



March to Peterloo, from [An Untitled Lady](#), by Nicky Penttila

*[Chapter 38]*

Maddie could see that Deacon had the right of it; neither the coach much less the crested carriage would have made it to within a mile of Middleton this morning. The road, lanes, and paths were filled with folk heading in the same direction. Maddie and the driver barely made it to the edge of town in the field wagon, but were able to give a dozen of the older walkers a ride in the bed of the cart.

Though the day was fine and fair, the air warm even at this early hour, she shivered and held herself close. So many people! There must be hundreds, even thousands, in Middleton alone. Women in simple white dresses and aprons and bonnets, just as she wore; men in their Sunday best. She'd never been alone among so many strangers, and none of her kind, or what she'd been brought up to think were her kind. She'd been so wrong.

As disconcerting as the scene was, her fears faded quickly. The people jostled her, sure, but only in their eagerness to get into the square to join their fellow marchers, who met them with smiles and hearty slaps on the back. They did not frown at her, a stranger, but did not jump to welcome her, either. At last, the hubbub resolved itself. Men were forming up into the sort of contingents she'd seen rehearsing on the hill. Older folk and younger lined the road, looking on, the smaller children running in and out of the columns, practicing for their own parade. The women were forming themselves up farther down the road. She pressed her hands down, smoothing her apron and settling the butterflies in her stomach, and hurried alongside the columns to join them. Though the roadway here was cobbled, it smelled of fresh-turned earth after rain.

After a half-hearted attempt to dissuade her, Deacon had agreed to store her things at the castle until she sorted out where she would be living next. It hurt to wrench herself away from them, from everything, in the dawn-dark of early morning. Maddie knew this track would take her, finally, to her true family, but this first step was not solid, more a footfall on a swaying bridge, with Kitty and her father on the far side.

A bugle blast at her shoulder made her jump. Mr. Bamford stood at the musician's side, waiting for his tune to quiet the crowd. As all faces turned expectantly toward him, Maddie saw Kitty, only a few yards away. Her sister waved her over.

"Cut it a bit fine, didn't you? Should have stayed the night like I said. We sang and talked till dawn." She held a slip of green cloth.

“That’s your banner?”

Kitty unrolled it. Gold lettering on silk, *Suffrage Universal* on one side, *Parliaments Annual* on the other. “Made it ourselves, didn’t we? My words is in the speech, the prockle.”

“Proclamation?”

“Our president, Mrs. Fildes, is to give it to Hunt on the hustings, and he’ll read it out to the crowd. ‘May our flag never be unfurled but in the cause of peace and reform. And may a female’s curse pursue the coward who deserts the standard.’ I suggested the curse bit.”

“Will he really read it aloud?”

“He did at Blackburn, didn’t he? And Mrs. Fildes is to stand up with him, and we might as well. To hold the banner.”

Maddie’s breath caught in her throat. Stand before all these people? Her gaze darted from head to head. Far too many to count. The bugle shocked her into attention again, and Bamford started to speak.

“We are here assembled to attend the most important meeting that has ever been held for Parliamentary Reform, and we will show the steadiness and seriousness befitting the occasion. In our Sunday best, in step with the music, we will cast shame on our opponents, on those who call us a mob, who call us a rabble, who say we don’t deserve justice. They will see their error today. They will see in us a mirror of themselves, true patriots.”

The crowd roared and stamped, their sounding a tattoo on the cobbles. Maddie wondered if what he said could come true. The committee men she’d met seemed far from recognizing working folk as human, much less mirrors of themselves.

Bamford waved his arm, and the crowd quickly quieted.

The gesture was familiar. Deacon had used the same pat-on-the-head motion last night during supper. “Nash is a fool to give you up,” he’d said.

“He doesn’t want me. He wants another biddable worker.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. Something is wrong, and as you’re sitting here mope-faced, I lay the blame at his door. I truly thought he was getting better, you were serving as good influence, but obviously he’s more truculent than even I could imagine. Cutting you loose is by far the stupidest thing he’s ever done, and the sooner he realizes that and makes it up to you, the better.”

The pain behind her ribs tightened. She was also to blame for their troubles, no matter how Deacon saw it. Their marriage was a casualty of Nash’s ambition, Maddie’s accident of birth, and Manchester itself.

Bamford raised his arms. “Stay in your forms; follow your leaders. There may be those among us who would take advantage of our numbers by causing a riot. Do not follow them. Our hatbands sport sprigs of laurel, emblem of purity and peace. Offer insult to no one; on this day, suffer insult if you must to keep the peace, but know this. The first man who picks up a stick or a rock, the first man who raises a shiv or a cudgel against his fellow Englishman, that man ruins all. For that man will have proved to the nobs that we are nothing more than the rabble they believe us to be. It may be I am arrested, or others. We will offer no resistance, and do not you offer resistance on my behalf. I prefer to appeal to the laws of my country rather than to force. Is that not the very reason we meet today?”

