

CHAPTER XVI

PUNISHING THE BUNERWALS

ABOUT three months after joining at Abbottabad the 3rd war brigade was mobilised, and later on entrained to Hoti Mardan, about fifty miles north-east of Peshawar, and the head-quarters of the famous corps of Guides. Not being at all certain of the situation, I posted off by car at once with my brigade major to Mardan, and found orders awaiting me to take over command of all troops in the Yuzufzai ¹ country.

A good deal of chaos prevailed at Mardan, and reaching there in the early morning some difficulty was experienced in ascertaining exactly what troops I had, and where they all were. One fact was quite clear, however, namely that a detachment consisting of the Guides infantry with some squadrons of cavalry and a field battery had been heavily engaged with a large number of Bunerwals ² the day before at a place called Rustam.

¹ A division of the Peshawar district containing Mardan and outposts beyond.

² A tribe of Pathans occupying Buner, a tract of independent territory N.E. of Yusufzai. Can probably put about ten thousand fighting men in the field when well united and acting in a common cause. Looked upon as one of the finest races on the N.W. frontier of India, and being simple, austere, truthful, religious and hospitable, they are bright examples of Pathans. With the assistance of other tribes, the Bunerwals proved most formidable opponents against us in the Ambela expedition in 1863. They were predominant in the attacks on the famous Crag piquet which was lost and won no less than three times (with heavy casualties on both sides), eventually remaining in our possession. I am told on good authority, but cannot find the official reference, that it was the custom amongst the Bunerwals to tie a piece of red string round the right wrist of each of their dead warriors who had specially distinguished himself. On our retaking this Crag piquet for the third time our dead there (mainly Highlanders) were found with a red string round *each* wrist.

This hamlet was close to the Buner border, and some twenty miles from Mardan, along a road the last eight miles of which went through heavy sand. The enemy had been dispersed, but was hanging about close by, with the evident intention of attacking the camp again that night. Reinforcements were urgently required at once, but only half of my British battalion (1st battalion Royal Sussex) had arrived, the other half might come in shortly, the 6th Gurkhas ought to arrive that evening, while the 84th Pioneers was the only unit ready in Mardan.

Evidently my mission was to get to Rustam immediately, and see the situation with my own eyes, but it was stated my own car (a Rover) could not get through the deep sand. Luckily it was possible to purloin a Ford, so pushing off, after giving orders to impress all country carts possible, we reached Rustam by nine o'clock to find the garrison anxiously expecting assistance.

The camp was cram-full of horses belonging to the four or five squadrons and the field battery, and although everyone was digging hard, the perimeter was none too secure, and much too large for the number of men available for its defence. It was August of a rainless year, and the heat was intense, yet there was nothing for it but to go back as quickly as possible to try and get the remainder of the force to Rustam immediately. Anyhow before dawn next day, when the Bunerwals might be expected to be withdrawing from, what we hoped would be, a futile attack.

On reaching Mardan again we found the other half of the Sussex had turned up, the 6th Gurkha trains, with a lot of transport, were to arrive at 4 p.m., and a mountain battery with a company of sappers and miners next day. It was obviously impossible to start before night, so orders were issued to march off in one column at 8 p.m.

The question then arose where to assemble the troops so as to ensure a satisfactory start. There was an unbridged river to cross at Mardan itself, which the local commander told me was then easily fordable, but which a little rain rendered impassable for many hours. The sky was very clouded, rain was long overdue.

On both banks of the river were excellent positions of assembly alongside the road. If I concentrated on the Mardan side, and it rained, I couldn't cross. If on the

other, I ran the risk of all my supplies, which were only just being loaded and couldn't be ready till late, being cut off by an unfordable river, while the troops were marching away from the farther bank!

This was somewhat of a dilemma, but undoubtedly my endeavour must be to relieve Rustam, and for this purpose to get all the troops, all the transport, all the carts, across the river at once, man-handling the remainder of the supplies over as they arrived. One had to take risks; fortunately it did not rain, but the large fatigue parties necessitated a postponement of the march until 10 p.m.

It was a horribly sultry night, the men were dog-tired. At every halt they just threw themselves on the ground and were asleep in a few seconds, Lewis gunners twisting the mules' reins round their wrists. At 2 a.m. we could hear the furious cannonade of a camp heavily attacked, but were helpless to assist. It held out, however, and, very bedraggled, we crawled inside their piquets about 7.30 a.m., and after a rest set about the construction of a new and enlarged perimeter.

