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 T. Rice Holmes
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SIR CHARLES NAPIER

IN THE first year of the reign of George the Third, Lady Sarah Lennox, a daughter of the second Duke of Richmond, while she was acting in a play at Holland House, attracted the attention of Horace Walpole. 'Lady Sarah,' he wrote, 'was more beautiful than you can conceive....No Magdalen by Corregio was half so lovely and expressive.' She was then not quite sixteen. The young King sent her a proposal of marriage, and, when she next appeared at Court, took her aside and asked her what she thought of it. 'Tell me,' he urged, 'for my happiness depends on it.' 'Nothing, Sir,' she replied. 'Nothing comes of nothing,' said the King. His love remained, and he found an intermediary to assure her of his constancy. She accepted a second offer; but his mother interfered, and she contented herself with appearing as a bridesmaid at the wedding which had been arranged for him. In the following year she married Charles Bunbury, the owner of the first winner of the Derby, eloped a few years later with Lord William Gordon, was afterwards divorced, and in 1781 became the second wife of the Honourable George Napier¹, who had served in the American War, but whose commission had been sold for the benefit of his infant daughter. Soon after his marriage Napier, who was six years younger than his wife, re-entered the army², and ultimately rose to the rank

¹ J. H. Jesse, *Memoirs of George III*, i, 1867, pp. 69, 100; G. O. Trevelyan, *Early Hist. of Charles James Fox*, 1880, pp. 53-5; *Life...of Lady Sarah Lennox*, ed. Lady Ilchester, i, 1901, pp. 88-95, 105, 120; *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Mrs Paget Toynbee, v, 1904, pp. 19, 107; xii, 82 n. 3.

² *Army List*, 1781, p. 156; 1783, p. 177. Napier's name does not appear in the *Army List* of 1782.

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[More information](#)

of lieutenant-colonel. His eldest son, Charles James, the conqueror of Sind, was born at Whitehall on the 10th of August, 1782. On the side of his father, he was descended from Montrose and from the Napier who invented logarithms; on that of his mother, from Charles the Second, and therefore also from Henry of Navarre. He always believed that his father was, in genius, at least the equal of Wellington, and accounted for his not having risen to eminence by declaring that men in power feared him and resented his want of subservience. Whatever may be the value of this judgement, George Napier was a remarkable man. Six feet two in height¹, and built in proportion, he was spoken of by Sir Joshua Reynolds as a model of strength and manly beauty; and all who knew him were impressed by the force, the disinterestedness, and the generosity of his character.

When his eldest son was three years old, Napier settled at Celbridge, a small town on the Liffey, ten miles west of Dublin. Owing to an accident, caused by the carelessness of his nurse, Charles was often ailing as an infant; and, in contrast to his herculean father, he grew up a small and meagre boy. Reading in Plutarch that Philip of Macedon, Hannibal, and Sertorius had each lost the sight of an eye, he wished to suffer the same loss, as the mark of a great commander. But, though even in childhood he passionately longed for fame, and dreamed of winning it in war, it grieved him to think that the meanest animal was in pain. Once, while still so young that he could barely speak, hearing a crow caw, he began to cry, and, stretching out his little hands, exclaimed, 'What

¹ G. T. Napier, *The Early Military Life of Gen. Sir George T. Napier*, 1886, pp. 21-3.

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Sir Charles Napier

3

matta, poor bird? What matta?’ nor would he be quieted until he had been told, over and over again, that the bird was not unhappy. So sensitive a child could not but be alive to every danger; but, stimulated by love of glory and admiration for heroism, whenever he felt fear he would force himself to beat it down. One day, in his eleventh year, he had just caught a fish, when, before he had time to secure it, an eagle swooped down, perched upon his shoulders, and carried it off. Undaunted, he pursued his sport, and, as soon as he had caught another fish, held it up, challenging the eagle to attack again, and brandishing the spear-end of his rod.

In 1794, at the age of twelve, he received a commission in the 33rd regiment, then commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Wellesley. Soon afterwards he was transferred to the 89th, forming part of an army, of which his father was Assistant Quartermaster-General, assembled at Netley Camp under Lord Moira. Young Napier was taken to the camp; and there, although he did not actually join his regiment, he became familiar with military life. After a short stay, he was sent back to Ireland, and exchanged into the 4th regiment, but, as he was still too young to join, was placed as a day-boy at Celbridge School.

