

THE SLUG: A ROMANCE OF A DUFFER.

BY E. LIVINGSTON PRESCOTT.

THE latest importation into the Silver Lancers was Harringay Measom, otherwise "The Clerk," otherwise "The Slug," with more uncomplimentary aliases, but, for choice, the last.

The Silver Lancers is, as everybody knows, a "crack" regiment. The mess stood or fell together, and was naturally disgusted at the introduction into its sacred circle of a youth who seemed born to run his head against its fondest traditions. It was not altogether Measom's fault, but he might certainly have made things better for himself if he had chosen.

It was chiefly at the wish of his mother—who was a Harringay—that he had entered the army. There are always Harringays in the Service, but there never was, it was stated, a Measom, till The Slug crawled in—this was the unkind expression of Madison, a senior subaltern of unbridled language. The Measoms were purely commercial, and The Slug had been trained, morally and intellectually, for commerce. Unfortunately, however, Mr. Martin Measom, head of the firm, misled by his nephew's beautiful assimilation of business as life's one aim, when he met his last liability—that of dying—with the calmness which had characterised every other act of his life, left firm and fortune to Harringay. The frivolous blood of that airy family promptly effervesced, and The Slug, casting his pen from behind his ear—carrying it there was one of the little ways which drew on him Madison's amenities—took up the sword; and, discarding the highlows and white socks which his respected uncle had pointed out to heedless juniors as an almost holy example, in favour of boot and spur, joined the Lancers at Mugglewallah.

He had a real, perhaps hereditary, taste for soldiering. He was neither a coward nor an old woman, but he could not get rid all at once of the habits in which he had been care-

fully reared. He calculated the value of life as he had been used to calculate other commodities, and declined to hazard his own in various breakneck exploits proposed to him by fellow subalterns, without an adequate "value received." He was a bit of a lawyer, and would presumptuously argue a point with the Colonel or the Adjutant, if he thought himself in the right, and was sometimes a little tetchy with his comrades, whose reckless and personal humour shocked and alarmed him. He was a good and modest young man, and one or two of the giddier regimental matrons—I am afraid, purposely—shocked him also, and brought a blush to his cheek. He believed they were making love to him in earnest, but it was really only harmless chaff. He had a way of opening his eyes, almost falling backwards, and saying:

"Eugh!" (instead of Oh!) "Mrs. So-and-so!" with a nervous titter, which was certainly aggravating, as was his high treble voice, with its fatal demand for accuracy in all things, and his inheritance of small economies.

His sorest trial was horseflesh. He pined in secret when pranking gaily on a mettled war-horse for the modest "safety" on which, after business hours, he had been wont to disport himself on suburban roads. He viewed his chargers with dislike and apprehension, vainly endeavouring to conciliate them by endearing feminine epithets, and the production of sugar and apples. He was thrown every day with great regularity, but was too much of a man to ill-use the animal who caused his downfall, only remarking, sadly, that it was "unfortunate," and "so strange!"

He repudiated earnestly the idea of periling his valuable life in matches or races, and proved—on paper—how impossible it was, when you took into account "outlay," to "turn over" anything in this way; to the sore scorn of his compeers.

He was, indeed, once compelled, at midnight, to ride a buffalo through the Lines in the very lightest of costume—it was a Camp of Exercise, and there were no ladies about—but, as he afterwards mildly remarked, when he had got over the natural irritation of the moment, he “lost nothing” on that occasion, not even his temper. His tormentors released him, with a feeling that the thing had fallen flat somehow, and were a little puzzled by him.

Friends—he had one or two, though his mildness vexed their souls—and foes, though they were so without cause, at last united in a desperate effort to coerce him into being “like other fellows.” But this, like all the rest, The Slug would only do deliberately, in his own fashion, and for what he conceived to be an adequate return; which is the point of the story.

Three or four subalterns were stretched on deck-chairs in easy attitudes and costumes, with a due allowance of cool drinks, in the bungalow shared by Madison and another. The last comer—Carew, a junior captain mellowed by calm seniority, who had a sneaking kindness for Measom—stood in their midst, listening benignly to the incredulous shout which greeted the fact he had just announced.

