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Opening extract from

Behind the Walls: A City Besieged

Written by

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Extract from Behind the Walls by Nicola Pierce pp7-26

PROLOGUE

It is the winter of 1688 and bloody conflict rages across Europe. King Louis XIV, the Catholic king of France, wants to rule over the entire continent but cannot defeat his most hated enemy, the Dutch Protestant Prince William of Orange. Meanwhile, the mostly Protestant population of England bristle beneath the reign of the Catholic King James. Telling themselves not to worry, they reason that he is an old man, without an heir, and will be gone soon enough. On his death, his Protestant daughter Princess Mary, who is married to the Dutch William, will take her father's crown and all will be well again.

However, the heir to the throne changes when James and his much younger Catholic wife have a son, a male heir who will bow to the Pope in Rome. This proves too much for the English Parliament. They invite the fiery Prince of Orange to 'invade' and thus challenge James for the throne. William, anxious to rid France of another Catholic ally, accepts the invitation.

James flees to France, to be welcomed with open arms by his cousin, King Louis. There, they scheme to win back his English crown and decide to aim for a foothold in neighbouring Ireland.

It is a good plan except for the fact that not everybody on the island is Catholic or a devotee of King James. Take, for instance, the small walled city up north, founded by a saint and home to proud descendants of Protestant English and Scottish families, and the king's army. Who would have believed that the city of Derry was about to take centre stage for the first of three battles in the war of three kings, James, William and Louis XIV – a war which would change Europe forever.

CHAPTER ONE

A full-blown row had broken out, ruining what had otherwise been a peaceful afternoon, in this part of Derry at least. Horace had strayed again, breaking the rules and showing utter disregard for his surroundings, only these streets weren't his actual surroundings, which was the problem. He stood his ground, trying to make himself appear larger and taller than the others. A mischievous twinkle in his eye was the only proof that he knew exactly what he was doing and was more than ready for the circumstances.

In fact he was bigger than his opponents. The difficulty lay in the fact that there was only him while his opponents were a proper gang with a designated leader, followers and some sort of unspoken pact that they would not tolerate strangers on their street.

In baring his teeth, Horace declared his challenge while refusing to retreat. The high-pitched barking and snarling was fierce. There was no mistaking the sound of rage but the casual onlookers were unimpressed. Eyes rolled and heads were shaken at the clamouring uproar. A young girl who was scrubbing hard at a front door with a brushful of sudsy water let out a snarl of her own, 'Oh shut up, the lot of ye!' Horace blinked at her, his expression suggesting that he had no idea what the fuss was all about. However the girl ignored Horace's attempt at innocence and pointed rudely at him, 'You're the cause of all this trouble. Go back to wherever you came from or, by God, I'll give you a swift kick up the …'

'Horace!' Daniel Sherrard had finally caught up with his rebel of a dog. Smiling nervously at the girl, Daniel beckoned his friend to his side. 'Come over here, Horace. Good boy!'

Horace hesitated; after all, a fight was a fight.

But the others decided that it was no longer worth the hassle; there were too many around now. So they made do with a few threats and curses, wanting to suggest to the invader that he had narrowly escaped the most ferocious violence. Really, it would be best for everyone if he could just have stayed out of their area, back where he belonged in the Protestant quarters.

Daniel called him again. 'Horace!' This time the large dog licked his lips, sneezed and turned to nuzzle his owner's shins. Daniel patted him on the head.

The girl also quietened down though she felt obliged to offer some haughty advice. 'Maybe you shouldn't walk him around here.' She stopped scrubbing to check that the hem of her apron had not dipped into the bucket of water beside her feet.

Daniel shook his head. 'I don't! He runs off on me.'

Horace scratched himself a little and then found it necessary to plop down so that he could scratch himself a lot harder. Daniel watched him and offered the girl an embarrassed shrug. She almost smiled at him but was mindful of her father inside the house who would not be pleased with her talking to a boy, particularly a strange one. She knew all the boys in her tight-knit community which meant that the 'foreigner' had to be a Protestant. He certainly looked unsure of himself. He was far from home.

The other dogs had removed themselves to the far end of the street where they seemed to be having a good sulk together. Gesturing at them, the girl said, 'Best you be getting him home before they decide to make another run at him … and you.'

