

Prologue

28 June 1685: The English Channel

The Frenchman who called himself Narrey stood in the waist of the *Saint-Denis*, his leather-gloved hands clutching the frigate's gunwale, and looked out at the black, greasy swell of the Channel. Somewhere in the mist-shrouded darkness, somewhere ahead, were the famous white cliffs of his destination.

He wore a heavy black woollen cloak with a turned-up collar against the spitting rain, and a wide-brimmed black felt hat pulled low over his eyes, so that his lean body was rendered shapeless and his face almost completely hidden. He was tired, deep down into his marrow: the interrogation had been long and the prisoner recalcitrant but, after many hours of labour, almost the whole sea journey from Calais, the fellow had finally confessed. They all did in the end. Even the most stubborn. In the master's cabin underneath the quarterdeck, which had been put at his disposal for the crossing, the broken clerk was now being put to a last few follow-up questions by Guillaume, his loyal lieutenant, bodyguard and most efficient factotum.

Narrey, made a little queasy by the suffering he had ordered to be inflicted, had left the cabin to take a breath of sea air before the last act. This barbarousness was necessary, he told himself, for the security of the mission. Nothing else mattered. The mission was everything. One life was nothing against what they hoped to achieve.

The clerk, Jean Petit, had been caught red-handed by Guillaume going through his master's always-locked portable writing desk, riffling through his secret correspondence, just as the ship was weighing anchor in Calais harbour. Petit had pleaded that he was

merely searching for a spare stick of sealing wax for a private letter but Narrey had looked deep into his eyes and seen the lies and the terror there.

Petit had stuck to his story for two whole hours, while Guillaume piled the instruments. The clerk had wept and pleaded, screamed too, until the gag had been fitted. There was no need to disturb the sailors of the *Saint-Denis* unduly. Indeed, Narrey had struggled to mask his own revulsion at the age-old intercourse between a prisoner and his torturer. He had told himself that this was a test from God. A test he had passed, and for which the Almighty had amply rewarded him. For in the end, of course, Jean Petit, the faithless servant, the forsworn spy, had told them everything.

The clerk had been approached a month ago by a fellow called Jupon, an English merchant living in Paris with a reputation for unscrupulous dealing. Petit had been promised gold and a comfortable retirement in England if he would play Judas and report on Narrey's every move to Jupon. His ultimate paymaster was the Earl of Danby – a disgraced English minister, once known as Sir Thomas Osborne – who had soared in the English court under the second, the restored King Charles – now four months in his grave. The new English king, James, was Charles's younger brother.

James Stuart was a very different man to his brother. He had revealed himself to be a true Christian, even before coming to the throne, acknowledging the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and pledging his allegiance to the Holy Father in Rome. He diligently sought more tolerance for his Catholic countrymen, who were now fewer than a tenth of the whole population and dwindling every year, but many Protestant noblemen such as Lord Danby plotted to thwart the King's will and expel the last remaining faithful from their heretic nation, to extirpate Catholicism entirely.

The traitorous clerk had comprehended nothing of Narrey's mission – praise be to God. The mission was *not* betrayed, Narrey was certain of that. Even *in extremis*, Petit had denied that

he knew anything of the true reason for their night-time voyage to England. That had been what he was trying to find out for his English paymasters when Guillaume had discovered him with his hands deep in Narrey's private papers.

Jean Petit must die, of course – and not just as a punishment for his disloyalty. Much more importantly, Narrey could not allow anyone to learn of this embarrassing penetration of his defences. His position in Versailles was already dangerously weak.

Narrey looked down at his gloved hands on the gunwale and saw spots of gleaming blood in the moonlight. Disgusted, he reached inside his cloak and pulled out a handkerchief, wiped the gore from the black leather and looked for a moment at the red streaks on the delicate lace. The blood of a sacrifice, he told himself, as he opened his fingers and let the breeze whisk the fine cloth away and into the darkness.

We must all be prepared to make sacrifices. Just as Our Lord Jesus Christ did. Jean Petit must make his sacrifice too. And soon. They would be in Dover within the hour. There was no room for weakness in his mind, nor mercy. *This is God's holy work*, he told himself. He shivered a little, not just from the cold wind coming off the dark sea, not just from the grubby death he must accomplish this night; but from the knowledge of the sheer magnitude of the task on which he was now embarked.

The Sun King had briefed him, practically alone, in the vast, exquisite ornamental gardens of Versailles. Louis XIV and Narrey had spoken for nearly an hour, sitting on an iron bench almost like two old friends. And when the King had put the commission papers into his hands, their fingers had briefly touched. This was a sacred task, the King had said. Narrey wholeheartedly agreed with him. And with the sacred task and the blessing of royal touch had come a warning. The plan must succeed, Louis le Grand had said, looking into his eyes. Furthermore, it must remain a deadly secret, buried for ever. Narrey swore on his soul that he would ensure that

it could never be revealed. The Bourbon monarch had repeated this simple message several times in several different ways. An embarrassing failure, the Sun King had stressed, the exposure of this grand design to the public eye would be catastrophic.

Louis le Grand did not have to say that it would mean the end of Narrey's career, and also quite possibly his life, if this enterprise were to be discovered, but that was very clearly implied. Narrey knew that his many rivals in the deadly *milieu* of French intelligence were circling like crows on a battlefield, envious of Narrey's position in the King's favour; he also knew that, after the embarrassing debacle of the Holcroft Blood affair – another God-cursed spy – he could not afford another error.

From behind him, the Frenchman heard the sound of the brass bell on the quarterdeck ring out mournfully, telling the naval hour. It would be two of the clock on land. He'd absented himself from the cabin long enough. Jean Petit had had ample time to reveal the last of what he knew. It was time to silence him. He must put away his compassion and summon the strength to do what must be done. He shoved himself off the gunwale, sighed heavily and made his way back to the master cabin.

Narrey pushed up his hat brim and looked over at the prisoner, who was still lashed to his wooden sea-chair in the corner of the small cabin. Jean Petit's face was so swollen that it was difficult to see if his eyes were open or not, but Narrey thought he saw a gleam of life. His mouth was gagged with a thick wad of lambs' wool tied in place with a strip of rag. His bare chest was covered with a hatching of deep lacerations, scorch marks, and areas of oozing lymph where wide patches of skin had been removed. Both nipples had been excised, leaving twin gore-crusted pits. The man's hands, dangling from forearms strapped to the chair rests, were huge balls, the gross sausage-like digits purply red, the skin stretched almost shiny where the bones inside had been expertly shattered.

