

MICHAEL EDWARDES

Playing the Great Game

A VICTORIAN COLD WAR



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INTRODUCTION

The Great Game

THE nineteenth-century historian of empire, John William Kaye, found the expression in the papers of Arthur Conolly, one of its most enthusiastic players, who was murdered at Bokhara in 1842. The 'Great Game' took its comfortable place among all those other sporting metaphors—'play up, play up, and play the game', 'the game is greater than the players of the game'—with which the British tended to conceal the harsh realities of their imperial business. The Great Game subsumes more than a century of public drama and private tragedy, of high policies in ruins, needless wars, lonely deaths in wild places. It was a scenario which, ruthlessly edited, fitted very well with the Victorian concept of 'the romance of empire'.

But the romantic element should not be discounted. It was part of the attraction for the men who willingly and joyfully played the Great Game on the playing fields, not of Eton, but of Central Asia. Most of them were young. They gloried in their tremendous journeys of exploration and espionage, often in disguise, through some of the wildest parts of the earth. With no more authority than their own eagerness for action, they grasped the opportunity to organise the defences of remote cities. They sat down with the barbaric rulers of kingdoms with romantic names like Bokhara and Samarkand, Khiva and Khokand, and intrigued for their allegiance to an empire whose power could only be talked about and never adequately proved. They did all this with the belief that their actions contributed to the defence and stability of that empire, and were repaid for their efforts not with generosity and respect but with indifference, and were frequently allowed to suffer and die for policies that were in the main the product of the illusions, the ignorance, the fears, and the megalomania of generals and politicians in London, in Simla, and in St Petersburg.

The Great Game was a contest for political ascendancy in Central Asia between Britain and Tsarist Russia. The secret agents, British

and Russian, were the advance guards of armies that never met, for there was never to be open conflict between the forces of the two empires in Central Asia. But their clandestine activities often fed the dreams and terrors of the decision-makers thousands of miles away in their comfortable offices. Other wars were embarked on, despite the protests of those who had often risked their lives to gather the facts on which sensible and pragmatic policies might be based.

In high politics, however, illusions acquire a special armour against reality, and so the Great Game—in the graphic words of the Tsarist foreign minister, Count Nesselrode—was but ‘a tournament of shadows’, a secret war of illusions. What follows, then, is the history of those illusions, of the dangerous and bloody illusions that first took shape not in Asia but on a great raft moored on a river in east Prussia.

PART ONE

Embarrassments and Wars

To the extension of our political relations beyond the Indus, there appears to me to be great objections. From such a course I should expect the probable occurrence of embarrassments and wars, expensive and unprofitable at the least, without any equivalent benefit, if not ruinous and destructive.

SIR CHARLES METCALFE

The Start of the Game

IN JULY 1807, on a great raft moored on the river Niemen at Tilsit in east Prussia, the Emperor Napoleon and Tsar Alexander concluded a treaty, settling for the time being their differences and apparently heralding a new era of dynamic partnership against the British. Napoleon, with his dreams of an Asiatic conquest which would at least equal that of Alexander the Great, suggested a joint Franco-Russian operation against the British possessions in India.

When the news reached London and Calcutta, the grandeur and audacity of the projected enterprise overwhelmed common sense. The British ruling classes saw Napoleon as the spearhead of Jacobin doctrines, threatening the foundations of society in much the same way as their successors in Europe and America have seen Communism in the twentieth century. The conquest of India, which Napoleon was convinced could be achieved by fifty thousand men fighting their way through the Turkish empire and into Persia, properly belonged to the world of fantasy, but the general fear of this great French subversive sapped judgement. However irrational the emperor's project might be, it had to be countered. The steps that were taken in pursuit of this objective inaugurated a policy of what one historian has called 'frontier megalomania', the first phase of which was to end in the bloody catastrophe of the First Afghan War. By then the Napoleonic threat had been dead for more than a quarter of a century, and the French bogey had been replaced by that of Russia.

The eighteenth-century rulers of British India had not been troubled by the thought of potential threats to their sovereignty from West and Central Asia. Warren Hastings had sent two missions to Tibet, but his concerns had been mainly commercial. So confined was his interest that his first envoy, George Bogle, refused to accept a map of Tibet from a friendly lama on the grounds that his employers could 'have no interest in this country but that of commerce

and that to know a number of outlandish names or . . . the geography of Tibet, although a matter of great interest to geographers and map sellers, was of no use to my constituents or indeed to mankind in general'. The government's lack of curiosity was so profound that the first maps of the Himalayan regions were based almost exclusively on the reports of Jesuit missionaries!

Persia and Afghanistan held a similar lack of interest, and it was left to private enterprise to gather intelligence about these two countries. Even this was on the most limited scale. The only trustworthy account of Persian affairs was published by Jonas Hanway in 1753, after a journey made some ten years previously for the merchants of the Russia Company. In 1783 a member of the civil service in Madras, George Forster, at his own expense travelled in disguise through Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Persia, gathering military, political and commercial intelligence which was received with indifference by the government of India.

This attitude changed in 1798 with the arrival in India as governor-general of Richard Wellesley, brother of the future Duke of Wellington. Wellesley brought with him a hatred and fear of French Jacobinism. The news of French diplomatic activity in Persia produced from him an immediate response, even though the western land frontier of British India was more than a thousand miles away from the extreme limits of the Persian dominions. In 1800 Wellesley sent an envoy to the Shah of Persia to conclude a political and commercial treaty, his main object being to persuade the Shah not to listen to French agents and to do his best to keep the French army out of Persia. The treaty was not ratified, as it was thought unnecessary after the French evacuated Egypt in 1801.

The meeting at Tilsit, however, reactivated fears of a French threat to India, this time intensified by the partnership with Russia. Energised by fear, the governments in London and Calcutta began a flurry of diplomatic activity. Both governments sent emissaries to Persia, to the confusion of the Shah, but the result was a treaty that this time was followed by ratification.

The government of India's envoy to Afghanistan did not reach the capital of that tattered country. On his way, he had to pass through the independent Sikh state of the Punjab. Not for one moment did the Sikhs believe in the reality of the French menace. It seemed to them much more probable that the envoy was on his way to make a deal to divide up the Punjab between the Afghans and the British.

The mission had, in fact, overtones of black comedy. News of Napoleon's difficulties in Europe arrived before the envoy left British territory, and the number of presents he was carrying was reduced. Initially, the envoy was given no precise instructions, and when they finally arrived they were so vague as to be almost meaningless. The envoy could not find out where the ruler of Afghanistan actually was—and when he ultimately caught up with him at Peshawar, he discovered he was dealing with a ruler in imminent danger of losing his throne. The treaty he concluded was worthless. By the time it was ratified a few weeks later, its Afghan signatory was in exile. This was Shah Shuja, who was to haunt the imagination of British policy makers until finally exorcised in the British attempt to put him back on his throne thirty years later.

Other envoys were sent to the principal rulers of Sind, nominally an Afghan tributary but actually enjoying anarchic independence. A treaty was concluded there, too, but after the French menace disappeared into the mists from which it had come the treaty was allowed to lapse. In fact, only one of the missions achieved any solid or continuing success. This was the mission to the court of Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Punjab and master of the true frontier. Though the unreality of the French menace clouded the negotiations, the treaty that resulted stabilised relations between the British and the Punjab until the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839. Charles Metcalfe, the head of the mission to Ranjit Singh and at this time an ugly young man of twenty-three, was to become one of the most outspoken—but unfortunately ignored—critics of the Great Game.

At least one of the envoys saw the advantages of meeting any threat to British India on its own established frontier. As he moved across the great rivers and deserts of the Punjab in search of Shah Shuja, Mountstuart Elphinstone observed them to be a natural barrier to any invading army, and said so in his official report. It was not the last piece of sensible advice to be ignored by the governments in London and Calcutta.

As the power of Napoleon decreased in Europe, so the French threat to India was replaced by the Russian. In 1814 a new treaty was negotiated with Persia. It was an unusual treaty, for unlike the others it provided for mutual defence against any European power, though only Russia was regarded as a potential aggressor. The treaty was designed to frighten the Russians and stiffen the shah's

determination to resist them. Most important, the shah bound himself 'not to allow any European army to enter the Persian territory, nor to proceed towards India'. Another clause committed the shah to send an army against the Afghans should they 'be at war with the British nation', though the cost of the expedition was to be paid by the British. In case of a war between the Afghans and the Persians in which the British were not directly involved, they promised to remain neutral unless asked to mediate. For twelve years the treaty was left untested. The Russians were, however, on the move. Border disputes between Russia and Persia became almost routine, until in 1826 the Russians occupied a district claimed by the Persians. At this, the Persians, under the command of the heir to the throne, invaded Russia.

When things began to go badly for the Persians, the shah appealed to the British for help and was refused. Technically, the British were not required to go to the aid of Persia if that country was the aggressor, even if it was obvious that the Russians had goaded her into that position. But the real reason for this sudden addiction to diplomatic rectitude was that Britain was not in a position to aid Persia with forces strong enough to guarantee even a hope of success. The British hid behind diplomatic legality and lost face because of it. The rulers of the East became convinced that the British were afraid of Russia. There were some influential Russians who were beginning to believe it too.

Russia's war with Persia ended in 1828. The peace terms included the cession of two northern provinces and Persian navigation rights to the Caspian Sea. Persia was also to pay a large indemnity. It was obvious that Russian influence in Persia would now be paramount, and what had been designed as India's first line of defence had become a potential base for attack. Almost simultaneously with the Persian campaign, Russia had been at war with the Turkish empire. Was all this part of a plot to subvert the Muslim states of Western and Central Asia? There were British statesmen who thought it probable and began to take steps to combat it.

In 1829, while the fall-out of Russian activity in Persia and Turkey was at its maximum, a series of letters and memoranda passed between the then British prime minister, the Duke of Wellington, and Lord Ellenborough, the president of the India Board. The duke was concerned about the presence in the Caucasus of the Russian General Paskievitch, who had been mainly responsible for Russian

successes against both Persia and Turkey. Paskievitch was an expansionist, an empire-builder who talked openly (though vaguely) of the coming war with Britain. With the aid of his advisors, Ellenborough produced what would now be called a 'situation paper' on the possible course of such a war. He was convinced that the Russian army would march southwards to the Afghan capital of Kabul. Once there, they would have plenty of time to build up a firm base for the invasion of India.

Ellenborough was less certain about the precise route the Russians would take. They might march to Kabul by way of Persia and the town of Herat, or by way of Turkestan, navigating the river Amu-Darya to a point from which they could conveniently reach the passes of the Hinju Kush. As far as the timing of such moves was concerned, and the dangers they undoubtedly presented, he was optimistic. He thought that the Russian drive to the south would be slow, that the soldier would be preceded by the trader. Remembering the history of British India, he suggested that commerce would prepare the way for conquest. As the Russian merchant established his trading posts, elements of the Russian army would be introduced to protect them. By carefully watching the progress of Russian commercial penetration in west Central Asia, the route the Russian generals had decided upon would be revealed.

Ellenborough ended this seminal correspondence with a request to the Foreign Office for military, political and commercial intelligence about the states of Central Asia. Such information, it seems, was not available from India. But that gap would soon be filled. The long day of the spy—and the spymaster—was about to dawn.

Spies and spymasters

THE REASON Lord Ellenborough had to appeal for information to the Foreign Office in London rather than to the government in Calcutta was not that such material did not exist in the archives in India. The reports of travellers, map-makers, and even soldiers, lay mouldering in the files. If not forgotten altogether, their value had been downgraded by the priorities of the government of India after 1809. Generally speaking, top priority had been given to the consolidation of British power inside India.

The dominating school of thought had been that of the disciples of Charles Metcalfe, whose influence grew steadily after his success at the court of Ranjit Singh. At this time, though the British were the strongest military power in India, they were not unchallenged. Metcalfe and his followers believed that until the challenges were removed the security of the British dominions was not complete. Consequently, they approved of the extension of British rule to the south and east of the river Sutlej which, after 1809, was the western frontier of British India. Annexation, it was argued, would lead to more trade, to cheaper and more effective government. Consolidation in India would also supply the power base which Metcalfe believed was the best protection against foreign invasion.

This policy led to a number of wars. In 1814-16 a campaign was mounted against Nepal, mainly as a demonstration that annexations within the Sutlej frontier by anyone other than the British would not be tolerated. The war with Nepal was followed in 1817-19 by a campaign against the Marathas, a loose confederation of chiefs in Central India who at one time had seemed poised on the edge of empire. Those states that were not annexed were brought under British 'protection' their rulers overawed by forces trained and officered by the British but paid for by the rulers themselves. Naturally, such intelligence-gathering as there was was confined to India itself and to the states that lay upon the expanding frontiers of British territories there.

But men like Charles Metcalfe were not entirely in control of public policy. For one thing, the government of India was not an independent government. Strong governors-general could, and did, use their powers with considerable freedom, but the final arbiters were the politicians in London. The government of India was essentially an unequal partnership. India was ruled in the name of the East India Company, whose merchants had first arrived there in the seventeenth century. But over the years the government in London had increased its control over the Company. It was the cabinet that appointed the governor-general, and a strong governor-general in sympathy with the policies of the cabinet in London could in practice overrule the Company and its employees in India, however eminent and influential they might be.

The claim by civilians to control the policies of the British in India was not unchallenged, either. British power in India was based upon armed force. Because of this, soldiers coveted wider roles than the purely military. The officers of the Company's army, like its civil servants, were recruited by patronage. It was not what you were but who you knew that was the passport to either employment. Oddly enough, the army—though badly paid compared with the civil service—seemed to attract a higher proportion not only of more adventurous but also more intelligent young men, whose ambitions were quickly excited by the possibilities offered by an expanding empire.

As the frontiers of British India spread, a shortage of civilians led to many officers being employed on administrative duties, especially in the wilder borderlands. The young artillery officer encountered by a French traveller in a remote district in the Himalayas was not exceptional. Not only did he command a regiment of mountain troops and collect the revenue; he also acted 'as a judge over his own subjects and, what is more, those of neighbouring rajas, Hindu, Tartar, and Tibetan, sending them to prison, fining them, and even hanging them when he thinks fit'. It was from such men, the traveller noted, that he learned most 'about the affairs of the land'.

It was also from such men, neither purely civilian nor purely soldier, that a new breed known disparagingly by civilians as 'politicals' emerged. They became diplomats as well as administrators, secret agents, and controllers of secret agents. Apart from the role these new men played in replacing concrete policies with immature enthusiasms, their extra-military employment denuded

the Indian army of its more dynamic officers, leaving behind the aged, the very young, and those who were not intelligent enough for civilian duties. The army was to suffer for it in the First Afghan War, which destroyed not only much of the army but most of the leading 'politicals' as well. The effects were still being felt at the time of the great mutiny in the Company's army in 1857.

Such intelligence-gathering as had taken place in the twenty years preceding Lord Ellenborough's interest in Central Asia had been casual, amateur, and unco-ordinated. Various departments, even individual administrators, had their native agents and news writers, most of whom merely supplied the kind of gossip they thought their clients expected. But not always. At least one, Mir Izzut Ullah, produced accurate facts about the caravan routes from Kashmir to Yarkand, from there to Bokhara, and then to Kabul. He travelled as the agent of William Moorcroft, and his reports proved invaluable when Moorcroft himself made his own journey through Ladakh, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and part of Turkestan in 1820-25. Occasionally, freelance agents appeared in the offices of British officials with stories to tell of the wild and lonely places they had traversed. In 1812, while Mountstuart Elphinstone was preparing his report on Afghanistan—founded on his experiences with the mission of 1809—a halfcaste turned up, ragged and hungry, at Poona with valuable information. Elphinstone found this son of an English soldier and a Muslim mother literate, apparently trustworthy, but a little mad. In return for his information, Elphinstone offered him a job as a government clerk, but the man refused this splendid offer, asking only for sufficient money to pay his passage to Mecca.

The map-makers employed by the Survey of India were expected to produce information on local flora and fauna, human as well as animal, and to report on the most suitable routes for the movement of troops. But though they made accurate measurements—with the use of rosaries when secrecy was necessary and with strange instruments known as 'perambulators' when it was not—they kept very much to the recognised caravan highway, filling in the detail on either side from information taken from native maps or from the descriptions of travellers. The results, though not quite of the 'here be dragons' variety, in many respects inhabited the fringes of a similar fantasy. More scientific map-making was at least on the way. From around 1817 onwards, Alexander Gerard, a professional surveyor, explored every pass and calculated the height of every peak

between Simla and Tibet, and the new desire for information soon led to the application of accurate scientific methods to the mapping of areas well beyond the frontiers of British India.

Among the less probable of intelligence-gatherers were surgeons and medical men. Their European expertise was always welcomed by Asian rulers, though frequently they had to take their own medicine in order to convince their patients that they were not poisoners. Such men often travelled with government approval and provided reports of considerable value. But it was the man who had trained as a soldier who was most likely to recognise the strategic features of a country. He was often resourceful and courageous, and his ambitions were strong enough to encourage him to learn the languages of Central Asia, sometimes fluently enough to enable him to travel in disguise without running too high a risk of discovery. But such men were neither properly trained for spying nor, on most occasions, adequately briefed. Most had no knowledge of scientific surveying and were incapable of producing a map that was accurate enough to be serviceable. They were usually despatched with the vaguest of instructions and consequently produced the vaguest of reports. They exercised no critical judgement on the material they collected, because their masters were incapable of setting criteria for them. In intelligence-gathering, as in ordinary life, if nothing in particular is looked for, nothing in particular is what is usually found.

The men who controlled the secret agents were theorists who carefully tailored such facts as came their way to suit their theories. The agents knew their masters' opinions and, often unconsciously, gathered only such information as buttressed them. This might not have been so serious if there had been only one controlling centre, but there were at least four. Like all intelligence organisations they tended towards conflict and competition with one another.

The British authorities in Bombay, a province greatly expanded in size by the annexations that followed the Maratha war, had always considered Persia the outer defence of British India, and the relations of the government of India with that country had largely been influenced by Bombay opinion. It was an opinion shared by one of the most important of the spymasters, Henry Pottinger, who in 1820 was appointed British Resident in the native state of Kutch, over two hundred miles north of Bombay on the western coast of India. Kutch, which also lay on the southern borders of Sind, became the principal observation post on the western approaches to India.

Unlike some of his colleagues, Pottinger had travelled in the area of his concern. In 1810, in company with Charles Christie, he had journeyed through Baluchistan to Persia. Their purpose was to find out what might be the next move a Russian army might make after it had entered Persia. Another British officer was exploring the coastline of the Arabian Sea to discover whether it might be a possible route for an invading army to take from southern Persia to the town of Karachi in Sind (he reported that it was). Pottinger and Christie were concerned with more northern land routes. Together, they crossed Baluchistan disguised as horse dealers, closely pursued—though not closely enough, fortunately—by soldiers of the amirs of Sind sent to arrest them.

When the two men reached the north-west border of Baluchistan, having collected valuable material on the way, they parted. By then they had satisfied one of the main aims of their journey, which had been to confirm a report from less reliable sources that Baluchistan and Afghanistan were separated from Persia by a great desert, the Helmand, which might offer a serious obstacle to an invading army. Pottinger discovered that, on the numerous occasions when the Afghans had tried to invade Persia, they had skirted the southern fringes of the desert, so he followed this route westwards, making for the town of Kirman in southern Persia. For part of the way he changed his disguise, becoming a Muslim holy man, but was almost betrayed by some uncharacteristic action and ended his journey in the less exacting role of a peasant in baggy trousers and cotton shirt, a rope belt, a blue turban, and carrying a heavy stick.

Pottinger and Christie had arranged to meet again at Kirman, but Christie did not arrive at the appointed time. He turned up a month later at Isfahan, which Pottinger had now reached, wearing an Afghan disguise. Christie had spent several weeks in the town of Herat collecting information on its politics and defences. His report was to convince many British soldiers and politicals that Herat was the key to Afghanistan and the Punjab. Christie remained in Persia as a military advisor and was killed two years later in a frontier incident with the Russians.

There were many such military advisors in Persia at the time, and they were at least nominally under the control of the British legation in the Persian capital, Teheran. To that legation in 1824 came John McNeill, originally a surgeon in the Company's army but then about to embark on his career as the principal exponent of Russophobia in

the East. After the Russian successes of 1828, McNeill began to see Russian agents and intrigues everywhere, and by the time he was appointed minister at the Legation in 1836 he had convinced himself of the immediate reality of the Russian threat to India. In the same year he published a pamphlet that both reflected and confirmed the fears of other Russophobes in Britain, with the result that he became one of the most powerful influences on the British policy which finally led to the catastrophe in Afghanistan.

McNeill, Pottinger, and the authorities in Bombay agreed—with idiosyncratic glosses—that the threat from Russia would emerge through Persia, pass through the gateway of Herat into Afghanistan, and finally make its way through the passes of the north-west to the Punjab. The fourth intelligence centre disagreed. It did not find the menace of Russia nearly as imminent or as potentially dangerous as that of the Afghans. This intelligence centre was at Ludhiana, close to the frontier with the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab. From 1823 it was under the control of another military officer, Claude Martine Wade.

Wade was convinced that in the Sikhs lay the best defence for British India. They should be soothed and assisted to become the first line of defence against invasion by the Afghans, even if the latter were accompanied by a Russian army. As the Afghans and Sikhs were long-standing enemies, Wade's intrigues were concentrated on weakening the Afghans as much as possible. A divided and unstable Afghanistan, Wade argued, was the best means of retaining the Sikh alliance.

This might have been sensible if the Sikhs of the Punjab had been natural allies of the British. But such friendship as there was between the two powers depended upon the will of one aging and unhealthy man, that same Ranjit Singh with whom Metcalfe had concluded the treaty of 1809. The rest of the Sikh princes and nobles, the army which the British had permitted Ranjit to organise with the aid of French and other European mercenaries, were anxious for new conquests. The soldiers were determined not to fight in Afghanistan, which they quite rightly regarded as a death trap. All the evidence, even that collected by Wade's indefatigable agents, indicated that once the restraining hand of Ranjit Singh was removed, the Sikhs would attack the British, or at least some of those states that now lay under their protection. In that situation, a strong Afghanistan would be the best ally the British could find. The

occupational blindness of intelligence organisations is no twentieth-century disease. Nor is the ability of politicians and decision-makers to benefit from it. Wade found the right ears and conditioned their hearing.

Wade's agents were mainly employed in fomenting small wars in Afghanistan. It was not a particularly difficult task. The Afghans were prone to inter-tribal conflicts and the opportunities for exacerbating these were frequent. But Wade had larger ambitions. He wished to place on the Afghan throne a pliant nominee of his own. How such a puppet was to be both weak enough to accept the pulls of a British puppet-master and strong enough to impose his own will on the turbulent Afghan chiefs does not emerge from the extensive archives of Ludhiana. Nor is the contradiction diminished by the character of the man Wade believed could be the instrument of his plans. This was the same Shah Shuja who in 1809 had been overthrown a few weeks after signing a treaty with the British.

Fleeing from Afghanistan, Shah Shuja had unwisely accepted an invitation to visit Ranjit Singh at his capital of Lahore. For some reason—and against all reason—Shah Shuja had thought that the Sikh ruler would help him back to his throne. Instead, the amir was put under house arrest and forced to give up the great diamond known as the Koh-i-noor, the 'Mountain of Light', which now, as a heritage of irony and of empire, shines among the British crown jewels. It was seven years before Shah Shuja could escape from the constricting hospitality of Ranjit Singh and make his way to Ludhiana, where he was given a house, a small pension, and, after a few years, the encouragement of Wade to sustain his hopes of a return to power.

Wade was determined to convince the decision makers, as against all evidence to the contrary he had convinced himself, that Shah Shuja—who had failed on a number of occasions to raise even the feeblest of support inside Afghanistan, and whom most Afghans were more than willing to forget—was the ideal ally for the British. And he succeeded.

Wade's policy was to be twice put to the test. In 1833, with the almost blatantly unofficial aid and encouragement of the British and the cynical support of Ranjit Singh, Shah Shuja attempted to invade Afghanistan. His small force was chased out by the then ruler of Kabul, Dost Muhammad, a tough, pragmatic man who would have made a valuable friend for the British if they had been willing to

help him consolidate his power. Ranjit Singh occupied the Afghan frontier district of Peshawar—which had been his intention all along—while Shah Shuja crept back to the protection of his friends at Ludhiana. The second attempt to force Shah Shuja on his unwilling countrymen developed into the First Afghan War, and its dark tragedy was a direct consequence not only of Wade's strategic thinking but of its previous failure. Dost Muhammad, enraged by Ranjit Singh's seizure of Peshawar, for which he held the British responsible, sought an alliance with Russia. In doing so, he created the very situation which Wade's policies were ostensibly designed to avoid.

Naturally, the Russians welcomed this indirect British gift. Though the men who played on the Russian side in the Great Game had many things in common with their British opponents—naivety, topographical ignorance, uncritical enthusiasms, and strategical fantasies—they could recognise an advantage when they saw one.

Landscapes and figures

[i] *The shawl-goat and the horse doctor*

ONE OF the great pioneers of espionage, ignored by the government but an inspiration to many of the young men who were to follow him, was by profession neither a soldier, a surgeon, nor a map-maker. William Moorcroft was a horse doctor in his middle forties when he was appointed in 1808 as Veterinary Surgeon to the Bengal Army and Inspector of Military Studs. Before that, he had made his living in London as a manufacturer of machine-made horseshoes of his own design.

By 1811, Moorcroft's ambitions had spread beyond the limits of the breeding farm and the smithy. Ostensibly to search for new breeds of horses, he obtained the governments' permission to travel through the Himalayan regions and into Chinese Tibet. His real purpose was to introduce into India the breed of goats which provided the raw material for the making of the costly and elegant Kashmir shawls then much in demand in Europe. He also hoped to prove the then common belief that the rivers Ganges and Sutlej both had their source in the Tibetan lake Manasarowar.

Travelling in disguise with, as companion, Hyder Young Hearsey—a Eurasian who had once been a mercenary soldier in the employ of the Marathas—he moved through western Nepal and twice crossed the Niti pass, at nearly seventeen thousand feet one of the highest in the Himalayas. Despite the fact that both men suffered severely from altitude sickness and that blood gushed from Moorcroft's mouth as he reached the summit of the pass, he still claimed on his return that he had discovered a new and usable trade route for British goods to pass into Tibet. The Chinese, however, would not have permitted trade, even if the route had been practical, and it was perhaps just as well that the government in Calcutta was not interested in Moorcroft's suggestion.

The journey had not been easy. Local officials had looked upon

this strange expedition with active suspicion. In Nepal, Moorcroft was arrested as a spy and it was with some difficulty that he persuaded his captors to release him. His interest in the shawl-goat had also aroused suspicion, and he did not find it easy to obtain even a few specimens of wool. But the expedition at least proved that the Ganges did not rise in Lake Manasarowar, and neither did the Sutlej. Moorcroft failed to find the source of the Ganges, but he did find that of the Sutlej.

Only one part of Moorcroft's report on his travels created any interest in Calcutta. Moorcroft was convinced that Russian traders were active in the region to the north of the Himalayas. Late in 1812, he wrote letters to Charles Metcalfe, then Resident at Delhi and holding a watching brief on the northern frontiers, about Russian trade in Nepal and Tibet. Metcalfe merely filed them away, but there were men in Calcutta who were already convinced that after the Russian trader came the Russian army. They could not, however, persuade the government of any imminent danger, and when in 1814 Moorcroft again asked for permission to make a journey of allegedly commercial exploration he was refused, on the grounds that he had already created unnecessary trouble with the government of Nepal.

Moorcroft's standing with the government of India was restored within a few months by the decision to go to war with Nepal. The governor-general, concerned over possible Chinese reaction, was anxious to obtain information. Moorcroft supplied it. One of his most trustworthy native agents told him that the ruler of Nepal, fearing a British attack, had already appealed to the Chinese in Tibet for aid if such an event occurred. The Chinese had replied, asking how much money and how many men would be required. The truth of this story could, Moorcroft suggested, be tested by sending native agents to Ladakh and Kashmir to enquire whether any large purchases of grain—essential for a Chinese army passing through rough and inhospitable country—had been made. There are no records that his advice was taken, but contacts he had made during his travels in Nepal were of assistance to the British when they invaded the country. When Moorcroft next requested permission to go on his travels, he was not refused. In 1819 he was given leave of absence on full pay to make a journey whose official purpose was to purchase horses at Bokhara.

Moorcroft and his new companion, an Englishman named George Trebeck, were encouraged and officially authorised to travel to

Bokhara by a most roundabout way. This was so that the expedition could follow two of the most important caravan routes of Central Asia. One led from Kashmir to the Chinese frontier town of Yarkand, and the other from Yarkand to Bokhara. Moorcroft was certain that there was a market for British manufactures in Central Asia and the western parts of the Chinese empire and carried with him a wide variety of samples ranging from textiles to pistols and hunting rifles.

The party travelled through the Punjab, where Moorcroft acquired a safe conduct through Kashmir from Ranjit Singh. This was in payment for prescribing remedies for the Sikh ruler's many ailments, some of which seem to have been sufficiently effective to produce the permission to travel through Kashmir despite Ranjit's well-known fear of British espionage.

Passing through Kashmir, Moorcroft made for the independent state of Ladakh, which lay on the upper reaches of the Indus river, bordering Tibet. Ladakh was assumed by the treaty of 1809 to lie in Ranjit Singh's sphere of influence, though for religious and cultural reasons the state had much in common with Tibet, of which it had once been a part.

To the growing irritation of the government of India, Moorcroft spent two years in Ladakh compiling voluminous reports on the commercial prospects and endlessly negotiating with the Chinese at Yarkand for permission to visit that town. The government's irritation was increased when it learned from Moorcroft that on his own authority he had concluded a commercial treaty with the ruler of Ladakh. The government's reply was to disown the treaty, suspend Moorcroft's salary, and consign his reports to the files.

The government, however, did not order Moorcroft to return. Perhaps it was thought that the suspension of his salary might make him give up, but Moorcroft's imagination had been inflamed by that madness for the unknown to which certain minds are so susceptible. He was determined to reach Central Asia. In place of money, he still had the goods which he had obtained on credit from Calcutta business houses. Until they were sold, he could finance himself. But Moorcroft was rational enough not to allow the attractions of Central Asia to overwhelm his commercial spirit. For all his desire to reach Bokhara, he had not forgotten the principal aim of his first journey into the high mountains, and spent ten months in Kashmir studying the manufacture of shawls and the breeding of the shawl-goat. By 1823 he was ready to move on.

Leaving Kashmir, Moorcroft and Trebeck, their valuable merchandise loaded on to tough little ponies, made their way to Peshawar and from there through the menacing grandeur of the Khyber pass to the Afghan capital of Kabul. From there they travelled to Bokhara, arriving in 1824 to become the first Englishmen to reach this mysterious city since the middle of the sixteenth century. The rulers of Bokhara had a reputation for religious fanaticism and were liable to execute anyone who was not an orthodox Muslim. Moorcroft, however, was received with unexpected cordiality, perhaps because he emphasised his dubious qualifications as a physician. He was permitted to sell his merchandise and even to hope for the establishment of trade relations between Bokhara and India.

Moorcroft's notes—at least, those that survived—on his visit to Bokhara are brief and uninteresting. He stayed in the city for almost five months, after which he and Trebeck left for India. But instead of taking the direct route through Kabul they moved in the direction of Herat. Neither of them reached it. Moorcroft died at Andhkui in northern Afghanistan, some two hundred miles south of Bokhara, towards the end of August 1825, and his companion a short time later. It was believed that both men had been poisoned, possibly by Russian agents, but they could just as well have died of disease. More than twenty years after, two French missionaries, Fathers Huc and Gabet, who had managed to reach the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, were assured with a wealth of circumstantial detail that Moorcroft had not died at Andhkui in 1825 but at Lhasa ten years later, having made his way to that city in disguise. The most likely explanation is that one of Moorcroft's many native agents, possibly Mir Izzut Ullah who had trade connections with Lhasa, carrying letters from Moorcroft and even English maps, may have died at Lhasa in about 1835. The papers might have led the authorities to assume that the dead man was actually an Englishman in disguise.

The lengthy reports sent to the government of India during Moorcroft's travels reiterated the as yet unfashionable theme of Russian designs in Central Asia. Most of them were filed away. There was more interest in them in England than in India, and in April 1825 the Directors of the Company in London expressed their surprise 'that a considerable number of Mr Moorcroft's despatches which must have been received a year or two before were not brought on record till October 1823, an omission which is not

explained'. But they still agreed with Calcutta that Moorcroft's journey into Central Asia was unnecessary.

Moorcroft's advice was ignored primarily because it was believed that if it had been taken it would have antagonised Ranjit Singh. Wade's thinking was slowly becoming entrenched in the bureaucratic minds of Calcutta. Moorcroft's rejected treaty with the ruler of Ladakh had not been purely commercial. The ruler, frightened of Sikh expansionism, was really looking for protection. When the government disowned Moorcroft's treaty, they even took the trouble to inform Ranjit Singh that they had done so. Twelve years after Moorcroft's stay in Ladakh, the ruler was still hoping for British help against a threat of annexation which now seemed imminent. He approached a visiting British botanist, one Dr Henderson, and renewed his offer of trade in exchange for protection. As Henderson was absent without leave from his government appointment, he did not send this proposal on to Calcutta, and it was the Sikhs who informed the government, protesting strongly at Henderson's presence in Ladakh. Dr Henderson was immediately disowned, and severely reprimanded for travelling without permission in forbidden areas.

Moorcroft had been convinced that the route connecting Yarkand with Kashmir was the back door to India and that one day the Russians would enter through it. Before that, they would have established themselves throughout Central Asia by controlling its commerce. Through Ladakh and western Tibet, Britain could tap the great potential profits of the markets of Central Asia for herself, and by so doing establish a political ascendancy there that would inhibit, if not totally prevent, any Russian advance towards India. Moorcroft was sure that the Russians had already grasped the potentialities and Britain would have to move quickly before the opportunity was lost forever. The choice was quite simple. The British had to decide, wrote Moorcroft, whether the peoples of Tibet and Central Asia 'shall be clothed with the broadcloth of Russia or of England. Whether they shall be provided with domestic utensils of copper, iron or of pewter, with implements of iron and steel, with hardware of every description, from St Petersburg or Birmingham—it is entirely in the decision of the government of British India. At present', he added, 'there is little doubt to which the prize will be awarded, for enterprise and vigour mark the measures of Russia towards the natives of Central Asia, whilst ours are characterised by misplaced squeamishness and an unnecessary timidity'.

If the government in Calcutta was impressed by these arguments it made no move. In 1835 Ladakh was annexed by the Sikhs and the possibility of the British controlling the road to Yarkand had been lost. The journal of Moorcroft's journeys in Ladakh, Kashmir and Bokhara was not to be published until 1841, but a number of his reports were circulated privately in India. They were read by a young soldier who was to become one of the most famous of the players of the Great Game. Alexander Burnes was to claim later that Moorcroft had seen the future while others had been content with the present, and that it was in the hope of completing Moorcroft's work that he had himself embarked on his own well-publicised travels.

[ii] *Six horses and a vizier*

ON A hot and brilliant day in July 1821, a flotilla of flat-bottomed boats sailed up the river Ravi to the Sikh capital of Lahore. On board were a large retinue of servants, a small detachment of soldiers, a surveyor, six English draft horses—and Lieutenant Alexander Burnes of the Bombay Army. The horses were a gift from William IV, King of Great Britain, to Ranjit Singh, Maharaja of the Punjab. The long journey of seven months sailing up the river Indus from the Arabian Sea had been an intelligence operation, thinly disguised—and to some people ill advised—in the territories of the amirs of Sind. Its successful conclusion was, for twenty-six-year-old Alexander Burnes, his passport to the world of the Great Game.

Burnes, a Scot with the driving ambition of so many of his countrymen to make a name in the world that to a large extent created and sustained the British empire, arrived in Bombay in 1821. He later claimed to be the stupidest of his family, but soon after his arrival he had already decided that his future was not with the army but on the wider and more rewarding battlefields of the 'political'. To help realise that ambition—and to earn the extra pay that came with proficiency—he settled down to study languages. He began with Hindustani, that 'camp language' of the Mughal conquerors which had become the nearest India was ever to get to a common tongue. He then moved on to Persian, 'as it will improve my Hindustani and, perhaps, add greatly to my future prospects'. It certainly produced promotion, and with more pay the young Burnes was considering whether he could finance a journey to Persia and possibly

Arabia. Partly to raise money for this and partly so that he could send money home, he tried gambling at cards. He almost lost all his savings and learned, he said, 'a moral lesson'. But he never cut free from the recklessness of the gambler and took chances with the stake of his own and other people's lives that he never again took with money.

In 1825 it seemed that the amirs of Sind were about to attack the British-protected state of Kutch, where Henry Pottinger was the Resident. A force was sent from Bombay which included Lieutenant Burnes as interpreter. The expected campaign did not materialise but Burnes spent his time studying map-making and surveying, and produced 'a map of an unknown track for which the government rewarded me by an appointment in the department of the Quarter-master-General—the most enviable line in the service'. This meant his removal from regimental duties and greater chances not only of promotion but of impressing his superiors. So successful was Burnes in this that in 1828 he was transferred to army headquarters in Bombay and had the good fortune to attract the attention of another Scot, Sir John Malcolm, then ending his distinguished career as governor of the Bombay province.

Burnes volunteered to explore the river Indus and, with Malcolm's approval, set off, only to be recalled on the insistence of the governor-general, Lord William Bentinck, that such overt intelligence-gathering might offend the amirs. Instead, Burnes was appointed assistant to the Resident in Kutch. He saw himself 'on the high road . . . to office, emolument and honour'. Under Pottinger's guidance he found himself reading up the conquests of Alexander the Great, perhaps the most influential ideologue of the Great Game. He traced his journeys and those of his geographers who, at that time, were almost the sole source for topographical knowledge of the river Indus and surrounding lands. In 1830, Burnes planned to 'traverse . . . regions which have been untrodden since the Greeks of Macedon followed their leader'. Further, he intended to travel to England through Egypt and Syria and Greece. 'These, and all the countries near them', he wrote to a friend in England, 'are in my mind's eye; I think I dream about them'.

His first travels, however, were to be in a different direction. In January 1830, Lord Ellenborough, now convinced of the Russian menace and anxious that the government of India should be in a position to supply intelligence information to the cabinet in London, sent a secret despatch to Bentinck. The governor-general was

instructed to open up the navigation of the Indus, with the primary aim of repelling 'the Russian commerce from Kabul and Bokhara by carrying our goods directly' there. The secondary aim was to establish British influence in Central Asia. The excuse was to be the transport of the gift of six dray horses to Ranjit Singh.

