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John Kaye and George Bruce Malleeson

Excerpt

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HISTORY OF THE INDIAN MUTINY.

BOOK IV.—THE RISING IN THE NORTH-WEST.

[MAY, 1857.]

CHAPTER I.

THE DEHLI HISTORY.

It was a work of time at Calcutta to elicit all the details of the sad story briefly outlined in the preceding chapter. But the great fact was patent to Lord Canning that the English had been driven out of Dehli, and that, for a time, in that great centre of Muhammadanism, the dynasty of the Mughul Family was restored. The tremendous political significance of this revolution could not be misunderstood by the most obtuse, or glossed over by the most sanguine. The Emperors of Dehli had long ceased to exercise any substantial authority over the people whom they had once governed. For fifty years the Master of the Dehli Palace had been, in the estimation of the English, merely a pageant and a show. But the pageantry, the show, the name, had never ceased to be living influences in the minds of the princes and people of India. Up to a comparatively recent period all the coin of India had borne the superscription of the Mughul; and the chiefs of India, whether Muhammadan or Hindu had still continued to regard the sanction given to their successions by that shadow of royalty, as something more assuring than any recognition which could come from the substance of the British Government. If the Empire of Dehli had passed into a tradition, the tradition was still an honoured one. It had sunk deeply into the memories of the people.

Lord Canning
and the Dehli
question.

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Doubtful, before, of the strength of these influences, Lord Canning now began to suspect that he had been misinformed. In the preceding year, he had mastered the whole Dehli history, and he knew full well the peculiar circumstances which at that period made it so perilous that the Imperial Family should be appealed to in aid of the national cause. He saw before him, in all their length and breadth, the incidents of family intrigue, which imparted a vigorous individuality to the hostility of the Mughul. He knew that the chief inmates of the palace had never been in a mood of mind so little likely to resist the temptations now offered to them. He knew that the old King himself, and his favourite wife who ruled him, had been for some time cherishing animosities and resentments which rendered it but too likely that on the first encouraging occasion they would break into open hostility against the usurping Englishman, who had vaulted into the seat of the Mughul, reduced him to a suppliant, and thwarted him in all the most cherished wishes of his heart.

With as much brevity as may suffice to make the position clear, the Dehli story must be told. The old King, Bahádur Sháh, whose sovereignty had been proclaimed, was the second in descent from the Emperor Sháh Álam, whom, blind, helpless, and miserable, the English had rescued from the gripe of the Maráthás,* when at the dawn of the nineteenth century the armies of Lake and Wellesley broke up their powerful confederacy, and scattered the last hopes of the French. Sháh Álam was the great-grandson of Aurungzib, the tenth successor in a direct line from Taimur, the great founder of the dynasty of the Mughuls. Even in the depths of his misery and humiliation, he was regarded by the most magnificent of English viceroys as a mighty potentate, whom it was a privilege to protect, and sacrilege to think of supplanting. The "great game" of Lord Wellesley embraced nothing so stupendous as the usurpation of the Imperial throne. Perhaps it was, as his brother Arthur

* Lord Lake's first interview with him is thus officially described in the records of the day: "In the magnificent palace built by Sháh Jahán the Commander-in-Chief was ushered into the royal presence and found the unfortunate and venerable Emperor, oppressed by the accumulated calamities of old age and degraded authority, extreme poverty and loss of sight, seated under a small tattered canopy, the remnant of his royal state, with every external appearance of the misery of his condition."

