

CHAPTER XX

SOME TRIALS OF A COMMANDER

ABOUT the time of the Afghan armistice I was transferred to the officiating command of the Poona Division, and soon found myself engaged in dealing with a very unpleasant situation connected with discontent amongst British troops regarding their demobilisation. It is necessary to explain that on the Great War ending, a very heavy task was thrown on the military accounts department in settling up the field accounts of the thousands of soldiers killed, invalided, demobilised, to be demobilised, and still serving.

To meet this in India large drafts of N.C.O.s and men, likely to be of use as clerks and accountants, were demanded from every British unit, and concentrated in spare barracks, camps, etc., at Poona, where the work was to be completed. At one time the number was over four thousand, though considerably reduced by weeding out and demobilisation, at the time we are speaking of. Alongside them was the head-quarters of the signal service with a varying British strength of from one to three thousand, and a few miles away the remnants of a British reserve battalion, whose numbers fluctuated according to circumstances.

The trouble starting with the military accounts clerks was backed up by the signal corps, and spreading to the Reserve Depot, soon threatened to be most serious. I had, moreover, no British troops whatever with which to coerce the malcontents, and the use of Indian troops was of course impossible.

Dissatisfied with the tales they heard of abnormal delay at Deolali (the embarkation base). Discontented with the earlier release of what were called "pivotal men," i.e. those required at home to revive special trades and pro-

fessions. Disgusted at the ruling that men from Mesopotamia, with whatever service, should go first, and displeased at the communiqués issued from Simla, which they considered contradictory and vague, their attitude became very threatening, while "direct action" was openly discussed.

One morning at office, my brigadier-general, administration, entered my room in some perturbation to say that several hundred men were marching to the divisional offices in "fours." That one of the senior colonels of the military accounts department had tried to stop them, but they had simply walked quietly past his car. A few minutes later they appeared near the buildings, and formed up in a crowd on one side.

I first sent out the camp commandant, who after being received with hooting and hisses, returned in a few minutes, very pale, to say he couldn't get a hearing. The infantry brigadier having turned up was sent next, and with a voice like a bull of Basan, managed to get them to listen, and to agree to disperse while a deputation of leaders remained behind to be received by me.

A very unpleasant task it was, especially when the principal spokesman, stepping out of the ranks and tapping his side of my broad writing-table with his knuckles, said he wished to speak to me as "man to man"! His argument was that a period of six months from the Armistice having now expired, he was, by law, no longer a soldier. This was quite a unique experience for me, not having before found myself, as a general, practically in the dock with my rank and file as judges! He presented an ultimatum on a dirty piece of paper containing four demands. To these he said he was instructed to require an answer by 6 p.m., or the men would take steps to prove they were very much in earnest, as they were thoroughly disgusted with their disgraceful treatment by Simla.

The man—a sergeant—was a very good speaker, and although his action was unusual—not to say ill-disciplined—he was by no means aggressively disrespectful. He very evidently meant all he said, and there was a good deal on the men's side of the question, which fact I felt very strongly. Listening patiently, and promising an immediate investigation, the deputation withdrew.

After communication with Simla and more negotiations (!) with the men, lasting some days, it was suggested by the

Southern Command and finally arranged, that a deputation should proceed to Simla to state their own case personally. This resulted in the men getting rather more than the four demands in their ultimatum, and the trouble was over.

The suggestion to send up these men was an inspiration, and required much firmness on the part of the Southern Command, for "Simla" was extremely reluctant to receive the deputation. Indeed, had it not been for the active assistance given by the Governor of Bombay—Sir George Lloyd—I don't think Headquarters would ever have consented at all.

It was a great pleasure to be brought in contact with a real "live wire" like Sir George Lloyd. The hold he acquired so quickly over the people of the Bombay Presidency, Europeans and Indians alike, was most marked, while his keen energy, driving force and business instincts have been of inestimable benefit to a city like Bombay.

