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Khyber calling

Eardley A. J. Dawson

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KHYBER CALLING

By

“RAJPUT”

(LT.-COL. A. J. E. DAWSON)

“No proposition Euclid wrote,
No formulæ the text-books know,
Will turn the bullet from your coat,
Or ward the tulwar's downward blow.
Strike hard who cares—shoot straight who can—
The odds are on the cheaper man.”

—KIPLING

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To those British and Indian Officers and Men of the Army in India who feel they may recognize bits of themselves here and there, this book is respectfully dedicated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My thanks are due to Mrs. Kipling for permission to quote from the late Mr. Kipling's poems; also to the original publishers, Messrs. Methuen & Co.

I also wish to thank the Trustees of the Estate of the late Colonel T. E. Lawrence and Messrs. Jonathan Cape, Ltd., for allowing me to include an extract from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.
THE AUTHOR

FOREWORD

THIS is not a survey of any operations past or present on the North-West Frontier of India; nor is any reference intended to any particular serving regiment. Names of characters have been chosen at random; although based on general types, they do not represent any known living persons.

The object of my book is to try to sketch the life of a soldier on Frontier service. If I have been lucky enough to succeed in reflecting his image, then I feel amply rewarded.

'RAJPUT

DIARY OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS

- April* 10th An unarmed Gurkha is murdered.
 " 17th There is an alarm in Zai Khel.
 " 26th The Babe and I lunch with the Scouts.
May 3rd The Column is ordered to be ready to operate on light scale.
 " 4th The Column marches, and halts the night at Narai.
 " 5th The Column continues its advance to Bandarogha
 " 6th Halt in Bandarogha.
 " 7th The Column withdraws on Narai.
 " 8th The Delhis are sent to Kharab Bibi.
 " 9th Opening the road.
 " 16th No. 1 Brigade arrives in Zai Khel from British India.
 " 17th Constructing the new road from Zai Khel to Narai.
 " 22nd The road reaches Kharab Bibi.
 " 24th The Government summons the tribal elders to a *jirga*.
June 1st The road reaches Narai.
 " 3rd Isolated outrages occur.
 " 4th The Mullah of Daud begins a campaign to stir up the tribes in revolt.
 " 6th The Political hold another *jirga*.
 " 8th Nos. 2 and 3 Brigades arrive from down-country. No. 2 Brigade moves to Zai Khel. No. 1 Brigade goes to Narai.
 " 12th Another *jirga*.
 " 13th Troops opening the road from Narai are attacked.
 " 16th A convoy is ambushed.
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 " 28th Operations in the Bandar Valley.
 " 29th No. 1 Brigade effects liaison with No. 3 Brigade.
 " 30th Road building in the Bandar Valley.
July 1st Reconnaissances and operations in the Bandar Valley.
 " 18th The Bandars sue for peace.
 " 24th A *jirga* is held.
 " 30th Rifles are handed over to Government by the Bandars.
Aug. 1st Leave is opened.
 " 2nd The Column returns to Zai Khel.
 " 8th General's Inspection.
Sept. 5th Orders for the disbandment of the Delhi Regiment are received.
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CHAPTER ONE

I

I WAS donning my Blue Patrol jacket for dinner in Mess when Firoze Din, my orderly, suddenly said:

"Huzoor, a Gurkha mule-driver was killed by Pathans this afternoon."

I made no answer, but grunted. Rumours in Zai Khel were nearly always without foundation.

"They cut him into little pieces," went on Firoze Din with relish.

I opened a drawer and burrowed for a handkerchief.

"Enough of this rubbish," I said, tucking the cambric up my sleeve. "Tell the groom I want my horse at eight, sharp, tomorrow morning. You, too, will accompany me on parade. See that my equipment is clean this time; it was not so this morning. How can I punish the sepoy for not being clean when I am dirty myself?"

Firoze Din stood to attention and saluted.

"Huzoor, the matter shall be attended to."

I entered the Mess and found the others imbibing short drinks. Conversation seemed to be more animated than usual. Even Fish Face had woken up from his normal lethargy.

"Of course we shall make no reprisals," the Colonel was saying. "The authorities will talk a lot of hot air, and nothing will be done. What these Pathans really need is a damned good lesson."

"One up on Firoze Din," I thought. The youth had actually got hold of the right end of the stick for a change.

"Good evening, sir," I said. "What's up?"

"A Gurkha mule-driven killed while coming down from Castle Piquet. The same old story. How I dislike this system of sending unarmed men up with rations! Yet, if we decided on protection, it would mean a daily operation with twenty rifles at least. And I must say it is very rare for a Pathan to murder a man who does not carry a rifle."

"Especially in peace-time," put in Fish Face.

"In so-called peace-time," amended the Colonel. "After all, we have been sniped at intermittently ever since we came up here six months ago."

There was a titter of amusement at this remark. During practice manoeuvres, or Columns, to give them their local title, the Pathans invariably sniped the Brigade while in bivouac for the night. A chain of piquets on the surrounding heights could not prevent the odd tribesmen from taking up a position behind one of the million boulders. To sally forth in the dark against an unknown enemy perched on some hillock would be like chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, besides leaving camp undefended. So reluctantly the Brigade had to suffer the impertinences of a few Pathans, trusting to the piquets to prevent any massing of men on a large scale on dominant positions.

Peace? Yes; peace. After all, it must be a great temptation to a youngster to fire into a camp huddled up within a perimeter wall.

With luck the British will not be able to discover who committed the outrage.

Dinner tonight proved to be quite an interesting meal. Usually conversation in Mess, after months of stagnation, was wont to lead a deadly course. The men's boots, an Indian officer's idiosyncrasies, a clerk's shortcomings, took on a serious aspect which would have been ridiculous in civilized spheres. It was possible some trivial remark might lead to a first-class row, an odious state of affairs in a community which was forced to live together.

Tonight, however, a Gurkha had brought stimulation with his decease. It is an ill wind . . .!

"Parade tomorrow, as usual, sir, I suppose?" ventured Pearson, our Adjutant.

"Of course," said the Colonel. "What are you doing tomorrow?" —turning to me.

"I'm doing an Advanced Guard and Piqueting scheme," I replied. "My Company is falling-in outside No. 6 Gate at eight."

"I'll come and see you," said the Colonel.

I said nothing, but felt quite pleased. I liked our Colonel, though there were many who did not, chiefly because they feared him. He possessed a sarcastic tongue, and had likes and dislikes. Either you were an excellent fellow or a useless nincompoop. Actually I do not believe he would have harmed a flea. His bark was much worse than his bite. The sepoys, shrewd judges of character, were very fond of him, notwithstanding the fact that he gave them heavy punishments. As for a British officer, he had to be 'a useless nincompoop' or an absolute rotter to find himself on the wrong side of the Colonel!

"Mutton again," commented Harris, "and bloody tough, too."

"Well, anyway, it shows the meat is fresh," said Pearson consolingly. "A batch of goats was slaughtered this morning. Tuesday is meat-day for the sepoys."

I shuddered. I had seen the goats being driven towards the slaughter-house, among them some long-legged beasts; their beards and horns would not have disgraced the Mess walls as trophies of the chase. Damn the frontier! Harris was right. Why should we have to live on offal just because we were doomed to serve in the outposts of Empire? Yet if the Mess Secretary, doing his best to please, opened a tin of canned sausages, he was reprimanded because the daily rate of messing rose too high.

We are a funny race, the British. I often wonder how the French, Italians, or Germans would cope with the social situation on the North-West Frontier of India. Would they suffer like we do, saying, "This is a bloody awful country," or would they try to improve the occasion by importing fair women and efficient cooks?

I surveyed the menu thoughtfully. Brown Soup (which tasted of Worcester Sauce and hot water), Fried Fish (muddy in taste and full of bones, from a local river), Roast Mutton (goat, to give it its correct title), Caramel Custard (a favourite Indian sweet), and Craigie Toast (a concoction known all over India to Indian cooks, the compilation of which remains a profound secret). In English-speaking circles we should call 'Craigie Toast' a savoury. In Indian pidgin-English circles it is merely termed 'Secind'. I have never been able to discover the reason why.

Dessert, of a kind, follows the Secind. This is, generally, quite

good, and consists of nuts and fruit in season. Sometimes the Mess Secretary, greatly daring, opens a jar of preserved ginger. Everyone eats the ginger with relish, but in a few days' time questions will be asked. Is not the rate of messing too high?

Fish Face was a nice old thing, but pompous. Besides being our second-in-command, he was Mess President. He felt he had achieved efficiency if he could produce statistics which showed the daily rate of messing to be at some phenomenally low figure.

"We must think of the pockets of our junior officers," he said.

The Colonel supported him loyally, though I am not at all sure he enjoyed some of the economies.

I looked across the table at 'Babe' Lorrimer, my Company officer. By his plate stood a whisky-and-soda. Before dinner he had consumed one short drink, if not two. He was also fond of chocolate, with which he supplemented his rations. Evidently his pockets held a certain amount of surplus cash.

It is so often the senior officers who lack lucre, not the junior ones. Fish Face, poor man, had been somewhat unsuccessful in matrimony. His wife, Muriel, had made the stupid mistake of thinking her husband was a goldmine: a foolish error, for no one with money ever joins the Indian Army. She ran him heavily into debt, then, growing tired of his stodgy outlook, eloped with a British officer who was being transferred to service in England. Fortunately, there were no children, or, perhaps unfortunately—since a child with lusty lungs might have kept the couple united.

"Where's Grayson tonight?" asked the Colonel.

"Dining with the Punjabis," said Harris.

We all laughed. A guest night in the Punjabi Mess was a cheery affair. Few guests were allowed to depart till the early hours of the morning.

Port wine, coffee, cigars.

The Colonel was in good form tonight. I could read his mind working. He was nearly due for pension, and did not want to retire. Young for his years, active, and a good soldier, the thought of spending the rest of his life on the shell must have been irksome in the extreme. Now the death of the little Gurkha had instilled new hope into a mind decaying rapidly since it had no chance of succour. Could there possibly be a war, or, failing such an outlet, an operation which would entail expansion of the Army? Even partial mobilization would mean the creation of new units, and the possible retention of senior officers destined, normally, for pension.

I smiled when I recollected how the Colonel had dismissed with scorn the suggestion that any political intervention might accrue as a result of the murder. How often we veil our hopes under a cover of light sarcasm, when all the time we are praying to God that the opposite of our spoken expressions may occur!

At last the Colonel rose and moved into the ante-room for his customary rubber of bridge. No one wanted to play except Harris, who imagined he was going to win enough to pay for his month's messing.

It was customary to see that three officers remained in Mess to make up a four with the Colonel for bridge. I did not feel like taking a hand, and was glad when I saw Pearson (after all, it is an adjutant's job to humour his Colonel) and Fish Face (who was always ready to

win golden opinions) seat themselves at the table. Harris had sat down some time before, his mind ready for combat.

With a muttered "Good night" I hurried out of the Mess and off to bed.

I did not, however, at once go to bed.

When I returned to my quarter I remembered I occupied the position of British Officer of the Week, a task that entailed my visiting the guards on the perimeter at least twice a week by night.

Tonight, of all nights, seemed to be an obvious time for me to make my inspection. A Gurkha had been murdered, and the sentries would be starting at shadows.

The garrison of Zai Khel consisted of a Brigade of Infantry, a Brigade of Gunners, all the numerous medical and supply services without which a force cannot exist, and thousands of mules for transport. This immense concourse of men and animals required unceasing protection from the treacherous tribesmen, who would not hesitate to sneak into camp through an undefended gap if there was a sporting chance of stealing a rifle or looting some grain.

Space was valuable in Zai Khel. Extra yards meant extra protective detachments and sentries. Round the garrison stood a perimeter stone wall, four feet high, built, needless to say, by the sweat of human hands, and about three thousand yards long. Outside the wall an intricate barbed-wire system had been prepared.

I put on my belt and revolver, picked up a torch, and wandered towards the perimeter. It was spring, and the air was glorious, welcome after the rigours of a severe winter spent at a height of seven thousand feet. Stars gleamed like diamonds, and occasional meteors severed the sky like jewelled daggers. Silhouetted against the surrounding horizon jagged peaks loomed up against the camp, and on one of them I saw a lamp twinkling. Some signaller from a permanent piquet was sending a message. Coming down from one of these piquets, or, rather, blockhouses, for they are sturdily built, the Gurkha had been killed. I looked towards Castle Piquet, but no light was visible.

Silence everywhere. It was an hour after 'Lights Out'. Only occasional sounds could be heard: the sudden braying of a mule, the whimpering of a dog, or the muttered orders given to and repeated by a newly changed sentry.

Soon I reached the wall and began to stumble along that portion of perimeter for which my Battalion, the 11/50th Delhi Regiment, was responsible. Small shelters of stone, roofed in with corrugated iron, had been constructed about one hundred yards apart, generally overlooking some ravine or tactical feature where tribesmen might collect.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The challenge came softly.

"Grand Rounds," I answered quietly.

Always on the Frontier we try to minimize noise—no easy feat. Jack Sepoy likes to use his lungs on every occasion, and when he is not bawling he is coughing and expectorating. Noise, however, sometimes has its advantages. On a night like this it would show an evil-minded tribesman that the sentry was awake. Operations by

day are another matter, and indiscreet noise may give an enemy an excellent indication of our tactical situation.

I entered the post. Ghulam Ahmed, a youngster in my Company, was sentry. The others were asleep. But attached to Ahmed's wrist was a string. In the event of alarm one tug would wake the Guard Commander.

Ahmed's rifle was also attached to his right wrist by a chain. Without waking the guard, I examined the wrist of each sleeping member. Yes. The chains were intact. Should a wily Pathan tribesman succeed in deceiving a sentry, he would find a serious obstacle in his path.

My mind retraced its steps twenty years to the time when I was a subaltern. One infamous night a sleeping post on the perimeter had been surprised, and eight rifles stolen. No one heard a sound. Only next morning the theft had been discovered. Eight dead bodies lay on the ground minus eight hands and wrists. The sentry must have been fast asleep! As for the Pathans, they were, naturally, in a great hurry and could not waste time in disengaging the chains when at any moment their attack might have been discovered.

Anyway, a rifle chained to the wrist prevents its owner from leaving it lying about in unauthorized places.

"Now, Ghulam Ahmed," I said, "what would you do if you detected any suspicious movement out in front?"

"Wake my Guard Commander," he answered promptly.

"But supposing you hadn't time?" I suggested.

"I should fire a white Very light and try to see what was going on."

"And if you saw some figures and thought they were up to no good?"

"Fire at them."

My conversation woke the Guard Commander. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. His chain clanked, and made me think of some convict imprisoned on Dartmoor. One man turned over in his sleep, breathing fretfully; another snored. There was a stale smell of body odour and rifle-oil.

"What is the signal for the alarm?" I asked him.

"One red Very light followed by a green."

"When would you give such a signal?"

"If I was attacked, and couldn't deal with the situation."

"Good. Have you got your bombs?"

"Yes, Huzoor." He pointed into the dark.

I left the post and moved towards the inlying piquet which was quartered in a stable some distance back from the perimeter, and centrally placed so that it could reinforce any threatened post.

I found the Commander changing his sentries.

"Everything all right?" I asked. "What's your strength?"

"One platoon, Huzoor, of twenty-two rifles and a light automatic gun."

"Are you keeping in touch with the posts on the perimeter?"

"Indeed I am, Sahib. I send out a patrol every hour."

"Excellent," I said. "Salaam."

As I left the inlying piquet I nearly bumped into the Indian Orderly Officer of the Day. Evidently he had started his inspection from the other end of our sector.

"Posts all right?" I asked.

"Certainly," he replied.

I saw no point in continuing my inspection. The remaining posts would still be wide awake, and had been well tested.

I returned to my quarter. Horace, my bull terrier, chained to my bed, made a clanking noise as he rose to welcome me. I did not take him with me on my nocturnal perambulations round the wire. Stray cats, attractive bitches, and the animal world of the camp invariably led him astray. With the best intentions he would desert me, and I saw him no more till next morning, when he reported at my early-morning tea, dirty, dishevelled, often bloodstained, and stinking like a drain. I could control him by day, but never after dark.

"Well, Guard Commander," I said, "is your chain fastened to your wrist?"

Thump, thump, went Horace's tail.

"And what would you do in the case of alarm?"

Horace lay on his back and put his paws in the air. He desired to be tickled.

"I hope no Guard Commander would ever behave like that on duty," I said, complying with his request.

Thump, thump, thump, and thump went Horace's tail

3

I thought I was tired when I turned out the light, but found that my mind was too restless to let me drop off to sleep.

I attached no particular significance to the murder of the Gurkha. Some tribesman may have thought he had a grudge against the British, and that this was the best method of taking revenge. It was impossible to legislate for isolated incidents. As the Colonel had pointed out, we were supposed to be at peace, and unless we declared war how could we tell friend from foe? The camel-driver who walked amicably through Zai Khel in the morning might fire a few rounds into the sleeping camp at night.

My mother, writing to me, said once: "Why don't you disarm those horrid people?"

I tried to explain to her in an essay of about five thousand words, but came to the conclusion that I could not do justice to the abnormal Frontier situation if I wrote a treatise in three volumes.

Since sleep would not come, I retarded it still further by imagining myself a lecturer to a vast assembly of distinguished persons at home.

"The North-West Frontier of India," I said in my most statesman-like manner, "is a buffer State between India and Afghanistan. From time immemorial the invading conquerors have entered India through the connecting passes."

(Loud applause.)

"This buffer State, ladies and gentlemen, is a sinister-looking wilderness of forbidding hills covered with millions of loose stones and boulders. No green grass or shady trees soothe the eye save in a few oases where they have been planted by the hand of man. In some places prickly plants and shrubs adorn the higher slopes. There are one or two high mountains ranging between ten and sixteen

thousand feet, and if anyone is vigorous enough to ascend to their summits he will find on his way trees of pine and fir, also moss, ferns, and wild flowers.

"The tribesmen live dotted about in valleys at the lower altitudes, where life is more practical and efficient than that to be found on the tops of a few isolated peaks buried for a considerable part of the year in deep snow.

"The tribesmen may be likened to Scottish clans which flourished in the Highlands a few centuries ago." (Applause.) "They are as hard as the soil itself. Vendettas, feuds, poverty, and extreme variations of climate kill off the weaklings. Only the fittest manage to survive, and these are men of magnificent physique, expert in the use of a rifle. The constant necessity for vigilance against foes possibly more skilful than themselves has taught them all there is to know about guerilla warfare in a land where life is cheap and a rifle of inestimable value. Brave, cunning, and utterly merciless, they live by preying on their weaker brethren.

"Permanently to subdue such a country would cost several million pounds, and several million lives. An armed British force, remember, needs a great quantity of rations, equipment, and transport. For every mile it advances it needs a line of communication secured by adequate protective detachments.

"The main highways of the Frontier are stony river-beds winding their way between the hills. Every hill of importance must be seized and held permanently, otherwise the invading column will be attacked, and the machinery of communication dislocated." (Applause.)

"There are three schools of thought concerning the 'Frontier'. One school advocates retiring back into India and holding the line of the river Indus. The other school maintains that a forward policy is preferable, and the third desires a semi-forward policy by which the benefits of peaceful penetration will have an advantageous effect in time. If we leave the Frontier to founder in the hands of the tribesmen they are liable to assist a foreign invader and turn against us whenever they wish. Also they will always remain savage and illiterate. On the other hand, peaceful penetration means the building of roads, the introduction of wireless, telephones, railways, and mechanical transport, ensuring swift and safe communications. Already the semi-forward policy is reaping its reward. The tribes are becoming civilized, and in fifty years' time I predict that the Pathan will have become as amiable as his Indian neighbour. Three hours' journey in a passenger lorry will take him over a distance which previously he could not have covered in three days!" (Loud and prolonged applause.)

I woke up with a start in the early hours of the morning. 'Crack! Crack!' There was no possibility of mistaking the sound of rifle-fire. A sudden flash of light suffused my room. Someone had fired a white Very light.

I jumped out of bed and ran to the window.

No. The post which had opened fire was not in the Delhi area, not in our sector of the perimeter. I thanked God devoutly as I climbed back into bed.

I listened for a few minutes. Would the firing begin afresh, or be

taken up by other posts on the perimeter? Men were like sheep once firing began, and saw enemies in every shadow.

Silence reigned again, only broken by a loud and prolonged sigh from Horace.

I turned over on my side.

CHAPTER TWO

I

My Company stood outside No. 6 Gate in columns of four. The Babe brought the men to attention and made them slope arms. I returned the salute, then told him to 'stand them easy', and bring the Indian officers along to a small hillock from which we could obtain a good view of the surrounding country, especially the broken ground intersected with *nalas* and ravines.

Personally I was always much more afraid of broken ground than I was of the hills. The steep slopes of a hill culminating in a crest offered an excellent target to our covering artillery, machine-guns and rifles, but the dead ground at the foot, often out of sight of assisting weapons, made a dangerous 'no man's land' where a few concealed tribesmen might well ambush a piquet before it began to climb, or after it had descended.

I am referring, of course, to war, and our training comes under the category of 'Training for War'. Otherwise the day may dawn which will find us unprepared.

At the moment peace was supposed to prevail on the Frontier, and, according to Parliament and the Press, we were at liberty to proceed anywhere within specified limits, the Political being responsible for demarcating the areas within which we might operate.

Actually peace existed so long as we did not make a tactical error. The tribesman is the finest umpire in the world, and quick to penalize a mistake. He studiously studies troops when they go out from camp and train. He notes the speed at which they move on the hills, the precautions they take, the formations they adopt. Thus he knows quite well which units are good and which are indifferent: in other words, which regiments may presently offer him an opportunity for a sudden raid.

Hence the necessity arises for constant precautions. A Battalion, when it leaves camp, advances as it would in hostile territory. All dead ground in which an enemy might lie hidden must be searched carefully, and every hill offering a possible vantage point must be piqueted. A tendency to slacken may meet with ultimate disaster.

The tribesmen hold all the trump-cards, and can afford to play a waiting game. For six, eight, or ten months, possibly, they take no action. Day after day the regiments piquet the hills, hard, tiring work for the strongest, and nothing ever happens. The country appears devoid of life.

"To hell with this," said Tommy Atkins or Jack Sepoy. "Why should I have to climb these ruddy hills?"

Then one day a young Commander grows slack. He has piqueted the same old hill sixty times before and loathes the sight of it. When

he reaches the top, puffing and panting, instead of sending patrols to search the vicinity, he drowns. For the first time he omits to make adequate arrangements to cover his retreat. . . .

A dozen times his neglect remains unpunished. Meantime he takes less and less trouble to protect his detachment. Why should he? The Colonel's an old woman, he thinks. . . .

At last the watchful tribesmen see the opportunity for which they have been waiting patiently so long. One fine day the unsuspecting piquet is rushed and overwhelmed. A few mutilated corpses bear testimony to the raid. The rifles and ammunition have disappeared.

Service on the Frontier is a man's life, and a healthy one. The summer scorches, but the winter is long and cold, with bitter winds from far-off snows. Life is hard, like a frosted diamond, keen like a two-edged sword. An error of judgment means death.

2

I was proud of my Company, and determined its good name should remain untarnished. I was conceited enough to imagine that B Company held first place professionally in the Colonel's thoughts. Looking back, I realize what a genius the Colonel was; he had the capacity for making each Company think that it was the most favoured. As a result he extracted the best from each officer under his command.

Standing on the hillock, I explained the morning's scheme to the Indian officers.

"We will imagine," I said, "that B Company is being used to piquet the route through this valley, so that the Battalion may pass through safely and carry out a reconnaissance. Is that quite clear?"

"Certainly," they replied, and one of them added: "We have done it before."

"But you go on making the same foolish mistakes," I retorted. "One of these days you will get caught, if you don't improve."

"I quite agree," said Subadar Suleiman Khan, my senior Indian officer, and one who had seen war on the Frontier. "I am always warning the Company about it."

"Yet even you, Suleiman," I admonished, "have not yet learnt to curb that mighty voice of yours. When will you learn to control your men quietly, and not bellow orders at them? The Pathans can hear your platoon when it is two miles away from its objective."

Suleiman muttered into his beard and looked sheepish.

"Now, the Colonel Sahib is coming to see us today," I went on. "So do your best. We all know that B Company can teach the rest of the Brigade how to piquet hills."

"Without doubt." The rugged face of old Suleiman creased into smiles, reminding me of a wintry sun peeping for a minute through clouds.

"Then off you go," I said, "and explain to your men what we are going to do."

"Not too bad," admitted the Colonel, an hour later at my headquarters in the ravine. "The men are getting faster on the hills. But, remember, coming off a hill is even more important than going

up. It is during a withdrawal these devils catch you if you don't move like the wind. They're on top of you almost before you leave the crest."

"We have guns and machine-guns to cover withdrawals," I reminded him.

"Quite so, quite so. But at long ranges guns do not always find their mark at once, and by the time they succeed the damage may have been done. One man wounded coming down a hill may need a whole battalion to evacuate him."

I looked at the forbidding hills all round us. Far away I could see a signal flag wagging. A signaller standing near me made an answering flick.

"Whose piquet is that?" the Colonel asked.

"Suleiman's. I've got four piquets of one platoon each."

"Quite right. I believe in having strong piquets. Don't fritter your men away in small detachments. A platoon, with its light automatic, can at least hold its own and support itself. Are you going to retire now?"

"Yes, sir. The next phase of my scheme imagines that the Battalion has finished its reconnaissance and returned to camp. The piquets can now be withdrawn."

"Well, cheeroh," said the Colonel. "I'm afraid I can't wait to watch them, as I have got to attend a conference at Brigade Headquarters, probably about the Gurkha who was killed yesterday. Nothing will be done, of course. We shall just talk."

I saluted, and the Colonel wandered off, accompanied by his orderly and a hefty Alsatian bitch known as Tina.

I was signalling up orders to the piquets when three tribesmen swung along the track with loose strides towards me. They carried modern rifles carelessly slung over their shoulders, and disported daggers sheathed to loaded cartridge-belts round their waists.

"*Starai ma shai*,"* they said, as they reached my Headquarters.

"May you not be poor," I replied in Pushtu, giving the correct answer to their greeting.

"Are you well, fresh, and happy?" They continued the formula courteously.

Two of the men were bearded elders, and the third was a handsome youth of about eighteen.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To Zai Khel. We have business with the Political Agent there."

"Do you know anything about the Gurkha who was murdered yesterday?"

There was a chorus of dissent.

"A disgraceful affair," said the eldest of the three. "I hope Allah may punish the perpetrator of the crime."

"The Political will, if they catch him," I retorted.

The tribesmen laughed heartily at the jest. What curious people the British were, to make such a fuss about one dead man! If a column had been ambushed, and many rifles stolen . . . Well, that would be an incident worthy of irritation and possible reprisals.

One dead man, and unarmed. Bah! . . .

* May you not be tired.

CHAPTER THREE

I

ZAI KHEL is situated in the heart of tribal territory. Previously a temporary site for a Column sent out on a punitive expedition, the place has grown into a permanent colony of hideous-looking huts and erections. It is impossible to move anywhere without bumping into a cookhouse or latrine, and an officer on a short stroll is obliged to return the salutes of countless hurrying soldiers.

At all hours of the day the roads are blocked by squadrons of horses and mules going to and returning from the water-troughs outside the wire, by lorry convoys, by camels being loaded and unloaded, by bands playing, and by formations of men tramping up and down in fours.

Beyond the confines of the perimeter lie the inner and outer zones. Within the inner zone men are allowed to wander unarmed—and, presumably, unharmed—since the area is within sight of camp and in range of protective covering fire from the permanent blockhouses built on dominating positions overlooking the garrison.

The outer zone is farther afield, and applies to country in which armed troops may exercise. There there are no permanent piquets to afford protection, and troops are responsible for their own security against surprise. No single or unarmed man may enter the outer zone, since he provides too easy a target for unscrupulous scoundrels. "At least six rifles," is the order, and men carry five rounds of ammunition loaded in their magazines under the 'cut-off'.

As has been seen, one is not always safe in the inner zone. Elaborate police organizations in Europe do not succeed in preventing an occasional fanatic from assassinating a king, and on the Frontier it is impossible to prevent a few tribesmen from firing at football-players during a match, or from sniping an individual.

In normal peace-time the unarmed man on the Frontier should dwell in greater safety than a king. A king is killed on account of big political motives a man on the Frontier for his rifle, or perhaps owing to a sense of humour on the part of the tribesmen. After all, it must be exceedingly funny to note the effect after firing a few rounds into a football match!

The Gurkha might have been killed by some fanatic who thought he had been wronged by the Political, or yet by someone with a sense of humour. The track leading up to a blockhouse winds and rewinds itself round hidden corners, past overhanging rocks, and through narrow miniature defiles. There are twenty places where a dozen tribesmen could lay an ambush unseen by the occupants of the piquet above.

Why, then, do we not send armed troops to protect the maintenance of rations and water?

Well, as the Colonel pointed out, it would mean a daily operation with twenty rifles to guard against a remote contingency, and, as it is, the Battalion strength is frittered away on fatigues, guards, and perimeter detachments considered vital to the defence of Zai Khel. My Company, on paper, shows a brave muster of one hundred and sixty men. Yet when ordered out on an operation or manœuvre it is rare that I can raise more than eighty. I curse old Suleiman for being an

inefficient old fool, and tell him it is high time he went on pension. He just smiles and hands me a dirty piece of paper on which a 'parade state' has been scrawled by some educated youngster to his dictation. Suleiman himself cannot write at all, and signs his signature, when required, with an impression made from one of his huge thumbs. His 'parade state', needless to say, is always correct. The men of my Company have miraculously disappeared on a thousand and one outside tasks, and I am left to face the enemy with a handful of my last intelligent sepoy. It is surprising how the best men are demanded by outside sources!

I am told that the Indian Government pays a colossal sum of money to the tribesmen for the rent of the Zai Khel camp site. Really, of course, it is a bribe made in the hope of keeping the countryside quiet. The tribesmen take the offering and buy rifles and ammunition with it to use against one another, or the British, as chance arises. Foreign countries are only too ready to oblige by selling weapons, and arms can be smuggled in through Afghanistan in many ways. A few rifles pass in from British India, and troops serving in peaceful cantonments have always to be on their guard against thieves, who hide their loot for several months, probably burying it, and then smuggle it up to the Frontier.

There is a well-known story, published in a British journal, of a Mahommedan funeral procession passing through our outposts into tribal territory. A foul smell from the coffin assailed the nostrils, and the mourners affirmed the corpse to be that of a woman who had died of cholera. Such a statement was quite sufficient to give the terrible party a free road, and inspectors who might have been officious fled in panic to safe distances.

A young subaltern, however, commanding one of the posts became suspicious. He was young, and inclined to act when senior officers would have thought twice. He had also been warned about a gang of rifle-thieves which was known to be operating in the vicinity, and was determined not to let them slip through his hands should they try to pass through the defences which he commanded.

With considerable courage he walked up to the reeking coffin and inspected it. With even more courage he ordered a group of his men, Mahommedans themselves, to prise open the lid. He staked his whole career on one throw of the dice, for, if he was wrong, a very serious situation might occur involving racial and religious questions.

His men hesitated, and then obeyed the order. Inside the coffin lay the putrefying carcase of a goat. The men fell back, retching and holding their noses. . . .

The officer put his hand in the coffin and pulled out the goat. Underneath lay twenty-five stolen rifles, carefully packed.

Nothing succeeds like success!

2

"This is a bloody place," announced Harris at lunch. "What the hell we shall be like after two years of this I don't know. Sexual starvation is bad enough for a bachelor . . . but how the hell you married blokes manage to bear up without a nervous breakdown beats me altogether."

"It's certainly an unnatural sort of life," Fish Face agreed, looking up from an illustrated paper. "But we get three months' leave, remember, if we're lucky."

"Yep, and I don't get mine till July," returned Harris. "Three bloody months to wait! . . . I shall be mentally insane by that time."

Someone made the obvious retort that it would take a good deal to make 'Arris a bigger lunatic than he was now.

"And I'm not so damned sure I shall get my leave even then," Harris went on pessimistically, after the guffaw at his expense had died down. "Someone's sure to go sick . . . and five officers have got to be present all the time."

Two of our officers were in England on eight months' furlough.

"Cheer up!" said Grayson. "I don't have my leave till September. And the occasional week-ends I am given to go and see my wife in Risalwan aren't much catch, you know. It's a hell of a business getting there and back."

"Risalwan is bloody awful, too," commented Harris. "But it's better than this foul place. By the way, how's your wife?"

"Not too bad, thanks. Needless to say, she does not like Risalwan."

"Who would? I thought it a foul place when I passed through it. It's neither a peace station nor a Frontier post . . . a pretence of both. I stayed in the Rest House, which, judging from appearances, probably served as Alexander the Great's headquarters."

"I'm glad I sent my wife home to England," said the Colonel. "Personally, if I've got to serve on the Frontier, I feel Monica might just as well live five thousand miles away as one hundred. On has got to keep two establishments running in any case, and I find an odd week-end more unsettling than otherwise."

I am a bachelor, and always feel sorry for married people; they have so many worries. Yet often I wonder what is going to happen to me when I retire on pension. England, marvellous paradise to an exile, can be the most lonely country in the world to a man whose only bonds are married sisters, elderly aunts studying spiritualism, and vague relations so wrapped up in their own affairs that a week-end spent in their houses becomes a duty rather than a pleasure.

Here in India I can always find some man to amuse me, someone to drink with, someone with whom I can go out shooting. In England no men ever seem to be available. Every month during the spring shiploads of passengers journey home from Bombay, to disappear completely in some dense domestic forest.

We talk in the Mess of what grand adventures we will have on home leave, of trips to Germany, of motoring tours in Wales, but soon after our ship has berthed in Southampton or Tilbury we settle down in some small local circle, where we wander about vaguely until such time as an outward-bound mail-boat transports us once again to Eastern shores. I refer, of course, to those of us who are bachelors.

Yes. Marriage, with all its worries, seems to be the only solution. Now, in harness, I can laugh at old Grayson for being a fool and a pauper, can condole with the Colonel when he grumbles at the high expenditure his son is costing him at a public school. I can afford to get drunk every night, buy a new sporting gun when I want one, and travel to England on short leave by air. . . .

At the moment I live uncommonly well, but I am nervous of the future.

What is going to happen to me in six years' time when I retire? I feel the Colonel and Grayson may have the laugh over me t en. Fish Face . . . ?

I am not certain about Fish Face. Some men are doomed to be miserable in whatever sphere they exist!

3

I like Harris. He is a good sort. There are some who have no use for him because he is a ranker and entered the Army through the back door. They say he is not a gentleman, and should not have been allowed to pass through the exclusive gilded portals.

Harris has had a far more sensible education than most of us. Rudyard Kipling, when making a speech on Founder's Day to a certain famous school, pointed out to the inmates that the lives they lived as boys were small replicas of the lives they would create when they passed into the great world. "You will find no temptation in after-life," he said, "that has not tested you when you were a boy at school."

The author of *The Second Degree* goes even farther in substantiation of this truth. He maintains in his story that character formed at school changes little in after-years, and describes a great battle affecting the destiny of nations with the opposing Commanders as Generals who had been boys together at the same school in the past. General Blue was at his wits' end to discover which point in his defences General Red would attack—left, right, or centre—when he remembered a trivial incident that had occurred forty years ago revealing certain definite traits in his opponent's character.

Would General Red act the same now under similar circumstances? After all, football, cricket, hockey, squash, and boxing require definite characteristics on the part of their exponents. Strategy, tactics, and the principles of surprise are as important in games as they are in war.

Expanding his theme, the author of *The Second Degree* relates how General Blue took a risk, depending for success on his knowledge of Red's psychology—and won.

If schools play such an important role in formulating character, then one might argue that the best schools should produce the best—and presumably the strongest—characters. There are many who declare that the public-school system is rotten to the core, and that boys brought up under its traditions merely acquire an Oxford accent, a taste for idleness, and a superciliousness towards those unfortunate underlings who have not been blessed with a Pass into the greatest trades union in the world.

I am not prepared to attack or defend this statement. All I do know is that I never did a stroke of work at a well-known public school, and that I am woefully ignorant of matters which should be common knowledge.

Harris has not acquired an Oxford accent (I hope I haven't either), but he has been to a school which presented to him definite economic values. His parents are poor, and he realized he must work for his living. He has taken hard knocks, and given hard knocks in return. To him the world is intensely competitive, and only the fittest can

survive. I feel sure an opposing General would find Harris a very tough nut to crack.

Babe Lorrimer, of course, is as different to Harris as chalk from cheese. Here again we find the product of a public-school education. Babe's great game is Rugger, and he can 'putt' the sixteen-pound shot farther than anyone else in the battalion. The men love him for his strength.

The sepoys are simple, primitive children. They laugh and sing when they are happy; they sulk when they are annoyed. Nearly always they are happy. They worship youth, beauty, and strength. To rule them an officer must set a personal example. It is no use *telling* a sepoy how to shoot straight on the range; he will only listen politely and go on making the same mistakes. *Show* him how to shoot and he will become your devoted slave for life. Not only that, but he will, probably, shoot straight!

Perhaps, after all, there is something to be said for a public-school education, though when it comes to a question of shooting, Harris can hit the target as well as any of us.

4

If you wander along to the lines any evening you will see Suleiman holding court from a deck-chair. An obsequious slave lights his *huqqa*, and the men of his platoon squat round him, listening with admiration to brave deeds of valour in which the old Indian officer invariably plays the leading part of hero.

A mighty man was Suleiman in his young days. Even now he owns biceps made of iron, and fists like hams. He can still swing the Company dumb-bell above his head, a huge log hewn into fairly well-balanced proportions. Only three others in the whole battalion can emulate this feat of strength; one of them is Babe Lorrimer.

The Babe, during his first barrack inspection, was introduced to this monstrous piece of wood.

"Can you lift it, Sahib?" asked Suleiman, a twinkle in his eye.

The Babe panted and heaved, but could swing it no higher than his knees.

"Now watch me," said Suleiman, and, obliterating the handle in one paw, he snatched the block into the air and held it at arm's length.

"Hooray!" exclaimed the sepoys.

That night the Babe instructed his orderly to bring the dumb-bell to the terrace outside his quarter and not to remove it under penalty of direst punishment.

Three days later he could lift it too.

Suleiman nursed one great regret. He had no son. A young wife in the Punjab had borne him three daughters.

"I still have hopes," he confided in me one day; "but I must have leave." The old scoundrel looked at me anxiously.

I was not to be caught by such a subtle plea. Evidently the Indian ranks felt sexual starvation as much as we did, and if I let Suleiman depart from Zai Khel on his mission I should be inundated with requests for leave from over one hundred sepoys.

"You can go when your turn comes," I told him.

On another occasion Suleiman informed me privately that his wife cost a great deal of money. Obviously she knew the arts of her sex.

Multan Singh, our Subadar Major, was a fine old man too. He was the senior Indian officer in the battalion, and responsible to the Colonel for all matters relating to the Indian element. He had thirty-eight years' service, and wore many war medals and decorations. Like Suleiman, he joined as a raw recruit, and had worked his way up through all the grades of non-commissioned rank to the rank of Jemadar, lowest rank in the Viceroy's Commission. Promoted on the field of bravery, he left the Great War as a Subadar—the same rank as Suleiman.

In the years that followed he passed from strength to strength. The Government granted him land, conferring on him the title of Sardar Bahadur (brave leader) and awarding him the Order of British India.

Now, old in years and honour, he was nearly due for pension.

Unlike Suleiman, he had a son. Yet I hope, fervently, that if Suleiman should be successful on his next leave, his wife will not introduce to the world a creature so horrible as the offspring of old Multan.

Multan, weather-beaten peasant of good farmer stock, desired that his son should rise above his surroundings and obtain a King's Commission in the same way as many of his neighbours were doing. Knowing that education constitutes the primary factor for advancement, he had spared no pains, or money, to send his boy to good schools.

Alas!—the result was atrocious. Schooling, and attempts to master European mannerisms, had turned the youth into a most despicable creature. The last time I saw him he spoke villainous English, and I was secretly afraid he might address me as 'Old Boy', a term I dislike from old and established friends. He also wore European clothes, when he would have looked better dressed in native garb. Why do Indians spoil their looks by aping us in our attire, which is drab at the best, and unsuited to a colourful country like India?

The Colonel was appalled when Multan produced his prodigy.

"What the hell am I to do?" he said. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for Multan within reason, but to ask me to place his son in the Army as an officer is going a bit too far. The men would never follow him. Can you imagine him leading Suleiman under enemy fire?"

Certainly I could not imagine this possibility.

"And if we don't find the boy a job," the Colonel went on, "he'll only go and join some Communistic fraternity. All failed B.A.'s go against the Government as a matter of course."

"I think, sir, you had better write to Simla," suggested Pearson. "Multan will be quite happy when he hears his application has been forwarded."

"But I can't recommend the boy," objected the Colonel.

"No matter, sir," said Pearson placidly.

"Hear! Hear!" agreed Harris. "You ought to be a bloody statesman."

So the Colonel wrote to Simla.

The arrival of the English sea-borne mail dates a red-letter day in Zai Khel. Letters may come to India by air, but illustrated papers journey over the sea in ships.

There is a rush for the weeklies. More solid journals can wait till the middle of the week.

What does it matter if we are sexually starved? Let us gloat in our hunger over blonde beauties, actresses in semi-nude array, and women whose legs are insured for twenty thousand dollars. They bring us momentary relief.

"Grummitt!" says Harris, looking at Babe Lorrimer severely. "No cheating!"

The Babe is scanning an article, and he smiled. He knows that 'Grummitt' is a caution to him to study the pictures only. If he wishes to read about the 'Varsity match he must do so later. Now the moment is his to stare through the shop window at the goods displayed, then make way for others who have been waiting impatiently in the queue.

"Nothing exciting this week," exclaims Harris disgustedly a few minutes later, flinging his paper on to a table. "What are you staring at, Pears?"

He crosses over to Pearson and looks over his shoulder.

"Christ!" he mutters. "That's some girl, eh?"

"Let's look!" chorus half a dozen voices, and Pearson is surrounded.

The Colonel sits aloof. He is reading several closely-written pages. His face is a mask. Has Monica deserted him? I wonder. Perhaps his son has been expelled from school.

I could kick myself for these morbid fancies.

Fish Face also receives a pile of letters. Has Muriel, his wife, tired of her lover? Has F.F. found some other woman idiotic enough to fall in love with him?

God alone knows.

I turn to my own correspondence, which consists of a bill from my optimistic tailor at home, an invitation from a steamship company to journey up the Amazon, and an urgent request to subscribe to Dr. Barnardo's Homes.

Regretfully I examine the pamphlet which takes me up the Amazon. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

I

A WEEK later I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of rifle-fire. My room, as usual, was illumined by Very lights, and reminded me of the effects made by the headlamps of passing cars.

Before I had time to leave my bed I heard the 'rat-tat-tat' of machine-gun fire, and saw through the window a red shell, followed by a green, sail over that sector manned by guards of the British infantry regiment.

The various quarterguards, acting on this signal, blew the alarm on their bugles.

Zai Khel, till recently a sleeping haven of peace, sprang to chaotic life. Men not on the perimeter tumbled out of bed and rushed to the armouries for their rifles and ammunition. Adjutants proceeded to the telephone and received long, vague instructions from Brigade Headquarters. Officers put on whatever equipment lay to hand and loaded their revolvers. Runners, servants, mules, and barking dogs all added to the confusion and got in everybody's way.

Firoze Din, my orderly, appeared to have lost, or mislaid, his safe headdress. Even in the mad rush I found time to admire his long hair, which was trimmed and curled in a fashion that many women might have envied. Two silver-coloured combs gleamed in his raven tresses, and I could not help wondering what sensations the ladies of Piccadilly would feel if they saw him. As a physical animal he was superb, and he moved with the lithe grace of a panther.

Hastily I donned a pair of shorts, a khaki shirt, and slipped on a pair of stockings. I noticed that Firoze Din was filling my flask with neat whisky from a bottle. Evidently he thought I should need sustaining.

I hurried along to a small patch of ground outside our Mess, the rendezvous for those not on the perimeter. Firing could now be heard from all posts round the camp, and Very lights were being discharged from every direction, giving one the impression that the inhabitants of Zai Khel were celebrating Guy Fawkes Day in no uncertain fashion.

I found my Company standing like ghosts. . . . "All's well," said Suleiman in a well-meant whisper, which hissed through his beard like a gale.

"Ssh!" warned the Colonel, who was only ten yards away. "Stop that bloody row. Come here, you . . ." He waved his walking-stick at me.

I joined the group at Battalion Headquarters, and patiently we waited for information.

"Looks like a concerted attack," the Colonel remarked to Fish Face. "But I don't think much is happening in our sector of the perimeter. . . . Ah, here's Grayson."

Grayson, whose Company had been detailed for perimeter guards that night, came hurrying up to him.

"There's been no firing in our area, sir, except by number fourteen post," he reported, saluting. "The Commander swears he saw a gang of tribesmen out in front trying to get through the wire, so he loosed off at them. They appear to have gone, as he can see no one now when he fires a Very light."

"No one hit?" asked the Colonel.

"Can't see anything, sir. But we shall know presently." He pointed to the east, where a faint glimmer heralded approaching dawn. "In the meantime I have left an Indian officer to watch events and report any incidents that may occur."

"Thank you, Grayson. . . . Now, who the devil's this?"

It was only Pearson bustling up with news he had received over the telephone from Brigade.

"We are to 'stand to' here, sir; until further orders. The Brigade Major says the attack appears to be local, and the British regiment is quite able to cope with it. At the same time the Brigadier considers the whole affair may be a feint, and that there is a possibility of the

tribesmen launching their main attack against some unexpected portion of the wire. So he wants the perimeter piquets to keep their eyes skinned."

"Right," said the Colonel. He turned to Grayson. "You heard what Pearson said? Go along and tell your Company what is happening. The remainder of the battalion is stopping here as a reserve if required."

