

# NO ARMS, NO ARMOUR

by

ROBERT HENRIQUES

*"No more defenceless, maybe no less pleasant  
Than the plump peacock or the prime cock pheasant—  
A gilded company, a noble state  
They keep . . .  
No arms, no armour against fate."*

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BY ROBERT HENRIQUES

DEATH BY MOONLIGHT: *An Account of a Darpur Journey*

NO ARMS, NO ARMOUR

With gratitude to  
**DOREEN MARSTON**  
in London  
and  
**HARRY BLOOMFIELD**  
in Paris  
Taskmasters

## NO ARMS, NO ARMOUR

The mail and cuirass he was proud to wear,  
The mace and cutlery he used to bear,  
The broad-sword and the gaily pennant lance  
Were fine against a gentlemanly foe.  
The rifle, the machine gun and the tank,  
The well-cut field boot on a well-cut shank,  
Were better far for mucking about France;  
But rather less becoming, don't you know?

But whether it's the one thing or the other,  
A soldier has no arms against his brother.

Neither the clarion nor the fife  
Can help a gentleman to keep his wife,  
While Colonel, banker, lawyer, doctor,  
The General Staff, the King's Proctor,  
His bookies, politicians, tailors—all that lot  
Put it across him, so he finds he's got  
No arms, no armour against life.

No more defenceless, maybe no less pleasant  
Than the plump peacock or the prim cock pheasant.

And We, especial Trust and Confidence reposing  
In you, Trusty and Well Beloved, and supposing  
(And this is hot)  
That you are gents,  
Do, by these presents,  
Appoint you officers in our regiments.  
So what?

Wine, women, horses,  
Hear us sing.  
And "Gentlemen, the King,"  
We toast . . . A noble state  
We know—wars, revelry, divorces;  
And generals rule our courses,  
On which we have no star, nothing,  
No arms, no armour against fate.

A glittering company of officers and gents,  
No arms, no armour, gilt accoutrements.

## *Author's Note*

A NUMBER OF PEOPLE HAD READ this book before it ever reached the publishers. One of them said:—"it makes me want to be a soldier." Another:—"if there's a war, it will be considered anti-army propaganda."

But it isn't in any way propaganda; and the army of 1928 is only the hazard setting of events that are happening elsewhere and at all times, in trade, industry, law, medicine and even politics. Wherever you go, the process of human emergence can usually be discovered.

Some of the men in this book were harshly treated by—and speak harsh words against—the army, the staff and the generals. I have just come from making personal acquaintance with the present-day staff at its fountain head; the change that it has undergone during the last decade is considerable. I am not competent to express an opinion on such very superior officers as generals. Nor do I want to. Like bishops, prime ministers, income tax inspectors or anything else, I suppose there are good and bad. The Secretary of State for War has certainly done some useful weeding. As regards the army, I can only say that I have now, once more, become a Regular (if only temporary) soldier. I hope that I may be allowed to work out my three years in undistinguished obscurity and in peace.

R. H.

*August 15th, 1939.*

EXTRACT FROM THE KING'S COMMISSION

*To Our Trusty and Well Beloved*

PERCIVAL ST. JOHN TRANNION WINDRUSH

*Greetings*

WE, reposing especial Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and Good Conduct, do by these Presents Constitute and Appoint you to be an Officer in Our Land Forces from the *third* day of *September 1927*. You are therefore carefully and diligently to discharge your Duty as such in the Rank of *Second Lieutenant* or in such other Rank as we may from time to time hereafter be pleased to promote or appoint you to. . . .

*Book One*

1928





*Chapter 1* AS YOU COME OVER THE CREST OF BEACON HILL from the direction of Andover, Salisbury Plain is laid out before you, until it touches the horizon on the western marches of your vision. Superficially it is entirely flat; and its color scheme is always a monochrome—green or blue, in grades of tint and brilliance that vary with the time of day, with the weather or with the season. The subtle shades of tone, the undulations, the distant fields and roadways, the trees and buildings, are none of them insistent; and it is only on a later impression that the flat downlands become contoured, scarred with woods, wrinkled carelessly into folds that hold a token of human dwellings, a spire rising from the trees, a suggestion of smoke drawn out by the wind from an unseen beginning. No part of it challenges the dominion of the Plain itself; for the Plain scarcely admits its own individual features, denies them indeed, allowing them membership of its body, but claiming their submission to—their dissolution into—its single uniformity.

