

# **The Apple Necklace**

**By**

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The day had started before the sun had risen, it was cold and still. An army arose from its slumber, many yawned away the remnants of the peace that they had found inside their dreams. It was an Army on the march deep into the frontiers of another's lands.

The army ate what food was available and despite the groans of hunger and the emptiness of their bellies the soldiers took to the road. Briskly marching in long dense columns towards an inevitability that many of them feared. The body of warriors was made up of men of all ages, some barely teens while others already had one foot in the grave as their aged bodies trembled with the grey of too many years of life to now be a part of a force of life takers.

A boy soldier rushed from a distant field the grass and sunflowers brushing across his torso, he curled his arms delicately as he ran towards the dirty unwashed soldiers, their leather and steel vests no longer new and shiny were instead imbedded with grime and the muck of travel.

The boy, his uniform hanging from his still growing limbs, smiled as he reached the familiar faces of the men that he had looked up to in the past months of campaign. Taken from his family so that he may serve the Crown, the men of the Army were now his familiars. "I have apples," he announced.

Some of the older warriors tore the small fruit from his arms with little grace, others thanked him delightfully. One ran his hands across the boy's face and brow with an appreciative swipe.

"They are not as nice as those plucked from the orchids at home," the boy added as he began to eat one himself, the moistness of the fruit ran down his dirty fingers. He thumbed a reminder from home that he wore around his neck, a necklace of red glass in the shape of an apple.

"These are fine enough," a mature veteran who had taken on custodianship of the boy nodded.

A trumpet blasted in the distance followed by horns, the noise not uncommon to each of their ears. The soldiers lifted their weapons, for most long heavy wooden pikes. Others carried slender rapiers and heavy pistols. A few in the vicinity held carefully their matchlock muskets, machined weapons capable of shooting balls of lead or iron at fast speeds once the black powder had been ignited by a wick near the firers face.

The young boy soldier had been fascinated by the loud and smelly devices ever since he had first encountered them when he was pressed into service after his twelfth birthday. The young soldier steadied the long, heavy wood pike across his shoulder, the lengthy weapon was not to be used in singular combat but as part of a great martial formation. The weight wore into his slender shoulders, the digging in caused pain and ache. The boy did his best to not display the fatigue before the other soldiers who seemed to carry their own pikes with ease.

The army began its march forwards, the green lush lands soon turned into broken country where rock and feral grass met in clumps across an other wise barren landscape. The soldiers had been marching for what seemed like most of the day, their bodies yearned for rest and mouths sought the wet kiss of fresh water. Eventually dank air wafted among the already confined ranks as smoke and the mist of death slowly crawled with a tenacious grip on each of the soldiers.

The presence of such an unfamiliar discomfort churned at the young boy soldier who swiped his sweat drooled brow, he was too short to see ahead and what he could see to his side was fast becoming grimmer.

“Does it get any better?” he asked the nearby familiar veteran, as they continued to follow the man to their front, pikes lifting skywards above each of their heads.

It began to grow into a frightful dark. The veteran looked upwards and closed his eyes for a moment, the grey prickles of facial hair collecting soft ash as he adjusted the pike on his shoulder. Even if one thousand suns shone from above, no mortal could see their light least of all the boy from his lowly position. A cloud of thick ash and soot, marred with the milk of smoke wafted heavily throughout the air.

Man and beast coughed and swiped as best as they could to clear

lungs, nostrils and eyes off such contagion. Through burning red eyes and with heavy lungs an army marched despite the dark skies. "It tends to only get worse boy," the grey faced veteran finally answered. He did not look down to the youth, instead his grim expression remained the same as he watched ahead, lugging the pikes weight and the burden of the ash with as much effort and inevitability for the coming battle.

"How much further must we march?" the boy asked, the weight of the pike, his armour and the nature of such a fast-paced march were wearing him down.

"As far as we need to go."

"I can't feel my arm, the pike is growing too heavy for me," the boy admitted through fatigue.

