Chapter III

EARLY CASES

The preceding chapter, as already noted, has run far ahead of events which marked the advance of John Warburton as a police officer.

The Punjab during the 1860's was even more riddled with crime than London a hundred years later. Moreover, there were small areas - Jaghirs, or holdings - into which Government police jurisdiction did not extend, and bands of thieves would avail themselves of this immunity, so that a police officer needed infinite patience, energy, and watchful astuteness to bring them to book.

A gang of predatory Baluchis - twenty-four strong - was finally run to earth in 1867; five Indian constables received fitting rewards, and John Warburton earned wide commendation. The case resulted, further, in the removal of police powers from the hands of a negligent Nawab.

In the same year, he arrested a murderer, and soon afterwards unmasked a blackmailing plot, in which cattle were stolen and then returned - at a price.

By 1871, it was possible for the Police Administrative Report to state cautiously that

"The Police working in crime generally has improved".

Crime during the following year was being noticeably "kept under", office records were "in good order" (he never shirked "Paper work"), and the personal safety of the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab was thoroughly ensured during his tour of districts in 1872.

It was in that year that John Warburton became District Superintendent nearer home - in fact in the Ludhiana District.

There was urgent need for his presence. A bold and troublesome criminal tribe, the Baurias, was terrorizing the neighbourhood. Several outrages, committed with impunity, had led to the conclusion that the officer in charge was a man of "failing

mind". There were "arrears and irregularities right and left". In Jagraon, highway robberies were being committed in broad daylight; kidnapping and selling girls "seemed to be the normal occupation of the people".

We are not told about the "stratagem" that resulted in the first capture of a gang of these terrorists, but, before the year was out, the whole scene had changed, as though by magic. The Police working in Ludhiana had undergone a transformation; the traffic in kidnapped girls had stopped completely; the Jail was crowded; old cases, committed under the previous régime, were coming to light, and the offenders convicted. Confidence and quiet replaced fear and mistrust.

For the first time, the word "great" was now applied to the detective skill of John Warburton. The rooting out of bad characters was accomplished by an unsurpassed determination and perseverance.

This was in an area where the police organization had been "anything but satisfactory"; some Deputy Inspectors were bluntly described as having proved "utterly useless", and the improvement of conditions in the force was ascribed to "Mr. Warburton's personal energy and exertions alone". Some of the cases had been difficult as well as important, but had been "exceedingly well worked out" under the new District Superintendent's administration, and particular reference was made to "the celebrated Mahunt of Jassowal murder case". The details of this case are not given, apparently because it was only one of a number.

A significant feature of the report is a reference to the official harmony between Departments which then prevailed.

While pursuing dacoits and thugs and bringing them to justice, mixing and conversing freely with people of all classes, winning them over to work with the police instead of against them, and drawing up exhaustive reports in concise English, he was weeding out the apathetic and corrupt among his subordinate staff, and turning the police force into a more pliable and efficient instrument.

So much work, devolving for the most part on one man alone, was bound to prove a strain, and so, during the autumn of 1873, he was reported to be "much reduced by illness". Yet he

contrived to remain at his post far too long for his safety in 1874, and a Deputy Inspector - General commented that, though the management of the Ludhiana police was creditable to him, the police working good, the men well drilled, clothed and set up, and that the District Superintendent had been attentive to their comforts and had succeeded in getting them better housed than in most districts, and kept his office a model of neatness and order, yet he had been "less prompt than could be desired in taking up personally enquiries into serious cases".

This, in 1875, was the first adverse criticism of his career, and one may imagine what the overworked and superlative police officer thought about it.

In 1876, the Prince of Wales visited the country. It was the year in which Queen Victoria became Empress of India. On the occasion of the Imperial assemblage at Delhi, it was noted that Mr. Warburton had "paid great attention to the dress, accoutrements and appointments of his men, and his detachment was perhaps the smartest sent to Delhi".

He was smart in other ways, showing "a zealous and painstaking administration of his Police and a thorough knowledge of his District". Who, indeed, could know it better? It would also have been enlightening to learn what any surviving dacoits in the District thought of the suggestion that he was lacking in promptness.

One man who knew what he was talking about was Major E. P. Gurdon, the Deputy Commissioner, who had known the Ludhiana District before John Warburton came to it as District Superintendent. The change he noticed was "very great". Crime had been so much reduced that residents spoke of the situation in terms of deep gratitude. He knew the difficulties of the police, who "in all parts of their work are, unavoidably, more or less unpopular and subject to a certain amount of invective".

He went on to say what a difficult part a police officer had to play in maintaining an efficient hold over his work "and at the same time avoiding the imputations of oppression which are only too readily raised". This letter is dated 8th April 1877.

His next referred (in the following August) to a Treasury case, and said: "I only wish you had had it entirely in your hands

from the beginning, when there would have been less anxiety as to the recovery of the booty".

It emerges from later notes that 14,000 rupees had been embezzled from the Ludhiana Treasury - a fact which did not come to light until nearly three months after Major Gurdon had made over the District.

As it had happened during his period as District Officer, however, he was deeply interested, and considered that John Warburton's experience and skill were what were required in the matter, and he evidently expressed this opinion to his successor, Captain Macpherson.

Events justified his advice. The culprit, Kirpa Ram, was discovered, and made a full confession; all the stolen money was recovered, and both officers were agreed in ascribing this success to the energy and skill displayed by the District Superintendent.

There followed cases varying from card-sharping to dacoity, which were promptly cleared up, and the suggestion that his inspection tours had not been "so complete as might be desirable", as the Deputy Inspector-General of the Police, Amballa Circle, reported, was countered by his superior, the Inspector-General of the Punjab Police with the observation that it was no doubt owing to the confidence he felt in his great knowledge of the District and people that he had been "somewhat less active". In other words, he knew what was necessary.

These cases, though complicated enough, have not been examined in detail. They amount to minor skirmishes in John Warburton's vast war against crime - as compared with certain others.

The most resounding achievement of his career was now at hand - if not the greatest. Its initial history begins in the years before he became District Superintendent at Ludhiana, but it will be told in full in the following chapter.

