

CHAPTER XVIII.

Life of British Prisoners at Seringapatam.

With the conclusion of the treaty of Mangalore, the second Mysore War came to an end. But before we proceed to the events of the succeeding period, we may briefly dwell on the mode of life of the British prisoners taken during this war and interned in the fort of Seringapatam during the period from the Battle of Polilore (Pullalur) in September 1780 to the establishment of peace in March 1784 and on the hopes and fears that possessed them during this long interval. Fortunately two of the prisoners maintained journals of their own from which glimpses may be obtained of the daily life of the prisoners and of some of the outside events. There is at present no way of judging the accuracy in every detail of the events recorded from day to day and it must also be admitted that some of the observations recorded in these journals appear to be tinged with the colour of the moods for the time being of the two prisoners. Nevertheless the journals give a sufficiently general view of the treatment accorded to the prisoners and they not only rouse our sympathy for their sufferings but are also sufficient to throw some light in other respects.

Of the prisoners captured at the battle of Polilore (Pullalur), three batches were formed. On the forenoon of the 17th September 1780, Haidar being about to move his camp after his victory to the neighbourhood of Arcot, Krishna Rao, Haidar's treasurer, went into the quarters where the English officers were and ordered such of them as were capable of walking to stand up. This order being obeyed, an immediate division of the prisoners was made. Colonel Baillie, Captain Baird and a number of other officers were ordered to remain with Haidar's camp, and palanquins which had been taken by Haidar with the baggage of Baillie's corps at Perambakam were provided for their conveyance. The officers who were not wounded numbering twenty-three were sent to Bangalore and other places, while those who were wounded about twenty-seven were sent to Arnee in dhoolies and country carts. Colonel Baillie and others accompanied the army to Arcot and in the first day's march

Tippu is stated to have come up in his palanquin to Colonel Baillie and to have complimented him on his gallantry, attributing his defeat to the vicissitudes of war. While Haidar was engaged in his operations against Arcot, the English prisoners were kept in the neighbourhood in a tent pitched in the skirts of a village and they were at intervals attended by an Indian medical man to examine and dress their wounds. After about a fortnight, Baillie and some of his companions were separated from Baird and others and marched to Seringapatam in two groups. At the different places at which they halted, the inhabitants, it is acknowledged, seemed disposed to treat the prisoners with pity and respect. On the 6th November these prisoners first caught sight of Seringapatam after traversing a distance of 240 miles. When the captives reached Seringapatam, they were first conducted to the Durbar Office and then led to a house which was to be their prison.

This prison is described as consisting of an oblong square, seventy feet in length, with a sort of shed inwards and open in the middle. The space appropriated to cooking was at one end opposite to the entrance where the guard was stationed. There were four rooms without windows spread with mats intended for beds. To supply themselves with the necessaries of life, the prisoners were allowed one gold fanam or a little over four annas per day and as a special indulgence on account of the dampness of the climate they were also allowed one or two-thirds of a bottle of arrack each per week. A French surgeon was permitted to attend and dress the still open wounds of the prisoners, and two or three Indian servants whom the prisoners had brought with them were also allowed to stay in the prison and permitted to go to the bazaar to make purchases for them. These servants as well as the French surgeon served as the media of communication for the prisoners with the outside world as well as for hearing the rumours of what was going on. The prisoners remained in this state for about six weeks when on the 23rd December 1780 they were joined by the second batch of prisoners, the total number thereby being increased to 25. Further additions to the number of prisoners were made from time to time including Colonel Baillie but it does not appear that they were lodged with the first two batches of prisoners.

On the 10th of May 1781 all the prisoners except Baird are stated to have been put in irons. Early on the morning of this fateful day, it is written, a great clanging noise awoke the prisoners, who to their horror saw that a pile of irons was being deposited opposite to the guard-house. Shortly afterwards, the Killedar of the fort of Seringapatam visited and told them that it was the order that all should be put in irons. Captain Lucas who spoke the vernacular language perfectly addressed the Killedar on behalf of his comrades and protested in the most vehement manner against such an uncalled-for indignity being inflicted upon them. The Killedar who appeared to be not without sympathy replied that the order came from Haidar and must be obeyed. Having said this, the Killedar ordered Mohabat Khan who was in immediate charge to put each of the prisoners in irons and having waited to see the work begun, the Killedar left the place. When it came to Baird's turn to have his irons rivetted on, Captain Lucas again intervened. He pointed out to Mohabat Khan that the bullet still remained in Baird's thigh, that the wound was very much inflamed and that if matters were aggravated by irons, Captain Baird must inevitably die. Mohabat Khan replied that he had been given a certain number of irons and that each pair of irons must be utilised. Captain Lucas without a moment's hesitation is said to have replied that if that was the case he would gladly wear two pairs himself. This unselfish offer touched even Mohabat Khan who replied that he would consult the Killedar and the Killedar showed himself to be sympathetic. Thus for the time being Baird remained unfettered until the 10th of November following when his wound having healed, he was put in irons like the rest.

