

JACKIE FRENCH



THE
ANGEL
OF
WATERLOO

The battle was only the beginning

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*To all those who love the Matilda Saga —
and to the hundreds of generations of women
whose stories have become part of it.*

Chapter 1

To Keep Leeches

Store in a sealed Glass Container exposed to Light. Feed weekly. Efficacious for Bruises, especially around the Eye or Knee. One Leech for each Application is Sufficient.

From the Notebooks of Henrietta Bartley

WATERLOO

18 JUNE 1815

She'd been born on a battlefield; she'd lost her mother on another. Perhaps this would be the battlefield she died on.

Death crawled around her outside this small fort made of the piled bodies of French and English soldiers. A dozen living men perched their muskets on those who had once been their comrades to ward off attack.

Beyond the safety of her square, a thousand men, or ten thousand men, lay around her wounded or dead. Horsemen slashed at their enemies, though the main battlefront had moved hours before. The grey and yellow smoke made it impossible to see more than a few yards ahead.

The luckiest lay still. Other shattered bodies scrambled, struggled, men with legs blown off, some dragging their intestines as they vainly, briefly searched for aid.

Hen could not help them all.

She kept her eyes on the more superficial stomach wound she was stitching, glad her patient was unconscious, for she had neither the strength nor an orderly to keep him still. He was fifteen, perhaps, the same age as her, a smoke-black face seeping red from yet another wound, a scrape of shrapnel, perhaps, or a sword cut. Her father had ceased stitching altogether, taping wounds while their supplies held out. He and Hen had arrived in Brussels the day before, too late to acquire the horses, mules and panniers to which he was entitled. They had only the equipment they could carry.

Surgeon Gilbert's orders had been to proceed immediately to the Mont-Saint-Jean farm house. He, Hen and Assistant Surgeon Thompson had set out on the Waterloo road at first light, Hen wrapped in an old greatcoat, for the dawn was chill, even in midsummer. They'd trudged through mud and mist, and then green fields, and finally a wheat field sloping gently to a ridge. Larks sang, the wheat rustled. A few carts trundled past. Now and then horses passed them at a gallop, the only sign of war.

And then the thunder, ripping the air, the ground vibrating. Hen instinctively looked at the sky, but the noise didn't stop.

This storm was cannon. Somewhere beyond the ridge ahead of them the battle had finally begun. Within a few heartbeats white horses erupted through the wheat, their blue-coated French riders with sabres drawn.

Surgeon Gilbert flung Hen down into the mud. Men in red coats scrambled past, panting from a drift of gunpowder fog. British soldiers fleeing towards Brussels, thought Hen, holding her breath. They must be early deserters from what General Wellington called his 'infamous army', hastily assembled to fight the returning Napoleon.

She froze as the French cavalry pursued the men through the field, slashing at necks, shoulders, the horses rearing, their hooves striking down any man who tried to protect himself with bayonet or sword.

Minutes passed, or hours. Hen tried to peer towards the ridge, but already the battle smoke was too thick to make out what was

happening. Even as she looked the haze spread towards them. More redcoats ran past, screaming, dying under the hooves of the cavalry horses or from sabre cuts. So many men, trying vainly to escape ...

Surely the battle had not been lost so soon? Napoleon had won the skirmishes at Ligny and Quatre Bras, but even he could not have defeated all the Allied armies within an hour, Hen assured herself. More men and horses appeared like apparitions in the smoke, then vanished, then surged forwards once more.

At last the French cavalry retreated, a waving mass of red feathers and the glint of steel. There was no need for her father to tell her that it was impossible to head to Mont-Saint-Jean now. Instead Surgeon Gilbert managed to grab the sleeve of one of the fleeing redcoats. He and his friends hesitated, staring at Hen, then her father, then back to Hen again, unmistakably female despite her army coat, her gold plaits shining under her cap.

‘We need to form a square,’ ordered Surgeon Gilbert. ‘Hurry, you louts, if you want to live!’

The first man stared at him. ‘Ain’t got enough men to form a square ...’

‘Use the dead to build the walls,’ said Surgeon Gilbert shortly.

The man blinked, then gestured to his companions. Assisting a surgeon in a defended square suddenly seemed safer than retreat harried by French cavalry — especially if, by some miracle and the inspired leadership of the Duke of Wellington, the Allied side won.

Slowly other soldiers joined them, packing the bodies three or four deep at the base till the walls of dead were chest high — tall enough to shelter the living as the tides of battle swept back and forth, low enough to let them fire at the enemy, leaving a small gap that would let in a man, but not a horse. A square was impregnable, if each man held his position and kept his firearms loaded. Even cavalry could not penetrate an infantry square as long as the men who made up each side held their nerve. This square was doubly impregnable. The dead who made its walls could not retreat.

Hen and her father kept their bodies low, binding, stitching, amputating, Assistant Surgeon Thompson placing those too badly injured to survive in rows at the back of the square, where they could die gazing at the sky, not under the hooves of cavalry horses.

That had been hours back. The wheat was now a swamp of blood and mud. The sun drooped halfway to the horizon, spreading an orange glow through black and yellow smoke. Horses shrieked in challenge or died, their cries guttural among the shouts and moans of men. Somewhere across the ridge Napoleon and Wellington must still be urging on their troops. The ground trembled from cannon fire and horses' hooves.

