

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant script font, positioned on a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters.

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WATERLOO
THE BRAVEST MAN

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CHAPTER ONE

1815

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To James Macdonell's expert eye the two were evenly matched. One huge and powerful, the other quick and clever. James had been taught to box by his brothers at home in Glengarry. He had fought at fairs in Fort William and Inverness – indeed, had defeated more than one local favourite – but at thirty-four and a lieutenant colonel, he no longer took to the ring. He did pride himself, however, on being able to pick the winner within half a minute of a bout starting. This time he could not choose between them.

Corporal James Graham, the biggest man in the Coldstreams, taller and heavier even than Macdonell himself, was built like a cavalry horse. He had never seen the flame-haired Irishman defeated. But five minutes into the fight and his opponent, a wiry young private from the 3rd Foot Guards, was more than holding his own. He was quick as a snake and had been landing three or four punches to every one of Graham's. He ducked and

weaved under Graham's guard, jabbed fast, twisted his knuckles as they met cheek or nose, and skipped back out of range before Graham could respond. He did not carry Graham's weight of punch but if he could avoid one of his thundering blows to the chin, he might just wear his man down.

Macdonell leant over to Francis Hepburn, his equivalent in the 3rd Guards – both regiments belonging to General Byng's second battalion. To see over the heads of the spectators in front, Hepburn, a good head shorter, was standing on an upturned crate. 'Good man of yours, Francis. On the balls of his feet and fast hands. What did you say his name was?' He had to speak loudly to be heard.

Hepburn turned and grinned up into his friend's face. He put his hand to his mouth and spoke into Macdonell's ear. 'Joseph Lester. Private. Fancy a guinea on your man?'

Despite his misgivings, Macdonell did not hesitate. 'Make it two, Francis, and payment in full before supper, if you please.'

For its discreet location behind the town hall, the yard was the favoured place in Enghien for regimental prize fights and wrestling bouts. Since the guards had arrived in the town there had been many such bouts. Soldiers had to be kept busy. Today, for the match between the champion of the Coldstreams and the champion of the 3rd Guards, it was overflowing with spectators, not one of them impartial, and most shouting themselves hoarse.

The yard was formed on three sides by the tall houses that were typical of the town – three or even four storeys, brick-built, substantial – the houses of prosperous Belgian town officials and merchants. Their residents leant from every window, cheering

for their favourite and hissing at his opponent. In the yard, small boys sat on their fathers' shoulders or crawled between uniformed legs to get a view. Everyone liked a good fight.

Guards of both regiments in their red jackets and stovepipe shakos had linked arms to form a rough circle within which the fighters were obliged to keep. If either man was forced against the ring he would be shoved roughly back. If he left the ring he would be disqualified. A sergeant from each regiment stood behind the crowd, ready to restore order if it became too unruly.

In the warm evening sunshine sweat splattered off the bare chests and arms of the fighters, spraying the front row of spectators and making the cobbles treacherous. Above them a layer of pipe smoke hovered in the air, the sweet aroma of tobacco mingled with the sharp smells of effort and excitement.

Lester danced forward, thrust his left hand into Graham's eye, anticipated the counter aimed at his head and ducked under it. He jabbed again with his right and drew blood from Graham's lip. The 3rd Guards loved it. 'Joe, that's the way, man. Put the big ox on his arse.'

Graham grimaced and spat out blood. He jabbed out a huge left fist but landed only a glancing blow on his man's shoulder. Lester's knuckles were already red and raw from the punches he had landed, Graham's barely marked. It looked to Macdonell that he was about to see his man lose for the first time and, what was more, be obliged to hand over two guineas.

Sensing a result, the crowd became even more raucous. The Coldstreams yelled at their man to land a punch that would end it, the 3rd Guards roared with delight every time theirs

landed a blow or cleverly avoided one. Graham's hair and chest were plastered with sweat. His nose was bleeding and his lip was split. Lester was unmarked and showing no sign of slowing. Very much a light company man, thought Macdonell. Quick, clever, elusive.

The Coldstreams tried to rally their man. 'Imagine he's a frog,' yelled one. 'Wipe the grin off his froggy face.' But hard as he tried, Graham could not land a telling blow. Lester was in and under his guard before he knew it, landing a punch, stepping back and never taking his eye from his opponent. The 3rd Guards sensed victory.

