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Traitor's Blood

Written by Michael Arnold

Published by John Murray

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TRAITOR'S BLOOD

MICHAEL ARNOLD

JOHN MURRAY

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To John, who always believed it would happen


Late 1642
Royalist territory
Parliamentarian territory
Disputed territory
Neutral territory
Inverness
Aberdeen
Perth
Edinburgh
Newcastle
Carlisle
York
Lincoln
Newark
Chester
Nottingham
Worcester
Edgehill
Colchester
Pembroke
Gloucester
Oxford
Bristol
Brentford
London
Basing
Taunton
Langrish
Portsmouth
Plymouth
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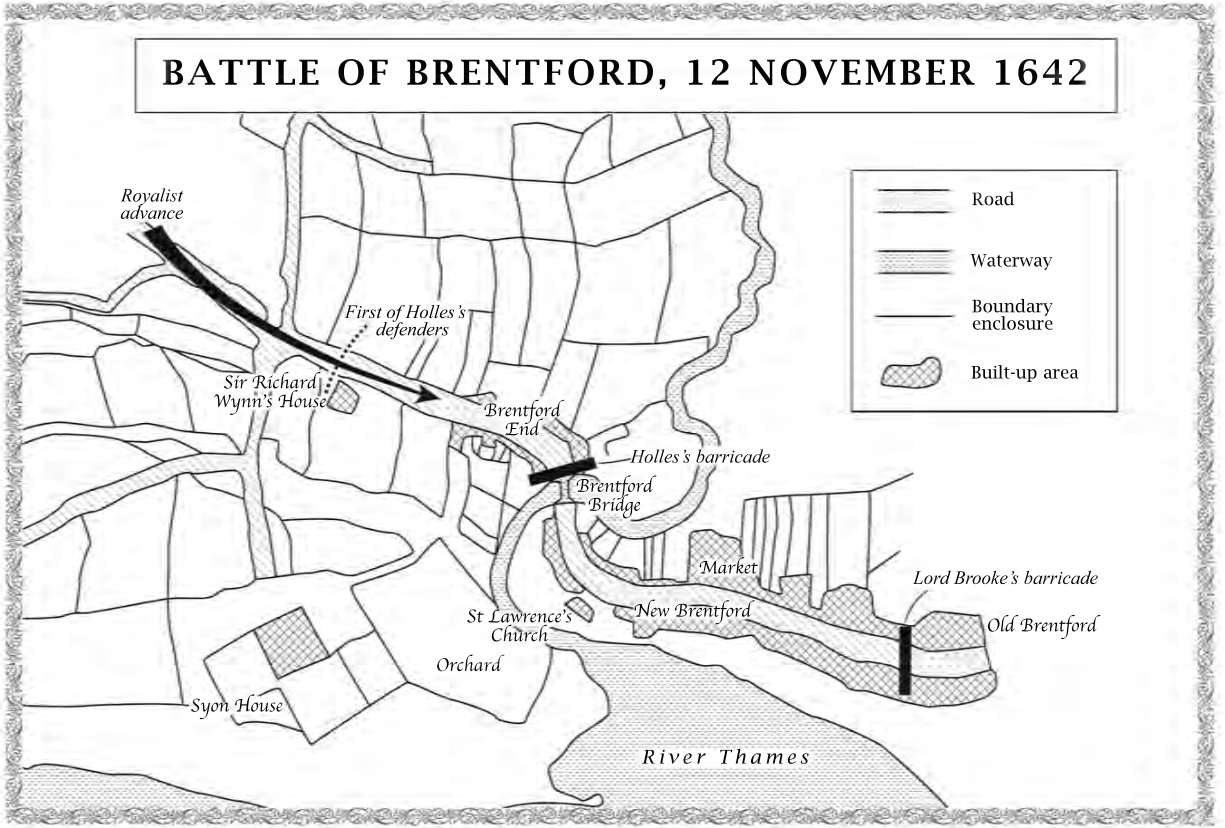
BATTLE OF BRENTFORD, 12 NOVEMBER 1642
Royalist advance
First of Holles's defenders
Sir Richard Wynn's House
Brentford End
Holles's barricade
Brentford Bridge
Market
Lord Brooke's barricade
New Brentford
Old Brentford
St Lawrence's Church
Orchard
Syon House
River Thames
Road
Waterway
Boundary enclosure
Built-up area

PROLOGUE

FEBRUARY 1642

Lisette Gaillard watched the skiff bob into view, waves buffeting its fragile hull. There were three men aboard, sailors who had come from a ship anchored out beyond the dangerous shallows. Three men to transport the most precious cargo imaginable.

'Girl!'

A man and a woman, both wrapped in long, fur-trimmed cloaks, stood behind her. It was the shorter of the pair that had spoken. His fine shoulder-length hair flowed loosely in the wind, and his pinched, shrewish face was white against the elements. His companion was hooded, with only her face exposed to the inclement weather.

