

### *The Sentiment of Empire*

three-masted frigate *Southampton* arrived in Durban Bay, and the Republic was doomed. Within a few years Natal was among the most absolutely British of British colonies, officially defined as 'a centre whence the blessings of civilization and Christianity may be diffused', and the most visionary and unyielding of the Boers, packing their guns and Bibles, had trekked still farther into the interior—over the high Drakensberg, across the Vaal, deep into the territory of the Matabele, to establish high on that bitter plateau the Republic of the Transvaal—so far away this time, in country so sparse and unenticing, so innocent of advantages, that even the imperial instincts of the British, it seemed, would not again disturb the *lekker lewe* of the burghers.

*Morris: Heaven's Command*

### CHAPTER FOUR

### Roots into their Soil

ON the dirt road west of Mirzapur on the Ganges, perhaps 700 miles from Calcutta, there stood the temple of the goddess Kali at Bindhachal. It was a tumultuous and exotic shrine, especially at the end of the rainy season, when supplicants came from all over India to propitiate the goddess. The air was aromatic then with incense and blossom, dust swirled about the temple walls, the tracks were crowded with bullock-carts, wandering cows, beggars and barefoot pilgrims. Night and day goats were sacrificed, their blood spilling down the temple steps, and sometimes one heard the shrieks of devotees, tranced in ecstasy or bloody themselves with flagellation, invoking the blessings of the divinity—Kali the terrible, Kali the blood-goddess, consort of Shiva the destroyer, naked, black and furious, with her sword, her noose, and her bludgeon stuck all about with human skulls—Kali the dark one, with the protruding tongue and the bloodshot eyes, haunter of the burning ground, in whose heart death and terror festered.

This was the holy place of the Thugs, the hereditary fraternity of stranglers, who had for hundreds of years terrorized the travellers of India. Their secret society had branches and adherents from the Indus to Bengal, and they had their own hierarchy, rituals and traditions, and believed that when they strangled strangers on the road, they were strangling in Kali's cause—for Kali herself, when she had strangled the demon Rukt Bij-dana in the dawn of the world, had created two men from the sweat of her brow, and ordered them to strangle, and their posterity after them, all men who were not their kindred.

Thuggee enjoyed the secret protection of rajas and rich men, Muslim as well as Hindu, besides the terrified complicity of the

peasantry. It was an ancient secret of India—the mutilated corpse at the bottom of the well, the silent stranger at the door, the unexplained subsidy, the whisper at the cross-roads. At Bindhachal was the priesthood of the cult. There, once a year, the stranglers went to pay their dues to the priests of Kali, and to receive their sacred instructions in return: where they should operate in the following year, what fees they should bring back to the shrine, what rituals they were to perform, if they were to enjoy the protection of the goddess—for if they neglected their obligations, homeless spirits they must become, to linger without hope in the empyrean.

To the British rulers in India, Thuggee had always seemed less than wholesome. 'To pull down Kali's temple at Bundachal and hang her priests would no doubt be the wish of every honest Christian', wrote a contributor to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* in 1830. But it was the East India Company's traditional policy not to interfere with Indian religious customs. A blind eye was turned, and the rumours and legends of Thuggee inspired in the sahibs and their wives little more than a chill frisson, until in the 1830s the evangelical impulse reached the Indian Empire too, and moved the British not merely to conquer, exploit or consort with their subjects there, but actually to reform them.

## 2

The gentlemen of the East India Company had not originally intended to govern India, but merely to make money there. This they very effectively did throughout the eighteenth century, ten years' service with John Company often sufficing to set a man up for life in the Shires, see him through a convalescent retirement at Caledon, or even lay the foundations of a Sezincote. Over the course of generations merchant venturing led to military conquest. 'A very old friend of my father's,' wrote William Hickey the diarist, who went to India as a company cadet in 1769, 'presented me with a beautiful cut-and-thrust steel sword, desiring me to cut off a dozen rich fellows' heads with it, and so return a nabob myself to England.' The first forts and factories made way for palaces and barrack blocks—the Company developed from a trading agency to a Government—the

British presence moved inland from the ports to establish an ascendancy over the princes and maharajahs of the interior.

At first the Company, even with its new responsibilities, remained a swashbuckling, showy, amoral kind of service. It bred eccentrics and flamboyants, like old Sir David Ochterlony, for example, British Resident at the Court of the King of Delhi, who used to travel about the country in a carriage and four, huddled in furs, shawls and wraps of gold brocade, and attended by platoons of spearmen, troops of horsemen and, so legend said, thirteen wives each on her own elephant. There were few Englishwomen in India then, the sea passage being so long and dangerous, and the climate so dreadful, so that Englishmen were closer to Indian life than their successors were to be—often with Indian mistresses, generally with Indian friends, and cherishing little sense of racial or religious superiority.<sup>1</sup> They did not wish to change the sub-continent—it would have seemed a preposterous ambition. They treated the native princes with respect and occasional affection, tolerated the religions of the country (they actually administered several thousand Hindu temples), and did their plundering, fighting and trading in a spirit of uncensorious give-and-take. They were for the most part natural conservatives. Often they were men of aesthetic sensibilities too, and responded sensually to all the gaudy seductions of the land.

Their style was urbane. They drank tremendously and lived luxuriously. Prints of the period show the Governor-General bowling through his capital, Calcutta, in a high-wheeled gilded barouche, with foot-grooms running beside and behind, a stately coachman high on his seat, and a dashing escort of cavalymen kicking up the dust behind. The Bengalis pause to see him pass, with their water-jugs upon their heads, or their burdens laid upon the unpaved street. An ox-wagon awaits his passing. An Indian sentry presents arms. High overhead the kites soar, and perched along the balustrade of Government House, meditatively upon the lion and sphinxes of its triumphal entrance, the adjutant cranes stand statuesque against the sun. An impression of pagan but cultivated ease is given by such a

<sup>1</sup> It had been 'jungled out of them', to use a phrase of Emily Eden's.

scene. The Governor-General, though clearly immensely grand, does not seem cut off from his subjects: the relationship looks organic, like that between peasants and gentry in contemporary England, each side knowing each others' faults, and making allowances.

3

But just as in England social relationships began to shift, so in India too, as the new century advanced, the nature of the British Raj changed. In 1813 the Company's trade monopoly with India was abolished, and for the first time English public opinion began to have some direct effect upon British administration in India. 'John Company' was no longer self-sufficient and all-powerful: the British Government held a watching brief, the Crown appointed a Governor-General, and Parliament at Westminster was the ultimate authority of the Raj.

Now the vocabulary of the evangelicals, so familiar already in Africa and the Caribbean, found its way into Anglo-Indian commentaries too. We read of natives awaiting redemption, of Christianity's guiding beacon, of providential guidance and the Supreme Disposer. The Indian territories were allotted by providence to Great Britain, wrote Charles Grant, the evangelical chairman of the Company's Court of Directors, 'not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, long sunk in darkness, vice and misery, the light and benign influence of the truth, the blessings of well-regulated society, the improvements and comforts of active industry. . . .' James Stephen wrote of the 'barbarous and obscene rites of Hindoo superstition', and Wilberforce declared the Christian mission in India to be the greatest of all causes. 'Let us endeavour to strike our roots into their soil,' he wrote, 'by the gradual introduction and establishment of our own principles and opinions; of our laws, institutions and manners; above all, as the source of every other improvement, of our religion, and consequently of our morals.'

*Our own principles and opinions.* Now it became axiomatic that things English were superior to things Indian. Britons no longer habitually went out to India in their teens, fresh and receptive: nowadays

they generally went in their twenties, and they saw things differently. The old Indian ruling class, which had once worked or fought in equality with the British, was reduced in their eyes to comical or despicable ineptitude, or at most to glittering impotence (for the English always loved a prince, even a heathen one). The eighteenth-century sahibs had respected the Moghul culture, and viewed its decline with a reverent melancholy: their successors mocked and caricatured it—the last of the Moghul Emperors, Bahadur Shah, was left to rot within the walls of the Red Fort at Delhi like a quaint souvenir of the past.

With the first steamers from England there arrived, too, a new generation of Englishwomen, no longer a worldly, amused and tolerant few, but ladies of a more earnest kind, determined to keep their menfolk healthy and orthodox in mind as in flesh. Now a man could spend a family lifetime in India, with municipal responsibilities perhaps, and a prominent customary position in the evening parade through the Maidan. Now there arose a respectable Anglo-Indian community of administrators, merchants and planters, living with their families in genteel circumstances, and decorously attending church on Sundays. The Company had hitherto forbidden the entrance of Christian missionaries to India: now, by Government order, the ban was lifted, and godly apostles swarmed through the Indian possessions. Bishop Heber himself, the author of *From Greenland's Icy Mountains*, assumed the Anglican see of Calcutta, with archdeaconries throughout British India (and one in New South Wales).

The more enlightened the British in India became, the more dreadful India looked. Its ignorance! Its savagery! Its hideous customs of widow-burning, infanticide, religious extortion! Its ludicrous learning and its nonsensical laws! It seemed that God's mysterious ways had denied the Indians, perfectly intelligent though many of them were, the benefits of any true civilization of their own. The old habits of easy-going complicity, suitable enough to a commercial concern, no longer seemed proper to the British of the Raj. Was it not horrible to consider that in Calcutta, only thirty years before, the British had celebrated the Treaty of Amiens by parading with military bands to the temple of Kali herself? Or that in Ceylon,

even at the end of the 1830s, they were still shamelessly appropriating to themselves the revenues of the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy? Now, thanks to the illumination of the reformed religion, the way was clearer: India must be Anglicized.

The historian Macaulay, who spent some years in India, argued that this could best be achieved by higher education in the English manner, and in the English language, for 'the literature now extant in that language is of far greater value than all the literature which 300 years ago was extant in all the languages of the earth put together'. Others went further, and in their new-found sense of mission, diligently tried to alter the nature of Indian life. The immense structure of Indian society, which was based upon dizzy complications of caste, religion and land-ownership, was beyond their powers. Nor did they try to abolish the main body of Indian custom, social or legal, which was inextricably enmeshed in Hindu and Muslim belief. They did, however, boldly set out to stifle the most offensive of native customs, however ancient, popular or divinely rooted. They forbade human sacrifice and infanticide. They put down *suttee*, the practice of burning widows, and henceforth, in their treaties with independent princes, insisted on its abolition as a condition of their protection—though the custom was so fundamental to the Hindu moral order that its very name meant, in the Sanskrit, chaste or virtuous.<sup>1</sup> And in a model campaign of evangelical imperialism, combining high moral fervour with advanced organizational skill, they turned their attention to that abomination of Bindhachal, the secret society of stranglers.

<sup>1</sup> And one group of pious Bengalis unsuccessfully appealed to the Privy Council in London against its prohibition. It lingered anyway. In 1927, when the police tried to prosecute a case of *suttee*, one of the vernacular papers could still complain that the British judiciary was 'unfamiliar with Indian social life and outlook, and belonged to another civilization', and isolated widow-burnings were reported even in the 1940s. Human sacrifice was more resilient still. In 1970 a bus conductor and his father in a village near Saharanpur were alleged to have sacrificed a ten-year-old boy to Kali: the crime came to light, it was macabrely said, when villagers felt giddy after eating a sacred *chupatti* distributed by the accused after worshipping the goddess.

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Their agent of wrath was Captain William Sleeman, who had gone to India in 1809 as a cadet in the Company's Bengal Army. He was a soldier's son, and a figure of Cromwellian integrity—auburn-haired, blue-eyed, with a stubby farmer's face and a fine high forehead. He spoke Arabic, Persian and Urdu, he excelled at the tougher sports, he did not smoke and hardly drank, he read the rationalist philosophers like Locke and Hobbes, and he stayed generally aloof from the womanizing and high jinks that characterized the lives of most young Company officers. In his thirties, Sleeman was seconded to the civil administration, and it was as a magistrate and district officer in central India that he first became interested in the ghastly mystery of the Thugs. Patiently and methodically he learnt all he could about the sect, and so horrified was he by his discoveries that by the 1820s it had become his prime purpose in life to destroy Thuggee, in the practice as in the principle—not merely to prevent its murders and punish its practitioners, but to discredit its tenets too.

The Thugs worked in absolute secrecy according to strictly-enforced rituals. They were highway murderers. Finding a likely group of travellers upon the road, preferably of their own caste, they would infiltrate themselves into their company with ingratiating talk, join them on their journey for a day or two, and then, when the moment seemed ripe, the place suitable and the omens auspicious, fall upon their companions with a well-tried technique of noose-work, knee and grapple, and strangle them from behind with a silken noose. They cut the bodies about with ritual gashes, buried them or threw them down wells, burnt any belongings of no value and ran off with the rest, sometimes taking with them also an especially attractive child or two. Not a trace, of Thug or traveller, was left upon the scene.

By western criminal standards these were motiveless crimes. Any victims would do, and they simply disappeared without trace or apparent cause. If evidence of Thuggee ever came to light, most Indian peasants were far too frightened to reveal it, and in the

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ordinary courts of law Thugs were nearly always acquitted; for the stranglers were migratory and all-knowing, might take their revenge anywhere, and were the servants of Kali herself, who lived on blood. The Thugs were active all over India between November and May, the travelling season, and were at their most murderous in Bhopal and Bhilsa, in central India, where Sleeman estimated that the odds against a citizen's safe passage in the months of Thuggee were almost two to one. In 1812 it was reckoned that 40,000 people were killed by the Thugs each year; in three months of 1831 one gang murdered 108 people; many individual practitioners had strangled, during a lifetime in the guild, a thousand victims with their own hands.

The Thugs had their own hierarchy and forms of initiation, and their own secret language, which, like the Romany of the gypsies, enabled them to express hidden meanings in the presence of strangers. Its words, though Hindustani in form, were mostly peculiar to itself, and its meanings were sinister. *Bisul purna*, for instance, was a clumsy strangling; *jywaloo* was a victim left for dead but found to be alive; *kburuk* was the noise made by the pickaxe when digging a grave. The *rumal* was the yellow silk handkerchief, tied around a silver rupee, with which the stranglers killed. The *pola* was the secret sign left by one Thug for another. The *gobba* was the round communal grave of Thuggee, in which the victim corpses were packed around a central core of earth, to prevent the jackals exhuming them, or the corpses themselves, as Sleeman once put it, 'emitting that effluvia which often leads to their discovery'.

Thuggee was strictly hereditary. A boy-child was initiated stage by stage into the full horror of the craft—as a scout first, then as a grave-digger, then as assistant murderer, and finally, if he could show the necessary attributes of steel and ferocity, as a qualified *bburtote* or strangler, an aristocrat among Thugs. A boy's first murder was an occasion for rejoicing, like a rite of puberty or circumcision, and elaborate ceremonials attended the sacred pickaxe which every thug gang carried—*kussee*, the holy emblem of the craft, which was a tooth from the mouth of Kali, and without which no strangling could be sanctified. After every murder the Thugs sacramentally ate a morsel of consecrated sugar, and this coarse yellow *goor*, they

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believed, irrevocably altered them. 'The *goor* . . . changes our nature. It would change the nature of a horse. Let any man once taste of the *goor* and he will be a Thug, though he know all the trades and have all the wealth in the world.'

The British had known about the Thugs for many years. As early as 1673, John Fryer had reported the awful bravado of a young Thug who, tied up for hanging, 'boasted, that though he were not yet Fourteen Years of Age, he had killed his fifteen men'. But generally the British, like the indigenes, preferred not to see, or at least to convict: in 1827, when three Thugs turned informer and four more were charged with murder, the British circuit judge not only dismissed the case, but sentenced the informers to five years for giving false evidence, their sentence to be preceded by five days spent riding backwards on donkeys round and round the city of Jubbulpore. It was not until 1830 that a new Governor-General, the reformist Whig Lord William Bentinck, appointed Sleeman Superintendent for the Suppression of Thugs, gave him fifty mounted irregulars and forty sepoy infantrymen, and set him loose in an area twice as large as England, Scotland and Wales put together to destroy what Sleeman himself called 'the most dreadful and extraordinary secret society in the history of the human race'.

The evangelical mission could be merciless itself, in the knowledge of its rectitude, and civil liberties got short shrift in Sleeman's Thug-hunt. He operated from headquarters at Saugor, a drab and dirty town set on a forbidding lake in the heart of the Thug country. His campaign depended upon the use of informers—'approvers', as they were called then—convicted Thugs whose lives were spared in return for information and help in the field. The informers themselves, though they might not die, never regained their liberty—'like tigers', it was said, 'their thirst for blood is never to be appeased'—and captured Thugs were removed from the ordinary processes of law, and tried by a Special Commissioner. Those who were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment or more had branded upon their backs and shoulders the words 'Convicted Thug' in the vernacular—a deviation from the Regulations fully warranted by the crime of Thuggism, which justly places those who practised it beyond the pale of social justice'. Later they were

tattooed with the single word 'Thug' neatly on their lower eyelids.

5

Sleeman worked with a relentless urgency. He had a Cause. 'I glory in it,' he wrote, 'and ever shall do.' With a few assistants fired by his zeal, with his wild troop of horsemen, turbanned, sashed and sabred, relentlessly he tracked down every clue and brainwashed every captive: and 'ever at the stirrup of . . . the Thug-hunting Englishman', he wrote, 'went one or two apostate members of their own murderous guild'. Every thread of information was passed to his headquarters at Saugor, until he had built up a detailed intelligence file on everything to do with the history, the symbolisms, the customs and the techniques of Thuggee, linked to a ten-foot map more detailed than India had ever known.

