

Blood & Divide

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# Blood & Divide

A Novel of Flodden Field

JOHN SADLER



LION FICTION

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Published by Lion Fiction  
an imprint of  
**Lion Hudson plc**  
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road  
Oxford OX2 8DR, England  
[www.lionhudson.com/fiction](http://www.lionhudson.com/fiction)

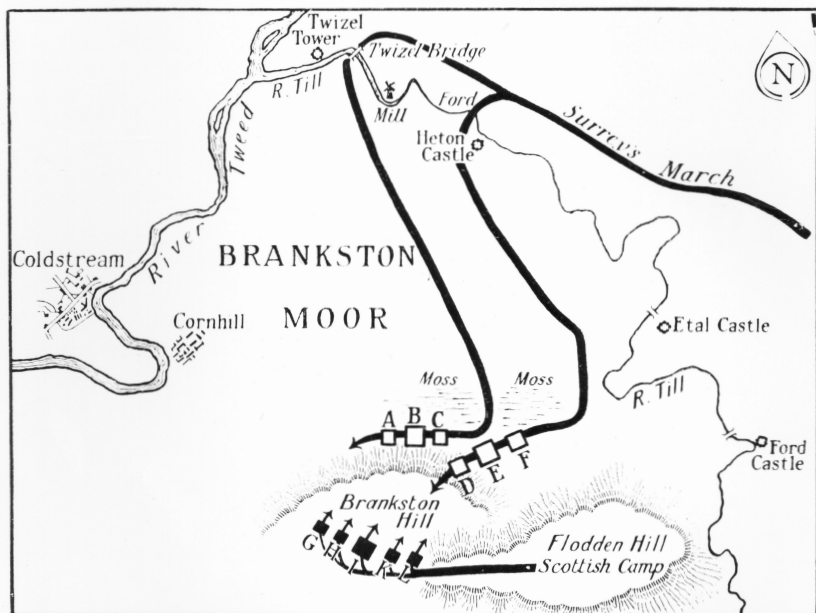
ISBN 978 1 78264 089 9  
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 090 5

This edition 2014

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, September 2014, LH26

*This one is for Captain Sam Meadows 2RGR*



## THE BATTLE OF FLODDEN FIELD

English □ A Edmund Howard B The Admiral C Sir M. Constable D Lord Dacre  
 F. Earl of Surrey F Lord Stanley L Lennox & Argyle  
 Scots ■ G Home & Huntley H Crawford & Errol I King James IV K Bothwell

*Here are two people almost identical in blood...  
the same in language and religion; and yet a few  
years of quarrelsome isolation – in comparison  
with the great historical cycle – have so separated  
their thoughts and ways, that not unions nor  
mutual dangers, not steamers or railways, nor all  
the king's horses and all the king's men seem able  
to obliterate the broad distinction.*

**R. L. Stevenson: *Essays of Travel***

# Dramatis Personae

## SCOTS

James IV of Scotland

Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scotland

Alexander, 3rd Lord Hume

George Hume (half-brother to Alexander)

Isabella Hoppringle, lay abbess of Coldstream

Archibald Douglas, 5th Earl of Angus

Alexander Gordon, 3rd Earl of Huntly

Adam Hepburn, 2nd Earl of Bothwell

Walter Scott of Harden

## ENGLISH

King Henry VIII of England

Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey

Thomas Howard, latterly Earl of Surrey and

3rd Duke of Norfolk

Lord Edmund Howard, Surrey's third son

Sir Edward Stanley, 1st Baron Monteagle

Thomas Dacre, 2nd Baron Dacre

Thomas Darcy, 1st Baron Darcy de Darcy

Sir Marmaduke Constable

John Heron, Bastard of Ford

George Darcy

Lady Elizabeth Heron



## **Note: The Canonical Hours**

Matins – daybreak

Prime – around 0600 hours

Terce – 0900 hours

Sext – noon

Nones – 1500 hours

Evensong – early evening

Compline – later, before retiring





## Chapter One: The Quarrel

*A prince is also respected when he is a true friend and a true enemy; that is when he declares himself on the side of one prince against another without any reservation. Such a policy will always be more useful than that of neutrality; for if two powerful neighbours come to blows, they will be of the type that, when one has emerged victorious, you will either have cause to fear the victor or you will not. In either of these two cases, it will always be more useful for you to declare yourself and to fight an open war...*

**Machiavelli: *The Prince***

### **Bastard Heron picks a fight**

It was that sort of spring day on the marches: fat, grey-bellied clouds sagging, peevish rain, wind that brushed the fresh, border grass. Just ahead, a lone magpie started from cover. There was no sign of a mate. Bad omen.

