

CHAPTER XIV

RUNNING A DURBAR CAMP

WHEN preparations were being started in the early part of 1911 for the King George V. Coronation Durbar to be held in December of that year, I was astonished one day to get a wire from my old friend Jack Strachey, then manager of the Army and Navy Stores at home, asking if I would look after *one* of the camps, provided he was given the task of arranging all visitors' accommodation. Understanding that no troops would go from Quetta, the idea had some attraction; so, replying in the affirmative, I received orders a couple of months later to report myself at Delhi to Sir John Hewett, president of the Durbar Committee.

There I found old Jack (who was on a tour of inspection of his branches in India) wallowing in detail regarding the question of the visitors' accommodation. My first job was to survey and map out a large camp near the King's site to accommodate Members of both Houses of Parliament. Borrowing a plane-table, work was started, only to result, after completion, in a wash-out, because it was ascertained an autumn session and other reasons would prevent any Members coming.

Hoping then to return to Quetta, where the command of my battalion gave me quite enough to do, it was with much disgust that I received instructions to take over *all* the visitors' camps *at Delhi*, and command my battalion *at Quetta*, at one and the same time!

Strongly objecting, the president was bearded, and he told me Strachey could not be spared by his board of directors, and he wished me to take his place. He reminded me also that my services had already been placed officially

at his disposal. Giving me twenty-four hours to think it over, I made certain conditions, including the appointment of a locum tenens in Delhi itself, while I returned to Quetta with a small establishment. All being agreed to at once, there was nothing for it but to submit, with the best grace possible.

Then followed the most strenuous six months' work that ever fell to my lot. The only staff obtainable was a lance-corporal of the Essex as clerk and superintendent, and a post office baboo filched, with some difficulty, from the superintendent of Postal Records in the Punjab. The latter did all the accounts and was an excellent fellow; but, not being a trained accountant, had everything to learn.

To facilitate concurrent battalion work, the Gurkha Officers' Club, opposite my own orderly room, was commandeered. There I was to be found daily from early morn until 8 or 9 p.m., sending orders for camp equipment, furniture, crockery and all the odds and ends required for various camps to accommodate about a thousand visitors. Or else framing budgets, revised one after the other, checking accounts and trying generally to keep within the estimates.

The camps and fees *per diem*, per head, for a minimum of twenty days, were :

Ten guineas for double suites in *Curzon House*.

Six guineas for quarters in the *Cecil Hotel* (this Strachey had most astutely hired for a month, as it stood, for Rs. 95,000, which an ungrateful Government cursed him for doing, although eventually it was the only camp that paid its way).

Five guineas for tents in *Kudsia Bagh*.

Two guineas for accommodation in the "Nicholson" Camp.

I entirely disagreed with the committee over these fees, holding that the variation was too great. Ten guineas seemed to me too much, while two guineas was too little. Intending visitors would shy at the former and think the latter was a camp intended for European servants. Although I was told to mind my own business, the result justified my contention, for only nineteen suites were taken out of twenty-seven in Curzon House, and Nicholson Camp was not nearly filled. The Cecil Hotel and Kudsia

Garden accommodation was snapped up at once, the former making a good profit and the latter paying its way.

Looking back on those days it comes home to me now that there was really a great fund of amusement to be got out of it all. At the time, however, to have your office hourly besieged by one or other of my twenty-three worried camp officers requiring instant decisions; to be pestered day and night by Britishers, Canadians and Americans about non-receipt of invitations to the various functions; to have visitors eluding their camp officers to make complaints personally to me—none of this seemed to me joy then, and probably made me very snappish and irritable.

One morning I heard a rustle and, looking up, found a well-known and extremely good-looking Austrian countess at my side, who, plumping herself down on the edge of my *office table*, motioned her companion to the only vacant chair.

Asking what I could do for her she said, with a most attractive foreign accent, that the Countess —— (pointing to the lady in the chair, who was quartered next her in the Cecil) wanted to change her room, as she could not sleep because Sir *Surname* on the other side *snored* so badly. Explaining that there were no vacant rooms, she then proposed Sir *Surname* should be moved elsewhere, and next to some people she had spoken to and squared. I told her that Sir William (a well-known English baronet) had taken his rooms through our London agent, and would strongly object, because he had purposely got his two sons (aged eighteen and nineteen respectively) placed next to him in the hotel.