The crowd's cheering forced him to pause again. "Now, my country sisters and brothers, let us carry our banners, made with pride by our own hands. Let the band lead us. And let us bring our festive ways into the heart of this Puritanical town of strangers. A reformer's wake, with us the rushcarts. For Reform!"

Another roar of cheers swelled past Maddie and down the road. As it subsided, line leaders called for order, and the band struck up "God Save the King". She lined herself up just behind Kitty, who held one edge of the banner at the front of the first row. From the bonnet on her head to the high hem of her white skirt, Maddie matched the others. But her sturdy boots stood out. She hadn't thought to obtain clogs.

There must be one hundred women, a lake of white against the blues and browns of the men following. Their husbands, sons, lovers. Of those Maddie now had none, but today they were all her brothers.

The heaviness lifted from her lungs. She was part of something bigger than herself, something hopeful and good and true. With more spirit than she'd felt in months, she joined her voice to the others in praising "our gracious king."

\* \* \* \*

At the north edge of town, near the gate entering on Shude Hill, Nash and Trefford stood by their horses as they watched workers march past by the thousands.

Trefford's blue-and-white yeoman's uniform drew quite a few looks, but no one missed a step or a note of song. As he was alone on the hill with Nash, he must not be considered much of a threat, despite the nasty truncheon tied to his belt. His hands were busy with his flask at the moment.

Row after neat row of singing or smiling, Sunday-best men and wives filed past. Nash could see a few breaks in the column as it swept down Cheetham Hill Road, but he did not see a tail end as yet. Just as the drumbeat and fiddle sound of one group faded, that of the next could be heard.

The people held banners rather than pulling wakes carts, and they were clearly more sober than at wakes, but he felt the same sense of holiday as during those jubilant parades. Today's purpose might be serious, but their aspect, at least on this long march south to St. Peter's fields, was boisterous and gay.

He couldn't help grinning. "It's wakes, or an overgrown Sunday school scholars' parade, isn't it?"

Trefford did not share their enthusiasm.

Nash pressed him. "Look at their organization. Even their arms swing in step."

"These rebels are taking orders, all right, but from whom? Shades of the Jacobins." Trefford spit, hitting too close to his horse, which shied off. Nash's rented gelding didn't flick an ear.

"Nonsense. Take another look. Not one has a weapon. They've brought their children, for god's sake. Who would start a riot with their children on the field?"

"Men who carry banners like that." Trefford pointed to a large black banner, white letters spelling *Equal Representation or Death*. Beneath the dire words was another, *Love*, and an image of two hands clasping over a heart.

Nash's eyebrows arched. "I do prefer the blue one: *Unity and Strength, Liberty and Brotherhood*."

“See that green one, *No Corn Laws, Annual Parliaments*. Precious little chance of that. Just look at those women.” Trefford whistled.

A new regiment was following, at least four score women in the lead, their white bonnets tied at the same jaunty angle. But their banner, a beautiful green and red silk, carried a slogan oddly dour: *Let us DIE like men and not be SOLD as slaves*.

Trefford pursed his lips, and then quickly glanced at his horse. “Jezebels all, and dressed to match the French mob.”

“Or the vestal virgins.”

Trefford snorted. “If they wish to act like men, by god we’ll treat them as men. Into the New Bailey with the lot of them.”

“You can’t jail a man without cause, nor a woman, either.” They’d done it before, though. The thought chilled Nash to the marrow. What had Maddie gotten herself into? She should be at his side, watching, a silent witness or even a cheering one. Instead he’d let her fly into the fray.

No, he’d pushed her into it. He knew she wouldn’t find herself at the hands of Trefford and his lot, but what other mischief could accost her?

His grip tightened on the lead, tugging the horse closer. Patting her calm helped restore his temper.

A man stood to the edge of the paraders. Nash recognized Bamford, even under that ancient hat, and beckoned to him. The weaver waved and hiked up the short hill, his bugler in tow. Nash shook his hand, and turned to introduce Trefford, who quickly stepped aside to avoid the introduction. Nash spoke loudly, to rise over the din of the marchers and ensure Trefford heard every word.

“A right fine turnout, Mr. Bamford. I trust you still intend no harm?”

“None at all, Mr. Quinn. I would pledge my life for their entire peaceableness.” He turned and swept his hand across the line. “Do they look like persons wishing to outrage the law? Are they not, clearly, heads of decent working households, and their kin?”

“Much like.” Nash’s gaze flicked to Trefford, obviously listening though pretending to see to his horse’s bridle.

“Just so. If any wrong or violence take play, they will be committed by men of a different stamp than these.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I did think we might be stopped at the toll-gates, but no trouble there. Does that mean the meeting won’t be prevented?”

“The meeting is on.”

“Then all will be well.” He touched the sprig in his cap and led his man back to the tail end of a column. They led the band in “Cherry Ripe.”

“So, Trefford, what will you report? I don’t see a massed army surrounding the town, ready to invade.”

