An excerpt from

The Story of the Malakand Field Force

Winston S. Churchill

(1898)

Preface, omitted from this excerpt, followed by—

Chapter 1: The Theatre of War

Starts with 700 words describing "the scenery of the theatre of war", omitted from this excerpt

The inhabitants of these wild but wealthy valleys are of many tribes, but of similar character and condition. The abundant crops which a warm sun and copious rains raise from a fertile soil, support a numerous population in a state of warlike leisure. Except at the times of sowing and of harvest, a continual state of feud and strife prevails throughout the land. Tribe wars with tribe. The people of one valley fight with those of the next. To the quarrels of communities are added the combats of individuals. Khan assails khan, each supported by his retainers. Every tribesman has a blood feud with his neighbor. Every man's hand is against the other, and all against the stranger.

Nor are these struggles conducted with the weapons which usually belong to the races of such development. To the ferocity of the Zulu are added the craft of the Redskin and the marksmanship of the Boer. The world is presented with that grim spectacle, "the strength of civilisation without its mercy." At a thousand yards the traveller falls wounded by the well-aimed bullet of a breech-loading rifle. His assailant, approaching, hacks him to death with the ferocity of a South-Sea Islander. The weapons of the nineteenth century are in the hands of the savages of the Stone Age.

Every influence, every motive, that provokes the spirit of murder among men, impels these mountaineers to deeds of treachery and violence. The strong

aboriginal propensity to kill, inherit in all human beings, has in these valleys been preserved in unexampled strength and vigour. That religion, which above all others was founded and propagated by the sword—the tenets and principles of which are instinct with incentives to slaughter and which in three continents has produced fighting breeds of men—stimulates a wild and merciless fanaticism. The love of plunder, always a characteristic of hill tribes, is fostered by the spectacle of opulence and luxury which, to their eyes, the cities and plains of the south display. A code of honour not less punctilious than that of old Spain, is supported by vendettas as implacable as those of Corsica.

In such a state of society, all property is held directly by main force. Every man is a soldier. Either he is the retainer of some khan—the man-at-arms of some feudal baron as it were—or he is a unit in the armed force of his village—the burgher of mediaeval history. In such surroundings we may without difficulty trace the rise and fall of an ambitious Pathan. At first he toils with zeal and thrift as an agriculturist on that plot of ground which his family have held since they expelled some former owner. He accumulates in secret a sum of money. With this he buys a rifle from some daring thief, who has risked his life to snatch it from a frontier guard-house. He becomes a man to be feared. Then he builds a tower to his house and overawes those around him in the village. Gradually they submit to his authority. He might now rule the village; but he aspires still higher. He persuades or compels his neighbors to join him in an attack on the castle of a local khan. The attack succeeds. The khan flies or is killed; the castle captured. The retainers make terms with the conqueror. The land tenure is feudal. In return for their acres they follow their new chief to war. Were he to treat them worse than the other khans treated their servants, they would sell their strong arms elsewhere. He treats them well. Others resort to him. He buys more rifles. He conquers two or three neighboring khans. He has now become a power.

Many, perhaps all, states have been founded in a similar way, and it is by such steps that civilisation painfully stumbles through her earlier stages. But in these valleys the warlike nature of the people and their hatred of control, arrest the further progress of development. We have watched a man, able, thrifty, brave, fighting his way to power, absorbing, amalgamating, laying the foundations of a more complex and interdependent state of society. He has so far succeeded. But his success is now his ruin. A combination is formed against him. The surrounding chiefs and their adherents are assisted by the village populations. The ambitious Pathan, oppressed by numbers, is destroyed. The victors quarrel over the spoil, and the story closes, as it began, in bloodshed and strife.

The conditions of existence, that have been thus indicated, have naturally led to the dwelling-places of these tribes being fortified. If they are in the valley, they are protected by towers and walls loopholed for musketry. If in the hollows of the hills, they are strong by their natural position. In either case they are guarded by a hardy and martial people, well armed, brave, and trained by constant war.

This state of continual tumult has produced a habit of mind which recks little of injuries, holds life cheap and embarks on war with careless levity, and the tribesmen of the Afghan border afford the spectacle of a people, who fight without passion, and kill one another without loss of temper. Such a disposition, combined with an absolute lack of reverence for all forms of law and authority, and a complete assurance of equality, is the cause of their frequent quarrels with the British power. A trifle rouses their animosity. They make a sudden attack on some frontier post. They are repulsed. From their point of view the incident is closed. There has been a fair fight in which they have had the worst fortune. What puzzles them is that "the Sirkar" should regard so small an affair in a serious light. Thus the Mohmands cross the frontier and the action of Shabkadr is fought. They are surprised and aggrieved that the Government are not content with the victory, but must needs invade their territories, and impose punishment. Or again, the Mamunds, because a village has been burnt, assail the camp of the Second Brigade by night. It is a drawn game. They are astounded that the troops do not take it in good part.

