseggen, and Meckenheim were behind them. The marching British had been joined by several foreign regiments now, and there were seven more battalions and twenty-one squadrons of Dutchmen waiting beyond Coblenz. Prussians, Hessians, and Danes were marching on converging routes, and Villeroi, alarmed, sent to Flanders for reinforcements. His brother general, Tallard, in Alsace, took up a position on the Rhine.

The French were puzzled. Was this unpredictable Englishman really marching for the Moselle? Or was it Alsace? Or Lorraine? Pest take the man! Their spies reported that Marlborough had marched on from Coblenz, sending his stores ahead of him southward on the Rhine, and had ordered a bridge to be thrown across the upper reaches of the same river near Philipsburg. A bridge was meant for crossing. That being so, it *must* be Alsace.

But the schemes and devices of the high command were beyond the ken or care of the remorselessly marching column winding through the woodlands of the Rhineland. At Sinzig Marlborough learned that his first quarry, Marsin

and the Bavarians, had been reinforced by 12,000 Frenchmen. Speed, now, was as important as secrecy. Leaving the infantry to make the best time that they could, he plunged on with the entire allied cavalry, through Nasstatten, Schwalbach, as far as Kastel — on the shortest route to Bavaria.

‘It could be a lot worse,’ was Rupert Dolling’s grudging appreciation of the Archbishopric of Mainz, and Adam agreed. Each day they had broken camp before dawn, and ridden hard to camp again by noon — as rapid a march as any army had attempted. The roads were execrable, and not improved by constant showers, but the trooped conditions were more tolerable than those of the infantry, miles behind, plodding through ankle-deep mud, shoulders hunched and soaked. In the towns and villages there were cheering, flower-throwing crowds, curious to see these strange British, who sang, winked and jested, drank Rhine wine like water — but paid in good coin. Even Rupert could not complain of the frauleins’ eager hospitality. Few wenches wished to be seen abroad unless they were on the arm of a British redcoat, and if the price was a little bewildering, well, the jaunty strangers would be gone tomorrow. For the men from the London stews and the Highland crofts it was a soldiers’ paradise. Come next Lent there might be an embarrassing legacy of fatherless brats among the fairytale villages of the archbishopric, but that was not the redcoats’ concern. By that time they’d be over the hills and far away.

Marlborough and his dragoons pressed on, southward and southward still, across river-strewn Hesse Darmstadt and into the wooded hills of the Odenwald, through Zwingenberg, Weinheim, and across the Neckar river at Ladenburg. Now they were on the great plain just south of Heidelberg, reminding them of Flanders, and they moved forward at a steady, mile-devouring canter. The infantry were two, perhaps three, days behind, marching determinedly from dawn to noon over mud-clogged roads, while

yet behind them 2,500 draught-horses slithered and strained to haul the mightiest artillery train ever to accompany a British army.

The dragoons passed through Wiesloch to the waved scarves of the townspeople, and then, two hours beyond, Adam, following a careful scrutiny of the sky, turned to Rupert with a bemused frown.

‘Rupe — I’ll take oath we’re either on the wrong road, or we’ve changed route.’

Rupert shrugged and pushed his hat off his brow. ‘It’s the perishin’ road — worse than a bucket in a well. A German innkeeper and a German road — they’re the crookedest in Europe.’

Adam was silent, but fifteen minutes later shook his head. ‘No. There was a better road than this running southward from Wiesloch — and we’ve been riding east for more than two hours.’

‘What’s two hours in two hundred miles? Likely Corporal John’s fond o’ riding — and the foot must be half a week behind. It’d be like him to move us in a circle so’s the boots and bayonets can overtake us.’

But before noon they had skirted the small town of Sinsheim and wheeled, squadron by squadron, into a camping ground already marked out by the commissioners — not only for horse, but for 30,000 foot, ordnance, and baggage. Adam nodded. ‘We’ve changed route,’ he repeated.

Captain White of the 1st Troop had trotted up to speak to Captain Shadwell, and the two sat knee to knee, talking quietly, nodding, shrugging. Two hundred yards away the Greys’ tents were rising. The rearguard had cantered in on mud-spattered horses, and the flaps and ruffles of a distant drum told of the quarter-picquets preparing to mount. ‘It’s like Hounslow Heath wi’out the pie stalls,’ observed Rupert.

An orderly had brought a summons from Brigadier Wood for all troop commanders to muster, and White and Shadwell walked off sedately. They

were gone thirty minutes and, when they returned, their composure was noticeably strained. Only seconds later, it seemed, the camp was flooded with the news.

The Danube! Corporal John's southward march was a feint — as was the bridge near Philipsburg — and he was aiming his first blow at the Franco-Bavarian army now at Ulm. In Westminster and The Hague the Duke's critics would raise a howl of anger and spite at the thought of the allied army being marched into the unknown abyss of central Europe without a word of explanation or apology, and the coffee-houses would be filled with excited gossip. If Marlborough failed in this hair-raising gamble he would lose not only his army, and almost certainly the war, but — there were licked lips — very likely his head also. In Paris there would be near-panic, with couriers flying pell-mell to the four corners of the French-held territories. Marlborough — *mauvais sujet* — was loose and marching for the Danube! Villeroi! Marsin! Tallard! *Aux armes! A bas Marlborough!*

'Spittin' saddle-bags!' Rupert scratched his head. 'The Danube. I've heard of it. Where is it?'

'It flows through Bavaria and Austria, then Hungary — and Vienna stands on it,' Adam said. 'Aye, it's a long way — and a long tramp home if the French break us, Rupe. Ye'll be fortunate to see Sawston again.' He could have bitten off his tongue.

'Ah —' Rupert turned from the horse he was wiping down. 'It seems to me —'

'Oats,' Adam replied, stooping for a leather bucket. 'It's oats issue of twelve pounds. Hay tomorrow.' He walked away with Rupert's speculative eyes following him.

They were not to linger in Sinsheim. Now that the gauntlet was down it was a race against time — and the French. Marlborough and his cavalry clattered

on, through orchards and wheatfields, meadows of grazing kine and tiny villages nestling among the tree-tasselled hills. Eppingen cheered as they passed, and Grossgartach, then they poured across the Neckar river for the second time to stand at Lauffen, in the allied dukedom of Wurtemberg. It was the first week of June, but with the weather still unseasonably wet. Men, horses, guns, and caissons rocked and slithered through the mud amid oaths and vilification. There was at least one consolation. If Tallard and his vengeful columns were hastening from Alsace to the succour of Bavaria, they would be having a far more difficult time struggling through the narrow defiles of the Black Forest. Aye, it was mildly encouraging to know that the enemy was even more uncomfortable than oneself.

Despite the need for speed, and despite the indifferent weather, Marlborough was concerned that his men should not be brought into line of battle exhausted and ill-conditioned. He would sooner lose a day, he told General Churchill — commanding the following infantry — than prejudice either men or beasts. Men taken sick on route were to be dispatched to suitable towns in carts, with surgeons and escorts, that they might rejoin the column later. Colonel Blood, commanding the ordnance train, was instructed to utilize local horses as much as possible in order to lighten the burden on the military animals — whose strength would be needed on the day of battle. This was one campaign which Corporal John had to win.

The dragoons were among hillside vineyards now, with occasional glimpses of remotely sited, steeple-towered castles, and ruins that might have seen Julius Caesars tramping legions pass on their way to do battle with the Gauls. Sodden banks of wild roses lined the road, and the clouds still frowned, but there was good beef broth with dumplings at noon, bread and a measure of wine. The horses were carefully inspected for glanders or flux, dried down and carefully fed and watered, loose shoes repaired by fields smithies, and

the animals tethered — all before officer or trooper might give attention to himself.

At Mundelsheim Prince Eugene of Savoy, first soldier of the Empire of Austria, and with a military reputation second only to Marlborough's, rode into the allied camp to confer with the Duke. The following day, at Gross Heppach, the entire cavalry force paraded for review.

The two commanders trotted slowly along the long lines of pawing horses, the standards and guidons lying listless in the damp air, but the fifes and hautboys trilling sweetly. The dragoon's mounts had been brushed to a silky perfection, the men's regimentals cleaned of mud and their harness sparkling with a gaiety that disputed the dullness of the day. 'Dragoons — have a care!' The muskets crashed in salute, the officers' hats were off, sweeping low, long wigs mingling with their horses' manes, and the massed drums rolling.

'I have heard much, my Lord Duke, of the English cavalry,' Eugene turned to his companion, 'and, upon my word, I find them the best appointed — the finest — I have yet seen. And this after your long and strenuous march. It is incredible.' He smiled. 'And although money will buy fine clothes and fine horses, it can never buy that lively air I see in every one of your troopers' faces.'

'He's a coaxer, is yon Eugene,' Rupert spoke from the corner of his mouth. 'Likely Corporal John'll double our pay.'

'Aye, and tripe an' trotters for breakfast,' suggested Dan Fuller. 'Od fester it — what wouldn't I give for some tripe and trotters?'

Rupert drew a quick breath. 'Ah — I'd thank ye for some good English cheese an' ale, maybe a brace o' fat pigeons, well basted, or some mutton steaks. And some more ale. Likely three or four cold chops'd be tasty, and ham — country smoked, mark ye — wi' bread, new-baked to make ye' mouth burn. Then, if there was more ale, I'd be satisfied till noon.'

‘Dragoons’ breakfast is skilly,’ Adam grinned, ‘good, wholesome oatmeal — as good as ye’ll get in any poorhouse or prison. What better could ye wish for?’

‘Aye, and after it’s been in a warehouse for three years, and on shipboard for two, it tastes like sweepings from a brickyard. I’ll wager some of it were milled for Cromwell’s war.’

The cavalry remained at Gross Heppach for a further three days to allow the struggling infantry an opportunity to close the gap, then it was Boots and Saddle again, on to Ebersbach, Uhingen, Goppingen, Gross Süssen, and finally Geislingen, immediately beyond which was a mountainous watershed transected by a narrow, wooded pass — necessary to be secured if the infantry and ordnance were to proceed beyond it in safety.

It was the most hazardous section of the long march, and the stumbling infantry would be helpless in the confined defile if a determined enemy force — even one battalion and a single battery — chose to dispute the column’s advance. Marlborough’s gamble could be shot to crimson rags in an hour.

Two hundred feet above the road — a sinuous, overhung track of clogging mud — the 2nd Troop kept watch. From a black sky the rain deluged continuously, with the dragoons soaked to the skin and shivering. Sodden boots oozed with every step, wrists and necks were stained with scarlet dye and hats misshapen. Cloaks and breeches clung wetly, hindering movement, while the linked horses stood with heads lowered, disconsolate, and dripping water.

‘Here they come —’ someone said, and the dragoons, with clammy hands shielding their eyes from the downpour, peered westward through the rain haze which reduced visibility to a few hundred yards.

‘Poor bastards,’ Rupert commented. Below them the advance guard of the infantry, a full company, plodded stolidly through the gelatinous mud, their

scarlet regimentals soaked to a mahogany and breeches mired to the thighs. The men marched mechanically, faces lowered from the driving rain, and each with his eyes on the clodded boots of the man in front. The officers led their horses.

‘Blue facings — the Guards,’ Adam muttered, ‘and, b’God — they’re marching in step!’

‘Dragoons — have a care! Unslung ye’ muskets!’ Captain Shadwell had wheeled on them. ‘Dragoons — advance ye’ muskets!’ His hat was off in salute, his face streaming as he bowed to the passing company, then, ‘Dragoons — a huzzah for Her Majesty’s Foot Guards!’

As the cheers reached them, the heads of the stumbling guardsmen lifted, shoulders straightened, and the wavering ranks closed. In the van an officer drew off his own hat and held it bravely aloft, then voiced an order. Through the rain came the frail music of a single flute, to be followed almost immediately by the singing voices of the tramping soldiers.

*‘Over the hills and over the main
To Flanders, Portugal and Spain,
Queen Anne commands and we’ll obey,
Over the hills and far away.’*

‘Poor bloody kerns,’ Rupert said again. ‘Ye’d think they’d just suffered a battle — instead of marching to one.’

Five hundred yards behind followed three more companies of Guards, as sodden and muddled as the first, muskets reversed and hats shapeless and ludicrous. As far as the eye could see, now, there was column after column of scarlet — the crimson facings of the line regiments, the buff of the Hollands, the white of the Scots, the grenadier caps of the Royal Irish and, beyond still, the serried ranks of the Dutch, their once white spatter-dashes and cross-belts filthy, the officers’ wigs bedraggled and trailing.

A single battalion of blue Prussians trudged past, succeeded by the regiments of Saxe Eyesnach, Wartensleben, Munster, Lunebourg, Zell, and four of Hesse. There was a long pause, with only the sound of the rain slashing into the trees and the yellow, churned road, and then a dragoon swore. 'The festerin' artillery!'

Through the haze to the westward trod the straining, steaming horses of the ordnance train — Clydesdales, Punches, Percherons — heads tossing and hooves flailing as, urged on by the snapping whips of the carters, they flung themselves into their trace-chains to haul the guns through the tenacious quagmire. Gunners and mattsrosses, fouled from head to foot, wrenched like madmen at the slithering caissons or the choked wheels of the 24-pounders — the guns which could scarce be recognized as those that at Ruremond had been burnished to a gleaming brilliance by their proud attendants.

The tented ammunition waggons, heavy with iron shot and powder barrels, wallowed, often axle-deep, pitching and swaying like ships in a violent sea. Pioneers, grotesquely slimed, battled with spades and planks and ropes to compel onwards any waggon which threatened to founder, risking a maiming, perhaps even death, as they scrabbled among the lashing hooves and the slithering, iron-bound wheels. The scene was vibrant with noise — the oaths of the struggling soldiers and the shouts of the officers, horses whinnying and blowing, the rattle of chains and axle-trees and the creak of tortured timber, while all the time the rain lashed down, ceaselessly, mercilessly.

Behind the ordnance train — perhaps several hours behind — would be more marching infantry. There would be the Royal Welsh, singing, as they always sang, the melancholy ballads of their native valleys, and there would be more sturdy Dutchmen, of Brabant, Guelderland, and Cleeve. Possibly, too, there would be the twenty-one squadrons of Danish cavalry, a

reinforcement which Corporal John was anxiously waiting for, and finally, labouring to keep up with the rearguard, would be the baggage and sutlers — many of the latter facing ruin if their stocks were spoiled by the inclement weather, for they could claim no compensation for campaign losses.

The dragoons mounted and turned away to climb the watershed and descend to the river on the far side, across which the pontooniers had flung a bridge of boats. The opaque, grey-green river surface, stippled by the falling rain, swirled weeds and broken foliage between its crumbling banks, and a flock of wild duck scattered skyward as the horses approached. Towards the westward the clouds were still leaden.

The Guards had already crossed, and were plodding on towards Urspring. The bridge now lurched beneath the clattering feet of the 10th of the Line. When they had passed, the dragoons would follow, to push on ahead to overtake the van, and onward still to resume their outguard duties. They were drawing near to the Bavarian border now, and Corporal John would soon be looking to his dragoons for first-hand information of the enemy's movements. Seek, observe, and report. They would perform swift marches, old Sergeant Weekes had said, negotiate rivers and swamps, and keep equal pace with the cavalry. Aye, they had done all that, and more. They'd form hollow square, fire by platoons, advance, engage, or retreat with the foot — or ride stirrup to stirrup with the best horse regiments in the combined armies. Aye, and they could do that, too. The French would know of it in due time.

The redcoats filed past and, more concerned with the swaying bridge beneath them, few troubled to raise their heads to glance at the troop of dragoons waiting at the riverside. But one man did — halted, stared, then reeled from the ranks to stand before them. It was Francis Hewar.

As soaked and smirched as his fellows, he stood with feet apart, swaying

slightly, a spontoon over his shoulder. His face was white and drawn, his eyes red-rimmed and hollow, while rat-tail wisps from his sodden wig clung wetly to his brow. He scanned the line of troopers. 'The 3rd Dragoons,' he croaked.

'The 3rd Dragoon Guards,' Captain Shadwell corrected, jealous of his regiment's seniority.

Francis Hewar peered, frowning, along the line, screwing up his eyes and apparently experiencing difficulty in focusing his vision. He coughed painfully, staggered a pace, then said, 'By God — I'll kill him. I swear it.'

Captain Shadwell swung from his saddle. 'Ye're sick, lad, and ye should be in a waggon —' He reached forward to grasp the other's shoulder, but Frances Hewar shrugged him off.

'I'll kill him, d'ye hear? And ye'll not stop me, sirrah. Nobody'll stop me — no, Marlborough himself'll not stop me, nor any hired Mohock —' He staggered again. 'He'll not shame the Hewars, and live. A lick-spittle ploughboy —?' He laughed bitterly, and then, with a choking sob, fell to his knees in the mud, his face in the skirt of Shadwell's coat.

'Aye, lad, ye'll have all the killing ye want,' Shadwell's voice was kindly, 'but a few days o' rest and hot broth in the surgeon's waggon is more to ye' needs at the moment.' An officer and two men of the 10th Foot were already lifting the ensign gently but firmly to his unsteady feet and, unresisting, with head sagging and eyes closed, he allowed himself to be led away.

'That was Francis Hewar,' Adam said, then added, spitefully. 'It seems he's bent on killing someone.'

Rupert became suddenly concerned with adjusting a spur leather. 'Aye,' he grunted, carelessly, 'it seems that.'

Chapter Thirteen

THE FORTIFIED TOWN of Donauwört lay in a crook of the river Danube at the junction with the Wörnitz, overlooked by the fortress hill of the Schellenberg — whereon the main force of 13,000 Bavarians and French were positioned behind strong defensive earthworks. Marlborough's intelligence had already told of the regiments of Béarn and Nectancourt among the French units, and ten Bavarian battalions — involving three from the regiment of the Elector's Guards, three from the regiment of the Prince Electoral, three from the regiment of Liselbourg, and a battalion of French grenadiers in Bavarian pay. There were also, it was reported, twelve squadrons of French and Bavarian cavalry and fifteen cannon.

The capture of Donauwört was impossible without first storming the heights of the Schellenberg — a hill of some two miles in circumference with a flattened top of a half-mile across. To the southward the hill descended gently to the town walls, but on the northern aspect was strongly bastioned, not only with an old star-shaped fort erected by Gustavus Adolphus many years before, but by several days of frantic work by the French engineers, which had provided entrenchments, curtain and ditch, supported by earth-covered fascines. The French and Bavarian defenders were considerably outnumbered by the approaching allied army, but the deficiency was balanced by the strength of the position and the fact that the bulk of the Franco-Bavarian army was already marching from its Dillingen camp to relieve the situation. Corporal John had to attack — and win — quickly, and the Schellenberg in determined hands was capable of defying him for days, and mauling him badly.

Fifteen miles of execrable road still separated him from the town when, at three in the morning of July 2nd, a picked force of 5,850 men — sixteen battalions — hurried through the swirling mist towards the enemy. Ahead of them, already prowling the Schellenberg approaches, were 400 dragoons.

“‘Od perish it,’ Rupert muttered, ‘it’s quiet — and stinkin’ cold.’ The 3rd Regiment, dismounted, was positioned along the fringe of the woodlands which lay less than a half-mile from the enemy lines. To the eastward the sky’s blackness was turning to grey.

‘Ah — there’ll be noise enough, and ye’ll not want it warmer.’ Adam’s chuckle was artificial. His belly was twisting and there was a taste of ashes in his mouth. He’d known the feeling before — on his first eve-of-battle, on the banks of the Jaar river in Flanders. What had the Scots trooper said? Don’t forget there’s many a white-coat over yonder who’s thinking the same as yourself. Aye — that, he supposed, was some sort of consolation, but it didn’t seem to quell his squirming belly.

The mutter of conversation in the ranks had increased, and Sergeant Horobin’s low voice ordered silence. There were sharp-eared French picquets within a few hundred paces, and there was no sense in inviting a volley of musket fire. Not that the enemy was complacently unaware of the English. The indistinct hump of the Schellenberg was peppered with glow-worm specks of light — cooking fires and artillerymen’s braziers — and for the past hour the troopers had heard the faint but continual sounds of military activity. The enemy was awake, and waiting.

The sun rose, flooding the cornfields which climbed, undulating, to the eastward, and in Donauwört a bell was chiming the hour. They could see the defences of the Schellenberg clearly now, the trench lines and raw soil of mounded parapets, the cold glitter of bayonets and the flags of France and Bavaria. They could hear, too, the clatter of spades and mattocks as the

enemy still laboured to strengthen the earthworks of the perimeter and the emplacements of three batteries of cannon which commanded the open approaches and the woodlands in which the dragoons lay.

At nine o'clock a party of general officers with their mounted escort rode through the dragoons' lines to examine the enemy's disposition. Corporal John was there, immaculate, courteous, calm — and Adam's querulous fears suddenly fled. With the Duke in command, everything would be all right. Among the other belaced figures he recognized the generals Luke and Pallant, Lumley, and the 3rd's own Major-General Wood. Aye, everything was all right. There was a distant tattoo as, observing the sparkle of the group of officers, a French battery in the hill-top fort fired a tentative salvo. The Englishmen snapped shut their telescopes and retired unhurriedly.

The morning passed, and then the afternoon, with no sight of the advance guard of infantry and artillery which were hurrying to attack. Marlborough was aware that the main Franco-Bavarian army expected to arrive in Donauwört on the morrow, and that Marshal Tallard, with his massive French force, was already at Strasbourg and about to plunge through the Black Forest. The timing was critical. Whatever the hour, Corporal John must storm the Schellenberg before the end of today.

At four in the afternoon a cornet of horse tugged his saliva-flecked mount to a rearing halt alongside the talking throng of dragoon officers. 'They've crossed the Wörnitz! The 1st Guards, two battalions o' Royal Scots, the 23rd Welsh, the 37th, and eleven battalions o' Hanoverians and Hessians. The enemy's set fire to the village o' Berg and evacuated it, and Colonel Blood's batteries will be firing from the same hill into the Schellenberg.' He paused for breath. 'His Grace's compliments to General Wood — the dragoons to cut fascines and to prepare to march to the attack with the infantry as soon as it forms line of battle. The enemy's positions are to be carried before dark!'

There was a ragged cheer from the dragoons within earshot, weary of the long waiting, and even the normally inflexible features of Captain Shadwell broke into a smile. The long vigil was over. The weeks of marching, the atrocious roads and drenching rain, the endless hours of speculation — all were over. Corporal John had brought them here, through nine states and across fifty-seven rivers — for just this moment.

Shadwell's brief smile had faded. 'Dragoons — have a care! Unlink ye' horses and prepare to mount!' He walked his own beast along the front of the troop. 'Mount!' The troopers rose in their saddles. The troop guidon was ridden to the front, the drums and hautboys to the rear. Fifty yards to their left the regimental colours and the standard of England were already advanced, curling and snapping in the breeze, and General Wood's tall chestnut charger, held by an orderly, was stamping impatiently.

From the north-westward — having left the road from Ebermergen — Marlborough's column was now pouring along the fringe of the woodlands to form line of battle. Almost simultaneously Colonel Blood's batteries in the charred village of Berg opened fire, and the dragoons could see the spouts of earth and debris as the heavy shot ploughed into the enemy fortifications. The French guns, too, flashed and roared, belching black smoke and canister. The surgeons were laying out their instruments — saws, forceps, probes, cauteries, splints — and rolling back their cuffs.

Trotting now, the infantry were forming line — one of dragoons, four of foot, followed by another of horse, with, in the extreme van, fifty grenadiers of the Guards with slow-matches already smouldering. The Duke of Marlborough turned to his staff officers. 'It is my plan, gentlemen, to concentrate our immediate attack on the angle between the fort and the wood. If, with our first assault, we are able to carry the defences, so much the better. If we are denied, then we shall hold our ground and draw to ourselves the

attention of the largest share of the enemy, so that our main body, when it arrives in two or three hours, will find the town's lines only thinly defended, and will succeed where we have failed.' He paused to brush a speck of dust from his sleeve. 'And now, gentlemen, we shall take our steel to the enemy, if you please.'

The officers dispersed to their horses, General Goor, at the head of the Hollanders, drew his sword, waved it aloft, then pointed it at the ominous mass of the Schellenberg. In perfect unison the six lines of allied battalions tramped forward, with muskets shouldered, drums thundering, flutes trilling.

'Keep station!' Shadwell snarled. Ahead of the dragoons the grenadiers were marching as if on parade, grenado pouches open. Beneath their feet the ground was springy from the long rains, the thick grass mingled with purple heather and harebells. Rupert's hat was rakishly over his eyes. 'Dragoons — have a care! Draw ye' swords!'

The dragoons raised a cheer, to be drowned by an erupting roar as the French batteries opened fire. Ahead, the enemy entrenchments had disappeared behind the drifting pall of black smoke pitted with gun flashes. Clods of earth and stones filled the air, and there were horses fallen, kicking. The grenadiers in the van no longer marched shoulder to shoulder — there were great gaps torn in their line and the grass was littered with broken, contorted objects of scarlet and blue. The drums and fifes had not paused.