In ones and twos at first, later in scores, the Thugs were brought chained and hangdog into his courtyard, to be registered, interrogated, and locked up in the gloomy castellated prison which overlooked the lake. They were, to judge by drawings of the time, distinguished-looking men, mustachio'd more often than bearded, wearing turbans, white sashed dhotis over pantaloons, and sandals with curled toes. Sometimes the relatives of innocent victims passed by them in the yard, to identify exhumed corpses, or claim the possessions of murdered relatives. Inside Sleeman's offices, day after day for years, the painstaking questioning and interpretation of evidence proceeded. Once caught, a Thug suspect seldom returned to the world: condemned upon the evidence of his own comrades, he very soon found himself branded on the back and shoulders, thrown into jail at Saugor or Jubbulpore, or summarily hanged.

Sleeman found Thugs everywhere. He winkled them out from village and from castle. Some were senior officials in the service of Indian princes: one experienced strangler was spotted drilling the soldiers of the Ruler of Holkar in the courtyard of His Highness's palace. Some were the trusted servants of Europeans: the most important of all Sleeman's captives, the great Thug leader Feringheea of Gwalior, had been an intelligence agent in the employ of Sir

David Ochterlony. Several Thugs had spent half a lifetime in the service of the East India Company's armed forces, and one caught by Sleeman's irregulars was a well-trusted police informant on other varieties of crime. Sleeman also hounded down the bankers and patrons of Thuggee—'capitalists of murder', as he splendidly called them—and by the end of 1833 the Special Commissioner was able to report to Bentinck that 'the final extirpation of these enemies to mankind cannot be far distant, and will afford the noblest trophy to adorn His Lordship's return to his native country'.

This was the first systematic attempt to deal with organized crime in India—something quite new in Indian history. Yet even more effective than all the forensic and administrative skill, so characteristic of the new age, was the moral zeal behind it. The power of Sleeman's Christian conviction proved far stronger than the power of the Thugs' fraternal oath. Informers were obtained in surprising numbers, and once within the range of Sleeman's steady blue eyes, not to speak of those fierce horsemen in the lines outside, they talked freely and fluently—sometimes even engagingly.

'I am a Thug,' ran the confession of one eminent assassin, 'my father and grandfather were Thugs, and I have Thugged with many. Let the government employ me and I will do its work.' Each Thug-hunting posse, with its attendant apostates ready for betrayal, was a triumphant confirmation of Christian superiority over the forces of evil and ignorance. The Thugs themselves recognized this spiritual ascendancy. They had always believed their own powers to be supernatural. They worked to auguries and omens, and they were in occult partnership with their kin of the animal world, the tiger—'those who escaped the tigers fell into the hands of the Thugs', reminisced a famous strangler of Oudh, 'and those who escaped the Thugs were devoured by the tigers'. Yet even these arcane advantages, it seemed, were not enough to withstand the *iqbal* or auspice of the British. It was so powerful, one Thug assured Sleeman, that 'before the sound of your drums sorcerers, witches and demons take flight. How can Thuggee stand?' The powerful patrons of Thuggee, too, prudently recognized this force: Dhunraj Seth, for instance, a rich banker of Omrautee who had invested deeply in Thug enterprises, now directed his funds into a securer field—the



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East India Company's monopoly of the opium trade with China.

Sleeman was not surprised. He was a true son of his times. Fascinated though he was by the intricacies of Indian religion, he trusted in the omnipotence of western right and reason. We have verbatim records of his conversations with captured Thugs, and from them we can hear him, muffled but still indefatigable across the years, deliberately pitting his own convictions against the superstitions of his captives. Once or twice he seems to falter. One persuasive prisoner, who had admitted to 931 murders by his own hand, tried to convince Sleeman that the pleasures of Thuggee were merely akin to, though distinctly superior to, the pleasures of big-game hunting, to which Sleeman was himself addicted. 'For you, sahib, have but the instincts of the wild beasts to overcome, whereas the Thug has to subdue the suspicions and fears of intelligent men and women, often heavily armed and guarded. . . . Can you not imagine the pleasure of overcoming such protection during days of travel in their company, the joy of seeing suspicion change to friendship, until that wonderful moment arrives when the *rumal* completes the *shikar*—this soft *rumal*, which has ended the life of hundreds? Remorse, sahib? Never! Joy and elation, often!'

In any case, Thugs habitually insisted, they did not kill irresponsibly, like common murderers—God was in effect the strangler, and God allowed them the profits of their trade. Mere thieving they despised. 'A thief is a contemptible being, but a Thug—rides his horse—wears his dagger—shows a front! Thieving? Never! Never! If a banker's treasure were before me, and entrusted to my care, though in hunger and dying I would spurn to steal. But let a banker go on a journey and I would certainly murder him.' Thuggee was holy work. God was the killer.

'Then by whose killing,' asked Sleeman once, perhaps a little anxiously, 'have all the Thugs who have been hanged at Saugor and Jubbulpore been killed?'

'God's, of course.'

'And there is but one God?'

'One God above all Gods.'

'And if that one God above all Gods supports us we shall succeed?'

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'We see that God is assisting you, and that Devi has withdrawn her protection on account of our transgressions. We have sadly neglected her worship. God only knows how it will end.'

There was a nagging sense of incompleteness to such an exchange. Sleeman had to work hard to convince himself that his methods were fair, however unimpeachable his cause, and once, having lately learnt of the existence of yet another Thug gang, 300 strong, he was plunged into self-mortification. 'What a sad but faithful picture of our ruined nature does this present! Three hundred sons of fallen Adam leaguings themselves together for the purpose of *murder*! Are we by nature in the sight of God better than they? Certainly not . . . we are all—even you, gentle reader—in the sight of God as those 300 Thugs. As it is written, there is none righteous, no not *one*!'

## 6

By 1841 the cult had been virtually exterminated.<sup>1</sup> Several thousand Thugs had been tried, hundreds had been hanged, many were imprisoned or transported to the penal settlements of the Andaman Islands. The less terrible of them were sent to a trade school within the prison at Jubbulpore, where they learnt such useful crafts as carpet-making, cloth-weaving, carpentry and brick-laying. As the assassins lost their lust for blood, Sleeman built a walled village near the jail, where their wives and families lived. Later still the prisoners moved in there too, and until late in the Victorian era curious Anglo-Indians used to visit them as they aged, to gain a horrible thrill from their glimpses over the wall, and imagine all the terrors of noose, dismemberment and burial which had given the old reprobates such holy pleasure long before.

Almost to the end the campaign had found its opponents among the British themselves, for there were still men who believed such practices as Thuggee to be the prerogative of the Indian condition, and who doubted if reformist zeal could properly be applied to such

<sup>1</sup> Though the office of Superintendent of Thuggee survived until 1904, and until the 1940s at least the office of the Intelligence Bureau at Simla was popularly known as Thagi Daftar—Thug Office.

a people. As Sir Thomas Munro, one of the most celebrated of Anglo-Indian administrators, had said long before: 'I have no faith in the modern doctrine of the improvement of the Hindus, or of any other people. When I read, as I sometimes do, of a measure by which a large province had been suddenly improved, or a race of semi-barbarians civilized almost to Quakerism, I throw away the book'. Thuggee was an Indian tradition: what was more, it was a religious custom, and even Macaulay did not believe in trying to wean the Indians from their religions.

So Sleeman was not without his critics. Some were old-school administrators who believed in the principle of non-interference—'do nothing', as it used to be said, 'have nothing done and let nobody do anything'. Others were legalists who objected to his authoritarian methods. Others again, especially British Residents at the courts of independent Indian princes, thought he behaved unconstitutionally. The Resident at Gwalior, for example, opposed the Thug-hunters so resolutely that Gwalior became a Thug sanctuary, and after murder expeditions, so Sleeman maintained, stranglers could return there with as much safety as an Englishman to his inn. The Resident at Bharatpore was no less hostile: he was astonished to learn, he wrote to the Governor-General, that in the hunt for Thugs the end justified the means, 'a doctrine which I had erroneously supposed to have been long since exploded alike from morals and politics'.

But these were eighteenth-century voices, arguing against the times. Sleeman's campaign against the Thugs exactly fitted the developing ethos of Empire, even to its element of righteous ruthlessness. Charles Grant had expressed it perfectly. 'We cannot avoid recognizing in the people of Hindustan,' he had written, 'a race of men lamentably degenerate and base; retaining but a feeble sense of moral obligation; yet obstinate in their disregard of what they know to be right, governed by malevolent and licentious passions, strongly exemplifying the effects produced on society by a great and general corruption of manners'. No class of Hindu, clearly, was more degenerate and base than the fraternity of Thugs, or was governed by more malevolent and licentious passions; their practices offended against a universal moral law which, the evangelical imperialists

argued, stood above religious faiths, and which it was the first duty of Empire to uphold.

7

As for Sleeman, he bore no grudge against the Thugs, remorselessly though he had hunted them for so many years. He was a generous soul, he was no prig or chauvinist, and his satisfaction appears to have been purely ideological. He had proved the *iqbal* of Victoria's Empire, and deepened its roots in India. On New Year's Day, 1833, he set out on an official tour of his territories, carried in a palanquin, wearing his gold-faced tunic and his feathered cocked hat, preceded by an elephant and escorted as usual by sepoys and cavalrymen. With him went his wife Amelie, the daughter of a French sugar-planter in Mauritius. Mrs Sleeman was far gone in pregnancy, and what with the jolting of the palanquin and the nightly exertions of setting up camp (for they travelled less sumptuously than the Edens), on the sixth day out from Saugor she was seized with labour pains.

They pitched camp as soon as possible, in a grove of lime and peepul trees beside the way, and there in the shade a boy was born. It was an apposite *accouchement*. As Sleeman well knew, the grove had been notorious for generations as a haunt of Thugs—a *bele*, a place of strangulation. In that place, over several centuries, scores, perhaps hundreds of innocents had felt the Thug knee in the small of the back, the Thug breathing behind the head, and the soft silken pull of the *rumal* around the neck. A Thug baby born in such a murder-place would be considered unclean, and would pass his contamination down the family line, but Sleeman knew better. He was a man of the imperial enlightenment, and he, his wife and the baby boy all lived happily ever after.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Or at least for another twenty years, until he died with Amelie at his side—a Major-General, British Resident at the Court of Oudh, recommended for a knighthood, of a heart attack off the coast of Ceylon, on his way home after forty-six years in India to the land of just and old renown.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Laws of War

FORCE was ever the fuel of empires, though, and inevitably Victoria's was very soon at war. The first Victorian punitive expedition was mounted in November, 1837, just six months after the Queen's accession, and for the rest of the century her dominions were seldom at peace. Waterloo and Trafalgar had left Britain with the power to prevent any further global conflict for a century, but the Pax Britannica itself, the peace of Empire, was maintained only by incessant small campaigns. 'The great principles of morality,' the good Lord Glenelg once declared, 'are of immutable and universal obligation, and from them are deduced the laws of war. . . . Whether we contend with a civilized or barbarous enemy, the gratuitous aggravation of the horrors of war on the plea of vengeance or retribution, or on any similar grounds, is alike indefensible.' Few educated Englishmen would dissent in principle: in practice, by the nature of empire, Queen Victoria's wars did not always lack their gratuitous aggravations, and in the scale of the imperial motives the philanthropic was nicely balanced by the belligerent. War came naturally enough to the British, after so much experience of it, and empire offered them a more or less perpetual battle-field.

## 2

There were two main imperial armies. The first was the British Army proper, with its headquarters at the Horse Guards in London. In 1838 it was about 100,000 strong, divided into three guards' regiments, eight cavalry regiments, thirteen infantry regiments of the line, eight regiments of artillery and an incipient corps of engineers. Rather more than half of it was normally stationed abroad, and there were garrisons and contingents scattered across the globe

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from Tasmania, where the Army guarded the convict settlements, to Jamaica, where a force buried deep in the queer hill-country called the Cockpit, high above Falmouth, kept watch upon those refractory aboriginals, the Maroons. As a social institution the Army had scarcely changed since Marlborough's day. Its officers, many of them rich men of fashion, bought their commissions still, and did not generally find their duties onerous: training was minimal, and the average officer had plenty of time to spend on field sports, horse-breeding, or living it up in town. As for the rank and file, they remained Wellington's scum of the earth, so astonishingly redeemable by discipline and dangers shared. They enlisted for twenty-one years, and a large proportion of them were Irish Catholics, supplemented by recruits from all the simpler regions of Britain—the Scottish Highlands, the West Country, mid-Wales—and by an assortment of riff-raff and pseudonymous rogues.

Professionally the Army had not much progressed since Waterloo. Tactics were still based upon the square and the thin red line, training was still a matter of rigid regulation inflexibly enforced. Marksmanship was hit-and-miss: if a soldier hit the target once in three or four attempts, he was considered a good shot. Parade orders were still those of the eighteenth century—'The battalion will change front by the wheel and countermarch of subdivisions round the centre—Close up the supernumerary ranks—Right subdivisions right about face, the whole right wheel—Quick *March!*' The grand bewhiskered sergeants of 1815 were still the Army's core in 1839, and the soldiers went to war in the same long greatcoats, thick scarlet uniforms, shakos and whited bandoliers.

The Army lived ritualistically. Flags, guns and traditions were holy to it, and loyalty to one's regiment was the emotional keynote of the service. When a soldier was sentenced to death he was paraded blindfolded before his own regiment, made to kneel upon his own coffin, and, while the band played the Dead March from *Saul*, shot there and then. An elephant who refused to pull a gun to one Indian battle was formally court-martialled, and sentenced to receive twenty-five lashes of a chain administered by a fellow-elephant.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Though the British never liked using elephants in war—they suffered from footsores, and their ear-drums were vulnerable to the crack of rifle-fire.

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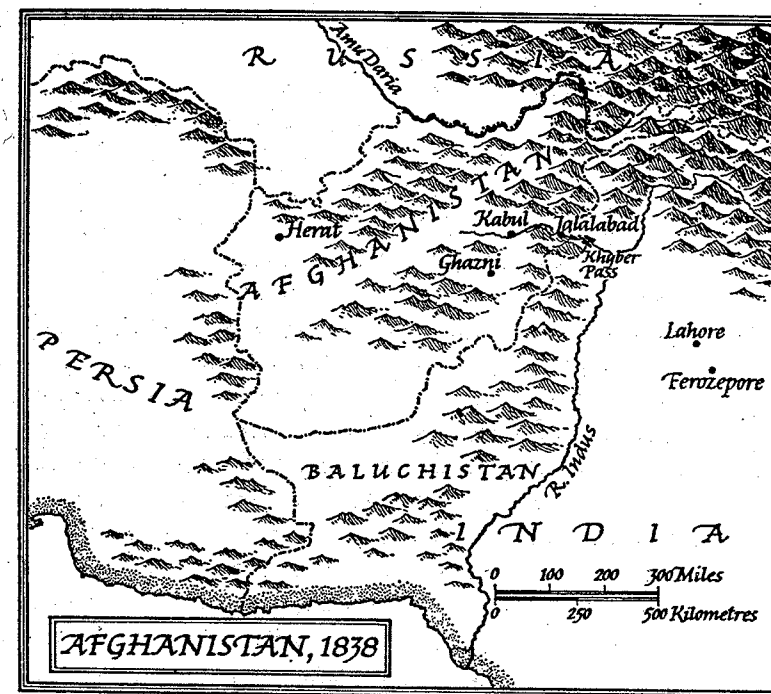
Ceremony and display was immensely important to the British military ethos, and this taste for splendour was carried over to the Empire, and became an imperial technique too.

The other imperial army was a very different force. Since the seventeenth century the East India Company—'John Company'—had maintained its own armed forces. By 1839 this army was divided into three Presidency forces, raised by the three administrative divisions of British India, Bengal, Madras and Bombay, the general commanding the Bengal Army being normally the senior officer of all. It was a force unique in the history of Asia. Though raised and paid by the Company, it was in effect at the disposal of the Crown, and formed a mercenary army bigger by far than the Queen's own forces. There were a few regiments of European infantry, recruited mostly from Ireland or among the drifters and adventurers always at a loose end in British India, but most of the other ranks were Indian: sepoy infantrymen of all races and religions, wearing uniforms that looked more British than Asiatic, drilled to British methods, grouped in numbered regiments in the British style: colourful troopers of irregular horse, raised on a personal or family basis by individual British officers—like the celebrated Skinner's Horse, 'the Yellow Boys', raised by the half-caste James Skinner, and run as a kind of club.

The commissioned officers of this curious force were all British, educated at the Company's own military academy at Addiscombe in Surrey, where they took a two-year course in military subjects, Hindustani, mathematics and mechanics. They did not buy their commissions (though a boy could be nominated for one by a grandee of the Company) and promotion was generally by merit. The long hot years in India inevitably took their toll; many officers deteriorated before their time, or succumbed to debauch and gluttony, and the glamour of it all masked many flaws and deficiencies. Even so, John Company's Army was a formidable machine—experienced, professional, and at some 250,000 men larger than any European army except Russia's.

