CHAPTER VIII

THE SUDAN, 1920–1925

THE end of the Great War found the Sudan politically contented, but soon to be suffering in common with the rest of the world from an economic depression which, to a country still in the early stages of development, brought problems of particular gravity. The general decline in the price of prime commodities, and especially the heavy fall in the price of cotton, were accompanied by the imminent necessity to retard or postpone the programme of works of development. To take one case only, the price of labour and materials had risen to such an extent that in 1921 it was reported that the original estimates for the construction of the Makwar Dam on the Blue Nile and the canalisation of the Gezira tract were quite inadequate and that the work could not be continued unless further funds were raised. The revenue accruing to the Government, which in 1920 stood at a figure of just under 4½ million Egyptian pounds, in the following year had declined by nearly half a million, and by a similar figure in 1922.

In these conditions the strictest economy had to be exercised, and it was uncommonly fortunate that the public security of the country was now so well established that heavy and unexpected charges had not to be incurred under this head during the years between

1921 and 1924. The outlying districts in particular were never free from the danger of sudden outbreaks of violence, and a very typical incident of the kind occurred in the Nyala district of Southern Darfur in the autumn of 1921. Southern Darfur is the home of a fanatical and unruly population belonging to three main tribes, Arab and semi-Arab; and Darfur had not as yet had sufficient experience of regular government to make these tribes amenable to peaceful discipline. In September of 1921 there appeared the usual fanatical nomad leader declaring himself to be the Prophet Jesus and proclaiming a jehad or holy war. The Inspector of Nyala district, Mr. Tennant McNeill, was alone at the time and had at his immediate command about forty police. The Governor of Darfur, on receipt of the news, sent a further force of fifty mounted infantry of the Western Arab Corps. No combatant British officer was available to go with this force, but Captain Chown of the Royal Veterinary Corps volunteered to accompany it, and arrived at Nyala just half an hour before Nyala was fiercely attacked by a horde of fanatical insurgents. Five thousand men took part in the assault upon a garrison of forty police and fifty mounted infantry. Mr. McNeill and Captain Chown were killed and the attackers drove the Government forces out of the post by sheer weight of numbers. Apparently with the death of the two English officers they considered the fight over and won, and retired without consolidating their advantage. The defending survivors were at once rallied by Yuzbashi Bilal Riyak, the officer commanding the mounted infantry, and the post was reoccupied and successfully defended against a second furious assault. This brave little band, numbering only thirty combatants in all, and now with

little or no ammunition left, was preparing to meet a third assault when the *soi-disant* Prophet was wounded by a fortunate bullet, and with his removal from the field the advance collapsed. Of the total force of 90 men, 43 were found to have been killed and 21 wounded when a relieving force appeared. "Had the garrison not held its own there is little "doubt that the rising would have attained very "serious proportions immediately and would in all pro- "bability have spread beyond the borders of Darfur." The official report concludes: "before the end of the "year the administration of the district was taking its "normal course". Such amazing vicissitudes and such possibilities of conflagration were still part of the yearly work of government in the Sudan.

But they were not in essence comparable with the political insurgencies which vex more advanced countries, and with the spread of regular methods of administration and its accompaniment of economic development they were bound to occur less and less frequently. This work was steadily going forward, but the difference in degree of advance between the northern and the southern areas was, of course, very wide. The north is populated by Arab tribes, all of whom, whether nomad or sedentary, possessed a tradition of local or tribal organisation and owned the authority of sheikhs or village elders. In addition to this tribal or local consciousness, they possessed the unifying bonds of a common language and a common religion. In the south, on the other hand, was to be found a bewildering conglomeration of pagan and primitive tribes possessing no common factor of unification, speaking numerous different dialects, and practising, instead of a common religion, an infinite variety of superstitions. The result was naturally that

while in the north by 1921 it had become possible to regularise by legislation the traditional powers possessed by nomad sheikhs or councils of village elders, and even to institute advisory municipal councils in three of the larger towns, in the south the problem was still either to accustom lawless primitive tribes to the idea of a settled central authority, or else, having discovered the declining elements of native authority which still lingered on, to revive these by careful nursing and to substitute for the chaos of intertribal warfare some rudiments of practical administration. In the Bahr-el-Ghazal province, for instance, the same year that saw the institution of a municipal council for Khartoum saw the first successful attempt to bring the Nuer tribe under administration of any kind, whilst among their neighbours and hereditary foes, the Dinkas, a witch-doctor was causing serious unrest by predicting, upon the evidence of natural phenomena, the fall of the British authority. The Nubas in their mountainous province further west were still at frequent intervals likely to slaughter policemen and burn Government posts, symptoms merely of the natural hostility of youthful pagans to administrative discipline. The serious rising which took place in the newly acquired province of Darfur has already been described, and enough perhaps has been said to show the immense variety of conditions from which administrative amenity had to be evolved.

