

CHAPTER IV.

CONDITION OF INDIA IN AUGUST 1857—STATE OF CALCUTTA—ORGANISATION OF NAVAL BRIGADE—THE MOHURRUM—DEPARTURE FROM CALCUTTA—POLICY ADOPTED BY LORD ELGIN—RESIDENCE AT HONG-KONG—ITS ABSENCE OF ATTRACTIONS—A TRIP UP THE RIVER—MACAO—A CHINESE DINNER.

WE spent August 1857 in Calcutta. Of all the eventful months of that most terrible year in India's history, it was probably the one most pregnant with evil forebodings. At no former period had the crisis appeared so imminent. Two commanders-in-chief had already succumbed before Delhi ; our army was dwindling away under its walls, and its leaders urgently demanding reinforcements which did not exist. Agra was besieged by a mutinous army, and men feared for the unhappy garrison a repetition of the Cawnpore tragedy. This frightful catastrophe appeared to impend still more surely over the devoted band at Lucknow, whose deliverance, at one time, was considered hopeless. At Dinapore our troops had just met with a disaster. The gallant little army under General Havelock, despairing of reinforcements, decimated by cholera, and worn out by battles and hardships, were compelled to retire on Cawnpore. Oude,

Rohilcund, Bundelcund, were lost to us ; the disaffection threatened to spread into the other Presidencies ; everywhere the mutineers seemed triumphant ; station after station was being deserted and plundered ; each week steamers full of fugitives arrived from up the country, with additional horrors to recount, and more disaffection to report. All communication was stopped with the north-west ; from Burdwan to Delhi, the country was infested with mutineers ; and every regiment but two in the Bengal army had either been disarmed, disbanded, or had mutinied. With the exception of the small China force, no European troops had arrived or were expected to arrive for two months. Meantime the hot weather was all against us, and all in favour of the rebels.

Under these painful circumstances, nothing struck me so forcibly, on my arrival, as the apparent calm which reigned in Calcutta. And yet, after the first few weeks, nothing appeared more reasonable than that this should be so. Those who are removed to a great distance from the scene of thrilling events, and experience at the receipt of periodical intelligence from it an intense degree of excitement, forget that if those on the spot were to be subjected to a similar strain upon the nervous system, continued over a length of time, it would give way altogether. Providentially the very proximity of the danger, and constant familiarity with those horrible details, which, arriving by instalments in England, acted on society like a series of electric shocks, produced a calmness

almost amounting to apathy in India. So far as the outward aspect of society was concerned, Calcutta was just as I had left it seven years before. The Maidan was just as crowded by its beauty and fashion now as it used to be then ; burra-cannas were nearly as numerous, considering it was the height of the hot weather ; and there was even a wretched attempt at an opera, which, however, was very thinly attended. The only differences I observed were, that constant reviews took place of volunteer corps ; that the Governor-General's body-guard mounted sentry without swords ; and that dining in Fort William involved the risk of being bayoneted by a series of Irish sentries, who would not admit your pronunciation of the parole to be correct, and were haunted by the suspicion that you were the King of Oude in disguise escaping in a buggy.

It would be in the highest degree unjust to attribute this apparent indifference to any want of appreciation of the real nature of the crisis, much less to any want of sympathy in behalf of those who had suffered, or of depth of feeling on the part of the sufferers themselves. It arose rather from that deliberate courage and steady determination to face the danger, and support the trials, which had so eminently distinguished our countrymen scattered throughout the upper provinces, and which had led to acts of unparalleled heroism. The public felt that, with the present deficiency of physical force, they must principally rely for safety upon that moral effect which

an undaunted attitude would create in the minds of the natives. Nowhere was this conviction more decidedly entertained, or its results more conspicuously displayed, than at Government House, and there can be little doubt that the example set by Lord Canning himself in this respect, exercised a most wholesome and tranquillising influence upon society at large.

Meantime the organisation of the naval brigade proceeded rapidly ; indeed, we had scarcely left the ship before our cabins were dismantled, and the preparations commenced for the equipment of very nearly the entire ship's company. Within a week after our arrival in Calcutta these were completed, and Lord Elgin went on board the Shannon, to bid farewell to the men and officers in a parting address, which was received with hearty cheers. A few hours afterwards they were on board the flats which were to convey them to the scene of their future triumphs.