Both dog and boy were strangers here.

Daniel experienced a tremor of annoyance. This was his city and he was allowed to go wherever he liked. Nevertheless there was no denying it. He didn't choose to come to this street. He was only here because of his disobedient pet. Tapping his leg, he said, 'Come on, boy. Let's go.' Horace gave the dogs a last cheeky bark and bounded ahead of Daniel.

As they neared the Diamond, the centre of the city, the streets got busier and dirtier. Daniel stepped over the stinking piles left behind by horses and cattle, his mother's warning against dirtying his new boots ringing in his ears. He took hold of Horace by the scruff of his neck in case the dog took off after the livestock.

There seemed to be a gathering in front of the Markethouse which usually meant that there was some sort of news pinned up on the wall of the building. Daniel could barely hear whatever was being read aloud over the clucking of the hens and the bleating of the skittish lambs. Carts rolled noisily over the paved stones, competing against the clip-clopping of the horses. Everywhere Daniel looked someone was either busy buying or selling something: candles, milk, animals, fish, eggs and shoes. Whatever a person fancied could be got here.

A beggar caught his eye. There were plenty of them. This one looked to be his father's age. His clothes were filthy and torn, just like his face. Daniel quickly looked away from him, judging the man to be a drunk, and one who was apt to get himself beaten up regularly.

Derry was a garrison city, meaning that she provided bread and board for the army of the king of England. However, two weeks earlier the city's soldiers and their commander, Lord Mountjoy, had left for Dublin, answering the summons of Sir Richard Talbot, the new lord lieutenant of Ireland. The ambitious Talbot was a loyal friend to the Catholic King James, and revelled in his prestigious appointment. Almost the first thing he did was to insist on a meeting with Derry's army of Protestants. Daniel found it peculiar not to see the uniform of the battalion standing out from amongst the crowd.

The previous evening his parents had discussed the turn of events, anxiously wondering what it could all mean. 'Soldiers keep the peace,' his mother had said; to which his father had muttered, 'It depends on the soldier.'

Robert, Daniel's older brother, immediately asked, 'What do you mean, Father?' He had his mother's dark eyes and high cheek bones while Daniel shared his father's features, clear blue eyes and a softness about the cheeks and chin.

Mr Sherrard sighed, ‘Lord Mountjoy’s regiment are mostly Protestant.’

Robert thought for a moment. ‘You mean you think they will send us a Catholic regiment instead of allowing Mountjoy’s men to return?’

His father nodded. ‘Oh, I think that is a strong possibility, don’t you? This city, along with Enniskillen, is one of the last Protestant strongholds, and I suspect that the Catholic lord lieutenant would much prefer us to be policed by his own.’

Daniel was suddenly returned to his surroundings by the sound of a commotion nearby. ‘Thief! Thief!’ A woman screamed and pretended to break into a run, but whoever it was that snatched her purse was already gone, disappearing into the throng of people who were drifting towards the Markethouse. Daniel shrugged his disapproval. It was the second robbery he had witnessed today.

The city needs her soldiers. That was his opinion. Even he could not help feeling the growing tension on the streets as the rumours raced throughout about marauding, murderous armies representing the Catholic king of England, James II.

A Catholic on the throne of England? How could this be?

Ordinarily Daniel did not concern himself with such worldly affairs but he simply could not ignore the worry in his parents’ eyes. It felt sensible to accept that there might be trouble ahead, though how he could not yet imagine.

I wish I was clever like Robert. If his brother had been present, Robert would have playfully punched Daniel in the arm, reminding him that there were three long years between them – nearly a thousand days. It was a huge difference between any fourteen- and seventeen-year-old boy. Well, that’s just it, he thought. Robert is no longer a boy, he is almost a man.

Horace yawned. Daniel glanced down at him. ‘Sorry, boy, but I want to hear what’s going on and then we’ll go straight home. I promise!’ Daniel believed that his dog understood every word he said. Since Horace made no move to voice his disagreement, Daniel was free to pat him as thanks for his cooperation. They joined the surging crowd. Daniel was putting his new plan into action, to keep himself informed of whatever was happening in his city and beyond. After all, he reasoned to himself, I’m no longer a child either.

