

**Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1642**

**H**e was trussed like a Michaelmas goose, the bonds at his wrists pulled tight around his ankles, arching his body backwards on the stone floor of the cellar where they had thrown him. Grunting, he mumbled obscenities to himself and belched, emitting a sour gust of wine from between the blackened stumps of his teeth. He squinted up at the face looming over him. Pock-marked and shiny with sweat in the candlelight, it filled his limited vision. A vein pulsed on the flushed forehead and flecks of spittle glistened on the stained, grizzled whiskers. Beneath the pitted, fleshy nose, a tongue protruded wetly from full dark lips. He giggled, hiccupped and with studied insolence, belched again.

The sound exploded from his throat as a heavy boot thudded into the soft corpulence of his belly. In a blur of movement a fist descended. ‘What’s your name? Why are you here? Who sent you?’ A vicious blow punctuated each question. ‘I will have your answer.’

Lights cascaded in his head. Tears of pain spilled from his eyes and tracked the livid weals on his cheeks. Gasping hoarsely he whispered, ‘Domnhall. My name is Domnhall O’ Néill.’

‘Hah! Found your voice for you, have I? And what kind of a name is that?’ His tormentor bent over him and grinned, fist poised for another blow.

Flinching, the prisoner cried out, his voice subsiding to a

whine as he tried to turn his face away. ‘Don’t hit me no more, Sir. I am named for *Domnhall Ua Néill* of *Magh dá chonn* and descended from the *Déisi Kings* of the *Uí Cheinnshealaigh*.’ He spoke with the slow concentration of the very drunk. ‘Sure and it’s the name my mother gave me.’

The trooper gave a shout of laughter. ‘And I’ll wager she don’t know who fathered you, eh? Hear that, Captain?’ He looked over his shoulder at his comrade who lounged against the cellar wall idly picking at his fingernails. ‘We’ve gone and got ourselves a king,’ he snorted. ‘A king! As if the one we’ve got weren’t bad enough we’ve got ourselves another.’ He grinned. ‘What are you? A misbegotten Irish bastard hatched in hell, that’s what you are.’ He worked his mouth and spat.

The spittle landed on the prisoner’s cheek and slid down to his chin. ‘I didn’t say I was a king,’ he slurred petulantly. Behind his back, fists clenched, his fingernails gouged blood.

‘So, Dunghill O’Neill,’ the trooper sneered. ‘Who sent you?’

‘Nobody sent me.’

‘No? Then why are you here?’

‘I’m a pedlar. I travel about... I sell gloves... ribbons, lawn and lace,’ he said with difficulty, his gaze resting on the trooper’s hand. ‘And tabby, sarsnet... very fine... and pots and pans and trinkets, pretty trinkets for pretty maids.’ And altogether too many eshes he thought, and hiccupped.

‘Eh? A pedlar? What kind of a fool do you think I am? God’s Bones! I’ll give you peddling.’ The man struck him again, splitting his lips like a ripe plum.

‘It’s the truth,’ the prisoner sobbed, bubbling blood. ‘Soldiers’ doxies, bless their generous hearts, they’ve pennies aplenty to spend on pretty ribbons... and well earned you’d say, well earned.’ He leered up at the trooper, wincing as blood spurted from his lips, streamed over the dark stubble on his chin and dripped into the folds of his grime-encrusted shirt.

‘Pah!’ The trooper grasped his chin and forced his head back. ‘And what about this? How did you come by this, eh?’

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The prisoner screwed up his eyes in an effort to focus on the package the trooper was waving under his nose. 'Found it on the road I did.'

'What road?'

'Don't know what road. Don't know thish country.'

Releasing his captive's chin the trooper cuffed his head from side to side. 'What else did you find, you piece of filth?'

'Naught but a dead man,' the prisoner gasped, added, 'he was in the ditch. Still warm he was. Still warm...'

'Pah! What manner of a man?'