The policy followed by the Government was everywhere the same, although the methods of application had necessarily to vary considerably. It was, according to the official description,[1] "to leave administration, as far as possible, in the hands of native

[1] *Report on the Administration of the Sudan in 1921.*

"authorities, wherever they exist, under the supervision "of the Government, starting from things as it finds "them, putting its veto on what is dangerous and un- "just, and supporting what is fair and equitable in the "usage of the natives. Much obviously depends on the "existence and efficacy of any local or tribal organisa- "tion. When such does exist the aim of the Govern- "ment is to foster and guide it along right channels. "Where it has ceased to exist it may still be possible to "recreate it. In pursuance of this policy, the Govern- "ment encourages native chiefs to administer their "own tribes in accordance with native customs in so "far as those customs are not entirely repugnant to "ideas of justice and humanity and aims at non-inter- "ference except where necessary." Thus in the north the Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance of 1922 regularised the traditional powers of some 300 sheikhs of nomadic and semi-nomadic Arab tribes, and even in the south it had been possible to inaugurate an experimental system of chiefs' courts, known as Lukikos Courts, which were working not unsuccessfully even in some areas of the Bahr-el-Ghazal and Mongalla provinces. The methods employed are well illustrated in the case of the new area of Dar Masalit, which had not been included within the Sudan boundaries until 1919. "The existing system", runs the official report for 1922, "was carefully investigated. It consisted of "a supreme authority in the person of a sultan, who "ruled the country both through agents appointed "personally by himself, and also through an organisa- "tion originally tribal but tending through the move- "ment of individual families to become territorial in "character. This organisation consisted of heads of "sections and heads of subsections, the latter being "the smallest administrative unit and controlling as

"many as six villages. Personal agents of the Sultan, "both executive and judicial, acted independently of "the local chiefs, and, as might be expected, this dual "system of control led to considerable confusion and "irregularity both in the collection of taxes and in the "administration of justice. The powers and jurisdic- "tion of the various authorities were vague and ill- "defined, with the result that the well-being of the "people depended to a large extent on the character "of the Sultan." It was of course decided, upon completion of this careful survey, to retain the existing machinery and method while endeavouring to purge it of abuses and anomalies. The first step was to procure that the existing machinery should carry out a regular assessment of the grain-crop with a view to putting the collection of the grain-tax on a systematic basis. Although the Resident was unable, owing to the troubles occurring elsewhere, to supervise the work of the assessment, it was carried out most successfully and with a high degree of honesty. The next step was to modify, define, and regularise the existing judicial system, and this work was carried out with the consent and co-operation of the Sultan. "This "method of indirect and advisory administration ap- "pears so far satisfactory," writes the Governor-General in his report, "and its future development "in Dar Masalit will be watched with considerable "interest." This method of maintaining and encouraging traditional native administration was supplemented by the gradual and careful selection of natives of the Sudan for appointment to government posts carrying direct administrative duties. These appointments had to be made with the greatest care and caution, because the Sudanese, while accustomed to submit to the authority of a chief—whether heredi-

tary or elected—or of a non-native official, had as yet no experience of, or respect for, authority vested in the person of another native of the Sudan, to all appearances no better, if no worse, than himself. Imaginary grievances, suffered at the hands of customary authority, he would bear without much complaint, but he would be very quick to give active expression to his resentment of any such case of grievance caused by a native official.