By next evening the force was complete with :

Six squadrons cavalry (two being on detachment).

One field battery.

One pack battery (mules).

One company sappers and miners.

Four battalions infantry with Lewis guns.

Usual field ambulances, supply sections and transport.

There was a political officer in camp who informed me that there were about eight thousand Bunerwals, some three thousand other tribes, and a lot of Hindustani fanatics¹ opposed to us. These latter people are always bent on creating disloyalty and unrest amongst the frontier tribes. They join many of the periodical risings and are noted for their disregard of death. Their chief desire is to kill as many British infidels as possible. If one of their number succeeds in killing a British officer he is perfectly happy,

¹ Also called Muhajirin, plural of Muhajir = one who abandons his country. A colony of fanatical Mahomedans who migrated from India about 1823 to the Buner country from Patna in Bengal. Their doctrines are those of the Wahabi sect, i.e. expounding the original tenets of Islam. The colony consists of about 1,000 fighting men and 1,500 women and children. They are a species of reformer, rather like our reformers of Cromwell's day.

and it does not in the least matter if he loses his own life in the attempt. Braver and more dare-devil fellows I never met.

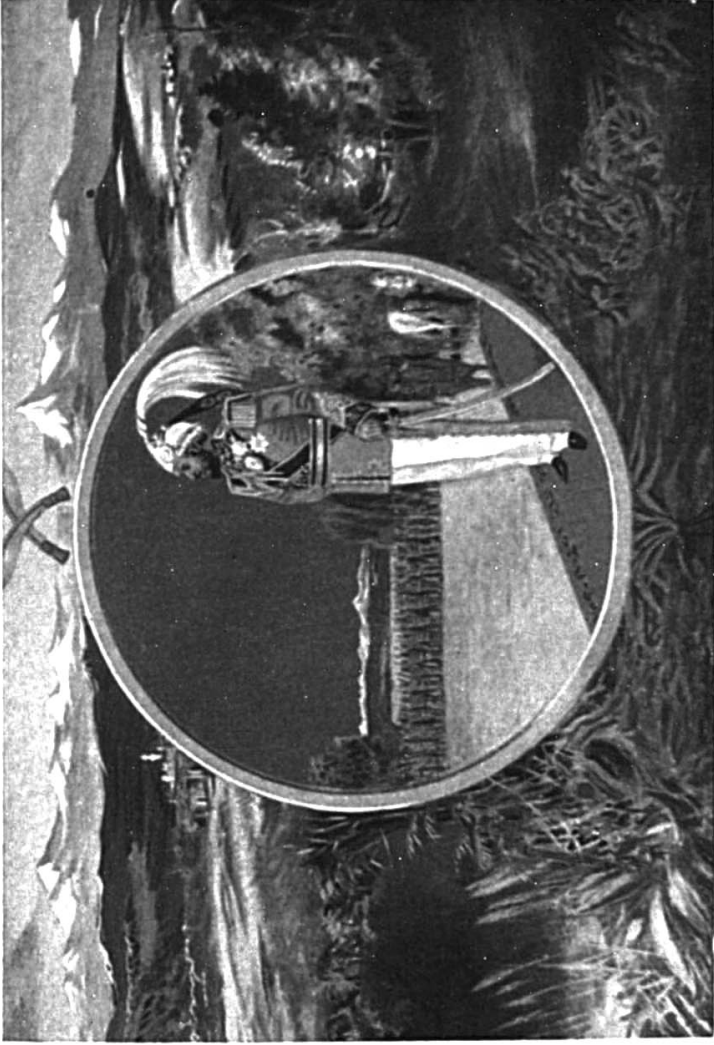
Only the day before our arrival one had concealed himself like a hare in some scrub jungle where line upon line of Guides passed over him. Waiting his opportunity, he rushed out at a British officer, advancing a little apart from his men, killed him from behind with his sword, and sank with a smile when riddled with bullets a few minutes later.

Some days afterwards seven more, trying the same game on a flank, close to me, were caught between a party of the Sussex hunting them, and some flankers of the Guides coming down from higher ground. Seeing the game was up they rushed out like tigers towards the Guides, missing the officer, but badly wounding one Guide before being all disposed of themselves. The most unpleasant part of this encounter was the vast danger of Guides shooting Sussex, or Sussex shooting Guides; or both, or either, shooting me!

