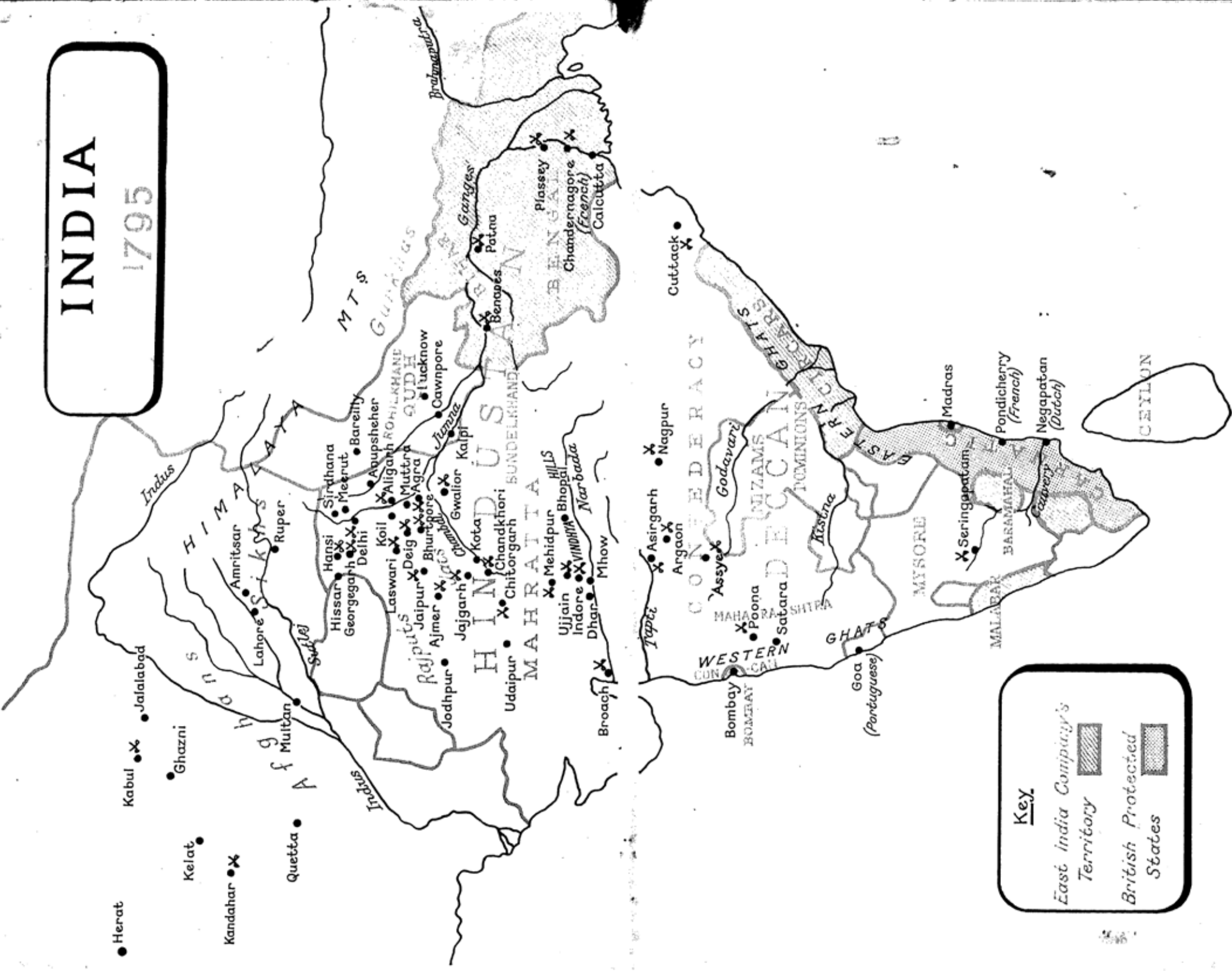


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The Life of Colonel James Skinner

1778 - 1841

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TO MY WIFE



Contents

I

Soldier of Fortune

1	The Pagoda Tree	3
2	Affair of the Bhais	16
3	The Golden Idols	26
4	The Untouchable Angel	34
5	Warlike George	43
6	'One Irish Sword!'	52
7	Perron's Dream	59
8	The D��b��cle	73

II

The Yellow Boys

9	The Delhi Road	91
10	The Blaze of Glory	98
11	Monson's Retreat	106
12	A Soldier's Head	113
13	The Chase	123
14	Amir Khan	130
15	'Oh Saints, it's Witchcraft!'	141

III

The Double-Edged Blade

16	The Lost Decade	153
17	The Hydra	170

Contents

18	A King's Commission	187
19	The Governor-General's Vase	211
20	A Purchase of Dogs	235
21	Brigadier	246
	<i>Glossary</i>	255
	<i>Bibliography</i>	258
	<i>Index</i>	267

Illustrations

James Skinner (<i>Mr Basil Bourne</i>)	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	<i>facing page</i>
George Thomas	22
General Perron	22
Lake at Laswari	23
A Mahratta chief's encampment (<i>India Office Library</i>)	54
Dowlat Rao Sindhia (<i>Krishna Mandir, Gwalior</i>)	55
Jeswant Rao Holkar (<i>Krishna Mandir, Gwalior</i>)	55
Begum Somru	86
Sir John Malcolm	86
Skinner's Delhi (<i>India Office Library</i>)	87
Akbar Shah II in durbar (<i>India Office Library</i>)	118
Skinner in durbar (<i>National Army Museum</i>)	119
Sir David Ochterlony (<i>British Museum</i>)	166
	<i>between pages</i>
Skinner in later life (<i>National Army Museum</i>)	166-7
Yellow Boys in 1810 (<i>India Office Library</i>)	166-7
And a century later (<i>National Army Museum</i>)	166-7
	<i>facing page</i>
Skinner's Horse review (<i>National Army Museum</i>)	167
View of old Delhi	214
A nautch in old Delhi (<i>India Office Library</i>)	215
Skinner's church (<i>National Army Museum</i>)	246
Skinner's farm (<i>National Army Museum</i>)	246
Skinner's mansion in Delhi (<i>Mr Harold Sale</i>)	247
Relics of 'Old Sikander' (<i>The Skinner family</i>)	247

Maps

The Second Mahratta War, 1803-1806	<i>facing page</i> 126
India in 1795	front endpaper
India in 1841	back endpaper

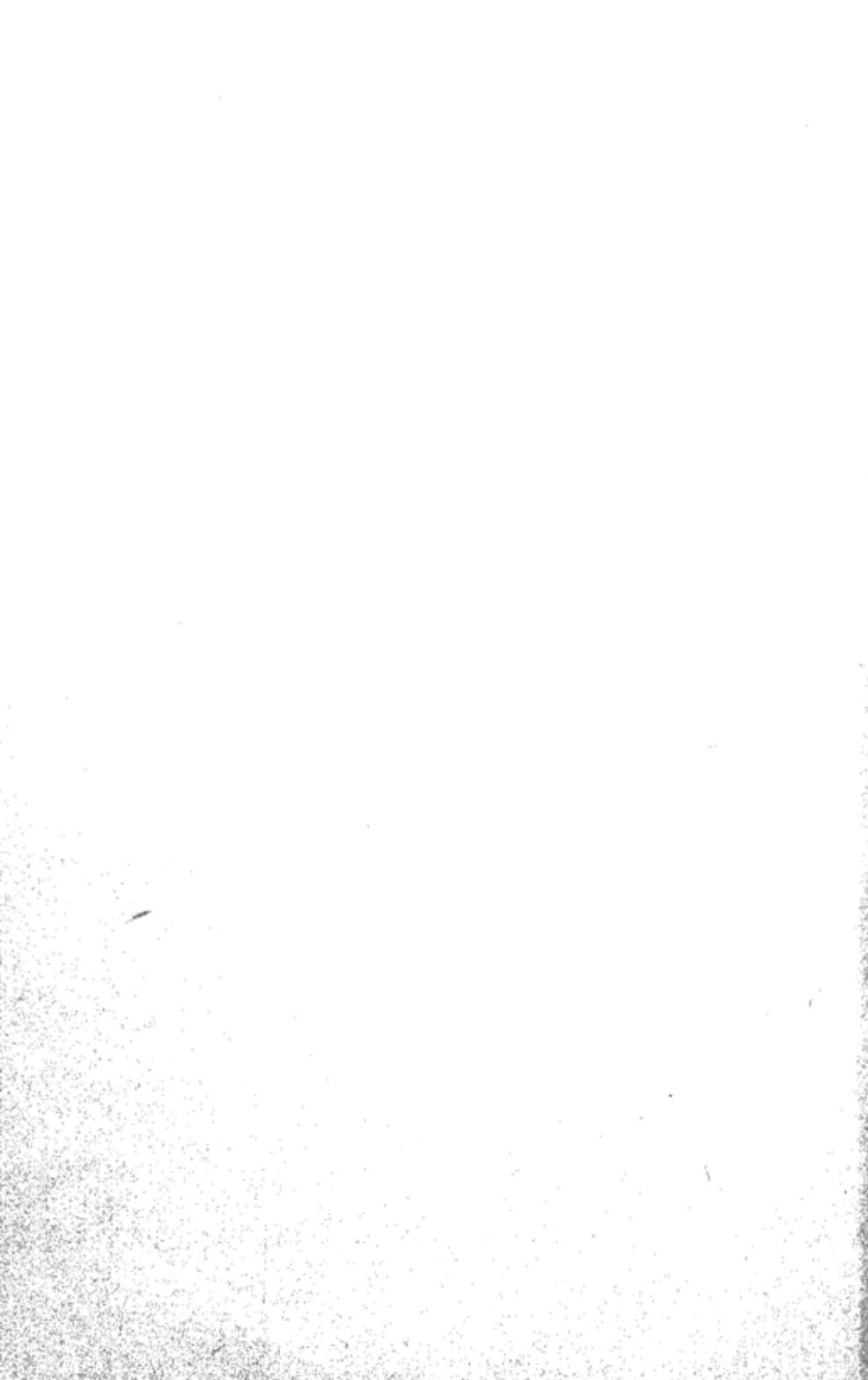
Author's Note

I acknowledge with gratitude my debt to the Skinner family, and in particular to Colonel James Skinner's great-great-granddaughter, Mrs Harold Sale (*née* Lillian Skinner), for the great help given me in my research. I am also very much indebted to the Librarian and staff of the India Office Library, for their expert advice and kind assistance, and to the following for their co-operation: the High Commissioner for India; the High Commissioner for Pakistan; the War Office; the National Army Museum; the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst; the Society of Army Historical Research; the Imperial War Museum; the British Museum; the East India and Sports Club; the Punjab Records Office; the Lahore Museum; the Punjab University; and the National Archives of India. Several institutions as well as individuals have very kindly accorded me permission to reproduce paintings, prints and photographs. The names of those concerned are shown in the list of illustrations.

Spelling. In Skinner's day place names in India and Indian words were spelt phonetically in English. This spelling has naturally been retained when quoting him or his contemporaries, but elsewhere in the text the standard 'Hunterian' system has been used, except where it would disguise such well-known names as Cawnpore or Lucknow under the correct but unfamiliar renderings – Khanpur and Lakhnau. In the case of some European names, particularly those of French adventurers, the most convenient and commonly-accepted forms have been adopted, again except when quoting from source material.

I

Soldier of Fortune



The Pagoda Tree

'COLONEL SKINNER' was the name on the jar of mango chutney, and what a memorial it made for a soldier! Not in stone, or bronze, or even plaster, but in chutney.

Yet what could have better recalled that illustrious founder of Skinner's Horse, the crack Indian cavalry regiment? What else could have given such flavour to the leader of legendary courage whose fabled exploits had shaped the course of history? There suddenly were his Yellow Boys charging with lance and sword against lines of cannon belching shot and grape and flailing chains. There his secret missions and hair-breadth escapes. There his harem of beautiful wives, the princely state in which he lived, and the air of strangeness and mystery that had always hung about his name.

Some of the stories one hears about him are almost incredible. Baden-Powell, in his inimitable book on pig-sticking, says Skinner hunted tiger in the way others do pig, with a spear, on horseback. Tiger! Yet Thorn describes in his *Memoir of the War in India* how 'a tiger of large size was shot with a pistol by General Lake, just as the ferocious animal was in the act of springing upon Major Nairne, by whom it had been previously speared.' And that of course in full uniform.

It was an age of high adventure, an age not so remote from ours in time, as in its ways, its marvellous opportunity, and its glamour. It was the age of the mythical Pagoda Tree laden with golden fruit for such as were bold enough to shake it. Men like the soldiers of fortune, who raised armies for the native princes

and rose to dazzling heights of power in a blaze of military pomp and eastern magnificence. The vast Indian scene was the canvas of those adventurers, who from our perspective seem a lot larger than life. War-lords, they fought out their battles on the dusty plains, and intrigued in native courts in an atmosphere of debauchery and cruelty which is almost unparalleled. In their mighty, forbidding fortresses they held sovereign sway.

Theirs was a brief heyday, and reference to them in the history books is limited to a paragraph, or at the most a page. They were a flash in the pan, but what a flash it was! It took the British a major war to bring to an end their fantastic run. Yet each in his own way, directly or indirectly, cleared the road for British paramountcy, and, of all those freelances involved in the convulsion, none was braver or truer to his salt, none a better friend of Britain, none more adventurous, than Colonel James Skinner, C.B., or Sikander Sahib, as he was known the length and breadth of Hindustan.

Skinner's unchallenged place in the Indian military history is as its most outstanding leader of light, irregular cavalry. But it was not so much the total of his amazing exploits as the man himself who created the legend: a man striving to prove himself by the solid worth of his service, and succeeding magnificently; a generous, much-loved man, whose name was never sullied by a base or dishonourable act. He was revered and hero-worshipped by the simple folk; and such people do not bestow their affection without good cause. He was honoured by the great, by the brilliant team of soldiers and statesmen who fashioned a British Empire in India at a time when the East India Company was slowly emerging from its chrysalis of commercial self-interest. Names like Lake, Minto, Hastings, Dalhousie, Combermere, Bentinck, Clare, Prinsep, Metcalfe, Ochterlony, Malcolm, Fraser, and Elphinstone could be listed among Skinner's many friends. Yet he was what they used to call a country-born, and had to overcome the prejudice that had grown up against the mixed race.

For the last twenty years of his life, with his reputation secure,

The Pagoda Tree

he was a must for every travelling official, writer and notability who visited the Delhi province; and there are few books of memoirs or travel touching on that place and period which do not mention Sikander Sahib and his hospitality. One of the main attractions was the entertainment he provided in himself, for he was an excellent raconteur.

Fortunately his story, rich as it is in anecdote and excitement, has been preserved; for he wrote his memoirs, in Persian, which was the second language of the cultured Indians and the senior European administrators, most of whom were oriental scholars. The memoirs are fragmentary. In parts they are confusing and historically inaccurate, but when they deal with his subjective experiences the details are vividly recalled, and they remain an important source of information on some of the fantastic battles in which he fought. Moreover they possess a vitality which gives some idea of the rare treat it must have been to listen to him, and I shall quote *in extenso* in the hope of preserving something of the flavour of this remarkable man.

Friends would gather round the old soldier of an evening on the lawn outside his house in Delhi, or the one in Hansi. Flocks of shrieking birds would be flying homewards to the city from the fields, and the cheroots and hookahs of the group would begin to glow in the gathering dusk. It was the time of the day when Sikander was at his best, and a name or a place had but to be mentioned for his thoughts to fly back to some episode or cameo of the glorious epic in which he played so noble a part. . . .

Regarding Skinner's origins there is some confusion. He says, 'I was born in 1778. My father was a native of Scotland in the Company's service; my mother was a Rajepootnee, the daughter of a zamindar (land owner) of the Bojepoor country, who was taken prisoner at the age of fourteen, in the war with Rajah Cheit Singh, I believe near Bejaghur in the Benares district. My father, then an ensign into whose hands she fell, treated her with great kindness, and she bore him six children—three girls and three boys. The former were all married to

gentlemen in the Company's service;¹ my elder brother, David went to sea; I myself became a soldier; and my younger brother, Robert, followed my example.' But the war with Chet Singh, Rajah of Benares, did not start until August 1781, and Bejaigarh (Bejaghar) was not taken until November of that year.

Very little is known of the background of Hercules Skinner, James's father, beyond the fact that his grandfather was David Skinner (Provost of Montrose 1713 - 14) who married Katharine, daughter of Robert Tailyour of Barrowfield, Montrose. They had six sons of whom David, a shipwright at Montrose, and thrice Provost between 1733-1744, married Margaret, daughter of Alexander Beattie, a burgess of Montrose and master of the ship, *Hopeful Jean of Montrose*. David and Margaret Skinner had five children, of whom the youngest, born probably in 1735, was Hercules.

Hercules entered the Bengal Native Army as a 'Country' cadet, so called in contradistinction to 'Europe' cadets who were appointed in Britain. 'Country' cadets were usually those, who, lacking sufficient influence at the Court of Directors of the East India Company, went out to India generally as 'free merchants' in the hope of securing a coveted East India cadetship - an asset providing a competence for life, with a fair chance, in the eighteenth century at any rate, of being able to leave India with a considerable fortune.

Hercules's brother, James (1733 - 1773), had already been commissioned in the British Army (H.M.'s 84th Regiment of Foot) in 1762, and transferred to the Bengal Army in October 1763, shortly before the assault and capture of Patna on 6 November 1763. He rose to the rank of captain and command of the 6th Native Infantry. He was probably instrumental in his

1. The daughters were: Mary, who married (1) Lieut. William Ridley, 32nd Sepoys (died in Calcutta in April 1794), and (2) Lieut.-Col. William Cooper, C.B.; Elizabeth Jane, who married James Oldham Oldham, Bengal Civil Service (retired as Judge of the Provincial Court of Appeal, Bareilly and in 1824 purchased Bellamour Hall in Staffordshire from Lady Blount); and Margaret, who married Thomas Templeton, an attorney in Calcutta.

The Pagoda Tree

brother's coming out to India and being appointed to the 'Country' cadetship.

Records show Hercules's admission as a cadet on 31 October 1771, and his commission as ensign (the most junior commissioned rank in the infantry) on 26 March 1773. But there is no indication of his unit until 1777, when he is shown as being in the 20th Native Infantry, a battalion which was numbered the 19th before 1775, which was never in action, and which was disbanded for mutiny in 1780. So if there is any truth in Skinner's romantic story of how his parents met, when and where it all happened we will never know.

That his mother was a Rajputni, however, there can be little doubt. Rajputs are the proud, military caste of Hindus, imbued above all else with a high sense of honour and destiny. In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Krishna is represented as saying to Urgein: 'A soldier of the Kshatri (warrior) tribe hath no superior duty to fighting. Soldier, who art the favourite of God, engage in such a battle as this. If thou art slain, thou wilt obtain Heaven; if victorious thou wilt enjoy the world.'

Death carries no great sting for the true Rajput, nor did it, apparently, for Jeany, as Skinner's mother was known. 'In the year 1790 my poor mother died,' he goes on. 'She could not endure that her two (younger) daughters should be forced from her and sent to school. She conceived that by their being taken away from her protection, the sanctity of the purdah was violated, and the Rajepoot honour destroyed; and, apprehensive of their disgracing themselves, from being removed from the care of all their female relatives, contrary to the custom of the Rajepoots, she put herself to death.'

The fact that Jeany tried to keep her daughters in strict purdah suggests she was a Moslem Rajput, of one of the tribes that were forcibly converted to Islam during the early Mohammedan invasions – an opinion that is shared by most of the present Skinner family.

That their young mother died by her own hand left a lasting impression on her two younger sons, who before long are to be

found charging at cannon with all of the Rajput's reckless contempt for death: of her eldest son, David, nothing is certain; he had probably left home before the tragedy occurred, for only the other two are mentioned as being sent away to an orphanage that year. Later, when their father was better able to afford the fees, they were removed to a boarding-school, for which thirty rupees a month was paid for each of them.

At the age of sixteen, James was apprenticed to a printer in Calcutta for seven years and sent to live with him and learn the trade. The boy hated it from the start, and on the third day ran away, determined to go to sea. He had only four annas in his pocket, and these he lived on for a few days, wandering about the bazaars. At length, when the money ran out, he did odd jobs, carrying loads and helping the native craftsmen, until one day he was surprised by a servant of his sister Margaret's husband, who laid hands on him and took him to his master, the lawyer Thomas Templeton. He gave Skinner a good scolding, and put him copying law papers, for which the boy earned his keep. Thus he worked three months, until his god-father, Captain William Burn, arrived in Calcutta. Burn called on Templeton and, on asking how James was getting on, received a very sorry account of his god-son.

'What do you really want to be?' Burn asked him.

'A soldier,' was James Skinner's prompt reply.

Burn was sympathetic, but the difficulty here was the boy's origin. Recent legislation had completely altered the status and prospects of the country-borns in India. From the earliest days of the East India Company, unions with native women of the country had been fostered, and the Company's personnel from the highest to the lowest had helped to swell the numbers of the mixed community. Half-castes were treated in most respects as British, and as British subjects were not permitted to acquire land or live farther than ten miles from the nearest Presidency town or East India Company settlement.

There were privileges too in being associated with the white race, and there was never any doubt as to where the allegiance of

The Pagoda Tree

the country-borns lay. Entry into the Company's service had been open to them, and they had fought in the succession of battles which had effectively established the British as a power in India. But a policy of discrimination had grown up side by side with the increase in the number of European women coming out to India, and it only needed an excuse such as the successful rebellion of the mulattos in the French West Indies for the prejudice to become law. By a decree, dated 31 May 1792, 'No Person, the son of a native Indian, shall henceforth be appointed by this Court to appointments in the Civil, Military or Marine services of the country.'

This debarred half-castes from the upper grades of the Company's services, but its shareholders were not satisfied. They also demanded the exclusion of the mixed race from the lower ranks of the army, where it was felt they were still in a position to undermine the British authority. It was not long before it was finally resolved that half-castes should only be eligible for non-combatant service as bandsmen and farriers. The ruling had caused great bitterness, not only in the community, but among fair-minded Europeans. An important door had been closed to many of their sons. There were, however, openings in some of the native states, whose chiefs had learned from bitter experience the value of European organisation and discipline, and Skinner was able to persuade his god-father that it was in the service of one of the princes that his future lay. So well did the boy succeed that Burn finally gave him 300 rupees and told him to go up river to join his father in Cawnpore, where he himself would shortly follow.

James Skinner's dark eyes shone with the thrill of contemplating the full, lusty career that now lay ahead of him. He was only just out of school, where the main topic of conversation appears to have been that of the military adventurers, who were to Skinner's age group in India what the cowboys of the Western are to the universal schoolboy today. More so perhaps, for there was nothing two-dimensional about the men who had suddenly become, within the decade, a vital entity in the struggle for

Indian supremacy. Armies they created had conquered kingdoms and overthrown princes, and they who had wrought the change, the members of a new military élite, were very much in demand. The big stars not only commanded huge salaries, but they were in a position to tap inestimable hoards of golden pagodas, mohurs and Venetian sequins, silver rupees and Spanish pieces of eight which were all current in India at that time. Soldiers of fortune lived in a state of bewildering magnificence, travelled in gaudy processions of elephants, held durbars, and filled their harems with picked beauties from all over Hindustan. They lived dangerously and fought bravely, and they had evolved a code of honour which made them generally respected by the masters who employed them.

It was not long before Skinner was on a river boat on the mighty bosom of the Ganges. He reached Cawnpore in April 1795, where his father readily gave his consent when he heard that Burn had already offered his conditional support. After a fortnight Burn himself arrived at the station, and a few days later James left for the Mahratta army headquarters at Koil, near Aligarh. From his father he had received a sword, a horse and some money, but Burn had provided an all-important letter of introduction to the celebrated adventurer, General de Boigne.

Benoît de Boigne. It was a name that had resounded in Hindustan. It had affected the price of India stock in London and excited speculation in Paris. It had awed every chief between the Sutlej, the Ganges and the Narbada, and it belonged to the best known, the richest and the most powerful professional soldier in the country.

Few men, even in India, could have claimed such a varied career as de Boigne. He had served in the Irish Brigade in Flanders and fought for the Russians against the Turks. He had been sold as a slave in Constantinople, favoured by the Empress Catharine in St Petersburg, and court-martialled in Madras, as an officer in the East India Company's army, for flirting with another officer's wife.

The Pagoda Tree

Later, on a journey to discover an overland route to Russia, his money and papers had been stolen. It was a misfortune that had proved a blessing in disguise, for he had abandoned his journey and sold his sword instead to Madhaji Sindhia, the powerful Mahratta chief, who was then trying to establish his authority at Delhi.

The Mahrattas were a race of predatory horsemen from Maharashtra, a country which was roughly the present state of Bombay, who in a century of conquest had become the dominant power in India, so that they levied tribute over an area of nearly 900,000 square miles. Their success lay in their mobility, for they had conquered by lightning raids rather than pitched battles, plundering and laying waste a country until the unfortunate inhabitants sued for peace at any price. The Mahrattas had never used infantry, but shortly before meeting de Boigne, in 1784, Madhaji Sindhia had seen his army of 20,000 cavalry twice defeated and dispersed by a British force of 4,000 European and native infantry. Another small force, by capturing the great fortress of Gwalior, had shown him what sepoys could do on their own when properly trained and led. This lesson had caused Sindhia to accept de Boigne's offer; and the Mahratta had commissioned the Frenchman to raise two battalions of infantry.

In that year the great Moghul Empire was rapidly falling apart, the Emperor little more than a symbol of sovereignty, a puppet in the hands of a succession of turbulent nobles in their struggle for power. Continued disturbances had reduced the capital to a state of near anarchy, when Sindhia, by a master-stroke, had succeeded in making himself paramount at Delhi. But it was de Boigne who had consolidated and maintained Sindhia's position, and by a series of brilliant victories the adventurer had crushed all opposition from the nobles, battered the insurgent Rajput states of Jaipur and Jodhpur into submission, and decisively defeated the rival Mahratta house of Holkar.

Sindhia had become the virtual master of Hindustan, and de Boigne, by now a general with his force increased to 30,000 infantry and 200 guns, was the man who had made it all possible.

It was said that de Boigne had made the profession of free-lance soldiering in India respectable. In the past, native princes, in their anxiety to raise battalions, had not been too particular about whom they entertained. Deserters from the French and English armies became soldiers of fortune, as did debtors and fugitives from justice. Some were brave men, but they were not as a rule a credit to their arms. Besides, the money was often uncertain, and it was not unknown for pay to be several years in arrears, during which time both officers and men subsisted on what they could extract by plunder and ransom. But now it was different. In de Boigne's army the prospects were good and the pay excellent. An ensign began at 150 rupees¹ a month, rising to 200 for a lieutenant, 300 for a captain-lieutenant, 400 for a captain, 1,200 for a major, 2,000 for a lieutenant-colonel, 3,000 for a colonel, and 10,000 for a general. Promotion up to captain was on a time scale, unless accelerated by outstanding service, after which it was by appointment. There was a special rate of compensation for those wounded in action, depending on the degree of severity, with a pension scheme for the dependants of those who were killed. There was an army medical service, with an ambulance corps to evacuate the wounded from the battlefield, the first of its kind in India and for that matter almost anywhere else in the world.

It was certainly a privilege to serve in one of de Boigne's *campos* or brigades, so it was with a beating heart that James Skinner rode out from Koil along the tree-lined avenue towards the fortress of Aligarh, early one morning in June 1795.

Odd glimpses of Aligarh, picked out of dusty old books and manuscripts of the period, tell us something of what Skinner would have seen that day in the fortress. The flag fluttering above the battlements was the White Cross of Savoy – de Boigne was born in Chambéry; but the sentry's challenge was given in English. Once inside the complicated system of gates and causeways, the scene was one of intense military activity – battalions of infantry, in scarlet uniforms with black leather accoutrements and black

1. The average rupee was then worth about 2s. 6d.

coxcombs in their blue turbans, marching and counter-marching to a brisk military air from their fifes, drums and cymbals; groups of gunners limbering and unlimbering field guns at the double; parties of recruits at drill and musketry training.

Near the keep was a large, tented pavilion with a crowd overflowing into the bright sunshine outside – de Boigne's durbar, where the great man, sitting on a high, throne-like chair, issued his edicts and gave public audiences. Immensely tall, erect and large-boned, he had a fine head, deep-set brown eyes and a strong, expressive mouth. He had turned forty-four, but already his solemn good looks were gaunt with overwork and ill-health. He ran the entire machine himself, unwilling to delegate a vestige of his responsibility.

Such a man did not engage a young officer without very careful consideration; and although Skinner was received with great courtesy and kindness when he presented his letter of recommendation, he was also subjected to a pretty searching examination. Just seventeen, he was a little over middle height with a strong, athletic figure, a swarthy, handsome face, dark shining eyes, and straight black hair. He had his father's fine forehead and stubborn jaw and his mother's slightly hooked nose and full lips – an amalgam of the two races that had created him, suggestive of the courage, generosity and sincerity that underlay his character. He obviously impressed de Boigne, for the General gave him an ensign's commission and posted him to the 2nd Brigade at Muttra, then commanded by a cashiered ex-officer from the Black Watch named Robert Sutherland.

Colonel Sutherland put him into a battalion of *Najibs*, or Moslem foot soldiers, under Captain Anthony Pohlman, a blustering, red-faced Hanoverian, with a sword arm like an executioner's, who had first come out to India as a sergeant in a regiment of German mercenaries in the East India Company's employ. His *Najibs* were a fierce-looking lot, with piercing black eyes and thick bristling whiskers, in baggy white pants, blue, quilted jackets and very high, starched turbans of the same colour. They were armed with matchlocks to which bayonets had recently

been fitted, and with swords.

There was one battalion of 1,000 *Najibs* to each brigade, the remaining infantry being made up of eight battalions of 750 *Telengas*, or regular foot, in scarlet uniforms, and one battalion of 1,000 *Aliguls*, or Pathan shock troops, who corresponded to the flank companies of a British infantry brigade. The cavalry support consisted of eight *risalahs* or troops of 110 men each, in green uniforms with red turbans and cummerbunds. The artillery numbered about sixty pieces manned by the artillery companies within each battalion with roughly ten men to a gun, including a European or country-born gunner. There was, in addition to these infantry guns, a siege train of four heavy battering guns, twelve howitzers and two mortars.

With 1,500 draught bullocks, 300 baggage camels and probably twenty elephants, the whole added up to a ponderous and slow-moving, but nevertheless extremely effective fighting machine, rigidly disciplined to the English drill movements and cavalry evolutions. To date none of the three brigades had lost a battle.

Skinner's first few months of service were spent happily enough in Muttra, and it was during this period that he must have acquired his first 'wife', for in the following year his eldest son Joseph was born. In October 1795 the 2nd Brigade was ordered to Bundelkhand, to join the army of the Mahratta general, Lakwa Dada, in reducing that turbulent country to submission. During this campaign Skinner saw his first active service, fighting in two field battles, and taking part in the storming of five or six forts. As he puts it, this increased his *shouq*, or earnest taste, for soldiering, and he set out to make himself proficient in the art of war. All his spare time was devoted to learning to use the Mahratta spear, to archery, and to sword exercise; and in a few months he made himself formidable as an opponent. He also began cultivating the Mahratta chiefs in Lakwa's army, and they soon took a liking to him.

While Skinner was in Bundelkhand a momentous change took place in the Mahratta high command. De Boigne's health broke

The Pagoda Tree

down, and, on Christmas Day 1795, he left Koil for British territory with a huge caravan of elephants, camels, and bullock-carts laden with his effects. The fortune he later took back to Europe exceeded £400,000 – made in just over ten years.

His old master, Madhaji Sindhia, had died the year before and had been succeeded by his grand-nephew and adopted son, Dowlat Rao Sindhia, just turned fifteen. To him de Boigne, with gifted political foresight, gave this parting advice, that he should never excite the jealousy of the British by increasing his battalions; indeed, that it would be preferable to disband them rather than risk a war. But Dowlat Rao was too young, too impressionable, and too infatuated with his newly acquired power to take the warning seriously. De Boigne did not recommend his own successor in accordance with the Indian custom. Instead he earnestly advised against placing the three brigades under the command of any one person, being only too well aware of the menace such a force could become, even to the Mahrattas themselves, if its complete control passed into the hands of some ambitious and unscrupulous individual. But again the boy chief would not heed the wise and experienced soldier. Pierre Cuillier, a Frenchman with the *nom de guerre* of Perron, was promoted to general and elevated to the supreme command.

It was the first step in the series of events that led ultimately to the total eclipse of the great Mahratta nation.

Affair of the Bhais

Perron's Pagoda Tree was his *jaidad*, or territory assigned for the upkeep of his brigades. It covered fifty-two *pergunnahs* or districts of some of the richest farm lands in the Doab, between the Jumna and the Ganges, and one of his first acts, after arriving at Koil in February 1797, was to take possession of it. He made a circuit tour of the revenue-collecting centres, proclaiming himself by beat of drum the rightful successor of General de Boigne, and appointing his own revenue officers.

Having thus secured the sinews of war, he was able to turn his attention to the other duties his post involved. As Subahdar or Governor of all Sindhia's possessions in Hindustan, he was responsible for internal security and for exacting tribute from the vassal states, so he kept his brigades busy, showing the flag, quelling local disturbances, and forcing refractory chiefs to pay up.

At first everything went smoothly. There were no major problems for Perron beyond finding new ways of shaking his Pagoda Tree. But before many months were out he was to face his first big crisis, a situation that on the face of things seems farcical enough, although at the time it suddenly threatened to sweep his young master from power.

It was known as the affair of the Bhais, and, as it afforded Ensign James Skinner his first opportunity of making a name for himself, it would be worth digressing for a moment to explain how the whole thing came about.

Though Madhaji Sindhia had freely expressed his intention of adopting Dowlat Rao as his son and heir, the old man had never

Affair of the Bhais

got round to signing the papers before he died. Still, his wish had been fully acknowledged, and Dowlat Rao had accordingly succeeded, and with the full blessing of his adopted mothers, Madhaji's widows, the Bhais. There were three Bhais, one of whom, Bhagirhti Bhai, was young and beautiful.

Before his accession, Dowlat Rao had promised to make ample provision for them, and they had therefore continued to reside in his camp, but nothing was done about it, and moreover as time passed they had found their modest allowances cut and even their little comforts circumscribed. No complaint, however, appears to have escaped them, until suddenly it was discovered, or at least alleged, that Dowlat Rao was having an affair with his youngest adopted mother, and the other two, needless to say, made the most of it.

They denounced the transgression publicly in terms expressive of their utmost abhorrence, and the rumpus took a pretty uncomfortable turn for the boy chief when they declared they could no longer regard as a son one who had so shamefully defiled his father's bed. It became necessary to gag the ladies at all costs, but Sindhia's mistake was in the man he chose for this most delicate task. The man was Surji Rao Ghatkia, the father of another beautiful girl, one reputed to be the most beautiful in all Maharashtra. Sindhia wanted to marry her, and Ghatkia had recently come into prominence by withholding his consent to the marriage until the spoilt and self-indulgent chief had acceded to his main condition, which was nothing short of the supreme office of prime minister. Sindhia's previous prime minister, Balloba Tantia, had been arrested and confined, and Ghatkia elevated in his stead. Nobody minded that very much in the Deccan, as no holds were barred in Mahratta politics, but from the start Ghatkia's deliberate policy seems to have been to undermine his son-in-law, and he began his diabolical administration by forcing his way into the enclosure of the elder Bhais' tents and having those unfortunate women stripped, flogged and barbarously degraded.

Both dowagers were Shenwi¹ Brahmins, related by blood or

1. There were eight classes of Brahmins in the Mahratta country.

caste to some of the highest office-holders in the government, and the outrage led to civil war. Within a short while the country was up in arms, with large bodies of horse flocking to the Bhais' standard. Once their numbers were large enough they moved northwards, plundering every village Sindhia owned between Kistna and the Godavari. The flame of insurrection spread as some of the most distinguished feudatory chiefs, including the powerful Lakwa Dada, joined the Bhais, so that by the time they reached the Rajput state of Kota, towards the end of 1798, the insurgent army numbered over 20,000 Mahratta horse, with fifteen battalions of infantry and twenty pieces of cannon.

The revolt had already assumed dangerous proportions before Sindhia finally stirred himself to issue orders to Ambaji Englia, his Commander-in-Chief, to mobilise, and for Perron to support him to the full.

Perron acknowledged the order, but because he was unwilling to assist a rival general to any extent, sent only two Telenga battalions, from the 2nd Brigade, one under the command of Captain Edward Butterfield, the other under Ensign Skinner. They joined Ambaji encamped near Gwalior with some 15,000 feudal Mahratta horse and twelve battalions of foot, the latter commanded by two dubious characters named Kaleb Ali and Kutub Khan.

For some reason Ambaji's son, Bhow, now took command of the force, and they marched to Kota, which was then, through the tyrannical husbandry and ruthless reforms of the Regent, Zalim Singh, the granary of central India. Every square yard of land capable of taking a plough was sprouting a crop of fresh young corn. Outside the villages were tell-tale mounds containing part of Zalim Singh's enormous reserves of grain.

They met the Bhais' army at a place called Chandkhori, southwest of the town of Kota.

The two sides faced each other at 3 p.m., and soon after a tremendous cannonade began. At 5 p.m. Bhow ordered his line to advance, when it soon became apparent that the whole of the Bhais' artillery was directed at the regular battalions, and that

Affair of the Bhais

both Kaleb Ali and Kutub Khan had an understanding with the enemy. Before long those two traitors with their twelve battalions deserted to them, leaving Butterfield and Skinner with 1,500 men in scarlet to face their combined infantry force.

Seeing this, Bhow galloped up to Butterfield and directed him to withdraw to the other side of a small river a mile in their rear. They retired by wings, in good order, but were charged several times by the Bhais' troops, and lost fully a third of their number before they could get under cover on the other side of the river. By that time it was getting dark, and Bhow ordered a general retreat to a fort some twelve miles farther back. At 10 p.m. they commenced the retreat, leaving behind their wounded and nearly all their baggage.

Their route lay through a narrow pass of about two miles between bleak hills, and Skinner was left with two companies and a six-pounder to hold the entrance until the rest of the army had cleared the pass. This he did, and at about two in the morning began to hear the enemy's drums. By that time the rest of their force had got well on through the pass, and he set out to follow. But one of the gun's wheels broke down, and instead of abandoning the piece Skinner determined to make a stand and die if necessary defending it. He ordered it to be charged with grape. The drums approached in the dark, and Skinner, waiting till they were almost upon them, gave them the round of grape and a volley of small arms and, rushing upon the enemy sword in hand, put them to headlong flight, killing a fair number.

For this success he was decorated with a grand *khilut*, or robe of honour. The investiture took place next day before the assembled army. A salute was fired as Bhow's proclamation honouring Ensign James Skinner was read, and a great shout of acclamation went up from the serried ranks of the host. Later a very flattering letter was received from General Perron, promoting his young officer to lieutenant.

In the shifting sands of Mahratta power politics the ultimate issue generally depended upon the fatalism of the great mass of

the people. Had Bhow been defeated at Chandkhori, it would have been kismet, and as likely as not Sindhia's adherents would have fallen off one by one. But Bhow had not been defeated, despite the perfidy of the bulk of his infantry, and this fact alone was proof enough that fate and the stars were still on Sindhia's side. His chiefs clung steadfastly to his cause.

Powerful reinforcements were assembled under his Commander-in-Chief's personal direction, including the whole of Colonel Sutherland's 2nd Brigade, and the scene shifted to Chitorgarh, the historic fortress of the Rana of Udaipur. The Rana had chivalrously offered the Bhais sanctuary.

Lakwa Dada had taken up a strong defensive position under the walls of the fortress, with his front protected by the junction of two rivers, and his flanks covered by steep hills, and the two Mahratta armies stood looking at each other with their inclination to fight diminishing daily. Things were seldom what they appeared in the endless squabbles that went on among that remarkable mountain people of the Western Ghats, complicated as they were by hereditary loyalties and jealousies, avarice and a natural preference for devious intrigue.

Intrigue was in the air. It permeated both camps at all levels, and an incident in which Skinner was personally involved will show how even the two contending generals were not above acting in concert to serve their own ends.

One morning he was out exercising his horse in a fine suit of Mahratta chain mail, when he met Hurji Sindhia, a relative of the Maharajah, with a body of 500 horsemen proceeding towards the river. Hurji, who said he had been sent by Ambaji to reconnoitre a ford where it was thought the whole army might cross to give battle, invited Skinner to join him. Skinner accepted the invitation, little knowing that the mission was no more than a snare to lure Hurji into an ambush arranged between Ambaji and Lakwa, who both sought his destruction.

They had got to within a thousand yards of the river along the left flank of Lakwa's army, when Skinner spotted a single horseman on the bank, who immediately on seeing them went down

Affair of the Bhais

into a *nullah*. He mentioned this to Hurji, who replied that it must be a Pindari. But scarcely had he spoken than they saw hundreds of horsemen suddenly appearing from behind hillocks and out of the hollows. In a matter of minutes a thousand and more were milling densely along the river bank, like eager starters for a terrifying race, and then they were off. They approached on pounding hooves of thunder.

Staunchly, Hurji's men received the charge and repulsed it, inflicting a fairly severe loss on the assailants.

This check, says Skinner, had an excellent effect, and they fell back skirmishing for about a mile and a half, when Balaram, the enemy leader, brought his men again to the charge.

'We repulsed this attack also,' Skinner goes on, 'but my mare was wounded by a sabre cut, and I received two or three sword blows on the body from which I was only saved by my armour. Hurjee, who was also in armour, received a spear wound in his right arm. I happened to be close by when this occurred, and cut down the man who speared him. But in this attack we lost some of our best sowars, and one or two Indians of note and courage. We still had two cos (three miles) between us and our camp, and Balaram had become furious – charging us on all sides. Our party now began to lose ground, the retreat began to be a flight, the soldiers to be disobedient to orders, and poor Hurjee to get confused. Balaram himself appeared in our rear, pressing us close, with about seventy or eighty sowars. On seeing this, Hurjee Sindea called aloud to the few who remained close to him, amongst whom I had the good fortune to be, telling them not to run like cowards, but to die like Rajepoots; that he well knew Balaram, who was leading the party in his rear, and that he would never fly from him. About fifty men turned with him, and with this handful of heroes he made a desperate push, and cut down Balaram himself. The others with us levelled several of his sowars to the ground, and the rest fled on all sides.'

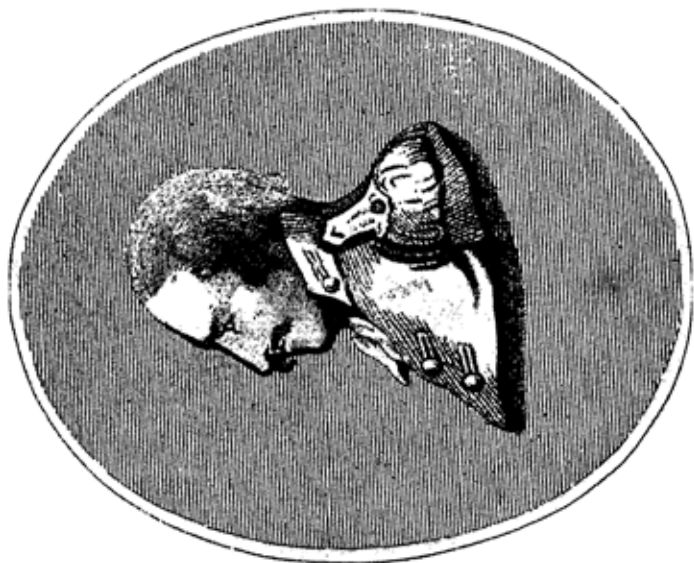
Few traditions are more honoured in the romance of India than the giving of rich rewards for a personal service, and Hurji Sindhia was not ungenerous when they got back to camp. He led Skin-

ner to his durbar tent where they all sat down. 'Hurjee then rose, and embracing me, said, "All these men who fought with me this day are my servants, and did but their duty; but you are my friend, and fought for me as a friend." He then took a pair of golden bangles, set with diamonds, and put them round my wrists, and presented me with a sword, a shield, and a very fine Dekhinee horse – all of which gratified me very much. I thanked him for his kindness, and declared that, though but a poor soldier, I was as much his servant as I was of Dowlut Rao's. He then gave me betel, as is the custom of the Mahrattas when they permit a soldier to retire, and assured me he would never forget me.'

Skinner felt he had good reason to be proud of himself that day, so it came as something of a shock when he was sent for and carpeted by Colonel Sutherland for the part he had played in the affair. The Colonel sat in a large, ornate chair, smoking a hookah, while a slave girl fanned him and a group of minions sat cross-legged at his feet. He accused Skinner of acting without orders, adding that he had no alternative but to report the whole matter to General Perron. However, 'On returning to my tent, it was intimated to me that if I would give the horse I had got and which was a noble animal, to the Colonel, he would say nothing of what had happened to Perron. To this I replied that I might give the bangles, but with the sword, the shield, and the horse, I would not part; and though several schemes were had recourse to by Colonel Sutherland, in order to obtain the animal, he did not succeed in depriving me of him. On the other hand Hurjee himself had written to Perron describing my conduct, and I received direct from that gentleman, in consequence, a letter of thanks – a circumstance which greatly annoyed Colonel Sutherland. But, ere long, the Colonel himself was discovered intriguing with the Mahratta chiefs in the other camp, and Perron discharged him, bestowing his command upon Captain Pholman, who was promoted to be Major. About the same time Captain Butterfield also quitted the service (having been dismissed for the same offence as Colonel Sutherland).'



Perron



George Thomas



Lake with his son at Laswari

By then the situation before Chitorgarh had become a stalemate. Pay having fallen into arrears, both sides took to plundering, and soon the fair land of Udaipur for a radius of a hundred miles, with its fertile, well-watered plains and sharp, romantic ridges, its venerable temples and shrines, its countless monuments to acts of bravery in its heroic past, its groves, orchards and serais, became a scene of chaos and desolation.

The Rana certainly regretted his chivalrous gesture, but what could he do? Like the other Rajput princes, descended from blue-faced celestial heroes of Hindu mythology, born into a caste intended only to fight, and bred for a sort of twilight of the gods, he was powerless to cope. As it was, he was a vassal of the Maharrattas, humbled by the jackal valour of hordes of these same depredators, to whom he paid *chouth* (a fourth) and *surdeshmukhi* (a tenth) of Udaipur's revenues, to purchase security from their incursions. However, events were taking place at Poona which brought a deep feeling of relief to all concerned.

Sindhia had at last been persuaded to arrest Ghatkia and reinstate Balloba. This opened the door to negotiation with the Bhais, and through Balloba's mediation they agreed to call off the war in return for a *jaghir* (estate) of eleven lakhs¹ revenue a year, with the city of Burhampur and the fort of Asirgarh being assigned to them. An agreement was duly signed, and the ladies departed from Chitorgarh. They had made their point, and there the matter rested, for the time being at any rate.

Desultory operations continued, for the two opposing generals now began contending for the province of Mewar, but that situation too was cleared up before long. Oddly enough, although Lakwa was defeated, it was Ambaji who came off worst in the end: his success had excited the jealousy of Perron, who began an intrigue which ended eventually in Ambaji's being ordered by Sindhia to return the province to Lakwa, who was also appointed to succeed him as Commander-in-Chief.

Skinner approved of the new appointment. 'It was', he says, 'a measure which pleased all the troops, both Mahrattas and Euro-

1. One lakh = 100,000 rupees, then about £12,500.

peans, for they knew Luckwa Dada to be an able, generous and excellent soldier.'

Then the momentous news arrived of the threatened invasion of India by Zeman Shah, King of Kabul, a grandson of the dreaded Ahmed Shah Abdali, who had dealt a terrible blow to the Mahrattas at Panipat forty years before. Another visitation by the Afghans was regarded as a national emergency, and this, as Skinner adds, made the Mahrattas all friends in a few days.

Soon a movement began towards Delhi of thousands of troops, feudal liegemen and mercenaries, and Lakwa at the head of 20,000 horse, several independent battalions of foot, and the 2nd Brigade, now under Major Pohlman, set out northwards through Rajputana, the varied and exciting land of Hindu chivalry.

Once the seat of wealth and comparative civilisation, it was now considerably reduced, and Lakwa's progress shows how this erosion had taken place. He made his troops work their passage. Several forts on the way were assaulted and taken, the owners being made to pay large sums to get them back. Smallish affairs, they were no match for a brigade of infantry with a battering train. They gave little trouble, save for a place called Bujgarh, which cost Lakwa a thousand men, and Jajgarh.

Jajgarh was a rugged stone fastness crowning a hill, full of purple shadows against a deep red sunset, its outlines blurred by a haze of wood smoke rising from the cooking fires of the town below. The town was occupied without much difficulty, but an assault on a breach in the walls of the fort with 10,000 men was repulsed with a loss of about a third of that number, including two European officers killed and two wounded.

Skinner received his first war wound early in the attack, while standing under a wall and protecting himself with his shield against earthen grenades, flaming thatch, and large stones which were showered on the stormers. A matchlock ball passed through the shield and the palm of his right hand with which he was holding it. The nature of the wound suggests he might have been a 'south-paw', although there is no other supporting evidence.

Affair of the Bhais

Four days after the attack the Rajputs made a sally on the Mahratta trenches and drove them from one sector. But in another sector Lieutenant Vickers, a young country-born, beat them off, following them back into the fort, and holding open the gates for the rest of the Mahrattas to pour in from all sides. The Rajputs defended themselves desperately, but were overwhelmed by superior numbers, and all but a few, who took refuge in the keep, died fighting. These, it was discovered, were preparing for the traditional Rajput holocaust of *Johur*: the women and children were to be blown up in the keep as the men rushed out to fight to the death. But Lakwa, touched by their heroism, instructed Pohlman to offer them the honours of war.

The Rajputs accepted and marched out with their personal arms and their families, and the Mahrattas made a prize of cannon, powder, shot and grain to the value of five lakhs of rupees.

Finally in October 1799 they arrived at Muttra, to be received with great ceremony by General Perron. Zeman Shah had reached Lahore, and the assembled Mahratta forces moved up to a wide plain halfway to Delhi, where troops of every description arrived daily to swell their numbers. Of Mahratta horsemen alone there were over 100,000, while their Pindaris, or subservient plunderers, were like a vast cloud on the outskirts of their camp.

At Koil, a 4th Brigade was quickly raised, and in the British frontier town of Anupshahr a large force assembled under General James Craig, whom Perron was to join when Zeman Shah advanced.

As it turned out Zeman Shah retired. Local disturbances in Kabul required his personal attention, and the next they heard was that he was hurrying back to his own dominions with his horde of fur-capped Afghans. With a massive sigh of relief the Mahrattas relaxed from contemplating their Armageddon. Their grand army broke up, and slowly the horsemen and their Pindaris began to move southwards.

The Golden Idols

In January 1800, Partab Singh, the Rajah of Jaipur, driven to exasperation by Perron's repeated exactions, determined to throw off the Mahratta yoke. He refused to pay his annual tribute of twenty-five lakhs of rupees, and Lakwa Dada was ordered to compel his allegiance.

It was to be a big show-down between the Mahrattas and the Rajputs, so Lakwa's army which assembled at Malpura, forty-five miles to the south-west of Jaipur, was widely representative of all Sindhia's tributary rajahs and tribal allies, and amounted to well over 60,000 horse, 40,000 foot, and 150 pieces of cannon, besides a community of 10,000 wandering Hindu aesthetes called Ghossains, armed with rockets.

At Malpura, Skinner met a number of his old Mahratta friends, including Hurji Sindhia, who gave him regularly every morning a lesson in handling the Mahratta spear. Skinner was in his element. 'In fact,' he says, 'perfecting myself in soldiering was my only pleasure.' Besides, 'Luckwa Dada had taken a great liking to me, and I made myself well-known among the Mahratta chieftains, whom I found to be a good, generous-hearted race of men.'

Skinner's popularity with the Mahratta aristocracy is understandable. He possessed all the qualities they admired in a soldier — courage, toughness, enthusiasm, and, curiously enough, frankness. Belonging, as they did, to an upstart nation with few pretensions and little sophistication, they would have preferred his somewhat brash cheerfulness to the formal respect which they

generally received from the other officers of the 2nd Brigade.

The Jaipur army was assembling outside a town called Sanganir, a few miles south of the capital, and spies brought in reports of a large concentration of Rajput horse, including 10,000 Rathors from the arid plains of Marwar, the bravest and most celebrated of all the Kshatri tribe, contributed by the state of Jodhpur. In numbers the Rajah's force was equal if not superior to Lakwa's, so there was no saying which way victory might go.

Towards the end of March, the Rajah set out from his capital to review his troops, and his arrival at his camp, mounted on a huge and richly-caparisoned elephant, was marked with much firing of small-arms and rockets, and an abundance of salutes. Great sacrifices were performed to propitiate the gods, some lakhs of rupees were distributed in gifts to the Brahmins and alms to the poor, and next day the Rajah began his march at the head of his army. They advanced to within thirty miles of the Mahrattas. Some delay followed because the Rajah's astrologers were not very happy about the position of his star, but on April 14th they advised him again to advance, so that both armies soon came within cannon reach, with just a river between them.

Lakwa appears to have used no astrologers, but instinct told him he must strike the first blow, and that night they slept under arms to stand by at 3 a.m. At four they saw the first portfire lighted on a hill in the rear, the signal to advance, and they moved off in two extended lines, the infantry and artillery in front, flanked on either side by 5,000 horse, and the remainder of the cavalry a thousand paces behind. Within half an hour they saw the second light, the signal to unlimber their guns. The Rajputs' fires along their front were now in view, their army asleep, quite unaware of the impending attack. But before the Mahrattas received their third signal, to open fire, their right had reached the Rajputs' left, and the flank cavalry, unable to resist a hopeless, unsuspecting enemy, had charged in among them. In an instant the whole of the Rajput line was ablaze with thundering cannon, as each gunner on awaking snatched a flame to his touch-hole.

By now the Mahratta infantry had reached the river, and each

battalion commander got his own men and guns across as best he could, reforming on the opposite bank, to continue the advance against a heavy cannonade. From the 2nd Brigade not a shot was fired in return until Colonel Pohlman gave the order, and he waited until the day had dawned and the enemy guns were less than 500 yards away. The 2nd Brigade's guns then opened, but after a few rounds Pohlman again gave the order to advance, and on they went, with their colours flying and their drums beating the step, in the face of almost point-blank gunnery from forty pieces ahead of them.

Skinner's horse was killed under him, the cannon ball like a momentary black speck touching the ground just ahead and then crashing through the animal. Skinner continued on foot, and soon it was grape and screaming chains coming at them out of belching flame and smoke, mowing down the Mahrattas in scores with each salvo, while the buffeting thunder went rolling around among the hills. Finally, at a hundred paces, they gave the enemy their first volley, and charged in with a blood-curdling yell, taking the guns along the sector and putting the opposing battalions to flight.

Next they saw the Holkar brigade under the Frenchman, Chevalier du Drenec, charged by the Rathors, who were seen some distance away in a compact body, the tramp of their hooves like far thunder above the tumult of the battle. On they came, first at a slow hand-gallop which increased in speed as they approached. Du Drenec's well-served guns roared incessantly, and hundreds fell under their own pounding hooves. But the murderous salvos could not stop them. On the Rathors came, now tilting down their lances for the crescendo, the headlong climax of their charge which bore them like a tidal wave over the brigade, laying flat its serried hedge of bayonets, trampling it down, till scarce a vestige of it remained erect. Then, without pausing to look back, they thundered on, unshaken and still in their formidable mass, to attack the Mahratta cavalry of the second line, which, as Skinner recalls, ran like sheep while the Rathors pursued them, cutting them down for several miles.

In the charge most of du Drenec's European officers had been killed, and he himself had only escaped by throwing himself down among the dead. Yet, splendid and terrifying as they were in their great charge, the Rathors by following the Mahratta horse put themselves right out of the battle, and, although they undoubtedly enjoyed themselves on that extended steeplechase, their fun cost the Rajah of Jaipur the battle.

Having seen the Holkar brigade wiped out, the Rajah now decided he would serve the 2nd Brigade the same medicine. Mounted on his gorgeous elephant, he advanced towards the brigade with five to six thousand chosen cavalry, and Pohlman to meet the threat formed his battalions into close columns of companies with his artillery in front. He let the Rajah come to within 300 yards before giving him his first salvo. Then, as the fresh wind carried away the pungent smoke, they saw his great painted elephant sinking down and the royal bodyguard milling around it in confusion.

The rest of the horsemen came on at the brigade, but were beaten off with great slaughter. They rallied and came again, but again were met with a fire that broke them in their surging charge. The Rajah had mounted a horse, and, seeing this, suddenly and quite unexpectedly turned and fled from the field, followed by the survivors of the charge.

He did not stop, it was said, until he reached Jaipur, forty-five miles away, where, however, the news of his flight had preceded him. It was said too, that his mother, a Rajput of sterner stuff, was waiting in the *xenana* to receive him. A female attendant in an adjoining chamber was preparing food, stirring the mixture with a metal spoon. As the Rajah entered, the spoon was heard striking the side of the cooking-pot, upon which the dowager Rani called out, 'Ay, be quiet! Here is the Rajah, and you know how he cannot bear the sound of steel!'

At Malpura, his troops were fighting on, but the tide of success had begun to incline towards the Mahrattas as the Rajput infantry were forced back at every point along the entire front. Their cavalry took over the fight, and for the next critical phase

made reckless and furious attacks on the Mahratta infantry formed into hollow squares. But at last, at about nine o'clock, the field began to clear, as the Rajputs, having dashed themselves in vain against the squares, lost heart without their Rajah and went off to look for him. The field was Lakwa's, and his infantry began plundering the dead, rounding up the horses and collecting the captured guns.

Of his 60,000 Mahratta horse there was still no sign, but later that morning the Rathors who had chased them off were seen returning from the pursuit, their kettle-drums beating out their victory. On coming closer and seeing the captured Jaipur colours flying in the Mahratta lines, the Rathors approached in loose order, thinking their own infantry were masters of the field. They were cruelly undeceived by a salvo of grape at close range from the 2nd Brigade.

Twice they charged the brigade, and though repulsed each time, several broke into the square before they were bayoneted. One Rathor *sowar* attacked Skinner inside the square, firing at him but killing his horse. Thrown to the ground, he only escaped by getting under a tumbrel. He never forgot the wild hatred in the Rathor's eyes, a look that remained even after the man had been pulled down off his horse and decapitated.

At about noon, camel-riders loped up with news of the headlong flight of the Jaipur army, and Skinner was detached with 300 horsemen to bring back confirmation of this. 'On reaching the enemy's camp,' he says, 'I found the news correct. It was utterly abandoned, and instantly I sent word back to Colonel Pholman. I went into the encampment. It was the largest and best I had ever seen, but totally deserted. Here were the most beautiful tents, and large bazaars filled with everything imaginable, but not a man to be seen. My three hundred *sowars* dispersed, and went to plunder; and I myself and two of them went on and reached the Rajah's wooden bungalow, the most beautiful thing I ever saw – all covered with embroidery and crimson velvet. I entered and saw nothing but gold and silver. Opening one of the Rajah's *poojah* (worship) baskets, I found two golden idols, with diamond

eyes, which I immediately secured in my bosom, for fear they should be discovered. I also found several other trinkets, which I likewise took. But about this time our Mahratta cavalry had also returned, and soon the encampment was full of them. In coming away I found a brass fish, with draperies hanging from it and I tied it to my saddle. On my way back I met numbers of Mahratta chieftains going and coming. All looked at me and laughed as I passed, for what reason I could not then imagine.