Bentinck was sceptical both of the Russian menace and of the value of the Indus as a trade route. The river, he guessed (correctly), would turn out to be unsuitable for steamer traffic. Furthermore, Ranjit Singh would certainly be suspicious and the amirs of Sind might try to reject the mission by force. As for the horses, they would 'cut a sorry figure on the plains of Hindustan', and the Sikh ruler would 'probably look on them as elephants'. Charles Metcalfe, now a power at Calcutta, was horrified at the plans for the mission. He found the scheme for surveying the Indus under the pretence of sending a gift to Ranjit Singh 'a trick . . . unworthy of our Government' and one that, when detected, 'as it probably will be', would 'excite the jealousy and indignation of the powers on whom we play it'. It was the kind of trick the British were often accused of playing, and now they were doing so. What would the British do if the mission were attacked or insulted? Fight a totally unnecessary war?

But the government in London was determined to ignore any argument. The mission must go on. Sir John Malcolm in Bombay chose Lieutenant Burnes to head it, and advised him to leave as soon as possible before the government changed its mind.

The amirs of Sind lived up to Metcalfe's apprehensions. When in the last week of January 1831 the flotilla of boats approached the first sizeable town up the Indus and Burnes sent letters to the capital at Haiderabad, the reply was a party of soldiers and a request that Burnes take himself and his boats to the river mouth and there wait for orders. After delicate negotiations, the flotilla was finally allowed to move up river towards Haiderabad. As the boats sailed slowly through the harsh landscape of Sind, soundings of the river were taken, the surveyor prepared his charts, and at stopping places discreet—though not discreet enough—enquiries were made about local customs and landmarks. By the time Burnes reached Haiderabad suspicion had solidified and the amir there received him with barbed courtesy. The presents Burnes had brought with him were handed over—'a gun, a brace of pistols, a gold watch, some English shawls and cloths, with two pairs of elegant cut glass candle-sticks and shades'. The amir was not impressed, and asked that the clock

and the candlesticks be exchanged for something else, as 'they formed no part of the furniture of a Sindian palace'.

Burnes found Sind itself and its inhabitants as miserable as the amir. The towns were full of beggars, the climate terrible, and the officials rude. But the Indus *was* navigable. And Burnes's reception in the Punjab was to make up for that of the surly amir and his tattered court. The great grey horses caused a sensation. There were military parades and banquets, Kashmiri dancing girls thoughtfully provided by the maharaja, and a drink that 'burned like fire' to which Ranjit was addicted. Not surprisingly, the reception as well as the drink went to Burnes's head. Physically unimpressive, he had carried out a dangerous mission by using his intelligence. He was no longer the pupil of Henry Pottinger, but a strategic thinker in his own right, and he must use every opportunity to convince the decision-makers that he was a man to be listened to.

Not too reluctantly, for he had to consolidate the position he had gained, Burnes left Lahore for Ludhiana. There he met Shah Shuja with whose future his own was to be so tragically tied. He found the Afghan exile uninspiring, and after several conversations in which Shah Shuja outlined his plans for returning to power, it was Burnes's opinion that the shah did not possess 'sufficient energy to seat himself on the throne of Kabul; and that if he did regain it, he has not the tact to discharge so difficult a position'. Burnes, having outgrown Pottinger, was in no mood to accept the tutelage of Wade.

At Simla, where he then went to report to the governor-general, Burnes was received with compliments on his 'zeal, diligence and intelligence'. He found the circumstances ripe for exploitation. A request for permission to make a journey through Afghanistan and into Central Asia as far as the Caspian Sea was immediately granted. 'The Home Government', he wrote to his sister late in September 1831, 'have got frightened at the designs of Russia, and desired some intelligent officer should be sent to acquire information in the countries bordering on the Oxus [Amu-Darya] and the Caspian; and I, knowing nothing of this, come forward and volunteer precisely for what they want'.

After the vaguest of briefings, Burnes went to Delhi to organise his team. His only European companion was to be Dr James Gerard, younger brother of Alexander Gerard who had explored the passes between Simla and Tibet in 1817. Gerard was a surgeon, but also a trained surveyor who was to produce the first military map of

Afghanistan with any pretension to accuracy. The surveyor with the party was to be Muhammad Ali, who had accompanied Burnes on his mission through Sind, and Mohun Lal, a young Kashmiri educated at the English school in Delhi, went as interpreter. The party, with its servants and a small armed escort, set out for Ludhiana and then pressed on through the Punjab. Part of the journey was spent in the company of Ranjit Singh and his court, as the maharaja moved across country. After several weeks, the party reached Peshawar and there shed their European dress for that of Afghans. Not, Burnes said, as a disguise, but merely to avoid attracting too much attention.

Burnes found Peshawar 'delightful', but Kabul was 'Paradise'. Along the way he was received in the most friendly manner, and at Kabul had conversations with Dost Muhammad. Burnes had no authority to negotiate anything, but he was expected to discover the sympathies and ambitions of the rulers and other great men he might meet on the way. Burnes found Dost Muhammad the opposite of Shah Shuja, and the two men became, within the limit of their reticences, good friends. But Burnes was anxious to move on.

'We travel from hence in ten days by caravan' for Bokhara, he wrote to his mother in May 1832. He was not worried for his safety, as all reports talked of peace in the wild country he was about to travel. It was just possible that he might be taken for a slave, 'but no one will attack me for my riches'. He had no tent, no chair and no table, no bed, 'and my clothes altogether amount to the value of one pound sterling'. His hair was shaved and his beard died black, but 'I never conceal that I am a European'. For all his poor appearance, he carried 'a bag of ducats' concealed under his clothes and a sharp sword was always buckled at his side. When he visited, he put his hand on his heart and said 'with all humility to the master of the house: "Peace be with you", according to custom', and then squatted down on the ground. 'I tell them', he wrote, 'about steam engines, armies, ships, medicine and all the wonders of Europe, and in return they enlighten me regarding the customs of their country, its history, state factions, trade, etc'. The only thing that appeared to worry him was the absence of bacon for breakfast. 'When they ask me whether I eat pork, I, of course, shudder and say that it is only outcasts who commit such outrages'.

From Kabul the party made its way across the raw mountains of the Hindu Kush to the city of Balkh. On the way they found many

traces of Moorcroft and Trebeck, and were saddened by a visit to what was alleged to be Moorcroft's grave. But three days in Balkh were enough. It was time to make for Bokhara. The party approached the city through a harsh desert landscape which changed near the city walls to fruit gardens watered by a little river. The city was surrounded by a high wall pierced by eleven gates. It was a place of mosques and palaces, great bazaars full of the noise and sweat of all the races of Central Asia. But it was also a city of sickness and plague, and of slaves, many of them—it was said—Russian soldiers captured in skirmishes with the ruler's forces.

Bokhara rustled with rumour and suspicion, yet Burnes was welcomed with remarkable affability. He had conversations with the vizier (*wazir*) the chief minister of the ruler, but he was not allowed to see the amir himself except from a distance. 'I am as good as the amir', the vizier informed him, 'if you have no matters of business to transact with the king; what have travellers to do with courts?' But Burnes soon acquired sources of information, who told him something of the private life of the ruler. He was apparently frightened of being poisoned. His drinking water was brought from special wells, and his food was first tasted by the chief minister and then locked in boxes to which only the amir and minister had keys. After an hour, if the minister was still alive, the boxes were opened and the ruler had his meal. 'We shall hardly suppose', was Burnes's comment, that 'the good king . . . ever enjoys a hot meal or a fresh cooked dinner'.

Burnes and his companions spent nearly four weeks in Bokhara. When the time came to leave, the minister not only arranged that they should join a caravan travelling across the great Turkman desert to Merv, but warned the caravan master that if anything happened to the party 'he would root [him] from the face of the earth'. Burnes was also given a document carrying the royal seal, demanding that protection be afforded to him. Apart from incidents with bandits, a mad camel, and a poisonous spider, the protective power of the royal seal sustained the party until it reached Meshed. There, mindful perhaps that he should keep all his options open and sustain good relations with Henry Pottinger, Burnes ordered Gerard to return to India by way of Herat and Afghanistan. Mohun Lal was to accompany him. At Meshed, Burnes met the Persian crown prince and a number of British officers attached as advisers to the Persian army. Then, with the remainder of the party, he rode on to Teheran.

At the Persian capital, Burnes was able to talk to John McNeill at

the British legation and to hear his views on the Russian menace. He also saw the shah and, according to the published version of his travels, pleased that monarch by replying to a request that he name the greatest wonder he had encountered on his travels: 'Centre of the Universe, what sight has equalled that which I now behold, the light of your Majesty's countenance, O attraction of the World!'

Burnes finally left Persia in December 1832 and reached Bombay a month later. He had been away for just over a year and 'had retraced the greater part of the route of the Macedonians; trodden the kingdoms of Porus and Taxiles, sailed on the Hydaspes, crossed the Indian Caucasus, and resided in the celebrated city of Balkh from which the Greek monarchs . . . had once disseminated amongst mankind a knowledge of the arts and sciences of their own history, and their world. We had beheld the scenes of Alexander's wars, of the rude and savage inroads of Jengis and Timour . . . in the journey to the coast we had marched along the very line of route by which Alexander had pursued Darius'.

Good romantic stuff, in a time when most readers had had the benefit of a Classical education and many saw the British in Asia as the inheritors of at least some of the Classical glories. But the real results of Burnes's travels were contained in his secret report to the government, very little of which found its way into his book. What Burnes had to report was very well received in Calcutta, and so was Burnes. His opinions were listened to with respect, though he was not without critics in high places, among them William Macnaghten, the head of the foreign and political department of the government of India. But this did not worry Burnes. He was not out to antagonise anyone if he could help it, and his report reflects the caution of a young man with a glorious future to secure.

The report was certainly impressive—Burnes made sure that it was—but it had a high value in its own right. He had proved that the river Amu-Darya, a possible Russian invasion route, was navigable from the delta on the Aral Sea to within twenty miles of the immense barrier of mountains that separated Afghanistan from the plains of Turkestan. But he also described the difficulties and dangers of the long corridor of passes which he had travelled on his journey through the mountains. Burnes implied, though he did not openly say so, that he was coming to doubt the probability of a Russian advance that way. It was much more likely that the Russians would move higher up the Amu-Darya and then make for Kashmir. In Kashmir,

there would be plenty of supplies, and a suitable area for setting up a base from which the actual invasion of the Indian plains could be mounted. Chitral, he seems to have thought, would be one of the key positions on this route.

As for the beliefs of the McNeill and Pottinger schools that the Russians would pass through Persia and then to Afghanistan by way of Herat, Burnes carefully did not come out openly against them but neither did he admit that the route from Meshed was the only one the Russians could take. He reported that the route he followed from Bokhara to Merv, and which from there led to Herat, was a waterless and barren desert, so sandy that even if cattle were available to pull guns and supply carts most would not survive the journey. Again, there was no overt statement of opinion. The reader was left to assume that the only practical approach to Herat was through Persia. For all Burnes's care, his report was severely criticised by the military experts at the legation in Teheran.

On Russian diplomatic and espionage activities in Central Asia Burnes was also non-committal. Unlike Moorcroft, he found the states of Central Asia quiet even though correspondence was passing between St Petersburg and Bokhara—mainly, he suggested, over the question of Russian slaves. It was possible that Khiva might fall to the Russians, but Bokhara would and could defend itself.

Burnes's reticences do not seem to have offended the governor-general, who perhaps took them for the modesty of a young man or even welcomed them as a change from the bombardment of opinion to which he was usually subjected. Burnes departed for Britain with the good wishes of those who mattered. His new reputation preceded him, and the publication of his *Travels into Bokhara* spread his fame in quarters that influenced opinion. He was entertained at a banquet by the Directors of the Company; awarded a Gold Medal by the Royal Geographical Society; and, perhaps most flattering of all, invited to the houses of the great. The king commanded his presence at Brighton and appeared to be fascinated by the young man's experiences. The king's ministers in London were anxious to hear his opinions, and Mountstuart Elphinstone gave him advice on the preparation of his journals for publication. The newspapers referred to him as 'Bokhara Burnes'.

Burnes returned to India in 1835 and took up his old position as assistant to Henry Pottinger at Kutch. But it was only a way-station. The following year he got what he had been working for in

London, the appointment as head of a 'commercial mission' to Dost Muhammad at Kabul.

[iii] *Onward, Christian soldier*

THE FAME of Alexander Burnes overshadowed the achievement of a younger officer who, after trying to reach Khiva, had travelled through Herat and Afghanistan to arrive back in India just as Burnes was setting out on his clandestine mission through Sind. The personalities of the two men were in sharp contrast. Burnes, the pushing, essentially pagan Scot, and Arthur Conolly, the quiet, intensely Christian Londoner. Both were courageous and determined, pushing a weak physique to the limits of hardship. But their ambitions were widely disparate. Burnes concentrated his mind on his own future, while Conolly sought to improve that of others. In the end, neither ambition was satisfied, and both men were to die tragic and pointless deaths.

In 1823 the Company's ship *Grenville* carried among its passengers Reginald Heber, the newly consecrated second bishop of Calcutta, perhaps still remembered for that stirring missionary hymn which opens: 'From Greenland's icy mountains, From India's coral strand . . .' In one of his letters the bishop recorded that he had been studying Persian and Hindustani and that 'two of the young men on board showed themselves glad to read' with him. One of them was Arthur Conolly, at sixteen on his way to take up a commission in the Bengal Artillery. The bishop did more than study languages with the young soldier. In the words of Conolly's nineteenth-century biographer, 'the Seed of the Word, which then came from the Sower's hand, fell upon good ground and fructified a hundred-fold'.

Conolly's first years in India were spent quietly with his regiment. He carried on with his study of languages, but the opportunity to move from the military service to the political, if offered, was not grasped. In 1827 he fell sick and was compelled to return to England to recuperate. There his militant Christianity blossomed. Conolly became a follower of William Wilberforce, the great anti-slavery crusader, but he was also infected with the desire to travel in strange places. Faced with a return journey to India by the long sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, he decided instead to make his way overland through Russia and Persia.

'Quitting London on the 10th of August 1829', he wrote in the first lines of his *Narrative of an Overland Journey to the North of India*, 'I travelled through France and the North of Germany to Hamburg, and embarking on a steam-vessel at Travemunden on the 1st of September, sailed up the Baltic and the Gulf of Finland in four days to St Petersburg'. By way of Moscow and Tiflis he made his way to the Persian border and crossed it to halt at Tabriz.

It had been his original intention to make for the Persian Gulf, there to board a ship to Bombay, but at Tabriz he found the then head of the British legation in Persia, Sir John MacDonald, and some of his staff. The talk, of course, was of Russian designs and the paucity of intelligence about the states of Central Asia. Conolly found his interest quickened, and suggested to MacDonald that he should attempt to reach India by way of Central Asia. MacDonald encouraged him with money and credentials and such meagre topographical information as he had. He also arranged for Conolly to take with him as interpreter Said Karamut Ali, a news writer employed by the British who was normally stationed at the Afghan town of Kandahar.

From Tabriz the two men made for Teheran, and from there for Ashkhabad, where Conolly decided to attempt the journey to Khiva in order to find out whether the state was actually menaced by the Russians. The country between Ashkhabad and Khiva was known to be harsh and full of bandits. Conolly until then had made no attempt to hide the fact that he was a European, but now he thought it would be wise to go forward only in disguise. He chose that of a merchant and purchased carpets and shawls, some furs, and bags of pepper, ginger and other spices to support the pretence. But Conolly lacked the knowledge to act the part. Bandits first stole his goods and his camels. He was then kidnapped in the hope of ransom. Only the opportune arrival of a large caravan of Persian merchants saved him from death or, more likely, from being sold as a slave.

Back at Ashkhabad with his rescuers, Conolly wisely gave up the idea of reaching Khiva. Instead, armed with the credentials from MacDonald, he was able to join the caravan of a wealthy Afghan who took him to be a diplomatic agent.

This time Conolly refused to disguise himself, and despite the fact that he was travelling with strict Muslims went out of his way to insist that he was a Christian. While in Meshed he spent much time discussing theology with members of the Jewish community. His

Christianity became more ostentatious every day, and he seems to have left a strong impression on those who might have been expected to resent it. Yet later travellers heard nothing but admiration for the way Conolly stood up for his faith. It is not impossible that the people he met thought he was mad.

But Conolly was now quite sure that any bad reputation the British had acquired in the East was due to their lack of Christian rectitude. Most Muslims, he thought, believed that the English had no religion at all. 'They hear from their friends, who visit India, that we eat abominations and are never seen to pray'. The best corrective for that was to send these poor heathens translations of the Gospels.

After leaving the caravan at Meshed, Conolly found himself short of money. Most of what he had been given by MacDonald had been spent on the merchandise stolen from him on the way to Khiva. But his theological discussions with the Jews of Meshed produced a loan and, with his interpreter, he set off for Herat. There Conolly also made a strong impression. So much so that a later arrival found himself received, on Conolly's account, with such munificent hospitality that he found it 'more than pleasant, for such liberality required corresponding liberality on my part, and my funds were not well adapted for any extraordinary demand upon them'.

Conolly was preceded to Kandahar by the news that 'an English spy' in the pay of the ruler of Herat—with whom the authorities in Kandahar were on the worst of terms—was on his way. Common sense persuaded the militant Christian to adopt Muslim disguise once again, but he was still incapable of sustaining the part in the streets and bazaars. He was forced to spend some time in hiding, during which he was prostrated by fever. Nursed back to health by Said Karamut Ali, he was next smuggled out of Kandahar into the countryside by some of the latter's friends. There, in imminent danger of arrest, he passed the time enjoyably with the boys of the village who took him out to hunt hyena.

The return to India was made through the Bolan pass, the one way out of Afghanistan that did not emerge into the Punjab of Ranjit Singh. Instead, Conolly passed into the territories of the amirs of Sind, who did not really matter. In January 1831 he crossed the frontier into British India. At Delhi he met the governor-general, Lord William Bentinck, and reported on his experiences, then spent the rest of the year putting his reports in order and preparing a journal of his travels for publication. But his pace was

leisurely, and the effect publication could have had in London was muted by the prior appearance of Burnes's *Travels*.

Conolly did not resent Burnes's success. Before beginning his own journey, Burnes had asked Conolly to join him. For various reasons, Conolly had been forced to refuse, but he had sent Burnes extensive notes. After Burnes's return the two men had corresponded, and when Conolly's book was published in London Burnes sent him cuttings of the reviews. By this time, Conolly had finally been removed from regimental duty to the political department as an assistant to the governor-general's Agent in Rajputana, a congeries of states in Central India. But he found the climate depressing and the horizons narrow. 'I would rather be a Secretary of Legation in Persia', he wrote to Burnes in May 1835, 'than the greatest magnate in any part of this consuming clime'. In the same letter, however, he thought he saw a brighter future. News that Lord Heytesbury had been appointed governor-general of India, he believed, might mean that 'British interests will no longer be neglected in Central Asia'.

Conolly finally escaped from the Rajputana on home leave in 1838. By then, Lord Auckland—whose actions were to influence the future of both Burnes and Conolly—had started putting into effect policies that would end in the First Afghan War. Auckland had replaced the unfortunate Lord Heytesbury before the later could even leave England. But Conolly was right about the trend in British thinking. When he reached London he found the government and public opinion inflamed by Russophobia and as anxious as ever to hear the opinions of men like Conolly.

Conolly had actually gone home to get married, but the engagement was broken off for reasons buried under a mound of cliché by his biographer, who was nevertheless sure that if Conolly had married he would not have gone back to India. If for no other reason than to divert his mind, Conolly welcomed the requests of ministers for information about Herat, then under siege by the Persians and their Russian advisers, and Afghanistan. The thought of a British advance into Afghanistan, then being widely discussed, delighted him. But his reasons were not those of the government or of Alexander Burnes. J. W. Kaye, who was not unfavourable towards Conolly's hopes but disliked the means—and Conolly's indifference to them—that might have to be used to achieve them, described Conolly's conception as 'rather that of a great Anti-slavery Crusade than of a political movement intended to check-mate the designs of

another great European power'. Conolly grasped 'the idea of a band of Christian heroes entering the remote regions of Central Asia as Champions of Humanity and Pioneers of Civilisation'.

While most people saw the Russians' advance in Central Asia as a menace, Conolly believed they had the very best of reasons for it—the release of Russian slaves. He was not unfashionable enough to miss the fact that this motive could be used to cover darker ambitions, but he thought it should at least be recognised. What the British should do was send agents into Central Asia who would negotiate with the rulers for the release of the slaves and persuade them to assist in suppressing slavery in their countries. This, it should be carefully explained to them, would remove the pretext for the Russian advance. As for the Russians themselves, Conolly wrote in a memorandum submitted to the cabinet: 'It might not be amiss, frankly to put it to the Court of St Petersburg, whether they on their part, will not desist from a jealousy which is injuring us both . . . Whether, ceasing from an unworthy policy, which seeks to keep alive a spirit of disaffection among the thousands whom it is our high aim to settle and enlighten, they will not generously unite with us in an endeavour peaceably to abolish rapine and slavery' and bring to that part of Asia the benefits of European civilisation.

Should the Russians refuse, Conolly argued, nothing was lost. The missions to the rulers of Central Asia would have collected valuable topographical and commercial intelligence during their travels, and while it was possible that the rulers might prefer to be left alone to fight the Russians themselves, 'they would accept overtures of a generally amicable nature from us that have some way for the extension of our commercial relations beyond Afghanistan, which we hope to settle'.

These suggestions, based though they were on ignorance and naivety, were received with interest by the British government, but there is no evidence that the responsible ministers of that government actually believed that Russia would advance through Persia or through Central Asia. The ministers were no less ignorant of the realities than Conolly. They too were playing the Great Game, if not by quite the same rules. They had their larger plans to trump any Russian lead, even if it was a no bid. Intelligence was always valuable and could be laid up like vintage port for future use. If the best type of man for collecting it had other, more visionary ambitions, there was certainly no need to discard him. At first, the ministers

thought they would send Conolly direct to Central Asia with credentials from the government in London, but they changed their minds and decided to allow the governor-general of India to make the decision whether such a mission was worth while. Conolly was sent back to India, again by the overland route, but this time through Turkey, Armenia, and the Persian Gulf.

[iv] *The man from St Petersburg*

THE RUSSIAN counterparts of Burnes and Conolly and the other young players of the Great Game are almost completely concealed by the destruction of Russian archives. Russian travellers in the wilder parts of Central Asia published their experiences and these were dutifully, but often belatedly, translated into French and sometimes into English. There is little help from other sources in going beyond the printed words. Diplomats produced their censored memoirs, generals their descriptions of campaigns, works were even specially produced by departments of the Russian government with the specific intention of provoking and exacerbating British fears of Russian intentions. But most of the available information on Russian intelligence activities, on the spies and the spymasters, comes from the other side and is more often than not tainted with the preconceptions and the wishful thinking of those who provided it.

When William Moorcroft arrived in Ladakh, he was told that he had been preceded by a Persian Jew who carried credentials from Count Nesselrode, the Russian foreign minister, as well as letters, one of which was addressed to Ranjit Singh. H. H. Wilson, who edited Moorcroft's Journals for publication after Moorcroft's death, alleged without any evidence that the agent had sent reports to St Petersburg on the political situation in Afghanistan. This agent was said to have died before he reached Lahore. When Moorcroft arrived in Bokhara, he heard that a Russian envoy was in the city negotiating with the amir. The bazaars and the coffee houses were full of rumours that Russia was about to attack Khiva and that Russian agents were active within the state's frontiers. Two Russian commercial agents were by then on the road to Ladakh and Kashmir.

Every traveller passed on rumours of this kind, always vague and inconclusive. There was, however, more substance in the activities of Count Simonich, the Russian minister at Teheran. Whether he was acting on direct instructions from St Petersburg or on his own

initiative cannot be proved. After the failure of the Persian attack on Herat in 1838, which he had encouraged if not inspired, he was repudiated by his government. But governments have a habit of dissociating themselves from the failures of their agents. It is most likely that, within the terms of a general brief to stir up as much trouble for the British as he could, while consolidating Russian influence with the Shah of Persia, Simonich acted independently of his masters. Until his recall, he acted against the public policy of his government, yet undoubtedly had the confidence of its ministers.

Simonich controlled an intelligence network from Teheran, with native agents operating in the environs of Khiva, Herat, and Kabul. But his most effective operators were young officers in the Russian army. One such was Captain Vitkovitch. According to one not altogether reliable source, Vitkovitch was a Lithuanian who, while a student at the university of Vilna, had attracted the attention of the authorities by the enthusiasm and openness with which he expressed liberal opinions. Joining in a demonstration in favour of Polish independence he was arrested and sent into administrative exile at Orenburg, a military colony on the Ural river north of the Aral sea. The authorities must have considered Vitkovitch of only minor revolutionary importance, or he would probably have ended up in Siberia. However, Orenburg was rough and not particularly comfortable, being essentially a forward trading post. Once there, Vitkovitch seems to have attracted the interest of the Russian commander, who sent him on a survey mission in the surrounding area and encouraged him to learn languages. Vitkovitch may also have been sent on a mission to Bokhara. In 1837, he was officially an aide-de-camp to General Perovski, the military governor of Orenburg.

The first indication of Captain Vitkovitch's activities came in a letter of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Stoddart, then a military adviser with elements of the Persian army stationed at Naishapur. (One of the more interesting paradoxes of this period is that the Persians allowed both British and Russian soldiers to act as military advisers, an example perhaps of the exploitation of foreign aid which was to become a commonplace in the middle of the twentieth century.) Colonel Stoddart reported that: 'Captain Vitkovitch [he called him Vikovich] of the Russian service, aide-de-camp to the general at Orenburg, arrived here from Teheran . . . on the 10th instant. He is gone on a mission to Kabul. Horsemen have been given to pass him . . . to Kandahar. He left yesterday'. The letter was dated

14 October 1837; at that time the Persian army, with Russian military advisers and a body of Russian artillerymen, was already on its way to besiege Herat.

The British legation in Teheran, unable to halt the shah's march against Herat, sent a small party under Major Rawlinson to join the line of march. For what purpose is not quite clear, but mainly, it seems, to maintain some sort of British presence with the force—though Rawlinson had instructions to try and persuade the commander not to attack. Rawlinson had moved quickly, travelling some seven hundred miles in just over a week, and was within a day's march of the Persian force when, in an empty plain, he came across a party of horsemen in Cossack dress. Among them he recognised a member of the Russian mission in Teheran.

Rawlinson reached the next caravanserai before the Russians. When they arrived, they recognised his party and, instead of entering the place for the night, rode off. Not unnaturally, Rawlinson's suspicions were aroused and, gathering his men together, he set off as swiftly as possible through the night, catching up with the other party as they breakfasted beside a stream in a gorge in the hills. The two groups, in the circumstances, could hardly avoid a meeting. Rawlinson approached the apparent leader of the party, but could find no common language. He tried, of course, English, then Persian and even French, but the leader pretended to speak no language other than Russian, which Rawlinson could recognise but not understand. After some difficulty, a member of Rawlinson's group discovered that one of the Russians' servants spoke the same language as himself. From this man he learned that his master was a Russian officer carrying presents for Dost Muhammad, the ruler of Kabul. Rawlinson continued his journey, and had been only two days in the Persian camp when he was introduced to the Russian officer he had met on the way. The man was, it seemed, a Captain Vitkovitch. To Rawlinson's surprise he spoke fluent French, and when Rawlinson reminded him that on their first meeting he had pretended not to understand any of the languages tried on him, the captain replied with a smile that 'it would not do to be too familiar with strangers in the desert'. Rawlinson did not record his own comments or describe his feelings to his superiors. But, no doubt, he added this experience to the store that, thirty years later, was to make the then Sir Henry Rawlinson one of the most articulate and influential spokesmen of the 'forward school' of anti-Russian strategic thinking.

The next time Vitkovitch was heard of, he was on his way to Kabul. Burnes, by then ostensibly the head of a commercial mission at the court of Dost Muhammad, had received reports from Rawlinson and his own agents that a Russian envoy was on the way. This was confirmed by no less a person than Dost Muhammad himself. The amir informed Burnes that a Russian agent had arrived at the town of Ghazni and was on his way to Kabul. The amir asked Burnes for his advice. Should he receive the emissary, or not? He did not wish to have anything to do with an agent of any power, as long as he had hope of friendship with the British. He would, he said, 'order the Russian agent to be turned out, detained on the road', or act in any way Burnes suggested. Burnes advised the amir not to refuse to see anyone 'who declared himself duly accredited'; indeed, he would welcome, on behalf of the government of India, 'a full disclosure . . . of the errand on which the individual had come'.

The amir sent Burnes two reports from his own agents, confirming that Vitkovitch was a trusted emissary of the Russian Tsar. One report ended: 'The conduct and appearance of this man seem to infer that he possesses no less dignity and honour than Captain Burnes and whatsoever arrangements he makes will be agreeable to the Russian ambassador' in Teheran. After Vitkovitch's arrival in Kabul, the amir continued to supply Burnes with copies of letters he alleged were presented to him by the Russian envoy. There was one from Count Simonich, authorising Vitkovitch to negotiate with the amir and requesting that he be treated with consideration and trusted 'with your secrets'. Whether these letters were genuine or fabricated by the amir for his own purposes cannot be established. Burnes certainly believed them to be authentic, but Burnes was not necessarily a good judge. He heard from one of his contacts at Dost Muhammad's court that Vitkovitch also carried a personal letter from the tsar to the amir, thanking him for his good wishes (conveyed by an emissary to St Petersburg), and assuring the amir that 'in my heart I will feel always happy to assist the people of Kabul who may come to trade in my kingdom'.

Whether or not the letters were genuine, Burnes was alarmed, and so was the British government in London when it heard about them. The British ambassador in St Petersburg warned the Russian government in January 1837 that Count Simonich's activities would not be tolerated, and assumed that he was acting on its own initiative rather than that of the Russian government. Count Nesselrode

replied that he knew nothing about the actions of the Russian minister at Teheran, and whatever they were they did not have the approval of the government. Burnes, however, was convinced—though he had no firm basis for it—that Vitkovitch was intriguing with the amir and that he had the full approval not only of Simonich but of the Russian government. When Burnes wrote to the governor-general to this effect, Auckland merely replied that Burnes should suggest to the amir that he ought to dismiss Vitkovitch with ‘courtesy [and] with a letter of compliments and thanks to the Emperor of Russia for his professed kindness to Kabul traders’. As far as Auckland was concerned, it was better to accept the pretence that Vitkovitch was merely in Kabul to negotiate trade agreements and ‘no notice need be taken of the messages with which he may profess to have been charged’.

The government in London remained concerned—and sceptical—at least in its diplomatic approaches to St Petersburg. Another *démarche* was made to the Russian government, who replied that, if what the British said about Count Simonich’s activities was true, then indeed he was acting contrary to his instructions and to the policies of the Russian government. Count Nesselrode even offered to allow the British ambassador to examine the book which contained the instructions sent to Simonich. These disclaimers ran counter to all the information reaching the British government. According to John McNeill, Count Simonich told him that he had urged the shah to attack Herat, though he added that he had disobeyed his government’s instructions in doing so. As for Captain Vitkovitch and his mission, McNeill reported that Simonich had informed the shah that Vitkovitch would ‘counsel the ruler of Kabul to seek assistance of the Persian government to support him in his hostilities with the ruler of the Punjab’. It had also come to the notice of the British government that Vitkovitch had ‘strenuously exerted himself to detach the rulers of [Kandahar and Kabul] from all connection with England and to induce them to place their reliance upon Persia in the first instance, and ultimately upon Russia’.

Count Nesselrode’s reply to the British government’s Note answered the unstated fear rather than the overt complaint. ‘The idea’, he wrote, ‘of assailing the security and tranquillity of the state of possession of Great Britain in India has never presented itself to the mind of our august master [the tsar]’. Count Nesselrode emphasised that the immense distances which separated Russia from India

made any such idea unreasonable. Count Simonich, far from inciting the shah to attack Herat, was in fact doing his best to stop him. Captain Vitkovitch's mission to Kabul 'was simply occasioned by the mission of an agent whom Dost Muhammad sent to us in 1837 to St Petersburg, with the intention of forming commercial relations with Russia'. The captain's mission had as its object 'neither a treaty of commerce nor any political combination whatever which a third power could have reason to complain of or to take umbrage at'. It was harmless. It had produced, 'and was intended to produce, but one result—that of making us acquainted with a country separated from our frontier by great distances, which oblige our government to increase our precautions in order that the activity of our commerce should not run the risk of engaging there in ruinous enterprise without having been enlightened beforehand as to the chances to which it might be exposed'.

The failure of the Persian attack on Herat allowed Count Nesselrode to demonstrate the truth of his diplomatic correspondence. Simonich could be safely recalled and his policy repudiated. If it had succeeded, the Russian government would no doubt have taken a different attitude. But, unlike the British, it knew when to cut its losses. Captain Vitkovitch also suffered in the downfall of his mentor. When he appeared in St Petersburg expecting the approval of his superiors and the promotion he deserved, he found himself disowned and attacked for actions contrary to the policy of the Russian government. Count Nesselrode ostentatiously refused to see him, allegedly sending a message to the effect that he 'knew no Captain Vitkovitch except an adventurer of that name who, it was reported, had been lately engaged in some unauthorised intrigues at Kabul and Kandahar'. Vitkovitch got the message and, returning to his hotel, 'wrote a few bitter and reproachful lines, burnt all his other papers, and blew out his brains'.

In the Great Game, front-line players were always expendable. Vitkovitch had produced no apparent results from his not so secret mission to Kabul, mainly because Dost Muhammad had been playing another game altogether. Vitkovitch had been used, not only by Count Simonich but by the ruler of Kabul. Dost Muhammad hoped by his attitude to the Russian agent to demonstrate the honesty of his desire for friendship with the British. But he failed. Lord Auckland was now convinced that Dost Muhammad could not be trusted. In that sense, Vitkovitch had won.

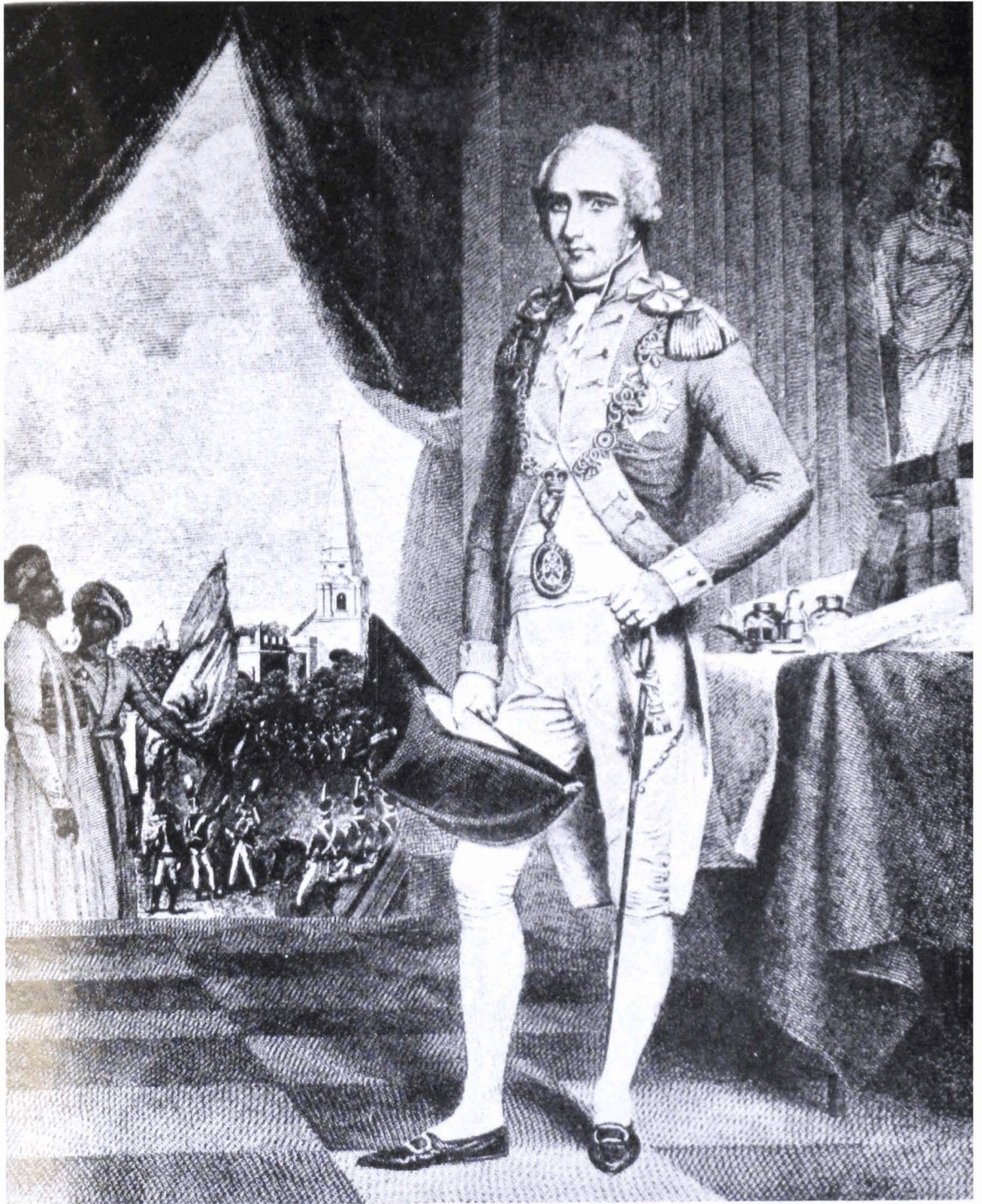
The siege of Herat

ONE MORNING, early in February 1838, a patrol of Persian soldiers from the army that had been besieging the town of Herat for nearly three months saw two men on horseback, one of whom was waving his turban—apparently as a flag of truce. Warily loading their muskets and fixing bayonets, the party approached to discover that one of the men was an envoy from the ruler of the besieged city. To their surprise he was also an Englishman.