A MINOR CASE: "BUTTON SAHIB" ROUNDS UP SOME HORSE-THIEVES.

THE HORSE-THIEVES SWEAR TO STEAL NO MORE.

Chapter IV

THE LEGEND OF RUPALON

In the village of Rupalon, in the Ludhiana District, lived Kan Singh.

He was the Lambardar of Rupalon, a man of wealth and influence, connected by marriage with some of the most prominent officials of Patiala, Nabha, and Jind. He was a personal friend of the Rajah of Nabha, and he exercised power over the leading men of the neighbouring villages. In Rupalon alone, 72 families were on his list of debtors. His daughter married the Nazim of Bassi, which extended his influence into an adjoining portion of Patiala territory.

He himself was married to Mussammat Athri, and they had only one son, Kirpal Singh, whose wife was the daughter of Sirdar Narain Singh, an official of high standing in the service of the Rajah of Jind.

A court intrigue, however, led to the Sirdar's disgrace, followed by imprisonment and confiscation of property and valuables, chiefly in cash, amounting to 50,000 rupees, which were secretly transferred from Jind State to Kan Singh's house.

The old Sirdar died in prison, so that all this property became virtually Kan Singh's. The prospects of further additions to his wealth from the same source did much to enhance the value of their daughter-in-law in the estimation of Kirpal Singh's parents.

Kan Singh was not without enemies, as will presently appear, but they would have been of trifling significance if serious trouble had not suddenly arisen in the very heart of this prosperous family.

Their son and heir, Kirpal Singh, so suitably and profitably married, got into bad company with young men of loose habits, and, under their influence, became involved with Partabi, a young married woman of Lopon, whose morals were no better. She was the wife of a goldsmith at Lopon, and there Kirpal Singh began to visit her in 1876. She seems to have held such attractions for him that he became quite obsessed, and indeed it was as clear a case as one could find of a man's going literally off his head about

a woman. He became estranged from his own wife, and his parents, having instituted inquiries, at once detected the liaison. Her husband, the goldsmith, had left her, and Kirpal Singh then committed the incredible folly of proposing that Partabi should be introduced as a domestic into his parents' house "to help with grinding corn".

Then the sparks began to fly. They let him know that they had found out all about the intrigue, and refused bluntly to have a woman of such disreputable character in their house. There was a family quarrel, following which Kirpal Singh, setting his parents at defiance, actually introduced the girl into the house, keeping her openly as his mistress in apartments occupied by his mother and wife.

Kan Singh, not surprisingly, put his foot down, and had her turned out,

She returned to Lopon, and from there the local lambardars, prompted by Kan Singh, packed her off to her husband's house, now in the village of Rajewal, accompanied willy nilly by the husband himself, a man named Ram Rattan - and his father.

Kirpal Singh, however, had passed beyond the range of reason. He mounted his mare, set off in hot pursuit, overtook the party two miles from Rupalon, snatched Partabi from her husband and father-in-law, laid her across his horse, and carried her back to his father's house.

Ram Rattan then preferred a charge of abduction, and Kan Singh informed the police of her whereabouts. She had, of course, been turned out again, and, having sought to disguise herself, told all manner of lies, but Kirpal Singh was convicted of abduction and fined the not excessive sum of 200 rupees.

He was not to be deterred by such a trifle, and soon abducted her again, aided this time by her brother-in-law, reinstated her under the paternal roof, and even expected his wife to wait on his mistress.

Both wife and mother remonstrated frantically, pointing out the serious disgrace he was bringing on the family, which had hitherto enjoyed a respectable reputation, and asking what future was before him, with the loss of the wealth and advantages his wife had brought him. As well reason with a monsoon storm!

Threats and appeals met with the staggering reply that, if they continued to stand in his way, he would take Partabi to Ludhiana and there embrace Mohammedanism with her.

To a powerful and highly respected Sikh family, there could hardly have been a more appalling threat from their only son, and from that moment it may be said that Partabi was doomed.

Having resolved on this, the parents had first to get Kirpal Singh out of the way, and they began by pointing out to him that, as long as he kept an abducted woman on British territory, he was bound to be detected and get into serious trouble; but, if he would take service with the Rajah of Nabha, who would offer him a highly respectable appointment as Lieutenant of Cavalry, he might keep his mistress with impunity. Kirpal Singh took the bait. He did not altogether trust his mother, who had the devil's own temper, and therefore left Partabi in charge of Dalail, a servant newly engaged, who had accompanied him on hunting expeditions and generally enjoyed his confidence. He went further still, and arranged with one Mussammat Ram Devi, who supplied water to the household, to guard against the poisoning of her food.

Taking leave of Partabi, and promising to return for her within eight days, he set out with his father for Nabha on August 4th, 1876.

Mussammat Athri then went into action. First she visited Dalail's house, pretended to be astonished at finding Partabi there, and, having first unbraided her for causing all the trouble, grew gradually more gentle and coaxing, and astonished the girl and everybody else by paying her affectionate attentions, supplying her with food and sweets, having her bathed regularly, and even condescending to dress her hair. Out of Partabi's hearing, however, she abused Dalail and his wife for giving her asylum, threatened to have them turned out of the village, and did not conceal from them what were her true feelings about the woman who had beguiled her son.

Two assassins were now engaged - Sher Dil, of Jatana, a notorious ruffian, and Diwan Singh, one of Mussammat Athri's own relations.

The first plan went astray: it was for Diwan Singh to induce Partabi to take shelter in the village of Majali and for Sher Dil to wait for her on the road and cut her down with his sword - 100 rupees being offered as a fee. Mussammat Athri, however, had been careless enough to allow Ram Devi to see her in conversation with Sher Dil. He passed this on to Partabi, who was at once alarmed, and begged Dalail to remove her to a place of safety. He suggested a neighbouring sugar-cane field, where she hid herself, going in male attire, which Dalail had supplied, then changing back into her own clothes and restoring the others.

In her absence, Mussammat Athri stormed into the Dalail household in a violent passion, and threatened again to turn them both out. Dalail, thoroughly cowed, made excuses, pleading that he had merely removed the girl to a safe place to avoid getting into trouble.

