

CHAPTER III

THE LIGHT HORSEMAN AND HIS HORSE

THE Australian Light Horse, to which this volume gives particular attention, was in body and spirit the true product of the wide Australian countryside. On its peace footing before the war, it represented the mounted arm of the Commonwealth Military Forces. It was then composed of twenty-three regiments, with a total strength of 456 officers and 6,508 men of other ranks. Some of the regiments, whose recruiting areas were close to cities and towns, included a small number of townsmen; but the light horse as a whole was essentially a force of countrymen, most of whom actually bred and owned the horses on which they did their few weeks of compulsory annual training.

The light horse was not a cavalry force. Its members were not armed with sword or lance. They were mounted riflemen, or in other words, mounted infantry, and their horses were intended merely to give them the greatest range of activity as a mobile body. The men were not trained in shock tactics—a point to be borne in mind in order to follow intelligently their work in Sinai and Palestine. Many of them, including a large number of their officers, had served with distinction as mounted riflemen in the South African War, only twelve years earlier, and the lessons learned against the elusive Boers had a strong influence upon their efficiency. The light horsemen, therefore, when they embarked for Egypt, were well schooled in the main principles of any mounted task which might be ahead of them. In this they had, perhaps, some advantage over the Australian infantry. Nearly all the Australian volunteers who served in South Africa were mounted soldiers, so that the light horsemen of 1914 might have been expected to include in their ranks a larger proportion of experienced veterans than were to be found in the infantry battalions.

The outbreak of war was followed by a spirited rush to the recruiting stations in every Australian country district. From the 12,000-mile coast-line to the very heart of the

continent, 1,500 miles inland, young men bade farewell to their farms and their "runs" and rode in to place themselves at the disposal of their country. Many of them offered not only themselves but also their cherished horses. They represented every phase of Australia's diverse rural industries: dairymen and small cultivators from the long rich coastal belt between the Dividing Range and the sea; orchardists from the foot-hills; timber-getters from the sparkling forests on the ranges; men from the larger farms of the long wheat-belt, on the inside slope of the mountains; and men whose lives had been spent on the sheep and cattle stations of the vast inland plains. On hundreds of outback stations there are intervals of days, sometimes of weeks, between successive arrivals of mails and newspapers. Many of the men lived in those remote areas—which are exempt from compulsory military training—and had never seen a soldier's uniform. But the response of the lonely settler of the interior and the far north, and farther north-west, was as instant and whole-hearted as the response of those who dwelt within sight of passing trains and steamers. Every worn road and grass-grown track carried its eager, excited volunteers, some riding singly, some in twos and threes. Squatters and stockmen and shearers, farmers and labourers and prospectors, they paced the same road in that spirit of true democracy, which, as the war went on, became perhaps the most beautiful and valuable of all the great qualities that in this war shone out of the Australian soldier.

Looking back upon that throng of great-hearted countrymen riding in to enlist for service oversea, one ceases to feel astonishment at the war deeds of the Australian light horsemen. For these men were the very flower of their race. All were pioneers, or the children of pioneers. Ninety-seven out of every hundred came from pure British stock; they were children of the most restless, adventurous, and virile individuals of that stock; many, deserting in their youth the limited holdings of their pioneer fathers near the coast, had followed the explorers' lonely footsteps and "pushed the outposts further out." All were workers; the Australian countryside is not yet old enough to support luxurious drones. All were men of resource, initiative, and resolution; all were accustomed from their earliest boyhood to carry

responsibility, and to take an intelligent interest in the growth of crops or the breeding and care of live-stock. All were horsemen of various degrees of excellence; not mere riders of educated horses, but men who had from their school-days undertaken, as a matter of honour and pride or of necessity, the breaking and backing of bush-bred colts and the riding of any horse that came their way. Their horsemanship came next to, if not sometimes before, their religion.

