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The Rout of the White Hussars

By RUDYARD KIPLING.

The band stopped playing, and for a moment there was a hush.

Then some one in E troop—men said it was the troop sergeant major—swung his horse round and yelled. No one can account exactly for what happened after- ward, but it seems that at least one man in each troop set an example of panic, and the rest followed like sheep. The horses that had barely put their muzzles into the troughs reared and capered, but as soon as the band broke, which it did when the ghost of the drum horse was about a furlong distant, all hoofs followed suit, and the clatter of the stampede—quite different from the orderly throb and roar of a movement on parade or the rough horse- play of watering in camp—made them only more terrified. They felt that the men on their backs were afraid of some- thing. When horses once know that, all is over except the butchery.

Troop after troop turned from the troughs and ran—anywhere and every- where—like spilled quicksilver. It was a most extraordinary spectacle, for men and horses were in all stages of eagerness, and the carbine buckets flopping against their sides urged the horses on. Men were shouting and cursing and trying to pull clear of the band which was being chased by the drum horse, whose rider had fallen forward and seemed to be spurting for a wager.

The colonel had gone over to the mess for a drink. Most of the officers were with him, and the subaltern of the day was preparing to go down to the lines and receive the watering reports from the troop sergeant majors. When "Take Me to London Again" stopped after 20 bars, every one in the mess said, "What on earth has happened?" A minute later they heard unmilitary noises and saw far across the plain the White hus- sars scattered and broken and flying.

The colonel was speechless with rage, for he thought that the regiment had risen against him or was unanimously drunk. The band, a disorganized mob, tore past, and at its heels labored the drum horse—the dead and buried drum horse—with the jolting, clattering skele- ton. Hogan-Yale whispered softly to Martyn, "No wire will stand that treat- ment," and the band, which had dou- bled like a hare, came back again. But the rest of the regiment was gone, was rioting all over the province, for the dusk had shut in, and each man was howling to his neighbor that the drum horse was on his flank. Troop horses are far too tenderly treated, as a rule. They can on emergencies do a great deal, even with 17 stone on their backs, as the troopers found out.

How long this panic lasted I cannot say. I believe that when the moon rose the men saw they had nothing to fear and by twos and threes and half troops crept back into cantonments very much ashamed of themselves. Meantime the drum horse, disgusted at his treatment by old friends, pulled up, wheeled round and trotted up to the mess ver- anda steps for bread. No one liked to run, but no one cared to go forward till the colonel made a movement and laid hold of the skeleton's foot. The band had halted some distance away and now came back slowly. The colonel called it, individually and collectively, every evil name that occurred to him at the time, for he had set his hand on the bosom of the drum horse and found flesh and blood. Then he bent the ket- tledrums with his clinched fist and discovered that they were but made of

silver paper and bamboo. Next, still swearing, he tried to drag the skeleton out of the saddle, but found that it had been wired into the cantle. The sight of the colonel, with his arms round the skeleton's pelvis and his knee in the old drum horse's stomach, was striking, not to say amusing. He worried the thing off in a minute or two and threw it down on the ground, saying to the band, "Here, you curs, that's what you're afraid of!" The skeleton did not look pretty in the twilight. The band sergeant seemed to recognize it, for he began to chuckle and choke. "Shall I take it away, sir?" said the band ser- geant. "Yes," said the colonel, "take it to hell and ride there yourselves!"

The band sergeant saluted, hoisted the skeleton across his saddlebow and led off to the stables. Then the colonel began to make inquiries for the rest of the regiment, and the language he used was wonderful. He would disband the regiment, he would court martial every soul in it, he would not command such a set of rabble, and so on and so on. As the men dropped in, his language grew wilder, until at last it exceeded the utmost limits of free speech allowed even to a colonel of horse.

