

10,000 Men

I saw the Duke today, and felt moved to ask him why it was he saw the need to march those poor devils of his up and down that accursed hill so often. 'Was it part of some immense Pythagorean calculation to ascertain the exact dimensions of that lonely mound of earth?' I politely enquired of his York-ship with a grin. 'Or perhaps the field-testing of some fiendish new tactic for the complete assimilation of defenceless hummocks into our ever-dwindling Empire?'

He coolly regarded me with that obtuse yet piercing stare so possessed of high-ranking British Army officers and said nothing, his hair-laden nostrils flaring slightly at the edges. Not wanting to appear weak before such a towering bear of a fellow, I pressed on with my inquiry, choosing to ignore the way his rigidly beaded eyes trembled within their sockets like parading recruits on a hot summer's day.

Suggestions of more efficient ways with which to extend the length and breadth of Her Majesty's domain were met with the same steadfast and sober response, such that a passer-by might have taken the Duke for an errant waxwork facsimile, let loose in the English countryside. For more than an hour did I heckle and gibe this most staunchly regimental of figures, without care or attention as to my own fate, for no other reason than simply that he

was there. But to no avail and the credit of his impeccable training, the Duke's temper remained firmly encamped within his frame.

Just as dusk approached, and I thought for just a moment that this great man might finally weaken, a runner approached across the clod-strewn ground with hot breath billowing out around his sweat-soaked form.

Quickly seizing the messenger's bounty from outstretched and trembling hands, the Duke proceeded to rip open the sealed pouch and devour the brief transcript within with the voracious appetite of a Colosseum lion that hasn't tasted Christian in days. Sparing only the briefest of disapproving glances in my direction, he instructed a nearby bugler to rouse the men and strode forth across the field with a manic gleam in his eye.

"On your feet lads," he bellowed as he eagerly mounted his charger and turned southward. "There's a tumbled egg-man some way distant, in need of repair, and like the very Devil himself, by God I'll find work for idle hands."