“But why,” said this beautiful creature with a charming smile, “they are not *bab-bies*, it is not as if they wanted their mother!” Seeing it was no use arguing, I told her I could not interfere, adding that I had a camp officer there on purpose to arrange these sort of things, and why therefore did she come to me?

“Oh,” she smiled, “because they all say you are so nice!”

On the whole I think visitors were fairly satisfied, with the exception of an irate general who abused me because he had not got some particular invitation for a lady he was interested in. Telling him I had nothing to do with the *selection* for the invitations, I advised him to go and see

Sir John Hewett. I believe he did, and got no change, for the lady was a divorcée.

A high Canadian official at Curzon House was most indignant because he had received no card for the "Investiture ceremony." He told me in a remarkably nasal twang how he had been assured in London he would get invitations to all functions, free; that, on the strength of this, he had bought a court suit, with sword, and that he didn't consider Canada was receiving the attention due to her.

I expounded the fact that the Investiture was a *Command*, not an ordinary invitation. At the same time I gave him a letter for Sir John Hewett, and eventually getting his card, he was able to utilise the court suit, though it was not in the least necessary.

The Durbar ceremony itself (i.e. the Royal proclamation announcing the solemnity of His Imperial Majesty's Coronation in London on 22nd June, 1911) took place on the same site as in January, 1903, and comprised a large roofed-in amphitheatre with tiers of seats and radiating gangways. Below the bottom row and along the ellipse ran a broad red road. Facing the centre, on the opposite side of the road, was a raised dais and canopy with two thrones. Behind these, running out into the arena, was a broad raised gangway of a couple of hundred yards or so, leading to a beautifully constructed pavilion, in which was another pair of thrones facing the paraded troops. Behind the troops again was a second huge roofless amphitheatre in which was accommodation for the assembled multitude in holiday attire.

A most impressive spectacle was the solemn procession of the King-Emperor and Queen-Empress, crowned and in state robes, from their thrones on the dais to the royal pavilion. This took place directly the Governor-General, the high officials and the ruling chiefs had individually done homage. The dead silence, the stately march, with equerries backing in front of Their Majesties all the way, the royal robes with the long trains held by pages, the scarlet-clad troops, and the gaily-dressed crowd beyond, all helped to make as gloriously an impressive scene as is possible to imagine. Not the least of the wonders of that day was a Grenadier from London, in full dress, posted in front of the royal pavilion, who stood at strict attention

with his cane under his arm, without the slightest movement, for about two hours.

When the Durbar was over, and as the troops were moving away, hundreds of natives pressed forward towards the thrones in the royal pavilion and did puja (worshipped) to them.

Even greater loyal emotion was shown at Calcutta a few days after the Delhi Durbar. The King, noticing the huge crowds at the principal ceremony and the great distance they were being kept away, had heavy ropes brought and an inner cordon formed much closer, with the aid of these ropes held by police.

Intimation being given the crowd that they could come up to the ropes, such a rush took place that the ropes and police were swept away, and for some considerable time the King was actually lost in the middle of an excited mob; but as safe as in the drawing-room of Buckingham Palace. All they did was to touch the "hem of his garments."

When he had gone away thousands worshipped the gold chair he had sat in, and every particle of dust and sand below the chair was gathered by nimble fingers to be treasured till doomsday.

One incident in the Durbar proves how short a step it is from the sublime to the ridiculous. In India there is a saying that it is impossible to eliminate the sweeper¹ and his broom from any function or gathering. Still, one would think it impossible for him to figure in a royal durbar. Nevertheless, he did in 1911, and photos snapped of the amphitheatre when all had taken their seats, and we were awaiting the arrival of Their Majesties, depict this menial with his attendant broom emerging round a corner of the dais! He was soon hunted off by a terribly shocked political.

