

SIR PERCIVAL MARLING

DISTINGUISHED NATIONAL FIGURE

AN APPRECIATION

(By COL. A. A. H. BEAMAN)

To the many accounts of Sir Percival Marling's distinguished career may I be allowed to add a brief personal appreciation of a very dear old friend?

In the early years of this century the holders of the V.C.—that "aristocracy of valour," as the King has happily termed them—were so few that they could almost be counted on the fingers; and we hero-worshipping Cadets at Sandhurst knew them all by name, and the exploits which had won for each that highest of all honours. Many years, therefore, before I was privileged to know him, the name of Percival Marling was familiar as a household word to me.

Percival Marling came to his manhood in the Victorian era, when England appeared to be settled on the pinnacle of an enduring prosperity and security. For the wealthy the world was very splendid then, and with all its amenities and distractions to his hand young Marling might, like many young men of that period, have taken the primrose path. But that strong strain of dutifulness, which was his outstanding characteristic to the end, spiced with an equally strong relish for adventure, led him into sterner ways. Instead of living the pleasurable life of a rich young soldier at home, he gave his youth and manhood to arduous service in the most exacting climates, often in circumstances of extreme hardship and danger.

Before he was 19 he was in the thick of Ingogo, and the disaster of Majuba. After a brief spell of leave he hastened out to Egypt to take part in Wolseley's march on Cairo, being present at the battles of Kassassin and Tel-el-Kebir. Then, volunteering and being specially selected for Graham's mounted infantry, he went through the gruelling and hazardous campaign in the Eastern Sudan. How he won his V.C. at Tamai is too well known to need repetition here.

One of the Epics of Our History

Shortly afterwards he played his part in one of the epics of our history.

That story, which once stirred Britain to the depths, has perhaps grown dim with the passage of time. For months General Gordon, with quenchless splendour of spirit, had been holding Khartoum against the Mahdi's encircling multitudes. The British public, roused at last to anger by the suspicion that Gordon was being abandoned by the politicians, insistently demanded that Khartoum must be relieved. But time was perilously short. Gordon's resources were known to be at an end.

Consequently a measure of extreme boldness was decided upon. While the main body of the Expedition moved ponderously up the Nile, a small force was pushed forward to strike across the uncharted Bayudu Desert from Kerti to Metemmeh, and there to effect a junction with Gordon's steamers. This little force, the famous Desert Column, contained the flower of the British Army, picked men all, and it included Lieutenant Marling. Consisting of less than 2,000 men, it appeared as a mere speck on the desert. The desperate nature of the enterprise, together with anxiety for Gordon's fate, captured the imagination of the world, and its progress was followed with breathless interest at home.

At Abu Klea

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At Abu Klea

The Dervish commanders, on the other hand, noted its march with exultation. "The English are mad," they said. "We will let them advance so far that to retire will be impossible; and then, when they are worn out with heat and thirst, we will destroy them to a man—as we did Hick's army." The Mahdi despatched ten thousand of his chosen warriors northward, who, at Abu Klea, fell with fanatical frenzy upon the little column toiling painfully through the scrub and sandhills.

There followed the fiercest and most bloody battle ever fought by our troops in those regions. The Dervishes broke the square—thereby inspiring Kipling's famous poem, "Fuzzy-Wuzzy"; but the calm and stubborn valour of the little column prevailed; the enemy who had broken in were cut down; the breach in the square was closed; and cool and steady marksmanship caused the Dervishes to withdraw.

Again, two days later, they fell on the column, much diminished now by casualties and burdened with the wounded. But again the Dervish attack crumpled, then melted away before the unshakable steadiness of the square—and the Desert Column won its way through to the Nile. How, after adventures that seem to belong to romance rather than to history, Khartoum was sighted, only to find that it had fallen on the previous day, and that Gordon had been killed—how the valiant Desert Column, altho its efforts futile, threw its surplus stores into the Nile and toiled back across the desert sands—these epic events formed part of the background of Percy Marling's experience.

Universally Popular

In India "Spike" was an universally popular figure, notable as a polo player and as a cricketer, the life and soul of the great Ambala Cricket Week. Characteristically, too, he went big game shooting in the uplands of Kashmir, an undertaking which, in those days, required no small courage and endurance. Good soldier, good sportsman, good comrade, few young men were better known and liked. Later he served again with distinction throughout the South African War, and in the Great War; and finally, with this long adventurous record behind him, he came home to take up his place in that sphere in which he was best known to us, and in which, perhaps, he did his finest work—the sphere of local public work.

It is safe to say that not a fraction of how much he did—for the sum was enormous—will ever be known. With the exception of his annual holiday abroad, almost every day was filled with engagements. He gave himself as fully and selflessly in his later years as he had done in the vigour of his prime. If he thought he could help on a good cause, no trouble was too great. The British Legion, the Playing Fields Association, the Boy Scouts, to name but a few of the things he had closely at heart, will long remember with gratitude how he would come long distances, perhaps in vile weather or on winter evenings, to encourage quite small and obscure gatherings.

Acts of Thoughtfulness

If he made an engagement, however insignificant, or other inducement, tempting though it might be, nothing short of illness in fact, would cause him to break it. This same constancy and thoroughness which had won him distinction as a young soldier,

the other, to the unluckiest dog in the trials, went to Mr. Leslie Harper, Worrall Hill, with "Shep."

stamped everything he did throughout his life. As chairman of the Bench he would hear with unwearied patience every exhaustive detail of some quite trivial case, while perhaps some of his colleagues chafed at the lengthening hour, but his kind just heart could not be satisfied with anything less than the most liberal interpretation of fair play, regardless of the flight of time.

And how kind that heart was. His little acts of thoughtfulness, which often meant so much to friends in every walk of life, like his good works, can never be numbered. How many of his young friends enjoyed happy days with the hounds through his generosity in lending them his horses—and how many needy souls found relief at his hands. He lowered no one's stature, but rather seemed to surround everyone, however obscure, with a glamour of importance. In the true sense of the word, he was successful and this happy state he owed in part to two great qualities. As a matter of course he looked for, and therefore found, the best in everybody.

Gift of Joie de Vivre

And, secondly, he had a rare and refreshing zest for life. Whatever he did, he did with a hearty relish. A run with the hounds, an agricultural show, the Eton and Harrow match, a hedging competition, a trip abroad—no one enjoyed them more than Sir Percival.

This gift of joie de vivre was his because his pleasures were a bye-product, not the purpose, of a busy selfless life. He frittered no time, and was never known to be bored. Bred in the sound and steadfast Victorian tradition, his life will remain an example to those who come after of wealth and position nobly used—first in the service of the State, and later in the service of those less fortunate than himself.

Now that he has passed on it is difficult to picture the many phases of our local life without him—for nothing seemed to be complete without Sir Percival. It is difficult to imagine the Berkeley Hunt without his familiar, unchanging figure; without his cheery word for all alike; without his fund of reminiscences touching every acre of the country, and stretching back for more than fifty years. It is difficult to believe that the kindly host of Stanley Park will no longer entertain his innumerable friends with the old Victorian warmth and geniality. There will be long be an empty place in Gloucestershire hearts for a distinguished national figure—and for a very gallant, very dutiful, very lovable friend.

MEMORIAL SERVICE IN STROUD

In response to a request of a number of people in Stroud who will be unable to attend the funeral of the late Sir Percival Marling, a memorial service is to be held in Stroud Parish Church on Sunday afternoon.

The service will commence at 3 p.m., and seats will be reserved for members of public bodies, but applications must be made by Saturday morning. Applications should be sent to the churchwardens—Major C. J. H. Fisher and Mr. H. H. North.