

Precipice-Riding in the Continental Armies.

BY B. WATERS.



THE Germans are not a nation of riders like the Spaniards, who may almost be compared to Centaurs or the English, who take to the saddle almost as naturally as a duck does to water. But there is a great appreciation of good riding in German sporting and military circles; and though the majority of German riders never attain to anything approaching excellence, the few who do are so successful that they more than atone for the shortcomings of the rest. At least, they do so as far as the reputation of the cavalry at a review is concerned, though in actual warfare, under modern conditions, rare and showy exploits do not really avail much.

I do not believe the proverb that genius is merely a question of infinite pains, but, if I did, I should acclaim the typical German as a genius. This is particularly exemplified in his study of riding: he either neglects it entirely, knowing that he is not fitted to excel in it, or else he pursues it until he attains to a perfection rarely met with outside a circus.

If we go into Tattersall's at Berlin almost any winter afternoon—particularly if a hard frost has rendered the roads useless—we shall find quite a number of officers riding round and round the school, practising and exhibiting their latest tricks to the admiration of their friends of the fair sex. They can do most of the so-called *haute école* evolutions, making their horses paw the air at the word of command, or proceed on three legs, or even two. The intelligent beasts are also made to waltz, pirouette, or stop abruptly in the midst of a headlong gallop. As a performance it would not be thought much of in the presence of an Arab "fantasia," but in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is king, and a German officer who obtains celebrity as a trick-rider is made almost as much fuss of as a successful cricketer at a public school.

Major Heyden Linden is probably the best-known rider in Germany. He was stationed for a long time at Hanover with his regiment of Lancers, and he afforded the principal attraction to the spectators in the military riding-school. His latest feat constituted the chief topic of the local tea-parties and *kneipen* for many a year, and his photograph was exhibited in the shop-windows in all sorts of surprising attitudes: such as crouching like

a cowboy round the girths of a horse, which was rearing perpendicularly; or hanging almost miraculously from one stirrup as he reached out to pick up a handkerchief whilst at full gallop.

Another very famous rider was Graf zu Dohmer; but one day, in attempting an unusually daring piece of trick-riding, he was pitched off on to his head and cracked his skull, with the result that he has been "queer" ever since. Eight years ago he was the smartest officer in the smartest regiment.

These were, however, single and exceptional cases. To find trick-riding carried out upon a large scale as part of the drill we must go to King William I.'s Hussar regiment, which is quartered at Bonn. Their colonel, Oberst von Winterfeld, is now one of the foremost riders in the whole army, and he has devoted his best energies to developing the equestrian skill of his officers and men. His success is no doubt mainly due to the fact that he never asks them to do anything which he is not prepared to do far more recklessly himself. Among his special apparatus, for instance, is a wall 15ft. high, which he has, on horseback, jumped down from several times.

The chief general exercises, which are depicted in my illustrations, however, take place outside the town in what is known as "the Sand." A sharp, headlong declivity of loose earth runs down from a field to an open common for a distance of 70ft. or 80ft., and the soldiers are taken down it *at a gallop!* This is, of course, as severe a test for the horses as for the men, and both require a great deal of practice before they can negotiate the precipice gracefully and securely. In the first illustration the horse at the top is unmistakably refusing, and his rider will be hard put to it to entice him over the brink in spite of the excellent lead which the others have given him. And then, in the event of a sudden start, it looks as if the man would very soon be pitched over his head. The two riders in front of him are evidently old hands, for they are sitting well back and holding themselves with easy confidence. They seem to know that their horses may be trusted for this work, and so carry themselves with a leisurely air, which can only be begotten of long experience. The attitude of the horse who is buck-jumping immediately in their path might, however,



From a Photo. by] 1.—PRECIPICE-RIDING IN THE GERMAN ARMY—REFUSING AT THE BRINK, [Theo Schafgans, Bonn.

well excuse a certain amount of anxiety, for his attempt to steady himself at the steepest part of the descent threatens not only to send his master flying, but also to oppose a dangerous obstacle to those who follow immediately behind him. It will certainly be a case of touch and go whether a few seconds more will not see three or four

horses and riders rolling down in one confused and inextricable mass. The occupants of the Royal carriage in the foreground and the riders and other spectators farther on are watching the issue with breathless excitement.

