

THE AMIR OF AFGHANISTAN

He civilised his people and himself remained
a savage.

Voltaire.



AMIR ABDUR RAHMAN KHAN.

One still strong man in a blatant land Who can rule and dare to lie. Tennyson, " Maud " (slightly adapted). I HAVE never before narrated the circumstances in which I came to visit the Capital and Court of the famous Afghan ruler, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. I had devoted so many years to the study of the Central Asian problem — the security of the Indian Frontier ; the policy of Russia, then in the full tide of her career of Asiatic aggression and conquest ; the part that was being played in the drama by all the countries lying on the glacis of the Indian fortress, Persia, Baluchistan, Afghani- stan, Tibet, China — and I had explored so many of these regions myself, that I was beyond measure desirous to visit that one of their number which, though perhaps the most important, was also the least accessible, and to converse with the stormy and inscrutable figure who occupied the Afghan throne, and was a source of such incessant anxiety, suspicion, and even alarm to successive Governments of India as well as to the India Office in London. I knew that the Amir was intensely mistrustful of the Calcutta Government, and I thought it not impossible that he might be willing to converse with an Englishman who had been the Minister responsible for the Government of India in the House of Commons in London, who was still, though no longer in office, a member of that House, and who had for some years written and spoken widely, though always in a friendly spirit, about the defence of the Indian frontier, and the importance of intimate relations with Afghanistan. Accordingly in the spring of 1894 I wrote a personal letter to the Amir, in which I confessed these desires, explained to him my impending programme of travel in the Himalayas and the Pamirs, and sought his permission to visit him at Kabul in the latter part of the year. After expatiating with more than Oriental hyperbole upon all these considerations, I added a passage in which I felt a modest pride : Khorasan I have seen and visited ; I have been in Bokhara and Samarkand ; I have ridden to Chaman, and I have sojourned at Peshawur. But the dominions of Your

Highness, which are situated in the middle of all these territories, like unto a rich stone in the middle of a ring, I have never been permitted to enter, and the person of Your Highness, which is in your own dominions like unto the sparkle in the heart of the diamond, I have not been fortunate enough to see. Many books and writings have I studied, and have talked to many men ; but I would fain converse with Your Highness who knows more about these questions than do other men, and who will perhaps be wilHng to throw upon my imperfect understanding the full ray of truth. Apart, however, from the hoped-for invitation from the Amir — never before extended to any Enghshman except to those in his personal employ, or to an official Mission from the Government of India, such as that of their Foreign Secretary, Sir Mortimer Durand — there were other and for- midable difficulties to be overcome. The Home Government (Lord Kimberley was then Secretary of State for India) viewed my project with some anxiety ; the attitude of the Government of India was veiled in a chilly obscurity, which was not dissipated until I arrived at Simla in the early autumn to plead my own case. Sir Henry Brackenbury, then Military Member, and a man of great ability and much imagination, was my one friend ; the Commander-in-Chief, Sir George White, was non-committal ; the Viceroy, Lord Elgin, hesitated. At a meeting of the Executive Council, however, it was decided to let me cross the frontier (on my return from the Pamirs), provided that a direct invitation from the Amir arrived in the interim ; but I was told that I must go as a private individual (which was exactly what I desired), and that the Government of India would assume no responsibility for my safety. It was while I was in camp in the Gurais Valley in Kashmir, on my way to the Gilgit Frontier, that I received a telegram from Kabul announcing the invitation of the Amir. From that moment all my anxieties were at an end, and it remained only for me to get through my Pamir explorations in safety in order to realise my supreme ambition in

the later autumn. Nearly three months later, on November 13, 1894, I rode alone across the Afghan Frontier at Torkham beyond Lundi Khana, and consigned myself to the care of the God-Granted Govern- ment, and to the hospitality of its Sovereign. And now let me say something about the personality and career of that remarkable man, so that my readers, to whom his name is perhaps now little more than a memory, may know what sort of being it was with whom I was about to spend long days in friendly intercourse, and who was to reveal to me, with an astonishing candour, his innermost thoughts and ideas. Born in 1844, Abdur Rahman Khan was the eldest son of Dost Mohammed, the celebrated Afghan ruler who had been alternately the foe and the protege of the British Government. He was therefore by birth and inheritance the direct and legal heir of his grandfather, and the recog- nised head of the Barukzai clan. It may be a consolation to reluctant students and to naughty boys at large to know, as the Amir himself told me, that up till the age of twenty he declined to learn either to read or to write, and that at a time when most European lads have their knees under a desk he was engaged in manufacturing rifled gun -barrels and in casting guns. It was in 1864, the year following upon the death of the Dost, that he first appeared in public life, being appointed to a Governorship in Afghan Turkestan ; and after that date there were few elements of romance or adventure that his career did not contain. Here victorious in battle (for he was a born soldier), there defeated ; now a king-maker in his own country, anon a fugitive from its borders ; for a time the powerful Governor of the Cis-Oxian provinces, and presently an exile in the courts of Meshed, Khiva, and Bokhara ; later on a pensioner of the Russians at Samarkand, and, finally, the British nominee upon the throne of a recovered Afghanistan, for nearly forty years, whether in the forefront or the background, he presented the single strong figure whose masculine individuality emerged with distinctness