Hen's bonnet sat on the muck-soaked soil, holding surgical instruments. Her cap had become a cover for an amputated thigh. She still wore the coat, despite the heat, for she had mislaid her apron. Even her plaits had come loose: a nuisance, as she had to keep pushing the hair from her eyes as she worked, gold now streaked with blood.

She bit off the final piece of thread from the stomach wound and began to stitch the boy's face, three quick stitches merely to hold the cut together, rather than the sixteen that would have meant less scarring.

There was no time at Waterloo for neatness.

Hen moved to the next man lined up against the wall of bodies. A veteran, for his red uniform had faded to pink, thirty perhaps.

And dead. She laid a blood-stiff coat over his face so her father would not waste time on a soldier beyond man's aid, and wiped the tears from her cheeks. The dead man deserved tears, even if she didn't know his name. The man lying beside him — a captain by his uniform — opened eyes as blue as the sky above the smoke and cloud. He stared at Hen and raised a trembling hand to touch her hair. 'I am in Heaven then.'

'Not yet I warrant, sir.' Hen sliced open his trousers to try to find the source of the blood still pooling on the ground. If

the blood flowed, they were still alive. ‘How goes the battle, Captain?’

‘Lost,’ said the captain, still smiling at her vaguely. He yawned, as men did as they died from loss of blood. ‘The French killed Ponsonby, you know. They’ve routed the Scots Greys. The Household Cavalry are all broken up.’

He didn’t seem to notice Hen staring at his thigh. His femoral artery had been sliced through. It was a miracle he had lived even a few minutes. Already his eyes were closing. ‘The French waited till we were sixty feet away,’ he murmured, almost happily. ‘They opened fire. The whole rank of us mowed down like grass before a scythe ...’

The words faded. Hen gently shut his eyes.

‘Don’t you listen to ’im, Miss. The French cavalry is spent. The Iron Duke ’as us forming squares.’ The speaker might have been thirty or eighty, with the leathery skin of a lifetime soldier. ‘Don’t you worry about me, neither,’ he added. ‘Just got me arm broke. Got it set right now. I’ll be up and at ’em.’

Hen glanced at his arm. It had indeed been set, strapped to what looked like a French bayonet, though she doubted the man would be able to walk, much less fight ...

Which soldier was correct? Wellington had never lost a battle yet, but nor had he ever faced Napoleon, the master strategist of Europe. But Hen had seen enough warfare to know that those in the midst of battle might know least, for all they could see was their small corner.

‘Hen! I need you!’ Impossible to hear her father’s words from across the square, but she guessed what he was saying as he nodded at a bloodstained sergeant the volunteers had placed on the ground before him.

She grabbed her bonnet of instruments and ducked over to him, keeping her head down, for shots still rang out around them, even if the main forces were deployed elsewhere, then crouched beside him. Surgeon Gilbert’s arms were red to the elbow, and his leather apron black and dripping.

Their patient on the blood-damp ground was young to be a sergeant, short and wiry. A cut bled freely on his cheek, but pumped strongly from his lower leg, cloth and flesh mangled together.

And she knew him. Had she met him after the battle of Vimeiro? Or was it Corunna, Talavera, Lisbon, Ciudad Rodrigo, Salamanca? Perhaps it had been the Battle of Toulouse. Toulouse was where Mama had died, a cut turned septic so even her remedies couldn't cure her. Hen and her father's grief remained private among the public triumph as General Wellesley — now the Duke of Wellington — defeated Marshal Soult, ending Napoleon's rule over most of Europe.

Until ninety days ago, when Napoleon returned.

'Papa, it's Sergeant Drivers,' she said urgently. 'Remember? We met him and his wife just after the Battle of Salamanca. Sergeant Drivers.'

Surgeon Gilbert stared wearily at the crumpled body in front of him. 'That was a good night,' he said slowly.

Hen nodded. Sergeant Drivers had just been promoted on the field for bravery. He'd stolen a chicken to celebrate, breaking Wellesley's orders not to loot. He'd asked Mama to hide it. The best place to hide a chicken, of course, was in a stew pot.

She remembered the sergeant's mischievous face as he opened his coat to show Mama his feathered plunder. Sergeant Drivers and his wife had dined with them that night, on Spanish chicken stewed with orange juice and almonds, and Mama's soda bread. The sergeant's wife was Spanish, like Mama. She and Mama had danced after dinner, clicking their fingers instead of castanets, while one of the carters played a guitar, a crowd gathering to clap the beat.

And then the sergeant had danced with Hen, showing her the steps and laughing at her mistakes. So many women to choose from, but he had asked a twelve-year-old girl to dance with him ...

'His leg will have to go,' said Surgeon Gilbert abruptly.

Not his leg, thought Hen desperately. How could he dance with only one leg?

Sergeant Drivers stared up at them, echoing her thoughts. ‘A man’s no use without a leg.’

But there was no choice. Or rather there was a choice, but little time in which to make it. The sergeant had lost too much blood already. She took a breath, steadying herself, and bent down close to him. ‘Sergeant Drivers,’ she said clearly.

The sergeant tried to focus on her face. ‘Little Miss Hen,’ he muttered.

‘Not so little now. Do you trust me, Sergeant?’

‘Little Miss Hen,’ he repeated, still gazing at her, as if wondering what she was doing among the bayonets and cannon.

‘My father is a surgeon, remember? I’m helping him. If we don’t take off your leg you’ll lose your life. Do you understand? Please. Your leg or your life?’

