

## CHAPTER II

### "ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK"

The staff—Office work—The "Poor Fund," and its distribution  
—A tale of woe—The D.C. of inspection rounds—Petitions.

THE staff at Zeila consists of the District Commissioner, the District Clerk—an Indian gentleman—his Indian assistant, an Arab clerk and petition writer, an Indian sub-assistant surgeon, Mahomed the Somal interpreter, Buralli, or Buralleh, the sub-inspector of police—also a Somal—an Indian superintendent of customs, and an Arab outdoor collector of customs fees. There are half a dozen mounted police, thirty odd foot police, and a round dozen or so of water police under an Arab jemadar. Besides these we have many smaller fry, such as conservancy sweepers, messengers, a lamplighter, etc., etc. The Akils I have already spoken of. The foot police supply or furnish a guard for the jail, which is under the care of the jail-master, an ex-slave.

There is also a Kathi, or native magistrate, and an Arab schoolmaster. Further, we boast quite a number of pensioners, amongst whom are the keeper of the Sheikh's tomb, and Ferjallah Alone, an old Soudanese jemadar who accompanied Gordon from

Egypt to Zeila, and subsequently took service in this country. Ferjallah is very old and feeble, and, as regards Gordon, most disappointing. To him Gordon is "Gordon," the greatest soldier that ever was. "What more than that do you want to know about him," says Ferjallah.

The D.C.'s office combines the work of treasury, court-house, post office, administration, tax collection, and every other public work of the town and district. It keeps an eye on trade, customs, shipping—such as there is (mostly dhows)—police, prisons, political and other situations. For all of these the District Commissioner is directly responsible to His Excellency the Governor of Somaliland. In addition he takes an interest in social matters, and may even, besides being sole guardian and presiding angel of the "Poor Fund," be called upon to assume the duties of food controller. Strangely enough he is not overworked.

Monday morning is usually the busiest time of the week. Since my arrival here I have arranged on that morning that all the poor people seeking relief shall come to the office. Such an arrangement is looked upon by the scallywags of the town as being tantamount to an invitation to parade with the paupers. Not only the scallywags but shameless old men and women of independent means take the opportunity—trusting to luck or an oversight on my

part—to line up with the crowd and beg for a four-anna bit; something for nothing is always worth acquiring. But there is such a collection of cripples and genuine “masakins” (poor people), well known to the police, and ready to eat up our slender fund, that the impostors stand little chance of getting anything. Of course, the first thing to be done is to weed out these latter gentry and send them off with a word or two of discouragement. Then the people who have friends, or whose sections belong to the district, are separated from the absolutely friendless. The former are assisted to make representations to their people of their necessity. Caravans from the interior are approached and asked to help their tribal brethren. The bush Somals, if they have any money, often respond to such an appeal, giving their dole with a pious hope at the back of their minds that “Rubbama”<sup>1</sup> will book it up against them for the future good of their souls.

And the people who are left are cripples, some of whom crawl on all fours, frail bent old men and women, deformed children, the sight of whose withered twisted limbs and pathetic eyes would wring the last sixpence from anyone but a hard-hearted D.C., who is so used to looking at and seeing these things. Amongst these people we endeavour to divide, as fairly as possible, the money of our

<sup>1</sup> God.

fund. Four annas, fourpence, will fill those empty stomachs for at least one day, and with care for two. One need have no fear that the money will go in drink; such things are not done here. When our fund is all gone we have a "whip-round" amongst the merchants of the town, who are, according to their means, a very charitable lot. Human nature is human nature all the world over, and who knows but that the D.C. secretly notes a generous donor as a man to be helped when the occasion arises. Some of the subscriptions are consequently very large; even as much as two or three rupees. Here, amongst these simple people, one realises that the Lord loveth a cheerful giver; provided, of course, that he is an "aggressively" cheerful giver—otherwise he might be overlooked.

Unlike other parts of Africa life in Somaliland is very hard for the poor and indigent, but is not, of course, comparable with life in Europe. Here, on the coast, no one is ever cold. The scantiest rags suffice for clothing, and the sand makes a comfortable bed. Poor though many of the people are they will not see a man die of starvation unless by helping him they are going to suffer themselves. It is necessary to remember that no ultra-humane, or excessively sensitive, race could hope to survive in this country. But there are always to be found people who seem to be perfectly incapable of taking

care of themselves, just as there are people who are incapable of doing anything else.

The other day a poor tired woman, dressed in rags, and carrying a child on her back, complained that she had tramped the interior in a futile attempt to beg assistance for her child, and blind husband who was present in court. This old rascal then took up the tale of woe. He had a brother in the town, he said, who was perfectly well able to support him, and he hoped the D.C. would put the matter to the brother without delay.