Among the red and white uniforms in the crowd was a scattering of bonnets – wives and sweethearts who had travelled with their men from England and local mademoiselles who had attached themselves to one of the English officers who had been flooding into the country for nearly three months. Enghien was but one of a dozen towns in which a British regiment had been billeted. At home no respectable lady would attend a prize fight. Here it was different. Belgian society had its own rules.

A young woman detached herself from the crowd and made her way to where Francis and James were standing. She wore a pink bonnet and a flowing cotton dress embroidered with tiny blue violets and tied under the bosom with a white ribbon. 'Colonel Hepburn, I wish you happiness,' she greeted Francis with a curtsy.

Francis grinned and stepped down from the crate. 'And I you, Miss Box. I had not thought to find you here.' It was an effort to speak over the hubbub without shouting.

‘Indeed not. I would not have come had some of the ladies not pressed me. And who is this gentleman?’ She indicated James with her fan.

‘My colleague, Colonel James Macdonell of the Coldstream Guards. James, may I present Miss Daisy Box?’

James inclined his head and took the outstretched hand. ‘*Enchanté*, Miss Box. I wonder how it is that we have not previously met.’

‘I have not long been in the country, Colonel Macdonell, and came to Enghien only a few days since. My father is employed in the embassy in Brussels. I came across to visit him and have stayed a little longer than planned.’ She glanced at Francis, whose handsome side whiskers could not quite conceal a blush. ‘I have found the city most agreeable.’ Miss Box’s blonde curls peeped out from under her bonnet and when she smiled a dimple appeared in each cheek.

‘Then we must hope that the sun continues to shine and the country to amuse you,’ replied James, hoping he did not sound too pompous.

There was a huge roar from the crowd. They looked up. At last Graham had landed a worthwhile blow. Lester was down on one knee, wiping blood from his mouth. He spat out a tooth and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. ‘Now we’ll see how good he is,’ said James quietly.

As if he had heard the remark, Lester advanced to within striking distance, changed his angle of attack at the last second, and landed a solid punch on Graham’s nose. More blood gushed forth and Graham snarled. He wiped away the blood and snarled again. It was the sound of a wounded beast turning

on its attacker. The direct hit on his nose had given him new purpose. The crowd sensed it and went quiet.

He circled his opponent, his eyes fixed on his target, fainted twice, saw that Lester's reactions had slowed very slightly, took a long step forward, brushed aside his guard and smashed a huge fist into his face. Lester wobbled but did not fall. A fearsome uppercut jolted his head backwards. For a second a look of utter astonishment came over him. Then he did fall. Prostrate on the cobbles, he was not going to get up again.

The crowd cheered and groaned in equal measure. But when Lester did not move, it went silent. Two guards detached themselves from the ring and crouched over him. One of them used a towel to wipe blood from the stricken man's mouth and nose. The other called for water, which came in a bucket and was tipped over Lester's head. Still he did not move. Another bucket was fetched. A guard slapped him gently on the cheek and spoke quietly. 'Up you get, Joe. It's all over now.'

Lester opened his eyes and blinked. He spluttered and retched and struggled up, supported by a guard on either side. Vomit ran down his chest on to the cobbles. He shook his head like a dog with a rat and cursed. 'Lucky Irish bugger. I slipped. He was all but done for.' The crowd laughed with relief. It was a fight they had come to see, not a death.

James Graham, who had stood quietly watching his stricken opponent, went over to help him to his feet. One of his eyes was swollen and closed and his nose was still bleeding. A cloth was held out to him. He wiped his face and hands and threw it into the crowd. 'The luck of the Irish, was it?' he asked in his

lilting brogue. ‘It’s a strange thing I’ve learnt now – the harder I hit the luckier I am.’

Lester held out a hand. ‘And that’s the hardest I’ve ever been hit. I’ll take more care in future.’

‘You do that and you’ll be a champion,’ replied Graham with a painful smile. ‘Although not in Ireland.’ He took the proffered hand, put an arm around Lester’s shoulders and led him through the crowd. ‘Now, come and we’ll spend some of the purse.’

James and Francis watched the two men go. ‘Stout fellows, both of them,’ said Francis.

