

CENTRAL ASIA

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MY LIFE: FROM BRIGAND TO KING AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AMIR HABIBULLAH: AN APPRAISAL

*Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah**

Eight illustrations including a, Habibullah during the height of his power as the brigand chief, and, b, Habibullah with his followers, after his defeat and capture at Kabul.

A 'Note' is written as a preface of the book, introducing Jamal Gul and his relation with Habibullah, popularly known as Bacha Saquo, and a brief introduction of the book. 'This remarkable narrative is from the original Persian of Jamal - the brigand and scribe - and was dictated by Bacha Saquo the water-carrier's son himself; who rising from the life of heinous crime, and shaking with his tread at least one part of the East, waded through blood to the proud throne of Afghanistan, till the selfless services of Nadir Shah and his brothers rescued the country from revolution'.

'Jamal grew up with the Bacha, as a brigand. Following his master's fortune he was a constant companion of Bacha during the Reign of Terror, as the Afghan call the period before the coming of Nadir Shah. Although Jamal was known by various names, he was nevertheless, not styled by any particular official designation as such, for during the bandit's regime, even highly placed officials changed places almost hourly'.

'Like so many companions of the Bacha, he too, evaded capture on the fall of the brigand; and escaping decapitation as a traitor, made his way out of the country to ply a humble trade between Europe and the Middle east'.

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

'For a time he placed his narrative at the disposal of a Persian-knowing scholar, when Jamal was roaming about in Europe as a Man of no Country. The latter rendered, a somewhat rough and ready original into the English language, without disturbing the essentials. Although it is arguable, whether a brigand, however uncouth, is incapable of using psychological terms, the introduction of some Latin phrases here and there, is excusable for the accommodation of difficult oriental expressions into more familiar European terminology'.

'Not only because the translator's name may uselessly intrude and confuse the essential story by dragging in immaterial characters; but also because, being already satisfied with his integrity, we have undertaken to suppress his name due to the nature of his occupation, and to avoid any un-necessary political controversy that it may give rise to' (pp. v-vi).

After giving some details that how Jamal was impressed from Bacha since their childhood, he remarked: 'The figure, too, was sturdy, with promise of a fine chest, abundant muscle and virile manhood. The hands were strong and supple, and the legs, encased in tattered pyjamas, could grip and stay on anything on four legs. Even then had I seen Bacha astride a maddened buffalo, and I had observed him from the hillside when he had tamed and broken in a young and spirited Yarkandi stallion'.

'Bacha became my guiding star for good or evil, and I, never entirely divorced from my love of writing, became his scribe'.

'As Bacha spoke and dictated to me, hiding behind mountain crags, leading his men over the pass, in the thick of battle, in the Irag Palace at Kabul, or in the confines of the condemned cell, so I wrote'.

'My notes were rough, and were frequently written upon anything that came to hand'. (p.ix).

After giving details of his childhood spent in Kalakan, a small village in Kohistan, and the bitter memories of early education confined to a religious Madrassa with a 'hostile' Maulvi, who always took delight in the persecution of his pupils, Bacha narrates how he avenged the insults bestowed upon him by the Maulvi. 'From the shelter of a friendly tree, I surveyed the village

square. I could see my father, with the mussack over his back, sprinkling water on the pathways in order that the Faithful might make their way decorously to the mosque. The men were on their way to pray, and as they passed, they nodded their heads dolorously in the direction of the skeleton of the Mullah's house'.

"There is that good man, the water-carrier", they remarked, "making the way clean for the feet of the Faithful. Ah, but his son.....!"

'After the prayers, there were more perambulations, and that which was in the nature of a mass meeting. Still in my tree, I could hear the Elders discussing me, and demanding that something be done to curb the rebellious spirits of one who knew not his place, being but a water-carrier's son'.

'One patriarch with lascivious eye, who had ever beheld me with disdain and abhorrence, led the spate of the feeling against me. "The Holy Mullah's abode has been defiled", he declaimed, "and this Bacha should be whipped and put to the meanest tasks". A peach, over-ripe caught the Patriarchal one on the side of the face, and the juicy liquid drooled distinguishly down his beard'. (pp. 6-7).