Guillaume, a brawny, balding man, was carefully cleaning his instruments with an oiled rag. The tools were laid out on a cloth-covered table by the bulkhead.

'Is there anything more?' said Narrey, riding another wave of nausea as he observed the clerk, and his lieutenant looked up from his work and shook his head.

'No, Monsieur le Comte, and I am perfectly sure this wretch knows nothing of the true nature of our mission. I have garnered a few more minor details of their craft. Codes, in lemon juice, written between the lines of love letters and left behind broken masonry in several churches. He and Jupon also used identical copies of Molière's play *Tartuffe* for their cyphers. Chalk mark signals, too. White: all clear. Red: danger. Nothing very new or interesting – I'll write it all up in my report. But, Monsieur, I do suggest it is high time that we settled our accounts in full with this Jupon creature.'

Narrey nodded. 'I will attend to it directly when I return to France.' But he was not thinking about Jupon, he was thinking of Lord Danby, the clerk's paymaster. And, on the edge of his mind, Holcroft Blood. Had that elusive English spy also been one of Lord Danby's hired men like this doomed little wretch before him?

'How much does our friend weigh, do you think?' he said.

Guillaume looked up. It was not a question he had anticipated.

'I . . . I don't know, monsieur. Two hundred *livres*, perhaps.'

Narrey looked closely at the prisoner; it was difficult to tell with him sitting down but he suspected that the bruised and bloodied fellow was a little lighter.

'Ask him.'

Guillaume selected a pair of heavy pliers from the table in front of him, turned to the prisoner and rapped the iron instrument once sharply on Petit's grossly swollen right hand. The prisoner jerked and gave a muffled scream behind his gag.

‘No more noise now, Jean,’ he said, roughly pulling away the lamb’s wool gag. ‘Just tell the Monsieur how much you weigh, as near as you can estimate.’

Jean Petit was whimpering, weeping, writhing in his bonds, eyes jerking from side to side in their fleshy slits.

‘Tell him,’ said the torturer. He raised the iron pliers once more.

‘I don’t know, monsieur, truly I do not know. A hundred and eighty *livres*, perhaps a little less. I beg you, highness, mercy, have mercy on me, I shall never betray you again. I cannot say what made me do it. I was weak. It was wrong, so wrong, but I swear by all the saints that I will serve you well from now on . . .’

Narrey closed his ears, hardened his heart. He walked over to the side table where a jug of wine was laid out with several fine crystal glasses. He reached inside his cloak and brought out a leather wallet. Opening it, he selected a small paper packet from inside. With his back to the prisoner, he emptied a quantity of grey powder into a delicate, long-stemmed glass then filled the vessel with deep red wine. At only one hundred and eighty *livres*, he judged, three quarters of the dose would be more appropriate. He stirred the wine with his gloved finger, wiped it dry on his cloak and brought the glass up to his nose. He could smell nothing. The crone he had visited in the Paris suburb, in the faubourg Saint-Germain, had sworn by her ‘inheritance powder’: it was undetectable in food or wine, she said, and very swift acting. It also had the advantage of giving death the appearance of nothing more sinister than an attack of apoplexy. The victim, she said, died with a minimal amount of paroxysm.

He walked over to Jean Petit and held the glass to his puffed out lips. ‘You will be of service to me if you drink this wine,’ he said gently.

Petit twisted his head away from the proffered wine. ‘Monsieur, I beg you, let me atone for my sins, I swear I shall be the perfect servant . . .’

'Drink it, Jean,' said Narrey, smiling down at his clerk, and pressing the glass to his bruised mouth. 'It will swiftly end your sufferings. Think of it as a mercy.'

Jean Petit looked up at his master's face. There was no forgiveness in his black soul, there never had been. Indeed this mercy – if it was such – was unexpected.

'Monsieur,' he said, 'I can still be of service to you, I could go to Lord Danby and tell him whatever you wanted . . .'

'I could never trust you again,' said Narrey. 'Never. Drink it, Jean,' he pushed the glass forward again, 'and you shall indeed be of some small use to me. It will be very quick, I swear it. And I will have a Mass said for your soul. The alternative, which I'm certain neither of us would prefer, is to make your death a long, slow one.'

Jean Petit opened his lips and drank the poisoned wine, gulping fast as if he were thirsty, swallowing hard, red trickles spilling down over his chin in his haste.

Narrey looked at the empty glass. There was no residue. Perhaps the old witch had spoken the truth. He pulled out a heavy round watch from his waistcoat pocket, flicking open the gold cover to note the time. It was seven minutes past two.

He dropped the poisoned glass and crushed it under his boot. Then he returned to the table and poured himself a large portion of the red in a fresh goblet. He sipped wine, wanting to gulp, wanting the alcohol to wash away his guilt – but knowing it would not. He must bear it, for the cause, for the mission, as he bore the weight of so many other terrible crimes. It was his lot. This was his personal sacrifice. Just as Jean Petit's sacrifice was to suffer torture and death. He could feel the exhaustion pressing down on his shoulders, an almost physical weight about his neck. In London, in a few hours, he could sleep a little. If his conscience would allow him to rest.

'Monsieur le Comte,' said an urgent voice behind him. He turned to look at Guillaume and saw that his lieutenant was pointing at Jean Petit.

‘Mary, Mother of God, that is indeed surpassingly quick,’ said Narrey.

Jean Petit was squirming in his chair, jerking against his ropes. His face had a grey pallor behind the bruises, he was coughing weakly, spitting out a bloody soup of phlegm and wine over his chest. Guillaume hurriedly crossed himself.

Petit was moaning now, a low clogged sound, his face screwed up in pain; his neck was rolling on his shoulders, he hiccupped madly, spat out another gobbet of spew, and then his bowels emptied in a horrible fluttering sound. A noxious stench quickly filled the cabin. The clerk gave one last violent heave against his bonds, then sagged. His body loose as an abandoned child’s doll, his spirit gone.

