

## LAUGHTER AT THE FUNERAL

By Gordon Wilmot

THE REGIMENTAL Sergeant Major escorted the Indian into my office. "Well, what is it, Dhurzi?" The Battalion tailor stood in front of my desk, a nervous little Moslem, fingering his trailing, off-white garments. It was 1947, and only a fortnight before, Pakistan had been born. Indeed, all the Moslems round us were nervous. We were in Delhi, and Delhi was quite a stretch from the nearest Pakistan border. They had reason to be nervous. One had only to poke one's nose into the Purana Quila – The Moslem refugee camp – to smell the smell of fear – and a great many other things.

"It's the Dhobi (head of the Battalion washermen), sahib, sir," he said. "He died yesterday and we cannot bury him."

"Well, dammit, you don't expect me to – do you?" "Oh, no sir." I detected a trace of Scotland in his accent. He had been with the Battalion for some time. He went on. "Thar's a sickman who carries a big sword and follows us when we leave the cantonment for the burial ground. He will kill us."

"A sick man?" I didn't understand why a sick man would want to rise from his bed and do in the Dhurzi's funeral cortege. The R.S.M. chipped in. "He means a Sikh, sir."

Of course he did. 'A Sikh man,' but he didn't pronounce the long "i". I could well imagine the menacing beard and curved sword, no doubt popping up from one of the many deep ditches that skirted the edge of the cantonment and led towards the rifle range. The old Moslem burial ground lay almost alongside the four hundred yards firing point of our range, a half mile out on the plain.

The Dhobis had a couple of huts at the gully end of the Battalion lines. There had been built a small concrete square with a large trough in the middle, and this was where they washed the Battalion's khaki-drill shirts and shorts. No, the 'Sickman' would certainly not want to join the funeral party out of respect for the deceased.

I looked across at the Dhurzi. "Well? What do you expect me to do about it?" "Sahib, sir, I would be most very pleased if you provide guard. One man, two man. Just the short time." His fingers were extraordinarily long. He had the hands of a fairy tailor in a Disney cartoon. I knew the form here, so could give him a clear cut answer. "No," I said. "I'm sorry, but I can't help you. You'll have to do your best without any help from us." "But Sahib, sir ..."

"It's your own affair, so get on with it without troubling us." I nodded to the R.S.M., and the Dhurzi was ushered out of the office. I liked him and he had served the Battalion well. He had the type of face, aged beyond his years, which was clearly alive to life's humour, of which, poor soul, he would have had little enough experience. It was a bad business, and the senseless killings were still going on. As is so often the case in the world these days, those in the minority were getting the worst of it.

In recently constituted Pakistan, Hindu villages were being burnt and pillaged, while the villagers were ruthlessly butchered. The Sikhs were sought out and cut down by the Moslems, who, hearing tales of

abominable tortures to their fellow men by the Sikhs in India, had turned into raving lunatics. In India, where Moslems were in the minority, the boot was on the other foot. Our Brigadier, coming back from seeing his wife on to the Bombay train at Delhi Station, remarked glibly that it was the first time he had seen three headless bodies before breakfast.

In all the world's history, nothing approaching the scale of this country's peace-time upheaval had ever taken place. Despite the many forebodings of a second Indian mutiny that had spread abroad, while the change-over was being discussed, the few British battalions left in India had only ringside seats in the turmoil. But even being right on the spot as we were, it was hard to grasp the immense change that was taking place to the soul of this vast tract of Asia. Hard to grasp, certainly, for myself who, beyond being born in the Indian hill station of Ranikhet and, twenty-eight years later, serving two years with the regiment in India, knew little enough of its life and history. But too easy to grasp for another, the commander of the armies there, known to soldiers as 'the Auk', whose command had now split into two and was about to cease altogether.