The yeoman used a downed log to hoist himself onto his horse.

“Then you’re blind. Are wives arm-in-arm with their husbands? Hand-in-hand with their children? No. They are regimented up just like the men, and in the front, like cannon fodder. This is no family meeting.” He kicked his horse into a fast walk, then a trot.

Nash had to scramble onto his own horse and fly down the side track to catch up. Trefford's report best not be the only one the sitting magistrates heard.

\* \* \* \*

Maddie was glad to march behind the banner that read *Liberty and Fraternity. Brothers, sisters, and freedom*. It seemed positively English, and increasingly possible, as judged from the center of thousands of marchers stepping lively on a bright-blue summer morning. Even the weather, dry if a shade warm, favored them.

At the last resting stop, Mr. Bamford had spoken of their possibly being detained outside the city, but as they passed the gate, they saw only one of the yeomanry standing among the onlookers. No one was going to stop them. A three-part cheer rose from behind her, and then the singing started up again, "Cherry Ripe." But Maddie's voice jammed in her throat. Nash stood next to that official.

Did he see her? She stepped closer to the woman beside her, hanging in her faint shadow. Surely he was too far away to distinguish her from the others.

Why had he come? Of course. He was an official, too. A pig-tailed gentry, a know-nothing, a dangerous fool. She'd heard all three epithets, plus more she couldn't quite understand, hurled at the magistrates and their committee by the marchers. Were they wrong? Not if one based judgment on the actions of others. Yes, if one based judgment on empathy, or understanding.

For a moment, amid all these bodies and their melodic shouting, Maddie felt alone, singled out, even as she knew she was invisible. How was it that only she could see both sides of the argument, that only she could see how the antipathy between the people and their masters only hurt them both? She didn't want this special sight, if that was what it was. She wanted to be as straight and sure as Kitty, or as Mr. Malbanks, or anyone else, really. It was easy to stay in one's place when one knew what one's place was.

As they neared the town, more and more spectators lined the roads, as well as white-smocked weavers, spinners, and other workers forming into their own contingents. They were entering the narrower streets now, and their party split, one taking the high road. The second, with the women's contingent, dropped down the lane to Smedley Cottage, to lead Mr. Hunt's carriage to the fields.

"We need a fiddler or three," Kitty called out. Bamford waved the closest two, a woman and her daughter, to keep their time.

The sound of music and cheering seemed to come from every direction, though they could only see themselves in the narrow street. Finally they reached the cottage, where stood a carriage with no horses but young men to pull it. Hunt was handing a well-dressed working woman into the coach.

"That's Mrs. Mary Fildes, with young George Swift. They're going to speak to the whole crowd. Who says women can't do what the men can do?" Kitty gave a loud huzzah.

The sound turned Hunt's head. He waved them over to join them in the coach. Kitty clambered on eagerly, the banner with her, but Maddie shook her head. The carriage smacked of her old life. She needed to walk to get to her new one.

Then she spied her father, among the men pulling the coach. She pushed over to him.

“Hie on up to the coach with you.”

She shook her head “Can I help you?”

“No, but take this.” He pulled a tambourine out from under his shirt. It was warm from his body and scented of him. “Lead us. You’ll need to make a lot of noise to get anyone’s attention.” He nodded at her.

She took the tambourine and gave it a shake. Joy filled her heart so fast she thought it might burst. This is where she belonged.

Despite the jostle and general hubbub, the chariot finally set off, Kitty sitting beside the driver, and Mrs. Fildes, who truly was as pretty as everyone said, beside the Orator. The young man sat post.

The convoy set off at a pace almost as slow as a funeral. It took an hour just to carry on down Deansgate. All Maddie could see, though, was her father, pulling with a dozen other men, smiling if he couldn’t sing. He looked a different man when he smiled.

All was giddy excitement as they made the last turning and could see the fields beside St. Peter’s church. And the more than sixty thousand faces looking for them.

Her father must have heard the stutter in her rhythm at the shock of the sight. Their gazes locked, and he grinned at her. She grinned right back. Even as the din threatened to burst her eardrums, she felt as if he were the only other person there.

*[Chapter 39]*

“*Hunt! Hunt! Huzzah!*”

The roar of the gathered crowd carried the force of an ocean wave, pushing Maddie back on her heels. She turned to see Mr. Hunt standing in the carriage, a stern smile on his lips, his legs braced by his fellow passengers.

The bands took up the refrain to “*See the Conquering Hero Come*” as the women and carriage pushed into the crowd. Though the path from Mount Street to the speakers’ platform was lined by special constables, the carriage could not easily make its way down the street to reach it. Maddie and the other women made no headway against the thickening tide of people. Each contingent on the field had clumped together around its banner, leaving barely the width of one person between. The Middleton contingent was forced to press ever closer together.

