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SWORD AND PEN IN KENT 1903-1913

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UNTIL the age of half-past-nine I lived in two worlds and two atmospheres, those of the sword and of the pen. Of the first I was very much aware. Of the second I knew nothing. Let me begin by saying that I was born in England. To be exact I was born in the married quarters of the British Army's famous School of Musketry (since called the Small Arms School) at Hythe, Kent, where my father was an instructor from 1902 to 1913.

In those days Hythe with its environs Seabrook and Sandgate formed a sleepy and straggling watering place in the shadow of Shorncliffe and close by fashionable Folkstone. The School was a group of brick and stone buildings secluded on a hillside at what was then the skirt of Hythe, with an ancient military canal winding through pastures before it and trailing off towards the west around the flat reaches of Romney Marsh. The canal and a row of crumbling Martello towers along the Channel shore were part of Mr. Pitt's energetic measures against the threat of invasion by Napoleon a century before. Between the canal and the towers lay the western outskirts of Hythe and a broad stretch of shingle once washed by the sea but at this time a convenient site for the rifle ranges of the School.

Like other sons of the military personnel I was christened in the old parish church on Hythe hill and later attended a school for boys (Saint Leonard's) in the town. Otherwise we saw little of town life. We lived in a special world of khaki and deadly

weapons enclosed by stone walls and a tall iron fence, with the day-long crackle of rifles and Maxim-guns echoing against the ridge on which it stood. Long columns of infantry came marching down from Shorncliffe Camp to shoot on the ranges under the vigilant direction of the School staff. In summer there were tent camps also in the fields that made a shady green carpet between the canal and the shingle flats. It was the period immediately following the South African War when Britain had decided to train a compact army of professional soldiers, every man of whom could fire a rifle in the cool and deadly fashion of the Boers. The machine-guns (two to a battalion) were regarded merely as a useful adjunct to the massed fire of the riflemen.

My father, a crack rifle-shot himself and a member of the army's Bisley team, was one of the few in those days who saw that the machine was much more deadly than the man, and that in the event of a continental war the side with the machine-guns would be sure to give the one with the rifles a very rough time of it. Most of his off-duty hours he spent in studying small-arms of the chief European powers, samples of which were available at the School, and in forming certain theories about their use—especially the use of machine-guns. He put many of his ideas on paper. One of my clearest memories of that time is the lean tanned face under the evening lamp and the brown hand scribbling away with an old-fashioned "stylus" fountain-pen. What his superiors did with these earnest compositions I know not, but I can guess. The authorities in their time-honoured way were preparing to fight the last war, not the next.

The precincts of the School were forbidden to civilians, and the staff and their families formed a small military clan living apart from the town in all ways, even to entertaining themselves with their own plays, concerts, dances and whist-drives. Once each summer there was a mass picnic on which we all drove in *char-a-bancs* along the road to Dymchurch and spent a day upon the sands. Each Christmas there was a concert or a full-dress pantomime in the Lecture Hall, followed by a gorgeous children's party in the Officers' Mess, complete with Christmas tree and Father Christmas himself, with gifts for everyone.

Eventually owing to congestion in the married quarters some of the staff were permitted to live outside the School, and my father took a house on the fringe of the town between the rifle ranges and the School. Here we were able to enter more

into the life of the town and countryside, chiefly the countryside, for my father and mother loved it. There were walks along the tree-shaded canal, wonderful explorations of The Roughs—the original cliffs of the coast left high and dry since Roman times by the receding waters of the Channel, and sunny jaunts to pick bunches of primroses and wild hyacinths (which we called “blue-bells”) in the woods and hedgerows of Ashford Hill. Often on summer Sundays we went by open horse-tram along the promenade from Hythe to Sandgate. My father was an ardent cyclist and he took me (perched on a cushioned seat on the handlebars) on tours of Folkstone, and of hamlets like Cheriton, Postling, Lyminge, Stanford, Westenhanger, Sellinge and Lympne, all of which lay within a five-mile radius of the School. Much closer at hand and within reach of my own small legs (less than a mile behind the School) was Saltwood Castle, a place of awe, where King Henry’s four courtiers had tarried and plotted on their way to kill Thomas Becket at Canterbury—all sitting in the dark, according to the legend, so that none might see the other’s face.