Eldred Pottinger, at twenty-six just entered on the Great Game, had arrived in Herat in August of the previous year. He was a soldier who had been transferred to the political department from the Bombay Artillery, not in recognition of his brilliance at languages or his driving ambition, but because he was the nephew of Henry Pottinger. He joined his uncle, as Alexander Burnes before him, as assistant at the Residency at Kutch. Burnes had broken away from Pottinger's tutelage. Eldred was just embarking on his education. Yet he was one of the few 'politicals' to achieve any real success, largely because of the limitations of his own character and of the field of action.

Pottinger was not imaginative. He went to Herat for excitement rather than on some crusade or with the idea of furthering his prospects. He was, no doubt, influenced by the prejudices of his uncle, but he does not seem to have viewed the Russian menace with quite the same apprehension. His enthusiasms, wrote Kaye, were of the 'sturdy, stubborn kind', and in case readers might think Pottinger a rather dull hero, claimed that he had something that transformed the apparent dross into bright gold—'an abiding sense of his duty to his country'.

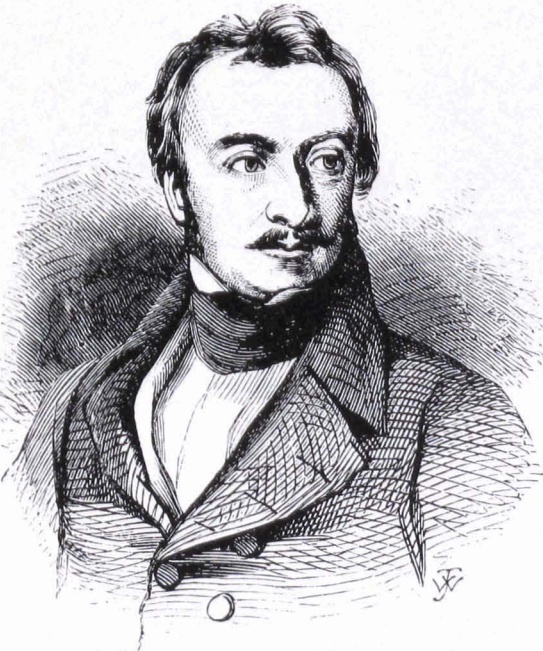
Early in 1837, with the encouragement of his uncle, Pottinger had set out for Afghanistan with two native companions, disguised as a Kutch horse dealer. His instructions were nebulous—and unofficial. As far as the Resident at Kutch was concerned (and through him,



1. Lord Wellesley



2a. William Moorcroft and Hyder, in Indian dress on the left,
with two Tibetans



2b. Sir Henry Pottinger



2c. Alexander Burnes



3a. Eldred Pottinger

3b. Arthur Conolly





4a. Lord Auckland

4b. General Kaufman



the government of India), Pottinger was merely a private gentleman on his travels. No credentials, no authority to negotiate. Just a general instruction to spy.

The Kutch horse dealer gave way to a holy man when Pottinger left Kabul. He thought that Dost Muhammad would try to prevent him leaving for Herat, and pretended to be going in almost the opposite direction. Pottinger's disguise was often in danger of penetration. The ability of these young British officers to travel with any pretension to pseudonymity was due not to their expertise, but to the essential parochiality and the cosmopolitanism of Central Asia. When men from the next village were often considered to be foreigners, the man from over the next mountain was an utter stranger. The caravan routes of Central Asia brought to the great emporia men from as far as eastern China or the shores of the Mediterranean, men of all colours and many languages. Fundamentally, the success of any disguise lay in the ignorance of those it was intended to deceive.

Yet Pottinger very soon found himself under suspicion. He seems to have been sent off by his uncle without any real training in what to expect. His Persian was bad, and though pretending to be a holy man he had no acquaintance with the different sects of the Muslim faith, sects which were as often as not in bloody conflict. He had not even gone to the trouble to learn the Muslim prayers and genuflections. When almost caught in a trap by a local chief with a reputation for dealing in slaves, and left to say his prayers, Pottinger recorded in his diary that he 'had not taste for this mockery, and not considering it proper, *never before having attempted it*, was rather afraid of observation'.

Even his baggage was just the kind to excite or confirm suspicion. Not only was he carrying European medicines which might possibly be explained away, but English books. When one of them was examined during a search, the illustrations were taken to be idols. A pair of compasses was explained away as being necessary for astrological calculations. Pottinger was surprised to find that local opinion condemned such things. A phrase book with English equivalents for Persian and Pushtu also raised some questions which Pottinger, possibly for lack of a good answer, ignored. What actually saved the party, Pottinger seems never to have discovered, but at last they were allowed to leave. Early in August Pottinger and his two companions set off with a caravan of slave dealers.

As Pottinger was congratulating himself on their escape, a number of the chief's men came running after them. The chief wanted him to return. Pottinger, though uneasy, thought that the chief might want a bullet mould or something of the kind to go with the pistol Pottinger had given him as a parting gift. Leaving his companions to look in the baggage for the bullet mould, Pottinger returned to the chief's fort. As he drew near there was the sound of a shot, followed by loud shouting. As he approached an open space in front of the fort, he was greeted by the chief with: 'Peace be unto you. You may go now—I don't want you. I only sent for you to make the gun go off, but it has gone off'.

Without further adventures, Pottinger and his party reached the town of Herat some ten days later. The approach to the town was through a rich countryside, with cornfields and vineyards, fruit and vegetable gardens, supervised by small fortified villages. The country around Herat was known, with much hyperbole and some truth, as 'the granary of Central Asia'. But if the surroundings were pleasing, Herat itself was not. Arthur Conolly had found the town 'one of the dirtiest in the world'. Behind its moat and walls pierced by five gates lay acres of stinking rubbish. When Conolly had asked one of the inhabitants how people could live in such filth, he was told: 'The climate is fine; and if dirt killed people where would the Afghans be?' Conolly's description, Pottinger noted in his diary, could not be bettered.

The ruler of Herat, Shah Kamran, and his chief minister, Yar Muhammad, were not in the city when Pottinger arrived. While waiting for their return he was almost taken by slavers within a few hundred yards of one of the town gates. Only the presence of mind of one of his companions saved the day, for they had no weapons. He said they were accompanied by a large party that was only a short distance away. After this experience, Pottinger recorded it as his opinion that no one should venture out without arms, 'and it is a rule that everyone should follow in these countries'.

The inside of the town appeared to be no safer. A son of Yar Muhammad was acting governor and supplemented his salary by robbery and slave dealing. It was not wise to be out in the streets after sunset. Pottinger thought that perhaps if the Persians did come—and rumours that they would were now filling the bazaar—most of the ordinary inhabitants would welcome them with joy.

The rumours of a Persian advance brought Shah Kamran and his

minister hurrying back to Herat. After their arrival early in September 1837, the rumours solidified into menacing fact. The Shah of Persia claimed that Herat was part of his dominions; if necessary, he would come and take it himself. The shah who had succeeded to the throne three years before had been compelled by the death of the then heir in 1833 to raise a siege of Herat in order to ensure his own right to the succession. The new shah was believed to be pro-Russian, and there is little doubt that Count Simonich found him more than willing to re-open the campaign against Herat.

Pottinger was not greatly impressed by the returning Herati army, nor by its leaders. Like most of the town, he went out to watch Shah Kamran arrive. Kamran travelled in a covered litter of red cloth, surrounded by a bevy of guards and servants whom Pottinger judged both shabby and superb. But it was the minister, Yar Muhammad, who interested Pottinger most. During his stay he had learned that Shah Kamran was merely a puppet of his minister, and that Yar Muhammad was a tyrant, tough, unscrupulous, and with no intention of giving in to the Shah of Persia. Preparations were being made for the defence of the city even before Yar Muhammad's return. Food and grain were being stored, and work—of a sort—was being done on the defences. Pottinger, ever mindful of his uncle's views on the strategic importance of Herat to the British in India, decided to emerge from his disguise, which had so far resisted penetration, and offer his help in the defence. After all, he was an English artillery officer and he could not sit in his caravanserai and wait for the Persians to come.

Pottinger sent a message to Yar Muhammad requesting an audience. A few days later the minister received him. Pottinger took, as a gift, his two remaining pistols. Pottinger was overdiscreet in his journal entries, perhaps because he thought it would be best to commit as little as possible to paper—which at last showed some signs of maturity—and did not say whether he went to see Yar Muhammad as an English officer or as a stranger offering help. It seems more likely that he disclosed his identity in advance. After the meeting he did not bother to maintain his disguise. Presumably, he felt safe under the powerful protection of the minister, for Yar Muhammad had welcomed his offer of assistance.

The shah and his army arrived outside Herat on 22 November. He was accompanied by a number of Russian military advisers, a contingent of Russian soldiers masquerading as refugees, a member

of the Russian minister's staff, and a British officer holding a watching brief for John McNeill.

When the attack on Herat began, it became obvious to Pottinger, who had not been asked for advice, that the defences of the town were most inadequate. As the advance Persian force moved on the outer earthworks, the protecting fire of small-calibre guns hit the walls. 'It was a very disheartening sight', wrote Pottinger in his journal that evening, 'to see the breaches they made in the rotten parapets'. He did not think much of the defenders' mode of warfare either. The troops brought in a number of heads from every skirmish and displayed them on the ramparts. He found the whole business barbarous and disgusting. In any case, he noted in his journal, the numbers were not particularly high, 'and collecting them invariably broke the vigour of the pursuit, and prevented the destruction of the [enemy's] trenches'. Fortunately, even with their Russian advisers, the Persian forces were not more efficient than those of Yar Muhammad. They had soon penetrated the outer defences, but would go no further. Pottinger thought that they had been taught by their English advisers only what to do up to that point in the attack on a city, and now that their teachers had gone they had no idea what to do next—and neither did their new Russian officers. This piece of naivety can be discarded, yet in fact the Persians did not advance, even when 'they had an open breach [in the walls] and no obstacle which would have checked British troops for a single moment'. Pottinger's lack of experience hid from him that what he was seeing was warfare, oriental style—half intrigue, half noisy display.

Envoys had been passing between the two sides for some time. They bypassed the Europeans, though the Russians were probably aware of what was going on. But neither side could agree to the other's terms. The siege dragged on into 1838, Persian artillery and rockets making a fine noise and display but doing very little damage. The defenders had even been galvanised into rebuilding some of the walls. But the town was never closely invested. Three of the gates remained open, the fields near the town were worked, cattle grazed, and supplies were brought in without interference.

Pottinger had been active at all times, roaming the ramparts and offering advice that was seldom taken. But in the middle of January he was asked by Yar Muhammad to travel to the shah's camp as his envoy. No one from Herat, the minister said, would trust himself to the shah's good faith. Pottinger agreed, and was instructed by Shah

Kamran on the sort of language he should use to the Persian ruler, a mixture, it seemed, of 'entreaty and threat'. But there was to be a delay in Pottinger's departure for the Persian camp. Shah Kamran thought his arrival would be more impressive if it followed a successful sortie from the besieged town. One was tried a few days later, with no success as the two sides did not even meet. Another sortie two weeks later was more impressive, though Pottinger considered that it had amounted to no more than a few isolated and not particularly bloody skirmishes. However, it was thought demonstrative enough to be followed up by Pottinger's mission to the shah.

Pottinger received his final briefing from Yar Muhammad in the hot room of a public bath, surrounded by high military officers 'in a state of almost entire nudity' and servants 'standing around him armed to the teeth.' The temperature was so high that Pottinger hurried away before he could be asked to join the party at breakfast.

Yar Muhammad's instructions were for Pottinger to tell the shah's minister that Yar Muhammad considered himself the minister's son and that he was 'most desirous of showing him filial affection', but that he 'was bound by the salt I am eating to stand by my old master'. If the shah would return to Teheran with his army, Yar Muhammad would follow to pay his respects, but no one in Herat was prepared to give in to force, 'nor', he added, 'dare I propose it to them'. It was obvious, though perhaps not to Pottinger, that Yar Muhammad was still keeping his options open. If the shah pressed the siege to a successful end, Yar Muhammad wanted it known that only loyalty to his honour had kept him at Shah Kamran's side. At the same time, he reminded the shah that Herat would be defended to the last.

Pottinger carried only verbal messages from the ruler and his minister. What he was expected to achieve, or what he thought he could achieve, is not clear. But his reception by the party of Persian soldiers he met on his way to the shah's camp seemed a good omen. When they found out he was an Englishman, they told him that 'the English were always good friends of the King of Kings'. Their officer turned out to have been trained by a British adviser, and he welcomed Pottinger as at least a friend. Pottinger told him that he came as an envoy of the ruler of Herat to the shah, and that he must see the shah's minister without delay. The Persian officer sent a messenger to his commander, who turned out to be General Samson, a Russian in the Persian service.

Samson, Pottinger recorded, took him at first for an Afghan and 'was a good deal surprised at finding I was a European'. After tea with the general, he was sent off with an escort to the main Persian camp. Rumour preceded him. It was known that he was an envoy from Herat (a high Afghan official, it was said), and wishful thinking had decided that he was coming to ask for terms of surrender. By the time his party reached the camp, it was crowded with soldiers and servants, and it was only with difficulty and the liberal use of their iron ramrods that the escort could make way for Pottinger to reach the minister's quarters.

The minister received Pottinger with a courteous request to state his business. Pottinger told him that he was merely a private gentleman travelling in those parts who had happened to get caught up in the siege of Herat and had been asked, as an uncommitted person, to carry messages from Shah Kamran and Yar Muhammad. He also asked for permission to visit Colonel Stoddart, whom he had heard was with the Persian force and for whom he had brought despatches that had arrived at Herat. He insisted, however, that he had no official standing except as an envoy of the ruler of Herat.

Pottinger badly wanted to speak to someone he could trust before opening discussions with the Persian minister. The minister, too, preferred not to talk before consulting his advisers and the shah. An Englishman appearing out of nowhere, ostensibly an accredited envoy from a besieged city, and claiming to be an innocent bystander? As truth, it was almost beyond belief. A conspiracy of some kind seemed much more likely. The minister politely told Pottinger that he had permission to visit Colonel Stoddart. As for seeing the shah, that must be left to the monarch himself.

Stoddart's surprise at seeing Pottinger was no less than the minister's but there was no need for him to conceal it. His servants announced Pottinger by a high-sounding title. The two men met at the door of the tent, Stoddart still buttoning up his dress uniform. To Stoddart's flowery Persian phrases, Pottinger replied in English. 'No one', he wrote in his journal, 'who has not experienced it can understand the pleasure which countrymen enjoy when they thus meet—particularly when of the same profession and pursuing the same object'. But the two men had hardly sat down when a message arrived from the minister demanding Pottinger's presence. Pottinger found the messenger impertinent and he was ordered out. Stoddart

hastily explained what he knew of the situation in the Persian camp, and both men went to the minister's tent.

The minister asked Pottinger to deliver his messages to him. But Pottinger replied that he was obliged by the ruler of Herat to deliver them personally to the ruler of Persia, and, he added, the fewer the number of ears listening the better when he told the minister the message he had for him from Yar Muhammad. Discussion continued for some hours. The minister demanded a map prepared by Alexander Burnes, which he alleged showed Herat as a Persian possession. The map was produced—and proved the minister wrong. At this he was 'very indignant, and said that the British government had never told him'. Stoddart suggested that the matter be referred to Teheran. The talks went on, without progress, until it was time for Pottinger to be received by the shah.

Again, his reception was courteous, though restrained. The shah, sitting on a European chair, was simply dressed in a shawl vest with a black cap on his head. He listened quietly to Pottinger's message and then replied by rehearsing his complaints against the ruler of Herat. At first the shah maintained his dignity, but soon 'talked himself into a passion and said Kamran was a treacherous liar'. The shah, he said, would not rest until the town of Herat had fallen to his troops.

After leaving the shah, Pottinger was anxious to return to Herat as quickly as possible, but a violent thunderstorm in which the rain turned to snow delayed him for a day. As he reached the city he was surrounded by some of the defenders wanting to know his news, but he referred them all to Yar Muhammad. Shah Kamran, who had been watching his approach through a telescope, sent for him immediately. When Pottinger delivered his message, he broke into 'a gasconading speech, abusing everyone'. It was 10 February 1838.

The siege continued on its desultory way. The Persians brought up new siege engines, among them an immense gun which fired either an eight-inch shell stuffed with pieces of lead or a twelve- or eighteen-pound shot with an outer case of copper. These missiles were so prized that when they landed the garrison of Herat would fight for them. But not for long. After firing five or six shots the gun carriage, which was too light for the weight of the gun, collapsed, and the gun was never fired again. In place of shells, the Persians sent an envoy. Officially, he came from General Samson but he had the full approval of the minister. The message he brought was simple and

appealing, if somewhat unexpected—get rid of Pottinger. Without him, the two sides could probably arrive at an accommodation. Pottinger was dangerous. Whatever he said, he represented the English government, and the English had started off in India by pretending ‘friendship and trade . . . and finally by such deceit had mastered’ the country.

Shah Kamran’s suspicion and hatred of the Persians almost completely cancelled out his doubts about Pottinger and the British. The British were many hundreds of miles away, the Persians were at the gates. Shah Kamran even went further, and rejected the Persians’ advice to deport the Englishman by suggesting that negotiations between the two sides could, in fact, best be left to Stoddart and Pottinger. At this stage, even Pottinger began to have doubts about the propriety of his position. ‘It might be alleged’, he thought, ‘from my having a commission in the Indian Army, that I was a secret agent for Government, whereas I was a free agent’. He seemed worried that his superiors at Calcutta might think he had acted improperly by helping the people of Herat against the Persians. He knew he could well be disowned—and was preparing his defence. His appeal would be to honour. ‘A guest should not leave his host at the approach of danger but help him through it.’

Shah Kamran and his minister were delighted to have Pottinger in Herat. They might not take too much notice of his military advice, but they knew that he was a valuable tool in any negotiation, and his presence in Herat may have had some deterrent effect on the Persians. But some members of the garrison were not so pleased, or so dissimulating. One Afghan officer accused the English of plotting to annex Afghanistan as a prelude to attacking Persia and Russia. The officer seemed to think that it was the intention of the British to use Afghans to fight their wars for them. Pottinger, ‘with a great deal of trouble’, explained that Britain had no designs on Afghanistan and would prefer that the Afghans stayed quietly in their own land, eating ‘the produce of their own fields’. When he suggested that the British were always prepared to mediate in disputes if they were asked, the officer replied: ‘What is the use of talking? If you interfere in one point, you must in all . . . and it is nonsense talking of advice and persuasion’.

Another Persian envoy arriving on 20 February declared that the shah had no wish to occupy Herat with a Persian force. All he wanted was for Shah Kamran to acknowledge the sovereignty of the

Persian ruler. Though this was a modification of the original demand, it too was rejected. During these diplomatic games the siege had continued. So too had the attempt to undermine Pottinger's position. Persian agents were active in the town comparing the might of Russia—which was supporting the shah—with that of Britain, represented by the somewhat lonely figure of Lieutenant Pottinger. Pottinger did attempt some counter-propaganda, though he was careful, he wrote, to 'avoid any attempts to underrate the power of any nations in opposition to the English'. In this way he could emphasise that, though Britain might indeed be smaller than Russia, everyone knew that 'only a few years ago, the disapproval of the English government, when mentioned to the Russian government, had been sufficient to stop the march of the Russian army on Teheran and to preserve the King of Kings from becoming a vassal of that empire'. It seemed an odd point to make to men defending their town against that same King of Kings.

A narrow escape from a Persian bullet while visiting one of the inner defences hardly broke the monotony of the siege for Pottinger. But on 18 April, after an unusually brisk bombardment, a message was sent across the lines to the effect that an Englishman wished to pass through into Herat. This was treated with more derision than suspicion, but a note was next sent claiming that the man was a representative of the British minister to the court of the shah. This news was sent to Pottinger, but when he arrived on the walls where Yar Muhammad was waiting the latter told him that he had sent a reply to the effect that he wanted no Englishmen or Russians to mediate, and that the outcome of the siege should be left to the swords of Persians and Heratis. Yar Muhammad, however, assured Pottinger that this had been only a gesture to impress the Persians and that the British officer would certainly be allowed into the city.

After some delay, Major D'Arcy Todd, assistant to John McNeill who was now in the Persian camp, passed through one of the town gates and was taken to Shah Kamran's apartments. Somewhat to Pottinger's surprise, Todd was dressed in an elegant uniform with large gold epaulettes, a cocked hat, and spurs. Pottinger thought he was probably the first European 'to appear in costume in Herat' for it 'caused great admiration', Todd's message was straight-forward. He came to offer the mediation of the British government if Shah Kamran would accept it. The ruler appeared delighted, giving Todd a number of gifts of honour, his own cloak, a horse. But Todd

was anxious to avoid a display of conspicuous success, which might raise suspicions in the Persian camp, and contrived to get away without the horse. This and other gifts, including a second horse, were left with Pottinger who had them returned with some excuse, but Shah Kamran replied that they had been given to the English and Pottinger should keep them. Pottinger responded that he did not have enough grain to feed them and suggested that they might be eaten. 'The people present on the receipt of the message highly approved the latter part and Yar Muhammad gave to the most clamorous [one] horse . . . which was duly roasted. I believe the other one underwent the same fate a few weeks subsequently'.

After Todd's return to the Persian camp, McNeill acted with great haste. Count Simonich, the Russian minister, was hurrying to the shah's camp and it was up to McNeill to persuade the shah to withdraw from the siege before the Russian arrived. He was successful enough to win the shah's permission to mediate. McNeill's first move had been to send Major Todd to Herat, his second was to go there himself. In the evening of the day of Todd's departure from the town, McNeill appeared at the outer defences and was immediately taken to Shah Kamran. Pottinger was asleep when a message from the ruler called him to the council chamber. Discussions went on throughout the night, and both Pottinger and Yar Muhammad were surprised to find McNeill at work again at seven the following morning. When McNeill left Herat, he had its ruler's approval for negotiations.

But McNeill reckoned without the Shah of Persia. No sooner had he reported on his return to the camp than the shah changed his mind and refused to accept any solution other than the unconditional surrender of Herat. McNeill was compelled to send Todd to Shah Kamran to explain. The latter did not seem particularly upset. He told Pottinger and Todd that he had never expected anything else from the Persians, who were 'noted for their want of faith ever since they had been heard of'. McNeill preferred to put the blame on Count Simonich, who had opportunely arrived at the shah's camp while McNeill was in Herat.

Certainly, Simonich had been extremely active. A large amount of Russian gold was finding its way into the pockets of important Persian officers and, what was worse, it seemed into those of some of the defenders of Herat. Simonich was also pushing the shah to step up the siege and was himself reconnoitring the town. The

increase in the intensity of the Persian fire and the activities of Simonich's agents were soon causing both McNeill and Pottinger some anxiety. Pottinger attended meetings at which he tried to persuade his audience that the Russians could not be trusted. Sometimes he was listened to with respect, sometimes with marked dislike.

In order to gain time, Pottinger informed Yar Muhammad that McNeill had threatened the shah with British reprisals, saying that should Herat fall the British would send an army to retake it. Pottinger had no authority for this, and when late in May McNeill ordered him to make no commitments whatever on behalf of the British government, he found himself in a predicament that a more experienced 'political' might have ignored. Instead, Pottinger went to Yar Muhammad and admitted that he had exceeded his powers. This diplomatic nicety did not obscure the lie, and he was violently attacked by those present. Overwhelmed, he suggested that representations be made to McNeill, who might be persuaded to take some positive action.

But McNeill's position was set upon shifting sands. The shah's officials treated the British mission with open arrogance. McNeill's diplomatic couriers were being arrested and searched, their documents confiscated. And not only at the shah's camp. It appeared to be becoming policy to humiliate the British in other parts of the Persian dominions. McNeill's protests produced shocked surprise and evasive replies. He therefore announced his intention of leaving the camp. The longer he remained there, the more effect his humiliation would have on the waverers among the defenders of Herat. It was all, he believed, part of a carefully orchestrated Russian plot. McNeill reported that at one interview the shah said that he would be willing to give up the siege of Herat if the British would provide him with a good excuse, such as an open threat to attack Persia if the siege went on any longer. The shah then once again changed his mind. He would, he said, stop all harassment of British diplomatic personnel but would not raise the siege. Furthermore, McNeill must order Pottinger to leave Herat.

McNeill refused, claiming that Pottinger was a private citizen and not under his orders. On 7 June the defenders of Herat could see quite clearly that the British mission was leaving the shah's camp. Pottinger, the innocent traveller, had by then been officially appointed British Agent in Herat. The change of status did not

inspire any upsurge of confidence in the garrison. The siege went on, the sufferings of the defenders intensified, their morale steadily declined. At one Persian attack, Pottinger recorded that he had to push Yar Muhammad into action physically. When negotiations were opened up once again towards the end of June, Yar Muhammad told Pottinger that the one point that could not be agreed was the Persian insistence that Pottinger should be deported. 'They were so pressing, that he said that he had never before guessed my importance and that the Herat envoys . . . had always thought me one man, but that the importance attached to my departure showed that I was equal to an army'. Pottinger does not seem to have realised—or if he did, he suppressed the realisation—that the real reason for the failure of negotiation was that neither Shah Kamran nor Yar Muhammad was convinced that they would survive an agreement to surrender.

But help was at last on its way. The British government would not send an army to Herat but it did send warships to the Persian Gulf. On 19 June troops were landed on an island opposite Bushire. Rumours began to flood the shah's camp outside Herat. The British had landed a vast army at Bushire and were advancing on Shiraz and other towns. The news reached McNeill in more accurate form while he was on his way to Teheran. Colonel Stoddart was then sent back to the camp with a simple and menacing message—stop the siege of Herat or the British would continue their advance.

On receiving the message from Stoddart, the shah asked for confirmation. 'The fact is', he said, 'if I do not leave Herat, there will be war, is that not it?' Stoddart assured him that this was so, and the shah replied: 'It is all that I wished for. I asked the minister [McNeill] . . . for it; but he would not give it to me. He said he was not authorised'.

Though the shah decided immediately to accept the British ultimatum, he still hoped to gain something out of the months of siege. With his encouragement, a member of the Russian mission made a last attempt to persuade Shah Kamran to submit to the shah. If Shah Kamran was prepared to come out and meet the shah in token of his submission, that was all that would be required of him. Shah Kamran and Yar Muhammad were not unwilling to make a gesture that was essentially meaningless. News of British action in the south had reached Herat, though Pottinger had no firm information to pass on. There were also rumours that the Russians

had attacked Tabriz and that Britain and Russia had concluded an alliance as a preliminary to partitioning the whole of Asia between them.

Soon, however, the defenders of Herat could see the break-up of the shah's camp. He had formally agreed to the British terms and the Russians had been unsuccessful in producing a face-saving formula. Instead, the shah issued a proclamation claiming that he had raised the siege out of compassion for the inhabitants of the town. The siege of Herat had lasted for ten months and the town had only survived because of the incompetence of the Persian forces and the fears of Shah Kamran and Yar Muhammad. The Russians, too, had failed, and Count Simonich was recalled.

Within a few months of the raising of the siege, both Pottinger and Stoddart—who had remained behind to help, with British money, in the reconstruction of life at Herat—had been insulted by the minister and ignored by his master. In January 1839, Colonel Stoddart left for Bokhara, for torture and death. Pottinger, praised by McNeill as 'the hero of Herat', was appointed assistant to the envoy and minister at the court of Shah Shuja. In September 1839 he arrived at Kabul to join his minister, Shah Shuja, once again on the throne of Afghanistan, and the British army that had put him there.

The process by which Shah Shuja, after thirty years of well-merited exile, had returned in apparent triumph to his native land was a paradigm of the Great Game. Fear, ignorance, naivety, separate ambition, were all contained in it. So, too, were the seeds of public and private tragedy.

Catastrophe at Kabul

‘THE FIELD of my hopes, which had before been chilled by the cold blast of wintry times, has by the happy tidings of your Lordship’s arrival become the envy of the Garden of Paradise . . . I hope that your Lordship will consider me and my country as your own’. So wrote Dost Muhammad in 1836 when he welcomed the new British governor-general, Lord Auckland, on his arrival in India. Dost Muhammad could hardly have foreseen that his oriental compliments would be taken as a solemn invitation, or that three years later, Auckland—considering Dost Muhammad’s country as his own—would have given it to someone else.

In fairness to Lord Auckland, no such thought was in his mind at the time. To Dost Muhammad’s barely concealed desire for an alliance, he replied with honest conviction: ‘My friend, you are aware that it is not the practice of the British government to interfere with the affairs of other independent states’. But his conviction was not to last. Auckland had been warned by Lord Palmerston, the British foreign secretary, that Russian moves in Persia and on the Afghan borderlands were beginning to worry the government. John Cam Hobhouse, then president of the India Board, had briefed Auckland on what were believed to be Russia’s ambitions and told the new governor-general that he must watch the frontiers for signs of Russian movement against India. Auckland does not seem to have been unduly impressed. A charming, rather indolent man, his view that something might have to be done in Afghanistan took a long time to harden into positive action.

Perhaps Auckland’s worst quality was that he was no judge of men, of their character or worth. This was compounded when he cut himself off from the main centre of the government of India, at Calcutta, from his own Council and a wide range of experience, at just the time when he needed the peace of a settled establishment and all the expert opinion he could find. In October 1837 Auckland

set off on a journey through northern India, surrounded by a vast retinue of soldiers and servants, which lasted for nearly eighteen months and ended at Simla, more than a thousand miles from Calcutta in the foothills of the Himalayas. There he stayed for another year.

His travelling diverted the governor-general's mind from the harsh realities of a forward policy with the frivolities of an endless series of dances, banquets, levées, state visits, and the upheavals of moving a camp which was as large as a small town. It also left him at the mercy of a small number of advisers.

Among these was William Hay Macnaghten. Macnaghten had been in India since 1809 and, like Alexander Burnes, had begun life as a soldier but quickly exchanged the sword for the pen. He was a brilliant linguist, having gained prizes for proficiency in all the Asian languages taught at the Company's training school in Calcutta. In 1836 he was head of the foreign and political department, and a confirmed bureaucrat. Not for him the excitement of venturing into harsh and lonely places. The contrast between Burnes and Macnaghten was profound—the older man cold, delighting in intrigue for its intellectual pleasure, 'dry as a old nut', as a contemporary put it, and Burnes, almost a Byronic figure, enjoying himself in native dress and with native women, seeing tragedy in the making and yet taking no action to avert it. But in the autumn of 1836 that tragedy was still unforeseen. Macnaghten was with the governor-general, Burnes about to leave for Kabul.

In June 1836 Hobhouse had sent Auckland a despatch asking him to consider 'what steps may be proper and desirable for you to take to watch more closely than has hitherto been attempted the progress of events in Afghanistan and to counteract the progress of Russian influence in a quarter which, from its proximity to our Indian possessions could not fail if it were once established to act injuriously on the system of our Indian alliance, and possibly interfere . . . even with the tranquillity of our own territory'. The despatch went on to leave the best form of action to be taken entirely to the discretion of the governor-general. He might, Hobhouse wrote, choose to appoint a confidential agent in Kabul. In reply, Auckland added a postscript to a despatch of his own announcing that he was sending Alexander Burnes on a mission to Kabul. Hobhouse would 'observe from this communication', he wrote, 'that we had in a great degree anticipated your in-

structions. The subject will continue to engage our most serious attention'.

But it is obvious that Auckland did not really give the matter serious attention at all. Burnes was not sent as the head of a diplomatic but of a commercial mission, with a small staff, no particular instructions, and no authority to carry on negotiations. It was not, in fact, until May 1837, while Burnes was still making his leisurely way to Kabul, that he received some vaguely worded instructions from Macnaghten, which, though they did not change the official nature of the mission, altered its purpose to more political than commercial ends. But Burnes still had no authority to negotiate.

Burnes arrived in Kabul in September 1837. Dost Muhammad was delighted to renew an old acquaintance and soon got down to discussing his political aims. He wanted, he said, British help in regaining Peshawar from Ranjit Singh. This was the one thing Macnaghten had been unequivocal about. The British were not going to imperil their relations with the Sikhs. Burnes, however, believed that an alliance with Dost Muhammad was the best policy and wrote to Macnaghten that, if the ruler of Kabul could not look for support to the British, he would undoubtedly turn to the Persians and the Russians. There was news that a Persian army with Russian advisers was on its way to seize Herat, and that a Russian envoy (Captain Vitkovitch) would be arriving at Kabul. Macnaghten replied only with a refusal to do anything about Peshawar, and a warning to Dost Muhammad not to enter into alliances with any other states.

Burnes took the hint. In trying to convince the government of India that it must support Dost Muhammad, he might be prejudicing his own future. In April 1838, after a stay of seven months, he left Kabul for India. He still believed that the best policy was to support Dost Muhammad, that the reception given to the Russian agent had been designed only to put pressure on the British. But it was obvious that Auckland and his advisers had taken the envoy's presence in Kabul as a threat and decided that British interests could only be protected by violent action. In June 1838, when Auckland asked for his views, Burnes replied that he still regarded Dost Muhammad as 'a man of undoubted ability: and if half you do for others were done for him . . . he would abandon Persia and Russia tomorrow'. But in the same letter he wrote that if the British government were contemplating replacing Dost Muhammad, it had 'only to

send Shuja to Peshawar with an agent and two of its regiments, as honorary escort, and an avowal to the Afghans that we have taken up his cause to ensure his being fixed forever on the Throne'. It was exactly what Auckland and Macnaghten wanted to hear—and Burnes obviously knew it. In fact, the governor-general and his advisers were clearly planning to overthrow Dost Muhammad.

The plan was the sole responsibility of William Macnaghten—or so it was said after his death. Ranjit Singh would supply the men, the British the money and advisers, and the indefatigable Shah Shuja the figurehead. The first move was a treaty between the three parties, signed in Lahore in June 1838, but it soon emerged that Ranjit Singh had no intention of using Sikh forces to put Shuja back on his throne. It was clear to the wily old man that Auckland had the bit between his teeth and that he could easily let the British fight the battles for him. Ranjit Singh was correct in his assessment. Auckland, pushed on by Macnaghten, would not allow anything to interfere with his decision. In October 1838 he issued a manifesto from Simla. It reiterated the familiar arguments and added others which were, equally, distortions of the truth. But the commitment was plainly stated. 'His Majesty Shah Shuja will enter Afghanistan surrounded by his own troops and will be protected by a British army against foreign intervention and factious opposition'.

While that army, grandiloquently called 'the Army of the Indus,' was being assembled, Auckland looked around to see who could be squeezed to pay for it. No one, it seemed, in British India. His eye fell on the amirs of Sind. Naturally, they objected. As Ranjit Singh was not only unwilling to supply troops himself but even to allow the Army of the Indus to march through his territories, it was decided that the army should go through Sind and, on its way, bully the amirs into paying up. The treaty between them and the British, which contained a solemn promise that the latter would not move any military stores up the Indus, was set aside 'while the present exigency lasts'. The army started its march through Sind in December 1838, devastating the countryside and demanding loot, until the amirs gave in. The First Afghan War had begun and no one, least of all Lord Auckland, was to be deflected from his purpose by the fact that in September, after a campaign of notable inefficiency, the Persians had given up the siege of Herat and marched away, and that the Russian agent had left Kabul after further pressure on the Russian government. The two ostensible reasons for the venture had

evaporated, but the Army of the Indus marched on. With it went William Hay Macnaghten, now 'Envoy and Minister on the part of the government of India at the Court of Shah Shuja'.

Through Sind, the going was slow but sure. Slow, because though there were only some 9,500 combat troops there were over 38,000 camp followers and 30,000 camels. The Company's army depended for its supplies on Indian contractors, with the result that an army on the move was rather like a city of tented shops which packed up each morning and reappeared each night. For this mobile city there were no sanitary arrangements, so that among the commodities regularly delivered to the fighting soldier were dysentery and cholera.

The commanders of the expedition were men mediocre even by the standards of the time. General Cotton never thought of sending out advance patrols, and of General Keane it was later said that the troops knew little of him 'and what little they did know did not fill them with any eager desire to place themselves under his command'. Some of the junior officers were men of courage but little experience. A further burden on the army was the fact that its commander only had authority in military matters. The real command of the expedition lay with Macnaghten the Envoy and with his 'politicals'.

Despite arguments and disagreements between the military and the politicals, Kandahar was taken in April 1839, and Shah Shuja, accompanied by Macnaghten, entered it in triumph. Though the latter's despatch to Lord Auckland claimed that the shah had been received with 'feelings nearly amounting to adoration', others would not have agreed. In fact, most of the population stayed away from the official installation of Shah Shuja as ruler of Afghanistan. Those chiefs who had come forward to support him had mostly been bought with lavish distributions of British gold. Nevertheless, the army had to move on against Kabul and Dost Muhammad. It was not in very good shape, and another two months passed before the town of Ghazni was reached.

There the reception was somewhat different. The walls were defended. It was yet another month before, having blown in the gates, a storming party was able to enter the town. The rest of the army followed and enjoyed itself in an orgy of looting and rape. Not to be outdone, Shuja had fifty prisoners hacked to death. Even in such a violent country as Afghanistan, this was noted and remembered. It was, however, the fall of Ghazni that led, at least for the time being, to a withdrawal of support for Dost Muhammad.

Deserted by most of his men, the Dost was not in a position to make a stand. Macnaghten's bribes had been so generous that all that remained of Dost Muhammad's defiance was a row of abandoned cannon across the road to Kabul.

At last, in August 1839, Shah Shuja and the British reached the walls of Kabul. Preparations were made for a ceremonial entry. Alexander Burnes, who had been allotted a number of minor roles in the expedition and was generally ignored by Macnaghten, unexpectedly found himself at the moment of Macnaghten's triumph invited to enter the city by the envoy's side. Surrounded perhaps a little too obviously by British bayonets, Shah Shuja after thirty years of exile rode towards the great fortress of the Bala Hissar. Resplendent with jewels—though not, of course, the Koh-i-noor—and mounted upon a white horse, with Macnaghten and Burnes in blue and gold uniforms on either side, the shah entered the palace of his ancestors, breaking suddenly into a 'paroxysm of childish delight'. There had been no signs of delight on the faces of his subjects. Macnaghten chose to see only respect, but others, more discerning, observed 'stern and scowling looks'. The populace seemed more interested in the Europeans than they were in their new ruler.

News of the installation of his puppet reached Lord Auckland at Simla. Everyone congratulated him on his great foresight and statesmanship, enlarging on their congratulations with balls and galas in his honour. In London, too, the satisfactory conclusion of a mission about which some had felt serious doubts was greeted with satisfaction. Auckland was made an earl, Keane a baron, Macnaghten a baronet, and Burnes a knight. A few voices were to be heard asking the obvious question, 'what next?', but nobody in authority appeared to hear them over the buzz of felicitations. Even the death in Lahore of Ranjit Singh, the other 'partner' in the Afghan enterprise, was noticed only for the horror of his barbaric obsequies, in which four of his widows and a number of female servants were burned alive on his funeral pyre.