Her father, in the lead of the cart, called for the women to fall back. Maddie and the others gratefully stepped to the side to let the barouche pass. Even Mr. Hunt, sitting straight in the seat, and taller in his signature white top hat, looked a bit taken aback by the size of the crowd. Mrs. Fildes beside him waved a small flag. Kitty waved her larger one side to side, her arms pumping as if there were a great wind. Her grin rivaled the sun, bright and high at one o’clock.

Maddie fell in behind the carriage, its wheels kicking up dust even on ground as hard-packed at St. Peter’s field in high summer. There would be no shelter from the sun—not the smallest cloud marred the blue of the sky. She began to wish she’d had more than a few sips of water at the last stop.

After they breached the first of the two single rows of constables, protecting a path from lower Mount Street to the speaker’s platform, it was only a minute’s work to reach it. Two flat wagons lashed together, a short stair between them, formed the platform, or what the country folk called hustings. The men pulled the barouche to the side, and Hunt jumped to the ground, then handed Mrs. Fildes and Kitty down. Other women took up places in the carriage for a bit of rest. One looked as if she might give birth at any moment.

Kitty was the first up the steps, joining some two dozen others already on the platform. She took a place on the far right, away from the constables, seating herself on a large drum. She held the banner out so all could see the image: Justice, an elegant woman dressed in pale blue, carrying scales in one hand and treading the serpent of corruption under her boot.

Maddie didn’t recognize the handful of other women on the stand, nor the many men. Mr. Bamford was not there; he must have remained with their contingent. Kitty’s head swiveled side to side, her smile dimming. Was she looking for her?

Maddie pushed through the crowd to reach her before the space in front of the hustings packed too tight with people. Those in the back were surging toward the front, pushing the women who circled the wagons even closer. For the first time, she felt uneasy. She was well and truly trapped here, even if it was blue sky overhead and not a prison ceiling.

When Kitty caught sight of her, at the edge of the wagon, she gestured frantically for Maddie to come up, patting the edge of the drum to offer her a perch. Her mouth

moved, but the cacophony of voices around her stole the words away. Clapping and chanting skittered over their heads, with the chatter of thousands rumbling underneath.

Maddie started to slide past the last few women in her path, but a picture of Nash flashed through her mind. It was bad enough a committee man's wife attended a workers' meeting, but to stand on its stage? Could she truly break from him so completely?

Why not? In for a penny, in for a pound. She made it to the back of the "stage" and took the steps up. Kitty pulled her into a sideways hug on top of the drum. She grinned, twin to her sister's.

Where was their father? If he were on the platform, too, it would be perfect. But Hunt's head popped up from the stairwell; as he stepped onto the hustings, it rocked. Too many feet on it already. Their Da must have gone around the other way.

Hunt held up a hand. A pocket of quiet washed across the field. Then a roar the likes of which Maddie had never heard rumbled through the field, resolving itself into a single word: "Hunt! Hunt! Hunt!"

\* \* \* \*

"So, a Sunday-school parade, after all."

Nash stepped into the first-floor parlor of a Mr. Buxton's house on Mount Street, his mouth gripping a smile. Trefford might have told him the magistrates had moved from the Inn to here, across the street from St. Peter's fields.

Most of the men didn't turn from where they stood, staring out the wide bowed windows at the swirl of bodies that filled the field, but Heywood, seated at a writing desk, looked at him and frowned. He was too late. The first words out of Malbanks's mouth proved it.

"Nothing like. Trefford reported in already. Death threats sewn lovingly into flags. And look at the women. All in white, impudent hags."

Nash joined them at the window. The first dozen rows rounding the stand were women, a sea of white faces, dresses and bonnets, as if the two dozen people on the hustings were the center of a daisy and the first rows of listeners its petals. "Mothers and daughters, all," Nash said.

Chief constable Nadin crossed his roast-beef arms in front of his porcine chest. "Not our mothers and daughters. Harlots all, drunk on the poison of reform."

"Need to be taught a lesson," agreed Malbanks.

A cold foreboding brushed Nash's forehead. Maddie was out there somewhere, marching and singing. She had deserted him in favor of the family that had once deserted her. The pain of it seemed lodged in his gut.

"What lesson?" At their silence, he pictured the worst. "You'd throw them all into jail?"

The church bells chimed over the top of the hour. Nash tried to follow the tune to quell his rising sense of panic. Then a wave of roaring noise crashed against the house, rattling the window frames.

He'd never heard a sound at such volume, far greater even than the steady rumble-roar of the largest manufactory. "Hunt! Hunt! Huzzah!"

Nash leaned out the window. Past the heads of Malbanks and Nadin leaning from the window beside him, he saw a barouche and the white top hat that was Hunt's. He had women in the carriage with them, waving more of those banners.



Nash was sorry to recognize “Hail the Conquering Hero Comes,” on the trumpets and drums. The scene did remind him of the stories of Roman coliseums and gladiators primed for battle. Hunt planned to fight today with only words. How could he win?

They pulled their heads back in and turned to stare at one another, eyes wide. Even now, with all they had expected, the sheer force of a crowd this size shocked them.

