

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BELIEF OF KUFĀH.

THE town of Kufah has several times been mentioned in the preceding narrative, and the fact that a small garrison of regular troops was invested there. Though not included among the so-called sacred cities of Mesopotamia, this town was founded as far back as 638 A.D., three years after Iraq had fallen through conquest into the hands of the Muhammadans. The main interest of the place is due to the fact that 'Ali, the originator of the Shiah sect, and nephew of the Prophet Muhammad, was assassinated there in 661 A.D. The great mosque, which marks the traditional site of the murder, stands about a mile and a half from the present town on the way to Najaf, which lies seven miles to the south-east.

The story of how 'Ali came to be buried in the desert at Najaf, or rather where Najaf now stands, will, I think, bear repeating here. It is related that as he lay dying he said to those around him that, as a Badawin Arab, he desired to be buried in the desert, and gave instructions that after death his body was to be tied on the back of a camel which was to be free to wander and graze where fancy led him. Whenever the camel chanced to lie down to rest there was to be the burial place. The peculiar site of Najaf, which stands in the desert on a ridge of reddish sandstone, is accounted for by this story, which, like most traditions that have come down through the ages, has lost in accuracy but gained in interest. Thus the tale goes on to say that, when at the point of death, 'Ali had a vision from the Almighty, in which he was told that where the camel

bearing his corpse should chance to rest, was the self-same spot at which Adam and Noah were buried.

The latter portion of the tale concerning 'Ali's death is known to few Europeans, but every true believer of the Shiah sect thinks that Najaf holds the tombs of the three patriarchs, and that when he makes his pilgrimage to the holy city and prays at the great shrine, he does so in the presence of their revered remains.

If 'Ali really gave vent in his dying hour to the utterance which is now attributed to him, he must have been one of the most far-seeing men who have trod this earth; but it is probable that the latter part of the tale owes its origin to the ingenuity and avarice of some Najaf holy men who were desirous of drawing pilgrims to their shrines from the rival city of Karbala.

Kufah, the houses of which are built mostly of stone and mortar, has a river frontage of from five to six hundred yards along the right bank of the Kufah channel of the Hindiyah branch, which forks at Kif and forms two channels—the Kufah and the Shamiyah. The town, which is credited with a population of from three thousand to four thousand persons, is surrounded on all sides but the river front by date-palm plantations, and there are gardens on the left bank of the channel.

About the middle of June the garrison of Kufah, which was intended by its presence not only to overawe the inhabitants of the town but keep in check those of the surrounding country, consisted of two companies of the 108th Infantry (approximately four hundred and fifty rifles), under the command of Captain D. M. Dowling of that regiment. From this garrison, on the urgent representation of Major P. F. Norbury, the Political Officer of the Shamiyah Division, half a company was sent to Najaf on the 23rd June. This force was obtained by withdrawing to Kufah on the 20th two out of the three platoons which were at Abu Sukhair fort and village, a place which stands ten miles down-stream from Kufah and on the same bank of the channel. As the situation was one of growing and general unrest, and as the force at Abu Sukhair was very

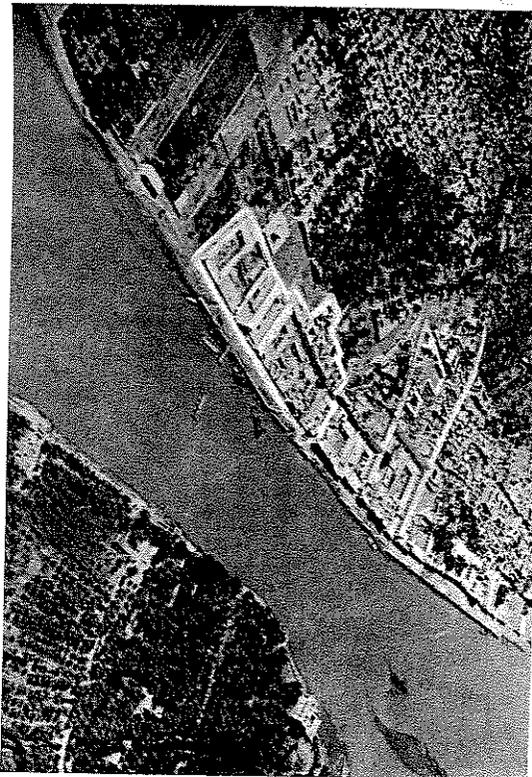
small, it was strengthened on the 4th July by the despatch of a reinforcement of one hundred and six rifles, which had arrived at Kutah on the previous day. The Political Officer once more became importunate, with the result that Captain Dowling sent a platoon to Umm-al-Barur, which is twelve to eighteen miles from Kutah according to the route followed. At the same time Captain Dowling gave it as his opinion that such a force was totally inadequate to maintain order.

On the 8th July the Political Officer came to the conclusion that the detachment at Najaf was unnecessary, whereupon it was ordered to move to Kutah, at which place the hospital khan was occupied. Next day the Political Officer agreed to the concentration of all detachments at Kutah, but later advised against the withdrawal of troops from Abu Sukhair, where the defence vessel, *Pireggy*, commanded by Lieutenant D. H. Stanley, arrived from the Upper Euphrates on the 13th.

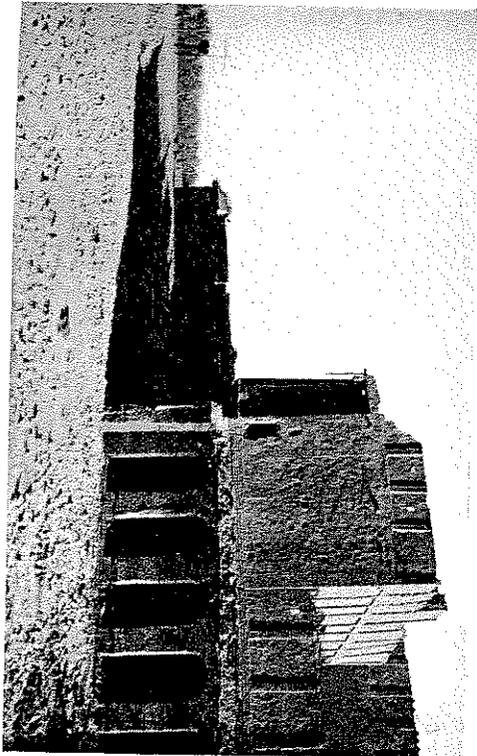
Signs of hostility began to show themselves on the 14th, when a motor bellum on its way to Abu Sukhair, with rations for the Levies, some of whom were also there, was heavily fired on, and only escaped capture through the intervention of the *Pireggy*. On her return to Kutah next day, where work on the defences was in progress, she was continually under rifle fire.

As the withdrawal of the Abu Sukhair garrison now presented considerable risk, the Political Officer came to an agreement with the tribesmen, under the terms of which it marched to Kutah unmolested on the 18th. Two days later boats with supplies for the garrison of the latter place were attacked as they were coming down-stream and the guards overpowered, and on the 21st the investment may be said to have begun.

The relief of this beleaguered garrison was the first and main object of the operations which were about to be undertaken from Hillah in a southerly direction. These would be followed by such action as would ensure the release of the prisoners taken on the 24th July, who were believed to be confined in Najaf; and the promoters of



Kutah from the south-east, 4th October 1920. (Buildings held by garrison are shown within white lines.)



Block of buildings held at Kutah by 108th Infantry. (Defence vessel *Pireggy* on the left.)

the insurrection and the inhabitants in and near the sacred cities would be overawed.

I was anxious to impress that part of the country in which the operations would take place with as great a display of strength as possible, and with that object in view the defence of Musayib and the Hindiyah Barrage was allotted to only one battalion, the 45th Sikhs, a unit which, though anxious to continue with the fighting column, would benefit by a brief rest. For a similar reason another unit, the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles, that, whenever it had been engaged, had won distinction, was left in charge of Hillah. To add still further to the force available and bring fresh troops on to the scene, the headquarters and two squadrons of the 5th Cavalry were withdrawn from Ramadi, and made their way by road to Hillah through Baghdad. The area on the Upper Euphrates, from which they came, had now become quiet, and on the 9th October the regular garrison of Hit, which post, as already mentioned, had been held by the loyal Dulaim tribe under their Shaikh, Ali Sulaiman, pending our ability to reoccupy it, was replaced.

Unfortunately it was necessary to leave troops north-east of Baghdad, where propagandists were reported to be busily engaged in trying to renew the disturbances, to continue the process of restoring order, and to ensure compliance with the terms that had been issued. For this purpose, and excluding the detachment at Deltawah, I left under the command of Brigadier-General Beatty the following troops, which included those necessary for guarding the railway line :—

32nd Lancers (less two squadrons),
13th Pack Battery R.G.A.,
40th Pack Battery,
1st Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers and Machine-gun
Company,
1/94th (Russell's) Infantry,
2/119th Infantry,
99th (Deccan) Infantry,
and certain details.

