

an account of

a Massacre

in

the North

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Saint Monday, 16th August, 1819

Just shy of 2 o'clock and the field is almost empty.

It hasn't taken long.

Twenty minutes. Half an hour, at most.

Sounds can be heard in the distance. Shouting and panic from afar, softened by distance, bouncing off walls and carrying over rooftops. Deceptive. Could almost be a celebration. Some drunken parade.

Then, suddenly and again, silence.

The horses nicker and shake their bridles. Small, discreet sounds. They are coated in sweat and dust and rarer splashes of blood, black now and dry. The dust hangs in the warm, motionless air, refusing to settle. Some weeping can be heard close to, but it's stifled as if for fear that it might provoke an angry response. Many of the injured have resorted to the Friends' house and are being consoled and treated.

The Hussars speak among themselves, gathered in small bunches, recreating the moment of the charge. Some of the yeomanry are loudly boastful and jocose, but most speak in conversational tones, their throats dry from dust and tired from shouting; some insisting on a technical point of the action, pointing out the features of the field and how on another occasion it might be done better; that is more effectively. Debates about numbers, prophecies about the near future. Calm sardonic observation. A man demonstrates a stroke to illustrate a moment in his narrative.

One officer sits astride his horse, smoking a short clay pipe and staring blankly at the row of buildings that seem, in his fancy, to gaze impassively back. There is a dark patch in the field that he is curious over.

Boggy with blood, he concludes on closer consideration, tapping the pipe stem on his teeth. Or perhaps a spilt flask of something or other.

Across the field, an injured man is limping slowly away. He skirts clear of the soldiers, tripping over the colourful banners which have been torn to shredded rags, treading on the bonnets and caps, a bloody strip of shirt, clogs and shoes, the soiled bronze of a flattened musical instrument.

A basket of pies tipped over, the pies whole, but rolled in the dust. He leans to rescue one and straightens in sudden agony.

A militia man picks through the detritus, searching for a suitable souvenir.

He holds up a banner, 'Liberty or Death' slashed and bloodied, and begins to fold it carefully around his arm, like a draper with a bolt of cloth.

A few streets away a woman holds her little boy.

A man sits by a canal, taking in the sun, his eyes closed.

On one thing, all the witnesses later agreed.

It had been a beautiful day.

1815

Chapter One: The Soldier

In which a battle is fought; many heroic actions performed; and powerful emotions are recollected in tranquillity...

Belgium, Sunday, 18th of June, 1815

‘You fucking lummoX,’ he said. ‘Stop fucking pushing.’

‘Can’t help it, Silas, t’others are jostling me.’

A long morning. No one marching how they should, in and out of formation, squeezed down country lanes and then stumbling over open fields, and early in the day Silas Paterson took a blow to the forehead. It wasn’t the enemy, but some swine on the front line. Miller he wouldn’t wonder, stepping backward when he should have been wheeling right, the twat.

The ground was uneven and slippery with last night’s rain and he stumbled as they were ordered once more to shift this way and that, the order coming from the colonel on his chestnut nag. The colonel was looking about him all the time, standing up in his stirrups to get a better view, and every now and then another officer in the distance waved his hat and the colonel would start his shouting again. Silas went forward and Miller, like as not, had stayed stood and Silas’s face had made its acquaintance with the sharp edge of his comrade’s haversack. At first a numbness, by degrees and as the day went on, it turned infuriatingly sore and he couldn’t free a hand long enough for him to rub at it. Not that it’d do any good. When he’d hit his face, his heart had leapt up in his chest, as if the pain were a knock at the door, someone urgently expected, only to find the caller wasn’t the awaited guest after all. The heart had sat down once more and gradually resumed its more regular drumming.

They had been manoeuvring intermittently all morning. The sun was out and glistened on the grass, where grass could be seen. It also dried off them as had got soaked the night previous, which were nigh on all of them. As the day warmed up, steam came off the drying uniforms.

They could hear shouting and the ground seemed to move beneath them as if there were someone close by, beating it with a mallet. Waiting was made all the worse when the front line, directly ahead of him, decided to have a farting competition and the ripping sounds of the best efforts could be heard above the sound of the fire fight going on to the left of them, near the woods. Before long the air reeked, sour farts being added to the sharp tang of horse piss and the metal smell of kicked up soil.

‘Good Christ,’ Malcolm said in a low voice. ‘Some bugger’s done it in earnest.’

He could hear him right behind him and to his side. Good old Malcolm. He made Silas chuckle. Silas'd rather have him in front but then again maybe not. His farts could drop birds from the sky. It were a proven fact. He'd seen him do it in Spain.

Ben Hornet from West Riding was to his immediate left, grinding his teeth, so that Silas could hear a cracking. Silas asked if he could see out ahead but Ben shook his head.

'Not so much as a glimmer,' he said, scratching at his scraggy beard with a dirty get thumbnail. It had a crack in it, looked like a river on a map. 'We're going to get it hot and fast before the day's out though. I can promise you that.'

The old soldiers had been talking with grim satisfaction to begin with about how this one were going to be parade ground stuff, a big bang on affair with lines of battle and decorum according to the rules of war, a ruction of course, bloody, with thunder certainly, but at least this way, it would all be over with by sundown. Not guerrilla; not the peninsula. Thank the merciful God. Orders had been barked but morning dragged on without so much as a peep-pie.

