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Under Siege

EDWARD MARSTON

CHAPTER ONE

July, 1708

‘Will you think of me, Daniel?’ she asked, gripping his hands.

‘Every day,’ he replied.

‘Will you write to me?’

‘I’ll try to, Amalia, but it’s not always possible.’

‘Promise me that you’ll take care to stay out of danger.’

He laughed. ‘That’s something I can never guarantee.’

‘I worry about you so much.’

‘There’s no need. I can look after myself.’

She tightened her grip. ‘Oh, *why* do you have to be a soldier?’

‘I like the life.’

‘How can you like all that pain and suffering and death?’

‘Army life has its redeeming features,’ he said with a smile. ‘Remember that it’s only because I’m a soldier that I

had the opportunity to meet you. Do you have any regrets about that?’

She beamed at him. ‘No, Daniel,’ she said, ‘I don’t.’

Daniel Rawson’s visit to Amsterdam was necessarily a fleeting one. Having ridden to The Hague to deliver news of another startling victory by the Grand Alliance, he galloped north to pay the briefest of visits to Amalia Janssen. Delighted to hear of the success at the battle of Oudenarde, she was even more thrilled to see the man she loved. The seemingly endless war against the French had drawn them closer that summer because Amalia had been kidnapped by the enemy and was only rescued from their hands by Daniel’s skill and audacity. The experience had strengthened the bond between them to the point where it was unbreakable. They now lived for each other.

Duty, however, could not be ignored. The doting swain had to remind himself that he was also a captain in the 24th Regiment of Foot and a member of the Duke of Marlborough’s personal staff. He was needed by the captain-general both as an interpreter and as someone entrusted with assignments that always flirted with dire peril. A final kiss from Amalia had sent him on his way and the exquisite taste of her lips stayed with him for a whole day. He’d first met her in Paris where he’d been sent to rescue her father, Emanuel Janssen, a celebrated tapestry maker imprisoned in the Bastille when unmasked as a spy. To get them safely back to their own country, Daniel had had to call on all of his daring and resourcefulness. During the hectic flight, he’d got to know father and daughter extremely well.

Until Amalia came into his life, Daniel had taken his pleasures where he found them and broken more than a

few hearts in the process. Tall, slim, well featured and with an easy charm, he'd had no shortage of conquests and took them in his stride. All that had now changed. He'd at last found a woman he adored and to whom he felt obliged to be faithful. The notion of permanence had entered his head. He'd started to think seriously about marriage, children and family life. Nevertheless, tempting as they were, such delights would have to wait until the War of the Spanish Succession eventually came to an end, and nobody could predict with any certainty when that might be. He and Amalia would have to wait, enduring the loneliness and anguish of being apart.

It was a long ride back to Oudenarde and Daniel was grateful that, for the bulk of the journey, he would have the company of a squadron of Dutch dragoons sent as reinforcements. He joined them as they were crossing the border into Flanders, his bright red coat in striking contrast to their sober grey uniforms. Daniel fell in beside a lieutenant who was intrigued by the newcomer's history.

'You live in Amsterdam yet fight for the British?' he asked.

'My father was English, my mother was Dutch.'

'Then our army should have taken precedence. After all, you were brought up in the United Provinces. You left England when you were still a boy.'

'I'm content to fight with a British regiment,' said Daniel.

'Well, you've obviously fought well, my friend, if you've earned a position alongside the captain-general himself. Tell me,' he went on with a sly grin, 'is it true that the Duke of Marlborough is as miserly as they say?'

‘His Grace is the most generous-hearted man I know.’

‘I speak not of his heart but of his purse. The rumour is that he keeps it shut tight. While our generals maintain their quarters in some style, the duke’s, I gather, are unbecoming a man of his standing. It’s the reason he tries to dine elsewhere instead of inviting guests to his own table.’ He gave a chuckle. ‘Why deny it? Everyone has heard about his reputation for meanness.’

‘Then everyone has heard a foul calumny,’ said Daniel, loyally. ‘I’ve had the privilege of dining in His Grace’s quarters on more than one occasion and he is an unstinting host.’

It was not entirely true but he said it with sufficient conviction to wipe the smirk off his companion’s face. In fact, Daniel knew that the idle gossip about Marlborough’s parsimony was not without foundation. By comparison with those of generals in allied armies, Marlborough’s quarters were remarkably modest and he did dine in more comfortable surroundings whenever an invitation came. Daniel would never admit that to the lieutenant. He revered the captain-general as a man and as a soldier, believing that what he did with his money was his own business. Any criticism of his mentor would always be roundly contradicted by Daniel.

‘What happens next?’ asked the lieutenant.

‘That remains to be decided.’