They, when they fight among themselves, bear little malice, and the combatants not infrequently make friends over the corpses of their comrades or suspend operations for a festival or a horse race. At the end of the contest cordial relations are at once re-established. And yet so full of contradictions is their character, that all this is without prejudice to what has been written of their family vendettas and private blood feuds. Their system of ethics, which regards treachery and violence as virtues rather than vices, has produced a code of honour so strange and inconsistent, that it is incomprehensible to a logical mind. I have been told that if a white man could grasp it fully, and were to understand their mental impulses—if he knew, when it was their honour to stand by him, and when it was their honour to betray him; when they were bound to protect and when to kill him—he might, by judging his times and opportunities, pass safely from one end of the mountains to the other. But a civilised European is as little able to accomplish this, as to appreciate the feelings of those strange creatures, which, when a drop of water is examined under a microscope, are revealed amiably gobbling each other up, and being themselves complacently devoured.

I remark with pleasure, as an agreeable trait in the character of the Pathans, the immunity, dictated by a rude spirit of chivalry, which in their ceaseless brawling, their women enjoy. Many forts are built at some distance from any pool or spring. When these are besieged, the women are allowed by the assailants to carry water to the foot of the walls by night. In the morning the defenders come out and fetch it—of course under fire—and are enabled to continue their resistance. But passing from the military to the social aspect of their lives, the picture assumes an even darker shade, and is unrelieved by any redeeming virtue. We see them in their squalid, loopholed hovels, amid dirt and ignorance, as degraded a race as any on the fringe of humanity: fierce as the tiger, but less cleanly; as dangerous, not so graceful. Those simple family virtues, which idealists usually ascribe to primitive peoples, are conspicuously absent. Their wives and their womenkind generally, have no position but that of animals. They are freely bought and sold, and are not infrequently bartered for rifles. Truth is unknown among them. A single typical incident displays the standpoint from which they regard an oath. In any dispute about a field boundary, it is customary for both claimants to walk round the boundary he claims, with a Koran in his hand, swearing that all the time he is walking on his own land. To meet the difficulty of a false oath, while he is walking over his neighbor's land, he puts a little dust from his own field into his shoes. As both sides are acquainted with the trick, the dismal farce of swearing is usually soon abandoned, in favor of an appeal to force.

All are held in the grip of miserable superstition. The power of the ziarat, or sacred tomb, is wonderful. Sick children are carried on the backs of buffaloes, sometimes sixty or seventy miles, to be deposited in front of such a shrine, after which they are carried back—if they survive the journey—in the same way. It is painful even to think of what the wretched child suffers in being thus jolted over the cattle tracks. But the tribesmen consider the treatment much more efficacious than any infidel prescription. To go to a ziarat and put a stick in the ground is sufficient to ensure the fulfillment of a wish. To sit swinging a stone or coloured glass ball, suspended by a string from a tree, and tied there by some fakir, is a sure method of securing a fine male heir. To make a cow give good milk, a little should be plastered on some favorite stone near the tomb of a holy man. These are but a few instances; but they may suffice to reveal a state of mental development at which civilisation hardly knows whether to laugh or weep.

Their superstition exposes them to the rapacity and tyranny of a numerous priesthood—"Mullahs," "Sahibzadas," "Akhundzadas," "Fakirs,"—and a host of wandering Talib-ul-ilms, who correspond with the theological students in Turkey, and live free at the expense of the people. More than this,

they enjoy a sort of "droit du seigneur," and no man's wife or daughter is safe from them. Of some of their manners and morals it is impossible to write. As Macaulay has said of Wycherley's plays, "they are protected against the critics as a skunk is protected against the hunters." They are "safe, because they are too filthy to handle, and too noisome even to approach."

Yet the life even of these barbarous people is not without moments when the lover of the picturesque might sympathise with their hopes and fears. In the cool of the evening, when the sun has sunk behind the mountains of Afghanistan, and the valleys are filled with a delicious twilight, the elders of the village lead the way to the chenar trees by the water's side, and there, while the men are cleaning their rifles, or smoking their hookas, and the women are making rude ornaments from beads, and cloves, and nuts, the Mullah drones the evening prayer. Few white men have seen, and returned to tell the tale. But we may imagine the conversation passing from the prices of arms and cattle, the prospects of the harvest, or the village gossip, to the great Power, that lies to the southward, and comes nearer year by year. Perhaps some former Sepoy, of Beluchis or Pathans, will recount his adventures in the bazaars of Peshawar, or tell of the white officers he has followed and fought for in the past. He will speak of their careless bravery and their strange sports; of the far-reaching power of the Government, that never forgets to send his pension regularly as the months pass by; and he may even predict to the listening circle the day when their valleys will be involved in the comprehensive grasp of that great machine, and judges, collectors and commissioners shall ride to sessions at Ambeyla, or value the land tax on the soil of Nawagai. Then the Mullah will raise his voice and remind them of other days when the sons of the prophet drove the infidel from the plains of India, and ruled at Delhi, as wide an Empire as the Kafir holds to-day: when the true religion strode proudly through the earth and scorned to lie hidden and neglected among the hills: when mighty princes ruled in Bagdad, and all men knew that there was one God, and Mahomet was His prophet. And the young men hearing these things will grip their Martinis, and pray to Allah, that one day He will bring some Sahib—best prize of all—across their line of sight at seven hundred yards so that, at least, they may strike a blow for insulted and threatened Islam.

The general aspect of the country and character of its inhabitants have thus been briefly described.

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Author continues with the narrative proper, commencing as follows::—

The tale that I have to tell is one of frontier war.

[end of excerpt]