'A poor man; no boots on his feet, no coat on his back, no lace on his collar, no rings on his fingers. Hish horsh was dead too,' the prisoner mumbled sadly.

'You filthy, lying, snotty-nosed, toad-faced, long-haired, stinking Irish beggar, what else did you find?' Again the trooper raised his fist.

Whimpering, his victim shrank back. 'Nothing else... nothing... he'd been robbed,' he cried out as the fist descended.

'You're lying. There was no man was there!'

'To be sure there was. His head was all stove in.' The prisoner's voice sank to a whisper. '*Saoth liom an ceann an bhir laim...*'

'What's that you say? Speak English, you scum.'

'Nothing... it's the truth.' He let out a guttural cry as the trooper's boot thudded into his ribs.

'So – you found a man, but he was alive when you found him, wasn't he? You killed him, didn't you, then robbed him blind. You fat, snivelling Papist – you wouldn't know the truth if it hit you between the eyes. You're a thieving, murdering, godless, lying incendiary and hanging's too good for you.' The trooper aimed a vicious kick at his victim's groin and smiled as he screamed, vomited, voided the contents of his bladder and lost consciousness.

'Leave it, Hooper, you'll kill him.' The captain spoke curtly. Moving forward from the shadows he held up the sconce and

looked with contempt on the inert body at their feet.

‘So? The vermin’s better dead, Cap’n Dewett, Sir. I’d be doing ‘im a favour,’ Hooper muttered defensively.

‘Here, give me that.’ Dewett held out his hand for the package still clutched in Hooper’s fist. ‘Where did you say you picked him up?’

‘Ilminster – we had reports of a stranger in the tavern. By the time my patrol got there this sot was out in the road capering about with a fiddle and demanding they open the gates for him. We thought he was naught but a vagrant – he seemed harmless enough. We’d have left him for the Watch, excepting we found this down his shirt, so we brought him back for questioning.’

‘You did well, Sergeant.’ Fingering the slim package with distaste, the captain gingerly unwrapped the oiled cloth and drew out a sheet of folded paper. ‘You found nothing else? What about a body? Was there a dead man like he says?’

‘No.’

‘How far did you look?’

‘About a mile in both directions,’ Hooper lied. ‘All we found were a couple of packhorses straying up the road loaded with fripperies, and poor beasts they were too. We let the Watch have ‘em.’

‘So he could be telling the truth. We don’t know where he came from. He could have found it like he says.’

‘Nah. The miserable puggard is lying. More likely stole the beasts, murdered their owner and took it off him thinking it might be worth something.’ Hooper paused, scratching at his beard. ‘Mind you, it could be he’s a deserter; they’ve been fleeing like hares before bratchets since the Earl of Bedford moved against them, cowardly Royalist bastards.’ He spat roundly at the floor. ‘And we know they’ve been filling their ranks with Irish, devil take their murdering Papist souls. I’d wager he’s bin soldiering – see here, his face is scarred under all that filth. An old sword cut looks like.’

‘That means nothing – and when did you last see a fat

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soldier, Hooper, eh? No, he's more likely a thieving gypsy, but it's still possible he's carrying messages for the enemy.'

Hooper frowned. 'Surely even they would not use this pigswill as a messenger?'

'You think not? Beggars can't be choosers. Lord Bedford has them pinned down at Sherborne and they're heavily outnumbered. By now they'll know we've taken Portsmouth. Even if they were to break out there's nowhere left for them to run. Nobody round here will lift a finger to aid them.' He brought the paper up under the light to examine the seal. 'I'd wager this is a plea for reinforcements. It would be useful to know where he was taking it.'

Hooper's fingers strayed to a lump on his chin. 'He didn't want us to have it that's for sure, he felled three of us before we got it off him.'

'Three of you?' The captain snorted with derision. 'A fat, unarmed fiddler and drunk into the bargain?'

'He's right handy with his fists for all that, and he broke a few heads with that damned fiddle.'