from the obscure and internecine and often miserable drama of Afghan politics. It was he who placed, first his father Afzul, and afterwards his uncle Azim, on the throne ; and when, Afzul having died and Azim having been defeated by a younger brother, Shere Ali, he was obliged to flee from his country into a ten years' exile, it was with the conviction, which he never abandoned, that his services would again be called for and that he would assuredly return. For this purpose he accepted a Russian pension (the greater part of which was, he told me, systematically filched from him by peculation) and resided at Samarkand, in order that he might be near to the Afghan frontier whenever the emergency should arise. The Russians never quite recovered from their astonishment that one who had been a recipient of their hospitality and their pay should, in later years, after recovering the throne, have pursued a policy so little in accord with Russian aspirations ; and for a while they consoled themselves with the reflection that this was a mere ruse, and that the true Russophil would appear later on. These expectations were sadly disappointed ; for although he did not care for the British much, Abdur Rahman disliked the Russians far more, and had a very shrewd idea of the fate that a Russo-Afghan alliance would bring upon his country. Incidentally, he told me that while a refugee in Russia he secretly learned the language, and never enjoyed himself more than when he heard the Russian officers discussing their real policy in the presence of the seemingly simple - minded and unsophisticated Afghan. In 1878 his opportunity came, when Shere Ali, inveigled by Russian promises to his doom, threw off the British alliance, and brought a British army into his country, thereby forfeiting first his throne, and, a little later, his life. Crossing the frontier, Abdur Rahman overran the whole country, and by 1880 had acquired so commanding a position that when, after the treachery of Yakub Khan and the open hostility of Ayub, the Indian Government were looking out for a suitable candidate for

the throne, they had no alternative but to take the single strong man in the country, whom they forthwith installed as ruler, and then retired. In the thirteen years that elapsed before my visit the Amir had consolidated his rule over one of the most turbulent peoples in the world by force alike of character and of arms, and by a relentless savagery that ended by crushing all opposition out of existence, and leaving him the undisputed but dreaded master of the entire country. No previous Sovereign had ever ridden the wild Afghan steed with so cruel a bit, none had given so large a measure of unity to the kingdom; there was not in Asia or in the world a more fierce or uncompromising despot. Such was the remarkable man whose guest I was for more than a fortnight at Kabul, living in the Salam Khana or Guest House, immediately overlooking the moat of the Ark or Citadel. The Amir was residing in a neighbouring two-storied house or villa, surrounded by a high wall, and known as the Bostan Serai. In the grounds of this place he now lies buried. Our meetings and conversations took place in a large room in that building. They usually commenced at noon or 1 p.m. and lasted for some hours. I do not propose to narrate here the long conversations, mainly of a political character, in which the Amir indulged, because, as I have before said, I do not wish this volume to become a political treatise, and because much of what he said was intended to be confidential. Later on, however, I shall narrate one of his most characteristic harangues about his impending visit to England, the invitation to which he accepted through me, since it reveals many of the most interesting traits of his shrewd but untutored intellect. In the intervals, however, of these quasi-political conversations the Amir would talk discursively about almost every topic under heaven; while, during my stay, I heard many anecdotes of his curious character and amazing career. Perhaps before I come to these I may say a few words about his external appearance and mien. A man of big stature though not of great height, of colossal personal

strength, and of corresponding stoutness of frame when in his prime, he was much altered by sickness when I saw him from the appearance presented, for instance, by the photographs taken at the Rawal Pindi Durbar in 1885. The photograph that I reproduce represents him as he was at the time of my visit in 1894. He suffered greatly from gout, and one of the favourite amusements or jests of the native compositor in the Indian Press was to convert "gout" into "government" and to say, not without truth, that the Amir was suffering from "a bad attack of government." A large, but in no wise unwieldy figure sitting upright upon silken quilts, outspread over a low charpoy or bedstead, the limbs encased in close-fitting lamb's wool garments; a fur-lined pelisse hanging over the shoulders, and a spotless white silk turban wound round the conical Afghan skull-cap of cloth of silver, or of gold, and coming low down on to the forehead; a broad and massive countenance with regular features, but complexion visibly sallow from recent illness; brows that contracted somewhat as he reflected or argued; luminous black eyes that looked out very straightly and fixedly without the slightest movement or wavering, a black moustache close clipped upon the upper lip, and a carefully trimmed and dyed black beard, neither so long nor so luxuriant as of yore, framing a mouth that responded to every expression, and which, when it opened, as it not unfrequently did, to loud laughter, widened at the corners and disclosed the full line of teeth in both jaws; a voice resonant but not harsh, and an articulation of surprising emphasis and clearness; above all, a manner of unchallengeable dignity and command—this was the outward guise and bearing of my kingly host. I may add that for stating his own case in an argument or controversy the Amir would not easily find a match on the front benches in the House of Commons; whilst if he began to talk of his own experiences and to relate stories of his adventures in warfare or exile, the organised minuteness and deliberation with which each stage of

the narrative proceeded in due order was only equalled by the triumphant crash of the climax, and only exceeded by the roar of laughter which the denouement almost invariably provoked from the audience, and in which the author as heartily joined. Like most men trained in the Persian literary school (Persian being the language of the upper classes in Afghanistan), the Amir was a constant quoter of saws and wise sayings from that inexhaustible well of sapient philosophy, that Iranian Pope, the Sheikh Saadi. The Amir's appearance, like that of most Orientals, was greatly enhanced by his turban. I never saw him in the sheepskin kolah or kalpak of his military uniform. On one occasion when we were talking about his visit to England he removed his turban and began to scratch his head, which was shaved quite bald. In a moment he was transformed from the formidable despot to a commonplace and elderly man. I implored him when he came to London never to remove his turban or scratch his head ; and, when I told him my reason, his vanity was at once piqued, and he promised faithfully to show himself at his best. His characteristics were in some respects even more remarkable than his features. This terribly cruel man could be affable, gracious, and considerate to a degree. This man of blood loved scents and colours and gardens and singing birds and flowers. This intensely practical being was a prey to mysticism, for he thought that he saw dreams and visions, and was convinced (although this was probably only a symptom of his vanity) that he possessed supernatural gifts. Generous to those who were useful to him, he was merciless to any whose day was past or who had lost his favour. But even in the most unpropitious circumstances his humour never deserted him. At one of his country durbars certain tax-gatherers were disputing with the local landowners as to the taxes to be paid. As they all insisted on speaking at once, he placed a soldier behind each of them with orders to box the ears of any man who spoke out of his turn. On one occasion he put a man to death unjustly, i.e.,