The veteran looked down at the struggling youth. Empathy jerked free of the old man as he helped to raise the boy soldier back up as the young warrior fell to his knee briefly. Another nearby soldier assisted the pair, taking the pike into his own arms, despite some protests. It was not uncommon for soldiers to fall like this, least of all on such a day.

"Easy lad, a few more steps and we shall have you tasting some water."

The veteran supported the young warrior and his own pike never once losing pace with the long ranks of the great army.

"It feels like days," the boy sighed, his eyes running as ash layered his brow and dark oily tears slid along his young cheeks. The veteran brushed the boy's cheek and lifted him higher so that he could march in unison with the others.

"I bet that it is not like this back at home for you," the veteran said tenderly as the many thousands of boots bashed the ground around them. "No," the boy spoke as his eyes remained closed. it is never this hot in the height of summer nor is it so grim, even in the worse of winter."

"Tell me again of what was your village like?" the veteran asked, around him soldiers stared ahead indifferent to the toil that draped upon his arm. Ahead of them formations rushed to prepare for battle,

an army of greater numbers awaited their arrival.

“Pleasant, we grow the best apples and fruit.” The veteran took note of the boy’s necklace, it thrummed upon his chest with the motion, the soldiers around them began to dash to wider formation, no longer marching to war instead they were preparing to meet it. The veteran carried the boy, he dragged him into position as another soldier holding both his own and the young soldier's pike waited for the boy to reclaim his weapon, all the while his eyes in the distance watching through the polluted air for the presence of an enemy.

“Now I need you to stand upon your own legs and hold your pike.” The veteran helped raise the young warrior, the youth dazed with a delirium. “Point your pike forwards and do as we do,” the veteran insisted.

Drums and horns roared and squealed around the moving army of men, pounding feet and the plodding of hoofs shook the ground as dust and soot draped each of the soldiers. Even the most experienced warriors exhibited a panic on their face as they struggled to orientate themselves among the muddled dance inside the grimacing of so many dirty clouds. The youth did his best to emulate the others, his mind as foggy as the air was dirty.

“Stand firm! Here they come,” an officer's voice yelled out across the wide grouping of pike armed soldiers.

A roar and thumping of hooves blasted from their front, the ranks filled with rows of soldiers jarred and backed against the veteran and his boy companion.

“God help us all!” cried a voice from among the noise.

The young boy soldier bit down on his lip until some blood fell across his teeth as he held the pike tightly, its base was pushed into the dirt as the sharp tip aimed at an unseen incoming horde of enemies that the boy had never before seen or even prior to his enlistment knew existed.

“What about your mothers baked pies?” the veterans calm voice asked, to their front a sudden shock tore into the front ranks as steel met steel and black powder erupted in loud bark followed by a noxious scent.

“They were sweet and sour at the same time.” The boy closed his eyes, for a moment he could taste them. His loins began to grow wet as his young knees tremble. A roar of baying men jeered into one another as smoke and death's mist cascaded around them all.

The soldiers felt the weight and force from those ahead press against them, the boy felt the backside of the man to his front jar against him as shot and shell blasted through the flesh and bones of their comrades despite their armour.

“I would drink milk with them to even the taste out,” the veteran said as he pushed his pike forwards.

Those ahead had been thinned out and now lay trampled dead or dying beneath the enemy. Horse and armed enemy foot soldier pushed blades and lances into the soldiers, swords and rapiers clanged while at close range those with loaded pistol fired them into the chests of their enemy.

The ranks to their front had collapsed and thinned down, the ever-consuming spectre of death chewing through the men with a bestial hunger. The boy felt his pike buckle viciously from within his hands, he opened his eyes and saw that it had impaled deep into the chest of an enemy horse, the animal's shrill wail of agony caused the boy to let go of his grip. The wood of the pike slammed and kicked around as the horse fell into the ground writhing in pain, the young boy soldier ran backwards all he could do was watch as his rank of soldiers crumbled, opening from the hole that he had just allowed.