But meeting a trooper who had been sent by Colonel Pholman to call me, I instantly followed him to that officer's presence. I found him sitting with Luckwa Dada along with several other chiefs, under a large tree; and on my approach, Luckwa himself came up, and ordered me to dismount. I naturally feared that he might have heard something about my prize, which I had secured in my saddle bag, and thinking that he wanted to examine it I began to excuse myself, saying that I was much fatigued and would be glad to have some rest. But Luckwa told me that he wished to see me, for I had saved the Old Pateil's¹ turban in this day's battle. I thought by this he meant to say my battalion had especially distinguished itself in the charges of the Rhatores; but he came closer to me, and Pholman, seeing me confused, perplexed me still more by laughing. At last Luckwa asked me what it was I had hanging to my horse. I replied, "A brass fish." "Will you give it to me?" he asked. "By all means," said I, "provided you will demand nothing more of me." "No," said he, "I will not." "Give me your word on that," I replied, and he immediately did so; on which I loosed the fish and presented it to him. "Well," said he, "dismount now, and let me embrace you;" and as my orderlies and groom had now come up, I dismounted, and he embraced me. He then explained to me that the fish I had given him was the actual *mahee muratib*² or imperial ensign of honour bestowed by the king of Delhee upon the Rajah. I then showed

1. Madhaji Sindhia, the 'Old Patel', had once been forced to fly in a battle with the Rajputs, and in his flight had lost his turban.

2. The Fish of Dignities, an order given by the Moghul Emperors to chiefs of the highest rank, to be fixed to a long pole and borne on an elephant before the recipient in procession.

Luckwa the few trinkets I had brought from the Rajah's bungalow, taking good care to say nothing about the idols. At first he would receive nothing; but, on my pressing him, he did accept a diamond ring, of the value of about 200 rupees. Luckwa then presented me with a grand *khilut*, a fine embroidered palankeen, an *aurenee*, and an allowance of forty rupees per month to maintain the bearers. I expressed my gratitude to him for all his kindness, but observed that, being under Colonel Pholman's command, I could not accept the rewards without his permission. On which that gentleman immediately gave his consent, and I was dismissed from the durbar.'

A palanquin or *palki* was a large, box-shaped litter, seven feet long, by three wide, by four high, with sliding doors or curtains, slung from a long pole by which it was carried by four men. For an officer the privilege of riding in one was a distinction which used to be given by deed of grant from the Moghul Emperor. As a matter of policy Skinner later gave the palanquin to Pohlman. It had been a profitable day. The plunder, *khilut* and *aureni* (large parasol) were valued at 15,000 rupees. Moreover, when Perron's general orders were read out at the head of the brigade, Skinner's battalion was highly commended for their conduct, he was promoted to captain-lieutenant, and the allowance for his *palki* bearers was confirmed. There was also a flattering personal letter from Perron himself, with assurances that he would not forget Skinner's services.

It had been a total victory for the Mahrattas, but for Lakwa Dada it gained him little advantage. Dowlat Rao Sindhia had recently been induced by his beautiful wife to release her father from prison, and once again the execrable Ghatkia was dominating the councils of the vacillating young prince. A plot was being hatched to destroy the Shenwi Brahmins, and Perron, sensing a change in the wind, had started another intrigue, this time against Lakwa. Before long orders came from Sindhia depriving the Mahratta general of his post as Commander-in-Chief. It was the first blow in what was to become the most terrible and far-reaching plot in Mahratta history.

The Golden Idols

On May 10, Perron arrived to take over, not only Lakwa's command, but the fruits of his victory: the Rajah of Jaipur had come to terms, and it was Perron who collected his tribute of twenty-five lakhs of rupees, of which the Frenchman kept the customary twenty-five per cent commission for himself.

The Rajah then invited him to visit Jaipur, and Skinner was among the officers selected to accompany the general. It was a magnificent state occasion, marked by gaudy processions, glittering durbars and extravagant entertainments. Peace was cemented, and the 2nd Brigade marched away into the arid Jodhpur country to punish some of that Rajah's refractory chieftains at his request.

It was while they were engaged in this lucrative work that the news reached them of Ghatkia's frightful revenge.

The Untouchable Angel

The plot against the Shenwi Brahmins was deeply laid. The sudden arrest of Balloba Tantia, their leader, was the signal for a concerted round-up of the leading adherents of the party, and the news that followed soon after shocked the entire country.

Balloba, a greatly respected man, was treated lightly; he was poisoned. But of the remainder, all men of exalted rank and distinction, four were blown away from cannon, three had their heads beaten in with mallets, and one was blown sky-high in a cluster of rockets, a new mode of execution devised by Ghatkia, who had master-minded the whole plot. In addition to these top men, several others of substance and influence were destroyed in various novel ways, while a great many more, all important officers of state, only got off by paying every pice they possessed.

Thus in one stroke Ghatkia glutted his revenge and eliminated his most serious rivals, but he practically wrecked Sindhia's entire administration, and once again he split the state with civil war. In the resulting confusion and discord an extremely dangerous young man escaped from prison and was joined by many of Sindhia's chiefs. He was Jeswant Rao Holkar, the natural son of a previous ruler of that house, who had burst upon the Mahratta firmament like a new star, boding no good. Soon he would be strong enough to challenge Sindhia. Then nothing would stop the upstart in his compulsion to destroy.

As for Sindhia, all he had to rely on were his regular infantry brigades, of which there were now five under Perron (who had been made Commander-in-Chief), with three independent

The Untouchable Angel

brigades commanded respectively by Colonel John Hessian, a Dutchman, Major John Brownrigg, an Irishman, and Colonel Michael Filoze, an Italian. All these troops were kept on practically continuous active service, coping with one insurrection after another, and Skinner was in several actions during this unsettled period.

In particular there was the battle he fought when he was put in sole command, at the age of twenty-two, of a detachment of three battalions, a battering train and 500 horse that were sent against a Rajput fort near the Chambal river. He took the fort, but only after most of the garrison had resisted to the death. His brother Robert, who had joined his battalion as an ensign that October, was wounded in the neck by a matchlock ball.

Then, while the rest of the detachment returned to Muttra, Skinner's battalion was hired out to the Rajah of Karoli who had declared war on his neighbour, the Rajah of Uniara, and was collecting a force to attack him. The battle they fought was just another of the countless minor engagements that have soaked the good earth of India in blood – a clash between vaunting petty rulers, the cause of which has long been forgotten – but for Skinner it was his most terrible ordeal in his whole career as a soldier.

His first sight of his allies had filled him with dismay. India at that time was the land of mercenaries who wandered about seeking employment, ready to fight for anybody who could pay them. Some were good, others bad, but the five battalions the Rajah of Karoli had hired were the scum of the profession. Besides, as Skinner says, the Rajah did not have the cash to pay them regularly, and every day they pressed him for money. 'I was uneasy about the fate of my own battalion, and reported to Colonel Pohlman that no dependence was to be placed on the troops the Rajah had engaged, so that he would require to reinforce me immediately, as otherwise we must be cut to pieces.' But reinforcements never reached him, and, as events proved, his forecast was tragically right.

It was a repetition of the flagrant treachery he had seen at

Chandkhori, for no sooner had the battle commenced than the five scum battalions deserted to the other side. The Rajah of Karoli beat a hasty retreat, his cavalry was not long in following him, and Skinner was left with less than 1,000 men to face the augmented enemy now totalling ten times that number.

He fought his way to a deserted village, intending to hold it till nightfall, and attempt an escape under cover of darkness to the town of Tonk six miles away. But he was advised against the plan by his native officers who said it would not be possible to hold a mud village against the weight of thirty cannon the enemy could bring to bear. Skinner, who respected their judgment, agreed to evacuate the village and try to gain some ravines about three miles away. They might have pulled it off, for their desperate counter-attack on the enemy foot was at first successful, and they captured some guns. But the moment they began to retreat they were subjected to charges of the Uniara cavalry in wave after wave. Skinner's horse was mortally wounded, though it gamely bore him on for another two miles before it finally fell dead in its tracks.

There now appeared little hope of their making their objective, and rather than have his beloved battalion routed he halted them for a last stand. First the enemy foot attacked, and Skinner, giving them a volley at fifty yards, counter-attacked so effectively that their centre gave way. But the position was hopelessly exposed, and the battalion was galled by cannon fire from both flanks. Skinner then threw his men into a hollow square, and in that formation once again he tried to gain the ravines. But they were pressed so close his men began to lose heart. Only 300 now remained, and, calling on 100 to support him in a do or die effort to save their colours, he turned to meet a charge of the whole Uniara cavalry. On looking back, he found to his dismay that only ten men had followed him. He was on foot, and as he turned to join the others a horseman galloped up, matchlock in hand, and fired. Skinner felt a searing pain in his groin and fell as the avenging tide passed on, riding high and over the broken remnants of the ill-fated battalion.

The Untouchable Angel

His memory of what followed remained with him as long as he lived. As he says, 'It was about three in the afternoon when I fell, and I did not regain my senses till sunrise next morning. When I came to myself, I soon remembered what had happened, for several other wounded soldiers were lying near me. My pantaloons were the only rag that had been left me, and I crawled under a bush to shelter myself from the sun. Two more of my battalion crept near me — one a soobahdar who had his leg shot off below the knee; the other a jemadar with a spear wound through his body. We were dying of thirst, but not a soul was in sight, and in this state we remained the whole day, praying for death. But alas! night came on, but neither death nor assistance. The moon was full and clear, and about midnight it was very cold. So dreadful did this night appear to me, that I swore, if I survived, to have nothing more to do with soldiering. The wounded on all sides were crying out for water. The jackals were tearing the dead, and coming nearer and nearer to see if we were ready for them; we only kept them off by throwing stones and making noises. Thus passed this long and terrible night.

'Next morning we spied a man and an old woman, who came to us with a basket and a pot of water. To every wounded man she gave a piece of bread from the basket, and a drink from her water-pot. To us she gave the same and I thanked heaven and her. But the soobahdar was a high caste Rajepoot, and as this woman was a Chumar of the lowest caste he would receive neither water nor bread from her. I tried to persuade him to take it that he might live; but he said that in our state with but a few hours more to linger, what was a little more or less suffering to us? Why should he give up his faith for such an object? No, he preferred to die unpolluted. I asked the woman where she lived, and she gave me the name of her village which was about two cos from Tonke and a cos and a half from where we lay.

'About three in the afternoon, a chieftain of the Uniara Rajah's, with one hundred horsemen, and coolies and *beeldars* (porters), arrived on the ground with orders to bury the dead and to send the wounded into camp. The poor soobahdar now got the water of

which he was in the utmost need, indeed, nearly dead for want of it. When we were brought to camp, we found a large, two-poled tent pitched, in which all the wounded of my battalion were collected, and to the best of my recollection they amounted to about 300 men. No sooner was I brought in, than they all cried out, "Ah, here is our dear captain!" and some offered me bread, and some water, or what they had. The chieftain had wrapped me in a large sheet when he took me up; and right glad was I to find so many of my brave fellows near me. My wound was now dressed by the native doctors, and the ball taken out. They soon sent the Rajah word of my arrival, and he sent for me immediately. His tent was close by, and they carried me thither upon my *charpae* (string bed). The Rajah got up when I entered, and sending for a *morah* (stool) sat down by me, asked my name, who I was, and what rank I held. I replied that I was a soldier, and now his prisoner. He then sent me back to my tent, saying I required rest and gave me much praise for my conduct in the day of battle.

'No sooner had I reached my tent, than a *chobedar* (staff bearer) came from the Rajah and presented me with 500 rupees, and a tray of cooked meats for dinner. Of the first I gave the *chobedar* 100 rupees as a present; the other 400, with the victuals, I divided among my men. As for myself the surgeon gave me a good dose of opium, which procured me a fine night's rest. Next morning the Rajah pitched a small tent for me, and wanted to remove me from them, but I begged he would permit me to stay with them; on which he came himself, and sat talking to me for an hour of different things, and sent me food from his own kitchen, and was kind and generous to all the wounded.'

Later, they were all sent to Muttra, where Perron himself welcomed Skinner back. The General was lavish in his praise of the battalion, and to the survivors he gave promotion if they were fit to resume duty, or pensions if disabled. Skinner he promoted to captain with command of his bodyguard, two crack *Najib* battalions known as the 1st and 2nd General Perron's Own Infantry. Robert Skinner was also in Muttra, fully recovered from his wound. He too was promoted, to lieutenant, and given command

The Untouchable Angel

of his brother's old battalion, which was brought up to strength and placed under orders to join Colonel Pohlman, then operating in the Jaipur country.

Before Robert left, his brother gave him 1,000 rupees to take to the untouchable angel of mercy who had brought them food and water in their ordeal. 'Tell her she is my mother,' Skinner charged him.

Soon after taking up his new command, Skinner's two élite battalions were transferred to the 3rd Brigade under Colonel Pedron, who had been ordered to support Ambaji in yet another war on Lakwa Dada and the Bhais. It was to be an all-out effort to smash the rebel power, over which Perron was later to take personal charge.

The issue was finally settled in the bloody battle of Sounda, a fortress belonging to the Rajah of Datia, in Bundelkhand. Under its walls the Rajah and Lakwa were encamped with 5,000 Maharashtra horse, 10,000 Bundela foot and horse, and two regular infantry brigades, one under Colonel William Tone, brother of the Irish rebel, Theobald Wolfe Tone, and the other commanded by a petty Rajput rajah named Berar Singh. Their position, on a high plateau, was formidable. It could only be approached by three steep gullies, all of which were well defended by infantry and guns. Perron's orders that night were ruthlessly simple. The approaches were to be stormed and carried at all cost.

Though a memorable and decisive day for Sindhia, little is known of the battle of Sounda. The 3rd Brigade was opposed by Colonel Tone's brigade with sixteen guns. Tone was then in his thirties, tall and debonair, with a weakness for beautiful women, and a devil-may-care attitude to his life of adventure. He had the cool courage to hold his fire until the very last moment, so that Skinner and his two battalions leading the column were suddenly met with a murderous volley of grape and musket fire. Still they came on, swarming up the slippery slope, to the smoking muzzles of the guns, engaging the defenders hand to hand, and finally overwhelming them. In one gully the attacking column was

beaten back. Hearing this, Perron galloped up to where the routed troops were taking cover at the bottom of the gully, reformed them and led them back up the passage in a charge that carried the position.

On the flat table land above the ravines the three columns linked for a concerted thrust towards Sounda, and their cavalry, coming up through the gullies, thundered on after the broken enemy battalions to wreak their total destruction. Lakwa's cavalry fled after little more than a token resistance, and the victors fell upon their camp which they stripped to the tent pegs.

Perron's losses were severe. Ten of his officers and about 5,000 rank and file were killed and wounded. But Lakwa's defeat left him beyond hope of recovery. His principal allies lay dead on the field, with all their guns lost and their armies destroyed. Lakwa himself was severely wounded and hiding in the fort, and the Bhais, who had only just managed to escape on horseback, were flying for their lives.

An unwritten code governed the conduct of gentlemen adventurers when they found themselves on opposite sides in battle, and Perron honoured it. Skinner had taken Colonel Tone and four of his officers prisoner. These Perron released, and, providing them with camp equipment, horses and camels, and 10,000 rupees in cash, sent them back to their master.

That master was none other than Jeswant Rao Holkar, the Bastard of Indore, the Mahratta prodigy who in the past year had made himself both a legend and terror in Hindustan.

There is something almost poetic about the violence and ferocity that was Jeswant Rao Holkar. Born of a concubine to the previous ruling chief of Indore, the Bastard had come into prominence in the dispute over the succession between the two legitimate sons, Mulhar Rao, a fine upstanding young man, and Khasi Rao, a deformed imbecile. Through Sindhia's interference the imbecile had succeeded, after the other had been killed, and the Bastard, who had escaped after being taken prisoner, had turned outlaw.

Soon he had following him a swarm of freebooters, all men as desperate as himself. As his fame as a ruthless depredator spread, so his followers had increased, until they were no longer just a band of outlaws, living hard and moving fast, but an army, given recognition by the adhesion of many important Mahratta chiefs, and made formidable by an alliance with the notorious Pathan freebooter, Amir Khan, with a well-mounted body of his own countrymen. To these elements were added infantry battalions officered by Europeans. Holkar was tireless and determined, and his crippling exactions had made a rapid expansion possible. The sole function of this army was plunder, and he had kept it continuously employed, with detachments ranging far and wide, so that before long the greater part of the province of Malwa was practically ruined.

In contrast with Holkar's vigour was Sindhia's weakness and indecision. The latter, as Skinner records, 'took to kite-flying, nautching, drinking, with all the worst native vices.' Most of the military decisions were left to his commanders, but these instead of facing up to the threat were either too busy feathering their own nests, or at loggerheads with one another and involved in all sorts of devious intrigues.

Gopal Rao Bhow, a Mahratta general of the old school, made a striking remark as to this degeneracy in open durbar when Sindhia desired him to build cantonments at Ujjain, his capital. 'Our fathers,' said Gopal Rao, 'the first founders of the Mahratta power, made their houses on the backs of their horses. Gradually the house came to be made of cloth, and now you are making it of mud. Take care, and mark my words. Take care that in a short time it does not all turn to mud, and is never rebuilt.'

The court flatterers called him a fool, and Sindhia laughingly said, 'Who is there that dare oppose me, as long as I have my infantry and guns?'

'Beware,' the General replied. 'It is these very infantry and guns that will be your undoing.'

Events would bear out the wisdom of the general's words, but at the time they only met with contempt.

At length Sindhia was aroused to the necessity of forcing a major engagement upon Holkar. The affair of the Bhais having at last been satisfactorily concluded (Sindhia had been persuaded to make them a fairly generous settlement), he left Poona with a large army in the early summer of 1801. Two important battles were fought between the two Mahratta states, the first at Ujjain which Sindhia lost, 'and in this sad affair,' says Skinner, 'sixteen country-born officers, who were all my school fellows, were killed at their guns.'

The second battle, at Indore, Sindhia won, largely because Holkar fought it without his European officers, whom he had sacked shortly before the battle in one of his sudden rages. Sindhia's battalions on the other hand were commanded by Colonel Sutherland, whom he had recently reinstated, and who saw at Indore an opportunity of proving not only his merit but his faithful adherence to his master's interests, a duty that of late had been overlooked by even Perron himself. Sutherland seized the opportunity with both hands.

With the loss of all his ninety-five guns, and the dispersal of his troops, Holkar's defeat was total. Had the blow been followed up, the power of the Bastard must have been annihilated. But Sindhia omitted to take that vital precaution, supposing his enemy to have been utterly ruined. It was another of his monumental blunders, and one which contributed not merely towards his own undoing but the misery of countless thousands.

Given breathing space the resilient Holkar completely recovered. Almost before people realised it, he was again on the rampage. Under officers like Vickers, Harding, and Armstrong (Tone had been killed in action), his brigades were reformed, and once again he was ready to contest the supremacy of Maharashtra. For this he conceived a bold plan. It was one that would rock the entire nation.

Warlike George

While Sindhia was muddling through his campaign against Holkar, another war was being fought out near Delhi. It was a personal war between Perron and George Thomas, the Irish Rajah, and Skinner played a conspicuous part in the affair.

If de Boigne was the most successful of all the European adventurers in India, to George Thomas must go the credit for being the most audacious. Known throughout Hindustan as Jowruj Jung (Warlike George), Thomas was a native of Tipperary, a giant of a man in his early forties, who had deserted from a British man-of-war at Madras some twenty years before, and, after a career of incredible adventure and vicissitude, had created an army and carved a kingdom for himself in the heart of upper India. It was a territory of 3,000 square miles whose turbulent inhabitants had previously acknowledged no other authority, and he had declared and maintained his independence in defiance of all the princes and powers surrounding it. He minted his own rupees, cast his own cannon, made his own gunpowder.

For some time a bitter enmity had existed between Thomas and Perron, but that alone would not have brought about the clash. The real cause lay in the startling fact that, only six years before, Thomas was casting his first cannon out of the brass cooking pots he and his band of desperadoes had plundered from the villages they attacked. That single gun was now sixty, and the band had become an army of ten battalions of infantry and 500 cavalry, which he had driven in a conquering wedge through vast tracts of Jaipur, Udaipur and Bikaner, and northwards through

the dreaded Sikh country to the banks of the Sutlej. Moreover he had lately scourged the Sikhs in yet another brilliant campaign.

From this campaign, as Thomas told William Francklin, 'I realised near 200,000 rupees, exclusive of the pay of my army, and was to receive an additional lakh for hostages which were delivered up. Besides this, I explored the country, formed alliances and was in short dictator of all the countries belonging to the Sikhs south of the river Sutlej.'

To the vigilant and jealous Perron such progress could not be allowed to continue unchecked. Such an army on his western doorstep, dangerously within striking distance of Delhi, was uncomfortable to say the least.

Several offers of service had already been made by Sindhia to Thomas, but Thomas had declined to serve under a Frenchman, 'our respective nations being in a state of actual hostility towards each other', while Sindhia, tutored by Perron, had turned down the Irishman's alternative proposal, to serve with an independent brigade. There the matter stood in the early summer of 1801, when Thomas was away in the Punjab campaigning against the Sikhs, and Perron suddenly prepared to advance on his defenceless capital.

Warlike George frustrated that move by returning home at a speed which not only astonished the Frenchman but shook him from his immediate resolve.

Perron next appears anxious to negotiate, and the terms he offered were not ungenerous. He proposed that Thomas should enter Sindhia's service with the rank of colonel and command of a brigade of the same strength as the others, for which he would receive 60,000 rupees a month in cash or *jaidad*. Perron also agreed that Thomas should be permitted to keep his territory of Hariana, providing he furnished another five battalions, but, it was intimated, he must either accept the terms offered or prepare himself to fight.

Faced with no alternative, Thomas then seems to have accepted the fact he could go farther and fare a lot worse, and a meeting was agreed upon, to take place near Delhi. Had he con-

tracted to serve Sindhia, Thomas would have done so faithfully, for he was absolutely straight. But an event occurred in July which entirely upset the applecart.

On the 8th the news arrived of Holkar's victory over Sindhia's force at Ujjain, and with it came an urgent summons for Perron to send his three brigades to reinforce the army in the south. Perversely enough, from that moment as far as Perron was concerned a settlement with the Irishman was completely out of the question.

Though Sindhia was promised immediate support, Perron went no farther south than one stage from Delhi. There he stuck. He had no intention of putting himself and his brigades directly under the unstable Sindhia, or of leaving his domain at the mercy of his rival. What Perron wanted was an excuse to keep his brigades tied down in Hindustan, so the result of the conference was a foregone conclusion.

The first meeting took place on 20 August 1801. Despite the intense heat, Perron wore his full uniform of heavy sea-green serge with gold lace and epaulettes, while Thomas appeared in a uniform of British military red. It is a pity so little is recorded of this occasion. It must have been a rare moment when those two remarkable men entered the tent from opposite sides and shook hands, Perron with his left hand, the right having been blown off by a premature grenade in the siege of Kanaund in 1793.

As the Irishman's French was non-existent, and the other's English only halting, the language of their diplomacy was Hindustani, while the form of procedure was bound by rigid oriental usage, which was the only etiquette they knew. Like Thomas, Perron had come to India as a common sailor in a man-of-war, and deserted.

The two parties of officers faced each other, lounging back in large, upright chairs, hookah stems in their hands, puffing indolently, while servants behind them stirred the air with large fans made of palm matting and edged with blue cloth. In the space between the rows of chairs, amanuenses sat cross-legged, scratching with their reed pens as they recorded every word that passed.

Their function not only slowed down the exchanges, but had the effect of making them stilted and deliberate.

According to Skinner, 'Several meetings took place, and Thomas dined with us repeatedly, and all seemed to be going well. We saw his troops who looked well but were not over-disciplined: his artillery was very fine, and his bullocks particularly good and strong. The only European officers he had were Captains Hearsey, Hopkins and Birch; and there were some Europeans acting as sergeants in his artillery.'

By 'European' Skinner means 'of partly European origin'. All three of Thomas's officers were country-borns or half-castes, the word 'Anglo-Indian' being used more, at that period, to describe Britons either serving or domiciled in India. Hearsey was in fact the great Hyder Hearsey, whose name, like Skinner's, was to become a by-word in India. He, as well as Hopkins, had previously served under Perron.

Thomas had come to the conference confident that the moment could not have been better chosen as far as he was concerned. For while Perron was not in a position to dictate terms, he (Thomas) had received repeated offers of money and support from Holkar, Lakwa Dada and others. So the Irishman's indignation is understandable when suddenly out of the blue Perron demanded he should not only give up one of his richest districts to the Mah-rattas, in lieu of which he would receive only 50,000 rupees a month for his brigade, but would also be required to send four of his battalions forthwith to Sindhia's assistance.

Thomas's angry rejection of the proposal was hardly in keeping with the leisurely pace of the proceeding.

'Be warned of the consequences,' Perron said. 'It must lead to war.'

'Then let it be war,' Thomas replied. He glanced round at Perron's officers, among whom Skinner sat. 'Tis a pity, gentlemen,' he told them. 'But the next time we meet I shall be obliged to kill ye.'

Having forced the issue, Perron's next move was strangely

inconsistent. Instead of taking personal charge of the operation, he departed for Koil with what Lewis Ferdinand Smith describes as 'impolitic precipitation', leaving to match the redoubtable Warlike George a man who had already been superseded in May of that year for his craven conduct during the siege of Ajmir. This was a plump ex-cook named Louis Bernard, who had come out to India in Admiral Suffrein's fleet, and later, with the *nom de guerre* of Bourquien, had sought the Pagoda Tree in upper India. He was Perron's bosom friend, 'raised from obscurity to rank and riches,' says Smith, 'with outrage and injustice to other officers in his army more deserving and older in the service.'

Major Bourquien marched against Thomas with an augmented 3rd Brigade of ten battalions of infantry, a powerful battering train, 2,000 regular cavalry and 6,000 Sikh horse. He began the campaign by taking a small, unfortified town called Jhajjur, then went on to attack a fort called Georgegarh, from which he was repulsed with considerable loss. He then heard that Thomas was retreating northwards into the Sikh country, so, leaving Captain L. F. Smith to invest Georgegarh with three battalions and the battering train, Bourquien set out with the rest of the brigade in pursuit.

But Thomas's movement was only a feint, so that while the brigade was blundering northwards, their quarry doubled back and swooped down on Georgegarh, covering the last seventy-six miles in two days. Smith was nearly caught napping, and only managed to escape with the battering train to Jhajjur by sacrificing a whole battalion as a rear guard.

According to Skinner, whose battalions formed part of the 3rd Brigade, they were half-way to Patiala before Bourquien found out he had been tricked, and he turned them round and started back, driving them like a madman. They marched without halting, save for two or three hours at a time to rest the men and cattle. They found Thomas drawn up at the end of a wide open plain, against the fort of Georgegarh and flanked by villages which he had fortified. His front across a stretch of sand dunes was defended by six battalions and thirty-five guns, supported by his 500

Mussulman cavalry in reserve just behind. It was a formidable position, but Bourquien, who had been accused of sitting on his backside before Ajmir, determined on a daring attack – one in which he would anticipate the Duke of Plaza Toro in *The Gondoliers* by leading his army from a safe distance behind.

Skinner remembers it as the most bitterly contested engagement of his long and active military career. At 3 p.m. they moved into a frontal assault in open columns of companies. In an age of camouflage and concealment in military tactics it is difficult to appreciate the set ideas of a period when an army was dressed to appear as conspicuous as possible, and troops were deployed with a total disregard for the use of cover. Here were 6,000 foot steadily advancing across a wide plain, with their colours flying, their fifes and drums setting the step with a stirring march, and their officers (except Bourquien) out in front on their magnificent chargers. Behind each battalion came its guns at their drag-ropes, and behind these the ammunition tumbrels drawn by trains of white, long-horned bullocks. They could have been at a review only that presently the sand dunes ahead erupted and the thunder of the battle began.

They formed line under heavy fire, the shot ricocheting two or three times before whipping in at thigh or hip level and bowling men over like toy soldiers. The cavalry were on the flanks, but took good care to keep out of cannon reach. When Bourquien's right had come into line with Thomas's left, word was given to wheel, and thus they moved into the final phase of the attack.

Thomas's position was very cleverly chosen, for the sand deadened the shot fired against him, which stopped short instead of ricocheting. Moreover, as the attackers reached the sand the going became very difficult. Along Thomas's front his begrimed gunners with their portfires could be seen working like fiends. Men were falling in hundreds as grape raked through them and flying chains cut them in half. Powder tumbrels hit by shot began going off like claps of thunder, throwing up pieces of men and cattle in their mushrooms of black smoke.

Soon the Mahratta line was within musket range, and volley

after volley was added to the salvos. Still they trudged on steadily towards the dunes, until, as they came to within 150 yards of Thomas's position, Skinner saw two of the opposing battalions suddenly rush out in columns of companies led by young Hopkins.

'They formed just in front of our left wing, and gave their fire exactly as if they had been at a review,' he says. 'Then they charged and succeeded in driving back our left wing. However, our gunners kept to their guns and the gallant Hopkins having his leg shot off by one of our six-pounders, his men gave way as soon as he fell, and ran back taking their leader along with them. Our left wing then rallied and resumed their position, but the fire was so murderous that our whole line was ordered to sit down; as for Thomas's men, they were sheltered by the sand hillocks in his front. In this way we remained the night.'

It was the night of an incident which Skinner's friends used to hear him describe with remarkable effect. His brother Robert was also in the action, though separated from him by a considerable distance, and what with the confusion and smoke on the battlefield, neither brother knew how the other had fared. However, after it had all ceased, a report reached Skinner that his brother had been killed, while Robert received a similar one as to James. Each, moved by the same impulse, rushed out on the bloody field, and looked all over it for the body of his brother. It was grim work, in the dark amidst the tangle of torn and mutilated corpses, and after a weary and fruitless search both returned to Bourquien's tent to make their report.

By a remarkable coincidence both entered the tent from opposite sides at the same time, and the first thing each saw was the other. They saw nothing else, and one can imagine the feelings of relief and joy with which they embraced before the astonished officers of the brigade.

At sunrise the next morning they hung up a flag of truce, and were allowed to clear the field of, according to Skinner's estimate, between three and four thousand dead and wounded. It took them till noon. The flag was then pulled down, but the battle was not

resumed. Bourquien ordered a withdrawal, which for some unknown reason he was allowed to carry out unmolested, and he retired out of cannon reach, leaving Thomas master of the field.

Though the battle of Georgegarh ended without a decision, the advantage was certainly with Thomas. 'But,' says Skinner, 'we were surprised he now permitted us to remain for fifteen days without attempting to attack us, or make good his retreat to Hansee, for there was no doubt in our minds that, had he tried either plan, he would have succeeded. The state of our guns (fifteen guns had been dismounted and twenty-five powder tumbrils blown up) and the spirits of our soldiery were such that had Thomas shown any inclination to move towards us we should have got out of his reach; for our commander, Major Louis Bourquoin, was not only a coward but a fool. He was one of those who had got on by flattery; and had it not been for Captain Burnear (Bernier), a Frenchman, we should certainly have lost the day, for the major was not seen at all during the battle, and our being saved from total destruction was entirely owing to the exertions of Captain Burnear, who was a brave and able soldier.'

Smith goes even further: 'Had Thomas taken advantage of Bourquin's ignorance and folly, and sallied out on the beaten troops of Perron, he would have overturned his power. Had he acted with his usual prudence, boldness, and activity, the forces under Bourquin must have been destroyed; the allies of Thomas would have thrown off the mask, and openly taken his part; and before Perron could have collected another efficient force, Thomas would have been master of Dhailee and the King's person, and probably would have extinguished Perron's power and authority. Scindea would have quietly transferred that power to Thomas, for he would have been equally indifferent who governed Hindustan, Perron or Thomas and he must, from impotency to resist, have bowed to the will and power of every aspiring mind who commanded large bodies of regular infantry.'

There it was. Thomas, hitherto a bold and vigorous strategist, now lets his greatest victory slip through his fingers. Instead of acting promptly he goes on an extended drinking bout,

Warlike George

leaving everything to the 19-year-old Hyder Hearsey who made no positive decision, either to counter-attack or to retreat to their stronghold. They remained encamped outside Georgegarh, and by the time Thomas emerged from his stupor the damage had been done. The toils were gathering round him.

What came over Thomas that fateful night of 29 or 30 September 1801, when he should have been toasting victory rather than drinking to obliterate something from his mind? It might have been on account of Hopkins, who died that night in his arms, for Thomas was greatly attached to the young man. But could the loss of one officer have plunged a case-hardened campaigner like Warlike George into an abyss of despair? It is hard to believe. What did happen then that night on those bloody dunes? The answer remains a mystery.



41335

‘One Irish Sword!’

By the time George Thomas recovered from his bout of drinking his camp was surrounded by twenty-two battalions of infantry, with 110 pieces of artillery and 14,000 cavalry; the whole army of 30,000 men under the command of Colonel Pedron who had been sent to supersede Bourquien.

Pedron was an elderly Frenchman, who had fought at Chandernagore when Clive took it in 1757. After a lifetime's service in India there was little he did not know of the slow, erosive strategy of starving a besieged army from without and corrupting it from within. Hearing that two of Thomas's officers had their homes in Perron's territory, Pedron had their families seized and terrorised until in the end both officers were willing to betray their master.

One was Thomas's revenue collector, Shitab Khan, who also commanded Georgegarh. He revealed to Pedron that a fast camel convoy of grain was on its way to the besieged camp, from Vaman Rao, one of Thomas's allies. Needless to say the grain never reached the camp; rather, one morning a lone horseman galloped up out of the sunrise, stopped, rearing his horse on its hind legs, threw a bag over the *chevaux-de-frise*, and was gone.

The bag was taken straight to Thomas. It was a cruel taunt. It contained the noses of the camel-drivers who had attempted to beat the blockade.

Shitab Khan also organised the theft of the grain stocks in the fort, so that on October 23 he was able to report to Pedron that Thomas's men, now destitute of grain, were having to eat their

cattle : meat alone for men accustomed to a grain diet being both sickening and injurious.

'On this,' says Skinner, 'Pedron hoisted a flag, and proclaimed that all soldiers taking refuge under it should get quarter. About 200 came over that day and we were ordered to get within cannon reach, and to keep on the alert at night.'

It was the beginning of the end of the Irish Rajah's army. As the days passed the battalions melted away until, on November 10, only his staunchest veterans remained. It was thought he might attempt a break-through that night, so, as it got dark, orders were received to move in closer. The noose was tightened, and just in case that giant of legendary resource should try to make a dash for it the whole of Pedron's cavalry were disposed in squadrons at intervals outside the circle of infantry to intercept him.

Nine o'clock brought a lull among the besiegers. Every precaution had been taken, and the men had been allowed to stand down on their arms. They were grouped round hundreds of little fires strung in a flickering necklace around the camp. Within the circle great bonfires, fed with firewood brought up in carts, shed a fitful light on the vigil, and the shadowy forms of the mounted sentinels could be seen against the flames as they stalked the edge of the darkness. These vedettes were to give the alarm, but there was a weak link in the chain – the sector covered by five licentious and undisciplined battalions, commanded by George Hessing, the half-caste son of one of the independent brigade commanders. They were poor stuff and Thomas knew it.

All of a sudden the lull was broken by the musket shots of vedettes giving the alarm. It was taken up in an instant by a series of frantic bugles echoing all round the circle, and Skinner, looking towards the camp, saw a body of three or four hundred cavalry go straight out towards Hessing's sector in a charge. They were silhouetted in momentary relief against the lurid flashes of his guns, and then they were through, with the whole of Pedron's cavalry thundering after them.

Although most of the fugitives were cut down before they had

gone very far, Thomas with Hearsey and Birch and two of his European sergeants managed to get away.

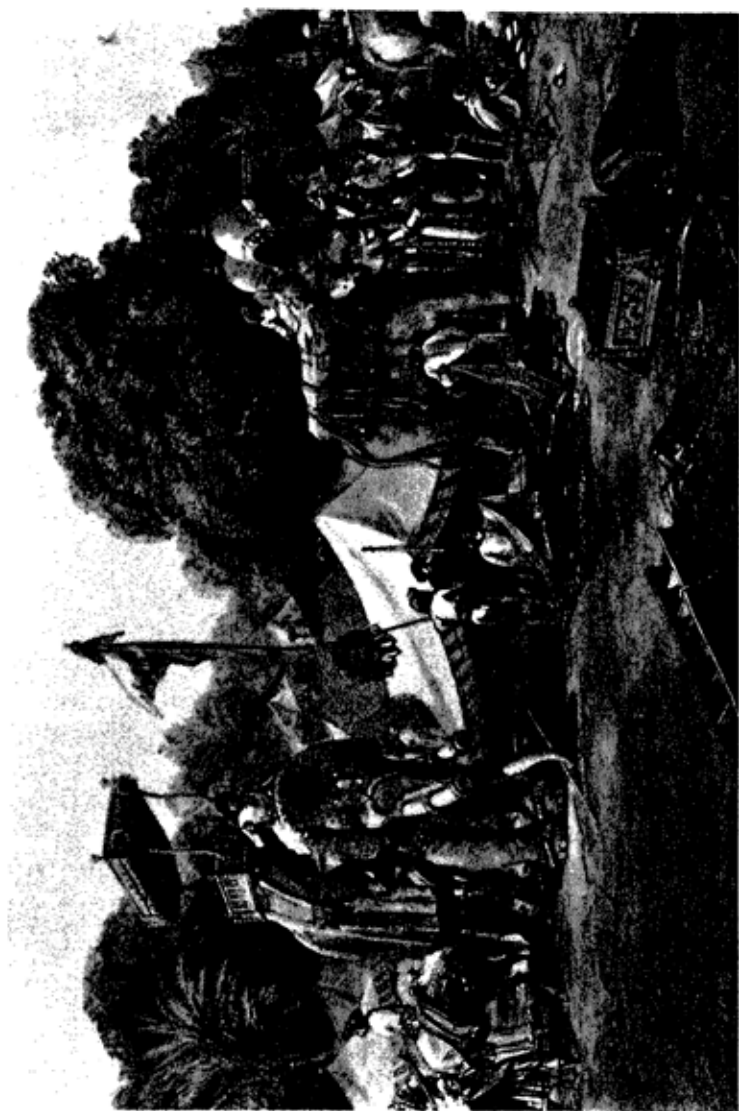
'All his guns and camp were taken,' Skinner says of Thomas, 'and his soldiers having laid down their arms were offered service, but they refused it with contempt. They all appeared very much attached to him, and several native officers, who had been a long time in his service, rent their garments and turned beggars, swearing they would never serve as soldiers again.'

Having thus destroyed Thomas's army, Pedron departed, leaving Bourquien to finish the job. Again he bungled it, for Thomas was allowed to sabotage the entire water supply surrounding his capital for a radius of ten miles, and the 3rd Brigade arrived to find the wells filled in and the water tanks defiled with carcasses of pigs and cattle, which rendered their contents undrinkable by Moslems or Hindus. This delayed their advance sufficiently to enable Thomas to cast several new cannon and throw up earthworks before his main gates. The works proved costly to the Mahrattas, for in clearing them many lives were lost, including that of the brave Major Bernier, on 10 December 1801.

After the walls had been breached a few days later, the town was stormed by 4,500 men in three columns. One of these, led by Skinner, was opposed by a party under Birch, who twice beat them back before they eventually gained a foothold in the breach.

'Just as I got up,' Skinner recalls, 'I saw Birch about twenty yards away taking aim at me with a double-barrelled gun, the contents of which, both barrels, he fired at me; but a sweet little cherub saved me from them. I immediately levelled my javelin, and, putting my shield to my breast, darted it at him, and took off his hat. On that he ran off and joined his men who were now retreating from the wall.'

The stormers were now in the town, but Thomas did not give it up without a bitter hand-to-hand fight that raged up and down the main bazaar. In one encounter Robert Skinner got a cut at Thomas who was saved only by his suit of chain mail. At length,



A Maharratta chief's encampment



Jeswant Rao Holkar



Dowlat Rao Sindhia

the superior numbers of the Mahrattas began to tell, and the defenders were driven into their fort.

Thomas's fort at Hansi had a celebrated past, going back six centuries to the time when it served as a defiant strong point in the path of the Mohammedan invasions. The walls which he had restored were of mud and so thick that when Bourquien opened his bombardment the 18-pounder shot merely buried themselves without in the least shaking the rampart. Thomas might have held out indefinitely, but for Bourquien's mining under the walls, as well as a more insidious undermining operation over them — letters rolled on arrows were shot into the fort from the trenches, offering six months' pay and permanent service to the garrison if they gave up the fort and Thomas.

From the replies received there was no doubt that the majority of Thomas's men were now ready and willing to betray him.

Bourquien was exuberant, but his officers, who were all British subjects, according to Skinner, 'felt indignant at this underhand treachery, and agreed that it would be disgraceful if through such intrigues Thomas should be taken prisoner and put into confinement; for Bourquoin had declared in bravado that so he would use that blackguard Englishman when he got hold of him. This was language which we did not admire; but knowing Bourquoin to be more of a talker than a doer, we managed to persuade him into offering terms, assuring him that he would himself gain a higher name by inducing Thomas to capitulate than by catching him by treachery. It was one day after tiffin, when the wine he had drunk had put him in high spirits and good humour, when we plied him thus, and at last he called out, in his broken English, "Well, gentleman, you do as you like — I give power; he be one damn Englishman, your countryman, that treat their children very ill." He meant that the country-borns were very ill-used in not being admitted into the Company's service.'

The distinction between English and Irish does not appear to have bothered the dominant French party in Perron's brigades, but nationalities had nothing to do with it. Thomas was a soldier

who commanded the highest respect and admiration among the adventurers, and the officers lost no time in sending Lewis Ferdinand Smith to the fort with a flag of truce.

Aware of the disaffection in his ranks, Thomas agreed to accept any terms the officers made for him, and they with some difficulty prevailed upon Bourquien to permit him to go free, with all his ready money, personal arms and movable property, with a Mahratta battalion to escort him to British territory, provided he surrendered the fort with all his cannon, regimental arms and warlike stores. It was settled that the fort should be given up in two days, with all the honours of war, and in the meantime a cessation of hostilities was proclaimed.

A meeting then took place between Bourquien and Thomas, at the latter's bungalow overlooking a large tank outside the town, and all their officers went except Skinner who was left in command of the trenches. Thomas, from all accounts, received them very courteously, and was particularly gracious to Robert Skinner whom he embraced and to whom he showed the sabre cut which had nearly severed his belt. To Bourquien the Irishman was charming, and the erstwhile adversaries wound up great friends.

Bourquien then invited Thomas to dine with the brigade the following night, and Skinner, who was present, leaves this vivid picture of the occasion:

'Hearsey and Birch spent the whole day with us, talking of our various exploits; but it was about seven in the evening when Thomas arrived with about fifty of his sowars, much affected, as it appeared, by his misfortunes. About eight we sat down; and, after dinner, did all we could to cheer Thomas, taking great care to avoid all conversation about our attacks, or anything that might give him offence. By eleven o'clock all of us had got pretty merry with drinking bumpers to such toasts as "General Perron", "George Thomas" etc, and Thomas was quite happy; when all of a sudden Bourquien called out, "Let us drink to the success of Perron's arms." At this we all turned up our glasses; and Thomas, on hearing and seeing this, burst into tears, and putting his hand to his sword called out to Bourquien that it was

not to him but to his own ill fate that his fall was due. Drawing his sword he stood up. "One Irish sword," said he, "is still enough for a hundred Frenchmen!" Bourquoin, in terror at this, jumped from his chair and ran out of the tent calling out for his guard. Then Thomas's sowars, hearing the hubbub, also rushed in, and we, apprehensive of a row, called out to them to keep off, as it was only the sahib that was drunk. Meanwhile Thomas, in the midst of us, kept waving his sword and calling out in Hindostanee to look how he had made the d-d Frenchman run like a jackal! It was not without much persuasion, and no small fear of some accident, that we got Thomas at last to sheath his sword. We then got the soldiers out of the tent; and when Thomas had sat down we explained to him that the wine had made Bourquoin forget himself, but that he must not regard it as an insult, but agree to make it up. To this he consented; and, going to seek Bourquoin, we brought him in and he immediately shook Thomas's hand and told him he was sorry for what he had said. A few more glasses now went round; and, perceiving that they were getting still more "jolly", being captain of the day in the trenches, I rode off to the town, and cautioned the men not to challenge Thomas's sowars, for that their master was drunk. About midnight, Thomas arrived by the Barsee Gate, where there was a guard of a naik and six sepoy, whom I had omitted to caution; so, when he came close the sentinel challenged. Thomas's men replied, "Sahib Bahadoor", as he was usually called by his men. The sentinel replied that he knew of no Sahib Bahadoor, so that he must stop until he got permission from his officer to pass. Thomas, who was much in liquor, now turned round to his sowars and said, "Could anyone have stopped Sahib Bahadoor at this gate but one month ago?" "No, no," they replied; on which he dismounted, drew his sword, and making a cut at the poor sentinel, smote off his right hand. Up got the guard immediately on this and gave the alarm; but fortunately I was only a few yards distant from the gate, and on hearing the noise ran up. There I found Thomas walking up and down with his naked sword in his hand, and Hearsey and several of his sowars who had dismounted endeav-

ouring to lay hold of him. At length a rissaldar, named Meer Mahummudee, caught hold of him from behind, when the rest ran in and taking his sword from him sent for his palankeen, and had him carried into the fort. Next morning, having come to himself, Hearsey told him what he had done, on which he sent for the soldier he had wounded, and gave him 500 rupees. He also wrote an apology to Bourquoin, expressing his concern for what had happened.'

The incident mars Thomas's farewell to Hansi, even if the sepoy's bayonet was only a few inches from his chest, as it must have been, when the sword came down and took off the man's trigger hand. Had the sepoy really meant business, he might have provided a happier conclusion to this chapter. Thomas would have ended his career with another fine gesture of defiance. He would have been buried in Hansi and revered ever after as its legendary hero. Instead he departed on 1 January 1802 with two and a half lakhs of rupees in cash and effects, leaving behind a harem and numerous progeny. He intended returning home to Ireland, but got no farther than Berhampur, where he died on August 22 that year, having steadily drunk himself to death.

There, wretchedly, his magnificent adventure ends. But they must be few indeed who cannot be stirred by its sheer impudence. Here was an illiterate Irish sailor who aspired to the conquest of the Punjab, and might well have achieved it had things panned out differently. George Thomas was of many parts – knight errant, social reformer, visionary, benevolent dictator; but in the role in which he concerns us here he appears as almost a complete expression of the man of action, and his career is an example of the opportunities India offered for the soldier of fortune.

He was buried in the old English cemetery at Berhampur, in exactly which grave no one knows, for the name-plates have long since fallen away. A pity. It would have been interesting to see what sort of an epitaph his contemporaries placed over Warlike George.

Perron's Dream

Perron was now at the height of his power. He had brought all Hindustan into subjection, and was supreme within Sindhia's vast possessions from the Narbada to the Sutlej. He commanded four regular brigades each of 8,000 front line soldiers, with 5,000 regular cavalry, besides garrison troops in his fortresses; and in the event of war could summon to his standard all the thousands of liegemen of every rajah and chieftain in the territory he controlled. Within his own *jaidad* he maintained the dignity and state of a sovereign, with the power of life and death over his subjects, and, beyond its boundaries, he was paramount through the titular authority of the aged Moghul Emperor, who was virtually his prisoner.

Perron had come a long way from the lower deck of a French frigate, but unfortunately for the British and country-born officers in his brigades his whole attitude towards them had suddenly changed.

Skinner thought it was just that success had gone to the General's head, for he says, 'Perron now began to feel his power and to change his manner, and instead of being, as formerly, a good, plain, honest soldier, beloved by the soldiery and esteemed by all about him, he began to turn his ear to flattery, to neglect merit, while his favourites got all the good appointments, and he himself thought only of amassing money.'

Apart from his salary of 15,000 rupees a month as Commander-in-Chief, Perron was allowed his table expenses, plus 32,000 rupees a month to maintain his personal bodyguard of 800 chosen

cavalry. He took five per cent commission on the revenues of his *jaidad* (now thirty lakhs) and the six *subahs* or provinces he administered, and twenty-five per cent on the tributes he collected from the vassal princes. Moreover, he collected Sindhia's salt and custom duties for Hindustan¹ and minted the money for the northern territories, both of which were lucrative fiscal responsibilities. But there were some other, better perks besides. For instance, a fairly liberal allowance of nine lakhs a year had been allotted to maintain the dignity and court of the Emperor upon whose nominal authority the Mahrattas held their power in Hindustan, but only half a lakh was reaching the old monarch, who was hard put to it to make ends meet, and actually wrote to Sindhia requesting that the money should be sent to him direct, instead of through channels in which there were evidently leakages. There can be no doubt at all which channel proved the leakiest, though Sindhia needless to add took absolutely no action, or perhaps it would be more correct to say he could take none. In any event embezzlement was so much a part of that sort of transaction in India that nothing was thought of it. All things considered Perron was believed to have been grossing between ten and twelve lakhs of rupees a year.

None of his officers would have denied him the privilege of exploiting his position to the utmost. The India of that period was above all the land of the Pagoda Tree, and the *raison d'être* of the Pagoda Tree was that it should be shaken. But what many did object to, however, was the deliberate policy of discrimination against the British party which the General had adopted. It was a complete departure from the principles laid down by de Boigne, who had always been impartial and promoted men only on seniority and merit, and Perron, in following a diametrically opposite course, hardly even bothered to conceal his purpose, which was to make his brigades what they soon came to be called – the 'French Army'.

Not merely a 'French' army, but, as one of Perron's embittered

1. One of the old main divisions of India representing the territory north of the Narbada.

English officers put it, 'a miniature of the French Revolution, for wretches were raised from cooks and barbers to become colonels and brigadiers, and absurdly entrusted with the command of troops, and shown into paths to acquire lakhs of rupees. This was the quintessence of *égalité*, the acme of the Revolution, the principles of which were now generally effected in the force.'

Was this just the result of an especially acute form of Anglo-phobia on Perron's part, or did it go deeper? Not one of the English party answers that, but Skinner provides a clue which may be the key to the whole business. He says this of Perron, that 'so puffed up was he with his riches and power, that he allowed himself to be persuaded by his flatterers to send an ambassador to Bounaparte. M. Desoutee was the person despatched, but the purport or result of his embassy was never known.'

Skinner does not say when this took place, but it clearly follows upon the series of historic events that had recently altered the entire political situation in India.

To appreciate them, let us go back forty-five years, to the time when Clive's astonishing victories had put an end to French influence in the East, leaving their erstwhile native allies frightened and confused, and eagerly looking to Britain for protection; save one, Hyder Ali, the brilliant usurper of the throne of Mysore, who had continued obdurately in favour of France. His son, Tipu Sultan, had held to his father's violent policy, accumulating treasure and armaments, and building up his army against the day when he planned to overthrow the British.

Tipu's machinations were inspired by a seething hatred of the English, of whom he wrote, 'An Englishman, a dog and a pig were three brothers of the same family.' He invited Napoleon to invade India, undertaking not only to support him with troops, but supply him with everything he needed, from powder for his cannon to palanquins for his generals. 'If you will assist me,' he wrote on 2 April 1797, 'in a short time not an Englishman shall remain in India; you have the power and the means of affecting it by your free negroes; with these new citizens (much dreaded by

the English) joined to your troops of the line, we will purge India of these villains. The springs which I have touched have put all India in motion, and my friends are ready to fall upon the English; for everything here is at my discretion. Your enemies, as I have apprised you, shall be mine.'

To which Napoleon replied from Cairo, informing 'the most Magnificent Sultaun, our greatest Friend, Tippoo Saib', that he had arrived on the borders of the Red Sea 'with an innumerable and invincible army, full of the desire of delivering you from the iron yolk of England.'

Tipu's court had become the axis of an anti-British plot, and his capital, Seringapatam, the centre of a Jacobinic club whose members, all French officers in Tipu's army, would hoist the *bonnet rouge* on a pole in processions round the town, and swear eternal hatred of all sovereigns, 'Citizen Tippoo alone excepted'. The club was a spy ring from which a succession of agents were sent out in many guises to form the links in a mesh of conspiracy covering the length and breadth of the sub-continent.

One of the arch-conspirators was the famous adventurer, François de Raymond, in the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad, who, since his defeat in the battle of Kardla in 1795, had fallen from being one of the leading powers in the Deccan to a tributary of the Mahrattas.

Raymond had seventeen battalions of regular infantry, 600 cavalry and a very fine train of artillery. His officers were all Jacobinic French; they fought under the French flag, and the Cap of Liberty was engraved on their buttons. In Hyderabad, where Raymond would be received in his cantonments with a royal salute, his power was second only to that of the Nizam, in the event of whose death the Frenchman would have been in a position to elevate to the throne whomsoever he pleased.

The assurances Tipu had made Napoleon were certainly not without substance, for it was more than likely that he could have involved the Mahrattas had Napoleon landed on the Malabar coast; while on the British side, to meet this threat, was an army that had been allowed to run down on account of the few

financial straits of the East India Company.

Fortunately for the British, however, a new Governor-General arrived in April 1798 – Lord Mornington, afterwards the Marquis Wellesley. He immediately reversed the policy of neutrality in political relations with the native powers that had been followed during the administration of his predecessor, Sir John Shore.

Raymond had died in March that year; but with his successor, Piron, proving even more violently anti-British, the Governor-General had directed his energies towards the elimination of his battalions from the political scene, and achieved that by a treaty of alliance with the Nizam. The whole corps was then dramatically disbanded and replaced by a British force of six battalions of sepoys.

The next blow to the French plot was Nelson's victory at Aboukir, which completely overturned Napoleon's immediate plans for the invasion of India; and that was followed, in May 1799, by the defeat of Tipu and the capture of Seringapatam, with 929 cannon, 424,000 shot, and jewels and specie to the value of over 45,500,000 star pagodas, apart from an enormous amount of plunder taken by the troops.

Tipu (motto: *Better to live two years like a tiger than two centuries like a lamb*) had died fiercely defending his capital, and with him had gone the entire French organisation controlled and master-minded from that quarter.

Now the odd thing about Perron's anti-British policy is that it does not appear to have been adopted until at least eighteen months after this event – in early 1801 he had promoted and congratulated Skinner along with the other survivors of his decimated battalion; and there is nothing to suggest that at the time Perron was anything but the plain, honest soldier his army had always known him to be. He was a stocky little man, and had once been popular as a hardy and experienced campaigner, a general who never asked his troops to do anything he was not prepared to undertake himself.

De Boigne's recorded opinion of Perron was that he was a

brave officer but without exceptional ability or imagination. He had risen to the command of the 1st Brigade by sheer hard work and plenty of bull, and, being stationed at Poona when de Boigne retired, was in a position to ingratiate himself with the youthful Sindhia and so acquire the supreme appointment. Yet, even if Perron did not possess exceptional military talents, he was still shrewd enough to appreciate that a deliberate policy of discrimination against the English party was obviously short-sighted, especially in view of British dominance on the Indian political scene.

He had many powerful enemies. 'All the Mahratta chiefs began to hate him, and to lay plots for his ruin,' says Skinner. 'They even entered into correspondence with the English authorities for this purpose.'

Why then should Perron suddenly want to make more enemies, and those of the British subjects in his brigades, when such a course must surely weaken his own position? The whole thing is incomprehensible, unless Skinner's remark about his being puffed up with riches and power is linked with the plot he was hatching with Bonaparte, with M. Desoutée (Descartes?) as the go-between.

Tipu was dead, and with him had gone all Bonaparte's hopes of achieving his favourite ambition – the conquest of India. But did not Perron still remain as the last but surely by no means the least of the instruments of France? As a master of Hindustan was he not indisputably more powerful than Raymond had ever been? More effective strategically with his brigades stationed in the very heart of the country? More valuable politically with the Emperor in his custody? And Sindhia, whose authority he sustained, was he not everything Bonaparte could require of a native ally, possessing as he did a thirst for power, a hatred of the British, and vast resources? Could he not, through his control over the Peshwa, the Mahratta overlord, mobilise the whole nation, with all its vassals and tributaries?

Whether the original idea was Bonaparte's or Perron's we do not know, but the agreed master plan was for the latter to unite

the principal native powers in a grand confederacy, declare war on the British in the name of the Moghul Emperor, and drive them into the sea. For his part, all Perron asked for were 200 fully trained French officers to enable him not only to dismiss his British officers but increase the number of his native troops. Napoleon promised to supply this requirement, and in due course 200 selected young men were secretly dispatched, disguised as private soldiers, in a draft of 1,400 'colonial defence force' volunteers, under General de Caen, to Pondicherry. It is believed that M. Desoutée left with them. After arriving at Pondicherry, they were to travel in a coastal craft to Cuttack, then in the possession of the Mahratta Rajah of Berar who would provide facilities for their overland journey to Koil.

Thus Perron in his turn had touched the springs of another French plot for the overthrow of the British, and now he waited for his schemes to bear fruit.

He had come a long way for a youth named Pierre Cuiller who had once hawked handkerchiefs in the streets of Nantes. He had become the greatest and most powerful adventurer in all Hindustan, but what was that, when, if his luck held, he could have no less a prize for his exertions than the whole of the British Empire in India, with himself in the glittering role of its first French Proconsul?

Could not such a dream have so infatuated him as to warp his good sense and discretion, surrounded as he was by toadies and flatterers egging him on to practically anything? Whatever the truth is, we do know that a serious snag had developed which looked like upsetting the applecart. Perron, by withholding his brigades from Sindhia, had incurred his master's grave displeasure, while Colonel Sutherland, by his victory over Holkar in the battle of Indore, was high in the Maharajah's favour at court and assiduously working to supplant him. The situation was not only serious for Perron, it was positively dangerous; so in January 1801, when Sindhia summoned him to Ujjain, it required considerable courage on the General's part to face the music.

He took care to go well escorted. Setting out from Muttra with his bodyguard troop, he was joined *en route* by Pohlman's 2nd Brigade to which Skinner had been re-transferred, after a furlough he spent with his father, now a lieutenant-colonel, in Berhampur, and his sister in Calcutta. The combined force marched to Ujjain which it reached on 20 March 1802.

