

## CHAPTER IV

### COURT WORK

The Court opens—Sultan Mahomed Haji Dideh—Petitions—A case of "being found out"—Gambling—Mr Gandhi.

As I enter the office there is a slight commotion: Buralli, Mahomed the interpreter, and Mahomed Auwit have already arrived, and hurry from the desk of the last named to bid me good morning. We are a polite community. Mahomed Auwit has practically finished his morning's work, as a small pile of petitions prepared by his hand, and placed ready in my basket, testify. When I have taken my seat Buralli informs me that the Sultan of Zeila is waiting to be received. I assent, and a fine old grey-beard is ushered in. His feet are innocent of shoes or sandals, but his cotton shirt and pantaloons are spotlessly clean. A pleasant intelligent looking man is my mental note. He fumbles with a bundle of papers, from which he extracts one and hands it to me.

"Sultan Mahomed Haji Dideh," I read, "was born at Zeila, and is not in a sound state of mind."

He is under the delusion that he is king of all the kings. His dominions, he says, extend even beyond the limits of this earthly planet.

“(Signed) ISHER DASS,

“*Sub-assistant Surgeon.*”

What can I do for you I asked the old man. Buralli explains that the Sultan sometimes visits the custom-house on an imaginary tour of inspection. As a rule Harrichand, the customs superintendent, is very good natured and puts up with the old man's nonsense. This morning Harrichand was busy, and when the Sultan called could spare him no time and became cross. Sultan Mahomed Haji Dideh was summarily ejected onto the street.

Concerning this insubordinate conduct on the part of one of his officers the old man is here now to complain. I look round the court for inspiration. A crowd has collected near the door hoping to hear the old fellow baited. He himself looks so dignified, so like what he professes to be, that I have not the heart to hurt his feelings. I seize his certificate of insanity, copy it, and hand it back, saying that I have made a note of his complaint, and that it will be attended to. The Sultan is sane enough to realise there is nothing to be gained by prolonging the interview; he accepts his paper, bows condescendingly, and, turning about, struts majestically out of court.

I turn to the petitions.

"I most humbly beg to state," I read, "that one Abokr Fahia of the Gadabursi, Abrian, had looted a pregnant she-camel from Wais Kurmaneh of the Issa Rer Kul. And then, instead of this she-camel, Issa Rer Kul had taken a camel from Abokr Fahia. Now the Gadabursi Abrian want their camel from the Issa Rer Kul and do not wish to settle the claim of the she-camel Issa Rer Kul. I therefore pray your honour to order him, Akil Wairreh Yunis, who filed the complaint, to restore the camel of the Issa Rer Kul. By doing me this act of kindness I shall ever remain grateful. Signed, Hersi Ahamed, his mark, of the Issa Rer Kul."

Now Wairreh Yunis is the Akil of the Abrian section of the Gadabursi tribe, and Hersi Ahamed is the Akil of the Rer Kul Issa tribe. In Political Case No. 17, of 1918, judgment was given against the Rer Kul in favour of the Abrian for two camels, one of which had been paid according to the Abrian statement, and the other remained as yet unsettled for. This camel Wairreh Yunis was now demanding, and Hersi Ahamed in his petition pleaded it was paid for by one camel owed to the Rer Kul by the Abrian. Rather confusing but that was what was meant. It will be observed in the petition above

that the camel taken from Wais Kurmaneh is described as having been pregnant.

When case No. 17, of 1918, was heard neither Hersi Ahamed nor Wais Kurmaneh attended to defend it, hence judgment was given against them in default. The present case, numbered sixty-seven of 1919, however, brought some facts to light concerning this old case. It would be hopeless to attempt to write down the tortuous statements made by the various witnesses, and the following is what we arrived at, after sifting the evidence, as a correct appreciation of the origin of the dispute.

