

# SHOOT ME FIRST

A cattleman in  
Taliban country.  
24 years in the  
hotspots of  
Pakistan and  
Afghanistan.

A close-up portrait of a man, Grant Lock, wearing a grey tweed flat cap, glasses, and a light-colored shirt with a patterned vest. He has a serious expression and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a textured, yellowish wall.

GRANT LOCK





# SHOOT ME FIRST

A cattleman in Taliban country.  
Twenty-four years in the hotspots  
of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Grant Lock



Melbourne

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# PROLOGUE

NORTH-WEST PAKISTAN, 1992

The stench of stale urine rises with the dust as my Pakistani workmen begin to demolish the building. Shovels and picks bear down on the mud bricks, clay rendering and poles. Sweat rolls down their faces, glistening in the sun.

Time is up. The *dukandar* (shopkeeper) has had his chance to demolish it himself. Now I'm doing it for him, as quickly as I can, before there is trouble. I'm dimly aware of the noise of a crowd gathering in the street outside the mud walls of the derelict Pennell High School.

This is Bannu, in Pakistan's Pashtun country, near the border with Afghanistan. Back in the days of the British Raj, Dr Theodore Pennell built a school for boys and later added this segregated compound for girls. Neglected, and closed in recent times, we plan to open it again.



It is a challenging region for an *engrez* (foreigner) to work in. Before too many years have passed, the eyes of the whole world will focus on the nearby rugged Tribal Area. The Taliban- and al-Qaeda-riddled mountains span this porous border of the Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pilotless drones will circle overhead while Islamic extremism oozes from its mountain fastness. As the Coalition tries to extricate its troops from the Taliban war, Afghanistan will be worried. The United States will be worried. Indeed, the entire world will be worried because the sting of an over-patronised Taliban scorpion will be curling back to strike its mentor, nuclear-loaded Pakistan.

Now in 1992, however, as I watch the walls of the *dukandar's* illegal storeroom come down, all I'm worried about is getting the job done despite any uncooperative locals.



“Sir! Now! You must come *now!* They are very upset!” It’s Samson, my dedicated Pakistani assistant. Unlike the long-haired muscle man of Old Testament times, my Samson is frail and sickly. He stands barely as high as my shoulders. But his shrewd understanding of Pashtun ways has got me out of jams before.

“Sir! Sir! You must come outside! They have *guns!*”

So what’s new? As with the naan bread and chai tea they survive on, Pashtuns and guns are synonymous. Pashtun boys are born with a gun in their hands. Pashtun courage and marksmanship when repelling invaders and settling feuds amongst each other are legendary.

“Look, Samson, this building is coming down. Right now! We need all the space we can get to rebuild the school.”

“*Voh bahoot bahoot naraaz!*—They are very, *very* angry, Sir!”

Pashtuns and guns, plus anger. I’d be a fool to ignore that nasty cocktail. I order the workmen to keep up the demolition. Dust from the collapsing clay roof fills the air as I march to the gate. It was hard enough to evict the squatters. We’re not stopping now.

Stepping out of the compound, I can see that the influential shopkeepers have indeed stirred up an angry crowd. Mostly bearded, they are gesticulating and shouting in Pashtu. What’s all this about? They know their fellow shopkeeper illegally extended his storeroom into the school ground. They know that yesterday he signed a document admitting his fault. He agreed for us to remove the building if he failed to do it himself within twenty-four hours. Surely they know that we are re-opening Pennell’s school for their Muslim daughters as well as the minority Christian girls. Don’t they realise that this is for them?

But the mob is defending the damaged honour of their colleague, who yesterday had to publicly admit his guilt to an unbelieving foreigner, a lowly *kafir* who stands with the small community of Pakistani Christians, the local *kafirs*.

Hospitality, honour and revenge. That’s the age-old mantra of Pashtunwali, the unbreakable code of the Pashtuns. Looking into the black eyes of the shouting beards, I can see that in this dusty Bannu bazaar, honour and revenge have conveniently coalesced.

The mob surrounds us. Samson's glasses seem bigger, and his body smaller, than ever. The mob's burly leader shouts in Urdu, a language that has taken me three years to master. "If you don't stop your workmen from demolishing the building"—and he pauses to add venom to his ultimatum—"we are going to shoot them!"

The crowd falls silent, savouring the imminent back down of the *engrez*. The preservation of all-important male honour trumps female welfare every time. Anger and indignation surge up within me. *Hey, you bellowing misogynists, this is for you. This is for your daughters, for the mothers of your grandchildren.*

I stare back. Who is going to blink first? My brain fleetingly recalls a girl I met the day before. "I want to study," she confided. "One day I want to become a doctor."

