

SACRIFICE

ACCORDING to a man's environments so his life is, so his tragedies are, and his end will be.

To be mauled by a lion is an extraordinary and painful experience that comes to very few of us. Yet it is the common lot of the menagerie attendant. So with the soldier, whether living here in peaceful England or going about his duty in Bombay, Kerachi, or some like place, his life, shaped by environment, is full of that incident which makes for tragedy.

There are conditions of life so colourless, so even, that the slightest deviation from the smooth and normal flow of existence stands out as a landmark to be looked back upon and discussed for a score of years.

The sedate Government office, with

its days made up of returns, dockets, references and cross-references, remembers vividly that remarkable day in '83 when young Swink upset the red ink over the Public Works ledger—Swink himself, now a stout veteran of forty-four, will reconstruct the scene for you. At the vicarage at Bascombe-cum-Marsh, how often do they talk of that memorable Sunday when the dear Bishop drank a wine-glassful of vinegar under the impression that it was *Château Lafayette*?

In a thousand peaceful homes, the extraordinary happening that is retailed through the ages is very small potatoes, indeed, and well may their worthy occupants shake their heads doubtingly when I talk of the abnormalities of army life. For death in terrible guise is on calling terms with the regiment. He comes, not in conscious majesty, as one who knows that panic will grip the heart of

all who observe him, but apologetically, rather, like a man slighted.

When we, in the army, with stately march and bowed head follow the laden gun-carriage to the little military cemetery, and come back merrily, with the band playing unseemly tunes, you call us "callous," and are a little shocked, but the explanation is this: we are teaching the young recruits that this grisly monster is not so terrible a fellow; not one to be shivered over or shuddered at, but one to be treated with a certain amount of good-natured contempt.

"When we was stationed in England," said Smithy, apropos, "an' when we was on manœuvres, we pitched a camp one Saturday near a little village, an' the Colonel got the local parson to come along an' chew the mop on Sunday. He was a nice young feller, but he'd never seen real soldiers before, an' it worried him.

By all accounts he sat up half the night makin' up his sermon, an' then he come along an' preached about what fine soldiers the ancient Israelites was, an' how we ought to be like 'em. An' he sez that when we was killed, an' if we happened to have time to think the matter over, we should realize that it was all for a good cause, an' take it in good part.

"When the sermon was over, an' we was dismissed, he walked round the camp talkin' to the men. Of course, everybody was polite. It was 'yessir,' an' 'no, sir,' an' Nobby, who's one of the best, even went so far as to promise to call round at the church that night. But what was surprisin' about this parson was he would talk about dyin', an' accordin' to him, a chap ought to use all his spare time to sit down quietly by hisself an' say, 'Well, here's another day nearer the grave.' It was a comic idea, but it didn't catch on.

“Now, there’s lots of fellers in the world who think like him, that to be good you’ve got to have a dial as long as a wet week, an’ that the surest sign of badness is gladness.

“It’s a wrong idea, an’ the proof is this: that the best man that ever wore a uniform was the happiest—and that man was Father John Stronard, C.F.*

“The first time I ever saw Father John was in Aldershot in ’94. He ran a soldiers’ home in North Camp, an’ was one of those fellers with a thin, refined face, that had ‘Priest’ written all over him. He wasn’t an R.C., for all that. He was Church, very High Church, so some of the chaps said, an’ wore little medals on his watch chain. But high or low, he was the whitest kind of white man that ever lived. He was friends with all the other chaplains—that’s the

* C.F.—Chaplain to the Forces.

best sign. Friends with 'em all, from Father O'Leary to Mr. Stemm, the Baptist lay preacher. He'd got no fads, he smoked a big fat pipe all day, an' was ready to put on the gloves with any feller that thought he had the beatin' of him. He never threw religion at you, but when a man acted the goat, you'd see that man go miles out of his way to avoid Father John.

"Fellers trusted him an' told him things. There was a wild devil in Ours called Cross—Sam Cross. Cross by name and crook by nature. There wasn't a decent-minded man of Ours who would have anything to do with him. It wasn't that his language was bad—it was worse than that. After he started swearin' you felt that the room ought to be disinfected.

"One day on the ranges, firin' our annual course, we was usin' a new cartridge, 'Mark 10.'

“ Nobby was lyin’ alongside of me, an’ was passin’ sarcastic remarks about the markers.

“ He fired a round, an’ got an ‘ outer ’ ; then he tried to pull back the breech block.

“ ‘ Hello,’ sez Nobby, ‘ she’s jammed.’