on false evidence. Thereupon he fined himself 6000 rupees, and paid this sum to the widow, who for her part was delighted at being simultaneously relieved of her husband and started again in life. On another occasion his humour took a more gruesome turn. It was pointed out to him by one of his courtiers that he had ordered an innocent man to be hanged. " Innocent ! " cried the Amir. " Well, if he is not guilty this time, he has done something else at another. Away with him." In this strange and almost incredible amalgam of the jester and the cynic, the statesman and the savage, I think that a passion for cruelty was one of his most inveterate instincts. The Amir often exerted himself to deny the charge or claimed that it was the only method of dealing with a race so treacherous and criminally inclined. For instance, as I rode to Kabul, I passed on the top of the Lataband Pass an iron cage swinging from a tall pole in which rattled the bleaching bones of a robber whom he had caught and shut up alive in this construction, as a warning to other disturbers of the peace of the King's highway. He revelled in these grim demonstrations of executive authority. Nevertheless, the recorded stories — as to the truth of which I satisfied myself — were sufficient to show that a love of violence and an ingrained ferocity were deeply rooted in his nature. He confided to an Englishman at Kabul that he had put to death 120,000 of his own people. After one unsuccessful rebellion he had many thousands of the guilty tribesmen blinded with quicklime, and spoke to me of the punishment without a trace of compunction. Crimes such as robbery or rape were punished with fiendish severity. Men were blown from guns, or thrown down a dark well, or beaten to death, or flayed alive, or tortured in the offending member. For instance, one of the favourite penalties for petty larceny was to amputate the hand at the wrist, the raw stump being then plunged in boiling oil. One official who had outraged a woman was stripped naked and placed in a hole dug for the purpose on the top of a

high hill outside Kabul. It was in mid- winter ;and water was then poured upon him until he was converted into an icicle and frozen alive. As the Amir sardonically remarked, " He would never be too hot again." A woman of his harem being found in the family way, he had her tied up in a sack and brought into the Durbar hall, where he ran her through with his own sword. Two men having been heard to talk about some forbidden subject, he ordered their upper and lower lips to be stitched together so that they should never offend again. A man came into the Durbar one day and openly accused the Amir of depravity and crime. " Tear out his tongue," said the Amir. In a moment he was seized and his tongue torn out by the roots. The poor wretch died. One day an old beggar threw himself in the way of the Amir as he was riding through the streets. The following dialogue then ensued : " What are you ? " "A beggar." " But how do you get your living ? " " By alms." " What ? Do you mean to say that you do no work? " " None." " And you have never done any ? " " Never." " Then it is time that we were relieved of your presence." And the Amir nodded to the executioner. His cruelty even extended to punishing acts, however innocent, which had not been authorised by himself or which seemed to trench upon his prerogative. Though I was his guest and he sincerely desired to do me honour, and did so, he could not tolerate that any of his subjects should show spontaneous courtesy to the stranger. A man who spoke to me while I was on the road to Kabul was seized and thrown into prison. A man who offered me a pomegranate as I rode into Kandahar was severely beaten and imprisoned and deprived of his property. Nevertheless, this monarch, at once a patriot and a monster, a great man and almost a fiend, laboured hard and unceasingly for the good of his country. He sought to raise his people from 54 TALES OF TRAVEL the squalor and apathy and blood-shedding of their normal lives and to convert them into a nation. He welded the Afghan tribes into a unity which they had never previously

enjoyed, and he paved the way for the complete in- dependence which his successors have achieved. He and he alone was the Government of Afghanistan. There was nothing from the command of an army or the government of a province to the cut of a uniform or the fabrication of furniture that he did not personally superintend and control. He was the brain and eyes and ears of all Afghanistan. But it is questionable whether in the latter part of his life he was more detested or admired. He ceased to move abroad from fear of assassination, and six horses, saddled and laden with coin, were always kept ready for a sudden escape. I should describe him, on the whole, in spite of his uncertain temper and insolent language, as a consistent friend of the British alliance. Though he often had differences with the Government of India, whom he loved to snub and annoy, though there were moments when the relations between them were very strained, though, when I became Viceroy, he did not spare me these conventional amenities and we were sometimes on the verge of a serious quarrel, I did not and do not doubt that on the broad issues of Imperial policy his fidelity was assured. But he acted in this respect, as in all others, from expediency alone. He knew that the British neither coveted others from Jeremiah the son of Saul.[^] On another occasion the Amir's eldest son Habibulla, whose ethnology was a little hazy, told me that the Afghans were Jews who had been conquered by Babu-Nassar (i.e, Nebuchadnezzar) in the time of Yezdigird, and deported to Persia, where they lived a long time. Later on they migrated to Afghanistan, where they settled in the region of the Suleiman (Solomon) Mountains, to which, in reference to their origin, they gave that name. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew descent of the Afghans has been the subject of prolonged dispute, great authorities having argued on either side. The champions of the theory point to the marked Jewish features of so many Afghans, to the great number of Jewish Christian names (e.g, Ibrahim = Abraham, Ayub=Job, Ismail =

