

Chapter 14

Egypt and the Third Year

Soon after I had arrived in Egypt, I started to take a new boy's magazine called "Modern Boy". Unfortunately, there was an article in it by Fred Root, a sturdily built medium fast bowler from Worcestershire. The wickets in Egypt were coconut matting on "mutte", a sort of hard packed clay. Spin was not very effective so a faster, flatter ball swinging in either direction was a better option. I decided to be a second Fred Root but, of course, I wasn't built for fast bowling and so, although I never lost length, I didn't develop as well as I should have. By this time, I played quite well and, for some reason, my Dad thought it best to let me go my own way. A trooper in the Royal Dragoons, who had replaced the 10th Hussars, tried to reason with me but I wouldn't listen; after all I was taking wickets. He was right and I was wrong, but more of cricket when I get to Sidi Bish once more.

The Royal Dragoons were an interesting Regiment who used to put on shows, riding their horses in races, jumping, tent pegging etc.; by this time the Norfolk Regiment had been replaced by the Gloucestershire Regiment.

It was this year that we moved into "huts". They were really wooden bungalows, built in line, four families to a block. It was pleasant living in them and we grew melons and loofahs in the sand at the rear of the bungalow. Dad bought a puppy but unfortunately it died and I was heartbroken. We also had a tortoise but its skinny neck revolted me. It was about this time that I got interested in the RAF and I made several rather clumsy models of aircraft. I also used to walk to the airfield at Heliopolis and talk to the Fitters working there. I scrounged some bungee elastic from them which I used for making catapults; I also made toy tanks from cotton reels. "Kiwi" was at last persuaded to let us field a soccer side against two Public Schools. Nasria School beat us 4 - 1 and the Prince Farouk School 10 - 1. I know that I scored the goal against Nasria. "Kiwi" stood on the line tearing his rather woolly hair but we didn't mind as we had a game, or rather two games. "Kiwi" had his usual Christmas Party to which Betty and I were always invited. Unfortunately, he would never invite Kathleen Walker. I can only think that it was either because she was Catholic or that her father was, by then, a civilian; he was a rather objectionable man. Certainly I could not be friends with her as children are today. I could only kiss her by chasing her and grabbing a kiss when I caught her. Yes, I could still run. One evening the school seniors went to see a Shakespeare play in Cairo and I

managed to grab a seat next to her on the bus which gave me great satisfaction. One hilarious evening, at the Slade Ground, my Dad pulled my leg unmercifully when the band played "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen". Much laughter but also a little sadness as I really did like her. She was also the first signpost on my long road to Catholicism. It is a little sad that she will never know.

That year I achieved two ambitions at school. Firstly, I won the High Jump at the School Sports. To win I had to jump 4' 1". "Kiwi" would not let me go on as self aggrandisement was not the order of the day. Secondly, I was voted most popular boy in the school and was given a wallet as a prize. I was disappointed that Kathleen was not voted most popular girl, but then, I was biased. "Kiwi" also achieved an ambition. His son beat me in the exams, he coming first and me second. About this time there was a spate of stealing by the natives called, in the vernacular, "Loose Wallahs". The husbands ganged up to catch them so they were frightened off.

That year at Sidi Bish was notable for the cricket match that my Dad managed to fix between a side of the boys on the camp and the Victoria College Public School. I captained and picked our very scratch side. They went into bat and to my surprise I had seven wickets in no time at all. Their score was 30 for 7 with me on about 7 for 11. Thinking that we would have no players, they had reversed their batting order and so with me having to bowl right through in a really hot sun, I was faced with their real batsmen when I was tiring. At the other end, Joe Stovin had to be given a rest as he was all in. At tea they were 110 for 7 and, I might add, extremely apologetic. We went in but it was hopeless; they didn't reverse their bowling order and we were all out for 40/50. I



Our makeshift cricket team with Me on my Dad's right.

got about 11 or so when my Dad gave me out LBW. You should have seen my face. On our return there was a donkey derby starting so we cheered up a bit, but my donkey, despite being called "Seven Wicket Turner", came in last.

In general, the second half

of the year was not a happy one. It started off with a boy earlier that year, repeating to me what a singularly dissolute soldier had told him about the pleasures he had enjoyed and the things he had seen in the brothels of Cairo. Having been brought up at home and school to respect women and live a clean life, and knowing nothing about sex except perhaps that women bleed once a month (I didn't know why), I was shocked to the core. I was sensible enough to tell my parents who explained gently as best as they were able; while I was at school, there was so much else to think about that I mentally set it aside. Nevertheless, I never played with that boy again. I suppose I was rather a prig. To explain the ignorance of children in those days can be shown by a small example. Two ten year olds had heard that sex consisted of the boy putting his "thing" into the girl's "hole", but that was all they had been told. They decided to try it but, of course, with no success and I am sure that they were puzzled for days as to why his limp little willy wouldn't go into place.

"Kiwi" decided to run a dance for the children whereupon, I hurriedly learned from Betty how to Waltz. I don't know who taught her! Armed with this knowledge, off I went to the dance, where I grabbed Kathleen and proceeded to show her my prowess. Unfortunately, she hadn't bothered learning at all and doing a Waltz to a Foxtrot caused some difficulties. Anyway, it didn't matter at all because I was with my girl. Then the blow fell; both Kathleen and I were fifteen and were made to leave school. I spent some time at the men's 1st class certificate class but didn't really get on. An Officer found me a job with a chemist in Cairo, but my Father, rightly I think, turned it down. Uncertainty came into my mind and I had a very unhappy three or four months. I was, I suppose, in the middle of adolescence and became very conscious of myself. I doubted my own sanity, wondered if I was illegitimate and my teeth were constantly on edge. I was obviously in a very nervous state. Fortunately we were coming to the end of our stay and I decided that I wished to join the Royal Air Force. I applied and was sent for a medical. My Mum was still convinced that I was delicate and thought that I would not pass, but she was not correct. The doctor described me as "small as a whippet and strong as a horse". I also took the entry exam. It seemed such a long time before I heard that I had been accepted, that this too, and perhaps this more than anything else, caused my nervous reactions. In the end I did hear that I was to go to Halton as an Apprentice in January 1930. In the meantime, we were booked for a passage to England on the Troopship Dorsetshire, leaving in November. And so, it was goodbye to Egypt.