

THE GENERAL'S NEPHEW.

SEVERAL years before the introduction of Minié-rifles and tunics, when Brown Bess with a well-hammered flint was considered the most efficient weapon of the British soldier, the regiment to which I then belonged was stationed, during its Indian tour of service, in the Sultryport division, commanded by Major-General Sir Hannibal Peacocke, K. C. B., one of the best whist-players and worst general officers in the service. He had entered the army young, and having both luck and interest, rose rapidly to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, when he was put on half-pay, and, having served almost exclusively on the staff, as ignorant of regimental duty as a man well could be. During the years which followed, he endeavoured, by assiduous attention to the duties of a man about town, to fit himself for future command; and on promotion to the rank of general, attended every levee of the commander-in-chief, asking for employment, and became a regular hanger-on at the Horse-guards, who, either to get rid of his importunities, or oblige his brother-in-law, Lord Cawood, gave him a division in India. Favoured child of fortune as he was, the general was always grumbling at his ill-luck, particularly at the card-table, though he could not bear to hear any one else do so, and would always demolish the complainant's grievance by quoting some greater misfortune which had happened to himself, making the lesser mischance appear contemptible and insignificant. If a defeated adversary made any remark on the number of rubbers he had lost, the general would exclaim: 'You don't call that a run of ill-luck, do you, sir? Why, I played whist regularly every night for eight years, and never held a trump the whole time.'

'But, Sir Hannibal,' rashly suggests an incredulous sub, 'you must have dealt every fourth round, and taken the turn-up card into your hand.'

'By no means, sir; with my usual luck, I positively made a misdeal every time.'

The youngster is silenced; and the triumphant general makes a mental *mem.* that so wide-awake a young gentleman is just suited for the agreeable task of the next treasure-escort, which amiable intention he generally carried out with praiseworthy fidelity.

The general had never been married; but he brought out a nephew with him, who he requested might be gazetted to the first vacancy occurring in any of Her Majesty's regiments in the Sultryport division. In those days, commissions had not been thrown open to public competition; preparatory examination was undreamed of, and popular opinion unanimously pointed out the greatest fool of the family as the fittest for the army.

No rational doubt could be entertained that Lord Cawood's second son was perfectly eligible on this score to wear a red coat; he accompanied his uncle to India; and soon after their arrival, the *Gazette* informed us that the Honourable Peregrine Falcon Rooke had purchased an ensigncy in our regiment.

There was at the time, I fear, a sadly democratic feeling in the corps, as some of our slips of aristocracy had not been very favourable specimens; and others who had left the regiment soon after going on foreign service, had made rather hard bargains with their successors. We were not, therefore, inclined to think better of the young hand because he happened to be an earl's son; besides which, we were shortly afterwards ordered in from our out-station, where game was abundant and duty light, to the formality and field-days of division head-quarters; and we all felt sure that our recall from our happy hunting-grounds was chiefly in order that the junior ensign should be under the avuncular eye, and have the benefit of his countenance and support on first joining.

We arrived in Sultryport at the beginning of the hot season, and being a new station, houses were so scarce there that five of us were fain to content ourselves with the joint-occupancy of a splendid mansion, consisting of one large room, with an enclosed verandah all round. That is to say, we remained in the house by day, and slept at night in tents pitched close outside, until, as the rainy season drew near, we were driven from their comparative coolness by sand-storms occurring nearly every night, which forced us to take refuge in the house.

It was an unusually hot season even for that climate; the rains delayed their coming; the hot wind blew from sunrise till midnight; there was a lurid haze in the scorching atmosphere, through which objects loomed large as if seen through a fog. Our only chance of getting any sleep was to keep the punkah going all night, for which purpose we had a relay of coolies; much-enduring individuals, without any peculiar characteristics mental or physical, except an inordinate capacity for sleep and extreme scantiness of drapery, who, in consideration of the monthly guerdon of eight shillings, without board or lodgings, undertook that one of their number should always be ready to fan our fevered brows. Like most natives, they possessed the power of instantly composing themselves to sleep at any hour of the four and twenty; but at night, in particular, the exercise of their monotonous

