

STORMING OF TAKHT-I-SHAH PEAK

Howard Hensman

Sherpur, 12 December 1879, midnight

I left Mahomed Jan and his followers in possession of the hills to the south of the Sherderwaza Heights, with a part of General Macpherson's brigade on the latter, ready to attack him. To-day a party of 560 men, made up in nearly equal proportions from the 67th Foot, 72nd Highlanders, 3rd Sikhs, and 5th Ghoorkas, aided by two guns of Morgan's mountain battery, have made that attack, and have established themselves on a lower hill between the Sherderwaza Heights and the high conical peak of Takht-i-Shah, whereon the enemy muster in great force and have sixteen standards flying. This peak is the highest of the clump of mountains south of Cabul and lying between the city and Charasia, and was the point whence Captain Straton tried to heliograph to the Shutargardan in the early days of our occupation. It is cone-shaped, looked at from Sherpur, and on its southern side joins a ridge running southwards above the village of Indikee. The sides facing Cabul are very steep, and covered with huge boulders polished by wind and rain, and of a kind to check any storming party. Perfect cover is afforded to men holding it, and on the summit is a well-built sungar of great thickness, covering a natural cavity in the rocks which has been made bomb-proof by some Afghan engineer, who understood the strength of the point. Fifty men could lie in perfect security behind the sungar or in the hole below it, and could choose their own time for firing at an advancing enemy. Outside the sungar, and a little lower down, is a cave, wherein another strong body of men could hide themselves and act in a similar way, while their flank to the left would be guarded by a broken line of rocks extending down to the kotal, where the Bala Hissar Ridge meets them. Just between the two ranges is a low, dome-shaped hill, blocking up the otherwise open kotal; and round this a footpath winds, leading to the sungar, but so narrow as only to admit of men going up in Indian file. The enemy occupied this morning the Takht-i-Shah Peak and the line of rocks I have mentioned, and had also a few score of men on the lower hill in the kotal. Away on the south, hidden from our view, were some 5,000 or 6,000 men, waiting for an attack to develop, in order to reinforce the peak. At eight o'clock our guns opened fire from the picket on the ridge. There were then only seven standards on the peak, but during the day nine others were brought up; and the long ridge, stretching downwards to Beni Essar, was lined with men. These were, by the contour of the ground, safe from our shells, and they quietly watched the guns all day. From eight o'clock until evening Captain Morgan fired shell after shell into the sungar and the rocks below. The enemy were of quite a different order to those we have hitherto had to deal with. They stood up boldly to their flags, and waved their rifles and knives in derision at each shot. We could not spare more infantry for the attack, as we had to protect Sherpur, which, we learnt, was to be attacked by Kohistanis from over the Paen Minar Kotal, north of the lake. The city, too; was known to be in a ferment, and a demonstration might at any time be made from it against our cantonment. General Baker with his flying column was still absent, and our object was rather to hold the main body of Mahomed Jan's force in check, than try to disperse them with 560 men. At nine o'clock heliographic communication was opened with General Baker, then on the Argandeh Kotal. He reported that his rear-guard had been harassed for the last two days, and that the hills in all directions were lined with tribesmen. He was ordered to march without delay to Sherpur, and it was hoped at first that he would arrive in time to assist General Macpherson in attacking the enemy's position. As he had to march fourteen miles with his rear-guard engaged from time to time, he did not reach Sherpur until evening, so his troops, foot-sore and tired, were not available.

After several hours' shelling of the Takht-i-Shah Peak, the 67th the Highlanders, Sikhs, and Ghoorkas made their attack; and, in spite of the stubbornness with which the Afghans fought, established themselves on the low hill on the kotal. They tried to work upwards to the sungar; but the fire of the Afghans was so true and sustained, that the attempt had to be given up. Our men also ran short of ammunition, and they contented themselves finally with holding the position captured, so as to be able to co-operate on the morrow with any force sent out from Sherpur to attack by way of Beni Hissar on the enemy's flank. Our casualties included Major Cook, VC, 5th Ghoorkas, shot below the knee; Lieutenant Fasken, 3rd Sikhs, bullet wound in both thighs; and Lieutenant Fergusson, 72nd Highlanders, seriously wounded in the face. The enemy this evening still hold the Takht-i-Shah Peak in strength, and large reinforcements are said to have joined them from Logar, the Ghilzais from that district being up in arms. It has been decided to-night to send a brigade, under General Baker, to attack the peak from Beni Hissar village to-morrow at the same time that Colonel Money, of the 3rd Sikhs, moves up another force from the hill on the kotal.

13 December 1879, evening

To-day the Takht-i-Shah Peak has been carried, and a strong picket now holds it. The action has been a great success, but there are still large bodies of the enemy above Indikee; and as they may try to regain the position, General Macpherson has abandoned Dehmazung altogether, and posted his brigade on the Sherderwaza Heights. At eight o'clock this morning General Baker left cantonments with the following troops:—

G-3, Royal Artillery, four guns;
No. 2 Mountain Battery, four guns;
92nd Highlanders (six companies);
Guides' Infantry (seven companies);
3rd Sikhs (wing of 300 men);
5th Punjab Cavalry.