"There's hundreds of them," Lilburn, my new man, exhaled unnecessarily.

"Several hundred," I replied, "but we're all friends today." You know how it is on these days. There are rules, of course, conventions – even laws – but none of those count for too much on the marches, the threapland,<sup>1</sup> the wasteland between two perpetually warring states.

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<sup>1</sup> Wasteland, a contested barren frontier.

I was kitted out in my better finery: slashed jerkin over pinked doublet with fine linen hose. I still carried sword and buckler, of course, and they weren't decorative in the least. Marjorie, my wife, glowed in a fine kirtle, shining nearly as bright as my sister-in-law Elizabeth, whose gown was cut to show off her fine swan neck and dazzling skin. William, my brother, or half-brother I should say, free of the taint of bastardy and safe in acres, looked worried as was usual in my company. I wasn't sure if he feared my greed for his wider estate or lust for his beautiful wife. On either count he'd have been fully justified.

"William, and John." This was from our warden, Bull Dacre, businesslike as ever, dark as a crow, only his fine harness freshly burnished. Despite this being a truce day, the warden would have seemed undressed without breast and back.

"There'll be no trouble today, boys. Mind your manners and – I'm talking to you, Johnny – wind your neck in and keep your temper. Today, we salute our Scottish cousins and remember what good friends we all should be." Sage advice from one not noted for his amiability towards our neighbours. The great red bull banner of Dacre had flown over most border battlefields.

The Scots were closer now, Sir Robert Kerr's flag "The Sun in his Splendour" wafting over. A hesitant sun peeked out and decided, at least for the moment, to stay – perhaps a better sign or just a drier day for killing.

"Has anyone told him we're friends?" I gestured towards the Scottish warden, Dacre's opposite number.

"He'll behave if he stays sober. Best keep out of his way," he advised. "The man hates you even more than he hates me, and that's an achievement, but he won't pick a fight with me because I'm warden. You, Johnny, on the other

hand, are a notorious reiver. You've emptied his byres and killed his clients and he's not the forgiving sort – no sense of humour I can detect. So, for God's sake, try to break the mould and be discreet."

All true. As I was only half a gentleman, I needed to steal to maintain my estate. I was good at robbery and still alive, two things guaranteed to annoy Sir Robert Kerr of Cessford. I might be the Bastard but he was utterly vicious, vain, bitter, quarrelsome, and vengeful. Perhaps I'm no different, but I do as I do to survive. He spilled blood for sport and there is a difference.

"The Scottish warden," I suggested, "could be counted as something of an expert on the subjects of thieving and the cutting of throats. There's none of either occurs on his patch unless he's ordered it so and takes his cut."

"True enough," Lord Dacre replied equably. "I'm not asking you to like him, just keep out of his way." Delicacy prevented him from pointing out that he and I had a very similar relationship: I paid him a fee per head for every beast I lifted and never, or mostly never, shed Scottish blood till he gave me the nod. All in all, we were very useful to each other.

"John," my half-brother nagged, trying not to look as worried as he clearly was, "just keep your peace, just for one day. Do you think you can manage that?" I had not come to seek a fight. Only a fool would do so on a truce day when all quarrels were set aside. I had with me only two of my company, Lilburn and Starhead, both quite new and neither with a price on his head. Within my affinity, this was rare. I was here just to see, to observe and to listen, my pouch heavy with English silver, for ale and other forms of tongue-loosening. I had other functions in the game of cross-border politics.

"Do as we're ordered," I told my lads. "Keep clear of any of the Scotch warden's men. Watch both your drinking and your mouths. There's no complaints filed against us. We're as pure as the local virgins." No complaints. This was the cause of the Kerr's fury. He had nothing on any of us; not so much as a willing witness. Intimidation was habitually a game with several players. On this bare upland pass, one of the gateways through the crowding hills, the bigger mummerly of marcher justice unfolded. Now was all brightness and cheer, winter and dark nights of a reiver's moon both gone. Our countries were as near to peace as they'd ever been.