In Kabul, however, it was becoming increasingly obvious to Macnaghten that the British could not leave their protégé to his own devices. Gold had bought some sort of allegiance from many of the Afghan chiefs, but next to gold they respected power—and it was clear that Shah Shuja possessed none of his own. If the British wished to see their man remain on his throne, they would have to

stay close by. Wives came up from India to join their menfolk, while the men who had no such impediment discovered that Afghan women were remarkably pretty and, on the whole, willing. Some of the liaisons were legitimised by marriage, but most were not. This caused some resentment among the Afghans. Concubinage was common in Afghanistan, but prostitution had been virtually unknown until the arrival of the free-spending British. Even more offensive to Afghan pride were affairs between British soldiers and Afghan married women. Early in the occupation, Shah Shuja, under pressure from Macnaghten, executed a man who had killed his wife for her adultery with a British officer. This breach of Afghan custom was widely resented.

In fact, the British were building up antagonism on many levels. The recklessness with which money was squandered by the occupying force soon drove prices high, and the poor of the city began to suffer. As the troops settled in, Christian missionaries came from India. Their activities inflamed religious fanaticism, as did the soldiers' often thoughtless defilement of Afghan shrines. But during the autumn and winter of 1839 antagonism remained beneath the surface. When the government of India ordered economies, it was felt quite safe to allow some of the troops to return to India.

Early in 1840, however, it was becoming plain that all was not as well as it should be. For all Macnaghten's optimism—and bribery—the chiefs had not come in from the countryside to offer their loyalty to Shah Shuja. Where there were British troops, the Shah ruled, but nowhere else. The British politicals were not helping, either. Inexperienced and often brash, they antagonised both Afghan officials and British military officers. General Nott, commanding at Kandahar, caustically and with justice remarked that 'the conduct of the thousand and one politicals has ruined our cause and bared the throat of every European in this country to the sword and knife of the revengeful Afghan and the Bloody Bellooch'. Nott's language may have been extravagant, but he may well have had in mind the actions of one political who destroyed a village of twenty-three people because 'he thought they looked insultingly at him'.

There was also the problem of Dost Muhammad, still at large despite efforts to capture him. In fact, the Dost was inflicting defeats, and though he was almost as frequently defeated himself he always popped up again. 'I am like a wooden spoon', he said. 'You

may throw me hither and thither, but I shall not be hurt'. By September 1840 Macnaghten was almost driven to distraction. At no period of his life, he claimed, had he been 'so much harassed in body and mind . . . The Afghans are gunpowder and the Dost is a lighted match'. He talked of hanging the ex-amir 'as high as Haman'. Shah Shuja, however, knew his Macnaghten and replied: 'I suppose you would, even now, if I were to catch the dog, prevent me from hanging him'. He was soon proved right. On a clear, crisp morning in November, Macnaghten on his daily ride outside Kabul was hailed by another horseman. Following behind was Dost Muhammad himself, elegantly dressed even though he had been in the saddle for a night and a day. Dismounting, he saluted the envoy and offered his sword. Side by side the two men rode into the city. Ten days later, after regaling the British with the tale of his life and adventures, the Dost was sent into India with a recommendation that he be well treated. Auckland received him graciously and generously, awarding the fallen monarch a substantial pension. Seeing the wealth and luxury of British India for the first time, Dost Muhammad commented: 'I cannot understand why the rulers of so great an empire should have gone across the Indus to deprive me of my poor and barren country'. More and more Englishmen—especially those in Afghanistan—were coming to agree with him.

All through 1841 the storm gathered. Powerful tribes were in revolt. Macnaghten, preparing to leave for Bombay to be governor there, described everything as 'quiet'. Burnes, still ignored by the envoy, lived a separate life in his house deep in the city, listening to news of rebellion and intrigue, and adding new girls to his harem. He was quite convinced that disaster was at hand. Macnaghten had been ordered to cancel the subsidies which kept at least some of the chiefs quiet, and they not unnaturally resented this loss of income. Soldiers were attacked in the city streets, British officers—out shooting—stoned by gangs of angry villagers. Rumours abounded of preparation for attack on the hated foreigners and their puppet. Yet no attempt was made to protect the British positions. On the contrary, at the request of Shah Shuja, the British had vacated the great fortress of the Bala Hissar and built themselves a cantonment in an open plain, compounding this stupidity by siting their arsenal some considerable distance away. To make matters even worse, a new general had taken over the command early in 1841. General Cotton, his predecessor, though not much of a soldier had at least been

active, but General Elphinstone was crippled with rheumatic gout and had seen no fighting in Asia. He had tried to avoid the appointment, but Auckland had insisted. General Nott, the obvious candidate, was too independent and outspoken. Elphinstone was in such bad health that he was unlikely to resist Macnaghten.

Elphinstone was unlikely to resist anyone, even the Afghans. Nor was there any other man with real dynamism. In October, General Sale and his brigade were ordered back to India as an economy measure, and instructed (on the way) to punish those tribes who, after the ending of the subsidies, had tried to close the roads out of Kabul. Sale found himself attacked instead. Halting in the valley of Gandamak, he waited for news from Kabul. When it came, it was of a rising in the city. Sale and his brigade were instructed to return to Kabul. After consulting his officers, Sale decided to disobey Elphinstone's orders and make for Jalalabad, even though his wife and daughter were still in Kabul.

For all the rumours of a coming revolt, the rising was a surprise to everyone including Alexander Burnes, still in his house in the heart of the city. On 1 November there were strong indications that an attack was about to take place on Burnes's house. Burnes received warnings from at least two reliable sources. Instead of moving into the military cantonment which, for all its faults, was at least safer than the city, Burnes asked only that his guard be increased. Even at eight o'clock the next morning, with a mob at the gates howling for his death, Burnes's urgent message to Macnaghten suggesting that troops should be sent into the city also claimed that he could probably deal with the disturbance himself. But the situation was soon out of control. Burnes, courageous to the last, harangued the mob, offering money in return for safe conduct, and was greeted with howls for blood. One of Burnes's British officers was immediately shot and the remainder, retreating into the house, prepared for defence and waited for relief from the cantonment. It never came.

The noise could be heard from the city as Macnaghten, Elphinstone and others argued about what should be done. Only the despised Shah Shuja acted, sending some of his own troops, under a mercenary named Campbell, to help Burnes. But the force could not reach Burnes's house and was compelled to retreat. Meanwhile, the mob was breaking through the mud walls of the house, the stables were set alight, and the end was near. Attempting to escape disguised

as a native, Burnes was recognised and, with his brother John, hacked to pieces.

Now, in a frenzy, the mob turned to the Treasury which was opposite, sacked it, but allowed two British officers and the wife and children of one of them to return unmolested to the cantonment. There, muddle and inertia still reigned. The second-in-command, Brigadier Shelton, a courageous but cantankerous man, when finally ordered by Macnaghten to use his own judgement, marched into the Bala Hissar and then did nothing. Seeing that the British were not moving on the city, the mob, which had been expecting an attack, began to plunder and loot, murder and rape. Elphinstone's response on that November evening was to write a note to Macnaghten: 'We must see what the morning brings, and then think what can be done . . .'

Elphinstone was too sick to command, but he would not give up his authority. Shelton, who should have called a conference of senior officers and taken command himself, confined himself to being rude to Elphinstone and doing as little as possible. Within a few days, Shelton was at loggerheads with Macnaghten as well. News of the murder of Burnes and the immobility of the British spread rapidly throughout the country. Garrisons were attacked, columns massacred, and the chiefs began to move on Kabul. The British in their open cantonment began to feel the enemy pressing in on them. The attitude of the senior officers naturally did not inspire the ordinary soldiers. As their leaders collapsed into what can only be described as a total funk, so their morale slumped. On one occasion, when action was finally decided on, the troops involved broke and ran, and a call for volunteers from a European regiment was responded to by one solitary Scottish private.

By 13 November the situation had deteriorated to such a state that some major action was unavoidable. Shelton demanded it and Elphinstone agreed—but only on condition that it was authorised in writing by Macnaghten! The attack on the Afghans, now dominating the heights above the cantonment, was bungled, and the Afghans saw their chance and swept into the cantonment. Lady Sale, a sharp-tongued observer who might better have been in command herself, wrote in her journal: 'The Afghan cavalry charged furiously down the hill upon our troops. No squares were formed to receive them. All was regular confusion: my very heart leapt to my teeth when I saw the Afghans ride clean through them.' Fortunately, in these

desperate straits self-preservation came uppermost. The charge was thrown back. But British morale was not improved.

Most of the officers—and probably the men, though their opinion was not canvassed—wanted to leave immediately for India. Macnaghten opposed this but was forced to open negotiations with the Afghan chiefs, now headed by Dost Muhammad's eldest son, Akbar Khan. It was, wrote one young officer, 'a catalogue of errors, disasters, and difficulties, which following close on each other, disgusted our officers, disheartened our soldiers, and finally sunk us all into irretrievable ruin, as though Heaven itself . . . for its own inscrutable purposes, had planned our downfall'. In fact, it was clear that if the British were to save themselves, it would not be through superior military expertise. There was plenty of courage but no generalship, and in times of crisis one is not much use without the other. Forced into negotiations, Macnaghten fell back on his old methods—where guns might fail, gold would succeed. He arranged a treaty with the chiefs, but neither side kept the bargain. Macnaghten then offered rewards to various desperate characters if they would assassinate some of the signatories.

Now so involved in intrigues, Macnaghten saw nothing fantastic or threatening in an offer from Akbar Khan to deliver up the head of one of the original rebel leaders. With this proposal there were others. The British could stay for another eight months; Akbar was to be made chief minister and receive three million rupees. On 23 December 1841, Macnaghten set out with a small escort to seal the bargain with Akbar Khan. When they met on the bank of the Kabul river, Macnaghten complained that there were too many Afghans crowding in. But Akbar answered: 'They are all in the secret', and according to one who was present, 'no sooner were these words uttered than I heard Akbar call out "Beeger" [seize] and turning round I saw him grasp the envoy's hand with an expression of the most diabolical ferocity. The only words I heard poor Sir William utter were "Ar barae Khoda!" [For God's sake!] I saw his face, however. It was full of horror'.

Two retreats and a retribution

ON 6 JANUARY 1842, the once proud and now almost totally demoralised Army of the Indus left Kabul for India. The hard Afghan winter and the attacks of tribesmen were to reduce it to a mindless rabble. Ironically enough, nearly two years before a Russian army caught in the horrors of a Central Asian winter had also been forced to retreat, broken and decimated, to its base.

The first news of Russian troop movements in Central Asia had taken the form of a rumour passed on by Eldred Pottinger from Herat that the Russians had finally decided to send an expedition against Khiva. This was soon supported by reports from the British ambassador at St Petersburg. In fact, the ambassador seems to have got most of his information from a Russian newspaper. Russian caravans were being harassed and Russian subjects kidnapped into slavery with, apparently, rather more frequency than could be tolerated. 'Every means of persuasion', according to the official communiqué, 'has now been exhausted. The rights of Russia, the security of her trade, the tranquillity of her subjects, and the dignity of the state, call for decisive measures, and the Emperor has judged it to be the time to send a body of troops to Khiva to put an end to robbery and exaction, to deliver those Russians who are detained in slavery, to make the inhabitants of Khiva esteem and respect the Russian name, and finally to strengthen in that part of Asia the lawful influence to which Russia has a right, and which alone can ensure the maintenance of peace'.

Though the communiqué went on to say that the expedition was merely punitive and would return to base after satisfaction had been obtained, the British government was not prepared to believe in such limited aims. Burnes, when he heard about the expedition that by then had left the Russian base of Orenburg, thought that the time was almost come when the frontiers of the two empires would meet. The Russians, he said, were justified in attacking Khiva, 'justified by

all the laws of nations; and in a country like England where slave dealing is so odiously detested [the attack] ought to find favour in men's eyes rather than blame'. But he suspected the timing and considered that it was really a reply to the British advance into Afghanistan.

The hard news reaching the British in Kabul was scanty. In March 1840 Macnaghten was still reporting on the strength of the forces of General Perovski and commenting: 'Let us hope the armada may be dispersed before it reaches Bokhara . . . If the Russians are likely to establish themselves there, we had better be up and doing'. A week before Macnaghten wrote, the news that the Russian expedition had not been successful was released in St Petersburg. It is a wry comment on the efficiency of the intelligence network Burnes was supposed to have set up in Central Asia.

Perovski had started out against Khiva—some eight hundred miles from his advance base at Orenburg—with great hopes of success. But though his agents had reported on the kind of terrain he must expect to pass over, he was surprised to be caught by the almost waterless desert that soon faced him. Extreme heat and lack of water had seriously reduced the Russian force by the time it arrived at Abu Balik, less than a third of the way to Khiva, in July 1839. There, Perovski decided that the only way to ensure a regular supply of drinking water for his troops was to delay continuing the journey until the onset of winter, when snow would supply all his needs. Burnes and Macnaghten were at this time contemplating sending a British force into Central Asia to take, among other places, the town of Balkh, so that they would be ready and waiting by the time the expected Russian army arrived.

In the meantime, in November 1839, Perovski had left Abu Balik for, he hoped, Khiva. But he miscalculated the severity of the Central Asian winter. There was plenty of snow for drinking water, but the conditions were arctic in their severity and neither his men nor his baggage animals were prepared. To frostbite and the gangrene that almost invariably followed the amputation of a damaged limb were added hunger and, later, disease. Finally, Perovski could go no further. He was only half way to his objective when he turned back for Orenburg, leaving behind more than half his men and nine-tenths of his baggage train. It was a lesser catastrophe than that which was to hit the British in Afghanistan. But whereas the British were to return to Kabul in triumph, Russia would not attempt to reach

Khiva again until, after thirty years of careful preparation, they occupied the city in 1873.

In January 1842, however, the hope of retribution lay very low among the priorities of the ragged British force leaving Kabul. Like Perovski, it failed to anticipate the rigours of winter in high Asia. Eldred Pottinger, who had succeeded Burnes as the new political chief, advised that the troops should be issued with sheepskin jackets and that their feet should be bound in rags, but this was rejected by the military as effeminate and unnecessary.

4,500 fighting troops, hundreds of sick and wounded, a large party of women and children, a vast quantity of baggage, and twelve thousand panic-stricken camp followers straggled out of the cantonment. The first night, the column camped only a mile or two from Kabul and watched the cantonment blaze. Next morning the confusion was even worse. There was no order, wrote one officer, only a 'mingled mob of soldiers, camp followers, and baggage cattle, preserving not even the faintest semblance of that regularity and discipline on which depended our only chance of escape from the dangers which threatened us'. Lady Sale noted that no orders were given and no bugles sounded.

At the tail of the column, Afghan looters were at work. As the column passed a small fort, a party swept out and captured a number of guns. As the columns pressed on, so did the Afghan raiders. Things became even more chaotic than before. When a halt was called, Lady Sale wrote in her journal: 'No ground was marked out for the sepoy. Three-fourths of the sepoy are mixed up with the camp followers, and do not know where to find the headquarters of their corps. Snow lies a foot deep on the ground. No food for man or beast; and even water from the river close at hand difficult to obtain as our people were fired upon fetching it'. There was worse to come. As the British entered the Khurd-Kabul pass they came under heavy attack. Akbar Khan, who had tried to ensure the safety of the retiring army and so remove at least one excuse for reprisals, was ignored by the attackers though he addressed them in person. He could only suggest that some of the British married officers and their wives should come into his camp, for safety. The offer was accepted and the column moved on into massacre. As night fell on 10 January after a day of prolonged butchery, only 450 Europeans remained alive. Most of the sepoy were dead, and out of the twelve thousand camp followers all that remained was a hysterical mob of about three thousand.

From these the soldiers planned to cut loose under cover of darkness but, hearing them moving, the whole mob followed, drawing the Afghan fire. Next day, the remnant reached the pass of Jagdalak. The last three bullocks were taken from the camp followers and the Europeans devoured the raw flesh, helping it down with handfuls of snow. Two days of desperate fighting and negotiations followed. Generals Elphinstone and Shelton were received by Akbar Khan round a blazing fire, given hot tea, and told they were now hostages. Behind them the retreat continued, the numbers dwindling every day until, sixteen miles from Jalalabad, only six—all British officers—were alive. On 13 January the lookout at Jalalabad, straining his eyes for a sight of the approaching army, saw one reeling pony, its rider slumped forward over its neck. It was Dr Brydon, the last survivor of the six, saved from death—it was later suggested—when a sword thrust was deflected by a copy of the New Testament tucked away in his cap. Years afterwards, Dr Brydon was to admit that it was not the New Testament but a copy of *Blackwood's Magazine* that had saved him.

When news of the retreat from Kabul reached India, Auckland pronounced the disasters 'as inexplicable as they are appalling'. But he had already been superseded, and a new governor-general, Lord Ellenborough, arrived in India in February 1842. Auckland had already taken some action. He appointed as commander of the Army of Retribution which was assembling at Peshawar General Pollock, a man of experience and decision despite having spent forty years in the Company's forces. Sale held out at Jalalabad, Nott at Kandahar.

When Ellenborough arrived, he issued vague but stirring proclamations. On one thing, however, he was reasonably clear. The situation called for 'the re-establishment of our military reputation by the infliction of some signal and decisive blow upon the Afghans'. One British army went to the relief of Nott at Kandahar, another to that of Sale at Jalalabad. After this, Ellenborough was afflicted with cold feet and ordered an evacuation. An outburst of indignation forced him to order his generals to retire *by way of Kabul, if they so wished*. Nott and Pollock, sweeping all before them, moved on the Afghan capital. Nott arrived first, on 17 September, and Pollock two days later.

There the British hostages were released on payment of twenty thousand rupees to their jailer. All that was left of the Army of the

Indus was thirty-one officers, ten women, eleven children, two civilian clerks, and fifty-two soldiers—all British.

Nothing remained but revenge. Kabul was almost entirely destroyed, the few remaining inhabitants suffering with the buildings as 'every kind of disgraceful outrage was suffered to go on in the town'. At another place where refugees from Kabul had gathered, every Afghan male past puberty was killed and many of the women were raped. In the words of one young officer: 'Tears, supplications, were no avail; fierce oaths were the only answer; the musket was deliberately raised, the trigger pulled, and happy was he who fell dead . . . In fact we are nothing but hired assassins'.

With British military prestige now believed restored, the Army of Retribution retired to India through the Khyber pass, where the rearguard was strongly attacked by Afghan tribesmen. With it travelled the family of Shah Shuja, the ruler himself—without the British to protect him—having been murdered. As the army marched through the Punjab it was passed by a small band of horsemen escorting Dost Muhammad back to Afghanistan.

In December 1842, Lord Ellenborough staged a colossal military show at Ferozepur on the Punjab frontier. He had already issued a variety of bombastic proclamations and had declared that the army was bringing back with it the famous gates of the great Hindu temple at Somnath, which had been stolen by the Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century. Most people thought the proclamations were a hoax, but they turned out to be genuine—which was more than could be said for the gates of Somnath. The show at Ferozepur was perhaps more purposeful. It reassured the army of the governor-general's high opinion, and it was thought that a display of force might perhaps overawe the Sikhs, who had been gloatingly unhelpful in the recent troubles. Forty thousand troops and hundreds of guns were manoeuvred in a vast area surrounded by huge marquees hung with banners and 'polyglot emblazonments' of the victorious army's battles. There were triumphal arches, gorgeous uniforms, elephants, and admiring women. The troops were reviewed by Lord Ellenborough from a throne at the centre of a five-pointed star. When the Duke of Wellington heard of it, he snorted: 'And he ought to sit on it in a strait-jacket', a suggestion that might better have fitted Lord Auckland and those who survived of the men who had advised him into catastrophe.

The murders at Bokhara

SIX MONTHS before Lord Ellenborough's grandiose public relations exercise at Ferozepur, two men had been taken from their dark cell deep in the citadel of Bokhara into an open square and there, to the delight of a large crowd, had their heads chopped off by the public executioner. Their friends would have had difficulty in recognising in these two tattered scarecrows, worn by years of torture and unfulfilled hope, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly.

Stoddart had arrived in Bokhara in the middle of December 1838 on a mission from John McNeill, British minister at Teheran. Stoddart's instructions were simple—to do all he could to persuade the amir to release Russian subjects held as slaves in his country and so remove any excuse for a Russian invasion. He was also to offer the amir British assistance in case of a Russian attack, and to assure him that he had nothing to fear from the invasion the British were about to launch on their own account in Afghanistan. On the contrary, the amir would have much to gain from a British success there, as Afghanistan would give them a forward base from which to help the amir resist Russian threats to his independence.

It would have been difficult for McNeill to have found a more unsuitable person to carry out such a delicate task. Stoddart was an arrogant young man and despite his service in Persia almost totally inexperienced. He had at that time been in the East for barely three years and had shown that he really considered Asians as inferior beings. The mission began badly, with Stoddart refusing to conform to court etiquette, a dangerous insolence at oriental courts where the niceties of protocol had long been elevated into an exact and rigid science. Stoddart rode his horse into the main square of the city, a privilege restricted to the amir and his nobles. This might have been overlooked if the offender had carried more impressive credentials; the amir was insulted that those he presented did not bear the

signature and seal of Queen Victoria. Furthermore, he was suspicious of Stoddart because one of the envoy's own servants had brought with him a letter from the ruler of Herat warning the amir that Stoddart was a spy and advising him to kill the man as soon as possible.

The amir, Nasr Ali, was the same prince Burnes had seen only from a distance, but the chief minister of that time had been replaced. Stoddart's letters had been addressed to the old minister, another serious error. The amir was still the blood-thirsty tyrant of Burnes's time. Short and fat, with small black eyes and a dark complexion, his fear of poison which had so impressed Burnes was merely a symptom of a wider madness. The muscles of the amir's face twitched constantly, his temper was uncertain, his whims unpredictable.

Yet at the first audience the amir gave to Stoddart he was polite and smiling. Three days later, he had the envoy thrown into a pit full of rats and snakes, known as the Black Well. Here he kept Stoddart for some months, frequently threatening him with death if he did not become a Muslim. For some time Stoddart steadfastly refused to convert, but one day he was taken from the pit to a place where a grave was dug before his eyes. The officer of the guard threatened that he would bury him alive. At this Stoddart gave in. He would become a Muslim. Immediately, he was allowed to bathe and was given clean clothes and a reasonably well furnished apartment. Stoddart did not realise that he had been released from the Black Well not because of his conversion but on the intervention of General Perovski.

Perovski had demanded that the amir give Stoddart up to him, but the amir was not prepared to do so. There were rumours of Russian troop movements reaching Bokhara, but the amir had also received information about the British advance into Afghanistan. Under the circumstances it seemed to him wise to release Stoddart and to tell the Russians that he had done so at their request, but to pretend that Stoddart was unwilling to be handed over to the Russians. That ought to keep Perovski quiet while the amir waited to see what the British might do. With alarming news of their success in Afghanistan, it would only be sensible to treat Stoddart well and give him the impression that he was back in favour.

Stoddart's position remained precarious; the way in which he was treated depended on the news from Afghanistan. When the amir



heard of the British occupation of Kabul, he received Stoddart in audience and told him that he was anxious to conclude a treaty with Britain. Stoddart was handed a grandiloquent letter to Queen Victoria—in which the young queen was described among other high-sounding compliments as ‘the Jewel of the Sea of Glory and Greatness’—and permitted to send this letter with other despatches to Kabul, for onward transmission to London, on 16 March 1841.

Stoddart was now living about a mile outside the city, in a pretty house in one of the many gardens that surrounded Bokhara, belonging to the Naib, the Master Gunner of the Royal Army. He was even encouraged to make preparations to leave Bokhara. There remained, said the amir, only one small matter to be cleared up. Why had the Queen of England not replied to his letter? Stoddart’s departure was postponed from day to day, but no royal letter arrived.

While Stoddart was expecting to leave Bokhara at any time, another Englishman was approaching the city by a very roundabout route. Arthur Conolly had arrived back in India in 1839 after an overland journey during which he had annoyed the British government by holding totally unauthorised talks with an envoy of the Khan of Khokand at Constantinople. This had not, however, affected his welcome by Lord Auckland who, instead of giving him specific instructions, had sent him off to Kabul for Macnaghten to decide what he should do. Conolly did not object to this; Macnaghten was not only a man of power—he was also a cousin.

Conolly’s plans for Central Asia appealed to Macnaghten but not to Alexander Burnes. Burnes considered Conolly ‘flighty’, and his ambition to civilise Central Asia as an attempt to ‘purify Tartary’. But it was Macnaghten who made the decisions, and in August 1840 he had authorised Conolly to go on a mission to Khiva and Khokand. He was also told—and this appealed to Conolly’s knightly Christianity—that if Stoddart had not yet been allowed to leave Bokhara he should go and rescue him! Nothing could better display the horrible fantasy of the Great Game than this casual suggestion, casually accepted. Stoddart might have been saved by wise diplomacy, or even by a small demonstration of force. Instead, his release was left to a religious fanatic lost in missionary dreams. To a man who, after visiting a ruined city, could seriously write in a report to government: ‘Shall we not some of these days, exert influences which our grand move [into Afghanistan] has gained us, to make Merv once more a “king of the earth” by fixing its borders in peace between

destructively hostile parties who now keep up useless claim to it, and by causing the desolate city to rise again in the centre of its national fruits, as an emporium of commerce and a link in the chain of civilising intercourse between Europe and Central Asia?’

Conolly left Kabul on 3 September 1840 with a Khivan envoy, an ambassador from Shah Shuja, an Afghan spy Allahdad Khan, and a train of eighty servants. Their journey took them first to Merv, then to Khiva where the khan, though polite, did not conceal that he thought Conolly’s plans for organising Central Asia approached the edge of madness. From Khiva, the party moved on to Khokand, where the ruler was even less enthusiastic than the Khan of Khiva. During his stay in Khokand, Conolly received a number of letters from Stoddart, one of which accompanied an invitation from the Amir of Bokhara, inviting Conolly to visit him and presenting assurances that he would be well treated.

Nothing would stop Conolly from accepting the invitation. The ruler of Khokand advised him strongly against it. When he heard of it, the Khan of Khiva warned Conolly that the Amir of Bokhara could not under any circumstances be trusted to keep his word. Even the minor difficulty that Khokand and Bokhara were then at war was not to be allowed to interfere. In fact, when Conolly crossed the frontier between the two states he came upon the amir returning in triumph from some minor skirmish, his bands playing tunes of glory.

What happened in Bokhara after Conolly’s arrival remained something of a mystery for nearly twenty years after his death. A number of his friends formed a committee in London, which resulted in the journey to Bokhara of a remarkable traveller, the Reverend Joseph Wolff, intent on discovering whether Conolly and Stoddart were alive or dead. But though Wolff confirmed that both men had indeed been executed, he could produce no firm details of their last months. However, another bizarre element was to be added to an already bizarre story on a late summer day in 1862, when a small parcel was left at the house of Conolly’s sister in Chester Square, London. It contained a prayer book and a letter from a Russian, Victor Salatszki, saying that the book had come into his hands in 1848. It had belonged to Conolly, and the margins, end-papers, and fly-leaves were all covered with minute writing. It turned out to be a kind of journal kept by Conolly during his imprisonment.

The journal began abruptly. ‘On the 10th November 1841, Stoddart joined me at the Naib’s, and on the 19th we removed

heard of the British occupation of Kabul, he received Stoddart in audience and told him that he was anxious to conclude a treaty with Britain. Stoddart was handed a grandiloquent letter to Queen Victoria—in which the young queen was described among other high-sounding compliments as ‘the Jewel of the Sea of Glory and Greatness’—and permitted to send this letter with other despatches to Kabul, for onward transmission to London, on 16 March 1841.

Stoddart was now living about a mile outside the city, in a pretty house in one of the many gardens that surrounded Bokhara, belonging to the Naib, the Master Gunner of the Royal Army. He was even encouraged to make preparations to leave Bokhara. There remained, said the amir, only one small matter to be cleared up. Why had the Queen of England not replied to his letter? Stoddart’s departure was postponed from day to day, but no royal letter arrived.

While Stoddart was expecting to leave Bokhara at any time, another Englishman was approaching the city by a very roundabout route. Arthur Conolly had arrived back in India in 1839 after an overland journey during which he had annoyed the British government by holding totally unauthorised talks with an envoy of the Khan of Khokand at Constantinople. This had not, however, affected his welcome by Lord Auckland who, instead of giving him specific instructions, had sent him off to Kabul for Macnaghten to decide what he should do. Conolly did not object to this; Macnaghten was not only a man of power—he was also a cousin.

Conolly’s plans for Central Asia appealed to Macnaghten but not to Alexander Burnes. Burnes considered Conolly ‘flighty’, and his ambition to civilise Central Asia as an attempt to ‘purify Tartary’. But it was Macnaghten who made the decisions, and in August 1840 he had authorised Conolly to go on a mission to Khiva and Khokand. He was also told—and this appealed to Conolly’s knightly Christianity—that if Stoddart had not yet been allowed to leave Bokhara he should go and rescue him! Nothing could better display the horrible fantasy of the Great Game than this casual suggestion, casually accepted. Stoddart might have been saved by wise diplomacy, or even by a small demonstration of force. Instead, his release was left to a religious fanatic lost in missionary dreams. To a man who, after visiting a ruined city, could seriously write in a report to government: ‘Shall we not some of these days, exert influences which our grand move [into Afghanistan] has gained us, to make Merv once more a “king of the earth” by fixing its borders in peace between

destructively hostile parties who now keep up useless claim to it, and by causing the desolate city to rise again in the centre of its national fruits, as an emporium of commerce and a link in the chain of civilising intercourse between Europe and Central Asia?’

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thence to a good house given to us by the amir in the city, where we were well entertained for a month. We had four or five interviews with the amir that month, in all of which he cross-examined me and Allahdad Khan about the objects of our journey to Khiva and Khokand, and expressed impatience for a reply to his letter to the Queen, once proposing that Stoddart should go home, via Russia, to ascertain why it had not been sent. He also repeatedly asked why I had no credentials, to which we could only reply that I had come on His Majesty's own invitation.'

This seems to have been received quietly by the amir. But before Conolly's next meeting with him, news of reverses at Kabul had reached Bokhara. 'Towards the end of November, reports came that Shah Shuja had been deposed at Kabul, and Mr Burnes and most of the English killed there, and, in a word, our influence in Afghanistan had been quite destroyed. The amir questioned us about these rumours. We could only express doubts of their truth, but the rumours evidently gained hold upon His Majesty's mind, and encouraged him to think that we had been cut off from our support, for, after summoning us to court on the 2nd of December, he suddenly attacked me about the objects of our missions to Khiva and Khokand, saying in an overbearing and contemptuous manner that he perfectly understood that the object of our dealing with those states was only to excite them to enmity against him, but that we must not think that we could play the same game here, for that Turkestan would not bear it.'

'I replied that the English government never urged underhand war, that it was able, please God, to encounter any enemy upon its own strength, and that where it designed hostility it would declare the same openly. The amir on this accusing me of talking big, said he would imprison *me*, and that then our army might come and see what it could do!'

Conolly still believed that he was dealing with a rational man. He was prepared for a tyrant, but not for a psychotic, nor did his limited experience allow him to understand just how much importance the amir placed on the fact that, still, no reply had been received from Queen Victoria.

At their next meeting, the amir 'talked long and graciously with us about the continued bad rumours from Kabul. As we were leaving the Citadel, a servant came after us to say that the king had heard that I possessed a very superior watch and that His Majesty

would like to see it. I went home and returned alone, with my gold McCabe chronometer, which I on a second interview presented to His Majesty. He graciously accepted it, and conversed with me for some time very kindly about the superiority of English manufactures'.

But this was only an interlude. Next morning, 20 December 1841, the two men were once again summoned to the amir's presence. After being kept waiting in an anteroom for several hours, they were told: 'The amir is pleased to signify that your authority has not been proved—your word is still always the same, and no proper answer has come to the amir's letter, though Stoddart has been here more than three years. Now, Turkestan will not bear these sort of things, and there must be an end of them, and your departure hence is difficult. Therefore, fix a period when a reply will come, or else—according to the credit that you severally enjoy in your own country—make arrangements for freeing yourselves by raising ten or twenty thousand *tillas*, and then a man shall be sent with you both to see you across the river Oxus. Otherwise you must look only for imprisonment.'

Both Stoddart and Conolly replied that they would pay no ransom, they had committed no crime and were only the bearers of the most friendly communications from their government. They were not told that letters had arrived from Kabul in which Macnaghten; while insisting on their release, described them not as diplomatic envoys but as innocent travellers. Why Macnaghten took this line is not known—his reasons died with him—but it effectively removed official protection from Stoddart and Conolly. The two men were kept in the anteroom until after sunset, with no message from the amir. Then they were taken away to the Naib's town house and confined in a small room there. A few days later, their personal possessions were removed from them.

They heard no more from the amir until a week had passed, when after sunset, an official 'came to our room with the Master Gunner, and ordered me in a rough tone to take off my coat and neckcloth. We thought that he had been sent to put me to death, and Stoddart, who knew him, conjured him to say at once what was intended. He replied that nothing was designed against either of our lives, but that I had incurred the amir's displeasure, and that in such case clothes like mine were out of place. Then, causing me to go on disrobing till I stood in my short and drawers, he called for a torn and stinking old sheepskin cloak, and a cotton girdle cloth to match, which he

made me put on, and departed telling Stoddart that he might remain as he was for that he and his clothes were all right'.

The two men remained closely confined in the small room. But they managed to smuggle out some letters written in invisible ink, for there were still men willing to help them. Only one of the early letters contained the slightest criticism of a government which had done nothing either to support or rescue them. Most were cheerful, probably because Stoddart and Conolly suspected their letters were being read by the amir and his minister. But Conolly's journal made no attempt to hide the truth.

The entry for 10 February read: 'We have now been fifty-three days and nights without means of changing or washing our linen. We hope the amir is inclined to treat us better, but he has behaved foolishly and ill that we can feel no confidence in him. This book will probably not leave me, if all ends well with us, so I now will, as opportunity serves, write in it the last blessing of my best affection to all my friends'.

Hopes of release ebbed and flowed as rumours came and went. One told that there had been a Russian mission in the city and that its leader had tried to persuade the amir to give up his prisoners. A servant reported that the amir was about to dismiss the Englishmen with dresses of honour. But Conolly was resigned. The notes still smuggled out were no longer cheerful or reticent. In one to his brother, written on the eighty-third day of their confinement, Conolly described the amir's attitude—which he had once thought 'dictated by mad caprice'—as the 'deliberate malice of a demon, questioning and raising our hopes and ascertaining our conditions only to see how our hearts were going on in the process of breaking'.

The previous evening, he had 'looked upon Stoddart's half naked and much lacerated body' and pleaded with one of the jailers to convey a request to the amir 'that he would direct his anger upon me and not further destroy my poor brother Stoddart, who has suffered so much, and so meekly, here for three years. My earnest words were answered [by Stoddart], "Don't cry and distress yourself" '. The two men kissed each other and knelt down to pray. 'And we have risen from our knees with hearts comforted, as if an angel had spoken to us, resolved—please God—to wear our English honesty and dignity to the last, within all the misery and filth that this monster may try to degrade us with.'

Other letters and a kind of notebook that was smuggled out and

finally reached General Pollock at Kabul after the British return show that, almost until the last, Conolly was still thinking about Britain's role in Central Asia, and was apparently quite unaware that the catastrophe in Afghanistan had stripped away the illusion. It had certainly done so for the amir. Though there were rumours of a British return with an army of retribution, he preferred to believe himself safe from vengeance. Conolly and Stoddart no longer mattered. It was best to dispose of them.

Conolly's journal stopped far short of the last scene. A number of versions of this exist, but the most likely is that retailed a year later to Colonel Shiel at the British legation at Teheran by a man who had once been employed by Conolly. He said he had heard the story from one of the executioners.

On Tuesday 14 June 1842, several men entered the room occupied by Conolly and Stoddart and, after stripping them, took them to a cell in the citadel. 'In stripping Colonel Stoddart, a lead pencil was found in the lining of his coat and some papers in his waist. These were taken to the amir, who gave orders that Colonel Stoddart should be beaten with heavy sticks till he disclosed who brought the papers, and to whom he wrote. He was most violently beaten, but he revealed nothing. He was beaten repeatedly for two or three days.

'On Friday June the 17th, the amir gave orders that Colonel Stoddart should be killed in the presence of Captain Conolly, who was to be offered life if he became a [Muslim]. In the afternoon, they were taken outside the prison into the street, which is a kind of small square. Their hands were tied. Many people assembled to behold the spectacle. Their graves were dug before their eyes.

'Colonel Stoddart exclaimed aloud at the cruelty and tryranny of the amir. His head was then cut off with a knife.

'The chief executioner then turned to Captain Conolly and said: "The amir spares your life if you will become a [Muslim]." Captain Conolly answered: "Captain Stoddart has been a Mussulman for three years, and you have killed him. I will not be a Mussulman, and I am ready to die". Saying which, he stretched forth his neck. His head was then cut off'.

No vengeance was to catch up with the amir. The governor-general and the cabinet in London preferred to ignore the deaths of Stoddart and Conolly—except for denying Conolly's authority to go to Bokhara at all and charging his estate with the cost of the journey.

Most of the 'politicals' had been drawn into the vortex of the

Afghan war. Many, like Conolly and Stoddart, Burnes and Macnaghten, were dead. Eldred Pottinger, who survived captivity at Kabul and was rescued by General Pollock nine months after the disastrous retreat, was courtmartialled for signing an agreement with Akbar Khan permitting the troops to leave Kabul, but was honourably acquitted. Ignored by the governor-general, Pottinger decided to visit his uncle; Sir Henry Pottinger was no longer a spymaster but head of a British mission to China, following a more successful but no less reprehensible campaign usually known as the Opium War. Catching 'Hong Kong fever', Eldred Pottinger died on 15 November 1843.