“ It took him nigh on five minutes to get the exploded cartridge out, then he whistled, got up, an’ walked to the officer in charge.

“ ‘ Beg pardon, sir,’ sez Nobby, ‘ see this?’

“ He held up the cartridge.

“ The officer-boy, who hadn’t been from Sandhurst a week or so, frowned most terrible, an’ sez, ‘ What’s wrong with it?’

“ ‘ It’s split all up the side, sir,’ Nobby sez, ‘ an’ this is the second time it’s happened—the cartridges are defective.’

“ If the officer-boy had known cowheel from tripe he’d have called up the officer in charge, who was at another part of the range, but bein’ only a kid at the

game, an' not wishin' to take advice from a private, he sez, very stern :

" ' Go back to your place, me man, an' don't talk nonsense.' "

" So Nobby came back an' lay down. "

" By-and-bye, the Colour-sergeant come up. ' Why aren't you firing; Clark ? ' he sez, an' Nobby told him. "

" The ' flag ' took the cartridge, an' looked at it, an' shouted, ' Cease fire ! ' "

" Up dashed the officer-boy. "

" ' What the dickens is wrong, Colour-sergeant ? ' he sez angrily. "

" ' Defective cartridges, sir, ' sez the ' flag, ' "

" ' Who said so ? ' sez the officer. ' Go on firin' till I tell you to stop. ' "

" So we went on firin' for two minutes, an' then the breech block of Sam Cross's rifle blew out, an' Sam went down screamin', with half his face shot off. "

" I'm not going to tell you how the officer was tried an' cashiered, or how the

ammunition was called in, an' the fuss the papers made about it.

“ When Cross got back to his senses, the first man he asked for was Father John, an' Father John was at the hospital before you could say knife. Practically he didn't leave him for two days an' nights. He was with him when the doctors operated on poor old Sam, an' with him through the night when it was a toss up whether the patient would live or die, an' with him for a couple of hours every day till Sam was turned out of hospital cured.

“ Now the rum thing about it was this, that although he'd sent for the Father, an' although they was together so long, not one word of religion passed between them.

“ At first Father John used to only sit an' read in his soft voice—bits out of books—an' then, when young Sam got better an' could talk, they'd discuss the

coal business what Sam's brother was in, an' county cricket, an' things like that, but for all this, Sam came back to the battalion a new man.

" The only thing that was ever said, was said before witnesses, an' that was the day before Sam came out. He walked with the Father to the door of the ward, an' stood a bit awkward tryin' to put the words together.

" ' Father,' he sez, sudden, ' how could a chap like me get to be a chap like you ?'

" ' How d'ye mean, Sam ?' sez Father John.

" ' I mean,' sez Sam, ' you're a man same as me, barrin' education ; how did you get to be patient, an' gentle, an' all ?'

" ' By sacrifice,' sez Father John, sadly.

" That was Sam's motto when he came back to barracks. He'd got the idea in a dim sort of way into his thick head, that sacrifice meant not doin' somethin'

you wanted to do, an' doin' things you didn't want to do.

“ Sometimes the devil in him got up ; an' I've seen him standin' by his bed-cot, with the veins in his forehead swollen an' his eyes glarin' at somebody who had annoyed him, but he wouldn't speak, an' his hands would be clenched till the knuckles were white—then you'd see his lips move, an' you could almost read the word 'sacrifice' on his lips.

“ Then the regiment was ordered to India, an' we left the padre behind. He marched down to the station by Sam's sidé, an' he shook hands with him on the platform. I believe that poor Sam never felt anything so much as he did that partin', but he 'stuck it'—he was learnin' his lesson.

“ We hadn't been in India a year, movin' from station to station, before a feller by the name of Dah Yussef, who

was a sort of head thief in the hills, came down an' burned a village, killed a lot of people, an' carried off some women an' cattle. He was a *pukka budmarsh*, was old Joseph, an' this was about the ninth dacoity he'd committed in the year, the Government lookin' on an' sendin' polite messages to him, askin' him to kindly return the goods an' no questions would be asked. We was stationed on the border, an' naturally we was very bitter about the Government not doin' anything.

" 'It's a scandal,' sez Nobby, very indignant. 'I've a good mind to write home to the *Islington Gazette* about it. It's this Liberal Government,' sez Nobby, gloomily.

" 'It's a Conservative Government in now,' I sez, but Nobby sez it didn't affect the argument.