Mussammat Athri now discarded her original accomplices, and sent Dalail for Muhammad Shah, Sayed of village Chak, and, in Dalail's house, all three plotted the death of Partabi. She offered 200 rupees, which they accepted.

The same night, when all was still, Muhammad Shah quietly entered the village, softly called Dalail as he passed, and together they went on, having provided themselves with a gandala (or digging tool), a basket, and a khurpa. They crossed the railway-line over a wire fence into a plain interspersed with sandhills. At the foot of one of these hills, they dug a grave, and then walked back to another sandhill, 200 yards away, on which stood a young kikar tree. The moon was shining clearly as Muhammad Shah sat down by the tree to wait, while Dalail went back to Rupalon and Partabi. He told her that one Gurdit Singh, from Mandiala, a neighbouring village, had been sent by Kirpal Singh to escort her secretly to Nabha, and urged her to hurry, to avoid being seen. Partabi, nothing doubting, took a small bundle of clothes under her arm and her half worn-out shoes, in which she could not walk very easily over ploughed or sandy ground, and followed Dalail.

As soon as they encountered Muhammad Shah, who had his face muffled, Dalail said: "Gurdit Singh, I have brought Partabi: will you start now?"

Muhammed Shah replied that, as it was a bit early to travel, it might be better for them to have a short sleep first. Partabi, probably very tired, lay down and went to sleep at once.

The two men were now waiting for the mail-train, with the idea that its passing would drown her screams.

Its approach was their signal: Muhammad Shah knelt on her chest. Dalail held down her legs, and in a moment she was beheaded.

They wrapped the head in a chudder, carried the body to the prepared grave, and buried it, throwing in her shoes and the small bundle of clothes, and took the head to some fields a few hundred yards off, where they thrust it into a hole, after deepening it, but removed the silver ear-rings before covering it over.

They recrossed the line, washed their clothes in a tank, and separated.

Mussammat Athri was informed that the deed had been done, and they produced the ear-rings as evidence, but the blood-money was only paid on Kan Singh's return.

When Kirpal Singh arrived home again, his father and uncle had departed on some business to Patiala, and the young man, looking for Partabi, was informed that she had absconded from the house.

He searched for her frantically, was met with a show of blank ignorance everywhere, and, having failed to find her, returned to Nabha to take up his military duties, but undoubtedly suspecting foul play.

His suspicions were strengthened by the report of Mangu, actually a dependant of Kan Singh, who said that Partabi had been murdered and that Dalail knew the truth. Kirpal Singh at once invited Dalail to Nabha, received him and treated him kindly, then questioned him. He went further, and made him drunk, but, even when "under the influence", Dalail gave nothing away. He went back to Rupalon, but Kirpal Singh continued to mourn Partabi and to suspect what had really happened.

Hearing of this state of affairs, his mother had a Gurmukhi letter written, purporting to have been sent by Partabi from Amritsar, where she invited Kirpal Singh to come and meet her at a certain place.

This extraordinarily foolish device brought Kirpal Singh to Amritsar quickly enough, but only deepened his suspicions when he found she was not there. He resigned his appointment at Nabha, returned to Rupalon, and again taxed Dalail about her.

The latter persisted in his denials, but the fact that he was obviously better off financially had not escaped general attention, and, with people beginning to talk, Kan Singh felt it expedient to send him away from Rupalon for a while. He was therefore appointed revenue collector at Kartapur, a village in Patiala territory belonging to Kan Singh's daughter, the widow of a Patiala official. While there, he stole some grain, which got him into trouble with Gujar Singh, a nephew of Kan Singh. Being roughly treated, Dalail returned to Rupalon in a rage, and, throwing in his lot with some of Kan Singh's enemies, assisted in the fabrication of a case in which the bones of a Mohammedan woman were produced as the remains of the murdered Partabi.

This started a police investigation.

Then, in April, 1877, Ram Rattan put in a petition, expressing suspicions of foul play against Kan Singh. A rather superficial inquiry was made, and the case was still pending, when, in December, two men came forward and said that they were prepared to point out the remains of the murdered woman.

Special police officers now took up the investigation, and some bones were found in a small hole near Rupalon, which one of the informers declared that he had seen Kan Singh and Dalail burying.

They proved to be only part of the skeleton of a young woman, lacking the bones of the hands and legs and a few others as well.

Dalail now admitted that he had taken part in the burial, stated that a stupefying drug had been administered to Partabi by certain members of Kan Singh's family, and that Gujar Singh had severed the head with a sword, taken it away somewhere else, and helped him to carry the body to a sandhill - which was searched by the police without success.

Then Dalail retracted all his statements, and explained that he had made them falsely, at the instigation of the two informers.

Further inquiries disclosed a conspiracy, got up by the Lambardar of Bholapur, to discredit Kan Singh.

By this time, the police so far engaged were in a thorough muddle. They returned to Ludhiana with Kan Singh, Kirpal Singh, Dalail, and Gujar Singh, whom they had arrested for murder; but the bones were not those of the murdered woman. Dalail said that he had been forced to confess by violent means, but there seemed little doubt that the two informers, whose names were Gulab and Lukha, though their statements were inaccurate, to put it mildly, had stumbled on a case of murder, and the Deputy Commissioner, G. E. Wakefield, concluded that Partabi had indeed been murdered and also (though here he was mistaken) that the bones were hers.

Wakefield, known as "the Burra Sahib", was a very large man of benevolent nature, with a gentle-looking wife and several children. They lived in a large house, and were extremely hospitable. Yet they were no better off than the Warburtons, and the two men would lend each other money in times of stress. "The Burra Sahib" authorized John Warburton to re-open the investigation, which had virtually collapsed.

Though suffering from a bout of sickness, he went out at once and pitched his tent at Rupalon, whose inhabitants now witnessed the spectacle of an expert in action. With a selected body of police under him, he detained all those suspected of being concerned, directly or indirectly, in the alleged murder. He placed each of them separately in charge of trustworthy officers and men, and proceeded to sort out, rapidly but methodically, all the jumble of charges, confessions, and retractions, keeping out all who might invent material for or against the prosecution.

