CHAPTER XI

IF few Indian cities were profoundly affected by the war, to Karachi it was the beginning of a new era of progress and development. This port had had little history before the British conquests. Historians dispute whether or not Nearchus, Alexander's admiral, set sail from there on the return to Babylon, but it seems that in early times the chief port for the Indus Delta was Debalbunder, some distance to the east. In the eighteenth century Karachi was the port from which Baluchi and Afghan mercenaries set out in coasting steamers to hire their swords to Hindu princes of Kathiawar. Another profitable export was that of sharkfins and maws for the China market. The principal Hindu banker for the town, Seth Naomal, had been in youth forcibly circumcised by Muslim fanatics and, like many other Hindu malcontents, anxious for British intervention. His services in assisting the invaders were rewarded by the grant of a C.S.I.

Napier, the conqueror, was from the beginning enthusiastic over Karachi's future. "You will be the glory of the East," he exclaimed, "would that I could come again to see you, Kurrachee, in your grandeur!" But for many years it seemed that this prophecy was as unlikely to be fulfilled as so many others uttered by the magniloquent Napier. It was a remote province, administered by a few able but often notably eccentric men. The name of Tyrrhuit (with the inevitable addition of Badshah or king) is still remembered with both awe and amusement in Lower Sind. One hot weather, feeling bored alone in his

headquarters at Kotri he sent his acquaintances in Karachi wires announcing his own death. The European community dug out from tinlined boxes black coats and striped trousers and journeyed in great discomfort to Kotri. They were shown the coffin with the corpse in it, and were discussing the virtues of the dead man with the charity usual on such occasions when suddenly the corpse sat up, the door to the dining-room was opened and there was the table laid for lunch surrounded by crates of champagne. On the Upper Sind Frontier the saga of General John Jacob continues to grow, and the extraordinary clock which he made is still the wonder of visitors to Jacobabad. Even in Karachi a certain eccentricity was not uncommon and General Nicholson won bets by crossing Mangho Pir hopping from the back of one crocodile to another till he reached the farther bank. His name, however, is long forgotten, but his wife was to become one of the most popular poets of her time. She wrote under the name of Lawrence Hope ; and tastefully-bound copies of *The Garden of Kama* may be seen in most Indian bookshops or chemists' to-day. She came of a gifted family, for her father was Colonel Cory, the then editor of the *Sind Gazette* and her younger sister was to win fame as Victoria Cross, the novelist. Miss Cross spent her earlier years helping her father who as editor of the only English paper that Karachi boasted had to work hard to supply his small clientèle with news. It can hardly have been from Karachi that the Misses Cory drew information for their romantic writings ; for in their youth it was a dreary place. Steamers from Bombay anchored a mile off-shore and passengers had to climb down into a wide-bottomed sailing boat where they were jostled by negro coolies and dingy Arabs and their luggage was trodden over by the stumbling heavily-veiled

Muslim women and wetted by the green slime of the boards. This boat only took you as far as Manora, and thereafter you had to drive in a horse-carriage to Karachi. The horse went very slowly in the heat, and the springless seats smelt of bugs and human sweat. On the right stretched black mud and seaweed to the distant line of the sea, and on the left a few corrugated-iron sheds broke the monotony of desert. In Karachi the roads were wide and straight and there were a few fine bungalows, but gardens were almost impossible. The soil was sand and if you dug deep a saltish damp oozed up, destroying all plant roots. All you could hope for was a few palms, casuarinas and oleanders. All around was the desert and when the land wind blew the fine white sand banked up against the walls of the bungalows and seemed to fill everything, beds, drinking water, clothes. In the evenings if you went for a stroll you soon came to the end of the town, and there was the sun setting on the grey marshes and the barren outlines of the Baluch hills. There was a church of light yellow stone, and a low-roofed hotel called "Reynold's" with a shelf of bottled beer and a clutter of old newspapers on the ricketty basket-chairs. The Empress Market "a very handsome building . . . in the domestic Gothic style" was opened in 1889. And when the Frere Hall was handed over to the Municipality it was suggested that "the desolate and unsightly appearance of the compound was a reproach to them and so they decided to do something to improve it. To effect this the milk-bush hedge has been uprooted, and stone posts and chains substituted. A new cast-iron Band Stand has also been erected." And there was the Sind Club of which the following description was written in 1890 [1]:

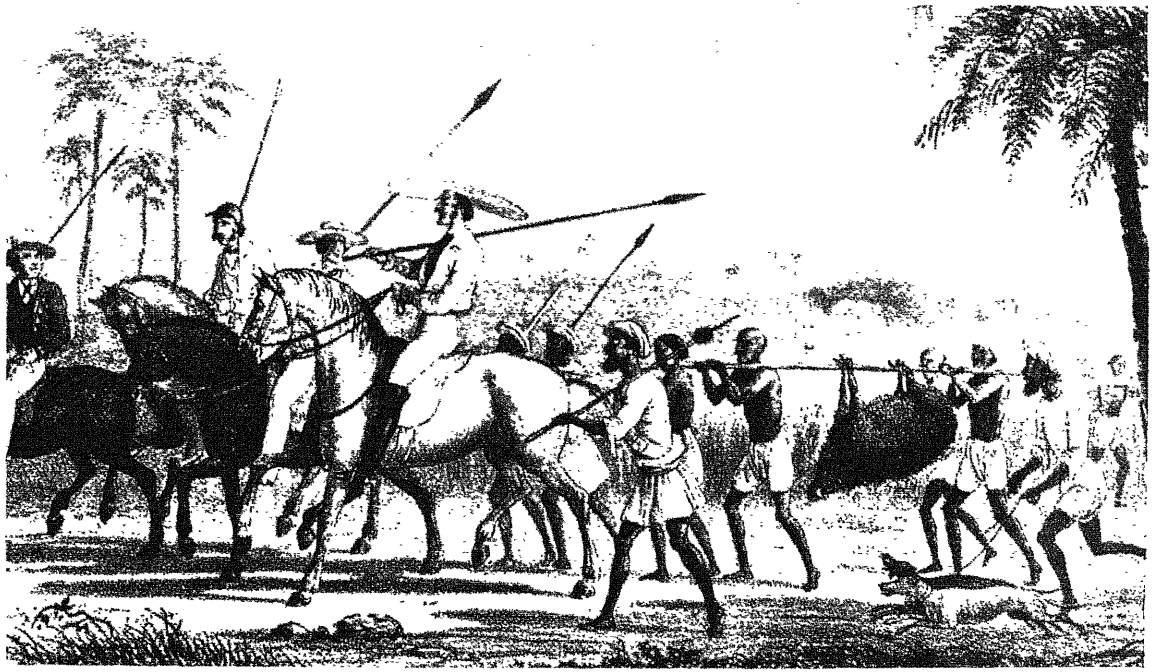
[1] A. F. Baillie's *Kurrachee*.

> The clubhouse is extremely well adapted to its purpose. The verandahs and large entrance hall are cool and comfortable, and the dining-room upstairs is a very handsome apartment. The members are exceedingly hospitable and any traveller properly introduced is at once admitted an honorary member, and permitted to pay a subscription for the period that he remains, which allows him greater freedom than if he was simply a free guest. They "swear" by their whisky, but I might venture to remark . . . that by constantly using the same spirit without any change, the palate loses to a great extent its power of appreciation . . . I have heard that ladies have recently been admitted as members and their more refined taste will have had its effect on the description and quality of the beverages consumed.

The progress of Karachi was inevitable, but for years the progress was slow. There were no roads at all outside the town, and proposals for road-making were turned down by the authorities on the ground that roads discouraged young Englishmen from riding. There was no direct rail connection with Delhi or Calcutta, and the line to Bombay had to run through Jodhpur (with changes at Marwar and Ahmedabad) because the more southerly route proposed would have passed through the territories of the Maharao of Kutch who was a very religious ruler disapproving of railways as much as of Bovril. Up to the war Karachi was considered a pleasant station with an enviable climate, but dull and backward compared to many other places.

The campaign in Iraq brought immense profit to Karachi contractors and with the rise in prices the whole hinterland flourished, remote Baluch notables bought motor-cars and invested money in Karachi banks (one such intending depositor was so enchanted with his first experience of a lift that he spent all day going up and down in it, and returned to his village without remembering to visit the bank). Everyone in Karachi seemed to have money. There was a temporary restraint while the war lasted, and

as a measure of economy the Commissioner offered his guests at dinner-parties home-made champagne which his cook had distilled from Quetta grapes. The local Volunteers were well supported and a detachment kept guard at the harbour (members of the detachments would in after-years irritate members of the 1914 Dinner Club who had been exchanging stories of Mons or Ypres, by retailing their own war experiences, the discomforts of a "shake-down" in the Customs Building and the way the harbour search-lights kept waking one up). The war ended, but prosperity continued. New houses and new quarters rose everywhere and the suburbs of Karachi sprawled clumsily over the desert. Champagne, real champagne, reappeared on the tables. There were *dîners dansants* every night at the Carlton Hotel, opposite the station, and on warm evenings the dancers sat in the narrow garden where folding chairs were ranged round bamboo tables. There were picnics every holiday at Manora with hampers from Cumper's Café and in the evenings numbers of new American cars gathered at Clifton (which was already referred to by local patriots as "The Brighton of Karachi") where a pier had been built, jutting out from the sandhills and, though not reaching as far as the water, affording a view over the sands and the sea, both a little grey with coal-dust from the harbour. There were breakfast and supper parties at the Boat Club, a tall, timbered building rising from the mud flats between Karachi and the port, with a terrace where one breakfasted on excellent cold-storage sausages and watched in an inlet of the sea below the evolutions of the swimming parties and, towards the opposite bank, native herdsmen washing their camels, and there was the Golf Club and the County Club and the Gymkhana and the Karachi Club (but this was mainly for Indians who were