The courage and ferocity of the Bunerwals combined with great speed and stamina on the hillside had for years stamped them as very formidable opponents, whom the Government were always most anxious to placate, and dissuade from joining any frontier disturbance. They were not particularly well armed as a tribe, though—like the Hindustani fanatics—possessed, individually, of a good number of modern rifles. Openly expressed pride at the efficiency of my little force probably led Sir G. Roos-Keppel, the Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, to motor over from Peshawar, for an hour, to implore me not to despise my opponents, to remember they were men of extraordinary activity and spirit, and to read and re-read the accounts of the fighting in 1863¹ when we had come off so badly against them.

And this was the only visit I had, and as for instructions, I received none. My divisional commander away back at Peshawar was more than busy with the situation on his other flank; where the Mohmands were expected to break out any minute. Writing to him for a hint, I said, that except feeling certain I was not to allow the enemy an

¹ Ambela Campaign. British force, 9,000. Killed and wounded, 909.



To face page 20
**GENERAL HIS HIGHNESS MAHAJAH SIR CHANDRA SHUM SHERE JUNG, PRIME MINISTER AND
MARSHAL OF NEPAL, XMAS, 1920.**

initial success, I was very hazy regarding my limitations, but did not propose to let him knock me about without retaliation. His reply was that it was difficult to say much, and the only thing he could think of was Lumsden's¹ invariable instruction to his Guides :

“ I want Heads.”

That was just like Fred Campbell² ; so typical of this fine frontier soldier—the best we now have alive—who trusted his subordinates, and left them alone to carry out their tasks, probably the reason for his unfailing success, and the cause of his wide popularity.

It took a few days to settle down at Rustam, and make our camp impregnable. For five nights running we were attacked by hordes of wild tribesmen, evidently well supplied with ammunition, for they fired thousands of rounds from all sorts of rifles. It was very interesting to note the difference between the “ swish ” of the larger bore like the Snider or Martini-Henry, and the “ ping ” of the '303 or '256.

Our casualties were surprisingly small, due partly to the fact that the cavalry had been reduced by sending two squadrons to distant outposts, and partly to dug-outs, traverses and other precautions. An enormous number of bullets went high. As the tribesmen often attacked from two opposite sides, it is a matter of wonder whether they made many casualties amongst themselves. I don't think we made many at night ourselves. My standing orders were that the fire was on no account to be returned, unless there was a distinct target visible by flares, searchlight, or moon, and then only by order of a British officer.

Fire discipline was excellent. The hour of attack varied, being sometimes 9 p.m., but oftener 1 or 2 a.m. At the first shot every tent was downed immediately. On no occasion did the enemy actually close, due undoubtedly, after the first night, to trip wires, booby traps and elephant pits. At first I scorned a dug-out, but later, as the area of my bivouac seemed to attract an enormous quantity of bullets, I had to submit to the hot, stuffy abomination.

¹ Raised the Guides, as a subaltern, in 1846-47 at Peshawar. Corps is now called “ Queen Victoria's Own Corps of Guides (Frontier Force) (Lumsden's).”

² Now General Sir Frederick Campbell, K.C.B., D.S.O.

On the second night—and before I had succumbed to a dug-out—I woke just before the firing began in a muck sweat, as the slight breeze we got had suddenly dropped, and called to my servant to get me a change. He was in a dug-out twenty yards away, and as he came the bullets started. Down he dropped, and I thought he was shot. It was only a precautionary measure, however, for I soon saw him wriggling to me on his stomach, from which posture he handed me a clean shirt, and then retired in the same way. He was a fat cantonment Pathan from Abbottabad, and I laughed so much I got hotter than ever.

After the third night the “sniping” in force was no longer to be calmly endured; besides I was then ready to move out. There were three main valleys leading to the Buner country, named Ambela, Malandri and Pirsai, and I felt sure that one, or all, must be the temporary resting place of the enemy. Taking each in turn, we drove out the tribesmen, inflicting such casualties on them that their night operations became less and less formidable, until when the third valley was cleared, and its villages burnt, they ceased altogether.

The most serious impediment to successful work in the field was the intense heat, and the sandy nature of all roads and tracks, making them extraordinarily trying to the infantry and mountain artillery. Already several cases of heat stroke had occurred in camp, and my cavalry brigadier had returned with two dead sowars¹ tied on their horses (and several more unconscious ones supported by comrades), after an all-day reconnaissance to report on an adjacent tribe. Meeting them at the entrance to camp, it was a sorrowful sight to see a nice-looking horse stepping out freely, while on his back lay the dead rider with head touching the mane, hands tied together below the neck, and feet lashed under the horse's belly.

