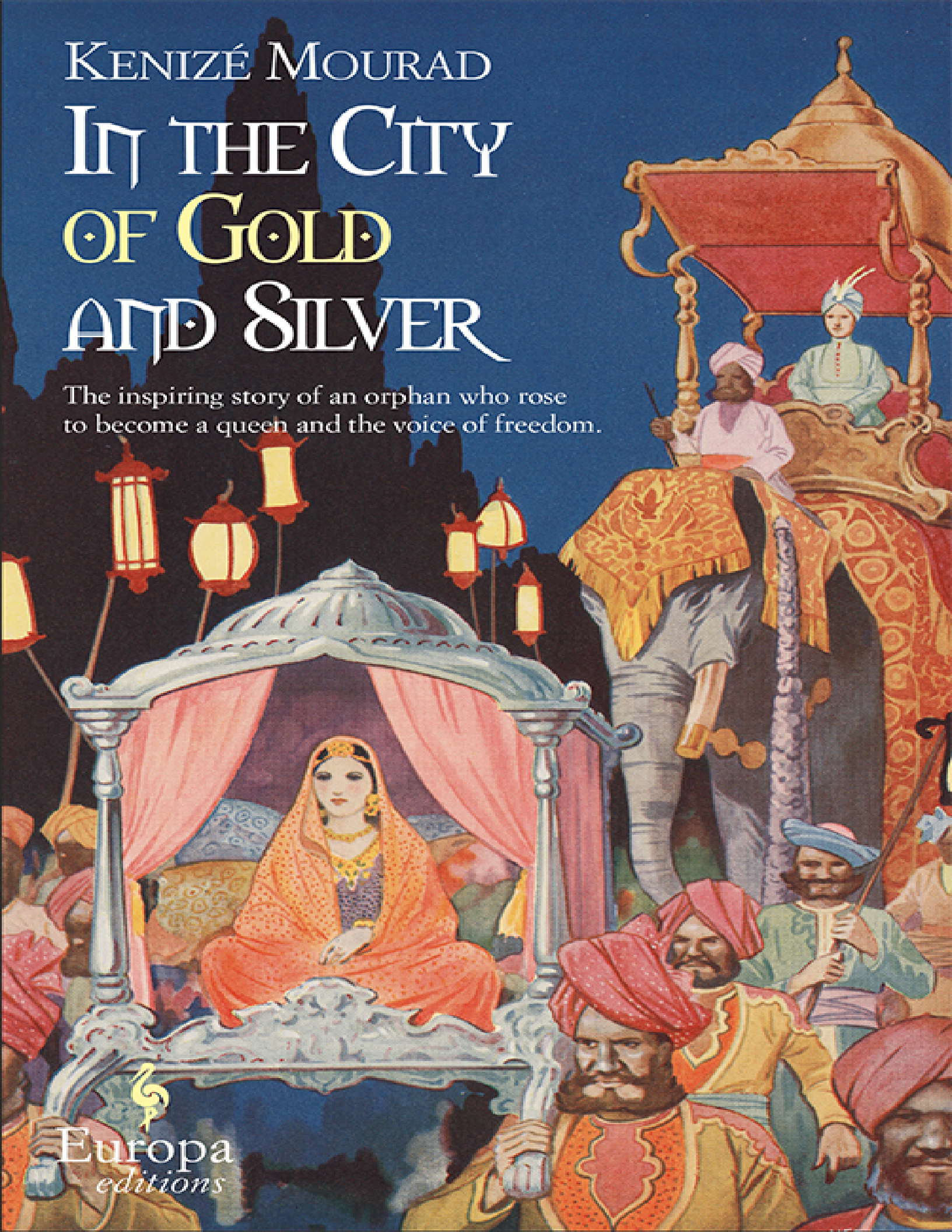


# KENIZÉ MOURAD IN THE CITY OF GOLD AND SILVER

The inspiring story of an orphan who rose  
to become a queen and the voice of freedom.



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First publication 2014 by Europa Editions

Translation by Anne Mathai in collaboration with Marie-Louise Naville  
Original Title: *Dans la ville d'or et d'argent*  
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Cover Art by Emanuele Ragnisco  
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ISBN 9781609452421

**Kenizé Mourad**

**IN THE CITY OF GOLD AND SILVER**

*Translated from the French  
by Anne Mathai in collaboration with Marie-Louise Naville*



To my Aunt,  
Begum Wajid Khan

IN THE CITY OF GOLD AND SILVER

“The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage  
than all her generals put together.”  
*The Times*, 1858

“The lessons of the 1857 insurrection are very clear. No one likes  
another people conquering their territory, depriving them of  
their land, or forcing them to adopt better ideas under the threat  
of arms. In 1857, the British discovered what the United States  
are learning now: nothing radicalises a people so greatly or  
undermines moderate Islam to such an extent, as an aggressive  
intrusion.”  
William Dalrymple

## FOREWORD

**T**he historical events and the heroes of this story are real. This saga is situated in Awadh, a kingdom in the north of India, equivalent in its heyday to today's Uttar Pradesh, as vast as half of France.

As it is a novel and not a biography, we have taken certain liberties while remaining true however to the characteristics of society at the time.:

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n 1856, the British East India Company reigns over India. In less than a century, this association that had obtained the right to trade from small coastal enclaves, just like the French, Dutch, and Portuguese companies, begins to meddle in the quarrels between Indian sovereigns who are staking their claims to independence as the power of the Mughal Empire declines. The Company offers support and armed troops in exchange for unlimited commercial rights and huge rewards. It also takes the liberty to intervene, with increasing brutality, in the politics of the states it is supposed to protect.

Soon, it gains direct or indirect control over all the states in India. Between 1756 and 1856, the Company annexes around a hundred of these states in the name of the British Crown. They represent about two thirds of the country's surface and three quarters of the population. The Company does not annexe the remaining states. It deems it more efficient to leave them under the rule of the sovereigns, who have grown submissive out of necessity and are, in reality, under the Company's domination.

In the early days of January 1856, this is still the situation in Awadh,<sup>1</sup> the richest kingdom in north India.



He has insulted the king again!”

Malika Kishwar strides furiously up and down her bedroom surrounded by her terrified servants. She, who is usually so controlled, can barely speak now, suffocated by her indignation. How she hates these *Angrez*,<sup>2</sup> who behave as if they are the masters here, humiliating her highly respected sovereign, her beloved son, day after day. She, the first lady of the kingdom of Awadh is going to stop these boors . . . Stop them? In frustration, she throws off her *dupatta*<sup>3</sup>, revealing her impressive figure, while a young servant hurries to pick it up. What can she do? She had tried so many times to convince the king to oppose his “friends and protectors” escalating demands, but Wajid Ali Shah, normally so gentle, had finally expressed his irritation:

“I beg you not to keep bringing up this subject, honoured mother. The Company is always looking for reasons to confiscate the state. We must not give them any, but rather show what loyal allies we are.”

“Loyal allies? Of these traitors?” she almost retorted, but the look on the king’s face forced her to remain silent. His eyes were so sad, his expression so distraught that she realised it would be pointless, cruel even, to insist. No one suffered the indignity of this degrading situation more than he did. The resident, the powerful East India Company’s representative, had been the real ruler of the kingdom for years now, while he, her son, the king, held only an empty title. He was really no more than a puppet in the hands of this Company, who for the last century had used influence, threats, and deceitful promises to appropriate all the sovereign states, one after the other.

She does not understand . . . *How did we get ourselves into this situation?*

The heavy drapes at the entrance to her room part. A eunuch wearing a white *pyjama*<sup>4</sup> with a long prune-coloured velvet *kurta*<sup>5</sup> announces the

arrival of the king's first and second wives. Their silk trains rustle behind them as they enter with haughty smiles and majestic steps; their fair complexions confirm the purity of their lineage. The first wife is about thirty, the second barely younger, but they have grown plump and have aged prematurely due to their idle lifestyle and the vast quantities of sweets they consume. They do not care, their position is assured: they each have a son. According to *zenana*<sup>6</sup> rules, they should hate each other—power struggles are merciless in this cloistered world—but they are friends, or at least, they seem to be.

Malika Kishwar is no fool. She admires her oldest daughter-in-law's skill. Alam Ara has conquered her rival with an assiduous and demanding affection, never leaving her a moment of freedom, lending her servants and eunuchs who report her every word, and convincing her that their boys cannot do without each other. In short, she has wrapped her in the gossamer web of her unfailing love. What better way to prevent her from plotting? The discreet Raunaq Ara is no match for her opponent Alam Ara. Yet, Raunaq Ara, the daughter of the *grand vizier*,<sup>7</sup> had long been Wajid Ali Shah's favourite, but gradually he grew tired of her, as he tires of all the beauties who grace his palace, one after the other.

After bowing to the Queen Mother in a respectful *adab*,<sup>8</sup> Alam Ara straightens up and enquires:

“What is going on, *Huzoor*?<sup>9</sup> The eunuchs told me the Angrez has surpassed himself with his insolence and has even threatened His Majesty? We must do something!”

Her eyes are ablaze. An insult to her lord and master is an insult to her, and the first wife, who is proud of belonging to one of Delhi's noblest families, is cruelly affected by these constant humiliations.

Malika Kishwar allows an ironic smile to flit over her lips. She is aware of her daughter-in-law's vanity, but she also knows that in order to attain the envied status of the Queen Mother one day, Alam Ara would never risk the slightest gesture against their execrable masters.

“Go to my son, he is very upset. You know how sensitive he is. Stay close to him, comfort him with your respect and admiration and help him forget this painful scene. It is all you can do.”

Then with a wave of her hand, she dismisses them. Today, she is not in the mood to listen to their complaints or the impossible plots they spend

hours on end hatching. She can feel it; danger is clearly approaching. She needs to consult her astrologer.

\* \* \*

A servant informs the two wives that the king is in the *parikhana*, the “house of fairies” at the heart of Kaisarbagh, the Emperor’s Garden.

Kaisarbagh is a series of palaces built in a quadrangle around an immense park. It is a mixture of baroque exuberance with its pale yellow or turquoise stucco and its balconies festooned with high archways, framed by pilasters reminiscent of Versailles. A multitude of Mughal-style cupolas reminds one of the East. Wajid Ali Shah had chosen this syncretism when as crown prince he had this majestic complex built for his many wives, favourites and dancers. Kaisarbagh is vast, bigger than the Louvre and the Tuileries palaces combined.

Located at one end of the garden, decorated with fountains and white marble Venuses and Cupids, the “house of fairies” is a music, dance and singing school reserved for young girls recruited by the kingdom for their charm and beauty. They constitute the king’s artistic troupe, a choir and dance ensemble, essential to the sovereign with his passion for music and verse. He is an excellent poet himself, the author of a collection of a hundred literary booklets and highly respected by both Indian and foreign specialists.<sup>10</sup>

When the two begums enter the *parikhana*, the “fairies” have just begun to perform a play.

Strange characters wearing crinoline or the British officers’ red uniforms hold forth on the stage. They are miming the occupiers to the laughter and applause of a few dozen women reclining on thick carpets strewn with velvet cushions.

“These natives really have no moral sense. They have innumerable wives and concubines!” declares a fat lady wearing an apple green crinoline dress in a piercing voice.

“And the poor things put up with it, how undignified!”

“What can you expect with their slave mentality? If my husband ever dared look elsewhere . . .”

As an aside, two “officers” comment:

“I am not criticising their lack of morals, but their lack of practical sense. If one of us were to take a mistress, would we be stupid enough to make an issue of it? When we have had enough, we would just leave her. If, unfortunately, she happens to get pregnant, well, that is not our problem! Here, just because they have slept with one of these beauties, these imbeciles feel obliged to provide her with an allowance and a status, and to recognise all their bastards as legitimate children. Can you imagine the inheritance problems we would have if we were to do the same?”

A pink crinoline with a nasal tone:

“My dear, just imagine, one of my servants had herself chosen a second wife for her husband! She said she was getting old and did not want to share his bed any more, nor did she want to do the housework. The second wife would take care of it all and, on top of that, she would look after her with respect and . . . gratitude.”

“Really, these Muslims have no morals!”

“The Hindus are no better!”

“Muslim or Hindu, these people’s only laws are laziness and sensuality,” intervenes a blue crinoline. “Which Christian would dream of refusing to do her wifely duty, even if she does not enjoy it? When my husband is in the mood and wants to . . . well, I pray . . .”

“We all do, my dear. Only whores enjoy such disgusting things!”

In the *parikhana*, the audience is in fits of laughter. Jeers erupt from all sides; it takes a while before the actors can continue.

A red uniform advances to the front of the stage:

“Whores or not, these Indians are lucky to have at home what we have to go looking for elsewhere, with all the risks—and expenses—involved!”

“Do you know,” his neighbour retorts, “that barely thirty years ago, before our young English girls started coming out to India to get married and thus establishing the rules of decency, every officer had his *bibi* at home, his native mistress—gentle, devoted, sensual . . . It was paradise!”

They both sigh, raising their eyes skywards.

“Maybe these poor Indians deserve to be pitied rather than blamed,” dares a thin violet crinoline. “Some adore gods with monkey or elephant heads, others follow a false prophet and call us polytheistic because we believe in the Holy Trinity. Fortunately, over the past few years, more and

more of our missionaries have been coming out here. I've heard some Indians have begun to convert . . . ”

Loud cries from the audience interrupt her midsentence. The women, who had been roaring with laughter until then, now protest indignantly:

“What lies! These deceitful Angrez are spreading slanderous rumours to divide us! Who would possibly want to become one of these cannibals who boast of eating their God in a piece of bread? A God they crucified, a God who . . . ”

“Calm down, ladies!”

A deep voice resounds. Instantly, the women fall silent and turn towards the gilded divan upon which their beloved master lies.

At the age of thirty-four, Wajid Ali Shah is a handsome man with fair complexion and jet-black hair. His plumpness, a sign of wealth and power, accentuates the dignity of his every gesture. His hands, small and delicate, seem weighed down by heavy rings, but it is his eyes that draw everyone's attention: those immense black eyes full of sadness that not even the sweetness of his smile could deny.

“It is unfortunately true that some have converted, or at least, they pretend they have. Not out of conviction—how could anyone believe this nonsense? The English themselves cannot explain it, so they call them ‘mysteries.’ In my opinion, these so-called conversions are motivated by utter poverty. They occur amongst the poor, mainly because the missionaries distribute money and educate their children.”

“But the converts are despised by everyone around them!” objects a woman.

“That is why I am convinced they are making fools of these foreigners and continue to practice their ancestors' religion in secret.”

Then, looking around at the audience, he continues:

“Back to this afternoon's entertainment, I found it very witty. Who is the author?”

A young, slender woman moves forward. Her dark green eyes contrast sharply with her fair complexion. She bows gracefully, raising her hand to her forehead as a sign of respect.

“Hazrat Mahal! I knew you were a poetess, but I was not aware you also had such a keen sense of satire! You have made me laugh on this difficult day. You truly deserve the name I gave you: Iftikhar un Nissa, ‘the pride of

women.” He pulls an enormous emerald ring from his finger: “Here, take this as a token of my appreciation.”

“The pride of women! That good for nothing!” sneers Alam Ara, who cannot suffer Hazrat Mahal. Around her a murmur of acquiescence spreads, as much to please the first wife—the uncontested queen of the zenana after the Queen Mother—as out of jealousy for all the other women the sovereign honours.

“Forgive me, Huzoor,” Alam Ara hazards, “but do you not think it is dangerous to make fun of the Angrez in this manner? If they were ever to hear of it . . . ”

“If they were to hear of it, it would mean we had spies in this palace, and that I cannot imagine,” says the king ironically. “If, however, the echo of our games were to reach their ears, I would not mind their realising that we make as much fun of them as they do of us. They have their cannons, our only weapon is mirth, and I have no intention of depriving myself of it!”

With this, Wajid Ali Shah gets up and takes leave of his “fairies,” a smile still hovering on his lips.

\* \* \*

*He is too good, too soft, and maybe too . . .*

Hazrat Mahal tries to banish the words that repeat themselves insistently in her head, words that cannot apply to the man she loves and admires—the sovereign. Words that had shocked her to the core when she had heard them pronounced just a few days ago by Rajah Jai Lal Singh, reputedly her husband’s best friend.

She had ventured out onto the northern terrace of the zenana, the one that overlooked the Diwan-i-Khas, the hall of private audience. Hidden behind the high *jalis*<sup>u</sup> no one could see her, but she could watch the comings and goings of the dignitaries. It made a change from the gossipy company of the women and eunuchs.

A tall man, whose slim elegance stood out among the chubby silhouettes of the members of the Court, was deep in discussion with two other men:

“Under the present circumstances, this is not wise! The more we give in, the more the British think they can control everything. His Majesty should put them in their place. Unfortunately, he is too weak.”

Shocked, Hazrat Mahal had leaned forward to identify the speaker. She recognised the rajah, a man reputed for his frankness as well as for his courage and loyalty towards the king.

At Court there were not many like him.

She had felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. She trembled with indignation. Weak, the king? He, who presided over the destiny of his millions of subjects, who led and protected them! She had hurried back to her apartment and dismissed the servants. She longed for peace.

Curled up on her divan, she continues to tremble, no longer out of anger but out of fear. She has a strange feeling, similar to the despondency she had felt when her father died. She was only twelve at the time, and since her mother had died while giving birth to her, his death left her an orphan. She had lost the only person who loved and protected her; she was now defenceless . . .

Like today . . . But what was she imagining? Today, the king is in power, he is young, in perfect health, she is one of his wives, and most importantly, she has a son who looks exactly like his father.

She remembers the eleven-gun salute that had marked his birth ten years ago. Wajid Ali Shah was crown prince at the time, and the whole palace seemed to rejoice at the arrival of this fat baby, even though he was only fourth in the line of succession. Elevated to the envied position of mother of a boy, she was given the title “Begum Hazrat Mahal”,<sup>12</sup> Her Exalted Majesty.

She, the little orphan . . . as Allah is her witness, she has come a long way.

Slowly, drawing in the smoke from her crystal hookah, Hazrat Mahal remembers . . .

**M**uhammadi was her name at the time. She was born into a family of small artisans from Faizabad, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Awadh. It had been a prosperous town until King Asaf-ud-Daulah chose to move to Lucknow in 1798. His departure led to the ruin of thousands of artisans who supplied the vast and refined court with jewels, rich fabrics and precious ornaments. Muhammadi's grandfather had died of despair, and her father, Mian Amber, survived by doing all kinds of odd jobs until, in 1842, he was finally offered a position as a caretaker in Lucknow.<sup>13</sup>

The whole family had accompanied him to Lucknow, but a few months later, Mian Amber died of tuberculosis. Muhammadi, his youngest daughter, was taken in by her uncle who had a reputation as the city's finest *topi*<sup>14</sup>embroiderer. His *topis* were said to be so perfect, they would fit the head of the person they were made for exactly, but if anyone else tried wearing them, they would end up with an unbearable headache!

One day, when the embroiderer was working on a *topi* for the crown prince, Muhammadi could not resist the temptation. As soon as her uncle left the room, she placed the midnight blue silk marvel, dotted with a constellation of tiny diamonds, on her head. She was stunned by the image she saw reflected in the mirror—a ravishing princess was looking back at her. Regretfully, she laid the *topi* back on the table. Just in time! Her uncle had come to fetch the hat, which was to be delivered immediately.

The next day, their peaceful lane resounded with raucous cries:

“Where is that rascal of an embroiderer? Beat him up!”

Terrified, the embroiderer had escaped through the backyard while his trembling wife opened the door. Before her stood a huge black eunuch accompanied by two guards. He held out the *topi*.

“Where is your husband?”

“He has gone out . . .”

After signalling to the guards to search the house, the eunuch continued in a threatening tone:

“Who dared to wear the crown prince’s *topi*?”

“But nobody would ever dare . . .”

“Then how do you explain this?” the eunuch shook the hat, revealing a strand of long black hair inside, and threw it on the ground.

Meanwhile, the guards had returned, pushing a terrified Muhammadi before them.

“We didn’t find the embroiderer, but this girl was hiding in the back room!”

The eunuch looked her over carefully and, softening, he asked:

“Who is she?”

“An orphaned niece we took in,” the embroiderer’s wife hurried to answer, grateful for the diversion.

“Is she married?”

“Not yet.”

The eunuch had nodded his head.

“Well, this time your husband is safe, as my prince is indulgent and abhors violence. But if it ever happens again, tell him I will deal with him personally and he will regret the day he was born!”

A few days later, two women had come to the embroiderer’s home. Under their black burqas they were wearing brightly coloured *gararas*<sup>15</sup> and their faces were heavily made-up. The embroiderer’s wife had immediately recognised them: they were Amman and Imaman, former courtesans who groomed beautiful girls for aristocratic harems. They taught them etiquette, dance and other arts, the most accomplished girls being destined for the royal palace.

The matter was quickly settled. All the more so, as overcome with guilt, Muhammadi had admitted her mistake and her aunt, who had never liked her, no longer had any scruples about getting rid of her. Luckily, her husband, who may have been moved by his niece’s tears, was away. Amazed and delighted with the purse the two women had slipped into her hands—so much money for this scrawny girl!—she had tried to warn them about her difficult nature, but Amman and Imaman were no longer

listening. They covered Muhammadi with a burqa and pushed her into the waiting *palanquin*.

Muhammadi did not cry for long. The world she entered was fascinating. Amman and Imaman's large house was in the centre of the *Chowk*, the main bazaar in the old town, with its stalls selling kebabs and other tasty treats, its innumerable artisans, famous jewellers, shoemakers, perfumers and amazingly delicate *chikan*<sup>16</sup> work embroiderers, famous throughout India. All of this, steeped in the fragrance of spices and jasmine. Behind the openwork balconies above the stalls, one could catch fleeting glimpses of prostitutes dressed in colourful silks, chewing *paan*<sup>17</sup> as they watched the hesitant men lingering below.

However, the Chowk's real fame lay in the fact that it was the courtesans' district. In Lucknow, courtesans enjoy a very high status, quite unlike that of prostitutes. Renowned for their elegance and sophistication, they usually have a wealthy patron and every evening welcome aristocrats and artists into their salons to share art, music, dance and conversation.

Some courtesans are also accomplished poets and musicians. All of them are hostesses whose language and etiquette is so refined that young men from prominent families are often sent to them to complete their education.

However, attaining this respected position requires hard work and pitiless discipline. Those not gifted or dedicated enough to reach the required level of perfection find themselves relegated to the poorer part of the Chowk as second-rate courtesans, or even reduced to the status of mere prostitutes—a prospect that terrifies these women.

Amman and Imaman's house was large enough to accommodate ten boarders—more would have compromised the remarkable quality of their training. The young girls were woken up at 5 A.M. to perform their morning ablutions in cold water, and then they said their prayers. Religion and morality were a fundamental part of their education.

Lessons in comportment, dance and singing began after a light breakfast and continued until two in the afternoon. Music lessons were also a must; each girl had to know how to play at least one instrument: the

*sitar*, the *sarangi* or the *tabla*.<sup>18</sup> After a frugal lunch, the afternoon was spent in learning Persian, the language of the Court and of poetry. Muhammadi loved these moments when her imagination could run free, within the limits of the precise codes of classical poetry, of course.

In the evening, the boarders had free time and they made full use of the absence of their “benefactors,” who were often out visiting potential clients. They had great fun, carefully applying make-up, dancing while dressed up in transparent veils, miming scenes of passion and jealousy in which they surpassed their rivals, vying for the attention of a handsome prince, who fell madly in love and covered them in jewels. Every evening, they added a new episode to the dream, living in anticipation of the brilliant future the two sisters had promised their most gifted students. Each one saw herself as the most talented.

At first, Muhammadi had taken part in the games, but she soon tired of them. She preferred to sit alone, writing her poems, practicing her calligraphy, or talking for hours with Mumtaz, a young girl who also came from an area near Faizabad.

Amman and Imaman had found Mumtaz during their yearly visits to the most remote villages of the kingdom. Enchanted by her fresh beauty, they had dangled the prospect of a rich marriage before her parents, who were poor farmers. A few pieces of silver convinced them.

Mumtaz had been in Lucknow for two years now and had come to realise she would probably never have a rich husband, at best it would be a succession of rich patrons.

This realisation in no way diminished her gaiety. Naturally cheerful, she saw no ill will in others. Muhammadi had often tried to warn her of the boarders’ gossip and malice. Despite being two years younger than Mumtaz, she was much more perceptive and capable of thwarting their schemes.

One day, when Muhammadi had just turned fourteen, Amman and Imaman came with some exciting news: the crown prince needed more “fairies” for his *parikhana*, and tomorrow the best of them would be presented at the palace. Without a moment’s hesitation, they chose three girls: Yasmine, Sakina and Muhammadi. Then they promptly left the room, ignoring the protests and supplications of the other girls.

Mumtaz and Muhammadi had spent the night together—maybe their last—crying, dreaming, promising they would never forget each other, swearing they would meet again, no matter what happened. Losing each other was like losing their families all over again.

“Don’t be so sad, I probably won’t be chosen,” whispered Muhammadi, kissing her friend’s tears away.

“Don’t be silly, I know you will captivate the king. You are so beautiful! You will reach great heights. I can feel it . . . Promise that you’ll ask me to join you. Among all those courtesans, you will need a loyal friend, and I . . . I only have you.”

Muhammadi had sworn she would, and exhausted, they had fallen asleep in each other’s arms.

*The next day, the day I arrived at the palace . . . eleven years ago . . . it seems like yesterday . . .*

Hazrat Mahal remembers how frightened she had been when she was taken into the main zenana hall along with her two companions. There were about a hundred women belonging to the Court dressed like princesses, who stared at the girls, laughing and making comments she guessed were unkind.

She stood waiting with her eyes lowered as the agitation and laughter escalated around her, all the while feeling her anger rising. She had never tolerated being humiliated; no matter if people deemed her awkward and said she would never find a husband. That was how her father had brought her up: “We are poor, but we are from an old family, never forget this, and under any circumstances always keep your dignity, whatever the cost. Know that the worst thing in the world is to lose your self-respect.” Her beloved father . . . she missed him so much, she wished she was far away from here, this palace, these women, whom she already detested.

“Silence, ladies! Do you not realise you are terrifying these young girls?”

The voice was melodious but the tone severe. Muhammadi looked up in surprise. A handsome man stood before her smiling, wrapped in an embroidered cashmere shawl. Speechless, forgetful of all the usages and greetings she had gone over a hundred times, she stood there, gaping at him.

Outraged, Amman and Imaman stepped forward and forced her to bend her neck.

“Forgive her, Your Highness, this girl is one of our most accomplished students. Your presence has made her lose her head!”

The crown prince began to laugh. He was twenty-four years old, and although used to his success with women, he knew how clever they were at pretending to be in love. Nonetheless, this ravishing child delighted him. She was so troubled, so awkward and clearly not feigning her admiration, that he felt flattered. However, he quickly collected himself and addressed the matrons:

“Your protégées are charming, but let us see if they are talented. I have thought up a new play for Lord Krishna’s birthday, and I need dancers who are not only beautiful, but who possess a real sense of rhythm. There is no room for mediocrity in *kathak*.”<sup>19</sup>

He clapped his hands and immediately a small group of women sitting on a low stage began to play.

As if in a dream, Muhammadi watched as Sakina and Yasmine moved onto the floor and began to dance gracefully to music alternately sensual and merry. She would have liked to join them, but her legs were leaden, and she remained glued to the spot while the rumble of indignant murmurs rose around her.

Brusquely, the prince motioned to the orchestra to stop, and said in an irate tone:

“Did you not hear? I asked you to dance!”

Her eyes full of tears, Muhammadi lowered her gaze. She had been preparing for this moment for months, her life was being decided and now she had spoilt it all . . .

“Why are you not dancing?” asked the prince impatiently.

“I am not a dancer!”

Where had she found the courage to reply in this manner? Later, she often asked herself and ended up admitting that the most desperate situations pushed her to discover her strength, her truth. In that instant, she realised that although she had learnt to dance like all her companions, to her, it was just another activity; she had never seen herself as a . . . dancer. She had other dreams.

As she had already gone this far, she found the strength to add:

“I am not a dancer, I am a poetess!”

Her declaration was greeted by a stupefied silence, soon followed by exclamations. Wajid Ali Shah quietened them with a gesture:

“Poetess, really! What vanity! How old are you?”

“Fourteen, Your Highness.”

“Fourteen! Your insolence is unheard of! I do not know whether I should laugh or get angry.”

Amman and Imaman intervened, stammering:

“Forgive us, Huzoor, we could never have imagined . . . This creature has gone mad! We will punish her. Send her away. This is the first time such dishonour . . .”

“First, I want to punish her myself by letting her ridicule herself in public. Come, sit down here and recite one of your poems for us. I warn you, I am well versed in this art myself and know all the masters, so you cannot fool me!”

She felt as if she was teetering on the edge of a black hole. She could only see shadows, she was going to fall . . . she was falling . . .

“No!”

The sound of her own voice brought her back to herself. She opened her eyes, around her the women were sniggering. She would not give them the pleasure of watching her humiliate herself. She thought of her father, who said that courage is the greatest virtue; then, taking a deep breath, she began to recite accompanied by the resonant notes of the sitar. Her voice, feeble to begin with, gradually grew firmer and stronger. Sometimes a whisper, sometimes vibrant, following the rhythm of the images she spun out into a sumptuous fresco. She was no longer in the malicious harem. She was the beauty carried away by her lover on a spirited horse. She was the snowy mountains and flowery valleys they galloped through. She was the spring they drank from and the bed of moss where he held her so gently and placed a kiss on her lips, like rose petals.

When she stopped her recitation an hour later, a deep silence reigned over the assembly. A few women furtively wiped their eyes, while the prince looked at her thoughtfully.

Muhammadi realised she had won, and suddenly all the tension she had repressed was released and she began to cry.

**A**mmam and Imaman departed, leaving the three young girls behind in the prince's harem.

While Sakina and Yasmine were taking part in the daily rehearsals conducted by the prince, Muhammadi, who was not invited to join them, became increasingly concerned and kept to herself. No one spoke to her. The women, touched by her poems at the time, had withdrawn, unable to forgive her for wanting to be different, and they commented loudly on Wajid Ali Shah's flighty nature. Overnight, he was capable of forgetting the girl who had captured his attention for a brief moment.

As for her former companions, they did nothing to reassure her: "His Grace is excited about his new ballet, and he is so nice to all the dancers! You were wrong to stand up to him, he does not like ill-natured women and those who have been here the longest say you risk spending the rest of your life as a chamber maid."

A week passed, and then one evening Wajid Ali Shah had her summoned to his private apartments. Surrounded by a few friends, he was leaning against plush cushions, smoking a splendid hookah inlaid with gold. Petrified, Muhammadi froze at the entrance.

"Come, do not be afraid, we want you to recite some of your poems for us," he encouraged her with a smile.

Reassured, she took a few moments to collect herself, then, in a vibrant voice, began with a poem dedicated to the glory of the most amorous of men, the Emperor Shah Jahan, who had the Taj Mahal—the white marble wonder—built for his beloved. At length she displayed her talent and charm, interrupted only by flattering exclamations from the gathering.

Late at night, everyone went home, but Wajid Ali Shah asked her to stay. "If you want to that is," he murmured.

If she wanted to! That was the moment she had fallen in love.

She remembers the nights they spent together, reciting poems and loving each other until dawn. She was amazed by his delicacy, he at her innocence. He had even composed a poem in her honour; it began like this:

“By what miracle did Amman and Imaman bring this modest young girl here? Her whole body exudes a perfume of roses, she is a fairy.”<sup>20</sup>

A few weeks later, she was pregnant. That was when he gave her the title of “Iftikhar un Nisa,” “the pride of women,” as he appreciated her dignity that set her apart from the others who were so submissive.

When Allah finally blessed her with a son, she thought she had found a certain security. Quite the reverse, it was the beginning of a war, the covert war of harems, where accidents and poisons are the weapons that mothers must ceaselessly protect their offspring from.

Fortunately, she has her faithful Mammoo! In this world of jealousies and intrigues, the eunuch is her only protector. For today, she is no longer the king’s favourite. As charming as he is fickle, he is far too busy with new beauties, and if she wants to retain his affection, she must entertain him, amuse him, as she did this afternoon, but certainly not discuss her problems with him.

Wajid Ali Shah himself had offered her Mammoo, or more precisely, had accepted that she engage his services. At the time, nobody wanted the eunuch, he was said to be unlucky. His mistress—one of the new favourites—had died under mysterious circumstances, and Mammoo had been accused if not of collusion, at least of negligence. Wajid Ali Shah should have sacked him then, but he hesitated. The man was certainly the most skilful of the zenana’s servants and excelled at resolving delicate matters. So when Hazrat Mahal, who had just given birth to a son, had come to ask her husband to give her the eunuch as a housekeeper, he had agreed, relieved at this unexpected solution. The other women had tried to dissuade her, arguing that she was credulous and the eunuch was unworthy of her trust; she had stood her ground. It was not only out of charity. Of course, it was sad to see Mammoo in this pitiful situation. Dismissed from the palace, all doors would be closed to him, and he would have ended up on the street. Hazrat Mahal, who had suddenly found

herself alone at the age of twelve, understood his despair. However, she was also guided by her intuition. Gifted with a capacity to judge beyond appearances, which earned her as much loyalty as unflagging hatred, she had sensed a keen intelligence and a great deal of ambition in the eunuch, and had felt that by engaging him she would have a worthwhile ally. As for Mammoo, it was clear: the young woman had saved him. He would henceforth be devoted to her, body and soul.

Hazrat Mahal congratulates herself daily on her decision. Confined as she is to the zenana, the eunuch has become her eyes and ears. He haunts the markets of Lucknow, hanging around the stalls where he has made friends, and conveys the latest local gossip to his mistress every evening: what they are saying about the sovereign, what they are saying about the British, so much so that she is more up to date about the mood on the streets than anyone else in the harem, with the exception of the Queen Mother of course, who maintains an entire army of informers.

These days Hazrat Mahal is particularly attentive to the rumours. She has the impression that the British resident's insolence is not a sudden whim; he has received orders and something serious is brewing. Thus, when the eunuch finally appears, she cannot contain her impatience.

“Well, Mammoo Khan, what news do you bring?”

“The people are discontent because the Angrez are increasingly disrespectful. Young greenhorns newly arrived from England, who are put in charge of the old, experienced sepoy, dare call them ‘niggers’<sup>21</sup> or even ‘pigs’! It's even worse when they happen to venture into the Chowk. They are incapable of distinguishing a prostitute from a great courtesan, so the latter close their doors to them. Then they make such a fuss, especially as they are very often drunk!”

“And what do they say about *Jan-e-Alam*?”<sup>22</sup>

“He is still much loved, but people complain he is hardly ever seen. They miss his weekly processions when anyone could place their petition in the silver boxes hanging on the side of his elephant. Everyone believes it is the Angrez who have prohibited these processions, that they are doing everything to keep him away from his people, but they say he is the king, and he should not listen to them!”

“Easier said than done!” Hazrat Mahal interrupts, shrugging her shoulders, exasperated. Until now, she has obstinately refused to doubt

her husband, considering it the worst kind of betrayal, but of late she has had to face facts: progressively, the king has accepted everything, now it is the British who decide. She recalls the reforms the young man had undertaken at the beginning of his reign—reforms of the army, the legal system, the administration. She remembers his enthusiasm, his desire to help his people . . . and how, little by little, he had been discouraged by the endless objections, the obstacles, the warnings and the veiled threats proffered by the resident. The king knows the price to be paid for annoying the all-powerful East India Company; two thirds of the princely states have already been annexed.

With a fury born of despair, Wajid Ali Shah had taken refuge in his youthful passions—music and poetry. He spent his days and nights composing, versifying and dancing. The zenana had never been so joyful, it constantly welcomed new “fairies” and they produced the most elaborate shows.

Soon, the resident had cried foul and had complained to the Governor General<sup>23</sup> Lord Dalhousie about the state of “debauchery” in this Court, where the sovereign neglected his responsibilities, concerned only with his pleasure. The governor had threatened, and the king had attempted to satisfy his demands, but no matter what he did, nothing found favour in the eyes of the Company. Therefore, to escape this inextricable situation, to forget the constant humiliations, he had again plunged into a whirlwind of parties.

*He is unhappy. He is trying to drown his troubles . . . Ah, if only I could talk to him, encourage him to resist, assure him his people love him and support him . . . But he does not listen to me, I am only his fourth wife, and even his mother hardly has any influence over him . . .*

Immobile, the eunuch awaits orders. She should not allow him to guess her distress; he is her faithful servant, not her confidant. She must not let him gain a hold over her. She knows how some eunuchs manage to influence their mistresses to such a degree that they end up controlling everything. She also knows Mammoo’s appetite for power, “Mammoo Khan”<sup>24</sup> as she calls him, to satisfy his thirst for respectability. He, in fact, claims to be descended from aristocracy, and he does have a certain air about him. Small but well proportioned, he stands very straight, and his severe visage only lights up for her. Nonetheless, despite the interest

shown by Hazrat Mahal, he has always remained discreet about his past and she suspects that, like many eunuchs, he is an illegitimate child who was abandoned or sold at birth. He is disliked in the palace, since whenever he feels either mocked or disdained, he takes revenge. She knows, but she does not care; what counts is that he would give his life to protect them—her son and herself.

Her son, she misses him so. Ever since he turned seven he had to move from the zenana into the men's quarters. She had tried hard to delay the fateful moment, citing the child's fragile health and his constant need for his mother. It had been in vain. He had been torn from her.

Slowly she had come to terms with the situation, and now they meet on Fridays but only if there are no official ceremonies, which the king's sons, however young, have to attend.

She has not seen him for several days.

"Mammoo Khan, go and bring me Prince Birjis Qadar, please."

A few minutes later, a radiant Mammoo reappears, followed by a frail little boy with wavy hair, who throws himself into his mother's arms.

"*Amma*, we had a kite flying contest and I won!"

Touched by the child's enthusiasm, his mother congratulates him while the eunuch cannot help commenting: "Of all His Majesty's sons, our little king is the most talented!"—immediately drawing a dark look from his mistress.

"I have already told you not to call him that! If anyone ever heard you! Are you trying to bring misfortune down on us? You know full well he is only fourth in the order of succession and there is very little chance of his reigning one day!"

"One never knows! He is far more intelligent than his elder brothers—fat, spoilt boys. The king will realise it one day, or maybe his brothers will fall ill . . ."

Hazrat Mahal shivers.

"Be gone before you make me really angry!"

While the eunuch leaves muttering, she clasps the surprised child against her.

"Do not fear, my darling, whatever happens I will protect you."

What can happen? She cannot imagine, but she has the clear impression of ominous clouds gathering on the horizon.

The whole town, dressed in all their finery, converges on the house of fairies. The elegant theatre, adorned with white balusters and raised pavilions topped with domes, is located in the park of Kaisarbagh. The monumental doors sculpted with sirens and fish—emblems of the kings of Awadh—separating the palace and its gardens from the rest of the town, have been thrown open for the occasion. Riding high on their thoroughbreds, who are prancing about with their manes and tails dyed in bright colours, horsemen mingle with dignitaries carried by eight turbaned men, in palanquins canopied with crimson silk, and with *talugdars*<sup>25</sup> enthroned on their elephants, caparisoned with gold embroidered velvet. It is the evening of the great *mela*, the yearly celebration hosted by the king, to which the entire town is invited.

On entering the park, people go into raptures over the trees and shrubs trimmed into the shapes of deer, peacocks or tigers, illuminated by thousands of lanterns. From every branch hangs a perfume vial delicately sprinkling the guests. They advance slowly, fascinated by the fireworks that burst forth from small mounds, conjuring up bouquets of flowers, streams, palaces, fabulous animals and ephemeral characters of every colour. A magical world created by the sovereign, where art and dreams replace reality, a reality he is denied.

Immense tables are set out under arches of rare flowers decorated with gold filigree. They are covered with a spread of delicacies coated with silver leaf, finer than a butterfly's wing—pure silver reputed to refresh and improve memory and sight. Awadh is proud of having taken Mughal cuisine to unrivalled heights of sophistication. The poultry is fed on pineapples, pomegranates and jasmine to perfume its meat, and young goats drink milk laced with musk and saffron. The Court employs dozens of chefs, each striving to invent the tastiest dishes, so many masterpieces for which they will be royally rewarded. Over the space of a century, these

master chefs have made Lucknow the undisputed centre of north Indian culinary art.

Now, the crowd has swelled into a never-ending stream. A hundred varied dishes are laid out to satisfy all its desires, amongst them the melt-in-the-mouth *galawat kebabs*, perfumed with a touch of rose essence; *nargisi kofta*, baby goat meatballs stuffed with egg; innumerable curries and *biryanis*; and best of all, the town's speciality of seven different *pulaos*<sup>26</sup>: garden pulao, light pulao, cuckoo pulao, pearl pulao and jasmine pulao.

Finally, all kinds of sherbets and sweetmeats, including *mutanjan*, minced meat cooked in sugar, and *lab-e-mashooq*, "the beloved's lips," a preparation made from cream, almonds, spices, honey and betel nut to give it its red colouring. For the king and his inner circle, the betel is replaced by powdered rubies, said to calm the nerves.

Despite the late hour it is a family outing, as no one would dream of missing this splendid celebration for anything in the world. Everybody knows that only Lucknow, the town of nawabs, can pride itself on organising such spectacular festivities. Lucknow, with its ninety-two palaces, innumerable flowering gardens, three hundred temples and mosques, its fifty-two markets overflowing with carpets, embroidered fabric and perfumes, this capital of music, poetry and dance as well as schools of theology, this town known as "the bride of India" that some compare to Paris . . . only Lucknow is capable of offering such sumptuous entertainment.

Ali Mustapha, the copper engraver, has come with his neighbour, Suba Nanda, the embroiderer. They have known each other for years, their wives are friends and their children have grown up together. Not a single Holi, the Hindu festival of colours, has been celebrated without Ali Mustapha's family being invited to share the milk and honey cake, not an Eid ul-Fitr meal, the feast concluding the Ramadan fast, has gone by without Suba Nanda's family being welcomed to partake of it.

The confrontations between religious communities that sometimes trouble other states are, in fact, unheard of in Lucknow, where the sovereigns have never discriminated between their subjects. Shia Muslims themselves, they have always had a policy of employing Sunni Muslims and Hindus, who make up the majority of the population, often

appointing them to the most eminent positions. They also enjoy bringing scholars of different beliefs together to discuss religious issues, following the example set by India's greatest ruler, the Mughal Emperor Akbar. During the 16th century, the emperor used to invite representatives of different schools of thought to his capital in Delhi to hold a discussion in his presence, with a view to founding a universal religion intended to unite all men. It was *Din-i Ilahi*, a syncretistic ideology that borrowed from Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. This, at a time when the Inquisition was raging in Spain, Portugal and Italy, and when the Wars of Religion were spreading bloodshed in France.

Wajid Ali Shah perpetuates this tradition of tolerance, but his aesthetic tastes incite him to dedicate himself in particular to the domain of the arts. "All ills come from ignorance," he often says. "It is through knowledge of one another's culture that communities learn to appreciate and respect each other."

Under his impetus, Lucknow, the centre of the "gold and silver civilisation," the "Ganga-Yamuna civilisation," named after the two sacred rivers that flow through the state, has reached the pinnacle of refinement. The marriage between the Ganga and the Yamuna symbolises the fusion of Hindu and Muslim traditions.

This evening, the sovereign stages a musical drama he himself has written, a variation on the theme of the god Krishna's youth and his dalliances with the beautiful *gopis*.<sup>27</sup>

A vast stage has been set up in front of the palace of fairies, illuminated by thousands of candles twinkling in crystal candelabras. On one side is the orchestra, on the other, the important guests reclining on thick carpets and velvet cushions. As for the crowd, they will watch the show from the gardens, and if they cannot see everything, they can at least get drunk on the music.

Krishna, the blue god, is the Hindus' most beloved divinity, and the events of his youth are an inexhaustible source of enchantment for them. Before his birth, a prediction announced he would kill the cruel king. In order to escape the curse, the latter, just as Herod would do centuries thereafter, had had all the newborns put to death. However, Krishna's father, Prince Vasudeva, had managed to hide his son in the countryside,

where the young man grew up and worked as a cowherd. His beauty, his intelligence, his noblesse attracted the favours of the gopis.

Innumerable stories and miniatures portraying his loves depict him playing the flute and dancing with the pretty gopis. But Krishna is no common philanderer; he is a god. He is able to satisfy all the gopis because he is universal love, the Divine Principle, which individual souls seek to unite with in order to attain liberation from the terrestrial world.

Wajid Ali Shah finally makes his entrance to admiring murmurs. Enveloped in white muslin, his wavy hair flows over his shoulders, and his whole body is covered in blue powder made of finely ground turquoise and pearls. Around him, disguised as gopis, are his ravishing “fairies,” adorned with their most sumptuous jewels.

They will dance and sing for hours, miming joy, jealousy, despair and again happiness, while he, the seducer, recites verses that drive them mad with love. Wajid Ali Shah has composed the poetry for the occasion in the Urdu language, a harmonious blend of Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and Turkish, the perfect expression of which is to be found in Lucknow. Inspired by the most famous Arabic tale recounting the love between Majnun and Layla, the king has introduced a variation into Krishna’s life: Krishna falls in love with Radha, but her family is unaware of the boy’s divine and princely nature. They see him as a mere cowherd; they oppose the relationship and lock Radha up. Frantic with sorrow, Krishna abandons his games with the gopis to dance his despair.

Wajid Ali Shah now throws himself into a stunning kathak performance. A long silk cloth has been placed on the ground, along which the king will advance. His agility is astounding. Despite his corpulence, he seems to fly, his bare feet drawing skilful figures, and when the music stops, the mesmerised audience realises that the crumpled fabric on the ground forms the shape of the sovereign’s initials: W A S.

Although the Arabic tale ends with the death of Majnun, who is unable to survive the loss of his beloved Layla, to please the people the king provides a happy ending to the drama: moved by the depth of their love, the gods reunite the two lovers.

The last scene surpasses all the others. As fireworks paint the silver cascade of a waterfall, a white elephant is brought onto the stage. The royal elephant caparisoned with brocade encrusted with precious stones,

his ears decorated with pearls and its legs weighed down with gold bracelets, kneels heavily before his master, raising his trunk in a respectful adab. Then, accompanied by Radha, Krishna-Wajid Ali Shah takes his place in the vermilion *howdah*,<sup>28</sup> and they set off towards the palace to the audience's admiring exclamations and blessings.

Regretfully the crowd slowly departs, leaving behind the marvellous world it has shared for these long hours of festivity. Their eyes still wide with the sight of so much splendour, Ali Mustapha and Suba Nanda allow themselves to be carried along by the colourful tide.

"It's more beautiful every year!" Suba Nanda finally declares. "Our king is a magician."

"Definitely!" approves Ali Mustapha. "And most of all, he is generous. Do you know of any other king who would organise celebrations like this for his people?"

"Certainly not. And I'm truly amazed to see how well he played our Krishna!"

"Your god Krishna, do you know he reminds me of our Prophet? All the women fell in love with him too, but just as with Krishna, who only really loved Radha, I think the Prophet's only true love was his young wife, Aisha."

Hand in hand, the two friends continue to converse all the way home.

\* \* \*

"What a scandal! Dancing half-naked in front of the populace, with his concubines to top it all! And spending exorbitant sums on those ridiculous shows instead of carrying out the reforms we have been demanding for years!"

In his dark wood-panelled drawing room, lit with copper lamps, Colonel James Outram, the British resident, comfortably settled into a deep leather sofa, is entertaining a few friends. The scene could well be taking place somewhere in distant England, if it were not for the dark-skinned servants wearing white gloves, silently serving the whisky.

"As of now, all this is over. Gentlemen, I have a great announcement to make. I have just returned from Calcutta where I met with the Governor General Lord Dalhousie. It has been decided that henceforth the state of

Awadh will be administered by the East India Company, which will have all powers and financial control. The king will retain his titles, authority over his house and we will grant him a pension of one hundred and fifty thousand rupees a year. If he refuses, we will be obliged to annexe the state and the sovereign will be relieved of all his rights and privileges.”

The announcement is received with a general outcry. Although the news has been awaited for a long time—Lord Dalhousie has never hidden his desire to offer the Crown this new jewel, the richest state in north India—everyone is surprised at the manner in which this is to be carried out. To annexe the state while they are still bound to the sovereigns of Awadh by numerous treaties, while the rulers of Awadh have always been loyal allies and, in difficult times, have even lent the Company considerable sums, showing good taste never to demand repayment. How could this act possibly be justified before the Indian community?

“Come, gentlemen, it is our moral duty to take control of this state! The natives will thank us for freeing them from this libertine!” exclaims Colonel Outram, indignant at his compatriots’ unexpected reluctance. “For almost ten years we have been asking the king to carry out reforms, and instead of complying, he continues to sing and dance!”

“It is just the manner in which this whole thing is being handled, sir, that may pose a problem. We all agree in substance: Wajid Ali Shah is totally unfit to govern.”

“Let us rather say that we have done our utmost to prevent him from governing,” intervenes Colonel Simpson, a white-haired gentleman.

And, unmoved by the reproving outcries, he proceeds.

“I have lived here for twenty-five years, much longer than all of you put together! I collaborated with Major Bird and Colonel Richmond, the resident of Awadh during the first two years of Wajid Ali Shah’s reign. I can testify that as soon as he came to power, the king tried to reform the army and the administration, particularly the legal system, but Colonel Richmond vetoed it. The king then declared himself ready to follow our instructions. In fact, within eight months, advised by the resident and Major Bird, his prime minister had drawn up a far-reaching reform plan that was to be tested in one part of the territory. The king was going to sign it when Colonel Richmond decided to obtain prior approval from Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General in Calcutta. Newly arrived from

England, the latter did not even look at the project. He rejected it on the pretext that the reforms would serve no purpose unless they were brought into immediate effect throughout the state of Awadh.

“Exasperated, the resident handed in his resignation, as it was clear from that time onward, that no matter what the king did, Awadh was condemned. For economic reasons, the Company had already decided at the time to annexe the state, as proven by a letter Lord Dalhousie wrote, which I read in September 1848.”

His words are met with protests.

“If this is true, why did they wait eight years?”

“They still had to find a pretext! According to the treaties, we can only annexe Awadh in the event of a rebellion. As Lord Dalhousie complained, the king is ‘desperately docile.’ Thus, Dalhousie sent Colonel Sleeman here as the new resident with an official mission to evaluate the situation. In reality, he came to look for incriminating evidence.”

“Indeed, no matter what, the king did not stand a chance against him. He was damned if he did and damned if he did not. Sleeman, a puritan, detested everything Wajid Ali Shah represented and never missed an opportunity to oppose and humiliate him! To discredit him in the eyes of his subjects, he even had it publicly announced that the sovereign was prohibited from using his title Ghazi, ‘the Conqueror,’ a title held by his ancestors ever since they ruled over Awadh!”

“I worked with Sleeman myself. After forty years in India, his nerves were shot,” confirms an officer. “He was suspicious of everyone and lived in terror of being assassinated. In his dealings with the king however, he was only obeying Lord Dalhousie’s orders: he had to prove that Wajid Ali Shah was incapable of reigning and, consequently, the East India Company was obliged to step in.”

“One moment, my dear chap,” interjects Sir James Outram sharply. “The colonel left behind thousands of pages incriminating the government, on which I based my report for Lord Dalhousie. You are not going to tell me he made it all up!”

“No, but he only listened to what reinforced his prejudices. All the rumours, all the slander, were taken at face value. The Residency had become a veritable complaint bureau! He ended up creating a state within the state that increasingly infringed upon the king’s prerogatives. When

Wajid Ali Shah protested, Sleeman shouted rebellion and reminded the unfortunate sovereign that according to the treaty of 1801, this was a cause for annexation.”

“Perhaps he did exaggerate,” admits Sir James, shrugging his shoulders, “but nonetheless it is undeniable that the natives will be better administered from now on. At least we will give these poor devils the benefit of justice and civilisation.”

“Forgive me, sir, who says they do not prefer their own justice and their civilisation?” retorts Colonel Simpson harshly.

These last words are received with sniggers.

“Their civilisation? Call it their customs, but please, do not speak to us of civilisation!”

“They are too ignorant to discern what is good for them,” adds an officer with a condescending pout. “They have lived under tyranny, exploited by the royal Court and the prominent taluqdars. We are setting them free and opening the doors of a just world to them. It is our mission as Christians to bring the founding values of our society to these unfortunate souls.”

Everyone approves heartily:

“The Company’s duty is to ensure the well-being of the population of India and to protect them against unworthy sovereigns. Ours is a struggle of good against evil, the annexation of Awadh is a moral duty!”\*

If in passing the British Crown obtains certain advantages, so be it . . . After all, Awadh is an important producer of cotton and silk, which the factories in England have great need of, and the soil in the region is perfect for cultivating indigo that is currently selling at an incredible price.

I n the dead of night, the king is relaxing in the zenana's vast drawing room, celebrating with his wives and his favourite concubines. The show has been a resounding success. The people responded enthusiastically, and the select audience of aristocrats and artists seated near the stage fervently acclaimed his poems. These blessed moments of respite help him forget the resident's constant reprimands and humiliations. Indeed, he has not met the Englishman for several days and thus feels he can breathe more easily.

While two slaves stand behind him waving large peacock feather fans, Wajid Ali Shah tastes the Mughal dishes coated with fine gold leaf brought to him by an uninterrupted stream of young servants. Although gold is reputed to be a cardiac tonic, this precious coating mainly serves to reveal the presence of any poisonous substance. Sitting next to her son, the Queen Mother does not touch any of the dishes. No one, not even she, is to dine before the sovereign. It would be an inconceivable lack of respect. Besides, in the evenings she is usually content with her favourite drink: a fresh fruit juice enhanced with a powder of finely ground pearls, excellent for her health, her *hakim*<sup>29</sup> assured her.

The atmosphere is cheerful, the women banter, the night is sweet.

Suddenly, the heavy silk curtain covering the door is pushed aside, and a eunuch announces that the Prime Minister, Ali Naqvi Khan, has arrived and requests an audience.

“At this hour? Can he not wait until tomorrow?”

“He insists, Your Majesty, he says it is urgent.”

“All right. Give these ladies a moment to retire, then show him in.”

As the disappointed women gather their belongings, the king beckons to his mother:

“Do not leave, I request you to please remain behind the jalis.”

The Queen Mother agrees—her son often consults her on delicate matters—and catching sight of Hazrat Mahal, says:

“Come with me, my daughter, I have a feeling it is something important, I want to hear your opinion.”

She has had many opportunities to appreciate the young woman’s intelligence, and especially her integrity that dissociates her from the intrigues of the harem. She is one of the few people the old lady trusts.

The prime minister enters, livid. He bows deeply and profusely, but no sound escapes his lips.

“Come now, Ali Khan, calm yourself. What is the matter?”

Making a visible effort, the man manages to articulate:

“A letter from Lord Dalhousie was delivered to the resident for you.”

Wajid Ali Shah feels an unpleasant shiver run through him, but he quickly pulls himself together:

“What an honour! And what does this letter say?”

Ali Naqvi Khan shakes his head and, with pinched lips, hands the missive over to the king.

For several long minutes Wajid Ali Shah peruses it; his hands tremble and tears slowly blur his vision. Furiously, he throws the letter as far as he can.

“How dare they lie so brazenly? To claim that it is my fault the people live in poverty when Lucknow is the richest town in the country. Awadh is known as ‘the Garden of India’ because our harvests are so abundant! On the contrary, it is precisely because of our wealth that they have decided to seize the state. Those who want to monopolise others’ riches while garbing themselves in the finery of virtue, will only see wrong in anything the others may do. I will not allow them to force my hand. I will never sign my land and my people over to foreigners!”

“The resident asked me to warn Your Majesty that in the event of a refusal on his part, battalions of British troops stationed about thirty miles<sup>30</sup> away have orders to march on Lucknow . . .”

“To massacre us all, I imagine! Summon the Council immediately, we must find a solution. And do not forget to send for Rajah Jai Lal Singh.”

An hour later about ten half awake advisors are gathered around the king. Indignant, none of them has words harsh enough to describe the treachery of the British who, despite their arrogance, were still considered allies just yesterday. No one, however, has the slightest idea of how to circumvent this tragic situation. They can only try to negotiate, promising to follow the resident's and the governor general's injunctions to the letter, if they consent to express their demands clearly . . .

"Let us not harbour any illusions, gentlemen, it will be of no use. Sir James declared that the honourable East India Company has already waited too long, and regardless of anything we might do, their decision is irrevocable. If the treaty is not signed within three days, the kingdom will be forcefully annexed and Your Majesty will lose all rights and privileges. I fear that unless we are willing to place our own and thousands of innocent lives in danger, we are obliged to comply."

"Comply with what?"

A handsome man, about forty years old, has just entered. He is Rajah Jai Lal Singh. Respectfully, he bows before the sovereign.

"Please forgive me for being late, Your Majesty. I was not at home, a sick uncle . . ."

Despite the gravity of the situation, the king cannot suppress a smile. The rajah is known to assiduously frequent the parties held by the famous Chowk courtesans, who squabble over his presence, for he is as witty as he is charming.

Quickly he is informed of the situation, and they hand him the governor's letter to read. He makes no comment—unlike the other members of the Court present, the rajah has a military background—but calmly declares:

"I see only one solution: we must fight."

His statement is received with alarmed protests.

"Fight? Against the British Army! And with what?"

"We will gather all the taluqdars. Each one has his small army and they detest the British, who try to reduce their privileges. Added to Your Majesty's troops—about seventy thousand men, including the palace guards and the police, poorly trained I admit, but who would lay down their lives for their master—that will make up a force capable of resisting. And of course there is the civilian population!"

And, turning to the king:

“The people love you, Your Majesty, and are increasingly angered by the rudeness and arrogance of the English. They will fight to keep you and to avoid falling under the yoke of the foreigners, who intend to reform their customs and even their beliefs.”

“What can these people do against British cannons?” objects the prime minister impatiently. “As for the taluqdars’ troops, they are barely fit to fight bandits. A well-trained military force will make short shrift of them! Do not listen to the rajah, Your Majesty, he wants to drag you into a mad venture where you will lose everything. The only reasonable solution is to sign. You will enjoy a peaceful existence, a comfortable income and you will retain your titles and honours!”

“Sir, I always suspected you were a friend of the British, but your words prove you are only their minion!” exclaims Rajah Jai Lal, red with indignation.

Behind the jalis, the Queen Mother lets out a small laugh of satisfaction.

“Well said! I have often advised my son to be wary of him, this Ali Naqvi is a traitor employed by the British to spy on us.”

Hazrat Mahal does not reply; she only has eyes for the rajah. What a brave man! If the king would listen to him, instead of those servile courtiers who surround him . . . She remembers what she has heard about Jai Lal Singh: his family is Hindu and of modest origin. His father was a small landowner who had once saved King Nasiruddin Haider from a panther attack during a hunt. The sovereign ennobled him and made him his trusted confidant. As children, Jai Lal and Prince Wajid Ali Shah played together. However, fearing the Court’s atmosphere would soften him, Jai Lal’s father had sent him away to pursue a military education. The two friends had nonetheless remained very close. The king knows he can completely rely on the rajah’s loyalty.

In the Council Hall, the discussion grows heated, and if the weary king had not ordered them both to calm down, Ali Naqvi and Jai Lal would most certainly have come to blows. This confrontation is the last straw for the two men who have always despised each other. The former, an old aristocrat, astute and corrupt, has nothing but contempt for the military man of recent nobility, with his behaviour and language that are far too direct. All things considered, the corruption this greenhorn criticises him

for is far more convivial, when executed elegantly, than boring, blunt honesty. As for Jai Lal, the prime minister represents everything he detests—hypocrisy and political short-sightedness, minor compromises and great cowardice, which have imperceptibly brought the carefree Lucknawi society to its present crisis.

“I have given my opinion and have nothing more to add. Would Your Majesty permit me to retire?” whispers the prime minister, hoping all the while he will be asked to remain.

But the king has heard enough for the moment; he wants to speak to his friend alone. With a sweeping gesture, he dismisses all his advisors.

Then, turning to the rajah:

“Do you really think we stand a chance?”

“I think we can win if we are united. In any event, surely you will not give in and let these bandits steal Awadh from you! We must fight, Your Majesty. Your honour is at stake, as is that of your family, who shaped this prosperous kingdom and edified this admirable town, the pearl of northern India! And then think of your people! They trust you, how could you abandon them to these foreigners, who have nothing but contempt for their values and want to force them to adopt their own, supposedly for their own good?”

The rajah has turned purple with indignation:

“The tactics are always the same! When a power has decided to invade, they accuse you of every crime under the sun: either you are a cruel dictator, or you are incompetent. Public opinion—for in these so-called ‘civilised’ countries, they prefer to have the support of public opinion—is manipulated by a press that meticulously describes the supposed vices of the man to be brought down. Of course, you know the British press portrays you as a libertine and a drunkard, although you have never touched a drop of wine, you scrupulously pray five times a day, and no woman lies with you without first receiving the *maulvi*’s blessings<sup>21</sup>!”

“I know all that, as well as how powerless we are in the face of this slander . . . But tell me, you who are a military man, how much time do you need to gather the taluqdars and prepare our forces?”

“About two weeks.”

“And I have three days to give them an answer! If I refuse, the British army will march on Lucknow, it will be a bloodbath. No, my friend,

resistance is impossible. I would be sacrificing my people in vain.”

“You will agree to abdicate?”

“Never! To take control, they will have to violate the treaty and remove me by force. The whole world will see them as the aggressors they are, I am sure they will hesitate.”

“Do not delude yourself, Your Majesty, the world forgets very quickly. One event erases another, and he who is in power imposes his own version of history, which, within a few years, becomes the unquestionable truth.”

\* \* \*

On the afternoon of February 1st, 1856, at precisely 4 o'clock, Colonel James Outram, followed by an interpreter, arrives at the entrance to one of the most sumptuous palaces in Lucknow, Chaulakhi Palace, the Queen Mother's residence. The latter has asked to see him and he eagerly responds to her invitation. She has her son's ear and he hopes to be able to convince him through her. If the king would only listen to reason and agree to relinquish power, it would be a thousand times preferable to an annexation, which is likely to provoke violent reactions, as he has repeatedly warned Lord Dalhousie. The governor general would not listen. After eight years in India during which he successively annexed the states of Satara, Punjab, Jaipur, Sambalpur, Jhansi, Berar, Tanjore and Karnataka, he is about to leave, and is particularly anxious to cap his efforts by offering the state of Awadh to the British Crown. To achieve this end, he is willing to use any possible means, including breaking the treaty that binds them.

The colonel has every intention of preventing the situation from deteriorating to such an extent. The king is more concerned with poetry than politics, and his mother is an intelligent woman, who will soon understand where her family's interest lies.

At the entrance to the palace, he is saluted by women guards dressed in black kurtas and *churidars*,<sup>32</sup> a cartridge belt strapped across their chests. Being short and corpulent himself, the colonel always feels uneasy with these dark, muscular Amazons, who are far more imposing than his own soldiers. Nicknamed “the black cats,” they are said to be of Abyssinian

origin. The first ones are supposed to have come to Awadh during the time of Bahu Begum, Wajid Ali Shah's ancestor, who had maintained her own army. They are efficient and completely loyal, unlike the eunuchs, who are ceaselessly plotting. The only problem is they often fall pregnant

...

Inside the palace, the resident is released to another group of female guards, Turkish this time, with milky complexions. They precede him, shouting "*Purdah karo!*"<sup>33</sup> in order to warn the women of a stranger's presence. He is led through a labyrinth of vestibules giving on to small, shady inner courtyards, up and down narrow staircases, without meeting another living soul. However, Sir James has the clear sensation of being watched by hundreds of pairs of eyes.

Finally, they reach the audience room, the Hall of Mirrors. The colonel has heard of it, but this is the first time he is actually entering the place. At the threshold he stops, dazzled: lit by high crystal candelabras, the walls and ceiling are covered with mosaic and thousands of tiny mirrors, depicting the gardens of paradise, sparkling with a profusion of multicoloured flowers and birds.

At the centre of this splendour, sitting on a simple white sheet, two black shapes are awaiting him.

Purdah, of course! He had forgotten; it is going to be easy to converse with shadows! The colonel feels his irritation rising, all the more so as in all traditional interiors, the hall is devoid of chairs, and despite the cushions the servants bring, he is unable to sit comfortably. What else? He has to remove his shoes as well? That is out of the question! It is the custom in India, and even considered the most elementary courtesy, but he is an Englishman and sees no reason to comply with the traditions of the natives.

The Queen Mother receives him with a long formula of welcome, transmitted to the interpreter by the dark silhouette seated next to her. It would be improper for a man to hear the Queen Mother's voice.<sup>34</sup>

While the interpreter responds with a flowery speech, Colonel Outram arms himself with patience. Experience has taught him that in India, and especially in Lucknow, the heart of the matter is only approached after long detours and to want to hurry things along only results in delaying them further.

Young girls enter the hall carrying silver platters filled with acidic-coloured delicacies. He has to refuse them seven times, as etiquette dictates. He will only accept a glass of “lemonade,” a very sweet juice of lemon and rose. Despite his efforts, he has never managed to acquire a taste for this refreshment, but he has mastered the art of wetting his lips while seeming to drink it.

An hour passes interspersed with trivial comments and long silences. Finally, the Queen Mother makes up her mind:

“Is it true, sir, that the honourable East India Company, which you represent, has decided the king, my son, is no longer fit to reign?”

“That is true, Your Majesty.”

“Is it true that it has decided to relieve him of all powers and take over the administration of the state?”

“It is true.”

“And if the king refuses, is it true that the Company has decided to annexe our state by force?”

“It is true, Your Majesty, but I dare hope we will not have to resort to such extremes.”

“And how so, Mr. Resident?”

“It is very simple. The king has only to abdicate and the Honourable Company, in its clemency, will grant him a generous pension of one hundred and fifty thousand rupees, and will permit him to retain his titles and authority over his Court.”

