

AN INCIDENT IN THE SECOND AFGHAN WAR,

1877 TO 1880.

DURING the winter of 1878-79 the First Division of the Khyber Field Force was in Jelalabad—or, rather, was in camp before the town. With the exception of steeplechases, an occasional paperchase on horseback, and polo, there was little to relieve the ordinary routine of military duties—working parties, outposts, and the like. There were occasional expeditions into the interior for the purpose of overawing the turbulent Afridis—hill tribes—nearly all fighting men constantly engaged in looting and devastating the more peaceful villagers and villages of the rich and fertile plains. Many of the latter did a lucrative business with our people, supplying food, etc., for the troops, and were, in consequence, very friendly to the English occupation, which especially enraged their more warlike compatriots. It was generally to encourage the former and teach the others a necessary lesson that these expeditions were organised. Great caution was required, as it was easy to fall into an ambush or become entrapped in one or other of the narrow mountain passes through which our troops, with their line of baggage and commissariat animals, had to pass. Especially into the Bazar Valley the defiles were very narrow, and it was necessary to crown the heights and clear the stone fortifications or “sangahs,” which were carefully though roughly built, and commanded all the salient points.

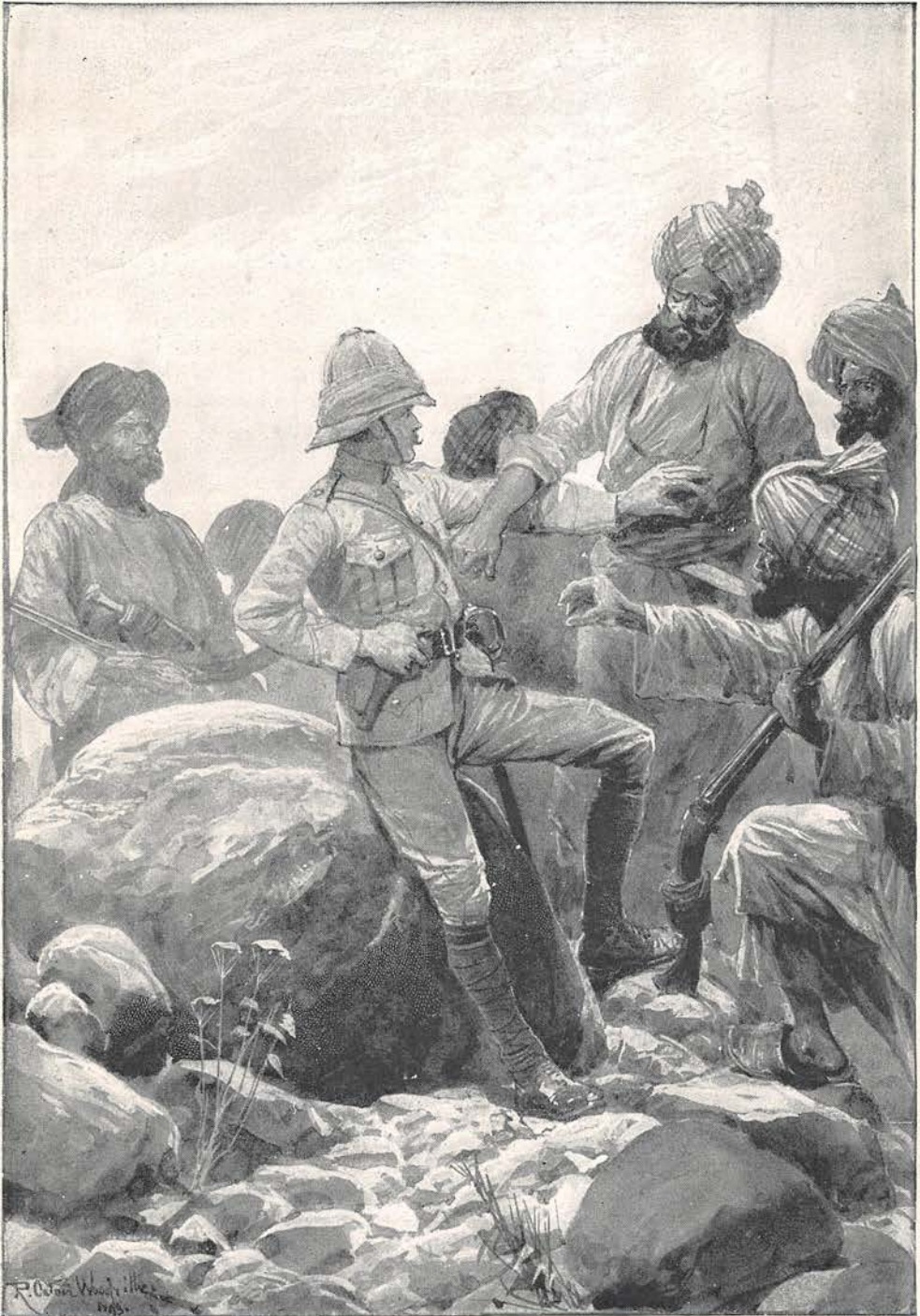
The Bazar Valley Expedition is the one in which occurred the incident of which I am writing.