Heywood approached the window. “Gentlemen?”

“A riot, just waiting for Hunt to set spark to tinder,” Malbanks said.

“Nothing of the sort.” Nash had to shout to be heard over the crowd.

Malbanks pointed at the banners. “*Liberty or Death. Equal Representation or Death.* There’s no other interpretation.”

Nash tried to remember those he’d seen. “*Labour is the Source of Wealth. Taxation without Representation is Unjust?*”

“Enough.” Heywood stepped up to the window and handed a sheet of paper out to Nadin. “Constable, please arrest Mr. Hunt and his fellow organizers.”

Nadin pulled his head from the window’s opening. “I’ll need more help, with this crowd.”

Malbanks nearly skipped to the window. “My yeomanry will back you up.”

Heywood walked heavily back to the writing table. “We’ll call the cavalry first.”

Nash stepped in front of the desk, startling Heywood into dropping the pen. “You never intended to let this happen.” Heywood stared at him as if he were an insect, letting Malbanks talk for him.

“On the contrary. This is exactly what we intend. Show the people that these gatherings are a danger, to us and to them. Especially to them.”

Nash couldn’t let this go. Heywood had the ultimate power. He could still stop this.

He grabbed the man’s wrist. “You are going to attack women and children?”

“We attack no one. We intend simply to arrest the men on the stands. We will read the Riot Act, and the people will disperse. This is too big for us, Quinn. We can’t control a mob.”

Malbanks stared out at his unsuspecting victims and smacked his lips. “Without the head of the snake to lead them, the tail will straggle back to their homes. Tails between their legs.”

“Snakes don’t have legs,” Nash said softly.

“Details. An enemy that would not hesitate to commit murder. That is what we have saved our country from today.”

Heywood wrenched his hand from Nash’s grip. “Call in the message-riders, Quinn, on your way out.”

Malbanks slapped the window’s sill. “Perhaps you’d wish to accompany them. It’s your bruiser of a wife riding post with Hunt. No doubt she’ll join him on the hustings.”

“You lie.” Nash ran to the window. He could see only the back of her, tawny curls under the band of a classic bonnet.

“Loose hair, loose morals, my mam always said. You heard what she did to poor Wetherby.”

Nash closed his eyes. It could not be true. “He deserved it.”

“Careful, man, or I’ll have you arrested as a Radical spy,” Malbanks said. “As well as for slander.”

\* \* \* \*

On the hustings, Maddie found the sights and especially the sounds overwhelming, but Kitty seemed to bask in the roar. Her feet square to the corner of the platform, she stood tall, surveying the tens of thousands of people facing her. The tallest heads in the crowd seemed high enough only to kiss her clogs.

Another lady reformer stood parallel to Kitty on the right side of the hustings, waving one of Stockton’s rather militant black flags. Kitty’s gorgeous deep-green silk seemed more appropriate.

From her perch at the back of the platform, Maddie gave up trying to guess the numbers in the crowd. It filled the huge field, overflowing onto the streets at the rear, and people still pushed in. The women in the front rows were now squeezed so tight they looked like threads pressed out of pattern. Washerwomen, cotton batters, weavers, hand laborers, and hawkers of all sorts, all in white, all calling and clapping.

Hunt held up a second hand, and the chanting ceased. Maddie swayed; her ears had grown so accustomed to the chants and roars, their sudden absence threw her off balance. Now she could hear the regiments’ flags snapping behind him on the hustings and before him on the ground.

“My friends, we are here peaceably assembled.” The hush settled on the crowd, at least those who could hear his voice, ready to listen to a speech she expected would last a good hour or more.

Hunt projected his voice out, but somehow it also rolled back and around her. She’d always been in the midst of the crowd before. The odd ricochet made her feel singled out, as if she were helping Hunt speak.

Hunt’s cadences seemed to draw the attention of even the double row of special constables. What had Kitty called them? Penny-pinching pawnbrokers, second-rate inn keeps who sold watered ale, and men of business who kept their boot on the throats of their workers, taxing their wages for imagined infractions while dressing their wives in French thread. How could they stand there so blithely among thousands who resented them?

As he spoke the word “countrymen,” Hunt waved his arm, drawing her gaze toward the far end of the corridor of specials. A movement. Horses, with men upon them, tossed their heads, mincing in place.

That must be the yeomanry Nash talked about. High upon their saddles, making their way down the aisle of constables, they were going to arrest Hunt. Many had expected Hunt would be arrested by day’s end, but his speech had only just started. What could he have said already that was seditious?

Most in the crowd strained to hear the vibrant sentences of the speaker, but the sound of murmuring grew as more and more people saw the horses.

“Steady, friends,” Hunt called out. “Welcome them. Show them our new ways. If they want me, they will have me. No striking back.”

The lead horseman raised an unsteady sword, as if in drunken greeting. The crowd closest to him raised their arms and their voices, calling and responding, as if they

were at the loom, or the spinning-wheel, or church on Sunday. The chorus spread across the crowd, a wave of salutes sparkling like water over pebbles in a brook.