When the sound of guns started, it was already past eleven. Everybody suddenly shut up as if they wanted to listen to something being said in another room. Everybody was locked in a private atmosphere of anxiety and fervid internal mithering of the approaching future. White smoke began to drift over them from the batteries that were firing from the other side of the hill in front of them. They had seen the horse artillery rattling past earlier in the morning. The sound of the cannon fire, which had been intermittent and distant, now became constant and larger as if it was about it with a seriousness of purpose hitherto not felt. The plopping of muskets going off sounded like someone dropping pebbles in a well at first. Little punctuation marks to the grand discourse of the big guns, but now the popping was a constant tearing sound as of ripping cotton. The soldiers broke their peace and yelling and cursing broke out, like an explosion, in their midst. Familiar voices sounded, distorted as if stretched and wrung out; the words nothing more than the usual expressions of bravado and impatience.

'Why are we waiting? Wh-y are we waiting?'

'Come on then, let's get on with it.'

'Aye, aye, now it's hotting up or I'm very much mistaken.'

Silas heard his best friend, Harold Atkinson yelling the bluest profanities. Harold was a trooper who justified the idiom; he invented the best possible curses and spoke of nothing but vice. Every officer was imagined as a prospective inhabitant of Sodom, every cavalry man in illegal congress with his horse. And any woman they saw was so imagined in a series of phrases and snatches of rhyme and colourfully sketched tableaux that, before sight was lost of her, she had been vividly seen to in every possible way.

‘Wind fucker, wind fucker,’ he was yelling now. ‘Big dogs’ cocks.’ It was nothing particularly new for Harold, but it was loud and high and without joy.

‘Shut your faces,’ Sergeant Persimmon yelled. ‘Stow it, boys, stow it.’

‘Steady men, steady,’ the colonel rode up and down. Silas could see him above the shakos of the front line. He bobbed as he studied the men. His eyes alert to them, his frown anxious.



Last night, the colonel, half-cut, had come round to see the men. He had been playing cards and no doubt had put away the best part of a case of claret. He always seemed to have ready access to warming liquid no matter where they were; and they weren't in the mountains no more. Jamming a bayonet in the ground and tying his horse's reins to the handle, he stepped in front of the fire Harold had managed to build from wood John Lees had scavenged. The fire was sheltered on one side. They'd stuck their muskets in the ground bayonet first and hooked three coats together to make a tent. There was Silas, Lees and Harold stood there, but the colonel had made straight for Silas. The flames gurgled and hissed in the rain. The colonel must have been pissed because he recognised Silas which he'd never have deigned to do sober.

‘Well then Pat, ...er ... Paterson, ain't it?’ he coughed up a wad of phlegm and spat it into the fire. It was a meaty gob-full and thudded and then fizzled. ‘At ease, at ease, men. Well, what do you make of the news? A rum affair, if you ask me. Boney's about and we're for it, if he gets a sniff, eh? Or perhaps it's ‘Grand old Duke of York’ stuff, all over again, don't you think?’

‘Chance we might fight tomorrow sir?’ Silas had been in the army long enough to know it best never to answer an officer. No matter how innocuous the question seemed, how breezy the manner. Always answer a question with a question. Officers answered questions, privates didn't know fucking nout.

‘Nah, run more like. Scram, scarper. Dutchies'll see to that, if the Prusskies don't show, what,’ the colonel nodded to himself and glared into the fire. The other soldiers had moved away from them on various pretexts. Silas was caught though, having been addressed directly. ‘They daren't face old Boney. Can't say I blame 'em to tell you the truth. Been damned near battered every which way by him for the last decade or so. The Duke's never had to face him though so he don't know how to lose. He's our man all right. You'll see.’

Silas wasn't sure why the colonel wanted to talk to him, but he nodded and kept his mouth shut. He had been in the wars, perhaps that was it. Not one of these Johnny-Come-Latelies, fresh off the boat. He'd been in Spain. And he was a large man. The biggest in the line. He looked as strong as

he was. Maybe that was it. Tall men like Silas tended to attract attention one way or t'other. They would be picked on by small men or befriended by everyone else. Take Harold. He loved nothing more than hiding behind Silas, after he had caused some gratuitous offence.

The colonel had nodded for several minutes, gazing silently into the flames. He muttered, 'Whatever happens there'll be plenty of murder somewhere along the line', and eventually, he staggered off into the night.



Harold's swearing had accelerated so the words ran into each other. 'Wind fucker, windfucker, winfkr, wnkr, wnkr, wnkr, wnkr.'

As Silas was turning to tell him to hold his noise, he saw something out of the corner of his eye and the first cannonball hit the ranks. It struck about five feet to the left of Silas. At exactly the same time several shells whistled over head and a canister of grape burst directly above Silas's line; a hundred pieces of hot metal shrapnel tore through uniform and flesh. The lines broke as men stumbled and fell, screaming, hands clutching at the smoke-drowned air about them and at the blood that pumped, spiralling from them. And Silas found himself released into the middle of space. He looked around. There were people lying on the ground around him. He struggled to right himself but his hand skidded from under him in the slick of someone else's viscera.

Another ball skipped up on the bank directly in front of the line and ploughed through the men at chest height. Blood splashed men on either side of those wounded in such quantities and with such arterial force, it became hard to tell who had been hit, who knocked over, who had fallen over and who was wounded and who was dead. More shells exploded and more iron balls ploughed through men, spinning and rolling. Some cannonballs hit the bank and bounced over their heads, flicking mud over them as they spun above.

Everything has gone red.

The sky above is misted with clouds of red, the ground squelches red under foot, the colours everywhere are seen as through a red lens but then Silas realises what's happening and he wipes the blood from his face and his eyelashes with his sleeve and spits it out of his mouth and shoots it from his nostrils.