General Baker took the road past the Bala Hissar, and, upon debouching into the plain north of Beni Hissar, found the enemy posted in force all along the ridge in front, leading down from the Takht-i-Shah Peak. Beni Hissar was also full of Afghans, and in the fields about it were detached parties. These, seeing our force advancing, began to stream towards the ridge, and the original plan of attack was so far modified that, instead of working round through Beni Hissar village, the Highlanders and Guides were sent straight across some marshy ground at the ridge. The object in view was to cut the enemy's line in two, and it was attained most successfully. Our eight guns opened fire at 1,400 yards upon the masses of Afghans on the ridge, and the shells kept under the musketry fire opened upon our infantry. The 3rd Sikhs protected General Baker's left flank, while the cavalry aided in keeping the scattered parties about Beni Hissar in check. Nothing could be finer than the advance of the 92nd and the Guides; they reached the slope of the hill, and opened fire upon the enemy, one continued roll of musketry being heard as they pushed upwards. They gained the crest, and the Afghan line was severed, about 2,000 being left about Beni Hissar while the assault was made upon the peak. The rapid fire from our breech-leaders swept away such of the enemy as stood firm, while the bayonet made short work of the ghazis who defended the standards. At some points twenty and thirty bodies were found lying piled together, shot through and through by Martini and Snider bullets, showing how well the volleys had told. In a very short time the majority opposed to the storming party had broken and fled. A few ghazis fought desperately, but upwards went the Highlanders in the same gallant style they had shown at Charasia, and under the same leader, Major White. The Guides, under Colonel Jenkins, were equally eager, this being their first chance in the campaign, and they shared with the 92nd the honour of scattering the defenders of the ridge. One young Highland officer fell a victim to that uncalculating courage which becomes rashness when pushed to extremes. Lieutenant Forbes, with only a few men, scaled the ridge, and got detached from the regiment which was toiling up as fast as the men with their heavy load of rifles and ammunition could climb. He was left at last with only Colour-Sergeant Drummond, an old twenty-one years man, and a band of ghazis turned back and attacked him. The Sergeant was shot down, and Lieutenant Forbes rushed forward to save his body from mutilation. After cutting down a ghazi he was overpowered and killed before the Highlanders could save him. Not a man of the ghazis who had turned back escaped: they were shot and bayoneted on the rocks. As the attacking party neared the Takht-i-Shah Peak the Afghans deserted it; and when a party of the 72nd Highlanders and 5th Ghoorkas from the Bala Hissar side reached the sungar, they found the flags still flying, but no one guarding them. The position had been captured in about two hours, and as the mid-day gun was fired in Sherpur, the heliograph flashed from the sungar, and the peak was known to be ours. Some of the enemy ventured too near the Chardeh plain in their retreat, and a squadron of the 14th Bengal Lancers charged among them, killing between twenty and thirty.

While the Highlanders and Guides were storming the ridge, an attack had been attempted from Beni Hissar upon General Baker's left flank, but the 3rd Sikhs drove back the enemy, who began to move round towards Siah Sung, and eventually collected in force upon these hills. They were shelled by our guns, and the 5th Punjab Cavalry were reinforced by two squadrons of the 9th Lancers, a squadron of the 14th Bengal Lancers, and the Guides' Cavalry. Wherever the ground was good, our sowars and Lancers charged and did great execution. The Afghans fought bravely, forming up to receive the cavalry with a steadiness that trained infantry would not have surpassed, and reserving their fire until the horses were close upon them. One brilliant charge by the 9th Lancers cost that regiment one officer killed and two wounded, besides the loss of several troopers. Captain Butson and Captain Chisholme, at the head of their respective squadrons, swept down upon 500 or 600 men, taking them on the right and left flank. Captain Butson turned in his saddle as he faced the enemy, and cried out— "Now, men, at them for the honour of the old 9th," and the next moment he fell dead, shot through the heart. He was in command of the regiment, the affair of the 11th having sadly thinned the ranks of the officers, and his death is universally regretted. Captain Chisholme was shot through the leg, the flash of the rifle burning his clothes, so steadily had the Afghan in front of him waited before discharging his piece. Lieutenant Trower was also slightly wounded, while the Sergeant-Major and three