Sergeant Drivers’s gaze met hers. ‘Life,’ he said at last. He managed to smile. ‘Little Miss Hen! Best chicken I ever ate.’

‘Remember it now,’ said Hen, automatically smiling back at him. *Sometimes we can give nothing but a smile.* After which battle had Mama said that? Hen had smiled at every patient since.

‘Just keep thinking of that chicken and how you’ll be eating more, and just as good. Is Mrs Drivers with you?’ Hen grabbed the iron clamp.

‘Aye, Isobel’s waiting for me in Brussels ...’ The words became a gasp as Hen twisted the clamp around his thigh, cutting off the blood supply as Thompson held the man down.

Surgeon Gilbert’s bone saw began to cut through flesh, muscle and both bones in the man’s leg. The amputation took less than a minute — the time that it took for Sergeant Drivers to scream eight times, gripping the ground with white fingers, holding himself with such iron control that the assistant surgeon didn’t need to hold him down. Few surgeons could cut as fast or as neatly as Surgeon Gilbert. His patients mostly survived.

Hen took up the wooden-handled surgical iron, red hot in its bed of coals. Sergeant Drivers screamed again as she pressed the iron to the living stump.

Sergeant Drivers fainted, which meant Hen did not have to spare him some of her small supply of laudanum till he was conscious again. The wound was now sealed cleanly, with no further bleeding, and so unlikely to become infected, especially with his wife to care for him. Assuming the French allowed those in this square to live ...

She blinked away tears. Useless tears. Stupid tears. But she had never seen a man take his surgery so bravely.

‘Don’t want to be tripping over this.’ Thompson hauled the sergeant’s shattered leg over to the wall of bodies. Hen forced herself not to look at it. It had been such a happy night ...

Surgeon Gilbert wearily moved to the next man in line — a Frenchman, but Thompson had checked he was unarmed and Surgeon Gilbert did not refuse to tend the enemy. Hen picked one of the last clean rags from the surgery bag and dipped it in rose oil. She tied it carefully over Sergeant Drivers’s stump, then removed the clamp. She took his hand as she studied his face, noting the darkness of blood loss under his eyes, but his pulse was strong. What had he and his wife been doing since Salamanca? Serving in the Americas perhaps ...

Something moved behind her. She turned in time to see a young man — an officer in the fine uniform of the Hussars — quickly dismount from his horse, then haul the bloody body draped over it across his shoulder. He stepped through the narrow passage in their protecting wall of dead and laid the body down.

He beckoned to Hen. ‘Surgeon! Attend this man. Now!’

‘He’ll have to wait his turn.’ Hen moved towards the next patient. Back in their Peninsular days her father had adopted the new French system of triage — the most urgent cases attended first, no matter what their rank. Those he knew he could not help were not treated at all.

‘How dare you?’ The officer grabbed the collar of her coat and hauled her up to face him. ‘Egad, sir, I’ll have you cashiered for this. This man is a lieutenant in the Household Cavalry ...’

‘I don’t care if he’s the Prince of Wales. Let go, you fool, or you’ll get us both shot.’ She pulled away from him, ducking down behind the cover of the walls again.

The officer squatted automatically and stared at her. Hen knew the moment he actually saw her face above the bulk of her army greatcoat, the tangle of her blonde hair.

‘You’re a girl!’ The officer stared around the square. ‘Someone said there was a surgeon here.’ He hesitated. ‘They’ve burned the chateau. I’d better try to get him to the hospital at Mont-Saint-Jean. But my horse is blown and there’s Frenchies on either side. I don’t know that he’ll make it.’

The body on the ground groaned, becoming a young man, twenty perhaps. Hen kneeled, quickly assessing him. A pale face, with the sunken eyes of massive blood loss; his left arm shattered just below the elbow, a rough tourniquet above. No other wound visible.

The young man opened his eyes and stared at her. Brown eyes, the clearest she had ever seen. A small eddy of clean air and sunlight drifted over them. ‘An angel come to hell,’ the young man whispered, then closed his eyes again.

‘Where is the surgeon?’ demanded the other officer urgently, peering through the smoke.

‘Busy.’ She did not bother to call the man ‘sir’. Surgeon Gilbert would operate on at least another six men before he would attend this lieutenant. ‘Threatening him won’t help,’ she added, with pride.

Her father had been on a half-pay pension when he had taken up his commission again only a week earlier. If Wellington won — *when* Wellington won, Hen told herself — her father would probably be put back on half pay once more: there would be little need for army surgeons once the war was over. But there’d be the prize money from this battle. It might even

be enough to have the cottage by the sea he had promised her mother, and which her mother had not lived to see.

And if Napoleon won?

Hen closed her mind to that.

‘It will have to be Mont-Saint-Jean then. The surgeons there will obey orders!’ The officer hesitated, peering out into the smoke as if he had lost all sense of direction.

The young man on the ground opened his eyes again. ‘Get yourself killed trying,’ he muttered.

He was right. Hen realised she had seen more battles than either of these men. This was almost certainly their first. A lone rider had no protection, with enemies on every side ...

‘I’ll see to him,’ she said.

‘You! You’re a girl. A child!’

‘That arm has to come off. You can either help me amputate it, or get back to your regiment.’ She reached for the clamp.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, girl.’ The officer bent, obviously intending to carry his friend away.

Hen grabbed his arm in fury. ‘I am the best chance this man has, sir. No, I’m not an army surgeon, but you’ll be lucky today to find one with more experience, or better training. Now either get out of the way or help me.’

