CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHICAL

CHARLES HAMILTON SORLEY was born on 19th May 1895, in 44 Don Street, Old Aberdeen, and was the elder twin son of William Ritchie Sorley then professor of moral philosophy in Aberdeen University. On both sides he was of Lowland Scottish descent, his forbears having come, so far as is known, from the lands between the Tay and the Tweed. One grandfather, the Reverend William Sorley, was, as a young man, among the ministers of the Scottish Church who "came out" at the Disruption of 1843: his humour, force of character, and keenness of mind made him a man of mark in his day in the life of the border country. The other grandfather, who was known and loved by Charlie, is George Smith, C.I.E., of Edinburgh, a journalist and man of letters, much of whose life was spent in India.

A year after the boys' birth their family moved to Powis House, a fine Adams mansion standing high above the Old Town and looking over the dream-like crown of King's College Chapel to the rim of the North Sea. It is a fine windy place and a good natural nursery for children; the fields round the house were filled with beasts; and there is the exciting neighbourhood of a local railway station, which inspired the children to create imaginary kingdoms of their own "up the line," connected by a vast railway system one of whose rules was that all the officials must cross the line by the

bridges only while passengers and others might do as they pleased.

At Powis the boys and their elder sister spent four happy years of normal and contented childhood, sometimes going with their beloved nurse to her home by the North Sea, where they learned to plant potatoes or ranged the windy moors in search of lapwings' eggs, coming home full of barn-door wisdom and the life-histories of every creature on the farm. In 1900, when the boys were five years old, they came to live in Cambridge, "where the low streams run," as their father was appointed Knightbridge professor in the University. Until then and for some years after they were taught at home by their mother. Their education, besides the acquisition of an angular handwriting, consisted chiefly in singing and marching games in French and English, history stories and fairy stories, reading aloud from the Bible and the *Pilgrim's Progress*, but especially in learning by heart any amount of poetry—ballads and passages of Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Macaulay, and Blake. With "Once more unto the breach, dear friends," Sir Patrick Spens, or "Tiger, tiger, burning bright" humming in their heads, it was vaguely disappointing to be set down to Mrs Hemans and Mary Howitt, when they first went to school. It is sad to have to record that well-meant efforts to interest them in natural history failed completely, nor did they ever have much inclination to collect stamps, play with bottles, or maim themselves with tools. But they were eager to write down whatever came into their heads or seemed to them worth remembering and telling about. When they were about ten, their sister had

a hand in the inevitable school magazine for which she demanded contributions. Among other efforts Charlie gave her the following verses:

The Tempest

The tempest is coming,
  The sky is so dark,
The bee has stopped humming
  And down flies the lark.

The clouds are all uttering
  Strange words in the sky;
They are growling and muttering
  As if they would die.

Some forked lightning passes
  And lights up the place,
The plains and the grasses,
  A glorious space.

It is like a story
  The light in the sky:
A moment of glory
  And then it will die.

The rain is beginning,
  The sky is so dark,
The bird has stopped singing
  And down flies the lark.

The beginning of school-life, as a day-boy at the King's College Choir School, meant nothing but satisfaction and happy anticipation to Charlie. He always wanted to grow up, and this was a stage farther on. Each new experience—whether game or book or place or human being—came as an adventure to him; he always criticized eagerly, but he reaped and remembered only the best—nothing else counted. "No, I haven't got a pain, but I can't help it when I think of the future," was his explanation when he was found crying

in bed, with his head far under the clothes, after he had heard that scarlet fever would separate him for six long weeks from his brother and from school. This was an almost solitary instance of complaint or depression. Whatever disappointments, apprehensions, or sense of failure he ever had afterwards, he kept to himself and met his adventures—especially the greatest of all, in August 1914—with a happy readiness and humour that gave a sense of comfort and assurance to those about him. "There goes Charlie, aye bright and brave," as our old Yorkshire hostess said at the end of a holiday. At the same time he had a quick understanding of what failure, or weakness, or limitation means for other people and his sympathy was active—even to the extent of leading him on one occasion to deplore his own easy lot: "I often feel terribly unworthy and untried in that life has given me no troubles or difficulties at home, such as alone strengthen a man," he wrote to a friend in 1915. Everybody and everything interested and had a claim on him. He knew that life had been good to him, and by instinct he gave back all he could.