The temperature of one British soldier down with heat stroke rose to 110° Fahrenheit, which I had always thought impossible. Such however was the fact reported by my principal medical officer, and moreover the man recovered after treatment in ice baths.

Visiting one of our distant outposts with my invaluable brigade major, we had some eighteen miles to ride, mainly across country. On arrival he looked rather cheap, but

¹ Trooper of Indian cavalry.

swore he was all right. After going a few miles on the return journey he appeared really bad, and shortly afterwards collapsed, though I was fortunately able to catch him before he fell to the ground. The combined water bottles of the escort revived him, but we still had twelve miles to go before we reached any track fit for an ambulance.

There was a well of coldish water six miles ahead. Getting Loveday on to his horse, we galloped the whole distance, supporting his swaying body, myself on one side and a duffedar¹ on the other. Then came the last six miles covered in the same way. He was 106° on arrival at the hospital tent, where he had to remain over a week, much to his chagrin, for although not over strong, his lithe wiry body contained the heart of a lion.

I was to lose him soon afterwards to command his battery, and then a group of artillery in France, where he covered himself with glory.

My worst experience of heat-stroke was during the return from our advance up the Malandri Valley. Although we started at 3 a.m., and had less than eight miles to cover, there was opposition to contend with, villages to burn and much scrub jungle full of rocks and boulders to be searched. All this took time, so that it was after midday when we began to withdraw to camp.

So many British soldiers fell down with heat-stroke that the rear-guard could hardly move. The stretcher bearers were so overcome themselves that they were useless. It was then that the splendid Guides, and later the 84th Pioneers, came forward and volunteered to carry the sick, while officers, mounted and dismounted, as well as men in the ranks, took over the rifles and accoutrements of those *hors de combat*. Fortunately I had reduced the scale of ammunition that day to fifty rounds per man on account of the heat, but even then found the six sets of accoutrements picked up, and hung on to myself and my horse, a most uncomfortable burden.

Strict orders existed that no Britishers were to be buried near Rustam, because their graves would be desecrated by the enemy. Progressing at a funereal rate at the tail of the rear-guard, with an occasional bullet to keep one awake, the thought came to me of how on earth we could get the corpses of so many soldiers into Mardan. With little experience

¹ An N.C.O. of Indian cavalry.

of heat-stroke, I felt that many of the muttering, unconscious men, with blue lips and swollen faces, must surely succumb.

Some way on we came to a large tank about two and a half feet deep. Scated in it I found most of the casualties, presenting a very comical spectacle with their large sun hats, surrounded by huge neck covers, appearing just above the level of the water, making the whole crowd look exactly like a lot of floating mushrooms. And close to the tank, to my relief, was an army of transport carts, ordered out in case of emergency, and which conveyed all the sick back to camp, every one of whom eventually recovered.

It is difficult to describe in words the extraordinary interest of an independent command like this. An efficient and companionable staff, capable and contented troops, successful though arduous operations, isolated and detached situation, all tended to make the few weeks spent at Rustam—in spite of the heat—the happiest of my life. About a fortnight sufficed to drive the enemy entirely away with considerable casualties, and it is a significant fact that the much dreaded and powerful Bunerwal tribe have never lifted a finger since. Not even in our darkest days, when every inducement to rise was given by seditious emissaries, to each trans-frontier clan.

It does not appear to me certain that this has been fully recognised. I do not allude to personal recognition. The ultimate rewards of a Companionship of the Bath and promotion to Major-General "for distinguished service in the field" were more than sufficient. Nor to the avowal of the Brigade's activity in Sir Beauchamp Duff's despatches. But, to the *reality*, that the operations of the force relieved the Government of India of much anxiety in this particular quarter for a very long period, i.e. from September, 1915, up to the present date.

In September, 1915, orders reached me in Rustam, by cipher wire in the middle of the night, to move my force as quickly as possible to Peshawar. Thence it was to go on towards Shabkadr—eighteen miles north of Peshawar—to take part as the 3rd brigade, with the 1st Division under Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Campbell, in possible action against the Mohmands, a powerful and well-armed tribe of some twenty-two thousand fighting men.

Their country lies north of the Kabul river, the south-eastern boundary running close to our outlying forts of Michni, Shabkadr, Matta and Abazai, usually held by the frontier constabulary. In early October the enemy crossed our border in considerable force, and on the 5th a regular battle took place near Shabkadr in which the 3rd brigade occupied the left flank of the division. The Mohmands were entirely defeated, and very shortly made submission.

