PEGASUS

Based on an incident in South Leitrim in the late Forties/early Fifties.

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The thoroughbred look *Photo: Margaret Benison*

Rabbitte, the publican and the local sergeant were old friends. They genuinely hit it off and had several common interests. Both fancied themselves as good judges of horses, though neither made a fortune as a result of their imagined knowledge. Rabbitte had a haggard where he always had at least half dozen skewbald and pied-bald horses of indeterminate parentage.

He traded quite a bit back and forward with the itinerants, sometimes making a fiver or so on sales or swaps. The sergeant judged himself an expert on the racing capabilities of the various animals running on the racecourses of Ireland and England. He couldn't say if he ever made much or any money on his bets, but it was, as he said, an interest, which kept his mind occupied. Then both were addicted talkers, who loved to chat for hours about local and world affairs. And then they were related through drink, though they didn't know or ever consider that.

When the pub closed at night, Rabbitte, having assured himself that 'the little woman' was in bed, the oil lamp turned down and all but himself and the sergeant alone in the bar, with maybe a couple of favoured and close-mouthed locals, our friends generally got down to some serious talking and drinking. The All Ireland Football Championship was discussed regularly. There was little point in dwelling on the Connaught Championships, as the county usually didn't get beyond the first round. The County Championships were discussed and then the various other provincial clashes. Politics were rarely talked about, as this led to intemperate arguments.

But World affairs were high on the agenda. In this field the sergeant shone and liked to pontificate on the follies of the various world powers. England, or Perfidious Albion, as he said, in deference to his clerical training in Maynooth prior to becoming a policeman, had a lot to answer for. Rabbitte, whose uncle fell from his motorbike and was killed while carrying a dispatch for the IRA and was credited with having lost his life 'in the cause of Ireland', naturally agreed.

The Economic War, the blockading of Irish ships bringing food to Ireland during the war just ended, the recently achieved independence of India, the state of the crops, the price of cattle and such mundane things were all subjects for prolonged and enjoyable debates. Though the opinions and conclusions reached were, at times, debatable, rarely did a serious argument arise.

Of course the conversation invariably came around to horses. The racing prospects and results were argued over, jockeys were damned, trainers accused of all sorts of duplicity and the weather blamed for everything from horses falling to animals running off the course. The same weather saved both of them a good few bob when race meetings were called off, which unfortunately wasn't often enough, if they'd cared to admit it. The truth was that neither of them knew that much about horses and their habits. This horsey condition was the cause of a disagreement on one particular night. It was the night after Aintree, when the sergeant passed the remark that horses in general weren't particularly good climbers and preferred the flat.

This remark, which the sergeant realised, was puerile, was immediately taken up by Rabbitte, who claimed that the animals were quite versatile when bred and trained for steeple chasing. He emphasised the point by referring to his own animals in the haggard, saying that some of them were as happy on high as on low. He then realized that his nags were trained for nothing but he kept his mouth shut.

Rather than be faced down, the sergeant pooh-poohed Rabbite's opinion and in no time at all a full-blown argument was in progress. Unfortunately, for all concerned, on the particular night, a third party was present. A happy bachelor, living off thirty acres of good Longford land, McHugh, with neither chick nor child, had no calls on his time and had a few shillings in his pocket.

From past experience he knew that once an argument started that morning wouldn't see them home. He hadn't either a front or rear light for his bike, which he doubted he would be cycling home on anyway, so he disagreed with the sergeant and said, 'Of course horses love climbing'. He didn't know whether the bloody animals did or didn't, never having owned one anyway, but what was there to lose!

The argument went back and forward for ten or fifteen minutes, but the sergeant saw that he was trapped. Mountain horses, steeplechasers, cavalry

animals, even circus horses came into the discussion. He wouldn't budge and the situation was becoming hopeless. 'Tell me Sergeant', said Rabbitte 'how did Hillary get to the top of Kathmandu? Horses, Sergeant, horses'. 'Rubbish, Bob, rubbish. He used dogs and natives to pull him up there – well natives mostly'.

He hadn't much time for Hillary as he reckoned that without Tensing Norgay Hillary would still be fooling around the foothills of the Himalayas. It was pointless telling Rabbitte that Hillary was famous for reaching the top of Everest, not Kathmandu, but he left it so, lest Hillary climbed Kathmandu as well.

While ruminating on this pet subject, Rabbitte added insult to injury by remarking, 'The only horse that doesn't climb is a seahorse'. McHugh, who didn't know what a seahorse was, guffawed. 'Christ, you're right, Bob, never saw a horse that didn't climb like a goat.' The sergeant remarked that well McHugh should know all about goats as that was as much as he ever owned.

