

PAGES OF BRITISH HISTORY

Medical Battles—Noteworthy Events in the Story of the Creation of

(Continued from our last.)

Siege of Pondicherry, 1760-1.

In every quarter of the globe where France had territory, war was waged against her at this time, and nowhere more successfully than in India.

The chief strength of the French there was at Pondicherry, on the Coromandel coast of Hindostan, a place which, while yet a village, with a slip of land about five miles long, had been purchased by King Louis from the Rajah of Bejapore. After being taken by the Dutch, and restored at the Peace of Ryswick, it speedily became populous; and fifty years of tranquility enabled the French to construct a handsome and regular town—the capital of their settlements in India—with strong fortifications, from which, unaided by European arms, the natives could never have expelled a garrison. The lofty bastions and ramparts were armed with formidable artillery; and, from its situation, Pondicherry could not be bombarded from the sea. Round this centre French influence extended over various parts of the vast peninsula, and France soon had colonies or factories at Balasore, Cosimbazar, Masulipatam, and other places. Their power almost overshadowed ours; and, like us, they were soon drawn into alliance with native princes, and from being merchant-traders became soldiers.

When the tide of European war flowed from the West to the East, there were in India, on the British and French sides, men of eminent ability and romantic courage.

On the declaration of war, in 1756, the Count de Lally, an Irish soldier of fortune in the French service, was sent out as lieutenant-general and commander-in-chief of the French forces in India—a distant, and to Europeans, but little known land in those days, and only to be reached by long and perilous voyages round the stormy Cape. In support of this expedition, the Count destined six millions of livres, six battalions of infantry, and three ships of war. The Chevalier des Soupirs was the second in command to Lally, who embarked at Brest, accompanied by his brother Michael. After various encounters, with varying success, in India, the Governor and Council at Calcutta, hearing that Lally meant to threaten Trichinopoly, determined that Colonel Eyre Coote, who had recently come from Europe, should take the field against him with about 700 European infantry, 7,000 sepoy, 370 horse, and 14 guns. Lally began his march at the head of 2,200 Frenchmen and 10,000 native troops. Among the latter were 1,800 blacks, called the Regiment de Marquis de Bussy, 300 Caffres, and 2,000 cavalry furnished by a Mahratta chief with whom Lally was in alliance. They were all clothed and armed after the brilliant and picturesque fashion of their country, and were led by a *ris-saldar*, or commandar of independent horse. Lally had with him twenty-five pieces of cannon.

He came in sight of the British on the banks of the Poliar, then quite dry, though in the usually rainy month of October. There they hovered in sight of each other, till Lally suddenly invested Wandewash, a fortress of the Carnatic, against which his batteries opened with such effect that in three days there was made a practicable breach in the outer bastion; but about the time that Lally, a fiery and energetic officer, was about to lead the assault, Coote, with 1,700 Europeans and 3,000 blacks, fourteen pieces of cannon, and one howitzer, came suddenly upon his rear, to relieve the garrison.

Lally now found himself between two fires; but turning, like a lion at bay, he drew off from the trenches, and, on the 21st of January, 1760, formed in order of battle.

While the lines were threequarters of a mile apart, the cannonading began on both sides, and was continued till noon, when Lally's French horse began to charge the left wing of Coote, who sent a few companies of sepoy, and two guns, and these soon drove the troopers to the rear of their own army.

Lally now placed himself at the head of his line of infantry, and leading on in person the Regiment of Lorraine, impetuously fell on that part of the British line where Coote was dismounted at the head of his troops to receive him.

Two distinct volleys of musketry were given and received, after which

the Regiment of Lorraine rushed on to the charge with incredible fury. Count Lally was in front, sword in hand. The bayonets clashed and crossed. The British line was broken, but for three minutes only.

Then ensued a brief and terrible and bloody series of single combats, and the Regiment of Lorraine was hurled back in confusion and defeat, over ground strewn with its own dead and dying; while the explosion of a tumbrel in the rear added to the disorder, of which Coote took instant advantage, by ordering Major Brereton, with Sir William Draper's Regiment, to fall on the French left, and seize a fortified post which they were about to abandon. The service was performed gallantly; the French left was routed, and hurled by the bayonet on its centre.

Confusion now reigned supreme among the enemy; but Major Brereton, a gallant and accomplished officer, fell mortally wounded.

"Follow—follow!" he exclaimed to some of his soldiers, who were affectionately disposed to linger near him. "Follow your comrades, and leave me to my fate!"

He expired soon after, but, led by Major Monson, the regiment advanced with increased ardour and fury; and after a vain and desperate attempt made by the Marquis de Bussy, with Lally's regiment of the Irish Brigade, to repel it, the French and their allies were routed in every direction. The Irish regiment was almost cut to pieces; De Bussy had his horse shot under him, and was captured by Major Monson, to whom he presented his sword.

Lally brought up his cavalry to cover his retreat from a field where he left 1,000 men killed or wounded, and 50 taken prisoners.

Coote lost 200 in killed and wounded. Ultimately the campaign ended gloriously for Britain, by the conquest of Arcot, a most extensive maritime district of Hindostan, and by hemming up the Count de Lally in the fortifications of Pondicherry.

Lally had now only 1,500 French troops with him. These were the remnants of nine corps of the King's and Company's services; the cavalry, artillery and invalids of the latter; the Creole Volunteers of the Isle of Bourbon; the Artillery du Roi, the Regiment de Mazinis, and those of Lorraine and Lally.

On land the British had four battalions of the line; at sea were seventeen sail of the line, carrying 1,038 pieces of cannon, the smallest vessels in the fleet being fifty-five ships.