" Old Joseph, or Yussef, or whatever his name was, naturally got bolder an' bolder, an' not satisfied with raiding

the villages near his hills, he came farther into the open, an' started ructions almost on the plains.

“ That's what the Government of India was waitin' for. The Guides an' a battalion of Ghoorkas was waitin' *doggo*, an' came by forced march, an' the Anchesters, the Wessex, the Punjab Lancers, an' two batteries of Artillery was sent off at a minute's notice to call on Uncle Joseph.

“ We got the order at midnight, an' by daybreak we was twelve miles on the road.

“ It was supposed to be one of them cut an' come again campaigns, all over in ten minutes, but the Government had left it a little bit too late, an' the Afridis were up in arms. We fought two sharp battles, an' then the enemy retired an' took up a strong position on the foothills. We shelled 'em, but we couldn't shift 'em ; then the Guides, the Ghoorkas, an'

the Anchesters tried to take the position by assault—but we failed.

"The General in command drew us off, an' we waited for reinforcements. They came in twenty-four hours, the Kents, Lancasters, an' a battery of howitzers—an' with 'em came Father John. He was in India for duty, an' although we hadn't known it, he'd been there for some time.

"Nobby, watchin' the reinforcements march in, was the first to spot him, in his Khaki uniform, an' with the black Maltese cross on his collar. Nobby dashed back to our lines lookin' for Sam Cross, an' found him sittin' down quietly, drinkin' cold tea.

" 'Sam,' sez Nobby, very excited, 'who do you think's turned up?'

" 'Father John,' sez Sam, calmly, an' Nobby was rather disappointed, because he wanted to create a little sensation.

“ ‘ I had a feelin’ he was comin’ ,’ sez Sam, gettin’ up, ‘ but I didn’t durst go down to see ’em marchin’ in, for fear I’d be disappointed. No,’ he sez, shakin’ his head at Nobby’s question, ‘ I didn’t know he was in India.’

“ Nobby told me afterwards it made his flesh creep to hear him—it was like listenin’ to a man that’s in the habit of seein’ ghosts. Nobody saw ’em meet, but when I met Sam comin’ from the Kent’s lines—where the padre’s tent was—his eyes were red, like a man who’d been cryin’.

“ Next mornin’ we formed up for the grand assault. Soon after daybreak the guns got into action, the howitzers goin’ close up under the escort of the Guides’ Cavalry, an’ shellin’ the sangar, where the enemy was lyin’ as thick as bees in a hive. At eleven o’clock the infantry moved, the Guides an’ the Anchesters on the enemy’s front, the Ghoorkas an’

the Wessex on the left, the Kents an' Pubjabüs on the right, and the Lancasters in reserve. I've only got a dim idea of what the fight was like. We went ahead by short rushes from cover to cover. The air seemed to be 'filled' with flyin' bullets, an' the enemy had got an old gun into position, an' was dealin' out bits of scrap-iron at regular intervals.

"It was terrible hard, when we began the ascent of the hill, for the ground was broken up, an' big boulders an' stones came flyin' down to meet us. These were worse than the bullets. We'd got into a tight place, with a big, deep nullah in front of us, an' between us an' the enemy, an' we lay down firin' steady. The nullah had to be crossed, an' we had to rest before we could do it, in the face of the fire. We could hear the chaps on the right come into action, an' from where we was we could see the Ghorkas an'

Wessex comin' up on the left, an' I was just wonderin' why it was that the Wessex, which is a rotten regiment in peace time, should be such a decent corps in war time, when I heard Sam Cross shout, 'Go back—go back, for God's sake, Father John!'

"I looked round.

"Father John was comin' up the hill behind us—not foolhardy, but takin' cover.

"Sam's face was white, but the padre was smilin' when he reached up. His big pipe was in his mouth, an' he crouched down behind the little rampart of stones that protected us, with a pleasant nod.

"Personally, I thought it was a bit silly of him to come into danger like this, but I found out afterwards that he'd heard the General say that the success of the fight would depend upon the Guides an' the Anchesters. You see, the intelligence staff knew nothing about the big

nullah on the hill, an' even we, who was lyin' along the side of it, didn't know what a terrible business it would be crossin' it, for it ran so that it was fully exposed to the enemy's fire, an' every man who scrambled out on the other side could be picked off by the enemy's marksmen. .

"When Father John knew what we were in for he came up. Lyin' down there, with his pipe goin' he was full of spirits an' made some of our youngsters, who'd got a bit fidgety, cheerful, too.