After that incident, Bacha decided to associate himself with Nur Khan, a fellow villager, and a robber. They decided to robe the Hindu money-lender of the village. They carefully planned it and eventually robbed the Bania. On offering resistance the bania was killed by Nur Khan and Bacha killed his wife. That was the start of his criminal carrier, and was the first serious crime committed at the age of fourteen years. Nur Khan on some pretext refused to divide the spoil with Bacha, the same fate was meted out to him. 'Nur Khan could feel my knife in his back in a spot which I had selected after hours of silent and amusing contemplation. It pierced the skin just over his kidney, and it sank deeper. Then with a thrust, and a wrench, the steel was buried to the hilt, and was playing merry with his skewered intestines. Slowly, that uplifted arm fell; slowly those eyes, but a few inches from mine, lost their brightness, and became tired, and filmed. Slowly, Nur Khan toppled sideways, fell to the narrow mountain

path, rolled to the edge, and disappeared in the abyss below - food for the jackals'. (pp. 16-17).

Bacha was joined by his close friend Jamal and they proceeded to Kabul. They found a jeweller to dispose off their belongings: to their astonishment the jeweller offered only 33 rupees. They bought for themselves Pashtoon dress i.e., trousers, waistcoats and kullahs. For more than three years they remained in Kabul working with the horse thieves from the mountains who came to Kabul to dispose of the loot of the caravans. 'We fed well, and we dressed well, for we soon learned the dark, hidden ways of the bazaar, and we could be of the greatest assistance to those who came from the hills and knew not the ways of the townsmen. Even so, we had to exercise care, for these were the days of the Ameer Habibullah, and the way of transgressors could be both irksome and gory. Moreover, there was an innate suspicion of those who came from Kohistan - a suspicion which even our carefully-fostered ingenuousness could not entirely dispel'. (p. 21).

They were confronted by an officer of the royal bodyguards who was also put to death and then founding Kabul unsafe for them, Bacha and Jamal slipped across the Frontier and came to India via Khyber. Describing the Frontier and praising the Ferenghis, Bacha remarked: 'and for the first time I viewed the land of Hindustan and the Ferenghi in his own habitat. The English, by the way, even though they be Infidel, can laugh like men. They laugh with their stomachs, and not with their eyes as do the Hindus. Their humour is as ours, and is not caustic and acrimonious. Yet, many of their jokes I could never understand, even though I was aware that there was a humour, and not merely taunting vindictiveness. Yes, I liked the Ferenghi, because he could laugh at simple things, and could appreciate a horse, and a dog, and bravery - even when that was directed against him'. (pp. 21-22)..

On Peshawar, he commented: 'Peshawar, the city of roses and chrysanthemums, the fine civil station with its polo-playing officers and its tea-drinking memsahibs, and the colourful, kaleidoscopic bazaar, where in the course of one single day, one

can meet men of all classes and of all countries. Peshawar - with its seething city within, and its calm, peaceful, almost somnolent civil station without, where even though they be on the frontier line, and right in the mouth of the khyber, and white men play their games and then repair to their club to make merry'. (pp. 22-23).

In Peshawar Bacha started selling tea, a profitable business, with a multitude of other shrouded activities. 'Many a .303 rifle bolt was filched from the barracks under the very eyes of the soldiery; many a polo pony disappeared, to make its way across the Indus, through the ravine country around Attock, and southward to Rawalpindi, to be sold in the marts of Lahore, Murree, Sialkot, Amritsar and elsewhere'. (p. 24).

In Peshawar after establishing his business, Bacha married the daughter of a tribal chief. But he was not happy with his wife and regarded her as 'a she cat, immense, and gross', who 'had vinegar in her veins instead of warm, red blood'. (p. 25). In a tribal warfare Bacha's wife died and he left the area immediately to avoid his engagement in the inter-clan war in Khyber. At this stage, according to him, he 'knew not where to mend my steps. I had had no news from Kabul, and to show my face there might well provoke trouble. Where court darlings are concerned, eastern officials are apt to have long memories, and - I had never been able to ascertain whether I had been connected with the removal of that bumptious swordsman of the Royal bodyguard. Equally, it would be unwise to direct my steps to Kohistan where the death of the goldsmith and his wife would still be vividly remembered and a subject for nightly discussions round the village fires'. (pp. 27-28).