Grayson departed to the perimeter, while Pearson returned to the orderly-room telephone.

Meantime our Mess staff, who had a great reputation in the Brigade for efficiency, arrived on the scene with hot tea in mugs, and biscuits. I laced my tea with a nip of whisky from my flask. After all, I could not disappoint Firoze Din!

Another swig from my flask, noted by Firoze Din with approval, and I was in the mood to watch Aurora laying henna-tinted fingers on the surrounding hills. Really, these dawns are beautiful. English people miss a great deal in life by not rising earlier from their beds.

I watched Aurora slowly blinding the stars with her caresses till only one diehard resisted her, a huge planet—could it be Venus?—hanging like a lamp low down over the eastern horizon.

Gradually the sky grew golden, and the jagged peaks and crest lines became silhouetted in soft tints. Suddenly the sun jumped on to the summit of Gul Sar, and Aurora retired with a blush to her chamber.

With Aurora's departure I returned, reluctantly, to a world of men. The firing had died down. Men were coughing and expectorating. Mules were braying. One man, led to me by Suleiman, asked my permission to go to the latrines.

I was seriously considering another drink from my flask when Pearson came back from the office with the news that we might dismiss.

"Well, what's happened?" the Colonel asked testily. "Surely that bloody fool Brigade Major must have some reason for hauling us out of bed like this!"

"He sounded very fussed, sir," answered Pearson. "I couldn't get any information at all."

"And he's one of our Staff College graduates!" muttered the Colonel as he walked back to his quarters.

"Poor old Staff! They always get the blame," whispered Harris. He turned to the Babe. "Let that be in your mind before you take the Staff College examination, thinking you're cut out for a ruddy General."

At lunch-time we heard the cause of the alarm though the British regiment had done its best to conceal it.

Four dead goats gave the show away. They were found riddled with bullets in the tangle of barbed wire outside the defences.

Four goats driven into the wire had succeeded in deploying a whole Brigade, and had cost the Government fifty thousand rounds of ammunition. . . .

What is more, a tribesman reported through the Political Department that these animals were his, and demanded the sum of fifty rupees to compensate him for his loss.

Yes. The tribesmen have a great sense of humour!

For a few days following this incident, or the 'British Affair', as we called it, there was a good deal of talk and laughter in Zai Khel amongst us lower ranks. The usual topic of the men's boots had been subjugated by a matter of much more absorbing interest.

The higher ranks saw no joke at all. The Brigadier was furious that his wonderful Brigade, which he thought he had coached to a high state of efficiency, should take fright like startled rabbits for no adequate reason. He severely bullied the Brigade Major, an act that pleased our Colonel enormously, softening his heart a little against the gilded Staff.

In the Army we all feel reactions set in motion from the top. An exploding General is like a stone dropped into water; the bubbles permeate to the farthest shores.

The Brigadier, in this case, vented his spleen (and I must say I think he was justified) on all Battalion Commanders.

"Don't you realize," he said, "that these bloody tribesmen have the laugh over us? One rotten show like that is the hell of a smack against our prestige. Have your men no discipline that they must loose off thousands of rounds into the blue just because another post along the perimeter has got the wind up?"

The Colonel of the British regiment tried to protest, but was withered.

Our Colonel sent for us afterwards, but was kinder in his denunciation.

"I know perfectly well," he said, "how damned infectious firing can be on a dark night when one's nerves are jumpy. I was in France for some time during the Great War, and the scamper of a rat was sufficient to make one draw one's revolver. . . . But, nevertheless, we must rub it into our men that popping off rounds at nothing is very demoralizing. We cannot afford to get the 'wind up' just because others are scared. A well-trained regiment should be steadiest when conditions are at their worst."

Grayson felt this criticism somewhat keenly, as his Company had been guarding our sector of the perimeter. I comforted him by telling him that any Company in the Battalion would have acted in the same way. Imagination runs riot when one cannot see, and every man in the Brigade, including the Brigadier, thought Zai Khel was being attacked that night by a considerable force of tribesmen.

Down in the lines Suleiman lectured his platoon. Not having been involved on the perimeter, he was inclined to adopt the attitude that none of his men could possibly have behaved with such foolishness had B Company been on guard. When he discovered that I was listening he changed the drift of his conversation hastily into less romantic channels.

It is a funny place, the Frontier. One minute we curse the men for being slack, and tell them that if they do not wake up they will be ambushed by tribesmen. Then, because one night they happen to be exceptionally alert, we revile them for wasting Government ammunition.

We are a curious race, the British. No wonder other nations fail to understand our psychology. Certainly the tribesmen must think us utterly mad, for we try to play them at their own game with the

odds heavily against us. A General, noted for his wit, once remarked that Frontier warfare is like a game of cricket in which the British bowl and bat left-handed against a strong team of players who can break any rule whenever they wish.

Query 1. Why not blow a few villages to bits like they do in Spain?

Answer. Because this practice would not be conforming to a six-ball over. Drastic procedure would undoubtedly hasten the end of hostilities, especially if the women and children were killed, but such wanton ideas do not coincide with the principles of the British Community. Let British officers and Indian sepoy be killed, by all means (this is cricket), but do not try to win a victory by unfair means.

Query 2. Supposing the British always give twenty-four hours' notice to the tribesmen to quit before they bomb a village, in order that the women and children may be removed to a place of safety: does this action not alter the rules, or at least constitute a by-law?

Answer. Certainly not. What would your reactions be if a Foreign Power bombed London?

Query 3. A village on the Frontier is made of mud. Assuming that it might take the tribesmen three weeks to rebuild their village (whereas to re-create London would take years), do you still maintain that it is defiling the laws of cricket to constitute a new by-law in favour of such a proceeding?

Answer. Very definitely. Cricket is cricket.

Query 4. How about gas? Gas could be used very profitably in many parts of the Frontier—notably in making certain valleys untenable.

Answer. Horrors! My dear sir, you do not understand the spirit of cricket.

Occasionally on the Frontier, when dire necessity arises—or, shall we say, the tribesmen have committed some outrage definitely beyond the pale—we are mean enough to break a rule and ask the Royal Air Force to drop a limited number of bombs on a deserted village. Such action, however, causes vigorous protests from Club Committees in England which maintain that Frontier cricket is not being played in accordance with the spirit of the game.

I trust that in the next world war Foreign Powers will adhere to the rules of cricket.

3

Eight miles from Zai Khe! stands a fort of tribal levies—or Scouts as they are called—commanded by a young British lieutenant. The Babe and I lunched there the other day, and I fear the Delhis may lose a promising young officer for four years. The Babe instantly lost his heart to the fine, virile men we saw drilling on the square, he is determined to apply for secondment to such a fascinating force.

"Glad you like our show!" laughed the young Commander, whose name was Smythe. "Precious little goes on up here we don't hear about."

"Then you must know who beat up the Gurkha in Zai Khel," said the Babe at once.

"Of course I do. I can't give you the man's name, but I can narrow the circle of possibles down to six. One of them did it. He is a man of the Bandar tribe."

"Do you know *why* he did it?"

"No. He was just disgruntled, I expect."

"Well, are the Political doing anything about it?" I asked. For the Scouts work under the Civil administration.

"Certainly they are. I dare say we shall be called in to help if the Bandars won't hand him over. The trouble is, of course, he may bolt into Afghanistan, where we can't get him. There are a dozen places where he may hide till the trouble blows over."

"What happens then?"

"I dare say we shall impose a fine on the Bandars, and make them hand in some rifles as security for good behaviour in the future. One can't go to war just because an odd man kicks over the traces."

I agreed. Either we must try to control the Frontier with some form of loose political machinery or we must go to war on a lavish scale with the intention of disarming the tribesmen. To attempt the latter task we should require a large expeditionary force, which would entail vast expenditure. Further, if we succeeded in our project we should still need large forces to police the country we had won.

Peaceful penetration, backed up by mobile Columns stationed at vital points on the main passes, and strong enough to bring recalcitrants to terms, seems to be the solution.

"Can you bank on your men's loyalty?" I asked Smythe.

"In any minor disturbances, yes. In a holy war affecting a general rising of the whole Frontier, I can't say. Blood calls to blood, you know."

At this juncture an orderly entered and smartly saluted. His skin was nearly as fair as the Babe's, and he had clear-cut, distinguished features with rather an aquiline nose. Some historians say that the Pathans are the lost tribe of Israel. But many races have been given this gratuitous title.

After a hurried conversation in Pushtu, Smythe apologized for having to leave us for a few moments, and departed with the orderly.

"Did you understand what the orderly said?" I asked the Babe.

He laughed. "Only one word, and that was 'telephone'."

"You'll have to learn Pushtu if you join the Scouts," I reminded him.

The room in which we sat was comfortably furnished. The pictures on the walls spoke of tradition. There was a portrait of the King, and numerous groups of football elevens, athletic teams, and Scouts' officers and men. Several silver cups gleamed on the dining-table. I noticed that one had been presented by an Englishman now famous in history.

"It's just like our Mess," I observed.

The Babe sighed rapturously. I could see he had joined the Scouts already in his mind, and I sympathized with him. He was just the type of strong public-school youth who would do well in such an institution, which demanded of its officers superb physical fitness.

Smythe returned carrying a map.

"Talk of the devil!" he said. "I have just been ordered to round

up a village in which our Bandar friend is supposed to be hiding. We leave tonight, and must be in position before dawn."

"How far have you got to go?" I asked.

"About nineteen miles, I calculate. We shall go by a circuitous route so as not to give the show away."

The Babe and I looked at each other. I was thinking of our Zai Khel Column, with its huge baggage train trying to move nineteen miles at night over unfamiliar, mountainous country.

"We take no transport," said Smythe, as if in answer to my unspoken thoughts, "so we can cut straight over the hills. We take a water-bottle each, and a few cakes of bread. . . . You see, we count on speed."

"Do you still want to be a mountain goat?" I asked the Babe.

The Babe's eyes were shining.

"I wish to God I could go with you," he said.

I shrugged my shoulders. There is no accounting for taste.

4

Grayson, journeying down to Risalwan on one of his rare week-end visits, had driven the Babe and me as far as the Scout fort. Money or no money, he was the proud possessor of a large car.

Now we stood on the road outside the gate waiting for one of the innumerable passenger lorries to take us back to Zai Khel.

Two vehicles passed us, panting and puffing up the steep gradient, grossly overloaded with men and merchandise. I told the Babe I was not going to travel in them at any price; we must wait for a more expensive lorry.

To refuse an opportunity, however, is to tempt Fate to take its revenge. Nearly an hour passed, and no more lorries appeared in sight. At last, when it seemed possible that we might have to spend the night in the fort, a vile-looking structure on wheels crawled painfully up to the gate, water bubbling out of its radiator. It was crammed with Indian humanity, and three of the passengers were tribesmen armed with rifles. Two sepoy returning from leave cleared the front seat for us, and we managed to squeeze ourselves in next to the driver, who was a Sikh.

The road to Zai Khel is part of the main circular road winding its way for hundreds of miles through tribal territory and connecting most of the vital links in the chain of passes through which a foreign invader would have to move. Originally a series of river-beds, the road has grown into metalled maturity only after many punitive expeditions had paved the necessary way for peaceful penetration.

'Where troops have been once, troops can go again' is a slogan of the Frontier. There are still many unexplored regions into which Columns cannot move without fighting, but we are opening up the country as fast as the Political will give their permission. The Political negotiate, and if successful the elders of the tribe concerned issue an invitation to British forces to enter their territory.

Sometimes Columns are received with treachery. Sometimes we have to fight our way uninvited through new country to deal with troublesome tribes. . . . Always we must be on our guard.

The main circular road, however, has become an accepted fact with

the tribesmen. Actually it is as useful to them as to us. A Pathan can now accomplish a day's journey in comparative safety which in the old days would have taken him a week of perilous enterprise, for then there was always the chance he might be embroiled in a scrap with his neighbours en route, or end his life by being ambushed by an enemy with whom he had a blood feud.

The rule of the main road is that all travellers are immune up to a distance of two hundred yards on either side of its boundaries. A Pathan may not assault anyone within this sanctuary. He must wait till he and his opponent have crossed the limit. As a result, traffic can move with 'comparative safety'.

It is impossible, of course, to legislate for a fanatic, and isolated outrages happen at times. Yet it is strange how few 'incidents' do occur along the common highway. Even thieves possess a code of honour.

To ensure the freedom of the road, armed police, called khassadars, have been recruited from the tribesmen. They supply their own rifles and ammunition, but are paid a regular wage. Here again we see the useful adaptation of the proverb 'Set a thief to catch a thief'.

It is a remarkable game, cricket, as we play it on the Frontier. The tribesmen will snipe a sleeping force in bivouac, but in nine cases out of ten they will not molest traffic on the road. The latter practice is accepted, definitely, as body-line bowling.

Nevertheless, we do not tempt the Pathans by offering them easy bull's-eyes. The orders in Zai Khel are strict. No one may wander by himself beyond the inner zone, even if his footsteps take him along the main road. Parties must be no fewer than six rifles. Motor-cars and lorries may carry unarmed men. Pathans are unlikely to waste ammunition on fleeting targets.

As we creaked and jolted along the road towards Zai Khel I saw the Babe looking over his shoulder into the interior of the lorry.

"That Pathan has got a marvellous dagger," he said.

The tribesman smiled, displaying splendid white teeth. Guessing the Babe's thoughts, he passed over the knife for our inspection. The blade, when removed from its beautifully wrought sheath, had the sharpness of a razor.

"Useful for cutting up Gurkhas!" I remarked.

The Babe laughed.

"I must buy one of those," he said.

"Send one to your mother for a Christmas present," I suggested.

"Do you think this Pathan would sell it me?"

I was about to say I was quite sure he would if the price named suited his fancy, when the tribesman inclined forward and touch the Sikh driver on his back.

The lorry stopped. . . .

The three tribesmen descended, and the owner of the dagger came forward to reclaim his possession.

"You must come and visit me in my village," he said courteously. "I shall be happy to see you."

"Where do you come from?" I asked him.

He pointed towards some distant mountains.

"One day we will certainly come," I replied, then wondered if my remark might be misconstrued.

The driver put his lorry in gear and we started onwards with a violent jerk. . . .

"We couldn't possibly go and see him, of course?" inquired the Babe.

"The trouble would be in getting there," I answered. "Once we reached the domains of his village we should be as safe as houses. The Pathans have a great sense of hospitality. No guest is ever harmed."

"Let's ask him to send an escort," suggested the Babe.

"Wouldn't the Colonel be pleased!" I remonstrated. "Why not wait till you join the Scouts? . . . You can do what you like then."

The Babe nodded, and we relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

"THE Column will be prepared to move at twenty-four hours' notice on Light Scale."

This message, marked 'Secret', reached Pearson in the orderly-room one day early in May, when the sun shone in a cloudless sky.

"'In the spring a young man's fancy,'" trilled Harris, as he returned from an inspection of his mule-lines. I was on my way to inspect my Company armoury, and we stopped to discuss the 'bloodiness' of Zai Khel.

An orderly came up with a piece of paper in his hand.

"More bumf," said Harris, searching in his pocket for a pencil with which to initial it.

A moment later he whistled. The context of the circular contained the message Pearson had received a few minutes earlier, with the extra information that the Colonel wished to see all officers at midday.

"Generally speaking, I'm not surprised," commented Harris, after I had read the message. "It's about time we had a ruddy Column."

Personally, I was not at all surprised. The imperturbable Firoze Din had told me several days ago that the Zai Khel Column was going out on operations for at least ten days. When I asked him how the devil he knew he said the move was common gossip in the bazaar.

Yet the Brigade had marked their message 'SECRET'.

Suleiman had not only informed me that the Column was going out, but that fighting would be a dead certainty. He said he had been given this news by a Pathan.

At noon we tramped into the Colonel's private sanctum in the Battalion office. Pearson closed the doors. Clerks were told to go and eat their food.

"Now, gentlemen," said the Colonel, when we had seated ourselves, "the Political want a Column to march into the Bandar Valley for purposes of demonstration only. I gather that the arrest of certain scoundrels who were concerned with the murder of the Gurkha has not been successful. Last week the Scouts met with considerable opposition, and there were five casualties. . . ."

I looked at the Babe and winked. Was Smythe one of the casualties?

"The Political are sure that the arrival of troops in force will have an immediate salutary effect on the tribesmen. There is to be no fighting. At the same time we must take usual precautions. No troops have been in this Valley before. The Quartermaster will issue necessary orders regarding equipment and transport, while Pearson will detail those men who are to stop behind in camp for local duties. . . . Finally, I need hardly say that I am confident the Battalion will maintain its high standard in the forthcoming operations."

Later I summoned the Babe and the Indian officers to my quarter. We went carefully through the Zai Khel Column Standing Orders, as amended frequently by Brigade, and supplemented by the Battalion office.

"Light Scale means we have mules and camels only," I remarked, turning over the typewritten pages. "We are unlucky! Scale B would have meant carts and lorries, which allow for more kit. Have you got your note-books?"

Huge fists produced grimy papers from strange hiding-places, and stumpy pencils were moistened into life on wet tongues.

I dictated various orders on the disposal of waterproof sheets, bedding, ammunition, rations, cooking-pots, spare pairs of socks . . . a thousand and one details, with many more to come later which I had temporarily forgotten. Soon 'Urgent' messages would arrive from the Adjutant and Quartermaster. "Three men are required as runners." . . . "Ten men are needed to fetch supplies from the dump." . . . "Subadar So-and-so Khan will remain in Zai Khel to command the depot."

I cannot help being a pessimist at times, and active operations seem to demand that all one's best and most able men should be taken away to other spheres.

"Lieutenant Lorrimer will act as Brigade Orderly Officer. . . ."

I tried to close my mind to fantastic imaginary commands, and hurried out of my room. Perhaps a brandy and ginger-ale would restore my nerves. . . .

Outside the Mess, Grayson, who held the post of Mess Secretary, was packing up the few articles of camp furniture legislated for in Orders. Fish Face stood near the scales ruefully inspecting his bedding.

"Ten pounds overweight," he said; "and I thought I was well in hand!"

"Twenty pounds of kit do not take much making up," Grayson returned. "What are you putting on your horse?"

"My mackintosh, a spare pair of boots, and shaving-gear. I can't get on any more. . . . Ethel looks like a Christmas tree as it is!"

"I know," Grayson rejoined sympathetically. "This question of kit is the very devil." He turned to the scales and began to check the weights of certain stores.

"Did you ever see such a fool?" Grayson asked me as Fish Face departed to his quarters to re-make his kit. "The man has been on at least one light-scale Column. Surely he knows by now what he can or can't take?"

I could not help laughing. In my own Company there were a dozen places where I could secrete a few extra pounds of kit—the

cooking-pot mule, for instance, was one. Fish Face did not know the tricks of his trade. My bedding lay on the ground near the scales. I weighed it. The weight was nineteen pounds! Firoze Din chuckled as he removed it.

The Babe's orderly arrived with his master's valise. I weighed it. The needle on the scales registered eighteen and a half pounds. Good for the Babe! We did not ask questions in B Company . . . though I wondered often how Suleiman managed to dress like a bloated civilian in bivouac.

I am a lover of animals, and I do not allow my mules and camels to march overloaded. Before a Column I inspect them. Yet there are some animals which, owing to bulk and cubic space, carry impedimenta under regulation weight. Surely it is not contrary to the rules of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to adjust certain loads, secretly, till they reach regulation standards? It seems to me a shame that the cooking-pot mule should be in a superior position to his brother staggering under a maximum burden of two heavy boxes of ammunition.

We have got to be careful, of course. Our Brigadier possesses an eagle eye. Invariably he notes our mules, and the way they are loaded, on Column. An ex-Cavalryman is reputed to be keener on the welfare of his animals than on that of his men. A well-groomed mule on parade will bring an Officer Commanding a Battalion far higher marks than an exquisitely turned-out sepoy.

So in B Company we have to load our transport with a certain amount of intelligence—or, rather, camouflage.

In the lines the sepoys packed their kits, laying them out in bundles ready to be loaded on to Commissariat mules. They were allowed five pounds each—in other words, one blanket. Spare necessities of life were carried on the man.

Camels were allotted to the Quartermaster, and they conveyed rations, fuel, surplus bombs, Very lights, and ammunition. The Mess camel bore a very precious burden of reserve whisky, beer—and a canvas bath.

Laughing, cursing, swearing, the troops in Zai Khel made their preparations for the move.

The Colonel, wise soldier, sat inside the Mess. Experience had taught him the folly of poking his nose into other people's affairs when they are busy. Let subordinates do their jobs unhampered. Criticism can come later. I wish all Colonels would follow our 'old man's' example. Some Commanding Officers are pests. Feeling they must do something active, when there is nothing for them to do, they stamp round the lines gravely impeding a regular routine which the Indian officers know backwards. They seem to forget their turn will come directly the Battalion leaves camp as a fighting unit. 'It is the role of a Commander,' so our manuals inform us, 'to make decisions.'

During the afternoon an orderly from Brigade Headquarters brought Pearson an envelope marked 'Very Secret'. The brief contents stated that the Column would march at eight next morning.

"'Very Secret' be damned!" the Colonel laughed, when he read it. "I bet every tribesman on the Frontier knew the hour of march hours ago."

I went along to the lines in the evening for a final survey of the day's work and found the Babe seated in a deck-chair next to Suleiman on his throne.

Suleiman offered to abdicate, but I waved aside his courteous suggestion and another chair was produced.

An orderly offered me cigarettes, and the old warrior insisted that a whisky-and-soda must be brought me from the Mess.

"I don't drink, myself," he said. "I'm a Mahommedan."

"About the only vice you haven't got," I reminded him.

There was a guffaw of joy from the sepoys squatting round us.

Suleiman joined in the laugh against him, then inhaled a deep draught from his *hugqa*, which sang "Hubble, bubble."

"You don't smoke the *hugqa*, Sahib?" he inquired, as the apparatus was being passed round.

"He does not," the Babe chipped in. "But it is the only vice our Company Commander hasn't got!"

A fresh roar of laughter greeted this sally. Suleiman smacked his thighs, and I thought his throne would collapse. Such a fragile structure had not been intended by its manufacturers for elephantine convulsions.

'Hubble, bubble . . . ' sang the *hugqa* in its transit from mouth to mouth.

"Well, Sahib," said Suleiman presently, "I think we shall get some fighting this time. I have warned these fool sepoys to be on their guard. They won't listen, of course . . . they know better than an old man like me."

A chorus of protest met this assertion.

"I don't know what's happened to the youth of the present day," said Suleiman, shaking his head. "When I was a boy, men were men. Now even the tribesmen seem to have deteriorated."

"You're just as bad as we are in England," protested the Babe, "All my life I have had it rammed into me that my father and grandfather were twice the man I am. I think old people get an inferiority complex, and that's why they talk such nonsense."

More laughter from the sepoys. The Babe had scored a palpable hit.

Secretly I had agreed with Suleiman. Now, I fear, I turned traitor to his cause. Damn it, I am not old! My age is thirty-nine. I could not allow such an accusation to pass unchallenged.

"It is the way of the world," I remonstrated, rather feebly, "to think the present generation inferior to the last."

"The way of old people, you mean!" said the Babe.

"On the other hand," I continued, "don't you think there is something to be said for the days when there were no trains, and men had to travel on horseback?"

Suleiman agreed emphatically, and spoke of his village, which, even now, was thirty miles away from the railway line and only accessible after a long journey by lorry over third-rate roads. Still, this was civilization to him. In the old days he would have travelled by camel. India is three hundred years behind Europe in the way of progress.

"The young men of the Punjab are growing effeminate," he

reiterated. "Nowadays they expect to have everything done for them."

A heated discussion followed amongst the sepoy, tempered with respect for old Suleiman.

At last the Mess bugle sounded its half-hour warning for dinner and I rose.

Suleiman shouted for a lantern, and an orderly to guide us back to our quarters.

As I bade farewell to him he said in a stage whisper:

"When are you going to get married, Sahib?"

"How the hell can I get married in a bloody place like this?" I retorted.

"When you go on leave," he purred. "That will be the time."

"Marriage doesn't seem to have suited *you*," I answered. "Where is your son who is going to bear your name?"

As we followed the orderly back towards the Mess we could hear the men laughing at my Parthian shot.

3

I became rather drunk in the Mess that night. I think most of the others imbibed one over the eight, too. Tomorrow we should be without the luxuries of tables and chairs, though the Mess staff did their best at improvisation by the simple method of digging a square trench about three feet in depth. We sat on the wall of the trench with our legs inside, and were faced by a natural table.

No troops had marked into the Bandar Valley before, and conversation tonight turned into a debate on the possibilities of a 'scrap'.

"The Political maintain, definitely, that there will be no fighting," Fish Face pointed out. "A few snipers are all we need expect."

"To hell with the Political," said Harris. "They know nothing."

"Well, surely they ought to know the temper of the tribesmen," defended Fish Face. "The Pathans can't mass an army to oppose us without someone hearing about it."

"Suleiman has heard all about it," I mentioned.

Everyone laughed.

"I don't think we need worry about tomorrow," put in the Colonel. "It is all easy country up to Narai. The next day we go through a bloody awful pass . . . we might be sniped there."

"Well, I hope there are no caves," said Grayson. "Snipers in caves are damned difficult to dislodge, and they can defy an army corps for hours."

"At any rate, one thing is quite clear," remarked the Colonel presently: "we shall not be so comfortable this time tomorrow night."

Fish Face agreed with a shudder.

"Trust a snake rather than a tribesman' is an old saying," commented Grayson. "I heard some years ago of a case of a young officer offering a wounded prisoner a drink of water from his bottle. The Pathan drank it and then shot his benefactor dead."

"Hell!" exclaimed Pearson. "I should not care to fall alive into their hands. Some of the stories one hears is enough to make one sick." He took a long drink from his glass.

"Hear! Hear!" said Harris.

There was a silence, and I found myself regarding the Colonel who meditatively selected a cigar from his case, clipped the end carefully with a cutter, inserted it in his mouth, and then lit the weed with intense deliberation.

One is supposed, so they say, to be able to judge a man's character by the way he removes the top from a boiled egg. I also think a cigar- or cheroot-smoker gives away many of his characteristics. Harris, for instance, never bothers to tinker; he just bites off the end and spits it on to his plate or the nearest ash-tray. On the other hand, Fish Face dealing with his cigar presents a picture of unctuous pomposity. . . .

I do not smoke cheroots myself, so can afford to laugh at others over this one point concerning character. No doubt I am doomed when I slay a boiled egg. . . .

"Is it true," asked the Babe, who, like myself, was smoking a cigarette, "that the real reason the tribesmen cut up their prisoners is to prevent them going to heaven?"

The Colonel smiled.

"Partly that, and partly because they are brought up from babyhood in an atmosphere utterly cruel and merciless. Life is very cheap on the Frontier."

"I'm told the Mahomedan paradise consists of beautiful concubines," said Grayson; "enough and to spare for each man. . . ."

"Hence the reason for preserving one's anatomy when one goes there," observed Fish Face drily.

We all laughed.

More whisky. The Mess was enveloped in a haze of conflicting smoke. Dimly I noticed that the Babe's face looked rather flushed.

A servant came in and handed a telegram to Grayson. Anxiously he opened it, and then smiled.

"I've got a son," he announced.

"Hooray!" we shouted. "That means another drink."

"Good old Grayson," said Harris. "I'm glad to see someone is trying to assist our Empire."

The Colonel laughed. "It's high time some of you fellows got married and did your job," he said. He turned to me. "What about you? Don't you think it's time you settled down with a charming young woman?"

"That's just what Suleiman is always saying," said the Babe.

"All right," I answered. "Give me eight months combined leave from tomorrow and I'll see what I can do."

"Too late!" Harris commented. "Like the ten virgins, he is too late. They were late, weren't they?" He looked at the Babe for confirmation.

"They missed the bus, if that's what you mean," said Pearson.

"Exactly. That's just what I meant," agreed Harris.

The Colonel shouted for the Abdar.

"I am sure we shall all have great pleasure in toasting Grayson's son and heir. Fill up!"

We sang 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow', and then broke into 'Auld Lang Syne'. Presently we found ourselves singing negro songs. Then we sang 'You Are My Heart's Delight'.

"I'm sure you can sing, Babe," I said, during a lull in the programme. "Your servant tells me you sing beautifully in your bath."

What about a solo?" He had scored so many points off me during the course of the evening I felt I must take my revenge.

To my great surprise, and of others too, the Babe proceeded to deliver 'Ole Man River' in a surprisingly melodious bass voice.

"The Babe must give us a drink on that," said Pearson at the end. "He's been concealing his talent!"

"I agree," said Harris. "Disgraceful!"

The Abdar entered and received his orders.

"One should never conceal one's talent," said Harris. "It's swank."

"Well, what about you, then, 'Arris?" said the Babe. "We haven't heard you show us what you can do."

"No! For God's sake, no!" put in Pearson. "Don't encourage him. I've never heard such a bloody noise in my life."

"All right," said Harris. "I won't sing, provided the bribe is high enough."

Pearson called for the Abdar.

"I'd rather pay for any drink," he said, "than listen to 'Arris warbling."

"Be careful!" reprimanded Harris. "I shall insist on champagne in a minute."

There was a tap on the door of the dining-room, and the face of the Brigade Major appeared.

"Come in, Lintott," the Colonel invited cordially. "What can we do for you? Abdar!"

Lintott apparently required no service. As an honest and painstaking Staff Officer he had come round to inquire if all was well with us, and if there were any hitches in our arrangements for the march tomorrow.

We were soon able to convince him that all was well with us.

The party broke up at three in the morning. We were due to march at eight.

CHAPTER SIX

I

THE day dawned bright and clear. The winter rains and snow were over, and we might reasonably expect fine weather for our march, which had been scheduled to last five days. Two days would take us to our objective, where the Brigade Commander intended to halt twenty-four hours before starting to return.

Unfortunately, no dogs were allowed on Column, and I hated leaving old Horace behind. He always drooped pathetically when I said good-bye to him. I was lucky, however, in owning a servant who was devoted to him, and it was cheering to be able to leave the dog behind knowing he would have care, attention, and exercise. I did not trust the Colonel's bearer, and was secretly afraid poor Tina had a thin time when her master went away.

Firoze Din took complete charge of me on Column, and took great pride in defeating with his efficiency the other servants and orderlies. My bedding was always the first to arrive on the scene when we reached bivouac, and others might curse that there was

lack of water, but a full pail invariably appeared for my use the instant I inferred that I desired to wash.

Indeed, I had to watch Firoze Din closely. He was quite capable of emptying some of the men's water-bottles rather than inform me that my royal commands could not be obeyed. What is more, the sepoy would gladly accede to his tyranny, and constantly I had to see that they were not deprived of some comfort for the benefit of their Company Commander.

Democracy will never find favour in India. From time immemorial invading despots have ruled the country, sometimes wisely, more often unwisely, and nearly always cruelly. As a result the inhabitants have acquired no initiative, but remain loyally subservient to any lord destined to command them.

The British present a complete enigma to the Indian people. A Colonel will play hockey for his Battalion and receive, without murmur, severe knocks across his shins. The next day he punishes an offender who has committed some crime by confining him to cells for twenty-eight days, and every sepoy in the regiment accepts his verdict as just. He may make mistakes, but he is just.

When I retire I shall always remember these light-hearted, sturdy peasant folk. They are the backbone of the real India.

"Why don't you kill off the agitators with machine-guns?" Suleiman asked me one day down country, when we were employed in-trying to stop a particularly unpleasant riot in a native city.

"Killing is not the British way, if we can avoid it," I answered.

Suleiman scratched his head.

Yes. The British are a strange enigma.

Recourse to violence, however, is not the British way—not till several officials have been murdered. One can but marvel at the success of the sleeping lion.

2

The Delhis had been detailed as part of the main body, so we marched along behind the Attocks, who were supplying the advanced guard and piqueting troops.

"We shall do the piqueting tomorrow," said Harris. "The Brigade Commander always singles us out if there's any chance of a scrap ahead."

A pleasant conceit, but I agreed with him. I might have added that B Company would be given the most dangerous task, but I refrained.

At midday the sun felt exceedingly warm, and I could sympathize with the mountaineers who were protecting the route for us. The country was still open, but the wide river-bed, which was our road, wound steadily upwards. The main stream, now a mere trickle of knee-deep water, zigzagged irritatingly from one side to the other, and constantly we had to wade.

After heavy rain the ravine would spate into a raging torrent reaching a depth of several feet where it passed through narrow gorges.

"Beer?" inquired Firoze Din during one of the ten-minute halts.

I nodded, whereupon he produced a bottle from his haversack and

ripped off the stopper with his bayonet. Then he detached a large tin mug which was strapped to his pack and filled it to the brim with frothing liquid.

Previously I had given Firoze Din strict orders that he was not to augment his equipment, heavy enough already, with surplus and unnecessary luxuries for his master. A Mess mule followed Battalion Headquarters, and carried limited quantities of food and refreshment for immediate requirements during operations. There were times however, when an officer found himself employed on a mission several miles away from this valuable quadruped, and on one famous (or, rather, infamous) occasion I was doomed to drink plain water from my bottle for twenty-four hours. Firoze Din was horrified, and determined that such a monstrous calamity should not overtake B Company Commander again.

"Why do you not carry your own beer?" is the natural query of my critics.

Well, to be candid, an officer wears very little kit, and is not asked to carry his spare shirts, socks, and towel fitted into a pack adjusted to his shoulders. An officer carries a revolver, field-glasses, and a small haversack filled to repletion with orders, maps, note-books, and message-pads. Personally, I also use a walking-stick (most helpful over stones and boulders), but this practice is illegal, and I am still waiting for the Colonel to give me a reprimand. . . .

Now, Firoze Din's pack is a safe and unbreakable depository for any substance made of glass. . . .

At three in the afternoon we reached Narai without a shot being fired. We were forced, nevertheless, with the inevitable heart-breaking task of building a wall round the section of perimeter allotted us for defence.

As usual, no boulders of suitable size lay in the vicinity. There were millions of small stones, and several large rocks which could have been uprooted only by an elephant.

"Never mind," said Suleiman, and detailed half the Company to scour the countryside. A fatigue party dug a shallow trench to make an even base, and waited to receive the stones.

Meantime we were protected by temporary piquets furnished by the advanced guard.

The camp site, originally marked out by the Brigade Staff Captain and the Quartermasters of each unit, who had proceeded ahead with the advanced guard, presented a scene of complete chaos. Seething masses of men, horses, mules, and camels surged in all directions. It seemed impossible to believe that such a throng could be herded into one small space.

"What a bloody muck-up!" exclaimed Harris, who was selecting favourable night positions for his machine-guns, a duty relegated to him as Support Company Commander.

An orderly hurried up with a message to say that the Colonel wished to see me immediately.

"Where?" I asked.

He pointed to a mound on which I could see dimly some figures.

"Get on with this wall as fast as you can," I said to the Babe.

"It's got to be up before *Retreat*, which is at seven."

"I'll do what I can," he promised, "providing the Adjutant and Quartermaster don't pinch all our men for other jobs. Ten men

have gone to help Grayson with the Mess, and fifteen are digging latrines."

"Have you any spare men?" I asked Harris.

"Not one," he replied cheerfully. "All are employed in making machine-gun emplacements."

As I passed Grayson I asked him if he could help me out with a few men.

"I'm needing men myself," he said. "The whole of my Company are working on fatigues—at least, those not already building the stinking wall. Have some tea? The Abdar says it's ready."

I shook my head and went to the mound, where I discovered the Colonel, the Brigade Commander, and an Artillery officer discussing camp piquets for the protection of the Column during the night.

"Fourteen rifles up there," the Colonel said to me, pointing to the summit of a sinister-looking crag that frowned seven hundred feet above us. "And eight rifles on that round topped hill with a bush on it. Got that?"

I studied the best routes to the objectives through my field-glasses.

"At the moment the piquets of the advanced guard occupy both hills," went on the Colonel, "so you will have protection on the way up. But I will also tell Harris to cover your advance with a machine-gun section."

"Get your men moving as soon as you can," added the Brigadier, "but see they have a hot meal first."

I looked at my watch. It said five.

"Where are the other camp piquets?" I asked.

The Brigadier pointed out four hills, which would become the responsibility of the other Infantry battalions after taking them over from the advanced guard.

On my way back I saw the Punjabi regiment, which had been acting as rear-guard and pulling in the Column piquets along the line we had advanced, march into camp. Their Adjutant, rather a friend of mine, smiled at me as he passed.

"Nothing exciting," he said. "Perhaps we shall see some fun tomorrow."

The only piquets of the advanced guard now remaining were round the camp. These were about to be relieved by the garrison.

I hastened in search of Suleiman. There was no time to spare. Besides eating a hasty meal, the men must fill their water-bottles from the chlorinated canvas tanks. The Very pistols and reserve ammunition had to be issued, and mule transport obtained to carry stores and bedding to the piquets. A roll of barbed wire might be useful, too. . . .

I found Suleiman and heard, to my great annoyance, that the mules had gone down to the river-bed to be watered, and were not due back for at least another twenty minutes. Also the tanks had not yet been filled with drinking-water.

I wandered through the confusion to the neighbourhood of the cooking-places. There I discovered that the oil cookers were refusing to function properly, and, as a consequence, no hot food was ready.

I studied my watch. The time was half past five. My piquets must move at six if they were to 'take over' and settle in before dark. Also the relieved advanced guard elements retiring to camp needed consideration.

At last the oil cookers decided it was time to quit practical joking. . . .

"The men are ready to march, Sahib," said Suleiman. "It won't take them five minutes to eat their food."

"What about water?" I asked.

Suleiman winked.

"We filled up from the stream before we entered camp."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "If the doctors knew that you would be court-martialled. Supposing someone catches cholera——"

"Allah will look after us," returned the old scoundrel piously.

At this juncture the Babe reported the good news that four mules were standing outside the quarterguard ready to move. . . .

3

The sun swooped down behind a hill, and shadows swiftly lengthened into dusk. Like the abatement of a thunderstorm the atmosphere in bivouac suddenly grew quiet and calm.

Horses, mules, and camels stood tethered in straight rows contentedly munching their forage. Rations and bales of stores lay neatly stacked. The oil cookers crackled and hissed, while the smoke of many fires ascended leisurely into the still air. The perimeter wall, in some miraculous fashion, appeared to have risen to prescribed dimensions, and the machine-gun and infantry defensive posts looked efficiently capable of defending the garrison from all forms of attack except snipers.

At *Retreat* the garrison 'stood to'. The Brigade Commander inspected the defences.

"Get your piquets up all right?" he asked me as he passed.

"Yes, sir. You can see their signal lamps."

I pointed to where spots of light flickered in the rapidly approaching darkness.

"The Artillery have got most of the dead ground taped," he said. "Your Colonel can show you their fire plan should you need their help during the night."

After 'Stand down' I indulged in a good wash. There was plenty of water in the stream, so I knew the men could not suffer from my godliness.

Later I went to Suleiman's bivouac, to find him having his legs massaged by an obsequious orderly.

"Don't get up," I said to him, as he prepared to rise. "Is everything O.K. now?"

"Absolutely, Hozoor. The men have all had a hot meal, and the local alarm posts along the wall are detailed. You go to your Mess and don't worry."

Groping my way along the section of wall held by B Company, I spoke to the sentries, making sure they were acquainted with their orders. Then I went to our Mess and found the Colonel reading a magazine under the vivid glare of a petromax lamp.

"We're on a peace march," said the Colonel, "and we're allowed as many lights as we choose. From a sniping point of view a few hundred lamps are more of a hindrance than a help. Shall we go pub-crawling?"

The nearest Mess proved to be that of the Artillery, and we saw that many visitors had arrived before us.

"Come and join in," was the hospitable invitation.

A young Gunner subaltern ordered us whisky pegs, then told us his battery had been allotted to the advanced guard and piqueting troops for next day.

"The Brigade Major warned me there will be two advanced guards tomorrow," said the Colonel. "The Punjabis start the ball rolling from here, and we take over when they become used up on piquets."

"I hear the country is difficult going," said another officer. "The Brigade Commander intends to advance damned slow and take no risks."

We drank some more whisky, took leave of our hosts, and stumbled towards more lights, which appeared to indicate another Mess. The Colonel nearly fell over somebody's bedding, and cursed audibly.

Soon we found ourselves in the Gurkha circle, and, judging from roars of laughter, evidently good stories were being broadcasted.

The Colonel of the Gurkhas rose to greet us, and I noticed he looked rather like one of his own men. Short in stature, yet stockily built, with brown weather-beaten features, he sported on his head the jaunty hat common to the Gurkha rank and file. He was smoking a large cheroot.

"What will you have?" he asked. "Beer, whisky, gin——"

"She was only a tribesman's daughter," said someone. "Can any bloke answer that?"

We pondered . . . but could find no answer to the riddle.

The young officer—and author, it may be added—gave his solution. Needless to say, it was unprintable.

We spent an amusing half-hour thinking out further vulgar situations for tribal daughters.

Then the Gurkha Colonel suggested we might compose a few limericks.

"There was a young girl of Narai," he said. "Let's have the next line. . . ."

Within five minutes we had invented a very pleasing poem on the virginity (or rather lack of it) of the local maiden. We decided we ought to send it to *Punch*.

"I'll give five rupees," said someone, "to the man who can give us a limerick on Bandarogha . . . the place we stop at tomorrow night."

"There was a young girl of Bandarogha
Who married a man in a toga . . ."

"Yes! Yes!" we all exclaimed excitedly. "Go on!"

The poet scratched his head.

"The fifth line is the hitch," he said. "I can't use the word 'ogre', as it already appears in the first line."

"Let's all think it out on the march tomorrow," suggested the Gurkha Colonel. "We must meet tomorrow night and decide on the winner."

"Yes; and let's make the conference hall the Delhi Mess," said my Colonel, rising. "We shall look forward to seeing you—and the winner."

We enjoyed a good dinner under the stars. Our cook rose to his greatest heights on Column, probably because he had insufficient time to play tricks with the food. In Zai Khel, where we dined at half past eight, I am certain he began to boil the roast joint at four. Dinner, once cooked was put into a kind of cupboard, on a grill shelf, with a lighted charcoal brazier underneath to keep it warm. Then ten minutes before we were due to take our places at table the villain browned up the mutton to make it resemble its correct counterpart. Other dishes suffered in similar fashion.

This abominable cupboard I have mentioned has its uses. Known throughout India as the 'Hot Case', it is of inestimable value in a Mess where breakfast is a movable feast between the hours of seven and ten, and where Fish Face lunches at twelve and Pearson at three. For dinner, however, the cook has no excuse to proclaim its virtues.

Dinner is a fixed meal, and it is rare for any officer to enter late once the senior officer has led the way into the dining-room.

Our appetites, of course, become sharpened on Column. After a long day's march any kind of picnic in the fresh air is enjoyable. Not that dinner tonight could be described by such a light-hearted term. We had dined off soup, fish, joint, pudding, and savoury—or, rather, 'Secind'.

Now we sipped our coffee in an intense stillness. The camp had sunk into the lethargy of sleep. Occasionally a mule brayed or a camel grunted; otherwise all was still.

The Colonel yawned, then tapped out the ashes from his pipe.

"I'm off to bed," he said. "Good night."

We all rose too. Sleep is valuable on Column.

On my way to my blankets I saw the moon poise herself for a moment over a distant hill before she swung herself magnificently into the heavens. Soon the camp lay bathed in silvery sheen . . . the whole panorama, garish and forbidding by day, lay bewitched and intoxicated in a light that might have shamed a Northern sun.

From afar I could hear faintly the tinkle of a small waterfall in the stream some distance below the camp . . . the stream in which the men of my Company had replenished their water-bottles.

I slept fitfully—the ground under my blankets was hard, though Firoze Din had spent considerable time with a small shovel in trying to level me a soft mattress. . . .

I heard the snores of sepoy . . . animals pulling impatiently at their heel chains . . . the relief of guards, conducted under a soft, singsong, monotonous chant . . . the occasional 'click' of a rifle as a new sentry slipped a round of ammunition into the breech. . . .

Always my mind retained subconsciously the noise of rapid fire from hidden enemies, the agonized squeal of a wounded mule . . . the sudden rush to the perimeter by men after the alarm. . . .

Before dawn the camp stirred to restless life. The march to the main body had been timed for eight, but there was much to do before then.

Animals had to be watered and fed, food eaten, and baggage packed into bundles for loading:

At six-thirty Grayson was silently cursing Fish Face for not having finished his breakfast.

"Thanks to him," he said to me, "we shall have our work cut out to get the Mess loaded in time."

I reported to the Colonel that our piquets had signalled 'All clear'.

"That's good," he said. "They understand, don't they, that they will stay where they are till the rear-guard withdraws them?"

"Yes, sir. I explained all that to them yesterday."

"It's rather curious no one sniped the camp last night. I thought, at any rate, a few rounds would be let off at us."

"Perhaps they are waiting till tonight, sir. We shall be in the heart of their rotten valley by then."

"Maybe you're right," the Colonel agreed. "We don't want a serious scrap . . . but a few rounds loosed off would do the battalion no harm, and keep the men on their toes. By the way, you might go round and see the Gurkhas who are doing rear-guard, will you? You can show their Colonel the exact position of our piquets and the best place from which to withdraw them."

I saluted. Yet I was thinking more of the men's stomachs than the tactical situation. The Babe must go and see Suleiman and make sure that cooked rations would be available for the camp piquets when they closed up on us. Thanks to their inaccessibility, the poor devils had missed their morning meal and would be hungry.

On my way I saw the Punjabi advanced guard and piqueting troops marching through the gate. A Company of big bearded Sikhs particularly caught my eye.

"Mind you put out piquets as far along the route as you can," I called to one of their officers. "The fewer you leave us to do, the better pleased we shall be."

"All right," he answered cheerily. "What's it worth to you?"

"A case of whisky," I said.

I could hear some of his men, who understood English, laughing at the joke.

I found the Gurkha Colonel walking up and down, smoking one of his cheroots.