'His reception here was not of a nature to gratify an officer like Perron,' Skinner recorded. 'It was not until the 25th that he was invited to call on the Maharajah; and then having proceeded to the durbar with 200 horsemen, he was kept waiting in the *kutchery* (office) at the gate for two hours, while Sindea was amusing himself by flying kites. Not a chieftain came out to meet him, while he sat in company with certain discontented chiefs of note, among whom was old Gopaul Rao Bhow, who was at the head of the (national) army. This officer, addressing Perron, said, "Observe to what the Old Pateil's reign has come. Good soldiers are all forgotten, and none but dirty time-servers and flatterers can get on. But mark my words, he will soon find out his error, but not until too late to mend it." To this Perron replied that he was but a servant, and all he knew was to obey. This sort of conversation went on until the *chobedars* announced the approach of Sindea, when we all rose, and Perron went up and presented his *nuzzur* (gift from an inferior to a superior). Sindea just touched it, and asked him if he was well; to which Perron made the usual reply of "By your favour", and then we all, in turn, presented our *nuzzurs*, and were desired to sit down.

'In half an hour Sindea dismissed the durbar, and desired Perron to return to camp, which he did, completely disgusted with the cold and slighting treatment he had received from his master. Eight days now passed without the slightest notice or message from Sindea to Perron; and Gopaul Rao, a great friend of the latter, signified to him he had best be on his guard, as the Maharajah had resolved to lay hold of him. Several secret visits passed at this time between Perron and Gopaul Rao, whilst Colonel Sutherland and Major Brownrigg were intriguing against the former. Perron, aware of the intrigues of his enemies, became

depressed and perturbed; when, at length, matters seemed likely to be brought to a crisis. A day was appointed for holding a durbar, to which Perron and all his European officers were invited. At this durbar Sindea, together with his father-in-law, Surjee Rao Ghatkea, had formed a plot to lay hold of him; and had employed 500 Pathans, belonging to Bahadhour Khan, a chief then at Malaghur, and several others of his own favourites – his companions in vice and debauchery – to carry this purpose into effect. Perron, however, was made aware of this plot, and ordered all the native officers of both brigades, as low as the rank of jemadar, as well as all the European officers, to come fully armed to attend his visit to Sindea. Our full uniform included a brace of pistols attached to our sword-belts, and these he directed us to bring loaded. We amounted in all to 300 native and thirty European officers; and in this state of preparation we marched to the durbar, which was held in a large tent pitched for the occasion.

'At the hour of nine in the morning, headed by Perron, we reached the tent. Sindea rose to receive us, and we all presented our *nuzzurs*. We were then directed to sit down on the left side of the presence, the right being occupied by the Pathans, who regarded us very fiercely. When we were seated, Sindea, turning to Perron, observed that the invitation had only been extended to himself and his European officers, to which Perron replied, that in arranging his suite he had only followed the old rule laid down by himself and his uncle; and this answer silenced him. All this time we sat quiet, eyeing each other, whilst much whispering went on between Sindea, Gopaul Rao, and Surjee Rao (Ghatkia). I believe it was Gopaul Rao who persuaded him not to attempt any violence, for that not only himself, but the whole party, would be cut to pieces by the fine body of men whom Perron had brought in.

'Sindea then ordered the Pathans to retire, and they all got up, looking as if they would eat us, while our men sat laughing at them with the most perfect unconcern. When they were gone, Sindea and Surjee Rao began to flatter, and endeavour to throw Perron off his guard; but he, assisted as he was by his old friend Gopaul Rao, was too old a soldier to be so cajoled; and so *khiluts*

were ordered for us all, and after receiving them we presented our second *nuzzurs*, which Sindea graciously accepted. Betel was then handed round, and we received leave to retire.

Perron then got up, and taking off his sword, laid it down at Sindea's feet, saying he had grown old in his service, and that it did not become him to be disgraced by dissolute knaves and bullies; that all he wanted was his discharge. Then, addressing us, he said that henceforth we must look to Sindea, for that he, for his part, was too old now to brook affronts, and must retire. Sindea, on this, rose and embraced Perron, telling him that he regarded him as his uncle, and that he had no idea what had offended him. Compliments without measure passed between both parties, but, on leave taking, Perron cautioned Sindea to beware of Surjee Rao Ghatkea, for he would be his ruin, a caution in which all the old Mahratta chiefs joined cordially, and applauded the part which Perron had taken.

'At length we reached camp, where several days were occupied in the transmission of messages to and from the court, and in visits from chieftains who were sent to make matters up. But Perron was too indignant to be pacified.'

Perron, however, allowed himself to be talked round, but only after Sindhia had first agreed to transfer Sutherland to the 2nd Brigade, which was returning with the General to upper Hindustan. According to L. F. Smith, this precautionary measure was brought about with a gift to Sindhia of five lakhs; in any case it was the end of Sutherland's hopes, and, with no illusions as to what to expect from Perron, he took offence at some remark and used it as an excuse for suddenly quitting Ujjain with an escort of one hundred horsemen. The buoyant general had weathered the storm. He returned to Koil in perfect safety. But, as Smith observes, 'it was clear to every discerning eye that his influence with Dowlat Rao Scindea was much diminished.'

Skinner was with his brigade at Secundra, near Delhi, when the news arrived that Holkar, now the acknowledged Chief of Indore, had made a bold bid for Mahratta supremacy. Having re-formed

his army, while Sindhia was kite-flying in Ujjain, the Bastard had swooped down on Poona like a dark god of destruction, seeking before plunder the greatest political prize of the Mahrattas, the person of the Peshwa; and, on 25 October 1802, had defeated a force sent against him and taken Poona. The Peshwa, they heard, had flown to the British for protection, and the whole Mahratta empire was thrown into the greatest agitation. Then, the following summer, rumours came from Sindhia's camp of disagreements between himself and the British resident, and Perron gave orders to prepare for war.

The cause of all the fuss was the Peshwa, the suzerain and lord paramount of the Mahratta nation.

It was a peculiarity of the Mahrattas that they clung with passionate sentimentality to their curious political relics. In the past fifty years their national entity had completely changed. They were no longer one people under a single absolute Rajah: his sovereignty had been whittled away as the kingdom had split into independent principalities, carved out of the whole by ambitious and vigorous generals; but the emotional links remained, though oddly enough not with the Rajah, successor of the great Sivaji who had founded the Mahratta power, but with the hereditary Peshwa, or chief minister, who had usurped it, and maintained the Rajah as a sort of political high priest to invest him with *khilats* and agree ceremoniously with all his decisions.

The current Peshwa was a smooth young man named Baji Rao, whom Sindhia had placed on the throne, after deposing his brother. Baji Rao was therefore Sindhia's stooge, and before formally accepting British aid he had written begging his sponsor to assist him to recover his throne. Sindhia had promised help, and had immediately written to Perron ordering him to send one of his brigades to Poona. But Perron had again let him down, and in the end it was the British who drove Holkar out of Poona and put Baji Rao back on the throne.

Thus the political prize, which Sindhia had fashioned for himself and Holkar had sought to snatch away, had fallen to the British, who secured it with a force of 6,000 infantry stationed

at Poona. At one stroke Sindhia found his control over the Peshwa completely undermined; and in the encroachment saw a positive threat to his own independence. And not only Sindhia felt that way. No situation could have been less acceptable to the Mahrattas as a whole. The entire country was disturbed, and once again the chiefs put aside their internal dissensions in the face of a common danger.

Even Sindhia and Holkar were reconciled, while Rughoji Bhonsla, Rajah of Berar, another powerful Mahratta chief, attempted to form a confederacy.

Meanwhile, however, Perron had not found it easy to resist his master's imperative demands for reinforcements, and at last, in February 1803, when just one more threadbare excuse would have constituted an open act of defiance, Perron finally yielded. The 4th Brigade and half the newly formed 5th Brigade were dispatched, while at the same time the General tendered his resignation.

He had abandoned his magnificent dream of restoring the French empire in India, for the turn of events and Lord Wellesley's deliberate policy had put that entirely out of his reach.¹ To Perron half a loaf in the shape of his fortune of fifty lakhs was better than none, and he had accordingly written to General Lake, the British Commander-in-Chief, asking to be allowed to proceed with his caravan and personal bodyguard through the Company's territory to Calcutta, with a view to embarking for Europe.

Lake had forwarded the application to Wellesley, and he, keen to detach Perron from the Mahratta service, had accorded his sanction. But, before it reached him, Perron had changed his mind. Sindhia, in view of the national crisis for the Mahrattas, had written declining to accept his resignation, and requesting him to take command of their combined forces in a total war against the British.

1. After many delays the 200 French officers eventually arrived at Pondicherry, but Wellesley, who had word of the plan, prevented them from leaving the port. There they remained, until the war with France broke out, when they were all made prisoner.

Once again the tide had turned for General Perron, and, seeing in the coming struggle a revival of all his patriotic hopes for France, he consented to withdraw his resignation and accept the supreme command.

From Skinner we have an idea of Perron's overall strategy. 'His plan for acting against the English was as follows: Ghalaum Mahomed, the Rohilla chief, was engaged to commence in the Katahoor and overrun the country towards Lucknow; while Ambajee, with all his horse should cross at Cawnpore, and march down to Allahabad. The brigades under Perron's command were to assemble at Dehlee; while Perron himself, with about 20,000 horse, composed of his own regular cavalry, the Sikh chiefs' contingent, and all the horse belonging to the petty rajahs of the Doab, were to occupy that country and harass the British troops forming at Cawnpore under Lord Lake. The Mahrattas were to hoist the King's (The Emperor's) imperial colours. Sindea, with all his own forces undertook to watch and harass General Wellesley in the Deccan. The battalions of the Nagpore Rajah (Bhonsla of Berar) were to march through the Rewah country towards Calcutta, to burn and destroy everything in its course in the countries through which they passed.'

It was a comprehensive plan of campaign, for which the Mahrattas between them had mobilised nearly 150,000 troops and 600 field guns. Had it been carried out a long and bloody conflict would undoubtedly have resulted, but, as Skinner says, 'the jealousies existing in the Mahratta councils overthrew every scheme.'

The chief wrecker was Ambaji, who coveted Perron's post, and, according to L. F. Smith, eventually paid Sindhia twenty-five lakhs of rupees for it. On the eve of the war Ambaji was appointed to the chief command, with instructions to supersede Perron, who was to be subordinate to his orders. 'By this action,' Smith adds, 'Scindea delivered Perron over to his most implacable enemy, for Ambajee would have assuredly drained Perron's purse if he had spared his life.'

Matters finally came to a head between the British and the

Sikander Sahib

Mahrattas when Colonel Collins, the British Resident, left Sindhia's camp on 3 August 1803. This was taken as a declaration of war, but Perron received no intimation of it from the Mahrattas. Ambaji saw to that. He wanted if possible to surprise his predecessor, who it seemed had burned his boats with the British.

The Débâcle

On 28 August 1803 an important change took place for the British and country-born officers in the service of Sindhia. Two of their number, Captain Kenneth Stuart, the country-born son of a British general,¹ and Captain George Carnegie, a Scot, having signified that they would not bear arms against the British, the remainder were summarily dismissed, their arrears paid up, and they were ordered to quit the Mahratta territory.

This came as an unexpected blow to Skinner who had never had any intention of deserting the Mahratta colours. His loyalties were in the highest freelance traditions of India, where it was not a man's race that claimed his allegiance so much as the master whose salt he had eaten. Moreover, he had been rejected by his father's people, who had debarred him from the honourable profession of arms in their service, and were in fact deliberately reducing his kind to a depressed class of underlings and non-combatants, a caste neutered spiritually and economically. An intelligent and sensitive young man, he had become embittered. He had turned to his mother's people who had accepted him and honoured him. He was therefore indignant when he heard of his dismissal, and announced his intention of going to seek redress from Sindhia himself. In this he was joined by at least three other country-borns, and together they set out with Stuart and Carnegie who were to accompany them as far as Koil.

As it was summer the journey was made at night with *missal-chis* or torch-bearers going ahead of the party, each carrying in one

1. Lieut. General Robert Stuart (1744 - 1820).

hand a roll of flaming flax and rags, and in the other a skin bottle from which he kept pouring oil on his torch as he went along. They arrived next day at Koil just as General Lake's Grand Army was approaching the ancient fortress of Aligarh, outside which Perron was drawn up with 15,000 horse to meet him.

Skinner makes no mention of what ensued, and the following proceedings come from Stuart, who had been trying hard to get Skinner to go over to the British, but had not so far succeeded. At Koil they had pitched their tents in a garden near the Sasni Gate, to lie up during the heat of the afternoon, when news of the impending battle was brought to Skinner. He proposed going right away to see Perron to try if possible to talk him round into reversing his decision.

Just then they heard cannon fire. Going out of their tents to investigate, they presently saw a large body of Mahratta horse galloping past in a disorderly manner, with Perron following them in some confusion and without his hat. Skinner immediately rode up to him, calling out that he was determined to share his fortunes.

'Ah, no, no!' the General said. 'It is all over. These fellows, they have all behaved bad. Do not ruin yourself. Go over to the British. It is all up with us.'

'By no means,' Skinner replied. 'Let us rally them and make a stand. You may depend on it that all of us here are ready and willing to fight for you.'

But Perron shook his head, 'Ah no, Monsieur Skinner. I not trust. I fear you all go over.'

'Do you mean to call us traitors?' Skinner demanded.

'I do not trust,' Perron repeated.

This annoyed the other, who argued hotly that no one had ever been able to point the finger of accusation at any of them for treachery. They were all eager to fight, he said, and to deprive their master of the service of so many faithful officers was to betray him and ruin his cause. But Perron would not listen. He rode away shaking his head.

'Good-bye, Monsieur Skinner. Not trust, not trust.'

'Then you can go to the devil!' Sikander roared after him, and turned his horse and went back to his companions.

He was determined now to take the case to Sindhia. He wanted to pack up and leave right away, but Carnegie, who was a sensible man, spoke up, pointing out that it was not only futile for them as British subjects to hope for any justice from Sindhia, but hardly worth taking the risk of placing themselves in his power.

'Why not come with Stuart and me to seek British protection?' he suggested.

For some time Skinner opposed this plan. He said he had little faith in the British, who, he added, were as likely as not to send them all back to Cawnpore as prisoners-of-war. But he gave in at last, and they all set out that evening for a small fort near by. It had been occupied by a brigade of infantry under Colonel Edward Clarke.

Very little is known of the encounter with Clarke, beyond that he told them somewhat rudely that if they wanted British protection they had better go to the main camp, and they left indignant at the repulse. Next they overtook or were overtaken by Lieut.-Col. Everard Brown of the 2nd Native Cavalry, attended by two orderlies, who enquired who they were. On learning they were ex-Mahratta officers seeking British protection, he also told them they would have to go up to the camp, where the Commander-in-Chief was the only one who could give a decision on the matter. They then mentioned the repulse they had already met with, and asked the Colonel if he might spare them one of his orderlies to secure them admission to the camp. This, as they thought, was somewhat ungraciously refused, and they were told by the Colonel they would have to find their own way as best they could.

As he rode away, Skinner complimented Carnegie upon the politeness of his countrymen, and, turning his horse, galloped off towards the garden. Carnegie, a little piqued, said he would do as the Colonel had suggested, and taking with him Lieutenant Ferguson, who was one of the party, rode on to the British camp. Near it they were met by a captain, and in this officer they were

more fortunate. He not only escorted them into the camp but gave them a drink in his tent. He was about to take them on to see General Lake, when he enquired after the two Skinners, who, he said, were sons of his particular friend. On hearing that James was one of their party, he immediately sent him a letter asking him to come to the camp at once.

This letter reached Skinner just as the sun was going down, and, though apparently sceptical as to its good faith, it induced him to delay his departure that night. Then Carnegie and Ferguson galloped up hurraing and calling out that they had arranged everything, and, though they persuaded Skinner to return with them to the camp, he remained very doubtful as to the sort of treatment they, as country-borns, could expect.

His apprehensions were however soon dispelled on meeting the Commander-in-Chief, a fine aristocratic-looking English gentleman of fifty-nine, immaculately attired in a beautiful red coat and white buckskin breeches. General Lake welcomed them cordially, said he was delighted to accord them British protection, and ushered them into his mess tent where they dined, were regaled on the finest wines 'from the exhilarating Sheeraz of Persia to the ruby carbonelle and humble port', and so well treated they forgot the slights received earlier that day.

It was General Gerard Lake who made the evening for Skinner by his wit, wisdom and total lack of affectation. In over forty years of campaigning in Germany during the Seven Years' War, in Holland, in America, in France, and against the Irish rebels in 1798, he had never lost a battle. His son Captain George Lake, of the 34th Regiment of Foot, was his Military Secretary, but that young man was only one of a group of hero-worshipping staff officers who remained constantly with the General, hanging on every word.

Next morning after breakfast the ex-Mahratta officers were taken to a large, two-poled tent with the tent walls rolled back to let in the cool early-morning air. Lake was there, sitting at a plain, unpolished table, but now Skinner's doubts returned, for on being pointed out as the senior officer of the party, he was ques-

tioned about Perron's army. Unwilling to betray any secrets, he confined himself to such information as was easily to be had in the local bazaar.

The interrogation could hardly have been satisfactory for Lake, yet far from being displeased he asked Skinner if he would care to raise a regiment of irregular horse in the British service. It was to be an entirely new type of Indian Army unit, distinct from the highly-disciplined regular cavalry which was integrated with the infantry and artillery and trained for a particular role in battle. What Lake also required were regiments of light horse, well versed in skirmishing, for a multiplicity of other jobs in the war. The idea thrilled Skinner, but sadly he shook his head. It was most painful to have to refuse, he said, but he could never fight against his old comrades, or draw a sword against either Sindhia or Perron.

Skinner was then asked to write to various French officers in the brigades, and inform them that if they came over to the British they would receive favourable terms. This he also declined to do, pointing out that apart from its being a waste of time, the lives of the messengers who took the letters would not be safe. Skinner's companions, however, were not so pessimistic, and at length he as well as they were talked into writing some letters, which were accordingly sent. But, as he had warned, the messengers were put to death for delivering such invitations to treachery; that is, all except Skinner's messengers whose lives were spared only because of the tremendous regard the Mahrattas had for his name.

It was a reputation not only for courage and military skill, but for integrity, and the fact that it should be held by an officer barely twenty-five years old greatly impressed Lake. The outcome of this, and of better acquaintance with Skinner, was that he became a great favourite with the General who took to consulting him at every turn; while the young man, for his part, was so taken with the other's kindness and affability that he became quite devoted to him.

For Skinner, too, there was the chance of studying a British

fighting machine at close quarters, and what he saw amazed and excited him. Lake's Grand Army numbered 10,500 – not much more than a single Mahratta brigade – but it possessed a far higher proportion of European officers, with majors and lieutenant-colonels in command of the units, colonels of the brigades and major-generals of the wings. There were four infantry brigades composed of eleven battalions of sepoy and one British regiment, H.M.'s 76th, with three cavalry brigades of three regiments of Light Dragoons and five regiments of Native Cavalry. These, with the Artillery, Horse Artillery, Engineer and Pioneer Corps, and the different departments of the General Staff, seemed to Skinner to be better integrated than any military organisation he had ever encountered.

It had been trained to perfection by Lake, who made a novel use of gallopers or Horse Artillery guns. Two were attached to each cavalry regiment, and nothing, says Thorn, 'could exceed the celerity and exactness of the manoeuvres made with them at full speed by this large body of cavalry, whose combined movements, conducted with the most perfect order, and in a spirit of emulation, gave certain promise of the glory which, in the space of a few months afterwards, crowned their labours.'

What particularly struck Skinner was that the whole worked smoothly, without the jealousies and intrigues that all too frequently interfered with efficiency in the Mahratta brigades. The British officers were like an enthusiastic, happy team, and this unity was reflected in the high morale throughout the rank and file.

On the other side, however, Colonel Pedron, the Commandant of Aligarh, had been the first to demonstrate the kind of loyalty Sindhia could expect to receive from the French party. Perron had written to the Colonel in heroic terms: '... Remember you are a Frenchman; and let no action of yours tarnish the character of your nation ... I hope in a few days to send the English general back as fast or faster than he came ... Make yourself easy on the subject. Either the Emperor's army or the army of General Lake shall find a grave before the fort of Aligarh ... Do your duty; and

defend the fort while one stone remains upon another . . . The eyes of millions are fixed upon you.' Yet, when the time came, the Colonel was not only ready to surrender the celebrated stronghold, but would have done so had it not been for one of his own Rajput officers who arrested him and took over command of the fortress himself.

The overall British plan of campaign was for a combined operation involving nearly 50,000 men in four task forces – Lake's in Hindustan, and three in Gujerat and the Deccan under the Governor-General's younger brother, Major-General Arthur Wellesley, whose appointment to the command had caused a certain amount of head-shaking – General Wellesley being only thirty-four. However, as events were to prove, the Marquis Wellesley had certainly made no mistake in giving his first big chance to the future Duke of Wellington.

General Arthur Wellesley struck the first blow of the war, with the capture of the great fortress of Ahmednagar, on August 12, even before news of the rupture had reached Lake. Then came Lake's skirmish with Perron's cavalry on August 29. Then within the same week followed the spectacular *coup de main* on the mighty fortress of Aligarh.

Before dawn on September 4, Skinner was at Lake's side, as they waited on horseback for the morning gun from the camp to trigger off the assault on Aligarh. As the sky lightened, the forbidding outlines of the fortress emerged, but neither the immense height of its walls nor the reported great depth and width of its moat appeared to worry them. Spanning the formidable moat was a causeway which Pedron, through gross neglect, had omitted to cut, and Lake had therefore decided to hazard an attack on the gate itself.

The flank companies of the 76th had been detailed for the first part of the operation, and, as the morning gun boomed, Skinner saw a rush of redcoats at a breastwork on the causeway which was defended by a picket of some fifty men with a six-pounder. But these, instead of resisting, bolted, and the assault party, who had hoped to get in through the wicket-door with the fugitive

defenders, were shut out.

The gate was in the flank of a massive bastion, and, says Skinner, 'instead of retreating these brave fellows stood upon the causeway for a full hour, under one of the heaviest fires of musketry and great guns I have seen.'

Grenadiers were seen attempting to mount the bastion on scaling ladders, but they were forced down by rows of Rajput pikemen. The enemy six-pounder at the breastwork was brought up to blow the gate open, like a petard, but it made no impression. A twelve-pounder had then to be sent for, and while they waited the storming party was exposed to continuous raking fire. It was a critical phase, and according to Skinner they fell back, on which General Lake called out, 'They run!'

They were rallied, however, this time taking with them the twelve-pounder, and, as Skinner goes on, 'The God of Heaven certainly looked down upon those gallant fellows, for with two shots they blew open half the gate, and giving three shouts they rushed in. The Rajepoots stood their ground like brave soldiers, and from the first to the second gate the fight was desperately maintained on both sides, and the carnage was very great.

'As soon as he heard the shout, the countenance of Lord Lake changed from anxiety to joy, and he called out, with the greatest delight, "The fort is ours"; and turning to me asked what I thought of European fighting. I replied that no forts in Hindostan could stand against him. Then spurring his horse he galloped proudly to the gate. But when he saw his heroes lying thick there, the tears came to his eyes. "It is the fate of good soldiers!" he said.'

In all, four gates had to be forced before the grenadiers, beating back the defenders, mounted the ramparts. Fiercely the Rajputs resisted, but not for long, so that the British troops, through a combination of indefatigable courage and wonderful luck, found themselves masters of the reputedly impregnable fortress of Ali-garh after a single morning's bloody work, with a loss of 278 in killed and wounded against more than 2,000 of the enemy casualties, hundreds of whom were drowned in the ditch as they

threw themselves from the walls in an attempt to escape.

As a reward, General Lake let his stormers go to plunder for three hours. Skinner took no part in it, but he gives some idea of the free-for-all the day became: 'As I was returning to the town I saw a European passing through the avenue with a bag of dollars on his shoulders; he was attacked by two native troopers, who sought to deprive him of what he had bought so dearly. When he found that blows would not keep the fellows off, he just took and tore the bag and scattered the cash. The rascals believing their booty thus secure, began to gather them up, upon which he took his gun, shot the one and bayoneted the other, then coolly taking off his jacket, he fixed a knot upon the sleeves, and filling them with the dollars, threw it across his shoulders. He next loaded his gun, and seeing me called out to me to come near; when I came he offered me fifty dollars if I would escort him to camp. To this I agreed, and went with him to the party that was in charge of Pedron, which was about 200 yards from us, and here he tendered me the dollars. I, of course, refused to take them; on which he thanked me, and I returned to the town.'

The fall of Aligarh was a staggering blow to the Mahratta cause, for not only did Perron lose his principal strong-point, with immense quantities of arms, war equipment and treasure, but the speed and vigour of the attack struck panic into the minds of the natives. The task before Lake had been clearly laid down. Perron's army was to be destroyed, his *jaidad* seized, and the Emperor released from his thraldom; Delhi and Agra were to be taken in order to extend the British frontier to the Jumna; alliances were to be formed with the minor states west of that river; and lastly, the province of Bundelkhand was to be annexed to the Company, thus to secure a buffer for Benares against the inroads of the Mahrattas.

The overall strategy was directed towards the establishment of British paramountcy, and Aligarh had made a brilliant start.

Opposing Lake was an army of at least 50,000 regular troops, many of them veterans who had served under de Boigne and were as yet unbeaten. They had a fine tradition, and would have

resisted obstinately had they been properly and honourably led. But their French officers, after all their patriotic flatulence, proved the best allies the British had in the whole affair.

'Perron,' says Skinner, 'had not only disgusted all the chiefs in Hindostan by his pride and overbearing deportment, but had bestowed the command of troops, forts and districts upon his own relations (by marriage) and connections, most of whom being men of low extraction, and without education, thought only of making money, and looking after their own interests. These, like Perron himself, so far from being seriously attached to Sindia's service, only attempted a show of zeal, in order to blind the natives until they should have an excuse to be off to the Company's provinces, whither they had already remitted the greater part of their wealth.' Their positions of command and responsibility, he goes on to say, gave them much influence over the troops, but 'the use they made of this was to derange in every way they could the system of the army, with a view to making their escape the more easily.'

The first to desert Sindhia was Perron himself, though it was not without some difficulty that he managed to escape from 5,000 of his regular cavalry who had fled with him from Aligarh.

Sending these to plunder and devastate the Company's provinces towards Cawnpore, he hastened to Agra, picked up his family and as much of his wealth and property as he could conveniently take with him, and set off for Muttra with his personal bodyguard of 800 troopers mounted from his own stables.

Reaching Muttra, he awaited permission from Lake to travel through the Company's territory to Chandernagore, but before this could arrive he was surrounded by the regular cavalry who had heard of the fall of Aligarh and, refusing to believe it had been taken by assault, had come back angrily demanding an explanation.

To add to the General's embarrassment, his bosom friend, Bourquien, led a revolt against him in Delhi, causing, as Skinner puts it, 'no small confusion.' It was a treacherous bid for power by the ex-cook, who forced the blind and doddery Emperor to invest

him as Commander-in-Chief, seized Perron's banker from whom he extracted some lakhs of rupees, and laid siege to the fort to get at the army funds. Not content with that he sent a letter to the regular cavalry surrounding Perron at Muttra, informing them that the General was about to desert his command and urging them to take him prisoner or put him to death.

Hearing of the letter, Perron displayed great resource in coping with the situation, which at that moment had begun to look pretty black for him. Mustering the angry sowars, he protested to them in bitter terms of Bourquien's conduct, assuring them of the falsehood of his assertions, and declaring that he intended going immediately to Delhi to seize the traitor and have him blown from a gun. But first he suggested giving them an advance of pay which he had brought for them from Agra.

To this they readily agreed, and, ordering three lakhs of rupees to be issued to the risaldars, Perron told them he intended crossing the Jumna that same evening with his bodyguard and party, and that they were to follow in the morning as soon as all the troops had been paid.

It was a clever ruse, because the risaldars, finding so much money in their hands, began to quarrel over the division of it, while Perron crossed with his suite which included 500 baggage porters. As soon as it got dark he gave the boatmen 5,000 rupees, instructing them to lay up their boats on that side of the river for the night, and next morning to inform the risaldars that he had gone north to the next stage for Delhi, about seven miles away. He then set out, but, instead of going north, turned east and covered thirty miles in the night to Sasni, where he placed himself under the protection of a British detachment and out of reach of the men he had once commanded.

After Perron's flight Delhi became the rallying point of Sindhia's regular army, and Bourquien was the man of the hour; though, when the news came that Lake was approaching, he wanted to retire westward, and was put in irons by his men until he undertook to lead them against the British. The battle, which was fought on 11 September 1803, provides an excellent example

of the careless verve of Lake's generalship, with his great facility for employing infantry and cavalry together to their utmost tactical advantage. It also ranks among the great victories of the British in India.

Bourquien had got twelve of his battalions of infantry across the Jumna, with sixty-eight pieces of artillery, the regular cavalry and some Sikh horse, when Lake arrived and encamped just short of their position, quite unaware of his proximity to it because of the height of the tiger grass and the shape of the land lying between.

They were so badly off for information, says Skinner, that the troops had actually started to cook their dinner when Bourquien's cavalry appeared so close at hand that the grand guard and the advanced pickets were immediately turned out. As the numbers of the enemy continued to increase, Lake went out in person to reconnoitre, taking with him the whole of his cavalry. The enemy horse retreated as he approached, and coming up over a tilt of land he saw the whole of the opposing force drawn up on rising ground in complete order of battle, posted very strongly with each flank covered by a swamp, and their front protected by their artillery and a line of entrenchments. This front was the only point that could be attacked.

It was high noon and very hot. Lake's men had already marched eighteen miles since three o'clock that morning, and moreover he was seriously outnumbered. His entire force, after having been milked to garrison Aligarh and protect his convoys, now consisted of about 4,500 British and Indian troops, while Bourquien faced him with more than 15,000 of the finest regular soldiers in Hindustan. But experience had taught Lake the great virtue of an immediate attack, and, despite the weight of argument against it, he promptly decided to give battle.

Bourquien opened with a brisk cannonade, on which Lake sent orders for the infantry and artillery to come up. They formed instantly, but it was fully an hour before they reached the field, during which time the cavalry had come under a very heavy fire, so well directed as to cause serious loss in men and horses. Lake's

horse was shot under him, whereupon his son gave up his horse to his father, and remounted himself on a riderless one, which in turn was shot under him.

By now it had become apparent to Lake that the enemy position was too strong to be taken by the frontal assault to which he had committed himself, and he found himself in a desperate predicament in which either to go on or call off the attack would have been fatal. How he got out of it was by a brilliant feint in which he first gave the order to retire. The movement was carried out with perfect precision, but the enemy, thinking it was the commencement of a retreat, came down from their entrenched position and advanced with all their artillery, shouting and exulting, as if victory was already theirs. They were soon undeceived, however, as the British cavalry suddenly opened from the centre and the infantry appeared, formed line and continued their advance with their general leading them in person.

The Mahratta gunners greeted the advancing line with salvo after salvo of round, grape and chain shot, and most of the British losses occurred during this desperate phase. But not a man advancing removed his musket from his shoulder till they came to within a hundred paces of the enemy, when Lake gave the order for a volley, and they charged with such a rush of fury that the whole front broke and the Mahrattas fled in all directions. Immediately Lake halted the charge, forming his infantry into columns of companies, so that his cavalry could go through the gaps with their galloper guns, to pursue the enemy battalions to the banks of the Jumna, where hundreds of the fugitives only escaped the sabre to perish in the river. Some attempted to escape in ravines to the right of their position, but these were followed by the British infantry and completely routed. By seven that evening not an enemy was in sight who was not dead or wounded, and these exceeded 3,000 against Lake's losses of 478.

The game was now up for the French adventurers. Bourquien having flown from the field of battle, had re-crossed the Jumna with a party of horsemen and plundered Delhi before surrendering a few days later with several other French officers. They

were sent down river to Calcutta, where all trace of them is lost, except for Bourguien.

A postscript on him and his bosom friend is provided by de Bourienne, Napoleon's Prefect of Police, who was the French Consul at Hamburg in 1805, when Perron arrived and applied to him for a passport. Perron, says De Bourienne, was accompanied by two copper-coloured children, a boy and a girl, the offspring of an Indian mother. 'Their father exhibited great affection for them, and caressed them continually. Some days after General Perron's arrival, Bourguien also arrived and applied for a passport for France. He was at daggers drawn with Perron, who spoke of him with similar bitterness. They professed a profound contempt for each other, and accused each other of being the cause of the ruin of the Mahrattas. Both had immense fortunes. I do not know what has become of Bourguien, but General Perron retired to a magnificent estate which he had bought in the neighbourhood of Vendôme.'

If the battle of Delhi was the end of their military careers for the French party, it was the beginning of an entirely new one for James Skinner. After the battle eight *risalahs* of Perron's regular cavalry, amounting to 880 men, came over to Lake and expressed their willingness to serve the British. They were immediately enrolled, and, on being asked to choose one of their own officers as their own commander, with one voice shouted, 'Sikander Sahib!' Sikander is the Hindustani version of Alexander, a name that has been in the Indian subconscious since the great Macedonian's invasion in 327 B.C. It was an appellation Skinner had earned for his dauntless valour and leadership, and General Lake was told by the clamorous horsemen that they would have no one else.

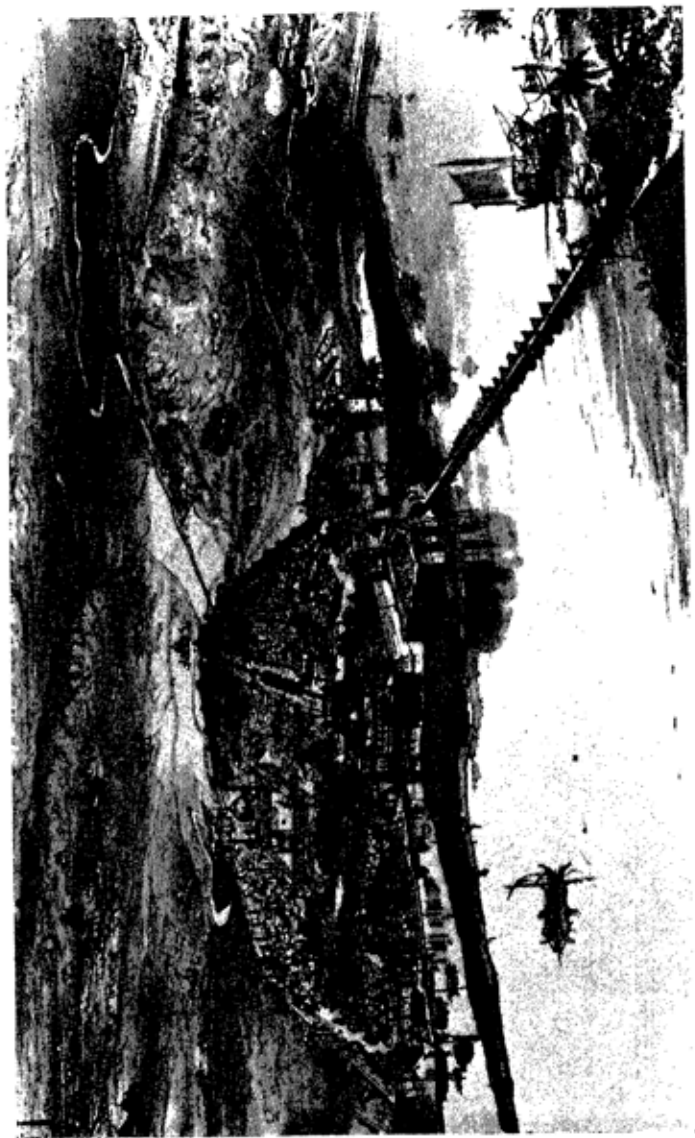
Though Skinner had turned down Lake's first offer of a commission, things were different now. 'At Coel,' as he says, 'proclamation was made to all British and country-born officers, late of Sindea's service, informing us that we should meet with punishment if we were found again in arms against the British; but that



Begum Somru



Malcolm



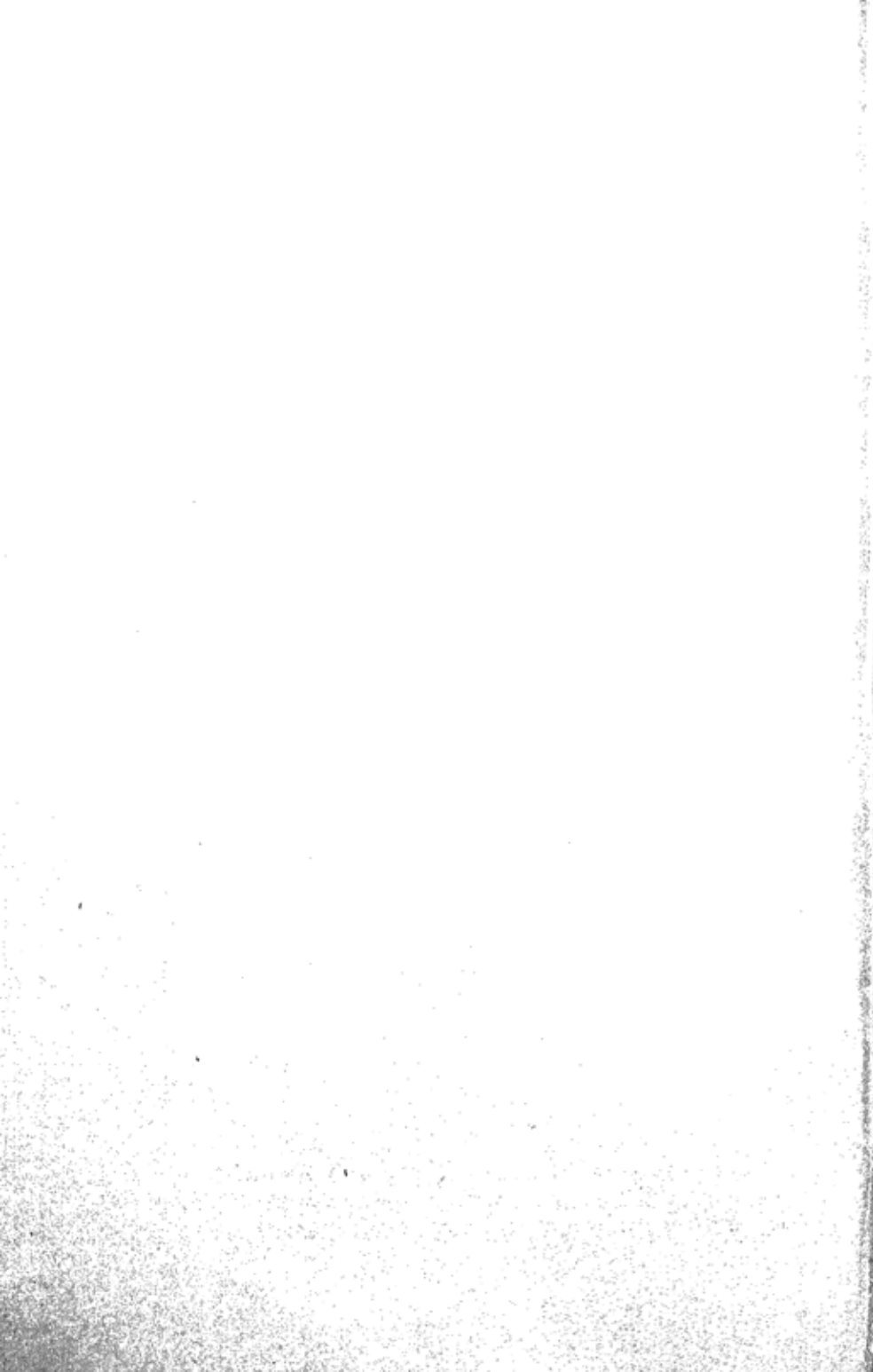
Skinner's Delhi. Kashmir Gate and St James's Church at the bottom right of the city

whoever chose to accept and serve should receive the same pay he had from Perron; and now, my old comrades having asked for me, I received a letter from Lord Lake appointing me to the command, with a promise that I should not be employed against Sindea, but that my duty should be to keep the road from Alleghur to Dehlee clear of all marauders. I accordingly joined my corps at Secundra having arranged that Lieutenant Scott¹ should be appointed as my second-in-command.'

That was the start in 1803 of what was later to become the premier cavalry regiment of the Indian Army. It was the first of the irregular corps to be raised, and it has continued in unbroken succession since that year. Originally styled Captain Skinner's Corps of Irregular Horse, the designation was soon abbreviated to Skinner's Horse. Several other bodies of horse, raised at that time by various officers, looked and remained what they were — nondescript mercenaries, dressed and armed each man according to his individual taste. But James Skinner was too ardent a soldier to be content with such a unit. From the first day they paraded together he infused into his men a corporate spirit, a special style and character that were soon to make them famous throughout Hindustan. There was nothing nondescript about Sikander Sahib's Yellow Boys, as they became known. He loved a fine uniform and understood its value. His men already had the green one of Sindhia's Hindustani Horse, but he determined to get away from that, and chose a yellow tunic with a red turban and cummerbund edged with silver for the men. For the officers he decided on a dark blue jacket with silver facings, a red and gold striped cummerbund, white buckskin breeches, black Wellingtons, and a Dragoon helmet with a white cockade.

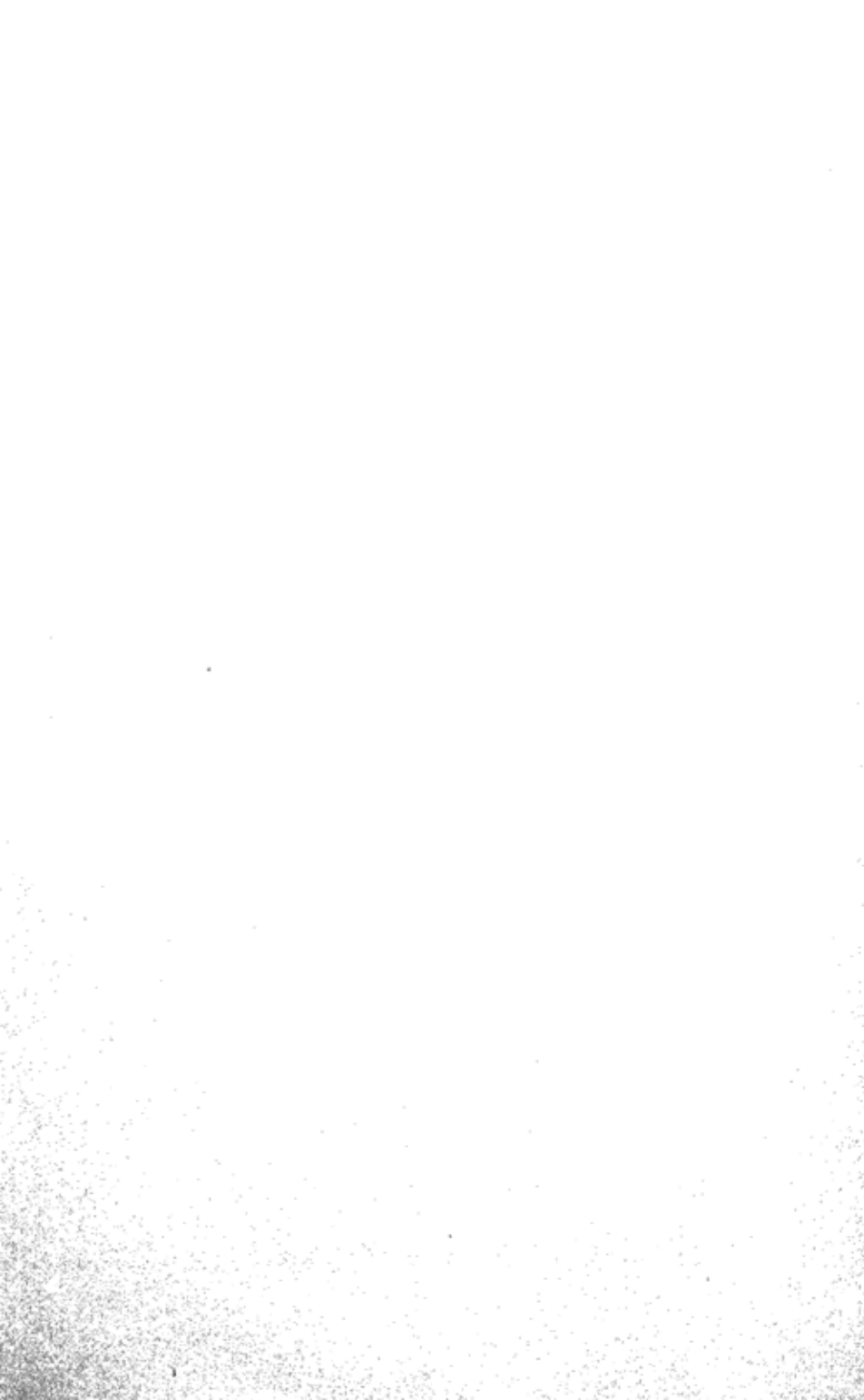
The flag they rallied under bore his father's coat of arms, the griffin's head and bloody hand of the ancient Skinner family, which was also tattooed on his stomach. It was there as a means of identification in case his head should be severed from his body.

1. George Scott, born in India *circa* 1784, the son of George Scott of the Madras Civil Service. Later Adjutant, Gardner's Horse, he died suddenly in 1822.



II

The Yellow Boys



The Delhi Road

The day after Perron dismissed the English party from his brigades, Robert Skinner had left for Sirdhana, near Meerut, to join the army of a woman known as the Begum Somru.

The Begum was the widow or mistress of the notorious German adventurer, Walter Reinhardt (nicknamed Sombre, or Somru as the natives pronounced it), who in 1763 had undertaken the massacre of nearly 200 English prisoners of Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Bengal. Sombre had died in 1778, in the service of the Delhi court, and, his son being altogether unfit, the Begum had succeeded to his *jaidad* of six lakhs a year, and to his command of five battalions of infantry, forty pieces of cannon and 500 Moghul horse. Though in her twenties at the time, she had, through her talent for intrigue and sheer ability, managed to keep her territory intact and her authority unimpaired for the next twenty-five years, a period of surrounding upheaval and change. She was now a legend in Hindustan as a crafty and tyrannical witch of fading charms and a weakness for young European officers, of whom she had employed a fair number, including George Thomas and Bourquien, in those twenty-five years.

At the start of the war she had supported Sindhia, but the moment she heard of the British success at Delhi, she lost no time in sending Robert Skinner to Lake to make terms for her. Lake sent Robert back with a treaty confirming the Begum in the possession of her *jaidad*, with instructions for her to stand fast at her capital of Sirdhana. But the Begum was too positive a character to carry out Lake's instructions to the letter. She came to Delhi to

pay her respects to the General in person as fast as relays of *palki* bearers could carry her.

An anecdote Skinner tells of the meeting reveals the diplomatic adroitness of that remarkable woman. It happened that she arrived at the British camp one night just after dinner, and Lake, on being informed, came out of the mess tent to receive her. As the adhesion of every chief was important, he wanted to show her how pleased he was by her gesture, but, having dined extremely well, completely forgot the protocol which was enjoined on such occasions. As the diminutive Begum got out of her palanquin, he suddenly stepped forward, and, to the utter dismay of her attendants, took her in his arms and kissed her. The solecism might have created an extremely awkward situation but for the lady's presence of mind. Courteously returning the salutation, she turned to her attendants and told them, 'It is the salute of a padre to his daughter.' As the Begum had turned a Christian, anything would have been in order as far as her attendants were concerned.

Before leaving Delhi, Lake appointed his Deputy Adjutant-General, Lieut.-Col. David Ochterlony, Resident at the court of the Emperor, with a garrison of one battalion and four companies of sepoys. For additional support two battalions of *Najibs* were raised from among those of Sindhia's troops who came over to the British, and placed under Lieutenant Birch, who had been with George Thomas, and Lieutenant Woodville, a young ex-Mahratta officer. Skinner, who was based at Secundra, was also under the direct command of the Resident.

Skinner's main function was the settlement of the upper Doab. Since the collapse of the previous government, the country had become infested with lawless bands, and his regiment was kept busy breaking them up and restoring order in the administrative vacuum. It was no work for the squeamish, for many were the villages they found burning, and many the wells choked with corpses of victims with their throats cut. There was only one medicine for the lawless – the rope, and before long from high trees all over the area swung the pendulous fruit of Skinner's

The Delhi Road

swift and summary justice.

His regiment had been increased to 1,200 soon after its inception. They were all Perron-trained cavalry, mainly Moghuls from around Delhi, well mounted and, it was thought, adequate for their allotted role in view of the rapidity with which most of the Doab chiefs had made their submission to Lake. But no sooner had he departed with his dreaded army than trouble began. A Mahratta chief, named Madhu Rao Falkia, who occupied the fort of Malagarh, called upon Skinner to quit the area. His insolent demand was timed to coincide with the advance on Delhi from the north of another Mahratta named Bapu Sindhia with 5,000 men and five or six guns.

To oppose this inroad Ochterlony sent Birch and Woodville with their two battalions of newly-raised *Najibs*. At the same time Skinner was called to Delhi, to have his cavalry at hand should the need arise.

That evening, Skinner arrived in the city to get the startling news that the *Najibs* had been cut up in a battle near Sonapat some thirty miles away. Birch, with Woodville, who was wounded, and a few others had managed to escape from the disastrous field, where they lost all their guns.

As it happened, the threat to Delhi fizzled out. The victorious Bapu Sindhia, having shown his teeth, returned northward. But his success was an encouragement for others to attempt the same, and the first thing Skinner heard on his return to Secundra was that Madhu Rao was preparing to attack him with a battalion of 800 men, two guns and 500 horse. It was a tidy little force, one which that chieftain could use to menace the country for several miles around, so Skinner wrote informing Ochterlony of the situation. He added he was well aware that no troops could be spared to assist him, but if he could have the loan of a couple of field pieces he would like to try a battle.

In later years Ochterlony was to become one of Skinner's greatest friends and admirers, but the churlish reply he sent to that spirited request for artillery cut the young half-caste to the quick. It was, Skinner says, to the effect that as 'one of my country-

men (Birch) had already lost four of the Company's guns, he would not trust me with another; but that I was by no means to retreat. Much hurt by this ill-natured remark, I resolved not to retreat, but rather to die.'

That night, at about 4 a.m., Skinner was aroused by one of his spies with intelligence that the enemy had set out from their fort which was only twelve miles away. Skinner immediately ordered boot and saddle, and they waited, drawn up outside the camp with matchlocks primed and matches glowing in the dark, till first light brought a dewy morning of mists and flying bats, and villagers appearing in the fields with their little pots of water.

Madhu Rao's force, led by one of his officers, had stopped a mile and a half away, the infantry in a line with the two guns in the centre, and the cavalry just behind. Seeing that the enemy would not come closer, Skinner advanced at a walk until the cannon jumped and their shot came whipping towards him. He had already decided on his battle plan – to attempt to turn the enemy's flanks – and, forming his men into two divisions, sent one with Lieutenant Scott to the left, and took the other himself to the right.

They charged in two curving hooks, but in both divisions the men lost their nerve and were repulsed. Wheeling round, Skinner quickly rallied and reformed them and this time led them all together in a frontal charge straight at the centre of the line. 'But they deserted me,' he recorded. 'I passed between the guns with about fourteen men, and just as I did so, my horse was shot under me by a matchlock ball and one of my troopers carried me off behind him.'

Skinner was angry now. Mounting another charger, he harangued his men, telling them they had failed him in his first battle. 'Desert me if you wish,' he cried. 'But I shall not turn my back on this foe. I shall not live if I cannot drive them from this field.' And spurring his horse he headed it straight for the enemy guns.

This time not a man held back. Madhu Rao's infantry only gave them a volley before they broke and fled, and the Yellow

The Delhi Road

Boys dashed in and cut them to pieces, while their cavalry fled for their lives.

It was the Regiment's first victory, but it cost them dear. 'Lieutenant Scott received eleven sabre cuts and was not expected to recover, and we had 200 men killed and wounded,' Skinner says, adding that he 'wrote an account of the whole affair to the Resident at Dehlee, begging him to send assistance for Lieutenant Scott, which request he complied with, laying a dak¹ for him to the city. He wrote me a public letter of thanks, and I also received a very handsome one from Lord Lake, a few days afterwards.'

The letter alluded to is probably the following communication from Lake's headquarters at Agra, dated 23 October 1803:

To Captain Skinner.

Sir,

The Commander-in-Chief had derived great satisfaction from the perusal of your letter of the 9th instant, communicating the defeat of Madhoo Row by the troops under your command.

His Excellency desires me to express his cordial thanks to you and Lieutenant Scott for your gallant conduct, and trusts that the wounds which Lieutenant Scott has received will neither prove dangerous nor long deprive the service of the benefit of his exertions.

His Excellency desires you will signify to the native officers and men his entire approbation of their behaviour, and to assure them the bravery which they have shown on this occasion merits His Excellency's warmest praises, in testimony of which he has ordered the enclosed Persian letter to be addressed to them.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient servant,

J. Gerard
Adjutant-General.

1. With relays of palanquin bearers, it was usual to cover forty miles a day. On an express run, however, this rate of progress could be doubled or even trebled.

Meanwhile Ochterlony had sent for Skinner and told him he wanted Madhu Rao out of Malagarh and away from the district. Skinner agreed it would be a desirable object, but explained that with the Mahratta's cavalry still intact and a garrison of some 2,000 in his fort, it would not be easy to dislodge him without a battering train and quite a large force of infantry.

'Try offering him terms,' Ochterlony said. 'I authorise you to settle with him for any amount up to a lakh of rupees.'

Madhu Rao rejected the offer of terms with contempt; but rather than send a negative report to Delhi, Skinner posted his troopers so as to blockade the fort, and began harassing Madhu Rao's cavalry wherever he could meet them out of cannon reach.

'This,' he says, 'was continued for fifteen days without effect, when I found out that all the forage in the fort consisted of two stacks of grass, which would last the horses about three months. These I resolved to destroy, if possible, and for this purpose agreed with a Goojur spy, who volunteered for the service for 300 rupees. This man having some brethren in the fort, pretended to desert from me, and fled into the place, where he was well received. He returned in a week, assuring me that he had done the business; upon enquiring how he had managed it, he told me he had put a slow match to each stack, an assertion which I was slow to believe at first, but in the course of twenty-four hours we saw them both on fire, on which I gave the money agreed upon. Three days after this the cavalry made offers to come over, but I refused to receive them alone. Several attempted to escape, but they were pursued and put to death by my horse. At length Madhoo Rao sent a *vakeel* (envoy) to make terms with me, and the following were proposed and accepted. The fort was to be given up, but all his private property was to be secured to him, except the guns and provisions, which were to be left, and the soldiers were permitted to march out with their arms. I promised him also that I should take him to the Resident at Dehlee, who I was sure would take him into the service. The fort and the *purgunnah*, consisting of twenty-eight villages, were then given up

and added to the Company's territory, and I marched Madhoo Rao with all his troops to Dehlee, where he was received very kindly by the Resident, and afterwards handsomely pensioned. His son Ram Rao was taken, with 600 sowars, into the British service. For my part, I received the thanks of the Resident and Lord Lake for this service, which, though it did not involve much hard fighting, was yet a duty of great fatigue and hard work. Of my force, there was never less than 300 or 400 men mounted day and night, and amongst them I was constantly required to be. By this close blockade the enemy was forced to come in within the month, and the cash I was authorised to give for the surrender of the place was thus saved to the government.'

He returned to his duties with a will, and, as he goes on, 'Several mud forts were taken, and many parties of desperate marauders were destroyed; so that collections of revenue began to come in. The Resident continued his kindness to me, rewarding me liberally for services well performed, and sending favourable reports of my conduct to headquarters.'

Skinner makes no mention of what he earned during this period. His salary, according to L. F. Smith's list of payments to ex-Mahratta officers, was 500 rupees a month. But the rewards referred to, by custom from ten to twenty-five per cent of the amounts saved and revenues collected, must have been substantial. At all events the money he made that year in the Doab formed the basis of the immense fortune he was later to acquire.

The Blaze of Glory

The greatest assistance Skinner received in restoring law and order to the Doab was from the news of the success of British arms which poured in from every front. The confederates were reeling under successive staggering blows as resistance in their mighty fortresses collapsed, their armies were destroyed, and some of their most valuable possessions were lost for ever. Broach, at the mouth of the Narbada, had fallen to one British column, which had gone on to reduce Champanir and Powangarh. Another column had invaded and conquered the province of Cuttack. A third had crushed out all resistance in the province of Bundelkhand. At Assye, General Wellesley with a force of 4,500 had routed the combined hosts of Sindhia and Bhonsla totalling over 50,000 men, of whom 10,500 were regular infantry with 115 guns.

And at Agra was enacted the contemptible farce which exemplifies the cowardice, ineptitude and blatant self-interest that betrayed the Mahratta cause all down the line.

Incredible though it may seem, Lake had arrived before the great fortress to find seven of Sindhia's regular battalions of infantry encamped outside the walls, having been denied admittance by the garrison lest they should plunder the twenty-five lakhs of rupees in the treasury that the garrison wished to reserve for themselves. With the seven battalions within the walls, Agra would have certainly proved a tough nut to crack. Instead, Lake was able to attack and beat them into submission on the glacis. Five days later, after a bit of a bombardment, the garrison itself

The Blaze of Glory

capitulated, and ironically all the treasure went to the British.

The man chiefly responsible for the surrender of the fortress was its commandant, Colonel George Hessing, aged nineteen, Perron's wife's nephew, and, according to Skinner, too rich a man to defend the place well. 'For himself he made good terms, carrying off four or five lakhs of rupees, besides what he had in the Company's funds.'

But it was the end of the trust the native princes had hitherto reposed in the adventurers, and it led tragically to many being seized and tortured to death. In Holkar's service three country-borns – Vickers (whose gallantry in the battle of Poona the year before had made him famous), Dodds and Ryan – were beheaded, when, on their loyalty being put to the test, each signified he would not bear arms against the English. 'Others,' Skinner adds, 'perished in the service of different petty Rajahs; while all those traitors, who were the cause of their deaths, were well treated by Lord Lake, and suffered to go where they chose.'

While the French party were thinking only of their nest-eggs, and the confederates were defeating their own ends with treacherous intrigue, the only men who did any real fighting for the Mahrattas were the infantry of Perron's brigades. Of these there were still twelve battalions, with 5,000 Mahratta horse, under the command of a veteran native officer named Sarwar Khan, who resisted several very tempting offers made to him by Lake. When all inducements failed, Lake decided to give battle, and caught up with them near the village of Laswari at sunrise on 1 November 1803. He had ridden all night with his cavalry.

Thinking that the enemy force was on the move, Lake gave the order to charge. But Sarwar Khan's seventy-two guns were waiting for them, most of the pieces hidden in the long grass and chained together to form a cavalry obstacle, and the charge was greeted at a range of twenty yards with an iron tempest of grape and double-headed chain shot that mowed down whole divisions.

Still the British cavalry penetrated the line of guns, formed and charged again, back and forth three times, as the guns were

reloaded and turned each time to face them, and the enemy battalions, drawn up behind a barricade of carts, bullocks and cumbrous baggage, galled them with a raking fire. Then, finding that he could not penetrate the barricade with cavalry, Lake called off the attack to await the arrival of the infantry, which he had left behind on the march the night before. At noon they arrived – the 76th Regiment with six battalions of sepoy.

