CHAPTER XVI.

FOREST ROBBERIES.

I am one of those who have always felt the deepest sympathy for the earnest, zealous, hard-working Forest Department. Forest Officers have always been among the best abused of officials. Even the Police have not had such hard measure dealt out to them by the public at large, while their treatment by the Government they serve so admirably has been capricious, unjust, and unreasonable to a degree.

There are probably not many men now in India who remember the good old times when the forests, like a good many other matters—salt, excise, and even customs—were left a good deal to chance; when "Bombay Castle" possessed but the foggiest knowledge of the precise position of the valuable properties belonging to the State, and certainly had no accurate register of them; when the idea of conservation, still less of afforestation for the benefit of posterity, never entered the brain of Chief Secretary, Revenue Commissioner, or Collector; when, so long as sufficient timber was sent up to the Bombay Dockyard, and enough money scraped together spasmodically to nearly cover the scanty pay of one or two
Conservators, and a few (a very few) clerks and peons, "His Excellency the Governor in Council" was perfectly satisfied, and was content to pigeon-hole with calm indifference the valuable reports, full of earnest warnings, teeming with practical suggestions, annually submitted by able men like "Daddy Gibson" and Dalzell.

"The world went very well then" for those who needed wood for any purpose. Did an energetic Collector or Assistant-Collector want timber for a school or a dhurm-salla (rest-house), he simply ordered the Mamlutdar (Head Revenue and Magisterial Officer of a sub-district) to send out and have it cut. Did an officer of the Roads and Tanks Department want charcoal, he sent his men out and hacked and burnt and wasted as he chose. Did a villager, from the Patel downwards, want wood for any purpose, he simply helped himself, while timber-merchants and boat-builders with perfect impunity pillaged right and left, and the forest tribes gradually denuded the hillsides around large towns, living by the sale of firewood, which cost them nothing but the labour of felling and taking away. The actual loss to the State by this reckless waste, in the first thirty-five years after the downfall of the Peishwa, must have been many crores of rupees, but it is but a fraction of the loss to the present generation of the people at large, as sensible men among them now perceive.

This sinful waste went on till the early Fifties, when the administration throughout India began to
entertain some glimmering of the vast importance of forest conservation in the future. But the first remedial steps had hardly been taken when the country was convulsed by the Mutiny and Rebellion, and reforms in this and many another important direction had, perforce, to be laid aside till quieter times, so that it was not really till about 1863, if I remember aright, that a Forest Department was regularly organised, even then it was very indifferently equipped.

Meantime enormous mischief had been prepared for the future in the widespread growth of a belief among the people that they possessed, or had acquired, prescriptive rights to devastate the forests at their own sweet will. Restrictions, however reasonable and just, were regarded as "zoolum," spoliation, or the mere exercise of arbitrary power. This dangerous feeling especially predominated in the Bombay Presidency, and in the country all around the Presidency city; for, what with the marvellous impetus given to trade in the early Sixties, what with the introduction of Vehar water, the population of Bombay had nearly doubled, and with it the demand for fuel.

Thousands of men, mostly sturdy "Ghattis,* had gradually formed into hundreds of gangs felling firewood wherever it could be found within paying distance of the city, to which it was transported by rail, carts, and native boats. While yet un-

* Marattas from along the Ghauts, or Syhedri Range of Mountains.
prepared and insufficiently manned, the unfortunate Forest Department, now incessantly called upon by Government to show good financial results, had to combat combination after combination, to check petty thieving as well as to repress wholesale organised robbery, at the same time to prevent clamour, and to see that the city was fully supplied with fuel at a reasonable rate. How devotedly the Department worked, how well on the whole it succeeded, must be fresh in the recollection of all old Bombay residents. Indifferent to the abuse showered on it from all sides, not discouraged by the niggardliness and the contradictory orders from time to time issued from the Secretariat, the heads of the Department gradually systematised the supply to Bombay, arranged for block-felling by rotation and supervised the felling by their own officers.

It was about this time some seventeen years ago, that the following remarkable case occurred. It will, in all likelihood, be remembered by sundry and various officials in the Western Presidency, notwithstanding the care that will be taken here to conceal names and localities. I was not myself in any way officially connected with it, but I was favoured by a brother “peeler” with a perusal of his notes, from which I took some of my own sufficient to enable me to give an outline of the main facts.

Great pressure was at the time being brought to bear on the Forest Officer of a district not far from Bombay to raise an extra amount of revenue to cover the cost of certain much-needed supplementary
estimations which Government had with much difficulty been induced to sanction. He was therefore driven to fell more firewood jungle than usual, which necessitated the employment of contractors instead of felling departmentally. These contractors were, I well remember, restricted to cutting the commoner kinds of fuel trees, the better or building timbers, such as "Teak," "Ain," "Kinjal," being expressly excepted by the terms of the contract. The contractors bound themselves to fell so many thousand "candies"—about 688 lbs.—of wood in certain specified jungles, to remove it after cutting it into billets, to certain convenient depôts outside the forests, and then to buy it at a certain rate per "candy," with permission to remove it by pack-bullocks or by tidal creeks to the nearest railway station, or to the city of Bombay itself.

With efficient supervision over the axe-men and common honesty at the depôts, the contracts, though loosely worded, might have worked fairly well, saving the Department enormous labour, and in a rough and ready way netting a fair return. But the supervision unfortunately, could not be efficient, and this from no fault or want of energy on the part of superior Forest Officials. Besides routine office duties, and having to travel over an immense area of rugged country, the unfortunate Assistant Conservator was in those days expected to do something towards forest demarcation, a duty which in itself takes up the whole time of any hard-working man. He could not be in two places at once, and was
compelled to rely on his subordinates, depot-keepers, and the like. Once these gentry became the tools of the contractors, any amount of depredation could be carried on with impunity, almost without the least risk of discovery; and that was what happened on this occasion.

The contractors were simply some twenty stalwart "Ghattis," every one of whom for years past, and their fathers before them, had exploited forest lands for the supply of Bombay. The "Company"—"Ballaji Ghatti and Co.," as they called themselves—had very little money of their own, probably not more than two to five hundred rupees a-piece, except Ballaji, who having a thousand to contribute to the capital, and being moreover a man of exceptional energy and force of character, was naturally the chief manager or director. Ballaji's and his brother's share in the venture was, I think, eight annas in the rupee. It was he who did the financing; it was his brother who kept the books; the other members of the so-called Company were merely working gangers or mussadums, with half-anna, quarter-anna, or pie shares in the profits in proportion to the amount of capital they each brought in.

Of course the Company had backers in Bombay; for a big contract like this, likely to run for two or three years, requires considerable capital to start and carry on with until the wood can reach the market and be sold. Several months must elapse before wood cut in the jungles during the monsoon is even
fit for sale. Meantime axe-men and labourers have to be paid. "Brinjars" (Indian gypsies, or men with droves of pack-bullocks) have to be given advances at the outset and kept paid from month to month, while their droves of pack-bullocks toil dustily and wearily backwards and forwards, from jungle to depot, removing the logs; cartmen or boatmen, or (as in this instance) both, have to be paid cash down for all the wood transported to Bombay.

Ballaji Ghatti and Co.'s backers were wealthy wood dealers at Carnac Bunder; who when Ballaji had secured this contract, were quite ready and able to advance the Company all moneys required, on a stamped agreement that all the wood worked by it should be consigned or sent to them at Carnac Bunder. The backers, whom I will call Haji Ladak and Co., had also power under the deed to inspect Ballaji's books, and if necessary, even to overlook the operations up-country.

