



BILLY BOB BUTTONS

# TOR

## ASSASSIN HUNTER

Or

The Ramblings of a Swedish Botanist

Tuesday, 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1870  
18 Days to Assassination Day

0533 hours, Northern France

A bullet ricochets off a 16<sup>th</sup> century French cabinet, splintering the shiny walnut top. I duck and muster a lopsided grin. I know, any moment now, hundreds of howling German troops will storm our flimsy barricade of stools and rusty iron bathtubs, but I still think the cabinet would look wonderful in a scholar's study or in a quaint villa in southern Italy...

'SIR!' The shout jolts me back to the horrors of war. 'The scout the French sent out just reported in. He spotted the enemy holed up in the Hôtel Le Château Fort just up the Rue de l'Eglise.'

This from my second-in-command, Jasper: crew cut, three gold teeth, tattoos of bottoms and boobs from his wrists to his elbows; he's a Goliath of a



man from Ullapool, which, according to him is a 'dump of a town' in the very north of Scotland.

'He spotted a full regiment of the rats, Major; mostly cavalry.' He thumps the metal foot of a chipped bathtub. 'When they hit this wall of yours it will topple like a domino.'

I remember the hotel well: pretty archways, silk sheets on the four-poster beds and a rose-entwined balcony overlooking a sunny courtyard, now just a jumbled hill of bricks and charred wood like the rest of La Moncelle. The town had been so sweet, the home of soft cheese and the fruity Neuf-de-Pape wine, now the home of black crows enjoying a banquet of French trooper eyeballs.

'Jasper, lad,' I punch his iron-cast bicep, bashing my knuckle; he has the tree trunk-sized limbs of a century old chestnut, 'if...'

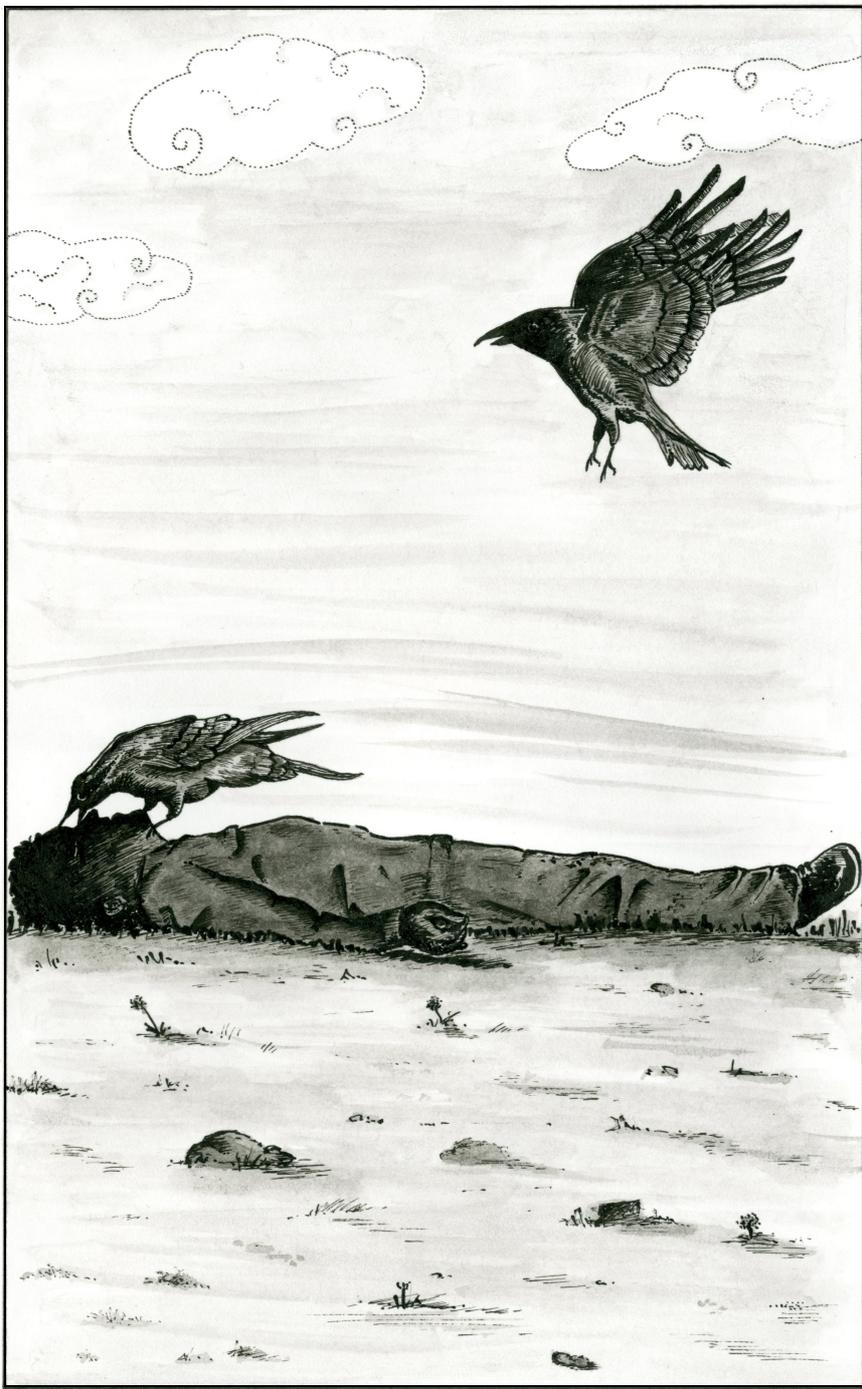
My second-in-command grunts. He's no fool.

