

X
All Hallows' Eve

William Bennett

Warwick, Monday the 31st of October 1642, 9 o'clock

At last they were marching. They were leaving Warwick. They were marching towards London. They were going home.

William Bennett strode out at the head of his company. He wished that they marched faster. But they were just one company in the great column that was the Earl of Essex's army. The pace the drums beat out seemed desperately slow. At this rate it would take them at least a week to reach London.

Were they too late? They had sat in Warwick licking their wounds for five whole days while the road to London was left open to the King. The damned cavaliers might be at the gates of the city now. They might yet storm, pillage, burn, rape and slaughter as they wished. There were many who said that Prince Rupert would bring the destruction of the war in Germany to England, that he would leave London a smoking ruin like Magdeburg. How had they left their city unprotected and at the mercy of the cavaliers?

William had hidden himself in a bed in Warwick in dark despair. Despair for the loss and waste, the throwing away of years of hard-earned capital, for risking his business and home, for acting like a foolish young man, for wanting to be a soldier – to be a hero, for what he had put his wife and family through, for leaving Thomasine.

But worse was the thought of Nehemiah and those killed or wounded. He had marched from London with his company of a hundred brave apprentices, journeymen and boys, resplendent in their red uniforms, armour, helmets and caps, all with the best pikes, muskets, swords and accoutrements money could buy. Of those hundred, the tally on his ledger showed only thirty-one musketeers, twenty-seven pikemen, two drummers, two corporals, one sergeant and an ensign remained. Sixty-four. One third lost.

This night would be All Hallows' Eve. Demons and evil spirits would be free to roam the Earth, to torment, torture, take unworthy souls. Would the ghosts of those he had failed, those he had left dead at Kington, return to haunt him, to take their vengeance, to drag him to Hell? He dared not think of Nehemiah's face with its bloody bandages and staring eye.

Thank God they were now marching. There was a chance of seeing Thomasine, his children, his home again. Perhaps the cavaliers were not yet at the gates of London. Perhaps they were still wallowing in their victory, drunk on their looting or stuck in the autumn mud. Perhaps there was yet time to rescue his family, to save London. Perhaps there would be peace. Surely there had been enough letting of blood to cool the nation's distemper. Surely the King and Parliament would come together now to heal the body politic.

Damn, how he longed to return to the city! He should never have left it. He did not really understand soldiering. It was still a mystery to him. But he understood business, commerce and trade. He knew where he was in the city: how to buy and sell; how and when to invest; the thrill of owning a share in a venture; the pleasure of turning a profit; the re-investment and doing it all again.

He might have to start again; he had so little capital left. But, if he could claw back some of the money Parliament owed him in back-pay for his company, he would do it. As long as he

was free to work and trade, as long as a malignant court did not corrupt and stifle the marketplace with its sale of monopolies to favourites, as long as the city and its merchants kept their independence.

A man should be free to rise, to better himself by his own ability and effort, to rise or fall on his own merit. Yes, some would fall by the wayside, but that was only natural. They must learn to pick themselves up, to emulate their betters, not rely on largess and charity. Each man must seek God's merit in his endeavour to succeed.

The market place was the best engine of progress. It was the proving ground that nurtured strong growth. Trade, commerce and the law were the keys to a strong nation. Look at the Dutch Republic. They had built themselves a state that defied Spain, Rome and the Imperial *tercios*, a state that traded where and with whom it liked to bring back the riches of Africa, the Indies, the Spice Islands, Cathay and the Japans.

If he could not rebuild his business in London, he would leave for Holland, or join his uncle in Virginia. He would rescue his family and start again. God, let him reach them in time! Tomorrow they would pick up Watling Street and head south for London.

Anthony Sedley marched at the front of his file of musketeers. They'd left Warwick behind, passed through Southam and on into Northamptonshire. They were going the wrong way. They were marching south and east, away from Birmingham.

He longed to get back to the iron-forge, to feel its heat, to laugh and talk with his fellow workers. But most of all he wanted to hold his wife and babies again. To tell them he lived, to take heart, to stick together, not to give in to oppression, to tell them that the rebellion was alive. But now the army marched south, south to save London.