“The Slug? Bosh; he’s having you!” cried Madison; but his voice was uncertain

“He never ‘has’ anybody; he thinks it’s ‘unkind,’” said another. “It hurts his own feelings, he says, so it would be wrong to do it to anyone else.”

Carew allowed the storm to subside, and, looking round on his audience, tranquilly repeated:

“To-morrow evening, The Slug is going to ride his grey pony over every jump on the race-course. It’s true as Gospel, ’pon my word! He told me so himself. He says it’s the first time he ‘ev-er b-b-betted,’ and he doesn’t know if it’s ‘quite right.’”

“Who’s the other man?” asked somebody.

“You might guess that, I should think. Vallance—he’s always on to Measom, and he’s got him up at last.”

“I hope the poor little beggar won’t break

his neck, that’s all. Why, the grey’s barely thirteen two! and that last jump is a teaser for a big horse.”

“I hope not, too,” said Carew; “but it’s all signed and sealed.”

“The little fool is in a mighty funk, I’ll lay!” Madison commented, scornfully.

“Don’t, my son, or you might be out. I was giving him friendly cautions, but he unexpectedly shut me up by saying he knew it was ‘d-d-dangerous’”—The Slug had a painful stutter, among his other gifts—“but he ‘meant to g-g-go through with it.’ Something’s put a bit of heart into him lately.”

“Or someone,” a man observed sententiously.

“Beginning with a ‘D,’” a pert youngster chirped from his corner. “Yes, you may laugh, but I’m hanged if—”

“Be quiet, Baby!” said Carew, in the midst of a shout of general derision, followed by much laying of odds, in which Measom’s backers were nervously economical.

That evening another regiment gave a dance. It was a regiment which, not being crammed with sober family men, understood people’s feelings; hence, there were skilfully constructed nooks here and there, with palms and soft lights, and seats in twos and twos, and draughts, which thoughtfully rendered the arrangements unsuitable for chaperones; and much business was done that night.

In one of these corners, at a time when everybody else was dancing or supping, sat the “someone beginning with a D,” alluded to by the sagacious subaltern at Madison’s bungalow. She—needless to remark it was a she—was Miss Maud Dashper, with whom, at present, every unattached man at the station was, or fancied himself, more or less in love. She was a tall, fair girl, with large blue eyes, which she seldom found it worth her while to open thoroughly; a slightly aquiline nose, suggesting command, and a small, beautifully curved mouth, quite capable of keeping the owner’s counsel. Her complexion was as pure as pink and white sweet-peas, and her hair cowslip-coloured. Other ladies described her as a wax doll, but she

had ideas, nevertheless, though the world in general knew little of them. She had a way of very gently and calmly, and in the most refined fashion, chaffing men who made love to her. This annoyed them much, and made people call her a flirt, but she was not so.

The present companion of this beautiful sphinx was no greater a person than the humble Slug. He sat by her, somewhat ill at ease in the handsome mess jacket of the Silver Lancers, which he had made the mess furious by likening to the attire of a boy in buttons. His sallow and rather spotted cheek—the high living of the Silver Lancers came uneasily to the diner at a second-class city restaurant—had a strange little flush upon it, and his eyes, which were dull as a rule, gleamed feverishly, while his stutter was more marked than usual. Who understands these things? Maud Dashper, who could put down a District Commissioner, and had silenced for half an evening the Admirable Nevinson—lady-killer, poet, Shikari—tolerated, even protected, the stammering scapegoat of the Silver Lancers. Perhaps she, who received so many mendacious flatteries, and a general assent to every proposition she chose to lay down, was amused by the meek resistance of The Slug, who, though dazzled as by the noon-day sun, stood up for his own little theories in that shining presence, just as he would have done in any other. Some women have a good deal of insight as to what really constitutes a man.

After a long silence, during which Measom looked at his boots, and Miss Dashper glanced from under her eyelashes at him, he turned suddenly round to her, and said, abruptly, with his feeble falsetto somewhat strained and deepened: “I should like to t-t-tell you something.”

She signified assent by turning her large eyes full on his face—a compliment she seldom paid to anybody.