'My horse.' The man's voice was querulous and pitched high.

Lisette looked past him, her gaze scanning the ridge beyond the beach where a crowd of mounted figures hovered, their dark forms spectral against the horizon's dying light. She raised a hand and a single rider kicked away from the group, leading a large, white charger behind his own horse down the steep dune.

'Jesu, but it's cold!' the man cursed through gritted teeth.

The woman dipped her chin, hunching against the wind's bite and pulling the cloak's warm ermine-fringed hood further down her brow. She stared at the swirling belts of sand around her feet, brought fleetingly to life by the salty breeze. At length, she looked up and rolled her eyes.

'No matter,' the man murmured quickly, catching her expression. 'Greater trials lie ahead.'

The woman set her lips in a stern line. 'They do, Husband. They should not. But they do.' She sketched the sign of the cross in the space between them. 'If God wills it.'

The man lifted a dainty hand to his chin, thin fingers worrying at the precisely trimmed russet beard. 'God wills such things?'

'Truly. England is a realm of heathens, Husband. Heathens and rebels. God placed you on His great earth to turn that tide. To crush rebellion and to lead the common man back to the true faith.' Her upper lip quivered. 'You did neither. Now you are punished. We,' she hissed, 'are punished.'

He turned abruptly to the sea. Lisette followed his gaze. Did he pray for the cold depths to lurch up and swallow him, she wondered? When he finally turned back, she saw that he kept his eyes fixed on the ivory buttons at the top of his wife's cloak, never summoning the courage to rise beyond the tip of her proud chin.

'I will redeem us, Hetty,' he said quietly.

She nodded. 'You must.'

The sailors were now wading in the shallows, dragging the bucking boat in their wake.

'Your Majesties,' Lisette said earnestly, 'we must depart.'

The queen did not look round. Henrietta Maria, Princess of France and Queen Consort of England, would leave when it pleased her and not a moment before.

The boat would wait. So would Lisette.

'Make haste to your kin,' King Charles said, 'and pray for your husband.'

'Pray, sir?' Henrietta Maria smiled fiercely. 'I shall do more than pray. I will petition my brother and Pope Urban. By the year's end you will have coin and men. Cannon. Horse.' She reached out long fingers to touch the king's cheek. 'My family, the church, they will not abandon you. Nor shall I.'

Charles glanced beyond his queen's shoulder, to where the sailors stood knee deep in the surf. 'I fear for you.'

'Do not, sir. Have strength. You are God's appointed. Chosen by Him and no other. Parliament's jackals cannot touch either of us. Be king, sir,' she said, softly now, pleading. 'For me, if for no other. Be king and lead your country. A monarch must command, my love. Others must follow.' Her mouth twisted, as though tasting rotten meat. 'Puritans. By God they would not thrive so in my brother's land. He crushes them beneath his heel before they would grow in number. Before they infest his kingdom as they infest yours.'

The queen's fingers tightened on Charles's arm. 'Do not fret. All is not lost. Gather your strength, Husband. Call your forces. Destroy the rebellion and prove, at last, that you are your people's rightful liege lord. I will make haste in my mission, sir. And I will return to your side, as God is my witness.'

They kissed, and Lisette marvelled at the tenderness they were unashamed to show.

‘Come, Lisette,’ the queen snapped, as she pulled away.

Lisette bowed and waved to the group that still waited on the ridge. At once a dozen riders, the queen’s retinue and the royal children, began walking their mounts down the dusk-veiled beach towards them. At their head was a tall young man with broad shoulders and a perpetually amused gaze. ‘Let us reach the safety of the ship before dark, Aunt Henrietta,’ he said. His mouth twitched upwards. ‘Damned if I am to swim to Holland!’

‘Take my arm, Rupert,’ the queen commanded. She waded without hesitation into the chilling surf. Lisette followed tentatively, gasping as the water licked up to her knees. In less than a minute the party was aboard the vessel, crammed on to low benches, and the sailors had pushed off.

Lisette Gaillard screwed her eyes shut as a stinging ribbon of spray leapt from one of the oars. She glanced across to her queen. She had not flinched.

As the skiff rode the first choppy breakers, the queen shrugged off Prince Rupert’s restraining hands and stood, staggering slightly as her boots fought for purchase on the slick wood.

‘Be king!’ she cried back to the shore. King Charles raised a hand, then he leapt up on to his horse and urged the beast into a gallop. He headed towards the great cliffs that stood as sentinels, guarding this corner of England against sea-borne foe. Lisette guessed he would watch them until their ship had vanished on the horizon.

Long fingers fastened gently but firmly around Lisette’s wrist.

‘I am ready to do my duty. Are you ready to do yours?’

Lisette nodded. ‘Yes, Majesty.’

Queen Henrietta Maria's eyes gleamed in the fading light. 'Find it. Return it to me. Our lives depend on your success.'