"Have you?" he inquired affably, extracting a leather case from his pocket. "I suppose you've come to tell me you have solved that limerick. Well, let's hear it."

I explained to him that I had come to show him the positions of our camp piquets, and pointed out the last place in the river-bed from where they would be visible.

"That's quite all right," he said. "I'll signal them off. But I don't suppose the rear-guard will clear the camp till past noon. I've never seen so much transport in my life as we've got on this Column."

I saluted and returned to the lines, to find the chaos of the previous afternoon prevailing.

Horses pawed the ground, whinnying excitedly; camels snarled savagely as loads were secured to their backs; mules protested, striving their utmost to prevent themselves from being saddled. Men ran backwards and forwards bearing strange baggage.

Meantime the night piquets from their positions on the surrounding hills still protected the camp.

The Punjabi advanced guard, now three miles ahead on the track leading to Bandarogha, must have piqueted every hill of any importance that might harbour a hidden enemy. There these piquets would remain until the whole Column had passed by safely, and a large red flag, symbolizing the tail-end of the rear-guard, gave them the permissive signal to withdraw.

6

The Delhis led the main body, immediately behind Brigade Headquarters. Going proved slow, for after one mile the river-bed narrowed into a rough track which climbed over the shoulders of steep hills to drop again into deep ravines.

About midday the Brigadier sent for our Colonel.

"The Punjabis are nearly all used up on piquets," he said, "and there are still five miles to go before we reach camp. I want you to take your battalion forward and piquet the remainder of the route. Get into touch with the Officer Commanding the Punjabis, who will show you where his last piquet is sited. You will know then where to begin. Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," the Colonel replied.

"I am halting the Column here for an hour in order to get the transport closed up and some of the animals watered. This break should give you ample time to get your piquets out well ahead of our advance."

We pushed on, leaving the main body in a *nala* down which a small stream bubbled its way over the stones.

"Just our cursed luck," grumbled Harris. "We *would* be made to go on when everyone else has a rest!"

Less than a mile in front we passed the Punjabi headquarters.

"Pretty stiff hills, these," remarked their Colonel. "Nasty-looking precipices to retire off, eh?"

The Delhis now assumed the role of advanced guard and piqueting troops. Slowly we wormed our way along the winding track, putting up piquets covered by the machine-guns of Harris's Company till they reached the summits and signalled 'O.K.'

The day was brilliantly fine, the sky a deep blue. I could see an eagle hovering almost motionless a thousand feet above us. Far away to the north gleamed the permanent white mantle of snow.

"There's one advantage living at a high altitude," the Colonel observed to Fish Face—"we do escape the extreme heat."

Fish Face grunted. He was rather stout, and hated climbing hills. He panted and dripped with sweat. The poor man hated soldiering! though he would never admit it, and he could not afford to retire till he had earned his full pension. To make certain of continuous bread-and-butter he flattered the Colonel till we were nearly sick. We all prayed to God that F.F. would never be given command of the Delhis. Yet we were sorry for him.

Gradually our rifle Companies became dispersed into little detachments dotted about on the hills. Eventually my three platoons—the fourth had been used up on camp piquets, and was still miles behind—occupied an area on either side of the pass. The battalion moved on, leaving me with my Company Headquarters.

"Don't forget to go back and meet the rear-guard flag directly it approaches your area," the Colonel reminded me over his shoulder. Then he turned to Grayson, the Commander of the next Company to piquet.

The Babe, who had been marching with B Company's first line transport, closed up and halted. I told him to unload the mules, as we should not move on for at least two hours.

We watched the battalion till it disappeared from view round a bend.

"Thank God we are on our own for a while," I remarked, lighting a cigarette. I turned to my signallers, who were flag-wagging furiously. "Have you established touch with all the piquets?" I inquired.

Evidently they had, for answering flicks of white could be seen below the positions.

"I hope the Piquet Commanders will remember to reconnoitre their way down," I said to the Babe. "It is obvious they will have to retire down different spurs to the ones on which they went up. . . . The rear-guard won't pull them down till it's half a mile ahead of where we are now."

"Well, we've practised it all enough during training," returned the Babe. "They should know what to do."

"That's quite true," I admitted. "Yet they go on making the same old bloody silly mistakes. Suleiman is absolutely reliable; I have no fears for him. But the other two piquets are commanded by Havildars, of whom I'm not quite certain; they lack experience."

"It was damned bad luck having to leave the pukka Platoon Commanders in Zai Khel. One is due for a Musketry Course, isn't he?"

"Yes, and Pearson, curse his soul, detailed the other one for garrison duties. I had to leave a good Indian officer behind."

A discreet cough made itself heard, and I turned to find Firoze Din holding a bottle of beer in one hand and my mug in the other.

"I got it from the Mess before we left camp," he announced apologetically.

"I wish to God my orderly would have these brainwaves," grumbled the Babe.

"Well, you have this," I said, laughing. "I don't really want it."

"Nonsense. I've never known you refuse beer yet. . . . Let's split it."

Firoze Din, with considerable skill born of much practice, ripped off the stopper. . .

"You have first swig," said the Babe.

"God bless you," I toasted. "We'd better have our lunch now while there's nothing to do."

We produced packets of sandwiches from our haversacks and began to eat.

Presently I said: "Would you like to do a useful job?"

The Babe nodded.

"Well, will you go along the track and see how far the piquets remain visible? Imagine you are the rear-guard Commander, and decide from what points you would withdraw the piquets, taking into consideration covering fire from machine-guns, light automatics, and rifles. . . ."

"Rather." The Babe rose.

"Finish your lunch first," I suggested

"No. I'll eat as I walk along."

I was pleased at the Babe's keenness.

"Remember," I reminded him, as he put on his equipment, "we must help the rear-guard Commander all we can. He will welcome any information we can give him. Take a runner with you . . . you can send him back to me with a message if necessary."

"I'll take my orderly, too," said the Babe. "A walk will do him good. . . . Next time, perhaps, he won't forget my beer!"

Ten minutes later the head of the main body of the Column appeared in sight. The Brigadier rode up and asked me to point out my area to him.

"Good," he said, smiling. "I hope we shall reach Bandarogha without any trouble."

Standing by the side of the track, I had ample opportunity of studying the unwieldy Column as it crawled past. Infantry with their horses and first-line mule transport; batteries of mountain guns with their vast complement of animals; sappers and miners with mules bearing engineering equipment; signal sections with technical appliances; field ambulances of camels with panniers strapped on either side; sanitary sections of sweepers and menials. . . .

And behind . . . miles of camels in single file, bearing baggage and supplies without which no force can exist.

Writhing like an elongated serpent, the Column wriggled its tortuous way over the twisting narrow track.

7

There was a gap of some fifteen-odd minutes after the last camel had passed. Then round the bend came formed bodies of men—Punjabi piquets withdrawn by the rear-guard—marching to a rendezvous, where they had orders to halt and let the rest of their battalion close up on them. They looked hot and dishevelled from prolonged doubling.

I was about to ask one of their Indian officers if he had seen the Delhi camp piquets, when suddenly I saw them coming along under their Platoon Commander.

At this juncture the Babe returned from his reconnaissance.

"I'm going back to meet the rear-guard flag," I said. "You stay here with the transport for the present. It will be time enough for you to move when you see our first piquet withdrawing."

The camp piquets halted, and sat down near Company Headquarters.

"Well, Sahib, how are the men?" I asked the Platoon Commander. "Are they very tired?"

"Nay, Huzoor," replied the Indian officer. "They are hungry, it is true, but quite fit and happy."

"That's good news," I said, "and I have good news for you, too. . . . Go over to that mule and you will find some cooked rations waiting for you to distribute to your men."

I went back towards the rear-guard flag, with a signaller, a runner, and Firoze Din, to find men and animals mixed up together in

clamorous confusion. Piquets doubled by, sweating and breathless; guns from a battery swept back to off-load and take up covering positions; machine-guns were rushed out of action to leap-frog back to other suitable localities; companies of the Gurkha rear-guard were echeloned in depth with a view to giving any necessary support.

I found the Gurkha Colonel calm and efficient. Smoking cheroot after cheroot, he rapped out orders like an automaton.

"Hullo," he said, as I reported. "Have you finished that verse yet about the young lady of Bandarogha?"

I had to admit that I had not succeeded.

"I thought I'd got the answer about an hour ago . . . but this damned noise is so awful I can't hear myself think! By the way, where are your piquets?"

"My first—number eleven—is that hill with the rocks on it," I pointed out the others in succession.

"Your number fourteen piquet seems to be on a bitch of a hill," he remarked. "Have you reconnoitred a good place to withdraw it from?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I will show you presently."

A piquet from No-Man's-Land came doubling past the flag. The Commander went up to the Gurkha Colonel and saluted handing him a slip of paper.

The Colonel glanced at it.

"'Number ten piquet—seven rifles,'" he read. Then to the Indian officer: "Are all your men correct?"

The reply was in the affirmative. The Colonel told him to march on in quick time and rejoin his Headquarters.

"Now comes your turn," the Colonel said to me.

The red flag moved slowly along. The Babe, in obedience to my orders, fell in the Company Headquarters and marched well ahead—yet always in touch if wanted.

"We're getting into the heart of Bandar territory now," the Colonel observed. "Pretty grim-looking country!"

The route onwards confined itself again to the river-bed, which seemed to grow narrower and narrower as we advanced, the mountains shutting us in like high walls.

I sent a runner to the Babe and told him to join me.

"The first three miles were a level plain compared with this," grumbled the Colonel. "It won't be too easy covering you off, I'm afraid."

"The country opens out again a bit presently," I said. "It's only my Company area that's like this. . . . My second-in-command, who has reconnoitred the route, suggests you withdraw number eleven piquet from here."

The Colonel conversed with the Battery Commander, and gave orders to the machine-guns.

Arrangements having been made for covering fire, he told me to take charge of the red flag and signal my piquet permission to withdraw.

Far away I saw an answering signal, to which I replied by giving the 'washout'.

The lonely little piquet began to withdraw. . . . Midgets in the dim distance tumbling down towards the rear-guard flag that symbolized, at least, companionship and comparative safety. . . .

"They seem to be pretty well down," the Gurkha Colonel observed presently, looking through his glasses. "I think we can move on slowly."

Numbers twelve and thirteen piquets were withdrawn in the same way. At last only number fourteen remained. . . .

"I think you had better withdraw this piquet father on," I suggested, after consulting the Babe. "The ravine widens a little, and I think you will be able to get better positions for machine-guns."

"Well, no place could be worse than this," returned the Colonel, staring up at the monstrous hill that glowered over us. "One would need anti-aircraft appliances to give covering support from here!"

Numbers eleven and twelve piquets came doubling in, and I collected their paper slips, passing on their 'All Correct' reports to the Colonel.

"Where's number thirteen," asked the Colonel.

"Almost down, sir," I answered. "They are hidden by a bend."

"Let's get on, then. The platoons of the rear-guard have got all local enemy approaches taped."

I despatched a message to my non-commissioned officer in charge of the B Company transport telling him to keep to his present distance of three hundred yards from the red flag, and to close up the piquets as they reached him.

Meanwhile the Battery Commander asked me if I could give him an exact location of my last piquet.

"I've got you," he said, when I had described it to him, and hurried off to give an order to his guns.

After half a mile the red flag reached the spot which the Babe had indicated to me.

"We're the hell of a long way from the piquet," the Colonel grunted. "But I suppose we can't help ourselves. There is nowhere else nearer."

The gunner came up with the information that the battery was ready for action.

"And the machine-guns?" queried the Colonel.

"They, too, are in position, sir," said his Adjutant, who had just received a message.

The Colonel looked at me, the inevitable cheroot dangling out of his mouth.

"Let 'em rip, then," he said.

The piquet was so high up and far away that the Gurkha Adjutant had to watch for the answering signal through his field-glasses.

"They're off," he remarked, a second after the 'wash-out' signal.

I handed over the red flag to a sepoy and seized my glasses. . . . Yes, they were coming down the precipitous spur as well as could be expected. . . .

Suddenly there was a 'crack—dhong!' Clearly through the still air came the sound of rapid firing. . . .

Through my glasses I could make out small figures dancing on the skyline . . . certainly not my own men.

"Bang—! Bang—!" thudded the guns of the battery from their position in rear. . . . But those first important shells went far over their objective.

"Rat-tat-tat!" zipped the machine-guns. . . . But their first burst fell at too long a range.

"Can anyone see the piquet's white flag?" the Colonel asked.

"Yes, sir," I said, "but it is stationary. The piquet must have halted."

On their way down from the crest it is the custom for the last man to wave a white screen or flag. This signal tells the gunners and troops covering them off that all ground vacated behind them is clear for firing. Ranges can then be adjusted without fear of hitting the returning piquet.

"What the hell is happening?" queried the Colonel. "I can't see a damned thing through these glasses."

No one else could, either. The hills, with their barren stony soil, were brown in colour; so long as troops stayed motionless it was impossible almost to locate them. What was more, the tribesmen, well realizing this important factor, invariably wore khaki-coloured clothes.

Only movement and glitter catch the eye. The sun shining on a man's bayonet or accoutrements may cause the sudden gleam to be visible for miles. It is advisable to let 'spit and polish' go to the dogs when there is trouble brewing.

Suddenly the Gurkha Adjutant gave an exclamation.

"I think the piquet is trying to retake the crest," he said. "Look . . . near that large rock with a white mark on it. . . . Some men are moving. . . ."

A moment later a signalling flag began to flutter-flutter.

"Take down the message, and be quick about it," the Colonel rapped out to a signaller.

Meantime the guns and machine-guns had found their target. Shells burst at intervals on the crestline, while bullets spattered laterally along it.

Of the enemy there was no sign. . . . Only now and then in the tremendous local din came the sound of distant firing on the hill, telling the troops below that some sort of battle was being fought up above.

Frontier fighting is a very lonely type of warfare. It is a war of a person or persons against odds that are always in favour of an enemy, who can choose his own ground for attack. Hills that overlook the advance of a Column must, of necessity, be piqueted, however disadvantageous the accidents of ground may appear to the officer detailing men for this task; otherwise deadly sniping from effective ranges would cause havoc among the troops and animals bunched up in the narrow valley below.

It is, then, no very difficult matter for tribesmen, born and bred to mountain fighting, to select some suitable ambush for a murderous assault on a handful of men engrossed in trying to retain their balance as they retire down an abnormally steep hill of loose stones that slip from under their feet. Expert in the art of scouting, Pathans, by using folds in the ground, can crawl to within a few yards of a piquet without being detected; they will play hide-and-seek with any reconnaissance patrol sent out to search the ground.

Then . . . when the last man has left the piquet to bolt for the bottom and safety, it is a matter of seconds for the tribesmen to flash up to the top from a hiding-place near at hand and pour a volley of bullets into the backs of the retreating troops.

Should this manœuvre prove successful, it is followed up by a

charge with knives; for the piquet has had to halt and attend to the dead and dying.

It is the law of the Frontier that no wounded soldier must be left to fall into enemy hands.

Very important, too, is the safety of our rifles and ammunition.

8

The Colonel snatched the message from the signaller and read out the text written in Roman Urdu.

"About fifty enemy fired on piquet from ridge. One man killed, three wounded. Cannot move, as enemy now in position below ridge firing down on us. Send reinforcements."

He looked inquiringly at me.

"My Company—minus the platoon on that hill—is all closed up and ready," I said. "I'll go at once."

"You've got your stretchers with you?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Right-ho. I'll tell the section of the Field Ambulance to send their stretcher-bearers to meet yours at the foot of the hill. . . . And do try and signal me the pin-point position of the enemy. Your piquet does not state clearly where they are, and it makes it very hard for the guns."

"I'll do my best," I promised him.

"Well, good luck, old chap," he said, as I moved off towards my Company. "We'll give you all the support we can."

I saw him fumbling in his haversack for his cheroot-case. Strong weeds kept his mind cool and collected.

Quickly I explained the situation to my Platoon Commanders and non-commissioned officers. There was no time to waste. At any moment the enemy might charge the piquet with disastrous results; for they were superior in strength and held a stronger position.

The Babe was tingling with excitement at the prospects of his first scrap. He shifted his position restlessly, like an impatient horse before the beginning of a race.

"Now, is everything quite clear?" I asked. "Lorrimer Sahib will attack up the left spur with number five platoon, and Subadar Suleiman up the right one with number six. . . . Number seven platoon will advance behind number six under my orders. Its role will be close support, and possibly counter-attack. . . . But I think the enemy will clear off when they see us coming up at them from two sides."

Just as the leading platoons were moving I spoke to the Babe.

"I'm sending you off with number five platoon because I need a responsible officer to take charge. It is a separate attack on its own, though I hope we may be able to keep more or less in touch with one another. Tell your signallers to keep their eyes skinned. . . . We will meet on top of the ridge."

Opening out into suitable deployment formations, B Company began to advance towards the hill, the guns and machine-guns behind firing with renewed zest on to the objective.

A few enemy bullets spattered round us, ricocheting from rocks and boulders with buzzing sounds like angry hornets disturbed in

their nest. So far no one had been hit. The range was a long one, but we were rapidly approaching. Soon we might have to abandon this steady advance in the open and make use of covered folds in the ground to assist us forward.

Five minutes later Suleiman's platoon was ascending the hill, and I took up a position to cover his movement. The enemy fire was steadier now, and the buzzing noises ended in a shrill 'ping'. I could see no sign of the Babe and his men, though a signaller told me he had seen them a minute before near the foot of their spur.

I was surprised the tribesmen had not thought discretion the better part of valour by this time. Soon they would be outflanked . . . provided they held no trump cards in the way of hidden resources. Later I learned they had placed themselves in a very serious predicament.

The Havildar commanding number fourteen piquet, contrary to my somewhat pessimistic expectations, had acquitted himself well and taken every precaution for his safety. Seeing the rear-guard flag moving along the track, he realized that in a very short time his piquet would be withdrawn. Acting in accordance with lessons digested in training, he despatched a strong party of men from his piquet to a covering position three-quarters of the way down the spur along which he intended to withdraw. . . . Suleiman was just reaching them now, and I saw his platoon halt while he conferred with their young non-commissioned officer in command.

I also learned later that this covering party from the piquet must have been overlooked by the enemy. For when the tribesmen arrived on the crest with the intention of destroying the bolting detachment, they were received with well-aimed fire from the contingent down the hill. Checked by this unforeseen volley, they were discomfited still more by shells from the guns that began to find the ridge.

Instead of charging down on the piquet with knives, the Pathans deemed it more prudent to take temporary cover and wait for a favourable opportunity. Casualties had been inflicted and these would have to be evacuated by the unfortunate piquet, making easy targets for men who held the key position. Meanwhile they detailed special marksmen to neutralize the covering party with steady fire while the remainder waited for an opportune moment to assault.

Our advance, however, altered the tactical situation. Sooner or later the tribesmen would have to retire before greater strength in numbers enveloped them from two sides, and to do this manœuvre successfully they would be compelled to pass back over the ridge, which was now an inferno of bursting shells. Below them lay a handful of men hampered by casualties and an unfavourable position, unable to move a yard without attracting deadly fire at close quarters.

It is interesting to consider the psychology of the enemy leader. Life is cheap on the Frontier, though all human beings, for some strange reason, desire to retain physical life as long as they can. A retirement over the ridge was inevitable, and the covering party down the hill being rapidly reinforced was an unfortunate evil. . . .

The tribesman commanding was faced with three alternatives. He could stay where he was and be annihilated; he could retire immediately; he could assault the piquet and then retire.

The first course open to him was too stupid to consider. The second was intolerable . . . he had won considerable success and checked the Column; below him lay a demoralized piquet with rifles and ammunition. Could he ever face the young men and girls of his village again if he failed to take home with him such precious booty?
"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity."

9

It is the role of a commander to make decisions, so the military text-books inform us. How much easier for him it would be if he knew what was passing in the mind of his opponent! Napoleon possessed this gift, and most of the great captains of the past.

I am afraid, at the time, I had no idea what the tribesmen were thinking about on top of the hills, and was merely surprised to see they were staying there so long. . . . Had they decided to die like heroes? Such a chivalrous decision did not seem to me to be quite in accord with my brief experience of Pathans and their methods. But why did they not retire?

From a small *nala* I was able to pick out the position of the enemy by the puffs of smoke from their rifles. I signalled back their location to the rear-guard, though definite reference points were hard to discover among so many rocks of the same shape and size.

Suddenly I saw Suleiman wave a huge hand, and his platoon began to climb upwards.

Still the enemy did not budge.

Such behaviour was extraordinary.

Then in a flash I knew what was going to happen. What an idiot I had been not to think of it before!

"Kneel down!" I roared at my reserve platoon. "Aim in front of the piquet's white flag. Range six hundred."

Almost at the same moment the tribesmen rose to swoop down with loud yells on the piquet.

During the next few minutes the area round the white flag became a shambles.

The charging tribesmen were met with a burst of rapid fire that dropped several of their ranks and put them out of action. Speed, however, and the difficulties of hitting a fast-moving target, carried the remaining odd dozen on to the bayonets of the piquet, which, owing to four casualties, consisted of seven fighting men only.

During the hand-to-hand fight that ensued I found it impossible to render any assistance in the form of covering fire, for friend and foe were mixed up in a hopeless muddle of quivering bodies.

The small party of B Company fought for existence against overwhelming odds. Hacking, slashing, bayoneting, they died at their posts—to such good purpose that only four tribesmen remained on their feet.

Meanwhile, Suleiman's platoon, striving breathlessly to reach the scene of action, had succeeded in ascending to within two hundred yards of the battle.

"On, on, lazy pigs!" I heard Suleiman bellowing at his men, the only time in my service I did not criticize him for making an unnecessary noise.

The four remaining tribesmen now thought it high time to depart.

Bearing off the rifles they had managed to collect, they retired up the slope.

"Kneeling position!" yelled Suleiman. "Rapid fire!"

For the rest of his life Suleiman always swore it was this prompt action of his that turned defeat into victory.

At any rate, the four Pathans dropped like rabbits shot in their tracks, and whether or not they were killed by Suleiman's platoon, my reserve platoon, or stray machine-gun bullets from the rear-guard, will remain an unsolved problem in the annals of the Delhi regiment. Needless to say, the men in each unit claimed the responsibility.

The section of enemy tribesmen—some ten men strong—left behind to neutralize our covering fire during the assault on the piquet at last decided retirement was the better part of valour.

During this activity Lorrimer, advancing up the left spur, saw little of the battle. He told me afterwards that contours and folds in the ground made communication difficult, and it was only by sending his signallers fifty yards away to the flank that he could receive any information as to Suleiman's movements.

After a time he lost touch altogether, and damned the old Indian officer in his mind for not co-operating with him. My orders had been for the two advancing detachments to reach the top of the hill more or less simultaneously.

Realizing he could achieve nothing by waiting, he pushed on. Training in mountain warfare had taught him the importance of speed.

Far away below he could make out my reserve platoon, which had halted. Somewhere on his right continuous firing could be heard; evidently the tribesmen were still in position.

Threequarters of the way up he found that the steep ascent culminated in a false crest of rocks; from there onwards the slope curved gradually to the summit of the hill, which was visible from that point, less than two hundred yards away.

He said that as he breasted this intermediate ridge every feature of the hill came into view, while the panorama of the country lay at his feet like an aeroplane photograph.

It was at this moment that the Pathan marksmen leapt to their feet and flung themselves back over the ridge. Seeing that Suleiman was advancing towards the objective, the Babe hastened on with his platoon.

We all met on the top, the two coincident spurs joining the ridge like the feelers of an octopus.

Two men of Suleiman's platoon had been badly wounded, and one slightly hit. All those in my reserve had escaped.

I pushed out strong patrols to search any broken ground for lingering traces of the enemy, and heliographed a signal message to the rear-guard Commander, telling him the hill had been seized.

I looked at my watch. It said four.

"We shall have to work damned fast," I said to the Babe, "if we want to reach camp before nightfall. It gets dark soon after seven, and God knows how long it's going to take us to evacuate these casualties. . . ."

"And it's nearly three miles to camp when we reach the rear-guard flag," put in the Babe.

"With Grayson's piquets still out on the hills waiting to be withdrawn," I added. "I bet the Colonel's cursing."

"And don't forget the bloody perimeter wall we've got to build when we reach bivouac . . . and the camp piquets."

"And the fact we shall probably be attacked again. The tribesmen are certain to see they have us at a disadvantage."

We both laughed. Suleiman, who did not understand one word of English, politely joined in with a guffaw.

"Well, here are my orders," I said in Urdu. "Lorrimer Sahib will hold this hill with two platoons until I give him the signal to retire. I am going down to the piquet with Suleiman's platoon to superintend the evacuation of the casualties. Suleiman will take up a position from where he can cover the retirement."

I hastened down the hill as fast as I could, slipping and stumbling over rocks and loose stones.

'I'm glad I'm not a stretcher-bearer,' I thought; 'nor would I like to be a wounded man.'

On my way down I passed the four dead tribesmen. Some of the rifles of the piquet were slung across their bodies, the others lay on the ground beside them.

Suleiman rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"Not a rifle lost," he said.

"We haven't got back to camp yet," I reminded him. "Detail some men to collect these rifles, and try and find some sturdy youngsters who can carry the corpses down as far as the piquet. It will save both time and the stretcher-bearers."

Suleiman pursed his lips in disgust.

"Take these pigs with us?" he asked incredulously.

"Do what you're told, at once," I ordered him. "I'm going on. Meet me at the piquet."

This was neither the time nor place to argue with the old man about the finer points of chivalry. Secretly, in my heart, I agreed with him. If I had been captured by the Pathans I should have been castrated by now, unless kept for some more unspeakable revenge. I remembered the case of a captive British officer in 1919 who was handed over to the women-folk to make sport for them. These charming members of the fair sex stripped him naked and pegged him out on the ground. Having cut open his abdomen, they released a pack of starved pariah dogs, which devoured him alive.

Yet many folk in England protest strongly when the Royal Air Force drop a few bombs on a mud village!

10

Round the piquet's white flag the stretcher-bearers were busy, and I was thankful to see that the Gurkha Colonel had reinforced me with a medical officer and ambulance men from the rear-guard.

"What a mess!" said the doctor. "However, evacuation should not be difficult, since only three men are alive. One can bump a corpse about, but one has to be careful with wounded men."

"Has anyone from the piquet survived?" I asked.

The doctor shook his head.

"Take a look," he said. "Besides being slashed to hell, they're riddled with bullets. The tribesmen are all dead too."

"What about two men who are badly wounded? Will they recover?"

"I doubt it. If I could get them into hospital right now they might have a chance. But being jolted down this bloody hill, and then bounced up and down on a camel, is enough to kill anyone not in the best of health."

Two orderlies passed by me bearing a stretcher. I recognized the body of the Havildar who had commanded the piquet so gallantly. I found myself wondering, involuntarily, if his widow would receive a Government pension. Eight months ago, I had given him urgent leave, as a special case, to go and get married.

I counted the dead tribesmen. There were thirteen corpses, not including those Suleiman was bringing down.

A Gurkha runner came up with a message from the rear-guard. He was nearly breathless, having climbed in record time.

"Inform me when you retire so that I can give you all available support."

I took the opportunity to write out a short account of the events that had happened—too long a story for signallers to cope with—and sent back the runner to the rear-guard.

At the foot of the hill I could see the camels of the Field Ambulance. Two were already on their way towards the rear-guard flag, their unshapely canvas panniers containing the casualties swaying grotesquely with their movements. Loud snarls came from the remainder kneeling below as they suffered indignantly the process of being loaded.

Suleiman and I stripped the dead tribesmen of their daggers, ammunition, and belongings, piling them into one heap with their rifles. Then I detailed a small fatigue party to take charge with strict instructions to the N.C.O. that he was to guard this property as if it belonged to the Government.

"Any looting, and you will all be court-martialled," I warned the men. "I have written down the items in my note-book."

The bodies of the tribesmen were carried away, and were those of young men, as far as I could see. But the action of violent death, and bloodstains mingled with dried sweat, had made accurate scrutiny impossible. Indeed the area round the piquet reeked like a slaughter-house, and I could not help wondering how Fish Face would have reacted to the scene. Why I thought of Fish Face I do not know. Probably the old boy would have risen to great heights in an emergency. War has a strange knack of extracting unsuspected qualities in men.

For instance, I had always regarded the Havildar of the piquet as a fool, and earlier in the day had discussed his failings with the Babe. Yet no one possessing brilliant intelligence could have fought more gallantly. Supposing he had failed to send a covering party down the hill, the results would have been twice as disastrous: many more men would have been killed, many rifles stolen, and the tribesmen would have won a sweeping victory with subsequent gain in prestige.

As it was, the Pathans had suffered severe losses both in men and rifles. At the time I did not know, of course, what casualties they had sustained on the crest, for they managed to remove their dead when they bolted. Later we learned that six had been killed,

and at least double that number wounded. So their total numbers of killed reached the figure of twenty-three.

Our casualties had amounted to eleven killed and three wounded. No one in the piquet's covering party had been hit, and I registered the fact that the non-commissioned officer commanding must have selected an admirable position.

But the day was not over yet. Carrying the casualties down the hill was taking an interminable time, and I hardly dared to look at my watch.

Would the last of those wretched camels never start moving? I could have stamped with impatience. The vital minutes were slipping away, and already the sun showed an inclination to dive behind the hills. Thank God there was some sort of twilight in the far north of India. Even so it would be dark in another hour. . . .

Angrily I cursed the higher authorities for allowing the Column to march nearly nine miles at a stretch from Narai to Bandarogha. Such a distance was easy for troops provided they were not molested. But the finest soldiers in the world cannot fight and march at the same time, especially when the route lies through unreconnoitred mountain passes.

Then I cooled down, realizing how impossible it is ever to gauge the Frontier situation. No doubt the tribal elders in the Bandar Valley had done their best to prevent their young hotheads from taking part in rash ventures. 'A little sniping' had been the information given us by the Intelligence Department before we left Zai Khel, though considering the Scouts had sustained five casualties in a previous encounter it struck me that the statement had been somewhat optimistic.

Well, there would be trouble enough now. Even the benign Government could hardly fail to take some sort of punitive measures after the events of today.

I wondered how long we should have to stay out on Column, and thought of old Horace waiting for his master. . . .

Then Firoze Din came up with my whisky-flask in his hand.

"Will the Sahib not drink?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"When we reach the rear-guard flag I'll have a big one," I promised him. Normally I never touched whisky before sundown.

There was a titter of amusement from my Company Headquarters.

Suleiman was in his element. He had enjoyed every minute of the day.

"This affair is nothing," he said boastfully. "Why, I remember ten years ago——"

His reminiscences were interrupted by one of my signallers.

"Look, Sahib, the camels are moving off. . . ."

I sprang to my feet from the boulder on which I had been sitting. Yes, they were off. . . .

I looked at my watch. The time was quarter past six.

"Zero-hour six-thirty," I said to the signaller. "Send that message at once to the rear-guard. Is there light enough for your helio?"

"I've got a lamp," he said.

To the Babe we semaphored the same message.

At six-fifty-five B Company arrived at the rear-guard flag without one shot being fired by the enemy. Actually I had not expected any opposition during this phase. The tribesmen, if they intended to renew hostilities, were not going to attack in an area which was well covered by our artillery and machine-guns. They were much more likely to concentrate elsewhere.

Besides the Gurkha Colonel, a large group of officers was present at rear-guard headquarters. The Brigadier, Brigade Major, our Colonel, and Grayson were amongst those standing there.

"Well done, B Company," said the Brigadier. "They put up a damned good show."

Such unexpected praise was sweet, and I felt ten years younger. The Brigade Commander had made at least one friend for life by his remark, and earned the permanent devotion of one hundred rank and file.

"We're not out of the wood yet," went on the Brigadier, "but the tribesmen have had a nasty lesson, which is all to the good. I am going to try and get you back to camp under cover of darkness, though if we get shot up we may have to stay where we are for the night. After all, the Pathans can see no better than we can, and if we use our heads—and our feet—we ought to get back all right. The Attocks, Punjabis, and the British Battalion are safely in Bandarogha, and have built the necessary defences."

I nudged the Babe.

"It's an ill wind!" I whispered. . . .

The Brigadier turned to the Gurkha Colonel.

"Carry on," he said. "I have installed an Advance Brigade Headquarters with a wireless telephone set three hundred yards down the track, so I can get in touch with Bandarogha if there's any trouble. Send your messages to me there."

Our Colonel came to me and said:

"There's no use in your hanging about here. Push along with your Company to Battalion Headquarters, and be ready to act if I need you. I'm going to stay with the rear-guard till Grayson's piquets are down."

It was now dark, but our eyes had become acclimatized and the track lay clear ahead. I swallowed a big peg of whisky, then passed my flask to the Babe.

"Cheeroh, B Company!" I heard him mutter.

Tramp, tramp, tramp. . . . Sometimes our boots caused sparks to fly from the stones. We tried to move quietly, but inevitable noises proclaimed our departure, and I could see a lamp from one of Grayson's piquets answering a message from the rear-guard.

Presently I saw some dim figures sitting huddled by the side of the road. An officer stepped out in front of me, and I recognized Pearson. We had reached our destination. . . .

"'Here's jolly good luck to the girl who loves a soldier,'" I heard a well-known voice sing *sotto voce*. Then Harris emerged from the shadows.

Apparently Fish Face had been sent on to Bandarogha with the cooks and followers, the object being to provide the men with a hot meal directly we reached camp.

"For God's sake, tell us what's happened," said Pearson. "We know you've had casualties, but no accurate account of your show has reached us."

"Well, it was like this . . ." I began.

My story was rudely disturbed at its inception by the well-known 'crack-crack-crack' of rifle-fire from the direction of the rear-guard.

"Strike me pink!" ejaculated Harris. "Haven't those Pathan bastards had enough yet?"

"I thought they might follow us up," I returned. "After all, in this darkness, they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. We can't possibly afford the risk of breaking up our force by attacking them. Our only hope is to keep concentrated, and try and get to camp."

"My orders from the Colonel," said Pearson, "are to keep Battalion Headquarters moving just behind the Brigade Signal Section." He pointed to a faint light from a torch, where I could see the outline of a man with pads clipped over his ears.

"Crack-crack-crack-crack. . . ."

"Why didn't I join the Church?" groaned Harris. "My mother always wanted me to be Archbishop of Canterbury."

"Here, have a drink," I said, and told Firoze Din to hand over my flask.

"No, thanks," returned Harris. "We have the Mess mule with us here. What about some lobster mayonnaise, or a little *pâté de foi gras*?"

"I'd rather have turkey and ham," I replied. "Then I'd like some strawberries and cream——"

"With fresh asparagus to follow," put in Pearson, "and, of course, champagne to wash it down."

Our flippant conversation was interrupted by an orderly from Brigade Headquarters with a message to say they were moving.

"Load up the mules," ordered Pearson.

Some of the poor brutes had not been watered since morning. Animals are the real sufferers in war.

Slowly we trudged along about three-quarters of a mile, then halted. The Brigade signallers unloaded their wireless apparatus and proceeded to 'get in touch' with the rear-guard.

The firing behind us became intermittent. I wondered how the Gurkha Colonel and Grayson were enjoying their task of withdrawing the piquets. Fervently I prayed that there might not be trouble, as I did not relish the idea of B Company initiating a counter-attack in the dark.

My fears were somewhat dispelled by the Brigadier, who arrived at this moment from the direction of the rear-guard.

"Everything's going fine," he announced cheerily. "Two of Grayson's piquets are in safe and sound. There is only one left to be withdrawn, as the other two were in the camp zone, and I ordered the Attocks to relieve them and take them over as camp piquets for the night."

My estimation of the Brigadier was rising in leaps and bounds. The main body of the Column would have reached Bandarogha in the early afternoon, consequently the men detailed for camp piquets had had ample time to refresh themselves and make necessary preparations for staying out all night. It was a good point in favour

of the Brigadier that he had considered these facts, for the battle raging in the vicinity of the rear-guard must have taken primary place in his mind.

"The tribesmen firing at us now are, I think, only scattered bands of youngsters who feel that this opportunity of loosing off at us is too good a one to miss. So far we have had no more casualties, but there is always the danger of the mules stampeding. . . . Now I must go to the telephone and find out what's happening."

A few minutes later we received orders to move on.

Tramp, tramp, tramp. . . .

Suddenly we emerged round a sharp bend, and Bandarogha camp lay before us. No lights were burning, but we could hear the neighing of horses, and sense the animated bustle of seething life.

"'There's no place like Home'," crooned Harris softly. "I hope Fish Face has remembered to put out my slippers for me."

We halted just inside the gate, and felt immensely relieved to see an efficiently built wall guarded at points by machine-guns and rifle detachments.

"The main body must have worked like Trojans," Pearson remarked appreciatively. "We couldn't have done better ourselves!"

The Brigadier came and stood with us.

"I don't think you will be needed now," he said. "But you had better wait here for a bit. Directly the rear-guard flag comes round the bend it will pass into the range of the camp defences, and then your task will be over."

"Crack-dhong-crack. . . ."

Instinctively I ducked, then felt rather ashamed of myself. . . . The bullets fell nowhere near us.

"Crack-crack. . . ."

This time the volley was followed by the dreadful screaming of an animal in the transport lines.

One of the camp machine-gun posts commenced firing . . . Rat-tat-tat . . . rat-tat-tat.

Then all became quiet again.

"We've got to expect sniping," said the Brigadier

The red flag passed into camp at nine.

During the last mile the rear-guard had sustained three casualties, one being killed and two wounded. A Gurkha detachment, moving to a position from where it could assist one of Grayson's piquets when it had to pass over some broken ground at the foot of the hill, bumped into a party of tribesmen preparing an ambush. A short but sharp engagement ensued, and the Pathans fled into the night in disorder.

Fortunately the affair took place at a distance of only one hundred yards from the track, so the removal of the casualties had been a comparatively easy matter.

Needless to say, we were very grateful to the rear-guard for its help and co-operation.

Fish Face had done quite a lot of work in camp, and food had been cooked during the hours of daylight.

But we could not sit down and eat just yet. . . .

Numerous matters needed attention. The animals had to be watered and fed, men detailed for protective tasks on the perimeter, rifles checked and ammunition counted, the positions of camp piquets ascertained, and what role we were expected to play in the event of an alarm.

I slipped away as soon as I could to the hospital, one of the few institutions which boasted a tent, and enquired after the health of the wounded. There I learnt that one of my badly hit men had succumbed to his injuries, while the other was lying in a precarious state. I was glad to hear that the two Gurkhas had not been seriously wounded, though one of them was suffering great pain from a bullet which had penetrated some nerves.

On my return I found the men settling down. The only water-supply was a well, and the Sappers and Miners had brought a pump with them from Zai Khel which they could use to fill light, portable canvas troughs. Needless to say, a guard had to be posted over the supply, and special times allotted to units to fetch their water; otherwise chaos would have prevailed. The stream, which had been so useful at Narai, was too far from the camp now to prove of service.

Personally I was glad the animals could be watered in the precincts of camp. A journey down to the stream, however near, at this time of night would have been asking for trouble in the form of an ambush.

The enemy sniping had ceased. . . . I wondered what had happened to the wretched animal which had been hit. Thank God it was not one of ours. . . .

I went along to the Mess, and found that dinner was about to be served. There had been no time to dig a trench, so we sprawled on the ground or sat on boxes. Everyone was in excellent humour . . . for all felt the Delhis had acquitted themselves well.

"'There was a young girl of Bandarogha,'" quoted the Colonel drowsily, after an excellent repast of hot soup from Thermos flasks, cold tongue, and pickles, followed by canned apricots. "I wonder if anyone has completed the limerick?"

"Crack—dhong—crack—whizz—bang! . . ."

"Oh, damn the tribesmen!" said the Colonel. "It's time they went to bed. At any rate I shall sleep well, knowing they can't rush the camp."

I looked at my watch. Half past eleven.

"'Little man, we've had a busy day,'" said Harris, as we wandered towards our blankets.

I paused to talk to one of my sentries. We had all spent a 'busy day', but he, poor devil, was going to spend a busy night, too!

As I lay down—we had orders that night to sleep fully dressed—I saw the faint paling of the sky over one of the surrounding hills. Soon the horizon flushed to an amber tint, and once again the moon rose in her majesty to reign over us for a short night. . . .

How oft hereafter, rising, shall she look
Through this same Garden after me—in vain!

'If the moon was of an inquisitive nature,' I thought, 'she would search in vain for quite a number of familiar faces she had known the previous night.'

Perhaps, however, the poet was wrong. It was possible the moon did not care a damn about her subjects. . . .

A loud snore from Firoze Din terminated my meditations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

NEXT day the Column stayed in camp, and the troops received orders to improve the fortifications, somewhat hastily erected the previous afternoon. Colonels and senior officers were summoned to Brigade Headquarters to consider every aspect of the situation.

Meanwhile the Brigadier awaited instructions by wireless from Higher Command.

There was a great deal of discussion in Bandarogha as to what those instructions would be, and betting was heavy on several possible courses of action.

(1) Would the Column be ordered back to Zai Khel, and punishment left in the hands of the Political in the form of an ultimatum to the tribesmen to surrender a certain number of rifles and pay heavy fines?

(2) Would the Column be ordered to remain in Bandarogha pending the arrival of punitive troops from down country? In that case reinforcements would have to arrive quickly, as we only held reserve rations sufficient for two days. That is to say, if we did not return to Zai Khel, the Column could exist on full scale for four days.

(3) Would the Column be ordered to return to Zai Khel, and then, after careful preparation and any necessary reinforcements, instructed to build a road to Bandarogha, gradually consolidating the route as it advanced?

The majority of public opinion favoured the first possibility, but quite a large number of speculators, including myself, voted for the third. I could not believe that the Government would be satisfied by inflicting fines.

Most of us ruled out the second alternative as being impracticable. Our policy on the Frontier is to introduce civilization as soon as possible, not to annihilate several hundreds of tribesmen, a procedure which would defeat that object.

I felt quite certain the Government would build a road.

The Babe, Suleiman, and the men, of course, wanted war. . . .

I reminded them that road construction under opposition was no easy task. There would be sniping, ambushes laid for the unwary, attacks made on isolated detachments. . . .

Indeed there *would* be war, the only difference being that we should not be the aggressors. Most nations would welcome the free gift of a road, but not the Pathans, who consider any incursion into their territory as a flagrant violation of their principles of independence.

There had been no sniping since last night. The hills round Bandarogha camp seemed to be devoid of life and looked peaceful enough under a pleasantly warm sun.

Under cover of a platoon with loaded rifles the Babe marched off

as many men from B Company as he could muster to the stream about half a mile away. There they bathed and washed their socks, shirts, and the few surplus garments they were able to carry in their meagre allowance of kit. Camp water facilities could not cope with such expensive luxuries as the cleansing of four thousand human bodies. Water was needed for the bare necessities of life.

Suleiman and I climbed up a hill to one of the camp piquets from where we could obtain a fine view of the surrounding country. The track from Narai looked startlingly clear, but the hills below us appeared insignificant and comparatively flat, the same as mountain scenery always does to a passenger in an aeroplane. From the height at which we stood it was difficult to imagine what an important role those elevated contours had played in the strategical and tactical march of the Column.

We could trace the camp, a tiny rectangle within its walls. We could see pygmies moving about, hear the faint buzz of some remote, ant-like existence. I tried to observe our Mess through my glasses, and saw a figure which reminded me of Harris.

"How far is it to camp?" I asked the Piquet Commander.

"Just eight hundred yards," replied the Havildar, and produced a range-card in confirmation.

By means of the instrument he knew the distance to every important object near his post. Should the tribesmen attack him from any direction his men could open fire with reasonable accuracy.

Sudden attacks at night were, of course, another matter, but I noticed that his piquet had found sufficient time to erect an efficient-looking fortification of stones. Some of his men were busy at the moment making barbed-wire defences to guard against possible enemy approaches.

"Is the Column going back to Zai Khel tomorrow?" asked the Havildar.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"What do you want to do?" I queried.

He grinned, and then spat.

"I should like to wipe out all those pigs," he said quietly.

A murmur of approval from the piquet sentries showed that his verdict was a popular one.

"Well, perhaps we will," I rejoined.

Suleiman regarded me doubtfully. It was clear he thought me an optimist.

On the way down we passed two mules going up to the piquet. One carried water in small aluminium tanks known as *pakhals*; the other was loaded with supplies. An armed escort led them for war was in the air.

Idly I wondered if there was any dead ground between camp and the piquet in which the tribesmen might set an ambush. At the moment we were still in full view of the piquet. . . .

One cannot expect artillery, rifles, and machine-guns to cover every yard of space in a mountainous country intersected by ravines, false crests, and undulating contours.

We were more or less wrong in all three guesses as to what action the Government would take.

During the course of the afternoon the Colonel returned from Brigade Headquarters to say that the Column had received orders to retreat on Narai the following day. There it would remain pending further instructions, and keep open the route to Zai Khel by means of permanent piquets sited under the direction of the Brigadier. Fresh troops were on their way from British India, and would build a road from Zai Khel to Bandarogha via Narai. The role of the Column was to protect this force during its task and ensure safe communications.

"Christ!" ejaculated Harris. "We shall be out under Field Service conditions for months."

Grayson looked rather wistful, no doubt wondering what his wife would say about this new campaign. The poor man had not seen his new-born baby son, and now it looked as if he might have to wait for months. Successful marriage in the Army is rather a gamble.

The Colonel, on the other hand, looked ten years younger. A war meant extension of service for him. Perhaps, after all, he would be able to send his boy to the University. Once he retired on pension he would never be able to afford the fees.

It's an ill wind . . .

Personally I was rather bored. Twenty years ago the prospects of a war on the Frontier might have fired my youthful imagination. Now I have no axe to grind. I am an old *koi hai* with twenty years' service in an infantry regiment. Many of my contemporaries have risen through their own ability to higher planes, or found a temporary respite in seconded billets with State forces, or other interesting organizations. Sensible Colonels realize that it is good for officers to escape for a while the drudgery of regimental routine. Some Colonels are selfish, and will not let their officers go.

