

William Simpson: **Notes and Recollections of my life  
to my dear daughter Ann Penelope Simpson**

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## **The AFGHAN BOUNDARY COMMISSION 1884.**

Russia's conquest in Central Asia, but more particularly her occupation of Merve and Sarrakhs, which brought her frontier on the Afghan Turkestan, made it necessary that the Boundary between Russian and Afghan Territory should be properly defined. From our relations with the Kabool Government, it was considered necessary that this matter should be carried out by the British Authorities, - and a Commission was appointed to proceed to the region for this purpose.

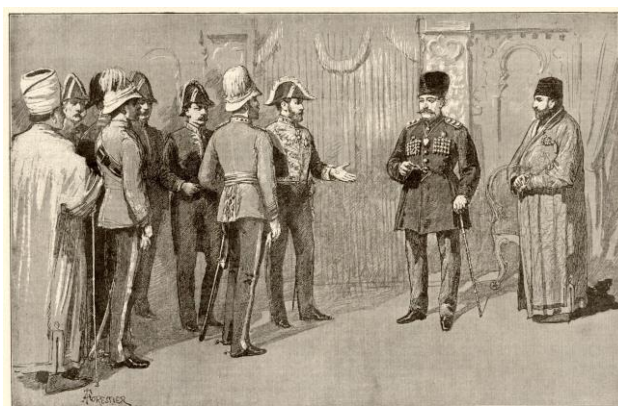
A few weeks before the Commission started Mr Begnum asked me if I should like to go with it, and if I could get permission to do so. - The first of these questions I could answer, but the second could only be replied to by making inquiries. General Sir Peter S. Lumsden was an old Indian friend, So I called upon him at the Indian Office, and ...ted my case. Sir Peter told me that there had been many applications from Gentlemen of the Press to accompany the Commission, but all had been refused. However, he said that from himself, he would be very pleased if I would be allowed to go, - and he would do all that lay in his power to procure the necessary permission. A few days afterwards I had a letter from him stating that I was to be one of the party.

General Lumsden was the Head of the Commission, and three others which formed it. These were Colonel C.E. Stewart, an Indian Officer; Alex. Condie Stephen, of the Diplomatic Service; and Colonel Ridgeway, an Indian Officer. He was in India, and came from there with the Escort and Camp. Col. Stewart did not start with us. Sir Peter, Condie Stephen, Captain Burrow, and the Nawab Mirza Hasan Ali Khan, a Persian Gentleman, attached to the Commission, and myself, started from London. Our route was via Vienna to Odessa, where we took a steamer that called at Eupatoria and Sebastopol. Here we had time to go on shore and drive up to Cathcart's Hill. At Yalta most of the passengers left, as they were going there because it has now become a summer, or Sea side, place of resort. - The steamer called at Theodosia and Kertchi, and from that along the Circassian Coast to Batoum. Here we took the train to Tiflis, where we stopped a day and went on by train to Baku, where we took the steamer to Enzelli, the port of Retsh [sic! Resht]. From Retsh we moved on to Tehran. Here a stay was necessary to form a small camp for our further journey eastward to the Afghan Frontier. Sir Ronald Thomson, our Minister, was at Gulahek, the summer quarters, a few miles out of Tehran, where we were all put up. Here I had to find a servant, a horse, a tent, bedding, and few other things necessary for a Camp. I was very fortunate in a man, a Persian, named Abbas, who turned out to be a very good fellow. He had enough French for me to get on with him. The horse I bought had belonged to Ayoub Khan, the man that fought so well in Afghanistan, and called him "Gulahek", from the name of the place where he came into my possession. He was a strong Afghan G...out, but his back got sore, and one of the baggage horses of the Camp was given me till he got better, - I found this a more pleasant animal to ride, - so I retained him, and "Gulahek" remained as one of the baggage camps. The new steed I named "Zohrab" a parsanite Persian name, - the ancient personage who wore it was the son of Rustem.