Skilfully he played off those who were most likely to have projected the murder against those who were suspected of putting it into execution. Revelations followed rapidly. There was no doubt that Kirpal Singh had placed Partabi in charge of Dalail; but his mother was now led to disclose the name of Muhammad Shah, who had, it seemed, brought Partabi's head and showed it to her in Dalail's house.

Her statement, identifying Muhammad Shah, was corroborated by Mussammat Ram Devi, without their having been allowed to communicate with one another. In the same way, Mukabir, wife of Dalail, was led to describe Partabi's shoes, silver ring, and other possessions.

Mussammat Athri's consultation with Dalail and Muhammad Shah, the acceptance of 200 rupees offered for the murder, Partabi's sudden disappearance, and the whole plot came out - even before Dalail or Muhammad Shah had made any disclosures.

There followed a considerable amount of tortuous lying by Dalail, even after another interview with Kirpal Singh had succeeded in getting some of the truth out of him. His alternate lies and retractions had confused the police before, but now he had met his match. John Warburton first pretended to believe him, and then suddenly confronted him with damning evidence, which reduced him to incoherence. Muhammad Shah fared no better and fell into a cunning trap by trying to be too clever about the sandhills.

This led to the famous search, for which John Warburton assembled Abdul Karim (Native Doctor), Ahsan Shah (Honorary Magistrate), and Ramji Dass (Assessor). Anyone who might be a friend of Kan Singh's was kept out of the way, but Dalail was called, and, in the presence of those witnesses and of the Teshildar of Ludhiana, who was also present, his statement was read out. Muhammad Shah was also called, having denied complicity in the murder but blurted out at the same time that the body would be found in the sandhill searched before.

Now, sandhills are notoriously mobile, and it was two years since Partabi had last been seen alive. Some time passed before John Warburton, after careful inquiries and calculations, marked out one of them and fixed sticks round it. The spot was cordoned off, and 900 men set to work on September 18th, under his personal supervision, the sand being carried away in baskets. By evening, about a third of the hill had been cut away and removed. A guard was placed, which allowed no-one to approach the spot, and next morning the digging-party was increased to 1500. At about ten o'clock, when the sandhill had been reduced to about a quarter of its original size, the remains of Partabi emerged - minus the head, but with all other bones intact. The shoes, bits of cloth, remains of the silver ring, and some beads, were all there, the doctor examining everything and making careful notes.

The investigation had been re-opened by John Warburton on September 5th, 1878, so that the whole affair had been cleared up in a fortnight.

Muhammad Shah was hanged; Dalail, despite his alternate confessions and retractions, was admitted to have turned Queen's

Evidence and pardoned; Mussammat Athri, who had planned the murder, was transported for life; Kan Singh was sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment and fined 1000 rupees.

None of them could be called skilled criminals, and the glaring blunders they made laid them open to strong suspicion.

On the other hand, the false evidence, the production of the wrong body, and the suppression of all knowledge of the crime by interested persons combined to throw doubts upon the matter, especially as the police originally charged with the investigation tampered with the affair, and enabled Kan Singh to have secret interviews with Dalail.

It might have been an elaborate plot by Kan Singh's enemies to "frame" him and his family, and indeed there was such a plot at one time.

Cool action, an intelligent approach, with untiring perseverance, backed by knowledge of the country and superior detective powers, cleared up the mystery in the minimum of time, after the case had apparently collapsed.

The story lost nothing in the telling. Far and wide, through the Punjab and beyond, the powers of John Warburton took on a legendary strength. *Edmund Candler, in his book The General Plan, afterwards tried to tell it as a short story, but, as he could not follow the intricacies of the police-work involved and the peculiar problems of the case, he introduced a ghost to reveal the secret, and that rather spoilt the effect.

Of greater significance was the fact that the village poets and bards, who had long chanted tales of "Jan Nikalsain", now began to enlarge upon the epic deeds of a "police-wallah". They composed a lengthy ballad, describing the whole tragedy of Rupalon, and would come and play it on their instruments as an accompaniment to the singing on the verandah at Christmas. As the name Warburton was a little difficult to pronounce, they cut it down to "Button Sahib", and the cry, "Button Sahib ki jai!" went up - as it did for Gandhi in later years. Soon the song was being sung all over the Punjab and elsewhere. It even penetrated to the frontier, where another Warburton was just beginning his career as a political officer, and Robert even made John a small allowance. Yet the career of "Button Sahib", though already a name to conjure with, was still only developing.

* Author of THE UNVEILING OF LHASA, THE MANTLE OF THE EAST, THE LONG ROAD TO BAGHDAD, etc. Mrs Candler was reputed to be the most beautiful woman who ever went out to India.

Chapter V

POISON

Sharfu, alias Sharf-ud-din, was the son of Saudagar, a butcher in the village of Kaithan. This village is in the Hoshiarpur district, and Anglo-Indians, especially those acquainted with the Punjab, will not need to be reminded that Hoshiarpur was famous for the manufacture of lacquer and inlaid goods.

When quite a lad, Sharfu became a professional gambler and expert card-sharper. His spendthrift ways naturally brought him into conflict with his father, and a serious quarrel ended in their becoming estranged.

This happened in about 1861, when Sharfu was barely eighteen, and he left home with a company of horse-dealers, led a wandering life down country for some time, and then enlisted, surprisingly, in the Bareilly police. Presumably there was nobody to look into his past life, and Bareilly, being in the middle of what was then called the North West Provinces, was far from his birthplace.

His career as a policeman did not last long; he had a vicious disposition, and in 1864 he abducted the daughter of a "Thakur". Then, suspecting her of an intrigue, he cut off the poor girl's nose, for which he was committed to Bareilly Jail, where he suffered fifteen months' rigorous imprisonment.

While in jail, he made the acquaintance of a notorious criminal, who passed as a proselyte to Islam.

This man went under the names of Tikka Ram, alias Babu Khan, alias Lal Mohammed. He was, in fact, the head of a gang of professional poisoners.

On their release, Tikka Ram and his gang established themselves at Aligarh, in the North West Provinces, but just bordering the Punjab.

Sharf-ud-din was at first Tikka Ram's lieutenant. They carried on poisoning operations there till 1867, when, owing to some disagreement, Sharf-ud-din separated - and incredibly contrived to take service with the Agra police.