The two imperial armies did not greatly care for one another. Their styles were different, and the contrasts jarred. The Indian armies had abolished flogging in 1835; the British Army flogged

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so readily that troops in the Queen's regiments were nicknamed 'bloody-backs'. The British private soldier generally soldiered *faute de mieux*: the sepoy generally came from a military caste, proud of his hereditary calling and much respected for it. British Army officers were often terrific swells, Indian Army officers were mostly middle-class career men. Contact between the armies, which frequently served side by side, was polite but not often enthusiastic: British Army officers did not much like working under the command of Company generals, and Company soldiers resented the fact that many of the best local appointments, like that of C-in-C, Bengal Army, were reserved for Queen's officers.

But between them they were extremely powerful, and the story of Victoria's Empire, as it unfolded during the next half-century, weaved itself around their joint existence, and often followed their trumpets.

The first big Victorian war was precipitated by Emily Eden's brother George. In the 1830s most of the British possessions could be considered invulnerable. The Royal Navy made them so. There was a long land frontier, it was true, between Canada and the United States, but 10 million Americans with their minds on other things did not then pose any serious threat to the stability of the Empire: on the contrary, the Royal Navy was their own first line of defence, and the only real guarantor of their Monroe Doctrine. As for the scattered islands and remoter settlements of the Empire, they were either so awful as to be scarcely worth coveting, or accessible only by courtesy of the British fleet.

The one exception was India, where during the past half century British power had been extending steadily towards the north. Here the British must defend a land frontier 2,000 miles long. No foreseeable threat arose from the decadent Chinese Empire in the north-east.<sup>1</sup> To the north-west, however, stood Russia, whose strength was uncertain, whose intentions were always mysterious, and whose empire in Asia had grown as fast as Britain's. In theory at least the most vulnerable corner of the British Empire was the top left corner of India, and there lay the home ground of the Great Game, which was to share courts with the Eastern Question for much of the nineteenth century. At one time or another Turkey, Persia, Egypt and the Balkans were all considered by British strategists to be the Key to India, but the classic Great Game was played in the mountain kingdom of Afghanistan, and there more than anywhere the British repeatedly scented danger. Immediately to the north of it the Russian Empire lay, probing towards Bokhara and Khiva; immediately to the south lay the British Empire, whose influence extended, thanks to a treaty with Ranjit Singh the Sikh, to the line of the Indus river. Between the two the Afghan kingdom stood glowering and secretive, inhabited by some of the most warlike

<sup>1</sup> When the British acquired Hong Kong in 1841, indeed, in the course of a trade war against the Chinese, one commentator likened the new colony to 'a notch cut in China as a woodsman notches a tree, to mark it for felling at a convenient opportunity'.

peoples on the face of the earth, and veiled always in intrigue.

It was little-known to Europeans, except by disrepute. Its capital, Kabul, lay deep within the mountains at 6,000 feet, clustered at the foot of a mediaeval citadel, the Bala Hissar, on a desolate gravel plain: a foxy, evasive kind of city, riddled with xenophobia and conspiracy, and living it seemed always on its nerves. All around were unmapped, bald and inhospitable highlands, pierced by narrow ravines and deep river-beds, traversed only by rough tracks. The kingdom made its living by plunder and agriculture, for the Muslim Afghans thought trade an ignoble occupation, and left it to foreigners. The general character of the people was at once savagely independent and desperately unpredictable. The Afghans could be lively, humorous, courageous, even warm-hearted: but they could also be bigoted, sly, and murderous. They were uncompromisingly picturesque. The women were enveloped head to foot in the white cylinder of the *burkha*, with only a mesh at the eyes to demonstrate the human presence within. The men wore huge turbans, or satin caps with gold brocade crowns, with leather boots buttoned up to the calf, huge sheepskin cloaks over their shoulders, and shirts with wide sleeves for the concealment of daggers or poison phials.

The Afghans were not only implacably chauvinist, they also fought incessantly among themselves, for they were split into great tribal divisions—the Durrani, the Ghilzais, the Barakzais—and sub-divided multitudinously into clans—Hazarahs, Tajiks, Sadozais, Khaibaris, Afridis—not to speak of innumerable Pathan groupings on the southern border, and Tartars and Uzbeks in the north. All these groups had their own characteristics, their own traditions and their own loyalties, and they made Afghanistan extraordinarily difficult for a foreigner to understand, and almost impossible to govern. There had been eight changes of royal dynasty in the past half-century, deposed monarchs generally being murdered, but sometimes only blinded.

The British wished, on the whole, to preserve the independence of this unnerving State, as a buffer against Russian pretensions. In the 1830s, however, they had doubts. The Amir Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk, one of the flabbier of Afghanistan's generally gristly kings, had been deposed thirty years before and had been in exile ever since,

first as an enforced guest of Ranjit Singh, then as a pensioner of the British in India. It was now rumoured that his successor, the virile Dost Mohammed, might be plotting an association with the Russians. There were whispers of Russian missions, subventions, arms supplies, and at the same time the Russians were known to be backing the Persian army which was, in a desultory sort of way, besieging the Afghan fortress of Herat in the west. These were misty, contradictory reports, but in 1837 a British agent, Alexander Burnes, went to Kabul ostensibly on a commercial mission, and confirmed that there really was a Russian mission in the city. Just what the Russians were up to, nobody knew:<sup>1</sup> but they were evidently up to something in the far north-west.

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Lord Auckland, a weak, diligent and ordinary man, was perturbed. It took six months to get an answer from London, so the problem was all his. Burnes had recommended that the Dost, for all his flirtations with the Russians, should be regarded as a potential ally rather than a likely enemy. Auckland and his advisers in Calcutta determined otherwise. Dost Mohammed, they decreed, must be removed from office in the interests of imperial security, and the aged and compliant Shah Shuja restored to his throne in Kabul. In October, 1838, Auckland accordingly published, from his retreat at Simla in the Himalayan foothills, a manifesto of intent. The Governor-General felt the importance, it said, of taking immediate measures to arrest the rapid progress of foreign intrigue and aggression towards the imperial territories. Since Dost Mohammed and his supporters had proved themselves 'ill-fitted . . . to be useful allies to the British Government', the British proposed to restore to the throne of Kabul the exiled and rightful king, who would 'enter Afghanistan surrounded by his own troops, and will be supported against foreign interference and factious opposition by a British army; and when once he shall be secured in power, and the inde-

<sup>1</sup> Intelligence was limited, since no Briton in India understood their language.

pendence and integrity of Afghanistan established, the British army will be withdrawn'.

This was a dishonest proclamation. Far from being ill-fitted as an ally, Dost Mohammed was conceded by everyone who met him to be infinitely superior to Shah Shuja, and his subjection to Russian influence was at best uncertain. There was no sign that the Afghans wanted Shah Shuja back, and still less evidence that they would welcome a British army to protect him. The Perso-Russian siege of Herat presently failed anyway. From the start the Afghan enterprise was distrusted by many Britons at home. Lord Palmerston, Foreign Secretary in Lord Melbourne's Whig Government, was convinced that the Russian threat was real and urgent, but the Court of Directors of the East India Company, when details of the invasion plan reached them in London, were horrified. The Duke of Wellington thought the difficulties would start when the military successes ended, and the Press, in London as in Calcutta, attacked the manifesto for its distortions and sophistries. In Parliament angry members demanded publication of the relevant documents: Palmerston obliged them, first cutting out, however, all the good things Burnes had reported about Dost Mohammed.

But Lord Auckland, in the way of undetermined men, was determined. He had made up his mind for once, and he would stand by his resolution. The British armies would enter Afghanistan early in 1839, and the Great Game would be settled once and for all. Besides, Lord Auckland thought, it would be an opportunity for Ranjit Singh the Sikh to demonstrate the reality of his new alliance with the British, by contributing a large proportion of the forces required: an opportunity of which, in the event, he wisely took no step to avail himself.

5

Some 9,500 Crown and Company troops, with 6,000 men under the febrile command of Shah Shuja, formed the Army of the Indus, the principal invasion force for Afghanistan. Before it went to war it was ceremonially paraded, by courtesy of Ranjit Singh, at Ferozepore on the Sutlej river, south-east of Lahore. Ranjit came down from his capital for the occasion, and Lord Auckland, as we already know,

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travelled there with his sister Emily and his caravan of 12,000. The meeting between the two leaders was less than majestic, for their two lines of elephants collided and Ranjit fell flat on his face in front of two British nine-pounders—and the evening's entertainments were less than decorous, for Ranjit presented a cabaret of dancing girls and bawdy buffoons, and drank too much—but the purely military functions were stately and impressive, and on December 10, 1838, the Army of the Indus moved off from the parade ground for its war against the Afghans.

Wars went slowly then, and the army took a circuitous route. Shah Shuja wished to take the opportunity of subduing some unruly Amirs of Sind, to the west, whose allegiance he claimed—a commission easily performed, for the unfortunate Amirs were told by the British commander that 'neither the ready power to crush and annihilate them, nor the will to fall into action, were wanting if it appeared requisite, however remotely, for the safety of the British Empire'. The winter had gone, and the spring had arrived with its promise of flooded streams and heat-haze, before the troops crossed the Indus River and marched up the mountain valleys towards Quetta, Kandahar and Kabul. For the first time since the days of Alexander the Great, it was said, the 'flags of a civilized nation' flew across the Indus.

The soldiers' progress was laborious, for behind them in an apparently endless stream there stumbled some 38,000 camp followers and 30,000 camels. The army was to live off the country, but took with it nevertheless thirty days' rations of grain, and enough sheep and cattle for ten weeks' meat. It also carried an astonishing supply of inessentials. Two hundred and sixty camels, it was said, were needed to carry the personal gear of the commanding general and his staff. One brigadier needed sixty. One regiment required two just for its Manila cigars. There were tons of soap, gallons of wine, crates of jam, crockery, linen, potted meats. Each officer was allowed a minimum of ten domestic servants—most had many more—not counting the grooms for his camels and the six bearers he needed if he took a palanquin.

Every regiment had 600 stretcher-bearers. Every platoon of every regiment had its water-carriers, its saddlers, its blacksmiths, its

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cobblers, its tailors, its laundry-men, and there were the men who polished brasses, and the men who put up tents, and the cooks, the orderlies, the stable-boys—together with all their wives, and all their children, and often aunts, uncles or grandparents—and troops of prostitutes from half India, with fiddlers, dancing-girls, fortune-tellers, metal-workers, wood-gatherers—with herdsmen to look after the cattle, sheep and goats, and butchers to slaughter them—and there were carts and wagons by the thousand, palanquins, drays, chargers, ponies, dogs—and so all this great multitude stumbled away to war, each corps with its band playing, a regiment of Queen's cavalry, two of Company cavalry, nine regiments of infantry, engineers, gunners, Shah Shuja's 6,000 hopeful sepoys and those splendid prancing banditti, the Yellow Boys. A mighty dust hung in the air behind them, as a sign that the Raj was marching.

## 6

As a military operation the invasion was a qualified success. The army presently ran short of supplies, as its lines of communication grew more tenuous, and it was repeatedly harassed by the Afghan marksmen of the passes. Its intelligence proved faulty, too, perhaps because it had no intelligence department. But Ghazni, the first place to offer formal resistance, was taken by storm in a neat little *coup d'armes*, and when Afghan forces consequently fell back in confusion, the Dost himself, refusing British terms of 'honourable asylum' in India, fled north to take refuge with the crazy Nasrullah Khan, Amir of Bokhara, who promptly locked him up. Organized opposition seemed to be at an end, and on August 6, 1839, Shah Shuja, supported by the full panoply of British imperial power, entered Kabul to re-assume his throne.

Aesthetically the King's return was fine. A scramble of low mud buildings and roofed bazaars, dominated by the powerful silhouette of the Bala Hissar, Kabul was just the place for pageantry, and the King cut a sufficiently imposing figure. His coronet unfortunately no longer bore the diamond called the Koh-i-Nor, Light of the Universe, for that well-known gem had long before been extracted

by Ranjit Singh as a fee for his hospitality, but in other respects the restored ruler of Afghanistan adequately looked the part. He was a good-looking man, dark of skin and stoutly built, with his luxuriant beard dyed black, and he was gorgeously dressed that day, and scintillated with jewelry, and rode a white charger accoutred in gold. Beside him rode the representatives of the British Empire, wearing the cocked hats, ostrich feathers and blue gold-laced trousers of the diplomatic uniform, and behind him the soldiers of the Raj, dusted down and fattened up after their year's march from Ferozepore, demonstrated in simple terms the power behind his throne.

The Kabulis, it is true, watched the King ride by in sullen silence. They paid more attention to the British diplomatists than to Shah Shuja, and very few citizens showed him any royal respect at all. But the old man was childishly pleased to be back in his palace (though everything, he said, seemed *smaller* than it used to be), and his British bodyguard, firing him a royal salute and offering him their insincere congratulations, for they all despised him, left him there with his own soldiers and returned to their camp. 'I trust,' said General Keane the commanding officer in his dispatch to Lord Auckland next day, 'that we have thus accomplished all the objects which your Lordship had in contemplation, when you planned and formed the Army of the Indus, and the expedition into Afghanistan': but he did not really think so, for he expressed his thoughts very differently in a private letter to a friend. 'Mark my words,' he said then, 'it will not be long before there is here some signal catastrophe.'

7

Much of the army was now sent back to India, and General Keane went with it, leaving a division of infantry, a regiment of cavalry and an artillery battery. The Russians had vanished from Kabul, and the capital in its baleful edgy way was apparently docile. The British settled in. Their chief representatives were an Ulsterman and a Scot—Sir William Macnaghten, 'Envoy and Minister at the Court of Shah Soojahool-Moolk', and Sir Alexander Burnes, unexpectedly back in Kabul as British Resident. These were now the real rulers of Afghanistan, the puppet-masters.

Macnaghten had never been there before. He was 44, but looked much older—an Indian civil administrator, bespectacled, habitually top-hatted, with a dignified presence and plenty of ambition: 'our Lord Palmerston', Emily Eden called him, perhaps a little cattily. He was a great linguist, and though his talents were mostly of the bureaucratic kind, his manner could be pedantic, his views were often fatuous and his appearance was, in that anomalous setting, sometimes a little comic, still he had courage and was honest—if not always with himself, at least with others. Burnes was a more elusive character. A kinsman of Burns the poet, he had begun life in the Company's armies, but in his twenties had made a famous series of journeys in Central Asia, penetrating as far as Bokhara and the Caspian. He was lionized in England, where they called him Bokhara Burnes, and William IV had once summoned him to Brighton Pavilion and made him talk for an hour and a half about his amazing adventures. It was Burnes' reports from Kabul, during his mission there in 1837, that had turned Auckland's mind to the idea of invasion: though he had admired the Dost, still he prudently adjusted his views to the Governor-General's policies, and had accordingly been knighted shortly before the war began. He was still only 34, a wistful-looking man with a long nose, a sparse moustache and pouches under his big brown eyes.

Although the Dost was still alive, and there were signs that most of the Afghan tribal chiefs would never pledge allegiance to Shuja, the British set out to enjoy themselves in Kabul. The 16th Lancers had unfortunately taken their foxhounds back to India with them, but there were many other pleasures available. The climate in the autumn was pleasant, the natives, if undemonstrative, seemed friendly enough, and there was little work to do. They built a race-track, and skated on frozen ponds, and played cricket in the dust, even persuading a few Kabulis to take up the game. They learnt to enjoy the wrestling matches and cock-fights that the Afghans loved, and they organized amateur dramatics. In the early mornings they went for rides over the hills: in the evenings they listened to band concerts; in the night, very often, they comforted themselves with seductive girls of Kabul. One or two married Afghans.<sup>1</sup> Others, be-

<sup>1</sup> Notably Colonel Robert Warburton, who married a niece of the Dost, and



fore very long, were joined by their wives and children from India. There was no shortage of food now, and the officers entertained each other lavishly. Burnes used to give weekly dinner parties at his house in the city, with champagnes, sherries, clarets, liqueurs, hermetically sealed salmon and Scottish hotch-potch ('veritable hotch-potch, all the way frae Aberdeen').

So safe did the British feel that presently the Army was moved out of Kabul proper, leaving the Shah protected only by his own levies in the Bala Hissar. Now the whole force was concentrated in a big cantonment on the low damp plain to the east, within sight of the citadel but about a mile from the city's edge. It was a disturbing spot. The Kabul River ran across the plain, slate-grey and shaly, and between the camp and the city there were orchards and gardens, intersected by irrigation channels. In the spring the view could be beautiful enough, with the pinks and whites of the orchard blossoms, the shine of the water, the clutter of the bazaars and houses beyond, and the silhouette of the great fortress rising in tiers upon its hillock as a centre-piece to the scene. But all around the plain lay arid hills, one ridge beyond another, featureless and bare: and on their brown slopes stood here and there, relics of the centuries of Afghan feuding, small fortress-towers, some crumbled, some recently patched up, which gave to the whole place an ominous watchful air, as though even when one was thinking home-thoughts on the river bank, or hacking back to camp through the apple-orchards, one was never altogether unobserved.<sup>1</sup>

Here the Kabul Army ensconced itself, with all its camels and camp followers, all its appurtenance of stable, canteen, bazaar and married quarter. There were garrisons too at Kandahar and Ghazni to the

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whose son Sir Robert Warburton, half British, half Afghan, was to be the most celebrated frontier administrator of British India—'uncrowned King of the Khyber'.

