



MY EARLY LIFE

1874-1904

WINSTON CHURCHILL

*Introduction by
William Manchester*

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

Published by Simon & Schuster

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

collected the names of all the officers together with the number of chukkas they wished to play. These were averaged out so as to secure 'the greatest good of the greatest number.' I very rarely played less than eight and more often ten or twelve.

As the shadows lengthened over the polo ground, we ambled back perspiring and exhausted to hot baths, rest, and at 8.30 dinner, to the strains of the regimental band and the clinking of ice in well-filled glasses. Thereafter those who were not so unlucky as to be caught by the Senior Officers to play a tiresome game then in vogue called 'Whist,' sat smoking in the moonlight, till half-past ten or eleven at the latest signalled the 'And so to bed.' Such was 'the long, long Indian day' as I knew it for three years; and not such a bad day either.

CHAPTER IX

EDUCATION AT BANGALORE

IT was not until this winter of 1896, when I had almost completed my twenty-second year, that the desire for learning came upon me. I began to feel myself wanting in even the vaguest knowledge about many large spheres of thought. I had picked up a wide vocabulary and had a liking for words and for the feel of words fitting and falling into their places like pennies in the slot. I caught myself using a good many words the meaning of which I could not define precisely. I admired these words, but was afraid to use them for fear of being absurd. One day, before I left England, a friend of mine had said: 'Christ's gospel was the last word in Ethics.' This sounded good; but what were Ethics? They had never been mentioned to me at Harrow or Sandhurst. Judging from the context I thought they must mean 'the public school spirit,' 'playing the game,' *'esprit de corps,'* 'honourable behaviour,' 'patriotism,' and the like. Then someone told me that Ethics were concerned not merely with the things you ought to do, but with why you ought to do them, and that there were whole books written on the subject. I would have paid some scholar £2 at least to give me a lecture of an hour or an hour and a half about Ethics. What was the scope of the subject; what were its main branches; what were the principal questions dealt with, and the chief controversies open; who were the high authorities and which were the standard books? But here in Bangalore there was no one to tell me about Ethics for love or money. Of tactics I had a grip: on politics I had a view: but a concise compendious outline of Ethics was a novelty not to be locally obtained.

This was only typical of a dozen similar mental needs that

now began to press insistently upon me. I knew of course that the youths at the universities were stuffed with all this patter at nineteen and twenty, and could pose you entrapping questions or give baffling answers. We never set much store by them or their affected superiority, remembering that they were only at their books, while we were commanding men and guarding the Empire. Nevertheless I had sometimes resented the apt and copious information which some of them seemed to possess, and I now wished I could find a competent teacher whom I could listen to and cross-examine for an hour or so every day.

Then someone had used the phrase 'the Socratic method.' What was that? It was apparently a way of giving your friend his head in an argument and prodding him into a pit by cunning questions. Who was Socrates, anyhow? A very argumentative Greek who had a nagging wife and was finally compelled to commit suicide because he was a nuisance! Still, he was beyond doubt a considerable person. He counted for a lot in the minds of learned people. I wanted 'the Socrates story.' Why had his fame lasted through all the ages? What were the stresses which had led a government to put him to death merely because of the things he said? Dire stresses they must have been: the life of the Athenian Executive or the life of this talkative professor! Such antagonisms do not spring from petty issues. Evidently Socrates had called something into being long ago which was very explosive. Intellectual dynamite! A moral bomb! But there was nothing about in The Queen's Regulations.

Then there was history. I had always liked history at school. But there we were given only the dullest, driest pemmicanised forms like *The Student's Hume*. Once I had a hundred pages of *The Student's Hume* as a holiday task. Quite unexpectedly, before I went back to school, my father set out to examine me upon it. The period was Charles I. He asked me about the Grand Remonstrance; what did I know about that? I said that in the end the Parliament beat the

King and cut his head off. This seemed to me the grandest remonstrance imaginable. It was no good. 'Here,' said my father, 'is a grave parliamentary question affecting the whole structure of our constitutional history, lying near the centre of the task you have been set, and you do not in the slightest degree appreciate the issues involved.' I was puzzled by his concern; I could not see at the time why it should matter so much. Now I wanted to know more about it.

