

MICHAEL EDWARDES

# *The Orchid House*

SPLENDOURS AND MISERIES OF  
THE KINGDOM OF OUDH, 1827-1857

'I know nothing about gardens, but Oudh is a  
d——d Orchid House.' R. M. EDWARDS. 1828



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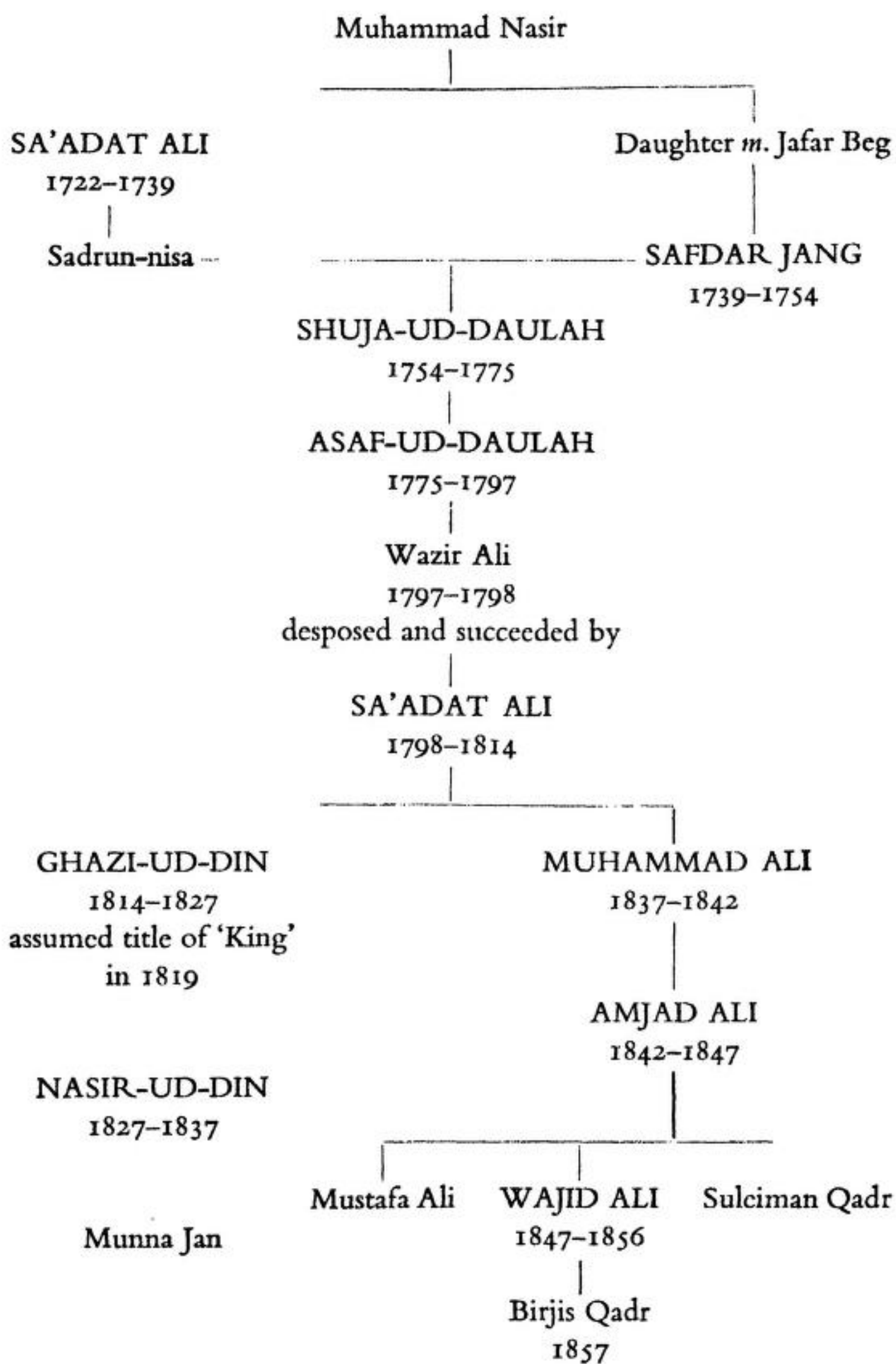
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## THE NAWABS AND KINGS OF OUDH



'There is,' says Mr Croupley rather pompously, 'no animal so fierce and terrible as the wild buffalo, when thoroughly aroused—heavy and clumsy and awkward though he be. I have frequently seen him put a good-sized elephant to flight, goring the fugitive terribly.'

