

THE POLISHED BREASTPLATES and the helmets of the distant lancers caught the morning sunlight like a hundred mirrors. The breath of the horses was fine mist in the clear sharp air. Hyde Park, white with hoar frost so thick the sun had failed as yet to mark its surface, its trees leafless and stark, looked as bleak as a battlefield.

Apart from the lancers, the park was almost deserted. It was early, just after seven a.m., and only two or three grooms exercised their masters' horses on a far stretch of Rotten Row.

Henry Cox, ex-Indian Army sergeant and now gentleman's gentleman for Captain John Hawkdale Pendragon, pulled the collar of his black overcoat closer to his thick neck, and watched the approaching cavalry with a critical and professional eye. It was his habit to take a brisk morning walk in the park, before calling his master at eight.

As a former lancer himself, normally he could identify cavalry at this distance, but the men ahead carried their lances sloping forward, which had the effect of making them appear shorter than the regulation issue, and this was puzzling Cox. In the freezing air his breath was condensing on his clipped ginger moustache and he wiped it with the back of his hand.

The lancers were winter cloaked, but the garments swung open from their necks. As they

drew nearer he recognised the regimental colouring of their uniforms—the blue and fawn breeches, skin-tight above black boots, the cloth striped with a wide band of gold; the cloaks of matching colour, heavily trimmed with bullion. The plumes of the broad-topped shakos, of dyed horsehair; the 12th, the Prince of Wales' Royal Lancers.

The officer leading the men reached Cox and rode past. Cox turned to look at them. The lancers were smartly presented, and even Henry Cox was unable to detect a Haw in any of their uniforms. The boots shone, and reflected the trees at the side of the track. Not a single fingerprint marred the polish of their equipment or bridlery. Lance heads were sharp and oiled. The sheep skins over the horses' rumps were carefully brushed.

Each of the men carried his lance sloping at an angle some thirty degrees from the vertical; it was precise with each rider, and as they passed, four abreast, not a lance was a degree out of line with its neighbours. But Cox frowned. As the last line of riders passed him, he turned and followed them for a hundred yards. The horses moved quicker than Cox could walk, and he had no wish to emulate the urchins who chased London parades by running alongside. Gradually the lancers drew away, and Cox stopped and watched them ride in the direction of their barracks behind Bird Cage Walk.

The 12th, the Prince of Wales' Royal Lancers, were famous. They had returned only recently from the Crimea, where they had received many war honours and casualties in the long siege of Sebastapol. There were few signs of battle on the men Cox had been watching.

He scratched his chin with a blunt fingernail,