D'Arcy Todd, who had remained behind at Herat after Pottinger's departure, was disgraced after two years, because he withdrew his mission at Herat without asking for authority to do so. Todd had discovered that the ruler of Herat was secretly corresponding with the Shah of Persia, but he had not discovered that the shah was about to make up his differences with the British. For his ignorance, he was sent back to his regiment. Colonel Wade was more fortunate. He had accompanied his protégé, Shah Shuja, back to Kabul, but was forced to leave it to Macnaghten to work out the details of his ingenious plans. When he returned to India, the Sikhs demanded his removal from Ludhiana—probably because he knew too much about them—and he spent the last four years of his service in an honourable appointment in the backwater of the Central Provinces.

The first half of the Great Game was over and, during the interval, it was best for some of the players to retire into obscurity.

PART TWO

A Hotplate for the Bear

I could make of Central Asia a hotplate for our friend the Bear to dance on.

LORD MAYO

The road to India

[i] *The Russian avalanche*

DURING THE interval between the halves of the Great Game, the expansion of the British and Russian empires towards their 'natural' frontiers continued. The logic of such expansion was summed up by Prince Gorchakov, the Russian foreign minister, in a Note that he sent to the major powers of Europe in November 1864. Gorchakov pointed out that Russia had found herself brought into contact with a number of semi-savage tribes who were a constant menace to the security and well-being of her empire. The only possible answer was to bring these tribes under control, but as soon as the Russians did this they found that the new converts to civilisation were themselves threatened by aggression from other tribes beyond the new borders. These, in turn, had to be brought under control. In effect, the constant need to expand security created a dilemma. The state must either abandon the 'incessant struggle and deliver its frontier over to disorder, which renders property, security and civilisation impossible, or it must plunge into the depths of savage countries, where the difficulties and sacrifices to which it is exposed increase with each step in advance'. Such, Gorchakov continued, 'had been the lot of all countries placed in the same conditions. The United States of America, France in Algiers, Holland in her colonies, England in India—all have been inevitably drawn into a course wherein ambition plays a smaller part than imperious necessity, and where the greatest difficulty is in knowing when to stop'.

In 1849, Britain at least had stopped at the frontier hills and passes of the north-west. Sind had been annexed in 1843, mainly as a morale booster after the catastrophe in Afghanistan. 'It put me in mind', commented Mountstuart Elphinstone, 'of a bully who had been kicked in the streets and went home to beat his wife in revenge'. The Punjab had been different; there the Sikhs had attacked the

British—as some of the wiser British officials had expected. Two wars were fought before the British took control. But the ‘natural’ frontiers envisaged by the Russians were not so quickly reached.

The failure of General Perovski to get to Khiva slowed the momentum of the Russian advance in that area, but did not bring it to a halt. The Khan of Khiva surrendered a number of Russian slaves in 1840, and two years later signed an agreement with the Russians which he did not keep. This treaty, however, was used by the Tsar Nicholas, then on a visit to London, as a reinforcement to his agreement with the British that the Russians would ‘leave the khanates of Central Asia to serve as a neutral zone interposed between Russia and India, so as to preserve them from dangerous contact’. Russian demands on both Khiva and Bokhara were limited to the suspension of slave-taking, the reduction of customs levies on Russian trading caravans, and the setting up of commercial agencies in the two countries. To these were later added a further demand, that Russian vessels should be permitted to navigate the river Amu-Darya. None of these demands was satisfied until Russia took over effective control of Khiva and Bokhara.

Bokhara, however remained on reasonable terms with the Russians as long as their forces made no overt move in her direction. But Khiva and Khokand were inextricably involved in the Russian desire for security against the nomads operating on the southern fringe of the steppe. In 1847, the Russians built a fort at the mouth of the Sir-Darya river which brought them to the frontiers of Khiva and Khokand. From there they made their first conquest. In 1853 the Khokandian fortress of Ak Musjid, on the lower reaches of the Sir-Darya, was taken and renamed, significantly, after General Perovski.

The Crimean War, in which Britain and Russia were in direct conflict for the first and last time, slowed down the Russian advance in Central Asia, though increasing the need for it. In 1854 the Russian frontier stretched in the form of related fortresses from the mouth of the Sir-Darya in the west to Fort Perovsk, but there was a gap from the Aral Sea to the Ural river of almost six hundred miles with only a few scattered forts until the frontier joined that of Siberia at Ili. Apart from a slight extension of the Siberian frontier line across the Ili river, St Petersburg would authorise no further expeditions while it was entangled in the war in the Crimea.

During that war, fears of British expansion into Central Asia intensified. Turkish envoys—obviously, it was thought, with the

encouragement of their British allies—were active in Central Asia, and though the Turks were unsuccessful in finding allies there were rumours in 1856 that British agents had appeared in Khokand, Khiva, and among the Turkoman tribes. Not only that, but Dost Muhammad, who had become an official ally of the British in 1855, annexed some of the territory of the Amir of Bokhara. A year after the conclusion of the Crimean War in 1856, Britain, taking advantage of Russia's weakness, forced Persia to evacuate Herat, which had finally fallen to Persian forces in October 1856, and to grant extensive commercial privileges to British merchants.

In this threatening situation, Colonel Nikolai Ignatiev, who had been Russian military attaché in London, was sent on a mission to Khiva and Bokhara to settle the differences that exacerbated their relations with Russia, and to undermine any influence Britain might have gained there. At the same time, a famous Russian orientalist, Nikolai Khanykov, was sent to Afghanistan in an attempt to convince Dost Muhammad that the Russians wished only to strengthen the states of Central Asia as a bulwark against 'England's drive for conquest'. Khanykov got no further than Herat, as Dost Muhammad, faithful to his British alliance, refused to allow him to go on.

The failure of these two missions increased Russian anxiety, especially when in 1860 further rumours of the activities of British agents in Bokhara reached the Russians. The following year, Ignatiev, now a general, took over as head of the Asiatic department of the foreign ministry, and one Nikolai Milutin became minister of war. Both men were ardent supporters of a forward policy in Central Asia. At first their plans were seriously restricted. The government and the tsar were against the two men's suggestion that the gap in the frontier line should be closed, and Turkestan and Tashkent occupied. But it was felt that it would do no harm to send reconnoitring parties to test the feasibility of such action in the future.

These parties were provocative in themselves, and under the command of adventurous officers chafing at restrictions imposed by St Petersburg were liable to become involved in incidents. In June 1863 the commander of one of the expeditions, Colonel Cherniaev, disobeyed his instructions and occupied a fort in Khokand, declaring the area under Russian protection. Instead of reprimanding Cherniaev, the forward party in the Russian government justified his action as an important step in regularising the open frontier. Milutin

supported this view in a memorandum in which he insisted that the Russian occupation of Central Asia was the only really satisfactory bargaining instrument with Britain. In case of a European war, he wrote, 'we ought to particularly value the control of that region, it would bring us to the northern borders of India and make easy our access to that country. By ruling in Khokand, we can constantly threaten England's East Indian possessions'. This was essential, he added, 'since only in that quarter can we be dangerous to this enemy of ours'.

The forward party in the Russian government proved their case against those, such as Prince Gorchakov, who favoured a more cautious approach. In December 1863 the tsar instructed Milutin to go ahead with the closing of the frontier gap. Nine months later, this was completed. Cherniaev was made a major-general. In politics, nothing succeeds like well-timed excess.

But the establishment of a continuous frontier did not solve the problems of either the khanates or the alleged British influence in Central Asia. Cherniaev knew this and so did his superiors. But it was Cherniaev who thought he could bring off another coup. Again without any authorisation, he moved his forces, this time against Tashkent. The attack was unsuccessful and Cherniaev was forced to retreat. One result of the fiasco was the triumph of the cautious party at St Petersburg and Prince Gorchakov's Note to the great powers, in particular its last paragraph. 'We undertake the duty', it read, 'of proving to neighbouring states by a policy of firmness as regards the repression of their misdeeds but of moderation and justice in the employment of armed strength and of respect for their independence, that Russia is not their foe, that she cherishes no design of conquest, and that peaceful commercial relations with her are more profitable than disorder, pillage, reprisals, and chronic warfare'. In brief, that Russia had no more territorial claims in Central Asia.

There is no doubt that Gorchakov's Note reflected current official Russian policy. Neither the tsar nor his ministers at that moment wanted to annex the khanates, but this did not mean that they were prepared to tolerate any other paramount interest there than their own. The Russian government was ready and willing to accept cheap and successful interventions without express authority, but not unsuccessful and expensive ones. There always existed, as there did with the British, an unstated but obvious compromise between

the caution of governments and the recklessness of commanders in the field beyond the restraints of the telegraph and the railroad. Ministers over-estimated the willingness of states to be good neighbours; the military did not consider the possibility that they could be. Successful recklessness was rarely rejected and soon rationalised into good policy. The catalysts of compromise were just those forces so precisely defined by Gorchakov in his Note—enmity and anarchy on soft frontiers.

In December 1864, the Amir of Bokhara invaded Khokand, seized a Russian envoy and demanded the immediate conversion to Islam of all Russians in Khokand. But after meeting Russian forces at Irdjar the amir and his troops fled, leaving the road to Samarkand wide open. The new governor of Turkestan, General Kaufman, in an endeavour to achieve his aims without bloodshed, offered a treaty to the amir. By its terms, Samarkand would be formally ceded to Russia. The amir found the treaty unacceptable and once again attacked the Russians, only—for a second time—to be put to flight. Kaufman then occupied Samarkand and, leaving a small force in the citadel, moved on in an attempt to dispose of the amir once and for all. After his departure, the Russian garrison found itself besieged by over twenty thousand men but managed to hold out until Kaufman's victorious return. A treaty with Bokhara was finally signed in June 1868. The terms included an indemnity payable in gold; the cession of the valley of the Zerafshan and the city of Samarkand to Russia; free passage through Bokhara and protection while there for Russian subjects; and the right to trade. Kaufman, in return, undertook not to 'occupy or molest' the city of Bokhara.

Success along the line of Sir-Darya turned Kaufman's attention to the Russification of the whole of east Turkestan. In 1851 a treaty had been signed with China legalising trade between the two countries, but, apart from caravan traffic between Jungaria and Semirachensk and the construction of trading posts at Tchugutchak and Kulja, the agreement had not been particularly productive. The existence of the treaty was kept a secret until 1861, in an attempt to conceal from England the objects of Russian expansion in Asia. The actual terms of the treaty were not disclosed until 1871.

In 1863, however, there was a rising in Chinese Turkestan, where the mainly Muslim population of Kashgar rose under a Khokandi adventurer, Yakub Beg, and destroyed the Chinese presence there. This convinced Kaufman that Chinese Turkestan was best left alone,

at least for the time being. For eight years the Russians endured the violence and anarchy that set in after Yakub's success, until in 1871 they finally reacted by occupying the Chinese frontier district of Ili. During these years, Kaufman concentrated on the west, where Khiva remained unsubdued and the upper Amu-Darya still unoccupied. Geography and climate were, however, still the real enemies of Russian expansion. In the way of the Russian advance were the arid wastes of the Kara Kum and the frozen region of the Ust Urt plateau.

In 1869, a strong fort was established at Krasnovodsk on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, and preparations were begun for another expedition against Khiva. But a rebellion of Kirghiz tribesmen and Cossacks of the Don threatened Uralsk and Orenburg and was not suppressed until late 1870. Yakub Beg was also rumoured to be conspiring with the rulers of Bokhara and Khiva to raise a holy war against the Russians. The order was given to march on Khiva.

Russian agents incited the Turkomans to revolt against the Khan of Khiva and, while he was occupied with the rebellion, a Russian force—moving across the steppe from Krasnovodsk—was to attack the Khivan army. Again, climate, topography, and the guerrilla tactics of the Khivans combined to repulse the Russian expedition. Kaufman now determined to settle the Khivan problem once and for all. His plan was an attack with large and well armed forces divided into two prongs, one starting from the Caspian and the other from Tashkent.

In March 1872, a column commanded by General Kaufman in person and comprising some 5,500 men and eighteen guns left Tashkent. Another of under three thousand men commanded by Colonel Markosoff advanced from the Caspian, while General Vereffkin, with two thousand infantry and six guns, moved down from Orenburg. The khan sent out emissaries to India and Persia, seeking aid, but without success. He then declared he would fight to the bitter end.

That end came in June 1873, when Kaufman entered the town of Khiva in triumph.

The next stage in Kaufman's plans was a treaty with Bokhara. This was signed in October 1873 and established the right of free navigation of the Amu-Darya and an acceptance of trade between Russia and Bokhara. The Russians now began to found the rudiments of an administration in their newly acquired dominions. The

new province of Transcaspia was formed in the winter of 1873, with its headquarters at Krasnovodsk. The pacification of the area was, however, difficult, and plans for the building of new towns were temporarily suspended because of a rising in Khokand. The khan appealed to Kaufman for assistance, claiming that the rebels were Kirghiz from Russian territory. The request was refused. The trouble in Khokand continued well into 1875, in which year Kaufman sent an envoy to the khan asking permission for a Russian expedition to pass through Khokand on its way to Kashgar. On his arrival, the envoy found that the khan's brother had joined the rebels and so had the state army. The khan decided, under the circumstances, to place himself under Russian protection and fled to Tashkent. His successor sent an envoy to Kaufman blaming the insurrection on the oppressions of his predecessor and expressing his desire to live in peace with the Russians. Unfortunately for him, the people of Khokand were being incited to a holy war. Kaufman now acted. The Russian campaign was successful and the city of Khokand was captured. The task of pacification was not so easy. In March 1876, the khanate of Khokand was annexed.

Even before the annexation of Khokand, the speed of Russian expansion had been described by Lord Salisbury—who became secretary of state for India in 1874—as ‘this Russian avalanche . . . moving on by its own weight, not in consequence of any impulse it receives from St Petersburg’. Salisbury did not see what could be done to stop it. The best policy, surely, was ‘to divert it into some channel where it will not meet us. If it keeps north of the Hindu Kush, it may submerge one dynasty of Mussulman robbers after another without disturbing our repose. It will at last break itself harmlessly over the vast multitudes of China’.

But would it? Not if at least one Russian general had his way.

[ii] *The dream of General Skobelev*

HE HAD a passion for white horses, and it was said of him that ‘he rode into battle clad in white, decked with orders, scented and curled, like a bridegroom to a wedding, his eyes gleaming with wild delight, his voice tremulous with joyous excitement’. The Turkomans called this exotic creature ‘Bloody Eyes’, and they had reason. In 1878 Mikhail Dmitrievitch Skobelev was thirty-seven years old

and a major-general. For long he had had a dream of conquering India. He also had a plan for doing it.

Other Russian generals had dreamed the same dreams and drawn up plans to realise them. As recently as the Crimean War, detailed plans for an invasion of India had been prepared, and discussed by the tsar himself. General Duhamel in 1854 had suggested a move through Khiva and Herat and then into Afghanistan. A year later, General Krulev put forward a proposal for a march to Herat via Ashkabad and Meshed. Both assumed that, when the Russian forces passed through the Khyber and into the Punjab, they would be welcomed by the population. It was an axiom of Russian strategic thinking that the people of India were only waiting for an excuse to rise up against British oppression, and that the bulk of Britain's native army would desert when they heard the Russians were on their way. These invasion plans had not been put to the test. But the mutiny in the Bengal Army which almost overwhelmed the British in northern India in 1857 at least gave some support to the generals' expectations.

It was another war with Turkey which was to give Skobelev the opportunity to put his own plans to the tsar. In 1877 the Russians attacked Turkey. In the campaign that followed, Skobelev commanded at the siege of Plevna. By January 1878, Russian forces were sweeping down on Constantinople, and Britain moved Indian troops to Cyprus and a battle fleet to the Bosphorus to protect the Turkish capital. It seemed that war between Russia and Britain was about to break out. In 1876 Skobelev, then military governor of the new province of Fergana—which had been created out of the khanate of Khokand—had sent his plan for an invasion of India to his superior, General Kaufman, the governor-general of Turkestan. This plan, though passed on to the tsar and his ministers in St Petersburg, was temporarily filed. The arrival of the British fleet at Constantinople immediately revived the views of many Russian military strategists that the best way to relieve British pressure in the Near East was by applying counter-pressure against India. The Skobelev plan was discussed, matured, and elaborated at a council of war held in the Russian camp outside Constantinople.

As approved by St Petersburg, the plan envisaged a combination of military, diplomatic and subversive action. The first two were designed to create a power base in Afghanistan from which an invasion of the Indian plains would be mounted. The last was to stimu-

ate, with the help of disaffected elements in India itself, public disorders which would divert the British from the threat on their frontier. For this, agents with gold and promises were to be sent to India. The Russians first projected a three-pronged military movement against India. A force would move from the Fergana via Kashgar, another from Samarkand to Kabul, and a third from Petro-Aleksandrovsk and Krasnovodsk, via Merv, to western Afghanistan. The actual force to be used in the invasion of India was to be spearheaded by Mongol cavalry who, like their forebears who had ridden with Genghiz Khan, could move rapidly without the cumbersome apparatus of nineteenth-century logistic support.

But in May Russian troops were pulled back from Constantinople and the tension decreased. Milutin, the war minister in St Petersburg instructed General Kaufman, who was in overall charge of the projected campaign, that the tsar and his government now envisaged only a limited military demonstration on the Afghan borders. Changes were made in the routes originally planned. All of them, however, meant that the Russian army had to pass through Bokhara. Permission for this was obtained from the amir, and all three Russian forces were ready to leave their bases on 1 July 1878. Eight days later, Kaufman received orders from St Petersburg to cancel the demonstration of armed force. A congress held in Berlin had settled the Balkan crisis and such a display might prejudice agreements made there.

It was perhaps just as well that the campaign was abandoned. The Fergana force was caught in severe snowstorms while crossing the Alai mountains. That from Petro-Aleksandrovsk had to travel down the Amu-Darya river in slow native boats, as a steam transport did not arrive in time. The main Samarkand force did not cross the Russo-Bokharan border.

Skobelev was bitterly disappointed at the abandonment of his project. But his dream did not die when Skobelev died 'in mysterious circumstances'—possibly murdered by a boy friend—in a Moscow hotel room in 1882, and he at least lived long enough to see one albeit unforeseen result of his careful planning.

In June 1879 a diplomatic mission headed by General Stoletov passed through Bokhara on its way to Kabul. This mission had not been cancelled with the military moves, and Stoletov reached the Afghan capital in July despite attempts by the amir, Sher Ali, who had succeeded his father Dost Muhammad in 1869, to stop him.

Under pressure from Stoletov, the amir signed a treaty of mutual defence against Britain. Stoletov was then recalled, because, as St Petersburg explained to London, the Congress of Berlin had removed the reason for his mission. But though the general himself left Kabul, some members of his mission remained behind. They might, it was thought, be needed, for the government of India had reacted so violently to the mission's presence in the Afghan capital that it seemed anything might happen. In fact, the government of India had already taken the first steps that were to lead to yet another British envoy being murdered in Kabul and yet another Army of Retribution entering Afghanistan.

An earthen pipkin and two iron pots

THE GOVERNMENT of India's reaction to General Stoletov's mission to Kabul was a practical consequence of the theories of a new school of strategic thinking that had slowly emerged after British India reached its 'natural' frontiers. For more than twenty years after the final annexation of the Punjab in 1849, the government of India was more concerned with settling a troublesome frontier than with looking too closely at what went on beyond it. The thinking of the administrators of the Punjab, who controlled the Khyber pass into Afghanistan, tended to dominate the government's attitude. But in the 1850s the beginnings of a new forward school could be found in Sind. There, General John Jacob was convinced that the British must occupy Quetta in Baluchistan, a sparsely populated area abutting both Afghanistan and Persia. Quetta was only twenty miles from the Bolan pass into Afghanistan. 'From Quetta', wrote Jacob, 'we could operate on the flank and rear of any army attempting to proceed towards the Khyber Pass; so that, with a British force at Quetta, the other road [to India] would be shut to an invader inasmuch as we could reach Herat before an invading army could even arrive at Kabul'. As such a forward policy was not popular at the time, Jacob attacked potential critics with: 'You wish the red line of England on the map to advance no further. But to enable this red line to retain its present position . . . it is absolutely necessary to occupy posts in advance of it'.

But Jacob was ahead of his time and Quetta was not occupied until 1876, when the forward policy had been officially recognised. Until then, the dominating policy was that of a 'close frontier', behind which an area of endemic tribal anarchy could be stabilised. But Afghanistan could hardly be ignored. For one thing, the tribes overflowed the ill-defined frontiers, and their allegiance was often claimed by Afghanistan. The policy of the government of India was best summed up in a despatch of Herbert Edwardes, then commis-

sioner of the Peshawar district, to the governor-general in 1854, when he claimed that 'it would contribute much to the securing of this frontier if open relations of goodwill were established with Kabul'. Such relations were, in fact, established by treaty in 1855 and 1857. At the height of the Mutiny troubles in that year, when it was even suggested that Peshawar be handed back to the Afghans, Dost Muhammad made no attempt to regain it.

After the suppression of Mutiny, India came directly under the British Crown, the old dual government of the East India Company and the Board of Control ceasing in 1858. The years that followed were years of caution in frontier and foreign policy while the government of India concentrated on internal problems, on financial retrenchment, famine relief projects, and administrative routines. In Britain, the Liberal administrations of Palmerston and Lord John Russell seemed more interested in Europe and America, while such Liberal leaders as Cobden, Bright and Gladstone were educating their party to accept the need for reform and retrenchment at home and no imperial escapades abroad. In 1865, Britain had both a Liberal and a Conservative government. There were two general elections in 1868, the second bringing in a Liberal administration which lasted until 1874 when the Conservatives returned to office under the leadership of Disraeli. On the whole, the years between 1865 and 1874 were quiet ones in India, years when the viceroy was almost always allowed to get on with ruling India in his own way.

Lord Lawrence, a famous Punjab administrator who became viceroy in 1864, handled frontier and trans-frontier affairs with a masterly caution. Dost Muhammad of Afghanistan died in 1863 and when a struggle for power took place between his sons, Lawrence tried to play the role of a benevolent neutral, replying to one of the contenders who sought his aid: 'My friend, the relations of this government are with the *actual rulers* of Afghanistan'. When Sher Ali triumphed over the other contenders, Lawrence immediately recognised his position with a grant of money and the promise of a regular subsidy. Lawrence left India advising the government that it was best to avoid getting involved in Afghanistan.

His successor was appointed by the Conservatives of 1868, but before he could take up his office the government had fallen and was replaced by Gladstone's first Liberal administration. The Conservative nominee, Lord Mayo, was however not recalled. He arrived in India with only one preconceived idea, that India should be kept

out of British party politics. He persuaded his Conservative friends to support the government. In return, the government rarely interfered with his developing policies. The most important of these led to a meeting between Mayo and the amir, Sher Ali, in March 1869. The meeting produced no large-scale British commitment to Sher Ali but, mainly as a result of Mayo's tact and firmness, a friendliness acceptable to both sides. One consequence of the new spirit injected by Mayo into relations with Afghanistan was that Britain's prestige rose considerably in Asia. Mayo hoped that his actions would reinforce the belief that Britain wanted peace, not expansion. Friendship and non-intervention would offer a significant contrast to Russia's aggressive posture. For this reason, Mayo would not sanction an advance on Quetta. As for Russia, if that country was demented enough to attack India, a handful of British agents and a few hundred thousand pounds in gold could raise the whole of Central Asia against her in a holy war. 'I could make', he wrote in December 1870, 'a hotplate for our friend the Bear to dance on'.

But Mayo thought that, instead of secret intrigues, a cordial relationship could be established with Russia and mutual spheres of influence defined. This had been suggested before, in 1865 by Lord Lawrence, as a counter-move against a growing body of support in Britain and India for a 'forward policy'. The leader of the new forward school was Sir Henry Rawlinson, the soldier-scholar who, as an officer in the East India Company's army, had been a military adviser in Persia, had served in the First Afghan War, and when British consul at Baghdad published a work on cuneiform inscriptions. In 1859 Rawlinson had been minister at Teheran, but resigned his appointment after a year. Apart from ancient inscriptions, his main interest was in combating what he believed to be Russia's designs against India.

In October 1865 Rawlinson published an article in the influential *Quarterly Review* in which he argued that Britain must retain complete freedom to advance to Kandahar and Herat in defence of India. In 1868, as a member of the Council of India which advised the secretary of state, he submitted a long and closely argued memorandum in which he demanded the abandonment of the traditional cautious policy and called for establishment of a 'quasi-protectorate' over Afghanistan. Rawlinson's proposals were rejected by the government of India in January 1869 and by the new Liberal administration in London. But instead of taking up Law-

rence's original suggestion for the definition of spheres of influence, the British foreign secretary broached to the Russian ambassador in London the idea of 'neutral territory' between Russian and British possessions. This proposal, made in February 1869, was welcomed by Prince Gorchakov who, in return, suggested Afghanistan as the neutral zone. Under pressure from India, this was rejected. Afghanistan did not touch either the Russian frontiers or her current spheres of influence. To accept Afghanistan as 'neutral territory' would have meant giving Russia the go-ahead to expand to that country's northern borders.

The British government countered Gorchakov's proposal with one offering the 'upper Oxus [Amu-Darya] which was south of Bokhara' as the 'boundary line which neither Power should permit their forces to cross'. This 'would leave a large tract of country, apparently desert and marked on the map before us as belonging to the Khan of Khiva, between Afghanistan, and the territories already acquired by Russia'. Russian punitive expeditions would be permitted to cross the line, but only on the understanding that afterwards they would return to the right bank of the river. Though the Russian and British foreign ministers met at Heidelberg in September 1869, no agreement emerged as Gorchakov still wanted Afghanistan as the neutral zone.

At this stage Lord Mayo put forward his own idea for a belt of independent states between India and Russia. Afghanistan, Kashgar, and Kalat would be Britain's spheres of influence, Khiva, Bokhara and Khokand, Russia's. To further this plan, Mayo sent a personal envoy to St Petersburg. The mission left the situation still confused, and the confusion was intensified when, in November 1869, the British government—which had until then believed that the true Afghan frontier in the north lay on the Hindu Kush—decided to regard it as back again where it had been in Dost Muhammad's time, on the river Amu-Darya itself! Arguments continued, but in January 1873 Prince Gorchakov accepted the British proposal. Essentially, this meant that the Russians agreed that Afghanistan lay within Britain's sphere of influence and Bokhara strictly within their own.

This fragile and fundamentally illusory agreement had a very short life, though it was never officially repudiated by either side. In February 1874, Disraeli became British prime minister at the head of a Conservative administration. The forward school was now to have its chance. Britain's new policy for containing Russia in Central

Asia was inaugurated by Lord Salisbury, the secretary of state for India, in January 1875. Afghanistan, Kashgar, and Kalat were to be converted from independent states in a British sphere of influence into 'dependent, willingly subordinate states'. Among the most important features of the new policy was to be the establishment of a British political mission in Kabul. On this the Conservative government in London and the Liberal-appointed viceroy, Lord Northbrook, could not agree. Northbrook had succeeded Mayo on the latter's assassination in 1872 and his policy was much the same, except that Northbrook managed to offend Sher Ali. Faced by the viceroy's intransigence, the government decided to wait until his period of office expired two years later. But in September 1875 Northbrook resigned and Lord Lytton went out to take his place.

Lytton knew nothing of India. The son of a novelist, and a novelist himself—under the pseudonym of Owen Meredith—he had had some minor diplomatic experience in Europe before his appointment as viceroy. He was a brilliant amateur, full of sharp insights and even sharper ignorances. Like Disraeli, he was a lover of rhetoric and theatrical gestures such as the great durbar held in 1877 to announce the assumption by Queen Victoria of the title of Empress of India. Under Lytton, the ceremonial at Government House became ornate and stuffy, though he outraged social opinion at Simla by smoking cigarettes between courses at the dinner table.

Lytton arrived in India with a sense of heightened tension which seems never to have left him. In offering him the appointment, Disraeli had repeatedly referred to 'the critical state of affairs in Central Asia' and to the need for Britain to take control in Afghanistan. Disraeli's farewell words were: 'There is now a fortunate reaction in favour of pluck, and in boldly carrying out this policy you may confidently reckon on the cordial support of Salisbury and myself'. It was an open invitation for Lytton to do what he liked.

Within a few months of his arrival in India, Lytton was discussing with his commander-in-chief plans not only for the *annexation* of Afghanistan but for an attack on Russia in Central Asia with a force of twenty thousand men. Sher Ali's refusal to receive a British mission did not worry him. Russia was undoubtedly behind it. 'The prospect of war with Russia', he wrote to Salisbury in September 1876, 'immensely excites, but so far as India is concerned, does not at all alarm me. If it is to be—better now than later. We are twice as strong as Russia in this part of the world, and have much better bases

for attack and defence'. Should war be declared, a British force should be sent immediately to Central Asia. The khanates could be raised against Russia 'and put a sea of fire between us'. In fact, he added two weeks later, 'so far as India is concerned, no event would be more fortunate than a war with Russia next spring'.

Russian moves in Central Asia in 1878 and, in particular, General Stoletov's mission to Kabul, seemed to Lytton to increase the probability of war. On his own responsibility, he ordered immediate military preparations. In London, the government had accepted Russian assurances that the troop movements in Central Asia had been cancelled and that the Stoletov mission had been withdrawn. It even appeared as if Disraeli was contemplating an Anglo-Russian alliance against Germany! Lytton argued for an attack on Afghanistan, but the government wanted political ascendancy achieved by diplomatic pressure, not by war. Lytton marshalled all his arguments for a forward policy in his despatches and telegrams, while canvassing support in Britain against the government.

Not unnaturally, Lytton considered himself betrayed by Disraeli and Salisbury, and he seems to have forgotten that in many of his despatches sent after his arrival he had promised to carry out the government's then policy towards Afghanistan 'without moving a single soldier'. Neither his arguments nor his attempts to pressure the government proved successful. In August 1878 he was instructed by the new secretary of state, Lord Cranbrook, that no more than watchfulness was needed, but that he should renew his demand for a British mission at Kabul. He was not to be bellicose. The amir was to be assured of Britain's friendliness and lack of desire to annex his country. This was too much for Lytton. He was convinced that a mission would be refused, and proposed to take military action when that event arose. After informing the amir that a mission was already on its way and receiving no response, he ordered the mission to the Afghan border, where it arrived on 20 September 1878. There it was courteously refused entry by the Afghan border guards. Lytton now asked the government in London for permission to use force to get the mission to Kabul.

The activities of its governor-general angered the cabinet, but members were divided on what should be done next. Lytton had created a situation which could not be ignored, and there was no real alternative but to give the viceroy retrospective approval for the measures he had taken, while warning him to be careful. Lytton

attacked these vague instructions as redolent of 'mistrust, suspicion, timidity, and a fretful desire to find fault on the most frivolous pretext. Yet no single word affords . . . the faintest clue to a leading idea, a governing principle, or an intelligent object or purpose'. A day later, he urged: 'We really have the game in our hands; our antagonist is by no means a first-rate player; and if only our partners will kindly help us to play the game according to the obvious rules of it, without trumping our best cards, and then revoking, we cannot fail to win it, and with it, a stake of the highest value'.

A divided cabinet gave Lytton his opportunity. On 19 October, he informed the government that British troops would cross the Afghan frontier. Two days later, having received no reply to an ultimatum sent to Kabul, the invasion began. From Cranbrook, Lytton received unqualified approval. 'Your great work is begun—God give you a good deliverance'.

After a few rather desultory engagements, the British occupied Jalalabad and Kandahar, and negotiations were opened with Kabul. Sher Ali's appeal to the Russians for help was rejected with the excuse that Russian troops could not cross the passes of the Hindu Kush in winter, and he left Kabul with the remainder of the Russian mission on 22 December 1878. His son Yakub Khan remained behind as regent. Sher Ali hoped to go to St Petersburg to petition the tsar, but he was advised by an agent of the Russian governor-general of Turkestan to return to Kabul and make his peace with the British. He went back to Afghanistan only to die a broken man in February 1879. The British opened negotiations with Yakub, and with ominous speed they were satisfactorily concluded in May 1879. Among the most important clauses of the treaty signed by Yakub was one giving the British full control of Afghanistan's foreign relations, and another which provided for the establishment of a British mission at Kabul.

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Lord Lytton was delighted with the treaty and so was the government in London, though there was strong criticism from the Liberal opposition. There were also some doubts in India. General Roberts, who had commanded a force in the invasion, felt that the whole episode had been too facile, and it was said that when Sir Louis Cavagnari heard of his appointment as envoy to Kabul, he felt the chilling presence of the shades of Burnes and Macnaghten around him.

Pierre Louis Napoleon Cavagnari, son of one of Napoleon's officers but a naturalised Englishman, had joined the Company's

army in 1858. Ten years later he took up political duties on the Afghan frontier. He acquired a reputation for success in dealing with the unruly tribesmen, mainly, it seems, by methods that later came to be known as 'butcher and bolt'. It was Major Cavagnari who had been responsible for the negotiations with Yukub Khan and the signing of the treaty that had ended the British invasion. In these, backed by the powerful persuasion of the British army, he had been successful and was rewarded with a knighthood. No better person, it was thought, could be found as first envoy at Kabul. But for all his premonition of death, he was an incorrigible optimist, more inclined to see things as he would like them to be than as they actually were.

Cavagnari, with an English doctor, a civilian political assistant, and a lieutenant commanding a small escort of twenty-five cavalry and fifty-two infantry of the famous frontier regiment of the Guides, passed through the Kurram valley on his way to Kabul and was entertained to dinner on 15 July by General Roberts. After dinner, Roberts had been asked to propose a toast to the envoy, but, he wrote later, 'I was so thoroughly depressed and my mind . . . filled with such gloomy forebodings as to the fate of these fine fellows that I could not utter a word'.

Despite these forebodings, the mission was well received in Kabul, and throughout the month of August Cavagnari's many letters and telegrams continued to exude optimism both for the future and the present security of the mission. But around one o'clock in the morning of 5 September 1879, Roberts, then at Simla, was awakened by his wife 'telling me that a telegraph man had been wandering round the house and calling for some time, but that no one had answered him'. Going downstairs, Roberts found the man and read the telegram. It was from one of the political officers on the Afghan border. 'One Jelaladin Ghilzai, who says he is in Sir Louis Cavagnari's secret service, has arrived in hot haste from Kabul, and solemnly states that yesterday morning [3 September] the Residency was attacked by three regiments who had mutinied for their pay, they having guns and being joined by a portion of six other regiments. The embassy and escort were defending themselves when he left at noon yesterday. I hope to receive further news'.

It had been a crisp, fine dawn in Kabul on 3 September, with a touch of frost in the air. The British mission was housed in the great fortress of the Bala Hissar, a congeries of buildings set high on a hill overlooking the city. The military escort was just beginning its daily

duties when three unarmed Herati regiments entered a nearby courtyard to receive their arrears of pay. These regiments had recently been recalled to Kabul from Herat, where there had been no fighting during the British invasion. As the men marched through the city streets, it was reported to Cavagnari, they shouted abuse at the British mission and its members. When Cavagnari heard this, he merely laughed and replied: 'Curs only bark, they do not bite'. There had been other rumours, too, of a plot to murder the envoy, of plans to attack the mission building. Some sources seemed respectable, others did not. Cavagnari, who seems not to have recognised the menacing historical parallels, did nothing, consulted no one, continued writing rose-coloured despatches to India.

There was no thought of conspiracies and deep-laid plots early on that September morning. The Herati regiments had only come for their pay. When they found that they were not to get it in full, someone suggested that there were piles of gold at the British mission. It was eight o'clock and Cavagnari had just returned from his morning ride when a mob of soldiers appeared. Among the shouts for money were shouts for Cavagnari. The Herati soldiers jostled members of the Guides escort and some men tried to lead away the mission's horses. Then there was a shot—who fired it was never discovered. But it was enough to send the unarmed Herati soldiers back to barracks for their arms.

In the lull, Cavagnari sent a message to the amir calling for protection. The amir's palace was only a few hundred yards away from the mission buildings and the amir had a personal guard of over two thousand men. It was nearly two hours before the soldiers returned with their weapons, but despite the fact that he had received no response to his message to Yakub Khan, Cavagnari had made no effort to place himself and his men under the amir's *personal* protection by evacuating the mission and making his way to the palace. It was as if Cavagnari was caught in the same trauma as Burnes almost thirty years before.

When the Herati soldiers returned, Lieutenant Hamilton, who commanded the Guides, had arranged a kind of defence. The mission was housed in a number of mud and wood buildings overlooked from most sides. They were places to die in—unless relief came, and came quickly. Cavagnari, who had gone up on the roof of the most substantial building, was firing at the leaders of the mob with a rifle when he was mortally wounded by a fragment of metal.

The defence of the mission was now the responsibility of Lieutenant Hamilton.

In his early twenties, Hamilton had won the Victoria Cross in the invasion campaign, but gallantry and courage were merely to delay the inevitable. Renewed appeals to the palace produced the amir's eight-year-old son, accompanied by his tutor holding a copy of the Koran aloft and calling on the mob to return to barracks. It had no effect. When guns were brought up, Hamilton tried to capture one of them. In the first attempt, the surgeon and six cavalrymen were killed; in the second, Cavagnari's political assistant; in the last, Hamilton himself, trying to cover his party, was cut down. Left in command was a native officer, with perhaps a dozen soldiers. Called upon to surrender, they refused, and rushing out of the now burning building fought to the end. As the sun began to set on 3 September 1879, all that remained of the British mission in Kabul were some men of the escort who had been taken prisoner early in the attack, and the faint glow of the dying embers of what had become a funeral pyre.

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When the news of Cavagnari's murder was confirmed, the government of India moved with considerable speed. Three British armies crossed the Afghan frontiers; Jalalabad and Kandahar were reoccupied by two of them while that under General Roberts was instructed to move through the Kurram valley to Kabul. Some forty miles outside Kabul, Roberts was joined by the amir, but his attempts to slow down Roberts's advance were ignored. On 12 October, after only minor Afghan resistance, Roberts entered Kabul and occupied the Bala Hissar. One of his first acts was to set up a commission to enquire into the fate of Cavagnari and the rest of the mission. Shortly afterwards, the amir abdicated and was sent to India with his family. Roberts was now the ruler of Kabul.

The commission of enquiry decided upon a number of guilty men and hanged them. It was, wrote the regimental historian of the Guides, 'a cold bleak day in early winter. On one side stand the blackened, bullet-riddled ruins of the Residency . . . To the left, drawn up as a guard, is a long line of British soldiers with bayonets fixed. Behind them, covering every coign of vantage, every roof and wall, are crowds of Afghans, silent, subdued, expectant. In the centre, in an open space, stands a little group of British officers, one of whom holds a paper from which he reads. Facing the ruined Residency is a long, grim row of gallows; below these, bound hand

and foot and closely guarded, is a row of prisoners. A signal is given, and from every gibbet swings what lately was a man. These were the ringleaders in the insensate tragedy, who, brought to justice by British bayonets, hang facing the scene of their infamy, for a sign throughout the length and breadth of Asia of the righteous fate that overtakes those who disgrace the law of nations'.

