

NIVEN EXCERPT

My last year in Malta was enlivened by two things.

First I was made transport Officer and as such spent my days with the horses and the mules. Mules are disagreeable creatures. I thought it was maybe because they always got the worst jobs. Like pulling the company cooker. When the company went on the march, at the back and falling further and further behind, would be a couple of mules hauling an immense black cauldron on wheels. Inside the cauldron, depending on what time of day it was, would be either boiling tea or boiling stew. And behind the great steaming cauldron would come the company cook stirring the contents as we marched.

A certain Sergeant Fensham was the transport sergeant. He was a wonderful man. If anything went wrong then Sergeant Fensham had the solution. On one very dignified occasion when we had to supply a team of black horses to tow a black gun carriage, one of the lead horses slipped and grazed both knees. Thus the beautiful all black entourage was in danger of being ruined by the sight of two white knees. Sergeant Fensham came to the rescue. He produced a tin of Black Cherryblossom boot polish, applied a generous amount to the horses knees and the ensemble went on its way, perfect in every way.

On another occasion however, we nearly came to grief. The Colonel's horse was a little too fresh before an important ceremonial parade, and so Fensham gave it an over generous jab of tranquilliser. Instead of jogging in a dignified fashion around the parade ground, the wretched animal with the Colonel astride it and several thousand onlookers watching, tottered about rolling its eyes and threatening at any moment to lie down and go to sleep. That incident got both Fensham and I into quite a lot of trouble.

The other boredom reliever of those last twelve months was the Fancy Dress Ball to be held in the magnificent Opera House. All

the local dignitaries were to be present. It was the big social event of the year. Trubshawe and I spent many a happy hour trying to decide what we should go as. Most of the Officers were going as pierrots or famous historical characters. Trubshawe and I decided to go as goats.

First we put some very evil smelling rugs on our backs. Then horns on bands were fixed to our heads. Finally between our legs, to represent the goat's udders, we had footballs with rubber gloves attached. To give ourselves some dutch courage we downed a pint of dry martini apiece, and then two very drunken goats joined the grand parade.

As all of us competitors circled the judges I could feel a growing animosity from the crowd. I suspected that it was directed at the two drunken goats, Trubshawe and I. This suspicion became a certainty when I glanced behind me and realised that Trubshawe had produced a brown paper bag and was sprinkling black olives on the floor behind me.

This little flourish proved one thing too many for a party of Maltese students, who had a very short fuse when they thought someone was mocking the local institutions. They jostled and shoved us as we left the floor and then pursued us like a swarm of angry hornets all the way back to the safety of the Union Club.

We were confined to Barracks for that little adventure.

EPISODE TWO

We arrived back in England a few days before Christmas. Although it was a drizzly December evening when we arrived there wasn't a man among us who didn't rejoice at being home. We were quartered at the Citadel Barracks in Dover.

Practically everyone in the battalion was sent home on leave, but Trubshawe and I were still in deep disgrace because of dressing up as goats at the Fancy Dress Party. As a punishment we had to stay in charge of the Barracks and a small group of men over Christmas and the New Year.

As a matter of fact we had a very good time. The Barracks became rather like a holiday camp. Trubshawe and I let the men do very much what they wanted.

Hogamanay was as boisterous as ever. The cook gave us fifty members of the caretaker party a wonderful spread of haggis with all the trimmings. Following regimental tradition the officers, which in this instance consisted of just Trubshawe and I waited on the men. Trubshawe rounded off the evening by belting out an endless stream of songs on the tinny canteen piano, while many toasts were offered and accepted.

The following day was a day of shock. We rose late with appalling hangovers. After the heat of Malta the damp and cold of England was particularly difficult to come to terms with. Trubshawe and I were attempting to get warm by downing a concoction called "The Heart Starter" –which was actually a lethal mixture of port and brandy-when the door opened and the solitary mess waiter stood there. He was rolling his eyes, making spastic movements of his head and shoulders and jerking his thumb over his shoulder. When he stepped aside the reason for his alarm became clear. Behind him was a real live Major General, followed by two more officers from the General staff.