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HISTORY OF THE EAST INDIAN RAILWAY

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HISTORY OF THE EAST INDIAN RAILWAY

(PART II)

By

GEORGE HUDDLESTON, CLE., V.D.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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Tales for the Train.

The White Fakir.

A Daughter of India.

Kissed by the Sun.

etc., etc.

PREFACE

The first part of this history was published in May, 1906, and until recently the idea of completing it did not occur to me.

But at one of our recent East Indian Railway dinners, the officer presiding suggested that it would be a good thing if someone came forward and wrote a second part. I, too, hoped this would happen and that it would be a person younger and better acquainted with modern conditions than I am.

Unfortunately no one offered and so, after waiting a while, I determined to have a shot at it myself. I could not have attempted this if the present Board of the E.I.R. had not agreed to allow me access to their office, and I am indebted to Sir James Bennett Brunyate, K.C.S.I., C.I.E., the Chairman, and to his colleagues for having permitted me to examine the interesting, if rather meagre, records still there. I am also grateful to Mr. C. G. Young, their Secretary, who gave me all the assistance in his power.

I admit I have not found it so easy to write the history of the 18 years from 1906 to 1924 as I did the earlier part, covering over 60 years from the formation of the Company up to 1906. When in the service I had more detailed information at my elbow. And, besides, I was far younger then and able to dictate most of the book, instead of writing it out laboriously, as I had to this time.

There may be those who will say I have written too much about myself and expressed too many of my own personal views. They are quite right and I wish I had been able to do otherwise.

G. HUDDLESTON.

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CHAPTER I.

RETIREMENT OF THE CHAIRMAN AND OTHER CHANGES.

The year 1906 opened normally. That great intellectual lion, General Sir Richard Strachey, R.E., G.C.S.I., F.R.S., L.L.D., was still Chairman of the Board in London; Mr. James Douglas, C.I.E., continued to be the Company's Agent in India, and Mr., afterwards Sir William Arthur Dring, K.C.I.E., remained in the position he had long held as General Traffic Manager.

But for some reason or another, possibly mere intuition, a common feeling that important changes were not far off was gaining ground daily. Some professed to scent them on the way and naturally there ensued a good deal of talk and surmise. Then, rapidly, rumours turned into certainty when, after the manner of secrets believed safely guarded, the truth leaked out that the Agent had either tendered his resignation already or meant to do so immediately!

At about the same time the age of the Chairman became a topic for chatter. True that Sir Richard appeared to be as active in the Company's affairs as ever; his demi official letters to India, as well as the Board's Officials, were as lucid and suggestive as they had always been; but there was no getting away from the fact that he had reached his 90th year. Several of those, who contemplated it, foresaw that nature was bound to take its inevitable

course. No one on the line desired to say goodbye to the General and yet, truly marvellous as his record had been, a few of the most loyal could not avoid noticing that the conduct of business was a trifle old fashioned and out of date.

To give a single example :—When the Agent wrote to the Board recommending that the sister of one of his subordinates, a peon who had died after thirty-nine years service, should be allowed a gratuity of six months pay—a little less than five pounds—he was told that it could not be sanctioned !

Although the strictest economy was accepted as essential and in my personal opinion a recommendation to pay a gratuity to the *sister* of a deceased servant simply courted refusal, I do think that so small a matter might have been left to the discretion of the Agent, without the need of any reference whatever to the Board in London.

In the earlier part of this story I have said a little about Sir Richard's work on the E.I.R., and for the moment would like to speak generally. Merely to write down the positions and titles he held would fill pages. As to his titles I believe he looked on his F.R.S. as the most coveted, the one he valued most highly. Be that as it may, not many of the older generation are likely to forget that long before he retired from the East, he and his brother John, 'The Strachey Brothers' as they were called, had between them, directed Indian affairs for years.

It was Richard and John who initiated and largely developed the idea of Railway Construction when it was in its infancy. It was these Strachey brothers also—one a sapper, the other a civilian—who had advocated and pressed forward irrigation as another of India's greatest needs. Much of their work in these directions appears in the comprehensive and authoritative volume edited by them in the early eighties "The Finances and Public

Works of India" now, like several of their various enterprises, lost sight of. It is unfortunate that no one has written the story of their remarkable lives. What a stirring biography could have been made of it ; what examples for emulation !