Someone's tugging at his belt and he turns to see young Mathers trying to pull himself upright, but his leg, which is a bloody mess, quite rightly refuses to support him. Behind him Harold's sitting cross legged, holding the bone which is all that's left of his right arm, holding it delicately with his finger tips and saying 'ouch, ouch, ouch,' in such a way that Silas has to stop himself from

laughing. If ever there were a time to curse, it's now and yet all Harold can manage is the meagre complaint of a ten year old.

'Up, up, 33rd on your feet, you fucking dogs, on your fucking feet!' Sergeant Persimmon screams. He's running down the line now, grabbing and kicking at the soldiers who are not on their feet. 'Up, up I say. 33rd. Shame, for shame. Come on lads. Form a fucking line, form a fucking line, you fucking cunts.'

Shells are still exploding and the earth shudders with the fatal impact of cannon balls. Silas looks about him as he straightens up and can see that men are standing upright and forming the line once more and he's pulled into the front line. He shuffles to make sure he is the right distance, his musket held as he has been trained, forward from the chest. He moves his shako, which has been knocked askew. He is very thirsty. He looks down at the damp patch on his leg but no one will pay heed to the urine on account of all the blood. There is a real stench of shit now, unmistakable.

'Never mind,' he mutters, consoling himself with the inadequacy of the expression. Something a mother might say to a tyke. 'Not to worry.'

The colonel on his horse is right in front of him and is talking over his head to the whole company, or what is left of it. The regimental colours are up again, he sees. They'd disappeared for a moment. A young ensign who has just joined the regiment is looking a bit shy, but he's got to his feet and is now staring straight ahead, holding the colours high, wiping the spill of vomit from his tunic with a brisk hand. It reassures Silas, even though he can guess that they'll be moving now they've been hoisted so high. It don't signify. As long as he can see the colours he knows where he is, what he is, who he is, what he is supposed to do.

The wounded are crying and wailing behind him. He wishes they'd stow it. His sympathy is soon finished. There's a gladness in his heart that at least he isn't them. He can't hear Harold any more. Harold, who never let anyone call him Harry and who had fought a man who (subsequently and as a direct consequence) had gone on to lose an eye. Harold, who saved Silas's life in Spain, by bayoneting the biggest bugger you ever saw. The only man Silas had ever met bigger than him. And Harold had killed the bugger. Harold, who still insisted on hiding behind Silas even though there was no one he couldn't kill given the chance. Harold, who now has a wound that means he's as good as dead.

He's either crawling away or he's passed out. Or he's already dead. Pay no heed. No mind.

More shells explode overhead, but to the side. He sees further down the line, other men sprawling and wounded and then some begin to stand up once more. A messenger rides up to the colonel, shouts something in his ear and then rides off again. He's not gone but ten yards when a cannon ball

takes the upper most half of his head off and the horse, suddenly uncertain, halts, turns to come back and then, changing her mind, walks on as the rider slides from her back.

'33rd, lie down, men lie down. Everyone down,' the colonel shouts.

There's an immediate reluctance to follow the order, as if this might be a test of the regiment's mettle. There's a glance at the sergeant before men begin to comply, wondering if order or no he might well disapprove and bring this up at a later date.

Seeing this, he bawls, 'You heard the colonel, whassamatter witchya? Scared of getting your pretty faces dirty. Down on your faces, you scallywags. Down. Down. DOWN.'

So down they lie and a length of soil like this seems a new paradise. John Lees crawls over to Silas.

'You seen my bayonet, Silas?' he yells. Silas shakes his head. 'Oi, anybody seen my bayonet?'

'Sod off,' he is told.

'I'll stick *my* bayonet up *your* arse,' a Welsh voice tells him. 'How about that, Lees, you ruddy bastard?'

The sun is nice and warm, Silas notices, as the smoke drifts away. He can't hear much now. He can hear the guns as if they are very far away and he can hear the explosions but as long as he doesn't see the bodies and the dirt flying he can place them safely in the next field along. All the voices, even John Lees shouting his own merry profanities sound like whispering now, the sound of the artillery below them is like the surf of a distant ocean, the sea beyond the dunes, heard from inside a house. He closes his eyes just for a moment, his hands cover his face and, with the shells still exploding above them and cannon balls still flying over their bodies, he falls asleep.



His bed was in the corner of the room, beneath the window.

The wind would whistle as it blew through the gap between the wooden frame and the wall. He'd stuff paper in the hole, or some putty, but the wind would wheedle its way in and whistle again; victorious and mocking. It would wake him in the night but he didn't mind so much. He kept himself tightly wrapped in his blanket. He'd learnt early how to roll himself up in it so his body would keep the blanket pinned down tight as he slept and keep in the precious warmth. For there was rarely anything else to warm him except his own body heat. He would listen to the whistling in the darkness, the winter darkness, muffled in cloud; darkness so dark opening your eyes and closing your eyes made no difference. A darkness that'd kill you. If you got up to go to the privy in the night, you'd be lost before you got out of the room; you'd fall down the stairs and break your neck or worse still fall out of a window and be brain stupid for the rest of your natural, like that crack fart

Harpy Simmons, from whose mouth swung a perpetual rope of drool and made animal noises when you threw stones at him. They often threw stones at Harpy. Silas had the best arm in the village, they said. He'd got plenty of practice. His mam woke him up by yanking his blanket away and opening the window. His mam believed cold to be the healthiest thing for a body, opening the window wide as soon as he were awake, no matter month nor weather.

'Wash your face and hop to it,' she'd say. The mean-hearted bitch. A yank of the ears if he weren't already out of bed and heading for the stairs.