Ishmael, Ishak= Isaac, Yahia=John, Yakub = Jacob, Yusuf = Joseph, Isa = Jesus, Daoud = David, Suleiman == Solomon, and many others), to the fact that the Feast of the Passover is still observed by the Pathan border tribe of the Yusuf zai ; and to the occurrence of the name Kabul in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Kings ix. 13), where Solomon, having given King Hiram twenty cities of Galilee in return for the timber and gold presented to him for the Temple, Hiram went out to see them and was very much disgusted, " calling them the land of Cabul {i.e, dirty or disgusting) * This is the conventional account given in the best-known Pushtu history, called Tazkdrat ul-Muluk, which was composed in the time of the early Duranis, and probably invented the legend. unto this day." I believe that this reasoning is quite fallacious, the Biblical names employed by the Afghans being all in their Arabic form, i.e. post-Mohammedan in origin ; and the Hebrew word Kabul in the Old Testament having no connection, except in spelling, with the Afghan Kabul. The theory of a Semitic origin is now generally discredited, but there is nothing inherently improbable in the belief that some of the Afghan tribes may have entered the country from Persia (of which language they speak a patois) and may have come at an earlier date into Persia from Syria or Assyria (the land of the captivity). There I will leave the matter, to which I have only alluded here in order to record the opinions of the Amir. And now, having given a general picture of the man, his personality and his acts, let me pass on to narrate a few of the more interesting conversations, other than on political subjects, with which he overflowed. He spoke in Persian through an interpreter ; and while at times he would indulge in short and staccato phrases, at others he would pour forth a torrent of declamation that lasted for six or seven minutes without a pause. Never was the mixture of shrewdness, vanity, and ignorance, which were so strangely blended in Abdur Rahman's character, more patently shown than in the conversation which

he held with me one day in open Durbar with regard to his contemplated visit to England. He had already received an official invitation from Her Government, tendered through the Viceroy (Lord Elgin) to pay such a visit, and to this invitation, with calculated rudeness, he had declined for months to return a reply. I had good reason for thinking that he was postponing his answer until I arrived at Kabul, and he could hear from me personally what sort of reception he would be likely to meet with in London. From the start, accordingly, this formed a constant topic of our conversation ; and I very soon realised that, while appearing to hang back, the Amir was in reality intensely anxious to come, provided, on the one hand, that he could be assured of a welcome in England compatible with his own exalted conception of the dignity and prestige of the Afghan Sovereign, and, on the other, that he could safely be absent from his country for several months of time. He would discuss these subjects with me interminably in all their bearings, being in reality much more concerned about the former than the latter. At length, towards the end of my visit, his mind was made up ; the decision to pay the visit was definitely taken ; the acceptance was written, in the form of a personal letter to Queen Victoria, which the Amir handed to me in open Durbar, wrapped up in a violet silk covering, embroidered with a Persian inscription. This parcel I took back to England and ultimately transmitted to Her Majesty : and unquestionably the visit would have taken place had not the Amir learned a little later on that, had he left his country, the chances were that, in consequence of the reign of terror that prevailed under his iron hand, he would never be allowed to return, and that in his absence some less fierce and dreaded occupant would be installed upon the Afghan throne. It was in the course of one of these public conversations that the following dialogue occurred — to understand which it should be premised that the one Englishman against whom the Amir cherished an

overweening, though entirely unfounded prejudice, was Lord Roberts (then Commander-in-Chief in England), whom he was never tired of accusing of having condemned and hanged, by bought and perjured evidence, many thousands of innocent Afghans upon the arrival of the British army in Kabul after the murder of Sir L. Cavagnari in 1879.[^] This monarch, who had not hesitated himself, as he boasted to me, to put out the eyes of thousands of his own subjects (after the Hazara rebellion), and who was utterly indifferent to human life, had no words of reprobation too strong for the British Commander, who had dared to punish a gross act of international treachery by the execution of the guilty parties ; and he would constantly repeat that Roberts had killed thousands of innocent Afghan people and could never be forgiven. Hence the ensuing story. 1 These charges against the findings of the Military Court at Kabul, and the consequent executions, having been taken up and repeated by the Opposition in London, the answer of Lord Roberts was read in both Houses of Parliament. His full reply, with an abstract statement of the executions, was published as a Parliamentary Paper in February 1880. A, " When I come to England and to London and am received by the Queen, shall I tell you what I will do ? " C. " Yes, Your Highness, I shall be glad to hear." A, "I understand that there is in London a great Hall that is known as Westminster Hall. Is not that so ? " C. "It is." A, " There are also in London two Mejlises {i.e. Houses of Parliament). One is called the House of Lords and the other is called the House of Commons ? " C. " It is so." A. " When I come to London, I shall be received in Westminster Hall. The Queen will be seated on her throne at the end of the Hall, and the Royal Family will be around her ; and on either side of the Hall will be placed the two Mejlises — the House of Lords on the right, and the House of Commons on the left. Is not that the case ? " C. "It is not our usual plan ; but will Your Highness proceed ? " A. "I shall enter the Hall, and the Lords will rise on

the right, and the Commons will rise on the left to greet me, and I shall advance between them up the Hall to the dais, where will be seated the Queen upon her throne. And she will rise and will say to me, 'What has Your Majesty come from Kabul to say ? ' And how then shall I reply ? "C. " I am sure I do not know." A, "I shall reply : ' I will say nothing ' — and the Queen will then ask me why I refuse to say anything ; and I shall answer : ' Send for Roberts. I decline to speak until Roberts comes.' And then they will send for Roberts, and there will be a pause until Roberts comes, and when Roberts has come and is standing before the Queen and the two Mejilises, then will I speak." C. " And what will Your Highness say ? " A, "I shall tell them how Roberts paid thousands of rupees to obtain false witness at Kabul and that he slew thousands of my innocent people, and I shall ask that Roberts be punished, and when Roberts has been punished, then will I speak."It was in vain that I indicated to the Amir that things in England and in London were not done exactly in that way, and that the ceremonial of his reception would hardly be of the nature described. Nothing could convince him. This was no doubt exactly the manner in which he would have managed the business in Kabul ; and London meant no more to him than a larger stage and a change of scene. When I reflected what might have happened had the visit been paid and had the Amir been confronted with the more sober realities of British official procedure, I felt almost glad that Her Majesty's Government were spared the spectacle of the Amir's disappointment and its consequences, which might have been serious ; although the personal encounter between the two protagonists, had it ever taken place, could hardly have failed to be diverting. The only person in England who, when I recounted the story, failed to find it at all amusing— and this perhaps quite pardonably — was Lord Roberts himself. Knowing that I was a member of Parliament the Amir never spoke to me contemptuously, though often with a touch of sarcasm, about the House of Commons.

