ROBERT GRAVES

THE WHITE HORSE OR 'THE GREAT SOUTHERN GHOST STORY'

THERE HAD ALWAYS been a Colonel Flack at Sophie, Georgia, even while it was still called Sophiaville, and a Doc Halloran, too; not to mention a Lawyer Pritchard. For generations it was a vexed question 'who got there the fustest', the Flacks or the Hallorans, and many a hasty word was spoken on account of it, until at last the Lawyer Pritchard who flourished under President Polk summoned his Colonel Flack and his Doc Halloran to the County Court House. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'all the relevant documents are right here in that safe; and if this tomfool argument crops up again, I'll publish a certificated extract of them in every paper south of the Line, which won't do neither of you-all a heap of good.'

The Flacks came from the county of Somerset in England, and owned a regular coat of arms, with the motto Nec Flacci Mortem, meaning: 'I don't care a straw for death.' And they certainly did not.

We Doc Hallorans -- for I'm the present holder of the title -- originate in Co. Meath, Ireland. We're charged with the protection of the said Flacks in the matter of setting their broken bones, plugging their bullet holes with medicated cotton, scaring away their green rats and pink elephants (especially after Thanksgiving), and also seeing that they get born in good shape. We take the task pretty seriously, because the Flacks, when they're not in liquor, are the best folks for a hundred miles around; and our debt to them, to quote Lawyer Pritchard, is inassessable and unrepudiatable.

The Flacks suffered as heavily as any Georgian family in the Civil War; lost nearly every male of the younger generation in this battle or that, and Colonel Randolph Flack was fuming and pining because he had to stay home and mind the plantation, instead of riding out with General Lee. The principal tie was his lady: she'd been widowed in the first skirmish of the war, he'd married her a year later, and now she was expectant. The Colonel couldn't very well leave his lady in the big mansion, all alone except for the slaves; there were plenty of deserters and bad men around at the time. So he continued to pine and fume, and my great-grandfather had to bear the brunt of his tantrums.

General Sherman took Atlanta early in September, and began moving across Georgia on his notorious march to the sea; destroying, as he went, everything that could be destroyed. The Colonel took it into his head that Sherman was the Beast of Revelations, and that the South's only hope lay in putting that Beast out of the way. Moreover, he was going to do it himself, in gentlemanly fashion. He would ride up to the General, salute him with a sweep of his beaver hat, and ask point blank: 'Sir, are

you man enough to shoot it out?'

My great-grandfather did his best to dissuade him from his project. 'May I venture to doubt, Colonel Flack,' he said, 'whether you'd be permitted to approach within parleying distance of General Sherman? He's reckoned to have a bodyguard of Maine hunters about him who'll drill you clean at a thousand paces.'

'Those goddam Yankees can't shoot!' shouted the Colonel, who was certainly in liquor at the time.

'They can't miss!' answered my great-grandfather.

'We'll see about that,' said the Colonel. 'Nec Flacci Mortem!'

'And what of your lady?' asked my great-grandfather.

'Why, she's a Southerner, Doc; she'll understand.'

'And what of your child?'

'That's your business, Doc,' says the Colonel. 'But I'll be along at the birth, never you fear, to see fair play.'

Nothing could stop the obstinate fellow. He sent for his case of duelling pistols; he sent for his white horse; he made his coloured valet stuff the saddlebags with bourbon, corn bread, bacon and a couple of clean shirts. Then off he trotted, clippety-clop, up the dirt-road, over the brow of the hill, then down through the sweet-potato patch, splash across the creek and away into the pine wood...

What took place at the encounter, nobody ever learned: whether the Maine hunters drilled him clean, or whether General Sherman was even quicker on the draw than he... But Colonel Flack didn't come riding home that week, nor that month neither, though Sherman's sixty thousand were now well on their way to Savannah. Sophie, I am glad to report, lay a good twenty miles off the track of destruction and escaped without losing so much as a hog.

The day before Twelfth Night, the Colonel's lady was brought to bed, and this being her first child, my great-grandfather felt a certain anxiety; he arrived early with his black bag, and had twenty-four hours to wait -- from midnight to midnight. But as the clock struck at last, a noise of hooves was heard approaching at a gallop from the pine woods and then splashing across the ford through the creek, which was mighty deep at that season, and up through the sweet-potato patch, and down over the brow of the hill to the mansion. My great-grandfather was working like a demon now to save the child, and the sweat streaked his face. However, he stole a glance out of the window

and recognized both horse and rider; so he cried to the lady: 'Courage, ma'am, all's well! Your husband's home!' And with that they made a concerted effort and another male Flack was brought into the world; which saved the family name from extinction, for all the rest had been killed. But he didn't dare tell her until many months later that the breast of the Colonel's shirt was stained with red, and that his face shone white as clay in the moonlight.

Now, this posthumous child happened to be the Colonel's seventh; and a tradition arose at Sophie that whenever a seventh Flack came to be born (it could be counted on to be a boy) the Colonel's ghost would attend the accouchement. If it hadn't appeared on such occasions, or if no Doc Halloran had been in attendance on the lady, Sophie would have reckoned it mighty queer.

Well, this is where I enter the story. The Flacks, as usual, had been breeding fast, but the current expenditure of life was well above the average; three boys gone in the First World War, and two in the Second; and several other deaths from miscellaneous causes had reduced the line to the widow and two daughters of the late Colonel Randolph Flack, killed with the Marines on Iwo Jima. But a posthumous child was expected around Twelfth Night, to make the seventh.

Lawyer Pritchard waited below, trampling up and down the parlour, like a bear in a cage, muttering to himself and anticipating the worst. I had been upstairs for twenty-four hours, but with plenty to occupy my hands and mind; though it looked to be a losing battle.

Finally the clock struck midnight, and the moment of crisis came. I heard the sound of hooves galloping out from the wood, plunging down into the creek, then through, and up, and over, and along the dirt-road. 'Fine,' I thought, as they clattered to a stop. But then came sounds of a scuffle, and when I dared steal a glance through the window, I saw my own black gelding in the driveway, and on that black gelding sat Colonel Flack, dressed exactly as my father had described him to me -- beaver hat, pistol case, bloodstain and all -- but I have never in my life seen a more dejected face! What is more, it was the face of the Colonel Flack whom I knew, Randolph Flack, of the Marines!

It all seemed so wrong and so out of key with tradition that I heard myself hollering madly at him: 'Hi there, Colonel, you turned hoss-thief? That's my beast! Where's your own?' And as true as I'm standing here, he hollers back: 'It's the Commander-in-Chief, Doc! He's grabbed mine and told me to shift for myself.'

Another mounted figure moved into the light of the french window, and you will excuse me for not describing him, for though I have seen Death often in the course of my professional activities, and wearing many disguises, that is not a subject on which I care to dwell in company. I'll say no more than this: he was riding the Colonel's white

horse.

'Call yourself a Flack?' I hollered again. 'So you're a coward after all, is that it? Forgotten the family motto, eh? You, who never before let yourself be pushed around by the Top Brass? Nec Flacci Mortem indeed! My word, I'm downright ashamed of you, Randy Flack! And no Doc Halloran ever said that before to a man of your name.'

It worked. I saved the mother and I saved the boy. Then, when I could look up again, I watched the Colonel trotting away out of sight, mounted on his own horse; and the duelling pistol smoked in his hand.