‘I’ll see you damned before I’ll let —’

Hen reached for the pistol under her coat. For some reason it seemed essential that this man, among the tens of thousands dying, should have a chance to live, just like Sergeant Drivers.

‘Tim ...’ The officer bent to hear the whisper. Hen left her pistol in her sash.

‘Never argue with an angel.’ The young guardsman managed to hold up his shattered forearm. ‘It seems my arm is now surplus to requirements. I would be most grateful, miss, if you would ...’ His voice clenched to a stop from screaming in another spasm of pain.

‘Here.’ Hen reached into her bag. She still had some laudanum, home-made and strong, though nowhere near enough of it. She

put the bottle to the man's lips, waited till he'd sipped, then recorked it. She tightened the clamp, removed the rag, then handed the officer the scissors. 'Cut away as much of his sleeve as you can.'

'Why?'

'Infection. Any foreign matter in the wound could kill him. Be quiet, don't distract me, and do what you are told.'

The officer blinked at her. Probably no woman had spoken to him like that since his nanny in the nursery. But he did begin to cut the cloth, and carefully.

The young lieutenant's breathing slowed with the dose of laudanum. Hen reached for the bone saw as his eyes shut, hesitated, then took up a scalpel instead. A saw cut through bone and so was faster, and speed was necessary if a patient was not to die of shock. But the laudanum would give her time to cut back flaps of muscle and skin that could be sewn more neatly round the stump. It might even ... Hen wiped the smoke from her eyes, and looked at the arm more closely. The bone was broken, but bone mended. 'I can save his arm. I think.'

'You think?'

'Go and find a splint. A length of wood. A bayonet will do. Hurry!' She poured brandy onto the wound, splashed a little more on her implements, then used the tweezers to probe for splinters of bone. Scalpel next, to cut the shattered flesh, then needle and waxed silk thread. She had just begun to sew when the officer returned. He'd found a rifle stock.

'Thank you. That's perfect.'

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?'

'No,' said Hen bluntly, still sewing. 'If I amputated and sealed the wound now he'd have less chance of infection.' She snipped off the thread, and began another stitch. 'But if the wound goes putrid his arm can still be amputated. Once it's off it can't be put back.'

The sounds behind them changed. A trumpet called. Other trumpets replied.

‘I need to go.’ The officer hesitated. ‘You’ll look after him?’

‘Yes,’ said Hen. She did not say that she had possibly condemned two or three others to death while she spent time trying to save a young man’s arm. She pushed the thought from her mind. The first lesson her father taught his assistants — and his family — was to focus on what you could do and what you were doing. If you thought of what you could not do you would go mad.

She glanced up. The officer had vanished in the smoke. She couldn’t even see the white smudge of his horse. Would he survive this day? Would any of them? Was anything — even control of Europe — worth all this?

Perhaps the world was mad. She bent to her stitching again.

Chapter 2

A Dry Wash for the Hair When on Campaign

Take Florentine Orris Root. Grate finely. Dry then grind to Powder. Leave unsealed in a dry position for six Months for the Perfume to strengthen. Dust towards the Scalp and brush outwards. The Scent lingers for a Week or more and is most pleasant.

From the Notebooks of Henrietta Bartley

Two hours later, judging by the red smudge where the sun sat on the horizon, the young man was still alive, still sleeping, his breathing deep and, to Hen's relief, his pulse steady and strong. It was impossible to judge a dose of laudanum. Some seasons the poppy seemed stronger than others. A little as needed was best — impossible on a battlefield.

Was this still a battlefield? The air nearby no longer sang with mortar fire, but cannon still thundered in the distance. Hen could still faintly hear the far-off clash of metal above the groans and cries for help. But other figures moved among the wounded now, not fighting, but carrying the wounded to her and her father or to the small French ambulance carts.

Did the French ambulances mean Napoleon had won? Or was their square just in a small backwater of the ground, not strategically important to either side?

A corporal who had lost an eye and part of his cheek had managed to tell Hen that the French had taken La Haye Sainte, almost the centre of the Allied army, before the pain of his wound and her padding and stitching had finally given him the blessing of unconsciousness. The little laudanum she had left needed to be kept for an emergency, though she did not care to think of emergencies worse than this.

Time enough to face them when they came.

Victory seemed impossible now. Around her, French, Belgian and English soldiers bled together. No Prussian or Dutch allies had been brought to their aid post, though a Hanoverian, twelve years old at most, had been brought in with both legs crushed at the knee. Were the vital Prussian and Dutch troops fighting elsewhere? Or had they retreated, believing the cause unwinnable, and never joined Wellington's forces?

If this battle was lost she would be dead by nightfall, used, abused, then killed by the rampaging enemy, who would take loot and women as their due. She had the pistol under her soldier's greatcoat in case of that. Wellington kept control of his men, except for the occasional stolen chicken or pig. But Hen believed he was the only general who did so. His forces fought for their country and, yes, for the prize money, but also with honour. Other generals' soldiers' reward for risking lives or limbs was the freedom to loot, to rape, to ransack, to do anything and everything they wished in a few days of vicious, victorious freedom. Hen had seen the bodies of women with their ears cut off for their earrings, their skirts ripped and bundled, clearly showing the use that had been made of their bodies.

