

Chapter 10

The Toils of War

George was not on holiday at Simla. He told Minto he was up at six every morning, soon after sunrise, and that he, Emily and Fanny would walk ‘up a hill and down again, or down a hill and up again, before breakfast’. At his desk by seven (he claimed), he worked steadily through until six, when it was time for the evening ride into the valleys. Letters went off by postal messenger or *dak* (pronounced ‘dawk’ by the drawling nineteenth-century British) to members of his Council in Calcutta, to Sir John Hobhouse at the Board of Control, to Henry Pottinger the Resident at Haiderabad, to John McNeill the British Envoy in Tehran, and to the secretaries who accompanied him. He did not correspond with Burnes at Kabul, since Burnes left there a few weeks after the Edens arrived at Simla.

George’s north-western policy had undergone a forced change since he left Calcutta. The idea that British commercial penetration of Central Asia might achieve political ends was clearly a non-starter. Burnes had been given some freedom to negotiate, but without diplomatic powers. Macnaghten had encouraged him to mediate between the Sikhs and Afghans about the return of Peshawar to Afghanistan, but when George learned in January 1838 that Dost Muhammad was making difficulties about the exchange he ordered Burnes to end the negotiations. Although Burnes liked Dost Muhammad and testified to his popularity as a ruler, British suspicion of the Dost was growing. As he was hostile to the Sikh empire, might he be conspiring with the Russians? Burnes had shared his Christmas dinner with an unofficial Russian agent, the Polish-born adventurer and Central Asian expert

Jan Witkiewicz, who, like him, was posing as a commercial envoy. The situation was doubly absurd, since Witkiewicz was not a Russian government spy but a freelance negotiator, who had been summoned by Dost Muhammad as a possible alternative source of help to Burnes. In Emily's simplistic interpretation of the story after she and George reached Simla, Witkiewicz became a battalion of Russian secret agents sent from St Petersburg to stir up trouble on 'our frontier', while others busied themselves 'egging on the Persians' at Herat.¹

The Persians had started besieging Herat in November 1837. Hostilities had intensified in April, and McNeill had threatened war on the Shah if Herat fell. He also implored George to intervene to frighten the Persians into calling off the siege, but again George was reluctant to send an army that far, and was aware of a non-interference clause in the current Anglo-Persian treaty. Macnaghten, mistrusting Dost Muhammad's territorial ambitions, had urged Burnes to confine him to ruling Kabul and make sure that both Herat and Kandahar stayed independent of the rest of Afghanistan. Yet when Burnes went to Kandahar and made the chiefs an unauthorized offer of East India Company troops and money for their defence in case Herat fell, George refused to confirm the offer. Burnes's failure to achieve a deal left him helpless and frustrated, and he was glad to be summoned to help Macnaghten on a diplomatic mission to the Punjab. Witkiewicz, encouraged by the Russian minister at Tehran, began urging Dost Muhammad to unite Kabul with Kandahar as a vassal state of the Persians and Russians.²

On his Simla hilltop George was distracted in several directions at once. On 1 May he wrote to Minto that there was trouble in Burma and Nepal as well as Afghanistan. Tharrawaddy, the self-made King of Ava, was poised to tear up the Treaty of Yandabo that had ended the first Anglo-Burmese War. There were rumours of disturbances within India and to the north-west. Envoys from Nepal had been stirring up unrest in the independent princely states, and observers feared a possible alliance between Nepal and the Punjab to reclaim the trade routes and territories the Gurkhas had lost in the Anglo-Nepal War.³ Afghanistan might be saved by British intervention and become a useful buffer state against the Persians and Russians, or it might turn out to be a dangerous toy that would blow up in the face of any army that was sent there. George was right to feel helpless when he commented to Minto, 'I have a menacing mess of politics to the west with which I have a very imperfect power of dealing'.⁴