On our right, a narrow burn ran alongside, a slash across the dun moor, clear water flecked with brown gurgling over speckled stones as round as shot. As was usual on these occasions, a sudden festival appeared. Ale and wine flowed. Dice rolled and horses pranced, restless. Colour spread lively across the narrow neck of empty moorland, this saddle between England and Scotland. Every man and woman preened in their very best gear. It was only on days like these we got to meet our neighbours other than over snarling lances.

Bright as fireflies, our women chattered in a warming sun. Tables were set up and both wardens took their solemn places, each equal in his station. I drifted amongst the company, drew some nods, and kept my two fellows close. Thieving's a common trade on the marches, defined by name rather than nation. An Armstrong's an Armstrong come whatever; otherwise he may be English or Scots to suit.

Martin Elliot of Braidlee lounged by a conjurer's booth, watching all and nothing, a lean, spare man of middle height. "Your brother's wife is a rare beauty," he

confided. "No wonder he never looks easy." Elliot and I were no strangers. "Our precious warden lusts after your blood," he continued. "He's a great practitioner of the arts of hating and you're his current favourite. Loathes you more than he does me; I should be offended."

"I like to think I've given plenty cause."

"Have a care, Johnny. He's bloody minded and determined. He has you in his sights."

I'd already weighed the odds. Tynedale and Redesdale men were there. I enjoyed our warden's protection for what that was worth. Kerr had a dozen men with him, all well armed. I didn't think he'd want a brawl – too far beneath his precious dignity, the ground too public. Our kinds of dealings were best done in darkness. William and his small party ambled over, the women arm in arm, laughing, Elizabeth with her head back, her lissom figure enticing. Her fine, very blue eyes rested on me for a moment, her glance unfathomable, and passed on. William did not notice or chose not to.

"The Treaty of Perpetual Peace," he said to me, "the old king's legacy, near ten years calm or just about." Aside from people like me, he didn't need to add.

"War is always just around the corner," I responded cheerfully. "France and the empire banging it out and our new king's not his father. He's full of high ambition, blessed with a fat purse. He's no time for his brother-in-law, far as I can tell." Now, as you can imagine, King Henry did not discuss grand strategy with ruffians like me. I listened to Dacre who listened at court and had more fingers in more pies than any knew. I said so.

"Our lord warden is a spider sure enough," Will acknowledged. "He has a man at every lord's table on both sides of the line and chooses his agents with a

fine eye, which is why you're not dangling from a noose somewhere. He needs you because you're useful, because you ride with the Liddesdale names, because you're his eyes and ears. Get it wrong just once and you're a dead man for sure."

"I'd hate to damage the family name," I retorted, "and I pay my dues." The fiscal aspects of my relationship with the warden went both ways. He paid for information and intelligence received, for lies and deceits put about, while he took a generous slice of my profits from robbery and extortion – a very worthwhile connection for both parties.

"The marches are strung tighter than a lute," Will continued. My nearly brother was not a reckless or a vengeful man – rather more the affable type – but he had wit as well as position. "Our King Harry has the urge to strut a rather wider stage. His careful father bequeathed a realm at peace and free from insurrection, a calmer England than we've seen for decades. These Great Italian Wars provide opportunity to resurrect our ancient quarrel with the French. Nothing goes down better with the English than frog-bashing. You know that well enough. You've done your share."

"And isn't James tied to France, like all before him?" I queried.

"He is that, which means the two must fall out. Henry doesn't give a fig about the Scots and he won't pass on chances in France just to keep the back door to England bolted."

"That will be our job, I assume?"

"Same as ever: England fights France, Scotland fights England. All English eyes are on the prizes over the Channel. We'll be left to hold the line."

"Business as usual then," I suggested.



"As always, which is why we must be careful, taking care not to give provocation," he warned.

"We meaning *me*?"

"You, brother John, in particular; Cessford is James's favourite. God knows why but he has the King's ear and he pours venom. Your name is mentioned frequently. The warden and council receive a litany of complaints against you. Kerr has made you his special project. Your continued existence offends him and, at the same time, diminishes him. How can he claim to rule the march when you wave two fingers at every opportunity? Your presence here is a snub to him and to the Scottish King. You're a very clear indication that our warden, and by implication both King and council, pass water heartily on the Scots."