Silas splashed his face with the water from the jug and woke up properly, suddenly aware of the sound of the cockerel at the farm and the sound of shutters opening and banging and people beginning to move about in the village. His mother had been up a good hour and his father and uncle would already be out in the boat unless the weather were foul. Outside, he'd get his bag full of stones and he'd go out onto the fields and spend the whole morning scaring birds for which he was paid three pence. He also saw to his traps for vermin. Mr Allerton wasn't supposed to use traps as they could kill foxes and foxes were greatly valued in those parts on account of the hunt. Mr Allerton was vehemently opposed to the hunt and hated Lord Clem as if he were the plague. So they did use traps and occasionally they'd poison a fox and then bury the rust coloured body in the black soil.

Mr Allerton was always decent to him partly on account that Allerton had accidentally broken Silas's jaw. He'd caught Silas sleeping when he was paying him to work and fetched him such a clout across the chops. He'd got a thrashing when he got home as well, once the full story was out. His dad and uncle did a lot of work for Mr Allerton, not to mention he was the landlord and many said a fair one, which was considered something of a rarity as these things go. Mr Allerton had been dead sorry when he'd seen Silas rolling on the floor holding his face. The anger had gone out of him, like when the rain just stopped, for no good reason.

'Ain't knowing me own strength, lad,' he said, sitting down beside Silas and lifting him so he was cradled in his arms. His face had gone pale and he looked like he were about to sick up. He spoke in a soft voice that Silas had never heard him speak in before. As a matter of fact Silas had rarely heard anyone speaking in such a soft and low voice, cept it were to an injured animal. 'I dint mean to give thee such hurt. Only to admonish wrong-doing. But it's wrong, more wrong by far; a big un like me belting a lal un like you. It smacks all too unhappily of oppression. Tetchy. I am getting tetchy and unjust.'

Despite the hurt and the itchiness of the plaster and the bruises from the beating he got when he got home, his subsequent good behaviour had much more to do with that voice than out else. He liked his work as well. He could knock a bird from the sky with one of his pebbles. He could kill them

when they were nout but specks to most eyes. He knew animals well, names and habits, and could track them and find their holes, warrens, nests and sets without waste of time nor effort. He killed rats in the barn with Mr Allerton's dog, Shepherd and a gang of beautiful ferrets which he called one after t'other James for no reason other than he liked the name. Him and Shepherd got on very well together. And sometimes they would have vicious fights just for the fun of it, rolling round in the straw and Shepherd snapping at his throat and ears but never a bite in earnest, cept occasionally. Silas went out and worked, rain or shine. Used to being wet, his mam said he were a hardy lal chap. His brother, Simon, got a soaking one Monday and were dead by Saturday cause he caught an infection and it got into his lungs and then his brain pan. Silas liked Simon well enough, but took pride in what his body would tolerate. Like when his jaw was broke. Hurt like all buggery put together, but still he hadn't whined or out. He'd just got on with it. Itchiness was the worst. And the glares, curses and kicks, he'd got from his dad and uncle on account of them being out of humour with him. But he healed well and never complained and that won him the grudging respect of his family.

He chipped his stones to make them sharp and flat like discs and he threw them over arm with deadly accuracy. He would get other jobs in time as well. He was taller than all the other boys his age and so he was soon tret as a man. Long before he actually was one.

Of course, in his head, he weren't a bird-frightener. In his head, he were David again that big sod Goliath, or a Spartan, a grenadier. He wondered always about when he would finally get off to the army. Uncle Sam had joined the army. Uncle Sam was the eldest of his father's two brothers and he only existed to Silas in stories and other people's memories. Silas had no memory of his uncle Sam. Perhaps, a heavy hand laid on his head when he was lal could have been Sam. Like as not wasn't. He were probably just imagining sommat cause he wanted it.

Uncle Sam was fighting off in the Americas, they told him. Canada. Uncle Sam killed a man with his bare hands. Uncle Sam saved the regiment when there looked to be no hope. They seemed precious well informed of all of Uncle Sam's doings, given that he hadn't been seen for ten years or more and never once wrote a letter. Sitting in the kitchen those were the stories his father and uncle would tell.

'Don't go filling his head with stories,' his mam'd say. 'Next thing you know he'll be up and after the King's shilling hissel. And then where will we be what with the boat to tend and the farm needing help? Answer me that buggerlugs.'

Mr Allerton needed less and less help so it seemed. And it was said in the neighbourhood he was being squeezed sommat inhuman by Lord Clem, on account of some legal case about right of way and a disputed boundary to his land. Mr Allerton sold land to a man who later turned out to be an

agent of Lord Clem. It seemed not only that they didn't see eye to eye but that Lord Clem despised Mr Allerton as 'a sheep-faced loon'. Such he had called him in the public square in Ulverston on Market day. And it was thought much to Mr Allerton's disadvantage. Folks reckoned he must have done sommat ripe to upset his Lordship, it being so rare that men of his quality should deign to have any personal antipathy in these matters.

Mr Allerton took to avoiding town and it was whispered that his legal case had almost ruined him and that when various shopkeepers and feed merchants went to see him, he hid and refused to be found. Some said he'd gone a lal bit daft in the head. Doo-lally, like.

Silas's mam said, when Mr Allerton was found hung in his own barn, 'there's a lesson in it for you, boy.' His mam said, it's better either to be dirt poor or to be filthy rich. The worst thing in life is to have a bit. On account of the disappointments attendant on losing the little you have which can kill you dead worse than poison.

Mr Allerton's debts were such that Lord Clem possessed the farm without paying so much as a shilling. At last, he had his right of way and, as of the following November, fox hunts ran merrily across Allerton's land hooting and tooting and the dogs yapping away and Silas attended the field and became known as a handy lad with the hounds. He earned more under Lord Clem as he was given other jobs and there was talk of making his father bailiff. Lord Clem was heard to call him 'a steady lad' and he was the only boy that he called by name.