Adam felt no fear. The French canister was scything down the infantry of the centre in swaths. Sergeant Horobin had gone with the first salvo, and so had Hodder Roberts, the Hertfordshire lad, but he could still see the well-tailored shoulders of Captain Shadwell, and Rupert was still beside him. A fog-like bank of smoke, acrid in the nostrils, rolled to meet them, thinning as the breeze plucked at it, and he noted — with a strange, detached satisfaction — the English shot from the batteries in Berg hurtling into the hillside ahead,

shattering palisades and earthworks. He could see a waggon afire, and white-coated infantrymen scattering down the slope to swell the numbers in the perimeter entrenchments — and then the enemy batteries vomited again, at point-blank range.

Adam's horse reared as another, wounded and terrified, blundered into it and then wrenched away, uncontrollable. Saddles everywhere were empty, and men, bloodied and blinded, grovelled among the flailing hooves. The long lines of red and blue wavered, then came on, with the French and Bavarian infantry now pouring steady volleys of musket fire into the approaching battalions. The grenadiers in the van had been reduced to ten men with an officer, but they were mounting the last steep slope before the enemy fascines and were breaking into a run. Behind them the bayonets came through the smoke, English, Dutch, Hanoverian, Hessian, line after marching line, the flags curling and the men roaring hoarsely as the officers exhorted them on with shouts inaudible above the chaos of shot and thundering drums.

With only thirty paces to go, Adam kicked his horse up the incline. There was a ditch immediately ahead, but shallow at this point, beyond which was the enemy parapet, of basketed earth, timber, and buried fascines. The grenadiers were already across the ditch, hurling their grenades, and behind them the multicoloured sea of infantry and horse poured in.

From a distance of only a few feet the massed muskets of the defenders flamed yet again, clawing down whole companies from the ditch bank and tumbling the mangled redcoats into writhing piles. But men were across now — guardsmen, dismounted dragoons, blue-coated Dutchmen — slashing, thrusting, scrabbling at the parapet for footholds. A musket exploded almost in Adam's face, and he reeled back, half blinded. His horse sank beneath him, shot through the throat and vomiting blood, and Adam sprawled, but Rupert, also unhorsed, hauled him to his feet with an oath.

‘Forward, dragoons!’ Captain Shadwell had mounted the parapet, and a dozen troopers had followed. A wall of bayonets swept them back, hacking, slashing. Guardsmen wept with angry frustration, tearing at the muzzles of the enemy muskets with their hands, fighting with fists and nails, thrusting with sword or bayonet at the equally determined Frenchmen who opposed them.

Adam’s eyes were stinging and his breath coming in short pants, his lungs filled with the caustic powder smoke that swirled about them. The sweating face of an enemy grenadier, cavern-mouthed, rose before him, and his sword scythed, shearing through the laced mitre cap and jarring his wrist as the steel met bone. The grenadier fell, crimson-masked and jerking. A boy drummer of the Royals, clambering frantically behind, laughed excitedly, then toppled with a musket ball in his chest, still grimly clutching his drum.

‘Stand to receive —!’ someone shouted, and Adam turned in time to see, beyond the parapet, line after line of newly-arrived Bavarian infantry rolling down the grassed slope of the Schellenberg towards them, bayonets fixed and muskets aimed. With Rupert and a score of others he sprang into the ditch, crouching, just as the long ranks rippled from end to end with yellow flame and a thousand musketballs cut down the redcoats still surging over the parapet. Another blanket of choking, black smoke enveloped them. The Bavarian drums were beating the charge, and Rupert, struggling to reload his weapon, swore bitterly. ‘‘Od perish it — we’re broken —!’

The Bavarians, in solid phalanx, disciplined and irresistible, came like a grey-white flood against the decimated van of the allied foot, driving back the infantry and dragoons in ragged, defiant groups. The redcoats, many carrying their wounded, loaded, fired, and reloaded with the cold determination born of frustration and despair but, in dispersed groups, many lacking officers or even sergeants, and with the French artillery again sweeping the corpse-

strewn field with murderous grape, there could be no standing.

Adam clutched at a gouged forearm — a hurt he had no knowledge of receiving — the blood trickling over his knuckles and congealing stickily. Rupert spat. ‘It’s the long tramp home ye spoke of, Adam lad — if we get off this festerin’ hill alive.’

But Rupert was wrong. Through the smoke haze behind them appeared, magically, the scarlet and gold ranks of the 1st Guards, fewer than before, but re-formed and marching with precision behind a shot-torn standard, the drums rolling steadily and resolutely and the steel-tipped muskets unwavering. The swords of the officers — pitifully few — were raised, glittering ruddily in the glow of the setting sun.

‘The Guards!’ Rupert shouted, his eyes suddenly tearful. ‘The glorious, foot-slogging bastards!’ They scrambled clear of the remorselessly tramping feet, cheering deliriously and careless of the hail of shot from the French lines.

Behind the Guards, yet again, were streaming the bluecoats of the Dutch service, perhaps lacking the drilled symmetry of the Englishmen, but stolidly determined, loading, ramming, and priming as they marched, then shouldering with a loud ‘Hoezee!’

The Bavarian first line halted, raised muskets, and fired, then reloaded as the second and third lines stamped on, but the Guards were not to be denied this time by mere musketry. They came savagely forward, and the Bavarians for the first time, faltered. Then, with a crash that the waist-stripped gun crews in Berg could hear, the two formations collided.

‘Cut ’em to rags, ye pipe-clayed clods!’ Rupert yelled. The enemy ranks shivered, spilling white-coated infantrymen in all directions as the Guards drove deep into them. The Bavarians were running now, their well-drilled lines melting, disintegrating into chaos, with the Englishmen herding them

mercilessly at bayonet point into the Schellenberg entrenchments. Behind the Guards the Hollanders followed, wheeling to right and left to meet any flanking counter-attack which might be launched from the defence lines to the westward which, as yet unapproached, were detaching company after company to throw against the new allied thrust.

With the Bavarians retreating beyond the torn parapet, a new storm of musket fire and flung grenades was again taking a vicious toll of the leading platoons, and the well-served French ordnance, with an unobscured field of fire, recommenced volley after volley of mutilating canister with ghastly accuracy. The gun-smoke billowed down the hill and across the plain, clinging to hollows and shrouding the thickly scattered dead, the crawling maimed, the litter of shattered drums and muskets. But the Guards were standing. Scarcely an officer survived, and the crimson-sashed sergeants were shouting the orders, the imperturbable guardsmen firing and reloading by platoons to maintain a continuous counter-fire on the entrenched Bavarians.

‘They’ll not live!’ Adam snarled. ‘That canister’ll massacre them if they’re not supported!’ With Rupert and a throng of others he stumbled across the cluttered grassland towards the woods where, he guessed, the battalions would be re-forming to advance again. He could see the gilded tips of regimental standards behind a swell in the heathland, sheltered from enemy shot, and turned towards them, surprised at his own bitter anger. He wanted — *wanted* — to throw himself into the bloody mêlée of the entrenchments, to claw and club and thrust —

‘Margery! Dolling! D’ye suppose ye’re strolling in Brompton Garden?’ It was Captain Shadwell, hatless and clutching a dragoon’s musket and bayonet. ‘Get in the saddle, curse ye!’ A score of riderless horses had been gathered by pioneers and carters, and Adam reached for the bridle of a dapple mare carrying the housings of the Scots Dragoons. A confusion of regiments

surrounded him — the white facings of the 3rd, the blue of the 2nd, the yellow of the 5th. General Wood was there, on a dragoon's cob, and General Lumley, sword in hand and waiting impatiently for the cavalymen to form line. Satisfied at last, he raised his blade above his head, and the serried troops of English horse moved forward towards the Schellenberg.

As they breasted the rising ground which hid them briefly from the enemy they could see that the re-formed companies of the 23rd Welsh and the 37th were advancing, cheering, ahead of them, and to their right the Hessians were wheeling to follow. Westward, beyond the marshes of the Wörnitz river, the sun was plunging, gory, towards the horizon. Yet again the French guns flared in the failing light, raking the heathland with a barrage of maiming death, and the Welsh cheers faded. Caught in the crossfire of canister and musketry, the trotting 23rd were suddenly a shattered, reeling rabble, the survivors stumbling dazedly over the blood-drenched bodies of their fallen comrades. Behind them, undismayed, the Hampshiremen of the 37th tramped on, staggered as they met the full fury of the storm of shot, but struggled forward, cursing, to join the Guards in the smoking holocaust of the Schellenberg approaches.

Into the valley of destruction the horse thundered, directly towards the angled bastion around which the bulk of the enemy was now concentrated — as Corporal John had gambled. Of the picked troops that had opened the attack, however, possibly a third had already fallen, and his main army, under the command of Prince Louis of Baden, was not yet reported in sight. If the Schellenberg had not fallen by dark he must call off his attack until dawn — and at dawn the Franco-Bavarian army from Dillingen would be thrown into balance against him. Already the British and allied battalions which were absorbing the full venom of the fortress's ordnance had done more than flesh and blood might be expected, and were dangerously near to breaking for the

second time. His cantering squadrons represented his last throw of the dice.

Knee to knee, the dragoons jingled through the wreathing smoke, across the pocked and shot-scarred turf where the Welsh and Hampshire soldiers, Guards and Hollanders lay in tangled heaps, where several platoons of Royal Scots sprawled on their faces in drilled lines, torn down by grape as they marched. The horses were lathered and breathing hard, for they had been heavily ridden for several hours, but they were willing enough, and would gallop until they dropped.

Adam's throat was as parched as leather and hoarse from shouting meaningless obscenities. His hands — one gripping his reins, the other his sword — were sweating, filthy and bloodied, his eyes weeping and sore. I'm Adam Margery, he bawled — knowing his voice to be lost in the multifarious roar of battle — I'm Adam Margery, a surgeon's apprentice! He laughed crazily, hugging the horse beneath him with his knees and tensing for the scything hail of canister which at any moment would vomit from those ruthless Schellenberg batteries.

He had lost sight of Rupert — somewhere to his rear, he thought — and most of the faces about him were strange, but there rode Lumley, and General Wood, and Captain Shadwell — good old Shadwell —

He could see the nearest battery clearly — five 60-pounders, he would hazard — behind its embrasured earthwork, and the swarming ants that served the reeking monsters — the gunners crouched over the breeches, the toiling, frenzied mattrasses, and the pioneers with their wheelbarrows of shot scurrying to and from the ammunition waggons in the rear. He could see the laced coat of the master gunner, running from gun to gun, then raising his arm —

There was a paroxysm of flame and smoke — black smoke rolling like hideous surf down the hill. He saw the grass flatten, and then there were

horses screaming, flying clods, and dishevelled, red-coated figures grovelling, crawling, among the chaos of churning hooves. A riderless horse with a ripped belly and entrails trailing whirled madly, snapping, and Adam's own mount shied, almost unseating him. He saw General Wood slumped over his cob's neck, swaying, with both hands pressed to his chest, but Lumley still rode, standing in his stirrups and shouting. Where was Rupert? Hands clawed at his leg, and he had a momentary vision of a crimsoned, jawless face, gushing blood, before his mare tore him away, trampling and sprawled, twisted shapes of tattered scarlet and blue, into the clear grassland beyond.

He was unscathed. The little mare was plunging ahead gamely, and he did not dare look over his shoulder even to seek Rupert. There was blood on his breeches and the flying skirt of his coat, but he was unharmed — and his apprehension of a few moments ago was gone, replaced with an exultation fired by the sudden fact of his survival. He was alive, wasn't he? By God, he was alive! Alive! Other fools were shattered by musket balls, mangled by grape — but not Adam Margery. Was Grandfather Ralph's Naseby like this? He — Adam — would have as good a story to tell when the wind rattled the casements of a winter's night.

Now they were among scattered infantrymen reeling away from the fighting, the wounded and the fugitive, some with a cursing cheer for the passing squadrons, other sullen and whitefaced, hurrying for the safety of the woodlands. The smoke was fog-like, acrid.

Hard against the ditch the 1st Guards still stood, flanked by the Hollanders, the 23rd and the 37th of the Line, and behind the earthworks the lilies of France and the eagles of Bavaria still flew provocatively. The defenders were firing stubbornly and, partly concealed by their palisades and the ubiquitous smoke, it was difficult to gauge the extent of their injuries. The English battery on the Ebermergen road was still hurtling round-shot into the hillside

positions and the allied infantry still crashing volley after volley across the corpse-clogged fosse — sometimes a little raggedly, with sergeants commanding companies and private men leading depleted platoons — but surely having some effect on the defiant defences. Even as the dragoons swept into the battle line, a flood of enemy infantry poured down the hillside again — the soiled white coats of the Liselbourg, Fonboisar and Béarn regiments and the nodding mitre caps of the veteran Bavarian grenadiers — in a determined sortie to break the formations of the British and Dutch for a second time. If the redcoats could be flung back just once more, they could never re-form and attack again before dark — and tomorrow fresh battalions would be streaming into Donauwört, infantry, guns, cuirassiers — against whom the jaded troops of Milord Marlborough would shatter themselves completely.

‘Dragoons, have a care. Make ready ye’ links. Clear ye right foot o’ the stirrup.’ The proximity of two thousand enemy bayonets, only seconds away, could not compel the urbane Shadwell to curtail the correct sequence of orders, or even to hurry his voice. ‘Dismount and stand at ye’ horses’ heads. March clear of ye’ horses and advance ye’ muskets. Check ye’ primings and present.’ The advancing feet of the French were thirty yards distant. ‘Fire!’

Adam fired, heard the roaring cheers of the Guards to his right, saw the golden lilies above the musket smoke totter and, as the smoke cleared, the tangled carnage among the leading enemy files. He was loading again, ramming, priming, as the Guards, the Welsh, and Hampshiremen swept forward to take their steel to the momentarily confused French. ‘Dragoons, have a care. Fix ye’ bayonets.’

There was another shout, wild, sobbing. ‘The Imperialists! The Imperialists are with us!’ A weeping boy soldier flung an arm to the westward. ‘God in stinkin’ Heaven — d’ye see? The festerin’, bleedin’ Imperialists —!’

The sun was setting, red-gold, beyond the Wörnitz river, and the ruins of Berg were a silhouette against which the flashes of Colonel Blood's battery could still be seen. Between Berg and the walls of Donauwört the broad, shadowy plain was filled with marching battalions in full line of assault, Austrian infantry — the thousands of white gaiters and crossbelts flickering and the bayonets like silver wheat above the massed, trotting formations. Flying batteries were careering, pell-mell, down the hillside, and on the far flank cavalry squadrons were deploying. The Ebermergen road, where it breasted the skyline of the hill, was vomiting soldiers, and several Austrian guns, already halted and unlimbered, were spitting probing volleys at the Schellenberg entrenchments only six hundred yards away.

In Gustavus' fort the French artillerymen, near exhaustion, with bleeding hands and torn nails, were frantically prising their guns around to meet the new threat, but the leading Imperialist foot were already storming the westward earthworks, held only by the thinly-spread Nectancourt regiment — all others having been progressively withdrawn to counter the sustained attacks of the British and Dutch. There was a brief musketry exchange, a last, defiant salvo from the fort's desperate battery, and then the Austrians were cascading over the French palisades, scattering the outnumbered defenders and pushing, almost unopposed, up the face of the Schellenberg.

From the battle-worn British and Dutch troops there rose a savage roar. Generals and guardsmen, dragoons and drummer boys, were waving their hats, shouting, blaspheming, snarling. They needed no bidding from Corporal John. They knew. The drums thundered, the colour guards with their shredded damask standards paced to the fore, and sixteen battalions of vengeful infantrymen rolled like a flood-tide towards the French, over the ditch, into the trenchworks. General Lumley was waving on the dragoons, and they raced forward with bayonets levelled.

The French and Bavarian Foot, already wavering before the angry advance of the British redcoats, saw the whole battle line of Hollanders, Hessians, and Hanoverians suddenly convulse, then deluge, multicoloured and pitiless, towards them. On their left flank the Imperialists, behind the French guns now, were almost upon them, pouring out of a blood-red sky. The stunned, white-coated mass stumbled back, fired a half-hearted volley, then broke, spilling across the darkening hillside, running for the river, the marshes — anywhere — to escape the inevitable massacre.

‘Kill — kill and destroy!’

‘Dooden! Dooden!’

Adam, as vehement and un pitying as the rest, flung himself up the slope, his weariness gone. He was a savage, blood-lusty animal, slashing, stabbing, clubbing. There were Frenchmen and Bavarians everywhere, throwing down their muskets and crying for quarter, scrabbling beneath waggons or, like cornered rats, fighting hopelessly. The redcoats battered them down, trod over their writhing bodies, seeking, slaying, hate-filled. An ammunition waggon exploded with a roar, raining flaming fragments and vomiting a column of dense black smoke skyward, and a camp-woman, terrified, running with dishevelled head lowered and skirts raised, screeched as a bayonet ripped into her, then fell kicking and retching.

Adam scrambled on, eager to kill. He was against the shot-gouged wall of the fort now, shimmering in the garish light from the burning waggon and piled about with corpses. This, then, was the gun emplacement which had caused havoc among the advancing redcoats — had scythed down Hodder Roberts and Sergeant Horobin, and torn a thousand others to crimson ruin. He turned away, peering through the half light towards the river, glinting dully — then halted as, from a few yards away, a voice shouted.

‘Non, non — mon ami —!’

He turned. In a shadowed angle of the wall a French artillery officer stood, half crouching, his pale face above his steinkirk reflecting the flicker of the distant flames. Before him was a dragoon with sword lifted. The officer, backing away, raised a pistol and fired, spinning the dragoon about and flinging him to his knees. Adam's own musket shot struck the officer in the chest. The man slid slowly down the wall and lay with his face to the earth.

From habit. Adam reached for his cartouche box to reload, but a few feet away the fallen dragoon was struggling unsuccessfully to rise, panting. Adam placed down his weapon with a muttered curse, not wishing to be detained — then cursed again at his own lack of charity. He eased the dragoon to a sitting position, his back against the fort wall. The man's neck-cloth and waistcoat were drenched with blood, his face puckered with pain.

'I'll get ye to a surgeon,' Adam said. He rose to his feet. Within yards a troop of Austrian hussars clattered past, and there was a continuous fusillade of musket shots towards the river. Plague take it! There'd be few surgeons on the Schellenberg yet — and darkness had almost fallen. It would be a long tramp across the cluttered battlefield with another over his shoulder —

The dragoon raised his head. 'In God's name —' his voice was hoarse, '— not a surgeon. Not a surgeon. I can't, ye see —?'

Adam laughed. 'Dammit, man — there's naught to fear from a surgeon — and ye'll need to be hurt before ye're better.' He knelt again. 'Ye' bleeding will have to be staunched —' Resigning himself, he fumbled at the other's neck-cloth. The dragoon coughed, clutched at Adam's hands, then fell back, defeated.

Adam unravelled the neck-cloth, peeled open the waistcoat, and opened the neck of the blood-soaked shirt. The wound, it seemed, was close against the right armpit. If he could make a pad of rolled linen, clamp it firmly under the arm —

He checked, sucking in his breath. His searching fingers were cupping the unmistakable, pouting belly of a woman's breast.

For a long moment he could not believe what his trembling hand told him. Behind him, far distant, men were shouting, murder intent, hunting down the fleeing remnants of the French and Bavarian infantry, stabbing, shooting — blood-hungry animals. The shadowed wall of the fort was a tiny sanctuary, unnoticed, immune. He stared down at the wide, pain-filled eyes, meeting his mutely, appealing. Then those eyes closed and the head slumped.

He climbed to his feet again. A trooper of the 2nd Royal Scots Dragoons — aye — plain red coat wi' blue facings and brass buttons, white waistcoat. It couldn't be true. He swallowed. But the fellow was bleeding badly. He knelt yet again, half dragged, half carried the sagging form into the broken walls of the fort and laid it carefully between the cold, silent cannon. There were two corpses against a far wall, comically twisted. He ripped the saturated shirt from throat to waist, tearing off his own neckcloth to provide a dressing. The pistol ball had ploughed between chest and arm, lacerating both and, his probing fingers suggested, probably splintered a rib or two.

There was a tub of water against the parapet — it was too dark to see how foul. In the half light he swabbed the wound and strapped the arm, with an intervening pad, firmly to the body. It was the best he could do. Satisfied, he descended to the wall again, to where the artillery officer lay, groped among the dead man's pockets until he found what he sought — a brandy flask, half filled. All French officers, he had been told, carried brandy flasks. The noise of conflict had moved to the river bank, and the area about the fort was deserted save for the silent dead and the sputtering wreck of the burned-out ammunition wagon. He returned to the fort.

The dragoon still lay inert on the stone-flagged floor, but breathing steadily. Adam drew off his own coat and rolled it for a pillow, then forced the neck of

the brandy flask between the clenched teeth. There was a gasping cough and a deep, sighing breath. The eyes opened, fluttered, then closed again. Adam raised himself on his knees.

A woman in dragoon's regimentals? In Bavaria? It couldn't be —

He took a mouthful of brandy. There was one way of making sure. He unfastened the waistband of the dragoon's breeches, but a hand clasped his wrist.

'Don't trouble yesel', It was a whisper. 'Ye'll only find what ye suspect. I'm a woman.'

Adam fumbled for the brandy flask. 'Aye,' she said, 'and I'll have another mouthful o' that.' She began to pull herself to a sitting position, but he restrained her. 'Lie quiet,' he suggested, 'or ye'll start bleeding again.' He gave her the flask and she took a long draught, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Well, cully,' she winced, 'now ye know. And now ye know, p'raps ye'll button my shirt.'

To the Queen.

Camp at Ebermergen, July 3rd, 1704

Madam,

I most humbly presume to inform your Majesty that the success of our first attack on the enemy has been equal to the justice of the cause your Majesty has so generously and zealously espoused. Mr Secretary Harley will have the honour to lay the relation of yesterday's action before your Majesty, to which I shall crave leave humbly to add that our success is in a great measure owing to the particular blessing of God on the unparalleled courage of your troops. I shall endeavour to improve this happy beginning to your Majesty's glory, and the benefit of your allies, being with the greatest zeal and submission,

Madam,

Your Majesty's most dutiful and most obedient subject and servant. M.

Chapter Fourteen

AS THE LAST of the sun's light faded from the horizon, the rain began to fall in torrents.

Corporal John had unleashed his cavalry, and throughout the night the sabres rose and fell, pursuing the scattering French and Bavarians across the Schellenberg and along the river bank. A bridge of boats was swamped under the weight of desperately flying soldiers, throwing hundreds into the river, while others plunged among the reeds of the Danube marshland, or eastward, seeking the darkness of the hills. The troopers followed remorselessly, killing, killing, until, at dawn, their sword arms were fatigued and their own savage lust exhausted.

On the Schellenberg and the battlefield of the approaches, the surgeons worked under improvised shelters, the endless stream of cursing maimed being carried in from the rainswept field by soaked and weary infantrymen. By noon tomorrow four thousand wounded would be counted, and would begin the painful, twenty-mile journey to the waiting lazarets in Nördlingen — a journey scores would not survive. Beyond the reach of the surgeons' flickering lanterns, on the sodden plain, fifteen hundred lay dead — guardsmen, infantry of the line, grenadiers, dragoons, the men that Marlborough had chosen to lead his assault, the flower of his army — and of the British engaged, one in three had fallen.

In the emplacement on the hill Adam and his companion were secure against the elements. Groping in the darkness of the fort's vault-like interior, he had found first a lantern, then an officer's camp bed, blankets, a bag of biscuits and a canteen of rough wine. Come daylight he might find more —

but then, daylight would bring other problems.

The lash of rain beyond the heavy walls obliterated all other noise. In the yellow gleam of the lantern he studied the woman's face, composed now, and sleeping. Aye, now that he knew, it was a feminine face, but with the hair tucked up under a dragoon's hat he would not have given it a second glance — and, he supposed, her modest breasts would not be apparent under a heavy scarlet coat. Aye, incredible though it might seem, given a swagger and a masculine repertoire of oaths, she could pass as a dragoon.

But why? Who was she? A sutler wench or a camp doxy with an unwomanly desire to kill? And how had she acquired her regimentals — and feigned her way into the ranks of the Scots Dragoons? It was all very curious, but Adam was aching with fatigue and his powers of comprehension were numbed. He lay his head on his arms and slept.

He awoke, by habit, at the reveille hour of five, but there were no drums beating, no sound beyond the embrasure through which the dawn sunlight streamed. The rain had stopped, and there were birds singing.

For a few moments he lay musing, only half aware of his surroundings, then, guiltily, he sat up. The woman, already awake, eyed him from the camp bed silently.

Adam, stiff in every limb, but much refreshed, yawned, then walked to the embrasure. 'It looks like being a bright day,' he said. 'Likely Corporal John'll not have reveille beaten, but there'll be pioneers about later, piling the dead.' He glanced down at her. 'Now there's light, I'll look at ye' wound.'

