

## AN ENGLISHWOMAN PRISONER IN AFGHANISTAN

LADY SALE AT KABUL (1842).

ON the 23rd of August of last year Afghanistan celebrated, as usual, the anniversary of her independence by brilliant festivities in the suburbs of Kabul. *L'illustration* reproduced a photograph, brought by air, of the new Sovereign, the Emir Habib-Ullah, dressed in national costume and surrounded by members of his government.

Exactly eighty-six years before, the same Review had reproduced on its first page the portrait of an Englishwoman who had witnessed the barbarous revolt at Kabul and who had been imprisoned by Akbar-Khan for many long months.

Time rolls on, and history repeats itself. To-day, as yesterday, Afghanistan stands out as the country pre-eminently noted for riots and civil wars. Hardly are the last speeches ended, the last dances over than the news of the march on Kabul led by the rebel general Nadir-Khan, and the probable assassination of Habib-Ullah is blazoned abroad.

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It is evening in Kabul in November, 1841. The crowd slowly moves through the Char-Chuk, the Grand Bazaar, now lighted up. Each shop has its suspended lamp forming a circle of stars scintillating under the dark vaults of the arcades. They are all there, merchants selling silks and embroidered stuffs, engravers of seals and stamps, harness makers, manufacturers of rhinoceros skin shields, painters, cooks hastily preparing the famous *Kabobs*, elaborate meat

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dishes—specialities of Kabul—bakers still cooking thin cakes against the sides of the oven besieged by a horde of late-comers. Everywhere the strife between light and darkness throws up the colours more vividly and deepens the darkness. In the goldsmiths' quarter the light sparkles on the gems of the massive rings and gold filigree work, in the quarter of the shoemakers and saddlers it enhances the brilliant symphony of red and tawny leather. And above all the marvellous quarter where Kabul, city of a thousand fruits, spreads out, piles up, and is inundated with the treasures of the numberless orchards that surround it. Kabul, the city of grapes, where during six months of the year the scent of the vintage and the intoxicating odour of the wine-press pervade every lane and alley. The rising tide of the berries breaks into foam over the market, little children are stained to the cheeks with vermilion till they seem to be painted, stray dogs, even the cattle themselves, swollen, replete, gorged, stamp about in the mass of ripe fruit, while from the ground arises the acrid odour of fermentation. It is doubtful if the merchants of *jalodeh* still offer the cooling jelly of melted snow and the juice of fruits; or if the hawkers of wild rhubarb, with their strident voices, any longer importune the passer-by.

Summer is passing; but around the piles of fresh nuts, of pipless pomegranates and pears of Samarkand the stream of buyers flows on ever more and more swiftly. Elphinstone, the traveller, had previously written from Kabul saying that 'fruit is more plentiful than bread.'

However, on this evening the quarter occupied by the armourers distinctly attracted the people, who were fascinated by the knives and dirks brandished by some black-bearded soothsayer puffing his wares. Suddenly the spectators were shaken by a sort of eddy or current, a whispering passed, increased, died down

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and vanished. What was happening? Nothing. From the top storey where the merchants lodged, a woman leaned, a white form closely veiled; she could distinguish in the distance the immense turban of a mullah, a blue neckerchief draped across his shoulders, a staff in his hand and a large law book under his arm; accompanied by gaunt disciples, he was returning from some pious expedition.

At his approach the ranks opened, certainly something strange had happened. Then a man came running, he wore puffed-out breeches, a shirt with wide sleeves and a cap shaped like a Uhlán's, in gold brocade with a black peak. What was he saying? Akbar-Khan is marching on Kabul? Akbar-Khan, whose father had been driven from the throne by the English, to be replaced by an Afghan who was more submissive and more trustworthy. In the old market place a low rumble arose from the tumult, then all was still.