Bacha was thinking seriously of going to 'down country' when one evening he met a 'Holy man', a Mullah, who predicted that "I see you rising", he continued, "Rising ... rising to a high estate upon the bodies of the fallen. There is blood ... there is ribald laughter... there is lamentation". (p. 28) 'He gazed at moon, and was lost in meditation. "There will be six or seven - I cannot see clearly, but eventually you, young man, will assume the Royal raiment....." (p. 29). The Mullah attached an amulet to

Bacha's hand and said: "Young man despise not what I have given thee. It will charm away the bullets, and divert the assassin's knife. Its potency will remain with thee as long as I remain upon this earth, and ... for two moons beyond". (p. 30).

Bacha narrates the quick succession of some of the kings after the assassination of Amir Habibullah near Jalalabad on the night of 19 February 1919. Sardar Nasrullah, the younger brother of Habibullah proclaimed himself as the king; Sardar Inayatullah, the first son of Habibullah was next to follow him; Sardar Hidayatullah, his second son was motoring to Kabul to relieve Amanullah of the Governorship of Kabul but his motor broke down, and he was stranded. Amanullah proclaimed himself in Kabul, and succeeded in winning over people to his side and eventually became the king of Afghanistan.

'When we heard the news, I laughed in my hand, for I knew that the People of Kohistan, and many in the Frontier tribal tracts, would regard Amanullah as an interloper. Even so, rumour said, there were those in Kabul who failed to see in Amanullah the rightful heir, because, as third son, at no time had he been regarded as the possible successor to his father. Yet, there were greybeards who said that the new king would do well. He was no mere princeling, they said. Had he not been entrusted with affairs of state, and had he not been Governor of Kabul? But, I, who had been in the capital, and behind the scenes, saw trouble looming in the distance. Like many other men, he was afflicted of his in-laws, and I had seen what I had seen. Again I bethought of the Mullah, and of his extraordinary words. I could see trouble... death... blood... much as he had painted it. But Amanullah was well versed in the ways of state, and his span was to be lengthy. In many ways he had sound common sense, and who can fail to applaud his first action? He increased the pay of the soldiery to twenty rupees per month. That settled the army. He promised the country as a whole, an unqualified national freedom, entirely divorced from British interference. That settled the agitators'. (pp. 32-33).

In the days of turmoil, Bacha got an opportunity and he came back to Afghanistan. He settled in Jalalabad temporarily and

started gambling, thus increasing his stock of rupees. Then came the fateful night when he had to pour every penny out of his pocket and not contending with this he sold out the carpets and the expensive silk, brought from Hindustan. Next morning, (28 February 1919) penny-less Bacha enlisted himself in the army to get the promised twenty rupee per month salary. He was taught drill and the mechanism of a modern rifle. The strict discipline of the army was bit disturbing for Bacha but he had to comply with the rules and regulations of the army. He was not happy with the way their officers and instructors were dealing them. Soon he became the best shot of his unit.

After narrating the causes and events of the Third Anglo-Afghan war, Bacha gives due credit to Nadir Khan, the incharge of the Khost plank, who, according to Bacha, alone had saved the Afghan honour. Bacha gives details of the Hijrat Movement and the treatment meted out to the Muhajirin by the Afghan monarch. On Amanullah's banning the entry of the Muhajirin into Afghanistan, Bacha commented that, 'As a result of this edict, many hundreds of religious zealots perished, and even in Afghanistan there were many who were not slow in declaring that the monarch had been guilty of inhospitality to the Faithful in the course which he pursued. The Hijrat gave Amanullah a definite setback in the popular esteem of his countrymen, and provided the groundwork upon which much future criticism was based. Later, when he was to introduce his reforms, the Mullahs remembered his treatment of the Khilafatists, and made much capital out of the situation'. (p. 49).