It is no exaggeration to say that when he lays down his office, the record of progress in housing and sanitation, of difficulties overcome and of improvements carried through, has seldom been approached before. His kindness to me is ineffaceable, as is the memory of the interest he took not only in the welfare of the troops, but in little personal matters coming under his notice.

Lady Lloyd soon endeared herself to the people of Bombay, Poona and Karachi. To hear her speak in public is a revelation, and a matter of much envy to anyone called upon to do likewise. Absolutely at her ease, confident, fluent and never at a loss for the right word, she is indeed a valuable coadjutor to a public man occupying so high a position.

The permanent encumbent of the Poona Division, having been passed fit by the India Office medical board, returned to India, and I was moved on to the command of the 16th Division at Lahore. This I was to hold until anno domini, and a fresh distribution of the Indian Commands (which made Lahore a British service vacancy) came into force.

Except for parting with our kind friends at Government House, I do not know that we were sorry to leave Poona. To those who have continually resided in the Punjab, United Provinces, or Quetta, the climate is not congenial.

The Poona season proper is July, August and part of September, when the monsoon breezes up the ghats make the plateau very pleasant. It is then a real good station, but at other times somewhat depressing.

The hunting is not bad, and I had many good gallops there, but the great feature, during the season, is the succession of race meetings held under the auspices of the W.I.T.C.¹ These are really well run with experienced stewards and secretary, comfortable grand stands, a beautiful course, and, last but not least, abundant entries. A great attraction is the totalisator,² which does a tremendously big business, taking the place of bookmakers abolished in the days of Lord Sydenham.

This totalisator is a source of much profit, as five to ten per cent. of the takings go to the fund. By this means the W.I.T.C. has become extremely wealthy, but they spend their surplus money wisely and well, in general improvements for the benefit of the racing public. Also in very handsome donations to deserving institutions and charities. Indeed, so great is their benevolence that I doubt if there is a single worthy object in the Bombay Presidency of late years that has not received assistance from their hands, especially during the Great War.

The officer accommodation question at Poona is perhaps more acute than anywhere else, though it is bad enough everywhere. At Poona it may be attributed to the large increase in the garrison's strength of officers, and to the fact that many wealthy Parsees and Indians have now elected to take up their residence there, especially during the season.

¹ West India Turf Club.

² A method of gambling in horse-racing introduced into India from Australia some twenty years ago. It consists of a building, or booth, with windows like a railway ticket office. You go to a window before a race and take as many tickets as you like on the horse or horses you have selected. The price varies, but in Calcutta and Bombay it is usually ten rupees (at present rate of exchange, say, 12s. 6d.) a ticket. As soon as the start is declared the windows are shut. Winners are paid directly the numbers go up and you get your share of all the money invested on the particular race, less five or ten per cent. for the Race Fund. By a mechanical contrivance the number of tickets taken on each horse is indicated, one by one, on a large disc above the ticket windows. By this means you can judge the odds before making your investment.

Houses in cantonments are very limited in number, and those outside of a high rental and often very inconvenient. As my predecessor, having no wife in India, lived in the club quarters, there was no house whatever for us when we arrived in the middle of the season. Strange as it may seem, still it is true that as the divisional commander I had to wait weeks before I could get one.

I am not at all sure that it was not through the good offices of the Governor that one was eventually procured. Anyhow he asked me one day if it were really true that I couldn't get a house, and when I said "Yes," he remarked, "Well, I'll see you *do* get one." Shortly afterwards one of his high officials, whose wife had just gone home, went to live in the club and, offering us his house temporarily, at the usual rental, we gladly accepted it.

At this time we were receiving from home the post-war regulars for the garrison of India, preceded by advance parties of two or three officers of each unit with some fifty N.C.O.s and men. As these parties were primarily located at Poona for some time, while their destinations were being decided, and as many battalions, drafts, married families, etc., also made a brief sojourn there, I had every opportunity of getting to know them.

The advance parties consisting, as they mainly did, of selected officers and trained soldiers who had been out in India before, were delightful to deal with. Later came the new units themselves, of surprisingly good material, but extremely raw and untrained.