So I resolved to read history, philosophy, economics, and things like that; and I wrote to my mother asking for such books as I had heard of on these topics. She responded with alacrity, and every month the mail brought me a substantial package of what I thought were standard works. In history I decided to begin with Gibbon. Someone had told me that my father had read Gibbon with delight; that he knew whole pages of it by heart, and that it had greatly affected his style of speech and writing. So without more ado I set out upon the eight volumes of Dean Milman's edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I was immediately dominated both by the story and the style. All through the long glistening middle hours of the Indian day, from when we quitted stables till the evening shadows proclaimed the hour of Polo, I devoured Gibbon. I rode triumphantly through it from end to end and enjoyed it all. I scribbled all my opinions on the margins of the pages, and very soon found myself a vehement partisan of the author against the disparagements of his pompous-pious editor. I was not even estranged by his naughty footnotes. On the other hand the Dean's apologies and disclaimers roused my ire. So pleased was I with *The Decline and Fall* that I began at once to read Gibbon's Autobiography, which luckily was bound up in the same edition. When I read his reference to his old nurse: 'If there be any, as I trust there are some, who rejoice that I live, to that dear and excellent woman their gratitude is due,' I thought of Mrs. Everest; and it shall be her epitaph.

From Gibbon I went to Macaulay. I had learnt *The Lays of Ancient Rome* by heart and loved them; and of course I knew he had written a history; but I had never read a page of it. I now embarked on that splendid romance, and I voyaged with full sail in a strong wind. I remembered then that Mrs. Everest's brother-in-law, the old prison warden, had possessed a copy of Macaulay's History, purchased in supplements and bound together, and that he used to speak of it with reverence. I accepted all Macaulay wrote as gospel, and I was grieved to read his harsh judgments upon the Great Duke of Marlborough. There was no one at hand to tell me that this historian with his captivating style and devastating self-confidence was the prince of literary rogues, who always preferred the tale to the truth, and smirched or glorified great men and garbled documents according as they affected his drama. I cannot forgive him for imposing on my confidence and on the simple faith of my old friend the warder. Still I must admit an immense debt upon the other side.

Not less than in his History, I revelled in his Essays: Chatham; Frederick the Great; Lord Nugent's Memorials of Hampden; Clive; Warren Hastings; Barère (the dirty dog); Southey's Colloquies on Society; and above all that masterpiece of literary ferocity, Mr. Robert Montgomery's Poems.

From November to May I read for four or five hours every day history and philosophy. Plato's Republic—it appeared he was for all practical purposes the same as Socrates; the Politics of Aristotle, edited by Dr. Welldon himself; Schopenhauer on Pessimism; Malthus on Population; Darwin's Origin of Species: all interspersed with other books of lesser standing. It was a curious education. First because I approached it with an empty, hungry mind, and with fairly strong jaws; and what I got I bit; secondly because I had no one to tell me: 'This is discredited.' 'You should read the answer to that by so and so; the two together will give

you the gist of the argument.' 'There is a much better book on that subject,' and so forth. I now began for the first time to envy those young cubs at the university who had fine scholars to tell them what was what; professors who had devoted their lives to mastering and focussing ideas in every branch of learning; who were eager to distribute the treasures they had gathered before they were overtaken by the night. But now I pity undergraduates, when I see what frivolous lives many of them lead in the midst of precious fleeting opportunity. After all, a man's Life must be nailed to a cross either of Thought or Action. Without work there is no play.

When I am in the Socratic mood and planning *my* Republic, I make drastic changes in the education of the sons of well-to-do citizens. When they are sixteen or seventeen they begin to learn a craft and to do healthy manual labour, with plenty of poetry, songs, dancing, drill and gymnastics in their spare time. They can thus let off their steam on something useful. It is only when they are really thirsty for knowledge, longing to hear about things, that I would let them go to the university. It would be a favour, a coveted privilege, only to be given to those who had either proved their worth in factory or field or whose qualities and zeal were pre-eminent. However, this would upset a lot of things; it would cause commotion and bring me perhaps in the end a hemlock draught.