Two other never-to-be-forgotten functions are stamped on my brain, the homage ceremony at a bastion of the Delhi Fort, and the fire at the Investiture.

As regards the homage ceremony it must be stated that over a million inhabitants of the surrounding district had been collected and assembled by the civil authorities in the *bela*² of the River Jumna, close under the walls of

¹ Very low-caste menial of the Conservancy Department.

² A sandy waste on the banks of a river.

the fort. This multitude was to march by and do homage to the King and Queen seated, fully robed, in a bastion jutting out from the fort wall.

My wife and I had got seats in an enclosure a few feet to the right of Their Majesties. In common with the majority, we had looked upon this particular performance as a vast piece of humbug—a sort of “by order” function got up to please the King and Queen. But Lord Hardinge and Sir John Hewett had known better, and this we realised when we saw this huge mass of people of all ages surging forward in excited batches, through the well-arranged barriers, to do homage to their King-Emperor.

It amazed us to behold with our astonished eyes the spontaneous, genuine and impulsive feelings by which they were undoubtedly actuated. To hear their cheers, shouts and excited cries of “Badshah! Badshah!” (Emperor! Emperor!) as they passed the Presence. Finally to note, with big lumps in our own throats, that below the eyes which blazed with so much enthusiasm, tears were running down the cheeks.

If any corroboration were necessary it was given me on my way home by a major of Indian infantry on duty in the *bela* who told me he had been as sceptical as I was before the event, and felt as small as I did at our defective forethought. We could see that the King and Queen were deeply affected. In fact no one had expected so emotional a scene.

The fire at the Investiture was a very near thing. The function was held in a huge canvas hall draped in light blue muslin, the colour of the “Star of India” order. This was festooned in wave after wave along the ceiling, and right down to the floor all round. It can easily be imagined how this would have blazed to nothingness in a few seconds had flames once touched it.

What happened was, a telegraph messenger, bringing a wire to the tent next but one to this hall, and windward of it, leant his bicycle with its lighted lamp against the ropes of the tent while he tried to find someone to whom to deliver his message. The breeze blowing over the bicycle, the lamp set fire to the tent, and in less than two minutes there was nothing left but charred canvas and bits of burnt furniture. Fortunately the tent in between, belonging

to Lord Crewe, was cut down immediately, and that really saved the situation.

Inside the hall we could plainly hear the roar of the flames, which sounded only a few feet away, and every second we expected to see them. There was a sudden movement amongst the large audience of ladies, British officials, non-officials, Indian nobles and native gentlemen. Many rose up, turning towards the one entrance, but all with their eyes on the royal dais.

Seated in the third row and actuated by a sudden impulse, I remember standing on my chair, and shouting in a loud voice, which sounded quite strange to me: "Sit down, oh I do sit down."

Near by this had a good effect, but it appeared to me that the spectacle of the King calmly persevering with the investments, as if nothing had happened, did more than anything else to stay the excitement.

It was not as if he did not know. For one thing, he could not fail to hear the roar of the flames, and besides this the Duke of Teck had slipped out at the back at once, and returning had whispered the news to His Majesty. Adding, I fancy, that Crewe's tent had been cut down, because King George appeared much amused.

Early in the evening an entertaining thing happened. The heralds having proclaimed by fanfare the arrival of the King and Queen, and Their Majesties, after the processional entry, having taken their seats on the dais, the Queen suddenly got up and, with a small escort, walked out again.

An excited Rajah, exactly in front, turned round to me to say she must be ill. Shaking my head, he insisted on repeating his remark, enquiring what else could it be? Not satisfied with my further negative motion, he jumped about on his seat, and informed his right- and left-hand neighbours that the Queen must be sick, very sick. Being just as ignorant as he was of the cause, we felt puzzled, but it seemed extremely unlikely to be sickness with a private way out behind the dais, if required. When just about to ask the Rajah if he was *obliged* to be so fidgety, a flourish of trumpets was again heard, and in marched the Queen, through the audience, in the sky-blue robes of the Star of India. Making an obeisance to the King, she was invested with the order of Grand Commander,

after which His Majesty, assisting her to rise, kissed her full on the lips in front of us all. I very nearly cheered!