The horses looked nervous, side-stepping, coming too close to the tightly packed bodies. The lead horseman turned, perhaps to see if his men were following him, but that turned his horse's head as well. The horse lurched into the crowd, which spilled into the open aisle to get away from it.

"Stand fast!" Hunt's call was picked up by the leaders of the regiments across the field. "They ride among us, stand fast."

Other horses and their riders had lodged themselves in pockets along the route, people jamming their paths, unable to move. The horses snorted in panic. The lead man—did he grin?—lifted his sword and slashed it down. Blood spurted from the head of a defenseless woman.

Other riders had drawn and were cutting. But the bulk of the yeomanry was pounding toward the hustings, toward her, their swords out, their horses' eyes crazed.

Fear punched Maddie in the chest. She stepped back, against the drum, and almost fell off the platform. A man in the platform's center was waving, standing halfway up the stairs. "Women this way!"

Maddie reached for Kitty, and they locked hands. Her sister's face was wild with anger, but the noise was such Maddy couldn't hear what she was shouting. As they were pushed down the stairs, Kitty's hand let go.

Maddie turned back, pulling herself out of the stream of ladies running for the carriage to go back for Kitty. The wagons were rocking, the ties binding them together pulling apart. The yeoman must be boarding from the front.

The short stair collapsed.

*[Chapter 40]*

“Good god, sir, don’t you see they are attacking the yeomanry? Disperse the meeting!”

Heywood’s voice was ragged as he stood at the top of the steps to Buxton’s house, but his eyes were clear with rage. From the base of the steps, Nash watched him order Lt. Col. L’Estrange to send his trained cavalry troops into battle as if he were watching a play upon the stage. This couldn’t be real.

Ethelston leaned out the balcony’s window, speaking the words to the Riot Act in a voice that only the soldiers and committee men could hear. At least the Act allowed the crowd an hour to disperse. Nothing serious could happen till then.

They intended to arrest Hunt. To arrest Maddie. He played through his mind the steps he’d need to take to get her released from jail. He wasn’t sure who the magistrate on duty was this week, but surely no one would want women held in that cesspit overnight. He’d pledge the warehouse as surety; they couldn’t want more. But what if they charged her with gross sedition? There might be no bail at all.

The thought of her locked away from him tore at his chest. He pushed it out of mind, concentrating on the military arrayed against her. L’Estrange had mounted and was shouting orders. Nash grabbed the man’s ankle, careful to avoid spooking his charger. The lieutenant was young but cool under fire, and he’d put up with the committee with no more than the occasional locked jaw and reminder that they were no longer at war.

“You’ll not wait the hour?”

“I have my orders.” He’d just ordered them to present. They were going in now.

Nash didn’t let go. “But there are women and children here.”

“I have my orders, sir.” But he put a hand on Nash’s shoulder. “I’m not a monster, man. We won’t wage war on the people.” But that was exactly what the yeomanry were doing, Nash saw as he trailed the horses to the edge of the street. Those part-time soldiers had not been in danger, yet had lashed out. He knew reinforcements, infantry and artillery, stood in the streets to his left and right. If this caught fire, no one would escape it.

Maddie, his Maddie, was in the thick of it.

Malbanks stood beside him and grimaced. “A right scheme, this was. Every district in Britain is in revolt. At least Manchester will be preserved. We will not be taken.”

Nash couldn’t help responding, though he knew nothing could reverse the man’s mind. “You’ve made it so they cannot escape, even the innocent. The exits are blocked.”

“Just as well. Quicker this way.”

“May all the souls who die today wait for you at the pearly gates.” St. Peter himself must surely be watching.

“They are traitors, Quinn. They will rest in hell.”

Nash mounted his horse, trying to steady his mind so he wouldn’t spook her. As he turned the mare’s head toward lower Mosley Street, away from the field, he watched L’Estrange’s Fifteenth Hussars lining themselves along the eastern end of the field. They would be the bottom pincer, with the yeomanry at the north the top, pressing the people into the fixed bayonets of the Eighty-eighth Infantry. A slaughter waiting to happen.

Nash knew he couldn't stop it. He knew he should run. In battle, weapons don't discriminate.

He turned his horse back toward the crowd. Toward Maddie.

He followed the wake of the first line of cavalry. As they met the crowd, they slowed, and he shot through them toward the hustings, barely registering the bloody gashes and moans of constables and crowd alike. The field was screaming. He opened his mouth to match it, to keep the scream from lodging inside him.

Fewer than a dozen people still stood on the hustings, constables in blue pushing men in brown down. A flash of white at the front, skirts swinging. Her bonnet pushed back, her arms wielding the pole like a scythe, Maddie seemed to be floating in midair.

She must have tried to jump and caught herself on a piece of the wagon. She couldn't reach the ground. She couldn't get away.