You can see that the Plain is a fine, brutal piece of handiwork. Its parts may be grand or lowly, ugly or beautiful; Druids' stones, Saxon and Norman churches, the rippling Avon and its tributary streams and modest bridges; and there are army encampments blemishing the slopes with foul suppurations of corrugated iron. But, from the top of Beacon Hill, there is never anything more than the absolute Plain that shakes itself clear of the sky at sunrise and melts into it again at dusk.

From here, Bulford Camp is directly below you; straight ahead is Larkhill with its satellite gunnery establishments; beyond that again are the balloon school and the wide ranges. Because of the shoulders of the hill, you cannot see on the left the aerodromes or, far away to the right, the barracks and encampments that make up Tidworth. Airplanes circle and twist overhead or come past, flight by flight, in strict formation. Tanks nose their way up the slopes, and armoured cars slide through the lanes with the trees meeting above them. From the ranges there is the sound of shells bursting, the cough of the little guns and the deep reverberations of medium artillery. There is the simian chatter of machine guns and the crackle of rifle fire. A troop of cavalry trots over a crest, a squadron deploys into open order. A battalion in field service marching order tramps by on a route march. Everywhere, all over the Plain up to and beyond your horizon, men are marching and drilling and running and crawling and peacefully working their instruments of destruction. The Plain has been given over to the rape of soldiers by a public that has no further interest in its army. The army reciprocates this indifference.

Like the Plain, the army is itself a splendid and dominant body corporate. In its detachment it is proud; and proud, too, in demanding the submission and uniformity of its members. They may be handsome or ugly, tall or little, intelligent or stupid, brave or timid, kind or brutal, Godfearing or pagan, happy or miserable; but you may not know these finer distinctions on a first, second or third inspection. They must be men in uniform with a uniform way of speech and a uniform way of thought and living. Whatever there is within them must be encased in a single military character. If the casing splits they are asking for trouble.

From Beacon Hill you might drop down into a score of army messes, into a score of ugly red brick buildings or dilapidated shacks of corrugated iron. In each of them you would—with few exceptions—meet the same people, see the same faces, hear the same speech, detect the same hackneyed stanzas of mechanical thinking. You might divine, with reason, that you had come amongst a race apart; a race that was kind and courteous and

physically splendid, but otherwise subhuman. Your eyes and ears and intelligence would tell you that this was so; but they would instruct you falsely.

☞ The General's car was coming slowly up the hill from the camp. It was a big, grey, twelve-year-old car of the mid-war period, unwieldy, uneconomical, belonging to the Government and driven by a lance-corporal. At its age, it was all it could do to crawl sturdily to the top, a little steam coming from the radiator and laying a curtain of trembling vapor between the sunlight and the amber discoloration of the windshield.

The car suited the General, who was completely a pre-war soldier; who looked on the war as a pitiful era of confusion for the army, a lapse that must never recur and whose recurrence in the same monstrous form was so improbable that it need not be thought about. For a general, it had been a time of madness, with the tenets of decent soldiering slipped so far into the background that men, untrained and slovenly, were banished to the mud and left to the shells of heavy artillery; that officers were clerks, and accountants and the sons of nobody; that commanders lost reason, remembering horses and sabers only against a dim background of historic pageantry; that people dressed strangely and talked of duckboards and burrowed downwards instead of galloping towards the enemy; that the speed of the horse no longer dictated strategy; that even spurs were discarded.


At the time, it had been a nightmare for a true soldier. And now, ten years afterwards and the army sane again, the past could be comfortably forgotten. The next war would be of a more heroic, traditional pattern, with all the fine thunder of hoofs and clashing of sabers, with officers once more gentlemen, living as such, riding horses, going hunting as part of their training. That today they could not afford horses, that the Government housed them in ruins less habitable than a slum tenement, that the cost of messing and the upkeep of equipment exceeded their pay checks—these were their own misfortunes, sad indeed but too displeasing for a general's consideration.