Macnaghten had decided that the answer was a game of human chess. His principal piece was the unsavoury Shah Shuja-al-Mulk, the former Amir of Afghanistan, who had failed to win back his long-lost throne from Dost Muhammad in an attempt in 1834. After deposition by his next-youngest brother in 1809 he had been humiliated as a prisoner by Ranjit Singh, who had compelled him to give up the Koh-i-Noor diamond he had stolen during the sack of Delhi. (Emily would sketch this in Lahore, finding it 'very large but not very bright'.⁵ In London it would be reduced to almost half its size and polished into brightness.) Later, Shuja had settled comfortably into quarters in Ludhiana in the British protectorate of the south-eastern or cis-Sutlej Punjab. Thanks to his wife's cleverness and persistence he had secured an East India Company pension, which made him well-disposed towards his protectors. The British Resident in Ludhiana, Claude Wade, cynically disregarded Shuja's appalling private behaviour (when annoyed, he would order any servant within sight to be castrated or mutilated) and promoted him as a friend to the Sikhs and a potentially useful and legitimate replacement for Dost Muhammad. He was, after all, a Durrani, one of the historic Afghan dynasty whose members had been dethroning and murdering one another for generations, and was therefore less of an unknown quantity than the inscrutably independent, jumped-up Barakzai, Dost Muhammad.

It was Burnes's word against Wade's, but Burnes saw no future in continuing to defend Dost Muhammad or hoping to be able to offer him a treaty of mutual defence and support. At the end of April 1838, as he prepared to leave Kabul, preparations were made to include Ranjit Singh as a necessary participant in the game. A deputation of six Sikh chiefs and their fifty-two supporters set up camp above a precipice at Simla, in the first formal contact between the Sikhs and a Governor-General since Lord William Bentinck's historic meeting with Ranjit on the banks of the river Sutlej in October 1831. Prompted by Macnaghten, George intended to take things further than vague statements of mutual goodwill. The Sikhs were at Simla for ten days of diplomatic discussions before Macnaghten headed a mission to Ranjit at his summer palace at Adinagar, near Lahore.

The plan Macnaghten and Colvin had made for George was an unprecedented instance of frontier-creep. Herat was roughly 900 miles distant from the nearest part of the north-west frontier of British India, yet George now believed that distance would not deter the Russians if they once gained Herat, then decided to advance on

Kandahar. From there they might penetrate Baluchistan and Sind, threatening the Indus trade route which the Company had not yet abandoned. Alternatively, Dost Muhammad might invite them to Kabul, from which they might pounce on Peshawar and the imperial riches of Lahore before continuing eastwards to threaten the British.

Once George had been persuaded that Dost Muhammad was not to be trusted, removing him seemed the safest way of defending the north-west frontier. Reluctant to involve the Company's armies, he hoped to let others do the fighting, treating the perilous strategy of regime change as a local embroilment between Sikhs and Afghans. The operation, as initially planned, would be financed by the government of India but effected by Ranjit's supposedly well-disciplined forces, together with the private army of the deposed Shah Shuja, who would be restored to his throne once Dost Muhammad was beaten. British forces would garrison Shikarpur in Upper Sind, as much to keep Ranjit from seizing it as to provide a base for the invaders, but would take no part in invading Afghanistan. Once Shuja was re-enthroned, he would pay subsidies to Ranjit as the price of his support. George had explained the plan he and Macnaghten had discussed with the Sikh envoys in a minute to government of 12 May. Ranjit had so far fought shy of making a treaty with the British, and the deputation that went to meet him at Adinagar still had to sell him the plan.