A yeoman galloped past, slashing the pole apart damned close to her hands. She wriggled and reached back, trying to free herself, as the man turned his horse to charge her again.

Nash gouged his horse's belly, pushing her to run. He had to get there first.

Her arms crossed in front of her, the short pole facing away, as she swung to nearly facing him. The front of her dress was dark red with blood. Someone had already gotten to her.

Bile rose to his throat, his nose. His horse snorted at the pain of his kicks. He would kill that yeoman.

As he rode past Trefford, arm raised for another blow, Nash stripped the sword from his hand. Not slowing down as he reached the platform, he swung the blade to just behind Maddie. His arm rang at the impact of the weapon on the nail, but the blade won out. She was free. He leaned to wrap his left arm around her shoulders, but she'd slid water-fast to the ground.

With a powerful underswing, he knocked the charging yeoman's sword away. As the man passed, the surprise on his face turned to pain as Nash punched him in the side hard enough to knock him off his beast.

Nash dropped down beside her. The screams, the shouts, the sickening crunch of bone and suck of wounded flesh that had assaulted him while astride fell to nothing. All he heard was her too-loud gasps, the gurgle of blood punctuating the end of each breath.

She lay in a ball, trying to protect her insides. From the front, he could see her shoulder blades between the pulses of her heart.

"Cross your arms tight, sweetheart. Hold yourself in."

He scooped her up, and pushed himself to stand. Her head lolled back, eyes closed, pain altering her features beyond recognition. He had to get her help. The hospital, or Lady Egerton's house. Heywood's, if he had to. Her hand scrabbled at his shirt, but had no strength to grasp it.

"That's him!"

He looked up at L'Estrange riding toward him. Then eye level, at the angry young yeoman he'd felled. The first punch, to his jaw, only made him stagger. The second, at his temple, stunned him enough that he let go of Maddie. She hit the ground without a whimper.

"Enough! He's under arrest. I'll take him myself. Yeoman, move on."

Nash dropped to his knees, trying to scoop her up again. As he touched her shoulder, her body gave way.

Her dress gaped open, exposing all she had lost. He slipped off his coat and draped it over her, shielding her innards from the sun.

He wiped the gore from her beautiful face. Her head fell back, lids opening, her unseeing eyes a pure reflection of the sky's perfect blue.

Kitty.

\* \* \* \*

Faster than the day's faint breeze, panic swept across the field. The crowd that had been pressing so persistently toward the hustings now was fleeing it. Maddie quickly made her way to the front of the platform.

On the boards, the dark-clad special constables had their truncheons out, clubbing whomever stood in their path, their weapons rising and falling. One constable tugged Hunt by the coattails as if to throw him off the stand and onto the ground. Others were ripping the flags and breaking their poles, some by swinging them at the people on the stands. She saw the older lady fall. Chivalry be damned; they were not going to spare the women today.

A man jumped from the wagon, falling into the path of one of the part-time cavalry. Maddie quickly looked away, but she couldn't block out the sound of crunching bone and howling voice. It took her eyes panicked seconds to find Kitty in the melee. Her sister had backed up, pushing the giant drum between her and the club-wielding men. But two of them had longer reach, landing blows on her shoulders. One knocked her hand back into her face, blacking her eye.

The pain of each blow seemed to echo in Maddie's body. Her vision blurred.

"Jump, Kit! I'll catch ye." Her father's voice cut through the din. He was as far away as Maddie, but back and to the side, pushing against a tide of fleeing women. The truncheons would lay Kitty low before he got to her.

Maddie got to the front edge of the hustings first. "No! Jump here. Here!" She pounded on the bed of the wagon, as if her puny force could distract anyone from the grisly dance on stage.

Kitty must have heard her; they locked gazes. Another blow knocked Kitty's shoulder crooked, but she kicked the drum at him, pushing him back and giving her room to run straight off the front of the stage. Maddie stepped back to give her space to fall. She held out her arms and held in her breath, bracing for her sister's dead weight.

She didn't hear the horseman until the force of another flailing body hit her from behind. She was thrust forward, past the corner of the stage, landing on her hands and hips a good yard from where Kitty should have landed. Maddie's face and hair were wet with blood. A young man, his shoulder cleaved from his body, lay across her.

She had to get back to Kitty. She rolled out from under him, not listening, not hearing his screams, and scrambled to her knees. Spitting dust and blood, she blinked hard to clear her vision, and then wished she hadn't.

In front of her were the deadly prancing steps of giant horseshoes. Which meant above her was one of those killing swords. She froze, her fear so great it sharpened every sense while dulling her power of volition. "This is Waterloo for you!" His sword hand wobbled, a sign of poor practice, but it did not stop its arc directly at her.

It was only inches away when she regained control of her limbs. She pushed herself backwards, trying to get away, but the movement first raised her chest, pushing it toward the blade.