One sad event, indeed a tragedy, in Kudsia Garden Camp, really marred the pleasures of the Durbar. About midnight towards the end of the King's visit, my medical officer came to tell me that an American visitor named Harris (Harris' agricultural machinery) had got confluent smallpox. Asking why I had not been told before, he said he was not certain until that night, and did not wish to raise an alarm in such a large camp with the occupants of this tent, in the middle of a line of several others. This seemed a bit lame, but the only thing to do was to get the case away somewhere.

Mr. Harris was on his honeymoon with a young and extremely pretty bride, and a boy of fourteen, the issue of a former marriage. He was a religious enthusiast, and had been attending missionary meetings in the Delhi City, where it was supposed he had contracted the disease.

The doctor was sent off immediately in a car to see the Durbar health officer, a stoutish colonel, who, waked out of his beauty sleep, was not very helpful. He absolutely refused to take the patient into his segregation camp, nor did he give any feasible alternative. It was now 2 a.m. and there was nothing more to be done that night.

Having heard, as a dead secret, that Leslie Cheape, of the Inniskillings, was a smallpox patient in the Hindu Rao hospital on the Ridge, but that the fact was being kept very dark to prevent alarm, there seemed to be in this a possible solution of our difficulty.

Calling up the medical officer in charge of his hospital at 6 a.m., I told him of our case and asked him to take it in. Very indignant he was; couldn't dream of such a thing; his hospital was not for contagious diseases, etc., etc. Mentioning that I happened to know what Leslie Cheape was suffering from, there was a brief silence, and then a voice came through: "I'll send an ambulance over at 3 p.m.; please have patient ready then!"

The camp officer, two orderlies and myself, carrying poor Harris to the bullock ambulance, accompanied it to the outlet gate on to the main road. There we found the men of a British infantry unit lining the street on both sides.

It was for the King's passage to some function, and this road we had to cross. Causing a slight commotion by getting the men to make way, their colonel galloped up, extremely angry, to ask why the devil we were upsetting his dressing, and ordered the men back immediately.

Saying how anxious we were to get the ambulance through, he answered me that it was quite impossible, as the King was almost due. "Very well," I said. "Just as you like, then, we stay here, but this is a case of confluent smallpox." The ranks were opened at once, and we got through.

Next morning Mr. Harris died at 4 a.m., and in the evening we buried him in the little cemetery just behind the statue of John Nicholson. It was a cruel beginning of married life for his poor wife, who bore her loss with true fortitude, supported as she was by her deep religious convictions. We visited her frequently, and took her books, at the Hindu Rao hospital, where she and her young stepson had to wait over ten days in segregation before returning to America.

It was most fortunate that we had no other cases, and due, I consider, to the precautions at once taken. Having pulled down the batch of Harris tents, I had them dragged, together with the matting, furniture, carpets, all his clothes, bedding, etc., to a space behind, where they were instantly burnt; while everything belonging to Mrs. Harris and the boy, together with a few sentimental relics of her husband, were thoroughly fumigated and disinfected. All the remaining visitors were informed of what had taken place in order that, if they so wished, they could go elsewhere, but no one left.

Shortly after the Durbar, Field-Marshal Sir William Nicholson, having completed his tenure as Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the War Office, was raised to the peerage as Lord Nicholson. He was then deputed to India as president of a commission to advise regarding reductions in Indian military expenditure.

The findings of the commission were not unanimous. That is, there was a strong minority report which disfavoured the recommendation that India should not be required to supply, even herself, from her own munition factories. The feelings of all thinking soldiers were with the minority, and that's about all there is to say.

There are a good many stories about Lord Nicholson as C.I.G.S.,¹ two of which are quite worth repeating :

One morning he suddenly decided he would go and inspect the cavalry depot at Canterbury. The staff were informed, the depot warned by telephone, and off he went, by motor, accompanied by one staff officer. On arrival it was found the O.C. had gone off to a wedding, but Sir William was met by a young officer with an eyeglass who addressed him in French! Assuring the boy he knew English quite well, the usual round was made, both the C.I.G.S. and his staff officer being much puzzled by this young officer's manner and his treatment of them.