When Lisette Gaillard replied, her voice was a whisper on the winter wind. 'I will not fail you, Majesty.'

CHAPTER 1

OCTOBER 1642

It had snowed the previous night; not heavily, but enough to dust the fair-meadow so that its surface crunched beneath latchet shoes and bucket-top boots.

The captain stamped his feet to beat some life back into deadened toes. He squinted across a chaotic scene littered with the debris of torn flesh and shattered weaponry, toward the distant village of Kineton, its thatched roofs obscured by dense rows of pike thrust high above the enemy units. He tried to count the iron-clad heads that gleamed in the wan sun like grey pearls, but the ranks were too deep, the army too vast.

'Hot work!' A voice suddenly split the captain's thoughts like a warship's broadside. 'I said hot work, eh, Captain Stryker? Bloody chilly day, I grant you, but I'd wager Satan's goddamned britches it'll be scorching once the big guns cough!'

Lieutenant Colonel Sir Stanley Balham continued to bellow excitedly through his thin white whiskers as he drew his mare up alongside Stryker. The captain heaved himself up into his own saddle, the big sorrel-coloured beast twitching nervously beneath him, steam rising steadily from its flared nostrils into the cold evening air. 'I

was just telling Butterworth that you and the lads have been up to your armpits already.'

'Aye, Sir Stanley, that we have,' Stryker replied, though he had no clue who Butterworth was. The lieutenant colonel's nose wrinkled as he studied Stryker's less than savoury appearance. The captain's buff-coat and breeches were shabby and daubed with crimson patches that hinted at the deaths of several men, while his long hair jutted from beneath the wide brim of a tattered hat in great sweat-darkened clumps.

'Nothing you ain't seen before though, I'd wager,' the older man said gruffly.

Stryker cast his gaze over the chaotic tableau stretching across the plain in front of them. 'I have seen plenty as you'd say were similar, sir, yes. But . . .' he paused.

'But?' the lieutenant colonel prompted. 'Go on, man, you may speak plain.'

'It is a rare and terrible thing to be facing one's own countrymen.' Stryker shrugged and looked back toward the battlefield. The push of pike he had been watching was dissolving in the deadly melee, and men were slaughtering one another in the packed ranks of bodies. It would be infernally hot in those ranks, and bloody. The air would stink of flesh and sweat and shit. Eventually it would turn sickly sweet. Blood and death. 'I never thought I'd live to fight an army of Englishmen.'

Perhaps not an army, needled a little voice from the back of his conscience, but he had certainly fought against Englishmen. Killed them even.

'Tragic.' Sir Stanley nodded gravely. 'But necessary, Stryker.'

'My men and I won't let His Majesty's cause fail,' muttered the captain.

The lieutenant colonel grinned. ‘Capital, sir. Admire your courage, Captain, damn me, I do.’

Stryker nodded at the compliment, though he knew admiration for his particular talents would stretch only as far as those talents proved useful. A professional killer engendered more fear than respect in the upper echelons of society. He was dangerous, a man whose morals and appearance were considered more akin to those of common bandits plaguing Balham’s estates than to a comrade-in-arms.

Worst of all, there was the scar; Stryker knew it would likely be turning Sir Stanley’s stomach. The lieutenant colonel’s careful approach on Stryker’s right-hand side, in order to view the part of his face that remained intact, had not passed unnoticed.

Stryker watched Sir Stanley make the sign of the cross and wondered if he was asking God to smite the rebel horde or to protect him from another kind of demon closer at hand.

‘Yes, sir, war is crucial!’ Sir Stanley barked. He drew a wheezy breath and leant across to slap the younger man on the back, the leather glove making a dull thud against the captain’s crusty buff-coat. ‘Someone must stand beside our king in his time of tribulation. The rebellion must be stopped. Cut out like the festering canker you and I, good Christian men that we are, know it to be!’

‘Praise God.’ Stryker forced a smile as Balham hauled on his reins, urging his horse back down the lines.

‘Praise God, Captain Stryker!’ Sir Stanley called over his shoulder. ‘And long live King Charles!’

*

Stryker twisted in his saddle to scan the escarpment that dominated the landscape behind them. His gaze rested upon a small group of figures, barely visible in the gathering dusk. 'What now?' he whispered, ignoring the twitching horse and creaking leather beneath him.

'What's that, Captain Stryker, sir?'

Stryker's body twisted back to face the massed ranks of humanity across the expanse of ground between Radway and Kineton. His one good eye, however, slid down to the man standing beside him. 'I was asking him what we should do now, Sergeant Skellen,' he clarified.

Skellen's uniform bore no demarcation of rank, but his bearing was confident. He was tall and lean, the owner of a dour leathery face and a deep voice that frequently dripped with sarcasm. His big, gloved hands wielded the vicious halberd, the only official token of his status, with an ease that denoted a man familiar with weapons and their deadly purpose.