His precocious intimacy with soldiers had already left its mark upon his character. In manner and habits he had little in common with the ordinary schoolboy, and bore himself as if he were conscious that he was already an officer. All boys hate injustice; but Napier was so abnormally sensitive that once, when his master had struck him for a supposed offence, he shut himself up in a closet for hours, weeping and brooding over his grievance, and did

1-2

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

not regain his equanimity for a week. He never quarrelled or fought, but, quiet and reserved as he was, he rapidly established an ascendancy over his school-fellows. Signs of coming rebellion were already manifest in Ireland; and, noting that in many places bodies of yeomanry were being raised, he determined to organize the boys as a corps of volunteers. Though nearly all of them belonged to Catholic families, who were indisposed to support the Government, he persuaded them to consent to his project; and uniforms, flags, drums, and rude fusils were provided by their parents. A faction tried to secure the command for John Judge, the best pugilist in the school and the foremost in all games; but the lad snubbed his supporters, and insisted that Napier, as the only one who had any knowledge of military affairs, should be elected chief. The faction submitted; and the slender sensitive boy formed and inspired his volunteers, some of whom were five years older than himself, while nearly all had been taught to regard him as a heretic, and to abhor the Government which he desired to uphold.

Meanwhile events were passing around him which caused young Napier to reflect with a seriousness disproportionate to his age. The loyal and the disloyal were equally savage. Bands of malcontents in quest of arms nightly attacked Protestant houses; poor peasants were often carried into the town, dead or dying from wounds which had been inflicted upon them by passing soldiers or yeomen. When, in 1798, the rebellion broke out, Colonel Napier, refusing to follow the example of the families who fled to Dublin, fortified his house, armed his five sons, and awaited an attack, which, though often threatened, was never

Cambridge University Press
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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Sir Charles Napier

5

delivered. At a later time he was accepted as the virtual commander of a company of militia, and, accompanied by his eldest son, often scoured the country at their head. One night they suddenly encountered an armed body, and both sides halted; but when a fight seemed imminent the colonel, suspecting that his opponents were friends, gave an order as a test in a loud voice, and a cry of recognition was heard. The moon shone out, and Charles was seen with his little fusil and fixed bayonet charging against Tim Sullivan, a huge grenadier. Tim looked down in astonishment, lifted up his diminutive foe, and kissed him. The boy's mind, early habituated to scenes of bloodshed and civil strife, was quickened by intercourse with two old family servants, a nurse and a butler, who, with natural eloquence, strove to nourish his ambition.

In 1799 Charles Napier, then a boy of seventeen, commenced his public career as aide-de-camp to Sir James Duff, the commander of the Limerick district. Towards the end of 1800 he was appointed a lieutenant in the 95th¹, or Rifle Corps, and joined his comrades at Blatchington, in Sussex. A cordial friendship soon arose between him and his captain, Alexander Cameron, a youth scarcely older than himself. It was borne in upon his mind that the foundation of success in war is discipline, and that one of the most important duties of an officer is to acquire a thorough knowledge of his men. But when

¹ The regiment was so called by Sir W. Napier in his *Life* of Sir Charles (i, 13), hereafter cited as *Life*; but in the Army Lists of 1800–3 there is no mention of a 95th regiment. Napier's is described in those of 1801 (p. 348), 1802 (p. 346), and 1803 (p. 237) as 'A Corps of Riflemen.'

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[More information](#)

the prospect of active service appeared to recede, and he became oppressed by the contrast between the excitement of his boyhood and the monotony of barrack life, his spirits fell. The news of the Peace of Amiens filled him with anxiety. 'Sometimes,' he wrote to his mother, 'my thought is to sell my commission, and purchase one in Germany or elsewhere; but my secret wish cannot be fulfilled, which is to have high command with British soldiers. Rather let me command Esquimaux than be a subaltern of Rifles forty years old.' Except on the rare occasions when he went to evening parties, he had little amusement. Billiards he was fond of; but fearing to be drawn into playing for money (for he was very poor), he hardly ever touched a cue. Every moment that he could spare in the day-time he devoted to study; and from five o'clock, when the mess was over, he read on again till ten. Home-sickness early seized him; and it needed all his force of will and all the distraction afforded by the company of pretty girls to enable him to fight against it. 'I am a determined rake,' he wrote, 'in love with four misses at once! I rode across the Downs, twelve miles after dark, to dance with one of them, and then came home at day-break. Yet would to heaven I could get home!'

After a short sojourn in London, where he checked his passionate longing for pleasure, Napier was sent on a recruiting mission to Ireland, and thence proceeded to Shorncliffe, to rejoin his regiment. In the following June, 1803, he went to Dublin, to join his cousin, General Fox, who, having been appointed Commander-in-Chief, had given him a place on his staff. Soon afterwards Fox was transferred to the London district, and Napier accompanied him thither.

Sir Charles Napier

7

His income was inadequate to his expenses: he was again attacked by melancholy; and hearing that his brother William had been gazetted in the 52nd regiment, he fretted at not being able to join him. 'What a curse,' he complained, 'to have a turn of mind similar to mine. Great exertion or perfect tranquillity is necessary to me, who have not that superior intellect which can regulate itself.' But his gloomiest descriptions of his own melancholy were generally lighted up by a flash of humour. 'Last night,' he told his mother, 'I sat up till two o'clock, writing on the old subject of grievances, and lashing myself into a fury with everything. Abusing the army, pulling off my breeches, cursing creditors, and putting out the candle all in a minute, I jumped into bed, and lay there blaspheming, praying, and perspiring for two hours, when sleep came. What I wrote is not worth sending, however, being full of jokes, politics, and blue devils. I live in fear of my creditors, but that shall not last. I will not be a tailor's slave.'