The General thought of his officers, sighed and thought more happily of the lunch that awaited him.

The General's car had a ponderous dignity and was at least faster than a horse, so that it was easily ahead of the tempo of decent soldiering; but if the young lance-corporal (who was chauffeur) tried to gain too much by his motor, the General prized the upper half of his body forward from the whipcord upholstery and from the Brigadier beside him, panted himself forward to the dividing glass between himself and the driver and tapped with the end of his leather-covered cane until the young man in front half turned his head in respectful attention.

"A little slower, Blower."

Blower straightened his head and eased his foot off the accelerator. The General's breath rippled the ends of his grey moustache and he sank back against the whipcord. The car groaned on up Beacon Hill until, at the top, it gathered itself for the mild descent towards Andover. Lunch was half an hour ahead and eight miles distant.

 The battery was climbing the hill in the opposite direction, returning to camp from the first route march of the training season. Seen from the crest, its approach had a curious appearance; it lacked the common rhythm of marching troops or driven horses, seeming at first a-rhythmic, but resolving later into an unusual meter of movement and countermovement. The dipping heads of animals, always irregular when seen in column, at first caught and puzzled the eye, until it became clear that the creatures were mules and that they traveled one behind the other and at no exact intervals, instead of in pairs or in ordinary gun teams of six well-matched horses.

Intermingling with the mules, the men walked stolidly, not in step and not marching smartly; short, sturdy drivers and tall gunners, strolling loosely, slouching even, each one to the gait that best suited his own disposition. There was insolence in their walking. Men of the Light Artillery, or of the Pack batteries—as they were known when they served in India and the East—men of the screw guns, the little short-nosed howitzers that took to

pieces and traveled on mules, didn't march, they walked. But the knowledge that they held the marching record of the army, and that each gunner was specially selected by the doctors for his size and physique—and the romantic implications of that knowledge—gave them insolence.

The battery, a long serpent of brown, sweat-flecked mules and horses, of painted and burnished gun parts, of jingling chains and polished leather, writhed with the road towards the hilltop.

The General's car reached the summit at that moment.

☞ Seeing the head of the approaching battery, the General leaned forward with interest.

"What's this, Arbuthnot?"

The Brigadier pulled himself nervously from the corner of the back seat and looked through the window. His promotion depended on the General's recommendation, and with relief he saw that there was no cause for anxiety.

"A battery, sir."

"I can see that."

"A light battery, sir."

"I can see that."

"I can't quite make out, sir. . . ."

"Who are they, Benjamin?" the General asked impatiently.

His A.D.C. twisted round in the small seat opposite.

"The Seventeenth Light Battery, I think; shall we stop and see them past us?"

"Have we time?"

"Plenty of time, sir."

"All right; tell Blower, will you?"

The three men stood by the side of the road; the General, heavy, stubborn, in his own command a bulwark against which dissension rebounded, impregnable in the rightness that was a general's heritage. Beside him, the Brigadier, Commander of the Divisional Artillery, in less than a year due for promotion or retirement, waited uneasily. It was difficult to find the middle role that his situation needed. He must be confident, knowledge-

able, master of his subordinates; he must respect the General's rightness with proper humility. He must not know that Benjamin Ramsay, tall, dark and careless, one of his own very junior officers and the General's A.D.C., stood behind and laughed at the pair of them.

Along the road, the order to march to attention was passed down the column. The General heard it and composed his mind into a critical attitude, tapping the leg of his boot, waiting until the grey-haired major at the head of his battery should come—level.

It was not a military figure—slim, grey, fragile—and the General viewed it with displeasure, seeing an elderly gentleman who fitted his horse all right, but whose shoulders were bowed and who was somehow slumped into the saddle; seeing—as the major gave the order "Eyes Right" and swung his own head towards the group of officers—a worn face and soft, large eyes set in the tired whiteness of cheeks and forehead; seeing the face of an ascetic, a scholar, a hero even, but not that of a regulation soldier. The General caught the passive gaze but cast it aside, not admitting it, not daring to admit it.