Thus amply provided with capital, Ballaji Ghatti and Co. set merrily to work, felling an immense supply of fuel ready for removal after the monsoon. It was a very easy matter to corrupt the depot-keepers and the few rangers concerned. Regular pay, perhaps twice as much as the pittance paid to them by the Government, secured their hearty co-operation in the extensive frauds that followed. The depot-keepers simply had to shut their eyes, let as much wood as Ballaji and Co. chose to bring down pass through and out of the depot, being careful only
to keep their books in tally with the dummy set of books kept by the firm to show to the "Assistant Saheb," or any one desirous of learning what progress was being made under the contract.

The firm's real books, of course, corresponded as to consignments and advances with those of the consignees and backers, Haji Ladak and Co., which, I may mention in passing, were as truly and honestly kept as those of any large firm in Bombay.

The forest ranger had merely to hold his tongue and ignore the felling of teak and other timber excluded from the contract. If the "Saheb" happened to come along—there was always ample warning—for a day or two few pack-bullocks would be seen about, and the sound of the axe would scarcely be heard on the hill-sides. The villagers round about, liberally supplied by Ballaji with brushwood and such occasional pieces of timber as they required, did not peech and all went happily as a marriage-bell.

Ballaji Ghatti and Co. were coining money by thousands monthly; believing they were quite safe, they extended their operations and boldly stacked great wood piles at any spot convenient for removal, especially on the banks of certain small tidal creeklets navigable by small native craft. It was, I believe, ascertained subsequently that Government was robbed under this contract to the tune of nearly two lakhs of rupees in about three years, and the depredations would probably never have been checked had not an exceptionally sharp Parsi inspector of police been appointed to the district.
SECRET FOREST HOARDS

[Turn face p. 166.]
Ruttonjee, now dead some years, used to be called by his European superiors Inspector "Bucket,"* so much did he remind them in manner and appearance of that plausible detective. It was not long before he smelt a rat, and set himself to work to ferret out all the details of the plot. He first easily ingratiated himself with Ballaji and Co., wormed all he could out of them, got a sight of the contract, and plied some of the "Ghatti" partners with liquor on every possible occasion, when they let out the secret of the double sets of books, and boasted freely of their gains. Going to Bombay he scraped acquaintance through mutual friends

* Charles Dickens's 'Bleak House.'
with Haji Ladak and Co., and thoroughly satisfied himself that he was in for a "real good thing;" then, making some police pretence for passing a few days in one of the jungles being felled, he saw with his own eyes two immense stacks of wood of all kinds ready for removal.

His next step was to take the opportunity of the Police Superintendent dining one night quietly with the Collector and District Magistrate to wait upon them and divulge the conspiracy. These gentlemen, in the absence of the Assistant Conservator of Forests (who was too far off), determined to strike at once. By the following evening all the forest depôts where Ballaji and Co. were working, all the great wood piles in the jungles and most of the books, were in the charge of the Police.

Unfortunately, Ballaji, who had the true books of the firm over in Bombay, somehow received intelligence in time to enable him to secrete them, so that they were not found till after the trial. The District Magistrate undertook the investigation himself, Ruttonjee prosecuting; in due course Ballaji, his brother, and I think a dozen more "Ghattis," signatories to the Company's deed of partnership, who had been actively engaged in supervising operations in the forests, were committed for trial to the Sessions, on charges of stealing teak and other valuable timbers, besides the huge wood piles found in the jungles.

The Crown was represented at the trial by an English barrister of high standing, and also one of
the leading native pleaders of the High Court. The case seemed simple enough: the contract permitted the accused to fell and remove a certain quantity of fuel wood; but Haji Ladak's evidence and the books of his firm showed that the accused had already delivered in Bombay and received credit for about twenty times as much as the stipulated quantity, besides that they were in possession of half as much more stacked in the jungles.

The contract forbade the accused to cut teak and other specified building timbers, but it was proved that they had nevertheless felled such timber, transported it to Bombay and sold it, besides stacking much more ready for removal.

For the defence, which was conducted by two astute native pleaders, it was contended that a criminal charge could not lie: that the Government remedy, if any existed, was a suit for damages for breach of contract. The false or dummy books of Ballaji Ghatti and Co., and the several depot-keepers' books above mentioned, were relied upon as proving that the Company had not felled or removed more than they were entitled to under the contract; it was further contended that the excess shown in Haji Ladak's books was purchased in the course of trade from various other parties; that the wood piles found in the jungles were not actually found in the possession of the accused, but must have been stored by some other persons unknown.

The Judge decided that under any circumstances the charge of theft would not apply, and the
accused were acquitted. On this, Government appealed to the High Court, against the acquittal, so far as Ballaji and his brother were concerned, the accomplices not being considered worth the trouble. An appeal against an acquittal is no common occurrence. A Full Court of the Honourable Judges, after a patient hearing, reversed the acquittal, found these two men guilty, and passed a moderate sentence.

I am afraid that, in the above sketch of the case from memory, I may have omitted several points, especially some of a legal nature; but my object has been rather to show how the State used to be defrauded in forest matters, how serious were the obstacles which opposed the strenuous exertions of the department in the earlier days of its organisation, than to describe accurately the details of a trial which attracted considerable attention at the time. It can easily be selected by the curious from among the reported cases of the High Court of Judicature of about 1875–76.

As time has gone on the Government has become juster and more liberal in its grants towards a most important department, its organisation has steadily improved, excellent checks on fraud and depredation have been put in force, and such conspiracies as that of Ballaji Ghatti and Co. have become well-nigh impossible.

The sequel to the case is well worth telling. "Inspector Bucket" was excessively annoyed at the "Ghattis" having been enabled to get their real books
out of the way, and he vowed that he would never rest until he traced them. It was not, however, till several months had elapsed that, obtaining a clue, he actually unearthed them in the house of a relative of Ballaji; proceedings were thereupon instituted against certain members of the old Company for producing the fictitious books in evidence at the Sessions trial, of whom in the result two or three more were convicted and sentenced.

Poor Ruttonjee would undoubtedly have risen to the highest grades in the Police Service, but that his eyesight totally failed him when he had reached the Inspector grade; not having served sufficiently long for a pension, I fear, he died in very poor circumstances.
CHAPTER XVII.

THE PREDATORY TRIBES.

Every one serving in India in the early “Fifties” must retain a vivid recollection of the kind of lull that then prevailed throughout the length and breadth of the land—the lull before the storm.

It was in those days that the Court of Directors first bethought themselves of making some general and sustained effort to suppress crime; the Indian Governments were urged to improve the organisation of the Police, to trace out the swarms of thieves who infested the country, who, not only by their own predatory habits, but by reason of their close connection with “Thugs,” “dacoits,” cattle-
lifters, and poisoners, rendered the detection and suppression of more serious crimes well-nigh impossible.

The Thuggee Suppression Department of the Government of India was naturally employed in a systematic investigation of the habits, customs, and mode of operation of the hundred-and-one predatory castes and tribes scattered throughout the Deccan and the Carnatic. Captain (now General) Hervey, an experienced officer of the department in the Southern Mahratta Country, with the aid of Thug approvers, devoted some years of patient labour to the classification of Bumptias, Oochlias, Kaikaris, Katkaris, Wadars, Beldars, besides a host of musicians, jugglers, mummers, and acrobats, all of whom preyed upon hapless villagers, some openly, some under the cloak of an ostensible occupation. His report, so far as I am aware, has been the only text-book or work of reference for nearly forty years, and he has done well to publish a new book in the past year.

Although these tribes are fast dwindling away, or being absorbed in the labouring population, and they are no longer the scourge to the country they used to be, or because of police vigilance are now comparatively harmless, their organisations remain, their old traditions are religiously preserved, it is quite certain that if circumstances again favoured their operations, they would again give an infinity of trouble to the authorities. General Hervey's work should, therefore, be found in the official library of
every District Magistrate and Police officer in the Western and Southern Presidencies.