The number of troops at my disposal was now, for the first time, sufficient to admit of operating simultaneously in strength in two directions, and by doing so it was expected that the insurgents would be led to divide themselves into two or more groups.

The plan of one of the forces, the 55th Brigade column, was to relieve Kutlah and recover the prisoners. That of the other, the 53rd Brigade column, was to occupy Tuvairij, on the Hindiyah branch of the Taphrates, and threaten the holy city of Karbala, which lies thirteen miles to the west. The columns were composed as follows:—

- 55th Brigade Column—Brigadier-General H. A. Walker,
 35th Seinde Horse (less two squadrons),
 37th Lancers (two squadrons and Machine-gun Section),
 39th Battery R.F.A.,
 97th Battery R.F.A. (one section),
 131st (How.) Battery R.F.A.,
 45th Pack Battery (less one section),
 61st Company, 2nd (Q.V.O.) Sappers and Miners,
 67th Company, 2nd (Q.V.O.) Sappers and Miners (less one section),
 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment,
 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Rifles,
 8th Rajputs,
 1/15th (Ludhiana) Sikhs,
 87th Punjabis,
 1/116th Maharaftas,
 108th Infantry (less detachment at Kutlah),
 1/32 Sikh Pioneers,
 and certain details.
- 53rd Brigade Column—Brigadier-General G. A. F. Sanders,
 6th Cavalry (less two squadrons and Machine-gun Section),
 2nd Battery R.F.A. (less one section),
 132nd (How.) Battery R.F.A.,
 45th Pack Battery (one section),

- 9th Company, 2nd (Q.V.O.) Sappers and Miners,
 2nd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment,
 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade,
 3/9th (Bhopal) Infantry,
 13th Rajputs,
 1/12th Sikh Pioneers,
 and certain details.

As all operations that take place in Mesopotamia depend mainly on the supply of water, and as the troops moving along the Hillah-Kiff road would be forced to rely on what is carried by channels running westward from the Nahr Shah canal, which lies parallel to and from two to four miles east of the road, special arrangements had to be made. The little Hillah-Kiff railway of two feet six inches' gauge also depends for water on the same source, but the permanent way had been damaged by the insurgents, and as there was a deficiency of rolling-stock, it was of little military value. Either the tribesmen in July had cut off the water from the Kiff road at the time when the ill-fated advance towards that place was made, or the low level of the Hillah branch may have been responsible for the dried-up canals. In any case the result contributed in no small measure to the reverse suffered on that occasion. It was decided, therefore, that the Kutlah force should march in two columns, one column along the bank of the Nahr Shah canal, which was to be the line of supply for the whole force under Brigadier-General Walker. The canal is navigable for country boats for some part of its length, and parallel and close to it a road with blockhouses at intervals would be made. These arrangements would ensure a supply of water running by side channels to the other column on the Kiff road, provided that the columns kept roughly abreast of one another. While following this road, which was a track superior to that along the canal, the column would be in a position to close the channels running to the westward of it, to the inconvenience of the inhabitants on that flank. The road itself passes through open country, which is intersected by numerous major

and minor canals. All these are bridged, and thus make the road passable for all arms in normal times, but they form a series of excellent parallel defensive positions against a force moving either in a northerly or southerly direction.

Before, however, the date fixed for the advance on Kif and Tuwarj, and while the troops required to move against the latter place were assembling from Baghdad and other places, a minor operation had to be undertaken. The necessity for it arose from the fact that the Nahr Shah canal takes off from the Hillah branch of the Euphrates two and a half miles below Hillah. On this stretch of the river the banks are covered with a dense belt of palm-trees, and the road to Diwaniyah lies close along the right bank of the river, which is here not more than fifty yards in breadth. Since July the insurgents had been in the habit of occupying these palm-groves in considerable strength, and it was certain that, unless they were driven from their stronghold, they would interfere with the passage of native boats from Hillah to the mouth of the Nahr Shah canal and the use of the road to the same point. The only means of ensuring the safety of the force and its supplies lay in the construction of a blockhouse line outside the belt of palms, and to a distance of three-quarters of a mile below the mouth of the canal. The advance on Kutah would be delayed by the work which would have to be undertaken; but the garrison, as it was afterwards known, though getting short of food, feared the possibility of a hasty and ineffectual attempt at relief, and raised no signals, when our aeroplanes made their periodical visits overhead, lest alarm should be caused regarding their condition.

On the 6th, when the troops moved out from Hillah, little opposition was met with, and it seems that the insurgents were taken by surprise. But on the 7th a considerable concentration of tribesmen from the surrounding country, who were confident of preventing us from reaching Kutah, collected, and held the numerous banks of old and new canals which branch off from the river south of Hillah. While columns of infantry worked their way down both

banks of the river the engineers and pioneers carried out the construction of blockhouses and the erection of wire entanglements. The resistance offered was at first stubborn,

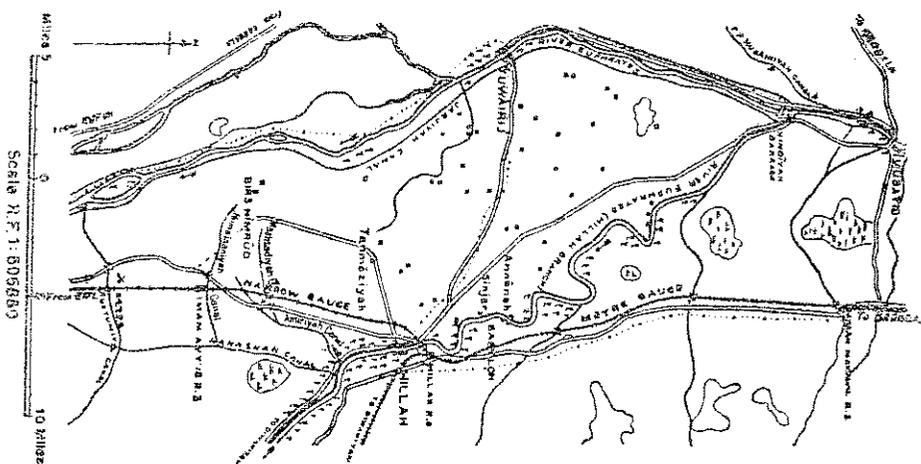


Fig. 7.—Operations round Hillah.

and the insurgents continued holding their strong positions until the infantry arrived at close range.

On the left bank the 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, with two companies of the 8th Rajputs, advanced without

a check over the open plain outside the belt of palms along the river bank; while on the other bank the remainder of the 8th Rajputs, supported by the 1/15th Sikhs, was forced to traverse country of a more enclosed nature. As the force, supported by artillery, approached the insurgents' position, the defence weakened, and, after an engagement lasting three and a half hours, the ground they held was captured. As the tribesmen, who numbered some three thousand five hundred, fell back, they offered excellent targets for artillery, rifle, and machine-gun fire, and heavy toll was taken. Our casualties for both days of the operation amounted to eighteen killed and sixty-eight wounded.

To the successful action on the 7th, and the heavy losses inflicted on the tribesmen on that date, may be imputed the comparatively slight resistance which the column encountered during the larger operation which followed.

On the 11th October the troops of the Kutāh and Tuwairij columns, being now assembled, carried out operations to clear the flanks of their subsequent lines of advance, and on the 12th they moved towards those places.

The 53rd Brigade column operated north from Hillah, and destroyed the important villages of Annanah and Simjar and others on the north-eastern flank of the Tuwairij road. The 55th Brigade column moved to the Tahmaziyah area west of Hillah, and destroyed all villages of the Fahlah tribe on the western flank of the road to Kif, thus clearing its own right flank and the left flank of the 53rd Brigade column. Both columns encountered slight opposition, and camped at night two to three miles from Hillah.

On the 12th each column began its main advance. The 53rd Brigade column had been ordered by Major-General Leslie, commanding the 17th Division, to push through to Tuwairij on that date with the hope of saving the boat-bridge, which crosses the Euphrates there, before the insurgents had time to burn it. For the first five miles no opposition was met with, and blockhouse construction along the line of communication was carried out. Thereafter at two different lines of villages and the Jarjiyah canal, which runs parallel to the Hindiyah branch—on the right bank of

which stands Tuwairij—and half a mile east of it, stubborn resistance was encountered. As the cavalry acting alone was unable to break through, the 2nd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment and the 13th Rajputs, supported by artillery, were brought up. A heavy fire of guns and machine-guns was now brought to bear on the bank of the Jarjiyah canal, and the cars of the 6th Light Armoured Motor Battery, moving on in advance, crossed the canal bridge, and caused the tribesmen several casualties.