The country was interesting on account of its broken nature and its numerous ravines, in which the tribesmen operated with a most extraordinary skill for concealment, and from which it was very difficult indeed to dislodge them. It was also of particular advantage to me to get to know this terrain, for some fifteen months later my head-quarters were in Shabkadr Fort while commanding the blockade line running from Abazai on the Swat river to Michni on the Kabul, a distance of sixteen miles.

Before describing the Mohmand blockade line, it is necessary to say a few words about the condition of India in the early months of 1916. That is, before the desperate situation on the Western Front was fully realised in India, or the ever-increasing necessity of *well-trained* officers and men, for our numerous other fronts, was thoroughly understood.

The internal situation was better than it had been for a long time. Indian Princes and others had come forward nobly in the matter of men, horses and money, and there was a general feeling amongst Indians that all political and private controversies should be put on one side, and a combined effort directed towards winning the war. But strange to relate, at this very period, an extraordinary apathy seemed suddenly to seize the authorities and the European population, which, though only transitory, was alarming enough at the time, especially from a military point of view. It was just as if someone had voiced the general feeling by saying :

“What more can we do? We have denuded India of troops, munitions and equipment, to an almost dangerous extent. We have successfully repelled trouble on the North-West Frontier in several quarters. We have the internal situation quiet and in hand. We have raised and are raising more regiments. Heaps of officers have

entered the Indian Army Reserve. Drafts are preparing for overseas, and the country is full of Territorials from home. True, a division is invested in Kut, but we can send nothing more there. The future is in the lap of the gods, and in the hands of the War Office in London."

With that feeling existing, life seemed to settle down in large cantonments as if there was no war on at all. People seemed satisfied to do their daily task and live just as they had lived before, simply noping for the best. There was no real effort to strain every nerve in preparation for a long titanic struggle. In short, apathy was abroad.

These are only personal reminiscences, and of course I may be quite wrong, but that is how things struck me at the time. So much so, that I committed a daring act, by writing a highly confidential letter to the Chief of the General Staff pointing out what I have just said and begging for a lead from above. Instancing too the fact that hundreds of new officers of the Indian Army Reserve were getting no adequate instruction; that frontier warfare was a forgotten art; that the Territorials had never heard of it; that too much listlessness existed, and that above all we needed schools of every description to teach the would-be teachers.

The letter was very well received. Probably steps were being taken at Simla. Anyhow, a fillip was very shortly given to training, and by the late summer numerous schools of instruction of every kind were initiated, from the mountain warfare school at Abbottabad for Territorials—later extended to embrace officers of all services—down to large schools at Sabathu, Bangalore, etc., for cadets from the ranks who were about to receive commissions.

This was the only lapse, as far as India was concerned, and it was not of long duration. Just as before she had given of her best and tried her hardest to answer every call; so later on, and up to the Armistice, did she put forth her full strength. As regards the military this meant the most intensive training, and every other kind of preparation. As regards others, a memorandum has been issued giving full detail of India's efforts. In addition there was the mighty recruiting campaign in the Punjab of that grand patriot Sir Michael O'Dwyer, and the vigorous war work of nearly every other soul, the most energetic amongst them being Lady O'Dwyer herself.

Towards the end of 1916 it became evident that the Mohmands had failed to fulfil their pledges. They were restless again and guilty of frequent raids into British territory; so much so that the Indian Government decided to establish a blockade line along their border in order to prevent entirely all egress and ingress, until the tribe effectively carried out the demands of the Chief Commissioner.

An apron of barbed wire was erected close to their south-eastern boundary from the Kabul River and Fort Michni in the south-west, to the Swat River and Fort Abazai in the north-east. Blockhouses were constructed every eight hundred to four hundred yards. On the enemy side of the obstacle were stretched two strands of "live" wire supplied with electricity from a power-house on the Abazai flank. The current was switched on every evening and withdrawn soon after dawn, while "alarms" were introduced at varying intervals to inform the garrisons of the blockhouses, by the explosion of detonators, that the live wire was being interfered with.

My predecessor (General Sir W. Benyon) had commenced a deep trench running the whole way along our side of the fence, which it was my first object to complete, so as to admit of patrolling under complete cover from blockhouse to blockhouse. In each of these were placed rifle batteries formed of six or seven loaded rifles clamped together in a wooden framework. Trained along the fence with "combined" sights, these could be fired simultaneously by pressing a thin iron rod running through the trigger-guards, and they could be reloaded at once with ease.