I shall always vividly remember that game of bowls in the garden of his lovely house that sunny evening; with the Field Marshal was the author Alan Moorhead, my commanding officer, and myself. It was quiet and the garden seemed to be purring sleepily in the sun. Then through the evening air came the distant mutter of a machine gun, firing a long burst - silence, then a short burst.

Our soldier host looked over the trees and said quietly, "That's from the other side of the river, isn't it?" The three of us who were with him remained silent, sensing the heavy heartache of one who, steeped in a country's life and history, having risen to the top of its armies, was now about to hand over something that had taken Britain a hundred and fifty years to build.

Handing over a happy country with confidence in its future would have been a different matter, but to break up like this was a bitter business.

Just before dinner the following evening my Pathan bearer announced that the Dhurzi was outside, and anxiously craved an interview. I walked out on to the veranda of my bungalow and saw about eight Moslems, headed by the Dhurzi. Salaams over, he apologised at once for any disturbance caused. He pointed out, however, that the deputation bore witness to the feeling amongst many Moslems who worked for the Battalion, that it was high time that the dead Dhobi was buried. He added that he and his fellows were peaceable men, who were greatly disturbed by the sabre rattling Sikhs, at least one of whom always appeared whenever they set foot outside the Battalion lines.

Was it not possible that I, who had always done so much for them in the past, could assist them to find a way out of this dilemma? He spoke with quick smiles and manipulation of fingers, accompanied by the solemn nods of his fellows. Looking at their bobbing heads, each face a picture of earnest misery - more like a Gilbertian scene than real life - I had to stifle a smile.

Really, comparing this burial out here with the orderliness of a funeral at home, made the whole thing ludicrous. But whenever one thought of their poverty and the web of religious prejudices into which they had been born, one felt like sobbing. "Come to the Adjutant's office at eight-thirty tomorrow morning," I said.

One thing was abundantly clear. If the British interfered in any way with the feuds going on around them it would be absolutely fatal. Favour shown to a man was favour to a sect, rumour would contort the incident, enlarge, lengthen and exaggerate it, until the British would be labelled to the creed of the man favoured. Putting my mind to the problem seriously for the first time, I saw that it really presented no difficulty. I picked up the telephone and spoke to one of the Company Commanders.

The Dhurzi was waiting for me when I came off the drill parade next morning. He got up off his haunches and saluted me. "How soon are you prepared to bury the Dhobi?" I asked. "At once, Sahib."

"In half an hour's time a Section of Charlie Company are leaving for the range from the corner of the lines nearest the range. They will be firing for about an hour." He waited. "Well? That's all. I am just telling you this in case you are interested."

"Thank you, Sahib." He backed away, then walked off briskly.

I couldn't resist going over to Support Company at nine o'clock. The Commander's office was up stairs, and outside it there was a balcony which went round the building.

It was the building nearest the range. The Company Commander saw me looking out across the plain. "Hell. What's going on now?" he asked. "See for yourself, John," I answered. It was an incongruous sight. Out in front, marching towards the range in a small cloud of dust so that their boots were invisible, strode ten hearty Jocks with their rifles slung. Fifty yards behind came five Moslems. The Dhurzi was in front, carrying spades. Behind him came his four compatriots, carrying on a board between them a body draped in a coarse white cloth, legs and feet protruding.

I hadn't time to wait, but I could well imagine them digging rather frantically and carrying out a hasty burial service while the firing practice went on. Then they would rapidly follow on behind the men when they returned to the lines. As we watched, we saw two or three of the Jocks looking over their shoulders at the macabre retinue behind them. Snatches of laughter and ribald chatter came over to us as we stood watching. I took one last look at the funeral party, shuffling jerkily along, grim and pathetic under the hot sun, in the pungent presence of death, fearful for their own lives, and trying to keep up with their cheerful escort.

As I walked down the steps to the ground floor veranda, I heard the strains of the Battalion's latest song favourite being whistled by the firing party. I thought the tune drifting over in the hot morning air was, perhaps, unintentionally appropriate.

We had a record of it in the Mess. It was called 'Adios'.