At Tuwairij a further stand was made by the tribesmen, who set fire to the boat-bridge; but the sappers and the 13th Rajputs, pushing on, extinguished the flames and occupied the town. Here Agha Hamid Khan, the former Deputy Assistant Political Officer at Najaf, who, as will presently be shown, had done good work in relation to our prisoners, was released, he having been taken to Tuwairij and kept in confinement, but not otherwise ill-treated. As an instance of the manner in which the tribal leaders kept up the spirits of their followers and of the lies with which they fed them, he relates that only two hours before his rescue he heard the people begin to dance and shout with glee in the streets of the town. On asking his guard what had happened, they replied that news had come of the capture of Mahmudiyah, which is on the railway to Hillah, nineteen miles south of Bagdad, by the Turks, and of the victorious advance of a Sharifian force from Ramadi.

In the action which led to the capture of Tuwairij aeroplanes co-operated with effect, as they had done on many similar occasions, attacking the insurgents as they streamed back to Karbala. The Arab loss this day in killed was estimated at two hundred. Our own was inconsiderable.

The following day the blockhouses on the Hillah-Tuwairij road were completed, and defences were begun at the latter place for a garrison of half a battalion.

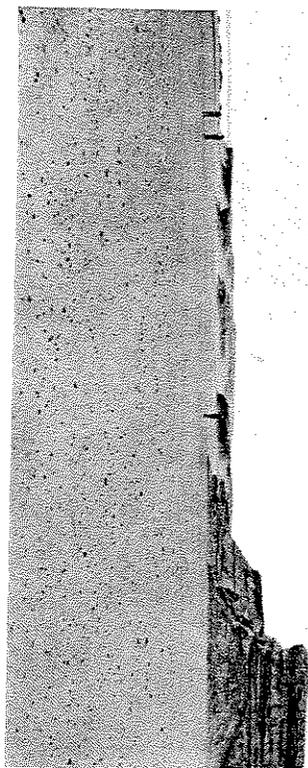
As a result of the capture of Tuwairij the submission of the inhabitants of Karbala became imminent. Early in the insurrection a form of government had been set up at that place, and the eleven Arabs who constituted it

were ordered to make formal submission for the town to Brigadier-General Sanders at Tuwairij, after which they would proceed to Baghdad, where the High Commissioner, Sir Percy Cox, who had replaced the Acting Civil Commissioner, Lieut.-Colonel A. T. Wilson, had arrived on the 11th October. Forty-eight hours' grace were given them in which to comply with the summons, failing which they were warned that the column would proceed to Karbala, from which river-water continued to be cut off. Ten of the eleven submitted on the 16th October, and were sent to Baghdad. The action of the insurrectionary government at Karbala was shortly followed by the submission of several tribes, whose representatives came in and complied unconditionally with our terms.

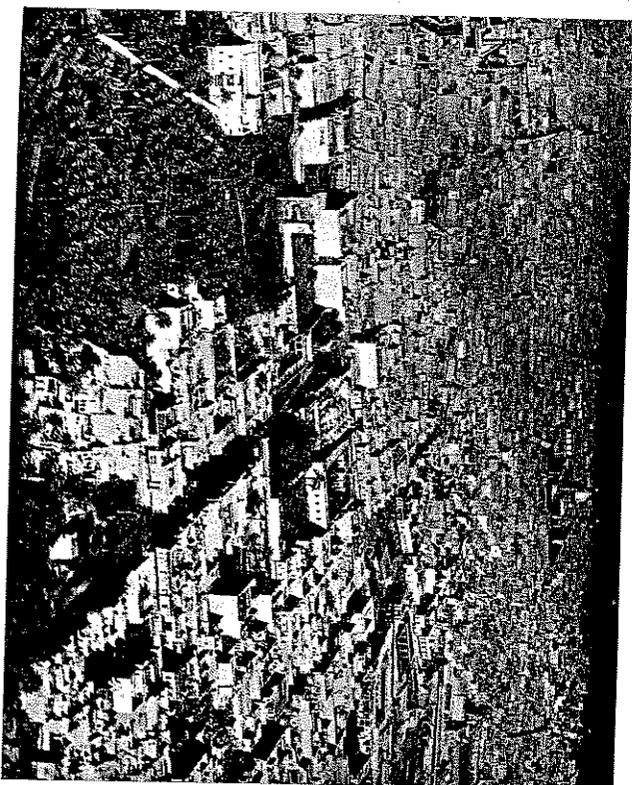
While these proceedings, which were the thin end of the wedge of general surrender to superior force, were taking their course, the 53rd Brigade column carried out operations in the neighbourhood of Tuwairij.

Turning next to the more important operation for the relief of Kufah, this was equally successful. On the 12th that portion of the column which marched along the Kif road was opposed by a force of some two thousand Arabs, who were holding the Humaisaniyah canal, and who were driven off by the 87th Punjabis, the cavalry and guns working on their flank.

On the 14th a body of six hundred insurgents who held the canal bank north-east of Kif was disposed of by the 1/16th Mahatras, supported by the 6th Light Armoured Motor Battery, and the town was entered. Here the column which had constructed blockhouses along the Nahr Shah canal united with that which marched along the Hillah-Kif road. To cover the construction of a bridge across the Euphrates in pontoons, but the width of the river falsified reports, and was found to be considerably greater than was anticipated. Consequently all available bridging material which had been intended for Tuwairij, in case of the destruction of the crossing there, had to be despatched from Hillah on the 15th. It reached Kif at



The cliff which gives Iraq its name.



Karbala from the east.

2.30 P.M. on the same date, after an eighteen mile march, and by 5 P.M. the bridge was completed. By 9.30 A.M. on the 16th the whole force had crossed and resumed its march on Kufah.

At 8 A.M. on the 17th October the northern outskirts of the town were reached, and the insurgents were found to be holding them in strength; but the 35th Scinde Horse, making a wide turning movement to the west, cut the Kif-Najaf road, and charging the insurgents sabred twenty-seven, and caused other casualties by Hotchkiss-gun fire.

Meanwhile the infantry advanced through the palm gardens, ably assisted by low-flying aeroplanes. In front the 108th Infantry, the balance of which regiment formed the beleaguered garrison, led, closely followed on its right by the 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment, and on its left by the 1/15th Sikhs. The insurgents turned and fled, pursued by aeroplanes, and by 9.30 A.M. Kufah was relieved.

What had occurred there during the preceding months was briefly as follows. When the investment began the garrison consisted of the following:—

	British Officers.	British Other Ranks.	Indian Other Ranks.	Arabs and Persians.
108th Infantry	4	..	486	..
Police and Levies	6	3	..	115
Departments	2	12	102	..
D. V. <i>Force</i>	1	6	14	..
	13	21	602	115

As mentioned earlier, the hospital khan had been occupied on the 8th July, and as the probability of investment grew stronger the Assistant Political Officer's house and office, the barracks of the local police and certain other buildings, were held as a defensive position.

The miniature siege followed the usual course of such operations against a semi-savage enemy. At first the Arabs, who, here as elsewhere, were led by officers of some experience, made several attempts to expel the garrison by fire from the sheltered area which they held. Buildings were set alight, and the flames seriously threatened those which our troops were occupying. On one occasion the

conflagration was so extensive that only with great difficulty and after several hours' work was the fire got under. During one of these attacks Captain J. S. Mann, Assistant Political Officer, while gallantly helping to save the police barracks from destruction, lost his life by rifle fire. This officer had not been long in the country, but his tact, ability, and personal charm had made a deep impression on all who had come in contact with him, and it was felt

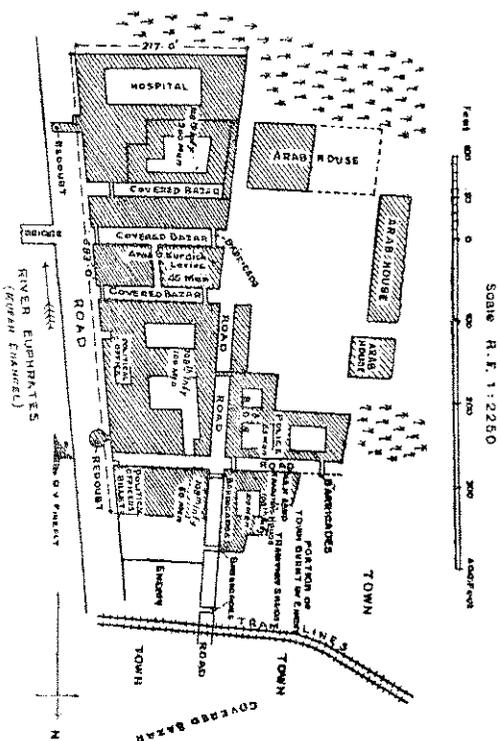


Fig. 8.—*Kutah Garrison, July-September 1920.*

that had he lived he would have risen high in the public service.