We found Sir Patrick Grant at Calcutta ; and a few days afterwards Sir Colin Campbell unexpectedly arrived to assume the command-in-chief of the army in India, and to inspire fresh confidence into the minds of all. The most exciting period of our visit was during the last days of the Mohurrum, when predictions were rife of midnight attacks, and one or two ladies took refuge on board ships in the river. A 24-pound howitzer, hoisted up to the maintop of the Shannon, looked menacingly over the Maidan, while strong guards of soldiers and volunteers were posted all over the town. The last day, how-

ever, universally named as the day of attack, passed over quietly. I happened to meet the procession on their way to throw the Ziahs into the water. I have scarcely ever seen a Mohammedan religious procession less excited ; indeed, the panic among the natives was much greater than among the Europeans, for the preparations made by the latter induced a dread on the part of the natives that they might be attacked by mistake.

Lord Elgin was detained at Calcutta until the arrival of the mail informing him that the force which he had diverted was to be replaced by 1500 marines. An offer made by General Hearsay for regiments to volunteer for China, was only responded to by one ; and it was evident, therefore, that no dependence could be placed upon extensive reinforcements to be derived from this source. As for the original China force, it was owing to their opportune arrival that the tide of rebellion, which had been setting steadily down upon Calcutta, was already stemmed. The regiments diverted from Singapore had saved Dinapore, relieved Arrah, and were in full march to join Havelock : upon these timely reinforcements not only was the relief of Lucknow, but the safety of Bengal, depending. It was therefore clear to Lord Elgin that he need not expect to see again any one of the China regiments now employed in India ; nor, while they were rendering such vital service, could he desire it. A consideration of these circumstances involved a very serious change in his policy in China, whither

he was now desirous of returning, for the purpose of conferring with Baron Gros immediately upon his arrival. In consequence of the Shannon having been made over for the service of the Indian Government, the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamer Ava was placed at Lord Elgin's disposal for his conveyance to China; and on the 3d of September we bade adieu to our hospitable hosts at Calcutta, and once more turned our faces towards the Celestial Empire.

General Van Straubenzee and his staff, who had arrived in Calcutta with Sir Colin Campbell, under the impression that the generals of the China force had proceeded with it to India, finding that they had not received orders to leave Hong-Kong, accompanied us on our return voyage to that place.

On the 20th of September, after a prosperous passage, we once more found ourselves anchored under Victoria Peak, in circumstances very little more encouraging than those which had forced us away from China two months before. An expedition to the mouth of the Peiho was more than ever to be deprecated. Two months more must elapse before the first instalment of marines could be expected, at the most favourable computation. Baron Gros had not yet made his appearance.

In the mean time, during our absence at Calcutta, the complications and difficulties arising out of the anomalous state of things already described upon the Canton River, had forced the Admiral to establish a blockade, which gave a new complexion to the aspect of our

diplomatic relations with the Imperial Government. To go to the mouth of the Peiho, unsupported either by the representatives of other powers, or a naval force of our own, would be to insure an insult from the Government at Peking; whilst the prevalence of the north-east monsoon would retard our arrival in the Gulf of Pechelee until so late a period of the year, that a departure would be forced upon us with a precipitancy in the highest degree encouraging to the systematic policy of the Empire in dealing with barbarians, and injurious to our national prestige. The treatment which we received from the Chinese authorities upon the occasion of our subsequent visit to the Peiho, fully confirmed the estimate then formed of the obstinacy of the Government of Peking. Under these circumstances, Lord Elgin determined patiently to await at Hong-Kong the arrival of the force destined for the capture of Canton, and when that operation was concluded, to proceed northward as early as possible in the following year, retaining possession of the city as a material guarantee for the satisfaction of our demands.

In the mean time, the interval of inaction at Hong-Kong, which this determination rendered inevitable, involved an existence under circumstances of a somewhat trying character. A steamer of the Peninsular and Oriental Company, however comfortable its accommodation, and obliging and amiable its commander (and in Captain Caldbeck we were particularly fortunate in this regard), is not exactly the

residence which one would select, in which to pass two summer months in one of the worst tropical climates in the world. Nor, even if the attractions of Hong-Kong were less than they are, which is scarcely possible, is it a pleasant thing to be anchored a mile at least from the shore. During the season of typhoons this distance was doubled. We then sought shelter under the Kowloon promontory ; and a dinner on shore was a serious undertaking, when it involved a midnight voyage in an open Tanka boat, possibly in a gale of wind or a pitiless storm of rain. This was an experience of common occurrence. Sometimes we were detained on shore from stress of weather ; and on the occasion of a typhoon, which destroyed two hundred junks at Macao, but the full violence of which we escaped, the Ava was obliged to keep under steam all night.