I relent. 'Ok, when - Colonel Von der Tann and his German cavalry attack, he will order his men up this street here. When they get to my wall, they will be boxed in; there's no cover, not even a ruddy bathtub to hide in. Remember, we took 'em all.'

He rewards my sincerity with a wry smile.

'Trust me, lad,' I plough on, 'this is going to be a duck shoot.'

Just then, a sniper's bullet zips by my cheek, shatters a yellow-dyed chamber pot in the wall and plops innocently to the dirt.





With a furrowed brow, Jasper thumbs the tip of his shiny bayonet. 'But who'll be the ducks,' he drawls, 'them,' he eyes the iron ball by my foot, daring me to fib, 'or us?'

I brush him off with a chuckle, but his words chew on me, flooding my stomach with acid. He thinks General de Wimpffen's plan is foolhardy and he's spot on; the enemy will crush us; but I must follow orders and so must my men or we risk a blindfold, a shower of bullets and a cosy blanket of French dirt.

The Germans had invaded their unsuspecting neighbour in August of 1870, seemingly hell bent on re-drawing the world map and forcing France to be a member of the tyrannical German Empire. And, so far, the enemy's plan seems to be working perfectly. In only a month of bitter fighting, the German juggernaut has overrun half of France, a plague of locusts hungry for frogs' legs and French Champagne.

I wonder if Von der Tann, the enemy's heroic colonel, will command the attack on our barricade. Sadly, our 'heroic' French general, de Wimpffen, is a bungling fool. He's led me, my troop of privateers and his army into an inescapable trap, the name of this trap: La Moncelle, a small town in northern France.

And to top it all off, de Wimpffen still thinks he can win.



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KAPOOM!

Just up the street, St Barthélemy's chapel blows up in a tempest of flying splinters. Such a sweet church too; I recall the steeple door had a very pretty La Belle Sultane rose carved in it.

I pull a sliver of wood from my shoulder and hunker down with my men. Crooks and murderers the lot of them and I'm no different; they'd pilfer the boots of a bishop, his bible too if they thought it'd sell. Here for the booty, not the shiny medals; but all of them handy with a musket and bayonet. I trust them; I know they will not run till I tell them to.