After a long silence, the Queen Mother’s husky voice rises. Ignoring protocol, she addresses the resident directly.

“What crimes has my son committed? How has he provoked the wrath of the British government, for whom he has only respect and admiration? Tell me, sir, what he must do and I promise he will follow every instruction to the letter!”

“I regret, Your Majesty, but these are the orders. I can only follow them.”

“You can at least convey a message to the Governor General Lord Dalhousie. Tell him the king is only too willing to administer his state in accordance with the governor general’s directives, if he would kindly define them clearly.”

“The king has already made such promises. The Company has been very patient, now it is too late.”

The Queen Mother is silent for a moment, overwhelmed, then:

“I see now, sir, that my son is condemned. But if the British government does not consider him fit to reign, why not appoint his brother, Mirza Sekunder Hashmat, in his place, or his son?”

Taken unawares, Colonel Outram remains silent. The proposal makes sense. He has no valid answer to oppose it. Except that Lord Dalhousie will never . . . He mumbles:

“I do not see . . . how this would be to your advantage?”

The dark silhouette straightens.

“Not to our personal advantage sir, but at least the kingdom of Awadh would endure, and our name would not be dishonoured!”

“I am sorry, Your Majesty, London’s decision is final and irrevocable. I have come here to request you to persuade the king to agree. If he signs, he will live opulently, with nothing more to worry about. If he refuses, he will lose his kingdom and his whole fortune. We are convinced that as a mother, you will want to ensure your son’s and all his dependents’ welfare. Besides, you will have an independent income for yourself, as the Company is offering to pay you a pension of a hundred thousand rupees.”

“Enough!”

A harsh voice pierces the dark veil:

“What gives you the right to be so insolent? How dare you try to bribe me so that I will convince the king to abdicate and bring this dishonour upon himself! For you Angrez nothing matters but money! Do you think we have not understood your game? You have long coveted Awadh’s wealth and whatever my son might have done, he had no hope of satisfying you!”

With an abrupt sweep of the hand, the Queen Mother indicates to Sir James that the interview is over.

As the Turkish guards surround the resident to escort him away, the slim black figure, who is none other than Hazrat Mahal sitting beside the Queen Mother, leans towards her:

“He is white with rage, Huzoor, he will take his revenge.”

“Well, my daughter, they are stealing our country, what more can they do? I have been far too patient. When this lout insulted me, I had to stop

myself from ordering my Amazons to whip him! When I think that a hundred years ago, the Queen Mother of Awadh, Begum Sadr-i-Jahan, travelled in a palanquin carried by a dozen British prisoners . . . Alas! How times have changed . . . ”

**D**ay after day, the British troops advance on Awadh. To demonstrate his peaceful intentions, the king has supplies sent to them and has ordered his own troops be disarmed and his artillery dismantled. He intends to show he does not harbour the slightest desire for rebellion, and thus ensure that the East India Company has no excuse to annexe the state. Incapable of duplicity, he refuses to believe they can violate the treaty that has bound them to their faithful ally and most generous donor for the past fifty-five years.

No matter how many times his friend Rajah Jai Lal reminds him that the governor general has already annexed a dozen states over the last few years with no valid justification, and therefore will have no scruples about seizing Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah will not listen.

“Hundreds of taluqdars have pledged their support,” insists the rajah. “They can raise an army of a hundred thousand men and a thousand pieces of artillery! And you know very well that since most of the British army’s sepoys are from Awadh, they will refuse to shoot their brothers! Just one word from you, Your Majesty, and the country is ready to fight to avoid falling prey to the Angrez!”

To no avail. The king continues to declare he does not want to shed the blood of his people. Maybe he does not really trust the taluqdars’ sincerity either, and Jai Lal cannot blame him entirely for this. The region’s history shows that most of these prominent feudal lords’ first loyalty is to their own interests, and when they find themselves in a position of weakness, they do not hesitate to change sides to rally behind the strongest. But most of all, Wajid Ali Shah is not a man of action, much less a warrior . . . Jai Lal loves him and respects his humane qualities, but he is perfectly aware that his friend lives in a dream world and has always fled confrontation.

At 8 o'clock in the morning of February 4th, Colonel Outram, accompanied by two officers, arrives at the royal palace where he is received by unarmed guards. A heavy silence reigns in the deserted living rooms usually full of busy courtiers, and the few servants he does encounter refuse to meet his gaze.

Surrounded by his ministers, the sovereign is waiting for him in the Council Hall. The resident has barely crossed the threshold when the king rushes over to embrace him warmly, as if welcoming a long-awaited friend rather than a judge who is about to announce his sentence.

Uncomfortable with this unexpected display of affection, Sir James has some difficulty disengaging himself.

“Your Majesty! Please!”

And withdrawing to a respectful distance, he declares:

“Your Majesty, I have a message for you from his Excellency the Governor General Lord Dalhousie, representative of the honourable East India Company.”

In his most official tone, Colonel Outram announces to the king that the Company finds itself obliged to break the treaty of 1801 allying it with the kingdom of Awadh, given the king's multiple breaches of the obligations set out in the aforesaid treaty. The Company thus demands that the king sign a new treaty consisting of seven articles in which he recognises that he has constantly and publicly betrayed all his commitments and consequently, he accepts that the exclusive administration of all the state of Awadh's civil and military affairs will henceforth and forever be under the responsibility of the honourable Company. The Company will also freely dispose of all the state's income in the manner it sees fit. For its part, in its great magnanimity, the Company guarantees the king a pension of one hundred and fifty thousand rupees per annum, as well as the respect of his titles and his authority over his Court.

Although the resident was prepared for protests, he did not expect the outburst of sobs and moans the verdict provokes. In tears, Wajid Ali Shah reminds him of his own and his ancestors' loyalty to the East India Company; they have always been its most devoted allies and have never hesitated to help in difficult times. He will not stoop so low as to specify the amounts, but everyone knows the enormous sums lent and never reclaimed. To say nothing of the cost of maintaining an army imposed by

the Company, the numerous constructions required to house the resident, his retinue and his administration, as well as the multiple and incessant expenditures necessary to ensure the comfort of his increasingly intrusive guests.

In a dramatic gesture, the king even tears off his turban, the symbol of his sovereignty, and cries out in a heart-rending voice:

“I no longer have any power, how could my humble person conclude a treaty with the all-powerful Company?”

For hours, the phlegmatic resident reiterates that he is only obeying orders, and if the king does not sign his abdication, in addition to the kingdom, he will forfeit all the advantages conceded to him. He has, however, underestimated the monarch, who, to his great surprise, obstinately refuses to give in, indifferent to both promises and threats.

“I will appeal to the governor general in Calcutta. I will even go all the way to London to demand justice from Queen Victoria!”

Infuriated by what he, as a true English gentleman, considers a disgraceful pantomime, Sir James Outram finally terminates the meeting:

“Your Majesty has three days to decide. If on February 7th at midday, he has not signed, the East India Company will take permanent and exclusive control of the state and Your Majesty will be divested of all his privileges.”

On February 7th, 1856, the annexation of the state of Awadh is officially proclaimed, and in Calcutta, the Governor General Lord Dalhousie notes complacently:

“Today, our most gracious queen has five million subjects and one million three hundred thousand pounds of revenue more than she had yesterday.”

In Lucknow, however, events do not unfold as well as expected. Convinced that the population, having been exploited and tyrannised by an irresponsible and corrupt government, would enthusiastically welcome the new administration, the British are taken aback by the Lucknowis' passive resistance. While awaiting the outcome of his visits to Calcutta and London, the king has directed his subjects to obey the new authorities, so there are no demonstrations, but petitions circulate, demanding that *Jan-e-Alam*, “the beloved of the world,” remain sovereign.

Sir James has no use for these protests that he claims are inspired by the Court. He cannot, however, ignore the army and the administration's refusal to join his government. Disregarding an offer of very high salaries, the senior civil servants and the military personnel of the recently dissolved royal army avoid the colonel, who intends to incorporate them into the Company's rank. To his great displeasure, neither the promises of fabulous pay, nor the offer to recruit both young and old, are successful in convincing the soldiers. At the risk of being declared rebels, some officers bluntly declare: "Enough of your proposals! The men have eaten their king's salt<sup>35</sup> for decades, they cannot serve his enemies now!"

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As for Wajid Ali Shah, realising that to demand justice from the governor general, the Company's representative, would be a waste of time, he has decided to go all the way to England to plead his cause before the queen and parliament. He intends to present the proof of his constant efforts since his accession to follow the orders imposed by successive residents, and to explain how, while urging him to enact reforms, they systematically deprived him of any means of initiating or discharging them. Some of his former ministers would be able to testify to this. In addition, there are reams of documents proving his statements and the bad faith of the Company's officials. Queen Victoria can only recognise his loyalty and the incessant intriguing by those who claim to be paragons of morality.

For his part, fearing that the East India Company's questionable methods would be exposed and that the British press would discover that the "guilty party is not who one thinks it is," Colonel Outram resolves to do everything in his power to prevent the king's departure. Under false pretences, he places the ministers who are to accompany the sovereign under house arrest: the finance minister, the person responsible for the government archives and even the prime minister, although he is close to the British but critical of the annexation. The colonel also seizes the official documents and public acts that could support the king's arguments, leaving the latter with no means of pleading his cause.

Contrary to the resident's calculations however, Wajid Ali Shah does not give up. He will go and throw himself at the queen's feet, as he has every faith in her impartiality and wants to be heard.

Colonel Outram is furious. Abandoning all semblance of civility, he spares the king no humiliation and will stop at no malice to prevent his departure. As he dares not detain him by force, he has the twenty-two members of the sovereign's inner circle arrested, his closest supporters chosen to accompany him, and he goes as far as confiscating all his carriages.

From her apartments in Chattar Manzil Palace, where the king's wives and relatives live, Hazrat Mahal follows these events in great detail thanks to Mammoo's invaluable network. He has his informers both within the Residency and within the palace walls.

She is proud of her king, who displays such determination confronting this ordeal, but deplores the fact that he has not followed Rajah Jai Lal's advice. She had tried to talk to him, but he had frowned at her first words. He, usually so patient, suggested she return to her poems instead.

The young woman seriously doubts the king will obtain satisfaction from Queen Victoria. How could she challenge the Company, which in a few decades has brought the Crown three-quarters of India with its immense resources? Resources that have allowed England to become the world's leading industrial and commercial power.

These are all questions that are readily debated in the zenana.

Smiling to herself, Hazrat Mahal remembers the amazement of the British ladies when the Queen Mother invited them to high tea. They only talked about their wardrobes and knick-knacks, convinced these were the sole subjects accessible to these poor cloistered women, until, exasperated, the Queen Mother had begun to question them about their new prime minister's programme; questions they had been quite incapable of answering.

For these *memsahibs*,<sup>36</sup> convinced of their superiority, seclusion implies ignorance and submission. They are far from imagining the complexity of a harem and the extent to which, if one wants to go beyond the condition of mere odalisque, one must remain constantly alert and up-to-date with everything, in order to be able to steer a clear path through the innumerable pitfalls.

Seclusion is a litmus test that destroys the weak and makes the indomitable stronger. In order to attain their goals, these extraordinary

women have to deploy a wealth of intelligence, subtlety and tenacity. This is how Oriental women, these “submissive creatures,” whether shut up in a harem, confined to their homes or hidden under their veils, generally control the person who imagines himself to be their lord and master.

Hazrat Mahal’s thoughts gradually return to her husband: why has he refused to fight? She had reacted fiercely when she had heard Rajah Jai Lal accuse him of weakness, but in the light of the tragedy they are currently going through, she has her doubts . . . Accustomed to the indulgent lifestyle at Court, is Wajid Ali Shah still capable of making difficult decisions? She promises herself she will do everything possible to infuse him with some of her boundless energy. He will have great need of it during his mission in England, which will certainly be fraught with a thousand obstacles. She is determined not to remain in Calcutta with the other Mahals, and intends to convince the Queen Mother to take her along in order to entertain the king, to make him laugh and to versify with him.

On March 13th, 1856, after six weeks of confrontation that no one, not even his friends, would have believed him capable of, Wajid Ali Shah leaves his beloved town, saluted by a mixed crowd of Hindus and Muslims in tears. They accompany him for miles, showering blessings upon him, begging him not to abandon them and to return soon.

Hazrat Mahal is not among the travellers.

The day before they were to depart, the Queen Mother had summoned her.

“I am sorry, my child, but despite my insistence, my son decided not to take you along.”

The young woman felt the earth slipping away from under her feet.

“But why?” she cried out, distraught. “What have I done to displease His Majesty?”

“Nothing, he planned to take you with him, but you must know you have powerful enemies in the zenana. The first wife, Alam Ara, made a terrible scene, swearing that if you went she would remain in Lucknow with her son, the crown prince. The king tried hard to make her change her mind, but she would hear nothing of it and he was forced to give in.”

*He was forced to give in! Is he not the king? No one, not even Alam Ara, can impose their will on him. But he hates confrontation . . . and for the sake of peace he abandons me . . .*

She felt as if she was caught in a stranglehold, she found it difficult to breathe; her legs no longer held her up, she . . .

When she regained consciousness, she saw the Queen Mother by her side, caressing her forehead with a gentleness unusual for this woman, reputed for her coolness.

“Do not work yourself up into such a state, my child. My son and I expect a great deal from you. You will be our eyes and ears here, and you will pass everything you consider important on to us. The king appreciates your intelligence and loyalty. He knows you will not disappoint him.”

“Oh, I would do anything to be of service to him!” she stammered, still overwhelmed by emotion. “But I do not know . . . Thousands of miles apart and watched by the Angrez, how will we be able to communicate?”

“You will find ways. The king trusts you. Never forget that he named you ‘the pride of women.’”

In the months that followed, this sentence, which Hazrat Mahal often repeated to herself during her worst moments, became her most precious talisman.

**T**he annexation of Awadh scandalises public opinion throughout India. *The Hindu Patriot*<sup>32</sup> writes:

“What is true of the common thief who steals an apple is also true of the ‘hero’ who annexes a state. If, in the first case the offense against morality condemns the culprit, then how can the usurper not be condemned even more vehemently? Awadh is ill governed we are told, so let us annex Awadh. Hyderabad is oppressed, then let us depose its sovereign.

But if one follows this reasoning, no kingdom in the world will be safe any longer from its neighbour’s aggression, inasmuch as accusations of bad government will fly the moment a powerful, unprincipled state wants to seize a weaker state unlucky enough to possess riches the former covets.”

Everyone considers this annexation pure and simple theft, and they are worried. If the British are capable of betraying their most faithful ally, then surely they are capable of anything! Who will their next victim be?

Yet these fears are soon to be forgotten, as by an extraordinary coincidence, this year, 1856, the Hindu festival of colours, Holi, and the Nowruz festival, marking the beginning of the new year for Shia Muslims, fall on the same day: Friday, March 21st. Throughout India there are continuous festivities.

In Lucknow though, a sense of mourning is tangible. The streets are silent, the marketplaces deserted and most of the shops shut. The king has been gone for eight days and no one feels like celebrating. People stay indoors lamenting, remembering happier times, neighbours visit each other to exchange scarce and uncertain news, but above all, everyone is

concerned about the future that seems overshadowed by danger and threats.

In the palaces the atmosphere is gloomy, life seems to have come to a standstill, and the women drift about aimlessly. Without the king's visits to look forward to, they while away the time, having their hair done and being massaged with perfumed oils for hours on end. But now, these previously joyful rituals have a bitter taste: whom are they making themselves beautiful for? The very idea seems absurd, even shameful. These women existed for "the beloved," for a glance, a word, a smile from him . . . From now on, for whom and for what exactly are they living?

Hazrat Mahal no longer leaves her apartments. She could never abide all the gossip and backbiting anyway, let alone the whining. And while her sworn enemy, the first wife, has gone, she has also lost her protector, the Queen Mother. She now realises how much the latter had done to smooth her way. The cutting remarks and treacherous innuendos she suffered after the king's departure—"You poor darling, he did not want to take you . . . How strange, we all thought you were so close to him . . . !"—were more surprising than painful. She did not know how jealous the others were of her.

Nevertheless, thinking about it, she has to acknowledge that the women in the zenana react very much like her young companions from the time she was a part of Amman and Imaman's household, and that possibly it is her attitude that provokes them. She is never unpleasant, but she does nothing to nurture the easy relationships that make life in such a confined atmosphere more bearable. She prefers to spend her time alone, reading or composing poems, rather than participating in games and chatter she considers childish. Even if she is always polite and even-tempered, her indifference incites bitterness and resentment. Anyway, she has long abandoned the adolescent illusion of wanting to be loved by everyone. After all, what is the point of being appreciated by people one has not much regard for? Obviously, living this way implies a certain isolation, but apart from the few months of happiness spent with her husband, the king, until he moved on to others, solitude has been her most precious companion for a long time now.

Her son? Birjis Qadar, the apple of her eye—for whom she would give her life a thousand times over—she almost never sees him since he had

been entrusted to the tutors.

Lost in her thoughts, Hazrat Mahal has not heard Mammoo enter.

“Huzoor?” The eunuch coughs discreetly. “Huzoor?”

Smiling, she watches him approach. After eleven years in her service, he has not changed much, apart from a slight plumpness and prematurely whitened hair that he dyes with henna, leaving a carrot-like tinge of questionable taste, which—given his oversensitivity—she refrains from commenting on.

“Huzoor, I have just returned from the great mosque. Something terrible has happened! Can you imagine, after the morning prayer, His Majesty’s brother, Prince Mustafa Ali Khan, gave a speech inciting the faithful to disobey the foreigners. The people applauded him, but guards waiting at the exit forcibly led him away to the chief commissioner’s<sup>38</sup> headquarters. The crowd tried to intervene, but the guards had their rifles trained on them, so the people could do nothing but shout insults against the Angrez.”

“May Allah protect the poor prince! He is simple-minded, irresponsible! I wonder who drove him to make such a declaration . . . ”

“The chief commissioner has already ordered an enquiry and has threatened the prince with exile should it happen again. Sir James has no intention of taking any risks, as he seems to fear a rebellion. The population is up in arms against the foreigners. In the streets they do not acknowledge them, in the bazaar the shopkeepers refuse to extend any further credit<sup>39</sup> and even the porters refuse to carry their packages.”

At the idea of an English person weighed down with cumbersome packages, panting and sweating, Hazrat Mahal cannot suppress a mocking smile. What a great lesson! How long can it last though? She knows her compatriots are first and foremost realists, and how could she possibly blame the poor for making the compromises she reproaches the rich for? Can one bite the hand that feeds you your daily *chapati*<sup>40</sup>? Great principles rarely withstand hunger . . . As a child, she saw the ravages misery wrought around her, and since then, she has often wondered whether traditional morality has a place in these extreme situations, or even whether it has any meaning at all . . . This morality, flouted daily by the virtuous circle of the wealthy, who cry “thief!” whenever a starving man summons the courage to “steal” something to feed himself with.

Which of them is the criminal? Who should be judged?

As evening falls, the sky gradually turns a pink hue and flocks of starlings initiate their graceful ballet while on the edges of the fountains, nightingales trill, competing with one another. Mammoo has retired. Hazrat Mahal has asked for her writing case to be brought to her. Since the king's departure, she has received no news from him, but every day she keeps her diary scrupulously up to date for him. How will she send it? She does not know yet, but the eunuch has promised to find a safe way.

After the excitement of being entrusted with such an important mission, she has begun to doubt: is this journal really the king's idea or the Queen Mother's invention to console her for having been abandoned, and to give her existence in the zenana some meaning? It used to be so cheerful here, but since the departure of the man who was its very *raison d'être*, this zenana has been reduced to an absurd monstrosity, a prison where the most beautiful women of the kingdom wilt away. Will Wajid Ali Shah ever return?

*And if he does not return, will I remain here, buried alive? At the age of twenty-five, can my life already be over . . . ?*

Her throat constricted with anxiety, she paces up and down her bedroom. She refuses to lament like all these fools, who are mainly prisoners of their luxurious and indolent habits. Her life has never followed a chalked-out path; she has boundless energy and an ardent desire to live. If the sovereign does not return, she will leave the zenana. How? To go where? She has no idea. She only knows that she will survive, as she has done so far, always managing to extricate herself from the most difficult situations.

\* \* \*

The new British authorities were expecting the population's gratitude, but they were quickly disillusioned. Despite their claims that those dissatisfied are in a minority, they have felt it necessary to post spies everywhere and adopt a series of measures to consolidate their power. They must obliterate all memory of the previous regime, the governor

general from Calcutta recommends: “Our authority will be contested until the people have forgotten their king.”\*

To this end, everything that evokes the magnificence of the dynasty is to be destroyed, dispersed or confiscated.

It starts with the superb zoo that Wajid Ali Shah had set up along the banks of the river Gomti, which he loved to visit in his impressive fish-shaped boat. Seven thousand animals are thus auctioned off: hundreds of lions, elephants, tigers, two thousand thoroughbreds from the royal stables, thousands of peacocks, parrots and homing pigeons. Everything is bought by Europeans and their “lackeys,” as no respectable Indian would contemplate acquiring the spoils of the kingdom. All the more so as the profits from the sales are to be handed over to the East India Company.

In May, Sir James Outram, who is unwell, is replaced by Coverley Jackson, the new chief commissioner, a man with brutal manners who does nothing to hide his contempt for the “natives.” With his zeal for reform, he turns a deaf ear to any advice advocating caution. He orders the demolition of some of the town’s ancient monuments in order to, he declares, make room for wide avenues and a railway track. The inhabitants of Lucknow watch, broken-hearted, as palaces and stately houses are razed to the ground. The great Khas Bazaar, the most important market for luxury goods in the whole of north India, is also destroyed. Many religious buildings are torn down too, in particular a small Hindu temple—a revered pilgrimage site. As for Kadam Rasul, the monument erected to house a stone believed to bear the impression of the Prophet Muhammad’s footprint, it is transformed into a storehouse for gunpowder.

The population is sickened by what it perceives as arbitrary measures designed to destroy the capital’s beauty and to erase the very memory of its grandeur. All kinds of rumours circulate: “The king has been taken prisoner. Nobody knows where he is . . . The king has fallen ill with grief, they fear for his life . . . ”

On May 15th, news declaring the sovereign has been reinstated and British rule is over draws everyone out into the streets. Yet again the information is false and the chief commissioner, furious at these challenges to the new order, has the ringleaders arrested and publicly

hanged. He does not dare go so far as to have the publisher of the weekly *Tilism* executed for publishing this information, but, in order to set an example, he condemns him to three months' imprisonment.

Coverly Jackson has no compunction either about confiscating Wajid Ali Shah's precious library for the Company, with its forty-five thousand works and ancient manuscripts of inestimable value. In vain, the Lucknawis accuse him of theft, but as with the sale of the king's menagerie, he just does not care. In charge of administering Awadh, he takes the decisions he deems necessary and has no intention of allowing the population's moods to influence him.

To cap it all, on August 18th, Jackson delivers the final blow intended to destroy the very foundations of the previous regime. A decree is passed ordering the taluqdars to disarm the six hundred and twenty-three forts and the troops they maintained in order to preserve a certain independence *vis-à-vis* the capital. What the sovereigns of Awadh tolerated, British authority now opposes. It intends to centralise power and thus prevent any kind of resistance to the new agrarian reform.

Under the influence of puritanical rigour and notions of social justice currently in vogue in England, the decision to dispossess the taluqdar, "this hedonist, this exploiter," is taken to benefit the peasant who works the land. One way the British do this is to demand the payment of taxes before the sale of the May harvest. As most of the taluqdars do not possess the necessary funds, their land is confiscated and then handed over to the farmers. Thus, this is not only a "highly moral action" but also a means of decapitating the opposition—leaving the ruined feudal lords without the means to challenge the new regime—while the British gain the eternal gratitude of millions of poor wretches, who, in the event of problems, will surely come out in support of their recent benefactors.

\* \* \*

"We have to fight! We cannot just sit by and watch them strip us of our rights!"

About thirty taluqdars are gathered in the comfortable *mardana*<sup>41</sup> belonging to the Rajah of Tarapur. The situation is serious. The unyielding administration has refused to extend the deadline for them to make their

payments, and despite all their efforts—family jewels pawned, loans at usurious rates—many of the important landowners have not been able to amass the required funds. Some have been thrown into prison, others have fled to escape this indignity, yet others have barricaded themselves into their forts with the firm intention of resisting. In the district of Faizabad alone, where the taluqdars possessed eight thousand villages, they have lost half of them. In the Bahraich district, one third of the villages have been confiscated.

“Did you know that they wanted to throw the old Rajah of Kalakankar into prison, but he was so ill, they agreed to take his eldest son instead?”

“They have even incarcerated a poor simpleton, the taluqdar of Bhadri’s adopted son, on the pretext that the man could not settle all his taxes before the end of May!”

Each of them cites examples of recently imprisoned friends or relations.

“What a disgrace! What on earth are they trying to do?”

“Simple, they want to ruin and dishonour us to eradicate any influence we have over our farmers, assuming sole responsibility as masters.”

“In my opinion it is more complicated than that,” intervenes a man with a white beard. “The English are not only avaricious, they are convinced only they possess the ultimate truth which they then claim must be spread worldwide. It is a sense of superiority that stems from their ignorance of other civilisations. The strongest rarely take the trouble to understand those they dominate, they just pick up some details they find shocking or funny with which to reinforce their prejudices.”

“When we try to explain something to them, even when we manage to prove them wrong, they just dig their heels in and end the discussion!”

“Obviously! They need to turn a blind eye. If they did not believe themselves much more advanced, how could they legitimise their domination? If they realised that their culture, their religion, their system of government are not superior to others, they would have no justification for imposing them. They would be forced to admit that the ideals they spout—creating a better world, defending the oppressed—are only empty words that conceal their desire to appropriate the resources of people who cannot defend themselves.”

“Exactly what they did when they deposed our king and confiscated our properties on the pretext of immorality,” approves a hefty taluqdar,

smoothing his moustache. “These British are the devil incarnate!”

“Do not let yourself be fooled, my friend, not only the British use these methods but the powers that be in general. They have always behaved in this manner and will continue to do so.”

“In this regard I find the animal world far superior,” remarks an old taluqdar. “They kill only to satisfy their vital needs, letting other creatures live. With men, there is no limit to their greed. They accumulate more wealth than they have use for, and too bad for those whom they plunge into misery!”

“And as they see themselves as they grab people’s wealth with one hand and offer alms with the other!”

“Of course, they are horrified when anyone protests!”

“And should the population rebel, they shoot them!”

The atmosphere grows increasingly heated, curses and threats fly: “We’ll confront them and fight if necessary! It will not be said that the noble taluqdars of Awadh . . . ”

“Enough, my friends,” intervenes the Rajah of Tarapur, “there is no point in our getting so worked up. We are here to decide upon a strategy. At least now we are all aware that the English are our enemies, even though we believed their empty words for a long time. The question remains: what will our plan of action be?”

“We must barricade ourselves into our forts and resist!”

“Beforehand, we should send a delegation of taluqdars to the governor general in Calcutta to explain that the country is on the verge of rebellion.”

“A rebellion? But why would the farmers rebel when they are being given land?” asks a young aristocrat in astonishment. He has just returned from Delhi where he was studying astronomy with a renowned *alim*.<sup>42</sup>

“Because this means we cannot ensure their security any longer. Whether the harvest was good or bad, we always gave them a decent percentage, so they always had enough to eat. They could also count on our help if they were ill or needed handouts to marry their daughters. This relationship of allegiance and trust established over centuries benefited everyone.”

Heads nod in agreement; the ideas of equality propagated in Europe have no currency here, they are considered foolish: how can an illiterate

farmer have the same decision making power as his lord? How is he going to defend himself now against dishonest civil servants and find his way through the administrative jungle alone? Will he be able to pay his taxes when he has never learnt to plan ahead and, until now, has only lived on a day-to-day basis?

“It will be all the more difficult for them, as the British have undertaken a re-evaluation of all the land,” announces a taluqdar who has just returned from his estate with the latest news. “They sent out dozens of their civil servants who know nothing about our countryside and depend on the local staff for information. Of course, the latter overestimate the revenue, either to gain popularity with the British, or to take their revenge on anyone who refused to grease their palms. Depending on the districts, it appears that the next taxes will be 10 to 50 percent higher than last year!”

There is an outcry from all present: “The farmers will never be able to pay such high amounts! Are they going to put them all in prison?”

“Blessed be their greed! It is what will save us!” says the Rajah of Tarapur ironically. “Soon, even the farmers who thought they had something to gain from the new situation will return to us. That will put us in a much better position to negotiate with the Company, or, if it comes to it, to fight. But we must quickly agree on a strategy. Once again, I ask all of you to think it over.”

An animated discussion follows. However, by nightfall the only decision they reach is . . . to meet again the following week.

**B**y order of the new chief commissioner, the British progressively seize Lucknow's most beautiful palaces. Any excuse is a good excuse. At the beginning of the month of September 1856, a rumour begins to circulate claiming that Qadir Ali Shah, a maulvi who commands a troop of twelve thousand faithful, is plotting an uprising involving some members of the royal family. This provokes another series of confiscations.

At dawn on September 6th, Moti Mahal Palace is stormed by an English detachment, and on the pretext of searching for compromising documents, they brutally evict the inhabitants with no regard for the women or children. The soldiers take full advantage of the situation to grab a booty of jewellery and precious objects but stop short of wrecking the building, as the resident has decided to house some of the Company's officers there.

A few weeks later, on October 3rd, the impressive Macchi Bhavan fortress on the southern bank of the Gomti River is attacked by British forces. The Indian officer in charge refuses to surrender and is taken prisoner, while the soldiers seize a collection of antique firearms and valuable armour along with about thirty cannons. The fortress, which is also the residence of one of the king's brothers, is converted into barracks for the Company's troops.

The women of the royal family and the principal wives follow these events from the sumptuous five-storey Chattar Manzil Palace on the Gomti River with heightened anxiety, as they have just been informed by Coverley Jackson that they must be prepared to leave the building. He needs the palace to accommodate the 32nd Infantry Regiment.

"House a whole regiment in the most beautiful residence in Lucknow, the man is mad! They will vandalize everything! Out of the ninety-two palaces in this town can he not find another one, or does he just want to

drive us out, to humiliate us and tarnish our sovereign's honour even further?"

"Don't be alarmed! He cannot take Chattar Manzil," decrees one of the begums in a knowing voice. "This palace is included in the list of properties the Company has left to the royal family for our personal use."

"You still believe what they say?"

Hazrat Mahal has just entered the drawing room.

"We have already had a taste of their double-dealing! No matter what they promised, or even signed, they will do as they please. We have no way of stopping them!"

The women would like to silence this bird of ill omen; they do, however, recognise she is blessed with a certain worldly wisdom. In their anxiety they overlook their resentment and pester her with questions: what should they do? Does she have an idea?

The brouhaha is interrupted by the arrival of a solemn black eunuch ceremoniously carrying an engraved silver cylinder in his hands.

"Ladies! I bring a letter from His Majesty."

A letter from Jan-e-Alam! The women stand stock-still. At last! In the eight months since his departure, they have not received a single message. They have only learnt from hearsay that he has reached Calcutta, where he had to stop and rest, tired after travelling for six long weeks, to prepare for his departure to distant England.

With a mixture of fear and hope, they stare at the casing that protects the precious parchment. Does it announce the success of his mission?

Hazrat Mahal is the first to come to her senses.

"Has the messenger come directly from England?"

"No, Huzoor. He has come from Calcutta."

From Calcutta! The women are astonished: "Why such a detour? From England, he should have disembarked in Bombay and come directly to Lucknow. The journey is long enough, lasting at least two months, weather permitting. Well, the main thing is the letter has arrived! Hurry, let us break the seal and see what our beloved king has to say."

The honour of reading the august message aloud falls to Begum Shahnaz, one of the king's cousins and the oldest amongst them.

"To my respected wives and relations, so dear to my heart,

Since that fateful day when I left you and had to abandon my beloved town, not a day passes when I am not overcome by grief at the thought of all I have lost. The journey was very difficult; I fell ill and we were forced to make a long halt in Benares, where the maharajah welcomed me like a brother. Now that I am in Calcutta . . . ”

A general outcry interrupts the reading:

“What, in Calcutta? Isn’t the king in London? Would these merciless scoundrels have stopped him from leaving?”

Finally, the begum gets angry:

“Now please! Let me continue if you want to know what happened!”

“Now that I am in Calcutta I feel better, despite the unbearable humidity. However, on my arrival I was so exhausted that I was not up to facing the long sea crossing. Therefore, I decided to send the Queen Mother instead, so that she may plead my cause before Queen Victoria. You all know how intelligent and tenacious she is. I am convinced I could not have a better ambassador. My brother and my oldest son are accompanying her, along with some of my ministers, and, in particular, Major Bird, an invaluable support who will be able to testify to what really happened. All in all, one hundred and forty people embarked on June 18th and they arrived safely at Southampton on August 20th.

There, a big crowd had gathered to see the princes, who were dressed in their richest garments, and they were given an enthusiastic reception. For her part, the Queen Mother received the city’s most influential ladies. A few days later, the delegation set off for London, where this time there was no official welcome. My brother General Sahib sent the Queen, her husband Prince Albert and the prime minister our detailed reply to Colonel Sleeman’s allegations, set out in the ‘Awadh Blue Book,’ which served as a pretext for the annexation. The Queen Mother has not yet obtained an audience with Queen Victoria, but she has been promised it will be granted imminently.”

*He did not even go to England then!*

Hazrat Mahal is no longer listening. She feels as if all the blood has drained from her body. She is utterly exhausted.

*Why, oh why, did he not go himself to plead his cause? If only I had been with him, I would have convinced him to leave, but surrounded by courtiers and traitors, he has allowed himself to be influenced and took the easy way. Can he not see how he proves them right, all those who accuse him of fleeing his responsibilities and being incapable of ruling? But I am too severe . . . maybe he*

*really was very ill? Maybe they tried to poison him to prevent him from disclosing the “Honourable Company’s” turpitudes to the queen . . .*

The begum reads on:

“The new Governor General, Lord Canning, is very pleasant indeed. He has placed a palace at my disposal and has assured me I can remain there for as long as I like. However, in memory of my beloved Lucknow, I intend to have a new palace built, a replica of Kaisarbagh so I can recreate the enchanting setting of my lost happiness here. To pass the time I have begun to produce a new show, but I miss my fairies; the ones in Calcutta cannot be compared with Lucknow’s beauties!

And you, my dear wives, I miss you most of all. I hope that a more favourable fate will reunite us soon. I weep when I think of our separation and I kiss your beautiful hands.”

A bitter smile on her lips, Hazrat Mahal thinks of this king whom she has admired for so long.

*He speaks only of himself, his regrets, his sadness, not a word of concern about what our fate has been, about how we have had to face the occupier’s tyranny alone since his departure! And not even a hint about the messages I send him. Does he even receive them? Mammoo assures me they reach him regularly, but perhaps Mammoo is lying to me. To console me and keep my hopes up . . .*

As for her companions, they are ecstatic.

“This letter is a sign from heaven,” comments Begum Shahnaz. “It shows us the way out: we will write to the king describing our situation and beg him to remind the governor general of his promises.”

Relieved, the women agree. If Jan-e-Alam intervenes, they are saved! Hazrat Mahal does not share their confidence but refrains from making any comment. They enthusiastically write the letter and hand it back to the messenger who is returning to Calcutta, favouring him with a purse of gold coins for his diligence.

A month later, on November 12th at the crack of dawn, the inhabitants of the palace are woken by a clamour and the clatter of weapons. A battalion of soldiers led by a British officer is attempting to enter Chattr Manzil Palace. The guards who try to resist are rapidly neutralized, and the eunuchs are unceremoniously jostled.

“By Order of His Excellency the Chief Commissioner,” proclaims the officer, a strapping young lad swaddled in his red uniform, “the injunction to evacuate was sent to you a month ago. Out of consideration and great kindness for the ladies of the ex-royal household, His Excellency has afforded them a grace period. The deadline has expired. The ladies are requested to gather their belongings and to leave the palace within the hour.”

Panic reigns behind the heavy zenana curtains, followed by wails and outraged cries of protest: “Leave the palace? It is impossible! And to go where?”

“Ladies, you have had a month to prepare. Now you have an hour, not a minute longer.”

Inside the zenana the confusion has reached its peak. Barely awake, the women feel as if they are trapped in a nightmare. They cannot believe their misfortune. True enough, they had received the ultimatum, but they had not taken it seriously, convinced that Wajid Ali Shah would intervene to resolve everything. And now . . . such monsters! Alarmed, they rush from one room to the other, crying and scolding the eunuchs and the servants: what is to be done? What should they take? Hastily they throw heavy jewellery sets of rubies, diamonds and emeralds into makeshift bags; but amongst the dupattas embellished with pearls, the gold-embroidered gararas, the tortoiseshell or ivory toilet sets, the vermeil tableware, the silver mirrors, this multitude of indispensable precious objects, which should they take, what should they leave? A cruel, impossible choice . . . this luxury, this elegance, it is their whole lives—their lives that these bandits are asking them to abandon in an instant!

“They can kill me if they want, I will not leave!” Her eyes red from crying, Begum Akhtar sinks heavily into a sofa.

The women surround her, stunned.

“This is all so undignified! If I must live like a pauper, I prefer to die,” continues the begum in a voice trembling with emotion.

Some agree:

“If we refuse to leave, surely they won’t shoot us!”

“Who knows? They are capable of anything!”

While they are wasting precious time in futile discussions, Hazrat Mahal, with Mammoo’s help, has had her jewels, her most beautiful

clothes as well as her books and manuscripts placed in trunks, watched over by her servants. A eunuch sent to enquire where they are to go comes back with the information that the royal wives, their children and their retinue are to move into the south wing of Kaisarbagh.

Returning to her companions, Hazrat Mahal hurries them along:

“There are only ten minutes left, I think you should be quick.”

“If you want to obey the Angrez, good for you! We, however, have decided to remain here,” replies Begum Shahnaz haughtily.

“Come now, be realistic! They will not allow you to stay!”

“We are not cowards, we will fight!”

Though exasperated, Hazrat Mahal is careful not to pursue the issue, but she does not understand this childish attitude! After all, their fate could be worse; the Kaisarbagh palaces are amongst the most beautiful in Lucknow and boast the largest gardens planted with the finest flowers.

Palanquins are waiting before the heavy portal of the zenana. Concealed by her veils, Hazrat Mahal steps into one, accompanied by a few servants and her son Birjis, who is delighted with the adventure. Mammoo follows her with about twenty strong men carrying her trunks.

Through the slightly parted curtains, she watches nostalgically as the gold-domed palace recedes. There she has spent the last twelve years; she had been a favourite, gratified with everything she desired, and sumptuous celebrations had greeted the birth of her son. There she had known one year of happiness and glory, then eleven years of quasi-obscurity—a fate common to all the beautiful prisoners in harems. Nonetheless, she cannot complain, as her gift for poetry allowed her to retain the sovereign’s friendship and attention until the end.

On reaching Kaisarbagh Palace she crosses a series of vestibules, terraces and inner courtyards, explores a multitude of empty rooms. She is alone and she takes her time. Finally, she chooses a dozen bright, spacious rooms opening onto a veranda decorated with bougainvillea. Mammoo and the servants will find a way to make them as comfortable as possible, requisitioning boxes, divans, draperies and carpets from wherever they can find them.

She has barely finished settling in when her unfortunate companions arrive late in the afternoon, their hair dishevelled and their clothes in disarray. From their accounts, interrupted by sobs and curses, she

understands that at the given hour, not leaving them a minute's grace, indifferent to their cries, the soldiers seized them and forced them out, watched by the terrified population. Then, they threw their belongings pell-mell into the street, stealing some of the jewels in the process.

This unwarranted violence inflicted upon the royal wives provokes such indignation that it reaches the ears of the new governor general in Calcutta.

Lord Canning is already besieged by letters from Wajid Ali Shah denouncing the sale of his private possessions, the theft of a large part of his treasures, the occupation of his palaces to house horses and dogs, and finally the threat of doing away with the pensions granted to the members of the royal family. The governor general attempts to moderate Coverley Jackson's ardour, but his efforts are in vain. The latter will not listen even though his unfair and brutal measures earn him the hatred of the whole population. The Lucknawis start lending a more ready ear to fakirs and maulvis, Hindu and Muslim holy men, who travel the country preaching revolt.

Henceforth, the days in Kaisarbagh Palace pass slowly, full of gloom. Hazrat Mahal has ceased to write her daily accounts for the king. She is convinced now that he does not receive them or, if he does, he does not read them, as he is too busy recreating the splendour of bygone days in his new home. Imperceptibly she sinks into melancholy, despite Mammoo's best efforts to entertain her.

She, who used to love composing poetry so much, does not even feel the desire to anymore. She had written to share beauty and dreams, to convey ideas, feelings and fragments of life, those small pebbles on the path to the serenity she was seeking, and wanted to share with others. She does not write to exhibit her pains and is averse to the morbid narcissism that considers one's own miasma so worthy of interest that one wants to display it to the whole world. Is anything more banal than unhappiness? Everyone experiences it, we "encounter misfortune" daily. Happiness, on the other hand, is an art. Books and schools of philosophy have constantly tried to reveal different means of attaining it. This is her chosen path.

Nonetheless, the trials of her youth taught her that misfortune can also be a gift if one is capable of seeing it as a stage rather than a state, a stage

necessary to understanding oneself and to come to an understanding of the world, to go beyond oneself, and thus gradually reach a state of serenity. In her case, this transformation occurs through writing. She sees the writer as an alchemist whose whole existence is an attempt to transform darkness into light, an immense task both challenging and involving total dedication of the mind and body.

She is not yet ready for that though. She needs an active existence. Writing for her is an indispensable time for reflection, but it cannot satisfy her thirst for life.

Life? Her lips twist into a bitter grimace. What life can she hope for locked up in this zenana? As a child she dreamt of horse rides and adventure, drunk on the freedom her unorthodox father had permitted her, conscious that her condition as a woman would impose its limitations soon enough. With the onset of puberty, she had discovered her unfortunate fate as a prisoner when, having become an orphan, an uncle for whom tradition was no laughing matter had taken her in. However, unlike her companions whose whole existence had been confined between high walls, the acidic taste of freedom was imprinted on her very being and prevented her from giving in. Ah, if only she had been blessed with the same carefree nature as her friend Mumtaz, for whom everything was cause for laughter!

Mumtaz . . . they have not seen each other for twelve years!

*Yet I had sworn nothing would separate us, I would send for her as soon as I was settled . . . She must have waited and worried, certainly been upset with me and despaired. And I, immersed in my new life, my love for the king, then for my son, busy evading the intrigues and creating an undisputed position for myself, I forgot all about her! Because in such a different world, I had no need for her . . . never thinking that she may have needed me . . .*

Hazrat Mahal gets up. She feels a desperate urge to see her friend again.

The eunuch comes running to answer her call.

“Mammoo Khan! Find me a modest palanquin carried by two men. Have it brought to the servants’ entrance. I also want you to borrow a burqa from one of the slaves. Be discreet, nobody must guess it is for me.”

“But Huzoor, the palace has dozens of palanquins! As for the burqa, surely you are not going to wear that horrible black tent that only commoners wrap themselves in!”

“Mammoo!” She raises her eyebrows. “Did I ask for your opinion? Come on now, hurry up!”

Peering out through the curtains of the palanquin, Hazrat Mahal can barely recognise her town. She had been told about the destruction but had never imagined it to be so widespread! The network of small lanes that led from Kaisarbagh to the centre of Lucknow had been torn up, and under the burning sun emaciated workers toil away, building what seems to be a wide avenue. Here and there, ancestral homes have been razed to the ground. Ahmed Ali Khan's palace, General Aneesuddin's too, the Qahwa Khana Club near the Residency, and even . . . the great Khas Bazaar, where she used to buy her ribbons when she was an adolescent. She cannot believe her eyes. Why this devastation?

"To modernise the town," explains Mammoo, sarcastically. "Thus have our new masters decided!"

While the palanquin continues towards the Chowk, moving away from the noise and the dust from the road works, Hazrat Mahal has the strange sensation of disappearing into a grey, silent world. Until recently, it was difficult to forge a path amidst the sumptuous carriages, *sukhpals*,<sup>43</sup> *finases*,<sup>44</sup> palanquins, and horses with silver harnesses, surrounded by a joyful, colourful crowd thronging the stalls overflowing with goods for sale.

Nowadays the town seems to have been ravaged by the plague. Most shops are shut and only a few bamboo sedan chairs are to be seen out on the streets. Consequently, despite its modest appearance, Hazrat Mahal's palanquin attracts attention. They are surrounded by hordes of beggars whom Mammoo tries to disperse by distributing a few small coins. Amongst these pitiful wretches, Hazrat Mahal is astonished to see what she believes are soldiers in rags.

"They are indeed soldiers who belonged to the king's army, dissolved by the British," confirms Mammoo. "Of the seventy-thousand-strong force permitted by the resident, and closely monitored by him, the current

government has taken on fifteen thousand men, who felt compelled to accept so they could feed their families. The majority, however, refused to serve their former master's enemy. Perhaps they hoped to find employment with the rich taluqdars, but the latter, ruined by the agrarian reform, no longer have the means to hire them. Subsequently, most of the ex-soldiers are left destitute. For these proud men this represents an intolerable decline, and they wait for the first opportunity to take revenge."

The palanquin turns into the main street in the very heart of the Chowk, with its shops trading in luxury goods and courtesans' houses. Hazrat Mahal cannot believe her eyes, all the doors are shut and the balconies, previously full of flowers, where languishing young beauties stood fanning themselves, are now deserted and overgrown with weeds. Where once chimes of laughter, song and poetry rang out, there now reigns a deathly silence. Finally, the palanquin comes to a halt at the end of the street in front of Amman and Imamam's stately house.

They have to wait several minutes before the heavy door opens slightly, revealing an old lady wrapped in a black shawl.

"What is it?" she asks suspiciously.

"This is the house belonging to the ladies Amman and Imaman, is it not?" enquires Mammoo, disconcerted by this unexpected apparition. "Do they still live here?"

"What is your business with them?"

"Now there, old woman, watch your tongue! Go immediately and inform them that my mistress, the very noble and respected Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of our King Wajid Ali Shah, has come to visit."

A good fifteen minutes pass before hurried footsteps and exclamations are heard, and suddenly the main door is thrown wide open to allow the palanquin to enter.

"Muhammadi! May Allah be praised! What a surprise!"

Drawing aside the curtains, two plump, white-haired women hurry to help Hazrat Mahal descend. The latter hesitates for a moment . . . Is it possible that these two old ladies are Amman and Imaman? She remembers majestic women, not beautiful but imposing, with their copper-coloured hair, painted lips, eyes outlined with *kohl*, always dressed in expensive clothes. How could they have changed so much? It is not

only the wrinkles but a general air of neglect in their appearance, which no longer seems to matter to them.

The same air of neglect is evident everywhere as she enters the house. The furniture is covered with dust, the large crystal chandeliers and the copper objects are tarnished, the carpets do not seem to have been cleaned in months and the silk on the huge sofas is creased, even torn in places. The house looks abandoned.

Two hastily summoned servants dust and plump up the cushions, they spread a white sheet on the carpet, while a third brings sherbet. The two sisters apologize profusely:

“We do not even have any sweets to offer you! Ah, if only we had known you were coming! No one has visited us in months and we have had to send all our boarders away.”

“But why?”

“If you only knew! It has been a disaster! Since the government confiscated the taluqdars’ villages and raised taxes, our clients, the cream of Awadh’s aristocracy, have been ruined. And the few who have something left are so worried, they do not have the heart to enjoy themselves. All the respectable houses in the Chowk have closed. Only a handful of second-class establishments still remain to cater to the Angrez military or the nouveaux riches, who made a fortune buying up for a song the land distributed to the farmers.”

“The farmers are selling their land instead of cultivating it?”

“Clearly you know nothing of what is happening in this country!” retorts Amman bitterly. “I have a young cousin staying here. She has come from the countryside with her children. She will tell you what is going on.”

Offended by this lack of consideration—something she is no longer accustomed to—Hazrat Mahal falls silent, leaving Mammoo and Imaman to exchange a flood of courtesies in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

*She treats me as she did when I was thirteen and I was one of her boarders! But do I prefer it when people make fun of me and speak ill behind my back, as they do at Court? In fact, I am no longer used to being spoken to frankly. She is right; I am too cut off from the world . . . A world that is changing so fast . . .*

Calm and poised again, she welcomes Amman’s relative with a big smile. Nouran is a peasant from the Sitapur area, some fifty miles outside

Lucknow. She had walked all the way into town with her five young children. Although she is not even thirty years old yet, she looks closer to fifty, exhausted by toiling the land and the harsh climate.

“Our village belonged to the Rajah of Salempur,” she says in a colourful dialect, forcing Hazrat Mahal to concentrate to be able to follow. “We have always worked his land and, as is the custom, he used to give us a quarter of the harvest. It was also he, of course, who provided us with the seeds, the water, the tools, the cart to transport the wheat or sugar cane, and who paid all the taxes. If it was a good season, we had enough to survive on and even a little extra, and if it was poor, the rajah helped us until the next harvest. We never went hungry. He was a good master. His army protected us from bandits and marauders, and his presence dissuaded the civil servants from creating trouble for us. He was like a father to us and we were all devoted to him, he could ask whatever he wanted of us in exchange, like repairing the fort, cleaning the drains . . . Although he could be severe at times, he was always fair and we respected him. Until the Angrez came along and upset everything!”

“They gave you the land though!” objects Hazrat Mahal.

The peasant woman begins to cry:

“Ah, the heavens have truly punished us! I had told my husband we should not take the land that belonged to our master. He beat me, berating me for being an ignorant, stupid woman, shouting that the Angrez were offering us an opportunity to be owners, to do as we liked with the whole harvest and to become rich. Like all the other farmers, he followed the village council’s decision: after numerous discussions, they had decided to accept the occupier’s offer. We never saw our rajah again. Thank goodness, I think I would have died of shame.”

“Then what happened next?”

“First, in order to buy seeds, pay for the water and rent the cart to transport the sugar cane, we were forced to borrow from the village moneylender at an interest rate of 15 percent a month. The harvest was not very good, but the worst part was that the new taxes, evaluated by the Angrez, were much higher than the previous year! That took up half our profit. After we had repaid our loan, we had nothing left to live on. The village council asked the government for an extension until the next harvest, six months later. Their immediate response was: ‘Either you pay

up or we will seize your land.' We thought it was an empty threat as in the state of Awadh, never, as far back as any peasant can remember, has anyone seen land being confiscated to pay off a debt! Neither the king nor any of the taluqdars would have imagined confiscating our means of livelihood on the pretext that we owed them money. At worst, we were asked to send our children to help with different jobs!"

Using the corner of her dupatta to wipe the tears away, Nouran then continues in a broken voice:

"When the buyers, the rich merchants and the moneylenders from nearby villages actually turned up, we realised the Angrez government was not joking. A delegation of elders hurriedly set off for the capital to plead the villagers' cause. On the way there, they met other deputations from surrounding villages who were facing exactly the same problem. When they arrived in Lucknow, try as they might to explain the fate of the tens of thousands of families that were being condemned to die from hunger, it was all in vain. The authorities refused to listen. It seems that in their country this is the way things are done: someone who is in debt has his possessions seized and is thrown into prison . . ."

"That makes no sense at all," comments Imaman. "How can a man who is locked up pay his debts? These Angrez really do have strange customs."

"Strange? Criminal, you mean!" exclaims Nouran, red with indignation. "If not for you, my benefactors, my children and I would have died of hunger, like the tens of thousands of peasants who, driven from their land, are dying now."

Then turning to Hazrat Mahal she continues:

"Huzoor, is our king going to return? I beg you, tell him his people are waiting for him, they need him!"

Moved, Hazrat Mahal holds the woman in her arms.

"I will tell him, I promise, but as you know the British are detaining him in Calcutta . . ."

"Not for much longer!" interrupts Amman. "The people have had enough! All one hears everywhere is talk about driving them out. They have to leave India this year, so the prophecy says."

"What prophecy?"

"The prophecy of Plassey of course! It predicts that the Angrez will be forced to leave India a hundred years after the Company's troops

overcame the king of Bengal's troops at the Battle of Plassey. This victory that marked the beginning of their domination was won on June 23rd, 1757. It is now January 1857 . . . ”

Hazrat Mahal nods her head. As a good Muslim, she believes neither in the prophecies nor in the miracles that the common people are so fond of. She is careful, however, not to share her doubts with Nouran, who only has this hope to keep her going.

“Everyone here has problems,” Imaman sighs deeply. “The peasants and the big landowners, as do the shopkeepers and craftsmen. Now there are no clients left, the hundreds of luxury businesses and workshops that made all these marvels have had to close. The other day, going down the street I noticed some craftsmen begging. They were men who had been my suppliers. I pretended not to see them so as not to humiliate them, and I sent my servant to give them a few rupees as alms. It broke my heart though. What is going to become of us all, if even the little people who created our town's wealth no longer have any work and are dying from hunger?”

“Is no one distributing wheat and soup as before in times of famine?” asks Hazrat Mahal, amazed.

“That used to be funded by the king or the taluqdars then. Today, the wealthy are these money-lending shopkeepers who get rich by ruining others. They have no pity for anyone.”

All of them are silent, lost in their gloomy thoughts. Suddenly, Hazrat Mahal remembers the real reason for her visit.

“And Mumtaz? What has become of her?”

“Mumtaz? She only remained here for a few months after you left,” explains Amman. “She was a good girl but did not have the necessary qualities to develop into a great courtesan. Nonetheless, we have always ensured our girls are well placed, even if they do not attain high positions. We never abandon them. We never allow them to be reduced to prostitution, although this has often been a problem, it is something we are proud of!”

“So . . . where is she?”

“We married her off to a small local taluqdar. As she was from the countryside, we thought she would be in her element there. But the last news we received, three years ago now, was that she had left.”

“Left? To go where?” asks Hazrat Mahal, alarmed.

“She had no children, so her mother-in-law treated her as her ‘whipping boy’ and relegated her to the level of a servant. She is said to have run away and managed, it seems, to return to Lucknow. I even thought she had gone to ask you for help.”

*Help . . . Poor Mumtaz, she was too shy and too proud to go begging to someone who had forgotten her for so many years . . .*

“How can we find her?”

“I have had people search for her all over the Chowk in the second-rate houses. No one has seen her. At least, that is what I was told.”

Hazrat Mahal shivers.

*She may be dead and it is all my fault . . . I had promised to help her, I forgot her . . .*

Lost in her thoughts on the way home, the young woman does not reply to Mammoo, who tries his best to distract her. She remembers the long evenings spent exchanging secrets with Mumtaz and imagining the future, she hears her friend’s clear laughter again and sees her honey-coloured eyes. With all her might, Hazrat Mahal begs Allah to help her find her.

A drum roll draws her out of her thoughts. Through the curtains she can make out a long procession, preceded by musicians wearing red turbans. At the centre, mounted on an elephant, a thin man with long hair and a black beard is sitting perfectly upright in his howdah. She barely has time to notice his aquiline nose and his piercing eyes under bushy eyebrows before instinctively drawing back with a gasp. Despite the curtains concealing her, she has a very distinct impression that the man looked straight at her.

“Mammoo, do you know who this man is?”

“Of course, everyone here knows him. He is Ahmadullah Shah, the maulvi from Faizabad. Nobody really knows where he comes from. There are all sorts of stories about him: some say he is from Madras and related to the former sovereign Tipu Sultan; others, that he belongs to a good family from across the river Indus, and it is said that he has visited England. In any case, he is rumoured to possess supernatural powers and he has thousands of disciples. A fierce enemy of the British, he exhorts Hindus and Muslims to *jihad* in order to drive them out of the country.”

“And the British do nothing to prevent him?”

“Oh, a new ‘prophet’ appears almost every day, inciting the people to rebel. Most of them are arrested and executed. Just last week, a Hindu fakir arrived to spend a few days here and is supposed to have met with the sepoy, but by the time the police began to make enquiries about him, he had already left for the north. In Ahmadullah Shah’s case, the government hesitates. The crowds revere him as a holy man, and the British fear his arrest will stir up too much controversy. But how much longer can they tolerate his impassioned speeches?”

*What power in his eyes . . .*

Hazrat Mahal is deeply shaken, she has an intuition she will see this man again and that their destinies will be intertwined . . .

When Mammoo comes to see his mistress this morning he is all excited: the latest “Dum Dum” rumour is the talk of the town!

Word has spread that new cartridges sealed with pig fat, prohibited to Muslims, and cow fat, taken from the Hindus’ sacred animal, are stored in the Dum Dum ammunition depot near Calcutta. Now, as the soldiers have to bite the cartridges open, using them would be sacrilegious for any sepoy—the Hindus would be reduced to the status of untouchables, while the Muslims would be defiled.

“It is a worker at the cartridge factory who inadvertently revealed the secret,” recounts Mammoo, “all because a Brahmin sepoy denied him a drink from his water jug. This challenged the factory employee to retort sarcastically: ‘There’s no need to be so high-handed, all of you will soon have lost your caste anyway, as the English have put impure fat into the new cartridges!’”

“What new cartridges?” enquires Hazrat Mahal, who can just about distinguish a rifle from a revolver.

“The ones for the Lee-Enfield rifles that the army is soon planning to switch to. They are more accurate than the old Brown Besses, and above all, they have a range of eight hundred metres, instead of two hundred. But the sepoys will never agree if the cartridges really are sealed with impure fat! The news has spread throughout the garrisons and everyone is worried, especially the high-caste Brahmin and Rajput Hindus, who make up the overwhelming majority of the Bengal Army. They have long suspected the English of wanting to convert them.”

“Ridiculous! Just a few missionaries are not going to make a difference . . .”

“Don’t be mistaken, Huzoor, the number of missionaries is constantly on the increase and, in addition, some of the officers do not hesitate to proselytize and seek conversions.”

Hazrat Mahal shakes her head sceptically:

“This cartridge story is strange. The British are generally too clever to offend their troops’ religious feelings.”

Yet the population no longer trusts them. People have barely recovered from the shock of the circular a certain Mr. Edmond recently sent to the Company officials, recommending that since India is under Christian rule, all the Indians should be converted to the “true faith.” As the letter was posted in Calcutta, it is rumoured to have come from the governor’s office. The latter categorically denied this. He did not convince anybody.

A few days later, a new rumour had surfaced, confirming another of the “foreigners’ diabolical plans”: it claimed that powdered pig and cow bones had been added to the flour distributed to the soldiers. The sepoy, beside themselves with anger, had dumped entire consignments of flour into the river.

“Despite their officers’ protests, who swore this was just slander, the men are overexcited,” Mammoo reports. “There are allegations that mysterious envoys have arrived in Lucknow, and that every night secret meetings are being held in the barracks.”

*Secret meetings? A conspiracy against the occupier . . . Finally!*

“This very evening, you will attend one of these gatherings,” the young woman instructs the eunuch, “and you will faithfully report back to me on everything that is said there. But take care not to be recognised!”

\* \* \*

Tonight, a crescent moon sheds a weak light over the base camp while silent shadows creep stealthily along the barracks’ walls. One by one, they join the group of soldiers squatting around a fire, sipping cups of tea and smoking a *chillum*<sup>45</sup>. In contrast to the usual noisy, cheerful meetings, this evening everyone is quiet, lost in their thoughts.

Suddenly one hears a branch crack and a man raises his head:

“Look! He is here!” he whispers.

A tall figure dressed in a sepoy uniform approaches; his badge indicates that he belongs to the 19th Infantry Regiment stationed in Berhampur, about five hundred miles east of Lucknow. The men greet him, their hands on their hearts, then, fussing over the visitor, they provide him with a

blanket to sit on, a good hot drink and a few chapatis, which he accepts gratefully, admitting he has not eaten anything since the previous day.

“I left Berhampur two weeks ago and have already visited half a dozen military bases. I only travel by night, for although the British have no idea of my mission, if I am caught, I will be executed as a deserter.”

He studies his audience carefully:

“Before I go ahead to explain the purpose of my visit, I need you to give me your word that everything said here will remain secret.”

For over two hours, the man evokes the indignation felt by the soldiers and populations throughout the north of the country towards the foreigners, who are acting as if they were the masters here, dethroning kings and ill-treating a population they despise.

“They even treat us sepoys, the spearhead of their army, as their slaves, even though we have conquered vast territories for them. If not for us, they would still be no more than a small trading company! However heroic our actions, however many victories we win, we have no hope of attaining the rank of officer. While a young fellow, fresh from England is immediately promoted to a position of command, just because he is white, for them, we remain the ‘natives’ . . . niggers! This is the first time in our history we have been treated as inferiors in our own land!”

Gathered around the messenger, the men nod their approval; they are very upset: all of them belong to high castes or are from honourable families, and are used to being respected, which makes them even less tolerant of the new officers’ arrogance and vulgarity.

“And now, in order to control us better, they are trying to convert us,” adds the messenger.

Indeed, over the last twenty years, some political or military leaders have been striving to convince the population to embrace the Protestant faith, and openly denigrate their religious practices. On different pretexts, hundreds of Hindu temples, mosques, *madrassas*<sup>46</sup> and Sufi sanctuaries have been closed or destroyed.

“Near my village they have even confiscated the land belonging to the mosque so that they can build a church!” grumbles a sepoy.

“The worst is they try to poison our children’s minds,” continues the messenger. “Just imagine, they had secretly begun to teach the Bible to the students at the large secular college in Delhi! When one of the

teachers underwent a scandalous conversion, only then the families realised what was going on and hurriedly withdrew their offspring from the establishment. But it is still happening in other government schools.”

The men clench their fists. These attacks on their religion are attacks on their honour. They find it intolerable.

“We had no problems as long as we were fighting neighbouring states,” remarks an old sepoy. “The principalities have always waged war on each other. But now it is our own state that is being annexed, and we find ourselves serving the occupiers. It is as if we were betraying our own and betraying ourselves. When we return to the village, their silent disapproval is palpable. It is even worse now that the situation has deteriorated with the new reforms. The price of wheat and corn has almost doubled and there is a threat of famine.”

“We need to act now, but how?”

The messenger silences them with a gesture.

“You will know soon enough. Our committee for the defence of the Hindu and Muslim religions has set up active cells throughout the northern half of the country. The infidels want to direct our consciences in order to control our behaviour. We will not allow this. You are the advance guard, talk to your comrades, soon all the sepoys will rise up to drive the foreigners out. But remember, it must remain a secret until the signal for the general uprising is given—our success depends on the element of surprise. You will soon be receiving a sign advising you to be prepared and . . . ”

His sentence is interrupted by the sound of a sneeze. The sepoys immediately jump up, and from behind a curtain of trees, they drag out a small man who fights like the very devil.

“A spy! He heard everything! We have to kill him!” shout the soldiers, pushing him towards the messenger, while, terrified, the man attempts to protest.

“I was not spying. I am the servant of an important person.”

“You weren’t spying? Then what were you doing there listening to us? ”

“I was out for a walk, I heard voices and . . . ”

A resounding slap interrupts him.

“If you value your life, answer us immediately: who is your master?”

“My ma . . . my begum . . . ? One of our king’s wives,” stammers Mammoo.

“Her name?”

The eunuch hesitates, but as his life is at stake, he can forget his promise!

“Begum Hazrat Mahal, the fourth wife.”

The men surrounding the eunuch roar.

“He is lying! The English sent him!”

Mammoo is livid, how can he prove his good faith? He can only see one solution:

“Then send a man to the palace to verify my story!”

He does not dare imagine his employer’s fury; she had ordered him to keep her name secret, but he has no choice: these men will not hesitate to torture him to death.

The messenger is puzzled:

“Why would one of the sovereign’s wives be interested in our meetings?”

“My begum is interested in anything that can harm the usurpers and bring our beloved king back,” declares Mammoo, regaining some of his haughtiness. “She writes to His Majesty every week to inform him of everything that is happening here.”

He does not specify that the letters remain unanswered, that, almost certainly, they never arrive. The conspirators must believe the begum has the king’s ear, that she can be a useful ally, and hence he, an asset to be handled with care.

“This begum . . . Hazrat Mahal, does she have a son?” questions the messenger thoughtfully.

“Yes, Prince Birjis Qadar. He is only eleven, but he is surprisingly mature for his age.”

“Well then, we are going to send you to the palace with two soldiers to check on all this. Know that if you attempt to escape, they will kill you immediately. On the other hand, if what you say is true, here is a letter to give to your mistress.”

\* \* \*

To Mammoo's amazement, Hazrat Mahal did not get angry. Lying on her divan, a triumphant smile on her lips, she reads and rereads the letter the messenger from Berhampur sent her. What she has spent the last year hoping for is taking shape. She cannot contain her excitement:

"Look, Mammoo, what do you think?" she asks, holding the letter out to the eunuch.

"Huzoor,

Great events are underway. Be prepared.

We are counting on His Majesty's close relatives.

Sepoys, faithful to their king."

"What do you think? What should I do?"

"Nothing, just wait."

"Wait! Always wait!"

Hazrat Mahal raises her eyes to heaven, exasperated.

"We women spend our whole lives waiting, until . . . we have nothing left to wait for. But this time it is different, do you not see that? The people are ready to fight against the Angrez. It is true their weapons are superior to ours, but we will drive them out! There is not one single example worldwide of an occupier able to remain in power when he is not wanted, however strong he may be!"

The young woman gets up and paces the room nervously.

"According to the messenger, apart from the Sikhs,<sup>47</sup> the whole army—from Calcutta to Delhi—would be ready to rebel, about one hundred and twenty thousand sepoys! Do you think the king is behind the plot?"

"He must know about it, but until he has received an answer from Queen Victoria, I don't think he will act. If he can obtain satisfaction through negotiation, why would he fight? This is what he replied to Rajah Jai Lal several months earlier, when the latter offered him the taluqdars' support to resist the annexation."

"I wonder if the rajah knows," murmurs Hazrat Mahal thoughtfully.