In spite of the difficulties, however, steady progress was being made, and at the same time the decline in world prices was not permitted to hold up to any important extent the economic development, upon which so much had already been expended. The contract for the building of the Makwar dam had to be cancelled early in 1922, but after personal discussion with the Governor-General and his advisers, the British Government agreed, in order to allow the work to proceed, to guarantee the principal and interest of a further loan of £3,500,000, and a new contract was entered into with Messrs. S. Pearson & Sons, under which both dam and canalisation work were to be completed by July 1925. At the same time final arrangements were made for the commencement of another work of extreme importance for the economic life of the Sudan. Cotton is the prime commodity of export, upon which the prosperity of the Sudan was for long expected to depend, and the extension of cotton cultivation of good quality was a problem which had long engaged the earnest attention of the Government. In addition to the Gezira tract, much in this direction was hoped for from a proper utilisation of the fertile delta of the Gash river in the Kassala province, which lies on the Eritraean boundary. The Gash river rises in the

Abyssinian foot-hills and drains a long narrow area of mountainous country with heavy but spasmodic rainfall. Its waters in full flood are heavily laden with silt, and flow into no river, but just north of the town of Kassala begin to spill over a delta which the river has laid down in the course of years. This delta, consisting of a rich alluvium, highly fertile, extends to something like 500,000 acres, of which it was estimated that some 200,000 could be cultivated to produce first-class long-staple cotton. In 1922 an agreement was come to with a company called the Kassala Cotton Company, under which the Government was to construct at once a railway some 217 miles in length linking up Kassala with the line from Atbara to Port Sudan, while the company was to undertake the development of the cultivable area in the delta. The estimated cost of the project was £2 million. Of this sum the railway was to cost £1½ million, but the railway project would not of course serve only for the development of the Gash delta: it would also constitute the first step in the policy of opening up the whole of the Eastern Sudan by its ultimate extension from Kassala on to Sennar and so across the Blue Nile dam to connect with the existing main line. The construction of the line was commenced in October 1923 and completed with extreme rapidity by April 1924, and the Kassala Cotton Company took over the irrigated areas of the delta in July of the same year. It was confidently expected that the completion of the Gezira irrigation project in 1925 would, together with the development of the Gash delta, prove to be the turning-point in the economic history of the country.

There was further ground for optimism also in the state of the finances. In 1923 the revenue had shown,

instead of a further decline, a considerable recovery, and the same process was repeated in 1924 and brought the figure back again above the £4 million mark to a point which it had not reached since 1919.

But in 1924 came a sudden and sinister interruption in what had so far been a well-ordered story of arduous but successful endeavour. For the first time in the history of its connexion with Great Britain the Sudan tasted the unpleasant fruits of political agitation. It was Egypt who brought her this poisonous gift, not the first in the series of misfortunes caused by that neighbour. The story of the beginnings of the agitation which led to the troubles of 1924 has already been told in connexion with the history of the first constitutional democratic government of Egypt. What took place in the Sudan, after the murder of Sir Lee Stack, the Governor-General, in the streets of Cairo, still remains to be told.

It will be recalled that in January 1924 Zaghlul had been called upon to form the first democratically elected government of Egypt and had accepted the task. The result, as described in detail in Chapter VI. of this volume, was an immediate increase in political propaganda in the Sudan. The ground had long been in process of preparation, and now that the extremists held the reins of power in Egypt, the Egyptian disseminators of Sudanese political propaganda were no longer hampered by the same sense of fear that had previously imposed a restraint upon their activities. Within a very few months the effect began to be felt in the larger towns of the north, and in June overt troubles commenced with rioting at Omdurman. It will be further remembered that when the crisis had culminated in the murder of the Governor-General, it was decided that all Egyptian officers and

units should be at once withdrawn from the Sudan, and that the remaining purely Sudanese units of the Sudan Army should be constituted into a Sudan defence force under the Governor-General. For the first time in the history of the condominium the public security of the Sudan had been threatened by political agitation—an agitation engineered from Egypt and designed to promote only the interests of Egyptian extremists—which, undoubtedly, if the sternest measures had not been immediately taken to suppress it, might have resulted in abiding distress and unhappiness to the population of the Sudan.

Sir Lee Stack, the murdered Governor-General, had spent the greater part of his years of service in the Sudan. In 1927 he had been appointed Acting Governor-General in the place of Sir Reginald Wingate, and in 1919 he was made Sirdar. "An unswerv-"ing devotion to duty, a keen insight into men and "affairs, a clear and analytical judgment, an inex-"haustible sympathy and patience, and a very excep-"tional charm of personality, were the outstanding "features of his character. Quiet and unostentatious "in his work, courteous and thoughtful towards all "alike, he won his way by persuasion rather than by "force and shepherded the country through eight diffi-"cult years with conspicuous ability and success. His "obvious single-mindedness and honesty of purpose "gained the confidence and trust of all with whom he "came into contact, and the well-being and content-"ment of the people to whose interests he devoted "himself heart and soul are a living monument to his "memory." This description of a public servant who could not easily be replaced is taken from the official report on the administration of the Sudan for 1924: there is nothing that a later historian would wish to

add to or delete from so simple and so rich a record of service untimely ended.