‘Come now, Captain Rawson. You belong to the duke’s staff. You know the way that his mind works and must have heard him discussing the possibilities that confront us. What course of action will he pursue?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Daniel, firmly.

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘You can believe or disbelieve what you wish, Lieutenant. I have no knowledge of which way the wind blows, and even if I did, I’d never confide in someone who has such a distorted view of His Grace’s character. One of his great virtues is his ability to keep secrets. Look in his face and you will have no idea what he is thinking. In short,’ added Daniel, ‘he is discretion personified.’

The lieutenant was peeved. ‘I see that you take after him.’

‘I can imagine nobody better on whom to pattern myself.’

‘You’re speaking as an Englishman now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘With all respect, Captain Rawson,’ said the other, sharply, ‘I think that you ought to march under a Dutch flag from time to time. Then you’d realise that the duke is not the paragon you claim.’

‘There’s no better general on this earth,’ affirmed Daniel.

‘Oh, I agree, my friend. I just wish that he’d be as ready to spill British blood as he is to shed that of the Dutch. You only have to look at Blenheim. Yes, it was a famous victory but it came at a terrible price – and it was your fellow countrymen who paid most of it.’

‘Casualties are inevitable in battle.’

‘It just happens that we had more of them than the British.’

‘Our regiments had their share of losses,’ said Daniel, stoutly. ‘I was there. I saw the carnage. Our soldiers fell all around me. Besides, if it’s a question of counting the corpses, I think that you’ll find the troops under Prince

Eugene sustained the highest number of casualties. Such figures, of course, were dwarfed by French losses. Some 20,000 Frenchmen were killed or wounded and many more deserted. You should be proud that so many Dutch regiments helped to achieve that victory.’ Controlling his temper, he eyed the man coldly. ‘Do you have any other ill-informed observations to make about His Grace?’

The lieutenant lapsed into a sullen silence. They rode on for another mile before he picked up the conversation again.

‘My brother was killed at Blenheim,’ said the man, sourly.

Daniel was sympathetic. ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘He was shot during the first attack.’

‘You can at least console yourself with the thought that he didn’t sacrifice his life in vain. Your brother was part of an army that inflicted lasting humiliation on the French.’

The man was scornful. ‘What bloody use is that?’ he challenged. ‘Humiliation didn’t bring about surrender. We trounced the French at Blenheim, at Ramillies and now at Oudenarde but they still keep coming back at us. This damnable war drags on from year to year.’

‘Granted,’ said Daniel, ‘but they fight with a debilitated army now. We have the upper hand and they know it. It’s the reason their diplomats sue for peace so strenuously behind the scenes.’

‘Then why is there no end to it all?’

‘Because the terms they offer are unacceptable.’

‘We have your precious Duke of Marlborough to thank for that,’ alleged the other. ‘Left to us, there’d have been an honourable peace treaty long before now.’

‘There’d also be a Frenchman on the throne of Spain,’ Daniel reminded him. ‘That’s what this war is all about. Do you really want King Louis to control the Spanish Empire and hold sway over the whole of Europe? Is that what you call an honourable peace? Or, to put it another way,’ he added, ‘did your brother, and the thousands like him, die for nothing?’

The man retreated into silence once more, cowed by Daniel’s forthrightness but unconvinced by his argument. The lieutenant’s desperation for peace was shared by many in the armies comprising the Grand Alliance. Wearing out from fighting, shocked at the high death toll, frightened by the spiralling financial losses and robbed of any urge to press on, they were eager to negotiate a peace. Daniel knew full well that Marlborough was equally keen to see an end to the hostilities but neither he – nor the British government – could stomach the idea of leaving Louis XIV’s grandson, Philip, Duke of Anjou, as the ruling Spanish monarch.

‘No Peace Without Spain’ – it had been the rallying cry from the start. As other voices grew faint, that of Marlborough – and that of Captain Daniel Rawson – remained as loud as ever. Until the French claim to the Spanish throne was renounced, there was no hope at all of peace. War would continue with undiminished ferocity. As the cavalcade rode on through the sunlit countryside, Daniel wondered how long it would be before the two sides would clash once more.

Travelling with the dragoons might give him companionship and ensure his safety but it also slowed Daniel down. On the last day, therefore, he bade farewell to the squadron and set

off on his own. While the others kept to the main road, he was able to veer off it and cut miles off the journey. He was riding through familiar territory, passing towns and villages that the Confederate army had liberated, lost to the French, then recaptured once more. Vestigial signs of warfare were everywhere. He passed a windmill destroyed by fire, farms deprived of their livestock and fields churned up by the furious charges of cavalry regiments. All was tranquil now but it would not be long before further havoc was wreaked.

