

## A Fatal Mistake

“I’ve gone and enlisted for seven years.” Clara recalled that morning in 1807 when her bleary-eyed husband Jeb had delivered this bombshell. She knew he had been in the tavern the night before, drowning his sorrows after losing his job at the tin mine. She discovered later that a canny recruiting officer had plied him with drink and flattery, regaling him with tales of the glorious military life. Jeb had taken the King’s shilling in front of witnesses so that was that.

He was a good man and the prospect of remaining at home whilst he went off to fight Boney was unappealing. So she was elated when she was chosen by lottery to ‘follow the Drum’ as one of the six wives permitted in his Company. She left Plymouth for Portugal in June 1808. As a sturdy farmer’s daughter she was well equipped to cope with the rigours of army life. In fact she enjoyed this new experience so far removed from her cloistered upbringing on the remote family smallholding near Helston She took enormous pride in her ability to keep up with the column during its interminable forced marches. So unlike the other camp followers who often straggled miles behind.

But all changed on the fateful retreat to the Galician port of Corunna a year later. On the day Sir John Moore was killed, Jeb was hit by a musket ball, shattering his right hip. On returning to England he became a different man. Morose, resentful, in constant pain and prone to frittering away on strong cider the pittance Clara earned as a laundress. She could forgive him his moods but as his violence towards her became intolerable she finally snapped.

One dark night as he was staggering home on the coastal path she ambushed him. One push sent him plummeting to the rocks below. His body was never found.

Clara was startled from her reverie by a sharp tap on the window. She saw Jeb’s face pressed against the glass. The shock killed her. Jeb’s brother Isaac saw her lifeless body crash to the hard earth floor.

350 words