There was nothing Hen could do to change the battle's outcome. Nor, just now, was there any urgent work at her station. Sergeant Drivers was still unconscious, but his pulse was steady, despite the loss of blood. All the men within the square of defenders alive and dead had been treated. Some men would live and some would die, but just now there was no more she could do for them. Even her water bottle was almost empty. Outside ...

No. This was not the time to consider the uncounted wounded beyond the square. Hen allowed herself to sit, and then to lean against the wall of bodies, already cold. Apart from the time spent hiding in the wheat field she had not rested since dawn.

Eat, she told herself. There was bread and sausage in her bag, and a bottle of cold chicory coffee from the elderly woman they had been billeted with.

‘Hen?’ Her father stood grey faced, his eyes red rimmed, Thompson at his side. ‘I don’t think the fighting is going to head back this way, at least not for a while. We’re going to see what we can do outside. Don’t leave till I get back.’

She nodded. She did not ask if she could go with him, knowing the answer.

‘You’ve done good work, girl. Now eat.’

She managed a smile. Always smile when you say goodbye, Mama had said, in case you do not get the chance again. Was this the last time she would see her father?

She watched as Surgeon Gilbert vanished in the smoke beyond the wall. Hen ate and drank, and felt her hands steady. She stood and peered out of the square, trying to ignore that the wall that had protected her had faces, unblinking eyes, blood already dried to black. But her father and Thompson were lost in the swirls of grey and yellow.

An English rider neared, his horse foam flecked, limping. The man seemed whole, till Hen saw he gripped the rein in his teeth. ‘Do you need help, sir?’ she called.

The horse slowed. ‘Broke me arms, but they’ve been set.’ His voice was hoarse from smoke and shouting. ‘Looking for me younger brother. You’ve wounded in there?’

‘Yes.’

The rider nudged his horse over to the wall of bodies. He gazed at their faces, then down at the men on the ground, and shook his head.

‘I hope you find him,’ said Hen. ‘Sir,’ she added urgently, ‘how goes the battle? Is it still being fought?’

‘We’ve maybe got the Frenchies on the run, but it’s too close to call. Lost most of our men, but maybe Boney’s lost more. It’ll come down to who can hold their forces together long enough to claim the field. No man will dare run from a square around by the Iron Duke.’ He nudged his weary horse onwards, as it slowly picked its way among the bodies.

Victory, thought Hen, desperately hoping his assessment was true. Possibly. And at a massive price. She pushed her hair out of her eyes again, and turned to see that the young man whose arm she had so carefully repaired was conscious, gazing at her. His lips moved. She moved closer, kneeled next to him to hear his voice.

‘We’ve won?’ His voice too was hoarse.

She hesitated. ‘Yes,’ she lied. Let him have what comfort he could.

‘I knew we would.’ He shut his eyes again.

He is possibly the only person in the world who was so sure, she thought. If the Iron Duke won today every man who’d survived would be a hero.

Though not girls, she thought. Even Mrs Fletcher and Mrs Marsh, who stood beside their men to load their muskets, and who took the muskets up to fire when their husbands fell, had never been mentioned in the broadsheets or the dispatches. Mrs Fletcher and Mrs Marsh had been friends of Mama, but both were dead now, like their husbands, one at Salamanca, one at Lisbon.

‘What are you doing here?’ The young man’s voice was steady, despite his pallor. A good sign.

‘Eating bread and sausage. Here.’ Hen reached for the bottle of cold coffee. ‘You need to drink. You’ve lost a lot of blood.’ She glanced again at his bandages, but the wound was no longer even seeping. Her mother would have been proud of her.

She supported the young man’s shoulders and held the bottle to his lips while he sipped, then took it away when he shook his head to say he’d had enough. She laid him down again, this time with a rifleman’s coat folded to make a pillow. The rifleman did not need it now.

His lips twitched in the beginning of a smile. ‘*Why* are you here?’

‘My father’s a surgeon,’ she said.

‘And he brought you to a battle?’ He sounded indignant.

‘Yes,’ said Hen shortly. This young man was definitely a green ‘un. Anyone who’d been in the Peninsular campaigns would know a girl on her own in a strange town that would be looted if the French won here today was in more danger from retreating or rampaging soldiers than one working in a defended area on the battlefield.

He managed a full smile this time. ‘I apologise for not being able to find anyone to introduce us properly.’

She smiled back, pushing her hair out of her eyes. ‘My name is Hen.’

The smile became a grin. ‘Hen as in cluck, cluck, cluck?’

‘Hen as in “definitely not Henrietta”. Hen means love where my father’s family come from. Papa’s Aunt Henrietta was supposed to be rich but all she left us was a mourning ring and a potted aspidistra.’

‘What happened to the aspidistra?’

‘Mama gave it to a family we were billeted with. Can’t carry much when you are with the army. Aspidistras aren’t any use. And we already had a chamberpot.’

Another smile. ‘Your mother sounds ... capable.’

‘More than that. My father called her his miracle,’ said Hen. She wanted to *talk*. Had to talk. She had spent the whole day murmuring reassurances and the last week had been too occupied by travel for conversation.

It would not be dark till near midnight this midsummer night, another two hours, at least, judging from the sword-like gleams of sun still perched on the horizon. By midnight she might be fighting off French soldiers, or trying to hide among the mountains of dead. She needed to remember the world beyond this battlefield, the good days between the battles when she and Mama and Papa had been a family, and had laughed.