At about the same time, or shortly afterwards, Tikka Ram was arrested, charged with two cases of poisoning, and was

sentenced to 28 years' imprisonment. He was just beginning to serve his sentence when Sharf-ud-din was dismissed from the Agra police, whereupon he set off with Tikka Ram's wife, Mussammat Zahuran, and two daughters, Mussammat Wilayatan and Mussammat Banno, and also Ramzani, caste Sheikh of Badaon (in the North West Provinces) back to the Punjab, staying for a few months at Umballa and Jullunder, but then boldly returning to the village of Kaithan. A dispute over the plunder lost him the assistance of Ramzani, who returned whence he had come and disappeared from the scene of action.

In his home village of Kaithan, Sharf-ud-din now organized a fresh gang, fourteen strong, and proceeded to carry out operations on the system he had learnt from the imprisoned Tikka Ram. From the latter's poison gang he had acquired a perfect command of the Purbiah dialect of the North West Provinces. He next disguised himself as a respectable native of Oudh, and, accompanied by one of his new associates, to represent a servant, he frequented the Grand Trunk Road, waylaying natives of Oudh, returning with their wages. He gained their confidence by passing himself off as a "Kaith", or Munshi, from whom, being of a menial class themselves, they felt it an honour to accept an invitation to share meals - especially at his expense. Serving himself first, he then gave them their portions, into which he had introduced a preparation of dhatura and opium. He also preceded the meal with an aperitif of country spirits, so that their suspicions were not aroused by the symptoms which the drug produced.

They were soon insensible, and Sharf-ud-din and his companion then sprinkled the remainder of the spirits over their victims, left the empty bottle to suggest that they were simply intoxicated, and, having robbed them of all they possessed, chose a short cut across country to a fresh point, taking the precaution of exchanging their Purbiah Hindu disguises for ordinary Punjab costume.

There can seldom have been an example of more successfully organized crime. From July, 1867, till February, 1872, Sharf-ud-din continued his operations without intermission. What is almost as extraordinary is that so many similar cases of poisoning did not arouse the suspicions of the police, until the highways were almost littered with corpses in which the post-mortem revealed the presence of dhatura.

Sharf-ud-din made hist first step in the direction of discovery when he drugged a dhobi in the Karnal district in 1871, and so brought his activities to the notice of India's greatest detective.

John Warburton's report of the following October was the first to express the opinion that a gang was at work. In February, 1872, he was called upon to furnish a further report to the Inspector-General of Police, Umballa Circle, who deputed a Deputy Inspector to trace the gang.

Hardly had he done so when the first serious rift in Sharf-ud-din's organization took place, and Mussammat Zahuran, in a fit of jealousy, denounced him to the Jullunder Police. The immediate cause of the rupture was her two daughters, who with Sharf-ud-din, made themselves scarce. He had great inventive skill, and showed considerable powers of imagination in covering his tracks.

He next disguised himself as a "Darwesh", and made his way to Patiala, where two men became his pupils, Kairu and Fakiria. Still moving rapidly, he passed through Delhi and Alwar to Jaipur, and at last established himself at Jhilaya under the style of Wilayat Ali Shah, otherwise Punjabi Sha, posing as a man of good family and a professor of alchemy, pretending, among other things, to cure diseases by charms.

Here he renewed his old calling, and organized a second gang, of seven men, but carefully avoided the Punjab, where the police were not idle.

Tikka Ram had been released on a conditional pardon, and John Warburton, summoning him and his wife, Mussammat Zahuran, from Cawnpore, succeeded in obtaining from them the full history of Sharf-ud-din's career. He had been described by those who knew him intimately, and a reward of 500 rupees was offered for his apprehension.

This produced two arrests - of people resembling Sharf-ud-din, but not Sharf-ud-din himself. The Hoshiarpur police sent emissaries as far as Lucknow without result.

In May, 1874, however, Sharf-ud-din's trail was picked up again when he murdered two travellers in a garden near the Rai police station in the Delhi district. The circumstances of the crime pointed unmistakably to the same man, and a careful narrative was published in the Police Gazette, with an offer of rewards for his capture and that of his accomplices - 1000 rupees, and 500 rupees respectively.

It was still a long trial, however, and not till late April, 1879, did "Button Sahib" receive a letter from Tikka Ram, promising a clue to Sharf-ud-din's whereabouts if his expenses to Ludhiana were paid, as well as his daughter's. He at once telegraphed to the District Superintendent of Police at Muradabad to send the pair off by the next available train. They arrived two days later; their statements were recorded, and from these it seemed that Sharf-ud-din had already landed himself in prison at Agra Central Jail, but under the alias of Debi, son of Rub Chand, a resident of Jaipur.

He had disguised himself with his old consummate skill, not only having his beard shaved but only a "choti" or tuft of hair left uncut on his head, and these devices, combined with his prison dress, so baffled Tikka Ram, his old chief, and Mussammat Wilayatan, who had lived with him for years, as his wife, that neither could recognize him with any certainty. Fortunately, an able Duty Inspector and Sergeant had gone with them, with full and ample instructions and intimate descriptions, including indelible marks and distinguishing features, so that they were able to establish beyond doubt that this was indeed Sharf-ud-din himself.

Having identified him, they followed their further instructions pushed on to the gang's headquarters in Jaipur territory, arrested the whole of the new gang, and recovered a considerable amount of plundered property as well as a large quantity of dhatura seed from the house of one of them.

It was now necessary for the Inspector-General of Police to obtain sanction for the transfer of the prisoner from Agra Jail to Ludhiana. At the same time, another party of police under a Deputy Inspector was sent off to the Hoshiarpur District, and secured those of the Punjab gang who were still in their homes.

In the end, only three of Sharf-ud-din's various accomplices were still at large when the poisoner made a full and exhaustive confession, covering the commission of at least 69 crimes.

Even then, the prosecution was held up, owing to the lapse of years and also to the fact that his association with his victims had been of such short duration. Most of them had been Purbiahs or residents of Oudh, of a class constantly absent from their houses, acting as syces or grass-cutters. Imperfect and often incorrect records of residence helped to increase the

obstacles which the police had to overcome in tracing them. Apart from this, questions of jurisdiction and legal formalities proved an incredible hindrance. Miles and tangles of red tape seemed to stand in the way of the course of justice.