Macnaghten's companions on the mission were the Military Secretary William Osborne, an aide-de camp, Captain George Macgregor, and Dr Drummond, who 'has left our little sparks of life to go out by themselves,' Emily joked to Charles Greville, 'because Runjeet was particularly anxious to be attended by the Governor-General's own physician.'⁶ Ranjit was, indeed, terminally ill, as the Edens would see in December. Claude Wade joined the delegation from Ludhiana to press the interests of his protégé Shah Shuja, and Burnes was there in an advisory capacity. Even as the delegation set off, George was unconvinced of the wisdom of Macnaghten's plan. Burnes told Charles Masson that, when he arrived at Simla, 'Torrens and Colvin came running to him and prayed him to say nothing to unsettle his lordship; that they had all the trouble in the world to get him into the business, and that even now he would be glad of any pretence to retire from it.'⁷ After weeks of prevarication equal to George's, including withdrawal to Lahore in the broiling June heat, Ranjit signed a treaty with the British, which, with Shuja as co-signatory, committed all three parties to war.

At Simla without Macnaghten, George was restless. Early in June Emily reported to Mary that ‘in the plentitude [*sic*] of his power’ (a phrase she liked so much, spelling and all, that she used it again to Charles Greville) he had ordered a small naval detachment to occupy Kharag island in the Persian Gulf.⁸ The warships were George’s responsibility since they came from Bombay. Sir John Hobhouse at the Board of Control was sympathetic, although the frequently bullish Foreign Secretary Palmerston was uneasy about provoking hostilities with Persia. (Getting even with Russia, Britain’s chief rival in the competition among the great powers, was another matter.) The occupation of Kharag seems to have made little difference, but Simla buzzed with speculation, and Emily was coolly evasive when asked what George would do next.

‘Pray, is it true, what we heard yesterday morning, that the Governor-General had said he would burn Herât if he could?’ I said it sounded plausible, as he probably did not wish Herât to fall into the enemy’s hands. ‘Well, but then we heard that the Governor-General had said in the afternoon, that he was against any warlike measures whatever; that contradicts the morning story.’ I recommended that they should always believe the afternoon anecdotes, because G. sees people in the morning, and he sees nobody after luncheon, so what he says to other people might be less than the truth, but that what he says to himself, in the afternoon, must clearly be the real state of the case.⁹

In private, however, she admitted to Charles Greville that her ‘whole heart [was] fixed on intelligence from Herat’ and on discovering whether Dost Muhammad had really sold out to the Persians and Russians. While ignorant of Dost Muhammad’s motives, she was as cynical as Wade about Shah Shuja, and explained that the government of India had always felt able to keep neighbouring countries in order by having

a large assortment of Pretenders, black Chevaliers de St. George, in store. They have had their eyes put out, or their children are in hostage, or the Usurper is their own brother [...] But still there they are, to the good. We have a Shah Shuja all ready to *lâcher* at Dost Muhammed if he does not behave

himself, and Runjeet is ready to join us in any enterprise of that sort. Still, all these *tendencies* towards war are always rather nervous work. You should employ yourself more assiduously in plucking Russia by the skirts and not allow him to come poking his face towards our little possessions. Whenever there is any important public measure to be taken, I always think George must feel his responsibility – no Ministers, no Parliament, and his Council, such as it is, down at Calcutta. To be sure, as you were going to observe, *if* he ever felt himself in any doubt, he *might* feel that he has my superior sense and remarkable abilities to refer to, but as it is, he has a great deal to answer for by himself.¹⁰

It's clear from this that, while feeling anxious for George, she was also fascinated by the extent of his power. She had been reading his dispatches and having 'a great deal to write and to copy' for him.¹¹ But in trying to impress Charles Greville she had got one important thing wrong. Shah Shuja was intended not simply as a threat to Dost Muhammad, but as a replacement for him. Sir Henry Fane then insisted that the current plan would not work; the 5,000 men Ranjit Singh had promised would be too few to invade Afghanistan effectively, let alone relieve Herat. The British must, after all, be militarily involved.

Emily broke the news to Lord Minto with her usual blend of perceptiveness and self-conscious archness.