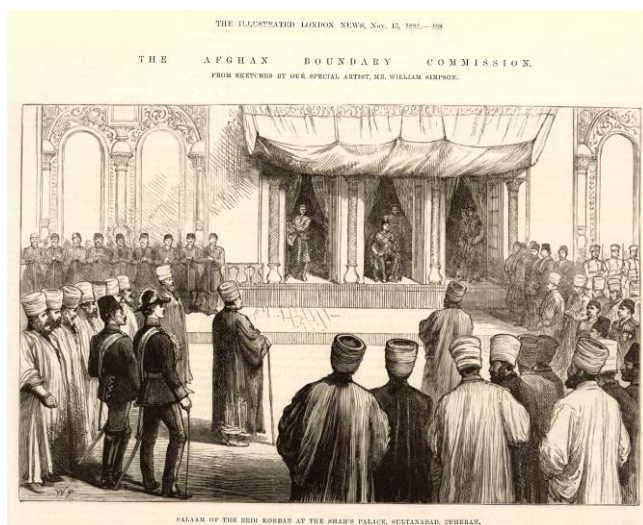
I found two of the sons of Consul Churchill, the man who had been with General Williams at Kars, at Gulahek. They were connected with the Legation.

Sir Peter made a ceremonial Call upon the Shah, I asked to be allowed to accompany it, and permission had to be given, particularly as I wished to sketch, - this was granted. When we were received I kept behind and slightly in a corner, so that I might see and use my pencil. They all noticed that the eyes of the Shah were upon me during the whole of the interview, - and at the end the interest His Majesty had taken in my doings was shown by his asking to see what I had sketched. This rather took me by surprise, - for the interview had not lasted above ten minutes, and my sketches were of the slightest, - they could not be otherwise in such a short time. - So I asked Sir Ronald to explain that they were only short-hand notes, and that I should finish it all afterwards. The Shah took so much interest in the subject that Sir Ronald told the Shah of a few of the wars I had been in and the travels I had made. The Shah seemed pleased, and gave orders: that I should receive every facility while I was in Tehran, and particularly I was to be given an opportunity of seeing the ceremonies of the Corban Bairam, which would take place in two or three days. - When we retired, all said that my "face had been whitened", a figurative phrase meaning that I had found favour in the eyes of the "Centre of the Universe". This interview took place in the Palace of Sultanabad, coffee was not served to us in the Shah's presence, but we went to another house in the gardens, where this was done.

Next morning the Shah sent me his Photograph, - so that I might do justice to his portrait. This is in my book of portraits along with the letter that accompanied it. The letter was written by Aboul Kassem Khan, son of Mahmoud Khan, the Foreign Minister. The son had been educated in England, and could speak and write our language.



RECEPTION OF SIR PETER LEMAREN AND SUITS BY THE SHAH, AT TEHRAN.



SALAAM OF THE BIRD KORBAI AT THE SHAH'S PALACE, SULTANABAD, TEHRAN.

On the morning of the Corban Bairam, - we had come into Tehran, to make our final preparations for our journey, - while at breakfast a Persian gorgeous in blue and silver lace entered the room bearing a long silver mace in his hand, and stated in Persian that he had brought a Carriage for the "Naksha Basha". One of the Churchills was at the table, and said to be particularly well apt in Persian, but at first he could not see what was meant. I was familiar with the word Naksha, a "plan" or "picture", in India, and it caught my ear at once, and made a guess that it applied to myself. The man meant that he had been sent by the Shah for the "Great Artist". I was driven in a carriage and ... to the Palace at Sultanabad, where the ceremony gone through, and was what would have been called a Durbar in India, in Persia it is called a Salaam. All the high Officials of State, Officers and Officials, with troops, occupy the ground in front of the Palace, and the Shah sits at an arched opening. - There are no presents like that are given at an Indian Durbar. The Shah made a number of statements about the country, and other countries, - and the Officials say "Bali, Bali" yes, yes. A Khatib or Reader, repeated some words, and a poet then

recited some verses in praise of the Shah, the troops marched past, and the ceremony was ended.

We left Tehran on our march eastward on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, - and it took us a month to reach Meshed, - our route was along the great highway between Western Asia and Turkestan. It is the route that armies must have taken in the past, for on our left was the great Elburz chain of mountains, and on our right the great salt desert that extends over nearly all the central part of Persia. The details of this journey will be found in my Diary which was written daily at the time, and the pictures done on this journey are in another large volume.