The officering of these units varied in a very marked degree. In one you would find hardly any officers who had been in the ranks, and in another quite the reverse, until the climax was reached in a battalion which had only half a dozen officers who were *not* "rankers," including the C.O. in the latter category.

Many of these "rankers," being married, complained bitterly of the impossibility of living in India on their pay, whether they had their wives with them or not, saying it was much more difficult to do so than in England, with the good allowances existing there. The Indian Government at once sanctioned an increase of pay to subaltern officers from the ranks, and many too were transferred home at their own request.

It was most gratifying to note how quickly these new

troops settled down, how easily they got accustomed to Indian conditions and how rapidly they picked up the traditions of their corps. Both in the Poona and Lahore Divisions I was extremely pleased with the work done, the progress made and the keenness shown by all ranks to reach the pre-war standard.

It was with the married families we had the most difficult task, owing to want of knowledge of their probable date of arrival. For example, getting official intimation that those of the battalion which had recently arrived to form part of the Poona garrison would leave England in a month's time, all their quarters were colour-washed and got ready.

It all took time, however, for a great deal of alteration was required owing to a much enhanced establishment to that existing before the war. This was probably due to the extraordinary number of war marriages, and the fact that the War Office did not wish these women and their families to remain behind, if willing to come out. Almost as soon as the above intimation was received, the infantry brigadier called at the office to tell me the battalion commander had just informed him that his women and children were actually on the sea, and would arrive shortly.

"Quite impossible," we all said, and the official document was produced, at which the C.O., who had come in, shook his head, but was unconvinced, his private information being entirely different.

The next day was Sunday, and at about 4 p.m. I was informed that a wire had just been received from Bombay saying these married families—fifty-two wives and many children—would reach Kirkee railway station (a suburb of Poona) at 5 a.m. next morning!

Now Sunday evening is not a favourable time to catch people, nor are twelve hours sufficient in which to allot furniture, arrange transport, prepare food, procure good milk, engage servants and have everything conducive to their comfort ready, for a lot of women and children who have never seen India before.

My staff were pretty busy that night—and so were others—and they told me next day how much they owed to the officers and N.C.O.s of the artillery at Kirkee, who had worked like Trojans, and were meeting these people and feeding them for four days. This they did so well that all declared they had never eaten such good food in

their lives before. I have always said: "If you want a thing done quickly in an emergency and want it done *well*, ask a gunner." They've never let me down.

It was fortunate the families were given a good break² fast, for on reaching their quarters afterwards, and seeing how small they were, what little furniture there was, and how much they had to do, many of them sat down on the steps and cried bitterly. Thus my wife found them on going round to see if she could give any help.

This influx of batches of married people all over India, with no knowledge whatever of the country and no nucleus of pre-war families to show them the way about (moreover women of a superior class to former days and accustomed to a higher standard of living), was a very difficult situation to deal with. What made it still more difficult was the fact that the War Office were unable to say, straight off, what the fixed establishment should be.

I am afraid there was a good deal of discomfort at first. The husbands had certainly to put their hands in their pockets to a very considerable extent, in addition to grants from regimental funds, to provide what in the old days might have been called luxuries, but are now requisites. So far as I could ascertain the average came to about Rs. 200 (say £13) per man.

The matter was of course immediately represented by me, and doubtless by others, and the Government of India took action as soon as possible. There was unavoidable delay in completion, but before the question was represented by the Esher Committee, a much more liberal household outfit was sanctioned. In addition, the construction of a large number of extra quarters, of a far superior type, was put in hand.

It is interesting to note that attention is now concentrated on good hill accommodation, while the winter months will be spent on the plains under canvas. Some of the old stagers, of whom there are a few left, will not care about this for, like the pre-war British soldier, they much prefer the ease, comfort, big bazaars and facility for getting servants in the plains. They think nothing of the heat, even putting aside any consideration for their children.