It was not indeed until January, 1881, that Sharf-ud-din was hanged. Several of his accomplices were transported for life, but three got off on appeal, and it was feared that some of his "pupils" might still attempt to follow up his deadly practices.

The police were on the alert, however, and knew what to look for; the organized gangs were broken up, and the wholesome fear of "Button Sahib", whose long campaign had again brought so many evil-doers to justice, continued to exercise its effect on an ever-increasing scale.

Chapter VI

THE SANSIYAS

The traditional pedigree of the Sansiyas is as simple as it is credible.

A Hindu Rajah had two sons - Oogur Sain and Gadhar Sain. The latter, having displeased his father in some way, was cursed, transformed into a donkey, and became the property of a "Kumhar".

About the same time, another Rajah had a daughter, and Gadhar Sain subsequently sought her hand in marriage. The Rajah does not seem to have objected to the idea of a donkey as a son-in-law, provided the creature could perform a miracle according to the conditions he laid down. The miracle is not specified, but, whatever it was, he performed it, and his proposal was accepted, though the views of the bride are not stated at this point.

Gadhar Sain, however, had the delicacy to visit his wife at night in human form, and again we are left to wonder why, if this was possible, he could not defy the curse and become human altogether.

One morning, he omitted to resume his donkey's hide, and went out hunting. His wife found the hide, and, preferring him as a human being to a sort of Nick Bottom, burnt it; but Gadhar Sain, on returning, was so distressed at the loss (perhaps this was how the curse worked) that he mysteriously disappeared.

The Princess was then found to be with child, upon which her father became enraged and turned her out of the house.

Retiring to some mountainous country, she gave birth to a son named Sains Mal. It was from Sains Mal that the Sansiyas unanimously claimed descent.

Sains Mal, however, married, and is said to have had four sons:Mallah, Bedho, Mahesha, and Mangal. The first two had twelve sons each-Mallah's dozen being variously regarded as the progenitors of the authentic Sansiyas. From Bedho's off-spring sprang a variety of wandering tribes - snake-charmers, bear and monkey-leaders, acrobats, women dancers and prostitutes, makers of mud toys, carriers and cattle-dealers, professional thieves, and others.

Mahesha died without issue, and Mangal had only one son, the originator of a nomadic tribe given to acrobatics.

An early authority, Colonel Harvey, General Superintendent of the Thuggi Department, summed up the Sansiyas in a report of November, 1869. In this he said that they originally followed the occupation of Bhats to the Jat tribe, the deeds of whose ancestors they chronicled, and recited when begging from them in the manner of wandering minstrels. The Jats called the Sansiyas their bards, for they attended all Jat festivals, flattering them by seeking to trace their descent from some ancient chief of warlike renown. They were repaid with donations according to merit, and came to be established as Bhats or bards of the Jat tribe and an honourable class.

Their numbers inevitably grew, so that they could not subsist on the charities of one tribe, and therefore spread over Meywar and Marwar and other Rajput States, which, however, had bards of their own.

Thus the Sansiyas took to robbery by fraud and also by open violence.

From Rajputana and Malwa they spread into the valley of the Nerbudda, and thence over Central India, but more especially over the Hyderabad and Nagpur territories, where the jungles gave them cover and the police were not formidable. They are referred to as Sansiyas in this chapter, but they became known by different names all over India. In the Punjab they were simply called Sansis.

The tribe as a whole was nomadic, living in camps formed of reed huts, and keeping donkeys and bullocks for transport.

They had no complications such as caste prejudices, ate with Hindus and Mohammedans alike, did not indeed object to feeding with sweepers, and included pigs, porcupine, jackals, and ground lizards in their fare: in fact, these were considered luxuries.

They drank country spirits, spending half their income on them, were inveterate smokers, and for nine months in the year camped in different places, the men committing robberies, the women dancing and whoring. In the rainy season they camped in certain places which they held sacred. During these months,

accounts were settled, marriages arranged (at great expense - 400 to 500 rupees according to the abilities of the suitor), and social ceremonies observed.

They combined funds for the evasion of justice and for the compensation of relatives of members sometimes mistakenly convicted for the crimes of those belonging to other gangs.

They had no religion beyond worshipping the ghosts of their ancestors - father, grandfather, and great-grandfather - in whose memories they erected masonry platforms at certain points.

They were less nomadic in certain areas, where they settled in villages - more particularly in parts of the Punjab.

*The typical Sansiya male was dark, attractive, and wiry. The adaptability of the tribe was shown by a readiness to grow hair on the head or face, or remove it, according to the custom of the country in which they found themselves. The women were generally dark and good-looking, though this did not last long. A tendency towards intimacy with better classes of Mohammedans and Hindus was apt to produce a change of appearance in both sexes, giving them a fairer appearance.

The Sansiya language possessed different dialects, but with certain words common to all sections, by which they could recognize one another.

When in their camps, the Sansiyas would help themselves to any unguarded fowls, goats, grain or garments. Their cattle would trespass on neighbouring fields, damaging the crops, and a small fee to the village headman kept his mouth shut - nor did individuals venture to protest.

Their favourite occupation, however, was highway robbery, accompanied by violence, following in the footsteps of their most lawless ancestors.

To show how they worked, however, it is best to take one district, operated by a single branch of the tribe which came from the region of Muthra. They formed their camps, however, in the district of Aligarh (remembered for its connection with Sharf-ud-din), where there were six of these camps - five of them headed

* "They met a troop of long-haired, strong-scented Sansis with baskets of lizards and unclean food on their backs, the lean dogs sniffing at their heels. These people kept their own side of the road, moving at a quick furtive jog-trot, and all, other castes gave them ample room; for the Sansi is deep pollution" - Kim

by women. Not that there was any lack of men, who amounted to 70, that is male adults quite apart from women and children, in the six camps.

They followed a well-tried system.