The sergeant glanced up at Stryker to show he had his full attention, but was careful not to allow his dark eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, to meet the officer's gaze directly. 'Beg pardon, sir, but who?' he said in an accent common to the rough taverns of Portsmouth and Gosport.

'His Majesty, the King,' Stryker replied, with a jerk of his head to indicate the ridge behind them.

What should they do? The opposing armies had been locked in combat for the better part of the afternoon. Both sides had made gains; both conceded losses. It was now growing dark, and the snow had been trudged and pounded by hoof and foot into a blood-red slush during the battle.

'Aye,' said Skellen knowingly. 'Men won't stand for it, Mister Stryker.'

In an instant Stryker lurched down to lean over his sergeant, the muscles in his thighs protesting as they gripped the creaking saddle. 'They will stand for it, Skellen,' he growled dangerously, having to raise his voice above a fresh salvo of cannon fire that was being unleashed from the battery to his left.

The sergeant whipped his head back to face front. 'Aye, sir,' he grunted.

'They will stand for it as long as I bloody well tell them to, and I'll tear the goddamn throat out of anyone who so much as farts his dissent.'

Skellen clamped his mouth shut, fixing his gaze on the distant enemy formations. He knew that his captain was right. Yes, *his* men would stand – they'd follow him into the mouth of hell itself if he asked them – but the rest? The raw recruits and the farm-hands, only here under extreme duress? They would be away as soon as the dusk could cover an escape, dissolving into the night as if they'd never been here at all.

Edgehill itself was a ridge, a growth jutting out from otherwise low-lying land to form a long mound running north to south, seven hundred feet above sea level. It stood like a great barrier between the towns of Stratford-upon-Avon in the west and Banbury to the east.

Nestled snugly beneath this great escarpment – on the Stratford side – was the village of Radway, and running north-westwards from Radway was a wide plain. It was at the end of this fair-meadow that Kineton could be found, perched on the edge of the River Dene.

Stryker knew how different it would have appeared just two or three days earlier. The fair-meadow, punctuated by rough scrubland and flanked by ancient hedgerows, would have been a serene patch of unadulterated countryside. At its centre there was a ploughed field, which, though tough work at this time of year, would be subject to the toil of a farmer and his oxen.

But not today.

The battle had raged for much of the afternoon, ebbing and flowing like the great tides Stryker had seen dash the North Sea coast when he'd shipped out to the Low Countries thirteen years previously. It had begun with an hour-long cannonade, though the relentless pounding of infantry positions on both sides had had little effect.

As woeful as the Roundhead aim had been, Stryker had still heard the screams while iron balls skipped off the granite-hard earth and crashed through the Royalist ranks as if they were skittles. The wicked shot would cut a man in half. If it just took him at the knee, he was accounted fortunate.

Maddeningly, fewer of Parliament's troops went down under the Royalists' attack. Essex was either a clever man, or a lucky one, Stryker judged, for arranging his infantry behind the ploughed land in front of Kineton had been a crucial stroke. The Royalist cannon balls had, more often than not, sunk into the turned earth, nullifying the lethal ricochet that put paid to so many of the king's men.

'Which would you rather?' Stryker said, glancing down at Skellen. 'Fight a clever man or a lucky one?'

'Lucky, sir,' Skellen replied immediately. 'His luck'll run out. Now your clever cully makes his own luck. That's a man to be feared, sir.'

They were startled by a splatter of mud and snow, kicked up from the hooves of an incoming gelding. The rider, one of the colonel's aides-de-camp, wrenched on his reins, bringing his steed to a skidding halt.

'Captain Stryker, sir!' the aide shouted over the battle din, before Stryker could rebuke him for his impertinence. 'Compliments of Sir Edmund and you're to intercept yon blue-coated fellows,' he said, indicating an advancing pike formation. He evidently could not precisely identify the unit, though it was clear from their pro-Parliamentarian field chants that they were not friendly.

'He means us to advance?' Stryker asked urgently.

'I think not, Mister Stryker, sir. Think not. Rearguard action is all.'

'Rearguard?' Stryker was incredulous. 'We're retreating?'

'Not so, sir.' The aide shook his head vigorously as his mount fidgeted and whickered, thick clouds of steam billowing from its flaring nostrils. 'Ordered march back towards the hill.'

'We're damn well retreating!'

'The day is stalemate, Captain. His Majesty aims to remove himself from this place in an orderly manner and reconcile his forces. You are to keep', he continued before Stryker could reply, 'those damned Roundheads at bay while the main force withdraws. You'll have artillery support.'

Stryker acknowledged receipt of the order with a curt nod, and the aide wheeled his horse about in an ostentatious flurry of hooves and snow.

The men had stood idle for too long in this confounded weather anyway. Swinging out of his saddle with tremendous energy, Stryker thumped on to the frozen earth. A

soldier materialized from somewhere and took his mount's reins without a word, leading the beast to safety behind the Royalist lines.

Stryker turned to his sergeant, who was standing like a statue a few paces behind him. 'You heard the man, Mister Skellen.'