But horsemanship is only one of the many qualities to be desired in men who are to engage in mounted warfare. These young Australians were by their daily occupation expert observers and judges of country. They possessed a highly-trained sense of distance and direction; accustomed to riding the country roads and tracks by night almost as frequently as by day, they were at home in the dark. Australia possesses no big game, and the rifle is therefore not in general use; but many of these men were familiar with the long-range weapon, and all, or nearly all, were expert with the breech-loading shot-gun.

They were not perhaps horsemasters in the military sense. Few Australian countrymen are called upon to foster their horses with the care which is necessary in the colder countries of the north, where the climate is less kind, and where grazing areas are limited and horses worth more money. The Australian saddle-horse, outside the cities and towns, is seldom fed in a stable, and little time is given to its grooming. When an animal is wanted it is usually brought in from a small paddock near the homestead, cleaned, perhaps, of mud or falling coat, saddled, and ridden. The ride finished, the procedure in most seasons of the year is to remove the saddle and bridle and turn the horse back at once into the paddock without grooming or hand-feeding. The countryside is remarkably free from animal disease; veterinary skill is rarely needed; thanks to good horsemanship, even sore backs are uncommon. If a horse loses its condition because of excessive work, it is spelled, and another brought into use.

This somewhat casual habit was reflected in the quality of the Australian light horsemen as horsemasters on service. They had a great deal to learn before they became highly

efficient in the care of horses worked constantly under very heavy loads and living all the time under artificial hand-fed conditions. But, if at the outset it was found necessary to impress upon them the value of ceaseless grooming, of extreme care in the balanced packing of saddles, and of the greatest possible regularity in feeding and watering, they proved apt and willing learners. They began their campaigning strong in the first essential quality of mounted soldiery; they instinctively understood and loved their horses. The light horseman's horse was something more than the animated machine which served and carried him. It was his respected friend and ally. Very early in the mounted war in Sinai the troopers learned that the asset above price was the good horse, and that the horse evacuated because of debility, or sore back, or any other cause, was never recovered by its former rider. This knowledge, added to the strong affection of the men for their animals, led, as the campaign developed, to a very high standard in horsemastership.

Another factor which gave the Australian countryman natural fitness for his work in Palestine was that he was bred in a land of strong sunshine. From his birth he had been accustomed to very high summer temperatures, to dusty roads, and to the exercise of careful thought concerning water-supply. All who enlisted from inside the Dividing Range had known seasons of short rainfall; all had more than once been compelled to call forth their ingenuity to find water for sheep and cattle and horses. The heat of Sinai was scarcely worse than the heat of many parts of Australia; nor was the scanty supply of water, which restricted operations and often exhausted and disheartened men from colder latitudes, a matter of surprise or serious concern to the light horsemen.

The Australian possessed, therefore, remarkable qualities, both natural and acquired, for a mounted war in a hot, dry country. He was, when engaged in such a war, living and fighting under conditions closely resembling those to which he had been accustomed all his life. He needed only to learn discipline, and to become skilled in the effective use of modern destructive weapons, to be a formidable soldier.

From the moment when war was declared the service proved highly popular with recruits. For some time after the

outbreak of hostilities men could upon enlistment declare the branch of the service in which they would serve; consequently the original light horse regiments were made up almost entirely of countrymen, and to a great extent of men who were then either engaged in their compulsory training or upon the active reserve. The original regiments were further marked, as well as strengthened, by the extent to which they were built up of groups of friends who had enlisted together, and who went to Gallipoli in the same troops and squadrons. The light horse force, as it sailed from Australia in the end of 1914 and early in 1915, was, in brief, a remarkable band of brothers in arms, a capable band drawn from a wide and fragrant countryside, animated by a noble cause, thrilled and expectant with the sense of a grand adventure in foreign lands, and knit together by the common interest of their peace-time callings and the still closer ties of personal friendship and affection. No more wholesome and splendid body of young men ever went out to battle than these rural sons of Australia's pioneers.