vocation seemed to possess an effect as irresistibly somniferous as the branch dripping with Lethean dew did on Palinurus. Somnus relaxed their wearied limbs; the long punkah, under which all slept, stopped, and we awoke, bathed in perspiration, to abuse the coolie, rub our mosquito bites, and doze off again. The paymaster, a choleric little Welshman, being the most wakeful of the party, took upon himself the task of keeping the coolies on the alert, for which purpose his cot was placed in the centre, with an abundant supply of ammunition heaped alongside thereof, in the shape of the united boots and shoes of the entire party, besides a collection of sundry miscellaneous articles, such as glove-trees, cricket-balls, old books, &c.; which might, on occasion, be converted into projectiles. Even with this formidable armament, and the fear of punishment before their eyes, the coolies did snore occasionally; but retribution swift and terrible followed, from the avenging slipper of the paymaster.

I do not think we were as grateful to him as we ought to have been for his exertions, as we found that the noise produced by the shower of missiles, the crash of broken glass, or the piteous accents of the coolie deprecating master's wrath, protesting he was murdered, or imploring assistance from the governor-general and East India Company, was quite as fatal to 'tired nature's sweet restorer' as the want of cool air.

We accordingly had a tall three-legged stool constructed, on which the coolie on duty was always perched. It gave him great facility in pulling the punkah, and proved an excellent seat as long as he remained awake and sat upright; but the moment he began to nod, the rickety tripod was overbalanced, and the whole concern upset bodily. This we found a most effectual means of murdering sleep, as, after performing half-a-dozen of these involuntary somersaults, the coolies learned to keep themselves awake, and the punkah going.

Whilst we, in a semi-deliquescent state, were endeavouring, by expedients such as these, to render the heat somewhat less unbearable, we were constantly tantalised by seeing the junior ensign in undivided possession of an excellent house adjoining ours, which he did not offer to share with any one.

Young Rooke seemed an ungainly, rather silly lad, without much harm in his composition, or anything aristocratic in his manners or appearance, but with an overweening sense of his own importance. At drill, he was the most awkward fellow I ever saw; it required a couple of sergeants to put him in the proper position of a soldier, and the moment their hands were withdrawn, he relapsed into his usual slouching attitude. He had a habit, too, of knocking one foot against another like a horse cutting, by which he was always losing step; and when he shouldered his musket, it seemed an even chance whether he sent the bayonet into his own cheek or his neighbour's. All rebukes and corrections he received with so well-satisfied an air, that his amendment seemed hopeless; and Wright, our adjutant, was in a state of despair at having such an unpromising recruit to deal with, declaring his life would be shortened by being daily compelled to witness so melancholy a spectacle. Now, next to a pretty girl and a well-drilled battalion, there was nothing Wright liked so much as a joke, particularly a practical one; indeed, he loved it not wisely, but too well, and had often got into trouble by indulging his facetious propensities.

He longed to play off some trick upon Rooke, which might soothe his own feelings, and diminish the other's self-importance, but found it difficult to get an opportunity for doing so, as the youngster seldom came to mess or mixed with his brother-officers, being unwisely kept away by his uncle, the general, which made him even more unpopular than he would have been at any rate. Accordingly, he gravely informed Rooke that, as he had got on so far in his drill, it was time for him to proceed to more advanced exercises, and commenced learning the drum, for which purpose the drum-major would provide him with an instrument, and attend at his quarters for an hour daily, after morning parade—a private hint being given to the instructor, that the lesson should always be given in the verandah, which was in full view of the mess-room. There we used to assemble every morning for coffee and billiards, but both were neglected for the pleasure of seeing Rooke pacing up and down with a drum suspended from his shoulders, practising the initiatory exercise called 'mammy daddy,' which is, in fact, the *do, re, mi* of all who learn this sonorous instrument.

To explain for the benefit of the uninitiated, it may be briefly described as follows: The tyro's hands being arranged in the proper position, he gives two taps with the right one, then withdrawing it, holds the drum-stick perpendicularly by his side, repeats the same process with the left, and so on *ad infinitum*. It is rather monotonous work, and, at the best of times, makes the performer look rather foolish; but when Rooke's awkward movements and shambling gait were contrasted with the splendid proportions of the drum-major, who owed his situation to the fact of his being the handsomest man in the regiment, the effect was inexpressibly ludicrous,

and formed a never-failing source of amusement to those who witnessed it. The pupil, however, had not advanced beyond these elementary studies, when his further progress was stopped by his uncle coming in one day to pay our colonel a visit.