<sup>1</sup> A sensation that lingers even now. The plain has scarcely changed, and from the ridge to the east of the Bala Hissar, on one of those heavy hot mornings that contribute so powerfully to the flavour of Kabul, it is all too easy to imagine the isolation of the cantonment far below, and even to trace its outline in the dust. Kabulis well remember where it stood, for the war is a key event in Afghan national history.

west, and at Jalalabad to the east, and in the field columns were always on the move, and Macnaghten's political officers were ubiquitous. The British hoped that by a combination of display, bribery and coercion all the factions of Afghanistan could be persuaded into cooperation, but they never succeeded. Some groups of the community gave no trouble. Others, particularly the Muslim fanatics called Ghazis, and the Ghilzai tribe which controlled the main mountain passes into India, had to be repeatedly subdued by punitive expeditions, fun for the officers and good experience for the troops. Generally the political officers were treated with wary respect: but in the south at Kelat the half-naked and terribly emaciated corpse of Lieutenant Loveday was found chained to a camel-pannier, while over the border to the north Colonel Charles Stoddart, on a more advanced mission of intelligence, was thrown by the mad Nasrullah into a deep pit full of bones, decomposing matter and especially bred reptiles.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Macnaghten and Burnes felt sanguine. In his comfortable gardened Residency in the heart of the city, down the road from the Bala Hissar, Burnes had little to do but quite enjoyed himself—'I lead a very pleasant life, and if rotundity and heartiness be proofs of health, I have them'. Macnaghten, whose wife presided graciously over the social life of the cantonment, lived no less contentedly in the Mission Residence upon the plain. 'All things considered,' he thought, 'the perfect tranquillity of the country is to my mind perfectly miraculous. Already our presence has been infinitely beneficial in allaying animosities and pointing out abuses. . . . We are gradually placing matters on a firm and satisfactory basis . . . the country is perfectly quiet from Dan to Beersheba.'

There remained the Dost, who in the summer of 1839 escaped from Bokhara and re-entered Afghanistan with a force of Uzbeks. For a time he did seem to threaten Macnaghten's tranquillity—'I am like a wooden spoon', he had said, 'you may throw me hither and thither, but I shall not be hurt'. But this worry was surprisingly soon removed. In the cool of the evening of November 4, 1840,

<sup>1</sup> From which, professing Islam, he was presently removed and beheaded, together with Captain Arthur Conolly, author of the phrase 'the Great Game', who had been sent to Bokhara to negotiate his release.

Macnaghten was taking an evening ride with his assistant George Lawrence, through the gardens near his Mission. They were approached by two Afghan horsemen. One stopped at a distance, the other came close and asked Lawrence 'if that was the Lord Sahib'. Told that it was the British Envoy, the Afghan seized Macnaghten's bridle and cried that 'the Amir was there'. 'What Amir?' asked Macnaghten, taken aback. 'Who? Who? Where?' 'Dost Mohammed Khan', he was told: and presently the second horseman approached, and the Dost himself, dismounting, pressed the Envoy's hand to his forehead and his lips, and offered his sword in token of surrender.

The Dost was a striking man, and he behaved with a dashing dignity—'Every effort was made to soothe the Ameer's feelings,' we are told, 'and he soon became serene and cheerful.' After ten days he was sent away to exile in India, escorted by a troop of horse artillery and two regiments of infantry, and warmed by the admiration of his enemies.<sup>1</sup> His departure seemed to set the seal upon the Afghan adventure, and before very long, it was thought, the British might return to India too, leaving Shah Shuja with his 6,000 soldiers to look after his own destinies.

8

Yet just as there lingered over the cantonment some suggestion of disquiet, so presently more sensitive minds in the occupying army were troubled by forebodings. The story of the war against the Afghans is full of omens and dark prophecies. 'A signal catastrophe', General Keane had forecast, and many of the soldiers, with their vulnerable lines of communication through the Ghilzai passes, sometimes felt a chill breath of isolation. William Nott, one of the most outspoken of the generals, wrote: 'Unless several regiments be quickly sent, not a man will be left to note the fall of his comrades'. Colin Mackenzie, one of the most perceptive of the majors,<sup>2</sup> wrote:

<sup>1</sup> Admiration long felt in England, too. My copy of his biography, by Mohan Lal, was given in 1861 as a leaving present to one of his boys by Lionel Garnett, when a housemaster at Eton. It was dedicated to Queen Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> Who was later to be a general himself, and went on to discover the marvel-

'Our gallant fellows in Afghanistan must be reinforced or *they will all perish*.' In Kabul Major Hamlet Wade, watching a ceremonial review of the 44th Regiment, suddenly saw the passing troops not as a parade at all, but as a funeral procession—'What put such a thought in my head, I know not'. At Jalalabad, 150 miles to the east, Colonel Dennie of the 13th Light Infantry had an even more explicit vision. 'You will see,' he observed one day, 'you will see; not a soul will reach here from Kabul except one man, who will come to tell us the rest are destroyed.'

A sense of uneasiness spread. As a ruler Shah Shuja was a poor substitute for the incisive Dost, surrounding himself with doddering and petulant advisers, and becoming ever more querulous himself. The British officers, though they made many friends in Kabul, made many secret enemies too, by their free and easy behaviour with the women—who, frustrated as they often were by their husbands' pederastic preferences, were dangerously ready to oblige. Private soldiers were increasingly insulted and molested in the streets of the city. The keener professionals were concerned about the state of the cantonment: badly sited on the open plain, impossible to defend, with the main commissariat store actually outside the perimeter defences—'a disgrace', as one young artilleryman wrote, 'to our military skill and judgement'.

Now rumours began to nag, of new plots among the Ghilzais, of a threatened rebellion in the north, of Persian intrigue in the west; and the army in its cantonment, after a year in the tense and oppressive atmosphere of Kabul, showed the early signs of communal neurosis—petty quarrels and rivalries, snobbishness, touchiness. 'The whole country is as quiet as one of our Indian chiefships,' wrote Macnaghten ever more resolutely, but fewer believed him now. 'The Envoy is trying to deceive himself,' wrote the formidable Lady Sale, whose husband General Bob had been having a tough time with the Ghilzais, 'into an assurance that the country is in a quiescent state,' while in London the Duke of Wellington was not deluded by the Envoy's dispatches. It was impossible to read them,

lous sculptures of Amaravati—which, after lying for fifty years in the stables of East India House, are now among the treasures of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

he said, 'without being sensible of the precarious and dangerous position of our affairs in Central Asia'.

Into this disturbing setting there hobbled, in April 1841, a new Commander-in-Chief—literally hobbled, for Major-General William Elphinstone was not merely, as one of his senior subordinates wrote, 'the most incompetent soldier that was to be found among the officers of the requisite rank', he was also so crippled by gout and other unidentified infirmities that he could hardly walk. Elphinstone was a delightful man, but hopeless. Everybody liked him—he was an old friend of Auckland and his sisters—but nobody thought him the slightest use as a general. Patrician, kind, beautifully mannered and nearly 60, he had last seen action at Waterloo, and though the son of an East India Company family, spoke not a word of Hindustani or any other oriental language. Why this gentle sick old gentleman should have been commanding an army in Afghanistan is difficult to imagine, when he might have been happily retired in England cherishing his memories, his Commandership of the Bath and his knighthood in the Order of St Anne of Austria: and indeed he apparently found it difficult to explain to himself, for he strenuously denied his fitness for the job—'done up', he said of himself, 'done up in body and mind'.

The rougher of the senior officers treated the implausible newcomer with frank contempt, and he seems to have viewed the situation despairingly from the start. Even his rheumy eye observed the dangers of the cantonment, and he was anxious in his invalid way about the Kabul army's direct line of communication with India—through the passes to Jalalabad to the east, and thence through the Khyber to Peshawar and the Indus. 'If anything occurs,' he said vaguely once to one of his officers, 'for God's sake clear the passes quickly, that I may get away.' One senses that even in this incompetent's mind, as the army loitered through its second year of the Afghan enterprise, a mood of premonition impended, an instinct that the inner forces of Afghanistan were assembling, out of sight and understanding, against the foreigners on the plain.

So they were. At dawn on November 2, 1841, a mob arrived at the gates of Burnes' Residency in Kabul, shouting abuse and screaming for the Resident's blood. Telling his guards to hold their fire,

Burnes walked on to his balcony with his assistant, William Broadfoot, and his own brother Charles. He tried to appeal for order, but was shouted down. Shooting broke out and Broadfoot, after picking off six of the Afghans in the garden below, was shot dead through the heart.<sup>1</sup> The mob was now all around the Residency, the stables were burning, and a stranger appeared inside the house, urging the Burnes brothers to follow him quickly outside. They inexplicably trusted him, and throwing Afghan robes around their shoulders, followed him through the door into the chaotic garden. At once their guide shouted 'Look, friends! This is Sekunder Burnes!'—and the Afghans fell upon the brothers with their knives, and very quickly hacked them both to pieces.

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'My dear Sir William,' wrote the General to the Envoy later that day, 'since you have left me I have been considering what can be done tomorrow. Our dilemma is a difficult one . . . to march into the town, it seems, we should only have to come back again . . . we must see what the morning brings, and then decide what can be done.'

For partly by design, more by combustion, the riot in the Kabul had now become a rising. The Kabulis had first assumed that, the British Resident having been murdered and the British Residency burnt to the ground, the British Army would come marching up the road to exact a terrible revenge. All that happened, though, was the arrival of a modest infantry force to give the King some extra protection within the Bala Hissar. Encouraged by this feeble reponse, thousands of Afghans in and around the city broke into open revolt, and within a few days the Kabul region was in a state of war, and the British were in effect besieged within their cantonment.

General Elphinstone continued to consider what could be done tomorrow, but never did decide. He had fallen off his horse on the morning of the riot, and had never felt well again. His conferences of

<sup>1</sup> A year to the day before, his brother James had been killed in a skirmish against the Afghans: four years later his brother George was killed in action against the Sikhs. They came from Kirkwall in Orkney.

war were painful to experience, the old general vacillating, wondering, changing his mind, and frequently embarking upon detailed reminiscences of the Peninsular War. Even his choice of phrase was lugubrious. 'It behoves us to look to the consequences of failure'—'Our case is not yet desperate, I do not mean to impress that'—'I was unlucky in not understanding the state of things'. Since he seemed to have no opinion of his own, everybody else offered him theirs, subalterns to brigadiers. Some thought they should leave the cantonment and move into the Bala Hissar *en masse*. Some thought they should abandon Kabul altogether, and retreat to Jalalabad. Some thought they should seek out the leaders of the insurrection, and negotiate terms.

Each day more Afghans joined the rising, until a guerilla army of several thousand artisans and tradesmen swarmed around the cantonment, becoming bolder by the hour. It was a raggle-taggle army, by the standards of the victors of Waterloo who watched it apprehensively from their fortifications, but it was both skilful and determined: it had its own cavalry, its long-muzzled *jezails* easily outranged the British muskets, and its marksmanship was horribly exact. Soon the road between the cantonment and the city was blocked; worse still, the Afghans had seized the commissariat fort, plundered it, burnt it, and thus deprived the British of nearly all their stores. All this in full sight of the cantonment, within whose perimeter the decrepit general rambled on, and the private soldiers kicked their heels in half-mutinous despair—'Why, Lord, sir', complained Elphinstone to Macnaghten one day, after reviewing some of his soldiers, 'when I said to them "Eyes right", they all looked the other way'.

They made a couple of sorties. Both failed ignominiously, the British infantry running away, and this was their last attempt at offensive action. They were beaten almost without a blow. Food was running short, winter was setting in, the troops were demoralized, the camp-followers were panic-stricken, the political officers were baffled or discredited, the commanding officer was all too often prostrate, the British Resident was dead. All the Afghans now seemed to be in arms against the British, and by the end of November Macnaghten had decided to negotiate a settlement.

At this climactic moment there arrived upon the scene a formidable Afghan leader—Akhbar Khan, the Dost's son, who had been in exile in Turkestan, and who now returned to Kabul with a force of Uzbeks at his heels. With this fierce, sly but attractive potentate Macnaghten now opened negotiations. Arranging to meet him on the banks of the Kabul River on December 11th, the Envoy offered him the draft of a treaty of submission, couched in the most abject terms. The presence of the army in Afghanistan, it said, was apparently displeasing to the great majority of the Afghan nation; and since the only object of its presence there was the integrity, happiness and welfare of the Afghans, there was no point in its remaining. Macnaghten offered to evacuate the country at once, lock, stock and barrel, giving Shah Shuja the choice of going with them or remaining in Kabul, and promising to return Dost Mohammed to his country as soon as the army had safely passed through the Khyber on the road to India. In return, the Envoy suggested, the Afghans would guarantee the safe conduct of the British, and would immediately send provisions into the cantonment to keep them alive enough to march.

The Afghans understandably accepted. They must have been astonished. It was agreed that the Kabul garrison would march in three days' time: but in the meantime Macnaghten, who had just been appointed Governor of Bombay, and faintly hoped still to extract some credit from Kabul, embarked upon a subtler course of conduct. There arrived in the cantonment on the following evening an unexpected messenger from Akhbar. Captain 'Gentleman Jim' Skinner, a member of the celebrated Anglo-Indian fighting family, had not been seen since the start of the uprising, when he had been caught in Kabul: it transpired now that he had been befriended by Akhbar, and he came with a secret additional proposal from the prince. It was this: that he and Macnaghten should deceive the other Afghan leaders with a hidden compact. Shah Shuja would remain upon his throne; Akhbar would be his Vizier, and would receive a large fee from the British Government, and a pension for life; the British could stay in the country for another eight

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months, and then leave apparently of their own free will. Face would be saved. Honour would be restored. Macnaghten would be Governor of Bombay. The original purpose of the invasion would be achieved.

Bringing such a message, remarked Gentleman Jim, was like being loaded with combustibles, but the distraught Macnaghten snatched at the offer, and signed a statement in Persian to say so. Nothing, in a country so hideously entangled with double-cross, could have been more dangerous. Several people warned the Envoy of treachery, and suggested that it might all be a plot. 'A plot!' Macnaghten cried—'a plot! let me alone for that—trust me for that!' Anyway, as he told George Lawrence, it was worth the risk. 'The life I have led for the last six weeks you, Lawrence, know well; and rather than be disgraced and live it over again, I would risk a hundred deaths. Success will save our honour, and more than make up for all risks.'

So two days before Christmas, 1841, Sir William Macnaghten, with three British officers and a small detachment of Indian cavalry, rode out of camp once more to meet Akhbar Khan. They took with them a lovely Arab mare, as a present for the prince. There was snow on the ground, and they found Akhbar, with a group of chiefs and a hovering crowd of Ghazis, awaiting them some 360 yards from the cantonment. A carpet had been laid on the snow, and upon it Akhbar and Macnaghten, greeting each other courteously, sat down together. Akhbar spoke first. Was Macnaghten, he asked, ready to put into effect the proposition of the previous night? Why not? Macnaghten replied: and instantly Akhbar cried, 'Seize them! Seize them!', and the chiefs and onlookers fell upon the Englishmen to screams and imprecations from the Ghazis all around. Macnaghten's Indian escort turned and fled. The three staff officers, almost before they knew what was happening, were bundled pillion on to horses and galloped away through the murderous Ghazis. One fell and was killed immediately. The other two were imprisoned in a nearby fort. Behind them, as they were swept away, they just had time to see the Envoy, his face ashen, being dragged head first down a snowy slope. 'For God's sake!' they heard him cry in Persian, before they were out of earshot, and Macnaghten disappeared for ever.

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It is probable that Akhbar himself shot Macnaghten in the confusion, and that the maddened Ghazis then cut him to pieces with their knives. Later that day the imprisoned officers saw a dismembered hand bobbing up and down outside the bars of their window, and learnt that it was Macnaghten's. 'Look well,' the Ghazis screamed at them, 'yours will soon be the same!' Though they did not know it, the Envoy's head, deprived at last of top hat and spectacles, was already being paraded through the streets of the capital, while the rest of his corpse was suspended from a meat-hook in the great bazaar.

## 11

Even now the Afghans expected reprisals, but the British had lost all fight. All they wanted was escape. Far from unleashing his troops furiously upon the city, General Elphinstone, now further debilitated by a wound in the buttock, merely re-opened negotiations, as though Her Majesty's Envoy and Plenipotentiary had never been murdered at all. This time there was no subterfuge. The Afghans dictated the terms, the British accepted them. The Army was to leave immediately, handing over hostages for the return of the Dost, together with all its treasure and almost all its guns. The Afghans in return promised to provide 'an escort of trustworthy persons' to see the British Army, 26 years after Waterloo, safely through the passes to the Indian frontier. Nobody believed them. It was Christmas Day, but the signing of the agreement gave no comfort to the British, who were now terrified, bitterly cold and very hungry—the only food the private soldiers got that day was a little flour with melted ghee. As the shivering army packed up its possessions, rumours of treachery haunted the camp. The eighteen chiefs who had signed the agreement, it was said, had secretly sworn to destroy the whole force, and all its followers. Lady Sale, diligently writing up her diary on Boxing Day, said she had been told that the chiefs meant to capture all the women and kill every man except one: and opening by chance a copy of Campbell's poems, she found the stanza:

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*Few, few shall part, where many meet!  
The snow shall be their winding sheet,  
And every turf beneath their feet  
Shall be a soldier's sepulchre.*

On January 6, 1842, the army began its retreat, the most terrible in the history of British arms, and the completion of a tragedy whose 'awful completeness', as the historian Sir John Kaye was to write, was unexampled in the history of the world. To reach the safety of the British garrison at Jalalabad, the force had to travel through ninety miles of desolate mountain country, deep in snow, held in fief by the predatory Ghilzais, and now additionally infested with Ghazis too. The cold was terrible, and the march began in confusion. In all some 16,500 souls struggled out of the cantonment: about 700 Europeans, 3,800 Indian soldiers, the rest camp followers and their families. More than a thousand horses went with them, together with bullocks to pull the carts, camels, mules and ponies. Most of the European women and children travelled in camel-panniers: the camp-followers straggled along behind as best they could, frightened, bewildered, littered with babies, and cooking-pots, and all the voluminous half-fastened baskets, boxes and bundles that poor Indians carried on the march.