‘Stout indeed. And we shall need plenty like them when Boney arrives,’ agreed James, holding out his hand. ‘Two guineas, was it not?’ Francis produced two coins from his pocket and passed them over. ‘Perhaps Miss Box would care to join us for supper?’

‘How gallant, Colonel Macdonell.’ Daisy beamed at him. ‘I should indeed care to.’ She slipped an arm through his. ‘Come along, Francis, all this excitement has given me quite an appetite.’

They were about to leave the yard when there was a yell of pain from behind them. They stopped and turned. A scuffle had broken out. A punch was thrown and a woman shrieked. In a trice, guard was fighting guard. A sergeant swiftly rounded up the ladies and ushered them away like a shepherd with his flock. Macdonell recognised two of the brawlers – both Coldstreams and both cut from the same shabby cloth – frequently drunk and forever in trouble. There were rotten apples in every orchard and Privates William Vindle and Patrick Luke were as

foul and maggoty as any. He was on the point of stepping in when Francis tapped his elbow and turned away. 'Time for our supper, James. The sergeants will sort it out.' He strode off, leaving James to escort Daisy.

Since arriving in Enghien, Macdonell had had ample time to explore. A man could not spend every hour training and studying. He had discovered a town of fine avenues and narrow streets, tall houses and ancient churches. Twenty-two or so miles south-east of Brussels it was close enough to attract visitors but distant enough not to be overwhelmed by them. Town officials made sure the streets were clean and petty crime was swiftly dealt with, so shopkeepers and merchants prospered. Much as he missed home he had come to like the place.

The avenue down which they strolled ran from north to south almost the length of the town and was lined with stalls selling cakes, cheeses, chocolate and sweet drinks. In the shade of a plane tree, they drank punch. 'Now, then,' said Francis when their glasses were empty. 'To the Grand Café, I fancy. For a few francs we shall have a good supper and another glass of punch. Advance.'

The Grand Café, a favourite with British officers and Enghien burghers alike, was a short walk down the avenue. Outside it, tables and chairs – mostly occupied – had been set for those who preferred to dine in the evening sunshine. Waiters in aprons, carrying plates and trays, bustled about trying to keep their customers happy. Wine flowed and voices were raised. James and Francis nodded to officers they recognised and smiled at their admiring glances. Daisy pretended not to notice and led them to a table. 'Today

I shall eat veal,' she announced. 'I do so enjoy it and we seldom see it at home.'

They ordered their meal and more punch. The food was good and the punch strong. James did not have to make much of an effort at conversation, leaving Daisy to chatter away happily. She was born in Hampshire, her mother had died when she was a girl, her father was a senior official in the embassy, and she had insisted on crossing the Channel to visit him and to see a little of the country. She hoped there would be no fighting to spoil her visit. Francis Hepburn assured her that there would be no fighting for some weeks, if at all, and that she should concentrate on enjoying herself.

She waxed lyrical about Brussels restaurants, its elegant squares and parks and the courtesy of its people. 'Such a change from England,' she declared. 'I had not before realised how uncouth we English can be.' She put a hand to her mouth. 'I do not mean to offend, Colonel Macdonell. Although you of course are from Scotland, are you not?'

'I am, madam, and I rather agree with you. The Englishman is a rough type, unlike his cousins to the north. We can only hope he is not found wanting when Buonaparte arrives. The Corsican comes from much the same sort of stock.'

'And will he arrive, do you think, Colonel?'

'Despite what Francis has told you, I fear that he will. But we shall be ready, shall we not, Francis?'

'Naturally, we shall. If he comes anywhere near the border, he will find us blocking his path. I daresay he will turn his army around and run back to Paris.'

Macdonell raised an eyebrow. 'Let us hope so.' He rose and

excused himself. He was duty officer the next day and must be up soon after dawn. He left Francis to entertain Miss Box and returned to his billet in the Château Enghien.

Supper had been good, the evening was agreeably warm and the town was quiet. Yet he found as he walked that neither the prize fight nor Miss Box had lifted his spirits. He was sick of waiting, sick of trying to find ways of keeping the men occupied and out of trouble, sick of the tedium. For three months Wellington and Napoleon had been building their strength. Now, surely, they were ready. Napoleon would cross the border and the Allies would march to face him. Very soon they would be at war and Francis Hepburn knew it as well as he did.