Lake now attempted an outflanking movement along a nullah, but was spotted by Sarwar Khan, who threw back his right wing and saluted the General, advancing at the head of the 76th, with a fire that killed or wounded over 200 of that magnificent regiment. Two horses were shot under Lake, who then had the agony of seeing his son severely wounded as he was begging him to mount his own charger.

The advancing British infantry were then charged by the Mahratta cavalry, who in turn were charged by the 29th Dragoons and driven from the field. That work done, the 29th were joined by the rest of the British cavalry as they fell upon the rear of the enemy infantry and entirely cut off their retreat.

Desperately Sarwar Khan's battalions resisted, but they were steadily driven back from their guns by the advancing British foot. Soon it was apparent that the day was lost to the Mahrattas, as again and again they were charged and combed by the deadly teeth of the British cavalry. Still they would not break or yield, until, when all was lost, Sarwar Khan quitted the field on an elephant, and the last of his army, barely 2,000 men, hemmed in on all sides, finally laid down their arms and surrendered.

Of the remainder, more than 7,000 lay dead or dying near the positions they had defended, the frightful picture of carnage heightened by periodic explosions of powder tumbrils that shook the atmosphere and obscured the horizon with sulphurous smoke. To this was added an overcast sky, for a hurricane was soon to follow with furious rapidity, multiplying the horrors of the wounded on that ghastly field.

As he was leaving the field after the battle, Lake was cheered by a group of soldiers. He took off his hat and, thanking them for

The Blaze of Glory

the part they had played, pointed to the dead piled round the Mahratta guns and told them that such an enemy had shown them all how to die. He was under considerable emotional strain at the time, having just heard of the death of some of his finest officers, including Major-General Charles Ware, whose head had been taken off by a cannon ball. The lawyer William Hickey mentions in his memoirs hearing a major describe how 'cut up' Lake was that night. 'They heard him crying loudly when they entered the tent. He took Colonel Salkeld by the hand and burst into fresh tears, saying how "dear bought the victory had been".'

Indeed it was a victory, the most decisive in Hindustan. But for some reason nothing was done about disposing of the enemy dead, with the result that after a week the vicinity became so offensive that the British force marched away, leaving them to the jackals, the vultures and the ghouls. Such then was the end of the fine army in which Skinner had served for eight active, happy and exciting years.

Soon all India was resounding with the news of Lake's victory, as a stream of envoys arrived at his camp from chiefs and rajahs who had all thrown off the Mahratta yoke and eagerly sought British protection. Meanwhile the combined operation was carried on apace, and cities and fortresses continued to fall with bewildering rapidity to the British task forces thrusting on their respective fronts. The *coup de grâce* was delivered by General Arthur Wellesley when he broke the confederacy in the battle of Argaum on November 29, yet the relentless pressure did not stop. Still the terrifying military machines ground on until finally the confederates agreed to terms, dictated by General Wellesley, as the only means of averting the conquest of their entire territory; and the year 1803 closed with the termination of the shortest, the most spectacular, and the most gloriously successful war in British military history.

In the space of five crowded months, four major battles and three secondary actions had been fought and won, and nine great fortresses and fourteen fortified towns and cities had either

surrendered or been taken by assault. Upwards of a thousand field guns and wall pieces had been captured, with large stocks of small arms, ammunition, supplies and war equipment. Immense quantities of treasure had fallen to the victors.

Apart from the prizes, the result of these conquests was epochal. French power and influence were eradicated from India for ever, and a century of Mahratta supremacy had come to an end.

Great chunks of territory were now added to the British empire, the Company's frontiers being extended to the Jumna, to include the rich Doab, with the cities of Delhi, Agra and Aligarh, and important tracts of land along the right bank of that river. The province of Cuttack was acquired, as was most of the province of Bundelkhand, and some very useful and valuable territory in Gujerat. Tracts were added to the territory of Britain's ally, the Nizam of Hyderabad. Moreover, all claims on the British Government were renounced by Sindhia, who was also compelled to surrender all claims on those of his former tributaries who had become allies of the British during the war. These included the principal Jat and Rajput rajahs, who were guaranteed their independence, exempted from paying tribute and ensured against aggression, in return for which they undertook to act virtually as a buffer against any future encroachment by the restless and predatory Mahrattas. Thus the Marquis Wellesley's war aims were all achieved. His dream of British paramountcy was a reality.

For most of the soldiers of fortune, however, it was the finish of the profession of arms. On Wellesley's express instructions, into each treaty had been inserted a clause whereby the native signatory undertook 'never to take or retain in his service any Frenchman, or subject of any other European or American power the government of which may be at war with the British government, or any British subject, whether European or native of India, without the consent of the British government.'

It was intended as a safeguard against the possibility of another situation developing in which the rise of a party of adven-

turers could suddenly threaten the balance of power. It was a wise precaution, but it meant the end of the golden age of the Pagoda Tree.

All that winter Skinner had patrolled the Doab. He had largely succeeded in restoring law and order to the area, when suddenly in February 1804 word came that the Sikhs on the west side of the Jumna were preparing to attack Saharanpur, which was garrisoned by a small British detachment, and Skinner was ordered with all haste to its support. It was a duty he performed only too willingly, as the officer in command of the detachment was none other than his godfather, William Burn, now a colonel.

While on the march further orders were received for Skinner to proceed direct to a ford due west of the town, where Lieutenant Woodville had taken up a position with his battalion of *Najibs* to prevent the Sikhs from crossing.

By the time Skinner joined Woodville about 5,000 Sikh horsemen had massed on the other bank. They were a barbaric lot who cavorted and raced about on the wide sandy stretches along the river, with their round shields on their backs and their long black hair and beards flowing loose in the wind with the manes and tails of their horses. Every now and then they would gather opposite the *Najibs*, waving their swords and shouting defiance. They appeared to be working themselves up into a frenzy while waiting to be joined by others from the neighbouring *misals* or clans.

Skinner does not say what he thought of the situation, though as a sound tactician he is hardly likely to have seen the sense of isolating a battalion of infantry at a ford nearly twenty-five miles from the rest of the detachment when the river could have been crossed at several places up or down stream. What we do know is that he decided there and then to take the initiative.

Leaving the battalion to occupy the Sikhs' attention, he took his cavalry to a ford eight miles below their position, crossed the icy river at about three in the morning, and having come up to the Sikh camp before daybreak took them completely by surprise.

They descended on the helpless warriors as they lay wrapped in their blankets in a clear, cold, February dawn.

The fight was brief, for the enemy thought only of getting away, and they dispersed, leaving over 400 of their number with two of their sirdars dead or wounded upon the sand, and a hundred of their horses in the hands of their assailants. Skinner's own casualties were not light, for the Sikhs discharged their matchlocks and blunderbusses at them as they galloped away. His own horse was shot under him.

Lake's reactions to this affair may be learned from the following dispatch from his headquarters at Bhowani, dated 2 April 1804:

To Lieutenant Colonel Burn,

Commanding a Detachment.

Sir,

I have had the honour today to lay your letters of the 27th and 28th ult. before the Commander-in-Chief. His Excellency had perused with peculiar satisfaction your report of the successful operations of the detachment under the command of Captain Skinner. The Commander-in-Chief has on former occasions remarked the zeal and spirit evinced by Captain Skinner, and, in the present instance, the judgment, decision, and promptitude which he has displayed calls for his fullest approbation. His Excellency desires you will signify to Captain Skinner his cordial thanks for the ability, skill, and courage he has shown; and to Lieutenant Woodville, and officers and men who were employed on this occasion, his thanks and approbation of their steady and gallant behaviour.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient servant,

J. Gerard
Adjutant-General.

The immediate threat to Saharanpur had been relieved, but

The Blaze of Glory

knowing the Sikhs, Skinner realised they would be back in greater numbers to avenge their defeat. Bred in adversity, they were vindictive and merciless. So on his own initiative he sent peace proposals to all the sirdars of the contiguous districts, and within a month had prevailed upon them to accompany him to Colonel Burn, with whom they came to terms.

For this service Skinner was again highly commended. He remained on at Saharanpur during that hot weather. It was there he first heard the news of Monson's calamitous retreat, and it was there too that the seeds of mutiny were sown in the ranks of the Yellow Boys. For the first and only time in the Regiment's long history was the life of their commander in peril from his own men.

Monson's Retreat

In Indian warfare there was, oddly enough, a species of reverse that was worse than defeat. Defeat had in itself a certain epic dignity. It was kismet; it was written in the stars. But to retreat was to try to cheat the inevitable, to swindle destiny, to be chosen as a sacrificial victim and to refuse to accept the sacrifice. If anything could bring out all the savagery of a native enemy, if anything could inspire his relentless determination and compel his impulse to destroy, it was the prospect of an army in retreat. The story of the British in India abounds with instances in which success has attended a resolute resistance, even against overwhelming odds. A prolonged retreat on the other hand had almost invariably proved disastrous, and no exception to this rule was that carried out by Colonel the Hon. William Monson in the summer of 1804.

The British were now at war with Holkar. It would have been natural to suppose, after the events of the previous autumn, that no prince in India would have had the temerity to cross swords with a power that had humbled the mightiest in the land. But the conduct of the Mahrattas was often capricious and unpredictable, and it was the Bastard of Indore who had forced the issue, one which the British had gone to great lengths to try to avoid.

With superb Machiavellianism, he had held aloof from the confederacy, intending to join only when the Sindhia's power had been reduced to the level of his own, and when by intervening he could tip the scales and thus claim all the credit for the ultimate victory. That victory would go to the Mahrattas he never

seems to have doubted, provided they made the right use of their military means. Like all the Holkars, he was a great advocate of the predatory system of warfare, and had written warning the confederates against pitched battles with the English, advising them rather to conserve their infantry and guns under the protection of their forts, and to operate exclusively with their light cavalry, using it to devastate the Company's provinces and to prevent supplies from reaching British armies in the field.

That advice had been Holkar's sole contribution to the Mahratta cause; indeed, while the confederates were staking their all for Maharashtra, he was ranging Malwa and crippling that province with enormous exactions — from Mandsaur alone he took over 100 lakhs of rupees worth of plunder. The breathless pace of the British victories had, however, left him no chance to intervene, and, attributing their success to the treachery of the French party coupled with the military imbecility of the confederates, he was confident, proud and ambitious enough to think of taking on the victors single-handed.

The Marquis Wellesley had accepted his vaunting challenge, and Lake had opened the offensive with a thrust southwards through central India, preceded by a detachment of Native Infantry and irregular cavalry under Colonel Monson, while Colonel John Murray began an advance on Indore with another large force from Gujerat.

The British took Tonk Rampura, a town in Holkar's possession, and the Mahratta, having thus lost the only footing he had in Hindustan north of the Chambal, hastily crossed that river. It was now mid-May, with central India at its hottest and driest. There were no light-weight summer uniforms in those days. Troops wore thick, red serge and carried upwards of 70 lbs. in arms and equipment, and, according to Thorn, they were burying ten to fifteen Europeans a day from heat exhaustion. Moreover, draught cattle were dying for want of forage, the ground being parched. So Lake decided to get his main army back into quarters, intending to wait until the autumn before attempting a final settlement with the Bastard who meanwhile could easily be kept

in check between Murray and Monson.

Either force, in Lake's view, was large enough to cope. Indeed it was Monson's intention to continue active operations, and, after the main body left, he went on to take a hill fort near the Mokundra Pass.

He then advanced another fifty miles southward into Holkar's territory, hoping to communicate with Murray. Hearing next that Holkar had re-crossed the Chambal, Monson made a forward movement to meet him. But he was running very short of supplies, and on being informed that Murray, instead of advancing to effect a junction, was actually falling back, because the rains had broken, Monson decided to retire. He made the decision against the advice of his officers and the desire of his sepoy whose morale at that point was that of invincible men.

On July 8 the fatal retreat commenced. Leaving his 3,000 irregular horse as a rearguard, Monson moved off with his five battalions of sepoy and artillery. Three hours later Holkar's advance elements made their appearance before Captain Lucan, an Irish ex-Mahratta officer, who was in command of the irregular horse.

'Had Lucan retired at once he might have saved himself,' says Skinner, 'But he desired to make a name and thought he might acquire it with a brilliant charge before commencing his retreat; and so he might had his troops been staunch, but they were not.' Half the number, under a Mahratta chief, took flight, and later went over to Holkar. The remainder, after a gallant stand against the whole of Holkar's cavalry, were wiped out.

Monson had now gained the Mokundra pass. Here, says Skinner, 'he might have defied all the armies in Hindustan to drive him from it. But in making his retreat to Kotah, a distance of only sixteen cos, it came on to rain violently, and Monson lost almost all his guns, which were left sticking in the mud, together with all the tents. On his arrival at Kotah, Colonel Monson made application to the Rajah for provisions, and also for permission to leave two 12-pounder guns under his care. But Zalim Singh refused, declaring that he would neither furnish supplies nor take

charge of the guns, unless the Colonel would remain and attack Holkar.'

So Monson's unfortunate brigade plodded on through the quagmire that Malwa had become in the torrential rain. The rivers were swollen, and not only were whole units sacrificed to effect a crossing, but sepoy's wives and children left behind were slaughtered by aboriginal Bhils who came down from the hills and were in the Mahratta interest.

Meanwhile Skinner was at Saharanpur, where he was joined by his brother who had left the Begum Somru's service. Orders were received to proceed with all haste to join Colonel S. Brown, who commanded a large detachment of British troops at Muttra.

The Regiment got to near Muttra without trouble, but just before they reached the city an incident occurred which shows how much British prestige had already suffered from the news of the reverse.

'I had commenced crossing the Jumna and got over six rissalahs under charge of my brother, when the rumours and alarm occasioned by Colonel Monson's retreat, began to damp the spirits of some of my men. Immediately on understanding this, I gave orders that 300 more should cross and join my brother. They saddled their horses accordingly and went to the ghaut (ford); but then, believing themselves to be out of my sight, they commenced their march towards Koorjah in the Doab. At this conjuncture I had with me 200 men, a hundred being *bargheers* mounted on my own horses, the others on horses of their own. On the first I placed the greatest reliance; but I was somewhat doubtful of the attachment of the others; and seeing the rascally conduct of the 300, I was somewhat at a loss what conduct to pursue. Whilst meditating on the subject I saw my *bargheers* saddle, which increased my uneasiness, for I feared they were going to follow the example of the 300; but from this apprehension my mind was soon relieved by their coming up in a body and requesting me to chastise the misconduct of the runaways, who were, they said, disgracing the character of the corps. To this I replied, that if they

would swear upon their Koran to be faithful to me and to the service, I would then be proud to be their leader, and to this they immediately agreed. Lieutenant Boyd¹ of the 15th Native Infantry, who, with a company of sepoys, had crossed to receive from me some treasure brought from Delhi, was witness to this proceeding; and as soon as I was satisfied, I mounted my horse and desired my *bargheers* to follow me, leaving the remainder in camp. I overtook the runaways about a cos off, and when within a hundred yards of them I ordered my Yellow Boys to halt, as I purposed to go forward and reason with them. When I got within hearing, the rissaldar, who was the leader of the deluded men, came up to me with four of his sowars. I tried to bring them to reason with mild words; but perceiving that these had no effect, I began to make use of abusive language and threats. On this the cowardly leader of the mutineers ordered one of his men to fire at me, and before I could either draw sword or pistol the man fired; but missing me, shot my horse dead on the spot through the head. My Yellow Boys seeing me fall, immediately gave a shout and charged them sword in hand and with such goodwill that about ninety of their number were cut up. The rest fled to a fort in the neighbourhood belonging to the Hathras Rajah, who was not on friendly terms with the British government. Of my party there were ten men killed and several wounded. Next morning I crossed the remaining portion of my party, and, having joined Colonel Brown, reported the occurrence to him.'

The next ten days spent at Muttra were filled with mounting uncertainty for the British detachment, as alarming and perplexing news continued to arrive of what was happening to the retreating forces. Lucan, they heard, had been taken prisoner and tortured to death. They heard that two of Monson's officers taken at the hill fort had been beheaded, and that all their men had gone over to Holkar, as had a large number of Monson's sepoys of his detachment who had deserted during the retreat. Besides these, six of

1. William Boyd, born in Londonderry 15 January 1785, died at Muttra on 26 November 1804 of wounds received in the battle of Deig on 13 November 1804.

Monson's Retreat

Sindhia's battalions and two regiments of irregular cavalry, which were rushed south to Monson's aid, had also deserted to the enemy.

The rot quickly spread to Muttra where the arrival of some of the victims of the retreat struck terror into Brown's detachment. These were sepoys who came into the camp naked, with their noses and ears cut off. They had been mutilated, they said, for refusing to enter Holkar's service. Desertions occurred every day. Then Colonel Brown lost his nerve. Though his detachment consisted of four battalions of sepoys, two regiments of Native Cavalry, 900 Skinner's Horse, and enough provisions to last them several months, he called a council of war to decide whether they should fall back on Agra or stand fast at Muttra. By a majority of three colonels to two majors the decision to retreat was carried.

Skinner gives us some idea of the utter panic that prevailed: 'About sunset, the detachment all of a sudden paraded and an hour later marched off to Agra, leaving tents and almost everything behind. Being pitched at some distance, I knew nothing of all this until my brother, who was for piquet, proceeding with 200 men to his post about an hour after they had gone, was surprised to find no piquet party, and that fifty of my men who had been with it had gone too. On this he returned to me with the information that we had been abandoned. I instantly saddled, and striking my tents formed my men into two columns with our two six-pounders. About three hours after the detachment had left us I commenced my march, and soon found out the road they had taken, by the followers. Of the enemy I saw nothing and joined the main body within two cos of Gowghaut.'

According to John Pester, one of Lake's officers, Colonel Brown was leading the retreat, taking care always to keep at the post most distant from the enemy. But Holkar, who had been informed that Brown had struck camp in a violent hurry, had concluded it could be for no other reason than to attack him, and was actually in flight in the opposite direction. Skinner's spies had brought him word of this, yet Brown would not listen. They

limped on, without stopping, to Agra, and, says Skinner, 'so greatly was the character of the British troops degraded in the native eyes by this behaviour, that even the very thieves pelted us all night with stones.'

At Agra the detachment remained three days, and during that time they witnessed another of Holkar's atrocities. 'The men who had gone over to him in the retreat had begun to desert back to us from Futtehpoore, and Holkar, in order to make an example that should deter the rest, cut off the noses, ears and right hands from 200 of them. This act of cruelty was the saving of us, for our sepoys, who had been deserting by hundreds, seeing these poor mutilated wretches coming in daily, ceased at once to leave their regiments. At length, after all the surviving officers had come in, I saw about 1,500 men march into camp with colours flying under the command of a British sergeant, with a great number of soobahdars and jemadars of native corps. These heroes had kept their ground after all the officers had left them. The poor sergeant was never noticed. This body of men had made good their way, pursued by Holkar's cavalry, to within eight cos of Agra.'

Thus ended both retreats. Had Monson's force been wiped out completely, it would have counted as a single debit against a page of magnificent credits. But after being scourged across central India for nearly two months, he had reached the very dregs in his cup of humiliation. He lost for Britain all the laurels won the year before.

Holkar was now the man of the hour, and to his standard flocked thousands of the disbanded soldiery of Maharashtra. With his ranks swelled to nearly 80,000, he advanced to take possession of Muttra. All Hindustan lay within his grasp.

A Soldier's Head

History often hinges on the things of little consequence. Among the stores and supplies abandoned at Muttra was grain to the value of five lakhs of rupees. But it was the stock of wines and liqueurs in the officers' mess, an item least essential to the Mahrattas, that had the greatest effect on the future prosecution of the war. Where the food lost to one side was a positive gain to the other, the drink proved the converse. Holkar had a great fondness for liqueurs, particularly cherry brandy, and the orgy that followed his triumphal entry into Muttra held him up for four weeks. 'He gave himself up to nautching and all sorts of voluptuousness, which luckily for us had such an effect on his health that he could not move from his bed,' Skinner records.

But Holkar was unperturbed. He had found, he thought, a way to beat the English, and was confident he now had the upper hand. Between hangovers he spent his time bestowing whole districts on his favourites and those who had served him well. In victory the Bastard was munificent.

From the accounts of adventurers who served him, a composite picture of this extraordinary man is a mass of contradictions. Physically he was a short and bow-legged man, but broad and immensely powerful. He would have been handsome, in the manner of a dark, lascivious Mephistopheles but for the empty socket of an eye, lost through the accidental bursting of a match-lock, which gave a certain drollness to his expression. He was as well educated as any pundit, was studious, loved learning and books; yet he gloried in fighting, was a matchless horseman and a

formidable exponent with the sword and spear. He was said to have possessed an appreciation of the arts, a certain mental refinement, and a true understanding of the humanities; yet with that were a coarseness of speech and a species of ribald wit and behaviour which needless to say endeared him to the soldiery. In his dress he was either extravagantly bejewelled, or at times the other extreme, appearing naked but for a loin cloth, and telling his assembled courtiers and generals they were ridiculously overdressed. He was generally good-humoured, approachable, unconventional. His charm, when he wished to exert it, was irresistible. With it, and a combination of flattery, artfulness and mirth, he had managed to retain the allegiance of his myrmidons through the vicissitudes of his turbulent career. But he was uncertain, and, as it often happened, a man who had been encouraged to be familiar with him one day would find himself severely rebuked the next for not observing the proper forms. Holkar was not one to be taken for granted.

Although he generally satisfied his army by his ample indulgence of their worst excesses, he would deny them plunder without rhyme or reason, and he never hesitated to shoot a man or open fire on a unit that disobeyed his orders. On occasions he could be lavishly generous, but his rapacity was gargantuan, and he was, as we have seen in the case of the ill-fated Vickers, base in his ingratitude. Power was Holkar's passion, power on any terms. He was blatantly irreligious and, possessing no conscience to speak of, there was no breach of faith, no act of atrocity or sacrilege he balked at to attain his ends. To frustrate them, to threaten his power, was to release the uncontrollable violence in the mainspring of his character. It was that violence which made him frightful in his cruelty, and a terror in the summer of 1804 to the British army in Hindustan.

There was a rumour that he had sworn to commit a certain shocking mutilation on every European officer who fell into his hands, and so great was the funk this threat inspired that the officer commanding the hard-won fortress of Aligarh, on being summoned by one of Holkar's officers to deliver up the place,

actually agreed to capitulate within fifteen days and wrote to Lake informing him of the terms he had accepted. There is no record of Lake's reply, but the tone of it can easily be imagined.

Colonel Richard Macan was the officer whom Lake had rushed to Agra to take command of the demoralised remnants from Monson's and Brown's detachments. These were brigaded at a town just outside Agra, where rigid discipline and the arrival of five regiments of Native Cavalry helped to restore confidence. Meanwhile, Lake was approaching from Cawnpore with an all-British force. Though the country was inundated, and rain still poured down in torrents, they reached the left bank of the Jumna on September 22. They were met by Skinner's Horse.

Of all the regiments of irregular cavalry, and there were over 20,000 horsemen of this category in the British pay before the commencement of Monson's retreat, only Skinner's had not deserted, and, in recognition of their loyalty, Lake 'inspected them, praised them highly for their fidelity, increased their pay ten rupees per horse, and promised that they should have bread for life.'

Skinner was then issued with four galloper guns, and directed to join a detachment of fifteen companies of sepoy, under Major Henry Worsely,¹ in a drive through the Doab where Holkar's revenue collectors were levying contributions. It was, as Skinner says, a difficult business, and after dispersing the collecting units, and hanging some of the petty chiefs who had shifted their allegiance, they closed on the Jumna opposite Muttra which had been reoccupied by Lake. As the river was not fordable at that point, a bridge of boats was hastily constructed.

Meanwhile Holkar had cut Lake's supply line from Agra, so that in a few days food and forage failed, and whole regiments of cavalry had to go out to safeguard the foraging parties against thousands of enemy horse which had surrounded the British camp on the right bank of the river. Day and night, between ten and twenty thousand horsemen were seen constantly hovering about a little distance away. These it was impossible to engage.

1. Later Major-General Sir Henry Worsely, G.C.B.

Whenever they were charged they scampered off in all directions, but as the regiments turned about to return to camp, the Mahrattas dashed up boldly attacking their rear and flanks and firing long shots from their matchlocks, while those who were armed with swords and spears brandished their weapons, making a shrill barking noise like jackals.

In one sweep about thirty of the enemy were killed and several others were made prisoner. These were brought in, all terrified, for naturally enough they expected in retaliation the same sort of treatment Holkar had meted out to his prisoners. Instead, Lake ordered each man to be given one rupee, and they were sent back with a message to their chief that only cowards treated their prisoners with cruelty.

The grand plan behind Holkar's harrying tactics became apparent when the news reached Lake of an attack on Delhi by all the Bastard's infantry and guns. It was a brilliant and well-timed blow that was likely to lead to the most serious consequences should the Mahrattas succeed in getting hold of the Emperor. Though fallen from power, the aged Shah Alum was still an object of veneration and traditional importance throughout Hindustan.

The little news that Lake received from Delhi was bad. Most of the irregular horse there had gone over to the enemy, and the *Najib* battalions had mutinied and been disbanded. Of the remaining troops, 800 had to be stationed within the palace as the Emperor's personal guard, which left some 3,500 to defend a city seven miles in circumference against a besieging army of twenty-two battalions of infantry with nearly 200 guns. There were no fortifications except for an old, ruined wall which in many places was without a parapet capable of supporting a gun, much less taking the shock of one being fired. There was no ditch, and the city was surrounded on all sides by ruins and cover up to the wall itself.

The Mahrattas, Lake heard, were making full use of these advantages. The walls had been battered and the breaches

assaulted continuously. Though the garrison was resisting heroically, and there had been some bold and effective sorties, the men were exhausted. Most of them had been without sleep for several days.

Although the situation at Delhi was desperate, Lake, without food for his army, was unable to move a step in that direction. At that time operations in India were completely dominated by their fantastic logistics, and it was not only his combatants that a British general had to consider, but his followers, and these at the lowest count were seldom less than ten times as numerous.

There was a mahout for every elephant, and several hundred of these animals were required for carrying the heavy camp equipment of an army. There was one driver for every three camels, of which there were several thousands for the lighter baggage. There were two attendants to every horse – a groom who took care of the animal, and a grass-cutter who went out with a small trowel and dug up grass roots for forage. There was a driver to every three of the artillery draught bullocks, of which there were large teams to every gun, every tumbrel and heavy ordnance cart. There were the drovers for the Brinjarra load-bullocks, and from eighty to a hundred thousand of those animals might be used for carrying an army's supply of grain. There were palanquin and doolie bearers for conveying the sick and wounded. There were hundreds of lascars required for pitching and striking tents. There were servants, of whom a general employed fifty, a field officer thirty, a captain twenty, and a subaltern ten; while the rank and file were provided with a cook, water carrier, cook's boy and dhobi to every ten or twelve men sharing the same tent. In addition to these followers were the herdsmen who looked after the army's mutton on the hoof, milk men with their herds of goats, poultry men with their mobile chicken farms, merchants with their stalls in the camp bazaar, where every commodity imaginable would be for sale – food, sweetmeats, wines, liqueurs, European groceries, fabrics, weapons, jewellery, bed linen, shawls, medicines, aphrodisiacs, food-stuffs, fish, meat, firewood,

brass ware, earthenware, even furniture. Bankers and money-lenders would have their stalls side by side with the doctors, barbers, letter writers, jugglers, tumblers, fortune tellers, snake charmers, musicians and dancing girls.

Camp life lacked none of the amenities of the town, but it meant that all these followers, with their families, and their followers, and their families, consumed vast quantities of *atta* or coarse flour, which was so scarce at Muttra just then that it was selling in the camp bazaar at three seers (about 6 lbs.) to the rupee, when the normal price in that part of the country should have been between 150 and 170 seers to the rupee.

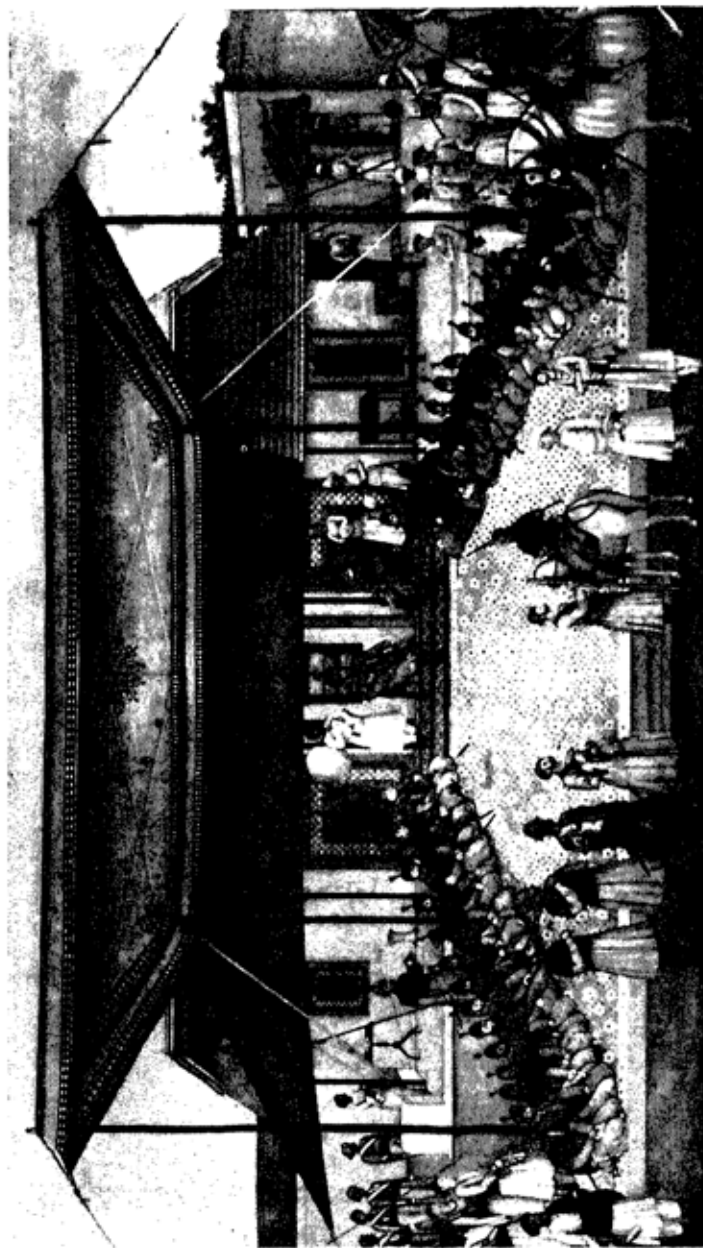
Skinner was ordered to bring in all the grain he could find on the east bank of the river, where of course he could operate without interference from the enemy. He used to plunder the villages, but it was seldom enough for a day's requirements. Once again the army's morale began to ebb. Desertions took place, particularly among the Native Cavalry troopers, who were seen galloping over to the enemy from their posts; and to prevent this shameful business Lake had to station a sepoy with each trooper vedette, with orders to shoot the trooper if he should attempt to move towards the enemy.

This state of affairs had continued for six days, while alarming reports arrived every day of the siege of Delhi, and Lake waited impatiently for a convoy of 60,000 Brinjarra bullocks laden with *atta*, which was on its way through the Doab from Cawnpore.

Brinjaras were a class of nomadic Hindus, living in large tribal communities, whose sole function was transporting grain, which they generally purchased in bulk in districts where the harvest had been abundant, and sold where the commodity was scarce. They were a hardy lot, constantly on the move and travelling great distances, the men armed with an assortment of ancient fire-arms, spears, shields and scimitars. To an army in the field they were indispensable, and on the whole they proved resolutely faithful to the side which engaged them. But, as it so happened, those on whom the fate of Delhi depended had been stopped by the Rajah of Hathras a day's march to the east of Muttra; and on



Akbar Shah II holding a darbar at Delhi.
Ochterlony, the British Resident, is on the left



Skinner holding a regimental durbar. His son, James, is seated on his left

A Soldier's Head

being bribed had promised to give up the *atta* to him.

'When this information reached Lord Lake,' says Skinner, 'he sent for me and asked whether I thought I could bring the Brinjarras away. I replied, that if his lordship would leave it to me, I would either bring off the supplies or lose my life in the attempt.'

The Hathras Rajah was violently anti-British. He had given Skinner a lot of trouble during the settlement of that area, and the problem he now created for Lake was a physical one. The General could of course have the *atta* seized, but to move it required 60,000 bullocks, and these, as Skinner fully realised, would be gone over the horizon the moment the British appeared in force across the Jumna. Moreover, even if they did succeed in capturing the bullocks, they would be of little use without their drovers. Loading and driving them was a job for specialists, which Lake would hardly be in a position to organise as far as Delhi in time to save the city.

The whole consignment had been unloaded at the Brinjarra encampment near Hathras. What Skinner had somehow to do was capture the bullocks fully laden, for then their owners would surely go with them.

Returning to his camp, Skinner summoned all his spies and messengers, and laid a *dak*, or post by relays of horsemen, to the encampment which was twenty-seven miles due east of Muttra. He gave orders he was to be informed the moment they began loading the bullocks – a major operation that would take, he reckoned, long enough for him to stop them getting to the fort.

At last, at about midnight on the second day, Skinner got the news he was waiting for. He ordered boot and saddle, and soon set off at the head of 1,200 men. So rapidly did they cover the distance that they got to within a cos of the place before, as Skinner's spies informed him, the loading was complete.

It was still dark, and ahead of them in the distance they could see the Brinjarras' fires, where the entire community had been working all night. Silently the Yellow Boys waited until just at first light, when a spy rode up to say all the bullocks were ready,

and would start to move off towards Hathras unless prevented.

Leaving 800 men with his brother to follow in a second wave, Skinner led out the remaining 400, approached the Brinjarras from behind cover, and suddenly dashed in among them, crying out that General Lake had sent him to their aid.

Immediately the Brinjarras began throwing the loads off the bullocks, declaring they would not go with him. He ordered them to stop, warning that any who disobeyed would be put to death; and a few were, without any hesitation, when they did not heed him. Then Robert was seen approaching on a thunder of hooves, and the Brinjarras suddenly gave in. The leaders agreed to take the convoy to Muttra.

'To Muttra! To Muttra!' The call was relayed to the front of the great herd, and slowly the animals began to move, plodding with horned heads low, towards the west.

By sunrise, Skinner had got the whole of his sprawling prize under way. Then, realising that the Rajah would be out after them the moment he heard what had happened, Skinner instructed his brother to go on with the convoy with half the unit, while he himself turned back with the other 600 to show front to the Rajah.

As Skinner waited, the sun came up over Hathras, a fortified town on a small hill with a very high brick building in the centre considerably over-topping the surrounding bastions. Hathras was the chief market for the cotton produced in the Agra province, and Dhyaram, the Rajah, was rich. He had expended large sums in strengthening the defences, and on troops who were trained in the European manner. Skinner was therefore prepared for trouble.

After waiting about two hours he saw a body of 1,200 cavalry come galloping out of the town. They headed for the Brinjarras' dust cloud which was visible for miles. Seeing the Yellow Boys, they stopped, and a single horseman was sent on ahead to enquire who their commander was, and by whose authority he had taken away the Brinjarras.

'Inform your master,' the horseman was told, 'that my name is Captain Skinner, and I have General Lake Sahib Bahadur's order, which is the best in Hindustan.'

Back came the Rajah's reply that Captain Skinner should surrender the Brinjarras, otherwise he, the Rajah of Hathras, would take steps to punish him for his insolence.

'Tell your Rajah,' Skinner said, 'that my head and the Brinjarras go together and he is at liberty to try to take them.'

The messenger galloped back with the challenge, and Skinner waited with a beating heart to see whether the Rajah would accept it. The Rajah did. He sent out a party of skirmishers, who approached obliquely, then swerved and came galloping across Skinner's front, firing their matchlocks – a time-honoured cavalry tactic in India.

'But,' says Sikander Sahib, 'my Yellow Boys soon sent their horses back without their riders, and the Rajah, on seeing I was determined, and was not to be frightened, asked me if I would take his *vakeel* to Lord Lake. I replied that I would not take him now, lest people might think that I had gained the Brinjarras by some false promise; but if he would send him later I would be his friend, and try to obtain his forgiveness. To this he agreed, and then marched back towards the fort. For my part, I thanked the Almighty for my success, and joining my brother, returned that evening to Muttra.'

Major Worsely was the first to meet and congratulate Skinner, who rode on to the British camp, where Lake was at dinner. 'On hearing that I had arrived, he immediately came out and asked me, "Well, have you succeeded?" "Yes, my lord," was my reply, on which he shook me by the hand, and declared he would never forget me or my corps. He then asked me to come in to dinner, but I told him that having been eighteen hours on horseback, I was pretty well knocked up; but that I should wait on his lordship in the morning.

'I returned to my tent accordingly, and ordered all my sowars a *seer* (2 lbs.) of sweetmeats each, which, through Major Worsely's assistance I got from the town, and then ate my dinner. Next

morning, I called on his lordship and reported the Brinjarras at 60,000 bullocks all loaded with *atta*. On this he again shook me by the hand, and taking the sword he wore at his own waist, presented it to me with 20,000 rupees. The Brinjarra jemadars were also all handsomely rewarded and ordered immediately to cross the river. These Brinjarras gave just seven days' supply to the army, which enabled it to march, on the 12th October, to the relief of Delhi.'

Slowly the army began to move to the northwest. It marched in the form of an immense rectangle drawn with four red lines of moving troops – on one side the infantry, on the opposite side the cavalry, in front the advance guard composed of all the pickets coming on duty, and in the rear the pickets returning from duty. The parks and the columns of artillery were on the inside, always keeping to the high road, and next to the infantry. The remainder of the space within the 'oblong square' was filled with the multitude of non-combatants, with all their beasts and transport in indescribable variety. Yet, despite the size and diversity of this mass, an amazing regularity was maintained, for to break ranks was to invite the immediate closer attention of the Mahratta horse who hovered all around waiting for an opportunity to dart in and pick off the stragglers.

A young English soldier of the 76th was killed in this way, and the following day they heard that Holkar was at a grand *nautch* when the soldier's head was brought to him by one of his cavalry. Delighted with the trophy, the Bastard gave the horseman twelve rupees and, placing the head on an upright spear, made the *nautch* girls dance round it.

Lake was appalled. 'Gentlemen,' he said to his assembled officers, 'we shall not rest till we have destroyed the power of this barbarous monster.'

The Chase

On October 18 the weary defenders of Delhi were suddenly amazed to see the Mahrattas raise the siege and draw off to the south. Only then did they realise relief was at hand.

Holkar's infantry went through the Rewari pass, into the territory of the Rajah of Bhurtpore (Bharatpur), but again General Lake was prevented from following because of a serious shortage of supplies, and again the situation was remedied by the arrival of a convoy of Brinjarra bullocks escorted across the Doab by Skinner's Horse.

Foiled in his attempt on the capital and the Emperor, Holkar now determined to perplex and harass Lake in the true Mahratta style. With this in view, he made a rapid move northwards under cover of darkness, crossed the Jumna below Panipat, and fell upon Colonel Burn's battalion of sepoys who had fought in the defence of Delhi and were on their way back to Saharanpur. Burn was surrounded, but, clearing the road with showers of grape, fought his way to a near-by town called Shamli, where he threw himself into a small deserted mud fort, and prepared for a desperate defence.

Meanwhile, at Delhi, Lake had ruthlessly unencumbered his army of all but essential baggage and followers, issuing each man with a week's rations which he carried himself. He had then divided his force into two parts – one predominantly infantry, the other predominantly cavalry – and, sending the first in pursuit of Holkar's battalions and guns, set out with the second, which included Skinner's Horse, to the relief of Colonel Burn at Shamli.

They reached Shamli in three forced marches. As they came up, Holkar at first showed a bold front, and Lake, anxious not to frighten the Mahrattas before he could close with them, gave strict orders that no galloper guns were to be used, and that the attack was to be made sword in hand. But, while the British force was forming for a charge, a body of Mahrattas made a feint on the right, on which the gallopers were instantly opened and, as Lake had fully expected, the sound of cannon proved too much for their prudent enemy. They dispersed as if on a signal from Holkar himself, and in less than an hour not one of them was in sight.

'We trotted after them for about four miles,' Skinner says, 'but it was all to no purpose. We had to return without effecting anything, and his lordship was so enraged at the disappointment, that he swore he would deprive these regiments of their galloper guns.'

They camped near the town, and next day went on after Holkar who had swung round to the south-east on a hate-slaking course of plunder and rapine down the length of the Doab, leaving a trail of burned-out villages and murdered inhabitants, which was not difficult to follow.

As they neared Katouli, in the Begum Somru's territory, they heard that the Bastard was with her, and Skinner was sent on ahead with a troop of Yellow Boys to reconnoitre. He had not covered three miles when 500 enemy horse appeared, who on seeing him immediately sent back two express camels with the information. As he was heavily outnumbered, Skinner retired, at the same time dispatching a messenger to inform Lake of the situation.

The Mahrattas charged, but it was a half-hearted attempt, which Skinner repulsed, before heading his men towards a deserted village, in which he prepared to defend himself. The Mahrattas hung about, taking long shots, but no sooner did they see Lake's dust than they were off. On that, Skinner immediately went after them. He followed them for a couple of miles, charging them twice, and capturing a stand of colours and a number of their riderless horses.

The Chase

He was now fairly near Katouli, where Holkar's main body of cavalry, numbering perhaps 60,000, suddenly came into view behind the walls of the town, and Skinner pulled up in dismay. Lake was not far behind, with the 8th Dragoons, and he also halted, seeing the formidable mass fronting them aggressively. He sent back to bring up the rest of the line, but as the enemy seemed to be on the point of charging them, Lake gave them a few rounds from his gallopers which again completely dispersed the horde.

For his excellent work that day, Skinner was presented with a pair of pistols by Lake.

They followed Holkar relentlessly along the grim trail he had blazed, covering twenty to twenty-five miles a day. He kept just ahead of them, but on November 16 they reached a village called Aligunj, still burning after the Mahrattas' visitation, to be informed that he had gained on them and was at Ferruckhabad thirty-six miles away.

It was disheartening news, but Lake saw in it the opportunity he was waiting for. He felt that Holkar, after two weeks of having the British doggedly on his heels, was as likely as not to relax for a night in the pleasure of a nautch, secure in the thought of those thirty-six miles between him and his pursuers.

'Gentlemen,' Lake addressed his officers, 'instead of pitching, we will march again tonight.'

It was a memorable and exciting night. Just as they were mounting their horses, the news arrived of the victory gained by the infantry over Holkar's battalions near the fortress of Deig (Dig), and they set out with soaring spirits, eager to come to grips with the Bastard in person. The moon was up and the night pleasantly mild as they rode through the silent countryside. An occasional dog barked in the darkened villages, and here and there they passed the vacated fires of night watchmen, who were prudently observing them from the shadows; otherwise the clatter of their hooves and the rumble of their gun carriages and tumbrils disturbed no one.

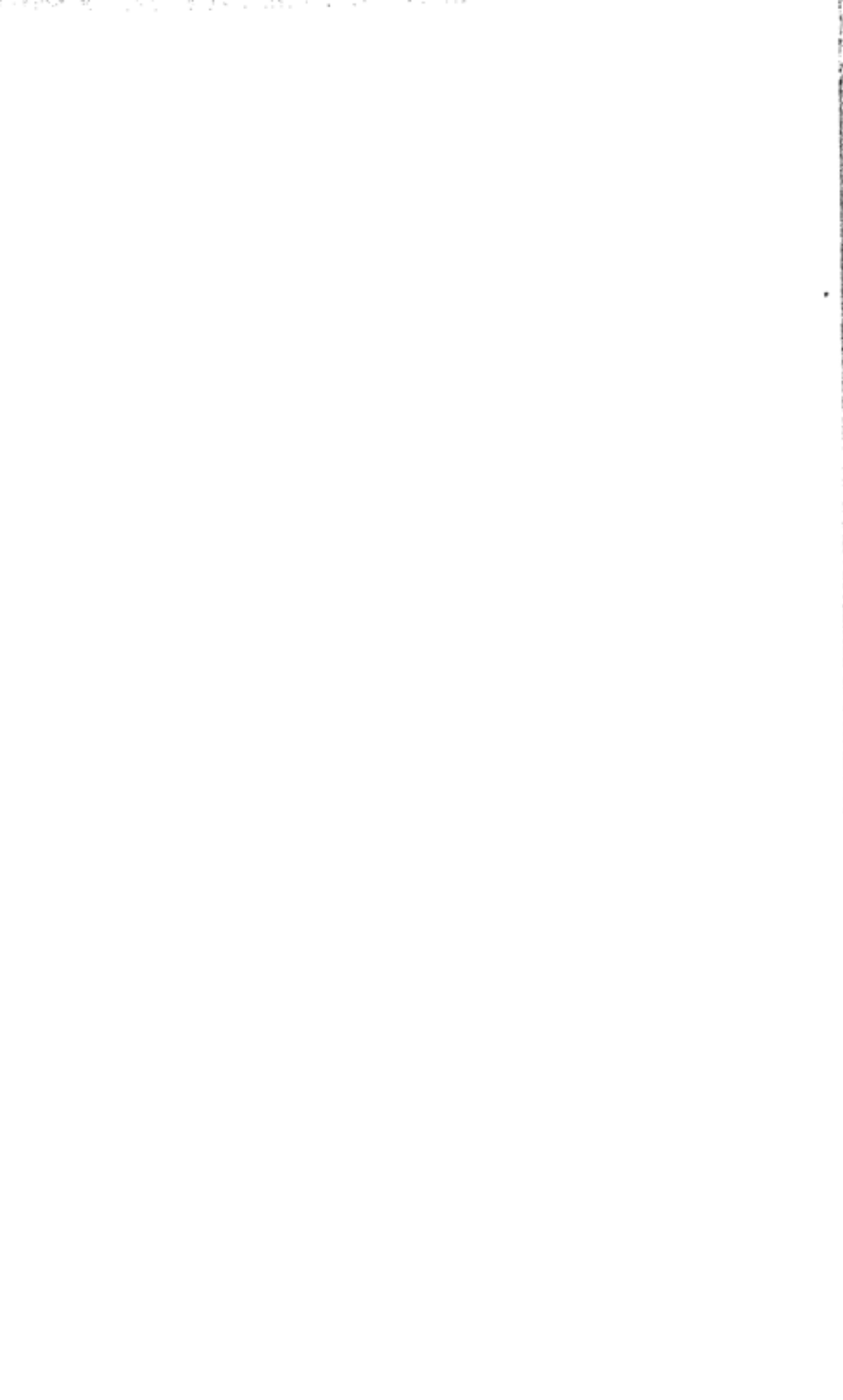
In the Mahratta camp the weary plunderers slept, save for the indefatigable Holkar and his senior chiefs whose company he always demanded in his debauchery. The girls were Rohillas, from the colony of that race in Ferruckhabad, and the liqueurs were from the neighbouring British garrison town of Fatehgarh. Holkar had intended to make a night of it, but he also received news of Deig. His 20,000 infantry had been driven from a near impregnable position by two European regiments of foot and six battalions of sepoy. Over 2,000 of his men had been killed and wounded and he had lost eighty-six cannon. He retired to his tent without mentioning it to anybody.

He had lost interest in the nautch and turned in, but it is recorded he did not sleep well, and when at first light he heard a loud explosion he jumped up in alarm. On being assured, however, it was only the morning gun at Fatehgarh, he thought no more about it. Nor apparently were his suspicions aroused when the actual gun was heard from the fort a little while later. He was still stunned from the calamity at Deig; fate could not deal him such another blow. But Holkar was not the only Mahratta who was off his guard that morning.

As it happened, the first explosion was one of Lake's ammunition tumbrels that blew up as it jolted into a rut, yet when the British arrived on the outskirts of the camp, they found the whole of the Mahratta cavalry asleep. Even the men on picket duty were lying wrapped in their blankets as they slept holding the reins of their horses. Not a man moved while the gunners of the Horse Artillery charged their pieces with grape and aimed them at the heart of the sleeping camp.

Then, at a signal from Lake, the murderous salvo was fired, to be followed by a massed charge led by the General in person. It was butchery with a vengeance, for the British had waited long for this moment, and soon the plain was covered with Mahratta dead.

Holkar only just managed to get away. He never stopped, say the native chroniclers, until his famous horse, Mowah, had taken him across the Calni river eighteen miles away. But many of his



The Chase

followers' horses were too jaded to be up to a desperate flight, and their riders tried to escape by climbing into the high, leafy branches of the mango trees in the extensive topes of that area. They might have got away with it had they been able to resist sniping with their matchlocks at the rear divisions of their pursuers as these passed under. But their firing gave the Mahrattas away, and they were hunted out and pistolled, so that they tumbled lifeless from the trees.

Lake's losses in the affair were trifling. Two dragoons were killed and some twenty Europeans and Indians wounded, but Holkar left no less than 3,000 dead upon the ground, and these, counted with subsequent desertions, reduced by over a half the cavalry force of 60,000 which had followed him to Ferruckhabad.

The following day, Lake sent for Skinner, said he wanted Holkar closely followed and asked him if his regiment would undertake the job.

'My Yellow Boys,' said Skinner, 'will obey any orders your Excellency might give.'

'Go then,' Lake said. 'Give me good information, and I shall be up with you.'

Choosing 600 of his best-mounted men, Skinner set out at 2 a.m. and rode forty miles to Mainpuri which he reached the same evening. Mainpuri was a large walled town in fertile and delightful country, to which Holkar with his remaining force had come, and out of revenge had set about burning the homes of the British residents. These people had all collected in the house of Captain Martin White, where, with three companies of provincial militia and one gun, they were preparing to face a mass assault. Skinner arrived, however, before the attack took place, and Holkar, thinking the whole British cavalry was upon him, took to flight.

'Happy were both officers and civilians to see me that day,' says Skinner. 'For they declared that had I not arrived as I did, they were afraid their own troops would have gone over to Holkar.'

Next day the Yellow Boys started again and caught up with the Bastard at Etah, over forty miles to the north-west, where they surrounded and made prisoners of a party of his Mahratta horsemen. These Skinner used for a ruse, to prevent the rest of their number from pillaging the town. Telling his prisoners, he looked on them as brothers, he let them go, sending his salaams to Holkar, but warning them not to fall into the hands of General Lake's Dragoons who were not far behind. This intelligence was carried right away to their chief and, as Skinner expected, the Mahrattas were soon again on the run.

He carried on after them, and so the chase continued, with Skinner hanging on to Holkar's tail, and sending word back to Lake, who followed three or four marches behind. Only when Holkar crossed the Jumna near Muttra did Skinner let go; then, retracing his steps to near Hathras, he halted for Lake to come up.

It had been seven gruelling days of which he says, 'The horses were never unsaddled, and we rested with the halter in our hands all night, having to change our ground two or three times during each night, to avoid a surprise from Holkar. In this pursuit I acquired great plunder in horses and camels. We lived on the green *jowar*¹ that was standing in the fields, which we prepared by husking it out and putting it into pots, adding *ghee* (rendered butter) and meat, and boiling the whole together. It was then served out in earthenware pots, my share being always brought me by the men, who showed me great love and attention, and were willing to act as my private servants, and tried in every way to please and add to my comfort; but I felt the want of my dram.'

After four days Lake arrived, and the Regiment paraded to receive him. He came up, says Skinner, and praised them highly, promising that their services would never be forgotten. On their commander he bestowed a horse with a beautiful saddle and silver trappings, which had been sent to him by some rajah. The unit was then given a month's leave, and Skinner was told to recruit to bring his strength up to 1,700 – an order greatly to his advantage, as he was able to recruit *barghirs* to ride the horses he had cap-

1. *Holcus sorsum*, a grain that grows like Indian corn, and as high.

The Chase

tured. Of these men there was no shortage in the Doab, where he had but to hang out his colours and beat his drum to attract crowds of old comrades from Perron's brigades. It was a happy, busy and exciting period for James Skinner.

Amir Khan

Holkar's inroad into the eastern Doab had left an aftermath of refraction and anarchy. It was a tough, lawless area, dotted with mud forts, which were little more than nests of brigands – an evil that had grown up as a result of the weak and chaotic government of Oudh, from which the districts had been ceded. Only a severe settlement policy could achieve any peace or regularity, and even before their month's leave was up Skinner's Horse was on its way to support a British detachment, under Colonel Richard Grueber, which was operating against the rebel chiefs.

The next few months were hard work. Two forts were taken after some bitter fighting in which the garrisons were cut up almost to a man. It was then decided to proceed with some force against a chief named Dhundia Khan who was menacing the supply line from Anupsheher to Muttra, and for a month his fort of Komona was besieged. Before they were able to take the place, however, word came that the notorious Amir Khan had crossed the Jumna and was hurrying to Dhundia's relief. With some apprehension Colonel Grueber instantly raised the siege and retired under the walls of Aligarh.

Amir Khan was a Rohilla or Indian-domiciled Pathan from near Moradabad, who in 1787 at the age of twenty, had left his village with ten followers. Now, seventeen years later, he had an army of 30,000 Pindaris or freebooters, half of whom were blood-thirsty Pathans. Amir Khan was Holkar's closest associate. The two were bound by contract, signed by each in his own blood, to share everything, fortune or misfortune, equally.

Amir Khan

Their chief ally in the war against the British was the Rajah of Bhurtpore, a chief who was now bitterly regretting the side he had taken — his fortress of Deig had fallen to Lake with a valuable prize in guns, war material and treasure. Holkar had by then become a major liability to the Rajah. Apart from the destruction of the Bastard's army, all his territory in the Deccan and Malwa had been reduced by the British, and his capital of Indore was already in British hands. Then, to add to the Rajah's discomfiture, his own capital of Bhurtpore had become the scene of the confederates' last stand when the siege commenced on January 4, 1805.

Before long, their combined efforts to cut Lake's supply lines had ended in a fiasco, and Amir Khan, indignant at the aspersions cast by his allies on the courage of his Pindaris, had left Bhurtpore in disgust to try his luck independently in the Doab and the Rohilla country.

It was purely a plundering foray undertaken in the belief that Lake would not dare detach any part of his force in pursuit without being compelled to raise the siege. But the Pindari chief did not know Lake. No sooner had the Commander-in-Chief been informed of the situation, than he dispatched Major-General John Smith with the greater part of the British cavalry and Horse Artillery to cope with it.

On February 11 they reached Aligarh, where Skinner was ordered to join in the chase with 1,000 of his men.

As it took roughly a generation for a district to recover from the effects of a Pindari visitation, Smith was determined to give the horde as few opportunities for plunder as possible, and he started out again at midnight, sending Skinner with 500 Yellow Boys on ahead to reconnoitre. It was hoped that Amir Khan would still be at Kamona, where they had been encamped two days before, but Skinner arrived to find the Pindaris had taken themselves off towards Anupshahr during the night. He did, however, surprise a body of 300 of Dhundia Khan's *Aliguls*, whom he attacked and cut down to a man.

The chase now began in earnest. The Mahrattas had been fast, but these Pindaris, whose success depended entirely on lightning raids, were the lightest and fastest horsemen in history. All Smith could do was follow them doggedly, and the British force went up the right bank of the Ganges, to a ford where they learned Amir Khan had crossed over into Rohilkhand two days before.

The water was breast high for the horses, except in midstream, where they were obliged to swim. Several women and children followers of the bazaar, who were mounted on ponies and bullocks, were swept away by the current and drowned. On either side of the ford were quicksands, which were pointed out by guides who went ahead prodding the river bed with poles. The opposite bank was so steep that several baggage camels in trying to climb it slipped on their spongy pads and literally burst as they fell with their loads.

Reaching Amroha on the 17th, they heard that Amir Khan had got to Moradabad, and Smith, fearing for the safety of a British collector, William Leycester, sent Skinner on in advance. Skinner left at noon, and rode all day and night to save another British community in the nick of time. The European residents of Moradabad had all taken refuge in Leycester's house. They were surrounded by Pindaris when suddenly Skinner's dust was seen, and the enemy took to flight, thinking it was the whole British force.

Another soldier would have been satisfied with his mission well accomplished, but not Skinner. Instead of stopping at Leycester's house, he pursued the Pindaris, and actually succeeded in overtaking and cutting up the rear-guard of 300 men before these could join their comrades across the Ramgunga river.

For the next ten days, Amir Khan led them a dance round the luxuriant Rohilla province of Rampur with its panorama to the north of towering snow-capped Himalayan peaks. Then, on February 28, while on a reconnaissance patrol, Skinner came in sight of a burning village, and surprised a party of Pindaris in the act of plundering it. Most of them either escaped or were cut

down, but two were taken prisoner, and from these Skinner learned that Amir Khan had gone off towards a town called Sherkot.

Armed with this information, Skinner went to Smith and volunteered to go disguised into the Pindari camp, to try to discover something of their leader's plans. Smith at first refused to entertain the idea. It was just not worth the risk, he said. But the other persisted, arguing it was the first reasonable chance they had yet had of getting to grips with the Amir, whose rear scouts were far too vigilant to permit of a surprise, but that if they could find out where he was planning to go next, they could get there first and be waiting to receive him.

To this, says Skinner, 'after a good deal of hesitation, General Smith agreed; and, accordingly, putting on a native dress, I took ten of my most confidential sowars, and giving out to my corps that I was going upon urgent business to Mooradabad, I went straight to Sherekote.'

It was eighty miles away, to the north-west, tucked close under the hills. Near the town, they met up with a party of Amir Khan's foragers, and went on with them about nine miles to the Pindaris' camp pitched on the pebbly banks of the clear, rushing Ramgunga river, above a place called Afzalgarh.

Little notice was taken of them as numbers of followers, messengers, spies and even prospective freebooters seeking employment came and went with few questions asked. The horde was spread over a considerable area to reduce their vulnerability to surprise attack, with each man bivouacked by the side of his horse for a quick getaway. The only tents belonged to Amir Khan and his chiefs, whose elephants and camels were tethered near by, so that on the first note of alarm the baggage and women could be rushed off along a pre-selected escape route. Likewise, the bazaar was organised for desperate flight, the stalls being either on wheels, ready-yoked to camels, or capable of being quickly loaded; yet this in no way restricted the variety of merchandise on sale, or the amenities available to that mobile army. There were bevvies of hardy troupers with huge silver nose rings and languishing looks.

Skinner's men had brethren in a Pindari body under the Amir's brother, Shahmut Khan, and with it they spent the night. Early next morning Amir Khan wanted to move on, but the Mahratta Pindaris, who had been insulted the day before by a number of Pathans, refused to co-operate until the offenders had been punished. This the rest of the Pathans refused to allow, and presently, to Skinner's utter astonishment, the two parties drew up to fight.

Actually, they did not come to blows, but as the dispute did not seem likely to be settled that day, Skinner sent word back to Smith, suggesting he attacked while the Pindaris were still dis-united. Later, as it happened, Amir Khan suddenly and quite dramatically settled the dispute, and it was agreed by all to march next morning. Skinner therefore quitted the camp as he felt there was no time to be lost.

He had not gone three miles, when he was met by one of his own spies with the news that the British were going to pitch near Sherkot. Skinner pressed on, and reaching Smith, begged him not to pitch, as he might never get such a chance again. To this the General agreed, and they merely halted at Sherkot, where baggage was placed under the protection of the rearguard, and Skinner donned his full dress uniform for the battle.