The moment the last soldiers of the rearguard left the cantonment gates, the mob poured in to plunder and destroy: and hovering always on the fringe of the column, sometimes sending peremptory messages to the general, sometimes coming close, sometimes disappearing, the chiefs of the Afghans predatorily rode. The retreat was a misery from the first step. As the troops marched in tolerable order along the snow-covered track across the plain, the camp followers in their thousands milled all about the column, turning the march into a muddled rout, pushing their way frantically towards the front, shouting and jostling, separating platoon from platoon, soldiers from their officers. Sometimes troops of Ghazi horsemen dashed among them, slashing with their sabres and galloping off with loot: the rearguard lost fifty men almost before it had left the lines.

So it was obvious from the start that the Afghan assurances meant

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nothing. If the escort of chiefs was capable of keeping off the Ghazis and Ghalzais, it had no intention of doing so: this would be cat and mouse to the end. Within an hour or two many of the soldiers were frost-bitten, while hundreds of the Indian bearers threw down their loads in despair and ran away into the wilderness. Before it had left the valley the army was virtually without food, fuel, shelter or ammunition, and behind it left a trail of dead and dying people, like a track of litter after a grisly holiday—some wide-eyed and insensible, some pleading to be put out of their misery, some stabbed about with knives, for the fun of it, by the Afghan children who swarmed through the mêlée. When the British camped for the first night, only six miles from the city, they looked back to see the night sky red and flickering with the flames of the burning cantonment: and when the rearguard arrived in the small hours, exhausted from its running day-long battle, and its soldiers shouted in the darkness, 'Where's the 54th? Where's the 6th?', they found the camp in a state of nightmare chaos, men and women dying all around from hunger and exposure, and were told everywhere, as they looked for their units, that 'no one knew anything about it'.

## 12

The retreat lasted just a week. During the first three days the way led through a series of precipitous passes, most of them 5,000 feet high and all deep in snow, and day by day the struggling mass of the British and their dependents grew smaller and weaker. They were never left at peace. Now and then they saw their escort chiefs, cloaked upon their horses upon distant knolls, or awaiting their arrival at the head of a pass, and sometimes Akhbar himself appeared with a demand for hostages, a gloating recrimination, or ever less convincing assurances of goodwill. Every day the harassment grew more brazen, until every gully seemed to hide an ambush of horsemen, and there were marksmen on every ridge.

Terrible scenes were enacted in the snows. We see Lieutenant Melville of the 54th Native Infantry, speared and stabbed in back and head, crawling after the column on his hands and knees. We see Dr Cardew of the medical service, fearfully wounded, tied to the last



gun and left beside the road to die, while his soldiers mumble their goodbyes to him. We see Mrs Boyd and her son Hugh, aged four, tumbled out of their panniers as the camel that carries them is hit by a bullet and crumples slowly, groaning, to its knees in the snow. In the middle of the carnage, the hunger, the cold, the terror, we see an Indian deserter from the Mission guard, blindfold and ragged, shot on the spot by a firing squad.

On the fourth day Akhbar sent a message to Elphinstone suggesting that the English women should be handed over to his care. Eleven women and their children, including Lady Sale and Lady Macnaghten, were handed over to the care of the Afghans, together oddly enough with several of their husbands: they were taken away to a little fort in the hills, and fed that night on mutton and rice. By then the fighting strength of the army was down to 300 British infantry, about 480 sepoy, and 170 cavalymen, most of them frost-bitten, many snow-blind, many more without weapons or ammunition. They had passed through the first of the great passes, and there were seventy miles to go.

By the end of the fifth day the last of the sepoy were dead or missing, and no baggage was left at all. For miles the track was thick with the corpses of the camp-followers. Perhaps 12,000 people had died since they left Kabul, only a few thousand Indians survived, and the only people fighting back were the men of the 44th Regiment and the 5th Light Cavalry. They had passed through the second and third of the passes, and were fifty miles from Jalalabad.

On the sixth and seventh days the survivors struggled through the worst of all the ravines, the Jugdulluk, an allegorically gloomy defile, where the winding track passed between immense impending crags, and only a few scraggly holly oaks broke through the snow. Here the Afghans had blocked the way with a barrier of prickly ilex, six feet high. The soldiers fell upon it with their bare hands, while a fury of fire was poured at them from the ridges on either side, and Ghilzai horsemen galloped mercilessly among them—scrabbling frantically away with their frost-bitten fingers, dying in their hundreds, until at last a gap was made in the barricade and there was a mad rush of horsemen and foot-soldiers through it, the horses rearing, the shots flying, crazed soldiers sometimes shooting at their

friends, and into the confusion the Afghans falling with their knives and long swords to leave the snow stained with blood, mashed about with footfalls, and littered with red-coat bodies.

By the eighth day the army had no commander. Summoned to a conference at Akhbar's camp, Elphinstone had been held there as a hostage, and his soldiers never saw him again. But by now there was virtually no army either: only some twenty officers and forty-five British soldiers had survived the slaughter in the Jugdulluk. At a hamlet called Gandamak they found themselves surrounded by Afghans and called to a parley—a handful of emaciated, exhausted and mostly unarmed Britons, with Captain Souter of the 44th wearing the regimental colours wound about his waist. It was a trick. The soldiers were slaughtered, only half a dozen being taken prisoner. The only survivors of the army now, apart from a few wandering sepoy, were fourteen horsemen, who, by-passing Gandamak, had galloped desperately towards Jalalabad—twenty miles away.

By the ninth day only six survived—three captains, a lieutenant and two army doctors, one of whom, Dr Brydon, had already lost his horse, and had been given a pony by a wounded subahdar of the native infantry—'take my horse', the Indian had said, 'and God send you may get to Jalalabad in safety'. At Futtahabad, sixteen miles from Jalalabad, the officers found themselves kindly welcomed by the villagers, who offered them food, and urged them to rest for a while: two of them were murdered there and then, three more were killed as they fled the place.

## 13

So there remained, on January 13, 1842, only one survivor of the Kabul army—Surgeon Brydon, Army Medical Corps, galloping desperately over the last few miles to Jalalabad, Afghans all around him like flies, throwing stones at him, swinging sabres, reducing him in the end to the hilt of his broken sword, which he threw in a horseman's face. And quite suddenly, in the early afternoon, Brydon found himself all alone. The Afghans had faded away. There was nobody to be seen. Not a sound broke the cold air. He plodded on through the snow exhausted, leaning on the pony's neck, and

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presently he saw in the distance the high mud walls of Jalalabad, with the Union Jack flying above. He took his forage cap from his head and feebly waved. The fortress gates opened; a group of officers ran out to greet him; and so the retreat from Kabul, and the first of Queen Victoria's imperial wars, came to its grand and terrible end.

'Did I not say so?' said Colonel Dennie, who was watching from the walls. 'Here comes the messenger'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The British returned to Kabul within the year, spoiling Sir John Kaye's awful completeness, but blowing up the great bazaar as a reminder of their displeasure, and subduing the Afghans until the next Anglo-Afghan war, forty years later. Shah Shuja was soon murdered, of course, and Akhbar died in 1847, supposedly of poison: but Dost Mohammed was returned to his throne after all, and proved himself, as we shall later see, a true friend to the British Empire. The Great Game soon revived, and provided perennial alarums and arguments for the rest of the century. Lord Auckland, who wrote of the catastrophe that 'the whole thing was unintelligible to me', became First Lord of the Admiralty and died a bachelor in 1848. Poor Elphinstone died in the hands of Akhbar, who sent his body to Jalalabad, respectfully wrapped in aromatic blankets and attended by the general's valet. Dr Brydon we shall meet again: his pony was last heard of by Mr Eric Linklater the novelist who, when he wished to replace a damaged iron fence upon his estate in Cromarty, was told that it had been bent during an unsuccessful jump by Dr Brydon's famous pony, and had been left unrepaired in memorial ever since—a pleasant but unconvincing fantasy, Mr Linklater told me, for Brydon did not return from India until 1860, when the pony would have been about 20 years old.

As for the retreat from Kabul, though largely forgotten in Britain it is vividly remembered in Afghanistan: when in 1960 I followed the army's route from Kabul to Jalalabad with an Afghan companion, we found many people ready to point out the sites of the tragedy, and recall family exploits. I asked one patriarch what would happen now, if a foreign army invaded the country. 'The same', he hissed between the last of his teeth.

### CHAPTER SIX

## Merchant Venturing

ON the other side of the world, on a summer day in those same 1840s, there sits around a polished oak table a group of men so far removed from the world of Akhbar and Elphinstone, so indifferent we may suppose to the aims of evangelical imperialism, that they might be living in another century, or another civilization. Yet they represent an imperial dynamic no less potent than strategy or philanthropy: profit.

There are ten men in the room, with a secretary in attendance, and they are sitting around the table as in a board room. They look a grave but weather-beaten lot, like businessmen hardened, and most of their faces are of a gaunt Scottish cast. The room is comfortably dignified. A log fire burns, and on a side-table are the minutes of previous meetings, in large leather-bound volumes, with quill pens, and bottles of ink, and sand-blotters. The hours pass in earnest deliberation, expert and hard-headed, and the talk is of trade percentages, available stocks, staff promotions, distribution problems. Scratch, scratch goes the pen of the secretary, page after page across the foolscap, and at the end of the session the ten men file up to sign their names and ranks at the bottom of the page, in steady unostentatious hands, before following their chairman through the door into the corridor outside—down which, when the door is opened, a fragrance of wine and roast victuals comfortably drifts.

They are in an elegant white house upon a creek. It is made of painted clapboard, and it has wide shuttered windows, a belfry over the adjoining warehouse, gardens and outhouses behind: all around thickets of trees run darkly to the creek, and to the wide islet-speckled lake which lies below. It looks an urbane and cosy place—a well-stocked, warm, carefully cherished place, where men can do

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Epic of the Race

HIGH above the Jumna River at Delhi, towering over the bazaars and alleys of the walled city, there stood the fortress-palace of the Moghul Emperors. Clad in decorations of gold, silver and precious stones, this had once been the most magnificent palace of the East, the envy of rulers from Persia to China, a mile and a half around, walled in red sandstone, sited with all the expert advice of astrologers, magicians and strategists. This was Qila-i-Mubarak, the Fortunate Citadel, Qila-Mualla, the Exalted Fort, approached through the high vaulted arcade of the Chata Chauk, where the royal bands played five times daily in the Royal Drum House, and the ambassadors of the nations prostrated themselves in the Diwan-i-Am before the Shadow of God.

Here the royal ladies looked through their grilled windows to see the Stream of Paradise rippling through its marble chute, here Aurungzeb worshipped in the copper-domed mosque of the Moti Masjid, here in the Golden Tower above the river the Emperor on ceremonial occasions greeted his people far below, and here in the Diwan-i-Khas was the very crucible of the Moghul Empire, white marble ceiled in silver, with water running through its central conduit, and on its dais the Peacock Throne itself, inlaid with thousands of sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pearls, guarded by jewelled peacocks and a parrot carved from a single emerald. The Red Fort was one of the great masterpieces of mediaeval Muslim art. *If there be a Paradise on earth, said the famous inscription above its Diwan-i-Khas, it is here, it is here, it is here.*

2

In 1857 there still lived in this marvellous place the last of the Mog-

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hul monarchs, Bahadur Shah Zafar. By now the palace was only a parody of its own splendours. With the crumbled mass of its red sandstone, with its audience chambers stripped of their glories and the overgrown lawns of its Life Bestowing Gardens, it was like a relic from some dimly remembered, half-legendary golden age. Yet Bahadur, a powerless pensioner of the British, was still the titular King of Delhi. The British preferred it so. When they found it legally or tactically convenient, they could refer to him as the embodiment of traditional power, or claim to be acting as his constitutional successors. Their representatives visited him with formal respect, entering his presence barefoot or with socks over their boots, and until the 1850s presenting a ceremonial bag of gold, the *nazar*, in tribute to the Ruler of the Universe. Bahadur, who was very old, accordingly lived in a phantom consequence. He was an eastern monarch of the old kind, frail but dignified. His face was fine-drawn and long-nosed; he was bearded to the waist like a king in a Persian miniature; he wandered about his palace leaning on a long staff.

He was a poet, a scholar, a valetudinarian, and believed himself to possess magic powers.<sup>1</sup> He distributed charms and shadowy privileges. By his authority a royal bulletin was issued each day, reporting events inside the sorry court as might be chronicled the affairs of a Jehangir—or a Victoria. He was surrounded still by swarms of servants, and attended by many wives and unnumbered children, and at the Lahore Gate his personal bodyguard, 200 strong, was quartered under its British commander. To many millions of people, especially Muslims, he was still the true ruler of India: and it was as a ruler that he bore himself still, conscious of his heritage and deeply resentful of the changing world outside. 'A melancholy red-stone notion of life', Emily Eden had called it.

Bahadur lived altogether at the mercy of the British. They paid him a subsidy of £200,000 a year, but they had effectually removed the centre of Indian life from his court to their own capital at Calcutta. They did not even bother to keep European troops in Delhi, so unimportant a backwater had it become, and it was administered as a provincial city like any other. Sometimes they thought Bahadur

<sup>1</sup> For instance he thought, wrongly as it proved, that in time of necessity he could turn himself into a house-fly.

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should be removed too, to somewhere less historically suggestive, but for the time being they let him stay. They had, after all, made it clear that upon his death the imperial title must lapse, so that in a sense he was already no more than a ghost or a memory, an emperor in the mind.

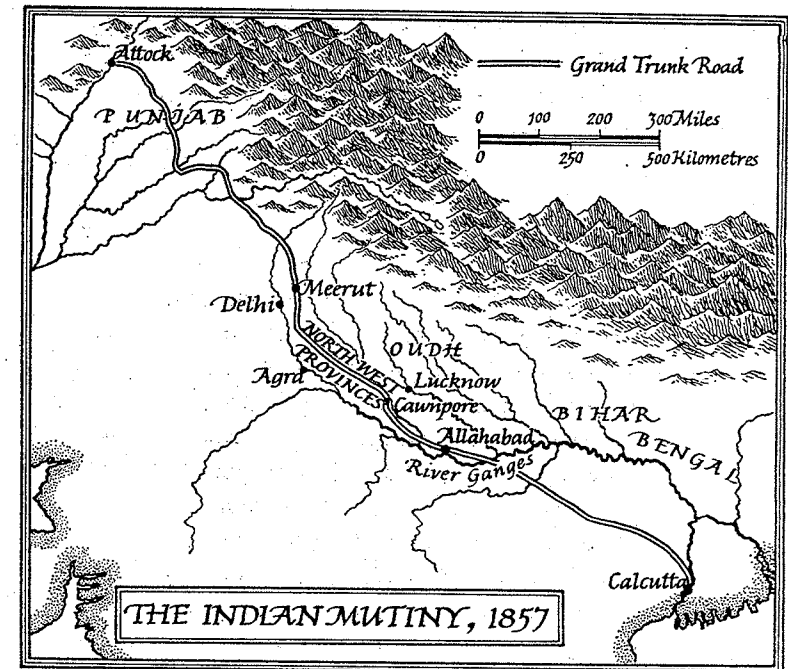
### 3

Early on the morning of May 11, 1857, this monarch *soi-disant* was sitting in his private apartments overlooking the river when he heard the noise of a crowd shouting and jostling in the dusty space below, where petitioners habitually appeared to offer their pleas, and jugglers or dancing bears sometimes performed for the royal entertainment. It was Ramadan, the Muslim month of fast, when tempers were always testy, and the combination of heat, hunger, exhaustion and religious zeal was traditionally the begetter of riots.

The old king sent for the commander of his guard, Captain Douglas, who stepped out to a balcony to stop the disturbance. There below him, between the palace and the broad sluggish sweep of the Jumna, were hundreds of Indian soldiers, some on horseback, some on foot, in the grey jackets and shakoes of the Company service, dusty from a long journey, their horses lathered, waving their swords and calling for Bahadur. Douglas shouted to them to move away, for they were disturbing the king, and after a time they went: but an hour or two later the noise began again, fiercer and louder this time, and shots rang out beyond the palace walls. There were angry shouts, a fire crackled somewhere, women screamed, hoofs clattered, and suddenly there burst into the royal precincts a rabble of cavalymen, firing *feux-de-joie* and shouting exultantly. Behind them a noisy mob of sepoys and ruffians from the bazaar, scarlet and white and dirty grey, poured into the palace. Some ran upstairs to Douglas's quarters, and finding him there with two other Englishmen and two Englishwomen, murdered them all. The others swarmed through the palace, brandishing their swords, singing, or simply lying down exhausted on their palliasses in the Hall of Audience.

