THE GREAT GAME

On Secret Service in High Asia

PETER HOPKIRK

'Now I shall go far and far into the North, playing the Great Game...'

Rudyard Kipling, Kim, 1901

JOHN MURRAY

For Kath

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There can be few more fascinating subjects than the Great Game or few authors better qualified to write about it.'

Fitzroy Maclean, The Independent

'An immensely readable and magisterially detached work . . . One gripping chapter fol-Financial Times lows another.'

In the lonely passes and blazing deserts of Central Asia an epic struggle took place during the last century between the agents of Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia. It became known as the Great Game, and its repercussions are still

being felt today.

The vast imperial chessboard on which the two superpowers of the day manoeuvred for advantage stretched from the snow-capped Caucasus in the west to Tibet and China in the east. When play first began, the frontiers of Russia and British India lay some 2,000 miles apart. By the end, the gap had shrunk in places to less than 20 miles.

This book tells the story of the Great Game, one of the most romantic episodes in modern history, through the adventures and misadventures of those who took part in it on either side. Some travelled on their shadowy missions in disguise, as holy men or native horse-traders, while others set out in full regimentals. It was always a dangerous game, and some never returned.

As the Russians pushed forward their frontiers the British became convinced that they would not halt until India, the richest of all imperial prizes, was theirs. Soon the Tsar's empire was expanding at some fifty-five square miles a day, as one by one the khanates and caravan towns of the old Silk Road fell to the fastriding Cossacks, ever in the van of the Russian advance. At times war seemed inevitable.

To the young officers and others on either side who were chosen to play the Great Game it was the stuff of dreams. Here was the chance to escape the monotony of garrison life, and perhaps win promotion, glory – or even a place in the imperial history books. It was their task to fill in the blanks on the staff maps, discover possible invasion routes, gather political intelligence, befriend powerful khans, and report on the movements of the other side.

(continued on back flap)

For nearly a century the two most powerful nations on earth – Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia – struggled to out-manoeuvre one another in Central Asia. Those who engaged in this shadowy contest in the vast no-man's-land to the north of India called it 'The Great Game'. It was the real-life world of Kipling's Kim.

'The Great Game is absolutely marvellous, the best thing I've read for ages.'

Patrick Leigh Fermor