In the next photograph we see that the first horse and man have come badly to grief,



From a Photo. by] 2.—A BAD SPILL, [Theo Schafgans, Bonn.



From a Photo. by]

3.—NECK TO NECK.

[Theo Schafgans, Bonn.

and the others are judiciously allowing a decent interval between each plunge over the brink. As might be expected, accidents are by no means rare at these exercises; but as a rule they are not serious ones, for a special Providence seems to watch over all those who expose themselves to extraordinary risks. After all, the danger is only in learning, and, unless a man is unduly rash, he can soon train himself and his horse to go down far steeper places even than this in comparative security. The usual plan is to begin by leading a horse down the precipice several times, and then giving him his head the first time

he is ridden down. Indeed, the most expert officers say that, provided a man will sit far enough back and give his horse his head, he is as safe as on the level. The next photograph

is taken from lower down, and shows us some of the best performers who are most at their ease. Two horses are starting almost neck to neck, and the riders are leaning back at so exact an angle that the farther one can only be made out by very careful inspection. This method of leaning back is by no means so easy as it looks, and requires an immense amount of practice before it can be performed with the airy carelessness of Herr Scheibel,



4.—THE AIRY CARELESSNESS OF HERR SCHEIBEL.

From a Photo. by Theo Schafgans, Bonn.



5.—PRECIPICE-RIDING IN THE ITALIAN ARMY—AN EASY DESCENT.
From a Photo. lent by Goers & Co.

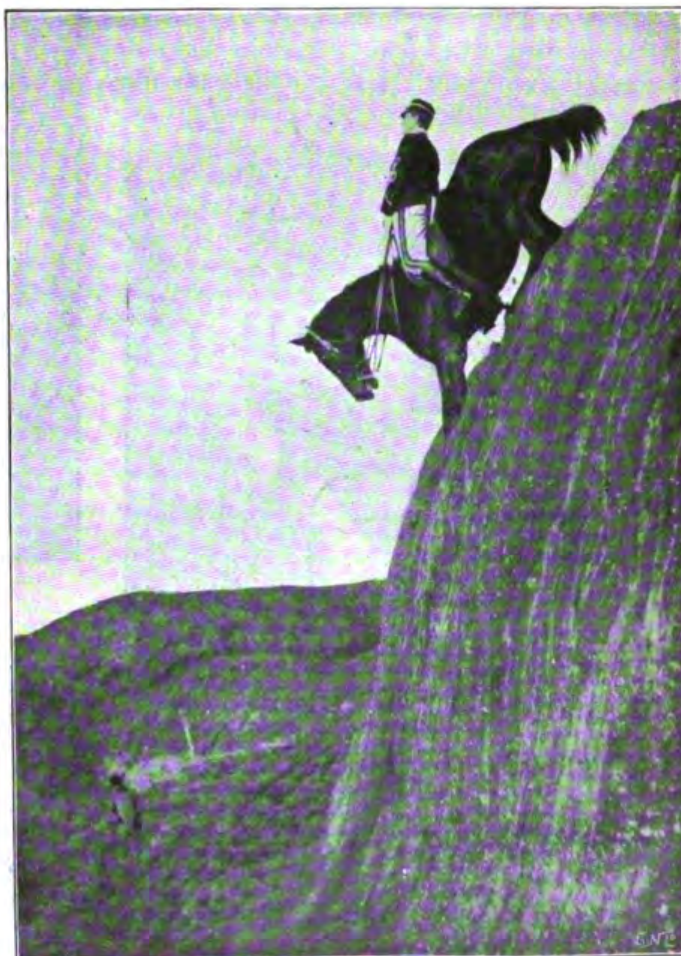
bling chasms, without ever a qualm on the part of the driver. At first I imagined I was rushing to certain destruction, and all the time I was exposed to exceeding discomfort; but I soon learned that there was nothing to fear, as the horses had been accustomed to such mad performances from their earliest infancy, and their fathers before them. But I should not like to attempt such an exercise with European horses who had never been confronted by anything rougher than a hard high-road, and I am, accordingly, quite ready to do justice to the courage and skill of the German officers who have induced their horses to attempt such feats as those which it