The force of the blow severed the plackets of her dress and pounded her heart into a solid bruise. But it also pushed her farther back and down, where he couldn't reach her to deal a second blow from way up on that high horse. She told her limbs to move, scramble away from those sharpened hooves, but they did not respond. She wasn't going to be able to help Kitty. She couldn't even help herself.

She closed her eyes, shutting the blood and din and smell and chaos out. In the safety of her mind, she said farewell to Kitty, to her friends from school, to her parents, one by one.

Then Nash's face flashed behind her eyelids. She couldn't say goodbye to him. He refused to listen, even in her own imagination. He would not let go, would not believe she was through. Get up, he said, and fight for your family. That's how you prove you deserve one.

She opened her eyes. She lay on her side beside the bloodied man, now merely groaning. The cavalryman had turned away from her, looking for more live meat. She moved her arm and pressed her palm against her chest. Dry. No blood.

Shocked into sense, she ran her fingers up and down. The blade had split one of the stays in her corset. The stays were bone, two inches wide and a quarter-inch thick, she knew from the corset maker's advert. Her skin might be scratched enough to scar, but nothing more.

If she could just catch her breath, she could get away from here. Windmill Street wasn't but twenty yards behind her. She struggled to sit up, and wiped at the blood on the side of her neck and face.

A thought floated by. She wasn't modestly attired at the moment, her dress gapping like that and blood all in her hair. She shouldn't really be seen in public. The idea somehow calmed her, and she took a sip of air.

"There ye be." Strong hands under her arms jerked her to her feet. Her father, a gash on his temple but still seeming to have all his senses. He must have helped Kitty, and then come back for her. "Can ye run or must I carry ye?"

She took a step and did not fall. He clasped her hand in his, both slippery, hers from blood, his simple sweat. They slipped under the wagons and then dashed onto the street. The yeomanry must have massed here, she could see their trampling, but all were on the field now.

Step by labored step, they slid past the carnage. Screams and a crunch of metal behind them turned her head. Between the horses, she saw a pile of arms and legs and torsos tumbling down one of the cellars of a rowhouse.

With each step, Maddie's dim hopes rose. She might live through this.

"Keep moving, lass. We're not safe yet."

But safety felt just a step ahead. Beside them stumbled women and men with cuts across their faces and hands and children whose faces were streaked only with terror.

"Just around the bend."

With a sigh of relief, they passed the crowd at Mount Street and could see the sign for lower Moseley and escape. But as they passed the final knot of men and horses, the flow of frightened people around them stopped.

Turning the corner, blocking their escape, came an army, bayonets fixed and aimed straight at them.

Maddie and the others froze in terror. Then they realized the soldiers were only creeping at them. They weren't going to mow them down, merely slowly crush them underfoot. They did not leave room enough for a body to pass. Regular troops, trained and cool under the heat of the sun, they would not stop.

Maddie recovered her wits before her father did. She tugged him to the side of the street. His feet trod slowly, as if his clogs were sticking to the cobblestones.

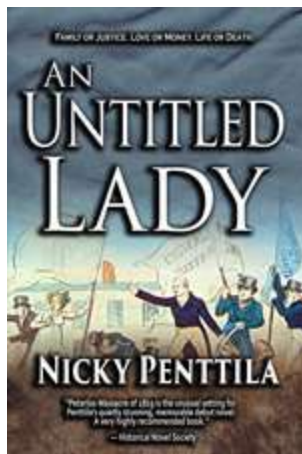
There—an eighteen-inch alley between houses, not meant for any but the night-soil man. She dragged him to the entry and pushed him in ahead of her. He was a tight squeeze, and unwilling. The stench stalled her too, but holding her breath she pressed them on. They had no other option.

They popped out into a closed space less than the width of Nash's bed and holding three privies, ancient but still in use. Maddie bent, hands on her thighs, to recover her breath. But her nose refused to take in the air her lungs were screaming for. She forced herself to inhale; the air scorched her nose and burned its way down to her already bruised lungs. Her body felt as if it were working at one-quarter capacity, her heart as leaden as that artillery's cannon.

The courtyard's filth hurt her eyes, but the picture of what had occurred on the field blotted it out. Impressions she had not had time to notice in their pell-mell escape now crowded her mind for attention. One woman screaming as another's forehead split open. A man, clutching his hand, hanging from a fold of skin, his attacker riding away with the pole he had been holding. Mounds of clothing writhing in the dust and dirt. A boy, unhurt, not running away but crouching beside his fallen mother, crying for help. So much blood.

"Go ahead, cry, sweeting." Her father laid his heavy hand on her shoulder. She felt him shudder. "Hunt and them had it wrong. City rules don't hold for Manchester men."

From [An Untitled Lady](#), by Nicky Penttila



"Powerful. Disturbing. Heartbreaking. Smart. Occasionally gentle, often brutal. And always enthralling. An atypical setting, an actual historical event, masterfully layered characters and a sophisticated, seamless narrative — *An Untitled Lady* is a standout, gripping historical romance, unlike any Regency you've ever read." —*USA Today*