Veriest dregs of the population as they are, they attracted little special notice during disturbed times anterior to British rule; they were merged in the swarms of camp-followers and hangers-on to every native army, to every Pindari horde, or considerable band of marauders, and as the country settled down, they crystallised as it were, into small bands and gangs, and spread far and wide among the villages.

Vast numbers of them, such as the Wadars (earth-workers), Beldars (quarrymen), lime and charcoal-burners, basket-makers, have been more or less permanently absorbed into the great body of migratory labour required for the construction of roads and railways, canals and tanks, during the past thirty years.

Thousands upon thousands of them were swept off by famine and cholera between 1876 and 1880. Comparatively few gangs still remain to wander about the Deccan, and there is now little or nothing in their appearance or habits to distinguish one tribe from another. The malodorous but somewhat picturesque procession of old crones, bold-faced slatternly girls, and nearly-naked urchins occasionally encountered on the road, with its drove of donkeys and buffaloes heavily laden with mats and hut-poles, on which are perched a few dissipated-looking fowls, may belong to any tribe. They eat any garbage—land-crabs, field rats, village pigs,
or what not. They all drink like fishes when they get a chance, but yet one tribe will not eat, or drink, or intermarry with another, so scrupulously are caste distinctions observed among them.

They frequent every fair and jattra (pilgrimage), where they annex every portable thing they can lay their hands upon, pilfer from every shop-keeper's stall, and finally decamp at night with goats, or sheep which they promptly eat, or with a few head of cattle, which some of the men drive rapidly off to a distant town and sell for anything they will fetch. On their way from fair to fair, from "jattra" to "jattra," they will sometimes squat for a few weeks together on the outskirts of some town or village where any building operations are in progress, and they get fairly well paid for fetching sand, or earth, or chunan (lime) with their long-suffering donkeys.

Neither these poor beasts nor the buffaloes are ever fed. The day's work or the day's march over, they are simply turned loose to forage for themselves in the crops if they are standing, in the stackyards or around the threshing-floors if the harvest is over. The villagers well know that it is hopeless to attempt to catch the cunning beasts at night, for some time they patiently tolerate the nuisance, but the usual ending is a free fight, when the Ryots, exasperated beyond endurance, turn out some morning and drive their rascally visitors beyond the village limits.

I remember witnessing an affair of this kind some
years ago, which gave me a fair idea of the omnivorous dishonesty of these wandering rogues. It was early dawn, accompanied by a couple of sowars (mounted police), I was on my way to inspect a police post at some distance from my camp. As we were passing a small walled village that stood back from the road, shouts and screams broke the silence. Galloping towards the village we came upon an encampment of Khaikaris (ostensibly basket-makers), in which, amid a cloud of dust, some twenty sturdy Mahrattas, armed with sticks, were demolishing the filthy mat hovels and freely belabouring the male occupants.

The shrill shrieks of the women, the yelping of curs, the imprecations of the combatants, the donkeys and cattle rushing wildly about in the middle, made up as pretty a scrimmage as has ever been witnessed outside Donnybrook. The unexpected appearance of a "Saheb" on the scene, perhaps a few cracks from my horsewhip, produced a momentary calm, and then a crowd of Khaikari women rushed forward, beating their breasts, vociferating and pointing to a female lying apparently senseless near.

Dismounting to see what was the matter with her, and giving my horse to a sowar to hold, that worthy told me, with a broad grin, that the woman was only shamming, and that he had seen her cast herself down on the ground as we rode up.

However, as she persisted in feigning to be dead, I ordered a "chatty" of cold water to be brought, and
myself drenched her with the contents. Needless to say the effect was magical. The crone jumped up, and proceeded to curse me volubly by all her gods, amid roars of laughter from the assembled villagers.

Putting a cordon of Mhars (village watchmen) round the encampment, I held a rough-and-ready inquiry. It was the old story. The gang had arrived about a week before from Punderpoor, pitched their camp without permission, and refused to budge when ordered by the Patel. Their beasts had been turned loose every night to graze their fill in the standing wheat; calves and goats had disappeared; houses and shops had been robbed right and left; and last, but not least, the behaviour of the younger Khaikari women had been scandalously indecent, so the incensed village elders had determined at last to rid themselves forcibly of their unwelcome visitors.

Gravely reproving them (as in duty bound) for having taken the law into their own hands, but secretly in my own heart, approving what they had done, I proceeded to have the huts and every member of the gang of Khaikaris thoroughly searched. Never was such a wonderful collection of spoil found! Some half-dozen pieces of well-worn silver jewellery, several bundles of brand-new brass ornaments, ear and nose rings, bangles and necklaces, bunches of coloured beads, several little circular folding-mIRRORS, new tin pots, plates, pans, new and old copper and brass "lotahs," coils of new rope and balls of string, embroidered skull-caps, women's
brass back-combs, breast cloths, "saris," or petti-
coats, new "Dhoturs," pieces of cotton cloth and
sandals "kumblis" (blankets), tied in the middle
and filled with grain and pulse of all kinds. Besides
all this miscellaneous "loot," the men had some fifty
rupees in cash concealed about their persons. It was
plain enough that the gang had had a real good time
at Punderpoor.

Some few articles being identified by the villagers,
I sent the whole gang back to the Punderpoor Native
Magistrate, who ultimately convicted about half of
them. I was not surprised to learn six months
afterwards, that the stackyard of this particular
village had been fired and grievous loss inflicted on
the unhappy ryots (cultivators). Of course this was
a piece of revenge perpetrated by some members of
the gang, who probably travelled many miles for
the purpose. These rogues always manage to pay
out any village that may have offended them, which
is doubtless one of the reasons they are tolerated
so patiently. Moreover their old women are credited
with the evil eye, and believed to practise witchcraft
extensively.

It is a very difficult problem to know how to deal
with these wandering rogues; they do not mind
being "moved on," for they are always more or less
on the move, they are quite indifferent where they go,
so long as they can manage to get to the next
"jattrra," wherever it may be. The police are not
numerous enough to follow them up, the people
rarely lodge a complaint against them for the
reasons above given, thus there are no specific grounds for interfering with them.

There are other predatory tribes, not migratory, of whom the "Bamptias" and "Oochlias" of the Deccan may be regarded as types. They have no ostensibly honest means of livelihood, they are thieves pure and simple as their tribal names explain. "Oochlia," for example, is derived from the verb "Oochaline," to lift or pick up. In former years they usually inhabited a quarter of their own in every considerable town; villages they did not care about; there was no scope in them for the exercise of their great talents for theft on an extensive scale.

The old native "raj" strove hard to rid the principal cities of the pest, and even to reclaim these people from their predatory habits; they were driven out of the towns and compelled to live on sites allotted to them, lands were given over for their cultivation, advances of cash, occasionally regular cash allowances, were granted to them for the purchase of seed and cattle and implements of husbandry. There was at least one "Bamptia" village close to Poona itself, and for aught I know it may still exist. They were also numerous in the Satara and Kolhapur territories, and in the petty Mahratta States, but the experiment never succeeded very well in any of them, though no doubt it was an advantage to have the rascals collected together at spots where they could be subjected to some kind of discipline and supervision, such as being compelled to attend muster at least at nightfall, and once earlier in the
day. Some few certainly have settled down into fairly honest cultivators, but the majority of them, from father to son, are still regularly brought up and carefully trained to steal, and as I shall presently explain, a splendid and boundless field has opened out for them of late years.

