

CHAPTER V

LORD DUFFERIN AND THE AMIR

MY battalion had a pack of hounds at Ambala drawn along in camel shigrams (species of covered wagon), and we hunted regularly on Thursdays and Sundays. In the winter the battalion went to Delhi for a big camp of exercise. We were camped for a time on the Ridge alongside the Chief's camp, where a lot of foreign officers were staying. They used to ride round with the Chief, and it was an extraordinary thing how the men disliked the Russian representatives and would whisper amongst themselves in the shelter trenches :—

“Them's the ruddy Roosians, them's the fellars we're going to fight, the beggars in the white caps.”

It was here that a linguistic sapper officer, who was helping to look after them, and remarkable for his marvellous agility in walking under a rope and then jumping over it, or hopping on to the mantelpiece and remaining there, got very lively one night. In his light-heartedness he insisted on continuously calling out : “I want to hop that ruddy Russian round the table.” This caused much consternation : the Chief heard about it, and he had to leave Delhi next day.

It was here also that the celebrated ball at the Delhi Club took place, when all of us were very merry, down to the last joined subaltern. This joviality was partly owing to the high spirits of everybody at the apparent certainty of a war with Russia, and partly because our fitness, after a hard camp life on short commons, made the wine take effect very easily. The Cheshires had a meet next morning at 6.30 a.m., and my duties of whip necessitated a rapid change into hunting kit immediately after the ball. The long jog to covert, a good run and a search

until 3 p.m. for two hounds, lost when rioting after pig, effectually worked off any excess in champagne the night before.

It was here, again, that I made up my mind to go into the Indian Staff Corps (the old term for the Indian Army), to my colonel's intense disgust. This necessitated very early action with the proper authorities encamped on the Delhi Ridge, as I was already over age.

I had put down for cavalry, as that was the arm I wanted, but then taking fellows a very long time to get, owing to paucity of vacancies. I realised, however, that the first thing to do was to get into the Indian Army somehow, and trust to luck about the mounted branch later on. Enquiry taught me that a colonel, called Collett, then deputy adjutant-general, was the man I wanted, but that the interview might be unpleasant! Fortified by the thought of my success with the War Office Military Secretary, I judged a bold course the better one, and next day sent my card into his office tent. Being duly admitted, the following conversation took place:

Self. "I've come to say I want to enter the Indian Staff Corps."

D.A.G. "All right, then, send in the necessary papers."

Self. "Yes, that's being done, but unfortunately I'm over age."

D.A.G. "Then, I'm afraid I can't help you."

Self. "I came into the Army late, having been in business first, and as promotion in the Indian Staff Corps is by length of service, I don't see how I can do harm to anyone."

D.A.G. "Humph! Fond of shooting?"

Self. "Yes, sir, very."

D.A.G. "All right, I think it can be managed and I'll get you posted to an Assam battalion."

Now I had little idea of where Assam was, but fancied it had something to do with the Andamans. The thought flitted through my brain, that here I was trying to enter the I.S.C. for the specific purpose of marriage, and running a risk of permanent appointment to a unit in the wilds. Hence my reply after a longish pause.

Self. "Well, sir, I know beggars can't be choosers, but I think I'd rather give up the idea."

D.A.G. (who had been very patient). "Oh! well, I

daresay I could post you to a Bengal regiment, on one condition, and that is that you join immediately you get the telegram. Do you agree?"

I knew nothing of Bengal regiments, but this seemed splendid, and I agreed at once.

Before the troops dispersed there was a big review and march past, with Lord Dufferin taking the salute, and all the foreign officers present—French, German, Russian, Austrian, Italian, American, etc., etc. The morning broke beautifully fine and about 8 a.m. off we started to take up our position in line, dressed in review order, red, and officers in Wellington boots and straps. All went well until the Viceroy returned to the saluting base from his ride down the line, when the rain began to fall in torrents. A water-proof was pressed on Lord Dufferin, but he waved it aside, and for three long hours sat on his horse in the pitiless down-pour. Drenched to the skin he was, indeed, but he had for ever endeared himself to the soldiery, who cheered him lustily whenever and wherever he was seen.