For all the speed with which military operations had been carried out, for all the swift punitive action, for all the bodies hanging from gibbets as a warning to others, the country was not pacified. In an endeavour to intercept a large Afghan force making for Kabul, Roberts narrowly avoided disaster, but by the end of December 1879 the enemy had been defeated, communications with India had been reopened, and all seemed quiet. For the second time, the British were in possession of Kabul. But what could they do next? The government in London had no clear idea. The day the British entered Kabul, Lytton had suggested the immediate annexation of Kandahar and the neighbouring districts. But the government preferred to hand them over to a ruler loyal to Britain, while giving Herat back to the Shah of Persia. Advised by the Russians that, if he accepted Herat, he would make himself a vassal of the British, the shah declined the offer. Kandahar was declared an independent state under British protection. But this did not settle the central question of who should rule at Kabul. In fact, the British found themselves very much in the position in which Lord Lytton had seen Afghanistan, as an earthen pipkin between two iron pots, in danger of being crushed between caution and the forward policy. But at least most people agreed that it was unwise for a British army to remain for long at Kabul. In March 1880 Lytton sent an agent to Kabul with instructions to find someone who could be placed on Yakub Khan's deserted throne.

Three months earlier the Russians had played a card of their own, one which they thought might well turn out to be a trump. In December 1879 they had allowed Abdur Rahman, Sher Ali's nephew, to leave for Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman had been living in Tashkent for ten years and was thought by both Russians and British to be strongly pro-Russian. As it turned out, he was overwhelmingly pro-Afghan. When he left, Abdur Rahman took with him a retinue of 250 men and a supply of the latest Russian rifles, and by the time Lytton's agent arrived in Kabul he had made himself the master of Afghan Turkestan.

The spring of 1880 brought changes in London, too. In an election in which Afghanistan and the forward policy had been the main issues, the Conservative administration of Disraeli had been defeated and replaced by another Liberal government under Gladstone. Lytton resigned. The instructions given to his successor, Lord Ripon, were to reverse his policies. Criticism of the previous government's actions was particularly sharp. It appears, the new secretary of state wrote to the new viceroy in May 1880, 'that as the result of two successful campaigns, of the employment of enormous force, and the expenditure of large sums of money, all that has been accomplished has been the disintegration of the State which it was desired to see strong, friendly, and independent, the assumption of fresh and unwelcome liabilities in regard to one of its provinces, and a condition of anarchy throughout the country'.

The reversal of policy took some time to achieve. In July 1880 Abdur Rahman was recognised as amir, but Kandahar was not settled so easily. An attempt to take it from the ruler approved by the British resulted in the famous march of a force under Roberts from Kabul to Kandahar, a distance of 334 very difficult miles in twenty-three days. But finally, in March 1881, the British evacuated Kandahar which, with Herat, was soon occupied by Abdur Rahman. The British retained for the time being their hold on the Khyber pass, and on the Kurram valley. They also took Pishin to the north of Quetta, and remained in Quetta itself. The only return demanded of Abdur Rahman was his promise to maintain relations with no other state than Britain. To this he agreed.

The motive for this astounding decision to trust a man who had spent more than a decade in Russia and was still generally believed to be pro-Russian was a combination of party politics and practical necessity, for the British forces in Afghanistan were suffering serious supply problems. But the motive was concealed behind a façade of liberal do-goodism of the kind expressed by Gladstone as concern for 'the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan'.

Yet the fear of Russia would not go away. It infected men of all parties. Very soon the Liberals began to suffer from a strange mental affliction, diagnosed at the time as 'Merv-ousness'. In this they were not alone, for there were influential men in the Indian military establishment who dreaded the consequences of a Russian move towards Merv, which they believed would become Russia's forward base for the capture of Herat and the long anticipated invasion of India.



5a. General Cherniaev

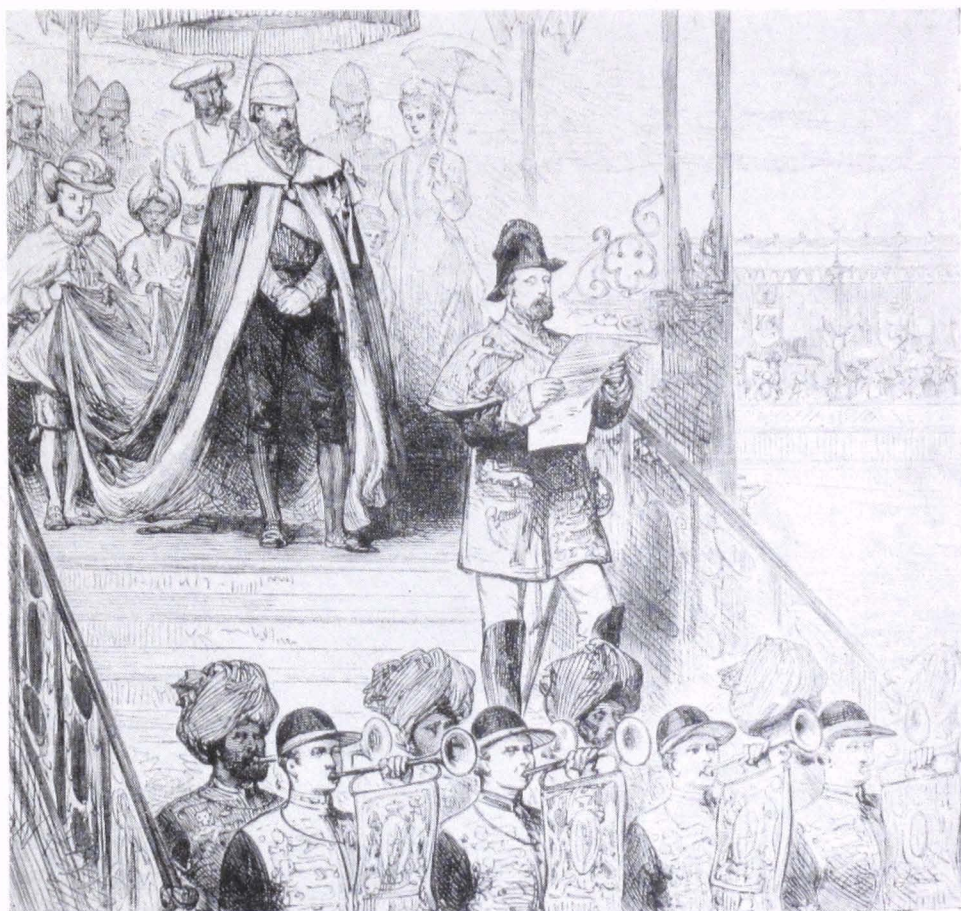
5b. General Skobelev





6a. Sir Charles
Metcalf MacGregor

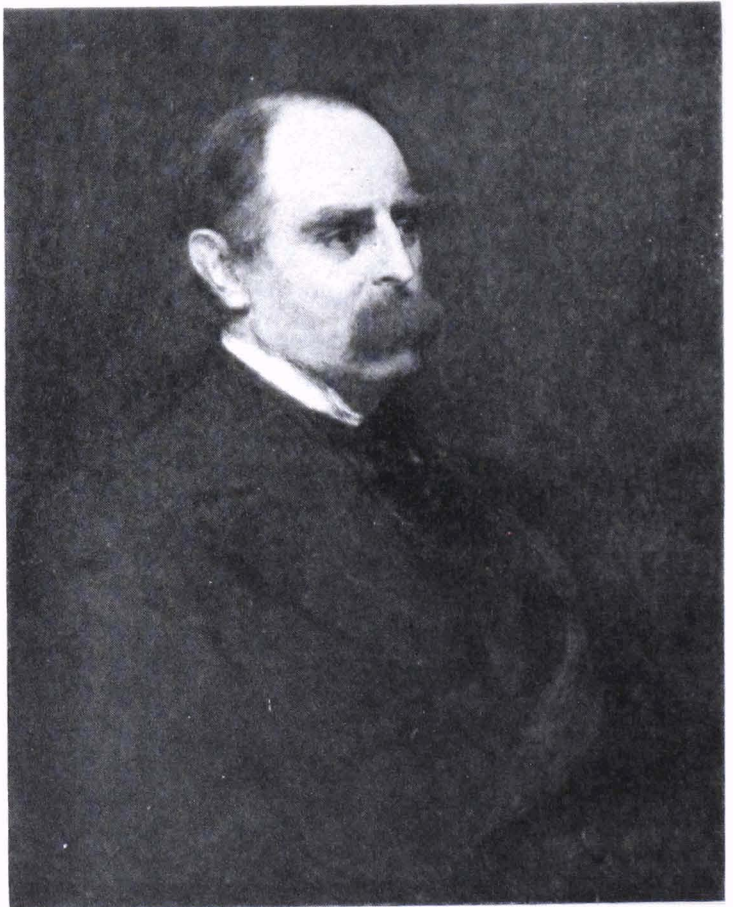
6b. Lord Lytton,
at the Imperial Durbar 1877





7a. Sir Louis Cavagnari
with Afghan chiefs

7b. Sir Francis
Younghusband in 1906





8. Lord Curzon

THREE

The edge of the razor

[i] *A damned big question*

From Major-General Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor KCB CSI
CIE, Quartermaster-General in India.

To Major the Hon. G. C. Napier CIE

Simla
5 June 1883

... I should be much obliged if you would write a paper showing how soon the Russians could put a force of 20,000 men down at Herat. Work it out as though you had to put that number of men there, and show where you would get the troops from; where they would embark; how long they would take to get to the east coast; how long to disembark; what route they would take, (1) supposing Persia was openly on their side—(2) if she was passive—(3) if she was hostile; what supplies would they require; what baggage; what transport—they would have to take at least two heavy batteries with them; what would be the best means which could be devised for ensuring that we should receive very early and reliable information of what Russia was doing.

Entre nous, I am preparing a paper on the reverse of this question—viz., how soon could *we* put a force into Herat of 20,000 men with heavy artillery. I think I would undertake, *if Government put their backs into it*, to put such a force into Herat in [ten] days.

To Lieutenant-Colonel Sir R. Sandeman KSCI, Agent to the Governor-General, Quetta

Simla
15 June 1883

I am making out, *as an exercise*, some calculations as to the arrangements necessary to put a force *en route* to Kandahar in the shortest

possible time. Of course the question of supplies enters largely into these; and to enable me to be sure that no supplies that are procurable locally be carried up needlessly, I should be much obliged if you let me know approximately what quantities of supplies you could put down within fourteen days at each or either of the following places—viz., Quetta, Gulistan, . . . Of course it may not be possible to give any accurate estimates, owing to your not being able to make inquiries; but your great local knowledge and experience may enable you to give some that might be very valuable to us. Of course you will understand that I am not making these calculations on account of any probable move, but only to be ready, as such a move is not impossible.

*To Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Roberts Bart. GCB VC etc,
Commander-in-Chief Madras*

Simla

20 June 1883

. . . Nobody up here cares two *d's* about Russia. If we were paid for it, we could not play their game better. I am sure it is a hideous blunder letting them get to Herat. The effect on India will be enormous, and I am sure we could prevent it. I think an officer should be sent as soon as possible with [one million] rupees to put the defences in order, and to gain influence and prestige for us. Of course Abdur Rahman would not like it, but he would sooner have a British officer there than Ayub [former ruler of Herat] which will be the case if he does not look out; besides, we could buy his consent for [100,000]. Simultaneously the railway should be pushed on to the other side of the Khojak Pass [from Quetta into Afghanistan]. I would send a division down and give the work out on contract to regiments, who would do it in six months. Then another [100,000] or so would induce Abdur Rahman to ask for it on to Kandahar.

I am having two papers got ready; one to show how soon we could put 10,000 men in Herat—another, how soon the Russians could do the same. We are about equal *now*, and we could beat them, but every day tells against us . . . Yes, I remember writing to you about the Intelligence Branch, and was delighted but not surprised to see how thoroughly you entered into the spirit of it. I don't know who it is, but there is someone in the Military Department who is very hostile to our Intelligence Branch. They are always nagging us; but we have given way enough and we mean fighting next time.

To His Excellency, General Sir D. Stewart, Commander-in-Chief in India

Simla

5 July 1883

I think we are living in a fool's paradise, and are trying to make ourselves think that we can put off the evil day when complications with Russia will arise by doing nothing—by burying our heads in the sand, in fact. The steps we should take at once are, in my opinion, to send an officer to the Caucasus to report on what is going on there—*i.e.* on the distribution of troops, the facilities for moving reinforcements by rail, and for embarkation and disembarkation on the east coast of the Caspian. Another officer should go to [Ashkabad], and go about as much as he could along the east coast, and make good arrangements for getting early information of what is going on . . . I know we have Stewart at Khaf [on the Persian frontier west of Herat], and at all events he is doing no harm; but we want more officers than him.

Secondly, Our answer to the Trans-Caspian railway should be to make eight miles of our Harnai [fifty miles east of Quetta] line to every one they make, and therefore I think efforts should be made to put a strong force on to the line this cold weather—I mean more than we are sending. I write this in case you should feel inclined to take the question up to Council, and see if something cannot be done.

To Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Roberts

Simla

13 August 1883

My paper [*The Defence of India*] is a very long one. It will not be published, but printed and circulated, and you may be sure you will have one of the first copies. So much vague jaw is expended on what the Russians can and cannot do, that I begin by showing exactly what they can do. Then, and not till then, I hold we are in a position to see exactly what the danger is, and then only can we take steps to provide against it. These steps divide themselves into—(a) measures necessary to maintain our hold on India inviolate; (b) diplomatic measures to be taken—*i.e.* in way of alliances, &c., against Russia; (c) military operations, both offensive and defensive.

With reference to the first, I want to show what measures are necessary to prevent any chance of a rebellion in our rear . . .

It is a damned big question . . . and I should be glad to think only two or three were gathered together to think it out; but no one seems to care . . . It will not come in their day, but I think it will come in yours and mine, and I can't help seeing its magnitude and our carelessness.

If I can manage it, I will get some copies of the first proofs, and send to you and a few others who are interested in and capable of understanding the question; but I don't know more than six men who come under that category.

To Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Roberts

Simla

23 August 1883

I have finished the Russian part of the question, and have proved, to my own satisfaction at least—

1. They have many more men available than would suffice for the invasion of India.

2. They could put forces into Herat, Kabul, and Chitral in sixty days after starting. How many days this would be after or hearing of it depends altogether on our Intelligence arrangements, which at present are as bad as they can be.

3. If once in possession of these places, they could reinforce them to a sufficient number and in sufficient time to make it impracticable for us to turn them out. What would be the state of affairs under these circumstances, think you? I think if we allow them to get so far, it is only a question of time when they will be in a position to invade India . . .

To General Sir D. Stewart

Simla

28 September 1883

You know there have been reports for some time of the massing of Russian troops in the Trans-Caspian district. Now we hear that General Komaroff is to take 10,000 or 15,000 men to Merv. What are they going to Merv for? . . . My idea is they are not going to Merv. They are making the going to Merv a pretext to enable them

to collect troops about Sarakhs, with some other objective in view. That objective, I hold, is Herat, and I fully expect that our dream will very shortly be broken by some rather startling news . . .

To General Sir D. Stewart

Simla

1 October 1883

. . . Now, what I want our Government to do is to copy the Russians, to look ahead a bit—to do, as you say, all that can be done without declaring war against Russia. *One of the first steps is to have the north and west boundaries of Afghanistan laid down*, and there is not a day to be lost: *now*, there can be no counter-Russian claims to any part of it, but this may not be the case a few months hence. Having laid down the boundary, *the next thing is to inform Russia solemnly that if she crosses that border it will be war with us*. I don't believe at present she believes this, anyhow we have never yet told her so in plain words.

But of course this will be of no use unless we take steps to make Herat safe . . .

Memorandum to General Sir D. Stewart

Simla

7 April 1884

At present we seem to be dependent for our information on Russian movements in Central Asia on:—

(1) News-writers stationed at Kandahar, Herat, Merv, Bujnurd, Daragaz, Shiraz, Meshed, Isfahan, and Ashkabad.

(2) Such information as Afzul Khan sends us from Kabul.

(3) Bazaar *gup* [gossip] from Peshawar and Pishin.

(4) Translations from Russian newspapers (which are, however, generally out of date).

(5) Stray reports from the Berlin and St Petersburg Embassies.

(6) Reports from Colonel Stewart (at Khaf) &c.

This is, I think very unsatisfactory. No news-writer who is known to the local authorities can possibly write anything of value, as it may be taken for a fact that their letters are read before despatch. Then, of course, Russian papers are quite different from our own. Our papers record every scrap of information they can get hold of, often

with very little thought as to whether it is advisable it should be published or not. Russian papers, on the contrary, never publish anything the authorities do not wish to be known—*i.e.* nothing that can be of much use to us.

In order to show how unsatisfactory our information is, I need not go back further than one month, when the news burst upon us that *the Russians had occupied Merv . . .*

[ii] *For pleasure and instruction*

SIR CHARLES MacGregor was mistaken in thinking that others were not as concerned as he was about Russian expansion or the lack of information about it. The government of India, however, was a hierarchy of secrecies. A number of departments had their agents in the field, but the results of their activities were not coordinated. In many cases, information was not even passed on to the viceroy, and a viceroy who disliked the military—like the Liberal, Lord Ripon—was inclined to keep the generals in the dark as much as possible.

The government in London was as anxious as Sir Charles and his military friends for a settlement of the northern border of Afghanistan, and so were the Russians, though it was to take until 1887 before any real agreement on demarcation was reached. Ripon was kept informed of the negotiations between London and St Petersburg, of their progress or lack of it, but he kept the information to himself. His line was caution, and he took strong exception to the paper produced by MacGregor on *The Defence of India*, which was printed with great secrecy at the government printing works in Simla in September 1883. MacGregor's paper was a highly polemical and provocative piece of special pleading, ending with the words: 'I solemnly assert my belief that there can never be a real settlement of the Russo-Indian question till Russia is driven out of the Caucasus and Turkestan'.

MacGregor was reprimanded for making his paper more widely known than was thought desirable, but in July 1884 he sensed a change of attitude. 'Never mind, my boy', he wrote in a private letter to a friend. 'I always say the politicals are the soldiers' best friends, and they are now preparing for us as pretty a kettle of fish as the most ardent could desire, and you and all of us will get our chance yet'. In fact, India got a new viceroy at the end of 1884, and a few months later a new Conservative administration took office in

London. The military did not get their chance, but, in the combination of a Liberal viceroy, Lord Dufferin, and a Conservative secretary of state, the forward policy was again in high fashion.

Beyond the frontiers of India, the revived policy was to be expressed in three separate but related projects. The central purpose was the demarcation of the Afghan border, central because both Dufferin and the government in London were certain that frontiers, in the later words of Lord Curzon, were 'the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war and peace, of life or death to nations'. But there were also peripheral aims, no less important.

The first project was the joint Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission itself. This was to settle the border from the Persian end eastwards along the Amu-Darya. The British party would also carry out a detailed survey of Herat and the surrounding country. The second project was designed to conclude a military alliance with the ruler of Chitral. At the same time, the mission would survey the state and the passes from it over the Hindu Kush. As it was thought that, in any general plan for inhibiting Russian expansion, some understanding with China would be helpful, the third project envisaged a mission to Kashgar.

The last time a mission had been sent to this important trading centre was in 1873, when the rebel Yakub Beg had asked for one. But Russian influence had been too strong for it to achieve any worthwhile results, and by the end of 1877 Yakub Beg was dead and the Chinese back in control. The Chinese, however, were not able to fully administer the empty wastes of the province they called Sinkiang, the 'New Dominion', and there were no frontier demarcations on the Russian side. It was believed that Russia could pass through this area to the Pamirs, the watershed of both the Amu-Darya and the Indus. The mission, therefore, was one of importance and delicacy. The man chosen to head it was Ney Elias, one of the most experienced of travellers and, since 1874, an official of the foreign department of the government of India.

Elias had already visited Kashgar twice in what can only be described as a quasi-official character. He had not been well received by the Chinese authorities on either occasion. The second had been in 1880, when he probably suffered from the aftermath of Britain's flirtation with the rebel Yakub Beg. But Elias stood out from the generality of agents of the government of India. Most of them were resourceful and courageous men, some were scholars, but Elias

combined all these virtues with an intimate knowledge of the places and peoples of Turkestan. He was not a soldier, but he had a keen eye for strategic detail. Above all, he was most unlikely to create any sort of diplomatic incident that might involve his government either in political concessions or useless military responses.

Before the mission could leave, passports had to be obtained from the Chinese government in Peking. Two were requested, as Elias, who had only recently returned from sick leave in England, hoped to take an English doctor with him. The purpose of the mission, the Chinese government was informed, was to negotiate a trade agreement and to arrange for the setting up of a British Residency at Yarkand to control the hundreds of British-Indian subjects active in trade there. The real purpose of the Residency would be to report on Russian activities, but naturally no mention of this was made to the Chinese. The Chinese government was requested to advise the Chinese authorities in Kashgar of the mission, and to arrange that a Chinese official of consular rank should be available to meet Elias for negotiations.

As the passports had not arrived by the end of April 1885, Elias decided to leave Simla without them, as he wanted to cross the Pamirs before the onset of winter. There being no English doctor available, he took with him an Indian medical assistant. There were also a Turki interpreter and a Chinese clerk. Before reaching Leh, Elias was delayed by illness. When he arrived there, he met a Scots merchant who had been operating in Kashgar since 1874 but had just been expelled. This he believed had been at the instigation of the Russian consul in Kashgar. The excuse given for his expulsion had been that he did not possess a passport issued by the Chinese government. In fact, he had never had one but until that time the Chinese authorities had never questioned his right to stay.

Elias took the expulsion of the Scots merchant as a portent of worse to come, and when his passports finally caught up with him they confirmed his fears. Instead of describing him as an accredited official of the government of India, they showed the purpose of his visit as 'for pleasure and instruction'. When Elias complained of loss of the status that was absolutely essential to the success of his mission, he was informed that the Chinese government did not accept that there was any Indian trade with Chinese Turkestan and, consequently, there was nothing to negotiate about. Elias was convinced that his mission had been sabotaged by the British

legation in Peking, but there were more likely reasons. The Russian consul in Kashgar had threatened the local authorities so forcefully that they feared a possible Russian military move against them if they allowed Elias to arrive with consular rank and accredited status.

There was, it seemed, nothing more that could be done. The mission must go forward even under restrictive conditions. In the middle of September 1885, a month after leaving Leh, the mission arrived at Yarkand. There, at least, Elias was received by a guard of honour, though it was ragged and dirty, undisciplined and badly armed, typical, unfortunately, of the Chinese army in the area. Elias could not see these men being of much use against the Russians. He found Yarkand a palimpsest of opposition. At the top, the Chinese amban—the senior resident official—was cold and unhelpful; below were various exiles from Khokand and elsewhere who were antagonistic. Over all lay the shadow of the Russian consul at Kashgar, who seemed to frighten everyone. The consul himself was not in Yarkand, but had left before the arrival of the mission. Elias thought it was because he had wanted to avoid meeting him.

It was a pity that the two men could not have met, especially as, at the time, Anglo-Russian relations had reached a new low. There had been a clash between Russian and Afghan troops at Penjdeh in the previous March which had created a situation that looked as if it could be resolved only by war between Russia and Britain. Rumours had reached St Petersburg that a council of war had been held in Calcutta, with the viceroy and the amir Abdur Rahman present. The amir was, in fact, on a visit to the viceroy, but he told Lord Dufferin that he was not worried about the Penjdeh incident and the viceroy was able to advise the London government that Penjdeh could be given up, if necessary, to the Russians. 'It is out of the question', Dufferin wrote, 'that all England and India should be thrown into a flurry of excitement and a deluge of expense, every time a wretched Cossack chooses to shake his spear on the top of a sandhill over against Penjdeh'.

But the Russian consul at Kashgar did not know this and neither did his superiors. British agents were reported to be active among Bokhariot rebels, and a pretender to the throne of Khokand was said to have been present at the Calcutta council of war. Most of these rumours were unfounded, but St Petersburg reacted by starting work on the extension of a railroad line as far as Merv. Troops were also moved from Russian Turkestan to the Amu-Darya. A meeting

between Elias and a Russian official might have contributed to a lessening of tensions. But Elias had something much more practical to worry him. He heard that the Chinese were proposing to annex the state of Hunza, part of the buffer zone planned by Dufferin. Elias was also told that an attempt would be made to murder the head of the British mission then on its way to Chitral, as it passed through Hunza. His urgent message to the government of India was ignored, but fortunately no attack was made on the British mission when it arrived in Hunza.

Elias did not know that the government of India was taking little or no notice of his despatches. But he did realise that his mission to Kashgar was a failure. He had not been altogether convinced of the value of the mission in the first place. Pressure in Peking was more likely to influence China; a gunboat on the Yangtse was worth much more than a mission to Kashgar. It was now time, Elias believed, to get on with the rest of his assignment. This, according to his highly detailed instructions, was to explore the upper Amu-Darya, survey the Pamirs, and, finally, to join up with the Afghan Boundary Commission.

Leaving Yarkand was a problem in itself. Elias found difficulty in buying ponies, and his own men were being curiously awkward. He wished to leave his Chinese clerk behind, but the authorities would not let him do so without permission from Kashgar. This Elias settled by leaving the clerk a few miles from Yarkand so that he could return there on his own. Elias was glad to see the last of him, as he had a rather overrated view of his position. The clerk was ordered to establish friendly relations with the Chinese if he could, but to make no commitments of any kind.

Elias was now on his way to the Pamirs, the 'Roof of the World', which played such an important role in the strategic thinking of both the Russians and the British. The Pamirs are a series of broad valleys, mostly over 11,000 feet in height, separated by great mountain ranges through which there are few passes. In winter the Roof of the World is a place of sharp-edged winds and grinding cold. Very few Europeans had travelled in the area, though Russian geographers had been active in the early 1880s. Another traveller, a mysterious Greek, may have been responsible for the legend of the Abominable Snowman. The British knew very little about the Pamirs at first hand. Moorcroft had touched the edges, and Lieutenant Wood had been sent by Alexander Burnes to discover the source of the Amu-

Darya, and thought he had found it in a lake in the southern Pamirs in 1837. The last British visitors had been two native agents of the Survey of India in 1873, but their maps had not been very accurate, nor was their information helpful to Elias. The government of India was still using the map of rather a restricted area compiled by Wood fifty years before. In fact, both the British and the Russians carried on their diplomatic arguments and even agreements in an atmosphere of intense topographic ignorance. Fluid or non-existent frontier lines, inaccurate maps, travellers' hearsay, all exacerbated the danger of conflict. The second part of Elias's mission was an attempt to remove at least some of these problems.

Elias's journey was not made easier by troubles with his party. For some reason his men refused to handle the baggage, and the ponies Elias had been forced to buy were the worst he had ever had to use. The Chinese amban had insisted on sending an escort of soldiers with the party to the limits of his jurisdiction, and Elias had hoped that one of them might at least know the country. None turned up. The maps Elias carried had been compiled by two members of the 1873 mission who had attempted a return to India by way of the Pamirs, but had been forced to turn back. Where the maps ended, Elias had to find his own way. The nomads he met supplied him with information, not only on the countryside but about their attitude to the Russians and the Chinese. They seemed to prefer the Chinese. As he travelled, Elias discovered two new peaks, both over 25,000 feet in height, and he asked in a despatch to the head of the foreign department whether he could name the higher of them Mount Dufferin. Some of the nomads Elias came in contact with he believed had once been Christians, part of that great Nestorian heresy that had once spread as far as China and penetrated the nomad hordes who had once, long ago, threatened Europe.

Soon Elias reached the extreme limits of Chinese suzerainty. He found no Chinese *presence* there. As in so many things, the Chinese relied on the longevity of past tradition to sustain their claims. What had once been Chinese was always Chinese. Elias was told that at the Kizil Art pass, to the north of the great Kara Kul, there actually stood a pillar marking the border between China and Russia. The lateness of the year prevented him from visiting the site, though he was prepared to accept the story as authentic. But even if the pillar actually existed, it had no more real meaning than a casual stone. It stood in emptiness, without the reinforcement of even the

most meagre military display, in an open land which would welcome the Russians as much or as little as it would welcome the Chinese who claimed it. And at the southern edge of this land was the Muztagh range, with passes into India itself.

By the middle of October 1885, Elias had reached a pass which lay on the eastern limit of Afghanistan's claim to Shugnan, part, with Roshan, of a dual principality on the upper Pandj river. Despite its importance in the diplomacy of London and St Petersburg, he found no Afghan border post nor any Afghan troops in the vicinity. Elias sent a messenger on ahead of the main party to the capital, Bar-Pandj, to warn the Afghan commander there of his approach. He was surprised and perturbed when he heard that his messenger had been stopped and arrested. Apparently the Afghans had heard rumours of either a Chinese or a Russian force operating in the area, and thought Elias was part of it. When he finally arrived, Elias was however received with such warmth that he believed it must be due more to relief that he was not a Russian or even a Chinese than to the fact that he represented the government of India.

The Afghans insisted on giving Elias a military escort which successfully kept away the local inhabitants and thus restricted Elias's sources of information. But at least he was able to confirm that the Afghan claim was valid on geographical grounds. Next, he reconnoitred a number of passes which might have served as Russian invasion routes, and was able to report that none of them was passable for baggage animals. Elias was now using a map prepared by the Russian traveller, Dr Regel, in 1882, and found it accurate. Careful enquiries during his travels revealed that there had never been any historical ties between this area and the khanate of Bokhara.

Elias had received no mail from India since he left Yarkand. It was now the end of November, and he had been led to believe that he would be sent more detailed instructions for his next moves. He had had no replies to his own letters, sent to Chitral in the hope of reaching the British mission there. But, instructions or not, he must move on. He was welcomed at the capital of Badakshan with ostentatious ceremony, but it was a filthy place, sweltering in summer and now, in winter, bitterly cold. There was smallpox killing off the children, and a kind of low fever debilitating the adults. The weather, which until then had been unusually mild, closed in. Elias spent his time, after the minimal social courtesies to his hosts, writing up his reports and considering the advice he should pass on to those who

had sent him. He also had to decide what to do when the weather improved enough for travelling again.

By the beginning of January 1886, the weather was good enough for him to leave. He had still received no new instructions from India, and so proposed to carry out further survey work along the Amu-Darya while collecting ethnographic and other data. But as Elias moved westwards he fell ill. To his repeated requests for instructions, he now added one for a doctor to be sent to join the mission. The party was also approaching the areas of activity assigned to the Boundary Commission and the mission to Chitral. The Boundary Commission—which was very large, with more than thirteen hundred in the main party—had been moving very slowly, and had been preceded by a wave of resentment which even lapped against Elias. Large parties were inclined to eat up more than the surplus of supplies in places they passed through, and local economies, already precariously balanced on the knife edge of real want, were often toppled over by their demands.

Failing any response from the government of India, Elias sent a request for a doctor to the leader of the Boundary Commission, who replied that he had only one and could not spare him. He also wrote to India asking whether he should send a party to bring Elias out. There were roughly three hundred miles between the commission's winter quarters at Bal Murghab and Elias's camp, and Elias expected in his present weak condition to take a month on the journey. Setting out on 5 February, however, he took only three weeks to reach the commission's quarters. There the doctor proved unsympathetic over Elias's ailments, most of which he thought were a product of nerves. Whatever they were, Elias began to recover and by the end of April appears to have been well enough to return to duty. But what that duty was to be was not clear.

West Ridgeway, the leader of the commission, had told Elias that the commission itself would survey the areas he had passed; if Elias wished to join in, it would be only as a surveyor with the commission. This was not only offensive to Elias, but conflicted with instructions he had at last received from the foreign department, which made no mention of Ridgeway's new project. In his instructions, Elias was allowed a choice. He might return and survey the Darwaz, an area lying on both sides of the Amu-Darya north of Badakshan, or put himself at Ridgeway's disposal. It was a typical example of the way in which the various departments of the govern-

ment of India failed to coordinate, gave to their agents inadequate instructions, or allowed such instructions to consist of private understandings never disclosed to other parties until they could do damage. Too much discretion was often left to men who had none. Ridgeway was a soldier, hot-tempered and inclined to be impetuous. Like Colonel Lockhart, the head of the Chitral mission, he was also politically naive. Such a combination of failings hardly appealed to Elias, who shared none of them.

While Elias was making up his mind what to do, news had been received from Lockhart—who had finally reached Hunza—that he intended to go to Badakshan himself. The arrival of both the commission and Lockhart, whose party was more than three hundred strong, would certainly upset not only the economy of Badakshan but the people. Elias thought it best to retire before he found himself overwhelmed by an army of surveyors and their servants. As for the Darwaz, he would leave that to Ridgeway. But there were to be more awkward problems than those of personal or inter-departmental jealousies. The Afghan governor of Badakshan, on instructions from the amir in Kabul, ordered Colonel Lockhart and his mission not to enter the country. Elias, the governor wrote, had the necessary credentials from the government of India and the authority of the amir for his mission, but Lockhart had no such status. When Lockhart, with soldierly indifference, ignored the governor's order and kept on marching, he found himself denied supplies for his party and soon got into serious difficulties. Nevertheless, Lockhart informed Elias, he would meet him at the Badakshan capital 'whether the Afghans like it nor not'. Lockhart's actions naturally upset the Afghans, though Elias and his party were treated in the same respectful and friendly way as before.

In the middle of June 1886, Elias and Lockhart met at the town of Zebak near the frontier with Chitral. It was as far as Lockhart had managed to move without supplies, and with dissatisfaction among his men incited by the governor of Badakshan. As the two men met, a long delayed letter from Ridgeway arrived for Lockhart telling him that he should withdraw immediately. His attitude had antagonised the Afghan government and its officials, and this was seriously threatening the work of the Boundary Commission. This letter, and Elias's careful and simple explanation of the facts, finally persuaded Lockhart that he had been acting in a foolish if not dangerously provocative way. It was hardly an excuse, but it was certainly charac-

teristic of the government of India's casual attitude to the realities that, though Lockhart had kept them well informed about his intentions, no attempt was made to stop him. The result was that his own mission to Chitral, which had seemed reasonably successful, was itself prejudiced. Lockhart could not have done better, Elias thought, if he had been employed by the Russians.

Elias decided to make his way back to India through Chitral, but not in Lockhart's company. After a short and unwelcoming stay in Chitral, Elias received orders to return to Simla, where he arrived at the beginning of October, seventeen months and three thousand miles after he had first set out.

Elias's report was kept very quiet. Only six copies were sent to the government in London, and they went without comment from the viceroy. Elias's main suggestion for stopping Russian expansion in Eastern Turkestan was for Afghanistan and China to move forward until they possessed a common frontier, properly administered and internationally accepted. Should Russia cross this border it would be an overt act of aggression that could not be easily explained away. The rest of the report contained detailed opinions and supporting material on the various passes that might possibly be used by an invading Russian army on its way to India.

Elias's conclusions were not immediately acted upon. In fact the government of India preferred to keep them as damp as possible—for they were potentially explosive. For the time being, Russian activity in the Pamirs seemed to have subsided. It was not until 1889 that a new viceroy adopted Elias's recommendations. But by this time Elias was in Burma, and it was to a much younger man, Francis Younghusband, that the government turned.

[iii] *The adventure of Shah Sowar and 'Mr Smith'*

MEN LIKE Elias scorned disguises and rarely attempted to conceal their identities. The more successful players of the Great Game in the second half of the nineteenth century were not much given to the play-acting of a Pottinger or a Burnes. Some Englishmen, however, did travel about their clandestine business in disguise. Some, obviously, were successful, some were not and died obscure deaths. But in the story of 'Mr Smith', a British spy, and Shah Sowar, a cavalryman of the Guides, the ineffectiveness of one was fortunately more than matched by the resource of the other. As told, some

twenty years later, by a contemporary British officer in the Guides, with slightly heavy but good-natured humour, the story once again demonstrates that touch of farce that occasionally leavened the tragedy of the Great Game.

An order reached regimental headquarters to detail a cavalry soldier who could speak Persian, and one stout of heart and limb, to accompany a British officer on a mission of considerable danger and uncertainty. He was to call at a certain house, on a certain day, in Karachi, and to ask for the name of Smith. Shah Sowar was the trooper selected, and when he arrived at the place of tryst he was ushered into the presence of Smith. Smith, however, was not Smith at all, but somebody quite different; not that it mattered much, for Smith was only his Karachi name.

Next day, on board ship, he became the Sheikh Abdul Kadir, on his way to Mecca or where not; and from that moment commenced the troubles of the redoubtable Shah Sowar. To anyone who has the least knowledge of Asia the extraordinary difficulty which any European must experience in disguising himself as a man of an Eastern race will be apparent. By dint of living for years as Asiatics, exceptional linguists like Vambéry and Burton have undoubtedly been able to pass unchallenged, but anyone possessing qualities short of theirs must inevitably be discovered a dozen times a day. The way we eat and drink, the way we walk and sit, the way we wear our clothes and boots, the way we wash—every little thing is absolutely different from the methods and manners of the East.

These things Shah Sowar pointed out with much politeness, and great persistency, to Sheikh Abdul Kadir, late Smith. 'Be it spoken with the greatest respect, but there would be less liability to the unmannerly curiosity of strangers if the Cherisher of the Poor wore his own clothes. Beautifully as your Highness speaks Persian and Hindustani [his Highness really spoke both indifferently] it would be difficult for one of such commanding presence to pass himself for any but an Englishman. English officers are a race of princes; how then can they disguise themselves as inferior folk?'

'Don't fret', replied Smith, alias Sheikh Abdul Kadir. 'I am going to remain a prince all right; for I propose passing myself off as a near relation of the amir, a refugee from Kabul'.

'As your Honour wishes', was the resigned reply; but Shah Sowar saw big rollers ahead.

Arrived on the coasts of Persia (it matters not where), Sheikh Abdul Kadir, Shah Sowar, and a cookboy, landed as refugees from Kabul, on their way to place their swords and services at the disposal of the Shah of Persia.

In these days an officer with a government permit might probably travel, with a moderate escort, in perfect safety through Persia; but at that time a government permit and a small escort would merely have served to draw the unwelcome attention of the hordes of robbers who infested the country. For good and sufficient reasons our friend Smith was required to pass through a certain tract of very unsettled country on his journey, ways and means being left to his own ingenuity.

