

CORONACH

Soldiers

Bancroft was thinking of Culloden.

His thoughts came as shattered vignettes, without sense or sequence: the ranting clans, the sleet, the standard rippling in the wind. His place was behind the colours, and he remembered waiting there with the orderly drummer beside him and the lion standard of blue silk, gold-fringed, teasing the corner of his eye as he listened for the opening fire. The ensign holding the standard was a boy of fifteen with a sweet face, now white and rigid as if aghast at the nearness of death, or such a splendidly arrayed superior, or both.

It was well past noon: they had marched from Nairn at five that morning and he was hungry; the sleet was beating on his back and into the enemy's face. The first shot came from the rebel lines: he recalled flicking open his watch. Two minutes later the shattering roar of the royal artillery set his mare Peggy rearing with fright, and he brought her down with an iron hand and a sharp, insistent knee. It was a little after one o'clock. He felt for the watch again, wondering what would become of it if he fell. It had been a gift to him and he wanted Mordaunt to have it, but he had not specified it in his will, and no one would know.

Mordaunt was on the left at the flank of his battalion, slightly forward of the non-commissioned officers: through the sleet and with the smoke rolling it was difficult to see him. He tried by the force of his gaze to draw his attention, but Mordaunt, motionless but for the hand calming his horse, did not look toward him. The sleet stopped. Five hundred yards away Clan Cameron broke into the charge.

The whole right wing of the rebel army followed, throwing itself on his men. The shock of the charge shattered through the regiment, and over the screams when it broke on the bayonets of the front line the sergeants were shouting as if insane, "Close up! Close up! Close there, damn you, by your right man, close!" The ranks thinned, holding the charge, throwing it back, then it surged again and broke them. The line swayed, the colours dipped and faltered; he felt blood on his face but no wound, no pain, and looked beside him. The ensign was dead, the staff of the standard holding him upright.

Sharp musketry from the left, Wolfe's regiment supporting his own, sending volley after volley into the rebels' flank. Covered by their fire, he spurred down toward the front, knowing the sight of their commander would hearten his men more than curses, and in the interlude between one rush and another they found the breath to give him a short, barking cheer. Then the clans came on again and the second wave caught him where he was: he had seen his danger, but whatever else he was in other men's eyes he was no coward, and he sawed the mare's head round savagely to meet it with his sabre in his hand.

It engulfed him: screams and splitting metal and the hollow clang of steel blade on musket stock and barrel. The mare foundering over the yielding flesh of men, some of whom were not yet dead. Screams, and smoking blades and the aching heaviness of his sword arm, the cramp in his fingers, and everywhere the smell of death, not blood and not the tearing pungency of gunpowder but the smell of shit, of ripped bowels. And then he thought he saw Mordaunt's body on the ground.

The shock brought him back to himself: a white-hot blinding pain, a dripping wetness on his thigh. He held his arm up to his eyes in disbelief and a geyser of blood sprayed his face. Both blade and hand had been hewn from his wrist.

He remembered nothing more, only the iron cauterizing the stump and the stench of charred flesh, and the screams tearing out of his throat. They had held him down, and, spilling his urine, he had fainted.

He opened his eyes and found the vial of laudanum and tilted the dose into his brandy. He had begun to take opium for the pain: he was well aware that it had become something else for him. He had known many drugs, promiscuity among them, and at one point a brief and anguished bout with religion. The effect was the same, soporific, a taste, momentarily, of Lethe.

He drank it, the brandy disguising the bitterness, and eventually it warmed him: the flush of pleasure, the sense of elation. It would leave him, and the process would be repeated throughout the night, and the day and the night that would follow, as his tolerance and the dose and the risk and his detachment and disdain for his own life increased.

He would have no other companion tonight, or none that he wanted.

He drank, drifting with the thoughts, the memories, the half dreams, ephemeral happiness: in Venice with a young innamorato who had soon been taken from him, and in the early months of his acquaintance with Mordaunt. He had preferred their friendship. His love, when it came, brought him nothing but fear, of discovery, death or hideous disfigurement; fear of his only rival, a woman and her beauty. He remained what he had always been, a desperately lonely man, wracked between jealousy and tenderness.

The pain had dulled to a heavy throbbing. The grotesqueness of the wound, which he dressed ineptly every morning, haunted him, as everything haunted him: his loneliness, his own appearance, the reflection in his shaving glass that told him he was aging, and mocked him with his fears and his pain and the past, and his passion for a man who would not love him.

He sat listening to the rain, and the light threw strange shadows across his face, turning it into a mask with empty eyes.