This episode was recalled to my mind thirty-one years later by a very courteous act in heavy rain by General Padma Shumsher, of the Nepal army at Abbottabad, where I had the pleasure of supervising the training of over six thousand of the Nepalese contingent, in addition to my other work as a brigadier.

For some time the general had wished to give me a ceremonial parade of the whole contingent on the brigade review ground *four* miles from his camp. At last, a day being fixed, eight o'clock saw me riding up to the saluting base to receive the general salute. Hardly was this over, and just as the troops were moving to march past, one of those torrential showers, so common on the North-West Frontier, commenced. In two minutes we were wet to the skin, with water bubbling over the top of our boots, and I soon saw my wife's car near the flagstaff standing in inches of splashing rain.

Galloping up to General Padma, I told him to dismiss the men to take shelter in some empty adjacent barracks and at the same time begged him to ride home quickly and change at once. As he still delayed, after giving the necessary orders about the men, I repeated my request, when he remarked, "But I must pay my respects to Mrs. Woodyatt first, after her coming down to see the parade." Saying

I would explain and that she would never expect it in that awful shower, I trusted he would ride away. But not instead of that he galloped off to the car, where he actually got off his horse and stood in the slush for several minutes in animated conversation with my wife.

"Blood will tell," I said to myself. "That's a very gallant and courteous act, denoting the true gentleman."

And so it was in Lord Dufferin's case at the Delhi Review. But the parade had to go through, rain or no rain. For ages we infantry seemed to stand facing the saluting base, while the cavalry and artillery went past, the elephant batteries squelching the mud into regular furrows. I saw the red from the tassels of my sash running in crimson streaks down my overalls, while the pipeclay from my white helmet poured in pale streams along my chest and back. When eventually we got near the flagstaff, the going beggars description. It was all one could do to keep one's feet, let alone keep pace to the drowned strains of "Wha Winna Fight for Charlie," the old Cheshire "March Past," symbolic of Sir Charles Napier and Myanec.

Some of the native infantry in those days wore shoes. Dozens of odd ones were lying in the mud everywhere. The native ranks of one unit (the 39th Bengal Infantry), looking upon their loss as a very serious matter, many men actually fell out to recover them. Indeed the native officer carrying the Queen's Colour was said to have fished his up with the top of the pole. Anyhow, the unit was entirely disgraced and eventually disbanded.

This episode was the talk of the whole camp for days, the indignation being intense that this should have happened in front of all the foreign officers. It was somewhat of a relief, therefore, to hear later that the offence had not been overlooked, and that the Chief had assembled the foreign officers and told them so.

Our men were splendid, and grave as could be, for the good name of the old "two twos" (22nd Cheshire Regiment). I myself saw one man near the right flank of the company in front slip badly some twenty yards before reaching the Viceroy. Recovering, he regained his balance indeed, but had lost the hold of his rifle. The man on his right, however, catching it deftly, carried this rifle past, as well as his own, while the unarmed private fell in line with the supernumerary rank and went by like a Trojan.

In the meantime Lord Dufferin had brought off his famous conference with the Afghan Amir, Abdūr Rahmān, and off we went to Rawalpindi where a large concentration of troops took place. It was always raining, and raining hard.

Camped some three or four miles away we started one morning at 4 a.m., in great-coats over our full dress, to line the streets for the Amir's arrival. Of course at 8 a.m. the sun came out, and the order was passed down the line to take off great-coats and stack them in rear. Sheringham and I had failed to put on our red tunics at all! It appeared a pity to sweat in them under our overcoats, and it looked a dreadfully threatening day! We could not very well stand alongside our men's tunics in great-coats, so after some very severe remarks by the C.O. we were ordered to hand over the company and go back to camp. Feeling very dejected we trudged off. When the battalion returned about noon we learnt that the Amir had never even arrived! The fact was that at Peshawar he had refused to get into so strange a thing as a railway carriage!

In the afternoon orders came that the streets would be similarly lined the next day. Luckily it didn't rain and the Amir *did* arrive.

At a conversazione given by the Viceroy, a chance came to me of studying Abdūr Rahmān very closely. Sitting out with some girl in a kind of boudoir tent, I walked the Amir, entirely by himself, looking very bored. Plumping himself down on a couch he remained buried in reverie for a long time, with a stout walking-stick between his legs. He wore a black astrakhan cap with a diamond star in front, a kind of frock-coat and long untanned leather boots.