an officer of the reserve, who seems to lie down on his horse's back and shows off to the extent of keeping his right hand behind him throughout the critical descent. He seems almost to form with his horse one supernatural being, to whom no obstacle is alarming, or no ascent or descent impossible. We expect almost to see him crawl up the side of a house or disappear into the air like a witch on a broomstick!

has been my privilege to describe.

Similar exercises have also been attempted

After all, given a certain knack of sticking on, which most circus-riders find no difficulty in acquiring, the chief credit of such a performance belongs to the horse. In roadless and precipitous countries horses acquire a sureness of foot and recklessness of obstacles which would scarcely be credited in humdrum, civilized lands. Having become inured for generations to every sort of difficulty, they become second only to goats and chamois in their agility. I have often driven in Bulgaria and the neighbourhood of Constantinople in a large carriage drawn by a pair of horses, which proceeded at a brisk trot, and often broke into a headlong gallop right across country, through hedges and fields; through torrent-beds full of great boulders; up hill and down dale; and along the sides of crum-



From a Photo. lent by | 6.—BEGINNING TO SLIDE.

[Goers & Co.



7.—SLIDING.
From a Photo. lent by Goerz & Co.

in the Italian army with a certain success. Signor Paderni, the civilian chief of the Pinerolo establishment, set himself some



8.—PREPARING TO LEAP.
From a Photo. lent by Goerz & Co.

twelve years ago to ride up and down a sugar-loaf hill; and a less experienced horseman lost his life in trying to imitate this exploit. This fatality caused all such exercises to be forbidden for a time, but they have since been resumed, and there is great emulation among the Italian cavalry to excel in circus tricks at the present moment. There is a disused gravel-pit at Tor di Quinto, in the Campagna, near Rome, with a declivity of some 40ft., and here all sorts of daring experiments are practised. You can judge for yourself how daring these feats are by



9.—ANOTHER HORSE PREPARING TO LEAP.
From a Photo. lent by Goerz & Co.

glancing at the extremely impressive photographs that illustrate the rest of my article.

The horses have to be accustomed to their work gradually. In our next photograph we see them ridden down a very easy descent. In process of time they come to perform extraordinary feats—feats so remarkable that nothing short of the testimony of one's own eyes or a photograph would make one believe it. Sometimes they slide down the greater part of the way, but when they realize that



10.—LEAPING NEAR THE BOTTOM.
From a Photo. lent by Goers & Co.

they can slide no farther, they become alarmed and take prodigious leaps as they approach the bottom of the slope. Sometimes the leap comes much earlier, and the crash at the bottom is something terrific. Accidents are, however, very few and far between. The horses "fall soft."

This work requires a great deal of nerve, but is of no particular use for practical purposes. Otherwise it would certainly have been imported into our own cavalry, seeing that English riders are unrivalled by any others in the world.

A word may be pardoned with reference to my illustrations. Time was when an exposure of the one-hundredth of a second was considered wonderful, but such exposures would have been useless for

such rapid work as this, which has been done with the Goers-Auschütz slit-shutter in the thousandth part of a second. For pictures of subjects like the flight of a bullet, the splash of a drop of water, the movements of ripples in a fluid, even the thousandth part of a second is too fast; but with the aid of a magnesium flash, and, better still, of an electric spark, infinitesimal moments of time can be utilized. Indeed, in some cases it has been found that the duration of the light of an electric spark is as short as one twenty-five thousandth part of a second of time.

So we may compliment the photographer who took these most curious and striking snap-shots.



From a Photo, lent by] 11.—LEAPING FROM A HEIGHT, [Goers & Co.