I fear I have been too easy-going to take examinations necessary for high advancement, and perhaps I have lacked the courage to apply insistently for interesting work outside that of my Battalion. As a result I seem to be doomed for ever to go on doing the same work I did twenty years ago.

'A subaltern knows nothing and does everything. A Captain knows everything and does nothing. A senior officer knows nothing and does nothing.'

This may sound an ironical statement, but there is a germ of truth in it. I do not know who the author was, but he must have had both a knowledge of human nature and a sense of humour.

We are all Field-Marsals at the age of twenty-five, ignorant, perhaps, but our ardour carries us along. Later on in life the intrinsic value of high appointments begins to diminish; but we are still interested in the military profession, and we continue to study treatises, manuals, and their amendments. At the age of forty we know exactly what position we have reached after so much labour, and to what rank we may attain provided the gods are good to us and we succeed in winning the fair smiles of our Colonel's wife. By that time courage has left us. We think of pension and a small

cottage on the Downs overlooking the sea. It would be foolish to take any risk when a safe harbour looms in sight.

I have not lost my nerve, I hope. I am just tired of being treated like a small boy instead of as a man reaching comfortable middle age. Twenty years ago I received with zest the helpful suggestions of my Brigadier on how to piquet a hill. Now I feel that instructions in such a subject must be rather a waste of time. Either I know by this time how to accomplish the most elementary task in mountain warfare or else I am terribly inefficient, a menace to the Army and my men.

Six years ago the Delhis served for two years on the Frontier. Then we went down country to a civilized cantonment, with its bungalows, gardens, recreations, and social amenities. There our new Brigadier took us in hand at once. He was convinced we must have forgotten on the Frontier every principle of war as it is waged on the plains. I remember him coming out to see B Company do a small tactical exercise . . . and, of course, in his eyes the whole scheme was wrong. Two years later he complimented the Delhis on parade indicating that under his careful supervision the Battalion was shaping well.

When we heard we had been detailed to go to Zai Khel the Colonel gave us orders to practise again the elementary rules of mountain warfare. Most of us British officers, and many Indian officers, had served before on the Frontier, so our task was not an immeasurably difficult one. True, we lacked mountains up which to climb, but demonstrations on a sand model soon restored to our minds the technical routine of the past.

In Zai Khel the Brigadier smilingly treated us like a prefect receiving new boys at school. Demonstrations on correct procedure were staged for our benefit by battalions which had learned experience. Lectures were given us on how to piquet hills. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the fact that our Colonel had won his Distinguished Service Order for excellent work rendered in Frontier operations in the past!

Now once more we had emerged from the new-boy stage. Thanks to his teaching, the Brigadier regarded us as one of his best battalions. . . .

Is it any wonder that I feel tired? Next year the Delhis move down country again. . . .

Seriously I wonder if I shall have the courage to face a new Brigadier. . . .

The answer, of course, is: "Why not become a Brigadier yourself?"

Well, we will see. At present I am not even a Colonel! . . .

The Gurkhas came to our Mess that night, and interest in the new military situation proved greater than the solution of the Young Girl of Bandarogha.

Obviously leave had been stopped for all ranks—a serious calamity for those who dwell in a barren country where there is nothing else to think about. The Gurkha Colonel had planned to fly home to England on short leave to see his wife, who was ill; another officer

had booked his passage on a boat to Australia; others had made varying itineraries

Would there be a war, or would the bloody Bandar Khels throw up the sponge when they saw the Government meant business? Even if there was no opposition it would take at least six weeks to construct a passable road from Zai Khel. The terrain up to Narai was easy and presented no difficulties, but onwards to Bandarogha the rocky nature of the ground demanded much harder work. Blasting would be necessary to remove some of the huge boulders and smooth the way round overhanging cliffs.

No one minded war. We grumbled at its uncertainty. The Gurkha Colonel was due for leave in three weeks' time. Providing the Bandar Khels behaved themselves, and Government work proceeded satisfactorily, leave might be given again to those having urgent private affairs. On the other hand, leave might still be curtailed.

The Gurkha Colonel scratched his head. Should he cancel his passage? Airways are strict with a passenger who fails to give sufficient warning that he cannot make the journey, and may keep a considerable portion of his deposit money as forfeit.

It was all very difficult.

Personally, I hoped to go on two months' leave to Kashmir in July—the same month as Harris. It was now the first week in May, so I had every hope the Frontier dispute would be settled before the later date. Not that I worried much. My sympathies were all with Grayson. There is some comfort in being a bachelor after all!

'Crack—dhong—crack—dhong! . . .'

Instinctively we ducked our heads, while someone turned down the hurricane lamp which served as our light. The camp defences were sound, and could not be rushed, so the Brigadier had given his permission for lamps and cook-house fires.

Some post on the perimeter answered with machine-gun fire. A white Very light ascended into the heavens.

Then all was again still.

"The Huns having their nightly hate!" said the Gurkha Colonel, who had fought in France in the Great War.

Discussion followed as to whether the Pathans would attack the Column or not next day during its retirement on Narai. Most of us thought they would; they had burnt their boats, so they might as well carry on the good work. The tribal elders, knowing the retribution to come, might try to prevent their young men from taking an active interest in our departure, but it seemed doubtful that they would meet with success.

The total number of casualties to be evacuated were now three—two Gurkhas, and one man from B Company. The poor wretch whom I had seen in such a precarious state last night had died of his injuries early next morning.

Directly we heard that the Column was to stay for an indefinite period in Narai, Suleiman detailed a burial party and disposed of the dead. I hated leaving the bodies in an abandoned wilderness, as I felt sure the tribesmen would unearth them once the Column had gone. Had we been returning to Zai Khel I would have pleaded with the Colonel to allow us to take them there, for then they could

have been laid to rest in a proper cemetery with a Mohammedan priest to attend to the last rites.

The doctors, however, showed little sympathy. Indeed, they resented my having waited so long before giving Suleiman his orders. Bodies decompose quickly in a hot climate, and the weather was getting warm even at our present high altitude.

Kit on Column consisted of shirt-sleeves, shorts, half-putties to grip the ankles, and strong leather sandals known as *chaplies*. I doubt if natives of the Austrian Tyrol could devise a more comfortable costume. The only snag was our headgear. The men wore nice cool *safa* turbans wound round their heads, but we poor officers were doomed to wear *topees*, monstrously heavy contraptions bowing us down under their weight. The *topee* is a grand tradition of the days when our forefathers fought in tight overalls and red coats fastened at the neck over stiff collars. Somehow it has managed to survive the changes of a modern world.

Probably, if war was declared, we should be allowed to wear *safas*, for under Field Service conditions the spit and polish demanded by the Parade Ground must naturally decline. The gleaming of a man's bayonet, or equipment, gives an excellent indication to the enemy of the position of our troops. Likewise the *topee* significantly proclaims the presence of a British officer; for the war of 1919 we wore *safas*, but the good effect was often spoilt by officers not wearing the same kit as their men, and brandishing walking-sticks, which could be spotted miles away. I am afraid I was one of the worst offenders! Yet it is obviously apparent that if officers wish to escape the unpleasant attentions of hostile snipers they must dress, walk, and act in a similar manner to their men.

The Gurkha officers have managed to escape from this pernicious *topee* heritage, even in peace-time, and wear the jaunty hats of their men. But the Gurkhas do not form part of the Indian Army; they are a separate Corps enlisted from the Kingdom of Nepal. They are unaffected by the troublesome process of Indianization, and watch with considerable amusement our well-meant efforts to aid and abet the cause of the down-trodden Babu.

The Gurkha has a great sense of humour—or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say a sublime sense of the ridiculous. The old gentleman slipping on his proverbial banana-skin is certain to provoke unstinted mirth.

The Indian sepoy is quick to see a joke, too, but I think he is more tortuous than the bland, smiling Gurkha, who has been aptly described as the Oriental counterpart of the British Tommy.

The Gurkhas are Hindus; as such, they burn their dead. The Gurkha Colonel told me they had burnt the corpse of their rifleman killed during the final stages of the rear-guard action near Banda-rogha.

Knowing the scarcity of wood on a light-scale Column, I was uncharitable enough to wonder how they had procured sufficient material to erect a funeral pyre.

Perhaps Suleiman would discover their secret when his orderly failed to give him his hot, sweetened tea in the morning.

After dinner some officers of the British Battalion came to visit us. They told us an amusing story about the sniping earlier in the evening.

When, like us, they ducked their heads to escape the enemy volley, they heard a scream from the junior lieutenant, accompanied by the sounds of splintering glass. Sitting up, they saw the youngster drenched in what appeared to be blood. The officer next to him went to his assistance, but was puzzled by an overpowering smell that seemed vaguely familiar. The spectators then saw that the tablecloth, spread picnic-fashion on the ground, was drenched in liquid. . . .

Careful scrutiny revealed the fact that a bottle of Worcester Sauce had paid the supreme penalty. The junior lieutenant had not been touched by an enemy bullet, but his shirt and shorts were ruined.

No trace of the bullet had been found, and it was surmised it must have ricocheted away in irregular flight after striking the bottle and ground.

I wondered whether the tribesmen would ever hear of the results of their shooting. With their special brand of humour they would be the first to appreciate the joke.

Meanwhile, thanks to light-scale operations, our Mess had run out of whisky, and we had to entertain our guests on beer. I registered a note in my mind that I would go pub-crawling tomorrow night, though it was probable that other units were also short of alcoholic supplies.

Never mind. In two days' time the Column would have established permanent piquets between Narai and Zai Khel, and in three, with any luck, the line of communication would be open for the passage of transport convoys.

Then there would be plenty of whisky. . . .

Perhaps I might be allowed to send for Horace.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

THE Delhis and Gurkhas marched in the main body, while the Attocks, followed by the Punjabis, occupied the role of Advanced Guard and Piqueting Troops. The British Battalion had been detailed as rear-guard.

We cleared camp at eight, and settled down to a tiresome march over uneven ground. Today the dirty work was being done for us, though we might be needed to come to the assistance of either the Advanced Guard or rear-guard should those two formations encounter serious opposition.

Personally, I hated marching with the main body. Nothing tired me more than the monotonous tramp-tramp along a narrow track. At one moment a big gap would yawn between platoons; at another we found ourselves bunching together like a crowd at a football

match. It was impossible for the troops in front to maintain a regular step; hence those behind suffered. Sometimes a playful machine-gun mule would rear and plunge—generally on the brink of a precipice—knocking off the *safa* of its sepoy attendant, who was dragged along hanging on to its reins. Occasionally a mule succeeded in disengaging its load, thus causing further delay, while two or three men left the ranks to restore the fallen boxes of ammunition or water-*pakhals* to its erring back.

Every hour it was the custom of the main body to halt for ten minutes' rest. Loads were removed from the mules, and the men divested themselves of their equipment, with the exception of two sections from each Company which were detailed to take up defensive positions overlooking any dead ground in the vicinity. A Commander is responsible for the protection of his unit against surprise, and piquets on the hills, though safeguarding the route, cannot see into every nook and cranny that might hide a handful of men.

About an hour after we left camp Suleiman drew my attention to a droning noise in the sky. Soon an aeroplane circled over us, then passed on towards Bandarogha. Evidently it had been sent from Risalwan the nearest Air Force centre, to assist the Column—and especially the rear-guard.

I knew the Brigade Signal Section possessed no wireless equipment suitable for communication with the air, so the only two possible methods by which the pilot could give his information was either by dropping messages on to the Column—a dangerous business in that mountainous valley, seeing he would have to fly low to carry out his task accurately—or by ordinary land wireless on his return to his aerodrome.

Anyway, it was comforting to see we were supported from the air, and I knew there would be a 'plane flying over the Column all day. Each 'plane would carry out its reconnaissance, and be relieved by another on return to Risalwan. In an emergency perhaps a whole flight would arrive, carrying bombs.

"We're one up on the tribesmen now," remarked Suleiman.

I agreed. At the same time, having flown over the Frontier, I knew how difficult it was to observe movement from the air. It is one matter to note enemy troops marching along a dusty road, but quite another to spot tribesmen moving in their khaki-coloured hills.

Still, we were 'one up'. The tribesmen strongly resented British aeroplanes, maintaining their employment did not comply with the rules of Frontier cricket. They accepted resignedly our artillery, though, no doubt, their forefathers had protested against our using these weapons.

The day was beautiful; not a cloud in the bluest of blue skies. We sweated gently through our shirt-sleeves, and thought of our piqueting friends boiling as they climbed the steep slopes.

Presently we reached the stream. There the main body received orders to halt for an hour and water the animals. This time Harris could find no cause for grumbling, and departed with his machine-gun mules to a clear pool.

The Brigade Transport Officer marshalled the mules and camels as they arrived in single file, and sent them to the water in batches. When they returned they were given their fodder.

An orderly unloaded the Mess mule, and we sat down to a luncheon of sandwiches and beer. The men squatted in groups, eating and smoking.

On the hillocks around us sat men with loaded rifles; sentries watched all possible enemy approaches. After half an hour we sent fresh men to relieve them. They came down with alacrity, took off their equipment, and began to eat their food.

We lay on our backs and smoked. The Babe and Grayson held a competition to see who could blow the best rings into the still air. The Colonel smoked a pipe; Fish Face a cigar.

The aeroplane appeared over us, heading towards Risalwan. Either it had some information to report or was going to be relieved. The droning noise grew fainter. . . .

"Lucky devils, the Air Force," remarked the Colonel. "They always have a home to return to, and a comfortable bed to lie on."

Harris cordially agreed.

"They get shot down sometimes," I reminded him.

"So do we!"

There was no answer to this statement.

"I wonder how the rear-guard is getting on," said Pearson. "It must be about half-way between here and Bandarogha."

"It can't have encountered any opposition," said Fish Face, "or we'd have heard the guns booming."

"Touch wood!" suggested the Colonel. Looking at his watch, he added: "I think we had better get the mules loaded up."

Reluctantly I rose, and Firoze Din helped me fasten my equipment. It had been pleasant sitting here. Now we should have to wade and re-wade through the stream. I wondered how the Sappers would negotiate this river-bed when they built the new road.

2

Half an hour later we heard the guns firing behind us. Automatically the main body halted, while the Brigade Signal Section 'tuned in' with the rear-guard.

The last time I had seen the Brigadier was at the Attocks' headquarters, about a mile towards Bandarogha from the place where we had rested.

Our Colonel, who was the senior officer present, went with Pearson to the wireless set. The men sat down and waited.

A sudden wind rose, and in its wake the clarity of the day changed to a sombre hue. The deep blue of the sky faded, assuming the colour of a dirty sea.

Pearson returned to say that the rear-guard was being closely followed up by about two hundred tribesmen. At the moment it was not in difficulties, having been reinforced by the withdrawn piquets of the Attocks. But the Brigadier considered it advisable to have a spare battalion near at hand, and had ordered the Gurkhas to take up a defensive position astride the ravine. The Delhis were to proceed at once to Narai with the transport and the remainder of the main body and take on the camp piquets and defences. . . .

The Colonel joined us, and we began to march towards Narai. As we passed the Gurkhas they gave us an ironical cheer.

The wind dropped ominously . . . then a huge black cloud surged over the horizon and leapt at us like a mad dog. In a few seconds we were engulfed in the screaming vortices of a dust-storm.

To move was impossible. We crouched in our tracks, leaning against the gale. I saw Harris's *topee* ascend from his head like a rocket, and through laughing at his discomfiture my mouth became filled with sand. I thanked God I was not a mule attendant, though, as far as I could see—which was not far—the animals appeared to be as immobile as we were.

After about ten minutes the storm passed, and we staggered to our feet in a kind of drunken stupor.

Suleiman looked like a miller who had fallen into a flour-bin. His beard was saturated with dust; really he looked more like a dirty representation of Santa Claus than the figure of a soldier.

In vain the men of Harris's Company searched for the missing *topee*, until at last the Colonel decided the Battalion could wait no longer. So Harris tied a handkerchief over his head, and we marched on.

I wondered how the dust-storm had affected the fighting round the rear-guard.

The sounds of gun-firing had ceased.

3

We marched into Narai, dirty and dishevelled, thinking of baths and thanking God there was a sufficient water-supply.

My eyes smarted. When I wiped them a black stain appeared on my handkerchief. I trembled when I thought of the toilet preparations necessary to clean Suleiman's beard.

Having stayed in Narai on our way to the Bandar valley, we thought little manual labour would be required in camp. Alas! Some roving Pathan scavengers had visited the site during our absence and unearthed the refuse so carefully buried by our sanitary sections. What is more, they had knocked down the perimeter wall in several places. Big fatigue parties would have to be detailed to repair the destruction.

Still, we had reached our destination. We were home. We had with us our bedding, food, and drink. The guns had started to boom again, but we were unlikely to be shifted from our anchorage.

The immense baggage train threaded its way into camp, but this time every man knew where to go. There was the chaos of moving men and animals, but no chaos due to uncertainty. Within a few minutes of arrival our Mess cook was preparing tea. Within half an hour the canvas tanks were filled, the water chlorinated. Fires crackled and hissed; soon savoury smells rose from the cooking-places.

The Punjabis had piqueted the second half of the route from Bandarogha to Narai but they had used up all their reserves. No men were available to help repair the defences.

Six aeroplanes suddenly appeared, flying in formation towards the battlefield. A few minutes later I saw three of them dip . . . I thought I heard the explosion of the bombs, but could not be certain. I calculated that the rear-guard must be about four miles away.

The time was now four-fifteen. Two and three-quarter hours' more daylight.

Presently a string of ambulance camels, escorted by a small guard, arrived in camp. Doctors and orderlies removed the casualties from the panniers. Some of our men had already pitched the hospital tent.

"One British officer seriously wounded, one Tommy killed, and three wounded," reported the Babe, whom I had sent to make inquiries.

Later we heard that the British officer was the young subaltern who had been the hero of the Worcester Sauce episode. 'Troubles never come singly' appears to be a correct proverb.

The camels, to their intense indignation, were now made to rise to their feet. Instead of being able to rest and enjoy some succulent forage, they were led out of camp and taken back along the river-bed towards Bandarogha. The rear-guard might need them in the event of abnormal casualties.

I sympathized with the camels. Animals have a great sense of what is proper and just. I remember elephants piling teak in Rangoon which flatly refused to continue work once the midday bugle for rest and food had sounded. They dropped the logs from their trunks, remaining deaf to all entreaties. When the second bugle called them back to labour they grunted and groaned like a party of old women. Nevertheless, they began to work again.

Animals which have been out on Column know all the routine, and when they reach an obvious camp at the end of a day's march they do not expect to be made to do a return journey to their original starting-point. Taking stores to the piquets is quite another matter, and accepted with resignation.

Five o'clock. . . .

Now we could hear the distant sound of machine-gun fire as well as the guns. We had sent a signal section with a helio and lamp up to one of the camp piquets, hoping it might establish communication with Brigade Headquarters, the rear-guard, or possibly the Gurkhas.

So far no piqueting troops withdrawn by the rear-guard had entered camp. Obviously the Brigadier was concentrating all the troops he could muster.

I saw three aeroplanes dip again . . . this time I heard the bursting of the bombs, and the redoubled clamour of machine-gun fire. . . .

Then the three 'planes rose. Presently I saw the six flying high in perfect formation.

4

The firing died down as the rear-guard drew nearer Narai. Either the tribesmen had been given enough medicine for one day or they found the country opening out too much for their liking. It had been easy to harass the Column in the ravines from precipitous hillsides, but now the widening river-bed was drawing them into unnecessary exposure. Also, had they not driven the accursed Government troops out of their valley? Their womenfolk should be well satisfied with the day's work.

Five-fifty. . . .

Formed bodies of men, chiefly Attocks who had piqueted the first half of the route, began to enter Narai. I could see distant machine-gun mules being off-loaded, and figures hurrying to take up fire positions. A mountain battery came towards us at a fast trot, then unlimbered within a few yards of camp. In half a minute the guns were in position and ready for action. Signallers followed, paying out from a drum a long line of telephone cable.

Horses with their grooms, first-line transport, ambulance camels . . . all seethed down the river-bed towards Narai.

Presently I saw a group of horsemen heralded by an orderly carrying a lance on which fluttered a blue pennon. The Brigadier was approaching with his Staff. The riders dismounted near the battery. The Brigadier spoke to the Gunner officer, then scanned the country through his field-glasses.

Six-fifteen. . . .

The British Battalion, which had handed over its task of rear-guard to the Gurkhas, after retiring through their defensive position, now came in view. The Attocks had all arrived safely in camp. Three of their men had been wounded during operations earlier in the day.

The Brigadier left the battery and came to our headquarters inside the entrance to the perimeter. The Colonel pointed out to him our machine-gun posts, and the position of our reserves.

Suddenly the battery opened fire . . . a few seconds later we saw a puff of white smoke on the crest of a hill about three thousand yards away . . . then we heard a faint 'plomp'.

"The enemy have gone," said the Brigadier, "but I'm taking no chances."

Six-thirty-five. . . .

At last the rear-guard flag appeared in sight. Slowly it moved towards us—then halted. Large and red, it could be seen for miles.

The river-bed was a hive of activity. Gurkhas and Punjabis swarmed everywhere.

Again the battery opened fire, this time at a much closer range. We saw the shell burst high above the retiring piquet descending the slope.

'Rat-tat-tat' belched the machine-guns. We could see the dust spatter from the bullets traversing along the evacuated crest.

"That's the stuff!" approved Harris. "Some of that dope the day before yesterday, and there would have been no casualties."

"We weren't at war then," the Colonel reminded him. "We were supposed to be on a peace march—until the tribesmen let us down."

5

The rear-guard had timed its operations with skill, for a few minutes after seven the red flag passed majestically into camp, shepherding all before it.

Baths! How we longed for baths! The sepoy, poor devils, would have to wait until the following morning. The stream was outside the perimeter, and even if it had been safe to let the men bathe under cover of darkness, a great deal of work remained to be done before indulging in luxuries.

Actually, I feared there would be little rest or relaxation for the men next day. The Column had been ordered to open communications between Narai and Zai Khel. Staying as we were for an indefinite period in Narai, it was imperative that we completed our task as soon as possible.

The Column needed fresh supplies of rations and stores; wounded and sick men had to be evacuated; and some sort of post-office service was required.

It was the duty of the Column to ensure the freedom of the road. Now we had left their valley the Bandar Khels were not likely to offer us serious opposition. The fun would begin when the new road felt its way through the ravines towards Bandarogha.

However, sufficient unto the day . . .

The Punjabis had sustained no casualties, due to their piqueting the second stage of the route. Among the Gurkhas, one man had been slightly wounded; he had been able to walk to Narai. In addition to the casualties evacuated to camp in the early afternoon, two more Tommies had been wounded.

Three mules had been wounded; two were destroyed by the rear-guard where they fell. The other, hit in the neck, had been brought back to camp.

All horses and camels had escaped injury.

6

All Commanding Officers were summoned to Brigade Headquarters to discuss the operations for the following day. It was nearly half past nine when our Colonel returned.

With a sinking feeling I realized it would be past midnight before we saw our bedding. Pearson would have to write his orders, and these would have to be communicated to Indian officers and men.

"I will tell you first the Brigadier's ideas," said the Colonel. "Brigade Orders will be coming round shortly, just as soon as Lintott can get them written.

"The distance to Zai Khel is thirteen miles, and the ground fairly easy from the point of view of protection. At the same time, it is a long way to be responsible for. Supposing a permanent piquet ten miles from Narai is attacked, how can we support it from camp? Such an isolated detachment would be annihilated before we could assist it.

"The Brigadier considers, therefore, that a chain of permanent piquets dependent on Narai would be impracticable.

"Supposing, then, we rule out permanent piquets, and decide to march out every morning as a Column. We open the road by putting up temporary piquets, stay out all day, and return in the afternoon when work is done, withdrawing the piquets behind us.

"Again there is a hitch. This plan would mean that the Column—or part of it—is forced to march twenty-six miles every day. Indeed, we might just as well return to Zai Khel and open the road from there.

"But the Government is particularly insistent that we keep a force in Narai. This place lies at the entrance to the Bandar valley, and we can keep our eyes on any truculent tribesmen who try to

interfere with the construction of the road. A column here may well serve as a deterrent, and an advanced base will be useful to all concerned.

"The Brigadier's solution is that we must have troops between here and Zai Khel. Thirteen miles is too great an area for one concentrated Column to look after. He has decided, therefore, to send the Delhis and a battery of guns to Kharab Bibi. . . ."

Instinctively we tried to peer at our maps, but the Colonel stopped us.

"Do you remember a small plateau above the river-bed, about six miles from Zai Khel?" he asked. "There's a small village near it with a watch-tower."

I remembered perfectly. It was the place where Firoze Din had given me some beer.

"Well, that's where we're going. The Column—minus one battalion remaining in camp—is taking us to Kharab Bibi tomorrow, and will see us settled in before it returns to Narai. Our task will be to open the road every day to Zai Khel. The Column is responsible for the sector Narai to Kharab Bibi."

"A damned good show," said Grayson approvingly. "We shall be on our own with no one to worry us."

I agreed, wondering if I should be able to fetch Horace from Zai Khel.

"What about the village?" asked Fish Face. "Shall we have any trouble from there?"

"I shall see that the guns lay a permanent bead on it," replied the Colonel. "Any nonsense and we'll blow it to bits."

"That's the stuff!" approved Harris. "By the way, Kharab Bibi means 'Bad Women' when translated."

We all laughed.

"I wonder if the women are bad in the loose sense," went on Harris, "or bad in the way they cut up prisoners."

"Bad in every sense and way, I should think," said Pearson.

"I'm told some of the Pathan women are very pretty," ventured the Babe.

Harris stared at him severely.

"Hands off, Babe," he reproved. "If those women capture you with your golden locks I don't know what might happen. Some years ago a British officer with red hair was seized by the Pathans and kept for breeding purposes. You see, they hoped his children would have red hair. . . ."

"And did they?" asked the Babe.

"I don't know. The British officer was never heard of again; but he must have had a damned good time while it lasted."

An orderly marched up and saluted.

"Brigade orders," said Pearson, scanning the sheets. "We march at eight." He turned to the Colonel. "Do you want me to write out any further orders, sir?" he asked. "The Delhis march at eight with all their goods and chattels . . . that's all there is to it."

"To hell with orders," said the Colonel, who had been enjoying the interrupted conversation. "If Company Commanders can't tell their men what to do without a lot of written bums, well, they ought to resign their commissions."

The Babe and I rose, and went off in quest of Suleiman.

CHAPTER NINE

I

SEVEN days later Kharab Bibi had grown into a presentable and fairly comfortable camp. Tents had taken the place of bivouacs. Extra kit and stores had made a welcome appearance. Further, the Brigadier said we might send for our dogs, for we were no longer on Column, but a protective detachment performing fixed duties.

The first day we opened the road I went into Zai Khel. Old Horace nearly knocked me down. Tina was hardly less effusive. I brought them out in triumph to our new residence.

'Opening the road' was rather fun. After the first few days the Brigade which had arrived from down country assisted in the work. We met half-way between Kharab Bibi and Zai Khel. Then, in the late afternoon, we retired on our respective camps.

With other troops to help, it was now no longer necessary to use the whole Battalion on road protection. One rifle company was detailed daily with a section of machine-guns in support. The battery stayed in camp; it had registered all the important objectives up to three miles, so there was no point in moving it.

I liked opening the road. At six in the morning darkness Firoze Din woke me, a mug of steaming-hot tea in his hand. I tumbled off my camp-bed—luxurious requisite from Zai Khel—shaved, washed, and dressed. A swift breakfast in the Mess consisting of porridge, followed by eggs, and I was ready for the day's adventure.

Each time I left camp I tried to vary the procedure of operations; somewhat limited in scope, since certain dominating features always had to be piqueted. Sometimes I sent my piquets up from the river-bed. At other times a roving flank-guard moved along the hills, dropping piquets as it passed. There were times when I did not send any men up an important crest, and trusted to the machine-guns below to give sufficient aid when needed. I was determined that the watchful tribesmen should not pin me to a definite routine.

By nine o'clock we reached a raised island in the river-bed, the recognized meeting-place between the 'up' and 'down' troops. Here I chatted with my opposite number. The road was now opened for traffic.

Soon afterwards the convoy appeared—strings of camels wending their way to Narai via Kharab Bibi. In the afternoon it would return. Then, when the last camel bearing a red flag had passed, I was allowed to begin the withdrawal towards camp.

After the first two days relays of camels were stabled in Narai. They were employed on the 'down' convoy. In this way the 'up'-going and 'down'-going animals met at Kharab Bibi, where they transhipped loads, thus saving a great deal of time.

Once I arrived at the island there was no more work to be done, but I kept a small reserve near at hand to guard against emergencies. So far the tribesmen had displayed no hostility, and their lack of enterprise was our chief danger. There was always the chance that the men of one of our piquets, lying on a crest for hours at a stretch, might fall into a comatose state under the influence of the warm sunshine.

The Babe, keen youngster, fretting at the enforced inactivity

volunteered to pay surprise visits to certain piquets at odd intervals.

A good idea. I gave him a small escort, and sent him off rejoicing. Personally, I enjoyed the long hours on the island, and found time to refresh my memory of Rudyard Kipling. The last time I had read his poems was while sitting in a *machan* waiting for a tiger to return to its kill. I remember I had become so engrossed in the fickleness of Delilah Aberyswith and 'most mean Ulysses Gunne' that I failed to notice for some time that my quarry had returned and was lying beside the carcass. Fortunately, the magnificent beast had not seen me.

2

Soon the road had passed the island along the far bank of the river-bed and, like a snake, wound its way round a corner in the direction of Narai.

Opening the road became a much more interesting task.

Following in the wake of the 'up' troops came lorries and Ford vans bearing engineers and personnel. The river-bed was alive with men carrying stones, loose earth, and sifting. Suddenly one would hear a dull roar in the distance and see a volcanic eruption of boulders and rocks shoot into the sky.

In some places where there was loose sand the Sappers pegged down wire netting in order to facilitate the passage of wheels over the treacherous ground.

No heavy rain had fallen yet; only a few thundery showers, which had caused little damage. Always, however, we were on our guard. One severe tropical storm could dislocate temporarily the functions of the main road from Zai Khel to Risalwan, destroy bridges and culverts, and submerge railway lines erected in the civilization of down country. We could not expect our road to Narai to prove the exception to such a test. Presently, perhaps, concrete would triumph over sand, but at the moment the urgent demand was for a highway capable of swift communications in the hour of need.

The monsoon failed to penetrate to the far north where we served, but at such a high altitude rain was fairly constant in the summer, consisting usually of sudden storms varying in magnitude which lifted as quickly as they came. Hail pellets the size of pigeons' eggs had been known to destroy goats, and left the hills covered with a mantle of false snow.

Meanwhile, the reinforcing Brigade waited near Zai Khel in a perimeter camp of its own construction. Already the Commander had visited Narai and discussed the situation with our Brigadier, and his Battalion Commanders often took their subordinate officers up the road towards Kharab Bibi, studying the country with a view to possible future contingencies. They came and talked to me on the island, and I asked them how they liked being pulled away from their comfortable bungalow lives in cantonments. Most of them rejoined that they preferred the Frontier to stations down country, finding the work much less irksome.

I agreed with them. Life in big cantonments these days is not worth living. Too many senior officers are fired with ambitions to become the Commander-in-Chief. As a result they pester their juniors by arranging a substantial training programme of tactical

exercises, demonstrations, debates, essays, lectures, and sand-model exercises which successfully prevent regimental officers from carrying out their normal functions—namely, commanding their men. By these means the senior officers hope to impress their still more senior officers. Thus life in the Army goes on!

For six months down country I hardly ever saw my Company at all. When I was not engaged in some paper battle involving modern instruments of war, which certainly will never appear in India for the next fifty years, I found myself appointed President of a Court Martial, detailed as member of some Board ordered to report on men's socks, or else elected as Supervising Officer in a promotion examination.

"What does an anti-tank gun look like?" Suleiman asked me one day.

I was unable to answer his question, for I have never seen one. Yet in all our training schemes we are supposed to introduce these mythical weapons. Perhaps they will arrive in India when the Babe becomes a Major-General, but by that time, no doubt, there will be many more advanced scientific discoveries 'used in imagination' . . .

No, I prefer the Frontier to down country. There is only one type of warfare suitable for the hills, and the most ambitious General can hardly ask us to consider anti-tank guns when our foes are not provided with armoured vehicles.

The curse of the Frontier is, of course, sexual starvation. Years ago as a subaltern I was forced to spend a whole year in an outpost without leave—fortunately, an unusual predicament. When I went down country the voices of two women talking nearly made me jump out of my skin. I had become so accustomed to the deep tones of men that it took me some time to attune myself to the higher quaverings of the fair sex.

Leave? Should we get any leave this year? I wondered.

Poor Grayson. Poor Gurkha Colonel.

3

With the arrival of the new road-head at Kharab Bibi, the reinforcing Brigade sent one battalion to join us. Part of the perimeter wall had to be demolished, then reconstructed to contain our fresh allies.

The Engineers and Army Service Corps officers and personnel, with their mechanical transport, made their headquarters with us. The 'up'-going camels, which hitherto had been employed between Zai Khel and Kharab Bibi, were now no longer required, a motor convoy traversing that sector of the route.

Still the tribesmen preserved discreet silence.

The Political Agent summoned the elders of the Bandar Khel to a conference—or *jirga*, as it is called—in Zai Khel. The *jirga* is a recognized law of Frontier cricket, providing automatically a temporary armistice during which no ruffian, however despicable, would dream of opening hostilities.

We heard later that the meeting had been fairly satisfactory. The Political demanded the surrender of the man who had murdered the Gurkha, a fine of twenty-five thousand rupees and the surrender

of six hundred rifles. Further, a road would be built as far as Bandarogha, and troops maintained permanently in the Bandar valley at the discretion of the British Government.

The elders accepted the ultimatum, but said they could not be certain of the attitude of their younger brethren, nor could they hand over the murderer, as he had fled into Afghanistan. A notorious priest, known as the Mullah of Dand, was preaching fanaticism and trying to promote a holy war to protect Islam.

"We old men know that we cannot prevail against British Authority," said a spokesman. "But the rising generation always thinks it knows best. Youth loves to fight."

"Well, you had better persuade your young men," cautioned the Political, "or it will be the worse for you. Any nonsense, and we shall burn your villages and drive you homeless over the hills."

We read an account of the *jirga* in the newspapers. Speculation ran high as to what the results would be.

The Mahommedan *mullahs* of the Frontier, fearing to lose their power as civilized and economic conditions improve, hasten to exert their influence in the hope of stemming any invasion of their territories. They find ready listeners in the young men, and trade on their conceit. The Pathan suffers from an overwhelming vanity in his own prowess, and needs but little stimulant to his imagination to make him feel he can defeat five sepoy single-handed.

I kept a Pathan servant once, who had been born in British India, as I thought thereby I might improve my knowledge of the Pushtu language. Never again! The youth swaggered round the bazaars as if he was lord of all creation, and the Hindu vendors fed his insolence with their respectful salaams. He could have robbed them—and I dare say he did—and no one would have dared to report him to the police. Like most bullies, he would probably have bolted if any man had plucked up sufficient courage to assault him.

He was handsome, and, I think, faithful. But I did not keep him long enough to test his loyalty. My brother officers complained that he was causing trouble amongst their servants, so I dismissed him. When I paid him off, to my great surprise he burst into tears. I catalogued his weakness as being due to injured vanity rather than to love for his master!

Pathans are great wanderers, especially those born in spheres under British control, such as Risalwan district, which fringes the Frontier borderland on the Indian side. You will find them stoking the furnaces of ocean liners that ply between Europe and the Orient, attending horses in Australia selected for Indian importation, and gambling in the bazaars of Shanghai.

The uncivilized tribesmen of the border send rifle thieves on expeditions to down-country cantonments. Any stolen arms are promptly buried. Months later, after the hue and cry has subsided, they are unearthed and transported northwards by various means. I have already related how one ingenious method was detected by a young officer commanding an outpost.

"There seems to be a great deal of difference between Pathans and tribesmen," the Babe said to me one day, "yet you frequently call the latter Pathans too."

I reminded him that the term 'Pathan' denotes a certain sect, like 'Rajput', and is again divisible into many sub-classes. The

Pathans vary in their clans from the peaceful settled peasants of Northern British India to the lawless Mahsuds, Wazirs, and Afridis, who dwell in the barren frontier hills and whom the progress of time has not yet succeeded in taming.

4

A few days later the road reached Narai, and the Engineers and Mechanical Transport men departed to take up their residence at the new terminus, leaving behind a few details for emergencies and a breakdown gang.

One morning a shy-looking youngster climbed down from the leading lorry of the up-Convoy and asked for the Delhis' Mess. He was Evans, a new officer posted to us.

The Babe was delighted to receive a contemporary, junior to himself.

"There'll be someone else to do the bum jobs now," he commented.

Poor old Babel! As the child of the family he had always been given any dirty work that demanded the use of intelligence slightly higher than that of an Indian officer. Actually, it was good for him, and I know he liked it.

He was indefatigable in hundreds of ways, and equally adaptable when he was in charge of a party constructing a new hockey ground, supervising the stable routine of the regimental horses and mules, or training the sports team for a competition.

"Can you play hockey?" Pearson asked our new-comer at lunch.

A very important question. We needed fresh blood. Grayson, our star centre-forward, was 'getting on' in years, and anxious to hand over his sceptre to anyone qualified to carry it. Pearson was a useful centre-half, and the Babe a promising left back. I was very keen on the game, but had sunk gradually from regimental standards to an inconspicuous place in the B Company team.

"I have played a bit at right half," said Evans. "But I'm no good, I'm afraid."

It was difficult to tell whether this statement was true or due to becoming modesty. Evans was short in stature, but stocky in build. He looked healthy and active, and had dark hair. Rather a good fellow, I thought.

"Well, we'll soon find out how you play," said the Colonel. "But we shall have to wait till we get back to Zai Khel. The ground here is too bloody awful for hockey, and we haven't got time to make one. Our chief recreation here is basket-ball——"

"And kicking a football about," put in Grayson; "though that's not much catch. When the ball bounces on the stones you never know what angle it is going to take."

"A foul country," said Harris sadly. "Whatever made you join the Indian Army?" he asked Evans.

The boy laughed.

"I think the Frontier is just marvellous," he rejoined, smiling at Harris, whose eyebrows had risen in astonished query. "I've always wanted to serve on it, and I think I'm dashed lucky to get posted to a regiment that's there."

"Mercy me, and bleeding snakes!" ejaculated Harris, but he returned Evans's smile.

How often a chance remark, or an incident trivial enough to all outward appearances, may shape a man's destiny!

I could read visible approval in the Colonel's face. If Evans had been carefully coached, he could not have made a speech more calculated to appeal. Old grumblers though we were, we loved the regiment and all the fine traditions behind it, and we could not fail to be touched by the spontaneous enthusiasm of youth standing before a world waiting to be conquered.

"You will join Grayson's Company," said the Colonel.

"Bad luck!" sympathized the Babe, laughing. "But we can't all join the best Company, you know. I got to B Company first."

Grayson threw his napkin at the Babe.

"You need a damned good kick up the bottom, Babe," reproved Harris sternly. "One of these days you'll get it."

5

The same night, following regimental custom, we 'dined' our new subaltern. As a regimental guest he sat in the place of honour on the Colonel's right, and was regaled with as much free drink as he choose to imbibe.

The scene, perhaps, lacked the splendour of a down-country Mess where red-coated bemedalled officers, booted and spurred, take their seats at a polished mahogany table loaded with gleaming silver. In Kharab Bibi there was no band to play us into dinner to the tune of 'The Roast Beef of Old England', and then charm us with the strains of popular musical airs. No portraits of ancient Generals, famous in the past, or Royalty, stared at our revels from dim places on the walls.

Here our Mess was a tent, and unbreakable camp crockery represented the customary silver. Our clothes were 'Blue Patrol', and we sat on folding chairs under the bright glare of an acetylene lamp. During active operations our bandsmen were employed as ambulance stretcher-bearers; their instruments remained behind in the depot.

However, the Mess owned a gramophone, and after dinner the Babe played it. Evans not being a bridge-player, we decided to gamble mildly at *vingt-et-un*. Presently some officers from the reinforcing battalion came in for drinks. We made them join the game.

A fog of cigar and cigarette smoke filled the tent like a gas cloud. The watchful servant at once replenished any empty glass.

After two hours the game palled. So we stopped playing and began to tell dirty stories. Fish Face, to my surprise, produced a really good one. I wondered if he had culled it from Muriel.

We retired to bed in the early hours of the morning.

The camp lay in sleeping stillness, broken by the occasional fretful wailing of a dog in the village. I wondered what the inhabitants were doing. Were they all asleep, or were the principal characters hatching some foul plot to assist the Mullah of Dand? So far they had paid us no attention, except that a few vendors had

approached the perimeter gate with the apparently peaceful purpose of selling chickens and eggs. The Colonel, when he heard of it, gave instructions to gate sentries to allow no tribesmen within a distance of two hundred yards of the camp.

Quite right, too. There is a story that many years ago the sepoy of a small detached post were visited by some charming women. These fairies halted outside the piquet, proclaiming by no uncertain gestures that they were prepared to offer their services for a small remuneration. Greatly allured, and hypnotized by such unexpected good fortune, the guard commander and his stalwart warriors sauntered out to inspect the beautiful damsels.

Alas! All is not gold that glitters. These lovely girls, having ogled their prospective lovers into a state of idiotic enchantment, suddenly uttered loud yells and drew their knives. . . .

The sentry on duty in the piquet was rushed before he could recover from his surprise. The guard commander and his merry men were slashed to pieces, and portions of their anatomies removed in triumph and kept as trophies.

In that small encounter the Government lost eight sepoy, eight rifles, six thousand rounds of ammunition, one light automatic gun two boxes of bombs, one week's reserve rations for the piquet, and a good deal of equipment.

How did the tribesmen deceive the piquet? Quite easily. A Mohammedan woman wears long sweeping garments, and a burnous over her head which can be used as a veil. Tell-tale hands can be hidden in lengthy sleeves, and as much or as little of the face exposed as desired.

Suleiman always loved this story, and was wont to cap it by one in which he maintained that a gang of tribesmen disguised themselves as a herd of goats, crawling on all fours towards an unsuspecting post. . . .

Somehow I do not believe him.

6

I have heard many extraordinary stories about the Frontier, but must give the Colonel first prize for describing the one that seemed to me to be the most incredible.

The Mess, as usual, had been the scene of his discourse; the time after dinner, and after the port and brandy had made more than two journeys clockwise round the table. We were in the throes of packing up, down country, preparatory to our long journey by rail and road to Zai Khel.

The conversation turned, somewhat naturally, to a discussion on the tribesmen we should so soon encounter, and their characteristics. Harris had made the statement that no officer or man of the Government forces who in time of war fell into the enemy hands ever had the good fortune to succeed in escaping with his life; rather did he die a painful and lingering death. . . .

I remember I agreed with Harris, but was somewhat bored. I had served many years on the Frontier before, and had heard so often this kind of talk. And to my knowledge the number of men who had been taken alive by the tribesmen could be counted on the

fingers of one hand. No General, Colonel, Junior Officer, or Non-Commissioned Officer would ever abandon his men unless the situation was so desperate that no other course was possible. . . .

I was somewhat surprised, therefore, to hear the Colonel remark that he knew a British officer who had been seized by the enemy in war, and yet lived to tell the tale.

"It happened in the year nineteen hundred and eight," the Colonel said, "when I was a junior Captain in the Topak Rifles. We were part of a large Column operating in the very heart of tribal territory not so far from Zai Khel, where we are going now. . . . You have heard of the Salm Tangi? Some of you have been there, I dare say. . . ."

I knew the place well, a ravine narrowing in between high cliffs.

"One of the Topak companies," continued the Colonel, "was commanded by a fellow called Warburton; a good chap, and very efficient. The men worshipped him.

"Well, it was in the vicinity, as I have said, of the Salm Tangi that the event occurred—the 'narrows', through which the Column had to pass. This death-trap was some three hundred yards long by thirty yards wide. There is a road now over the cliffs, of course.

"At the northern end stood a hill which overlooked the cliffs, though the actual passage through the 'narrows' was invisible from it. On the summit of this hill one of Warburton's piquets got into difficulties, and was shot down at by tribesmen who occupied a position on a high ridge about two hundred yards away. . . . You know how often it happens that one climbs a hill from which one feels there will be a good view, only to find there is another higher hill behind. And one cannot go on climbing indefinitely!

"Warburton at once collected all available men of his company and went to assist. He succeeded in getting into such a position on a neighbouring ridge that he was able to bring enfilade fire to bear on the enemy, and the piquet was able to retire on the rear-guard. Unfortunately, Warburton's detachment also got into trouble on the way down, and was ambushed by some of the enemy who had managed to work round and conceal themselves in dead ground. . . .

"As I have mentioned, a good deal of country was invisible from the 'narrows', and for some reason or other a covering party allotted to the cliff area had retired at the same time as the piquet. Evidently the Commander thought that Warburton was out of danger and could manage to move supported by his own weapons.

"Alas! This was not the case. Warburton's crowd was cut to pieces, and he himself taken alive."

"When the tragedy became known, the enemy had gone.

"A score or so of corpses bore testimony to the scrap, but of Warburton there was no sign. One wounded man pointed vaguely at the hills before he too perished out.

"The wretched rear-guard Commander was in a dreadful state. What could he do? There was nothing definite to attack—the tribesmen might be anywhere; and he had insufficient forces at his disposal to risk a wild-goose chase through hostile country. Also, it was getting very late, and there were several more piquets to be withdrawn before camp could be reached.

"It was a situation which, I trust, none of us will ever be in.

"The rear-guard Commander made the only decision he could

under the circumstances. He continued to withdraw the piquets, and sent a message to Column Headquarters relating what had occurred."