‘My mother taught me everything. How to deliver a baby or make a potion for the gout, or cook bread on a campfire, or catch pigeons for a stew. We mostly sold my father’s rations and lived on what we could trap or shoot or forage. There are women who wait. My mother wasn’t one of them. She went where my father went, and so did I. I still do.’

‘Where’s your mother now? Back in Brussels?’

‘Dead. Not here,’ she added quickly. ‘A year ago.’

‘I’m sorry.’ It sounded like he really meant it. ‘Another battle?’

‘Yes,’ said Hen shortly, though Mama’s cut had gone septic two weeks after the battle itself was over. She checked her own hands again automatically, but they were unscratched.

‘How long have you been following the army?’

‘All my life.’ For every man in the Peninsular army there’d been at least two women — wives, daughters, women of easy virtue — a massive train that followed the army wherever it went, halting briefly while the soldiers fought, then swarming onto the battlefield to retrieve the men, or bury them. Friendships forged in brief alliances to help and protect each other.

The young man gave the faintest grin that became a grimace of pain.

‘Here.’ Hen pulled the laudanum flask from her bag and held it to his lips. ‘Just a sip.’

He did, wrinkling his nose at its bitterness. ‘What’s in it?’

‘Laudanum. I made it myself. Tincture of poppy, a little monkshood, honey and brandy.’

‘Waste of a decent brandy.’

‘It wasn’t that decent,’ she admitted. ‘Is the pain easing?’

‘You know, it is. I can hardly feel it now.’

She didn’t believe him: enough of the elixir to deaden the agony would kill him. But the dose she’d given him should be enough to make the pain bearable and, in a little while, she’d give him more, so he could sleep until his friend arrived — assuming he had survived — or other transport turned up to carry the officer back to his billet back in Brussels.

Or till the French arrived, and killed them all or — as he was an officer — took him as a prisoner for ransom. They would not bother to ransom her. But she would not think of that ...

‘Brussels,’ she said wistfully. ‘Did you go to the duchess’s ball last night?’

‘I did.’

She had thought from his accent that he was the kind of man a duchess would ask to her ball.

‘Was it magnificent? I ... I watched the guests enter on the way to our billet. The women in their jewels and dresses, and the Highlanders — I could hear them playing from outside.’

He laughed, then winced. ‘It wasn’t magnificent at all. No ballroom, a scrap of a place really. Everyone was crowded like ants in a nest.’

‘I’d still have liked to see it.’

‘You’ve never been to a ball?’

She shook her head.

‘When you’re older, maybe.’

She said nothing. Her family was respectable, but a poor army surgeon’s daughter was unlikely to be invited to a ball. And even if the duke offered a personal invitation to a surgeon under his command, Hen no longer had a suitable chaperone for such an occasion. But she would not tell this young man that, this obviously very well bred young man.

‘What are they like? Balls I mean.’

‘Hot. Crowded. Filled with eagle-eyed mamas and simpering daughters.’

‘But they must be beautiful. The dresses, and the music ... are there flowers?’

‘What? Yes, hot-houses full of them. I prefer my flowers in fields,’ he added.

‘And banquets?’ The thought reminded her to offer him the coffee again.

He hesitated, ‘There’ll be none for you.’

‘I haven’t had my arm half torn off.’

‘Only half?’ He managed to hold the bottle in his good hand now, sipping slowly.

‘It’s whole now. And it’ll stay that way if it’s cared for. Don’t you like dancing?’ she added longingly.

‘I like dancing well enough. It’s the partners who are boring. Do you like dancing?’

‘Oh yes!’ Often there’d been music and dancing around the campfire, or in houses where they’d been billeted.

‘So you can dance, and cook pigeons and make potions.’

He was joking, but the thought of the ball she had not been invited to — all the balls and opera parties and routs she would never be invited to even when she was old enough to officially ‘come out’ in society — still hurt. ‘I can hit an ace at a hundred yards, but I’ll never be a lady — not the kind who were at the ball last night.’ She tried to make a joke of it. ‘I ... I am afraid I lack all sensibility. I cannot play the piano, or embroider or ... or perform any of the womanly arts.’

He looked at her consideringly. ‘Yet you sewed my arm back on. How many languages can you speak?’

Hen blinked. ‘Spanish, Portuguese, French, a little Dutch and Prussian, some Flemish and Russian.’ Alliances were made by kings. Friendships were made when their armies mingled.

‘I think you are amazing, Hen who isn’t Henrietta. I don’t give a rush for embroidery and pianos. I think you are the most beautiful young woman I have ever seen. Even in an army greatcoat.’

She flushed. Men had told her that before. This was the first time she had cared.

‘Your hair looks like sunlight. Your face is an angel’s ...’

He’d said that when he first saw her. Her blush grew deeper. ‘That’s the laudanum speaking. And you’re ill. Men often think the women who nurse them are beautiful. But then they get better.’

Mama had warned her about that. Her father had just laughed, and kissed them both, and said they would always be beautiful.

‘What do your relatives say about you following the army?’

‘None left on my father’s side. I’ve never known any of my mother’s relations. We’ve been too much on the move.’ And they were Spanish and in Gibraltar, a wealthy merchant family who had cast off their youngest daughter when she married an English naval surgeon with no prospects except one possibly wealthy aunt — but no need to tell this young man that either.

‘What if something happens to your father?’

Hen shrugged. ‘Then it’s just me.’

He looked at her quietly for a moment. ‘They don’t give army pensions to daughters.’