In the latter part of 1782, it is related, proposals were made by some of Haidar's officers to these prisoners to enter the service of their master and that they would be allowed three times the pay they were getting in their army, as many horses, palanquins and wives as they chose. The prisoners one and all are stated to have refused to consent to such proposals. On the 13th of November Colonel Baillie died. Towards the close of 1782 several more European prisoners arrived. On the 15th of December 1782 intelligence was received in prison through a washerman that

Haidar had died and the prisoners expected that Tippu's accession to power would bring them a favourable change in the treatment accorded to them. Shortly after, they observed an unusual bustle about the fort and amongst the guards, a new Killedar replaced the old one and new officers took charge of the prison. On the 27th of December the news of Haidar's death was made public at the Cutcherry and nagaras or drums were beaten for three days in consequence. On the 22nd of March 1783 the body of Haidar was interred in the Lal Bagh garden, one mile from the fort. On the 4th of June the prisoners celebrated their King's birthday for the third time since their captivity.

On the 8th of August the prisoners observed one of the sons of Tippu riding and an account is given of him in the journal. "We peeped" says the writer "eagerly through some small apertures which we had found means to make or improve a little in the walls of our prison. The young Sultan was mounted on a beautifully managed Arabian horse finely caparisoned. He was preceded and attended by a number of people, some of whom bore his umbrella, others fanned his face, others proclaimed his rank and high descent. At one particular place which he had passed and repassed, two elephants were stationed to pay their compliments to the young prince. The creatures were not only taught to kneel at his approach and show other marks of obedience but also to fan his face, as he went along, with fans which they grasped and wielded with their trunks."

On the 7th of March 1784 one of the prisoners became insane and as he could speak the language of the country, he applied to the Killedar for interview as he wished to reveal to him many of the supposed misdeeds of his fellow prisoners. The prisoners had one serious cause of alarm inasmuch as, though the use of pen and ink had been prohibited on pain of death, they had contrived to obtain them, had maintained journals and had carried on correspondence with prisoners in other places of confinement. Accordingly at night they burnt some of the papers and hid others by digging holes. Some were deposited under the tiles and thus before morning, more than a hundred sheets of paper were disposed of,

During all this time the unhappy maniac, it is stated, with a pair of irons weighing nine pounds was walking about the prison from 5 o'clock in the evening until 2 in the morning incessantly at a rapid pace, vowing the most terrible vengeance against all his fellow prisoners. The next morning when the prison officer inquired of the maniac what revelations he had to make, the latter after considerable delay stated that there was a conspiracy on the part of his companions to poison him and as a proof he drew out of his pocket a piece of bread supposed to be poisoned. Baird who was by the side of the maniac immediately snatched the bread from his hands and swallowed it. The officer was thereby assured of the baselessness of the charge made by the lunatic and the prisoners were saved from a serious fate which they feared would overtake them.

On the second of March 1784 the officer in charge of the prison and a Brahmin whose duty it was to pay the prisoners their daily allowance ordered the irons of Baird and two other prisoners to be struck off and took them to the Killidar's presence. At the Cutcherry where they met the Killidar the announcement was made to them, to their joy, of peace having been concluded and of their approaching liberation. After this interview, Baird and his companions were removed from the fort to a choultry at some distance, where the next day they were joined by all the prisoners who were in Seringapatam. On hearing the news of their immediate liberation, there were loud shouts and demonstrations of joy on the part of the prisoners and when the tumult had to some extent subsided, a proposal to celebrate their deliverance with a regale of plantain fritters and sherbut was readily accepted. About nine o'clock at night when supper was finished, toasts were drunk with the utmost hilarity and such was the agitation of the minds of those who took part in the repast that not one, it is said, could compose himself to sleep.

At last when the morning broke and the armoured who was to remove the fetters arrived, every one struggled to have his fetters knocked off first. Promises, threats, bustling, jostling, every expedient that could be imagined are said to have been put in

practice in order to obtain that which would have come unsought in the course of sometime. About two or three in the afternoon, the irons of all the prisoners were removed and they were conducted to the Killedar. After they returned to the choultry from the presence of the Killedar, the prisoners were allowed to walk about and to bathe in the river. "Every object and every recreation however simple" says the writer of the journal "became a source of ardent delight. All the satiety which the free enjoyment of the beauties of Nature generates had been overcome by years of restraint and abstinence, and the mere sight of the country with all the advantages of scenery and climate from which they had been so long excluded excited of itself the most agreeable emotions in their hearts and minds." Although their irons were knocked off, it is said, it took some time for these liberated prisoners to use their limbs so as to walk freely.