At Nishapur I visited the tomb of Omar Khayyam, the astronomer poet of Persia; and I sent home to Mr Quarritch the seeds of the rose bushes I found there. These have been cultivated at Kew, - and a cutting is to be planted next month, on the grave of Ed. Fitzgerald, the translator of Omar.

From Meshed we marched to Sarrakhs. Here the Tejend or Heri Rud is the boundary between Russia and Persia. New Sarrakhs is Persian, and Old Sarrakhs is Russian, - on this account, I crossed over to the Russian Camp, and introduced myself to General Komaroff to ask permission to sketch at Old Sarrakhs, which was granted. From Sarrakhs we came south along the Heri Rud to Kuhsan, where we found the Indian Camp and escort had arrived. Here I found some old friends both among the Europeans and the natives. Talbot of the Engineers being one. From Kuhsan a party of us including General Lumsden struck off North East for Penjeh, on the Murghab, from which we marched south along that river to Bala Murghab, where the camp settled down for the winter. This was from the beginning of December till the Beginning of February. The Camp then moved to a place called Gulran.

From that place I began my homeward journey. I had illustrated the region sufficiently well, and there was nothing more for me to do. - One object I had in my plans was that of visiting Bamian from that locality, and if I had done this, I should perhaps have gone straight to Kabool, and then to Peshawer and Bombay. The General knew my wish on this matter, and was willing to help me, ... the Afghan authorities seemed to be against it, so I gave it up. The chances of being robbed, or perhaps having my throat cut, while travelling through such a lawless part of the world, was a consideration I had measured in my own mind, and although I was willing to risk this, yet it was perhaps as well that such a possibility was not put to the test. Talbot when on a surveying expedition afterwards managed to visit Bamian, and sent me, after my return home, some valuable details of the statues and caves, which I brought before the Royal Asiatic Society.

The fighting between the Russians and the Afghans took place after I had left, but I could not have seen the affair although I had remained, and I had sent home sketches of the locality which the editor had luckily, and they were ready to appear when the news reached London. - On this thrift I had been sending home letters as well as Telegrams to the Daily News, so, I was again a sort of double-...relled correspondent.

On my return back to Meshed I came by Turbat-i-Shaik Jami, where Mr Alex. Finn of the Consular Service was stationed. - So that I can claim to have visited the tombs of two celebrated Persian poets. I remained about a week in Meshed, and saw a good deal of that holy place. From this I travelled back to Shahrud, on the way we had come from Tehran, but at Shahrud I struck off to the north for Asterabad and then to the Caspian at Bunder Gez, where I found a steamer to Baku.

In this journey back we put up every night in Caravanserais. Abbas and I had horses, and there were horses for the luggage, and a man to look after them. Abbas and I started in the early morning, and he carried my breakfast in bags or receptacles on his horse. When we got about half-way, or at some place we thought was suitable, we stopped, - a fire was lighted, on which the kettle was boiled, and the substantial part of the breakfast was

warmed up. This, with the eating of the meal generally occupied about one hour. – We then finished the march. On arriving at the Caravanserai, we rode around to see which was the cleanest of the rooms, - or pens, they might be called. On selecting one, Abbas swept it out, - laid down a piece of carpet, set my small camp table and stool, and made my bed, which was made of iron and folded up, so that I felt very comfortable in such rough accommodation. The curious thing in these caravanserais are the strange neighbours one has. Next door to me might be a travelling dervish, on one side, - or camel drivers on the other, - or it might be pilgrims to the holy tomb of the Imam Reza at Meshed. To see a European eating with a knife and fork was a great attraction to these people. The rooms in the caravanserais were simply open, arched recesses, So ... my doings could be seen. Abbas at times put up a cloth to serve as a screen, but then it kept out the light. There was a dervish from Herat that came along a good part of the way with me. – That is, he turned up every evening at the caravanserai. He was ... for Kerbella, and carried an iron rod with the figure of a hand, - the panja, at the end of it. He had a few words of English, and some Hindustani, so we could manage to hold some slight conversation. He was quite young, and carried a begging bowl, which reminded me of Buddha's ascetic outfit.