All this was true, but the arts of peace have little attraction for us paupers. War was far more desirable. Brother Will could shake his lugubrious head but he had a fine house and rents to pay for it. My own was far more modest and its upkeep demanded a more active lifestyle.

"Actions have consequences," he reminded me. "Your actions in particular. So take good care not to poke the hornets' nest today. When the muck flies it generally comes in my direction so you'll understand why I go on like an old maid. They can't find you but they know where I live."

\* \* \*

Trestles had been set up so the wardens could begin their business – or what passed for business. Most, if not all, of the accused were clients of one side or the other. They could trust their respective wardens to cheerfully pervert any semblance of justice as long as they'd been paid. You might say that was really the sticking point. Those who

were appointed to uphold whatever law there was were more part of the problem, a very large part. And who am I to preach? No small part of the general enmity was down to me. Our wardens were just rather higher up the pay scale.

Hooves thundered by. Vast amounts of coin changed hands on truce days, wagered on horseflesh. Our mounts hereabouts are important and breeding's a very lucrative business. A decent horse should be able to carry you forty miles in a night and then forty back, and be as adept driving a herd of recalcitrant beasts as in facing an enemy line.

For once I did not bet. My aim was directed to a smaller booth on the periphery, scruffy and ill-adorned. Master Willie Dodds, "Dentatore", had no need to advertise. A queue of sufferers lined up outside, as though hesitating before the abyss. Pained and suffering, they attended upon the barber surgeon's pleasure. I ignored the queue and strode straight in. One of the benefits of reputation is that lesser men tend to give way. On these marches reputation is everything, and mine, I can say without boasting, was significant.

"Master Heron, as ever a pleasure." Dodds was enormous, a great swag-bellied giant with forearms thick as hawsers, jowls overlapping like breakers on the shore, fringed by a great, dark mass of beard. Cowering in the single battered chair was one of the Robsons, Sym of Silkieside, who looked imploringly at me as though I had come to mount a rescue.

"One of the dangers of your calling, Master Heron," Dodds continued, "is that you take your dinner too hot before you mount up or too cold upon your return – if you do return, that is." His expression was mournful, that of a man who habitually expects the worst and is rarely disappointed. "Whilst this is understandable, it plays havoc

with your teeth. And you do all seem to like your preserves, sweet and sickly; death to molars."

Beside him on a crude stand lay a selection of his instruments – an array of files and scrapers, rasps, and various diabolical spatulas. No torturer could ask for more, and looking at Master Robson's expression I could see he agreed. "I'm afraid this tooth is beyond redemption," Dodds advised his terrified patient. Swift as a snake he seized and pinioned his victim from behind, his impressive bulk and vice-like grip inescapable. With a mild flourish, he picked up a pair of well-used bronze pliers and speedily inserted them into the patient's gaping mouth. Sym was emitting mewing sounds of mixed pain and terror.

"Ha," the surgeon grunted, finding purchase. With a practised jerk he yanked the offending tooth free, a spurt of blood and vileness running over the patient's jaw. Sym was near fainting. I was feeling a little green myself. "Wild mint and pepper," was the advice, "rinsed around with wine, administered daily. Now be off with you. Sit, Master Heron," he commanded.

"I'm sure my teeth are perfectly fine," I asserted with the barest hint of tremor.

"I'll be the judge of that, laddie, and besides, our type of business is best transacted with at least a semblance of passing trade. Although your teeth are indeed sound, I detect signs of limyness. You do not cleanse them as often as I'd recommend. No need for these, as yet." Almost sorrowfully, he put down the pliers. "But you should try some of this, a physic of my own devising." He handed me a small earthenware jar. "Don't look so alarmed. It's merely a mixture of sal ammoniac and rock salt with saccharin alum, all ground down into a powder. Just rub your teeth daily using a small piece of red cloth."

“Why use red cloth?”

“Haven’t a clue but that’s what all the great writers say, and who am I to argue? I have the honour, I may add, to be consultant Dentatore to His Majesty King James. The King, I am pleased to say, takes a great interest in my art, and is most learned on the subject. He has read all the great masters – Aetius and de Chauliac etcetera.”

