

CHAPTER ONE

France, 1705

Daniel Rawson saw him coming. From his vantage point high up in the tree, he could command a view that stretched for almost a mile. With the aid of his telescope, he was even able to identify the man's regiment. The rider had a blue knee-length coat with red cuffs. He wore a cravat, a tricorne hat and black leather boots that glistened in the sun. The weapon holstered beside him was a rifled carbine. Daniel knew that he must therefore belong to the Royal-Carabinier corps. The horse was keeping up a steady canter, its hooves sending up clouds of dust from the dry track. At that pace, it would reach Daniel within a matter of minutes. It was time for him to climb down to a lower branch.

Though he was a captain in the 24th Foot, a seasoned

British regiment engaged in fighting Louis XIV's mighty army, he was not in uniform now. Indeed, he would have been unrecognisable to most of his fellow-soldiers. Dressed in the nondescript garb of a French peasant, he'd grown a beard, dirtied his face and found a cap that hung low across his forehead. Since he was fluent in French and had the broad shoulders of someone accustomed to hard labour, he was confident that nobody would see through his disguise. What set him apart from other churls was that he had money in his purse and weapons under his smock. He also had a pretty accomplice.

When the rider got closer, Daniel gave the signal and Marie nodded in reply. Picking up her basket, she came out of her hiding place in the copse, walked across to the track and began to saunter along it. She was young, fresh-faced and buxom. Her long brown hair trailed down her back from beneath her bonnet. As her hips swayed rhythmically, her skirt swished to and fro. Hearing the clack of hooves behind her, Marie stopped and turned. The rider came round the angle of the trees and she had her first sight of him. He was tall in the saddle and, from what she could tell, passably handsome. The closer he got, the broader became her smile. He, in turn, was appraising her carefully and he liked what he saw. He took her for a farmer's daughter on her way to market in the next village. She stood obligingly aside as if to let him go past but – urgent as his business was – he felt that he could tarry for a short while. It was too good an opportunity to miss.

He slowed his horse to a trot and gave her a friendly greeting. Marie giggled in reply and flashed her eyes. It was all the invitation he needed. Tugging the animal to a halt, he dismounted, removed his hat and enjoyed a long, luscious kiss. Her lips were sweet and warm. He looked around to make sure that they were alone. The place seemed utterly deserted. Marie led him to the shelter of the trees. After tethering his mount, he discarded his hat, removed his sash then took off his coat. Tumbling a country wench on a bed of green grass was just the fillip he needed after several hours' ride on a hot day. She was clearly willing and far too wholesome to be a whore. He would not even have to pay for her favours. Setting her basket aside, she put her hands on her hips. When she giggled again, her breasts trembled irresistibly.

Daniel waited until the trooper lowered his breeches. It was the moment when his quarry was completely off guard and at his most vulnerable. Eyes fixed on the girl and loins already on fire, the man did not hear the branch creak or the leaves rustle above his head. Daniel timed his jump perfectly, hitting his target with such force that he knocked all the breath out of him, and used the butt of his pistol to club the man into unconsciousness. Letting out a gasp of fear, Marie turned away, horrified at the sudden violence. There had been no mention of murder when she agreed to help Daniel. He had told her that it was merely a jest played on an old friend yet he had just struck the so-called friend on the head. She could not bear to watch and was

frightened that she might also be in danger.

Working swiftly, Daniel stripped the man of his remaining clothes then tied him securely to a tree with some rope he'd concealed nearby. When Marie dared to look again, she saw that the trooper she'd enticed from his horse was now bound and gagged, seated upright against a trunk with his head slumped forward on to his chest. What really caught her eye and banished her anxiety at once, however, was the fact that Daniel was naked from the waist up, clearly intending to put on the man's shirt and coat. She studied his slim, smooth, lightly tanned, muscular body with gathering interest. He was so different from the pot-bellied oafs she served at her father's inn. Though it bore the scars of war, his physique was truly impressive, hardened by combat and combining a sculptured beauty with latent power. Marie was roused and entranced. She forgot all about the victim of the assault. Her mind was on something else now. As Daniel reached for the shirt, she raised a hand.

'Wait!' she cried.

'Don't worry,' he said, taking some coins from his purse. 'I always honour a debt. You did well, Marie. Here's your reward.'

'I care nothing for the money, good sir.'

'But you earned it.'