They are exceedingly intelligent and observant, very active in their habits, the lads being as carefully trained in running and athletic exercises as they are trained in the skilful use of their fingers. They are good actors and able to assume almost any disguise; very plausible and insinuating in their address, scrupulously clean in their persons and habits, and somewhat addicted to finery withal. They rarely drink: their womenkind, all expert thieves themselves, have or had a reputation for virtue. They are very staunch to each other, no police officer ever succeeded in getting any reliable information out of a "Bumptia." They rarely molest their immediate neighbours, do not steal sheep, goats, or cattle, or pilfer from shopkeepers in the vicinity of their homes. In fact, they pay freely and honestly for what they want, are willing to do a good turn for a neighbour, and generally are thought rather good fellows than otherwise.

Travellers have always been, and always will be, their prey, but they never resort to violence, and I never heard of their taking human life. They are to be found very busy in the dense crowds thronging into a sacred shrine, detaching the heavy silver "Kirgutis" (waist-belts) or long cotton-bag purses
carried by well-to-do Mahrattas, or snipping off necklaces and earrings, which they pass from hand to hand with incredible rapidity. If there is a row, or one of them is suspected when an article is missed, he does not run away, but assumes a virtuously indignant air, it is very certain nothing will be found upon him. "Pandoorang Hari" relates many amusing tales of their tricks upon travellers, but none of them beats the story I am going to tell about myself.

Pray remember, good reader, while you laugh at me, that when the incident happened I was a very young policeman indeed. Marching between Satara and Kholapur, I halted for a couple of days' shooting at a favourite camp within hail of one of these "Oochlia" villages. Being full of zeal, as all young "Peelers" should be, and withal rather fond of airing my Mahratta on every possible occasion, I sent for two or three of the elders from the "Oochlia" hamlet in the evening, and had a long and very affable conversation with them.

They were pleasant and unrestrained about the lives their people used to lead under the former or native "raj," but they of course had long since abandoned all dishonest practices, and had settled down as honest cultivators. They were doing very well—were bringing up their children in the paths of virtue, indeed they were about to petition the Sirkar to let them have a school. Under the Company's "raj" thieving could not prosper, while every honest man was safe and happy. "No one knew better than the Saheb, whose knowledge of the language and of the native character
was notorious throughout the country." I sucked it all in greedily like the young fool I was, promised to say a good word for the school and we parted the very best of friends. After a frugal meal and the pipe of peace, I inducted myself into my "pyjamas" and went to bed, feeling particularly well satisfied with myself, and firmly convinced that I was the most promising young policeman in the Presidency.

I was always I must mention much given to dogs, and at that time possessed two—one, Vickie, a little black-and-tan terrier who always slept on my bed, the other a huge bull-dog, very good tempered when loose, but a perfect demon when on the chain. "Tim" always travelled with the cook, being chained at night to the "Bobbajikhana," or cook's cart, under which he slept a few yards from the fire, my two servants sleeping near. We were all very tired and the camp was soon buried in sleep, when I was suddenly awakened by the most horrible yell from the fire. Springing off the bed and catching up a stick, I rushed to the spot to find the faithful "Tim" holding on to the leg of a nearly naked lad of about sixteen, who was screaming "Murder" at the top of his voice.

Needless to say, all the little camp gathered on the spot. The first thing was to get "Tim" to release his hold of the lad's leg—no easy matter to accomplish, for "Tim" had got his teeth well in above the ankle. The boy bled profusely, and was half dead with fright. We dressed the wound, gave him some brandy and tried to get the young rascal to tell us
THE NIGHT'S SURPRISE: "TIM'S GOT HIM."
how and why he came there, but he simply would not open his mouth. There was nothing for it but to tie him hand and foot, and leave him in charge of my solitary peon (I was not allowed a sentry in those early days), with strict injunctions not to go to sleep again.

I then ordered a “peg” (brandy-and-soda) to be brought to my tent, and returned to have a smoke before turning in again. Lo and behold! my tent had been fairly cleaned out; the clothes I had taken off, a sword, a revolver and belt, my watch and a few rupees on the chair by my bedside, and a host of smaller articles were gone, worst of all my beloved gun and its case.

The whole thing flashed upon me; the “Oochlias” had paid me a visit! The lad had been sent through the camp on purpose to raise an alarm and draw us all away from my tent, but incautiously going too near had been boned by “Tim.” Meantime his confederates had quietly gutted my tent and decamped with the spoil. I don’t think I ever felt so small—it was such a very transparent dodge. I comforted myself however, with the reflection that at any rate I should be able to find out in the morning to whom my prisoner belonged, but to my disgust, my peon came with a chapfallen face at daylight to report that the lad had somehow or other got away. We went over to the “Oochlia” hamlet, of course, but no lad, it was stoutly declared, was missing from the families; no lad present bore the marks of “Tim’s” teeth, none of my things were found in the village, nor was
anything ever traced, except the gun-case, with my name on it, which was found some months afterwards in a dry watercourse several miles away.

How my plausible friends of the preceding evening must have chuckled over the whole business! I may mention that it is a very favourite dodge of these people to raise an alarm by fire or otherwise at one end of an encampment of travellers, while some of their party loot at the other end.

These gentry have gradually transferred their attention to the railways, and hardly a passenger train runs at night that does not carry some of them. They mingle with the people in the waiting sheds, very soon find out what bundles are worth annexing, and where the owners are going, then take tickets themselves for some nearer station, and travelling in the same compartment, either watch their opportunity for making off with the bundles during the night, or drop them out of the window near the station they themselves are to alight at, whence they walk down the line till they find the spoil. Of course there are hundreds of other opportunities afforded to them during a long journey and in crowded compartments, of practising their profession. Every new section of railway opened extends the field for their operations.

The Railway Police are fully cognisant of what goes on, and they do their utmost to warn third-class passengers against "Bumptias," but I fear they are not as yet very successful in catching any of the rogues. It is the old story—there are no detectives.
CHAPTER XVIII.

CRIME DURING THE FAMINE.

Few men who witnessed the last Deccan famine (1877–79), fewer still of those whose lot it was to be employed officially in coping with it, care to talk much about their dreary experiences, but those ghastly years are burnt into their memories nevertheless, and can never be forgotten to their dying day.

Who can ever forget that brazen sky overhead, that hideous brown-black landscape destitute of vegetation, parched and cracked by the sun’s fierce heat, swept almost throughout the night and all the day long by sand-laden blasts hot as from a fiery furnace? Who can forget the miserable cattle, mere hides stretched over skeletons wandering or rather staggering about in vain search for food and water and lying dead or dying along every roadside? Who can forget the living human skeletons dragging themselves to the nearest relief work or hiding in their desolated homes to die, whole families together, of starvation? Day after day, week after week, month after month, for two whole years hardly a cloud in the sky, hardly a drop of rain, the river-
beds dried or drying up—cholera raging everywhere!

It so happened that I saw some weeks of the Bengal famine in 1873–74 while on a visit during privilege leave to a relative, a planter in Behar. I can honestly say that I never witnessed all that time, nor did I hear tell of such misery as was to be seen any day in the "arid zone" of the Deccan in the first year of that famine before relief measures had been well inaugurated. I believe the difficulties of grain transport and distribution were much greater in the Deccan than they ever were in Behar, certainly large districts blessed with a superabundance of food grains were nearer to the famine-affected area in Behar. Money, too, there was comparatively plentiful and the State poured out treasure with a lavish hand, regardless of expense. In the Deccan, on the other hand, the calamity had to be dealt with almost parsimoniously, for strict economy was the order of the day.

I am not going to discuss who was right or who was wrong on various questions of famine management. Are not these vexed points laboriously discussed in the various official papers which culminated in the admirable Famine Code which only two years ago was found to work so well? With the country now traversed by good roads and covered by a network of cheap railways the calamity of 1877–79 ought never to occur again, even in the "arid zone," for the administration now really has for the first time its finger on the pulse of the country, never
again will matters be allowed to drift in the hope that they will somehow mend, never again will the railways be found insufficiently supplied with rolling-stock and engines, never again will the Government lack a complete scheme of relief works for every district. There may be scarcity, but there never ought to be a famine again.