After all this rough kind of travelling, - and the last two marches, from Asterabad to the Caspian, had had ..., and ... caravanserais, - when I found myself on board the steamer, and sitting in the cabin with cushioned seats and a white table cloth before me, it seemed as if my journey was ended. The steamer, "The Grand Duke Constantine", Capt. Kack, a Norwegian who could speak English, - called at a port called Mashad-i-Sar, on the south coast of the Caspian, and west of Bunder Gez, so I took Abbas on board, and landed him on this place. This saved him more than a week's travelling in getting back to Tehran. I handed all my camp traps over to him, as they were now useless to me. He had seen a photo of my little daughter that had been sent out to me, - and he gave me a Gold coin, or rather a token, for her. It is one of the tokens which are sold in Meshed, and are worn by those who visit the tomb of the Imam Reza at that place. There were one or two old coins with it. The British Museum custodians have described them, - and they expressed a wish to have one of three small copper coins, which I sent in to the museum in the name of "Ann Penelope Simpson". The other two with the gold token now form part of a necklace I have had made for my daughter. I knew that Abbas had a daughter, and in my money was a bright, new Sovereign, with the St. George on it, - this I gave him saying, he could make it into an ornament for his girl, or buy some nice thing with it for her. I understood him to say that it would become an ornament, - which was what I expected. Abbas I found all through to be a capital servant, and I was lucky in having picked him up among the applicants.

The steamer went back to Bunder Gez, and sailed north to Krasnavodsk, on the eastern shore of the Caspian, – from which it crossed to Baku.

In Persia I had seen the children and young folk playing with eggs dyed red. With them it was the New Year ceremony. At Baku, I found them playing with similar eggs, as a part of the Easter celebration. This is a good illustration of the theory that a ceremony is older than the legend that grows up to explain it. In this case the playing with the dyed eggs is evidently the same in both cases, - but it has a different signification in each system.

I had a letter of introduction to Mr Törnudd, the head man at Mess. Nobel's establishment at Baku. One of Mr Nobel's sons went with me to the oil wells, and the Fire Temple at Sara Khani, and which I found was, as Col. Stewart informed me, a Hindu Temple, of which I made sketches, and managed to make a rough squeeze of one or two of the Devianagari inscriptions.

I staid a couple of days in Tiflis to make sketches of that picturesque place. I was introduced by M. Jules Mourier, a French Gentleman to Prince Georg Djambakour-Oibéliani, a Georgian Prince who spoke English perfectly, on this account he had been

appointed to the staff of General Zelony, who was to have been the chief of the Russian Commission for the Afghan Boundary. Captain Harford, our Consul at Sebastopol, with a Mr Wallace Cochrane Baillie turned up at the hotel, and we came back to Odessa together. At Batoum I left my heavy boxes, to be sent to London by steamer. From Batoum we went to Odessa, the steamer going along the Circassian coast to Kertch, - then along the Crimean coast to Sebastopol. I did not go ashore at Yalta, but somehow the following was given to me as a notice in English in the Hotel de Russie at that place

*“Accounts on white paper are delivered every day to be verified, and they are paid by leaving the Hotel, or by a longer stay every Saturday. Baths of Sea and Sweet Water at ever hours. Possessing own’s Cows Fresh Milk is to be had Morning and Evening. Conversation Saloon with a Royal.”* – (supposed to mean a piano).

Mr Perry the Consul General at Odessa, asked me to take a packet of dispatches home with me to the Foreign Office, and gave me a special passport. The events on the Afghan frontier were ...icklish, and the chances of their leading to war were serious. – The Russians were pushing troops on to Central Asia. I saw a regiment at Baku, and Mr Peacock, the Consul at Batoum came to Baku while I was there, so it is probable that the dispatches related to matters connected with these movements, - and it was considered unsafe to trust such documents to the Russian Post Office.