But to others he was less reticent. On one occasion he told an English- man in his service that he ought to go to the public hammam (Turkish Bath) in Kabul in order to see what in the Amir's opinion the British Parliament must be like. The English- man duly went, and soon discovered what the Amir had in mind, for the place was full of men, and the high dome overhead reverberated with their calls for towels, soap, etc., and their usual loud-voiced conversations, until the meaning of any individual words and the words themselves were lost in the confusion of sounds, and only added to the general uproar. Among other curious illustrations of the Amir's colossal, but childish vanity, I recall the follow- ing. He cherished the illusion, which was warmly encouraged by all the courtiers who were in the Durbar Hall, that he had a monopoly of all the talents and was the universal genius of Afghanistan, particularly in all matters of mechanics and the arts. One day, as I was going to the Durbar, I passed through an ante-chamber in which was standing a superb Grand Piano, evidently a fresh importation from Europe, the case of which was exquisitely painted with pictorial subjects or scenes. I was told — though this was probably untrue — that the artist or designer had been no less a person than Sir E. Burne-Jones. A, "Did you notice the Grand Piano standing in the adjoining chamber as you came in ? " C, " Yes, I did." A, "What did you think of the painting of the case ? " C. " I thought it magnificent." A, "I painted it myself ! " The other case was this. One day I was a little late in attending the Durbar, my watch having stopped in the morning. A, " Why are you late to-day ? " C. " I am sorry to say that my watch stopped this morning." A. " And yours is an English watch. Send it to me, and I will put it right without difficulty. I am a professional watch-maker myself and keep right the watches of all the people of Kabul ! " I hastily explained that my watch had resumed its full and orderly functions, and accordingly was able to save it from the hands of the illustrious amateur. I may here anticipate

somewhat by giving another example of this amusing trait. After I had returned to England I married in the summer. If she should at any time thrash you I am certain you will have done something to deserve it. — I am your sincere friend and well-wisher Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan. As a balance to this type of correspondence I append a single example of a more political letter, written to me while I was still a private person ; but revealing many of the best-known features of the Amir's epistolary style. In the first part of the letter is a reference to a press report of something that I was alleged to have said about Afghanistan in England. The second part relates to the constant disputes between the Indian and Afghan Governments, arising out of the frontier warfare known as the Tirah Campaign, which occupied the greater part of 1897. May my dear, discerning friend. His most honoured Excellency, the Honourable George Curzon, Esquire, Minister of Parliament, M.P. of the House of Commons, continue in the keeping of (God) the True Protector. The letter of that kind friend written on December 30 A.D. 1897, corresponding to Shaban 5, a.h. 1315, reached the presence of your friend at the best of seasons. From the circumstances of your corporeal well-being joy was produced, and I rejoiced at the soundness of that dear friend's health. As for what that kind friend wrote concerning the adverse words which have been reported to me as having been uttered by that friend, I have never had cause to complain of that kind friend's friendship, nor of his utterances concerning the State of Afghanistan ; neither do I suppose any such thing. I regard you as the first of my friends, the only friend I have in the world. On this subject I have much to say, for there are many reasons for speech. When that kind friend was in Kabul, and we and you sat together in one place, and discussed our inmost thoughts about Russia and Afghanistan, and the disorder of Afghanistan, concerning the antagonism of the Russian Government, the defects of Afghanistan had still in no wise been remedied when the

misconduct of a frontier contiguous to the frontier officers of the Most Glorious State of England brought about disturbance and confusion, until at length the frontier officers of that State first cast suspicion upon me for their foolish deeds and words ; for they issued proclamations for a general massacre of the people of the hill-passes, and fear overtook them all, and they slew the Agents of the Most Glorious State and burned and ravaged ; and several thousand men and part of the Army of the Most Glorious State died, neither did they gain anything save hostility. Alas ! alas ! for this nearness and proximity of Russia, and the hostility of the Afghan frontier tribes. I do not know what the end of it will be, for although I have no concern with the people of Tira and the Afridis and the peoples of Bajawar and Swat, it is now eleven months since all caravans from my dominions have been stopped, and the implements which were necessary for my engine- workshop have been detained. In proof of this I send enclosed in this packet, for your information and perusal, an Order written by the Commissioner of Peshawur for the caravan conductor (Kafila-bashi) of your friend (myself) located at Peshawur, about the detention of the oil-boxes, and I do not know what may be the reason of his (the Commissioner's) conduct. They have caused my thoughts to incline to doubt India, so that enemy and friend are passed out of my memory {i.e. I confuse friends and enemies}. If you will again peruse the political news of India which has gone to London wherein they have said many things about {i.e. have cast many reflections on} my friendship, and have made (many) aspersions (you will see that) I have patiently stomached much, and by these forbearances it will be known to that kind friend that my friendship towards the Most Glorious State is very firm, for had this not been so, I too would have said something foolish ; but what shall I do, or what shall I say ? This much I will say that I remain the friend of the Most Glorious State and that loyalty thereunto abides in my heart, but the Agents of the Most

