

CHAPTER II

THE CALL OF INDIA

IN December, 1880, I was gazetted a second lieutenant in the 1st Royal Cheshire Militia Light Infantry, a cumbrous title, changed next year to 3rd Battalion Cheshire Regiment.

We came out annually in Chester, the officers messing at the Grosvenor' Hotel. The training had always to be arranged so as to close before the Chester Races on the plea that the town would otherwise be painted red by our gallant men! A large majority of these were Irishmen, with very many old soldiers amongst them. We did a certain amount of soldiering, but the whole thing was largely a big social county merrymaking, with enormous lunches, and cheery guest nights every week.

The Colonel was Tom Cholmondeley, a capital judge of a horse and a keen rider to hounds. The second-in-command was France-Hayhurst, of Bostock, and then came Tom Marshall, of Hartford, one of the keenest non-regular soldiers that ever stepped. As ardent a Volunteer as he was a Militiaman, everyone was delighted when in 1906 he was created a civil K.C.B. Amongst his many accomplishments was an expert knowledge of rowing. My father, who was at Christ Church just before or just after him, told me of his very peculiar case. Having broken down in training when bow of the Oxford eight, he was put in as *cox* on purpose to keep him in the boat. Then he became president of the O.U.B.C., an unprecedented honour for a man who had not actually rowed in the race.

A. N. Hornby (commonly called "Monkey") was one of our company commanders, the darling of his men and the leader in every kind of frolic. He was then thirty-five, and the picture of manly strength, health and good

looks. Hunting all the winter and playing cricket all the summer ought to keep anyone fit! Captain of England for cricket and football the same year, he was about the best-known man in the British Isles, and as popular in Chester as he was at the Old Trafford, or in Blackburn.

His father's mills were located at Blackburn, and he could have been Member for that constituency any day he liked. When put into the mills after leaving Harrow, he encouraged cricket amongst the hands to such an extent during the dinner hour that this period was often prolonged to two or even three hours. At last, in despair, his father gave him £500 a year to keep away!

We were great friends and I often stayed with him at his first cottage near Nantwich. Soon after joining, on account of my running reputation, I was put on the battalion annual sports committee, of which Hornby was president, and we set out one day to buy the prizes from a Chester jeweller. "Monkey" was very particular about the cup for the officers' race, which he informed me he invariably won. I am not sure he did not pay something extra for it out of his own pocket. Anyhow, he didn't seem too pleased when I managed to beat him, though I was nearly caught myself by a very speedy half-back called Forbes, of the London Scottish, who had just joined us.

Another skipper was Rhys Jones, who had been in the Regular Army, but then lived mostly by his wits. One big guest night, when over sixty were dining, he offered to bet anyone, or everyone, anything from a fiver to a pony that he would not "go as you please" seven miles round the Rhoddey (Chester racecourse, and, I think, one mile round) next afternoon in an hour. Nearly everyone took him on, and a lot of money was wagered.

Now almost every man you meet would say he could "get" seven miles in an hour. It does not sound very difficult, yet out of about fifty of us only seven managed to do it. Some began by trotting, then walked, then got behindhand and lost. Others began by walking hard, and then got such pains down their shins they couldn't run. All found, a thing *they* hadn't thought of, but Jones had (!), that the grass had not been cut for ages, and was abnormally long and rank. Those who won trotted all the way, though some of them very gently.

As mentioned in the last chapter, my commission, on passing into the Army from the Militia, was dated, 12th May, 1883. It was great chagrin to me to be gazetted to the 1st Dorsets at Aldershot, and not to a battalion in India. Not that I then wanted the Indian Army, but desired so much to serve in that country. No, could I get to the 2nd Dorsets at Peshawar, as there was no vacancy. In vain I waited nearly six months for one and then, taking my courage in both hands, went personally to the War Office. In those days the official to see on such matters was the military secretary, though I did not think he was at all likely to consent to see a humble lieutenant like myself.

In fear and trembling my card was given to the messenger, and very shortly I was admitted to the Presence. Now, in those days I had not the faintest conception of what a military secretary was like. Barring that his name was, if my memory does not fail me, Lord Edward Seymour, I was not sure of his rank nor did I know anything about him.

I had pictured to myself a somewhat brusque, but debonair, young officer who would hurl curt questions at me, and probably tell me to go to the devil. Instead of that I found a most delightful old gentleman in a frock-coat who, getting up from his revolving chair, shook hands warmly. Waving me to a seat, he said: "Sit down, sit down, and tell me what I can do for you."

It only remained for me to explain that I wanted to transfer to a battalion in India, and suggested the 2nd Cheshires, as I knew many of the officers.

"Of course, of course," said my friend, "and you have a claim, having done some years' service in the county militia, a very strong claim, and we are doing all we can to encourage the Territorial connection. Let me see" (consulting the Army List), "I notice that the last joined subaltern in the 2nd Cheshires is three months junior to you, and" (looking up at me) "I'm afraid we can't antedate you, and put you in over his head."

Hastening to explain that it didn't matter in the least, I deeply wondered, and have wondered ever since, what he would have said and done if I had *insisted* on being put above this officer, for he was such a dear, kind old gentleman.