'Begging your pardon, sir, I'd rather take my wages another way.'

'Then you shall have my horse – I need to ride his.'

'That's not what I meant, sir.'

‘Oh?’

‘I want neither payment nor the horse,’ she said, stepping a little closer.

‘Then what can I give you?’ Even as he asked the question, he guessed the answer. Daniel grinned happily. ‘Ah, I understand now.’

He had chosen the ideal accomplice. When he had spent the night at a nearby inn, Daniel sensed that Marie would be able to help him. She was comely and eager. He had told her a plausible tale about playing a trick on a friend in the army. Dressing up as a peasant, he’d explained, was all part of the jest. All that he’d hired her to do was to cause a distraction and she’d done that with surprising skill, unaware that she was actually assisting the enemy in the theft of royal dispatches. The giggle that had bewitched the trooper was now directed solely at Daniel and it was very tempting. As it grew louder, her whole body shook with sheer delight. Marie spread her arms wide to claim her reward, at once offering herself and pleading to be taken. Daniel needed only a second to reach his decision. Having got what he wanted, he could afford a little distraction.

‘Let’s find somewhere more private,’ he said, glancing at his captive. ‘We don’t want to make him jealous, do we?’

‘Confound it!’ exclaimed the Duke of Marlborough, pacing up and down. ‘Can there be anything worse than leading a coalition army? I’m fighting with one arm tied behind

my back and both feet lashed together. Bickering and delay will be the ruination of me. I'm not allowed to move one solitary inch without a council of war beforehand.'

'The Dutch are awkward bedfellows, Your Grace,' agreed Cardonnel.

'They're the bane of my life, Adam. But for their caution, we could have won a decisive action on the Moselle and occupied French soil. We could have been giving nightmares to King Louis. Instead of that, we're back where we started.'

'The blame cannot be laid entirely on the Dutch.'

'No,' said Marlborough, heaving a sigh. 'We also have to contend with the problem of the Margrave of Baden. I ride all the way to see him in order to apprise him of my plans and what does he tell me? Not only is he unable to supply me with wagons, guns and horses but his wounded foot makes it impossible for him and his men to undertake the siege of Saarlouis. Yet another project has to be abandoned.'

'It's very frustrating, Your Grace.'

'It's positively infuriating!'

Marlborough and Adam Cardonnel were alone in the tent that acted as their headquarters. It was only because he could trust his secretary that Marlborough was able to vent his anger so openly. Most of the time, he had to conceal it behind soft words and a polite smile. As commander-in-chief of the Confederate army, he was hampered at every turn by his supposed allies. His triumph at the battle of

Blenheim the previous year had sent tremors through France and been marked by wild celebrations in England, Austria, Germany and Savoy. Even the Dutch hailed Marlborough as a hero, though praise was tempered with criticism of the high number of casualties among their regiments. On his return to England in December, he was greeted by cheering crowds and honours were heaped upon him.

When 1705 dawned and the campaigning season neared, there was justifiable optimism in the air. It was felt by many that Marlborough would build on the success of Blenheim, achieve other startling victories in the field and bring the War of the Spanish Succession to an end on terms dictated by the Allies. Optimism, however, was short-lived. The first setback occurred during the voyage to the Netherlands in April. Caught in a squall, Marlborough's yacht ran aground on the sandbanks of the Dutch coast. He had to endure a gruelling four-hour pull in an open boat against wind and tide. There were moments when it looked as if the elements would destroy a man who had survived fierce battles against the finest army in Europe. He was fortunate to reach dry land alive. The ordeal left him with a fever and a pounding headache.

There was worse to come. When he reached The Hague, he found the Dutch army unready to take the field and unwilling to fight far beyond its immediate borders. Always thinking ahead, Marlborough had arranged during the winter for his supply depots to be fully stocked so that

his army never had to forage while on the march. To his dismay and fury, he discovered that the depots were half-empty owing to neglect, corruption and betrayal. Instead of being able to nourish his army's advance up the Moselle, his depleted stores were a huge problem. There were few opportunities to forage in the stark countryside and unseasonably cold weather was another distinct hazard. Marlborough complained bitterly that they were much more afraid of starving to death than of the enemy.