He knew that much about the army then, even as a newly commissioned officer. She shrugged again. Her father had saved a little and, unlike most young women, Hen knew she could arrange a life alone. She did not have the skills to be a governess, but she could teach languages or be employed as a nurse, and survive in genteel poverty.

A man moaned a little way away: one of the amputees. Hen scrambled up. It was Sergeant Drivers. She checked his pulse again. Thready, but still strong, though he was still deeply unconscious. Trying to give him fluids now might choke him. There was nothing more that she could do till she was sure that he could swallow. If she managed to return to Brussels she must make sure Mrs Drivers knew her husband had survived, and where he was, so he could be taken to their billet — he would receive better care from her than in a field hospital.

She turned and found the lieutenant still watching her. She sat beside him again, glad that her promise to her father meant she had this time free to talk, to sit, to imagine what it might have been like to walk inside that house last night, dressed in silk with pearls, on the arm of this young man. To waltz with him ...

‘How old are you, Hen not Henrietta?’

‘Fifteen.’

He said softly, ‘It’s not easy for a fifteen-year-old girl to manage alone.’

She gave him a reassuring smile. 'I can look after myself.'

'You shouldn't have to.' He grimaced again. She lifted the flask once more, glad she still had laudanum to offer him, and let him sip, saw his eyes lose their focus slightly as the pain eased too. 'That's good.'

She smiled, changing the subject. 'My mother knew herbs. Everywhere she camped we had a garden, and she had supplies sent by apothecaries in Lisbon and London. She and my father worked as a partnership. She used to say, "He cuts and I cure." One day we were going to have a cottage by the sea, and a garden of our own.'

'Is that what you want now, Hen?'

She looked out into the smoke, as if she might see the future. 'Oh, yes. I love watching things grow. But it doesn't have to be a cottage by the sea. Just somewhere with peace, but some adventure too, the kind that doesn't involve cannons.' Hen looked back at him and grinned. 'My father and I lived in lodgings till we came here. Do you know how boring it is, living in lodgings? I even learned to knit, though I'm no good at it. But my sewing is excellent.'

'I know.' He carefully didn't look at his arm. 'Am I going to die? Or lose my arm?'

'Neither,' said Hen, with only slightly more certainty than she felt. 'The wound is clean. All it needs now is rose and lavender oil applied morning and night, with hot fomentations to ease the swelling.' She gave him another grin, pushing her hair out of her eyes again. 'Unless the battle moves this way again and we both get hit by a cannonball.'

And unless the French had already won. She could still hear gunfire, though no battle ended cleanly. Whichever army won would be chasing stragglers for days.

He reached for her hand and kissed it. She was startled. She had never been kissed, except by her parents. But she did not draw her hand away.

He met her eyes. 'I can think of no one I'd rather die with. I've never seen a grin on a battlefield before.'

She flushed. 'I'd rather live.'

'I can think of no one I'd rather live with, either. Hen, definitely not Henrietta, will you marry me?'

'What?'

'That is not the correct way to answer a proposal,' he chided. 'You should say, "La, sir, this is so sudden! You do me a great honour, but I have not ever thought of marriage." And then you pause significantly for the count of three, then say "Yes."' "

'You don't know me.' She found her voice was trembling.

'Don't I? A friend of mine, Captain Smith, met his wife on a battlefield too. Love at first sight for both of them. They were married that day and haven't been a night apart since.' He squinted through the smoke. 'Juana will be on the battlefield as soon as this is over, to make sure he's not wounded.'

Hen had met Captain Smith, though never spoken to him. Mama had helped his young wife several times. Juana had the heart of a lion, but no experience of living in an army camp. What was she doing now? She was not one to wait quietly with her embroidery. 'I hope ...' Hen could not say, 'that he's not dead.'

The lieutenant laughed. 'Smithie? They say he's the only officer who's been through the entire campaign without a scratch. Got a charmed life. And a charming wife. Well, will you be mine?'

'I ... I ...'

'Hen, my darling, if I die you'll get my pension, plus my share of the prize money, now we've won. Not much else, I'm afraid. I'm a younger son. But you'll have the protection of my name.'

'No,' she said flatly. 'I'm not marrying anyone for their name and a pension.'

'How about for love then? Marry me and if we both live we'll ... well, I don't know what we'll do, but I'll promise you a garden, as well as happiness and adventure and a partnership, just like your parents had, and Smithie and his Juana.'

'Love?'

He nodded.

He couldn't be serious. He was serious. He was grateful because she had saved his arm ...

He'd said she looked like an angel. And he offered love. She looked at him, found him watching her. Papa said one day on a battlefield was like a thousand. An hour with this man today meant she had known him months.

She found she so very much wanted to say yes.

'If you marry me you can make sure I get those, what were they, fermentations on my arm? What is a fermentation anyway? Something to do with brandy?'

'Fomentations. Hot poultices. Bran is best, it holds the heat, but any hot cloth ...' Hen stopped, as he grinned at her.

'Marry me and you can teach me all about hot fomentations. And how to cook pigeons. And I will take you to a ball,' he added, suddenly serious. 'That is a solemn promise, Henrietta. You and I will dance and we will have adventures.'

She should say no. She should say, 'Ask me again, when you are well.' But no matter who won this battle, after this one day he and she would be in different worlds and she might never see him again.

'Say yes,' he said softly. 'Hen, I need you in my life. I never knew what I needed till I met you. After today I will never meet another girl who can shoot a pistol and sew up an arm. Marry me now.'