It was a matter of extreme importance that this blockade should be so effective as not to allow a single tribesman to cross the frontier, nor any supplies whatever from India (especially salt, a commodity they *must* have), to reach the Mohmands, except by arduous detours round the flanks of the line through alien tribal country, which they were well known to be most unwilling to undertake.

The above preventive measures one would think sufficient, but the Mohmands are so brave, gallant and resourceful that, aided by their own wit and courage, combined with unlimited secretive help from the local inhabitants, there was hardly a single week in which

one or two successful attempts were not carried out, and generally without any loss.

Outside the trench, between it and the barbed wire apron, was constructed a narrow path of loose earth most carefully brushed every evening by each blockhouse so as to show any footprints. From the politicals one would hear that spies, or friendly villagers, reported the advent of one or two of the enemy from between certain blockhouses.

This would be corroborated by both footmarks and alarms, but what beat us was, not only how they had evaded patrols which prowled from piquet to piquet at uncertain intervals during the night, but how they escaped death from the live wire, or the bullets from the blockhouses, so soon as the detonators exploded.

At last a prisoner was caught and, under promise of freedom and reward, he revealed some secrets. It appeared that amongst the enemy was a pre-war pensioned havildar¹ who, having served in our sappers and miners, had gained a superficial knowledge of explosives and electricity. He it was who taught them that dead wood was a non-conductor.

Getting a forked stick of dead wood, and tying a stout cord to one prong, the Mohmands very carefully placed the fork on the live wire with the stick end away from them, keeping a keen ear all the time for the movements of any patrol. If any movement was heard they decamped, and lay doggo until danger was over. Their sight and hearing are both quite abnormal, they can almost see through a brick wall or hear a pin drop on a carpet.

The man holding the cord, together with his companions, then moved away some thirty yards from the wire, and concealing themselves carefully in the undulations of the ground, gave the cord a sharp pull, with the result that the detonators exploded. Off went the rifle batteries, with the weapons too of the sentries of the adjoining blockhouses, and this length of trench and barbed wire received an avalanche of bullets. At the same time the Mohmands, hidden and quite safe, smiled at the success of their ruse!

Waiting patiently—they possess infinite patience—lest some intrepid spirits should stalk along the trench, they

¹ N.C.O. of Indian infantry, equivalent to a sergeant.

would afterwards approach the live wire, bend down the upper strand with the forked stick (the detonators being useless for alarm until renewed next day), step carefully over both strands, throw their resais¹ over the barbed wire, manipulate it, jump the trench and, kicking up their heels with delight like lively young cattle, would make off for the nearest village!

Talking of barbed wire with some of them later on, they expressed the greatest contempt for it, saying that it only stopped cows and donkeys, for men could always get over without even damage to their clothing, with the aid of a charpoy² or a good thick resai.

I feel that I can corroborate this statement, having occasion one day to go to the enemy's side of the fence, by a gap, to select a better site for a particular piquet. This post had suffered much, the day and night before, from sniping. I was no sooner beyond the wire with two of my staff, and a good way from the gap, than a well-directed fire from a ravine about eleven hundred yards away much disconcerted us. We were the more surprised because we had purposely chosen the middle of the day when the enemy, supposed to be feeding, never fired.

However, the bullets came fast enough, some over and some short. A Lewis gun opened on to the enemy at once from the piquet, but there was only a slight cessation and the greater number of bullets were falling between us and the gap! There was nothing for it but to retire through the barbed wire, which we did with remarkable, though ignominious, haste. It was a formidable-looking apron, but appeared quite easy (!) and the only damage was a bad tear in both my sleeves, and ruination to my brigade major's Bedford cords!

Feeling, after the disclosures of our prisoner, that the live wire current might not be strong enough, though we had many donkey casualties, I sent to Calcutta and got the voltage doubled. It was then extremely powerful and, after finding an occasional dead Mohmand along the line, the attempts to cross became less and less frequent.

A sad tale is connected with one of these attempts. A stalwart young Mohmand tried to cross with his mother. Going first and touching the strand he set off the detonators,

¹ A wadded blanket.

² A native bed of wooden legs and sides and stringed framework.

but somehow they escaped the hail of bullets. His mother then tried to dissuade him from any further action, but he refused to listen. Her tale to an informer was that on bending to put his leg over the upper strand, his waistcoat touched the wire, causing a shock, and he called out, "I am hit." Rushing to him, his mother caught hold of him, when his body came into contact with the live wire and he was instantaneously killed. Fearing his body might be captured, this poor woman dragged it for two miles over most difficult country to her village.