Later, at Lahore, I was to experience an instance of this where the wife of an old artillery sergeant, who had been

in India before, influenced the women of several new units to refuse to move to the hills. She pictured them as bleak, horrible mountains full of wild animals, with no bazaars, no comfort and every movement done on foot. She had no children, but others had.

Hearing of this I suggested a circular should be sent round giving a true account of the horrors of the plains in the hot weather. The beauty and advantages of the hills were to be dwelt on, and a point made of the benefit derived by the children. At the same time my staff proposed to all brigadiers that the regimental ladies should further the matter by personal visits and explanation. This had very good results except in the very battery to which this obstructionist belonged, where a bombardier's wife with two children absolutely refused to budge.

Meeting the major's wife and asking how her propaganda was progressing she mentioned this case, adding she had tried every kind of persuasion in vain. She added she had even gone so far as to say that the major-general commanding the division was interesting himself very much in the matter and thought no woman should stay down in the plains. To this the bombardier's lady had replied: "Major-general or no major-general, I am not going to them 'orrid 'ills full of snakes and wild animals, and nothing but working and walking from morning till night!" Eventually she was left below, but the children were sent up with another family.

To arrive in Lahore as G.O.C. Division, but a perfect stranger, at the very beginning of the 1919 Christmas week, with its hunt meets, races, polo tournament, dances and horse show, was something of an ordeal, but perhaps not a bad preliminary introduction to all grades of society.

This was the first year since 1913 that any serious attempt had been made to revive the pre-war glories of the Lahore Christmas festivities, and what with hunting twice a week, two full days at the horse show, and some kind of tourney every afternoon, one was kept pretty busy. I had brought with me, from Poona, my Australian hunter "Warrior," and at Lahore he repeated his Poona successes by taking first prize in both "Hunter" and "English and Colonial" classes, as he did again two months later at Rawalpindi.

The hunting was very good, and indeed all through the season the M.F.H. (Lieut.-Colonel W. F. S. Casson)

showed excellent sport to large fields. I took a bad toss on the 29th February owing to my horse putting his foot in a hole when going fast. But I always look back on it as really a piece of good luck, because it happened on the very last day of the season.

For the benefit of those who do not know, it may be said that the Lahore Cantonments are situated six miles from the capital itself, a distance which is just far enough to make the journey a nuisance, and yet not far enough to cause the visit to be a real change or novelty.

Tradition has it that in 1851-2 it was decided to transfer troops from Anarkali (suburb of Lahore), on account of its unhealthiness, to a new cantonment outside. This the Lahore general was instructed to select. Seeing no object in placing troops anywhere except in Lahore itself, he protested, but was overruled.

Time went on until, no plans or proposals being submitted, Simla sent very urgent orders for the selection and report to be carried out immediately. Calling for his staff and his horse, the general galloped hard across country until his mount was clean cooked, when dismounting, he said: "This will do for the site of their damned cantonment!" A stone opposite the present church marks this spot, but the inscription on it fails to do justice to the above legend. The name given was Mian Mir.

In face of the question asked in the House of Commons, during the war, as to whether it was true that certain Territorials had been moved to the unhealthy climate of Mian Mir, and the reply: "No, sir, but to the salubrious station of Lahore Cantonments," it may be as well to explain that the two places are identical, except in name!

As a matter of fact Mian Mir got such a bad reputation for malaria that, after General Walter Kitchener's campaign against this disease, when he closed all irrigation aqueducts in the place, it was thought as well, in 1906, to change the name to Lahore Cantonments. This compulsory stoppage of innumerable little channels of water, running in excavated ditches, certainly made a difference from the health point of view, but the lack of irrigation also made the station extremely dusty and barren. So much so, that as funds became available, brick channels

were substituted for the old excavations and the water was reintroduced. The place is not particularly unhealthy now, but the decrease in malaria may be as much due to the present habitual use of mosquito curtains and to other health precautions, as to the change in the methods of irrigation.

I arrived in Lahore too late to have any connection with that prince of lieutenant-governors, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, but in his successor, Sir Edward Maclagan, the new ruler of the Punjab, I was to find a very charming gentleman.