The last lamps burned down; outside the walls the English camp reposed silently in the darkness, little by little the last rumours died away. The twin fortresses of Balahissar standing on their rocky height could hardly be distinguished; a dog passed along the little bridge called Pul-Mesten. Thus slept Kabul on the eve of the revolution.

In the morning three hundred insurgents laid siege to the house of an Englishman, Sir Alexander Burnes, killing him and several officers who were his guests and setting fire to the house. Truly the hour was favourable to the rebellion.

On the 12th of October General Elphinstone, commander of the English forces, had sent Major-General Sir Robert Sale at the head of a brigade to force the defiles of Khurd Kabul, which assured communication with India; these defiles had been closed by the Ghilzais chiefs in spite of a well-paid agreement. He was without accurate news of the expedition and had taken

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no measures against a sudden attack. Akbar Khan's hatred was enduring and merciless. At Kabul the street fighting waxed fast and furious; every door was an ambush, every window a trap. Elphinstone, rather anxious as to the turn the fighting might take, ordered the troops to retreat to their cantonment.

In the *Annual Register* for 1842 appears the following severe criticism: 'The situation of this cantonment had been chosen in defiance of the most elementary prudence and common sense.' The walls were crumbling, the advance posts isolated by the Kabul river, provisions and munitions were shut up in a disaffected part impossible to defend. It seemed as if the Commander-in-Chief had lost his head in face of the invasion of the camp by thousands of refugees, amongst whom were the wife, daughter, and son-in-law of General Sale.

A riot at Kabul is a very ordinary occurrence, and it astonishes no one. There are, in fact, certain parts of the world whose destiny is to be a zone of influence. As a watch tower, a cross-road of nations, a sentinel of civilisation, Afghanistan, in its fortress of mountains behind its rampart of rocks, menaces at once the roads to Persia and the frontier of India, thus inevitably becoming the lists where the ambitions of the Asiatic Powers, Great Britain and Russia, would confront each other.

The first English travellers, Forster at the end of the eighteenth century, then Elphinstone during the time of Napoleon's Oriental schemes, and later still Burnes, thwarting the intrigues of the agents of the Tsar, had penetrated as far as Peshawar, and even into the heart of the mysterious Afghan country. Naturally, they all wrote accounts of their travels: Elphinstone recalling 'the rain which falls without intermittence in England' (is this said in good faith?), says: 'such rain is unknown in most Asiatic coun-

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tries.' Burnes extols the exquisite flavour of the fruits of Kabul and the immorality of its women.

For years past the Governor General of India had been passionately interested in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, replacing monarchs as if they were worn-out clothing and imposing upon the country more yielding claimants, such as Shah Shujah, against whom Akbar-Kan had arisen. But if the Afghan is not possessed of the national spirit, he has the nostalgia of independence. To politics as to business affairs he applies his two favourite precepts: 'Each one eats of the fruits of the earth which belongs to him,' and the following, more exclusive still: 'No one shares anything with his neighbour.' So when the English yoke was becoming too heavy, revolt threatened. Suddenly yells pierced the air, and arms were raised in an access of fury and hate which had imprudently been set at defiance.

Truly the account of those November days in 1841 at Kabul seems to date from yesterday. In the East, especially, nothing changes. Whether he be called Akbar Khan or Bakri Sakao, whether he be an heir of the fallen monarch or a dictator sprung from the exasperated people, one can easily guess whose hand raises or overthrows the State puppets and whose will guides the political intrigues. Only, sometimes, the issue is unexpected. 'It is of vital importance that the prestige of England's name should not be diminished in India by any reverses.'

Now 1842 was not only a disaster for Great Britain, it was a recoil for Europe and a warning to Asia. Lady Sale was a witness of this disaster, and she dared to call it by its true name: *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan*; which is the title of the book published in London in 1843. Who, then, can maintain that the word *disasters* is banished historically from the British vocabulary?