Shepherd had fallen to his care and, though his mother complained without pause or interval of the waste of food to feed a mangy dog, she nevertheless did not insist on him being killed as she could have done had she wished to exercise her full power. Silas believed this was more to do with some trace of respect for Mr Allerton rather than any regard for his happiness.



They called across the fields to him, the village children. They came running through the swaying and drizzling rain, falling and racing and shouting long before they were in earshot. He could see them waving and calling and he was exasperated by them. By now, he was as distant as a celestial object to the other children of the village. He was their London. He earned more money and was trusted with tasks like no other child his age. In fact, Silas had long ago crossed the boundary of what was considered a child in those parts. His usefulness and physical strength, his size and the number of men who knew his name, crowned by Lord Clem, made him a man, a young man, a man not quite arrived but nonetheless, not a child.

They shouted excited and breathless, their voices raw with shouting and rain. 'Your dads are dead, your dads are dead,' the voices called in almost unison, trailing one lone voice at the end higher than the others. 'Your dads are dead.'

He ran home and found the bodies in the kitchen top to toe on the table, their legs dangling and water dipping from their sodden clothes, their long hair hanging with seaweed. Silas sat down in the doorway until his mother saw him and gave him a kick to get him out of the way.

'It's a miracle that we recovered the bodies,' Samson, a cockle man, said. He stood with his hat in his hand. He too was soaking wet. 'They were washed up on the banks and Jemmy had his sheep there, a-grazing. You know how he do. Regular.'

They looked like brothers now. My dads, Silas looked at them. Their dripping made them seem still alive. The way the water still seeped from their clothes and ran over their still soft skin. They were cold as beck water in winter, of course, but Silas couldn't help a surge of outrage, an indescribable fury about how they lay. They looked uncomfortable. Why did no one move them to the bed? He didn't speak though. He already knew that mother had given birth standing up so as not to ruin the bed linen. He had been told so on more than one occasion as a self-proclaimed example of her self-sacrifice. If the giving of life hadn't been allowed to dirty the bed linen, then death certainly wouldn't be given half a chance.

They stayed up that night, watching over the bodies and friends and neighbours who had heard called round. His dads had not been garrulous, nor over-friendly as one might say. They had been silent serious men, prone to take offence on account of wild rumours that often circulated the taverns and market places of nearby villages and towns about their smuggling, their thieving, their double dealing. Most of the rumours, however, centred on ongoing debates concerning Silas's and his siblings' paternity.

But, that said, the two men had not been backward in helping out when asked and they'd done their fair weight in favours, most of which would now remain unreturned. They were handy men, like Silas himself. Men who could be relied on to do a job and do it well. They were admired for the way they worked hard without complaint. Sleeping only a few hours, taking their boat out in all weathers, then hawking their catches at the marketplace or from village to village with a wheel barrow. Dangerous work. Tides came in devious quick on occasion, regardless of a close watching of the moon. Cockling with lanterns on the shifting sands of Morecambe bay or out in their small boat in all but the filthiest of weather.

Like most sailors they deemed an ability to swim unlucky on account of its arrogance in challenging the sea. There was always the reasoning that if the boat were to capsize chances were it would do so many miles from shore and swimming would do nout but prolong the terror and pain. Drowning

was widely believed to be the best way of dying and the only regret would be the loss of the body for your loved ones. They were to be congratulated that the current had been so generous as to deposit the bodies once more upon the shore.

The one candle did little to illuminate the room. Eyes glinted in the darkness and occasionally his mother would trim the wick. On getting up to do this, she didn't return to her customary seat but came and leant against the wall where he was stood. He had been sleeping without knowing it and so woke with her holding his hand.

'You're the head of family, now Silas,' she spoke in a low voice as if she did not want the bodies to hear. 'You're all that stands now, betwixt your little brothers and disaster, the workhouse. And if that's how it ends, you'll have to take them in alone as I would rather die than accept a fate such as that.'

'I know mother,' he said. 'I know.'

'You'll go to Lord Clem, go up to the house, bright and early, first thing tomorrow,' she said. 'Go to his man, Mr Gines, and tell him of our misfortune. Like as not he'll already know by then. Have his Lordship know that you will seek to fulfil all the duties your father and uncle formerly performed. All the duties you previously undertook, your young brother will now endeavour to undertake.'

'Yes mother.'

His mother squeezed his hand and her whole body leaned against him. 'You won't let us down now, will you son. You're the man,' she said. 'You've got to be the man now.'

'I won't let you down, mother.'

As first light broke, Silas went upstairs to the room where his brothers were sleeping. He threw his clothes on his blanket and rolled it up, tying it with some baling twine. Putting his father's second coat over the one he was already wearing, he kissed his brothers, each one, lightly on their heads. He stood in the room for one moment listening to the whistling at the window. At nights, it had sometimes sounded like a taunt, tantamount to an insult, when he had battled to sleep, but now there was a new sound to its tone; it sounded carefree.

He left the house and never went back.



'On your fucking feet,' his mother screams in his ear. 'Form a line. 33rd Form up. You filthy little bastard, on your feet.'

Silas is standing upright before he wakes. Opening his eyes, he finds himself standing to attention. His musket is held loosely in his hand. As yet he can't grip it. His body is waking up in pieces. The colonel rides down the line inspecting his men. The sergeant bellows, and yanks a man up, kicking him hard. The colonel's horse snorts directly in front of him and his breath hits Silas in the face, like a warm wind that's shifting direction.

Silas is stood on the front line, Miller to his side and Hornet directly behind him. He feels a hand on his back. 'Here we go, son,' the familiar voice rumbles.

'Oh I wish I were at home,' a Welsh voice mumbles.