Gauged only by the variety and extent of General Strachey's accomplishments in India, an elementary idea of his vitality may be gathered. But if we bear in mind the invaluable work he did for the E.I.R., partly told in the first volume of this history and if we recollect a tithe of what he accomplished in numberless other directions after leaving India, as for instance the task of directing the Herculean construction of the Assam Bengal Railway across the hills which separate the two provinces ; or the onerous duties associated with the numerous scientific societies in which he took a leading part, we shall get some idea of the variety of his pursuits.

Add that in his 64th year he became the father of one of the most brilliant writers of our time, I refer of course to his son Lytton, author of "Eminent Victorians" and other recognised works of great literary ability and outstanding character, a further sidelight on his power of eluding old age and retaining, apparently impoverished, the bodily and mental assets of far younger men, becomes still more evident.

Remember also that Lytton was not the General's youngest son and that this same General had fought with distinction in the Sikh war in 1846 !

Having said this much, it may be imagined with what feelings of pride, loyalty and honour, we of the East Indian Railway Service, who witnessed so much of what he accomplished, rejoiced in the General's association with us.

Nothing was too large or too small for him. During his Chairmanship, everyone of the staff in India from top

to bottom felt a sense of security. They knew that no grievance, no injustice, real or imaginary, would be passed over unconsidered. It was said that he had no waste paper basket. That may be mythical, but it is a fact that it was customary for him to spend several days a week in the office, up to six o'clock in the evening or even later and never did anything seem so unimportant to him as to need a waste paper basket.

In one year selected haphazard, no less than ten appeals from the staff in India, were disposed of by him personally. One came from a Cabinman. Rank made no difference, the Chairman paid the same attention to high or low, and, whatever his finding might be, he always sent a dignified and conclusive answer.

Moreover the Agent did not discourage appeals, quite the reverse. Knowing that the staff had the right to represent their troubles to the highest authority he thought it better for them to do so, rather than cause them to bottle up their grievances and simmer disaffection. Ninety per cent. of the appeals were against fines; when fines were abolished, as told later on, they sank to a mere bagatelle.

As to Mr. James Douglas, C.I.E., who had been Agent of the Company since 1899 and before then Chief Auditor, his retirement had been expected for several years and the absorbing question was who would succeed him? All the staff anticipated and hoped it would be William Arthur Dring. He had been Head of the Traffic Department for over ten years and had worked loyally throughout, never uttering a word of complaint, though, be it remembered, he had suffered previously an unexpected setback when J. M. Rutherford was brought in over his head from the North Western Railway. Highly though the newcomer was thought of, Dring had the sympathy of everyone on the line when that happened and we were all delighted

that at last he was promoted to the Agency. He was a most capable and beloved chief, knew the E.I.R. from A to Z and no one ever better deserved being made Manager of the line than he.

But while these changes were awaited, a most unhappy event occurred. Unrest in India and particularly in Bengal was beginning to show itself in various ways. Opposition to the Government, or indeed to any public authority, was becoming more and more evident daily. On the East Indian Railway it took the form of a strike suddenly imposed without a word of complaint, warning or justification. It began at Jamalpore, where practically the whole of the Locomotive shop staff ceased work abruptly, without giving any reason for doing so. They only remained out a few days and then begged permission to resume duty. This was allowed, and three clerks found to have been at the bottom of the trouble were got rid of.

Almost simultaneously, at Asansol and adjacent stations, many clerks and other subordinates revolted in a similar way. And again it was discovered that a few disaffected men were responsible. These also lost their jobs.

Largely due to the wisdom and foresight of G. L. Colvin (later Agent of the Company, now Sir George Colvin, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.) who was, at the time, Traffic Superintendent of Asansol District, all mail and passenger trains ran regularly throughout the period of disturbance. Goods trains alone suffered delays.

When the trouble ended several of us wondered whether the concord and harmony enjoyed by both officers and subordinates since the line was first opened, would ever be the same again. I have no hesitation in saying that the shock was as deeply felt by all who had remained loyal as it was by the officials, and although doubts for the future prevailed, we hoped for the best.