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1804-5.] LORD WELLESLEY AND SHÁH ÁLAM. 3

and John Malcolm declared, and as younger men suspected and hinted, that the Governor-General, worn out by the oppositions and restrictions of the Leadenhall-street Government, and broken in health by the climate of Calcutta, had lost his old daring and cast aside his pristine ambition. Perhaps it was believed by him and by his associates in the Council Chamber that it would be sounder policy, tending more to our own grandeur in the end, to gather gradual strength from this protective connexion with the Emperor, before endeavouring to walk in the pleasant paths of imperialism. But, in either case, he recoiled from the thought of its being suspected in England, that he wished to place the East India Company, substantively or vicariously, on the throne of the Mughuls. "It has never," he wrote to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors, June 2, 1805, "been in the contemplation of this Government to derive from the charge of protecting and supporting his Majesty the privilege of employing the Royal Prerogative as an instrument of establishing any control or ascendancy over the States and Chieftains of India, or of asserting on the part of his Majesty any of the claims which, in his capacity of Emperor of Hindustan, his Majesty may be considered to possess upon the provinces originally composing the Mughul Empire. The benefits which the Governor-General in Council expected to derive from placing the King of Dehli and the Royal Family under the protection of the British Government, are to be traced in the statement contained in our despatch to your Honourable Committee of the 13th of July, 1804,* relative to the evils and embarrassments to which the British power might have been exposed by the prosecution of claims and pretensions on the part of the Máráthas, or of the French, in the name and under the authority of his Majesty, Sháh Álam, if the person and family of that unhappy monarch had continued

* The objects are thus enumerated in the despatch to which reference is made: "The deliverance of the Emperor Sháh Álam from the control of the French power established in the North-West quarter of Hindustan, by which the Government of France has been deprived of a powerful instrument in the eventual prosecution of its hostile designs against the British Government in India, and the British Government has obtained a favourable opportunity of conciliating the confidence and securing the applause of surrounding states by providing a safe and tranquil asylum for the declining age of that venerable and unfortunate monarch, and a suitable maintenance for his numerous and distressed family."—*July 13, 1804.*

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THE DEHLI HISTORY.

[1804-5.]

under the custody and control of those powers, and especially of the French.

It must have taxed the ingenuity of Lord Wellesley, even with the experienced guidance and assistance of Sir George Barlow and Mr. Edmonstone, to design a scheme for the continuance or restoration of the Empire on a small scale—a scheme whereby Sháh Álam might become more than a pensioner, a pageant, and a puppet, and yet less than the substance of a sovereign. He was to be a King and yet no King—a something and yet nothing—a reality and a sham at the same time. It was a solace to us, in the “great game,” to know that we “held the King;” but it was a puzzle to us how to play the card. It was, indeed, a great political paradox, which Lord Wellesley’s Government was called upon to institute; and he did the best that could be done, in the circumstances in which he was placed, to reconcile not only the House of Taimur, but the people who still clung reverentially to the great Muhammadan dynasty, to the state of things which had arisen out of those circumstances. It was determined that a certain amount of that dignity, which is derived from territorial dominion, should still be attached to the person of the Emperor; that within certain limits he should still be the fountain of justice; and that (negatively) within those limits the power of life or death should be in his hands. And, in addition to the revenues of the districts thus reserved as an appanage of the Throne, he and his family were to receive stipendiary allowances amounting to more than a hundred thousand pounds a year.

Thus the Emperor of all the Indies—the Great Mughul, traditionally the grandest sovereign in the Universe—became, whilst still indued with the purple and the gold of imperial state, and rejoicing in the appearance of territorial dominion, virtually a pensioner of a Company of Merchants. The situation was one which conferred many advantages on the British Government in India, but it was not without its dangers. Even in the depths of his misery and degradation, the King’s name was a pillar of strength; the rags of royalty were revered by the people. And Lord Wellesley saw clearly that if the ancestral State of the Mughul were perpetuated—if he were left to reside in the Palace of Sháh Jahán, with all the accompaniments of his former grandeur around him, in the midst of a Muhammadan population still loyal to the House of Taimur—there might

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1806.]

AKBAR SHÁH AND MR. SETON.

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some day be an attempt to reconstruct the ruined monarchy in the person of one of Sháh Álam's successors, which might cause us grievous annoyance. So it was proposed that Mungér should become the residence of the Imperial Family. But the old King shuddered at the thought of removal, and the shudder ran through his family, from the oldest to the youngest, male and female, relatives and dependants. Not, therefore, to inflict any further pain or humiliation upon them, Lord Wellesley consented that they should abide in the Dehli Palace. At some future time their removal might be effected without any cruel divulsions, any of those strainings and crackings of the heart-strings, which must attend the exodus of Princes born in the purple, with the memory of actual sovereignty still fresh within them.