In parties ranging from six to twelve, they would leave their camps, taking the train at the nearest out-of-the-way station. They were careful to dress neatly in clean white clothes dhoties, kurtas, or mirzais, caps, and large turbans - looking like respectable Purbiahs. They travelled in different compartments, booking for the place from which they intended to work homewards. On arrival, they would buy cooked food and also heavy bamboo lathis, six or seven feet long. When questioned, they gave themselves out to be Banjaras, Baiparis, Gujars, Thakurs, as the case might be.

At nightfall they would go out along the high road and strip for action: that is to say, they stripped themselves of superfluous clothes, which they left in charge of one man, and then lay in wait for passing traffic. The attack was launched on an ekka or cart by striking the pony or bullocks, and the drivers, with their lathis. When it had been brought to a standstill, they pulled it off the road, pretending to be Government officials, searching for contraband opium or stolen property; the travellers would be made to get out, and they and their vehicles thoroughly searched and rifled. They then withdrew to some cover, inspected the booty, and discarded anything likely to be recognized and of no value, such as cooking utensils and ordinary clothes, leaving them on the road to be picked up by passers-by, who would be liable to incur suspicion as a result.

Thus they would commit several dacoities within a few miles and by daybreak be far away from the scene of the last robbery. They covered the ground by using ekkas and country carts.

Here is an example of an actual series of crimes committed by one gang of eight men.

On May 16th, 1882, they arrived from Aligarh at Umballa Cantonment. That night they committed six dacoities on the Grand Trunk Road towards Karnal, walked back along the railway to Rajpura Station, and from there on the 17th went to Patiala by horse dak, thence to Nabha in ekkas. On the 18th, they put up in the serai, and left that evening for Patiala. On the

road, they plundered an ekka, and reached Patiala on the morning of the 19th; from there they worked their way to Pehoa, committing three dacoities en route. On the 20th, they hired two carts, which took them to Thanesar. The following night they plundered four ekkas near Pipli, and proceeded towards Karnal, hiring a cart at Shamgar on the way, so that they reached Karnal on the 21st. The same evening they went on towards Panipat, and, after committing four dacoities, left the Grand Trunk Road and crossed the Jumna in the Muzaffarnagar District, where in the village of Nagla they hired a cart to Bahuni, in the Meerut region. There they hired another cart, which took them to Meerut City Station, whence on the 24th they left by train for Aligarh.

Total: 18 dacoities by one gang of eight men in less than ten days.

On their return from one of these expeditions, the gang would bury the plunder a little distance away, but their success would then be celebrated by feasting and drinking. A pig would be slaughtered for the occasion; and, when it was considered safe to disinter the booty, the women would be allowed to keep any trifling articles they fancied, but the rest of the jewellery, having been rapidly broken up, would be disposed of to goldsmiths or sold through dealers in country spirits.

The proceeds would be divided equally among the actual robbers, who, however, would allot a small share to members left behind through incapacity, as well as to widows of deceased members - or the wives of the convicted.

Their intelligence service was maintained through constables nominally in charge of camps, through spirit-dealers and lambardars, especially those intimate with Sansiya women. Consequently, a police raid seldom met with success. Besides this, the approach of strangers was loudly advertised by barking dogs, braying donkeys, and following on these, the beating of a drum as a signal to all males to disperse with any stolen goods - so rapidly that even pursuit on horseback was too slow to cut off the well-organised retreat.

There would remain in the camp a collection of women, children, and old men, well primed to give false names when questioned; the women would profess to be widows or unmarried- and account for the children by declaring unblushingly that they were the fruits of prostitution. No information would be forthcoming about the absent males, and sometimes the police would be

greeted with showers of dirt, embarrassing exposures, and frantic expedients, such as throwing the small children at the constables and dashing them perilously on the ground. If the police, despite these manifestations, seemed to be inclined to linger, the dispersed males would set off in gangs for different districts, there to resume their depredations.

Meanwhile, stolen property remained concealed in a number of ingenious hiding-places - for example the hollowed-out centre-poles of huts or bed-legs, the hole being stopped with a cork.

It was in July of the year 1882, already mentioned in connection with the Aligarh gang's exploits, that "Button Sahib" was placed on special duty, to investigate what amounted to a vast criminal campaign.

The series of dacoities had been going on since 1881. They were so sudden, carried out with such daring, and the movements of the dacoits so rapid, that the police were entirely baffled.

In one or two districts where (the report runs) "the unscrupulous zeal of the subordinate constabulary was allowed to have full play", perfectly innocent persons were arrested and prosecuted. We have seen already how this was likely to happen, as a result of the tactics adopted in discarding goods likely to be recognized.

What the situation demanded was a man of rare quality and generalship. "Button Sahib" had shown himself to be possessed of shrewd intelligence, untiring energy, knowledge of the people, and fluency in their language. To deal with the Sansiyas, however, something more was required -what amounted to a psychological ability to 'get into a man's skin" and gain his confidence.

Once again, when summoned to an unusual task, "Button Sahib" had the bad luck to be in poor health; but nobody would have thought it who had seen him in action. The first step he took was to go to Umballa and have a number of perfectly innocent people released. He was also in time to prevent the conviction of others, both there and in the Kurnal district.

He then went into the North West Provinces, and, living at times in a small tent, proceeded to seek out the weak links in the Sansiya organization.

To understand the magnitude of the task and the peculiar genius required for it, we must stress the fact that these people were in a strong position to bribe the police, paying handsomely to smooth matters over; further, that a Sansiya, even when caught red-handed, according to tradition, would never betray the names of his associates; the latter, moreover, would spare no pains to obtain his release by bribery, and even by employing European counsel. They invariably gave false names, both their own and those of their parents, and where they had lived - all of which made it difficult to prove previous convictions.

Though an early raid which John Warburton organized in the Aligarh district was not successful, the Sansiyas taking alarm in time to decamp, there was no doubt that they had been surprised in the middle of a wedding-feast, and left two opened bundles to show that he was on the right track. Foiled but by no means frustrated, he set to work patiently to procure approvers and to collect every bit of information about their habits and doings.

Most of the particulars already given about the Sansiyas, apart from Colonel Harvey's report, come from "Button Sahib's" investigations.

Precisely how he managed it, not even the detailed reports of his different operations disclose.

