One of the Six Hundred: A Novel

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ONE OF THE SIX HUNDRED

A Novel

BY JAMES GRANT

AUTHOR OF "THE ROMANCE OF WAR."

"Half a league, half a league,
Half a league, onward,
Into the Valley of Death,
Rode the Six Hundred!"
TENNYSON.

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ONE OF THE SIX HUNDRED.

CHAPTER I.

To be handsome, young, and twenty-two,
With nothing else on earth to do;

But all day long to bill and coo,
It were a pleasant calling.--THACKERAY.

I was just in the act of humming the above verse, when the following announcement was put into my hand--

"Regimental Orders.--Head-quarters, Maidstone, December 31st.

"As the regiment is to be held in readiness for foreign service in spring, captains of troops will report to Lieutenant and Adjutant Studhome, for the information of the commanding officer, on the state of the saddlery, the holsters and lance-buckets; and the horses must be all re-shod under the immediate inspection of the veterinary surgeon and Farrier-Sergeant Snaffles.

"Leave of absence to the 31st proximo is granted to Lieutenant Newton Calderwood Norcliff, in consequence of his urgent private affairs."

"Hah! this is what most concerns _me_," I exclaimed, as I read the foregoing, and then handed the order-book, a squat vellum-bound quarto, to the orderly-serjeant who was in waiting.

"Any idea of where we are likely to go, sir?" he asked.

"The East, of course."

"So say the men in the barracks; for the present, good-bye, sir," said he, as he wheeled about on his spurred heel, and saluted; "I wish you a pleasant journey."

"Thanks, Stapylton," said I; "and now to be off by the night train for London and the north. Ugh! the last night of December; I shall have a cold journey of it."

Despatching my man, Willie Pitblado--of whom more hereafter--to the mess-house to report that I should not dine there that evening, I proposed at once to start for home, resolved to make the most of the favour granted me--leave between returns, as it is technically termed.

I propose to give the story of my own adventures, my experiences of life, or autobiography (what you will); and this I shall do, in the face of a certain writer, who asserts, with some truth, doubtless, that she does not "believe that there was, or could be in the world, a wholly true, candid, and unreserved biography, revealing all the dispositions, or even, without exception, _all the facts of any existence_. Indeed," she adds, "the thing is next to impossible; since, in that case, the subject of the biography must be a man or woman without reserve, without delicacy, and without _those secrets_ which are inevitable even to the most stainless spirit."

With all due deference to this fair writer, I beg to hope that such a candid spirit may exist; and that, without violating the delicacy of this somewhat (externally) fastidious age on the one hand, and without prudish or hypocritical reserve on the other, I, Mr. Newton Norcliff, will relate the plain, unvarnished story of a cavalry subaltern's life during the stirring events of the last ten years.

My regiment was a lancer one. I need not designate it further; though, by the way, it has always struck me as somewhat peculiar in our cavalry of the line, that while we have our Scottish corps, the famous old Greys, and no less than three Irish, we have not one English regiment, provincially designated as such.

I despatched a note of thanks to the colonel, handed over my cattle to the care of my friend Jack Studhome, the adjutant, and had a hasty

interview with Saunders M'Goldrick, our Scots paymaster--not that I wish the reader to infer that he was my chief factor and reliance (heaven help those in a dragoon regiment who find him so!).

Glad to escape, even for the brief period of a month, from the monotony of routine parades, the stable duty, the barrack life, and useless hurly-burly of Maidstone--to be free from all bother, mess, band, and ball committees, courts-martial, and courts of inquiry; from having to remember when this parade took place, and when that particular drill, and all that sort of thing--glad, I say, to escape from being saluted by soldiers and sentinels at every turn and corner, and to be once again lord of my own proper person, I relinquished my gay lancer trappings, and resumed the less pretending mufti of the civilian--a suit of warm and strong heather-mixture tweed--and about nine o'clock P.M. found myself, with some light travelling baggage, my gun-case, railway rugs, &c. (in care of Willie Pitblado, who was attired in very orthodox livery--boots, belt, and cockade), awaiting the up train for London, at the Maidstone station, and enjoying a last friendly chat and a cigar with Studhome, as we promenaded to and fro on the platform, and talked of the different work that would soon be cut out for us, too probably, about the time my short leave expired.

The British fleet was already in the Bosphorus; the field of Oltenitza had seen the terrible defeat of the Russians by the troops of Omar Pasha, generalissimo of the Porte, avenge the recent naval massacre at Sinope. Ere long, the Turks were to be again victorious at Citate. General Luders was about to force his way into the Dobrudcha; Britain, France, Russia, Turkey, and Sardinia were gathering their hosts for the strife; and amid these serious events, that absurdity might not be wanting, the sly broad-brims and popularity-hunters of

the Peace Society sent a deputation to the Emperor Nicholas, to expostulate with him on the wickedness of his ways.

"Egad! if the weather proves cold here, what will you find it at home, in Scotland?" said Studhome, as we trod to and fro; for there is no knocking the idea out of an Englishman's head that the distance of some four hundred miles or so must make a more than Muscovite difference in soil and temperature; but it was cold--intensely so.