‘Less than two minutes,’ said Narrey, looking at the timepiece in his hand. ‘It’s almost unbelievable. That faubourg Saint-Germain crone truly is a sorceress.’

Part One



Chapter One

5 July 1685: Somerset

A cone of orange flame, speckled with black fragments of burning wad, erupted from the cannon's muzzle. The gun's report crashed over the tranquil landscape of the Somerset Levels and startled a flock of roosting starlings from a hawthorn beside the road from Taunton to Bridgwater. The sound seemed different when the Falcon was fired without its three-pound ball, or so thought the tall English officer who stood beside the smoking gun. It was a higher, more childish tone, far less ferocious.

Lieutenant Holcroft Blood, a big, broad-shouldered fellow of about thirty years in the blue coat with yellow turn-backs of the Ordnance, squinted against the dying sun, following an imaginary flight path of the absent ball. In his right hand he gripped a linstock, a long wooden pole that held a burning length of match cord at the end, which he had used to fire the cannon. The iron round shot would have struck the base of a clump of alder bushes, he reckoned, about three hundred yards away in the middle of a sheep-cropped field, striking the ground there and bouncing on at about the height of an enemy's chest, maybe a little lower. He might be wrong, of course, but he doubted it. He was gifted in this small way, being able to accurately predict the fall of shot – real and imaginary – within a margin of error of only a handful of yards.

However, there had been no shot in the Falcon and no enemy in sight. The rebel forces – some six thousand men under James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, the late King Charles's eldest illegitimate son – were snug inside the newly dug earthworks of the market town of Bridgwater three miles away across the marshy fields of Sedgemoor.

Tomorrow, perhaps, the heavy guns of the Royal Train of Artillery would be hauled by their horse teams to within half a mile of the earthwork fortifications of Bridgwater and fired in earnest, pounding the rebels into submission. But that was tomorrow. On this warm evening in early July, Holcroft Blood turned to the small, wiry, sharp-faced redcoat hovering beside him and, handing him the linstock with the burning match cord, said: 'Sergeant Miller, you may set the watch for the Train.'

'Sir,' said Miller briskly, and bustled away trailing a thread of smoke from the match and barking commands to the soldiers leaning against cannon barrels, sitting on boxes of equipment or barrels of powder, or just lounging idly on the grass.

Holcroft put a hand on the Falcon's bronze barrel. It was pleasantly warm. He noticed a smudge of dust on the gleaming metal, twitched out a snowy kerchief from his coat sleeve, and wiped it away – giving the barrel a few extra swipes of the lace-edged linen cloth for the peace and satisfaction of his own tidy mind.

Then he turned and contentedly watched Miller, in his usual energetic fashion, detail off the guard soldiers of the Train – the red-coated men of the newly formed Royal Fusiliers – setting sentries at intervals along the front of the line of cannon and dismissing scores of others back to their tents and cook fires next to the baggage park a hundred yards behind the line of guns. These men belonged to a specialist regiment, which had begun life as the Tower Guards, had briefly been the Ordnance Regiment, and this year had been renamed the Royal Fusiliers. Its task was to protect the Train – the mile-long column of cannon and gun carriages, ammunition wagons, ox-drawn fodder wains, equipment-loaded mules and other assorted beasts of burden – on the march and the pieces of artillery in battle from attacks by enemy infantry and cavalry.

Each fusilier was armed with the new flintlock musket or 'fusil' – rather than the old matchlock – as it was considered safer to arm soldiers who were frequently around open kegs of gunpowder with

a weapon that was discharged by the single striking of flint on steel, rather than with a musket that required a constantly burning match. And while the Royal Fusiliers could be used as regular infantry, if necessity demanded it, and they trained like any other regiment in these tactics, they also took great pride in their special role and in the big killing machines under their protection.

There were twenty-six of these heavy bronze cannon in Holcroft's charge that fine evening, lined up neatly north to south along the line of the Bussex Rhine – a deep muddy ditch that marked the forward defensive line of King James's encamped army. The guns ranged from the heaviest pieces in the Train, the twelve-pounder Demi-Culverins, to the six-pounder Sakers and down to a pair of light three-pounder Falcons – one of which Blood had just fired to signal the end of the military day.

The guns had been hastily positioned that afternoon by the Comptroller of the Royal Train of Artillery, Holcroft's commanding officer, Colonel Henry Sheres – a surveyor and fortifications expert, even an intrepid traveller in his youth, but now a man who was more interested in wine than in winning battles. The guns had been placed to dominate the dusty, unpaved road to Bridgwater with their fire. This was the most direct, and therefore most likely route that the enemy would take to attack the small royal force, if they chose to come out of their earthworks and fight. There were two other smaller crossings of the Bussex Rhine in this section, crude narrow fords known as plungeons, which were used to drive sheep from one pasture to another. The lower plungeon was a hundred yards north, to Holcroft's right as he looked out over the fields towards Bridgwater; the other one, the upper plungeon, was half a mile beyond that where the Rhine curved round to the east.

Holcroft turned to his right and watched the men of Colonel Percy Kirke's foot regiment responding to the signal gun and setting their own watch on their stretch of the line. A company of flint-lock musketeers formed up beside the lower plungeon, saluting and

stamping with precision. These fifty or so redcoats would provide the picquets for the first four hours of the night. All four hundred men of Kirke's Lambs – as the regiment was known for their badge depicting a Paschal lamb – were drilled to a peak of perfection and it gave Holcroft a deep sense of rightness and pleasure to observe their clockwork-like drill motions.

Holcroft, shading his eyes with his left hand against the sun's dying glare, looked beyond the Lambs to their neighbouring regiment – Trelawny's – which was comprised half of pikemen, and half of flintlock musketeers. Beyond Trelawny's came three battalions of crack Guards regiments under Colonel Edward Sackville and the Duke of Grafton – another of the late King Charles's many bastards, but this one loyal to the legitimate Stuart lineage; and, finally, at the extreme right of the line, the Earl of Dumbarton's contingent of five hundred matchlock bearing Scotsmen. All in all, nearly two thousand royal infantrymen. A formidable military force.