Unfortunately, spasmodic unrest continued, there were

those, chiefly outsiders, who were intent on stirring up discontent among the Railway Staff. So it happened that, at intervals, there followed fresh outbreaks. The most serious arose in the rainy season, mainly on the lower section of the line.

No useful purpose would be served by dwelling on these occurrences during this unhappy period. There were not only grave faults on the side of the strikers but many practical proofs of the courage, under extreme pressure, of those who remained loyal and true to their salt. I will only add that the Board fully supported and approved the action of the Management in India. Addressing the proprietors, as they were then called, Mr. Bazett W. Colvin, the new Chairman, in the course of his remarks said:—"Temporary embarrassment was met by the excellent vigour and judgment of the superior officers, admirably supported by the goodwill and ungrudging co-operation of European, Eurasian and loyal native staff. . . . The Board are always ready to consider reasonable claims; but coercion, as in this instance, can only be met by firm and uncompromising maintenance of discipline."

Apart from the strikes little of consequence in the affairs of the Company occurred at this period, excepting the changes in Management to which I will revert later on. A good deal of new construction, including that of the grand chord line, was going forward, as well as the enlargement and rebuilding of Howrah Terminus, which had become completely out of date and was totally inadequate to the work required there.

And it was at about the same time that one of the comparatively modern lines of India began to threaten the E.I.R. with competition. I refer to the Bengal Nagpur. In the main they claimed two rights; the first, admission to the Jherriah Coalfield, which the E.I.R. had opened up and were apt to regard as sacred to themselves and,

secondly, access to Howrah Station, our Calcutta terminus then being rebuilt. After a short controversy they got both.

And that was not all. No sooner was a settlement come to as to the entrance into Jherriah, than it was agreed that equal rates should be charged for coal from this important field to Calcutta, by whichever route the traffic was carried, although the new way was the longer.

Access of the Bengal Nagpur to Howrah Station afforded an alternative line of travel between Calcutta and Bombay, having identical starting and terminal points. The monopoly of carrying this traffic had previously been in the hands of the E.I.R. and naturally the control of the station remained with them, though it suited both Companies best to book their own passengers.

It sounds ridiculous now, that there should ever have been any hesitation or doubt as to the rights of the Bengal Railway Company in either case. After all the public were largely concerned and obstructing public facilities is a course that seldom succeeds.

Nevertheless the public failed to see the outcome of the entry of the Bengal Nagpur into the Jherriah coalfield; it meant the opening of many new collieries, and a greatly increased output of coal, with the ultimate result that both prices and profits dropped. Naturally some firms did not like this!

But there was yet another claim urged by the Bengal Nagpur Railway, at about the same period, which they lost, and in all probability, if they look back on it now, they are not sorry they did so.

Put briefly they did not think the facilities at the Calcutta Docks for dealing with export coal were adequate to their needs as well as ours, and wanted a separate terminus for themselves. They therefore evolved a scheme for dealing with their own anticipated coal exports at a place known

as Luff Point. There was a tremendous controversy in Calcutta as to this proposal. Some took one side, others the contrary. The E.I.R. thought the idea would lead to quite an unnecessary complication ; to their way of thinking there were obvious difficulties in dividing the export traffic between two points of despatch, when one was sufficient. Two rather long articles appeared in the Englishman opposing the B.N.R. plan. One of these has been reproduced in the first part of this history, the other may rest in oblivion. I have reason to believe that both articles, of which I may now confess I was the writer, had their effect. Anyhow the Luff Point scheme fell through.

Early in 1907 the changes referred to at the beginning of this chapter were introduced. In February General Sir Richard Strachey advised India that he had resigned the Chairmanship (he still remained a member of the Board) and that his Deputy, Sir Bazett Wetenhall Colvin, had been appointed to succeed him. And this is what Sir Bazett said to the proprietors :—

“ I must say a few words of the deep regard which you will doubtless share, that is felt by us who have been Sir Richard Strachey's colleagues, at his retirement from the office of Chairman of this Company, which he has held so long and with such signal success. It is hardly possible to overstate the great benefits the undertaking has derived from his rare knowledge and increasing devotion to its interests, and it is a great misfortune for it, that advancing years should have compelled him to withdraw from a position which he has so admirably fulfilled for the last seventeen years.”