A man called out, ‘Please repeat yourself, sir. We didn’t hear you!’

Several people around Daniel cried out, ‘Speak up! Speak up!’ The new additions to the crowd seemed anxious about what they might be missing. As far as Daniel was concerned their nervousness was thanks to the rumours of Catholic, or Papist, invaders.

The speaker, one of the townsmen, held up his hand and shouted as politely as he could, ‘Alright, alright. Quieten down.’ He waited for silence. ‘This here,’ he began, pointing to the pamphlet in his hand, ‘was issued by Prince William of Orange.’ Some clapping dutifully greeted the prince’s name. People craned their necks to be sure to catch every word uttered. In fact the speaker was gearing himself up for his big moment and thus roared his next line, ‘The Dutch Prince has declared the infant Prince of Wales to be an imposter!’

Well!

The word ‘imposter’ was taken up and repeated several times over, first in hushed tones but then as more people joined in it became louder and angrier: ‘“Imposter”? “Imposter”? Yes! “IMPOSTER”!’

A chorus of ‘Hear! Hear!’ rang out from the ones who had already heard the news. They’d had time to digest the information and agree that the newborn son of Catholic King James had no right to, what must only ever be, the Protestant throne of England. Anxious to hear the rest of the pamphlet they began shushing in earnest. There was no time to waste just yet.

‘Let me continue!’ called the speaker. ‘Prince William says he doesn’t wish to seize the throne for himself but he does believe that his father-in-law, King James, is being ill advised by the worst sort of people.’

Daniel assumed that both William and the speaker meant Catholics when they referred to the ‘worst sort of people’. King James had surrounded himself with Catholic friends and servants, losing the love of his two Protestant daughters Mary and Ann and a lot else besides.

Two elderly women beside Daniel accepted this, one of them declaring, ‘Well, William is not going to bring violence against his own father-in-law, is he?’

Her friend nodded and then thought of something. ‘And he’s a foreigner. So, he can’t very well go and make war on the English throne, now can he?’

The first one sniffed her agreement. ‘You’re right, Doris. Sure the English wouldn’t stand for that!’

Daniel wished they’d both shut up. The man was now reading out a list of things – bad things – that had been done in James’s name, but Daniel couldn’t hear a blessed word.

Horace whimpered his impatience to leave which, unfortunately for Daniel, set the women off on another topic.

‘That dog smells!’ pronounced the one called Doris.

Her friend giggled, ‘Almost as bad as your Harold!’

The two women burst out laughing, annoying the ones behind them. Daniel was grateful when the others shushed them. There was no way he would have done it himself; they would have boxed his ears.

There was silence just in time to hear the man finish off by saying, ‘William suggests a free parliament, one that can fix all the wrongdoing.’

There was a sober applause to this and then, when there seemed to be nothing else to read or hear, the crowd slowly, almost reluctantly, began to disperse.

Horace licked Daniel’s hand as if to remind him of his promise that they would go now. Daniel paused to be absolutely sure that the meeting was at an end, before allowing himself to be pulled along in the direction of home.

CHAPTER TWO

Over the coming weeks changes tiptoed into the city. When Daniel accompanied Horace on his meanderings he saw more and more new faces, whole families with their belongings squashed up on carts, coming in from the hinterland beyond Derry’s walls.

One day he, Horace and his father were walking by Bishop’s Gate when they spied a young man on a tall, white horse who seemed to be escorting one such family into the city. Mr Sherrard hailed him, ‘Why it’s Adam Murray! Good day to you!’

The dark haired man, who wore a wide brimmed hat and a long frock coat, turned and smiled warmly, taking the time to nod graciously at Daniel. He addressed the family of refugees, ‘If you follow this street around to the right, the lady of the third house said she could take you.’

The woman had a baby in her arms; two more children – boys no more than four or five years of age – were tugging at her skirts, wanting something or other. Their father stretched up his arm and shook Adam by the hand. ‘Thanks for your help, Mr Murray.’

Adam rushed to assure him that there was no need for thanks. ‘Don’t worry. Your family will be safe here.’

The Sherrards waited for the family to leave before approaching. Daniel kept a firm grip on Horace, to prevent him from getting any ideas. Adam jumped down from his horse and embraced Mr Sherrard who asked, 'Is your father here too? I've not seen him in such a long time.'