Dewett grunted. Carefully breaking the seal, he unfolded the paper to peer at the closely written page. 'One thing's for sure, we'll not find out if you kill him now, and we'll get no sense till he's sober.'

'What does it say?'

'How the devil should I know – I'm a soldier not a cleric. No matter, Colonel Strode will make sense of it.' Dewett refolded the paper and tucked it into his coat. Wrinkling his nose he bent over the motionless body, stirring it with his foot. Loud bubbling snores emanated from the open mouth. 'S'death, I wouldn't want his head when he wakes. He's an ugly brute, isn't he? Certainly has the look of a gypsy.' He eyed the fat mound of the prisoner's belly, the despicable clothing, the black hair matted with ordure and plastered like rats' tails round the dark, puffy face. 'Ugh! Plague take the man, he stinks. What did you do with his boots?'

'He weren't wearing any.'

JO FIELD

‘No? Can’t have travelled far without boots.’ With his mind already straying to other, more pleasurable things, the captain held up the sconce and glanced cursorily around the room. His shadow loomed on the steps that led out of the cellar and slid over a pile of casks stacked against the back wall. On the opposite wall was a rack of dusty bottles and tipped up beside them a long trestle table-board. Nothing more. Reaching for his knife, Dewett grasped the rope at the prisoner’s back. The candles flared and guttered adding thick fumes of smoking tallow to the acrid stench of sour wine, vomit and urine.

Hooper put out a hand to stay him. ‘Pardon me, Cap’n Dewett, Sir, but I’d leave his bonds secure. He’s a deal more dangerous than he looks.’

Shrugging Hooper’s hand off his arm Dewett sliced through the rope and pushed the prisoner face down on the floor. ‘I don’t want him choking to death when he spews, Sergeant. Don’t fret; his wrists and ankles are still bound and he’s more than three parts dead already,’ Dewett said, striding towards the steps. ‘Come on, there’s nothing more we can do here tonight.’

Reluctantly Hooper followed, shaking his head. ‘No offence, Cap’n, but I think you’re too soft.’

Dewett looked down his nose. ‘Has it not occurred to you that the Colonel will want to question the prisoner? He’ll not be best pleased if he’s dead, will he?’ He grinned. ‘Besides, there’s more ways to kill a cat than by skinning it. He’ll have such a thirst on him come morning he’ll sell his soul for a drink. You mark my words. If there’s anything more to tell he’ll tell it then. Kill him after if you must. Now stop blathering and come on, I’ve better things to be doing with my time.’ He winked, exaggeratedly cupping his groin. ‘Too soft, you say?’

Hooper laughed grudgingly. ‘Whoremaster! Which one is it this time?’

Dewett leered. ‘That’s for me to know and you to guess.’ Chuckling, he took the steps two at a time, pulled open the

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heavy door and waited, tapping his foot. 'I'll report this to the Colonel when I've done with her. You're in charge meantime.'

'Hell's teeth. It's alright for some.' Hooper grumbled under his breath as he shuffled up the steps.

The prisoner feigned unconsciousness until he heard the bolts slide home, then cautiously opened his eyes. A glimmer of moonlight filtered into the cellar through two small gratings high in the wall. Dimly he could see the barrels, grey humps stacked against the opposite wall. Apart from the steps there appeared to be no other way out. Grinding his teeth, he forced himself to think. He had a hazy recollection of being dragged through a kitchen and along a passageway before they threw him down the steps. He looked again at the barrels. Was he under the brewhouse? If so, surely there was a trapdoor? From where he lay, he could not see one. Gingerly he tried to move and swore softly. Flexing his long fingers, he curled them around the knots at his wrists. Ignoring the pain that fired in his veins as his bonds slowly loosened, he worked at them until his hands were free. '*Saoth liom an ceann an bhir laim...*,' he murmured again, the half remembered Gaelic phrases of his childhood coming unbidden to his lips. '*Ni doilge leam ceann eile ... ceann Domnhall ĩ Néill bhúige.*'

He gently probed the deep cut above his left ear, repeating the ancient words in English to take his mind off the pain: 'Grievous to me the head in your hand. *No sadder to me the other head, the head of Donal, grandson of Neill – Godamme!*'

He let out a cry; his ribs hurt, his head throbbed and judging by the blood on his breeches, his thigh wound had re-opened. But nothing broken, please God, nothing broken.