Thinking back now over the criminal statistics of the decade ending in 1880, it is easy to perceive the growth of some forms of crime, the disappearance of others, as distress began to be felt, as it became more and more acute, as it afterwards died away. A highly interesting not to say instructive, diagram might, I am sure, be prepared from the criminal returns for the years 1875 to 1880, and I deeply regret now that I did not bring home with me the reports that would be necessary for its preparation. As it is, I can only write from memory, aided by notes and diaries of a not very comprehensive kind.

With the first sign of bad season, with the rise in prices of all food grains, dacoity, which had been at the lowest ebb ever known began steadily to increase. By dacoity I do not mean the mere robbery without violence of grain by half-a-dozen half-starved wretches, which, under the Penal Code, has to be classed as "dacoity," but I mean the real old-fashioned dangerous dacoity by desperate characters armed in some way with bill-hooks, clubs, and an occasional sword, whose victims were not necessarily a petty grain merchant, but more commonly wealthy Sowkars and Marwarris (money-lenders).
Organisation soon became observable in these crimes. Leaders came to the front, the Nizam's frontier again became disturbed, well-armed bands, occasionally mounted, crossed over the frontier to commit outrages in quite the old style. In a district where a dozen dacoities of the mild Penal Code type had lately been regarded as a heavy record for a year, there began to be two or three real dacoities in the month, and the number rapidly increased until almost every post that came brought a report of a dacoity of one sort or another.

Strange that at such a time, when hundreds of desperate and reckless men infested the country, not a single attempt was made—at least, in my recollection—to rob the mail-carts, though it was a matter of common knowledge that millions of rupees worth of ornaments and other valuables were being daily sent up in them to be melted down and converted into coin of the realm. In the famine years there can be no doubt, for instance, that the mail contractors of the long postal line from Dharwar via Belgaum, Kolhapoor, and Satara to Poona, safely conveyed property of this kind to the value of several crores of rupees. What special precautions were adopted by the contractors I am not aware, but the fact remains that they cheerfully undertook this tremendous responsibility and acquitted themselves splendidly of their dangerous duty.

What good fellows, by the way, are the Cursetees and Nowrojees, the Cowasjees and Pestonjees, engaged in these enterprises! How many poor
ladies and children could never get away to the Hills, but for the liberal credit generously extended to them by the Parsee phaeton and tongawallas! How much they have lost by their generous forbearance is known only to themselves and never spoken of by them.

Well, we led the dacoits all over the country a terrible life of it. What with stirring up the Nizam's Government to exert something like authority along the frontier, what with numerous additional police posts and incessant patrolling by sowars (mounted police), hundreds were caught and convicted on our side of the boundary line, and hundreds more escaped into the Mogulai or Nizam's territory, where there is very little doubt not a few were quietly shot or hanged out of the way.

Meantime, relief works of sufficient magnitude capable of employing any amount and every description of labour having been set fairly going, hundreds of restless spirits abandoned depredation and settled down quietly on the works. Serious dacoities then began to diminish as rapidly as they had sprung up, and we soon had little crime to contend with (at a distance from the railway line), beyond small thefts and robberies of grain. Of these, of course, there were thousands every month to the overflowing of every gaol and subordinate gaol.

On the whole, however, considering the deplorable condition to which the people were reduced there was much less thieving than I should have expected, the poor creatures were wonderfully patient, wonder-
fully good to each other while the charity of the
well-to-do knew no stint.

I have above italicised the words "at a distance
from the railway line," because the exigencies of the
famine requiring the transport by day and night of
thousands of tons of food-stuffs by railway, gave
birth to wholesale depredation of quite a novel
character on the Great Indian Peninsular lines.
Heretofore a loaded train of open trucks was always
perfectly safe from theft as it passed up or down-
country, grain bags here and there might be opened
in the goods yards and some of the contents pilfered,
but such a thing as the carrying off of whole bags at
a time was unknown.

Now all was changed. Heavy trains compelled to
travel slowly up certain "banks" or steep inclines
were boarded as they went along by bands of men
who threw the bags down on the embankment by
dozens where their confederates loaded them into
carts or on pack-hullocks and ponies and drove
away. The guards one or two perhaps to one train,
were powerless, of course, and more often than not on
dark nights were utterly ignorant of what had been
going on, or they were driven by showers of stones
to remain under the cover of their guards' boxes.

On the arrival of the train at its destination,
trucks were often found half emptied. The con-
signees lodged a claim against the Railway Company
for the loss, the Company paid up freely, and the
game went merrily on. The perfect impunity with
which these robberies were effected, the facility with
which the stolen goods could be got rid of, attracted all the daring spirits in the country side. Bheels, Ramoshis, Kolees, and Ryots worked together with a will and the petty grain-dealers everywhere egged them on and acted as receivers.

I rarely succeeded in tracing through my police any of the bags thus stolen. Empty sacks were found in abundance, now and again petty dealers were found in possession of grain that could not have been honestly come by, but of evidence there was little or none obtainable. The villagers for miles on each side of the line, from the Patels or headmen, downwards, were banded together and doubtless shared in the gains. One might have had some sympathy if they had been starving villagers seeing vast quantities of the grain they needed to support life slowly passing their doors unguarded. But these were by no means starving people. The spots at which trains were thus looted were not even within the famine limit, and though prices of grain, no doubt, ruled high in consequence of the neighbouring famine, the people near the inclines were not in want. On the contrary, they were remarkably well-to-do, for even the Bheels, the Ramoshis, and the Kolees in the vicinity had not seriously felt the pinch of famine. Thousands upon thousands of bags of grain of all sorts, worth several lakhs of rupees, were thus made away with.

Long after it was all over I obtained some insight into the organisation. It was the grain-dealers, of course, who instigated the robberies. They paid from
Rs. 2½ to Rs. 5 a bag to the villagers, according to what its contents were, whether "jowaree," "bajree" wheat, or "dal." They had storage room and grain pits in which to store the contents with their own grain. They refused to keep the sacks which were burnt or torn up and scattered about the fields.

The organisers of the raids were the village Patels and a few naiks or chiefs of the Bheels and Kolis. The carts, bullocks and pack-animals belonged to the Patels and villagers. The actual robbers who mounted the trains were villagers, Bheels and others, employed and paid for their trouble at so much per bag brought away. They became very daring and expert in boarding moving trains, but several of them lost their lives in jumping off. I remember one poor wretch found with his head severed from the trunk, and another with both his legs cut off was found still alive in the morning. A very rich harvest was doubtless thus earned during eighteen months or more by the inhabitants of villages near these "banks."

But the evil by no means stopped there. Gatekeepers can easily cause a train to be pulled at night for five, ten, or twenty minutes by displaying a light, on the excuse that they heard something on the line. Signalmen can delay signals, and what so simple as to have their "pals" in readiness to board a train thus pulled up? Yard watchmen, too, had their "pals," and gradually most of the subordinate rank and file employed on the railway yielded to temptation.

Lastly, shrewd heads were laid together, "Bunias"
(merchants) conferred with native station-masters, and the game of false consignments began. For thirty or forty bags actually loaded in a truck the station-master would sign for fifty or sixty, the difference being ultimately paid for by the Company and the loss attributed to theft by the Bheels in transit. There were dozens of other ways in which the Company were similarly defrauded; the curious will find them set out in the Report of the Commission which at last was nominated to inquire into these robberies and to devise means for stopping them—it was a document which attracted considerable attention in 1879–80.