They formed a force essentially easy to train and discipline, provided they were handled with quick intelligence and sympathy. British regular officers, without an understanding of their native qualities, sometimes found them difficult; but, as the war developed, it became recognised that the Australian officer who had trouble with the light horsemen was not fit for his command. With the inevitable occasional exception to be discovered in any large body of troops, they were self-respecting men, accustomed to hard-working, independent lives. Like all citizen soldiers, they found rigid discipline irksome, but to all the essentials in that discipline their obedience was instant and absolute. It was as impossible as it would have been disastrous to stamp out the individual in them. Because of the lives they had lived, it was safe to entrust them with some play for their own personality and initiative. Each man, while subscribing fully to the collective command, waged all through the campaign an intense personal war of his own, animated not by any burning racial or national passion against his enemy, but by a sheer impulse, begotten of his pioneer blood, to do with all his will and power a task which interested him or which had to be done. Perhaps the light horseman fired fewer wild, unaimed shots in the war

than any other combatant. He stalked the enemy with the same absorbed interest and deliberation with which he might before the war have stalked a plains turkey. To waste his effort and ammunition in a fight was in his eyes an offence against his personal intelligence.

But the qualities which made him so effective as an individual soldier, and his fire discipline so absolute and unbreakable, rendered him impatient of that side of discipline which may be termed purely ceremonial. When away from his own officers, he was somewhat indifferent to the rigid rules of saluting; and this attitude, together with the disdain with which he regarded all army formality and etiquette which did not, to his rational mind, have some direct bearing on his work as a fighting soldier, produced much embarrassment, and at times even strained the relations between the light horse commands and the British General Staff in Egypt and Palestine. The evolution of the light horseman in these respects was interesting and typical of his strong individuality. In the early days of the war he was remarkable among the Australian force as a whole for punctilious observance of formalities. But as he learned the grim lessons of war, and became more and more effective as a fighting man, he grew less regardful of army ceremonial.

All through the war the light horseman tried things by the light of his strong common sense. On a hard-riding advance, when victory depended upon speed, and speed upon a supply of horsefeed, he did not hesitate to help himself to any grain or other fodder possessed by the natives of the country. Orders forbidding such conduct might have been couched in the strongest terms; but when it was a choice between failure through loss of horses, and success to be achieved by the commandeering of fodder, he did not hesitate to flout authority. He dismissed such incidents from his mind with the scornful thought that a General Staff which could not settle trifling affairs of that sort with the natives was not fit for its job, and rode on happy because the bulging nosebag ensured an evening meal for his beloved waler.

The light horseman, with all his unconventional ways and his occasional forcefulness, was at heart distinguished by shyness and reserve. The young Australian countryman leads a

simple and peaceful life. He bears himself modestly. One of the first horsemen of the world, and breeding the world's best horses of their kind, he indulges himself in no distinctive horseman's attire. He has none of that picturesque flashness which cowboys of western America and the Canadian northwest of a generation ago inherited from the Spanish pioneers of the Pacific slope. A felt slouch hat, a shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, long trousers, not particularly made for riding, boots, and very gentle spurs make up his everyday dress. He rides, as a rule, in a plain English hunting saddle, and carries neither lasso nor revolver. A temperate man, his one excess is a harmless celebration at the annual races or agricultural show, or on an occasional visit to the capital city of his State; even then the impelling force is the bursting strength of his youth rather than any disposition for strong drink or unwholesome excitement. Men of all young British countries engage in these occasional sprees, which were in fact a stronger feature of the early pioneering days, when most of the settlers were of British birth, than they are among the native-born. The young countryman of the Commonwealth is neither a hard nor a regular drinker, but, when his rare holiday comes, he engages whole-heartedly in a joyous demonstration. On occasion he did this at Cairo, and at other places abroad, and his high spirits and forceful, but as a rule quite harmless, carnivals sometimes led to misunderstanding in the minds of men who did not know the native wholesomeness of his life at home. Any study of the slender "crime" sheets of the light horseman throws a sure light upon his character. The worst offence discoverable there (with the exceptions inevitable in a body of many thousands of men) is that of occasional physical violence, of blows struck in anger. But those tell-tale sheets are clean of all morbid or unmanly offences, and remarkably free from charges of desertion, cowardice, or disobedience to orders in action.