“What else interests the King of Scots?” I enquired, poking my head outside the booth towards the pitiful queue of sufferers. Clearly their own pain preoccupied them, their moans and cries certain to muffle any utterances of ours that escaped.

William Dodds spied for England and probably for Scotland, France, and Spain and for any other interested party with a deep enough purse.

“He likes war,” my informant continued, “as a drunkard craves liquor. Unlike you, he has never practised in earnest, of course, but he loves the idea of battle, of armour and trumpets and all that martial nonsense. He seeks to build an army that can beat the English in plain field.”

“Something of a novelty,” I suggested, idly fingering one of Dodds’ instruments of torture.

“Times change,” sighed Master Dodds with the sure certainty of a man who knows too well they always change for the worse. “He builds harness<sup>2</sup> to protect his men from English arrows. He reads Vegetius and all who write on war. I’m not persuaded he understands all he reads, for – as no doubt you could advise him – the gulf between theory and practice is as wide as the sea. He loves his cannon though. Those are his special toys. Great noisy monsters they are; frighten half of Edinburgh near to death, work of the devil.” He shook his head disapprovingly.

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2 Armour.

"A potent artillery train nonetheless?" I probed.

"If you say so, but I do mind how His Majesty was thwarted by Norham's walls, before we entered into this new era of peace and mutual love. He may have reflected on how a future siege might be accelerated, should we say. He loves his ships too."

"His navy grows?"

"Prodigiously," he smiled. "You'll recall he launched *Margaret* in the year '06, one of the finest warships afloat. Well, now he is building the *Michael*, which will dwarf all his past efforts... She'll be the greatest ship on the ocean, carry a vast arsenal and scores of men-at-arms. She's cost the Scottish taxpayers all of thirty thousand pounds."

"I'm impressed," I admitted.

"So you should be. Navies are what it's all about these days it seems and so Scotland will rank with the world's great powers. King Harry will have to dig deep into his father's treasure to build a bigger one, though no doubt he will. England's not the only player on the field, not any more. The King is of course admiral of his own fleet, wearing his gold chain and whistle like a schoolboy. The council voted unanimously to give him the job. He was the only candidate, surprisingly."

"Surely this is all just posturing?" I scorned. "Scotland is small and impoverished. The King's grip is only firm on half his kingdom."

"Well, I'm sure Lord Dacre knows better than the likes of us. It's his silver that keeps the pot boiling. As for King James, he means it. He will have his place on the stage like his brother-in-law. He burns to sit on the councils of Europe. Both he and King Harry yearn to be bigger fish in a wider pool and in this they cannot remain friends, for each is backing a different horse."

"Is there talk of war – in the council, I mean?"

"None I can detect as yet but King James encourages his privateers: those Barton brothers, as you'll recall, who care not which flag they plunder and are a pain in King Harry's Tudor backside. You understand all about enemies, though, as you've so many of your own. One of them is scarce fifty yards away."

"Sir Robert and I are not friends," I confessed, "nor likely to be."

Dodds looked at me. If I didn't know him better I'd have thought he was concerned. "The warden detests you," he went on, choosing his words with care. "You are notorious; your lawlessness which is your own and not his embarrasses him. Sir Robert is ambitious too. He seeks a place on the council and the King shows him favour. James is a poor judge in many ways and Kerr is a cunning flatterer. He's already got a plum job within the household and will have more. Bringing in your head would serve him well. He's built you up as the bogeyman, so now he needs to bring you down or look the fool."

"Perhaps I should feel honoured?"

"For sure, and if he brings you down, he weakens Dacre. But the one good thing about having enemies is that they have enemies of their own who may become your friends, at least when it suits them. Kerr is but one warden; the other, Lord Hume, hoards his honours as a miser loves gold. Compared with him, Cessford is a mere novice, a parvenu. Hume has held high office since he helped this King get rid of the last and he won't let James forget that. His power is here, on the marches. Kerr is also on the marches so he's a threat and Dacre pays and plays with them all."

Outside, the sounds of the fair continued, like some distant fairy tale. It wasn't, of course; half the men present

had blood on their hands and most of the rest were thinking about it. I could hear my two fellows muttering, cadences wafting on the fitful breeze.