The next effort of the besiegers was to explode a mine, but this, like the attempts to burn out the garrison, was a failure. About the middle of August it was discovered that tunnelling was in progress at the north-west corner of the defences; but the work must have been of a perfunctory nature, for a burst of Lewis-gun fire caused the tunnel to collapse. Following this unsuccessful venture, an envoy from the leading shaihs near Kutah arrived with a letter, in which the surrender of the garrison was demanded. But the defenders—over whose position aero-

planes from Baghdad flew, according as they could be spared for the purpose, and from which encouraging messages, newspapers, and sometimes cigarettes were dropped, as well as bombs on the besiegers—knew that help, though long deferred, would be forthcoming, and the envoy returned empty-handed to his masters.

The mishap of the 24th July on the Kif road had placed an 18-pdr. gun in the hands of the insurgents, and although the breech-block had been removed before capture, one of them managed to forge a rough substitute, and on the 17th August the gun opened on the *Firefly*. The first shot took effect and caused her to burn fiercely, so much so that it was feared that her magazine would explode and harm the garrison, for she was anchored close to the houses which were held. In consequence she was sunk by Lewis-gun fire, which perforated her plating. Her gallant commander had been wounded earlier and received some burns, and two days later died, while one British soldier of the crew was killed and another wounded.

Next day it was discovered that the field-gun had been removed to a point only two hundred and fifty yards distant from the defences. Concentrated Lewis-gun fire was turned on the spot, the gun was damaged, and the crew were annihilated. That night, under cover of darkness, the insurgents removed the gun; but the garrison had not seen the last of that weapon, for, at the end of August and early in September, some ninety shells were fired at them, causing, however, few casualties, while many were inflicted in return by rifle fire.

As the time of relief grew closer the besiegers seemed to slacken their efforts to overpower the garrison. On the 14th October it was known that our troops had taken Kif, and on the 16th aeroplanes dropped the welcome news that on the morrow the defenders would regain their freedom. This, as has been seen, proved to be true, for on the 17th the column from Kif arrived, and the siege of eighty-nine days' duration came to an end.

The good spirits which had been maintained throughout this weary trying time, during the last three weeks of which

the garrison had subsisted on rice and horse-flesh, speak well for all who took part in the defence, and a special word of praise is due to the non-regular troops. Among the garrison were some Persian police and Arab Levies, who, resisting all appeals of the insurgents to desert and join what for long must have seemed to them the winning side, remained staunch to their leaders and true to their salt. The casualties during the siege, which after a time involved itself into an attempt to starve the garrison, amounted to twenty-five killed and twenty-seven wounded.

When the relief force reached Kufah information was received that the British and Indian prisoners in the hands of the Arabs had been moved from Umm-al-Barur to Abu Sukhair, but it was shortly found that they had been transferred from the last place to Najaf.

On the 18th representatives of Najaf arrived at the headquarters of the 55th Infantry Brigade, and made submission for their town. They were then informed that the first condition of the terms was the surrender of the prisoners, and on the 19th October seventy-nine British and eighty-nine Indian prisoners were handed over.

At this point a few words regarding the vicissitudes of the prisoners may be of interest. The first news of them after their capture on the 24th July came through a Deputy Assistant Political Officer, Agha Hamid Khan, C.I.E., a first cousin of His Highness the Agha Khan. He had remained at Najaf, and in spite of the great risk to his life held his post there for some time after the insurrection began. He reported that the prisoners included about sixty-five British soldiers, who had been marched almost naked without socks or boots to Kufah, and had been disgracefully treated by the tribes on their way there. Hamid Khan added that he was sending these unfortunate men such clothes and comforts as he could procure, and that each prisoner would be given a small sum of money. A few days later a Muhammadan physician, who it was hoped would get through to the prisoners, was despatched from Baghdad to Karbala with necessaries and medical comforts for them, and it was learned with satisfaction shortly

after that they were now at Abu Sukhair, nine miles south-east of Najaf, and were being better treated. The physician was not able to reach Najaf, where the prisoners, three only of whom were suffering from wounds, had been removed, as that city was in a highly-disturbed state; but Hamid Khan, who continued there for some time longer, did everything possible to alleviate their confinement. The notables of Najaf had been informed that all money spent by them on behalf of the prisoners would be refunded, and that any barn done to them would be visited with punishment in due course. About the middle of September the Assistant Political Officer of Musayib, who was in touch with Najaf, reported that some more prisoners had arrived there from Samawah, which proved that every one captured in the armoured train there had not been killed.

From that time onwards all news received regarding the prisoners was satisfactory, but, as was expected, the advance from Hillah to relieve Kufah caused them to be moved from Najaf, and a report was received that they had been transferred about the 9th October to Umm-al-Barur. They were, however, shortly afterwards brought back to their previous quarters, and, as stated, were handed over on the 19th October.

That in the end their treatment had been good was evident from their healthy and well-nourished appearance when released; and for their wellbeing credit is partly due to Company Sergeant-Major Mutter of the 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment, the senior non-commissioned officer with them.

And here it may be mentioned that every endeavour was made to ascertain what had become of those reported missing after the fight of the 24th July on the Kif road. From evidence found on the ground it seems probable that many men lost their way early in the retirement owing to a bend in the road, and, falling in with tribesmen near Birs Nimrud, where a tower which has incorrectly been credited as that of Babel stands, were captured and killed.

On the 20th October the 18-pdr. gun which had been lost on the 24th July, and which had fired altogether one hundred and thirty-five rounds into Kutah, sometimes at a distance of one hundred and fifty yards, causing the garrison considerable annoyance, was recovered from the left bank of the river near that place.

The 55th Infantry Brigade meantime was at Tuvainji waiting until our administration at Karbala was firmly established; but as some firing on the blockhouses round Musayib was reported, a part of it was sent northward to operate as far as the Hindiyah Barrage.

As in all cases of submission, the collection of fines and the execution of other terms lead to delay and demand the presence of troops, a commander soon finds himself with much of his force scattered about the country. Even then precautions, such as guarding lines of communication, cannot with safety be neglected; and though I was anxious that my troops should show themselves in every corner of the insurgents' country, which in some places was still unsubmitted, such operations had for a time to be postponed.

CHAPTER XVII.

EVENTS IN THE RIVER AREA.

It is now time to turn to the events that had taken place in the River Area, which, as mentioned earlier, roughly comprised all Mesopotamia south of a line running from Kut-al-Amarah to Nasiriyah and including both these places. This area, with the troops garrisoning it, was commanded by Brigadier-General H. E. C. B. Nepean, who also held the office of Inspector-General of Communications. The disturbances which began at Rumaitah at the end of June spread quickly southwards, and displayed themselves mainly in the vicinity of Samawah and in attacks on the railway line north and south of that place.

At this time the only regular troops on the Euphrates between Jarbuiyah bridge and Basrah were the garrisons at Samawah, Ur, and Nasiriyah. At Samawah there were two and a half companies of the 114th Madrasas, which were strengthened by some small detachments from other units, and at Nasiriyah three companies of the 2/125th Rifles. At Ur, the railway junction for the latter place and nine miles distant from it, was a company of the 2/125th Rifles, less one platoon.

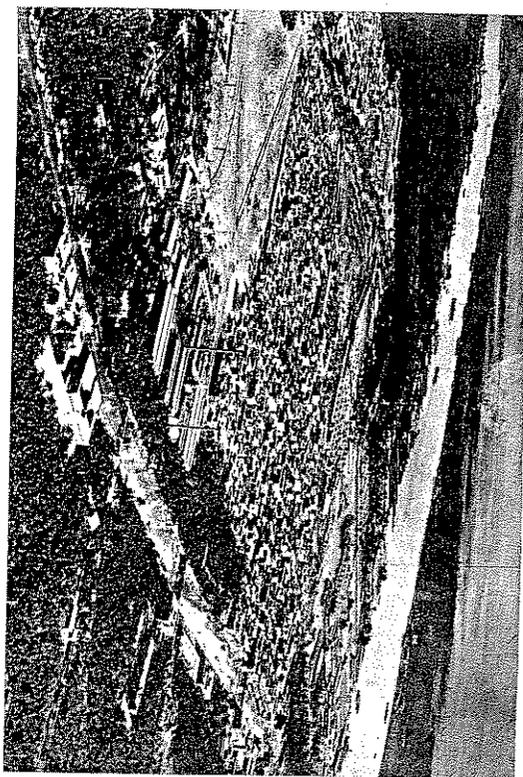
I had every intention of withdrawing the garrison of Samawah, but to have done so before reinforcements arrived from overseas would almost certainly have precipitated events and led to other powerful tribes joining in the insurrection. Had this occurred, Basrah, which was my Base, and which, as stated previously, had, like Baghdad, its numerous establishments distributed over a wide area, and possessed a garrison inadequate for more than essential

guard duties, would have been in danger of attack. And further, a rising of the tribes in the region between the Tigris and Euphrates on both banks of the Shat-al-Gharraf, to which I shall refer more fully later on, would have led to disturbances on the Tigris, which would have impeded my sole line of communication with the Base.