She made no comment, but winced as he eased the congealed dressing from her chest. 'It could be a deal worse,' he decided. The pectoral muscle and the inside of the arm were badly scored, and bruising extended across the ribs, but there was little he could do except administer a clean dressing. In the vault below he found sufficient material from which to tear binding strips

and, in the officer's valise, a dubiously clean shirt to exchange for the woman's blood-clotted one. When he had finished tending her, they sat in silence, gnawing biscuit and sharing the canteen of vinegary wine.

'Ye're sweating to ask me,' she said at last, 'so I'll tell ye. My real name's Welsh. Mrs Christian Welsh — but known in the regiment as Kit Davies, Dragoon.'

He stared at her, disbelieving. 'Ye mean — ye're serving as a man?'

'Aye,' she nodded, 'and have been for nigh two years.' She stared back at him, her lower lip defiantly out-thrust. 'That's not all. Before that I were in the infantry, wi' Dutch William.'

Adam drained the canteen. 'But why? Why should a woman want to tramp an' fight with the army? Even suffering's better — if ye insist on following the scarlet —'

She laughed humourlessly. 'That's so, but not any scarlet — only my husband, Dick Welsh. He were honest enough, but trusting — and weak-headed in his cups. He were cheated into enlisting and drafted to Flanders. I ain't seen hide nor hair of him since.' She looked thoughtful for a moment, then went on.

'We were milliners, Dick an' me — stockings, garters, gloves, mittens, handkerchiefs —' she laughed again, then sang,

*'Here is an English coney fur,
Russia has no such stuff
Which to keep your fingers warm,
Excels your sable muff.'*

She was grinning at Adam with half-closed eyes, then, 'Aye, so I followed him. It weren't too difficult, and in time it comes second nature — the 'cautions, I mean. But I were a rosy-cheeked lad, soft-skinned as the youngest drummer boy, and a sergeant took a fancy to me.'

For almost a minute she sat in silence, staring at the square of sky through the embrasure. ‘It were strange,’ she said at last, musingly. ‘He thought I were a boy — and there were times when I was desperate hungry for a man, I c’n tell ye. He were a cunning one — and finding me alone one night he fondled me, and I were hot wi’ wanting. I were all but revealing meself and dropping my breeks for him — but instead I put a sword through him.’

Adam’s startled expression amused her, and she chuckled. ‘Ah, he lived, and there were a deal o’ trouble, but the sergeant were known for his habits, and in the end I were discharged, more’n likely to keep the matter quiet. Then, seein’ that I still hadn’t found Dick Welsh, I enlisted in Hay’s Scots.’

Adam studied her, incredulous. ‘But how — in a regiment o’ men —?’

‘Aye, I’ll not deny there’s been awkward times, but I’ve grown expert in not betraying meself — to be sure there’s many men who are a mite shy o’ stripping before their fellows, and there’s always ways if ye’re determined enough. Anyway —’ she shrugged and winced, ‘— I done it. This —’ she indicated her bandaged chest, ‘— were always something I couldn’t provide for. I knew it might happen one day.’ She transferred her gaze to Adam. ‘D’ye suppose I can stay a dragoon?’

Adam rubbed his chin, then grunted. ‘If ye’re thinking of me, Mrs Welsh — Davies —?’

‘Kit,’ she said.

‘Kit — aye — if ye’re thinking of me, I’ll not expose ye — but it’s ye’ wound. By rights ye should have a surgeon’s attention, and likely sent to Nördlingen —’

She leaned forward. ‘Ye haven’t told me ye’ name.’

‘Margery. Adam Margery, Trooper, 3rd Dragoon Guards —’ he snorted, ‘— but never mind that —’

Kit Davies smiled. ‘Adam, lad, ye’ve done well enough by me so far. I’ll

hazard ye've saved me, and I've a feeling the wound'll heal with the attention ye've given it. Adam —' she was pleading, '— all I need is a few days. Ye'll agree I'll not be missed, nor questioned when I return to my troop — or you, for that matter. I'll wager the dragoons are scattered over twenty miles o' country, wi' scores o' men riding with strange companies. It'll be a week before every troop is back and reformed. All I want is food and drink for three days — then, by God, I'll sit in a saddle if it kills me.' She paused. 'Three days' victuals, that's all I ask of ye Adam — and ye' silence.' She was watching his perplexed face, then cried desperately, 'Two days!'

Adam walked again to the embrasure. He could see the hill ascending to the burned-out village of Berg and the long sweep of woodland beyond. There were lines of tents on the plain, and cooking fires smoking, the gleam of scarlet and steel. On the road was a long file of waggons, the first of the baggage train. The army was rousing itself.

'Where will ye stay?' he asked. 'They'll be here soon — engineers, pioneers. The place'll be swarming with redcoats. Likely they'll want to haul off the guns. Ye can't stay here — and where else is there?'

She laughed. 'When ye're like me, spending every hour scheming ye' way out o' situations, this comes easy. While there's redcoats about, I'll stand at the wall wi' a riding cloak and my musket shouldered. Aye — I'll stand, believe me. Who'll question the presence of a sentry? Ye could stand sentry for weeks, and nobody'll ask ye why. All I ask is two or three days o' quiet — no drills, no riding —'

'Aye,' Adam conceded reluctantly, 'but ye'll need more than two or three days, Kit. Ye've a spiteful wound, and it's rest ye want, not standing sentry. If ye get gangrene —'

'Ye're being perverse,' she accused. 'It's my wound, ain't it? All I'm asking ye for is a bite to eat — and ye should find that easy enough.' She

drew a deep breath. ‘I’ll do a barter wi’ ye, Adam.’ She released her queue ribbon and shook down her shoulder-length hair. ‘I’ll allow I’m no beauty, and I ain’t worn a petticoat or furbelow for six years. I ain’t had a man astride me for seven, though I’ve itched for one on occasions. Do as I ask ye, Adam —’ she nodded, ‘— an’ I’ll never refuse ye — in camp, on the march, anywhere — and ye’ll find me woman enough.’

Adam returned from the embrasure to stand over her, mildly stung but momentarily at a loss for words. Her brown hair, loose to her shoulders though shorn to a man’s length, emphasized her femininity. With a face tanned by wind and sun, her hands roughened, she was — as she’d confessed — no beauty, but nor was she forbidding. For many men, weeks without female company, she’d be a goddess, but at the moment the prospect of divesting her of spurred boots and breeches instead of lifting a petticoat aroused no emotion in him.

‘Ye’re supposed to be seeking ye’ husband,’ he said.

‘Aye,’ she agreed, ‘and if I must pay a price for the privilege, then I will — and I’ve been a redcoat long enough to know I’ve one thing that’s always good currency. If I was desperate I’d use it — and I’m desperate now.’ She gazed up at him. ‘Well?’

Adam shrugged. ‘I’ll remember the offer, Kit —’ then he laughed. ‘‘Od’s blood — it’s almost indecent. It’s like —’ He shrugged again. ‘I’ll do as ye want, though I’m not convinced of the wisdom of it.’ He paused to consider. ‘The dragoons’ lines will be best, and I’ll need to hurry if ye’re to be standing sentry when the day’s fatigues start.’

‘God bless ye, Adam,’ she cried.

The grass of the Schellenberg gleamed wetly, soggy underfoot, and soaking his boots before he had walked a dozen yards. The brass of the French guns had dulled, dripping. All on the hill was ruin — collapsed, flattened tents,

smashed and charred waggons, scattered muskets and cartouche boxes, splintered fascines — and corpses. Contorted, ludicrous, like broken, sodden dolls, the corpses lay everywhere, the mired white coats of Frenchmen, the blue-grey of Bavarians, the faces flung to the mud or staring with sightless eyes at the bleak sky.

Beyond the defence lines the corpses were red-coated and blue — the British, Dutch, and German. He could see where the Guards had stood — and fallen — and the Royal Welsh. They still lay there in their twisted heaps. Dead hands clawed at the earth, dead mouths gaped, screaming silent defiance. In the distance, among the scarlet, he could see the darker shapes of fallen horses, where the dragoons had met the French canister, but he turned away, his belly already querulous.

Already, from the camp lines against the wood, a few curious soldiers were strolling the plain, idly recalling the fighting of yesterday or seeking souvenirs — or valuables from the dead — for which they could be flogged. It would not be long before they turned their attention to the Schellenberg, and Gustavus' fort — and Adam must hurry.

Food — preferably hot — and a riding cloak were his first needs. Later, at greater leisure, he might filch some dressings and salve from a surgeon's tent. It would be difficult to attempt the accepted treatment of scalding oil of turpentine or elder. Simple, clean dressings would have to suffice and, since Kit Davies — or Welsh — seemed to possess the constitution of any man, she might well overcome the deficiency.

He could see the Dragoons' standards now, the King's — Lumley's 1st, the Scots Greys, and Wood's 3rd. Measuring the number of tents, he estimated only three of the regiment's six troops — the others must still be absent. The horses were roped in lines under the trees — browns, chestnuts, greys — with saddlery and housings piled behind each beast. He walked along the line,

untied a rolled riding cloak from a crupper, and tucked it under his arm. The next second a bayonet was prodding his buttocks, and he turned.

‘Adam! Ye clod-headed loon!’ It was Rupert, throwing down his musket and clasping him in a bear-like hug that squeezed the breath from him. ‘Adam — by God — I thought ye dead! I saw nothing of ye after the canister tore us to bleedin’ shreds — I tell ye, I thought ye dead —!’ He was half laughing, half crying, and wiped an eye with his knuckles. ‘B’God’s truth — I’d sooner see ye than sixteen sutler waggons!’ He withdrew a pace, concerned. ‘Where’ve ye been? Are ye hurt? So help me — I’ve been thinking of ye all night, and waiting relief so’s I could search the dead for ye! ’Sblood —!’ He knuckled his eyes again. ‘What would I have told ye’ family —?’

‘I’m not touched,’ Adam grinned, ‘save for a scratched arm — and I’ll cherish the scar.’ He peered beyond Rupert. ‘But I’m short o’ time, Rupe. Is there food? Hot food?’

‘Short o’ time?’ Rupert’s eyebrows rose. ‘Aye, there’s food. Skilly, same as usual — bread, and I’ve a pound or two o’ sausage in my haversack I got in Amerdingen. The commissary waggons aren’t up wi’ us yet.’

Adam was unrolling the riding cloak. ‘I’ll take the sausage, Rupe — all of it — and some bread. I can’t carry skilly.’ He grinned again. ‘And I’ll wager there’s a bottle of wine as well as sausage in that haversack —?’

Rupert was staring at him. ‘Aye, p’raps — but what are ye talking of? Ye want all the sausage and ye can’t carry skilly? Ye don’t have to carry it — ye can eat it here. That is,’ he sniffed, ‘if ye can stomach boiled brick-dust.’

‘It’s not for me.’ Adam frowned, then added, ‘There’s a wounded Grey on the Schellenberg — in the old fort. That’s where I’ve been most of the night.’

Rupert still stared. ‘That was Christian of ye, but what’s the need? A couple of troopers will have him in the surgeons’ lines in a few minutes — where

ye'll find a thousand or more other crippled kerns.'

'Aye —' Adam hesitated, then decided there was no avoiding the issue. 'There's a difficulty. Y'see, the dragoon's a woman.'

Rupert's eyes narrowed. 'The dragoon's a *what*?'

'A woman — a woman dragoon, Rupe — enlisted as a man. That's why she can't be brought to a surgeon. I'll tell ye more of it later — but ye'll not breathe a word to anyone, ye understand?'

Rupert took Adam's arm. 'Are ye sure ye weren't hit in the head during that last storm o' canister? A woman dragoon, ye say?' He whistled. 'Ye' excuses are usually a mite more credible, Adam. If it's a French doxy ye're hiding, why don't ye say so? I ain't a damned parson.'

'It's the truth I'm telling ye, Rupe.' Adam could see Captain Shadwell emerging from his tent, immaculate despite the circumstances but wearing a common trooper's hat in place of his own lost one. Rupert pulled a wry face, unhooked his haversack from an overhanging tree behind him, and offered it to Adam.

'I'm a simpleton,' he decided. 'Two pounds o' good sausage, my bread ration, and my last bottle of Rhenish I was saving to mourn ye' death wi'.' He pushed back his hat to scratch his head. 'If ye find any more o' these female dragoons, ye might share 'em. I'm a mite tired cf the ordinary kind meself.' As Adam turned away, Rupert muttered, 'I've never seen a female dragoon, nor even a mermaid.'

Carrying his spoils, Adam recrossed the grassland and climbed the lower slope of the Schellenberg. There were already several pioneers' waggons abroad, collecting the dead which would be buried in communal pits before they polluted and caused offence to the nose and possibly infection among the living. Soon there would be others, retrieving weapons, hauling off the abandoned enemy guns and stores, and destroying all that was of no

immediate worth. In an hour or two the road descending from Berg would be filled with approaching columns — more infantry, the baggage carts, and the overdue Danish cavalry.

Then he halted, his heart in his throat. Fifty yards away, filing out of the fort, was a group of officers, Dutch and English. They stood for a moment, talking together, then mounted their horses and trotted away, their wigged heads nodding. Adam broke into a run, scrambled up the last, weed-tangled incline, and reached the wall of the fort breathless and apprehensive.

Against the wall Kit Davies stood with musket shouldered, pale but erect. She gasped when she saw Adam, and leaned against the stonework. ‘It was a near thing, Adam lad — but they didn’t notice I had an empty sleeve. I told ye — ye could stand sentry for weeks, and nobody’ll question ye.’ She lowered herself to a sitting position and pulled the cloak around her, while Adam opened the haversack. They sat eating together.

Satisfied, she leaned back. ‘They victual ye well in the 3rd. In the Greys it’d be naught but skilly.’ He made no comment.

Fed, and with a few mouthfuls of Rhenish, her spirits were returning. ‘Two or three days o’ this, and I’ll be foraging for meself,’ she said. ‘Then boots and saddle and Lilliburlero.’

‘Have ye no intelligence of ye’ husband’s whereabouts?’ Adam asked.

She shook her head. ‘He ’listed in the 8th, o’Hamilton’s, but he had gone from them — to the 16th, they said. But the 16th knew naught of him, nor the 24th. He weren’t in the 23rd or 37th, and I’ve secured every troop o’ horse. I were waiting for the 10th and the Hollands to come up from Ebermergen camp — when this happened.’

‘Have ye considered,’ he inquired, ‘that he might be — he might — be dead?’

‘Aye, many times,’ she nodded, ‘but I must know. Mind ye —’ she

chuckled, ‘— if I found him I don’t know what I’d do. After six years o’ soldiering I’ve changed a mite from the dewy-eyed wench that’d just lost a husband to the wars. If I saw him from a distance, I’d not know if to approach him or no.’

Adam grinned. ‘And if ye found him with a doxy on his knee?’

She chuckled again. ‘I could scarce complain. There’s many a time I’ve fondled a doxy — I’ve had to — and they all hot and ready to bed a dragoon. You should have seen their faces when I slapped their rumps and told ’em I preferred to sleep wi’ a horse.’

For an hour she talked of her experiences, with a lack of modesty and with frequent soldiers’ oaths, until the amused Adam could hardly credit that this was not only a woman, but one schooled in the soft courtesies of millinery. Chicken-skin gloves — to keep the hands plump, soft, and white — followed quickly upon a bayonet charge against Fort Picard and five days of bread and water in Liège. She wanted to talk, it seemed — to unburden herself of years of counterfeit — and Adam was a convenient listener.

Aye, she confessed, she’d sworn and caroused, and killed, the same as any man — and there had been times when she had lost courage and sight of her purpose, times when she had wanted desperately to collapse in shrieking tears, to claw off her regimentals and run — anywhere — from the constant company of soldiers and the smell of sweat-stained scarlet — times when the sight of a trim wench in frills and ribbons and brocaded shoes would fill her with disgust for herself and a yearning for lavender water and the feel of soft alamonde against her skin. But she had steeled herself with the thought of Dick Welsh, the simple, trusting fool — who’d allow himself to be hanged if told it was good for a toothache — tramping his heart out somewhere with Corporal John’s army of vagrants and criminals. Milliner or redcoat, he was an innocent dolt without her. She must find him, or know for sure that he was

dead.

When Adam left her, the morning was well advanced, and the wet slopes of the Schellenberg and the grassland beyond were alive with activity. Hundreds of fires, of damp fuel primed with powder, ribboned thick, green-grey smoke skyward, and the plain was dotted with scarlet figures and tumbrils, pioneers and infantrymen, collecting the dead. The Austrians' tents had risen to the eastward, and their surgeons were already at work among the wounded of yesterday, probing, amputating, suturing. The long lines of broken, bleeding men lay patiently, white-faced and silent, waiting their turn for the slashing knife of the redfingered surgeon, who was likely to slay where the enemy shot had failed. The hardy constitutions that survived the clumsy scalpels would be decimated by gangrene, septic infection, and bone necrosis — but a miraculous few would remain, shuffling legless or armless, to beg a living in market-place and tavern.

The tumbrils moved slowly across the grassland, the attendant pioneers lifting the sagging corpses by ankles and wrists, ready on a moment to strip a ring from a finger or dip a quick hand into a sodden pocket when the eyes of officers or sergeants were elsewhere. The penalty for robbing the dead would be a flogging, or even a hanging, but a gold ring would buy a month of ale or a week in a brothel — and what need had the dead for a gold ring, a miniature, or a handful of silver? If a finger was stubborn, a quick stroke of a razor-sharp blade couldn't harm a corpse, and a treasured lock of hair spilled from a wallet was best trodden into the mud.

A few yards from Adam's path two Hollanders in muddied clogs were chanting as they piled an already laden tumbril.

‘Engelschen, soldaat.’

‘Hollandsch, serjant.’

‘Pruisisch, soldaat.’

‘Engelschen, vaandrig.’

Engelschen, vaandrig. He halted, shrugged, but did not move on. There were, of course, hundreds of ensigns of foot, and to a Hollander an Englishman meant Scottish, Welsh, Irish. He told himself again that there were hundreds of ensigns —

The redcoat officer lay on his back, his face hidden by a Hollander who knelt, running deft fingers through the dead man’s pockets. ‘Zijn geld is op,’ he muttered, disgustedly, and rose to his feet. ‘Niets.’

Adam stared down at the outstretched figure. The right arm terminated at the elbow in a shredded tangle of bone and flesh, and the right hip had been torn away, almost severing thigh from trunk. A night of rain had not washed away the spattered crimson that now blackened in the sun and stained the trodden heather. The face was unmarked, blenched and glistening with wetness, the eyes wide and glazed. Aye, it was Francis Hewar. Adam had known it.

He swallowed at the nausea suddenly in his throat. Odd, he considered, that he was surrounded by hundreds of corpses, bloodied and mutilated, but they meant nothing to him — no more than sacks of ruined, sodden flour. Only the sight of this one — a man he knew, his cousin — sickened him. Not that he had ever experienced any feeling of kinship for Francis Hewar. They had met seldom and briefly, never on equal terms and usually in a climate of mutual dislike, but the other was, after all, Adam’s cousin — and a Sawston man. Was there anything he — Adam — should do? He wanted to do nothing, and he turned his gaze away as the Hollanders lifted the limp body and flung it unceremoniously into the tumbril. The cart creaked as it moved on, jolting its gruesome load, and the Hollanders were chanting again. There was nothing he could do, and he only wished he had not seen.

He stood motionless for several minutes, sucking in his breath until the

nausea faded. Another Hewar dead. First Rebecca, and now Francis. He thought, inevitably, of Mary — the last of the Hewar line, then lifted his head to stare after the lurching tumbril. She seemed a lifetime away. A lifetime lost. And Edmund Hewar, complaining, ill-humoured. Adam could almost hear his uncle's strident, contemptuous voice, his disdainful pinch of snuff with eyes to the ceiling. Well, Adam thought, his bluster would be sobered a little when he read the casualty lists of the Schellenberg action.

Behind him, in the dragoons' lines, the drums were beating to form picquet, and he could hear the familiar words of a shouting sergeant. 'Advance to form the picquet — halt! Form the picquet — march! Halt — prime, load, and shoulder! To the right and left, to your companies — march! Halt! March and lodge your arms!'

Adam hurried back to the lines, anxious that he should not be struck from the muster roll.

Chapter Fifteen

LONDON SEETHED with excited speculation. Handsome Churchill, then, had confounded his critics and, with Marsin and his Franco-Bavarians displaying a pointed reluctance to become embroiled again with the Allies, the threat to Vienna seemed, for the time being at least, to be thwarted. British redcoats — God bless 'em — had smashed the Schellenberg fortress and now stood undisputed masters on the Danube. That was mud in King Louis' eye. Whoever doubted that an Englishman was worth three Frenchmen — as they had been at Crecy and Agincourt and — well, Crecy and Agincourt? God save the Queen and the Duke of Marlborough! If King Louis wanted to fight, there were plenty more debtors and criminals in English prisons who could shoulder a musket —

A few uneasy people pointed out that the enemy defeated by Marlborough had been largely Bavarian, had numbered only 13,000 and, even so, had given a good account of themselves before being overwhelmed. Marlborough, they said, still had to face Marshal Tallard, even now pushing through the Black Forest — and this time the balance of numbers would be in the enemy's favour. Wait and see, they warned — the battle that mattered was still to come. Few listened.

The weather was warm in London, with the flies bad and the Fleet, an offence to every nose, oozing its indescribable filth into the Thames. But trees were in full leaf, and it was possible, with care, to walk from Holborn to Cheapside without muddying one's hose. Linkboys and chairmen, cripples, cut-purses and strumpets thronged Drury Lane with calculating eyes on the emerging theatre gentry. Many a titled head had shared the same pillow with

the tousled curls of a street wench — it was fashionable since a king had bedded an orange girl and made her a power at St James’.

Marlborough’s victory was on everybody’s lips. The news-sheets were filled with it, patriotic doggerels were being sung, and play-writers were frantically writing redcoats into the most unlikely stage situations. English superiority at sea had for long been taken for granted, but to win battles on land — on hostile soil — was a rare experience, and the lustre of Admiral Rooke’s capture of Gibraltar was a mere glimmer beside the blazing torch of Marlborough’s achievement.

The stirring news, however, brought no new flood of recruits to the colours, and the recruiting captains’ spirited cajolery was scarcely more heeded than before. Londoners, at least, preferred military glory by proxy.

Among the counties the response was better, and in a score of rural towns an untidy trickle of fresh-faced boys followed behind the drums, emboldened by ale and determined to exchange the drudgery of plough and hoe for the less predictable drudgery of a foreign campaign.

A singing troop of Cambridge lads had tramped through Sawston towards Royston, to set the cows in the fields lifting curious eyes and the ale-boy at the Queen’s Head to stand gazing after them longingly until receiving a buffet from his master. Edmund Hewar, dismounting heavily from his horse at the big house, scowled and turned towards the door. Perdition take the war! There were already rumours abroad of a demand for still higher wages come next Quarter Day, and labourers and menials were becoming almost insolent with their picking and choosing. A family down with smallpox in nearby Whittlesford had only made matters worse, with fools burning herbs and boiling simples, and the old dotard Hugwick making a great affair of examining tongues. Hewar scowled again. B’God, but the time would come

It was hot, damned hot. The sweat glistened in the creases of his fleshy neck, and he reached for his kerchief. No news from Francis for two months. Cambridge reeked like a sewer, and a bonfire on Market Hill, celebrating the Schellenberg victory, had smothered him with sooty particles which clung to his clammy skin. He had used his crop on a band of tumbling urchins, and been hooted for it. Aye, but the time would come.

The great hall was a cool, shadowed haven, but his eyes ached and his throat was dry. He stood for a moment, feet apart, breathing slowly and wiping the sweat from his jowls. It was the claret, he decided, and these infernal London wigs were a torture in high summer. Claret and sun, they didn't mix well. He fumbled for his snuffbox, then changed his mind.

From somewhere in the depths of the house came the puny wail of an infant, and his lip curled. Rebecca's bastard. The thought of it made his head throb and he reached for the high back of a chair. Better by far if the brat had died with Rebecca instead of remaining a constant, nagging reminder of his daughter's betrayal of her breeding. Since its birth he had refused to see the child, and only Mary's persistent pleading had persuaded him to allow it in the house — if exiled below stairs. Elizabeth, Rebecca's maid, he had flung into the street and her box after her, and if he'd known of the whereabouts of the ostler Dolling he'd have shot him like an animal.

It had been a black occasion for the Hewars. His own wife, Rachel, had puked and wept continuously, wringing her hands, until he had cursed her for a whining Margery — and he detested the name Margery almost as much as he did that of Dolling. The villagers, he swore, were laughing at him behind his back — Edmund Hewar, whose lady daughter has given herself to a common stableboy — and the neighbouring gentry were scarcely better with their barbed sympathies and witty asides. He wiped his face yet again, unable to quell the angry self-pity that filled his throat.

The claret must have been tainted, he decided. He needed a purge, or perhaps a bleeding — but not at the hands of that drunken imbecile Hugwick. Hewar lowered himself to a chair, loosening the neck-cloth tight about his throat. Damn the claret. Damn everything. If a man couldn't drink a brace of bottles —

Below stairs the child was still wailing, the weak quaver penetrating his throbbing head like a white-hot bodkin. Rebecca's brat, sired by an ostler. A shaft of sunlight, golden-flecked, had moved across his face, and he made to rise, but his legs were leaden. The effort was too much and he fell back, breathing noisily. 'Od's blood, he was ill.