This was a hint that I was due to disburse some of the English warden's silver, though even the satisfying clink of coin achieved no visible cheering of Dodds' demeanour. "I think it's time I thought of retirement," he confided. "If I was you I'd be doing the same."

When I stepped outside the booth, the surgeon's queue of sufferers had evaporated, replaced by a burly half dozen, none of whom needed medical attention and all in Kerr livery. Sir Robert himself, warden of the Scottish March, in finest slashed jerkin and silken hose, stood at their head. My two men looked nervous. In all probability so did I. We had cause. This man was dangerous and breaking the truce was apparently a matter of no consequence.

"Heron," he began, "the Bastard." He and his affinity moved like well-oiled harness, supple, smooth, and all joined up. None had been chosen for his looks or wit. Nothing about them shone but their weapons, which included a brace of Jeddart staffs and a very handy looking two-hander. I and my team carried cross-hilts and bucklers.

"Thief, murderer, and outlaw," the Scottish warden continued, all conversational but his hard, narrow eyes weren't smiling. A big man, Cessford, easily my size and height, a good few years my senior, inclined to paunchiness but still strong as an ox. He'd go for heft and bulk, not finesse; he'd a few jars on board but not enough to affect his moves.

"Scum of the marches" – he was warming to his sermon – "you've emptied barns and byres, left widows and orphans across Teviotdale, yet you dare show your tinker's face at my court."

"Not all true," I replied. "I have never struck a woman or child. I've killed a few Scotsmen, of course, but all in fair fight."

"Do you imagine you can parade yourself here, dressed up like a bishop's catamite, and simply strut around, thumbing your nose at my justice?"

"Justice?" I queried, just the hint of a sneer. "I'm not sure your lordship would be too well acquainted with justice. Extortion, murder, thievery and so forth, yes, but not what any, other than you of course, might describe as justice."

The man had a narrow face, a particularly sly breed of malevolent fox, red-headed, with ginger stubble above the pallor of his flesh; I knew I'd have disliked him whatever the circumstances. The feeling was clearly mutual. He was arrogant, savage, and ill-tempered, so sure of his position and sure of the moss-troopers at his back – three to our one at best. It's not always the odds that matter, though; it's how you use the ground. The trampled space was narrow, hemmed by the tawdry booths and straggling guys.

"Damn your insolence," he retorted. "You are my prisoner. See how fast your tongue wags when you're kicking air."

"Need I remind your lordship," drawing out the word, "this is a day of truce? Everyone here is inviolate. You have no bill filed against me or any of my company. I ride with the English warden and insist upon your courtesy."

"Insist? You piece of filth – I'll spill your thieving guts. Give up your swords. Now."

"Come and take them," I suggested, "if you have the nerve for it... if you are not the bag of wind and water I take you for." I heard Lilburn exhale slowly behind me. He was never that bright but he recognized Rubicon as we



crossed over. Cessford must draw or withdraw. Neither necessarily appealed. He had relied upon surprise backed by odds. Now we had stalemate, a stand-off. What he proposed was a gross breach of marcher law, even by local flexible standards.

"What the devil is going on here?" Lord Dacre, my brother Will, and a posse of others had arrived, Tynedale men mostly. The odds had just shifted. "Sir Robert?" enquired the English warden, all politeness but with an edge. Cessford boiled, thwarted. "This man, my lord, this Bastard, whom you see fit to shelter, must answer for his crimes."

The English warden seemed to ponder. "Master Heron is not called to answer any charges today, though, is he, Sir Robert? I will advise you that he rides in my company as land-sergeant." This sudden appointment was news to me but afforded some measure of respectability.

"Sergeant!" the Scotsman sneered. "Since when do honest wardens employ gaol-scum?"

"Not infrequently, sir, judging by your own affinity." This drew a laugh and, true enough, Kerr's company were notorious. There's a certain pleasure to be had in goading a bully when he's wrong-footed, though you've really got to be careful you don't push it too far.

"The Scotch warden," I advised loudly to all and sundry, "favoured the odds but a moment ago, come like an assassin in the night, but now it seems his ardour has cooled or perhaps he's less the hero than he'd have us imagine." This went down well, with the English at least. Poor Will went a whiter shade and Dacre a tinge redder. "That will suffice, Master Heron," he chided. Cessford was proper mad, fighting mad. His retreat option had just evaporated.