Daniel was skirting a wood when he heard the cry. It was a long, high-pitched scream of rage from the mouth of a woman in obvious distress. Kicking his horse into a gallop, Daniel came around the angle of the trees to be confronted by a strange sight. A man in the uniform of a Hessian officer was struggling to overpower a stout woman in rough clothing. Beside them were two horses and a donkey. No quarter was given in the fight. While the woman kicked, punched, bit and unleashed a torrent of expletives, the man pummelled away at her before managing to trip her up. As she fell to the ground, he dived on top of her, holding down both of her arms in an attempt to subdue her. Spitting in his face, she tried to throw him off but he was too strong and determined. When he punched her on the jaw, she was momentarily dazed and unable to stop him hauling up her skirt to reveal a pair of fleshy thighs. Before he could lower his breeches, however, he heard the approaching horse and looked up, snarling angrily when Daniel arrived and reined in his steed.

‘Go on your way!’ he ordered.

‘It seems that I’m needed here,’ said Daniel, dismounting.

‘Stay out of this or you’ll be sorry.’

‘Leave the lady alone.’

Grabbing him by the scruff of his neck, Daniel yanked him clear of the woman then lifted him to his feet. The man swung a wild fist but Daniel parried it with an arm and replied with a relay of punches that made his adversary stagger back, blood cascading from his nose. Howling in pain, the man hurled himself at Daniel and they grappled for minutes, testing their strength, feeling for advantage, each trying to throw the other to the ground. Daniel slowly exerted pressure until he felt the Hessian weaken. Without warning, he suddenly brought his knee up into the man’s groin, causing him to bend invitingly over and allow Daniel to fell him with a solid uppercut to the chin.

As the Hessian collapsed in a heap, the woman jumped up, pulled down her skirt and started to kick the fallen man as hard as she could. Taking her by the shoulders, Daniel eased her gently away.

‘You saw what the bastard was trying to do to me!’ she yelled.

‘I want to know why,’ said Daniel.

‘He’s a cheat and a liar. He promised to buy the horse off me then refused to pay. When I argued with him, he knocked me down and tried to rape me.’ Realising that she hadn’t even thanked him, she produced a warm smile. ‘You came along at the right moment, sir. I’m very grateful to you. Where did you learn to speak German so well? There are not many British officers who can do that.’

‘I speak Dutch, French and German,’ he told her, ‘and I sometimes act as an interpreter.’

‘What about Welsh?’

He grinned. ‘That’s beyond me, I’m afraid.’

‘It’s a beautiful language. I could teach you, if you wish.’

‘No, thank you.’

‘May I know your name, please?’

‘It’s Captain Daniel Rawson.’

‘I’m Rachel Rees,’ she said with a lilt. ‘I used to be Mrs Baggott, but my first husband – God bless the old fool! – got himself stabbed to death by a French bayonet. My second husband – I was Mrs Granger when I was married to him – was trampled to death at Ramillies. By the time I found the poor dab afterwards, his head had been smashed to a pulp. I only recognised him because of the wedding ring he wore in his ear. Ah well!’ she sighed. ‘Such are the fortunes of war.’ Her brave smile was tinged with resignation. ‘Since then, I’ve used my maiden name. I’ve been plain Rachel Rees and had to shift for myself.’

She was a woman of generous proportions and middle height, with a chubby prettiness not entirely obliterated by the ravages of an outdoor life and the imprint of marital tragedy. Daniel put her in her late thirties. He didn’t need to be told what she did. Rachel Rees was a camp follower, one of the many females who trailed behind an army, acting as cooks, seamstresses, washerwomen and – in the wake of any fighting – as nurses. Clearly, she was also a scavenger, combing the battlefield after the slaughter had ceased and stripping the corpses of anything of value. Among her recent acquisitions, it appeared, was the horse now cropping the grass behind them. Daniel noted the quality of the saddle and the elaborate housing.

‘This is a French officer’s horse,’ he observed.

‘I found it looking for a new owner,’ she said, airily, ‘so I took care of it until I could sell it. This man offered me

the best price,' she went on, indicating the Hessian who was now sitting up and rubbing his sore chin, 'and I was stupid enough to trust him. Well, you saw how he honours a bargain.'

'She's a horse thief!' said the man as he hauled himself gingerly to his feet. 'She deserves to be hanged from the nearest tree – if you can find one strong enough to support her.'

'What's that villain saying about me?' demanded Rachel.

'The lady deserves to be treated with respect,' said Daniel in fluent German. 'An apology would not come amiss.'

'Apologise to that big, fat, ugly tub of lard?' sneered the man. 'Nothing would make me do that!'

'Then you'll have to die unrepentant.'

Stepping back, Daniel drew his sword with a flourish and held the point against the man's throat, jabbing lightly to draw blood. The Hessian put a hand up to the scratch and swore volubly.