Here the Colonel had paused dramatically, and taken a long drink from his glass. . . .

"The rest of the story," he continued presently, "comes, of course, from Warburton himself, since he lived to tell the tale.

"The tribesmen carried him off until they reached a zone which they considered safe. They then set him on his feet and made him walk—he had an ugly knife-wound in the left shoulder, and was faint from loss of blood. Beating and kicking him, they reached, eventually, one of their villages. By that time it was quite dark.

"Warburton was flung into a room and locked up for the night. To make quite sure he did not die, they saw to it that he had water. Death was to come later.

"Next day, about noon, he was hauled out of his prison and led to an open square round which all the village inhabitants were sitting. The children screamed with excitement when they saw him, and danced with glee in anticipation of the fun to come. On the rooftops women peered through the slits of their veils, anxious not to miss one moment of such a drama.

"In vain poor Warburton scanned the cruel faces in search of any sign of sympathy. Rows upon rows of evil-looking scoundrels, yet handsome in a villainous way with their clear-cut features—some people say these tribesmen are the lost tribe of Israel—sat gloating over their wretched victim, an unholy light of joy in their eyes.

"There was little delay. Two ruffians, who had played a major part in his capture and custody, advanced on him and stripped him stark naked.

"There were shrieks of laughter from the women and children, and roars of derision from the men.

"One of the two ruffians now went away into the sitting crowd; a moment later he returned with an enormous knife. The second tribesman trussed up Warburton's legs with cord, but not his wrists. He was thus free to wriggle to his heart's content, and to the amusement of the onlookers. The more he tried to stop the executioner in his task, the more they would laugh.

"As the executioner, smiling evilly, stooped over him, Warburton recoiled in horror, feebly putting up his hands to ward off the knife.

"There was a shout, and a big bearded Pathan elder leapt into the ring, pulling the murderer away.

"Warburton, half starved and sick from his wound, fainted.

"When he came to, it was to find pandemonium raging round him. Everyone was gesticulating and yelling, and a free fight seemed imminent. Prominent in the foreground stood the bearded elder.

"For at least an hour this wrangling went on, during which time Warburton lay naked on the ground. Several times certain tribesmen made towards him as if to carry on the good work so rudely interrupted, but in each case the mysterious elder interfered and succeeded in restraining them.

"After what seemed an age, two men came and assisted Warburton to his feet. They then led him, under the direction of the elder, to a prominent house with a large tower. There he was given food, his wound dressed, and his clothes restored to him.

"I will now leave Warburton's narrative for a moment, and return to the affairs of the Column.

"The night following the day on which Warburton was snatched from a horrible death, we were encamped on a plateau called the Spin Girai.

"During the early hours of the morning one of our perimeter posts thought it detected suspicious noises out in front. A few white Very-light shells were fired, but nothing was seen. At dawn the usual patrol went out, and nearly fell over the body of a man propped up against a large boulder.

"It was Warburton!

"He had not dared to shout, nor try to disclose his identity, for fear of being misunderstood by the guards on the perimeter. If he had, a few score bullets would have been his reward. It does not do to take risks against tribal enemy—shoot first and ask questions afterwards is a Frontier maxim.

"So that, gentlemen, is how Warburton returned to us. A few weeks later, and he became his own fit self. He is the only British officer I've ever heard of who was released by the tribesmen when engaged in fighting a holy war. Peace is another matter, and I have heard of Air Force officers who have crashed being brought in under promises of ransom."

The Colonel had smiled at everyone, and waited for applause.

"Come, come, sir," Pearson ejaculated. "You have not told us why he was allowed to go free. Don't keep us in suspense!"

The Colonel laughed.

"Has no one guessed?" he asked.

Obviously no one had.

"Well," said the Colonel, "I will tell you. I'm surprised, though, that at least two of you here have not solved the riddle. Am I not right in saying that two of you fellows are Masons?"

Fish Face and Grayson nodded assent.

"Warburton," went on the Colonel, "consciously or unconsciously made that sign known in Masonic circles as the Signal of Distress, which no Mason dare disregard."

"But what has that got to do with it?" gasped Pearson.

"The Pathan elder was also a Mason," replied the Colonel, smiling.

CHAPTER TEN

I

THERE was a pause in the road-building operations. The Mullah of Dand, proclaiming himself champion of Islam, issued a warning that he would evoke a general Frontier rising should the Government troops dare to enter Bandar territory. He despatched an invitation to all the neighbouring tribes to rally round his banner, pointing out the insidious manner in which the British were interfering with tribal freedom.

He also stirred up racial and religious animosity by expounding the age-old theme that the British intended to introduce Christianity by force.

"Now is the time for the chosen of Allah to show their mettle," he announced unctuously, in a speech to some visiting deputations. "I call upon those of you who have not already been subjugated by British intrigue to fight for your liberty . . . and I challenge those weaklings among you who have been conquered to evict the foreign invader."

Hastily the Government summoned another *jirga*. This time, in addition to previous demands, the Political ordered the immediate expulsion of the Mullah from the Bandar valley, for it was there the chief disaffection lay. If the priest was banished by his own tribe, he would lose his prestige and carry less weight in other parts of the Frontier.

But the elders shook their heads. They themselves were ready to comply with the Government request; the younger men again were the trouble. The Mullah had a big following.

The Government then sent aeroplanes which dropped printed pamphlets into the villages. The context of the propaganda explained that the British had no desire whatever to interfere with the Mohommedan religion, and that they only wished to promote civilization with its abundant benefits.

Meanwhile, isolated outrages began to occur with alarming frequency. A British officer travelling by car to Zai Khel was ambushed by tribesmen and shot dead—a significant violation of the sanctity of the main road.

Following this tragedy, two lorries loaded with supplies and merchandise were attacked. The Pathans kidnapped two Hindu passengers and decamped with them and the captured booty into the hills.

The khassadars began to desert. The Government deemed it prudent to dismiss those of the Bandar sect. Their places were taken by forces of armed constabulary rushed up from British India.

Telegraph wires were cut, attempts made to blow up bridges. A peaceful village near Risalwan was raided.

The Government was now faced with a very unpleasant situation. It had gone too far to retreat; indeed, such a procedure would have invoked an intolerable state of affairs, giving the tribesmen the false impression that we were afraid of them. The Pathans, with their ineffable conceit, would at once rise in universal revolt.

To go forward might mean war. To retire meant inevitable war. Realizing that strength often means peace, the Government wisely sent two new Infantry Brigades, a Company of Armoured Cars, and several batteries of Artillery to the Frontier. One Brigade stayed in Risalwan as a mobile reserve, ready for instant transportation to any scene of action in lorries. The other moved to Zai Khel. The original reinforcing Brigade went to Narai, collecting on its way the Battalion which had been quartered with us in Kharab Bibi.

The forces from down country were now grouped into a striking Division under the command of a Major-General, and became the Field Army.

Units, such as ourselves, posted for duty on the Frontier for two years in the normal way, were designated as the protective troops. We had to guard the passes while the Field Army did the big work—or 'mopping up', as it is called in military slang.

Again the Government held a *jirga*, calling in representative elders

from all the chief tribes. The Political delivered an ultimatum that, failing the departure of the Mullah from the Bandar valley by the sixteenth day of June, any Pathans seen in certain demarcated areas would be liable to be treated as enemies. The Air Force would bomb without warning groups or formations seen from the air.

The elders were visibly impressed, for they saw the Government at last meant business.

"If we expel the Mullah," the Bandars asked, "will you guarantee not to continue building the road beyond Narai?"

"Certainly not," retorted the Political, and quite rightly. "We marched into your country intending peace, and then only after you had harboured a murderer whom you refused to hand over to us for justice. Thanks to your treachery and hot-headedness, many lives have been lost. The road will proceed to Bandarogha. If you were not so foolish you would realize the commercial value of a good road. In twenty years' time your sons will bless the British for having brought prosperity to their homes."

There could be no compromise. Weakness at this juncture would have been fatal. The road must go on at all costs.

The British officer who had been killed provided the Political with further difficulties. His assailants had been traced to a region near Zai Khel. They were Kaumanis, a tribe usually somewhat hostile in the Bandar Khels—which proved how effectively the Mullah of Dand was spreading his net.

The Political imposed a heavy fine on the Kaumanis, demanding the immediate surrender of the murderers. The elders professed great horror at the deed. The money should be forthcoming, they said; but the murderers had gone with a small force, or *lashkar*, to join the Mullah of Dand.

All the elders agreed that the Government was not interfering with the Mohommedan religion, and many openly deplored the fact that outside tribes were being dragged into a dispute that lay entirely between the Government and the Bandar Khels.

Then an old man of the Magrawals suggested that a deputation of leading elders from the tribes represented at the *jirga* be formed. They would go and interview the Mullah of Dand and try to bring him to his senses.

The Magrawals, like many other tribes, received substantial allowances from Government for their good behaviour. Contact with the British had brought them nothing but good. All they had to do was to allow troops to pass unmolested through their areas; in return they received not only monetary grants, but found considerable employment. Zai Khel, for instance, had been built by Pathan labour—chiefly Magrawals.

Enlistment in the khassadars also provided remunerative service for the young men. Were all these advantages to be lost because the Mullah of Dand had got a swollen head? The Bandars were fools ever to have opposed the Government troops in their valley.

The Kaumani elders, anxious to conciliate the Political, agreed with the old leader of the Magrawals. They had no desire to pay up any more fines. The Mullah must be laid by the heels.

"It's all very well talking," said the Political, "but we want deeds—not words. None of you seem able to control your young men, and their folly may lead you all into great disaster."

After considerable discussion it was decided that a special *jirga*, under the leadership of the old Magrawal, should wait on the Mullah of Dand.

So it will be seen that, at any rate in debate, the cause of civilization defeated any decree of lawlessness.

The Scouts, at the moment, did not figure in the political situation. Those who served in the North were recruited from the Southern tribes of the Frontier, those in the South from the Northern.

2

Notwithstanding 'alarms and excursions', life in the Kharab Bibi sector continued to be quite peaceful. We were sniped one night, but the Colonel retaliated by ordering the Artillery to drop a few shells beyond the village. The incident reminded me of coastal defences in the Great War halting a ship which had ignored the signals to 'hove to'.

The sniping ceased.

The troops in Narai were not so fortunate. One morning, in the early hours, a camp piquet of eight men was attacked by approximately forty tribesmen. The sentry, peering over the top, was killed by the first volley. The attackers leapt over the stone fortifications, and a bloody hand-to-hand conflict ensued with rifles, knives, daggers, and stones for weapons.

Eventually the enemy withdrew, leaving four men killed.

The new Brigade at Zai Khel assisted us, like its predecessor, to open the road to the island, so we were still able to economize in force by sending one Company with supporting machine-guns. Without outside help the whole Battalion would have been required daily on protective duty. We realized that in the event of active operations we should lose this welcome co-operation, for then the Brigade would be needed for punitive effort. Actually, at the moment, it was involved a good deal in road protection round Zai Khel, the main road to Risalwan being anything but safe in the present unrest.

Armoured cars were stationed in Zai Khel, and these were useful in escorting supply and maintenance lorries along dangerous segments of the road. Sometimes when there was a particularly important convoy to protect, such as vehicles loaded with explosives and ammunition, they came to Kharab Bibi and Narai.

Our Brigade Headquarters in Narai detailed one different Battalion each day to open the road downstream to Kharab Bibi. With so many troops in hand for defences and any necessary working parties, there was no difficulty there in finding sufficient men. The Attocks, for instance, had only to do this task once in four days, likewise the other units.

All leave, of course, had been stopped. We sympathized with the Gurkha Colonel who came in to see us on one of his periodical excursions downstream. We drank 'perdition to the Mullah' in tankards of beer, and the 'speedy restoration of better days'. I noticed that the Babe and Evans did not join too heartily in the toasts. How I envied them their youth, wishing I could find, like they did, romantic adventure lurking round every corner.

There are many who might doubt it a romantic adventure to run the risk of being murdered by a Pathan. Fortunately, youth never considers remote possibilities. He lives for the moment animated by glory. Experience—and what is experience but age?—can alone teach him that the elusive Victoria Cross, if won at all, is more likely to be given to the relations of a dead man than to a living hero.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. I always think that an admirable sentiment for youth too young to know, and old men too old to care.

To youth, death is always glorious—when he thinks about it at all. The Babe would never visualize an end so prosaic as a motor crash on the Brighton road. No. Death, driving a car at three hundred miles an hour on Daytona beach, perhaps, or operating a balloon five miles up in the stratosphere.

Death is too easy. Those of us who have learnt experience—or, rather, are growing into middle age—fear the inglorious prelude to death, not death itself. We fear the shell that maims, the bullet that blinds, the surgeon's knife and the reeking smell of anaesthetics.

Youth thinks of none of these things, only of glory. His callous indifference may plunge the world into another war.

Do I envy the Babe and young Evans? . . . I am not so sure I do, now. I just pray that their belief in their glory will carry them safe. . . .

3

The sepoy were very cheerful. The Indian soldier shows up best when serving under conditions which demand intense physical labour. Feed him like a healthy animal, send him to bed thoroughly weary, and you will have little mischief in the lines.

They accepted the stoppage of leave philosophically. Leave would be given again later. All the same, there were many whose reasons for going on immediate leave were as urgent as Grayson's. Land required harvesting, houses rebuilding to stand the force of the coming monsoon. Lawsuits needed to be defended in the civil courts, farming accounts adjusted, cattle purchased at the annual fairs. Then there were wives who could not live peacefully with their mothers-in-law, wives who were intriguing with handsome neighbours, wives who were sick or had ailing children. Finally there was the eternal lure of the unmarried girl.

An Indian marriage causes the maximum trouble to all concerned except the priests. Its date cannot be fixed to suit the convenience of the bride and groom. Horoscopes have to be consulted, favourable and unfavourable omens considered, and many ceremonies observed before the nuptials may take place.

A sepoy comes before me with a telegram from his father which reads:

Marriage arranged. Come at once or much loss.

The priests have decided that a certain date is favourable. Money and presents between the betrothed couple's relations have exchanged hands, large sums paid to the priests, and a suitable dowry

for the bride promised. All these matters have been settled in the absence of the groom.

Poor devil! He finds his Company Commander very unsympathetic. I have been 'had for a sucker' too often, to use an expressive American phrase. If I sanctioned his request, two hundred sepoy would receive similar telegrams within a fortnight.

To mitigate the marriage nuisance, I tell the men they must give me at least three months' warning of intending marriage. Then I put their names on a roster and try my best to send them off at the required time. With a little care their ordinary leave can be adjusted to cover a wide scope of possible horoscope decisions. A sepoy gets either two or three months' leave every year, provided the Mullah of Dand is amenable. We send them off in batches, after considerable discussion as to who should go with the first party and who with the second or third. Needless to say, old Suleiman holds a prominent position in the debate!

The men think of many clever dodges for obtaining extra or special leave. I find my scanty knowledge of human nature taxed to the utmost when confronted by someone who has a request to make. Is he genuine, or is he an impostor . . . ?

The telegram reads:

Wife dying. Come quickly.

or:

Father killed accident. Come immediately.

No one desires to be heartless. As a Company Commander, I am entitled to give five per cent. of my men special leave up to twenty days on 'urgent private affairs'.

Suleiman, damn him, never helps! Every sepoy who asks for leave is an authentic case to him.

I hesitate, and am lost. The applicant cannot go for a few days as my five per cent. are all on short leave—they always are—but he can go when a man comes back. The clerk enters his name in a book. The sepoy gives me a radiant smile, salutes, turns right about, and marches away. He has defeated his poor old 'bloody fool' of a Company Commander. No doubt there will be much joking in the lines.

Damn the Mullah of Dand! Thanks to him, all leave is stopped. Two batches of men, however, managed to escape before the present crisis occurred. The first batch has returned. The second is due back next week. . . .

No one is on short leave, for twenty days have expired since we entered the Bandar valley. . . .

Telegrams nevertheless continue to arrive from dying mothers.

Jack Sepoy is an optimist!

Zai Khel, supposed to be our permanent frontier station for two years, had now become a kind of depot. The battalion office, with its large clerical establishment and all the perquisites necessary for a life in barracks, was there. We had substituted camp life for a bivouac existence, but it was impossible to bring any surplus

luxuries to Kharab Bibi. The convoy already worked to capacity—besides, we might be ordered to move at any minute.

The head clerk sent us urgent correspondence, and Pearson had been twice to Zai Khel to 'clean up' arrears. He also inspected the men we had left there for guard duties and perimeter defence work. We relieved these men from time to time, sending sepoy who were not too fit for strenuous work on the hills. 'Lame ducks' the Colonel called them.

One day, to my great annoyance, I discovered the B Company dumb-bell lying outside Suleiman's tent. Having worked out a table of necessities almost down to ounces, it was incredible that this monstrous piece of wood, over fifty pounds in weight, should have arrived.

I was furious with Suleiman, and seriously thought of marching him before the Colonel to receive a severe reprimand. But the old man protested he had given no orders for the dumb-bell to be sent from Zai Khel—which was possibly true—so I decided to wait until I knew who had loaded the wretched thing, and under what authority, at the other end.

I told Suleiman the dumb-bell must be cut up into firewood, for when we moved there would not be room for such a piece of surplus furniture. The Colonel had given strict instructions that all our goods and chattels must tally with the prescribed transport. It was easy enough to obtain kit from Zai Khel spread over a number of days, but what the hell were we going to do if we marched at a few hours' notice?

Suleiman nearly wept at the idea of destroying his precious toy. Even the Babe looked gloomy. . . . However, discipline is discipline and must be enforced.

"Take it to the cookhouse at once," I ordered sternly.

Suleiman picked it up and walked off with it as if he was carrying a baby.

Then I laughed, and was lost. The Babe joined in, and we roared with mirth till the tears streamed down our faces. . . .

"Go and tell that bloody fool," I said to the Babe, when I had recovered sufficiently to speak, "that the execution has been postponed. . . . But, remember, we cannot take it back to Zai Khel. We've got too much kit as it is."

What children the sepoy were! Suleiman, with all his years and medals, had never grown up.

I always remember an incident in the Army of the Black Sea just after the Great War. The Fleet was lying in the Bosphorus off Constantinople, and we were given permission to take our more educated men to inspect the ships. Needless to say, there was great excitement, and much combing of moustaches and whiskers by those who had been selected from the regiment.

We went all over the ship allotted to us, viewing guns, turrets, and torpedoes. But what took the public fancy most was the lift which elevated us from deck to deck. Special supplementary excursions had to be arranged, and the men reminded me of villagers riding merry-go-rounds at a rustic fair.

The next day in barracks I made those who had passed school examinations write a short essay in Roman Urdu on what they had seen, with special reference to what they considered to be the most useful and scientific innovation on the ship.

One hundred per cent. voted for the lilt!

On another occasion I asked a senior Indian officer—not Suleiman then—what he thought of Constantinople. Surely he must be impressed with the mosque of Saint Sophia, the glories of the Golden Horn, the seething masses of different nationalities passing over Galata Bridge, and the hidden mysteries of the cavernous bazaars? We youngsters had been thrilled with the ancient city. What did the old man think about it all?

This is what the old man said:

"The water is not very good to drink, but one can buy good vegetables and water-melons."

I wonder if Constantine turned in his grave!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON the morning of the thirteenth of June we heard the rumble of guns firing from the direction of Narai.

I was having my breakfast in the Mess. Grayson had gone with his Company to open the road downstream.

"Some trouble with snipers, I expect," the Colonel said. "It can't be a serious show."

News had filtered through that the Mullah of Dand had received the Magrawal *jirga*. After much discussion, he said he was prepared to draft a letter to the British stating his terms. Before he did so, however, he must confer with the leaders of the tribes who had joined him. His force—composed of detachments, wandering gangs, and outlaws who had managed so far to evade justice—was swelling every day. Intelligence reports confirmed that there were about four thousand men collected in the ravines and gorges of the Bandar valley.

One word from the Mullah and this formidable army would disperse. At the same time, fanatics sometimes unleash passions they are unable to restrain. I wondered if the gathering tribesmen, stirred to revolt, would pay much attention if the Mullah suggested peace.

Also, what about the Mullah's terms? I felt sure his first stipulation would be the abandonment of road-building projects in the Bandar valley.

Well, the Political gentry must chew their own fat. I did not envy them their job. At any rate there would be a temporary armistice while the Fakir consulted his lieutenants and drafted his ultimatum.

But what was all this firing going on . . .? I calculated from the sound that the engagement must be taking place about three miles away.

The down troops from Narai were due at Kharab Bibi at ten. It was now nine-thirty, so they would be late in any case.

The Colonel had given orders for the alarm posts on the perimeter, normally only occupied at nights, to be manned at once. He was taking no chances. With one Company and some machine-guns

away on road protection we were a small unit somewhat isolated.

The ground round the camp, however, was fairly well suited for defence, being a plateau overlooked by two hills which were already held by our piquets.

The other hills stood too far away to cause us any anxiety except that of long-range sniping. To reach the perimeter an enemy would have to advance some distance across open ground under fire from our machine-guns. The Artillery had registered all places where the tribesmen might concentrate.

Kharab Bibi was not a death-trap like many a spot between Narai and Bandarogha, but precautions were necessary if we wished to avoid casualties.

At eleven-thirty the road remained unopened by the down tro ops and we could still hear the booming of guns.

The motor convoy from Zai Khel had arrived loaded with rats, mails, and a few military passengers. It was easy now, provided the enemy did not obstruct, to do the double journey to Narai and back in one day.

Only a few camels were needed to carry large items of bulk such as firewood. Perhaps one of them could transport the B Company dumb-bell back to Zai Khel. A good idea . . . and now was the time, before we became implicated in some operation or hasty move. I must tell Suleiman. The old man would rejoice.

2

At noon our Brigadier in Narai spoke to the Colonel on the telephone. The Punjabis were heavily engaged with enemy tribesmen estimated at about five hundred. On no account was the convoy to leave Kharab Bibi. Further orders would be given later.

That was the first and last information we received of the battle till nightfall. The tribesmen cut the telephone cable, and there was no way of repairing it until the road was opened next day. The radio telephone set which had been so useful in the Bandar valley operations was no good now as its wavelength was not strong enough to penetrate eight miles.

But we still had telephone communication with Zai Khel, and the Brigade there had wireless capable of reaching considerable distances. We could always find out the Narai situation providing the wire stayed unharmed.

The Colonel was keen to establish direct contact with Narai if he could, and during the afternoon climbed a big hill on the far side of the river-bed accompanied by Pearson, two signallers, and an armed escort. After an hour's hard work with a helio he was rewarded by an answering flash from one of the piquets. There was no point in wasting time trying to send a long message, also the men in the piquet probably had no idea of what was going on, so he returned to camp. If it was absolutely necessary we could now get visual communications with Narai.

The Colonel said he heard machine-gun fire as well as the guns, but could see nothing of the battle beyond some men and mules going along the river-bed.

It was now four-fifteen. We could still hear a 'booming', but it

was a fainter sound than before. Evidently the Punjabis were retiring on Narai.

"The Brigade will damned well *have* to open the road tomorrow," commented the Colonel, "or they'll get no rations."

"Well, they've got enough troops," I said.

The curse of Frontier fighting is, of course, the evacuation of casualties. A few wounded men hit on the hillside may cause a big battle involving the deployment of hundreds of men. No one must be left to fall into enemy hands.

"When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains,
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier."

There seems to be a kindred spirit between the women of Afghanistan and those of the Frontier hills. I trust I may never have to sample the tender mercies of either breed.

Just before dinner Pearson managed to obtain some information from Zai Khel. Two Punjabi British officers had been killed, two wounded; one Indian officer wounded; sixteen men killed and thirty-one wounded. The Attocks who had gone out to assist lost twelve killed and wounded. Three British Tommies also had been wounded.

Details of the battle were not forthcoming.

"I wonder if the name of the Mullah will appear in the list of the King's Birthday Honours," said Harris sarcastically in Mess. "Surely he deserves a reward?"

"Perhaps he'll be made a Companion of the British Empire," suggested the Colonel.

"Or be given the Order of Merit," said Fish Face.

"I don't think he is quite scholarly enough for that," I put in. "Some Order connected with the British Empire would be more suitable."

"I agree," said Pearson. "Just think of the service he is rendering the 'axing' Committee. A few more British officers killed, and there will be no need for the Government to try and get rid of surplus Captains and Majors."

A white Very light leapt into the heavens, descending, in its trajectory, a ball of incandescent flame. It hit the ground with a 'womp', and sizzled and hissed till it burnt itself out. . . . No rifles or machine-guns opened fire.

"The men are on their toes all right," observed the Colonel. "Rather nervy work being on duty in the piquets. Which Company has got the job?"

"Mine, sir," said Grayson. "I'm glad you have let us double the strength and use whole platoons."

"Well, after the Narai affair I think we must recognize the fact that eight men in a hastily constructed piquet are not strong enough to beat off attacks by a large force when it is determined. The 'pukka' blockhouses round Zai Khel are another matter, and I defy two hundred tribesmen to gain an entrance to one of them once the ladder has been drawn up and the door closed."

The blockhouses at Zai Khel were stone fortifications made at great cost. The piquets round Kharab Bibi had of necessity been

built by sepoy labour, and were simply circular erections made of large stones, sandbagged where necessary, with loopholes to fire through. Outside, barbed wire defences had been improvised. The Sappers were far too busy with their own work to help us build more permanent structures. Besides, we knew we might be marching to some other destination at a moment's notice. There was no point in handing over ready-made forts to the tribesmen who would use them to advantage if ever we passed through Kharab Bibi again.

"A rubber of bridge?" asked the Colonel.

Fish Face, Harris, and Pearson obliged. I was due to open the road on the following day, so felt like going to bed.

Grayson went to the signal tent to test the telephone communications to the piquets.

The camp stirred fitfully. The white Very light had woken many from their rest. I could hear men coughing, and the occasional murmur of subdued voices. A mule squealed angrily and tugged at its heel chain. Someone told someone else to 'shut up and go to sleep'. A sentry protested in no uncertain terms that it was time for his relief.

The night was beautiful, and warm. Down country men would be sweating and writhing under their mosquito-nets. At this altitude I slept with a sheet over me. Here there were no mosquitoes. Risalwan would be like an oven tonight . . . also many other places on the Frontier lower down.

Suddenly there came a weird eerie sound starting on a low note and working up to a high crescendo; then it died away again in wailing cadences to rise once more in a higher howling key. . . .

Jackals! Carrion beasts of prey disturbing the night as they capered about in search of putrid flesh and rotting bones. The refuse heaps of Kharab Bibi must have been a windfall for them. 'It's an ill wind . . .'

Or were they jackals . . .? Someone had told me once that the Pathans called to each other in this fashion. Were the tribesmen signalling to the village . . .?

No. It was all right. The hideous noise, which had stopped temporarily, now broke out with renewed vigour close at hand. . . . I saw dim shapes crawling through the wire, then scampering through the camp.

Silence again. The jackals were too busy searching for food to wail. . . . Tomorrow at dawn they would take up the refrain again, meeting as a pack outside the wire, then dispersing to their lairs.

3

I opened the road downstream next day without incident. The officer I met on the island was very vague about the Narai battle, so I had to wait for accurate information till my return in the late afternoon.

Grayson told me all the news. Our Brigade had opened the road that morning, and the Brigadier had talked with our Colonel. Not a shot had been fired by the tribesmen on the journey downstream to Kharab Bibi, and no sounds of gunfire had been heard during the withdrawal.

It appeared that the leading troops of the Punjabi Advanced Guard had come under enemy rifle-fire from two conical-shaped hills on the southern side of the river-bed. The Battalion at once deployed, and proceeded to attack the tribesmen, with one Company supported by artillery and machine-guns.

Good progress was being made towards the objectives when heavy firing began from the top of a ridge about four hundred yards to the north of the river-bed. It was then discovered that this position was held in considerable strength. The tribesmen on the two hills to the south were few in number and had successfully played the part of decoys.

Shot at from the front and behind, the Punjabis suffered heavy casualties, particularly a machine-gun section which had taken up a covering position on the banks of the *nala*.

Overlooked by the tribesmen from the ridge, the machine-guns were soon put out of action, and the men and mules killed or severely wounded.

The Punjabis attacked the ridge with their remaining rifle company, but were not completely successful. No reserves were now in hand, and casualties demanding speedy evacuation lay on both sides of the river-bed. Shells from the guns burst along the top of the ridge with fair accuracy, but the tribesmen were dispersed in well-organized groups below the summit, and were very difficult to see.

The Brigade Commander, when he heard the news, sent the Attacks to assist. The arrival of fresh reinforcements turned the scale, but only after long delays and more casualties. The tribesmen fought with great bravery, and harassed the rear-guard during the retirement on Narai.

So it appeared that the Mullah of Dand had decided not to seek peace with the British Government!

We surmised later from a perusal of the official reports that the Mullah's head had grown even more swollen as a result of the Magrawal *jirga*. Such a deputation of leading elders had greatly enhanced his prestige and importance. His talk of peace had been merely a ruse to gain time. . . .

We read, also, that a procession of tribal women had visited the Mullah holding copies of the Holy Koran in their hands.

They implored him to desist from his warlike activities and make peace. Their husbands and sons were being killed to no good purpose. There was no village in the Bandar valley which had not suffered some bereavement. What was the use of a futile war?

The Mullah sternly advised them that their religion should be of stronger value to them than family ties binding them to their relations.

"Seek consolation in God," said the Mullah. "To every Mahomedan who slays a British officer I promise Paradise."

The tribal women, like most of the fair sex in this world, were wiser than their menfolk. They preferred a definite life in the present universe to the joys of a mythical future existence. They were all in favour of exterminating the British. . . . Why not? But they objected strongly to the heavy toll of retaliation. The Pathan casualties had been exceedingly heavy, somewhat out of proportion, they opined, to the temporary victories gained. 'Kill, but do not get killed,' was their slogan. There was no doubt what-

ever that the British and Indian troops on the Frontier were brave fighters. They were dreadfully foolish, and were easy to ambush, but they fought inexorably. One could kill them in shoals, but other troops came up and were always ready to continue the battle. . . . Fighting the Government troops was like trying to dislodge a mountain.

The Mullah remained obdurate. His conceit had passed all bounds. His vanity throve on the adulation of his followers. Every dog has his day, and this was his great hour.

The Political still worked desperately for peace, hoping to avoid stringent action.

Meanwhile the Royal Air Force was not allowed to carry out its proper role—namely that of surprise. No village was allowed to be bombed unless the inhabitants had received forty-eight hours' warning of intended action. When the 'planes appeared all human beings had, naturally, departed from the vicinity, taking with them their sheep, goats, and worldly possessions.

The Mullah dwelt in a cave which was quite inaccessible to air attack, even if the Air Force had been given sanction to try and destroy his headquarters.

There was much discussion as to who was financing the Mullah. Some said he was being paid by a foreign Power. Others maintained he was being guided by a strong Mahommedan syndicate in Risalwan.

Personally I did not credit either theory. I felt that the Mullah was an opportunist.

Many stories circulated about the Mullah. A prominent newspaper stated that he had been born in British India, was well educated, and had worked for his living when a young man. Restless by nature, and frantically religious, he left his post and became a strolling saint. His footsteps led him to tribal territory, where he quickly gained influence over the savage barbarians. He found he could sway with ease their childish passions, and his new strength stirred him to great delight. Why should he move when he was regarded as a divinity, and given free board and lodging?

The Mullah, unpleasant scoundrel though he was, must have possessed certain elements of greatness. Legend credited him with supernatural powers, an immense weapon he was not slow to use. Rumour said he was about forty-five years of age. We heard that he spent many hours each day in his cave wrapped in prayer and meditation. Outside a faithful band of followers guarded him.

What frightful acts have been perpetrated in the name of God! Several decades ago a little man, subject to epileptic fits, and jealous of Christianity, decided to found a religion of his own. I wonder if he knew that in the centuries to come his teachings might be fanatically misconstrued.

Oh, well. I suppose the Mullah is not the only man who has ever abused the words of God. Rasputin was no better, and he called himself a Christian. . . . Then history shows us the age-old conflict between Protestants and Catholics with the memorable occasion of the Huguenot massacre on St. Bartholomew's Eve.

What a pity we must quibble over what seems to me to be such minor points. We all recognize the presence of a supreme God, yet we worry about the way we should worship Him.

"There is only one God, and Mahomet is his prophet."

The Mullah and I worship one God, but he wishes to kill me because I do not bow down to Mahomet.

God reminds me of a magnificent cedar tree rising majestically above a green lawn. We recognize and admire the tree, then tear each other to pieces over an argument about some of the minor branches.

Am I a pagan? Or is the Mullah of Dand?

Perhaps we are both heathens. . . . At any rate, God must know!

4

Mullah or no Mullah, it was still considered necessary to hold examinations affecting the promotion of British officers.

The Babe, serving on probation, was required to pass his 'Retention' before he could be registered as a permanent incumbent in His Majesty's Indian Army. He must drill a Company to the satisfaction of a selected board of officers, then answer various military questions both verbally and in writing.

The examination was to be held in Risalwan in three days' time, and we chaffed him a good deal in Mess on the eve of his departure. The main road from Zai Khel being no longer a sanctuary for traffic, he would have to travel by a lorry convoy escorted by armoured cars and infantry in vehicles. The journey, which took a private car two and a half hours, would now take about four, or even more. The first stage of the road from Zai Khel twisted and turned down the pass, dropping two thousand five hundred feet in eight miles. After that the country opened out, though there were two or three gorges, always inevitable in hilly country. Risalwan stood on the flattest of flat plains some ten miles from the foothills.

"You'll see some women at last," said Harris, rubbing his hands gleefully. "Be careful, and don't get married."

"Or, if you can't be good, be careful," cautioned Pearson.

"I should think it's getting too damned hot for women in Risalwan," suggested Fish Face. "Surely most of them must have gone by now?"

We looked at Grayson inquiringly.

"Nan moves in a week's time," he said. "She should have gone sooner, but she's always been hoping this damned war would finish, and that I'd get down for a week-end."

Poor old Grayson! Living a normal life in Zai Khel he could have run down to Risalwan in his car any week-end he chose. Now, at the moment, we needed him. Also to go anywhere these days was such a business. It would take the Babe two days to reach Risalwan, as by the time he reached Zai Khel tomorrow the Risalwan convoy would have departed. He would have to wait in Zai Khel till the following day.

"I hope you will go and see my wife, Babe," said Grayson. "I'll give you a letter for her if you will kindly deliver it."

The Abdar came in, and we all ordered drinks.

"Here's good luck, Babe," toasted the Colonel, smiling. "Mind you pass with flying colours."

"Yes, indeed," I said. "You must keep the B Company flag at the top of the mast."

The Babe assured us that he would do his best.

A sudden gust of wind shook the flaps of the Mess tent, causing the latent dust to eddy and rise.

The Colonel went to the doorway and looked out.

"Not a star in the sky to be seen tonight," he observed. "We shall have rain soon, I think."

The wind dropped. The atmosphere became warm and sultry. I should hardly need a sheet over me tonight.

"The war will be over by the time the Babe gets back," commented Harris.

The Babe threw him an indignant glance.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

ON the sixteenth of June an officer of the Political Department lunched with us. He was on his way down from Narai. He seemed to be very cheery about the whole situation. The tribesmen had received hard knocks in their encounters with Government troops; correspondingly the Mullah's influence appeared to be weakening. There was every hope of a peaceful settlement without recourse to war, though, as yet, the Mullah had not left Bandar territory.

"Thank God the show's nearly over!" said Fish Face devoutly.

"Amen!" murmured Harris.

Grayson was out opening the road, or I am sure he would have agreed in like terms.

I went to the lines in the afternoon and watched a basket-ball match between two platoons of B Company. The air was very close. The storm we needed for our health's sake, but which might do so much damage to our communications, had not yet broken. Actually gangs of Sappers had been busy on the Kharab Bibi sector of the road, making great improvements where they were needed. The only weak spots were two *nalas* which could not be avoided.

Presently the Colonel came and joined me. After the game we wandered round the perimeter in quest of exercise, Horace and Tina trotting ahead and occasionally wrangling with each other in friendly dispute. Horace got lots of exercise, as he opened the road with me; Tina not so much.

We watched the Indian Officer of the Day mounting the quarter guard, and inspecting the men for night duty on the perimeter. We saw him examine pouches, ammunition, and equipment. We heard him give his orders, repeated by the non-commissioned officers in command.

The new guard took its place. The old guard marched away. The defensive troops tramped off to their posts which protected the camp.

"What can we look at now?" asked the Colonel, laughing. "Is there anything else exciting, or have we seen all that Kharab Bibi can offer in the way of entertainment?"

"The stables," I suggested. "We haven't done them."

The transport havildar gave us some sugar. Ethel, Fish Face's mare, slobbered over us in her greed. The mules pricked up their ears and stared at us quizzically.

"Any animals sick?" asked the Colonel.

The havildar showed us two mules suffering from girth galls.

"They'll be all right in a day or two," he said.

A half-starved pariah dog slunk up, whining. Horace snarled, and the poor wretch bolted, its tail between its legs.

"We must get these *pi* dogs destroyed," remarked the Colonel. "It's extraordinary how they appear from nowhere when one pitches a camp."

"And they breed like mice too," I said.

We wandered along to the cooking sites, where culinary exponents, clad only in loin-cloths, smacked the flour into shape between their hands. Pungent smells rose from pots in which tasty concoctions simmered gently.

An enormously fat cook, his stomach wobbling and heaving, offered us each a toasted corn-cake. The Colonel refused his, but I took one. It tasted quite good. I often eat these cakes in lieu of bread when out shooting.

We passed the followers' quarters and saw many menials working. The washerman was checking the clothes he had just brought back from the stream. A bootmaker was mending a pile of *chaplies* as fast as he could. A tailor was patching up shirts. . . .

As we drew near the Mess Grayson's Company began to filter into camp.

Inside the Mess Fish Face was haranguing the cook about the decreasing quality of the food. Quite right, too. Our rations had been really disgraceful during the past week.

Harris, however, trying to read a newspaper, was furious.

"Why the hell can't he do all this in his tent," he said in a stage whisper, glaring at poor Fish Face. "One can't get any peace in the Mess these days."

Fish Face pretended not to hear.

We were beginning to get on each other's nerves. We tried hard not to talk 'shop' in the Mess, but what else had we to talk about? We lived too near the men to escape. The world of beautiful women was too far away to memorize accurately, although we read from end to end the illustrated papers from home. Actually, I think, these papers were more of an irritation than a pleasure, and only served to make us discontented with our lot.

I suppose it is natural always to desire what you do not possess. No man who thinks can ever be really happy. I am not a great thinker, alas, but when I am out in India my mind is dominated by a small house and garden 'somewhere' in England. A round of golf in the morning, a drink at the local inn, a game of tennis or a car excursion in the afternoon, a visit to the cinema in the evening—what could be more delightful?

Then I go home on leave, and my dreams of bliss become an accomplished fact. But are they so blissful . . .? Our landlady is an old cat, there is never enough hot water for a bath when one wants it, and the maid gives notice. There is a frightful row at the tennis club between a senior Colonel and the wife of a retired Indian Civil Service official. Members take sides according to their

fancy, and tennis, instead of being a peaceful game, almost develops into a free fight.

Still, one becomes acclimatized. And it is also very possible in India that a senior Colonel may have a difference of opinion with the Commissioner's wife. Human nature is primeval everywhere.

But what drags my mind back to India when I am living in England? Is it 'the East a-callin'?' No, not necessarily. I fear it is restlessness with me. A life of idle peace seems good when I am working, and not so good when I have nothing to do.

Why not work in England? Perhaps I might be given the secretaryship of the tennis club if I applied for it. My life would then be full in trying to appease the anger between the senior Colonel and the I.C.S. official's wife . . . a noble cause, with an olive branch as the prize.

Yes, it is not a bad idea, the tennis club—for six months . . . until the spirit of restlessness drags me again.

I know what Harris would say to all this:

"Get married, you bloody old fool!"

That is what Harris would say—not being a married man himself.

2

I was drying myself in the bath-tent when the blow fell.

Pearson pulled aside the flaps and burst in on me unceremoniously. His face was white.

"I say . . ." he stammered, "I've got some ghastly news. . . . The down-convoy . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

"What about the down-convoy?" I asked. But I felt an uncomfortable feeling along my spine. "Pull yourself together, man, and speak coherently. . . . Which convoy? What convoy?" . . .

But I knew in my heart which convoy it was. God in heaven, I wished I might be wrong!

Pearson made an effort.

"The down-convoy to Risalwan was ambushed this morning as it was passing through the Laktu Gorge. . . . The Babe has been killed. . . ."

It is supposed to be un-British to show emotion. Pearson was only a young fellow and had seen little service, whereas I had seen death in many forms. Yet I confess I had to put an arm round the centre tent-pole for support. My legs were shaking, my body felt limp. . . .

"Go on," I said wearily.

"Five British officers have been killed, and over twenty rank and file. They recognized the Babe by the identity disc he was wearing. . . . I don't know any more details."

A signal orderly came up and told Pearson he was wanted on the 'phone.

I slipped into my mackintosh and walked over to my tent. It seemed almost impossible to believe the Babe had gone. He had been so young and happy his last night in Mess. 'Those whom the gods love die young' . . . Was that the reason he had been taken from us? Surely a properly escorted convoy ought to be a safe means of transportation—even if the tribesmen decided to stage an

attack. I could understand anyone being killed on Column, but the disaster to the convoy sounded incredible. The tribesmen were able to concentrate at any point. It was damnable!

I had just finished dressing when Firoze Din poked his nose inside my doorway.

"The Colonel Sahib sends his salaams. He is in the Mess."

I noticed as I went across that I was sweating. The atmosphere was stifling; not a breath of air. In the distant sky I could see flashes of sheet lightning, intercepted now and again by specimens of the forked variety. It could not be long before the storm broke. The poor wretches guarding the perimeter would have a thin time, also the mules and horses in the open stables.

I was not surprised to find an air of gloom prevailing in the Mess. The Babe had been popular. We had loved him for his youth and sincerity, his passionate interest in simple things of which we older men had grown tired.

The Colonel was wiping his reading spectacles with his handkerchief, a sure sign that he was perturbed and endeavouring to hide his emotions. The last time I saw him make this gesture was shortly after reading a cable from England. I often wondered what news that wire contained.

"I will tell you all I know—and that isn't much," he said, looking up after a prolonged pause. "The Staff Captain, Risalwan, rang me up, and gave me the following details . . ."

Here the Colonel picked up a piece of paper, and without the aid of his glasses began to read the notes he had made.

"The convoy left Zai Khel at seven this morning escorted by armoured cars and embussed Infantry. A low reconnaissance aeroplane proceeded ahead, but failed to see any enemy concentrations.

"At eight-thirty the convoy, consisting of thirty-five lorries, began to pass through the Laktu Gorge. There were two armoured cars at the head of the convoy, two in the middle, and one at the tail. I don't know how the Infantry was disposed. . . ."

"The tribesmen—I can't make out how many there were—occupied positions on both sides of the ravine. They let the two leading armoured cars and five vehicles get through, and then opened fire at fifty yards' range.

"The results, as can be imagined, were appalling. Some lorries, their drivers killed outright, went hurtling over the edge of the road into the river-bed two hundred feet below. Other lorries ran into the cutting on the hill side of the road, and either overturned or remained stationary. Officers and men trying to climb out of their conveyances were shot like rabbits. The road was blocked, and no one could go forwards or backwards. . . ."

"Scouts were rushed out from their post, also Infantry from Risalwan. After a long battle the enemy retired. The killed and wounded have been evacuated to Risalwan. The dead will be buried tomorrow. . . ."

The Colonel blew his nose, then with a clean corner of his handkerchief began to rewipe his spectacles with increased vigour.

"I don't see how any of us can go to the funeral," he said suddenly. "We should never get there in time . . . and the road is still blocked. The only way would be by 'plane from Zai Khel

—and then only one officer can be taken as passenger. I should have liked a detachment from B Company to blow the 'Last Post'. . . ."

"I asked the Staff Captain about a 'plane, sir," said Pearson. "He says it's out of the question. If he lets us go by air, other units will want to do the same. There'd be the hell of a lot of grousing. . . . He says the troops in Risalwan will see that the funeral is carried out with full military honours."

Outside a sudden wind rose. The Mess tent filled with eddying dust. The lamp on the table shivered at the onslaught, the light straining like a dog on a leash. . . .

"I hope someone has seen to the tent-pegs," said the Colonel. "We don't want the Mess to collapse on us."

There was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a roar of thunder. The wind howled. . . . Down the lines I heard a voice shouting orders. The Mess tent swayed like a balloon at her moorings, dust billowing in from all corners. . . .

The Abdar informed me that Subadar Suleiman Khan wished to speak to me.

I emerged into the gale to find a group of Indian Officers. A flash of lightning lit up their profiles. For one second I saw Suleiman's face, noticed the wrinkled lines and creases under his eyes, his black beard which must have been dyed by some subtle process since there were no grey hairs in it.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"I am afraid so," I replied.

There was another flash of lightning, an even more deafening clap of thunder.

"It is God's will," said the old man, and I knew he was crying. . . .

Then the rain descended in an avalanche, and we were all bolting for safety. . . .

Thank God for the storm, I thought, as I entered the Mess. It had spared me, at least, an emotional crisis with Suleiman; saved me from being un-British and breaking down in front of my Indian officers. The men must never know the weakness of their Company Commander. Damn old Suleiman! Why did he always behave like a child?

The wind abated under the tremendous velocity of rain. The dust turned into mud. A sickly sweet smell of substances unaccustomed to dampness pervaded our nostrils.

"We shall get no dinner tonight," observed the Colonel. "The fire must have been obliterated long ago."