General Sir R. Strachey has one permanent memorial on the East Indian Railway. The bridge over the river Jumna, opened on the 8th January, 1910, by Sir J. P. Hewitt, K.C.S.I., then Lt.-Governor of the United Provinces, was by a happy inspiration named “ The

Strachey Bridge.” As the General had been mainly instrumental in obtaining sanction to its construction, at a time when the East Indian Railway had no direct access to the important city of Agra, a more appropriate name could not have been thought of. The credit for the idea, which met with the full approval of the Home Board, must be given to W. A. Dring. The bridge was a big thing and cost with its approaches 28 lakhs of rupees ; but suitable as it was to link it with the Chairman's name, I have reason to know that Dring himself would have preferred a more worthy souvenir of Sir Richard's invaluable services to the E.I.R.

There is still another memento of the General. It is a most excellent portrait in the strangers' guest room of the Oriental Club, London, painted in 1889 by Lowes Dickenson and bequeathed to the club by his widow.

In a letter dated 1st May, the Board wrote that W. A. Dring had been appointed Agent, in place of J. Douglas retired.

I have mentioned the old fashioned methods in those far off days and it may surprise the present generation to hear with what meticulous exactitude their instructions to their new Agent, although he was an old and tried servant of the Company, were framed. This is what they wrote him :—

“ You will reside in Calcutta or at such other place as may, from time to time, be prescribed by the Board.

“ You will devote your whole time and attention to the success of the company and will not, directly or indirectly, be engaged in any other service, business or speculation whatever.

“ You will at all times obey the orders and directions of the Board and be subject to all the regulations from time to time made by the Board for the guidance of their servants and the management of their affairs.

" You will be careful to regulate your communications relative to the affairs of the Company in a manner that shall not, directly or indirectly, affect the undertaking injuriously.

" You will be required to give security, through the Company's guarantee fund, in the sum of Rs.20,000."

This happened over thirty years ago and was not the last letter written in exactly the same words. I suppose the Board thought it desirable to write in detail as to their Agent's duties, but when, about the same time, they wrote appointing me to succeed W. A. Dring their advice ran in a different vein altogether. Of course the letter to the Agent was worded in a formal manner, quite unnecessary in the case of a head of a Department. We all recognised this; it was so in Dring's case and had been the same for generations before and were so after. Personally I see nothing in it to cavil at, except that it seemed old fashioned and I am certain that Dring didn't. The Board's letter appointing me read as follows:—

" The Board have appointed Mr. George Huddleston, C.I.E., Chief Superintendent of Transportation, to succeed Mr. Dring in the appointment of General Traffic Manager.

" Looking at Mr. Huddleston's long and excellent service of twenty-seven years, to the fact that he had acted on several occasions for the Head of his Department to the satisfaction of the Board and that his present pay and allowances amount to Rs.1,900 per mensem, they consider that he should not receive less than the full salary of the post, viz. :—Rs.2,500 per mensem from the date of his taking over."

Needless to say I was very gratified; but what I really valued were the sincere and hearty congratulations of my dear old friend and chief, William Arthur Dring.

CHAPTER II.

COMPETITION

From its earliest days the East Indian Railway had to think of competition. The rivers and the roads were a menace, though neither was feared. On the contrary one of the reasons for the original alignment along the valley of the Ganges was " to tap the river at Rajmahal." As to the roads, the doubt whether people would be attracted from bullock carts to the rail was dispelled the moment the first train ran out of Howrah Station.

This does not mean that steamers and boats were scrapped like old jam tins, or that roads were ploughed into paddy fields, because all traffic was immediately deflected to the railway. One has only to glance at them to see that this is not so. Take the Grand trunk road as an example; hundreds of passengers can always be seen trudging along its billiard table top surface, while hundreds of bullock carts, laden with merchandise, are making their way by it, often for anywhere else than a railway station.

Religious mendicants, fakirs, agricultural labourers and other more or less destitute folk don't possess an anna to plank down on a train fare and, besides, they seem to prefer to meander through life without any sense of time. The Traffic man who could draw people of this mentality to the rail would indeed be a genius. Fortunately their number is a mere bagatelle compared with train travellers.

As a matter of fact there was nothing worth calling