'Indeed an' I did, sir,' Skellen replied briefly.

'We advance on my mark.'

'Sir.' Before he turned away, Skellen's gaze flickered momentarily to meet the single eye that stared back at him.

'Ready?' Stryker asked his old comrade-in-arms.

Skellen's look was sardonic. 'Yes, sir.' A tiny smile played across the captain's features, before vanishing back behind its usual saturnine mask. There was no one in the world he would rather have watching his back than Skellen.

The sergeant turned about and marched away towards the bristling ranks awaiting his order.

'Look lively, you mangy palliards!' Skellen yelled, as he took up his position to the left of the front rank. 'Eyes front! Shoulder pikes!' he cried, slamming his halberd, its fearsome blade dark with crusted blood, into the cold earth. 'We march on Mister Stryker's word an' no other!'

'Gives me the chills, that eye,' one of the new recruits murmured to his mate. 'From neck to nuts, as God's m' witness.'

'It should,' Skellen growled, startling the pikeman, who had not intended his comment to be overheard.

The pikeman swallowed hard. 'Beg pardon, Sergeant, but I ain't never seen a grey eye like that. Dark, but silver. A damned sparkin' anvil.'

Skellen nodded, his thin face splitting in grim relish. 'They say his mother was a she-wolf, Bicks.'

The pikeman, Walter Bicknell, was unable to stop his eyes swivelling over to where the captain now stood facing the company.

Skellen followed Bicknell's stare and chuckled. 'The flecks of silver only show when he smiles, which ain't often, or when he smells a kill, which he does this very moment.' The sergeant stepped away to cast deep-set eyes upon the rest of his men. 'Follow him, lads! Follow the good captain! Follow him and thank the good Lord above that he's on your side!'

The massed ranks straightened. Nearly one hundred pairs of eyes, made watery by the cold, blinked rapidly to regain focus. Lungs were hawked clear of gunpowder-spotted phlegm, shoulders were rolled and squared and the sixteen-foot lengths of ash hefted into the dank air. Pikes were damned unwieldy brutes, especially on a day like this, when a man's fingers were numbed to the marrow, but in these expert hands they rose in unison, dropped in unison, and nestled comfortably on to shoulders that had carried them for hundreds, in some cases thousands, of miles.

In front, a tall officer with one eye and a devilish grin drew his broad sword and showed them the way. And as one, they followed him.

The king had declared war on Parliament in August, but it had taken a full fortnight for the army to amass. Stryker had been summoned from his home in Hampshire, and hired to gather a company. It had not taken as long as he had feared, for the majority of his old comrades came

swiftly back to answer the call. These were veterans, hard men who had seen war on a grand scale in Europe and lived to tell the tale. The king was glad of them, though many of His Majesty's more high-born officers had raised eyebrows at the rough-and-ready captain and his grizzled professionals. Stryker had swelled his ranks with lads from the shire whose eagerness partly compensated for their inexperience, and he had left Skellen to batter them into shape on the long march to the rendezvous point at Shrewsbury.

Some weeks later, the combined forces of the king had headed south, aiming directly for the capital. London was the key, the nest of vipers that writhed and schemed at the heart of this conflict. That was how Stryker's senior officers referred to the city, but Stryker had many good friends in the London Trained Bands, friends against whom he may soon have to fight. And fight he would, if it came to that.

The great mass of men, with its lingering train of baggage and hangers-on, had then marched south through Warwickshire. It had been made known that they would fall upon the Parliamentarian town of Warwick, striking a hammer-blow upon the rebel cause early in the hostilities. Stryker had had his doubts about launching an assault against such a well- fortified position. The possibility of a lengthy siege in the freezing weather was not enticing. He had fought in sieges before. He had camped through cold and sleet, blood and disease. He had watched as heavy ordnance had pulverized ancient fortifications and reduced another innocent population to famine and death. He had seen the rape and massacre of innocents when walls were finally

breached. He was not inclined to repeat the experience, and certainly not on English soil.

He was pleased, therefore, that the order to bypass the well-garrisoned castle town had been received. Essex would be left to roam the Warwickshire countryside while King Charles would push south with the intention of taking Banbury. The town was another stronghold of Parliament, but it was considerably less fortified. The proposition had looked good to Stryker, and his spirits had lifted as they traversed the Wormleighton Hills that rose to the north and east of Edgehill. They would crush Banbury, leave Essex kicking his heels in the Cotswolds, and open the road to Oxford.

'Keep your bastard eyes forward, Powney, God rot your stinkin' hide!' Now Skellen's coarse battlefield tones penetrated the frosty afternoon air like a volley from a saker cannon.

Stryker glanced at the unfortunate Powney. He felt a brief pang of sympathy for the young pikeman as Skellen tore strips from him, but the sergeant was right. A lost footing now would throw out the man's stride and the effect would undulate back through the ranks causing chaos.