“You know”—his flush deepened, and the manhood of his aspect waxed—“I get a good deal chaffed—I am a strange animal, I suppose; I’ve lived so plainly and soberly. But, when they took to implying, if not saying,

that I was a coward, though I’ve stood a lot”—the stutter had vanished now, and he spoke quickly and firmly—“I thought it was time to do something. So I’ve got five pound on the event of my riding my grey pony Dandy over every jump on the race-course to-morrow evening.”

The waxen goddess started, and became all woman; her cool cheek was crimson, and her eyes half-imploring. “On that little pony? But you’ll be killed, Mr. Measom!”

“I don’t think so,” he said, deliberately. “I want to show I’m not quite so soft; and—besides—there’s another reason”; he looked very straight in her eyes, trying to laugh down some emotion; “I don’t mind saying to you, Miss Dashper, though I wouldn’t to anybody else, that I’m rather af—I do funk a little”—he was slowly acquiring the art of slang. “Still, I mean going through.”

“Why?” she asked, quickly. “What is the other reason?”

He continued to look at her: the look a man seldom wears more than once in his life, though he may feign it, or attempt it, many times, was on The Slug’s face.

“Because—I want to show—you—I’m something of a man, after all. I ride to win—or smash, I suppose.”

He said no more, and she, also, was silent and meditative. Watching her, he saw her teeth clench, her great blue eyes flash into sudden lightnings, and thought how royally beautiful she was, and entirely above such a scarecrow as himself. She clenched her hands, too, tightly in one another, and set her scarlet lips. The resolution at which she seemed to arrive, he thought with timid intuition, somehow concerned himself.

“You were going to speak?” he ventured.

“No, to act. Don’t ask me any more questions, please. And let me do what I like, to-morrow. Promise!”

He promised at once, with that sublime abjectness which goes side by side with the rash courage of a true love; then she shook her plumage daintily, and they returned to the ball-room.

II.

NEXT day, in the cool of the evening, all the subalterns and many seniors of the Silver Lancers were gathered in animated discussion near the untenanted grand stand of the race-course.

That arid and grassless plain lay vacant under the still evening sky, but, half a mile away, just emerging from the station, was, as in ancient romances, a solitary horseman.

The Slug's rash undertaking had been kept pretty quiet, for, though the Silver Lancers themselves may laugh at a comrade, they do not love to expose him to public derision. The unkind spirits, however, made very merry over his coming downfall, while others were a little nervous as to probable casualties. Vallance, who had been calmly and sweetly snubbed with the utmost consistency by Miss Dashper, showed personal feeling.

"Danger? Bosh! Nothing ever happens to a duffer like that! Either he'll tumble off at the first jump, or the grey will make a bolt for his stable, and shoot him off at the door."

The hero of the hour trotted slowly up, and greeted his fellows with a vague stutter. His hands fussed nervously with the buckles and girths of the grey's trappings, his face was white and set, and his eyes narrowed. He was evidently holding himself tight.

When all was ready, he took a long look at the awful waste of the course, with the varied barriers it was his doom to surmount. There were six or seven, and three, at least, were none too easy, even for an ordinary horse: a bit of stiff timber—posts and rails—a mud wall topped with balls of the same material, and last, and worst, the triplet of a low rail, a bank, and a broad hedge of tough and tangled creepers, the whole between five and six feet high, and disproportionately wide.

His courage was moral, not physical; he saw that, while most of the spectators laughed, one or two feared for him. He looked over into the hazy gold of the distance, and something like a prayer struggled up from his heart. He had his foot in the stirrup to mount, when an exclamation from his brother

officers, and the rhythm of hoofs on the road, made him turn round. There, swinging easily towards him on a great ramping chestnut waler, steered as lightly as a feather by her light hand, was Miss Maud Dashper.

He took his foot out of the stirrup, and touched his cap mechanically, with white parted lips, and a tragedy of hope and fear in his dull heart. She pulled up, with a nod to the rest, and shot one swift glance his way—a glance that was a spur, a star, a subtle spark of strength.

"Don't let me stop you. I came to see it," she called out. Her clear ringing voice had lost some of its indolence, but none of its coolness. "In fact"—launching a glance of meaning defiance straight into the heart of his laughing enemies—"I have a fancy to try the course myself at the same time. Nobody objects, I conclude?"

Whoever did was disinclined to say so; and Carew answered for the rest:

"Only too delighted, Miss Dashper. We know what the chestnut can do."