The decision to create a Sudanese Defence Force recruited only from natives of the Sudan was not a sudden outcome of Sir Lee Stack's death. It had been very clear for some years to the Sudanese authorities concerned that if and when Egyptian agitators decided to use the Sudan for their own ends the only effective agency which they would possess for creating disaffection in the Sudan itself would be Egyptians stationed in that country, either civil officials or army officers. There would be little difficulty in counteracting the efforts of other emissaries sent from Egypt, but so long as these official potential agencies remained, the danger of disaffection in the Army, spreading thence to the civil population, was always real and imminent. To an army recruited from a backward and fanatical population, the complications of a divided allegiance were not easy to explain satisfactorily, while the dangers were enormously increased by the presence of two classes of non-native officers and of the power which disloyal Egyptian officers would possess to influence the minds of their men by unsettling stories of what the future might hold in store. So that when in the early part of 1924 subversive propaganda from Egypt was intensified there was no other course but to consider how the discipline and *moral* of the Army could be preserved. The High Commissioner, the Governor-General, and the Prime Minister held a personal conference in London in August 1924 to consider what steps were necessary in face of this danger. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald then took the view that the British Government would be prepared, if the Egyptians refused to play the game in the Sudan, to tell

them that they must quit the Sudan altogether: a proposal was at the same time taking shape for the creation of a purely Sudanese force. In order to meet the additional expense involved to the Sudan budget, it was advocated that the economic development of the country, and particularly of the cotton-growing areas under canal irrigation, should be accelerated very considerably.

The negotiations with Zaghlul which shortly ensued did nothing to ease a situation already tense to the point of crisis. His attitude in regard to the Sudan amounted to a clear denunciation of the Convention of 1899, for his open contention was that the Sudan was the property of Egypt, and that the British had stolen it against the will of the Egyptian people. It was a stupid attitude to take up, even if it be judged only from the point of view of self-interest. In this light it could only be justified on the assumption that Zaghlul was right in despising British assertions, for had the Egyptians been told to remove themselves at once from the Sudan, they were powerless either to refuse or to retaliate effectively. Indeed there was no reasonable ground upon which Egyptians could justify the extremist attitude in regard to the Sudan. The cry had been used for their own domestic ends, and those Egyptians who thought as well as felt on the subject could only have argued either that the control of the Nile water might be unfairly used as a weapon of compulsion upon Egypt, or that the competition of Sudanese cotton might in time menace their own economic welfare—arguments which would not have much influenced an impartial audience.

Nothing, however, had been done in regard to the problem until events in Egypt brought about the

decision to evacuate all Egypt units at once. And immediately the trouble which had been anticipated became real. The Egyptian artillery and 3rd Battalion refused incontinently to move without orders from King Fuad. This difficulty was not insuperable and need not have led to disturbance, but the period of grace thus acquired was, as might have been expected, utilised by the disloyal in instigating disaffection among the Sudanese battalions. The uncertainty of the situation and the indeterminate position of the Egyptian officers and units thoroughly upset the *moral* and discipline of the whole Army and made the work of the disaffected much easier, and on November 27 the 11th Sudanese mutinied in Khartoum and a number of them left barracks carrying arms and marched on the Gordon College. The acting Sirdar, Colonel Huddleston, took gallant and personal charge of the ensuing situation and endeavoured to persuade the mutineers to return to discipline and submit to his personal orders, but no persuasion was of any avail. Fighting with the mutineers took place on the 27th and 28th, and it was not till the evening of the 28th that it was reported that the mutineers were finally captured or scattered, leaving heavy casualties.

The problem now was to build out of a situation so incomprehensible to the ignorant mind a new force, loyal and undivided in its allegiance. The Egyptian units began to take their departure without incident on November 30, and their entrainment continued steadily, but it was now difficult to persuade the populace that it was the Egyptians and not the British who were leaving. They had indeed done deadly work. The confidence of the British officers in the regular Sudanese troops was shaken, the *moral*

of the latter was undermined and in the case of at least two regiments destroyed, it seemed, beyond repair. Only the irregulars remained thoroughly trustworthy and clearly unshaken in their belief that the only thing that mattered was their own British officers.