He was more angry than concerned. His legs wouldn't obey him, but he'd been wine-fuddled before — and he'd have a shattering head in the morning. Confound that shrieking brat. He was vaguely aware that his jaw had sagged, uncontrollable, and there was saliva on his chin.

Rachel was over him, white-faced and tearful — and unshaved Hugwick. What in Hell was Hugwick doing here? And, b'God, how was he — Hewar — suddenly in bed? A moment ago he'd been in a chair —

Old Hugwick, crow-like and untidy, but with a professional dignity that had survived forty years of pot-tossing, was opening his medicant box. 'Bleeding first,' he said firmly. 'All of twenty-two ounces — then an emetic.' There was a scalpel in his hand. 'There must be no fire, and the windows kept continually open. Bedclothes no higher than his waist.' He pushed up the sleeve of Hewar's bedgown. 'He shall have twelve bottles of small beer, acidulated with spirit of vitriol, every twenty-four hours. Nothing else.' Below him Edmund Hewar, who had named Hugwick a drunken fraud and a murdering sow-gelder, was breathing heavily with closed eyes.

Rachel Hewar fluttered at the bed-foot, desperately wishing to ask a question but even more terrified of the answer. The blood was trickling,

crimson and splashing, into the basin in Hugwick's cupped hand. He looked up absently at Rachel, then his grey-stubbed face softened.

He shrugged. 'Smallpox,' he said. There were four cases in Whittlesford and a dozen or mere in Cambridge. In three or four days, he knew, the number would treble. It always did. The Whittlesford cases were poor folk, but smallpox was no respecter of rank; it leaped without warning from the straw palliasse of the pauper to the silk-curtained bed of the wealthy. There was no known cause, no agreed treatment — though it was necessary for a doctor to make a pretence of it — and it was viciously contagious. Even now, he knew, the disease might be fastening its foul claws on his own body.

Without raising his eyes from his patient he spoke again. 'It will be best, Madame, if you left us. I will leave your husband comfortable and arrange for a woman to nurse him under my instructions. There are several, having recovered from smallpox, who are now safe from it.' He glanced up briefly. 'There is nothing you can do — and I advise that you depart, with any others of the house, as far as you may.'

Rachel Hewar's face had suddenly crumpled into oldness as her narrow, nervous little world disintegrated about her. For forty years she had made no greater decision than the choice of a pair of gloves or the acceptance of a second glass of madeira. Now Rebecca was shamed and dead, and Edmund struck down. She had walked in fear of Edmund, dreaded his rages and submitted to his overbearing, bullying domination — but unless a miracle prevented it, he was dying. 'Leave him?' she whispered. She shook her head helplessly. 'I cannot.'

Hugwick sniffed. He had not supposed that she would. Women like Rachel Hewar, drained of all initiative, could seldom contemplate a departure from the normal. Aye, she'd remain, a tearful, pathetic waif, incapable of positive thought and a constant nuisance to him. He'd prefer a rough-tongued village

woman with her quart of ale and work-scarred hands, who'd scrub and wipe, cook and carry, unruffled and stolidly efficient. Smallpox nursing required a crude disregard for nicety, not the cool white hands of a perfumed lady.

'Stay or not, Madame,' he persisted, 'you'll need a woman. He has to be washed, and his slops seen to — and other things. It's no task for a gentlewoman.' He closed the incision in Edmund Hewar's wrist with the ball of his thumb as he reached for a fresh basin. 'There are people in Whittlesford awaiting my attention, but I can arrange for a woman to be here in an hour.'

Rachel Hewar's knuckles were clenched whitely around the bed-post. 'No,' she said slowly. 'I'll have no woman tend my husband. It's a wife's task. What needs to be done, will be done.' Suddenly provoked, she tore the pendulous lawn ruffles from her arms. 'Wash him, Dr Hugwick? And tend his slops? I'll do it. I'll do everything.'

He eyed her with a mixture of doubt and new respect. 'Aye, Madame,' he nodded, 'if you're determined on it. But you'll understand that you're running a grave risk. Smallpox is mightily infectious, and even recovery demands a bitter penalty.'

Rachel was already wringing out a wet linen with which to bathe the flushed brow of her comatose husband. 'And you, Dr Hugwick? Are you safe from infection? I do not recall that you were ever civilly received by this house, and I am aware that you gain small payment, or thanks, in Sawston and Whittlesford.'

Hugwick smiled, his stubbled cheeks wrinkling, and then shrugged. 'I am a doctor, Madame.' His red-shot eyes fastened on her. 'And your husband's contempt can never rob me of that distinction. He made of me a figure of ridicule, until even the village children laugh at me and throw their clods, and the tap-room fools turn their backs to me. Until —' he glanced down at

Edmund Hewar, ‘— someone has smallpox.’ He was still smiling. ‘Then it’s “Dr Hugwick, sir — your Honour, sir — if it please you, sir!”’

Rachel brushed back a wisp of hair from her own warm forehead. The room, despite the open window, seemed stifling. Edmund Hewar’s eyes flickered open, examined the ceiling with a blank, puzzled stare, then closed yet again. He was breathing through a loose, open mouth, his cheeks puffed. Wigless, his balding, close-cropped head was wet with perspiration.

‘Is he — will he die?’ Rachel asked.

Hugwick might have said that the probability was very high. Even the youngest and healthiest were scythed down by smallpox, and Hewar was neither young nor particularly healthy. ‘It depends on the virulence,’ he compromised, ‘and God’s will.’ He had completed his bleeding and was wiping his soiled fingers on his waistcoat. ‘Now he must vomit.’

He opened his medicant box again, then glanced up. ‘You must forbid this room to all others, Madame. You must entertain no visitors — and I would advise that as many as possible of those others in the house be sent away. It would be folly to expose them.’ He paused. ‘Particularly the infant.’ In Cambridge they were already digging the pits to receive the new summer’s harvest of corpses, and he, Hugwick, was required to inform the magistrates of all new cases at the first opportunity following diagnosis. Edmund Hewar was Sawston’s first, but tomorrow there might be twenty, with the plague-carts trundling among the cottages and the sour grey smoke rising from the fires which consumed the bedding and chattels of the dead.

Rachel Hewar was standing very still. ‘Yes,’ she said, quietly. ‘Mary and the infant must leave at once, and a maid. We mustn’t —’ She halted to wipe the moisture from Hewar’s cheeks, then suddenly drew a deep, shuddering breath and pressed a hand to her own brow. ‘I think —’ she began again, and reached forward to grasp the arm of Hugwick, already at her side. ‘The

vapours, Dr Hugwick. We women are weak creatures. I am sorry —’

‘Aye,’ he agreed, but his eyes were calculating as he lowered her into a chair. ‘Aye — but sit a moment, Madame, sit a moment. It may be that the stress of the day has been too much for you.’ He was staring at her intently, frowning. ‘A small measure of spirits of wine will be of benefit.’ Twelve days, he estimated, for smallpox to show — and the first Cambridge case had been two weeks ago. Aye, it was likely, i’faith. He held a small glass to Rachel’s lips. She sipped, coughed, then smiled wanly. ‘I’m sorry, Dr Hugwick, if I try your patience. It’s my head — and my back. The weather — so sultry —’

Beyond the open window the distant trees shimmered in the noon heat haze. The sky was gold-blue and empty. There would be a good barley harvest for the Ware and Royston markets this year — if there was labour enough to bring it in, or landowners alive to sell it. Smallpox could destroy one in six of a community, and strolling fellows would demand nine shillings for a week’s work in the fields. Odd, Hugwick realized, how the birds were silent. Even the hum of summer insects, it seemed, had ceased. The world had paused, waiting, listening.

For a moment panic filled Hugwick’s throat. Rachel Hewar was right. What did he owe Sawston? For half a century he had administered physic, delivered babies, mended fractures — sometimes riding forty miles to sit up all night for no more reward than a roasted potato and a draught of buttermilk. Snowstorms, driving rain and swollen rivers had never kept him from a patient, and he had often returned home in the early dawn ice-caked and near senseless, unable to dismount. Aye, in London his efforts might have earned him a fortune. In Sawston he earned £200 a year, but could whistle for most of it. He was poor enough, but there was many a villager who found it hard to look him in the eye when they owed him so much. Now

— he was getting old, and the prospect of another smallpox epidemic was a frightening one.

But the moment of fear passed and he breathed again, wearily. Who else was there but the drunken old fool, Hugwick, eh? Nobody — at least, nobody nearer than Cambridge, and Cambridge would have troubles of its own if the threatening epidemic was anything like that of 1665, which had slaughtered eight hundred.

He began to order his thoughts. He'd need tar water — plenty of tar water. There was, of course, the French remedy of rose leaves soaked in water and lemon juice, with a strong dose of Peruvian bark added, but he'd have little time for such refinements. It would have to be tar water.

A few feet away from him Edmund Hewar lay with eyes closed and mouth agape, and Rachel, almost hidden in the deep chair, sat with her head thrown back, her face flushed and sweating. Well, Hugwick decided, they'd come to no further harm for an hour, by which time he'd have a woman here — and there was much for him to prepare. First, however, he must ensure that Mistress Mary and the child — and all others who might — left the big house for a healthier locality. He must do that now.

Mary, he'd hazard, would be below stairs, to where Edmund Hewar's outraged pride had banished Rebecca's brat Hugwick walked across the smooth flags of the great hall, seeking the servants' door. It was pleasantly sombre and cool here, and for a few seconds his vision was confused by the shadows. He paused, his thoughts still with his pestle and mortar, with sulphur, wormwoods, and pennyroyal — and his horse needed shoeing, but it must wait.

'Od's blood, but his head ached — a not unusual morning condition with Hugwick — and he swallowed at a dry throat. For some reason his eyes were refusing to attune themselves to the gloom of the hall, and the russet and gold

of a tapestry on a far wall were blurred and congealing. He felt desperately tired.

Then he knew, starkly and precisely.

The bulbous eyes of a Tudor Hewar surveyed him mockingly from an ornate frame above his head. Aye, the irony of the situation would be highly amusing to a dead Hewar. He walked carefully forward, the noise of his own footsteps seemingly miles distant, then halted again, swaying.

‘Mary! Mistress Mary —!’

The mob-capped, frightened face of a serving wench floated before him, and he almost snarled. ‘No nearer, girl! Where is your mistress —?’ The face dissolved and wooden heels clattered. Hugwick could hear the girl’s plaintive voice: ‘It’s Doctor Hugwick, raddled again, and askin’ for Mistress Mary —!’ He swore.

‘Raddled, i’faith?’ The Tudor Hewar was positively leering at him, and his tongue clogged his mouth. ‘Godammit, girl — will you not bring Mistress Mary?’

‘Doctor Hugwick?’ It was Mary’s voice at last, mildly concerned but still cool. ‘I heard about my father only a few moments ago — or I would have come to you sooner.’ She was eyeing the unsteady Hugwick curiously. ‘He has been drinking overmuch of late, Doctor Hugwick — and so, it seems, have others.’

Hugwick straightened himself with an effort. ‘On this occasion, Mistress Mary, drink has nothing to do with it. No —!’ He gestured her away, ‘— don’t come nearer.’ Mary frowned, and Hugwick resumed, ‘Your father has smallpox and, I fear, so has your mother. It’s important —’ he paused for breath, ‘— it’s important that you and your people leave the house at once. Go anywhere — anywhere — away from here —’

There was horror and doubt in Mary’s face. ‘Smallpox? Are you sure?’

Doctor Hugwick — if you are sure, how can we abandon them?’

Hugwick snarled again. ‘In God’s name, girl, this is no time for pretty feelings. There’s nothing you can do, and you only endanger yourselves and the servants — and the infant — d’you understand? Run, girl — get out of this house. It’d be better to lie under a hedges than in a house reeking of smallpox, my oath on’t!’

Mary shook her head. ‘I’ll stay. The servants can go.’

‘You’ve not the right!’ Hugwick was shouting. ‘If you’ve no consideration for yourself, then think of others. Think of the infant — are you giving it a choice? Think of the air you breathe, which’ll offer death to every innocent who comes near you — and think, if you will, of your name, that you might be the last of your line to hold it!’

He halted, rubbed a hand across his eyes, then spoke more soberly. ‘I beg you, Mistress Mary — go. I shall remain and do all that I can. Send Goody Wiles to me as you pass through the village, and when the danger is past I’ll have word sent to you.’

Mary was undecided. ‘I can do anything that Goody Wiles can — and the child can go with my maid.’

‘No.’ Hugwick’s head was beginning to throb angrily and his patience was draining. ‘Goody Wiles has already taken smallpox and survived. She’ll not take it, nor be the bearer of it, again. D’you understand? For you to remain would be pointless and irresponsible — and a further burden to me. Now, please — I have much to do.’

Mary nodded reluctantly. ‘I will take coach for Cambridge.’

‘A plague on Cambridge! Go into the fields, girl. Stay in God’s clean air. It’s people that carry infection, not trees and cornfields — and you’ll not find a welcome in Cambridge when it’s known you’ve come from a smallpox house.’ He made a final effort. ‘The nights are mild. Find a farm — or even a

barn or a hayloft — until the weather coldens. But go now.’ He turned, and with unsteady dignity walked back towards Edmund Hewar’s room. Mary watched the door close behind the old doctor, then heard the key click in the lock. She wheeled on the white-faced maid at her side.

‘Fetch the child, well wrapped — quickly — and come with me.’

Chapter Sixteen

THE DRY, reed-thatched roofs of the village of Genderkingen were aflame, cascading sparks over the charred and still burning stubble of the surrounding cornfields, through which, an hour earlier, a searing wall of flame had roared, to send fowl and rabbits scuttling, and to be halted only by the shallows of the Lech river.

The villagers had already abandoned their doomed cottages and, with a few bundled belongings and some nervous cattle, now stood in a sullen group at one end of the rutted street, watching the flames lick hungrily from wall to wall and then reach for the timbers of the tiny church. A dog, with tail between legs and ears flattened, was barking ceaselessly.

A hundred yards away the 2nd Troop of the 3rd Dragoon Guards sat their saddles, eyeing the result of their work with equally wooden faces. Men like Adam Margery, Rupert Dolling, Dan Fuller, and Boyle Russell — countrymen all — took no pleasure in firing hard-won crops or the unoffending homesteads of simple peasant folk. ‘We are advancing into the heart of Bavaria,’ Corporal John had ordered, ‘to destroy the country, to deprive the enemy of subsistence and support.’ Three thousand horse had been dispatched towards Munich to burn and spoil the countryside about it, a complete reversal of Marlborough’s earlier policy, and the army, for the first time, was puzzled and sceptical. To wantonly lay waste an occupied province seemed sensible only if the enemy were about to retake it, and Marlborough’s redcoats might wish to dispute that.

What they did not know, however, was that Bavaria was on the brink of abandoning her ill-fated alliance with France — of perhaps even joining the

Allies. Marlborough, impatient as ever with any indecision, had decided to hasten a conclusion one way or the other. Bavaria was to be put to the torch.

But there would be no looting, ordered Corporal John, and no foragers would enter a house or barn on pain of death. Only oats, summer barley, grass, and clover would be foraged — and that paid for. Rye, corn, and spelt would be burned. It didn't make sense to the redcoats. Why burn good corn? Many of them came from backgrounds where theft and fraud were everyday matters, but there was reason behind stealing, none behind spoiling. No, it didn't make sense.

There were no cheering townsfolk or kiss-blowing wenches to greet the troopers as they followed first the Schmutter and then the Lech southward on their march of destruction. Vineyards and cornfields, hayricks, barns, mills, and granaries were for burning — and once the flames had taken hold there was little the dragoons could do to prevent them from spreading to the tinder-dry thatch of houses and outbuildings. There was cold hatred in the eyes of the Bavarians now — people who, a month ago, and despite their own army's reverses, would have offered jugs of wine and oat-cakes, and patted the well-kept horses, while the small boys would have followed for a mile on the road.

'Dragoons, have a care —!' Captain Shadwell, as depressed as the redcoats, turned the troop away from Genderkingen.

'We might a' least left them seed for next year's sowing,' Rupert muttered, 'or a few mouthfuls o' cattle fodder.' He glanced at Adam quizzically. 'What d'ye say, *Sergeant*?'

Adam shrugged, lowered his chin into his neck-cloth and kicked his mare on. For several days his conversation with Rupert had been of the briefest, and he was still angrily puzzled after a series of unfortunate situations that had caused the estrangement of the two Sawston men.

It had all begun when Adam had returned to the Dragoons' lines after

seeing the broken body of Francis Hewart on the Schellenberg approaches. In low spirits, he had told Rupert — and Rupert had thrown back his dark head and laughed. ‘I always told ye, Adam,’ he chuckled, ‘that milord Frankie would lose his head to a cannon-shot or die from French pox! That’s all the Hewars deserve!’ Adam had been hurt — although a month earlier he might have agreed — but he had kept his peace.

The same day, to mend one of the gaps caused by the enemy’s canister, Captain Shadwell had promoted Adam. Although lacking the service of most of the troopers, Shadwell had said in his clipped voice, Adam Margery was better educated than any, and probably more intelligent. Probably, mark you. It remained to be seen. A sergeant could be broken just as easily as he had been made. On the other hand there was nothing to forbid any man rising to the Queen’s commission, particularly in wartime. Perhaps Sergeant Margery was such a man. It remained to be seen.

The Captain subjected Adam to a terse lecture on the responsibilities of a dragoon sergeant, his loyalty to his officers, and the need to abandon any friendships he had among the troopers. ‘Be too familiar,’ he warned, ‘and you will breed insubordination. Better to be hated, if that maintains their respect.’ Adam had emerged from Shadwell’s tent with a new red sash but heavy with apprehension.

‘So that’s it,’ Rupert had sniffed, then pushed back his hat to scratch his head. ‘Aye, it were a London coat and silk hose once, I recall, when I had to be content wi’ grogram.’ There was a tinge of disdain in his voice that Adam had not heard before. ‘A sergeant, eh? Has the Captain heard of ye’ family connexions, Adam? Likely he’s a mind to be a Hewart coachman when he’s next paid off, eh?’ The strange cynicism in his voice was suddenly dispelled, however, by another laugh. Then he shrugged.

It had been difficult enough to stand before the troop, to bark the command,

‘Dragoons, have a care —!’ to soldiers older and more experienced, to realize that he had the power to order a flogging, a gantloping — and, aye, his word would not be disputed in sending a man to the gallows, if he were so minded. Sensitive, he watched the lean, brown faces of the troopers for an ill-concealed sneer, a wink, or a hand hiding a muttered comment — but, save for Rupert, he saw none, and was encouraged, aware only of an invisible wall between himself and the others, which denied him a share of their lusty exchanges, their daily confidences. He rode alone in his station at the rear of the troop, silently. He rose earlier, fully dressed and shaved before rousing the men, and retired later. Sentries did not challenge his passing, and his horse was groomed, his brasses polished, by men suffering punishment. For the first time since coming ashore at Rotterdam he experienced the gnawing teeth of loneliness.

There was a further complication. In the old fort on the Schellenberg, Kit Davies rested, shouldering her musket whenever the noise of footsteps approached. Although, with his new rank, Adam’s coming and going were unlikely to be questioned, his absences from the lines would be more easily noticed and — as Captain Shadwell had pointed out — a sergeant could be broken just as easily as made.

Kit Davies, however, was as robust as any man, and a few days of inactivity in the warm sunshine of the fort might well be sufficient to allow her to sit a horse, providing she did not exert herself and reopen her wound. Well, he had promised her those few days, after which she must fend for herself. He would keep his word — but now he would need help.

When, on that first evening, he had asked Rupert to accompany him to the Schellenberg, the other had raised his eyebrows, then grinned. ‘Yes, sir, Sergeant Margery!’ They had crossed the approaches, still littered with corpses and debris, in silence, with Adam leading, until they reached the fort,

and Kit Davies stood before them. Rupert eyed her without interest until she spoke.

‘Adam, lad! I thought ye might have struck camp — wi’ me empty-bellied an’ the Frenchman’s brandy finished.’ She took the kerchief-wrapped victuals he had brought, then glanced at Rupert. ‘Who’s this? Another of ye’ Newgate Second?’

‘He’s a friend, Kit,’ Adam answered. ‘Feed yeself, then I’ll look at ye’ wound.’

She snorted. ‘Aye, ye will — but if yon staring loon thinks he’s going to gawk at a female stripped of her shirt, he’s mistaken. He can take my musket and walk sentry!’

Rupert’s eyes widened, his mouth opened with incredulity. ‘A doxy? A doxy dragoon?’ He bellowed with laughter.

Kit Davies snarled. ‘Name me a doxy again, cully, an’ I’ll smash ye’ mouth wi’ the butt o’ this musket! I’m a respectable woman — and married — so keep ye’ tongue between ye’ teeth, d’ye understand?’

Rupert gulped, then nodded. ‘’Od’s faith — I ask ye’ pardon, Mistress.’ He drew off his hat penitently. ‘The coarseness of army life and the company of rude fellows blunt the edge of a man’s good breeding.’ He bowed. ‘Consider me your humble servant, Mistress.’

She grunted, mollified. ‘Aye — but fair words’ll not make any difference, Trooper. Here’s the musket — and it’s twenty paces from wall to wall. If ye halt in the angle at the far end ye can see the clock tower in Donauwört.’

The two men were retracing their steps across the Schellenberg approaches before Rupert spoke again. ‘Aye — who’d’ve thought that from eleven thousand redcoats, ye’d pick the one who was a woman, eh? I’ll allow she’s a mite rough-tongued, and no ravishin’ beauty —’ he winked, ‘— but ye don’t need a goddess in the dark — or talk.’

Adam sniffed. ‘Kit Davies isn’t Nell Something, Rupe. Ye’ll likely find yerself with a bayonet through ye if ye start playing wi’ her buttons, that’s certain.’

‘Ye mean ye’ve tried it?’ the other asked. ‘Or is that another way o’ saying she’s sergeant’s property?’

‘Neither,’ Adam spat. ‘I don’t relish a wench in dragoon’s boots and breeches — and she’s already given one designing kern a foot of steel for being too hot-fingered. The sooner she’s in the saddle and out of my sight the easier I’ll feel.’

‘It’s a pity,’ Rupert observed. He whistled for a moment, then added, ‘But likely ye’re right. It wouldn’t do for every female dragoon to drop her breeks for the sergeant’s favour, would it?’

Adam frowned. ‘This evening I’ve charge of the watering party and tomorrow I’m detailed for magazine guard. That’ll leave no opportunity to visit the fort. Ye’ll be in the lines — I’ll see to it — and I’d be obliged if ye ensure she’s victualled.’

‘Aye — wi’ pleasure. What wi’ two men being hanged for maraudin’, and a female dragoon, tomorrow’ll be a divertin’ day.’

Tomorrow came and passed. When Adam, alone, next visited the Schellenberg the condition of Kit Davies was much improved, and she was able, with a wince, to ease her injured arm into a coat sleeve. ‘Just one more day, Adam,’ she said, ‘and I’ll ride. I swear it.’

‘Only if ye have to, Kit,’ he advised, ‘but every further day ye can rest will make the danger of ye’ wound rupturing less likely. Half o’ the Greys have ridden eastward towards Rain, and some of the others are escorting prisoners back to Ebermergen. We’ll delay as long as we can — and with Rupe Dolling helping to keep ye fed, it’ll be easier.’

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. ‘Aye, Rupe Dolling.’ Her eyes rested on

his face. ‘Adam —’ she hesitated, then began again. ‘Adam — ye’ll know that I’m indebted to ye —’

He laughed, shrugging, but her serious eyes were still on him. ‘Aye, but wi’out you I’d probably be dead — or at best exposed as an imposter, which might end in the same thing, or the flesh flogged from my backbone and abandoned. Besides — ’ she smiled, — it’s been an almighty relief to talk to someone —’

Adam patted her sound arm. ‘Then there’s no loss, eh?’ he grinned. ‘And in a few days ye can forget it —’

She drew suddenly close to him. ‘Adam — God help me —’ she whispered, ‘I’d like well to compensate ye.’ Her hand was on his chest. ‘Aye, ye’ve seen daintier wenches — but none more willing for ye, my oath on’t — whenever ye wish. It’s the only coin I have, but I’d sooner pay it to you than anyone —’

Adam choked. ‘Sblood, Kit, ye’re married —’ He knew his protest was lame.

She breathed quickly. ‘I ain’t seen Dick Welsh in seven years, Adam, nor taken a man since. D’ye suppose it’s only men that get an itch i’ the belly? There’ve been times when I’ve put my head under a pump to cool the heat from me — a score o’ times seen a strong fellow bared, an’ been burning wi’ want —’ She could see the disconcertion in his face and paused. ‘Aye,’ she nodded finally, ‘I’m not going to beg ye, Adam. I’d never do that.’ She turned away. ‘An’ I’ll not mention it again. Ye can know that if ye’re so minded ye’ll never be refused, that’s all.’