As Shah Sowar had foretold, the first serious pitfall was the question of language. When persons of some rank are travelling it is customary for the headman, or chief, to come and pay his respects to them, when they are encamped near his village or domain. It was after one such visit that the chief, as he came out, called Shah Sowar to him and said: 'Who did you say that your master is?'

'Commander of the Faithful, his name is Sheikh Abdul Kadir, a relative of the Amir of Kabul and a refugee', glibly replied Shah Sowar, but inwardly considerably perturbed.

'Well, with all respect', replied the chief, 'I never heard anyone talk such bad Persian; he talks just like an Englishman'. And with that he departed.

Shah Sowar at once grasped what a narrow escape they had had, for an Englishman found in that region in disguise was a dead man. So soon, therefore, as it was dark he persuaded his master to saddle and move on a few miles, lest further reflection might shed a light on the dim suspicions of the chief. One bargain Shah Sowar made during that night march, and that was that Sheikh Abdul Kadir was henceforth to remain speechless and leave the rest to his own ingenuity and knowledge of his countrymen.

A few days afterwards an occasion offered for testing the new arrangement. Arrived at a somewhat important town, a servant of the local chief came to make enquiries about the new arrivals, in order that the etiquette of visiting might be observed, this etiquette ruling that the inferior should pay the first visit. Here Shah Sowar at once took a high hand, insisting that his master, from his princely connections, held the higher rank and must be visited first. 'But', he added in a confidential whisper, 'my master is an extraordinary man; some days he is as lively as a bulbul and laughs and talks with every-

one; on others he sits silent and morose and will not utter a word. Be it spoken in confidence but I think he must be mad. At any rate prepare your master. If today happens to be one of his bad days, then that is kismet and your master must excuse'. Having thus prepared one side, he placed a bed across the end of the tent and asked Sheikh Abdul Kadir, late Smith, to sit crosslegged on it, to glare fixedly and furiously into vacancy, and to grunt at intervals, but on no account to utter a syllable.

In due course the chief and his retinue arrived, and were met with great politeness and many salaams by Shah Sowar; but that worthy managed to whisper in the chief's ear the sad intelligence that this was one of his master's bad days, and that the Evil Spirit was upon him. 'Nevertheless be pleased to enter', he added aloud. 'His Highness will be glad to see you'.

The exceedingly restricted area of the tent prevented a large assembly, but the chief, his brother, and Shah Sowar managed to squeeze in and squat down. After exchanging salutations the chief gravely stroked his beard, and gave vent to a few polite expressions of welcome. To these Sheikh Abdul Kadir vouchsafed no reply beyond a grunt. The chief glanced at Shah Sowar, and that excellent comedian, assuming the ashamed look of one disgraced by his master's rudeness, at once made a long-winded and complimentary reply in the most fluent and highflown Persian. Then, before the effect should be lost, he ordered in tea, and commenced an animated conversation with the two strangers, all parties absolutely ignoring, out of politeness, Sheikh Abdul Kadir and his Evil Spirit. Thus anxiously skating over the thin ice, Shah Sowar at last, with a feeling of infinite relief, bowed out the visitors, charmed with his excellent manners and quite unsuspecting that they had sat for half an hour within two feet of a British officer. When the time for the return visit came, Shah Sowar went alone to make the readily accepted excuse that his master was not in a fit state that day to fulfil social obligations.

Thus the ready wit and resource of Shah Sowar piloted the party through many dangerous waters, till one day they chanced across a nomad tribe under a venerable white-bearded chief, who could count a thousand spears at his beck and call. The usual visits of ceremony had been paid and tided over somehow, and the travellers were resting during the heat of the afternoon, when a confidential servant of the White Beard came to Shah Sowar and said that his

master had sent for him. A peremptory call like this boded no good, but by way of getting a further puff to show which way the wind blew, Shah Sowar assumed a haughty air. 'Peace be unto you', he said. 'There is no hurry. I will come when I am sufficiently rested, and have received permission from my own master'. 'Be advised by me, who wish you no harm, to come at once, as the matter is of importance', replied the messenger. 'Oh, very well', grumbled Shah Sowar, feeling that trouble was in the air. 'I will come'.

When he arrived at the camp of the White Beard he was immediately ushered into his tent, and there found the old warrior seated crosslegged on a rich carpet, and gravely stroking his beard. 'Look here, Shah Sowar', said he with soldierly directness, 'it is no good lying to me. That is a sahib you have with you. I have been to Bushire, and I know an Englishman when I see him'.

Shah Sowar was prepared for this, but, by way of gaining time, he answered: 'Your Excellency's cleverness is extraordinary, to lie to your Highness would be the work only of a fool. Perchance my master may be a sahib, but there are many nations of sahibs, and why should this one be English?' 'Peace, prattler!' sternly replied the old autocrat. 'There is only one nation of real sahibs, and they are English'.

Shah Sowar, driven into a corner, stroked his beard for some time under the rebuke, and then said: 'I perceive there is no good trying to deceive so great a diviner as you. I will speak the truth. My master is an English officer travelling on business. What then?'

'What then?' slowly replied the White Beard. 'Why, I have sworn on the Koran, and before all my tribe, to kill every Englishman I come across. I fear no nation on earth but the English, and lest they swallow me up, I have sworn to swallow them, one by one, whenever I meet them'.

'If your Honour has thus sworn there is nothing else to be said', answered Shah Sowar. 'But I have one petition to make, and that is to give us till the morning before we die'.

'Your petition is granted; but why say "we"? I shall not kill you, for you are a Muhammadan, and a Persian, and shall join my horsemen', said the White Beard.

'When the Sahib dies, I die also', was the brave reply. And with that Shah Sowar hurried back to tell the bad news to his master. Arrived at their little camp, his worst forebodings were confirmed, for a strong detachment of the White Beard's men guarded it on every side.

All that afternoon the prisoners racked their brains to find a way of escape, and hope seemed to die with the setting sun. Then Shah Sowar arose and said: 'I will have one more try to see what can be done', and, gaining permission, he went over again to the chief's camp, and asked for another audience. The old man was at his prayers, and Shah Sowar devoutly and humbly joined in. When they had finished he asked for a private audience, as he had something of importance to say.

'Well, what is it?' said the White Beard when they were alone.

'It is this', gravely replied the Guides trooper, 'and be pleased to listen attentively. When you bade me speak the truth this afternoon, I spoke fearlessly and at once. I acknowledged that my Sahib is an English officer. Hear now also the truth, and on the Koran I am prepared to swear it. This English officer whom you propose to kill is the bearer of an important letter to the Shah of Persia, and I swear to you by Allah and all his prophets that, should harm befall him, for every hair of his head, the Shah will kill one of your horsemen. Make calculation, oh venerable one; has not the Sahib more than a thousand hairs on his head? I have spoken. Now do your worst, but blame not me afterwards'.

'This is very unfortunate', said the much perturbed chieftain. 'Have I not sworn before all my people? How then can I now spare this Englishman? My kismet is indeed bad; I can see no road of escape'.

'That I can show you', said Shah Sowar, 'and for that am I come again'.

'Say on, I am listening'.

'You have sworn before your people that you will kill the Englishman at dawn; but there is no reason why the Englishman should not escape during the night. To save your face I will heavily bribe one of the sentries, and we will escape on foot leaving everything behind. Thus you will get all our horses, and mules, and tents, and all that we have. And in the morning you can say, "It was the will of God", and march away in the opposite direction'.

'You have spoken well', said the chief after deep thought. 'I will do as you wish; it is the will of God'. Then he added aloud, and with anger so that all might hear: 'I have spoken; at dawn the accursed Englishman shall die, and I will shoot him with mine own hand. Praise be to Allah, and Muhammad the prophet of Allah'.

So Shah Sowar went back to his Sahib and explained the plan of escape. As soon as all was still the three slipped noiselessly out of

the camp, past the bribed sentry, and, setting their faces to the south, toiled on, hiding at intervals, till they had placed well nigh forty miles between themselves and the camp of the White Bearded Chief.

Then his heart broke through the stiff reserve of the Englishman, and he embraced his gallant comrade, and said: 'You and I are no longer master and servant, sahib and trooper; you have saved my life and henceforth we are brothers. What can I do for you to show my gratitude?'

'Nothing, Sahib, except to tell my Colonel that I have done good service and upheld the name of the Guides'.

[iv] *A case for punditry*

RATHER MORE successful, though they were also sometimes penetrated, were the disguises adopted by the native agents of the Survey of India. In 1864 a special school was established at the Survey's headquarters in Dehra Dun, a hill station in the lower Himalayas, to train native agents and surveyors. These men became known as the 'pundits' and were used to gather both political and topographical intelligence in areas where Europeans could not safely enter or where, as in Tibet, they were forbidden entry.

The first two 'pundits' were Bhotias, a race closely allied to the Tibetans. They were also nephews of a man who had befriended Moorcroft in 1822. Their training consisted of normal surveying routines, the use of the sextant and the pocket compass, how to work out heights by boiling water, and how to recognise the stars. When in the field, where the possession of a sextant or a compass would have caused suspicion at least and, at worst, torture or perhaps death, they kept them concealed inside the prayer wheels carried by many Tibetans. Their steps were counted off on a special Buddhist rosary of one hundred beads.

Very soon the first two 'pundits' were followed by more of different races, though all came from parts of the Himalayas—men with hill faces and a command of hill dialects and major languages. They travelled in the disguise of merchants, or small traders, pilgrims, or Buddhist monks, some as Muslim holy men if such a disguise happened to be more appropriate. They were taught simple medicine, for no one was more welcome or less likely to be suspected than a healer. The Buddhists carried their prayer wheels and rosaries, the Muslim holy men ornate compasses that pointed to that most sacred

of Muslim shrines, the Prophet's city of Mecca. In the true manner of the spy, they never used their own names, hiding instead behind fictitious ones for the benefit of those amongst whom they travelled, and behind numbers and initials for their employers.

One pundit' Hari Ram—No. 9 or MH— was the first to make a circuit of the Everest group of peaks in 1871. Another, AK, visited Lhasa and was a member of the 1873 mission to Kashgar. Another, as a young boy, had been with Eldred Pottinger at the siege of Herat, and was for a time tutor to the sons of Sher Ali, Amir of Afghanistan, a position he made use of to transmit intelligence to the government of India. Most of the maps produced by these men were accurate as far as they went, and many were not superseded until more scientific and overt surveying methods could be used.

Some of the ways used to check their observations were extremely ingenious. George Bogle at the end of the eighteenth century had brought back information identifying the Tsangpo of Tibet as the same river that appeared in Assam as the Brahmaputra. Other travellers had confirmed Bogle's identification, including the 'pundit' AK. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of European geographers suggested that the Tsangpo actually flowed into one of two Burmese rivers, the Irrawaddy or the Salween. To settle the matter, a British member of the Survey of India trained a Tibetan monk in survey work and in 1880 sent him to follow the course of the Tsangpo as far as he could go downstream; he was then to throw specially marked logs into the river. Men were ordered to watch the river in Assam for the arrival of the logs. The river was watched, but none appeared, and after two years the observation was given up. Though the Survey of India received further confirmation that the Tsangpo did indeed become the Brahmaputra—and believed it to be true—it was not until more than thirty years later that two British travellers explored the bend of the Tsangpo gorges and proved it to the rest of the world.

The work of the 'pundits' was extremely valuable but it was almost entirely confined to the collection of topographical and ancillary data. They were humble men who disguised themselves as humble men and avoided officials and other persons of consequence in the areas through which they passed. Their work demanded anonymity and they did everything to preserve it. On the whole, too, the government of India did not really trust natives to gather political intelligence or to indulge in quasi-diplomacy or intrigue. It

preferred to use Englishmen. An exception, however, was Sarat Chandra Das.

Das may have been the model for Babu Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, the secret agent in Kipling's novel of the Great Game, *Kim*. He was certainly used on political work. From 1879 he travelled between northern Sikkim and Lhasa and reached the Tibetan capital in 1881. Das's instructions came from the lieutenant-governor of Bengal, acting with the sanction of the government of India but on his own initiative. Das's mission was to contact the Tashi (or Panchen) Lama, an important political as well as religious figure. The lama resided at Tashilhumpo, and after visiting there Das was to try to make his way to Lhasa.

Das found the Tashi Lama very friendly, and was offered a place in his suite on a forthcoming visit to Lhasa. Unfortunately, the lama died suddenly, and Das went on to the capital alone. Without the support of the Tashi Lama, he was compelled to stay in hiding and was unable to approach high Tibetan officials. But on his return to Tashilhumpo, he established relations with the regent, who had temporarily replaced the Tashi Lama and who asked him to buy a lithographic press, a camera, and a telephone—of which the regent had heard interesting reports. The regent also gave Das the money to buy them. When Das returned to Bengal, the lieutenant-governor returned the regent's money and sent the articles as gifts.

This promising situation was prejudiced by a threat of war between Nepal and Tibet, originating in an anti-Nepalese riot in Lhasa which followed the stealing of a piece of coral by a Tibetan woman from a Nepalese jeweller. The Nepalese quarter of Lhasa was sacked and a number of Nepalese subjects killed. The crisis was, however, settled in 1883 and in the following year the government of Bengal sent an official mission to Sikkim to discuss relations with Lhasa. The mission was headed by Colman Macaulay, the Bengal financial secretary. With him went Sarat Chandra Das. A Tibetan lay official told the mission that it was really the Chinese who were the stumbling-block to better Anglo-Tibetan political and trade relations. If the government of India could get an order from the Chinese emperor, Tibet's suzerain, calling for better Anglo-Tibetan relations, then an important lay faction in Lhasa would certainly help, as it was really only the monkish hierarchy that was anxious to maintain its old commercial monopolies. The official hinted that the British had more friends in Tashilhumpo than in Lhasa. There, Queen

Victoria was seen as the Goddess of War, while in Tashilhumpo she was regarded as the incarnation of a protecting deity.

The lieutenant-governor of Bengal was so impressed by the results of the Macaulay mission that he submitted suggestions to the viceroy, Lord Dufferin, for the opening of relations with Tashilhumpo and an approach to the Chinese government. Dufferin was not so enthusiastic, but traders in Britain, anxious to expand their activities, brought pressure to bear on the secretary of state. In October 1885, Macaulay, again accompanied by Das, arrived in Peking in an attempt to obtain the Chinese government's approval and help in sending a mission to Lhasa or, failing that, to Tashilhumpo.

While Macaulay argued with the Chinese foreign office, Das, dressed as a Buddhist monk, stayed at one of the most important Buddhist temples in the Chinese capital. There he met a Tibetan agent sent by Lhasa to watch the negotiations. This man told Das that the Chinese government would not grant passports for a mission, and that the negotiations were merely a front. Das reported to his superior that the Chinese were convinced that if a mission arrived in Tibet the Tibetans would forcibly eject it, which would cause a crisis that might damage China. If recent history was anything to go by, the British would probably attack China itself.

Das's report was ignored, and Macaulay left Peking without passports, convinced that they would be sent after him. On this assumption, the mission assembled at Darjeeling early in 1886 with Das as Tibetan interpreter. But the passports did not arrive and, in the end, the mission was abandoned.

Neither Lord Dufferin nor the British government wished to press too hard upon the Chinese. But the viceroy and the cabinet were still thinking of them as potential allies against the Russians. Tibet could wait. For 'pundit' Sarat Chandra Das, it was the end of his usefulness in the field. His cover had been completely blown. He could not visit Lhasa; it was even too dangerous for him to visit Tashilhumpo. His movements were closely watched by Tibetan spies, his letters to Tibetan friends intercepted. Soon other men would take his place, for Tibet was drifting almost imperceptibly into the orbit of the Great Game.

[v] *Where three empires meet*

IT WAS in the afternoon of the first day of November 1890 that the

messenger arrived at the pleasant European-style house near the Andijan gate. The two Englishmen, he reported, had been settled into a small house outside the city walls overlooking the river. Mikhail Petrovsky, Russian consul in Kashgar for eight years and—as the Englishmen were soon to find out—its virtual ruler, had been informed in advance of the two men's movements. The elder, Captain Francis Younghusband, was, at twenty-seven, well known to the Russian government and to the consul, though the two men had not met before, as an explorer and political agent in some of the most sensitive parts of Central Asia. Yet it was the younger man, twenty-three-year-old George Macartney, who might be a potential threat to Petrovski's position in Kashgar. Macartney had no reputation, either as an explorer or as an agent, but he was the son of a Chinese princess and his father—Sir Halliday Macartney, a man of influence at the Chinese court—was at that time secretary to the Chinese legation in London. But it was meeting Younghusband that most interested Petrovski. He was head of the British mission, and there was no doubt that he was in Kashgar to undermine Russian influence and to strengthen the Chinese in resisting it.

In 1887 Younghusband, then a lieutenant in the Dragoons, had made an adventurous journey from China through the Gobi desert to Yarkand. From there he crossed the great Karakoram and entered Kashmir. No European had travelled this way before and Younghusband was the first to see the great peak which later came to be called K2. The journey had been difficult and edged with danger. Younghusband had no previous experience of high mountains—the pass he used was over 18,000 feet—he carried no tents, and was forced to do without a fire in case it attracted the attentions of Hunza tribesmen. In 1889 when the new viceroy, Lord Lansdowne, took up the policy suggested by Ney Elias four years before, Younghusband was sent back to Hunza, ostensibly to investigate reports of slave raiding activities, but also to find out whether the rumours of the existence of a pass into Baltistan that might be used by the Russians were true. Younghusband was also to negotiate a treaty with the Mir of Hunza and to do everything he could to combat the intrigues of an alleged Russian agent, then in Hunza, who was believed to be on his way to Ladakh.

Following the practice of Elias, whom he greatly admired, Younghusband took only a small party with him. It was the first time men of a Gurkha regiment were used in mountain exploration.

Younghusband was able to explore all the passes to the east, and discovered what he believed to be two easy ways from the Pamirs into Hunza. In the middle of October 1889, Younghusband met up with the Russian scientist and explorer, Captain Grombchevski, who with a German naturalist called Conrad was exploring the head waters of the Yarkand river and the passes into India from the Pamir side. Grombchevski was the Russian agent whose influence Younghusband had been sent to undermine.

The three men spent two days together, the Gurkha soldiers facing Grombchevski's Cossacks like outposts of two armies yet to meet. Yet there was nothing but friendliness between the Russian and the Englishman as they discussed, in bad French, their experiences among the high hills, in the wild and lonely places. Nevertheless, when they parted, Younghusband was determined to get Grombchevski out of Hunza. By advising the Russian to move in a particular direction he managed to cut him off from his supplies; nearly starving, Grombchevski was compelled to leave the area. Curiously enough, Grombchevski was not the only other European explorer in Hunza at this time. Younghusband came across two other British officers, both there unofficially, and a Frenchman, who did not appear to be a spy.

After Younghusband's visit to Hunza, which had not produced a treaty though it had discomfited a Russian, the government of India decided to send him to Afghanistan, to carry on where Elias had left off in Badakshan. But the amir, angered by the activities of the Boundary Commission and currently engaged in putting down a rebellion, refused to permit Younghusband to enter the country. Instead, Younghusband was ordered to Kashgar, with instructions to investigate the Chinese claim to the Pamirs in more detail than Elias had been able to, and to persuade them to establish military posts on the borders of their claim, so closing the gap in the Chinese, Russian and Afghan frontiers. As Younghusband needed a Chinese interpreter, he was sent George Macartney.

On their way to Kashgar, Younghusband and Macartney stopped at Yarkand. There they were unexpectedly joined by Grombchevski who, after leaving Hunza, had been exploring the northern border of Tibet. The meeting between the Russian and the Englishman was again amicable, but after the British party had left for Kashgar Grombchevski followed, in order to report to Petrovski what his agents had heard of Younghusband's discussion with the Chinese

authorities in Yarkand. By the time Younghusband and Macartney paid a courtesy call on the Russian consul, Petrovski had been well briefed on their recent activities.

But before Younghusband was ready to visit the house at the Andijan gate, he made himself acquainted with the situation in Kashgar, which was really two cities, the old one surrounded by mud and stone walls, like any other Central Asian town, with crushed narrow streets and a central market place. The Chinese, like the British in India, separated themselves from the 'native' city and had their own cantonment some two and a half miles away, with tall gateways and impressive buildings. The Chinese insulated themselves from the rest of the population with pomp and protocol and ostentatious display, and were only concerned with the maintenance of law and order and the regular collection of taxes. Apart from this, the population could look after itself, which it did with considerable success. Relations between the two sides floated comfortably in a sea of corruption. It was government by percentages, but because these were institutionalised the system worked, and most people seemed reasonably prosperous and content. Corruption, however, had eroded the army. Generals would claim for an establishment of regiments that did not exist and pocket the difference. As a fighting force, the Chinese army was as effective as a paper tiger—and the Russians knew it.

The Russian presence in Kashgar was pervasive. Petrovski had arrived in 1882 as part of the package known as the Treaty of St Petersburg, in which the Russians returned to China parts of the country which they had occupied at the time of the revolt of Yakub Beg. From it the Russians gained the right to send a consul to Kashgar. The man chosen for the post could not have been better suited, either to its demands or to Russian ambitions. Petrovski was himself immensely ambitious, with the vanity and temperament that so often accompany the desire for success. Many of his colleagues disliked and feared him. So did the Chinese in Kashgar. But there was nothing they could do about it. Behind Petrovski lay the Russian army, its menace barely concealed. There was also a Russian economic presence, for after Petrovski's arrival Russian subjects began to dominate the trade of Kashgar. Cheap Russian manufactures could be seen in every bazaar in the province, and traders from India were being squeezed out by low prices.

The man Younghusband first met in December 1890 was not the

Petrovski who bullied the Chinese and whose temper was notorious, but a witty and civilised host. Younghusband found him very well informed on India, with hundreds of official British publications on his library shelves, and no doubt files of secret information in his safe. Petrovski contrasted his own freedom of action with that of Younghusband, whose instructions he said he knew. After the first meeting, Petrovski made it quite clear—though in an oblique way—that he would stand no meddling in Kashgar's affairs. He could, he told Younghusband, start a revolt in the province any time he liked, and already had two pretenders living in Russian territory.

Younghusband preferred to ignore Petrovski's hints, and it seems likely that he was not as well informed about the Russian as the Russian was about him. In fact, Younghusband was operating in a situation beyond his capacities. An intrepid explorer, a tolerably good soldier, and capable of playing a trick on Grombchevski, Younghusband was neither as cunning nor as unscrupulous as Petrovski. His naivety was reinforced by his apparent success with the Taotai, the chief Chinese official at Kashgar. Within a few days of Younghusband's arrival in the city, the Taotai complained to him that Afghan troops had occupied an area in the Alichur Pamir which was Chinese. If the Afghans were really under British influence, as he had heard, would Younghusband kindly use his to get the Afghans to leave? Younghusband obligingly wrote to the Afghan governor of Shugnan, asking him to issue the necessary order.

When news of this reached the amir, Abdur Rahman, in Kabul, he protested violently to the government of India, who immediately disowned Younghusband's action. Fortunately, that news took some time to reach Kashgar, and when, in the spring of 1891, Younghusband heard that the Russian governor-general of Turkestan intended to make a visit to an area near to the Chinese-claimed frontier, he had no difficulty in persuading the Taotai to send a small force to Somatash as a demonstration of Chinese possession.

Younghusband did not realise that the governor-general's proposed tour of inspection had been instigated by Petrovski, who had been sending scaring reports on Younghusband's activities to his superiors. Petrovski knew, probably through the secretary to the Taotai, what was going on in the discussions between him and Younghusband. He was also, without Younghusband's knowledge, feeding information to the Taotai about the supposed object of

British road building in the direction of Hunza, which China claimed as a tributary state.

In July, however, Younghusband was preparing to leave under the impression that his mission had not only been completed but successfully so. He had persuaded the Chinese to make a military display, however small, on their remoter frontiers, and he believed that was all that was needed to deter the Russians. But he had left Petrovski out of his calculations. Russian agents had informed Petrovski that another British officer had been travelling over the same route as Younghusband and Macartney. The reports insisted that the officer must be travelling secretly to Kashgar for some sinister purpose, as he had only two servants and virtually no baggage. Petrovski was convinced that some new element had been added to the situation. The British were not alone in seeing single, and in many cases innocent, travellers as the vanguard of armies.

When the British officer arrived, Younghusband, for some reason, decided to take him on an informal visit to Petrovski, but when they arrived at the consul's house they were refused entry, on the grounds that it was after normal hours of business. The next day, Petrovski sent a letter to Younghusband complaining of a deliberate diplomatic affront. Younghusband sent an apology for any unintentional insult but Petrovski did not reply, nor did he see Younghusband again before the Englishman left for India. By then, Petrovski had heard that Younghusband was taking the new arrival back with him by way of the Pamir route, which tended to reinforce the Russian's suspicions. In fact the officer, Lieutenant Davison, on leave from his regiment, had decided without either permission or adequate preparation to follow Younghusband's route across the Mustagh pass, but had lost his way and most of his equipment. He had managed to struggle as far as Yarkand and there had been able to borrow funds to get him to Kashgar and the British mission. Younghusband's decision to take Davison back to India with him was both a courtesy and a way of ensuring that Davison did not get lost again.

But Petrovski had reported Davison's arrival with his own alarming comments to his superiors in Tashkent, who reacted by sending a detachment of cavalry and infantry under the command of Colonel Ianov, with instructions to annex the Pamirs as far as the Sarikol mountains on the east and the Hindu Kush in the south! Younghusband reported to Macartney in August 1891 that the force had reached the Pamirs ahead of him. This was the last that

Macartney, who had moved from Kashgar to Yarkand to avoid the overwhelming presence of Petrovski, was to hear of Younghusband for some time. When next he heard, it was from one of his native agents who brought the startling news that the Russian commander had expelled Younghusband from what he claimed was now Russian territory.

When Younghusband and Davison reached the Pamirs they learned that Ianov had divided his forces, sending the infantry westwards to the Alichur Pamir and the cavalry towards the passes of the Hindu Kush. Younghusband dispatched Davison to follow the Russian party making for the Alichur, and himself hurried south in an endeavour to reach the passes before the Russians. He had followed the Russian cavalry for some distance when, at a remote spot some 150 miles from the known Russian frontier, he caught up with a detachment of ten Cossacks at a supply base. Colonel Ianov, he was told, was ahead on foot reconnoitring a pass into Hunza. Younghusband decided to set up camp to await his return.

When Ianov arrived back, the two officers dined in full uniform in the Russian's tent. Younghusband learned that he had not only entered Hunza but had passed through British territory and returned by way of Afghan Wakhan. A party of Afghan soldiers had tried to stop him but he had, Ianov said, ignored them. Ianov explained with great frankness the extent of the areas he had been ordered to annex. If he carried out his task, the Russian frontier would at last touch that of British India or, at least, of a protected state. Younghusband is reticent about the rest of the evening, though he says that he enjoyed his meal—no doubt on the condemned man principle—but Ianov's revelations could hardly have been more shocking. All that Younghusband thought he had achieved while at Kashgar lay in ruins.

There was worse to come. The next morning, Ianov and his men left camp, returning some hours later. The Russian politely informed Younghusband that he had been ordered to expel him and his party from Russian territory. Younghusband protested that he was in Afghan, not Russian, territory. The politeness remained, but the Russian insisted, and further demanded that Younghusband sign a document agreeing not to leave through any of twenty-one specifically named passes, all of which led directly to India. It was Ianov's intention to force Younghusband to return to Chinese territory, and he intended to let it be known why. Younghusband signed the

paper but actually moved in the direction of Hunza, partly to keep some kind of watch on Russian actions, but also in the hope that Davison would reappear.

It was not until early in October when Davison arrived in Younghusband's camp. He had joined the commander of the Russian infantry party at Somatash, but had been put under open arrest when Ianov arrived there. Ianov had also warned the party that had been sent by the Taotai to show the Chinese flag that they must leave Russian territory, or be ejected. The Chinese withdrew, and Ianov removed the inscribed stone that had been placed at Somatash to mark the Chinese border. Later, the party had joined up with that of the governor-general of Turkestan, who was on an inspection tour, and Davison had been handed over to a Third Secretary of the British embassy in St Petersburg, who was accompanying the governor-general's party. A few days later he had been escorted to the Chinese border and had then made for Kashgar, before setting off to join Younghusband.

The news of Russian activities in the Pamirs and the expulsion of Younghusband had stimulated the government of India to action, even before it received Younghusband's detailed report and his appreciation of the consequences of the Russian moves. In the winter of 1891-92 a small campaign was mounted against the states of Hunza and Nagar, and both were occupied. The government of India was also anxious to exert more control over Chitral. The government in London followed up the successful Hunza-Nagar action with diplomatic pressure in St Petersburg.

Negotiations began in March 1893. A power struggle had been taking place in St Petersburg between the foreign ministry and the war department over the whole question of Russian action in the Pamirs, and the opening of discussions between London and St Petersburg was a direct consequence of the triumph of the foreign ministry. Negotiations, however, were not easy. Hard bargaining with other people's lands dominated the proceedings, but in the autumn of 1893 an understanding was achieved. The British reluctantly agreed to make Afghanistan evacuate parts of Shugnan and Roshan, and in return Russia accepted the Pamir river as a demarcation line of their frontier, extending in a roughly easterly direction as far as the Sarikol mountains, which marked the Chinese border. The narrow corridor of territory then created between the Russian frontier and the Hindu Kush was assigned to Afghanistan as a

demilitarised zone. Two years later this understanding was formalised into an agreement signed in London and defining the 'Spheres of Influence of the two Countries in the Region of the Pamirs'. In the same year, the British occupied Chitral.

[vi] *The view from the Andijan Gate*

THE DEFEAT of the war ministry in St Petersburg which led to the agreement with Britain on the Pamirs was also a defeat for the Russian consul at Kashgar. Petrovski seemed to be having a run of bad luck. He had sent back emissaries from Hunza, who had approached him and the Russian government for help against the British, with rifles and ammunition and vague promises of aid. He had tried to put pressure on the Chinese to go to the assistance of Hunza, which was a Chinese tributary state, only to be overtaken by the swift conclusion of the British campaign. But in spite of the fact that the Russian minister in Peking had assured the Chinese government that Colonel Ianov's activities had not had the authority of the government in St Petersburg, the military in Tashkent still had the backing of the war ministry and their own plans for the renewal of the Russian offensive in the Pamirs.

George Macartney, now back in Kashgar, was bombarded with rumours, some from his own agents, but more deliberately put about by Petrovski. The most important of these was that the Russians were going to the help of Hunza and that, for the purpose, a force of three thousand Cossacks had left its base at Osh, not far from the Chinese border. Macartney passed these rumours on to India, where they reinforced other just as startling information that had been relayed by the British ambassador in St Petersburg. It seemed as if the expected Russian campaign in the Pamirs was about to begin.

Petrovski continued his war of tensions at Kashgar while Russian troops moved nearer and nearer to the Chinese frontier. Just when it appeared that a clash between Chinese and Russian forces was about to take place—and there was no doubt which would be the victor—an unexpected, though not unknown, force intervened. A sudden change from calm, mild weather to snow and ice stopped the Russian advance, blocked the roads, and drove the Russians back to their base. The British, too, undermined another of Petrovski's hopes. He had warned the Chinese that the British would not accept a Chinese nominee as the new ruler of Hunza; this had been de-

manded by Peking as its suzerain right. But the British accepted the nominee, so removing the main basis of Chinese complaint, which was a matter of prestige rather than political reality.

In June 1892 Petrovski received news that the Pamirs campaign was being revived. An agreement had been reached between St Petersburg and Peking to settle their Pamir dispute by diplomacy, but talks had broken down. In Kashgar, Petrovski was sure the Chinese will to resist a Russian invasion had collapsed. But the first to suffer from the Russian advance were not the Chinese but the Afghans. On 12 July a Russian detachment under Colonel Ianov approached the Afghan frontier post at Somatash, and in an exchange of fire the Afghan commander and most of his men were killed. It was a situation immensely dangerous, and thoroughly confused. Ideal, in fact, for Petrovski.

In Kashgar he was steadily eroding Macartney's already anomalous position. Macartney had no official status. He was, Petrovski told Lord Dunmore, who had been travelling in the Pamirs before arriving at Kashgar, nothing at all. 'I don't know him as a British official; I once knew him as Younghusband's interpreter, and now I only know him as an English spy'. As an English spy, Petrovski warned the Taotai, Macartney was importing arms to Kashgar. These—two rifles and two revolvers for Macartney himself, and two revolvers as presents for Chinese officials—had arrived from Gilgit in twelve sealed boxes. Petrovski insisted that all of them contained weapons. He also put about a story that he had received a decoration from the Amir of Afghanistan, which implied a change of attitude in Kabul. Petrovski's next move was to accuse Macartney of acting as a fence for Russian government property, and had his own men arrest one of Macartney's servants. Petrovski then sent a complaint to the Chinese governor in Urumchi.

None of these moves seemed to be having much effect, though they were obviously giving Macartney some anxious moments. Petrovski realised that he might even be offending the Chinese authorities. But in August 1893 an incident took place which seemed to give him the opportunity for a coup of far more consequence than the mere discrediting of Macartney. Whether Petrovski provoked the attack of a Chinese mob on his secretary and three other Russians while they were sightseeing at a shrine outside Kashgar cannot be proved, but he took advantage of it to create a crisis. The Chinese made no attempt to find the ringleaders of the mob, and Petrovski

warned them of the possible consequences. But the opportunity to send a Russian punitive expedition in to Kashgar was lost. The governor-general of Russian Turkestan would not move. It was the first indication Petrovski was to receive of the shift in the balance of power inside the government at St Petersburg.

However, Russian influence in China and that of Petrovski at Kashgar was increased by the consequences of the Sino-Japanese war, which broke out in July 1894. After eight months of fighting, China was totally defeated. The territorial and financial demands of the victorious Japanese led to intervention by Russia in collaboration with France and Germany, and the Japanese were forced to abandon most of their territorial claims. Russia found herself extremely popular in Peking. At the same time, the Chinese military presence in Kashgar, already weak, was further weakened first by the demands of the war and then by the financial requirements of the peace treaty. When a rebellion in the adjoining province of Kansu seemed about to overflow into Sinkiang, it looked as if the Russians would be able to enter Kashgar on the pretence of 'maintaining order', something they had frequently threatened to do. But the rebellion was crushed and another opportunity for Russian intervention slipped away.

But if the view from the house at the Andijan Gate was not to be of a Russian-occupied Kashgaria, Petrovski was determined that it would be of a Chinese province totally subordinate to Russian interests. Whichever party might be strongest in St Petersburg, he knew he had the backing of the Russian military establishment and that even the cautious and conservative men of the foreign office would always be prepared to go along with his plans for Russian economic penetration.

Crises continued in the Pamirs, agitated the governments in Calcutta and London, and were dampened by diplomacy in St Petersburg only to rekindle in some other, but clearly identifiable form and, not infrequently, some other place. Petrovski steadily went on working, a pressure here, an intrigue there, until by the time he finally left Kashgar in August 1903 Russian economic and political influence seemed unassailable. Four months after Petrovski's departure from Kashgar, the British—convinced that Russian influence had now spread to Tibet—sent an armed mission to fight its way to Lhasa. At its head was Petrovski's old adversary, Francis Younghusband.

Machine-guns to Lhasa

AT THE end of December 1898 a new viceroy had arrived in India. No other ruler of this, the most glorious and most powerful of imperial satrapies, had prepared himself with such diligence to meet the demands of his high office. For George Curzon, to become viceroy was the achievement of a long-held ambition. The office not only appealed to an essentially romantic element in his character, but to his firm belief that in India lay 'the true fulcrum of dominion, the real touchstone of our Imperial greatness or failure'. It was for this that Curzon had equipped himself by study, by travel, by the purposeful concentration of ideas.

Many of these ideas concerned the Russian threat to India. As part of his education for the high office he was determined some day to occupy, Curzon had travelled widely in the East. In 1888 he journeyed through Russian Central Asia, and the result was a book dedicated to 'the great army of Russophobes who mislead others, and Russophiles whom others mislead', in the hope that it would be 'found disrespectful to the ignoble terrors of the one and the perverse complacency of the others'. Curzon believed he fitted into neither category himself. He did not deny the very real existence of a Russian menace to India, but was convinced that it should be evaluated and reacted to calmly and without emotion.

Unfortunately for Curzon, he was forced to deal with and frequently defer to a government in London which either did not believe in his policies or was distracted by a disastrous war in South Africa. And as if this was not enough, he was to find that his conceptions of imperial policy were in conflict with the growing desire of the British government to come to terms with Russia's ally, France, and with Russia herself, in an attempt to balance the increasing menace of imperial Germany.

Within a few weeks of the outbreak of war in October 1899 between Britain and the Boer republics in South Africa, the British

army learned the bitterness of defeat. By the time the war ended three years later, it had taken more than 400,000 British troops to conquer a nation whose total population numbered around 150,000. The revelations of British military incompetence seemed to Curzon to unnerve the government in London. He was convinced that Russia, in cooperation with France, was planning the domination of Persia and the Persian Gulf. In the summer of 1899 he had given his views in a long memorandum, in which he said: 'It should be a cardinal axiom of British policy that Her Majesty's Government will not acquiesce to any European power and more especially Russia, over-running Central and Southern Persia and so reaching the Gulf, or acquiring naval facilities in the latter even without territorial connections'. It was absolutely necessary that such a policy should be backed by force if diplomacy turned out to be inadequate.

The cabinet could not accept this and in fact did not see how, in the long run, Russia could be kept away from the Gulf. Curzon did, but his arguments failed to break through the pessimism of the ministers. The cabinet even refused to allow Curzon to reply to tendentious letters from Abdur Rahman concerning the interpretation of the treaty between Britain and Afghanistan, although he complained that, 'if you do not answer an Oriental's casuistry, he thinks he has reduced you to silence, and in [the amir's] recent batch of letters to which I am referring he repeatedly taunts us with not replying to his previous communications. I think in these cases you may really trust me to know how to handle the amir as well as anyone else at home'.

It was hardly surprising that the Russians were anxious to take advantage of Britain's loss of face in Asia. The Russians had had more than half a century of practice in disseminating scary rumours reinforced by displays of armed force. The South African war not only tied up a large number of British troops; contingents had also been drawn from the Indian army. To the historical Anglo-Russian tensions was added an increasing feeling of vulnerability on the part of the British in India. From St Petersburg, through what was probably a calculated indiscretion by a member of the general staff, came news of Russian troop concentrations at Kushk, only ninety miles from Herat, and of the movement of vast quantities of war materials to Central Asia. Earlier rumours that the Russians were about to extend the railroad from Orenburg to Tashkent, and even through Seistan to the Persian Gulf, were being repeated. The war

minister, General Kuropatkin, had spoken of a plan to send a hundred thousand men to the Afghan border, and of the coming great war with India.