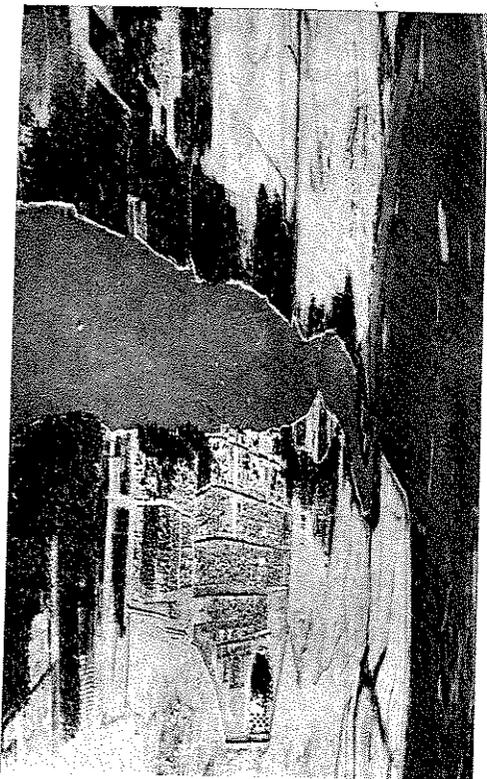
As reports reached General Nepean that trains were being fired upon, the railway being damaged and telegraph lines cut, a train, which carried as reinforcements one hundred men of the 2/125th Rifles under Major C. D. May, was despatched on the 2nd July to Samawah, which at that time was in the area of the 17th Division. On the same date No. 1 armoured train, manned by one hundred rifles of the 129th Baluchis, under Captain J. R. M. Hanna, was sent to patrol the line from Khidhr to Samawah. At the latter place was Major A. S. Hay, 31st Lancers, a capable and energetic officer, who had arrived there on the 27th June, and as senior officer assumed command of the garrison.

The next day, the 3rd July, as several tribes south of Ramathah were reported to be disaffected, the *Greenfly*, one of the protected defence vessels, and another ship of the same type, known as F. 10, were ordered to proceed from Nasiriyah to Samawah. That place had been reached on the 3rd by Major May in face of opposition which caused five casualties to his detachment, and the armoured train, which was following, had its engine derailed about eight miles north of Khidhr. This mishap necessitated the construction of a diversion round it, and the train only reached Samawah on the 9th July, at which place it was berthed.

On the 3rd, too, seventy-five men of the 3rd Euphrates Levy, under Lieutenant C. E. Simpson, arrived at Ur, and marched next day for Khidhr. The railway station at that place happens to be the only point on the line between Nasiriyah and Samawah where the Baghdad-Basrah railway runs close to the river, and it is in consequence a point of considerable importance in that waterless area. On arrival there on the 4th July the situation was found to be quiet, and the stationmaster and his staff were enjoying



Basrah from the west.



Nasiriyah, looking up-stream.

the protection of the Abu Rishah section of the Juwahir tribe. As will presently be seen, the commendable behaviour of that tribe at this time did not prevent them six weeks later from firing into the backs of the retreating garrison of Khidhr and soon after committing the worst atrocity of the insurrection.

Meanwhile the *Greenfly*, which had arrived at Samawah, took part with F. 10 in minor operations which were engaged in by the garrison, but unfortunately on the 10th August, when on her way to Khidhr, she ran aground some five miles above that place. As the insurgents were then in control of the Hindiyah Barrage, and no more water could be turned down the Hindiyah branch, and as, to make matters worse, the river at this time was daily falling, all endeavours to refloat her failed. Efforts to haul her off the sandbank on which she was aground were made by another unprotected defence vessel, the *Grayfly*, and F. 11. These, as also another attempt made under heavy fire on the 15th August, during which the ships were riddled with bullets which caused several casualties, were unavailing. On the 20th August the last attempt to salvage the ship was made. On that date the *Grayfly*, accompanied by two other vessels each carrying a company of Indian infantry, found that the insurgents had left the vicinity of the *Greenfly* to celebrate an annual festival, and in consequence it was possible to remove the wounded and replenish her supplies. Two days were spent by the flotilla near the stranded vessel in strenuous endeavours to extricate her from the sand, which through the action of the stream had silted up and held her like a vice. But all proved vain, and the flotilla, once more disappointed, turned down-stream and went back to Nasiriyah.

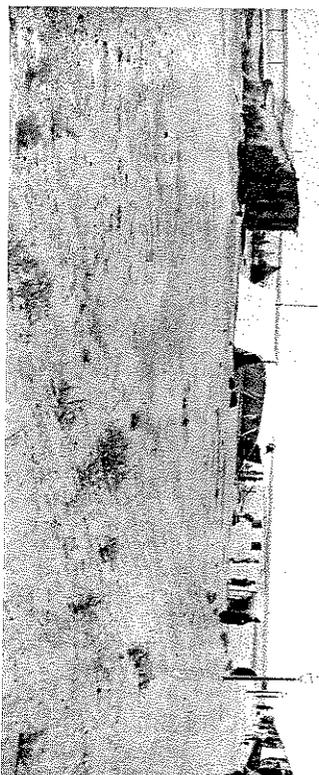
Between that place, which is fifty-six miles to the south-east of Samawah, and Basrah the line was rarely damaged, but on the section further north, between Khidhr and Samawah, which places are seventeen miles apart, rail-cutting and rail-repairing were an almost daily occurrence. The custom was for the armoured train to patrol daily from Samawah towards Khidhr, whence another similar train

advanced to meet it, in the hope of keeping open the line between those places. This procedure had gone on uninterruptedly till the 12th August, when the track was so seriously damaged by the insurgents that the trains could no longer meet.

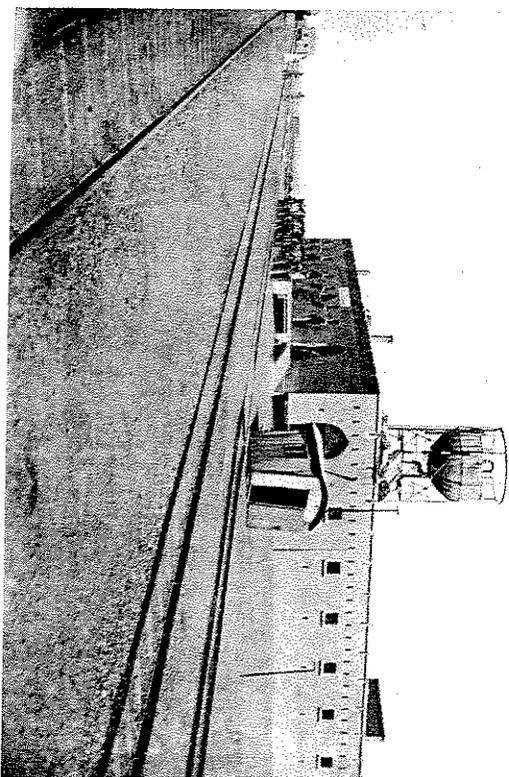
A few days earlier General Nepean had telegraphed that the tribes between those places were becoming more unruly, and that trouble of some kind was brewing. A later telegram added that a concentration of two thousand insurgents was reported to be near Khidhr, and he requested instructions whether that place should be reinforced or evacuated, the latter course being one strongly opposed by the local Political Officer.

The opposition of the latter officer to the proposed evacuation was natural, for the isolation of Samawah and the loss of Khidhr might well lead to an attack on the inadequately garrisoned town of Nasiriyah, combined with a rising by a considerable portion of the Muntafiq. As, however, Khidhr was too far from the *Greeniffy* to assist her, was merely a point on the railway line to Samawah of no importance once that railway was closed for traffic, and to hold it would only add another to my isolated garrisons among which Samawah could now be counted, I, without hesitation, ordered it to be evacuated.

It may here be stated that Khidhr station is typical of such spots on the Mesopotamian railways, if those on the Baghdad-Samarrah line which were built by the Germans be excepted. These latter stations are solidly constructed of concrete blocks, and take the form of double-storied defensible barracks, within which are a well and pumping-engine for keeping the garrison supplied with water. Khidhr, on the other hand, possesses none of the usual attributes of a station in the European sense of that word, for nothing exists there beyond a small mud hut, which serves as an office and dwelling for the stationmaster, a few tents for the personnel, and a tower whence locomotives draw their water. Indeed such wayside stations would be flattered if they were classified as what are known at home as "halts."



Khidhr railway station on Basrah-Baghdad system.



Balad railway station on Baghdad-Samarrah system.