But he was wrong—at least, about dinner. He had forgotten the hot-case, that domestic implement we had cursed so heartily in the past. For the cook, following ancient and forbidden custom, had prepared most of our evening meal in the late afternoon. The joint lay warm and snug in the hot-case, and the hot-case stood in the store- and pantry-tent, which also served as our servants' sleeping-quarters, well guarded by the cook who smiled triumphantly. Perhaps now the Sahibs would drop this hot-case nonsense and bow to superior culinary wisdom.

Gradually the storm receded. The sounds of thunder grew fainter. . . .

We ate our dinner at ten *post meridian*.

I opened the road next morning. The day was lovely and clear after the rain. The river had not spated as much as I had expected, and there was only one place in my sector where lorries might have found difficulty in crossing the *nala*. I left a party at this point with picks, shovels, and ropes.

I wondered what the road was like nearer Narai where the river-bed narrowed.

I met the Company Commander of the 'up' troops from Zai Khel on the island, and he was able to tell me quite a lot about the disaster to the convoy. Another Company from his regiment had been rushed out to the scene in lorries directly news had reached Brigade Headquarters.

"A bloody affair," he remarked. "The khassadars responsible for that bit of the road—and who had been loyal up to date—deserted without any warning. They must have joined the Mullah's army."

"Surely the Political must have known something about it?" I suggested.

"Apparently not. They have disclaimed all responsibility in the matter."

It transpired that a famous outlaw had led the tribesmen, a gang numbering about one hundred. With an unpleasantly accurate knowledge of tactics, he had selected the one vital spot where the convoy must be completely helpless. Owing to the precipitous steepness of his position the guns of the centre armoured cars could not be inclined sufficiently to fire. Meantime, the leading armoured cars had passed round a bend and could not get back on account of the wreckage, whereas those at the tail were also out of sight and unable to work forward.

The wretched Infantry, detailed to protect the convoy in open warfare—not an ambush—tried their best to rally, under murderous fire at close range, and make some sort of a stand. The arrival of a detachment of Scouts advancing over the hills towards the rear of the enemy lessened the tension, also the Infantry Company from Zai Khel which attacked up the left flank of the position.

Fighting continued all day. Down below on the road superhuman efforts were made to evacuate the dead and dying. By nightfall about half the lorries had managed to crawl on to Risalwan.

"Our Infantry Company was ordered back before dark," said my opposite number, "reinforcements of Scouts piqueting the stranded lorries of the convoy. How about lunch?" . . .

We extracted from our haversacks our respective packets of food and compared notes.

"Damn it!" I exclaimed. "You've got ham sandwiches. . . . I've only got mutton."

"It's tinned," he replied, "and not much good. I see we've both got hard-boiled eggs."

"Have a tomato?" I inquired.

He shook his head.

"No, thanks. I never touch 'em—not since a pal of mine died of cholera from eating 'em."

Somehow my tomato did not taste so good after this statement.

Firoze Din came up and saluted.

"Have some beer?" I ventured, playing my trump card.

"No, thanks. I like beer, but it makes me feel sleepy. I drink cold tea on these occasions."

Horace waddled up, sniffing, and received a ham sandwich as his reward. I felt rather jealous. I registered a note to tell Fish Face to order tinned ham. Fish Face had taken over the Mess catering arrangements from Grayson. Any change would be welcome after the muck we had been eating during the past ten days. Variety was the spice of life. Fish Face never knew what he was eating half the time. . . . What would I not have given for a filleted sole . . . or, better still, an English beef-steak, red and juicy!

I translated my thoughts to my friend. He quite agreed with me. We spent a pleasant but self-torturing half-hour, discussing London restaurants and dishes. We decided that India was not a fit country for an English gentleman to live in, and that the sooner we handed it over to Congress the better. As for the Frontier, could any solution be more suitable than to hand over the bloody place to the Mullah of Dand? . . .

Our tirade was disturbed by the arrival of the down-convoy. Evidently it had negotiated safely the gorge near Narai. The Colonel had given me orders before marching that morning to commence my retirement without fail at four should the convoy fail to pass the island by that hour.

It was a beautiful afternoon, the atmosphere fresh and invigorating after the storm. Here and there unexpected little rivulets trickled down the hillsides, emptying with soft gurgles into the river-bed reminding one for a brief moment of Himalayan mountain springs. The sky was a gorgeous blue. No doubt in England we would describe such a day as an Indian summer.

I studied the panorama through my field-glasses. There was not a sign of life to be seen outside the river-bed . . . except the occasional flutter of a piquet's semaphore flag. The Mullah had been warned that any gathering of more than two tribesmen would be regarded as hostile. . . . Long ago the womenfolk had trekked northwards to safer spheres, driving before them their goats and cattle.

A deathly stillness pervaded over all. No birds animated the scene with their songs. . . .

On my way back to Kharab Bibi, the sun began to drop towards the horizon, dabbing the hills with his brush like a master painter. . . . Violet, purple, heather . . . what colours he produced from his palette!

Did I say there was no bird life? . . . I was wrong. By the roadside lay a dead camel, stenching with putrefaction. Forty or fifty bald-headed vultures, bloated and well fed, fought each other for tit-bits. . . .

Tonight what they had left would be finished by the jackals.

We heard next day that those wounded in the attack on the convoy amounted to nine British officers and thirty-eight rank and file.

Another Brigade from British India was despatched to Zai Khel.

The great urgency now was to keep the road open, and prevent any further recurrence of tribal acts of aggression against our main communications.

The convoy episode, naturally, caused great excitement and unrest amongst tribes which had remained so far neutral. The Mullah gained in prestige, though many elders shook their heads over the Laktu Gorge massacre. They knew the British must take punitive measures soon. War could do their territories no good. There would be big fines to pay, hostages to hand over, rifles to surrender. . . .

We argued a lot in the Mess. No one knew what was going to happen. Were we to be employed as military troops or continue to remain a police force under exasperating conditions?

"Why the hell we don't use mustard gas, I don't know," said Harris irritably. "Any doctor or scientist will tell you it's more humane than high-explosive shells."

"Come, come! That wouldn't be playing Frontier cricket," I reproved him sternly. "Be British!"

"Be Yiddish!" snapped Harris. "As far as I can see, to be British is just to be a bloody fool."

We discussed the merits of gas, and were unanimous that it should be employed. Eighty per cent of mustard-gas casualties make a complete recovery, a fact not known to many civilians. What is far more important is the fact that a gassed patient is out of action for at least two months.

"Demarcate an area, and give the Air Force a free hand with mustard-gas bombs," said the Colonel, "and the Frontier would be quiet in ten days."

"It would be no damned good," criticized Harris. "We'd be certain to warn the villages before we started . . . and then there'd be nothing left to gas. My God! We're a curious race."

"We're a nation of cricketers," I reminded him. "To blow a man's legs off with high-explosive shell is an accepted rule of the game . . . but to send a man to hospital for two months, suffering from gas, simply isn't done."

"Talking of hospitals," said Fish Face, "what would the tribesmen do if they were gassed? They have no hospitals to go to."

"They have no hospitals to go to when we blow off their legs with artillery," retorted Harris. "At least, I don't think they have. . . ."

He turned to the Colonel for confirmation.

"I don't know much about tribal dispensaries," replied our Commanding Officer. "But I know of a large Mission hospital in Risalwan to which the Pathans go regularly for treatment. . . . Any tribesman can get medical attention there."

"Priceless!" ejaculated Harris. "Can't you see the humour of it? . . . We gas two thousand tribesmen, evacuate them to hospitals in British India, and then cure them."

"A very excellent idea," the Colonel agreed, his eyes twinkling, "and one that would definitely hasten the progress of civilization. By the time the tribesmen left our hospitals, they would probably be ready to wear tail coats and top hats if we asked them to do so."

Pearson produced a note-book and pencil from his pocket.

"Let's cable a message to the War Office," he suggested. "Such a brilliant conception of strategy ought to be passed on at once. . . ."

I'm sure the Secretary of State for War would be overwhelmed with gratitude at our obvious solution to Indian Frontier problems. . . ."

"If he knows where the North-West Frontier of India is," put in Harris. "He might confuse it with North Borneo."

Pearson put down his pencil.

"That's true," he reflected. "Perhaps, after all, we oughtn't to confuse the poor man. . . . We don't want him to spend a sleepless night."

The Abdar entered.

"You are wanted to speak on the telephone, Huzoor," he said to the Colonel.

I picked up a modern English journal and gazed at the pictures. The portraits were mostly of lovely semi-nude actresses and Society girls displaying advanced sex appeal in every line of their carefully posed bodies. An Indian would have dubbed them prostitutes without hesitation. Perhaps they were. If it is prostitution to inflame the senses, then certainly they were. I gloated over them . . . then looked up quickly, guiltily afraid that someone might see the expression on my face. Probably when we had gone to bed or were out working the Mess servants slobbered over them too.

The Colonel returned.

"All Political control has been taken over by the military authorities," he announced. "Two Brigades are going to advance into the Bandar valley very shortly. Further details will be given us later."

"Wow!" said Harris.

5

To me fell the task of adjusting the Babe's affairs. There was not much I could do in Kharab Bibi; but on return to Zai Khel the disposal of his kit and payment of any outstanding debts would have to be settled.

I hated the job. Who would not? A bundle arrived by the up-convoys containing the Babe's equipment, *topes*, and regimental badges. Thank heaven the authorities in Risalwan had omitted to send the clothes he had been wearing. I doubt if I could have faced such an ordeal.

The Colonel drafted and redrafted, at least twenty times, a letter to the Babe's mother. In it he made the usual platitudes . . . "loved by all ranks" . . . "a great loss to the Army" . . . "difficult to replace". He also asked her how she would like us to deal with her son's effects. Should we sell the bulk of his kit, sending home personal relics such as his sword, watch, and photographs?

Poor Mrs. Lorrimer! I had seen her portrait in the Babe's room in Zai Khel. He had adored her. Sometimes he had spoken to me of her. In her frame she looked young and sweet . . . too young to be the mother of a hulking great lout like the Babe.

And according to the Mullah of Dand, the dead man who had slain the Babe was certain to go to Paradise!

"The Crammer's boast, the Squadron's pride,
Shot like a rabbit in a ride!"

The Political, now under the military, were trying their best to restore the situation. No one wanted war, but 'peace with honour'. Unfortunately, we were dealing with a race whose conceit could only recognize force, any honourable efforts for peace on our part being mistaken for weakness.

If we entered the Bandar valley with superior forces, the Mullah and his followers would quietly slip away to another retreat. True, we would build our road and thus achieve our original primary object—that of 'opening up' the Bandar territory; but the Mullah would still be at liberty to harass us from other directions.

Our great trouble now was to meet a concentrated enemy. If we could fight a pitched battle against several thousand tribesmen, the war would be over. The present guerilla tactics employed by large raiding gangs with their greater mobility were causing us considerable embarrassment. The Pathans were able to strike at a hundred different places, disappearing afterwards into their inaccessible hills.

Luckily, as yet the whole Frontier had not risen. Revolt was confined to the Bandars, and numerous small forces of young men, outlaws, and fanatics. The main tribes still remained neutral, though the elders were having a difficult time in keeping control.

Not all the khassadars, by any means, had deserted. The Magrawal posts had rendered great assistance in protecting the road, and had suffered casualties driving off hostile tribesmen.

The Mullah was trying his utmost to rally the neutral tribes under his banner. A few more disgraceful episodes such as the massacre of the convoy, and he would probably succeed. British officers and men butchered in droves were not likely to enhance British prestige in a country where Force is Right.

The Frontier situation rather reminded me of Lawrence's revolt in the desert against the Turk. The principles were the same, and show what well-organized raiding-parties can achieve against a force operating in a barren hostile country where water is the nectar of life and the protection of a long line of communications vital. On the Frontier hills, as in the desert, the whole plan of campaign for a punitive expedition must be governed by the supply and maintenance of water.

Have we attempted too much on the Frontier? The fine roads we have built, amounting to several hundred miles, are splendid provided we can enlist the services of khassadars to protect them for us. The existing military forces are quite inadequate to ensure the necessary safety should the tribesmen turn against us. To piquet every hill of importance along these main highways would require the presence in the country of at least two Army Corps.

One might argue that the tribesmen, not equalling two Army Corps in numbers, would likewise be unable to piquet every dominating feature in such a large area.

That is quite true. But the choice of initiative lies with the tribesmen. They can choose at their leisure some undefended locality and swoop down on it; and they would be certain to select those places we failed to piquet, like Lawrence did when he raided the Turkish railway between Maan and Medina. The damage might not be permanent, but communications would be interrupted, and heavy losses in life incurred. Successful and continuous interference

with the up-convoy from Risalwan to Zai Khel would soon cause acute anxiety in our part of the world.

To refer again to Lawrence, for there are many passages in his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* applicable to mountain warfare:

It was the fight of a rocky, mountainous, barren country . . . the hill belt was a paradise for snipers; and Arabs were artists in sniping. Two or three hundred men knowing the ranges should hold any section of them [the Turks]; because the slopes were too steep for escalade. The valleys, which were the only practicable roads, for miles and miles were not so much valleys as chasms or gorges, sometimes two hundred yards across, but sometimes only twenty, full of twists and turns, one thousand or four thousand feet deep, barren of cover. . . . To have such a labyrinth of defiles in the rear, across the communications, would be worse than having it in front. *Without the friendship of the tribes*, the Turks would own only the ground on which their soldiers stood; and lines so long and complex would soak up thousands of men in a fortnight, and leave none in the battle-front.

The italics are mine, as the point seems to be worth emphasizing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

EVENTS, now in military hands, moved swiftly. The great trouble was to locate an enemy who would stay in position while we attacked him.

The down-country Brigade in Narai moved out at dawn into the Bandar valley, while another Brigade from Risalwan entered the southern passes, the object being to enact a converging movement in co-operation. The role of our Brigade was to keep open communications between Narai and Zai Khel. The newly arrived Brigade in Zai Khel was needed for road protection, especially up to and including the Laktu Gorge.

We were all very cross that our Brigade had been given such an inactive part. Prolonged internment in Kharab Bibi, with its never-changing routine, had got on our nerves. Cheerfully we would have marched anywhere rather than stay in such a bleak spot.

The cool atmosphere imparted by the thunderstorm had been succeeded by considerable heat. Heavy intermittent showers only increased the humidity, attracting flies in swarms.

Still, we were lucky, climatically, compared with the Risalwan troops advancing to the higher altitudes from a plain estimated at nearly sea level. They would have a terribly severe climb in the low-lying sultry summer before they entered the undulating Bandar valley.

The arrival of the convoy both on its 'up' and 'down' journeys provided the chief excitement of the day for those left in camp. We met sick officers and men in the process of evacuation, and

heard varying gossip about the Frontier situation. Some said the Magrawals had risen against us; others affirmed that large forces were pouring in from Afghanistan to assist the Mullah. Quite a number were convinced that the tribal revolt had been instigated by a foreign Power. An officer of the Attocks told me that large sums of money had been found on the bodies of the dead tribesmen picked up after the Narai encounter.

"Where did they get this money?" he asked.

I pointed out to him that the Pathans are anything but poor these days. The large allowances paid to the tribes by Government with instructions to behave themselves provide a handsome annual revenue. If they choose to buy rifles and ammunition instead of attending to the products of peaceful civilization, that is our fault.

The English newspapers afforded us considerable amusement. As usual, when war is imminent, the arm-chair critics wrote offering many suggestions and proposals. The old Frontier Force diehards were of opinion that special troops, like the Foreign Legion, should be allocated permanently to the Frontier, forgetting that a very large force indeed would be required for the purpose, and that in the case of serious trouble the regular forces in India would, inevitably, have to be rushed northwards as reinforcements.

After all, what is the purpose of the Army in India if it is not to defend the Frontiers?

The present system, whereby each regiment does a limited tour of the Frontier, at least ensures a working knowledge of the role which troops may have to carry out in war. Hand over Frontier service to separate specialized units, and the Indian Army will soon become ignorant of the rules of Frontier cricket.

Personally I consider it absolute rubbish that mountain warfare takes a great deal of learning. The principles that govern its application are fewer and simpler than 'plains' warfare, the situations that are likely to arise far less varied. The whole secret of hill fighting is physical fitness and constant alertness. A sepoy who is a plainsman can learn to move as fast as any hillman with two months' training if he puts his mind to it. Would we excuse an Englishman from climbing a hill under the pretext that he was born in the Norfolk fens and had never seen a mountain?

We became very heated in the Mess sometimes discussing the critics. The Delhi regiment recruited its stock from the northern Punjab down to the United Provinces. We cursed the Frontier, but we were proud of our men and knew they could work on the hills quite as well as any Frontier Legionaries recruited solely for that purpose.

We became, however, somewhat mollified when the Colonel received a Special Order of the Day from Headquarters awarding decorations for gallantry in the previous fighting. The Havildar and the six sepoys of the B Company piquet who had fought so well during our advance to Bandarogha each received a posthumous Indian Distinguished Service Medal for their excellent stand against overwhelming odds. The Gurkhas, too, came in for their share, also other regiments and units in the Brigade.

It was sad that, of the Delhis, no one lived to wear his award. Nevertheless, down the lines the sepoys heard the news with the greatest enthusiasm. Men are all children at heart, and the possible

honour of wearing a noted ribbon on the left breast of one's tunic acts as a considerable stimulant to high endeavour. Who created the idea of crowning victors with laurel leaves in ancient Rome? He must have been a genius.

Suleiman and the Indian officers of B Company held a tea-party in honour of the gallant deceased. That is to say the function was called a 'tea-party'. In reality we sat down in the late evening to a feast of nuts, curried snacks, sweetmeats, and such delicacies as Kharab Bibi could produce, while orderlies filled our glasses, preferably when we were not looking, with enormous potions of 'whisky'. There was no sign of the liquid which we have designated tea'.

I had learnt to be very wary of these parties down the lines. There was nothing the Indian officers liked more than to see British officers somewhat the worse for alcoholic wear and tear, and they spared no pains to achieve the desired result. On one occasion I had been compelled to rate Suleiman soundly for giving me an unorthodox drink which tasted like a mixture of gin and whisky. The old rascal protested it was only a 'Punjabi peg', a cocktail much in vogue in his part of the world.

To do Suleiman justice, he did not touch alcohol; nor did any of the Mahommedans in the regiment. The Hindus were those who liked strong wine. They had heads like iron, filling their glasses with neat whisky . . . then, if in company, adding the tiniest drop of soda or water for the sake of politeness.

On this particular evening the Colonel warned Suleiman, when accepting his invitation, that whisky was to be offered only in small quantities. We were in arms against unscrupulous tribesmen who might attack the camp at any minute.

Even after these definite instructions I had quite enough to drink. . . .

At exactly the right moment in the proceedings the Colonel rose and called for silence. In a short speech he said how glad he was that the regiment had met with the recognition it deserved, and how certain he felt that British officers, Indian officers, and men would always keep the flag of the Delhis flying.

I have heard dozens of Colonels make dozens of similar speeches on appropriate occasions, but no one who heard our Commanding Officer talking could doubt his sincerity. He was a man who disliked 'holding the floor', as he called it, and I think this trait provided the principal reason why he had not risen to higher spheres in the military profession. He was an officer of the old school, with a wider knowledge of men than that of the doctrines propounded by advanced schools of thought. Sound common sense dictated his life, and it had never let him down.

Deafening applause greeted the end of his speech, which was also the signal for us to shake hands and depart. Suleiman tried hard to retain me, pointing out that the night was still young. . . . But I refused his invitation. Perhaps if the Babe had been with me I might have stayed.

The Narai Brigade reached Bandarogha without encountering much opposition. Threatened from two directions, the tribesmen

had to dissipate their forces, and they were more nervous of the southern advance than of the northern. For should the Southern Brigade penetrate the Bandar valley with sufficient strength to keep open the route to Risalwan, the Government would have succeeded in making a permanent short cut between British India and the area of operations.

Our plan, marked 'Very Secret', was as follows:

The Risalwan Brigade was to advance methodically, taking all precautions, to a place in the Bandar valley marked on the map as Oboe Shai. The Commander had orders to drop two camps on the way manned by sufficient men to ensure the safety of the line of communications. Engineers would be detailed with these detachments and they were to try to make a road suitable for wheeled traffic.

The distance from Risalwan to Oboe Shai was nineteen miles, but the first eight led through flat country, and the terrain could be protected by constabulary and patrols from Risalwan. The last eleven miles presented danger, a rough track winding upwards over a steep pass. At the top, or, rather, in the 'bottle-neck', the enemy were certain to offer opposition.

Now, Bandarogha is only eight miles north-west of Oboe Shai. The role of the Narai Brigade, therefore, was to threaten the tribesmen from their rear, and join the Risalwan Brigade at its objective.

Military history tells us that the convergence of two separated forces on to one point is the most difficult operation in war. It calls for perfect timing, and the means of frustrating unexpected obstacles. Blücher nearly failed to reach Wellington in time at Waterloo, while the fates of two nations hung in the balance. On the other hand, Lee in Virginia succeeded repeatedly in accomplishing this high feat of war, with the result that the Confederates, though inferior in numbers and lacking munitions and supplies, kept the Federals at bay and very nearly defeated them.

The risk, of course, in directing two separated armies lies in the possibility that each force may be defeated in detail before unison is effected. On the other hand, success, if attained, is generally overwhelming.

In Frontier warfare there is little risk in sending two Columns on different missions. The tribesmen have no artillery, no machine-guns, and no Air Force to assist them. Also their lack of discipline, fostered by what they are pleased to call 'independence', and inter-tribal distrust and jealousy, generally prevent large armies massing together under a single leader. Even if the Mullah could persuade the Magrawals to join the Bandars in a holy war I doubt if the two tribes would accept a common generalissimo—for long, anyhow.

No. Guerilla tactics, which aim at harassing and impeding, have always been the rules of cricket observed by the tribesmen. And so long as the Government have sufficient forces on the spot, and are prepared to take action, the results of enemy activities can have little more effect than the stings of angry hornets.

But the Government must show force, and use force, to quell a disturbance. Unversed in technical subtleties, the Pathan only believes what he sees. The known presence of twenty-five thousand reinforcements on the Frontier will shake his morale far more than

the doubtful value of an army half that number but with a preponderance in artillery and aeroplanes.

So far—with the exception of our little affair in the Bandar valley, which had been forced upon us—we had sat still hoping the Political would find us honourable peace. The Pathans, naturally enough, thought we were afraid to attack them, and I dare say their views were endorsed by propaganda from agitators in British India.

Now the tables were reversed. Given a free hand, the Government troops asked for nothing better than to seek out the enemy and teach him a salutary lesson. Hotheads and undisciplined youngsters must be put in their places. They must be shown that there was wisdom in the heads of their elders.

Youth, youth, youth! Is it not the same all over the world? The rising generation, oblivious of the horrors of war suffered by their fathers, sound a clarion call to arms, little knowing the miseries to which they are setting their seals.

Lucky tribesmen! Benevolent Great Britain! I wonder how many nations, faced with our Indian Frontier problems, would be content just to administer a salutary lesson, calling an armistice directly their opponents cried for peace? Would it not be, rather, in their case, a war of extermination followed by an army of occupation which gave no quarter?

We are either an admirable, or a very stupid, race. Perhaps we are both. Our great mistake is that we have not educated our nation to think of war from a national point of view. Because we hate the idea of war we refuse to listen to any technicalities.

Otherwise, how is it that in this year of grace politicians can still talk nonsense in the House about aeroplanes bombing defenceless tribesmen? Why is it that so few civilians realize that the use of poison gas is a quicker and far more humane road to peace than high-explosive shells fired by artillery?

A little trouble on the Frontier, and we tie our hands by suing for peace with men who understand only force. Peace, peace at all costs. Meanwhile agitation goes on brewing, and eventually it takes an expeditionary force to quell what was originally a minor disturbance.

In the Delhi Mess we were all adamant on one point. Directly after our encounter with the Bandars in their valley we should have taken the bull by the horns and carried out the road-building programme to Bandarogha, and not sued for peace with a swollen-headed priest.

3

Our Brigade, less the Attocks and Delhis, moved in the wake of the down-country Brigade to Bandarogha, the idea being to keep open the lines of communication to Zai Khel while operations were in progress. The road onwards from Narai was to be broadened where necessary, and perfected as soon as possible.

Sitting in Kharab Bibi, we saw 'planes droning overhead. They passed over at dawn, at midday, at all hours. Beyond three wounded casualties sustained during the advance to Bandarogha, and who were being evacuated down the line, we saw or heard little of what was going on.

We read in Orders that the Bandar valley had been clearly demarcated for the purposes of blockade. It was the habit of the tribesmen to use certain grazing-grounds for their cattle, and these were denied them by the Air Force, which harried any appearance of men or herds. As far as possible the Air Force also prevented the villagers from cutting their crops, which stood ripe and ready for the harvest.

Hostile gangs were reported to number about three thousand all told. Concentrated under one Commander, and led with intelligence, they might have proved a formidable obstacle. An attack, for instance, against some post along the lines of communication might have given them considerable success. With Kharab Bibi in their hands, the question of supply and transport for troops at Narai and Bandarogha might have become exceedingly serious. The Brigade, destined for Oboe Shai, might well have had to curtail its operations, considering the relief of Kharab Bibi of momentarily greater importance.

I sincerely hoped the tribesmen would not attack Kharab Bibi in great strength. Our garrison was capable of repulsing reasonably sized forces of enemy, but a well-organized assault with two thousand men could hardly fail to take the defences.

Fortunately the mentality of the tribesmen was rather like that of Abraham Lincoln. The Bandars feared for their capital and could not bear to see British Government troops pouring into their territory. The invasion of Maryland must be prevented at all costs. It did not occur to them that an attack on Richmond would soon cause the invaders to scurry back to their own country.

In the Mess we felt optimistic that the war would soon be over. We wondered whether the Government would think out a fresh policy for the Frontier or continue giving the present system a fair trial.

There is no doubt but that law and order is coming slowly to the Frontier. Gradually the tribesmen are becoming absorbed. Wonders have been achieved in the past fifteen years. Pathans who in the old days rarely left their fastnesses, except to raid, now journey daily to British India in lorries along a metalled road every bit as good as a main highway in Britain.

Irresponsible youths are the cause of all trouble, their passions inflamed by turbulent, self-seeking priests. The historian will observe, if he checks Frontier history, that a serious outbreak occurs approximately every fifteen to twenty years in that barren region. The reason is not far to seek. It is because childhood grows to manhood in that time, ignorant of wars which were waged when it was too young to carry a rifle. The old men know, for they have opposed the British before, to their ultimate disadvantage. The young men do not know, and will not listen. They think their elders a pack of nervous old women.

These youths are full of spirit. They must be subdued once in a while. A schoolmaster does not treat with a refractory pupil who refuses to learn a geography lesson. He punishes him sufficiently to administer justice and bring home reproof.

War, so some ancient wit reminds us, is a long period of boredom punctuated by moments of intense fear.

At the moment the Delhis were suffering from prolonged boredom. We were sick to death of the river-bed down to the island. As for Kharab Bibi camp, it grew more and more like a prison cage. The sight of my brother officers began to cause me annoyance. Why did Harris always announce his entry into the Mess with the words "Hullo, gents"? Such an utterance was not funny, and after being repeated two thousand times one felt as if one had been subjected to the Chinese torture where the victim is bound so that a water-tap drips on to a certain part of his head at the rate of five drops in one minute.

Even the Colonel developed irritating habits. Instead of saying "Shall we go in?" when dinner was announced, he adopted the ridiculous words, "Hungsi Bungi?" Old jokes, like old soldiers, never die. The first time we all laughed. Now the phrase had become a recognized formula, and I felt like rushing up to the Colonel and gagging him five minutes before the dinner-hour.

I admit that the world is a looking-glass. What one sees in it is one's own reflection. I realize that I was as trying to others as they were to me. No doubt Pearson disliked the manner in which I drank soup.

Thank God we had Evans with us to brighten us with his youth; though what the boy really thought of us would have been interesting and probably humiliating, to know. He must have found us a boring crowd of old fogies. Now that the Babe had gone, the only one of us within ten years of his age was Pearson.

Grayson, kindest and most sympathetic of men, did all he could to keep the youngster amused and happy. The friendship between the two was one of the brighter spots in our drab existence.

The Colonel had applied to Headquarters for another officer to take the Babe's place, but without result. One of our officers had been seconded to the Auxiliary Force for four years; another was doing a recruiting job in North India; two others held Staff appointments, having succeeded in passing through that forcing-house known as the Staff College.

It is a tragedy of regimental soldiering that there are never enough officers, particularly when there is a war. Actually the Delhis were very well off, boasting a Colonel, Second-in-Command, and two senior Company Commanders. Some units had no Field Officer at all. The Attocks, for instance, were desperately short and their temporary Commandant was a young Captain slightly senior to Pearson. A great chance for him. If he displayed conspicuous ability he stood well in the way of picking up a decoration, or even accelerated promotion.

The bane of our lives in Kharab Bibi was the dust. Showers of rain only subdued it. An hour or two later eddies of reeking pestles, the sport of any chance breeze, submerged the camp like swarms of devouring locusts. One's eyes smarted and burned from dust; one's kit was full of it; one's tent smelt of it. Nothing escaped the foul malady.

Perhaps we should have cursed the breezes rather than the

dust, for they, also waited the pungent odours of latrines and stables.

Then there were the flies. We tried every ruse we knew to kill these pests, but millions fresh from hearty meals of dung and texcreta escaped, to settle in the Mess, where they fattened themselves still more by perching on the butter or vegetables. Thousands died by falling into the milk-jug, which proved to be the best trap of all.

What with dust, flies, and second-rate food, it was hardly surprising that our stomachs rebelled at intervals against such tyranny. Fortunately, so far no one had succumbed to dysentery. With the exception of Evans, we had become more or less inoculated against minor ailments through years of residence in India.

Against the serious diseases of cholera and typhoid fever the camp Medical Officer raged a relentless campaign. Woe betide the cook who failed to soak fresh vegetables in a solution of permanganate of potash.

We grew rather to dislike the doctor. His officiousness gave us more trouble than it was worth. The water, saturated with chlorine, was undrinkable, and we protested that it was not necessary, surely, to instil such vast quantities of dope. But the doctor had a bee in his bonnet about the water, and it remained to the end of our stay in Kharab Bibi an unpalatable drink. I think the poor man had an inferiority complex. He was convinced he would be flung out of the Army if anyone became really sick.

Luckily, mosquitoes did not breed at that high altitude. I tremble to think what steps the doctor might have taken had we been faced with the possibility of malaria.

5

Having defeated the doctor, at any rate outwardly, I am sorry to say our Mess cook brought his career with the Delhis to a sticky end.

No one minded, except for a few murmurs, finding stray filaments in his soup which looked, on close scrutiny, rather like hairs from the cook's beard. The discovery of a dead insect, moth, or fly among the vegetables only led to a desultory complaint. So long as the food was edible we could survive odd unexpected spices and condiments. Besides, thanks to medical efficiency, we knew that a dead fly found under such circumstances had lost its harmful properties through being saturated in permanganate. Moths, too, are probably very good for the digestion, though I was present on no occasion when one was swallowed intentionally.

Yet there are limits to all things. And the cook should have known better than to drop a cigarette-end into the curry. It was gross carelessness on his part.

We were having lunch when the crash came. Curry with rice was always a popular dish in the Mess, the concoction admirably camouflaging stale, uninteresting meat left over from previous meals, liberally endowed as it was with chilis and submerged under thick layers of chutney.

Yes. Curry was better than the brown stew, shepherd's pie,

and crumb chops which graced our table only too often. Why the devil didn't Fish Face see that we had more curry? He was supposed to vet the cook's proposed menu every morning.

Meanwhile, the Colonel, a heartening mound of food on his plate, shouted for beer. A good idea. I would like some beer, too.

Harris and most of the others also thought beer a good idea. The curry was hot indeed, and slid down well when washed into the belly with pints of amber liquid. Soon I was sweating like a pig, and mopping my brow with a handkerchief. I never dare eat curry in polite society. Even the sight of it makes my skin tingle, causing beads of perspiration to form.

The others laughed at me good-naturedly. The Colonel's face had become a puce colour, but he did not sweat. Fish Face looked moist, but he did not drip. Harris and Pearson did not turn a hair; they looked abominably cool.

Grayson and Evans were out opening the road. We sympathized with them that they had missed such a good tiffin, though Fish Face remarked that curry could easily be carried in a thermos. I provoked a laugh by replying that one would have to carry too much beer.

Suddenly I saw the Colonel examining his plate intently. Then he scratched about with his fork.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "This is just about the frozen limit."

He removed to his side-plate a small object and passed it round for inspection. It was the end of a native 'biddy'—a mixture between a cigarette and a small cigar. It must have dropped from the cook's mouth while he was stirring the curry. Actually it had been fairly well curried, and it was lucky the Colonel had not been eating absent-mindedly. It might so easily have gone down his throat with a piece of chutney.

We each gazed at it in turn, unable to believe the phenomenon.

But undoubtedly it was a 'biddy'.

The Colonel cleared his throat, and I saw he was trying to summon self-control to his aid.

"The cook will depart on the down-convoy tomorrow," he said acidly. "I only regret it is too late to send him today."

This statement was all very well. I admired the Colonel's effort at emulating a Roman Emperor dismissing one of his slaves, but who was going to do our cooking?

Fish Face pointed out the difficulty. We were not in Zai Khel, where it would have been comparatively easy to find someone with pretensions to cooking, but in Kharab Bibi.

"I don't care a damn," said the Colonel, with an air of finality. "The cook has got to go. I won't have the filthy beast in the Mess." Then Pearson came to the rescue.

"My servant can cook after a fashion," he announced. "He looked after me when I went on a shooting-trip last year."

So it was arranged. Pearson's bearer was made *chef d'hôtel* pending the arrival in due course of a qualified man from Risalwan.

We forwarded the 'biddy' to the doctor with the suggestion that he should pickle it and preserve it in a jar as a permanent souvenir of his services as Camp Health Officer on the North-West Frontier.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

THE operations leading to the occupation of Oboe Shai were highly successful, and a tribute to all ranks.

The Northern Brigade reached its new camp twenty-four hours before the Southern Brigade without a great deal of opposition, for the tribesmen had decided to muster all their forces overlooking the track up which the Southern troops would have to pass. For once the Pathans were concentrated, though, as usual, they lacked a common leader. Many of their numbers comprised gangs which had joined with the sole purpose of obtaining loot. The easy way in which the convoy had been ambushed and fired their imaginations. "By all means let us have a holy war," they said, "if we can seize sufficient loot."

The Northern Brigade established itself in Oboe Shai, and to all intents and purposes settled down for the night. Camp piquets were constructed and occupied, bivouacs put up, and troops allotted to perimeter posts. The tribesmen watched these details, and after sunset fired a few rounds into the camp.

At eleven-thirty the Northern Brigade, less one strong detachment, moved out of Oboe Shai on very light scale, accompanied by the minimum number of mules and camels considered necessary for twenty-four hours' operations.

Avoiding the direct route the Column marched 'across country', and after great difficulties in crossing knife-edged hills, where several mules fell down precipices and had to be destroyed, at dawn reached the defile, the safety of which was so vital to the Southern Brigade.

The tribesmen were caught unawares. For once the impending move of Government troops had been kept secret, perhaps because there were no bazaars attached to the camp at Oboe Shai.

Completely surprised by the unexpected arrival of the Northern Brigade, and unable to retreat, since their rear was blocked, the tribesmen hastily moved off to a flank.

Here, however, they had not counted on the sudden appearance of aeroplanes, which dived at them, machine-gunning with good results.

The Royal Artillery also found excellent targets, so the casualties of the tribesmen were heavy, and their discomfiture extreme. They scrambled away as fast as they could, leaving many dead and wounded behind them.

The key position now held, it was an easy matter for the Southern Brigade to ascend over the pass. By midday the move had been accomplished, and the Northern Brigade, which immediately after the fighting had sent two battalions to piquet the main route to Oboe Shai, acted as rear-guard to its newly arrived guest.

At four in the afternoon the tail end of the force passed into camp. Some tribesmen had followed up the withdrawal, but in a half-hearted manner. Whatever unison they had succeeded in effecting was lost, at any rate temporarily. They had been thoroughly surprised, and their morale was shaken.

Our own casualties, since the day the Northern Brigade had entered the Bandar valley from Narai, amounted to five killed and sixteen wounded.

We heard later that the tribesmen in the engagement at the defile had lost fifty killed, and more than double that number wounded. It is always difficult to compute tribal losses, as the Pathans invariably take away with them all casualties they can remove. This time, however, they had been forced to leave large numbers behind them, with resultant losses of arms and ammunition.

As a result of this encounter, and the easy way in which two Brigades had occupied the Bandar valley, the Mullah lost a great deal of prestige. His doctrine had always bordered on the supernatural, for by this method he could play on the superstitions of the tribesmen. He had told his followers that he was immune from bullets and bombs, and that if only they would place their faith in the one God, they, too, would find partial immunity. According to their increase in faith so their bodies would find divine preservation from the weapons of the infidel.

But now troops had entered the Bandar valley, and the Mullah, immune though he proclaimed himself to be, had slipped away towards Magrawal territory. Further, tribal casualties had been heavy. Evidently faith had not proceeded far enough to triumph over mortality.

The tribes began to grumble. Several large gangs, disappointed, dispersed. No loot had been seized; indeed many rifles had been lost. And if the Mullah was so divine why did he not come personally to the battlefield and conduct, or bless, the operations?

Would the stupid war now end? Surely the Magrawals and other tribes must see the futility of joining a cause doomed to ultimate failure.

2

The bodies of our dead, thanks to small numbers, were evacuated to Zai Khel for burial where there was a proper cemetery. Some times interments have to take place in the vicinity of the battlefield, owing to lack of transport facilities and swift decomposition of corpses, but this procedure is avoided if possible. The tribesmen are nearly certain to dig up the dead and mutilate the remains.

"Not that I care a damn what happens to me once my number is up," remarked the Colonel in Mess.

"I quite agree," returned Grayson. "But I hate to think of my friends, even though they are dead, being defiled by those bastards."

A question of sentiment: but I thanked God the Babe was lying safely in Risalwan cemetery, his body—or what was left of it—intact. How much simpler it was to burn corpses after a battle like the Hindus did. But then there was very rarely enough wood, and partial cremation was worse than burial.

"One thing about being killed in action, or dying of wounds," said Fish Face, "is that the chances are you can't come back to life again. I read in a book the other day that many more people than we realize are buried alive, especially those certified dead through natural causes."

"Heavens above!" ejaculated Harris. "How can you tell that?"

"Through an occasional coffin having to be opened," replied Fish Face. "Sometimes a post mortem reveals the fact . . . the body has shifted, or the grave clothes are disarranged."

"What a cheerful conversation!" remarked the Colonel. "I think I must have a drink."

We all ordered drinks. Yet Fish Face's statement held the attention of the Mess. There is always a morbid satisfaction in discussing death.

"One can have one's veins cut," suggested Pearson. "That ought to prevent one coming back to life."

"Or be buried at sea," put in Grayson.

"Not much use to you if you die in Northern India," Pearson retorted. "At any rate, in England a dead person does lie in state for a few days before being put in his coffin. Out here a man is buried a few hours after he passes out. Supposing he isn't quite dead? A man killed in a polo accident, for instance, through being thrown on his head. . . . Isn't there some sort of concussion which produces a coma resembling death?"

"I believe there is," said the Colonel, "but doctors hate to admit it. Actually I think very few people are buried alive. You can generally tell if a man's dead by looking at him . . . his features and muscles relax till he looks many years younger. My mother looked like a young girl after her death. I don't think this rejuvenation could take place from mere coma."

"Let's ask our camp doctor," suggested Pearson. "He's sure to have ideas."

Everyone laughed.

"He'd want to disinfect the corpse before it was buried," remarked Harris.

3

The Colonel, poor man, must have hated Kharab Bibi more than any of us. The nearest officer in age to him was Fish Face, and the two officers had nothing in common. Fish Face tried his best, but he was dull. One could not get drunk with Fish Face—since two whiskies constituted his evening's ration—nor could one discuss the delights of lewd women with him, for he did not appear to understand the subject.

Most of us, of course, were too young for the Colonel. We could drink with him, talk smut with him, but we could not bring him the companionship he needed. In Zai Khel, or even on Column, he could wander off and chat with someone of his own rank. In Kharab Bibi he was caged like an animal. The Artillery Battery Commander was only a junior Major, and the Mechanical Transport Department worked under a subaltern.

This was not the war the Colonel had secretly desired. Sitting in Kharab Bibi was not likely to bring promotion in its train. The two Brigades in the Bandar valley were having all the fun. There were good chances there for gallantry and initiative.

The Colonel, however, gave little indication of his true feelings. In the early morning he suffered from a moderately sized liver, but an inspection of the lines generally gave him the required outlet to vent his spleen. By breakfast—a movable feast which rarely found more than two officers at any one time in Mess—he was glum, but approachable. From eleven in the morning onwards he was the

same as the rest of us, always ready to give advice, to joke, or to share a bottle of beer.

There was very little office work, though more than there should have been. We were not designated as being 'on active service' yet we were living under Field Service conditions. Zai Khel at the moment was no more than a depot, yet correspondence with Headquarters, formations, and units down country flourished as if we were stationed in some peaceful permanent cantonment where war had never penetrated. Pearson, now sent on a weekly visit to Zai Khel, dealt with all the problems he could solve; those beyond his scope were brought to the Colonel.

I was reminded, sometimes, of Bairnsfather's ludicrous picture of a harassed Colonel sitting in a dug-out in the front line during a particularly severe bombardment in Flanders. Shells are bursting in every direction, when the telephone rings. The Colonel lifts the receiver, and after prolonged 'Hullo' and 'I can't hear yous', due to the deafening noise, discovers that he is being asked by some official at the base to report immediately how many tins of plum-and-apple jam have been consumed by his regiment during the past three days.

I know that Kharab Bibi can hardly bear comparison with Flanders, but it is annoying, nevertheless, to receive a letter from the Arsenal in British India demanding an explanation as to why out of thirty thousand empty fired cases of ammunition reputed to have been returned, six have been found, on counting, to be deficient.

It is also rather trying to be reminded by a certain department that a sum of two annas is outstanding on the debit side, and 'when do you propose to adjust it'?

Really we needed an officer to live in Zai Khel to deal with correspondence. I suggested Evans might fill the role, but the Colonel would not hear of it. He said the boy was too young; an absurd view to take. It is always a good plan to give a youngster responsibility, providing life and limb are not asked to pay the price of inexperience. Dealing with office work in Zai Khel would have given Evans an excellent introduction to office routine. Any important letters he could have sent on to the Colonel.

For a Company Commander there was little office work to do in Kharab Bibi. Twenty minutes a day, when not out on road protection, sufficed to settle any intricate problem Suleiman might produce. Leave had been stopped; so no one could waste my time asking for it. Money was no use to men in a desert; so there was no need to issue pay. If a sepoy wanted to buy cigarettes he could purchase them from the regimental contractor by signing a 'chit' subject to the veto of his Platoon Commander, who was responsible that certain scales authorized by battalion orders were not exceeded.

As for crime, the men were too busy and hard-worked to find time to perpetrate many serious outrages. Once I had to take a non-commissioned officer before the Colonel for making an insolent reply to an Indian officer. But on analysing the case it was found that both men were more or less equally to blame. The subordinate escaped 'Severely Reprimanded'. Discipline had to be maintained, and the Colonel was quite right in taking the side of his Indian officers.

Sometimes a fight took place down the lines, but I shut my eyes and turned a deaf ear, unless, of course, matters passed beyond

control. The sepoy were just as bored with Kharab Bibi as we were, and it was not surprising that hot tempers occasionally clashed.

Putting aside minor disturbances, which, after all, must occur in any large male community, the sepoy behaved marvellously well. They laughed, and sang, and made jokes. They were just as witty as their Tommy counterparts in the British Army. One rather stout man in B Company was known as 'Rations'; another who verged on the very thin side was called 'The Corpse'.

We British officers all had nicknames down the lines, but it was almost impossible to find out what they were, probably because they were unprintable. Suleiman once told me, on a festive occasion, that the Colonel was known as 'The Khalifa'. If his statement were true, could any title be better, conveying as it does majesty, pomp, and the head of a great religious family?

I had a shrewd suspicion that Fish Face had been dubbed 'The Begum'. The Babe swore it was true, and he had mixed with the men much more than his Company Commander, and on a more level footing. Whenever I see Fish Face now I visualize a ring through his nose, a *sari* over his head, and his body cloaked in a long, voluminous skirt.

I have never discovered my allotted name. Perhaps the Babe had known it, but he refused to admit knowledge of the secret. I can only imagine it must be worse than 'The Begum', and it serves me right for laughing at Fish Face. 'Old Fool' . . . 'Poop' . . . 'Pansy'. . . . What can my name be?

I do not know what my other brother officers are called, but I am doubtful if Harris is known as 'The Memsahib'.

4

Meantime, the two Brigades in the Bandar valley consolidated the camp at Oboe Shai, and, assisted by Engineers, indulged in an orgy of road-making.

There was frequent sniping, we heard, and occasional skirmishes with the tribesmen who had abandoned their efforts at concentrated resistance for guerrilla tactics, a warfare at which they were much more proficient.

A species of thick scrub jungle, peculiar to that part, adorned the slopes and crests of the hills round Oboe Shai, an unwelcome foliage which served as excellent cover for the Pathans, and gave added anxiety to the Commanders of camp piquets. Sniping even occurred by day, and observers had to be posted along the perimeter to try and locate these enemy pests either by their chance movement or puffs of rifle-smoke.

The Brigades also carried out reconnaissances over wide areas. On retiring they were generally followed up by the enemy, but they hit back hard, and tribal casualties were far in excess of our own.

The Mullah strove hard to regain his waning control, but the other tribes regarded the easy occupation of the Bandar valley by Government troops as a sign of defeat. The initial trouble on the Frontier had been caused by the Bandars. Why should other tribes hasten to assist a lost cause? Let the Bandars fight the British Indian troops. It was their own fault the Government had seized their valley.