The train I came in brought me to Berlin, and after two nights and days in the train, with little food, I felt very tired, and so, I determined to have a night’s rest at Berlin. In the morning I called on Count Seckendorff, and he asked me to call again after breakfast to see the Crown Princess, which I did, when she came in, she had a pretty young girl with her that she introduced to me as her Grand Daughter, - I believe she was the Daughter of the Eldest Daughter of the Crown Princess, - the Princess or Duchess of Saxe-Meiningen, - I said, - “Is this your Grand-Daughter”, - giving a slight emphasis on the word “your”, - the intonation meant are you already a Grand-Mother, - and she caught the meaning quickly, for she at once replied, “yes, my Grand-Daughter”, - giving a repetition of my emphasis on the word “my”. I then mentioned that I recollected the announcement of her own birth. I asked if the young lady could speak English, - and the Princess replied “yes, nothing but English here”. – This was the only indication I heard from her of the strong English proclivities she has been credited with. – I then told her about the Afghan Frontier, in which she was evidently much interested, - and made some strong remarks, and then she asked me if I would oblige her by calling on Col. Swaine, the Military Attaché to our Embassy. She wrote out his address for me on a piece of paper. – and tell him all that I knew. On leaving Seckendorff went with me to the Embassy where I saw Sir Edward Malet, - and then I went to Col. Swaine’s house and saw him, telling him important points, and answering questions he put to me. I did all this, and was in time for the midday train, which brought me to Willesden on the evening of the next day. The 29<sup>th</sup> April 1885. I had been away close upon eight months.

When I left in September my little daughter was an infant in arms, - on my return I found her toddling about on her feet.

The dispatches I brought home were sent on to Lord Granville, who was then Foreign Minister, and this led to an invitation to lunch in his house in Carlton Terrace. – I did not take my sketches, so, I had to go another day soon after, to show them to Lord and Lady Granville.

The action of the Russians at Penjdeh, which so nearly led to a war, seems to have given the Queen a great interest in the locality, for at the end of May, I received a message from Sir Henry Rons... that I was to come to Balmoral, where the Queen then was, and bring my sketches with me. – I started on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, and arrived at Balmoral next day. Sir Henry told me that I was to remain two nights in the castle. I had my meals with the suite. – In the evening just as dinner was coming to a close, a message came in from the Queen asking if my sketches could be shown at night, - I said yes, - and went to my room to bring

them. I was taken into the drawing-room, where the Queen sat with some ladies. One was the Marchioness of Lorne, and another was the Princess of Leiningen. I had with me the silver ornaments, which I had brought from Central Asia, including the child's cap I had brought from Penjdeh. These were first looked at, and the Queen appeared to be delighted with the jaunty look of the little cap, for she held it up as high as her hand could reach, and called the attention of the other ladies to it. The Queen looked carefully over all the drawings, - while I stood at the table and gave explanations of each. Next evening the suite was invited to the drawing room, a custom which is known as "joining the Royal Circle", - but I found that the word circle is very far from being geometrically correct. - I should prefer to call it a very irregular polygon, - for on entering the drawing room, we each took a place anywhere round the room, as near to the wall as the furniture would permit. The Queen went round chatting for a longer or shorter time to each. When she came to me, - I forget now how it was that the conversation chanced to turn upon Lady Canning in India. She was a great friend of the Queen's, and the details I was able to give of Lady Canning, of the camp life, of which I had seen so much, how Lady Canning devoted her time to sketching, - now a lot of her sketches were burned from a fire in her tent, - all this so interested Her Majesty, that she stood talking to me, for about half an hour. - When at last the Queen retired, and we were all going out Dr Reid said, - "Why Simpson, you kept the Queen all to yourself tonight."

Next day, before I left, Miss Stepford, one of the ladies in attendance, brought me the two volumes of the Queen's life in the Highlands, with Her Majesty's signature in them; and I had to write my name in two small books of names Miss Stepford produced. One of them was an old and very shabby looking volume, but I saw a number of important names in it. I assumed that every visitor, or guest of the Queen's would write their names in this well-worn little book. I left on the 4<sup>th</sup> June, and was back again in Willesden on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>. -

Transcription done by Paul Bucherer-Dietschi

Corrections done by Anke Schürer-Ries

Bubendorf, January 16, 2012