In the choice of a public school Charlie was a pioneer, as his family had no previous experience or tradition to guide them. He settled the question for himself by gaining an open scholarship at Marlborough College, where he went in the autumn of 1908. The one drawback to this adventure was the separation from his brother, who was sent to another school because even the wisest of men and schoolmasters do not seem able to refrain from making comparisons; and it is fairer for a boy to be on his own. The boys were alike in the deep love and understanding they had for each other;

but they had great independence of ideas and outlook and were—for twins—remarkably different in nature and appearance. They looked forward to being together at the University; and meanwhile there were the vacations which, in summer, were usually passed either at a Yorkshire inn where the moors approach the sea, or else in one or other of the home-places—Selkirk, Dunbar, or Aberdeen. Once we went with bicycles to France, and rode about the coast of Normandy and the land by the Seine. Charlie's comment (it was his first time abroad) was that it was the rottenest country he had ever seen and the finest holiday he had ever had. We had the habit besides of going to Marlborough every summer—not for Speech Day, which he did not recommend, but earlier when the fern and beeches are fresh in the forest "and the downs are dimpling green." Once, on an afternoon of gusty rain, when we had struggled up a steep red road and were about to cross over to the downs, we came suddenly on a field covered with great white flints. "What a lot of stones, how hopeless it looks!" said one of us. But Charlie, who generally responded readily, said not a word; he only stared at the field as if he saw something written on it[1], and then we all went on in silence.

He was thirteen when he entered Marlborough, and at first the school absorbed him completely. He had a period of hero-worship, very little qualified by criticism, for its demigods among the boys and masters; he abounded in the mysteries of its etiquette and slang; and he would pore by the hour over the blue School List, declaring that he knew by headmark most of the

[1] See *Marlborough and Other Poems*, 4th ed., p. 6 ('Stones').

boys in it—which may very well have been the case, as he had a quick memory for names and faces. His enthusiasms were always breaking forth in brilliant generalizations, which were as often cheerfully and relentlessly shelved. So at this time he was certain that there was nothing to beat the public school system: it was the finest in the world.

In January 1910 he and his friend Arthur Bethune-Baker entered one of the senior houses in college—C House, the oldest and most beautiful of the buildings, and the home of the Adderley Library, which became for him a great resource and pleasure. In the following November Arthur died at school after a few days' illness. At the time Charlie took it very quietly, but it is certain that what had been achieved in that short life became a part of him which was never forgotten or left behind.

His attitude towards the school, though essentially loyal and filial, developed in breadth and humour as he found freedom and read and thought for himself. On one of the family visits to Marlborough he asked, with subdued excitement, whether we had seen *The Widow in the Bye Street*. The reply was that we had but that it had been chained up from the youth of the flock. To which he answered, supremely scornful, "We take *The English Review* in the Sixth; and, any way, I've bought a copy and am lending it to people."

He took his share eagerly in the occupations and interests of the school, especially football and the O.T.C. But what he liked best was to tramp or run over the surrounding country. No one more enjoyed and valued his friends, or more willingly took and gave the best of

company; yet when he went for long walks, or for runs in shorts and jersey, over the downs, he chose to be alone. In July 1911 he bicycled from Marlborough to Cambridge in a day; but that passion soon passed; and in the spring of 1912 he walked home, taking four days to the hundred miles or so of distance. It was stipulated that he should spend the nights in a bed under cover, and not under hedge or haystack as he proposed; but there are evidences that the condition—if there was one—was not taken too seriously by him. Part of his way lay along the bank of the canal by Hungerford; here he found the dead straight line of the tow-path so unbearable that, to keep going at all, he had to repeat aloud the thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, which he had just learned as an imposition. He gaily told his first teacher that it was the only portion of the Bible which he could remember by heart. In September 1913, in returning for what was to be his last term at school, he left the train at Fenny Stratford and had a three days' walk to Marlborough.