"This man has insulted me," he exploded, his rodent face as puce as his beard. "I will be satisfied."

"Come, Sir Robert," warned Dacre. "This is foolish and unseemly. Gentlemen in high office do not brawl like broken men. We'll have no feuding at the truce."

"Truce be damned!" he screamed, spittle flying. "Draw that blade!"

I obliged, feeling the steel slide clear, bright with lanolin from the wool lining.

Lord Dacre gave an eloquent shrug, his duty of moderation discharged. Will put his head in his hands. All the Tynedale men brightened visibly. Here was rare sport on a day of alleged amity. Money was already changing hands. I hoped I might carry the better odds. The space around Sir Robert Kerr and me cleared as though by alchemy. We stripped off jerkin and doublet to avoid constriction and fought in bare sarks: a chill, after all, was the least of anybody's worries.

Now a brawl may be murder but duelling is gentlemen's business. Daft, you'll think, and maybe it is. Our raids and forays provide ample scope for getting yourself killed. But there is kudos in the affair of honour, intoxication in the red shift. Blood flows like fire in your veins and the colours all around glow as never before. Spring grass shone green and the brightening sky a deeper blue.

"Vermin," my opponent hissed. Sir Robert Kerr was not a clever man but slippery as an eel and brave enough, heaving with fury. Left or, as we say, Kerr-handed as well, which confers advantage in scrapping. Two of his affinity acted as seconds, Lilburn and Starhead for me. I'm not sure if either knew quite what they were getting into.

Enemies were the one commodity I already possessed in impressive numbers, but this was different. If I killed Kerr – and only one of us would be leaving the stage alive today – then my entire name was at feud with all of his.

Kerrs were very numerous and possessed of very long memories. Poor Will had a right to look depressed. He was at feud with a few names already, thanks to me, but the Kerrs were in an altogether different league. Vengeance to them was religion.

We'd fight with sword and buckler. I took guard, right leg thrown back, blade low and to the left, buckler covering sword arm. His stance was similar. No fanfare or fine sentiments ever preceded a borderers' fight. We had so many; there was neither time nor inclination. I moved first, cutting upwards under my opponent's wrists, shifting grip and springing forwards. He simply stepped back then thrust, venomously swift, aiming for my belly. My turn to step back, parrying with buckler. Clang of steel on steel.

Blades touched again and broke off. Together they made six feet of honed death, controlled by mass of muscle, sinew and nerve, tight as a bowstring. We beat lightly, a dancer's step, flicked away and drew back, his slime-green eyes on mine. We both wore horseman's boots, supple and tied tight; nails gave grip.

Around us the crowd, half-glimpsed, milled and shifted, mutterings on form, shouting odds. I gathered I was ahead, guaranteed to goad my mad bull opponent even more. Fine by me; mad is careless and careless is dead. My turn to swipe at the fat Scotsman's gut, but he skittered back out of reach. I came on, aiming for his lumpen head, pivoting on my left. He side stepped also to the left, and took my blade on sloping parry. The swords scraped and parted.

Overhead a curlew called out its plaintive serenade, oblivious to the madness below.

He was quick, far quicker than his bulk suggested, tremendous power in his blows, like trying to block a falling oak. That was his style: use weight and force to

batter an opponent. He turned his parry into another belly-slash, forcing me back on my right, weapons high, balance and protection. This saved losing an arm, though his point flicked blood from mine. A glancing cut, no damage to muscle.

I sprang back fast and low. Keep this ox on his toes and make the idiot sweat, wearing him out. He parried downwards, left leg back, blade down. We closed and he sought to rearrange my features with his pommel, tensing his right leg for the lunge. I beat him back with buckler. Sweat coursed from us in rivulets. We steamed like destriers.

No respite for Sir Robert. I lunged hard, opening a distance, and sent him scattering back.

Swords grew heavier, muscles of wrist and arm knotting against the strain. Bucklers provided play of their own, battering in fast beats. I feinted, he parried too close and I stabbed down into his thigh. He grunted with pain, blood on his fine hose – just a prick though.