The loss of Huy, a citadel on the Meuse, had forced him to abandon his bold scheme to strike across the French border and he had to lead his entire army north. He did so with great reluctance but Marshal Overkirk – the one Dutch commander in whom he could confide – was desperate for reinforcements. It was almost two years since Marlborough had captured Huy from the French and it had both strategic and symbolic importance for him. It could not be left in enemy hands. Though the fortress was soon retaken, Marlborough remained depressed.

'We were outmanoeuvred, Adam,' he admitted.

'Circumstances conspired against us, Your Grace.'

'Fearing an attack up the Moselle valley, the French diverted us by attacking Huy. They knew that General Overkirk lacked the numbers to defend it. We simply *had* to retire in order to rescue them. Yet another plan of campaign was wrecked. With enough money, men, horses, artillery and commitment from our allies, I could bring this war to

a satisfactory conclusion by the end of the summer.'

'It's not destined to be the summer of 1705,' noted Cardonnel, sadly.

'Nor any other, I fear. How can I attack the French where it will really hurt them when I'm trapped in the Low Countries?' He gave a weary smile. 'I'm sorry to rant on like this, Adam,' he went on. 'You know the difficulties we face only too well. Nothing can be gained by endless protestation. Forgive me.'

'There's nothing to forgive, Your Grace.'

Adam Cardonnel was extremely able and intensely loyal. He was the son of Huguenot refugees who had fled from the atrocities in France that followed the revocation of the Edict of Nantes twenty years earlier. Sickened by the persecution, he had vowed to fight against the all-conquering army of Louis XIV; and Cardonnel's mastery of French was a potent weapon. Marlborough relied heavily on him and his secretary was never found wanting.

The captain-general of the British forces was a striking figure even though he was now in his fifties. He was known for his grace, natural authority and infinite charm. Only close friends like Cardonnel were allowed to see him in blacker moods and to know his innermost feelings.

'We must be satisfied with more modest gains this year,' said Cardonnel. 'It's foolish to hope for another Blenheim every time we take up arms.'

'I know, I know,' said Marlborough, shaking his head.

‘We must be patient. The trouble is that patience requires time and I’m fast running out of it. Most commanders have retired before they reach my venerable age.’

Cardonnel was about to point out that Marlborough looked far younger than he really was when he was interrupted by a noise outside the tent. A guard entered.

‘There’s a French prisoner who insists on seeing you in person, Your Grace. He says that he has something of great value.’

‘Has he been relieved of his weapons?’

‘He handed them over when he arrived in camp.’

‘Then let’s see the fellow.’

The guard withdrew for a few moments then entered again with a blue-coated trooper who wore a neat moustache and pointed beard. The prisoner bowed and released a stream of French, gesticulating with both hands as he did so. Marlborough was mystified but Cardonnel burst out laughing.

‘I hope that *you* understand the rogue, Adam,’ said Marlborough, ‘because I could only translate one word in ten.’

‘He was deliberately teasing you, Your Grace,’ explained Cardonnel. ‘Ask him to introduce himself and you’ll understand why.’

‘Captain Daniel Rawson, at your service,’ said the prisoner, doffing his hat.

‘Is that *you*, Daniel?’ asked Marlborough, peering at him.

He let out a cry of recognition. 'By Jove, I do believe it is! Since when did you join the Royal-Carabinier regiment?'

'It was a temporary enlistment, Your Grace. Luckily, the man who loaned me this uniform was close to my own height and build. I'll be happy to tell you the full story. First, however,' he added, reaching into his right boot to extract something, 'here are some dispatches sent to Marshal Villeroi. I had the good fortune to intercept them on the way.'

'Tell us how,' said Marlborough, dismissing the guard with a flick of his hand and taking the missives from Daniel. 'Are these from King Louis himself?'

'They're copies of his orders,' said Daniel. 'I had to deliver the originals. I broke the seals on them, noted their contents then sealed them up again with care. Only by handing them over in person to Marshal Villeroi could I be certain of being entrusted with his reply.'

Cardonnel was amazed. 'You went straight to the heart of the French camp?'

'It seemed a shame to waste this uniform.'

'And you have Villeroi's reply?'

'In his own fair hand,' said Daniel, fishing it out of his other boot and holding it up. 'He's expecting it to be opened in Versailles and not here.'

'You took a terrible risk, Daniel.'

'It was all in a good cause, sir.'