* * * * *

My various readings during the next two years led me to ask myself questions about religion. Hitherto I had dutifully accepted everything I had been told. Even in the holidays I always had to go once a week to Church, and at Harrow there were three services every Sunday, besides morning and evening prayers throughout the week. All this was very good. I accumulated in those years so fine a surplus in the Bank of Observance that I have been drawing confidently upon it ever since. Weddings, christenings, and funerals have

brought in a steady annual income, and I have never made too close enquiries about the state of my account. It might well even be that I should find an overdraft. But now in these bright days of youth my attendances were well ahead of the Sundays. In the Army too there were regular church parades, and sometimes I marched the Roman Catholics to church, and sometimes the Protestants. Religious toleration in the British Army had spread till it overlapped the regions of indifference. No one was ever hampered or prejudiced on account of his religion. Everyone had the regulation facilities for its observance. In India the deities of a hundred creeds were placed by respectful routine in the Imperial Pantheon. In the regiment we sometimes used to argue questions like 'Whether we should live again in another world after this was over?' 'Whether we have ever lived before?' 'Whether we remember and meet each other after Death or merely start again like the Buddhists?' 'Whether some high intelligence is looking after the world or whether things are just drifting on anyhow?' There was general agreement that if you tried your best to live an honourable life and did your duty and were faithful to friends and not unkind to the weak and poor, it did not matter much what you believed or disbelieved. All would come out right. This is what would nowadays I suppose be called 'The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.'

Some of the senior officers also dwelt upon the value of the Christian religion to women ('It helps to keep them straight'); and also generally to the lower orders ('Nothing can give them a good time here, but it makes them more contented to think they will get one hereafter'). Christianity, it appeared, had also a disciplinary value, especially when presented through the Church of England. It made people want to be respectable, to keep up appearances, and so saved lots of scandals. From this standpoint ceremonies and ritual ceased to be of importance. They were merely the same idea translated into different languages to suit different races and

temperaments. Too much religion of any kind, however, was a bad thing. Among natives especially, fanaticism was highly dangerous and roused them to murder, mutiny or rebellion. Such is, I think, a fair gauging of the climate of opinion in which I dwelt.

I now began to read a number of books which challenged the whole religious education I had received at Harrow. The first of these books was *The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade. This was Colonel Brabazon's great book. He had read it many times over and regarded it as a sort of Bible. It is in fact a concise and well-written universal history of mankind, dealing in harsh terms with the mysteries of all religions and leading to the depressing conclusion that we simply go out like candles. I was much startled and indeed offended by what I read. But then I found that Gibbon evidently held the same view; and finally Mr. Lecky, in his *Rise and Influence of Rationalism* and *History of European Morals*, both of which I read this winter, established in my mind a predominantly secular view. For a time I was indignant at having been told so many untruths, as I then regarded them, by the schoolmasters and clergy who had guided my youth. Of course if I had been at a University my difficulties might have been resolved by the eminent professors and divines who are gathered there. At any rate, they would have shown me equally convincing books putting the opposite point of view. As it was I passed through a violent and aggressive anti-religious phase which, had it lasted, might easily have made me a nuisance. My poise was restored during the next few years by frequent contact with danger. I found that whatever I might think and argue, I did not hesitate to ask for special protection when about to come under the fire of the enemy: nor to feel sincerely grateful when I got home safe to tea. I even asked for lesser things than not to be killed too soon, and nearly always in these years, and indeed throughout my life, I got what I wanted. This practice seemed perfectly natural, and just as

strong and real as the reasoning process which contradicted it so sharply. Moreover the practice was comforting and the reasoning led nowhere. I therefore acted in accordance with my feelings without troubling to square such conduct with the conclusions of thought.

It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations. Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* is an admirable work, and I studied it intently. The quotations when engraved upon the memory give you good thoughts. They also make you anxious to read the authors and look for more. In this or some other similar book I came across a French saying which seemed singularly opposite. 'Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît pas.' It seemed to me that it would be very foolish to discard the reasons of the heart for those of the head. Indeed I could not see why I should not enjoy them both. I did not worry about the inconsistency of thinking one way and believing the other. It seemed good to let the mind explore so far as it could the paths of thought and logic, and also good to pray for help and succour, and be thankful when they came. I could not feel that the Supreme Creator who gave us our minds as well as our souls would be offended if they did not always run smoothly together in double harness. After all He must have foreseen this from the beginning and of course He would understand it all.