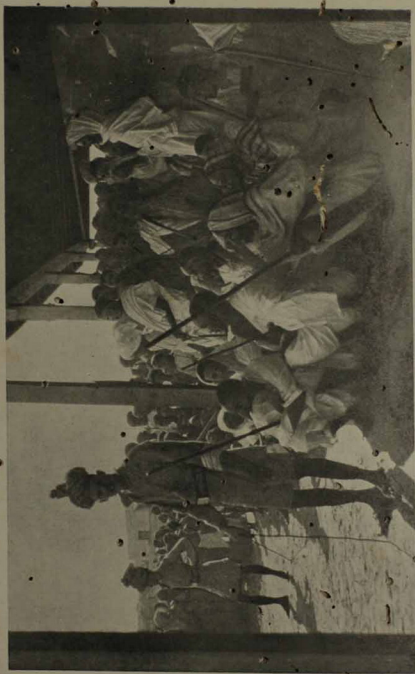
Last year drought conditions obtained in Somaliland, and many people, among others Abokr Fahia, were hard put to it to procure food. All Abokr's milk camels were dry, and it was a case of having to slaughter an animal. His choice fell on Wais Kurmaneh's she-camel, which he looted and killed. He does not attempt to deny that he looted this camel, but he denies it was pregnant. Wais Kurmaneh says it was, but how is he going to prove it; the camel is dead. When the latter found out what had happened to his she-camel he lay in wait near Abokr Fahia's kurria until a favourable opportunity presented itself, when he looted one of his she-camels in revenge. But this camel he did not kill, and, shortly after he had seized it, it gave birth to a baby camel; therefore the Gadabursi claim that the Rer

Kul mán looted two camels from their man and must return the baby, which they have claimed for as one camel. They consider they hold a strong position, as the original camel looted being dead (and dead camels tell no tales) it cannot be proved to have been pregnant.

But their reasoning is not my reasoning. They find it hard to explain why they hid the true facts of the case a year ago, and neglected to explain, until it was dragged out of them, that the whole case was trumped up on an affair of cross-looting. Nevertheless both parties considered they had a *bonâ fide* case, and both parties felt aggrieved that they got nothing out of it all but a sound wiggling. Never mind, better luck next time.

I go through the rest of the petitions; nearly all claims for ordinary debt, and settled in much the same way as similar cases are settled in England. There are the usual petitions from divorced women for payment of their mehr, or maintenance, for their children, with a request that the D.C. will put the screw on, and, as an inducement to do so, he is assured of the lifelong prayers of the petitioners in reward.

Buralli has one or two criminal cases to settle. A small boy about five years old is placed in the dock, and charged with the theft of two rupees from the old lady who makes the earthenware pots. Accord-



SCENE OUTSIDE ZELLA COURT-HOUSE.

ing to her the baby prisoner is a desperado of the deepest dye. Has he not been the cause of her losing two silver rupees? But when we turn him upside down, and the stolen money falls with a jingle on the floor, she says: "He is only a child, Sahib, let him go." And I let him go. He is branded for ever, child as he is, as a sneak thief. Had he waited until he was older, and held up an old woman on the road with his spear, threatening to take her life unless she handed over her one and only camel on which was packed all her worldly possessions, he would have been regarded as a hero, and might lord it with the best of his brigand friends, in the mosque or in the town. But now he is only a thief who stole two rupees, and was arrested by the police. Decent people will hound him from their doors. A strange thing, public opinion!

Then comes a "grievous hurt" case. Husband, wife, and the other man. How the wife fights to save her reputation. She is prepared to sacrifice her husband if only that can be spared. But facts are too strong for her. One after the other they are uncovered, and shred by shred the woman's reputation goes, until only rags are left. Yesterday how highly she held her head, and how disdainfully she scorned her more unfortunate sisters, whose ranks she joins to-day. But she fights as no queen ever fought for her crown, until she is forcibly

removed. Her morals have nothing to do with the present case beyond having provided a provocation for her husband's offence. And yet, serious as is the matter for her, she is no worse than hundreds of the other townswomen. She has only committed the unpardonable offence of having been found out.

The last case of any importance is one in which a number of ladies are charged with gambling. There has been a police raid, and the usual paraphernalia of such cases is produced. A dirty old pack of cards, some small silver coins, and a number of coppers. Police Constable No. 13—unlucky number, he has a beautiful black eye—deposes that he caught the prisoners red-handed, playing cards in one of the numerous coffee shops in the town; seized the cards and the coins, and arrested the men.

“And did they come quietly, Constable?”

“Yes, Sahib.”

“Then whatever on earth has happened to your eye?”

No answer, and I do not press the question. As a matter of fact P.C. No. 13 set out last night to administer a little corporal punishment to his wife. His wife chastised him instead.

The prisoners plead guilty to playing cards, but state they were only playing for cups of coffee. That is an old yarn, and does not go down. Fined one



rupee each, and cautioned that they will not get off so lightly next time.

And now comes Mr Gandhi, the public works superintendent. His coolies have actually gone out on strike. For what? More pay? No. Then for what? More water. Well, Mr Gandhi, you can settle this strike by giving them as much water as they want, and hang the expense.

The court work is over; I go to count picks and shovels at the prison, and say "salaam" to the by no means unhappy wretches I have sentenced to terms of durance vile.