Of a large and stout figure, he had a very strong face, covered with a thick beard dyed red, his upper lip and a small portion of the lower being clean shaven. It looked as if he had retired bored to death, and though various equerries and people came and peeped at His Highness now and then, he gave such a vicious snarl at the sight of them, that they promptly disappeared.

What we were chiefly concerned with, however, was the Grand Review, but the rain being so persistent, the new parade ground on the far-away plain was unfit for use on the appointed day. It was arranged, therefore, that the

review should take place in Rawalpindi itself, by marching units up to the cricket ground by one road, whence they formed to the left, marched past and then, forming again to the left, returned to quarters by another road. This went off very well, and some forty thousand cavalry, artillery, and infantry went past by troops, sections and companies. When asked by Lord Dufferin, however, what he thought of it, the Amir looked knowing, but only said, "Very clever!"

It took some hours to make out exactly what he meant, and then it transpired he was firmly convinced that only about five thousand troops had taken part at all, the same units having marched round and round eight or nine times. This is what he meant by "Very clever." In vain the Viceroy, through his interpreter, endeavoured to clear his mind of this misapprehension. The Amir pinned his belief mainly on the indisputable fact that a "*ghāgrā paltan*" (kilted regiment) had gone past several times. He politely brushed aside Lord Dufferin's assurance that there were four or five different Highland battalions in camp.

Towards the end of the Conference, the Viceroy held a grand Durbar at which the Amir, after a speech by the Viceroy, received a sword of honour, and his suite and family numerous other presents. Each was brought in separately, and announced by the Foreign Secretary, who, making an obeisance, would say: "A pair of guns for His Highness' eldest son, the etc., etc., etc." This took an interminable time, until it really appeared as if everyone of his numerous relatives in Afghanistan was getting something. The Durbar tent was packed and, for the first time, ladies were permitted to be present. On receiving the sword of honour, Abdūr Rahmān was heard to say a few words which the interpreter translated in a loud voice, as follows: "With this sword I shall kill the enemies of Queen Victoria." Being received with acclamation, the Amir looked up very quickly and suspiciously at the novel sound, to him, of hand-clapping.

During this concentration the 'Pindi Club was crowded to suffocation. There would be rows six to eight deep in the evening trying to get a drink. One night Sheringham and I tried to dine there before going on to the lotteries, but it was precious little we got to eat and nothing at all to drink. There were some shocking incidents as regards

"chits" signed for drinks with fictitious names. This and bad management and the fact that many drinks were not signed for at all, caused a heavy loss to the club instead of a big profit as should have been the case. In face of this it is extraordinary that, over twenty years later, the club in Lahore at a big gathering should still maintained the "chit" system instead of cash vouchers, and with, I regret to record, exactly similar results. Many vouchers were, in this last case, signed "Bishop of Lahore," and these, that best of good fellows, Bishop Lefroy, is said to have redeemed.

Outside Rawalpindi we were camped by brigades mostly along the main road. Exactly opposite the Cheshires' quarter guard was the camp of the 4th Gurkhas, which had the reputation of being the best dressed unit amongst Gurkhas. Colonel Hay was the C.O. and Mercer the adjutant. My delight in these little men was mingled with regret that, firstly, I could not get them to understand a word I said, though they smiled, which was something; and secondly, that I was never likely to serve with them. Not only was I down for cavalry, eventually, but vacancies in the Gurkhas appeared to be reserved for sons of distinguished Indian Civil Service and military officials, or the relatives of other great men.

Outside Assam and Burma there were at that time only five regular battalions of Gurkhas, with nine British officers apiece, including the M.O. Great was my delight when I was asked to dinner with the 4th, and little did I think that five years later I should be offered the adjutancy of a recently formed 2nd Battalion to the 4th, or that thirty-four years afterwards I should have this same old battalion, under the command of my great friend "Eliza" Tillard, as one of the units of my division in the field. Mercer was very busy after dinner selecting the tartan for streamers for the pipes they were just starting, and I thought what a keen, earnest, good-looking fellow he was.