During luncheon with the officers the O.C., having been urgently sent for, returned. When asked whether the War Office telephone message had been duly received, he said "Yes," but they had also been warned to expect a visit from a Russian general. The boy had jumped to the conclusion that Sir William was the foreigner.

On saying "Good-bye," Nicholson when stepping into his car, turned to this youth and said: "Even now I don't believe you know who I am." A fatuous smile being the only response, Sir William added: "Well, I'm commonly called the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and First Military Member of the Army Council."

"Good God!" gasped the lad, "what's that?"

Lord Nicholson was extremely fond of quoting Horace and the Bible, being a master of both. These quotations served him well on many occasions. Here is an example:

In 1909, when C.I.G.S., he had to preside at a banquet of officials and others in connection with the scheme for the new Territorial force. Amongst the after-dinner speeches, one was delivered by a very irate and injured Volunteer colonel, who told the Army Council in unmeasured terms what he thought of them and their treatment of the Volunteers. The whole table was quite uncomfortable. Many wondered how the chairman would be able to refute the speaker's charges and arguments, which had been ably put.

Rising to reply, the C.I.G.S. touched on other points brought up, and coming to the speech of this indignant warrior, said: "As for Colonel ——'s charges, I am indeed sorry he should think he has been so badly treated by the

¹ Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Army Council. I can only ask him to take cōmfort in the words of the scripture, that 'He whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth.'"

The roar of laughter which followed, in which the aggrieved one himself had to join, entirely eased the situation. There was nothing more to be said.

"Old Nick," as he was often called, had held many appointments at Simla, including those of military secretary to Lord Roberts and adjutant-general to the Army. He was therefore well known in India when he took his seat as president of this Army Commission. One of the members was Sir W. Meyer, now "High Commissioner for India," in London, and to him is given credit for the most appropriate allusion to Lord Nicholson's sobriquet of "Old Nick."

At the first meeting of the commission Meyer was late. Coming into the room with his little mincing steps, and seeing so many military members seated at the table, he stopped short, exclaiming: "I feel like Daniel in the lions' den!" Then, after a pause, "But I am much worse off than Daniel. *He* put his trust in the Lord, while *I* can only hope for support from Old Nick!"

A year or two later the very interesting officiating command of the 1st Quetta Infantry Brigade fell to my lot. After holding it nearly six months orders came appointing me to the general staff as G.S.O.I., 8th (Lucknow) Division, with summer head-quarters at Darjeeling. It was a matter of great regret to both of us to leave Quetta, but it couldn't be helped, and we felt that we had been extremely lucky to remain there undisturbed for nearly six years.

When you *are* moved there is nothing like a real good move, which is certainly the case when it is a matter of going from Quetta to Darjeeling, a distance of over two thousand miles by rail. In the month of July, too, across the Sirhind Desert with a wife, two Gordon setters, two horses, two orderlies and six servants, to say nothing of mountains of luggage. Great were the preparations, for the dogs had to be shaved, household effects packed, and arrangements made for a halt in Calcutta after four nights running in the train.

But what did it matter? Wasn't it a matter of congratulation to be appointed a first-grade general staff officer before you have finished your regimental command,

and didn't we long to see Calcutta, which neither of us had ever visited? Nor was the journey half so bad as we expected. What with reserving a whole compartment, keeping it tightly closed by day, and filling a large tin tub with a block of ice, the carriage was comparatively (!) cool. The dogs were in clover near the ice, and the horses were kept comfortable with ice-caps on their heads.

Darjeeling was mostly enveloped in mist, and it never ceased raining. Even in the early autumn it was only occasionally one got a glimpse of the glorious snows with Kinchinjunga (28,100 feet) overtopping everything else. By going five miles to a small rest-house, and getting up before dawn, we saw the highest peak of Mount Everest (29,002 feet) tipped by the rising sun. We missed the American invasion, which came annually a little later in the year. Sallying forth from their hotels at 3 a.m., these indefatigable sightseers would rush up to this bungalow to add to their bag a glimpse of the highest mountain in the world.