Adam was surprised at the depth of his own embarrassment. ‘Kit —’ he began, floundering, ‘— I’m honoured, ye can believe me.’ His lips twisted apologetically. ‘It’s got nothing to do with ye looks, and under different circumstances I’d probably devour ye. Likely it’s something to do with nearly being a surgeon. After a couple of years o’ walking the wards, a

patient ye're attending isn't for dallying wi'. It's — well — it's difficult.'

'Ye mean surgeons are all chaste and virtuous?' She snorted with disbelief. 'I ain't noticed it. Why don't ye just say that a scrubby hoyden in breeches and cropped hair don't give ye an appetite?' She sniffed, and Adam, without looking at her, sensed that there were tears in her eyes. 'Aye,' she went on, 'perhaps I've been deceivin' meself these last few years. When a woman can't *give* herself to a dragoon it's time she took to a rocking chair and clay pipe in the hearth corner.'

'Ye've taken the wrong sow by the ear, Kit,' Adam protested. 'Ye're a handsome woman — breeches or no breeches. I've told ye — under different circumstances —' He shrugged. 'Look, Kit — tomorrow the 10th and the Hollands Foot are coming up from Ebermergen camp, and ye' husband might be among 'em. At the end of the campaign ye can take ye' discharge and be back in Mincing Lane wi' ye' millinery, and all this — Flanders and Bavaria — will be only a fading dream. Aye, and ye'll have a story that no other woman in England can tell.' He grinned. 'And I'll wager ye'll tell it to nobody.'

Down the hill, just beyond the abandoned Bavarian palisades, pioneers and prisoners were digging the long pits to receive the dead of both armies. Soon the chaplains would be droning, the raw earth replaced, and by next year's spring the grass and heather would have erased from sight the last traces of the day's bitter fighting. A decade later, perhaps, a probing plough would up-spill a rusted musket or a rotted half-boot, and the ploughman might pause for a moment to recall the day when the long lines of foreign redcoats had marched against the Schellenberg fortress — and the many who remained, six feet below his plough.

'Millinery?' Kit Davies scoffed. 'Do ye suppose, after this, that I can go back to measuring muslins and minikins for plump white ladies? More likely

I'll be sharing rum and bawdy songs wi' the Chelsea cripples — they being the only redcoats that'll show any gallantry towards one like me.' She laughed bitterly.

There was no point, Adam decided, in remonstrating with her in her present mood. Depression was often a sequel to wounding or sickness, and tomorrow the mood might have flown. He took his leave with a jocular air, to which she responded sullenly, and made his way back to the dragoons' lines.

Ten miles eastward, towards Neuburg, the little town of Rain — garrisoned by six hundred Bavarian infantry, four hundred French grenadiers and six cannon — was stubbornly refusing to capitulate. The Allies, anxious to minimize losses of men who could not be replaced before the inevitable arrival of the French main forces, refrained from direct assault and satisfied themselves with reducing the garrison's walls and ravelins by steady bombardment from ten 24-pounders.

The effect on the town's old but thick wall was disappointing, with the heavy shot cutting into the soft stonework without achieving any great damage. That the defences would eventually crumble and the enemy surrender was certain, but the task would demand a heavier cannonade than had been anticipated. An ammunition train was ordered from Donauwört, with two troops of the 3rd Dragoon Guards to escort it.

It was inconvenient but unavoidable. All that Adam could do was to list Rupert among the six men, under a corporal, left at Donauwört to guard the absent dragoons' baggage. The remainder of the troop, with hautboys, drummers, quartermaster, and farrier, rode eastward towards the Bavarian lowlands and the obstinate town of Rain.

Crossing first the Danube and then the Schmutter, the procession of tented waggons moved along the road that bisected the flat water-meadows, on the surface of which the July sun flashed silver and hosts of flying ants erupted

among the rushes, reed-mace and hair-stalked sundew. In the van a cornet carried the troop guidon, blue and golden, and the carters nodded on their boxes, drowsy from the warmth.

With Rupert absent from the troop, Adam felt suddenly free of the mild discomfiture he had experienced since his promotion. It was easier, he supposed, to shout instructions at men who knew little more about him than his name, easier without the knowledge that Rupert's amused eyes were following his every move. All the same, he was uneasy about leaving Rupert behind to provide for Kit Davies. If Rupert knew everything about Adam, then he — Adam — was well aware of Rupert's weaknesses, and an indiscretion could mean Adam being broken to the ranks, Kit Davies exposed, and Rupert Dolling flogged before the regiment. Still, he shrugged, Kit Davies was no innocent maid to be soft-talked by a dragoon, and Rain was only ten miles distant. Adam could be back in Donauwört by tomorrow evening.

But, ignorant of the affairs of an English dragoon sergeant, the French colonel commanding Rain's defenders was not to be stampeded into surrender by the mere arrival of eighteen ammunition waggons and a hundred dragoons. He had held out for six days and had shrewdly deduced from the besieging troops' disposition that a direct assault on his walls was unlikely. The little town of Rain hindered the Allies' advance into Swabia, and every further day's delay would be invaluable to the Franco-Bavarian command and to Tallard's army hastening from the west.

The week of siege that followed was a frustrating one for the dragoons — who would have preferred a headlong assault with grenades and bayonets — and to Adam in particular. The weather was warm and humid, and there was no diversion other than to watch the batteries continuing their leisurely bombardment during the hours of daylight, and interest in this activity soon

palled. The two troops trotted the Munich road hoping, with little confidence, to sight the dust of an enemy column, but saw none. Scattered hamlets were deserted, with doors and windows barred and the cornfields bleaching under the hot sky. The few country-folk encountered viewed them balefully, silently, or pulled an errant child from their path with a guttural oath. It was a new experience to be hated, and one which gnawed at the men's morale. They were becoming short-tempered and irritable, and discipline was fraying.

Because of the lengthening distance from Donauwört, rations — hitherto as good as an army in the field might ever expect — were deteriorating. Badly salted beef, named 'Irish horse' by the troopers, was maggoty and uneatable. There were weevils, too, in the biscuit, butter was oily and rancid, and cheese, oatmeal, and peas were hard-dried to tastelessness. They rode back to Rain, only to discover that during their brief absence the defenders had relieved the tedium by making a spirited sortie, surprising a careless Imperialist patrol, and killing an officer and several men before being driven in. The dragoons were disgusted to have missed such entertainment, but it was Rain's last gesture of defiance. The following day the garrison surrendered.

The victory was hardly an auspicious one, and there was no singing or good-humoured banter on the return march to Donauwört. Mark you, Donauwört was better than staring at the battered walls of Rain. There'd be fresher victuals, and likely the sutlers would be in the lines, restocked with beer and Rhenish, and the girls hot for it. The thought of it was cheering and, as the lights of the Schellenberg camp showed in the dusk, Shadwell stiffened them in their saddles with an order to trot.

In the Royal Irish lines they were met with the sobering sight of seven men, secured to posts, being lashed into unconsciousness by the light of a dozen torches. 'Christ,' Dan Fuller muttered. 'That's a fine welcome f' heroes.

What d'ye suppose they've done? Complained o' their skilly?'

Adam, as irritable as the rest, silenced him, then wished he had held his tongue. Flogging was common enough, as was the dislocating Strapado and the Wooden Horse — and the Irish troops were notoriously troublesome in camp or billet. Like the Scots, who disliked them intensely, they showed a dash and pugnacity in battle which the English sometimes lacked, but were quick to rebel against the rigid discipline which made the English redcoats more dependable and, in the final analysis, more effective. Soldiers who fought with a coordinated and predictable precision, however unimaginative, were always to be preferred to inspired individuals, however courageous. Shadwell, his face craggily impassive in the flare of the torchlight, was wheeling them into the dragoons' lines.

‘Dragoons, have a care —’

Taken by surprise, the corporal's guard tumbled into line, struggling into coats and buckling belts. Shadwell frowned. ‘Prepare to dismount —!’ Adam's eyes moved over the baggage guard, searching. Then he swore under his breath. Rupert Dolling was missing.

Captain Shadwell swung himself slowly from his saddle, shaking the creases from his riding cloak. ‘Damned rag-pickers,’ he snapped. ‘In a half-hour ye'll remuster, with brasses polished and boots cleaned. Then I'll have the muster read and inspect arms and running ball. Any deficiencies'll be punished.’ He glared at Adam as he walked away. ‘See to it, Sergeant.’

Adam turned on the guard corporal. ‘Ye're a man short — Dolling. There's no absence for baggage guards. Where is he?’

The corporal rubbed his nose with his thumb, grinning. ‘Aye. I ain't see'd him since noon. I weren't too concerned, seein' he's not listed for sentry before midnight, an' he's always come back. Likely he's in the sutlers.’

Annoyed by the other's indifference, Adam flared. ‘Then ye'd best search

the sutlers, Corporal, because if Dolling's not mustered before retreat, ye'll likely be broken before reveille — and if ye add insolence ye'll maybe make the acquaintance o' bread an' water again.' He had the satisfaction of seeing the corporal's eyes widen before he kicked his horse about, out of the lines, and into the darkening approaches towards the Schellenberg.

The fort, he supposed, was the first place in which to look. If Rupert was not there, he could indeed be swilling ale in one of the newly-arrived sutler tents — which might be preferred. During Adam's week of absence, Kit Davies must surely have recovered sufficiently to have returned to her regiment, and Rupert Dolling would be more interested in Nell Something than an empty fort. Ahead of him the stars were just beginning to show over the flattened hump of the Schellenberg, and the evening air was cool to his skin. Damn Rupert.

Fifty yards from the mound he reined and dismounted. The walls of the old fort were grey-white in the gloom, the stonework below the gun embrasures scorched and blackened by the French battery's furious resistance of a fortnight earlier. There was no sound.

To his own surprise he found himself walking on tip-toe, and he swore softly again. Then he halted. From the cavernous entrance of the storeroom, a few feet away, a dull, yellow shaft of lantern light was thrusting spear-like towards his boots.

He stood motionless for a moment. Wherever Rupert was, he must know that if he did not return to the lines before retreat was beaten he would be listed a deserter, and field punishments were brutal. A thousand lashes were commonplace, and at a critical period of a campaign a shooting might be considered more effective in stiffening the discipline of others. Adam had watched several floggings, and had no desire to have another on his conscience. A shooting? He shrugged, then trod unceremoniously down the

few steps which descended to the ill-lit storeroom.

Rupert Dolling, coatless and bootless, flung himself to his feet, groping for his sword. On the disarrayed bed Kit Davies, clad only in soiled body-clothes, her hair loosened and face flushed, sat up. There was a brief silence, then Rupert laughed.

‘Adam!’ He was unusually abashed. ‘Well — if we had to be surprised, I suppose I’d sooner it be you than anyone else.’ He reached for his boots. ‘It’s a deal later than I reckoned — and we had no warning of ye’ returning —’

‘Aye,’ Adam said. He refrained from looking in the direction of Kit Davies. ‘And this time ye’ve got trouble. The Captain’s likely to have the skin from ye’ back if ye’re not mustered in fifteen minutes, polished and clean for parade. If ye were anyone else, Rupe, I’d have ye under arrest.’ He turned at last to Kit Davies. ‘And you, Kit — if ye’re fit enough for bed-play ye’re fit for the saddle. There are troops o’ Windham’s, Hay’s, and Lumley’s returning to Donauwört tonight, and it’s likely the last chance ye have of rejoining ye’ people wi’out too many questions. Ye might ha’ done it easier a week since.’

‘Ha’ ye swallowed a drill manual, Adam?’ Rupert queried. ‘Or are ye just soured because Kit has shown a preference for a trooper instead of a sergeant, eh?’ He was grinning. ‘Just because ye found her, it don’t mean she’s personal property.’

Adam refused to be provoked. ‘I’m not going to discuss wenching with ye, Rupe. My horse is outside, and ye can climb behind me — or ye can stay here and take the consequences. It’s fast becoming a matter of indifference to me.’ He shrugged. ‘Kit will have to fend for herself. There’s no more we can do for her — but if ye’re coming, it’d better be now.’

Rupert buttoned his coat deliberately slowly. ‘It couldn’t be that ye’re thinking o’ the questions ye’ll have to answer if ye’ scheming’s uncovered,

would it? A flogging for me, perhaps, but they can't break me lower than a trooper —'

With a snort of disgust Adam turned towards the door, but he had an unexpected ally in Kit Davies. "'Od's blood, Rupe Dolling —!' she spat. She snatched up her musket. 'Ye'll do as ye're told, and smart — or I'll put a ball through ye, and then there'll be no questions an' no answers.' She thumbed back the hammer. 'An' I'll tell ye a secret to prick ye' vanity. It was Adam I was hot for, but he spurned me — and you was just convenient. Ye could've bedded me if ye'd been a Barbary picaroon.'

Rupert's blank gaze rose from the musket to Kit's face. Then he gave a knowing chuckle. 'Women,' he sniffed. 'That's women for ye — loyal wi'out logic. I suppose ye're thinking ye're doing me a service by disowning me, eh, Kit? An' if I left ye, ye'd be in tears wi' wanting me again —'

There was a thunderous reverberation as the musket flashed. The ball tore through the brim of Rupert's hat and gouged stone splinters from the far wall, while Rupert stumbled backward with an amazed yelp. The small chamber was choked with powder smoke, and the ears of all three were singing. Rupert wrenched off his mangled hat, his eyes wide with disbelief. 'Jesu Christ!'

'Aye,' Kit Davies said, 'likely that'll show whether I'd shed any tears for ye, cully. If ye still have any doubts, I'll carve it on ye' chest wi' a bayonet.'

Rupert shook his head. 'I'm convinced.' He knotted his neckcloth and turned to Adam. 'Ye can have this vixen, Adam — I'm satisfied wi' Nell Something, even if I do share her wi' the rest o' the troop.' He glanced at Kit. 'It's female spiders, ain't it, that kills their mates?' As Kit reached for her bayonet he made for the door.

Kit Davies gave Adam a tight little grin. 'That's the finish o' that comedy, Adam. I were tempted by him, but when it happened it were tasteless, an' I

knew it was only Dick Welsh I wanted.’ She paused, then, ‘In a way I’m glad I had to be sickened by Rupe Dolling, an’ not you.’

*

The 2nd Troop could feel the heat on their scarlet-clad backs as they turned westward, away from the inferno of Genderkingen. They must show themselves at Schrobenshausen, where Corporal John was mustering and refitting his forces in readiness for the angry advance of Marshal Tallard — who intended to shatter this impertinent Englishman once and for all, to drench the Swabian plain with English blood, and to prove to the world that there was only one master in Europe.

The troopers rode in meditative silence, as they had all day. There wasn’t much to joke about. They were hundreds of miles from home, in hostile country. Their advance was disputed by one army and their withdrawal in jeopardy by the approach of a second — and when those two enemy forces united, as they surely must, Corporal John would be outnumbered.

But there was no avoiding the issue and, faced with the inevitable, no English soldier could long refrain from singing. From the leading files the familiar words of ‘Lilliburlero’ were being voiced, and even Captain Shadwell’s lips were moving soundlessly.

*Courage boys, ’tis one in ten
That we return all gentlemen,
While conquering colours we display
Over the hills and far away —*

Chapter Seventeen

THE SOLITARY BELL in the stunted, square tower of St Mary-the-Virgin was tolling slowly, lazily, banishing the rooks to the girdle of elms which stood motionless and dusty in the sunshine. The sky was golden and vibrant with heat, the deserted road shimmered, and the flints of the churchyard wall were burning to the touch. Only the shadows were dark and cool, and the Granta was an anxious trickle between dry, cracked banks.

The Reverend John Haslop raised his right hand, palm forward, and droned the words of burial. Below his feet the grave-pit yawned, and a sun-dazzled vision could only just discern the gleam of brass embellishments on the coffins of Edmund and Rachel Hewar. In a few minutes the shovelled earth would hide them for ever from the sight of Sawston, and the bell would cease. It had tolled earlier this morning for Doctor Hugwick, and yesterday for six villagers buried — at parish expense — in unmarked plots at the churchyard's edge, but the smallpox epidemic had passed — flown, it was said, to London, where plagues were more virulent and of longer duration than anywhere else. There was a reprieve, now, for Sawston until next summer. Aye, there'd be winter discomforts — colds and stuffed noses, ague and rheumatism, and the children would cry with their chilblains, but only high summer threatened death to an entire community.

John Margery stood with his head lowered, as was seemly, but with his eyes avoiding the gaping maw of the grave-pit. He had stood thus two years earlier, on the Old Soldier's burying day, with Adam, Edmund Hewar and Rachel, Rebecca and Mary — and a full twenty respectful villagers. Now there was only him, John Margery, and the woman who stood at his side. He

coughed discreetly and eased the neck-cloth at his throat as the parson closed his prayer book, waited until the other had turned to depart, then drew a deep breath of relief. Rebecca dead, Edmund and Rachel dead, and old Hugwick. He hated burials, as he loved his soil. Good Cambridgeshire soil was for ploughing and hoeing, for yielding wheat and barley and fine green pasture. To laden it with the rottenness of death was almost sacrilegious. He wanted to stoop, to take up a handful of the injured earth, to press it gently through his yeoman's fingers, apologizing. He might have done so had he been alone.

Beyond the elms he could see the lawns of the big house, needing the attention of a scythe, and the gravelled path through which the green fingers of weeds were pushing. Further, he knew, the windows of the house were curtained and sightless, and the stones unswept. There would be bittersweet and nightshade spoiling the untended rose garden.

His own fields, however, were dense with heavy-eared wheat and barley. He would have his best crop for years, and wheat was fetching forty-two shillings in Royston against last year's thirty-three. There's be many a silken gentleman in the counties regretting the impotence of park and woodland, and eyeing his humbler neighbour's golden harvest with an envious heart.

But there were more immediate things to consider. 'Ye'll be leaving the big house closed?' he asked. 'It'd be better until summer's end, then ye can burn some swine's cress to sweeten the rooms. Ye can have Betty Cowper to help ye.'

Mary took a last glance at the grave-pit, which the sexton and his man were impatient to fill so that they might repair to the Queen's Head. 'The house is Francis', she said. There had been no news from her brother for ten weeks or more. 'I have written, asking his intentions.' They walked slowly towards the road. 'I don't think I could ever live there again, even if he cared that I should, and I can never think of it with affection.' She paused at the lych-

gate. 'And I have asked Francis to seek Adam, or at least give you new's of him. It is wrong that you should be so long without knowledge.' Mary had only a confused mental picture of an army in the field. It would be like the Cambridgeshire Militia drilling on Castle Hill, she decided, only there would be rather more of them, of course, with noisy drums, marching and stamping for no apparent reason, and port-flushed squires in swaggering scarlet and with an eye on the ladies. It could not be difficult for Francis to look along the ranks for Adam.

'Aye.' John Margery studied the ruts of the road. 'But ye'll mind there's been a battle, an' it's possible we'll both find ourselves the last of our name. The last of the Margerys and the Hewars. Have ye thought on it?'

Mary had — and the possibility had terrified her. No, she preferred to think of the Militia on Castle Hill, who got drunk after a Sunday muster, and nobody got hurt unless by falling down a tavern's steps. She had once seen — with scant interest — a painting purported to be of the Battle of Namur, which had featured precise lines of immaculate soldiers led by gorgeous officers on improbable horses, a complexity of banners unobscured by a few dainty wreaths of smoke and, for good value, two castles, a church, four cows grazing, and a pair of winged cherubs with golden trumpets. It had all seemed rather absurd. She had never seen a battery of heavy cannon, nor could envisage the blood-spattered carnage of a battalion shattered by canisters, the deafening noise of gunfire, oaths, and screams, the crawling maimed.

'The posts are delayed. They will both be safe,' she said. 'The Duke of Marlborough has charge of matters, and will do nothing foolish.'

Chapter Eighteen

THERE WERE ASHES in his mouth, and his belly was rebelling. He had felt the same before the Schellenberg action, and on the Jaar river, but, he recalled, he had overcome his nausea as soon as the fighting had begun. The Schellenberg and Jaar, however, were likely to be remembered as trifling brawls by comparison with the battle that today promised. The game was played out, and there was no thinking of anything beyond today. The inevitability of his predicament stunned him. Nothing, now — save the unthinkable possibility of the French retreating pell-mell — could prevent a battle, the biggest that an English army had ever engaged in.

No, this time the French would stand. Tallard's army, with its right on the Danube and the village of Blenheim, its front curtained by the Nebel marshes, and the mixed forces of Marsin and the Elector of Bavaria on his left, was in a strong position. It would be the French who would be questioning whether the English could be so foolhardy to attack. Adam shivered.

The dragoons had climbed into their saddles at three that morning, around them the drums of the great camp at Munster thundering in the darkness as the regiments of half-awakened infantrymen stumbled into line. Company after company wheeled to the westward, muskets shouldered and tramping footsteps deadened by the soft turf. There was a white, clammy mist clinging wispily to the ground, plucking at their boots and soaking their leathers. They had left their tents standing.

Long before dawn had begun to flush the sky behind them, the army had streamed past the darkened and silent village of Tapheim and spilled into the

vast plain which lay before the sleeping French. Here they halted to re-form, to wipe dry their damp weapons and to peer ahead through the ubiquitous mist. Horses champed and fidgeted, blowing long feathers of steamy breath, and the sergeants gave their orders in low voices, almost conversationally. Free of the long defile between Danube marshes and woodland, the long single column was deploying into nine. English redcoats, Dutch, Hessian, Hanoverian, the splendid Danish horse, the battalions from Lunenburg and Zell, the men silent, their faces grim and glistening dankly from the vaporous air, jostled into their new places — some nervously eyeing their officers, others morose and thoughtful, a few pretending indifference and muttering forced witticisms. The French camp, somewhere ahead through the shrouding mist, was still silent.

A man can die but once, Adam tried to comfort himself. We owe God a death, and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit the next. But his schoolboy platitude didn't help, and the morning chill was pushing through his coat.

The troopers had wrapped their spare neck-cloths around the pans of their muskets to keep the damp from them, and Adam would check their cartridges as soon as they formed line of battle. Behind them, at last, the dawn was rising, streaking the sky with grey and yellow. There was a flutter of wings from the marshes on their left as startled wildfowl took flight at the sound of tramping regiments, and from a distant, hidden farmhouse a dog was barking. Still no sound from the French, whose picquets — mist or no — must surely now hear the jingling rumble of guns and caissons, the chinking harness of thousands of horse and the tapping drums that led sixty-six battalions of marching infantry. Could the French be sleeping still? If they were, they were about to have a sorry wakening.

The sun burst, ruddily golden, from the horizon beyond the river, opaquely

at first, then, as the mist fled, flooding the plain with rosy light, gilding the water's surface and the sodden marshland, and revealing — as if a curtain had been wrenched aside — the brilliantly-coloured panorama of the Danube valley. Long columns of infantry, scarlet, blue, white, and gold, interspersed by trotting squadrons of horse, were extended across the plain like splayed fingers of a hand reaching for the Nebel river, which flowed along the French front. There was a wave of cheers from the hurrying companies, and the horses, suddenly excited, tossed their heads, nostrils flaring. The surgeons' waggons were wheeling out of column and halting.

From a short distance away a regimental band struck up the rousing music of 'The Protestant Boy', and there were more cheers. Officers everywhere were standing in their stirrups to determine the next in line, the nature of the field ahead and, most interesting, the circumstances of the enemy position. Adam curbed the impulsive voices among the troopers with a quick order: 'Ride straight in ye' saddles, and silent!' His own eyes were devouring the surrounding scene as quickly as they might, fearful of losing the smallest item. He knew himself trembling.

The British dragoon squadrons were on the extreme left of the Allied army, close against the Danube, so that the greys of Hay's 2nd stood fetlock deep in the soggy flank of the river. The 5th Royal Irish and ten squadrons of English dragoon guards were next innermost, followed by thirty or more squadrons of foreign horse in solid, glittering lines. Adam could recognize the blue and silver of Bothmer's, the crimson of Villars', and the bearskin caps of Bulow's — Hessians all. Farther right, towards the north-east for three or four miles, infantry and artillery were still swinging into battle line — geometrical squares and columns of red and blue, crawling, throbbing, the sun flashing on fields of shouldered bayonets, the sheen of horses, and the spinning wheels of guns and caissons. 'Dragoons, have a care —!' Adam tore his attention back

to Captain Shadwell. 'Make ready ye' links —!'

Immediately in front of them the familiar facings of Rowe's brigade of British foot were halting — Welshmen, Scots, and the buff breeches of the 3rd Hollands. The redcoats were set to cleaning their muskets while the brigade chaplain moved from battalion to battalion to read prayers before each in turn. The officers were dismounting, gathering together in small groups, and the Royal Welsh were singing lustily.

Captain Shadwell and the troop farrier moved among the horses, examining pasterns and knees, and searching for signs of glanders. Adam and the cornet followed, inspecting weapons and ball. Rupert's eyes met his, quizzically.