In December, 1806, Sháh Álam died, and was succeeded by his son, Akbar Sháh. It happened that the English officer, who at that time represented the British Government at Dehli, was a courtier of the old school, whose inveterate politeness of speech and manner had ample scope for exercise at the ex-imperial Court. Mr. Seton would have died rather than hurt the feelings of the humblest denizen of the Palace. In the caricatures of the period he was represented saluting Satan with a low bow, and hoping that his Majesty was well and prosperous. Associated at this time, in a subordinate capacity with Mr. Seton, but much trusted, and consulted by him with the deference shown to an equal in age and position, was young Charles Metcalfe, who, although little more than a boy, saw clearly the store of future trouble which the British Government was laying up for itself by not curbing the pretensions of the now effete Mughul. "I do not conform," he wrote, "to the policy of Seton's mode of managing the Royal Family. It is by a submission of manner and conduct, carried on, in my opinion, far beyond the respect and attention which can be either prescribed by forms or dictated by a humane consideration for the fallen fortunes of a once illustrious family. It destroys entirely the dignity which ought to be attached to him who represents the British Government, and who in reality is to govern at Dehli; and it raises (I have perceived the effect disclosing itself with rapidity) ideas of imperial power and sway which ought to be put to sleep for ever. As it is evident that we do not mean to restore imperial power to the King, we ought not to pursue a conduct calculated to make him aspire to it.

1806.
Akbar Sháh.

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Let us treat him with the respect due to his situation; let us make him comfortable in respect to circumstances, and give him all the means, as far as possible, of being happy: but, unless we mean to re-establish his power, let us not encourage him to dream of it." No grey-haired politician could have written anything wiser than this; and when, after the lapse of a few years, the writer himself became "Resident" at Dehli, and had the supreme direction of affairs, all his boyish impressions were confirmed. He was brought face to face with a state of things offensive alike to reason and to humanity; but neither he nor his successors in the Residency could do more than recommend one measure after another which might gradually mitigate the evils which stood out so obtrusively before them.

Time passed; and the English in India, secure in their great possessions, dreading no external enemy, and feeling strong within them the power to tread down any danger which might arise on Indian soil, advanced with a firmer step and a bolder presence. They no longer recoiled from the thought of Empire. What had appeared at the commencement of the century to be perilous presumption, now seemed to be merely the inevitable accident of our position. The "great game" had been imperfectly played out in Lord Wellesley's time; and ten years afterwards Lord Hastings saw before him the results of that settlement where nothing was settled, and resolved to assert the supremacy of the British Government over all the potentates of India. Times were changed both at home and abroad, and our feelings had changed with them. The Company had not quite forgotten that it had been established on a "pure mercantile bottom." But the successes of our arms in Europe had given us confidence in ourselves as a great military nation; and, though the Directors in Leadenhall-street, true to their old traditions, might still array themselves against all projects for the extension of our military and political power in the East, it was felt that the people of England would applaud the bolder policy, if it were only successful. From that time England became arbiter of the fate of all the Princes of India. There was no longer any reluctance to assert our position as the paramount power. It was a necessary part of the scheme then to put down the fiction of the Dehli Empire. The word Empire was, thenceforth, to be associated only with the British power in the east; and the mock-majesty, which we had once thought

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1806-37.] DIMINUTION OF IMPERIAL PRIVILEGES. 7

it serviceable to us to maintain, was now, as soon as possible, to be dismissed as inconvenient lumber.