Then, with 1,400 regular cavalry, the Horse Artillery, and 1,000 Skinner's Horse, General Smith set out to fight 30,000 Pindaris at Afzalgarh. The date was 2 March 1805.

At 2 p.m. they came up with the Pindari host, drawn up in order of battle on the right bank of the Ramgunga. Pitched battles were never part of Pindari strategy, but as both Pathan and Mahratta had apparently accused the other of cowardice, honour demanded a display of valour. Discretion had been thrown to the winds.

Skinner led the Horse Artillery to a ford, and the British crossed the river and formed in two lines – the first consisting of the Horse Artillery and the 27th and 29th Dragoons, the second of the 8th Dragoons and the 6th Native Cavalry, with the right flank along the bank of the river covered by part of the 1st Native

Cavalry, and the left flank by Skinner's Horse.

As the British advanced, so did the Pindaris, and the battle opened with the Horse Artillery and the flank gallopers firing briskly. The British advance continued at a trot, increasing to a hand-gallop for an intended charge, when they were suddenly stopped by a deep *nullah* in their front. At that moment, a body of 300 Pathan *Aliguls*, who had been hiding in the nullah, sprang up and rushed out on the centre of the line carrying white flags, which they stuck in the ground. At first it was thought they were coming over to the British side, but their real intention was only discovered as the party rushed furiously on the astonished Dragoons, who had their ranks pierced while standing still, and were thrown into some confusion. Order was quickly restored, however, as a squadron of the 8th Dragoons charged the desperadoes and cut them to pieces.

While this was going on in the centre, two bodies of horse attacked the British flanks. The assault on the right, led by Shahmut Khan, was beaten off by the gallopers of the 29th, which smashed through the massed formation as it approached, broke its Pindari nerve, and sent it flying back headlong in retreat. On the other flank, the charge was led by Amir Khan in person, and warmly received by Skinner's Horse, who gave them a volley from their matchlocks, and drawing their swords charged and repulsed the Pindaris with great slaughter.

'We killed two of their sirdars, took one prisoner, with ten stands of colours, among which were two golden ones, carried by *ackas* (picked horsemen famed for single combat), and 200 horses,' Skinner recorded. 'My brother Robert's conduct this day surpassed all I had ever seen of his before. One of my gallopers, having got rather far away from the corps, an *acka* of Meer Khan's with about forty sowars charged and took it. My brother observing this, immediately charged them with twenty choice men, re-took the galloper, and cut down the *acka* with his own hand.'

Soon the action was concluded, as the Amir drew his men off out of cannon reach and formed in one mass, and General Smith, according to Skinner, thought their numbers too great to be

charged. The Pindaris then retreated, whereupon the British force went after them, pursuing them past Afzalgarh, until the broken, hilly terrain got too difficult and it became too late anyway to hope to achieve anything. Over 500 Pindaris lay on the banks of the Ramgunga, with three of their principal chiefs killed, and three including Shahmut Khan wounded. Of the British force only nine were killed and about thirty wounded.

Rather than continue the hopeless task of trying to follow the Pindaris as they darted from place to place, Smith decided to take up a position at a ford covering the approach to Bareilly. But scarcely had they pitched at the ford when the dreadful news was brought Skinner that his brother was surrounded by the Pindaris in a ruined serai near Sambhal, some forty miles to the east.

Apparently filial duty had brought Amir Khan to the area, where his mother, it was said, lived in extreme poverty. After visiting her, the Pindari chief had encountered Robert Skinner on his way to the Doab with 500 Yellow Boys.

'From the account given me by the messenger,' says Skinner, 'it appeared that when they were thus hemmed in, Meer Khan had written to the rissaldars, desiring them to give my brother up, and that he would give each of them three months' pay as a reward. This they refused contemptuously, upon which the Meer advanced with 10,000 men dismounted, towards the serai, and sent the same message again, to which he received the same reply. My brother, in order to test the men's fidelity, addressed them and told them that if, by giving up his single life, they could save 500, he was quite willing to go as a prisoner to Meer Kahn. To this they replied that when they were all destroyed he might go, but not as long as they lived. Numbers meant nothing, they said, since hundreds were daily destroyed at Bhurtpore. They too, were soldiers hired to die, so let them face such an honourable end. On hearing this, my brother wrote to Meer Khan, declaring that he had always believed him to be a brave soldier, but that his conduct this day, in attempting to seduce and delude the men

under his command, had proved him to be a coward. Therefore he despised him and dared him to come on. As soon as the messenger was dispatched, and he saw the Meer's people moving, Robert told his men to kneel down and offer their last prayers to God to grant them courage to die bravely. The storm now took place on all sides, but it was nobly repulsed. Many of the enemy got up to the very walls, and were cut down from them in trying to get over. Three times did they assault, and each time they were driven back with great slaughter. When it got dark the messenger left my brother, who in his letter told me they had expended all their ammunition, and were now cutting the shoes off their horses' feet into slugs. These were all that remained to them to repel the multitude around them. But he said the men remained staunch and firm to him, and he besought me in his letter to come to his aid without delay.'

Desperate with anxiety, Skinner went to General Smith, 'crying and entreating him to march, or to allow me to go to my brother's assistance. I said I would cut my way through Meer Khan's troops, and get into the serai, which was only twenty cos off, in time to save him. But, as it was already 3 p.m. before the letter reached me, General Smith declared that it was useless; that the Meer must either have destroyed the party or gone off from the place, as Colonel Burn was in that quarter. As for him, he said, he could not leave the ford.

'Hope thus failing me, I was utterly at a loss how to act, when the following stratagem occurred to me, and I instantly put it into practice. I wrote a letter to my brother, saying I had just received his, and had shown it to the General, who was about to march with his whole force in about an hour or two; but in the meantime, he must keep the Meer at play by proposing terms of surrender. One of my hircarrahs, who had been brought up in my family, volunteered to have this delivered to Meer Khan, and ten of my sowars who were equally confidential, undertook to play him a trick in aid of the plan. To the hircarrah I promised 800 rupees, and a thousand to the sowars. They all left me at 4 p.m. and General Smith himself agreed to march at midnight.

'The hircarrah and sowars got to within a cos of Meer Khan's position at about dawn of the following day, when they received information that my brother was still safe, and had repulsed yet another storm the evening before. Being a clever fellow, the hircarrah came to the following arrangement with the sowars, namely that just at daybreak they should set fire to several stacks of *khurbee* (corn-straw) that were in the fields, while he should contrive to be taken by piquets, and of course be brought before the Meer. This he easily managed, and being taken to Meer Khan, confessed at once that he had been sent by me, who was very much attached to my brother. That he understood the sahib had been taken prisoner, and was in his camp, so he had come to fulfil the service he was engaged to perform as a true and faithful servant. That the Meer might do with him what he pleased, only let him be permitted to see his master. Meer Khan had the letter read, and then asked the hircarrah when the British army would move. He replied that the orders issued were that they should move at midnight. Whilst this was going on, the sowars had set fire to the stacks, and then chased in a few camp followers, who had gone out upon business of their own. In a moment the cry arose that the English had arrived, upon which Meer Khan immediately mounted his horse, ordered the hircarrah to receive a few stripes and in a short while not one of them was to be seen. The hircarrah and the troopers then went to my brother, who welcomed them very warmly.'

Next morning Robert himself arrived at the British camp, with his kettle-drums beating victory and his colours flying. His 500 Yellow Boys had accounted for the astonishing figure of nearly a thousand Pindari casualties, for a loss of about sixty of their number in killed and wounded.

Farther north at Amroha, Amir Khan then suffered another reverse when he attacked and was beaten off by a body of irregular horse under a Captain Murray. Then on Colonel Burn's approach Amir Khan fled northwards, but his baggage and bazaar, through some misunderstanding, arrived in Amroha, where Murray fell upon it and cut up the escort of *Aliguls*.

By now the Amir was really on the run, with thousands of his Pindaris fallen away from him, and his military reputation sunk so low that every town and walled village opposed him.

On March 13 Smith learned that he had re-crossed the Ganges into the Doab, and doggedly the British cavalry went on after him. On the 18th they came before Kamona where his erstwhile ally, Dhundia Khan, was now much humbler; he sent a *vakil* to entreat General Smith to obtain his forgiveness from the Commander-in-Chief. Then next day, as the British arrived before Aligarh, they received news that the Pindaris had actually crossed the Jumna, and at long last the chase was over.

Skinner accompanied the force to Muttra. There he left it to return to Aligarh, and it was with pride and satisfaction that he noted, 'I reached that place on the 22nd, terminating a course of the severest service that any corps had ever been through. In the chase after Holkar the army had gone 500 miles, in that after Meer Khan 700 miles, and mine was the only Hindostanee corps during all that time that continued throughout the chase. It performed all the duties of the camp, and, to the best of my belief, was never less than eighteen hours out of the twenty-four on horseback. The hardships endured by my men, who were constantly out, were well known to the commander and officers of the two detachments. On the smallest calculation, they underwent in these two chases full twice the labour and hardship endured by the regulars, and often in the chase after Meer Khan, when my men were the rearguard, have they picked up the European Dragoons who were knocked up on the march, and dismounting, put them on their own horses and led them thus to camp; conduct which made them beloved by the Dragoons. Notwithstanding this hard duty, my Yellow Boys never murmured, nor were they once accused of disobeying any order whatsoever. Never did they turn their backs before the enemy, though frequently opposed to far superior numbers. His Excellency's kindness towards the corps was great, and whenever service was to be performed, I was sure to be sent for, which was a matter of the greatest consolation and satisfaction to me and gave me spirits to undergo my labour

cheerfully, knowing that if anything were done, it would not fail of being acknowledged by his lordship. In these two campaigns, I had the satisfaction of receiving from his Excellency two swords and a pair of pistols, a circumstance which was regarded as a mark of great favour and approbation.'

It was by no means the end of Skinner's soldiering that season. The Doab remained unsettled, and the Sikhs to the west of the Jumna were again in arms. The cause of the trouble was not hard to find. It lay at Bhurtpore where it had been found that the illustrious General Lake was not always right and not always lucky.

'Oh Saints, it's Witchcraft!'

Bhurtpore in the spring of 1805 was a bitter pill that had stuck in the British throat. That celebrated maiden fortress of the Jats, eight miles in circumference, grim and menacing in its defiance, had withstood four desperate attempts to take it by storm, with a loss to the British of 3,203 soldiers in killed and wounded.

Not only were the defences formidable, but the town was garrisoned by the remainder of Holkar's infantry and the whole of the Rajah's army, most of the latter being brave and hardy Jats, a turbulent Hindu tribe originally from the banks of the Indus below Multan. Moreover, the Rajah was wealthy enough for a protracted war, which could be carried on without serious dislocation to his people since the size of the stronghold and the nature of the surrounding terrain ruled out the possibility of a blockade.

However, the situation rapidly improved for the British at Bhurtpore after the return of their cavalry, which Lake used with such effect in surprise attacks against Holkar's Mahratta horse that great numbers quitted their leader in despair. So low became their morale that they did not even fight for their lives: in one dawn attack not a single British soldier was killed although a thousand and more Mahrattas were counted dead on the spot and along the line of their flight. A few days after this event 3,000 of the remains of Holkar's regular infantry were intercepted by a British detachment and defeated with severe loss. Then, to complete the catalogue of Holkar's misfortunes, his cause was suddenly abandoned by the Rajah of Bhurtpore. Hear-

ing of Lake's elevation to the peerage, the Rajah wrote to congratulate him, signifying at the same time his desire for a reconciliation and offering to pay twenty lakhs of rupees to the British by way of an indemnity. This was accepted, a treaty was signed, and Holkar departed friendless and alone.

The vaunting depredator who, at the start of the campaign, had threatened to annihilate the British power in Hindustan with an army of 80,000, was now beaten, abandoned and destitute. Yet all was not entirely lost for him. Under the malign influence of Ghatkia, Sindhia was on the brink of another war with the British, and with him Holkar found, not only sanctuary, but the means of restoring part of his lost fortune.

With Sindhia's connivance, and on the condition they shared the proceeds, Holkar succeeded in kidnapping Ambaji, from whom, according to James Tod, who was in Dowlat Rao's camp at the time, no less than fifty-five lakhs were extorted.

Among the various tortures to which the unfortunate Mah-ratta general was subjected was that of oiled tow which was fastened to his fingers and lighted. He attempted suicide to free himself of his sufferings, but the only weapon he had, a small, English pen-knife, did not pierce deep enough; the wound was stitched up by the surgeon at the British Residency, and Ambaji recovered. As a sop to his injured dignity, and at Holkar's request, he was placed at the head of Sindhia's administration, and thus became principal adviser in the joint councils of war of the two chiefs. In the end, it was he who succeeded in re-kindling their old rivalry, and finally, after an uneasy collaboration, they parted; Sindhia to make his peace with the British, and Holkar to set out with a force of 12,000 horse, two or three thousand infantry and thirty guns. He took a route for the Punjab, giving out that he expected to be joined by the Sikhs and the Afghans.

The first Skinner heard of this was when he received orders to join a detachment under Colonel Burn in an attempt to intercept the Bastard. But Holkar was too quick for them. He had got past, and they turned north after him, linking with Lake who had come up determined to neutralise him before he could stir up any more

trouble. On December 2 they reached Ludhiana to discover that he had already crossed the Sutlej and was at a place farther north called Jullundur.

Political considerations prevented Lake from crossing the Sutlej. This galled him intensely. But next day, when he learned that Holkar had not moved, he observed at dinner that he wished someone would try the ford with a troop and a galloper. Colonel Worsely, Lake's Adjutant-General, nudging Skinner, whispered that the hint was intended for him. Skinner jumped to his feet.

'If your lordship will give me leave, I will try the ford tomorrow morning,' he volunteered.

'All right,' Lake replied. 'Be there about dawn with two *risalaks* of your Yellow Boys and a galloper, and I will be with you.'

Skinner bowed and sat down. Early next morning he was ready waiting at the ford with his brother and his two best *risalaks*, when Lake arrived with the whole of his staff and a number of other regimental officers. There was still some doubt about the political implications, and Sir John Malcolm, who was one of the political agents, argued the point of their crossing.

'I heard his lordship reply that he took the responsibility upon himself,' says Skinner. 'He then mounted, and coming up to me, said, "Well, are you ready?" "Yes, my lord," I replied. "Well then, dash forward," said he, and upon this I made my salaam, and giving three cheers dashed on. Our horses had to swim for about twenty yards, after which they got a footing. There was an island in the middle of the river, to which I bent my course. On reaching this, we discovered it to be quicksand, in which my galloper stuck fast. I dismounted, and, remaining with it, directed my brother to cross with the men and return with one *rissalah* dismounted to relieve the galloper. In less than an hour they came back, took out the horses, and dragged the gun across. Just as we landed I took off my hat and gave three hurrahs, in which Colonel Malcolm and all Lord Lake's staff joined, proclaiming that the first British gun had crossed the Sutlej.'

A few Sikhs made their appearance but were quickly chased off; and the Yellow Boys, returning to the ford, began their task of sounding it and marking the passage with posts. By that evening they had completed the job for which they received a reward of 5,000 rupees from their ever-generous general.

If Lake was not strictly correct in entering upon independent Sikh territory without formal permission, that he did so in relentless pursuit of Holkar had a marked effect upon the reception the Bastard got from Ranjit Singh, the paramount chief in the Punjab. There is no doubt the Mahratta had received some hope and encouragement before setting out from Ajmir, but it had all dissipated by the time he crossed the Beas river on December 8.

On that day, Skinner reached the river with an advance party of 400 troopers to catch a glimpse of the Mahratta rearguard on the far bank, from where they loosed off a few rounds at him with an old eighteen-pounder in a final gesture of defiance. They had been waiting for a convoy of bullocks, and this he next proceeded to capture and take back proudly to Lord Lake.

That night the British camp was struck by lightning in a sudden and terrifying storm, at the height of which a number of cavalry horses, rearing in panic, broke loose from their pickets. They went careering after female ponies in the bazaar, and a number of men were savaged in the mêlée. But in Amritsar, sheltered from the same storm and perhaps only remotely aware of it, the assembled Sikh chieftains in a grand *Guru Mata*, or national council, were discussing the great issue at stake – peace or war with the British. Late into that tormented night they talked. But finally, their decision was unanimous. It was to remain strictly neutral, but to offer to mediate between the two parties.

Holkar was accordingly informed of this, and, with no alternative but to accept, sent his envoys with those of Ranjit Singh to the British camp on the banks of the Beas. On 19 December 1805, they waited on Lake. Negotiations were opened, and Sir Charles Metcalfe, who visited the Mahratta chief, left this account of him in a private letter: 'His appearance was very grave, his countenance expressive, his manners and conversation easy. He has

not at all the appearance of the savage we know him to be . . . A little lap-dog was on his musnud (throne), a strange playfellow for Holkar. The jewels on his neck were invaluablely rich.' Holkar was still attended by his Fidus Achates, Amir Khan, whom Metcalfe goes on to describe as 'blackguard in his looks . . . He affected on the occasion of my reception to be particularly fierce, by rubbing his coat over with gunpowder and assuming in every way the air of a common soldier.'

Unfortunately, Lake was not able to instruct Metcalfe to dictate the sort of terms that Holkar deserved, for the General's hands were tied by a radical change of policy.

Although the Marquis Wellesley's bold measures had completely broken the power of the Mahratta chiefs, the protracted warfare, the sudden accumulation of debt, and an outcry in England against his administration, had influenced the opinion, not only of the proprietors and directors of the East India Company, but of the British Government. The venerable Marquis Cornwallis had succeeded as Governor-General, shackled with injunctions and intent on establishing peace at any price. He had died within three months of his arrival, while engaged in undoing all that had been achieved with so much blood and sacrifice; and his successor, Sir George Barlow, the senior member of the Council, had adopted to the full all his predecessor's principles of caution, economy and conciliation. In that spirit an arrangement had been entered into with Sindhia, on terms entirely favourable to him; and now, although Holkar had been humbled and certainly merited no leniency, Lake was directed to extend to him the same indulgence.

As can easily be imagined, the negotiations were soon concluded. Yet despite great concessions made in the name of future peace and amity, Holkar's envoy, on his return to the British camp, instead of producing the treaty ratified by his master, began raising objections. This roused Lake's anger, and he ordered the man to quit the camp immediately, informing him that all intercourse was at an end and the treaty was cancelled forthwith.

On that the envoy's whole attitude suddenly changed. Craving the General Sahib Bahadur's indulgence, he explained that he was only carrying out his master's instructions, which were to try to obtain better terms, but if not successful to accept those which had already been offered.

'If that treaty is not signed and delivered within two days, I will cross the river,' Lake told him. 'Inform your master it is his last chance.'

To prove he meant business, Lake struck camp and marched down the left bank of the Beas to a ford. The sabre rattling worked, for on 7 January 1806 the signed treaty was ceremoniously presented to the Commander-in-Chief, with a salute of guns, loud cheers and many expressions of joy. Later that afternoon, at the request of several important Sikh chieftains, Lake gave a review of his troops.

According to Skinner, Ranjit Singh himself was present in disguise. 'All were amazed,' he noted, 'at the performances of the Europeans and Horse Artillery, and especially when the Horse Artillery dashed through intervals of cavalry after a charge and fired within fifty yards of the spot where these great folk were standing. It was all astonishment, and a general cry burst from the Sikhs. "Oh saints, oh saints!" they cried. "It is all witchcraft!"'

Peace had come to Hindustan, but it was the peace of impolicy. In Barlow's view the security of the British in India depended either on their controlling all the native states, or leaving these to exhaust each other in internecine wars and disputes, which were sure to come if they were left to themselves. His was the latter choice, and he was not ashamed to write that 'the British possessions in the Doab will derive additional security from the contests of the neighbouring states.'

Despite Lake's opposition, Barlow abrogated all the defensive alliances that had been concluded with the Rajput and Jat states. In the treaty with Holkar the only part of his possessions retained by Lake for the Company was a tract north of the Bondi hills, as a buffer for the protection of the petty states. But the

general who had defeated this most violent and unrelenting of all Britain's enemies now had the mortification of seeing the territory in question delivered back by Barlow. Nothing was left to curb the restless ambitions of the Mahrattas, nothing to stop the rapid growth of the predatory bands, and, as Lake and others had gravely prophesied, anarchy was to follow in central India.

It was a whole decade of misery for millions of human beings. A decade known as *gardi ka wakht* or the Time of Calamity.

As for the paranoiac Holkar, he was to fall a victim to his own power mania. He returned to his dominions reinstated to full authority, but instead of devoting himself to their good government he again began to re-build and re-organise his army. Departing now from the traditional Mahratta principles of warfare, he modelled his new force entirely on the British pattern. Instead of a disorganised swarm of mounted liegemen, he created a corps of 10,000 regular cavalry, which were formed into regiments. He raised twelve fresh battalions of infantry, for which he had upwards of 200 pieces of brass ordnance cast in four months, driving his foundry men with a terrifying impatience.

The new army might have shared his enthusiasm had he been reasonable, but it had become an obsession with him. Day after day he trained his troops, making the cavalry charge the infantry, and the infantry charge the guns, which in turn were rushed to the flanks and rear of the line, the gunners being made to aim close to men and horses to accustom both to the hottest fire. Accidents were many, but men who flinched were brutally punished. These sham fights took place twice a day, and Holkar was always in the thick of them, coaching the commanders individually or stage-managing the whole manoeuvre; and so severe was his criticism, and such was the terror that these violent proceedings inspired, that several of his principal officers fled for their lives. On top of it, Holkar never seemed to rest, for his nights were spent in drinking and debauchery.

So it went on for eight months, until one night there was a commotion in the *zenana* of his palace, from which the women were suddenly seen running out in terror, screaming that the

Maharajah had gone off his head in a paroxysm of rage. The Prime Minister was immediately sent for, and, after a search, a gibbering Holkar was found trying to hide himself in a large bundle of dirty clothes. Declaring him insane, the Prime Minister ordered him to be seized. It is said the Bastard fought like a tiger, that it took thirty stalwarts all they could do to tie him up.

Many attempts were made to cure him but to no avail, and after a year of violent madness he relapsed into complete imbecility. In that state he lived for three years, cared for like an infant by a holy woman named Lakshmi Bhai. He died at Bampura, where a mausoleum was erected over his ashes.

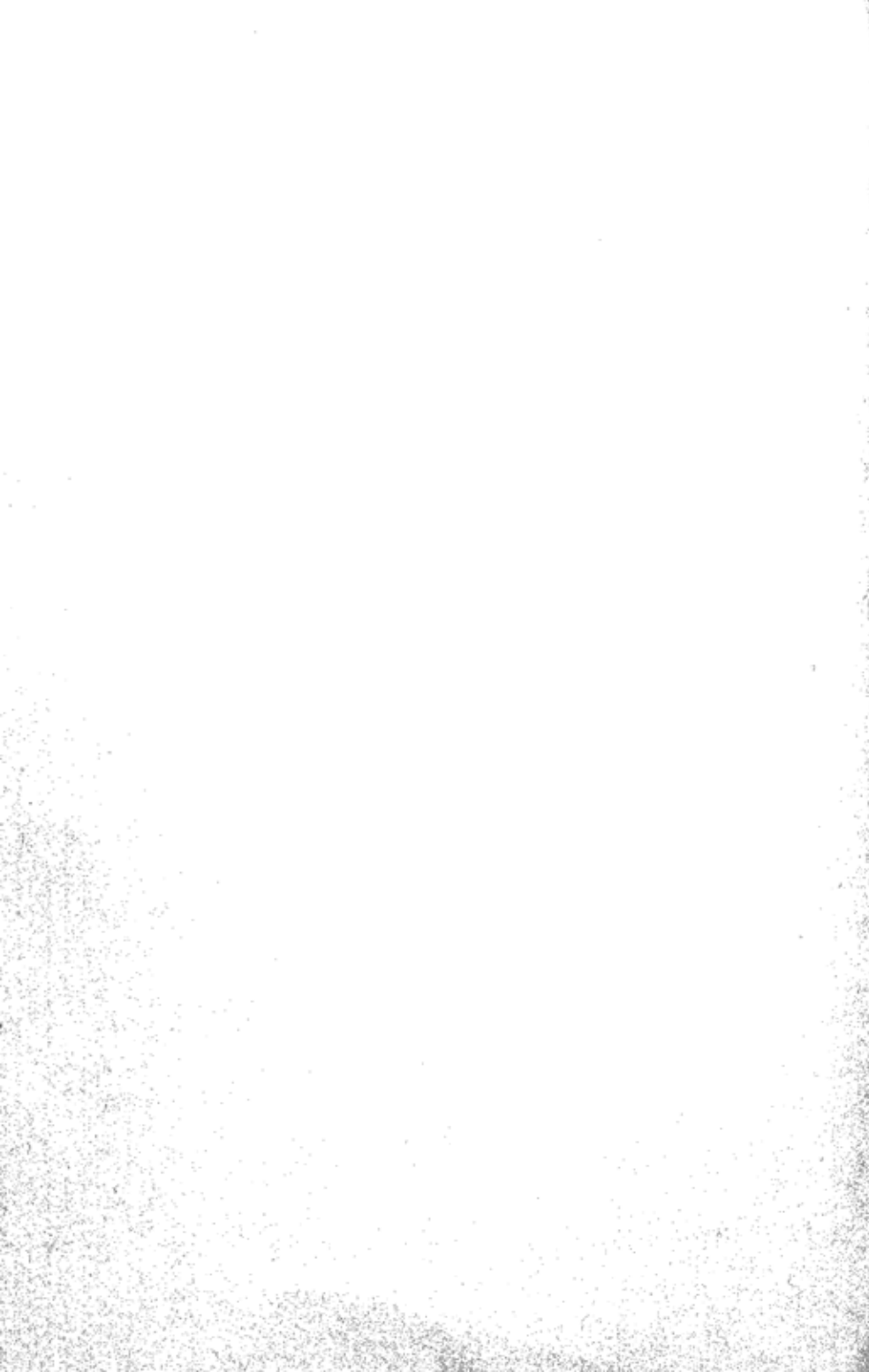
So ended the career of the strange and terrible Bastard of Indore, cursed, it was said, for the murder of the infant son of his legitimate half-brother, the rightful heir to the throne he occupied. Prodigious in energy, talent and courage, but prodigious too in baseness and cruelty, Holkar was a creature of his age and culture, a product of a system in which justification of expediency and total self-interest found their fullest expression. It provided the conditions in which his turbulent genius could flower and bear its dreadful fruit, and as he himself had been consumed by his own excess of ambition, so this system too would collapse into a vacuity of chaos and disorder for which history can provide no parallel.

To this tragedy may be added that of Barlow's policy. Perhaps he is not to be judged by the same yardstick as a governor-general, a nobleman picked for his qualities as a statesman, and capable of looking beyond the balance sheet for the current year, which Barlow was not. Barlow was no more than a servant of the East India Company, pledged to carrying out the huckstering policy of Leadenhall Street, and the onus of his despicable sell-out of Britain's allies rests more on the directors than on him. What men like Skinner had fought for, men like Barlow threw away. They allowed the system to be perpetuated when it could have been rooted out.

So it was a false peace, without security and safeguards, with nothing indeed to prevent the rise of an evil that by comparison

'Oh Saints, it's Witchcraft!'

makes the ranging depredations of the Mahrattas appear benign. It is true that Britain put the matter right in the end. Yet so much suffering could have been saved if there had only been a little foresight when the loose ends were being tied up in 1806.



III

The Double-edged Blade



The Lost Decade

After the war with Holkar, all the corps of irregular cavalry were disbanded, except Skinner's Horse, which as a reward for its meritorious service was put on a permanent peace-time footing with a strength of 1,200.

This idea, needless to say, came from Lake, who was anxious to preserve the young unit with already such a fine record and traditions. But the final word rested with Barlow, and once again another of the Commander-in-Chief's decisions was reversed.

'My mind,' says Skinner, 'had been made quite easy by the late arrangements, when suddenly an express arrived from Lord Lake, desiring that I should immediately repair to headquarters. I overtook him at Secundra, where he was sitting at breakfast, and was very kindly received. After breakfast, his lordship retired to his tent, where I was soon sent for, and found Colonels Malcolm and Worsely with him. With tears in his eyes he gave me the dispatch from Sir George Barlow, which contained the order to discharge my corps. I read it, but said nothing, when his lordship catching me by the hand, said, "Skinner, I regret this much - what can I do for you?" "My lord," I replied, "if you are satisfied with my conduct, I am repaid for all my exertions. The character you have already given me will procure me bread; and some just man may hereafter come to the head of affairs, who, from your recommendation, may again take me by the hand." "Well," said he, "but how can I satisfy you now?" I replied that I should be contented with a small *jagheer*, as I did not mean to serve again as a soldier, unless obliged to do so. He asked me how

much would satisfy me and my brother, to which I replied, that I desired to leave it all to his lordship.

'He then consulted awhile aside with Colonel Malcolm, and turning to me, asked if 20,000 rupees a year each would satisfy both of us. I immediately thanked him, and said he was making princes of us. He laughed, and then appointed *jagheers* of 5,000 rupees a year apiece to four of my *rissaldars*, pensioned all the officers as low as duffehdars (commanders of ten), gave a month's pay as gratuity to the rest of the corps, and placed all the wounded men on the Hauper establishment. I then took my leave, with a letter to the collector of Coel, for my *jagheer*; and returning brought my corps to Delhi, where the painful task awaited me of tearing myself from the men who had gained me such laurels in the British Service.'

The General Order discharging the corps is dated 11 April 1806. It records the Commander-in-Chief's 'high sense which he entertains of the valuable services rendered by Captain Skinner and the corps under his command during the war.' But although it adds 'his lordship will not fail to report to Government the zealous and successful manner in which Captain Skinner has invariably discharged the duties of his important station', it did not secure for him adequate justice from Calcutta.'

Back came Sir George Barlow's ruling that the Skinners, being British subjects, could not be permitted to hold land, and both brothers had to return to the collector the deeds of the estates they have been given.

It was a cruel blow, a decision characteristic of Barlow, of whom William Hickey says he was 'a compound of meanness and pride without a particle of genius', adding that 'Sir George Barlow was the son of a silk mercer in King Street, Covent Garden, and nature had certainly intended him for nothing more elevated in society than a measurer of lute strings from behind a counter; although that fickle jade, Madam Fortune, with her usual unsteadiness, threw him into so much more exalted a sphere. His manner in society was cold, distant and formal. I do not believe he had a single friend in the world, nor one individual

person about whom he cared or in whose welfare he felt at all interested.'

Lake, however, was not prepared to let the matter rest. He recommended James Skinner in the strongest terms, and Malcolm, who shortly left for Calcutta, was authorised to fight the case.

The position was that all officers who had quitted the Mah-rattas in conformity with the Governor-General's proclamation of August 1803 had continued to draw the pay they had been receiving from Sindhia, until October 1 of that year, when, in view of their sacrifice of prospects in the Mahratta service, each had been granted a pension for life equal to that given a retiring officer of equivalent rank in the Company's service. Skinner was therefore in receipt of a captain's pension, but as a result of Lake's and Malcolm's determined efforts on his behalf, he was informed that, in view of the special services rendered by him and the sense which 'the Government entertains of your general merit and character,' he had been assigned the net full pay of the rank of Colonel in the Honourable Company's service, and was accordingly authorised to draw a Colonel's pension of 300 sonaut rupees¹ per month, with permission to reside in any part of the Company's territories, or to proceed to Europe at his option.

'This,' as Skinner remarks, 'was all that Lord Lake could obtain for me; my four *rissalders* got each of them more; but I resolved in my own mind to remain quiet, and see what further misfortunes there might be for me to bear. In the meantime, I received from his Excellency a letter, telling me that what he had obtained for me was for the present only; but that as soon as he should reach home he would get the Court of Directors to confirm me in my *jagheer*, and also to replace my 1,200 men on permanent service, in spite of Sir George Barlow.'

It was well known why Lake was going home. He had publicly

1. All rupees were not uniform, the older the coin the less its value through its becoming worn. A two-year-old rupee was called a *sonaut* rupee and was worth 100/111ths of a *sica* or standard rupee.

declared that no consideration on earth would induce him to serve in any capacity whatsoever with so paltry and contemptible a colleague as Sir George Barlow. Lake had openly snubbed him.

'Every day of the week,' says Hickey, 'the General was received by the higher order of society in Calcutta with the most respectful and kind attention. Every day of the week he was invited to some festive entertainment, all of which he appeared to enjoy and partake of with peculiar satisfaction, being constantly in spirits and the highest good-humour. If there was any exception to this description of his behaviour it was at the dinners given by Sir George Barlow, where, although he considered from the elevated station that he filled as a member of Government that it was incumbent to be present, he was always distant, ceremonious, and formal, and invariably the first of the guests that quitted the table; whereas at the houses of other gentlemen he usually sat out the whole of the company. This line of conduct Sir George Barlow could not do otherwise than observe, and there is no doubt of his being extremely mortified thereat.'

It was a reassuring thought for Skinner that he had such a champion as Lord Lake, particularly as Barlow's appointment was revoked that year and he was succeeded by Lord Minto. Buoyed up with hope in the knowledge that his kindly patron would not rest until he had succeeded in having both of Barlow's over-riding decisions revoked, Skinner settled down in Delhi, as he says, building castles in the air. But one day, these too were suddenly swept away when the sad news reached him of Lake's death from pneumonia in February 1808, just a few months after his return to England.

With the money he had saved, Skinner began to trade and speculate. In 1808, he and Robert succeeded in having their pensions commuted into two adjoining *jaghirs* at Belaspur, near Aligarh; and, as he says, 'by laying out a little money on the land, and the exercise of much diligence, we found it capable of considerable improvement.'

Three hundred of the Yellow Boys disbanded in 1806 were

The Lost Decade

barghirs, mounted on Skinner's own horses, and these Lake had succeeded in getting on to the establishment of the Resident at Delhi. Thus a nucleus of the unit was kept going, until, in February 1809, Skinner was ordered to march with it to Saharanpur, where an army was assembling because of a threat of war with Ranjit Singh.

Having made himself paramount among the Sikhs, by systematically crushing and plundering all the Punjab chiefs, Ranjit Singh had turned his attention to those between the Sutlej and the Jumna. It was originally rumoured that he had promised a large *jaghir* in the area to one of his concubines¹, and the Cis-Sutlej chiefs, as they were known, had immediately sought British protection. It had been deemed necessary to curb Ranjit Singh's expansion, and Charles Metcalfe was sent to the Punjab to try if possible to settle the matter by arbitration. To support his contentions, a body of British troops under Colonel Ochterlony advanced to the frontier, while an army in reserve was mobilised for any serious eventuality. To this force the Cis-Sutlej chiefs were to contribute 10,000 horse, and Skinner was to be given command of it.

However, as it happened, Ranjit Singh came to terms under a treaty concluded in April 1809, and the army was disbanded.

At that time, the old George Thomas district of Haryana, which had been given in *jaghir* to a Moslem chief, was in revolt against his authority. Unable to cope with its turbulent inhabitants, the chief had given it up to the Company, and Skinner, with his 300 Yellow Boys, was directed to support the Hon. Edward Gardner, a political officer, on an expedition to settle it.

Through Colonel Worsely's efforts on his behalf, Skinner's Irregular Horse was augmented, by a proclamation dated 29 May 1809, to eight *risalahs* of 100 troopers each, with two

1. She may have been the notorious Mora who attained considerable ascendancy at the depraved Lahore court, until, in 1811, the pederastic Ranjit Singh suddenly dropped her for a handsome Brahmin youth, whom he raised to the lucrative office of chamberlain.

gallopers; and in less than two months he had completed his establishment. Many of his old comrades who had gone over to Amir Khan and Holkar came flocking back to him the moment they heard he had hung up his standard.

It was a comparatively simple matter in those days for an officer to raise a regiment, provided he had the name and reputation to attract the men. The process was partly Mahratta in origin. Cavalry soldiers were of two categories – *silladars*, who provided their own arms, equipment and horses, and received a fixed sum for their services; and *barghirs*, who had everything found for them by their master, and therefore gave him two thirds of their pay. The scale of pay laid down by the proclamation was from twenty rupees a month for a sowar to eighty for a risaldar. The native officers were all men of some substance, who brought bodies of followers including their own *barghirs*, for whom they were entirely responsible. Three of the Regiment's *risalahs* were made up of Skinner's *barghirs*, and one *risalah* of Robert's *barghirs*, which made it a pretty profitable business for the two brothers.

The men they recruited were mainly Sayids and Moghuls from the Doab, with a few Rajputs and Brahmins; but there was always a place for any adventurer, and Pathans and Baluchis also found their way into the ranks of Skinner's Horse.

Oddly enough, although the next five years were probably the most important in the development of the Regiment, remarkably little is known of this period of Skinner's life. All the information he himself provides is that he 'worked hard in the district, and performed with my corps many acts of gallantry, as the whole army can witness. Among others, I was at the taking of Bhowanee, and in company with the 6th Native Cavalry charged the garrison who were making their escape.'¹

But a few documents among Skinner's papers shed some light on the high degree of regimental efficiency he achieved with the diverse elements of which his unit was composed. It should be

1. Bhowani was captured in 1809.

remembered too that against the large establishment of European officers in a regular Native Cavalry regiment, Skinner's only other sahib officer was his brother.

The first of these documents is a General Order dated 4 January 1813, relating to a review of the troops at Hansi by the Commander-in-Chief, who arrived at the station on tour. Of Captain Skinner's corps it is recorded that his Excellency 'considers it but justice to that officer thus publicly to declare, that the size, condition, and figure of the horses, and the arms, clothing and appointments of the men are of a superior description to those of any other corps of irregular cavalry that has yet fallen under his Excellency's observation. Acting in brigade, their movement indicated such a knowledge of European tactics as would enable the corps to combine, whenever required, its movements with those of regular troops; while its separate performance of the various movements more particularly appropriate to, and characteristic of, irregular horse, satisfactorily demonstrated the superior excellence of the corps of that particular line of service which is more immediately the object of its maintenance by Government. The Commander-in-Chief requests that Colonel Arnold and Captain Skinner will accept his best thanks for having, by their individual and united exertions, rendered the whole detachment at Hansee so highly disciplined and efficient.'

Soon after the Commander-in-Chief departed it seems that Skinner was again asked to put his men through their paces, for there is a detachment order by Lieutenant-Colonel Arnold dated 29 January 1813 which reads:

The commanding officer having at the inspection this morning, of the corps of irregular horse commanded by Captain Skinner, experienced singular satisfaction at the performances of the various evolutions, both regular and desultory, he begs to add his testimony to their extraordinary attainments in discipline, to those already awarded them by that experienced and veteran officer Lieutenant-Colonel Adams,¹ whose sentiments were so

1. Later Major-General Sir John Withington Adams, G.C.B.

fully acquiesced in, at the recent review of the troops by his Excellency Lieutenant-General Champaigne.

Lieutenant-Colonel Arnold returns his most cordial thanks to Captain Skinner, for the result of his unwearied exertions so ably exemplified in the exercises this morning, and entreats he will explain to the corps at large the high ideal he entertains of their merits.

J. Arnold

Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding at Hansee.

Colonel Arnold quitted the station in October of the following year, but not without recording in another detachment order his 'sincere thanks to Captain Skinner, for the great and prompt assistance, in all emergencies, received from him, Lieutenant Robert Skinner, and the corps of irregular cavalry, whose gallantry and good conduct have been repeatedly recorded. The orderly behaviour of the corps in the cantonment, and the alacrity and effect with which they perform all duties required of them, could not be surpassed.'

Those must have been good days for Skinner, full of success and achievement. He was in his early thirties, at his prime as an active soldier, and already prosperous as a businessman. Several of his trading ventures had reaped high dividends, and an indigo plantation and factory he had started in Belaspur were both flourishing. He was also a gentleman farmer and was then in the process of building up a herd of the finest Hissa cattle, as well as developing a stud which was later to become famous in upper India.

We have a glimpse of him then, of the man inside the magnificent blue and silver uniform. The life he led, in common with Ochterlony and other high-placed Europeans up-country, was wholly Moghul. They were completely under the spell of its culture, and had mastered Persian, which was the second language of the educated classes. They lived in magnificent style. Ochterlony had thirteen 'wives', and evening by evening they

The Lost Decade

took the air, on thirteen elephants. Harems were the accepted practice among those who could afford the luxury, especially the adventurers; Hyder Hearsey for one had a pachesi (Indian ludo) board tattooed on his stomach for his 'wives' to play on while he slept, while Skinner is recorded as having had fourteen of what he refers to as 'companions'. This number is disputed by the present generation of Skinners who say his establishment was more modest. Their contention is borne out by documents in the possession of the family which seem to indicate there were only seven throughout his life, of whom three from this period actually outlived him and are named in his will – Ishuri Khannum, Khowaj Bux, and Manu.

Ishuri was a Moslem and is identifiable as the 'old lady' mentioned in the long letters in Sikander's spidery hand, written some twenty years later. She was probably his first love, for he committed her to the special care of his sons, and they, when she died, erected a large Moghul tomb over her remains in the Mohammedan cemetery at Hansi. Of Khowaj nothing is known, except that she too was a Moslem. But Manu on the other hand was a Hindu, and legend has it that Sikander rescued her, a young widow, as she was on the point of being sacrificed on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Later she became a Moslem, and when she died a fine Moghul tomb was erected over her remains by her son, Alexander.

Some indication of the high regard in which Skinner was held may be had from the following letter from Archibald Seton, the successor to Ochterlony's first term as Resident at Delhi. Seton had left to accompany Lord Minto, the Governor-General, on his expedition to Java.

On board the *Mornington*,
12th March, 1811.

My dear James,

My departure from Delhi was so very sudden, that I could not write to you; even now I can scarcely find time to do so. I cannot,

however, quit Bengal even for a time, without requesting you to do me the justice to believe that my friendship for you will continue the same in whatever part of the world I may be; and that should it ever be in my power to promote your or your brother's views, I shall eagerly avail myself of it.

Lord Minto is already acquainted with your merits; in short, both of you stand high in the general estimation. Remember me in the kindest manner to your brother Robert and tell him for me, that wherever I am, he must consider me his sincere *friend* and *agent*. God bless you, my dear Skinner. Believe me ever most cordially yours,

A. Seton

P.S. It is most gratifying to me to reflect, that our friend Metcalfe, who succeeds me, feels towards your brother and you exactly as I do.

There was, however, a big fly in the ointment – Skinner's rank. Though addressed as 'Captain' he held no official commission, for the old rule of 1792 still debarred country-borns from combatant grades in the Company's service. It had been hoped, in view of their good service in the Mahratta war, that the rule would be abolished. There had been much talk of a new charter for Eurindians or Anglo-Indians, as the mixed race were then becoming known. But they had been disappointed, and many, including the Skinners, had grown very dissatisfied.

In Charles Metcalfe the brothers found a friend who lived with a sense of shame at the injustice of their position, and he tried to have their *jaghirs* at Belaspur made hereditary, which was their one desire. The application was, however, turned down by the Governor-General in Council, as it was 'considered contrary to the principle on which *jaghirs* were given.' This was too much for the Skinners to bear, for the next we know is that James was about to quit the British service altogether.

He gives his reasons on paper: the cup of his bitterness was full indeed: 'In the Mahratta service I had always a well-grounded hope of rising in rank and fortune; no question was

ever raised as to my birth there. When I entered the British service, I believed I had gained a field in which the fruits of zeal and fidelity would be matured and reaped in perfection; and no exertions on my part were spared to forward this object. I imagined myself to be serving a people who had no prejudices against caste or colour. But I found myself mistaken. All I desired was justice. If I was not to share in the privileges of a British subject, let me be regarded as a native and treated as such. If I was to be regarded as a British subject, did I merit no more than a pension of 300 rupees a month, without either rank or station? And, after the distinct and repeated promises of the permanent maintenance of my corps, was it fair that I should be liable to be commanded by the youngest subaltern in the army, deprived of the hope which I had so fondly entertained of passing my old age tranquilly in that service to which my better days had been devoted? But I thank my Creator that there remains one source of satisfaction – one consolation under every disappointment; and it is this, – that I have ever discharged my duty as a soldier with honour and credit; and that no one can ever upbraid me with “dishonouring the steel” or being “faithless to the salt”; that finally, though I have failed in gaining what I desired and deserved – that is, rank, – I have proved to the world that I was worthy of it; by serving my king and my country, zealously and loyally as any Briton in India.’

Skinner may sound a little unreasonable, since the pension of a lieutenant-colonel would appear to be a liberal reward for all that he could have done in three years’ service; for no longer had he served when this was first granted to him. But his own native officers, as it has been remarked, were given more, and many officers far less distinguished and deserving than him had been magnificently rewarded. Still, the money had never really worried him. What he had striven for was a king’s commission, but this had been refused on the very grounds on which he had been deprived of his first *jaghir* of 20,000 rupees.

His birth had been brought up again, as a misfortune, if not a reproach, and, like a double-edged blade, had been made to cut

against him both ways. How truly Bourquien had remarked that the damn Englishmen treated their children very ill!

However, two factors caused Skinner to alter his decision about quitting the British service. One was the dramatic change in Government policy which called for a rapid expansion of the Company's armed forces, and the other was the sympathy and breadth of vision of the new Governor-General, the Marquis of Hastings.

To begin with, a historic letter from the Adjutant-General put Captain Skinner's Corps of Irregular Horse on an entirely new footing.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Camp Moradabad,
6th December, 1814.

My dear Skinner,

Instead of an addition of only four *rissalahs*, I am now to acquaint you that the Governor-General is determined to augment the corps under your command to 3,000 sowars; you may, therefore, proceed to take measures to raise that number as soon as you can, and let me know without delay what assistance you will require in money that an advance may be authorised to enable you to carry the measure into effect.

I wish you would let me know in confidence, what number of cavalry, of the same excellent description as that under your command, you could raise, and whether you do not think that raising a large body of them would probably have the effect of drawing off a large proportion of Meer Khan's best cavalry.

I remain, my dear Skinner, yours very sincerely,

G. H. Fagan
Adjutant-General

Then six weeks later Hastings himself visited Skinner's headquarters at Hansi, and of the occasion the following entry appears in his lordship's private journal:

Jan. 15, 1815

We had divine service in the middle of the day . . . I then desired to see Captain Skinner. Private information had been given to me that he had become dissatisfied with our service and proposed to resign. He is a halfcaste and was formerly in the Mahratta service. On the war breaking out with them, he quitted their service in consequence of the proclamation recalling all British subjects employed by us, and much distinguished himself by his enterprise, his intrepidity and his judgement. At the peace the corps commanded by him was kept in pay, and he was retained at its head. The frontier station of Hansi was assigned as its head quarters. The equity and the strict observance of every promise which had marked Captain Skinner for many years, had obtained for him a prodigious influence among the natives. The loss of such a man at such a moment would be serious especially as there is little probability that he could reconcile his mind to idleness, and it is sure that he would have most tempting offers from Holkar or Scindia. His discontent arose from this, that the officers of Irregulars have no rank but in their own corps. Hence, if the garrison of native infantry at Hansee be reduced (as has often been the case) to a subaltern's party, Captain Skinner must find himself under the orders of possibly a very inexperienced youth.

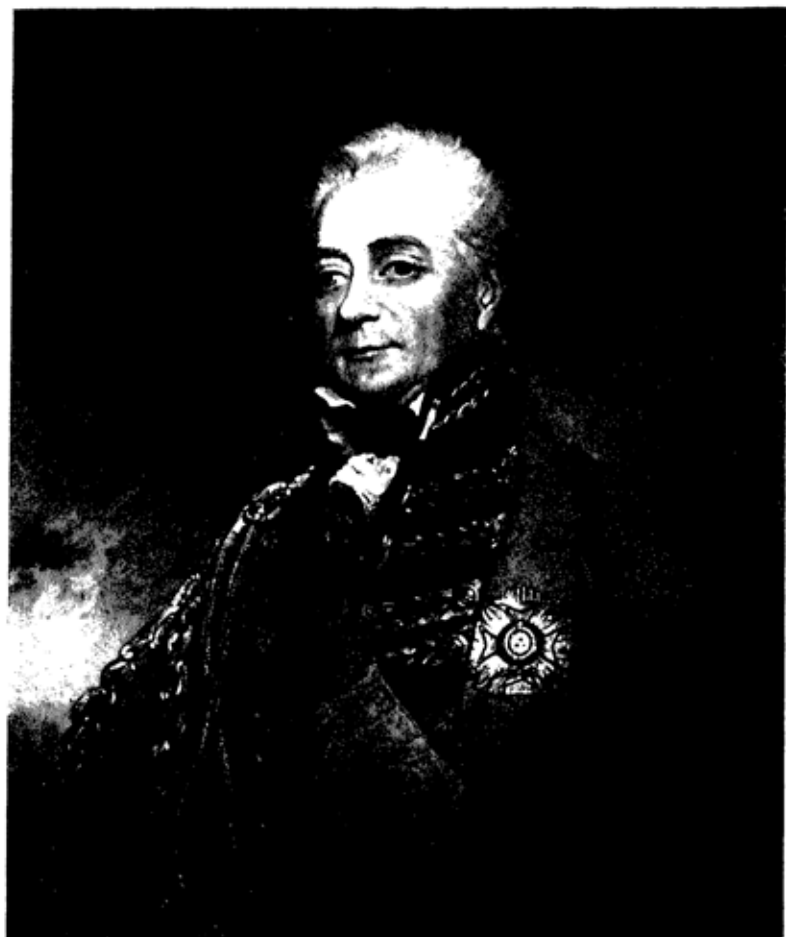
I affected not to know anything of the dispositions which he had indulged; but, beginning by a compliment to the state of his corps, I told him I wished to give a public mark of my estimation of his character. I therefore requested he would assume the honorary title of Lieutenant Colonel; and I apprised him of my intention to propose to the Government that such a rank in the Irregulars should entitle the officer holding it to rank as youngest field-officer of the line, and to command accordingly all captains and subalterns. I explained that as battalions were often commanded by captains, it would be easy to compose such a corps for an irregular officer in whom one had confidence, as might enable him to achieve actions meriting the highest distinctions and recompense.

He appeared extraordinarily gratified, and with peculiar earnestness entreated me to rely on his unreserved devotion. To understand this warmth of feeling, one ought to know the excessive depression in which the halfcastes are held by the Company's servants. Till Lady Loudon gave a private hint that colour would never be noticed, halfcaste ladies, though of the best education, and conduct and married to men in prominent stations, were not admitted to the Government House . . .

How little the Marquis of Hastings knew of Sikander's real character when he confessed he was worried about his being tempted by offers from Sindhia and Holkar! Skinner, who had eaten British salt! Still, those apprehensions served their purpose, for he was to be a 'local' field officer.

But nothing at all was done about his brother's rank, and in disgust Robert resigned. Skinner sent on the resignation, and on 25 March 1815 the Marquis replied anxiously to James from Fatehgarh: 'Let me beg of you to entreat that he will suspend his determination until he can be secure against the foregoing advantages which might have made the profession agreeable to him. Circumstances have prevented my being able yet (as I must carry the Vice-President in Council with me on such a point) to settle the rank for officers in the Irregular cavalry corps. I need not repeat to you my anxiety to put matters on a footing which would be gratifying to officers of that description, and not much time is required for arranging it. You mentioned your readiness to sever from the corps which you command a proportion which might make a separate one for your brother. I own to you I should prefer his continuing (with advanced rank) second to you; though I would station him with a party of your corps at a distance from you. The wish to keep your command as respectable as possible, is what influences my disposition on that point. Therefore, tell me frankly whether your brother can be reconciled to that plan.'

In another letter Hastings reaffirms his plan for settling the 'local' rank problem, explaining the analogy which was fixed for officers of the provincial corps of loyalists who served with the



Ochterlony



Skinner in later life



Yellow Boys in about 1810



And a century later

General Fraser, 1850



Skinner leading his regiment home from a review. Fraser rides by his side, while his son, James, skirmishes with a trooper

King's army in America. 'I propose,' he adds, 'that the youngest major of the line should command the eldest lieutenant-colonel of the irregulars; but that the field officers of the latter should command all captains of the regular service. By this arrangement, you see, it would be practicable to entrust an irregular officer with a considerable force, having only the attention to place under him battalions which happened to be commanded by captains . . . You will appreciate that the rank to which I have alluded would not be progressive but ordinary brevet, though any brilliant service performed in it would actually tend to advancement.'

It seemed fair enough, and Robert, who was made a 'local' major, agreed to withdraw his resignation. Although he is shown in the Bengal Army List of that year as second-in-command to his brother, Robert was given nominal command of the 2nd Corps of Lieutenant-Colonel Skinner's Irregular Horse, while command of the 3rd Corps later went to William Fraser, James Skinner's most intimate friend.

Fraser's position in the corps was one of those curious anomalies which are occasionally to be found in the early days of British paramountcy in India. Actually, he was a civilian, in the political department of the Government, but his passion was soldiering, and we have it on the authority of Jacquemont, the great French botanist and traveller, that Fraser did it for kicks: 'For my part the only thing I find odd about him is a perfect monomania for fighting. Whenever there is a war anywhere, he throws up his judicial functions and goes off to it. He is always the leader in an attack, in which capacity he has earned two fine sabre cuts on his arms, a wound in the back from a pike, and an arrow in the neck which almost killed him. This is the price he has paid for always having succeeded in extricating himself from the frays into which he has rushed without being forced to kill a single man . . . To him the most keenly pleasurable emotion is that aroused by danger: such is the explanation of what people call his madness. It goes without saying that, possessing this type of courage, Mr Fraser is the most pacific of men. In spite of his great black beard you would take him for a Quaker.'

For years Fraser had worked in close contact with Skinner's Horse in the settlement of large tracts of wild and refractory country. He took part in their unit exercises and he appeared with them on parade. But the fact he had no rank and could not wear a military uniform deprived him of much of the satisfaction he might otherwise have derived from the pursuit of his hobby. When the Gurkha war started in 1814 he became the political agent with the 2nd Division under General Sir Gabriel Martindell, and undertook several long and hazardous journeys into the Nepalese interior, constantly attended by detachments of Yellow Boys.

Then, after the war, on being appointed commissioner for the settlement of the hill states, he wrote to the Governor-General urging the expediency of investing him with military rank, as the best means of aiding the objects of his mission. It was a try-on, of course, but Hastings understood and was willing enough to gratify the whim of a good man who had done his work well. Accordingly, Fraser was given the option of receiving the 'local' rank of lieutenant-colonel, unattached to any corps, or that of major in Skinner's Horse. He did not hesitate in choosing the latter, which gratified his old friend very much, and till the day he died Fraser held that rank and was in the thick of every affair in which the unit was engaged. At other times he was a civilian, and later became Commissioner in the Delhi territory and Agent to the Governor-General in Delhi.

It was natural, with such a dynamic interest in common, that a deep friendship should have grown up between the two men, but if opposites attract here then was an astonishing example of that affinity. Against Skinner's open-faced friendliness, goodwill and liberality towards everybody, Fraser was a strange, solitary enigma of a man, who was easily bored by his fellows and showed it. His hero was Napoleon, whose cross of the Legion of Honour and monogrammed diamond ring he possessed, having been given them by the exile in acknowledgement of some gift he had sent to St Helena. Fraser's anathema was bumbledom, and he was well known for his perpetual conflict with his superiors in auth-

ority. With Skinner he found solace and moderate advice, and with Skinner's Horse in battle he could purge his soul from time to time. For sport they hunted lions, which were then in large numbers around Hansi and constituted a serious menace to the peaceful expansion of that turbulent district. They hunted together on horseback or on foot, for Fraser would never allow himself the comparative safety of an elephant's howdah; and the way they did it, with cumbersome and unreliable matchlocks, would make a big-game hunter of today shudder. According to Jacquemont, Fraser alone accounted for eighty-four lions, thus contributing largely to the extinction of the species in India.

Among the other 'local' officers who joined the Regiment about this time, were Henry Forster (son of Henry Forster of the Bengal Civil Service, Mint Master at Calcutta), who became Adjutant, 1st Corps, and later raised the famous Shekhawati Brigade; William Martindell (son of General Sir Gabriel Martindell), who became Second-in-command, 1st Corps; Richard Grueber (son of Colonel Richard Grueber) who became Adjutant, 3rd Corps; and Robert Dick (son of Major-General Sir Robert Dick). Another officer who joined in 1819 and remained with the Regiment for many years was James Turnbull. Of him very little is known.

It was not long after Lord Hastings's visit to Hansi that Skinner was able to bring his strength up to 3,000; indeed he was able to inform the Adjutant-General on 3 February 1815 that 'horsemen are still coming in daily from all quarters, and I am now discharging the bad ones and taking in the good. All those that come from Amir Khan's camp are very good horsemen.'

The new establishment was officially sanctioned by a proclamation dated July 29 of that year, which at the same time organised the unit into three corps of 1,000 sowars each, with two galloper guns, the whole under Skinner's overall command.

It was all part of the Governor-General's preparations for another war, the largest military undertaking ever attempted by the British in India.

The Hydra

The absurd indulgence shown to the defeated Mahratta chiefs in 1805-6 had won England no friends among them. So far from earning their gratitude, it had only nourished a seething hatred in their hearts for the power that had brought them to the ground, but had failed to clip their wings. They had experienced no sense of calamity from the war, learnt no lessons from the mauling they had received. No sooner was the ink dry on their treaties than they were back at the old game.

Ever since the British had restored him to his throne in 1803, the Peshwa had pursued a course of oppression, conspiracy and double-dealing, and already in 1814 several outrages perpetrated at his instigation had brought him to the verge of hostilities with the British. His court was profligate and corrupt, but the worst aspect of his rule was a revenue system whereby he farmed out his districts to the highest bidders, who then bled them dry. Thus, the Peshwa had amassed in ten years treasure to the extent of 500 lakhs of rupees. He had been forced to submit to more rigid control by the Resident at Poona, but had continued to break his promises, and was known to be preparing for war, for which purpose he had sanctioned an expenditure of 100 lakhs.

Of Sindhia's true feelings for the British there was evidence enough in a treacherous correspondence discovered between himself, the Nepalese and the Peshwa. Holkar and the Rajah of Berar were also involved in various anti-British activities; all of which pointed to a grand conspiracy on the part of practically the whole Mahratta nation to throw off the yoke that was keeping

them in check. But even if no hostility had been evinced or suspected on the part of the Mahratta chiefs, the consequences of their widespread depredations and chronic misrule were sufficient to call for interference on the part of the British.

Instead of a regular system of revenue, each chief collected what he could by force, and all over Rajputana, Malwa, Bhopal and the Deccan, detachments of infantry and horse were constantly on the move, levying contributions indiscriminately, reducing forts and punishing zemindars who failed to pay up blackmail or tribute. As ever, in India, it was the peasantry who suffered most, and not only were they ground down under ruthless exactions, but on top of it they had to endure the further depredations of swarms of Pindaris, whom their overlords had neither the power nor the inclination to suppress.