"Certainly. He is a trained soldier and has always been in contact with the sepoys. I would not be surprised if he were directly involved."

"Try to find out. And from London, what news?"

“Public opinion is on our side as the press, informed by Major Bird, exposed the Company’s lies and betrayals. The debates in the House of Lords were very lively. Lord Hastings even asked for the resident to be recalled: ‘Our problems are entirely the result of our attitude,’ he declared. ‘If the annexation of Awadh is confirmed, the Indian sovereigns, realising they cannot trust our word, will turn from friend to foe.’\* Feeling the winds of change, the managers of the East India Company finally received the crown prince and the king’s brother with all the honours. They offered them vast amounts in compensation but refused to discuss the annexation of Awadh, claiming they acted on government orders.”

“Certainly just another lie! The only person who can solve the problem is Queen Victoria. The Queen Mother has been in London for six months now, why has she not obtained an audience yet?”

“They keep making promises, but the audience is put off from one week to the next on different pretexts: the queen is not in London, or she is tired, or she has too much to do. In fact, this affair must be an embarrassment to her, as it is difficult to challenge the East India Company, which has brought so much wealth to the Crown, but she cannot condone an injustice either. I think she is dragging things out as she has not yet decided on what position to adopt.”

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, chapatis mysteriously begin to appear in northern and central India. These small flatbreads arrive in packs of six. They are left with the village guard during the night, with orders to distribute them to the six neighbouring villages, which, in turn, are to cook six chapatis and distribute them to the six nearest villages, and so on. So much so that in less than three weeks the tiniest hamlet has received these chapatis, and everyone wonders what all this means exactly. But everybody guesses they announce great events.

Alerted, the British administration tries to discover where the phenomenon originates from and its significance. In vain. Speculation is rife, theories abound—from a simple joke to a possible conspiracy, not

forgetting the possibility that these chapatis could be a popular talisman against the cholera which is rampant at the time.

On Hazrat Mahal's orders, Mammoo scours the town searching for explanations, to no avail. Having run out of options, he ventures into the Chowk, as far as Amman and Imaman's house. Earlier it used to be the best-informed area of Lucknow. Maybe he will find some information here today . . .

The two matrons are absent and Mammoo is about to leave when Nouran, the young woman they had taken in, shouts out to him.

"I know something about these chapatis, but I will only tell your mistress."

"How can a peasant like you know something everyone else in town doesn't? You are just trying to get into the palace," retorts Mammoo, exasperated.

"As you like, but the begum will not be happy," sniggers the woman.

"Where did you get your so-called information from?"

"I repeat, I will only tell the begum."

"Well, I will take you to her, but if you have lied to me, know that you will be whipped. Do you still want to come with me?"

Nouran's only response is to shrug her shoulders and, getting up, she nimbly slips on her burqa.

It is late afternoon; the drawing room is filled with a shadowy light. Hazrat Mahal dismisses all the servants, including Mammoo, who leaves muttering that she is wrong to trust this peasant woman.

Looking over her shoulder as if afraid of being overheard, the woman murmurs under her breath:

"Huzoor, be prepared, the distribution of chapatis announces the Great Mutiny."

"What mutiny? And how do you know this?"

Instinctively, Hazrat Mahal has also lowered her voice.

"My grandmother is from Madras and she often told me the story of the Vellore Mutiny that took place when she was a child. She said everything had begun with chapatis being distributed mysteriously and, just like today, no one knew what it meant, only that something important was about to happen."

“And what did happen?”

“The British officers wanted to force their sepoy to abandon their religious symbols, maybe they wanted to convert them even then . . . As they could not rebel openly, the men organised themselves secretly, and one night they massacred all the officers and some of the soldiers while they were sleeping.”

Hazrat Mahal stifles a shiver.

*So far, the chapatis have been distributed over one third of the country, could it be that preparations are being made for rebellions not only in the state of Awadh, but also in Bengal and Bihar, in the region of Delhi, in fact all over the north of India?*

This thought frightens her, even though for years her only desire has been to be rid of the occupiers. In the face of an imminent general uprising, her certainties are suddenly shaken.

*Against the British army, the most powerful army in Asia, are our compatriots up to it? . . .*

The peasant woman’s common sense brings her back to earth.

“In any event it is up to the men. If they decide to fight there is nothing we can do about it. I wanted to warn you though, as the other day you were kind to me, and I thought you might want to protect your son and leave Lucknow for somewhere quieter.”

Hazrat Mahal stiffens. Desertion? The suggestion cuts her to the quick.

“Do not forget that my son is a prince and I am the wife of the exiled sovereign. There is no question of us abandoning our people. We belong here.”

The following weeks bring their share of disturbing and thrilling news. On the 17th of February, Maulvi Ahma-dullah Shah is arrested in the neighbouring town of Faizabad while exhorting the crowd to rebel against the foreigners.

“Your maulvi did not let them push him around. Everyone is talking about his courage,” Mammoo reports to the begum.

“My maulvi?”

“Yes, the one we saw on our way back from our visit to the Chowk. You told me his sharp gaze had seen right through you, even piercing the thick curtains of the palanquin.”

True enough, Hazrat Mahal is not likely to forget that look.

“What happened?”

“The English were reluctant to arrest him, as he is so popular. The officer first asked the maulvi and his disciples to lay down their weapons, which would be returned to them when they left the town. The maulvi replied haughtily that he would leave the town when he wanted to and then turned his back on the officer. As his men were becoming aggressive, the English preferred to move off, but they came back in force the next evening. The maulvi and his disciples fought valiantly, but in the end, he was wounded and taken prisoner.”

“How absurd! They are making a martyr of him, a symbolic rallying point that is far more effective than if he had remained free! White people think they can solve everything by force. They do not try to understand the other side’s point of view—much less discuss it. The net result is they are detested by one and all. They will pay dearly for it one day. The oppressed peoples will do them no favours!”

Shortly after this incident, one learns that in Berhampur, to the north of Calcutta, the 19th Infantry Regiment revolted and refused to use the new cartridges. By mid-March, the movement reaches the Ambala

weapons depot where detachments from forty-one regiments are assembled to learn how to handle the new rifle. Then on March 29th, in Barrackpore, a Brahmin sepoy, Mangal Pandey, shot a British officer and wounded another with his sword while inciting his companions to rise up to defend their religion. Finally overpowered, he was to be hung a few days later, along with the Indian sergeant who refused to arrest him.

British society is stunned. In almost a century, this is the first time one of the “loyal sepoys” has dared attack a superior. To explain this “unprecedented act” people point out that Mangal Pandey was acting under the influence of drugs, but what they are unable to understand is why none of the twenty other sepoys present intervened to defend their officers.

At this point, the Governor General, Lord Canning, decides that this cartridge business has gone on long enough. All the necessary assurances have been provided and to compromise any longer would be viewed as a sign of weakness. As soon as the final order is issued, mysterious fires break out in most of the government buildings and officers’ bungalows at the Ambala garrison. All attempts to identify the perpetrators are met with a stony silence from the soldiers.

News of the uprising travels quickly, and the sepoys in Lucknow grow restless. Doctor Wells the 48th Regiment doctor’s ill-considered act of drinking a medicine directly from the bottle in the infirmary is taken as a provocation: the men unanimously refuse to be treated for fear of being polluted and losing their caste. A few days later Doctor Wells’ bungalow is burnt down. It is common knowledge that the soldiers from the 48th are responsible, but their guilt will never be proved.

In the highly charged atmosphere that prevails at the end of March, the new chief commissioner arrives in Lucknow. Sir Henry Lawrence is transferred from Punjab, where he re-established peace and won over the population to such an extent that he was nicknamed “the king of Punjab.” His methods were diplomacy and an enlightened reform policy.

Tall and thin, his long face framed by a grey beard, the chief commissioner resembles a prophet from the Old Testament. He is also endowed with a strong sense of duty and uncompromising principles. Born in Ceylon, the fourth son of a British officer, he knows the Indians

well and appreciates them. Lord Canning thus judged him the best person to redress a situation gravely compromised by Coverley Jackson's brutality and tactlessness.

Shortly after his arrival, Lawrence writes to the governor general:

"I notice the looks of hatred when I walk around, the population is deeply discontented. I immediately had it known that my mission was to rectify the mistakes that have been made over the last year. In an attempt to soothe tempers, I have prohibited any kind of destruction without my approval, particularly in what concerns religious buildings. Tomorrow I am holding a *darbar*<sup>48</sup> to honour the taluqdars, who have been very harshly treated: some have lost half their villages, others have lost everything."\*

With a series of receptions and private meetings, Sir Henry manages to win over the nobility to some extent. Addressing them in Hindustani and showing them a level of consideration they are no longer accustomed to since the annexation, he promises to plead in favour of the restitution of their land. He also receives delegations representing the shopkeepers and craftsmen. They have heard the chief commissioner is an open-minded man whom one can talk to. However, he has neither the time nor the means to study the new taxation system, which is supposed to favour the peasants but is, in reality, strangling them. He has to tackle a more pressing problem: the sepoys' discontent that is growing day by day.

This afternoon, for the first time, a delegation requested a meeting with him, and he invited the few officers present to listen in on the conversation from the adjoining drawing room.

About half a dozen devoted old sepoys, magnificently decked out in their customary red tunics, have come to see him. Lawrence has grown to know these men well over the thirty years he has served in India, and has had innumerable opportunities to appreciate their courage and loyalty.

"Come in, my friends!"

With a gesture, he encourages the small, intimidated group crowded around the door: "Do come in!"

One by one, the soldiers enter the smoking room. Clicking their heels, they stand to attention saluting the chief commissioner and remain rooted to the spot. Sir Henry, who is comfortably settled in his leather armchair, beckons them to sit down. It is contrary to usage, but he wants

to show his consideration for these veterans, who took the difficult decision to come to see him, certainly going against the opinions of the younger lot.

As he expected, they refuse—never in a sepoy’s memory could one imagine infringing upon the hierarchical order in this manner—but they are touched by the gesture.

“Thank you for your kindness, Sahib,” declares the one who seems to be their leader—easily sixty, his face covered in scars, but standing straight as a ramrod. “You are like a father to us, we owe you respect. We would never be seated in your presence!”

“Very well, my good men. So, what brings you here?”

“Serious events, Excellency. Since the beginning of the year, especially after the Berhampur and Barrackpore mutinies, our regiments are highly excitable, and, despite the efforts of the oldest amongst us, it is impossible to calm them down. We tried to talk to our officers, but they say they have no time to listen to our recriminations. Therefore, we thought maybe you, who have a reputation of being a wise and understanding man . . . ”

“Is it a question of money? Seven rupees a month, the same pay for fifty years although the price of cereals has doubled, I admit it is not much! I have, in fact, spoken to the governor general, who promised to think it over.”

“We are very grateful to you, Sahib, but that is not really the problem. It is not the lack of promotion either, although it is trying for an old soldier to be insulted by a young officer, freshly arrived from England and who . . . ” The sepoy hesitates. “Well, who is not very familiar with the local customs.”

Sir Henry nods his head.

*Greenhorns who know nothing and give orders wildly! It is a shame and I have warned the top hierarchy that if we were not careful, we would be headed straight for disaster . . .*

He makes no comment, but his silence encourages another old sepoy:

“It used to be so different before! The sahibs were close to their soldiers, they took us hunting with them and when they had the dancers over for a show at the regiment, we used to be invited along too. There was even an officer we called ‘the wrestler’ because he used to join his men in the ring! We were fond of the sahibs, as they treated us like their

children. Now they despise us, they never mix with us and when they are displeased about something, they hurl insults at us. Quite often we are court-martialled for insolence because they do not understand what we are trying to tell them, although we are only offering explanations.”

Around him, the other sepoys murmur their agreement, but their spokesman interrupts them impatiently:

“We have not come here just to complain, Sahib, we are willing to sacrifice everything for you, but . . .”

The man’s voice catches in his throat, his eyes fill with tears.

Sir Henry is moved. He gets up and takes him by the shoulder.

“Come now my friend, speak up.”

Hiccupping, the old sepoy mumbles:

“We can accept everything but . . . we cannot renounce our religion.”

“And who is asking you to give up your religion?”

At this, they all started talking at once: the new cartridges sealed with pig or cow fat, the flour mixed with the powdered bones of prohibited animals. Sir Henry assures them repeatedly that this is only slander invented to provoke trouble, but he is unable to convince them. Even if the cartridges are not defiled with impure grease, admit the sepoys finally, everyone now believes they are: “If we use them, our families and our whole villages will reject us out of fear of becoming untouchable themselves by coming into contact with us. In doubt, we will forever be seen as plague carriers, or worse still, condemned to becoming outcasts.”

“Or Christians,” suggests one of them.

This is too much for Sir Henry.

“Is it such a great misfortune to become a Christian?” he exclaims, outraged. Then realising that with these words he is confirming their fears, he hurries to add: “We never convert people by force or trickery. It is up to each person to choose freely!”

The words are barely out of his mouth when he remembers the Inquisition, the persecution of the American Indians, the Wars of Religion in Europe . . . Fortunately, there is no chance of these simple sepoys ever having heard of such events.

“But then,” objects a man, “why teach Christianity in state schools, and why transform the Kadam Rasul sanctuary which houses the imprint of the Prophet’s foot into a weapons depot?”

“Mistakes have been made,” concedes Sir Henry, “and I am here to remedy them. I give you my word that in future no building, particularly no religious building, will be demolished without my permission. As for the new cartridges, I have good news for you. Taking into account your and your families’ misgivings in this matter, the governor general has ordered that the sepoy no longer be required to bite open the cartridges. From now on, they will be opened by hand instead. Thus, the problem will cease to exist. There, my good men!” he concludes, rising. “I hope you are reassured now. Do not hesitate to come back to see me if you need to, I will always be here for you.”

The sepoy take their leave with profuse thanks and greetings. Sir Henry’s kindness warmed their hearts—it is for leaders like him they are ready to lay down their lives. They are not, however, any more reassured than when they arrived.

“If they have changed the rules for the cartridges, it’s because they do contain impure fat,” observes one of them. “Otherwise why would they have done that?”

“It’s true! In any event, touching prohibited fat with our hands is just as polluting and means we lose our caste anyway.”

What should they do? Will they, despite themselves, be driven to revolt?

“What insolence! How dare they criticise their superiors!”

“I admire your patience, Sir Henry! I personally would have had them whipped!”

The few officers who had listened to the conversation from the drawing room next door can hardly hide their annoyance with the resident. He should at least have taken their side against these subordinates.

Sir Henry settles himself into his armchair, slowly lights a cigar and studies them with his cool gaze.

“Gentlemen, I allowed them to speak because they were only telling the truth. Over the last twenty years, I have had ample opportunity to realise how far the relationship between officers and soldiers has deteriorated, and in general too, between the population and us British. If you want people to respect you, behave in a respectable manner instead of getting angry and allowing yourselves to insult them. Do you think that after our

military victory in Punjab, it is by whipping and abuse that I managed to win the loyalty of the people? It is by listening to them, trying to understand their problems and providing an efficient and fair solution.”

And, turning to pick up a document:

“I would like to read you what I wrote yesterday to the Governor General, Lord Canning, who asked me how to calm the discontent that is spreading through the garrisons:

‘Beyond the problem of the cartridges, as long as we refuse to admit that the natives, the native soldiers in particular, have the same feelings, the same ambitions, the same perception of their skills as we have, we will never be safe.’\*

“Gentlemen, is it really too much to ask that for a moment you put yourselves in the place of the Indians? They are sentimental people who would give everything unreservedly, if we are courteous, and if we treat them like human beings, instead of crushing them with our Western superiority!”

“Come now, Sir Henry, how can we possibly have a discussion with such a stubborn lot? This cartridge business is pure propaganda!”

“Not necessarily! According to the information I have received, local producers seem, in fact, to have replaced the sheep fat with pork and beef fat that is far less expensive. It has nothing to do with desecration, merely a question of serious money! The sepoy, however, are all the more distrustful, as there are many overzealous officers who are trying to convert their men.”

“And why not? Converting Indians to the Truth would not only take them out of their misery and vice, but would teach them the benefits of a well-ordered society!”

“Let us say rather, as Charles Grant, a previous manager of the East India Company, did, that ‘converting Indians would raise their morality while serving the initial purpose for our presence in India—the expansion of our trade.’ At least he had the merit of frankness! As for morality, I fear that for the Indians, we are hardly role models, with our habits of swearing and drinking, borrowing money we do not return, and above all, not respecting our treaties, as was the case here in this very city when we annexed Awadh.”

“I fear, gentlemen, that by continuing in this vein, we risk losing India.”

Today the zenana is in a flurry of excitement. They have just heard of Nana Sahib's arrival, which was celebrated with great pomp. This colourful character is the adopted son and heir of the peishwa, the ex-sovereign of the Mahratta confederation and lord of western India. Vanquished by the British in 1818, the old sovereign had been exiled to Bithur, near Kanpur,<sup>49</sup> where he died a few years ago.

What is his son doing here? Princes rarely travel, and only for special occasions such as major ceremonies or great durbars.

The eunuch who had gone in search of information returns with the latest news:

"Nana Sahib informed the British administration that he is here as a tourist."

The news is greeted with an outburst of hilarity. Tourism! That's a beauty! Only the Angrez travel as tourists! Do they not realise that Nana Sahib is making fun of them?

"Earlier, he had visited different states in the north of the country, Jhansi in particular, where he met his childhood friend, Rani Lakshmi Bai,"<sup>50</sup> specifies the eunuch.

"Courtesy visits, no doubt!" sneers Hazrat Mahal, sarcastically raising an eyebrow.

She remembers the impressive character glimpsed at a *mushaira*<sup>51</sup> held by the king, her husband. Tall and well built, with a round face and fair complexion, Nana Sahib had shown up, his flat turban tied in the Mahratta style, studded with pearls and diamonds, and his ears adorned with heavy emerald pendants. He surveyed the assembly with a dismissive glance, and she had sensed a vain and insecure personality. What she later learned had confirmed this first impression.

On the peishwa's death, the East India Company had refused to recognise this adopted son, contesting his title and the huge pension paid

to his father. For years, Nana Sahib had tried to influence their standpoint with compliments and gifts—even claiming he was best friends with the British—but to no avail. Finally, he had sent his right-hand man, Azimullah Khan, to London to plead his cause before Queen Victoria. It had been a futile attempt. The former had not even been received at Court.

“In truth, the Rani of Jhansi has the same reasons as the Nana to detest the British,” comments a begum. “They refused to recognise her adopted son, despite the fact that the rajah had specifically designated him as his heir, and then, arguing that the state was without a ruler, they annexed it! Lakshmi Bai seemed to have resigned herself to the situation, but I heard she is only waiting for the right opportunity to take revenge.”

“And whom is the Nana here to meet?” enquires a young woman.”

“Tomorrow he is to call on the resident,” the eunuch informs them, “but today he is visiting his peers, specifically Rajah Jai Lal and his brothers, who are making arrangements for his stay here.”

The sound of Jai Lal’s name startles Hazrat Mahal. Just as she suspected, this “touristic” visit to recently annexed states is a first contact, maybe even an attempt to initiate a plan of action.

Nonchalantly, as if the conversation was no longer of interest to her, she gets up to return to her apartments, but she whispers an order to Mammoo, who is following close behind:

“Go and mingle with Nana Sahib’s retinue as if you were one of Rajah Jai Lal’s servants. Keep your eyes and ears wide open and report all the details back to me.”

Bathed in the golden light of this late April afternoon, guests throng the vast veranda of the *kothi*,<sup>52</sup> where Nana Sahib is finishing his siesta. They have come to pay their respects to the man they consider the legitimate successor of the great Mahratta sovereigns. If it were not for the dozens of guards posted outside the gates of the park, it would appear to be a joyous and easy-going gathering.

Not without some difficulty, Mammoo manages to edge his way into a group of confectioners who have come to deliver *laddus*, *burfis*, *gajar halwa*<sup>53</sup> and other sweetmeats, highly appreciated by the Nana. Once inside, he easily spots Rajah Jai Lal, deep in conversation with a thin,

olive-skinned man dressed in an elegant tunic of white silk, embroidered with silver. Imperceptibly, he moves closer, without either of the men noticing.

“And why, my dear Azimullah, did you go visiting the trenches at Sebastopol, instead of returning directly from London?”

“I wanted to see with my own eyes what was being said in Istanbul: about the British Army’s collapse before the town held by the Russians, their unsuccessful attacks, the despondency—even within the high command—the disorganisation and indiscipline in the ranks . . . To my astonishment, I witnessed firsthand how weak these English really are, while here, we believe them to be invincible. They could do nothing against the Russians. Ah, the Russians! What formidable warriors! Capable of enduring anything! I left Sebastopol convinced that if we knew how to organise ourselves, even we . . .”

“Sshh! We could be overheard.”

And, lowering his voice:

“Is it true you met with the tsar’s agents?”

“One of them contacted me on my return to Istanbul. They are closely monitoring the situation in India and long to evict the British. Their messenger assured me that if we manage to stir up a rebellion in our country, and above all, to reconquer Delhi, they would be ready to provide us with substantial material aid and would help us drive the British out. We continue to correspond through Kashmir, aided by modest almond and fruit traders, who carry our messages back and forth.”

“For our part, since the annexation of Awadh, we have been active. We never miss an opportunity to bring up the Battle of Plassey’s prophecy, which states that the British have to leave India a hundred years after their victory—which is, in fact, in June this year. You know how superstitious our compatriots are: prophecies are signs from the heavens, which they would not dare ignore. As for the cartridge business, true or false, it is heaven-sent, and we are making the most of it! The people are infuriated and ready to rise up but, unfortunately, a lot of our prominent taluqdars still believe they can negotiate. They are unwilling to take any risks.”

“Apart from those who have nothing left to lose, of course! The Rani of Jhansi was raised at the peishwa’s court with Nana Sahib, she calls him

‘elder brother.’ She is ready to follow us. So are the princes of Nagpur, Satara, Karnataka, Tanjore and other states that have been annexed over the last few years. My master maintains a regular correspondence with them. If some still do hesitate, I am sure they will join us once the rebellion breaks out, and they realise how widespread it is.”

“And the date that has been set is still . . . ?”

Their words are lost in whispers that Mammoo cannot decipher, despite all his best efforts. He has heard enough though; he must inform his mistress as quickly as possible.

\* \* \*

Hazrat Mahal listens attentively to the eunuch’s report. As she suspected the sepoys’ insubordinations in Berhampur and Barrackpore are not isolated incidents—a general uprising is in the offing. And, in Lucknow, Rajah Jai Lal Singh is one of the main instigators. But this Azimullah character, can he be trusted?

“What do you know about this man, apart from the fact he is the Nana’s favourite advisor?”

“He goes by the name of Azimullah Khan and is proud of being a Pathan from the northwest territories, part of Afghanistan that the British have never been able to conquer, however hard they tried. In 1842, after four long years of battle, they had to retreat, as their army had been hacked to pieces: out of twelve thousand men, barely a few dozen returned. They are certainly courageous and cunning, these Afghans. They have an exceptional capacity for endurance. They have never been subjugated, and I doubt if anyone would be able to rule them in the foreseeable future either!”

“And this Azimullah?”

“According to information I could glean, he is said to have arrived in Kanpur as a child, accompanied by his mother during the Great Famine of 1837. They were employed as domestic staff, first by the founder of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, then by his successor. The child was highly intelligent and was finally sent to school. There, he was taught English and French, but they also tried insistently to convert him to Christianity. Worse still, he was the victim of repeated sexual harassment,

and his gratitude towards his benefactors soon turned into hatred. As he is charming and extremely competent, he found a position with some Europeans, notably Brigadier Ashburnham, but was dismissed for theft in 1850. He denied the accusation, albeit unsuccessfully. Publicly humiliated, he developed a terrible grudge against English society.

“It was at about this time that he entered Nana Sahib’s service. Formerly, he had been the Nana’s English teacher, now he has become his confidant and chief advisor. They say the prince never makes any decision without asking his advice. In a way, he is his *eminence grise*.

“Since his failed mission in London, it would appear that he himself is convinced and has persuaded Nana Sahib that he will never obtain justice. If, on the other hand, the princes unite, it would be possible to defeat the British in battle.”

“May Allah hear him!” sighs Hazrat Mahal. Then, with a short laugh: “However, it seems this Azimullah has nothing against English women. I have heard it said that in London, he was quite a ladies’ man.”

“Yes, he is supposed to have been a great success in high society. Apparently, he passed himself off as a prince, and given that he is handsome and has perfect manners, women literally fell into his arms. He developed a real contempt for Western women, who, in his opinion, have none of the qualities of restraint and modesty of the women here. Beneath his outwardly elegant and worldly manners, Azimullah is reputed to follow a strict moral code. It seems that his journey to Europe convinced him just how corrupt these societies, posing as models of virtue, actually were. Instead of dazzling him, it reinforced his hatred.”

“I was astonished that Nana Sahib, a well-known reveller and such a weak, indecisive man, actually has the audacity to conspire. Well, I like what I hear of this Azimullah,” concludes Hazrat Mahal, dismissing the confused eunuch.

\* \* \*

20 April 1857

Sir Henry Lawrence  
Resident, Lucknow

To Sir Hugh Wheeler  
Resident, Kanpur

My dear Wheeler,

Yesterday I received your friend, Prince Nana Sahib, accompanied by his brother and his secretary, a certain Azimullah. I must say, they made a very poor impression indeed; their arrogant manner was just short of insolence. In addition, I was unable to understand the exact reason for their journey to Lucknow—tourism being a feeble excuse. They were to come for dinner tonight but cancelled at the last moment, claiming urgent business in Kanpur.

Given the current problems, I cannot advise you strongly enough to remain wary of this individual, and not to place any trust in him.\*

Hoping your family and you are all well, I send you my kind greetings.

Lawrence

Sir Hugh Wheeler

To Sir Henry Lawrence  
25 April 1857

My dear Lawrence,

Thank you for your concern. I know the prince can be disconcerting at times, but I can assure you he is a true friend of the English, which he has proven on countless occasions. Just recently, he suggested placing some of his men at our disposal in the event of trouble, and he even went so far as to offer to accommodate my family in one of his residences.

In any event, all is calm here, and I have total confidence in my sepoys' loyalty.

With fond memories,

Wheeler

\* \* \*

On this scorching Saturday afternoon of May 2nd, a squadron of the 7th Infantry Regiment is assembled on the training field. The atmosphere is tense: the British officers have just announced they are to begin the

training session for the new Lee-Enfield rifles, using the new cartridges, as ordered by the Governor General Lord Canning.

Strapped into his impeccable uniform, Major Carnegie inspects his troops. With irritation he notices the crumpled tunics, some torn at the armhole—it must be said, they are so tight that if a man dropped his bayonet, it would be difficult for him to bend down to pick it up. But surely this is the very purpose of a uniform: to be a hard shell that forces one to stand upright? The Indians are naturally indolent and inattentive; the British had tolerated their whims for decades on the pretext of respecting their culture . . . Fortunately, things are now on the right track, and they are attempting to inculcate real values into these soldiers.

Standing to attention before his men, he orders in a loud voice:

“On my command, load the rifles!”

A slight shiver runs through the troop, furtive looks are exchanged. No one moves.

Taken aback, the major shouts his order again; the sepoys lower their heads, immobile.

In the face of this blatant indiscipline, the major almost chokes with indignation. Have these soldiers lost their minds? Do they not know the price to be paid for disobeying an officer?

But with his threats, the silence grows heavier, more hostile.

Finally, a sepoy steps forward and declares that the 7th Regiment, like the regiments in other garrisons, refuses to renounce its religion by using polluted cartridges.

Controlling his anger, Major Carnegie tries yet again to explain: “These are the same cartridges as before, this story of unclean fat is a false rumour spread by troublemakers . . .” But he is wasting his time. The men no longer trust their officers’ words. The broken treaties, the deposition of their king and the annexation of their country have persuaded them that the British are capable of the worst.

Having exhausted his arguments, the major, red in the face, finally sends them back to their quarters, warning them they will be severely punished and made an example of.

All night long, gathered under their tents, groups of sepoys discuss the situation. Rather than risk being hanged for refusing to obey orders, some recommend a mutiny and slaughtering the officers.

“Impossible!” object others. “The emissaries made us swear to wait for the signal, all garrisons must rebel together—a surprise effect is needed to be able to overcome the Angrez!”

“We no longer have a choice! Are we going to wait for them to execute us?”

There is a heated debate. They argue and abusive insults are exchanged. Men come in and out, going from one tent to the other to listen to the different opinions, in an attempt to establish a common position.

Taking advantage of the confusion, an old sepoy slips out of the camp. He hurries through the night, keeping to the back roads. After a good hour’s walk, out of breath, he finally reaches the high gates of the Residency.

In the bright moonlit night, the mansion looms impressively. A dozen armed guards are posted at the entrance. In vain the man explains he has urgent news for the sahib, he must see him immediately, as it is a question of life or death. The guards do not want to know. It is past midnight, the chief commissioner is asleep, waking him up is out of the question. The sepoy should return the following day.

“Tomorrow all the English officers will have been massacred, and it will be your fault!” shouts the old man in despair, but he realises they think he is mad. Taking advantage of a moment’s inattention, he grabs one of the guard’s rifles and shoots in the air. He is immediately overpowered and thrown to the ground. Inside the Residency, however, lights have been switched on. Alerted by the sound, Colonel Lawrence’s aide-de-camp sends his batman to find out what is going on.

Seething, the old sepoy is roughly pushed towards the house. Sir Henry, woken by the commotion, appears in his dressing gown.

“What is the matter, my good man?” he exclaims, surprised.

“The matter, Sahib, is that these imbeciles of guards are so frightened of disturbing you, they would prefer to see you dead!” explodes the sepoy, and without pausing for breath, he recounts the men’s feverish discussions, their absolute determination not to touch the polluted cartridges, their fear of being hanged for indiscipline and their decision to act first, by killing all their officers.

He has barely reached the end of this story, when a messenger on horseback arrives panting, bringing the latest news: the sepoys have just

taken over the arms depot!

Sir Henry turns pale; he had bet on his soldiers' loyalty. He was wrong. There is no time to lose.

In under an hour, all the British forces stationed in Lucknow are mobilised: the infantry, the cavalry and the artillery. In the darkness, they stealthily approach the camp and surround the barracks. The sepoys are alerted by the sound of branches cracking, they come out of their tents to find themselves staring into the mouths of British cannons.

The moonlight bathes the two groups of soldiers in an unreal light. They observe each other—allies yesterday, enemies today. No one stirs, aware that the slightest movement could have catastrophic repercussions.

Mounted on his chestnut horse, Sir Henry Lawrence advances toward them.

“Soldiers, listen to me! Some here are trying to fool you and lead you to disaster. I, your commander, give you my word that no impure fat is used in the manufacturing of the new cartridges. Believe me, my good men, over the last thirty years that I have been in India, I have come to know your civilisation and your beliefs, and I respect them—just as I have always appreciated your courage and dedication. I will never betray you! Soldiers, I am counting on your loyalty, but know that those who have betrayed us . . .”

From within the British ranks, an inopportune shot rings out, interrupting his speech. The sepoys panic; a few remain where they are in a frozen stupor. The majority flee and, using the darkness, try to conceal themselves in the surrounding shrubbery. They are soon caught and handcuffed: is the fact that they fled not proof of their guilt? For hours they are interrogated and whipped to force them to reveal the details of the plot and the names of the instigators. Not one of them speaks.

In his office, Sir Henry paces up and down, in his hand a letter one of his spies has just brought. It was sent by the 7th Infantry Regiment of Awadh to the 48th. It states that the soldiers declare their willingness to give their lives to protect their faith and hope the 48th Regiment will join them.

What is to be done? The previous day Lawrence had given orders to disarm all the sepoys. Some of the old faithful soldiers were crying,

protesting their loyalty. It had wrung his heart, but he is obliged to enforce respect for British authority, even if in this particular case, he can understand these men. In the past, an assurance from their officers would have sufficed to convince them; today a long list of errors and injustices has made them lose all trust.

Here and there, the insubordination gains ground. In Meerut, the largest garrison in north India, eighty-five sepoy who refused to use the cartridges are court-martialled: they are demoted and condemned to ten years of hard labour. If it were only the soldiers! Sir Henry is well aware the discontent has spread to the whole population, whether it be the tens of thousands of craftsmen; former employees of the king, who are now unemployed; the peasants subjected to taxes that are too heavy; or the feudal lords, whose forts have been demolished and a large share of their lands confiscated.

Nonetheless, whatever his predecessors' errors and short-term policies, he cannot deny them. He is forced to follow the same path, however dangerous and unfair it might be. His loyalty to England takes precedence, even over his conscience.

Following the old British strategy of "divide and rule," Sir Henry decides to invite all the aristocrats, notables and upper echelons of the Awadh army to a grand durbar at the Residency.

On May 12th, before an audience of rajahs, taluqdars, British officers and Indian non-commissioned officers—the latter being given the right for the first time to sit with the English—the chief commissioner delivers a long speech on the benefits of British power and his absolute neutrality on the question of religion.

"Rest assured that we will never interfere with your customs or your beliefs, we respect them. Unlike the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who disparaged the Hindu religion and forced conversion to Islam, unlike Shivaji, too, the great Hindu hero, who loathed Islam and put thousands of Muslims to the sword."

Stone-faced, his guests nod their heads politely.

Then it is time to distribute medals to the deserving soldiers who helped put down the rebels—heroes in the eyes of the British, traitors to their comrades.

Finally, refreshments and all kinds of delicacies are served by impassive servants. To the Indians' great astonishment, the British officers join their groups, joking and informally discussing the latest events, forgetting, for the occasion, their usual arrogance that prevents them from mixing with the natives. If they think they can win the sepoys' sympathy in this manner, they are wrong. Their sudden congeniality leads the latter to conclude that the English are afraid and are trying to soften them.

As for Sir Henry's speech on the benevolence with which Christians regard other religions, as opposed to Hindu and Muslim intolerance, it amused them. It is, in fact, common knowledge that the Mughal emperors, even the deeply pious Aurangzeb, had Hindu generals leading their troops. As for Shivaji, the illustrious hero of the Hindus, during his war against the Mughal emperor, maintained Muslims in crucial positions within his army. Besides, in the event of defeat, the population always gave shelter to the vanquished, whatever their beliefs.

In the state of Awadh itself, religion has never led to the slightest discrimination. Sovereigns like Safdarjung and Asaf-ud-Daulah offered Hindu priests land for their temples and often even financed them. A few years before he was expelled, Wajid Ali Shah himself had allocated a superb piece of land in the centre of Lucknow to some Irish nuns for them to build a Christian school called Loreto Convent. It later went on to accept girls from the best Hindu and Muslim families.

"This policy of discrimination began when the English arrived, with only Christians being offered the highest positions!" a rajah says.

They all agree, fully aware the British are trying to turn them against each other in order to weaken them.

**O**n the morning of June 10th, Mammoo Khan bursts into the zenana with extraordinary news: the Meerut garrison has rebelled! After shooting a colonel, the mutineers freed their comrades, imprisoned for refusing to use the new cartridges. They also released all the other captives, then spilled into the streets, burning houses occupied by Europeans and killing those they met on the way.

“The memsahibs and children too?” gasp the horrified women.

While Mammoo hesitates, Hazrat Mahal offers an explanation:

“These acts were certainly carried out by the criminals who were freed along with the soldiers. Our sepoys would never attack defenceless women and children! But tell me, how many of ours were killed?”

“That is the most astonishing thing! The English were so surprised that they did not react immediately, and so the insurgents had time to flee on horseback. They galloped forty miles towards Delhi to His Majesty the Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar’s palace. There, they massacred the English guards who tried to intervene and demanded the sovereign be awakened. When the latter appeared, asking what the commotion was all about, they greeted him with applause, proclaimed him the Emperor of India and leader of the rebellion, then they lifted him up on their shoulders in triumph.”

“Without asking his opinion?”

Incredulous exclamations burst forth. The eighty-two-year-old man, who bears the honorary title of King of Delhi, is the last Mughal emperor and Akbar the Great’s<sup>54</sup> descendent. However, he now only reigns over his palace, the splendid Red Fort and its adjoining buildings, some thirty square kilometres at the centre of the old city, on the banks of the Yamuna River.

Even before the arrival of the British, the Mughal emperors, who had dominated India for two and a half centuries, held only nominal power. In

1739, Delhi and the palace had been pillaged by the Persian king, Nader Shah. He had seized the Peacock Throne,<sup>55</sup> a marvel encrusted with sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pearls, as well as the famous *Koh-i-noor* diamond. Ten years later, an Afghan invader, Ahmad Shah Durrani, looted the capital, leaving the empire in a severely weakened condition. Since then, the Muslim and Hindu lords enjoyed a de facto independence. In 1788, another Afghan invader, Ghulam Qadir, had the reigning emperor Shah Alam blinded for refusing to reveal where the remaining treasure was hidden. Taking advantage of the power vacuum, the Mahrattas then occupied Delhi. Anarchy prevailed for fifteen years, until the British made their entrance in 1803 and re-established order—to their advantage. Since then, they have maintained the Mughal representative in a state of splendour, but with powers restricted to within the walls of the citadel.

Nevertheless, the imperial family had been up in arms against the British for some time now. They had in fact learnt that Lord Dalhousie now considered the great Mughal an empty figurehead, and for economic reasons had decided to put an end to this “farce.” On his death, his heir would not be recognised as the emperor, and the privileges enjoyed by the imperial family would be abolished. At the palace, concern vies with fury. Some of the princes have even made contact with the dispossessed rajahs and nawabs, so much so that when the sepoys arrive there on May 11th, they are not only welcomed with open arms but everything has been organised for their arrival. All of them, from the emperor’s sons to the courtiers, are well aware that Bahadur Shah Zafar’s death will mean the end of the house of Timur.<sup>56</sup>

Mammoo Khan’s announcement has stupefied the women of the zenana.

“It was said the emperor was only interested in poetry and his thousands of pigeons that flew in close rows above his head to protect him from the harshness of the sun whenever he went out. We were told he was a sage who stayed well away from the political scene. Could he possibly be behind this conspiracy?”

“Certainly not! Still, they did not leave him much of a choice: in order to legitimise their movement and to be able to spread it across the country, the sepoys need to give it a credible historical basis. By raising Bahadur Shah Zafar to power, they are reviving the prestigious Mughal

era, which both Hindus and Muslims consider the most brilliant period in their history, and hence, erasing two centuries of British colonisation. The people, who applauded the emperor when he appeared on his elephant and proclaimed *swaraj*,<sup>57</sup> understood this perfectly.

“Oh you, sons of Hindustan, if you so desire, we can destroy our enemy,” he declared. “We will liberate our religion and our country, both dearer to our hearts than life itself. Hindus and Muslims rise up! Of all God’s gifts, *swaraj* is the most precious. What the oppressor demon stole from you through lies and trickery, is he going to keep it forever?”\*

“His speech was greeted by a cheering crowd. It was as if the humiliating foreign occupation had never occurred, as if suddenly India was regaining its very soul and the Indians, their identity and their pride.”

The women are speechless; do they even dare believe it? Is it possible that the British, these all-powerful masters . . .

Hazrat Mahal trembles with excitement.

“You mean to say the Angrez were beaten by our troops?” she asks in a strangled voice. “It is not just a mutiny that will be put down tomorrow, like the all the others?”

“I do not believe so, Huzoor, I heard Rajah Jai Lal say . . .”

Mammoo hesitates, the words he is about to pronounce seem so overwhelming.

“He said . . . that it was the beginning of the war for freedom.”

“Allah be praised! After all these misfortunes, our country will finally be rid of these villains!” exclaims an old begum.

Little by little, the importance of the news slowly sinks in. Excited and distraught all at the same time, the women embrace and congratulate each other, some laugh, others cry, exclamations ring out along with a thousand questions that the confused eunuch cannot answer.

At last, Hazrat Mahal manages to restore calm.

“And in Delhi, tell me, how did the British react?”

“Strangely enough, there are few British troops in the city, and the sepoys, who certainly had advance warning, immediately made contact with those in Meerut. For twenty-four hours, a real witch-hunt was carried out against the Europeans. Some were killed, but the majority, including the women and children, were imprisoned, until some British

officers blew up the arms depot, killing dozens of sepoys. In retaliation, the rebels executed all the prisoners.”

These words are met by murmurs of dismay:

“Killing their women and children . . . The Angrez will never forgive us!”

“This seems to be exactly what the leaders of the rebellion desire,” retorts the eunuch. “This morning I overheard a discussion between Rajah Jai Lal and the Rajah of Mahmudabad. They suspect the decision to go through with massacre was made in order to eliminate any possibility of backing down. The sepoys in Delhi no longer have a choice. They have to fight. If they surrender, they know they will be hanged.”

“And in Lucknow, what are our men doing?” asks Hazrat Mahal impatiently. “Are they finally going to take up arms, restore legitimate power and bring us back our king? Or are our smooth-talking rajahs and nawabs still procrastinating? I was under the impression that at least Rajah Jai Lal was a man of action.”

“That’s true, he is quite unlike the other taluqdars, and the soldiers love him, but he has to wait for the precise date.”

Seeing the look of incomprehension on the begum’s face, Mammoo continues:

“A date was set for a general uprising that would take the British by surprise, but now everything has to be reconsidered. While walking through the town, I noticed that people were terribly excited. The latest events have banished all their fears, and they are ready for anything.”

In the zenana, enthusiasm slowly gives way to anxiety.

“But then . . . anything can happen?”

“We are already in a difficult situation, if there are riots in town, the British may well take it out on us . . .”

“Do you remember how they vandalised Moti Mahal Palace while looking for proof of a so-called conspiracy!”

Exasperated by her companion’s faintheartedness, Hazrat Mahal rises, signalling to the eunuch to follow her.

“Run along and find me a burqa,” she whispers to him. “We do not need a carriage this time, we will walk.”

A silent shadow follows Mammoo through the narrow alleys of the old bazaar. There has not been such a dense crowd for a long time. It seems as if the whole of Lucknow has decided to meet at this centre, which is humming with the latest rumours. On a street corner, a half-naked fakir with the trident of Shiva—the god of destruction—painted on his forehead, preaches to the spectators:

“The prophecy, remember the prophecy! This year, the Angrez, who have oppressed us for a hundred years, will be annihilated! United, we will crush them like vermin!”

A little further on, a maulvi with a long black beard hurls curses against these monstrous Christians, who hold macabre ceremonies during which they “drink their God’s blood and want to force us to do the same!”

The crowd shivers with horror. “*Angrez murdabad!*”<sup>58</sup> they roar at the top of their voices, while the Indian policemen sitting a few metres away ignore them.

Groups deep in passionate discussion cluster around the food stalls, where nobody intends to buy anything today.

“It seems the population in Persia rebelled and the British troops suffered huge losses. In China too, there were demonstrations, and fearing a general uprising the British requested reinforcements from the Singapore garrison, which was refused, as they themselves were expecting trouble.”

“It is the Russians who are funding this operation behind the scenes. During the Crimean War, they realised how weak the British Army actually was, and swore to drive them out of the region.”

“In London, the queen has no idea what to do. It seems she was so badly shaken by the events that she has shut herself up in her palace and refuses to see her ministers!”

*What nonsense, thinks Hazrat Mahal, Queen Victoria is as solid as a rock!* But she dares not intervene, as she knows her vocabulary and her intonations and the Court’s sophisticated language would betray her.

It is Mammoo who speaks up instead:

“And where did you get this amazing information from?”

They do not appreciate his tone. Where has he come from? Maybe the news upsets him? The animosity is palpable. In this overexcited crowd, the slightest doubt, the tiniest contradiction, is considered a betrayal.

Fortunately, a group of young people walking up the street, waving black flags, diverts their attention. Hazrat Mahal tugs at Mammoo's sleeve and both of them use this moment to slip away.

On the way back, they notice that some shops are shut and the word "traitor" is written in red letters on the doors. When Mammoo asks what this is about, he is informed these shops belong to traders who have ignored orders and continued to extend credit to Europeans. Vindictive graffiti appears here and there along the walls, the streets are buzzing with feverish activity, but there is not a British uniform in sight. The authorities seem to have decided to ignore the troublemakers instead of arresting them, in order to avoid fuelling the tension.

"I would never have imagined the people could be so angry!"

As soon as she reaches the palace, Hazrat Mahal takes off the burqa, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Mammoo, bring me my writing case, I must write to Rajah Jai Lal. You will take the letter to him immediately."

She chokes with indignation. What are these cowardly taluqdars doing? She has a good mind to tell them what she thinks of their passivity . . . But it would be of no use. As the Indian proverb says, "It is better to drink the milk than eat the cow."

So, taking hold of her best *kalam*,<sup>59</sup> she begins:

"To the Most Honourable Rajah Jai Lal Singh,  
from Begum Hazrat Mahal,  
wife of His Majesty King Wajid Ali Shah

Huzoor,

This afternoon I have had the opportunity of observing the enthusiasm of the people of Lucknow at the announcement of the latest events. They dream only of fighting to drive out the British and to bring their king back. They are ready to sacrifice their lives, but they await instructions, a leader, and they do not understand the rajahs' silence.

May I add, as I am in regular contact with His Majesty, I noticed certain questions regarding the loyalty of friends he has always counted on. I know you will not want to disappoint him."

It is true she has embellished things a little, but with this last sentence, she intends to hurt the rajah's pride. As he is a man of honour, he will find the idea that his friend doubts him unbearable.

She seals the letter, and, handing it to Mammoo says:

“Go as quickly as you can and bring me back the reply.”

Unlike most of the taluqdars' palaces protected by dozens of armed men, Rajah Jai Lal's house is guarded only by two watchmen. The first one registers the visitor's name and function, the second takes the information to the rajah's secretary. The rajah's answer to those who criticise his imprudence is that his rare enemies are no longer alive. If they point out that this reduced staff does not befit his rank, he retorts that he is first and foremost a soldier and enjoys a simple life. This attitude is unique in Lucknow's high society, where extreme sophistication is the rule and the most decadent elegance a virtue.

And if one accepts the eccentric Rajah Jai Lal's quirks, it is because he was and still is the king's friend and confidant. In fact, he leads people to believe that they continue to communicate, right under British noses.

Mammoo Khan is not left waiting for long. The secretary considers him the cleverest eunuch in the palace; he has had several dealings with him in the past, and has always been satisfied with the precision of his information. So today, he is ready to help Mammoo. His Lordship has asked not to be disturbed, but if it is urgent business, he will see what he can do.

A few minutes later, Mammoo is shown into a vast room with wide arcades that open onto a deserted veranda. The rajah is poring over Ordnance Survey maps laid out on a table.

“What does the palace want that is so urgent?” he asks, irritated, while he continues to study and annotate his maps.

“It is not the palace, Your Honour, it is the most important begum in the palace, the only one the king trusts,” replies Mammoo confidently. “I bring you a letter on her behalf.”

The rajah raises his head and studies the eunuch, who holds the letter out to him. He reads it rapidly and bursts out laughing.

“Your mistress is certainly audacious, she dares challenge me! In fact, I have already heard of her. I am told she has a keen political sense. It is a

rare enough quality in a woman for people to remember it. I was also told she has a son?"

"Oh yes," answers Mammoo eagerly, "a brilliant boy, a true king in the making!"

"How old is he?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven?" The rajah utters a curse. "What can one do with an eleven-year-old child!"

Mammoo, however, is not ready to pass up the opportunity he has just glimpsed. Choosing his words carefully, he says:

"The mother is at least as intelligent as her son and is ready to do anything to free her country."

The rajah bites his lips: this damned eunuch can read his thoughts; he would never have believed himself so transparent. He wants to end the conversation rapidly.

"All right. Well, tell your mistress I thank her for her letter."

Then, seeing the eunuch is waiting, motionless, he adds almost despite himself:

"Tell her also that when the time comes, I will remember her."

**A**fter the tense days following the assault on the city of Delhi and Bahadur Shah Zafar's enthronement, Lucknow seems to have returned to its usual calm. To all appearances at least, life continues unabated. The British make it a point of honour to modify none of their habits; they continue going out on horseback or in carriages but are now armed with loaded revolvers. Beneath the usual compliancy however, every so often the occasional suspicious murmur and insolent glance surfaces.

In this month of May, as temperatures soar with each passing day, everyone's nerves are on edge.

At the Residency, Sir Henry Lawrence has assembled the leading civil and military authorities. The governor general has just accorded him plenipotentiary powers, and he wants to discuss the measures to be taken to reinforce security in the vast Residency and the twenty adjacent buildings spread over this thirty-acre property. In the event of danger, they must be capable of providing shelter for the fifteen hundred members of the British community, half of whom are women and children, along with some seven hundred members of their native household staff. He also intends to have a moat dug and a boundary wall erected along a perimeter of a mile and a half.

"And the neighbouring houses?" objects a major. "We are at the centre of a highly populated area. It would be easy to shoot at us from the terraces."

"Have those houses evacuated, but only destroy them if absolutely necessary. And most importantly, no religious buildings are to be touched!"

"Even if they overlook the Residency compound? Then of what use is the wall?"

Sir Henry shrugs his thin shoulders.

“Do you want us to antagonise the entire population? Do you not think we have been inconsiderate enough already? Let us try not to generate more hatred. Groups of sepoys requested an audience yesterday to assure me of their loyalty; I do not want to do anything that could alienate these men. We may need them.”

“Because you intend to continue accepting natives within the Residency compound?”

“So they can cut our throats at leisure?”

The two captains look at Sir Henry as if he has gone mad.

“You don’t understand the first thing about these people!” interjects old Colonel Simpson. “I have been living beside them for so long. I can assure you the older ones will never betray us!”

Sir Henry calmly puffs on his cigar while he scrutinizes his officers:

“I am sure you are perfectly aware, gentlemen, that we only have one European infantry battalion here—six hundred soldiers—whereas there are over twenty thousand sepoys in the Awadh region alone. If the situation turns ugly, do you seriously think we can contain it by ourselves?”

“Calcutta will send reinforcements.”

“Their equipment will slow them down. They will take over a month to reach here. In the meantime . . .”

“All right, let us say that a handful of old sepoys will remain loyal,” admits an officer, “but all the others, who meet every night to plot against us and are only waiting for the first opportunity to revolt, are we finally going to disarm them?”

“Have I given an order to that effect?”

“No, but I imagine you will do so soon.”

“Well, once again, you are mistaken.”

Sir Henry’s tone is icy. The young, vain, ignorant upstarts they have been sending out here for the last fifteen years are ruining the work of generations of soldiers, who have earned the Indians’ respect, and often their love.

“If we disarm the Lucknow sepoys now, it will prove we are frightened, and it may very well spark off a general uprising in the surrounding garrisons. I think, on the contrary, we must show we trust them. That is

why I have decided that, from now on, I will be sleeping amongst them in my mess at Camp Muriaon.”

And, with a mocking smile:

“You are most welcome to join me there, if you feel that way inclined!”

The following week sees the centre of Lucknow transformed into a vast construction site. Hundreds of workers are busy fortifying the Residency buildings, digging ditches and erecting a boundary wall pierced with loopholes, behind which the cannons are positioned. For days, bullock carts go up and down, transporting weapons and ammunition as well as all kinds of supplies, flour, sugar, tea, coal and fodder for the animals—enough to last out a very long siege if need be. They can no longer ignore the gravity of the situation: since the fall of Delhi, other garrisons along the Ganges have revolted, and the rebellion draws dangerously closer to Lucknow.

Sir Henry works tirelessly, supervising the smallest details, only allowing himself two to three hours sleep a night. He is everywhere and always has a humorous word, an encouraging smile for the simple soldiers who adore him.

For his part, Major Carnegie has created units to evacuate the houses closest to the Residency. Entire families find themselves evicted with no idea where to go, they are not even given the time to pack their most precious belongings—a fact which is not lost on the soldiers. Despite the chief commissioner’s instructions, a large number of houses are demolished, as Major Carnegie fears they will be occupied by “terrorists”—these Indians who have the audacity, to say nothing of the ingratitude, to want to rid themselves of benevolent British domination.

One of the residences that has been razed happens to be the palace belonging to Wajid Ali Shah’s brother, who has gone to London with the Queen Mother to plead the deposed king’s cause. The princesses and their ladies-in-waiting are brutally expelled—one even has her arm broken—and they find themselves in the street, destitute, as they have not been permitted to take anything with them. The soldiers scornfully throw saucepans and various other kitchen utensils at them from the windows, while they confiscate jewellery and other precious objects, before blowing up the palace.

They find shelter in one of the Kaisarbagh palaces, now the last remaining haven for the women of the royal family. *For how much longer?* wonders Hazrat Mahal anxiously, as she and the other wives make room for these unfortunate women and help them to settle in. *We are being chased from residence to residence. The English are confiscating and destroying everything as they please. If we do not react quickly, and if the taluqdars continue to hesitate, soon there will be nothing left to save . . .*

This Sunday, the 24th of May, is Eid ul-Fitr, the festival of sweets marking the end of Ramadan. Fearing violent incidents, Sir Henry Lawrence has ordered the British soldiers and police to stay out of sight.

As they come out of the mosques, the faithful proceed in silent demonstrations throughout the town. For hours the men walk, stone-faced: it is the moment to be counted, to show their determination and their strength. In the evening, none of the usual celebrations are held—no spectacular lights, no deafening orchestras, no distribution of multi-coloured sweetmeats, no performing monkeys and no snake charmers. No one feels like celebrating. Beneath the apparent calm, the people sense that confrontation will soon be take place. They are only waiting for the signal.

By May 25th, all the British women and children should leave their bungalows and move to the Residency compound. Sir Henry has set the date, and despite all the protests and resistance from the incredulous women—horrified at having to abandon their comfortable homes because of a hypothetical danger—he will not budge. He even sends his officers to check that every house has actually been vacated.

The transfer is spread over a short week. The families arrive, one after the other, and settle in as best they can, often seven or eight to a room for, despite the modifications made to the layout, they lack space. There are not enough beds, so mattresses are laid on the ground, and sometimes a table is placed at the centre of the room for meals. People gather on the basis of affinity and, of course, social class. The officers' wives are given the most comfortable lodgings. Whatever happens, hierarchy must be respected; it is the only way to maintain order. As for the household help, they are crowded together outside on the verandas.

The townspeople are furious: the Angrez are being allowed to reinforce their defences, and turn the Residency into an impregnable fortress while they sit by twiddling their thumbs! What are the leaders up to? When will they give the signal to attack?

On Saturday, the 30th of May, in the afternoon, a sepoy from the 13th Infantry Regiment, who had been decorated earlier on for denouncing a spy, creeps up to Captain Wilson's bungalow, and softly scratching on the door, he reveals:

"It is for this evening, Sahib! The 71st Infantry has issued orders that the uprising commence at nine o'clock."

Despite the warning, Lawrence refuses to take action. He has been sleeping in the garrison's barracks for several nights now amongst the sepoys in order to prove his trust in them. He is not going to ruin everything on the basis of a rumour. While he is dining with his officers, the cannon thunders nine times. Not a sound escapes from the barracks.

"Your friends are late!"\* he remarks ironically, turning to Wilson.

The words have barely left his mouth, when the silence is broken by the sound of gunfire, followed by more shots. A red glow appears in the sky. The guests rise hurriedly. Sir Henry orders that the horses be prepared. While they are saddled in haste, a messenger arrives panting.

"The infantry regiments have rebelled. They are setting fire to the bungalows, destroying and pillaging everything they find. The officers who tried to reason with them were killed and the rest fled. The 7th Cavalry Regiment tried to intervene, but when a rebel galloped towards them, exhorting them to support the insurrection and to defend their faith, the majority switched sides and joined the mutiny."

Sir Henry frowns.

"After they have finished with the garrison, they will want to enter the town. We must stop them at all costs."

And, turning to his officers:

"Use Her Majesty's 32nd Regiment, four cannons and the European artillery company to block the road. I will meet you there."

Then, signalling to Major Carnegie:

“Major, we risk an uprising in town. They are going to try to join the mutineers. You have been here for ten years, do you think we can trust the police?”

“I think, sir, that we cannot fully trust any of these damned niggers! However, the police are still relatively reliable. Anyway, do we really have a choice?”

“In that case, we will post a few British men to reinforce the native officers. About a dozen, that is all we can use. They must be told it will be dangerous for them. Better ask for volunteers.”

“Yes, sir!”

Major Carnegie walks off shaking his head. Giving soldiers the choice! Has one ever heard such a thing! What a strange man, this Lawrence! Nonetheless, they say that in Punjab he managed to set a catastrophic situation right, just by showing the natives some consideration and respect. Major Carnegie cannot believe it: as if it were enough to show some respect for your enemy to avoid a war and reach an agreement, he scoffs. And, if there were no more wars, what would the men do? They would die of boredom and end up killing each other anyway! “Good God,” he murmurs into his moustache, “save us from these dangerous pacifists!”

All night long, the sepoys burnt and pillaged, delighting in their revenge against these foreigners who had destroyed their houses and palaces. When the British commander gave the order to turn the cannons on the insurgents, in a sudden burst of solidarity, the Indian artillerists switched sides and joined the rebellion. British soldiers were called in to man the guns, firing all night without a break. When at dawn, Sir Lawrence and his troops recapture Camp Muriaon, all that remains are charred ruins strewn with corpses. The majority of the rebels have fled towards Delhi after vainly trying to join forces with the inhabitants of Lucknow.

In town, the police have managed to suppress the popular uprising with the help of a few sepoys who have remained loyal to the British. Apart from the numerous dead, they have taken about forty prisoners, who are court-martialled, condemned to death and hanged before a hostile crowd, kept in check by the cannons.

In the days that follow, several important personalities, suspected of having incited the population to revolt, are arrested. Amongst them, King

Wajid Ali Shah's eldest brother, as well as Shuruf-ud-Daulah, previously the king's grand vizier, and two princes from the Delhi royal family, who had arrived in Lucknow a few weeks earlier to help organise the rebellion.

The atmosphere is strained, and Sir Henry Lawrence considers the time has come to move his headquarters to the Residency, where the civilians are already gathered. He no longer doubts that a real war is in the offing. Before he leaves, though, he sends Captain Birch and a division of Sikhs to seize the royal treasure kept at Kaisarbagh. He must deprive the Indians of the means to continue the uprising.

Despite the guards' opposition and the women's cries, the treasure is seized on June 17th. For hours, carts collapsing under the weight of boxes filled with gold and precious stones go up and down the mile separating Kaisarbagh from the Residency.

"These gems were impressive," writes Captain Birch. "There were magnificent pearls and emeralds as big as eggs, sumptuous jewels and tons of gold. We buried the whole lot in the main building of the Residency."\*

In the zenana, the theft of the treasure came as a real shock. Everyone knew the British command was capable of cruelty and treachery but not of acts of robbery. "They have taken all the ceremonial jewellery," the women lament, "even the sacred royal crown passed down from father to son on enthronement day. And now they are imprisoning our princes, will they dare kill them?"

They are interrupted by the excited shouts of a little servant girl, her cheeks flushed with emotion.

"Huzoor! Huzoor! Come quickly, come and see! Look what is happening outside!"

Holding up their trains, the begums hurry towards the wooden screens that allow them to look out without being seen.

The sight they discover leaves them speechless: down in the street, men are carrying big puppets dressed in the red British uniform. Shouting, they beat them with sticks, to the great amusement of the onlookers, who applaud when they slash off the heads with their swords, then brandish them like trophies, all the while saluted by the crowd's triumphant jeers.

In the following days, the processions continue with mounting vengeance. The puppets no longer represent only soldiers but also women and children, who are beaten and decapitated to shouts of “*Angrez murdabad!*” The walls are covered with graffiti in Urdu, Hindi and Persian, written in red letters: “Death to the foreigners despised by the gods and hated by the true sons of the land.” “Those who remain passive are born from English pigs and carrion-eating crows!”\*

*Why are they doing this just under our windows? Hazrat Mahal wonders thoughtfully. Are they trying to involve the palace? Show us the people’s resolve, expecting us to inform the king? They are clearly awaiting a sign, and as the taluqdars are doing nothing, they hope the sovereign will intervene, but . . . he is far too busy with his pleasures . . . No, I am being unfair again. The poor king is a prisoner, his letters are monitored. He has no means of taking action. He has the right to enjoy what remains of his life rather than making himself ill . . .*

Although she tries to justify his behaviour, she cannot understand the attitude of the sovereign she so admired, this husband she loved. She is angry with him, as if he had betrayed her, while deep down she knows she chose to turn a blind eye in order to continue to dream.

**A**s if the Lucknow mutiny had been the signal, the rebellion spreads like wildfire, not just in the state of Awadh, but throughout northern India. Day after day, garrisons revolt. Everywhere, property belonging to the British or their representatives is burned and destroyed, prisons are thrown open, treasures pillaged. The sepoys see it as fair compensation for years of miserable pay.

The Europeans who could not escape are killed during the confrontations or executed. These acts of cold-blooded murder are decided by assemblies of sepoys. This cruelty is something their masters had subjected them to for decades; today the roles are reversed. For years they had endured insults, blows, whippings, they saw their comrades tied to the mouths of cannons and blown to bits. Now they are reacting with the same violence, and just as mercilessly.

Yet sometimes, humanity prevails. A few sepoys help families, and even some of their officers, to escape. But there is no turning back—they are on different sides now.

On June 12th, despite initial hesitations, the Awadh police force joins the rebellion. Everywhere fierce confrontations take place, with the population becoming increasingly involved. This is no longer mere mutiny: the rebels clearly state they are at war against the “colonisers who stole our country and humiliated us,” and sometimes even declare their struggle to be “the battle of the blacks against the white man.”

The announcement of the Kanpur mutiny on June 4th has been enthusiastically welcomed in the zenana. They knew full well that Nana Sahib had not come here as a tourist but to establish a battle plan with the other rajahs! Soon it will be Lucknow’s turn to rise up. The people are ready, they are only waiting for a signal from the leaders, Rajah Jai Lal Singh and his friend, the Rajah of Mahmudabad; their names are on everyone’s lips. They also speak of Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who has just

been released from prison. His disciples—both Hindu and Muslim—have sworn undying hatred for the occupier, who dared defile their religion.

However, when the eunuchs announce the rebellion of the state of Jhansi, led by the rani, the exhilaration reaches its peak. All the women have heard of Lakshmi Bai, whose unconventional father had raised her to become an outstanding horsewoman, skilled in the art of warfare. They are full of admiration for her. Hazrat Mahal, in particular, feels an instinctive empathy with the young sovereign. They are more or less the same age, and although their backgrounds are very different—one is the daughter of a minister, the other of a minor craftsman—both are beautiful, intelligent, courageous, and most of all, ambitious. Whether it be for themselves or for their sons, they have both decided to force destiny's hand.

The uprisings continue; Benares, Jaunpur, Allahabad, Sultanpur, Gonda, the whole of north India is ablaze. The joy is short lived however, as the palace soon receives distressing news: suspected of being behind the rebellion, King Wajid Ali Shah has been imprisoned in Fort William, near Calcutta.

*As if the people needed any further encouragement to revolt! Hazrat Mahal is indignant, while her companions lament.*

*The foreigners seize our country and our wealth, they take control by exiling our beloved sovereign, crippling the population with taxes, ruining craftsmen, confiscating the land, even attacking our religion—and they are surprised that there is rebellion! They are looking for a scapegoat, refusing to admit that they are solely responsible for this situation.*

*This, however, is something the whites cannot understand, as they are utterly convinced of their superiority. Do they ever put themselves in other people's shoes and imagine their suffering and possible reactions? Never! As long as they are the strongest, they continue to crush and kill to preserve order and the values of civilisation . . . What civilisation? A traders' civilisation where gold is prized above all else, an attitude they conceal under a veil of morality.*

She is shaken out of her thoughts by the women's imprecations; now they curse this insurrection, which they were celebrating just a few days ago.

“What can we do to help our Jan-e-Alam?” they wail.

“We could start a hunger strike to force the Angrez to release him,” suggests a curvaceous begum.

“Well, you certainly could,” sniggers a small, thin girl, to the furious looks of the elders.

“It would be of no use at all. The British would be overjoyed to let us perish. So much less expense for them!” cuts in Hazrat Mahal, dryly.

The women spend the whole afternoon in discussion, drawing up the most absurd plans. Worried, Hazrat Mahal finally retires to her apartments. For the time being, her doubts and grievances against her husband are forgotten. She remembers only his charm and his kindness. Now that he is in difficulty, she will do everything possible to help him. There must be a way: can she find a spy to carry a message to him, buy off the guards, or divert attention using some kind of distraction . . .

“Mammoo Khan,” she declares to her trusted servant, who is standing at the threshold of her room, “I want to see Rajah Jai Lal.”

“See the rajah?”

The eunuch cannot suppress a shudder. He is used to his employer’s unconventional ideas, but she has never expressed such an unreasonable request.

“See him where? And how?”

“I am sure you will find a way, you are so clever,” she whispers in her most winning voice. “Obviously, no one must know. It is impossible to bring him here into the apartments, but maybe the garden?”

“Huzoor, you know very well that no man is allowed to enter the zenana gardens!”

“But a woman . . . in a burqa?”

“Come now, Huzoor, the rajah will never agree,” objects Mammoo, trembling at the very idea of having to transmit such a proposition to the impressive soldier.

“To save his imprisoned, maybe even tortured master, can he not accept this inconvenience? I am counting on you to convince him. We could meet in a quiet corner during the siesta. Nobody would dream of stepping out in this heat. Go, Mammoo, you are serving your mistress and your king. We will not forget it.”

And with this majestic “we,” by which she includes herself for the first time in the sovereign sphere, the young woman dismisses the dumbfounded eunuch.

Two shadows slip through a door, concealed under a thick curtain of jasmine. Following the palace eunuch—recognizable by his plum-coloured kurta—a tall, well-built woman in a black burqa trips up, letting fly a loud string of curses; a frightened “ssh!” from the eunuch silences her. As soon as they reach a dark corner with a small marble bench, from under the burqa the rajah appears, perspiring and furious.

“What a fool I am to have allowed myself to take part in this farce! I warn you, if it is not something important, you will not have heard the last of it!”

