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978-1-108-04469-1 - Reminiscences of the Burmese War in 1824-5-6

F.B. Doveton

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

EMBARKATION, AND FALL OF RANGOON.

In April, 1824, it was my lot, and a proud and happy lot I thought it, to hold the rank of ensign in the Madras European Regiment, then in garrison at Masulipatam, the capital of the Northern Circars; and never shall I forget the shouts of joy with which we welcomed the intelligence of a war with the Burmese, in which our own corps was to bear a part. The day that brought the news was, in truth, one of rejoicing, especially to the youngsters among us, who, reckless of the fatal consequences that flow from war, thought only of the opportunities it would afford of personal aggrandizement. The calamities of the many were forgotten in the intoxicating prospects of

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the few; and the well-known professional toast of "Prize-money and promotion," and the more barbarous one of "A bloody war and a sickly season," were given and drunk, not simply with due honours, but with the most uproarious applause. This thirst for glory, this love of war, is not confined to the novice in arms, as yet inexperienced in its horrors; it is common to all ranks and to all nations, from the private soldier to the field-marshal—from the barbarous New Zealander to the cultivated and Christianized native of Britain. In the instance before us, all hands, from the colonel downwards, were exulting in the prospects war held out, though, short-sighted creatures that we were, a moment's reflection would have told us that prize-money must be purchased by the blood of thousands, and promotion could only be obtained by the death of those for whom we were at the same time professing the warmest and kindest feelings of friendship. Such is man! But a truce to sentiment, or I shall fall into disfavour at the very threshold.

The Madras European Regiment, at the period I speak of, was 1,300 strong, in a high state of discipline, and, being commanded by a man to whom we all looked up as the very *beau*

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idéal of a soldier, we calculated upon making a distinguished figure in the forthcoming campaigns. Under such auspices, we thought, *Teucro duce, et auspice Teucro*, we could not but conquer. But the result proved that we were wrong in our calculations, and that we very much over-rated our commandant's qualifications in the field, though he was an admirable drill, and in other respects a man of superior abilities and of estimable character.

"The Lambs," a name given to my old corps, (I conclude, upon the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, for their gambols and frolics were none of the gentlest) are the oldest and most distinguished regiment of the Madras army, as Indian records can testify. In support of their character, I need only point to their colours, upon which are emblazoned the words "Arcot," "Plassey," "Candore," "Wandewash," "Sholingur," "Nundy Droog," "Amboyna," "Ternate," "Banda," "Pondicherry," "Mahidpoor," and "Ava." In addition to these, they enjoy the distinction of wearing the royal tiger upon their caps and appointments, with the Latin motto, *Spectamur agendo*. From the year 1746, when the regiment was employed near Trichinopoly against the French, under the

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celebrated Laurence, up to the present time, its services have been so extensive in their nature as they have invariably been distinguished in their operation; and it has fallen to the lot of few corps in the East to have faced such a variety of foes. The “Lambs” having fought against the French, the Dutch, the Cingalese, and Burmese, besides Indians of every denomination, their organization has undergone many modifications, sometimes consisting only of one battalion, but occasionally of many, according to the exigencies of the service. When I joined them they consisted of one battalion of twelve companies, the East-India Company at that period having only one European regiment of their own at each presidency. These corps are kept up by recruits from home, and drafts from H.M.’s regiments as they return to Europe. Formerly the recruits were of an inferior description, from some mismanagement or other in the Home Department. Their defects, however, partook less of a physical than a moral character, for fighting was the very element in which they delighted, especially when it came seasoned with the pillage of a pagoda or the sacking of a stockade. The truth is, we had some lawless fellows in our ranks in those days, who were

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only to be kept under by the iron or, more properly speaking, the hempen rod of discipline, *alias* the cat-o'-nine tails, of which article, I grieve to say, there was then a great consumption in the Madras European Regiment. The cat, however, and regular exercise under our excellent drill had got us into first-rate working order. Only eight companies out of the twelve were ordered to join the expedition: they mustered in all about 900, officers and men.

Reports had long been rife of the excesses of the Burmese on our north-eastern frontier, and of the encounters thereby occasioned between them and small parties of our troops, some of which had terminated much to our disadvantage. At one place, in particular, 1,500 of our troops, under Col. Bowen, were totally repulsed with heavy loss, where the enemy occupied a formidable stockade, named Doodputlee. Many collisions of this nature took place before the declaration of a general war; but at length, the patience of the Governor-General being fairly exhausted by repeated but ineffectual remonstrances to the court of Ava, a manifesto was thundered forth against his golden-footed majesty, and this edict was to be backed by a formidable naval and military expedition, to

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take possession of Rangoon, the capital of Pegue and the key of the Burman empire, and which, if terms could not be agreed upon there, was to penetrate into the interior by the line of the Irrawaddy. This noble river is the grand artery of the country, running from north to south for the space of six or seven hundred miles, seldom less than three-quarters of a mile in breadth, and navigable for small vessels up to the very walls of Ummerapoora.