The Pindaris were not a tribe, but a huge, loose organisation of banditti, created by the type of warfare the Mahrattas had introduced into India, and perfected in their rise as a predatory power. At first the Pindaris were merely armed followers, who plundered foodstuffs for the light horsemen and lived by selling it in their bazaar outside the camp. Regarded as useful auxiliaries by the different Mahratta chiefs, who invariably seized a large share of their booty, the Pindaris' aid was purchased by occasional grants of land, or more correctly speaking by a tacit admission of their right to possessions which they had usurped, and a privilege of plundering even beyond the licence normally given to a Mahratta army.

Under this system the Pindaris took form. Their chiefs acquired reputations, and their claims upon their adherents were handed on to their descendants. Bands were joined in federal unions, out of which greater chiefs arose who were powerful enough to operate independently of the armies they had once followed. It was at this stage of their development that they emerged as a serious menace to the countries in which they operated, for they attracted all that was desperate in a community. Murderers, thieves, vagabonds, all were welcome to swell the numbers in a Pindari chief's *durrah* or camp.

A *lubhar* or foray usually numbered from a thousand to four thousand horsemen, armed with spears and swords, and with about one matchlock in every fifteen. They moved with great speed over long distances, sustaining their horses, it was said, with spices and stimulants. They would enter an area, split into groups, comb the villages, and meet again at pre-arranged rendezvous. They took only movables, seeking out money and jewellery with the aid of swift and unmentionable tortures, from which neither sex nor age secured a person immunity. Speed was important to the Pindaris, who frequently struck off the hands of children as the shortest way to the bracelets that adorned them. Animals were stampeded along, and the plunderers left behind a countryside of burning villages and homeless and wounded inhabitants flying in all directions. On the return of a foray, after a fourth of the plunder had been taken by the leader, and a couple of valuable articles had been given to the principal Pindari chief, the rest was offered for sale in the *durrah* bazaar, to which bargain hunters and traders flocked from all around.

At first little notice was taken of the Pindaris by the British, whose territory was scrupulously avoided by them, and whose subjects had been known to pass unattended through villages during a raid without being molested. But, since the war with Holkar, and particularly since about 1810-11, when the Pindari hordes were augmented by large numbers of Pathan and Mah-ratta soldiery, this tacit immunity for the British disappeared. Madras Presidency received visitations from the notorious Karim Khan with more than 10,000 followers carrying rapine and depredation across the province.

In December 1816 word was suddenly flashed round Madras that the Pindaris had reached the cantonment. It was later found to be a false alarm given by some domestic who had seen a few dhobies and grass cutters having a sham fight on their ponies in the Artillery lines. But such was the effect of the word 'Pindari' that the entire European population dropped everything and fled in panic to Fort St George. That winter scarcely a day passed without news coming in of some fresh outrage committed by

The Hydra

Pindaris as they ranged the peninsula. In the Company's provinces alone the value of their plunder reached ten lakhs of rupees, and the toll of dead and maimed persons left in their wake exceeded 7,000.

The Mahratta powers, although they had all been plundered by the Pindaris, had never made any real effort to cope with them. Rather, the princes had employed them to devastate and ruin each other's countries; and soon the time came when the freebooter chiefs were powerful enough to affect major political issues. In 1810, when Karim Khan and another Pindari chief named Chitu joined Amir Khan in a brief, unstable confederacy, their combined host of 60,000 caused a sensation throughout India.

The Marquis of Hastings, soon after his appointment in November 1812, had realised the necessity of suppressing the Pindaris as a prerequisite for the establishment of peace and security in the country as a whole. He had accordingly ordered an increase in the irregular cavalry in British pay, and in addition to Skinner's Horse three other irregular corps, commanded by Captain Cunningham, Captain Baddeley and Lieutenant Roberts respectively, were placed on the same establishment as that of Skinner's Horse, except for the galloper guns.

In the winter of 1815-16 attempts were made to intercept the forays, but without much success. The Pindaris were too numerous and widespread. Also they moved with a rapidity never previously experienced in history, and when pursued dispersed into many small parties which were practically impossible to follow as they darted away along scattered paths to their mountain lairs. But the following winter, by heroic forced marches, brilliant deduction and a bit of luck, several British cavalry units succeeded in destroying some hundreds of Pindaris, who never as a rule fought when opposed, and when cornered were found to make no attempt even to defend themselves.

Orders were that all taken prisoner were to be summarily executed, and this work was performed with zeal by both Dragoons and sowars.

The true *durrah*-born Pindari was acknowledged as the basest of all human creatures, and, according to Sir John Malcolm, was ignorant to a degree almost beyond belief, unskilled in anything except the art of torture, at which, it was said, the women were far more adept than the men. It was said too that they were forced to plunder, as the territory they held was not sufficient to support a tenth of their numbers; but in fact they were constitutionally incapable of settling into a tranquil community, besides being disinclined for anything but a life of rapine and dissipation. Singly they were cowardly, insignificant specimens; but in their large, yelling packs they were like swarms of human locusts, acting from instinct, taking what they could take, and destroying what they had to leave behind.

In 1797 the Rajah of Berar engaged a *durrah* of Pindaris to ravage the state of Bhopal, with whom he was at war. So thoroughly was this deadly work carried out that twenty-five years later Malcolm reported that Bhopal still had not recovered from the effects of the visitation.

The Governor-General's decision to undertake a big cavalry operation against the Pindaris was made that winter, in December 1816, even before he received authority from England. For various reasons the measures he planned had to be deferred until the close of the ensuing rains, and a good thing too: the Court of Directors generously sanctioned an all-out offensive to drive the Pindaris from their haunts on the banks of the Narbada and in Malwa; and Hastings with great imagination and foresight enlarged it into a major campaign to eradicate from central India the whole predatory system, and thus provide a stability such as the country had never previously known.

It was realised of course that this would probably mean a head-on collision with the Mahratta powers, whose economy was based upon systematic depredation and who were, therefore, as criminal as the Pindaris. But since another Mahratta war seemed in any case inevitable, the risks and the discomfiture would have to be accepted.

The Marquis based his strategy on a series of pincer move-

The Hydra

ments carried out by major columns, with detached forces acting as stop-gaps, and garrisons established at strong-points dotted about the operational area for internal security. To this end two main armies were organised – one in the Deccan, consisting of five divisions plus one in reserve under Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Hislop, with a Gujerat Division, under Major-General Sir William Kerr; and another army in Hindustan, of four divisions with two in reserve under the personal command of the Marquis of Hastings.

Brigadier-General Sir John Malcolm was appointed Political Agent of the Governor-General with the Deccan Army, besides having command of one of the divisions.

A total force of 81,000 regular foot, 10,000 regular cavalry and 23,000 irregular cavalry were involved, all to take up their pre-arranged positions on the periphery of central India, so that at the drop of a hat, the concerted movements should begin.

Considering the great distances separating the divisions, the difficulty and endless variety of terrain, and the systems of establishments then in use, the mind boggles at their problems of administration, communications, and supply. To these may be added the threat of 106,000 horse, 81,000 foot and 600 guns which the Mahratta confederacy had mobilised.

Preparations in the south, in view of the distances the British columns had to march, were necessarily public, but those north of Bundelkhand were managed with great secrecy, so as not to alarm Sindhia until he should find himself compelled to submit to intended proposals or make war under serious disadvantage to himself.

In mid-October Hastings suddenly proclaimed that he was advancing to the extirpation of the Pindaris, and in order to rule out any excuse for obstruction or prevarication on the part of the native powers, he declared that neutrality would not be tolerated. All who were not for the British in the grand enterprise they were pursuing for the welfare of the country as a whole, he said, would be considered as against the British.

By that time the two armies were ready to move, and Hastings

made a swift thrust with two divisions to below Gwalior, where Sindhia was encamped with the best of his infantry and artillery. The move completely disarmed him, and he was forced to sign a treaty by which he was required to place his troops at the disposal of the British Government, with superintending British officers seconded to the main detachments to see the orders were carried out.

Meanwhile Skinner, with orders from Metcalfe, had sent his 2nd Corps, under Robert, to the 4th Division of the Deccan Army, left his 3rd Corps for the protection of the Delhi area, and with the 1st Corps had himself joined his old friend, now Major-General Sir David Ochterlony, who had lately distinguished himself in the Gurkha war and was in command of the 4th Division of the Grand Army of Hindustan. They had taken up a position near Rewari to the south of Agra.

Their specific object was to expedite the arrangements with the Rajput states, which had been invited to an alliance that would free them for ever from the thralldom of predatory armies, in return for a portion of their revenues as the price of protection. Ochterlony's orders were also to co-operate in overawing Amir Khan at the head of an army of 20,000 horse and 8,000 foot, mostly Pathans.

Following Sindhia's defection from the Mahratta cause, Amir Khan had signified his desire to follow that chief's example, and his envoy had accepted the terms offered, namely a *jaghir* of twelve lakhs a year with British protection, provided the Pathan chief disbanded his followers, relinquished all connection with the freebooters, and gave up his 200 guns for which he would receive five lakhs of rupees as compensation.

Though the terms were generous enough, the crafty Pathan had not signed the engagement. He was eagerly watching events at Poona and Nagpur, and Ochterlony, who was not a man to be trifled with, advanced on the Pathan army which was then in Jaipur State.

The British division encamped near Jaipur City. Here nego-

tiations were re-opened, and after five days, their progress being favourable, a meeting was arranged between the General and the Chief. The place agreed upon was a village nine miles equidistant from their two camps, and there Ochterlony proceeded with Skinner, his staff officers and a cavalry escort.

The formal meeting took place next morning, when, according to Skinner, Amir Khan appeared to be in a state of great alarm, although he was attended by 500 horsemen, a company of infantry and two galloper guns. Both he and Ochterlony approached on elephants, but as the two animals were brought alongside each other for the principals to shake hands, the bodyguard in the howdah behind Amir Khan held a cocked pistol aimed at the General's breast; and the horsemen were all at the ready with lit matches on their matchlocks and blunderbusses.

After a few brief exchanges, the Amir called out hurriedly, '*Chalo, chalo,*' (go on, go on), and the two elephants separated.

Ever since Sivaji, the first great Mahratta, had disembowelled a Moghul general with a 'tiger's claws' concealed in his hand, as they embraced at a meeting, few native chiefs had been able to approach their erstwhile opponents without apprehension. However, at subsequent meetings Amir Khan's security measures relaxed as he thawed out and became quite affable.

But he never made much of an impression on Skinner, who thought him mean-looking, with a dark, thin, evil face, and poorly dressed in a dirty white upper garment and a blue turban. What he said was trifling, badly expressed, and generally not in very good taste. He boasted he was king of Hindustan, but had resigned his claim to the title because of his friendship for General Ochterlony! Far from being in awe of him, his attendants and subordinate officers treated Amir Khan with good-humoured contempt. They openly disapproved of his trucking, as they said, with the English, and half in earnest promised him a taste of the bastinado on his return to camp. Unlike their scruffy leader, they were all fops, beautifully dressed and perfumed.

There is no doubt that Amir Khan's signature on his engagement with the British was only secured by their resounding successes in

the Deccan. As he remarked, what was the use of fighting when a couple of battalions could beat many thousands of men?

The breach with the Peshwa had come at last. After attempting to seduce the sepoys of the British garrison at Poona, who refused to be bribed, he had ordered the massacre of the entire garrison of 2,800 men. His army, vastly their superior in numbers, had surrounded and attacked them, but had been severely defeated and put to flight.

In Nagpur, the ruler, the Appa Sahib, had proved no less treacherous nor to any degree more competent in his treachery than the Peshwa. With an army of 18,000 he had attempted to storm the Residency at Nagpur, defended by a garrison of 1,400, all native soldiers except for their European officers. He had been thoroughly beaten by them, and on the approach of British reinforcements had made his humble submission.

On top of that came the defeat of the entire Holkar army at Mehidpur, by Sir John Malcolm, and immediately upon that the news that the Pindaris were all on the run.

Two chiefs, Karim Khan and Wasil Mohammed, on Sindhia's advice and encouragement, had agreed to join forces, but just as they were about to cross the Narbada on their biggest foray yet, news came of the British advance on all sides, followed by Sindhia's capitulation. This intelligence threw the Pindaris into the greatest dismay, and the two *durrahs* moved rapidly northwards from their mountain fastnesses above Bhopal. They united near Seronge, to form 16,000 horse and foot with ten guns, and moved on towards Gwalior just as three of Lord Hastings's Hindustan divisions were closing in for the kill.

The 1st Division turned them to the west; the 3rd chased them, killing some hundreds, to a pass; and as they debouched through that into Kota they were intercepted by the 2nd and cut to pieces. The two leaders burnt their baggage and fled south, then west as the second Division came round in a hook to drive them against the 5th Deccan Division that had come up from the Narbada. Meanwhile, Wasil Mohammed was flying for his life to Gwalior, where Sindhia was later to order him to be seized and handed

over to the British, and the Pindari in despair was to commit suicide. His confederate sought refuge with the Holkar army, but was turned away by the boy Chief's ministers, who after their defeat had no thoughts but how best to save themselves from ruin, and no wish to be embarrassed by his presence.

It was the same with the other *durrahs*. Hunted relentlessly, they were attacked and defeated again and again, until they were so reduced as to become the prey of petty chiefs and village head-men who plundered and slaughtered them with zeal, remembering the wrongs they had suffered for so long at the hands of these base and cruel freebooters.

Karim Khan finally gave himself up to Sir John Malcolm, and was later pardoned and given a small pension. But his rival, Chitu, was not so fortunate. He was pursued till all his followers fell away, and, hunted and alone, he was sprung upon and killed by a tiger.

Thus perished the human locusts. 'There remains not a spot in India that a Pindari can call his own,' Sir John Malcolm reported not long after the war. In September 1817 there were at least 100,000 of these freebooters ravaging central India. Four months later they were all dead or dispersed, never to plunder again.

In May 1818 Skinner was ordered to join Brigadier-General Malcolm who was engaged in an all-out effort to round up the fugitive Peshwa. In the past six months Baji Rao had been given not a moment's respite as the 4th Deccan Division had followed his flying army with its multitude of elephants laden with treasure, rich baggage, entertainers, concubines and all the other trappings of an Indian court. For two months the division had marched and counter-marched in an effort to engage him, and at last, on 20 February 1818, they had caught up, and in a running battle had killed his general, rescued his political prisoner, the Rajah of Satara, and captured his baggage elephants and treasure.

After that, the Peshwa's troops had lost heart and fallen away. Soon his favourites had begun to desert, and even his brother had abandoned him in despair and surrendered to the British. So

Sikander Sahib

before Skinner could reach Malcolm, Baji Rao had surrendered to him on 3 June 1818 and the manhunt was over.

Skinner remained with Malcolm at Mhow. It was a busy time. Detachments of British troops with irregular cavalry were ranging the country to prevent the revenues of the current year from reaching those who wanted to protract the war. The chief among these was the Appa Sahib, who had become the rallying-point of all the defeated and disbanded soldiery of the country. In February 1819, the commander of the ancient fortress of Asirgarh, relying on its reputed impregnability, had decided to defy the British, and had offered the Appa Sahib the sanctuary of its walls. The fugitive chief had accepted, and a move was made to intercept him by the 1st/14th Madras Infantry and the 2nd Skinner's Horse. Although they were not successful, the following commendation appears in a Detachment Morning Orders dated 15 February 1819: 'Lieutenant-Colonel Smith would be wanting in his duty were he to omit on this occasion to express more particularly the high sense he entertains of the zealous and spirited conduct of Major Robert Skinner, and the fine body of men under his command. The steadiness and alacrity with which they obeyed orders, and the regularity of their rapid advance in two columns round the village where the enemy had been encamped a few days before, and their subsequent gallant pursuit of the fugitives down the by-paths in the mountains, and the continuance of that pursuit to the very gates of Asseerghur, was such as would do honour to any corps, however exalted in character.'

Asirgarh finally surrendered to Malcolm on 9 April 1819. As the Appa Sahib had already escaped to the Punjab where he could do no further mischief, the capitulation of the last great Mahratta stronghold brought the war to a close.

After a decade of resurgence, the Mahratta powers had crumbled, and if their fall is to be attributed to any single direct cause, outside their leaders' idiocy, decadence and complete lack of ethical standards, that cause will be found in the warning old Gopal Rao Bhow gave Sindhia when he told him that his regular

The Hydra

infantry, the brigades in which Skinner had served, would be his undoing.

The Duke of Wellington explains how this came about. In a despatch, written after the battle of Assye, he says, 'Sindhia's armies had actually been brought to a very favourable state of discipline, and his power had been made formidable by the exertions of the European officers in his service; but I think it is much to be doubted whether his power, or rather that of the Mahratta nation, would not have been more formidable, at least to the British Government, if they never had a European, as an infantry soldier, in their service; and had carried on their operations, in the manner of the original Mahrattas, only by means of cavalry. I have no doubt whatever but that the military spirit of the nation has been destroyed by their establishments of infantry and artillery, possibly indeed by other causes; at all events it is certain that those establishments, however formidable, afford us a good object of attack in a war with the Mahrattas, and that the destruction of them contributes to the success of the contest; because, having made them the principal objects of their attention, and that part of their strength on which they placed most reliance, they became also the principal reliance of the army; and therefore when they are lost the cavalry will not act.'

The sight of a really large concentration of Mahratta horse was most impressive, indeed terrifying to those who were ranged on the opposite side. So how was it possible for bodies of up to 20,000 of them to be put to flight by a squadron, or even smaller formations of European or Native Cavalry? The question was apparently the subject of considerable discussion among British officers at the time, and the following is the point of view of Colonel Valentine Blacker, who fought the Mahrattas in the Deccan and seems to know what he is talking about:

'The sheer size of a large body of Mahratta horse prevents the attack of a small but compact corps from being otherwise than partially received, and, as an equal front of an irregular body can never stand such a shock, the part menaced must give way. The body is thus broken, and each part acts on the principle of

avoiding an exposure to the sole brunt of the action, while the part immediately attacked flies. Did the remainder fall on the rear of the pursuers the chase must immediately be abandoned, but this would imply a degree of combination, the absence of which is supposed; and the facility with which disciplined squadrons divide, reassemble, charge and halt, by a single trumpet sound, keeps each part of the enemy in constant alarm of being separately attacked, which reduces all its efforts to the object of self-preservation. It was, therefore, no want of individual courage which produced the misbehaviour of the enemy, but rather the apprehension, however paradoxical it may appear, of being obliged to contend against odds. Our cavalry were too few in number to authorize the experiment of loose skirmishing. If that were tried it would soon be found that these horse, now so despicable in a body, would be most formidable in a detail. The best arm against the enemy's skirmishers are the Horse Artillery, which will always oblige them to withdraw. If to these be attached a party of either horse or light infantry, or both, as an active reserve, the cavalry may attack and pursue with little risk.'

Comparatively speaking the victory over armies was slight. Initial successes in minor actions had created such a belief in British invincibility that most of their opponents were kept constantly on the run. A far bigger job lay in winning the peace, for the campaign was not primarily an attack on any state or nation, but a system, and to tackle the problem was a dedicated team of soldiers and political agents that Hastings had partly inherited and partly picked himself. They were the instruments and interpreters of his policy, which if it is labelled expansionist was nevertheless liberal, humane and basically sympathetic to the needs of the people, their culture and the times.

Diametrically opposed to Barlow's principles, Hastings approached the Indian problem of his day with a willingness to accept what has since been termed the white man's burden. It has been said that the motives were not the highest, since the hydra

must needs be destroyed in the Company's own interests. Yet the scale on which the whole campaign was conceived, and the skill, courage and determination with which it was executed, lifted it into the epic class. And the conditions it achieved for the people make it the greatest single benefit bestowed by the British in India.

The task they faced in the spring of 1819 was Herculean. All Maharashtra and most of Malwa was under military occupation, and for the units involved the principal function was internal security. The defeated Mahratta armies were seething with resentment, and the strictest vigilance had to be maintained. Several plots were uncovered, including one against the Rajah of Satara, whom the British had restored to his throne with great pomp. There was another plot to murder all the Europeans in Poona and Satara, another to recapture the forts, and, although there was some sympathy for nationalist Mahratta feeling, a severe example had perforce to be made of the leading conspirators, who were mostly Concani Brahmins in the Peshwa's interest.

But an even greater security problem arose out of the thousands of non-Mahratta mercenaries who were left after the termination of hostilities without any means of livelihood. These still had their arms, and reports poured in every day of raids on villages by gangs of desperate men. The predatory habit was deeply ingrained, and it had to be stamped out ruthlessly.

The whole of central India and to a large extent the Deccan bore evidence of the tragedy of the lost decade. The picture left by those who were engaged in this work of restoration is one of utter desolation on all sides. Thousands of villages were deserted, their fields reverted to wilderness. For example, out of the 3,701 villages in the Holkar territory, 1,663 were deserted in 1817, and in Dhar, long the prey of the Holkars, 315 villages were deserted out of their total of 351. In some places tigers had become so accustomed to human flesh from corpses left unburnt or unburied that the villagers would scarcely venture from their homes.

Barlow had been right when he said the native states would exhaust each other with internal wars and disputes. But such a course had provided no real security, and it was next decided to adopt the alternative policy of undertaking the control of all the states, with an open assertion and assumption of paramount sovereignty, and full acceptance by the British of their obligations. It was based on the concept of a supra-national power acting as a referee in the political game, and having the means to see it was properly played. With the choice between that and anarchy, no ruler who had the option refused to co-operate. Anarchy had gone its full circle, so that even those who subsisted by plundering their neighbours had begun to feel the repercussions of a continued state of uncertainty and alarm. Divided, jealous and distrustful of each other, the rulers saw in the end the sense of surrendering part of their sovereignty to a common guardian to whom they could appeal, and in whose strength, good faith and integrity they could safely repose.

Upon that principle were based the peace treaties and engagements, and literally scores of these were negotiated, with all manner of people, from the highest princes in the land, down to head-men of wild aboriginal groups who took those historic documents away wrapped in their loin cloths.

Those who had served the British well were rewarded, like Bhopal, which was restored to the greatness she knew before the sway of the spoilers, and the Rajput states, which were generally relieved of paying tribute, and in some cases given gifts of land. But others who had been enemies were treated according to their deserts. The Holkar government, for instance, was reduced from independence to being one of the Company's dependent allies, besides being made to surrender large tracts of land to the Rajputs, disband its army, and maintain instead a British force.

No attempt was made to interfere in a ruler's internal administration of his state, though he was of course given all the advice he needed in this respect. A British Resident's main function was the regulation of the external affairs of a ruler, and so rigidly was this control maintained that some chiefs with a known propensity

The Hydra

for intrigue were not allowed to correspond except through their Residents. State armies were reduced to small forces for internal security and palace guards, and the private armies of the big Mahratta generals, formerly a serious drain on the resources of a ruler and an added blight on the country, were all disbanded.

Although several rulers did not transmit to their people all the benefits of the new political system that had been created for them, and mis-rule continued to a large extent, particularly in Rajputana, the general conditions of peace wrought an immediate transformation.

In three years Malwa had improved out of all recognition. For one, Holkar's revenues went up 400 per cent. as 1,120 of his deserted villages were reoccupied in that period. The remainder were reoccupied within the next few years, as industry and agriculture were revived. Indore changed from being practically a ghost town to a prosperous capital. As for Dhar, previously mentioned, its annual revenue rose in three years from 20,000 rupees to 267,000 rupees. By 1825 every village in the state had been restored, and practically the whole territory was under cultivation.

Such then was the pattern of the India Skinner helped to shape, a pattern which was to remain virtually unchanged through the succeeding generations of British rule.

One of his special assignments during the war was to support an infantry detachment conducting the Peshwa to Baithur, a place of sanctity near Cawnpore where he was to live in retirement on a pension of eight lakhs a year. There Skinner remained with the detachment for six months.

A significant fact is that the officer commanding the detachment was a captain — John Low: the Marquis of Hastings's scheme of 'local' ranks had met with so much opposition from the Army that in the end they became purely nominal. And even that empty shadow of authority for a soldier, as we shall see, the Army later wanted to take away. Yet so far from harbouring any resentment, Skinner was big enough to serve as assiduously

under a junior officer as he did under senior ones, a point which is clearly brought out in Low's final movement orders to him, dated Baithur, 18 July 1819.

After directing Skinner to place himself under the command of Major-General Sir Dyson Marshall, Captain Low goes on to assure Lieutenant-Colonel Skinner 'that the many obliging acts of private friendship which I have received from you, and the very cordial and useful aid which you have rendered me in my official duties on all occasions, have excited feelings of esteem and gratitude which I can never forget, and have fixed in my mind a most sincere respect for your character and the warmest interest for your welfare.'

After Skinner's departure, the Peshwa made one last bid to regain his throne. He escaped from Baithur and, heading south for Deccan, attempted to raise adherents but was soon tracked down by a party of irregular horse and captured. Later he was conveyed to a fort in Bengal and there imprisoned. That negatived his political influence, with the result that the Mahrattas, deprived of their one symbol of former greatness and power, finally abandoned the cause.

An empire had ended, an era had passed away, and, for Skinner, a major chapter in his life had been closed.

A King's Commission

As a reward for their services in the Pindari war, the *jaghirs* they held in Aligarh district were granted to the two Skinners and their heirs in perpetuity, and letters of congratulation poured in.

Sir John Malcolm's was among the first. 'One of our best Persian songs has a chorus - "*Allee Shah-in-shah Moobarik bashud!*" ' he wrote. 'In sober English, I wish you joy, and feel most warmly to Lord Hastings for his just understanding of your character.' It was entirely through Hastings's efforts that this measure of justice had been secured for Skinner, and Sir Charles Metcalfe dropped a hint of it in his letter: 'I cordially congratulate you on your good fortune, for which you are indebted to the kindness of Lord Hastings, and your own merits, which have powerfully recommended you to his favour.' But few could have been more gratified for Skinner than Sir David Ochterlony. 'I rejoice very much in the complete accomplishment of your wishes,' he wrote. 'But, valuable as the gift is, I think it has been made much more so by the very handsome terms in which it has been bestowed.'

By the close of 1819, India having settled down to a spell of peace, the 3rd Corps of Skinner's Horse was paid off; the 2nd, under Robert was posted to Neemuch; and the 1st, with James, returned to its headquarters at Hansi. It was there that he read an attack on irregular horse by 'a Bengal Cavalry Officer' in the *Calcutta Review* citing the desertion of 300 of Skinner's Yellow Boys at Muttra in 1804 as an example of the kind of loyalty that could be expected from that class of soldier. The article drew from the peace-loving Skinner a blistering reply.

Regarding the disaffection of his men, as he pointed out, all the regular units were similarly affected in those days of panic at the approach of Holkar. A further fifty of his men had also deserted him at Muttra, he said, but they had only gone with the rest of the British detachment which had fled without even letting him know!

Skinner sent a copy to Malcolm, and received in return a letter that must have soothed and gratified the indignant veteran. 'Calumnies upon corps or individuals have on some occasions their uses, when they elicit that truth from modest merit which gives publicity to actions that should never be forgotten,' Malcolm wrote from Mhow on the 23 December 1819. 'This has been the case on the present occasion. The plain and admirable statement you have given of these affairs – which the brain of the "Cavalry Officer", anxious to establish some favourite hypothesis, confused and misrepresented – will do you and your corps the greatest credit. You can both boast, that though there was in an hour of extreme trial some defection, never was the honour of a body of men better vindicated, than by the exemplary punishment (inflicted by the corps itself) of the criminal cowards who deserted their standards. The "Bengal Officer" should have thought more before he alluded to a partial defection of a few of your men, a solitary instance of desertion; and tried on that ground to stigmatise a class. But he is, I understand, dead; and let the subject, which the imprudence of friends has used his name to revive, die with him . . .'

Malcolm then analyses the character of Skinner's corps, and the particular relationship that existed between the men and their leader. 'With respect to the merits of our irregular horse, you know my sentiments. We have, both in our own services and as auxiliaries, many excellent bodies of this class of soldiers. Yours are the best I have seen of the former description, though I believe some of the Rohilla corps are very good; but yours have had great advantages, and have made admirable use of them. I do not mean to flatter, when I say you are as good an Englishman as I know; but you are also a native irregular, half born and fully

bred; you armed them, understood their characters, enter into their prejudices; can encourage them, without spoiling them; know what they can and, what is more important, what they *cannot* do. The superiority of your corps rests upon a foundation that no others have. Your *rissalders* are men, generally speaking, not only of character, but of family; those under them are not only their military, but their natural dependants. These are links which it is difficult for the mere European officers to keep up. They too often go upon smart men; promote, perhaps, a man of low family and indifferent character among themselves for some gallant actions; and then ascribe to envy, jealousy, and all unworthy motives, the deficiency in respect and obedience of those under him; forgetting the great distinction between regular and irregular corps in this point. Your personal kindness and generosity to your corps, have also effected much: and I have even found in Hindostan, fourteen years ago, and in Malwah during the last two, that every horseman of your corps considers, whether his duty requires him to act against the enemy, or to protect the inhabitants, that he has "*Sekunder Sahib ke alroo*" in his keeping. This, I delight in observing is a master-motive with them on all occasions.'

What Malcolm meant was that the Yellow Boys, in wearing Skinner's uniform, were conscious of the fact that they bore a reflection of his face, or character, and had therefore to live up to it. They were imbued with his principles, and an anecdote recorded by Baillie Fraser will show how this was done from their earliest days.

During the pursuit of Holkar, one of the Yellow Boys, a Pathan, came to Skinner and offered to assassinate the Bastard for a reward of one lakh of rupees. Skinner indignantly turned the man away, but, on realising that false reports might conceivably get abroad, mentioned the matter to Lake.

'What do you think?' Lake asked. 'Could the man really bring it off?'

'Does your Excellency wish me to speak my mind freely?' Skinner said.

'Undoubtedly,' Lake assured him.

'Well,' said Skinner, 'I have no doubt the man would be prepared to attempt the deed for such a sum of money, but what would be said in Hindustan of General Lake or the English? That, not being able to succeed by fair means, they had recourse to murder. If you will be advised by me, let the man be told publicly that the British will not stain their hands with treachery. Let him get the contempt he deserves.'

Lake agreed, and Skinner paraded his regiment. The Pathan was told that his offer had been conveyed to General Lake, whose reply was that he neither encouraged nor desired anything underhand.

The Pathan bowed his head in shame, and Skinner announced, 'Whoever brings me Holkar's head from the field of battle, fairly slain, shall have a splendid reward.'

It was Skinner's firm belief that treachery always got its just reward, and strangely enough it was borne out not long after when the Pathan was killed by a long shot in a skirmish. Seeing the man fall, Sikander turned to Lake, by whose side he was riding.

'Look, General Sahib, that traitor in my ranks has got his reward. That stray bullet surely had its orders, for though he was skulking in the rear it harmed nobody in front of him.'

Skinner, as testimonials from his various divisional commanders amply indicate, had brought his regiment to a peak of perfection, so he must have scratched his head somewhat to read in the final paragraph of Malcolm's letter a warning against carrying his zealous tendencies to excess: 'To conclude with my opinion on irregular horse . . . I know not, on the scale we now are, how we can operate in the field without them; but everything depends on their good management. They are no more fit for the duties of regular cavalry than the latter are for theirs. They are our light troops; and as such have their distinct place: to take them out of that is their ruin. You know my opinion, that you have gone to the *very verge* of making bad regulars out of admirable irregulars.'

Nor was the younger Skinner a whit behind his brother. Malcolm himself observed in Division orders at Mhow on 5 February 1819 after a review of the 2nd corps, that 'He cannot pay a higher compliment to Major Robert Skinner, his *rissaldars* and men, than by stating his opinion that the 2nd Regiment of Skinner's Horse is equal to the 1st not only in its discipline and appearance, but in those more essential principles of internal regulation, which maintain the character of a corps as high in times of peace as of war; by rendering it, from its good order and habits of regularity, a real protection to the inhabitants of the country in which it is employed. In this respect, every report Sir John Malcolm has received of Major Skinner's regiment since it entered Malwah has been the same, and it is one upon which he deems that officer and those under his command entitled to his particular praise and thanks.'

To appreciate the value of the foregoing testimony, we have to understand the first essential of the irregular set-up. A C.O.'s disciplinary powers were very limited: a directive in June 1809 laid down that privates and duffadars could only be discharged by their being pronounced 'unworthy or unfit' by a jury of five native officers of the corps, but if native officers misbehaved their conduct was to be reported to the Commander-in-Chief.

It was different of course in the case of *barghirs*, who were an officer's servants and could be hired or fired at his pleasure. But the system had been greatly abused, was frowned on and alternately abolished and restored, until it was finally done away with altogether in 1840.

The bulk of the corps were made up of *silladars*, all proud individualists, and to lick those men into shape, to control them and inspire them, an officer had little more to depend upon than his personality.

Surprisingly enough, Skinner possessed few of the physical attributes that might have been an asset to him as a dashing cavalry commander. Unlike Thomas, who was a giant, Skinner was of medium height. Unable to straighten his left leg on account of an old battle wound, he walked with a marked

limp.¹ He was then in his early forties, squat and very swarthy, with a square, heavy face, a large mouth and a hooked nose. This face was generally animated by a beaming smile, a pair of dark, shining eyes, and an expression of transparent sincerity. He was a simple-hearted man, extroverted, attentive to others, modest, guileless and very emotional. 'Often would the tears start from eyes, and his voice falter, when listening to some touching story, or some brave, generous act,' says Baillie Fraser, who knew him.

He was totally without assumption or affectation, and such was his humility that in order to remind himself of his origins he had an old spoon he used in his childhood placed on the breakfast table every day.

He never forgot a good turn, so there was always a crowd of pensioners he supported in his lines, men who had served him faithfully, or saved his life in battle on different occasions. One old friend was a charger he had ridden through the Mahratta wars, and once, in an encounter with the Sikhs, had carried him to safety by jumping over the heads of a party of the enemy foot who surrounded him after he had been speared. One morning this old horse broke away from his head and heel ropes and ran up to the window of the room where his master was sitting. The pensioner had come for a special purpose, to say good-bye. Throwing up his head, he neighed loudly and dropped dead.

In his manner Skinner was gentle, courteous and affable. His generosity was a by-word, as also were his kindness and liberality towards his men. All were devoted to him, which explains how he could afford to be, as it is said, strict and even severe with them. Disciplinary powers or no, there was not a Yellow Boy who did not dread his displeasure. It was only this which ensured their 'uniformly correct behaviour' in those rough and ready times, when the right to plunder was something a soldier had come to take for granted.

Skinner's enthusiasm did the rest, and it was a stirring sight to

1. Skinner received many wounds in the course of his fighting career, but records only two.

A King's Commission

see the whole corps out exercising, charging in line, or breaking into divisions and wheeling, and careering about in their various evolutions. Though the smartness of his men on parade had frequently been commented on, he did not, as Jacquemont puts it, 'approve of the eternal reviewing of troops, and grand manœuvres on smooth ground, a condition that is rarely present during a battle.' Their speciality was the Rathor charge, which Captain Mundy describes as 'an advance in line, two deep; the trot broke from a canter into a gallop, and on close approach the files opened out, and they came thundering on with wild shrieks and swords flashing over their heads. At the word "halt" each charger was brought up on his haunches within ten yards of the reviewing general.'

Skinner's favourite weapon was the lance, so most of his men were armed with it, with a round black shield, and a tulwar, the heavy Indian broadsword. He was not enamoured of the English sabre, with which the regiments of Native Cavalry had been equipped, and told Jacquemont he had never seen a native learn to use it skilfully. About fifteen Yellow Boys per risalah were armed with matchlocks, which they handled with astonishing skill and accuracy, despite the great length and weight of that weapon, firing and loading, and firing again, all at the gallop.

From all accounts, feats of arms seem to have been the main preoccupation of the Yellow Boys at Hansi. According to Thomas Bacon of the Bengal Horse Artillery, who visited the corps in 1835, 'The most striking of these are: bearing from the ground a tent-peg, fairly driven, upon the point of a lance; cutting a brass utensil in two, with the sword; striking a bull's-eye with a matchlock ball; picking up from the ground a card or small coin; all of them performed while the charger is at full speed. The whole regiment execute these exploits with wonderful dexterity, but some few are so nicely skilled, as to excite the astonishment of the beholders; among the first of these is Lieutenant Skinner, the Colonel's son.'

But none, as we know from Jacquemont, could beat the Colonel himself, who was considered one of the finest shots with a

matchlock in Hindustan.

From Lord Combermere, who reviewed the regiment at Hansi, we learn something of how the Yellow Boys managed those matchlocks which were all of seven feet long. The target was a bottle suspended from a gibbet, which the marksman galloped past at a distance of fifteen to twenty yards, with the matchlock supported across his bridle-arm. Just as he was passing, the reins were dropped, the gun raised in a short horizontal sweep, and fired. In this way, Lieutenant Skinner 'smote two bottles in his first two canters.'

The same exhibitions of dexterity astonished the Marquis of Hastings when he visited the unit in January 1815. After remarking on the Yellow Boys' skill at bottle-shooting, he goes on to describe how they skirmished with blank cartridges. 'They who pretended to be beaten showed uncommon adroitness in turning round on their horses and firing on their pursuers. The best part of the exhibition however was the skill of some of the men in parrying the lance with a sword. The lancer was supposed to have gained the advantage of placing himself on the left of the horseman whom he pursued. In that relative position, the horses going at full gallop, the swordsman quitted his right stirrup, and throwing his right leg over the horse, stood in the left stirrup facing to the rear and parrying the thrusts of the lance with the sabre. It must not be supposed that the lancers were inexpert. Tent-pins were driven into the ground with a mallet, so strongly that it would have been impossible for the most powerful arm to move them without their being previously loosened. Horsemen rode at these, and hitting them with the point of a spear forced them up from the ground.'

Their uniform was still the same as Skinner's original design - a yellow tunic, with a red turban and cummerbund edged with silver, drab pantaloons and jack-boots. Later the turbans were replaced by steel helmets, spiked, and hackled with a drooping plume of black horsehair, and draped with chainmail to the shoulders. A number wore surcoats of chainmail.

A King's Commission

In 1821, Robert died in circumstances which must have broken his brother's heart. The only clue to what happened comes from Emily Eden who visited Delhi in the entourage of her brother, Lord Auckland. Writing on 20 February 1838, Miss Emily says of Robert that he met a tragic end. 'He suspected one of his wives of a slight *écart* from the path of propriety — very unjustly, it is said — but he called her and all his servants together, cut off the heads of every individual in his household, and then shot himself. His soldiers bought every article of his property at ten times its value, that they might possess relics of a man who had shown, they said, such a quick sense of honour.'

Emily Eden, though a lively observer, is not always accurate, and it would be wise to accept her version of Robert's death with reservations. For one thing, Sikander left money to Robert's children in his will, which discounts the fact that he accounted for every individual in his household. What the Skinner family today believe is that Robert, finding the woman and a servant in compromising circumstances, killed them in the heat of the moment, and then shot himself. But the truth of the matter will never be known.

Robert was succeeded in his command by a European officer, Captain William Baddeley, of the 3rd Rohilla Cavalry and the Dromedary Corps. The name of Robert's unit was changed to Baddeley's Frontier Horse.

However, Skinner was still at the head of 1,000 men when he went to Calcutta in 1822 to visit relations and pay his respects to Lord Hastings, whose term of office was drawing to a close. Hastings promised that his command would not be lessened by a single man, yet no sooner was the Marquis out of the country than the corps was again put on its peace establishment of 800 men.

In 1823-4 Skinner operated almost exclusively in the Hissar district, suppressing a series of insurrections. His principal opponent during the period was a Rajput freebooter named Surjah, who had gathered together a band of 5,000 desperate men and did considerable damage before Skinner's Horse eventually

defeated and dispersed them.

On his return to Hansi from that particular expedition, Skinner was greeted by a letter informing him of a resolution of the Government to increase his command by another regiment equal to the one he then had.

'I lost no time,' he says, 'in promulgating this good news; so that all my old men, who, to use their own phrase, "had been praying for such a day", flocked around me; and in the course of a month and a half, I mustered my new corps, equipped, complete and efficient in all respects, men and horses; and immediately commenced drilling them. Shortly after I received orders to complete both corps from more of my veteran soldiers who had been disbanded, while the new appointments and promotions were filled by seniority with men who had distinguished themselves by their gallantry.'

All the regiments of irregular horse were redesignated Local Horse, and given serial numbers in a revised establishment laid down in May 1823. Thus Skinner's two corps became respectively the 1st and 8th Local Horse, and two months after the augmentation were presented with colours – crossed tulwars on a yellow ground with the motto *Himmud Murdon Muddut Khuda* (God helps those who help themselves) emblazoned in Persian lettering.

The establishment for the two regiments provided for only three sahib officers and a medical officer, and in February 1825, to Skinner's great joy, his second son, James, was made a local lieutenant and appointed his adjutant. James was seventeen.

It was the time of the first Burmese War, when the political sky was darkening for a storm of unrest and reaction that was soon to break all over the land. Hindustan was still full of ex-soldiers whose traditional profession had gone, but whose habits precluded their finding peaceful occupations. The police force, still imperfectly organised, was unable to cope properly, and the administration of justice was generally unpopular. Moreover, the land assessments, made by British collectors eager for promotion, were altogether too high, and local disturbances kept

troops constantly on the move. Matters were further complicated by events in the Jat state of Bhurtpore which was under the control of the Resident at Delhi, then Sir David Ochterlony in his second term of office.

On the death of the Rajah, not without suspicion of poison, the throne had been seized by his brother, Durjan Sal, in an attempt to supplant the rightful heir, a boy of five years of age. Prompt action was evidently desirable, owing to the disturbed state of public opinion in India; and Sir David Ochterlony, believing the child's life to be in danger, reported accordingly to Calcutta, and mobilised the troops at his disposal. This appeared to be succeeding. The usurping uncle offered to come to see Sir David at Delhi, and to leave the young Rajah to his care.

But the experienced soldier-statesman had not reckoned on the grandees in Calcutta, who not only preferred to put off the evil day, but resolved on 'making some arrangement by which Sir David Ochterlony should retire from active employment.'¹ A harsh letter was accordingly sent by Lord Amherst, the Governor-General, rebuking Ochterlony for what he had done and ordering him to 'remand to cantonments' all troops which had been called into the field. Indignant and mortified, the veteran resigned his appointment, retired to one of his Moghul mansions, and there died, in July 1825, of a broken heart.

But relations with Bhurtpore continued to deteriorate. The usurper became openly scornful and defiant, and British prestige and authority gained nothing in the eyes of the princes as they watched the Jat chief in his stronghold cocking snooks with impunity at the paramount power.

Since Lake's four unsuccessful attempts to storm the fortress twenty years before, it had left a lasting impression of British failure. 'Ah, you may bully us, but go and take Bhurtpore,' was a taunt Skinner had heard from many a refractory chief whose fort he was ordered to reduce.

Appointed to succeed to the Residency at Delhi for a second term of office, Sir Charles Metcalfe wrote to urge that vigorous

1. Mr Secretary Swinton to Sir Charles Metcalfe, 10 April 1825.

action should be taken against Bhurtpore without delay. It was next known that Lord Amherst's views were 'materially altered', and early in December the same year two strong divisions, totalling 27,000 men, were assembled to march against the fortress. They were commanded by the Commander-in-Chief in person – General Lord Combermere, who had commanded Wellington's cavalry in the Peninsular War.

When the measures taken against Bhurtpore had first been contemplated, Wellington, on being asked by a deputation from the Court of Directors to recommend a general whom he thought capable of carrying them out successfully, had mentioned Combermere.

'But,' said the leader of the deputation, 'we don't think very highly of Lord Combermere. In fact, we do not consider him a man of any great genius.'

'I don't care a damn about his genius,' Wellington replied. 'I tell you he is the man to take Bhurtpore.'

The 1st Local Horse was ordered to form part of Combermere's army – five risalahs of Yellow Boys, under Skinner, joining the division forming at Muttra, and five under Fraser joining the division at Agra. On December 8 and 9 the two divisions moved out from their respective stations towards Bhurtpore.

The Agra division was the first to get there, and to Fraser and his five risalahs went the honour of the first engagement of the siege. It was a brilliant affair and one of the most important single contributions to the campaign.

The site of the immense fortress was lowlying, a factor which added considerably to its strength, since the water from a *jhil* or lake in the vicinity could easily be discharged into the broad, deep moat. All that held back the water was a narrow *bund* or embankment which the Jats had but to cut to add immeasurably to their chances of his holding out, so as soon as Durjan Sal heard of the British advance he ordered the flooding of the moat. A party of his pioneers went to work on the *bund* supported by a number of his Jat horse, under the command of a petty Jat rajah named Numrana.

It so happened that as the two British divisions approached each sent a party of Skinner's Horse on ahead to secure the *bund*. Skinner unfortunately took a wrong turning in the dense jungle near Bhurtpore, which, instead of leading him to the *bund*, landed him in a skirmish with the Jats practically at the ditch of the fortress.

Fraser, however, was successful, not only in finding the *bund*, but in saving it. He arrived on the scene just after the enemy pioneers had cut a channel and the water had begun to flow. Charging the Jat horse, he routed them and pursued them so closely to the fortress that the defenders shut the gates against their own men, for fear the pursuers would force their way in with them. In the desperate fight that ensued, Numrana eventually fell, and the remainder of his men, losing heart, either fled into the jungle or surrendered. Whereupon Fraser, notwithstanding a spear-wound in the face, turned and galloped back to report the situation at the *bund*, and a party of British sappers were immediately sent up to block the channel.

Next morning, Fraser's detachment was ordered out again, this time to charge some enemy horse standing near the fort. The detachment galloped right up to the ditch, but the Jats, instead of waiting to receive them, darted back inside their stronghold, and the Yellow Boys had now to retire under fire. This movement Fraser carried out with a fine display of cool courage, not permitting his men to go any faster than at a walk, although they were well within range and some ten men and fifteen horses were hit before they were safely out of it.

Lake, with wholly inadequate means, had tried to take Bhurtpore as he had Aligarh, with a rush and a cheer. And in one of his brave assaults he had nearly succeeded. Combermere may not have possessed his genius, but he had what was required to crack this toughest nut in all India – an understanding of the problem, a tremendous fire-power of 110 battering-guns and fifty-two field pieces with almost unlimited powder and shot, and an inexorable, English thoroughness.

He began by carrying out a detailed reconnaissance, which

Lake had never done. He was also in possession of an exact plan of the fortifications, which, as he noted, consisted of a citadel and a continuous *enceinte* of thirty-five mud bastions, connected by curtains. Additions had been made to the *enceinte* since Lord Lake's time, and one bastion, called the Futteh Boorj or Bastion of Victory, was vauntingly declared to have been built with the blood and bones of those who fell in the last siege. The ramparts were of mud, strengthened by rows of tree-trunks buried upright and covered with a mixture of clay and cow-dung, put on in layers, each being allowed to harden under the fierce sun before another layer was added. Outside the nine gates were an equal number of semicircular earth-works. The citadel, completely commanding the body of the place, was of great strength. The ditch, 150 feet broad and sixty feet deep, had its counterscarp faced by a perpendicular revetment of stone. From the escarp rose a perpendicular stone wall of eighty feet, forming a *fausse-braye*, well flanked by forty semicircular towers. Above this, rose another stone wall, seventy-four feet in height and flanked by eleven conical bastions, whose total relief reached 173 feet.

A part of the country surrounding the town was covered by thick scrub and jungle, the remainder by ruined villages, small gardens and enclosures. The garrison of the fortress amounted to 25,000 men, of whom a considerable number were Pathans.

The second siege of Bhurtpore proved one of the most exciting and dramatic operations of its kind in British military history. The bombardment was intense. Apart from the breaching batteries which pounded continuously at the walls with their eighteen- and twenty-four pound shot, hundreds of shells were daily rained on the town and citadel, while companies of Gurkha sharpshooters sniped at defenders on the ramparts, and sappers carried on active mining operations under them. Vigorous counter-mining measures were adopted by the defenders, and many were the fights in the galleries underground, when the opposing parties met.

From time to time throughout the siege bodies of Jat horse would sally out in desperate sorties, and both detachments of

Skinner's horse made a name for themselves in several cavalry actions and skirmishes. Again and again they were commended by the Commander-in-Chief in orders. In particular there was a gallant affair at Konheir, when two of Skinner's *risalahs* engaged a thousand of the enemy cavalry and routed them with heavy loss. But there was also one less distinguished occasion, at least in the opinion of John Bennet Hearsey¹, then a captain in the 6th Light Cavalry.

Writing to his brother William, on 30 December 1825, Hearsey describes how in a skirmish 100 Skinner's Horse, on being charged by the Jats, instead of facing them, 'turned tail, and the first thing I knew of it was seeing them going bang through my squadron, which was in column of threes. I ordered it immediately to halt and front, but found the front of my squadron so hampered by Skinner's people, who had now pulled up and begun to fire on the enemy (who had got on the other side of some bad ground within fifty yards of us), that I could not charge them.'

It would be only fair to the Yellow Boys to add that a certain amount of professional jealousy existed between the Hearseys and Skinner, and John Hearsey may not be allowing for the fact that a *risalah* of irregular horse, acting as a skirmishing party for two squadrons of regular cavalry, as they were on that day, could hardly be expected to stand up to the shock of an enemy charge of far superior numbers.

On January 7 the second of the two breaches was reported practicable and orders were given for the assault to take place the following day. On the 8th three mines were sprung, blowing in the counterscarp, and an excellent descent into the ditch was thus formed.

There was a debate that morning as to whether the left gun breach was in fact practicable, and an anecdote relating to this provides a sidelight on Skinner's humility, which was one of the main aspects of his character. Combermere, like Lake, had invited him to join his staff in an advisory capacity, though from

1. The General Hearsey of Mutiny fame, and a cousin of Hyder Hearsey.

all accounts Sikander Sahib seldom opened his mouth to speak unless specifically asked for his opinion, and then only gave it with some reluctance. Such an occasion was the debate on the breach, when, after listening to the engineer officer who declared it fit to be stormed, the Commander-in-Chief turned to Skinner and asked him what he thought.

Skinner's reply was that he was not worthy to touch his Excellency's shoe much less offer him advice, but on being pressed said that not only was the breach impracticable but that the stormers would not be able to reach it from the ditch.

The engineer officer, Captain Irvine, disputed this, but said he would make sure, and mounting his horse galloped boldly up to the walls for a closer look at the damage. He returned untouched by the fire and patted Skinner on the back.

'You are right and I am wrong,' he said. 'The breach is not practicable, and the height of the counterscarp is too great.'

The result was that the assault was postponed. Skinner recommended that they should rely more on mining than bombardment, as the Mahrattas did, and Combermere added that the engineers should study carefully a scheme submitted by a Lieutenant Forbes for a combination of breaching batteries and mines in which the latter were to play the principal part. The plan, with slight modifications, was adopted and carried out.

On the 15th the batteries continued firing as usual and expended 1466 rounds of ammunition in the course of twenty-four hours. Next day the score was 1894 shot with a mine of 5,000 lbs. of powder exploded under the left breach with perfect success. Combermere now decided that the storm should take place next day, and called for dismounted volunteers from the cavalry to swell the numbers in the storming party. Skinner was asked to furnish 200 men, and the response he got to his appeal will bear out what has already been said of the feeling that existed between the Yellow Boys and their commander.

'When I made known this order, and called for volunteers,' says Skinner, 'the whole corps replied that if any selection was to be made, they wished me to do it myself, as, if left to their choice,

they would all go. This praiseworthy spirit left me no alternative. To avoid hurting the feelings of anyone, I refrained from all selection; but ordered the party to be told off agreeably to the roster of duty; but as I wanted a steady and experienced commander to lead them, I placed at their head Shadull Khan, one of my oldest, most faithful, and trustworthy native officers; and on the evening previous to their joining the detachment of cavalry volunteers, I paraded this fine party, and thus addressed them: "This is the first time of your going into danger when I cannot accompany you; but such is my affection for you all, that I cannot allow you to part from me without carrying with you something dear to me." Then taking by the hand my son James, whom, on the late augmentation, Government had permitted to enter my corps as adjutant, I went on - "See, here is my son! Take him, and gain for him such laurels as you have won for the sire."

'On this the noble Shadull Khan, of whose valour I had often been an eye-witness, stepped forward, and taking my son by the arm, called aloud in reply, - "Farewell, our own commander. Trust in God, who never deserts those faithful servants who do their duty; and who, please God, will now do their utmost to maintain the honour of the corps." Having said this, the whole party gave three cheers, and went off to join the camp of volunteers, while I and the rest returned to our lines with tears in our eyes.'

The storm was however deferred, and, a European infantry regiment having arrived in the meantime, the cavalry volunteers were no longer required. A 10,000-lb. mine, till then the largest used by the British engineers, was exploded to improve the breach, and the storm was then ordered for the following morning, when the springing of another three mines was to be the signal for the attack.

The preparations had been carefully supervised by Combermere. The role of every unit was carefully planned. Sappers were detailed to go in with the first wave, trained in throwing ropes with nooses to lasso the upright beams in the parapet, thus to provide hand-ropes, while bombardiers were to follow with

spikes to put out of action the captured guns. During the siege, many experiments had been made with ladders of different sorts. Those of bamboo had been found the lightest and best, and to prevent the escalading parties from losing their footing, the steps were bound with canvas stretched taut. For weeks men had practised escalading. Large numbers of hand-grenades were also used by the stormers, although most were dummies with fizzing fuses to scare the defenders. Grenades having proved almost as dangerous to those who threw them as they were to their enemies, Bhurtpore was the last occasion on which grenadiers carried the missile from which they originally derived their name.

At 4.30 on the morning of 18 January 1826 the British troops filed silently into the trenches. A little after eight an engineer officer reported to the Commander-in-Chief that the mines were ready. He at once ordered them to be fired, and they waited with mounting excitement as the defenders crowded on either side of the breach below which a fizzing gunpowder train raced towards the mines. For a few moments not a sound disturbed that clear bright morning, until suddenly the ground shook, the bastion in front heaved, and the wall disintegrated in a dense cloud of dust and smoke streaked with debris.

Timbers and stones falling into the trenches killed two sepoy standing close behind Combermere and Skinner, besides striking down Brigadier McCombe, who was standing between them, and several other officers and men near by.

As soon as the dust subsided the assault began. The breach was carried, with General Thomas Reynell standing on the summit of a bastion, exposed to heavy fire from the citadel, calling out his orders to the advancing columns. These filed off to the right and left along the ramparts, clearing bastion after bastion, from which numbers of enemy soldiers threw themselves into the dry ditch to escape from their assailants. After three hours of bitter fighting the town was in Combermere's hands.

When Durjan Sal saw there was no hope of holding out, he hastened to the citadel for his wife and two sons, and, followed by

a body-guard of forty picked horsemen, sallied out by the Kumbhir Gate. They cut their way past a picket, and, keeping close under the walls for some distance, made the jungle where they were joined by some more horsemen. They might have escaped, only that Durjan Sal broke out prematurely and they were surrounded and taken prisoner, each of the body-guard with between £2,000 and £3,000 in gold mohurs sewn into the lining of his saddle. The citadel surrendered soon after, with treasure to the value of nearly £500,000, of which Combermere's share was £60,000.

Thus ended the taunt of Bhurtpore, the capture of which exercised over the politics of India an influence that can scarcely be exaggerated. Sir John Malcolm, on the occasion of a vote of thanks to the Commander-in-Chief from the East India Company, said that 'if the siege had failed, it would in all human probability have added to the embarrassments of the Burmese War that of hostilities with almost every state in India.'

With the end of Bhurtpore's reputation for impregnability came a marked change in the attitude of a number of chiefs who for some time had been heading towards an open rupture with the British. They became tractable and submissive. For years Bhurtpore had been a symbol which had given some comfort to nationalist feelings, but now that it had gone an era had passed away.

And there was more to it. Woven into the romance of Bhurtpore's past were fantastic stories of the treasure that had found its way there for safe keeping in times of trouble and uncertainty. This had always been entrusted to the local Chumars, the skimmers of dead animals, who as untouchables were precluded from any hope of rising above their station, and were therefore considered beyond being tempted to betray what had come to be regarded by them as a sacred trust. Only in times of extreme national emergency could they be persuaded to reveal treasure, and the siege of Bhurtpore by Lake in 1805, Skinner used to say, was one of them.

His authority was a Jat chief who was actually present when the chowdri or head man of the Chumars pointed out a spot where on digging they came upon a chest containing 300,000 gold mohurs

(each worth £2 at that time). The Rajah was very thankful, and, on asking whether that kind of assistance could be repeated, the chowdri enquired what the Rajah's daily needs were to wage the war.

'About a lakh of rupees a day,' said the Rajah.

'Fight on then, Rajah Sahib, for two years if need be, and we will find you the means,' the chowdri assured him.

Needless to say, every effort was made to secure the enormous hidden wealth of Bhurtpore, but although extensive excavations were carried out, not a vestige of the treasure was uncovered.

After the Jat war an order was received from Calcutta for Skinner's first regiment to be reduced to 800 and the second to be disbanded. He protested, as a year had scarcely elapsed since they had been embodied, and many of the men were still in debt from the purchase of their horses, arms and uniforms. On Combermere's recommendation the ruling was modified, the disbandment order held in obedience, and the 2nd Regiment allowed to run down. It was finally broken up in 1829, after an epidemic at Hansi had decimated the Yellow Boys. Skinner was then obliged to complete the strength of his 1st Regiment out of the 2nd and discharge the remainder, though he did manage to obtain, after a struggle, a reduced pension from the Government for those among them with over twenty years' service.

It was through the earnest efforts of his friends in high places that Skinner was eventually decorated – with the C.B. Years before, his old friend Henry Worsely had tried to obtain it for him through the Earl of Buckingham, but had been told that as Skinner did not hold a commission from his Majesty the whole thing was impossible. After Bhurtpore, when Combermere recommended the Companionship of the Bath for Skinner, the same objection still applied, only now the redoubtable Malcolm was on the spot in London to suggest how it could be easily overruled.

When Charles Wynne of the Board of Control observed that

the only obstacle to Skinner's being made a C.B. was his not having a king's commission, Malcolm's reply was, 'Then why does he not hold a commission? Has any officer deserved it more? Out of the numerous individuals in Spain and Portugal to whom brevet commissions have been granted, name one who has done the same service to the state.'

It was unanswerable, and Wynne promised to recommend the double honour. He eventually carried the matter through in the face of some not very creditable opposition in certain Government circles in India, which was linked with an attempt to deprive him of even his paltry 'local' rank. However, prejudice had not blinded justice in London, and the following extract from a General Military Letter, dated 27 March 1829, will show what the Honourable Court of Directors thought of Skinner and of the disreputable attempts to stigmatize him. The ears of some of those *grande*es in Calcutta must have burned to read:

The remark made in the second paragraph of your letter under reply, that 'your Government was not a party to the recommendation in favour of Lieut-Col Skinner to the Crown, which obtained for that officer the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, in the East Indies,' has occasioned us some surprise; for, in your military letter of the 20th July 1816, you expressly recommend that the stationary as well as the then merely nominal rank of Lieut.-Colonels Skinner and Gardner,¹ and the stationary rank of Major to the then nominal Major Skinner should be granted, to which we acceded.