'Make certain ye' charges are hard rammed,' Shadwell was saying, 'ye' frizzens firmly closed, and loose powder blown off —' His words were interrupted by a drumfire of cannon shots from the westward.

Beyond the Nebel river, and now less than a mile away, the French were firing signal guns to recall outguards and foragers. For hours their picquets had been making uneasy reports of troop movements in the dark of the morning, and for hours the French command had dismissed them as being merely patrol activity or, at most, a cover for Marlborough's retreat. It was not to be imagined that even the illogical Englishman would contemplate an attack on the Grand Army of France, whose battle line, which embraced three fortified villages, lay snugly behind marshland, with the forest protecting one flank and the Danube the other. It was not to be imagined, but it was seven o'clock and French officers were tumbling from their beds, rubbing their sleep-swollen eyes in amazement at the impossible vision which met them. It was incredible, but no longer to be denied. Milord Marlborough had brought his army to seek an understanding with Marshal Tallard.

The redcoats across the river watched the French camp convulse with sudden activity. Drums were beating to arms and the tented lines were

vomiting white-coated infantry. Gun batteries were scrambling from the rear — more than ninety guns, they'd heard, to their own fifty — and staff officers were flogging their horses recklessly across the army's front. Then, almost simultaneously, there were tiny petals of red flames from three clusters of cottages on the near side of the river, with the evacuating enemy dragoons scuttling for the safety of their own lines.

Directly opposite the British dragoons' position, across the Nebel, was a sizeable, straggling village of high-gabled houses, hedged gardens, and a tall-spired church. But this village was not for burning. It was Blenheim — or, as the ignorant natives named it, Blindheim. For several minutes Captain Shadwell had studied the village through a spyglass. He snapped the glass shut with a grunt, and then, as an afterthought, offered it to Adam, at his side.

'Take a look, Sergeant. Blenheim. Ye can take it that's the mark the Duke will set us.' His lips pursed.

With the glass to his eye, the village leapt towards Adam. He could see, now, the surrounding entrenchments and palisades, the streets barricaded by farm waggons and piled furniture. Two batteries were visible — and there were probably more — but, of more significance, Blenheim teemed with infantry, and both stockades and houses bristled with muskets.

Adam lowered the glass. 'Twenty battalions?'

'Twenty-five, I'll hazard,' Shadwell said, 'but that's not all. Ye'll see upwards of twelve squadrons of dragoons beyond the village, in support, and more infantry. And ye'll see, if ye look carefully, some scarlet coats ahorse. That's the *gens d'armirie*, Sergeant.' His eyes were oddly thoughtful. 'It'll be another Schellenberg.'

Around them the troopers were adjusting girths and stirrup leathers, tucking back the skirts of their coats, feeding their beasts a hatful of corn or themselves munching the hard ammunition bread that formed their field

rations. It might be the only chance to sustain their bellies throughout the coming day. Shadwell surveyed them dubiously. Under those scarlet regimentals were petty thieves and debtors, pimps and vagrants — most of whom could boast more than a passing acquaintance with the inside of an English gaol. Very soon now they were going to be thrown against the finest of King Louis' incomparable troops, the pride of the army schools of Tournay, Cambrai, Valenciennes, Charlemont, Metz, and Brisac. Aye, the redcoats had met Frenchmen before, but never sixty thousand of them — and under such adverse conditions. Would they stand?

The French command may have been surprised, but they must be laughing into their laced cravats by now and, if Corporal John wished to exploit any advantage which might remain, he would do well to attack as soon as possible — before the French could properly adjust their battle line, position their batteries and open fire across that open plain — just like the Schellenberg. Shadwell was impatient. The sooner the better.

It was ideal cavalry country — a vast table of close-cropped stubble. Except for that trickle of a Nebel and its fringe of marsh there wasn't a tree, hedge, fence, or dyke to obstruct an advance of either horse or foot. Aye — and ideal for musket fire from those Blenheim barricades. In God's name — why were they waiting?

Only Marlborough and his staff knew, and knew well. The left wing of the Allied army, in which the 9,000 British troops were placed, had marched for the nearest stretch of the Nebel and were in position soon after seven in the morning. The extreme right wing — seven Danish and eleven Prussian battalions, and seventy-four squadrons of cavalry — was required to march a further five miles to the northward, like a door swinging on a hinge, before coming into line. Marlborough had never declined to fight against odds, but on this occasion he was determined that not one redcoat nor a single drummer

boy would move forward a step until every man of his army stood in line. Whatever it cost, he would wait.

At eight o'clock the French cannonade began and almost immediately, in the exposed British companies, men began to fall. Following Shadwell's example, Adam paced slowly backward and forward before the troop, his hands clasped behind him. 'Sblood! — was Shadwell as imperturbable as he looked? As the heavy French shot hurtled into the lines, Adam wanted desperately to throw himself to the ground, head in hands. At first he watched for the flash of the batteries across the river, but could not refrain from flinching, and turned away — still, however, listening for the devil's tattoo which preceded every jarring, blood-spattered paroxysm among the close-spaced ranks of dragoons and infantrymen.

'Festerin' Christ —!' It was a voice from the ranks. 'Are we standin' here while the French play chuck-farthing wi' us? What's our own guns doin'?'

As if the plea had been heard, the English batteries suddenly erupted. They had been waiting patiently for just this moment — to pinpoint the enemy artillery positions and to concentrate on disabling them. The lesson of the Schellenberg — where whole companies had been torn to crimson shreds before coming within musket shot of the enemy — had been learned. This time — if Colonel Blood's marksmen could help it — the redcoats would be given a chance of coming to grips with the French.

It was a compensation to see, through the thickening smoke, the spouts of earth and debris peppering the enemy line, but around Adam men were still falling, cursing, crying. Here and there horses were becoming unmanageable, tugging at their links and snorting, white-eyed. There was a brassy discord of music from the bands of several regiments, the bandsmen puff-cheeked and determined, half-drowned by the reverberating thunder of gunfire. Officers paced slowly, anxious to reveal no sign of concern, or chatted together in

small groups as if this were only a Mayday levy in Windsor or Edinburgh. Behind them the redcoats stood unmoving, sullen.

A long hour passed, and then a second, with no respite from the enemy guns. Several miles to the northward Prince Eugene was still driving his regiments of the right through clogging marshes to reach his assigned position and, until he sent word that he was ready, Corporal John would not move. In the dragoons' lines men were still being smashed to the ground quicker than the pioneers could remove them, and Adam had been busily employed relieving — so far as he could without dressings or instruments — the agony of shattered limbs and torn flesh.

Major-General Wood, recovered from his Schellenberg wound, but still pale, strode slowly among the 3rd's ranks, pausing occasionally to talk to a veteran face or a pink-cheeked cornet. He halted above Adam, crouched over a trooper with a shattered hip.

'Val Notre Dame,' he mused. 'His Grace was-right.' He raised his hand. 'No — don't rise, Sergeant. For the moment ye're of more service on ye' knees than an entire regiment on its feet.' He nodded at Shadwell and walked on.

Adam returned his attention to the wounded trooper. A shattered hip was something he understood — and a distraction. He could no longer, like Shadwell, pace before the troop feigning indifference, nor did he possess the bovine mentality of most redcoats, which permitted them to stand in disciplined ranks for hour after hour, helplessly exposed to the French cannonade. This trooper with the smashed hip, for instance — a big-limbed lad from a London slum, illiterate and dull-witted. He glanced at the pain-twisted face. The man was dead.

There was a new burst of cheering, distant at first, then approaching. He climbed to his feet, shading his eyes. Across the front of the army two

mounted officers were cantering leisurely. The dragoons were shouting, their hats off and high in the air. The drums roared.

It was the Duke, followed by his aide. He rode easily, smiling, his eyes scanning the scarlet lines — pausing occasionally on a fallen soldier or a jerking horse being dispatched by a farrier's axe — and he doffed his own hat towards General Wood. The French guns were firing frenziedly, but the Duke did not glance in their direction, and when a ball struck the ground only feet from him, showering him with earth, he merely pulled a wry face and brushed ruefully at his soiled coat. The redcoats laughed with him, and the Duke returned them a careless, reassuring wave of his hand, cantering on.

The order came at last. 'His Grace's compliments to Lord Cutts. The twenty battalions of infantry under your command, supported by General Wood's fifteen squadrons of the left, will attack the village of Blenheim. All lines elsewhere will advance across the Nebel river and to closely engage the formations of the enemy's centre —'

The drums ruffled in unison.

'Dragoons — have a care! Unlink ye' horses and prepare to mount!'

'Tenth o' the Line! Load, prime and shoulder —!'

'Twenty-fourth o' the Line! Fix firm ye' bayonets and shoulder-!'

'Colours and guards to the fore, make ready to advance —!'

The drums of twenty battalions rolled deafeningly. Brigadier Rowe, whose five regiments of English, Welsh, and Scots foot were to lead the attack, climbed from his saddle and sent his horse to the rear, disdaining advantage over any of his infantrymen. Then he drew his sword and, with an imperious wave of his hand, strode determinedly towards the smoke-hazed roofs of Blenheim. Behind him, with a loud huzzah, the scarlet ranks lurched forward, and the dragoons followed. Over the shouldered bayonets of the 23rd Welshmen, Adam could see Brigadier Rowe, his hat laced silver and gold,

marching thirty yards ahead of his brigade, a lone figure with bared sword. On the far left the greys and dapples of Hay's 2nd were prancing. Kit Davies would be there, Adam mused. Well, she had seen more battles than himself, and her wound would be well enough knitted, but if she suffered another it would be unlikely that he would be of help to her again. His own horse was climbing a shallow mound, and he looked to his right.

Far away to the north-east the Allied line was flung, solid phalanxes of colour, meticulously ordered, red, crimson, blue, and glittering steel. Against the green curtain of woodland, four miles distant, he could see pulsating threads of white — the gaiters of the Prussian riesengrenadiers of the extreme flank. The plain was pocked with the brown mushrooms of falling shot, and more men were dropping, blood-drenched, retching, sprawling.

Another Schellenberg, Shadwell had said. He could see the Captain beyond the three ranks of the troop, his long, curled peruke bouncing on his shoulders. Rupe Dolling was there, hat over narrowed eyes. Boyle Russell and Dan Fuller. Adam flinched as a heavy ball struck the ground miraculously between two platoons of the tramping redcoats ahead, spun high in the air, then fell with sickening impetus into the dragoons behind him. He heard the choking scream of a horse, lowered his head to avoid a rain of stones and dust, and kicked his own beast on.

It was wet and yielding underfoot now, but the infantrymen were churning forward confidently and the leading platoons had reached the river's bank and were plunging across, knee-deep, without breaking rank. The enemy ordnance had shortened range, and falling men were threshing wildly in the water, drowning as their comrades, with a shouted profanity, pressed on, unable to pause. Adam's mare, with nostrils flared, stepped delicately into the muddy stream. Shadwell was shouting his troop on, and there was a moment of confusion as a horse floundered, bringing down a second. Now, Adam

thought, the French horse must surely charge — before the redcoats could properly re-form on the far bank — and if the infantry were flung back into the river, into the lines of following dragoons, there would be chaos.

The French cannon fire had suddenly ceased. Aye, this would be it — and God help them. But, ahead, the foot were climbing on to firm ground, jostling into line again, and striding on, unopposed. 'Sdeath! The French had missed a chance — but they couldn't be such fools —!

Not a shot to be fired, Brigadier Rowe had ordered, until he had thrust his own sword into the Blenheim palisade. The drums were rolling again, and the gaps in the ranks had closed. There was canister bursting, and at any moment they would be within range of the massed muskets of twenty-five battalions. Adam swallowed at a choking throat, sweating coldly and his ears singing from the intensity of noise around him.

His horse reared upward, gaining the far bank. At that moment a canister shell burst full in the centre of Captain White's troop, only yards to his right. A dozen saddles emptied and horses rolled, flailing and screaming. Captain White was down, bloodied hands clutched to his face and, nearer, a stray shot had spun Boyle Russell from his seat, his opened cartouche box spilling. There was no time to pause. The Blenheim defences were aflame from end to end as the white-coated French infantry volleyed, reloaded, and volleyed again. It was another Schellenberg, and the British redcoats, with muskets still shouldered, were being butchered in swathes.

Captain Shadwell was still riding, but the troop cornet had fallen over his mount's neck, with the guidon trailing from his dying fingers. As Adam spurred to the fore he saw Rupert lean from his saddle and snatch up the guidon, and then Shadwell was snarling at him. 'Margery! The First Troop's nary an officer nor sergeant alive. Ye'll wheel 'em into line with the Second, and bring 'em on!' Adam flung up a hand and wrenched his horse about.

His fears had flown, forgotten. ‘Dragoons, have a care —!’ It was his own voice, but unreal. ‘Close to ye’ left and keep station, damn ye —!’ The remnants of the 1st Troop, dismayed and momentarily confused, forced their excited and lathered mounts into line — a shortened line, but unbroken. ‘Sit straight, ye toadin’ ploughboys! If ye can’t stomach a whiff o’ partridge shot ye’d best be hawking ribbons in Spitalfields!’

Brigadier Rowe had marched unhesitatingly to within thirty yards of the barricades before the French had fired their first murderous volley. Miraculously he was unscathed, although behind him the leading ranks of his brigade were shattered and reeling. But they came on.

Rowe reached the enemy breastwork, hedged with bayonets, and thrust home his sword — a single second before the Frenchmen’s second volley smashed him to the ground. Around the barricades, now, the leading, ragged lines of redcoats were swarming, slashing, and stabbing. Two officers who reached the mortally wounded Rowe were shot dead over him, and along the entire Blenheim perimeter the British and supporting Dutchmen were being hewn down by the firmly entrenched French.

Above the continuous roar of musketry there was the reedy note of a trumpet, barely audible. ‘God’s death!’ Adam shouted. ‘Captain Shadwell — the *gens d’armes*!’

Magnificent in scarlet, with cuirasses gleaming and matched horses cantering proudly, the four squadrons of superb cavalry rode with parade-ground precision and insolent ease, straight at the stumbling right flank of Rowe’s brigade. The British, already suffering heavy losses from the brisk musket fire of the Blenheim battalions, and wavering, began to fall back in disorder. At any moment they might turn and scatter, to create confusion among the following formations of infantry and dragoons. The French were cheering.

‘Dragoons — have a care!’ The troop captains were anticipating General Wood’s order to wheel and engage. ‘Lay ye’ right hand on ye’ swords. Draw ye’ swords!’

Only three British dragoon squadrons had passed the Nebel; two more were still crossing, but four hundred swords rasped from their scabbards, silvering in the sunlight. Adam laughed. His Newgate debtors and cut-purses were about to be thrown against the elite of King Louis’ army.

But the time was not yet. Even as General Wood reached for his laced hat to wave forward his poised horsemen there was another angry thunder of musketry from ahead, and the French cheers had died. Behind Rowe’s hesitating British the supporting brigade of Hessians had pivoted to its right, firing a scything volley — its first — at the confidently approaching *gens d’armes*. and then charged headlong with the bayonet.

The glittering French horse, only seconds earlier intent upon sabring the retreating platoons of British, turned to see an unwavering wall of steel rolling towards them — two thousand bayonets levelled and remorseless. It was unthinkable that mere mercenary infantry would dare to charge the unchallengeable *gens d’armes*. The Frenchmen reined, uncertain, and in that moment were lost. The trotting lines of disciplined Hessians sheared into them, swept them back dishevelled and confused until, to escape ignominious defeat in full view of their own army, they struggled free of the mêlée and spurred for safety.

‘Did ye see that?’ The dragoons were laughing, hooting — and impatient, now, to be among the fighting, but the Allied horse had still not passed the Nebel in sufficient strength. General Lumley’s 1st had been compelled to cross where the waterway was divided, and so negotiate both branches and the soft, marshy meadow which separated them. The troopers had dismounted, leading their horses and wading, and on reaching firm ground at

last had met the full blast of artillery and musketry fire from Blenheim — and could get no farther.

On the 3rd's right, Bothmer's and Villars' were across, and a squadron of Bulow's — less troubled by the Blenheim fusillade — had moved into line with the infantry. Elsewhere the dragoons were struggling through the river and holding their ground.

Adam's attention was confined to the area immediately surrounding him. What might be happening along the four miles of opposed regiments he could neither see nor guess. Here, opposite Blenheim, the French held the advantage and showed little sign of being dislodged from their barricades. Even as he watched, the French cavalry came sweeping towards the advanced battalions again — the re-formed *gens d'armes* followed by several squadrons of dragoons. Now, surely — his sword hand was sweating — the 3rd must charge. He was parched and already tired, and anything was better than waiting on this shot-flung river bank. Anything was better.

But it was the 6th and 7th, better positioned, who were ordered forward to meet the oncoming French. The two sister regiments rode forward steadily, knee to knee, in excellent order behind their guidons and standards, their commanders, Colonels Palmer and Leybourg, cursing their men on. The halted 3rd watched enviously, saw the closing French cavalry fire from the saddle and the British thunder forward with the sword. The two formations collided, merged. A pall of dust and powder smoke rolled over the savagely fighting mass of horsemen, and Adam strained his aching eyes under a shading hand. Then Shadwell swore, chuckling. 'They break! We've mastered 'em!'

The onlooking dragoons were cheering deliriously, waving hats and carbines — the 3rd, 5th, Lumley's 1st still scrambling from the river, the Royal Irishmen and Hay's Scots — waiting yet to come into line. 'Od's

blood! British dragoons — the red-coated prison scum — had whipped King Louis' vaunted *gens d'armes*, Europe's proudest soldiery! Huzzah for the bully-boys o' the 6th and 7th! God save the Queen and Corporal John — and a rotten fig for King Louis!

But the elation was premature. Just beyond Blenheim, to the north-west, eighty French squadrons were drawn up in two lines, fresh and undismayed by the discomfiture of the haughty *gens d'armes*. The King's gentlemen had been given their chance. Now squadron after squadron of hardened dragoons trotted forward, wheeled, and thundered towards the British. It was the turn of the cantering 6th and 7th, triumphantly herding the chastened *gens d'armes* away from the Allied foot, to rein, turn, and retire.

General Wood's order to advance came directly from Corporal John. Five squadrons were to move forward to strengthen the first line, to hold at bay the obviously impending assault of the French horse. All Allied cavalry not yet having passed the Nebel must do so immediately, in support. General Wood's hat was high in the air, pointing ahead. The 3rd Dragoon Guards, the 5th, and the Greys rolled forward with a shout.

Drumming hoofbeats, harness jingling, flecks of saliva whirled away by the breeze, red coats jostling and swords outflung, the sulphur taste of powder smoke, men's faces tanned and sweating, tight-lipped or bawling, tossing manes and tails, and dust. The sun was hot on his shoulders, and he could see scattered infantrymen running desperately from the path of the trotting, unswerving squadrons. Blenheim was on their left flank now, obscured by smoke beyond the serried platoons of British and Hessian foot, firing doggedly. There were more marching ranks on their right — blue-coated Dutchmen he could not name, Ferguson's 15th Yorkshiremen, the 37th of Hampshire, and the cock-a-hoop Scots of the 2nd and 26th. Then they were past and clear, and there was nothing before them now save the flat plain

filled, as far as the eye could see, with the massed divisions of French cavalry.

But he had no opportunity to give attention to details of the enemy's disposition — there were several squadrons already in motion towards the infantry battalions against the Nebel, but now sweeping in a wide circle to accept the challenge of the newly arrived dragoon guards. Closing at a brisk trot, the two corps would meet obliquely in a few seconds. Adam was six yards ahead of the 1st Troop, on the extreme right of the three British regiments, with the guidon behind him and Captain Shadwell on his left. Shadwell was leaning forward, his face pale and taut — and then the French dragoons fired, holstered their pieces, and spurred on through their own pistol smoke, sabres advanced.

The French fire — God's mercy — was hurried and high, and scarce a shot found a mark — and then there was tumult. Dusty white coats and red facings whirled about Adam, and for a moment he was alone, surrounded. He hauled back his mount, thrusting at the laced chest of an officer who flung past him, shouting. Then the redcoats were with him, slashing, hewing, snarling. There were saddles already empty — from the collision of horses — and a Frenchman, cut bloodily across the face, clutched at him, but Adam hurtled him aside.

Use the point — old Sergeant Weekes had been adamant. 'Ye can't parry a thrust so easy,' he'd say, 'as a clumsy edge.' But it was a temptation, in this angry mêlée, to flail wildly at every Frenchman within reach. Around him the redcoats had no such qualms. Several hours of sullen, simmering anger exploded into berserk fury. The Duke himself could not have restrained them now, and no cavalry in the world contain them. With swords, hatchets — or bare hands tearing their opponents from their saddles — they clove deep into the tangled French ranks, cut their way through, turned, and spurred in again.

Adam was sweating, panting, and sick in the throat. His coat was torn and his right arm blood-splashed to the elbow. He had killed one man and wounded a second — probably mortally — and he was thankful to find himself still alive. There was a nervous twitching in the muscle of his thigh that he could not control, but the survivors of his troop were turning their horses, willing yet again to run at the French, and Adam turned with them — to find himself suddenly knee to knee with Rupe Dolling. The other laughed in his face. ‘Better’n skittles at Bartholomew Fair —!’

Adam shouted, too late. An enemy dragoon, scarce a dozen feet away, had flung up his pistol and fired. Rupert jerked, his face incredulous and his sword spinning from his grasp. ‘That’s damned uncivil —!’ he croaked, and fell from his saddle, arms outstretched.

Adam sprang to the ground and dropped to his knees beside Rupert, who lay with his face to the earth. ‘Rupe — ye’re hit?’ It was a needless question. As he turned Rupert on to his back he could see shirt and neck-cloth sodden with blood.

‘Aye,’ Rupert whispered. His eyes were clenched and his face drained of colour. ‘It’s a churchyard one, Adam lad —’ he grinned wryly, struggling to breathe, ‘— an’ I thought I were for Tyburn —’

‘Ye’ll hang yet,’ Adam pronounced, but his fingers, beneath the soaked shirt, gave him the lie. Rupert’s breastbone was smashed, and his lungs would be congesting. He would be dead in a few seconds. There was already a bloody froth on his lips, and his head was sagging. ‘There’s a surgeon’s waggon just across the river — and by tomorrow ye’ll be suppin’ brandy an’ milk in Munster camp —’

Rupert’s eyes opened, meeting Adam’s. ‘No, lad —’ he coughed. ‘Adam — I’m going fast, I c’n feel it, Adam — an’ there’s no time.’ He gripped Adam’s hand. ‘Rebecca’s brat — it’s mine, Adam.’ There was an impish grin

twisting his face. 'She had a rare anatomy, did Rebecca — no mistake.' His grin faded. 'The brat, Adam — I ain't heard of it — an' I'd like ye to see it don't want for naught.' With an effort he forced another grin. 'I couldn't bring meself to tell ye that ye weren't the first wi' Rebecca — silk coat or no. But the brat's mine, Adam, an' —'

'I'll see to it, Rupe,' Adam nodded, choking. Rupert grinned weakly yet again. 'And there's Nell Something,' he added. 'I still owe her fourteen shillings.' Then he was dead.

Chapter Nineteen

ADAM RODE THROUGHOUT the rest of the day in a half daze. The French horse had shaken themselves free of the savage grip of the British dragoons, retiring behind their own dust to reform and charge repeatedly, bravely and at great cost. Again and again the golden lilies thundered forward, and by sheer weight of numbers forced the Allied squadrons back — back into the gaps between the battalions of waiting infantry, who tore them from their saddles with massed volleys. And yard by yard the infantry closed around Blenheim, itself spitting defiance from every window and door, every ditch, hedge, and barricade.

Along the four miles of the Nebel a score of vicious battles were being fought to the death. Colonel Bloods artillery, brought across the river by incredible labour, smashed down the nine infantry battalions of the French centre with grape. The Frenchmen, inexperienced recruits, had stood unflinchingly in squares, and their corpses lay in drilled lines still. The cavalry battle rolled over them, unheeding.

As the afternoon wore on it was becoming apparent to even Adam that the continuous assaults of the French horse were becoming less frequent. Aye, they came on bravely enough, but their ranks were thinner now, and lacked the insolent élan of earlier. Their strength, if not their spirit, had been broken against the tenacious redcoat troopers and the murderous musket fire of the Allied foot. Ghost-like, the Frenchmen cantered out of the smoke haze which wreathed the corpse-strewn field, slumped in their saddles now, weary and nearing desperation, firing their pieces and wheeling away, followed by a blizzard of shot from the steadily advancing British, Dutch, and Hessians.

Load and prime, present and fire. Adam's voice was hoarse, his lips cracked, his cheek blistered from a powder flare. His ears ached from the incessant noise, and the repeated charging and counter-charging had left him exhausted. He peered with narrowed, smarting eyes into the smoke ahead. The end must be soon, one way or the other. There was a limit to the endurance of flesh and blood — and in Blenheim there were still twelve thousand Frenchmen to be prised out of their defence works. The village might be the rock upon which the weary Allied troops could finally shatter themselves.