When Sammy looked at you, you saw only the eyes, blue, childlike, full of power that was neither aggressive nor defensive. You saw a man without armour who was unafraid; a man without rancor whose knowledge challenged your misunderstanding. You saw a love that welled out and searched for a mate to draw back to it; an embracing love, not of life largely and widely, but of all its specific parts, of each human being, each animal, of the feel of leather, the stones of the road, the roundness of a pipe, the glitter of a breech block. It was not a deliberate emotion but an unconscious attitude to everything that was felt, touched, met with; an emanation no more controlled than the exhalation of an animal's scent glands.

When Sammy looked at you, the love came across and met antipathy without protest. You flinched; for you saw the unexpected, a man unbelievably human.

The General did not flinch; there was nothing in his making that either gave way or responded to outside influence. The laws of dynamics did not apply to him, and to an action there

was neither reaction nor yielding. You could explain him only as a Yale lock affair, or perhaps as a solid block, through which ran a patterned channel; all that conformed to the pattern slipping through the channel, but bent and battered currency—currency that did not respond to his understanding—being stolidly rejected. That was the General; an expert, seeing through expert eyes a machine whose working parts he knew in detail but of whose uses he had little concern and little knowledge; a banker, busied over human arbitrage but considering human coins, in their infinite diversity, only in terms of his native coinage; a preacher, enthroned on his own pulpit, blazing the wrath of God without admitting the frailty of his congregation. Any, and each, of those comparisons gave you an idea of his strength and his weakness.

He must have been young once, that General, just as all generals started from pink and slobbering babies; just as every general owed an incongruous conception to some distant act of passion. But if the General looked through the wrong end of the telescope, thought back to the days of night-lights and a starched rustling by the cot-side, his memory stopped short at a dark November evening in the gunroom.

“His Lordship,” the headkeeper diffidently suggested to the General’s father, “thought we might blank Hog Wood into Jane Spinney . . . the birds’d fly better that way, coming home again.”

“Blank Hog Wood!” the General’s father answered. “My grandfather would turn in his grave at the thought of it.” And, from that evening, the small, pink-cheeked, curly-headed, large-eyed boy became an embryo general.

But you had to suppose that the General once clasped small arms round a woman’s neck; loved, hated, feared, wondered, trembled at the shadows; that once his mind threw out tendrils to grasp at the strange things that happened round him; to pull them back so that it could chew them, digest them and make something new out of them somehow. You had to try and understand the change, to find out when and why that mind—the mind of all generals, the mind of the army—shut itself against all but pre-conception and became a sausage machine, turning



out uniform sausages at one end, no matter what you put in at the other. You had to try to understand, but you were left bewildered; bewildered that a man could be so inhuman that he did not flinch at the pure humanity of the major.

The General returned Sammy's salute curtly and transferred his glance past the trumpeter, the rosy-faced boy with an impudent nose, to the battery staff that followed. The sun on the horses' coats showed them hard and in good condition, so that you had to admit there must be a horse-master somewhere in the battery.

It did not look as if it were the major.

Riding behind the battery staff at exactly the regulation distance, at exactly the regulation distance giving the order "Eyes Right" in an ungentlemanly voice that rang like a sergeant-major's, and—with exactly the right drill movement—flicking his own head across, shoulders squared and back hollowed, a sturdy, red-faced, short-legged little man rode in advance of the leading section.

In the way that a banker who sees a strange coin might at once appreciate its sterling value, the General assessed the officer. That is a rough parallel, but it does not go far enough. As an engineer, schooled in the supremacy of a Birmingham product, might look without enthusiasm at a foreign automobile, the General glanced at the funny little man who was passing. "May do the job . . . but no quality, no finish," was the obvious opinion. And this grudging admission meant very little, was strongly qualified. The job of an officer, as the General could have told you, was not to be discharged by acquired proficiency; the care of horses not to be left to those who had manual experience of its practice; the welfare of men not to be tended by those who had served through the various grades of non-commissioned soldiers. A battery could not be shot by a man who had fought his gun at Le Cateau. The power to do these things wasn't trained into a fellow but came from the womb in his company; and the womb that had yielded this officer did not bear consideration. That was the General's immediate verdict as he spoke over his shoulder to Benjamin:

"I say, Benjamin, a ranker, isn't it?"