



A Journal of the First Afghan War

Florentia Sale

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The first Afghan War of 1838-1842 witnessed one of the greatest defeats ever inflicted upon the British by an Asian enemy--the retreat from Kabul. On January 6, 1842, a British force that, with its followers numbered some 16,000, marched out of Kabul under an illusory safe conduct; one week later, nearly all of them--men, women, and children--lay dead along the ninety mile route, some killed by the Afghan enemy, the rest frozen to death in the snow.

Of all the participants in the tragedy, none has told the story better than Lady Sale. This is her journal. One of the few witnesses who survived the massacre, Florentia, Lady Sale, was the wife of second-in-command at Kabul, Sir Robert Sale. Her journal begins in September 1841 when the whole position of the British, and the butterfly social existence they led in the Kabul cantonments, was menaced both by Afghan intrigue and by the incompetence of their own command. The journal ends a year later, with the rescue of Florentia by her husband from nine months of captivity in Afghan hands. In the intervening period she had witnessed battle, murder, and sudden death, had been exposed to freezing cold and burning heat, had endured vermin-infested lodgings and incessant earthquakes--all recorded with a laconic imperturbability and an occasional flash of sardonic humor.

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