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Behold, therefore, the English camp besieged by the rebels; the Fort of the Commissariat, holding reserves of provisions and munitions, was lost, and the situation appeared to be hopeless. Sir William Macnaghten, who had been commanded to negotiate an honourable armistice, failed, and on December 11th General Elphinstone, overwhelmed, was forced to sign the capitulation. The English retired later, safe and sound, to India, but they evacuated the whole of Afghanistan never to return. Nevertheless, Akbar Khan felt, arising from the depth of his being, the hate accumulated by years of humiliation; he meant to fight without quarter, but he feigned to renew negotiations to enable the English to stay there till the Spring.

On December 23rd came an unexpected blow. Macnaghten and Trevor, who had been sent as peace envoys, were treacherously killed, their heads were sent to Kabul, and their bodies exposed to the insults of the populace in the Grand Bazaar. Had not General Elphinstone grasped the fact that his troops, his sepoy, his officers and himself were already worsted? He furnished arms to the enemy, he agreed to deliver up all his cannons, with the exception of six, and to retire immediately. After sixty days of fusillade, of assault, of useless sorties, after sixty days of thirst and of hunger, on January 6th, 1842, the British Army left the ruined camp.

This defeat caused shame and anguish to Lady Sale. She was entirely without news of her husband, but she knew that if he were still alive he would not lay down his arms. The sky was clear, crystalline, icy, the sun glittering but giving out no heat; snow was everywhere, splendid snow dazzling, alarming, rising like a shroud under the hoofs of the horses. Was this an army in retreat? No, far from it, only a throng of fugitives, among them shivering women

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and children, and only five thousand soldiers to protect this horde in distress, menaced by the earth and the cold, for they had neither bread, tea, fire, nor tents, when all the rigour of winter suddenly descended upon them. The next day, when the sun rose, hostile as ever, men and women still lay upon the frozen ground in a sleep so deep that no noise of cannon could disturb nor awaken them. As in the retreat from Moscow, the army, pressed hard by an invisible foe, crumbled away in the snowy solitudes, leaving behind it a train of the dying, whose sufferings were ended by the long knives of the Ghilzais; and a trail of dead half devoured by prowling beasts. The sepoys burnt their clothes to warm their hands for the last time at a cheerful blaze.

Then Akbar Khan re-appeared. The English troops were about to enter the famous defiles of Khurd Kabul, through which the river flows in a restricted course through perpendicular ramparts of rock. He offered an escort and promised security. General Elphinstone, whose over-confidence or whose optimism one hardly knows which to admire more, sent three of his officers, Captains Pottinger, Mackenzie, and Lawrence, as hostages. But hardly had they entered the gorge when the soldiers were greeted with a fusillade. Each rock hid a sniper, every ridge was guarded by the enemy, men fell, children screamed, and women ran like mad to the edge of the precipices. Lady Sale's son-in-law was mortally wounded, she herself received a bullet in the shoulder and her long cloak was pierced through and through. At night, when the unfortunate survivors prepared to set up their tents, they found that five thousand of their number were missing.

Akbar Khan, emboldened, proposed to take the women and children under his protection and to conduct them to a place of safety. Besides this, he de-

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manded, so that the remnant of the English Army might be spared, three new hostages, one of whom must be the Commander-in-Chief. Elphinstone, having no more cannon, gave up the struggle; and Lady Sale, her daughter and Lady Macnaghten, the widow of the officer who had been assassinated, were among the prisoners.

From this time the English soldier was the prey of the Afghan, he entrapped him, followed on his track, harassed him without ceasing, then suddenly came the butchery of Jugdulluk. The only survivor, Dr. Brydon, reached Jalalabad and broadcast to the world the terrible disaster.