The purpose of these moves—if they in fact existed at all—was difficult to establish. Were the Russians trying to prevent the British from sending troop reinforcements from India to South Africa, and so increase their troubles there? Or were they trying to inhibit an Anglo-Japanese alliance, which could only be directed against Russia in the Far East? One thing Curzon was sure of: British capability to advance to Kandahar, to Jalalabad or Kabul, in case of trouble in Afghanistan, was seriously threatened.

The makers of policy in St Petersburg undoubtedly kept all these factors in mind. The foreign minister, Muraviev, did not consider that Britain's difficulties with the Boers called for any radical reappraisal of Russian policy. Military preparedness in Central Asia should be maintained—the British were always impressed by this. Russia's railroad-building projects should be continued and new lines surveyed across the Transcaucasia to link up with the Persian system. But not everyone in the Russian government agreed with Muraviev. The finance minister warned that the Russian economy could not support even the present rate of military activity in Central Asia. General Kuropatkin believed the most important thing was to win control of the Bosphorus. But all were agreed that events in South Africa might have repercussions in India and Central Asia, though, so far, India seemed to have taken the news of British reverses calmly. Nevertheless, said Muraviev, when unrest did come—as it undoubtedly would—that was the time for Russia to seize Herat.

Against such a move was the argument that the seizure of Herat would upset not only the British, but Afghanistan and even Bokhara. The Russians were trying to win the confidence of Abdur Rahman. The seizure of Herat would certainly destroy the peace-loving image Russia was trying to create. Such an image was essential to the policy she now proposed. As the Amir of Afghanistan was forbidden by treaty to have relations with any power other than Britain, now, when the British were in difficulties in South Africa, seemed the moment to inform them that the time had come for Russian diplomatic representation at Kabul. This suggestion was embodied in a Note to the British government in February 1900. A few days earlier, it had been announced that the Russians were making a large loan to the Persian government and that a Russian gunboat

would shortly visit the Persian Gulf. This was taken by the government of India to be a prelude to other, more militant moves. Curzon considered putting the Indian army on a war footing. If the Russians hoped to create a background of tension for their main aim of getting an agent in Kabul, then Curzon thought it was best to play a waiting game—though taking precautionary measures—and then, when the request was formally made, to refuse it. The government in London agreed. The policy of wait and see was assisted by the sudden death of Muraviev and his replacement by a politician more interested in the Far East than in Central Asia.

This did not mean that the tension did anything more than lessen. The potentialities remained, particularly as Abdur Rahman could not last forever. When the amir died in October 1901, there were many who feared the worst. They had history on their side. In Afghanistan, the death of the ruler had usually been a signal for civil war amongst the pretenders to that ill-fated throne. Abdur Rahman—in Curzon's words, 'at once a patriot and a monster, a great man and almost a fiend'—had ruled his country with a heavy and bloody hand. But even he had lived in fear of assassination, and six horses saddled and laden with gold were always kept ready in case sudden flight should be necessary. Curzon felt that the chances of a peaceful succession by Abdur Rahman's son, Habibullah, were better than average, but precautions had to be taken. Plans were made to mobilise troops at strategic positions along the Afghan frontier if the situation in Afghanistan should dissolve into anarchy. The home government was uneasy—obviously harbouring some fears that Curzon might use the amir's death as an excuse for a forward movement into Afghanistan—and the secretary of state forbade him to make any military move without first having the approval of the home government, and instructed him that any communication with Habibullah must be cleared with them first.

The transition of power, however, went smoothly, and Habibullah was able to inform the viceroy that Afghanistan had acknowledged him as ruler. 'My duty', wrote the new amir, 'is to act and behave in the same manner as my revered father used to do, and I will be a friend of his friends and avoid his enemies'. The British government officially recognised Habibullah, and Curzon decided with the approval of the cabinet to allow the new ruler time to settle in to power before raising the still vexed question of relations between British India and Afghanistan.

On the death of Abdur Rahman, the Russians made no move to put up a candidate of their own for the vacant throne. In fact the Russian government had now a very low priority for affairs in Central Asia. Russian ministers were mainly preoccupied with the Far East, which was to play much the same role for Russia as South Africa for the British. It was reported by fairly reliable agents that the Russian military establishments at Ashkabad, Merv, and Kushk, had been run down. So much so that it was estimated the Russians could put no more than eight thousand men and twenty-four guns on the Afghan frontier. But to Curzon, though this was comforting for the moment, the future seemed as menacing as ever—if not more so. A *tour d'horizon* from Calcutta in 1902 produced a vista of nothing but dark clouds.

There was little doubt that Russia could take northern Persia whenever she wished, and Afghanistan from Herat to the Amu-Darya with very little effort. Kashgaria was already a Russian economic satellite and could become a Russian colony any time St Petersburg thought it worth while. On the borders of Burma there were Russia's allies, the French, intriguing for control of Siam. As for Tibet, rumours of a Russian protectorate over that country were swelling in volume. Soon, Curzon felt, the ramparts overlooking India would be manned by enemies, and then 'we shall not be able to move, to strike, to advance, in any part of the world where French and Russian interests are involved, because of the menace that will stand perpetually at our Indian doors'. But he could not convince the British cabinet. He was refused troop reinforcements, and when the problem of Afghanistan re-emerged, so did the conflict between Curzon and the ministers in London.

Curzon's repeated invitations for the new amir, Habibullah, to meet him had been left unanswered. Once again there were rumours of Russian intrigues. Curzon informed the home government that if he had received no response from the amir by the time the great Delhi durbar was over in January 1903, he would send a letter so strongly worded that it would compel the amir to reply. The cabinet became seriously alarmed at this. In November 1902 Curzon had already outlined to the secretary of state just what he would like to do if the amir should be foolish enough to ally himself with Russia. He proposed that a military expedition should be sent to occupy the Afghan town of Kandahar and that the Indo-Afghan frontier should be moved forward to the Helmand river. Curzon

claimed that the prestige of the empire was at stake. 'If you allow a man and a State of his calibre to flout the British Empire, then we had better put up our shutters and close business'. But the home government's reply to his proposals had been crushing. The cabinet absolutely refused to countenance 'any action likely to entail military operations'. If necessary, it would even go so far in the other direction as to 'abandon all our present obligations, and to substitute nothing in their place except an attempt to come to an understanding with Russia'.

This fundamental conflict of opinion between the cabinet and Curzon—which might well have led to his recall—was, however, smoothed over by a letter from the amir which, if not particularly satisfactory, was at least conciliatory. The way was thus opened for negotiation. Nevertheless, the cabinet repeated its view that all thought of a military solution must be put aside. There would be no money available for any military action as the home government had decided, in face of the German challenge to Britain's naval supremacy, that much of its defence expenditure must be concentrated on the navy. Curzon rather acidly pointed out that policy was not entirely a matter of 'exact calculation nor of mere £. s. d., nor of ships and men. Diplomacy is also capable of playing its part; and there are two constituents of successful diplomacy which seem to me sometimes in danger of being forgotten; one is knowing your own mind, the other is letting other people know it'.

The home government began to suffer from a recurring nightmare. Curzon seemed to be advocating a policy which could only lead to military involvement. Yet they themselves were engaged on attempts to tranquillise the Anglo-Russian dialogue in Central Asia so that they could get on with the job of preparing Britain's defences against Germany. The cabinet continued to inhibit Curzon from taking positive action, and the Afghan problem was allowed to lie uneasily quiescent.

No sooner had the Afghan situation lapsed into a kind of tense calm than the problem of Tibet once more raised the most profound alarm in Curzon's mind. When Curzon had arrived in India, the Tibetans had sent troops over the border into the state of Sikkim. Under the terms of treaties concluded with China in 1890 and again in 1893, Sikkim was under British protection and her actual ruler was a British political officer. Theoretically, Tibet was under Chinese protection, but in practice the various agreements between

Britain and China on the subject of the Tibetan border were not worth the paper they were written on. The Tibetans—aware of China's military weakness—were preparing to throw off Chinese rule and the Chinese were unable, even had they been willing, to enforce the treaty provisions on the Tibetans. But the diplomatic fiction of Chinese responsibility remained, and Curzon chafed at finding himself in a position that was 'most ignominious, and the use of the Chinese Amban [political Resident in Tibet] as an intermediary, an admitted farce'. Curzon was determined to bypass Peking and treat directly with the rulers of Tibet. The problem was how to get letters to Lhasa and then to the Dalai Lama and his ministers. No European could reach the capital and Curzon was basically unwilling to trust native agents. But what alternative was there? In September 1900 a letter was prepared and given to a British officer, Captain Kennion, who was to take it to Gartok and there hand it over to a responsible Tibetan official to pass on to Lhasa. Kennion entered Tibetan territory, pushing aside Tibetan border guards who tried to stop him, and set off on the road to Gartok. Halfway there he was met by a larger Tibetan force which ordered him to retreat. As Kennion had no instructions to force his way to Gartok, he went back a mile or so and made camp. A few days later, two Tibetan officials came to Kennion's camp and readily agreed to transmit his letter to Lhasa. Because, he was told, of the distance between Gartok and the Tibetan capital, no reply could be expected before February of the following year.

In March 1902, Kennion heard from Gartok that, though his letter had been received in Lhasa, it had been returned unopened with the comment that there was no pressing need for communication between the Tibetan government and the British. But when the letter arrived, Kennion discovered that the seals had been broken, and he again took up the matter with Gartok. This time, he was informed that the letter had not been sent to Lhasa after all, and that the officials at Gartok had only agreed to send it in order to get rid of him. Other sources, however, confirmed that the letter had not only reached Lhasa but had been read. Curzon would not accept this. As far as he was concerned, the letter had never left Gartok. On what he based his opinion is not clear. As far as intelligence was concerned, the government of India knew less about what was going on at Lhasa than it had done in the time of Warren Hastings.

Whatever the difficulties, Curzon was determined to open up

communications with Lhasa. Another letter would be sent, but before it went, in July 1901, Curzon informed the secretary of state for India that if it met the same fate as the first one he contemplated adopting 'more practical measures with a view to securing the commercial and political facilities which our friendly representations will have failed to secure'. The secretary of state immediately assumed these 'practical measures' to mean 'proceedings which would practically be an invasion of Tibetan territory'. He replied categorically that 'we have the material objection that just now our military establishments are not in a condition to justify any expedition of size beyond the frontiers of India'.

In December 1901 Curzon learned that his second letter had never reached the Dalai Lama. The emissary carrying it, a Bhutanese official called Ugyen Kazi, had been recommended to Curzon by the government of Bengal. When he returned from Lhasa, Ugyen Kazi reported that the Dalai Lama had refused to accept Curzon's letter on the grounds that he could have no dealings with foreigners without the approval of the Chinese Resident in the city. Ugyen Kazi said he had therefore returned with the letter, its seals unbroken. Other sources, however, suggested that the emissary had not even attempted to present the letter and that he had been forbidden to enter Tibet again. Curzon felt that the Bengal government had let him down badly in the choice of a messenger. There were apparently well-founded rumours that Russian agents were already active in Lhasa—but the viceroy of India could not even get someone to deliver a letter to the Dalai Lama. If Curzon was to inaugurate a new Tibetan policy, he felt that there would turn out to be only one way of doing it—to send an armed mission to Lhasa which would at least be sure of getting there.

In January 1902, Curzon wrote to Sir Arthur Godley at the India Office. 'After my complete failure to get at the Dalai Lama of Tibet, we have now to decide what to do . . . We shall presently address you, proposing to enforce the treaty line [in Sikkim] which we have allowed to be invaded and ignored for years. This is the minimum that we can undertake; and it ought to have been done long ago'. In effect, Curzon was giving notice that he intended to carry out some sort of military expedition on the northern frontier, whatever the cabinet in London might think about it.

The first hard information about Russian intrigues in Tibet had come from an item in the *Journal de St Petersburg*, which reported

that on 30 September 1900 the tsar had received one 'Ahambra-Agvan Dorjiev', an accredited official of the government of the Dalai Lama. This caught the government of India by surprise. They had never heard of Dorjiev, which was not surprising considering the lack of intelligence information available at Calcutta. But neither had the Chinese, and they had a resident official at Lhasa. It all sounded very sinister, especially when another Russian newspaper, the *Novoe Vremya*, editorialised in November that 'present events in China are quite sufficient to explain this attempt on the part of Tibet to seek a rapprochement with Russia, if such it really be. It is only natural . . . that Tibet should seek Russia's protection. Russia has gained such renown by her peoples of Central Asia . . . who have fallen under her power or who have appealed to her protection, that it would be perfectly natural if not only Tibet but all the other regions of northern and western China contiguous with the Russian dominions, were to begin to take steps to obtain peace and tranquillity under the aegis of the tsar'.

Curzon did not attach much importance to Dorjiev's alleged interview with the tsar until it was reported that he had visited Russia again in June and August 1901. By then, Curzon had learned that Dorjiev was not a Tibetan—hardly surprising, perhaps, as he bore a Russian name, though it could have been a false one—but a Buriat Mongol and a Russian national. He held the post of 'Professor of Buddhist Metaphysical Philosophy' at an important Tibetan monastery. As for Dorjiev's discussions with the Russians, it seemed that the British had unknowingly helped them take place. Dorjiev had passed through India on both his missions, crossing the country by rail and leaving from Bombay by sea. The government of India had known nothing of this, and neither, it turned out, had the intelligence service of the government of Bengal. Curzon was furious at this blatant incompetence. It was obvious that the only way to know what was going on in Tibet was to get a mission to Lhasa.

Rumours of Russian activities in Tibet increased in 1902, and the most persistent clustered round the signing of an agreement between the Dalai Lama and the tsar. At the end of December, Curzon gave his official opinion. 'Russia', he wrote, 'has concluded some sort of agreement with the Tibetan Government which will presently result in a Russian Envoy at Lhasa, and a little later in a Russian Protectorate. This is a challenge to our power and position wholly unprovoked,

entirely unwarrantable, fraught in my opinion with the most serious danger, and demanding the most prompt and strenuous resistance. If we do nothing now—while all the cards are still in our hands—we shall deserve the worst that could befall us’.

Curzon, the British foreign office, and the India Office were all agreed that the reports of a Sino-Russian agreement over Tibet could not be ignored. But there was no such agreement on what action should be taken. The foreign office advised that a firm declaration be made to China and Russia that Britain would not tolerate any change in the status of Tibet; in reply to this declaration the British received protestations of innocence from both governments. The India Office, though supporting Curzon’s plea for a definite Tibetan policy, would not accept his proposal that a mission be sent to Lhasa to negotiate a treaty with Tibet. They could not, Francis Younghusband remarked later, rid themselves of the memory of what had happened to Sir Louis Cavagnari at Kabul in 1879 and what had followed his murder.

An ingenious alternative to a British mission had been suggested by two distinguished members of the Council of India in the middle of the previous year. It involved the use of Nepal. The Tibeto-Nepalese treaty of 1856 provided for the Nepalese, in return for a Tibetan subsidy, to go to the aid of Tibet ‘if the troops of any other Raja invade that country’. Presumably the Russian tsar came into the category of ‘any other Raja’. The Nepalese, through their agent in Lhasa, were entitled to enquire whether Russia had opened relations with the Dalai Lama. If the Tibetans gave an unsatisfactory reply, ‘might not Nepal be urged to send a force to Lhasa and demand from Tibet an assurance that it would permit no Russian troops to enter its country?’ To Curzon, of course, any suggestion that Britain might use the troops of an Asian country to fight her battles for her was completely unacceptable. Not only would such a thing be bad for prestige; it would undoubtedly give the Nepalese swelled heads. The problem of India’s northern frontiers was, he thought, quite bad enough already without encouraging Nepal to assume the role, however disguised, of mediator between the Indian empire and a parcel of monks.

In England, only the war office came out on Curzon’s side and gave powerful support to his proposal to send a mission to Lhasa. Military opinion held that the cost of sending a British agent to Lhasa would be quite small. A single brigade would suffice; the

Tibetan army—if such a thing could actually be said to exist—would not be able to oppose it. Lord Roberts, now British commander-in-chief, approved the plan and said so in a Minute to the foreign office in October 1902. ‘Russia’s predominance in Tibet’, he wrote, ‘would not be a *direct* military danger to India, but it would be a very serious disadvantage. It would certainly unsettle Nepal, and would, in all probability, interfere with our Gurkha recruiting, which would of itself be a real misfortune. I consider it out of the question Russia being permitted to attain a footing in Tibet; we have had, and shall still have, quite enough trouble owing to Russia being so near us on the N.W. frontier of India—that we cannot avoid; but we can, and ought to, prevent her getting a position which would inevitably cause unrest all along the N.E. frontier’. Curzon could hardly have expressed his own view more cogently, although he did so more exhaustively in his important Minute of 8 January 1903, in which he reviewed the history of India’s relations with Tibet and outlined in considerable detail the plan of campaign for which he hoped to win cabinet approval.

The basic proposals contained in his Minute were simple. Initially, he suggested that Britain should take advantage of a recent Chinese approach for talks on Tibet. The Chinese, said Curzon, should be informed that Britain was prepared to talk, but only at Lhasa, and that, furthermore, a high Tibetan official of recognised authority must participate. The subjects for discussion should cover not only ‘the small questions of the Sikkim frontier, but the entire question of our future relations, commercial and otherwise, with Tibet’ and ‘should result in the appointment of a permanent Consular or Diplomatic representative in Lhasa’. The mission should, Curzon insisted, be accompanied by a military escort but should be announced as having interest only in commerce. Finally, it should be publicly stated that Britain had no desire to annex any part of Tibetan territory or to establish a protectorate over the country as a whole. Curzon was not, of course, basically interested in the question of Indo-Tibetan trade which, on even the most optimistic estimate, was potentially quite small. His aims were purely political, though, when the first Blue Book on the Tibetan affair was issued in February 1904, a distinguished former prime minister said it gave the impression that the object of the Indian government ‘was to make people drink Indian tea who did not like Indian tea and did not want Indian tea’.

In 1903, however, the British cabinet was under no such illusion. Lord George Hamilton, the secretary of state for India, had become convinced that a mission was now necessary. It seemed to him that, if nothing was done over Tibet, it would be 'perfectly hopeless for Great Britain to attempt to arrest Russia's progress in any part of Asia'. But he wrote privately to Curzon to say that the problem was how 'a good international case for the course of action you suggest' could be established. Without such, the cabinet would hesitate and delay 'until it may be too late to send an expedition this year'. The cabinet's anxiety to have a satisfactory reason for action was yet another indication of Britain's changing position in the world. In the past, though always delighted to have a good moral incentive for political action, Britain had never really worried too much about international opinion. Upper Burma had been annexed in 1886, for example, ostensibly because a British-owned trading company had been discriminated against. No weightier justification was then thought necessary. But in 1903 things were different. The prime minister, A. J. Balfour, feared that sending a mission to Lhasa would be interpreted as an 'attack upon the integrity of China', and the foreign secretary, Lord Lansdowne, wanted to continue diplomatic negotiations with Russia. At a cabinet meeting in February 1903, Curzon's proposals were rejected—at least for the moment—although he was given permission to start constructing a number of strategic roads along the north-east frontier.

Also in February, the Russian foreign office complained that there were rumours of British forces already in Tibet. There was in fact no truth in this, and the rumour was denied. Lansdowne hoped, in the course of his 'diplomatic negotiations', to extract an official denial from the Russian government that it had any intention of interfering in Tibetan affairs. It would obviously take time to elicit such a disclaimer—a fact which gave the home government a further excuse for delaying its final decision on Curzon's proposals. In April, however, with surprising rapidity, the Russian government officially denied that it had either concluded any agreement with China relating to Tibet or that it had any intention of sending a diplomatic mission to, or establishing an agent in, Lhasa. The Russians also said that they 'could not remain indifferent to any serious disturbance of the *status quo*' in Tibet, and warned the British government that if such should occur they would not take counter action in Tibet but would feel 'obliged to take measures elsewhere'.

Curzon was by now fully aware of the home government's reluctance to be involved in any mission to Lhasa itself. He therefore suggested instead that he should open negotiations with the Chinese and Tibetans at the town of Khambajong, just inside the Tibetan border. A letter from the Chinese Resident in Lhasa had provided him with an opening. In his letter suggesting negotiations, the Resident had written that the British delegates 'can either come to Yatung, or the Chinese Deputies will proceed to Sikkim *or such other place as may be decided upon by your Excellency*'. Snatching at the phrase 'such other place' Curzon chose Khambajong, though the Chinese Resident probably meant somewhere like Darjeeling, inside British territory. From Curzon's point of view, Khambajong was ideal. It was on Tibetan soil and it lay conveniently on the main routes to Lhasa. If, as in the past, the Chinese delegates failed to turn up, the British mission with its military escort could move slowly along the road towards Lhasa, ostensibly to meet the tardy delegation. Pressure would thus be quietly exerted on both the Chinese and the Tibetans.

The home government now agreed to Curzon's plan, although with some reluctance. It made a condition that no forward movement from Khambajong should take place without its prior approval, and refused to give any indication of what should be done if the talks at Khambajong did in fact take place but broke down.

The mission was to be headed by two joint commissioners—J. C. White, political officer to Sikkim, and Major Francis Younghusband. Younghusband, then Resident in the Indian state of Indore, was well known to Curzon. Though he had no actual experience of the Sikkim-Tibet frontier, Younghusband's adventures in the Pamirs and elsewhere qualified him for the job. He knew, Curzon wrote, the Oriental 'by heart', and was a man of great political ability.

In July 1903 the mission crossed the Tibetan frontier, disregarding the polite request of the Tibetan frontier guards that they should turn back. The commissioners' instructions from the home government were simple. They were to discuss only matters of trade and the location of a mart inside Tibet at Gyantse. Nothing else was to be touched upon except outstanding frontier problems. As Curzon put it: 'We enter the arena with our hands tied behind our backs by His Majesty's Government'. But he was not particularly worried by the restrictions on his field of action. The weight of

recent experience with Tibet was on his side. The triviality of the mission's ostensible purpose was likely to be more of a disadvantage to the cabinet than to Curzon. It was, he believed, most unlikely that anything concrete would emerge from the meeting at Khamba-jong—if it ever took place. The meeting *did* take place, and was beset by intrigue, non-cooperation, and other deliberate frustrations. To Curzon, the logic of the situation was inescapable. The mission must press on to Lhasa and open real negotiations—by force, if necessary.

In September 1903, Curzon urged the home government to sanction a further step into Tibetan territory as far as Gyantse. The cabinet showed little enthusiasm. Lord Lansdowne recorded in a Minute that the prime minister was 'incredulous as to the importance of Tibetan trade and dislikes the idea of allowing ourselves to get permanently entangled in Tibet'. Balfour had more immediate problems to contend with and did not, therefore, give the Tibetan problem the consideration it demanded. In the autumn of 1903 a government crisis, which had been simmering for some time, suddenly boiled up when Joseph Chamberlain resigned over the question of tariff reform. At the same time, a number of other ministers—including Lord George Hamilton—also resigned.

On 1 October—at the very height of the cabinet crisis, when it looked as if the Balfour government might fall—Lord Lansdowne, the foreign secretary, sent off a telegram authorising the Young-husband mission to advance to Gyantse. The government, however, survived the loss of Chamberlain and in Balfour's reconstructed cabinet St John Brodrick became secretary of state for India. At the first meeting of the new cabinet, Lansdowne's telegram—which had been sent on the authority of Balfour—was challenged. It was even suggested that the authorisation to march upon Gyantse should be immediately cancelled. But it was not. Instead the cabinet sought to control Curzon by placing further restriction on his actions.

The changes after the government crisis brought into the cabinet men more inclined than their predecessors to search for some rapprochement with France and her ally, Russia. Previously Chamberlain had leant towards Germany, while Hamilton had undoubtedly been anti-Russian. The changes did not mean that the old policy was reversed overnight, but, when agreements were concluded with France at the end of 1903, Britain's unwillingness to become involved with Russia in the fastnesses of Central Asia—which

had hitherto been founded on purely military objections—was reinforced by her growing friendliness with Russia's ally, France. But for all its desire for a new system of European alliances as an insurance against Germany, the cabinet could still not quite rid itself of the traditional fear of Russia; the Russian threat had been the cornerstone of British foreign policy for too long to be casually abandoned. Yet, in the case of Tibet, the cabinet was not prepared to treat it seriously. To all appearances, the Balfour government was in a state of shock, half unwilling to abandon traditional policies and succeeding, therefore, only in emasculating them.

At the end of October 1903, Curzon received a startling demonstration of this. St John Brodrick, now at the India Office, sent the viceroy a telegram. 'Though I fully appreciate the force of the reasons which caused you to urge an immediate advance to Gyantse I see from my predecessor's telegram to you of 1 October that the advance was contingent on a rupture of negotiations which has not yet taken place. Please let me have a full estimate of the expenditure involved and a statement of the troops necessary to maintain communications'. From this it appeared that, in spite of Lansdowne's categorical telegram, the whole affair was once again under discussion. Curzon replied that 'a rupture of negotiations with Tibet (if indeed negotiations can be said to have ever begun) is not only inevitable but has taken place'. By telegram on 4 November he recapitulated all the arguments that had already been exhaustively examined, and calculated that the mission would cost £153,000. He followed this up by sending a despatch accompanied by a mass of documentation. The British government replied by telegram on 6 November, before it had received the written despatches. Its terminology was excessively vague; it seemed, as Curzon put it, to assume that the mission was 'going to Gyantse simply in order to secure from the Tibetans legal reparation or satisfaction [for past affronts]'. Surely, he added, the whole purpose of the mission was to negotiate agreement on the future. The cabinet, however, refused to resolve the ambiguities of its telegram.

On 13 December 1903 the mission set out for Gyantse. Young-husband was now in sole charge. With him as escort was a force of eight thousand men commanded by Brigadier-General Macdonald. In March the mission had its first armed clash with the Tibetans. This was little less than a massacre in which between six and seven hundred Tibetans were killed. 'I got so sick of the slaughter',

wrote one officer who had been firing a Maxim machine-gun at practically unarmed Tibetans, 'that I ceased fire, though the General's order was to make as big a bag as possible'.

When news of the clash reached England it was greeted with anger and disquiet. The home government had publicly insisted that the mission to Tibet was strictly diplomatic, designed only to clear up a number of outstanding questions concerning trade and commerce. Now, it appeared, that an ostensibly peaceful expedition had been involved, as a writer in the *Spectator* later put it, in 'crushing half-armed and very brave men with the irresistible weapons of science'. The opposition, both inside and outside parliament, to the Tibetan expedition, gravely annoyed the cabinet, which had only agreed to its despatch with very great reluctance and many reservations.

Nineteen days after the mission finally reached Gyantse, on 11 April 1904, Curzon left Bombay on his way to England on leave. Behind he left Lord Amphill, the governor of Madras, as acting viceroy. While Curzon was still at sea, a force of eight hundred Tibetans attacked a British outpost at Chang Lo and suffered heavy casualties. Nothing could have been better from Curzon's point of view. An unprovoked and treacherous attack upon a peaceful commercial mission cancelled out, at the very least, the earlier massacre and confirmed that the Tibetans were intransigent—as Curzon had always maintained, but which the British cabinet had never really believed. Younghusband, who was in complete agreement with Curzon's policy, wrote to him to say 'the Tibetans as usual have played into our hands'. In a telegram to the acting viceroy, he was more official. 'Now that the Tibetans have . . . thrown down the gauntlet, I trust the Government will take such action as will prevent the Tibetans ever again treating British representatives as I have been treated'.

In India, Younghusband's telegram was discussed in the viceroy's council and, on 6 May, Amphill telegraphed the secretary of state suggesting that a 'definite limit of time should now be imposed, and that a further advance should at once be made, unless within that time proper representatives of both Chinese and Tibetan governments, invested with full powers, reach Gyantse,' where the mission was then encamped. Six days later, Brodrick replied, authorising an advance to Lhasa if, after one month, no negotiations had taken place at Gyantse, but insisting that the terms of the telegram of 6 Novem-

ber 1903 were to be strictly adhered to. The essence of the latter telegram, though vaguely worded in parts, was that there should be no occupation of Tibetan territory and no question of installing a permanent agent at Lhasa. On this authority, the mission proceeded and reached Lhasa on 3 August 1904.

As the mission approached the capital, the Dalai Lama and Dorjiev fled to Mongolia. But the Tibetan officials who remained behind were friendly, and apparently anxious for discussions. Though the Tibetans had fought bravely and as well as their antiquated weapons would allow, they were now docile and apparently well disposed. While Younghusband was negotiating terms, others were looking for evidence of Russian intrigues with the Dalai Lama. Before Young-husband had left India he had gathered every scrap of rumour with which to support the sending of the second mission. Now, in Lhasa, it was essential that those rumours be substantiated with facts. While on the way, the stubborn resistance of the Tibetans to the mission was attributed to the presence of Russian officers, though none was captured or found dead. The discovery of a rifle or a revolver of Russian manufacture was instantly reported to Calcutta. But what evidence was there in Lhasa of Russian influence or intrigue?

The British found very little. Younghusband was shown the draft of a treaty between Russia and China in which both countries agreed to protect Tibet and the Russians to send military advisors to train the Tibetan army. It was also learned that the Russians had sent a quantity of arms and ammunition, but very few weapons were actually found, and those made in the Lhasa arsenal, allegedly under the supervision of a Russian agent, were actually Martini-Henrys of English pattern. On the whole, it did not amount to much, and definitely not to certainty. But there was enough, Curzon believed, to justify what he had seen as a pre-emptive strike.

Before Younghusband's arrival at Lhasa, the British cabinet had asked Curzon, who by then had arrived in England, to discuss with them the terms of any treaty which might be negotiated with Tibet when the mission arrived at Lhasa. Despite the 6 November telegram, the government of India had reiterated its own opinion that a British agent *should* be located at Lhasa or, failing that, at Gyantse, and that Tibet should cede the Chumbi valley to India. It had further suggested that all fortifications along the road from Lhasa to India should be destroyed, that Tibet should not enter into relations with any foreign power without Britain's approval, that trade marts

should be established at various places, and that an indemnity should be demanded to cover the cost of the expedition. 'No decision was arrived at', Curzon wrote to Ampthill the day after his discussions with the cabinet. 'The cabinet are, as you know, anxious to get out of the whole thing. They are naturally ignorant of anything but large and frequently incorrect generalisations; and the discussion wanders about under imperfect control'. On the same day Brodrick also wrote Ampthill a letter, but one which revealed more of the cabinet's attitude than had been disclosed to Curzon. 'Our main point', said Brodrick, 'is to re-establish our prestige, and to make it clear to Russia that we will not surrender predominance in Tibet to her. In our judgement the mere fact of a British force marching to Lhasa and slaughtering a great number of Tibetans on the way ought even without a treaty to establish our claims and show our power'.

The cabinet's opinion as expressed by Brodrick in his letter to Ampthill was entirely opposed to that of Curzon. To him, one of the main purposes of the expedition was to establish a channel of communication between Lhasa and the government of India. Previous attempts to negotiate with Tibet, lacking an envoy of some sort actually at Lhasa, had failed. Yet now the British government was prepared to discard all the advantages the mission had achieved; on 6 July it repeated its instruction that 'neither at Lhasa or elsewhere is a Resident to be demanded'. On the same day as this telegram was sent to Ampthill, Brodrick wrote to Curzon to say that 'the Cabinet view is most clearly in favour of having the power to send an Agent to Gyantse or any mart which may be finally arranged, rather than to lay down an intention of appointing one to which we should be bound to adhere'—a statement which, in its woolly thinking, seems accurately to have reflected the British cabinet's incomprehension and ignorance throughout its dealings with Tibet. On the whole, the cabinet was making it clear that it was more interested in arriving at a rapprochement with Russia than in defending India against what it believes to be a rapidly diminishing Russian menace. For reasons of prestige the cabinet had felt itself compelled to show the flag in Tibet, but once that had been done it was anxious to get out of any further commitment which might stretch Britain's already weak military resources and jeopardise the cabinet's hope for more friendly relations with Russia. The cabinet was extremely grateful for the fact that Curzon had, by coincidence, been on leave just at the time when he might really have taken the

bit between his teeth. 'I believe', Brodrick wrote later in a private letter to Ampthill, 'that Curzon would have declared a protectorate over Tibet without a moment's hesitation'.

But though Curzon was safely immobilised in England, Younghusband, his man on the spot, was still very much a free agent. Despite his instructions from London, Younghusband was determined to carry out Curzon's policy, even if it meant finding some way to circumvent the orders of the British government. In the draft proposals Younghusband submitted to the Tibetans, therefore, he deliberately included the demand that a British Agent should reside at Lhasa. His excuse for this was that the British government might change its mind about establishing an Agent at Lhasa and, if this were to happen, it would be extremely difficult to introduce such a demand at a late stage in the discussions. Younghusband had convinced himself that the cabinet's instructions actually permitted him a considerable amount of discretion, for the cabinet had said in July that the terms of any treaty finally negotiated might be 'subject to alteration' if the mission was compelled to go to Lhasa.

The Tibetans accepted Younghusband's terms—terms which differed from those authorised by the home government on two important points. Article VII provided that, as security for an indemnity to be paid in seventy-five annual instalments, the British would occupy the Chumbi valley until the last instalment had been paid. A 'Separate Agreement' appended to the treaty but not actually part of it gave a British agent stationed at Gyantse the right to visit Lhasa 'to consult with high Chinese and Tibetan officials on such commercial matters of importance as he found impossible to settle at Gyantse'. The word 'commercial', of course, was not to be taken too seriously; the aim of the mission, as both Younghusband and Curzon saw it, was entirely political.

In the case of the indemnity, the actual sum had been left to Younghusband's interpretation of how much the Tibetans could reasonably be asked to pay. He had, however, been instructed that under no circumstances was payment of the indemnity to be spread over a longer period than three years. Younghusband decided to demand 50,000 rupees for every day after the Tibetan attack on the outpost at Chang Lo, but the Tibetans said they could not pay this within three years or even within five. They put forward the counter-proposal of seventy-five years in which to pay off a sum which then stood at 750,000 rupees. As the indemnity was still increasing at the

rate of 50,000 rupees a day, Younghusband accepted the Tibetan proposal with the proviso that the British should occupy the Chumbi valley as security. Younghusband had always had his eye on this, for the Chumbi valley was, as he said, 'the key to Tibet . . . the only strategical point of value in the whole north-eastern frontier from Kashmir to Burma'. Younghusband believed the home government would accept the arrangement, if only to ensure regular payment of the indemnity.

But the cabinet was not prepared to confirm Younghusband's terms. On the contrary, it decided to hold him personally responsible for endangering the whole pattern of future relations with Russia. It repudiated the 'Separate Agreement' providing for an Agent in Tibet, reduced the indemnity by two thirds, and insisted that it be paid within three years.

Both Curzon and Younghusband had been defeated, mainly by a rapidly changing world. In fact, the Tibetan mission was to be the last great event in the tournament of shadows, in the century of cold war between the Russian and British empires. But it was not quite the end of the Great Game itself.

The end of the Game

WHILE THE British were voluntarily retreating from Lhasa, the Russians were suffering a series of disastrous defeats in the Far East. In February 1904 the Japanese attacked Russian naval vessels at Port Arthur in Russian Manchuria. The cause of the war was ostensibly a disagreement over the recognition of spheres of influence in China, but the Japanese were really fighting to establish their status as a Great Power, and at least part of the Russian motive for allowing negotiations to end in war was the desire of certain members of the Russian government, in the words of Plehve, the interior minister, for 'a short, victorious war that would stem the tide of revolution' in Russia itself. The effect of the Japanese victories was soon felt throughout the world. For colonial nationalists it seemed that at last Asia had stood up and repaid the West in its own violent currency. In Russia, revolutionaries saw nakedly revealed the hollowness of tsarist power. In London, the Conservative secretary of state for India thought the Japanese victories 'may exhaust Russia to a degree which will render her innocuous to us for many years to come'.

Another consequence of the Russian defeat was that that country turned towards Europe. When it did, it found a new Liberal administration in power in London, convinced that the Russian danger had passed. In August 1907 Britain and Russia came to a formal agreement on Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet, as a necessary prelude to the creation of the Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia. In Tibet, Britain and Russia acknowledged Chinese sovereignty and undertook to refrain from intervention; the Russians recognised that Afghanistan was securely within Britain's sphere of influence. As for Persia, it was virtually partitioned between the two parties, Russia getting the north with its oilfields and Britain the south and the warm-water ports of the Gulf. In the middle was left a buffer zone.

But the fears, the illusions, the ignorance of a hundred years of

cold war did not disappear with the placing of signatures on an agreement. The first world war and its consequences—which included the fall of the tsar and his replacement by the oligarchs of Soviet Communism—gave them new strength. Russian projects against India were still being rumoured—and attempts made to counter them—when Britain divided up her Indian empire between the successor states of India and Pakistan in 1947. The forty years from the Anglo-Russian agreement to the end of the empire saw much attention given to frontiers with China, then disintegrating under the pressure of internal anarchy and Japanese aggression. The British still had their supporters of a forward policy, but the government of India made little real attempt either to fully administer or properly define the northern borders of the empire. Perhaps it did not seem to matter. When China was weak, she could be more successfully threatened elsewhere than in the harsh and cruel wastes of the northern mountains. Fortunately for the British, they did not have to face the possibility of a powerful China, anxious—and able—to exorcise the humiliations of the past. In 1949 the Chinese People's Republic was inaugurated and in the following year was already making its power felt in Tibet.

The prime minister of the new republic of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, not only inherited the mantle of Lord Curzon but the fateful ambiguities of the Great Game. He, too, chose a forward policy, flourished inadequate maps and misleading precedents, the conclusions of romantic agents and armchair strategists, succumbed to the bellicosities of generals. In October 1962, the Chinese army crossed into north-eastern India in what many Indians in their panic believed to be an invasion that would not stop until it reached the Bay of Bengal. But the Chinese went no further than their own claim lines and then withdrew in an almost classic Great Game manoeuvre. Perhaps, after all, Kipling was right when he made Hurree Chunder Mookerjee say to Kim, the newly recruited player: 'When everyone is dead, the Great Game is finished. Not before'.

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