Relentlessly, the German artillery shells the town. Trees uproot, doors blow up and in. I see a carpenter's hut flip and cartwheel over the roof of the town's school, tidily skewering off two chimney pots and a weather cockerel. I curl up in a ball, my cheeks to my knees. Over and over, tremors jolt my body and booms of thunder ricochet off my skull. I wonder, will the next cannon ball land on me or the man by my elbow.

Finally, the bombardment stops and I look warily up at my wall. To my astonishment, it is still up, chamber pots, bathtubs and all.

I clamber to my feet and, watchful for snipers, I peer over the irreparably chipped top of the cabinet. Most of the Rue de l'Eglise is now lost to a dusty yellow mist, the sun just a milky blob on the



horizon, but I spot a cart blazing merrily casting jumping red shadows over the twisted body of a German trooper. My enemy, but still a mother's son. All seems still but for the ever-circling crows and a hangman's noose swinging gently in the breeze - justice for deserters the de Wimpffen way - but I know Von der Tann's cavalry will soon be on us and my fifty-two battle-weary privateers must find a way to stop them.

The cannons were just the warm-up act; a taster, to soften us up.

I feel oddly calm, almost sleepy. I suppose I rely too much on the lucky rabbit's foot in my pocket to ward off the bayonets and bullets. Never been hurt you see; not even a tiny scratch. My men think I'm lucky so they follow me, but I remember Dad telling me, 'Men who trust in luck need an awful lot of it.' That and, 'Never test the depth of a river with both feet.' I wonder if today is the day my pot of luck finally runs dry.

A pallid-faced corporal trots over and hands me a battered tin mug. He's the new fellow but I remember his name is Pedro; he's from Granada in the south of Spain and by the look of it, he's trying to grow a moustache over his plump goldfish lips. Trying to. 'Orders from General de Wimpffen, Major,' he tells me stiffly. 'He needs to see you. Oh, and he told me to tell you to be prompt. In his words: Now, and not a week on Thursday.'



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I thank him for the drink and the news with an even stiffer nod; de Wimpffen is not on my birthday card list. But lifting the coffee to my lips, I spot it ripple ominously.

I cock my head like a wary sparrow, then...

‘WAKE UP, LADS!’ I yell, dropping the mug in the dirt and snatching up my rifle. ‘VISITORS! TWELVE O’CLOCK!’

I rest the barrel of my musket on a bathtub leg, my eyes fixed on the swirling mist. Then, slowly, I thumb back the lock. I’m holding the Enfield rifle-musket, in the chamber a Minié bullet. It has a killing range of over three hundred yards compared to the fifty yards of the old ball and musket. Invented by Captain Claude Étienne Minié of the French Army; I met him in a bar in Paris a few years ago, cheerful chap, enjoys a spot of rum if I remember correctly - and Cuban cigars.

There is a low rumble. Louder. LOUDER! From the mist gallops the enemy cavalry. A dozen, two, three - hundreds of teeth-baring, eye-bulging troops on teeth-baring, eye-bulging steeds. With swords in fists and howls of ‘DRAN! DRAUF! DRÜBER!’ they look like devils sent from the pits of hell.

‘Hold your fire,’ I hiss. An unnecessary warning to my men. They know not to shoot too soon and risk missing. Our muskets may be capable of killing at three hundred yards but only if the musketeer is a remarkably good shot and the target happens to be



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a barn door or the particularly hefty bottom of a cow. 'Remember, big targets only,' I remind my troopers. 'Go for the chest.'

With the cavalrymen only two hundred feet away, I look up to the early morning sky. The crows circle us keen to enjoy our soft flesh. I hate them. I want to lift my rifle and shoot them but I dare not squander a bullet.

A hundred and fifty feet.

An unstoppable tidal wave of sharpened steel and guts...

A hundred feet.

...snarls and wild eyes, they jump the burning wagon...