After some talk about India I took my leave, and in December, 1883, shipped in the troopship *Malabar* to join the 2nd Cheshires at Peshawar.

It was when talking of India to this military secretary that the lamentable ignorance about that country in England, now acknowledged as a truism, was first brought home to me. Never having had a relation out there, I was pretty ignorant myself, but had talked to everyone available with any knowledge of the subject, and found I knew a good deal more about it than this War Office official.

When orders eventually arrived, no one at my home had any idea whether Peshawar was in Madras, Bombay, Bengal, or the Punjab. Hearing that a painter working in the house was an ex-soldier and had been to India, my mother rushed off to ask him if he had ever been to Peshawar.

"Oh! yes, mum, I was there two years," said the painter. "What sort of a place is it, and is it healthy?" she asked. "Well, mum, I don't rightly remember, except that we was always having so many funerals we christened it the Valley of Death!"

In connection with this ignorance an amusing story was told me by one of my generals, years later, about an incident at the War Office in the early eighties when holding an appointment there, obtained in a rather peculiar way, as follows: In the second Afghan War he had been a field engineer and accompanied Sir Sam Browne and the Political Officer when a ford over the Kabul river was reconnoitred for the passage of the 10th Hussars by night (31 March '79). The spot was selected and this young engineer said he would get the ford staked. This was not done, however, as the villagers objected and the general decided it was unnecessary.

But the sapper was not satisfied. He felt uncomfortable, and noting the decision in his pocket-book, gave it to the general to sign, as he said he would like to feel exonerated for the neglect of a very obvious duty. * Rather annoyed, Sir S. B. scribbled his signature and the date.

As everyone knows, the 10th Hussars lost an officer and forty-six men crossing this ford. England, being horrified, rose in her wrath and said, "Who's to blame?" As a matter of fact, the ford was all right if correct crossing

taken, for some Indian cavalry went over first, and arrived on the other bank quite safely.

Enquiries were made, and the War Office eventually got on to the field engineer, who had evidently failed to carry out a most necessary precaution—a precaution, too, which was not only his particular work to see to, but moreover is specially referred to in our Regulations.

My friend sat quite tight until the last stage, when he was told it was proposed to remove him from the service, and what had he to say? His reply was to enclose that invaluable leaf from his pocket-book!

Not only was he *not* removed, but he was given a good appointment in Whitehall, and eventually rose to become Major-General G. E. Sanford, C.B., C.S.I., and to command the Meerut Division.

His tale about the ignorance relating to India, or rather, in this case, the assumption by the higher authorities of the universal existence of such ignorance, was as follows:—

In 1882, after his return from Malta, the late Duke of Cambridge, as Commander-in-Chief, assembled the War Office staff, and, after some conversation on various topics, addressed them, in most ponderous tones, with a very guttural accent, and a rich rolling of R's:

"Gentlemen, in conclusion, I want to tell you about Maltår, which I have just visited. I was very glad to see Maltår, and Maltår was very glad to see me.

"It was a great pleasure to me to see the trrroops, who were looking very well, and the trrroops had much pleasure in being inspected by me.

"You doubtless know that I also saw for the first time some Indian trrroops.

"I saw them all—Sikhs, Gurkhas, Punjabis, etc. They moved well and are fine fellows, very fine fellows, but *black, gentlemen, you know, quite black.*"

A Devonshire friend of mine in the Indian Civil Service, and also a volunteer in India, was a very fine rifle shot, especially with the match rifle. He was shooting at Wimbledon in the eighties, when word was suddenly sent round to say the Duke of Cambridge was on the ranges, and would see all the competitors from India at the flagstaff in half an hour's time.

My friend, a stalwart Oxonian, struggled into his private's

uniform, and the batch was hastily dressed in line to await the approaching Duke. It consisted of officers, N.C.O.s and men, both regulars and volunteers, together with Indian orderlies, etc., all fallen in anyhow, a motley crew, for there had been no time to arrange anything in order.

The Secretary of the Association, meeting the Duke near the right of the line, was told to explain who each man was. The Indian Civil Service volunteer, being very tall, was on the right, and the secretary named him as "Mr. X, 5th Punjab Rifles." "Ah!" said the Duke, "A Punjabi, I know the Punjabi, I met them at Maltà, fine fellow, very fine fellow"—and passed on!

My only personal experiences of the famous Duke were, firstly, at a review at Aldershot in 1883, very soon after I had joined the 1st Dorsets; and, secondly, at Cannes, in 1901, when he was a very bent old man.

At the review, it was my misfortune to be the right guide of my company on the saluting base (the old drill). I thought I had gone past quite nicely, but the Colonel afterwards shattered my self-complacency by rudely enquiring why the blazes I moved my left arm when marching at attention, and whether I had been taught to do so in the Militia.

I then remembered that as I squinted to my right and viewed an enormous figure in a blue frock-coat with very large and high patent-leather boots and ample bosom covered with Orders, I had, at the same time, heard a loud voice calling out: "Who the devil is that officer swinging his left arm, who's that swinging his arm?"