Adam shook his head and grinned. 'You know how stubborn he is. I tried to get him to move into the city, even for a month or two, but he won't hear of it.'

Mr Sherrard exclaimed, 'So have you now set up home here in Derry?'

Adam shrugged. 'Ach, I'm here and there.' Giving Daniel a sidelong glance, he added, 'Actually, I'm looking to set up a regiment of like-minded souls who are prepared to fight a Catholic army, should it be necessary.'

Daniel stared openly at him. This was thrilling talk indeed.

Adam's horse, a shade of smudged white, nudged the boy in the shoulder, pushing him forward. Neither his father nor Adam took any notice of this as they discussed the latest stories that were spreading through the neighbourhood.

Mr Sherrard asked, 'You think they're coming for us?'

Adam glanced around them before saying, 'Yes, I suppose I do.'

Daniel's father wasn't prone to exaggeration or undue excitement. He put a hand on Adam's arm. 'You know, a Catholic regiment does not have to mean terror. A city this size, this busy, needs her guards to keep order.'

Adam silently refused to agree with the first part and as to the second he offered, 'But we have soldiers. There are plenty of men here who want to protect everything that Derry stands for.'

Daniel watched the two men stare at one another before his father sighed, quickly following it up with a tight smile. 'Well, in any case, it's good to see you, Adam. Tell your father I was asking for him.'

The younger man returned the smile, though his was easier. 'Thank you, sir. I'll tell him.'

The horse only stopped butting Daniel when his master was back in the saddle again. Horace began to strain beneath his grip; the dog sensed that four legs were about to leap forward and he wanted to be free to play with them. One look from Mr Sherrard, however, put an end to that plan. Horace stood meekly beside his family and watched the horse take off, making no attempt to chase it.

There was a strange expression on Mr Sherrard's face. Daniel thought his father looked disappointed. Maybe he hadn't wanted the conversation to end so soon, or end how it had.

'Father,' ventured Daniel, 'is there going to be fighting? Are we in danger?' These ideas had only occurred to him as soon as he opened his mouth. His father didn't answer immediately. Daniel wanted him to know that he could take it, whatever his father was toying with not saying. 'I see all these people moving into the city. They're afraid, aren't they?'

Mr Sherrard gestured that they should continue walking. 'I don't know, son, and that's the truth. There's no point in my making up something for you because I just don't know what's going to happen.'

Later that same day, Robert Sherrard was much more forthcoming when Daniel asked him the same question. 'Something has to happen and soon!'

Daniel waited patiently for further explanation. His brother was preparing to join his friends at the wall. Working in shifts, they were helping to keep look-out for any sign of trouble, both inside and outside the city.

'Look, Dan, William isn't going to back down. Any decent Englishman wants that old Papist off the throne and William is the one to do it.' Robert had little of his father's discretion.

Daniel nodded to show he was listening hard. 'But, what does that mean for us … exactly?'

His brother challenged him. ‘Come on, what do you think it means?’

Daniel quickly ran through all the bits of information he had collected, glad for the opportunity to have his brother’s ear. ‘Um …’ he hedged. ‘If William takes over from James – which is what we want him to do?’ Here he looked at Robert to check he was correct in his assessment thus far.

Robert was pushed for time and decided to shorten the lesson. ‘Yes, it’s what we want here in Derry but down in Dublin, James’s friend, the lord lieutenant, Richard Talbot, is far from happy. He will surely rustle up a Catholic army to take over this garrison which, as he knows, fully supports a Protestant king taking back the throne. Actually …’ Robert pushed in the last of the buttons on his tunic, ‘that’s probably what he’s doing this very minute. And then they’ll be coming for us.’

Daniel hid his panic, or so he thought.

As Robert made to leave, he punched Daniel in the arm. ‘Don’t worry! This city can hold her own against James, Richard Talbot and whoever else comes looking for trouble.’

Daniel couldn’t stop himself from asking, ‘Are you sure?’

Robert merely winked as he slammed the door behind him.

Horace looked at Daniel expectantly: weren’t they going out too? Just then, Mrs Sherrard, her hands covered in flour, called out, ‘Stay right where you are, Daniel Sherrard. I need water fetched from the well.’