A clear laugh answers him.

“It is important business Rajah Sahib, have no fear!”

Taken aback, the rajah tries to peer through the shrubbery, in vain. There is a slight rustling behind the opulent rose and jacaranda bushes; a slim, elegant woman emerges. Wearing a long brocade garara, held up by a belt decorated with topazes and pearls, she has covered her net kurta with a gold-embroidered dupatta that hides her chest, her hair and the lower part of her face. As she approaches, the rajah realises her slender figure and proud bearing made her seem taller than she is.

With none of the shyness and simpering airs common to the palace women, she takes a seat on the marble bench and, with a gesture, invites the rajah to sit down. A quick glance confirms there is only this one bench, yet the rules of etiquette forbid . . . A mocking glance brings him back to reality. What rules? Are they not already breaking the most sacred one—the dictates of purdah?

Embarrassed, he sits down at the other end of the bench, cursing his awkwardness in front of those beautiful green eyes growing more and more amused. Why did he agree to this absurd meeting? He hates the affectation of the Court! If he had not been the king’s friend, he would never have set foot there. He far prefers soldiers to all these degenerate aristocrats, and the witty courtesans of the Chowk to the evanescent palace beauties. Not that he has ever approached the latter—he has only glimpsed them during the shows hosted by the sovereign—but these

languid creatures, confined to a world of artifice, seem to him to be more akin to dolls than women.

“The reason I wanted to meet you personally, Rajah Sahib, is because the matter is urgent. The king is in mortal danger. You and I know him well enough to realise he will not be able to bear captivity in that horrible Fort William. We must free him. You are a man of action, but above all, you are his most loyal friend. Do you have a plan?”

The voice is serious, slightly husky, mesmerising. The rajah is surprised at his own thoughts and tries to discern the speaker’s features through the light fabric.

“Well, Rajah Sahib?”

The voice has shifted from charming to impatient.

“I have not really had time to think about it,” pronounces the rajah, collecting himself. “We have so much to do at the moment, to coordinate our actions . . . ”

Brusquely he stops himself, biting his lip. What is he revealing to this woman whom he does not even know . . . Has he lost his mind?

The green eyes shine with excitement.

“Allah be praised! Would the rajahs finally be deciding to act?”

In her enthusiasm, the young woman has allowed her veil to slip, revealing an aquiline nose and a determined chin that contrasts with her voluptuous lips.

*Some temperament!* thinks Jai Lal, noting with amusement that the begum is in no hurry to rectify her veil.

“And when do you intend to launch the operation? Can the palace help?” she asks passionately.

“Help? How could the zenana help?” grumbles the rajah, mortified at having given so much away. “Please forget what I just said. The greatest service you can render our country and our king is to be silent.”

*What a rude person!* Disgusted, Hazrat Mahal stiffens and draws her dupatta around her:

“I do not need any lessons from you, sir. It appears that you are quite unfamiliar with the women of this country. Are you not aware that over centuries, they have fought innumerable times? Some have even reigned and led armies on behalf of a captive or deceased father or husband . . . Razia, the Sultana, who . . . ”

“Sshh! Huzoor!”

With frantic gestures, Mammoo forces her to lower her voice. In her indignation, she had forgotten the danger of their situation. If anyone were to surprise them, the punishment would certainly be death for both of them.

While the eunuch goes to check the adjacent alleys, the rajah attempts to redress the situation. He has no desire to anger the young woman: she is intelligent, passionate, she could be useful one day and—why deny it?—she intrigues him.

“I did not express myself well, Huzoor, please excuse a soldier, inept at the subtleties of the Court. I pray you, let us return to the subject of our meeting: freeing the king. Do you have a plan yourself?”

Hazrat Mahal hesitates. She would like to walk off and leave him sitting there—the lout! But she restrains herself; of all those close to Wajid Ali Shah, the rajah is certainly the most capable: she needs him. But he has to understand that he needs her too!

“Until he was imprisoned, I maintained a regular correspondence with His Majesty,” she declares. “I kept him informed of everything that is happening here, the people’s growing discontent and the fact that they are awaiting his return. Now he is in captivity, it will be more difficult, but I am sure a few pieces of gold will be able to sweeten the guards.”

A lie for a good cause, but the rajah is not fooled, as he himself has also spread the rumour that he is in touch with Wajid Ali Shah. He knows his friend well enough to be aware of how quickly he forgets those he is separated from. Why would he write to a begum whom he clearly did not like enough to take into exile with him?

Hazrat Mahal guesses his doubts—the same ones her own retinue shares—but she has long since found a way to parry them.

“The day he left, the king asked me if I would remain here to be his eyes and ears. He said he did not trust any of his other wives. He insisted I was the only one capable of undertaking this mission. How could I have refused? We left each other in tears. I miss him terribly, but I console myself with the knowledge that I am useful to him.”

“Your devotion honours you,” comments the rajah with a conviction Hazrat Mahal suspects is tinged with a touch of irony.

Unperturbed, she continues:

“This is my plan: there must be an ammunition depot inside Fort William, just like in all the forts. We will have to find a way to blow it up, then, we can take advantage of the panic to free the king with the help of our men stationed there.”

“But it is impossible to enter Fort William. It is the best-guarded prison in the whole of India!”

“My eunuch, Mammoo, knows a sepoy who used to be with the Bengal Army. He served at the governor general’s in Calcutta for years. He claims there is a secret passage that exists between the governor’s residence and the fort. We will just have to get one of our men into the Residency under some kind of disguise. Once in place, the guards we will have bribed would show him the underground passage to the fort and the arms depot. In the confusion provoked by the explosion of the depot, we would be able to help the king escape. He would, of course, have been forewarned. We need half a dozen accomplices inside, which should not be difficult to find, given the resentment against the British . . . and a generous reward for the job.”

“Why so few? To protect the king during his flight, we need a lot more men!”

“We are not planning to fight, but to help the king escape during the few minutes following the explosion while everyone is busy containing the fire! The fewer people who know, the less the risk of indiscretion.”

“I must admit it is a good idea. Does one learn these things in the zenana?” The tone is light, but his eyes are admiring. “There remains, however, a considerable problem: once the king is free, where should he go? Obviously not back to his palace in Calcutta, nor to his Lucknow palace. The British would put him right back into prison.”

Entirely taken up with her plan, Hazrat Mahal has not envisaged this problem.

Not truly convinced herself, she ventures:

“He could join the sepoys and lead the revolt.”

Given the rajah’s silence, she adds:

“He has not dealt with military matters for a long time, but you could be his advisor . . . ”

“I could ask for nothing better . . . if he so desires.”

They look at each other. There is no need to say more. They both know the king well enough to realise he will never accept such a risky undertaking. Wajid Ali Shah is a poet, a faithful friend, an affectionate husband and, in times of peace, a benevolent and generous sovereign, but one cannot expect him to be a warrior.

Given the young woman's turmoil, Jai Lal takes pity on her.

*Does she still love him so much, even though he abandoned her . . . ?*

Suddenly, he wants to reassure her:

“Trust me, Huzoor, we will free this country and reinstate the king, with all his powers!”

As she does not reply, he concludes with a smile:

“And maybe, we will even need the help of some people in the zenana, whose skill, I must admit, I had underestimated until now.”

### June 17th: telegram from Sir Henry Lawrence to the Governor General Lord Canning, in Calcutta

“The news from Awadh is terrifying. In under two weeks, the British forces have been swept aside and our administration has totally collapsed everywhere, except in Lucknow, where we are waiting. Our spies have informed us of important rebel concentrations, some twenty miles to the north of the town.

“I sent troops to support Kanpur, where General Wheeler is under siege, but en route the soldiers killed their officers and joined the mutineers. Wheeler is begging me to send more reinforcements; it is with a heavy heart that I have had to refuse, as we are expecting an attack here any day now and we are only a few hundred fighters.

“Please, send troops to save Kanpur as soon as you can, they will not be able to hold out for much longer.”\*

**I**ndeed, the situation in Kanpur is alarming.

Since the beginning of the events in May, Sir Hugh Wheeler had realised it was not a mutiny, but a rebellion intent on overthrowing British power. In anticipation of an attack, he had two brick buildings at the centre of the garrison fortified. A trench was dug and a three-metre high wall erected around it; the whole structure was defended by ten cannons. A quasi-symbolic defence that Azimullah, Nana’s right-hand man, had ironically nicknamed “the fortress of despair.”\* Although Kanpur was one of the most important garrisons in India, oddly enough, it had only three hundred European soldiers for three thousand sepoys. Sir Hugh was not particularly worried, however, convinced that, as in Meerut and Sitapur, the mutineers would set off for Delhi once they had burned and pillaged the bungalows.

Sir Hugh had joined a sepoy regiment at the age of sixteen and has served in India for fifty-two years. A small-built man with twinkling eyes,

he is one of the older generation of officers who speaks fluent Hindustani and is a great admirer of the local culture. He even married a young girl of mixed Irish and Indian race, and they had six children. He loves his men, who, in return, are unstintingly devoted to him. Nonetheless, he is fully aware of the deep discontent British policy has aroused over these last years. He alerted the authorities several times, but they did not respond. Now he knows the time for revenge has come. His confidence is not shaken though: his sepoy will never attack him or his entourage.

On May 21st, General Wheeler learns that the 2nd Cavalry Regiment will engage in a mutiny during the night. He has the women and children moved into the fortified camp and gives orders that the treasure be transported there as well. However, the sepoy responsible for guarding it profess their undying loyalty and refuse to hand it over. The atmosphere is electric. If he insists, Wheeler knows he may provoke a confrontation, but can he really leave eight hundred thousand gold rupees accessible to the mutineers? It is the faithful Nana Sahib who provides a solution by offering to send two cannons and three hundred of his Mahratta warriors as reinforcements to guard the gold. Sir Hugh hesitates, but he lets himself be convinced, remembering the numerous occasions when the Nana had done him favours and how, just recently, he had offered to place fifteen hundred men at his disposal to help reconquer Delhi.

It is Azimullah who serves as the go-between.

“Would you believe it, they actually agreed!”

On his return to Nana Sahib’s, Azimullah cannot contain his hilarity.

“I will never understand these English! They think nothing of stripping you of your titles and your inheritance, and yet swallow all your claims of friendship, as if it were perfectly natural that all you think about is helping them. Do they not realise that you hate them for what they have done?”

“Oh, but I do not hate them!”

“Because you are too kind and too noble, Your Highness. But you are not the only one they have robbed. They ruined the taluqdars and, in fact, the whole country by forcibly banning our crafts in order to force us to buy their industrial products at very high prices. And to top it all, they crush us with their contempt!”

“Personally, I have always had a good relationship with them.”

“On the condition that you respect the distance between them, the whites, and us, the blacks! Have you already forgotten the previous resident’s outrage when you dared asked for his daughter’s hand in marriage, although he used to claim he was your best friend? He turned his back on you and never spoke to you again.”

Nana Sahib’s face flushes crimson. He shoots a venomous look at Azimullah. How dare he bring up such a humiliation! It looks as if he enjoys reopening the wound and stirring up hatred.

But the announcement of the cavalry uprising turns out to be a false alarm, and most of the officers return to sleep amongst their men as a way of showing them their trust.

As for Nana Sahib, in true Mahratta style, he plays both sides of the fence. On June 1st, accompanied by his tall, skinny brother, Bala Rao, an angry individual who hates the whole world, the Nana attends a secret meeting on a boat with the sepoy’s cavalry leaders, and lets them understand he is a supporter of the rebellion. Then, when Sir Hugh—  
informed of this meeting—confronts him and expresses his astonishment, Nana Sahib explains that his intentions were simply to calm the sepoy’s down and bring them back to their senses.

Nonetheless, the news of the Lucknow garrison uprising and the British troops’ progress towards Delhi has dissipated any illusion that a conflict could be avoided. As the cavalry grows more and more restless, the courage and diplomacy the officers show their men cannot avert the danger indefinitely.

During the night of June 4th, gunshots ring out. A messenger arrives a few minutes later announcing that, in cahoots with the cavalry, Nana Sahib’s troops have seized the treasure.

For Wheeler, this is the first sign of his friend’s betrayal.

Soon the 1st Infantry Regiment joins the cavalry. Although they ignore their officers’ reprimands, the sepoy’s have no intention of harming them. Just as in Meerut and Delhi, the rebels’ first initiative is to release all the prisoners. This marks the beginning of a night of pillaging and arson, punctuated by cries of victory. The Europeans, who have taken refuge inside the fort, follow the events fearfully.

At dawn, the Indian officers of the 53rd and the 56th advise Wheeler they can no longer rely on their men. The general then asks the veterans—soldiers he has known for a long time—to remain at his side.

“Impossible, Sahib,” replies an old sepoy sadly, “Europeans and natives can no longer stay together. We fought for you, we shed our blood for you and in return, you used your cannons to pulverise our brothers. You and your people must leave as quickly as possible, Sahib. You have been like a father and mother to us, we will cover your flight, but we can no longer stand by you.”

Meanwhile, the sepoys have reached Bithur Palace, ten miles from Kanpur. They clamour to see Nana Sahib.

Woken by Azimullah, the Nana cannot make up his mind. Things are not going as planned: their strategy had been a general revolt that was to take the British by surprise and force them to leave. Now, the soldiers’ impatience has ruined the project, and the British high command in Calcutta has already begun to send reinforcements. If he joins this rebellion, which in all likelihood will be suppressed, he will lose everything, maybe even his life. If, on the other hand, he is seen to be supportive of the British . . .

But the sepoys leave him no choice—they need a legitimate leader. Either Nana Sahib agrees to lead the movement and they recognise him as the sovereign, or they kill him.

“How can you imagine I support the British?” exclaims the Nana, his hand on his heart, under Azimullah’s ironic gaze. “Let us bury the treasure in a safe place and head for Delhi to join our emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar!”

Nana Sahib retires to his apartments to the troops’ standing ovation. However, Azimullah does not take the same view. How will they chase out the occupiers if, instead of crushing them now while they are weak, they give the British a free hand and the time to gather reinforcements? He will spend hours trying to persuade his master to attack the Kanpur garrison in order to establish his authority there:

“In Delhi, you will only be one amongst dozens of princes. You will be powerless, whereas here, you are the absolute ruler. The men revere you.”

Vanity winning out over fear, the Nana finally allows himself to be convinced.

It will take even longer to persuade the sepoy, who have no desire to fight their officers. Ultimately, the fear of the whites' terrible vengeance and the promise of gold coins overcome their hesitations. They are also assured that once Kanpur is freed, they will march to Delhi, the glorious capital of the great Mughals, from where the movement to recapture the whole of India is to begin.

At dawn on June 6th, convinced the sepoy are on their way to Delhi, General Wheeler receives an unexpected message, a very courteous letter from Nana Sahib informing him that his troops will attack at 10 A.M. A last qualm towards his friend, combined with chivalrous morality that prohibits surprise attacks, has influenced this decision, which the prince has carefully kept secret from his partners. It gives Wheeler the time to recall all his officers and to bring the Anglo-Indian population into the camp—in all, a thousand people, half of them women and children.

The siege will last three weeks, during which the camp is heavily bombarded. The British respond as best they can but have to use their ammunition sparingly. Each day brings new victims. The heat is dreadful and they are short of water, so they have to risk their lives to go to the only well. The camp is so poorly protected by an adobe wall that some of the besieged prisoners are even killed inside their rooms. The place resonates with moans of the injured, tormented by hundreds of flies, and is pervaded by the unbearable stench of corpses.

By the end of the week, Wheeler realises they cannot hold out much longer. He sends the Nana a message, requesting him to allow them to leave for Calcutta. Despite his betrayal, he still has some faith in this prince, who was once a friend.

In the Nana's opinion, it would be the best solution, but he cannot take the decision alone. He has to consult the rebel officers, his brother Bala Rao, nicknamed "the Cruel," and his secretary Azimullah. For once, the latter loses his legendary composure:

"Spare the English while they are massacring our women and children everywhere! You cannot be serious! Is the blood of the whites worth more than ours? Is a blond child worth ten, a hundred of our children?" he chokes with rage.

His words are met with a roar of approval. For some time now, large numbers of refugees have been pouring in from villages around Benares and Allahabad, where the revolt has been brutally suppressed. Petrified, they tell of the houses and fields burned, the rapes and mutilations. Major Renaud and Colonel Neill's troops had hanged thousands of peasants—adolescents to old men—from trees all along the road. Now they are advancing towards Kanpur, destroying everything along the way.

The British consider this ferocity just retribution for the killing of civilians in Delhi and Meerut—white men and women killed . . . by the natives! Slaves who dare raise a hand against their masters! That is what is really scandalous! There is no greater crime than that of abolishing a natural hierarchy, where everyone has their designated place. This rebellion is sacrilegious, for it contests the “good” order of things: a world where the white man is, in all evidence and for all eternity, superior to the black or dark-skinned races, particularly if they are not Christian!

The battles continue for days. The small garrison counters the sepoys' attacks with a resistance born of despair. On June 23rd, the anniversary of the Battle of Plassey, they manage to repel a particularly harsh attack, but when a shell destroys the building where the medicines and supplies are stored, Sir Hugh Wheeler submits to the inevitable, and he sends the Nana another message.

The latter shuts himself away with his brother, his advisor Azimullah and his most important general, Tantia Tope, to discuss what should be done. After a lengthy, private discussion, they decide to send an Anglo-Indian hostage, Mrs. Jacobi, with a letter signed by Nana Sahib, ceremoniously addressed:

“To the subjects of Her Very Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria,

“All those who played no part in the crimes against Indians and who are ready to surrender, will be given safe passage as far as the town of Allahabad.”\*

Sir Wheeler hesitates: can the very man who betrayed them so cleverly be trusted? His officers remind him again that they only have three days' supplies left, and that the women and children will all perish. On their insistence, he gives in.

The practical details are to be discussed on neutral territory. A meeting takes place between two British officers, pale and gaunt, and the Nana's representatives: Tantia Tope, the Mahratta general—a massive dark-skinned man who always wears a white turban and is reputed to be a brilliant strategist—and the elegant Azimullah Khan. Nana Sahib promises he will provide the British with a flotilla of boats and oarsmen to transport them safely to Allahabad, the strategically located town at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna. In exchange, they must abandon their cannons, rifles and ammunition. After long negotiations, they are allowed to keep their revolvers.

On June 26th, an armistice is declared. Overcome by delayed compassion, Nana Sahib has sixteen elephants, eighty palanquins and several bullock carts sent to transport the women, children and wounded as far as the riverbank, where large boats are waiting for them.

On the morning of the 27th, everyone squeezes themselves as best they can into the overloaded craft under the inscrutable gaze of the soldiers who have escorted them there. Despite the oppressive heat, a few notables sitting in the shade of a small Hindu temple overlooking the Satichaura Ghat watch the operations closely. Azimullah Khan, Tantia Tope and Nana's brother are clearly visible, but the prince himself is absent.

At 9 A.M., seated in the first boat, Sir Hugh Wheeler gives the signal for departure. His craft has barely begun to advance however, when, at a gesture from Tantia Tope, the oarsmen throw live embers onto the thatched roofs of the boats, then jump overboard. As the boats burst into flames, hundreds of sepoy emerge from their cover on the riverbank and begin to open fire. From the opposite shore, two cannons bombard the fragile flotilla. There is complete panic. Some men shoot back to gain a few futile minutes, while in a desperate attempt to flee, most of the terrified women, children and wounded jump overboard. The few who escape the bullets and make it to the shores are cut down by the swords of the Mahratta cavalry.

Hundreds of corpses float on the reddened waters of the Ganges. All the men have been killed, except four, who managed to escape. They will later describe the horror they endured.

Hugging their children tightly against them, the terrified women scream, imploring those soldiers who seem hesitant for pity, when finally an order to stop the massacre arrives from the palace.

The survivors—about two hundred women and children—are cooped up in a small house called Bibighar, so named as it was built for the *bibi*, a British officer's mistress. The dilapidated building, having been empty for a long time, has no furniture, and the prisoners have to sleep directly on the mud floor. The only food they receive twice a day consists of flour and *dal*, the lentils that constitute poor Indians' staple diet.

Why has the Nana spared them? Out of pity for the women and children of those who had been his friends in another life, or out of pure calculation? In the event of a setback, these hostages could be valuable as a currency of exchange.

But for those who crowd around the shelter jeering, these women, now stripped of all they possessed, are mainly objects of revenge. For the Indians, who have slaved all their lives for the memsahibs without ever receiving the slightest recognition, the sight of their humiliation is a joy. What is unbearable about the Angrez has nothing to do with the work, which was no harder than at the begums', it is that in their houses, the natives are invisible. Instead of being an integral part of the household, and being scolded as well as protected like children, they are treated like shadows, instruments to be used, never human beings deserving of the occasional benevolent glance.

Relationships that are dehumanising on a daily basis breed bitterness. The Indian women mock the captives vociferously; revenge is sweet. They delight in watching the memsahibs on their knees, scraping their hands on the stone while they clumsily try to grind the wheat to obtain a bit of flour, and washing their torn dresses—rags their servants would discard—the only garments remaining to these “ladies,” who used to be dressed in silk and lace!

The female head guard of Bibighar treats them especially harshly.

The woman, nicknamed “the begum” for her fair skin and authoritarian manners, used to be a prostitute. She is totally devoted to the Nana's secretary. Just like him, she hates Angrez women, the kind ones in particular, who affect simplicity while maintaining a certain haughtiness, those for whom charity is such a clear way of marking distance that it

becomes insulting. She thus seeks every possible means of humiliating them. When informed that the prisoners' health is deteriorating dangerously, Nana Sahib sends a doctor and allows them an hour's walk daily. The begum chooses to have them parade down the most crowded streets, where they endure slurs and jeering. Or she makes them march through the main bazaar, surrounded by stalls full of foodstuffs, and if ever a trader, overcome with pity by a child's hungry look, dares hold a fruit out to them, she immediately barks: "Have you no shame? Give it to our children who are dying of hunger instead!"

In the Bibighar prison, weakness and dysentery wreak havoc but, despite everything, the women do not lose hope: from a servant's gossip, they have learnt that Major Renaud's regiment has left Allahabad and is on its way to Kanpur to free them.

Upon receiving this news, Nana Sahib assembles his council.

"The yellow-faced, narrow-minded people have been vanquished, but they are attempting to return. We will wipe them out!"\*

According to his spies, the British troops number a few hundred men, and although they have left a string of devastated towns and villages behind them, they have also suffered heavy losses, either in battle or due to heatstroke and fevers.

On July 9th, the rebel army commanded by Tantia Tope and the Nana's brother is sent to stop the British forces. They have far more men and should win easily, but General Havelock's reinforcements arrive unexpectedly. They launch a surprise attack, confounding all expectations. After two days of fierce battle, Nana Sahib's troops are subdued.

When the news of the defeat reaches Kanpur on July 13th, the war council unanimously decides to defend the town.

But what should they do with the prisoners?

Most of the prince's advisors, particularly his brother, Tantia Tope and Azimullah, are of the opinion they should be eliminated: "They saw everything that took place here, they can testify against us." Nana Sahib, himself, firmly opposes this solution and to convince his companions, he argues that the British will give anything to recover their women and children. If the situation deteriorates, these hostages are the only hope of saving their skins.

The war council adjourns without having reached a decision.

**A**riving from all over the other districts of Awadh, groups of rebels assemble in the town of Nawabganj, twenty miles from Lucknow. The majority are sepoys coming from the garrisons in revolt, but there are also a few taluqdars who have decided to lead their troops into combat against the British occupying forces. What do they have left to lose? The new English laws have dispossessed them of their lands and, above all, of their status by sabotaging the complex system of loyalty that had, for centuries, bound them to their peasants. They only have one objective now: to drive out these bandits who, sheltering behind great moral principles, have stolen their land and their honour.

By the end of June, there are over seven thousand men at Nawabganj, including one cavalry regiment and two military police regiments. Their leaders are the Rajah of Mahmudabad and Rajah Jai Lal Singh—old and faithful friends. On the other hand, the arrival of a strange character, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, is cause for concern. Just recently released from prison, where his incendiary speeches had landed him, the maulvi is followed by over a thousand disciples, clearly hypnotized by his presence. Under the circumstances, it is out of the question for the two rajahs to forgo such a valuable input of armed forces, but they will have to watch him closely.

On June 28th, a messenger from Kanpur announces that Nana Sahib has gained control of the town. Now they can finally launch the assault against Lucknow with no fear of a surprise attack by the British.

On the 29th, under the maulvi's command, an advance force of eight hundred men is sent towards the village of Chinhat, seven miles from the capital, while Jai Lal and Mahmudabad go over the final strategy.

In Lucknow, Sir Henry Lawrence, forewarned by his spies, hesitates. Should he send his troops to wipe out this first wave of rebels, and hopefully discourage the still disorganised enemy? This would also test

the loyalty of the sepoy who remained with him . . . but then he risks losing a part of his already reduced forces intended to protect the Residency and the civilians who have taken refuge there. Finally, at the insistence of his officers, who refuse to be branded as cowards, he sets off for Chinhat on the 30th at the crack of dawn with a column of seven hundred men.

However, these twenty-four hours of procrastination prove to be fatal: they have given the Indians time to regroup.

On this morning of June 30th, in the smothering heat, Lawrence's troops advance slowly across a sandy terrain, slowed down by the heavy Howitzer cannon pulled by an elephant. In order to save time, they have not stopped to eat and have nothing to drink, as the native water carriers have mysteriously disappeared. Nevertheless, Sir Henry is not worried; he knows his men's capacity for courage and endurance. Gritting their teeth, they continue to make headway under a merciless sun.

As Chinhat comes into view, the cavalry's advance guard encounters heavy fire. Before they have time to position the Howitzer, the Indian cannons, hidden behind a thick curtain of mango trees, force the British troops to a halt. The artillery battle lasts several hours, when, finally, the cannons on the Indian side fall silent. The British cry victory—the enemy is retreating!—until they notice the regiments descending the flanks of the hill in an encirclement manoeuvre. There are thousands of them advancing in perfect order. At this precise moment, the Indian artillerists and most of the sepoy in the column choose to abandon their posts. They push the cannons into the ditches quickly and rush to join their compatriots, leaving the British artillerists isolated and short of ammunition. Their stocks have evaporated as if by magic. Surrounded on all sides, the British fight furiously. They fall to enemy fire by the dozens; the situation is absolutely hopeless, when, finally, Sir Henry decides to sound the retreat.

Given the soldiers' state of exhaustion, the retreat would have been transformed into a bloodbath if Lawrence had not had a brilliant idea: he posts men equipped with flamethrowers on a narrow bridge. They hold off the Indians, permitting the rest of his troops to return to the Residency, where the blood-splattered fighters are received with panic. The losses have been heavy: three hundred dead and dozens wounded.

But above all, the psychological shock is immense—it is the first time a British army has been defeated by natives!

While the camp licks its wounds, Sir Henry Lawrence hurriedly has the latest gaps in the ramparts repaired, and tries his best to reassure the terror-stricken women and children. Meanwhile, the victorious sepoys are given a heroes' welcome. They recount the battle in great detail and describe the flight of these Angrez, whom, until now, everyone had believed to be invincible.

In order to complete their victory, a few hundred enthusiasts swarm the Residency, armed with only their rifles. Repelled by heavy cannon fire, they are forced to retreat, leaving a large number of their dead behind on the battlefield. They then vent their rage on the “collaborators”: the policemen who remained loyal to the occupier, but mainly the *banyas* and *mahajans*,<sup>60</sup> who have benefited from the new regime. The hunt for traitors begins. Helped by the angry population, the soldiers pillage and burn everything belonging to the British or their allies, and pursue those they presume guilty, resolutely deaf to the warnings of their commanding officers, who try to maintain order. In a vengeful frenzy, they burn the British bungalows as well as the prison, the court of justice, the tax office, the telegraph office, the station and everything that reminds them of British domination. The situation deteriorates from one hour to the next as peasants, avid to take part in the victory celebration and in the acts of retribution, arrive from the surrounding villages. There is absolute chaos.

\* \* \*

“We must act as quickly as possible, otherwise we will lose all control and the town will fall into anarchy.”

Rajah Jai Lal has assembled the military leaders and the taluqdars who took part in the Battle of Chinhat. All of them are aware of the danger, but after hours of discussion, they have still not managed to agree on a strategy.

“We cannot just start shooting soldiers to make them submit! It would spark off a civil war!” protests one of the rajahs.

“In my opinion, it would be best to leave them alone. In two or three days they will be exhausted and things will have calmed down on their own,” adds his neighbour wisely.

This is too much for Rajah Jai Lal.

“Allow them to continue vandalising the town? Make no mistake, it is no longer our sepoys leading this dance. These are criminals freed from the prisons, men who kidnap and kill women and children! If it were your homes and your families being attacked, would you continue to deliberate, sitting comfortably in your armchairs? No, of course not, you would immediately find a way to stop this carnage! But as it concerns ‘the others,’ people who are strangers to you, the poor who are used to misfortune, you take your time, arguing endlessly, discussing the principles to be respected, the necessary objectivity and the undesirable consequences that could result from a rash decision!”

And, pointing his finger at the speechless assembly:

“If the assassins, blinded by rage and hatred are guilty, you gentlemen in your luxurious ivory towers are all the more so! How can you sleep at night when, through indifference and cowardice, you allow all these innocents to be massacred?”

“You who speak so well, what solution do you propose?”

The young Rajah of Salimpur has never had much sympathy for Jai Lal, this new aristocrat. His frankness is an insult to the refined behaviour so prized by Lucknow’s society.

“We must re-establish an unquestioned authority that applies to everyone as soon as possible.”

“And how is that to be done? Our sovereign is a prisoner, hundreds of miles away, and we have abolished the British power that had replaced him. A taluqdars’ assembly then?”

Jai Lal shrugs his shoulders.

“You know perfectly well that the taluqdars will never manage to reach an agreement on anything! The only unquestioned authority would be a member of the royal family, as my discussions with the sepoys’ representatives over the last few days have confirmed. The cavalry favours Prince Sulaiman Qadar, the king’s brother, but the infantry, which is ten times larger and mainly Hindu, insists the throne should go to one

of Wajid Ali Shah's sons. The eldest are in Calcutta with their father, but two of them are still here."

"How old are they?"

"The elder one is sixteen, the younger, eleven."

"Children!"

"It does not matter. They will only be symbolic figures. All the decisions will be taken by the delegates designated by the taluqdars and the army."

"Don't forget the begums!" intervenes the old Rajah of Tilpur maliciously. "Some of them are strong personalities. Officially, the mother of a young king is regent until his majority, and should she get it into her head that she wants to govern, we may well have problems."

"We will find a way to make them listen to reason," interrupts Jai Lal. "At the moment, our priority is to find the best possible candidate. As head of the army, I propose that I, together with a delegate designated by the taluqdars, talk to the begums tomorrow."

\* \* \*

Mammoo Khan has been entrusted with the task of announcing the visit to the zenana. When Rajah Jai Lal contacted him, he had tried his best to insinuate that it would be a waste of time consulting the other wives, as Hazrat Mahal's son, Prince Birjis Qadar, was by far the best choice. He had been rudely rebuffed.

"Who do you think you are, permitting yourself to participate in affairs of state? It is for the army and the taluqdars to decide, not the eunuchs!"

From the look of hatred Mammoo shoots at him, Rajah Jai Lal knows he has gone too far, but at least he expressed himself clearly. Mammoo and the likes of him must understand that times have changed, and the days of palace intrigue, which too often passed for politics, are over.

The slaves hung a heavy curtain across the large blue drawing room of the Chattar Manzil Palace—this palace, where in happier times the king used to enjoy chatting to his wives. Behind the curtain, an assembly of aristocratic begums is waiting impatiently for the visitors' arrival. The little information Mammoo shared with them has whetted their curiosity: the Rajahs Jai Lal Singh and Mahmudabad have requested a meeting to

discuss the future of the revolt. The future of the revolt? They do not understand—war is men’s business! What do they, women, have to do with any of this? Hazrat Mahal is the only one who guesses their intentions, but she remains silent. In addition, Mammoo, generally so talkative, claims he knows nothing. She suspects he is lying, but since the day before he has been in such a vile mood that she prefers not to insist.

Footsteps can be heard in the vestibule. The two rajahs appear, escorted by the Turkish guards. The contrast between the rugged soldier with his weather-beaten face and his fair, delicate companion is striking. When dealing with such important business, though, they complement each other perfectly.

After multiple greetings and the customary compliments, the Rajah of Mahmudabad, choosing his words with great care, explains the reason for their visit. He has barely begun when outraged exclamations break out:

“Our beloved sovereign is still alive, how dare you think of replacing him!”

“It would be unpardonable treason!”

“We would never accept such vileness!”

The shocked women protest. Despite the turmoil of past events, they have kept the glorious image of Wajid Ali Shah alive and, among the population, their unshakeable loyalty upholds the belief that the sovereign will return. Being faithful to the king is a sacred cause for them. Is their status not inextricably linked to his? If he is dispossessed what will become of them? Wives of a monarch exiled by his enemies, but above all, disowned by his friends, they would become nothing more than forgotten shadows . . . of a shadow.

Calmly, the Rajah of Mahmudabad lets the avalanche of indignation run its course, waiting until the begums are ready to listen again.

He describes the indiscipline that is gaining in the sepoy ranks and the difficulty in controlling the troops. The victory has gone to their heads, he explains; the only authority they are henceforth willing to recognise is the great Mughal in Delhi, or his representative in Lucknow. As the latter is currently a prisoner, they want one of his sons to replace him until his return.

“So if Jan-e-Alam returns, his throne will be restored to him?” ask the women, suspicious.

“I swear it on my honour!” retorts Rajah Jai Lal, growing impatient with these protests of loyalty. “On the other hand, I can assure you that if the throne remains vacant, if the soldiers do not have a sovereign who talks to them and encourages them to fight, an indisputable arbitrator who knows how to punish but also to reward, who, in short, is a final authority in whom they have full confidence, most of them will abandon the cause and return home. This will leave the door wide open for the Company to re-establish itself and take its revenge. If that happens, I do not hold out much hope for any of our lives!”

At these words, the women shudder. They know this is no empty threat. Nonetheless, Begum Shanaz, the doyenne, is not totally convinced.

“I do not understand, Rajah Sahib, the soldiers themselves designated you as their leader, are they not willing to obey you?”

“You know our people’s mentality as well as I, Huzoor. They are naturally undisciplined. But for their God or their king, whom they revere as the incarnation of God on earth, they would make the ultimate sacrifice without the slightest hesitation.”

“You should also bear in mind, Honourable Begums, that if a king were to be reinstated, the Court would reclaim the place it deserves and you would regain your position, whereas presently, these palaces are totally desolate.”

This last argument cleverly put forward by the Rajah of Mahmudabad is what tips the scales. A return to a semblance of their former life—none dared hope for that any longer. The enthusiasm is considerably dampened, however, when Rajah Jai Lal reminds them that the period they are about to face will not be a time of celebration but rather a time of war, a merciless war against the occupier.

“It is for this reason that I ask you to discuss the question very seriously amongst yourselves, before designating the king. Bearing in mind the fact that both the princes are still very young, it will be the king’s to exercise the regency. Doubtless, it is an honour, but most of all, an arduous task and a particularly dangerous one under the present circumstances. The slightest error could be fatal. Of course, we will be there to advise the regent and guide her decisions, but the final responsibility will rest on her shoulders and her son’s.

“And now, Honourable Begums, may we respectfully retire in order for you to start the deliberations. Do not forget, though, time is of the essence. We will return this evening.”

\* \* \*

*My son . . . king?*

Could this ambition nurtured in secret for the last eleven years actually become reality? Hazrat Mahal shivers, not fully knowing whether it is out of excitement or fear. It is all so different from what she had imagined. Instead of glory and honour, what they are being offered today is a merciless confrontation that could prove fatal. The dream could turn into a nightmare . . .

Images run through her mind: the poor but carefree little girl for whom the horizons of happiness were limited to the red garara that young brides wear, and lots of sons who would have enough to eat every day. She feels a sudden nostalgia for those simple joys—the mutton they feasted on during the Eid ul-Kabir festival, it tasted even more delicious as they could only afford to eat meat once a year. The new clothes they received for Eid ul-Fitr; they pranced about in them all day, even wanting to wear them to bed! As the memories return, she is overcome by emotion but also amazement. She, who has come so far, does she really miss this ordinary past?

Around her, the women are deep in discussion. The rajah’s arguments have got the better of their hesitations, and they are currently trying to convince the pretty Khas Mahal of the luck and honour that have befallen her. To them it is clear—if they must designate a successor to the unfortunate Wajid Ali Shah, it can only be his eldest son, despite . . . Despite the fact that Nausherwan Qadar is an unstable adolescent, whose own father had considered him unfit to reign. Under the present circumstances, he will only be a symbol; the regent will take all the decisions, as advised by the assembly of the taluqdars. Yet to their great surprise, the prince’s mother resists. Usually so mild, so much so that they imagined her passive and malleable, now she obstinately refuses a responsibility she feels incapable of assuming. She is not interested in power, her whole world revolved around her love for her husband and her

son. Now, while she still mourns her captive husband, they would ask her to endanger the most precious thing she has left, her beloved Nausherwan? The more her companions insist, the more she resists them with a stubborn silence.

Furious, the begums change their tactics. They decide to shame her: this son she claims to love so much, is she not being selfish in denying him this unbelievable opportunity to ascend to the throne? The risk? It is minimal. They are living in troubled times, true enough, but the whole country is rising up against the occupier, one town after the other. There are not that many British forces left here, and without their sepoy, they will not be able to resist for long. And when they do finally leave Awadh, imagine the young king getting all the glory for the victory! Her head spinning with these arguments, and unable to counter them, the hapless Khas Mahal finally relents.

The reflected rays of the setting sun bathe the large zenana drawing room in a purple glow as the two rajahs return to enquire after the verdict. To welcome the visitors, some servants offer them mango and lemon sherbets prepared according to a secret palace recipe, while others fan them with broad *pankhas*.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, a commanding voice is heard from behind the curtain. It is Begum Shanaz; as the eldest, it is her privilege to announce the decision.

“Here, Rajahs *Sahiban*,<sup>62</sup> is the outcome of our private deliberation: we have unanimously chosen Prince Nausherwan Qadar, son of Begum Khas Mahal, as the future king.”

The disappointment he feels makes Jai Lal realise that he had always hoped that Begum Hazrat Mahal, who had so impressed him with her energy and intelligence, would be chosen. Now the die had been cast, he cannot intervene. In return though, he does want certain assurances:

“We thank you, Your Highnesses. If we may, we would now like to speak directly to the future regent,” he declares.

“She is very disturbed, give her a little time,” intervenes Begum Nashid, who tries to comfort the crying Khas Mahal.

“Forgive us, Honourable Begums, but we simply do not have time for such niceties. A war is at our doorstep and in order to fight, we must restore discipline in the sepoy ranks as soon as possible.”

Surprised, the Rajah of Mahmudabad looks askance at Jai Lal: why such harshness? Surely a few more hours will not change anything. Are the Court ladies being put to the test?

He soon receives an answer. From behind the curtain, a soft, trembling voice speaks up:

“I am ready, I will do my best. I will follow all your advice, Rajahs *Sahiban*. But you must assure me, on your honour, that my son’s life will not be put in any danger.”

Anticipating his friend's exasperated reaction, Mahmudabad patiently explains:

"You must understand, Huzoor, that in times of war, all lives are in danger—your son's, your own and ours. We have every intention of driving the British out, but if fate goes against us, we can only promise that we will do everything in our power to protect you."

A long silence ensues, then the soft voice declares, firmer this time:

"In this case I must refuse. My life is of little importance, but I feel I do not have the right to place the prince at such risk."

"I am ready to accept!"

The words rang out clearly in the middle of a stunned silence.

"And my son, Prince Birjis Qadar, is also ready to serve his country."

Disapproving murmurs rise around Hazrat Mahal: what is she talking about? How could a child undertake such a commitment?

"He is young, but I personally strove to ensure that he was brought up to be conscious of his duties towards his people, unlike other princes, who are only concerned with their prerogatives and the privileges of their birthright."

Disregarding her companions' indignant protests, she continues in a resonant voice:

"Just like you, Rajahs Sahiban, I am convinced the only solution for us is to fight. We have bowed down far too long, hoping our good behaviour would please our masters. But experience has shown that pleas and explanations are useless—those in power only hear what they want to hear. No concessions, no negotiations will return our country to us. The British invoke morality and justice, and swear their only aim is to re-establish public order, supposedly undermined by an incompetent sovereign. We now know they care nothing for justice and only want to appropriate our wealth. They will not budge until they are driven out by the whole population. With your guidance, Rajahs Sahiban, my son and I are ready to lead this battle."

\* \* \*

Under torrential monsoon rain, two sepoy regiments in full regalia are standing at attention in front of the elegant white marble *Baradari*<sup>63</sup> at the

centre of Kaisarbagh gardens. Inside, taluqdars and officers are gathered, awaiting the arrival of the crown prince. Contrary to tradition that dictates the king be crowned in the centre of town in the *Lal Baradari* made of red sandstone, it was judged more prudent to remain within the palace grounds.

Rajah Jai Lal had the greatest difficulty in persuading the soldiers that the choice of such a young child was the only appropriate alternative under these difficult circumstances. It took two long days of negotiations to reach an agreement: Birjis Qadar is to follow the directives of the great Mughal in Delhi, the supreme authority over northern India; the prime minister will be chosen with the army's agreement; and the officers will have to be approved by the soldiers, whose pay will be doubled. Lastly, the sepoys will be allowed to punish anyone who collaborates with the British in the manner they see fit.

Thus, the rebel soldiers in Lucknow—as in Delhi and other insurgent towns—demand not only monetary concessions, but also the right to participate in political decisions.

Amongst the notables awaiting the prince and his mother, one of the main victors of Chinhat, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, is conspicuously absent. Officially, he is incapacitated due to a battle injury and is unable to travel, but everybody knows he has no intention of swearing allegiance to the young king and, even less, to his mother. What can a woman understand of politics, or of warfare for that matter? He has reminded his partisans—who are quick to pass on his comments—of the bitter defeat Prophet Muhammad's youngest wife, Aisha, suffered when she led the army into the "Battle of the Camel," and he quoted the words of a famous alim: "A nation which places its affairs in the hands of a woman shall not prosper."

Taking advantage of a lull in the storm, the royal procession finally leaves the Kaisarbagh Palace for the Baradari. In contrast to past splendours, the procession only consists of about a hundred guards and a few phaetons carrying the prince and his mother, as well as the ladies and eunuchs, who are part of their retinue. Gone are the orchestras with their brightly

coloured uniforms, gone are the jugglers and dancers, glaringly absent the elephants caparisoned with brocades or the superb thoroughbreds, their

saddles encrusted with precious stones—the main attractions of the ceremonies held during Wajid Ali Shah’s time. Since his exile, they have been confiscated—stolen, say the Indians—by the chief commissioner, for the benefit of the British crown.

Nonetheless, the crowd is enthusiastic. People throng both sides of the road to watch the procession pass. When the young boy steps out of the carriage, followed closely by his mother, the begum, enveloped in veils, the crowd’s deafening clamour of cheers and applause spreads across the immense esplanade.

Inside the illuminated Baradari, the noble gathering waits in silence, curious but mainly sceptical about this eleven-year-old child who is being presented to them as the king. However, Birjis Qadar’s majestic bearing and the confidence with which he takes his place on the *masnad*<sup>64</sup> that replaces the throne—also confiscated—deeply impresses the entourage.

“Oh, you, Father of Victory, supporter of the religion, magnificence of Alexander the Great, you, the righteous King, Caesar of our times, Sultan of the universe!” Emphatically the great alim enumerates all the titles that the sovereigns of Awadh have taken great pride in for generations, then—as the royal crown has also disappeared—he takes the *mandil*<sup>65</sup> and solemnly sets it on the young boy’s wavy hair.

And when the small, frail figure of Birjis Qadar stands up to solemnly take the oath before God and vows in a clear voice to do his utmost to serve and protect his people and his country, even the hardest of hearts cannot help feeling a shiver of emotion.

As he finishes, the traditional twenty-one gun salute rings out, announcing the coronation of a new king. This is followed by a long line of eminent taluqdars and officers who, parading slowly past their sovereign, have come to swear allegiance to him. One by one, they bow deeply and he acknowledges each one with a word, a slight nod. His whole being exudes a nobility and calm, impressive in someone so young.

Beside him stands his mother, slightly in the background, her head held high and her eyes sharp. She is only too aware that these taluqdars, who prostrate themselves here today, will change sides at the drop of a hat. Loyalty and fidelity are not these princely families’ greatest qualities. Shifting allegiances, depending on the needs of the moment, are an old and accepted practice. She has a plan to counter them.

The parade of dignitaries comes to an end. Silencing the gathering with a gesture, the Rajah of Mahmudabad declares:

“Given our king’s young age and according to custom, his mother, the very noble Begum Hazrat Mahal, is named regent until her son’s majority. She will be advised by myself, as representative of the taluqdars, along with Rajah Jai Lal Singh, the army’s representative, and, of course, by her ministers. I ask you to swear allegiance to her.”

“Allow me, Rajah Sahib!”

The begum moves forward while the rajah, surprised by this unceremonious intervention, steps aside.

Majestic in her brocade garara, Hazrat Mahal, henceforth the Queen Mother, scrutinizes the audience with an imperious glance. She takes her time—what she is going to say requires their full attention.

“Highnesses, Sahiban, the dramatic situation our country is facing has convinced my son and myself to accept the heavy responsibility of power. In these troubled times, this means we are putting our lives at stake. We have decided to take this risk, as we are aware that the struggle for independence needs an unquestionable symbol as a rallying point, and this can only be the son of our beloved sovereign, the king, Wajid Ali Shah.

“However, as we have chosen to commit ourselves, so we ask of you a commitment in return. If I do not receive this assurance, if I must constantly worry that any setback will lead you to abandon the struggle, I will not risk my only son’s life. Hence I request each of you to come and swear, either on the Holy Quran, or on this jar containing sacred water from the Ganges, to fight faithfully and relentlessly to the very end; that is to say, until we have driven out the British.”

*What a woman!*

Rajah Jai Lal watches her, stunned. He would never have expected this speech, he who thought he knew her!

*Anyone else would have been content at becoming the regent. They would never have thought of imposing their conditions. She is right though, she knows how fickle the taluqdars are.*

Murmurs rise all around him:

“How dare she speak to us in this manner? Who does she think she is? She was a mere dancer before. She cannot make demands on us. If she

does not like it, we can do without her!”

Jai Lal senses the danger; if someone does not intervene immediately, the situation is likely to deteriorate. And without a king’s authority it will be impossible to contain the army and unite the taluqdars, leaving the British the chance to rapidly regain power, and their vengeance will be terrible!

He exchanges a look with the Rajah of Mahmudabad. The latter is going to try to calm the gathering:

“We should be offended by your words, Huzoor,” the Rajah of Mahmudabad declares, “but we understand they are dictated by your maternal love and the fear of the danger in which you place your son. Our mothers would doubtless have acted in the same manner. Thus, I think I am speaking for all of us when I say we do not hold it against you. The taluqdars’ generosity will not be found wanting. If the only way in which we can allay your fears is to agree to your surprising request, I think we can grant you this favour.”

And without giving the begum time to react, he steps up to the Quran and raises his hand to swear the oath, followed immediately by Jai Lal, who goes towards the jar containing the sacred water of the Ganges. Then, after a slight hesitation, all the rajahs and nawabs step forward, one by one, to take the oath on their sacred symbol.

Without the slightest inkling of the narrowly averted disaster, the hundreds of soldiers gathered on the esplanade shout their enthusiasm and impatiently demand to see their king. When the latter finally comes out of the ceremonial hall, followed by his mother, he is welcomed with a huge roar that resonates from one end of the garden to the other.

“Krishna! You are our Krishna!”\*

Laughing, crying, the men jostle each other to see, to approach, to touch their young sovereign. They are placing all their hopes in him, merging him into their adoration for Krishna, the child god, who personifies infinite love for the Hindus. Overcome by elation, some even dare to kiss him, and if Rajah Jai Lal had not rapidly brought the situation under control with a few blows from his cane, Birjis Qadar may well have died of suffocation. With great difficulty, the officers open a path to the phaeton, where his mother is waiting. As the jubilant crowd showers them

with blessings, the procession makes its way haltingly back to Kaisarbagh Palace, accompanied by a throng of admirers.

Throughout the night, in the glow of multicoloured paper lanterns, the people celebrate. Men dance and sing to the sound of tablas and *nagaras*,<sup>66</sup> cheering the ascension of their new king, while hidden behind the jalis, the women praise the young boy's qualities and marvel that for the first time in Lucknow, power is in the hands of a woman.

Not far from there, inside the Residency steeped in semi-darkness, the atmosphere is quite different. In every home only wails and sobs are to be heard, while outside, the soldiers pace up and down, their heads lowered.

In the main building, lit by a few candles, a bed has been set up, around which a group of officers and their wives read the Bible and recite the prayers for the dead. The tall, thin body of the person they so greatly loved and respected is lying on an immaculate sheet. This was the man who kept up their courage with his unchanging smile in the worst situations, the man whom they had trusted as a father.

Sir Henry Lawrence had been killed by a cannonball that entered his room while he was resting. Before he died, and despite his suffering, he took the time to appoint Major Banks chief commissioner and Colonel Inglis head of the fighting force, leaving him instructions on how to deal with the siege. He also insisted on dictating his epitaph, as simple as the man himself:

“Here lies Henry Lawrence who tried to do his duty.  
May God have mercy on him.”\*

The British flag flutters defiantly over the main Residency building. To vent their mounting frustration, the sepoys regularly use it as target practice, for since King Birjis Qadar's coronation they have been instructed to stop random attacks until further notice. This decision was taken by Rajah Jai Lal and the regent at their first meeting, when he told her of the futile deaths of soldiers, who set off to attack the cannons armed solely with rifles and their courage. A conference was called in order to define a strategy.

On this afternoon of July 7th, the military high command, the taluqdars' and rajahs' representatives, as well as the rest of the government, are assembled in Chaulakhi Palace, near the Kaisarbagh palaces, where the Queen Mother has chosen to set up home with her son.

They are awaiting the new regent with scepticism and slight irritation after Rajah Jai Lal had informed them that she wants to participate in every decision regarding the struggle against the occupier and the country's administration. He had, however, judged it wiser not to report her exact words: "If these honourable sahiban imagine I am going to be a puppet, content to merely record their decisions, they are mistaken," she had declared. "Observing the way the kingdom has been managed for a long time, I have noted a number of errors, and not all of them can be blamed on the British! Too often, our advisors place their own interests before those of the country. This is now over. The situation is serious, I will show no leniency."

At precisely 4 P.M., the Queen Mother enters, preceded by her Turkish guards in their dark green uniforms. Sumptuously dressed in a garara interwoven with gold and decorated with pearls, she slowly steps forward, no longer wrapped in her veils, as she had appeared on coronation day before the gathered people. Today her face is uncovered—a light gauze is draped over her hair, concealing her elaborate coiffure—in a gesture

indicating to all present that it is not the woman presiding over these government sessions, but the regent and leader of the government and, as such, purdah has no place here.

Its significance is not lost on the men assembled before her. Their first reaction is one of shock, but above all, her beauty perturbs them and so they avert their eyes. Nonetheless, they have to answer her explicit questions on this or that point on the agenda, and slowly they pull themselves together.

Hazrat Mahal smiles to herself, satisfied. She enjoys repeating the words spoken by the Prophet's granddaughter, Zeynab, who refused to wear a veil: "If God gave me beauty, it is not for me to hide it." And maliciously she notes that if women's beauty disturbs men so much, they can always choose to look away!

Rajah Jai Lal is the first to present his report:

"As the majority of the sepoys have gone to Delhi, we have twenty regiments under our command, about fifteen thousand men," he announces. "It will not be enough if Calcutta sends reinforcements, which they certainly will. We are at an even greater disadvantage, as our weapons are highly inferior to those of the British: our soldiers are equipped with the inaccurate Brown Bess rifles that have a range of two hundred metres, against their Lee-Enfields with a range of eight hundred metres. In addition, the only cannons we have are outdated and far less powerful than their Howitzers. Lastly, we are likely to run out of ammunition very soon, as the British made sure to blow up the depot before barricading themselves into the Residency."

His words elicit worried comments. The Chinhat victory gave them such a sense of invincibility that they have forgotten certain realities.

The regent makes herself heard over the hubbub:

"Why not reinstate the thousands of soldiers and officers belonging to the former royal army who, having been dismissed by the British, are now unemployed? That would give us about thirty more regiments! As for the ammunition, can we not quickly set up a factory and engage enough men to produce the quantities we need?"

"The problem, Huzoor, is that we have no money," objects Rajah Bal Kishan, the finance minister. "As Your Majesty saw with her own eyes,

Captain Birch had the state treasure forcibly transported from Kaisarbagh to the Residency, thus depriving us of the means of financing our action.”

“But as far as I know, we still have His Majesty’s private treasure?”

“I have no idea where it is. His Majesty sealed it himself and entrusted it to two of his right-hand men. I doubt they will agree . . . ”

“Have them brought here immediately.”

“We will try to find them, Huzoor.”

“Rajah Sahib, I am convinced that if you try, you will succeed,” interrupts Hazrat Mahal icily.

And then, seemingly oblivious to the murmurs of the dignitaries, outraged at being treated with so little respect, she turns to the governor of Lucknow, who has come to report on the situation in town.

“It is a disaster, Huzoor! All the bazaars are completely deserted, as the shopkeepers have shut their shops after the extensive damage perpetrated by the pillaging soldiers over these last few days. There is no grain to be found anywhere except in the black market at exorbitant prices, so much so that part of the population is starving and ready to revolt.”

Hazrat Mahal cannot repress an outburst of anger.

“Summon the tradesmen’s leaders, Governor Sahib, and have their grain purchased at the normal rate, of course. Then, in the name of the king, my son, you will organise a distribution of wheat and lentils for the needy. Be sure to have it proclaimed all over Lucknow and in the surrounding villages that we will show no mercy—those who starve the people will be hanged!”

And, glaring at the shocked assembly that seems astounded at such stringent measures:

“Remember, we are at war, gentlemen! If we do not impose strong discipline, our enemies will soon get the better of us, in which case it will not be just a few dishonest traders who will be hanged but all of us present here.”

She realizes from their reaction of stony silence and apprehensive looks that, this time, her words have left their mark.

Meanwhile, Hisam-ud-Daulah and Miftah-ud-Daulah, the two guardians of the treasure, have arrived. Informed of what is expected of them, they hesitate. Without an order from His Majesty, it would be a betrayal of his

trust. Even though the prime minister explained that this gold is indispensable to finance the war against the occupier, that it is their patriotic duty to hand over the treasure, they refuse: they have sworn an oath of loyalty to King Wajid Ali Shah, not to the government of Awadh.

“But how do you expect His Majesty, imprisoned in Fort William, to issue such an order?” asks an irate Jai Lal, who would gladly strangle these overzealous servants.

Hazrat Mahal discreetly slips a note to one of her Turkish guards, who disappears immediately.

The discussion has been underway for over half an hour, each one trying in vain to influence the two men, when the head of protocol appears and announces in stentorian tones:

“The King!”

Standing upright, Birjis Qadar advances to the centre of the group of courtiers, who bow respectfully. Taking his place beside his mother, he addresses the two guardians in a confident voice:

“I am informed of your loyalty towards my respected father, and I am grateful to you. However, did you not swear an oath of fidelity to me just a few days ago? Until His Majesty can reclaim the throne of Awadh, I am the king and you owe me your allegiance. I know my father, who has suffered his whole life under British tyranny, would not have hesitated to place his fortune at the service of our struggle for independence. I ask you therefore, in his name, to hand over the treasure to serve this noble cause.”

Impressed by his clear gaze and his words that suddenly seem perfectly logical to them, the two men express their devotion profusely: would His Majesty forgive them, for they are but poor, ignorant servants; the treasure will be delivered to the palace this very afternoon.

They take their leave, walking backwards, bowing all the way down to the ground.

With the issue of finances momentarily settled, the assembly now needs to define a strategy. Again, Rajah Jai Lal intervenes:

“I have made a careful study of logistics,” he declares, turning to face his peers. “Given their limited range, we must place the cannons as close to the Residency enclosure as possible. The inconvenience is that this makes them more vulnerable, and as we have very few, we must do our

utmost to protect them. Hence, I propose we make them mobile: we conceal them behind a corner wall or at the bottom of a slope. Using a platform with a pulley system activated by our men, we draw them out just to open fire, then immediately return them to their hiding places before the enemy has time to react.”

Everybody approves of this ingenious plan to safeguard the cannons as well as the men operating them.

“Do we not also have a Howitzer that the British abandoned when they were defeated at Chinhat?” enquires an officer.

“We do in fact have one. There are also four large pieces of artillery captured the same day by the lords of Ilaqa and Purwa. I have tried to convince these gentlemen to allow us to use them, and I even offered them compensation. But these British cannons—though of no use at all—represent such symbols of prestige that they refuse to hand them over.”

“Have they not joined our struggle then?” asks Hazrat Mahal.

“No, Huzoor.”

“They are wrong. We will send them a *firman*<sup>67</sup> signed by the king, directing them to participate in our battle against the occupier, with their men and their cannons. If they refuse, we will declare them allies of the British . . . with all the consequences that implies.”

The audience is dumbstruck, even Jai Lal, although he is aware of the new regent’s decisive personality.

In under a week, the main political and military guidelines are established. To everyone’s surprise, Hazrat Mahal turns out to be a remarkable organiser. Every morning, she presides over a meeting with the new Grand Vizier, Sharuf-ud-Daulah, and all the ministers, who keep her abreast of civil affairs; every afternoon, Rajah Jai Lal comes to report on military matters. As the sepoys’ spokesperson, he is the link between their high command and Chaulakhi Palace. In reality, although the prime minister is formally his hierarchical superior, it is Jai Lal who shoulders the main responsibilities, as in addition to his role as chief of the army, he has been appointed president of the Council of State. This council, set up by the rebels, consists of six soldiers and four civilians—Hindus and Muslims in equal numbers. Every decision has to be ratified by them; a power sharing that deeply irritates the regent.

For the moment, however, everyone agrees that the priority is to restore order, and to provide security and the bare necessities for the population's subsistence. Edicts signed by Birjis Qadar, posted simultaneously in Hindi and Urdu, announce the abolition of taxes on common consumer goods and reiterate that pillagers and racketeers will be put to death.

Contrary to what the British want to believe—unable to understand the magnitude of the revolt, they call the uprising a “mutiny” and the insurgents “bandits”—it is a real power that is being instituted, imposing its laws and sanctions, re-establishing the old structures and abolishing everything that represents the hated colonial regime.

One of the first measures the government takes is to restore the taluqdars' rights as both masters and protectors. Their villages are returned to them, and the peasants are given back their land, confiscated by the British administrator on the pretext that they were unable to pay the tax. Once again, ancestral order, and a social justice recognised by all, reigns in the countryside.

The year of the rebellion also sees the revival of traditional sciences and indigenous medicine, which the British had abolished in order to propagate Western-style science and techniques. Once again, the hakims treat the sick and wounded with their potions concocted according to ancient wisdom, and the *pandits*<sup>68</sup> encourage the rebels with their predictions based on a reading of the planets. There is a real revival of a formerly subjected culture under way. The ancient practices, once depreciated, come alive again and are restored to their rightful place in civil society. This is a reaction to the violence perpetrated by the British, who had imposed their own intellectual and cultural systems, mocking the Indians' traditions and beliefs, in order to justify Western superiority and thus British domination.

In the Kaisarbagh palaces too, the atmosphere has changed. Now it is solely occupied by Wajid Ali Shah's wives and their relatives who, reassured by the prevailing optimism, have returned to their interminable games of dice and chess, their various beauty treatments and, above all, to their favourite occupation—gossiping. Abandoning the zenana with its intrigues and petty jealousies, Hazrat Mahal has settled into Chaulakhi Palace, traditionally the Queen Mother's residence. This sumptuous palace

is particularly famous for its incredibly fragrant walls. It is said that the rajah who had it built had taken pity on a perfume seller in difficulty. He had bought up his whole stock, and had ordered it to be mixed in with the mortar prepared for the construction.

It is in the famous Hall of Mirrors that Hazrat Mahal receives Rajah Jai Lal every afternoon, when he comes to make his report on the military situation—the very same drawing room where, barely a year ago, the dramatic interview between the Queen Mother, Malika Kishwar, and Sir James Outram, the resident, took place . . .

*Everything has changed so fast . . . Have I also changed so much? Everyone looks at me differently, with far more deference, of course, but with fear too . . . even Mammoo no longer expresses himself as freely as he used to. Only Jai Lal remains frank and outspoken in his criticism. It angers me, yet at the same time, I am grateful to him for it. Power is so isolating. At least he does not hide the harsh realities from me . . .*

However, besides discussing practical problems, what the young woman really appreciates in the rajah is that he treats her like a human being and not as an all-powerful sovereign. Over the course of their daily meetings, a mutual trust has grown between them. With him she feels free to express her doubts, her concerns, she dares question him on matters she is ignorant of or does not understand, as she knows he will never use it against her. Unlike the majority of the courtiers—who reluctantly tolerate this woman “come from nowhere,” and who watch out for any signs of blunders she might make—Jai Lal has understood that, just like him, the regent is determined to fight for independence and that neither promises nor threats will cause her to waver. Her rejection of the occupiers is not based on a desire to replace them in order to benefit from the advantages of power, it is a rage against an injustice that crushes and humiliates. Where do her courage and conviction come from? Rare qualities indeed in Lucknow’s high society, which would tend to mock such traits. Would it be precisely because she has “come from nowhere” and quite unlike a number of opportunists, she has not forgotten the suffering of those who feel scorned? She has risen to this position out of nothing, just like him, a man whose father, a small landowner, was ennobled for having saved the king’s life during a hunt.

Together, they discuss everything, except one subject, which is taboo: Mammoo Khan.

To everyone's surprise, Hazrat Mahal had insisted on appointing the eunuch to the position of chief of the *Diwan Khana*, the royal household, which gave him the rank of a minister of the Court. Strictly speaking, this allows him no authority over the other ministers, but his constant proximity to the regent gives him control over everybody and everything, far exceeding his title and his abilities. He takes full advantage of this situation, insolently enjoying his new status. After having been despised for so long, he takes his revenge. Nothing makes him feel as good as crushing someone else and, on the rare occasion when he helps somebody, he exacts a very high price. He has an unquenchable thirst for power and wealth, and vengefully pursues anyone he suspects of mocking his condition as a eunuch, or his short stature. The scandal surrounding this former servant who now takes the liberty of pestering the proud taluqdars is such that the regent's enemies readily insinuate she clearly favours him because the supposed eunuch is, in reality, her lover and maybe even Birjis Qadar's father.

When Jai Lal had tried to warn the regent against promoting Mammoo to such a high function, when he mentioned the feudal lords' fury at being bullied and insulted by a former slave, she curtly put him in his place.

"Stop criticising him. He has served me faithfully for the last ten years. No one has ever been as devoted to me."

"Do not delude yourself, Huzoor, this type of man is only devoted to himself. The day his interests and yours differ, he will not hesitate to betray you."

Hazrat Mahal had turned pale.

"If you want us to stay on good terms, please do not bring this subject up again."

Enraged, Jai Lal is tempted to open her eyes, tell her what people are saying about them, but it is impossible. He would never permit himself to insult her in this manner. He clenches his fists and says:

"I thought you appreciated me for my honesty. If you want a courtier who echoes everything you say and agrees with your every whim, you will have to look elsewhere."

And, bowing deeply, he had left.

The rajah did not return for a few days, he had sent his aide-de-camp instead to keep the regent up-to-date with current affairs. Very quickly, however, Hazrat Mahal is forced to acknowledge that she misses their conversations and, above all, she needs his advice. She has important decisions to take and has doubts about her ministers' clear-sightedness. Swallowing her pride, she decides to request the rajah's return.

They must, in fact, prepare the attack on the Residency.

Until now, the sepoys and the taluqdars' troops have limited themselves to a constant harassment of the fort. Day and night, they unleash musket and cannon fire from the terraces of the surrounding houses. It is a war of nerves that leaves the besieged prisoners not a moment's respite, and in the long run, exhausts them both morally and physically. The rebels are also beginning to tire of these skirmishes that lead nowhere. They want to be done with these Angrez who taunt them, and they insist it is time to launch the great attack.

\* \* \*

In the chief commissioner's office—the only room still free of refugees' mattresses and trunks—five men are seated around Colonel Inglis, Lawrence's successor for military matters.

"It must be said, these Indians are good strategists," comments an officer. "They have placed their small cannons all around, but so close to our positions that our shells whiz overhead without managing to reach them. As for our firing at their artillerists, it is almost impossible: they are well hidden behind palisades, which they move with diabolical speed, or they conceal themselves in the deep trenches, dug just behind their cannons!"

"Good strategists, naturally! We are the very ones who trained them!"

"You have to admit, old chap, that we do not teach these tactics and tricks in our military academies."

"Come now, gentlemen! I have not gathered you here to argue over our adversary's qualities or failings," intervenes the colonel, a small, stocky man with grey hair.

And, puffing nervously on his pipe:

“Our spies have informed me a massive attack is being prepared and will be executed within the next few days. How many available men do we have?”

“About twelve hundred, sir, of which five hundred are natives.”

“And how many wounded in the hospital?”

“About sixty, but they are not safe there. A shell fell on it yesterday, it was lucky no one was hurt.”

The colonel frowns.

“Take our hostages—the three princes and that young Rajah of Tulsipur—to the hospital and keep them there. Have the word put about. The mutineers have their spies here too. You will see that by tomorrow, they will stop bombing that area.”

“Have we any news of the reinforcements sent by Calcutta?” enquires an officer, looking worried.

“They are expected any day now,” the colonel reassures him.