Holcroft began to walk slowly down the line of his guns, their brilliant polished metal catching the last gleams of sunlight. He stopped halfway down behind 'Roaring Meg', one of the six-pounder Sakers, an elderly piece but one of his favourites, and bent to look along its nine-foot barrel towards the darkening fields to the front. The barrels of the other guns were parallel with each other but Meg was out of alignment, only a little, a matter of a few inches, yet it made him feel uneasy.

'Sergeant Miller,' he shouted. 'Two men to shift old Meg. On the double.'

When the wiry non-commissioned officer came running up with two fusiliers in tow, Holcroft directed them as they lifted the heavy wooden trail of the gun carriage and shifted it three inches to the right. He looked along Meg's barrel once more, and then walked to the next gun, a bruiser of a twelve-pounder, to see that it was perfect. He nodded with satisfaction.

'Lieutenant Blood – what the Devil do you think you are about, sir!'

Holcroft whirled and saw Quartermaster William Glanville striding briskly towards him from the direction of the baggage park. His superior's face, under the huge black periwig he always wore, was flushed a purplish red with rage.

'You are moving the guns, sir. Moving the guns! How dare you! Against the explicit orders of the Comptroller himself!' Glanville nominally held the rank of captain but, as the quartermaster – in charge of rations, uniforms, munitions, fodder, and all manner of kit from horseshoes to gunpowder scoops – he was the *de facto* second-in-command to the Comptroller of the Train, Colonel Henry Sheres.

'Sir, I was merely . . .'

'Do not answer back, Lieutenant. I saw you with my own eyes. The Colonel was gracious enough to place the Ordnance exactly as he wished it to be placed and now I see you taking it on yourself to redeploy His Majesty's guns. Do not deny it.'

Holcroft said nothing. He saw that Sergeant Miller and the two fusiliers were standing stiffly to attention, shoulders back, feet together, faces artfully blank.

Glanville was a bully, as Holcroft knew well. A short, fat, florid, military tyrant. He was well-born – he came from an aristocratic French family who had transplanted to England two generations ago – but ill-educated; cunning but rather stupid, and suspicious of anyone more gifted than he. Glanville was famous in the lower reaches of the Ordnance for his incompetence, dishonesty and almost total lack of morality.

Early in their acquaintance, Glanville had conceived a deep and abiding loathing of his most senior lieutenant, loading him with extra duties whenever he could and complaining on occasion, sometimes within Holcroft's hearing, that he was too clever by half, an odd fish, not a proper gentleman, and unfit to bear the King's commission.

Holcroft had been tempted on more than one occasion to challenge the fat little bastard, or strike him in the face to provoke a

meeting, and then skewer him. But he had refrained from making the challenge. He desperately wanted to stay with the Ordnance, he wanted to stay with his beloved guns. And a duel, even a discreet one, if he survived it, could mean expulsion, disgrace and an end to his career.

After returning to England after many tumultuous, violent and dangerous years abroad – mostly spent in clandestine activity in France – Holcroft wanted nothing more than peace and stability. No upsets, no alarms, no more chaos. He had resolutely turned his back on intelligence work, vowing never again to have anything to do with that murderous world of deceit and lies. He had found himself a nice quiet berth in England with the Board of Ordnance – a home – and he fully intended to keep his new position. Even if it meant swallowing Glanville's ridiculous insults.

'I won't have it, do you hear me!' William Glanville was still ranting. 'You are not to move the guns about willy-nilly, putting them here, putting them there, without express permission either from me or from the good Colonel, do you hear me, Mister Blood. Disobey me and I'll have you cashiered. Am I being clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

Captain Glanville turned on his heel and strode off muttering under his breath.

Holcroft heard the other three soldiers breathe out.

'As you were, Sergeant,' he said.

Miller dismissed the two redcoats with a jerk of his chin.

Holcroft, with Miller bobbing along at his shoulder, resumed his walk down the line of the guns. Holcroft, as was his habit, remained silent. To his surprise, Miller spoke up. 'Don't let him trouble you, sir. He's a pig, that man, just an angry swine who hates the world and everyone in it.'

Holcroft stopped and stared at the smaller man in astonishment.

'None of the men have any respect for him, sir. Not one of them. He's no true gentleman, not at all. Just a fat furious pig—'

'That's enough, Miller.'

'Battle's coming, sir, you know that. We could always arrange a little accident. Quiet, like. All that confusion. A wild shot. A gallant officer tragically cut down.'

'I have no idea what you mean. You cannot arrange an accident. If you do that it's not an accident.' Holcroft frowned at the diminutive sergeant.

'Well, if you change your mind, sir, just tip me the wink. I'll be most discreet.'

Holcroft shook his head. John Miller was babbling again. He was a good soldier, an excellent sergeant but sometimes he did come out with the strangest utterances.

The two of them walked on in silence. They stopped at the last but one twelve-pounder and gazed down at a monkey-faced veteran who was seated cross-legged beside the carriage next to a small pyramid of iron twelve-pound balls in a wooden frame. The man had one ball between his knees and with a small hammer and chisel he was carefully chipping away at a patch of rust, turning it in his hand between taps, feeling for roughness with his broad fingertips in the dying daylight.

'Still at your labours, Jackson?' said Holcroft. 'The soup is up in the lines, you know. A cider vat will have been broached too, I should imagine.'

The master gunner, whose perfectly bald sun-brown head was as smooth as one of his heavy round shot, glanced up at the officer and jumped to his feet.

'“There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked”,' he said and grinned, displaying a mouth full of broken, blackened teeth.

'Isaiah 57:21,' said Holcroft immediately. 'But, consider this, even the most wicked of men – and you certainly must count among their number, Enoch Jackson – needs to eat. I would therefore urge you to consider the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 9:7.'

They often played this game, although Jackson, who had been a fiery dissident preacher in his youth, was far more proficient at it. As a speaker, he had commanded a large following in his

native Lincolnshire, and was famed for his excoriating sermons on the supreme virtues of chastity until, almost inevitably, he was discovered *in flagrante* with the nubile daughter of one of his congregation.

The young preacher was tarred and feathered and run out of Skellingthorpe and like so many other young men of the time he was swept up in the long, brutal wars between the first King Charles and Parliament. He had learnt his new trade on the bloody battlefields of Marston Moor, Naseby and Edgehill and though he had never risen above the rank of master gunner he was one of the most respected and well-liked men in the Ordnance and certainly one of the most experienced.

“Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works”,’ Jackson intoned. ‘Aye, right enough, sir. I’ll be along presently to the mess lines when I’ve finished this little lot.’ He nodded at the pile of iron balls at his feet.

Holcroft was about to move on when the old gunner said: ‘Do you think they will come at us tomorrow, sir?’ He nodded in the direction of Bridgwater and the unseen rebel army. ‘It’s just that I was wondering, if there’s going to be a dust-up, whether we shouldn’t perhaps bring up a few more Number Five powder kegs . . .’

Holcroft shrugged. ‘They have the greater numbers. And they know we are here.’ He paused to think. ‘They would be wise to attack sooner rather than later. Their men are drifting away, or so our intelligencers tell us, returning to their farms and homes. While we, of course, grow stronger every day. The King has summoned more of his regiments back from the Low Countries and Ireland. If they do not fight us soon they will surely be overwhelmed. So, yes, Enoch, yes, maybe they will come tomorrow – maybe they’ll all come marching up that road yonder with the dawn.’

‘If they come, sir, we’ll be ready for them.’ The master gunner put his hand on the long cannon beside him. ‘I’ll pass the word for

some more of the Number Fives to be broken out and made readily to hand. If they do come, we'll give them a warm reception, never fear, sir. You will remember Deuteronomy 3:22, of course.'

Holcroft nodded: 'Of course.' In idle moments during his service in France, Holcroft had read the whole Bible in English from cover to cover and his near-perfect memory allowed him to recall most of it in detail. But his mind was no longer on their game. He was thinking of a possible rebel attack in the morning. Were they truly ready? He thought so: there was enough powder, wadding and shot with each of his guns for an hour or two's engagement – and that gave them ample time to bring up more. The two hundred men of the Royal Train of Artillery – the red-coated fusiliers, the master gunners, the engineers, the pioneers, the matrosses who did the heavy lifting work with shot and powder, the civilian drivers of the horse teams, the carpenters, collar-makers, wheelwrights and farriers, all the diverse men who made up the huge artillery cavalcade – were almost all in the tent lines now, sampling the powerful local cider, supping up their turnip soup and barley bread, preparing for bed. But they could all be briskly summoned to their duty in the morning, if it were necessary. They *were* ready if they came in the morning, Holcroft decided.

His fountain of thoughts was broken by Sergeant Miller, who nudged him hard with his elbow and jerked his head in the direction of the lines. Holcroft whirled around half expecting to see Captain Glanville returned to berate him further for some footling misdemeanour. Instead he saw a white-haired gentleman in a long black cloak, black skullcap and white collar not three yards away who said loudly and clearly: 'Ye shall not fear them: for the Lord your God he shall fight for you.'

'Beg pardon, sir?' said Holcroft.

'Deuteronomy 3:22,' said the old fellow. 'It was a favourite of my old sergeant major. Always quoting it. Every soldier in the world knows that old chestnut.'

Holcroft looked at the man: he must have been in his mid-sixties, yet he had the muscularity of a man half his age. His long pointed nose and mean mouth, coupled with a large patch of black cloth fixed to his left cheek, which seemed to cover a long-healed wound, might have made him appear sinister had it not been for the pair of cheery blue eyes that fixed on Holcroft's own.

'This is a splendid display, Lieutenant, quite splendid,' said the newcomer. 'I count twenty-six pieces. A noble array of metal if ever I saw one. I congratulate you on it, sir!' Then he jerked in surprise. 'Bless my soul, can it be? Can it really be? How splendid! Tell me, young man, is that not Roaring Meg herself over there?'

Holcroft saw this odd fellow was pointing a bony finger at the Saker halfway up the line of guns. 'Don't tell me old Meg's still in service. After all these years!'

'That she is, Captain, sir,' said Jackson, shouldering his way past Holcroft and extending his right hand. 'And she fires as sweet and true as the day she was cast.'

'Jackson, Enoch Jackson, you dissenting old rascal, God bless my soul!' The old gentleman was heartily shaking the master gunner's hand. 'This is indeed a day of miracles and wonders. How are you coming along, Enoch? Well enough, I would say. Still managing to amuse yourself with the King's Ordnance, I see. Splendid!'

'Yes, sir, I'm a difficult man to get rid of, or so I'm told. But how are you, sir? I haven't set eyes on you since Naseby. Sorry to hear you was wounded . . .'

'Who *are* you?' interrupted Holcroft, a little more brusquely than was polite. He was bewildered by this oldster who dressed like a prelate and looked like a pirate, and who seemed familiar not only with his cannon but also with his master gunner.

'Beg pardon, sir,' said Jackson. 'Might I introduce the captain, Captain Peter Mews, as was. My old commander during the late wars. A fine officer, sir, brave as a lion, lays a six-pounder most elegant, too – a staunch man of God, who's been raised to the rank of Bishop of Bath and Wells.'

'It's Winchester, these days, Enoch. Bishop of Winchester, for my sins. And I haven't laid a Saker in forty years. But you're kind to remember my modest skills.'

'And this is Lieutenant Blood, sir,' Jackson continued, 'an officer who might have the makings of a half-decent gunner one day, if he applies himself.'

Holcroft said, 'My lord,' and made his bow. He could hardly believe a prince of the Church of England was standing there discussing the pointing of a cannon.

'Splendid, splendid! Just the man to accompany me while I inspect the guns!' said this bishop. 'Lead on, Lieutenant Blood, I wish to see them all. Don't hurry, I've plenty of time 'fore supper with Lord Feversham. I particularly want to see old Meg, pay my respects. I'm sure you understand. Do you remember, Enoch, that time when old Hoppy Featherstone-Haugh – he was killed at Maidstone, you know, poor fellow – but d'you remember when he made me that wager for fifty pounds that I couldn't hit a haystack with Roaring Meg at five hundred yards. Of course, I said to him . . .'

So Holcroft found himself leading a bishop and a master gunner, chattering like fishwives, back up the line of guns as the last light dissolved into inky black.