At the beginning of the following year came my first introduction to the Y.M.C.A., at a concentration (which included a large number of British units) held at Dacca, in Bengal.

The Y.M.C.A. was a movement in which my divisional commander took much interest, and which, with his usual foresight, he felt would eventually become of inestimable benefit to our men. He made rather an amusing slip in an official letter about getting a branch to Dacca, when he ended up: "In fact, I feel certain the British soldier will much appreciate the presence of the Y.W.C.A."!

The response by the Y.M.C.A. to his request far exceeded our most sanguine expectations. We found on arrival a large staff assembled under the direction of Mr. Callan, who made such a name for himself later in France. There was a huge shed for addresses and lectures, with roof and walls of matting.¹ Its capacity was a thousand soldiers. There were writing and other rooms attached, where letters could be written, and various indoor games played. In addition, preparations had been made for all sorts of outdoor tournaments, from football, hockey and swimming to badminton and tennis. Lectures and addresses took place at 7.30 p.m. and the general and I went frequently, and sang lustily the opening chorus of "Oh! my darling,

oh! my darling, oh! my darling Clementine," much to the delight of the soldiers!

On the first night Mr. Callan told the audience the aims, objects and achievements of the Y.M.C.A. He was a born orator with a telling voice, lucidity of expression, and fluent delivery. He explained that there was much misapprehension regarding their object and aims. That many thought they were intent on ramming religion down the soldier's throat, whereas their main desire was to provide him with healthy recreation for mind and body, so as to maintain both in a clean and fit state. He instanced this misunderstanding about religious pressure with the following tale:

"Why, coming here to-night I met Private O'Brien of the — whom I had known in Calcutta as being a good deal addicted to the wet canteen, but not a bad fellow. 'O'Brien,' says I, 'I trust we shall see you at our shows here.' 'Well, no, Mr. Callan,' said he, 'I can't very well come to your shows, as I *don't carry the brick.*'"

I sat between the colonels of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the "King's Own." When "carrying the brick" was mentioned there were roars of laughter from the men. I whispered in turn, to each, asking the meaning of the phrase. Neither knew, nor had I heard it before myself. Afterwards I had to tackle Mr. Callan, who told me it was a soldier's expression for carrying the Bible, and meant that a man had found or "got," as he expressed it, religion.

We were all much impressed with the great work done by the Y.M.C.A. at Dacca. Since then the world has seen what an immense boon the Association has proved itself to our soldiers in the field.

Among other military diversions at Dacca, many experiments were made in crossing a river by cavalry and artillery—with their horses, arms, saddlery and guns—as quickly as possible. Rough rafts were easily constructed, as well as inflated bags (one called the "Wheatley," invented by an officer of Indian cavalry), bales of compressed hay, balloon-like tarpaulins filled with dry grass, etc. The last gave the greatest buoyancy. I reproduce a photograph of the crossing of a fifteen-pounder gun, the motive power being a horse swimming on each side of the raft with his head held by a gunner.

We had a competition between a squadron of the 12th

and one of the 17th Cavalry. The men and horses, fully armed and accoutred, were drawn up on one bank. At a given signal all had to get to the other side as quickly as possible without wetting their clothes, rifles or ammunition. Then dress, saddle up, mount and gallop away in line from the further bank. The bags, bales, tarpaulins, etc. (filled), were ready at the water's edge, and they could take their choice.

Lord Carmichael, the Governor of Bengal, came down to see the show, and at the signal "Go!" it was very interesting indeed to see three or four of the best swimmers throw off their uniforms and dive in, carrying across rope ends as guides for the means of transport selected. Then all got stark naked (British officers included), stacked rifles, ammunition, uniform, saddlery, etc., on the conveyance chosen, while one half of the men swam over to receive the horses and the remainder drove them all in, crossing with or after them. The 12th won by a small margin, and the time from the start until the order was given to gallop off in line, fully dressed, was under half-an-hour. A very fine performance!