Sir Hannibal Peacocke, like most ignorant men, was very fussy about trifles, and constantly getting hold of some new hobby, which he rode until he tired of it, or some fresh one came in his way. Having that morning mounted a new one—a novel method of putting on the knapsack without straps, which proved a complete failure—he came in to display his equitation for the colonel's benefit. Having taken as much exercise in that way as he felt disposed for, the conversation turned on his nephew, who, the general remarked, he was glad to hear was getting on so well with his drill.

'I am sorry I cannot agree with you, general,' said the outspoken Colonel Hardy, 'for really I never met a more stupid lad in my life; he seems to make no progress, notwithstanding all the trouble taken with him.'

'I am afraid you do not take the trouble of making yourself acquainted with what passes in your regiment,' replied Sir Hannibal, with some asperity; for I can tell you the adjutant is so well satisfied with his proficiency, that he has allowed him to commence learning the drum.'

'The drum, general! you cannot be serious; there must be some mistake. Surely no one ever heard of such a thing as training an officer to a bandsman's duties.'

'My nephew never told me a falsehood, even in jest, Colonel Hardy; and you will find what I have stated to be perfectly correct, if you ask your adjutant, who I saw writing in the next room when I came in.'

Wright was summoned, and the moment he entered the room, perceived that the conjunction of two such luminaries boded him no good; and augured from the ominous silence which greeted his entrance, that, as he expressed it, the devoted storm was about to descend on his thundering head.

'Have you been playing off any of your jokes on Mr. Rooke?' sternly demanded the colonel.

'Jokes, sir!' demurely answered Wright. 'I can assure you, it's no joke trying to teach a man of his stamp. I'm nearly heart-broken from him myself; and the sergeant-major threatened suicide if compelled to continue drilling him. I could not knock anything into his head, or out of his heels; so I thought it no harm to try whether his hands could not perform some military movement. He's getting on very well at it; and I am sure the general would be quite pleased to hear the fine tone he brings out of the instrument.'

Had the general not been present, it is probable that the affair might have passed off as a harmless trick; but restrained by this, and a sense of duty, the colonel frowned down his rising mirth, and said: 'You have done wrong, sir, to allow your private feelings to influence you in the discharge of your duty; you have abused the authority I gave you over a young officer, and endeavoured to make him the butt of the regiment. This mock-instruction must be discontinued; and I trust you will see the propriety of apologising to Mr. Rooke for what has passed. I trust you are satisfied, Sir Hannibal.'

'No, I am not satisfied; very much the reverse,' said the general, his choler rising as he became gradually aware of the extent to which his nephew and himself had been imposed on, until between the state of the thermometer and internal warmth, he seemed on the point of spontaneous combustion. 'Go to your quarters instantly, Mr. Wright, and consider yourself under arrest.'

Whereupon the culprit left the room without speaking, and the general soon after took his leave, vowing vengeance against Wright; declaring that he would make an example of him, and that he was fully determined to bring him to a court-martial for such outrageous conduct.

To all this tirade, Colonel Hardy wisely made no reply; but, soon after the general's departure, sent him a note, saying that he hoped Sir Hannibal would, on mature reflection, view the case more favourably, as Wright was a young man of excellent principles, and a first-rate officer, though sometimes led away by high spirits; that it would be impossible to frame charges for a court-martial without making his nephew—he did not venture to say himself—the laughing-stock of the service; and, moreover, that if ever the matter came to a trial, he would feel bound to state that Sir Hannibal Peacocke, a general officer commanding a division, fully believed that learning the drum formed an integral part of an officer's education.

By this time, Sir Hannibal's wrath had time to cool; and seeing the cogency of these arguments, he replied that to oblige Colonel Hardy, he would treat the case as leniently as his duty would permit; that Mr. Wright might be released from arrest; but as he could not pass over such conduct without publicly expressing his disapprobation of it, the lieutenant in question should attend at the general's quarters the following morning, when, in the presence of all commanding officers and staff in the station, he would receive such a reprimand as

the major-general might deem it fit to administer.