Now, Jalalabad had been held by General Sale since November 15th. Faithfully executing the instructions he had received, he forced the passes of Khurd Kabul, where he was wounded, made himself master of the town, and fortified himself inside its crumbling walls. Within a few days he had again built up the ramparts, dug moats, fortified the gates, and erected breastworks; and already the fortress was blockaded by the insurgents. Then bad news came as a flight of awesome birds. On January 13th Dr. Brydon, fainting and appalled, dragged himself as far as Jalalabad to inform the General that the Army of Kabul had been annihilated, and that Lady Sale and her daughter were in the hands of the victor. Two days later he heard of the defeat of Major Wild in the Khyber Passes, and the retreat of the troops who had come from India to relieve the town. It was then that an Afghan chief transmitted to him General Elphinstone's order to deliver up the fortress and evacuate the country.

Life creates far more tragic situations than the most ably constructed novel can present. Is it possible to imagine nights comparable with those General Sale



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passed through in anguish and suspense? He knew he could depend upon no one, that he could expect no relief, and he questioned the worth of the order transmitted by the enemy. Was it voluntary or forced? And, on the other hand, what confidence could be placed in Akbar Khan, the shameless butcher of soldiers, to whom he had promised protection? The life of the prisoners was in his hands, the life of his wife, whom he had not seen for many long months, and the life of his daughter, already a widow. It was then that he became acutely sensible of the full meaning of the words 'My country,' and the General knew that he had not the right to abandon the fortress which was the key of the Afghan Passes. His decision was made, he would hold on.

History is only a perpetual recommencement. Many years later, during the campaign in Cilicia, another man had to undergo the same strain of responsibility. It was in the Spring of 1919. Major Mesnil, who has justly been called the hero of Bozanti, while besieged in the town, learnt that his wife, a Red Cross nurse, had been taken prisoner with the ambulances. The Turks, in hope of a more favourable surrender, had tried to force her to intervene. She had refused. At the parley when they came to warn him, and perhaps to threaten him, the Major replied: 'I am here by command. I shall defend myself. Nothing else concerns me.'

Meanwhile, Lady Sale, shut up in Tighree on the border of the rich valleys of Laghman, and later in Buddecabad, the impregnable fortress, had succeeded in communicating with her husband. She was alive, she besought him to defend Jalalabad to the last without thinking of her safety, for she preferred death to dishonour. The days were long for the unhappy captives cut off from the world. General Elphinstone was there, ill and depressed, and not destined to sleep

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his last sleep in a Christian land; the officer-hostages too, and women and children and Lady Macnaghten's little cat. They were wondering anxiously if the insurrection had been successful, or if Great Britain had renewed the campaign. On April 11th they were brutally transferred to Zanduh, where thirty-four of them were huddled together pell-mell into a room twenty-five yards square. One evening a far-off rumbling was heard; was it the cannon of the English, or cannon captured by the enemy? There was fighting going on down there . . . they listened intently, the noise came nearer—and then once more the silence of a sleeping land.

The English had not been inactive. Jelalabad continued to resist in spite of an earthquake which had destroyed all the works of defence. 'It is like a romance,' wrote General Sale, 'we have felt a hundred shocks in less than a month.' Then Akbar Khan himself came to attack the town. The Governor-General of India had been recalled, and hardly had Lord Ellenborough landed when he gave General Nicholls, Commander-in-Chief of the British troops, orders to concentrate his forces on Peshawar. Major Wild was rejoined by General Pollock, who was going to try to relieve Jalalabad. But he would be obliged to force the famous Khyber Passes, of which twenty-two miles out of twenty-eight were reputed to be insurmountable. 'The path winds above a frightful precipice somewhat similar to the Corridors that cross the Simplon.' On April 5th, at half-past three in the morning, General Pollock, who had only received half of his effective force, and who had only four thousand men at his disposal, began the march forward. Two flying columns scaled the ridges. *The Annual Register* proudly notes that this was the first time in history that an army had forced its way through these terrible defiles. Nadir Shah himself,

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the great Persian conqueror of India, had been obliged to buy the passage.'