Much that is misleading has been written of the Australian type of manhood. So far as a distinctive type has been evolved, it is to be found among men from the country districts, where there is a preponderance of young men long of limb and feature, spare of flesh, easy and almost tired in

bearing, and with a singular native grace of posture. The head is carried forward on long, powerful shoulders; and this, together with a casual, almost lazy, impression conveyed by the whole figure, and the national tendency to lean the body against fences, trees, vehicles, or the shoulders of a horse, misleads the stranger as to the Australian's great physical strength and superb athleticism. Perhaps no young manhood in any age, not even excepting the Greeks, has been distinguished by so great a love of physical exercises, and so much achievement in competition with men of other countries. But, although the man thus described may be roughly accepted as a national type, the light horsemen rode and fought in all shapes and sizes, from great square-built, heavy but active men like Granville Ryrie¹ to wiry little men like Harry Chauvel.²

The young Australian has never been in the slightest degree of warlike disposition. The national system of compulsory training was purely defensive. Except for an occasional brawl in the gold-digging days, his land has never known bloodshed. The nation has lived its century of hard pioneering, coveting no other people's territory or rights, and, except to a minor extent in its White Australia policy, wounding no people's racial susceptibilities. Nor was there ever in Australia a counterpart to what is known as the "Jingo" element in Great Britain. The keen and surprisingly cynical sense of humour, which is as sharply defined in almost every Australian as his sense of sight or hearing, makes Australians shy of any tangible expression of patriotism. The Australian countryman has never been fond of flying the Union Jack, or even his own Southern Cross flag. His loyalty to Empire is the unconscious loyalty of blood, rather than any defined loyalty to the British Throne. His affection for England is rather affection for the land of his fathers, than for the land that holds the supreme head of his Government. And this affection is strengthened by the fact that every Australian child's education, no matter how scanty, is based upon the

¹ Maj.-Gen Hon Sir Granville Ryrie, K.C.M.G., C.B., V.D. Commanded 2nd L.H. Bde, 1914/19; Member of Aust. House of Representatives, 1911/27; Asst. Minister for Defence, 1919/22; High Commissioner for Australia in London, 1927/32. Grazier, of Micalago, Michelago, N.S.W.; b. 1 July, 1865. Died, 2 Oct, 1937.

² Gen Sir Harry Chauvel, G.C.M.G., K.C.B. Commanded Desert Mtd Corps, 1917/19; G.O.C., A.I.F. in Egypt, 1916/19; Inspector-General, in Australia, 1919/30, and C.G.S., 1922/30. Of Clarence River district, N.S.W.; b. Tabulam, Clarence River, 16 April, 1865.

poetry and prose which tells the story of England and Scotland and Wales and Ireland. The countryman has but a rough knowledge of current affairs in England; but he is as well acquainted with the old battle stories of his forefathers and the stirring verse of the race as are his contemporaries in the Mother Country. His racial patriotism is therefore a very real and live thing, which, always smouldering, if without sign of smoke, bursts into flame when the honour of the old land of his fathers is touched, and when that land buckles on the armour of battle. It matters not who or where is the foe; and thus Australia's young manhood found itself engaged in a long and bloody war with Turkey.

There is something unreal and incongruous in the thought of the young Christian Australian Commonwealth engaged in a fight to a finish with the old Moslem Ottoman Empire. Before the war it is improbable that there were a hundred Turks in Australia or a hundred Australians in Turkey. The trade between the two lands was insignificant; direct diplomatic relations did not exist; each country was profoundly ignorant of and indifferent to the other. Apart from an occasional shudder at Armenian atrocities, the young Australian had never thought about Turkey at all; the young Turk had certainly never had occasion to think about Australia. And yet, by the grim circumstance of war, during a number of years each strained its resources and poured out its best manhood in conflict with the other. True, the Australians at Anzac and in Sinai and Palestine made up only a part of the Allied forces engaged; but they were always a great fighting vanguard, and it may safely be said that without them Turkey would not have been so utterly overthrown and destroyed.

