

THE LIGHT DRAGOON

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The Light Dragoon by G. R. Gleig

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BY

George Robert

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CHAPTER I.

How I enlisted, and what befel me then.

As I cannot imagine that among such as may honour these pages by a perusal, there are any who would take much interest in the personal history of one so humble as myself, I think it best to pass over all the incidents of my early life, and to come at once to the period of my enlistment. Who I am, where I was born, to what class of society my father and mother belonged, are points with which I alone am concerned. And for the rest, it is fair to avow, that if the incidents of my boyhood were all strung together, they would not make up a tale worth telling, far less a narrative which would for a single hour be remembered.

I entered the service in the summer of 1808, by enlisting as a private in the 11th regiment of Light Dragoons. The corps being at that time stationed in Ireland, I was sent, with several recruits besides, to the depôt at Maidstone; where, for some time, I ran the career which is appointed for recruits in general, and acquired some knowledge of the darker shades in human nature, if I learned nothing better. It unfortunately happens, however, that our first experience of this great book is not often favourable to our morals; and I confess that I am not an exception to the general rule. My extreme youth—for I was not more than seventeen years of age—exposed me to many and great temptations. The same circumstance laid me open to chicanery and deceit on the part of those around me; and I lament to say, that I became the victim, as well of my own folly as of the knavery of others. How I suffered from

the former of these evils, it is not worth while to tell. Young men would scarce take the trouble to follow my details, were I to give them; and if they did, I am quite sure they would never condescend to be warned by them. But it is not impossible that they may think it worth while to attend to such of my admonitions as seem to bear upon the behaviour of others; and I accordingly request that they will take good heed of the following aphorisms:

1. When you join your depôt, you usually arrive with a good deal of money in your pocket; that is to say, you get your bounty as soon as you have passed, and appear in your own eyes to be enormously rich. Be assured that it is quite possible to run through as much as ten or twelve guineas: and don't take the trouble to throw your shillings and half-crowns at people's heads, as if they were of no value.

2. You find a comrade particularly civil: begin to suspect he has fallen in love—not with you, but your money; and button up your pockets in exact proportion to the zeal which he manifests for trying their depth.

3. Non-commissioned officers are in an especial manner to be shunned, whenever they profess to hold you in favour, or seem to relax the bonds of discipline, in order that you may not be distressed by them. These harpies desire only to make a prey of you. They will first suck you dry, and then grind you to powder.

4. Endeavour to begin your career as it is your wisdom, not less than your duty to go forward with it. Aim at the character of a sober and steady man, and you will, without doubt, succeed in deserving it.

5. Keep your temper, even if you be wronged, especially when the wrong is put upon you by a superior. Truth and justice are sure to prevail in the end; whereas, it often happens that he who is eager to anticipate that end, is crushed in the struggle.

6. Finally, be alert in striving to acquire all necessary drills, and an acquaintance with your duty in general. It will be of far more benefit to you to be well thought of by a few good men, and by your officers, than to be called "a capital fellow" by scores of scamps, who will only laugh at your remorse, so soon as they have succeeded in bringing you into trouble.

But I am fast getting into a prose, so let me pull up; otherwise I may fail to carry, as I intend to do, public interest along with me.

Well, then, I enlisted in London; and, marching to Maidstone, underwent the customary examinations; after which, I was attested before a magistrate, and had my bounty paid with strict exactitude. Unfortunately for me, however, the society into which I was thrown bore no resemblance at all to a well-regulated regiment. The barracks were filled with small detachments from a countless variety of corps, and the sergeants and corporals, on whom the internal discipline both of regiments and dépôts mainly depends, seem to me, at this distance of time, to have been selected from the very scum of the earth. Like a band of harpies, they pounced upon us recruits, and never let us loose from their talons till they had thoroughly pigeoned us. We were invited to their rooms of an evening,—introduced to their wives, who made much of us,—praised, favoured, screened, and cajoled, till our funds began to run low, and then they would have nothing more to say to us. Under these circumstances, we were sufficiently well pleased when the order came to join the regiment at Clonmel; and, being put in charge of one Corporal Gorman, we began our journey, profoundly ignorant both of the route we were to follow, and the extent of funds which would be allowed us during the continuance of the march.

An admirable specimen was Corporal Gorman of the sort of land-sharks out of which the staff of the recruiting department used long ago to be formed. His first step was to extract from each of us, in the shape of a loan, whatever happened to remain of our bounty. His next, to defraud us of the better half of our marching-money, by paying over to us, respectively, day by day, one shilling, and applying one shilling and a penny to his own use. Like bad men in general, however, whom long impunity has hardened, he committed the mistake, in the end, of overshooting his mark, and we having been much irritated by his tyrannical behaviour, reported him, when at Lichfield, to a magistrate. It appeared that he was not now about to form his first acquaintance with that functionary. His worship knew him well; and, by a threat of bringing the case before

the general commanding the district, soon forced the knave to pay back the money which we, in our simplicity, had lent him. The arrears of our marching-money, on the other hand, we never succeeded in recovering. He promised, indeed, from stage to stage, that all should be cleared off; and prevailed upon us, on our arrival in Dublin, to sign our accounts, which he himself had made up, and by which we acknowledged that we had been fully settled with. But he entirely forgot to return, as he had pledged himself to do, the sum that was needed to render the acknowledgment accurate; and, quietly handing us over to a worthy not unlike himself, took his passage in the packet for Holyhead, and left us.