After a long march and a successful advance over the mountains and through defiles with little or no resistance, General

Tytler, our Brigadier, had encamped under General (now Sir) Fred Maude, V.C., in a large open plain at a sufficient distance from the neighbouring line of hills.

There had been desultory fighting by day with the Afridis, who were assembled in great force, but it had led to little result. By night, however, they kept up an incessant fire upon the camp, encircled by the cordon of outposts drawn close in, and occasionally they attempted to break through the line.

The position of the camp was frequently changed, and attempts made to draw the enemy to a general engagement. This was always declined, and as we advanced they retired farther into the heart of the country. They must have numbered a good many thousands. When we really had hopes, from news brought into camp by spies, that they meant to fight on the following day, an order came from Headquarters to the effect that our General was “on no account to embroil himself with the native tribes.” This, after all that had taken place, had bad results, as a retreat before natives is always a mistake. They construe such action into fear, and it led to a great loss of prestige to ourselves and gave them much encouragement. However, I am not concerned with all this, and am moving off the track. To return. One Sunday morning at church parade my regiment was drawn up in hollow square, and the Colonel was reading the service. Suddenly from the hills, some three miles distant from camp, a long line of fire burst out, with the continuous rattle and crack of musketry. We could plainly see large bodies of the Afridis coming down the hills and firing



ONE TRIED TO SEIZE MY PISTOL, ANOTHER MY SWORD.

at our baggage-animals, who were watering on the banks of the river below, attended by their native escort. In a wonderfully short time the Political Officer attached to the Headquarters Staff had obtained the necessary permission to start at once and see what could be done. He had been engaged in successful negotiations with the Afridi chiefs on behalf of our Government, and was naturally anxious that all his trouble should have tangible result.

Unarmed and alone, Tucker, our Political Officer, passed through the line of outposts, crossed the river beyond the late watering-ground mentioned, and ascended the hill, where, with glasses, one could almost make out the dark masses of the Afridis surrounding the solitary figure. To advance up that hill in the face of their fire required great determination, and involved no small risk.

The moment parade was dismissed, how well I remember, without further consideration, in the rash confidence of impulsive youth, running as quickly as possible in the hopes of seeing what was taking place. After getting through the line of outposts and crossing the river, I proceeded up the mountain by the rough path Tucker had taken, but missed it and him, and suddenly found myself surrounded completely by these dangerous hillmen, armed literally to the teeth with curious daggers and knives stuck about them, and each carrying his long inlaid gun or rifle. I particularly noticed one man—one of the finest men I have ever seen—dressed in the long yellow skin coat of the country. He stood well over six feet, and had enormous black whiskers and moustachios curled up to his eyes, which gave him a very fierce appearance. He carried arms of curious workmanship, of all sorts. He showed a good deal of excitement—as indeed they all did—gesticulating and talking loudly. But I did not understand their language nor they mine; but, doubtless, they wanted to know what I wanted, and apparently asked if I was looking for the Englishman, meaning Tucker. However, I sat down on a stone, and they around me, and my arms were a great attraction. One tried to seize my pistol and another my sword, but I did

not wish to make them a present of either the one or the other. Perhaps I might have felt it wiser to do so, but the sudden appearance of Tucker, breathless with haste, was a welcome relief.

He had been told by one of these men, with whom he seemed on good terms and who thoroughly trusted him, that an Englishman, a "Sahib," was in the hills, and naturally hurried to see who it was. His reception of me was not so hearty as I might have hoped, but it appeared that it was a risky thing to have followed him, and might have spoilt all his efforts. I remember he emphasised the fact that he himself carried no arms, and that it was very fortunate they had not cut me up for the sake of getting mine, as they covet arms more than anything else. With them also, not wearing arms means a messenger of peace, and shows that you mean no harm to them. It seemed strange to see this unarmed Englishman among these warriors; and apparently his mission had been successful, for the firing had all ceased, and by their gestures and behaviour it was plain that they regarded him as a friend. We walked down the hills together, and soon reached the camp, and I realised how much one bold man who represented "the great White Queen" could effect in a few hours. The work of our Political Officers—men of the Cavagnari type—has done as much for the Empire as armies and fleets, and truly the power of the rupee is greater than that of the sword. It was almost impossible to defeat these men in their own hills, where we could not follow them; and to have done so effectually would have meant in all likelihood a lengthened campaign and a doubtful success at the end. The required understanding had been arranged without bloodshed or loss of life. During the rest of the campaign the marauders who had troubled our convoys and harassed our troops gave us no further trouble, and by the judicious handling of a few powerful chiefs, one of the most serious obstacles to a friendly Afghanistan had been happily surmounted, and by means infinitely preferable to any that can ever be accomplished by brute force. J. R. S.