Australian and Turk fought therefore as strangers, impelled by no racial antagonism or spirit of revenge, and the struggle, although wholehearted and bloody, was always strangely free from bitterness. The one people waging a "holy war" in preservation of its very life, the other battling for the defence of its motherland and its own place among the nations—no two armies ever fought with less personal animosity a protracted and decisive campaign. Each side killed the other with all its might and main, but neither hated

nor despised the other. The Australians, who always referred to the Turk affectionately as "Old Jacko," regarded him with sincere respect, touched, as was natural in a manhood conscious of race superiority, with pity. They found him a clean, chivalrous fighter, and thought of him, it may almost be said, as a temporarily misguided friend. The Turk in his stolid way returned this good feeling, and always distinguished the Australians and New Zealanders from other troops of the British Army.

Picturesque writers and public speakers during the war often described the British campaign in Palestine as a "New Crusade," and represented our armies as impelled by a strong religious feeling. This was pure literary extravagance. Religious feeling was a factor with the Turks and was exploited by their leaders, but it contributed nothing to the whole-souled energy of the light horse. There was not, it is true, a single soldier, however free may have been his thoughts about religion, who was not moved in his inmost heart by the near approach of the British force to Jerusalem and Nazareth, and by the first crossing of the Jordan as the light horsemen rode towards the frowning uplands of Moab. But that emotion did not have its origin in the thought that the holy places were being wrested from the Moslem. When the young Australians visited the Mosque of Omar, one of the foremost shrines of the Moslem world, they went in a spirit of sheer curiosity, touched perhaps with religious veneration; they felt no exultation at the capture of the enemy's religious stronghold in Palestine. The campaign was in no sense a crusade.

When the regiments embarked for Egypt they were accompanied by their horses, and throughout the campaign these animals were reinforced from Australia. More than that, the Indian cavalry brigades ordered to Palestine in 1918 were mounted almost exclusively on Australian-bred walers. The horses used by the British yeomanry brigades were drawn from various parts of the world, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, the Argentine, and Australia; there were also "country-breds" from India and game little animals from Northern Africa, ridden by a regiment of French African regular cavalrymen—spirited horses, showing

much of the blood and quality of the Arab. Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps command, therefore, included horses representing more countries and types than even the men of many lands and races who rode them. Australia's walers, already world-famous for their work in India and in the South African and Russo-Japanese Wars, were in this company subjected to a searching comparative test. They proved by common consent incomparably superior to all their rivals, except, perhaps, the best of the horses from the British Islands, which included a number of valuable hunters and officers' chargers.

Expert horsemen differed as to the best type of horse disclosed by the miscellaneous Australian remounts in the campaign. Some good judges expressed a preference for the stocky, powerful pony types to be found among both the Australian and New Zealand regiments. But although these small animals, many of which possessed Welsh pony blood, had many admirers, the lesson of the war was that, provided a horse had bone and substance, and was not too eager and fretful, the closer it was to the English thoroughbred racing strain the more valuable it was for active service. The horses of a light horse regiment were not uniform. They included every kind of animal; large sturdy ponies, crossbreds from draught Clydesdale mares, three-quarter thoroughbreds, and many qualified for the racing stud-books. As a consequence of such mixed breeding, they frequently offended the horse-lover's eye by their faulty parts. But one quality they all possessed which made them superior to the horses from other lands: they were all, or nearly all, got by thoroughbred sires. This quality, reflected throughout in their spirit and their stamina, was their distinguishing characteristic. During sustained operations, on very short rations of pure grain and no water over periods which extended up to seventy hours—when horses of baser breeds lost their courage and then their strength—the waler, though famished and wasted, continued alert and brave and dependable. The vital spark of the thoroughbred never failed to respond. As long as these horses had strength to stand they carried their great twenty-stone loads jauntily and proudly.