The terrified old king retreated farther and farther into the re-

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cesses of his private quarters, but presently the leaders of the mob found him. Far from harming him, they prostrated themselves at his feet. They were rebelling, they said, not against the Moghul monarchy, but against the rule of the English, and they asked him as Light of the World to assume the revolutionary command. Bahadur did not know what to do. He was surrounded by advisers—Hasan Ansari his spiritual guide, Hakim Ahsanullah his physician, Ghulam Abbas his lawyer, his sons Moghul, Khair Sultan, Abu Bakr. He was not a man for quick decisions. He was old, he said, and infirm. He was no more than a pensioner. While he prevaricated, a messenger was posted to the British Lieutenant-Governor at Agra, forty miles away, in the hope that the Raj might resolve the issue by sending a rescue force: but as the hours passed and nobody came, as the mutineers dosed down in the palace, and their leaders pressed for an answer—as the sounds of looting and burning came from the city, with random musket-fire, and explosions, and hysterical laughter—as the princes whispered in one ear, and Ghulam Abbas in another,

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and the soldiers stumbled in one by one bareheaded to receive the royal blessing—as no word came from the British of comfort or punishment, and there stirred in the king's poor old mind, elated perhaps by all that martial loyalty, some inherited pride of the Moghuls—some time that evening, after dark, Bahadur Shah capitulated, and assumed the supreme and symbolic leadership of the Indian Mutiny. At midnight his soldiers greeted him with a 21-gun salute.

## 4

But it was not a national revolution at all. The Indian Mutiny, or the Sepoy War as the Victorians often called it, was one of the decisive events of British imperial history, which set a seal upon the manner and purpose of the Empire: yet it was limited in scale and confused in meaning. It had been smouldering for years, as British intentions in India became more radical, more earnest and more ideological. We have seen how, under the influence of the evangelical movement, the British conceived the ambition of re-moulding India to an image of their own design; now we see, in the fragile indecisive person of the King of Delhi, the inevitable reaction. All the conquests and conflicts of two centuries had led at last to this: in 1857 it was finally to be decided which were the stronger, the muddled loyalties and traditions of India, or the new dynamic of Victoria's Britain.

The British had made many enemies in India by their developing dogmatism—what Sir James Outram, one of the more sympathetic of their administrators, called 'the crusading, improving spirit of the past twenty-five years'. There were enemies of course among the princes, so many of whom had been humiliated, and who had been especially incensed by Dalhousie's doctrine of lapse. There were enemies among the Brahmins, whose supremacy of caste depended upon a series of shibboleths and assumptions now being systematically discredited. Religious leaders resented the advent of Christian missionaries, and the arrogant assertion by men like Nicholson and the Lawrences that Christianity contained the only truth. Ordinary people of all sorts rankled under the growing exclusivity of the British, fostered partly by better communications

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and the arrival of that archetypal snob, the memsahib. Colder and colder the rulers were withdrawing into their cantonments and clubs, to clamp themselves within a round of amateur theatricals, pig-sticking, gossip and professional ambition which shut them off from Indian life outside, and made them more and more contemptuous of it: by 1852, when the young Frederick Roberts reached India, one of the sights of Allahabad was the last of the hookah-smoking Englishmen, once familiar figures of Anglo-Indian life—he had a servant called his *hookah-bardar* just to look after the pipe.

That the British were powerful everyone knew. Their *iqbal* was formidable. But there were signs that they were not infallible. Kabul in 1842 had not been forgotten, and rumours were now reaching India of British reverses in the Crimean War, which had broken out in 1854.<sup>1</sup> The British were ludicrously thin on the Indian ground—in 1857 there were 34,000 European soldiers to 257,000 Indians—and they depended for their security, as any percipient native could see, upon the Indians themselves, represented by the sepoys of the Company armies. Out of this ground-swell of disillusion, signs and portents bubbled. Prophecies were recalled, legends resuscitated, secret messages circulated, and there were whispers of conspiracy.

Among the sepoys there were already special reasons for disaffection. In earlier times a sense of brotherly trust had characterized the regiments, and a family spirit bound British officers and Indian soldiers alike. Now many of the officers had wives and children in India, and they found it easier to live the sort of life they might lead at home in England, to the exclusion of their men. Though many officers would still swear blindly by their soldiers, and stand by them in any emergency, many of the sepoys felt a less absolute loyalty to their commanders. The rapport had faltered, and the British knew far less than they thought about the feelings of their Indian troops.

<sup>1</sup> How merciful was the Great Ruler of all worlds, wrote General Sir Garnet Wolseley in retrospect, to end the Crimean War before allowing the Indian Mutiny to begin—'we should have manfully faced the double misfortune, but it must have very seriously strained our resources'. As it was, many regiments came direct from one campaign to the other, feeling less than grateful, one may imagine, to the Great Ruler.

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In particular they were out of touch with movements within the Bengal Army.

Most of the Company sepoy were Hindus, for the three armies were all based in predominantly Hindu areas. The men of the Madras and Bombay armies were drawn from all classes and many regions, but the Bengal army was more homogeneous. Not only were its sepoy mostly of high caste, but they nearly all came from three particular regions, notably the recently-annexed kingdom of Oudh. Men like the Lawrences early saw the dangers inherent to this system. The Bengal sepoy were clannish, caste-ridden and susceptible. John Lawrence thought they should be supplemented by Sikhs and Muslims. General J. B. Hearsey, commanding the Presidency Division of Bengal, believed the army should set about recruiting Christians from the Middle East, Malaya, China, or even South America—'but they must be Christians, and then TRUST can be reposed in them'.

Yet in the officers' messes of the Bengal army there was little unease. Most officers refused to believe reports of subversion, and retained the affectionate trust in their men that was a British military tradition.

## 5

The new Enfield rifle, with which the Company armies were about to be re-equipped, used greased cartridges which must be bitten open to release their powder. Half the grease was animal tallow, and it was thickly smeared on the cartridges. Early in 1857 the rumour ran through the Bengal sepoy regiments that the grease was made partly from pigs, abominable to Muslims, and partly from cows, sacred to Hindus. This was a device, it was whispered, by which the British meant to defile the sepoy, or break his caste. Deprived of his own religion, he would be more or less forcibly converted to Christianity and used as cannon-fodder wherever the British needed him.

These rumours had reached the Government at Calcutta as early as January, 1857. Mutinies were not unknown in the Indian armies, and action was prompt. The factory-greased cartridges, it was

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ordered, were to be used only by European troops, and the sepoy were to grease their own with beeswax and vegetable oil. But it was too late. By now the sepoy had convinced themselves that the cartridge-grease was only one of a series of perfidies. At the end of March a young soldier of the 34th Native Infantry, Mangal Pande, stationed at Barrackpore under General Hearsey's command, ran amok and shot at his European sergeant-major on the parade-ground. The Adjutant at once mounted his horse and galloped to the scene, but Pande shot the horse beneath him, and as the Englishman disentangled himself from the harness, fell upon him with a sword and severely wounded him. There then arrived on the parade ground, as in some tragic pageant, General Hearsey himself, mounted on his charger and accompanied not only by his two sons, but by the entire garrison guard—all advancing, sternfaced and indomitable, upon the confused young sepoy. The general rode directly towards him, a son on either flank, and Pande stood with his musket loaded ready to fire. 'There was a shot,' reported the young Frederick Roberts, who was there, 'the whistle of a bullet, and a man fell to the ground—but not the General! It was the fanatic sepoy himself, who at the last moment had discharged the contents of the musket into his own breast.'

Poor Pande did not die at once, surviving to be hanged in public, but his name went into the English language: 'Pandy' became the British Army's nickname first for a mutineer of 1857, and later for the Indian soldier in general. His regiment was disbanded, its fate being publicly proclaimed at every military station in India, but the effect was not what the British intended. The 34th achieved a kind of martyrdom among the sepoy, and within a few weeks there occurred the next act of what seems in hindsight an inexorable tragedy. At Meerut, north of Delhi, eighty-five troopers of the 3rd Light Cavalry refused to obey orders. They were court-martialled, sentenced to ten years' hard labour each, and publicly degraded at a parade of the whole Meerut garrison. This was done with ritual solemnity. The garrison was drawn up in ranks around the parade ground. Commanding the scene was a regiment of European soldiers, ready for any trouble, and a battery of artillery with loaded guns. The mutineers were paraded under a guard of riflemen. Their sentences



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were read aloud, their uniforms were stripped from them, and on to the parade ground advanced the smiths and armourers, with hammers, shackles and chains. In a terrible silence the garrison, at attention, watched while the chains were riveted on. Sometimes a prisoner cried aloud for mercy. Sometimes there was a mutter in the sepoy ranks. It took more than an hour, and when at last the parade was dismissed, the prisoners marched off to their cells and the regiments returned to their quarters, a heavy sense of sorrow hung over the camp. Veteran sepoys wept in shock and despair, and at least one of the English subalterns, the future General Sir Hugh Gough, 'was weak enough almost to share their sorrow'.<sup>1</sup>

It was Sunday next day, May 10, 1857 and all seemed quiet in Meerut. Rumours reached the British officers of restlessness in the town bazaars, and there appeared to be a shortage of domestic servants in the cantonment that day, but morning and afternoon passed peacefully, and in the evening the European soldiers polished their boots, brasses and badges as usual for church parade. Then without warning, soon after five o'clock, Meerut exploded. Suddenly through the cantonment armed sepoys were furiously running, shooting, looting, dancing, leaping about in frenzy, setting fire to huts and bungalows, galloping crazily through the lines, breaking into the magazines, deliriously releasing the men of the 3rd Cavalry from their shackles and chains. A mob from the bazaars followed them, augmented by convicts freed from the city prisons, and policemen off-duty. Many of the sepoys tried to protect the officers and their families, but the crowd swept through the cantonment like a whirlwind, murdering Europeans and Indians alike, and leaving the whole camp ablaze, with clouds of black smoke hanging on the evening sky. The ground was littered with corpses, some horribly hacked about, with smashed furniture, with weapons and charred clothing and piles of ash.

In a frenzy of passion and fear the mutinous cavalrymen galloped

<sup>1</sup> He was one of the few British officers to fear the worst, and perhaps his instinct was hereditary: his great-uncle was Lord Gough, conqueror of the Sikhs, his father was a Bengal civil servant, his elder brother was an officer of the 8th Bengal Cavalry, and he himself was to spend forty more years in the Indian Army, before dying in 1909 as Keeper of the Crown Jewels.

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out of Meerut into the night, in scattered groups. Some still wore their high feathered shakoes and their cross-belted scarlet jackets: some had got out of their uniforms and thrown away their weapons. After them hastened hundreds of infantrymen, in field grey. All assumed, as their passions cooled, that the British dragoons stationed at Meerut would soon be after them, but when they left the blaze of the cantonment behind, and hurried away down the Delhi road, they unexpectedly left the noise and the excitement behind them too, and were presently passing through silent sleeping villages. Nobody followed them. It was a bright moonlit night, and most of the horsemen rode to Delhi almost without stopping.

By eight o'clock next morning the first of them crossed the Bridge of Boats across the Jumna, within sight of the Red Fort: and pausing to kill a passing Englishman, out on his morning exercise, and setting fire to the toll-house at the lower end of the bridge, almost before the King of Delhi had finished his breakfast they had arrived at the dusty space below the walls of the palace, and were calling for Bahadur Shah.

## 6

The Mutiny was a muddle. It had no coherent strategy and no enunciated purpose, and what symbolic leadership it had came from Delhi. There most of the Europeans were quickly slaughtered. Whole families died. All the compositors of a newspaper were killed as a matter of principle, and nine British officers in the arsenal blew it and themselves up when ordered to surrender 'in the King's name'. The few survivors fled the city, some to be murdered in the countryside, some to reach safety in Agra or Meerut; and so Delhi became once more, at least in pretension, the capital of a Moghul Empire.

The king's heart was scarcely in the revolution, and he consoled himself by writing melancholy verses in his garden, but around him the forms of an administration were erected, and he was obliged to act the emperor. Proclamations were issued in his name, regiments urged to mutiny under his royal aegis—'large rewards and high rank will be conferred by the King of Kings, the Centre of Prosperity, the King of Delhi'. A ruling council was constituted, six elected soldiers

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to look after military matters, four civilians as public administrators. A Commander-in-Chief was appointed, and all the princes were made generals. The king processed through the city streets on his elephant, and in his name food was requisitioned for the troops, and city bankers were persuaded to pay them.

But it was all a sham. The king did not trust the sepoy, and they soon lost their respect for him. They camped all over his beloved gardens, treated him as they pleased and ignored his diffident requests. Thousands more mutineers poured into Delhi over the weeks, sometimes marching over the bridge of boats with bands playing and flags flying, but the city remained in disorder. Shops were looted, homes were stripped, drunken Indian officers roistered through the streets. Business was at a standstill. The neighbouring countryside was ravaged by bandits and robbers. In the heart of the chaos, within his red-walled fortress, Bahadur sat helpless and despondent. His treasury was empty, and around him his self-appointed ministers and generals ineffectively bickered. They had ruined, he said, a kingdom that had lasted for five centuries. Sometimes he threatened to abdicate, or to kill himself, or to retire to Mecca for ever. But they kept him there upon his shadow-throne, and almost the only solace he found was in his ever gloomier verse—

*Clothed in my burial sheet I shall spend  
My remaining days in the seclusion of some garden.*<sup>1</sup>

This was the nearest the Indian mutineers had to a command centre, an organization, or even an objective. For the rest the rebellion, which spread murderously from station to station throughout northern India, burnt sporadically and haphazardly. Most of the princes and maharajahs stayed cautiously aloof, and there were no senior Indian officers to direct operations. The only common purpose was to get rid of the British Raj, and there were no concerted plans for a replacement. By the middle of June, 1857, the British had lost their authority in most of the central provinces, a slab of country

<sup>1</sup> Though as a poet he generally was, so *The Times* correspondent W. H. Russell reported severely to his readers, 'rather erotic and warm in his choice of subject'.

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extending from the borders of Rajasthan in the west to Bihar in the east. Everywhere else, though, they remained in command, and they demonstrated soon enough that it was only a matter of time before the rebellion was put down.

But from within the mutinous region terrible reports emerged. Whole communities had vanished. It was like a cauldron in the middle of India, and to the British in the other provinces, and even more to the British at home, life in the war zone seemed to have collapsed into incomprehensible nightmare. Two places only, besides Delhi, impressed their condition upon the horrified world—Lucknow the capital of Oudh, Cawnpore on the Ganges: and the names of these two Indian cities, hitherto so obscure, were now to become engraved for ever in the imperial memory.

## 7

Bahadur and his family apart, the only eminent Indian prince openly to throw in his lot with the mutineers was the titular heir to another ancient dynasty, subdued by the British long before, but still proud of race and origin. If the King of Delhi offered a cause of loyalty chiefly to the Muslims of India, Nana Sahib of Cawnpore, the adopted son of the last of the Mahratta rulers, was the closest the Hindus had to an emperor. To his people he was the Peshwa, successor to all the Mahratta glories, but to the British he was only the Maharajah of Bithur, a small town on the Ganges some ten miles above Cawnpore; for he was living in exile, and was denied all dignities like royal salutes, seals, or ceremonial gifts. The British kept a jealous watch upon him, as the possible fulcrum of a Mahratta revival, and he could not travel without their permission, or even appear in public without an Englishman at his side.

They liked him, though. He was not a very striking man, fatish, middle-ageing, sallow. But he was hospitable and generous, was fond of animals, and frequently entertained the officers of the Cawnpore garrison in his somewhat eccentric palace, half opulence, half gimcrack, beside the river at Bithur. It was true that he was known to cherish a grudge against the East India Company, who refused to pay him a royal pension, and it was noticeable that he would never

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accept the garrison's hospitality in return for his own. But the British did not resent these symptoms of wounded pride. They rather enjoyed his company, relished rumours of his unorthodox sex life, and trusted him far enough to let him visit all the military stations upon the Grand Trunk Road, and to mingle freely with the officers of the garrisons.

Cawnpore, a town of some 150,000 people, was one of the most important of those stations. Here the Grand Trunk Road was crossed by the road from Jhansi to Lucknow, and here too was one of the principal crossings of the Ganges. There was a sizeable British community in the town, and a garrison of four sepoy regiments with a European artillery battery. The news of the Meerut rising reached Cawnpore on May 14, 1857, but for a week nothing much happened. Only a vague premonition ran through the cantonment—'something indefinite and alarming overshadowed the minds of all'. Nobody seriously thought the last of the Mahrattas would ally himself with the last of the Moghuls, and anyway the garrison was commanded by the highly respected Sir Hugh Wheeler, whose wife was Indian, and who had been fighting battles in India on and off for half a century. Still, Indians and Europeans eyed each other guardedly, the gunners kept their guns well-greased, and Wheeler's agents in the town kept a steady stream of intelligence flowing into headquarters.

The general decided that while he would do nothing so rash as to disarm his sepoys, he would at least prepare a refuge for the British community in case the worst occurred. He chose two hospital barracks on the edge of the cantonment. He did not think mutineers would actually dare to attack the place, when the crunch came, so he did not fortify it very strongly, merely throwing two low earthworks around the buildings; and he felt sure that help would soon come from elsewhere anyway, so he did not overstock it with provisions (happily accepting, though, the regimental messes' cheerful contributions of wine and beer).

