

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

The MAN

ON HORSEBACK

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EASTABROOK



It could never have been "The Man on Horseback" had he not seemed much taller sitting than standing.

On foot he was a stubby, clerical fellow; mounted, he was the Marshal Magificent, after the populace's own heart. At work he was the humble old bookkeeper at Cass & Stacey's; at play, he was Mars, chapeau-crowned. On the one hand, nagging obscurity; on the other hand, dazzling publicity. To think that one's legs should make a difference like that! He despised those legs and the life he led on them, but he gloried in his torso and the occasional triumphs it brought him.

It must not be thought for a minute that horseback life held for him any visions of limitless desert or grassy plain, of long forest bridle paths or of high-lifting mountain trails. He was bothered by no foolish cowboy, Bedouin, nor Cossack hankering. He did not know life in the open; he did not care to know it in the open. He had never felt the tug and strain and quiver of horseflesh on the run; he didn't ride that way. The air of the town, a proper prancing gait, the crowd at the curb, the roar of the band, the swing of following legs and the drop of following feet, faces at innumerable windows, the magic melting of traffic ahead, color, music, glitter, cheers—all these were plenty good enough for him.

Precocity, like its antonym, nearly always misses fire when aimed at a parade. The crowd will have nothing overdone, nothing underdone. It must have it done just right. That is the reason so many men on parade are failures. An ounce too shy or an ounce too vainglorious and they are lost forever. It is a fine thing to gauge instantly, over the ears of one's horse, the exact nethermost demand of a street full of people.

Old Marcus Degremont could do that. Where he put the knack of it, Heaven knows. One doesn't find such things on the leaves of a ledger.

The man who rides at the head of a parade successfully must possess that most rare of all faculties, the power to balance a long line of display. It is a sort of sublimated *esprit de corps* tinged with a sense of beauty and warmed by a fine altruism toward all the parts concerned. It is a combination that is as rare as a warrior who embroiders. Any marshal can make a display of himself, but there are few marshals who can make a display of the men behind them. Old Marcus Degremont could do that, too.

He could do vastly more than that, indeed; he could embody, at the head of a parade, the spirit that lay at the foundation of all its units. To make ten thousand spectators feel Fraternity when four thin lines of lodgemen stride the streets; to make ten thousand spectators see Public Improvement when civic societies follow the drum! Some day a municipal office will await a man like that and there will be a splendid living attached. His bread and butter will not have to depend upon the keeping of books. And there will be an adequate title attached also, so that the most unprincipled scolder dare not wink the eye.

Is it any wonder that when strangers asked the townspeople who The Man on Horseback was that they should reply: "Why, that is our Colonel Degremont." Is it any less wonder that, when men meditating parades sought old Marcus Degremont, his wife should say, although her husband had never smelled stronger powder than she used in her biscuits, "Colonel Degremont is not in. Will you wait?" Or, "Colonel Degremont will be glad to talk the matter over with you, I'm sure." She always said Colonel Degremont, like that, as if some other Degremont were trying to steal his thunder.

All this was before the Spanish war. There was a real colonel in town now, to say nothing of captains and corporals, and there were even privates, who were not averse to display. Marcus Degremont had welcomed them heartily, but he did not know that they would ever threaten the place he had made for himself. It had not seemed possible to him, perhaps, that a real commander could ever care for the occasional honors of mere make-believe.

Not that the town had known no real colonels nor privates before; but that those of its acquaintance were quiet old men with dimming eyes and slackened steps, who had fought in the Great War and were forever tired of battles and display and wanted henceforth but a warm fireplace and the honor, once a year, of walking with flowers to the graves of their fallen comrades.

But these latter-day Spanish war veterans, with their ardent zeal of life, their youth, their rollicking irresponsibility, their khaki uniforms so jauntily simple, their boyish faces, their resilient shoulders, their slender waists, their swinging steps, and their fine long legs—these young veterans of a young war were the ones to make things hard for him.

Lancy was the new colonel's name. He was a tall, splendid-looking fellow with an incurving back, but with not much chest to speak of. Marcus Degremont had noted that chest at once. It was not a swelling chest. Marcus Degremont could inflate his chest till it strained the cloth of his stoniest uniform and caused the brass buttons to protrude almost to bursting. That

was the pity of it; his legs had been cheated to perfect his chest.

He had that military countenance and that commanding poise of the head seen in good pictures of Major-General Hancock. He had the same soldierly white mustache and the same eyes. His skin was inclined to ruddiness and it had a habit of purpling slightly when he was excited—a warlike shade which might have pleased any soldier. His hair was snow white, and was worn like the dashing Logan wore his, combed straight back and long.

And his legs? We say of crippled legs, "They are crippled," and that is all; further, pathos forbids. But one could only say of Marcus Degremont's legs that they were funny. That is, one said it until one's

making a solemn, pious leg in front, while its mate bagged dispiritedly!