It was bloody typical. The labourers and craftsmen were being driven by their masters to save Parliament and the sodding riches of London. Why couldn't the bloody workers of London rise up to defend their city from tyranny and oppression? Why did they not join the rebellion and fight for their rights and freedoms? Were they just soft?

Or was this all part of the bloody Norman system: the Earl of sodding Essex, grandee colonels, shitting officers and Members of Parliament protecting their own, while bastard cavaliers still roamed free in the north?

Somewhere up ahead, a dog barked. A prickle of anger swept over him at the childhood memory of eviction; the lord of the manor's hounds snarling on their leash as their cottage was torn down, cleared for enclosure; as they were forced off the commons, chased from the woods to tramp the roads as vagrants; his father worn down under the shame, hunger and the load on his back. He hated dogs.

No doubt they would have to sleep in some shitting barn or pigsty tonight. And it was All Hallows' Eve. His band of merry men would not be happy. They were town lads, cocky and streetwise, but edgy on a dark night in the middle of nowhere. 'A couple of hours or three and I reckon we'll stop. Harry, you alright?'

'Alright Anthony.'

'Zach, what about you lad?'

'Er, alright Anthony. But me pegs don't 'alf ache.'

The skinny runt could barely hold his musket. The march would be hard on him. 'Alf, take 'is musket for a bit, alright?'

'Oy'm alright. Giz it 'ere Zach.'

'Tom, alright?'

'All good Anthony.'

'Izzy? What about you?'

'Me bloody shoe latchet's undone again.'

'Bloody 'ell, Isaac. 'Ow many times 'ave I showan you? Now fall out, get it tied proper and get back in your place before sergeant kicks your arse. Will, mate... watch 'im will yer?'

'Alright Anthony.'

'Good. Now... when we stop, I want a nice big fire tonight. Plenty of wood. Keep it burning, alright.'

It was almost dark by the time Francis Reeve rode into Weedon-on-the-Street. Most of the foot had halted for the night in and about Daventry. But Balfour's Horse had pushed on through Dodford to Watling Street and the road south to London. Praise God, the way was open!

They passed squalid cottages, dung spread on the walls to dry under low eaves, fuel for their stinking fires. Worse: despite their poverty, many of the hovels burned candles at their window – candles for the dead. The fools still believed their dead were trapped in Purgatory, released to return home for this one night. Others scurried in the gloom towards the toll of the church bell, scuttling to join the vigil for the souls of the departed.

But there was no Purgatory. It was a Roman heresy, a lie to tempt the living, a fallacy to trap sinners. Their candles would not bring back their dead. They were proffering a light to the Devil! Their candles, their bells and prayers for the dead only invited Satan into their homes, into their souls. They were opening themselves to evil, letting in the forces of Hell, threatening all around with eternal damnation. Even now, all about him was danger, demonic forces surrounded him. This place, this night, was cursed. Its stench hung in the air.

They dismounted outside an old inn, one of several that lined Watling Street, as the last light faded and a mist formed over the ground. Behind them, the flames of a bonfire flared into the night sky atop a great dark hill brooding over the landscape, its light etching ancient rings dug deep around the summit.

'Tis Barrow Hill. The blood of the Danes do stain it.' A toothless old man stood beside him, an ostler in a battered leather apron. 'Best keep them and their kind at peace this night. They like a good bone-fire they do.'

Francis handed the man his horse's reins. Ignoring the outstretched palm, he strode into the inn. He had to find solitude, a place to pray, a sanctuary from evil. He needed to armour his soul, to feel the protection of God's word.

XI
All Saints

Ralph Reeve

Aylesbury, Tuesday the 1st of November 1642, 6 o'clock in the evening

‘Come on, Clem. I have a thirst for ale.’

‘Alright, Master Ralph. We just got a-hang up this here *bag-stone*.’ Clem held out the small round Suffolk flint, a natural hole through its centre. ‘Us don’t want no hags worrying the hosses tonight. I seen what they do to a hoss, leavin them all lathered in a muck sweat, a-shiverin and fair fit to drop by mornin. I ain’t a-goin to leave these here hosses without a hag-stone to keep them safe. Not this night, it bein Hallowtide and all.’