Presently Nana Sahib, who was allowed to maintain a small bodyguard of cavalymen and elephants at Bithur, approached his friends in the garrison and asked if he could help. Would the English ladies, for example, care to take refuge with him at Bithur? Or could

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he and his men help to keep things quiet in Cawnpore? The general preferred the second offer to the first. One of his problems was the defence of his treasury, which lay awkwardly, like the commissariat at Kabul, well outside the cantonment lines. Perhaps, he suggested, His Highness would care to reinforce the sepoy guard there with some of his own men? Nana Sahib agreed at once, moved into Cawnpore with 500 men and a couple of ceremonial guns, and settled in a bungalow between the treasury and the magazine. General Wheeler was delighted—he was proud of his Indian sympathies. 'It is my good fortune in the present crisis,' he reported to the Governor-General, 'that I am well known to the whole Native Army as one who, although strict, has ever been just and considerate to them. . . . Pardon, my Lord, this apparent egotism. I state the fact solely as accounting for my success in preserving tranquillity at a place like Cawnpore.'

Poor Wheeler! His success was illusory, and brief. On June 3, his informers told him that a rising was imminent, and all the women, children and non-combatants made for the new entrenchments. Almost at once, as if in response, the sepoys rioted, firing their pistols at nothing in particular, setting fire to buildings, and then, ignoring the Europeans crouched within their flimsy fortifications, rushing off helter-skelter towards the Treasury. They had no trouble with the Nana's soldiers, and loading the treasure into carts, and grabbing the munitions from the magazine in passing, and releasing all the convicts from the town gaol, and setting fire to all the documents in the public record office, off they set in motley triumph up the Grand Trunk Road to Delhi.

Now the Nana showed his colours. Nobody knows whether he had been in league with the sepoy leaders from the start, whether they impressed him into the cause, or he incited them. It used to be suggested that he was the spider behind the whole web of the Indian Mutiny, and that his visits to military stations were intelligence missions. Whatever the truth, less than 20 miles along the Delhi road the mutinous sepoys halted and returned to Cawnpore, where they apparently placed themselves under the Nana's command: and next day Wheeler received a letter from the Nana himself warning the British quixotically that he was about to attack their

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entrenchment. The European officers hurried into the refuge; guns were primed and sandbags strengthened; at noon on June 6, 1857, the first round fell into the hospital barracks, and the siege of Cawnpore began.

This pathetic action was to enter the mythology of the Empire. In the mid-Victorian era womanhood was elevated to a mystic plane of immunity, and the vision of European women and their children violated or murdered by mutinous ruffians touched atavistic chords of fury. In contemporary pictures the siege of Cawnpore, which was to have a lurid ending, was painted in appallingly lurid colours. Every sepoy is black, wild-eyed and blood-stained; every English mother is young, timid, spotless, terrified, and clutches to her breast a baby still immaculately pantalooned. It was above all the killing of women and children that horrified the public, when news of the Mutiny reached England: and of all the fearful tales of the rising, the story of Cawnpore was the most often and perhaps the most enjoyably retold.

Wheeler's entrenchment was in open ground about half a mile from the Ganges—a treeless place without a flicker of green, where black birds of prey circled always overhead, and the dry dust got into everything. Here the British were besieged for eighteen days. There were about a thousand of them, including 300 women and children. The two buildings were small single-story blocks with verandahs, and the arrangements (wrote Kaye, historian of the Mutiny as he was of the Afghan War) 'violated all the decencies and proprieties of life, and shocked the modesty of . . . womanly nature'. Indeed all the feminist elements necessary to such a Victorian drama were present at Cawnpore. Several babies were born during the siege. There was a wedding. Children played among the guns, mothers pathetically kept up their journals. Stockings and lingerie were commandeered to provide wadding for damaged guns ('the gentlewomen of Cawnpore', as Kaye says, 'gave up perhaps the most cherished components of their feminine attire to improve the ordnance . . .').

But though it read like a parody in contemporary accounts, it was all too real. There was plenty of ammunition, but the commissariat supply was eccentric, and in the first days of the siege one

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saw private soldiers drinking champagne with their tinned herrings, or rum with their puddings. Later everyone got a single meal a day, of split peas and flour, sometimes supplemented by horsemeat ('though some ladies could not reconcile themselves', we are told, 'to this unaccustomed fare'). The sepoys never stormed the position, but they kept up a constant fire of musketry and artillery, night and day, so that the British never got any rest, were always at their guns, and were forced to make constant sorties to keep the enemy at a distance. Every day there were more casualties, and as the tension increased, the food ran short, the bombardment relentlessly continued and the sun blazed mercilessly on, several people went mad. Every drop of water had to be fetched from a well outside the entrenchment, and man after man was shot getting it. Another well was used for the disposal of corpses: the dead were laid in rows upon the verandahs, and when night fell they were dragged away from the steps, feet first.

The temperature rose sometimes to 138 degrees Fahrenheit, the guns were too hot to touch, and several men died of sunstroke. On June 12 the thatched roof of one of the barracks caught fire, and the building was burnt to ashes, through which the men of the 42nd Regiment raked with their bayonets, hoping to find their campaign medals: all the medical supplies were lost in the blaze, and the survivors were forced to draw in their defences, and huddle in the single building left. Poor Wheeler was now distraught. 'We want aid, aid, aid!' he wrote in a message smuggled across the river to the British garrison at Lucknow. 'Surely we are not to die like rats in a cage?' When his own son Godfrey was killed—'Here a round shot came and killed young Wheeler', recorded a graffito, 'his brains and hair are scattered on the wall'—the old general was broken, and lay on his mattress all day long in tears.

By now the place was full of half-starved children, sick and wounded women, men blinded, insane, or helplessly apathetic. 'June 17th', recorded one young Englishwoman's diary, 'Aunt Lilly died. June 18th. Uncle Willy died. June 22nd . . . George died. July 9th. Alice died. July 12th. Mamma died'.<sup>1</sup> Yet on June 23 the most determined rebel assault was beaten off, and after thirteen days

<sup>1</sup> And she died herself on July 15.

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of siege there was reached a kind of stale-mate. The sepoy were too timid to take the place by storm, but too impatient to starve it into submission. On June 25 a solitary Eurasian woman, barefoot, with a baby in her arms, appeared on the flat ground before the entrenchments, holding a flag of truce. They carried her half-fainting over the rampart, and she presented an envelope ceremoniously addressed to 'The Subjects of Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria'.

The Nana was offering terms. 'All those who are in no way connected with the acts of Lord Dalhousie', his unsigned message ran, 'and are willing to lay down their arms, shall receive a safe passage to Allahabad'—100 miles away, and the first downstream city still held by the British. After a day of discussion with his officers, Wheeler accepted the offer, insisting only that his soldiers keep their side-arms, with 60 rounds of ammunition apiece. There were parleys on the flat ground before the entrenchment; the guns were handed over; and at dawn on June 27 the evacuation began.

Sixteen painted elephants, eight palanquins and a train of bullock-carts, with sullen mahouts and insolent drivers, took the sick and wounded out of the camp, down a shallow wooded gulley towards the river. Behind them straggled the walking survivors, rifles on their shoulders, scraps of baggage in their hands, ragged, dirty and silent. Most of the sepoy who swarmed around them treated them with contempt or contumely: others asked kindly after old friends or former officers. Crowds of sightseers followed too, but a few hundred yards before the river, where the track crossed a stream by a wooden bridge, they were all stopped. Only the British and their guards were allowed to proceed, the macabre procession of elephants, carts, palanquins and exhausted soldiers proceeding heavily in the heat towards the waterfront.

On a bluff beside the river there stood a small white temple, attended by a tumble of thatched huts, through whose purlieus dogs and geese wandered, and monkeys bounded. Below it was the *ghat* at which the Hindu faithful performed their ablutions in the holy river. Only a narrow gap in the bluff, sprinkled with trees, gave access to the water's edge. As they stumbled down to the waterfront, the British could not see far either up or down the river, but lying

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off-shore in front of them they discovered some forty high-sterned river boats, thatched like floating haystacks, with their crews waiting impassively on deck. There was no jetty at the *ghat*. The fit men were made to wade into the stream, carrying their wives, children and wounded—a forlorn emaciated company, many of them bandaged or splinted, some carried out on stretchers, some clutching ragged bundles of possessions. Bewildered and terrified, watched by the silent boatmen and the sepoy leaning on their muskets on the shore, they scrambled dripping and bedraggled aboard the boats, nine or ten souls to each craft. The last people to embark, Major Vibart and his family, were seen aboard with every courtesy by sepoy who had been in Vibart's regiment, and who insisted on carrying his bags.

On a platform before the little temple sat the Nana's representative, a functionary of the court at Bithur, keenly watching events below, and cheerfully crowded around the bridge over the gulley behind, peering through the gap like spectators at a sporting contest, hundreds of sightseers waited to see the last humiliation of the Raj. As soon as Vibart was aboard something ominous happened: instead of pushing off, all the boatmen jumped overboard and hastily waded ashore. Pandemonium followed. The British opened fire on the boatmen, and simultaneously the troopers who had so politely escorted the Vibarts aboard opened fire upon the boats. In a moment there poured into the stationary flotilla, from guns hidden on both banks of the river, a heavy fire of grape-shot and musketballs. The British were overwhelmed. Soon the thatch of the boats was aflame, and the river was littered with corpses, and threshed with desperate survivors. Women crouched in the water up to their necks, babies floated helplessly downstream, men tried desperately to shove the boats into midstream and get away. Indian cavalymen splashed about the shallows, slashing at survivors with their sabres, and the few people who managed to get ashore were either bayoneted then and there, or seized and whisked away beyond the gulley. Only one boat escaped, rudderless and oarless, and after nightmare adventures on stream and on land—chased through the night by maddened sepoy—besieged in a burning temple—without food, weapons, maps—at last two English officers and two Irish privates, all stark

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naked, swam ashore in friendly territory to tell the story of Cawnpore.<sup>1</sup>

Nobody else lived. Every man was killed. Every surviving woman and child was taken to a house called the Bibighar, the House of Women, a mud flat-roofed building beside the Ganges canal which a British officer had built for his Indian mistress long before. On the afternoon of July 15 several men, some of them butchers by trade, entered the Bibighar with sabres and long knives, and murdered them all. The limbs, heads and trunks of the dismembered dead were carried to a nearby well, and almost filled its 50-foot shaft.<sup>2</sup>

## 8

The other sacramental episode of the Indian Mutiny was the siege of Lucknow. This city, annexed by the Raj only in the previous year, was naturally full of dissidents—deposed princes, soldiers of the disbanded royal army, dispossessed stipendiaries, and a vast number of citizens who, far from welcoming the new enlightenment, missed the delinquent old days of cheap opium and corruptible officials. The British, who had a low opinion of Oudh traditional life, ensconced themselves in a grand towered Residency and used as an ammunition store the Kadam Rasul, a building particularly sacred to

<sup>1</sup> The last of them, General Sir Mowbray Thomson, survived until 1917 and was the most reliable eye-witness of the tragedy. Who opened fire first, the British or the Indians, and whether the Nana deliberately planned the massacre, we shall never know.

<sup>2</sup> It is all remembered in Cawnpore (nowadays spelt Kanpur). The fatal ghat, where the temple still stands on its bluff, is still called Massacre Ghat, and on the site of Wheeler's entrenchment there is a huge and awful memorial church, with a slab commemorating the '15 officers, 448 men, 3 officers' wives, 43 soldiers' wives and 55 children' who died. The massacre well, however, in the centre of the modern city, has sensibly been obliterated by the Indians since their independence, the British having covered it with a mourning angel of white marble. I wish I could say that a hush of elegy still hung over Cawnpore, but in fact it is a flourishing textile city, and in 1971 I was shown around its grim historical sites in a spirit of distinctly cheerful detachment. As for the Nana, he disappeared into myth, and nobody knows when or how he died.

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the Muslims of Oudh because it contained a stone impression of the Prophet's footprint.

But the Chief Commissioner was Henry Lawrence, fresh from the Punjab, and he seemed to have things well in hand, pursuing a careful mean between conciliation and firmness, and assuming plenary powers as commander of the military forces in Lucknow as well as head of the civil government. Lawrence thought he knew his Indians, and believed in trusting them as long as possible: 'until we treat Natives, and especially Native soldiers, as having much the same feelings, the same ambitions, the same perceptions of ability and imbecility as ourselves, we shall never be safe'. The mutiny had flared quickly throughout Oudh, and by the middle of June only Lucknow itself remained in British control: but though Lawrence was not well, he exuded his habitual kindly confidence, personally supervising the military arrangements, and sometimes going into the city incognito to see how the wind was blowing.

He had decided that the garrison, with the entire British community, should be concentrated within the Residency compound. This elaborate complex of buildings stood among flowered lawns in the very centre of Lucknow. To the north flowed the river Gumti, to the east was the huge tumbled pile of the Farhat Bakhsh, 'the Delight-Giver', the palace of the kings of Oudh. Closely around the compound walls straggled the native city, a foetid maze of alleys and bazaars, and towering over its gardens stood the Residency itself, a tall and ugly thing, from whose upper stories one could survey the whole expanse of the city, its towers, domes and minarets rising splendidly from the squalor at their feet. Within the thirty-three acres of the compound there were sixteen separate buildings—bungalows, stables, barracks, orderly rooms—and all this enclave, surrounded by mud ramparts, Lawrence now turned into a fortress. Trenches were dug, palisades erected, booby-traps set, wire entanglements laid. Artillery batteries were posted around the perimeter, and within the buildings the Residency staff prepared themselves for a siege. By the time the mutiny broke out in Lucknow, towards the end of June, the entire European population of the place, including a garrison of some 1,700 men, was entrenched within the compound.



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Soon everyone in England would know the topography of this place, and remember its names—the Baillie Gate, the Redan Battery, Sago's Garrison, Grant's Bastion. Anglo-Indian life was encapsulated there, grand ladies of the Company establishment to clerks and shopkeepers who were only just acceptable as Britons at all. There were merchants of several foreign nationalities, too, and many loyal Indian sepoy who had voluntarily joined the garrison—half the defending force was Indian—and several important political prisoners, including two princes of the royal house at Delhi. Tightly within their thirty-three acres this heterogeneous company huddled for safety, beneath the god-like authority of the Resident: beyond the walls the whole of Oudh was soon in hostile hands, and every house overlooking the ramparts had its quota of snipers and archers.

Almost the first casualty was Lawrence himself. A howitzer shell fell in his room, and when through the smoke and dust somebody call 'Sir Henry! Are you hurt?' there came after a short pause the faint but decisive reply: 'I am killed'. He lived in fact for two days more, giving detailed instructions to his successor about the defence of the garrison, and was buried quietly in the Residency graveyard beneath his own epitaph—'Here Lies Henry Lawrence, Who Tried To Do His Duty'. Without him the British sank into fatalism. The heat now was ferocious, the bombardment was unrelenting, and one could hardly move a foot in the open without a sniper's shot from over the walls. One by one the buildings toppled, until the whole compound was a sort of wreck. Food ran short. The air stank of carrion and excrement. Many of the women lived in cellars, where they were plagued by mice and rats, and often fell into gloomy fits of foreboding. 'In the evening, Mrs Inglis went to see Mrs Cooper, and found Mrs Martin sitting with her. They all had a consultation as to what they would consider best to be done in case the enemy were to get in, and whether it would be right to put an end to ourselves if they did so, to save ourselves from the horrors we should have to endure. Some of the ladies keep laudanum and prussic acid always near them'. (But Mrs Case and Mrs Inglis agreed that they should merely prepare themselves for death, leaving the rest 'in the hands of Him who knows what is best for us'.)

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Many of the Indian sepoy now deserted, and by July, 1858, the British were losing an average of ten men a day killed and wounded—among the wounded, after gallant service from the first day of the siege, was Dr Brydon, whom we last saw slumped on his pony outside Jalalabad twenty years before.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes rumours reached them of help on the way, and on August 15 a message arrived from the British. 'We march tomorrow for Lucknow,' it said. 'We shall push on as speedily as possible. We hope to reach you in four days at furthest'. And it added in Greek script, in case of interception: 'You must aid us in every way, even to cutting your way out if we cannot force our way in. We are only a small force.' This was cold comfort for the defenders, now reduced to 350 European soldiers and some 300 sepoy. They were harassed by constant mining operations under the ramparts—sometimes mines exploded well within the compound, and twice the ramparts themselves were temporarily breached. There were 200 women to care for, with 230 children, and 120 sick and wounded, and the rebels now had 18-pounder guns within 150 yards of the walls. The compound was a shambles.

Still, four days was not too long to wait. Not everybody behaved well at Lucknow: we hear of people hoarding food, stealing, standing upon seniority. For the most part, though, the British in the shattered Residency stuck to the principles of their age and culture, even in this extremity. Not only did they read their Bibles assiduously, attend church service regularly, and even entertain each other to formal meals, but they lived according to the strictest tenets of supply and demand, such as their compatriots had tried so disastrously to enforce on the other side of the world in Ireland. Food was bought from traders at current market rates, which were by the nature of things astronomical, and Sir Henry Lawrence's possessions were actually sold at auction within his ruined house, fetching very satisfactory prices.

The four days came and went. A week passed, and a month. It was not until September 23, after 90 days of siege, that the defenders heard gunfire on the other side of the city, and two days later there

<sup>1</sup> He survived this calamity too, dying comfortably on his estate in Scotland 15 years later.