“Finish him!” someone exhorted, though to which of us I couldn’t tell. Men truly enjoy another’s agonies, I find. One of us would die today but there’d be some revels at the wake. It is always the way. He came back, grunting, knuckles up, passing right. I moved left for a circular parry. He’d be sweating harder than me. This killing business is tiring, both of us heaving like blown nags.

This last parry, delivered with as much force as I could muster, spun him round so I could plant his kidneys with rammed buckler. He arched back, swung around, too slow – too damn slow by far – and I lunged straight for his hanging face, taking out one astonished eye and driving clean through bone and brain to burst out through the back in a pleasing shower of bright red.

Sir Robert Kerr of Cessford puked his breakfast, and a good one too, over the new green grass, thrashed like a landed fish, and passed ingloriously into history. It was, arguably, my finest kill to date and I was well proud. To judge by the cheers, my exertions had brought profit for some.

“Get him out of here and be right quick about it.” I recognized the voice of the English warden. “Make yourselves scarce, the lot of you, and you too” (this to my half-brother). “Stop gawping like an idiot and get your disreputable sibling on a horse, preferably a fast one.”

The rage of the Kerrs beat like a wave. The dead man’s affinity howled like dogs – as well they might as I’d just deprived them of gainful employment. Foaming, they looked around for Liddesdale men to back them but saw none. The late warden was no more popular there, and besides, I had some understanding with the riding names.

Marjorie had appeared as efficiently as ever – first aid was a speciality – and was fussing with my sleeve; Cessford’s cut had bled more than I’d realized. As the red mist receded, it began to hurt, rather a lot. Will looked fit to weep, yet his beautiful wife looked rather bored by the whole business. I had hoped for a warmer reaction.

“There’ll be the devil to pay for this,” Will half moaned. He wasn’t wrong.

### **Autumn: at sea. Thomas Howard writes his report to Thomas Wolsey**

*Most Reverend Sir; firstly my greetings and our hearty congratulations on your recent elevation. It falls to me to report an action at sea, here off the Downs, scarce two days gone, which I humbly beg you may relate to His Majesty and to the*

*council. The weather was vile, high seas and wind, but the lord admiral and I, engaged upon the fatiguing business of our patrolling, he with his flag on Barbara and I in Mary Barking did, by chance as it would seem, come up upon two Scotch vessels – Lion and Jennet, in press of sail and weight of shot our marked inferiors.*

*The former we knew to carry Andrew Barton, that most notorious of pirates who has, these many years, preyed upon His Majesty's shipping. They would outrun us, hoping that high seas, strong winds, and fog might give them succour. Swift as hounds we gave chase. A hard-run quarry it was, great crashing waves that seemed ready, by the minute, to engulf us utterly, hampering both hunters and hunted. Our two English vessels became separated in the squall and I, in my smaller carrack, engaged the lesser Jennet whilst my lord admiral closed with Lion.*

*Broadsides thundered over the darkening waters, round-shot crashing. The Scotchman, against whom we were opposed, soon struck and we took possession of her. This Barton, in the larger, would make a fight of it. With the waves riding so high, there was little that longer range gunnery could achieve and the two bigger vessels closed to grapple and board. Barton directed his men with élan. One of his singular tactics was to unleash a heavy boulder or weight from the yard arm to come crashing down onto and through an enemy deck.*

*My lord admiral, alert to his peril, detailed his most efficient archers to shoot any Scot seeking*

*to clamber up and release this great weight. Two brave Scots tumbled to the bloodied decks before Barton, who had the benefit of harness, refused to sacrifice more sailors and attempted the job himself. A first shaft glanced harmlessly from plate and it seemed the day might yet be his, but a second, well-aimed point shot under the arm, sending that notorious pirate plummeting down upon his own deck, mortally wounded.*

*Facing death, his courage, we grant, did not waver, urging his men on to continue the fight for as long as he had breath. Once their captain had expired, however, the rest swiftly became dispirited and hauled down their colours. In short, I am pleased to report that the day was ours and I wished my lord admiral joy of his great victory. Both of the Scottish sail are safe, the lesser of a hundred and fifty tons' burthen; the greater, double that, the whole valued at near six hundred pounds and more.*

*I hope I may have the honour to remain, etc...*