Accordingly I have always been surprised to see some of our Bishops and clergy making such heavy weather about reconciling the Bible story with modern scientific and historical knowledge. Why do they want to reconcile them? If you are the recipient of a message which cheers your heart and fortifies your soul, which promises you reunion with those you have loved in a world of larger opportunity and wider sympathies, why should you worry about the shape or colour of the travel-stained envelope; whether it is duly stamped, whether the date on the postmark is right or wrong? These matters may be puzzling, but they are certainly not important. What is important is the message and the benefits

to you of receiving it. Close reasoning can conduct one to the precise conclusion that miracles are impossible: that 'it is much more likely that human testimony should err, than that the laws of nature should be violated'; and at the same time one may rejoice to read how Christ turned the water into wine in Cana of Galilee or walked on the lake or rose from the dead. The human brain cannot comprehend infinity, but the discovery of mathematics enables it to be handled quite easily. The idea that nothing is true except what we comprehend is silly, and that ideas which our minds cannot reconcile are mutually destructive, sillier still. Certainly nothing could be more repulsive both to our minds and feelings than the spectacle of thousands of millions of universes—for that is what they say it comes to now—all knocking about together for ever without any rational or good purpose behind them. I therefore adopted quite early in life a system of believing whatever I wanted to believe, while at the same time leaving reason to pursue unfettered whatever paths she was capable of treading.

Some of my cousins who had the great advantage of University education used to tease me with arguments to prove that nothing has any existence except what we think of it. The whole creation is but a dream; all phenomena are imaginary. You create your own universe as you go along. The stronger your imagination, the more variegated your universe. When you leave off dreaming, the universe ceases to exist. These amusing mental acrobatics are all right to play with. They are perfectly harmless and perfectly useless. I warn my younger readers only to treat them as a game. The metaphysicians will have the last word and defy you to disprove their absurd propositions.

I always rested upon the following argument which I devised for myself many years ago. We look up in the sky and see the sun. Our eyes are dazzled and our senses record the fact. So here is this great sun standing apparently on no better foundation than our physical senses. But happily there is

a method, apart altogether from our physical senses, of testing the reality of the sun. It is by mathematics. By means of prolonged processes of mathematics, entirely separate from the senses, astronomers are able to calculate when an eclipse will occur. They predict by pure reason that a black spot will pass across the sun on a certain day. You go and look, and your sense of sight immediately tells you that their calculations are vindicated. So here you have the evidence of the senses reinforced by the entirely separate evidence of a vast independent process of mathematical reasoning. We have taken what is called in military map-making 'a cross bearing.' We have got independent testimony to the reality of the sun. When my metaphysical friends tell me that the data on which the astronomers made their calculations, were necessarily obtained originally through the evidence of the senses, I say 'No.' They might, in theory at any rate, be obtained by automatic calculating-machines set in motion by the light falling upon them without admixture of the human senses at any stage. When they persist that we should have to be told about the calculations and use our ears for that purpose, I reply that the mathematical process has a reality and virtue in itself, and that once discovered it constitutes a new and independent factor. I am also at this point accustomed to reaffirm with emphasis my conviction that the sun is real, and also that it is hot—in fact as hot as Hell, and that if the metaphysicians doubt it they should go there and see.

* * * * *

Our first incursion into the Indian polo world was dramatic. Within six weeks of our landing, the tournament for the Golconda Cup was played in Hyderabad. The capital of the Nizam's dominions and the neighbouring British garrison, five miles away in the cantonment of Secunderabad, maintained between them six or seven polo teams. Among these were the 19th Hussars, whom we had just relieved at Bangalore. There was ill-feeling between the men of the 4th and