I, then, had been the delinquent! It quite spoilt my afternoon as I sculled in gloomy silence up the Aldershot canal. In after-years it came home to me that I was only really a bit ahead of my time, for are we not now carefully enjoined in "Ceremonial" to swing the disengaged arm, when marching past, as at all other times?

I did not care for Aldershot in the summer. Having always been a rowing man, the excellent cricket was no use to me. Polo I could not afford, and that canal is a dull place to boat on.

It is a far cry to the old troopships, *Euphrates*, *Crocodile*, *Malabar* and *Serapis*, conveying troops to the East. They were commanded and officered by the Royal Navy, a duty

naval officers were said to loathe as being not only very irksome, but derogatory to their dignity.

My first experience, getting on board H.M.S. *Malabar* at Portsmouth during a cold evening in early December, 1883 (and accompanied by a prize-bred bulldog called "Muggins"), was rather an awkward one. Standing in my wake at the gangway was an offensive-looking person with a letter addressed to me. He turned out to be a representative from my tailor, hanging round to make me pay for my last suit of dittoes.

This was an unfriendly act I much resented, having just paid a very substantial bill for every mortal thing up to that one suit. Sarcastic enquiries as to whether the firm's prices justified the assumption that they did business for cash only, simply elicited the reply that "it was extremely difficult to get money out of gentlemen in India!" As the man kept following me about and was a perfect nuisance regarding his six guineas, the only thing to do was to get into uniform, and ask the ship's adjutant to put me on duty. It was then a simple task to order him off the boat; which I did promptly.

We subalterns were herded together at the bottom of the ship, aft, in a large space called the "Pandemonium," and not badly named at that in this particular instance. That is to say, although we were a merry crowd, we were certainly a lot of demons in our craze for mischief, and in our treatment of the officers of slightly higher rank who occupied thinly partitioned cabins, named horse-boxes, just above us. Pillow fights with them, or between ourselves, were of nightly occurrence. Then the purser, or his satellites, most inconsiderately refusing to renew our burst ones, we had perforce to refrain, and the majority of us found only greatcoats under our heads at night for the rest of the voyage.

◦ We were, of course, always in uniform, with dinner in mess dress. In addition to the field officer and orderly officer of the day, there was a subaltern on duty for every watch, who, to his intense disgust, had to go and salute, on the bridge, a naval officer years younger than himself, and report "coming on duty."

For days, the main attraction at dinner was sampling the various continental wines, of which there was an enormous assortment, being tempted thereto by the

ridiculously low prices after the land charges we had been accustomed to.

Lieut. Colonel F. C. Keyser of the Royal Fusiliers, a pioneer of the signal service and well known for years after his retirement as a zealous devotee of the English Turf, was Officer Commanding Troops. So interested was he in all happenings on board, that he started a ship's newspaper called *The Malabar*, which teemed with wit and humour. How it was printed, I don't know; anyhow, it was not only printed, but illustrated with excellent caricatures (by Lovett of the Gloucesters) of all the celebrities on board, including "Muggins."

The latter, however, soon got into dire disgrace. There were some calves on board for Christmas veal, and one being led past Muggins, who was rather irritable with his enforced confinement, he fastened on to its muzzle. A dislodgment could only be made by means of an iron crowbar, which strained his jaws badly for many weeks to come.

The naval officers were very fond of a mild gamble, and every night after dinner some ten of us sat down to Nap, Loo, Van John, or Poker. Colonel Keyser occasionally looked on, and one evening was present when the writer was initiating the company into the mysteries of a very gambling but extremely simple and foolish game learnt in Liverpool, called "Yankee Sam." This was not quite to the colonel's taste and he disappeared quickly, but his only remark was: "I'm d—d if you are not the most versatile young gamblers I ever met."

Shortly before this voyage there had been a rumpus at the Malta United Service Club, caused by the rowdiness of a trooper's contingent. The old privilege of being honorary members during a troopship's stay in port had been withdrawn for some months. Colonel Keyser knew Malta well, and was most popular there. As soon as we got into harbour he began to signal, asking that we might be allowed to use the club, and he would be responsible. His request being granted, we were all solemnly warned that we must be extremely careful in our conduct. So serious was the situation held to be that at dinner when, someone saying something extremely funny, I burst into laughter, an emissary came at once from the O.C. at the top of the table to warn me that no boisterous laughter was permitted!

The men were very badly accommodated indeed on these troopships. They were dreadfully overcrowded, and no one seemed then to think of doing anything for their amusement. As "officer of the watch" one had to go round the whole ship, and the smell was so nauseating in the men's quarters that in quite calm weather many of us were violently sick. What it must have been like when nearing the East in September, or March, passes all imagination, for no troops were allowed on deck at night.

Besides the parades by sectional commanders, we had alarm rehearsals almost daily, and fell in, equipped with life-belts, opposite the boats allotted. It was understood there were rafts somewhere; but, although with practice the rehearsal alarms were splendidly performed, it always worried us as to how each boat could possibly carry the number of persons detailed for it.