The very day that Pollock's troops began the offensive, spies from the Afghan camp brought to Jalalabad the news that the English Army had been routed and was retreating on Peshawar. The General was incredulous. But before long, salvos of artillery resounded, and the flares of great bonfires split the darkness; the enemy camp was celebrating the victory. Then Sale ordered the last attack. At dawn the whole of the garrison, divided into three columns, hurled themselves upon the camp, and Akbar Khan abandoned his cavalry's colours and the cannons that had been given up by General Elphinstone, and his war material, and raised the siege. On April 15th Pollock's soldiers arrived before Jalalabad.

Dysentery and fever kept the Army there till the middle of August. Akbar Khan tried to negotiate an exchange of hostages, but the only answer he received from the English was a renewed offensive, and the insurgents promptly fell back on Kabul. An arduous campaign was before Sale's troops, for they had to cross the defiles in the contrary direction.

Meanwhile, where were the prisoners? They were in the fort of Ali Mohammed; Lady Sale was first shut up in a stable and then in the apartments of the favourite wives, which, to tell the truth, made little change for her. The crackling of the fusillade now began. Pollock's army was approaching; so on August 25th she was removed to a new gaol at Bamekan. 'That horrible, half-ruined' fortress.' But the commander of the citadel was an opportunist and the triumphant march of the English incited him to come to terms with the prisoners. In the East money opens every door. On September 11th a Council of War was held in Lady Sale's room, and in an hour all was settled; the Afghan engaged to fight Akbar Khan for

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the price of twenty thousand rupees and an appreciable monthly payment, but he insisted upon the agreement being signed in the Name of Christ. What mistrust in his menaced God!

The standard of revolt, white bordered with red and fringed with green, floated over the battlements. Lady Sale wrote to her husband, saying: 'We shall hold on till we receive relief, even though we should be obliged to eat rats and mice, of which the fort is full.' But is it possible for a renegade to be a very faithful defender? Hope ran high during those summer nights—warm Asiatic nights, when horsemen prowled under the walls, friends or foes—who could tell? Then came rumours of another insurrection at Kabul, of the flight of Akbar Khan, of the advance of Pollock and Notts arriving by forced marches from Kandahar. Out of patience the prisoners decided to try to reach the English outposts at the risk of being attacked by fugitives, and seven days later, after a year's separation, Lady Sale was in the arms of her husband. The soldiers hurried, with shouts of welcome, to meet the wife and daughter of their General, the mountain artillery saluted them with repeated salvos, and the officers presented arms.

Here the Memoirs of the Englishwoman come to an end. But we recall the rest; the pitiless repression, Istalif, the stronghold of Kohistan, taken by assault and given up to two days' pillage and death; Kabul burnt down; the Grand Bazaar in flames after the departure of the English; Jalalabad devastated, its ruins henceforth fit only to be 'dens of jackals.'

Lord Ellenborough had given out a somewhat curious proclamation, inspired, no doubt, by the Lawrences of that day, which showed the depths of British altruism in matters colonial: 'The Governor General leaves it to the Afghans themselves to organise their own Government in the midst of the anarchy which is

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the natural consequence of their crimes. To constrain a sovereign to reign over a rebellious people would be incompatible with the politics and the principles of the English Government; in so doing it would thus put at the disposal of the first agitator the arms and resources of this people, and would impose upon itself the burden of aiding a prince without hope or benefit of his alliance.'

The English Army evacuated the country, stumbling over the dead, 'crushed like vermin.'

Doubtless those who have been assassinated and who lie rotting in the mountain ravines should be avenged, but the *Annual Register* asks: 'Is this how a Christian nation makes war?' And an English writer acknowledges that 'Our route was scarred by fire and blood, nothing escaped us, enemies and friends—at least friends, they styled themselves—suffered the same fate. For years to come the English name will be execrated in Afghanistan.'

You must certainly not expect to find in the *Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan* any profound views of history nor any keen psychological analysis. An Isabel Eberhardt might be capable of touching lightly in the incoherent pages of a journal 'upon everything by which her spirit lives.' But the soul of Lady Sale remains a stranger to us; she is too objective, she relates, but she does not relate enough. There is no doubt that she was a witness of important events, but she was also an actor in those events and we should like to know more about herself.