'This is wonderful,' said Marlborough, reading the two

copies before passing them to his secretary. 'Villeroi has orders to retire to Tongres and adopt a defensive attitude. It was ever thus – defend, defend, defend. That's all they do. Bringing the French to battle is more difficult than passing through the eye of a needle with a herd of camels. What was the marshal's reply?' He took the sealed dispatch from Daniel and opened it, translating it as he ran his eyes over the looping calligraphy. 'He congratulates the King on the wisdom of his decision and promises to abide by it. Villeroi is far too circumspect to do anything as rash as to mount a major attack.' After giving the dispatch to Cardonnel, he turned his attention to Daniel. 'You promised us the full story,' he went on. 'When I sent you into enemy territory to gather intelligence, it never occurred to me that you'd bring back a haul like this. I congratulate you.'

'Did you undertake the enterprise alone?' asked Cardonnel.

'No, sir,' replied Daniel. 'I had the assistance of a young lady.'

Marlborough laughed. 'There's no surprise in that, Daniel,' he said. 'You're the scourge of the fairer sex. You have a tradition to maintain. Dressed like that, you could win over any woman.'

'Oh, I had a full beard when I persuaded this one to help me and I was disguised as a peasant at the time. It was only afterwards that I became a trooper in a French regiment. I shaved off most of the beard and kept what you see now.'

Daniel gave them a lengthy account of his adventures on the other side of the French border. Listening intently, Marlborough and his secretary were torn between amusement and admiration, smiling at the comical elements in his tale and struck yet again by his bravado. Daniel Rawson had patently enjoyed every moment of his escapades. He was now ready for more action.

‘What must I do next, Your Grace?’ he wondered.

‘Await orders,’ answered Marlborough. ‘Since we’ve been prevented from piercing French defences along the Moselle, we’ll attack them elsewhere.’

‘And where will that be?’

‘The Lines of Brabant.’

Daniel was surprised. ‘But they’re virtually impregnable.’

‘Are they?’ asked Marlborough, and there was a twinkle in his eye.

CHAPTER TWO

The friendship between Captain Daniel Rawson and Sergeant Henry Welbeck was an example of the attraction of opposites. Apart from the fact that they served in the same British regiment, the two men had nothing whatsoever in common. While Daniel was an eternal optimist who could pluck hope out of the direst circumstances, Welbeck was so deeply sunk into melancholy that he foresaw nothing but disaster. In appearance, too, the contrast between them was stark. While one was tall, strikingly handsome and debonair, the other was stocky, round-shouldered and decidedly ugly, the long scar down one cheek turning an already unprepossessing face into an almost hideous one. Daniel loved women yet Welbeck hated them. Son of a

soldier, the captain was a devout Protestant, keen to fight a Roman Catholic enemy. The sergeant, on the other hand, was an unrepentant atheist, wondering what he was doing in the army and incessantly bemoaning his fate.

Notwithstanding their differences, the two men were very close. Daniel appreciated his friend's ability to turn raw recruits into efficient soldiers by cowing them into submission and making them fear their sergeant's wrath far more than the enemy. For his part, Welbeck had a sneaking admiration for Daniel's daredevil streak, even though it sometimes threatened to bring a distinguished military career to a sudden end. He was also grateful to find one officer with whom he could talk on equal terms instead of having to adopt a deferential tone. When the two men were alone together, no rank existed between them. It was one of the few consolations in Welbeck's army career.

They were standing outside Daniel's tent on a warm July evening amid the routine clamour of camp life. When he heard the orders for the next day, Welbeck was contemptuous.

'We're attacking the Lines at Brabant?' he asked, eyes bulging.

'That's right, Henry.'

'Why doesn't the Duke simply issue us with razors so that we can all cut our throats? That's a much easier way to commit suicide than trying to storm well-defended French positions. They'll pick us off like so many rabbits.'

‘The whole of the Lines are not fortified,’ Daniel pointed out.

‘That doesn’t matter, Dan. As soon as we attack any part of it, Villeroy will rush troops to that particular spot and repel us.’

‘They didn’t repel us at Blenheim.’

‘We had luck on our side that day.’

‘I didn’t think you believed in luck.’

‘I don’t believe in *anything*,’ said Welbeck, gloomily. ‘And I certainly don’t believe in walking to certain death by leading my men against the Lines of Brabant.’

‘You’ve led them into fierce skirmishes before now.’

‘That was different. There was always a faint chance I’d come out alive, give or take a few nasty wounds.’

‘You’ve certainly had your share of those, Henry.’