He forced his concentration back on the panorama of churned land stretching before him, littered with corpses of man and horse.

To his right the scattered debris of Prince Rupert's devastating charge lay like jetsam in tangled irregular clumps of flesh and blood. The grand pomp of cavalrymen had been reduced to carrion in but a few minutes.

The scene in the centre of the field was equally horrific.

It was as if a giant charnel house had disgorged its contents, dumping its macabre bounty on to the snow. Stryker was too far away to see the faces, and many were hidden behind the hedgerows that criss-crossed that middle ground, but he knew that each would be affecting its own sickening pose and expression. There would be those that grinned like demonic clowns and others that stared in shock, surprised by their own ends; some would be frozen like grotesque, terror-stricken statues. Each one would be like a ghoulish parody of the living. Here, though, there were fewer horses. It was the domain of man, where fathers and sons were impaled on long pikes, their bodies entwined with those pierced by shot or laid open by steel. Others had met their end by a hurtling cannon ball, though their bodies were broken and scattered, seeds tossed to the wind.

Stryker spat. The Banbury strategy had been a good one, but the enemy had discovered their plans and raced southwards to rescue the town.

In the end, it seemed to him that the two forces had stumbled into one another. Stryker had been at Edgecote the previous day when the council of war decided upon a course of action that would see Byron's brigade, some four thousand strong, push south to seize Banbury. Sir Edmund Mowbray's Regiment of Foot, Stryker's lads included, had been with that force, and they had fanned out to find billets for the night.

Stryker chose the little village of Cropredy, and though the night was unfathomably cold, the warm fires and even warmer sound of his comrades' banter and song had lifted everyone's spirits.

A staff officer, whose name now escaped Stryker,

though he would never forget that dog-tired voice, rode into their slumbering billet a little after four in the morning. The message was clear; the forces of Parliament were at hand. They had been spotted by a cavalry patrol out toward Kineton. A general muster was to be observed at Edgehill.

Stryker's company of pike and musket had begun the day in the centre of the king's lines, forming part of Byron's brigade. As the artillery bombardment crashed about them, an evil harbinger of the hostilities to come, the Royalist forces had been massed on the level ground in front of Radway. They had watched as Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, formed his Roundheads across the plain from their own positions.

At around three o'clock the order to advance had been given by King Charles himself, and had been passed down from his vantage point on the ridge, seven hundred feet above sea level, through the chain of command and eventually to the officers on the plain. The brigade shouldered pikes and prepared for the march across the snow-dusted fields as the terrain sloped steadily down towards Kineton.

Stryker remembered the nervous excitement of the raw recruits in Byron's great brigade, like young destriers ready for the charge. As General Sir Jacob Astley paced in front of the line, resplendent in red and gold, the men fidgeted in their ranks, apprehension flooding every vein and tension stiffening joints. Some had prayed, whispering silent pleas to the Almighty, while others growled personal threats towards the Roundhead lines. Stryker remembered the youngster – barely in his teens – in the front rank as he had snivelled pathetically, teardrops

tapping the taut skin of his white knuckles as he gripped his pike. Some men had laughed insanely to themselves; others spilled the contents of their stomachs, or bowels.

Like Stryker's lads, General Astley had worn only back and breast plates, having discarded the cumbersome tassets that would flap across his thighs. Stryker remembered the dark, wide-brimmed hat, adorned with a red ribbon and feather, as Sir Jacob made his way purposefully out in front of the great formation, holding his arm aloft.

'O Lord!' Astley shouted so that as many men as possible would hear. 'You know how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not forget me.'

Stryker had not known whether to applaud this show of valour, his cynical eye casting around to see if the king or Prince Rupert were within earshot. But now, as he remembered how Astley had drawn his sword and pointed it like an arrow toward the massed enemy battalions, he could not help but feel admiration. Stryker had found himself drawing his own sword and, with Sir Jacob's rallying cry of 'March on, boys!' echoing in his ears, he had repeated the call.

Like some giant biblical behemoth, the entire Royalist front line had rumbled into motion.

In front of Kineton itself, the slope's downward gradient petered out, stalled, and began to rise steeply. On this rising ground were the waiting Parliamentarians and, in immediate response to the Royalist advance, thousands of their finest men had marched out.

Stryker remembered the close-up toil of the push of pike. His men had marched in their tertio headlong into the blue uniforms of Sir William Constable's regiment

and levelled their wicked weapons, as the Parliamentarians levelled their own.

It was known as *the push*. Two bodies of infantry, each numbering in their thousands, pushing at the other, attempting to knock the other off balance, forcing the opposing tertio to fold and capitulate. Stryker often likened the manoeuvre to a pair of Greek wrestlers, shoving and grunting and sweating. But the classical allegory was abandoned in the field of battle. In this bout, the wrestlers were pointing sixteen-foot lengths of ash at one another, each topped with a wicked leaf-shaped blade. Amongst the grunts and oaths, the commands and the screams, another noise rang out rhythmically, constantly, in the background. The ostinato of battle. A thud, a squelch, and a loud sucking; blade impales man; blade twists in flesh; blade is jerked free to search for its next target.