The station at Khidhr had been occupied on the 4th July by three troops of the 3rd Euphrates Levy, under Lieutenant C. E. Simpson, and these formed the sole garrison of the place until its evacuation six weeks later. Nothing particular occurred there until the line north of it was reported to be seriously damaged. On the date of that occurrence, the 12th August, the armoured train on its return from a reconnaissance at 6 P.M. brought word that some three thousand Arabs had been seen fifteen miles to the north, and that they were moving in a southeasterly direction, with the evident intention of attacking the garrison.

At about 11.50 P.M. the insurgents, who by this time had arrived, opened fire, and the Levies, as well as the *Greenfly* with her 13-pdr. gun, replied. During the night the armoured train moved south, and engaged with its 13-pdr. gun large numbers of tribesmen, who soon worked round its flanks and compelled it to retire to the station, or run the risk of being isolated. About 9.30 A.M. next day the Ur Junction armoured train arrived, and its commander stated that the line to the south had not been damaged. Shortly afterwards my orders, transmitted through the General Officer Commanding the River Area, reached Lieutenant Simpson, and directed him to vacate the station.

As the Arabs were not far distant and kept up a hot fire, it was difficult to conceal the loading of horses, forty in number, besides kits and stores; but by the help of covering fire from the armoured train and the bravery and coolness of the garrison, the work was carried out successfully. In the absence of any competent railway personnel much shunting had to be done to marshal the trains in the order settled upon for the retirement, as it was necessary to have a rearguard composed of some armoured trucks and the 13-pdr. gun. The *Grizzly* and another unarmoured vessel, which were then engaged in helping to rebat the *Greenfly*, were desired to assist in covering the retirement until the trains had cleared the station. Owing to some misapprehension they failed to do so, and steamed to Nasiriyah without waiting for the operation to begin. In consequence

the situation was gravely compromised, for the insurgents were able to come close to the station, and add greatly to the difficulty of getting the garrison and followers on board the trains.

About 3.30 p.m. the leading train, which was to be followed at five minutes' interval by the two armoured trains coupled together, left the station and proceeded slowly south. A few minutes later, for some unknown reason, the first armoured train charged the train ahead of it, and forced a number of trucks from the rails, or, according to another statement, some waggons which it was pushing were derailed. A scene of great confusion followed, which was not lessened by the fact that the Arabs were firing at close range, though fortunately with almost no effect. The derailed waggons so blocked the line that the two locomotives and the vehicles which they were drawing, and with them the 13-pdr. gun, had to be abandoned, but the personnel, crowding on to the leading undamaged train, left the scene in safety and reached Ur at 9.30 p.m. Unfortunately the regular troops, consisting of seventeen men of the 1/10th Gurkha Rifles who were occupying the wagon nearest to Khidhr, though it appears that they were warned to save themselves by jumping on to the undamaged train, failed to do so, and remained behind. What happened to these gallant soldiers is uncertain, but that they defended themselves until all were killed there can be no doubt, for when the Samawah relief column reached Khidhr several weeks after, their skulls were found laid out in a row at the village of that name. I have related this affair at length, as the behaviour of the Levies, who were unsupported by regular troops, except those on the armoured trains, redounds greatly to their credit.

During the six weeks which preceded the investment of Samawah several local expeditions were carried out by the garrison, which now approximated to the strength of one battalion, though composed of three different units, in retaliation for attacks made or threatened by the insurgents. Barbuti bridge, which is near the camp and was guarded by a platoon of only nineteen men, under a

subadar, was attacked soon after midnight on the 2nd July, but was reinforced by a company at dawn, which only arrived in time to punish the aggressors as they retired. Some five hundred to six hundred Arabs had taken part in the attack, and although these succeeded in sacking and burning the camp in the vicinity they failed to reach the bridge. The defenders, who fought gallantly and whose commander was seriously wounded, suffered a loss of three killed and three wounded, while the tribesmen left twenty-seven dead on the ground. This attack was followed by other less serious affrays, for the Arabs have a rooted dislike to engage themselves against defences, and when our garrisons were besieged, generally preferred to expend their ammunition in firing from cover into the camp.

One of the minor expeditions referred to was undertaken against the village of Musa'adah, which is situated on the left bank of the river one mile north-west of the Barbuti bridge. This village, which was described to Major Hay by the Assistant Political Officer on the spot as "the property of a holy and pro-British sayid," but which harboured some six hundred to eight hundred insurgents who had twice sallied forth to attack our troops, was dealt with in so thorough a manner that there was no question afterwards of its harbouring any living thing.

Another expedition treated in a similar fashion three villages which had formed the base for the raiders who had attacked Barbuti bridge, and a river expedition was undertaken by the *Greenfly* and F. 10 in order to create a diversion in rear of the insurgents who were besieging the garrison at Rumaihah. After these expeditions the troops at Samawah were left unmolested for a time; but unfortunately lost the services of the *Greenfly*, which, it will be remembered, while patrolling the river on the 10th August, ran aground some five miles up-stream from Khidhr.

Some time earlier I had been informed by Brigadier-General Nepean that the defences of Samawah were not in a satisfactory condition, and for this and other reasons that place was transferred on the 16th July to the River Area.

I had visited Samawah on the 12th April, immediately after the issue of a general order regarding the responsibility for defences, and found the garrison engaged in making a new camp at Barbuti bridge, which was manifestly the proper place to be held. And here I may mention that, although the Euphrates valley railway had been constructed at the time that the railways were in the hands of the military authorities, insufficient attention seems to have been paid to siting stations and constructing bridges with a view to easy water-supply or defence. In fact, throughout the country similar anomalies were noticeable, and places such as water regulators had been constructed quite regardless of military considerations which it would have been possible to observe. This omission was perhaps more marked at Samawah than at any other point on the Euphrates line, and had the station here been placed at Barbuti bridge, two miles from the town instead of close to it, the unfortunate loss of an armoured train and of several lives, an incident which will presently be described, could never have occurred.

The actual dispositions for defence at Samawah, which show a change in the arrangements that were in progress at the time of my visit—a change of which I was in ignorance until the incident of the armoured train—were as follows:—

No less than four different posts were held, which included the main camp, the supply camp, Barbuti bridge post, and the railway station post. At the last of these was No. 1 armoured train, which, under the arrangements of the General Officer Commanding the River Area, was berthed at Samawah, and patrolled thence towards Khidhr. After Major Hay took command of the place, the defences first began seriously to be made, and were sufficiently strong to withstand attacks by tribesmen. As firing into the camp increased, communication trenches were begun, and by the 29th August the garrison could move within the defences with comparative safety.

I have stated that I intended to evacuate Samawah, and the way in which the line had successfully been kept open

for six weeks after the insurrection began induced me to believe that there would be no insuperable difficulty in doing so when the desired moment came. Moreover, my information led me to believe that the garrison could be extricated by the river route, and that that route would always enable supplies to be sent to the place. But the grounding of the *Greenfly* came as a distinct shock, and one which was not weakened by the failure of the *Grayfly* and other vessels sent from Nasiriyah to free her. It was evident that the garrison at Samawah would have to stand a siege. Their supply of food was sufficient to last until the middle of September, but that of ammunition was less satisfactory, as, in view of my intention to withdraw the troops, the retention of large quantities of either was inexpedient. On the 23rd the General Officer Commanding the River Area was ordered to send at once a month's supply by barge; and on the 1st September, by which date it had come to my knowledge that the supplies ordered had not all arrived and that there was a probability that the relief might be delayed, I ordered the garrison by wireless telegram to be placed on half rations.

On the 26th August a convoy, consisting of the *Grayfly*, *Sawfly*, *Stonefly*, and two steamers carrying troops and towing barges, on board of which were the supplies of food and ammunition I had ordered to be sent at once to Samawah, left Nasiriyah on a voyage which was to prove perilous. Heavy opposition was met with about eight miles above Darraji, which did not cease until Khidhr was passed. A few miles below that place one of the steamers, known as S. 9, appeared to be in difficulties, and was signalled, but replied that all was well, whereupon the defence vessel in rear steamed ahead, and joined the other ships in the vicinity of the *Greenfly*. As, however, an ominous cloud of smoke was noticed rising from the direction of S. 9, a defence vessel was detached to return to her lest she required assistance. On reaching her it was found that she had been abandoned and was in flames. Not a sign was visible of the crew or the platoon of Indian troops and two British officers who had formed her escort; and

it was later gathered from the statements of a few survivors, who escaped to Nasiriyah, that the ship with her engines out of order had drifted up against the bank, where she was rushed by a large force of tribesmen. Except for the few mentioned above who were captured and escaped, all on board, including the two British officers, had been immediately massacred. At night the convoy, with the exception of the steamer and two barges, which had run aground, anchored in the neighbourhood of the stranded *Greenfly*. Next morning the defence vessel, *Stonefly*, was sent back to Nasiriyah, and the remainder of the convoy continued on its way to Samawah, all of the vessels being heavily engaged throughout the day. By 7 P.M. the *Greenfly* and her consorts reached their destination, but one of the two barges which were being towed, and on board of which were food and small-arm ammunition, grounded under heavy fire two miles short of Samawah, and had to be abandoned.