Martyn took Hogan-Yale aside and suggested compulsory retirement from the service as a necessity when all was discovered. Martyn was the weaker man of the two. Hogan-Yale put up his eyebrows and remarked, first, that he was the son of a lord, and, secondly, that he was as innocent as the babe un- born of the theatrical resurrection of the drum horse.

"My instructions," said Yale, with a singularly sweet smile, "were that the drum horse should be sent back as im- pressively as possible. I ask you, Am I responsible if a mule headed friend sends him back in such a manner as to disturb the peace of mind of a regiment of her majesty's cavalry?"

Martyn said, "You are a great man, and will in time become a general, but I'd give my chance of a troop to be safe out of this affair."

Providence saved Martyn and Hogan- Yale. The second in command led the colonel away to the little curtained alcove wherein the subalterns of the White hussars were accustomed to play poker of nights, and there, after many oaths on the colonel's part, they talked to- gether in low tones. I fancy that the second in command must have repre- sented the scare as the work of some trooper whom it would be hopeless to detect, and I know that he dwelt upon the sin and the shame of making a public laughing stock of the scare.

"They will call us," said the second in command, who had really a fine imagination—"they will call us the 'fly-by-nights,' they will call us the 'ghost hunters,' they will nickname us from one end of the army list to the other. All the explanations in the world won't make outsiders understand that the officers were away when the panic began. For the honor of the regiment and for your own sake keep this thing quiet."

The colonel was so exhausted with anger that soothing him down was not so difficult as might be imagined. He was made to see gently and by degrees that it was obviously impossible to court martial the whole regiment and equally impossible to proceed against any subaltern who, in his belief, had any concern in the hoax.

"But the beast's alive! He's never been shot at all!" shouted the colonel. "It's flat, flagrant disobedience! I've known a man broke for less, damned sight less. They're mocking me, I tell you, Mattman! They're mocking me!"

Once more the second in command set himself to soothe the colonel and wrestled with him for half an hour. At the end of that time the regimental sergeant major reported himself. The situation was rather novel to him, but he was not a man to be put out by cir- cumstances. He saluted and said, "Regiment all come back, sir," then, to propitiate the colonel, "An none of the horses any the worse, sir."

The colonel only snorted and answered, "You'd better tuck the men into their cots, then, and see that they don't wake up and cry in the night." The sergeant withdrew.

His little stroke of humor pleased the colonel, and, further, he felt slightly ashamed of the language he had been using. The second in command worried him again, and the two sat talking far into the night.

Next day but one there was a com- manding officers' parade, and the colonel harangued the White hussars vigor- ously. The pith of his speech was that since the drum horse in his old age had proved himself capable of cutting up the whole regiment he should return to his post of pride at the head of the band, but the regiment were a set of ruffians with bad consciences.

The White hussars shouted and threw everything movable about them into the air, and when the parade was over they cheered the colonel till they could not speak. No cheers were put up for Lieutenant Hogan-Yale, who smiled very sweetly in the background.

Said the second in command to the colonel unofficially "These little things insure popularity and do not the least affect discipline." "But I went back on my word," said the colonel. "Never mind," said the second in command. "The White hussars will follow you anywhere from today. Regi- ments are just like women: they will do anything for trinkets."

week later Hogan-Yale received an extraordinary letter from some one who signed himself "Secretary Charity and Zeal, 3709, E. C.," and asked for "the return of our skeleton which we have reason to believe is in your possession."

"Who the deuce is this lunatic who trades in bones?" said Hogan-Yale. "Beg your pardon, sir," said the band sergeant, "but the skeleton is with me, and I'll return it if you'll pay the carriage into the civil lines. There's a coffin with it, sir."

Hogan-Yale smiled and handed 2 rupees to the band sergeant, saying, "Write the date on the skull, will you?"

If you doubt this story and know where to go, you can see the date on the skeleton. But don't mention the matter to the White hussars.

I happen to know something about it because I prepared the drum horse for his resurrection. He did not take kindly to the skeleton at all.

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