We go down to our detestable tents the 5th of Nov^r. I wish Guy Fawkes' ghost would blow them all up before we arrive – it would be an act of humanity [...] Have you been able to turn your mind enough to India to be aware that poor dear peaceful George has gone to war – rather an inconsistency in his character. I live in hopes that if we *preserve* India a grateful country cannot do less than make George Earl of Caubul & Fanny & me the Lady Afghans [...] I have a map of my own of what is to be the seat of war – & have a very clear notion of the importance of Herat & almost enter into the feelings of a Lady here whose husband is ordered on service & who says it is a great shame to order the troops away – & to leave Simlah to be taken by the *Prussians* & Russians.¹²

* * *

In spite of the frivolity she injected into letters to men friends about matters of state, Emily rose responsibly to her position at Simla. Once a week she and George gave a formal dinner for local residents and new arrivals. She also gave dances, coping with the fact that women almost always outnumbered men, and with the racism that curdled the atmosphere when she gave a farewell ball for the Sikh envoys. On that occasion she asked Isabella Fane ('Miss R' in *Up the Country*) to invite the Simla ladies, and learned on the morning of the ball that the ladies had unanimously agreed to refuse. Both she and Isabella reacted briskly to this demonstration of knee-jerk prejudice.

Considering that we ask forty natives to every dance we give in Calcutta, and that nobody ever cares, it was late to make any objection; and Miss [Fane] said that she begged to say that being in deep mourning, and not naturally a dancer, she meant to dance every quadrille, if there was any difficulty about it, just to show what she thought of their nonsense.

In the end all but three of the ladies were persuaded to change their minds, and they and the Sikhs danced seven or eight quadrilles in the tight space available, giving the aides-de-camp a break from their usual duty as partners. 'Two of them [the Sikhs] had seen English dancing before, and were aware that the ladies were ladies, and not nautch-girls,' Emily wrote,

and I hope they explained that important fact to the others [...] I own, when some of the dancers asked for a waltz, which is seldom accomplished, even in Calcutta, I was afraid the Sikhs might have been a little astonished; and I think Govind Jus gave Golaub Singh a slight nudge as General K— whisked past with his daughter; but I dare say they thought it pretty.^{13*}

* 'Pretty' was a favourite, dispassionately approving term that the Edens used in India to mean anything from attractive to harmless.

Many of the British in India, including the Simla ladies, were also prejudiced against people of mixed race. Clerks in government employment were known as the ‘uncovenanted service’ – ‘one of our choicest Indianisms, accompanied by our very worst Indian feelings,’ Emily remarked. Some of the clerks were disadvantaged Europeans, but most of them were of mixed race, and a mixture of racism and class snobbery kept them in a permanently inferior social position. In the 1833 debate about the charter renewal, Lord Ellenborough had expressed his distrust of mixed-race employees in comparison with pure-blooded ‘natives’. In Calcutta mixed-race people were segregated from whites at the theatre and were never invited to Government House.¹⁴

The aides-de-camp and other officers had planned to put on a series of plays at Simla for the benefit of the starving inhabitants of the famine districts. When several intending actors cancelled, members of the uncovenanted service offered to step in and take their parts. Although Emily found much of their acting absurd and clumsy, and certain of the more snobbish Simla residents made a point of staying away, George lent his military band to accompany the performances and he, Fanny and Emily turned out to lead the applause.¹⁵

Then, in September 1838, preparations were made for a charity sale of fancy goods in the Annandale clearing just outside Simla. Emily broke with convention by suggesting that she should invite the wives of the uncovenanted service to send in contributions.

This was rather a shock to the aristocracy of Simla, and they did suggest that some of the wives were very black. That I met by the argument that the black would not come off on their works, and upon the whole it was considered that we should not lose consequence, and might be saved trouble, by sending a printed paper round to each of their houses.¹⁶

So a tiny victory was won for racial equality, while the pure-blooded Simla ladies and the mixed-race wives remained at arm’s length from one another, as before.

* * *

There had been no room at Simla for the ten-mile-long military and baggage procession that had supported the Governor-General’s party on the march. The cavalry and artillery regiments, bullock-carts,