

The Orange Autumn

Excerpt from Chapter 20 of The Orange Autumn (Book 4 in the series)

Philip rode towards Reading at the head of the advance guard. All along the way folk were turning out to catch a glimpse of him.

“By the time Prince William passes along this route the streets of every town and village will be lined with cheering crowds,” he predicted to Giles, as he acknowledged them with all the aplomb of an actor taking a bow.

“You certainly seem to be achieving everything that William desired of you,” Giles admitted, “and we have collected more recruits this morning than we have since we landed.”

Philip was pleased at that, but not really surprised. He thought that men who might have been dubious about joining the forces of an invading foreigner would likely be more willing to march with an Englishman whose name and reputation were as widely known as was his own.

The advance guard could move quickly and had covered a great distance by the end of the morning without the slightest hindrance, that is until they entered a small town on the banks of the River Test.

The bridge was already crowded with people and more stood on both banks, all staring into the water. Above the sound of a rushing weir they could hear a woman’s hysterical sobbing.

“What the devil has happened here?” Philip said.

“I’ll find out, my Lord,” Thomas offered. He was quickly back. “It’s the woman’s husband,” he explained. “He fell into the weir and was drowned.”

“And that is why they crowd the bridge?” Philip said impatiently.

“Yes, my Lord. He is still in the water and can’t be fished out.”

Philip dismounted and pushed his way through the crowd. The body lay in the churning foam of the weir, bobbing up and down then sucked from view beneath the water and shot clear, only to be dragged back by the current to writhe once more in the foam, as if in some grotesque dance of death.



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“This is indecent.” Philip turned to the assembled company, who gaped at him in awe. “Will none of you put this poor woman out of her misery and retrieve the body of her departed?”

“It can’t be done,” reckoned one of the townsfolk. “He’ll have to stay there ‘til he rots and breaks to pieces.”

Philip winced as another loud howl of anguish came from the widow. “Of course it can be done, and I suggest it is done without delay. I have a troop of Prince William’s soldiers waiting to cross the bridge.”

“Then cross, my Lord, and we will stand aside,” the man offered. “There is not a man here who would go into that water, for to do so would be to throw his own life away. The Autumn rains have swelled the river and no-one could swim against that force.”

Philip looked down again at the torrent below him and judged the distance from the bridge to the calmer waters in front of the weir. It wouldn’t be easy but it was certainly not impossible. He looked, too, at the number of strong and able-bodied men who stood before him, men who, though they were afraid to brave the treacherous water, might not be afraid to march at the side of one whose courage they had cause to admire. It was an opportunity too good to miss.

“I could do it,” he said.

They all stared in amazement as, without another word, he removed his coat. Thomas stared too, though in horror, and ran across the bridge to join him.

“Surely you’re not going in there? Why would you think of such a thing?”

“I have my reasons. Look around and see how many men we could recruit here.” Philip handed him his coat and sword, then removed his riding boots and his stockings. “Besides, it’s not so difficult a feat.”

“Difficult? It’s impossible, so they say.”

“Well they’re wrong.”

The rest of the troop had dismounted by this time and Giles joined Philip and Thomas on the bridge.

Thomas grabbed him. “Stop him, won’t you, Giles?” he begged him frantically.

“When have I ever been able to influence him?” Giles said. “In any case I think he probably can do it.”



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Philip smiled. "You see, Thomas? Giles isn't worried!"

"I never said that," Giles muttered, as Philip climbed to the top rail of the bridge.

He balanced himself and then dived down, entering the river about three feet away from the churning waters of the weir. He had judged the distance exactly right and he surfaced near the drowned man. The icy water nearly took his breath away and he knew he must act swiftly. He grabbed the body by the leg and managed to hold onto it before it could be sucked down into the weir once more. The cold was sapping his strength but he managed to tow the heavy load back to the bank, where willing hands waited to relieve him of his burden.

Plenty were eager to assist him from the water as well, but he declined their help and heaved himself onto the muddy bank unaided.

He was shivering, but Thomas was soon by his side with a blanket. Philip looked up at him. "Here comes my little mother hen!"

"You need more than a mother hen," Thomas complained crossly, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders.

Philip noticed that he had gone quite white. "Did I scare you?"

"Of course you did. I believe you are the bravest man that ever lived, my Lord, but I die many times watching you attempt damn fool tricks like that."

"Are you going to lecture me as well?" Philip asked Giles, who had brought him his clothes.

"Whatever is the point?" Giles said. "It is high time you learned to put some value on your life, Philip, or at least upon the peace of mind of those who care about you."

"I thought you didn't care about me," Philip said wickedly, but Giles was plainly not about to be drawn on that topic!



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