

# JUST GOODBYE TO THE MAJOR

## *Soldier and Radio Personality*

Written for "The Listener"  
by A.M.

*JUST Badges, Just Old English Legends, Just Elephants, Just Mascots, Just Army Days.*

These are a few of the titles from a long list beginning with "Just" that listeners have heard regularly once a week over a period of years. And now Major Francis Henry Lampen, D.S.O., under the necessity of taking a rest, is giving up his regular talks, so we have called this biographical sketch and appreciation *Just Goodbye*. . . .

Major Lampen has done many things in his life, but he has not told the story of it consecutively. To fild the adventure and humour of it, you have to yarn to him or listen to his talks. Incidents and stories from many parts of the world are scattered through his talks like plums in a good pudding. He comes of an old Cornish family—and tells of a Cornish farm worker who directed a stranger, "Well, zur, it's like this 'eer. Furst 'e goee down 'e road. Then 'e turns right. Then 'e goee left. And then 'e gooe both ways," meaning straight on. His family, like many another of the kind, had a service tradition. His father was a general in India, and literally a brass-hat, for the Major remembers his brass helmet; they did wear such dreadful contraptions in that climate in the old days. An uncle was a general in the Royal Marines, and a nephew, Captain (now Major) John Lampen, commanded the Marines in the Achilles in the recent war, and married a New Zealand girl. So it was natural that Francis Henry should go into the Army. From Sandhurst he went to India, and after a term with an English regiment served in the Bengal Lancers. When they founded a regiment of Moplahs, those fanatical Moslems of South-west India, he was chosen for service with it, because he knew the language. Kitchener used to call the regiment "The Forty Thieves," and not even the sweet reasonableness of Francis Henry Lampen allied with British discipline sufficed to tame these masterless men; the regiment was disbanded. But Major Lampen still has the red fez that was part of his Moplah uniform.

### Disconcerting Magistrate

The above accounts for the fact that there is so much India in the Major's talks. But his adventures didn't stop there. In 1904 he and another subaltern had a year's leave, and because Russia and Japan were fighting, they decided to go home via the Far East. There they were caught up in a series of adventures strange enough to make a novel. These began with joining an American who was running supplies from China to the Russian Army. The American died of pneumonia, the venture had to be abandoned, and the two young Englishmen found themselves with the Russians. From this highly irregular position they passed into the hands of the Japanese, and were quartered in Tokio with a number of disgruntled war correspondents denied

access to the firing line. Foolishly, the band staged a demonstration of protest and in a twinkling they were arrested and taken to Court. As Lampen and his companion waited their turn to go before the magistrate they decided they must conceal their connection with the Indian Army. What country did they belong to? They chose the one furthest from the homeland—New Zealand. But when they told the "beak" that they were from New Zealand, the reply



Spencer Digby photograph

MAJOR LAMPEN  
From Sandhurst to broadcasting

was startling. "Right. There's a ship going there to-morrow, and you will sail in her!"

So sail they did, and in one of the queerest merchant ships that tramped the seas. She would stop en route and trade with Pacific islanders by putting goods ashore in boats and taking off island produce. Having overstayed their leave, the young men were in a jam when they landed at Auckland, but the local military authorities saved the situation by finding a job for them and asking India for their services.

### Territorial Officer

Back in India, young Lampen remembered New Zealand as a very pleasant country, and a promise by Mr. Seddon to give him an army job, so eventually he returned. Unfortunately Seddon was now dead and there was no record of the promise, so the young man kept himself by producing plays for amateur societies. He had picked up a good deal of the business in the Army in India. When the compulsory territorial

system of training was introduced, he got his chance and became an area officer. For all his sweet reasonableness there was a firm soldier in Francis Henry Lampen. When, in the very early days of the Territorials, the local mayor made fun of a marching column from the kerb, Lampen took him to Court, and had him taught a lesson. Soldiering was considered a joke in those days. In a few years we were to learn what sort of a joke it really was.

Major Lampen was one of those who gave us a proper foundation to build on when the test came.

Then he was sent to England to do a staff course, and, being there when war broke, was assigned to the training of the 250 New Zealanders who joined up in Britain. One day he marched them proudly into London to be entertained at the Guildhall. Passing Buckingham Palace, he felt, so he confesses, a flutter when a message came that the King would like to inspect his men. Then on to the City, and as they halted for a moment near the boundary, a sergeant of police touched him on the shoulder. "Your bayonets, sir." Only a few regiments have the right to march through the City with fixed bayonets, and the New Zealanders were not among them. The Major cherishes these little Army rights and has used many of them

### Soldier to Civilian

Then, with his contingent, he went to Egypt to join up with the Main Body, and on to Gallipoli, where he was in the show from landing to evacuation. In the later stages he was Brigade-Major for the New Zealand Infantry Division. Afterwards the Western Front, where he collected a D.S.O. and an illness that sent him back to New Zealand, to be Adjutant and Infantry Instructor at Trentham. When he retired in the 1920's he tried business for a time, but went back to his old love, theatrical production. Major Lampen has lost count of the number of *Our Miss Gibbs* and similar frivolities that he staged in this country, from Invercargill to Whangarei.

Broadcasting developed, and here, with his wide experience of life, his pleasant voice and kindly disposition, the Major found a niche. His talks in Dunedin were so successful that he came

to Wellington as a free-lance to take advantage of the capital's fuller opportunities. The centre of broadcasting found it was good to have him about when there were odd jobs to be done—a script to be read or someone to be interviewed on the air. He helped the Talks Department with a lot of talks on occupations, some of them odd, like deep-sea diving and risking your neck in motor car stunts for a living. He was "Wayfarer" in "Wandering with the West Wind." A most friendly soul, he had a knack of putting people at their ease and getting them to talk. Everything he was asked to do, he did cheerfully. Spreading despondency, he would inform us firmly during the dark days of the war, was a crime in the Army, for which the offender was liable to be shot. He never groused, or if he did, he salted it so with humour that one laughed.

### Sympathy the Basis

What makes a good radio talker? Major Lampen has become a great favourite on the air—almost an institution—because he speaks in a pleasant way about interesting things. But that's not quite right; he makes them interesting. The basis of his success is his warm disinterested interest in his fellows. Nothing is foreign to him. This sympathetic appreciation of things great and small, from the glories of British blood and state to the blackbirds that were members of the family at his home in a Wellington bay, have given his personal talks, and especially the *Just* series, their special intimate appeal. Listeners feel he is an understanding friend.

The same qualities have won him a wide popularity outside radio, have made him, for example, a desired and welcome guest at social gatherings, particularly R.S.A. reunions. His sense of humour is delightful, and he enjoys a joke against himself. There is the extremely funny story (as he tells it in detail) of his forgetting at the last moment his summons to the Grand Jury in Dunedin, and being late in consequence. "Have you any excuse to offer for being late?" asked the Judge. "None at all, Your Honour." "Oh, this is very refreshing. A jurymen has no excuse for being late." "No, sir. I can only put it down to mental aberration. I was well aware of my duty this morning, but I had an interruption, and it went out of my mind." "You're excused," said His Honor. Another jurymen was late that morning, a man also well-known in the city, but he was not quite so submissive as Francis Henry Lampen. "You're fined five pounds," said the Judge. "But your Honour," protested the jurymen, "a pound a minute!" "No, Mr. X," replied the Judge, ten pounds now; two pounds a minute." Can you identify the Judge?

The Major carries with him into retirement the good wishes of many thousands of listeners, as well as those of all in the Service who have been associated with him. "Goodbye," we can hear him say. "Carry on!"