In 1909 a wonderful thing happened. The Frenchman Bleriot actually flew across the Channel in an aeroplane and landed beside Dover Castle, twelve miles or so from the School. It was a feat that set the world agog, of course, and in Britain there was a sudden interest in aviation as there was everywhere. I remember a year or two later my parents taking me up the road to Westenhanger, where we watched several planes rising from the race-course, skimming over the trees and settling again like wire-and-canvas birds—the wonder of the age. There was a military side to all this. In 1911 or ’12 a mysterious encampment of Royal Engineers appeared in the fields beyond our house, and after a time we observed several monstrosities, round and bloated, rising in the heart of it. They were captive balloons. And one day a balloon rose over the rifle ranges dangling a target far below, a sort of model aeroplane at which the troops were instructed to shoot. It was the first attempt at anti-aircraft fire—a term then unknown.

I recall my father laughing about it afterwards, especially in the light of 1914. The troops soon became bored with firing at the lifeless object hanging in mid-air; and there was the balloon itself high above, a fat and shining mark. Tommy Atkins was nothing if not a humorist. Inevitably a bullet found the balloon. It began visibly to wilt, and the Sappers hastily reeled it in. The balloon was patched, the troops admonished, and

up went the target again. And the little comedy was repeated. And repeated. Eventually the authorities gave up, the Sappers packed up their camp, their gas-bags and the heap of iron gas-cylinders and departed; and the ranges resumed the normal rattle of single shots and the final crash of "ten-rounds-rapid" aimed at the prosaic bullseyes towards the sea.

Again, I recall the headmaster of Saint Leonard's turning all the classes out of doors upon a day to see one of the new British airships, a modest thing of the kind known later as a blimp, soaring over Shorncliffe and the town of Hythe. The Army had two at this time, called *Beta* and *Gamma*, but which this was I never knew. The Germans were experimenting with all sorts of aircraft, especially the famous Zeppelins, some of which were rumoured to be flying over south-eastern England at night—mysterious lights had been seen in the sky over Dover and Chatham. I remember long discussions at our house, where serious men talked with my father about these and other manifestations of German military activity. All of this was a mystery to me, of course, but it remains in my mind because one thing was repeated frequently and accepted without question—that Germany was plotting a great war in which Britain would have to fight, and it might come soon. When I recall these earnest sessions and the general public's surprise when the war actually came in '14 I cannot but admire the foresight and sympathize with the misgivings of those of the Hythe staff who sensed what was about to happen and who knew how little Britain was prepared to fight a war on the German scale. All these things and men and matters were only words and names to me then, a curious boy standing gravely by my father's chair; but when years later I studied my father's papers and diaries I was able to see the picture as he and some others had seen it all that time ago.

In the spring of 1913 something came to change completely the life of my family. The Canadian government applied to the School of Musketry for a group of instructors for the Canadian militia, and my father was one of those selected. In May '13 we left for Canada—for Halifax, N. S. to be exact, where we settled and became citizens of Nova Scotia. Within fifteen months the war with Germany was a fact. In another month my father was on his way overseas with the Canadian First Division, the immortal "Old Red Patches" of later days. He enjoyed working with Canadians, and many of those who worked with him have told me since how they admired him. He was

their kind of man. He remained with them throughout the war, with time out for wounds received at Ypres in '15 and near Lens in '17. He was killed while commanding the Winnipeg Rifles in the great plunge through the German lines at Amiens in August 1918. He had seen his predictions about the future of small-arms come utterly true as the war progressed, and (shades of Hythe!) had heard himself described by a British major-general as "one of the most brilliant men in this branch of fighting I have met;" and it was a poignant irony that he should have been killed at the war's climax by a burst of machine-gun bullets fired by a German conscript who in all probability hardly knew one end of a rifle from the other.