‘I’ll say one thing —’ It was Dan Fuller, wiping a sweating mouth with the back of a filthy hand before thrusting it again into his cartouche box. ‘There’s more spill an’ pelt than Johnny Kidd’s ’anging — but the monsweers are obstinate bastards, ain’t they?’ He spat a chewed wad deftly into the blackened muzzle of his musket and pushed home his rod. ‘A sight more saucy than they was in Flanders —’

They came on again and, enemy though they were, Adam's heart cried out for them. They were dragoons, like themselves — apprentices, husbands, farm-boys, brothers, haberdashers, and coachmen — who had carried King Louis' standard through a dozen campaigns from Namur to Barcelona, from the Maas to the Danube, usually with honour and always with bravery. Today their resolution was as strong as ever, but they had been frittered away in countless piecemeal attacks against Marlborough's equally resolute and better controlled musketry. The French still fired ponderously by battalions, while the British had been drilled to fire by platoons, and the difference in effect was swaying the fate of a battle.

The enemy dragoons knew, now, as they rode repeatedly against the tenacious scarlet ranks, that they could only fail. With their strength drained, their numbers depleted and many of their officers dead, they were only a

remnant of the glittering legion that had roared ‘Vive le Roi!’ at dawn.

‘Once more’ll be their last!’ Shadwell was shouting. ‘Once more, my bullies —!’

Could those desperate Frenchmen know, Adam wondered, how bitterly weary the redcoats were? A youthful *garçon-major*, dismounted but with sword in hand, reeled out of the smoke and staggered blindly forward. Adam raised his piece but, even as his finger tightened, the dust-smirched officer fell to his knees, sobbing with frustration and exhaustion, incapable of a further step. Then he collapsed, crumpled, his face to the ground only feet from the waiting bayonets, and the dragoons let him lie.

‘Unlink ye’ horses and prepare to mount!’ The sky was shadowed by approaching evening and the French squadrons had rolled back yet again. Would they come again —? But what now? British dragoons and Dutch, Danes and Hessians, Hanoverians and Lunenburgers — the entire Allied horse of Marlborough’s left and centre — were climbing into their saddles, holstering their muskets and drawing their swords.

‘Dragoons — have a care! Prepare to trot ye’ horses in close order. Advance ye swords — forward!’

The battle line swayed, then shivered into convulsion as eighty-six squadrons surged forward like a massive, multicoloured sea bursting from a confining dam, flooding across the green plain, pitiless, implacable. The patient, fatigued infantry cheered with hats waving, and boy drummers flayed their drums with sudden zest. Croaking gunners, their faces streaked with sweat and filth, clapped linstocks to fire-holes for the last time, stood back as the fouled monsters thundered and recoiled, then hawked, spat, and made for the water-tub.

Ahead, the *gens d’armes* were already wheeling away towards the doubtful sanctuary of the westward marshes, two miles behind their lines. The milling

French dragoons, hardly reformed, came forward slowly, apprehensively, reined to a halt to fire their pieces, then turned. Moments later they were engulfed by the wall of Allied horse which broke over them, carried them along like flecks in a tide-race until, broken and disordered, they spurred for their lives. The great horde of galloping horses poured on, smashing down all in its path. Artillerymen scattered, and the last pitiful ranks of abandoned infantry, petrified, were overridden and annihilated. Marlborough had achieved his understanding with Marshal Tallard.

To Her Grace the Duchess of Marlborough.

August 13th, 1704

I have not time to say more, but to beg you will give my duty to the Queen, and let her know Her Army has had a Glorious Victory. Monsr. Tallard and two other Generals are in my coach and I am following the rest: the bearer my Aide de Camp Coll. Parke will give her and account of what has pass'd. I shall doe in a day or two by another more att large.

Marlborough

Chapter Twenty

LONDON ROCKED WITH jubilation, and the bells of St Stephen's, St Mary-at-Hill, and St Martin's clamoured with noisy relief. Smudged copies of the *Post*, the *Gazette*, and the *Courant* were thrust from hand to eager hand in Chancery Lane and Paul's Walk, in Jonathan's and Lloyd's and Garraway's. The taverns and ordinaries were filled with joyous, ribald citizens, swilling ale to the Duke's health, drunkenly singing and easy victims for vagrant wantons scarce in their teens — twelve years was the age of consent — and soft-fingered cut-purses. The music of the Grenadiers' March was everywhere, and any soldier could drink his fill or unlace a sweating bosom in the Saracen's Head or the darkness of Stinking Lane. The guilds' militia paraded in Bishopsgate Street and Leicester Field, with no complaints of noisy drums, and bands of rowdy youths roamed the streets, looking for old men to upturn, windows to break, or unescorted maids to rape.

The contents of Corporal John's brief dispatch, brought by Colonel Parke from the field of Blenheim in eight days, had blazed like a flame across England. Tallard was defeated and captured, and the Duke of Marlborough had saved Austria, saved the Grand Alliance, saved the war. As yet there were no details save those few terse sentences addressed to Sarah Churchill, and some days would elapse before the country learned how shattering the victory had been. British dragoons and foot, following the complete rout of the French horse, had surrounded the fortified village of Blenheim and compelled the surrender of twenty battalions of infantry and twelve squadrons of cavalry — including some of the proudest regiments of France. Thousands of the enemy had been slaughtered, or driven into the Danube to

drown, and the survivors were scattered over fifty miles of countryside. The French and Bavarians, it would be estimated, had lost upwards of 40,000 men, including 15,000 prisoners. King Louis' campaign against Austria had been utterly and irrevocably destroyed. There would be sinking hearts in Versailles as, in London, the guns of the Tower boomed with triumph.

Breathless postboys, racing northward, shouted the news as they clattered into St Albans, Bedford, Cambridge, and Chelmsford. In village and hamlet portly, aproned tavern-keepers scuttled to squire and parson, and again the bells rang hysterically. Bonfires flared on chalk cliffs and castle hills from Thames to Tyne.

Revellers returning from the Summer Fair in Cambridge brought the news to Sawston, and the sleepy, sun-drenched village roused itself at the elated tocsin which burst from the belfry of St Mary's. Sawston had three men serving with the Duke — Francis Hewar, Adam Margery, and Rupert Dolling — a fact that nearby Whittlesford, Abington, and Trumpington, with nary a one between them, would be reminded of in no uncertain terms in the days to follow.

John Haslop, ageing now, would lead a thanksgiving on Sunday, and perhaps the Milners or the Huddlestons would consent to festivities. On consideration, was it so surprising that the French had received such a drubbing — with three Sawston men to contend with?

The clean-scrubbed kitchen of the Margery farm was cool and pleasantly shadowed. A tall old clock ticked gravely against the wall, and through the wide-flung window came the faint and unintelligible sounds of voices, the lazy swish of a scythe, insects humming, and the distant tolling of a church bell. There was the warm scent of mown grass in the air, and thistledown floated. Old Bellman lay in the shade, too old and stiff to be tempted by the frantic rabbits flushed by the harvesting labourers.

Betty Cowper, the parish foundling — rose-cheeked and buxom now, and giving cause for speculation among the village gallants — lifted the copper cooking-pan she had been scouring on to its dresser hook, then smoothed her pinafore over her plump hips.

‘There’s a brace o’ Wicken duck for the house, with ham and a pudding,’ she said, ‘and mutton and cheese for the field people.’ Her face suddenly softened. ‘Mistress Mary — it ain’t right for ye to be despairing so. Ye’re young and favoured, and ye shouldn’t be tethered to a scanty place like Sawston. Ye should be in London, where there’s theatres and masquerades, an’ people of ye’ own like. Or even Cambridge, now —’

‘No.’ Mary looked up from her sewing with a wan smile. ‘Perhaps next year, or the year after. I’ve little appetite for theatres or masquerades — and none for London. Sawston has all that I need.’

Betty Cowper screwed up her eyes at the ceiling. ‘Eggs and herrings! London! I ain’t never been there.’ She sniffed. ‘Think of it. Lights and coffee-houses and fireworks — an’ all manner of foreign novelties. I’ve heard there’s women —’ She blushed, then, ‘Why don’t ye open the big house again? It’s a pity to see it locked an’ empty.’

Mary’s eyes were intent on her needle. ‘How could I live alone in a house that has seen my parents die, and my sister —’ There was suddenly a tear on her cheek. ‘And now Francis.’

Mary’s comment was lost on Betty Cowper who, unable to remember ever having family folk, was equally unable to appreciate the loss of them. Before the parish foundling could apply her mind to such a phenomenon John Margery entered, dusty from the fields and flushed. He glanced quickly from one woman to the other, then brushed back his hair, thinning at the brow.

‘There’s news of another battle — a victory,’ he said. ‘That’s the reason for the bells. A great victory, with the French general taken prisoner.’

Betty clapped her hands, but Mary lowered her sewing thoughtfully. ‘And more of our soldiers killed?’

‘Aye, there’ll be losses,’ John Margery nodded. His eyes met hers. ‘But likely the end of the war is a mite nearer, and better a victory than a defeat. There’s not much news — just that there’s been a great victory.’

‘And now we must wait,’ Mary whispered.

‘Aye.’ John Margery was not entirely sure what she meant. The news of Francis Hewart’s death at the Schellenberg had been conveyed to them in a letter from the Adjutant of the 10th Regiment, a week since. Francis had died heroically and had been buried with full military ceremony close to the town of Donauwörth. There had been no news of Adam — but Adam was only a common soldier, unlikely to be the subject of a personal letter from his Adjutant. He, too, might have died at the Schellenberg, or in this more recent battle.

Was Mary thinking of Adam? Or perhaps — aye, more likely — of Rupert Dolling, father of Rebecca’s bastard?

‘If Dolling survives,’ he suggested, ‘there’s no certainty he’ll be returning to Sawston. I’ll hazard he’ll not.’

‘Dolling? Rupert Dolling?’ She looked up, puzzled and momentarily off guard. ‘I wasn’t thinking of Rupert Dolling. It’s Adam.’

She might still have hidden her feelings, but the next moment her face had flooded with colour and, embarrassed, her hands flew to her cheeks. She swallowed.

Betty gaped. ‘Ye mean —? Ye’re love-sick f’ Adam? *Our* Adam?’ Her pretty eyes danced. ‘Eggs and herrings —!’

John Margery, as confused as Mary, frowned at his servant. ‘Ye’ll have work, I’ll hazard, in the bedrooms.’ Betty Cowper giggled, bobbed a quick curtsy and whirled away, her excitement barely suppressed.

He turned back to Mary. 'I'm sorry, m'dear. I didn't know — and I fear it'll be all over the farm in an hour, and the village tomorrow.' He put a hand lightly on her shoulder. 'I'm not much of a man for talking —'

She smiled back at him. 'It doesn't matter, and I don't care who knows now.' She reached up to cover his hand with hers. 'I don't know why I tried to conceal it, especially from you and Aunt Jane —'

'I didn't know,' he repeated, shaking his head as if his ignorance was improper. 'But I'm well pleased — well pleased. Aye, it explains a lot of things.' He hesitated, then, 'Do ye mean ye'd consider marrying Adam?'

Her blush had not disappeared, but there was a hint of mischief in her brown eyes. 'He's never asked me.'

'Ho? Hasn't he?' He drew himself up. 'Well, we'll see about that, m'dear.' He walked to the open window to survey the wheatfields stretching towards the Cambridge coach-road. 'We'll see about that.'

'If he comes back,' her whisper reminded him.

He turned, his brow furrowing. 'Aye — if he comes back.'

Chapter Twenty-One

‘KEEP IT ’NEATH ye’ shirt, cully,’ Nell Something sniffed. ‘There’s more’n a few thievin’ kerns would like their fingers on it — an’ ye’ll not get another.’

‘The bearer hereof, Adam Margery,’ the pass was printed, ‘being discharged from the 3rd Dragoon Guards wherein he formerly served is returning to his abode in Sawston, Cambridgeshire, in order whereunto all HM.s officers, civil and military, are desired to let him pass from place to place until he shall arrive at Sawston.’ There followed the appendage ‘Henry St John, Secretary at War.’

Aye, as Nell pointed out, there were vagrants and imposters in plenty who would do a great deal for a discharged soldier’s pass. Marlborough needed more men and still more men. England’s prisons could not match the demand, and any ragged fellow on the road who could provide no evidence of lawful employment — or an army discharge — could be arrested by a constable, dragged before a magistrate, and impressed into army service. It might be well to keep the scrap of paper well hidden.

Adam shivered. Harwich was bitterly cold, and his threadbare regimentals gave little protection. A passage to England, fourteen days’ subsistence, his clothes, belt, knapsack, and sword were his parting reward for three years of campaigning with Corporal John. Discharged men, the authorities had ordered, must not travel more than three at a time. This last had scarce concerned Adam. He had Nell Something for company, her contract with the master sutler outplayed and returning to Cheapside and prostitution.

Blenheim. Everything seemed to have ended, and begun, at Blenheim.

Pursuing a defeated enemy, they had plunged westward through Wurtemberg, across the Rhine, to invest Landau. Dan Fuller, wasted by dysentery, had died there, and the troop had been reduced to eighteen lean scarecrows of men. Then westward still, to the Moselle valley, where Trèves and Traerbach tumbled before them, conveniently in time for winter quartering — and the campaign of 1704 had ended with the Allies better positioned than at any time since the war's beginning.

A raw, salt wind was blowing from Bloody Point and the open sea, whipping up the puddles. It was the same quay from which, three years ago, he had boarded the *Resolution* — a pale-faced surgeon's apprentice, sick in his stomach, and as cold and wet as he was now. He would always think of Harwich as grey, rainswept, and cold. Above them a tavern sign was swinging, creaking. 'The King's Head,' he said, shrugging himself into his damp collar. 'Hot vittles and a cup o' rum — what d'ye say, Nell? Our first in England, eh?'

In June the redcoats had turned their backs on the Moselle for the last time to return to the Netherlands — where Huy had fallen once more to the French and Liège was under siege. They had reached Maestricht, and Adam had hurried to the little street beyond the Vriydagmarkt. It was late summer, with the leaves rusting on the trees. He had waited, uncertain, for several minutes before entering, hoping to catch a glimpse of Katrin. Failing to do so, he had entered boldly, but Katrin was no longer there, and a new tavern-keeper stood at the taps. A bleak-faced, shapeless juffrouw served him beer, and he had left before nearly draining his cup.

Nell tore at a mutton chop with her teeth, then wagged the bone at Adam. 'Ye could do well for yeself in London, Adam. Think on it. Wi' me, and two or three more easy wenches, we could set up house near Drury Lane, say, where there's gentry. Brandy an' geneva downstairs, and likely a bit o'

coddling. Then, when they're hot an' slaverin', it's up the stairs —'

'It's called a brothel,' Adam said dryly. 'Are ye thinking of making a pimp of me?' He laughed.

'Aye, and ye'd never sleep cold,' Nell added.

In July the dragoons had seen the retreating backs of the French once more, at the storming of Elixem. Captain Shadwell had suffered a broken ankle. Adam and several others were shortly due for discharge, and the few who remained could not have mustered a corporal's guard.

Adam had not seen Kit Davies again — or, if he had, he had not recognized her. She must either be dead or still successful in her deception. Certainly she had not been exposed, or he would have surely heard of it. He wished her luck, hoping that, one day, she might find her errant spouse, Dick Welsh and perhaps — despite her disdain for petticoats and ribbons — live her remaining days in peaceful domesticity.

Outside the King's Head the rain was still falling from an ashen sky, but the food and rum had warmed them and they were in tolerable spirits. The cost of places in the stagecoach which achieved the White Swan in Whitechapel in a day and a half was far more than their lean purses could sustain, but a carter with tubbed herrings for Colchester agreed to convey them to that town for eighteen pence each — not ungrateful for the company of Adam's sword for the journey through the Bromley thicks.

In Colchester they found a cheap lodging house, and the slovenly woman who showed them to their soiled mattress endeavoured to catch Adam's eye until confounded by Nell. 'He don't need ye, draggle-tail. He's got 'is own!'

In the darkness Nell took Adam fiercely, then lay tightly pressed against him. 'We'll be parting tomorrow, Adam lad, and likely I'll never see ye again. Why don't ye come to London wi' me? I swear ye'll never go hungry nor want for ale — and I'll not complain if ye want another doxy on

occasions.’ She paused. ‘There’s only been two men as I’d tie meself to. One’s got hisself shot and now the other’s leaving me f’ pigs an’ cows.’ She pressed her lips to his neck. ‘Adam — if ye don’t find what ye expect in Sawston, will ye come to London?’

Her firm body arched under his stroking hands. ‘Aye,’ he said, smiling. ‘And I’ll take a strap to ye if I find ye abed wi’ another.’

‘The Mermaid, off Cheapside — ye can ask f’ me there.’ Her mouth searched for him. ‘An’ now I’ll give ye a soldier’s farewell ye’ll never forget, cully.’

The following day they separated, Adam taking the Halstead road across the Stour valley while Nell turned away towards Chelmsford. He watched her slight, pert figure until it disappeared from sight, and then tramped on, knowing his last bond with the 3rd Dragoon Guards to be finally severed. There was a lump in his throat.

He stepped out smartly for, although the rain had stopped, the wind was cold, biting through his coat and his thin hose. A signpost had told him that Halstead lay sixteen miles ahead, and the same distance beyond Halstead were the Cambridgeshire bounds. It was country that Grandfather Ralph had known well, and spoken of.

The road was empty. In an hour he was hungry, wishing he had spared a copper or two for bread and bacon before leaving Colchester. It might be three or four hours before he could satisfy his belly. He shrugged. He’d been hungry before.

Three miles farther he pulled off shoes and stockings to ford a stream, having met nobody, and afterwards sat on a bank to massage the circulation back into his numbed legs. Then he raised his head, sniffed, and stared about him.

Fifty yards away, from beyond a tangled thicket, a slender ribbon of smoke

was twisting skyward. He sniffed again. Smoke meant a fire — for whatever reason — and a fire meant warmth. He picked up his knapsack.

Crouched by a lively fire, a man was thrusting twigs under a steaming cooking-pot. He was a ragged fellow, his narrow shoulders covered by a creased and grimy coat of flowered figgetto that might have been fashionable thirty years earlier, his hose holed and his shoes broken. As he turned his head at Adam's approach he showed unshaven cheeks below startled eyes. He sprang to his feet.

'My oath —!' he spat, then grinned. 'Ye had me surprised, soldier. I thought for a moment ye might be a magistrate's constable — and I ain't fond o' constables.'

Adam chuckled. 'Ye can douse ye' match, friend, I'll not do ye mischief — but I'd thank ye for a moment by ye' fire. I'm chilled to the bone.' He tossed down his knapsack.

'Ye're welcome, an' wi' pleasure,' the other whined. His eyes examined Adam carefully. 'And what would a lone soldier be doin' on the Colchester road, eh?'

'Discharged from Flanders,' Adam answered, lowering himself to his haunches to envelop himself in the fire's warmth, 'and homing to Sawston.' He glanced up. 'Adam Margery, lately sergeant of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, an' three years wi' Marlborough.'

'Ye say so?' The vagrant was regarding him with new interest. 'Then ye've smelled cannon-smoke, eh? And I'll hazard ye've skewered a Frenchman or two.' He waved a dirt-encrusted hand. 'My name's Spiggot — William Spiggot — journeyman tinker an' tinsmith — but, I'll allow, a mite reduced in circumstances.' He groped at his feet for a twig, and with it began to stir the contents of the pot. 'Rabbit an' turnip.' He shrugged. 'A man must eat, eh? Will ye join me?'

A minute later Adam was burning his mouth with a savoury mess the quality of which he had not tasted for three years. ‘Did ye say rabbit and turnip?’ he queried.

Spiggot winked. ‘We-ell — it might ha’ been hare, an’ I seem to recall a woodcock — jes’ for the flavour, ye understand.’ He licked his fingers. ‘Discharged, eh? And Sawston, ye said? It so happens I’m travellin’ in that direction meself. Which road was ye takin’?’

‘The shortest,’ Adam said. ‘To Halstead, then across the bounds to Haverhill. As a lad I’ve walked from Sawston to Haverhill in an afternoon.’

‘Ah — Halstead.’ Spiggot rubbed his nose thoughtfully. ‘It’s like a good thing ye met me, Sergeant. Halstead’s a place to keep away from — ’less, of course, ye’re riding a coach. The constable’ll have ye in irons as quick as he sees ye. Chennel’s his name — an’ he gets ten shillings for every vagrant or felon that the army’ll take. I hear say there’s a whole company in Spain known as Chennel’s Company — all of ’em taken on the Colchester road, at Halstead. So, if ye take my advice —’

Adam shook his head. ‘I’ve got a passport, marked by the Secretary of War.’

‘A passport?’ Spiggot’s eyes widened. ‘D’ye suppose that’ll curb Chennel? My oath, it won’t. I tell ye, ye’re likely to find yeself aboard a transport within a week — an’ if the Secretary o’ War even heard of it, d’ye suppose he’d care?’

‘And do ye suppose I’d let some oaf of a constable take me?’ Adam snorted, then tapped his sword hilt. ‘Chennel would get a bleeding he didn’t expect.’

‘For that ye could hang,’ Spiggot warned. He raised his shoulders deprecatively. ‘Why make trouble for yeself? There ain’t no need. I don’t love constables neither, and ’specially Chennel. If ye come wi’ me I’ll see ye

beyond Halstead wi'out trouble — and besides, ye'll need a corner to sleep tonight.' He was cleaning the pot with a handful of grass. 'Ye could be in Sawston tomorrow evening.'

Spiggot was right, of course, Adam decided. He was almost home, and it would be foolish to become embroiled if a short detour would avoid him being so. The two men followed the bank of the stream away from the road, Spiggot shouldering a dirty linen bundle and talking continuously — of the perfidy of the Game Law, which denied anyone of less than a hundred pounds a year the right to kill partridge, pheasant, grouse, or blackcock, of the increasing numbers of footpads and highwaymen on the road and, with considerable venom, the knavery of law officers and magistrates. At dusk he pointed to his right. 'Halstead's over there, Sergeant, an' Braintree's to the southward. We'll pass between, nice an' easy. We'll make for Thaxted, and from there ye can near spit on Sawston — but that'll be tomorrow.'

It was dark, with Adam completely ignorant of his whereabouts, when Spiggot ushered him into a broken-walled cowhouse, thickly cobwebbed and smelling mustily. It was a poor place, but dry and a shelter from the wind, which was still chilling. Adam might have wished for better but, he conceded, he'd slept in much worse — and tomorrow he'd be in Sawston, and perhaps —

His knapsack was a pillow with which he was long familiar, and it seemed he had hardly lowered his face to its friendly roughness before he was sleeping soundly. Tomorrow would come quickly, and he was content.

He awoke to the sound of men's voices, roused himself, and then sat up slowly, blinking as a shaft of sunlight flared in his eyes. He was cold still, and his breath froze in the air. His muscles were stiff.

A man stood over him, and the figure of a second filled the open door of the cow-house. Neither was Spiggot. Adam looked from one to the other, and

then around him. Spiggot and his bundle were gone.

The nearer man prodded Adam with his toe. ‘Ye’ve slept enough, cully. Are ye coming peaceful, or do we put the gyves on ye?’

Adam stared, uncomprehending. ‘Who are you — and what’s ye’ business with me?’

The other sniffed. ‘I’m a magistrate’s constable, an’ I’m ’powered to arrest ye under the Recruitin’ Act. That is —’ he sniffed again, ‘— unless ye can show proof o’ support or employment —’

Adam groped for his sword, which last night had lain at his side, but the weapon had disappeared. The man withdrew a pace and produced a pistol. ‘Aye,’ he said, ‘I were warned about ye. Ye’re William Spiggot, and ye’ve robbed a discharged soldier of his regimentals, ain’t ye? Ye’re a vagabond, an imposter an’ a thief. That’ll do for a beginnin’.’

Adam climbed to his feet. ‘I’m Adam Margery, lately discharged from the 3rd Dragoon Guards and travelling to Sawston.’

The other nodded. ‘And likely ye’ve got a paper to prove it?’

Adam thrust his hand into his shirt, frowned, and then cursed. ‘That light-fingered mongrel!’ He drew a deep breath. ‘I tell ye I’m Adam Margery, discharged from the 3rd Dragoon Guards. Last night —’

‘Aye, I know what happened last night, cully. The real Adam Margery’s laid information against ye. Ye’re William Spiggot, an’ ye robbed him of his clothes *an* knapsack, thinking to pose as a discharged soldier. But ye forgot to take his pass, didn’t ye?’ He gestured with his pistol. ‘Ye want to look like a soldier? Well, cully, we’ll oblige ye. We’ll ’list ye in Colchester tomorrow — as soon as we’ve seen the magistrate.’

‘God damn it, man —!’ Adam exploded — and then his eyes narrowed. ‘Would your name be Chennel?’

The man chuckled. ‘Aye, it is. And how would a discharged soldier, newly

landed, know that?’

When Adam emerged into the open he was surprised to see the houses of Halstead less than a hundred yards distant, and he cursed Spiggot again. To defeat any intention he might have of running, Chennel cut the buttons from his breeches, and then motioned him forward. There was a cock crowing, but the hour was too early for people to be abroad, for which Adam was grateful. The heavy timber door of the village gaol — a single, cramped cell bereft of furnishings — closed behind him, and he was alone with the darkness and his frustration.