The reluctant tiger is removed, helped along with hot rods and a great deal of shouting. Wine is served in the gallery as an entr'acte.

Three large buffaloes with broad, flat foreheads and wide-branching horns were now pushed into the court-yard. The man-eater was not so cocky now and he retreated 'step by step, snorting as he did so but more with apprehension than with anger. Like all bullies, he would have rushed headlong at them had he seen any signs of fear; but their evident want of all terror of him was plainly the cause of his embarrassment.' The buffaloes were just as reluctant to attack as their predecessor, the tiger, and taking courage the man-eater advanced, snorting and waving his head menacingly. The buffaloes were unheeding of the danger. With a quick movement the man-eater lashed up with his iron-shod hoofs against the ribs of the nearest buffalo. The buffalo was stunned and the other two nodded their heads with surprise. The king laughed loudly at the animals' confusion.

'The man-eater deserves his life, let him escape!' But let Mr Croupley have the ending of his own story.

'The order was obeyed forthwith; he was adroitly muzzled and led forth to his stable, a victor and a conqueror, to end his days in peaceful glory.

'"I shall have an iron cage made for him," exclaimed the king; "and he shall be taken care of. By my father's head, but he is a brave fellow!"

'He *had* an iron cage made for him—one twice the size of many modern London dining-rooms; and there, roaming round the walls of his iron house, the man-eater exhibited his teeth to his admiring visitors, snapped at them valorously, and often showed how he had assaulted the ribs of the buffalo, by playing the same tune on the bars of his cage.'

## 18 *Cruel Amusements*

How much Nasir-ud-din enjoyed the exotic duel between the great bay horse and Burrhea, the tiger! The king's unusual taste in animal

entertainment was not confined to this single episode. On the contrary, for one of the commonest amusements of the court of Oudh was the fighting of birds and animals especially trained for the purpose.

On some evenings, after the dinner-table had been cleared, cock-partridges, spurred in sharpened steel and stimulated by drugs, would be placed upon it. Then, to excite them further, a hen was placed between them and, in a moment, the fight was on. It was a savage affair of beak and claw and spur. Blood was drawn, a thigh ripped, a side torn. The combatants would separate, each wary, seeking an opening or a moment off guard. A beak snaps. One of the partridges retires, an eye torn from its socket hanging on a single tendon against the cheek. From the spectators, there is only laughter and shouts of encouragement. The fight is renewed until one of the birds falls dying to the ground.

The table is swept clean. The wine circulates, the king's hookah is prepared. The fun continues until the king is carried insensible through the curtains of his zenana.

This is merely an indoor game, a cruel trifle to follow the dessert. With a little more organization, greater entertainment can be had. A stockade is erected around a circular enclosure—as can be seen in the illustration—and in a pavilion high up and secure from any unexpected catastrophe sit the king and his friends. Today, as an aperitif to a main dish of lustier fare, two antelopes will fight to the death.

These graceful creatures, small and elegantly formed, are caught in the foothills of the Himalayas and brought to Lucknow for training. Soon the sparring is over, horns are locked. One, a dark muscled beast, is gaining as, muscles taut and quivering, he pushes his opponent against the bamboo of the stockade. Down to his knees goes the weaker animal. A cry goes up from the spectators—now for the 'sport'. In a moment, antlers are unlocked and the sharp points of the victor's rip open the flanks of the weaker.

Tearing away, the gored antelope flies for its life. There is no escape. Round and round the circle he runs, like an injured moth inside a lamp-shade, bloodying the earth and stockade. The victor lowers his head and charges. Impaled on the sharp horns the loser falls dying—and the victor, shaking the carcass from his horns, raises his head in triumph.