It is true that in your letter of the 26th June 1819, you withdrew your recommendation in Colonel Skinner's behalf, as you considered it to be no longer necessary for the public interest; but the only objection you then made to the principle on which your further recommendation had been founded was, 'that the measure would not prove acceptable to the officers of the army.'

In the same letter, you informed us that the rank of brevet-

1. William Linnaeus Gardner, commanding the 2nd Local Horse. In 1819 he was awarded an unattached majority in H.M.'s service.

major had been assigned from the Horse-Guards to Major Gardner, without any notification to us of such objections to that grant as you now think apply to a similar concession to Lieut.-Colonel Skinner; yet we think it must have occurred to you, that, if Major Gardner acted upon the rank then conferred upon him, he must in all general duties have commanded all officers of H.M.'s and our service of inferior grade, but must have even superseded his immediate superior, Lieut.-Colonel Skinner, that officer's rank being then only nominal.

We state these circumstances for the purpose of explaining why, when Lieut.-Colonel Skinner was again recommended to his Majesty for the brevet-rank which has since been conferred upon him, no objection to that measure was offered on our part. The object of granting the commission of lieutenant-colonel in the East Indies to Lieut.-Colonel Skinner, was, as you rightly apprehended, with a view to qualify that officer for the distinguished honour conferred on him by his Majesty, as a Companion of the Bath.

We regret that the granting of that commission to Lieut.-Colonel Skinner, even for a moment, should have produced unpleasant feelings in the minds of our military officers.

Lieut.-Colonel Skinner, holding from his Majesty the local rank of Lieut.-Colonel in India, must necessarily entitle him to all the advantages arising from the possession of his commission; and, consequently, to take rank according to the date of it, with the officers of the king's and of our service.

We feel ourselves bound to direct, in justice to that distinguished officer, that you should take no measure with reference to him or the corps he commands, which you would not have taken had he not received from his Majesty the local rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in India.

Lieut.-Colonel Skinner must not suffer in his professional prospects in consequence of his having deserved and received a peculiar mark of his Majesty's approbation; and we are assured that there is so much of high and honourable feeling amongst our military officers, as to lead them not to question the advancement

A King's Commission

of a good soldier, who had won his honours in the field.

We cannot conclude these remarks without expressing our surprise, that in cases such as that before us, involving in your opinion great military embarrassment, you had not thought proper to consult your Commander-in-Chief upon the subject, on which his personal sentiments would have been particularly acceptable to us.

Rank and honour had come at last, yet poor Sikander Sahib had the mortification of seeing his name omitted from orders in India. He wrote, enquiring about it, to Lord Dalhousie, who then had the promotion gazetted. Sikander's gratitude is touching. 'I can only say that my utmost endeavours shall now be directed to render my future services equally deserving of the approbation of my sovereign and my honourable employers as hitherto,' he wrote. 'Though old age is creeping fast upon me, I trust that the Almighty may yet spare me to lead my Yellow Boys again into action; for I could not desire a more honourable end to my career than to close it at their head as I commenced it.'

Lord Combermere next arrived in Hansi on tour of the upper provinces, and publicly announced the award at a review of the Yellow Boys, and that night, as was his wont on big occasions, Skinner laid on a mammoth feast at which the whole of his unit sat down with their exalted visitor and his entourage and escort. They were waited on by a multitude of servants, yet as was his custom on such occasions, Skinner served the most junior drummer in the regiment with his own hands.

In December 1829 Skinner, now aged fifty-one, and his son James went to Calcutta to say good-bye to Lord and Lady Combermere before they left the country. The Skinners went on board the frigate *Pallas* which was to take the Combermeres home, and spent four days in the ship, most kindly treated, says Skinner, by Captain Lord Adolphus Fitz-Clarence, who commanded the vessel. It was a delightful change, and one can imagine the scenes in the wardroom every night, the yarns of battles long ago. Obviously the Navy could not let a soldier steal

the whole show, for as he goes on, 'Captain Fitz-Clarence was obliging enough to treat me with the spectacle of a sham fight, and showed what a British frigate could do in action. To me, who had never witnessed anything of the sort before, all seemed like magic, and I was quite astonished to see the dexterity with which the vessel was manœuvred – after a continued roar of cannon and musketry you might the next moment have heard a pin drop, on the order to cease firing being given.'

At last the time came for Sikander Sahib to leave the ship. He shook hands with all the naval officers first. When, last of all, he turned to Lord Combermere, the latter with a sudden gesture removed his own insignia of the Bath and pinned it on Skinner, whose own had not yet arrived from England.

'Take it my friend,' the General said. 'I would not like to leave India without seeing you invested.'

Sikander could no longer control his emotion. He left the ship in tears.

The Governor-General's Vase

In 1831 Skinner lost a great deal of money in the catastrophic failure of the East India Agency Houses in Calcutta. It was a misfortune he shared with Lord Combermere, who had put the whole of his Bhurtpore prize into Alexander's, one of the banks that crashed. Indigo had also slumped, and there too Sikander Sahib was heavily committed, as he now had processing factories in seven or eight places.

It does not appear to have been the first time he was unfortunate in this respect, for Emily Eden reports he had made and lost several fortunes. Though he traded in several commodities, including weapons, he had a poor business head. His son, James, complains of his father's 'negligent style of conducting business', and that he left everything to his native agents. Moreover, he was improvident. 'When his speculations are fruitful,' says Jacquemont, 'he spends his money like a native.'

Yet he had the foresight to purchase land when this was going cheap around Hansi, in Delhi, near Muttra, Belaspur, Kaberi, and other places. It is not certain whether this had been done only after 1825, when Anglo-Indians were permitted to acquire land, or whether, like Hyder Hearsey, an exception had been made in his case, and he had been allowed to buy up tracts in the districts he settled. The latter seems likely in view of the fact that he already possessed a *jaghir*, and because by this period he was already the owner of a vast holding which included 194 villages valued at the time of his death, in 1841, at thirty-four lakhs. (By 1887, when the same property was divided by deed of partition

among his recognised grandchildren, its value had appreciated to upwards of 300 lakhs.)

If the reports of Sikander's sex life are even partly true, his less fortunate, unrecognised grandchildren must have been a legion; for it was said that after he died some eighty people claimed to be his children. Allowing for exaggeration, the fact suggests that in this respect, at any rate, Sikander's habits were wholly Moghul, wholly in keeping with those of any man in his position in the age and society in which he lived. Those were robust times. For years he was engaged in a lot of rough, settlement campaigning, during which it hardly would have been worth the trouble and expense of being accompanied by his 'wives' with their multitude of servants and weight of cumbersome baggage. And if, as it seems probable, he was not averse to being entertained by some of the houris and others who tacked themselves on to his camp, neither he, nor anybody else, would have given it a second thought. Fraser, his most intimate friend, the first and greatest Commissioner of the Delhi territory, according to Jacquemont, had helped to populate half the villages in his district.

Yet, far from being considered lax in his morals, Skinner is described as being strait-laced, and is recorded as having strongly disapproved when it came to his knowledge that his son, James, was carrying on with his wife's two sisters who were living in the family home at Hansi. James was told he must decide which girl he wanted. He chose a sister-in-law, Fanny Barlow. The second sister-in-law was then asked to leave, and Sophia, the wife, was given a house in Hansi, where she spent the rest of her days. As a father, Sikander was loving, sentimental, demonstrative, predictable, and approachable. But he was strict and unrelenting on a point of family honour.

For all his womanising, the name Skinner had universally gained was anything but that of a lecher. To his tenants he was a benefactor who by irrigation schemes had greatly increased the yield of their farms. He was a father figure, who knew them all personally, and lent them money when they needed it. They brought him their problems to solve, their disputes to settle. Nor

was his interest in the village folk confined merely to his own boundaries.

'I had the happiness to march over the Doab with him for nearly three months,' a friend of his wrote. 'We visited almost every village, and the zemeendars used to talk freely over their concerns and of the British rule; and all classes, high and low, used to come to our tents, and we went into their little forts and dwellings . . . Nothing was to me more beautiful than his great humility, to see him with the poor sitting on the floor, and conversing with them on their several cases . . . At the termination of our tour all the zemeendars came and paid the Colonel a visit for three days at his *jaghire* of Belaspore, and were feasted in turn . . .'

All the seven children actually recognised by Sikander were illegitimate. As there was no form of civil marriage in India at the time, and it was not usual for Christians and non-Christians to marry by any religious rite, Sikander's unions were cemented only by tacit understanding. This as far as the ladies were concerned – and they were all highly respectable – was perfectly satisfactory. It was sanctioned by tradition, and indeed was reputable enough even for nawabs and other noblemen, when it came to giving their daughters, complete with dowries, to Christian gentlemen. But the term half-caste had become a base insult to their progeny, and was sufficient for Sir John Bennet Hearsey's son, Andrew, to horsewhip the Editor of the *Pioneer* for publishing an article in which he is thus described. The article was written by a reporter named Rudyard Kipling.

Hearsey received a month's imprisonment for the offence, the punishment being made almost unbearable by the Superintendent of the Allahabad Prison, a Dr G. C. Hall, who happened to be a personal friend of Chesney, the horsewhipped editor. Daily, Hall goaded the prisoner, who thus describes one of the exchanges that took place after Hall had referred to the wife of a certain Mr Elliot as a half-caste: 'At this deliberate and premeditated insult, I was in a fearful rage and shouted back, "I will not have a lady of my people spoken of in those terms in my presence." "Oh!" he sneeringly replied, "you want to make a new name for your

people." I answered, "It is false. I will have my proper people treated with proper respect, and called by their proper name, and that is Anglo-Indians. The descendants of the Saxons and British were called Anglo-Saxons, their descendants with the Normans were called Anglo-Normans, and we are therefore Anglo-Indians."

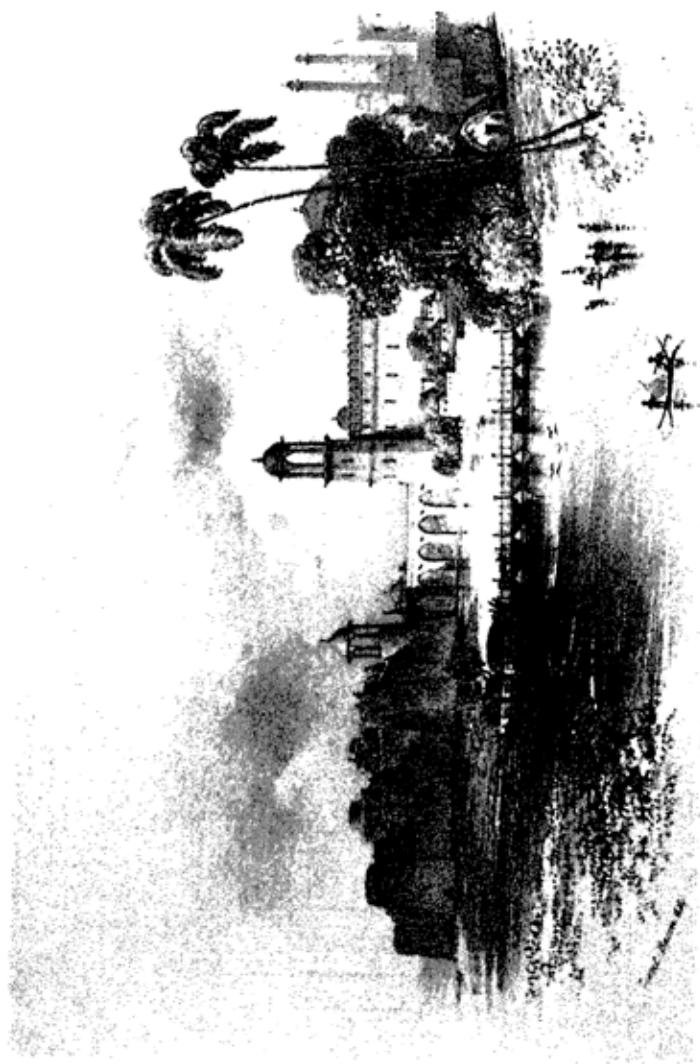
'Dr Hall continued in his angry, sneering manner, and said, "What definition does Johnson in his dictionary give of the term half-caste?" I replied, "Johnson was an old fool: how does he spell reindeer? And what definition does he give of the word Scotchman?" — my anger at this time being at boiling pitch, and it was with the greatest difficulty I could restrain myself from assaulting him for his repeated insults.

"Oh!" he replied, "the first is a compound word and the other is foolishness; but tell me what is Johnson's definition of half-caste." I answered, "I don't know and don't care." '1

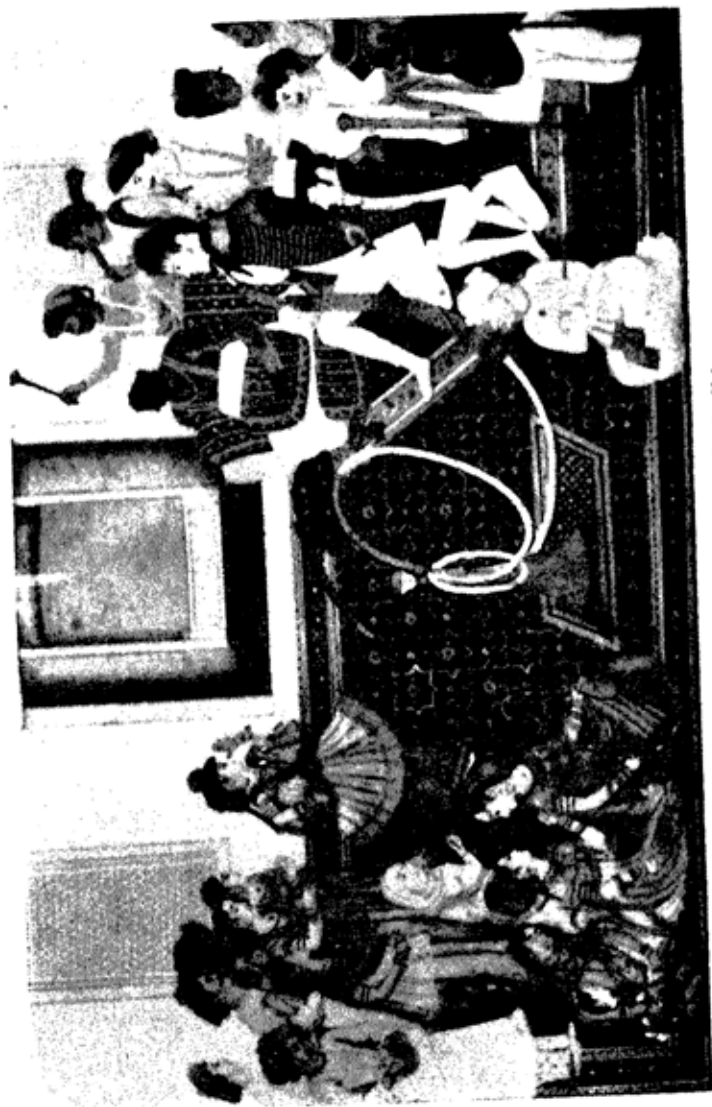
Joseph, Sikander's eldest child, is described by Lieutenant Thomas Bacon in 1835 as being known as one of the sporting characters about Delhi, having been educated at Delhi College and 'not wanting in general information, and a show of cultivation.'

According to Lady Clive Bayley, the daughter of Sir Thomas Metcalfe, Joseph was 'a marvellous creation, as you may imagine, when I tell you that his visiting dress consisted of a green customary coat with gilt buttons (or possibly gold as they were very pretty), very light claret-coloured trousers, patent leather boots, white waistcoat and gilt buttons, and a white necktie. He always carried a gold-mounted Malacca cane, with which he incessantly tapped his boots, and talked of the time when he was in the Guards, though he had never been out of India.' That was in 1848, when Joseph was fifty-two.

1. Johnson does not actually define 'half-caste' in his *Dictionary of the English Language*, nor in fact does he mention 'Scotchman' in the same work. However, Hearsey was right about Johnson's classic mistake. In the 1755 edition of the *Dictionary* 'reindeer' is spelt 'raindeer'.



View of old Delhi and The Emperor's Palace



Europeans at a nautch in old Delhi

Of Sikander's fourth son, then twenty-three, Lady Clive Bayley goes on to say, 'Another son was called Aleck Skinner, and when I went to call upon his wife, who was supposed to be educated English fashion, she offered to sing to me, and therefore set herself down at the piano and sang a song, playing the accompaniment herself; but both words and tune were unknown to me until I looked at the title page and found it was "Willikins and his Dinah" totally metamorphosed by her playing and her accent, and perfectly unrecognisable.'

James, the second son, was born in 1805. He was, as already recorded, Adjutant of the Regiment and a great horseman, swordsman and athlete. James, as one might appreciate, was the favourite of his father, whom he accompanied everywhere and whom he hero-worshipped.

Hercules, the third son, was born in 1814. He was educated at the Edinburgh Academy, and at his father's request joined the entourage of the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, from whom the following recommendation was addressed to the Court of Directors in a minute dated 17 May 1832: 'It has not been without considerable mortification that I have seen the large *jaghires* that have been given to many native sirdars upon their leaving the Mahratta service, whose merits and services can bear no comparison with those of Colonel Skinner; but I only revert to those by-gone events to support me in a request I have to make to the Honourable Court, that they will allow a son of Lieut.-Colonel Skinner's to be made an exception to a recent rule confining the choice to their own officers, and to be placed in the Nizam's contingent, or one of the corps of irregular horse. His name is Hercules Skinner. He is lately returned from England, where, for the last seven or eight years, he has been receiving the education of an English gentleman. He passed five months in my camp, and from all I could learn, his conduct and character are unexceptionable.'

Yet all that Lord William could obtain for Hercules was a local commission in the Nizam's army (Hyderabad Contingent). The young man became Adjutant, 1st Nizam's Cavalry, in 1834, and served in that capacity for many years. On furlough in

England, in 1847, he married Rose Ann, eldest daughter of Samuel Cardoza, of Redruth, Cornwall. Four years later he was elevated to the Unattached List, concerning which there is the following extract from a military dispatch from the Court of Directors, dated 3 December 1851: 'As a mark of our respect for the memory of the late Lt.-Col Skinner, C.B., we have much pleasure in giving you our authority to confer upon his son, Captain Hercules Skinner, an unattached commission as captain in the army of your presidency . . .' In January 1852, Hercules succeeded his brother James as Commandant, 14th Irregular Cavalry, till it mutinied in June 1857.

Thomas, Skinner's youngest son, was born in 1824. Little is known of him save that he died in 1864. Joseph died in 1855, James in 1861, and Hercules in 1866. But Alexander lived on, the sole surviving son, until 1885.

Like his father, Alexander lived the grand Moghul life, only more so. He is remembered as a tall, bearded figure in a bejewelled Moghul costume, the lord of an estate which was then about the size of Patiala. An autocrat, he kept the rest of the family in a state of penury, save for one daughter, Lena, who slept in a gilded bed suspended like a chandelier from the ceiling and rocked by her six hand-maidens. When Edward VII visited India as the Prince of Wales, Alexander entertained him: one of the Skinner heirlooms is a ring he gave Alexander to encourage him to do the right thing by the girl he was living with. She was a dancer whom Alexander had seen at a nautch and carried off to his hall, Lochinvar-style, and, curious to relate, it was Prince Edward of all people, who talked him into marrying her. Known in the family as 'Annie', she bore her husband eight children.

According to his will, Skinner had left all he possessed to his five sons. His wish was that the land should not be carved up, and as long as Alexander lived the estate was managed as a single concern. Once he died, however, disputes arose, and a suit was filed by the daughter of James by Fanny Barlow. The outcome was a deed of partition, in 1887.

The Governor-General's Vase

Of Skinner's two daughters, Elizabeth married, in August 1839, Radclyffe Haldane, a captain in the 45th Native Infantry, who died at Lahore in March 1849 of wounds received in the battle of Chilianwala. She remarried, in November 1853, George Wagentreiber, manager of the Delhi Printing Press. The second daughter, Louisa, married Captain Peregrine Powell Turner of the 61st Native Infantry. She died in Delhi on 31 January 1844, aged twenty-two. Nothing was left in their father's will to either of the two girls, which suggests that their share had already been given to them as marriage settlement.

Although Skinner's closest friends were Europeans, and he moved in their social world, he persistently resisted identifying himself wholly with them. Unlike his son, Joseph, and for that matter many others of the mixed community, his hobbies and interests were predominantly Indian. 'The Colonel is a man infinitely interesting to know,' says Jacquemont of him. 'He speaks only of the matters of this country, because they are the things about which he is most acquainted. If I were the Commander-in-Chief in India I would consult him often.'

One of Skinner's favourite topics of conversation was the variety of Indian castes, tribes and religions, and in the British Museum in London is to be found his classic work on the subject. It is in Persian, an exquisite illuminated manuscript entitled *Tashrih-ul-Akvam* (A Concise Account of the People) in which 104 paintings by native artists illustrate his descriptions of the entire caste system, beginning with the orders of religious mendicants, and continuing through the hereditary craftsmen and professionals, from the astrologers, conjurers, monkey men, bards and corn chandlers, to the ear-pickers, oculists, glass makers, lime burners, makers of brushes for cleaning thread, makers of plates of leaves, palki bearers, tanners and makers of clay figures. The manuscript, 462 pages written in large Nestaliq, with fine, gold-ruled margins, was completed at Hansi in August 1825, when it was dedicated to Sir John Mal-

colm. It passed to Malcolm's son, General George Malcolm, from whom it was acquired by the Museum in 1865 along with Skinner's *Tazkirat-ul-Umara* (A Description of the Princes), first completed in April 1830. A presentation copy, dedicated in verse to Malcolm, was completed in June of the same year.

The second work is in effect a Who's Who of the principal chiefs of Hindustan, with their portraits and historical notes on their families. It suggests a thorough knowledge possessed by Skinner, not only of the princely houses, but of the protocol attaching to each, and it was on this account that he became the Governor-General's adviser on all such matters.

The first occasion on which Skinner was formally consulted was in the latter part of 1831, when a meeting was arranged between Lord William Bentinck and Ranjit Singh. Apart from his desire to strengthen the new bond of friendship between the British and the Sikhs, the Governor-General wanted their overlord to take away with him a strong impression of British power, so bodies of crack European and Native troops were ordered to assemble at Ruper, on the banks of the Sutlej, where the meeting was arranged to take place. Two *risalahs* of the Yellow Boys formed part of this select detachment, and for Sikander Sahib it proved a memorable occasion. In its magnificence Ruper is reminiscent of the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

'We left Hansee,' he says, 'on the 1st of October, and marched by Kurnaul to Rooper, which we reached on the 21st, and found General Adams¹ already there, busily employed in clearing a large piece of ground for the encampment, in the front of which was a fine level parade, made to extend from the camp to the bank of the river, and occupying a space of at least two square miles . . .

'Preparations were likewise carried on upon the opposite bank of the river; and Runjeet's men had cleared a fine space and planted a garden, in the centre of which the royal tent was to be pitched. Wheat had been sown, too, in the shape of men, birds, horses, etc., in which forms it came up for the amusement of the chief, as well as to give verdure to this royal and magnificent

1. Sir John Withington Adams.

encampment, as the place cleared out for the Maha Rajah's tent was under a barren rock, although on the bank of the river. A bridge of boats was also prepared by the Maha Rajah's people; and though the boats were very small, it was yet sufficiently strong to allow the royal sowarees, consisting of elephants, horses, etc. to cross to and fro; nor did a single accident occur during the whole time of the meeting . . . The royal tent was made of red broadcloth, and the kunnauts (tent walls), which extended on each side to the river, leaving the front view open, were made of yellow silk and satin, with an entrance resembling the gateway of the royal palace at Dehlee, so that elephants with howdahs might pass under it. Besides the royal tent, there were two or three smaller ones of rich cloth, as also a silver bungalow or pavilion, something in the shape of a Hindoo temple, about ten feet square. This was placed on a hill in a very conspicuous situation, so as it might be seen very plainly from our encampment, and was carried about and placed as suited the different ceremonies and occasions.'

Ranjit Singh arrived at 8 a.m. on the 25th, with his escort of 16,000 Sikh horse and seven regiments of infantry, to the thunder of a royal salute of 101 guns. Deputations crossed and recrossed the river from either side, with further welcoming salutes, to prepare the way for Ranjit's visit to the British camp on the next day, and Bentinck's returning the compliment the day after. Troops were inspected, health was solicitously enquired after, rich gifts were exchanged. These included two magnificent horses from Skinner's stud, which were presented by the Governor-General to the Maharajah.

Ranjit at fifty-one was a small, wizened gnome with a moth-eaten beard tapering to his chest, and a dark, lecherous face pitted with the scars of an attack of smallpox in childhood that had also left him with a blind left eye like a clouded glass marble. He sat with one leg tucked under him on a beautiful golden chair inlaid with precious stones. He was gorgeously dressed and bejewelled, with, prominently displayed on his left arm, a diamond as large as a hen's egg, one that he had obtained by starving the

exiled Afghan king, Shah Shuja, who had sought refuge in Lahore – the Kohinoor.¹

Ranjit's court was the most splendid, barbaric and depraved in India. In his entourage was a band of about one hundred Amazons, specially selected for their beauty, from Kashmir, Persia and the Punjab. They were magnificently dressed with yellow turbans inclining to one side and armed with bows and arrows. When not riding out with the Maharajah, mounted on fine Arab steeds, as his ceremonial bodyguard, they sang and danced for his delectation.

The Sikh contingent gave a display of their military skill which left Skinner cold. They 'went through some of those manœuvres which were practised by our troops about a century ago,' he recorded. 'All was done in slow time, and each manœuvre took up fully a quarter of an hour . . . The artillery were much inferior to ours; and all their movements were done at a walk.' So much for the work of Ranjit's cadre of French officers.

As they had done a quarter of a century before, the British troops, European and Native, drew shouts of admiration from the Sikhs. Ranjit was particularly impressed by the gunners, who with a howitzer showed how they could spatter a curtain with grape at various distances. And, says Skinner, 'wishing to put their skill to a still severer test, he requested Lord William to have an umbrella put up as a mark near the target, a distance of about 1,000 yards, and direct the artillery officers to fire at it with round shot. The first two or three discharges being ineffective, Runjeet himself dismounted and laid the gun; but neither his Highness nor some of his best officers, whom he desired to try their hand, were any more successful. Captain Campbell, of the Horse Artillery, then took their place, and the first shot he made sent the umbrella to pieces, on which a roar of applause rose from the Sikhs.'

On their last evening at Ruper, Ranjit was the host at a lavish party in his gorgeous pavilion. "The troupe of Amazons also made

1. Acquired by the British after the second Sikh war, in 1849, as one of the spoils of victory.

their appearance, and sat in the centre of the company. Each set danced alternately before the Maha Rajah, who seemed very merry on this occasion, and was most attentive to his noble guests, Lord and Lady William Bentinck. Wine (thrice-distilled, to which crushed pearls were added as a rejuvenator) was brought in and very freely distributed in golden cups to the guests; Runjeet taking a particularly large allowance. After he had got somewhat elevated, a quantity of gold dust was brought and placed before the Maha Rajah, who ordered the nautch girls to throw it over the guests and he seemed much to enjoy the joke; for he also threw it at the ladies and gentlemen who sat near him, as well as at the dancing women. A number of his chieftains, too, were present, but none of them appeared to know how to conduct themselves; and instead of the manners of noblemen and gentlemen, displayed those rather of village churls.'

Skinner's view of Ranjit's courtiers is interesting as it would be hard to find a more insolent, debauched and narcissistic lot in history. The Eden sisters thought they were absolutely superb. Yet within a few years of Ranjit's death nearly all had died violently in the struggle for supremacy. Their funeral obsequies were each a holocaust of feminine beauty. When Suchet Singh, the great dandy of the Punjab, was slain, 310 women were burnt in his honour. At Ramnagar 150 were burnt with his head. The remainder perished at Lahore, Jammu, and in their homes.

Shortly after the Ruper event, Skinner was asked by Lord William to accompany him on a tour of Rajputana, the first ever undertaken by a Governor-General. All the Rajput rulers and principal chiefs had been invited to meet him at Ajmir, and there they came in their grand cavalcades. A hundred years later the protocol for meetings between the native princes and the Viceroy was fully laid down, but in January 1832 there were no precedents, and it was largely on Skinner's expert advice that such extremely delicate questions as the scale of artillery salutes for the different chiefs, the gifts they were to receive, how they were to be met and where they were to be seated, were decided,

acted upon, and laid down for future generations to follow.

Under this dispensation, Amir Khan, now with the title of Nawab, received thirteen guns, and was welcomed by the Governor-General, who stood to offer him and his sirdars seats in grand durbar before an assembly of 20,000 people.

Henry Prinsep, who was present, describes the Amir as a stout-built, hale-looking man of sixty-five, rather under middle height with decided Semitic features. 'The manners, the appearance, and everything about the Moosulman soldier of fortune, were in perfect contrast with the hereditary princes of Rajisthan, — the slaves of forms and ceremonious etiquette, whose lives are passed within palace walls, in the search of selfish, sensual enjoyments, diversified with occasions of ostentatious display to gratify a pompous, ignorant pride. The Pathan came to the door of the audience-tent very plainly dressed, and with no display of state. He rode in a common, open palkee, with one or two of his sons and principal officers on horseback alongside, and with altogether not more than twenty attendants. The high polish of the Courts of Dehlee and Lucknou was, of course, not to be looked for in the manners of a man who had raised himself from nothing : but the roughness of the soldier was tempered with the easy good breeding of the man of the world, and the impression made by Ameer Khan's first address was highly favourable. In conversation he was frank, affable, and lively, fond of anecdote, and ready in repartee. He greeted everybody he knew before, personally, or by character, with a good-humoured profession of joyful recognition, and with the ease of a man accustomed to deal with strangers, and with people of all characters and professions. At the interview with the Governor-General he was himself everything, his sons and surdars sat as mute listeners, and his vukeels and ministers had no call, and no opportunity to thrust in a word.'

An English band played during the interview, in the middle of which Bentinck gave the Nawab an emerald ring that he took from his finger. Another thirteen guns thundered on the Nawab's leaving the tent; and finally, the next day, after reviewing his

small army, Bentinck gave him his own sword from his waist.

The goodwill tour proved a great success, and when it was all over, Lord William recorded his gratitude to Skinner in a minute to the Court of Directors. It is a remarkable tribute from a dynamic Governor-General:

In the course of a long and varied service, in which it has been my good fortune to make the acquaintance of many of the most distinguished officers belonging to the armies of Europe, as well as those serving under the British banners, I do not recollect to have met anyone engaging more general esteem than Lieutenant-Colonel Skinner. The records of the supreme Government bear ample testimony to his useful and gallant conduct, so often the subject of commendation by that distinguished commander, Lord Lake; and upon every subsequent occasion of military operations, receiving the same meed of applause from all succeeding Commanders-in-chief. He enjoyed in an equal degree their private friendship and their public respect.

Having requested Lieutenant-Colonel Skinner to afford me, in my recent tour, the benefit of his experience in the manners, feelings and habits of the people of Rajepootanah, with a view to rendering my meeting with the Rajahs assembled as Ajmere as conducive as possible to their satisfaction and to the interests of the British Government, I then had the opportunity of witnessing the high opinion entertained of him by those who had been his companions as well as his opponents in arms when he was in the Mahratta service. Each chief was accompanied by some of the old sirdars; Meer Khan, in particular, the most distinguished partisan in the last wars, had upon frequent occasions come into contact with our brave "Secunder Sahib" (as he is known by all), and it was pleasing to hear them narrating their former military exploits. There was this marked distinction between the two; that Meer Khan took to himself the merit of every success, while Lieutenant-Colonel Skinner gave it always to the brave men whom he commanded.

I cannot refrain from relating an anecdote told me by an old

sirdar in the Jeypore service. He had a command at the battle of Buxar in 1764, and he must have been 100 years of age: but he still retained the erectness of youth, a fine martial appearance, and his faculties unimpaired. He described to me, with a manner and expression glowing with gratitude, how, in the battle of Jeypore (Malpura), Colonel Skinner, then a youth leading a charge, captured a field battery under his command; and by his humane and decided interference saved his life.

As a token of his friendship and esteem, Lord William Bentinck presented Skinner with a vase with a 192-word inscription expressive of the highest praise, while further commendations reiterating these sentiments came from Sir William Macnaghten, the Secretary to the Governor-General, before his Excellency left Delhi for Simla in April 1832. From Lord Clare, Governor of Bombay, who also was at Ajmir, came a sword accompanied by a letter, dated 27 January 1832, that begins, 'Your own sword has performed such good service to the British Government, that it is quite unnecessary to send you another; but I cannot resist begging your acceptance of that which I send by the bearer; being confident that whenever your services shall again be required in the field, you will use it in the service of Government with the same zeal and success against the enemies of England, which has in former and more perilous times than the present, so much distinguished your honourable career in India.'

For the last ten years of Sikander Sahib's life we have to turn to the travellers who visited Delhi at that time, and to his contemporaries who lived there. It was a Delhi redolent of its great past, in the twilight of the Moghul Empire, with the last of its emperors, Bahadur Shah, a British pensioner, living in tattered grandeur and squeezing baksheesh in the form of *nuzzars* from visiting British officials.

It was a Delhi thriving in the first spell of real stability in eighty years, as we can see from Emma Roberts's description of Chandni Chowk, the famous central bazaar of the city: 'This

street is usually crowded with a very picturesque-looking population. Delhi being a grand mart of commerce, multitudes of persons resort to it from the most distant provinces. Rare birds from the hills in cages, cheetahs hooded and led along by their keepers, Persian greyhounds, and Persian cats, are exposed in the streets for sale, the venders sitting or walking perfectly indifferent to the multitudes of hackeries, the strings of camels, the columns of elephants, and the troops of horses which jostle their way through dense throngs of pedestrians, engaged in chaffering, bargaining, quarrelling, or in their various trades, which are carried on in the open air outside the houses. Though the sight is both striking and novel it requires strong nerves to bear the heat, the glare and the noise. The gaudy colours of the dresses worn by the Moslems and Hindoos, when seen under the beams of the mid-day sun, are exceedingly dazzling. Glittering skull-caps, stuck upon one side of the head, are much affected by the Mohammedan dandies, and yellow and pink enter largely into their costume, but the sight is wearied by gazing upon the vast numbers of showy figures on horseback, or on foot, mounted upon various animals, or lounging over the balconies and balustraded roofs of the houses. Other senses are not less strongly assailed; the noise is absolutely stunning. In addition to men's voices raised to their highest pitch, shouting, hallooing, or talking in all the tongues of Babel; there is the creaking and rumbling of ungreased wheels, the braying of horns, the beating of tom-toms, the neighing of horses, groans of camels, and trumpetings of elephants, mingled with the screams of birds, and the sharp, short roars or occasional growls of the hunting-leopards: while such a fume arises from the garlic, and other odoriferous articles employed in the cookery, that the effluvium is almost overpowering. Frequently the confusion is heightened to a tumult by the uproarious progress of the sowaree of some native of rank. The great man sits at his ease on the back of a tall elephant, or lolls lazily in his palanquin, in either case perfectly indifferent to the inconvenience or damage which his retinue may occasion. A promiscuous throng, some on camels, some on horseback, and

many on foot, clear the way before him, rushing onwards, brandishing their weapons or their maces, and making his titles heard above the din and clamour which would defy less stentorian lungs. Such is a faint picture of the streets of Delhi, which with their itinerant musicians, their hanging tapestry flowing in long draperies from the top of the houses, their striped purdahs or curtains, the clinking of makers of hardware, the glitter of their brass and copper vessels in the sun's rays, must be seen, to be duly appreciated.'

Some of the finest brains in the Company's service had been sent to Delhi, and with few exceptions they came to stay. The legendary Ochterlony had built several mansions in the classical Moghul style, and lived in the style of a Moghul nobleman. Bishop Heber, who in 1825 met him travelling in a carriage and four, describes him as 'a tall, pleasant-looking old man, but so wrapped up in shawls, Kincob fur and a Moghul furred cap, that his face was all that was visible.'

His successor, for a second term of office, was the great Sir Charles Metcalfe, who preferred travelling by elephant instead of on horseback so that he could read on the move – mainly Persian literature. He spent his weekends at a retreat in the Shalimar Garden outside Delhi, where his Moghul family lived in leafy seclusion.

His brother, Sir Thomas Metcalfe, who became Commissioner of Delhi, was one of those rare Englishmen who, although he inherited the family estate of Fernhill in 1846, never thought of returning to it. He transferred all his family treasures to the mansion he built on the banks of the Jumna, and here he lived the expansive life of a pre-Mutiny 'nabob', until his death in 1853.

Among the principal landowners was the old Begum Somru, whom Bishop Heber describes as a 'little queer-looking old woman with brilliant but wicked eyes'. She still maintained her ragged little army of 3,300 officers and men with forty-four guns – quite unnecessarily, since she had been guaranteed protection by the British. Though it cost her four lakhs a year, she had grown enormously rich by merciless rack-renting, and

could afford to salve her conscience by giving away over ten lakhs to various charities, and by building, besides two churches, a college for Roman Catholic priests. She was one of the great hostesses of the period and gave frequent parties at her palaces in Delhi, Meerut and Sirdhana, where she adopted a European way of life, occasionally appearing in public, in her carriage or on an elephant, and dining at table in the presence of male guests.

She had no children of her own, but was much attached to her stepson's daughter who was married to a Colonel Dyce, at that time the manager of her affairs. The Colonel lost favour with the Begum, and was obliged to resign the management to his son, David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre, who, on her death, came in for the bulk of her fortune of about sixty lakhs of rupees.

Skinner had been an old friend of the Begum, and, on hearing that her heir contemplated going to live in Europe, composed a Persian ode strongly dissuasive of the step. But Lord Combermere, who had promised the Begum to sponsor the young man, advised him to the contrary. Through Combermere he was introduced into London society, where he met and married Mary Jervis, a daughter of Viscount St Vincent, but as a number of their friends had anticipated the union proved unhappy. Dyce Sombre had oriental ideas as to the position of women; he was inordinately jealous of the ordinary attentions paid to her by other men; and he was wilful to a degree bordering on eccentricity. He stood for Sudbury, and was returned in 1841-2; but he was unseated on a petition of bribery and corruption. Soon afterwards, his excesses brought upon himself the interference of the Lord Chancellor, and a commission of medical men having declared him to be of unsound mind, his property was put under the guardianship of the Court of Chancery. He spent the next ten years trying to prove his fitness to administer his own estate, and died in 1851 with the question still undecided.

Another famous personality seen at Delhi from time to time was Hyder Hearsey, who since the defeat of George Thomas had made a name for himself settling the Bareilly district, driving Gurkha invaders from the Terai bordering on Oudh, and ex-

ploring the source of the Ganges. He had married Princess Zuhur-ul-Nissa, a daughter of one of the deposed princes of Cambay, and is one of the great-great-grandfathers of the present middle generation of Skinner's direct descendants at Hansi.

Hyder's close associate was Colonel William Linnaeus Gardner, who like Skinner had raised a very fine corps of irregulars – then known as the 2nd (Gardner's) Local Horse. A nephew of the first Lord Gardner, and at one time in the service of Holkar, Colonel Gardner was married to Manzil-ul-Nissa, the elder sister of Hyder's princess, whose eyes he had first seen above her veil when he came to her father's palace on a mission from Holkar. As a condition of the treaty he negotiated, Gardner had asked for and obtained her hand in marriage. As a result of their marriages, both Hearsey and Gardner had acquired considerable estates under *firman* (royal mandate) from the Emperor Akbar Shah, whose niece was married to Gardner's son, William James.

Such then were some of the well-known personalities of Delhi with whom Skinner moved in a society of sophisticated native chiefs, British army officers, government officials, doctors, college professors, rich bankers and merchants.

Like Ochterlony, Skinner lived in the style of a rich Moghul. He had been given a title by the Emperor, and his seal bears the inscription Nasir-ud-Dowlah Colonel James Skinner Bahadur Ghalib Jang – Most Exalted, Victorious in War.

When he travelled, his cavalcade of elephants, carts, bullocks, and carriages was escorted by *risalahs* of Yellow Boys. He paid occasional homage at the Emperor's court, where the last of the line of Timor played out his grand charade of majesty to the very end. Aged and immobile, like an antique ivory carving, the Emperor would sit upon the cushion of his square throne, a relic of his crumbled Empire, in a decayed and desecrated Hall of Private Audience where once the mere frown of his ancestors had made great princes tremble. Little now remained of the exquisite ornamentation save the inscription in Persian that ran round the delicately carved walls: 'If There Be Paradise On Earth, This Is

It, This Is It, This Is It.'

Skinner's own Hall of Private Audience, in his mansion at Hansi, was modelled on the Emperor's. At Hansi, Skinner generally held his durbars and entertained distinguished visitors. His manners, say the travellers who visited him, were a mixture of Asiatic and European. They were Asiatic in that all the courtly formalities were observed, that he smoked an enormous hookah, and that his women never appeared in public unveiled. In most other respects his manners were European. He had a second mansion in Delhi, near the Kashmir gate. Set in beautiful gardens he laid out himself, it later became the seat of the Hindu College, and is now a Government office. There was a third residence at Bulandshahr. And a fourth, at Belaspur. At the Belaspur house, according to Thomas Bacon, he erected fortifications and mounted eighteen or twenty pieces of heavy ordnance. 'Although this is merely a toy of the old man's, it might be turned into very efficient account if need be,' Bacon adds.

Having lived through an age of uncertainty, Skinner never overlooked the possibility of upheaval and change. He had seen too much of strife to rely entirely on the protection the Government afforded, and had seen too much treachery to give his trust completely. Until the latter years of his life, as a precaution against assassination, he seldom slept two consecutive nights in the same bed, and would not tell even his personal servant exactly where he intended to sleep until the last moment.

His hospitality was proverbial. 'It was his joy to assemble a knot of friends at his home at Delhi or at Hansee,' says Baillie Fraser, 'and many a pleasant day, and week, and month was spent with "Old Secunder" in the pastimes or pursuits which then made India so delightful and which he so well knew how to promote. The joyous excursions that were made amongst the interesting environs of Dehlee, when pitching our tents amidst ruins that extend for twenty miles around it - now at the mausoleum of Hoomayoon, now at the gigantic pillar of the Coutub, or again among the Cyclopean walls and speaking silence of the old city of

Toghlucabad, till the evening saw us all gaily seated round our well-spread table, hookahs in mouth, enjoying the comforts of excellent fare, and no less pleasant converse – these were enjoyments which none who partook of them will ever forget.’

From Bacon, who visited Hansi in 1825, we have it that Sikander, at fifty-seven, was growing very stout as well as old, and that his complexion was ‘darker than that of most Musselmans, although in his youth he is said to have possessed skin more indicative of his mixed origin’.

Time and wisdom had mellowed Sikander into a grateful acceptance of his origins. The old bitterness had gone as his stature increased, and moreover the old discriminatory legislation against Anglo-Indians had been completely abolished in 1833.

Though essentially a man’s man, the women who recorded their meetings with Sikander Sahib found him gallant and amusing. The Eden sisters, Emily and Fanny, found he was the person they liked best in Delhi and much better society, Fanny thought, than any of the white colonels they had met.

When Lord Auckland visited Ranjit Singh at Lahore on high political business, his sisters accompanied him. After the great durbar Emily felt ill, because it was so stuffy in the durbar tent. Fanny too felt ill – on reading the dinner-list later that day! Alone she would have to face forty-two officers whose names she had never heard before, except that dear, brown, delightful Colonel Skinner – and she was sure she would not be lucky enough for him to be placed next to her.

They had been to a wonderful *nautch* at his place in Delhi, all fitted out in the native fashion, with a beautiful marble stage at the side of the house, where his guests were entertained by some of the best native singers and dancers in the city. They acted passages out of Vishnu’s and Brahma’s lives, and sang Persian songs which Emily thought made a very ugly noise, though Major Byrne, who spoke Persian, kept saying, ‘Well, this is really delightful – this I think is equal to any European singing – in fact there is nothing like it.’ One fat little *nautch*-girl sang a pas-

sionate song to George (the Governor-General) with little meaning smiles, which Emily thought attracted his lordship, though she felt it might have been a bit too much for him had he heard Major Byrne's translation – 'I am the body, you are the soul: we may be parted here but let no one say we shall be parted hereafter. My father has deserted me; my mother is dead; I have no friends. My grave is open, and I look into it; but do you care for me?'

Fanny, meanwhile, was concentrating on Colonel Skinner. She believed he had been brought up a Moslem, though he was, it seemed, a very unusual one. Once in his youth, as he had lain wounded on the battlefield, he vowed that if he lived he would build a mosque. However, when he was rich enough to fulfil that vow, he decided he would also build a church. Fanny asked him why.

'Where there is God,' he told her, 'there is religion.' Whatever that meant it certainly sounded profound.

It was his *zenana* that gave Fanny the idea that Sikander Sahib was a Moslem. Miss Emily too felt the strong Moslem influence. 'His Protestant church has a dome in the mosque fashion, and I was quite afraid with the best dispositions to attend to Mr Y., little visions of Mahomet would be creeping in,' she observed.

The truth is that Skinner, in his early years, had been strongly drawn to the Moslem faith, though when the Misses Eden knew him, in 1838-39, he was a fervent, practising Christian. He read his Bible every day, and as to his devotion, we have this from a friend who spent some time with him in Hansi: 'During the hot winds we used to sleep on the verandah for the sake of coolness. Long before daylight I used to hear him at his prayers with most earnest utterance. At all times he expressed a feeling of deep gratitude to the Almighty for the worldly advantages that had fallen to his share, and an entire dependence on Him for the future.'

There is some uncertainty as to Skinner's real reason for building the Church of St James, opposite his house at the Kashmir gate in Delhi, and it is possible he touched up the story each

time he told it to suit a particular audience. To others, besides Fanny Eden, he had said it was a church, not a mosque, which he had promised God as he lay wounded and dying of thirst that day long ago on the field of Uniara; but according to Lieutenant Bacon, the promise was made when his son, Joseph, was lying dangerously ill and he was praying for his recovery. Sikander had also been heard to say it had all started because of a ruined mosque he found in the compound of his house in Delhi when he purchased it. He ordered the mosque to be restored, but this apparently aroused the jealousy of the Hindu members of his *zenana*, and for peace and quiet he built a small temple. Then, because his loyalty to his own faith was questioned, he announced that when he was rich enough he would also erect a Christian church.

Bateman, in his *Life of Bishop Daniel Wilson*, gives yet another version: 'Entering into Delhi with a conquering army, twenty years ago, and gazing on its countless domes and minarets, he made a vow that if he was ever able he would erect an English church which should rear the cross amongst them.' If Sikander told that to the Bishop, it was certainly tailored for the occasion.

Anyway, what really mattered was that he built a church, and in doing so supplied a real need in Delhi since before that the only provision for Christian worship was a deserted bungalow, where a chaplain held weekly services. The original estimate was 90,000 rupees, but the final cost was nearly two lakhs. The church rose slowly, Bateman says, because Skinner, though still short of cash after the collapse of the Calcutta agency houses, nevertheless declined an offer from the Government to complete the work. It was finally ready in November 1836, and Bishop Wilson journeyed up-country from Calcutta to perform the consecration ceremony.

'The Bishop's arrival,' Bateman goes on, 'was notified to Colonel Skinner, who at once drove down to the chaplain's house and repeated his earnest request that he might be favoured with a visit preparatory to the consecration of his church. This Colonel Skinner was a man of much celebrity, and the commander of a

famous body of light horse called by his name . . . He was made a full colonel of the English Army by George IV, who himself put his name at the head of the list, and overruled all questions of etiquette in his favour . . . And now he stood before the Bishop, a tall, stout, dark man of fifty-six, clad in military dress of blue, silver and steel with a heavy helmet on his head and a broadsword at his side and a red ribbon on his breast, to say that his church was finished, and to beg that it might be consecrated. His sons were Christians and he was, but his wife remained a Mahometan, though, as he said with tears, "a better wife for more than thirty years no man ever had."

"The Bishop instantly drove with him down to the church. It was a beautiful Grecian building in the form of a cross with handsome porticoes at each extremity, three of them closed in and appropriated for the chancel. The body of the building was circular, and surmounted by an ornamental dome, cupola and cross. The flooring was marble, and a temporary desk and pulpit served for the present occasion. The whole effect was very chaste and beautiful. The Bishop was delighted and, mindful of the founder, called it St James and fixed November 22nd for the consecration.

"On that day a large congregation assembled and a very striking and impressive sermon, going a good deal into detail, was preached. After the consecration, the whole European society of Delhi met at Colonel Skinner's hospitable abode and expressed their deep gratitude to him. They also requested the publication of the Bishop's sermon as commemorative of the day. A most kindly feeling pervaded every mind.

"A confirmation followed and the Colonel, with his three sons, knelt at the altar to dedicate himself as he had previously dedicated his church to the service of God. The scene was very impressive and the Bishop's address moved all to tears. At the conclusion, the Colonel himself attempted to express his acknowledgement, but words failed, and he wept silently whilst the Bishop prayed that the kindness shown to the house of his God might be returned sevenfold into his own bosom."

Sikander Sahib

Though an intensely moving scene for all present, what has really immortalized the occasion in legend is an anecdote which has been handed down through generations. It concerns a gift from Bishop Wilson of a beautiful altar cloth, with the sacred monogram IHS embroidered on it in gold thread. Skinner was asked what he thought of the Bishop's gift.

'Very fine,' Sikander Sahib replied. 'But I see the durzi (tailor) has made a mistake in my initials.'

A Purchase of Dogs

In March 1835 William Fraser was murdered, and the mystery of his best friend's death, which Sikander helped to solve, with all its implications and repercussions, was one of the pre-Mutiny sensations of Delhi.

As an administrator, Fraser had done imperishable work in India, but he was an obstinately unreasonable man, and his lack of regard for the pride and honour of a young nobleman cost him his life. To those in Delhi, the most surprising part of the whole affair, when the truth came to light, was the identity of the individual who had ordered the killing. People just could not believe it was Shams-ud-din Khan, the Nawab of Ferozepore.

Shams-ud-din was rich – his *jaghir* brought him between two and three lakhs a year. He was young – twenty-three. He was good-looking, well-educated, talented, a popular figure in Delhi society. Moreover, he was an old friend of Fraser, who had known his late father, and had, according to Sleeman in his *Rambles and Recollections*, 'brought Shams-ud-din up as a child of his own; indeed he had been as fond of him as a child of his own, and the boy used to spend the greater part of his time with him.'

But a change had come about in the relationship, for Shams-ud-din was involved in a law-suit with his brothers over their inheritance, and Fraser had taken sides with the latter. That alone was hardly sufficient motive for the murder of a man Shams-ud-din looked upon as an uncle. But Fraser had openly declared he was disgusted with the young man, and when Shams-ud-din came to see him in Delhi had him turned away from his house. Skinner,

says Sleeman, 'having some apprehensions that by such slights the Nawab might be driven to seek his revenge by assassination, is said to have remonstrated with Mr Fraser, his oldest and most valued friend. Mr Fraser told him that he considered the Nawab still but a boy and the only way to improve him was to treat him as such.' But Skinner was right. Fraser had outraged the dignity of the proud scion of a noble family, and the affront could only be paid for in blood.

The proceedings of the trial of Shams-ud-din are preserved in the National Archives of India in New Delhi, and from it one can see how patiently and determinedly he laid the plot. His servant and boon companion, Karim Khan, nick-named 'Bharmaru' (sharpshooter) was picked for the job and sent to Delhi ostensibly to sell a carriage and purchase greyhounds for coursing. He arrived in September 1834 with a freebooter known as Ania Meo, well known for his extraordinary strength and fleetness of foot. They lived in their master's house in Dharyaganj. As all the Nawab's guns had been purchased through Colonel Skinner, and it might lead to suspicion if one were seen in Karim Khan's possession, he was ordered to purchase a gun for himself in Delhi. Accordingly, he bought an old blunderbuss, the barrel and stock of which he had shortened for easy concealment under his cloak. Then he and Ania waited for Fraser.

They waited six months, for the Nawab's strict orders were that they should only kill by night, and every time Fraser went out at night his guards were always with him.

In despair, Karim Khan wrote to his master begging to be allowed to 'purchase the dogs' by day. To this, the Nawab replied in his own hand, 'You have written that there were orderlies with the dogs; tell me, are these persons with the dogs as guardians or merely in company with the dogs from another quarter? You must purchase the dogs but purchase them so that no one shall be aware of the purchase.'

In Karim's last letter from Delhi, he could barely wait to do the business. 'Concerning the purchase of sporting dogs, you order me not to be in a hurry. Sir, I hurry matters because much delay

A Purchase of Dogs

has already occurred. By some means I will purchase the dogs and do myself the honour of waiting on you with them.'

But the Nawab cautioned him. 'In the matter of the dogs such haste is not proper. Circumspection is necessary, so that no one may know who purchased them.'

At last, on 22 March 1835, Fraser went to visit the Rajah of Kishengarh, accompanied by only two peons and a trooper. At last it seemed a purchase was in sight. At about eleven o'clock they were returning to Fraser's house on the Ridge. Just before they reached the gate of the house they overtook a horseman, who suddenly swung round on Fraser, shot him at point-blank range, and was gone. A large ball and two small slugs lacerated the Commissioner's lungs and heart, and he fell dead from his horse. The dogs had been purchased.

Needless to say Karim Khan's horse was too fast for the one on which the trooper gave chase, but what neither the purchaser of dogs nor his master had reckoned on was the skill, luck and determination of three men who undertook to bring them to justice. They were (Sir) Thomas Metcalfe, John Lawrence (later the great Lord Lawrence), and Skinner.

Lawrence was the District Officer at Panipat. On receiving the news next day he set out immediately for Delhi to help in the investigation. When he arrived no clues had as yet been discovered, save the hoof-prints of a horse, which could have been the murderer's only that they faced the wrong way. However, suspicion had fallen on Shams-ud-din, as being one prominent man who not only stood to benefit from the Commissioner's death, but possessed, as Skinner was able to point out, a strong motive for revenge. So they went first to the Nawab's house in Dharyaganj.

They found no one in the courtyard, nor could they get any answer to their repeated calls. Simon Fraser, the magistrate, then entered the house, and Lawrence seeing a fine chestnut horse tethered in the yard, went up and began to examine it.

On the hooves, he noticed nail marks where they ought not to

be, and it instantly flashed across his mind that Dick Turpin had sometimes reversed the shoes on Black Bess to put the Bow Street runners off the scent. One of the men with Lawrence measured the fore and hind hooves. He reported there was only a straw's thickness in the difference between them which was exactly the thing they had observed about the tracks on the road. While this was going on a trooper in his underwear lounged up, and, in answer to Lawrence, said he was an orderly of the Nawab of Ferozepore, who had been sent to the city on business for his master.

'This is a fine horse,' said Lawrence.

'Yes, sahib,' the loungee replied, 'but he is sick and off his food - he has been unable to work for a week.'

It looked healthy enough to Lawrence, and seeing a nosebag full of corn lying on the ground, quietly slung it over the horse's head. The 'sickly' animal began to eat greedily, and Lawrence arrested the trooper on the spot. He was none other than Karim Khan, and in his quarters the Nawab's letters were all discovered, though some had been torn up and thrown into a bucket of water.

Suspicious though the whole business of the dogs appeared, it was obvious that no criminal charge against the man could possibly be made to stick on such purely circumstantial evidence. Moreover, there was nothing to connect the Nawab with the murder. Something more concrete was required to support it, and this, the incontestable and most incriminating link in the chain, fell to Skinner to furnish.

Further investigation in Delhi revealed that Karim Khan had been accompanied everywhere by a man on foot named Ania. He had disappeared on the night of the murder, had not been seen since, and Skinner was assigned the task of bringing him in. It was one he undertook most willingly.

It was delicate work for, as Skinner realised, the Nawab must be in an agony of suspense since Karim Khan's arrest, and if the Yellow boys went at the search bald-headedly all they might find would be Ania Meo with his throat cut. So a team of Sikander's most trusted and reliable agents were sent with loosened

purse-strings into Ferozepore town and the surrounding district. Discreetly, they visited their contacts, for the Yellow Boys had settled the district and had friends in every town and village. It was soon learned that although Ania had returned to Ferozepore, he had taken flight and was hiding in the hills, not only from the British, but also from his own master. Skinner spread his mesh. He sent a personal message to Ania's family that a pardon for him could be obtained if he would assist in bringing the murderer to justice. The fact that the Nawab's own agents were also out looking for Ania decided him, and he finally surrendered to Skinner and turned King's evidence.

Ania's story was that he had been ordered to accompany Karim Khan as a reserve. After the killing he had returned to Ferozepore, but the news of Karim Khan's arrest had already preceded him, and, overhearing quite by accident the Nawab discussing ways and means of doing away with him, Ania had fled for his life.

The case against Karim Khan was complete. He was tried, sentenced to death, and executed, but weeks passed with no orders being given for the Nawab's trial, and the journals of the period teemed with appeals to Government to rouse itself to a sense of British justice. Feelings ran high in Delhi, where it was thought that the Nawab was too exalted a personage to be touched by the law, and that the supreme Government were looking for some face-saving solution to what was obviously a very embarrassing situation. This was not so. The Nawab's trial began in July, and he was sentenced to be hanged.

The verdict was received by the native population with a sense of outrage. There were rumours of a general uprising in Delhi to prevent the execution taking place, and Skinner's Horse were called in from Hansi to support the police and the garrison in the city.

When the Nawab was first informed that the sentence was to be carried out, says Bacon, he was so astounded as to be quite unmanned. In despair he kept dashing his head against the wall of his cell, and might have destroyed himself had the guard not

intervened. For a couple of days he watched for an opportunity to commit suicide, but as a close watch was kept over him he resigned himself to his fate, took refuge in his pride, and became quite stoical and indifferent.

Keen to get a good view of the execution, Lieutenant Bacon gladly accepted an invitation from the officer on guard to sleep the previous night at the Kashmir Gate, outside which the scaffold had been erected. One or two other officers did the same, and after dinner they met at the guard-room, where at about 11 o'clock the prisoner arrived with a party of 100 British sepoy. The officers offered to leave the room, but the Nawab begged them to stay and talk to him for a while. He ordered his *charpoy* to be brought into the room, and upon this he seated himself with his hookah.

'Do you think I will be allowed to wear the costume of my rank tomorrow morning?' he asked Bacon. 'I cannot bear the idea of being hanged by the neck like a dog in a common white muslin dress, such as my own slaves wear. It does well enough for dishabille, but for a public execution such as you will witness tomorrow morning, I should certainly prefer something better suited to my station.'

To this, Bacon could only reply that he had better speak to the Commissioner in the morning. The Nawab said that he had already done that, but the request had been turned down. However, he would renew his petition in the morning. When he finished his hookah he said goodnight to the officers, and turning over on his *charpoy* two of his servants *mulled* him, that is rubbed, pinched, thumped and squeezed him till his muscles relaxed and sleep came over his body.