There are some twenty-six, foolscap-size, printed pages of confessions made before the astounded G. E. Wakefield, Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana, of whom we have spoken before. They show, in the words of the "Burra Sahib", that John Warburton 'succeeded in eliciting, through their disclosures, a complete and exhaustive chain of evidence conclusively connecting the accused named by the approvers with the Kurnal and Umballa cases". He contrived" In a manner hitherto unachieved" to induce certain influential Sansiyas to become renegades to their tribe, and to make unprecedented disclosures which eventually broke up a powerful organization of professional criminals extending their depredations over a large part of India.

By May, 1883, he had traced to their origin 61 important cases, in which 40 practised dacoits were engaged, but by the time he had finished, the dacoities committed were found to have been more than ten times that number, and "Button Sahib's" campaign had had such an effect on the course of events that many "budmashes" were beginning to ask themselves whether crime was a paying proposition.

A long and protracted pursuit of a vast criminal organization is less spectacular than a single event, like the Rupalon Murder Case, with its dramatic dénouement among the sandhills.

Yet his achievements with the Sansiyas were something altogether more extraordinary. He had broken into a criminal ring, whose members were bound by tradition not to give one another away; and, by the exercise of his peculiar gifts, he had persuaded some of them to "talk", and, in consequence, an extensive and once lawless area of country was rapidly becoming safe for law-abiding citizens.

The rumour ran that "Button Sahib", known already to be something more than an ordinary "police-wallah", was nothing less than "a controller of many devils".

Chapter VII

MORE SPECIAL DUTY

Though still nominally a District Superintendent of Police, the conqueror of the Sansiyas remained on special duty. Small bodies of Sansiyas continued to be rounded up for some time, though their main organization was broken.

The next case which he was called upon to investigate may be regarded as a minor importance in his career, but it concerned the robbery of the Amballa Treasury Chests of the sum of 4000 rupees.

It might well have been more; for the total amount which the police had to escort to Simla was one million rupees in 25 chests.

What had happened was that two constables hit upon the plan of opening one chest and substituting gun-barrels for rupees, which they took away and buried.

The other police on the spot arrested the right man, but the evidence, as placed before the magistrate, had so many holes in it that several other people were also in the unpleasant predicament of being open to suspicion.

"Button Sahib" went into the matter with all his customary astuteness and application. The outcome was that he not only obtained a confession, narrowing down the theft to the two constables concerned, one of whom admitted that his reduction from 2nd Grade Sergeant to constable had led him to plan the robbery out of spite, but recovered all the lost money. His investigations also showed that there had been neglect and lack of discipline in the Police Guard, without which the theft could not have been committed.

His next venture was worthier of his special attention.

In May, 1885, he went up to Kasauli (in later days to provide him with a home) to consult Colonel Ewart, the Deputy Inspector-General of Police. The business in hand was the suppression of wide criminal operations which were being carried out in various parts of India by Peshawari and other Frontier Pathans.

Nobody with any knowledge of India needs any introduction to the Pathan, but, in view of "Button Sahib's" Afghan origin, it was a case of Greek meeting Greek.

What had already been established was that the criminals were using the railway for the purpose of their depredations, which often involved violence and occasionally murder.

Reports were called for from all District Superintendents in the Umballa Circle regarding serious cases, and one of these related that, on the night of May 24th, a party of Pathans had entered the Tara Devi Temple, on the cart road about six miles from Simla. They had plundered idols and other property, whose value was rather variously assessed, murdered the man in charge, and decamped.

Now, it happened that there was already a man in custody, one Hamidulla Khan, a Pathan of Pusti Kara in the Peshawar District, who with two others had been arrested in the Ludhiana serai for being in possession of a burglarious implement, a large Kabul knife, and a supply of dhatura - everything necessary for housebreaking, poisoning, and murder.

" Button Sahib" immediately fastened on this man, somehow gained his confidence, and, in the usual extraordinary manner (which had nothing so crude as "Third Degree" or physical force about it), induced him to talk freely. He was even so obliging as to draw a plan of the Temple, showing its two entrances and surroundings, and how the idols were placed. He had visited the building in disguise, made a thorough reconnaissance, and, with five other Pathans, attempted to break in and plunder the place. The alarm was given in time, however, and the enterprise failed. Hamidulla Khan believed that his five companions on that occasion must have been those who eventually carried out the outrage of May 24th. Nor was this all: he made other important disclosures concerning large-scale burglaries perpetrated by him and his gang in Meerut and Delhi, as well as dacoities in the Hill States during his service at Meerut as a sowar in the 9th Bengal Cavalry and after his discharge from the Regiment. Before enlisting, he had been in the Peshawar Police, from which he had been dismissed after imprisonment for burglary!

Descriptions and particulars of the five Pathans were soon humming over the wires, and one thing led to another. The Simla Police gave in the names of thirteen dacoits. More and more confessions and revelations followed.

Not all of them proved reliable. The course of police investigations runs no more smoothly than that of true love. There was no doubt, however, that Hamidulla Khan was the key to much that had been secret: one man tried to murder him with a talwar snatched from a Sergeant of the Guard.

Three men got away for a time, but a huge volume of statements occupied the attention of Deputy Commissioners, Extra Assistant Commissioners, and Magistrates throughout the year.

Many criminals became known, and, in his report from Simla, the tireless District Superintendent on Special Duty ,made certain observations from which the following extract is worth quoting:

"Large numbers of similar Pathans, desperadoes whose residences and even names are unknown, ostensibly working as labourers, reside at Simla and other Hill sanatoria, the Seats of Government in India, where their presence, considering their known reckless and ruffianly character, as sufficiently proved by the cases now brought to light, is, to say the least of it, undesirable".

After referring again to the revelations of Hamidulla Khan, he stressed the propensities of the genus Pathan, and added this telling paragraph - an educational item from one who knew:

"Indeed I do not think that better evidence in proof of such inherent propensities can be adduced than by reproducing the well-known saying that, when a Pathan child is born, his parents make a hole through the wall and pass him through it as a baptism, saying to the infant Be a thief-Be a thief, instead of taking the child out by the door in the fashion of ordinary people".