" 'Sing,' he sez, as the fire got heavier an' heavier.

" 'What shall we sing, Father?' sez Nobby.

" 'Anything,' sez Father John, an' he started us goin' with 'Where are the boys of the Old Brigade?' an' from one end of the line to the other we roared the chorus :

'Steadily, shoulder to shoulder,
Steadily, blade by blade;
Steady an' strong,
Marchin' along—
Like the boys of the Old Brigade.'

"In the middle of it the helio from headquarters began to wink, an' by-an'-bye the order was passed down the lines, 'Get ready!'

"Then, when there came a slackenin' of fire from the enemy, our bugle went, 'Come along! come along! come along, 'Anchesters!'—that's our regimental call—an' the 'Advance!'

"We were in the nullah an' over the edge of it before the execution began. The minute I reached the other side I could see the danger. Up the hill, as far as the nullah, the ground had been steep an' covered with big stones—it was from this nullah that they'd rolled the boulders down on us. Now, we were on a gentle slope, as bare of cover as a

soup-plate, an' there was no protection from the fire from the ridge above.

"The Guides on our right got the first blast of the storm, an' they went down in little patches, as if some blight had struck 'em, passin' a man here, an' takin' a man there.

" 'Steady, the Anchesters!' yelled the Adjutant; 'fix bayonets!'

"We was a hundred an' fifty yards from the position, an' I braced myself for the run.

" 'Charge!'

"With a yell that was almost like a scream, we dashed forward. I never ran so fast, or with any less effort, in my life.

"The bullets made a noise like a gramophone before the tune starts, an' I've got an idea that I saw a feller fallin', but I hadn't time to notice properly before I'd followed Nobby over the breastworks.

“ Nobby is the finest bayonet fighter in the regiment, an’ the second man he met was dead before the first one had fallen.

“ I got home with the bayonet on a big Afridi, who made a slice at me with his big knife, an’ then someone fell against me with a cough. In a fraction of a second, as I half turned to see who it was, I saw an Afridi pass his knife through Sam Cross.

“ Then two fellers came at me—I got the first, easy. I parried a blow, an’ gave him a short-arm thrust that brought him down—an’ the other feller was shot dead by Captain Marsham, an’ then the ‘cèase fire’ sounded.

“ I looked round. Nobby, who never loses an opportunity for business, was pickin’ up all the valuable-lookin’ articles, such as gold-mounted swords, within reach. I was thinkin’, regretful, of poor Sam, when, to my astonishment, he came up. He was bleedin’ from a cut head,

where some Afridi had got home on him, but there was no other sign of injury.

" ' Smithy,' he sez, quietly, ' come an' help me with Father John—I—I mustn't lift him.'

" ' Good God,' whispers Nobby, drop-pin' his swords, ' not—not——? '

" Sam nodded.

" ' Father John was killed as we came over there.' He pointed to the ramparts.

" He made no sign of grief, not even that evenin', when we laid the Father in a deep grave at the foot of the hills—an' he was the only man who didn't cry as we buried the greatest an' kindest 'of Christians an' friends.

" Sam only stood, with his bandaged head an' his white face; swayin' a little from side to side. Me an' Nobby, in our rough way, tried to cheer him when we got back to the camp—although we

wasn't feeling any too cheerful ourselves, for some good men went out that day. But he was as calm as possible.

“ ‘It's only proper that Father John should die that way,’ he said. ‘It's the right end—sacrifice. He risked his life because he wanted to help us.’

“ He put his hand to his side as though he was in pain, an' he was, too, though we didn't guess it.

“ ‘I thought,’ he went on, ‘that Father John would like me to see him put away nice an' comfortable—that's why I kept alive!’

“ He said this all so calm that I didn't understand what he meant.

“ ‘Let me down gently,’ he sez, an' Nobby saw the blood on his lips, an' put his arms round him.

“ We lowered him carefully down, an' two doctors came. Sam lay very still an' quiet.

"They stripped his coat. His shirt was caked with blood, an' one of the doctors whistled as he saw the wound.

" 'Is he dead, sir?' whispered Nobby.

"The doctor nodded.

" 'How he has lived for six hours with a knife wound in his heart,' he said, 'God knows. Why, by every law of science, he ought to have been dead this morning!'

"The Adjutant came up.

" 'How do you account for it, doctor?' he asked.

"The doctor shook his head an' couldn't say, but me an' Nobby could have explained. It was love, an' will, an' sacrifice that kept poor Sam alive—but mostly sacrifice."

THE END