Sir Hannibal Peacocke was a particularly neat man; the scrupulous exactness of his person was only equalled by the cleanliness of his house, and elegance of his bachelor *ménage*. Every one else's linen looked yellow in comparison with the immaculate purity of his; a speck on his white trousers, a soil on his boots, a stain on his table-cloth, or a particle of dust on the table itself, made him quite uncomfortable; but the presence of a fly or spider set him well-nigh distraught, and he would interrupt the gravest conversation to make slaps at an intruding bluebottle, and prided himself not a little on the dexterous manner in which he crushed the offender between his extended palms.

Next morning, at the hour indicated, commanding officers and staff assembled as directed at the general's quarters, all in full-dress, to look as imposing as possible. When Sir Hannibal entered the room, without noticing any one, he fixed his eyes on the wall, which a large speckled spider was slowly ascending on his return from a successful foraging expedition, taking with him a supply of ant-meat for the nourishment of his family.

The bearer, loudly summoned, warily and slowly approached the unsuspecting spider, and when arrived within springing distance, made a dash at it with the cloth he held in his hand; then removing it triumphantly, displayed the crushed remains of the spider, surrounded by a gory stain, on the wall. Instead, however, of the approbation he looked for, his master was so enraged at the mark on his spotless chunam, that he pulled a flash pink turban off the bearer's head, wiped the obnoxious stain with it, then threw it in his face, and kicked and pommelled him out of the room, to the great amusement of those who witnessed this practical commentary on the general's favourite exordium against maltreating native servants.

Then gravely seating himself at the head of a table covered with writing materials, Sir Hannibal motioned the other officers to chairs on either side; and they had hardly time to compose their faces, when Wright entered, looking so preternaturally solemn, that any one who knew him, would at once have suspected there was some mischief brewing.

Knowing Sir Hannibal's entomophobia, he had employed some of his spare time in capturing a number of flies and immuring them in a paper-box, perforated with innumerable pin-holes, in order to keep its inmates in a state of active vitality.

This he held inside his shako with one hand, and by keeping his finger on an orifice in the lid, let them escape when he wished. The general, not being gifted with much extempore eloquence, had written the wiggling he intended to administer, and now commenced reading it aloud:

'Lieutenant and Adjutant Wright, I regret—Buzz, buzz went an audacious blue-bottle within an inch of the pretorian nose. Slap, slap from the general, and the enemy retreated in good order, leaving him master of the field.'

He had hardly recommenced reading, when he was again interrupted in a similar manner; but this time he had better success, for the intruder was destroyed.

Complacent at the result of his *coup de main*, he made a third essay.

'Lieutenant and Adjutant Wright, I regret to find that'—Here a score of flies, rampant from their newly acquired liberty, made an onslaught, together with such a brisk hum of insolent defiance, that, dropping the paper he held, the general vigorously smote the air, in a vain attempt to rid himself of his persecutors.

Imitating the example of their chief, the other officers rose to assist him in banishing the unwelcome visitors.

Furor arma ministrat; each seizes what he can lay hold of—books, cocked-hats, and hand-punkahs are converted for the nonce into fly-flappers. A dragoon-major, more zealous than skilful, grasped a long ruler sabrewise, and making 'cut two' in most approved style, missed the blue-bottle, and nearly floored the garrison-surgeon, whose bald head it encountered in its descent. The adjutant-general, in making a vigorous sweep with his arm, knocked off the commissary's spectacles; and the latter functionary, purblind from their loss, and surprised at such an unlooked-for assault, upset the ink-bottle in groping to recover them, dashing its contents over the formidable foolscap whereon the reprimand was written, and extending its ravages to the snowy integuments which covered the general's nether man.

Solvuntur tabule risu. Such a scene of confusion ensued, that Sir Hannibal, finding it impossible to restore order, dismissed all present, intimating, however, at the same time his intention of reassembling them at some future time for the same purpose.

It would seem, however, that a convenient time for the purpose never came, as no one ever afterwards heard Sir Hannibal allude to the subject; nor, stranger still, does any mention of it appear in the life and memoirs of that gallant and distinguished officer, published after his lamented decease, several years subsequently, and it has consequently remained unchronicled up to the present moment.