In December 1913 he gained a scholarship at University College, Oxford. In ordinary course he should have remained at Marlborough for the rest of the school-year—till July 1914. But, after some discussion with the Marlborough authorities, his father decided to give him a short time abroad as a break between the grooves of public school and university. There is no doubt that the home of his heart was the Marlborough country, and it cost him something to give up the last six months there. But he left himself in the hands of "the gods who made a pother o'er his head" and agreed to the plan with his usual happy reasonableness.

He had always kept up the habit of writing down what was in his mind. When he was a small boy this took the form of long screeds of heroic verse after the model of Scott or Macaulay. Later he indulged in stories of the "shocker" sort, which he used to tell in the dormitory at night as the works of one Jonathan Armstrong. As he grew older he became more and more reserved about his writing. Though his family knew vaguely of his connection with the school magazine, *The Marlburian*, he never saw fit to enlighten them on the subject. He would sometimes mention, however, in his letters, when he made a speech at the Debating Society, or read a paper to the Junior Literary Society—started largely on his account, when he was in the Lower Sixth, by one of the junior masters—or to the senior society, to which he was admitted on promotion to the Upper Sixth. Before he left for Germany he was asked to mark his articles and verses in *The Marlburian* for preservation among the family archives and because his mother had an idea that something was "going on." At the time he did not respond to this badgering; but some weeks later he sent a batch of verses to her. This he continued to do regularly, generally for a birthday, till June 1915 when the last lot—"Two Sonnets"—were sent from France. A few days before these arrived it was suggested to him that a slim volume should be published "for fun" and to relieve the tedium of the trenches. But he would have none of it: "for three years or the duration of the war, let be." He was equally discouraging when asked for a "gallery" letter for the private record of the daily life and doings of his battalion in France. His sense

about such things was soldierly, and he disliked and dreaded anything in the way of advertisement or pose.

On the 20th January 1914 he went to Schwerin in Mecklenburg where, in the house of a lawyer and his wife, he found friends and conditions of the happiest and most entertaining kind. After he had got some hold of the language he moved at the end of April to Jena as a student of the University. There he realised a different world. Schwerin in 1914 was a place where people still said grace before meat, and meant it. In Jena they were more knowing. Both were amazingly young. Following their merciless family custom, his parents visited him in June and made with him a little tour in Thuringia, which closed with a week-end at Jena. On the Saturday night he took us through a square which was full of students—both men and women—seated at tables drinking and singing under flaring lights. Their singing was beautiful; their faces were mostly stupid and, in the case of recent duellists, revolting. The next day, as we went up towards a hill on the outskirts of the town, we met many of them again—both Korpsstudenten and Wandervögel—all in ridiculous clothes and with self-conscious looks which suggested pantomime. As we sat under the scanty shade of some scrubby trees, looking down on Jena shimmering in "the laden heat," and talking of its strange inhabitants, Charlie said dreamily, "I can't make out those fellows; they are always gassing about Goethe and Schiller; I think they're just hypocrites. But they must have some grit; for, though they do nothing at all their first two years but drink and fight and folly, yet they pull themselves together in their

third year and manage to get through their exams." The following day, in the University, we were shown the fresco of the students of 1813 marching away to war.

In the end of July he reluctantly turned his steps homeward. He had planned a week's walking tour with a friend in the Moselle valley; thence he was to dash across Germany to Berlin, then join his brother at Schwerin and return with him a few days afterwards. The latter part of the programme was not carried out. On Sunday, 2nd August, he and his friend were arrested at Trier, and kept in separate cells for the rest of the day. One damning circumstance was that they had no hats, though Charlie gravely assured the officers who examined them that such was the habit of "the best people" in England. For him the long hours of that day were beguiled by the cheerful conversation of a soldier-prisoner in the next cell, who hailed him cautiously through a knot-hole in the wooden partition. They did their best for one another during the day, muttering through the hole in the wall, always mindful of the sentry in the corridor. The two tourists were released the same night, with permission and orders to leave the country. Charlie returned through Belgium, with little idea that he was making for the storm-centre. As his train passed through Liége, in the early afternoon of Monday, he roused himself from sleep to have a look at the place, but noticed nothing peculiar except the "Waterloo top-hats" of the soldiers. At Brussels and Antwerp, however, he had many difficulties till he succeeded in getting a passage on a vessel chartered by the British consul. He reached home on the evening of August 6th,