Glorious State in India are endeavouring to bring about its overthrow. Please God it will not be over- thrown on my part, though should the initiative (in hostility or provocation) be taken by the Indian Govern- ment, I do not know (what might happen) : but, please God, (the initiative) will not be on my side, for my friend- ship towards the Most Glorious State is firmly established as a mountain. I hope from God that it may be the same on the other side, so that we may not become such as our enemies would desire. Further you wrote " at this time (of writing) is the transition of the year and the renewal of the Christian date into 1898 ; therefore I send my prayers for your welfare." So also your friend {i.e. myself) with fullest affection, sends greetings and congratulations, (praying) that, please God, you may pass the New Year in con- tentment and health, and may ever remember the circumstances of your safe preservation. For the rest, good wishes. May the days of your glory and gladness be continued ! Written on Monday the 15th of the month of Ramazan the Blessed, a.h. 1315, corresponding to the 7th of February, a.d. 1898. (Signed) Amir Abdur Rahman Ziya'u'l-Millati wa'dDin, G.C.S.I. and G.C.B. To return to the conversations of the Amir. Perhaps the most salient feature both of his bearing and talk was his gift of polished, but mordant sarcasm, sometimes, where his own subjects were concerned, taking the form of sardonic and fearful cruelty. I will relate four illustrations of this terrifying humour which happened during or about the time when I was at Kabul. Of one of these I was a witness. It arose during a conversation about the reputa- tion for cruelty which the Amir had been told that he acquired in England. A, " What do they say about my system of government in England ? Please tell me the exact truth." C. " They say that Your Highness is a very powerful but a very severe ruler, and that you have repressed with great harshness all hostile movements among your turbulent and rebellious subjects." A, " But they say more than that. They say that I am a cruel and

bloody barbarian, and that I do not know how to govern my people or to give peace and order to my country." C. " They may criticise Your Highness's methods. I do not presume to offer an opinion as to the results." A. {a, little while later). " Is there a paper in England called the Standard ? " C. "Yes." A. " Is it a good paper ? Does it speak the truth ? " C " Broadly speaking I believe that it does." A, "Is there a city in your country called Birmingham ? Is it a large city ? How many inhabitants has it ? And is it well governed ? " C " Yes, it is a very large city and it has over three-quarters of a milhon of people, and I believe that it prides itself on its municipal administration. A, "Is there also another city called Man- chester and is it like Birmingham ? C, "It is also a very large city with a very great population and is reported to be well governed."A, (producing a small piece of newspaper from a fold in his robe). " Here is an extract from the Standard, which you say is a good paper and a truthful paper, and which says that in Manchester, which is a great and well governed city, last year there were murders and in Birmingham murders ; and that many of the murderers were not captured and executed. Is that true ? " C. "If the Standard is quoting official statistics, I have no doubt that it is true." A, (turning to his courtiers standing in a crowd at the other end of the room). " What is the population of my country ? " Courtiers, " Your Majesty rules over eight millions of people." ^ A. " Ah, and how many murders were com- mitted inthe whole of Afghanistan last year ? " Courtiers. " Under Your Majesty's just and benevolent rule, where law and order are perfectly maintained, only six murders were committed in the entire country, and the guilty were caught and condemned to immediate execution." A. (turning to me). " And this is the country 1 I believe the real number was nearer 5.000,000. and these are the people whom I am accused in England of not knowing how to rule, and am taunted with being barbarous and bloody and cruel. Birmingham only has one-tenth of my population and

Manchester only one-fifteenth, and they are well-governed cities, and yet murders are committed there in the course of a year, and, as the Standard, which is a truthful paper, goes on to say, in a great many cases the murderers were neither caught nor executed." I own that I found it a little difficult to pursue, with dialectical advantage, this strain of conversation. On the other hand, the paucity of crimes of violence in Afghanistan, if it was true (as may well have been the case), was undoubtedly due, neither to respect for law nor to excellence of administration, but to the reign of terror that prevailed and to the horrible tortures inflicted upon persons suspected of murder. One day there came running into a Durbar being held by the Amir, streaming with sweat, and in the last stage of exhaustion, a Herati Afghan, who claimed to have run all the way from Herat without stopping, in order to tell the Amir that the Russians had crossed the frontier and were advancing into Afghanistan, and he appealed for a reward from his grateful Sovereign. A, (who did not believe the story for one moment). " Did you see the Russians with your own eyes ? And how many were they, and how many guns had they with them, and by what road are they marching ? " H, " Your Majesty, I saw them with my own eyes, and there were 20,000 men, and they had many guns with them, and they are advancing rapidly upon the Herat — Kabul road ; and they will soon be here, and I ran ahead of them without stopping, for days, in order that I might warn Your Majesty of the danger which is so near." A, (to his courtiers). " This faithful man had the good fortune to be the first to see the Russian army cross the frontier near to Herat, and he has run all the way here in order to warn us of the danger. How can we sufficiently reward him ? I will tell you. He also shall have the good fortune to be the first to see the Russians arrive, and we will put him in a place where he will have a better chance than any other man. Take him to the highest tree in this place, and tie him to the highest bough of

the tree, and let him remain there until the Russians come — and then he shall descend from the tree and bring us the news, and he shall obtain his reward." And so the faithful Afghan was taken and tied up in the tree ; and there he remained strung up aloft until he perished, as a warning to all other faithful Afghans whose fidelity was pursued at an unwarrantable sacrifice of the truth. My next story is more genial in its development, though no less sinister in its consequence. One day there was being counted out in the Durbar Hall before the Amir a great pile of gold (Bokharan tillas, bangles, and other coins), prior to being sent to the mint to be coined. The Afghan ministers were seated on the ground counting the tillas, and the Amir was looking on. As the counting proceeded, a harem girl, who was dressed in man's clothes in order to act as a spy, and who was standing in the background, observed that one of the principal Afghan ministers (whom we will call Suleiman Khan) was abstracting some of the gold tillas, and had already secreted eighteen in his worsted sock while pretending to scratch his leg. She accordingly wrote a note which she passed to one of the court attendants, who whispered in the ear of the Amir. The Amir took no notice, and the counting continued, until all the gold had been counted or weighed. Then, following a familiar practice, he apparently forgot all about the tribute, and commenced a line of discursive reflection on an entirely different topic. A, "A great many people say that the Afghans are not a white-skinned people, and they say, for instance, that their skins are not so white as those of the Russians or the English. Tell me, is this true ? " Courtiers (unanimously). " Your Majesty, there could not be a greater lie. No people have whiter skins than the Afghans, and we are convinced that no Afghan has so white a skin as Your Majesty." A. (much gratified). "That is true, and to prove to you that it is the truth, I will show you my own leg ! " Thereupon the Amir — who at one of my audiences did exactly the same thing to demonstrate to me the same proposition, though in a more