He considers it futile to demoralise his men by revealing that reinforcements are not likely to reach them any time soon. The day before, a messenger had arrived, informing him of General Havelock’s troop deployment: after bringing the city of Allahabad down on July 14th and then setting out on the road to Lucknow, the general had been obliged to re-route to Kanpur, in order to lend Major Renaud a hand in dealing with an onslaught from Tantia Tope’s men. It is also useless to point out that progress across the country is very slow, as most of the peasants have joined the rebellion. Villages have been transformed into fortified towns and the roads are strewn with traps. How much longer can they hold out? They have lost dozens of men since the beginning of the siege; as for the wounded, despite the surgeon’s talent and the volunteer nurses’ dedication, most of them end up dying of septicaemia or gangrene. But more importantly, it is the anxiety that dangerously saps morale. Supplies will not allow them to resist indefinitely, rations have already been reduced to lentil soup and three chapatis a day, and the children are constantly crying for more. Nonetheless, there is no question of surrender. The tragic fate of the Kanpur garrison confirms that the enemy will show no mercy.

Thankfully, they have enough ammunition, more in any event than the Indians, who bombard them incessantly, while the British have been

issued orders to make every shot count. But will they have the strength to withstand the massive attack that is coming? Even if they have the advantage of higher ground, will they be able to fight off the assault from an enemy force that is ten, maybe twenty times larger?

Colonel Inglis has spent a sleepless night going over all the options. He knows that if help does not arrive soon, they are lost . . . unless, in the enemy camp, the alliance between the taluqdars, the sepoys and the population breaks down. Unfortunately, for the time being, all his attempts at stirring up discord have been in vain. The police superintendent in the town of Bareilly even returned the fifty thousand rupees sent to him to pay agitators capable of creating discord between Hindus and Muslims. Despite the large sums offered, he had not been able to buy anyone's collaboration.

One of his companions tells a joke, suddenly drawing the colonel out of his grim reflections:

"Have you heard the latest rumour? The court superintendent, the eunuch Mammoo, is supposed to be the regent's lover and may even have fathered the young king!"

"A eunuch, how would it be possible?"

"Apparently, in some cases, the castration is not completed, or the person doing it takes pity on them. It has already happened that alleged eunuchs procreate. In any event, that would explain the begum's special attachment to her servant and his incredible rise to the position of head of the royal household."

"But then Birjis Qadar would only be a bastard without special rights or entitlements to the throne," exclaims the colonel. "Do you realise what this means, gentlemen?"

And, seeing his officers' bewilderment:

"It is a unique opportunity to throw the enemy camp into confusion. The cavalry already greatly resented the enthronement of such a young child. If the rumour that he is not Wajid Ali Shah's son is given credence, both he and his mother will lose all legitimacy. The taluqdars, the rajahs and the sepoys will be so busy tearing each other apart over a new candidate that, in the meantime, they will not bother mounting operations against us."

"But if it were slander?"

“What does it matter! We must spread the rumour, discredit the regent, create doubt about this Birjis: is he the king’s son or the son of a slave! False rumours have always been one of the most powerful weapons in warfare, often more efficient than cannons. Send our spies into town immediately, and have them cast doubts in everyone’s minds.”

**A**t 9 A.M. on July 20th, a huge explosion startles Major Banks as he is sipping his morning tea. A cloud of dust rises near the batteries positioned to the west of the Residency: a mine has just exploded.

The clarions immediately sound the alarm. Led by their officers, the artillerymen race to their positions, and the infantry moves in behind the trenches. From the direction of the town, a human tide advances towards them, the flags of Awadh flying at the centre, alongside the rajahs' pennants. Their cries of "Har Har Mahadev!" celebrating Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, and "Allah hu Akbar!" rend the air as thousands of sepoys prepare to attack.

The mine, placed under cover of darkness, has just exploded near to the Redan Battery, the most important British cannon unit. It should have opened a breach in the rampart walls, large enough for the attackers to scramble through and take over the Residency. Just barely after impact, and through the thick smoke, the Indian infantry makes headway swiftly while the artillery discharges incendiary shells to set the Residency buildings on fire. However, as the soldiers approach, they are met with intense bombardment and rifle fire. They had badly miscalculated the actual location of the mine and so the undamaged British batteries can spew their deadly fire.

Spurred on by their leaders' calls of "*Chalo Bahadur!*"<sup>69</sup> the waves of insurgents continue to move forward under the hail of bullets. Although they fall by the hundreds, some manage to reach the palisades. Pressing against them, safe from the bullets and cannon fire, they catch their breath and then relaunch an attack. Appearing from all directions, they try to break through the ramparts, fighting a merciless hand-to-hand combat with swords and bayonets; they slip in the pools of blood on the ground covered with corpses.

Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah leads the attack on the Bailey Gate<sup>70</sup> side. He has found an ingenious defence tactic to protect his men from enemy fire: the soldiers advance, concealed behind bales of cotton, and before the British realise the ploy, the Indians reach the foot of the ramparts. Once there, spurred on by the maulvi brandishing the green flag of Islam, his troops separate into two groups that push forward, heedless of the gunfire, until they capture an enemy battery. In a panic, the British artillerists call for reinforcements, and a furious battle ensues. The Indians seem to have gained the upper hand, when suddenly, under the astonished gaze of the British, instead of pursuing their advantage, they begin to retreat.

It is later discovered that, at this crucial moment, the Indians found out their ammunition supply was exhausted. The maulvi will never forgive the high command for this negligence, which he suspects was deliberate. From that moment on, he decides to fight the occupying forces alone.

The battle lasts seven hours. Both sides clash with equal ferocity. Finally, at about 4 P.M., the sepoys are given orders to retreat. They leave hundreds of dead and wounded behind on the battlefield; they will return to fetch them after dark with the tacit agreement of the British, who fear the bodies rotting in the intense summer heat will provoke an outbreak of disease.

As for the British, they have lost about twenty men—excluding the native soldiers, whose numbers are not counted. To their great distress, Major Banks, their chief commissioner, was struck down by a cannonball. The whole command is now in Colonel Inglis's hands.

Late in the evening, summoned by the Regent Hazrat Mahal, Rajah Jai Lal arrives at Chaulakhi Palace, still covered in dust. He finds her in a state of great agitation. He has barely completed his greeting, when she demands:

“What happened, Rajah Sahib? How can a few hundred British have held off an army of eight thousand Indians? This attack had been prepared for weeks, we sent in our best troops! Why this shameful defeat?”

“It is not for lack of courage, Huzoor, our men fought like lions. They resisted for hours against a firepower far superior to our own. Not one tried to flee. The number of dead and wounded bears witness to their courage and devotion. They deserve to be congratulated, not criticised.”

“But then why did we lose?” insists Hazrat Mahal, caught off guard and somewhat disconcerted.

“Because of our inferior weaponry. Both our rifles and cannons have too short a range. We also have a problem with the commanders: our officers are undisciplined and despite instructions, they launch frontal attacks, deeming courage more important than tactics. And finally, we do not have any competent strategists, as the Company has never allowed an Indian to rise beyond the rank of non-commissioned officer, nor command a unit any bigger than a company. None of our *subedars*<sup>21</sup> have been trained in military operations, they have no idea of logistics. In my case, everything I learnt was gleaned from books describing the great battles of the century.”

“Still, it was you who devised a strategy for this attack?” persists the young woman.

“Yes, and I thought I had succeeded in convincing the officers to follow it. As soon as the mine exploded, an advance party was to check that the breach was wide enough for us to get through it. The fire from the artillery barrage was to create a diversion while the infantry took the opportunity to advance along the flanks. Instead, as soon as the mine blew up, the soldiers rushed in led by their officers. Once the smokescreen dispersed, they found themselves face to face with the enemy, who were still well protected and shooting at them from behind their undamaged fortifications. It turned into a massacre. An unnecessary massacre due to lack of discipline and a burst of enthusiasm. The truth is, our sepoys are too courageous—for them, life does not count for much.”

“Unlike the Europeans, who value life so highly that they see death, the inevitable ending, as a real tragedy!” comments Hazrat Mahal disdainfully. “I am, of course, referring to the death of British men. They do not even bother to count their dead Indians.”

The rajah asks permission to retire. It had been a long day and he still wants to visit the barracks to reassure his soldiers.

Alone, Hazrat Mahal paces up and down her apartments. Despite the late hour, she knows sleep will not come easily. Her thoughts return to all these young soldiers who set off full of fervour this morning . . . and are dead this evening . . . for nothing?

*No, Jai Lal is wrong. These men are not dying for nothing. They are dying for their freedom, their dignity. By taking part in the battle, they are no longer poor wretches crushed by their daily cares. Their miserable existence finally has meaning. It matters little to them if they lose their lives, they will be heroes for eternity. This indifference to death is our army's strength but also its weakness, as our soldiers take unnecessary risks. While the British fight to win, our men fight to surpass themselves and attain glory.*

The following morning, Hazrat Mahal sends someone to fetch the rajah. She has spent the night mulling over the reasons for the defeat and wondering how they can improve the situation. She wants to discuss the matter with him.

The messenger returns alone: the rajah is not at home.

Mammoo has come as usual, bringing the latest news. Seeing the begum's astonishment, he takes great delight in informing her:

"He spent the night at the Chowk with the courtesans."

And in response to Hazrat Mahal's amazed expression, he adds maliciously:

"Despite the gravity of the situation, he does not seem to be able to stay away from them."

This is the perfect opportunity for him to take his revenge. The eunuch finds it difficult to accept the place the rajah has come to occupy in the begum's life. After all, it was he, Mammoo, who had been her only confidant for ten years. He was the one who had supported and encouraged her in her worst moments. With rage in his heart, he watched this newcomer gradually win the regent's trust. Now she consults the rajah on everything, just as she used to consult him, Mammoo, during the blessed time when she was locked up in the zenana, and he was her only link with the outside world.

The worst is when she welcomes the rajah with her happy smile—a smile she had never had for him. Watching them, he feels a rush of jealous rage. He had believed her different from the other feather-brained

women, who judge a man by his bearing. Could she possibly be attracted to this lout because he is tall and well built? Does she find him intelligent, when he is, in fact, only a smooth talker?

*I will not let it happen. I will not let her forget who she is: the wife and the mother of a king, the powerful regent whom everyone must respect . . .*

No one knows the young woman better than he does. How could anyone advise and protect her better than he can? He vows he will do his utmost to watch over her, as it is his duty, and shrugging his shoulders, he stifles a small warning voice whispering to him that he is actually mainly defending his own interests.

*How can he? And I believed . . .*

Alone again, Hazrat Mahal bites her lip in fury, her eyes fill with tears of disappointment. How can she have been so silly? This man, whom she admires to such an extent that she asks his opinion on all the affairs of the kingdom; this man, whose integrity she respected so highly, is only a vulgar hedonist! Barely out of her presence, he goes to cavort with the courtesans! Ah, he has made a real fool of her! How he must have laughed at her innocence . . .

She will tell him . . .

She stops short.

What can she say to him? She has no claim on him, no right whatsoever to comment on his private life . . . their relationship goes no further than work . . .

*Yet . . . Did I imagine the gleam in his eyes when I appear? Did I dream the gentleness I hear in his voice when he feels I am worried? Could it all be an act put on by a charmer, or worse, an opportunist?*

At 5 P.M., punctual as always, the rajah arrives for his daily interview with the regent. Hazrat Mahal had long hesitated to receive him. If she listened to herself, she would immediately break off all relations with him. However, that would lead everybody, especially the rajah himself, to wonder why. The real reason must remain a secret. Today she needs his advice more than ever: she has to find the means to help the families of the soldiers who died on the battlefield. Unless they are convinced that

their children will not be left to die of hunger, a large number of the sepoys may well return to their villages, just when they are needed the most. The rumor that British regiments have moved out of Allahabad and are marching on Lucknow has been confirmed.

The meeting is to be brief. With unusual formality, Hazrat Mahal enquires about the possibilities of raising funds, and the rajah suggests reinstating the taxes levied on the taluqdars' domains, interrupted due to the war. They also decide to publish an edict allowing the sepoys to pillage traitors but prohibiting them—under threat of the severest punishment—from attacking property belonging to ordinary citizens, whom they are supposed to be protecting.

Never has Hazrat Mahal been so distant with the rajah, never has she indicated so clearly that she is the sovereign. Hurt by her demeanour, which he attributes to the previous day's defeat—a reaction he finds unfair—Jai Lal takes refuge in a purely professional attitude and they separate coldly, annoyed with one another.

They are not given the time to dwell on their irritation though. Urgent business demands their attention.

After a tough battle, General Havelock had routed Nana Sahib's army. Preceded by an advance party led by Major Renaud, who has sworn to "exterminate all these niggers,"\* the general's troops had proceeded to Kanpur, burning villages and fields along the way. In the town deserted by Nana's forces, they had killed part of the population but had not lingered there. Leaving behind the dreaded Colonel Neill, a religious fanatic who believes himself destined for the most glorious future, they had immediately set off for Lucknow, hurrying to the aid of their compatriots besieged in the Residency.

Every day messengers reach Lucknow bringing the latest news. Soon, hundreds of escapees, more dead than alive, pour into the capital. They have horrific tales to tell: Colonel Neill and his men are not content with massacring the population of Kanpur and the surrounding villages, sparing neither women nor children; besides torturing their victims, they pollute them in order to ensure they find no peace even after death.

"I saw them stitch Muslims into pigskins and force them to eat the fat, despite all their screams and cries for mercy," relates an old peasant. "As for the Hindus, they stitched them up too, but in cow skins, forcing pieces

of the sacred animal down their throats. As long as I live, I will never forget the heartrending cries uttered by those men, usually so stoical in the face of suffering and death. Thus polluted, they knew themselves eternally damned. The British laughed and insulted them, then, tiring of their cries, they closed the bags and let them suffocate to death. Finally, they had them undergo rituals contrary to the principles of their religion—incinerating the Muslims and burying the Hindus.”

“The monsters!” Hazrat Mahal shivers in horror. “How can they be so cruel? Is it not sufficient to kill the enemy? Must they punish them beyond death, closing the door to eternal life, the only one that really matters to them?”

“Maybe it is because of the women and children imprisoned in Bibighar,” hazards a sepoy recently arrived from Kanpur.

His eyes glued to the ground, he continues in a barely audible voice:

“I was lucky enough to hide myself, but my comrades were forced to follow orders. General Tantia Tope threatened to hang them high if they refused.”

“If they refused what?” enquires Hazrat Mahal, worried.

“If they refused to kill the prisoners . . . ”

“Kill defenceless women and children!”

“Alas . . . Trembling and with tears streaming down their faces, the sepoys were forced to shoot through the doors and windows, until finally, to spare the victims, they aimed at the ceiling instead. Inside, the prisoners were screaming. After the first volley of fire, the soldiers declared they would rather die than continue. General Tantia Tope had them clapped in irons. I don’t know what happened to them. The virago they call ‘the begum’ went mad with rage. She sent for her lover, one of the Nana’s bodyguards, who arrived accompanied by four men: butchers, armed with swords. As soon as they entered the house, we heard heartbreaking cries and pleas. I fled. I could not bear it any more. Apparently, for half an hour these murderers methodically set about their terrible task. Later, one of them boasted the women clung to his feet, begging him to spare their children, but he showed them no mercy. There were about two hundred victims. Some were left in agony. Throughout the night we could hear their moans.

“The following morning, Tantia Tope sent sepoys to get rid of the bodies. They dumped them in the dry well in the courtyard.

“Two days later, on their arrival, General Havelock and his troops discovered the carnage. In a furious rage, they set off to take revenge on the population. But those responsible were already long gone. It was the innocent who were made to pay, as always, particularly after Colonel Neill took command. They arrested all the men, interrogated them and sentenced the majority to hanging. But before that, under threat of the whip, they were forced to lick the blood spilled on the floor of Bibighar. They were thus condemned to eternal damnation, just like those who had been stitched into pig or cow skins.”

The account is heard in deathly silence. Everyone is aghast; nobody has the heart to make the slightest comment. Long minutes pass before Hazrat Mahal tonelessly declares:

“The British will never forgive this crime. Let us pray that the blood shed by Nana Sahib does not stain us and our children!”

**F**orward, men! We must save our compatriots!”

General Havelock and his small troop forge ahead across the vast plain, striving towards two goals: to rescue the Lucknow Residency before it falls into the hands of the rebels and save the besieged prisoners from being massacred, as they were in Kanpur. Havelock is confident; he is absolutely convinced that God is on his side.

A little white-haired man, the general is the son of a ruined businessman. He joined the Company in India at a very young age and his courage won him dozens of medals, which he always wears proudly, rather like armour across his chest. A staunch Christian, he goes into battle with Christ’s name on his lips. During their free time, he teaches his men hymns from the Bible, and often deplors the fact that the government has not sent out enough missionaries to convert the sepoys to the “true religion.”

The general and his small army have managed to cross the Ganges, but now, about fifty miles from the capital of Awadh, they encounter fierce resistance. Alongside the sepoys, the peasants also retaliate, transforming every hamlet into a fortress. Sheltered by adobe walls or dense foliage, the Indian contingent keeps the British soldiers pinned down, while the women and children ensure a continuous supply of ammunition. There are thousands fighting with courage and tenacity, even in the most desperate of situations—a testament to their unwavering determination.

“Out with the Angrez!” has become their rallying cry.

Nonetheless, Havelock and his troops continue to advance, burning villages and exterminating the inhabitants on the way, “with the help of God, who supports this just and humanitarian cause”<sup>\*</sup>—without seeing the slightest contradiction in their action. If Neill’s name has become synonymous with terror, the pious Havelock is no less feared. When one of his officers asks him for instructions, he replies, “My dear man, hang as

many as you want.”\* And he recommends prisoners be executed by attaching them to the mouths of cannons.

Describing two young sepoy who were put to death in this manner, one of his officers, Major North, laments:

“They were two boys in the prime of youth—tall, muscular, delicate; they were like antique bronze statues. A second later all that was left of them was shreds of flesh scattered to the winds.”\*

However, as the days pass, Sir Henry Havelock comes to realise he is not facing a mere “mutiny,” as his colleagues disdainfully assure him, but a major rebellion involving the whole population. The British have superior weaponry, but the Indians have numbers in their favour: the fatalities on both sides are mounting rapidly.

On August 5th, the British forces are just twenty miles outside Lucknow. En route, the village of Bashiratganj resists. Given the heavy firepower from the Howitzers and the artillery troops, the Indian infantry at the centre begins to retreat, while the artillery on both flanks stands firm. But soon, in a rapid manoeuvre the Indian troops attack from the rear, and before the British grasp what is happening, they find themselves surrounded. With great difficulty, they eventually manage to free themselves, leaving behind about a hundred dead.

Havelock finally recognises that if he continues in this manner, he and his thousand soldiers will all be killed, even before they reach the capital. Although he has telegraphed Calcutta, asking them to send reinforcements urgently, the Governor General Lord Canning has no intention of depleting his defences and he sends help only sparingly. In addition, the military convoy advances very slowly. Havelock knows that all his telegrams will change nothing: given the dangers and the unbearable heat, it will easily take four to five weeks before reinforcements arrive.

In a message to the commander-in-chief, he writes:

“My officers, in whom I have total confidence, are all of the opinion that with the forces at our disposal, our advance on Lucknow is destined to fail. To confront the enemy in our current condition would be to court the total annihilation of our troops.”\*

With a heavy heart, he decides to delay the operation to save his compatriots. He leads his remaining men back over the Ganges to regain Kanpur, where they will await the convoy.

When news of the British retreat reaches the citizens of Lucknow, the town resounds with cries of joy. Men dance to the beat of tablas in the streets decorated with flags, celebrating what they consider a victory. There is not a single Englishman left in the entire state of Awadh, apart from those besieged inside the Residency. Soon, they hope, not one will be left in the whole of India!

Not a single British person in India, is it possible . . . ?

Poring over the Ordnance Survey maps, Hazrat Mahal listens attentively to Rajah Jai Lal's explanations. It is August 1857. Two thirds of the Bengal army has joined the rebellion—that is to say, eighty thousand sepoy and tens of thousands of volunteers—including the troops belonging to a number of taluqdars. Meanwhile, after their humiliating defeat at Chinhat, the British regiments are besieged in Lucknow and Agra, and stalled outside Delhi.

“The insurrection has also spread to several central states,” explains Jai Lal, “not that the ever-prudent princes have adopted a clear position. But a number of sepoy regiments have revolted, with the support of the local populations: Gwalior, Indore, Banda, Nowgong, Mhow, Sagar, Sehore and, of course, Jhansi. In the state of Bhopal, the begum has to contend with the nationalists, who have appropriated vast territories and contest her alliance with the British. It is the same in Bundelkhand and Rajputana. In Maharashtra, the town of Poona, to the south of Bombay, has rebelled, and we can hope to see a general uprising in the Mahratta principalities in the name of Nana Sahib, the peishwa's heir.”

“And what are the British doing?”

“They have finally got over their surprise! There were troops on their way to China, but London had them redirected to India. These troops are moving towards the centre of the country with the Bombay and Madras armies, as well as the Sikhs who have remained loyal to the Company. Our forces must act quickly: if the popular revolt spreads successfully towards the west and the south, influential sovereigns like the *Nizam*<sup>22</sup> of Hyderabad and the Maharajahs of Gwalior and Indore will realise it is in

their interest to support it. The other princes will soon follow suit and that will be the end of British rule!”

Hazrat Mahal does not dare to believe it . . . Can popular courage and determination really transform the whole country? Will the great princes risk a confrontation with the British? She recalls that she herself had, for a long time, only fought to convince the British powers to revoke their decision and reinstate her husband to the throne of Awadh. Like her entourage, her horizons were limited to demanding justice from an immutable master. However, day after day, massacre after massacre, she has realised it is no longer a question of asking or conceding. The conflict has escalated to such an extent, it has now reached a point of no return.

Nevertheless, many sovereigns still hesitate, torn between their suspicion of the British, capable of violating their own treaties, and their fear of the excesses which a potentially uncontrollable population may perpetrate once it shakes off its age-old lethargy.

“I will write to the Begum of Bhopal,” declares Hazrat Mahal, “to try to convince her that it is in her best interest to join the liberation movement.”

“The king should also send a letter to the Nizam of Hyderabad. Some of his troops are growing restless. They refuse to help the great Mughal’s enemies. We will certainly win if the states of Bhopal and Hyderabad join our battle, along with the Mahrattas.”

In his role as army chief reporting to his regent, the rajah provides her with information and an analysis of the military situation. However, he now maintains a certain reserve, neither proffering nor seeking a personal reaction. He even avoids meeting the young woman’s eyes. What she would not give to restore their former harmonious relationship, their passionate discussions on evolving operations, on questions of state administration, and continue to benefit from his invaluable advice. But she has to admit, what she misses the most is the warmth in his voice, the admiration and tender concern he had showered her with; it had been like a protective velvet cloak, shielding her from the jealousy and plotting . . .

*What am I imagining? What admiration? What solicitude? Exactly the same he must show the Chowk courtesans, whom, it seems, he continues to visit regularly . . . Surely I do not miss the affection of a man who made fun of me, who led me to believe . . .*

She had allowed herself to be deluded by him because she had felt alone, confused and vulnerable, harassed by so much hostility in the Court. She knows, however, that power always isolates and that the main priority is to command respect.

Hazrat Mahal straightens up, and with a majestic nod, she dismisses the rajah.

\* \* \*

“Long live Nana Sahib! Glory to the Peishwa!”

In these early days of August, the population of Lucknow enthusiastically welcomes the exiled prince of Bithur, the new Mahratta leader. After an unsuccessful battle, Nana Sahib has been forced to leave Kanpur to the British, and has come to fight alongside the begum, bringing about two thousand soldiers with him.

Hazrat Mahal has sent Rajah Jai Lal to welcome him with elephants, cavalymen, lancers and all the honours due to his rank. However, despite her advisor's insistence, she obstinately declines to receive him herself. It requires all the Rajah of Mahmudabad's powers of persuasion to convince her that no matter what she holds against the Nana, the unity of the leaders of the insurrection takes precedence over any other consideration.

This afternoon, the Chaulakhi Palace throne room buzzes with courtiers, who have hurried over to catch a glimpse of the Nana. But in fact the main reason for their presence is to witness the anticipated confrontation.

Seated next to her son, the regent gazes out into the distance. She ostensibly ignores their illustrious guest who, adorned with pearls and diamonds, salutes the young king and has sumptuous Benares silks spread before him. She has agreed to receive him but not to speak to him. She is thoroughly dismayed by this insignificant, vain character, whom she has always despised. Out of the corner of her eye, she observes the corpulent figure waddling about, spouting hot air. Suddenly her vision clouds over and instead of him, she sees faces screaming in terror, severed limbs,

rivers of blood . . . She can no longer contain herself. Abruptly, she interrupts the prince:

“Rajah Sahib, why don’t you please explain what happened at Bibighar.”

Her words resound like a whiplash. All conversation stops dead. Stunned by the violent tone of voice, the assembly waits.

“But, Huzoor, I do not understand . . . ” the Nana stammers, paling under the insult.

“Neither do I understand how you allowed innocent women and children to be massacred—a crime that dishonours our cause!”

Nana Sahib hesitates . . . Should he run the risk of being branded a mere puppet and admit to the fact that his orders were disobeyed? Or should he take responsibility for an act that, deep down, even he condemns? He recalls the violent altercation between himself and his advisor Azimullah, who claimed it was the Bibighar guardian who had taken the decision. He had not believed a word of it. He remains convinced Azimullah had compromised him on purpose to ensure that in the event circumstances were to change, he could never abandon the battle and seek reconciliation with the British.

Just then, Azimullah steps forward, his face tense. Abandoning his customary courtesy, he addresses the begum sharply:

“Our acts were a response to the atrocities perpetrated by the British. The rape and torture of thousands of our women and children, does that mean nothing? And the hundreds of villages burnt, the roads strewn with corpses, the men defiled with the perverse intention of preventing them from attaining any kind of peace, even after death? Aren’t we using two different yardsticks here—some are deserving of pity, others not? Have we assimilated the scornful attitude of the whites to such an extent, so as to consider our dead are worth less than theirs?”

Speechless, the audience looks on with bated breath.

He continues in a vibrant voice:

“When they dare insinuate that an Indian mother suffers less than a European mother at the loss of her child? Are they blind to the sacrifices our women make? These women who deprive themselves of everything to feed their children, sometimes even dying of hunger in the process? The British are not interested in reality, though, unless it confirms their prejudices.”

“The double standards of the British infuriate me as much as they do you, Khan Sahib. However, just not because our enemies behave like barbarians does not mean that we need to follow suit,” replies the Queen Mother, forcing herself to remain calm. “Their hypocrisy and cruelty are the very reasons we are fighting them. Are we going to stoop to their level?”

“We are at war, Huzoor. If we want to win, I do not think we can allow ourselves the luxury of moral considerations. The common people, who are the first to suffer, would not understand.”

“I hold our people in higher esteem, Khan Sahib. I think, on the contrary, they find such barbaric acts repugnant. The proof is that despite all your threats, you could not find a single sepoy willing to kill the defenceless prisoners in Bibighar! I believe that the strength of a nation depends, above all, on its moral strength.”

And, with the magnetic gaze of her green eyes fixed on the assembled courtiers:

“If we, the masters, show ourselves to be unscrupulous, capable of anything to satisfy our interests, why would the people accept the sacrifices we demand of them in the name of the ‘common good’? The population are ignorant of intrigues and power games, therefore we believe them easy to manipulate, but they are in fact far more perceptive than many of our great minds. They only respect their leaders if those leaders behave respectably. If we bypass the laws we have laid down, how do you expect them to trust us? One day they will revolt, and neither our speeches nor our promises will be able to appease their anger.”

The aristocratic audience listens, disconcerted by these strange words. They have always professed that scepticism is the sign of a higher mind, and morality, only good for fools.

Making an effort to stifle her contempt, the Queen Mother turns to face Nana Sahib:

“This crime, Rajah Sahib, has increased the risks we run. The British will certainly use it as a pretext to justify all their excesses. But I am also concerned about the men we send into battle: how can we demand they behave like soldiers and not wild animals, if unwarranted cruelty is the example their superiors have set for them?”

“Once taboos have been shattered, one never knows where the violence will end. We ourselves could very well be the next victims.”

**G**entlemen, I have summoned you here today to draw up a plan of action for the next assault on the Residency, but first of all, to go over our past failures and learn from our mistakes. Then we shall decide on the best possible tactics.”

The principal ministers and army leaders are gathered together in the Council Hall. Sharuf-ud-Daulah, the grand vizier; the head of the treasury; the Court minister Mammoo Khan; the Rajah of Mahmudabad, the taluqdars’ emissary; and Rajah Jai Lal Singh, the sepoys’ spokesman, are all present. The only one absent is Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who continues to boycott this government run by a woman.

“The Residency is surrounded by deep trenches eighteen feet wide and defended by Howitzer cannons,” explains Jai Lal. “The main building, from which much of the enemy fire is launched, is about ten metres above the entry to the camp. Our soldiers are being massacred by the hail of shellfire, even before they reach the ramparts. The only Howitzer in our possession, captured at Chinhat, is useless as we lack the necessary ammunition. We need to be able to approach the walls, unseen by the enemy.”

“Impossible, there are about thirty lookouts day and night, alternating every four hours. Not even a mouse can get through.”

“And what about a mole?”

His question is met with disapproving murmurs. This assembly is not inclined to joking. The rajah continues:

“I believe that our only chance is to dig tunnels beneath the Residency, plant mines under the batteries and when they explode, rush in through the breaches. It is a difficult task. The preparation, long and painstaking, will have to be executed in total silence so as not to alert the enemy. The risk of the tunnel collapsing makes it dangerous, and it is a huge gamble because if we miscalculate and our mines do not destroy their artillery,

the British will pick us off one by one as we emerge from the breach. On the other hand, if the mines explode as planned, we can take full advantage of the surprise effect to gain control of the camp.”

“It sounds possible in theory, but it is unrealistic. There are too many uncertainties. It will never work,” declares Mammoo Khan, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, maybe you have another suggestion then!”

The two men stare each other down. The rajah has difficulty hiding his contempt for the courtier, and the eunuch never misses an opportunity to belittle him in the begum’s eyes.

“Personally, I find the idea interesting,” interjects the Rajah of Mahmudabad. “In any event, what other option do we have? Our men are ready to die, but what is the point of sending them in armed with old muskets against cannon fire? Another alternative is to continue waging a war of attrition, shooting at the closest enemy positions and picking off as many as possible. This is demoralising and exhausting for those under siege since they must be on constant vigil, but as long as they have ammunition and a minimum of supplies, they will not surrender.”

“Our in-house spies have informed us they have sufficient provisions to hold out for several weeks longer,” specifies the grand vizier.

“Waiting around for weeks is out of the question!” intervenes Hazrat Mahal. “Calcutta is going to dispatch reinforcements soon, especially after what happened in Kanpur. The time to vanquish them is now! Given that a frontal attack appears doomed to failure, I am of the opinion we must try the tunnel warfare recommended by the rajah. What does the honourable assembly think?”

A short discussion ensues; finally, the proposed plan is accepted, as no one else has a better idea. It is decided to entrust the job to the Pasi volunteers, who belong to a very ancient tribe and are renowned for their expertise in archery, as well as the manufacturing and setting of mines.

During the following days, dozens of half-naked men bustle about, digging galleries twenty feet below the ground. It is an arduous and backbreaking job, with the dust burning their eyes, and the suffocating heat; the flames of the torches, lighting up the darkness, add to their discomfort. Rajah Jai Lal consults the palace architects in order to calculate the precise positioning of the mines beneath the British

cannons, to be able to ensure maximum destruction. These mines are to be stored in underground chambers alongside the galleries. At the time of the attack, all the Pasis have to do is light the fuses: the rooms and the batteries above will explode.

\* \* \*

This morning, Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Ward have come to see Colonel Inglis in a terrible state of agitation. They have not even taken the time to do their hair! Out of breath, they explain they were kept awake all night by the sound of dull thuds and vibrations strong enough to shake their beds. Over the last few days, other inhabitants of the Residency had also notified the head of the garrison of these developments. After consulting his officers, it became obvious that the Indians had changed tactics: they were now going to attempt to enter the camp by exploding mines.

To ward off this danger, orders have been issued to the inhabitants to report any suspicious underground noises and to gather in places they deem the safest. Most importantly—the best defence being offence—these chaps were going to be in for a surprise! By an extraordinary coincidence, or rather—so the besieged prisoners believe—by the grace of God, who helps the true believers—the Residency is defended by the 32nd Regiment of the Royal Army. These soldiers are recruited amongst Cornish miners, for whom subterranean work holds no secrets. In order to catch the assailants unawares when the time comes, Colonel Inglis has ordered them to track the progress made inside the enemy galleries and to dig openings and counter tunnels just above.

While all able men join in to help the soldiers with preparations to confront this new danger, amongst the women and children, anxiety reaches its peak: the “black devils” could pop up at any moment—from under an armchair, a table, a bed . . .!

Thanks to an Anglo-Indian messenger, able to creep through the lines unnoticed, Colonel Inglis manages to send a desperate letter to General Havelock in Kanpur:

“Please hurry, we will not be able to hold out much longer. There are five hundred women and children here as well as a hundred and twenty ill and wounded. We have only three hundred and

fifty European soldiers and three hundred able-bodied sepoy left. We are all extremely tired, as the enemy fire their cannon incessantly, not leaving us a moment's respite. In addition, our provisions are diminishing, we only have two or three weeks of supplies left.”\*

As a man of integrity, the colonel is perfectly aware, however, that for those under siege, the situation is very disparate: while many find it hard to even survive, others lack for nothing. As the Residency is composed of individual bungalows, people form groups based on affinity, with each household living as they choose, or as they can. Some prominent citizens possess their own personal stores of provisions and never go hungry. Money can buy a great many things, in particular the goods the dead have left behind that are auctioned off: foodstuffs, tobacco and clothes have all reached astronomical prices. Those who have the means to pay manage to organise a surprisingly comfortable life for themselves. At the Financial Commissioner Martin Gubbins's house, for example, a glass of sherry and two glasses of champagne are being served every night at dinner, and they make it a point of honour to drink tea with biscuits at 5 P.M., despite the cannon thundering away, whereas the garrison's everyday fare is reduced to a few chapatis with a lentil puree, and some children are dying of malnutrition.

At the height of the drama, when death can strike at any moment, the inequalities and social barriers of this microcosm of Victorian society remain. The ladies keep the ordinary women at a distance, and as soon as it is possible to move around the camp again, despite the heat, the vermin, the foul smells and the swarms of flies, they will call on each other in an attempt to uphold the etiquette which prevailed within the garrison before the rebellion.

Even if he disapproves of these inequalities and prejudices that persist amidst this tragedy, Colonel Inglis knows the sense of hierarchy is too deeply ingrained, and it would be useless to try to intervene. He is not going to provoke a civil war to add to the war!

\* \* \*

The date of Operation Sawan or “Rainy Season,” thus baptised by Begum Hazrat Mahal, has been set for August 18th. It is the second large-scale action since the beginning of the siege, and this time the Indians are sure to win thanks to the mine explosions. The Pasi workers have dug all night long to finish the job. They have even drilled noisily towards the north face of the compound to create a diversion while they set mines in another gallery on the southern side.

At dawn on August 18th, Captain Orr, his second-in-command Lieutenant Meham and two sentries are standing on the roof of Johanna House observing the enemy camp, when a violent explosion pulverises the building. All that will be found of them are scattered limbs. A few minutes later, another mine goes off, opening an enormous chasm in the southern ramparts, then another one, even closer to the houses. The flying debris has barely settled when sepoy jostle through the tunnels to access the breaches opening into the camp. However, the batteries have not been hit and, intact, they now spit heavy fire upon the men who emerge into the Residency compound. Total chaos ensues. Both sides shoot blindly, while inside the tunnels the sepoy regroup to confront the British who surge through the openings.

For hours, they engage in battle with knives drawn in the dark galleries; the heat is unbearable, the dust suffocating, the men trip over the wounded and the dead, but they continue to fight fiercely.

Meanwhile, Jai Lal and Mahmudabad launch an assault on the Residency fortifications, each of them leading several regiments. They intend to take advantage of the confusion to move into the camp. Despite the enemy artillery fire, they continue to advance. The soldiers fall by the dozen, but behind them their comrades rush forward, gritting their teeth, resolved to die rather than retreat.

The battle rages on when suddenly the sky darkens. The blinding midday summer sun disappears. Within moments, the surroundings are plunged into darkness. Before this demonstration of God’s fury, the alarmed sepoy come to a standstill. Then, suddenly and in total confusion, they panic: they fall back, and, despite their officers’ exhortations, they flee in absolute disorder. They run, they do not stop running until they have reached the town and the shelter of the garrison.

There, they begin to pray, begging Vishnu to protect them and Shiva, the destructor, to spare them his wrath.

In Chaulakhi Palace, Hazrat Mahal awaits the results of the assault, which she hopes will be decisive this time. Messengers arrive at regular intervals to bring her the latest news: the mines exploded as planned, the sepoys must have entered the camp, the regiments led by Rajahs Jai Lal and Mahmudabad are fighting like lions, they are breaking down enemy defences . . .

*Jai Lal . . . always at the forefront leading his troops . . . his men adore him, he never asks anything of them he would not do himself, unlike so many officers who remain at the rear, claiming they have to control everything. I hope he is not hurt, I hope he . . .*

She does not dare imagine that he could disappear. His death would be an immeasurable loss . . . for the cause. As darkness suddenly invades the room, she twists and turns in her seat, she feels breathless: is the fear only about losing her best lieutenant? At that very moment, when his life is in danger, she is forced to admit to herself that she is attached to this devil of a man, this cad who visits courtesans as soon as he leaves her house.

*Why do women prefer adventurers who make them suffer, rather than men who are kind and attentive? Are they seduced by the man or by the vast horizons he allows them to glimpse? Is it the man they love or the dream he represents? . . .*

A messenger arrives, interrupting her thoughts.

“Huzoor, the fighting has stopped! We were winning, when the sun abruptly disappeared and the soldiers fled, terrified!”

“Fled?” Hazrat Mahal cannot believe her ears. “And Rajah Jai Lal, did he not stop them?”

“He tried to, but he was unable to stem the panic. Three quarters of the soldiers are Hindu, what can one do against these people’s superstitions?”

“Silence! The next time I hear this kind of disparaging remark, I will have your tongue cut off. Get out and send Mammoo Khan to me at once!”

A few moments later, it is not Mammoo but Rajah Jai Lal who enters. She hardly recognises the proud soldier in this spent man, his uniform lacerated and stained with blood.

“You are hurt!”

She has been unable to contain her cry, but he promptly reassures her:

“I am not hurt, it is the blood of our wounded. There are hundreds of them . . . ”

Mortified at having revealed her concern, Hazrat Mahal pulls herself together and, now in a regent’s haughty tone, she asks him to describe what happened.

While the rajah relates the sequence of events, she feels her anger rise. Brusquely, she interrupts him:

“Yesterday the mines were badly positioned, today it is the sun’s eclipse, what will it be tomorrow?”

“There will be no tomorrow if we are not provided with decent ammunition,” retorts the rajah curtly. “Do you realise that I too am fed up of seeing my men killed, unable to defend themselves?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something is wrong with the ammunition we are producing. Our soldiers were shooting, but their bullets just crumpled on impact without harming the enemy—they barely scratched them. Tomorrow I will check the arsenal.”

“The arsenal set up by Mir Wajid Ali, Mammoo Khan’s friend?”

“Precisely! I am also going to send my spies on a mission, as it seems we are being betrayed. The British knew in advance where and how we were going to attack. They moved their batteries accordingly so that our mines exploded in the wrong places. In addition, I am told some of the traders are providing the besieged Residency with supplies.”

Hazrat Mahal flinches, but she declares in a confident tone:

“Please find these traitors, Rajah Sahib. I give you my word that their punishment will be exemplary.”

The rajah bows and takes his leave without another word.

Sadly, the young woman watches him depart. She would have liked to prolong the conversation, to discuss the future as they used to do. He did not give her the chance; undoubtedly, he must have been hurt by the criticism that was never aimed at him.

Why is she so awkward with him?

**I**n the vast Kaisarbagh square, situated between the royal palaces and the spice market, twelve gallows have been set up. A few metres away, on a platform covered by a crimson canopy, comfortable seats await the dignitaries and the Queen Mother. It is whispered that, braving tradition, she has decided to attend the traitors' execution in person. On each side of the dais, a regiment of sepoy stands to attention.

The long copper horns suddenly ring out; the Court makes its appearance. All the ministers are present, wearing silk *chogas*<sup>73</sup> and embroidered *topis* on their heads. The army chiefs are there too, proudly sporting their medals won on British battlefields, and of course, the regent, draped in dark veils, her face half-covered, impassive.

As soon as they are seated, the mournful drum rolls resound, announcing the arrival of the condemned: twelve men in *dhotis*,<sup>74</sup> stumbling under the *lathi*<sup>75</sup> blows delivered by the guards, who force them to move forward.

Arrested the previous day, tried and sentenced on the spot, they have been condemned for high treason. Some were shopkeepers who had provided the besieged British with provisions; others, working at the new ammunition factory, had filled the bullets with straw, bran and dust, instead of gunpowder and lead. Under interrogation, they had soon admitted everything: their intention was not to help the Angrez, just . . . to make a bit of money.

Now, down on their knees and trembling from head to toe before the sovereign—this young woman with her penetrating gaze, who holds their fate in her hands:

“Have pity, Huzoor!” they plead, sobbing. “We are not traitors, just ordinary men who gave in to temptation. It was not for us but for our children. You are a mother, surely you can understand. We beg you, let us live! We will be your most devoted servants, you can ask anything of us,

but grant us your grace. Do not plunge our families into misery and despair. Leave our innocent children their fathers!”

The sight of these men crying is intolerable, even for a hardened soldier. Worried, Jai Lal looks over at the regent. Her face is livid. She raises her hand—the convicted prisoners are silent, each one holding his breath—then she drops it slowly.

The crowd’s cheers drown the victims’ cries. Justice has been served! If some still had doubts, now every single one of her subjects knows they are governed by a true sovereign.

On the way home, huddled in a corner of her sumptuous palanquin, Hazrat Mahal shivers. What has she done? How could she, cold-bloodedly, have sent these men to their deaths? But she had to dispense justice . . . Justice? She is too lucid to be taken in by pretences—what justice?

*After all, these poor wretches have done nothing worse than others who, today, are the rich and powerful. I did pardon Mir Wajid Ali at Mammoo’s insistence. But even if he was not directly involved in the sabotage, he was incapable of detecting it . . . I could have forgiven the others too . . . No, it was my duty to make an example of them in order to remain firmly in command . . . in reality, it is more a question of politics than justice . . . It is absolutely vital that I defend this population. I am responsible for them, and acts like these place us in danger,* she reassures herself. However, the unease persists. Deep down, a small, insistent voice whispers: what you are really upset about is not these deaths but tarnishing the beautiful image you had of yourself—the powerful and generous sovereign beloved by all.

How illusory it all is! She knows full well that power forces one to be decisive, it does not permit the luxury of procrastination, nor yielding to either emotions or scruples. The regent of Awadh cannot allow herself young Muhammadi’s tender feelings.

By force of reason, Hazrat Mahal finally regains her composure, and by the time she reaches the palace, her self-confidence has returned. To her astonishment, a dozen wives and relatives of Wajid Ali Shah are waiting for her. She is disconcerted by their aggrieved expressions; she was not aware they were so sensitive to the common man’s fate.

As if it had anything to do with that! While she was presiding over the execution, a messenger had arrived, bringing news from Calcutta: His

Majesty is very ill. After being imprisoned in Fort William for the last two months, he has sunk into depression and refuses to eat.

“It is all your fault!” accuses Begum Shahnaz, shooting a look of hatred at the new Queen Mother.

“My fault! And why?”

Then they all start talking at once:

“Of course it is your fault! Out of vanity, you pressed for your son to take over our beloved’s position and now you preside over this government of mutineers! . . . That is why the Angrez imprisoned the king. They were convinced he was behind the rebellion. How could they ever imagine that a mere wife would take such a momentous decision without consulting him! . . . You have not only betrayed his trust, you will end up being responsible for his death!”

“And of what use has it been?” interjects Princess Sanjeeda, one of the king’s sisters. “Your great words about freeing the country, what a laugh! Your thousands of men are incapable of dislodging a few hundred British people! All utter nonsense, just to force us to submit to your whims . . . You do not really care about the country, nor do you care about your unfortunate husband. You are driven by your ambition alone! But it will not bring you luck, Allah will punish you!”

Hazrat Mahal tries to respond, to make these clamorous women listen to reason—in vain. Finally, she gives up and retires to her apartments, followed by a flood of insults and rants.

*I would never have suspected how much they hate me . . .*

The venomous criticism proffered by her former companions has left a bitter taste. All the more so, as she had been unable to defend herself. In any event, it would have been futile. No matter what she might have said, she would have been condemned anyway.

Sitting by the window she looks out, unseeing, towards the splendid flowerbeds in the Chaulakhi gardens, stretching all the way up to Kaisarbagh Park. Her solitude has never weighed so heavily upon her. No one to confide in, to share her doubts with, no one to ask for advice. For a short while, she had believed she could depend upon Jai Lal, but he had proved unworthy of her trust . . . As for Mammoo, she cannot allow him to suspect the slightest vulnerability; he would only try to take advantage of

it. He loves her, of course, as much as he is capable of loving . . . but his frustrations leave no room for generosity. His insatiable need for power drives him to divide mankind into two categories: the weak, to be crushed, and the strong, whom one latches on to in an attempt to manipulate them.

But what is she complaining about? After all, it was her choice to abandon the cosy existence of the zenana for the dangerous adventure of power. So that her son could be king? Not only that . . . She has to admit, she also relishes power—not for its material benefits, but because she can use it to improve others' lives and . . . be loved in return.

This love she had so sorely missed as an orphan, she still thirsts insatiably after it. For this very reason, any kind of rejection hurts. It is the same story every time, and every time she tries to reason with herself: so many people place their trust in her, and expect their new regent to provide them with help and guidance, so why let this malicious gossip upset her?

Shaking her head to dispel these doubts she cannot allow herself to entertain, Hazrat Mahal has her daily mail brought to her, along with a heap of petitions. Despite all her other occupations, she insists on reading these appeals herself; she finds them far more informative than the reports her ministers submit, and feels this is the best way to really know what the people think.

\* \* \*

“Huzoor, a lady is asking to see you. She did not want to give her name but claims to be a very old friend. I told her you were busy, but she replied she would wait the whole day if she has to.”

Seated at her writing desk, Hazrat Mahal sighs in exasperation. What she particularly dislikes in her new position is this unending stream of beggars and flatterers, who all consider they have a right to her help. Is she not all-powerful? Are they not her devoted subjects? She realises it is emotional blackmail but is unable to reject them; she of all people, who knew unhappiness in her childhood and so often dreamt of a helping hand.

While they were still friends, Rajah Jai Lal had chided her for this:

“Remember you are no longer Muhammadi, nor even Hazrat Mahal; you are the regent and must keep your distance. Your role is to ensure the proper functioning of the kingdom and the well-being of all, and not to concern yourself with the personal problems of this or that person. It is a bottomless pit and it will sap all your energy. You will end up being slandered, as you cannot satisfy everyone.”

“What should I reply, Huzoor?” persists the eunuch.

“A madwoman capable of waiting all day, I might as well get it over with quickly! Tell her to come in, but come back for her in ten minutes.”

Going against the customs of the Court and high society that consider it normal to make the lower classes wait indefinitely, Hazrat Mahal has never been able to accept this disregard for others, this manner of monopolising their time—hours, days, for nothing—this tendency to make them waste their lives, just out of indifference.

She knows very well that for those who have nothing, offering their time is proof of their devotion. Thus, in India, the powerful are surrounded by millions of poor, with their insistent and silent presence, their oppressive humility. She cannot get used to it, but realises she is powerless to transform a situation ingrained in the age-old structures of her country’s society.

The woman standing at the entrance, however, shows no signs of humility. She stares at the regent, a broad smile on her face, as if expecting a sign of recognition. In fact, Hazrat Mahal is sure she knows her—those brown gold-speckled eyes, the well-rounded forehead . . . And suddenly she exclaims:

“Mumtaz?”

They fall into each other’s arms, kissing and exclaiming with joy. They cannot believe it; it has been so long! They hug each other tenderly, move slightly apart, looking at each other.

“You are still so beautiful!”

“And you even more beautiful than before!”

Holding each other around the waist, they laugh in pleasure, and embrace again, happy, so happy to be united after all this time! How had they done without each other all these years?

Examining her friend more closely, Hazrat Mahal notices the fine lines at the corners of her lips and around her eyes, little wrinkles of

unhappiness. She recalls what the matrons had told her—the marriage, the sterility, the repudiation . . .

Even though Mumtaz no longer glows with the innocent optimism of her adolescence, in no way does she seem like a woman dejected by life. A sparkle twinkles in her eyes.

“Why did you never come to see me?” asks Hazrat Mahal.

“You know, Muhammadi,” she bites her lip. “Forgive me, but you will always be Muhammadi to me, the brave friend who intervened when others made fun of my naivety. I did not come because I feared I would be a burden on you. And then I said to myself, if you had really wanted to see me, it would have been easy for you to send someone to fetch me.”

Hazrat Mahal feels tears welling up in her eyes.

“Can you forgive me? I have been so selfish, swept away by the whirlwind of my love for the king, the pride of giving him a son, then drowning in the conflicts and intrigues of the zenana, where one has to be on one’s guard at all times if one’s do not want to be crushed. When I finally searched for you about a year ago, nobody knew where you were. I was terribly worried. I imagined the worst . . . Tell me, what happened to you? After you were repudiated, who looked after you? Why did you not contact me?”

“I did not contact any of my former acquaintances. I felt too ashamed. And you, well, there are so many people demanding your attention . . .”

“Mumtaz! It is not at all the same thing! You were my best friend!”

“I was afraid you had changed, and feared being rejected. That would have been the last straw. I preferred not to try, so I could keep the wonderful memories of our adolescence intact.”

“But then what convinced you to come today?”

Mumtaz straightened herself up, a mischievous gleam in her eyes:

“Today I do not need to ask you for anything. On the contrary, I have something for you.”

Then, in response to her friend’s surprise:

“Let me tell you what happened to me. My marriage soon turned into a nightmare. My mother-in-law humiliated me constantly, particularly after she realised I could not bear her any grandchildren. She began to beat me . . . four years of insults, abuse and ill-treatment. My husband did

not dare say anything, he had feelings of affection for me, but he was weak. And on his mother's insistence, he eventually divorced me.

“Repudiation is so dreaded by women that they are willing to endure anything to avoid it. For me—quite the reverse—it was an extraordinary relief. Finally, I was free! But penniless . . . So I took on protectors who were kind and treated me with far more consideration than my husband and his family ever had. I discovered that a married woman's ‘respectable’ status is far less enviable than a courtesan's. After all, what respect are we talking about? A married man does not respect what he considers his property, he has nothing left to conquer, he uses you any way he likes. You are even less than a prostitute, who at least has the freedom to refuse to share her bed. A married woman who does not possess a personal fortune is totally dependent on her husband's good will and moods, especially if she has children.

“As a courtesan, my life began again. My first protector was an older man. He treated me a bit like a daughter. He died after two years. I wept for him. The second had a heart attack when the Angrez confiscated the taluqdars' lands, after the king, your husband, was deposed. He was left paralysed. I wanted to visit him to bring him some comfort, but believing I was after his money, his family refused to receive me.

“Everything has changed since the kingdom was annexed. As you must have noticed, half the Chowk is closed. The old days, the brilliant nights when we were admired and feted, are over. The new rich have replaced the ruined aristocrats, and just because they pay us, they think they are entitled to everything. The few Angrez who send for us from the Kanpur garrison are no better. Their puritanical religion has riddled them with a sense of guilt. Like children on the verge of a forbidden act, they suffocate with desire. But as soon as they are satisfied, they leave without a word, as quickly as possible, without a glance, as if they wanted to forget what they consider shameful filth, rather than a celebratory meeting of bodies. All the courtesans hate them; in fact, most of them refused such a degrading relationship until we were made to understand how useful it was.”

“Useful?”

“We are the only ones who can travel freely, even now. We are invited to sing and dance at weddings, circumcisions. Nobody thinks to question our comings and goings, so we also have access to the Angrez. We allay

their suspicions by charming them and making their heads spin with our useless chatter, then we try to make them talk, to get information out of them—details that often seem insignificant to us, but, when pieced together, can provide the military command with precious information. At the moment I am seeing an officer who disagrees with his commander, and when he has had enough, he talks to me without suspecting for an instant that his sweet bird-brained courtesan could be a spy. I must say, I have come to enjoy this double game and I am quite good at it. The chief has congratulated me several times.”

“So who is this chief then?” enquires Hazrat Mahal, intrigued.

“Come on, guess! You know him very well. He is one of your advisors. Somebody whom no one suspects, as he has always visited the courtesans. Although, these days the women whom he used to see are in despair, as he neglects them. It seems he has been seduced by a beauty who keeps him at arm’s length, and he no longer even looks at other women!”

Hazrat Mahal feels as if her heart is going to stop, could it be . . .

“Is it . . . Rajah Jai Lal?” she guesses in a strangled voice.

“Exactly! It is he who persuaded us to start seeing the Angrez again, and every week we report back to him what we have learnt. I thought that, as the regent, you should also know so that the decisions you make will be informed ones.”

When the two young women separate late in the evening, promising to meet again soon, Hazrat Mahal hugs her friend tightly in her arms and Mumtaz, amazed, wonders why the regent is thanking her so effusively.

**W**elcome, Rajah Sahib! Please be seated and let us chat for a while.” Hazrat Mahal greets Rajah Jai Lal with her most dazzling smile when he turns up for his usual afternoon session to report on the latest military operations and the state of the army.

Amazed at this warm reception, which he is no longer used to, the rajah stands rooted to the spot, frowning. For weeks now, the regent has addressed him in a strictly professional manner, whereas before, she had encouraged a relaxed, almost friendly contact. He had not understood the abrupt change of heart, which had hurt him. But he had finally come to terms with it, telling himself he had overestimated her, as he should have known by now that all women, especially queens, are fickle.

*What has come over her today? She suddenly seems to notice I exist. Is she expecting me to fall at her feet, overwhelmed with gratitude? Who does she take me for?*

When he answers her, his tone is chilly:

“Forgive me, Huzoor, I cannot stay, I have a lot to do. Recorded on these sheets of paper, you will find an account of operations of the past few days and the army’s requirements for the coming week. Would you please take a look at them, we can discuss the details later.”

And without giving her the time to react, he takes his leave.

Left alone, Hazrat Mahal is momentarily stunned, then she starts laughing.

*Well done! Could I have imagined he would react otherwise? It is this quality of freedom I appreciate in him . . . Whatever is at stake, he is incapable of docility or behaving like a subservient courtier. I hurt him; it will not be easy to regain his trust, but I will. His friendship is very precious to me.*

*His friendship? . . .*

With an impatient gesture she rejects the other word that imposes itself with increasing insistence. Is she not married to Wajid Ali Shah? A good

man, whom she respects and who is all the more deserving of her loyalty since he is a prisoner, separated from his loved ones.

*Jai Lal is also married and has sons he is proud of. His wife, it is said, is primarily his children's mother. There is little romance in arranged marriages—generally set up between cousins so that all the land remains within the family. But it is precisely because these marriages are devoid of romantic illusions that they are solid: the woman devotes herself to the children, and the man has the freedom to pursue his dreams . . . elsewhere!*

All night long, Hazrat Mahal has debated with herself to reach the conclusion that the best she can hope for is to recreate a relationship of trust with the rajah, whereas to venture beyond that would be asking for trouble.

Thus, when she receives him at the palace the following day, her attitude is one of serene amiability. She wants to finalise the last details of the plan for the king's escape.

“As you know, Jan-e-Alam is growing weaker by the day. We must not wait any longer. If anything were to happen to him, I would never forgive myself.”

The rajah cannot help feeling taken aback:

*Does she still love her husband so much or is it guilt? Whether he was involved in the rebellion or not, the British would have imprisoned the king either way, according to the principle determined by the powers that be: better to be unfair than unwise. But why am I worrying about her? What she does and what she thinks, in so far as it does not interfere with our struggle, is no business of mine . . .*

“The difficulty,” continues Hazrat Mahal, “was to find a man clever enough to gain access to the fortress without arousing suspicion. But he also had to be totally incorruptible, as the British are ready to pay handsomely for any information regarding our plans. I spent a long time searching for this rare gem, and I believe I have found him in London. He is a member of Her Majesty Malika Kishwar's retinue.”

“Why in London?” asks the rajah, astounded. “Was it not simpler to choose somebody here?”

“It had to be someone totally committed. Where could I be surer of finding him than amongst those who left their families and their properties behind, without a moment's hesitation, to go and plead the

king's cause in cold and hostile England? Contact was established through the Queen Mother. The man will leave London within the week. He will disembark in Bombay and from there, he will set off directly to Benares. He will not pass through Lucknow so that no one will be able to connect him to us. In Benares, the anglicised Indian will vanish . . . to reappear in the guise of one of the town's innumerable *sadhus*.<sup>26</sup> Nobody would dare mistreat them—the Hindus implore their blessings, the others fear their curses. Our *sadhu* will travel to Calcutta, where he will make sure he is noticed for his piety and attract attention by performing a few 'miracles' accomplished with the aid of assistants.

"As his reputation will have preceded him, the sepoy at Fort William, Hindus for the majority, will take good care of him! In addition, he will already have half a dozen accomplices on-site."

"How clever! However, there still remains the problem we have already raised: what will the king do with his freedom? Will he lead the troops into battle?"

"He may try to find a compromise, but then it is no longer our problem, it will be up to him to decide!"

The rajah tenses and replies in an icy tone:

"I'm afraid, Huzoor, you have not fully grasped how much things have changed. These last months, tens of thousands of men have given their lives to liberate their country, to regain the freedom of their beliefs and their traditions, to recover their dignity. The British army has put the entire region to fire and sword, whole villages and fields have been devastated, women raped, children quartered. Do you really believe all this can be forgotten? For my part, I cannot ask my soldiers to sacrifice their lives if it means returning to the former situation. Furthermore, do not delude yourself, the British will refuse any negotiations with us 'natives,' who have not only dared to rebel, but have also committed the sacrilege of attacking white women and children. They swore their vengeance would be terrible!"

"If I understand you correctly, Rajah Sahib, you would refuse to obey the king if he were to order you to stop the struggle?"

"My soldiers would be the first to refuse, Huzoor, if I ordered them to! Just like the thousands of peasants, who urged their taluqdars to join the rebellion, would refuse! Our people are patient, so much so that they are

sometimes considered passive, but when they revolt, they fight to the bitter end because, unlike the elite, they have nothing left to lose.”

\* \* \*

“How dare he speak to you like that?”

After the rajah’s departure, Mammoo had joined his mistress, and he does not hide his indignation at what he classifies as “deceitfulness.” Overjoyed at the opportunity to belittle the man he considers his rival, he presses the point home:

“He swore his loyalty to you and has the audacity to go against you on the pretext that his soldiers would not follow his lead! In reality, he is playing a double game to satisfy his own personal ambition. These Hindus are hypocrites!”

More malicious gossip! Hazrat Mahal turns purple with rage:

“I forbid you to speak like that! If I find out you are spreading such nonsense, I will not hesitate to have you banished! Can you not see that our Hindu sepoys worship my son Birjis Qadar, just as they do their god Krishna? I will not tolerate that Awadh’s Hindu-Muslim culture, our ‘gold and silver culture,’ this extraordinary monument of humanism and tolerance, be threatened by the stupidity of religious prejudice.”

At her violent reaction, the eunuch lowers his head. Never has his mistress treated him in this manner. Going against popular opinion, she had appointed him minister of the Court, and now she threatens to dismiss him. Does she really think she is strong enough to dispense with him?

“I only want to protect you, Huzoor, as I have always done,” he stammers. “Your position attracts a lot of jealousy, people speak ill of you . . .”

“Well, let them gossip! All the years I spent in the zenana taught me how to ignore it. If you want to be esteemed by all and sundry, you end up doing nothing at all!”

“Be careful, Huzoor, you have a powerful enemy who has the people’s ear and is trying to undermine your authority. Several times, I heard him criticise your decisions and say you are leading the country to ruin.”

“Are you referring to that madman, the maulvi?”

“Ahmadullah Shah is not mad. Quite the contrary, he is extremely intelligent and cunning. He declares himself a prophet inspired by God, and vows he will wipe out all the British. His disciples come from the poorer classes and he knows how to talk to them, how to manipulate their suspicion against the rich and powerful. He criticises the weakness of the men at Court and the cowardice of certain generals. He is always at the head of his troops in battle, taking unimaginable risks. He has escaped death so many times that our compatriots, religious by nature, consider him a supernatural being who is going to lead them to victory.”

“And what exactly does he hold against me?”

“He reproaches you for not respecting purdah, wearing only a light veil over your hair when you are in the company of men, and also for protecting the British!”

“Protecting the British?”

“He heard that you had the lives of the refugee women and children spared, and even give them shelter in the palace before sending them on to Allahabad under escort.”

“And I am proud of having done so! Would this monster have me stand by and let innocent civilians be slaughtered? Does he not know that Islam forbids attacking the innocent? All these religious figures who interpret the Holy Quran as they see fit to make it serve their own purposes are our worst enemies! They are more dangerous than the foreigners who are fighting us, since they caricature our religion to such an extent that one day the Muslims will be seen as fanatics to be crushed!”

Hazrat Mahal can no longer contain her indignation:

“Maulvis, mullahs, imams, these people have no right to dictate how others should behave! Prophet Muhammad did not want a clergy. He saw only too well what damage these priests can perpetrate. He wanted the believer to be alone with the sacred book—the word of God—to be able to interpret the scriptures himself, in accordance with his conscience. If he insisted so strongly that Muslims, both men and women, study—saying that, if necessary, they should go as far as China in search of knowledge!—it was precisely in order to ensure that believers would be capable of managing their own lives with the help of the Quran alone.”

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Today, August 22nd, is the beginning of Muharram, the period of mourning for Shia Muslims in remembrance of Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, who along with his whole family was assassinated in 680 by Yazid, the Umayyad caliph, for refusing to recognise his authority. Since this massacre in Karbala, Iraq, Shias all over the world commemorate the tragedy every year during Muharram.

This Muharram is the first one since Birjis Qadar's coronation and, despite the battle, the regent intends to ensure it is celebrated with as much pomp as during Wajid Ali Shah's time. It will be an opportunity for the young king to appear before the crowds, and to reinforce the soldiers' morale and determination. In fact, even though the ceremony is specifically Shiite, Hindus generally participate in it too.

As soon as the crescent moon appears in the sky, a long procession leaves the Bara Imambara, the most sumptuous prayer hall in all of Lucknow. Built in the 18th century, the continuous vaulted roof, measuring fifty metres long and sixteen metres wide, is the admiration of architects the world over.

Majestic elephants, caparisoned in black, lead the procession. Sitting astride them are the pennant bearers, brandishing the insignias awarded by the Mughal emperors—silver and gold poles topped by auspicious symbols: a sun, a moon or a fish. Close behind them, come the horsemen parading the *alams*. These holy banners are embroidered with verses from the Quran and crowned with a bronze hand, symbolising the Shia pentarchy: Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law Ali and their two sons, Hassan and Hussain. Zuljinah, the martyr's white horse, its head lowered, follows at their heels.

Then, trudging along, beating their chests, men wearing dark robes move slowly, bearing a copy of Imam Hussain's coffin draped with a black cloth embroidered with silver tears on their shoulders. At the end of the procession, winding their way, comes the long line of *tazias* made of coloured wax and decorated with precious metals, fragile models of Imam Hussain's tomb at Karbala. Each district, each guild offers its own *tazia*, their rich decorations testifying to the donors' importance and generosity.

Finally, to the mournful beat of the drums, the penitents appear. Wearing black, they make progress, beating their breasts and wailing, “Imam Hussain! Imam Hussain!” while the surrounding crowd takes up the cries again: “Ya Hussain!” They will flay themselves all night long, their bodies heaving, their faces ecstatic, recalling their Imam, who had laid down his life, opposing the usurper.

For their part, throughout the town’s imambaras, the women, all dressed in black, wearing neither jewellery nor make-up, join in the mourning, reciting psalms. At the palace, the regent has sent for the best *marsia*<sup>22</sup> poetess in Lucknow; a woman who, in a husky voice, recounts with an infinite luxury of details the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his seventy-two followers, including old people and children. Her chants evoke the long march through the desert, the siege, the three days without food or drink, then the attack by the enemy’s army, the deaths of the companions of Imam Hussain: a ten-year-old child and an old man, even a baby, just a few months old. An accomplished tragedienne, her recital heightens the suspense. Hanging on to her every word, the women sigh and moan, until eventually, overcome by emotion, they burst into sobs, merging their own personal troubles with the sorrow of the Imam’s tragedy. Harder and harder, with increasing urgency, they pound their chests in order to mortify themselves and to experience in their own flesh some of the martyrs’ suffering.

It is on the day of Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, however, that the mourning ceremonies reach their paroxysm. On this day, after seeing his family and loyal followers massacred one after the other, Imam Hussain finds himself alone with his white horse Zuljinah to confront Yazid’s soldiers. As a hail of arrows pierces to death this last faithful companion, the soldiers pounce on the wounded Imam, cutting his head off, and—the ultimate sacrilege—begin to play with it like a ball.

Around the Residency, the cannons have fallen silent out of respect for the Imam: for one thousand, two hundred years, fighting has been prohibited on this day of Ashura. It is a day of remembrance, for tears and prayers.

Preceded by camels with black harnesses—the camels of the martyrs’ caravan—and Zuljinah, her white coat stained with blood, the procession of penitents advances to the sound of the funerary drums. There are

mature men, but adolescents too. Bare-chested, they hold whips made of chains ending in freshly sharpened steel blades. “Imam Hussain!” they cry out. “Ya Hussain!” answers the crowd. Simultaneously, the chains are brought down on the naked backs, the blades pierce the skin, drawing blood.