Whenever they’d bathed together in a river, Daniel had seen the injuries that Welbeck had collected over the years. Fearless in battle and driving his men on in the teeth of enemy fire, he had acquired many grotesque mementoes, including the marks on his thigh where a French musket ball had passed clean through and miraculously missed the bone. The slash of an enemy sword had been responsible for the gash on his cheek and the missing finger on one hand. His chest, back and shoulders were criss-crossed with other souvenirs of enemy blades. Only a strong man with a capacity to tolerate intense pain could have survived the battering

taken by Henry Welbeck. He was a walking portrait of the perils of warfare.

‘The Duke has finally taken leave of his senses,’ he declared.

‘He has a plan,’ Daniel told him.

Welbeck sneered. ‘Oh, yes, he always has a plan. He had a plan to strike into the heart of France through the Moselle valley but it came to nothing. All we did was to shiver in the cold and eat short rations because there wasn’t enough food for us or the horses – so much for *that* brilliant fucking plan!’

‘Have faith in him. As a soldier, he has no peer.’

‘He’s getting old, Dan. His judgement is starting to falter.’

‘I disagree.’

‘That’s because you’re so loyal to the Duke, you won’t admit that he makes a wrong decision. I know he likes to give the impression that he’s one of us and enjoys being called Corporal John, but we in the ranks pay for his mistakes. He gets off without a scratch.’

‘His Grace is always ready to share our privations.’

‘Yes – from the comfort of his coach.’

‘You’re being unfair, Henry.’

‘I speak as I find,’ said Welbeck, stoutly. ‘You weren’t there when we had to leave the Moselle in a hurry and charge all the way back up here to rescue the mutton-headed Dutch yet again. You went gallivanting off somewhere.’

‘I was gathering intelligence on French soil.’

‘Between the thighs of some trull, I daresay.’

Daniel chuckled. ‘Well, yes,’ he admitted. ‘Except that she was no trull. Marie was a gorgeous young woman with a fondness for someone in a French uniform. Though, as it turned out, she was very reluctant to let me put it on.’

Welbeck raised a palm. ‘Spare me the details, Dan. You know my view of females – they should be strangled at birth.’

‘In that case, the human race would die out.’

‘That’s the best bloody thing that could possibly happen to it.’

He was about to launch into one of his tirades when he caught sight of a youth, walking briskly towards them with a regimental drum hanging at his side. Welbeck was irritated.

‘Here’s my latest affliction!’ he said through clenched teeth.

‘The drummer boy?’

‘He’s more than that, Dan. He’s my nephew and he’s got some lunatic idea that being a soldier is something to do with honour.’

‘What’s the lad’s name?’

‘Tom Hillier – he’s my sister’s boy.’

‘You never told me that you had a sister.’

‘It’s something I try to forget.’

Daniel studied the approaching youth. Tom Hillier was

tall, skinny and fair-haired with pleasant features yet to shake off all the signs of boyhood. His slender torso was emphasised by the fact that his uniform was too tight for him. From the look in his eyes, it was clear that he held his uncle in high regard. Welbeck, however, stared at him with a mixture of distaste and resignation.

‘What do you want?’ he asked, gruffly.

‘I just wanted to speak to you, Uncle Henry,’ replied Hillier.

‘This is an army engaged in a war, not a tavern where you can pass the day in idle chat.’

‘I know that, Uncle.’

‘Of course, you do,’ said Daniel, looking him up and down. ‘So you’re Tom Hillier, are you?’

‘Yes, Captain Rawson.’

Daniel was taken aback. ‘You know who I am?’

‘Everybody in the 24th knows who you are, sir,’ said the drummer with a sense of awe in his voice. ‘On my first day here, I was told about some of your escapades.’

‘And when was that, Tom?’

‘Two weeks ago.’

‘You’ve only been with us two *weeks*?’

‘Yes,’ said Welbeck, sourly, ‘and it’s a fortnight too long. Tom ought to be at home, looking after his mother, instead of coming here to be butchered by the French.’

Hillier stiffened defensively. ‘I’m not afraid of a fight, Uncle.’

'You can't kill anyone with a pair of drumsticks.'

'Strictly speaking, he can,' Daniel put in. 'Drums are vital instruments of war. Because they can be heard above the noise of battle, they're ideal for issuing commands. You know that as well as anyone, Henry. There was a time, many years ago, when *you* were merely a drummer boy.'