The emboldened beard repeats his threat. "If you don't stop your workmen from demolishing the building, we will shoot them!"

I hear my voice answering the challenge. It's surprisingly strong and resolute. "If you are going to shoot my workmen, Sir"—and I jab my forefinger, first at his chest then mine—"you'll have to shoot *me* first!"

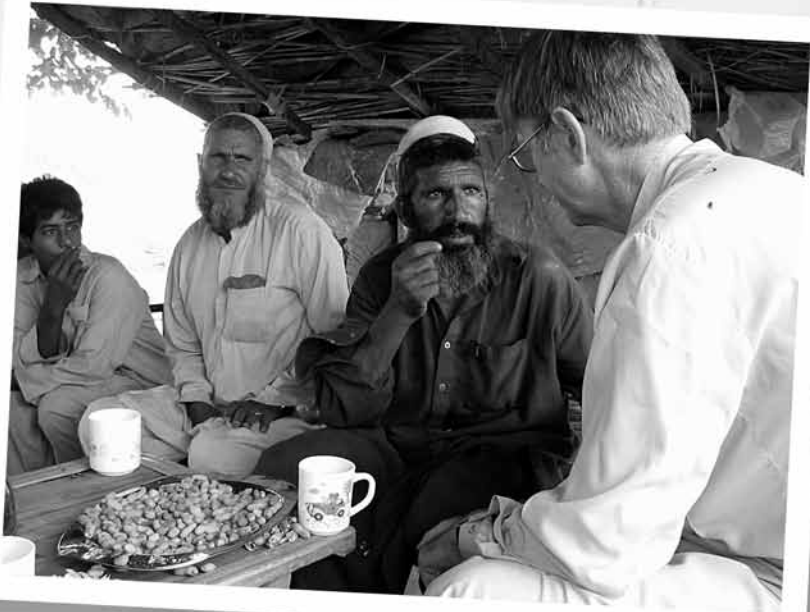
They all hear it. The silence thunders in my ears.



# THE FRONTIER

NORTH-WEST PAKISTAN

1989-1998



1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001

BY RUSSIA | AFGHAN CIVIL WAR

THE TALIBAN RULE AFGHANISTAN



# FLOWER POWER

PESHAWAR, NORTH-WEST FRONTIER PROVINCE, NOVEMBER 1989

Bloodstained plates of raw meat keep appearing. “*Moobarak ho!* Congratulations!” the young couriers declare as they pass over their gifts.

I’m rather touched, almost overwhelmed. Since early morning the gate bell hasn’t stopped ringing, and it’s only three weeks since we arrived in Peshawar. “I’m amazed that the neighbours all know it’s my birthday,” I confide to Janna. “It’s very considerate of them. You must have told them.”

“It’s a birthday celebration all right, Grant, but it’s not yours.”

“Well, who’s is it?”

“It’s Eid ul-Naabi, the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Didn’t you see them butchering the goats in the street?”

A bit deflating, but it was nice of the neighbours to share. I’ve been so busy taking over the development work from Mike that I hardly know what day it is. I do know that Muslims don’t show too much exuberance over their Prophet’s birthday because it’s also the anniversary of his death. They have to mix celebration with a measure of grief.

Janna changes the subject. “Grant, I want you to go over and talk to our neighbour.”

“Why’s that? I’ve seen him coming and going, but I haven’t actually met him yet.”

“He’s making passes at me.”

She now has my full attention. “What do you mean ‘making passes’?”

“You know how narrow our lane is. Well, when I’m up on the balcony hanging out the clothes, he throws little bouquets of flowers at me.”

I’m starting to fume. Maybe they do this in South America, but it’s definitely not on in this society. You can’t even look at a woman’s face here without risking the ire of her husband.

“He sits there on his balcony chair and throws these things at me. Sometimes he tries to talk to me. I pretend it’s not happening, but I’m getting uncomfortable about it.”

“I’m on my way,” I snort, and I head for the door.

*Okay, neighbour. We haven’t been here three weeks and you already have my wife labelled as an easy Western woman. You’re lucky I’m not a local Pashtun with a big gun.*

I cross the lane. Tall, don’t-look-at-my-women walls rise up on each side. The gate is opened by the neighbour. I try to be pleasant.

“Salaam alekoom, neighbour. My name is Grant.”

He shakes my hand warmly. “Welcome to Peshawar, Grant Jhi. I am Sultan. We are so honoured by your presence as our neighbour.”