I joined the head-quarters of my regiment at Clonmel at a moment when both town and country rang with the exploits of two celebrated robbers, called, respectively, Brennan and Hogan. Brennan, as all the world knows, was originally a soldier—unless my memory be at fault—in the 12th Light Dragoons; from which regiment he deserted in consequence of some quarrel with one of the officers, that he might take, after the fashion of Dick Turpin of old, to the road. His courage was as reckless as his presence of mind was astonishing, neither of which, however, would have much availed, had he not, at the same time, been thoroughly acquainted with the *localities* of the scene of his operations; but in this respect his advantages were fully as remarkable as in others, for there was not a hole or crevice in the counties of Cork, Tipperary, and Wexford, with which he seems not to have been familiar. Moreover, Brennan displayed, in the management of his reckless business, quite as much of sound policy as of hardihood. He was never known to rob, or in any way to molest, a peasant, an artisan, or a small farmer. He made war, and professed to make war only upon the rich, out of the plunder taken from whom he would often assist the poor; and the poor, in return, not only refused to betray him, but took care that he should be warned in time, whenever any imminent danger seemed to threaten. The consequence was, that for full five years—a long space of time for a highwayman to be at large, even in Ireland—he continued to levy contributions upon all who came in his

way, and had always about him the means of satisfying his own wishes. As might be expected, a great clamour was raised. Government was petitioned for troops wherewith to hunt him down. Large rewards were offered to any persons who should betray him; and day and night the magistracy of the counties were abroad, with dragoons at their heels, striving to intercept him. I heard that on one occasion, when Lord Caher, the most indefatigable of his pursuers, ran him hard, his horse became spent ere it could carry him to the Kilworth hill; and that it was only by quitting the saddle, and diving into the recesses of a wood, close by, that he managed to make good his escape. His favourite roadster fell, on that occasion, into the hands of his enemies; and he never ceased to lament the circumstance as a very grievous calamity.

Of Hogan I am unable to say more than that common report spoke of him as a pedler, whose brave resistance to Brennan's attack, originally won for him the friendship of the outlaw. It is said that the bandit fell in with his future associate one day when the pressure of want was peculiarly severe upon him. He had alighted, for some purpose or another, when the pedler came up, and, not anticipating any resistance, he carelessly desired the latter to render up his pack. But the pedler, instead of obeying the command, closed instantly with his assailant. A fierce struggle took place between them, neither having time to appeal to the deadly weapons with which both, it appeared, were armed.

"Who the devil are you?" said Brennan, at last, after he had rolled with his antagonist in the dust till both were weary. "Sure, then, I didn't think there was a man in all Tipperary, as could have fought so long with Bill Brennan."

"Och, then, blood and owns!" exclaimed the other, "if you be Brennan, arrah! then, arn't I Paddy Hogan? and if you cry stand to all the world in Tipperary, sure don't I do that same to the folks in Cork?"

This was quite enough for Brennan. He entertained too high a respect for his own profession to exercise it in hostility towards a brother of the order; so he struck up, on the instant, an alliance with the pedler, and the two thenceforth played one into the hands of the other.

Of the manner in which Brennan was accustomed to do his work, the following anecdote will give a just idea:—

Once upon a time, when the regiment of — Militia lay in quarters at Clonmel, two of the officers drove, in a one-horse chaise, to Fethard, where they had engaged to be present at a public dinner that was to be eaten at the principal inn in the place. They joined the company as they had proposed to do, and sat till a late hour at night, when, their companions departing, they likewise ordered their gig, and walked into what was called the travellers'-room, till it should be brought round to the door. There were several strangers in the room, one of whom, a well-dressed man, stood by the fire. But of these the militia officers took no notice, their heads, as it appeared, being filled with anticipations of what might befall on their way back to Clonmel. One, indeed, did not hesitate to express regret that they had sat so late.

"These are troublesome times," observed he; "and who knows but we may encounter Brennan himself?"

"What of that?" was the answer. "You and I are surely not afraid to encounter one man. We have a brace of pistols: only let the scoundrel show himself, and see how I'll handle him!"

The stranger who lounged over the fire looked up as these words were uttered, but took no notice of them. Only, when they quitted the apartment he withdrew also,—no salutation or mark of courtesy having passed between them.

The gig being by this time brought round, the two militia officers took their seats, and in high good humour and excellent spirits drove off. They continued their journey for a while without meeting with any adventure; till all at once, just as they had reached a peculiarly dismal part of the road, a man sprang from one of the ditches, and seized the horse's head.

"I'll trouble you, gentlemen," said he, presenting a pistol towards them at the same time, "to alight. I should be very sorry to hurt either of you; but by my soul! if you don't do as I bid you, or try to open the locker, I'll blow your brains out in a jiffy. It shall be no joke to you, anyhow."

The officers sat stock-still, staring at each other, and