When it was not blowing or raining, the heat was intolerable ; and we all suffered more or less in health from its evil effects. Often for days together we remained sweltering on board, from lack of energy or sufficient inducement to leave the ship. The charms of the Club or the excitement of a game of billiards failed to tempt us. Hong-Kong boasts of only two walks for the conscientious valetudinarian —one along the sea-shore to the right, and the other to the left of the settlement : then there is a scramble to the top of Victoria Peak at the back of it ; but this achievement involves an early start, and a probable attack of fever. The monotony of life is varied by

this malady alternating with boils or dysentery ; so that the proverbial hospitality of the merchants at Hong-Kong can only be exercised under very adverse influences. It was not difficult to account for a certain depression of spirits, and tone of general irritability, which seemed to pervade the community. A large bachelors' dinner was the extreme limit of gaiety.

It was provoking that a place possessing so many scenic attractions should have been so entirely devoid of other charms. Like a beautiful woman with a bad temper, Hong-Kong claimed our admiration while it repelled our advances. We did, indeed, make one spasmodic effort to be "jolly under creditable circumstances." Lord Elgin gave a pic-nic at the Bogue Forts. As his invitations were responded to by nearly all the ladies in the place, as the day happened to be lovely, and the Ava admirably adapted for the excursion, the attempt was not altogether unsuccessful ; and on our return at night, we indulged in a little picturesque dissipation. The deck was turned into a ball-room. The band of the Calcutta supplied us with excellent music ; while huge fantastic Chinese lanterns, swinging from the awning, threw a brilliant light upon the dancers.

On the 16th of October Baron Gros arrived in the *Audaceuse*, and after conferring with Lord Elgin, took up his anchorage in Castle Peak Bay, Lantao Island, where Admiral Rigault de Genouilly, with the French fleet, were at anchor, about twelve

miles distant from Hong-Kong. As Lord Elgin was desirous of judging for himself on the state of matters in the river, he proceeded in the *Ava* to Macao Fort. With the exception of the withdrawal of the garrison from Chuenpee, the occupation of North Wantung Island, and the absence of any junks from the river in consequence of the blockade, the aspect of affairs seemed unchanged since my last visit. We cast longing glances from the top of the Pagoda in Macao Fort upon the heights at the back of Canton, crowned by the five-storied Pagoda and Gough's Fort, with which we hoped before long to make a closer acquaintance.

On our return voyage we passed through Elliot's Passage, which had not been traversed for months ; we therefore took another gunboat, towing an armed pinnace, so as to be prepared for the very improbable contingency of meeting mandarin junks. The scenery was extremely pretty, the people engaged in taking in the harvest stared at us with curiosity, but apparent confidence. We entered the Whampoa Channel at the town of Whampoa,—formerly a place of as great bustle and activity as the port of Canton, the site of docks, and the anchorage of large merchant fleets ; now partially deserted, and desolate-looking in the extreme.

On the following day we proceeded to Macao, and explored that interesting old Portuguese settlement, with which, however, we have been too long familiar in England to render description necessary. Its air of respectable antiquity was refreshing, after the

somewhat parvenu character with which its ostentatious magnificence invests Hong-Kong. The narrow streets and grass-grown plazas, the handsome façade of the fine old cathedral crumbling to decay, the shady walks and cool grottoes, once the haunt of the Portuguese Poet ; his tomb, and the view from it, all combined to produce a soothing and tranquillising effect upon sensibilities irritated by our recent mode of life.

We strolled down to the harbour, and found it full of junks, most of them heavily armed with 6, 9, and 12-pound guns, bearing the well-known initials B, P., & Co., of this year's date, to be converted by Yeh to his own use when occasion required, for the crews did not conceal the fact that Canton was their destination—of course for trading purposes. Since the blockade of the river, the whole trade with Canton has been carried along the passage at the back of Macao, known as the Broadway.

We refreshed ourselves after the fatigues of our exploration at a Chinese restaurant, where I made my first experience in Chinese cookery, and, in spite of the novelty of the implements, managed, by the aid of chopsticks, to make a very satisfactory repast of eggs a year old preserved in clay, sharks' fins and radishes pared and boiled into a thick soup, *bêche de mer* or sea-slugs, shrimps made into a paste with sea-chestnuts, bamboo roots, and garlic, rendered piquant by the addition of soy and sundry other pickles and condiments, and washed down with warm samshu in

minute cups. Dishes and plates were all on the smallest possible scale, and pieces of square brown paper served the purpose of napkins.

On the 28th of October the arrival of the Imperador, after a remarkably quick voyage, with the first batch of marines on board, imparted new life and hope to the breast of every one connected with the Chinese expedition. It was the first faint glimmering of daylight, after the long night of despondency and inaction.