

# The Dutch Officer's Story

By Catherine Crowe

“Well, I think nothing can be so cowardly as to be afraid to own the truth,” said the pretty Madame de B., an English woman who had married a Dutch officer of distinction.

“Are you really venturing to accuse the General of cowardice?” said Madame L.

“Yes,” said Madame de B.; “I want him to tell Mrs Crowe a ghost story—a thing that he saw himself—and he pooh, poohs it, though he owned it to me before we were married, and since too, saying that he never could have believed such a thing if he had not seen it himself.”

While the wife was making this little tirade, the husband looked as if she was accusing him of picking somebody's pocket—il perdait contenance quite. “Now, look at him,” she said, “don't you see guilt in his face, Mrs Crowe!”

“Decidedly,” I answered; “so experienced a seeker of ghost stories as myself cannot fail to recognise the symptoms. I always find that when the circumstances are mere hearsay, and happened to nobody knows who, people are very ready to tell it; when it has happened to one of their own family, they are considerably less communicative, and will only tell it under protest: but when they are themselves the parties concerned it is the most difficult thing imaginable to induce them to relate the thing seriously, and with its details. They say they have forgotten it, and don't believe it; and as an evidence of their incredulity they affect to laugh at the whole affair. If the General will tell me the story I will think it quite as decisive a proof of courage as he ever gave in the field.”

Betwixt bantering and persuasion, we succeeded in our object, and the General began as follows

“You know the Belgian Rebellion” (he always called it so) “took place in 1830. It broke out at Brussels on the 28th of August, and we immediately advanced with a considerable force to attack that city; but as the Prince of Orange hoped to bring people to reason without bloodshed, we encamped at Vilvorde, whilst he entered Brussels alone to hold a conference with the armed people. I was a Lieutenant-Colonel then, and commanded the 20th Foot, to which regiment I had been lately appointed.

“We had been three or four days in cantonment, when I heard two of the men, who were digging a little drain at the back of my tent, talking of Jokel Falck, a private in my regiment, who was noted for his extraordinary disposition to somnolence. One of them remarked that he would certainly have got into trouble for being asleep on his post the previous night if it had not been for Mungo. ‘I don't know how many times he has saved him,’ added he.

“To which the other answered that Mungo was a very valuable friend, and had saved many a man from punishment.

“This was the first time I had ever heard of Mungo, and I rather wondered who it was they alluded to; but the conversation slipped from my mind, and I never thought of asking anybody.

“Shortly after this I was going my rounds, being field-officer of the day, when I saw, by the moonlight, the sentry at one of the outposts stretched upon the ground. I was some way off when I first perceived him; and I only knew what the object was from the situation, and because I saw the glitter of his accoutrements; but almost at the same moment that I discovered him, I observed a large, black Newfoundland dog trotting towards him. The man rose as the dog approached, and

had got upon his legs before I reached the spot. This occupied the space of about two minutes—perhaps not so much.

“ ‘You were asleep at your post,’ I said; and turning to the mounted orderly that attended me, I told him to go back and bring a file of the guard to take him prisoner, and to send a sentry to relieve him.

“ ‘Non, mon Colonel,’ said he; and from the way he spoke, I perceived he was intoxicated; ‘it’s all the fault of that damné Mungo. Il m’a manqué.’

“But I paid no attention to what he said, and rode on, concluding Mango was some slang term of the men for drink.

“Some evenings after this, I was riding back from my brother’s quarters—he was in the 15th, and was stationed about a mile from us—when I remarked the same dog I had seen before trot up to a sentry who, with his legs crossed, was leaning against a wall. The man started, and began walking backwards and forwards on his beat. I recognised the dog by a large white streak on his side—all the rest of his coat being black.

“When I came up to the man, I saw it was Jokel Falck, and although I could not have said he was asleep, I strongly suspected that was the fact.

“ ‘You had better take care of yourself, my man,’ said I. ‘I have half a mind to have you relieved, and make a prisoner of you. I believe I should have found you asleep on your post if that dog had not roused you.’

“Instead of looking penitent, as was usual on these occasions, I saw a half-smile on the man’s face as he saluted me.

“ ‘Whose dog is that?’ I asked my servant, as I rode away.