The fortress of Pondicherry being as strong as art and nature could make it, Colonel Coote was perfectly aware that it could only be reduced by famine. Moreover, he was of opinion that, with such an antagonist as Lally, a siege with regular approaches and assaults might prove futile; as, in addition to his French comrades, the Irish count had a strong body of armed sepoy, and a vast store of ammunition and arms, including 700 pieces of cannon and many millions of ball cartridges. Independent of mortars, 508 pieces armed the walls, which were as much as five miles in circumference. There were thirteen great bastions and six gates.

A number of petty forts surrounded Pondicherry; but these were speedily reduced, and the whole surrounding country fell into the hands of the British.

On the 17th of March the fleet of Sir Samuel Cornish came to anchor in the roadstead; and while Coote drew nearer by land, Lally fell back on the fortress, disputing bravely every yard of ground, until in front of Pondicherry he formed those famous lines, which, with a skill and valour that were admirable, he defended for twelve weeks, thus giving sufficient time to have the town fully victualled, and also conclude a treaty with the Rajah of Mysore, who pledged himself to continue a supply of provisions—a pledge he forgot to fulfil.

On the 2nd of September, 1760, Lally made a fierce sortie on the advanced post of Coote, but was driven back with great loss, while 17 of his guns were taken. Eight days subsequently the last work of the fortified boundary was stormed, and the French were enclosed in Pondicherry. Coote had 110 killed and wounded.

A body of the 89th Highland Regiment, which had been raised among the Gordon clan in the preceding year at Badenoch, were landed from the *Sandwich*, East Indiaman, and behaved with their usual gallantry. Pressing onward, they burst from the rear, through Draper's grenadiers, in their eagerness to get at the enemy. Tossing aside their muskets, they

raised a wild cheer, and with their bonnets in one hand and claymores in the other, threw themselves upon the soldiers of Lally, and cut many to pieces. They were only 50 in number.

the highlanders. Seven of which were found to be 18-pounders, loaded to the muzzle with all sorts of projectiles—bars of iron, jagged metal, stones and bottles.

In the month of October five sail of the line remained to blockade Pondicherry from the seaward, while Col. Coote enforced the investment by land.

On the night of the 7th of October, the boats of the squadron pulled into the harbor with muffled oars; and, under the muzzles of Lally's guns, cut out a frigate and Indiaman, with the loss of only 30 men.

By the 26th of September Coote's force amounted to 3,500 Europeans and 7,000 sepoy. The scarcity within the guarded circle of Pondicherry increased daily, till at last the stock of provisions ran out, and the soldiers and citizens were compelled to devour the flesh of elephants, camels, horses, dogs, cats, and even rats. Lally was frequently implored to surrender; but to no purpose, for his lofty pride and resolute spirit had made him vow that he would perish amid the ruins of the place, yet never surrender it.

On the 9th November, when Coote erected a ricochet battery at only 1,400 yards' distance from the glacis, all hope had died away in Pondicherry.

Four other batteries were now erected—one at 1,100 yards' distant called Prince William's Battery, mounted with two guns and one mortar, to destroy the cannon on the redoubt of San Thome; a second, called Prince Edward's, faced the southern works, at 1,200 yards' distance, to enfilade the streets from north to south; a third, called the Duke of Cumberland's Battery, was thrown up 1,000 yards from the north-west bastion, and a fourth, called the Prince of Wales' Battery.

All these began firing at once on the night of the 8th of December; and, personally animating his troops, Lally responded by a simultaneous cannonade. A fifth battery, called the Hancock, armed with ten guns and three mortars, opened at 450 yards' distance on the 26th of January, 1761; and now driven frantic by their sufferings, all in Pondicherry clamoured loudly for its surrender.

Thoroughly dissatisfied, and enraged at his desertion by Rajah of Mysore, Lally exclaimed with passion—

"Hell has thrown me into this country of wickedness, and, like Jonas, I await until the whale shall receive me into his belly. I shall go among the Caffres rather than remain longer in this place."

On the 5th of January Coote attacked the redoubt of St. Thome, sword in hand, captured it, and silenced all its guns; but on the 7th Lally retook it from the sepoy who had been left in charge. A few days afterwards, Coote sent 1,100 men, to erect a sixth battery, for 11 guns and 3 mortars. The erection of this battery had the effect of completely silencing the cannon of Pondicherry.

The siege was now over. The French drums beat a parley, and four envoys came from among the ruined walls with proposals for capitulation.

These were, that the garrison, being in a state of starvation, would surrender as prisoners of war; that the people of Pondicherry should retain all their civil and religious rights.

Thus fell the capital of the French Indies, after a siege which the skill and valour of Lally protracted, amid a thousand difficulties, for over eight months.

The quantity of military stores delivered over to Coote is incredible. There were 671 guns and mortars, 14,400 muskets and pistols, 4,895 swords, 1,200 pole-axes, and 84,041 common shot, with powder in proportion. The whole plunder amounted to £2,000,000 sterling.

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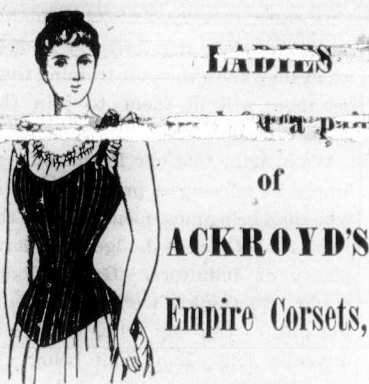
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