Amanullah introduced a number of reforms including the compulsory primary education, abolishing the practice of unregistered hakims and the compulsory military service. The educational reforms were resented by the clergy, who ordinarily had the education of the pupils in their own hands, and many of whom were thus deprived of their posts and emoluments. The ban on hikmat was taken as interfering in the age-long customs, which was criticised by a section of the Afghans. The new code of law was aimed at the southern provinces. According to the new codes, every eighth man was to be enlisted in the army. This cut across

the class prejudice of powerful families. Out of this resentment grew the Khost rebellion which was quelled by Amanullah largely due to his skilful diplomacy of using certain tribes against the rebels. Amanullah enlisted the support of Khugianis, Afridis, Mohmands, Shinwaris, Wazirs, Hazaras, and the like. Thus in this manner the rebellion was brought to a close.

During his campaign Bacha was able to 'throw off many of the irksome restrictions of the barrack square, and to indulge in soldiering as I imagine soldiering is. My methods, which to the purely military class, appeared remarkably unorthodox, earned for me something of the reputation of a dare-devil, and certainly one for bravery. Yet, both were built entirely on my ability really to shoot and my refusal to be entrammelled by parade ground methods. I did not see anything particularly brave in stalking one who was addicted to inconvenient snipping, or in meeting shock tactics with shock tactics. If, during the course of an engagement it became embarrassingly obvious that I was being singled out for attack, then I, in my turn, singled out the attacker, and the best fighter won. My comrades call it bravery. I merely regarded it as common sense. Then, too, I had my amulet, and - there was still my destiny. Perhaps I could afford to take risks'. (p. 53). After narrating his personal experiences of the military life, Bacha mentioned one particular officer, and equivalent of a major who always took delight in harassing Bacha on one pretext or the other. Eventually he got a chance and Bacha was imprisoned, rescued by Jamal. In lieu of his salary, Bacha took away a .303 rifle along with 500 rounds of ammunition and fled. But before his 'departure' of Kabul, he avenged his insult by setting ablaze the major's house.

Bacha's next destination was his village. He was given a hero-welcome by the villagers. They were misinformed of the incident of the Hindu money-lender and Nur Khan as the murderer of the Hindu money lender and his wife, who was duly killed by Bacha to protect the honour of his village. After spending some days in his village, Bacha discussed with Jamal their future course of action because 'There was, of course, no life for me in the village. There was no escape for one who had seen something of

the world, and who saw on every hand the narrowness of outlook which was the lot of those I had previously regarded with awe, and even respect. Now I found their oft-spoken views childish and irksome, and I longed to be away upon the hillsides with my good horse under me, and with my rifle and five hundred rounds'. (p.65). They decided for robbing the caravans passing beyond the hills. Starting from looting a small caravan they soon become notorious in and around Kohistan. Kohistanis flocked to Bacha, and soon his name was known throughout the hills of Kohistan. The authorities at Kabul were well-aware of the activities of Bacha. A force of two hundred men with two officers was despatched against him. Bacha was careful but confident of their failure. 'In the fullness of time', remarked Bacha, 'their capture was ridiculously easy, for these arrogant Kabulis rather disdained their task of routing out a tribal robber. They regarded the affair in the light of sport, but they had left Kabul before the arrival there of vital information, and they were quite unaware of my strength. They were under the impression that all they had to do was to precipitate themselves upon my village, overawe it with their machine-guns, and demand my surrender'. (pp.89-90). The force was defeated, the chief officer was purposely spared as Bacha wanted him to return to Kabul in disgrace and to tell a wondrous account of Bacha's might. Soon he became the Lord of Kohistan, the ruler of the caravans and was known throughout Afghanistan. After establishing his authority over the whole of Kohistan, Bacha's eye fell upon Kabul. Kabul, according to Bacha, was full of discontent and strife as a result of Amanullah's reforms. Bacha had a discussion of Amanullah's second phase of reforms and his un-timely 'European Pilgrimage'. 'Had he known of the great weight of feeling against him', according to Bacha, 'he would have hesitated in leaving his kingdom at such a time, but he was fully under the impression that the people welcomed his reforms, and that the only persons with whom he had to contend were the Mullahs. His courtiers told him this, and none others were allowed to approach the Royal presence. So satisfied was the King that his policy was right that his principal amusement was to hale a bearded Mullah before him, and then