'Hold your tongue!' roared Rachel. 'There's no need for foul language. I know enough German to understand those vile words.'

'That means you have *two* things for which to apologise,' said Daniel, calmly. 'You must say sorry for assaulting the lady and ask her pardon for inadvertently swearing in her presence. Well?' He held out his sword. 'Which is it to be? You can either behave like a gentleman for once or be killed like the cheating rogue you are.'

The man hesitated, weighing up his chances. His sword lay on the ground. Daniel gestured towards it, encouraging him to pick it up. If he was to kill the man, he'd do so in a fair fight. But the Hessian had grave doubts that he could

get the better of his opponent if they fought on equal terms. Daniel was fit, confident and had already demonstrated his superior strength and agility. The Hessian's one chance of winning was to shoot him with the pistol holstered beside the saddle of his horse. Pretending to bend down to retrieve his weapon, therefore, the man made a sudden dash for his horse. He was far too slow. Daniel had read his mind and stuck out a foot to send him tumbling to the ground. When the man rolled over on his back, he looked up at the sword that was poised to strike him.

'No, no!' he begged, losing his nerve completely. 'Don't kill me. I'm sorry that I attacked the lady and sorry that I swore in front of her. I apologise unreservedly. Look,' he went on, piteously, 'I'll pay her twice the price she asked for the horse and we'll part as friends.' He turned to her. 'What do you say to that?'

Rachel was unimpressed. 'I wouldn't sell it to you if you were the last man on earth,' she said, curling a derisive lip. She held out her hand. 'Give me the sword, Captain Rawson and let *me* kill him.'

'Don't let her touch me!' wailed the man.

'She won't need to now that the apology has been made,' said Daniel, lowering his weapon. 'Get up and go back to your regiment in disgrace.'

'He should pay for what he did to me!' shouted Rachel.

'Oh, he will – have no fear of that. The tables have been turned. He came to get a horse but will instead give one away.'

'You can't take my horse,' pleaded the man, scrambling to his feet. 'How will I get back to camp? It's miles away.'

'Then you'd better start walking.'

‘I’m a cavalry officer. I must have a horse.’

‘Buy one honestly,’ said Daniel, using the flat of his sword to smack the man’s buttocks. ‘Off you go!’

With a yelp of pain, the Hessian scurried away, flinging abuse over his shoulder and vowing revenge. Daniel didn’t even bother to listen. Instead, he sheathed his sword and indicated the man’s horse.

‘It’s small recompense for the way he treated you,’ he said, ‘but it’s yours to sell along with the other now. They’re both fine animals and will each cost a pretty penny.’

‘I can’t thank you enough, sir,’ said Rachel. ‘When I’ve sold the pair of them, I’ll have enough money to pay off all my debts and eat properly for a while.’ She nodded at her donkey’s huge saddlebags. ‘And I’ll be able to buy more stock. That’s how I make ends meet, you see. I’m a sutler. I sell all sorts of things to the army.’ Her face clouded for a moment. ‘Don’t think too harshly of me, Captain Rawson.’

‘Why should I do that?’ he asked. ‘I admire you. When I came along, you were putting up a good fight against that man.’

‘I know what people think about looters. They despise us for picking the pockets of the dead. But that’s not what I do. I search for the living, not the deceased. I got to Will Baggott in time to hold him in my arms for a few minutes before he passed away. It was such a comfort to him. And I’ve done it to so many other brave boys,’ she said, wistfully. ‘They’ve been given up as dead and I nurse them back to life for a while so that they can have a woman’s arms around them as they slip away. I’m there to give succour. I’m not like the others, Captain,’ she went on, earnestly. ‘I never take their money – not if they’re British soldiers.’ Her voice

hardened. ‘When it comes to the French, of course, it’s a different matter. It was them who killed my two husbands and left me to fend for myself. They *owe* me something in return. I’m entitled to take whatever I can from them. After the battle at Oudenarde, it just happened to be that horse.’

‘Be more careful when you sell it next time,’ he advised. ‘And try one of our own regiments. At least you’ll be able to haggle in your own language then.’

‘You don’t disapprove of me, then?’ she asked, hopefully.

‘Of course not, Rachel – I’m sure that you deserve everything you find, especially as it comes with the compliments of the enemy.’ They shared a laugh. ‘I’m just grateful that I was riding this way at the right time.’

‘I’m more than grateful,’ she said, standing on her toes so that she could plant a wet kiss on his lips. ‘Thank you, sir. I’ll never forget this. You have a lifelong friend in Rachel Rees.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ he said, taken aback by her unexpected surge of affection. ‘In times of war, a soldier can never have too many friends. But a new friendship was not all I forged today, I fancy.’ He turned to look at the receding figure of the Hessian officer. ‘I think I may have made a sworn enemy as well.’