

Chapter 12

Egypt and the Second Year



***Me back right dressed for Folk Dancing.
Betty fourth from right - Centre Row***

Just before the new year started we had the usual prize giving. It was on this occasion that various classes performed plays. I'm afraid that I was never any good at play acting but was always called up to do Folk Dancing; I had won a prize for first in class. The odd thing about the plays was that I could

always remember all the words. In fact when we did "The Merchant of Venice", I knew everyone's part. I also had to do the Folk Dancing on Sports Day about which I had mixed feelings. There were three boys and three girls and I was paired with a girl called Kathleen Walker; I liked that part. She lived near the Camp main gate in Talbot Block. I can't remember doing very much on Sports Day that year, but hockey had come into its own and whilst I cannot remember much about any of the games, I did score seven goals in one match; needless to say, we won that one.

This was the year when I learned to cycle. Cycles were borrowed, for about five piastres (one shilling), from an Egyptian cycle shop. I used to go for them and get one for Betty at the same time. I insisted that she rode a boy's bike, but I'm not sure why. The borrowing of cycles introduced me to an unsavoury form of sex in as much as one older boy warned me to be careful of the "Gippos" in the shop as they were liable to stick their cocks up my bum. I didn't have a clue what he was talking about and ignored it. I certainly never had any trouble. I found it most peculiar somewhat later when I had buckled the wheel of a new bike belonging to another boy that his Mum would not let him take it to the shop for repair insisting that I take it. I wondered if she had heard the stories too. Anyway, I took the bike, had it repaired without any trouble for about 12½ piastres

(2/6d) and Dad paid for it. Life was too much fun to bother one's head about mucky people and I went blithely on my way.

By now, Scouts had become a washout. A new Scoutmaster was introduced. He was a Royal Engineer's officer who asked us to call him by his Christian name. I thought this odd and he soon disappeared. Some years later, I read that he had been Court Martialled in Chatham for Sodomy, which may well explain his curious behaviour. Anyway, he never tried anything on with any of us. Scouts were then taken over by the Church of England Padre (he didn't have much clue), a Major and Corporal in the Tank Corps, who were both excellent chaps. For a time we attended at a flat in Heliopolis, going on trips into the desert on Armoured Cars. Ultimately, however, a new hut was built. I was already a "Second" and then became a Patrol Leader ending up as Troop Leader. I got several badges, including one for swimming which I got more for courage than ability. Part of the qualification was to dive from a twelve-foot high board. I did seven "belly flops", so the Major who was judging said: "I'll give it to you for pluck". The new hut, palatial though it was with excellent play facilities, was not the same. The spirit was missing.

During the year, the 15th/19th Hussars went on to India to be replaced by the 10th Hussars. It was noticeable that each time a regiment moved, any Army footballers changed Regiments and stayed in Egypt.

Dad was still working in what was called the 1911 building since it had been built in that year. Unfortunately, it had been built in the wrong place, the plans having got mixed up with another set. The result was that Abbassia got a building designed for Chatham and Chatham got the one designed for Egypt, complete with Eastern Minarets! For some reason, there were periods when Dad went to Cairo to work, presumably Kasr-el-Nil barracks. Mostly, these trips were made in lorries enclosed in cages. This was to stop missiles from rioting students. Men carried rifles but Dad was excused because of his health condition. We used to spend some Sunday evenings at the Slade Ground Club. The gardens were set out with tables and were lighted; drinks were available as were chips and a Military Band would play which made it all very pleasant.

In Cairo, someone thought of opening a Speedway and Dog track. My father got a spare time job once a week, taking the gate money. He used to take me along and, for a while, I enjoyed it, but after a period I got bored on my own and stopped going. I think this was because the speedway stopped; for some reason the Egyptians liked Dogs but not Speedway. Incidentally, I still couldn't fight but Betty could and she had several tussles with kids, unbeknown to me at the time, because they had said something about me. The only time I got involved in a scrap was once at Sidi Bish when some kid called my Father names; I chucked him into the sea. I also had a stand up fight with my friend Joe Stovin. It was a good job that the school bell went because he was stronger than me. I can remember being hit in the eye by a boy who threw a clod of sand and stones at me. I had a lovely black eye. This was the boy I eventually threw into the sea.