She was characteristically English. To live in Kabul in 1841 was almost a substitute for sport. . . . Lady Sale adapted herself to it and did not complain. She was a born traveller, she had courage, a good digestion and a good temper; she liked picturesque detail and a cheerful atmosphere; above all she had a sense of fair play, a strong sense of justice. Why

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charge the enemy with imaginary grievances when their real grievances were all sufficient?

Dirt, lack of water, swarming vermin, coarse food, stale butter, rancid oil, no forks, bad mutton, tramps under sun and rain, sordid quarters, all that is War! And, she adds philosophically, 'Were the women of the country better treated than we were?' Hers was the heroic smile of courage.

What strange pen pictures of manners and customs she manages to portray in her vivid but unexaggerated sketches! It was certainly she who first introduced Afghan women into the fashionable world of Europe. Her sincere portraiture calls up our imagination and those thick-set matrons with their thousand sticky plaits on which the gum has left shiny traces, with their queer faces to which the painted and excessively enlarged eyebrows give a broadened effect, with their hands coloured red, as if they had been dipped in fresh blood. We can see the young girls wearing white trousers, and their long hair, flowing over their eyes, gives them the most sullen and repulsive appearance possible.

'The favourite wife,' she writes, 'was the best dressed, she wore a dress of Kabul silk of inferior quality, and draped over the back, no doubt for the sake of economy, with a chintz apron. This dress resembled our nightdresses and was ornamented here and there with gold and silver coins or with pieces of the same metals cut into various shapes.'

Then suddenly we have our reward for a long perusal; only a small, unimportant phrase, but one that Lady Sale dated from her prison on May 10th, 1842: 'What are our lives when placed in the balance with the honour of our country? Not that I ardently desire to have my throat cut; on the contrary, I hope to live long enough to see English arms again triumphant

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in Afghanistan.' Is not a nation made up of small fragments of private journals such as this?

The renown of one who was called 'the heroine of the retreat of Afghanistan,' and who died ten years later at the Cape, where she had lived on a pension accorded her by Queen Victoria, spread far across the frontiers. In France a review, *L'Illustration*, which had just been started and was bringing out its first numbers, devoted a leading article to her on July 1st, 1843. Her portrait is there, her dress with bodice tight to the neck, and cleverly-fitted sleeves; her 1840 face with hair meekly parted in the middle and crowned with a loose turban, her only concession to Oriental taste. To have crossed the Passes of Khurd Kabul in this garb was more than heroic.

At the present time, when King Amanullah has left Afghan territory with his treasures, and with regret, when Kabul slumbers in factitious quietude, as the former riots slumbered at night, it is interesting to run through history to re-read Lady Sale's opinion of that Akbar Khan, predecessor of Bakri-Sakao and of Nadir Khan, but who could not succeed because he had not heeded the proximity of India, where Great Britain was on guard: 'If he had cut our army to pieces in open country or in the defiles, or by whatever stratagem he had employed to surprise it, he would have been the William Tell of Afghanistan, because he would have delivered his country from a hateful yoke imposed upon it by infidels. Instead of which he assassinated a plenipotentiary; he treated with his enemies and betrayed them; he massacred under their eyes a thousand men and women, dying of hunger and cold whom he had promised to feed and protect . . . his name will remain under eternal opprobrium.'

This is real hatred! The tone is merciless, but there are no hidden motives, no reservations; it would have saddened the officers of the Intelligence Service,

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but it delights us because it shows us the portrait of Lady Sale, the true one, not the one given by *L'illustration*. And, as sometimes happens, we impart to her a face which is perhaps more real than her own, a calm face with light, fearless eyes. She was genuine, she remained herself in misfortune, and simplicity is even more rare than courage.

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