With a muttered curse he inched gingerly onto his side and reached for the knots at his ankles. With shaking fingers he loosened them, gasping with pain as the rope finally fell away. Gorge rose in his throat, he retched, and dragging himself

on to all fours like a dog, spewed up a gutful of wine. For a moment he slumped back to the floor, his face pressed into the foulness, pinpricks of light spiralling behind his eyes.. Lifting his head he eyed the barrels speculatively and started to crawl, his progress hampered by the size of his girth. As he dragged himself slowly towards them he was acutely aware of the minutes ticking by. He would be naught but roast meat for worms once Colonel Strode learned of his capture. The foul thought spurred him on. 'Pray God Captain Dewett's lust will not be quickly slaked,' he muttered.

Fighting waves of nausea he reached the bottom row of barrels and rested on his elbows, his eyes wistfully level with a tap. The smell of malt sweetly filled his nostrils. He ran his gaze over the stack – mostly ale, but a few smaller casks – probably sack. His mouth watered. No, it was not a good idea. To distract himself, he started to count. Twenty-three hogsheads? He eased himself on to his knees, muttered, 'Fifty-four gallons in each, that's twelve hundred gallons.' Still calculating, he manoeuvred himself into a crouch, his murmuring barely audible between his gasps for breath. 'Assuming a generous allowance of, say, two quarts of ale per man per day, with a small garrison of around twenty men, that's nearly eight months' supply, give or take.' Grunting with effort, he clung to a barrel for purchase, slowly pulled himself to his feet and stood swaying. Waiting for the dizziness to subside he looked up, running his gaze along the great oak timbers above. Yes, he'd been right: a little to one side of the topmost barrels, hard to make out in the gloom and partially concealed by a joist, was a trapdoor. Was it bolted from above? There was only one way to find out. He started to climb, cursing as splinters embedded in his raw, slippery hands. At the top he paused for breath, listening, but all he could hear was the blood pounding in his ears.

Balancing on the uppermost cask he reached out to grasp the joist and stretching sideways pushed against the trapdoor. 'If it's bolted, I'll drink this cellar dry,' he promised himself.

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But creaking, it gave against his hand. ‘Careless, Captain Dewett,’ he murmured. ‘Very careless.’ Beneath his toes the cask wobbled, threatening to dislodge from the stack and bring the whole lot tumbling down. He steadied himself, repositioned his feet and summoning all his strength shoved upwards. For a breath the trapdoor teetered at its apex, then crashed backwards sending a shower of dust and cobwebs into his hair. Somewhere in the house a slumbering hound barked half-heartedly. He held his breath, waited for the shouts and curses, the sound of running feet. The bark subsided. With a shuddering gulp of air he started to breathe again. A rope dangled from pulleys above. At full stretch he grasped it and hauled himself up and out of the cellar.

The room above reeked of hops and malt. Grey light from a meshed window revealed the mashing tubs and brewing copper, a shovel leaned against it, beneath it, a scattering of coal. A salt-encrusted tub glistened under a window and beside it was a chest filmed with ash and cluttered with utensils. By that was an outside door. Edging across the room towards it, he found with a sob of relief that the bolts slid back easily. He grasped the latch and cautiously pulled open the heavy door. The hinges were well greased, their protest muted. Letting himself out, he stood with his back against the wall, listening.