Stryker knew that sound well. He had heard it countless times, on countless fields across Europe.

That first push of pike had ended inconclusively for Stryker and his men. They had been with Byron's brigade in the centre of the Royalist line and had smashed into the opposing tertio. He half expected the Roundheads to run at the sight of his hard veterans holding the centre of their particular battaile, but the enemy had been brave and had closed well, pushing and heaving forward with admirable resilience.

The ranks met one another, pushing as hard as was possible, then stalled. Pikes missed their marks, men were too closely packed to draw their swords, and the locked ranks screamed their frustrated enmity into the cold air. A melee was avoided as the Parliamentarian force eventually

withdrew, maintaining an order that Stryker could only admire. The pikemen, including his own force, had removed themselves from the front line as musket companies took up the battle, pouring volley fire into the autumnal gloom.

Stryker had marched back toward Radway, finding a position of relative safety in order to see to the wounded. It was vexing that they were not in the main brigade, for a devastating Roundhead cavalry charge, led by the standard of Sir William Balfour, had swept into the shocked Royalist ranks like a wave. Stryker and his men could only look on in fury as horsemen burst into view like so many avenging angels. The call to *charge pike for horse* – angling the spiteful points upward in a bristling mass that would deter all but the most well-trained or crazed animal – was late and panicked, as the brigade braced for impact. Joined by Sir Philip Stapleton's heavily armoured cuirassiers, Balfour's cavalry charge hit home right across the Royalist centre.

Stryker had watched in horror as first Fielding's brigade, and then Byron's, broke and fled back toward Edgehill. Victorious cavalrymen whooped and cheered as they chased their now pitiful quarry across the fields like rabbits.

Almost an hour after that frustrating capitulation, Stryker and his pikemen now yearned to enter the fray once more.

Stryker strode out in front of his company. Once again, his men were bearing down on an opposing battaile, but the pace of the entire battle was slower. Firing a musket was hot work that dried a man's mouth and stung his eyes.

To level a pike, its weight pulling down from several feet away, was enough to have your hands burning and your forearms screaming for mercy. And all that was before combatants engaged in the melee, where swords were drawn and punches thrown.

The immediate enemy were, once again, a company of Constable's bluecoats. They were more numerous than his own unit, but Stryker could see weariness informing their every step. The light tunics were stained red with blood, the men themselves tardy in their formation, ragged and out of step. They had been sent forward by Essex in a last-ditch attempt to seize the day, but Stryker could tell from the rounded shoulders of the front rank that this was one fight too far for them.

'Ensign Burton,' Stryker called, without shifting his gaze from the oncoming enemy.

'Sir,' Burton said, appearing beside him, struggling to hold Stryker's company standard high.

'Look at those bastards, Ensign. They tire. They're scared. They've been battered and bruised all afternoon.'

'Aye, sir, but so have we,' replied the younger man.

'But your rebel pikeman doesn't need to know that, lad. How do we know they tire, Mister Burton?'

Burton considered this for a moment, and glanced up at his captain. 'Well, their pikes are low, sir,' he ventured.

Stryker grinned, the puckered skin that was once his eye socket creasing in its usual macabre fashion. 'Very good, Mister Burton. Their pikes are low. Their shoulders are down. Their step is all over the damned place. So what must we not do?'

'Any of that, sir?'

'Exactly. Pass the colour to Corporal Mookes and check

over the men, Ensign. Any man looking tired, dropping his shoulders, lowering his weapon, missing his step . . . I want that man on a charge. Do I make myself clear?'

'Sir!' Burton barked, handing the giant standard of red and white taffeta to the corporal before turning his attention to the block as it made its inexorable progress toward the enemy.

The young officer had puked his guts on to the reddened snow during the first push. This time he'd be too busy for that.

It was but a moment before the pike blocks met. Never a man to stand aside and watch his company do all the work, Stryker had cut down two musketeers as they hurriedly loaded their weapons to spew lead into the Royalist ranks. He heard the drummers shift their beat to indicate that pikes should be levelled, and he heard the thud as the front ranks lumbered into one another.

Eager to join his men and coordinate the push, Stryker began to move toward the mass of bodies as they heaved onward. Already the Parliamentarian force was reeling against the strength of his ferocious pikemen, and he felt a pang of pride. But before he had covered just a few paces, he was faced with a new threat. Two bluecoats had broken away from their unit and were approaching him in the chaos, one on either side, attempting to outflank him. The man to his right was of average build, but his eyes were fearful and wild, like a caged animal. He gripped a thin blade in his white-knuckled fist, holding it level with Stryker's face. The other was a gigantic beast, wielding half a broken pike. Unfortunately for Stryker, the half he held was the business end, its red blade glistening with menace.