“Imam Hussain!” They flay themselves in rhythm to the incantation, their blood flows freely in the dust. “Ya Hussain!” A man collapses, then another. Quickly, they are carried away on makeshift stretchers. The lashes intensify, the penitents now flay themselves in a frenzy, in a desperate attempt to annihilate the body, to reach the ultimate state where, joining their martyred Imam, they will merge with The One.

The whole town centre is blocked by the tightly packed throng, fervently following the ceremony. A small group of sepoys suddenly emerges from around a corner, elbowing people out of their way: “Make way for the guards of His Excellency Mammoo Khan!” With difficulty they push through the protesting spectators, when a tall, bearded man steps in front of them and stands, legs apart, shouting at them:

“What Mammoo are you talking about? The dancer’s eunuch?”

Astounded, the sepoys come to a halt. It takes a few seconds before one of them draws his sword and advances, threatening:

“Would you be referring to the minister of the Court and the Queen Mother?”

“As far as I know, the Queen Mother is in London to plead the king’s cause, while the king himself is in Fort William, imprisoned by the Angrez. There is no other king or Queen Mother. Unless you are referring to one of the concubines His Majesty left behind in Lucknow? As for your minister of the Court, that former slave full of his own importance, don’t make me laugh!”

This is too much. Swords drawn, the sepoys rush towards him; however, about a dozen men suddenly emerge on either side of the agitator. Wearing simple *lungis*,<sup>28</sup> they are armed with clubs and lathis. The battle commences. The long sticks work wonders against the swords, breaking a wrist here, a shoulder there, even before the sepoys can reach their assailants. Very quickly they are cornered. Realising this, the bearded man signals his men to stop:

“Go home and tell Mammoo that the soldiers of Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, Allah’s messenger, send their greetings!”

And he disappears into the crowd.

The fight took place in front of hundreds of witnesses, and an echo of the scandal reaches the palace. The regent immediately convenes a meeting of the chiefs of the different armed forces in order to discuss the measures to be taken.

Nobody would dare say so openly, but no one is upset at the humiliation inflicted on Mammoo Khan, whose arrogance makes him unanimously detested. Nevertheless, a schism within the armed forces cannot be tolerated.

Rajah Jai Lal sums up the dilemma:

“The maulvi has become uncontrollable. His soldiers and a large section of the population worship him like a god. He considers himself above taking orders from anyone, and during battles, acts alone. This said, he is a good tactician and a born leader. Under the current circumstances, it would be a great pity to do without his support.”

“In any event, he cannot be ignored. He has sworn to rid India of the British, whom he regards as *kafirs*.”<sup>29</sup>

“What is amazing is that the Hindus follow him too, although he preaches a rigorous Islam, in opposition to the ‘degenerate Islam of the Court.’”

“Oh, he is skilful! He has toned down his convictions and, for the time being, only advocates the common struggle against the foreign oppressors, who want to impose their customs and religion on the believers.”

“And he is equally well regarded by the middle class, as he maintains an iron discipline amongst his soldiers: they are allowed to pillage the collaborators, but are strictly forbidden to touch the people’s property.”

The regent listens attentively.

“So you believe the maulvi would not only be an enemy of the British, but our enemy too? Do you think he could turn against us once the occupier has left the country?”

“Taking advantage of his reputation as a military and religious leader, he is perfectly capable of fomenting a revolution,” concedes the Rajah of Mahmudabad.

“Who said, ‘If you cannot conquer your enemy, cover him in honours in order to make a friend of him?’” murmurs Hazrat Mahal. “I think I will invite Ahmadullah Shah here and make him an offer he cannot refuse.”

Twenty pairs of questioning eyes turn towards her.

“As you all agree that he is an excellent military leader, I would like to placate him by putting him in charge of the next assault on the Residency, which we would call ‘Operation Muharram.’ This would be a way of recreating the alliance indispensable to the success of our cause.”

“Which means we would be under his orders?” protests Mammoo Khan.

“To the best of my knowledge, you do not take part in the battles, so this won’t affect you!” retorts the regent curtly. “It is for the officers to tell me what they think.”

“If he wins, it will be a disaster!” predicts the Rajah of Mahmudabad. “He will really become uncontrollable.”

“Let us not panic,” intervenes Rajah Jai Lal. “In order to win, Ahmadullah needs the support of our regiments. We have already lost too many men. From now on, I suggest we deploy our soldiers sparingly.”

“From now on? How long will that be?” enquires Hazrat Mahal suspiciously.

“As long as Operation Muharram lasts.”

In approval, everyone bursts out laughing.

“Are you not concerned he will take revenge?” enquires the regent anxiously.

“What more can he do? He is already trying to undermine the king’s authority and your own. If he claims to take power, however, the sepoys will not follow him. They can appreciate him as a military leader, but when it comes to politics, they are wary of him. Not because they are in the majority Hindus and he is a Muslim—that does not matter here, our soldiers fight shoulder to shoulder—but because they know very well that the maulvi is an extremist.”

**G**radually, the revolt spreads throughout northeast India, and now a large part of central India, the heart of the Mahratta region, appears ripe for rebellion.

During this month of August 1857, the governor general in Calcutta is no longer able to communicate with his officers; the telegraph lines have been sabotaged and the province of Bihar has joined the revolt, making the circulation of mail almost impossible. Thus, he is obliged to base his decisions on fragmented bits of information.

Everywhere, the Indians are riding a wave of enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the British reinforcements and units loyal to the Bombay and Madras armies continue their progress towards the centre of the country. The insurgents have to act quickly: the only way to drive out the British would be to extend the rebellion to include the west and the south. However, a number of princes are still hesitant, while some others—the most influential—have resolutely chosen the British camp.

The sovereign of Bhopal in particular, whom Hazrat Mahal had tried hard to convince, refuses to join the uprising, despite her subjects' demonstrations in favour of it. Like her mother, Begum Sikander is gifted with a political sense unencumbered by ideals, and she is betting on British success.

As for the biggest state in the Deccan, Hyderabad, rattled by maulvis preaching rebellion in the mosques, it would have switched alliances if the old nizam had not just passed away. The latter would not have hesitated to take revenge on the British for confiscating part of his state a few years earlier. Luckily for the occupying forces, his son, who succeeded him a few months before the beginning of the revolt, is under the influence of the Prime Minister, Sir Salar Jung, a dedicated Anglophile who had the rebellion's leaders arrested and handed over to the British authorities.

On August 14th, an army of three thousand men led by General Nicholson has reached the outskirts of Delhi, bringing necessary reinforcements to strengthen the siege while awaiting additional forces. To recapture the former capital, the governor general of India has issued orders that the bulk of troops be concentrated there. Indeed, the fate of the rebellion in the Northeast Provinces, which joined the revolt after the great Mughal had assumed power, depends on Delhi—as do the fates of the Punjab and central India. For even in the provinces remaining loyal to the British, maintaining control is proving increasingly difficult. If the seat of the former power—a symbol of two centuries of glory—is lastingly re-established, the country will fight as a single man to expel the foreigners.

Over the space of a few weeks, John Nicholson, a giant of a man, both taciturn and inspired, has become a legend. Since he left Peshawar in May, the rumour of his courage and brutality has circulated across the country; it is said that his troops are allowed to carry out atrocities on the population.

The Sikh soldiers have the worst reputation: horrifying stories are told of their prisoners being impaled, of their running stakes through children, whom they then roast before their parents' eyes. Fantasy or reality, the fact remains, the British officers do not condemn any excesses of force. Since the massacre of the European women and children, the British are convinced the Indians are evil savages to be exterminated.

For a number of soldiers, revenge is a God-given right inscribed in the Bible; their fight, a battle between Good and Evil; and crushing the mutiny, a crusade. They have the full support of the English press in Calcutta and London, which has run amok since the Kanpur massacres.

“For every church destroyed, we should destroy fifty mosques. For every Christian killed, we should massacre a thousand rebels,” declares *The Times*.

Even Charles Dickens goes as far as to write:

“I would like to be commander-in-chief in India. I would strike terror into this Oriental race and would proclaim that, on God's orders, I would do everything in my power to wipe their breed—

guilty of so many atrocities—off the surface of the earth.”

As for the Governor General Lord Canning, he has finally understood the danger of blind repression. It leaves an often-undecided population with no other choice but to join the rebels. He attempts to restore the rule of law, making him the brunt of insults from the British community, who scornfully nickname him “Clemency Canning,” but he is unable to put a stop to the terror inflicted by an army thirsty for revenge.

In Lucknow, news of the siege of Delhi has caused little concern. The capital is unassailable: surrounded by moats six metres deep and four metres wide, it is defended by tens of thousands of sepoys. What is not known is that the besieged population is desperately short of supplies and ammunition, and an increasing number of the starving soldiers are deserting.

Besides, the military command is preoccupied by General James Outram’s imminent arrival. He left Calcutta on August 25th and is marching towards Awadh. Warned by his spies, Rajah Jai Lal has informed the regent that Outram, leading a large, well-equipped army, intends to meet up with General Havelock in Kanpur in order for them to launch a combined attack on Lucknow.

Sir James Outram . . . Hazrat Mahal recalls the kingdom of Awadh’s last resident, his arrogance, his lies and the constant humiliations he inflicted on the unfortunate sovereign. She remembers in particular the interview with the Queen Mother, her plea for mercy for her son and Outram’s condescending, brutal reply.

She, the fourth wife at the time, could only remain silent . . . *Ah, things have certainly changed. I will show him, this evil Angrez, what my people and I are capable of!*

Within the Residency’s entrenched camp, the besieged captives have regained hope, convinced that this time, they will be saved. Indeed, after waiting over a month for Havelock’s army to cover the fifty miles separating Kanpur from Lucknow, they had to face a huge disappointment: the Indian attacks had forced the general to retreat.

Since then, despite all his efforts, Colonel Inglis was unable to keep up the garrison's morale.

"The fighters are exhausted," he wrote, begging for relief troops to come to their rescue. "Enemy fire, hunger and sickness claim about twenty victims a day. I do not think we can manage to hold out much longer."

Henceforth, they follow the progress of Outram's troops anxiously. Marching rapidly, the army has reached Kanpur.

On September 19th, it sets off for Lucknow. Crossing the Ganges by means of a floating bridge made of small flat boats, it advances under torrential rain. The first encounter with the Indians occurs twenty-five miles from the capital, exactly where Havelock's troops had been defeated a month earlier. The British charge to cries of "Remember Kanpur" and disperse the enemy forces with swords. Pursuing them, they continue to advance, astonished at the absence of any further resistance. When they reach Alambagh Palace, set in the middle of a garden surrounded by high walls, five miles from Lucknow, only then do they understand the adversary's tactics: protected on the left by the walls of Alambagh, and at the centre and to the right by a series of low hills, the Indians greet the attackers with heavy fire.

The encounter will last three days.

At the height of the combat, a woman appears on the battlefield. Riding an elephant, from her howdah high above, she spurs on the fighters, who cheer her: it is the regent. To galvanise the soldiers in this encounter—the first threat to Lucknow—she has decided to take an active part in the battle. She is also motivated by a need to take revenge on this Outram, who has so profoundly humiliated the royal family.

Surprised by the clamour, Rajah Jai Lal approaches. Recognising the young woman, he halts for a moment, hesitating between admiration and anger. As anger prevails, he spurs his horse on and, arriving level with her, he shouts rudely:

"What are you doing here? Have you lost your mind? This war is not a game. You have a duty to the state and to the king, your son. You have no right to get yourself killed."

Her green eyes grow almost black with fury:

“How dare you order me around? I do whatever I consider necessary. The soldiers need their queen’s encouragement.”

And then she turns her back on him.

She will remain on the battlefield for several hours, exhorting the sepoys, who, captivated by this fragile woman’s bravery, fight with increased courage and daring.

When she finally returns to the palace, still exalted by the heat of battle, a messenger is waiting for her; his clothes are dusty, he looks exhausted. He has just come from Delhi: after a week of fierce fighting, the imperial town has fallen.

Hazrat Mahal is stunned. The courier has to describe the terrible conditions of a starving population, an army lacking for everything—in particular ammunition—and torn by conflict and backbiting amongst leaders, for her to accept the hard reality.

“And what happened to His Majesty Bahadur Shah Zafar?”

“He has been taken prisoner and rumour has it that his sons have been assassinated. As for the town, I fear that . . .”

The regent silences him with a gesture.

“All this must remain between us, at least for a few days. An announcement of the great Mughal’s defeat would be disastrous for our troop’s morale. Please do not speak of this to anyone. The news will spread quickly enough, but it is important that we gain some time. Do you give me your word?”

“I am your devoted servant, Your Majesty.”

Bowing down to the ground in a respectful adab, he departed.

Once alone, the regent calls for her hookah. She pulls on it deeply; the gurgle of the water in the crystal bowl and the curls of sweet smelling smoke slowly calm her down. Frowning, she ponders: after the fall of Kanpur and now Delhi, the British are going to concentrate all their troops on Lucknow. It is vital to plan a new course of action. She must speak to Jai Lal.

Jai Lal . . . He must be furious; she insulted him in public! But why does he feel the need to control her every movement? She is the regent. It is she who decides! However . . . he seemed so upset.

*Was he really frightened for me? For me, or for the queen who, as he insisted, has a duty towards the state and her son? After all, does he see me as anything*

*other than . . . the queen?*

She recalls the emotion she had felt when Mumtaz had told her that the rajah was in love with an inaccessible beauty . . .

*I had believed then . . . I was probably only imagining things . . .*

Although he is amiable, Jai Lal now keeps his distance. Never mind, she will keep hers too. She is certainly not going to beg for his friendship!

Despite the Indian troops' courage, Alambagh is captured on September 23rd.

For the British, it is a strategic victory: they intend to use the palace as an advance base for further operations against the rebellious town.

At dawn on September 25th, Outram and Havelock launch the attack on Charbagh Bridge to the southeast of the town. In an audacious act of bravery, the British cavalry charges, swords drawn, the infantry following in successive waves. After a first terrible encounter, the British gain the upper hand, but the losses on both sides are immense. In order to cross the bridge, the soldiers have had to walk over hundreds of dead and wounded.

The Residency is only two miles away; the most direct route passes through the crowded area of Aminabad, riddled with trenches, bristling with palisades, where most of the houses have been equipped for defence. Forewarned by their spies, the British command decides to make a detour around Aminabad and to enter from the east, through what was formerly the European garrison and the palace area. However, as they approach Kaisarbagh they are greeted by a cannonade. Well protected behind the kiosks and the marble fountains, hundreds of sepoy led by Rajah Jai Lal are waiting for them. The men fight savagely with guns, swords and bayonets. Civilians lend the sepoy their support and defend every inch of land, while the women hurl volleys of bricks and stones from the terraces.

But the British cannons cover their troops' advance and, despite the opposition, they are now only half a mile from the Residency. Evening is falling, the soldiers are exhausted—they have not slept and have hardly eaten for the last three days. Outram, wounded in the arm, suggests they rest a bit before setting off on the last march through the congested

streets. For Havelock, this is out of the question; he swore to himself he would save the Residency today and not a day later.

On his orders, the 78th Regiment of Highlanders and the Sikhs continue to advance through the narrow streets lined with terraced houses. The men have just got underway when gunfire breaks out from all sides; they fall like flies. Colonel Neill, who is leading them, is hit in the head by a bullet. Indifferent to the losses, Havelock urges his soldiers to continue their advance. They progress heroically through the confined lanes under a hail of bullets and projectiles, and, finally, at nightfall they reach the Residency.

Bagpipes play as the Highlanders enter the entrenched camp. A joyful chaos ensues. The besieged occupants all rush to welcome their saviours. They shake their hands, blessing them through tears, while the rugged soldiers, trembling with emotion, hug the children they have saved from a certain death. The Residency's sepoys join in the celebration. To their misfortune, at the sight of natives, the British soldiers, used to shooting at "niggers," open fire and kill those who had gathered around them to offer their thanks, until the screams of the besieged British alert them to the misunderstanding.

The incident is soon to be forgotten and the celebrations continue all through the night.

The next morning, however, the joy subsides when the rescuers realise that it is impossible to evacuate the camp. Outram and Havelock's small troop has suffered heavy losses—five hundred and thirty-five dead and wounded—and they have neither the strength nor the means to transport the wounded, the sick, the women and the children—about one thousand five hundred non-combatants—to Kanpur.

The embarrassing truth is that after having made such a great effort to enter the Residency, the soldiers can no longer get out, and the liberators, who were supposed to save the besieged prisoners, have in fact joined their numbers.

"We are all depressed," notes Colonel Case's widow. "Our saviours are too few to deliver us and too many for the remaining supplies."\*

In town, on the other hand, the population enjoys a ready supply of jokes about “these *Angrez* who imprisoned themselves.” Making fun of those whom they usually admire, fear or hate is a rare treat for them; perhaps even more meaningful than killing them. After all, one only kills individuals, often poor wretches, while ridicule demeans the enemy, stains their image and destroys the authority of this so-called superior race.

They also rejoice in Colonel Neill’s death, whose cruelty had earned him the nickname of “the butcher of Benares, Allahabad and Kanpur,” and they convince themselves that the hated occupation will soon be over.

While one section of Lucknow feasts, the other buries its dead. Over a thousand have been killed, yet both the Hindus and the Muslims see them not as victims, but as martyrs. The Hindus will be reborn as higher beings, the Muslims will go straight to Allah’s paradise.

In Chaulakhi Palace, the regent has assembled the military leaders to congratulate them on their bravery and to consult them.

“I have just received a letter from General Outram. He requests permission to leave the Residency to return to Kanpur. In exchange, he promises the British will not punish those with no blood on their hands. What do you think?” she enquires with an ironic smile.

The assembly’s laughter is a clear answer: “These damned British are incredible! They are prisoners and promise not to execute all of us if we free them! Have you ever heard anything so outrageous?”

“And what do you intend to reply, Huzoor?” asks Rajah Jai Lal.

“I think I will make him wait a bit and then . . .” The tone is one of studied nonchalance, but her eyes shine with delight. “And then I will let him know that his offer is interesting and that I am considering it. After that, I will ask him to go into greater detail on certain points; in short, I will let him hope that I will agree but . . . I will forget to answer him. He will continue to write until . . .”

Hazrat Mahal stops short; her expression is now forbidding, and she concludes curtly:

“ . . . until he finally realises that I am making a fool of him, just as he made a fool of the king.”

**F**rom her terrace overlooking the Kaisarbagh gardens, Hazrat Mahal contemplates the setting sun reflected in the water of the fountains and on the white marble kiosks. Blissfully she breathes in these first moments of cool as she reflects on the events of the day. For the first time in weeks, she had decided to leave the responsibility of state affairs to her ministers in order to spend the afternoon with her son.

Over the past year, Birjis Qadar has grown a great deal. His green eyes, so like his mother's, sparkle with intelligence in his delicate face.

Together they had wandered down the garden paths, she in an open phaeton, he on horseback, proud of having her admire his progress:

“They say the Rani of Jhansi is an excellent horsewoman. Why do you not learn to ride, Amma Huzoor? We could go for long excursions together!”

Hazrat Mahal had replied that she would give it some serious thought, nostalgically remembering the time when Jai Lal had offered to give her lessons, suggesting that one day it could come in useful. She must learn!

She quickly chased the rajah from her thoughts; her son demanded her full attention. He told her how he was leading his sepoy company through their drill every morning. Since his coronation, the officers had determined he should learn about military leadership, like his father before him, who excelled at it—rather too much so for the taste of British, who had finally forbidden him to participate in military affairs!

However, Hazrat Mahal is aware of a lingering sadness behind the young boy's enthusiastic stories.

*God, how he has changed . . . He was just a carefree child . . . Today, he is the king, and already he no longer has any friends, only courtiers . . .*

As if guessing her thoughts, Birjis Qadar had taken his mother's hand and kissed it.

“I am doing everything I can to prepare myself for my duties, Amma Huzoor, but I do not know what exactly is expected of me, apart from presiding over a few ceremonies and being cheered on by the soldiers. I feel like a puppet. All around me, the country is in turmoil, and I remain inside the palace. I cannot stand it any longer. I want to fight too.”

“Fight? But you are only eleven! Furthermore, we cannot take the risk of your being killed. The country needs its king.”

“But you took part yourself in the Battle of Alambagh! Does the country not need its regent?”

Hazrat Mahal had remained speechless: her son was talking to her exactly the same way as Jai Lal did.

“I promise that when you are fourteen and almost a man, you will take part in the battles. But by then, I hope we will have won our independence and there will be peace.”

And she had taken him in her arms to console him—after all, he was still only a little boy . . . her little boy.

The arrival of a eunuch interrupts her musings.

*“Huzoor, Rajah Jai Lal is asking to see you. He is accompanied by an Angrez.”*

*The rajah at this hour, and with a British man! It must be a messenger sent by General Outram, who is growing impatient . . .*

The rajah’s companion, a young man sporting a turban, his skin darkened, turns out to be an ally. William Reid, a postal employee at the Residency, had earlier been one of His Majesty’s horticulturists, and still worships this king, who had made Lucknow into the “city of gardens” and had treated him like an artist.

When the kingdom was annexed, he had lost his job—more a vocation than a means of earning a living—and had found himself confined to a dusty office . . . He who had lived among flowers . . . The injustice done to the king, and consequently to himself, made him bitter. He dislikes his compatriots and considers them petty individuals who take advantage of India to live well above their status. On the other hand, he has great respect for the Indian aristocrats whom he had had the opportunity of meeting in the royal gardens.

Thus, deep down, he has remained loyal to his adopted country, and when the telegraph clattered out the astounding news, at great risk to

himself, he had decided to come and warn the regent.

News that is as important as it is disastrous: the plot to liberate Wajid Ali Shah has been uncovered. The governor general in Calcutta has been informed of it by London.

“That is impossible!”

Hazrat Mahal refuses to believe it. The messenger has to provide the details of the operation for her to finally admit—appalled—that they have been betrayed yet again.

“But how did London find out?”

“Madam, it would seem as though it were through . . . someone in your entourage.”

“What makes you say that?” enquires the incredulous regent.

“The telegram specifies that London received the information from Lucknow.”

Alarmed, Hazrat Mahal turns to Jai Lal.

“Who knew, apart from my closest circle?”

“No one, Huzoor,” replies the rajah grimly. “I knew we were surrounded by spies, but I did not imagine they had managed to penetrate the zenana . . . ”

And, addressing the young man:

“I honour your courage, sir, and your loyalty to our unfortunate king. What can we do to thank you?”

“Nothing. I did what my conscience and my heart dictated. I do not have to support my country when it behaves so badly, just because I am British. Now, if I may, I will leave, as my absence might be noticed.”

“But how will you get back inside the Residency?”

William chuckles:

“The same way I got out! With your incessant bombing, there is always a breach somewhere that has not been noticed straight away!”

As he bows to the begum, she says softly:

“Wait a moment, sir.”

She slips a ring encrusted with rubies off her finger:

“Take this, it is a small token of my gratitude.”

How could she imagine at that moment that the ring, later found amongst the young man’s belongings, would confirm Colonel Inglis’s

suspicious? He had been mistrustful of the king's ex-horticulturist for a while now.

A week after his visit to Kaisarbagh, William is to be convicted of treason and shot on the spot.

Left alone with the rajah, Hazrat Mahal holds her head in her hands.

"Who could have betrayed us like that? How am I to live, knowing that I am surrounded by spies, even amongst those closest to me?"

"You will have to be even more vigilant, Huzoor. In your position, you can trust no one."

Her eyes shining with tears, she stammers:

"Not even you?"

She seems so lost that Jai Lal is moved. For the first time since their quarrel, he relents, and in an attempt to comfort her, says:

"Yes, of course you can trust me, as I hold nothing more sacred than the freedom of our country. I will always be there to help you."

She turns towards him, she wants to take hold of his hands, to feel their reassuring warmth; suddenly she feels so vulnerable . . .

With an effort of willpower, she pulls herself together, and in a strangled voice says:

"I thank you, Rajah Sahib. Your presence beside me is infinitely . . . precious."

She has just stopped herself from using the words "essential," "indispensable" . . . She has no right to. How could she betray the king at the very moment when all hope of freeing him has vanished?

The rajah seems to read her thoughts; he nods slowly, he understands her scruples—he shares them—and respects her all the more for it.

He also knows, though, that he cannot continue to lie to himself. This queen, whose intelligence and willpower he admires, this sovereign, at times petulant and haughty, at others kind and disconcertingly simple, this woman who, at this moment, seems so terribly fragile . . . He feels for her something he has never felt before. It is not only desire—the carnal desire he had felt for the beautiful courtesans of the Chowk—although sometimes he has to force himself not to take Hazrat Mahal in his arms. It is far from the lukewarm quiescence he shares with the mother of his children. In front of the young woman, he is overcome by an immense

tenderness, an attraction which all his powers of reason and even his cynicism cannot fight off. It frightens him. For the first time in his life, he feels overwhelmed by emotions he cannot control. Making a huge effort to conceal his feelings, the rajah bows to the regent, and, assuring her of his devotion, he takes his leave.

\* \* \*

Since the fall of Delhi, Lucknow has become the rallying point for the insurgents. Thousands of sepoys arrive from the imperial capital. Groups of peasants from villages all over Awadh, armed with clubs, pitchforks and scythes, converge on the main town of the rebellion, where a military command and a legitimate authority still stand. For these men, the Queen Mother represents the fighting mother and the little king, Birjis Qadar-Krishna, unity between Hindus and Muslims.

Awadh's aristocracy has also joined the revolt with its private armies. Amongst the new reception is a prestigious personality whose reputation for bravery has already reached Lucknow. Prince Firoz Shah, the Mughal emperor's nephew, has just arrived with a small troop.

Preceded by the royal orchestra and accompanied by a majestic procession, a delegation of rajahs has gone to welcome him and escort him to Khurshid Manzil Palace, close to Kaisarbagh. This afternoon, the prince is expected at the Court. The Queen Mother is impatient to hear an eyewitness account of the battle of Delhi.

When he enters, she cannot suppress a feeling of disappointment. Small and thin in his brocade choga, Firoz Shah hardly resembles the warrior whose praises had been sung to her. It is only when the young man starts talking, eyes shining in his amazingly expressive face, that, captivated by the charm of his warm voice, she begins to understand the influence he exercises over all who come in contact with him.

For hours he recounts the agony of Delhi, how the population was suffering from hunger and thirst, the British having blocked the canal providing the town with water and destroyed the harvests, and how the rebel government no longer had enough funds to feed the army. As a result, increasing numbers of soldiers had deserted.

He describes the sepoys' quarrelsome and disorganised authority and the inability of the old emperor to control anything. He was disrespected even in his own palace, invaded by a rabble of soldiers. One of his sons, Mirza Mughal, had taken command of the army, but the other generals contested his authority to such an extent that the regiments were incapable of any unity of action. Lastly, there was a severe shortage of gunpowder, as the British had set fire to the main depot.

At the beginning of September, the British had launched the attack, supported by a six-mile-long siege train.<sup>80</sup>

“For three days, the cannons bombarded us incessantly. It was like a deluge of fire. Finally, on September 14th, the British began their assault. United at last by the threat of danger, we fought bitterly to defend every inch of land. The British advanced with difficulty through the labyrinth of streets and suffered very heavy losses. It was there, in fact, that General Nicholson was mortally wounded. May his soul be damned! For two whole days, the outcome of the battle remained undecided. However, a whole brigade fled and we were just too few. We needed to revive the resistance of a population who, out of fear, had gone into hiding.

“At our insistence, the emperor agreed to lead the army. You should have seen the crowd of enthusiastic volunteers waiting for him. We could still have won then because the demoralised British soldiers balked at making another foray into the confined, winding streets—a third of them, it seems, had already died there.

“Unfortunately, on the advice of his hakim, an Anglophile traitor, Bahadur Shah Zafar finally backed down and the discouraged crowd dispersed.

“Can one really hold it against him? He is an old man . . . But his act signed the imperial capital's death sentence. Delhi was slowly abandoned by its last defenders. I myself decided to leave then, considering it useless to have my men killed for the glory of it.

“The town fell on September 20th. We know how terrible British vengeance has been. For days, soldiers massacred both fighters and civilians, sparing neither the wounded nor the sick; thousands of prisoners were shot and the palaces pillaged and vandalised.”

“And the emperor?”

“Bahadur Shah Zafar had taken refuge with his family a few miles outside town, in his ancestor Emperor Humayun’s mausoleum. Informed by a spy, Captain William Hodson—an adventurer who had earlier been condemned for embezzlement—went in search of him and convinced him to surrender, assuring him that he would be treated with all the honours due to his rank. I have since learnt that the emperor is imprisoned in a small barred cell, on display and ridiculed by mocking visitors . . .

“As for his three sons accompanying him, Hodson had promised their lives would be spared, if they surrendered. Nonetheless, along the way he managed to separate them from their retinue, forced them to take off their clothes and shot them at point blank range.”

“How terrible!” shivers Hazrat Mahal. “How can these people not honour their own promises? I hope that his superiors punished this man accordingly!”

“Not in the least! Even if his commanding officers disapprove of his behaviour, they can say nothing. Hodson is now considered a hero, both here and in England.”

These words are received with disillusioned nods; everyone is quiet, lost in their thoughts.

To lighten the atmosphere, Hazrat Mahal signals to some young servants to distribute hookahs and serve mango and rose sherbets.

And, turning towards the prince:

“Are you going to stay with us, *Shahzadeh*<sup>81</sup>?”

“It would be my greatest desire, Huzoor,” he answers, staring at Hazrat Mahal in admiration.

She feels herself blush. The conflict and its tragedies have hardened her but have in no way made her insensitive to compliments.

“You are even more beautiful than people say,” he murmurs.

She knows she should seem offended and turn away, but it has been so long since anyone has admired anything but her courage and her intelligence, she feels like a butterfly thirsting after nectar.

The sensation of someone staring at her neck compels her to turn around: Rajah Jai Lal is watching her coldly.

As disturbed as she is irritated, she looks him up and down. Why should she feel guilty at taking pleasure in the charming turquoise prince’s<sup>82</sup>

compliments? Words that are of no consequence and are so pleasing to hear . . .

“Regrettably I must leave,” continues the latter. “I am going to the Central Provinces to lend my support to the freedom movement. We must encourage uprisings on all fronts simultaneously. It is our only hope of doing away with the British. The population is ready but incapable of organising themselves on their own and, unfortunately, the majority of the sepoys have left for the big towns.

“If you wish, though, I will leave you one of my best lieutenants. He has heard a great deal about you and dreams of serving you. I thought it could be useful to have someone at your side who knows perfectly the way the enemy thinks and reacts. Shall I summon him?”

With Hazrat Mahal’s consent, Firoz Shah’s lieutenant enters. He is a tall, blond lad, his complexion reddened by the sun. He bows respectfully before the regent.

Astounded, she turns to the prince.

“But he is English!”

“No, Irish. His name is Brendan Murphy.”

“To me they are one and the same. I do not want a European in my retinue. We already have enough spies amongst our own kind.”

The exchange has taken place in Urdu to prevent Murphy from understanding. The latter, still standing, smiles: he understands Urdu perfectly, but he also understands the regent’s reaction.

Firoz Shah stands up:

“I do not want to influence you. Talk to him yourself and decide.”

Shadows pervade the large drawing room as the servants start lighting the silver torches, while the Queen Mother and the lieutenant continue to converse.

Brendan Murphy recounts how he signed up for the British army in 1846 because people were dying of hunger at home. It was during the Great Famine. All the cereals and meat the country produced in vast quantities were being exported, and the potato harvest, the only food left to the peasants, had been destroyed by mildew.

“Exported by whom?” asks Hazrat Mahal, who does not fully understand.

“By the English, who colonised our country at the end of the Middle Ages, just as they are colonising yours! Four centuries ago, our lands were seized by colonialists from Great Britain, and the former owners were reduced to farmers who could be dismissed at will.”

“Are you telling me that the English colonised you, Christian Europeans, just as they are colonising us, the ‘natives,’ and, moreover, ‘pagans?’” exclaims the astonished begum.

“Absolutely! And just like you, we rebelled. In the 17th century, Irish peasants massacred thousands of colonisers. This led to the terrible repression by Oliver Cromwell, the new ruler of England. From then onwards, the population was totally subjected to the authority of English Protestant stock, who had appropriated all the powers. First they attacked religion, and then the clergy, who were giving the people the courage to resist. The priests refusing to swear loyalty to the Protestant king were banished or hung. Penal laws were introduced: speaking our own language, Gaelic, was forbidden, practising our religion was forbidden, any kind of education was also forbidden. The population was not only reduced to misery, it was crushed. Yet it continued to resist.

“In May 1798, the Great Revolt took place. On both sides, property was burnt and people were slaughtered. The English had the upper hand. The majority of the rebels were poor peasants, with neither weapons nor discipline. The repression was terrible. My grandfather had participated in the movement. He was killed, along with his whole family, except for his youngest son—a five-year-old who had hidden in the hay. That boy was my father. He was raised by distant relatives, and when he grew up, he always avoided politics. He worked as a peasant but had learnt to read and write, which gave him the status of a scholar in the village. It was a time when priests said Mass and conducted classes in the secrecy of roadside ditches.

“I learnt everything I know from my father. In 1845, the year the Great Famine struck my country, I was seventeen. It lasted four years. Out of a population of eight million Irish, a million died of starvation. Another million became exiles, including myself. But since the beginning of the century, Great Britain needed soldiers for her colonies. Thus, in 1846, as I had no other option, I enlisted in the army and came to India.”

The begum cannot believe it.

“But why were you, the Irish, treated like that?”

“As always and everywhere, people use moral reasons to invade a country and appropriate its wealth. Ireland’s wealth lies in its agriculture. You, here in India, have gold, precious stones, spices, as well as silk and cotton that are needed for the mills, which are constantly growing in numbers. These raw materials are so important at the moment that the headlines in the British press read: ‘The loss of India will be a mortal blow to our commerce and industry.’”\*

Hazrat Mahal nods; however, a detail intrigues her:

“It seems to me you understand Urdu. Where did you learn it?”

With a burst of laughter, the Irishman retorts:

“Quite simply, from my wife! I married an Indian woman and we have two wonderful children!”

The begum also starts laughing.

“I like you, Mr. Murphy, but you must meet Rajah Jai Lal Singh. When it comes to army matters, he is the one who decides.”

This is how Brendan Murphy, an Irishman from County Cork, was enrolled in the service of the kingdom of Awadh to fight the British occupation. He became Rajah Jai Lal’s right-hand man, and the rajah soon made a good friend of him too.

**I**n early November 1857, and Lucknow is preparing to withstand yet another assault. Fighters stream in from all over the country to lend their support to the resistance. There are now more than fifty thousand soldiers in the town—an impressive force but a liability too. All these men have to be fed and armed, and despite the administration’s best efforts to collect taxes, the coffers are almost empty. Consequently, Rajah Jai Lal was forced to announce that the new arrivals would earn only half of what Awadh’s regular army was paid, which provoked discontentment amongst the men, a predicament that Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah quickly turned to his advantage.

“God’s messenger” promised any sepoy who would join him, the same pay as the Lucknow sepoys, and so he managed to double the capacity of his forces at the regent’s expense. Thus emboldened, the maulvi never wastes an opportunity to criticise what he scornfully calls “the Court party.”

“This cannot continue. I must talk to him,” decides Hazrat Mahal.

“Do you think it is worthwhile?” objects Jai Lal. “He certainly has not forgotten the failure of Operation Muharram and the reluctance of our troops to support him.”

“I must try . . . After all, we have a common enemy, we have to work together.”

To flatter the maulvi, the regent has decided to receive him with all the honours befitting important dignitaries.

The meeting takes place in the throne room, in the presence of the king and some ministers. The begum is all smiles and attention. However, she has misjudged the man, who now considers himself her rival. Far from being appeased by the Queen Mother’s decorum and amiability, Ahmadullah Shah interprets it as a recognition of his importance and the fear he inspires. He launches into a virulent diatribe, accusing the

generals of incompetence and cowardice, and goes so far as to question the Court's commitment to the freedom movement.

“Enough!”

Hazrat Mahal interrupts, glaring at him:

“Are you perchance insinuating that I too, could be a traitor?”

The maulvi hesitates, then says disdainfully:

“Maybe you are being misled . . . Women are unfit to manage state affairs. They are too weak and easily influenced.”

“Really?” scoffs the begum. “So how is it that over the centuries, women have so often governed Indian states? Have you never heard of Razia Sultana, whose father designated her to succeed him on the throne of Delhi in 1236, as he considered her more capable than her brothers? She proved to be a skilful warrior and a remarkable administrator, re-establishing order in the country, encouraging commerce and supporting the arts. And the great Nur Jahan, Emperor Jahangir's wife, who, in the 17th century, led the Mughal Empire while her husband revelled in poetry and drink? And the sovereigns of Bhopal—one of the largest Muslim principalities in India—first Qudsia Begum and now her daughter, Begum Sikander? And also the Rani of Jhansi, who, at the head of her army, is currently leading the revolt against the occupier? And so many others . . . Are they all, in your opinion, weak and easily influenced women?”

At the audience's laughter, Ahmadullah Shah tenses.

“As a good Muslim, I respect the Holy Book that proclaims: ‘A state governed by a woman is bound to fail.’”

“It is not written in the Holy Quran! As a ‘good Muslim’ you know that very well indeed!” exclaims the begum indignantly. “On the contrary, the Prophet gave women rights that no Christian, Jewish or Hindu woman had at the time, and would only acquire centuries later: the right to inheritance, the right to dispose of her property as she sees fit, and the right to conduct business. Some women were even nominated to the position of *cadis*.”<sup>33</sup>

“At least they had the decency to wear the veil as is ordained,” retorts the maulvi, throwing a nasty look at her jet-black hair covered with simple translucent gauze.

“Yet another invention! Nowhere in the Quran does it state that the face has to be hidden, not even the hair! Women are only asked to be

modest.”

As the maulvi raises his eyes skyward, she orders:

“Mammoo Khan, bring me my Quran.”

A few seconds later, it is placed in her hands.

“Listen to the only two passages in the whole Book that deal with the veil:

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their shawls over their bosoms . . .”<sup>84</sup>

“And: ‘O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons . . .’”<sup>85</sup>

Turning to the maulvi:

“Over the centuries, men have perverted the meaning of the Prophet’s teachings. How could he have advised women to remain cloistered when his first wife, Khadija, was a skilled businesswoman, and his youngest wife, Aisha, used to attend dinners with him and his friends? They discussed everything, especially politics!”

“It is all clearly stated,” confirms the Rajah of Mahmudabad, “but as the common people cannot read Arabic and even amongst the Arabs there are few who understand the literary language used in the Quran, the ulemas interpret it as they please!”

Furious at finding himself challenged before the whole assembly, the maulvi rises.

“You are insulting the ulemas! You are insulting the Holy Quran! Allah will punish you!” he thunders.

And thrusting aside the eunuchs on guard, he leaves the throne room as if he were fleeing the devil personified.

\* \* \*

The new commander-in-chief of the Indian army, Sir Colin Campbell, is a sixty-five-year-old Scotsman who belongs to a famous clan, but one of its impoverished branches—his father was a carpenter by profession. As he could not afford to purchase an officer’s rank—as was the custom at

the time for sons from good families—he was forced to earn his promotions on the battlefield. His courage during the war against the Sikhs in the Punjab, then in the Crimean War, earned him a reputation as a hero.

Described in Calcutta's British circles as a “little fellow, foul-mouthed and ugly,” he has nonetheless won the trust of Queen Victoria, who has come to appreciate her Scottish subjects since settling down in Balmoral. Campbell's soldiers, particularly the Highlander Regiment, adore him, and these rough men from the Scottish highlands are the only ones in whom he has complete faith.

On October 28th, Sir Colin has left Calcutta to meet up with the forces stationed in Kanpur in an attempt to rescue the city of Lucknow. His priority is to liberate the Residency that has been resisting enemy attacks for four months now, thus becoming, throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, a symbol of the white race's courage and superiority.

He reaches Kanpur on November 3rd at the head of three thousand five hundred men. There, like General Outram before him, he tries to establish contact with the local notables, making them all sorts of promises. To no avail. No one is willing to cooperate, or even to provide food supplies for the British. Campbell then decides to assemble all the troops located upstream of Benares, and, accompanied by five thousand men and about fifty cannons and mortars, he sets off for Lucknow.

However, at the last minute he hesitates, having learnt that General Tantia Tope is heading towards Kanpur with the formidable Gwalior contingent, which revolted against their maharajah. In England, though, the enraged press leaves him no choice. General Windham will remain in Kanpur with two thousand men.

On November 9th, Campbell crosses the river and comes up against an advance guard of fifteen hundred sepoys. The odds are too uneven. After decimating them, he moves on to Alambagh, where a small English garrison is still stationed.

It is from this base, located five miles from Lucknow, that on November 14th he decides to launch the attack.

Meanwhile, in the capital, Rajahs Jai Lal and Man Singh—another great rajah of Awadh—are preparing their defence.

The first clashes take place around Dilkusha Palace, the “Heart’s Delight,” modelled on an English manor. It is in the vicinity of La Martiniere College, where students and professors are prepared to fight alongside the sepoy. Once again, British firepower defeats the light artillery and the muskets, forcing the Indian troops to retreat. A company will stay put, sacrificing their lives to cover their comrades’ escape.

The following day, Campbell’s advance guard swoops down on Sikander Bagh, a palace built by King Wajid Ali Shah for the pretty Sikander when she was his favourite wife. Surrounded by six-metre-high walls flanked by graceful turrets, the palace stands on the path leading to the Residency.

Rajah Jai Lal immediately dispatches his men to counter the enemy advance, but they only have rifles against the heavy artillery and the latest English weaponry: mobile launchers.<sup>86</sup> This is the first time these multiple-fire cannons are used in India, and they spread terror in the rebel ranks.

The battle rages on. The British manage to penetrate into the garden, cornering the insurgents, who fight back desperately. There are even women fighting on the Indian side.

During the attack, one of them manages to conceal herself in a tall leafy tree under which jars of cool water are placed. When the battle is over, some soldiers go there to rest in the shade and quench their thirst. Suddenly, the sight of a number of corpses lying under the tree attracts an officer’s attention. After examining the wounds, he realises that someone has shot them from above. Detecting a figure hidden amidst the leaves, he fires. A body, dressed in a fitted jacket and a pair of pink silk trousers, tumbles down. To his astonishment, he realises it is a young woman. Armed with two old pistols, she had managed to kill more than half a dozen men from her hiding place.

Not one of the three thousand Indian fighters at Sikander Bagh survives. Dawn breaks over piles of corpses, many still dressed in their old red uniforms.

The British advance continues. One of the last positions on the path leading to the Residency is Shah Najaf, the superb mausoleum erected for the first king of Awadh and his favourite wives. The confrontations last all afternoon; the British suffer such severe losses that the 93rd Highlanders division is ordered to retreat when, by chance, they discover a narrow

passageway behind the mausoleum. One by one, the soldiers sneak in; the Indian defenders find themselves caught between two lines of fire: in front of them, intense cannon fire, behind them, the “devils in skirts,” who pounce on them.

When evening falls, Shah Najaf’s lawns and flowerbeds are strewn with bodies. In order to avoid an outbreak of cholera, the British begin burning bodies, although some are only wounded . . . The night air is filled with the moans of the dying, begging to be shot.

The following morning, the last buildings close to the Residency are taken in hand-to-hand combat with bayonets, and in the early afternoon, the British army reaches the Bailey Gate, where the besieged captives go into raptures welcoming them.

With all these troops reunited, Generals Havelock and Outram have every intention of moving into Kaisarbagh, subjugating Lucknow and being done with the begum and her associates once and for all. To their great disappointment, Sir Colin categorically refuses. He has lost six hundred men and considers his remaining troops to be just sufficient to secure the evacuation of the Residency.

It is to take place on November 19th.

That evening, a first column of palanquins loaded with about five hundred women and children leaves the Residency and the town of Lucknow without any impediments. The garrison is to be evacuated within three days. During the night, in total silence, the hundreds of wounded are borne away on stretchers, protected by armed civilians and soldiers. Sir Colin has set up a diversionary operation to distract the Indians’ attention: Kaisarbagh is heavily bombarded by cannon fire in order to give the impression of an impending attack. Inside the palace, the women scream in terror and part of the terrified garrison is about to flee. The regent then summons the leaders:

“You can leave. I am staying,” she declares. “However, as I do not want to be taken alive by the enemy, I would ask you to cut off my head before you leave.”\*

In the face of this woman’s determination, the soldiers lower their eyes, ashamed of their own cowardice and, in a surge of pride, declare themselves ready to fight beside her.

Meanwhile, the long British convoy of four thousand men with horses and carts has reached the Gomti River. The only passage is a stone bridge, and despite the bombing and the darkness, the guards cannot possibly miss their crossing. They instantly sound the alert.

Informed in the dead of night, the regent does not seem particularly surprised:

“I was expecting it,” she replies to the officer who had hurried to warn her.

“I will sound the call to arms immediately for the troops to stop them!”

“No, let them go.”

“Pardon me?”

“Our objective is not to kill them. Our objective is to drive them out. If they themselves choose to leave and our country is thus rid of the last Angrez, so much the better! What more do you want?”

“Are we not going to avenge our dead . . . ?”

“For every British person slain, we have lost at least ten men! Do you not think it is enough? Furthermore, I refuse to attack a column of refugees with hundreds of their wounded. I am not Nana Sahib. And Rajah Jai Lal, the head of the army, shares my point of view. Do not insist. My decision is irrevocable: these people will leave in peace.”

The population celebrates the evacuation of the Residency as a great victory: all the British have left Awadh, except for Outram and a detachment of two thousand soldiers, who have remained to guard the Alambagh stronghold. The Indians boast that those, too, will soon be expelled.

There is a general mood of optimism, all the more so as they have just learnt of Tantia Tope’s victory over General Windham and of the recapture of Kanpur. The possibility of liberating the towns of Benares and Allahabad, which had belonged to Awadh before the disastrous Treaty of 1801, is discussed elatedly. Begum Hazrat Mahal even has the generals summoned to ask them to draw up a plan. Now nothing seems impossible!

**T**he recapture of Kanpur is to be short-lived. By mid-December, the town is in British hands again.

Nana Sahib, who has a price on his head, has fled; his whereabouts remain unknown.

As for his advisor, Azimullah Khan, no one has seen him. Since his body was not found on the battlefield, it is presumed he followed the Nana in his flight. However, Hazrat Mahal has her doubts: this is not consistent with his character. She has only met Azimullah once but remains convinced that while the man is capable of cruelty and cynicism, he is above all a nationalist, and will go to any extreme to free his country. Not being able to influence his terrified master any longer, it is likely Azimullah has left him in order to pursue the battle on his own terms. This brilliant, unscrupulous character's preferred area of expertise is not armed warfare, even though one must admit he is endowed with unusual self-control—it is claimed he smokes cigars on the battlefield while bombs explode all around him!—his speciality is the art of conspiracy and he excels at it.

During the following months, rumour has it that Azimullah Khan was spotted in Hyderabad with the rebel officers, then in Jodhpur, Poona and various other towns of central India, where the population is growing restless. As if by chance, wherever he goes, uprisings quickly break out. It is even whispered that he was arrested in Bhopal, but soon released, as the begum there had no desire to have Nana Sahib's protégé executed and to upset the man who may well be the next peishwa.

For his part, General Tantia Tope has been driven out of Kanpur and, as he can no longer count on Nana Sahib, he has decided to return to central India, his homeland, accompanied by Rao Sahib, his master's nephew. He has every intention of instigating a rebellion there amongst the Mahrattas.

Nonetheless, in Lucknow, the regent and her high command are worried.

During this month of January 1858, they are expecting another attack, much worse than the previous ones, as they know General Campbell has received large numbers of reinforcements from England, now on their way to Awadh.

Hazrat Mahal has undertaken the fortification of Lucknow. Fifteen thousand men are busy erecting bulwarks all around the town, except to the north, where the Gomti River acts as a natural barrier. Barricades are put up in every street and every alley, the main buildings are reinforced and every house is fitted with firing slots.

The trenches around Kaisarbagh have been filled with water from the Gomti and the army has established three lines of defence. The palaces have been transformed into veritable fortresses with bastions at every corner, the largest of which now houses the Armed Forces High Command; they are defended by one hundred and twenty-seven cannons.

If, in spite of all these preparations, the main fortifications were still to be wiped out, the resistance is to continue in the town centre, and old muskets have been distributed to the inhabitants. As always, though, ammunition is in short supply. To remedy this, the sepoys show great ingenuity. They invent a thousand ways of making shells: clay shells filled with iron filings, shells made of enormous wooden cylinders, stone shells, or even jute bags stuffed with shrapnel and gunpowder—all these equipped with improvised detonators. Old women are also paid to venture beyond the ramparts to collect stray bullets.

The regent is present on all fronts. Mounted on the royal elephant, she visits every construction site to encourage the men and to ensure ration distributions are sufficient. Many, in fact, have nothing left to eat. Ever since the fields were burnt by the enemy army, cereals are difficult to come by and expensive. And so she has appointed a leader for each area to make sure that no one starves to death, and she has ordered, if necessary, to confiscate food from the rich to feed the poor.

She has also summoned the bankers to request a two million rupee loan, which they have flatly refused. But with skilful negotiating, proffering in turn threats and promises, she has managed to obtain a first

instalment. It is far from sufficient, as no matter how loyal the soldiers are, they have to be paid. They cannot fight on empty stomachs, nor can they allow their families to die of hunger. Hazrat Mahal then decides to have her jewellery and all her gold and silver ornaments melted down. Despite the begums' indignant cries, she compels them to do the same. Out of the money thus obtained, she secretly sets aside a small war chest to finance her diplomatic actions.

The first will be to bring in, incognito, an Indian officer stationed in Kanpur, where there are still four native regiments under British command. Embarrassed, the officer attempts to explain the specific circumstances that prevented his regiments from joining the rebellion, but the Queen Mother interrupts him smoothly:

“I understand, Khan Sahib. It is however inconceivable that your soldiers and mine, Indians, brothers, slaughter each other!”

“I must admit, Huzoor, that my men and I feel trapped. We loathe the idea of fighting against our own, but at the slightest sign of indiscipline, we will be hung immediately.”

“So why not order your troops to fire blanks? We will of course do the same.”

“Yes, but afterwards? We will be executed for mutiny!”

“There will be no afterwards. Your sepoy will fire blanks and promptly join our ranks to fire at the British, with real bullets this time!”

The begum has finally been able to convince her visitor. They review the last details together, and a sum of one thousand rupees to be shared with his men seals the agreement.

Every day, Hazrat Mahal is busy from dawn to dusk, organising and mobilising everyone around her, but when she returns home exhausted, she has other problems to contend with. The begums in their Kaisarbagh Palace have formed a united front against her. The confiscation of their jewels had been the last straw. Their jealousy and irritation had been mounting for some time now, given the new Queen Mother's power; after all, she was only the fourth wife, and, moreover, from a humble background!

Mir Wajid Ali, the ammunition factory's former director, suspected by some to be loyal to the British, has fanned the flames. Frightening the women with descriptions of the enemy's victories, the power of their

cannons and their own camp's weak points, he has managed to persuade them that their new regent is incompetent, and of the danger of leaving decision-making power in her hands. Under his influence, a strong protest movement has flourished within the palace, with the women tirelessly picking fights and attempting to undermine the regent's authority.

Despite the fact that Hazrat Mahal tries to convince herself this is only inconsequential jealousy, and that she is above these petty intrigues, she cannot help but feel hurt by these cruel attacks. Fortunately there is Mumtaz! She has had a room near hers renovated for her friend, and they spend long moments together.

Even though Mumtaz is a comfort to her, she can hardly advise her on political matters. Hazrat Mahal misses the lengthy discussions with Jai Lal. She would so love to have him next to her as before; he who always knows what to do, while she, riddled with anxiety, hesitates, asking herself a thousand questions. His fortitude and decisive mind fascinate her. He reassures her when she has doubts, and his confidence and admiration give her the energy to move forward.

She looks for opportunities to meet him. In this Court, where no one can be trusted, Jai Lal's presence, his warm voice, his smile, have become indispensable to her.

Yet, the rajah remains on the defensive. He realises that the young woman is trying to revive their former relationship, but then there was only mutual friendship and admiration between them, whereas now . . . He knows he cares for her as he has never cared for any other woman. But what about her? What does she feel for him? She is so unpredictable . . . alternating between aloofness and charm for no apparent reason . . . He has no desire to give in to her yet again. Did he not see her flirting with Prince Firoz the other day?

How could he guess that Firoz Shah is the least of the begum's concerns?

\* \* \*

General Frank's troops, reinforced by the Gurkhas provided by Jung Bahadur, Nepal's prime minister and the country's strong man, constitute Sir Campbell's vanguard. They march towards Awadh, conquering towns

after hard-won battles, but the moment the Nepalese leave, the Indians launch further attacks and free them again. They harass the British army all along the route. Never admitting defeat, they incessantly renew their offensives and recapture the lost positions every time.

For General Frank, the objective is not to pacify Awadh—that would require far more troops—but to reach Lucknow. His forces make good progress supported by the Gurkhas—small, stocky warriors of legendary cruelty. They must absolutely be stopped before the panic-stricken population of Awadh flees before them. The begum’s high command decides to send a dozen regiments to counter their advance.

The sepoys have gone only a few miles when a horseman, riding at breakneck speed, catches up with them. He brings a message from Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah:

“Turn back! You have been deceived! The begum and the Court party want to keep you away while they negotiate the town’s surrender to the British. Return immediately to prevent this treason! It is a sacred order from God’s vice regent, whom you must obey!”

The men hesitate; they have sworn allegiance to the young king and the Queen Mother, but they are impressed by the maulvi: he is a brave warrior and a holy man. Why would he trick them? After a long discussion, they decide to turn around and return to the capital.<sup>87</sup>

The incident stirs up a hornet’s nest and sparks off an open crisis. When accused, Ahmadullah Shah replies by publicly contesting the begum’s and the “turbaned group’s”<sup>88</sup> authority, and he threatens to proclaim himself king.

His troops and the begum’s confront each other in a series of skirmishes, until on January 7th, the two sides fight each other in a real pitched battle. It has already been underway for several hours and has caused about two hundred deaths when the regent herself appears, interrupting the battle. And from her palanquin, with blazing eyes, she chastises the fighters:

“Have you gone mad? The enemy is at our doorstep and instead of protecting the population, you are killing each other! How could I have ever trusted you?”

The fighting stops. At the regent's reprimand, the men lower their heads in embarrassment. Seeing this, she relents:

“Go home and preserve your strength to defend your town and your families against the Angrez. I am counting on your loyalty and your courage.”

Amidst these internal conflicts, the commander-in-chief of the Indian army, Sir Colin Campbell, renews his offensive against Awadh. He would have preferred to wait until autumn and first put down the revolts, which are constantly breaking out in the surrounding areas, but politically, Lucknow remains a priority.

“All eyes in India are trained on Awadh, as they were on Delhi,” Lord Canning writes to him from Calcutta. “It is the sepoys’ last rallying point, the focus of all their hopes, the only centre that still represents a dynasty. The native leaders have been waiting the last two years to see if we are capable of retaining what we captured, in order to draw their conclusions.”\*

And so Sir Colin sets out. With thirty thousand men, including sixteen regiments from the royal army and a powerful artillery battalion, he commands the largest force assembled by the British in India.

Progress is slow, as the railway lines can only take them one hundred and twenty miles, from Calcutta to as far as Raniganj. Then the companies and all the supplies—cannons, ammunition, ladders and siege equipment—are transported for the remaining nine hundred miles separating them from Kanpur on elephant back or bullock carts. The whole lot makes up a siege train about ten miles long.

The scorching heat forces the men to halt between 10 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon, and so they are unable to proceed more than twenty-five to thirty miles a day. It will take them over three weeks to travel from Calcutta to Benares. From the holy town, they only advance in detachments of three or four companies, as the region is infested with groups of insurgents. After Allahabad, they even have to cover the last one hundred and fifty miles to Kanpur on foot.

Finally by mid-February, the whole army is assembled in Kanpur, and after a few days’ rest, is ready to march on Lucknow. Lord Canning, however, asks Campbell to wait: the prime minister of Nepal is keen to

participate in the siege. The town's wealth is legendary and he has every intention of obtaining a share of the booty. No one is fooled, but they cannot annoy such an important ally. Cursing, Campbell will wait a while; then, having run out of patience, on February 28th he orders his army to cross the Ganges.

The British have barely reached the other side when they encounter a huge deployment of troops. Not just sepoy regiments and taluqdars' troops, but thousands of peasants too, each one fighting desperately to defend their territory. It is a general mobilisation, much to the surprise of the British officers newly arrived in India.

"They had told us it was a mutiny," writes one of them, amazed. "Now what I see around me is a struggle for national independence. The whole country is up in arms against us foreigners."<sup>89</sup>\*

However, the superiority of the British forces quickly becomes apparent and increasing numbers of taluqdars desert. Rajah Man Singh is the first to betray and abandon the struggle. He retreats into his fort with his seven thousand soldiers, taking a number of his peers with him.

Despondency in the face of the adversary's strength is not the only reason for the defections. These feudal lords have become fearful of the power of popular revolt. They understand that a victory may well upset Indian society's age-old traditions and threaten their privileges to a far greater extent than the British—with their ingrained sense of hierarchy—ever would.

\* \* \*

This evening, Hazrat Mahal has returned to the palace exhausted and distraught. Between the losses on the battlefield and the desertions, the fighting force has been reduced by a third. There are about sixty thousand men left, and of these, only thirty thousand sepoys.

While her friend Mumtaz tries to entertain her, an officer demands an audience. Accompanied by a eunuch, he halts at the entrance to the drawing room. His preoccupied manner presages bad news.

"Well, speak up! What is the matter?" the Queen Mother questions him.

"While trying to resist the enemy attack at Nawabganj . . . Rajah Jai Lal . . ."

Hazrat Mahal trembles, her face has paled, she cannot speak. It is Mumtaz who encourages the man to continue:

“What happened to the rajah?”

“A cannonball killed him,” stammers the man, lowering his head.

*Cannonball . . . killed . . .*

Hazrat Mahal does not understand . . .

And suddenly, as if she were watching a performance, she hears someone shout:

“Is he dead?”

From the eyes staring back at her, she realises it is she who has just cried out, and that the man is watching her, stunned.

Mumtaz barely has the time to hurry the officer out of the room before Hazrat Mahal collapses in her arms. Jai Lal dead? Pain clutches her heart and prevents her from breathing. Panic-stricken, Mumtaz lies her down, bathes her forehead with cool water, and caresses her hands and her face, all the while trying to comfort her. In vain. She is suffocated by sobs, she thrashes about, she tries to stand up, but, drained of blood, she collapses onto the divan.

“So, you loved him so much?” murmurs Mumtaz, distressed.

Why had she never let him know? Always this damned pride . . . And now it is too late.

Mumtaz remains beside her friend all evening, singing old chants from their childhood to calm her. Hazrat Mahal closes her eyes and slowly, as her breathing becomes more regular, she falls asleep.

When she wakes up the next morning and realises it was not a nightmare, her tears begin to flow again, even more profusely. Despite all her efforts, she cannot control herself. She requests Mumtaz to cancel all her audiences and not to allow anyone entry to her apartments.

Towards midday, a huge commotion erupts in the hall. Drowning the eunuchs’ and the women’s high-pitched cries, a loud voice thunders: “Let me pass, you fools! If the Queen Mother is ill, it is all the more vital I see her!”

The brocade door hanging is swept aside, revealing a tall figure.

Her eyes wide with surprise, Hazrat Mahal looks at him as if she were seeing a ghost.

“You . . . are not dead?” she manages to say.

“Dead?”

The rajah stands stock-still, then, understanding the confusion, says:

“Oh no. It was the unfortunate officer beside me who was killed. I, as you can see for yourself, am very much alive!”

The emotion is too much for her, the floodgates, carefully built up over all these months, burst open, and sobbing, she throws herself into his arms, stammering incomprehensible words.

He embraces her trembling body and rocks her gently, as if she is a child that needs reassuring. Tenderly he caresses her long hair and, leaning forward, he places a kiss on her burning forehead.

Mumtaz disappears discreetly.

**I**n a modest dwelling in the old town, a stout woman, her hair not quite grey yet, is anxiously awaiting the arrival of her guests. Since the previous day, she has done her utmost to make her two poor rooms more welcoming. She had swept the mud floor, washed the blue painted walls and had dusted relentlessly. Then, in the bedroom, she laid out the treasures her niece had brought for the occasion: a large floral carpet, silk cushions, and instead of the *charpoy*<sup>20</sup> one of these Angrez inventions they call a “mattress,” covering it with a soft satin quilt, and lastly, sheets so fine, she had never seen anything like them.

When her niece Mumtaz had come to ask her to discreetly receive a couple of her friends in her house, Aslam Bibi had cried out. She, a respectable woman, was certainly not going to endanger her reputation built up over forty years of virtuous living by encouraging illicit love affairs!

However, Mumtaz had been so insistent that she had finally given in. A widow, the mother of already married daughters, Aslam Bibi still has a sense of romance and had been moved at the idea of this couple risking death, or at least perpetual banishment, for love. In India, whether one is Hindu, Muslim or Christian, nobody takes a woman’s virtue lightly. She was going to live the greatest adventure of her life through these mysterious lovers! Though it is mainly the purse of gold her niece had slipped her that had overcome her last hesitations. Since her husband’s death, Aslam Bibi barely manages to survive by weaving fine muslin that used to be highly appreciated, but hardly sells any more since the king’s exile and the ruin of the rajahs and taluqdars.

Night has long fallen. Sitting in her kitchen, the woman begins to worry: and what if her guests did not show up? Should she return the gold? . . . Impossible! She has already given part of it to the moneylender who has been advancing her money to live since her husband died—at 14

percent a month, a bargain, he claims, because he regards her highly; a regard he would be ready to prove to her. Since she has been widowed, however, Aslam Bibi has learnt a great deal. She knows she must not annoy her creditors but also that she should not respond to their advances in the hope they will forget the debt, as it is the opposite that actually happens: when there is nothing left to gain, they are pitiless.

She hears a soft scratching sound at the door. Roused from her thoughts, the woman jumps up to open it, taking care not to let the hinges creak, and hurries to welcome the slim silhouette concealed under a black burqa.

*“Assalam-o-Alaikum.”*

*“Walaikum Assalam.”*

They only exchange the traditional greeting.

Mumtaz has indeed ordered that everything be done with the greatest secrecy, but these few words suffice to convince the hostess that her guest is a Muslim woman belonging to the highest society. In addition, the delicate hand is proof enough, even if the absence of jewellery tries to assert the contrary.

Alone in the bedroom, Hazrat Mahal contemplates the peeling walls—a contrast to the refined bedding in which she recognises her friend’s intervention. She removes her burqa, sets her clothes in order—a dark blue garara embroidered with silver that brings out the sheen on her fair skin—and carefully arranges the coils of pearls decorating her hair. Will Jai Lal find her beautiful?

Jai Lal . . . Remembering his kisses, she is overcome by a wave of emotion. The memory of that morning when she had fallen into his arms crying fills her with joy . . . and fear. What had he thought of her? It has already been two days since that moment, and they have been careful to avoid meeting each other; their desire is so intense, they fear they will betray themselves.

It is the first time she is in love. She realises the feeling she had for Wajid Ali Shah was mainly admiration for a sovereign wreathed in glory, then, when she had come to know him better, tenderness tinged with pity for a kind and loyal being. She had long convinced herself he was doing all he could in an impossible situation . . . Since becoming the regent, though,

and especially since she has been in daily contact with Jai Lal, she has come to understand that, more than kindness and intelligence, a leader's greatest virtue is courage.

However, does courage exclude prudence? Is this meeting with Jai Lal in this unknown house not pure madness? Although she has chosen to risk her life to meet the man she loves, does she have the right to jeopardise her image of "the fighting mother" revered by the soldiers, her son's position and the future of the freedom movement?

She would never have agreed to Mumtaz's plan, even at the cost of tearing her heart out, if her friend had not managed to convince her it was foolproof. She would leave the palace using the same means that Wajid Ali Shah's former "fairies" sometimes employed. These beautiful dancers, abandoned by their master, pined away uselessly in a zenana which had become their tomb . . . The boldest of them had cultivated or renewed relationships outside the palace, and for a few gold coins, the eunuchs turned a blind eye: with the king gone, there was no longer any need to guard his treasure.

This evening, Hazrat Mahal had claimed she was very tired and had asked not to be disturbed for any reason. Mumtaz had discreetly brought her a burqa and ordered a phaeton from a coachman she knew well. He would wait for the lady and bring her back to the palace before daybreak. Meanwhile, Mumtaz would sleep in the Queen Mother's bed to make believe the regent was there in the unlikely event that, disobeying her orders, someone were to enter the bedroom.

The rustle of a drape . . . she feels a hand touching her shoulder. A shiver runs through her, she wants to turn around, but does not have the strength to. She remains where she is, motionless, savouring this lingering touch that moves upwards, caressing her neck . . . a gentle, firm hand that does not ask, that demands, as if it were evident.

In an ample embrace, he takes her in his arms and gazes at her, marvelling, all the while continuing to caress her back, her waist, her hips. And she, who had imagined this moment for months, feels like a child without a past, who wants only one thing: that this moment should last forever. With eyes wide open, she contemplates this man, she

trembles and the violence of her desire frightens her. For the first time in her life, she is no longer in control of her feelings.

So, to return to familiar ground, in an attempt to tame the unknown, she closes her eyes and parts her lips slightly, expecting a kiss.

“No!”

Jai Lal moves away, leaving her quivering. And, as she looks at him uncomprehending, says:

“No, my dear, I am not one of your dreams, a ghost you hang your desires and your emptiness on. Look at me. I am a real man, with his qualities and his faults, a man who loves you and whom you may be able to learn to love.”