'Battalion,' the colonel cries in what seems more of a scream. 'Battalion will shoulder arms.'

'The young chap's voice's not broken,' Harold had remarked when Schama had first joined them.

'That's why they love him at High Command. They give him lady love. Put him in petticoats and call him Matilda. He takes it betwixt the bum cheeks. He can service them one after t'other, without need of rest nor refreshments. And he's a lovely singing voice, a tenor, so they say, for he gargles nightly.'

I love you sir, thinks Silas, his eyes fixed on the colonel. I love you with my whole being. Thank God for the regiment, the 33rd. This spotty young drunk, with the hair the colour of late summer straw, wobbling on his horse, unable to hold the hysteria from his voice, no doubt soused still from the gin he drank first thing this morning; the hair of the large nasty bastard of a dog. There was an officer offering champagne breakfasts to his friends, someone had said. The colonel was his better in all ways. Better by birth, better by education, he had a horse and he had a sword that was drawn and which he raised and waggled about as if he wasn't quite certain what to do with it. And yet they all shouldered arms and were ready to follow this man into the field of fire, the valley of death. And it made Silas happy for the second time that day, because anything was better than this waiting.

Why were his thoughts running on so? Why wouldn't his mind stop?

He could see the field before them and the soldiers who were moving in their direction. They were blue and there were some in green as well, masses by the look of it but smoke was drifting across the field and the cannons were still firing. He could hear under it for the first time the sound of the enemy's drums as a distinct sound. It had always been there. But now he could see the drummer and, as he did, he heard the sound. The enemy had been marching toward them for what must have been minutes and he hadn't seen or heard a thing, only the guns, the shells and the occasional curse. There was the banking they had been positioned behind and the front line, but still the closeness of the enemy was something that struck him with the force of a blow and his heart lurched once more. This was the expected bad news. The bailiff. The constable.

But now there were more orders and his line was to move forward over the ridge and form a square. He was marching.

The colonel was shouting again. Shrieking.

'33rd. Here we go you damned villains. Hurrah, Hurrah, Hurrah!'

Silas didn't hear an order but it didn't matter; his body obeyed regardless of his will. And the men around him moved him forward. He moved with them, aware of the man behind him and glancing around at those beside him; Lees, Miller and then the Welsh git who owed him money, and then down at the ground which was slippery and uneven.

And he was marching with them and their own drummer was out to the right and hammering away. There is a thundering ripple of explosions close to. Earth is tossed into the air as powder and smoke drifts across the line, causing him to choke and his eyes to water. He marches on. It's now part of his body and he's thinking so quickly now everything around him jumps out, alive with sudden detail. The ground in front of him has been trodden and roughed up. Tufts of grass, flattened but trying to right themselves, individual blades stand out sharp. He feels the give of the sod and he looks ahead at where the colonel's riding his horse, holding his sword aloft. He notices blood running down the flanks of the colonel's horse and then in an instant, the length of a step he sees the blood on the colonel's thigh and on the next step the colonel slides slowly off his horse. Without breaking the line they step over the colonel's body, which is utterly devoid of movement, and begin to form a hollow square.

He hasn't heard the order but it doesn't matter. Why a square? With the infantry so close?

There are cavalry dead ahead of them. The infantry he had been watching have disappeared in the time it took the colonel to fall, breaking and allowing the squadrons to pass through their lines.

The artillery has stopped thank the Lord. Silas's attention is fixed entirely on the horsemen. The square is still forming around him. There is one rider with ludicrous moustaches. Must be a Frenchie. The rider holds his chin up as he rides, his sabre is drawn and levelled directly in front of him. He feels a dislike for this man. This is his enemy. Everything else disappears, but he sees this cunt as clear as day, even when the smoke drifts between the two bodies of men, this pompous clown, this verminous poltroon rides on at a trot, breaking into a gallop.

'Battalion make ready to receive cavalry,' calls a captain who has taken command. Silas likes this man even more than he had the colonel. He is steadier, older and notoriously ill tempered when it comes to losing at cards. But he now holds the men in his hands and the square is not yet closed.

The cavalry are about one hundred and fifty yards away. They are beginning to pick up speed.

Behind them, there seem to be thousands more.

'Front rank,' the captain calls. 'Make ready.'

It's a song they all know. A dance they've learned. They wait for the line, the specific command, but their bodies are already primed for the order. A question occurs to Silas with such urgency and clarity that it almost makes him forget what he is about. What the fuck am I doing here? he thinks, even as his hands bring the musket up level and ready to fire. Behind him he can hear Hornet moving into position. John Lees is beside him, grinning foolishly. He waggles his bayonet on his belt.

'Found it,' he says, winking.

Silas feels the weight of the musket. Old Brown Bess. He's as frightened of her as he is of the enemy. He loaded her hours ago, so she should be all right. But she could explode in his face as easy as spit in your eye. There's always that to consider. Not a happy thought to ponder on. Stow it. The ground is shaking he can feel his knee caps jangling, the power of the on coming charge now makes the ground bounce beneath his feet like the old mattress of a feather bed.

'Present arms.'

The cry sounds and along the line, the muskets are levelled with slapping sounds against shoulders. 'Fire!'

He almost drops his musket when it goes off but he manages to keep it straight and immediately he steps back and down to one knee as he begins to reload. The bang is the last full sound he'll hear for the rest of his life. He has heard the musket fired many a time but this time his ear gives up on him. It is as if his head has been plunged underwater, but he has had this happen before and the booming of the cannon fire had already given him a foretaste. He bites his cartridge pours the powder in the touch hole and the rest in the barrel loads the ball and rods it down with the wadded cartridge. John Lees is at his elbow and takes the opportunity to bellow in his good ear, 'What Larks!' It sounds like a someone is shouting from downstairs.