What did those legs cost him? Times innumerable during the Rebellion he had responded to the call for men, his heart burning with patriotism, and had each time been refused, until, tired of having him about the recruiting station, the sergeant had pointed to his legs, smiling significantly. After that Marcus Degremont gave him no more bother.

Life had not, however, been entirely without its triumphs, its glory. The town could not recall when he had not let its parades. By some hazy process it had chosen him, and having chosen him, it abided him, on parade. It obeyed him by platoons, and

playing at war sometimes contrives. Then, too, he was a man of affairs, and had been a social lion before the war. There were other reasons why he was to be feared, too trivial to be set down here.

When it doesn't cost any more, the people like the real thing, and Colonel Lancy was the real article. Did you doubt his rank, there was his commission in black and white. There is no winking the eye when his name was mentioned. If not a real man of war, he was a man of war's alarms, which is the next best thing. He liked display even as Marcus Degremont liked it, and he was young and rich and handsome. The air of the town, a proper prancing gait, the crowd at the curb, the roar of the band, the swing of the following legs and the drop of the following feet, faces at innumerable windows, the magic melting of traffic ahead, color, glitter, music, cheers—all these had their lure for him, too.

Is it any wonder that old Marcus Degremont felt the ground slipping from beneath his feet?

What made his position intolerably bitter was the fact that after thirty years Dick Leyden was coming home—Leyden, the one real friend of his whole life, except his wife. He was coming home, honored of men, to find him still the nonentity, the drudge, the clerk. And life had been equally hard for Leyden, but he had not tired until he had hawked his dove of success from the sky, while he—he groaned and his head dropped wearily into the worn hollow of his chair as he sat before the fire the night he heard that Leyden was coming and that the town meant to give him a properly fitting welcome. There was to be a triumphal procession to escort him from the station, through the principal streets, to the old house which had been his birthplace; and afterwards many distinguished citizens would speak their word of greeting.

"They will ask you to ride at the head of the procession, Marcus," said his wife, brightly, setting delicate stitches in a bit of nappy.

"No," said he, bitterly, "it will be Lancy."

"How absurd! You can't imagine Colonel Lancy is to permanently supplant you? What happened was merely a tribute to the returned soldier. Besides, the committee would think no one so fitting to lead the procession as Dick's old friend."

"Nobody recalls the friendship, I'm afraid. It was too long ago. And Heaven knows it's no wonder they shouldn't connect us, Dick, in his prosperity, and I in my—"

"I won't have you saying things about yourself," she cried, coming quickly to his side, and stooping to press her sweet old face against his. "You are making yourself wretched about nothing. Undoubtedly the place at the head of the column will be offered you as usual. And Dick will understand that in your way you also are preferred of your fellowmen. Oh, you'll see! The committee will wait on you to-morrow."

But the committee did no such thing, although he did not leave the office until later than usual the next day. Indeed, it was nearer seven than six when, after a last anxious glance of searching down the thinning street, he finally took off his black sateen sleeve protectors and got wearily into his coat.

There was a letter from Leyden awaiting him at home. He had written briefly to say that he was coming, and, speaking of his life since he had been absent, he wondered if, after all, Degremont's way had not been the wise way, the better—to stay quietly on in the old town, the spot which had been beloved of their fathers, making himself the more secure as time went by in the place he held there.

Marcus Degremont's face spotted with color like a girl's, and he dropped the letter hastily into the fire lest his wife should ask to read it and the irony of it scorch her soul. His place! He had none. He was not even remembered. Neither as friend nor citizen was he bidden to take any part in the home-coming ceremonies. And what would it not have meant to him to have done so! His heart leaped at the thought of it. He would have made it such a parade as the town had never seen. He would have done it for Leyden's sake, and Leyden, seeing him at its head, would have remembered him so, when, his brief sojourn over, he would have gone away.

At the moment the street bell rang and his wife brought in a communication from the committee. She stood back of his chair, leaning over his shoulder as he opened it.

"I told you so!" she triumphed. "I knew they wouldn't think of trying to get along without you." He drew the brief lines from their cover and they glimpsed them together, then she hung in silence over him; the committee desired him to head the third division of the parade!

Her hands dropped to his shoulders and pressed him into the chair when he would have started up

violently, words of furious protest upon his lips, his heart bursting with the outrage of it all.

"You will do it, Marcus," she said, "you'll do it that no one may say that you were hurt. You can stand it—the mortification and the disappointment and the sense of ingratitude. But they mustn't pity you!"

So, on that day which might have been the greatest and happiest of his life, old Marcus Degremont rode at the head of the third division. He rode his own mount, Pompey, a chestnut sorrel with a white mane and tail, and the walking gait of a conquering war horse. The mount was as familiar to the people as the man himself.

He sat in the saddle exactly as he had sat for years. He held himself so for her sake, who would be watching for him, love and rebellion, mortification and passionate protest filling her, but with her old head carried high, and an indomitable smile for all who glanced her way.