“ ‘Je ne sais pas, mon Colonel,’ he answered, smiling too.

“On the same evening at mess, I heard one of the subalterns say to the officer who sat next him, ‘It’s a fact, I assure you, and they call him Mungo.’

“ ‘That’s a new name they’ve got for Schnapps, isn’t it?’ I

“ ‘No, sir; it’s the name of a dog,’ replied the young man, laughing.

“ ‘A black Newfoundland, with a large white streak on his flank?’

“ ‘Yes, sir, I believe that is the description,’ replied he, tittering still.

“ ‘I have seen that dog two or three times,’ said I. ‘I saw him this evening—who does he belong to?’

“ ‘Well, sir, that is a difficult question,’ answered the lad; and I heard his companion say—‘To Old Nick, I should think.’

“ ‘Do you mean to say you’ve really seen Mango?’ said somebody at the table.

“ ‘If Mungo is a large Newfoundland—black, with a white streak on its side—I saw him just now. Who does he belong to?’

“By this time the whole mess-table was in a titter, with the exception of one old captain, a man who had been years in the regiment. He was of very humble extraction, and had risen by merit to his present position.

“ ‘I believe Captain T. is better acquainted with Mango than anybody present,’ answered Major P., with a sneer. ‘Perhaps he can tell you who he belongs to.’

“The laughter increased, and I saw there was some joke; but not understanding what it meant, I said to Captain T.—

“ ‘Does the dog belong to Jokel Falck?’

“ ‘No, sir,’ he replied; ‘the dog belongs to nobody now. He once belonged to an officer called Joseph Atveld.’

“ ‘Belonging to this regiment?’

“ ‘Yes, sir.’

“ ‘He is dead, I suppose?’

“ ‘Yes, sir, he is.’

“ ‘And the dog has attached himself to the regiment?’

“ ‘Yes, sir.’

“During this conversation, the suppressed laughter continued, and every eye was fixed on Captain T., who answered me shortly, but with the utmost gravity

“ ‘In short,’ said the Major. contemptuously, ‘according to Captain T., Mango is the ghost of a deceased dog.’

“This announcement was received with shouts of laughter, in which, I confess, I joined, whilst Captain T. still maintained an unmoved gravity.

“ ‘It is easier to laugh at such a thing than to believe it, sir,’ said he. ‘I believe it, because I know it.’

“I smiled, and turned the conversation.

“If anybody at the table except Captain T. had made such an assertion as this, I should have ridiculed them without mercy; but he was an old man, and from the circumstances I have mentioned regarding his origin, we were careful not to offend him; so no more was said about Mango, and in the hurry of events that followed, I never thought of it again. We marched on to Brussels the next day; and after that, had enough to do till we went to Antwerp, where we were besieged by the French the following year.

“During the siege, I sometimes heard the name of Mango again; and, one night, when I was visiting the guards and sentries as grand rounds, I caught a glimpse of him, and I felt sure that the man he was approaching when I observed him had been asleep; but he was screened by an angle of the bastion, and by the time I turned the corner, he was moving about.

“This brought to my mind all I had heard about the dog; and as the circumstance was curious, in any point of view, I mentioned what I had seen to Captain T. the next day, saying—

“ ‘I saw your friend Mungo, last night.’

“ ‘Did you, sir?’ said he. ‘It’s a strange thing! No doubt, the man was asleep!’

“ ‘But do you seriously mean to say that you believe this to be a visionary dog, and not a dog of flesh and blood?’

I do, sir. I have been quizzed enough about it; and, once or twice, have nearly got into a quarrel, because people will persist in laughing at what they know nothing about; but as sure as that is a sword you hold in your hand, so sure is that dog a spectre, or ghost—if such a word is applicable to a four-footed beast!

“ ‘But, it’s impossible!’ I said. ‘What reason have you for such an extraordinary belief?’

“ ‘Why, you know, sir, man and boy, I have been in the regiment all my life. I was born in it. My father was pay-sergeant of No. 3 Company when he died; and I have seen Mango myself, perhaps twenty times, and known, positively, of others seeing him twice as many more.’

“ ‘Very possibly; but that is no proof that it is not some dog that has attached himself to the regiment’

“ ‘But I have seen and heard of the dog for fifty years, sir; and my father before me had seen and heard of him as long!’