Chapter Two

6 July 1685: Somerset

Holcroft wiped the rim and passed the nearly empty flask of brandy to his friend Jack Churchill, his saddle creaking loudly as he leant across. The two men were slowly walking their mounts northwards along the line of the Bussex Rhine. On their left was the black line of the ditch, and a few scattered individual redcoats keeping watch. A hundred yards to their right was the sprawl of tents and cooking fires where the various infantry regiments were encamped. Somewhere in the darkness Holcroft could hear a man singing an old country love song quite beautifully, against background rumble of soldierly snoring. But apart from that the night was quiet.

He pulled out his brass pocket watch and flipped it open. It was half past one in the morning, a good three hours before dawn and four and a half before he might expect any breakfast. He wished he had taken the time to visit the officers' mess in the past few hours. Even if there had been no food on offer, he might have managed to refill his brandy flask from the decanter on the sideboard. Jack, God love him, had a way of hogging the spirits; he'd no sense of frugality on a chill, misty night when it came to other folks' flasks. It was the result of him being so disgustingly rich, of course. There was never shortage of fine French bingo for Major-General John, Lord Churchill, and he seemed naturally to assume it was the same for everyone else.

Holcroft could not complain, in truth. Jack Churchill, despite his swift rise, elevated rank and recent ennoblement, treated the lieutenant the same way as he always had since they were young men trying to make their way in the jungle of White Hall in the reign of the second King Charles nearly fifteen years ago. That is to say

with a mixture of exasperation, good-natured teasing, generosity and affection.

'Tell me more about your mad gunner-bishop, Hol,' Jack said, tossing the now empty brandy flask back to his friend.

'I spent above two hours showing him the pieces – never met a man of the cloth more enthusiastic about ordnance – and he wanted to know everything. Range of each gun, weight of charge, reliability in action . . . He's not a bad old stick, to be honest. Very knowledgeable about the art. But in the end I had to leave him alone with Enoch Jackson to go off and make my rounds of the rest of the Train camp.'

'And what is he doing here?'

'Apparently he heard a rumour three days ago that we had Monmouth's whole army trapped and so came down in his carriage from Winchester immediately. He wants to see a great victory, he told me. He was something of a hero in the last wars, or so I collect, and he misses the excitement of combat, the smell of burnt powder smoke and mass slaughter. Quite mad, you see. Not right in the head. Though I judge him to be a fairly harmless sort of lunatic.'

Jack Churchill gave a meaningless grunt. He knew that Holcroft hated the gore and stench and waste of life that a battlefield entailed – his joy lay in the cool, bloodless calculation of a cannonball's flight. The mathematics of mayhem – not its messy actuality. But Jack knew the grip the raw excitement of battle could take on a man. He'd proved his own courage in combat more than once as a young officer and, sometimes, just sometimes, he missed the hot, breathless roaring of bloodlust in his veins. But it was not seemly for an officer of general rank – or indeed for the second in command of the Royal Army, subordinate only to Lieutenant-General Louis Duras, Earl of Feversham – to speak of the joy of slaughter, even to an old friend.

'There's no guarantee your mad bishop will even get his battle, let alone a victory. It's no good counting your chickens before they hatch,' said Jack.

Holcroft frowned at his friend. 'Why are you talking about chickens?'

Jack stifled a smile. Holcroft Blood possessed a most unusual brain: strikingly brilliant in some areas, such as with numbers or cards or mathematical problems, but also, strangely narrow, even blinkered, in many others. He knew that it was a waste of breath to use even quite common figures of speech or metaphors with his old friend.

'I mean that if Monmouth has any sense he will slip away north to Bristol and beyond tonight. But if he does stay here, Lord Fever-sham means to close and assault Bridgwater – perhaps as early as tomorrow noon. You'd best make sure the guns are ready to move up in good time.'

'They're ready.'

The two men lapsed into silence. They were approaching the upper pluncheon and a picquet of the Earl of Oxford's red-and-blue-coated cavalry, which marked the farthest end of the line. Major-General Churchill received a crisp challenge, and salute, from the captain of the cavalry guard, then Jack and Holcroft turned their horses around and, walking the beasts slowly, they began the three-quarters of a mile journey back along the line of the Rhine towards the cannon at the far southern end.

Jack broke the silence. 'It is not right, Hol, you know. You being a mere lieutenant. I could help you rise, if you would let me. Are you sure that you won't allow me to put you into one of the line regiments? I'm sure I could manage a captaincy at the least. You could be a major in a year, given a bloody battle or two, maybe a lieutenant-colonel with your own battalion by the time you're thirty-five.'

'I'm content with serving the Board of Ordnance, Jack. You know I'd miss my guns if were to leave them. I'm happy to remain a lieutenant for the time being . . .'

They rode on in silence for a few more yards.

'And have you heard from your lovely widow, Elizabeth Fowler?'

'I've had one letter from her—'

Holcroft's words were interrupted by the distinct sound of a shot. It came from somewhere out on the moor, out in the mist-wreathed darkness.

Jack and Holcroft looked at each other.

'A dropped musket?' said Jack. 'A poacher out in the marshes?'

'That was a pistol shot, Jack.' Holcroft knew his ordnance. 'Horse-pistol. Half-ounce ball. One and half drams of powder. Standard side-arm for Oxford's Blues.'

For a moment they both stared out across the Bussex Rhine into the black night. And then came the sound of hooves drumming on the turf.

Out of the curtain of mist, like a mythical monster of yore, came a lone trooper on a rearing horse, the beast snorting twin plumes of white breath from its flaring nostrils. The rider, in the red coat with blue facings of the Earl of Oxford's cavalry, saw Jack in his general's froth of lace and finery and called: 'Beat your drums, my lord, sound the alarm. The enemy is come! Call out the men, sir, for Christ's sake. The enemy's upon us . . .'

'How many? From what direction?'

'Looks like the whole pack of 'em, sir. We glimpsed many hundreds, maybe thousands of the rebel bastards. And coming in from the north. That's all I know, sir. The enemy are on the move this night.'

From the north, Holcroft thought, while our whole line faces west! They are coming out of the darkness on our right flank. They could roll us up like a carpet.

'Well done, man,' Jack shouted across the ditch. 'Well ridden! We are forewarned. Now be a good fellow and spread the word down the line. Off you go!'

The trooper galloped off south calling out his message to the picquets he passed.

Jack turned to Holcroft. 'To your guns, Hol! Quickly now.'

