

‘3,000 animals with the mother of Shah Mahmud in 1725. She had no women, no officer, no servants with her, when she crossed the Maidan and came to the principal gate of the new Shah’s palace half naked, what clothes she wore in tatters, ravenously gnawing a great radish, more like a witch than the mother of the despot of a wide empire.

‘Early in 1724, with 6,000 Daghistanis included in his force, Nasrullah was sent to occupy Shiraz, the chief town of the great province of Fars, and all the Persian Gulf. But the Shirazis resisted and Nasrullah was killed by a bullet in the chest while advancing to the assault. His successor as commander of Afghan troops, Zabardast Khan, proceeded to reduce Shiraz by famine and, when several thousand had died of hunger, got possession and had governor and garrison put to the sword. The Afghans had, however, lost 2,000 men in the sorties and skirmishes. Of the 400 of them sent to take possession for Shah Mahmud of the small places on the coast the climate is said to have accounted for all but a tenth: most of the local inhabitants to the east migrated across to the Bahrain islands: only Kung and Bushire surrendered.¹

‘To proceed with the conquest of the kingdom which, it would seem, had not accepted as binding the transfer of sovereignty made by Shah Sultan Husain to an alien rule and race, Shah Mahmud at the head of his forces in May 1724 attacked the township of Gulpaigan in the province of Isfahan and took it: Kashan then offered to submit. For three nights after the return of the troops to Isfahan the city was illuminated. Almost at once Shah Mahmud set off for the province of Khuzistan in the south-west, bordering the Mesopotamian marshes; but the heat, almost as much as attacks by Arabs, obliged him to return after most of his force and baggage had been lost. No less than 50,000 Tumans are said to have been distributed to women widowed by this abortive expedition. Still, at the end of the year many fresh recruits arrived from Kandahar, and even Turks as well as more Daghistanis were enrolled.

‘The people of Yazd and its district had cut off and killed a large number of the Afghan recruits on their way across Persia: it became the turn for chastisement of Yazd, where the Gabrs’ (Zardushti and fire-worshipping survival of the ancient, pre-Muhammadian race) were supposed to favour him, and Shah Mahmud arrived before the town at the end of December, only to find the surroundings devastated by the Yazdis themselves: and their sorties put his soldiery to flight. He lost all his artillery in a stream, and retraced his steps to Isfahan, considering these two checks as a punishment of Allah: in propitiation he went and lived in a cave for forty days, emerging debilitated and half demented, thrown off his balance all the more by news of the escape from the “andarun” (where Shah Sultan Husain and his family had remained confined) of Safi Mirza, eldest son of the ex-king.

‘From then on Shah Mahmud seems to have determined to get rid of the rest of the Safawi family, lest they should become potential enemies: on 7.2.1725 he sent for all the princes to be brought to his presence in the courtyard of the palace, had their arms bound behind them, and then with the aid of two executioners he personally cut off their heads, only two young children escaping by throwing themselves into the arms of the ex-Shah, whose hand was actually cut by the stroke of a scimitar aimed at one of them. “Some say one hundred and fifty, others one hundred and eighty perished in this massacre,” remarked Fr. Leander of S. Cecilia, “but the Carmelite Fr. John Joseph of S. Antony makes this incident happen shortly after Mir Mahmud won the throne, in 1723, and says that only thirteen princes were then slaughtered, their bodies being left lying in the court where they had been killed, all the reign of Mahmud. In any case, the flight of Safi Mirza provided the motive for the act.”

‘The insanity of Shah Mahmud increased, he tore his own flesh, his body became loathsome with a disease resembling elephantiasis: even the schismatic Armenian bishop and priests from Julfa were summoned to read the Gospel over his head. But after receiving

¹ In their diary of 8.4.1727 the Agents of the East India Company at Gāmbnun wrote: “Should the Afghans get possession of this place, it will . . . be . . . with the good consequence of opening communications . . . to Isfahan”: i.e. it was not yet in Afghan hands. But 25.12.1728 they write of having paid a visit to the Afghan Khan: and 21.3.1728 they refer to men of Zabardast Khan arriving from Shiraz.