The British authorities in the Sudan were driven to the conclusion that only by the immediate abolition of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium and a formal declaration of Great Britain's trusteeship could any foundation be laid for a durable rebuilding of public security. They were now in possession of evidence, which they regarded as indisputable, that the mutiny had been engineered by Egyptians under the leadership of one of the senior officers of the Egyptian artillery, and that the instigation had been carried out after the Egyptian units had received orders to leave. They felt that nothing was wanting to justify upon legal and moral grounds the step which considerations of expediency also urged, and they pressed very strongly that it should be taken. The High Commissioner, however, could not accept their view, and the Secretary of State—now Sir Austen Chamberlain—was also opposed to it. The latter feared the possible effect upon foreign opinion; the former was concerned with the situation which faced him in Egypt and the necessity of not making things too difficult for Ziwar Pasha and his Cabinet, who indeed deserved much for their courage and loyalty in stepping into the breach.

On December 6 the acting Governor-General, in full agreement with the acting Sirdar, telegraphed as follows to Cairo for transmission to London: "Foundations of condominium are proved utterly "untrustworthy and we cannot rebuild army on

"double allegiance. It is impossible to guarantee that "we shall not have another mutiny: we can deal with "it if it occurs with our present forces, but every life "lost on both sides in suppressing it will be due to our "not doing what, according to all opinion here, we "should have done on the morning after Stack's "death, viz. declaring abolition of Egyptian authority. "The chance of a further mutiny will be very greatly "reduced by lowering the Egyptian flag."

The Secretary of State was naturally prepared to attach very great weight to strong joint representations from the Governor-General and the Sirdar, backed as they apparently were by the unanimous opinion of other Sudanese officials, but the Governor-General was no doubt right when he said that the step he proposed ought to have been taken upon the morning after the crime. To take it later would have been difficult to justify, especially now that the demands made upon Egypt in respect of the irrigation of the Gezira tract had provided the ill-disposed with a handle for criticism. That demand was, as we have seen, soon moderated, but it had had an unfortunate effect in Egypt and on foreign opinion, and the counteracting effect of its subsequent moderation would have been largely lost if at the same time we had made harsher demands in regard to the condominium. Probably the truth was that another opportunity had been lost, and that there was now nothing for it but to make the best of the very difficult situation which existed. The policy which was thenceforward followed was to preserve the condominium, but to remove the Egyptian units from the Sudanese army.

It was unfortunate from the point of view of future progress that the opportunity was not taken

when it presented itself to clear away the embarrassing differences which had for so long existed between the actual and the legal positions of the Sudanese administration. Had the condominium been at once denounced, this would have been recognised as a fitting punishment for the crime and the behaviour which led to it: even Egyptians themselves would have realised that the blame for such a culmination must lie upon the shoulders of their own Prime Minister, while nobody could have been found to deny that the step must conduce in every way to the welfare and advancement of the peoples of the Sudan. But the opportunity passed and was not taken. The Sudan was left to reconstruct, as best it could, the loyalty and the discipline of its army. By January 1925, outwardly at any rate, the situation in that country had returned to normal and there was little cause for anxiety in regard to future trouble. By March 12 in the same year, Lord Allenby was writing to Ziwar Pasha acknowledging the Egyptian Government's expressed desire to contribute towards the cost of the administration of the Sudan, and concluding, "In spite of the measures "which the events of last year obliged them to take, "His Majesty's Government have preserved the con- "dominium created by the Boutros-Cromer Conven- "tion of 1899 and they recognise, therefore, that it is "only right and proper that the Egyptian Govern- "ment should so contribute. They agree that the "amount fixed for this purpose should be £750,000".

The Egyptian Government had therefore again officially recognised the existence of the 1899 Convention, and the Sudan was still to receive from Egypt a much-needed subvention: also it was just possible in more optimistic moments to hope that

some advantage might accrue to Ziwar Pasha's government in the eyes of the Egyptian people from the fact that the condominium was still intact, when we had been so severely provoked to abolish it. But these, after all, were very minor advantages and were soon proved to possess little value. Ziwar's government did not long survive, subsequent negotiations attached very little weight to the condominium, and Egyptians continued to ask for further concessions. Perhaps the only thing that can be said with justice is that laudable efforts were made to make the best of a bad business.