In fact, Miss Dashper's waler, presented to her by an officer of the regiment which had preceded the Lancers at Mugglewallah—whose wife was Miss Dashper's bosom friend—happened to be a well-known steeple-chaser.

Then Maud leaned over her horse's neck towards the dazed and dumb Slug, and said, in quite a small, feminine whisper, with her long lashes on her cheek:

"Do *you* object, Mr. Measom?"

He shook his head vaguely; a faint glimmer of her purpose made his heart too full for a single word, as he scrambled ungracefully into his saddle and took up his reins.

"I'm done now," Vallance groaned to a chum. "That little brute will go anywhere with a lead!"—he alluded to the pony.

The Slug will never forget that ride, nor ever ride again as he did then. It was a waking dream, which he went over many times afterwards in his sleep.

But Dandy, the pony, was entirely practical—ponies are so—and he was aware that his rider, though a good soul, was a fool at

fences. Therefore he made things safe by jumping a few non-existent obstacles, just to get into the swing of it, on the way to the real ones, chucking his little hogged mane in the air, and snorting instructions as to his own guidance. He kept his head very creditably, considering that he had long had a particular ambition to try conclusions with a waler, to whom—he had often told the other ponies of the station—he knew he could give points, anywhere, on any course, and win. So he jumped fierily, with his hind legs popping like a rabbit's, and butted and scrambled his stubborn little way over everything, grunting a short remark, as who should say—"One more!" after each, while the chestnut swung along a little in advance, which was annoying, but helpful; and the chestnut's rider sometimes turned her head and cast back a smile at him—or his rider.

"He did"—the pony afterwards said, alluding to the latter—"exceedingly well, for him. Sat still, you know, and left it all to me!"

In fact, though under any other circumstances Measom would have been thrown a dozen times, he was at that height of tension when a man cannot lose his grip of anything, if he wishes to. The ground rose and fell before his dazzled eyes merely as the background of a slim, golden-haired figure in a dust-grey habit; and the group of spectators was an utterly unimportant trifle.

The last fence rose tall and stretched wide before him. It was the first he had absolutely realised. The figure in front brought out into brilliant prominence the idea which had all along dwelt unacknowledged in his heart. He dropped his head to his pony's pricked ear and whispered huskily, without knowing it:

"For God's sake—*win!*"

He seemed to be climbing a wall, saw the grey star, where the hair curved on Dandy's forehead, above him somewhere up in the sky, caught the little angry important response to the appeal of his hand and heel, and found himself on the other side, sitting limp in the saddle, with his hands hanging down, and Master Dandy getting all the rein

he wanted, to make a playful nip at the waler, as he remarked:

"Neck and neck, eh, old hoss? Pretty good match, I think."

The Slug did not hear this, because Miss Dashper was saying softly, but still with a warlike ring, and with the utmost distinctness:

"I congratulate you on your pluck and skill, Mr. Measom."

She raised her voice still more and added, with feminine unfairness, and a comprehensive stare at the men who crowded up:

"I don't know who else would have done it!"

Then she leaned down to pat Dandy's grey neck, and, with a look all sunshine to his rider, and the slightest and coolest of nods to the rest, departed at a leisurely canter.

A babel of praise and chaff clattered about The Slug's ears: it was not that, but the sound of the chestnut's retiring hoofs on the road, that woke him out of his stupefaction. As he caught it, he caught up Dandy's reins too, broke through his admirers, and galloped after Miss Dashper. What occurred was never precisely told. Maud was observed to pull up; Madison, who was long-sighted, averred that she shook hands with her pursuer. At any rate, they talked together for ten minutes or so, after which Miss Dashper cantered slowly on, and The Slug trotted back, to be congratulated afresh.

"Here you are, old chap," said Vallance, as the excitement subsided. "I brought it that you might have the comfort of seeing it in your last moments. Deserve it, 'pon my soul! though you did get a lead."

He extended an envelope to Measom, who had still rather a dazed expression, and smiled vacantly as he waved it back.

"Thanks, old man; but, indeed, I couldn't take it."

They perceived an unknown light, high and happy, on his face.

"Because, the fact is—there was a lot more at stake than *you* knew, or I quite knew myself, you see. I rode that race for love—and I've won!"