Stryker was confident of besting a single opponent, but two were daunting, especially given his compromised vision. Deciding that all the courage was to be found in the bigger man, Stryker chose him as his first target.

The big man offered a peg-toothed grin and jabbed at the air between them with his half-pike. He was too far away from Stryker to do any harm yet, but he had made his intention abundantly clear.

Stryker lifted his sword, holding it high as if meaning to cleave the giant's head in two. As he had foreseen, the man braced himself to parry the blow, while his smaller companion, relieved he would not have to tackle the tall captain immediately, let his guard down a fraction. In a heartbeat Stryker had dropped to his knees and rolled sideways, finishing in front of the smaller enemy. He lunged like an adder striking its prey, and rammed his blade deep into the hapless man's groin. It would be swift, Stryker knew, for he had killed in this fashion many times before. He had been taught that this was how the Roman legionaries had fought, and it was easy to see why. A severed artery in the groin would see a man bleed out inside a minute.

Turning his attention to the bigger man, Stryker saw that he was already falling back. The ugly grin had dissolved into a worried scowl as the lightning-fast Cavalier sprang to his feet. The big Roundhead had been telling himself that this was an easy kill, that the Royalist officer was a rake and a wastrel, a one-eyed one at that, the foolish follower of a popish king and ripe for slaughter. And yet now, with every fluid, predatory movement Stryker made, capped by his well-practised countenance of pure, calm fury, he knew instinctively that the enemy's

confidence would be trickling away. Stryker's clean-shaven face bore innumerable ancient scars, while the area that should have housed his left eye was nothing more than a mass of contorted flesh; disfigured and evil-looking. The giant would be staring with fear at that twisted socket, forcing himself to look into the good eye. Stryker, his silver gaze upon the Parliamentarian, looked into him – through him – so that the Roundhead would see his own death.

Stryker wanted to slash forward with his sword, but he knew the long pike would skewer him before he got close. *Hold. Hold. Let him make the first move.*

The big man lost his nerve. Swinging the length of wood like a club, he screamed with aggression, aiming the weapon squarely at the Royalist's head. But he saw the movement too late. His opponent had ducked beneath the blow, rolled through the bloody snow, and reappeared inches away like an acrobat. The world went black.

It took three attempts for Stryker to twist his blade free of the gigantic Parliamentarian's throat, but once it came away the blood flowed freely and the corpse crashed to the earth like a felled oak.

Stryker turned back to his own men. The push of pike had stalled. It was a crucial moment, where the engagement might break down into a melee, a close-quarters free-for-all where pikes were decommissioned and swords ruled.

When he reached the block, Stryker could see that his men were wavering. They had had the best of the opening exchanges, but their exhaustion was beginning to tell. The pikes at the centre of the push were vertical now, forced heavenward while the front ranks wrestled chest-to-chest, with

no way of keeping the poles horizontal. It would be sheer hell at the centre. Daggers would be drawn, for there was no room for a longer blade in that stinking agonized crush. Men would stab at one another, or bite the faces of the enemy. They would stamp and kick, or butt like rutting rams. Anything to break the opponent.

On the far side of the chaotic mass, Stryker could see an officer in tawny uniform directing the Roundhead push. Sheathing his sword, Stryker stooped to retrieve a discarded pike from the rapidly freezing slush and made his way along the rear rank of his own troops, so that he was now at the bottom left-hand corner of the block. The opposing officer was on this side too, but was concentrating on the movements of his men. He did not notice Stryker until it was too late.

The officer died quickly. The pike passed through his unarmoured chest and burst out of his back in a shower of muscle and bone. Immediately, as Stryker had hoped, the Roundhead block began to lose impetus. Men looked unsure of themselves with no officer to command them. Their sergeants kept up their filthy bawling, but no level of verbal threat would match the peril of more than ninety enemy soldiers bearing down on them.

In moments the push had completely stalled and the melee ensued. Pikes were thrown down in panic and the bluecoats began to flee in the face of Stryker's men. Stryker allowed the melee to continue for several seconds, giving his men the chance to take out their fury upon a defeated enemy, but he soon gave the order to withhold. The Parliamentarians were racing back toward Kineton. Now was not the time to give chase.

'Mister Skellen,' Stryker said as his men regrouped,

'please take these scoundrels back to Sir Edmund. Tell him they've had enough for one day.'

'Dragoons, sir!' a musketeer called from one of the ranks to Stryker's right.

Ensign Burton limped across using the stump of a shattered halberd as a walking stick. 'Charge for horse?'

Stryker shook his head. 'No. Not now. They won't take us on, it gets too dark. And the bastards are not even in battle formation. They mean to hold the ground.' He turned to a barrel-chested drum-major. 'Sound the retreat.'

'If they want this godforsaken field they can have it,' he said wearily as the company performed an orderly retreat, in step and facing the enemy, to the sound of the drum's familiar call. 'Fall back.'