The stone would ward off any witch that tried to ride a horse in the night. Clem handed it up to the boy who hung it by a cord from a beam over the stall. It was the boy from Oddington. He had caught up with them on the road the next morning. God knew where he had found a horse – stolen from the parson, most likely. He signed the muster role with a simple X, was found a sword and a pistol and joined as the fourth trooper in Ralph’s file.

‘There.’ Clem patted his horse one more time. ‘That should keep they safe for the night, shouldn’t it my beauty.’

‘Ralph, Clem!’ Luke’s voice called from outside. ‘You’ll want to see this.’

Luke was standing in the inn yard looking up at the hill beyond the river. Tiny pricks of flame flared and smouldered red in the fields and clear night air.

‘Fire red and low, light on my teen’lay.’ An old man squatted beside the inn wall. ‘They be burning tindles for All Souls. Some folks keep to the old ways.’ Between his legs sweet chestnuts roasted on a chaffer, the flames drawing deep lines in his face. Sunken eyes appealed for a penny as crooked hands cupped what warmth there was. ‘Best chestnuts in the vale.’

‘I haven’t had roasted chestnuts since I left for London.’ Ralph looked down at the old man, a travelling peddler or poor cottager trying to supplement his income. ‘Four years.’ This was an unnecessary expense and he had to save his purse. But times were hard for all. The man needed a sale. ‘We’ll take a dozen.’

‘I got cobnuts too. Find a Welshman and ’e will tell yer future. I seed em do it. Strange things they do with nuts. That’s if you can find a Welshman that speaks rightways.’

‘Alright, we’ll take a dozen cobnuts too.’ Ralph handed over a farthing while the nuts were scooped into the boy’s hat and carried into the inn. Luke bought them a jug of ale and they sat around an upturned barrel cracking the nuts and eating their hot mawkish flesh.

‘Well, I don’t mind sittin here eatin nuts.’ Clem looked up from the litter of shells. ‘But I thought we was a-goin to London.’

‘Good point, Clem. Luke, remind us why we are here. Why are we in the middle of bloody Buckinghamshire and not marching on London?’

‘Well, Prince Rupert leads the march on London. The King follows along the Thames valley. We’re to provide a flank-guard, to protect the army from any interference. We’re to watch for any move by Essex against the King’s march.’

'I reckon Old Cock Robin is still hiding in Warwick Castle. He knows the King will have his head for a traitor. What I don't understand is why we don't just seize London while we can. Why do we move so slowly?'

'I think the King doesn't want to be seen as a vengeful conqueror. He prefers to gather support as he goes, give time for the waverers to return to him, for Parliament to beg for peace. Then he can enter London as the people's hero.'

'At this rate, it could be Christmas first.'

'I reckon the King'll want to be in Whitehall for old Queen Bess's Day on the seventeenth. It's the perfect celebration of old Gloriana. It's two days afore his Majesty's own birthday feast and a week afore the Queen's. If I was to wager, I'd say he'll want to be in London in a fortnight's time.'

'So, let's drink to feasting and merriment in London in a fortnight.'

'I'll drink to a bit o' feasting.'

'Ah Clem, you remind me o' the other reason why I reckon we're here in the Vale of Aylesbury.' Luke enthused. 'This is where the Welsh drovers fatten their cattle afore driving them on to London for Christmas. And where they breed the ducks for London tables. I think our Commissary-General, Lord Wilmot, is here to intercept them. To feed our army and to hold them for ransom until London submits.'

'Oh Luke, that's clever.' Ralph slapped the table. 'So, the King enters London a hero, gives the people peace, Gloriana and beef, and sends his army home for Christmas.'

'Home for Christmas.' Clem lifted his ale. 'I'll drink to that an' all.'

They sat in silence for a moment, each lost in their thoughts. God it would be good to be home for Christmas, for bringing in the yule log, posset, misrule, twelfth night – and for Susanna.

'Mind, there'll be some not a-goin home anytime.' Clem stared at the fire. 'I heard tell we buried more than a thousand dead on Kineton field. And more'll die yet o' their wounds. 'Tis All Hallows. Best we remember the dead this night. Lest they haunt we.'