Fifty feet.

I jam the butt of my musket to my shoulder. 'FIRE!' I holler.

My name is Tor. Just, Tor. I love crackers with chévre cheese and red wine but only if it's room temperature. I hate turnips, I'm claustrophobic and I'm allergic to cats...

...oh, and I'm a major and a mercenary temporarily in the employ of the French army, my job...to shoot Germans.

0605 hours

Our muskets jump obediently, fifty-two Minié



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bullets chased by smoke, and grimly I watch the frothing steeds fold. But the regiment of cavalry is brave and deep, the clatter of hoofs seemingly ignorant to our lethal volley.

Unpityingly, they jump the fallen.

I finger my rabbit's foot, my totem. I feel so terribly powerless, driftwood in a raging river. It is like trying to stop a wild bull with a toothpick.

The enemy covers the last twenty feet in seconds, swords glinting menacingly, keen to find chinks in our cut-price armour.

'FIX BAYONETS!' I bellow, wiping my clammy palms on my tunic.

Time to get dirty.

They assault our make-shift wall; a battering ram of horse muscle, guts and willpower. Frantically, my men and I fire and stab, fire and stab. Everywhere there is blood: my troopers' blood, my enemy's blood, my blood. My bayonet hits bone and snaps off. My luck has finally abandoned me. I'm drowning in screeching men and yells for, 'MOTHER!'

The trooper next to me gets it: a bayonet to the chest. Why him and why not me, I wonder. This is not war, it is a schoolyard scrap. There is no skill to it. If the bullet or the bayonet finds me, it finds me. There is only luck, totally blind, totally wretched luck.

My mind skips to my sister. My poor, poor



sister.

Our wall is no longer a wall: the stools crushed, the bathtubs scattered, the French cabinet in tiny jagged splinters.

'FALL BACK!' I cry, snatching up a stool leg and parrying a cavalryman's sword. I hop up on an upturned bathtub and off my back foot I cuff him brutally on the jaw. He yelps and cartwheels off his saddle.

Frantically, I pull my fallen trooper to his feet. It is Gerry, a Londoner; sixteen and never kissed a girl. He is bleeding badly and there is overwhelming terror in his eyes. He will not see the sunset, or kiss a girl, but I throw the poor sod over my shoulder anyway.

Firing our muskets haphazardly, we helter-skelter up the street. We find the doorway to the town's library and scramble through it. There is no roof, no door, no glass in the windows, but a horse cannot follow us in here.

Safe!

For now, anyway.

I lever the injured Gerry to the floor and look around. I count only twenty of us left, cowering in a room of tipped-up desks and burnt and blistered books. I spy a blackened copy of *The Three Musketeers*, Alexandra Dumas's masterwork of swordplay and honour and the book I most enjoyed when I was a schoolboy.



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The clomp of boots. My eyes cut to the doorway. Whispers! German whispers. They must be on foot now. Soon, I know, we will be surrounded and they will overrun us.

General de Wimpffen had promised reinforcements but there is still no sign of them. Murder grips me and I thump the stool leg on my open palm. The man's a bungling fool.

A shadow by the window.

'Stay low,' I hiss.

Boots crunch.

A German trooper, keen to win a medal, storms our room. He is killed without mercy. I wonder, will his weeping mother get the medal now.

'Major!' An urgent whisper from Jasper. 'Why you holding a stool leg?'

'Oh!' I drop it and pull my sword.

'Brave French troopers!' The words echo in the room. 'This is Colonel Von der Tann of the Seventh German Cavalry. Surrender.'

'He thinks I'm a French ninny,' mutters Jasper. 'How rude.'

I chuckle. 'Very decent of you to surrender so quickly,' I cheekily shout, 'but we'd much prefer to shoot you.'

'Or bayonet you,' my second-in-command adds helpfully.

My men snort and there is the odd jittery chuckle. A nervy thumbs up from Pedro.