Quickly the road grew into efficient proportions. But now, instead of the original short road which had been planned from Zai Khel to Bandarogha, a long circular highway from Risalwan to Risalwan, via Oboe Shai, Narai and Zai Khel, was in process of construction, a distance of approximately one hundred and thirty miles if one included the eighty-mile sector of main road already in existence.

The Bandars had lost their valley. What was more, Government troops would either build the road or give the contract to neutral tribes. The Bandars had lost their chance, and the profitable remuneration of employment had passed into other hands.

Already the Magrawal elders had their eyes on the Bandar valley road. Why should they not have a finger in the pie? The construction of the main road to Risalwan had been an excellent financial undertaking, bringing regular wages to thousands of their young men. Allah be praised that they had managed to restrain their young hotheads from joining the Mullah of Dand.

Then, once the new road should be ready for regular traffic, they argued, khassadars would be necessary for its protection. For when peace was declared, the British reinforcements would return to India, and local troops were insufficient in numbers to guard the whole route.

Again, the British were certain to detail a detachment for permanent service in the valley, either at Oboe Shai or Bandarogha. The road was too long to be left entirely devoid of Government control. Who would build the new post or fort? Much labour would be required.

So reasoned the Magrawals and other neighbouring tribes. And, although they did not know it, civilization had already enmeshed them in its net.

5

Twelve days later—or nineteen days after the conjunction of the two Brigades at Oboe Shai—the Bandars asked for a *jirga* to consider terms.

In every engagement which demanded straightforward action the tribesmen had been beaten. Only in ambush had they been really successful. Once, near Narai, they had fought a big battle with the down-stream protective troops, but always their losses had been greater than the British. The Government Army was like a remorseless steam-roller; no tribal revolt could stem its progress.

The Bandars were thoroughly war-weary. The blockade prevented supplies reaching them from outside sources, and they found it difficult enough to feed themselves without having to assist itinerant allies from neighbouring tribes. Their crops were uncut and spoiling for the harvest, an unalluring reminder of possible famine to come. Their casualties had been very heavy, and instead of winning the applause of their womenfolk they had earned opprobrium. There was no family in the Bandar valley which had not suffered at least one male casualty.

With peace in sight the floodgates of criticism were again released. What was our policy on the Frontier? Writers who had any know-

ledge of India past or present found the Press a remunerative field in which to air their views. Everyone condemned the present system which led to fighting and war, but no one had any concrete suggestion to offer.

No one, either, appeared to have studied military and civil history. No one, for instance, mentioned the fact that our conquest of India really had been peaceful penetration in the cause of trade preceded by the minimum amount of fighting necessary to secure that purpose. From anarchy, thuggism, tyranny, and lawless oppression India has emerged into a model country steadily progressing forward towards self-government.

Is there any reason why the North-West Frontier, given time, should not become a peaceful and respectable member of Indian society? Or shall we retire behind the Indus and leave the tribesmen to their resources?

The day the Babe was killed I voted for the Indus. There are also other times I favour a general withdrawal, notably when I get caught in a dust-storm or Harris says: "Hullo, gents."

But in my few rational moments what other advice can I give but 'Go forward?' In fifty years' time fighting with the tribesmen will be as ancient a memory as encounters by American settlers with Redskins of a past generation.

In the year 1987 Zai Khel will be a hill-station surrounded by pine and fir trees. Children will play in the cool, fountain-splashed gardens, while their nursemaids smile demurely at passing British Tommies.

An occasional visit to the old cemetery with its time-worn graves and memorial slabs will be the only reminder of pioneering days when Grandfather Evans helped to carve the way to honourable and lasting peace. The lettering on some of the stones will have become so faint that it will be almost impossible to decipher. What strange people those old pioneers must have been! Evans junior possesses a faded portrait of his grandfather in uniform. What a funny old boy he looks in his Georgian dress and obsolete equipment!

The caretaker of the cemetery, an old, old man with a stick, comes limping up. He fought against the British fifty years ago and is inordinately proud of the fact, for it gives him great prestige. His son is an Inspector of Schools, and draws a handsome salary from Government.

Many exciting tales of the past this semi-toothless old man can tell you. But, alas! the new generation lives in the present. No one cares a brass farthing about what happened in the dim past. Indeed, it is rare that anyone even visits the old cemetery. For those who have the misfortune to end their days in Zai Khel a new burial-ground has been provided.

When the old Pathan dies, which surely must be very soon, it is doubtful if the authorities will appoint another caretaker in his place.

In the year 2000 the letters on the tombstones will have become illegible. Long grass and weeds sprawl across the graves. On the official map the site is marked 'Ruined Cemetery', and the place has become a popular rendezvous for lovers desiring to hold clandestine trysts.

Well, Great-Grandfather Evans, what do you think of it all? Do you approve of this new modern world? . . .
'Young milksops,' did I hear you say?
Come, come, Great-Grandad, that's not the way to talk at all!

0

It was decided to hold the *jirga* on July 24 at Narai, since that was the central spot for the Bandars, and fairly accessible for other tribes.

Optimism ran high in the Mess. The Colonel would not now become a Brigadier, and I had little chance of winning the Victoria Cross, but leave would shortly be opened again—a comforting thought.

It was tolerably certain that the reinforcing Brigades would not be sent back to British India for some time. Having secured peace by force, it was necessary we should keep it by force until all germs of possible further unrest had been obliterated. Another rising on a large scale must be prevented at all costs. The safety of the long lines of communication must be ensured by reliable khassadars.

A feature of the operations had been the loyalty and efficiency of the Scouts. In addition to ordinary straightforward fighting, they had proved themselves extraordinarily useful in assisting the regular troops in roles such as acting as Advanced Guard to night advances over unfamiliar terrain, and rushing out to the help of units or formations which found themselves in difficulties. With their virile Pathan stock and hill-climbing propensities they made an ideal mobile force to be used as occasion demanded.

Poor Babe! How he had longed to join the Scouts. Evans, at the moment, was too busy studying for immediate examinations in the common vernacular to talk seriously about joining these levies. No doubt, in time, he would be captivated by the picturesque, wild-looking scoundrels who composed that Corps.

Years ago, I, too, had wanted to be seconded to the Scouts. With that idea in mind I studied Pushtu assiduously for nine months, passing the necessary qualifying standards.

A zealous Colonel, however, soon threw cold water on my ambitions.

"You should think of your regiment first," he reproved me.

In vain I sought to beguile him with a formidable array of statesmanlike arguments. He, incidentally, had spent most of his service doing interesting outside jobs. "We must think of the Empire," I said; "not only of a small unit such as one's battalion." Not a bad oration for a junior officer! Surely such a brilliant effort at platform—or, rather, orderly-room—speaking must meet with its just reward?

It did! The Colonel told me not to talk drivel. He then charmed me into submission by making me his adjutant—a job after my own heart.

Perhaps, later on, when my appointment as adjutant was over, I should have sought to escape regimental routine for a while by asking to be seconded for four years service with State forces, or the Burma Military Police. But it is not wise to run foul of one's

Commanding Officer. He always holds the trump card in the end, especially these days when surplus officers are being ferreted out for retirement under varying gratuities and pensions. One word from him may make or mar an officer's career.

I comfort myself—or try to—by imagining that I was far too valuable an officer to be sent away, even temporarily, from the Delhi Regiment.

Alas! it is cold comfort which I fear will not bear analysis. I know now that I was a coward, too keen on my easy-going existence to provoke displeasure. I should have taken the bull by the horns and gone, knowing that my Colonel only had two years left to command. By the time I returned a new Commanding Officer would have taken his place, and my sins would have disappeared into the limbo of forgotten things.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

THE Government terms were accepted in *toto* by the *jirga*.

The young hotheads had been brought to their senses and were ready to accept peace at any price. Hemmed in by our troops the Bandars had been hounded out of their villages, many of which had been destroyed, and chased all over their native hills by the two Brigades at Oboe Shai. Success had also been achieved by preventing the arrival of food supplies from British India. Loot from a few ambushed lorries had not been sufficient to fill the bellies of large forces of men.

The terms were severe, but fair. No one wished to leave a legacy of hate in the Bandar valley.

Five hundred rifles were to be surrendered to Government, and handed in to the Political at Narai on July 30. By that date all tribesmen who were not Bandars must be expelled from the valley. Any alien seen moving about in the demarcated area would be arrested by our troops, and the tribe to which he belonged heavily fined.

The leading elders, who had been drawing allowances from Government, would forfeit their salaries for two years. The road-building contracts would be given to neutral tribes which had remained loyal. On no account would any Bandar be employed, even in the most menial capacity of coolie.

Khassadars would again be enlisted from the Bandars, and they would be responsible for the protection of the new road through Bandar territory. The future of the tribe would be dependent on their good behaviour and co-operation.

A Scout fort would be built at Bandarogha. Here, again, the contract would be given to those who had assisted the Government in the past crisis.

Fairly heavy medicine, but absolutely just. A touch of genius lay in the clause that Bandar khassadars would protect the route, receiving their pay and allowances. For now no quarrel or free

fight could take place without the Bandars receiving severe censure. Fate lay in Bandar hands to ensure that all work proceeded with harmony. The elders swallowed the terms without demur.

2

I walked into the Mess one morning to find our Brigadier talking to the Colonel. He was full of good spirits and very affable.

"You'll be glad to hear the Brigade is returning to Zai Khel," he said to me. "Divisional Headquarters think it time we went home for a bit and did some of our normal routine."

"What about road protection?" I asked.

"The Northern Brigade is taking over our sector from Bandarogha to Zai Khel. It will stay out till the road is finished and the khassadar system working properly. The Brigade now in Zai Khel will move back to Risalwan. There's no point in having more troops out on Column than necessary."

I cordially agreed.

"Eventually Kharab Bibi will become a khassadar post," he continued. "For the moment the Scouts are going to send a detachment here, which will greatly relieve pressure. The Northern Brigade is putting one battalion into Narai, and keeping the remainder in Bandarogha. The Bandars have promised to observe the sanctity of the road, so protection will not be the arduous and dangerous pastime it has been in the past. Precautions, of course, will have to be taken against snipers and gangs of ruffians—but then we always have to be on our guard against isolated incidents, whether we are at peace or war."

"Peace!" exclaimed the Colonel. "We were at peace when the Gurkha was murdered."

The Brigadier laughed.

"Actually the Gurkha affair had no political significance," he said. "Our march into the Bandar valley, where no troops had ever been before, stirred up the hornets' nest."

"Do you think we should have gone?" asked the Colonel.

"Wouldn't it have been better to have left the Bandars to themselves?"

"Certainly not!" The Brigadier was most emphatic. "The Bandars were harbouring the murderer, and refused to give him up. They then had a scrap with the Scouts, openly defying the Political. If the Government had taken no action the Bandars would have become insufferable. We should have only been staving off the evil day."

"But in any case the murderer escaped," remarked the Colonel. "He is supposed to have fled into Afghanistan."

"If the Bandars had behaved themselves they would have got off with a fine, the surrender of some rifles, and the presence of troops for a few days in their territory. We might also have demanded half a dozen hostages pending the capture of the murderer, otherwise they might have taken no action to apprehend him."

There was a pause, during which the Abdar passed round cigarettes.

"Are you sure you won't have some beer?" the Colonel asked. "Or a gin?"

But the Brigadier shook his head.

"I was terribly sorry to hear about young Lorrimer," he said presently. "You called him the Babe didn't you?"

The Colonel nodded, and then drew a letter out of his pocket.

"I heard from Mrs. Lorrimer this morning," he said, passing the letter over to me. "It came just before the Brigadier arrived."

Asking to be excused, I opened it and began to read. . . .

Now and then from a great distance I could hear occasional phrases from the Brigadier such as "great loss" . . . "clean, well-set-up youngster". I became absorbed in another world, a country through the looking-glass where 'Pinewood Cottage' stood with a small, carefully tended garden between itself and the main road. The whole letter exuded the subtle fragrance of a sweet personality.

He loved the regiment, and all of you so much [she wrote]. No incident was too trivial for him to talk about. . . . He always sent me a letter every week . . .

She finished up by saying she would like us to forward her his sword, watch, cigarette-case, and any personal knick-knacks we thought a mother would like to possess. The rest of his belongings we might sell. Not one word of self-pity, yet between every line one could sense tragedy. . . .

My reflections were disturbed by the Brigadier, who rose to depart.

3

It was just as well the Brigadier could not stay to lunch as our new cook, thought better than Pearson's well-meaning slave, was far from being a genius.

The soup tasted of diluted Worcester sauce, and the rich odour of the condiment seemed to permeate all meat and vegetable dishes in the same way that expensive perfumes of fair women assail the nostrils of their dancing partners, leaving a faint scent on hands and fingers for days afterwards,

The roast goat tasted rather sickly, and gave one the impression that roast horse might taste the same were one compelled to eat it. The kidneys were glutinous and sweet; the remains of the goat, of course. The liver was rich in a pungent kind of way; relics, also, of the same goat. Brain cutlets tasted rather like a mixture between mussels and herring roes; quite good if one hadn't seen the goat alive and kicking the day before.

It will be realized that the goat on peace or active operations is a most useful beast, and there is not much left of him at the end. Even the head is valuable, for, properly boiled, it makes an appetizing tit-bit for a dog. There was no delicacy Horace liked better.

Finally, the skins of slaughtered goats are dried, and sold by sweepers in the bazaar at certain prices just as rabbit-skins are bartered in the markets of other countries.

Thank goodness our cook had never heard of tripe and onions. I should hate to partake of this nourishment taken from the entrails of a goat. Haggis, yes. Here I am prepared to experiment; for my dictionary defines this food as 'a Scottish dish made of the heart, lungs, and liver of a sheep, calf, etc., chopped up with suet,

onions, oatmeal, etc., seasoned and boiled in a sheep's stomach bag' . . .

No; on second reflection I do not think we should ask the cook to tamper with ancient Scottish custom, not even on St. Andrew's night. Our new cook is the proud owner of false teeth, and I tremble to think what might happen after the Colonel's 'biddy' adventure—though, of course, we could insist on his removing his dentures before he commenced work. That would be Fish Face's task.

Our new cook has a sardonic laugh, and a squint. I think Fish Face is secretly afraid of him. Like the Mullah of Dand, he possesses a strong personality, submerging it in an aroma of Worcester sauce. . . .

So far he has routed the doctor, for he has all the tricks of the trade at his finger-tips . . . bowls of permanganate, soap for his hands, a clean towel. I do not suppose for one minute he ever uses these appliances. The towel always looks much too clean. The British Officer of the Week has to inspect the Mess cookhouse, among his other duties, and next time I am detailed for this unenviable role I shall make a small mark on the towel with an indelible pencil—when the cook is not looking, of course. Then, when my turn comes again about five weeks later, I shall be able to see whether my conjectures are correct.

I cannot check the soap. For weeks a shabby, part-worn, rather mouldy-looking slab of Lifebuoy has lain on a restle beside the bowl of water, ready to protect the hands from the contamination of 'twenty-seven germ diseases'. We can only hope it has been given a chance to display its advertised qualities. . . . At any rate, someone must have used it in the dim past.

No Indian cook works alone. He has a staff consisting of a mate, and very often a pantry-boy. It sometimes happens that the mate is a more skilful artiste than his master. When the cook is banished into exile his staff accompanies him.

Our new cook's best accomplishments are mulligatawny soup and curry. The latter dish, even now, causes considerable humorous apprehension when it appears on the table.

Everyone knows the cook has false teeth. Being an atrociously ill-fitting set, the poor man cannot hide them.

4

Ordinary leave in India was to be opened again from August 1, two days after the surrender of the rifles at Narai by the Bandars. But all officers were to be within forty-eight hours of recall. Short leave *ex* India would only be granted in exceptional cases, thus ruling out carefree trips to Australia or Japan. We wondered if the Gurkha Colonel would be able to prove his case 'an exceptional one'.

The Colonel decided to wait until the Delhis arrived at Zai Khel, and then send off Grayson, whose case was urgent, and Fish Face. When Fish Face returned, the Colonel would go on leave while his Second-in-Command looked after the battalion.

Thanks to the operations, all previously arranged leave-schemes

had to be cancelled. The Government allowed Army officers three months' privilege leave a year from the Frontier, but five officers must always be present with their unit. This order permitted us to send two away at once, for our numbers were seven.

Three months' leave, however, within forty-eight hours' recall of the Frontier is not likely to prove very exciting. It was just possible to visit Kashmir, and one might return on time providing there were no landslides or mishaps on the way. Unfortunately, it would be out of the question to go into the hills shooting, or on trek, or any distance away from a telegraph office. The only solution was to live in a houseboat, a very hot affair in midsummer, or settle down to golf in the high altitude of Gulmarg.

There were one or two hill stations reasonably near at hand, but to dwell for three months in these Olympian places surrounded by the gilded Staff would kill the average man unless he had a wife already installed on the premises.

No. A bachelor who goes on three months' leave must have a purpose. He may climb, he may shoot, he may explore. It is not good that he should settle for long in a fashionable hill station.

Ten days' leave, or a fortnight? Ah, that was another matter! Let an officer achieve what he can in such a fleeting period. Before serpent scandal has time to twine its coils he will be back again with his regiment.

So argued the Colonel, and I agreed with him. So did Harris, with exceptions. Harris hated social life in cantonments, where he regarded everyone as a snob. He preferred houseboat life on secluded lakes where he could take a sweetheart and keep her unseen.

Said a sweet young thing of Kashmir,
To one of her friends: "My dear,
I like these houseboats;
One can sow one's wild oats,
And there's no one to see or to hear."

This limerick was composed one night in Mess, so it can be quoted without the use of inverted commas. We all had a hand in it.

Taking into consideration the exigencies of the Frontier situation, the shortage of officers, the frailties of human nature, and the characters of his juniors, the Colonel wisely decided to allow each of us six weeks' leave, instead of the usual three months'.

"We all need leave," he said, "and as soon as we can get it. If we've got to wait three months till someone comes back, the last man on the list won't get away for nearly a year. By that time the next leave season will have started. Our trouble is we are so damned short of officers."

I wonder how many Colonels I have heard grumbling about the shortage of officers. I have never yet heard one declaim that he had sufficient. Actually we were well off compared with many units, two being on eight months' furlough in England.

The great principle of leave is to allow a steady exodus of officers on furlough, thus automatically ensuring a steady turnover. Three officers should always be away on furlough, for then one's turn comes more or less regularly every three years as sanctioned by Government. Short leave does not matter two damns when compared with the long period.

Fish Face should have gone on furlough this year, but he refused under the pretext that he was heavily in debt . . . no doubt owing to the extravagances of his Muriel before she bolted.

Unfortunately, there was no one to take Fish Face's place, and the Colonel should have been firm and ordered him to go. At any rate, his name should have been put at the bottom of the furlough roster, for someone now might have to wait four years.

Grayson and I were on furlough last year, also another officer who was posted to a Staff appointment on his return. The Colonel, Harris, and Pearson went home on furlough the year before.

So it was indubitably Fish Face's turn to go now. The Babe could not have gone even if he had lived, for a newly joined youngster must serve three years before he is allowed furlough, also pass certain examinations.

5

The second day of August was given as the date on which we were to evacuate Kharab Bibi. All superfluous stores were to be removed as soon as possible to Zai Khel by successive convoys.

I forgot all about the Company dumb-bell, until it was too late. It had been despatched with one of the first consignments on a day I was out opening the road. Suleiman pretended he had given no orders, and that he was quite in the dark; but of course the old man had been chief conspirator in the plot against me.

Funny old Suleiman! How little he knew his Company Commander in some respects, how much in others. Now that the Babe had gone, I would no more have ordered the abandonment of the dumb-bell than I would have directed Suleiman to leave behind the Company cooking-pots. The great chunk of wood inanimate as it was, evoked too many memories of youth and pulsating life. I wondered what Mrs. Lorrimer would think if I slipped it home as one of her son's personal effects. Would she be shocked? . . . I could send her no relic more redolent of the Babe, no truer memorial of courage and endeavour, no missive more stamped with his personality and the love of his men.

Soon the tents were struck, and we returned to a bivouac existence for a few days. With the departure of the hot-case, the joints improved, though those arriving at all hours for breakfast and lunch had to cool their heels for a bit while their requirements were being attended to.

The men whistled and sang. Twenty men from B Company were about to go on leave, and Suleiman persecuted me with alterations, cancellations, additions, and re-alterations to the names on the prepared list. He himself could not go—yet. Indian officers, being few in numbers, were in the hands of the Adjutant for ordinary leave, and Company Commanders could only recommend them; care had to be taken that all the most efficient men were not away at the same time.

Multan Singh's claim for leave was a prior one, and someone had to be selected to officiate in his place as Subadar Major and senior Indian officer of the battalion. For such an important position Suleiman was well fitted, and I hoped that he would be chosen permanently when Multan retired—a matter of eight months.

Suleiman was a much greater rascal than Multan, but he inspired universal confidence and respect. The welfare of the men would be safe in his hands.

Suleiman, at first, was furious at not being given immediate leave—especially since Multan had been granted three months to attend to urgent private affairs which would brook no delay. But he cooled down when I pointed out to him the great benefits that might accrue if he did his new work well. I sympathized with him over his wife, who also appeared to be suffering from sexual starvation.

"It's a hard world," I said, "but you should be thankful you are still alive."

To which Suleiman replied, "Glory be to Allah, the most merciful and compassionate."

Firoze Din annoyed me very much by begging for leave when it was not his turn to go. Trading on the fact that he was my orderly, he assumed that he could easily persuade me to let him take someone else's place. Indians have no morals at all, and are steeped in intrigue, bribery, and corruption from the cradle to the grave.

I was very angry with Firoze Din and threatened to dismiss him, for I felt he should have known his Company Commander better. Then, of course, he burst into tears, and I was done.

A sepoy is a most extraordinary creature. He can display wavy hair, carry a rose slung behind one ear, exude perfume—and yet retain his manliness. Any Englishman who adopted these characteristics would at once be dubbed a 'Nancy Boy'. By no manner or means could Firoze Din be given such a title. He was a huge baby ready to fight to the death anyone who dared insult his code of honour. He was an excellent wrestler, and would have cheerfully tackled the world's champion if ordered to meet that gentleman in the arena.

A good fellow, Firoze Din. Yet I am afraid he threw his weight about in the lines. As orderly to his Company Commander he was a great man, and no Indian would risk the chance of displeasing such a personage. Worse still, I am rather afraid that men desiring promotion, and non-commissioned officers who should have known better, flattered Firoze Din, hoping he would whisper favourably in my ear.

I have no evidence to prove my statement. If I had, Master Firoze Din would return to normal duty with a rap over his knuckles.

Perhaps it is just as well I live in ignorance of many incidents that happen in the lines. The men do not like an officer who is always nosing round their quarters and trying to pry into their secrets.

A British officer should dwell like a god on Olympian heights, descending now and again in human form. He should study the frailties of his subjects from an abstract rather than a concrete point of view.

The whole outlook of an Indian is different from ours. Many affairs we catalogue as crime seem trivial to him. Therefore any punishment meted out to him should be given with discrimination.

One cannot eradicate an elaborate tree system by lopping off one branch.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I

WE returned to Zai Khel without incident. An enormous Indian officer—bigger than Suleiman—arrived the evening before we marched, and took over Kharab Bibi with the utmost placidity and efficiency. Under his command were one hundred tribesmen.

Zai Khel somehow seemed smaller than ever, its streets narrower, the lines more crowded. We had piqueted the route downstream from Kharab Bibi, and the Brigade passed through our dispositions, for precautions must always be taken. After the main body had gone on, the rear-guard withdrew us, and we entered camp just ahead of it. Since we were nearly last, perhaps that was why the place looked crowded.

Home again! One has to live in tents for some time to appreciate the comforts of being able to stand upright in a room, the joys of proper bathing accommodation instead of an odious earthen site which adhered to one's naked feet if one trod upon it. How I hated my bath in Kharab Bibi, drying myself afterwards in a crouching position to avoid the roof, which sagged over my head, and fumbling with the tent-flap, which was supposed to fasten over the entrance, but invariably fell away every half-minute, leaving me exposed to the public gaze—a shameful proceeding in India, where to display complete nakedness is the wanton habit of a lewd person.

How nice it was to sit again on sensible chairs at table, instead of on the canvas abortions which collapsed if not balanced exactly, and broke under pressure of any but regulation weight! Fish Face had broken three in Kharab Bibi, and I had smashed one.

And how delightful it was to drink out of glasses made of glass in place of tin mugs, and to eat off china plates!

"Here we are, here we are, here we are again," sang Harris, as usual very untunefully. "Another three months and you and I will be on leave. Do you think we can wait as long as that? Where are you going?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't considered it."

Harris flung his arms towards heaven.

"You are a funny old stick," he said reproachfully. "I should have thought you'd have been thinking of nothing else."

I did not ask Harris what his plans were, as we all knew . . . a houseboat. A boy would fetch him his post every day. Not a bad life in a way, and an absolute change after the Frontier. Srinagar has well earned its reputation for being the Venice of the East, and a man would be difficult to please who could remain indifferent to its beauty . . . and by the time my leave became due in November the weather would be glorious. Deer began to descend towards the lakes in early autumn—magnificent creatures known as *Bara Sing* meaning Twelve Horns. . . . Perhaps I might risk a shoot, provided I stayed in the vicinity of a telegraph office.

Get thee behind me, Satan! I must not formulate such ideas. I am too near my pension to take risks. I must just hope that in three months' time the Frontier situation will have eased sufficiently to enable the forty-eight-hour ban to be lifted.

Fish Face, apparently, had decided to head for the nearest hill

station. The poor devil hated the idea as much as I did, but for different reasons. He was certain to meet many gossips who had known Muriel, and he was not energetic enough to rise above the occasion by giving champagne parties and chasing all the girls. By causing fresh scandal he could have killed the old one.

The obvious place for Fish Face was a houseboat in Kashmir, buried in some reeds, alone with his books and reflections. It was preposterous to imagine him keeping a woman. His only hope was to meet some yearning lady missionary, or a comfortable hotel proprietress who would be glad of a 'Major'—perhaps, presently, Lieutenant-Colonel—to lend lustre to her business.

I suggested a houseboat to Fish Face, but he seemed to think I was pulling his leg; and Harris, who was present when I made my harmless remark, nearly went into hysterics—which I thought exceedingly unkind of him. After that effort I tried no more to help Fish Face. He must work out his own salvation alone. 'To give advice is silly, but to give good advice is absolutely fatal.'

Three months certainly did seem a long time to wait for leave, but it would have been far worse if the Colonel had not cut it down to six weeks. I felt sorrier for Harris than myself, but he was required to act as Adjutant while Pearson went away on Grayson's return to woo a girl whom we felt he should have married ages ago.

"I shan't do your job unless you give me your promise to pop the question," Harris said sternly. "And it's no good blushing. . . . Get on with the work, man!"

Pearson was speechless.

2

The next excitement after the departure on leave of Fish Face, Grayson, and the men, was the news that a great General intended to visit Zai Khel with the express purpose of presenting units with the decorations won by them in action.

A great deal of discussion ensued between the Brigadier and the Colonel determining the conduct of the parade. Finally it was decided that, since B Company had scored the honours, its Company Commander should receive the medals direct from the General's hands.

Hating ceremonial display of any kind, I tried to persuade the Colonel to revoke this decision. He, as Commandant, should be given the medals, which, since the owners were dead, now belonged to the regiment.

The Colonel refused to accept my views, and pointed out that the medals belonged to the widows, failing whom the next of kin.

This statement started a fresh argument. Would it not be a good scheme to have the medals framed and hung on the walls of the Mess? We would, of course, have to write to the men's relations and obtain their consent—which, personally, I felt would be given with considerable reluctance. Indeed, I thought it rather hard luck they should be asked at all. If there is one thing in this world an uneducated Indian loves it is a medal, badge, or certificate.

We consulted Suleiman, now in full bloom as Subadar Major, but naturally he backed the majority which favoured the Mess.

Then Pearson had a brain-wave.

"Surely we don't want all seven medals, do we?" he asked. "One should be quite enough, with an inscription underneath to show how it was won. It's possible one of the men killed may have no very near relation." He turned to me. "You ought to know that," he said.

I did. But Suleiman, who also knew, answered first.

"Three leave widows," he said. "The others are unmarried. One man, Gul Khan, has no near relations. His father, mother, and brother were killed by the plague. I know, for Gul Khan used to live in a village only three miles distant from mine."

"Who is his next of kin, then?" asked the Colonel.

"An aunt," was the reply.

"So be it," said the Colonel. "We will write to her."

I was glad we had not tried to annex all seven medals, though no doubt they would have looked very fine altogether in one frame with a short account of how the recipients had died fighting to the last man.

3

The Great Man arrived. He visited the Gurkhas first. . . .

The Delhis 'feil in' on three sides of a square, the fourth being occupied by a table on which the medals already lay in snug little boxes, having arrived at Brigade Headquarters by registered post some days ago.

B Company faced the table from the middle side of the square. I stood three paces in front, the Colonel six. We were dressed in our Sunday best—starched tunics, breeches, gaiters, spurs. We also carried swords.

I have never felt so uncomfortable in my life. I had been spoilt by weeks of free-and-easy existence in shorts and wearing shirts open at the neck with rolled-up sleeves. Now the collar of my fastened shirt seemed to be about to strangle me, my tunic coat bit me under the armpits, and my legs felt stuffy and cramped under long puttees. But these trifles paled into insignificance compared with the agony I suffered from a button on the lower part of my breeches which was eating into my shin-bone.

Oppressed by such heavy burdens, I began to wonder if I should ever be able to walk up to the General without behaving like a cripple. As we 'stood easy', I turned round and surveyed the men, who, of course, were armed with rifles—much simpler implements than swords. They seemed to be nervous and uncomfortable, too, and suffering from sudden tickles which required scratching. Some were coughing and clearing their throats.

"Stop that noise," I ordered. But I knew they were only going through the usual nightmare which precedes an important parade when one must stand motionless at 'attention' for several minutes on end.

I looked at Suleiman. He was putting some finishing touches to his beard with his fingers. I noticed with satisfaction that his tunic appeared tighter than mine. I hoped he would do his sword-drill properly. I was a poor exponent with a sword myself, but he was worse. We had found little time for practice.

Thank God we did not require swords on Column! You can turn

your swords into ploughshares,' our Brigadier told us when we arrived in Zai Khel, straight from the spit and polish of a down-country cantonment. Needless to say, it was a very popular announcement.

Yet here we were wearing ceremonial review order, our medals clanking against our breasts.

I was just beginning to get a pain in my back when I saw the Colonel stiffen . . . the Great Man was approaching.

"Delhis . . . attenssshun ! . . ."

A pause.

"Slooape aams ! . . ."

The Great Man saluted, then with surprising quickness told the Colonel to 'order arms' and bring the battalion to the 'stand at ease'.

The General then made a short speech which, needless to say, was complimentary. After all, he had come to bestow decorations, not to criticize sword-drill. Nevertheless, I trembled. . . .

After the speech, the Colonel was summoned to the table, and stood next to the General.

The moment I had been dreading had arrived. Called forward by name, I gave a lurch, and then swayed towards the table. . . . I waved my sword in the air in salute, and trusted the movement was not a terrible travesty of the correct procedure described in the Drill Book.

The General smiled. Was it with irony? . . .

"Return your sword, please," he said.

I swept my sword round my head, and somehow managed to encase it in its sheath without looking down.

My opponent—I could regard him as nothing else—now shook hands with me in a very kind manner. He then said some very nice things about B Company, and how pleased he was to meet us all.

The rest of the parade went according to plan. The medals were handed over to me, but since I could not with dignity retake my place on parade and carry them at the same time, I fell out beside the Colonel.

The Battalion was ordered to march off to the lines under the senior non-commissioned officer, and the British and Indian officers were marshalled by Pearson into single rank.

The General stepped forward, shook hands with and spoke to each officer in turn. I thought Suleiman was going to burst. . . . but fortunately this imminent catastrophe was avoided by the General passing on. I did, however, notice the Great Man wince as his hand became engulfed in a mighty paw.

A few minutes later the parade was over.

Would the Great Man come to the Mess and seek refreshment after labour? Surely he must need a rest? The Delhi officers would be delighted. . . .

But no. The Great Man had still a busy day before him. Otherwise he too would have been delighted. . . .

We saw him off in his car. Then I hastened to my room. With what joy I discarded my uniform for more comfortable raiment!

Needless to say, many tankards of beer were consumed in Mess before lunch that day.

The day, however, was by no means over.

To do honour to the occasion, the men of B Company had decided to hold a theatrical entertainment in the lines. Officiating Subadar Major Suleiman Khan had issued invitations to all units in Zai Khel.

A piece of ground outside B Company's lines was just large enough to contain the stage, actors, and more distinguished members of the audience. A terrace on one side and a mound on another made an ideal upper circle and gallery for the *hoi polloi*.

The show began at nine, but British officers were not expected before ten. So we consumed a minimum number of drinks, knowing what was coming, and had our dinner at the normal hour. The ante-room of the Mess was then denuded of easy chairs, which were carried away to form the orchestra stalls.

Later, nasal voices uplifted in song, the twanging of instruments, and outbursts of great applause, informed us that the concert was in full swing.

We wended our way to the scene, and were greeted by Suleiman, who looked like an Emperor, magnificently attired in voluminous white pyjamas, silk shirt, heliotrope coat, and wearing a beautiful white *safa* head-dress carefully plaited, with the end rakishly peeping through the top in the shape of a fan.

After a great deal of shaking hands, we were conducted to our seats. Almost immediately afterwards orderlies arrived bearing whiskies-and-sodas.

The Emperor, breathing heavily with importance, departed to deal with other arrivals. It was not difficult to see that he was enjoying his role of officiating Subadar Major.

During all this time an attractive-looking girl had been singing on the stage. Who was she? Women were not allowed in Zai Khel.

I asked an Indian officer who was sitting behind, and he chuckled.

"Do you not recognize her?" he asked. "Why, it's Roshan Singh."

"Good God!" I exclaimed, and examined more closely the painted *houris* with a ring through her nose.

Roshan Singh was a young signaller. I knew him quite well, and had often cursed him heartily for his slowness in taking and sending messages.

"I think we shall have to call him Roshan Begum after tonight," I remarked to the Indian officer, who roared with laughter and passed the joke on to his friends.

An Indian entertainment is quite different from an English one. The audience talk, change seats, and walk about as they feel inclined.

Roshan Begum now began to dance, swaying her hips, and sidling round on her toes, which were covered with rings. Her ankles were festooned with bangles which made a jingling noise. Over her head was a silken *sari*.

Now and then she paused to sing, but I could not understand one word. Evidently she was being clever—or, more probably, 'smutty'—because the crowd screamed with laughter. I could understand

her no more than I could a Scotsman talking local slang in the Western Hebrides.

An orderly brought me another whisky. I accepted it. I thought I needed fortifying.

The orchestra consisted of two men from our pipe band playing reed instruments, and a drummer.

The crowd was enormous. All the expensive and cheap seats were filled. I could see, dimly, every kind of caste and creed jammed together in sweating profusion. Some were chewing betel-nut, others sweets. A night like this was rare in Zai Khel. Everyone meant to enjoy himself.

Headed by Suleiman, the Gurkha Colonel and two other officers arrived; many from the Gunners, Punjabis, Attocks, and the British regiment were already in their seats.

Meanwhile, round the perimeter the guards and sentries held their vigil. Hearing from a distance the sounds of laughter and cheering, they must have cursed their luck that it was their turn to be on duty tonight. One can imagine a Havildar, sulking at missing the fun, deciding to fire a red Very light and put a drastic end to the frivolities. . . . Fortunately no one felt quite that way.

Roshan Begum finished her turn and retired. At this juncture the Brigadier, accompanied by his Staff, appeared. Suleiman shepherded them to seats next to the Colonel.

After a short interval a clown made his entrance on to the stage, and I had no difficulty in recognizing him as Firoze Din. Folding his hands over a purposely distended paunch, he delivered a few topical pleasantries that delighted the crowd. He forgot neither the Brigadier nor the Colonel in his impudent sallies.

The Colonel smiled rather sheepishly. He was thinking of his distinguished guest. But he need not have worried, for the Brigadier laughed as loudly as anyone at the mimicry at his expense. Where one failed to understand words, there was no mistaking Firoze Din's gestures. . . .

My turn came next. . . . Firoze Din went to the wings and returned with a walking-stick. He sauntered to the front of the stage and then stopped. Leaning heavily on the stick, he crossed his left leg with his right and put his left hand on his left hip. . . .

The crowd roared with merriment, and I was reminded of Burns' famous couplet:

O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as ithers see us !

The Brigadier, away on my left, leaned forward and said to me, "What do you think of yourself now, old boy?" His eyes were wet from laughing.

Firoze Din had certainly wreaked his revenge on me for refusing to send him on leave !

My embarrassment wilted away under succeeding impersonations, and I realized that the laughter was just as loud at other people's idiosyncrasies as at mine. The peculiarities of Fish Face, somewhat to my surprise, were not represented, and I learnt afterwards he had escaped through being on leave.

The great genius of Firoze Din's performance lay in the fact that he did nothing unkind. No infirmity was expressed, only person-

ality—like a Prime Minister depicted smoking his pipe. Suleiman, of course, had coached him.

There was an interval after Firoze Din's turn, and the Colonel remarked to me, "I knew your orderly was an ass in private life, but I had no idea he was a public buffoon as well!"

More drinks and much chatter. Our guests were enjoying themselves hugely. I found time to speak to the Gurkha Colonel, and heard he was off to England almost at once by air.

"I shall be home, at any rate, for my boy's holidays," he said. "And I didn't have to forfeit any passage money after all!"

An Indian officer of the Punjabis came up and talked to me. I had been to his village once, when on leave, after duck and small game—a great bond always between British officers and Indians. We discussed his crops and the shooting prospects for next season. His son, a sepoy in the police, had just married. . . .

Then the beating of a drum signified that the concert was about to proceed, and we resumed our seats.

More females appeared on the stage, and were pointed out to me as being various sepoys in real life. Roshan Begum did not perform with them. Evidently she was the star artiste, too great to mix with a chorus. Perhaps she would charm the crowds again later. . . .

The present act seemed interminably long. To a European a nautch dance is a very dull affair. There is no originality, no lightning steps, nor the fast patter of little feet; nothing but dead slow rhythm and the constant twitching of breasts and buttocks.

At last, when I thought I was about to drop off to sleep, there was a final crescendo and the turn came to an end.

The Colonel whispered to the Brigadier, and they half rose . . . but before they could make a ceremonious departure, the regimental Pandit, responsible for the spiritual welfare of the Hindu element, climbed on to the stage. Suleiman hastened up to the Colonel and said, "Just one minute, Huzoor, if you do not mind waiting."

The Pandit, a wizened little man, dressed in a loincloth and wearing spectacles, cleared his throat and began a long discourse in a monotonous chant. No British officer understood him, and very few Indians; for, being a scholar, he chose all the most difficult Sanskrit words he could muster. He was not a divine who believe in preaching down to his flock.

I gathered he was talking about the regiment, for I caught the words "Colonel Sahib", and "*paltan*", which means a battalion.

On the termination of his sermon he was received with tremendous applause, particularly by the illiterate, who, failing to understand, thought the oration must indeed have been good.

The Colonel's second attempt to rise was frustrated by an unrehearsed item. The Mahommedan *Maulvi*, or priest, not to be outdone by his rival contemporary, hurried on to the stage. Fortunately for us, he had not prepared a speech. No one had warned him the Pandit was going to speak.

The *Maulvi* also an educated man, talked to us for a few minutes in his best Arabic, probably phrases he had coined from the Koran. He was perfectly safe, for no one had the faintest idea of what he was talking about, nor knowledge of the language. He finished by demanding in Hindustani three cheers for the Brigadier and Colonel Sahib.

The cheers were given with great gusto, after which the Colonel again tried to rise from his chair. This time he was ordered back peremptorily by Suleiman, who said, "One moment, please."

Suleiman felt it was high time he had an innings, and was furious with the *Maulvi* for daring to order three cheers. Any matter connected with cheering was the Subadar Major's prerogative.

He ascended the stage and faced the audience with superlative dignity. Calling for silence, he proceeded to make a short speech of fifteen minutes' duration in which he thanked the Brigadier for being a divinity, the Colonel for being a saint, all other officers for being above average, and the rank and file for being stalwart and sturdy sons of the British Raj. After that he called for three cheers for the Gurkha Colonel . . . and when those had subsided, three cheers for the regiment.

It was now obviously time for us to depart, and the Colonel managed at last to rise to his feet. The noise was deafening. . . . Presently, when we had gone, the jokes and songs would become more and more lewd—not fit for the ears of respectable British officers, even when the words were unintelligible.

My last impression of that memorable evening was a vision of Harris, who had drunk unwisely and was feeling his way to bed.

"Blash Subadar Majish," poor 'Arris hiccuped. "And I thought I had strong headsh!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I

THE month of August passed fairly uneventfully. Zai Khel was sniped at times, and roving bands of bad characters periodically cut telegraph cables and fired at the road-makers.

At one time I thought we might be sent out on Column to assist the Northern Brigade, but the situation cleared.

Gradually the novelty of living again in barracks faded away, and days and nights began to seem interminable in their cut-and-dried routine. The only comfort lay in the thought that dwellers on the plains were sweltering in heat, and being bitten by mosquitoes.

Goodness knows, Zai Khel could be unpleasant enough, too, when it chose. A high wind was wont to rise with the sun, submerging the camp in a continual cloud of thick dust.

Fortunately the nights were delightfully cool. Sitting outside the Mess before and after dinner made the pleasantest interlude in twenty-four hours.

There was one very hectic night when a telegram arrived announcing that Harris had been nominated for admission to the Staff College, and would report for duty the following February. The course lasted two years. Harris had qualified twice by obtaining half marks in all subjects, but had failed to pass in direct owing to the severe competition and large numbers of candidates.

We were all very pleased at Harris's success, and drink flowed in streams. No one 'crept silently to rest' till the dawn showed signs

of wakening in the eastern sky. The Colonel's liver was in such an appalling state when he rose from his bed that no man dared speak to him till he had consumed two bottles of midday beer. Luckily it was Sunday, so there was no parade or office-work.

Harris had to bear a good deal of chaff about his nomination to the forcing-house for gilded Staff officers; but he took it all in good part. The Colonel, particularly, delighted in making caustic comments. I think the old boy must have sat for the Staff College examination in his youth, and failed. To mention the Staff to him had the same effect as showing a red rag to a bull. He knew that the real reason he could find no further promotion was due to the fact that he had not passed through the Staff College. Sour grapes!

I missed Grayson's presence, rather. We were good friends. He was so placid, and always good-tempered—an ideal man to have in the Mess. No one could quarrel with Grayson; indeed, he had a way of quietening us down when rows seemed imminent.

I did my best, having been instructed by the Colonel, to keep an eye on Evans, for he was commanding A Company during Grayson's absence. The essential secret of guiding youth these modern days seems to be to give help without appearing officious. Youngsters, especially when they lack experience, are inclined to cover up their deficiencies by displaying a stubborn pride.

I suppose it is a sign of increasing age when one criticizes the younger generation for being made of less stern stuff than their fathers. Yet looking back on my subaltern days I remember senior officers who spoke to me in no uncertain terms if I made a mistake.

"Can't you command your bloody Company, sir?" a red-faced Colonel would bellow at me on a battalion parade. "I have never seen such a — show in my life."

The present-day junior officer would probably blow his brains out with his revolver if addressed in such a manner in public. Failing suicidal tendencies, he might sulk for a month or two, refusing to converse with his brother officers on any but official matters, and leave the Mess the moment meals were finished. Indeed, he might even ask to see the Brigade Commander, and lodge a complaint, though this procedure might prove a very unwise one. Brigadiers do not encourage newly joined children to report their Colonels unless, of course, there has been a very serious miscarriage of justice.

Evans, I am glad to say, was a very nice boy. One could not compare him with the Babe . . . but, then, comparisons are odious. He was always cheery, and worked hard with definite intentions of learning his job. I never felt any desire to bellow at him, but it should be remembered that I have emerged from the old school into the new. I have probably learnt self-control, like the Colonel. The Colonel bites, but he does not bellow, and he only bites when he is sure he has got his victim in a tight corner.

I liked Evans; and so did the men, I think. We had tested him at hockey, and found him quite useful. But he would have to practise hard before he became good enough to take Grayson's place.

It must have been very lonely for Evans in our Mess, with no one there of his own age. Zai Khel, however, was a better hole than Kharab Bibi, and he could call on his friends in other units,

or meet them in that ramshackle edifice which we called the Club.

Decrepit-looking barrack though it was, the Club was more exciting than many of its counterparts down country. Every Sunday morning in times of peace a regimental band played on the small lawn outside, and officers came to listen and drink beer. On Saturday nights the bar could become a very wild place, and the noise of popping corks and tinkling glasses has been known to go on till the arrival of 'First Light'—to give the dawn its formal military name.

Two officers in Zai Khel, of legendary fame, are reputed to have remained drinking at the bar from eleven on Sunday morning till six (half an hour before parade) on Monday. It should be accepted as a credit in their favour that no one in their regiment knew of this adventure till work was over for the day.

We went to the Club to escape from the Mess for a bit and see other people. One could dine there if one gave sufficient warning, and an occasional meal away from one's 'ain folk' makes a pleasant change. It was possible to dine, within limits, at any hour one chose without being herded into a formal meal to the cry of 'Hungibungi'.

I dare say one might have breakfasted at the Club, but it seemed rather too much trouble to order such a meal—even if it did mean escape from Harris's hearty morning greeting of 'Hullo, gents'. And, in any case, Harris would very likely have taken his revenge later.