The commander of the little flotilla, Captain W. H. Suffolk of the Inland Water Transport, had shown gallantry and resolution in bringing his three ships to their goal under considerable difficulties, which might have daunted others similarly situated. For forty-eight hours the convoy, with inadequate protection, had been exposed to a galling fire of musketry at close range, which had caused heavy casualties, and the prospect of running the gauntlet with success seemed nearly hopeless. But he carried out his task, and not improbably saved the garrison of Samawah from surrender and all the horrors which that word conveyed. As a reward for his services he was forthwith given the Military Cross.

The same night as that on which the convoy arrived, the attack on the railway station camp began, and was pushed with great vigour by a large number of the insurgents. This was not altogether unexpected, for during August Major Hay had been told by an intelligence agent that many of the insurgents would disperse to their homes for the Muhammadan festival, known as the Id-adh-Dhuha, or, as it is called in India, the Bagr'Id, which would take

place on the 25th of that month and following days. The same informant added that after it was over they would make an attack which would be directed first on the post known as the "railway camp."

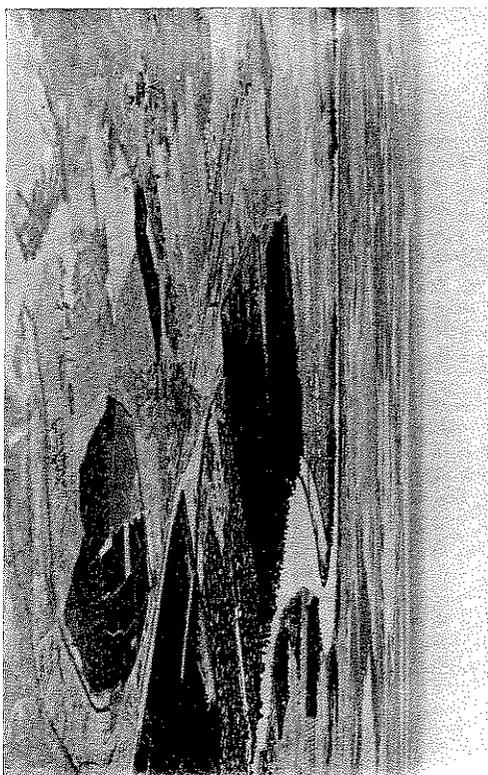
Its defences consisted of a bullet-proof wall surrounded by a barbed-wire obstacle. These were sufficient to make it secure, and their condition had made marked improvement under Captain Oswald Russell of the 10th Lancers, who was in command of the post, and who a short time before, when with his regiment on the Upper Euphrates, had received the Military Cross for gallantry. The garrison under his command consisted of about seventy-five all ranks of his own regiment, and a similar number of the 2/125th Rifles under 2nd Lieutenant H. V. Fleming, as well as Captain J. W. Pigeon of the Indian Medical Service.

The regiment to which Captain Russell belonged having completed its tour in Mesopotamia, where it had done admirable work on the Upper Euphrates under Lieutenant-Colonel Kemmis, was on the point of proceeding to India when the outbreak at Ramathah occurred. A few days later, as the situation began to grow serious and every available man was wanted, I ordered the regiment, which had handed in its horses at Baghdad between the 28th and 30th June, to stand fast at Basrah. Thereafter it was employed, sometimes to provide the fighting portion of the crews of defence vessels and at other times to man armoured trains or any special point on the railway. Thus it happened that, on the 6th August, part of Captain Russell's squadron held a post at Barbuti bridge, while the balance replaced the personnel of No. 1 armoured train, who joined the garrison of the main camp. The train, which carried a 13-pdr. gun and crew, usually consisted of several ordinary iron trucks with loopholes cut in them, an engine, and a few other vehicles; and, as stated earlier, was stabled at Samawah station. The water supply, which is alongside the railway line about two hundred yards north-east of the station, was still obtained by means of a pumping-engine connected with a pipe which ran to the river some

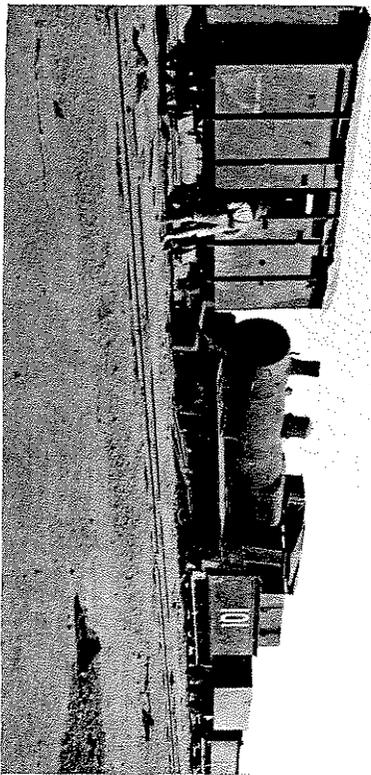
distance away. Up to the time of the investment the question of water presented no difficulty, but the pumping-engine became damaged, and although apparently the pipeline to the river was not cut, it became necessary to arrange a water store in all tanks and other receptacles that could be obtained. These were collected and for purposes of protection placed under a layer of earth.

The presence of the train at Samawah station was unknown to me, and I had no reason to suppose from the reports which came in periodically that the force at that locality was holding the ground otherwise than was projected when I visited the place in April. Had I heard what came to my knowledge too late to be remedied, I should unquestionably have ordered the station to be vacated and the gun on the train to be rendered harmless. Or as an alternative, if reports had come that the line was damaged, the train would more probably have been ordered to move to Barbuti bridge, and that post would not then have been evacuated. When the news arrived of the isolation of the station post with insufficient water and only eight to ten days' supplies, the danger of the situation was apparent, and no action but that which, as will be seen, was taken, was possible.

The site of the post, apart from its uncertain water supply, was faulty, as from the high wall of Samawah town, distant only about two hundred yards, fire of a slightly plunging nature could be directed on the camp, which not only exposed the garrison to loss, but caused many of the buried tanks to be perforated by bullets. In consequence of the loss of water that resulted, Captain Russell informed Major Hay that he would be forced to evacuate his ground if the investment exceeded four days, for the water from a well that had been dug proved to be brackish and unfit to drink. This report led to the preparation of a plan by which, in co-operation with aeroplanes from Baghdad, it was hoped to withdraw the garrison on the 3rd September. The plan it appears was as follows: As soon as the two aeroplanes appeared from Baghdad the defence vessel *Sawfly* was to fire a shot from her 3-pdr.



Samawah railway station and camp.



Samawah—The disabled armoured train.

gun at the pump-house near the station as a signal to evacuate. The supporting troops, consisting of two hundred rifles of the 114th Maharattas, would then move from the main camp along the railway line to a point about four hundred yards from the station, while a detachment of thirty men sent from Barbuti bridge, which post was successfully evacuated during the larger operation, guarded against the risk of envelopment. Besides these troops fifty rifles were held in readiness as a reserve.

At first all went smoothly and in conformity with the plan. Thirty men of the 2/125th Rifles, under 2nd Lieutenant Fleming, who had been ordered to seize the pump-house and loading ramp adjacent to it while the station post was being cleared, carried out their instructions. Captain Russell himself, with his men and the Medical Officer, Captain Pigeon, who were to act as rearguard, climbed into the train, which then began to move. The small party under 2nd Lieutenant Fleming, seeing that the train had started, retired as ordered along the railway and passed through the covering screen of the Maharattas. The train had gone about two hundred yards when the engine appeared to fail, or, as was later known, jumped the track, owing to a damaged switch. Immediately Captain Russell and Captain Pigeon were seen to jump out and run to each truck in turn, and survivors from the train relate that they were ordered to get out and make a bolt for safety.

What followed, so far as a careful study of all the evidence discloses, was that the Arabs, who were only two hundred yards distant and numbered from three to four thousand, rushed the train, hordes of them entering the waggons at one side and emerging on the other. Half of the occupants had not yet had time to leave it, and they were mostly killed, while a few were spared and made prisoners. Captains Russell and Pigeon remained with the train, doubtless unwilling to leave the sick and wounded who were on board, although had they chosen they could easily have escaped. The fight in which these gallant officers perished was short and sharp, covering, it is said, only a

The obvious conclusion to which one is driven regarding this incident is that in unsettled or semi-settled countries railway construction and other work for which protection is sure to be demanded should not be undertaken without the approval, so far as defence questions are concerned, of the military authorities. In this case, as already mentioned, those authorities were responsible for the siting of the railway, its stations and its bridges, and it is evident that, in their desire to build this new line of communication quickly, security was overlooked.