As I look back on those Hythe memories I realize that the Khaki columns I had seen slogging down from Shorncliff, or tenting in the fields beyond our house on Fort Sutherland Road, were in fact the incomparable Old Contemptibles who were to stand in the path of the German machine at Mons, at the Aisne, at First Ypres. All unwitting I had watched my father and the others training them for the stop-gap role to which they rose so superbly, and in the performance of which they died. It was something to have seen that, even as a child. And it is something to remember that my father, whom I worshipped, had a hand later in training and leading the magnificent Canadians who withstood the first poison-gas attack at Ypres, who fought it out again in the dugouts of Mount Sorrel, of Regina Trench and Courcellette, who stormed Vimy and Passchendaele and broke the Germans' heart at Amiens.

But that is aside. What I want to discuss in these reminiscences is not the course of events but the scene in which I spent the years of my childhood before coming to Nova Scotia and growing up a Canadian. According to most theory about childhood environment I should have become a soldier. Certainly that was the ambition of most boys in the families at the School. Yet when I did put on a uniform at the age of fifteen it was that of the sea, and it was as a Canadian sailor that I spent the formative years after fifteen that were to influence so much of my life and thought. It was not until the Second German War when I was getting bald and grey, and when my application for naval service had been rejected, that I found myself commanding a rifle platoon in a regiment of Reserve infantry engaged in the patrol and defence of the Nova Scotia coast. Then, whether on the rifle ranges or in cold patrols of a lonely shore in winter weather, I had to smile to think of the difference between this and the heroic visions of my youth.

I mentioned at the beginning of this sketch two atmospheres—those of the sword and the pen. The atmosphere of the pen I breathed all unknowing. It was not until my mature years, when I looked back with some curiosity upon my first decade on this earth and made an inspection of its background, that I realized how completely the School of Musketry had lived apart from its surroundings. Because that small bit of Kent is of all English soil perhaps the richest in its literary associations; it has been the habitat of famous pens, and some of those pens were living and moving close about the School at the time of which I write. Except for H. G. Wells, they seem to have ignored the School of Musketry as the School ignored them, and no wonder. In that milieu the School with its killing mechanism was as incongruous as a loaded pistol in a poet's bower.

This was the country of *Ingoldsby's Legends*. It was a favoured haunt of Dickens, who sang the praises of Folkstone in an article called "Pavilionstone" in *Household Words*. He was a frequent guest at the old Pavilion Hotel and he wrote most of *Little Dorrit* while staying there. Thackeray knew the region well. William Wilberforce and G. A. Sala often sojourned at Sandgate, and Ruskin lived there for a time exulting in the Channel sunsets. In my own time there were many others. Kipling did not live there but he spent much time roaming the region, especially Romney Marsh, and it was on the very scene of our summer picnics that he conceived that little masterpiece called *Dymchurch Flit*, with which he was always so content. It was within an hour's bicycle ride of our School that Arnold Bennett laid *The Gates of Wrath*, that John Masefield laid *Jim Davis*, that Jeffery Farnol laid *The Broad Highway* and *The Amateur Gentleman*. And then there was the incomparable H. G. Wells, who was apprenticed to a Folkstone draper in his youth. He said long afterwards, "If it was not for the fact that my health failed, probably I should now be the proprietor of a little business, over the door of which would be inscribed 'Herbert G. Wells, Draper'."

Wells lived some years at Sandgate after he became a writer, and it intrigues me to reflect that when I was being trundled along the Sandgate sea-front in a go-cart, Wells must have been walking there with a sharp eye for the scenes he described in *Kipps*. Kipps' holiday on the old canal I may very well have seen myself. Kipps' excursions to Hythe, "where the machine-guns of the Empire are forever whirling and tapping" were made in my own little scene, and quite possibly the guns he

heard with Wells' ears were those of one Maxim squad or another under my father's direction. And you will remember how Kipps finally settled with Ann in Hythe itself, and how Old Kipps recommended a house with eleven rooms, including a billiard room because "As you get on you'll be 'aving visitors. Friends of your 'usband's, p'raps, from the School of Musketry—what you want 'im to get on with. You can't never tell." And you can't. I am sure my father would have enjoyed meeting Kipps, billiards or no billiards.