agreeable context — proceeded to pull his white cotton pantaloons up the calf of his leg, and to expose the colour of his skin, which (I am bound to say) was extraordinarily white, considering that his complexion was somewhat sallow, and that he had a thick growth of black or, at least, dyed hair. A, (to his courtiers). " There, as you see, is the calf of my leg, and you can note how white is the skin." Courtiers, " Your Majesty, we never saw so white a leg, and the legs of all Russians and Englishmen are brown in comparison." A, " That is true. But let me see if my people and my courtiers are as white skinned as myself, or if they are less so. (Then, turning to the throng) Haji Mohammed, let us see your leg ! Ali Akbar, let us see yours ! (The two legs, exhibiting various degrees of yellowish pigmentation, were then satisfactorily exposed.) Suleiman Khan, let us see your leg ! " S. K. " Oh, Your Majesty, I beg you to excuse me. I have been suffering for some time from a severe ague in the lower part of my legs and I dare not pull down my sock." A, "It will never do for my servant not to follow the example of his Sovereign, even if his skin, as may be expected, is much less white. Pull down your right sock, Suleiman Khan ! " S. K. " I implore Your Majesty to be merciful. I am suffering the most acute agony from my ague. I must return at once to my house and have medical treatment. I entreat Your Majesty to have pity upon your faithful servant." A, " Pull down your sock, Suleiman Khan." Thereupon the guilty sock had to be pulled down, and the fatal gold Bokharan tillas rolled one by one on to the floor. The Amir, speechless with rage, threw himself back on the divan and for some time did not utter. Then he shouted, " Take him away to the prison, strip him of all his wealth, and let him be no more seen." (It was told to me at Kabul, though I cannot vouch for it, that this and no less was the fate of the unhappy Suleiman Khan.) Another incident happened soon after I left Kabul, the victim of which was an officer whom I had seen daily during my visits to the Palace. This was a dapper little figure, the

Commandant of the Amir's Bodyguard, who was always in attendance, in a beautiful uniform, in the Durbar Hall. He had, when a boy, been one of the Amir's favourite batchas or dancing-boys (an amusement much favoured in Afghanistan), and when his master attained to power, he had been promoted stage by stage until he had reached his present eminence. This man was believed, or found, to be guilty of some act of disloyalty or treachery to his Sovereign, and the latter heard of it before the culprit discovered that he had been detected. The scene happened in full Durbar, when one day the Amir told the story of the culprit's guilt, while he stood before him in his brilliant uniform, and thus announced the punishment : " A batcha you began and a batcha you shall end. Go back to your house and take off your uniform and put on your petticoats (the dancing- boys in Afghanistan dance in petticoats), and come back and dance here before the Durbar." The wretched man, a General, and forty years of age, had to do as he was bidden, and to come and dance in the garb of a girl before the assembled Court of Kabul. Can anything more refined in its cruelty be imagined ? I could tell many more anecdotes, some of them even more grim, of this remarkable man. One of his strangest traits was his unbounded and unconcealed contempt for his own people. Now and then he would burst out in a torrent of denunciation in open Durbar. He would say, " The Afghans are cowards and traitors. For years they have been trying to kill me, but they cannot succeed. Either they have not the courage to shoot or they cannot shoot straight." And then he would turn to the assembled courtiers and shout out : "Is this not true ? Are you not a craven and a miserable people ? " And with one accord, with bowed heads, they would reply : " Your Majesty, we are ! " One day he was enlarging upon this theme, and he told me two anecdotes in illustration of it. He said that when a few years before he had succeeded in defeating the rebellion of his cousin Ishak Khan, largely owing to the fact that some of the

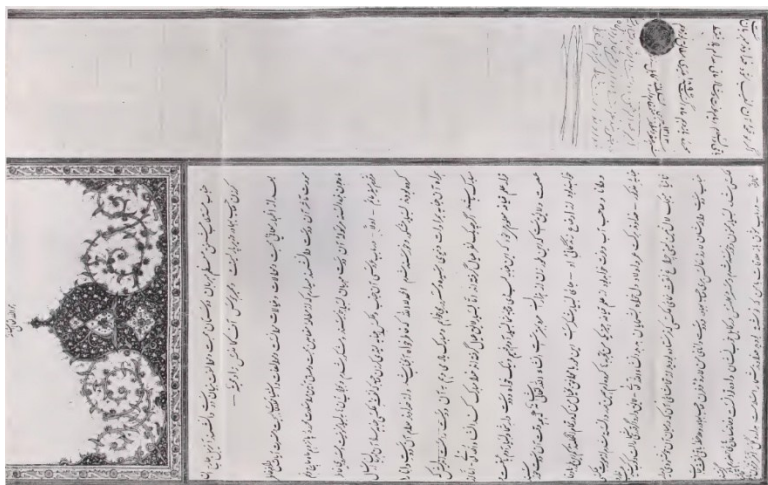
rebel regiments had deserted their leader on the battle- field (he seemed quite pleased at this, as though it showed that he himself had not won by the superior value or courage of his own troops), he had held a review at Mazar-i-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan. His loyal regiments marched past before him, and they included the battalions that had deserted from the enemy. The Amir himself was seated on a chair on a little mound, and the troops were defiling, four abreast immediately below him. As they approached, he noticed that one of his cousin's soldiers held four cartridges between his extended fingers, and, as he drew near, the man suddenly put up his rifle and fired point blank at the Amir from the distance of a few paces. " And did he hit me ? " the Amir shouted. " Not a bit. Just at that moment I leaned aside to speak to one of my Generals and the bullet passed under my armpit and went through the leg of a slave who was standing behind me ! Was not that good ? " And then he burst into a roar of laughter at this admirable joke, and at the gross ineptitude of the Afghan soldier, who could not kill him even at the distance of a few feet. Another of his stories illustrating the alleged timidity and cowardice of his people was as follows. He said that when he went to India to see Lord Dufferin, he was accorded a great military review at Rawal Pindi, and that after the review, which was held in pouring rain, he dismounted and entered the Durbar or reception tent prepared for him. There was a big table standing in the tent, and upon it was a miniature cannon. At sight of this object his terrified staff called out to him to hide, because the gun would infallibly go off and kill him. " What did I say to them ? " (he added to me). " I said ' Cowards and fools ! You think that this is a real cannon. It is only a machine to cut off the end of a cigar.' " Great as was his contempt for his people, he did not mean to run any risks or to give them any opportunity of getting rid of him before his time. On one occasion he was suffering severely from toothache, and decided to have the offending tooth taken out. The surgeon