troopers were killed and seven wounded. The Lancers rode through and through the Afghans opposed to them, and scattered them all over the plain. The 5th Punjab Cavalry also made a successful charge; and the Guides twice got well among the fugitives. Their second charge was upon a body of Lehistanis, who had crossed the plain east of Bemaru and made for Siah Sung with the intention of joining Mahomed Jan. They were shelled from the eastern end of the Bemaru Heights; and, upon seeing General Baker's force engaged, halted irresolutely near Siah Sung. They tried to retrace their steps, but were suddenly charged down upon by the Guides, who had waited for them behind the northern slopes of Siah Sung. Sixty are said to have been killed in this charge alone, the Guides chasing them as far as the Logar river, where the swampy ground checked the cavalry. Altogether the day's fighting has been a wonderful success; and though our casualties are eleven killed and forty-three wounded, the enemy's loss in killed alone must have been between 200 and 300. 150 of the 5th Punjab Infantry, sent out to reinforce General Baker, came upon a large party of Afghans marching down the Bala Hissar Road. They were at first mistaken for Highlanders; but when they fired a volley at the officer who rode up to speak to them, the mistake was soon apparent. The Punjabees at once extended themselves in skirmishing order among the willow plantations on each side of the road, and opened a rapid fire. The Afghans faced about and made for the Bala Hissar, but a company of the 5th cut off half their number, and in a hand-to-hand fight killed forty. These men, who are believed to have been from the city, were really run to earth, and were so exhausted that they could scarcely use their knives.

One feature of the day's fighting has been the attitude of the villagers about Cabul. A straggler from the 92nd Highlanders was found cut up between Sherpur and the Cabul river; officers riding alone have been fired at, and pelted with stones; and two villages on either side of the road to Beni Hissar opened a heavy fire upon our troops. General Baker halted on his way back to cantonments to burn these villages as a reward for their treachery. The lives of the men in one were spared on condition that they fired the other, the gates of which could not be forced open by our guns. The defenders were shot as they tried to escape from the ruins. From the Bala Hissar and near the city shots were fired, and the flanking parties of the 92nd, in their homeward march, came upon 200 or 300 men in the willow plantations, who fled towards the city walls. a convoy of wounded sent from the Sherderwaza Heights to Sherpur had also a narrow escape, the bravery of the non-commissioned officer in charge of the escort alone preventing a catastrophe on a small scale....

Sergeant Cox, with twenty men of the 72nd, was in charge of the dhoolies, and among the wounded were Major Cook, VC, 5th Ghorkas; Lieutenant Fergusson, 72nd Highlanders; and Lieutenant Fasken, 3rd Sikhs. Upon arriving at the foot of the hill, the road leading under the southern wall of the Bala Hissar was followed, and it was soon seen that parties of armed men were lining the parapets. Sergeant Cox, fearing to draw the fire by striking across the fields towards Beni Hissar, where General Baker was shelling some villages, put on a bold face, and marched on steadily. This had the best effect, as not a shot was fired from the walls. Ten Highlanders were at the head of the dhoolies, and ten in rear. Just as the little party got near the Bala Hissar gate a large body of Afghans prang out from among the willows lining either side of the road, and, drawing their knives, came straight upon the advance-guard. The road from Beni Hissar joins the road to Sherpur just at this point, and seeing that it would be impossible to cut through the enemy, or to retreat the way he had come (as in the latter case the men on the walls would probably open fire), Sergeant Cox pushed on, ordering his men to reserve their fire. His object was to get the dhoolies fairly on the Beni Hissar Road on his right, and then to fall back until help should come from that quarter. The manoeuvre succeeded admirably. Waiting until he was within twenty yards of the Afghans, he ordered the ten men with him to fire a volley. This was too much for the enemy, who broke and took cover in the trees. The dhoolie-bearers thought all was over, and those carrying Major Cook dropped their dhoolie in the middle of the road. They soon recovered courage, and while rapid volleys from the advance-guard kept the Afghans in check, all the dhoolies were got safely upon the Beni Hissar Road, and finally reached General Baker's force in safety. Sergeant Cox managed the whole business splendidly, and under such leadership the men were cool and collected, skirmishing and retiring without being touched by the scattered fire directed at them. After waiting an hour, the escort was strengthened by some cavalry, and the whole convoy of wounded reached cantonments in safety. The position in which Sergeant Cox was placed was a most dangerous one, as the least hesitation or want of decision would have been fatal: the Afghans were, indeed, so sure of success, that they did not fire at first, but trusted to cutting up the guard at close quarters with their knives. The three officers, whose lives were saved by Sergeant Cox's steadiness, reported the incident to Colonel Money, who had sent the dhoolies down the hill. Sergeant Cox was one of the men decorated with the distinguished service medal on December 8th for gallantry at the Peiwar Kotal. General Baker's force is now safely in quarters again. General Macpherson has sent back to Sherpur the 72nd Highlanders and the 3rd Sikhs, and, with the 67th Foot and the 5th Ghorkas, holds the Bala Hissar Heights and the Takht-i-Shah Peak. The enemy are still in force above Indikee and at Dehmazung, which commands the Cabul gorge, and the road into the city has been

abandoned. They may try to work round in that direction-that is, if to-day's defeat has not disheartened them. This evening a party of Kohistanis have come over the Surkh Kotal, and are bivouacking on a hill a mile and a half west of Sherpur. These are the reinforcements sent by Mir Butcha, who has no doubt heard of the success of Mahomed Jan on the 11th. The casualties to-day were eleven killed (two officers) and forty-three wounded. Of these the 92nd lost one officer and two men killed and nineteen wounded. The Guides had three killed and eight wounded.

Howard Hensman, *The Afghan War of 1879-80*. (London: 1881), pp. 198-206.