deride him for his bearded face and his comical garments. The courtiers, in their creased trousers from London, and their faultless morning coats, would preen themselves, laugh with the King, and thus spend a pleasant hour. Wild tales of these entertainment would make their way to the hills, and there was much reflective tugging of beards'. (p. 103).

Amanullah went on of his world tour. Bacha sitting up in Kohistan, like a vulture waiting for the living thing to become a corpse. 'A mentality such as that of Amanullah's demanded an inexhaustible supply of money. Already he had wrung the country dry. Extortion is a two-handed jade, and I could visualise the time when this spendthrift monarch would be left suspended with a poverty stricken and hostile people on the one hand, and a series of half consummated reforms on the other. For Amanullah there was not to be the fruit of attainment - only the dry husk of frustrated endeavour'. (p. 104).

However, Bacha had made contacts with Mohammad Wali, Amanuallah's favourite, and to whom he had dedicated the regency. He had two meetings with Mohammad Wali. His reception was not that which should be accorded to an enemy of the state. 'He was resolved', according to Bacha, 'no matter what happened to the rest of Afghanistan, that he at least would not go hungry, and might perchance become a King himself. (p.105). Mohammad Wali, according to Bacha, 'still kept his money bags open that those who cared might contribute'. (p.122). Bacha established between Kabul and Kohistan a line of trusty runners. There were those within the court who would do anything for money; and Bacha, could easily afford to buy information. He was informed of the strange royal decrees and the popular resentment against it. 'There were murmurings among the people; the army was disgruntled, and a rebellious clergy was stalking the land impressing upon the peasants that they were in the hands of Satan; The court was reviled; Amanullah was likened to a madman; tax-gatherers who still endeavoured to mulct the poor were murdered, and there was a drying up of resources in Kabul. The King had spent all on his journeys abroad; the country had paid its taxes long in advance, and the State coffers were running

empty. Each day, sitting up in the hills, I awaited the call which I knew must come. And, I was prepared, I was sanguine of victory, too, for my star was definitely in the ascendant'. (p. 110). Bacha was afraid of only one person: The one Afghan soldier for whom I had any regard, and the one commander whom I did not despise, was in Europe, seriously ill: he was General Nadir Khan who was away, and beyond easy recall. It required but a master stroke....' (p. 110).

Soon the spark to the revolt was ignited. Bacha gives details of the Koochi caravan passing through the Shinwari territory and that how they mistakenly fired upon the Shinwaris; bribed the local magistrate which infuriated the Shinwaris. They revolted against the Kabul authority, which sent forces against them and this proved to be a blessing in disguise for Bacha. The rebels evolved twenty-one points, among them being the resignation of the King, the non-acceptance of any of his house as the future ruler, the dismissal of the Queen and her relations, the disposition of all the Ministers, and a complete reversal of all new laws. After the non-acceptance of their demands they decided to march on Kabul to depose the King. When Bacha received the news of the tribal march on Kabul, he was determined to be there first. After gathering two thousand men he marched on Kabul. In the outskirts of Kabul he divided his force into two parts: seventeen hundred were kept in reserve and the remaining three hundred were kept in reserve and the remaining three hundred were split up into the neighbouring villages, waiting for a signal for the final assault. The palace intrigues were on its peak. Bacha waiting for the moment 'when the country would have to say: Who shall be King? Amanullah Khan must not only be dispossessed, but his name must be disgraced. Then, with no one ready to fill the breach, and with Bacha Saquo in command at Kabul, the clans would be the more likely to accept the situation. I had no illusions. I knew that they would look askance at the son of a water-carrier, and that if any other aspirant to the throne lifted his head, there would be war. But, if Amanullah could be induce to abdicate - if his nerves could be fretted to that degree when he lost his self-command, and with Nadir Khan sickly and ill in Europe, I