To distract their attention, he started a rendition of The Deserted Village but didn't get beyond 'Where health and beauty cheered the labouring swain', when Rabbitte resurrected the argument. 'Right Bob, let's settle this for once and all', he retorted. His proposal should stop the publican in his tracks. I have him, he thought. 'Get one of them nags in the haggard and we'll try it on the stairs.' The proposition didn't surprise Bob so much as the reference to his ponies. 'No nags out there, Sergeant, as you well know,' he remarked. 'Come on Mac, give me a hand bridling one of the ponies.' 'Before you go, Bob put up another round.' Bob did so.

They drank it and McHugh's round after that, before Rabbitte and McHugh set out, through the back door, rope, and flash lamp in hand, to bring in one of the ponies. The sergeant studied the stairs, which in these particular premises ran up direct from the bar. 'I could barely climb that myself,' he muttered.

The unfortunate and frightened pony was produced. Rabbitte pulled and McHugh pushed and with pure brute strength they hauled her into the bar, where she stood wide-eyed and trembling. All the better thought the sergeant to himself. 'Now we'll see if a horse can climb', says Rabbitte. 'Up ya girl ya', said McHugh, giving the pony a slap on the rump. The pony had now been literally dragged to the foot of the stairs, 'Up you get girl,' he said. Rabbitte stepped up a couple of steps, dragging at the reins. 'Come on, ya girl now.' No move. 'McHugh give her a shove. It mightn't do any harm either Sergeant if you gave a bit of a hand.' 'Divil a difference it'll make, horses don't climb stairs.' 'Oh yes they do,' said Rabbitte. They pulled and pushed but the pony refused to lift a hoof. 'Told you Rabbitte.' 'Want to bet Sergeant?' 'Right, a pound she won't to up.' 'Yer on - McHugh, hold the bets.'

The sergeant handed McHugh a pound note, remarking that it was the last he had, to be told that he hadn't a pound either, as the last round wasn't paid for. 'Right then, sixteen and four pence, she won't climb,' he says 'And you buy when I win the bet, right? 'What's the bet anyway?' says McHugh. 'That this bloody pony will climb this stairs, you gob shite, what else!' 'But that wasn't....' McHugh trailed off, just as hurt at the name as the reply itself. He understood that the whole point was whether or not horses were climbers as distinct from climbers of stairs. As for gob shites – look at the two of them making a racket that would wake the dead – no consideration for anyone.

After much tugging and slapping the frightened pony reached the bottom of the stairs. Rabbitte, to encourage the pony, lifted one of her front hooves onto the bottom step. Then, with Rabbitte pulling and McHugh pushing, slowly the pony started up the stairs.

Reaching the top, Rabbitte exhausted by now, urged her onto the landing. The two stumbled back down. 'Now, Sergeant, they didn't tell you everything in the Depót.' 'Or in Maynooth either,' added McHugh, amazed at his own cheek and wit. 'Alright, you've proved your point – put up another drink, Bob.' They resumed their discussions, though the subjects were diverse and inconclusive. Rabbitte wondered fleetingly several times on how he was going to squeeze past the pony on the landing, but put the thought aside temporarily. At four in the morning, as the sun rose over Longford town, McHugh bid farewell to the two, wobbled out the door and located his bike. After vaulting over the bar and landing on the other side, he eventually re-mounted and rode off into the sunrise, singing an off-key 'De Camptown course am five mile long. Doo dah, Doo dah, Doo Dah De', all that he knew of Stephen Foster's song.

'How the Hell am I going to get that bloody pony down off the landing?' asked Rabbitte. 'Maybe she'll fly, like Pegasus, you can't tell.' Proud of his knowledge of the Greek classics and at his wit, the sergeant laughed, pulled on his great coat, straightened his cap, hiccuped a few times, and left.

The following morning a very puzzled Mrs. Rabbitte found the pony on the landing. 'Himself' was flat out and still somewhat 'under the weather'. Much later in the day, the sergeant arrived. His head wasn't great but his rank saved him the necessity to comment. Three locals were in the process of winching the pony out through a greatly enlarged window opening. Mrs Rabbitte wasn't overly friendly and took his money silently as he got a pint. There was no sign of Rabbitte. He shouldn't drink so much – it made him do queer things, the sergeant thought to himself. And so much for climbing horses, or flying ones either. He sighed to himself and continued his tour of duty.