Benjamin Hornet fires and Silas stands once more looking up for the first time since he fired. Some of the French have fallen and the riders have lost some momentum, but they are still charging; tonnes of horse flesh and blade edge and lance point are still careering towards them.

A horse will always refuse a square. It's common knowledge. A fact. He can't pick out his foe, the fancy boy with the chops, but the line is still pushing before men from the back filling in the gaps. Some horses stumble over the bodies of their wounded comrades and some cut across the line creating confusion but there is an impetus, an irresistible impetus from behind. Silas can't hear any more orders but his movement are roughly synchronised with the men around him and he fires as they do and then kneels as they do and Benjamin Horne stands and takes his position to fire.

Someone must have yelled 'Bayonets' because that's what everyone seems to be doing. He stays kneeling and reaches for the bayonet in his scabbard that hangs from his belt to his left. Reaching

up he's fixing it on the end of his musket when there is a massive explosion and he is thrown over and backwards. He rolls over on the ground. His hand is bleeding from a deep cut across the palm where the bayonet slipped. A body collapses on him and he pushes it off him. It is Benjamin Hornet. He is dead, his face and top of his head is missing, from the lower jaw up. Sliced clean through. He staggers to a crouch and sees the rest of the horses and their riders charging around the back of the square, slashing and hacking pell-mell as men fall and some run. The colours tilt but are not seized and the cavalry charge is over. The horses have not broken the square but they have dented it, hacking and slashing they smashed into the part that was still manoeuvring, crushing and trampling some of the men. Men in agony with terrible wounds are pulling themselves towards the colours as the square begins to reform once more. The able bodied are moving with a manic animation. Silas is among them. He has found his bayonet and attached it to his musket this time without pain or incident. The square begins to form once more and he is behind Miller again, miraculously. John Lees is laughing his head off.

The captain is shouting, 'Steady, men. STEADY!'

The sergeant shouts, 'You there, stand up you cunt.'

The men have no need of these orders. They know that their survival depends upon each other, upon the fortress they can improvise out of their own bodies and fortitude, out of their courage and the steel of their bayonets. Names are called and someone shouts in laughter, 'Bong Jewer,' as the French cavalry is spotted wheeling about and thundering back toward the diminished square. Silas can't turn to face them because now the infantry are almost upon them as well from the front. The charge rams into the men to Silas's left. The man beside Silas stamps on his foot and he is lifted as the bodies are jammed close together. His feet actually flutter above the ground trying to find purchase, but this time the square does not break. The bayonets are held firm and slash and stab into horse flesh and rider alike. Silas is clobbered by the flat of a sword as one rider penetrates the lines and muffs a slash as he is pulled from his horse and despatched by musket butts and bayonets and booted feet. Regaining his position, Silas sees the infantry charging toward them and some genius must have shouted charge because the whole square takes off, breaking into a run. They slam into the French and then the lines behind Silas slam into him, knocking the wind out of him and shoving him into Miller's pack once more. He has the presence of mind to hold his musket up high and pokes over the shoulders of the men in front of him and into the French line which is now crouching and shoving in the opposite direction. The two bodies of men lurch and tussle and fall. It's a brutal game. Mad men wrestling. Bones are crushed under stamping boots, ribs cracked, skulls fractured and flattened, flesh is torn and skin sliced. Ears are pulled off, are grabbed and twisted and ripped. Teeth are smashed out of faces, with elbows and fists and foreheads. Noses are

broken. There are bludgeons and axes now being raised and swung. Someone has a lump of wood with nails driven into it. It swings once into a man's face where it sticks and won't come out again no matter how much its wielder wrenches at it.

Silas can see mouths moving. Screams and shouts. He leans on Miller's shoulders and slices at the face of a French soldier but the Frenchman doesn't register the pain, despite the crimson flap the blade opens, and keeps pushing forward so that enraged, Silas slices again and finally stabs at him, leaning forward and aiming and poking with his bayonet until it gets firmly stuck in the eye socket and won't come out. He lets go of his musket as the man falls backwards and grabs the bludgeon he keeps under his belt. Miller is dead but in the crush is held upright and Silas uses him as a shield as the French start at him. He ducks and pushes Miller's body up to receive the sword and bayonet thrusts intended for him. He can hear foreign curses muttered no louder than the nicest of intimacies.

There is another crush from behind as the French cavalry once more ride between the English squares. He twists around in time to see a rider who appears to tower over the men squirming beneath him. Silas watches the man's sword pass over the bodies until it strikes an upheld hand and passes clean through the wrist leaving the hand twirling in the air. The sword turns and is now thrust down, the point sinking into a man directly behind Silas. The point drives through the man's back and into Silas's shoulder the two men for a moment are held together, but the rider is a skilled swordsman and with a quick twist, jerks the sword out of the wound and high once more. Silas, with the last of his strength swings his bludgeon on its leather chord and flings it at the face of the rider, but his strength is gone from the arm that used to knock birds from the sky and the blow causes the rider merely to flinch and pull away before addressing another part of the line.

A blow knocks his shako down over his face and another blow on the back of his head feels like it has broken his neck. He folds underneath the weight of the French soldiers now shoving him from behind. Miller's body covers him as the French tramp over him and attempt to get at the men behind him and from there to the colours.

But Silas witnesses no more of the battle. His wounded hand bleeds freely. His other has been stamped upon more than once. He feels a cracking. He has an open wound at the shoulder which is also costing him pints of blood. His face is pressed into the mud of the field and his mouth also fills with blood as he has bitten his tongue. The blood from the body of Miller and many of the wounded, dead or dying comrades seeps into the mud around him, foaming under the motion and agitation of the feet of the quick. His eyes close and he sleeps for a moment.