It might be narrated how, during a period of thirty years, the sun of royalty, little by little, was shorn of its beams—how first one Governor-General and then another resisted the proud pretensions of the Mughul, and lopped off some of the ceremonial obeisances which had so long maintained the inflated dignity of the House of Taimur.* All these humiliations rankled in the minds of the inmates of the Palace; but they were among the necessities of the continually advancing supremacy of the English. It may be questioned whether a single man, to whose opinion any weight of authority can fairly be attached, has ever doubted the wisdom of these excisions. And humanity might well pause to consider whether more might not yet be done to mitigate that great evil of rotting royalty which had so long polluted the atmosphere of Dehli. That gigantic Palace, almost a city in itself, had long been the home of manifold abominations; and a Christian Government had suffered, and was still suffering, generation after generation of abandoned men and degraded women, born in that vast sty of refuge, to be a curse to others and to themselves. In subdued official language, it was said of these wretched members of a Royal House, that they were “independent of all law, immersed in idleness and profligacy, and indifferent to public opinion.”† It might have been said, without a transgression of the truth, that the recesses of the Palace were familiar with the commission of every crime known in the East, and that Heaven alone could take account of that tremendous catalogue of iniquities.

On the evening of the 28th of September, 1837, Akbar Sháh died, at the age of eighty-two. He had intrigued some years before to set aside the succession of the Heir-Apparent in behalf of a favourite son; but he had failed.‡ And now Prince Ábú Zaffar, in the official language of the day, “ascended the throne, assuming the title

1837.
Bahádúr Sháh.

* It was not until 1835 that the current coin of India ceased to bear the superscription of the Mughul emperors, and the “Company’s rupee” was substituted for it.

† Sometimes, however, great crimes were punished. Prince Haidar Sheko, for example, was executed for the murder of his wife.

‡ Indeed, he had made two separate efforts, in favour first of one son, then of another. The first endeavour was attended with some eventful circumstances which might have led to violence and bloodshed.

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of Abúl Muzaffar Sírájú' dín Muhammad Bahádúr Sháh Pádsháh-i-Gházi." It is sufficient that he should be known here by the name of Bahádúr Sháh. He was then far advanced in age; but he was of a long-lived family, and his three-score years had not pressed heavily upon him. He was supposed to be a quiet, inert man, fond of poetry, a poetaster himself; and not at all addicted, by nature, to political intrigue. If he had any prominent characteristic it was avarice. He had not long succeeded to the title before he began to press for an addition to the royal stipend, which had in some sort been promised to Akbar Sháh.

Sir Charles
Metcalfe.

Lord Auck-
land.

The Lieutenant-Governor was unwilling to recommend such a waste of the public money; but the Governor-General, equally believing it to be wasteful, said that, although as a new question he would have negatived it, the promise having been given, it ought to be fulfilled—but upon the original conditions. These conditions were, that the King should execute a formal renunciation of all further claims upon the British Government; but Bahádúr Sháh did as his father had done before him. He refused to subscribe to the proposed conditions, and continued to cherish a belief that, by sending an agent to England, he might obtain what he sought without any embarrassing restrictions.

Akbár Sháh had employed as his representative the celebrated Brahman, Rámmohan Rái, and ever still regarding himself as the fountain of honour, had conferred on his envoy the title of Rájah. English society recognised it, as it would have recognised a still higher title, assumed by a Khidmatgár;* but the authorities refused their official recognition to the Rájahship, though they paid becoming respect to the character of the man, who was striving to enlighten the Gentiles, as a social and religious reformer. As the envoy of the Mughul he accomplished nothing; and Bahádúr Sháh found that the "case" was much in the same state as it had been when Rámmohan Rái left India on the business of the late King. But he had still faith in the efficacy of a mission to England, especially if conducted by an Englishman. So when he heard that an eloquent lecturer, who had gained a great reputation in the Western world by his earnest advocacy of the rights of the coloured races, had come

George Thompson.

* A table-attendant; a waiter.—G. B. M.

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1848-9.]

ZENANA INTRIGUES.