‘Yes, sir!’

As Holcroft turned his horse, Jack called: ‘Your mad bishop will see his battle, Hol, if I’m not mistaken. But tell him to start praying for all he is worth for, if he wants to see victory tonight, we’re going to require a lot of help from the Almighty.’

‘Hold your fire, damn your black souls. You will not fire, I say. I repeat you will not fire your weapons. A bloody back for any man who discharges his musket without my personal permission. You hear me, you scoundrels? Stand firm. Do not give fire.’

The Scots-inflected bawling of Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Archibald Douglas, commanding officer of five musket companies of Dumbar-ton’s Regiment at the extreme end of the Royal line, could easily be heard above the ragged crash of the enemy muskets. And the dogged soldiers of that unit obeyed his command to a man. The Scotsmen stood in their perfect ranks in the foggy darkness on the field of Sed-gemoor, their lit matches smoking and glowing, and calmly received the incoming musket balls of the rebel regiments on the far side of the Bussex Rhine.

The enemy had first emerged out of the mist a quarter of an hour ago – hundreds of wild horsemen in long buff-leather coats and huge plumed hats who charged with a great drumming of hooves out of the darkness, hallooing madly, waving their swords. It had been an undisciplined, unfocussed and largely useless gesture. The leading mounts had balked at the obstacle of the Rhine, shying, whinnying and skidding to a halt, their riders cursing foully – although in daylight and under proper control they might well have jumped it. The King’s infantry on the far side of the ditch watched them impassively, almost contemptuously, as several hundred rebel riders regained control of their excited mounts and turned their horses’ heads to their right and – still making enough noise to raise the dead, and discharging their horse pistols to little effect at their enemy – galloped off down the far side of the ditch, heading south,

evidently seeking a crossing point, one of the plungeons, perhaps, or even the old stone bridge at the extreme south of the line.

The King's infantry watched them disappear again into the darkness. It was clear that they had lost their way in the crossing of the moor and had attacked the wrong part of the line. Or maybe they had been merely unaware of the existence of the Bussex Rhine. As the last horseman galloped away, one wag from the ranks of Dumbarton's Regiment shouted out: 'A pleasure tae make your acquaintances, gentlemen, do call again soon!' before he was silenced by a snarling sergeant-major.

The mass of rebel infantry, which arrived shortly after the cavalry, presented far more of a threat. A single regiment approached first, visible only in the darkness as an amorphous mass of tiny glowing coals on their matchlock muskets. The rebels had halted on the other side of the ditch about a hundred and twenty yards away from Lord Douglas's men. They seemed to be waiting for something, perhaps for the officers to order their ranks. Or for the rest of the army to catch up with them. But a quarter of an hour after the comic departure of the cavalry, several hundred enemy troops, seven or eight hundred at least, were soon in position opposite the royal line, and that was only a small part of the rebel force. The men of Dumbarton's eyed the mass of enemy troops on the far side of the Rhine. They were easily outnumbered, perhaps two to one. There were no smart quips now.

And now there was another whole regiment coming up on the enemy's left flank, another cloud of red dots, a shuffling horde of hundreds of men now forming up beside the first regiment. Two great blocks of rebel troops now stood against Dumbarton's – perhaps fifteen hundred men. After a short pause, broken by the shouting of the rebel sergeants, a lone musket cracked out, and a moment later the whole enemy front opened fire. There were no regular disciplined volleys, no firing by platoons or files of men, the fire was made up of hundreds of single shots, as each rebel fired his

matchlock and then went through the elaborate process of reloading, shoving down the bullet and wadding, priming the pan, aiming and firing again. They might not have been disciplined, but to the Scotsmen facing it, it was deadly enough. And, in ones and twos, Dumbarton's men were falling, bleeding, dying in their ranks.

'Hold your fire. You will not fire, I say. You can take this battering, lads. You can bear it. I know you can. Show them the kind of men you are.'

The Scotsmen heeded their colonel. They stood firm and received the fire.

The rebel regiments were, in fact, too far away for a decisive effect. A range of fifty yards was the usual distance for a first exchange of musket fire, followed by a howling charge with bayonets and swords. The rebels – West Country farmhands and craftsmen mostly, and good plain Protestants all – were showing their inexperience and lack of training. But to the men receiving it, this was a lethal fire, nonetheless.

Major-General Lord Churchill walked his horse slowly along the front of the assembled ranks of Dumbarton's, affecting not to notice the sporadic musket shots from the rebel ranks and pretending to be equally oblivious that some of the brave Scotsmen, hauled as they were from their slumbers, were improperly dressed – a coatless man here, a hatless one there, and one or two who were only clad in their linen drawers. All of them, every single man, had his matchlock musket, shot pouch, spare match and powder flask and bandolier of twelve pre-measured charges in stoppered wooden cylinders. All the men were capable of answering the enemy. But obedient to the orders of their red-faced colonel, they stood in silent ranks and took their punishment like the professionals they were. Jack Churchill nodded his approval at Douglas, who was standing, legs spread, chin out-thrust, half-pike in hand, two paces ahead of the front line of his men. The position of maximum danger.

Jack pondered his options. He could not move Douglas's men into safety. If he pulled them back, the royal line would be broken and the enemy would gleefully advance into the gap they left and could swing in behind the rest of the army and cause utter panic. The battle would be lost almost before it began. So the Scotsmen must stand and receive the enemy's fire until it was clear what his plan of attack was. At least there seemed to be no rebel cannon, Jack told himself.

It would also be fruitless for Dumbarton's men to return fire. At this distance, they would blaze away, waste their ammunition and achieve little – just as the enemy was doing. But good men *were* dying. Occasionally a bullet would crack by Jack's head, and he felt the chilling wind of its passing, and every few minutes one of the redcoats would give a muffled cry and fall to his knees, before being hauled away by the ever-present sergeants who called for the other men to close up, close up.

A dozen or so of Dumbarton's five hundred men were dead and two dozen more were wounded. But, for the moment, the regiment was solid. It would stand firm.