'Yes,' she said, before she'd even known she was going to say it. He lay back, suddenly relaxed, smiling despite the pain.

'There are three problems though,' Hen added cautiously.

He weakly waved his good hand. 'Name them, my love, and they shall be solved.'

'We need a priest, and my father's permission. And I don't know your name.'

Chapter 3

An Excellent Fomentation for Dressed Wounds or Rheumatism

Take Bran of Oats, or Peas, dried and split, or Rice. Sew in a Linen square the size and thickness of a Man's Hand. Heat by the Hearth. If the Linen scorches it is too hot. Apply each Hour.

From the Notebooks of Henrietta Bartley

His name, it seemed, was Leowine Maxwelton Bartlett, known as Max, with a family home in Sussex. Surgeon Gilbert, grey faced with tiredness, gave his permission, to Hen's complete surprise.

'He's right,' Surgeon Gilbert said shortly, nodding to the young man he had just agreed to make his son-in-law. The surgeon's skin was dark with smoke now, making his eyes seem bright. 'If anything happens to me you'll have no protection. I don't want you to be alone, Hen.'

Hen ducked as a shell whizzed over them, as if to counterpoint his words.

'Marriage will give you a family, not just a husband. I've heard of the Bartletts of Sussex. It's a good name, and you, sir,' he nodded at Max, 'you've taken your surgery with courage. You could go further, Hen, and do far worse.' Surgeon Gilbert shut

his eyes in weariness for a moment, then looked at her again. 'You are sure about this?'

'Yes, sir,' said Hen.

'And you, Lieutenant Bartlett?'

Max Bartlett was paler than he had been before, but his voice was still firm. 'I am, sir. I thank you. I did not think you would give permission so easily.'

Surgeon Gilbert gave a snort that might have been laughter. 'I married my daughter's mother three days after we met because I had been ordered to accompany the wounded back to England. Three hours, three days or three years would have made no difference to our choice. Life can be strangely clear on a battlefield, no matter how thick the smoke.'

'I saw a man giving the last rites near the Waterloo Road, sir,' offered Thompson. 'I'll warrant he's a priest.'

A French army chaplain, wondered Hen, or perhaps a local one, come to help? Just now it did not matter.

Surgeon Gilbert nodded. 'Could you find him again?'

'I think so, sir,' said Thompson. He vanished once more into the smoke-laden air.

Hen's fiance shut his eyes in what she hoped was painless sleep to wait for his arrival.

The priest arrived with Thompson just as the shadows thickened the gloom of smoke into the long midsummer dusk. Thompson clambered up over the bodies, then helped the small man in his black robes to do the same.

'Père Flambeaux,' said Thompson shortly. 'He says he's Flemish, not French. Seems the Frenchies burned his village, or maybe it was us.'

Père Flambeaux examined Hen and Lieutenant Max Bartlett without expression. Was he really a local priest? If he was attached to the French army they were technically his enemies. He nodded: it seemed Père Flambeaux was truly more priest than soldier.

Père Flambeaux spoke French. Hen and Surgeon Gilbert knew French. So, it seemed, did Max Bartlett.

Père Flambeaux did not seem startled by a request to marry a couple surrounded by small hills of the dead. Yes, he informed them tiredly, it would be a legal wedding, if they paid the licence fee. He did not even seem shocked by Hen's obvious youth. A girl on a battlefield needed whatever protection was available.

A man easily shocked would not have ventured here, thought Hen. Whatever reserves of emotion Père Flambeaux had seemed to have leached out of him. How many men had he, too, tended today? How many murmured confessions had he heard, how many last rites given?

The cannon fire still rumbled as war continued elsewhere, though the fighting had almost ceased around them. The earth had become a single song of groans and cries of pain. But there was love in one small square of this battlefield.

Quietly, efficiently, they gave their names, promised their offspring would be brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, which might prove difficult, but was the least of their concerns now. They clasped hands, her right one in his only available hand, the left. And in the distance guns still snarled, and men nearby screamed in terror or in agony. Soon, thought Hen. We will tend to you soon. Just a few minutes more of happiness ...

'Rings?' queried Père Flambeaux.

'We don't have —' began Hen, just as Max removed his signet ring, and, panting slightly from the pain, pushed it onto the fourth finger of her left hand. Surgeon Gilbert removed his own wedding ring and handed it to Max.

It fitted.

They were married.

Surgeon Gilbert offered Belgian francs to Père Flambeaux, who scribbled two small notes in return. Surgeon Gilbert produced the pen and ink he kept in his bag for urgent notes, then signed the forms as a witness. Thompson signed them too — he was probably the only other man present who was both conscious and able to write his name — and Hen and Max signed as well.

Hen read her copy of the note before her father placed it in his jacket pocket. Their wedding certificate. Her name and Max's would be entered tomorrow or next week perhaps in his church's register, Père Flambeaux assured them, as he pocketed the second note. Or, if his church was completely gone, the first register he could find ...

'Hen,' said Max softly, propped up on his good elbow.

'You may kiss him, my daughter,' said Père Flambeaux, and smiled for the first time, wiping away tears he had not shed before.

Her husband's lips were warm. A good sign after blood loss, thought Hen clinically, until suddenly there was only Max, the taste of him, the smell of him beyond the blood and gunpowder, the feeling that despite the haste this was the most right act of her life ...

Noise. The world ended.