The games we were fond of were stilts and throwing sticks with paper feathers. A notch round the stick and a piece of string knotted, it was amazing how far a missile could be thrown. I spent hours trying to hit kitehawks but never managed it as they were too crafty.

There weren't many different types of birds. Kitehawks, doves, a kind of crow and Hoo Poos are all that I can remember. There were a number of lizards and we got quite used to them on the bedroom walls. They did no harm, in fact they did quite a lot of good by eating flies. We saw the odd Tarantula and many scorpions. One night I directed a torch beam onto a pile of stones from our verandah in "C" Block and several scorpions came crawling out and started climbing the walls; I hurriedly switched off and went indoors. Indoor games for me meant meccano, reading and cards. My favourite card game was Solo Whist.

We went on our usual holiday to the camp at Sidi Bish but that year I caught Sand Fly Fever which rather spoiled things. Of course we always slept under mosquito nets but the sand flies could still get in. I recovered in three or four days. In the evenings we used to spend time at the Community Hall where we held concerts, drank pop and played Housey-Housey. A win often came in useful. There were also Whist, Beetle and Sevens drives. All in all very simple but we did enjoy ourselves.

Most of all we enjoyed the beach. One activity was fishing, with simple tackle, off the end of the sewage pipe, where there were shoals of small mullet. These, when caught, were used as bait on long lines which were anchored in the sand with the hooks and weights being thrown out to sea and left all night. Mostly we were met every morning by a tangle of lines but twice, to our joy, we were lucky and caught real fish. The largest of these was a 5lb Sea Salmon which we shared that evening with the people who sat with us. I can't remember any seagulls but there were hundreds of land crabs which used to bury themselves in the sand. At night they could be seen scuttling all over the place. Swimming was a delight. It was only allowed in one certain area bounded by a reef and netted on either side. Expert swimmers were always on duty and swimming was limited to certain times. Along the beach was a place called Spouting Rock which was a natural phenomena. The sea would rush into the side of a big rock cavern and then emerge out of a large hole in the top near where we could stand. It was rather a dangerous place really. There were lovely pools nearby however; they were very still and calm and beautiful for swimming. For some reason the water was fairly cold.

That year I realised for the first time that not all families were the same. I had got over my Sand Fly Fever and called on another boy, whose name was Denyer, to go to the beach. His mother and father were also preparing to go to the beach and my eyes popped out a bit when his mother bobbed in and out of the rooms naked from the waist up and quite unselfconscious. I had been used to seeing women feeding babies in public but this was different. The same boy remarked at a dance one night that my Mother's dress was obviously home made. I have no idea how he knew but I didn't like his remark very much.

That year I went camping with the Scouts. I was a bit homesick. I also won a bottle of pop for losing a boxing match. This camp was memorable for only one thing. One small boy kept on falling into the stream which was fed from the Nile. This meant that he had to be washed all over as Nile water had a large content of Bilharzia, a parasitic disease which was not pleasant to contract. The place we camped at was Mahdi. One day we were all under the shower set up by the Army when some ladies came by, obviously officer's wives. They were on horseback and one of them stood and looked at us for several minutes. She seemed cold and haughty and I almost shivered. Looking back I think that she exuded sexuality.

One of our school subjects was gym at which I was fairly proficient. In the evenings the PT Instructors would be practising and after a time also allowed me to practice. They also taught me back flips, somersaults etc. I thought of the boy in Canterbury who led the gym team which gave exhibitions at fetes. He was about half the size of the rest of the troop but a beautiful gymnast. He always went last and always outshone the rest. I dreamed about becoming as good as him but never did. One last memory of this year was the Army Cup Final where the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who were favourites, lost 0 - 2. Whenever the Scots played football in Abbassia (they were stationed in The Citadel, Cairo), the Mounted and Military Police were trebled. It was chaos with drunken Scots threatening the referee and everyone else in sight. The same night, they knifed their goalkeeper who had let in the two goals. We often watched the Egyptian team play the Army. They always won and I have often wondered why they never became a World force team. Even their Public Schools played soccer.

I am wrong that wasn't the last memory; Dad fell ill with severe dysentery and had to spend some time in the hospital at the Citadel. Fortunately he soon recovered.



The Family in Egypt in 1927