Next morning, says Bacon, 'When gun-fire announced the dawn of the day, we rose and found the Nawab also performing his toilet. This he did with more than usual care, and as soon as it was finished, he seated himself upon his *charpahi*, with his padre opposite to him, and commenced the recital of his prayers, which appeared to exist more in form than in petition; for while still muttering the words after the priest, he saluted us cordially, and

soon found an opportunity of inquiring if Mr Metcalfe had arrived, and of putting other questions regarding the movements without. He was habited in a spotless suit of fine white muslin, and when Mr Metcalfe made his appearance, he again sued to be permitted to wear the costume of his rank, but this it was deemed expedient to refuse; and the question was once again put to him if he confessed guilty of the crime for which he was condemned to die: in reply, he still adhered to his affirmation of innocence.

'After expressing to Mr Metcalfe his last wishes with regard to his family and the disposal of his affairs, he returned to the occupation of his toilet, dressing and combing his beard with great care, and examining himself, again and again, in a small looking-glass, as if he were really sorry to part with that, which in a few short minutes would be corrupted.

'Twice or thrice, he inquired impatiently if the preparations were not concluded, and at last he begged that a message might be sent to the Brigadier, requesting him to form up the troops with as little delay as possible; but all this was done deliberately, and with perfect self-possession. Eight o'clock was the hour appointed for the execution, and as the city clocks struck, the Brigadier sent word that all was in readiness. The Nawab, without bidding farewell to any about him, but simply giving to his servants and his priest a few articles of dress from his own person, such as the scarf, *kummarbund*, etc., quietly got into his palanquin, and attended by Mr Metcalfe and two other civilians, was carried to the scaffold.'

From the ramparts Bacon had an uninterrupted view of the scene. The gallows stood 300 yards away, in the centre of an open square formed on three sides by lines of troops, with the rampart completing the enclosure. As there were four regiments of Native Infantry, one of Native Cavalry, a battery of Foot Artillery and a regiment of Skinner's Horse, it was a very spacious square.

Inside it were gathered all the prominent chiefs and men of high rank and consequence in the city, many of whom had attended the trial throughout, and came with their equipages, decked

in all the bright colour and glitter of their rich costumes. Among these, Bacon recognised Hindu Rao, the exiled Mahratta Maharajah of Gwalior, whom Emily Eden describes as 'not quite an idiot, but something like it, and in appearance like a plump feather-bed, with pillows for his head and legs – covered all over with chain armour and cuirasses, and red and yellow shawls.'

When the Nawab arrived at the foot of the gallows, he stepped out of his palanquin, and with an air of complete indifference asked Metcalfe if he should ascend. Metcalfe bowed, and with a firm step Shams-ud-din mounted the ladder, at the top of which he was received by his two executioners. With perfect calmness he submitted his neck to have the rope adjusted, but suddenly drew back in horror on noticing that the men were of the sweeper caste.

'Are you a *mehter*?' he demanded of one of them.

But instead of replying, the man quickly brought a red cap down over the Nawab's face, and the next moment the trap door opened and Shams-ud-din fell. He died without a struggle; the slippers he wore did not even fall from his feet. The dogs, as somebody remarked, had been paid for.

As the body was left hanging for everyone to see, Bacon mounted his elephant and entered the crowd. Presently he was hailed by Hindu Rao.

'Ah sahib!' the fat Maharajah exclaimed. 'I see you everywhere – that is where there is any *tamasha* (fun) going on. He behaved very well – did he not? Will you come to my nautch this evening? Punna, whose singing you so much admire, will be there. Besides, I can offer you another inducement – you shall have something more substantial than our usual style of refreshment. I have just got a new cook from Calcutta, and will give you a first-rate oyster *pâté* with your wine. Ha, ha! I know how to tickle the over-refined taste of you English.'

'I'm sorry I have to decline,' Bacon replied. 'I am already engaged to dine with Colonel Skinner.'

'The very thing,' said Hindu Rao. 'The Colonel has promised

to bring his whole party, so of course you will come.'

That night Lieutenant Bacon was placed next to Skinner at table, and seems to have fallen completely under his spell: 'He is fortunately as generous as he is rich, and besides living in magnificent style indulging in unmeasured hospitality, his purse-strings are ever most cheerfully loosened in favour of public institutions, and for charity. Altogether, the old gentleman is looked upon as one of the ablest, and bravest, and most fortunate, and most distinguished, and happiest, and best rewarded officers holding a commission in the name of the Honourable Company. He is a most pleasant companion, full of anecdote and good humour, and no mean smattering of natural wit . . . He is esteemed and admired by all who know him, either personally or by character.'

At ten o'clock, they all adjourned to Hindu Rao's durbar tent, where they found the Maharajah under a scarlet canopy, listening in a state of half-stupor to the tale of a bard seated on the ground a little distance before him. The fat chief rose and cordially welcomed each of his guests, first by an English shaking of hands, then by a bear-like hug. Then, having seated himself in a gilded chair, he motioned them to the seats on either side of him.

The tent was glaringly lighted by torches held by bearers standing all round, or stuck on tridents. The ground was covered with a snow-white sheet in the centre of which the singing girls opened the entertainment with the most popular songs of the season, drawing shouts of applause from the entire company. *Nautch* girls danced through the full range of human emotion, buoyed up to near the state of collapse by the cheers of the audience and a peep every now and then into a little mirror worn as a thumb ring. Among them was Alfina, a great favourite of Lord Combermere's, a little *passée* now, but still in a class of her own, and loaded with costly gifts she had received from her admirers.

After Punna's tantalising exhibition of her charms, they had an excellent supper, with all the hermetically-sealed luxuries from England they could desire. Hindu Rao paid little attention to the

substantials, nor was he interested in the champagne and other costly wines. Like Holkar, he favoured cherry brandy, and during the supper break lowered three or four pints.

Lieutenant Bacon later fell asleep. He slept long and soundly, and when at last his servant woke him the rays of the morning sun were coming through the joins in the tent walls, dimming the garish light of a few torches still burning. The last set of *nautch* girls were just making their exit, and their jaded looks and soiled apparel were in miserable contrast to the gay illusions of the previous night. Groups of yawning officers were standing, stretching themselves, and discussing ways and means of getting back to cantonments, and Colonel Skinner was heard offering them the use of his carriage and four, but suggesting they should first repair to his place for breakfast.

Looking around, Bacon noted that the spotless white sheet on the floor at the start of the evening was strewn with remnants of the feast, and stained with wine. Empty bottles, broken glasses and ornaments were scattered in all directions, and on a *charpoy*, brought in for the occasion, lay the great bulk of the Maharajah himself, fast asleep. On the ground beside him was his hookah of state, capsized amid a pile of empty cherry-brandy bottles. And near by, lying in a corner of the tent, with his face to the bare earth, was the man who had helped to finish them – Hindu Rao's spiritual adviser.

William Fraser was buried in the churchyard of St James's, outside the west door. Over the grave of his friend Sikander Sahib erected, at a cost of 10,000 rupees, a fine tomb of white marble inlaid with green stones representing the weeping willow. It was totally destroyed during the Mutiny, but in Fanny Parks's *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* is a record of Skinner's inscription. It was written from the heart:

THE REMAINS
INTERRED BENEATH THIS MONUMENT
WERE ONCE ANIMATED

A Purchase of Dogs

BY AS BRAVE AND SINCERE

A SOUL

AS WAS EVER VOUCHSAFED TO MAN

BY HIS

CREATOR!

A BROTHER IN FRIENDSHIP

HAS CAUSED IT TO BE ERECTED,

THAT, WHEN HIS OWN FRAME IS DUST,

IT MAY REMAIN

AS A

MEMORIAL

FOR THOSE WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN LAMENTING

THE SUDDEN AND MELANCHOLY LOSS

OF ONE

DEAR TO HIM AS LIFE.

WILLIAM FRASER

DIED MARCH 22ND, 1835.

Skinner has left us only one other record of the depth of his feeling for his friend. It is a letter to Fraser's brother, written from Delhi on 29 November 1836. It was written with a leaden spirit.

'I came here to have my church consecrated, which was done on the 21st inst and a most handsome white marble tomb has been put over poor William. So you see, by the blessing of God, I have served *Him* and my friend too, whose memory and love remain firm in my old heart; and I only wish that when I am no more, I may be laid alongside of him . . . You wish me to give a narrative of his murder; I have neither the heart nor mind to relate the melancholy event. In him I have lost the best friend I ever had in this world; and my friendship with the world ends with him. I only wish I were lying with him.'

William Fraser had taken with him all the vigour and zest of their robust days together. Little remained of soldiering now. Little indeed for the old soldier but his memories.

Brigadier

Towards the end of 1838, the current obsession with the Russian menace, coupled with anxiety over events on the distant Russian and Persian frontiers of Afghanistan, was about to lead to the most unnecessary, unjustifiable, aggressive and disastrous war ever fought by the British in India. The Army of the Indus was assembling at Ferozepore with the object of placing on the Afghan throne a British puppet, Shah Shuja, who had been driven out by his own people nearly thirty years before, and Skinner at sixty received his last call to arms.

His 1st Local Horse, and Robert's old corps, now the 4th Local Horse, were formed into the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, and he was put in command with the rank of brigadier. However, news being received of the withdrawal of the Persian Army that had been besieging Herat, it was decided to reduce the Army of the Indus, and Skinner's brigade, to his great disappointment, was broken up. Only 1,100 men were now required, and the choice went to the 4th Regiment, which had recently distinguished itself in the suppression of the Thugs, and to one of Skinner's *risalahs*. These joined the expedition which left Ferozepore on December 11.

Skinner's senior rank had obviously precluded the selection of his regiment, since it would have been an embarrassment to demote him for the abridged command; moreover, as it was probably realised, it was going to be a young man's war, and the officers of the other regiment were all much younger than him. So Skinner returned home to Hansi, to receive from time to time



Skinner's church. His mosque and mansion are shown in the background



Skinner visiting one of his farms



End of a sentimental journey. Lillian Sale, a great-great-grandchild of Sikander Sahib, returns to his decaying mansion in Delhi



Relics of 'Old Sikander'. His matchlock, shield and the buggy he used in his latter years

reports of his Yellow Boys that made his breast swell with pride.

There was the *risalah*, under Captain Macpherson, that broke an attack by the Baluchis with 600 horse and 1,400 foot near the Bolan pass. There was Wurdi-Major Shahmut Khan who led a pursuit of Baluchi horsemen into the hills near Quetta, and after a long and difficult chase killed one of their chiefs in single combat. There was the exploit of Risaldar Azim Khan who brought in a convoy of Lohani merchants to Kandahar with badly needed supplies of grain, for which the Governor-General appointed him an A.D.C. Azim Khan was the first Indian officer to receive that distinction.

After Shah Shuja had been enthroned in Kabul in August 1839 and the greater part of the Army of the Indus was withdrawn to India, only two *risalahs* of the 4th Local Horse, under Captain Thomas Walker, remained with the army of occupation in Afghanistan. For that ill-fated force it was desperate work keeping the turbulent tribesmen in check and the Yellow Boys, as Walker wrote to his C.O., 'gained a name for themselves which they can never lose.'

They were steady and brave till the very end. Walker died in the disastrous action on the Bamaru Heights on 23 November 1841. Mortally wounded in an effort to cover the withdrawal of the infantry, he had charged with a *risalah* of Yellow Boys at an overwhelming host of Afghan cavalry, and thus saved our panic-stricken force from a general massacre that day.

Skinner would have heard of this deed, and his voice would have faltered and his eyes filled with tears. But he was saved the knowledge of the final tragedy. He was never to know how, on 6 January 1842, Elphinstone's army of 16,500 British and Indian troops, having first surrendered their guns and muskets, marched out of Kabul with the last of the Yellow Boys at their head. How, exactly a week later, Doctor Brydon was the only man of that army to reach Jalalabad. All but a hundred or so, who were taken prisoner, had perished in the massacre.

Skinner's own end came quite unaccountably, and for the

strange, sad details of his fatal illness we are indebted to his son James.

All through that November of 1841 Skinner had been in excellent health, but early on the 30th, 'a nasty foggy morning', he exposed himself to the air after a hot bath. He felt chilly during breakfast, yet was in excellent spirits, and kept laughing as he was shivering. During the day he carried on as usual, but, as he continued to feel aguish, he sent for James in the evening and asked him to take care of the guests at dinner, as he intended taking a purgative and going straight to bed.

He took eight Morison's pills that night, and followed them up next morning with a dose of Epsom Salts. But this only 'stirred up the bile slightly without removing it', so Dr J. A. Staig, the unit medical officer, gave a dose of calomel in the evening, followed by senna and salts the morning after. To their astonishment even this drastic treatment had no effect whatsoever. Staig wanted to repeat it, but Skinner felt he had had enough for the time being.

Though slight attacks of fever and ague persisted, he came to meals on December 3, although he touched very little, if any, food. That night, Staig persuaded him to have another dose of Morison's pills, followed by the usual senna and salts next morning, December 4, the fifth day of the illness.

Again, to Staig's bewilderment, it scarcely had any effect.

Skinner by now felt constant nausea. At about 11 a.m. he came out to say goodbye to Mr Clarke, the Sessions Judge, who had been his guest for the last few days, and now had to return to Meerut. Skinner sat with him for about an hour, and after Clarke had left, wrote a couple of letters. As the feeling of nausea persisted, James, that afternoon, administered two emetic powders he obtained from Staig, but the only effect they had was to create an intense thirst. Staig then wanted him to take another emetic, but Skinner, who was getting pretty desperate, asked for a really large dose of purgative, and the doctor obliged.

It was then about 4 p.m., and, after taking the medicine, Skinner sat on the veranda, smoked a cigar and made his son

read out some letters that had come by post. Staig wanted a second opinion, and now a Dr Holmes arrived. The evening closed in, and as it got rather cold both doctors asked Skinner to go back to bed. This he did, but reluctantly, as he would have much preferred 'sitting out and discussing Kabul politics.'

Then at last the purge began to act, though not in a way to satisfy the doctors who observed he was passing only blood and water. They pressed his stomach and enquired whether he felt any pain.

'No,' he replied, 'but I feel very thirsty.'

James next asked the doctors if they thought there was any danger, to which both replied there was not the slightest. What he needed, they said, was more purges, 'to get rid of the bile'; only then would he feel better. Staig produced his enema syringe and wanted to know whether the Colonel would have any objections to a clyster.

'Wait a little,' the Colonel said. 'I think the medicine will soon begin to act.'

They waited, but as he continued passing only blood, a dose of castor oil was next given to him. That, too, failed to achieve the desired result, and when presently a pain appeared in the region of the heart, Skinner called out to his son, 'I am afraid the gout has got into my chest.'

'What nonsense,' James retorted. 'You have not had an attack of gout for the past five or six years.'

A little later, Skinner told the doctors they could go home. They went out of the room, but as they said they preferred to wait until the medicine had acted properly, James asked them to stay to dinner. On going back into the bedroom, he tried to feel his father's pulse, but could not, though he did not press very hard in case it should make him suspicious. Skinner repeatedly urged his son to go to bed, and kept calling out, 'I don't know what is the matter with me.'

The doctors were not unduly worried about the weak pulse, or the coldness which James said he had also noticed. Both were quite confident there was nothing to worry about, but at about

half-past eight, on going in to see the patient, they found he had since been passing nothing but blood. Staig felt his pulse, then calling James aside, mentioned that a change had taken place for the worse. He added that he would have to resort to a very severe remedy – a blister, which was raised by igniting some spirits in a wide metal cup and clapping it on the affected part.

While the apparatus for that was being got ready, James went into the *zenana* and told the female members of the family, who had all gathered together in an anxious group, that they must remain perfectly quiet, as Sikander Sahib was being left entirely in the hands of the medical men.

When James got back to his father's room, yet another dose of castor oil had been administered by the doctors. Their unfortunate victim then paid his last visit to the closet. As he was on his way out a tremor came on, and they rushed to his assistance.

He was supported back to the bed.

'I don't know what is the matter with me,' he kept saying.

He lay down, and they were on the point of applying a blister to his stomach when suddenly he began vomiting. A moment later a spasm of quivering shook his body. Then he collapsed and lay still.

Staig felt his pulse. 'I am afraid it is all over with the old man,' he said.

James asked him to feel again. He did so, and with Holmes examined the body minutely. Both confirmed it was 'all over' and walked out.

'The scene which now ensued,' James wrote, 'both among the female members of the family, and the crowds of servants etc. that had all assembled, is really more than I can describe, for since his death I frequently start in my sleep to know whether what I have witnessed is reality or a dream. You can therefore fancy how little we expected such a calamity, and how suddenly and unexpectedly my poor father has been snatched away from us, for no man could have had more robust health than he had, and although this has been a very sickly season, he never even complained of a

headache, and used to have nearly a hundred patients whom he himself physicked every morning.'

What did Skinner die of? It is difficult to get doctors to commit themselves, for the clinical picture, as they point out, is incomplete and probably unreliable. But they are generally in agreement that the symptoms point to a bowel obstruction, and that it could have been caused by mesenteric thrombosis, the clotting of the arteries and veins leading to the bowel, which paralyses it. This, however, was not the immediate cause of death, which in such cases generally comes after the patient goes into a toxic coma. From the manner in which he died, it seems to have been a fatal heart attack and from the treatment he received need we wonder how it was brought on?

Suffice it to say that between 8.30 and 9 p.m. on 4 December 1841 Sikander Sahib was no more, and with him the age of the adventurers, with its glamour, high enterprise and magnificent rewards had passed away.

After his death, the irregulars were gradually regularised, the first step in that direction being taken during the Afghan War, when their designation was altered from Local Horse to Bengal Irregular Cavalry to overcome an Audit Department objection: on the march to Kandahar, horses and men nearly starved because as Local Horse they were not entitled by regulations to draw rations from the commissariat, though famine conditions prevailed and little or nothing could be purchased outside.

It was only a matter of time before the 'Irregular' was dropped in the evolution of these regiments, and the two of Skinner's Horse became the 1st Bengal Cavalry and the 3rd Bengal Cavalry. Later, they became the 1st Duke of York's Own Lancers (Skinner's Horse) and 3rd Skinner's Horse respectively, to be amalgamated in 1922 as the 1st Duke of York's Own Skinner's Horse. Finally they were redesignated Skinner's Horse (1st Duke of York's Own Cavalry), and as such form part of the Indian Army of today.

After the Skinners, the Regiment's officers were all regulars,

seconded for a tour of duty from Bengal Army units, until, on the reorganisation of the Bengal Cavalry after the Mutiny, British officers were permanently posted to Skinner's Horse and similar light cavalry regiments.

It had been Skinner's fond hope that his son would succeed him in his command. In the old days it would have been automatic – even widows had sometimes inherited their husband's regiments and brigades. The command was, however, given to Captain Lucius Horton Smith of the 6th Light Cavalry, a gallant and distinguished officer well known to the Skinners. Born in India, Smith was the son of Lewis Ferdinand Smith who will be remembered as a brother officer of Skinner's in the 3rd Brigade, the officer who, during the siege of Hansi, was sent to treat with George Thomas.

James continued as Adjutant of the Regiment (after November 1843 with the rank of captain on the Unattached List), until his appointment, in January 1846, to raise and command the 13th (later the 14th) Irregular Cavalry. He retired in January 1852, to become, two years later, an honorary major in Skinner's Horse, a distinctive appointment which succeeding heads of the Skinner family have since held in the Regiment. But 119 years were to elapse before another Skinner became its C.O., in September 1960 – Lieut.-Col. Michael Skinner, a great-great-grandson of its founder.

What is Sikander Sahib's place in Indian military history? If Lord Lake was the first to accept and engage mercenary horsemen as irregulars, it was Skinner, his protégé, who brought to perfection a multi-purpose light cavalry that could be used in a remarkable variety of roles: long-range reconnaissance and pursuit, internal security, escort duties, settlement duties from storming refractory strongholds to breaking up robber bands, secret missions, man-hunts, police work, infantry support in pitched battles, indeed anything requiring for its success the elements of speed, ingenuity, surprise, or just sheer hard work. They were in fact, mounted commandos, self-sufficient, versatile,

extremely mobile, hand-picked for character and courage, and trained as a body to a degree of fitness and perfection previously unheard of in armies. It is worth noting that tent-pegging and various other military feats, which Skinner had learned from the Mahrattas, were first introduced by him into the Indian Army. They were later to become popular events in every cavalry gymkhana.

In evaluating Skinner, one is tempted to wonder how high he would have risen had his skin been white. To a general? He had the requisite qualities – single-mindedness, energy, drive, resource, enterprise, imagination, courage, military skill, flair, passion for detail, experience in the field. It was his experience to which Lord Combermere paid due deference when it came to the practicability of the breach, experience which for all we know averted yet another failure at Bhurtpore with all the consequences that might have followed. Yet had Skinner become a general, his example might have been lost to succeeding generations of Indian Army officers, for whom he has remained the model of the perfect regimental commanding officer.

Skinner's greatest contribution was to the art of personal leadership. The gallant, kindly Lake was his own model, and to his attributes Skinner added a special kind of patience, understanding, sympathy, appreciation and respect, and above all an ability to touch the heart, rouse the passion, and swell the breast, that brings out the best in an Indian soldier. There is no easy way to an Indian's heart. You might fool him for a while, but sooner or later he will find you out. To be loved you must love, and therein lay the secret of a man who loved all men and of whom no one could say he ever did a base act or dishonourable act!

'We buried him with full military honours,' the devoted James wrote. 'The Hurreannah Light Infantry, under Captain Campbell, formed the advance guard. I gave no orders for our own troops, leaving it optional with them to do as they pleased, either to go as private mourners (since they observe that ceremony at their own funerals) or mounted. They preferred the latter, and the recol-

lection of this being the last occasion that I should ever behold the 'Yellow Boys' together with their distinguished commandant (for seeing his charger, helmet etc., made me fancy just as if he was at the head of the corps and not in a coffin) had such an impression as was most appalling and trying to the nerves, and when they lowered him to the grave I could not help thinking of the conversations we frequently used to have about death. Since his confirmation by the Bishop in 1836, he was very regular in his devotions and continually studied the Bible, and I sincerely hope he now rests where we all wish him, for if there is happiness in the next world no one deserves it more than my father, for he died with an easy and upright conscience, having injured no one, and done good to thousands. Although he had a bloated appearance during his illness, yet after death it looked so calm and serene, just as if he was in a sound and tranquil sleep! We intend removing and burying him in his church at Delhi, so that it may form his monument.' *Inside* the church, and not under the threshold, as he had once begged, 'so that all entering might trample on the chief of sinners.'

On 17 January 1842, Skinner's coffin was disinterred at Hansi and escorted by the whole of his regiment and a great concourse of people to the outskirts of Delhi. Here the cortège was met by a multitude from the city, so vast, the natives said, that no Emperor of Hindustan was ever brought into Delhi in such state as Sikander Sahib. On the Resident's orders, sixty-three minute guns were fired, one for each year of his life.

Two days later, the entire Christian community attended the funeral oration preached over the body. Then the coffin was lowered to its resting place, in the floor of the chancel, and only then did Delhi really feel Sikander Sahib was gone from them.

A hero was dead, but a legend had been born.

Glossary

- Aliguls* – shock troops trained for desperate service
Barghir – trooper who is mounted and armed by the man he fights for
Bania – shopkeeper, merchant or trader
Batta – subsistence allowance; any extra allowance to officers or soldiers, especially in the field
Budgerow – large keelless river boat
Bund – embankment
Charpoy – light string bed
Chobdar – mace-bearer or holder of a silver staff carried before a man of rank as a symbol of authority
Chota hazri – light early breakfast or tea
Chowkidar – watchman
Chumar – caste of skinners of dead animals and leather workers
Cos – about one and a half miles
Daffahdar – cavalry commander of ten
Doab – land between two rivers, *the* Doab being that between the Jumna and Ganges
Durbar – court or levee of a man of rank
Durrah – a Pindari camp or following
Farman – royal mandate or ordnance
Gardi – calamity or visitation
Ghat (ghaut) – landing place, path of descent to a river, a quay, etc.
Ghi – rendered butter
Ghole – compact body of cavalry

Hircarrah (*harkara*) – messenger

Howdah – elephant seat

Izzut – self respect, prestige, honour, reputation

Jaghir – assignment of land and its rent with or without conditions of service

Jaidad – land assigned to the upkeep of an army

Jemadar – junior native officer

Jhil – swamp or lake

Lakh – 100,000

Lubhar – a Pindari foray

Mahout – elephant driver

Mehter – a sweeper

Naib – deputy or assistant

Naik – Indian N.C.O., the equivalent of corporal

Nautch – a dance

Nawab – prince, lord or governor

Nullah – watercourse or small ravine

Nuzzur – offering made by an inferior to a superior in token of fealty and submission, the acceptance of which signifies protection and patronage

Pagah – personal bodyguard

Palki – palanquin

Pergunnah – district

Pukka – genuine, permanent, solid

Purdah – literally a curtain; custom of secluding women from the sight of male strangers

Raj – rule, reign

Risalah – troop, usually of 100 horsemen

Sardar – a chief or notable, a prefix used by the Sikhs

Silladars – troopers who furnish their own arms and horses

Sowar – cavalry trooper

Subah – administrative area of the Moghul Empire

Subahdar – governor of a subah; an Indian officer senior to jemadar

Suttee (*Sati*) – literally a virtuous wife; the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband

Glossary

Syce – groom

Tulwar – Indian broadsword

Thugs – bandits, working in groups, who murdered their victims
by strangling them with a silken cord

Vakil – agent, hence ambassador or advocate

Vazir – chief minister

Zamindar – landholder

Zenana – female apartments in a home

Zillah – district

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Other manuscript sources include a collection of Skinner's letters at Sandhurst, the Skinner family records, East India Company records at the India Office Library, and Skinner's Persian manuscripts in the British Museum.

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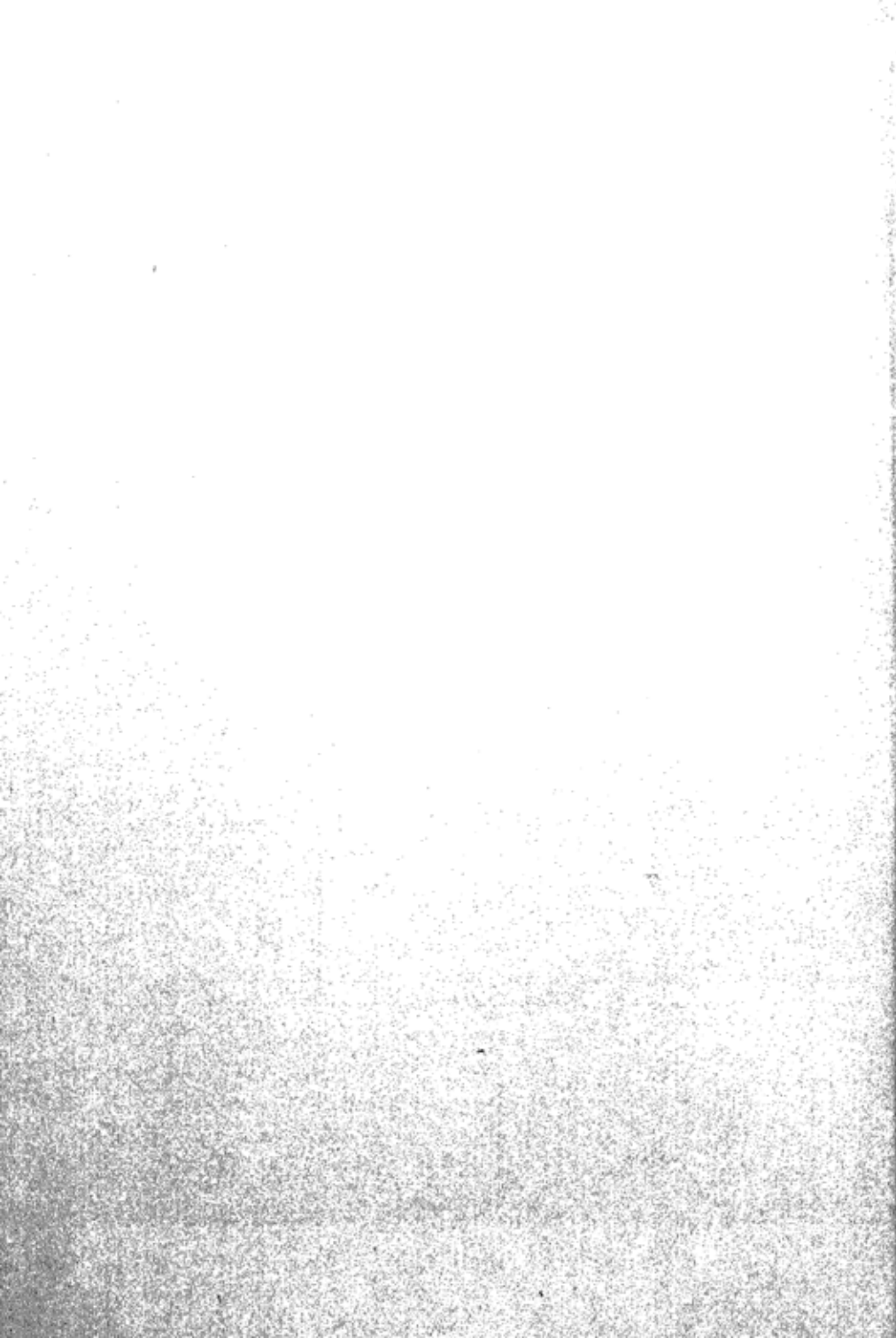
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Index

- ABOUKIR, 63
 Adams, (Sir) John Withington,
 as Lt.-Col., 159-60; as Genl.,
 218
 Afghans and Afghanistan, 24-5,
 142, 220, 246ff., 251
 Afzalgarh, 133ff.
 Agra, 81, 82-3, 98-9, 102, 111-
 12, 114, 176
 Ahmed Shah Abdali, 24
 Ahmednagar, 78
 Ajmir, 47, 48, 144, 221ff.
 Alexander's Bank, 211
 Alfina, 243
 Aligarh, 10, 12-13, 74, 79ff., 102,
 114, 130-1, 139, 187, 199
Aliguls, 14, 131, 135, 138
 Allahabad, 71
 Amazons, Ranjit Singh's, 220
 Ambaji Englia, 18, 20, 23, 39,
 71-2, 142
 Amherst, Lord, 197-8
 Amir Khan, 41, 130-9, 145, 158,
 164, 169, 173, 176-8; as
 Nawab, 222
 Amritsar, 144
 Anglo-Indians, 46, *and see*
 'Country-born' and Half-
 castes
 Ania Meo, 236, 238-9
 Anupshahr (Anupsheher), 25,
 131
 Appa Sahib, 178, 180
 Argaum, 101
 Arnold, Col., 159-60
 Artillery, Horse, 78, 84, 122, 126,
 134-5, 146, 193, 220
 Asirgarh, 180
 Ass(a)ye, 98, 181
 Astrology, 27
 Auckland, Lord, 195, 230-1
 Azim Khan, 247

 BACON, LT. THOMAS, 193, 214,
 229, 230, 232, 239-44
 Baddeley, Capt. William, 173,
 195
 Baddeley's Frontier Horse, 195
 Baden-Powell (Lord), 3
 Bahadhour Khan, 67
 Baji Rao, 69, 179, *and see* Peshwa,
 The
 Balaram, 21
 Balloba Tantia, 17, 23, 34
 Baluchis, 158
 Bapu Sindhia, *see* Sindhia
 Barlow, Fanny, *see* Skinner, Mrs
 (James)
 — Sir George, 145-9 153-6,
 182, 184
 Bateman, Rev. Josiah, 232
 Bayley, Lady Clive, 214-15
 Begum Somru, 91ff., 109, 124,
 226-7
 Bemaru Heights, 247
 Benares, 81
 Bengal Native Army, 6, *and see*
 Infantry Units
 Bentinck, Lord William, 4, 215,
 218-24
 Berar, Rajah of, 39, 65, 170, 174
 Bernard, Louis, *see* Bourquien
 Bernier, Capt., 50; as Major, 54
 Bhagavad-gita, 7

Index

- Bhais, The, 17ff., 39-40, 42
 Bharatpur, *see* Bhurtpore
 Bhils, 109
 Bhonsla, Rajah of Berar (the Nagpur Rajah), *see* Rughoji Bhonsla
 Bhopal, 171, 174, 178, 184
 Bhow, Ambaji Englia's son, 18, 20
 Bhowani, 158
 Bhurtpore, Rajah and Fortress of, 123, 131, 141ff., 197-206, 253
 Bikaner, 43
 Birch, Capt., 46, 54, 56; as Lieutenant, 92-4
 Blacker, Col. Valentine, 181
 Bourquien, Major Louis, 47-50, 52-8, 82-6, 91, 164
 Boyd, Lieut., 110
 Brahmins, 27, 158
 — Concani, 183
 — Shenwi, 17-18, 32, 34ff
 Brinjarras, 117, 118-22
 British Army, Logistics problems of, 117-18
 — Museum, 217-18, 258
 Brown, Lt.-Col. Everard, 75
 — Col. S., 109-12
 Brownrigg, Major John, 35, 66
 Brydon, Dr, 247
 Buckingham, Earl of, 206
 Bundelkhand, 14, 39, 81, 98, 102
 Bonaparte, *see* Napoleon I
 Burmese war, 196, 205
 Burn, Capt. William, 8, 9, 10; as Col., 103-5, 123, 137, 138, 142
 Butterfield, Capt. Edward, 18-19, 22
 Buxar, 224
 Byrne, Major, 230-1
 CADETS, 'COUNTRY', 6-7
 — 'Europe', 6
 Caen, Genl. de, 65
 Calcutta, 71, 86
 Calcutta Review, The, 187
 Campbell, Capt., 220, 253
 Cardoza, Rose Ann, *see* Skinner, Mrs (Hercules)
 Carnegie, Capt. George, 73, 75-6
 Catharine, Empress, 10
 Cawnpore, 71, 82
 Cavalry Units: 8th Dragoons, 125, 134-5
 27th Dragoons, 134
 29th Dragoons, 134-5
 6th Light, 201
 14th Irregular, 216
 1st Native, 134-5
 2nd Native, 75
 6th Native, 134, 158
 Champaigne, Lt.-Genl., 160
 Chandernagore, 52, 82
 Che(i)t Singh, 5, 6
 Chesney (Editor of the *Pioneer*), 213
 Chilianwala, 217
 Chitu, 173, 179
 Cis-Sutlej Chiefs, 157
 Clare, Lord, 4, 224
 Clarke, Col. Edward, 75
 — (Sessions Judge), 248
 Clive, Lord, 52, 61ff.
 Combermere, Genl. Lord, 194, 198-206, 209-10, 211, 253
 Cornwallis, Marquis, 145
 'Country-borns', 8-9, 46, 55, 76, 86-7, 99, 162
 Craig, Genl. James, 25
 Cuillier, Pierre, *see* Perron, Genl.
 Cunningham, Capt., 173
 Cuttack, 98, 102
 DALHOUSIE, LORD, 4, 209
 Datia, Rajah of, 39
 De Boigne, Genl., 10-15, 63-4, 81
 De Bourienne, 86
 Deccan, The, 131, 171, 175, 176, 178, 181, 183
 Deig, 110, 125-6, 131

Index

Delhi, 24, 31, 43, 71, 81, 83ff.,
91ff., 102, 116ff., 123, 156,
176, 197, 224ff., 254

Desoutée, M., 61, 64-5

Dhar, 183, 185

Dhundia Khan, 130, 139

Dhyaram, *see* Hathras, Rajah of

Dick, Robert, 169

Doab, The, 16, 102ff., 109, 123,
130, 139, 140, 146, 158, 213

Dowlat Rao, *see* Sindha

Drenec, Chevalier du, 28-9

Durjan Sal, 197, 198, 204-5

Dyce, Col., 227

EAST INDIA AGENCY HOUSES,
failure of, 211

East India Company, 4, 6, 8-9, 10,
13, 63, 107, 145, 146, 148,
155, 157, 174, 198, 205,
207, 215, 258

Eden, Emily, 195, 211, 221,
230-1, 242

— Fanny, 221, 230-2

Edward VII (when Prince of
Wales), 216

Elphinstone, Lord, 4, 247

FATEHGARH, 126, 166

Ferguson, Lt., 75-6

Ferozepore, 246

— Nawab of, *see* Shams-ud-din
Khan

Ferruckhabad, 125-7

Filoze, Col. Michael, 35

FitzClarence, Capt. Lord, 209-10

Forbes, Lt.,

Forster, Henry, 169

Fort St George, 172

Francklin, William, 44

Fraser, J. Baillie, 189, 192, 229-
30

— Simon, 237

— William, 4, 167-9, 199, 212,
235, 244-5

French in India, The, 60ff., 70,
99, 102, 107, 220, *and see*

Bernier, Bourquien, de Caen,
du Drenec, de Raymond,
Napoleon I, Perron, Suffrein

GARDNER, HON. EDWARD, 157

— William L., Lt.-Col., 207-8,
228, *and see* Gardner's Horse

— Mrs (W. L.), *see* Manzil-ul-
Nissa, Princess

Gardner's Horse, 87n, 228

George IV, 208, 233

George V, 258

Georggarh, 47-51

Gerard, J. (Adj.-Genl.), 95

Ghalaum Mahomed, 71

Ghatkia, Suji Rao, 17, 23, 32-3,
34, 67-8, 142

Gopal Rao Bhow, 41, 66, 67-8,
180-1

Grueber, Col. Richard, 130

— Richard (son of above), 169

Gujerat, 102, 107

Gurkha troops, 200, 227

— war, 168, 176

Gwalior, 11, 18, 176, 178

— Maharajah of, *see* Hindu Rao

HALDANE, CAPT. RADCLYFFE
217

— Mrs (Radclyffe), *see* Wagen-
treiber, Mrs (George)

Half-castes, 213-14, *and see*
'Country-borns'

Hall, Dr G. C., 213-14

Hansi, 55-8, 165, 169, 193, 209,
229ff., 246ff., 252, 258

Hastings, Marquis of, 4, 164-7,
169, 173-5, 178, 182-3, 185,
194, 195

Hathras, Rajah of, 110, 118, 119-
21

Hearsey, Andrew, 213

— Capt. Hyder, 46, 51, 54, 56,
57-8

— Mrs (Hyder), *see* Zuhwr-ul-
Nissa, Princess

— Genl. Sir J. Bennet, 201, 213

Index

- Heber, Bishop, 226
 Herat, 246
 Hessing, Col. George, 53, 99
 — Col. John, 35
 Hickey, William, 101, 154-6
 Hindu Rao, 242-4
 Hislop, Lt.-Genl. Sir Thomas, 175
 Holkar Brigade, 28-9, 41, 42
 — House of, 11
 — Jeswant Rao, 34, 40-2, 43, 45, 65, 68-70, 99, 106ff., 13ff., 122, 123-8, 130, 139, 141ff., 146-8, 158, 165, 166, 170, 179, 183-5, 188, 189, 190
 Holmes, Dr, 249-50
 Hopkins, Capt., 46, 49, 51
 Hyder Ali, 61
 Hyderabad, Nizam of, 62, 63, 102, 215-16
 INDIA, Afghan invasion of, 25
 — Macedonian invasion of, 86
 Mercenaries in, 35, 183
 Mohammedan invasions of, 7, 55
 Persian menace to, 246
 Russian menace to, 246
 — Office Library, 258
 Indore, 42, 65, 68, 107, 131, 185
 Indus, Army of the, 246-7
 Infantry Units: 34th Foot, 76
 76th Foot, 78-9, 100, 122
 84th Foot, 6
 1st/14th Madras, 180
 6th Native, 6
 15th Native, 110
 20th Native, 7
 45th Native, 217
 Ishuri Khanum, 161
 JACQUEMONT, VICTOR, 167, 169, 198-4, 211
 Jaipur, 11, 26ff., 43, 224
 — Rajah of, *see* Partab Singh
 — Rani of, 29
 Jats, 102, 141, 146, 197, 199, 205-6
 Jervis, Mary, 227
 Jodhpur, 11
 Johnson, Dr Samuel, definition of half-caste, 214
 'Jowruj Jung', *see* Thomas, George
 KABUL, 247
 Kaleb Ali, 18-19
 Kanaund, 45
 Kandahar, 247
 Kardla, 62
 Karim Khan, 172-3, 178-9, 236-9
 Karoli, Rajah of, 35ff.
 Kerr, Major-Genl. Sir William, 175
 Khasi Rao, 40
 Khowaj, Bux, 161
 Kipling, Rudyard, 213
 'Kohinoor, The', 220
 Koil, 10, 25, 47, 65, 73-4, 86, 154
 Konheir, 201
 Kshatris, 7, 27
 Kutub Khan, 18-19
 LAHORE, 230
 Lake, Capt. George, 76, 85, 100
 — Genl. (Lord), 3, 4, 70, 71, 74, 76-87, 91-2, 95, 97, 101, 104, 107-8, 115-22, 123-8, 142-7, 153-6, 159, 190, 197, 199-201, 205, 252-3
 Lakshmi Bhai, 148
 Lakwa Dada, Genl., 14, 18, 20, 23-5, 26-7, 30-3, 39-40, 46
 Laswari, 99-101
 Lawrence, John (Lord), 237-8
 Leycester, William, 132
Life of Bishop Daniel Wilson (Bateman), 232
 Low, Capt. John, 185
 Lucan, Capt., 108, 110
 MACAN, COL. RICHARD, 115
 McCombe, Brigadier, 204
 Macnaghten, Sir William, 224

Index

- Macpherson, Capt., 247
 Madhu Rao Falkia, 93-7
 Madras, 172-3
 Madhaji Sindhia, *see* Sindhia
Mahee muratib, The, 31
 Mahratta Army, 10-15, 19ff.,
 27ff., 43ff., 56ff., 71, 72,
 74ff., 85, 99ff., 113ff., 124ff.,
 141ff., 147-9, 162, 172,
 181-2, 183-6, 202
 Mahrattas, 11, 14-15, 18, 23,
 24-5, 26, 54-5, 60, 62, 64,
 68ff., 81, 93, 98ff., 106ff.,
 123, 145, 147, 155, 158,
 170ff., 180-6, 187, 253
 Mainpuri, 127
 Malagarh, 93, 96
 Malcolm, Genl. George, 218
 — Col. Sir John, 4, 143, 153-5,
 174, 175, 178; as Brigadier-
 Genl., 179, 187, 188-9,
 190-1, 205, 207
 Malwa, 107, 109, 131, 171, 174,
 183, 185, 189, 191
 Manu, 161
 Manzil-ul-Nissa, Princess (Mrs
 William L. Gardner), 228
 Marshall, Major-Genl. Sir Dyson,
 186
 Martindell, Genl. Sir Gabriel, 168
 — William (son of above), 169
 Meer Mahummudee, 58
 Mehidpur, 178
Memoirs (in Persian by Col. James
 Skinner, C.B.), 5, 258
Memoir of the War in India
 (Thorn), 3
 Metcalfe, Sir Charles, 4, 144-5,
 157, 162, 187, 197-8, 226
 — Sir Thomas, 214, 226, 237,
 240-1
 Minto, Lord, 4, 156, 161-2
 Mir Kasim, 91
 Moghul Empire and Emperor, 11,
 31*n*, 32, 59-60, 65, 71, 79,
 81, 82-3, 92, 116, 123, 224,
 228
 Moghuls, 158
 Monson, Col. the Hon. William,
 105, 106-12
 Mornington, Lord, *see* Wellesley,
 Marquis
 Mulhar Rao, 40
 Mundy, Capt., 193
 Murray, Capt., 138
 — Col. John, 107-8
 Muttra, 82-3, 109-12, 113, 120
 Mysore, 61

 NAGPUR, 178
 Nairne, Major, 3
Najibs, 13-14, 92, 93, 103, 116
 Napoleon I, 61-2, 64, 168
 Nelson, Lord, 63
 Nepalese, 170

 OCHTERLONY, LT.-COL. SIR
 DAVID, 4, 92-4, 96-7; as
 Colonel, 157, 160; as Major-
 General, 176-7, 187, 197,
 226, 228

 'PAGODA TREE, THE', 3, 47,
 60, 103
 Partab Singh, 26ff.
 Pathans, 14, 67, 130, 134, 135,
 158, 172, 176, 200
 Pedron, Col., 39, 52-4, 79
 Perron, Genl., 15, 16, 18-19, 22,
 23, 25, 26, 32-3, 34, 38, 39-
 40, 42, 43-7, 50, 52, 59-71,
 74, 79, 81-3, 91, 99
 Persia and India, *see* India, Persian
 menace to
 Peshwa, The, 64, 69, 170, 178-80,
 183, 185-6
 Pester, John, 111
 Piron, Col., 63
 Pindaris, 25, 130-1, 134-6,
 138-9, 171-5, 178
Pioneer, The, 213
 Pohlman, Capt. Anthony, 13; as
 Major, 24-5; as Colonel,
 28-32, 35, 66

Index

- Poona, 69, 99, 170, 178, 183
 Prinsep, Henry T., 4, 222
 Punjab, The, 144, 157
 Punna, 243
- RAJPUTS, 7, 23, 25, 26ff., 79, 80,
 102, 146, 158, 171, 176,
 184, 185, 195-6, 221ff.
- Ram Rao, 97
Rambles and Recollections (Slee-
 man), 235
- Ranjit Singh, 144-6, 157, 218-21,
 230
- Rathors, 27, 28-30
 Raymond, François de, 62, 63, 64
 Reinhardt, Walter, 91
 Reynell, Genl. Thomas, 204
 Roberts, Emma, 224-5
 — Lt., 173
 Rohillas, 71, 126, 130, 132, 188
 Rughoji Bhonsla, 70, 71, 98
 Ruper, 218-21
 Russia and India, *see* India, Russian
 menace to
- SAHARANPUR, 103-5, 109, 157
 St James's Church, Delhi, 231-4
 Salkeld, Col., 101
 Sandhurst, 258
 Sangarir, 27ff.
 Sarwar Khan, 99-100
 Satara, Rajah of, 179, 183
 Sayids, 158
 Scott, Lt. George, 87n, 94-5
 Secundra, 92, 93
 Seringapatam, 62, 63
 Seton, Archibald, 161-2
 Shadull Khan, 203
 Shah Alum, 116, *and see* Moghul
 Emperor
 Shah Shuja, 220, 246-7
 Shahmut Khan, 134, 135, 136
 — Khan, Wurdī-Major, 247
 Shamli, 123-4
 Shams-ud-din Khan, 235-42
 Shekhawati Brigade, 169
 Shitab Khan, 52-3
- Shore, Sir John, 63
 Sikh War (2nd), 220n
 Sikhs, 71, 103-5, 140, 142, 144-6,
 157, 218ff.
- Sindhia, Bapu, 93
 Sindhia Dowlat Rao, 15, 16-17,
 20, 22, 23, 26, 32, 34, 39,
 40, 41-2, 43-6, 50, 59, 60,
 64, 65-72, 73-9, 82-3,
 86-7, 91, 98, 102, 106,
 110-11, 142, 145, 155, 165,
 166, 170, 175-6, 178, 181
 — Hurji, 20-2, 23
 — Madhaji, 11, 15, 16, 31, 66
- Sirdhana, 91
 Sivaji, 69, 177
 Skinner, Alexander (son), 215,
 216
 Mrs (Alexander), 216
 David (brother), 6, 8
 David (grandfather), 6
 David (great-grandfather), 6
 Elizabeth (daughter), *see* Wa-
 gentreiber, Mrs (George)
 Ensign, *see* Skinner, Col. James,
 C.B.
 Hercules (father), 6-7, 9, 66
 Hercules (son), 215
 Mrs (Hercules), 216
 — Col. James, C.B.: Exploits
 and habits, General survey
 of, 3-5
 Origin and family, 5-10
 Apprenticed, 10
 Joins Mahratta Army, 11
 Physical appearance at 17, 13
 Ensign under de Boigne, 13-15,
 18-19
 First 'wife' and son (Joseph), 14
 First active service, 14
 Commands *Telenga* battalion,
 18
 Decorated and promoted to
 Lieutenant, 19
 Wounded at Jajgarh, 24
 Popularity with Mahrattas,
 26-7

In action at Sangarir, 28ff.
 Looting Jaipur camp, 30-2
 Further rewards, 32
 Commands 3 battalions at 22, 35
 'Hired out' to Rajah of Karoli,
 is wounded, captured and
 released, 35-9
 Captain under Perron, 38
 At battle of Sounda, 39-44
 At siege of Georgegarh, 47-
 51, 53
 His views on Perron, 59-61,
 64, 66, 71, 82
 His loyalty to the Mahrattas,
 73ff.
 High reputation at 25, 77
 At siege of Aligarh, 79-81
 Inaugurates Skinner's Horse
 and designs uniform, 87ff.
 In settlement of Upper Doab,
 92ff.
 Blockades and takes Malagarh,
 93-7
 His pay and perquisites, 97
 Commended for service at Sa-
 haranpur, 103-4
 And for local peace-making
 success, 105
 Observations on Monson's re-
 treat, 108-12
 Checks mutiny, 109-10
 Captures Brinjarra food con-
 voys, 119-22
 Receives Lord Lake's own
 sword, 122
 And a pair of pistols from him,
 125
 Relieves Mainpuri and chases
 Holkar to the Jumna, 127-8
 Receives horse and ornamental
 saddle, 128
 Authority to increase his regi-
 ment to 1,700, 128-9
 Relieves Moradabad, 132
 Rescues brother Robert, 137-8
 Reviews Holkar pursuit, 139-
 40

Receives additional gifts from
 Lord Lake, 140
 First to enter Sikh territory,
 143-4
 His regiment discharged by
 General Order highly com-
 mending him, 154
 Assigned a colonel's pension,
 155
 At capture of Bhowani, 158
 His regimental efficiency and
 further commendations, 158-
 60
 Prosperous trading and farm-
 ing ventures, 160
 Lives on Moghul pattern,
 160-1, 212, 228-9
 His harem, 3, 161, 212
 Considers resigning in protest
 against restrictions on
 'Country-borns', but recants,
 162ff.
 His force raised to 3,000, 164
 Granted honorary rank of Lt.-
 Col., 165-6
 Disposition of his 3 corps, 176
 His views on Amir Khan, 177
 In pursuit of Baji Rao, 179-80
 His share in the 'pattern' of
 India, 185
 Conducts Peshwa to retirement,
 185-6
 His *jaghirs* (grants) confirmed
 in perpetuity, 187
 At Hansi H.Q., refutes Press
 attack on 'irregular horse',
 187ff.
 Sir John Malcolm's views on
 him and his corps, 188-9
 Rejects offer to assassinate
 Holkar, 189-90
 His appearance, character and
 methods, 191-4
 Defeats and disperses Rajput
 freebooters, 195-6
 Given additional regiment, and
 Skinner's Horse re-desig-

Index

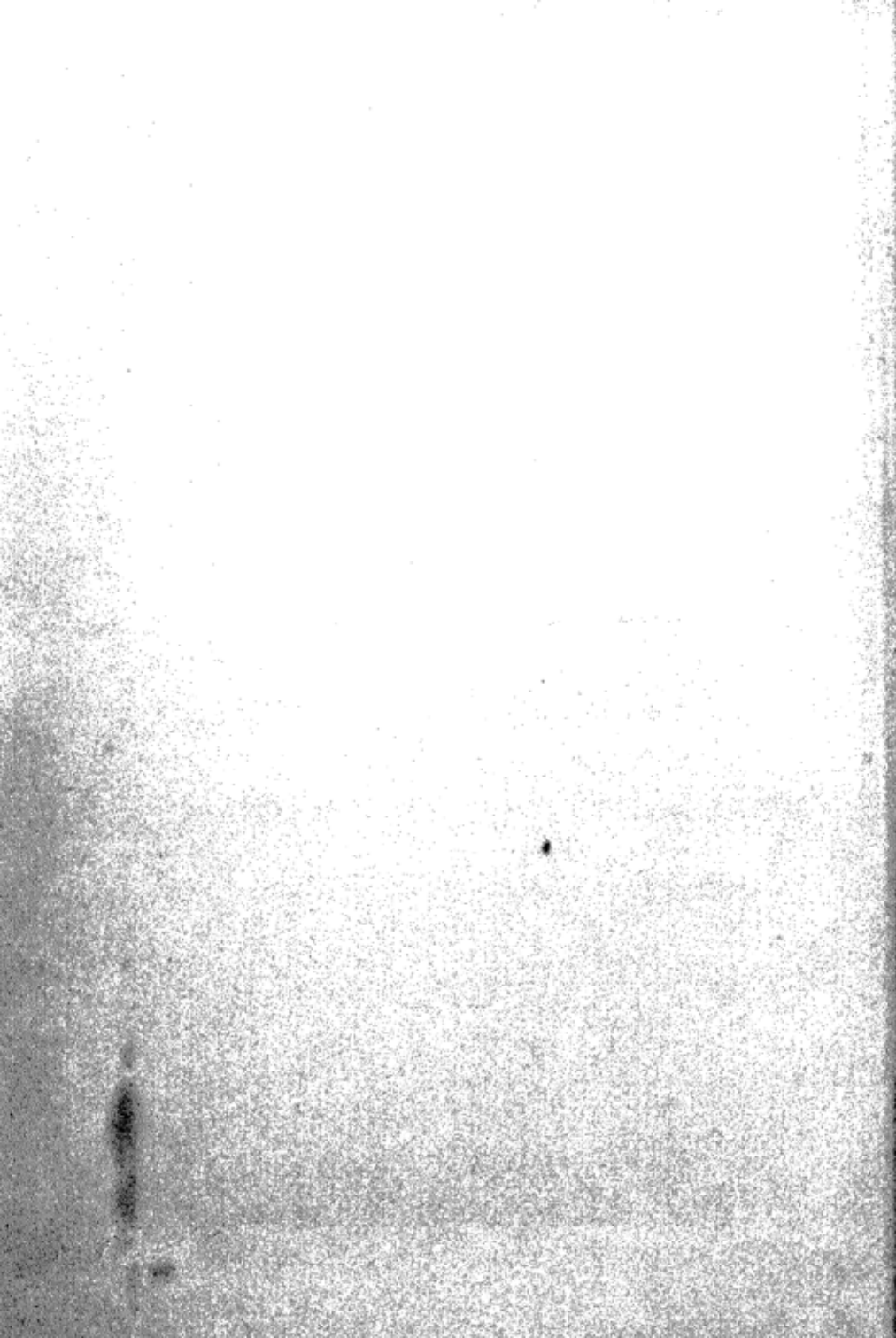
nated 1st and 8th Local Horse, 196
 In attack on Bhurtpore, 198-205
 Reorganisation of his command, 206
 Awarded the C.B. and receives C-in-C's own insignia, 206-10
 Heavy business losses, 211
 Purchases vast landholdings, 211
 His property dispositions, 211-12, 216-17
 His sex life, 212
 As a landlord, 212-13
 His 'wives' and children, 212-17
 His hobbies and interests are predominantly Indian, 217ff.
 His writings in Persian, 217-18, 227, 258
 At official reception of Ranjit Singh, 218-21
 Tributes and gifts from Lord William Bentinck, and from Lord Clare, 223-4
 Last 10 years in Delhi, 224ff.
 Friendship with Begum Somru, 227
 His Moghul title, 228
 His 'Hall of Audience' at Hansi, 229
 His Delhi mansion and other residences, 229
 Precautions against assassination, 229
 His wide hospitality, 229ff.
 His religious views, 231, 254
 Builds St James's Church in Delhi, and is confirmed (with 3 sons) at its consecration, 231-3
 Investigates murder of William Fraser, 235ff.
 His tribute to William Fraser, 244-5

Brigadier, 2nd Cavalry Brigade (which is broken up), 246
 Last illness and death, 249-51
 Place in history, 252-3
 His funeral at Hansi, but coffin re-buried in Delhi, 253-4
 His *Memoirs* in Persian, 258
 Skinner, James (son), 196, 203, 209, 211, 212, 215, 216, 248-51, 253, 258
 Mrs James, (daughter-in-law), 212, 216
 James (uncle), 6-7
 Jeany (mother), 7-8
 Joseph (son), 14, 193-4, 214, 216, 217, 252
 Katharine (great-grand-mother), 6
 Lena (granddaughter), 216
 Louisa (daughter), *see* Turner, Mrs (Peregrine)
 Margaret (grandmother), 6
 Margaret (sister), 8, 66
 Lt.-Col. Michael (great-great-grandson), 252
 Robert (brother), 6, 35, 38-9, 49, 54, 56, 91, 109, 111, 121, 155, 156-8, 156, 158, 160, 166, 167, 176, 180, 187, 191, 195, 246
 Robert Hercules (grandson), 258
 Thomas (son), 216
 Skinner's Horse, 3, 87ff., 98ff., 105, 109-12, 119-21, 123-4, 127-8, 130, 134-5, 136, 139-40, 143, 144, 153, 156-7, 158-60, 164, 168-9, 173, 176, 180, 187, 188ff., 192-4; redesignated 1st and 8th Local Horse, 196, 198, 209, 218, 239, 246; formed 2nd Cavalry Brigade, 246-7; later designations, 251-2
 Sleeman, Major-Genl. Sir W. H., 235-6
 Smith, Major-Genl. John, 191-9

Index

- Smith, Capt. Lewis F., 47, 56, 68,
71, 97; as Lt.-Col., 180, 252
— Capt. Lucius H., 252
Sombre, David O. D., 227
Sonepat, 93
Sounda, 39-40
Staig, Dr J. A., 248-50
Stuart, Capt. Kenneth, 73-5
— Lt.-Genl. Robert, 73n
Suchet Singh, 221
Suffrein, Adml., 47
Surjah, 61
Sutherland, Col. Robert, 13, 22,
42, 65, 66, 68
Swinton, Mr Secty., 197n
- TANTIA, BALLOBA, 17
Tashrih-ul-Akvam (Skinner),
217-18
Tazkirat-ul-Umara (Skinner),
218
Telengas, 14
Templeton, Thomas, 8
Thomas, George, 43-51, 52-8,
91, 191, 227, 252
Thorn, Major William, 3, 78, 107
Thugs, 246
Tipu Sultan, 61-4
Tone, Col. William, 39-40, 42
Turnbull, James, 169
Turner, Capt. Peregrine, 217
— Mrs (Peregrine), 217
- UDAIPUR, 23, 43
— Rana of, 23
Ujjain, 41-2, 55, 65-6, 68, 69
- Uniara, 232
— Rajah of, 35, 37-8
- VAMAN RAO, 52
Vickers, Lt., 25, 42, 99, 114
- WAGENTREIBER, GEORGE,
217
— Mrs (George), 217
Walker, Capt. Thomas, 247
Ware, Major-Genl. Charles,
101-4
Warlords' heyday, 4
Wasil Mohammed, 178-9
Wellesley, Marquis, 63, 70-1, 78,
102, 145
— Major-Genl. Arthur, 78, 98,
101; as Duke of Wellington,
181, 198
White, Capt. Martin, 127
Wilson, Bishop Daniel, 232-4,
254
Woodville, Lt., 92-3, 103
Worsely, Major Henry, 115,
121; as Colonel, 143, 153,
157-8, 206
Wynne, Charles, 206-7
- 'YELLOW BOYS', *see* Skinner's
Horse
- ZALIM SINGH, 18, 108
Zeman Shah (King of Kabul), 24,
25
Zuhur-ul-Nissa, Princess, 228





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