'That's why I joined this regiment,' Hillier explained. 'I wanted to follow my uncle's example. I've always looked up to him. I may begin with a drum but I hope to carry a musket in time.'

'More fool you, lad!' said Welbeck, scornfully.

'You couldn't have picked a better man on whom to pattern yourself,' Daniel observed. 'Henry Welbeck is the finest sergeant in the whole British army.' He winked at his friend. 'He's also the kindest and sweetest.'

Hillier smiled nervously. 'That's not what I've heard, sir.'

'Then you heard right,' said Welbeck. 'Look for no kindness from me, Tom, and expect no sweetness. Harsh words and a kick up that scrawny arse of yours are all you'll get from me or from any half-decent sergeant. We're here to mould recruits into good soldiers not to mollycoddle them. Your mother did you no favour, sending you here.'

'Mother tried to stop me joining the army.'

'Then you should have heeded her.'

'Why did you defy her?' asked Daniel.

'I've thought and dreamt of nothing else, Captain

Rawson,’ said Hillier, face igniting with pride. ‘I love the sound of drums when a regiment is on parade. It stirs my blood. Back in England, I had a life of boredom on our farm. There’s nothing heroic in doing all those chores. I want to see action on the battlefield. I want to fight against the French. I want to serve Queen and country.’

‘Wait until the first musket ball whistles past your ear,’ warned Welbeck. ‘You’ll change your mind then. Wait until you’ve filled your breeches with terror at the sight of an enemy attack. You’ll forget all about Queen and bloody country.’

‘I think the lad’s got more backbone than you give him credit for, Henry,’ said Daniel, tolerantly. ‘A willing volunteer should be nurtured. Welcome to the regiment, Tom,’ he added, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder. ‘I’ll leave you and your uncle alone to become more closely acquainted.’

‘I don’t *want* a closer acquaintance!’ insisted Welbeck. ‘I joined the army to get away from my family. As far as I’m concerned, they don’t exist.’ He glowered at Hillier. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘Yes, Uncle,’ said the drummer, backing away. ‘I’m sorry. Forgive me for intruding.’

After bidding them farewell, he turned on his heel and walked disconsolately away. Daniel watched him go.

‘You’re being very cruel to the lad, Henry,’ he said.

‘Tom needed to be told the truth.’

‘He’s your *nephew*.’

‘Yes,’ said Welbeck, ‘and that’s what unnerves me. He reminds me of all the things I’ve struggled to put behind me.’

‘Try to see it from his point of view.’

‘He’s a drummer, Dan. He doesn’t *have* a point of view.’

‘Tom is a callow youth, chasing his ambition. He’s alone in a foreign country, cut off from his family and friends. He deserves a little guidance from his uncle. Is that too much to ask?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Even you are not that hard-hearted, Henry.’

‘I don’t want him here.’

‘Why ever not?’ said Daniel.

‘Because he’s a responsibility – Tom is someone I ought to care for, Dan. As soon as I do that, I know I’m going to be hurt. Let myself grow fond of the lad,’ said Welbeck, ruefully, ‘and what will happen? He’ll be shot to pieces or trampled to death by a cavalry charge at the Lines of Brabant and *I’ll* be the one who has to write to his mother.’

‘You could at least be civil to the lad.’

‘He has to respect my rank. Tom has to look at me as an army sergeant and not as a relative of his. If he were my own brother, I’d treat him the same way.’

‘Blood is thicker than water, Henry.’

‘It can be spilt just as easily.’

‘Encouragement was all that Tom was after.’

‘Well he won’t get it from me,’ said Welbeck, firmly. ‘I’d never encourage anyone to join the army. It’s a dog’s life and my nephew will soon find that out – if he manages to stay alive long enough, that is. When he sees how many French regiments are defending the Lines of Brabant, he’ll wish he stayed at home on the bloody farm.’

John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, was nothing if not a supreme strategist. Having lost the initiative in the Moselle valley, he knew that he had to regain it swiftly in the Low Countries. First, however, he was obliged to have a council of war with his Dutch allies. Seated around a table in his tent, they did not show great confidence in his plan. They believed that the Lines of Brabant – a series of strongholds, ramparts, palisades, redoubts and trenches running all the way from Antwerp to Namur – were an insurmountable barrier. To cross anywhere along its seventy-mile extent would, in their opinion, be to court certain defeat and heavy losses.