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to India, Bahádur Sháh invited him to Dehli, and was eager to enlist his services. He had many supposed wrongs to be redressed. Lord Ellenborough had given the finishing stroke to the system of nazar-giving, or tributary present-making, to the King, by prohibiting even such offerings by the Resident.* Thus had passed away almost the last vestige of that recognition, by the British Government, of the imperial dignity of the House of Taimur; and although money-compensation had been freely given for the loss, the change rankled in the mind of the King. But the Company had already refused to grant any increase of stipend to the Royal Family until the prescribed conditions had been accepted;† and Mr. George Thompson had no more power than Rám-mohan Rái to cause a relaxation of the decision. And in truth, there was no sufficient reason why the stipend should be increased. A lakh of rupees a month was sufficient, on a broad basis of generosity, even for that multitudinous family; and it would have been profligate to throw away more money on the mock-royalty of Dehli, when it might be so much better bestowed.‡

There was, indeed, no ground of complaint against the British Government; and, perhaps, the King would have subsided into a state, if not of absolute content, *Zenana intrigue.* of submissive quietude, if it had not been for that activity of Zenana intrigue, which no Oriental sovereign, with nothing to do but to live, can ever hope to resist. He had married a young wife, who had borne him a son, and who had become a favourite, potential for good or evil. As often it has happened,

* Nazars had formerly been presented by the Governor-General and the Commander-in-Chief—by the latter, it would seem, as recently as 1837, on the accession of Sháh Bahádur.—See Edwards's "Reminiscences of a Bengal Civilian."

† Letter of the Court of Directors, Feb. 11, 1846: "It being impossible for us to waive this condition (of executing a formal renunciation of all further claims), the King must be considered as having declined the offered benefit."

‡ In addition to this monthly lakh of rupees, paid in money, Bahádur Sháh continued to enjoy the proceeds of some crown lands, and also of some ground-rents in the city.—See evidence of Mr. Sanders at the King's trial: "He was in receipt of a stipend of one lakh of rupees per mensem, of which ninety-nine thousand were paid at Dehli, and one thousand at Lakhnao, to the members of the family there. He was also in receipt of revenue to the amount of a lakh and a half from the crown lands in the neighbourhood of Dehli. He also received a considerable sum from the ground-rents of houses and tenants in the city of Dehli."

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from the time of the patriarchs downwards, this son of his old age also became a favourite; and the King was easily wrought upon by Queen Zinat-Mahal to endeavour to set aside the succession of the Heir-Apparent in favour of the boy-prince. The unjust supersession, which his father had endeavoured to perpetrate against him, might now some day be put in force by himself, for the gratification of his favourite. But it was necessary in such a case to walk warily. Any rash, hasty action might be followed by a failure which could never be repaired. In any case, it would be better to wait until the child, Jawan Bakht, were a few years older, and he could be extolled as a youth of promise. Meanwhile the great Chapter of Accidents might contain something in their favour. So hanging on to the skirts of Circumstance, he watched for the coming of an opportunity. And ere long the opportunity came—bringing with it more than had been looked for, and not all to the satisfaction of the royal expectants.

The story may be briefly told. In 1849, Prince Dára Bakht, the Heir-Apparent, died. At this time the King, Bahádur Sháh, had numbered more than seventy years. In natural course his death could be no very remote contingency. The question of succession, therefore, pressed heavily on the mind of the Governor-General. Lord Dalhousie was not a man to regard with much favour the mock sovereignty of the Mughul. Others before him, with greater tenderness for ancient dynastic traditions, had groaned over the long continuance of a state of things at which reason and truth revolted; and the extinction of the titular dignity of the Kings of Dehli, after the death of Bahádur Sháh, had been urged upon the Government of the East India Company.* But the proposal stirred up divisions in the Council Chamber of Leadenhall, which resulted in delayed

* Writing on the 1st of August, 1844, the Court of Directors observed: "The Governor-General has given directions to the Agent that, in the event of the demise of the King of Dehli, no step whatever shall be taken which can be construed into a recognition of the descent of that title to a successor without specific authority from the Governor-General. If in these instructions the abolition of the title is contemplated, we cannot give it our sanction until we have heard further from you on the subject, and have had time to consider the purport and the grounds of the recommendation which may be offered."