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burst into the compound a column of Highlanders, ragged, unshaven, kilted and furiously warlike, under the joint command of two remarkable generals, Henry Havelock and James Outram. Outram was an urbane old India hand, who had spent his youth in wars against Indians and Afghans, had put down sundry lesser insurrections, and had been Napier's political officer in Sind. Since then he had emerged victorious from the footling Persian War of 1856, and here he was a Grand Commander of the Order of the Bath, gazetted to succeed Lawrence as Chief Commissioner for Oudh. He was the senior officer with the relieving force, but he had generously, or perhaps cautiously, conceded the operational command to the second general, a very different manner of soldier. Havelock was a veteran of the Queen's army, a home-spun fighting commander. He had fought in practically every Indian battle during the past forty years, he had read all the military manuals, he had a blazing eye and a stubborn chin, and he had been converted many years before to a dogmatic Baptist creed. He believed absolutely in every word of the Bible, especially the bloodthirsty parts: for as Kaye innocently observed of him, 'he was thoroughly persuaded in his own mind that war was righteous and carnage beautiful'. This was his first general command, all the same, and with these tremendous convictions to inspire him, and with the blood-maddened Highlanders at his heels, and the sophisticated Sir James always considerate at his elbow, he was just the man for the job. The Highlanders, overjoyed to find any survivors at all inside the Residency, bayoneted a few loyal sepoys in error as they entered, and played the bagpipes all night long in triumph.

But no sooner had the relieving force lifted the siege, than they were besieged themselves. There were only a thousand of them, many of them wounded, all exhausted. They were in scarcely better shape than the people they had come to rescue, and within the compound their presence soon proved to be more a curse than a blessing. By now conditions were desperate. People were eating sparrows, and smoking dried tea or chopped straw. The surgeons had run out of chloroform and performed operations in public among the beds. Dysentery and scurvy were rife, and so were lice—most of the soldiers had shaved their heads bald, heightening the nightmare flavour of the

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experience. No building was much more than a shell—everything riddled with balls like smallpox, as the garrison chaplain put it—and into the ruins there now poured the torrential rains of the monsoon, dripping into every shelter, and clouding everything in a damp hot haze. All the time the rebel sappers mined beneath the compound, and one could often hear the clink of pick-axes far below one's feet: the rebels drove twenty mines under the compound, the British drove twenty-one counter-mines, and there were sometimes macabre battles between the sappers far in the clammy underground. Through it all the Union Jack flew from the Residency tower, defiant among its ruins in the heart of the hostile city.

At the end of October word filtered in that a second relieving force, under General Colin Campbell, was approaching from the north, and so there stepped into the limelight a hero of Lucknow soon to become legendary. Henry Kavanagh was an Irishman, ginger-haired and very large, who had worked for the Post Office department, and had made his name within the compound by his intrepid behaviour in the mines, where he spent night after night with loaded pistol awaiting the arrival of rebel sappers, and sometimes shooting them through the narrowing wall that separated their respective galleries. He now volunteered to find his way through the enemy lines, make contact with Campbell, and guide the relieving force into the Residency. Heavily blacked with lamp-oil, disguised in turban, orange silk jacket and pyjama trousers, and accompanied by an Indian guide whose heroism was to be less devoutly remembered by posterity, Kavanagh swam the river, bluffed his way through the rebel check-posts, and met a British picket: eight days later he returned to the Residency, dressed this time in a cotton quilted tunic, corduroy breeches, thigh length jackboots and a pith helmet, to conduct Havelock and Outram triumphantly through the shattered slums to Campbell. As the three generals met, Campbell's soldiers raised a cheer, and Havelock, at the moment of his glory, greeted them Napoleonically. 'Soldiers', he stentoriously cried, 'I am happy to see you!' (And a formidable lot they must have looked—Sikh cavalry in tangled draperies, English infantry in slate-grey, turbanned Punjabis, plumed and tartaned Highlanders, and the 9th Lancers, one of the smartest cavalry

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regiments in Europe, with white turbans twisted around their forage-caps).<sup>1</sup>

This time the relieving force did not join the garrison within the compound, but merely kept Lucknow quiet to allow the withdrawal of the survivors. First came the women and children, on the night of November 18, through the ruins of the riverside palaces to the British lines—some in wagons, some in litters, some walking. They moved under constant fire, helped and jollied along by soldiers or by the sailors of Campbell's naval brigade. Sometimes they were ushered into trenches, sometimes they passed through a camouflage of canvas screens. With them went all the crown jewels of the kings of Oudh, together with some £250,000 worth of treasure from the British Residency.

Next, at midnight on November 22, the old garrison marched out, breaking step to avoid arousing the suspicions of the rebels: and finally the rearguard, a few hundred gunners and Highlanders, crept past the Baillie Gate to join the army outside the city, leaving their camp-fires burning in the deserted ruins of the Residency. The siege of Lucknow was over. By dawn next day a procession six miles long, of soldiers, bullock-carts, litters, elephants, horsemen, sepoy and camp followers was crossing the silent plain towards Cawnpore—the babies crying now and then, the pipes intermittently playing, the tired grave generals in their palanquins, and all about them the great cloud of dust that marked the passage of armies, friendly or hostile, defeated or victorious, across the face of India.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The 9th, with whom I had the pleasure of serving nearly a century later, so distinguished themselves in the Mutiny that they ever afterwards called themselves the Delhi Spearman: 14 of their officers and men won V.C.s in the campaign, including Private Goat.

<sup>2</sup> Havelock died almost at the moment of success, and was promptly beatified by his fellow-fundamentalists—soon after his death a kind of Holy Tablet was issued in his name, each commandment opening with the dread words HAVELOCK SPEAKS . . . (and he says, for example, that Whatever A Man's Professional Calling, He Ought to Aim Evangelically At Doing Good). Outram, 'the Bayard of India', died in 1863, and is one of the few British administrators still commemorated by a statue on the Maidan at Calcutta: there is also an effigy of him on the Thames Embankment, puzzling

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## 9

These were the epics of an event which was itself to be called, by the Anglo-Indian historian Sir Charles Crosthwaite, 'the epic of the Race'. The rising grumbled on, in guerilla skirmish and punitive hunt, until the summer of 1859, but long before then the British had resumed their command of the sub-continent, and the myth of the Mutiny was permanently established in the Victorian folk-lore. It had never spread beyond the Ganges valley, nor had the other Company armies joined the Bengal sepoy. The Punjab had remained quiet under the masterly John Lawrence. Dost Mohammed had not taken advantage of the times to invade India and repossess the Peshawar country the Afghans claimed as their own. Despite their faulty intelligence and inept staff-work, the British had dealt efficiently with the rising, and the conduct of their armies did much to restore the British military reputation after the failures of the Crimea. The Indians were never to rise in arms against the Raj again, and far from weakening the imperial confidence of the British, on a conscious level at least the Mutiny hardened and coarsened it.

It brought out the worst in many of them. Even the heroines of the Lucknow siege, when they were relieved at last, came stumbling out with bags of rupees in their arms, and did nothing but grumble—'not one of them said a gracious word to the soldiers who had saved them', one officer recorded, 'a fact which my men remarked upon'. Even that gentle cellist Hope Grant of the 9th Lancers, now a general and a knight, entering a Hindu temple at the ancient city of Ajoudia, contemptuously kicked over the sacred image of the monkey-god inside, 'to the horror', as he complacently recorded, 'of the dirty fat priests about, who had worshipped, or pretended to worship it, since they were boys'. In general the British fought at least as savagely as the Indians, and in the aftermath of the tragedy

to that overwhelming majority of Londoners who have never heard of him. The ruins of the Residency, which were to be immortalized by Tennyson in heroic verse, are preserved to this day by the Indian Government, with diligent respect.

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the worst national streaks of intolerance and chauvinism showed themselves: the restraining authority of Lord Canning, the new Governor-General, merely brought him the contemptuous epithet 'Clemency' Canning. The British saw the war as a straight fight between good and evil, and the savageries of the rebels, though they could hardly be exaggerated, were shamelessly exploited. Contemporary accounts are rich in gloating detail—every sepoy a crazed barbarian, every Englishwoman raped before mutilation. In memoir after memoir the Indians are pictured as faithless and brutal ingrates—'niggers', as they were now often called, who were animated by no normal instincts of mercy and kindness, and showed no sign that they might ever, even in God's infinite mercy, be capable of redemption.

It was in an Old Testament mood that the Christian public of England now looked out to the smoking desolation of northern India. *The Times* demanded death for every mutineer in India: 'every tree and gable-end in the place should have its burden in the shape of a mutineer's carcass'. The Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, proclaimed the nation's support for 'all who have the manliness to inflict the punishment'. The atrocities committed by the mutineers, declared Lord Palmerston, were 'such as to be imagined and perpetrated only by demons sallying forth from the lowest depths of hell'. When every gibbet was red with blood, declared a speaker at the Oxford Union, when the ground in front of every cannon was strewn with rags and flesh and shattered bone, 'then talk of mercy. Then you may find some to listen'.

And the revenge was terrible enough. Indians called it 'the Devil's Wind'. 'No maudlin clemency', wrote an eye-witness of the recapture of Cawnpore, 'was to mark the fall of the city', and it is probably true that no British Army in history has been so inflamed with furious passion as were the Queen's regiments in India then. 'Cawnpore! Cawnpore!' they used to shout, as they stormed another rebel position with their merciless bayonets, slashing and spiking, taking no prisoners, and going on to burn, hang and sometimes disembowel. Officers were as maddened as their men. When the British found the charnel house of the Bibighar, they made their captives lick the caked blood from its floor before hanging them, and afterwards

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arranged guided tours of the premises for regiments passing through. Whole villages were burnt and all their inhabitants hanged. Passers-by who ventured to turn their backs upon a punitive column were often shot for insolence. Looting was indiscriminate and unchecked—'the men are wild with fury and lust of gold', reported an eye-witness at Lucknow, '—literally drunk with plunder . . . faces black with powder; cross-belts specked with blood; coats stuffed out with all sorts of valuables'.

The British armies swept across the country in a kind of fever—we read of a force marching sixty miles in twenty-four hours in the middle of May, of three officers galloping non-stop for thirty miles to an action, of 130 miles covered in sixteen hours by relays of horses, galloping all the way. Most of the regiments came to look like wild insurrectionists themselves: their spanking uniforms were long worn out, and officers and men alike wore what they pleased—tweed coats, turbans, cloaks, making them all seem, stripped of order's livery, beyond order's authority too. One well-known field artillery unit, whose harnesses, we are told, seemed to be held together with pieces of string, was commanded by a major in a fez and a Turkish cloak, tied around the waist with rope, and marshalled by a battery sergeant-major in a coat made from the green baize of a billiard table. 'The gentlemen must be very savage', an Indian lawyer of Cawnpore noted apprehensively in his diary, and when the warship *Pearl* sailed up the Hooghly to Calcutta and fired a ceremonial salute, the crews of the country boats jumped overboard in terror, and the crowds on the quay fled for their lives, assuming it to be a signal for the destruction of the city.

When, after the end of the fighting, inquiries were held, court-martials conducted, and sentences legally passed, condemned mutineers were lashed to the muzzles of guns and blown to pieces to the beat of drums. The cruelty of the British matched the cruelty of the Indians, and both sides fought equally from the heart. Though many Englishmen soon looked back to their revengeful passions with remorse, still the relationship between rulers and ruled never returned to its old pragmatism, Indians and British accepting the best and worst in each other as transient phenomena of history. After 1857 the Raj regarded itself as a ruling enclave, different in kind

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from its brown heathen subjects—an institution rather than a community, whose best intentions and most useful works were, for ever after, to be tinged ineradicably with distrust, disapproval or superiority. And as we shall presently discover, the emotions of the Mutiny found their echoes all over the British Empire, permanently affecting its attitudes, and leaving scars and superstitions that were never quite healed or exorcised.

## 10

For a last picture of this most horrible of imperial wars, let us return to Delhi, where the tottering old king, still writing his melancholy lyrics among the sprawling sepoy in his garden, remained the figurehead of the rising. His reluctant return to authority was brief. Long before the end of the mutiny, even before the relief of Lucknow, John Lawrence had formed a flying column in the Punjab, British and Sikh, and had sent it storming down the Grand Trunk Road to the relief of Delhi. John Nicholson commanded it, and leading his own regiment of Sikh irregular horsemen, fiercer and leaner than ever, was William Hodson. Such a combination of the righteous and the predatory could hardly lose. 'Where have we failed when we acted vigorously?' Lawrence rhetorically demanded, dispatching his young men to the rescue of the Raj. 'Where have we succeeded when guided by timid counsels?' The Punjab Movable Column, clattering at twenty-seven miles a day down the great road, fell upon Delhi with irresistible spirit, and in a week of street fighting recaptured the city, Nicholson entering the pantheon of empire, as was almost pre-ordained, by dying in the hour of victory at the Kashmir Gate.<sup>1</sup>

The British found the Red Fort abandoned. Only a few dour and fatalist sentries remained at their posts, asking for no quarter, and getting none. Anybody else found in the building was killed too as a matter of course, and that night the British commander ordered his dinner to be served among the exquisite arabesques of the Diwan-i-Khas. There was no sign of the King, but presently intelligence arrived that he was hiding with a ragged mass of followers in the tomb of his sixteenth-century predecessor Humayun, a vast

<sup>1</sup> Where his tomb remains, in a garden across the road.

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mausoleum, domed and minareted, which lay within its own gardens some miles east of the palace—almost a town in itself, court opening into court, and one of the noblest Moghul monuments in Delhi.

The intelligence chief of the Delhi force was Hodson, and to him fell the task of arresting the King of Delhi. Since we last met him in the Punjab Hodson had been accused of unjust treatment of native princes, and had been pronounced unfit for political office. He was more than ever a bitter and resentful man, his ferocity sharpened, his taste for vengeance heightened, his contempt for Indians sourer than ever. He was nevertheless given carte blanche to deal with the royal family as he thought fit, except that he must spare the life of the king, whom the British proposed to try for treason.

Off to the tomb of Humayun Hodson rode, with fifty of his own wild troopers, slashed about with cummerbunds and sabres, bearded, turbanned, booted, like a savage praetorian guard of the Raj—galloping heedless through the crowds of refugees who poured out of Delhi with their carts and bullock-wagons, and who cringed into the gutters as this terrible squadron swept by. The force halted in the open square outside the gate of the shrine, and sending an emissary inside to demand Bahadur's surrender, Hodson awaited the supreme moment of his life. One can almost see him now in the great dusty square, half an Englishman, half a Sikh, dusty, lithe, ardent, dressed in the haphazard flamboyance dear to irregular cavalrymen down the centuries, the son of the Archdeacon of Lichfield awaiting the submission of the last of the Moghuls. A small crowd had gathered in the morning heat, waiting there silent and expectant around the horsemen, and presently there emerged from the shrine a palanquin, born by four servants. Inside lay Bahadur, gaunt and exhausted, his long beard straggled upon his chest.

Hodson promised him his life, with the proviso that if any attempt were made to rescue the king on the way back to Delhi, Bahadur would be shot like a dog. Then the little procession moved off along the road to the city, the crowd following silently behind, and gradually thinning out as they approached the British sentries at the Lahore Gate. The city was almost deserted. Through the Chandni Chouk bazaar they passed in silence, the troopers reining in their horses: and at the Red Fort Hodson handed over to the

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civil power the Light of the World, who was promptly locked up in a dingy little house within the walls—where, sitting cross-legged upon a verandah, listlessly cooled by frayed peacock-feather fans, and sometimes shrieked at by harridan wives from behind their shabby screens, he offered for many months one of the favourite sight-seeing experiences of Delhi.

Next day Hodson went back to the tomb of Humayun to arrest two of the royal princes still sheltering there. To them he promised nothing. On the way back to Delhi he ordered them out of their cart, had them stripped to their loincloths, and borrowing a carbine from one of his soldiers, shot them both dead with his own hand. Watched by a vast crowd of Indians, he took the bodies into the city and had them thrown upon the ground in front of the police station: and there they remained until, their stink becoming unbearable, they were buried in the cause of sanitation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hodson himself was killed during the relief of Lucknow in 1858: his estate was valued at £170, not counting the horses, and his regiment survived the Raj as the 10th Bengal Lancers (Hodson's Horse). The King of Delhi was tried in his own Diwan-i-Khas for rebellion and complicity in murder: described by prosecuting counsel as a 'shrivelled impersonation of malignity', he was sentenced to life imprisonment and exiled with his nagging wives to Rangoon, where he died in 1862.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Pan and Mr Gladstone

SWEPT away with the carnage of the Indian Mutiny were the last dilettante deposits of England's eighteenth century empire. There had been a pagan, or at least agnostic charm to that old sovereignty—short on convictions, rich in gusto and a sense of fun—but there would be little that was airy or entertaining to the new empire emerging from the shambles of Lucknow and Cawnpore. It knew its values now, stern, efficient and improving, and it recognized as its principal duty the imposition of British standards upon the black, brown and yellow peoples. The Mutiny had demonstrated indeed that not all the coloured peoples were capable of spiritual redemption, as had earlier been supposed, but at worst the British could always concentrate on material regeneration—the enforcement of law and order, the distribution of scientific progress and the lubrication of trade.

## 2

Almost the first possession to feel the impact of these certainties was, as it happened, the most allegorically pagan of them all. Since the end of the French wars the seven Ionian Islands had been ruled by the British. Tossed from the Venetian Empire to the French, and momentarily to the Turks and the Russians, in 1815 they had been made a British Protectorate. The British had wanted them because of their strategic position. Not only did they stand on the fringe of Islam—just across the Corfu Channel the Muslim world began, in the high mysterious hills of Turkish Albania—but they also covered the entrance to the Adriatic Sea, and stood protectively be-