Daniel made a face that only his pet could see. ‘Yes, Ma’am!’

Robert smirked in the darkness as he heard his mother’s shrill voice. These days he was much too busy for household chores. How different his life was now. A few months ago his most pressing concern was to kiss as many girls as he could. Meanwhile, his father wanted him to study something, anything really. However, Robert did not feel that his future was paved between the pages of text books. He would leave those to his baby brother. Mr Sherrard was a hardworking physician who naturally expected one of his sons to take up his profession. It was unfortunate that his eldest son displayed little interest for dealing with sick people. But Robert wanted something different, something more than his father had done. He just hadn’t quite worked out what it would be. His mother seemed equally put out that he showed no inclination to become a pastor. Robert was bewildered that she ever imagined he’d want to do that. Church talk was best left to those who liked the sound of their own voice.

The house seemed to have shrunk as his parents’ expectations of him poured out into every room until, some evenings, he felt unable to breathe. It was like the walls were pressing against his chest.

But, now! Well, now things were happening beyond his parents’ control. Exciting things! Freedom beckoned. That’s how he felt anyway, though he couldn’t explain why. Maybe he just sensed that a change was coming and that was surely better than nothing at all.

He knocked on the Campsies’ door. Henry, his best friend, opened it, his coat on, ready to leave immediately. The two friends fell into step together. From a distance they looked alike, the same height and slenderness, the only difference being that Henry was broader in the shoulders which made him seem older and more capable somehow. He was also more dramatic in style, from the way he flicked dust from his coat to how he walked, ready for whatever was around the corner. ‘Any news?’ asked Henry.

Robert turned his head to spit. ‘Not really, other than my father bumping into Adam Murray earlier. He says he’s recruiting fellows to patrol the fields beyond the walls.’

Henry was intrigued. ‘Really? Are you going to join him?’

Robert refused to commit himself, knowing that his parents would have something to say. ‘Maybe … I’m just waiting to see what’s going to happen.’

Henry pretended to believe that the decision was completely Robert's to make. 'Yes, me too!'

The only light in the long, narrow street came from the candles in some of the windows, throwing flickering shadows before and after them. As they passed one murky alleyway the sounds of a fierce battle didn't distract them from their walk. There was a lot of scrambling and scraping of feet accompanied by high pitched shrieks of rage. 'Rats!' said Henry cheerfully. 'I saw one yesterday and I swear it was almost as big as your dog.' Robert didn't believe him.

A cat bawled nearby followed by a few seconds of startling silence until it was answered by a second cat. Some sort of challenge had been thrown down: one animal warily announcing the boundaries of its territory to the other, a rude intruder. Suddenly, the air was punctured by a flurry of barks. If there was to be any fight over boundaries, the dogs insisted on being involved.

On any other night Robert might not have noticed any of this. Fighting rats, quarrelling cats and enraged dogs were the most ordinary and least important sounds of any city. Tonight, though, things were different. Robert sighed and said, 'It's almost like they sense that something is about to happen.'

Henry was puzzled. 'Huh?'

Robert flicked his wrist, gesturing at the assorted chorus on the night air. 'All this noise?'

Henry thought for a moment and then shrugged.

Robert confided in him, 'You know there is a little part of me that longs for something to happen, something big too.' When Henry said nothing to this Robert added, 'I mean … I hope, that is, I want to be able to do something important. Ach! I'm not explaining myself properly.'

Henry did his best to understand. 'You want to do something special or heroic?' That didn't sound right either.

Robert tried again. 'Do you believe or do you even want a future beyond these walls?'

Henry was not an imaginative sort of person nor did he spend time wondering about the future. What was the point in that? He accepted that his life was going to be more or less like his father's. He hoped that one day, he too would be Mayor of Derry. Mr Campsie was an important man in the city. Why wouldn't his son want to be just like him? 'You think too much!' were Henry's final words on the subject.

Robert wasn't prepared to allow him the last word. 'No, it's not that. I just get bored sometimes. A bit of excitement is surely not too much to ask for.'

They arrived at the section of the wall that they would be watching from, for the next six hours or so. Henry gave his friend a playful shove. 'Be careful what you wish for, Robert Sherrard!'