I am not going to take the side of either of the parties to the controversy that followed. In my humble judgment both parties were partly wrong and partly right. The two Government members of the Commission distinctly under-estimated the depredations by the villagers of which I have given but a faint description above. They ran away too much at the start with the idea that the railway subordinates were principally responsible for the losses, and deeply implicated in the frauds. The railway nominee, on the other hand, could not bring himself to believe that his people could have been guilty—every one must sympathise with him—nor would he see that there had been shortcomings in the matter of supervision.

Such shortcomings were inevitable under the pressure of a sudden and extraordinary traffic for which the Company, through no fault of its own, was
unprepared. The Government, whether of India or of Bombay I will not presume to say, was mainly responsible for that unpreparedness. Had they not refused or delayed sanction for the large addition to the engine strength and rolling-stock previously demanded by the Company, the railway yards would not have been blocked, overladen trains need not have been despatched to crawl up steep inclines, or, as often happened, to be taken up in sections. Then, again, the question of the Railway Police had been allowed to drift unsettled, till the force, always numerically insufficient, was more or less demoralised and worse than useless. There was a conflict of opinion too, as to the responsibilities and even as to the relative duties of District and Railway Police.

In these later days matters could not possibly gain such head. The railway is well provided with rolling-stock and has established a simple but fairly efficient system of checking, the Railway Police are as good as any police in the Presidency of Bombay, their relations with the District Police are cordial and their respective responsibilities are well defined. At the first recurrence of train looting at "banks" or elsewhere, reasons would be found for establishing punitive police posts in peccant villages near the scene of the crime, and there is nothing better calculated than a punitive post to break up these little village combinations! Nothing is more improbable than that the G. I. P. Railway will ever again have to disburse from ten to twelve lakhs of rupees by way of compensation for this sort of loss.
CHAPTER XIX.

DISARMING.

Among the string of penal laws which were enacted in rapid succession after the outbreak of the great Mutiny, or Sepoy Rebellion, of 1857 was of necessity the Disarming Act. Most district officers of the Western Presidency held a very decided opinion that it ought to have been applied much sooner. Be that as it may, I do not hesitate to say that this disarming was one of the most unpalatable duties that ever fell to my lot.

The gradual nature of the rise of British power in and around the territories conquered from the Peishwa—the year by year absorption into the British Army of the best fighting men in the Maratha Country, the Carnatic, and Guzerat—had till then precluded the idea of a general disarmament. It was our cue to pacify the country and the best way to do that was to gather under our colours all restless and turbulent spirits, to conciliate all petty chiefs and the heads of the village communities enlisting their aid and influence in the enforcement of order and the dispersal of the numerous gangs of armed robbers by which the country was infested.
It was necessary that the people should be armed for self-protection. Up to comparatively recent times the ryot, or cultivator, took his "talwar" (sword) and his matchlock into his fields as a matter of common precaution. As the country settled down, and our police organisation began to produce good results—so that cases of marauding and dacoity became few and far between—the ryot still continued for dignity's sake to take his arms with him to his field-work. It was the right thing to do. Not to carry arms was to show himself a mean mortal.

Gradually, however, the long cumbersome matchlock with its dangling paraphernalia for carrying powder and ball was left at home, and the "talwar" (sword) only taken out to work with, perhaps, a dagger or two in the waistband. Next, the "talwar" was hung up at home and the dagger only worn. But though no longer actually in use, the weapons were usually highly prized, kept in fair condition and always in requisition at any village festival. There were no restrictions whatever on the sale and purchase of arms or ammunition of any kind, every considerable village contained a skilled armourer or two, and some family who lived by manufacturing gunpowder.

When, therefore, the terrible tidings came from Meerut and Delhi, the Western Presidency, in common with the rest of India, was full of weapons of all kinds, offensive and defensive, from the common "Bichu," or scorpion dagger to the light "Jingal," or cannon on the village walls.
The first step enjoined by the Disarming Act was the registration of all arms of whatever kind. Every man from the highest to the lowest was required within a stated time to produce his weapons at the nearest Government office, where they were duly registered against his name, labelled, and stored away till such time as the Magistrate, Assistant Magistrate, or other duly-empowered official should decide whether he should be licensed to retain any arms at all, and, if so, which of them; or, if the owner so elected, they were broken up into small pieces and returned to him. Non-registration of arms or concealment of them was, if my memory serves me aright, punishable by fine and imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for six months. The fullest powers were given to Magisterial and Police authorities to search for arms.

I was at that time serving in the Ahmednugger District (or Zillah, as it was termed in those days) and I well remember the thrill of dismay which went throughout the land when the needful proclamation was promulgated. For some days it seemed as if the people could not believe that the Sirkar meant to carry out its stern resolve. Very few weapons were registered for a long time and those mainly by the sycophants around the Government offices. Cringing Brahmins, sneaking Kulkarnis (village accountants), were, of course, foremost not only to register such arms as their households held, but to pay off old scores by giving secret information of weapons owned by the Patels, or village head men,* or any other
individual against whom they happened to have a grudge. It needed a few examples, however, before the old Maratha Patels and farmers would register freely, and their reluctance, of course, did them harm when the question of their retaining arms was considered.

It was a pitiful sight to see a grand old Maratha Patel bring up the weapons of his family—many of these were heirlooms, as it were—matchlocks of cunning workmanship ornamented profusely with silver plates and wire—swords in richly-embroidered velvet scabbards—blades wrought of the finest steel, with handles curiously inlaid with gold and silver, or occasionally encrusted with rough jewels—daggers of fantastic design, similarly embossed—pikes, and spears, and maces. Most of them had histories, and were prized by their owners as the apples of their eyes. I am glad to remember that the Act was, on the whole, very humanely and considerately worked, though every day's post brought us down the news of some fresh horror in the north-west, and we knew not when the flame of insurrection might burst out in our very midst. The majority of the better class of weapons, such as I have described, were broken up by a blacksmith on the spot, and the pieces returned to the owners. Many a fine old fellow did I see receive his fractured favourites and go away with tears rolling down his cheeks. Many another—always a younger man—departed with a scowl of hatred on his visage, and doubtless the deadliest thoughts in his heart. But the thing had to be
done. It was "nasib," "kismet"—our fate and theirs.

Disarming the rural population, as I have above attempted to describe, though slow, was a comparatively easy task. It was when the larger towns' returns were scrutinised that the authorities perceived the great difficulties to be overcome. Large walled towns, with from ten to twenty or thirty thousand inhabitants, many of them the scum of the population—towns in which thousands of stands of arms were known to exist—registered only hundreds, and there was infinite difficulty in obtaining information, and great facilities for concealment. People living in towns, all the world over, know less of and care less for the affairs of their neighbours than the simpler residents of the country. The wily Brahmin of the town was quite as ready to betray his neighbour, of course, but then he had not much knowledge of his neighbour's inner life. Moreover, at that time, in every town of any importance there were emissaries from the rebels in the north inculcating caution and patience and holding out large promises to the riff-raff and scoundrels of rich "loot" when the "good time" should come. Our police had hardly been really reorganised for four years—were drawn from the most ignorant classes, and contained but little of the detective element. It was only by a very rigorous use of the powers of search and by making examples of the richer householders who had concealed weapons that any way was made. It is very doubtful if any large town was thoroughly disarmed.
It was at this time, during what was called the Bheel Rebellion—of which I shall have much to say hereafter—that I happened to be on the way from Kopergaum with a small force under Major Montgomery to attack the Bheels reported to be strongly posted in large numbers, under some notable "naiks," or chiefs, on the border of Khandeish. Perhaps it was fortunate for myself that I was recalled by an "express" from the Magistrate, for the so-called "battle of Mandwe" which followed was somewhat a bloody business for the force. My "express" directed me to proceed across country with all possible speed to Sangamnair, a small partially-walled town about eighty miles distant, where I should find sealed orders awaiting me in the hands of the officer commanding two companies of a native regiment then posted at the place. Now, Sangamnair was a place of evil reputation in those days, though I believe it is now controlled by an excellent Municipality and contains many enthusiastic adherents of the "National Congress." I can hardly accord higher praise to it surely than this!