stood to have what I could hold'. (p.129) Bacha called his reinforcement and they started the snipping of Kabul. Kabul's defences were in a poor state because the best troops were despatched by the King eastward to check the Shinwari menace. Only the men of the King's bodyguard remained, supported by the students of the Military College. The communication lines outside Kabul were cut down by the enemy thus bringing the war more nearer to Amanullah. Mahmud Sami, a Turk who was originally imported into Afghanistan by Amir Habibullah as a military expert, became a naturalised Afghan and the head of the Military College whose students were then taking active part in the defence of the city was bribed by the Bacha. He demanded from Bacha to attack Kabul immediately; he would withdraw his students from the defence line. But he was not in hurry and was waiting for a 'good time'. Then there was scarcity of food in the city. The traders refused to trade and the shopkeepers refused to open the shops. They were forced by the royal bodyguards which led to the riots in Kabul. The common men viewed Bacha as 'Ghazi, the defender of the Faith, and the defender of the Mullahs whom the King was still sending into eternity from the mouths of cannon'. (p. 143). Amanullah in a despair appealed the tribals for help on lucrative promises. The King threw open the magazine, and all who asked for rifles and ammunition were supplied. Bacha disarmed several hundreds of his men and sent them to the city. Merely on asking they were provided the best weapons by the royal troops. Bacha sent his men to Jabal-us-Siraj, where the hydro-electric power house was situated. They cut off the supply and Kabul was without light and electric power. The majority of those whom the King had armed cared not for his cause. Once having secured the rifles, they either returned to their villages roamed the city killing off rich merchants, or joined the army of Bahca. The siege of Kabul continued for some days. The people at British Legation in Kabul were evacuated by planes sent from Peshawar. Amanullah's family flew to Kandahar, and after abdicating the throne in favour of his bother Sardar Inayatullah Khan, Amanullah left Kabul in his Rolls Royce towards Kandahar to rejoin the rest of his family.

After giving some details of the ouster of Inayatullah from Kabul they entered Arg. Their astonishment knew no bounds. 'About fifty of my principal followers accompanied me into the palace', remarked Bacha, 'and a most intriguing place we found it. Of those with me only one had seen European furniture before, and many of the appointments were quite beyond their comprehension. They laughed loud and long at the long, white baths, and refused to credit that mortals could go to such trouble merely to cleanse their bodies when there were streams ready to hand. These were the first European baths that I, had seen, but this I did not admit. Having dwelled in the land of the Ferenghi I was credited a knowledge of all such things, and I was required to answers a host of questions put to me by my brawny hillmen as we made our tour of the immense rooms'. (p.156). Bacha had given many examples of the foolishness of his men while dealing the things while residing in the palace. His next task was the formation of the government. His choice was for his close relatives and trusted friends. About the qualification of the ministers he himself confess that 'In the whole Ministry, only Sher Jan, the Court Chamberlain, and the acting Minister of Finance could read or write, which I considered to be just what Afghanistan of my day required'. (p.158). Bacha found an empty treasury; how he filled it formed an interesting part of his narration. According to him, the rich people of Kabul 'never adequately realised that there are sacrifices which the people must make for the State. I had to go to extreme lengths in order to obtain a paltry sum with which to satisfy the men who had carried me to victory'. (p.172). Bacha's next target was the closure of the schools; the teachers were dismissed. He closed the libraries, the laboratories and the Royal museum, and sold of the effects. As there was no metal from which to coin the rupees, leather coins were issued, properly marked and bore the stamp of the Royal mint. Merchants were particularly targeted: those who refused to comply with the orders of the King were hanged publicly. They reverted to the old methods of punishments: cutting of the hands of the criminals, had them hoisted aloft on the poles in iron caged.