“What about the woman,” I asked. “I hear you have divorced her.”

“Yes, I have divorced her, but she is looking after me as I am blind.”

“And is this your child?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied the old man who was not really blind.

“Well, we shall send for your brother, and meanwhile, as the woman is carrying this child and is tired out, you can have a rupee to buy food.”

The couple then left the court.

The following day the woman reappeared to complain she was starving and tired out.

“I’ve carried this child for hundreds of miles. I am its mother, but I’m so tired I can’t carry it any more—never again.”

“But you had a rupee yesterday to buy food.”



A STREET IN ZEILA.

“Did you expect me to get anything out of that?” she said. “I am used to getting nothing. The man took the rupee and spent it on himself.”

We sent at once for the man. Sure enough he had given the woman nothing at all. She had been divorced, he said, and was entitled to nothing from him.

“So—very well—if that is your explanation you can look after yourself in future. Your brother who can afford to do so will pay the woman a few rupees each month for the maintenance of your child. As for you, make your own arrangements.”

And so it was.

But to return to the day's work. We are early risers, and six o'clock every morning finds the people astir. After a cup of tea I commence the day by walking round the town. Just now we have an Indian superintendent of public works engaged in repairing buildings, and transforming an old police-lines into a hospital. There is a sum of money allotted for the completion of each piece of work, and this amount must on no account be exceeded. It behoves one to keep both eyes open, that this latter proviso is not lost sight of. From the superintendent I wander through the streets and note that the sweepers are doing their work in keeping the town clean. If the environments of a house are found to be in a filthy state—this happens seldom—

I just say: “Tell the owner to come to the office.” This means that he is “for it”, later on in the day. We do not argue about such matters in the street.

I generally visit the pier last of all, and anxiously look to see if the sea is attacking its foundations in any way. The D.C. is responsible for the pier, and there is always something going wrong with it. At present one Indian merchant has several thousand bags of salt stacked at one end, and I am in terror that this great weight will cause the foundations to collapse. When interviewed the merchant is always trying to do something about it, and something else is preventing him from doing it. He is undefeatable. I can only hope that when a big sea comes it will wash away the salt without doing any further damage.

Breakfast time comes at eight or eight-thirty o'clock, and at nine, sometimes earlier, one is in the office. First of all the cases come on. Divorce and matrimonial affairs are, as a rule, after a preliminary hearing, sent to the Kathi; but the aftermath of all such cases, such as the failure to pay mehr, or maintenance, is always cleared up by the poor D.C. Other cases are of a great variety, comprising political, civil, and criminal matters. There are also many petitions. Probably the contractor who controls the meat market complains that he cannot carry on any longer unless the dues payable by him to government are reduced. He is really the market



master, and recoups himself for the expenses incurred by charging the butchers a small fee for each animal killed and sold. This man makes as much fuss over the small fee he is called on to pay as if it were millions of rupees instead of tens. Therefore, we must check the animals slaughtered daily, over a given period, to enable us to compare his receipts with the fees we collect, plus his other expenditure. We do not take his word; we send our own man to collect these figures.

Then there are other petitions. One such from the daughter of a deceased pensioner, describing herself as a lone woman, lies before me as I write. "I am a poor orphan and have no one to turn to but God and your honour; I pray that you will assist me and I will always pray for your long life and prosperity." Rather overwhelming, but one reads that sort of thing without a quiver of the eyelid. Here is my note under the petition: "Petitioner is a good character; the daughter of a sepoy who accompanied Ferjallah Alone on General Gordon's escort from Egypt to Zeila. She makes a living by selling cakes of bread in the bazaar."

The petitions attended to, the District Clerk calls for some attention. The customs receipts have arrived and must be checked and locked away in the safe. A receipt is then signed for the amount and the peon goes off. After this, if the cases are

finished, miscellaneous work is attended to, such as the issuing of passes to natives desirous of visiting Aden or other places; the settling of applications for leave from police and other matters. In the afternoon correspondence is attended to, and last of all the balance shown in the cash book is compared with the cash actually in the safe. If the two amounts agree I sign the cash book. The last day of the month is pay day, and as I dole the wages out, an old man, who lives like a hermit on all other days at Sheikh Amar's tomb near my house, comes to the window grating and literally howls for pice. I shall never give that old humbug a pie.

After office hours one inspects the jail and arranges for the release of time-expired prisoners. We have no long sentence men so this happens frequently. Afterwards a long walk or a game of hockey or football: then home, a bath, dinner, and a lonely evening. To-night I occupied myself by writing this very imperfect account of how the days are filled. Of the cases one tries more anon.