RETURNING HOME FROM A HOG HUNT

not, and I think still are not, admitted to the other clubs) and the Sind Club, all flourishing in the post-war boom. The 1921 slump was a set-back, and several merchants suffered severely, but a sober optimism prevailed and everyone looked forward to the day when Karachi would eclipse Bombay. The authorities were going at last to build the Sukkur Barrage, a far greater undertaking than the Assouan Dam, the barrage that was going to change Sind from a desert into the Garden of India, a great granary, a wealthy province instead of a neglected division of Bombay.

The first aeroplane from England had been announced. There was a whole holiday declared and crowds watched the faint speck over the purple hills of Las Bela grow to the size of a bird, circle in the dry and glittering desert air, and come to rest on the level sweep of sand.

It was the herald of the new town that was to grow up, Drigh Road the air-port, with its neat little bungalows, and mess buildings (R.A.F. Mess and Imperial Airways Mess, too), refreshment room with aircraftsmen, including for a time "Aircraftsman Shaw", regaling his mates, of an evening, with gramophone recitals of Wagner and Beethoven at afternoon tea, factories and workshops, and the great ten-mile road to Karachi with military lorries painted khaki thundering past the huge and cavernous hangar built there in a lonely stretch of sand to house the R101.

Though local patriots were quick to seize on the phrase "Air-Port of India" it was some years before air-travel brought many passengers to Karachi. Even when the regular air-service was started the tired official or business-man who required of his leave, above all things, a preliminary rest and his wife who looked forward to the dancing

and deck sports (as I recently heard a lady say " The only way to travel is by British liners, because of the lovely organised games ") and the trip ashore at Port Said for bargains in Chinese shawls and amber necklaces found no attraction in the idea of air-travel. Moreover, after the first rush and confusion of the post-war years the P. & O. began to build some luxurious (and even quick) liners. They were furnished on modern, but not too modern, lines and the décor, quiet (unlike the flashy Italian ships of which a lady said, " nothing but floating night-clubs I call them ") and essentially British, was reassuringly like that of an hotel at a seaside resort which did not encourage trippers ; the dark Tudor lounge with its scalloped Ionic columns and huge arm-chairs, the Renaissance dining-room where one could be sure of bacon and eggs and grilled steak even in the Red Sea, and the Louis Quinze music-room where the ladies played mahjongg and bridge and sipped gimlets or chose a book from the five-shelf library (no nonsense about what ought to be bought, but just the familiar array that one would find at a W. H. Smith & Son's branch, a Naomi Jacob, Beverley Nichols, Donn Byrne and, for the broad-minded, Mary Borden) and where in the evenings they sometimes had concerts, a steward at the little yellow upright piano, another steward with a fiddle and a planter from among the passengers who could play the ukelele. There was also a new rival to air-travel in the overland route by train (or car) through Iraq and Turkey, and this had for its advocate Colonel Cory's successor at the *Gazette*, a brilliant business-man (" the Thruster " he once described himself) who was an ardent apostle of dress-reform among Anglo-Indians and surprised those who had known him formerly as sternly insisting on a stiff collar in the hottest weather by appearing on formal

occasions, dressed in white trousers, a patent belt and a middy blouse.

But the institution of the air-mail and the constant passage through India of notable flying figures were an advertisement and encouragement to air-passengers. They gathered in the early hours in the hall of Karachi's new hotel (a fine building, with dome and façade of caryatids and panelled dining-room) and filed into the bus that was to take them to the landing ground and the aeroplane gleaming through the dawn-murk. And then the long, inhospitable shores of Baluchistan ; the Cathedral Rock ; the walled fortress of Sharjah where it was pleasant to find in the waiting-room, guarded by Arab soldiers with chased-silver daggers, copies of the *Sketch*, the *Autocar*, and the *Indian State Railways Magazine* ; the frequent meals, cold-storage sausages after Karachi and afterwards tinned sausages, roast turkey at Bahrein and Basrah ; bridge at the narrow little tables or a book from the library shelf ; the Jordan, Jerusalem (" that's the Mount of Olives " as the informative passenger would know), Alexandria, Athens (" those are the ruins on the hill ") and at Brindisi the pale blue coach, pleasant anticipations of a long night, and reflections on the speed of modern travel that made the terrace of the Karachi gymkhana and the Long Bar of the Trocadero only a few days apart.