Bacha had a detailed account of Amanullah's attempt for regaining the control of Afghanistan and his failure and finally his crossing over to the British territories. Ali Ahmad Jan, a cousin and brother-in-law of Amanullah was next to proclaim himself King in Jalalabad. Soon Bacha overcome this potential rival of the throne. Ali A. Jan eventually retired to India. He went to Kandahar to support Amanullah and on his retirement from Afghanistan remained there. Despite his offering a stiff resistance he was imprisoned and sent to Kabul where he was blown from cannon into pieces.

Bacha without any hesitation mentions the regular cock fights, his favourite past-time hobby. The birds-keepers were honoured by the King himself who took great delight in cock-fight even at the expense of state business. He also gives details of his matrimonial life: by now he had two wives: one a native of Kohistan, who knew nothing about the court life and the other one a relative of Amanullah whom he married for two purposes: to win over those who were still sympathetic towards the cause of Amanullah, and, also to garnish his court. The last portion of the book mainly deals with the intentions of Nadir Khan towards the throne of Afghanistan and Bacha's endeavours to stop him at the Frontier, but he failed. Nadir still enjoyed the support of the tribesmen whom he used against Bacha. There was factional fighting between Nadir allies: Wazirs, Mangal, Jordan etc. had their own cases to plead but Nadir pacified them at least for the time being and diverted them against their common enemy, the 'tyrant Bacha sitting on the throne at Kabul'. Some resistance was offered at Gardez, but was occupied. Bacha decided to make a sudden attack on the General's army at Gardez. Due to the lack of ammunition and disunity amongst the General's forces they faced a defeat and were retreated to Khost.

There were a series of letters between Bacha and Nadir. Nadir was asked to submit otherwise his family members then imprisoned in Kabul would be hanged. He refused and remained busy in the tribal area requesting them to forge unity in their ranks and to oust the son of a water-carrier. In August the General's forces besieged the city of Gardez and conquered it. A large

number of Kabul troops were imprisoned and a large quantity of ammunition was seized. Bacha received two bad news in August: the loss of Gardez, and the Mullah of Khyber, who had given him the amulet was dead. After waiting for some time, Sardar Shah Wali Khan, acting on the advice of Nadir had took possession of Khushi and Wagho-Jan Pass, the places which Bacha termed as 'gate to the capital'. Bacha prepared himself to meet the General and reinforced the defence line of Kabul. On 8 September 1929 first column of the General's troops appeared moving towards the capita. They had Maranjan Hill as their objective. Bacha himself supervised the defence of the post and after heavy casualties the lashkar had to retreat. In the darkness of the night the General's troops had established their position in the Chaman-i-Huzuri. After giving details of the siege of Kabul and the psychological war for a couple of weeks, eventually not withstanding the heavy fire of Nadir's artillery, Bacha slipped away from Kabul on 2 October 1929. With much difficulty they reached Kalakan, their native village. Unexpectedly the fellow-villagers showed no sympathy for Bacha's cause anymore. Both Bacha and Malik Mohsin were advised to leave the village, lest they face the wrath of Nadir. For some time they roamed in the nearby hills. Death was awaiting for them in Kabul. Bacha was not afraid of being killed as he himself put it in these words: 'I thought little of death. It meant nothing to me, for I had achieved my ambition, and had been King. I had had my way with men, and I had made my mark. The land of Afghanistan would not speedily forget my rule' (p. 269) large rewards were offered for his head. Eventually his own native Kohistanis captured him and was handed over to the authorities in Kabul.

He was charged as a traitor, a murderer, a thief, a brigand. 'The officer who read the indictment became hoarse of voice before he had concluded the sonorous wording. "What you say, Bacha Saquo, son of a water-carrier of Kalakam...guilty, or not guilty?" 'I looked round at the semi-circle of hard, un-smiling faces, and laughed. It was not such a laugh as one would give when endeavouring to dissemble. It was a hearty guffaw, for these men were so serious. They took their task to heart, and they might

have been giving judgment on a matter of import rather than on an insignificant trifle - a mere life'.

"Guilty or not guilty?"