“ ‘Well, certainly, that is extraordinary—if you are sure of it, and that it’s the same dog!’

“ ‘It’s a remarkable dog, sir. You won’t see another like it with that large white streak on his flank. He won’t let one of our sentries be found asleep if he can help it; unless, indeed, the fellow

is drunk. He seems to have less care of drunkards, but Mango has saved many a man from punishment. I was once not a little indebted to him myself. My sister was married out of the regiment, and we had had a bit of a festivity, and drank rather too freely at the wedding, so that when I mounted guard that night—I wasn't to say drunk, but my head was a little gone, or so, and I should have been caught nodding, but Mango, knowing, I suppose, that I was not an habitual drunkard, woke me just in time.'

" 'How did he wake you?' I asked.

" 'I was roused by a short, sharp bark, that sounded close to my ears. I started, and had just time to catch a glimpse of Mango before he vanished!'

" 'Is that the way he always wakes the men?'

" 'So they say; and as they wake, he disappears.'

"I recollected now, that on each occasion when I had observed the dog, I had, somehow, lost sight of him in an instant; and, my curiosity being awakened, I asked Captain T. if ours were the only men he took charge of, or whether he showed the same attention to those of other regiments.

" 'Only the 20th, sir; the tradition is, that after the battle of Fontenoy, a large black mastiff was found lying beside a dead officer. Although he had a dreadful wound from a sabre-cut on his flank, and was much exhausted from loss of blood, he would not leave the body; and even after we buried it, he could not be enticed from the spot. The men, interested by the fidelity and attachment of the animal, bound up his wounds, and fed and tended him; and he became the dog of the regiment. It is said that they had taught him to go his rounds before the guards and sentries were visited, and to wake any men that slept. How this may be, I cannot say; but he remained with the regiment till his death, and was buried with all the respect they could show him. Since that he has shown his gratitude in the way I tell you, and of which you have seen some instances.'

" 'I suppose the white streak is the mark of the sabre-cut. I wonder you never fired at him.'

" 'God forbid, sir, I should do such a thing,' said Captain T., locking sharp round at me. 'It's said that a man did so once, and that he never had any luck afterwards; that may be a superstition, but I confess I wouldn't take a good deal to do it.'

" 'If, as you believe, it's a spectre, it could not be hurt, you know; I imagine ghostly dogs are impervious to bullets.'

" 'No doubt, sir; but I shouldn't like to try the experiment. Besides, it would be useless, as I am convinced already.'

"I pondered a good deal upon this conversation with the old captain. I had never for a moment entertained the idea that such a thing was possible. I should have as much expected to meet the Minotaur or a flying dragon as a ghost of any sort, especially the ghost of a dog; but the evidence here was certainly startling. I had never observed anything like weakness and credulity about T.; moreover, he was a man of known courage, and very much respected in the regiment. In short, so much had his earnestness on the subject staggered me, that I resolved, whenever it was my turn to visit the guards and sentries, that I would carry a pistol with me ready primed and loaded, in order to settle the question. If T. was right there would be an interesting fact established, and no harm done; if, as I could not help suspecting, it was a cunning trick of the men, who had trained this dog to wake them, while they kept up the farce of the spectre, the animal would be well out of the way; since their reliance on him no doubt led them to give way to drowsiness when they would otherwise have struggled against it; indeed, though none of our men had been detected—

thanks, perhaps, to Mango—there had been so much negligence lately in the garrison that the General had issued very severe orders on the subject

“However, I carried my pistol in vain; I did not happen to fall in with Mango; and some time afterwards, on hearing the thing alluded to at the mess-table, I mentioned what I had done, adding, ‘Mungo is too knowing, I fancy, to run the risk of getting a bullet in him.’

“ ‘Well,’ said Major R., ‘I should like to have a shot at him, I confess. If I thought I had any chance of seeing him, I’d certainly try it; but I’ve never seen him at all.’

“ ‘Your best chance,’ said another, ‘is when Jokel Falck is on duty. He is such a sleepy scoundrel, that the men say if it was not for Mango he’d pass half his time in the guard house.’

“ ‘If I could catch him, I’d put an ounce of lead into him; that he may rely on.’