It was known that a secret meeting had been held near Sangamnair between the Bheel and Koli leaders and an agent of Tantia Topee, at which the Bheel rising under Bhagoji Naik was decided upon, it was also more than suspected that seditious assemblages took place in the town. As a matter of course, I started at once, and, travelling with all possible speed, reached the Assistant Collector's bungalow the following afternoon.
Captain Simon—as I shall call him—handed me my sealed orders which informed me that I should in all probability receive a visit from a Madrassee military pensioner who had conveyed an offer to the Magistrate to give information as to where large quantities of arms of all kinds were concealed. I was to try to prevent the informer’s identity being suspected, was armed with the fullest powers of search and arrest and directed, moreover, personally to prosecute any individuals apprehended before the nearest European Magistrate. I may mention that scarcely one hundred miscellaneous and mostly worthless weapons had been registered, though it was notorious that the town was full of arms.

By eleven o’clock at night we had given up all hope of seeing our Madrassee friend and I had just turned into bed when I heard my faithful Portuguese “boy” saying, “Saheb! Saheb!” in that peculiar tone we know so well. Simon was roused, and in due course a muffled figure was ushered into a room, over the window of which we had taken the precaution of nailing a blanket. Our visitor was a fine specimen of the Madrassee low-caste sepoy, and had a slight limp from a wound received in Burmah. I shall neither name him nor mention his occupation, because his descendants are (or were, six years ago) still in Sangamnair. There was no humbug about him, at any rate, and he did not waste time. He gave me at once a list of the principal citizens in a certain street with a list of the weapons which he believed were hidden in their houses, adding
a supplementary list of other houses he suspected but was not quite sure about. He also gave me valuable information, which was afterwards utilised, of nocturnal meetings convened in various houses. He asked for no reward; he was in no sense of the word, as ordinarily used, an "informer," but he was genuinely indignant at the "Nimmak-harams," or "faithless to their salt," who hung back from helping the "Sirkar." We, or rather I, saw him on several occasions afterwards. I am glad to say that, quite unsolicited by himself, he was well rewarded for other important intelligence, which always proved reliable.

My friend Captain Simon was no idler and had not passed a solitary three months at Sangamnair with "pegs" and cheroots. He had made an excellent topographical survey of the country round and a fair plan of the town itself, with every street and lane of which he was familiar. Before we finally turned in we had studied these documents and decided on our next morning's campaign. The reveille was sounded at four o'clock, eighty men told off under arms; having fortified our inner men with eggs and bacon and strong coffee, Simon and I marched off at the head of them to the ferry which crossed the Sangam, or junction of rivers. By daylight we held every approach to the particular street named by our Madrassee friend, and sentries were posted to prevent the egress or ingress of any person. The surprise was complete; we took house by house in turn and ransacked it, "inside, outside, and in my lady's chamber." Many a wrinkle I got that
morning of the way to search a native house! Many a queerly-devised treasury and place of concealment did I see! Many weapons were found in these secret places, including numerous British-made pistols, but it was on the flat roofs that we made our greatest hauls. There, as is common in many Deccan towns, were stacked the "kirbee" or "jowari" stalks—the cattle-fodder of the country—great piles of unthreshed bajri (millet) and of the mal-odorous cow-dung cakes, or "brattles" (as some English writer terms them), the fuel of the country. In and under these heaps, which we ruthlessly pulled to pieces, despite the owner’s lamentations, we found any amount of matchlocks, swords and spears, and not a little powder in bags. I remember that on one roof we bagged twenty-five matchlocks and three good old "brown Bess" muskets: the curious thing was, all the weapons were in such good order—the matchlocks clean and bright and oiled—the swords as sharp as razors! In the six selected houses, inhabited by one Brahmin, a Purdesi, three Mahomedans, and two Marathas, we found over three hundred weapons, with which stacked in carts and our six prisoners we returned blithely enough to a late breakfast.

I arranged to take my prisoners off next day to Mr. Chapman's Camp, forty miles distant, at Sinnur, where they were in due course each sentenced to the full penalty. But the most amusing part of the incident occurred that night and was reported to me just as I was leaving with the escort on the second morning. The streets of Sangamnair were found
bestrewn with every description of weapon, from the modest dagger to the old-fashioned double-barrelled gun! It was too late to register, and the panic-stricken owners had thrown or deposited them in the streets during the previous night. Thus was Sangamnair disarmed!

I have often thought what a subject this would have been for the pencil of Gustave Doré—the waning moon—the narrow streets and rather lofty houses—the guilty owners stealing out to get rid of their illicit arms, or, maybe, to deposit them in the roadway opposite the house of an obnoxious neighbour.
CHAPTER XX.

AGRARIAN CRIME.

"Agrarian murder," "agrarian outrage," the dictionary describes as "an outrage or a murder brought about by some dispute as to the occupancy of land." While Ireland has been earning for herself unenviable notoriety as the country beyond all others in which both these crimes are endemic, India, on the other hand, has a gradually diminishing record, although disputes as to the occupancy of land are common—especially in certain districts the South Konkan for example—where earth-hunger has always prevailed—every little plot of cultivable land is tenaciously held and the complexities of tenures tend to the multiplication of feuds, whether between superior and inferior holder or between the ordinary "Ryots" holding direct as tenants of the State. It may almost be said that, in the greater part of India, notably in the Western Presidency, agrarian outrage, in the sinister sense in which it is now journalistically used, is nearly unknown.

Stacks of grain or forage especially when standing out in the fields are frequently burnt, no doubt, but it is rare that incendiarism is traced, or even sus-
pected. Cattle are now and again poisoned, but it is usually found to be the handiwork of the lowest castes—the Mhars and the Mhangs—seeking to make profit out of the skins which are their perquisites as village servants. I have rarely heard of cattle-stabbing, houghing, or otherwise mutilating, in all my thirty-five years' experience. From this detestable form of agrarian outrage the average Indian rustic shrinks with horror.

On the other hand—there was a time before the Revenue Survey finally determined the boundaries of villages and of each man's holding—when free fights such as the Irish peasantry delight in, were common, and crowns were cracked in orthodox Irish fashion, but for some years past, the causa belli having been removed, peace has reigned on the boundaries.

"Boycotting" is a science practically unknown to our Aryan brethren, except in so far as it is practised in respect of caste disputes and misdemeanours. No combination to boycott an individual by reason of a dispute as to the occupation of land has ever been brought to my notice. The simple "Ryot" is far behind the times, but there is no knowing how sapien he may become under the teaching of the far-famed "National Congress"—a body of unpretentious, unselfish patriots, of whom it is my anxious wish to speak with the humblest deference, seeing that they number among their leaders Members of Parliament—whom all the world recognise as most potential, sagacious, well-informed, disinterested, well-intentioned, well—anything you like in the way
of praise that you can find in the biggest dictionary in the British Museum Reading Room!

On the other hand, again, "downright murder, brought about by some dispute as to the occupancy of land," is of comparatively common occurrence, though even that has notoriously diminished of late years. The march of education—the ever-increasing, and (I will add) improving breed of pleaders—the comparatively small cost of litigation under simple and excellent Civil Codes—have developed the native's innate love of litigation to its fullest extent. Besides, there is a prolongation of pleasure in worrying your adversary in the Law Courts, from month to month and year to year, with delicious little interludes in the shape of intrigues and cross-intrigues and occasional exchanges of virulent abuse. To knock your adversary on the head is but a transient—a very short-lived joy—apt, moreover, to lead to unpleasant personal results. So the field of battle now usually begins in the Subordinate Judge's modest chamber to be transferred in due course to the Judge Sahib's Court and ultimately to the sacred precincts of Her Majesty's High Court at the Presidency.