“Run child, flee!” the veteran yelled as he pushed with great effort his own pike into the faceless enemy.

He soon fell backwards as men collapsed around him. The boy's last impression of the veteran was of the enemy overwhelming him as several of their blades plunged deep into his breast. The roar of cannon and belch of muskets thickened the air as the boy ran, he could not help to let tears fall down his cheeks as he did so. While he pushed through the smoke he took in a breath of cool air, it was free of the acrid sour of battle.

As he turned to see the battle behind him a thump threw him backwards. He fell heavy to the dirt. He could hear the battle though he no longer could smell it. Soon the cries, explosions and meeting of weapons whimpered away instead the groans and pleas sang upwards

as night coldly draped the death scape of carnage.

The boy, now immobile, did not beg or whimper. He only watched the smoke and ash as it fell, and crawled. Occasionally he could see a star as the night beyond the battlefields tomb pushed through.

The pain was constant and ached throughout it was with any attempt to move that he felt a sharpness of agony. The night was as cold as it was long, the pain never letting the boy escape his torment. Instead he watched the sky prayer and memory drizzling across his mind.

Morning rose bringing with it stench and birds, clawing and pecking the black winged beasts devoured the endless puddles of bodies. The boy could not see the thousands around him, his own tragedy was enough for him to contemplate. During the night he had thought about his home, what his little sister would be doing how his mother was coping. Now as the morning opened up the field, the suns new light burning away fog and lingering smoke he could only wait.

“Please take me God, I am ready to die,” the boy mumbled as blood pooled from his wounds, his young face caked in dirt and the dried blood of his pain.

“I can run you through to make it end quick,” an accented voice offered. The boy rolled his head painfully to his side a pair of enemy soldiers were eating only some steps away from him. They had been watching him as he lingered in his final moments.

“Are you my enemy?” the boy asked.

A dire faced soldier laughed before he answered. “You are too young to have enemies.”

“Then why have you killed me?” the boy asked as he coughed.

“It is war, it is what we are supposed to do.” The dire faced enemy soldier continued to eat from his clump of stale bread.

The boy coughed some more as he did his best to sit up, the pain caused him to groan and fall heavier back into the ground.

“You are not going to stand boy, you have nothing to stand upon!” the enemy soldier said as he pushed his bread back into his mouth. The other enemy soldier sniggered as he continued eating. The dire faced

enemy soldier walked towards the boy, and began to kick at something heavy on the ground.

The boy turned his head in the direction of the enemy soldier who struggled with whatever it was that he was moving with his feet. With a heavy thud after a swift final kick the dire faced enemy had moved what it was that he wished to show the boy.

“Like I said, you have nothing by which to stand upon.”

The enemy soldier returned to his fellow so that he could continue to eat. The boy turned his head some more so that he could see. The boy wished that he had not, two mangled and separated legs twisted and bloodied attached to a lower torso rested awkwardly among the blood, dirt and innards. The boy felt numb as warm tears drained down his cheeks. Those were legs, they were *his* legs.

He felt sick though he had no stomach by which to vomit from. He was in half, broken and torn.

“Run me through...” the boy cried softly, blood and spit bubbling upon his lips.

The pair of enemy soldiers remained idle watching him with fascination. The last of their food entering their own bellies. The dire faced enemy stood up and walked so that he peered over the boy, a sword now unsheathed and pressed against the child’s chest. The enemy flicked the necklace upwards from the boy’s neck and pulled it from the end of his sword. He looked at it for a moment.

The dire faced enemy threw the apple necklace to his companion, who caught it eyeing the jewellery with interest before placing it upon his own neck.

“You like apples?” the soldier asked.

“Yes,” the boy whispered.

“As do I.”

The enemy plunged his blade deep into the boy’s heart. The boy watched him, he could say nothing as the cold dirty steel with others blood still on it entered him. The pain ended.

**The End**