"The words came again, and the officer who uttered them was obviously shocked. That a prisoner should so lightly regard these proceedings savoured of the indecorous and unseemly". "Your answer!". I spat upon the carpet, and gazed down at the mess of saliva. I inclined my head. My answer was there for all to see. A ripple of anger and of astonishment went round the room, and I heard the president gasp. I could afford to grin. I still had my hour, and I still possessed the power to tile these men. I gazed out of the windows to the smashed ramparts beyond. I studied the decorations of the ceiling. I allowed my eyes to follow the delicate patterns of the carpet. But to these men's words I paid no attention. They might not have been there, and - in truth they bored me. The outcome of their foolish phrasing was known. Why this avalanche of talk? At length it was over. To die. To face a firing squad on a date to be determined. Again the cell. The end, but not an unfitting end to life such as mine. I would have loathed the cages, and the slow march of death through thirst and starvation... Starvation, perhaps. But thirst - no! I should have hated the poles of the aerodrome, the painful ascent, and the sudden impaling, but I would not have been unhappy had the sentence been a sudden exit before a cannon. But this was better than I anticipated. A firing squad! There is ever a certain dignity...." (pp.272-273).

Postscript

'There was a certain difficulty attaching to the demise of Bacha Saquo and those who were sentenced with him, for such was the abhorrence with which he was regarded that not even grave-diggers could be found who would besmirch themselves by touching his body.

On the morning set for his execution, he was roused early, and told that he must prepare for his death. Again Bacha Saquo laughed, and spat at the man who conveyed the tidings. He was offered clean raiment, but he spurned the gesture, preferring to

face the firing squad in the tatters which had been his when he was taken in his own hills.

When he arrived at the execution ground, he found a long, deep trench already dug, and as the principal culprit, he was placed on the extreme left. On his right, and ranged at suitable intervals, were those who had been his principal executioners and torturers during the nine months of his turbulent reign. He was made to kneel, and he was given time to make his peace with Allah, and he spent a long time in gazing the ground. Those whose task it was to carry through the ceremony reminded him that his last hour had come, but again this strange man laughed, even in the face of an ignominious death.

"I do not require you to tell me that", he replied pertly, as if he were exchanging badinage round his own village fire. "It has been decreed...it is kismet". "But", Mullah expostulated, "why do you not pray. Why do you not raise your hands in supplication, making these, your last requests?"

Bacha Saquo was actually amused, even with his grave yawning behind him. Why should I raise my hands to Allah?" he taunted. "He has given me all that I have desired. I have been King. I have had my every ambition realised. What more is there for me to ask?". He glanced along the line of doomed men, all of whom were praying devoutly. "How long", he demanded, "is this sorry farce to continue? I thought I was coming here to be shot. It seems that I am but an exhibition for the curious!"

With an outraged shrug of his shoulders, the Mullah turned away, and conferred with the officer in charge of the firing parties. The officer nodded in the direction of the still bowing figures, and his expression was eloquent. Bacha Saquo might deride death. He might even welcome it. But - he would have to wait for it. All must be conducted with decorum and precision. Merely because he was Bacha he could not be accorded a volley out of his turn.

Eventually, however, the last of the praying figures had risen to its feet, and the long line of drooping heads gazed forlornly at the array of soldiers. Not so Bacha. His head twisted and turned, and he made ribald jest with the unresponsive man next to him.

The order went along the line:

“Firing parties.....load!”

“Firing parties.....steady!”

“Firing parties.....on your targets!”

“Firing parties.....ready!”

Then Bacha laughed.

A sword flashed downwards, and the riflemen followed the signal. There was a crashing volley, followed by three belated shots which came incongruously to the ear. One by one that line of men sank downward and backwards, to fall, untidily, and with limbs awry, into the trench.

The last to disappear, was Bacha. His resistance to death must have been amazing.

And, the last picture: Men with shovels, groaning and sweating. A long mound of newly rammed earth. The last of a King, and - in one's ears, that eerie laugh still ringing'. (pp. 272-276).



CASPIAN SEA
(Hyrcanium)

Ural Mts

Keleshaq Desert

ARGHIZIA

Ust'-urt Plateau

KHWARAM SEA (Aral Sea)

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