I have described above the episode of the loss of the armoured train, an account of which appeared in my official despatch dated 8th November 1920, but in considerably briefer terms. I am convinced that, though it was believed at the time to represent what had actually occurred, it fell considerably short of the facts as I now know them. What confirmed me in that belief only came to my knowledge some months after the above description was penned. It is right, however, that what is believed to be the true story should be told, and that the cool courage of two British officers and a few men cut off and in desperate circumstances should be chronicled here.

In order to do so I must turn back to the month of October 1920, when the prisoners who had been captured by the Arabs on various occasions were released. Among these prisoners were five sowars (troopers) of the 10th Duke of Cambridge's Own Lancers (Hodson's Horse), who had formed part of the crew of the armoured train. As soon as their presence was reported they were ordered to be sent to Headquarters at Baghdad, where they were exhaustively examined by an officer of my staff as to the occurrences of the 3rd September. It was then found that three of them had been taken prisoners in an attempt to make their way to the camp after receiving an order to do so, and that the other two had been captured when the garrison of the train was overcome.

According to the story told by these two sowars, the train on the morning of the 3rd September was made up of several trucks and loopholed iron waggons, the gun-truck

and gun having been detached and abandoned in anticipation of the withdrawal. In front of the engine and in the direction of the camp were two such waggons (those shown in the reproduced photograph), the greater portion of the vehicles being behind the tender and between it and the station. The Arabs soon surrounded the train, and after some heavy fighting overcame the occupants of several trucks, leaving alive only those who held the last two loopholed iron waggons which were nearest to the station. About 2 P.M. Captain Russell withdrew the few survivors into the end wagon, but left open the communication door between it and the wagon which he had previously been occupying. At this door he took his stand, and, from the great losses which the Arabs admit and with which he is associated, he must have used his machine-gun, rifle, and revolver with deadly effect. It was about this time, or probably shortly after, that the Arabs, finding that they could not capture the last wagon by direct assault, bethought themselves of burning out the occupants. In order to carry out this plan and to avoid exposure, which was inevitable if they attacked from the flank or the end of the train nearest to the camp, they made their way underneath the trucks towards the occupied wagon. Several of them were shot by Captain Russell, who remained at the door to prevent what was in progress, but about 4 P.M. he was wounded in the right side by a rifle shot. The communication door was now closed, and the Arabs were able to pour oil on the wooden sleepers underneath the carriage and set fire to them.

Fourteen men besides Captain Russell were in this wagon—possibly also Captain Pigeon, though it is believed that he fell earlier in the fight—and as the situation was evidently hopeless, he told them that the best thing to be done was to make a sortie and sell their lives as dearly as possible. The Arabs were all round, close to the carriage, when several of the men jumped to the ground and hurled themselves into the midst of them. As not one of these brave fellows, worthy successors of the brilliant soldier who raised their corps, was amongst the prisoners who were

recovered later, it must be assumed that all of them lost their lives. Captain Russell, seeing what had occurred, remarked to those who were left that they might as well remain in the carriage, and he and they began firing again through the loopholes. But the Arabs, who were thirsting for the blood of the remaining few, had by this time made their way on to the roof of the wagon, and though several of them were shot, some succeeded by using crowbars in breaking in among the defenders, when the two remaining sowars were taken alive and their gallant leader was put to the sword.

Such was the account given by these two men of the grim struggle which had lasted for so many hours, and most of which had been fought out within the narrow limits of an iron wagon, where the terrible heat and lack of water must have been almost unbearable. It seemed to me to bear every evidence of truth, but was so substantially different from the earlier report which had been received that it was referred to the commander of the lately-relieved garrison of Samawah.

In his opinion, the evidence of the sowars was unreliable, and he remarked that "the stories of all of them are the stories of brave men who did all they could, but fear that they may be asked why they did not do more. They have been taken prisoners, and have got to account for it."

As I have stated earlier, three British officers and the numerous survivors, who included a subaltern and an Assistant Political Officer, were convinced that no one could be alive on the train, and no signs or sounds of any description which could have led to that belief were noticed in the camp throughout the day.

Soon after the occurrence, and before I knew that any one on board the train had been captured, I sent an Arab agent to Samawah to glean what information he could, as all that had so far reached me was extremely meagre. His researches, however, among the tribesmen and towns-people proved fruitless, for the Arab is notoriously careful not to commit himself lest retribution should follow any admission—and an amnesty had, of course, not then been

declared—and it is equally rare for him to disclose anything that might react disadvantageously on his fellows.

Although I felt certain that Major Hay and his officers had given me an unvarnished account of the incident, as regarded from their point of view, yet the equally explicit and widely different tale of the sowars left doubts in my mind as to what had really occurred. As inquiries on the spot would certainly be unprofitable until some time had elapsed, I decided to wait.

In December 1921 my duties took me to Nasiriyah on the Lower Euphrates, and while passing through Samawah on my way there I inquired of the acting civil surgeon, Captain J. V. McNally, R.A.M.C., who was at the station, if he had heard any mention made by the inhabitants of the circumstances surrounding the capture of the armoured train. His knowledge of Arabic, he said, was slight, but he had gathered the impression that the fight had gone on until the afternoon, and that the Arabs had suffered heavily, owing to the gallantry of the officer in command. As I expected to pass through Samawah a few days later, I desired him to gather all the information he could on the subject, but knowing the suspicious nature of the Arabs, recommended him to be careful in prosecuting his inquiries. At Nasiriyah I was told by the Political Officer, Major Ditchburn, and also by one of his assistants, Captain Kitehing from Suq-ash-Shuyuk, that from all they had heard on the subject the defence of the train had been a prolonged affair, and had been conducted with great gallantry. Indeed, the Arabs who were at Samawah at the time, of whom many had taken part in the capture, in which they had suffered heavily, had been so struck by the courage and determination shown by the commander of the train that they had conferred on him by common consent the title of "Abu sil Silah" (Father of the chains), on account of the steel chains worn on the shoulders of his khaki jacket.

At last the evidence of the sowars seemed to be corroborated from the direction whence alone such corroboration could have come.

As I returned through Samawah Captain McNally added a few more details to what he had already told me. First-hand evidence was, however, necessary, and fortunately this was forthcoming. Travelling with me was Major W. J. Bovill, a special service officer of my staff, and a fluent Arabic scholar, as well as the Arab agent who had been sent previously to make the inquiries to which I have earlier referred. Both of them began questioning some of the local Arabs at the station, one of whom was armed with a rifle, and belonged to the railway police. To our surprise some half-dozen of them readily answered questions, more especially the policeman, who showed us the scar of a bullet wound in his left leg which he said he had received in the attack on the train. One and all spoke enthusiastically of the bravery of him whom they called "Abu sil Sillah," and how the fight had worn on till between 4 and 5 P.M., when he and some others were shot and the train captured. They particularly referred to an Englishman who was clean-shaven, and who may possibly have been Captain Pigeon. As the fight was drawing to a close this individual threw ten-rupie notes from the train, and when the Arabs rushed to pick them up he hurled bombs among them, causing ten, twenty, or more casualties at a time.

There was now no doubt in my mind that the defence of the train had been a desperate and protracted affair, in which all who remained on board had fought heroically, and shortly after I took steps to rectify my earlier report on the episode.

It may be thought strange that those in the camp at Samawah should have remained in ignorance of what was in progress a little more than a mile to the south. Regarding this point I have drawn attention to the explanation sent me by the commander there, who himself was rewarded for his gallant defence of the place. The atmospheric conditions in Mesopotamia are fruitful causes of deception, and I have several times noticed that peculiarity of the country, which is far more prominent during the summer months than when, as often in winter, the sun's rays are

feeble and dust and wind are absent. The short distance which sound travels at times has been remarked on several occasions. As an instance of this I may quote the case of a squadron of Colonel Kemmis's regiment which reported that it had been under heavy fire, while he, though less than a mile distant, had not heard a shot. It must be remembered, too, that in the account above given, the fighting, after the first rush, took place at the station end of the train, and the Arabs were careful not to expose themselves to view.

Even if it had been known at the camp that a deadly struggle was proceeding within long-range rifle fire, the many thousands of armed Arabs round Samawah must inevitably have prevented the success of any attempt at rescue. Indeed, the Arab policeman who had been wounded volunteered a remark to the same effect, and added that the tribesmen would certainly have rushed the camp had the defenders made a sortie in force. That this was no idle boast is probable, and it is difficult to believe that with a diminished garrison the camp at Samawah could have held out, while its capture would inevitably have rallied to the insurgent standards a large section of the Muntafiq Confederation, besides throwing into the scale against us many waverers.