Water drips from a cracked gutter ticking off the seconds, and on the floor Gerry looks unblinkingly to the brightening sky. Then, 'So be it, Major Tor.' He says my name slowly, as if tasting the words.

My eyes flicker to Jasper's. 'He knows me,' I mouth. 'How? Why?'

Jasper chews thoughtfully on his thumb. 'Maybe he's a fan or,' he nods knowingly and snaps his fingers, 'he thinks you kissed his sister.'

In an avalanche of howls, they storm the room. Ten, twenty, thirty of them, piling in, all wanting a story to tell to impress a son, a wife, a father. Hand to hand we fight. Dirty, clawing, biting - we fight.

My fight is with the very talented swordsman, Colonel Von der Tann.

The German colonel is lightning fast. I deflect his sword, then off my back foot I lunge but miss, my boots slipping in the rubble. I stumble and my cutlass clanks to the floor. On my knees, I snatch up a book, thrusting it up to protect my eyes. It is the bible, but to the sharpened steel in Von der Tann's fist it is just a soft lump of butter. He runs it through and I look up to find the tip of the colonel's sword only a cat's whisker from the tip of my nose.

Flicking the book away, he drops to a knee and eyes me thoughtfully. I stubbornly return his look. Oddly, I see no thrill there, no joy in his victory over me. He has the cold eyes of a lizard sunbathing on a rock.



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‘Colonel!’ A call from the street. ‘The French!’  
The buffoon, de Wimpffen, has sent help at last.  
With a scowl, my victor hops to his feet, the  
news no doubt shadowing his sunny mood.  
‘GEHEN SIE MÄNNEN!’ he howls. ‘GEHEN  
SIE!’

The German cavalymen scramble over to the  
door. Then, the colonel eyeballs me, his cutlass  
unwavering. ‘I crossed swords with a gallant man  
this day,’ he tells me in English, bringing up the  
blade.

Feebly, I pick up my own sword and return the  
salute. Then I watch him stroll unhurriedly from  
the room. Why did he not kill me, I wonder.

‘MAJOR!’ It is Pedro, the corporal with the  
pubescent caterpillar on his upper lip. ‘Jasper’s  
hurt.’

Jumping to my feet, I hurry over. ‘STRETCHER  
PARTY!’ I shout, dropping to my knees.

My second-in-command is lying in a corner, his  
hands clawing at his blood-sodden chest. ‘Jesus!  
Jesus! Jesus!’ he is hissing.

‘Hold on, lad,’ I try to calm him. Roughly, I grip  
Pedro’s tunic. ‘Go fetch the ruddy stretcher party.’

‘They were all killed.’

I clench my fists. ‘BLAST!’

‘Forget it, Tor,’ Jasper grits his tobacco-rotten  
teeth and looks to the sky. ‘Wretched crows.’ His  
beseeching eyes find me. ‘Don’t let ‘em get me.’



‘I won’t.’

A tiny drop of blood seeps from his lips. ‘Bury me deep, Tor.’ He sort of hiccups, spraying me red. ‘Hale Mary, f-full of grace, the Lord - the, the Lord...’ Then his eyes flutter shut and I’m left in a room of dying men.

Giddy with anger, I jump to my feet. ‘Pedro! Hold the fort.’

Startled, the corporal grabs for my torn sleeve, rank forgotten. ‘W - why?’ he stammers. ‘Where y’ going?’

‘To find a surgeon,’ I snarl, wiping Jasper’s blood off my cheeks, ‘and to pick a fight with de Wimpffen.’

I was born on 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1844 in Jokkmokk, a tiny town in northern Sweden. My dad is Swedish too but my mum is from Ningbo, a village in China. I blame him for my allergy to cats and her for my dark skin and pond weed eyes: green and grey like an April’s day. I love the smell of freshly-mown grass and the hum of insects on a summer’s evening...

...oh, and I hate incompetent generals.