He wakes in the darkness his face still submerged in the mud. He adjusts himself so that his mouth can take some air. And he mutters, 'Never mind, never mind, never mind' and falls asleep once more.



John Lees gave Silas Paterson something to drink. Gin, or at least that's what was pencilled on the label. Alcohol with something in it, lime juice perhaps. It went straight to his head. But he takes another swig anyway. He'd rather feel confused if it's a toss up between confusion and feeling something else, something more fitting to his current state.

He was pulled out from under a pile of bodies by a trooper who had lost a boot in the fight and had been hopping about ever since looking for a corpse with a suitable sized foot. The dragging made Silas scream, waking up and passing out at almost the same time, like a match struck in a wind. John Lees recognised him and rescued him, boots intact.

'You were lucky,' said John Lees.

'Oh aye. A blessed day,' said Silas, touching gingerly at his wounded shoulder with his wounded hand. The pain was distant but coming. It surrounded him. His head, his stomach, his throat, both his hands, his leg, his foot, his tongue. The only pain he felt with immediate distinctness was the bruise raised on his forehead when he slipped earlier that morning.

'Listen to those poor buggers,' Lees said.

The light was almost entirely gone from the sky and although a warm night after a hot day, they started to build a fire. Lees was good at this, well known in the regiment as a top show scavenger and this, along with his genuine resilient cheerfulness, always made him popular. Silas loved him, of course. The flames began to lick at the wood and white smoke unfurled from underneath it. Lees lay flat on his stomach, blowing into the base of the fire until the wood glows red and the yellow flames flap like tiny flags. From the darkness comes the sound of shouting, pleading, groaning, every species of human misery expressed, like a discordant symphony of agony.

'There, there,' Silas muttered.

Lees smiled at him and, straightening up, pointed at Silas's wound. 'Didn't touch the bone then?' he said. 'You're a lucky bugger indeed.'

'What about you?'

Lees laughed and waved a hand at himself. 'I know,' he shouted, twirling like a flaming dancing master. 'Not a scratch.'

Silas carefully, tenderly took off his tunic, his head spinning suddenly as he fell back gasping.

‘Steady on mate,’ Lees said.

‘Look at the wound, John,’ Silas said. ‘What is it like?’

Delicately peeling away his shirt from the treachery stickiness of the wound, Lees peered as close as he could. Wiping his hand on the grass, he began to explore it with his fingers, ever so gentle.

‘Nothing better than a sabre for a clean wound,’ he said. ‘It’s bullets and shells and what not that’ll do for you. You’ll be as right as rain in no time. Though you do look a lal bit pale.’

The other soldiers who were gathering around the fire nodded at this well-worn wisdom. Some of them were from the regiment. Others seemed to be lost. They’d sat down in a ring around the fire, pulling out canisters, stone bottles, others, a crust of bread. They shared with each other. Their faces friendly, they seemed happy. Glad to be alive and glad of the light of the fire, as much as the warmth.

There’s a Prussian here and a Frenchman, who’s claiming to be Prussian but who everyone knows is French. No one minds him; the battle’s over. The fire begins to die and no one wants to leave what has become a blessed circle of humanity in the midst of infernal regions, not just to collect firewood. All around them sounds the howling of demons and screams of desperate horror. And the stench of the air is of turned soil, smoke and human excrement; stomachs have been opened and thousands of men have shat themselves and pissed themselves and no wind blew. Bodies killed early in the day have been out in the sun all this time and thick clouds of midges and bluebottles are already at work, mating, laying eggs and feeding.

Finally, Lees went off and little over an hour later he stumbled back with a new companion, helping to drag the branch of a tree and Lees hugged some broken staves and planks to his chest. They placed these on the dying fire and Lees once again performed his magic.

The new man turned to inspect those sat around the fire.

‘Damn me eyes, if it ain’t Paterson. How are you man? Good to see you alive. I could have told you there was no shell with our name on it, what? How are you I say? Gone a bit deaf have we, what? Bit too much of the old banging?’

‘Mustn’t grumble, sir,’ Silas said, waking up again. He keeps falling asleep with such ease. It’s really quite pleasant. He feels that sleep is just there, ready for him when he wishes it, to pull it over him, like a blanket. A blanket would be nice. There’s a big heavy blanket he could pull over himself. It’s heavy and he knows if he pulls it over him he won’t be able to get up ever again. But it’s there and is tempting.

‘I say Lees, get the man a fucking coat or something. Can’t you see he’s shivering something frightful?’ Colonel Schama said, and Lees stepped back into the darkness and returned with an

armful of tunics which he carefully laid over Silas's body. Silas smiled up at him, but he didn't like John Lees' face just then. He had never seen it so serious before.

'Chin up,' he told him, before he fell asleep. Silas noticed the way John looked at Schama.

He woke up again, because the men were singing. By some happy accident, they had no water, but plenty of gin and they were all thirsty. The Frenchman did a very creditable *La Marseillaise* and was applauded for his efforts. 'Bravo that man,' a captain said.

'Magnifique,' said the colonel and the Frenchman bowed.

A sudden doubt crept into Silas's mind and, as there was a lull in the singing, everyone was a little abashed to compete with such an accomplished voice, he aired his query.

'Mr Lees,' he called, uncertain as to whether he could call upon anyone else present to relieve him of his uncertainty. 'John?'

'Yes, Silas,' John bounded over.

'Who won?'

Everyone thought this was exquisite. They laughed and some men applauded. The good old British soldier, what a wonderful sense of humour.