The first expedition consisted of 8,000 men of all arms, who were followed in a few days by 2,000 more. The infantry regiments composing these were H.M.'s 13th, 38th, 41st, 89th, Madras European Regiment, and the 3rd, 7th, 9th, 12th, 18th, 34th and 43rd Regiment of Madras, and the 20th Regiment Bengal Native Infantry. The native troops employed were all from Madras, with the exception of this last corps, as the Bengal sepoys, for reasons I do not pretend to determine, are less available for foreign service. These troops were conveyed in from thirty-five to forty large transports, and convoyed by H.M.'s ships *Liffey* (of fifty guns), *Larne*, *Staney*, *Arachne*, and *Sophie*, besides the Hon. Company's cruisers *Hastings*, *Teignmouth*, and a number of small craft adapted for

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river service. The beautiful harbour of Port Cornwallis, in the Andaman Islands, in the Bay of Bengal, was to be the rendezvous of the respective divisions from Madras and Calcutta, being near the point of attack. My aim, however, is to limit my narrative as much as possible to the minutiae of the campaign, derived from my personal experience.

Three fine transports arrived at Masulipatam on the 9th of April, 1824, to take our regiment on board. Great was the excitement and bustle of preparation that followed the arrival from Madras of the order for our embarkation. The service we were going upon was altogether of a novel nature; and as it was beyond the seas, we were of course much restricted in servants and baggage. We cast off all extras, and squeezed what we considered indispensable for comfort and cleanliness into a couple of small-sized bullock-trunks, which, being united by a frame of cane-work, formed with the addition of a piece of carpet, a pillow and a counterpane—a sufficiently comfortable sleeping apparatus for Oriental campaigning. All this was adapted to the back of a bullock—the ordinary beast of burden in India—the whole being generally crowned with a camp washing-stand,

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brass basin and tea-kettle,—that never-failing source of comfort to an Englishman. These remarks apply only to the humble subaltern; the old hands were more luxurious. On Indian ground, cattle are to be had in any numbers, thereby allowing a person the enjoyment during a march of every thing he has been accustomed to in garrison; but in this case we thought it wiser to concentrate our goods and chattels, being doubtful how far the resources of the country we were bound to would supply us with the means of moving *à l'Indienne*.

Long before the first streak of dawn on the 11th, a part of our regiment was moving down to the point of embarkation, where the huge unsightly barboats of Bunder were in waiting to receive us, under the superintendence of that versatile genius, Mr. Dick Alexander, the master-attendant of the port, of whom it used to be said that he manufactured every thing, from a man-of-war to a mouse-trap. He was, however, as generally respected as he was generally known. Hitherto the active employment every one found in preparing for the move prevented our dwelling much on the more sober features of the promising landscape that was spread out before our mind's eye. The joy of the young-

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sters was, I believe, thoroughly without alloy; they cared but little for themselves,—less, of course, for others. A few there were who, whilst fully alive to the pleasurable prospect before them, could not but reflect at times on the possibility of finding a grave in distant Burmah, and solemn thoughts would obtrude themselves to sober down their excited spirits. There was, however, another class, with whom comparatively few of us appeared to sympathize: I mean the married men. They were linked to India and the dull station we rejoiced to quit, by the closest, the dearest of ties. We bachelors left nothing behind us for which we cared a rush; whereas they were to be torn from all they held dear on earth: however conscientious in the discharge of their duties, they were now encumbered by a double portion of care and anxiety. Oh! these sudden partings that precede the tug of war must be bitter moments! Thank God! I have been spared them.

Ah! then and there was hurrying to and fro,
And gathering tears, and tremblings of distress, &c. &c.

But, despite tears and sighs, the word of command had gone forth: onward we all moved, and the morning gun boomed over our heads, just as we pushed off the quay, and were slowly

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dropping down the slimy branch of the Kisthah, upon which the fortress of Masulipatam is situated.

By the 14th the whole of the corps destined for Ava, in all 900, officers and men, together with a large number of camp followers and 500,000 rounds of ammunition, were snugly packed in the vessels, the passage to which was most tedious, as, from the flat nature of the coast, they could not anchor nearer than eight or nine miles. To an inexperienced eye, the decks of an Indiaman, and more particularly a transport, just before getting under weigh, would present a scene of the most irremediable disorder—confusion worse confounded; and if it should happen to come on to blow just on quitting the anchorage, which, to complete matters, should be about nightfall—why, chaos itself would seem a joke to it! But in an incredibly short space of time both persons and things, live stock and dead, are shaken into their berths; and, be the first night ever so comfortless, the fresh morning air and the bright blue water that greet one immediately on emerging from the close dark cabin to the clean and comparatively spacious quarter-deck soon dispel all recollections of by-gone discomfort, and again,