In my days at Hythe also Henry James was living at Lamb House on Rye, on the other side of Romney Marsh where the old defence canal had its end, and writing the last of those meticulous and involved novels about the little social world in which for so many years he had lived and thought but of which somehow he was never quite a part. But far above all these to me stands the slim bearded figure of Joseph Conrad, then living in the small hamlet of Postling, just three miles behind the School. This was Conrad's home during his best period, from 1898 to 1907, in which he wrote some of *Youth*, *Lord Jim*, most of *Typhoon*, *Nostromo*, *The Mirror of The Sea*, *The Secret Agent* and other first-rate work. Often when my father cycled through Postling with his small passenger we must have passed the man himself, and certainly the house with its great barn, all overshadowed by the tall bluff called the Pent. The big stone house had been occupied before Conrad by Walter Crane; and presumably it was Crane who carved into the wooden lintel over the door:

Want we not for board nor tent

Whilst overhead we have the Pent.

Like a good many other sailors who have had enough of the sea Conrad did not choose to live within sight of it when he retired, but he liked to have it within reach. Of his six country homes after his marriage all but one were in Kent, and all within a few miles of salt water. This enabled him from time to time to journey to the shore and take another look at the element on which he had struggled so often and so far. The sea at Hythe was no more than a brisk hour's walk from Pent Farm. And it was on the beach at Sandgate, three miles from the School, that Conrad had dug his fists into the sand and exclaimed to H. G. Wells and Lewis Hund, "Ah? If only I could write zee English good, well! But you will see. You will see." And as Hind remarked long afterwards, "We have seen."

John Galsworthy was a frequent visitor to Pent Farm. He had first encountered Conrad the sailor on a voyage from Aus-

tralia to Capetown, and after Conrad retired to write in the quiet countryside behind Hythe he was Conrad's closest friend. Of Conrad's dwelling he had this to say. "Pent Farm, that little, very old, charming if inconvenient farmhouse with its great barn beyond the yard, under the lee of the almost overhanging Pent. It was a friendly dwelling where you had to mind your head in connection with beams; and from whose windows you watched ducks and cats and lambs in the meadows beyond. He liked those quiet fields and that sheltering hill. In Conrad's study at the Pent we burned many midnight candles, much tobacco."

I first encountered Conrad's books when I went to sea in small tramps and colliers out of Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia, in which I found hardbitten seamen, veterans of the Blue-nose sailing ships gone into steam, thumbing over much-read copies of *Youth* and *Typhoon* and *The Nigger of The Narcissus* and declaring that there, by God, was a man who knew the sea—as good as Dana—even as good as Melville. After that I read everything of Conrad's that I could find; and it did not strike me until long afterwards that by one of the queer chances of life I had spent my first years in his neighborhood, and while he was actually writing many of the pages that so entranced me now.

With all this in mind you may see why I cannot help reflecting on the oddly contrasted atmospheres in which my early years were spent. Neither of them had anything to do with my subsequent career, of course. That I became a writer of sorts at twenty-five was a mere chance, and that I became a soldier of sorts at forty was a comic anticlimax. If I mention my own pen in the same breath with those of James, Wells and Conrad it is only to amuse or perhaps to console myself with the thought that at one time I at least breathed the same air in the same scene with the giants.

I must confess that at the time my mind was filled with soldiers and the sounds of musketry, and with long rapturous stares at Lady Butler's paintings in the Officers' Mess; while the pen was a thing of which my schoolmasters at Saint Leonard's made what seemed to me an inordinate amount of fuss. But what impresses me most, in retrospect, is that odd little stylus pen of my father's whispering over the sheets beneath the lamp and setting forth the ideas of a soldier ten years in advance of his time. Leading his hard-fighting Westerners through the bloody wheatfields beyond Amiens on a hot day in '18 he proved with his life that the old adage was wrong. For him at all events the pen had been the weaker of the two.