“But . . . I love you!”

“You do not love me yet. You are scared. You just proved it by closing your eyes to remain in your imaginary world. You are enamoured of a dream. I think both you and I deserve better than that.”

She lowers her head to hide her tears. She knows he is right. She, whose courage everyone extols, is incapable of laying down her armour. She, with her sensual beauty that seems to promise infinite delight, can certainly take her partner to the peak of sensual pleasure, but she is left behind on the bank, while the other does not even notice—whether it be Wajid Ali Shah, the only man she has ever known, or the friend in the zenana with whom she tried to forget her loneliness. It is not that she is acting, quite the contrary; she enjoys love but is unable to relinquish her inhibitions, panicking at the idea of being vulnerable and of running the risk of being abandoned again.

Abandoned, as she had been as a baby, by the person she was attached to with all the fibres of her being: her mother, who died just a few weeks after giving birth to her. She had been told that for days she had refused her wet nurse’s milk and had almost died too.

Her father’s death had rekindled her feelings of insecurity. Since then, she could never allow herself to stumble . . . there was no one left to pick her up.

Thus she had been forced to arm herself with an inner strength. But she alone knows the weakness and anxiety hidden deep beneath her confident exterior.

And now that she is in love for the first time, she is terrified, she wants to let go but is incapable of doing so.

The sobs she can no longer contain suffocate her.

“Come, my *jani*,<sup>21</sup> cry as much as you want, but know that I love you and I will do so for the rest of my life.”

He takes her in his arms and embraces her tenderly:

“Although I take a long time to make up my mind, I also have a reputation for stubbornness and even if you fight like a fury to escape my love, I will never let go of you!”

She sobs even harder. It seems as if all the defences she has built up to protect herself are crumbling. She no longer knows if she is crying out of fear or happiness.

He draws her towards the big bed and slowly he undresses her. For hours he talks to her and caresses her, covering her whole body with kisses. She likes his slightly rough hands—the hands of a man more used to riding through the countryside than frequenting salons—but most of all, she likes the passion that seeps through every one of his gestures, and which he tries to suppress so as not to scare her.

The hours pass without their noticing. Then a soft knocking on the wall startles them. They cannot believe it is time to separate.

“She must be mistaken,” grumbles Jai Lal.

But through the window they can make out the first light of dawn.

Then he turns to the young woman and embraces her as if he fears losing her:

“When, my *jani*?” he asks in a faltering voice.

“Now, whenever you want, always,” she stammers, her face pressed to his chest. At this moment, everything beyond them seems unreal, unimportant. Unreal this war, this Court and this government too. The only reality is their love. For the first time she feels alive, the rest is only pretence and justification to escape the emptiness. She would like to abandon everything, to leave with him, to go far, far away.

She knows it is impossible. She has a duty towards her son. He had asked for nothing, she wanted him to be king and today her freedom is the price to be paid for her ambition.

As if reading her thoughts, Jai Lal murmurs:

“However much we may want to, neither you nor I could abandon the struggle and all those who have put their trust in us. We would despise ourselves. Our love would not survive it.”

As always, he is right.

So to lighten the atmosphere, she quips:

“Let us hope that between battles, the British will leave us time to love each other!”

“We will make their lives so miserable, they will be forced to take a break every now and then!” he promises, laughing.

Persistent knocking is heard on the wall.

Hazrat Mahal throws herself into Jai Lal’s arms.

“We will meet very soon, my love. And remember the emeralds—that will be our sign. I will wear them every time we can meet.”

And slipping on her burqa, she disappears—a slight black silhouette in the pale pink of dawn.

\* \* \*

Since March 2nd, General Campbell has been camped at Alambagh with his soldiers, preparing for the attack on Lucknow. On March 4th, General Frank joins him. Together, their troops represent thirty-one thousand men, almost all European, reinforced by Jung Bahadur’s nine thousand Gurkhas.

In Lucknow, now transformed into a fortified town, the population is on the lookout. The military command directs operations from its newly established headquarters in Kaisarbagh Palace. The private apartments are now empty, as the wives and the women of the royal family have left what has become an excessively dangerous place to take refuge in houses far from the combat zone. Hazrat Mahal is relieved. She could no longer bear their visits and recriminations, and hated being constantly spied upon.

Faced with the strength of the enemy forces, some taluqdars have chosen to flee, deserting with their troops. Apart from the thirty thousand sepoy, only ten thousand or so ill-prepared volunteers are left. Despite his best efforts to organise and reassure them, Jai Lal can feel their anxiety mounting, especially after news of the presence of the “Nepali

demons” has been confirmed. He needs help to comfort and motivate his men to continue the fight.

Hazrat Mahal had accepted immediately. The king and she will come to talk to the soldiers.

On this afternoon of March 5th, thousands of soldiers assembled in the immense Kaisarbagh garden stand in the sun awaiting the young sovereign, to whom they had sworn allegiance barely eight months ago.

When the king and his mother finally appear on the balcony, a wave of fervour runs through the crowd, cheers and blessings ring out from all sides.

In the background, Jai Lal waits for the enthusiasm to abate, but the men do not seem to tire of bellowing out their joy. He is obliged to call for silence in order to allow the king to speak. Birjis Qadar steps forward, dressed very simply in a white cotton churidar and kurta—clothes dear to the Lucknawis’ hearts—and wearing a royal mandil on his head.

In a vibrant but poised voice, he evokes his father, Wajid Ali Shah: “Your king, who is a prisoner in Fort William, is counting on all of you to defeat the Angrez so that he can return to Awadh and re-establish an era of prosperity and dignity.”

The adolescent is never presumptuous, nor does he assert himself as the sovereign. In a society where respect for elders is a supreme value, his modesty wins him hearts. He is cheered: so young and so wise! The rough sepoy are moved to tears.

With a gesture, Birjis Qadar silences the ovations.

“Now, the person whom I admire the most in the world, who with her courage and determination presides over our destinies, the Queen, my mother, will speak to you.”

Hazrat Mahal corrects him immediately:

“It is not I, my son,” and turning to the soldiers, “it is all of you fighters gathered here, with your courage and loyalty, who hold the destiny of Awadh in your hands! It is you whom we should honour and thank. We place ourselves in your hands.”

With an ample gesture she reaches out to the crowd, as if she wants to embrace all of them in gratitude.

Amazed and fascinated, the audience contemplates this exceptional woman, this queen, so beautiful and noble, who is paying homage to

them: simple peasants, mere soldiers. In the silence, Hazrat Mahal signals to Jai Lal to approach.

“I particularly want to thank your leader, Rajah Jai Lal, whose foresight and courage we all appreciate. He does and will do his utmost to protect you, for he loves you as his children. Under his leadership, you won a memorable victory at Chinhat, and for months, you have been holding off the enemy. Under his leadership, we will win!”

Her words are greeted with frenetic hurrahs. These men, who have always sacrificed themselves for their masters, have never felt so highly recognised and honoured. They are overcome with emotion; they laugh and cry at the same time. Galvanised, they brandish their rifles, their scythes, their lances. They are no longer afraid, they are no longer doubtful. They are ready to fight for the Queen Mother, the king and the country. Knowing how important it is for the people to be able to approach those they admire, the begum has had the royal elephant readied and, contrary to the custom that dictates it be reserved only for the sovereigns, she invites the rajah to join them in the silver howdah. Slowly, they tour the park, acclaimed by the soldiers, who are sensitive to the tribute paid to their leader.

Although danger is at the gates of Lucknow, Hazrat Mahal is radiant. Surrounded by the two men she loves, amidst the people cheering them, never in her life has she felt this happy.

**O**n March 6th at dawn, General Sir Colin Campbell launches an attack on Lucknow, which he hopes will be decisive.

Although outnumbered by the enemy forces, he decides to divide up his troops, contrary to strict military protocol. While he moves in from the southeast, he sends Outram—with seven thousand soldiers and a powerful artillery battery, galvanised by the young Lieutenant Vivian Majendie’s fervour—towards the north, along the supposedly impassable Gomti River. However, overnight, brilliant engineering allows them to construct two makeshift bridges and at dawn, Outram and his troops are able to ford the river.

Their objective: to capture Chakar Kothi, the racecourse grandstand opposite the Kaisarbagh palaces, and set up the heavy artillery there. The Indian command will thus find itself caught between two lines of fire.

However, taking the grandstand proves to be a particularly arduous task; a small group of sepoys positioned inside defends it ferociously. In under an hour about twenty British, including an officer, are killed. General Outram then gives the order for the gunners to open fire until all resistance is wiped out.

Lieutenant Majendie tells the rest of the story in his memoirs:

“Enraged at having lost Lieutenant Anderson, a very popular officer, a group of our Sikh soldiers rushes into the ruined building and comes out with the only survivor. Seizing him by the legs, they try in vain to tear him apart. This does not work so they drag him along the ground, piercing him with their bayonets. But the worst was yet to come: they improvise a brazier and hold the dying man above it, despite his jerks and his screams. At one moment the man, mad with pain, manages to escape his tormentors and drags himself a few meters along the ground, but they recapture him and again hold him above the fire until he succumbs, atrociously burnt.”

And Lieutenant Majendie concludes:

“Thus, in this 19th century that prides itself on its civilisation and humanity, one can roast a human being to death while small groups of Englishmen and Sikhs look on unperturbed!”<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, to the south, Sir Colin advances methodically. The fortified palaces, the mosques and the mausoleums are being taken one by one. The hardest battle is fought around Begum Kothi, the last palace before Kaisarbagh, which Rajah Jai Lal is defending with his sepoys. For hours they manage to resist, until British cannon fire destroys all the walls and Jai Lal sounds the retreat, judging it futile to sacrifice more men. With a few hundred sepoys, he remains in position to cover the escape while the British move into the kothi.

The fighting is particularly fierce. Once the sepoys have fired, they do not waste time recharging their rifles, but throw them at the British, using the bayonets like javelins. Then, drawing their swords, they rush in, hurling war cries and finally throwing themselves beneath the enemy bayonets, cutting off legs and feet before they themselves fall, pierced to death.

There are only a few dozen men left when Jai Lal gives the order to withdraw through a breach in the rear, close to where their horses are waiting. Just as they are leaving, the tall figure of a British officer suddenly appears:

“Is there anyone here?” he shouts randomly.

“Yes there is!” retorts Jai Lal, aiming his rifle. He has barely fired the shot, when, stunned, he recognises the soldier who has collapsed on the ground: it is William Hodson, the man who arrested Bahadur Shah Zafar and treacherously assassinated the emperor’s three sons. His picture had appeared in all the major Indian newspapers at the time.

The shot, however, has alerted the enemy. Jai Lal and his companions barely have time to mount their horses and beat a hasty retreat.

The news of the death of the most hated Englishman in the whole of India spreads like wildfire throughout the town. As far as the barricades, the name of the hero who has avenged the honour of the fallen but still revered imperial family is acclaimed.

As soon as he reaches Kaisarbagh Palace, still covered in dust and blood, Jai Lal is received by the young king and the Queen Mother, who express

their gratitude before the assembled court. While the enemy cannons continue to boom outside, a ceremony is improvised during which, with great pomp and circumstance, Birjis Qadar presents the rajah with a splendid *khilat* embroidered with gold and pearls.<sup>23</sup>

Later that evening, Jai Lal and Hazrat Mahal meet in Mumtaz's room, connected to the begum's by a narrow corridor.

It is now impossible to get to the small house in the old town, further besieged each day by enemy forces. They know they are taking a great risk, but in the general confusion with officers coming and going from one palace to the other, who would be surprised at seeing a masked man entering the former courtesan Mumtaz's room?

The only danger is Mammoo Khan, whose jealousy breeds suspicion. He was used to seeing Hazrat Mahal at any time of the day or night, but recently he had provoked her wrath by advising her to negotiate with the British. Contemptuously, the begum had forbidden him to appear before her. Since then he has been nursing his resentment and is not to be seen anywhere.

Immersed in her happiness, Hazrat Mahal has forgotten about him. Every evening she joins her beloved in the big bed decorated with fragrant jasmine and, until dawn breaks, they lose themselves in each other's love.

It is a lingering contemplation, where, trembling, they both discover and revel in one another. Before this man who gives himself without reserve, this warrior who gazes at her with wonderment and the innocence of an adolescent, her restraints and fears dissolve. She caresses his strong, robust body, nestling herself sensually against him, pressing her breasts and her stomach against his, astonished at her own audacity. Very quickly, though, she stops asking herself questions, swept away by a whirlwind, abandoning herself, head thrown back, lips parted in exaltation, caught up in a warm breeze, a deep chant, an intense light that penetrates her whole body; she can feel it growing, escaping her and blossoming into an incandescent explosion.

Every night they give themselves to each other in a passionate embrace. Every night they know it may be their last.

**G**eneral Campbell's troops methodically take over the town of Lucknow. Avoiding the roads spiked with traps and barricades, they go from house to house, dynamiting the walls to clear a path for themselves, and slaughtering the inhabitants who were unable to flee. The Indians defend the terrain tooth and nail and when they are forced to retreat, they take care to leave bottles of alcohol behind in the abandoned houses, knowing the British soldiers cannot resist the temptation to drink and this will delay their progress that much more.

From March 9th onwards, the bombing of Kaisarbagh intensifies. Campbell's cannons in the south are now joined by Outram's artillery in the north. Nonetheless, the sepoys have sworn to defend the seat of power and to give their lives for the Queen Mother, the king and the country.

Assisted by Mumtaz and two of the palace hakims, Hazrat Mahal has organised a makeshift dispensary. The Court surgeon has disappeared, doubtless judging it prudent to flee. Apart from dressings of antiseptic herbs for the wounds and ligatures to stem the flow of blood, they cannot do much more, except offer comforting words and administer opium to alleviate the pain.

However, many, in particular the few remaining ministers in the palace, believe that the regent's place is not at Kaisarbagh. They attempt to convince her to accompany them to a house far from the combat zone. Hazrat Mahal will have none of it:

"Leave, Sahiban, the king and I will remain. How could we abandon these thousands of men who are risking their lives for us?"

As for Jai Lal, he says nothing. She is grateful for this, as his worried expression betrays his concern, but he knows her well enough not to intervene. He understands that she needs to do something, to feel useful. All the more so as this very morning, she has received distressing news:

the Queen Mother Malika Kishwar, King Wajid Ali Shah's mother, had died in Paris two months earlier. The news has just reached India.

For Hazrat Mahal it has come as a terrible shock. The Queen Mother was the woman whom she admired more than anyone in the world. Demanding and passionate, she was a good judge of people and had never succumbed to flattery. She appreciated her son's young wife, in whom she recognised a personality as strong as her own, although too outspoken, and she had often warned her against the pitfalls of the Court.

The Queen Mother had waited months in London for a meeting with Queen Victoria. In vain. In despair, she had decided to return, stopping over in Paris on the way home. Maybe she could convince the French to intervene? In Paris, however, nobody had ever heard of Lucknow or the kingdom of Awadh, and they had paid no attention to this strange old lady. Exhausted and short of funds, the Queen Mother had fallen ill. She had passed away in a modest hotel, attended by her youngest son and two faithful servants. She had been buried in a cemetery called Père-Lachaise.

Hazrat Mahal tries to console herself with the thought that at least Malika Kishwar died with a clear conscience. She would certainly never have forgiven herself had she not done everything possible trying to save her son's throne. She was indeed a woman with a sense of duty.

*She trusted me; I will be worthy of that trust. I too will fight to the bitter end.*

The bombing was to continue for two days. Shells rained down on all sides. Jai Lal had a lucky escape and it was with great difficulty that he managed to persuade Hazrat Mahal that she and the young king remain in the basement.

At present, though, the enemy forces are nearing Kaisarbagh.

"We will not be able to hold out much longer," announces the rajah one evening, his face drawn. "You must leave immediately for Musabagh Palace."

"I want to remain with you!"

"And place the king in danger?"

She shivers.

"But you . . . ?"

"I will join you very soon, I promise."

He holds her in his arms for a long time.

“We will meet again soon, my jani! Come now, please, it is time. Night is falling, no one must see you leave the palace. An escort is waiting. We have not a moment to lose.”

Musabagh is a vast princely residence situated four miles to the north of the town, where the Court used to go to enjoy the fresh country air. In order to avoid attracting attention, the regent, her son and Mumtaz climb into a simple *doli*,<sup>24</sup> escorted by soldiers dressed up as peasants. As they cross the Gomti Bridge, Hazrat Mahal’s hand tightens on the revolver given to her by Jai Lal. She will not have to use it. They reach the palace without hindrance.

The following day, attacked from all sides, Jai Lal and his three thousand soldiers will be forced to beat a hasty retreat. Two hours later, Kaisarbagh is occupied by the British.

Their next target is Musabagh.

\* \* \*

As soon as she arrived at her new refuge, Hazrat Mahal systematically visited the buildings, appreciating the thickness of the walls and the massive towers, from where one could get a good shot at the attackers. However, the dozens of high doors and arched windows make the palace very vulnerable. All night long, the regent has encouraged her sepoy to erect mud walls and position sandbags to block the openings. When Jai Lal and his soldiers reach Musabagh the next day, he takes over operations himself. Despite his men’s exhaustion, he leaves them no time to rest. They hastily complete the defences and position the cannons on the corner towers and behind the terrace balustrades. Within a few hours, the summer residence is transformed into a fortress.

Just in time. General Campbell’s troops appear on the horizon.

For five days and five nights, the palace will resist the violent Howitzer attacks. The Indian cannons vainly try to retaliate; their cannonballs inevitably fall short of the enemy batteries. Then, risking everything, a few volunteers decide to slip out of the palace to steal behind the enemy lines in order to throw grenades at the artillery.

But before setting off for a certain death, the men have a last request: to be blessed by the king and the Queen Mother.

Every day, dozens of these men depart to sacrifice their lives in this manner, and every morning the heartbreaking ceremony takes place.

At the centre of this gathering of soldiers stand King Birjis Qadar and his mother. On behalf of the whole country, they thank the young men for their heroism. This gesture surprises them, as does the depth of emotion the Queen Mother is trying hard to hide. After all, they are only doing their duty!

However, when this great lady, whom they revere as they do Durga, the warrior goddess, asks their names and those of their native villages in order to assist their families after the victory, it is their turn to weep and shower blessings upon her.

Each night, Jai Lal and Hazrat Mahal manage to meet, refusing to allow sleep to keep them apart. They feel as if they have known each other forever, as if these short weeks have been years of love and mutual understanding. For the first time, Jai Lal allows himself to voice his doubts, as he knows the young woman silently caressing his forehead can understand and help him. And then, without saying so, he wants to prepare her for a future in which he may no longer be beside her.

He analyses their tactical errors severely:

“If the popular uprising had reached the western and central areas, we could have won. The people were ready to rebel, and had started to do so, but they needed leaders. Unfortunately, the sepoys preferred to get to the important centres of rebellion—Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur—leaving inexperienced civilians to hold off the British return.”

“We were also betrayed by some of the taluqdars who claimed to be our allies!”

“Not only the taluqdars. The enemy bought off many people’s loyalty. Indians provided them with food, transport and even information! Sometimes I think that as a people we lack honesty or dedication to any cause that goes beyond our own personal interest. Unlike the British, who are capable of the worst atrocities, but also of the greatest sacrifices for their country.”

“But our people have sacrificed themselves too, without counting the cost!”

“The people, yes, perhaps because their lives are so miserable that they consider they have nothing left to lose. But those who own something, the shopkeepers, the small landowners, have they ever been motivated by anything other than profit? As for our elites, apart from a few rare exceptions, have they ever acted in accordance with their great speeches on honour and service?”

Hazrat Mahal gazes admiringly at her lover, and yet again marvels at the difference between him and other men who, resigned, put up with their fate. Jai Lal never gives up, and this is another reason why she loves him; she loves him for his rebellious streak and his unshakable principles—what others refer to as “his madness”!

Nestling against his shoulder, she takes his hand and kisses it tenderly.

There are nearly four thousand men entrenched in Musabagh, but the rajah knows they cannot hold out for long against the superior British forces. Defeat is only a few days away. Their situation is all the more precarious as almost all the taluqdars have deserted the capital, followed by their troops. Maulvi Ahmadullah is the only one left. After resisting, barricaded inside Hazrat Abbas’s sanctuary in the town centre, he has come to Musabagh.

The first confrontation takes place on March 19th.

After bombarding the palace relentlessly, General Outram then launches the offensive, killing hundreds of men in the space of a few hours and capturing all the artillery battalions. The Indians, however, refuse to admit defeat and, in mad acts of heroism, they throw themselves before the cannons, armed only with their swords in an attempt to push back the enemy.

But how can they continue to fight without any artillery? The situation is desperate. Above all, they must save the king and the Queen Mother, and preserve the army for future battles. The rajah will remain behind with about a hundred sepoy to create a diversion, thus allowing more time to cover their escape.

Hazrat Mahal and Jai Lal are to spend a last night together. As she, distraught, sobs in his arms, he tries to comfort her:

“Have no fear, my jani, I will come to you. Meanwhile, I trust you. From now on, it is you who will lead the struggle. Do not let yourself be swayed. As the holder of absolute power, and as regent, the generals owe you total obedience. If they raise any objections, place your son at the forefront. They cannot disobey the king. Come now, promise me you will remain strong and will never lose hope.”

With a weak smile, she gives him her word.

They must depart before dawn. The rajah makes a short speech before the assembled soldiers, thanking them, and reiterates his confidence and his trust in them. The men are moved, their throats thick with tears: will they ever again see the man who for months has been as much a father to them as a leader?

Jai Lal then turns to his friend, the Rajah of Mahmudabad, who is to accompany the young king and the Queen Mother.

“I entrust them to you, Rajah Sahib,” he says in a faltering voice.

“I answer for them with my life,” the rajah assures him. He is an honourable man and has fully grasped the situation.

Hazrat Mahal covers her face with her veil to hide her agitation.

Jai Lal and she stand face to face; they cannot take their eyes off each other.

“Have faith, my jani,” he murmurs, “I love you more than anything in the world and I will reconquer Lucknow for you.”

It is time to leave.

Giving their horses a smart crack of the whip, the small army surges forward at a gallop, raising clouds of dust. Immobile, Jai Lal watches the road until they have completely disappeared from view.

A hand is laid on his shoulder. It is Brendan Murphy, his Irish companion, who insisted on remaining with him. They smile wordlessly at each other.

The day ahead of them will be long.

On March 21st, after a fierce battle, this last bastion of resistance falls. The maulvi flees with his partisans. Campbell’s cavalry gives chase for a few miles. Although a large number of his men are killed, Ahmadullah Shah manages to escape.

As for Rajah Jai Lal, someone told the begum, they saw him fight like a lion. Since then, no news. Was he killed in battle? Captured? Did he manage to flee?

\* \* \*

It was to take two weeks of intense bombing to subdue Lucknow.

The sepoys fought heroically and defended the entrance to the palace to the last. In the apartments, hundreds of charred bodies give off an unbearable stench, and in the streets, corpses block the conqueror's progress.

On the British side, however, no one can understand how the begum and her troops miraculously managed to escape without encountering the slightest resistance!

The official explanation is that the cavalry regiment assigned to follow them somehow lost its way.

Indignation is at its peak in the officers' mess: how could the colonel in charge of operations have made such a stupid mistake?

"It was no mistake, I can assure you of that. I was there," intervenes an officer amidst the commotion.

His words are greeted with a stunned silence and he continues:

"Refusing to pay any attention to his guide's information, the colonel ordered his troops to take the opposite direction. Some of us tried to make him listen to reason, but he insisted and we were forced to obey. That is how we galloped away from the route the fugitives had taken!"

"What a shame! This man should be demoted!"

The officer shakes his head in disagreement.

"It would seem that Sir Colin Campbell himself is responsible. He admires the begum greatly and did not want to risk killing or imprisoning her. He has not forgotten that last November, she allowed our besieged compatriots to leave the Residency with the women, children and wounded. With his sense of chivalry, he decided to let her escape in turn. I also suspect that as a Scotsman, with a long history of wars of independence, deep down he respects the men who are fighting to free their country."

“He definitely likes them!” confirms another. “I heard him say: ‘Now that we have recaptured Lucknow, why intercept the desperate soldiers who are only trying to escape?’”

General Campbell, however, has underestimated the begum’s determination to continue the fight, at any cost.

Unlike the events that occurred after the fall of Delhi, where thousands of civilians had been put to death, Colin Campbell refuses to organise summary executions. However, he is unable to control the rage of the soldiers, who take their revenge on all those who were unable to flee. Hundreds of elderly, sick people, women and children are massacred. Their bodies, along with the thousands of fighters’ corpses, give off a foul odour that permeates the whole town. Witnesses recount how they saw a young boy accompanying a blind old man, begging an officer to protect them from the soldiers’ condemnation:

“The officer unsheathed his revolver and struck him. While the boy was lying on the ground, he tried twice to shoot at him, but his revolver jammed. It was only on the third attempt that he managed to put a bullet through his head. The adolescent fell at his feet, covered in blood.”\*

The fate of the fifty sepoys who had surrendered after being promised they would not be harmed is also reported: “Having asked them to lay down their weapons, the officer in charge had them lined up against a wall and ordered his Sikh soldiers to finish them off. They disposed of them within minutes, either shooting them or killing them with bayonets.”<sup>95</sup>

\* \* \*

“How do you explain these atrocities?”

At the end of this month of March 1858, William Russell, the highly respected *London Times* correspondent, well-known for his reporting during the recent Crimean War, savours his whisky in the company of a few officers with whom he had entered Lucknow two weeks earlier.

“These acts seem more like displays of condemnation and fear rather than justified punishments,” he insists. “It would appear that in India, the British forget all their basic principles very quickly.”

“And you, sir, you seem to be forgetting Kanpur!” retorts an officer, trembling with rage. “Barbarianism has never reached such heights—the mutilation and rape of our defenceless women . . .”

“Forgive me, but I went to Kanpur and carried out a detailed investigation there. No one ever actually witnessed an English woman being mutilated or raped. These are rumours which, unfortunately, served to justify our men’s worst excesses. They were horrified by these abominable accounts of which I did not discover the slightest proof, stories spread by people in Calcutta who were, in fact, hundreds of miles away when the events took place. I have even been able to establish with certainty that the inscriptions on the walls of the house where the massacre took place were added after Havelock had taken Kanpur, thus proving they were written by British men. These demands to ‘avenge the rapes and mutilations’ drove the soldiers mad and convinced them to massacre all the ‘niggers’ they encountered, even women or children.”

His comments are received with hostile mutters, but Russell pays them no heed. He knows very well he cannot convince soldiers who are in the throes of military action. His only goal is to inform public opinion in the metropolis by countering the atrocious and slanderous descriptions put forward by the English press in Calcutta, which exhorts the population to demand ever more blood. As the only witness present, he feels obliged to warn the authorities in London to try to limit, if at all possible, the destruction and the carnage.

For Lucknow, alas, it is too late.

This town with its half a million inhabitants is now deserted. For weeks, the panic-stricken population will hide in the surrounding forests, preferring to die of hunger rather than risk the fate of the inhabitants of Delhi who, it is said, were tortured before being put to death.

Although the majority of its population was able to escape the worst, Lucknow, the rebel town, will be destroyed. Its long resistance must be punished; it must serve as an example of the price one pays for opposing British power. “The city of gold and silver,” the most sophisticated symbol of Hindu-Muslim culture, the town of a thousand palaces, gardens, temples and mosques, each one richer and more beautiful than the other, is to be systematically destroyed, after being savagely looted.

William Russell had arrived a few days before the assault. With great difficulty he had dragged his huge frame all the way up to the terrace of Dilkusha Palace, from where he looked out over the town, amazed:

“No city in the world, not Rome, nor Athens, nor Constantinople, can be compared to its stunning beauty,” he had written, captivated. “A vision of palaces, minarets, azure and gold domes, cupolas, colonnades, long, beautifully proportioned facades, rooftop terraces—all that emerging out of a calm ocean of greenery that spreads several miles around. Here and there, the towers of this magical city emerge amidst the luminous green. Their golden arrows sparkle in the sunlight, the towers and cupolas shine like stars. Are we really in Awadh? Is this the capital of a semi-barbarian race? Is this the city built by a corrupt, decadent and vile dynasty?”\*

Two weeks later, he notes with horror:

“Lucknow is henceforth a dead town. All that is left of its magnificent palaces are miserable ruins, their facades and domes pierced by cannonballs. The invaluable art and precious objects that had been accumulated here for centuries are left to be pillaged and destroyed by soldiers greedy for gold and ‘drunk on rapine.’ They break everything that is too fragile or too large to be taken away. The ground is littered with fragments of marvels that the men persist in destroying.”<sup>96</sup>

The most terrible scenes of destruction and pillaging took place in the sumptuous Kaisarbagh Palace. The soldiers broke down the doors of precious wood and dragged trunks full of brocades, silk carpets embroidered with pearls, gossamer muslins, out into the courtyards, then ripped them to shreds in a frenzy. As for the cashmere shawls embroidered with gold and silver, they had them burnt to salvage the metal. Enraged, they destroyed exquisite collections of jade, Venetian mirrors, crystal candelabras and threw delicate furniture inlaid with ivory or mother-of-pearl into huge fires, along with musical instruments, tortoiseshell vanity sets and thousands of priceless ancient illuminated manuscripts of which they could not possibly imagine the value. On the other hand, they fought over all that was metal and precious stone, gold and silver tableware, and jewellery abandoned by the terrified women during their flight.

In order to extract the rubies and emeralds, they took apart exquisitely embossed weapons, shields decorated with inlaid work, ancient swords and daggers, they lacerated the royal horse and elephant saddles in order to extricate the pearls and turquoises, destroying these marvels—evidence of one of the most refined civilisations in the world.

They even go as far as to tear off the fine gold sheets that cover the Chattar Manzil cupola. They make up a few hundred kilograms of gold that are to find their way to the market in London, where they are sold as trophies and are to reach astronomical prices.

The mosques and temples are also profaned. Inside the splendid mosque next to the Bara Imambara, drunken British soldiers dance jigs, and the Sikhs light bonfires, savouring their revenge on the execrated Muslims.

Even the houses of the poor, where there is nothing to steal, are vandalised “to teach them a lesson!” In fact, as the *Times* correspondent notes perceptively: “The worst thing for these soldiers is that this insurrection was carried out by a subjected race: black men who had dared shed their master’s blood.”<sup>27\*</sup>

And the Indian people, what do they think of the white man’s behaviour?

One evening while his servant is laying the table, Russell questions him.

After assuring himself that his master will not reproach him, the man answers:

“You see these monkeys, Sahib, they seem to be playing, but the Sahib doesn’t know what the game is or what they are going to do next. Well, the Indian people see the British in just the same way as the British see these monkeys: they know you are strong and ferocious so they dare not laugh. They see you as creatures who have come to hurt them, but they are incapable of understanding either the actions or the motivations behind them.”<sup>28\*</sup>

\* \* \*

The pillaging of the capital is to last over a month. When, laden with tons of booty, the army finally leaves, Lucknow is a ghost city where vultures feast on corpses in the vandalised gardens and ruined palaces.

Little by little, the terrified inhabitants are to return, little by little, the ruins are cleared away and the rebuilding begins.

However, the splendour of the “city of gold and silver” and, above all, its spirit of refinement and aestheticism, its extravagance, its delicate and subtle attitudes, everything that gave Lucknow the most exquisite quality of life ever known, has disappeared forever.

**H**azrat Mahal fled with four thousand soldiers, forty-five cannons and some of the treasure stashed away from British greed. They rode for two days to escape the enemy army; two days and two nights interrupted by brief halts in villages to water their horses and to have something to eat themselves.

At the insistence of the Rajah of Mahmudabad, who impresses upon her that the exhausted animals and men cannot continue at this pace, the begum finally accepts the hospitality of this gentleman whom Jai Lal has entrusted her to and who has become her protector. After all, the fiefdom of Mahmudabad is eighty miles to the north of Lucknow, and the scouts sent out on surrounding roads have not glimpsed even the shadow of a British soldier.

Mahmudabad Palace is an oasis of serenity, rising high above a calm river, set amidst gardens planted with thousands of roses. It is one of the most beautiful ancestral homes in Awadh, with its latticework towers and balconies, fragile columned parapets, long lacework balustrades and ochre walls covered with stucco scallops. A paradise the rajah has prudently had surrounded by strong fortifications.

His first wife, a pretty woman with a delicate face, warmly welcomes Hazrat Mahal in her private apartments, while the young king is received by the principality's dignitaries in the men's section of the palace. His mother will not see him again for the duration of their stay there.

Indeed, Mahmudabad's reigning family makes it a point of honour to respect the strictest purdah in the whole of Awadh. Even in times of war or natural disaster, not a single man can boast of ever having set eyes on or having heard the voice of a woman from the palace. The slightest sign of intimacy is considered a violation of modesty. And so Begum Shahar Bano confides to Hazrat Mahal that she never visits her mother-in-law accompanied by her husband, as this would be considered an unfitting

demonstration of familiarity, a breach of the etiquette and respect due the dowager, the very powerful Queen Mother.

Despite these rigid traditions, Hazrat Mahal is given the right to meet with the rajah daily so that strategies for the coming days and weeks can be finalized. The rajah insists that she make Mahmudabad her base: the palace is vast, and she and her retinue may occupy the main wing. As for the army, it will be easy to set up barracks on the adjacent plots of land.

However, Hazrat Mahal has other plans:

“I am infinitely grateful to you, Rajah Sahib, but I do not want to invite misfortune upon you, your family and your villages. For a year now, we have seen the British vent their rage on civilians as well as on the fighters. Not only those close to you, but also your peasants, are all at risk of being massacred.”

“Where do you intend to go then?”

“Towards the northeast. The Rajah of Gonda is offering me his Bhitauli fortress, between the Ghogra and Chauka rivers. He has warned me comfort there is at best rudimentary, but at the present time, comfort is the least of our concerns. The important thing is the fortress is difficult to access, and there are very few villages around against which the British could exact harsh retribution. If we want the population to remain loyal to us, we must not place them in danger.”

“Perfect. When do we leave for Bhitauli?”

“You will come? But your family? And the affairs of your principality?”

The rajah looks at her reproachfully.

“Did I not give my best friend my word that I would remain by your side during his absence? As for the principality, although they are in purdah, the women of my family know exactly what is happening and are used to running it while the men are at war.”

The rani confirms, smiling:

“My husband will accompany you, Your Majesty. He knows that between the Queen Mother and myself, he has nothing to worry about.”

Hazrat Mahal is about to retort that the situation has changed and the British could well resort to retaliation on all those closest to the rajah, when she is prevented from doing so by the latter’s son:

“Please, Huzoor, please allow me to come with you!”

Amir Hasan Khan is a handsome young boy, barely eight years old. From the beginning of the conversation, he has had a hard time containing himself: he is dying to join the fighters!

“You, my son, have a far greater responsibility,” the rajah assures him, placing his hand on his shoulder. “As the eldest, I entrust you with the care of your mother and your sisters. In my absence, it is you who will protect them.”

“*Ji Adab, Aba Huzoor,*”<sup>29</sup> murmurs the little boy, who has turned red with pride, bowing before his father.

\* \* \*

In this month of April 1858, the entire state of Awadh is on a war footing. When Lucknow was captured, the rebels were driven out and have dispersed throughout the country. The British administration has collapsed; its indigenous police force no longer exists, as regiments have mutinied one after the other and joined the insurgents.

As for the taluqdars and the rajahs, they have retired to their forts, where they are mobilising their troops. If they had thought of making up with the British authorities when the capital fell, Lord Canning’s proclamation at the end of March completely dissuaded them. The governor general had in fact announced that all property belonging to the kingdom’s aristocracy was to be confiscated, except the estates of half a dozen minor landlords, who had remained loyal to British interests.

All others, including the most powerful taluqdars, will be dispossessed of their lands. Their lives and those of their people will be spared only if they submit immediately to the chief commissioner, and on condition their hands are not stained with British blood.

By allowing the rebel lords to live, Lord Canning thinks he is showing leniency. In reality, by confiscating their property, he is depriving them of their power, their status, their honour, and thus compelling them to perpetuate the war.

\* \* \*

“I did everything I could to persuade Canning to change his declaration, but he would not budge!”

In Lucknow, the Chief Commissioner Sir James Outram’s irritation does not abate:

“It is surely not difficult to understand that by annexing their land and their villages, we are closing the door on all those whose only aspiration, since the fall of Lucknow, is to make peace with us!”

Sir Outram receives his friends in the drawing room of one of the rare palaces still standing. The Residency and its surrounding buildings are in ruins, and the new government has requisitioned the only beautiful houses still intact.

“There are approximately five hundred rajahs and taluqdars in Awadh,” intervenes an elderly civil servant. “Do you think they are all against us now?”

“Are we leaving them any choice? Do you think they are going to sit back quietly while we dispossess them? They have returned to their lands to organise the resistance, and they will fight to the end because they have nothing left to lose.”

“But why has Lord Canning, who was mocked for his lack of determination, adopted such rigorous measures all of a sudden?”

“Maybe he wants to salvage his reputation and show he is capable of a crackdown! But I think it is mainly because Calcutta is far away and decisions are taken in offices by senior civil servants who have no clue as to the reality in the field.”

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Since her departure from Lucknow, Hazrat Mahal has completely abandoned purdah, only wearing a light gauze veil supposed to hide her abundant hair. The Court no longer exists and the strict decorum, the sophisticated behaviour and the extravagant delicacy that constituted “the Adab culture” and had given the capital its reputation are no longer relevant here in the Bhitauli fortress.

Ever devoted, Mammoo has done his utmost to make Hazrat Mahal’s apartments comfortable. Now that the handsome rajah is no longer around, he feels they will finally return to their former relationship. With

alacrity, he has filled the cold, empty rooms with large woollen carpets and heavy drapes, and he has boxes made of precious wood brought in for her to store her possessions.

Touched by his kind gestures, the begum is nonetheless concerned about where he has been getting all these things from.

“People gave them to me for you, Huzoor.”

“People? What people?” she asks, surprised. And suddenly suspicious: “You would not have requisitioned them by any chance?”

And as the eunuch lowers his head:

“We have just arrived in this region. Do you want people to hate us when we are in desperate need of the local population’s support? You are to go back to those from whom you have taken these things, and offer to either pay or return their belongings. Here is some gold. Go immediately!”

The Queen Mother would never compromise regarding her principles of honesty or the respect due to the king and herself. This year in power had taught her that the slightest familiarity is fatal to authority. Rather than the ceremony that once accompanied her every step in life at the palace, she now attaches greater importance to respect and obedience due to the war leader she has become.

She had thought the change would be difficult for her; quite the contrary, she feels as if she has been freed, and realises with amazement how much the atmosphere of the Court weighed her down, despite having spent half her existence there. Were it not for her worries about Jai Lal’s predicament, she would almost be relieved. But apart from distressing reports of destruction and pillaging, her spies in Lucknow have been unable to bring her the slightest information on his whereabouts.

Each day the hope of seeing him return diminishes.

It is mainly at nightfall, at the time they used to meet, when the young woman is overcome by anguish. She does her best to be reasonable, to remind herself that she is responsible for thousands of soldiers, for a whole population who trusts her; but she feels that without the man she loves, without his advice and admiration to reinforce her strength and her determination, she can no longer summon the energy to continue the struggle.

Fortunately, she has Mumtaz, the only one she can share her confusion with, who takes her in her arms and rocks her when she can no longer

contain her sobs, stroking her hair, consoling her as one would a child.

“Cry all you want, Muhammadi,” she murmurs, affectionately using her former name. “Cry all your tears away, so that tomorrow, with no tears left, you can be the brave, the radiant Hazrat Mahal once again—the woman we all need so much.”

**F**rom her fortress in Bhitauli, Hazrat Mahal coordinates the attacks on the British. The fighters who had been forced to flee Lucknow and its surroundings have all united under the royal banner, so much so that her forces, those of her allies and Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah's formidable troops now represent almost a hundred thousand men. In dispersed groups, they hold all the territory of Awadh, neighbouring Rohilkhand—between the Ganges and the foothills of the Himalayas—and a part of the province of Bihar in the east.

The new strategy is not to confront the enemy in pitched battles, but to harass them on all sides, in order to prevent them from establishing their authority and to bring their administration to a grinding halt.

In this respect, the regent follows the advice Jai Lal gave her before they separated:

“Never try to fight regular British troops head on. They are superior to us in terms of weapons and discipline, but watch all their movements, keep control of the river ports, intercept their communications, their supplies and their mail, launch incessant lightning strikes on their camps. Never leave them a moment's respite.”

Every evening, when she finds herself alone in her room, Hazrat Mahal opens the medallion her lover had given her on their last evening. She studies the handsome face with its strong features, she delicately traces the contours of the arched eyebrows and the full lips with her finger; her whole being yearns for him. She senses . . . she knows he is alive!

\* \* \*

For six months, the insurgency keeps the British involved in unabated combat.

In a letter written in the spring of 1858, reporting the state of operations to the governor general, Sir Colin Campbell admits the difficulty in confronting the insurgents.

“Awadh is in a state of active rebellion. Every time our columns go into action, they literally march over the bodies of rebels, but as soon as they have passed, the resistance regroups. They cut off our communications and supplies, and recapture the places we have liberated . . . The enemy is as daunting after having being defeated as it was before.”\*

Echoing this point of view, one of the army pastors, Reverend Alexander Duff, writes in his journal:

“It is not a mere military revolt; it is a revolution that has been brewing for a long time and has driven Hindus and Muslims to unite. Beyond the sepoy, it is the revolt of vast multitudes against British domination. When our small, courageous armies push through these myriads, instead of leaving the deep mark of the plough, their passage is more like the wake of a vessel in a stormy sea that is covered over immediately.”\*

And it is not only in Awadh. The rebellion rages in all the neighbouring provinces. In Bihar, it is led by Kunwar Singh, an eighty-year-old taluqdar. The man, nicknamed “the old tiger” for his strength and cunning, holds off the British forces for weeks. His decisive victory at Azamgarh galvanises the Indian fighters. Despite the loss of an arm and a pierced thigh, pursued by two enemy regiments, he leads a thousand men across the Ganges to reconquer his fiefdom in Jagdishpur. Eventually, he dies of a haemorrhage. However, Kunwar Singh has become a legend throughout northern India: it is said when he was wounded, he cut off his arm and threw it into the Ganges, offering it as a sacrifice for the final victory.

Most of the time, the rebel leaders fight independently. The begum’s troops are supported by the Rajah of Mahmudabad’s men in the northeast; Kunwar Singh’s relative Rana<sup>100</sup> Beni Madho’s twenty-five thousand men in the south; the maulvi’s formidable fighters in the northwest; and everywhere, numerous taluqdars and rajahs who keep the rebellion alive.

This dispersal of forces is the most efficient tactic against an enemy scattered over such an immense territory. On the other hand, as soon as they plan a large-scale operation, the insurgents work together.

It is at the begum's headquarters, the seat of royal power, that the strategy is formulated and then communicated to the different leaders by the intermediary of relay messengers, stationed every six miles.

As they have no access to the telegraph lines—which are under British control when they are not sabotaged—the Indians have revived the ancient *harkara* system: a message written with a pencil dipped in milk to make it invisible is slipped into a piece of quill sealed at each end. Hidden in the first messenger's mouth, it is passed on to the next, so that within a day, the message can travel almost a hundred miles.

Thus, in the utmost secrecy, they hatch a plan to recapture Lucknow. It is not enough to control the countryside. They must reconquer the capital, the actual and symbolic seat of power, at all costs and reinstate their sovereign there.

To succeed, however, it is essential to work as a united front and first punish the taluqdars who have rejoined the British, in order to dissuade others, tempted to follow their example. Lucknow's new chief commissioner, Robert Montgomery—more skilful than the General Governor Lord Canning—has in fact proclaimed that those who surrender would be pardoned, and their property would be returned to them.

Fearing betrayal, Hazrat Mahal decides to attack the offenders without further delay.

In May, she launches her first punitive expedition against Rajah Man Singh, who has long played a double game, and who, with great treachery, abandoned Lucknow just when General Campbell attacked.

Riding at the head of ten regiments and followed by the loyal taluqdars' forces, Hazrat Mahal arrives at the outskirts of Shahganj, where the rajah had taken refuge. She immediately lays siege to the fortress by positioning the troops so that all accesses are barred, thus preventing the garrison from receiving any supplies or ammunition.

Trapped, Man Singh sends a desperate message to his allies:

“She has ordered all the *zamindars*, the taluqdars and the mutineers to join together to attack me. They are about thirty thousand. Small or big, they take pride in being the begum's allies. Even those who were close to me before have now turned against me.”\*

His call for help is ignored; the British are too busy fighting off the insurgents, who are harassing them on all sides.

This is exactly what the Queen Mother intended to prove: the British are incapable of protecting their allies. It would be madness to join them! Proclaiming the confiscation of Man Singh's state, she announces it will be shared between the taluqdars who are fighting him; then, after encouraging the troops, she returns to Bhitauli to prepare the forthcoming campaigns.

Barricaded inside his fort with his men, Man Singh continues to resist.

When British help finally arrives a month and a half later, the rebels, faithful to their strategy, retreat, only to take the war to other traitors designated by the begum, who, deaf to both promises and protests, remains unyielding.

While directing the military campaigns, Hazrat Mahal also continues to govern: order must be maintained, justice meted out and taxes collected. The tax collectors, formerly employed by the British, no longer dare venture into the villages, but the civil servants sent by the Queen Mother are well received by the peasants, outraged by the occupier's crimes.

The dynasty's prestige and her personal influence are such that even driven out of the centre of power, Hazrat Mahal still commands respect and obedience.

\* \* \*

The 10th of May, 1858, is an important date for the insurgents. It is the anniversary of the beginning of the uprising, when the Meerut garrison's sepoys revolted and marched on Delhi to free the city.

In Bhitauli, the Queen Mother wants to celebrate the event. In the absence of khilats, the young king distributes embroidered cashmere shawls to the bravest. One will be sent to Prince Firoz Shah for his battles in central India. By means of these rewards, the Queen Mother continues, at least symbolically, to affirm her son's power.

Since their flight from Lucknow, Birjis Qadar has become increasingly withdrawn. He dislikes his life in exile, with no friends of his own age, surrounded by adults who only speak of war. He used to be such a joyful

child, but now Hazrat Mahal never hears him laugh anymore. When she tries to draw him out, she only receives a polite reply: “I am fine, thank you, Amma Huzoor.” She has the distressing feeling her son has distanced himself from her, and that, just like the others, he sees her as the queen, not as his mother. She is fully aware it is her own fault. In order to regain his trust, she should listen to him more, discuss his concerns with him, advise him; in short, give him everything a son expects of a mother. Where would she find the time though? Her first duty is to the liberation struggle. And, after all, it is for him too that she is fighting!

Thus, she has entrusted the boy to Mumtaz, confident that her loving and attentive friend would look after him just as well as she would herself.

Thirsting for affection, the adolescent soon grows attached to the young woman. She spends entire days with him, comforting him, reassuring him with her tenderness, so much so that he begins to call her “Amma Mumtaz”<sup>101</sup>.

The first time Hazrat Mahal heard these words, she felt a pang in her heart: “Amma Mumtaz,” while he only calls her “Amma Huzoor,”<sup>102</sup> as Court usage prescribes . . . But then, is it not what she wanted? That he should find in Mumtaz the availability she cannot give him herself.

Cannot give him . . . ? Really?

*For your lover you found the time, but what of your child?* murmurs a small voice within her.

While the soldiers parade before her, Hazrat Mahal remembers herself as she was a few months earlier with Birjis Qadar in the throne room of Chaulakhi Palace; beside them, Jai Lal was introducing the most deserving sepoy.

At this memory, her whole body tenses; she is so worried about him that she finds it difficult to think about anything else. A few days earlier in fact, a messenger had arrived announcing the rajah had been taken prisoner on March 22nd, the last day of the battle of Lucknow, and that his trial had begun.

The British insisted on doing everything according to the rules, at least in appearance, for when it came to proof, they made other prisoners testify—the rajah’s former servants or companions, who did not hesitate

to accuse Jai Lal of every imaginable crime, in anticipation of a pardon. They even accused him of the murder of captured women and children, which he had resolutely opposed, and which had been carried out in his absence!

How can she save him? Hazrat Mahal had spent hours discussing the various options with the Rajah of Mahmudabad. They had arrived at the conclusion then they had to find an accomplice inside the place who would help him escape, just when they would be attacking Lucknow with all their troops.

The campaign was initially planned for the second week of June but, on the begum's insistence, as she argued that each passing day brought the rajah closer to death, they do their utmost to advance the date.

Now that she knows he is alive, as soon as she is alone, Hazrat Mahal tries to enter into communication with the man she loves. An ancient skill, mastered by sages, asserts that time and space is but an illusion and can be transcended by a focussed mind. Gathering all her energy, she concentrates, trying to transmit hope and strength to her lover, evoking the happy moments spent together, the long conversations during which they shared stories of their childhoods and their plans for a country that would soon be free.

By observing Jai Lal day after day, Hazrat Mahal had understood the value of an individual's role. If gifted with a clear mind and unflinching determination, a man or a woman can change the course of history, just by giving the lost and discouraged masses a focus. However, she had also understood another essential fact: the population must recognise in this individual something they themselves have been searching for confusedly. For a true leader is not someone who gives orders, it is someone who identifies a deep desire, knows how to mould it, make it real, and for that he must be very close to the people.

This is true for Jai Lal, as it is for her. Both of them come from simple backgrounds, unlike the Court aristocrats and all the elite, who are so far removed from reality that they are incapable of understanding the manner in which common mortals react.

*Jai Lal, my love . . .*

She will do everything possible to save him.

\* \* \*

For a while now, General Hugh Rose has been reconquering central India. This ex-consul general, formerly stationed in Beirut, at first viewed with scepticism, has turned out to be a charismatic leader. Always at the forefront, he has rapidly won his soldiers' support.

In March 1858, while Lucknow was falling, Sir Hugh Rose had begun the siege of Jhansi.

The impressive fortress, built on a rocky peak and surrounded by high fortifications, was defended by ten thousand men led by Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, whom everyone described as "a marvel of beauty and courage."

After a few days, Rose had launched the attack and set fire to the fortress. Trapped, the rani, disguised in men's clothing, had managed to escape with some of her troops, while the British army moved in to occupy the now defenceless city.

Although the major cities of Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, and, lastly, Jhansi, have been recaptured, fighting continues everywhere else under Begum Hazrat Mahal's impetus. British reports described her as the "soul of the revolt."

The rebels are particularly active in the north and in central India. Nonetheless, many of the taluqdars hesitate, waiting to see which is the winning side, as it is said that London is soon to send further reinforcements.

Second-guessing their calculations, the begum has it proclaimed that the soldiers and the civilians will show no mercy towards those who choose the occupier's side.

"How can you still be naive enough to believe the promises the British make you?" she asks sarcastically. "Rest assured, they will take revenge!"

She has changed so much since she fled Lucknow. She has hardened into a war leader ready to use any means at her disposal to win, including blackmail. Henceforth, she is no longer fighting only to restore the dynasty, but for herself and her son's life.

\* \* \*

In Lucknow, the Chief Commissioner, Sir Robert Montgomery, has assembled his main collaborators, some of whom, like Martin Gubbins, the financial commissioner, have extensive experience in the region.

“This cannot go on any longer. We have taken the major towns, even if in a few of them deliberate fires still break out sporadically, but we are getting nowhere in the rest of the country. Our armies are powerless against these thousands of men who fight fearless of death.”

“They are all the more courageous because they look forward to a future in the afterlife, which will bring them all the happiness they were denied during their miserable existence,” comments an officer.

“Nonetheless, have you noticed how the prisoners who so proudly brave the gallows or the execution squad, literally collapse when we attach them to the mouth of a cannon?” asks a colonel who has been posted in India for about ten years now.

“You must admit it is an abominable sight. Seeing these young men pulverised into a thousand bloodstained scraps of flesh . . . ”

“We are employing this method increasingly frequently, not out of cruelty or a desire for revenge, but because it has proven to be the most efficient method,” clarifies the colonel.

“How so? A dead man is a dead man!”

“Not in this country! Without a funeral or cremation rites, there is no future life possible. For both the Hindus and the Muslims, this is a thousand times worse than death itself. It is so important to them that some prisoners agree to talk if we will grant them the mercy of shooting them!”

This declaration is received with laughter, soon arrested by the chief commissioner’s frown.

“Show some decency, gentlemen!”

And, turning to Gubbins:

“You have received a message from Rajah Man Singh, it seems?”

“Yes sir. As you know, before the mutiny the rajah was a friend. It is true he has made mistakes, but since then he has been doing all he can in an attempt to redeem himself. He sent me a message saying we were going about things in the wrong manner, and if none of the taluqdars had responded to our advances, it was not because they do not want to. Given the population’s mood and the begum’s threats, it is quite impossible for

them to meet us or to swear loyalty to us publicly. They have asked us to find a way, either through a discreet intermediary or a signal agreed upon in advance, to confirm that in the event of their rallying to our side, we will grant them a pardon and make sure to leave them all their properties. Man Singh assures me that if this were the case, we would see most of them joining us.”

“Just words! We know them, these artful devils! They are playing a double game, waiting to see which way the wind blows,” protests an officer.

“No doubt,” admits Sir Robert, “but the situation is likely to turn in our favour quite soon. I have good news for you: we have obtained the support of Maharajah Jung Bahadur, Nepal’s prime minister and de facto sovereign since he deposed the king. He is placing his thousands of Gurkhas at our disposal to reinforce our troops. In return, we have promised him the territories in northern Awadh that adjoin his country . . . which we will be able to reconquer with his help.”

“Bravo! Between his Gurkhas and our Sikhs, it will be a competition as to who is the fiercest of the lot. The rebels fear them like the plague; their support will demoralise them completely.”

Nothing remains secret for long in India. The Queen Mother’s spies soon hear of the negotiations between Jung Bahadur and the British, and they rapidly apprise her of the situation.

At his mother’s instigation, Birjis Qadar sends a message to the maharajah. He does not refer to their dubious solidarity but explains the situation in the field, which is, for now, clearly in the Indians’ favour.

“How could these British,” he writes, “who cannot secure control anywhere, possibly allocate you any land? We are the dominant force in the country, and in exchange for your allegiance, we offer you territories twice as vast as those promised you, of which they currently do not possess even an acre!”

The letter was entrusted to a messenger. Was it intercepted? The fact remains, Birjis Qadar is never to receive a reply.

Nevertheless, at the end of this month of May, at the time when, preceding the monsoon, the unbearable heat crushes the Europeans, the

begum and her allies control the whole of Awadh up to fifteen miles from the capital, Lucknow.

**S**ixteen thousand fighters are assembled eighteen miles from Lucknow, at Nawabganj, where, a year earlier, the sepoy had gathered before successfully defeating the British during the famous Chinhhat victory.

They plan to recapture Lucknow by attacking on three fronts simultaneously. The begum has sent the greater part of her troops, but this time she is not taking part in the campaign personally. At the Rajah of Mahmudabad and all the generals' insistence, she has resigned herself to remaining in Bhitauli: the battle promises to be fierce and the Queen Mother does not have the right to risk her own life or that of her son. They represent the last royal dynasty with incontestable legitimacy, opposing the occupiers. Under pressure from his men, even Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah was forced to work closely with the Queen Mother. If anything were to happen to her, the movement, already beset by multiple rivalries, would disintegrate.

Hazrat Mahal gave in to their arguments, but now that they have left, she finds herself pacing up and down inside the fortress, incapable of concentrating on anything, plagued by doubts. Why did she relent? She feels as if she is abandoning her troops at the crucial moment . . . And deserting Jai Lal.

Her high command has promised their first task upon entering Lucknow will be to free the rajah, but she knows their individual interests and jealousies only too well to be convinced. To say nothing of the fact that making their way as far as the prison, at the heart of the town, will be no easy feat.

And so, in secret, she decides to summon the leader of one of her regiments—a young man who admires her unconditionally.

“I have a mission for you that requires your complete loyalty,” she declares. “As you approach Lucknow, you will bypass the combat zones and go directly to the prison accompanied by your best men. There, you

will ask for an officer called Amir Khan—he is one of ours—and you will give him, in the presence of his colleagues, Rajah Jai Lal Singh's transfer orders, signed by the Chief Commissioner Sir Robert Montgomery himself.

“Forgery is a highly developed art in our country,” she adds, smiling. “Above all, take care not to stay too long. Only engage in combat if absolutely necessary and bring the rajah straight back here to Bhitauli.”

“But what if he refuses? Perhaps he will choose to participate in the battle?”

“Then you will tell him . . . that the Queen Mother is ill and has asked to see him . . . Yes, I am asking you to lie. It is for our cause. After months in prison, the rajah is in no state to fight. We are not going to save him just to lose him again. The army needs him, the war is not won yet.”

The attack on Lucknow is planned for the morning of June 2nd.

General Hope Grant is in the capital having a well-deserved rest after weeks spent pursuing the rebels all over the state of Awadh. Informed that Rana Beni Madho is threatening the Kanpur-Lucknow road, having already destroyed several military posts and attacked several convoys, the general is forced out of his rest. He spends ten days travelling the region looking for the rana, but the latter seems to have vanished.

It is during this expedition that he learns that a vast number of troops have assembled at Nawabganj, and are preparing to attack Lucknow.

Would Beni Madho have acted as a diversion to draw him away from the capital? If that is the case, he has underestimated the speed with which the British can take action. Hastily, Grant reinforces his troops, adding a thousand Sikhs and a heavy artillery unit, and he calls on the Maharajah of Kapurthala for help. The latter immediately rushes to join him with his army. Together they bear down on Nawabganj, cutting the rana off from his men, and they surround the town. Trapped and disconcerted by their leader's absence, the Indian army is paralysed.

On June 12th, at dawn, the British troops launch their attack. The Indians react with a courage that inspires their adversary's admiration. Their counter-attacks are so fierce that the British have the greatest difficulty repelling them. Assembled under the green banner of Islam and the white banner of Hinduism, the sepoy fall in waves, cut down like the harvest.

“I have seen many battles and a lot of brave men determined to conquer or die, but I have never witnessed such heroic behaviour as that of these men,”\* declares General Grant, impressed.

This battle will be the last attempt to free Lucknow. The rebels will never be able to assemble enough men again to conduct such a large-scale campaign.

In Bhitauli, Hazrat Mahal is distraught. This is the first serious setback since the fall of the capital, and everybody’s morale is affected. She also suffers this defeat at a personal level: she has not been able to save Jai Lal.

*Oh, why did I listen to the generals? If I had gone there myself wearing any kind of disguise, accompanied by a few loyal men, I would certainly have found a way to reach the prison. And once there, with our accomplices inside and the letter, I would surely have been able to get him out . . .*

She is overwhelmed by remorse; she had allowed others to influence her, while she should only have listened to her intuition: to go herself and free her lover. Has she not placed him in even greater danger? The British too have lost men in this campaign. Are they going to take their revenge on the prisoners?

The rising doubt she has always warded off creeps its way into her thoughts with increasing insistence: will she ever see the man she loves again?

She cannot discuss it with the Rajah of Mahmudabad. They have only ever spoken of Jai Lal as a loyal friend, although the rajah had realised a long time ago that Jai Lal means much more to the begum. She will speak to him of nothing but her distress about all the victims. Does she have the right to send these thousands of young men to their deaths? What cause can justify a massacre of such a magnitude?

“It is war, Huzoor!” the rajah reprimands her gently. “Failures and deaths are unavoidable! As for the justification for a war, we could discuss it for hours. For some sceptics there is none, as nothing is more valuable than life itself. For others like myself and the majority of our supporters—officers and simple peasants alike—it is fully justified by its goal: getting rid of a foreign power, regaining our freedom and our dignity.”

“You are speaking, as I do, of freedom, independence. In reality, from time immemorial, Indians have been subjected to foreign powers—the

latest being the Mughals, who reigned over this country for over three centuries!”

“Indeed, but the Aryan, Arab or Mughal invaders always assimilated and even became Indianised. Unlike the British, they intermingled with the population. India was their country, and they were constantly striving to increase its power. They took Indian art and crafts to unrivalled heights of perfection. The Mughal emperors led the country to far greater prosperity than even that of Europe. British domination has ruined us. By exporting our resources to feed their nascent industry and imposing their cheap products on us in return, they have reduced our weavers, carpenters, ironmongers, leather workers, embroiderers, to misery . . . ”

Seated side by side in the begum’s drawing room—a familiarity they could never have allowed themselves at the Lucknow Court—the Rajah of Mahmudabad and the Queen Mother converse as old friends. She increasingly appreciates this man to whom Jai Lal entrusted her. At the age of thirty-five, he has the foresight and maturity of a wise man. He supports and advises her in every decision she makes. For his part, the rajah admires the young woman’s courage and her refusal to accept lies and injustice at any cost.

*This explains her extraordinary influence over the fighters, who would allow themselves to be torn to pieces for her, he thinks. She inspires as great a devotion as does the maulvi, without ever using religion the way he does . . .*

For a while now, the maulvi has been accumulating victories. On May 3rd, he conquered Shahjahanpur, midway between Lucknow and Delhi, where a large British garrison was based. Driven out a week later by Campbell’s troops, he takes advantage of the fact that the British are occupied fighting further north to recapture the town and force the rich inhabitants to pay him a tax for the upkeep of his forces.

Infuriated at being ridiculed by this man who constantly taunts him, Sir Colin hastens back. From May 14th to the 19th, the battle rages on. Armed forces rush in from all sides to save the maulvi, including the begum and Prince Firoz, each at the head of their regiments. Even Nana Sahib agrees to send his men, convinced to do so by his advisor Azimullah, who has decided to return to his master’s side and to keep an eye on him, as he

suspects Nana Sahib is prepared to rejoin the British side in order to obtain a pardon.

With so much support, the maulvi, along with a large number of his followers, will manage to escape during the night, to return triumphant to Awadh, from where he had been driven out a short while before.

How to catch this devil? Where weapons have failed miserably, the British are going to try treachery.

Ahmadullah Shah needs to build up his effectiveness. Now, he has been informed that the Rajah of Powain,<sup>103</sup> a small state situated between Awadh and Rohilkhand, is thinking of joining the rebellion. He immediately sends the rajah a message, but the latter wants to talk to the maulvi in person.

When Ahmadullah Shah arrives at Powain on June 15th mounted on his elephant and accompanied by a small escort, to his great surprise he finds the gates to the town locked and guarded by soldiers. The rajah and his brother are standing up above, on top of the ramparts.

Although he senses danger, Ahmadullah Shah does not give up and commences a discussion with the rajah. He does not notice that the brother has disappeared and that, hidden behind a firing slot, he has him in his sights. The exchange is lengthy; it becomes evident that the rajah has no intention of letting him enter. Incensed at having been tricked, the maulvi signals to the *mahout* to coax his elephant to break down the gates. At this very moment, the rajah's brother fires, killing him instantly.

The planned ambush has worked perfectly.

After cutting the maulvi's head off, the two brothers wrap it in cloth and, galloping the thirteen miles separating them from Shahjahanpur, arrive at the British officers' mess at dinnertime. With a theatrical gesture, they throw the maulvi's bloody head at their feet.

They depart with the promised reward of fifty thousand rupees—the price of their betrayal—but this act will earn them the contempt of their friends as well as their enemies.

The following morning Mammoo goes to see his mistress. He is jubilant; not only is his personal enemy, Rajah Jai Lal, in prison, but the begum's most dangerous competitor is no more.

“Huzoor, I have good news!” he announces triumphantly. “The man who has constantly caused you so much trouble has just been killed.”

“Who? Hope Grant? Colin Campbell?” asks the begum, her eyes shining in anticipation.

“No, Ahmadullah Shah!”

“The maulvi?” Hazrat Mahal starts. “But he was our ally! How dare you rejoice? Have you gone mad?”

“Well, he was constantly challenging you . . .”

“Clearly you will never understand anything! Go now, leave me!”

Once alone, the Queen Mother is thoughtful for a long while, staring into the distance . . . The maulvi dead? He, who always managed to get himself out of the most desperate situations without a scratch, so much so that his partisans called him “Allah’s protégé” . . . She cannot believe it . . .

He was certainly a threat to her, but what an amazing leader of men!

The poor, in particular, were devoted to him, as he promised them an end to their humiliation in a free society based on the equality the Quran extols. He also reminded them that to call the faithful to prayer, the Prophet had chosen a black slave, thus showing his refusal of social or racial discrimination. His disciples revered him as a kind of reincarnation of the Prophet Muhammad.

*If there were more like him, I might have lost my power, but we would have won the war.*

Does that mean she thinks she can lose the war? She immediately corrects herself:

*Of course, the loss of the maulvi is a severe blow, but we will vanquish our enemies, even without him!*

For although Ahmadullah Shah was a precious ally, did she really wish him to be victorious? Victory against the foreigners and for the country’s independence, of course, but . . . to create what kind of society? If the maulvi had succeeded in taking control, would his power have been any more acceptable than British rule? They could at least revolt against the latter, but can one revolt against the word of God that he claimed to represent? Once he had won, would he not have imposed a rigid interpretation of the Prophet’s religion, the opposite of the open and tolerant Islam which has existed in India for centuries?

Maybe Mammoo was right after all . . .

On the other hand, a few days later, the announcement of the Rani of Jhansi's death affects Hazrat Mahal deeply. They were almost the same age. Charismatic, strong-willed and valiant, they were like soul sisters; one a Hindu, the other a Muslim, both leading their people into a fight to wrest independence from the occupier.

Lakshmi Bai was killed three days after the maulvi, on June 18th, during the Battle of Kotah-ki-Serai, a few miles from Gwalior.

The messenger who brings the Queen Mother the news also hands her a letter from the rani, written the day before she died—a letter full of optimism in which she relates her latest victories:

“My dear Begum,

I am happy to announce that we have taken Gwalior! Nana Sahib was not present as he is still in hiding. But his nephew Rao Sahib represented him, and we had Tantia Tope's armies with us. We arrived near the citadel with four thousand cavalymen and seven thousand foot soldiers. At dawn, the Maharajah of Gwalior marched on us with eight thousand men, but to his great humiliation, his whole army, except his personal guard, switched sides and joined us!