The air was clear, and amid the blue ether the stars sparkled brightly. Snow, white and glistening, covered all the roofs of the houses and the line of the railway, and the Medway shone coldly, like polished silver, under the seven arches of its bridge, in the light of the rising moon; and now, with a shrill, vicious whistle, and many a rapidly iterated grunt and clank, came the iron horse that was to bear me on my way, as it tore into the station, with its mane of smoke, and its red bull's-eyes that shed two steady flakes of light along the snow-covered line of rails.

The passengers were all muffled to their noses, and their breath coated and obscured the glasses of the carefully-closed windows.

Pitblado brought me _Punch_, the _Times_, and "Bradshaw," and then rushed to secure his second-class seat; Studhome bade me farewell, and retired to join Wilford, Scriven, and some others of the corps, who usually met at a billiard-room, near the barracks, leaving me to arrange my several wrappers, and enjoy the society of one whom he laughingly termed my railway belle--a stout female with a squalling imp, whom, notwithstanding my secret and confidential tip of half-a-crown, the deceitful guard had thrust upon me; and then, with another shriek and a steady and monotonous clanking, the train

swept out of the station. The town vanished with its county court house, barracks, river, and the fine tower of All Saints' Church; and in a twinkling I could survey the snow-covered country stretching for miles on each side of me, as we scoured along the branch line to the Paddock Wood, or Maidstone Road Junction, of the London and Dover Railway, where I got the up train from Canterbury.

Swiftly went the first-class express. The fifty-six miles were soon done, and in an hour I was amid the vast world, the human wilderness of London, even while worthy Jack Studhome's merry smile and hearty good-bye seemed to linger before me. How glorious it is to travel thus, with all the speed and luxury that money in these our days can command!

A hundred years hence how will they travel--our grandchildren? Heaven alone knows.

I was now four-and-twenty. I had been six years with the lancers, and already the novelty of the service--though loving it not the less--was gone; and I was glad, as I have said, to escape for a month from a life of enforced routine, and the nightly succession of balls, card and supper parties among the garrison hacks or _passe_ belles, whose names and flirtations are standing jokes at the messes of our ungrateful lancers, hussars, and dragoon guards, wherever they are stationed, from Calcutta to Colchester, and from Poonah to Piershill.

A day soon passed amid the whirl of London, and night saw me once more seated in the _coupe_ of a well-cushioned carriage for the north.

This time I was alone, and had the ample seat all to myself, thereon to lounge with all the ease of a sybarite; and with the aid of a brandy-flask, cigars, and warm wrappers and plaids, prepared for the

dreary journey of a winter night.

On, on went the train!

Lights, crimson and green, flashed at times out of the darkness. Here and there the tall poplars of the midland counties stood up, like spectres in the moonlight, above the snow-clad meadows. Hollowly we rumbled through the subterranean blackness of a tunnel; out in the snow and moonlight again, amid other scenes and places. Anon, a hasty shout from some pointsman would make me start when just on the eve of dropping asleep; or it might be a sudden stoppage amid the lurid glare of furnaces, forges, and coalpits, where, night and day, by spells and gangs the ceaseless work went on. Then it was the shrill whistling and clanking of the train, the bustle, running to and fro of men with lanterns, the banging of doors, tramping, and voices, with the clink of hammers upon the iron wheels, as their soundness was tested, which announced that we were at Peterborough, at York, or Darlington.

But every station, whether we tarried or rushed past it, seemed wonderfully alike. There were always repetitions of the same glazed advertisements in gilt frames; the same huge purple mangold-wurzel, with its tuft of green leaves; the same man in the hat and surtout, with the alpaca umbrella, under the ceaseless shower of rain; Lea and Perrin's sauce-bottles; somebody else's patent shirt; the florid posters of _Punch_, the _Illustrated News_, and the _London Journal_; and the same parti-coloured volumes of railway literature.

Rapidly we rushed through England. Yorkshire and its Ridings were left behind, and now the Borders, the old land of a thousand battles and a thousand songs, drew near--the brave green Borders, with all

their solemn hills, upheaved in the light of the faded stars.

Grey dawn of the coming day saw us traversing the fertile Merse, with glimpses of the gloomy German sea, tumbling its whitened waves upon bleak promontories of rock, such as Dunbar, Fastcastle, and the bare, black headland of St. Abb. Then, as I neared home, and saw the sun brightening on the snow-covered summits of Dirlton and Traprainlaw, many an old and long-forgotten idea, and many a sad and affectionate thought of the past years, came back to memory, in the dreary hour of the early winter morning.

I have said I was but four-and-twenty then. When I had last traversed that line of rail, it was in the sweet season of summer, when the heather was purple on the Lammermuirs; and a sea of golden grain clothed all the lovely valley of the Tyne. I was proceeding to join my regiment, a raw, heedless, and impulsive boy, with bright hope and vague ambition in his heart, and with a poor mother's tears yet wet upon his cheek.

I had been six years with the lancers, and four of these were spent in India. While there, my dear mother died; and the memory of the last time when I saw her kind and affectionate face, and heard her broken voice, as she prayed God to bless my departing steps, came vividly, powerfully, and painfully before me.

It was on the morning when I was to leave home and her to join the corps. Overnight, with all a boy's vanity and glowing satisfaction, I had contemplated my gay lancer trappings, had buckled on my sword, placed the gold cartouche-belt and glittering epaulettes on my shoulders.

At that moment I would not have exchanged my cornetcy for the

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