19th Hussars, arising out of an unfavourable remark alleged to have been made by some private soldier thirty years before about the state of the 4th Hussars' barracks when the 19th had taken over from them on some occasion. Although not a single soul remained of those involved in the previous dispute, the sergeants and soldiers were found fully informed about it, and as angry as if it had only taken place the month before. These differences did not, however, extend to the commissioned ranks, and we were most hospitably entertained by the Officers' Mess. I was accommodated in the bungalow of a young Captain named Chetwode, now the appointed Commander-in-Chief in India. Apart from other garrison teams, there were two formidable Indian rivals: the Vicar Al Umra, or Prime Minister's team, and the representatives of the famous Golconda Brigade, the bodyguard of the Nizam himself. The Golcondas were considered incomparably the best team in Southern India. Many and close were the contests which they had waged with Patiala and Jodhpore, the leading native teams in Northern India. Immense wealth, manifested in ponies, was at their disposal, and they had all the horsemanship and comprehension of polo which were in those days the common ideal of young Indian and British officers.

Accompanied by the stud of ponies we had purchased complete from the Poona Light Horse, we set out anxious but determined on the long journey across the Deccan. Our hosts, the 19th, received us with open arms, and informed us with all suitable condolences that we had had the great misfortune to draw the Golconda team in the first round. They were sincere when they said what bad luck it was for us, after being so little time in India, to be confronted in our first match with the team that would certainly win the tournament.

In the morning we were spectators of a review of the entire garrison. The British troops, the regular Indian troops and the Nizam's army paraded and defiled in martial pomp

before us, or perhaps it was before the official notabilities. At the end came a score of elephants drawing tandem-fashion gigantic cannon. It was then the custom for the elephants to salute as they marched past by raising their trunks, and this they all did with exemplary precision. Later on the custom was abolished because vulgar people tittered and the dignity of the elephants or their mahouts was wounded. Later on still, the elephants themselves were abolished, and we now have clattering tractors drawing far larger and more destructive guns. Thus civilisation advances. But I mourn the elephants and their salutations.

In the afternoon there was the polo match. Tournaments in Hyderabad were a striking spectacle. The whole ground was packed with enormous masses of Indian spectators of all classes watching the game with keen and instructed attention. The tents and canopied stands were thronged with the British community and the Indian rank and fashion of the Deccan. We were expected to be an easy prey, and when our lithe, darting, straight-hitting opponents scored 3 goals to nothing in the first few minutes, we almost shared the general opinion. However, without going into details which, though important, are effaced by the march of time and greater events, amid roars of excitement from the assembled multitudes we defeated the Golcondas by 9 goals to 3. On succeeding days we made short work of all other opponents, and established the record, never since broken, of winning a first-class tournament within fifty days of landing in India.

The reader may imagine with what reinforcement of resolve we applied ourselves to the supreme task that lay ahead. Several years were, however, to stand between us and its accomplishment.

With the approach of the hot weather season of 1897 it became known that a proportion of officers might have what was called 'three months' accumulated privilege leave,' to England. Having so newly arrived, hardly anybody wanted to go. I thought it was a pity that such good things should

go a-begging, and I therefore volunteered to fill the gap. I sailed from Bombay towards the end of May in sweltering heat, rough weather and fearful seasickness. When I sat up again, we were two-thirds across the Indian Ocean, and I soon struck up an acquaintance with a tall thin Colonel, then in charge of Musketry Training in India, named Ian Hamilton. He pointed out to me what I had hitherto overlooked, that tension existed between Greece and Turkey. In fact those powers were on the point of war. Being romantic, he was for the Greeks, and hoped to serve with them in some capacity. Having been brought up a Tory, I was for the Turks; and I thought I might follow their armies as a newspaper correspondent. I also declared that they would certainly defeat the Greeks, as they were at least five to one and much better armed. He was genuinely pained; so I made it clear that I would take no part in the operations, but would merely see the fun and tell the tale. When we arrived at Port Said it was clear that the Greeks had already been defeated. They had run away from the unfair contest with equal prudence and rapidity, and the Great Powers were endeavouring to protect them by diplomacy from destruction. So instead of going to the battlefields of Thrace, I spent a fortnight in Italy, climbing Vesuvius, 'doing' Pompeii and, above all, seeing Rome. I read again the sentences in which Gibbon has described the emotions with which in his later years for the first time he approached the Eternal City, and though I had none of his credentials of learning, it was not without reverence that I followed in his footsteps.

This formed a well-conceived prelude to the gaieties of the London season.