Something scuttled squeaking in the shadows. A rattle of dead leaves hurled at his feet. Somewhere a loose shutter was banging rhythmically. He shivered. Between racing clouds the moon fitfully revealed a cobbled yard surrounded by a range of outbuildings. He could see the entrance, a gated archway with a lodge on either side. From one a light flickered. Straining to hear, he caught the faint rumble of voices and spasmodic, muffled laughter. A smattering of rain started to fall. Keeping to the shadows he limped towards the gate, supporting himself against the buildings as he passed them: still house, bake house, buttery and dairy, coach house, cart shed and stables. He could hear the dull thud of restless hooves. The gatehouse

door was not barred.

He pushed his way through, almost tripping over four bodies variously slumped in a comatose heap, muskets and flagons scattered around them. The guards! His luck was holding. Avoiding them he stumbled on, creeping past the adjacent cattle yards. The garrison was almost certainly housed in there. A little bit further and he was over the carriageway and out into the meadow beyond. He paused to get his bearings. Barrington Court was behind him. Looming on his left were the dark shapes of the Black Down Hills. Beyond them was Taunton, strong for Parliament, as was Yeovil to his right. Bridgwater and the Severn Sea lay ahead, but before then, spread out between the Quantock and Polden hills, were the marshes and safety. He had some eight miles to cover – he was not sure how. Would it be pushing his luck to steal a horse? He half-turned, hesitated, changed his mind and cursed. He felt as ungainly as a pregnant sow. The wads of linen wrapped around his belly and thighs had seemed like a good idea; they made him look fat and to an extent had protected him from that goddammed trooper's fists, but by God, he could not wait to be shot of them. What had the bastard called him? Dunghill? In other circumstances it would be almost funny. But at least they had not got his real name out of him. Had they known he was Sir Ralph Hopton's scout, they would have smelled a rat and all his efforts would have been for nothing.

His capture had been no accident. Since midsummer he had been with the King's Western Army – a grand name for barely four hundred ill-equipped men – under the command of William Seymour, the Marquis of Hertford. For weeks they had been defending Sherborne castle, blockaded there by the rebel Earl of Bedford and several thousand foot soldiers mustered by Parliament from all over Devon and Somerset. The Marquis had been so sure reinforcements would come to his aid. Alexander snorted; it had been wishful thinking. But they had not known it then and had made lightening attacks to keep the road clear, charging out of the castle to sting the

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enemy when he least expected it. It was during one of those skirmishes that his thigh had stopped a musket ball. He had been barely aware of it at the time, but was acutely conscious of it now as he dragged his abused body away from Barrington Court. Those sallies had been costly in men's lives, but they had bought rewards. The rebels had begun to desert, and the Earl of Bedford, lacking the heavy artillery he needed to break down Sherborne's walls and fearing all his greenhorn recruits would melt away, had moved back a couple of miles to Yeovil while he waited for the siege guns to arrive from Portsmouth, only recently surrendered to Parliament.

As soon as Bedford was out of sight, the Marquis of Hertford had abandoned Sherborne. Under cover of darkness he had led his army to Minehead, certain he would find boats in the harbour to carry them to Wales and safety. That too had been wishful thinking. Oh, there were boats aplenty, but only two of them were seaworthy, Tom Luttrell had scuppered the rest, the Puritan dog! Him and his feisty wife, who had fired down on them from Dunster Castle and wounded two dragoons. Mind you, it was a miracle they had got as far as they had unscathed. They had been clubbed and stoned by screaming hoards of locals in every village twixt Sherborne and Minehead.

The two boats were big enough to take the Marquis and his infantry, but not the horses – almost two hundred of them – so Hertford had ordered Hopton to ride on round the coast to Ilfracombe and find more boats. But Sir Ralph was not a man to give up so easily; he was damned if he was going to hightail it to Wales and leave the South West to that scoundrel Bedford. The Cornish were loyal; if he could only get to Stow and unite with Sir Bevill Grenville they might yet raise an army for the King. Hopton had been eloquent and the Marquis in no mood to argue. He advanced Sir Ralph to act in his stead as the King's General of Horse in the West, wished him Godspeed, loaded up his foot soldiers and with barely a backward glance embarked for Wales.