As usual, the general who led the opposition to Marlborough’s proposal was Frederik Johan van Baer, Lord of Slangenberg, a proud and resolute man of sixty. He stood out from his colleagues for a number of reasons, including the fact that he was a staunch Roman Catholic in an avowedly Protestant army. From the very start of the war, he had been a thorn in the side of the commander-in-

chief, questioning his every move, delaying his campaigns and refusing to acknowledge the victory at Blenheim as Marlborough's crowning achievement. It made for frosty relations between the two men.

'I dislike the idea intensely,' said Slangenberg, stroking his beard with aristocratic disdain. 'It's fatally flawed and will not deceive the French for a moment.'

'I believe that it will,' countered Marlborough. 'You prevented me from forcing the Lines two years ago and it was a costly mistake. I mean to break through them near Leau. Marshal Villeroi will then be drawn to that sector, allowing your forces, General Slangenberg, to find an easy way through the weakened defences near the Meuse.'

'It will not work.'

'My feint will deceive the French.'

'It would not deceive a child,' said Slangenberg, snapping his fingers. 'Marshal Villeroi will stay where he is and we'll find ourselves up against his strongest battalions. It's a foolish plan.'

Marlborough stifled a sigh and exchanged a glance with Adam Cardonnel. Councils of war were invariably a contest between British boldness and Dutch caution. To Marlborough's consternation, those contests were often lost and some of his most daring projects never outlived discussion. Another strategy now seemed in danger of being overruled. Fortunately, Marshal Overkirk, commander-in-chief of Dutch forces, came to Marlborough's aid.

‘It’s a sensible plan,’ he claimed, ‘and well worth trying.’

‘You’ve always argued *against* an assault on the Lines in the past,’ said Slangenberg, pointedly, ‘and rightly so. Geography favours the French. Where they’ve not built fortifications, they have natural defences of mountains, hills and rivers.’

‘Those natural defences can be pierced.’

‘Not when we’re outnumbered, Marshal.’

‘There’s no possibility of that,’ said Overkirk, meeting his gaze. ‘Many of the regiments will have been withdrawn to stiffen resistance near Leau. We’ll have a numerical advantage.’

‘Nonsense!’ cried Slangenberg.

‘Try to moderate your language, General.’

‘It’s complete and utter nonsense!’

‘We must agree to differ,’ said Marlborough shooting Overkirk a look of gratitude for his support. ‘I have the greatest respect for your military experience, General Slangenberg, but, if I’d listened to your advice in the past, I’d never have ventured outside Dutch territory and secured advances elsewhere in Europe.’

‘To do that, Your Grace,’ asserted Slangenberg, ‘you gambled with the lives of Dutch soldiers.’

‘The gamble paid off handsomely on the Danube last year.’

‘It failed dismally this year on the Moselle.’

‘We’re bound to suffer reverses from time to time,

General,' said Marlborough, stung by the comment but reining in his temper. 'We now have a chance to make amends for what happened on the Moselle. Behind the Lines of Brabant, the enemy feel that they are wholly invincible. Since they don't fear attack, we have the element of surprise on our side.'

'Then we must use it,' said Overkirk with an authority that silenced even Slangenberg. 'A clever strategy has been put to us by our commander-in-chief. We must adopt it bravely.'

There was a murmur of support from some of the Dutch generals but Slangenberg was unconvinced. He brooded sulkily. As the council broke up, British and Dutch commanders rose from their seats and dispersed. In the end, only Marlborough, Cardonnel and Overkirk remained. Marlborough shook hands with the Dutchman.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Your intervention was appreciated.'

Overkirk smiled. 'It's a brilliant strategy, Your Grace.'

'That's why you needed to understand the thinking behind it.'

'It was good of you to explain. Had you not done so, I would have been in the invidious position of having to agree with General Slangenberg. On the face of it, your plan is a poor one.'

'It will not deceive Villeroi for an instant,' said Marlborough. 'I'm counting on that fact.'

‘I hope that he reacts in the way you anticipate.’

‘We know the way that his mind works.’

‘The marshal has one glaring fault, Your Grace,’ remarked Cardonnel. ‘He believes he knows the way that *your* mind works.’

Marlborough laughed. ‘Then I’ll take the utmost pleasure in disappointing him, Adam.’