

26 Miles – Mile One

A name perpetual and fame permanent and immortal?

Words by Claire Falcon, images by Mark Noad and John Bryson

Unable to sleep, I leave the camp and stand looking out over Blackheath while the early light slowly lends shape to the horizon. For the first time in months, it seems, I have a moment of calm to prepare myself for whatever this last day might bring. I wait for strength to enter my soul, the virtue of truth to stiffen my spine, but instead panic envelops me. My head fills with unwanted thoughts that rush in as if a sluice has, at last, been opened.

What am I doing here? Why in God's name am I, the least warlike of men, looking battle in the face – and against the King's army no less? On this summer morning I should be preparing to explain to a foolish young man of the county why the contract he signed without proper advice is indeed watertight and that in future he'd be wise to consult me beforehand. Or indeed, at this early hour, I should be lying cosily in bed, reaching for the soft, warm shape of my wife, who turns to embrace me with sleepy affection before the day begins. Oh my beloved wife – if only I could lay my troubled conscience at her feet; I value beyond measure her calm wisdom, her open nature, her loving smile. Others laugh and say she is no beauty, but I am no Adonis, so we are well matched, she and I.

Shall I see her again? I cannot bear the thought that I may not. And yet it creeps treacherously into my mind.

Treacherous – is that what we are? This band of 15,000 ill-trained, ill-prepared countrymen slumbering in camp behind me, turned against their will into a rebel army?

Or perhaps it's not against their will. Perhaps for them words are no answer to the deep grievances we, as Cornishmen, came here to resolve. Perhaps I – no warrior, but instead a man of logical argument – perhaps I am here simply to lend respectability to the cause, to enable us to have got this far without the yoke of treason being slung round our necks.

Treason. I shiver in the gentle breeze, but it's not the crisp air which sends long fingers creeping round my bones, reaching deep into my bowels, making me clench every muscle to stop myself collapsing, quivering and insensible on the dewy grass.

Is it true what they say? Is it true that you feel every nerve ending scream in an agony beyond all possible imagination as they rip open your chest, cut out your innards and burn them before your eyes? Can a man really remain conscious through that? Surely the pain must render you insensible; surely God would have mercy and bring about a quick death?

But this cannot be my destiny! I am no traitor – I did not come here to fight the King! I came to speak the truth – to present our case rationally, confident that once in his presence we would be assured of a fair hearing. We should be on the steps of Greenwich Palace, delivering our petition, seeking justice – not camped like soldiers, with makeshift weapons all but useless at our sides; I am not here to fight!

This is Michael's doing. Michael, our self-anointed leader, hot-headed, impulsive, but, too late I realise, an insidiously powerful force. So persuasively does he incite simple men with his passionate calls for action – what chance did I have? My slight frame is no match for his hefty manliness, my words of caution, my urgings towards a peaceful reconciliation were never going to be heard in such a heady atmosphere of retaliation, the immediate cause forgotten in the clamour for revenge for longheld grievances.

He sleeps on back there, his hardy physical nature immune to the anxieties that gnaw at my soul. My fear turns to anger and then to fury at the thought that all I have worked for, all I believe in, all I live for will today be risked for his pride, his lust for glory, his desire to be the saviour of Cornwall. A name perpetual and fame permanent and immortal – these are Michael's aims today; not for him the merits of our case, not for him the righteousness of a just cause.

But as the sun's rays begin to gather strength and a mite of their warmth touches my skin, I hear again my father's voice: "*Speak the truth and only then can you be free of your chains.*" As the words take hold, my anger subsides and my spirit rises. Perhaps sometimes the truth can only be spoken through action. Perhaps sometimes words alone are not enough. Perhaps today, here at Blackheath, with the King's army gathering ahead of us, well-trained, well-armed and outnumbering us by I dread to think how many, perhaps today, Michael's is the only way.

I kneel to pray.

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The Cornish Uprising of 1497

In 1497, Thomas Flamank, a lawyer from Bodmin, joined with blacksmith Michael Joseph (An Gof) to lead the Cornish Rebellion, a popular uprising that saw some 15,000 Cornishmen march to London to protest against Henry VII's levying of war taxes on the people of Cornwall. Flamank's plan was to petition the king, and initially the march was a peaceful one. But as it moved through the south west, it soon became an armed rebellion. It was put down swiftly by the king's forces at the Battle of Blackheath on 17th June 1497. Flamank was captured on the battlefield while An Gof fled and was later captured at Greenwich. Sentenced to a traitor's death, they 'enjoyed the king's mercy' and, on 27th June at Tyburn, were instead hanged until dead before being decapitated. The site of their defeat is marked by a plaque in the wall of Greenwich Park – within the first mile of the London Marathon.

Michael An Gof is recorded to have said before his execution that he should have "*a name perpetual and fame permanent and immortal*".

Thomas Flamank was quoted as saying "*Speak the truth and only then can you be free of your chains*".