prepared chloro- form, whereupon the Amir asked how long he would have to remain insensible. " About twenty minutes," said the doctor. " Twenty minutes ! " replied the Amir. " I cannot afford to be out of the world for twenty seconds. Take it out with- out chloroform ! " The Amir was very proud of his gift of ironical retort, and he furnished me with two illustrations of it, which evidently caused him the greatest satisfaction. He told me that on one occasion a Russian officer on the North-west Frontier, some- where near Maimena or Andkui, had written him a letter to say that he proposed to exercise a force of 500 men, both cavalry and infantry, near the frontier, and he hoped that the Amir would not be alarmed, or regard this as a hostile proceeding. " Certainly not," replied the Amir, " he had no objection at all, the more so as he proposed to exercise a force of 5000 Afghan troops opposite the same spot." No more was heard of the Russian proposal. The second occasion occurred in the course of one of our conversations. I had produced one day an extract from an English newspaper which spoke of a new British gun that could throw a projectile for a distance of 15 miles. The Amir showed neither curiosity nor surprise. But a little later he turned to the Commandant of his Artillery, who was in the Durbar room, and asked him in a casual way what was the range of the new gun which he, the Amir, had just made and sent to Herat. " Fifty miles," replied the Com- mandant, without turning a hair. The Amir enjoyed very much talking about personal and domestic details, and sometimes would tell me stories about the private lives of his courtiers, who had to stand by looking rather sheepish while they heard the secrets of the harem revealed to a stranger in their presence. One day I was suffering from toothache and had a swollen face. This gave him an excuse for a dissertation on dentistry of which, as of every science, he claimed to be a master. Four things, he said, were bad for the teeth — meat, sweets, cold water, and wine. He had suffered very much from bad teeth himself, particularly

when he was in Samarkand, and since the age of forty he had worn entirely false teeth. These had been put in by a dentist from Simla, and from time to time he would take out the plate while speaking. In Samarkand, however, he could put no trust in the Russian physicians, because thirty-two of his own followers fell ill and went to the Russian hospital, where every one of them died. Accordingly he studied medicine, including dentistry, himself, and ever afterwards treated both himself and his followers. He was also much interested in the marriage laws and customs of different countries. Monogamy, as practised in England and Europe, he held to be a most pernicious system. Firstly, there being, as a rule, more women than men in European countries, monogamy meant that a large number of them remained unmarried, which was a cruel and unnatural fate. Secondly, if a man was only allowed by law to take one wife the country swarmed with "children of God," i.e. illegitimate offspring. In fact, the British Colonies, Australia, Canada, etc., were maintained as places to which to send these progeny, for whom there was no room at home. However, it was all due to our damp climate. Reared in perpetual water and mud, the English people were like rice, while the Eastern peoples, living on a dry soil, resembled wheat. Englishmen accordingly were not strong and could not possibly manage four wives, like the Moslems. As to the late period of many English marriages (instancing my own), that was due to the fact that there were so many beautiful women in England, that a man was never satisfied, and always thought that by waiting he would get something better still. I might, from the well-charged contents of my note-book, carefully made up every night during my stay in Afghanistan, tell many more tales of my unusual and astonishing host. Perhaps some day I may narrate some of my dealings with him, when, instead of being a visitor at his capital, I became the head of the Government of India and was called upon to correspond with him in an official capacity. He was a

very difficult person to handle and a very formidable opponent to cross. In my numerous interviews I flatter myself that I succeeded in winning the Amir's confidence, and he certainly spoke very kindly of me in his Autobiography, published by his Secretary, who acted as interpreter at our meetings. Upon me he left a profound, even if a somewhat chequered impression. Before I left Kabul he had made and presented to me with his own hand a gold star, inlaid with rubies and diamonds, and engraved with a Persian inscription. It is reproduced on the outer cover of this book. Seven years later, i.e. in October 1901, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan died at the comparatively early age of fifty-seven, though he was commonly believed to be much older. On that occasion the following Proclamation, with which I close my chapter, was issued by his son, Habibulla, who succeeded him : The blessed corpse of the august and potent king, according to his will, was carried to the Royal Taralistan with great pomp and honour, and he was interred in the ground, and placed in a place where is the real and ultimate abode of man. That august and potent monarch, that King of pleasing and praiseworthy manners, expired and sank in the depth of the kindness of God. May his abode be in Heaven ! In summing up his character, I do not think that I can find a better description than the final verdict which was passed by the Roman biographer upon the Emperor Hadrian, the studied antitheses of which have a peculiar appropriateness in the case of the Afghan Amir : " Severus laetus, comis gravis^ lascivus cunctator, tenax liberalis, simulator simplex, saevus clemens, et semper in omnibus varius.^ ^ ^ ^

Spartianus, De Vita Hadriani, 14. 11,



mir Abdur Rahman Khan48 Map of Afghanistan, prepared and circulated by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan54 Signed Letter from Amir Abdur Rahman Khan . . QQ