But occasionally one or other (or both) of the disputants becomes surfeited with the pleasures of litigation—hope deferred makes the heart sick. Evil counsellors among those interested in the never-ending suit and weary of it suggest more summary proceedings. Opportunities offer—a mere interchange of vituperation, especially if the dispute be among
members of the same family, warms up into an assault, homicide or murder follows. Or the villagers holding under a middleman of the rack-renting type get sick of their lives and of him, he is attacked in his own house, or waylaid and done to death. But in any case of the latter description it may safely be presumed that the superior holder richly deserved his fate, he must have proved himself over many years, a curse and a scourge to the villagers and brought his fate upon himself.

I recall two cases of each of the types just described, which were noteworthy for other reasons. Before relating them I may mention that in the Southern Konkan the murder of the middlemen (or Khotes) was at one time very common. Feuds between them and the occupants possessing different proprietary, or quasi-proprietary, rights of occupation dated from before our Conquest in 1819 to 1822, were overlooked by the British Government for many years (deeply occupied as it was with the settlement of much larger and more important districts), and were much embittered and aggravated when the Government did take up the question in 1853, or thereabouts, by an ill-advised and ignorant attempt to fit a Deccani coat on a Konkani back. Flushed with the success that attended the Wingate Survey Settlement in the Deccan, where the "Ryot" holds direct under the Crown, well-meaning but locally inexperienced members of Council insisted on rigidly applying the same principles of settlement to the Konkan, where hereditary middlemen (Khotes) had
existed for centuries, with privileged and unprivileged tenants under them. The result was, to say the least of it, disastrous and confusing; and, if I mistake not, three or four Khotes used to be knocked on the head every year in those troublous times.

But in all the cases that came under my notice, as, indeed, in every instance of agrarian murder "brought about by some dispute as to the occupancy of land," our Aryan brethren respected female life, and so far justified their title of the "gentle Hindu." In land disputes in India such an atrocity as shooting at, or in any way molesting, a woman has yet to be recorded. It has been reserved for "the finest pisantry in the wurrld" to earn an infamous distinction for their ingenuity and persistent cruelty in harassing, maiming, and even murdering defenceless females.

But to get to my tales. In the immediate vicinity of Dapolic,* that charming little station so long the headquarters of the "Guttrams," or Native Veteran Battalion, is a little village—the name does not matter. It was held by a co-parcenary of Khotes or middlemen, of whom Mhadowrao, the youngest member of the family, was a persona grata to the European residents and district officials alike. He was in his turn holding the office of Police Patel when I first came to know him in the way of business, and a very efficient man I found him. Well, but not too well educated, he was an agreeable and entertaining

* Already mentioned in Chapter II. :-“The Great Military Pension Frauds.”
visitor and his manners were those of a high-born, high-bred Brahmin of the old school.

Time passed, and just as I was beginning to know my district and my men passably enough, I was (as a matter of course) transferred to act for a year or more in a higher grade in a distant district to revert ultimately to my substantive appointment. I took charge at Ratnagiri, and, as in duty bound, proceeded to inspect my Police Guards at the District Jail. I found there was a solitary convict in the condemned cells who was to be hanged for murder on the following morning. I went to inspect the cell, when, to my horror, I recognised through the bars my old friend Mhadowrao. *He* was not the least discomposed, but calmly told me that he was condemned to die for having beaten his old uncle to death in a dispute about some "Khote Khasgi," or private Khoti land, to which he and his uncle each laid claim.

It appears that his uncle and he, though bitterly hostile to each other anent this miserable plot of land, being members of an undivided family, occupied the same ancestral house actually living on different sides of it. One day, just before the midday meal, they met outside and a quarrel ensued, in the course of which Mhadowrao struck his old relative violently with a bamboo stick he had with him. The old man, endeavouring to save himself, shut himself into one of the outhouses, but Mhadowrao in his frenzy of passion burst down the door, belaboured him dreadfully about the head; finally,
ferociously and atrociously mutilated the yet throbbing corpse. His fit of passion over, he calmly walked over to the Dapoli Police Station, gave himself up and volunteered a full confession.

The end of his life, however, was destined to be long remembered because of the mode in which he occupied his last few moments. I was at the execution as a matter of duty. Proceeding to the condemned cells, I found a native writer squatted outside the bars. Mhadowrao had asked for him to take down his last wishes while he calmly regaled himself on plantains and new milk. Naturally, I did not draw near till time was up, and then, ejaculating "Are Narayen! Narayen!" at regular intervals, Mhadowrao walked composedly out and up to the drop and died instantly. So great was the feeling against the man that there were very few spectators, and it was with some difficulty that Brahmins could be found to superintend the cremation of the corpse.

I came to understand the feeling against him when I heard his last "will and testament" (so to speak) which he had been dictating up to the last moment. It was simply an injunction to his "Vakil," or pleader, to recover from some thirty or forty of his wretched tenants certain small specified measures of grain he claimed to be due from them!

The second case was a foul murder of a most estimable landlord by a clique of ruffians instigated by his enemies in the village. I have no hesitation in giving his name in full. Vithal Prabhu Desai, a high-caste Brahmin of a family resident at Harcheri,
near Ratnagiri, for a century or so before the British Raj, succeeded to a lawsuit brought by his father against the British Government for illegal sequestration of his estates some fourteen years before. It was a very monster of a suit, the Jarndyce and Jarndyce of the Ratnagiri District Court. By 1859-60 there must have been few Judges and Assistant Judges in the Presidency who had not tried to unravel its skein of technicalities. To carry it on, so much as remained of the family estates was from time to time mortgaged: Vithal Prabhu was heavily indebted to the leading pleaders, and oft obliged to make his own motions in person. He practically lived in the Court, and had he not possessed many good friends, who honoured him for his well-known probity and believed in his wrongs, he might even have starved.

At last there came two Senior Assistant Judges in succession, who determined to clear the case off the file. The first decided most of the points in Vithal Prabhu's favour. Government and Vithal Prabhu both appealed to the High Court who returned the suit for fresh argument on certain issues, and then the Senior Assistant Judge (Baron Larpent) finally passed a judgment, which was upheld by the High Court. To a substantial extent Vithal Prabhu was restored to his ancestral possessions, and great was the satisfaction felt throughout the country side.

Restoring Vithal Prabhu, however, involved the ousting of certain parties who for years past had profited by his wrongs, and a fresh series of suits on
minor points ensued, which I need not particularise. Suffice it to say that Vithal Prabhu was gradually carrying all before him. But he had naturally imbibed a taste for litigation, and, it may be, he was not altogether prudent or forbearing in his treatment of certain of the sub-tenants who had been, or still were, hostile to him. It followed that there was a strong party inimical to him in Harcheri.

About this time I was leaving the district for good, and Vithal Prabhu, between whom and myself there was a warm friendship, wrote to say he was coming in from Harcheri the next morning to say farewell. I was loitering about the station paying adieu to others in the early morning, when a procession met me near the Civil Hospital, carrying a body on a bier. It was the corpse of poor Vithal Prabhu Desai, grievously battered about the head and chest. He was leaving Harcheri at daybreak to come over to see me, when he was waylaid at a lonely spot by about a dozen men who literally beat the life out of him. It was little satisfaction to learn that some of the actual perpetrators were brought to justice, for if I remember aright, none of the instigators of the crime were ever successfully prosecuted.