After much delay Lancy finally got the parade in shape and started it off towards the depot. He looked uncommonly proud as he rode at its head on his dainty-stepping, beautifully muscled horse. Bands were playing and people were cheering. The old thrill was in the air and Degremont's blood began to race. But there, blotting out the brightness of the day, was Lancy's slender, impudent figure, and he wheeled Pompey half-way about that he might not see it.

Then a shout brought him sharply around.

Down the street from the first division, four black horses hitches to a float swung about, toppled their driver from his seat, and came plunging madly back through the line of parade. To Degremont, the street before them seemed to lift to the middle, spilling colorful rivulets of paraders toward the curb. A panic mob was instantly evolved from the orderly ranks. Men pushed and struggled and fought to get out of the uncertain course of the frightened animals. Drivers lost their heads and tried to pull into nearby alleys, jumbling the line of vehicles furiously. The sidewalk crowds jammed ruthlessly into store entrances.

Degremont spurred Pompey toward the runaways. At the second corner they swerved suddenly, crashed the rear wheel from a projecting float, and swung toward a flower-bedecked phaeton that had pulled into the curb. The woman in it tried to lift her two little children out of the way.

Lancy, who had come galloping behind the runaways, shouting futilely, saw her and called to her in a frenzy of alarm. At the moment old Marcus Degremont swept by. He seized the nearest horse by the bit and the force with which he came pulled the leaders to their knees and broke the pole of the float, the splintered end stopping within a foot of the phaeton's wheels.

A great cheer went up from the dense crowd and Lancy flung himself from his horse.

"Is your wife hurt, colonel?" asked Degremont, leaning down from his horse.

Lancy, an arm about his wife, reeled up and replied, "No, not hurt, thank God! You saved her, and the children. . . . Take my place," he added. "Nobody but you can straighten things out in time now. And it was your place, anyhow—it shall always be your place."

A moment later, because of that magic which was his, scattered columns were reassembling, floats and vehicles were taking their old positions, bands began to play, flags that had been abandoned were waving again, and Pompey and his rider, both unmindful of that terrific strain of the muscles during the second's onslaught against the blacks, took their old place at the head of the parade, the rider with his accustomed martial bearing, the horse with his conquering step.

Degremont massed the first division in the square before the station, the others stretching away in beautiful, streamer-like lines. The train was just in, and a few minutes later the welcoming committee came out with their distinguished guest.

Cheers started in the square and ran down the lines. With uncovered head, the visitor started forward to his carriage, then glimpsed the splendid old figure at the head of the parade.

"A minute, gentlemen," he said, and ran out in the square like a schoolboy, to grab Marcus Degremont's hand.

There was a pandemonium of cheers at that which did not cease till Leyden returned to the committee.

"This is a proud day to me, to be thus honored, and to see my old friend honored also," he remarked to the chairman.

The carriage fell in behind the marshal, and his staff and the parade was resumed. Never, it seemed to Marcus Degremont, had his heart beat so proudly, never had Pompey stepped so high.

On the tiny balcony of their old-fashioned house, one of the last residences left in the business district, Mrs. Degremont watched the parade.

There was hurt in her heart and, proudly nonchalant, she turned her head from the glittering staff and tried to keep her eyes on the distant third division where she thought her husband must be. Then her woman's curiosity got the better of her and she permitted herself one swift glance in the direction of the staff. No word of what had happened had come to her.

Just as he had done many times before when he reached that balcony, Degremont turned his horse slightly, reined him in for a second, and swept a gallant salute to the old figure above.

His wife stared in astonishment. Her Marcus! Had there been a miracle! Aye, but she had felt all along that something like that must happen! What it was she did not know, did not care. He had been spared cruelty. He had kept his place of honor. That was enough.

She snatched her old lace handkerchief from her bosom and waved toward him, following him as long as she could see him, and missing altogether the tribute of the distinguished visitor in the carriage who, seeing her there, had bowed profoundly and lifted his hat.

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"I won't have you saying things about yourself," she cried.

glance reverted to the splendid body above them. They were thin legs for so large a body and ridiculously short. Below the knees they bowed rearward as well as sidewise. When relieved alternately from the weight of the body, as in walking, the rearward curves straightened slightly, so that, viewed from behind, the calves of the legs—twisting at the trousers—seemed carrying on a humorous conversation by winks. The left kneecap was larger than the right and was thus enabled to hold the trousers firmly,

when the parade was over it promptly forgot all about him, by platoons. For that is the way of the crowd with a man whose daily life is as insignificant as its own. It is difficult for the Marshal Magificent of the hour to redeem the Bookkeeper Obscure of the year.

Shortly after the soldiers came home from Cuba there was a parade, and Lancy rode at the head of it. Although he had not seen any more real service than had Degremont, he wore the halo which even