This over, an *hors d'œuvre* only, the company pass on to the main

event of the evening—a battle between two tigers. Mr Croupley describes it with the lip-licking relish and literary treatment of a modern novelist at a bull-fight. We, however, will move on to more exotic dishes. For, if it should be thought that the combat of birds, of antelopes, and of tigers, were the limits of the king's peculiar pleasures, the reader could not be more wrong. The king's 'sport' covered the whole range from the miniature to the magnificent. Camels were trained to grasp one another by the lip, and even that lumbering armoured-vehicle of the animal world, the rhinoceros, was kept in an open park to await his appearance in the arena.

Prepared with drugs, the rhinoceros is pitted, not only against another rhinoceros, but sometimes against an elephant, though Mr Croupley explains that this is not so interesting. He reserves his enthusiasm for the matching of rhinoceros and tiger, for in this there is 'infinitely more animation and excitement'.

One occasion saw the matching of two elephants. Both were large and on musth, a period when an elephant is particularly wild and ferocious, and when even the sight of another is enough to start a bitter fight. For the pleasure of the king, a favourite elephant, Malleer, veteran of many encounters, and another almost as formidable were brought out. Seeing each other, they charged—each with its mahout clinging to its neck. The impact of the two beasts was tremendous. The fight continued until the king's favourite pushed his opponent into the river which bounded the open space in which the elephants were fighting. Quickly, the defeated elephant swam to the other side. Tragedy now intervened.

Malleer was so incensed by the loss of his victim that he turned in revenge on his mahout who had the misfortune to fall off his perch. Trumpeting loudly, the great elephant raised his huge foot and ground the man's chest into a pulp of bone, blood, and tattered flesh. But this, however horrible, was not all, for the elephant tore off one of the man's arms and hurled it into the air over his head, blood whirling in heavy goutts on to the horrified spectators.

There is a silence for a moment. No one knows what to do. And then into the arena rushes a woman bearing a child in her arms. It is the mahout's wife. She moves towards the elephant. Mounted men are preparing to ride in to shepherd Malleer back to his quarters. They are armed with sharp spears. But the woman is there before them. She

looks at the remains of her poor husband and then turns to stare at the elephant.

'O Malleer,' she says, 'cruel savage beast! See what you have done. Here, finish our house at once. You have taken off the roof, now break down the walls; you have killed my husband, whom you loved so well, now kill me and his son.'

The spectators expect the maddened elephant to turn on the woman, but they are mistaken. Slowly, almost as if he is ashamed, Malleer moves his foot off the body of the mahout. He even lets the child play with his trunk. But all is not over yet—the spearmen are around him, pricking his hide with their sharp points, and his temper is rising again. Lumbering, the elephant rushes at his tormentors. They scatter hurriedly.

'Let the woman call him off,' shouts the king. 'He will attend to her.'

She does so, and Malleer comes back, just as a spaniel would do at the call of his master.

'“Let the woman mount with her child and take him away,” was the king's order. It was communicated to her. The elephant knelt at her command. She mounted. Malleer gave her, first the mutilated carcass of her husband, and then her infant son. She sat upon his neck, in her husband's place and led him quietly away. From that day she was his keeper, his mahout. He would have no other. When most excited, most wild, musth or not musth, she had but to command and he obeyed. The touch of her hand on his trunk was enough to calm his most violent outbursts of temper.'

## 19 *The Disappointment of Captain Mundy*

The state of rather cruel efficiency in the organization of the king's 'sports' was not apparent during the visit in 1827 of Lord Combermere, whom we saw earlier being received by the king. Among his suite at that time was Captain Peter Mundy, who recorded his experience of the king of Oudh's 'field sports' in a pleasant *Journal of a Tour in India*.

'Dec. 13th. The Commander-in-Chief having received an invitation from his Majesty to witness some spectacles intended for his amusement, we proceeded at an early hour to the palace, where the king met