The following day we conquered Gwalior with its treasure and arsenal. Tantia wanted to organise sumptuous festivities to which he invited all the Mahratta lords. He is trying to win over the principalities of the former confederation in order to have Nana Sahib recognised as the peishwa there. But the great Mahratta princes, the Maharajahs of Indore and Gwalior in particular, remain allies of the British, and they are followed by a number of smaller rajahs. Nonetheless, during these festivities, Nana Sahib was officially proclaimed peishwa; his nephew Rao, vice-peishwa; and Tantia Tope, prime minister.

As I obviously had nothing to do there, I retired to a small neighbouring palace, where finally it is quiet enough to write to you. I am now convinced that we will win. You will get your Lucknow back and I, my Jhansi. I have faith, as the people are with us. Has one ever seen an occupier crush a whole population? It will take time, but we shall emerge victorious.

Whatever happens, we must stand firm!

Your friend,

Lakshmi, Rani of Jhansi”

In tears, the messenger recounts the events that were to follow:

“While we believed them far away, on June 18th, the British arrived and struck like lightning. Tantia Tope and his troops had been celebrating for days. They did not realise what was happening. The rani was the first to

grasp the situation. Leading her troops, dressed as a horseman, she tried to stop the British advance. In vain. She was shot dead by a soldier, little suspecting he was killing a woman, moreover, the legendary heroine of Jhansi! She was eventually identified by the fabulous rows of pearls that never left her person, which contrasted strangely with her uniform.

“Surprised in the middle of their drinking session, Tantia Tope and his men were easily defeated by General Rose, who took over the Gwalior citadel and reinstated the maharajah.”

The rani’s letter trembles in Hazrat Mahal’s hands. Her eyes clouded with tears, she rereads the last lines:

“Whatever happens, we must stand firm.”

*It is like a message from beyond . . . The population is with us, we must continue the fight.*

\* \* \*

In central India, the British troops advance. Sir Hugh Rose knows that if the rebellion spreads through the Mahratta territory, the entire western part of the country will turn out to support it. Taking back Jhansi and Gwalior had been important steps, but now they must finish off with Tantia Tope and Prince Firoz Shah, who continue to defy them.

Fortunately for the British, the two largest states in the centre of India—Bhopal and Hyderabad—have not only remained loyal, but even provide them with elite troops.

Tantia Tope, who fled from Gwalior with twelve thousand men, is intercepted by General Rose’s army. But he manages to escape and continues to harass the enemy columns. He has the advantage of speed over the adversary, as he travels without tents or provisions; all his needs are met by a population totally committed to his cause.

As for Hazrat Mahal, she has retreated further north to Baundi Fort, beyond the Ghogra River. From here, she controls the whole region. She is accompanied by her friend, the Rajah of Mahmudabad, and a few other loyal rajahs and taluqdars.

From her new base, the Queen Mother continues to launch campaigns against the British detachments and the traitor taluqdars, implementing

increasingly harsh measures to punish the latter as the number of deserters multiplies. General Campbell knows how to talk to them. He is himself the grandson of a Scottish clan leader, who saw his family land confiscated just after the Jacobite Uprising of 1745. He understands the taluqdars' dilemma, and rather than confronting them, he tries to win them over.

Throughout the summer, Awadh holds its own, leaving the enemy no respite. Until October, Hazrat Mahal and her allies, in particular Prince Firoz and Rana Beni Madho, mount coordinated campaigns. Together they command a force of seventy thousand fighters.

Unconditionally loyal to the begum, just like Tantia Tope, the rana's greatest asset is his mobility. A thousand times the British think they have him, a thousand times he escapes, reappearing where they least expect him. He has become such a legend that decades after his death, his praises will continue to be sung at village gatherings.

Meanwhile, Campbell's promises have finally won him the support of the majority of the taluqdars. Now, at the beginning of autumn, there are only about fifty of them left out of the three hundred who had actively participated in the rebellion when it was at its peak. It is a blow to the Queen Mother, all the more so as her hopes of convincing the Maharajah of Nepal have been crushed. Shortly after the Nawabganj defeat, the latter wrote saying he was a friend of the British, categorically refusing her offer of an alliance.

From the fall of Lucknow in March until autumn, for eight long months, Hazrat Mahal and her allies manage to hold back the British forces and often even defeat them. But in this month of October 1858, the beginning of the dry season, General Campbell—knighted Lord Clyde by the grace of Her Majesty Queen Victoria—begins his winter campaign at the head of an army stronger than ever.

**A**midst the military campaigns and strategic discussions, the only moments of relaxation for Hazrat Mahal are those she spends with Mumtaz. Sometimes, though, she is ashamed of her selfishness. For years she had forgotten about her friend, and now that she has found her again, she uses her as a confidant to give vent to her troubles, never once asking after the young woman's own feelings, nor showing any interest in her personal life.

One evening, while her companion is brushing her long hair, she asks her:

“And you, Mumtaz, have you ever been in love?”

She did not expect the turmoil her question provokes. Mumtaz blushes, hesitates, then finally decides to talk.

“In love? I was madly in love, but I have never been so deeply hurt. I told you that after I was repudiated, I went back to being a courtesan in another house, not Amman and Imaman's, as I was too ashamed to face them. Every evening I sang, danced and conversed with the visitors, but I still had no protector. Although there was a taluqdar who came every day; he watched me as if I fascinated him, without ever speaking to me. And I . . . I felt like an adolescent in love for the first time. I sang and danced only for him. He was handsome in a way that moved me: tall, very thin, dark eyes in a strong-featured face, a hooked nose. All day long he was in my thoughts, but in the evening I barely dared glance at him, as I feared my feelings would be evident to everyone. This lasted for a month, a month of marvellous dreaming, where I imagined an intense and luminous relationship with him, long confidences, joys and sorrows too, certainly, but shared. I felt he had suffered, and I was ready to give him everything. I knew I could make him happy.

“Finally, one evening he came over and spoke to me and, to my great surprise, he confided in me immediately: his only son had died in a riding

accident; his wife had gone mad with grief. It had already been two years, but he was unable to get over it. I listened while he poured out his sorrow. Suddenly, he realised people were watching us. ‘These people bother me,’ he whispered, ‘when can we be alone?’

“When? I had to control myself not to answer, ‘Immediately,’ and suggested the following day, in my apartment, which was on the first floor but could be accessed without having to go through the salons.

“The day we were to meet, he sent me a message: he had to go away to settle some urgent business but would be back in three days. Would I be free? I hurriedly confirmed I would.

“I spent the following three days preparing for his visit. I examined myself critically: would I please him? He, who was so seductive, must have been used to the most beautiful women, and although I knew I was charming, I also knew I was no beauty.

“On the appointed evening, I paced up and down my room, arranging a cushion here, a vase there, my hands moist with apprehension. He arrived two hours late. I had given up, believing he would no longer come. I was as nervous as a young girl—me, a courtesan!

“I had had a light supper prepared, but he was not hungry. He took me in his arms and tried to draw me towards the large bed, whispering how desirable I was. Somewhat shocked at this haste, as I had imagined a more tender approach, I tried to resist, but he was not the kind of man to countenance refusal.

“We made love and he fell asleep instantly. I remained by his side, eyes wide open, a bitter taste in my mouth, feeling I had been treated like a prostitute. I tried to make excuses for him . . . Perhaps he was merely exhausted by his journey. Gently I caressed his forehead, and he woke up.

“‘I must leave,’ he announced abruptly.

“‘You aren’t spending the night here?’ I asked, stunned.

“‘Impossible, I have an important meeting tomorrow morning.’

“I pressed myself against him. ‘Then I will see you soon?’

“‘Certainly,’ he replied in a tone that seemed to imply the opposite, but I quickly chased the idea away.

“I waited for him every evening for weeks. He never returned. I was angry with him, but I was even angrier with myself for my awkwardness. He had poured his heart out and won me over, then he had disappeared.

Should I have hidden my feelings? Tell me, Muhammadi, why do we always have to be so calculating when we are in love? If we have to hold back our true feelings, pretend to be detached to better capture the other's heart, where is the joy in loving?"

Hazrat Mahal has no answer to these questions. With Jai Lal, it was a different world . . . At the thought of her lover, she suddenly feels an intense pain in her chest, like a tearing sensation . . . as if something terrible were happening, as if, far away, Jai Lal was suffering . . . and calling out to her.

\* \* \*

Cut to the quick by the critics who reproach him for having prolonged the war by allowing the begum to escape, General Campbell is now determined to crush the rebel forces once and for all.

His strategy is simple. The powerful British army will attack Awadh from the south, the east and the west, simultaneously, in order to push the insurgents northwards towards the Bahraich region, where the Queen Mother resides.

The regiments advance methodically, covering one district after the other, like a huge net. They comb every inch of land to ensure that every possible escape route is blocked. Their aim is to force the rebels to retreat towards the Terai, the region bordering Nepal, to surround them there and then finish them off.

Feeling the winds of change, Mammoo is filled with a nagging unease, but he dares not speak to his mistress, fearing she will be angry with him again. Since she scolded him about the maulvi's death, he has not appeared before her, waiting to be summoned. However, she does not even seem to notice his absence . . . In a fit of pique, he had even thought of leaving her and surrendering to the British, as a number of taluqdars have already done. Particularly since he has no desire to end up a martyr for a cause he does not believe in. For him, independence remains an empty word. He has always served the powerful—whether they be Indian or British, what difference does it make? It is true the British despise the

“natives” . . . but is there any contempt worse than the kind his compatriots inflicted upon him when they emasculated him?

For days he nurses his rage and toys with the idea of leaving, but deep down, he knows he cannot abandon his mistress. For the twelve years he has lived beside her, she has come to represent his universe. Despite his anger, he cannot do without her. Is this love? It is, in any case, a powerful connection that he is incapable of breaking. He will protect her, even against her will!

In secret, he has sent a messenger to Lucknow to discuss with Sir Robert Montgomery the conditions of the begum’s capitulation.

As always, however, Hazrat Mahal has been informed by her spies.

Furious, she immediately sends for the eunuch.

“You too, you are betraying me!”

“I am not betraying you, Huzoor,” stammers Mammoo, red with embarrassment. “Quite the contrary, I am trying to save you.”

“Save me? By dishonouring me?” She chokes with indignation. “How could I have trusted you? This time, it really is over. I never want to see you again!”

After Mammoo’s deception, Hazrat Mahal feels even more alone. She has always been aware of his weaknesses, but despite everything, he had long been a part of her life. Now she has only her faithful Mumtaz to confide in. At least with her, she can talk about the man she loves, whom she still believes she can save. All day long, busy with a thousand problems, she manages not to think of what his fate may be, but at night, she trembles for him and devises the most audacious plans, until she sinks into a deep sleep filled with nightmares.

\* \* \*

While to the south of the country, General Campbell’s regiments advance like steamrollers, the begum and her allies continue their lightning attacks, still supported by the vast majority of the peasants. Even when the rebel cause seems lost, the village people continue to boycott the British, refusing to deliver food and providing them with false information.

They play a determining role in this revolt, as they make up the majority of the fighting force.<sup>104</sup>

Nonetheless, despite their heroism, towards the end of the year the situation begins to turn against them.

Queen Victoria's offer of an amnesty is to incite a number of war leaders to change sides. Her proclamation, read out all over India on November 1st, 1858, announces the dissolution of the East India Company and the transfer of its authority to the British Crown. Solemnly declaring a total break with past errors, the queen guarantees all the treaties signed with the princes, and confirms each and every one in the position they had obtained during Company rule. Finally, she denies any new territorial ambition and promises religious freedom.

“We declare that by our royal will and desire, no one will be favoured, troubled or molested for reasons of faith or religious observances and all will benefit from the equal protection and impartial law enforcement. It is also our will that our subjects, whatever their race or their belief, be freely and impartially allowed to practice, in our service, the professions for which they are qualified by their education, their talent and their integrity.”\*

Most importantly, however, the queen offers to pardon all the rebels who are prepared to return home peacefully, with the exception of those who took part in the murder of British subjects or helped the murderers, as well as the leaders or instigators of the revolt. The others, if they submit before January 1st, 1859, will be amnestied.

On the 8th of November, besieged in his fortress by General Campbell and General Grant's combined forces, the Rajah of Amethi finally surrenders. He was one of the begum's most loyal allies; his capitulation will encourage other taluqdars who were still undecided.

On the other hand, forced to abandon his fort, Beni Madho decides to leave for the north with fifteen thousand men to join forces with Nana Sahib's brother. To General Campbell, who offers him very favourable conditions if he is willing to submit, he proudly replies:

“I cannot. My person does not belong to me. It belongs to King Birjis Qadar.”\*

At the same time, a secret message from General Campbell informs the begum that if she abandons this hopeless battle, she will be permitted to

return to Lucknow, where she will be welcomed with all the honours due to her rank and will receive a generous pension.

Hazrat Mahal does not even bother to reply. With a twinge of sadness, she remembers one of her last conversations with Jai Lal, while they were being bombarded day and night by enemy cannons in their Musabagh bastion.

“If we were offered an amnesty and if everything were to go back to the way it was before, as in Wajid Ali Shah and the British resident’s time, what would you do?” he had asked her.

“I would refuse!” she had answered without a moment’s hesitation.

He had held her passionately in his arms.

Today, after all she and her people have endured, she is more determined than ever to reject any kind of compromise. In her eyes, the queen’s aim in proclaiming an amnesty is clear: to decapitate the revolt, separate the most committed rebels from any others who are pretending, thus reducing their contingents.

In an attempt to prevent a wave of defections, Hazrat Mahal is to publish a counter-proclamation in which she sarcastically denounces the hypocrisy of Queen Victoria’s speech and the threats concealed behind her false promises:

“One must be simple-minded to believe that the British have forgiven our mistakes, or what they call our crimes. All of us here know they have never forgiven the slightest offence, big or small, whether it was committed out of ignorance or negligence.”\*

Then, one by one, the begum goes through the different undertakings proclaimed by the queen: how can we believe that everything will change because the Crown is replacing the Company while the new power retains the same rules, the same civil servants, the same governor general, the same legal system!

“We are told the queen will honour all the agreements concluded by the Company. However, the Company has appropriated the whole of India and failed to respect most of the treaties it signed with the sovereigns. Is this what the queen intends to respect? And if Her Majesty is not planning to carry out any annexations, as she claims, why then does she not return our country to us as the people demand?

It has also been announced that regardless of a person's religion, the law will be equal for all. This should be obvious! In fact, what does the exercise of justice have to do with belonging to one religion or another? As for the promise that there will be no interference in our religious practices, it is difficult to believe, when our temples and mosques are destroyed on the pretext of building roads, when missionaries are sent to the villages to teach Christianity, when people are paid to learn the rites of the Anglican Church!

It is also written that apart from those who have killed, led the rebellion or helped the rebels, the others will be pardoned. But who are these others when the whole population has revolted, and it is specified that all those involved will be punished? This proclamation says everything and its opposite!

Lastly, when peace is restored, we are promised road construction works and the digging of canals that will improve people's living conditions. It is interesting to note that the British have no better jobs to offer Indians than those of labourers! If people do not understand all that this implies, we can do nothing to help them.

Do not be deceived!"\*

\* \* \*

This morning disturbing news has arrived from Mahmudabad. The palace is besieged and the rani has sent a message to her husband saying she fears she will not be able to resist for long.

The distraught rajah reports back to the begum. Torn between two loyalties, he is a pitiful sight: he cannot leave the Queen Mother just when she needs him the most, but can he abandon his own family?

"Remember what you told your son when he wanted to accompany us?" Hazrat Mahal reminds him: "Your first duty is to your family.' Dear Rajah Sahib, you must leave immediately to help your family. They only have you. I will manage, I still have allies. Of course, I will miss your friendship, your kindness towards me . . ."

She steels herself against the emotion that threatens to overwhelm her. "I will always be grateful to you, I will never forget you."

And to lighten the solemnity of these words, she concludes in a more cheerful tone:

"Soon I will come to see you in Mahmudabad, and I am counting on you to organise a sumptuous party!"

Going against all conventions, she holds her hand out to him. He takes it and holds it fervently to his forehead. They look at each other, containing their feelings with difficulty; they know there is little chance they will ever meet again.

Meanwhile in Awadh, the British troops continue to advance and the insurgents are inexorably pushed northwards. At the end of November, the whole country south of the Ghogra River is subdued. Some rebels manage to return to their villages and disappear amongst the peasantry, but the majority converges on Baundi, the begum's fortress, the last bastion of power. Implacably, the enemy army approaches; the Indian troops try to prevent them from crossing the Ghogra, but despite fierce resistance, they are crushed.

With his colonial helmet on his head and his sword in his hand, General Grant is heading for Baundi, where he has every intention of taking the begum unawares. The latter, though, has already fled further north and gallops with her son at the head of her high command, followed by fifteen thousand fighters. Near Nanpara, Nana Sahib, Beni Madho and a few taluqdars who have remained loyal join her. Desperately, they combine their forces for a final stand, but they are no match for the enemy artillery and are again forced to retreat. Finally, on the morning of January 7th, 1859, with the enemy at their heels, the begum and her allies cross the river Rapti to take refuge in the Terai region, along the Nepal border.

On reaching the other bank, Hazrat Mahal stops. With great sadness she looks out over the plain that stretches as far as the eye can see, the wheat and sugarcane fields, the green mango and guava orchards, and here and there, emerging from all the vegetation, the thatched village roofs with blue smoke rising from them.

Will she ever see her country again?

In order to slow down the British advance, a regiment of sepoy remains on the southern bank of the Rapti. When the British cavalry arrives and charges, swords drawn, they cut to pieces all those who attempt to block their way.

The river is red with the blood of the hundreds of freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives to offer the Queen Mother and the king the

advantage of a few precious hours, which allow them to escape their pursuers.

This is the last battle to be fought in the land of Awadh. Henceforth, the territory is entirely under British domination.

The rebels are now trapped between the Rapti River and the foothills of the Himalayas in the Nepalese Terai—a region of forests and swamps swarming with mosquitoes and infested with crocodiles. Their only choices are to surrender or perish.

Considering Awadh pacified, Campbell leaves General Hope Grant in charge of operations. Judging that the fugitives will not survive long without ammunition or food, Grant is content to position his regiments along the border to prevent their return.

Hazrat Mahal's last hope remains Maharajah Jung Bahadur. Now that they are defeated, can he refuse her asylum?

At his mother's bidding, Birjis Qadar sends the maharajah another letter. He evokes the long friendship that has always bound the great families of Awadh and Nepal, and in the name of religion and fraternity between peoples of the same blood, he asks for sanctuary for all his followers.

A few days later, they receive his scathing reply:

“The state of Nepal, ally and friend of the British, will provide you no assistance and orders you to leave its territory within ten days. Otherwise, we will send our Gurkha army against you. In order to save their honour and their lives, we advise all those who were not involved in the massacre of women and children, to surrender to the British authorities.”\*

It is out of the question! Neither Hazrat Mahal nor the other fugitives trust the British anymore: experience has taught them what perfidious Albion's<sup>105</sup> promises are worth. For weeks they try to force their way through at different points along the barrier that separates them from Awadh; every time the British react and chase them back into the Terai. There are a few further confrontations, but the exhausted rebels are no longer in a state to resist. They flee through the jungles, the swamps and the freezing rivers. The rain, the cold, the swamp fevers and cholera take their toll on these weakened men, and they die by the hundreds.

After the Indian forces have been dispersed, Hazrat Mahal finds herself accompanied by Nana Sahib and Mammoo—the present difficulties have erased the past quarrels. To escape the enemy, they have to change camps incessantly with a reduced army of ten thousand men, followed by hundreds of women and children. The Queen Mother refuses to be discouraged. She has promised Jai Lal she will never lose hope. Nonetheless, an urgent problem needs to be resolved: how do they feed these thousands of people? Their stocks of flour are almost exhausted, and she has ordered her lieutenants to punish any thefts severely. They need to retain the population’s sympathy; it is their only protection.

She will be obeyed. At the height of the disaster, Hazrat Mahal still controls her men.<sup>106</sup>

Often in the evening, sitting around the *mangal*<sup>107</sup> in her tent with her two companions, the Queen Mother discusses the possibilities of escaping the trap, cornered as they are between the Gurkhas in the north and the British in the south. The Nana has lost a great deal of his haughtiness. He has a mere thousand loyal soldiers behind him and Azimullah, his devoted follower, has disappeared.

When Hazrat Mahal expressed her astonishment at his absence, Nana Sahib explained, looking embarrassed:

“My older brother is ill, Azimullah is with him. They are trying to reach Calcutta together.”

It is most unlike the Nana to do without such a precious servant, even to help out his brother. Hazrat Mahal concludes they must have quarrelled.

She is later to learn that, disguised as a fakir, Azimullah had effectively managed to reach Calcutta. There, using his “oriental prince’s” charm, which had wreaked such havoc in London and Paris at the time, he had successfully seduced a lovesick English woman. With her, he had managed to leave India and had settled in Istanbul, where he had become the representative of the Sharif of Mecca.

When she heard this story, Hazrat Mahal had burst out laughing—something she had not done in a long time.

“This ‘dear Azimullah!’ as the European ladies called him . . . And I, who took him for an idealist ready to die for his country! Is he not in reality just an opportunist who prefers to jump ship, considering the battle lost?

Unless,” she suddenly becomes pensive, “unless perhaps . . . from Istanbul he continues to plot against the British . . . ”<sup>108</sup>

In these regions swept by the biting Himalayan wind, the winter takes its toll on the men and the women used to the climate of the Indo-Gangetic Plain.

One morning, Hazrat Mahal wakes up to find her son burning with fever. The hakims are summoned to his bedside but are hesitant to pronounce their diagnosis. In any event, they prescribe decoctions and bloodletting. Nothing has any effect. The Queen Mother resolves to send a further appeal for help to Jung Bahadur. His only answer is to reiterate his threats: either the begum and those accompanying her leave his territory, or he will send in his Gurkhas.

Surrender to save her child? General Campbell has let her know that his offer of an amnesty still stands. Hazrat Mahal is torn. She cannot risk her son’s life . . . but does she have the right to abandon her companions who can hope for no pardon themselves? After days and nights of anxiety, as Birjis Qadar’s state of health has improved, she decides to continue with the resistance. To capitulate would be dishonourable and tantamount to renouncing the rights of this twelve-year-old king, whom she hopes will reign over Awadh one day.

The adolescent is still weak, however, and needs to be watched over constantly. Fortunately, Mumtaz is there to take care of him.

The young woman has grown as attached to Birjis as if he were her own son. She, who has suffered so deeply at not being able to be a mother, pours all the treasures of her love and tenderness on the young boy. Initially, she had curbed her impulses, constantly reminding herself that this beautiful boy was not her own and could be taken away from her any moment. Very quickly, though, she forgot her fears, for the Queen Mother is far too busy to intervene in a situation that seems to suit everyone.

Sometimes Mumtaz does not understand her friend: has she no maternal feelings? Nonetheless, when her son is ill she is consumed by anxiety . . . Could it be that she worries more for the king’s fate than for her son, as Birjis Qadar claims bitterly?

In Kathmandu, Jung Bahadur is under pressure from the resident, who warns him that his British allies are growing impatient. When is he going to send in his Gurkhas to force the rebels to surrender?

In fact, the maharajah realises that he has been overly presumptuous—his generals are not ready to fight the refugees just to satisfy the British.<sup>109</sup>

Jung Bahadur then decides to resort to trickery. He has a letter delivered to King Birjis Qadar, requesting him to travel to Butwal, halfway between his base in the Terai and Kathmandu. He wants no more bloodshed, he writes, and proposes to act as an intermediary between the Indians and the British in order to find an honourable solution.

Begum Hazrat Mahal and her companions judge the letter encouraging. In any event, do they have a better alternative?

They set off immediately.

For three months, the long convoy of almost ten thousand men, women and children trudges painfully through the snow-covered mountains. As they do not have enough horses or carts, most of them cover the two hundred miles separating them from Butwal on foot. Many are to die of cold, fever or dysentery.

To Hazrat Mahal's despair, Mumtaz is one of the first victims. Since their flight into the Terai, she has grown very thin: "My admirers would never be able to recognise me now," she jokes. She is wracked by frequent coughing bouts, but every time Hazrat Mahal suggests calling the hakim, she categorically refuses, arguing that it is only a throat irritation. However, she grows weaker by the day.

One morning, concerned at her absence, the begum enters her friend's tent. Mumtaz is lying stretched out, her long hair spread around her, a slight smile on her lips. At that moment, Hazrat Mahal thinks she has never seen her look so beautiful. Wanting to awaken her gently as she used to do when they were adolescents, she bends down to place a kiss on her forehead and jumps back with a loud cry: it is cold . . . Dead! Mumtaz is dead!

For the first time since their flight from Baundi, Hazrat Mahal breaks down. Deeply distressed, she reproaches herself for having dragged her friend into this impossible adventure, when, after the fall of Lucknow, she should have gone back to her village to wait for the situation to return to normal. Mumtaz had nothing to do with this flight; she had not followed

Hazrat Mahal out of political conviction, but out of loyalty to their old friendship. The begum had brought her along out of pure selfishness, because she needed a friend, a confidant. She had not, for a moment, envisaged the dangers she would force her to endure.

It is Birjis Qadar however, who is the most deeply distressed by Mumtaz's disappearance. Kneeling before her bed, blinded by tears, he goes on begging: "Don't leave me, Amma Mumtaz, please come back!" He is to remain at her bedside for hours, wracked by sobs, obstinately refusing to abandon the woman who had given him all her time and love over the past months. It will be terribly difficult to separate them.

In March, when the columns of refugees finally reach Butwal, their ranks are considerably diminished; only the hope of an imminent end to the nightmare gives the survivors the strength to hold on.

For four days, they await Jung Bahadur's promised visit. Instead, an officer of the Nepali army arrives. He brings a message from the maharajah reiterating the order to leave the country immediately.

Stunned, the Queen Mother and her companions realise they have been tricked. The indignant rajahs cry out:

"If this was what Jung Bahadur intended, why did he make us come here? To annihilate us more easily? He knows that after this terrible journey, we are too few and too exhausted to defend ourselves. Is he not ashamed to betray his brothers in this manner? As a Hindu at least, he should support us, since we fought in defence of our religion!"

"I cannot discuss this," replies the officer, embarrassed. "I can only repeat my master's orders: 'If you advance any further, the Gurkhas will kill you. You must leave Nepal and surrender to the British.'"

And, taking his leave of them, he departs.

While the rajahs and Nana Sahib decide to settle in Butwal to allow their troops to rest and to discuss what is to be done, the begum retires to the neighbouring fort of Naya Kot to look after her son. Weakened by the journey and disconsolate at Mumtaz's death, Birjis Qadar has fallen ill again, and Hazrat Mahal watches over him day and night. Now that she risks losing him, she realises that nothing matters more to her than her son's life. Thus, when Jung Bahadur's envoys arrive to enquire about her plans, she dismisses them unceremoniously:

“How dare you disturb me? My son is struggling between life and death. Leave me alone, I will answer you later!”

Jung Bahadur does not insist but, taking advantage of the fact that the rajahs and the begum are separated, he sends the British army the agreed signal: they may enter Nepal and attack Butwal.

On the 28th of March, 1859, General Kelly confronts Rana Beni Madho and Nana Sahib’s troops. Although they are weakened by illness and lack of food, and have neither cannons nor ammunition, the cornered men fight fiercely. They know they have no way of escaping the British. All the roads are watched, and if they surrender, they will be executed, but they continue resisting heroically. In vain. The troops are routed. Suffering a thousand difficulties, dragging themselves across steep mountains, crossing streams, clinging to precipices, the survivors manage to reach the Sirwa Pass. It is here that they fight their final battle on May 21st.

“We pursued the enemy into the mountains and reached a place covered in pools of blood. There, two rebels lay succumbing to their wounds, but the most heart wrenching was to see these sepoys’ wives dying of hunger and exhaustion beside them, often with a baby in their arms,”\* reports General Grant.

When Hazrat Mahal, who had remained in Naya Kot with her son, is informed of the tragedy, she sinks into a state of deep despondency: these years of battle, these tens of thousands of men sacrificed . . . all this for nothing?

An ultimate hope, however, helps her pull herself together. In central India, Prince Firoz Shah and Tantia Tope, each operating independently, pursue the guerrilla movement.

At the beginning of the month of April, Tantia Tope joins Rajah Man Singh of Narwar, who commands a small army. Together they wage war against the occupying forces, alternately winning or losing ground, until, surrounded, they take refuge in the Paron jungles. Helped by their spies, the British enter into contact with the rajah and manage to negotiate his submission: he will be pardoned, retain all his properties and, in addition, receive a generous reward, provided he reveals Tantia Tope’s hiding place.

The ally and friend accepts.

Tantia Tope will be captured by surprise while he is fast asleep.

Thus, one of the best generals of the insurrection, Nana Sahib's former general, who had fought the British on all fronts of the rebellion with brilliant success, was not defeated by bullets, but by treachery.

During his "trial," Tantia Tope is to challenge the crime he is charged with, arguing that he was not rebelling against the British government, as he was in no way a British subject, but one of the Nana's generals.

Ten days later, he will be hanged.

With his disappearance, deprived of its leader, the insurrection in central India progressively dies out.

At the beginning of May, a letter from the governor of Butwal informs the Nepali prime minister of Birjis Qadar's deteriorating state of health and the Queen Mother's refusal to surrender to the British. The governor specifies that the begum has a sachet of poison on her person and to avoid dishonour, will not hesitate to use it.

This must be avoided at all costs. Begum Hazrat Mahal has become a deeply admired, even idolised, symbol. Her suicide could provoke riots that will be difficult to contain, both in Awadh and in Nepal, where the population hardly appreciates Jung Bahadur's double game.

The latter is worried and hurriedly informs the British authorities, who do not want to be held responsible for the death of a national heroine either. They agree that Nepal will offer the begum and her son asylum.

Hazrat Mahal is to negotiate for ten days, demanding that the women and children be allowed to remain with her. This is agreed, except with regard to the boys—only those under the age of twelve are authorised to stay with her. On the other hand, notwithstanding her insistence, none of her soldiers will be allowed to accompany her. Not even Mammoo, who, despite their frequent disagreements, has been her faithful servant for thirteen years. She has no choice but to accept the conditions that are laid down.

At least by refusing to submit to the British, she is preserving her honour and her son's rights.

For the last time, the Queen Mother inspects her troops, or rather what remains of them: a few hundred emaciated men who cheer her, their eyes bright with tears.

Her throat constricted, she thanks them:

“You have fought heroically. You will be remembered as the glory of Awadh! Centuries will pass, but history will remember you! Now you must disperse and attempt to return to your villages, but know that the battle we have fought together is only the beginning of the freedom struggle.

“We have shown the way, our children will follow, and soon we will drive the British out of India forever!”

**F**rom now on, Hazrat Mahal is a prisoner. She has no illusions about the “hospitality” the maharajah offers her.

Jung Bahadur has had a spacious bungalow renovated for her. It is surrounded by a veranda made of light-coloured wood and overlooks a garden. He has also placed Nepalese guards and servants at the Queen Mother’s service. In contrast to his previous hostility, he receives her with a thousand marks of respect and expresses his concern for the young king’s health. He even sends her his best hakims: Birjis Qadar must not die under his roof, to avoid any rumours that he had had the young king killed to satisfy the British.

On the other hand, despite Hazrat Mahal’s protests, all her Indian servants are dismissed; these women who had accompanied her into the Terai, where fear, hunger and exhaustion were their daily fare . . . The Queen Mother often asks herself why she deserves such devotion. Is it because through her, and the cause she represents, these women can surpass themselves, redeeming their banal daily lives to be part of an inspiring mission?

Jung Bahadur remains inflexible, unwilling to take the slightest risk. The dozen guards at the entrance are not sufficient to reassure him. If he surrounds the begum with Nepalese servants—a question of practicality, he argues; they know the customs of the land—it is in reality to keep a closer watch on her.

He intends to be kept informed of her every move. She seems resigned, but he does not trust her; he is well aware of her fighting spirit.

For the first time, far from her country and the town she loves, Hazrat Mahal remembers the other exiles with sorrow—the old emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar; his wife, Queen Zeenat Mahal; and their young son, deported to Pegu, an ancient Buddhist centre in Burma, far removed from anything that could remind them of India. In comparison, her fate is

almost enviable. At least she is close to her own people. She will find a way to communicate with those who continue to fight on the Nepal-India border.

But that is for later.

At this point, her sole concern is her son's health. The Nepalese hakims have brought baskets full of multicoloured vials, potions made of dozens of herbs, steeped for weeks, sometimes months. In the initial stages, they managed to bring the fever down, but very soon, it rose again.

Day and night, Hazrat Mahal watches over the young patient, moistening his lips and cooling his forehead with a damp cloth. When they see her reel with exhaustion, the Nepalese servants offer to replace her. She thanks them, but always declines. She is angry with herself for having neglected her child for so long. She believes that while he is semiconscious, if he could only feel the depth of his mother's love, and how his life is truly the most precious thing in the world for her—if he could only realise she will never let anything take precedence over him again, that she will always be by his side, whatever the circumstances—he would regain his desire to live and would be cured.

*My poor child . . . I abandoned you in order to better fight for your future and that of our land . . . how lonely you must have felt . . .*

And she kisses his hands and his thin arms, bathing them with her tears.

Awed by her suffering, the Nepalese servants watch this woman in silence. They have heard the most contradictory things about her: she is an ambitious woman who fears neither God nor man, capable of perjury and murder in order to attain power . . . a manipulator who thinks only of herself . . . a brave woman fighting to free her country . . . They do not understand. All they see is a mother like themselves, a mother who is suffering and would give her life to save her son.

It is only after several weeks, once reassured her son is out of danger, that Hazrat Mahal is to show an interest in life again and starts taking in her surroundings.

Very soon—to their great surprise—she turns her attention to the women who work for her, who have always been kept in their subordinate roles.

She had noticed them examining her Devanagari<sup>110</sup> book with curiosity. She has in fact started to learn Nepali in order to communicate with her new retinue. However, when the begum points to a word and asks them how to pronounce it, they shake their heads with a small, embarrassed laugh: they do not know how to read.

So Hazrat Mahal decides to organise classes for these women and their children. A welcome occupation, as, after her two years of government, during which decisions had to be made and battles fought, she finds this forced inactivity difficult to endure. It will provide a much-needed distraction from her sombre thoughts.

Thus, every evening, sitting on the ground amidst her new students, she teaches them the basics of reading and writing. Little does she realise the astonishment her initiative evokes in this society, which is even more hierarchical than that of Awadh and, above all, extremely backward. Not only those who benefit from her teaching, but in their families and their native villages, everyone praises this queen, both simple and kind, and who—poor thing!—is a prisoner of the terrible Jung Bahadur.

For the latter is not loved. No one has forgotten the bloody coup d'état by means of which the young general, Jung Bahadur Rana, took over the government twelve years ago, relegating the king to the role of a puppet, nor have they forgotten how he persecuted his opponents and had them assassinated. Finally, his recent alliance with the British, who had taken Sikkim as well as a part of the Terai away from Nepal during an earlier war, deeply shocked the population, especially since he is cooperating with foreigners in fighting Hindu coreligionists!

Before accepting asylum in Kathmandu, Hazrat Mahal had carefully hidden her gold and her most precious jewels in the hems of her gararas. During her negotiations with the maharajah's envoys, although no compensation had been mentioned, she had understood only too well that as the price for his "hospitality," Jung Bahadur, known for his greed, had planned to award himself what was left of Awadh's treasure! She has no way of opposing him, but she intends to hoard away enough to continue supporting the struggle. Even under surveillance, she should be able to find a way to send small subsidies to the fighters.

Since Birjis Qadar's recovery, now that her attention and her energy are no longer monopolised, she can once again concentrate on the fate of her companions abandoned in the Terai.

She expects nothing from Nana Sahib, so she is not in the least surprised when Jung Bahadur informs her of his latest act of cowardice: while she was in Naya Kot, refusing to surrender despite her son's ill health, the Nana had secretly sent a letter to Queen Victoria, imploring her forgiveness. A humiliation he could have spared himself. In their reply to the man they held responsible for the Kanpur massacres, the British authorities advised him to surrender, with the promise he would be given a fair trial.

The Nana had not taken the risk and continued to wander in the Terai jungles with his nephew, Rao Sahib, and a few loyal followers.

On the other hand, the begum is concerned about Beni Madho. A conversation she has overheard between her guards reveals that the rana is resisting on the border, near the state of Tulsipur. After months of battle and flight, she imagines the dilapidated state his army must be in . . . How can she send them some help? Jung Bahadur has separated her from all her loyal servants; she is completely isolated. Can she buy off one of the Gurkhas who guard her? He will keep the gold or denounce her to the maharajah, or maybe both.

She has to find a solution. She, of whom the *London Times* wrote: "The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together," she will never admit defeat.

"Rani Sahiba!"

The young girl standing at the entrance is Ambika, her most intelligent student. For her, as for all the Nepalese, a woman from the royal household is necessarily a *rani*, and Hazrat Mahal has grown accustomed to this new title.

"Rani Sahiba, my brother is going to be married. Will you allow me to go home to my village to attend the ceremonies?"

"Of course. How long will you be gone?"

"Not long, a month at the most. My village is only a week's journey away, not far from Tulsipur."

“Tulsipur?” Hazrat Mahal’s heart starts to beat furiously. “But Tulsipur is in India!”

“Oh, for us villagers it’s all the Terai—half-Indian, half-Nepalese. Nobody would know where the border is if the British soldiers weren’t there sometimes to stop us from crossing it.”

Would it be possible . . . No, she cannot entrust this child with such a dangerous mission . . . Yet, this coincidence seems to be a sign . . .

Ambika is waiting. She can see the rani wants to say something but seems hesitant. Then, overcoming her shyness, she dares:

“You do so much for us, Rani Sahiba. I was talking to my companions about how, for the first time, a lady has shown interest in us and made us proud. I do not really know how to say this, but I just want to tell you that I will always be ready to serve you.”

“I am grateful, Ambika. Now be a good girl, bring me some embers for my hookah and leave me. But please do not go away without coming to see me first.”

Ever since her first taste of it in the house in the Chowk, the gurgle of the hookah’s water and the clouds of honey and rose-scented smoke have had a soothing effect on Hazrat Mahal, and help her to think. She has decided to be frank with Ambika, certain the young girl will not betray her. But if she gives her the gold, which she could sew into the hem of her own wide skirt, how will she manage to make contact with Beni Madho?

It is Ambika herself who provides the answer:

“I cannot go out of the house myself, but I have cousins and brothers. They have all heard of you and admire you. And my family has little love for the maharajah. They don’t know it here, but my mother’s brother was one of the king’s loyal followers. When the coup d’état took place, he tried to resist. He was captured and tortured to death. So if we can help you, for us it will be an unexpected opportunity for revenge!”

Hazrat Mahal marvels at the young girl’s simple and direct manner. Anyone else would have beaten around the bush, might have waited to be asked in order to obtain something in exchange. Ambika, however, agrees without the slightest hesitation, despite the danger, of which she is perfectly aware.

For a month, Hazrat Mahal is to wait anxiously for her return.

Meanwhile, on July 8th, 1859, peace is officially declared in India. This draws several sarcastic comments from the begum, who is well placed to know that battles continue in the Terai, as well as in central India where, despite Tantia Tope's disappearance, Prince Firoz and a few hundred men attempt to continue the struggle.

The following day, Hazrat Mahal and her son are overjoyed to learn that in a symbolic gesture of good will, the British have released Wajid Ali Shah from the Fort William prison.

"Amma Huzoor, I would so like to see my father again. Do you think they would allow me to?" asks the adolescent, quivering with enthusiasm.

"I doubt it, jani. You know very well that we are in exile and do not have the right to return to our country."

"But just for a few days! To see my father again! I miss him so much. He has been gone for three years! Please, Amma Huzoor, can you not ask this favour of the maharajah?"

"It is not he who decides, my son, it is the British, and I do not wish to ask them for anything."

"Why?"

"Because they would refuse just for the pleasure of humiliating me, or worse, they would use my request to spread the rumour that we have given in and made peace with them!"

The adolescent lowers his head to hide his disappointment. He admires his mother, but sometimes he finds her too harsh.

Sad at having to dishearten him, Hazrat Mahal is well aware that he is not convinced and that she talks to him as if he were an adult, while he is still merely a young boy who does not understand why his mother's political choices prevent him from seeing his father.

*In any event, it is preferable that he not meet him, so he may continue to idealise him and imagine him a hero, a martyr to his convictions . . . If he were to see him in his palace in Calcutta, surrounded by his dancers, busy with music and poetry, a thousand miles from his people's struggle, his world would collapse. It is better he continue to admire his father from a distance, even if he is to hold it against me . . .*

Ambika has finally returned. She brings a letter from Rana Beni Madho, who blesses the Queen Mother for her help and informs her he has finally

found a way to return to Awadh, where he intends to rouse the population in the king's name.

Hazrat Mahal no longer has enough gold to help him, so she decides to sell two sets of jewellery—marvels made of rubies and diamonds. A servant of hers had earlier been employed by one of the king's wives. Can she contact her? The royal family despises Nepal's new master; their discretion is assured. But what of her retinue? The begum knows she is taking risks, but are the fighters in the Terai not risking far more?

Chance works in her favour. The jewellery sets are bought immediately and the gold handed over to Ambika, who, this time, is to leave to supposedly bury her grandmother.

She will return very soon, as the begum fears her repeated absences will appear suspect, but she has been able to entrust the gold to a cousin, overjoyed at being able to do the maharajah a bad turn. They have agreed upon a signal to confirm the success of the mission.

Two weeks later, Ambika and her mistress have still received no news.

“You are playing a dangerous game, Huzoor!”

Jung Bahadur enters without even having himself announced. His face is contorted with rage. In his hand, he holds a letter from General Grant, which he waves in front of the begum.

“The general writes to me that his soldiers stopped a young peasant carrying two purses full of gold. They worked him over thoroughly, but he died without speaking. As the arrest took place not far from Beni Madho's camp, Sir Grant concluded that the gold was destined for this terrorist. Who was sending it to him? Would you have any idea?”

He stands threateningly before Hazrat Mahal, who feigns surprise:

“How would I know? I have been a prisoner here for months. You do not even allow me outside the garden!”

Beside himself, Jung Bahadur cannot repress a curse.

“Do you know I can have you placed in solitary confinement, both you and your son, and forget you there . . . forever?”

The green eyes flash, contemptuously.

“Then do it! Thus history will remember you forever!”

She senses he is about to strike her, but he just stares at her with hatred and leaves without a word. The next day the surveillance is reinforced and

all the servants replaced. Fortunately, Ambika is not under suspicion.

From now on, Hazrat Mahal has no means of communicating with the rebels.

Convinced that the Indians will revolt again and eventually drive out the occupiers, she devotes herself entirely to her son's education. One day Birjis Qadar will reclaim the throne; she must prepare him for it.

The adolescent is lively and intelligent. The ordeals have matured him, but he is often prone to bouts of sadness that worry his mother, as they remind her of Wajid Ali Shah's melancholic tendencies. However, is it necessary to search that far? Although the young boy has finally found some kind of security, he is paying the price for the long months of fear and deprivation, and most of all now, at an age when all adolescents are discovering life and freedom, he is under house arrest and paces like a caged lion.

With her extraordinary powers of persuasion, Hazrat Mahal works at convincing her son that he can transform his current situation into a great asset for the future. Instead of wasting his time in hunting, riding and futile parties, surrounded by hypocritical courtiers, he has the leisure to learn his profession as a ruler. She is there to help him. Has she not held the office of head of state and, to a certain extent, that of military leader, for almost two years? And beforehand, close to the seat of power for over ten years, she had been able to carefully observe court tactics, learn to foil intrigues; in short, she had been initiated into the art of politics.

She will not have to insist for long: Birjis Qadar needs to believe he has a destiny as a last resort to save himself from despair.

Henceforth, the only visitor to the bungalow is Jung Bahadur. Hazrat Mahal tolerates his appearances despite her scorn for him, as it is the only opportunity to learn what is happening, even if he takes pleasure in sharing nothing but bad news with her.

Thus at the end of August, she learns that Jai Lal's trial is still in progress . . . For over a year now! The witnesses continue to testify: former servants or ex-allies like Rajah Man Singh. She understands only too well why the judges prolong this masquerade. They have no intention

of pardoning one of the main leaders of the insurrection, but the rajah is admired throughout the country. His execution would be seen by all as the assassination of a hero of the independence movement. They must find a way to sully him, and until now, the witnesses have been too contradictory to be convincing.

*My jani . . . I hope these monsters have not tortured you . . .*

She cannot bear to imagine the marks on this body she so often caressed, on the handsome face she loved so passionately . . . She remembers that one day he had brought up the subject of torture:

“More than betraying anyone else, to give in is to betray oneself,” he had said. “It is to forsake everything one has lived for. It is not surprising that traitors kill themselves or become like the living dead. It is the price to be paid for renouncing oneself in the misguided belief that one is saving oneself.”

Jai Lal . . . Whatever his jailers do, she knows he will never submit. Oh, how she would love to avenge him!

Unexpectedly her son’s words ring in her ears.

“The British have done us so much harm, I would like to kill them all!” he had once exclaimed. She had reprimanded him for this simplistic reaction, unworthy of an intelligent person. And here she is reacting just like him!

Violence that breeds violence, she is too well aware of this dangerous cycle, where the right to be cruel in turn is invoked because of cruelty suffered. People consider they have the right to crush others, just as they themselves have been crushed.

The Indian population is caught in this spiral of violence. Once one conquers the blinding, paralysing fear, docility is often replaced by hatred, reinforced by the fact that it is also hatred for oneself, for having been a coward. Hazrat Mahal has never been placed in such a situation, but in her youth, she had seen so many people humiliated that she can understand their feelings.

By killing the other, we kill the vision that locks us into our insignificance and denies us our human dignity.

Yet, when violence breaks out the whole world is indignant:

“Why did you not speak up earlier? Why did you not explain yourself?”

These crushed men have long tried to make themselves understood. When they asked for a little justice, they found themselves beating their heads against a wall. And if no door in this wall ever opens, there comes a day when they will have to break it down.

This is the basis of all uprisings, of all violence: the impossibility of making oneself heard, however hard one tries.

Hazrat Mahal is certain that if the British government does not learn from this popular fury that has almost swept it away, India will rise up again sooner or later.

In the following months, Jung Bahadur returns regularly with news and a smile that grows more sardonic with every passing day.

At the beginning of September, he announces he has received a letter from Nana Sahib and Mammoo, who are both sick and begging for asylum. He seems to hesitate, but the begum knows he is waiting for her to plead their cause, just to have the pleasure of refusing. She nods her head, making no comment. He retires, disappointed.

Three weeks later, he informs her that the Nana has died of a severe jungle fever.

“I could have taken him in if I had thought it was important to you, but you seemed so indifferent to his fate,” he whispers, looking sorrowful.

Hazrat Mahal looks him up and down with such a grimace of disgust that he falls silent, petrified.

“Amma Huzoor, so who was this Nana Sahib?” her son asks her.

She does not know what to reply . . . Had anyone ever known who Nana Sahib really was? It is difficult to define this ambiguous and contradictory character . . . a coward driven by vanity to surpass himself, a weak man sometimes capable of courage, an arrogant personality riddled with complexes, a man who was often attentive but capable of allowing the perpetration of terrible massacres, asking his musicians to play louder to cover the cries that distressed him . . .

One day, the news Hazrat Mahal has feared for a long time arrives: Rajah Jai Lal Singh has been executed.

This time Jung Bahadur adopts a devastated expression:

“When I think of how he was killed . . . They did not shoot him, as they would a soldier. They hung him like a vulgar bandit!”

His snakelike eyes stare at her. He has a doubt; he would like it to be a certainty: if he could topple the irreproachable begum from her pedestal, it might be useful to the British.

Gathering all her strength, Hazrat Mahal manages to reply:

“Rajah Jai Lal was a hero. At least he did not betray his people by allying himself with the occupier.”

Then she turns her back on him.

Having barely reached her room, the young woman collapses. Against all reason she had clung to the hope that Jai Lal would only be condemned to captivity, that he would manage to escape, or that a popular uprising would open his prison doors. She cannot believe that she will never see him again . . . Maybe Jung Bahadur had lied to her . . . *Jai Lal, my jani* . . . She presses her hand to her chest; she is suffocating . . . When she regains consciousness, her distraught servants surround her, but she sends them away. She wants to be alone . . . with him.

Opening her gold medallion, she contemplates her lover’s portrait. They hung him at Kaisarbagh—the very place where they had fought their last battles together, where they had loved each other, where they had made so many plans for the future . . . maybe this thought gave him strength when they were trying to break him, not considering it sufficient to kill him . . .

In November, Rana Beni Madho and the Rajah of Gonda are killed in the Terai during a series of confrontations with the Gurkhas.

December 1859 is to see most of the other rebels in the Terai jungles captured one after the other. Bahadur Khan, the grandson of the last king of Rohilkhand, and Amar Singh, the “old tiger” Kunwar Singh’s brother, and . . . Mammoo!

Taken prisoner by Jung Bahadur’s men, they are to be sent to Lucknow and handed over to the authorities.

Maybe the begum would like to bid her former servant goodbye, suggests the maharajah sweetly.

Hazrat Mahal hesitates, fearing that Mammoo would be humiliated. She thinks of the eunuch who served her for so long. Despite the differences

that arose later, she is overcome by emotion, remembering the time when he was her only support. Yes, she will see him one last time to express her gratitude.

Their meeting is heartrending.

Mammoo sobs while he kisses her hands, begging her to speak to the maharajah: can he not remain with her? Hazrat Mahal knows there is no hope of saving him, but to calm him she promises to try, and he leaves slightly comforted. Later she reproaches herself for her own faintheartedness, but is it weak-heartedness to give hope to those who are not ready to die?

A few days later, she learns that Mammoo has been hanged.<sup>111</sup>

Winter in Nepal is harsh and Hazrat Mahal's health begins to deteriorate. But, above all, it is the condition of exile that saps her. In 1863, the British government yet again offers her the possibility of returning to India, on the condition that her son sign a document renouncing the throne. Yet again, she does not bother to reply.

Birjis Qadar has grown into a thoughtful and determined young man. He has inherited his mother's moral strength. He prepares himself, knowing that he will return to his country one day.

The British have re-established their authority; however, India is changing.

Whatever they do, the insurrection has sown seeds, and Hazrat Mahal will have the joy of seeing them flourish before she dies.

In Bengal, during the 1870s, the intelligentsia is fighting for the peasants oppressed by the British planters. This is the "Indigo revolt." The elites also launch movements against the censorship of the vernacular press and against racial discrimination before the courts.

These elites who had not joined the 1857 insurrection, trusting in the capacity of the British to modernise the country, realise that, as Hazrat Mahal had predicted, Queen Victoria's promises were only a smokescreen and the British ideals of democracy and equality do not apply to Indians.

From Kathmandu, Hazrat Mahal follows all these events closely. Although she is alone and impoverished, she remains a highly respected

queen. Despite her lack of funds, she never refuses charity to anyone who asks for it.

On April 7th, 1879, the woman the British described as “the soul of the revolt” passes away at the age of forty-eight, after having made her son promise her to continue the struggle.

The little Muhammadi, the poetess of the Chowk, Wajid Ali Shah’s captivating wife, the young regent, the passionate lover, the enlightened sovereign, the intrepid war leader, Hazrat Mahal, was like a dazzling meteor in Indian history.

She has shown the way towards India’s freedom.

## EPILOGUE

**I**n 1887, at the age of sixty-eight, King Wajid Ali Shah dies in his Matiaburj Palace near Calcutta. There are rumours circulating that the deceased was poisoned, as his nails are blue.

In 1891, the viceroy, representative of the British government, allows Birjis Qadar to return to India after thirty-two years in exile. He is not to enjoy his freedom for long. One year later, on August 14th, 1892, the heir to the throne of Awadh dies—also a victim of poisoning—along with his oldest son and daughter, during a banquet given by his half-brother.

Disputes regarding the inheritance but also political motives are evoked—Birjis Qadar shared his mother's convictions and did not hide the fact that he saw the British as usurpers.

Contemporary historians agree that the sepoy rebellion was neither a mutiny nor a revolution, but the dawn of India's march towards independence.

The Awadh insurrection in particular—the longest and fiercest fight—was a true national struggle, inasmuch as the whole population joined in under Begum Hazrat Mahal's leadership.

A few years after the bloody suppression, the battle was to start again, no longer led by the princes who had rallied to the British side, but by an educated bourgeoisie, who demanded a role in governing their own country.

This was to be the aim of the Indian National Congress, which held its first session in December 1885 in Bombay. It was followed by the All India Muslim League, a moderate party led by the Aga Khan, created in 1906.

During the same period, violent attacks were carried out. Following the division of Bengal by the British, a group of young upper-caste Hindus founded a movement which condoned terrorism as an instrument of divine power. These young people considered themselves the heirs to the

Hindu tradition of resistance to foreign tyranny, which was violating the “motherland.”

In 1916, in Lucknow—the emblematic town of the revolt and a symbol of unity between the different communities—the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League signed a cooperation agreement in order to obtain autonomy from the British, along the same lines as that granted to Canada and Australia. However, London would hear nothing of it.

Finally, in 1919, Gandhi launched *Satyagraha*, a non-violent civil disobedience movement, supported by both Hindus and Muslims.

It was to be a long and difficult struggle.

Ninety years after the beginning of the uprising against the British and the struggle led by Hazrat Mahal, in 1947, India was to obtain its independence.

Today, few remember the warrior queen, except in Lucknow, where old families take pride in having participated in this extraordinary saga. In 1957, to mark the centenary of the insurrection, Nehru came with all pomp and circumstance to rename Queen Victoria Park the Begum Hazrat Mahal Park.

In lieu of the bust of the former empress of India, Nehru had a memorial erected there, in honour of the heroic begum, the “soul of the revolt.”

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first of all like to thank my Indian and Pakistani friends for the documents and the precious information they provided during the difficult research involved in the elaboration of this book, where Begum Hazrat Mahal's life is recounted for the first time.

In particular, my sister-in-law Subhashini Ali in Kanpur.

In Lucknow, Professor Roshan Taqui, Rajkumar Amir Naqi of Mahmudabad, Rajah Suleiman of Mahmudabad, the Rajah of Jehangirabad, Begum Habibullah and the highly cultivated bookshop owner Mr. Ram Advani.

As well as the Amir-ud-Daula Public Library at Kaisarbagh and its director, Nusrat Naheed, who made numerous documents available to me.

In Karachi, I would like to thank the historian and journalist, Said Hassan Khan, my cousin Anees Uddin Ahmed and his wife Yasmine.

In Lahore, late Qamar F. R. Khan and her daughter Nusrat.

In London, my friends Nasreen Rehman and Mariam Faruqi.

In France, for their loyal friendship and their encouragement, I thank Ken Takase, Marie Deslandes, and Rana Kabbani.

And for their hospitality in places conducive to writing: Janine Euvrard, Jacques Blot, Manuela and Olivier Bertin-Mouro, Brendan and Beatrice Murphy, my brother Jean-Roch Naville and his wife Marie-Louise, Princess Rose de Croy as well as Her Excellency Malika Berak, the French Ambassador to Oman.

Lastly, for her careful reading, patience and sensible advice, I thank my friend Ishtar Kettaneh-Mejanes.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the others who supported and helped me, whose names I am unable to include here for lack of space.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For almost fifteen years, Kenizé Mourad was a reporter and war correspondent, working, most notably, at *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Her autobiographical novel, *Regards from the Dead Princess*, has sold over a million copies worldwide and has been translated into over thirty languages. *In the City of Gold and Silver* is her second novel.

## NOTES

\* All the quotes followed by an asterisk are taken from historical texts and some have been retranslated from French texts.

\* Retranslated from the French.

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes written as Oudh.

<sup>2</sup> The local pronunciation of the word “*Anglais*,” meaning “English,” spread by the French in India.

<sup>3</sup> Wide stole, supposed to hide the shape of a woman’s body.

<sup>4</sup> Wide trousers worn by both men and women.

<sup>5</sup> A loose-fitting tunic falling either just above or somewhere below the knees.

<sup>6</sup> The women’s quarters. In India, for both Muslims and Hindus, the separation between men and women is known as “*purdah*.”

<sup>7</sup> Grand vizier: prime minister; vizier: minister.

<sup>8</sup> Courteous form of Muslim greeting: the hand is raised to the forehead while bending forwards. The lower one bends, the greater the respect. The tradition of *adab* flourished in Lucknow, which was known as the centre of the most sophisticated manners in the whole of India.

<sup>9</sup> Your Majesty, Your Grace.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Garcin de Tassy in particular. He was a specialist in Oriental languages, a member of the French Academy and professor of Hindustani at the Imperial School.

<sup>11</sup> Latticed wooden screens.

<sup>12</sup> Mahal: the title given to a woman who has given birth to a male heir.

<sup>13</sup> Hazrat Mahal's origins are uncertain. She came from a poor family. Another version is that she may have been born in Farrukhabad, two hundred and fifty miles from Lucknow, her father being the caretaker of a mausoleum.

<sup>14</sup> Velvet or silk hats that were fashionable among the aristocracy.

<sup>15</sup> Floor-length trousers resembling a wide skirt, ending in a train.

<sup>16</sup> Embroidery on fine muslin.

<sup>17</sup> A cone of bitter leaf filled with betel nut chips and a small amount of tobacco that is chewed for a long time before spitting it out.

<sup>18</sup> Sitar, sarangi: stringed instruments. Tabla: a pair of small drums played by striking them with fingers and palms.

<sup>19</sup> One of the most popular dances of north India born out of a blend of Hindu and Muslim cultures. Very rhythmical, the feet and arms move very fast, while the bust remains immobile. King Wajid Ali Shah took it to a high level of perfection.

<sup>20</sup> Excerpt from a poem dedicated to Hazrat Mahal.

<sup>21</sup> Documents of the time show, in fact, that the terms 'niggers' and 'negroes' (*sic*) were commonly employed by the British to designate Indians.

<sup>22</sup> "The beloved of the world." Wajid Ali Shah was often called by this name.

<sup>23</sup> In every state that was not annexed, the East India Company was represented by a British resident. All the residents were accountable to the Company's governor general at the headquarters in Calcutta.

<sup>24</sup> Khan: a sign of nobility.

<sup>25</sup> Regional feudal lords who control a number of villages. A taluqdar can sometimes receive the title of rajah or nawab from a king.

<sup>26</sup> Rice-based dish accompanied by a variety of side dishes.

<sup>27</sup> Young girls and married women who looked after the cows; they were particularly known for their unconditional devotion to the god Krishna.

<sup>28</sup> A dome-covered seat, fixed on an elephant's back, where one or several dignitaries sit.

<sup>29</sup> Doctor trained in traditional, plant-based medicine.

<sup>30</sup> One mile is equivalent to 1.6 km.

<sup>31</sup> For the Shiites, *muta*, a temporary marriage, is permitted and celebrated by a *maulvi*, a religious person. In the event of a child being born out of however short a relationship, it allows the child to be recognised and to be entitled to the same advantages as the other children, particularly the inheritance

<sup>32</sup> Pleated trousers of Mughal origin, well fitted at the calves.

<sup>33</sup> "Observe *purdah*!"

<sup>34</sup> Contrary to the custom that stipulates that women of the royal family remain behind a curtain when receiving a man, for the occasion the Queen Mother has chosen the *burqa*, which despite everything allows more direct contact.

<sup>35</sup> In the past, salt was a rare substance, indispensable for survival. "To eat someone's salt" signifies to owe your life to the person who employs you.

<sup>36</sup> Literally “the gentlemen’s wives,” as Indians called white women.

<sup>37</sup> Published in Akola, in the State of Maharashtra.

<sup>38</sup> In an annexed state, the resident becomes the chief commissioner.

<sup>39</sup> British soldiers out in India did indeed lead extravagant lifestyles which they were unable to afford on their pay.

<sup>40</sup> A plain, round, flat wheat bread that serves as a staple.

<sup>41</sup> Reception hall in the men’s apartments.

<sup>42</sup> Scholar. Singular of “*ulema*.”

<sup>43</sup> Canopied divans topped by golden domes for noble ladies.

<sup>44</sup> Richly decorated sedan chairs.

<sup>45</sup> Small hookah made of clay.

<sup>46</sup> Quranic schools.

<sup>47</sup> The Punjab, the Sikhs’ homeland, was annexed by the British after the 1846 and 1849 Wars. Defeated, the Sikhs, who were also sworn enemies of the Mughals, chose to side with the British during the Sepoy Revolt.

<sup>48</sup> Official reception.

<sup>49</sup> Kanpur is located fifty miles away from Lucknow.

<sup>50</sup> A Mahratti term for “lady.”

<sup>51</sup> An evening during which poems are recited and improvised.

<sup>52</sup> Large house.

<sup>53</sup> *Laddus* and *burfis*: sweetmeats made from milk cream, sugar syrup and flavoured with different spices; *gajar halwa*: a sweet made from carrots.

<sup>54</sup> Emperor Akbar, warrior and philosopher, the grandson of Babur, the first great Mughal, reigned from 1542 to 1605 and unified India under his authority.

<sup>55</sup> The Peacock Throne can be admired today at the Golestan Palace in Tehran.

<sup>56</sup> The great Mughals took pride in being descended from Timur Lang or Tamerlane.

<sup>57</sup> Independence—this is the first time the word is used in India. It was taken up by Gandhi sixty years later

<sup>58</sup> “Down with the British!”

<sup>59</sup> Sharpened reed or quill pen.

<sup>60</sup> Traders and moneylenders.

<sup>61</sup> Long-handled fans made of peacock feathers.

<sup>62</sup> *Sahiban*: gentlemen, plural of *sahib*.

<sup>63</sup> Monument used for ceremonies, characterised by twelve open archways.

<sup>64</sup> Wide raised seat, covered with brocade cushions, on which one sits cross-legged.

<sup>65</sup> A coiled, gold turban decorated with a black pearl at the centre, surmounted by an egret's feather.

<sup>66</sup> Percussion instruments.

<sup>67</sup> Royal decree.

<sup>68</sup> Hindu scholars.

<sup>69</sup> “Come on, brave men!”

<sup>70</sup> Named after a previous resident of Lucknow.

<sup>71</sup> Indian non-commissioned officers.

<sup>72</sup> Princely title.

<sup>73</sup> Court dress worn by men over a *churidar*.

<sup>74</sup> Piece of cotton fabric worn by peasants, tied at the waist. One end is brought up through the legs and fixed at the waistband. It was later popularised by Gandhi as the common man’s garment.

<sup>75</sup> A long, rigid stick used to maintain order.

<sup>76</sup> Holy mendicants who roam the streets, going from one *ashram* to the next, and whom the people look up to for their powers.

<sup>77</sup> Elegiac poems commemorating the martyr Hussain and his followers.

<sup>78</sup> Cloth worn by men, tied around the waist like a skirt.

<sup>79</sup> Infidels.

<sup>80</sup> Siege train: artillery for attacking fortified places.#

<sup>81</sup> Imperial prince.

<sup>82</sup> *Firoz* means turquoise, a stone particularly appreciated by Shia Muslims, who consider it lucky.

<sup>83</sup> Judge

<sup>84</sup> *Surah 24*, verse 31 from *The Holy Qur'an* (translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali), Wordsworth Edition, 2000.

<sup>85</sup> *Surah 33*, verse 59 from *The Holy Qur'an* (translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali), Wordsworth Edition, 2000.

<sup>86</sup> Cannons mounted on wheels that spit fire very rapidly in all directions. They are equipped with a new device which eliminates the need to reload each time, as was the case with traditional cannons.

<sup>87</sup> Later it was rumoured that the letter was a counterfeit written by the British to divide their adversaries.

<sup>88</sup> The aristocrats.

<sup>89</sup> Drawn from British military reports.

<sup>90</sup> Bed made of woven rope.

<sup>91</sup> Darling

<sup>92</sup> *A Year of Service in India*, Vivian Majendie, London, 1859.

<sup>93</sup> Decorations did not exist at the time. The sovereign presented court robes or shawls of unbelievable value.

<sup>94</sup> Popular form of transport: a small carriage.

<sup>95</sup> Excerpt from *My Indian Mutiny Diary*, William Russell, 1858.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 353

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>99</sup> “Yes, my respected father.”

<sup>100</sup> Rajah for the Nepalese, sometimes used in Bihar too.

<sup>101</sup> Mother Mumtaz.

<sup>102</sup> Respected mother.

<sup>103</sup> Also called Powayan.

<sup>104</sup> The British estimate that in the kingdom of Awadh alone about one hundred and fifty thousand fighters were killed, of which thirty-five thousand were sepoy, the others being men belonging to the general population.

<sup>105</sup> An expression that dates back to the Hundred Years’ War and was imported into India by the French, who had opposed the British from the 18th century onwards.

<sup>106</sup> As confirmed by a report by General Ramsay, the British resident in Nepal: “So far, the rebels have committed no outrages in the Terai, they pay for everything they take and treat the village authorities with deference and respect.” Excerpt from *Foreign Political Consultation*, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>107</sup> Brazier.

<sup>108</sup> Azimullah is to be assassinated in Istanbul, certainly eliminated for political reasons.

<sup>109</sup> In a letter to the governor general in Calcutta, the resident writes: “Although he is not willing to admit it, he is not sure he will be obeyed if he was to send his army to fight the fugitives. He even fears it will lead to a revolt. The army leaders in fact consider that an unconditional amnesty should be granted to all the rebels: from the leaders to the lowest soldiers.”

<sup>110</sup> Nepali script identical to Hindi.

<sup>111</sup> The only one who manages to escape is Firoz Shah, “the prince of Delhi.” He is able to flee via Kandahar, Bukhara and Teheran, and finally stops at Mecca, where he dies in misery in 1877.