Most of my spare time was taken up in trying to settle the Babe's effects, and not only his, but those of the men killed near Bandarogha. For the deceased men, of course, I had Suleiman and other Indian officers to help me, but the Babe's affairs were more intricate than I expected, and I found myself corresponding with tradesmen, inspecting bank balance sheets, settling bills, and fighting battles with the Controller of Military Accounts over pay and allowance questions. One of the functions of the C.M.A. is to ensure that no officer makes one anna more than his due. As a result this necessary but unpopular department has completely hedged itself with obscure regulations—at least, so it seems to the individual who has submitted and resubmitted a claim half a dozen times, always, to have it returned with the remarks that the applicant should refer to some musty manual, page fifty-five, section three, paragraph nine, footnote two, sub-section 1a.

Unfortunately, to give him his due, the C.M.A. is usually correct! "My dear sir," one of their officers says blandly, when you go to interview him imbued with false hopes that you may be able to exercise the personal touch, "yours is a hypothetical case; as such it cannot be considered. We must stick to rules."

I was able to sell the Babe's shotgun, fishing-rod with tackle, and a pair of polo boots for what I trusted his mother would consider a reasonable sum. Odd officers bought some of his clothes. What was left over I auctioned publicly, and was astonished at some of the high prices paid by impecunious-looking men.

The Colonel had been down to Risalwan to inspect the Babe's grave, and some time ago I had written to a well-known firm asking for a catalogue showing replicas of tombstones and their prices. Contributions were invited from all serving officers in the regiment.

It was with some surprise that one fine morning I found a young sepoy, by name Aziz Beg, standing outside my Company Office. His platoon commander was beside him, looking rather sheepish.

"What on earth are you doing there?" I exclaimed. "You only proceeded on leave with the last batch!"

Aziz Beg was not due back till the latter half of September. And it was unthinkable for a man to return from leave till his time was up. Indeed, considerable trouble was caused in orderly-room circles by men arriving after their leave had terminated, thereby becoming absentees who had failed to report for duty. They got short shrift from the Colonel. His punishment was invariably 'twenty-eight days' rigorous imprisonment'.

Quite right, too. If we had tolerated the excuses of late-comers, then others would have followed their example. I have no doubt that eventually it would have become the code of honour amongst all ranks in the battalion that they should return late. Jack Sepoy is only human! Give him an inch and he will take a mile.

To my query Aziz Beg made no answer; but his platoon commander coughed discreetly, and in a terrific whisper, which was meant to be confidential, said:

"Huzoor, he has committed a murder. . . ."

"Good God!" I exclaimed, and looked round to see if anyone had heard.

Obviously everyone had heard. The square outside my office was littered with orderlies, applicants for leave, men with petitions about their land which they wished me to forward to long-suffering civil officials in their districts, men with trivial grievances, men who had lost minor articles of kit and would have to pay compensation . . . all the *hoi polloi* who congregate with the fixed intention of worrying their Company Commander and making him earn his pay. I wished at times we were back in Kharab Bibi . . . life had been peaceful enough there. Ever since we returned to Zai Khel I had been pestered with office work which had accumulated and grown to ridiculous proportions.

"Come with me," I said, and led the way to an uninhabited patch of ground outside my quarter.

"Now, what's all this about?" I continued. "What's all this nonsense about murder?"

The platoon commander cleared his throat.

"He killed his grandmother," he said dispassionately. "She deserved it," he added as an afterthought.

Then out came the story . . . a squalid tale of a young wife, and a nagging grandmother on his side who had long outlived her years, and who refused to 'pass on' considerably as his mother had done, and as all old relations should do. . . . The old harridan had made the young wife's life a hell, terrifying the life out of her, even sometimes beating her. . . . The wife was only a child of fifteen years, and had borne an unfortunate daughter instead of the much-needed son and heir. Apparently the old grandmother had risen to greater heights of umbrage after this unhappy event. . . . "The worthless brat can't even bear a son," she lisped, and proceeded to torment the girl with renewed vigour,

"I asked you for leave months ago," said Aziz Beg reproachfully. "But leave had been stopped."

I turned on him with wrath.

"That has nothing to do with it, as you know perfectly well," I said severely. "According to your story, your grandmother had been bullying your wife for many months—indeed, she started soon after your return from leave last year when you got married. Why did you not make arrangements for your grandmother to live somewhere else, or, better still, for your wife to live with her own relations?"

"I did not know my grandmother was tormenting my wife," said Aziz Beg. "She did not mention it in her letters. . . . I only found out when I went on leave."

"Well, that was no excuse to kill her," I retorted feebly. "When you went home and discovered what the situation was, surely you could have made some arrangements then?"

"I lost my temper," said Aziz Beg simply.

There seemed to be no answer to this statement, and I thought, guiltily, how excellent it would be if some nasty old gossiping women I knew in my home town in England could be despatched under the pretext of losing one's temper. But, alas! There can be a price to pay for such a deviation from self-control.

"Why on earth have you come back to the regiment?" I demanded irritably. "Surely you know you will be caught. We shall have to hand you over to the police."

"Nay, nay, Sahib," put in the platoon commander, smiling indulgently. "You will write a letter to the Deputy Commissioner explaining. Then all will be well."

Heavens alive! What children these sepoys were.

"You are my father, my mother, and my god," added Aziz Beg. "You can save me if you will."

He meant what he said, too.

Of course I had to take Aziz Beg before the Colonel. There he reiterated placidly that all the Colonel had to do was to write and explain his case.

Poor Aziz Beg! He was placed under arrest and put in a cell in the quarter-guard to cool his heels, and told he would remain confined until such time as the police required him. Meantime the Colonel wrote to the Deputy Commissioner explaining the case . . . but not in exactly the way the prisoner wanted it.

A week later we heard from the Deputy Commissioner. Aziz Beg's grandmother was still alive and kicking, though looking the worse for wear. Her head appeared to be a bit dented. She refused to file any suit against her would be murderer, so the case automatically dropped.

Aziz Beg at once asked if he might return to his village and finish his leave. I took his petition to the Colonel.

"Finish his leave, or finish her off?" asked the Colonel. "Do you think we had better let him go?"

I said I thought we could rely on his good behaviour.

Before Aziz Beg departed, I asked him what instrument he had used in the assault on his grandmother.

"Oh, just a mallet," he replied indifferently.

I had a strong feeling that Aziz Beg attributed the resurrection from the dead of his grandmother to the combined deity of the Colonel and myself.

3

One evening Horace 'gave me the slip'. Having partaken of a hearty dinner of cooked goat and vegetables, he lay down on his customary blanket preparatory to sleep. Presently loud snores intermingled with occasional excited whines gave every indication of both profound slumber and pleasant dreams.

I was seated at my writing-table busily engaged in making out a combined training and musketry programme for the edification of the Colonel. I should never see it carried out, of course—no one ever does. When will the higher authorities in the Army realize that Practice is far removed from Theory? My division of three months' parades into days and half-hours looks positively glamorous in the chart hanging on my office wall.

"Excellent, excellent," chuckles the Brigadier, rubbing his hands. "That's what I like to see—progressive training mapped out every day for months ahead."

The Colonel hastily agrees with him; also, to his credit, he pretends to agree with me. Actually he is far too old a regimental soldier either to believe or agree with anyone of the sort. He knows quite well that a hundred different causes will intervene. What about the Brigadier's own orderly who happens to be a sepoy of the Delhis? That pompous individual, who cares about nothing except his waxed moustaches, invariably contrives to miss the maximum number of parades compatible with his position, dignity and honour. . . .

What about men who go sick, or who squirm away on leave? What about the cook-house orderlies? . . . involving, as they do, a daily battle with Suleiman and his like. How well I know Suleiman's formula of "Sahib, it is difficult to find others who know the work in the cookhouses."

I should say that my marvellous programme is carried out in its entirety by about five sepoy. Others come and go as they will, and if there is a gap of several progressive training hours between their appearances . . . well, what can I do about it? If Sepoy Mohd Khan finds that he is expected to fire a light automatic gun without previous practice, having missed all the preliminary parades calculated to teach him how to hold, load and aim . . . then that is his funeral.

It is really remarkable how efficiently the battalion manages to 'carry on'. Notwithstanding his short notice, Mohd Khan always hits the target. . . .

Meantime my training chart smiles down happily from my office wall, and is the delight and pride of my Indian officers. Even young Evans is most impressed. . . .

At the moment, to the accompaniment of Horace, I was trying to compile my new training programme by frequent references to the old one. It was a nuisance having to construct another chart, but certain changes had been made in the musketry course since last year; also, of course, new dates were needed. Again, the old chart looked a bit moth-eaten; it required renovation. . . .

I became immersed in my work.

When the Mess bugle sounded, I rose with satisfaction. The *magnum opus* had been completed.

It was then I noticed that Horace had disappeared.

Damn the dog! It would be difficult to find him now. The old scoundrel would remain hidden from *my* view till morning. He would probably appear in the vicinity of others—preferably owners of the canine fair sex—and annoy them considerably.

I shouted for Firoze Din. . . . No answer, of course. The youth was never near when wanted. Like Horace, he was capable of the most mysterious vanishing acts.

I wandered into the Mess to find that the Colonel and I were the only diners; the others had gone to some other Mess, or the Club.

We were sipping our short drinks when the Colonel held up his hand.

"What on earth's that awful noise?" he asked.

I listened and heard it too. Indeed, I must have been wool-gathering not to have heard it before—screams, shrieks, barks, yells. . . .

"Hell!" I exclaimed, "that's Horace."

I darted into the night, the Colonel after me.

The noise appeared to emanate from the direction of number six post. The extraordinary and unusual din had brought many men to the doors of their barracks. I possessed a torch, but seized a hurricane-lamp from someone's hand . . . it might be useful.

When we reached the perimeter I found, as I had expected, masses of dogs assembled. Was Horace engaged in combat with one, or fighting the whole lot . . . ?

But, no . . . these dogs were not fighting . . . they were staring into the barbed wire defences, and barking hysterically.

Then I saw Horace, a blur of white, heaving, choking . . . he was worrying some dark blob of a creature. Jackal, hyæna, or whatever it was, it succeeded in freeing itself from Horace's jaws and managed to escape through the outer meshes of the wire. Horace dived after it, and they disappeared from view.

After ten minutes, we realized the futility of waiting, and started back towards the Mess. Only the dogs remained, making the night hideous with their screams. . . .

"I wonder what he was fighting," remarked the Colonel, as we sat down to soup served nice and hot from the hot-case. "It can't have been a dog—or those other dogs would have joined in."

The problem was soon solved.

After dinner I played the Colonel at nap. I hate the game, but there was no one else to humour the old man.

The Abdar was liquidating the whisky with sodas, when there was a snuffle outside. . . .

I rushed to the door and opened it . . . to admit Horace.

He looked like a living pin-cushion. His body, face, neck and head quivered, as he walked, with a hundred quills. . . .

"Porcupine!" ejaculated the Colonel. "Only a dog with the heart of a lion would fight such a creature."

I fetched a bottle of iodine from my room, and gently we removed each quill, daubing the wound with iodine. The grand dog never moved a muscle. He knew we were doing our best. Indeed, he wagged his tail during the whole proceeding.

The next morning we found the remains of the porcupine in the

bed of a *nala*. Even the vultures had given the corpse a wide berth, fearing the cruel quills.

As for Horace, his face had swollen. He looked like a weird kind of plum-pudding. Two beady black eyes gleamed like currants, and it was difficult to tell where his mouth began or his nose ended.

Fortunately he suffered from no ill effects.

4

Towards the end of August, twenty selected officers from down country arrived in Zai Khel to undergo ten days' instruction in Frontier cricket. The object of the course was threefold; firstly, to teach the rudiments of the game to those who had never been on the Frontier; secondly, to refresh those who had been there but who were supposed to have forgotten what they had learnt; thirdly, to enable officers to spread knowledge of the game among all ranks of their regiments so that when they came for a term of duty on the Frontier they would at least appreciate the difference between a six-and an eight-ball over.

The Colonel gave an impressive lecture on fielding—and how to place the field; in other words, the art of piqueting hills. And my Company, one morning, gave a demonstration to illustrate his remarks.

It was rather fun seeing new officers and new faces. Three of the visitors lived in our Mess and cheered us up considerably. Even the cook felt himself put on his mettle, with consequent improvement in diet.

What an important factor in life is 'change'! For three months while we lived under field-service conditions we thought of Zai Khel almost as a home-town. Did it not offer the delights of a civilized community?

Now I was so desperately tired of Zai Khel that I felt like offering the Mullah of Dand a substantial portion of my month's pay to reopen hostilities. Admittedly Kharab Bibi had been a grim spot, but at the moment it seemed a better place than Zai Khel. I was weary of the sight of the hurrying men tramping up and down the roads, the lorry convoys, the camels, and I was sick to death of the smell of the latrines, cook-houses, and stables.

"What you need," said Harris pointedly, "is a big, fat woman."

A thoroughly wholesome remark, and I laughed heartily for the first time for days.

Training cadres, promotion examinations, musketry instruction, drill, educational certificates . . . gradually we became absorbed in humdrum routine. Thanks to months of operations, the men had forgotten the many details important in a soldier's life.

'Spit and polish' seemed to have become a forgotten art too. The Colonel stormed round the barracks and found nothing to his liking. Company Commanders were summoned to the orderly-room and informed of his displeasure. Dirty window-panes, cobwebs, beds not in a straight line, kit not laid out in accordance with regulations. . . . "What has happened to you all?" he raved. "Get things put right at once."

The Colonel was certainly justified in his criticisms. And I

admired him for it. The 'old man' never interfered with machinery when it was working efficiently, but he quickly noticed any defaults. He had the uncanny gift of being able to put his finger on to a weak spot. He extracted the very best from his officers. First-class Colonels are few and far between; and I doubt if I shall ever serve under such a good one again! Thank goodness he had *not* been through the Staff College; otherwise he might have been taken away to higher spheres before completing his term of command.

Down the lines the men worked feverishly cleaning their equipment. The Colonel had found grave dissatisfaction with a recent quarter-guard, the men of which had fortunately been provided, that particular day, by men in another Company . . . not my Company, by the grace of God.

But I was taking no chances. I summoned a *jirga* of my Indian officers. Dire were the penalties I threatened to inflict if B Company failed to shine in the sun of the Colonel's appreciation.

In the distance I saw Harris administering similar reproof. . . . So the Colonel's urgent commands were already reaping fulfilment. The good name of the battalion would remain untarnished.

The sepoys responded grandly to the call. They were as anxious as we officers were about the good name of the Delhis. . . .

Quickly the lines grew spick and span.

Soon leather belts gleamed like mirrors. "One could use them to shave in," a non-commissioned officer remarked. Competition between Companies had always been rife, but never more so than at the present time.

A few days later the zenith of happiness and accomplishment in B Company was reached. . . .

I was on my way to the office when I saw the Colonel in the process of inspecting the quarter-guard. Fearfully my Indian officers looked on . . . and Suleiman, who as acting Subadar Major should have passed beyond the narrow confines of party spirit, muttered prayers into his beard. . . .

Now, why was the Colonel talking to the guard commander at such length? . . . Was it a reprimand? . . .

I could bear no more, and entered my office. A minute later I heard the familiar order of, "Guard, dismiss!"

I was dealing irritably with some annoying accounts, which would not work out correctly however much I tried to juggle with them, when I heard someone enter the room. . . .

"Get out," I ordered, without looking up, "and don't worry me for another hour."

A familiar voice broke into my thoughts.

"It's only me," said the Colonel gently. "I wanted to tell you I am very pleased with your guard. A definite improvement. . . ."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I

IN these days of enforced economy and emancipation, soldiers, like Empire administrators, must be prepared to see centuries of faithful work crumble to dust at one turn of Fortune's wheel.

One afternoon in early September orders came through from Government that the 1/150th Delhi Regiment was to be disbanded. The memorandum contained the usual regrets that so fine a battalion with years of loyal and gallant service had to be offered up on the altar of sacrifice; but the Indian economical situation, etc., etc., *ad lib.* . . .

The Colonel returned with the news from Brigade Headquarters. Seeing him in the distance walking with drooping shoulders and tired gait, I wondered what on earth had happened.

We were so dazed with the shock that it took us a few days to comprehend the full significance of the ghastly blow. Only those who have had the misfortune to go through with a disbandment can know what it means.

An institution that has carried its flag proudly for nearly two hundred years in the service of its Sovereign and Country is broken up with no more ado than the dismantling of an out-of-date battleship in a scrap-yard.

All institutions pass through good and lean periods; but taking the years as a whole the 1/150th Delhi Regiment had carried its colours worthily from times preceding the campaigns of Wellington—then Arthur Wellesley—and the Carnatic wars. Great leaders like Clive, Lake, and Coote were as much a force in Delhi regimental history as Maude or Allenby of more modern times.

Like a great public school, a battalion becomes steeped in tradition. Should a reminder of this fact be necessary, glance for a moment at the stern old gentlemen in their laces and frills staring down from their positions on any Mess wall. They were the Imperialists who defeated Dupleix, and prevented Napoleon from realizing his dreams of a French India. Originally they formed the nucleus of an Indian Army which has grown into a vast and efficient machine giving employment to thousands of loyal men from every district on the peninsula.

2

What were we going to do with our colours? Other battalions in the regiment had their own; they would not want ours, nor would they be allowed to carry extra standards. We might bequeath them to some museum, school, or military academy. . . .

Then there was the silver, some of it old and really valuable, mostly presented by individual officers on appointment to the battalion, or on promotion. There were also many cups and shields, challenge trophies played for on the hockey field, or shot for on the range. One of our most cherished possessions was a large sports cup which had become our permanent property after three successive annual victories in a down-country district contest.

There was a lot of loot in the Mess, too—spoils from the good old days when nations were not so scrupulous as they are now—lacquer and jade from China, a bronze Buddha from Burma, a large bell on our Mess verandah from some temple in Southern India. No doubt our sister battalions would be glad to take these from us.

Obviously a Committee would have to be formed, and I was thankful when the Colonel decided not to include me as a member. I had

had quite enough to do with dead men's effects without wishing to deal with a dead battalion. As it was, there would be more than enough work in discharging the men on special terms, or transferring them to other units.

Poor old Suleiman had not got a ghost of a chance now of realizing his dreams of becoming Subadar Major. No battalion wanted an old man who had already earned a handsome pension. Colonels liked to make their own promotions, naturally, from their own men. A few promising junior non-commissioned officers, however, might prove acceptable, and no doubt we should be required to send round a list of names with their attainments. Perhaps Roshan Singh would find a billet!

No. Suleiman would have to retire to his home and the permanent embraces of his wife. And he was lucky compared with the hosts of young men who must leave without any further chance of a career in the Army.

The Indian unemployment question is different from that in European countries, chiefly because the lower classes seem able to exist in some mysterious manner on a few husks of bread. Their wants are few compared with ours—a mud hut, and one square meal a day. Their clothes are so simple, too, and I often think what fools we are in India not to wear in ordinary civilian life baggy white pyjamas and soft shirts. Could any kit be more comfortable or economical?

Poverty, of course, exists everywhere. In a promotion examination once I was asked to explain why India was a 'poor country'. At first I was not clear what the examiner meant by his adjective—so many residents say they hate India and that the view of Bombay over the stern of a liner rivals that of Himalayan snows. Then I realized that 'poor' was not meant in any ironic sense and that he must mean poverty, for examiners, in my experience, have little sense of humour.

To the simple peasants—and they outnumber the rest of India by some vast majority—life in the Army offers immensely attractive prospects. . . . Wealth compared with the few copper coins to which they have been accustomed, excellent food, a good wardrobe of clothes, and a physical life they really enjoy. For every man recruited, at least ten youngsters have been inspected and 'turned down', so great is the rush for military service. How gladly Whitehall would welcome such enthusiasm on the part of British citizens!

I felt more sorry for our men in many ways than I did for ourselves. The British officers, at least, would be posted to other units, and, if we were lucky, to sister battalions of the regiment.

What we officers felt so acutely was the abandonment of a great cause. Naturally we considered the 1/150th to be the best battalion in the regiment, and this spirit had been sedulously fostered. Indeed, we considered our battalion to be amongst the chosen few in the Indian Army. We rather despised the sister battalions as being far below our high standard. We thought our men cleaner on parade, better turned out, and much more efficient.

No doubt our sister battalions thought themselves infinitely superior in every way to us. And now, at any rate, they had the last laugh. Still, they would be generous to us in our misfortune,

we knew. It was always possible disbandment might touch one of them next.

3

We were to march away from Zai Khel on the 20th, reaching Risalwan five days later. There we would entrain and proceed down country to Nashapur, a large cantonment centrally placed for the work of disbandment.

The 3/101st Lahore Regiment, now stationed in Risalwan, had been ordered to relieve us.

A fortnight of sorting, returning, handing over, and packing; a fortnight of farewell parties in other Messes, and entertainments by Indian officers; a fortnight of drunkenness, cold sobriety, tears and laughter.

The Colonel decided not to recall Fish Face and Grayson. They would go to Nashapur on termination of their leave, where they would be useful in taking over lines and quarters prior to the arrival of the battalion. As for Pearson, he would have to cool his heels till the disbandment had been completed. A permanent Adjutant could not be spared. The same rule applied to the Colonel himself. Indeed, we should all be wanted for the forthcoming work. There would be plenty of time afterwards, and our new regiments were nearly certain to grant us joining leave provided the circumstances permitted it.

I felt we should need some leave badly after our men had all melted away.

We never had enough officers for active operations, but we had ample for such a prosaic operation as moving the battalion down to Nashapur. We might, of course, be sniped between Zai Khel and Risalwan, but an attack on any large scale by tribesmen who had just made peace was exceedingly unlikely. The Frontier situation was settling down admirably, and soon the administration would pass once more into the hands of the Political. War was over—until it broke out again.

As for young Evans, he had won his first medal. Good luck to him!

4

The advanced party of the Lahore Regiment arrived, consisting of two British and two Indian officers and twenty-five men.

We handed over our mules, which nearly broke Harris's heart, but we reminded him we should have had to part with them in any case after our two years on the Frontier. In these days of stringent economy mules stay where they are, and incoming regiments take them over.

Still, the Lahoris were lucky to have our mules. Harris, as Machine-gun Company Commander, had *ipso facto* been in charge of the stables and all transport. The animals had thriven under his care and at the Zai Khel Horse Show the previous year the Delhis had won first prize in the entry for Infantry Machine-gun mules.

'Handing over' was not without its humour. Apparently in some dim past the Lahoris had been badly 'stung', having taken

over in good faith from another regiment the usual boxes of sealed ammunition, together with the immense number of loose rounds in opened boxes which is inevitable when guards go on duty each night armed to the teeth.

The Major in charge of the advanced party told me that one month after his battalion had arrived on the Frontier one of the piquets was attacked. The Commander, with commendable promptitude, gave the order to 'rapid fire', but was dumbfounded when, instead of hearing the usual staccato 'crrack', he was rewarded by a faint 'poufing' noise like the sounds made by an air-gun. . . .

It was then discovered that a large number of rounds had been ingeniously replaced by 'duds'.

As all soldiers in the Indian Army know, a Pathan will give one rupee for a legitimate round of Government ammunition: hence the great care that must be taken in looking after arms. It is said that a tribesman will offer eight hundred rupees for a Service rifle.

The men of the Lahore advanced party were not going to be 'had for suckers'. Besides the risk of 'dud' ammunition there was always the chance, they maintained, of rounds being short of their correct ledger numbers. Outgoing regiments, according to the Lahoris, were notoriously fond of trying to make up discrepancies in an underhand way.

As a result, not only every round, but every single item of furniture and equipment, was carefully checked. I found a fat Indian officer of the Lahoris in the armourer's shop disputing the size of a plain wooden table he had personally measured. The barrack master's ledger stated the dimensions of the upper surface to be forty-eight by thirty inches, but our friend calculated that it was only forty-six by twenty-nine inches. He therefore decided he could not take over the table.

Our Quartermaster Jemadar, the Indian officer who was handing over the armourer's shop, first of all pleaded, and then gibbered with rage. . . .

At this juncture I entered—whereupon our Q.M.J. thankfully put his burden on to my shoulders.

I talked to the Lahori first of all in jocular vein, and then with considerable heat. He remained obdurate. The table, he maintained, had been pruned down for nefarious purposes by the armourer and he could not take it over. We must produce a new table which co-responded with the barrack master's ledger. He was very polite, and no one could have taken offence with his manner. He had received his orders, he said, from the Major Sahib commanding the advanced party.

Unable to shake this living Rock of Gibraltar, I sent my salaams to the Major Sahib, and in due course he arrived.

I explained the situation to him, and then our eyes met. The next moment we were both shaking with laughter.

The poor Lahori Indian officer could not understand the joke at all, and he nodded his head even more than his Major Sahib said to him:

"Don't be an absolute fool. Take over the table at once."

Orders were orders, and the Lahori reluctantly consented to tick off the table as correct. As we left the shop I noticed a malicious gleam of triumph in the eyes of our Quartermaster Jemadar.

"That's the worst of these fellows," said the Major, by way of apology. "You tell them to be careful, and then they go and do this sort of thing!"

5

I woke up in the early hours of the morning to the familiar rat-tat-tat of machine-gun fire. White Very lights illuminated my room, and old Horace stirred restlessly, thumping his tail resignedly when I sprang out of bed. . . .

The Lahoris had taken over the perimeter from us the night before. Were they being attacked, or had some Guard Commander developed nerves? Perhaps the tribesmen knowing perfectly well that a new unit had arrived, were slyly testing the defences.

I prayed fervently that no one would be asinine enough to fire a red light unless it was really necessary. The Brigadier would be furious, and I could imagine the reprimand he would give the new Colonel.

Rat-tat-tat . . . crrack! . . .

Would the rest of the garrison follow the Lahoris' lead?

I need have had no fears. The British regiment on the left was definitely not going to fire one single round. It had been caught napping once before, and was not going to be seduced again. The approach of a large army of tribesmen would be necessary before the corporal in charge of number eleven post gave any order to fire.

And the Attacks on the right . . . ? No, they were not going to fire either. It so happened—though, of course, I did not know it at the time—that the same Company was guarding their sector of the perimeter as on that fateful night when some stray goats caused such agitation and despondency. No, certainly not! No one in the Attacks was going to fire. The Colonel Sahib had been very angry on that previous occasion. . . .

So the firing continued for a bit. Then, lacking sympathy, it died down.

I returned to my bed.

It was just as well the tribesmen did not know of the stubborn refusal of the old troops on the perimeter to be drawn into battle. Otherwise they might have found an opening for a swift raid.

The tribesmen know most of what goes on in Zai Khel, but, thank God, not everything.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I

WE marched out of Zai Khel for the last time. The Brigadier took the salute, and bands from all the regiments played us along the first three miles of road.

All British and Indian officers from the garrison turned out to see us depart. They shouted and cheered, and wished us the best of luck. Sepoys lined the route for nearly a mile, standing stiffly at attention as we passed.

The day was gloriously fine, with a touch of autumn in the air. Another three months and Zai Khel would be undergoing the rigours of a Scottish winter, but without the comforts of modern houses and electric heating. Ugh! How I had hated the past winter! At any rate, we would escape another one, unless I got transferred to a unit serving on the Frontier.

God forbid! At the moment I did not feel like serving with any regiment except the 1/150th Delhis. I could hardly bear the thought of saying good-bye to my Company.

Harris reciprocated my thoughts at the first halt.

"I feel like a schoolgirl about to cry," he said mournfully.

"Well, don't!" I cautioned him severely. "Your face is bad enough to have to look at in the normal way."

He saw I was near breaking-point, and shut up.

"Walk with me for a bit when we fall in," I said to him. I did not wish to hurt his feelings.

Presently a whistle blew, and the men fell in, buckling on their equipment. A minute later we moved on, the piquets sent out for local protection doubling back to join us.

The bands, which had led us so far, now stood to attention, while the British band played 'Auld Lang Syne'. I think it must have played the tune about fifty times before we passed out of range of the melody.

"A damned good send-off, anyway," said Harris, trying hard to be prosaic.

Down, down, down the winding neutral road marched the battalion towards the plains. I could see khassadars, responsible for our protection, on various vantage points. Today we had a fairly long march ahead of us—fourteen miles. Our camping-grand lay on the far side of the Laktu Gorge.

We began to sweat more and more as we descended, though we should stay tonight at a comfortably high altitude. There was no breeze, and the dust hovered over us like a large gas-cloud. On route-marches of any distance Companies took it in turn to march in front or at the rear. At the moment B Company was centrally placed. The men behind must have been having a thin time.

Officers, of course, could have ridden their chargers if they had liked. But we all felt we wished to march with the men on what must be a last occasion. We would march to Risalwan, our cased colours carried by two Indian officers in the middle of the battalion. They were marching just in front of me, dusty and grimy, the standards aloft.

I suggested to the men of my Company that they should sing. But they were too dispirited. After one or two mournful howls they lapsed again into silence.

Our band, however, played periodically the usual martial airs. When it stopped, the pipes took up another refrain.

It was midday when we reached the entrance to the Laktu Gorge. I had forgotten what an ugly-looking defile it was. The atmosphere felt suddenly chilly, and there were spots where the sun never penetrated.

We halted near a khassadar post. The Subadar, a Magrawal, came down smiling to meet us. He wanted to give the British officers tea, but the Colonel managed to evade the honour after con-

siderable discussion. We wanted to move on and reach camp, not hang about the main road.

The whistle blew, and once again we put on our equipment. The khassadar, a fine-looking man, shook hands with the Colonel. I wondered vaguely if he had been in the attack on the convoy—probably not as he was a Magrawal. Still, he might have been. All khassadars had deserted on that grim day, and no one could say whether or not they had joined in the fray. Loot is a powerful incentive.

As we marched through the defile my horse decided to execute a step-dance. It was only with the greatest difficulty that my groom succeeded in preventing him from falling over the precipice.

Yet there are many who say the horse has marked intelligence. Personally, I have never discovered it. A mule, yes, but not a horse.

Thanks to echoes and re-echoes, the sounds made by the band sounded extraordinary where I marched. It was quite impossible to keep step.

Then we emerged into comparatively flat country, and our first camping-ground lay before us, barren and forbidding. There was not a tree nor a blade of grass anywhere.

Still, I could do with a long drink.

2

Within a few minutes of arrival we were settled. The men were old campaigners, not newly fledged troops.

Tents sprang up like mushrooms, and in an incredibly short space of time the Mess was functioning like an old-established concern. I walked in to find the Colonel sinking a bottle of beer and Harris reading the paper.

We had lots of transport, and so every comfort. Our heavy kit, of course, had gone on ahead to Risalwan in lorries.

Notwithstanding the heat, I managed to doze after tiffin, and woke in the late afternoon to find Evans standing impatiently beside me.

"Listen!" he said.

I listened, and from a hillside near at hand could hear: 'chuk, chuk, chuk, chuk, chuk'.

"Chikor!" I exclaimed. "Get your gun."

"I have it ready," he returned; "also a party to beat for us."

"And an escort?" I inquired.

"Yes," he said. "Six men with rifles."

I yelled for Firoze Din to put my gun together, then strolled into the Mess for a cup of tea.

"Aren't you coming, sir?" I asked the Colonel.

"Certainly not!" he replied. "It's a waste of time and health trying to catch up with those damned birds."

Harris also refused to come, and Pearson said he had some work to do.

"And for heaven's sake don't go wandering too far into No-Man's-Land," counselled the Colonel, as we departed. "We don't want another war on our hands."

The following two hours fully demonstrated the folly of trying to pursue a covey of hill partridge on foot. The birds, with the exception of one corpse, won every time. I ought to have known better at my time of life than to engage in a rough shoot of this description, but I cannot resist going out with my gun if there is any fur or feather in the vicinity.

As we left camp the birds 'chuk-chukked' at us disdainfully from a cleft half-way up the hill. A direct approach was out of the question. Our only chance of success lay in an outflanking movement.

We therefore arranged that Evans should work his way towards the crest from the left, and I would do the same manœuvre from the right. The beaters would then advance on the chikor, which would fly over one of us, or both of us.

Admirable plans! But these chikor were old birds, and very wily. After ten minutes' painful exertion, and when I thought I must now be above them, I peered round a boulder, to discover with intense chagrin that the chikor had forestalled me by the simple expedient of trotting ahead of me.

Something must have startled them. The birds were now on the crest as far away as ever. 'Chuk-chuk-chuk' they cackled with amused contempt.

Needless to say, the next hill was some distance away—about two hundred yards as the crow—or, rather, the chikor—flies. For the humble pedestrian a small valley lay between, not to mention a descent from the hill on which we now stood.

Evans, however, was young and enthusiastic. He was also a good stalker. While I riveted the birds' attention with blasphemous curses he succeeded in appearing unexpectedly on their right flank.

'Bang!' went his gun. And 'bang!'

One corpse dropped. The remainder of the covey with the most graceful insolence glided along to the next hill.

I staggered up to the crest, and we conferred. The armed escort and beaters, who were useless in this country, joined us.

"That's our last objective," I said firmly, pointing to the hill. "We mustn't go any farther into No-Man's-Land."

Down we clambered to the small valley, and after about half an hour succeeded in locating the birds.

'Chuk-chuk-chuk', they tittered. 'Come and get us if you can!' I think, however, they eyed young Evans a little apprehensively.

Another plan of campaign. But the chikor were not going to be caught unawares again. They 'chuk-chukked' derisively until Evans was half-way through his counter-attack . . . and then flopped on to another hill.

"It's hard work, isn't it?" said Evans when we met. "Do you think we might have one more try?"

"Certainly not," I answered testily, thinking of camp and a mug of ale. How right the Colonel had been!

It took us nearly three-quarters of an hour to get back to camp, as there was no avoiding the first hill.

On entering the Mess we were greeted with ironic cheers. But on producing the dead chikor all laughter ceased.

"Damned good show," said Harris approvingly. "I never thought you would get one."

"Perhaps they bought it off a Pathan," suggested the Colonel. The laughter broke out again.

We arrived in Risalwan without incident; that is to say, we were able to report that no hotheads had sniped us or tried to impede us.

Indeed, but for the shadow of disbandment hanging over our heads I should have enjoyed the walk. There is a carefree atmosphere about a march when it entails no strategical or tactical problems, when one knows that a comfortable Mess will rapidly evolve at the next camping-ground, and that, beyond establishing an odd camp piquet or two, there is no work to be done.

After the pleasant altitude of Zai Khel, Risalwan seemed to us all to be simmering in heat. We felt as if we had suddenly walked from a cool drawing-room into an artificially heated conservatory. The residents, of course, laughed at us, saying the place was infinitely cooler than it had been one month before.

Well, Risalwan would score in two months' time. When Zai Khel shivered under a mantle of snow, Risalwan would be snug and cosy, but very cold at night.

I hated Risalwan. It was neither Frontier nor yet a down-country cantonment. The military authorities, feeling they were near the plains, thought it incumbent on them that all ranks should study European methods of fighting as well as the rules of Frontier cricket. No doubt anti-tank guns (imaginary) were much favoured in tactical schemes.

The whole atmosphere of Risalwan was of gloom. The bungalows were dark and crumbling to bits, the cantonment surrounded by barbed wire in case of a raid from the Frontier hills. And all ranks walked about with forced smiles, as if they were pretending that it was a matter of congratulation that they were serving in a so-called peace station.

Officers wore Mess-kit at night, instead of the comfortable Blue Patrol of the Frontier. Fortunately, our glad rags were safely embedded in our heavy kit, so when asked out to dinner we were able to don our familiar Zai Khel garb.

It was too early for women yet. They would begin to flock down in October. The only members of the fair sex I saw were two nursing sisters. They were both pretty and charming—or am I susceptible after one year's absence from female society? At any rate, when I saw them I managed to control myself sufficiently not to seek safety by hiding behind a bush. How nursing sisters manage to stay down in the plains all the hot weather and still retain their good looks is a secret that must baffle any medical practitioner or thinker. Certainly they put to shame the high-and-mighty ladies who flee to the hills in early April. But perhaps my mind is deranged. I must wait till I see some girls with the bloom of seven months of mountain air on their cheeks.

Meanwhile, I partook of tea with the nursing sisters, who, by the way, were called Eileen and Joan. I then introduced Joan to young Evans after much careful deliberation.

Harris, I felt, was out of the question, and Pearson was supposed to be engaged.

During the five days the battalion stayed in Risalwan I had quite a good time; so did Evans. There were no up-to-date restaurants or theatres to which we could go, but we bathed in the Club swimming bath, and afterwards ate potato chips with tomato sauce.

One night we went to the cinema—the dirtiest, oldest, and most ramshackle edifice I have ever seen. The film was in keeping with the building. No one could hear one word of what was said, and the lighting apparatus fizzled out on three occasions. It was also very hot, even under fans.

Yet we all enjoyed ourselves somehow. Afterwards we went to the Club and had sandwiches and beer. Then we went for a drive round cantonments in a dilapidated car. . . .

4

It is, of course, impossible to keep any affair secret in a small cantonment like Risalwan, where the gates are shut at night and guarded by armed sentries.

Evans and I had to submit to a good deal of chaff in the Mess about our girl friends, whereas the permanent residents regarded us tolerantly as a species of 'War Hero' down from the front, and considered it quite right and proper we should be amused.

During the day there was a lot of work to be done. Trucks stood at railway sidings, and these had to be loaded with all our regimental kit and belongings. On the last day the horses would have to be embarked, often no easy matter. Then there were the rations and feeding arrangements for the journey, which required calculation and organization. Nashapur was four days distant.

In the evenings we were free. The Colonel had discovered an old friend in the Indian Civil Service, so he played golf with him and generally dined with him. Harris and Pearson were the only two who really patronized the Mess.

I felt a little guilty sometimes at having introduced Evans to Joan. She was older than he, and I trusted the boy would not become so carried away by sentiment as to make an ass of himself. But I needed someone to clear the way for me with Eileen. The two girls were inseparable, which was not unnatural seeing how they lived together and were practically the only two women in Risalwan, not counting the Matron. I believe there was an American lady missionary, but I had not seen her.

Eileen, on the other hand, was much younger than I. At a guess I should say she was round about twenty-six. I had the feeling she thought me rather an oddity, which was not surprising. I did my best to act the Bengal Lancer stuff for her edification, and hope she was taken in by it.

What a frightful place Risalwan was! The moon shone at her best, demanding insistently that we should venture forth on nocturnal picnics. But where could we go? Even if we were able to bribe the gate sentry there was not much fun to be found in reclining on hard stones, or feeding jackals with the remains of

tinned caviare. There was always the chance, too, of being shot up by some roving band of brigands.

No. Risalwan was our prison, and in it we must stay. I felt rather like a Guardsman who has nowhere to make love except on hard seats in a public park.

Still, the ingenious find ways and means. . . .

5

On the fifth day after our arrival in Risalwan we were due to entrain at six in the evening. We should travel all night, reaching a small terminus in the murky dawn. There we would have to transfer all our goods and chattels to another train on the broad-gauge railway, for Risalwan, unfortunately, was served by a narrow gauge.

A damnable nuisance, this changing of trains. However, my study for promotion examinations has informed me that Australia is riddled with a network of different-sized gauges. If one travelled on a troop train from Perth to Brisbane it would be necessary to change trains at least six times. So evidently in India we may consider ourselves lucky.

Perhaps Australia has now a common standard. I must ask Evans. It is such a long time ago that I was obliged to study Empire problems such as the Australian Railway System, the Pipe Line from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, the pros and cons of a naval base at Singapore, and the Indian question in South Africa, that I have forgotten the answers. I must ask Evans, or, better perhaps, Pearson. Pearson will soon be taking his examination for his majority. Just before lunch on this our last day in the outposts of Empire the Colonel entered the Mess tent smiling. We lived under canvas, as there was no accommodation in the already occupied barracks.

What was the matter with the old man? I wondered. He must have been given promotion, or some job. I felt very pleased, and smiled back at him.

"Read this," he ordered, and flung a piece of paper at me.

I read it. Then I cheered.

Old Suleiman had been offered a job in the State Forces. He would be given the honorary rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, command a battalion, and receive excellent pay. Good news indeed!

"Pleasant things, like troubles, never come singly—fortunately." remarked the Colonel. "Read this too." He passed me an official-looking document.

In dry, terse language I found I had been offered the appointment of second-in-command of a Burma Infantry Battalion.

For a moment I felt rather dazed. Then:

"What about Grayson?" I asked. "He is senior to me."

"Too senior," answered the Colonel. "Grayson is going to the 4/150th Delhis, where I think he will get command in time."

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed. "Have you got posting orders for us all?"

The Colonel laughed. Then he called to the Abdar to bring beer.

"And what about you, sir?" I asked.

He chuckled.

"I am going to become Recruiting Officer in the Punjab,"

"Good egg!" I shouted. "We must toast each other on this."

The Abdar entered, and placed a pewter mug on a small table beside the Colonel.

"Beer!" I ordered.

Presently I heard that Harris and Pearson had been posted to the second and fifth battalions of our group respectively, and that Fish Face was to proceed forthwith to attend a course at the Senior Officers' School, where he would be vetted for future command. Harris would be seconded to the Staff College.

"And Evans?" I queried.

"The third battalion," said the Colonel.

We British officers had certainly been treated very well. I felt terribly pleased that the Colonel had been given another job.

Pearson came into the Mess, followed shortly afterwards by Harris and Evans. They had all heard the news.

"I must go and congratulate Suleiman," I said, rising. "I suppose he has been told?"

"I told him just now," said the Colonel. "But sit down, please. There is plenty of time to talk to Suleiman. I want to drink a toast."

The Abdar was summoned, and told to produce an old sherry which was generally reserved for important-guest nights.

When our glasses had been filled the Colonel rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen, I ask you to drink the health of the Indian officers and men of the 1/150th Delhi Regiment, the finest and truest men I have ever met. Some will be transferred to other units and appointments, many will have to be discharged under special pensions. Let us drink to their health, wherever fate may lead them, and wish them happiness and prosperity. . . ."

"Gentlemen, to the Indian officers and men of the 1/150th Delhi Regiment."

We sprang to our feet, and I am not ashamed to relate that there were tears in my eyes. Yes, and there were tears in other eyes too.

"The Indian officers and men of the 1/150th Delhi Regiment," we chorused.

Then we began to sing that age-old refrain, adapted to the special circumstances: "For they are jolly good fellows . . . and so say all of us."

After lunch I wired to Higher Authority, asking for three months' leave pending my transfer to Burma.

At half past ten the train stopped at a small wayside station.

I descended from my carriage and walked up and down the platform. No men, except sentries, were allowed out of their compartments, as this was not an official halting-place. As an officer I was privileged; besides, Horace needed a run.

Snores came from the train. The men were asleep. I passed the Colonel's abode, but the lights had been extinguished. Evidently Tina's natural instincts had been satisfied previously

Not a sound anywhere except snores, sighs, and deep breathing, and a hissing noise from the distant engine. The train was a very long one.

A sentry clicked his heels as I approached him. His orders, he told me, were to prevent undesirable persons from boarding the train.

The moon stalked the sky in all her glory. I could see the white dome of a mosque peeping above a shadowy village. Now and then a dog barked.

Away to the north lay the smudgy outline of hills. To the south the plains lost themselves in a vague horizon like the sea. A mosquito bit me, and I scratched the poisoned spot with momentary irritation.

The engine gave a piercing whistle which lasted for nearly half a minute. I called to Horace, who was bobbing about, a white blur, and he snuffled reluctantly towards me. He had discovered some exciting smells.

The guard saw us into my carriage. He was an Eurasian.

"I expect you are glad to leave the Frontier?" he said.

I leant out of the window and regarded the hills thoughtfully.

"I am not quite sure," I murmured.

Horace bounded on to the seat beside me.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"Sniffle-snuffle!" he said.

EPILOGUE

I WALKED aft along the decks. Is this a correct nautical expression? I was determined to witness what is sarcastically supposed to be the most delightful sight in India—the receding view of Bombay from the stern of a home-going liner.

Rounding a corner, I nearly bumped into my cabin steward.

"Ah, there you are, sir," he said reproachfully, wiping the perspiration from his face with a well-used handkerchief. "I have been looking for you everywhere." He thrust a telegram and a letter into my hand. "Arrived just now," he added.

I accepted the missives with considerable distrust. A telegram often means that one's leave has been stopped at the eleventh hour.

Meanwhile, a very obnoxious gong had already warned visitors for the third time that the ship was about to sail. Expectant coolies stood about on the quay waiting to remove the gangway on a signal from the bridge. And, as if these preparations were insufficient, the siren let a most ear-splitting blast, moistening me with dewy spittle from one of the funnels.

"We're off, sir," said the steward, quite unnecessarily.

I tore open the telegram, and read:

Bon voyage and pleasant leave. Eileen.

Regretfully observing from my face that the news was not unpleasant, the steward shambled away.

I looked at the letter. It was written in a spidery, uneducated

hand, probably that of a professional letter-writer in some bazaar. I sat down in a vacant deck-chair and opened it. This is what I deciphered:

Illustrious Sir,

This to hoping it may reach your good self prior dipartur with hopes you are good hilth this just say I arrive stait farces and most happi, Sir, thousand thanks for your sweet hilp. May God bliss you majesti a pairsanage you Honor most closely resimble.

I am, Sir,

Obedentl,

SULEIMAN,

Lcut.-Col.

For some time I stared into space. My mind was revolving with memories like a primitive water-wheel.

Then another frightful blast from the siren nearly made me jump out of my skin. This time I was covered with smuts.

I walked to the rail and looked over. We were moving. The rather lovely panorama of Bombay was unfolding before us as we glided from the docks into the harbour.

Why should I go to the stern of the vessel, when I could see so well from where I stood?

"Say!" said a big fat man who was standing beside me. "Like to borrow my glasses?"

I accepted the binoculars, and was rewarded with an exquisite view of Malabar Hill.

"A fine harbour, and a fine city," continued the fat man. "You coming back?"

"Yes," I said. And I was glad it was true. I should return to Bombay, travel by rail to Calcutta, collect Horace, my horse, my kit, and catch a boat to Rangoon.

A bugle sounded, announcing lunch.

"Have you booked a table?" asked the fat man. "If not, shall we sit together?"

I nodded. Together we went downstairs.

When I came up again on deck, India and Bombay had faded into the skyline.

THE END