*Well, Casanova, you are very amiable when you’re not on balcony duty, but I’m not falling for your buttery charm.*

“Come in and drink tea with me.” He flourishes a hand. “And if there is anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

*Yes, there is something you can do for me, my friend, and I will let you know, very soon.*

“Shukria, Sultan. I would like that. I do have something to talk to you about.”

“Yes indeed, my neighbour,” and he strokes his neat black beard. “There is much to discuss. I want to know all about your country and all about your children.”

In this society, you never ask someone about a man’s wife, or even mention her. That’s far too forward. You always ask about the children and, somehow, the wife is included. I’m convinced he wants to know about more than just “the children”.

Sultan’s son runs to the kitchen to notify his mother of the tea requirements. I’m trying to be civil as I answer the questions regarding my nationality. I musn’t come on too strong, or too quick.

“Tell me about your good family, Mr Grant.”

*This guy is sure being very cool about it all, but now is the time for me to speak.*

“Well, Sultan Jhi, I want to talk to you about that. You have been acting in a totally unacceptable way toward my wife.”



His body stiffens and his hands tighten their grip on the arms of his chair. "I don't know what you are referring to."

The son brings the tea prepared by his unseen mother.

"Mr Sultan, I think you know what I mean. It's not acceptable for you to sit on your balcony and watch my wife all the time, and it's a disgrace that you are throwing flowers at her."

He scowls, then releases his grip on the arms of his chair and bursts into laughter. I'm confused and offended by his outburst. "That would be Tariq, my brother!" he says.

"Whoever it is, Mr Sultan, you or your brother, this is not a laughing matter. It's dishonouring to your family and to my wife."

Sultan leans forward. "Lock Sahib, rest assured this will not happen again. I will talk to my brother." He rises. "In fact, I will call him right now. He's never far away."

As Sultan returns I can hear him admonishing his brother in no uncertain terms.

Tariq is a mousy sort of man, partly because he is small in stature and partly because he looks like he's been in a cage for a long time. The latter observation proves to be true. Sultan makes the introductions and I reluctantly shake the mouse-man's hand.

"*Muaf kaaro*, Mr Lock, *muaf kaaro*. Please forgive me. I promise not to do it again." He slumps into a chair. "It's because I am so bored."

Sultan re-enters the discussion. "Actually, Tariq can never leave the house."

"Can't leave the house?"

"If he does there are people who are waiting to kill him."

I'm starting to comprehend. "A blood feud?"

"Yes. Brave Tariq has avenged our clan. My mother and the old women decided who he would kill. But he had to sell his carpet shop in Islamabad because they found out it was him. Now he is safe, but only if he stays in my house."

I study the murderer slouching in his chair, impassively staring at the carpet and wishing someone else had been selected to pull the trigger. Somehow the bouquets don't seem so provocative now.

Janna continues to ignore the mouse-man sitting miserably in his veranda, but I greet him when I can. The police will never come looking

for him because the crime was related to a blood feud. But there could be someone waiting, very patiently, in the teahouse at the end of our lane.

It reminds me of a well-known Pashtun proverb:

*Maa sariaam enteqaam gerefem,  
faqat sad saal gereft.*

We avenged ourselves, and we did it quickly:  
it took one hundred years.



**SHOOT ME FIRST** is a gripping personal account of life in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The author offers intriguing insights into the culture of the tribal territories that straddle the two countries. This is home to the Taliban, an untamed land which continues to absorb so much of the world's attention and military endeavour. Lock is shrewd and laconic but above all compassionate. His experience of the world's two major religions deserves careful consideration.

**Crisp, beautiful and revealing. Valuable for anyone trying to build an appreciation of Islamic societies. And that should be all of us.**

**JOHN ANDERSON AO**

FORMER DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA

**Lock's adventures are probed for meaning so that the reader may have a deeper comprehension of a region frequently in our headlines but seldom in our understanding.**

**LYNN ARNOLD AO**

FORMER PREMIER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

**The raw reality of daily life for ordinary people, up close and personal. Lock gives the most pressing global issues of our time a human face.**

**MARK DURIE**

AUTHOR OF *THE THIRD CHOICE*

**Your book brought back so many memories. I couldn't help but cry.**

**HABIBA**

FUGITIVE FROM THE TALIBAN AND AFGHAN REFUGEE



Supporting micro-hydroelectric systems, empowering Afghan widows and overseeing a massive eye-care program, **Grant and Janna Lock's** development work in Afghanistan and Pakistan followed their notable success as cattle breeders in South Australia.

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