’Od’s blood — why hadn’t he remembered what Nell Something had said? He’d been gulled by the first quick-witted rogue he’d met — like some simpleton recruit — and the consequences could be serious. He would not be surprised if Chennel were well aware of his — Adam’s — identity. Spiggot, after all, had hardly the appearance or manner of a recently discharged sergeant of dragoon guards, and might fall short of even the recruiting officer’s low standards of physique. Adam, despite his protests — to which nobody would listen — represented a certain ten shillings.

He had no means of measuring the passage of time and, b’God, he was cold and becoming increasingly hungry again. He sat against a wall, his knees to his chin. It was unbelievable, impossible. After the Jaar, the Schellenberg, Blenheim, and Elixem he was to be dragged back to the drills and drudgery of a new company, the brutal floggings, the gantlope and the strapado, poor food and months without pay, to escape which hundreds of redcoats deserted to the enemy. It was preposterous, but Adam knew too well that he was unlikely to extricate himself easily. Chennel must be sure of himself, and zealous magistrates regarded the Recruiting Act as a franchise to both swell the army and rid the country of vagrants, poachers, and unemployed.

The cell door opened at last. It was Chennel, grinning, and Adam threw up

his hands to shade his eyes. ‘Listen to me, Chennel-!’

‘Ye’d best listen to me first, Spiggot. Ye’re a lucky man.’ The grin widened as Adam stared expectantly. ‘Ye’re lucky. It’s not Flanders for ye. Ye’re for the Americas, wi’ the 29th o’ Foot — as fine a battalion as the Old Bailey ever mustered, an’ most of ’em burned on the hand.’

Adam pulled himself upright. ‘Chennel — ye know damn’ well I’m not Spiggot, and no clod of a constable is going to enlist me in anything. Ye’ll need a magistrate’s warrant, and I’ve seen no magistrate —’

‘Ah — ye will, ye will,’ Chennel said, ‘for all the good it’ll do ye.’ He eyed Adam amusedly. ‘Quite the pauper-lawyer, ain’t ye? Well — I’ll tell ye. Ye’d get short shrift from Sir John. If ye can walk, understand plain English, an’ shoulder a musket, he’ll write a warrant. They don’t need Queen’s Guards to die o’ fever in the Carolinas.’ He guffawed.

In the street a throng of villagers watched from a respectful distance an open waggon in which a dozen men sprawled, their legs in irons and guarded by an infantryman at the tailboard with bayonet fixed. A bored Captain of Foot glanced first at Adam and then at Chennel.

‘Is this ye’ man, Chennel? What’s he doing in regimentals?’

‘He’s an imposter, Captain —’

‘And he’s a liar!’ Adam broke in. ‘Ten days ago I was with General Wood’s 3rd Dragoons —’

‘Silence!’ the Captain howled. ‘Ye weren’t told to speak, damn ye. I’m not concerned with ye’ filthy past. Monk or murderer, if the magistrate commits ye, ye’ll march.’ He turned back to Chennel. ‘Ye’ll get ye’ ten shillings as soon as he’s signed for.

‘Get them down,’ he spoke to the soldier, ‘and muster them in the yard of the Talbot, where the magistrate is.’ He pointed to Adam. ‘And watch this one. If ye lose him, I’ll see ye’ backbone.

‘Now hear this, ye scabby rogues —’ the Captain addressed his shackled charges. ‘Ye’ll enter one by one. Ye’ll take off ye’ caps and ye’ll not open ye’ mouths unless the magistrate questions ye. If he does, ye’ll stand respectfully and answer “ye Honour”. A foul mouth will earn fifty lashes in Colchester — and the same for anyone who snivels about justice.’ He scowled at Adam. ‘D’ye understand that, sirrah?’

Adam remained silent, debating the wisdom of taking to his heels. If the magistrate proved no more sympathetic than Chennel or the Captain, he could expect to be shackled — and to remain so until on shipboard, when all hope of salvation would have disappeared. There remained only a few more minutes.

He glanced carefully to left and right. The street, fester it, ran for fifty yards in both directions without an alley, court or gateway that he might use for a bolt-hole, and he had no desire for a musket ball in the back. He turned his head slowly. The soldier met his eyes, stared, then raised his musket threateningly.

‘Sheppard, carpenter, unemployed. Tracy, seaman, unemployed. Stroud, buckle-maker, unemployed —’ In succession the shackled men clattered sullenly into the Talbot’s tap-room. There was a brief grumble of voices before each, in turn, reappeared with face hang-dog or plainly expressing disgust. One hawked and spat. ‘Magistrate, d’ye say? Ye’d think he was God Almighty!’

‘Spiggot, vagrant —’ Chennel gave Adam a violent push, sending him stumbling into the gloom of the tap-room. The Captain stood there, a muster list in his hand, and seated behind a table was a man in a full-bottomed wig and a stylish coat of peach-coloured velvet ...

‘William Spiggot,’ the Captain repeated, ‘taken by ye’ constable, Chennel, ye’ Honour. It seems the man’s been posing as a soldier to avoid arrest.’

‘Has he, b’God?’ The magistrate’s face was lowered as the pen in his hand scratched. ‘Then I suggest ye arrange for a flogging, Captain, to teach him a measure of respect for the Queen’s uniform.’

‘Ye’ Honour —!’ Adam was both angry and desperate.

‘Keep ye’ peace!’ the Captain flared, but, with the magistrate’s pen even now marking the warrant which would condemn him to the purgatory of the American colonies, Adam was not to be silenced.

‘Ye Honour — I’m not Spiggot. My name’s Margery — Adam Margery — yesterday landed from Flanders and discharged sergeant of the 3rd Dragoon Guards. Chennel’s a lying crimp, and the Captain’s no better —’

The Captain snarled. ‘Ye insolent lout! If ye don’t quiet ye’ mouth I’ll put a ball into ye, recruit or no —’

The magistrate put down his pen and raised his head. ‘Adam Margery of Wood’s 3rd, did ye say?’ He leaned forward, peering at Adam. ‘Aye, fester me — it is.’ He searched for his snuffbox. ‘“Though the last time I saw ye, ye were a trooper — in company with a sutler’s wench named Nell something —’ he chuckled, ‘— aye, that was it, Nell Something.’

Adam stared. ‘“Od’s blood,’ he swallowed. ‘The Honourable John de Courcy.’

‘Sir John de Courcy,’ the other corrected, ‘Justice o’ the Peace.’ He tapped a fingernail against his snuffbox absently. ‘Val Notre Dame, wasn’t it? I heard ye’ affair ended well. As for me, I joined Galway’s rabble in Portugal — and left a leg there.’

Adam was silent as the magistrate surveyed him musingly. ‘I envy ye Blenheim, Sergeant. That might’ve been worth losing a leg for — instead of a herd of half-brained Portuguese peasants.’ He sighed. ‘One day in England — and ye get yeself plucked, eh?’ He looked across at the puzzled officer, then took up the warrant from the table and tore it into several pieces. ‘Ye’ll

not have this one for the Carolinas, Captain. He's a fool, but he's not Spiggot, and too good for the 29th riff-raff. Also —' he wagged a finger, 'ye'd best be a little cautious in ye' dealings with Chennel or, who knows, ye might yeself be facing a magistrate.'

He sat back in his chair, lips pursed and eyes still on Adam.

'Aye — ye'll not have been the first discharged man to be crimped into service. Ye're most of ye the same — easy game for every swindling rogue in the kingdom — but I'll hazard ye'll choose ye' company wi' a little more care in the future.' He reached for a blank sheet of paper, and again his pen scratched. 'This'll get ye home, Sergeant — and I advise ye go straight there, thanking ye' good fortune.' He grinned. 'And we'll consider that settles the surgeon's fee I never paid ye.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

THERE WAS A skurry of snowflakes about his feet, clogging the waggon-ruts and crusting the latticed windows of the Queen's Head, as he reached the first houses of Sawston. His boots were sodden, and fingers and toes ached with the cold that had long numbed his face. Several days' growth of beard shadowed his cheeks, and he was hungry — as hungry as he had ever been. He had not eaten since Spiggot's rabbit stew, and he had walked without pause from Halstead, tramping solidly, mile after endless mile with head lowered and shoulders hunched until, with a choking sob, he had sighted the sombre shape of St Mary-the-Virgin against the grey sky.

He was home. By God, he was home. There was Parson Haslop's church and the serried gravestones of forgotten Milners, Poles, and Hewars, the unmarked, snow-covered mounds of nameless villagers against the boundary holly hedge. There was the smithy, closed against the raw wind but with chimney trickling smoke — and the stables that had employed the laughing ostler, Rupe Dolling, a hundred years ago. The driving snow was gathering at the foot of the high wall that girdled the grounds of the big house.

He halted. The Hewars would be there — Edmund Hewar and Aunt Rachel, and Mary. Edmund Hewar would be roasting his fat hind at the great fireplace with a glass of ratafia in his hand, snarling at the Whigs and pouring contempt on the recent talk of a union with Scotland — whose beggarly status could do nothing but drain still further resources from England. Aunt Rachel would be seated demurely, sewing perhaps, but certainly agreeing with her spouse with untiring nods and sighs. And Mary?

He stood staring at the wall for several moments. From the churchyard, a

few yards distant, it would be possible to see the house. He walked to the lych-gate, the wind in his face and his eyes watering. The Margery farm was only a mile away, and a few more minutes would not matter.

He had not, however, bargained for the swirl of snow, and could see only the vague, cheerless contour of the house beyond a tracery of trees. There were no lights — which was surprising, since the sky was dull and the afternoon advanced. Beneath the trees and shrubbery, yet unreached by snow, the ground was thickly carpeted with the rotted leaves of autumn, and the usually trim hedges were ragged. No gardeners' hands, it was plain, had tended the grounds for many months. Perhaps it was the war. It was always the war.

He turned away, aware of a feeling of acute disappointment which surprised him, and then, with head lowered, almost collided with a hurrying, muffled figure emerging from the church porch.

‘Ye’ pardon,’ he muttered, and would have walked on, but the other stood in his path.

‘Ye have a lean and hungry look, my friend — and, I’ll hazard, ye’re cold and wet — which is a miserable combination for any mortal to suffer.’ He nodded towards the vicarage. ‘If ye’d care to walk along the road I can offer ye a basin of broth — and, if ye’ve the time, a chance to dry ye’ boots.’

Reminded of Spiggot, Adam pushed past, then halted. ‘Ye’re a parson?’

The man smiled, brushing the snow from his face. ‘Aye. I’m John Perkins, Vicar of Sawston.’

‘Perkins?’ Adam retraced his steps. ‘Did ye say John Perkins?’

‘Aye.’

‘But — Parson Haslop?’

John Perkins shook his head. ‘The Reverend Haslop died six weeks ago. He was a fine old man.’

‘He baptized me,’ Adam said.

‘Ye’re a Sawston man?’ The minister chuckled. ‘I’m sorry. My time here has been so brief that I’ve not yet met everyone. Especially those —’ he cocked his head, ‘— who do not attend church.’

Adam had no desire to continue a trifling conversation in the gusting snow of the churchyard, but he had one more question. ‘The Hewars?’ he asked. He looked towards the big house. ‘They are all well?’

‘The *Hewars*?’ Perkins leaned forward to peer more closely at Adam’s face. ‘If ye’re a Sawston man ye’ve been long absent, sir. The Hewars have been dead for more than a year — the smallpox of two summers ago —’

‘*Dead*?’ Adam shouted. ‘Ye mean — *all* dead?’

The minister nodded, frowning, then, ‘Ye didn’t mention ye’ name —?’

‘The Hewars —’ Adam insisted. Nausea reached into his throat. ‘In God’s name, sir —!’

Perkins hesitated, perturbed. ‘There was a daughter — Rebecca, I think — who died earlier. The others were taken by the smallpox of last year — as were several others. I’m told there was a son —’

‘Francis,’ Adam whispered.

Perkins stared, his face incredulous. ‘Ye’re not —?’

Adam shook his head. ‘No. Francis Hewar died at the Schellenberg, with Marlborough.’

The minister glanced swiftly at Adam’s sodden scarlet coat. ‘The Schellenberg?’ he calculated. ‘Then ye must be —’ But Adam had already turned away.

‘Margery,’ he said. ‘Adam Margery.’

John Perkins watched until Adam’s hunched figure had disappeared in to the white flurry beyond the lych-gate. ‘Margery,’ he reflected, blowing on his fingers. ‘I’m sure there was something —’ But it was time for evensong. He shrugged.

Emerging from the churchyard, Adam trudged, crushed and sickened, between the cottages that his tear-glazed eyes did not recognize. The wind tugged at the skirt of his coat and spun the falling snowflakes into a frantic maelstrom about his head, but he was oblivious to everything but his own misery. With the last of the cottages behind him, the Cambridge road was scarcely distinguishable from the white, featureless fields on either side. Above him the clouds were ash-coloured, and dusk was descending.

Twice he stumbled into the hidden ditch, floundering thigh deep in slushy snow and icy mud, and scrabbling free with raw and aching hands. On the second occasion he rose to his feet, shook the stupor from his head, and stared about him. Hereabouts should be Margery acres, stretching westward from the road clear to the Granta. He laughed churlishly, Margery acres — his father's property and, in course of time, Adam's.

By God, it was cold. The boots that had carried him from Wurtemberg were soggy and rotten, and his wet neck-cloth had rubbed the skin from his throat. The Hewars were all dead, and he, Adam, was the last of the Margery's. Mary was dead. He began to cry.

Here was the gate and the shallow trough of the old path. The latch was too stiff for his useless fingers and he tugged desperately, angrily, then scrambled over the gate to fall on the far side, swearing. He could see the yellow glimmer of a lighted window ahead, and there was the faint smell of wood-smoke in his nostrils.

A hundred yards more, after scouring half of Europe. There had been other such distances, burned in his memory — the last hundred yards to the Schellenberg, the avalanching charge at Blenheim, the dawn assault across Elixem bridge — but for three years he had cherished the vision of this rutted path, along which he had faltered as an infant, leapt and shouted as a boy and strolled leisurely as a book-studying youth. The ruts were snow-clogged now,

and it was difficult to imagine endless acres of golden wheat ruffled by the warm fingers of a summer breeze, Adam clenched his chattering teeth. Somehow it no longer mattered.

The lighted window was that of the kitchen, lattice-paned and curtained — the polished brass oil lamp, he'd hazard, on the long table that his mother had scrubbed every day. Sundays excluded, since John Margery had brought her to the farm twenty-nine years ago. Beyond the window was the kitchen door, heavily oaken, black and wet-streaked. It had never, to his knowledge, been chained — and he hoped that the habit had not changed in his absence. There was a fringe of snow climbing the lower panels which fell away as he pushed the door open, and then the warmth of the kitchen embraced him.

Aye, it was the old brass lamp, standing in a circle of its own light on the table. He closed the door behind him. There was nobody in the room, and he walked towards the glowing stove on the far side, to halt before it with arms outstretched.

There was a movement at his feet, and he glanced down. Bellman! The old dog, sprawling in the warmth, whined and flattened his ears. His tail danced ecstatically on the tiled floor.

'Bellman!' Adam dropped to his knees, thrust his face into the dog's warm flank. 'Dear old Bellman!' He was home, b'God. His wet coat was beginning to steam, and Bellman's rough, hot tongue was on his cheek. A wave of weariness, painfully intense, enveloped him, and he moaned. He was home.

'Tha's Bellman.' A small lisping voice spoke, close to him, and he raised his head. A dark-haired child in a shapeless nightdress stood against the table, with hands clasped before her and surveying him with grave eyes. 'Tha's Bellman,' she repeated, almost accusingly.

He turned to face her, sitting on the floor so that his face was on a level with hers. 'Aye,' he said, 'it's Bellman. We're old friends.'

She shook her head, frowning. ‘Bellman’s mine.’

Adam smiled. ‘Once — a long time ago — he was mine. We chased rabbits together, and brought the cows home — and once we dug for treasure in Five-acre Meadow.’

The child considered the statement carefully, then scratched the tip of her nose. Adam leaned forward. ‘I’m Adam,’ he confided. ‘What’s your name?’

She was not to be hurried. She eyed his sodden scarlet coat, his buttons and his wet boots, then, ‘I’m Sara,’ she said.

‘Sara,’ he nodded, ‘It’s a very pretty name.’ He smiled again. ‘Sara what?’ But she had suddenly transferred her interest to Bellman, who lay with his head on Adam’s knee, his tail still swinging lazily. Adam tried again. ‘Do ye live here, Sara? Who do ye belong to?’ There was something hauntingly familiar about the child’s dark eyes, something he should recognize but did not want to.

She had joined Adam on her knees. ‘Aunt Mary’s Sara,’ she explained, ‘and Aunt Jane, and Uncle John, and Betty —’ She frowned again, pondering, then added, ‘and Bellman.’

There were ashes in his mouth and nausea clawed at his belly. He choked, and the child’s eyes flew to his face, mildly alarmed.

Rebecca’s brat — with Rupe Dolling’s eyes. ‘Od’s blood — Rebecca’s brat.

He eased Bellman from him. ‘Ye said —’ No, she was an infant, and her talk was infant’s nonsense — a prattle of names —

‘Sara — ye said ye were Aunt Mary’s Sara —?’

She climbed slowly to her feet, sensing his change of humour, and pushed a thumb into her mouth, uncertain. He drew a deep breath and pulled himself upright. ‘Sara —’ But her feet were pattering on the tiles as she scurried from the room.

Adam started to follow, then halted. There were other footsteps — a

woman's footsteps — and he waited, his back to the stove and Bellman nuzzling his hand. The snow was thawing wetly from his boots and the skirt of his coat dripped. His unshaven cheeks burned rawly in the stove's warmth.

His mother? Or little Betty Cowper? Or —?

It was Betty Cowper — but not the pinched parish waif he had known three years ago. Plump and cherry-cheeked, she had blossomed into a comely young woman. The child Sara was clutching at her skirts and, faced by Adam, Betty gasped, pulling the child closer to her. 'Who are ye?' She pressed backwards against the door. 'What d'ye want here?'

'Betty —!' Adam's throat was dry and suddenly knotted, and the croaking voice was not his. Betty was breathing quickly, her eyes wide. 'Ye'd best be gone quickly, sirrah, before I rouse the house. There's naught of value to risk a hanging fer —' Her face had paled.

'Betty! Betty Cowper!' He uttered it at last. 'It's me — Adam — don't ye see?' He tore off his sodden hat. 'I've come home, Betty.'

For a moment she stood motionless, staring. Then her white face flushed with hot colour and her hands flew to her cheeks. 'Master Adam?' Her voice, too, was scarcely more than a whisper. They both stood, gazing confusedly at each other, until Adam forced a laugh.

'Ye've changed, Betty. I'll wager half the men o' Sawston are setting their caps at ye —' He shrugged. 'Aye, when I left, ye were no more than a sparrow —'

She came forward slowly. 'Master Adam — I'm so glad —' Suddenly overwhelmed, she squealed. 'Eggs and herrings! Master Adam! It's yeself —!' Adam chuckled, and would have kissed her cheek, but the next moment the room seemed filled with people — John Margery laughing, his mother weeping, and flush-faced Betty Cowper still exclaiming 'Eggs and herrings — it's Master Adam! Eggs and herrings!' Bellman, anxious not to be

ignored, whined and snorted among their feet, and Sara was climbing a tall-backed chair to achieve a loftier view of the unshaven stranger.

There were several minutes of joyful confusion — his mother's tearful embrace, his father pumping his hand and then easing off his wet boots, Betty Cowper pouring a cup of brandy, then ordered away to prepare hot water, warming-pan and dry nightshirt. His mother bewailed his soaked clothes, his lean frame, crying again for the flustered Betty to bring a cold fowl from the larder, with a jug of milk and fresh bread. John Margery refilled his cup, careless of Adam's protests that the brandy on an empty belly would send his head befuddled. What matter, his father asked gleefully.

The brandy was liquid fire in his throat, and he looked again for the child Sara. She was at his mother's side, gazing at him with dark, sober eyes. 'Od's blood, I'm home, he brooded, and it doesn't matter. There were questions he wanted to ask — but not now. They could wait. His father had taken up one of his worn boots from the hearth, holding it aloft proudly and talking about Marlborough's march to the Danube. Betty Cowper — i' faith, she'd become an interesting wench — was still busying herself with trivialities to justify her continued presence, and Sara was resting her head in Jane Margery's lap, almost asleep. Adam ached with weariness, his senses dulled by two generous cups of brandy and the warmth from the fire. He was home, aye — and it didn't matter.

But his father was talking, and Adam struggled to listen. He must resign himself, of course, to hours — he sighed — probably days, of questions and answers, to telling and retelling the charge at Blenheim, and the Schellenberg —

He was suddenly aware that both his mother and Betty Cowper were smiling at him expectantly, and he wrenched his attention back to his father. What had he been saying?

‘What d’ye think, Adam lad?’

Adam sat up. ‘I’m sorry —’ Betty giggled.

‘Marriage, lad. I’m near sixty years, and I’d like to see ye settled. Ye’ve sown some wild oats, I’ll not doubt, but ye’re twenty-five and need to be looking to the future.’ He paused, then, ‘Besides, in ye’ absence I’ve resolved a match for ye —’

‘Ye’ve *what?*’ Adam stared at his father, then at Betty Cowper and his mother. Betty was beaming, controlling her excitement only with difficulty, her fingers twisting frantically in her pinafore.

‘Aye,’ John Margery resumed, ‘I’ll allow there’s a slight difference in ye’ station, but neither of ye will suffer from it. She’s a fine girl, and loyal — and in due time the farm will be yours —’

Betty Cowper could contain herself no longer. ‘Ye’ll not regret it, Master Adam,’ she promised, her eyes tear-brimmed, ‘my word on it!’

Jane Margery frowned at the girl’s pertness, but then leaned forward to place a hand on Adam’s knee. ‘She’s been like a daughter to us, Adam. I can say no better.’

John Margery cleared his throat. ‘Ye’ll not be compelled, o’ course, Adam, but I’ve given my word, and wouldn’t care she were disappointed. All the same, I’d like ye to ask her yeself, jus’ to show ye’re willing — and then we’ll drink ye’ health, eh?’

Adam pulled himself to his feet, his thoughts chaotic. ‘Are ye saying,’ he asked slowly, ‘that ye’ve contracted me in marriage — an’ that being so, ye now want me to propose?’

John Margery nodded, smiling. ‘Aye, that’s about it, lad.’

Adam was silent, hardly comprehending. Then he drew a deep breath. ‘To Betty Cowper?’

The faces about him were suddenly blank, then Betty exploded into a

paroxysm of giggles, scarlet cheeked. His father's mouth dropped open.

From behind Adam another voice spoke, cool and measured. 'La, Master Adam — have you thoughts only for Betty? Could there be no other?'

Adam whirled. 'Mary! Dear God —!' He choked on his words. 'They told me — the new parson told me —'

She regarded him musingly, her eyebrows arched and her lips shaping a pout. Adam could not know that, behind her back, her hands were clenched desperately. 'But who could be more fitting? She's a seemly maid, well-tempered, and a good housekeeper —'

His heart was pounding. Mary — Mary — he exulted, wanting to throw back his head and laugh, to reach for her and crush her to him. Mary was here — within an arm's reach. It was incomprehensible —

'I didn't know,' he stammered, futilely. 'Mary —'

'She can cook and sew better than I, clean and pluck a fowl, jug a hare, salt a flitch, and darn and patch like a seamstress.' Her curls danced on her shoulders as she shrugged. 'And she might be willing to wed a discharged trooper.'

'Sergeant,' he said, then snorted. 'Damme — Mary, ye know —' He shot a sheepish glance at his audience. 'Ye know.'

'Know? Know what, Adam?' She dropped her gaze. 'Am I expected to guess, or will you tell me?'

'Ye mean — here?'

She nodded.

Adam hesitated, then, 'I love ye, Mary.' 'Sblood, he swore silently, better a French battery than this. Better fifty lashes over a gunwheel.

But Mary was not quite finished. 'And there was something else?'

'Ask her, Master Adam!' Betty squealed. John Margery inclined his head approvingly. 'Aye, lad,' he urged, 'ask her — then we'll drink to it, and the

whole thing can be finished wi’.’

‘‘Sdeath,’ Adam retorted. ‘Ye’d think I was buying poultry in Leadenhall.’ He swallowed. ‘Mary — I love ye. I want ye to be my wife.’

‘Good!’ John Margery slapped his thigh. ‘That’s that.’ He gestured to Betty Cowper. ‘A bottle o’ Portugal wine, and fresh glasses. No — two bottles.’ He rubbed his nose, ‘then we’ll talk about a settlement, and tomorrow —’

Neither Mary nor Adam heeded him.

If you enjoyed *Amorous Trooper*, please share your thoughts by leaving a review on Amazon.

For more free and discounted eBooks every week, [sign up to our newsletter](#).

Follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).