As Jack reached the left-most file of Dumbarton's men, he looked further down the line of the Bussex Rhine, due south, he could see that the rest of his infantry force – some fifteen hundred men, and all the musket men armed with the new flintlock – had been called to arms and was lined up neatly between the tents and the ditch in their companies and battalions. The enemy cavalry had long disappeared, swallowed by the night. But the alarm had been raised in good time, and the army was ready. The next regiment along from Dumbarton's was the crack First Foot Guards, his old regiment. No glowing cloud of red dots for these men. In the darkness, the battalions of his flintlock-armed foot were just indistinct masses, here and there illuminated by a pine-resin torch held by a junior officer or sergeant. He saw one of his aides, Captain Sedley, cantering towards him, and another rider coming up fast behind that.

Where is Lord Feversham? he asked himself. He had sent Captain Sedley to rouse the commander-in-chief in his quarters in Weston-zoyland a good half hour ago and yet there had been no sign of the General. Was he to take full command? Should he begin the counter attack? Dumbarton's poor men should not be made to endure much more of this. Should he march a regiment or two over the Bussex Rhine – a difficult manoeuvre in darkness and under fire – and take the rebels in the flank, push them back? He could do it, if necessary. Or should he delay, out of courtesy, stand firm, take the punishment and wait patiently for the more senior officer to show himself? He could not afford to prevaricate much longer. The Scotsmen were dying.

Captain Jonathan Sedley cantered up pink-faced and breathless. 'My compliments, sir, but Lord Feversham cannot be awoken from his slumbers.'

'What the Devil do you mean, sir?' said Jack. 'We are under attack here, in case it has escaped your notice; why cannot he be woken? Is he sick? Is he dead?'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but we knocked and knocked at the door of his chamber with no response. In the end I gave orders for two men to break it down. And they did so, most noisily, I might add. And still Lord Feversham did not awaken. He had taken a good deal of wine at supper with his guest, the jolly old Bishop of Winchester, a very great deal of wine, in truth, and well, my lord, I am ashamed to say he is still abed, even now, and snoring like an ogre.'

'Good God! How extraordinary! Well, I must act then, there is not a minute to waste. You will ride immediately to—'

The rest of Jack's words were drowned out by a gigantic crash. On the far side of the Rhine, to the left of the nearest rebel regiment, a cannon spoke, a three-foot tongue of golden flame illuminating the misty night. The three-pounder ball struck the centre left of the mass of Dumbarton's men, carving a bloody furrow in the battalion

ranks and leaving half a dozen men maimed or dead. Jack stared into the night. He saw movement on the extreme left of the enemy line, on the other side from the cannon, yet another cloud of red dots like a plague of infernal fireflies, another force, six or seven hundred men at least, coming out of the mist to join their fire with the two rebel regiments already engaged with Dumbarton's.

Understanding came to Jack in a single moment, all of a piece.

'Jonathan, listen very carefully to me, you must take this word to Kirke's and Trelawney's. The enemy are all coming here. All of them. The whole rebel force is concentrated here on our right flank. They believe this is the centre of our line. Not our right. They cannot see the formation of the rest of our men because of the flintlocks.'

Captain Sedley goggled at him – had General Churchill gone mad?

'Listen to me, Captain, flintlocks do not require burning matches and so those formations of our men cannot be seen in the darkness. We can see them' – Jack pointed at the clouds of red dots in the dark – 'and they see Dumbarton's. And they think this is the centre of the line because they do not see our men with flintlocks . . .'

He looked at the blank face of his aide-de-camp and promised himself that the man's military career was over after this fight. Behind Sedley, he saw Holcroft Blood riding up, his old friend's face white with anxiety.

'Never mind all that. Captain Sedley: you will take this command to the colonels of Trewlaney's and Kirke's regiments. They are to march their battalions north, to me, without delay, and position them on the far side of Dumbarton's, to extend our right flank.' Sedley looked confused. 'Over there.' Jack pointed to the black space to the north beyond the companies of Scotsmen, between the end of the line of infantry and the northern pluncheon somewhere out in the darkness, which was guarded by Oxford's cavalry. 'Just bring them up here to me, all right?'

'All right, sir,' Captain Sedley turned his horse and spurred away.

Another cannon fired, on the far side of the ditch at the extreme left of the rebel line, and Jack saw a shadowy ball skipping along the black turf away off to his right, mercifully missing the end of the last file of Dumbarton's stoic men.

Jack turned to Holcroft: 'This is the centre, Hol,' he said. 'This is the focus of their whole attack. I need all your guns up here right now. Bring them up with all possible speed and position them on either side of Dumbarton's. Here and here.' He made two chopping motion with his hand, indicating the placement of the batteries.

'Jack, I cannot.'

'What d'you mean? That is an order. Do it now, Holcroft, and don't argue with me. I don't have time for your quibbling.'

The crack of a musket ball split the air between them. Neither man moved a hair nor commented on its passing

'It's the horses and the drivers, Jack – they've gone!'

'What?'

'It was the rebel cavalry. They rode all along the front, firing off their pistols, yelling their slogans like silly children. And, even though they were in no real danger, the civilian drivers, they're not used to battle, and they saw the enemy horse and panicked. They began shouting that Monmouth had come in all his might and they were to be murdered in their beds.'

'They ran?'

'They cut the horse lines, jumped on their beasts and galloped off into the night. The horses followed them. They're all gone. I have no horses to move the guns.'

General Churchill's face was as grim as an ice-bound January. The rebel cannon fired again and an entire file of Dumbarton's men was ripped into bloody ruin.

'I don't care if you have to drag the bloody pieces up here by hand, Lieutenant Blood. But do it. I must have the cannon here.'

Jack leant in closer to Holcroft, and spoke softly so that no other ear could catch his words. 'Without cannon to match theirs, Hol,

and very soon, Dumbarton's will break. They cannot endure this fire for ever. And if they break, the whole rebel army will be through our lines and into the baggage park and beyond. And I cannot hold the line without your guns, Hol. Bring them up, any way you can. And quickly.'

'Sir,' said the lieutenant, saluting, and he turned his horse and galloped south.

'Colonel Douglas,' said Jack, loud enough so that every man within fifty yards could hear him. 'I believe we have shown these rebel rascals that good Scotsmen can take any punishment they care to dish out. Now it's time to deal out some punishment in return. Dumbarton's Regiment will advance thirty paces, up to the very lip of the Rhine, and give fire by files, if you please. And as briskly as you like, Colonel.'