Towards the end of the year he was gazetted in the Staff Corps; but the promotion gave him no pleasure. He had come more and more to detest the army, and almost despaired of being able to conquer the feeling. 'To me,' he wrote, 'military life is like dancing up a long room with a mirror at the end, against which we cut our faces, and so the deception ends. It is thus gaily men follow their trade of blood, thinking it glitters; but to me it appears without brightness or reflection—a dirty red!' But, confronted by the alternatives of forcing himself to embrace, if he could never love, his profession, of degenerating into a pitiful grumbler, or of starving, he braced himself by

a supreme effort to make the best of his lot. 'Resolution,' he told his mother, 'has worked a miracle. My low spirits are thrown off in a great degree; not quite, but I am now as eager to carry all by storm as I was ready to desert five days ago. Not that my opinion or dislike is changed, but that no man can make a figure in anything who does not go hand and heart to work.'

About this time he was startled by the death of his friend Cameron; but, when the first force of the shock had passed, he was astonished and half ashamed to find that hardly a trace of grief remained. 'I am an unaccountable creature and do not understand my own character. Ten days ago Cameron died, and this day I have been talking and laughing at the mess like a happy being.' Again, 'Determined to resist grief, I am disappointed to find there is no grief to resist....Every day, every hour of separation from those I love gives me pain, and his death only makes me melancholy for a few days: it is incomprehensible.' In the autumn of the same year, 1804, his father also died; and thenceforth his mother became more to him than she had ever been.

In the middle of the following year his quarters were removed to Hythe, where he was under the command of Sir John Moore. The example of that heroic man stamped an ineffaceable impression upon his character. Sir John Moore was not only the creator of the Light Division: he breathed the breath of a new life into the British army. While devising numerous reforms in matters of detail, he introduced a vital, not merely a mechanical discipline, for the enforcement of which he taught his officers to feel individually responsible; and in Charles Napier he found a disciple after his own heart. Never drinking

Sir Charles Napier

9

wine, never gambling, keeping himself rigidly apart from familiarity with the society of the mess-room, Napier thenceforth bent all his energies to fit himself for success in his profession.

A turning-point in his life soon appeared. In 1806 his cousin, Charles James Fox, gave him a majority in a Cape Colonial corps. Having failed in an attempt to exchange from this regiment into another, forming part of a division commanded by Moore, he was about to embark for the Cape when adverse winds detained him at Portsmouth. There he found himself in the society of the officers of the 50th regiment, who soon conceived for him so strong a liking that they urged him to exchange from his corps into theirs. He refused to pay for his exchange, as such a course would be contrary to the regulations; whereupon they contrived, by some means which he never discovered, to have him gazetted free of cost.

At this time the British troops, conscious of their power, their rivalry stimulated by the exploits of Nelson's men, were looking impatiently for war. Not less eager than any other for action and for glory, Napier schooled himself to struggle conscientiously through his monotonous daily work, resolving, if fame should be denied him, to remain satisfied with obscurity. After two years spent chiefly at Bognor and Ashford, and diversified by nothing more exciting than a trip to Guernsey, where he became a Freemason, and some new flirtations, he was summoned, in 1808, to join the first battalion of the 50th at Lisbon. As the colonel had obtained leave of absence, Napier commanded the regiment, which was incorporated by Sir John Moore in the army about to enter Spain.

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[More information](#)

II

During the retreat which Moore was soon forced to make, Napier showed what profit he had derived from the years which he had devoted to study. Keeping his men together in compact order throughout the ordeal of that march, he led them with unbroken ranks into battle at Corunna. There they charged and overpowered the greatest of the hostile columns, under the eye of Moore, who, warmly praising their conduct, ordered their attack to be supported; but in his absence Lord William Bentinck, who led the brigade to which the 50th belonged, commanded the regiment, in spite of his order, to fall back¹. Unaware of this command, and separated from his men, Napier was shot in the leg and stabbed in the back, and, overpowered by numbers, was on the point of being slain, when Guibert, a French drummer, swung aside the foremost of his assailants, and saved his life. Flung into a filthy room in a dismantled house, he lay two days and nights, pinched by extreme cold, tortured by his wounds, insulted by brutal soldiers, unable to touch the food which humane officers brought to him, and full of shame at the fancy that the regiment in which he took such pride had disgraced its colours. At length he was taken to the quarters of Soult, who treated him kindly, and finally he was placed in the house of a French banker, where he stayed for the next two months. Owing to a difficulty which arose about his exchange, he remained for some time longer virtually a prisoner, and did not return to his regi-

¹ Cf. W. Napier's *Hist. of the War in the Peninsula*, i, 1851, pp. 329-30, and *Life*, i, 93-4, 102, with C. Oman, *Hist. of the Peninsular War*, i, 1903, p. 588.