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EAST INDIAN RAILWAY HOUSE
CALCUTTA.28th Nov^r 1907

My dearest Pippa,

I break the silence of ages to give you an account of the strike. I suppose you have seen the Agent's letter of last week describing the beginnings of it but I may as well relate it all. On the 5th Nov^r the Loco. Suptd received an appeal signed by about 150 drivers of the lower districts of the line, mostly junior men, ~~for~~ which his decision was earnestly requested by midnight on the 14th day from the date of its submission. This appeal was a lengthy document and practically amounted to a demand for a complete new system of working the Loco. Dept in accordance with the men's ideas, the chief points being less work and more pay, and Europeans and East Indians to be treated on equal terms. It also contained various demands as to Police enquiries at accidents, the management of the E.B.S.Ry, alteration of method of calculating Income tax &c. As a whole it represents the ignorant ideas of inexperienced men for improvement of their position - many of the demands would not be acceptable to senior drivers and most of them were impracticable. However on the morning of the 18th a notice was posted up at the loco sheds from Browne saying he was prepared to listen to any reasonable grievances, but that the petition was so extraordinary that he could not believe all the signatures on it were genuine (some of them were not) and asking the men to confirm their signatures. On the afternoon of

the 18th telegrams were received from several stations from 'Traffic and Loco' saying that as the petition had not been attended to work would stop at 10 hours. This threat was carried out - Trains were run as far as the head quarters stations, and then both guards and stokers struck work - The up mails got as far as Asansol where the drivers / Conventured men who had not struck) were pulled off the engines by stokers and not allowed to proceed. This happened all over the line for the first two or three days of the strike, until we could get enough force at Ry stations to protect the men willing to work.

The chief center of the strike was Asansol where I believe ten passenger trains were held up with thousands of passengers in them. Sanitary conditions began to get bad and an epidemic of cholera was feared. However before things got too bad, a Company of British troops were despatched to Asansol and the station and yard were picketed, all stokers being turned off the premises, and it was then possible to gradually clear away the trains, but there were still many men anxious to work who did not dare to come in for fear of the stokers. You will notice that the guards had gone on strike without notice and without having given any reason for doing so - They and the drivers combined and were led by a guard called Engle-keen who was the ringleader of the guard's strike in 1906. This man has an extraordinary influence over the others and is evidently a born leader of men - Tommas Brown and George were both at Asansol trying to get the men to come in, but they refused to have anything to do with them and said they would listen to nobody but Dring the Agent and demanded his appearance at Asansol - Dring refused to do this and said he would not leave Calcutta nor act as an intermediary between the men and their Heads of Depts but that if they came to work all grievances would be carefully considered. Dring has been splendid throughout and by his firmness

has no doubt saved all railways throughout India from continual troubles of the most serious kind in future - He has had a good deal of worry from the Calcutta merchants, a good many of whom wanted him to take the men back to work on any conditions, as they don't like losing money but haven't the sense to see that if he gives in there will be railway strikes all over India every three months - However he got a little support from some of the less foolish ones, and the Board and Government have supported him well. On the 20th a meeting was held with the Consulting Committee in Dring's office when it was suggested that 3 representatives of Calcutta Commerce should go as peace-makers to Asansol to try to induce the men to return to work. Dring agreed on the understanding that they were to go as private individuals with no authority from him to make terms - Well they went to Asansol by water and had a meeting with the men which lasted all night and then they went to George and T.R.B. who were sitting in the rest room and said the men had agreed to return to work on the condition that none was to be punished for their actions. George and T.R.B. at first absolutely refused to agree to this, however the peace-makers said that if they didn't public opinion would be dead against them and that the dislocation of trade was so awful that ~~they~~ it would be very wrong not to agree to these terms, so at last after much haggling they agreed! The peace-makers then returned to announce the joyful news when they found to their disgust, that while they were away, Engle-keen had persuaded the men to revoke their decision and decline to return to work on any terms except a complete satisfaction of all their demands. This was Engle-keen's great mistake, and a great piece of good luck for us, as it is most necessary that the ringleaders should have a severe lesson, and if they had been allowed to return under an amnesty things would have been just as bad again as soon as Engle-keen thought the time was ripe - As it is, the peace-makers were furious, and agreed with George that the only thing to do was to show Engle-

See letter from Oliver to Phipps July 13, 1906 about the strike in 1906

ken, which was accordingly done next morning, the letter being personally handed to him by Colvin under the protection of a file of Tommies! Of course the men were furious and now declared that the first condition of any return to work was Sangleken's reinstatement - He has a great hold over them and at Asansol they have been very stubborn but at other stations men have been dribbling back by twos and threes, and now the drivers at Asansol have split from the guards, and in fact the strike is practically over - Ninety eight drivers at Asansol came in last night and this morning we have received a telegram from George & T.N.B. saying men returned to work strike ended -

It has been a troublesome time, but we have won the victory - It is a mercy that J.D. was not in power for he would have cared in for a certainty, as he did in the guards' strike, which has been the cause of this. On the whole the strike has been conducted by the men ^{in a} very orderly way - There has been very little rowdiness or violence and what there has been has been against the wishes of the strikers, although no doubt they terrorised a good proportion of men from working who wanted to - The water staff have given no trouble. A feature of the situation has been the fatuous imbecility of the ^{Calcutta} daily papers which have without exception written reams of idiocy on the subject. The Pioneer is the only paper I have seen which has been at all sensible -

I was going to Bombay on Tuesday to meet Margaret but of course had to stay here when the strike broke out - Luckily Jack Burns was with her and they managed to get through all right, arriving on Sunday only 3 hours late. I think she is looking very well through this, and it is a great joy to have her again - I wish she could have brought the babies with her - Please try to go down to Brighton

852 sometimes to see the creatures if you can ever escape from your Suffragettes - You might write and tell me the news of everybody and how you are getting on at Hampstead - I don't even know your address! I am very well and like my new work very much - Give my love to mamma and all of the family and with fondest love to you
Your very loving brother
Ralph Venning