“ ‘Into Jokel Falck, sir,’ said one of the subs, laughing.

“ ‘No, sir,’ replied Major R.; ‘into Mango—and I’ll do it too.’

“ ‘Better not, sir,’ said Captain T., gravely, provoking thereby a general titter round the table.

“Shortly after this, as I was one night going to my quarters, I saw a mounted orderly ride in and call out a file of the guard to take a prisoner.

“ ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

“ ‘One of the sentries asleep on his post, sir; I believe it’s Jokel Falck.’

“ ‘It will be the last time, whoever it is,’ I said; ‘for the General is determined to shoot the next man that’s caught.’

“ ‘I should have thought Mango had stood Jokel Falck’s friend so often, that he’d never allow him to be caught,’ said the adjutant. ‘Mango has neglected his duty.’

“ ‘No, sir,’ said the orderly, gravely. ‘Mango would have waked him, but Major R. shot at him.’

“ ‘And killed him?’ I said.

“The man made no answer, but touched his cap and rode away.

“I heard no more of the affair that night; but the next morning at a very early hour, my servant woke me, saying that Major R. wished to speak to me. I desired he should be admitted, and the moment he entered the room, I saw by his countenance that something serious had occurred; of course I thought the enemy had gained some unexpected advantage during the night, and sat up in bed, inquiring eagerly what had happened.

“To my surprise, he pulled out his pocket-handkerchief and burst into tears. He had married a native of Antwerp, and his wife was in the city at this time. The first thing that occurred to me was that she had met with some accident, and I mentioned her name.

“ ‘No, no,’ he said; ‘my son, my boy, my poor Fritz!’

“You know that in our service every officer first enters his regiment as a private soldier, and for a certain space of time does all the duties of that position. The major’s son, Fritz, was thus in his noviciate. I concluded he had been killed by a stray shot, and for a minute or two I remained in this persuasion, the Major’s speech being choked by his sobs. The first words he uttered were—

“ ‘Would to God I had taken Captain T.’s advice!’

“ ‘About what?’ I said. ‘What has happened to Fritz?’

“ ‘You know,’ said he, ‘yesterday I was field officer of the day; and when I was going my rounds last night, I happened to ask my orderly, who was assisting to put on my sash, what men we had told off for the guard. Amongst others, he named Jokel Falck, and remembering the conversation the other day at the mess-table, I took one of my pistols out of the holster, and, after loading it, put it in my pocket. I did not expect to see the dog, for I had never seen him; but as I

had no doubt the story of the spectre was some dodge of the men, I determined, if ever I did, to have a shot at him. As I was going through the Place de Meyer, I fell in with the General, who joined me, and we rode on together, talking of the siege. I had forgotten all about the dog, but when we came to the rampart, above the Bastion du Matte, I suddenly saw exactly such an animal as the one described trotting beneath us. I knew there must be a sentry immediately below where we rode, though I could not see him, and I had no doubt that the animal was making towards him; so, without saying a word, I drew out my pistol and fired, at the same moment jumping off my horse, in order to look over the bastion, and get a sight of the man. Without comprehending what I was about, the General did the same, and there we saw the sentry, lying on his face, fast asleep.'

" 'And the body of the dog?' said I.

" 'Nowhere to be seen,' he answered; 'and yet I must have hit him—I fired bang into him. The General says it must have been a delusion, for he was looking exactly in the same direction, and saw no dog at all—but I am certain I saw him, so did the orderly.'

" 'But Fritz?' I said.

" 'It was Fritz—Fritz was the sentry,' said the Major, with a fresh burst of grief. 'The court-martial sits this morning, and my boy will be shot unless interest can be made with the General to grant him a pardon.'

"I rose and dressed myself immediately, but with little hope of success. Poor Fritz being the son of an officer was against him rather than otherwise—it would have been considered an act of favouritism to spare him. He was shot; his poor mother died of a broken heart, and the Major left the service immediately after the surrender of the city."

"And have you ever seen Mango again?" said I.

"No," he replied; "but I have heard of others seeing him."

"And are you convinced that it was a spectre, and not a dog of flesh and blood?"

"I fancy I was then—but, of course, one can't believe—"

"Oh no," I rejoined; "oh no; never mind facts if they don't fit into our theories."