



*North from
Kabul*

ANDREW
WILSON

This is Afghanistan as few people have seen it and come back to tell the story: a country living within the shadow of Russia, filled with rumour and intrigue, and made precarious by the dangerous political liaison of an autocratic government bent on reform.

With a miniature camera and a knowledge of the language, Andrew Wilson entered Afghanistan by a 'back door' and stumbled on the building by Russian technicians of a military airfield close to the Persian-Pakistan border. From then on, travelling by decrepit trucks and buses, and for part of the time as a 'Russian', he found himself drawn into a world as strange as some of the novels of Kipling and Buchan. His lone wanderings brought encounters with Russian mapping parties, oil prospectors and technicians engaged in driving a tunnel through the Hindu Kush. Five times he crossed the Hindu Kush, the last time in a Russian aeroplane. From its icy gorges to the smoking sands of the Oxus valley, he portrays the Afghan landscape in all its fierce beauty and squalor. Across it move the Afghans—the author's romantic companions of the road—presented with verve and intimacy by one for whom Central Asia is a vital, living stage.



NORTH FROM KABUL



North from Kabul

By ANDREW WILSON

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THE taxi loomed out of the dark, a pair of headlamps in the empty street, and we loaded our luggage. It was four o'clock on a mid-September morning. Across the rooftops and mud-built serais of Meshed rose the domes of the shrine: the golden dome, jewelled with electric lights, above the Imam's mausoleum, and a little way beyond it, the sea-green dome of the Mosque of Gauhar Shad. The muezzins were crying the day's first prayer call; in a thousand tiny rooms the pilgrims were stirring for the day's devotions; above the city hung a cloud of chocolate-tasting dust stirred up by the brooms of sweepers.

My companion, Abdul, made a gesture of distaste. He was a good Afghan and a good Sunni Muslim, and the exuberant devotions of the sect of Shi'as, like everything else in Persia, were for him a matter of profound disgust. I had met him a few days before, on the train from Tabriz, immaculately dressed in a German suit and spotless shirt, with luggage labelled in Göttingen, where he was studying for his doctorate in physics. He was returning home, full of pride and German efficiency, to see the great changes which had taken place in his country in the past two years, and to announce to his family the news of his taking a German wife.

'Ah, Andreas,' he said as we loaded the last of his packing-cases, 'in five hours' time we shall be rid of all this schweinerei, and then you shall be my guest!'

I handed him the melons and the big box of pastries we had bought to sustain us on the journey. The driver squeezed me in with my donkey-jacket, blanket and camera-bag. And soon we were padding out of the city on the road which leads south.

I had travelled this road—this backdoor entrance to Afghanistan—before; but it had never seemed more exciting. Beyond the police barrier the sun came up through a grey-green dawn, lighting the mud forts and villages of the empty plain with a soft red light. The fields

were bared by the late summer harvest. Around the mud houses stood heaps of dry weeds and high cones of sheep-dung for winter fuel. Above the road itself some vehicle ahead of us had left a trail of dust which hung motionless in the air like a great snake.

Perhaps, after all, it is the thought of such mornings that takes one to Afghanistan. That, and nothing more.

Breakfast at a tea-house. A gardener watering petunias round the village fountain. Then we went on again, the heat beginning to shimmer on the earth. We met the first mirage, a wall of rose-coloured cliffs about ten miles to the left. A few minutes later they seemed like massive brick tenements, twenty times larger than life. Then they disappeared and their place was taken by a low line of genuine hills. Where they came down to the road we were stopped by a mischievous-looking character demanding a lift. He said we were entering the Place of the Seven Sicknesses, and that if we wished to avoid them, we would do well to throw some money on the road. I quietly disposed of some coins through the window, but he was quick to see it in the driving-mirror and promptly announced that he had reached his destination.

‘This,’ said the driver presently, ‘is where we should slit your throats, but luckily you’ve picked an honest pair to travel with!’

He handed over to his assistant who ditched us in the only pool of water for a hundred and fifty miles.

Just before noon we swung into the frontier town of Yussufabad.

Yussufabad is the beginning of the end of the earth. Its wide empty street is divided down its centre by a line of steel telegraph poles. The mud-domed houses are secretively grouped round small closed courts. The flies buzz angrily over the contents of three or four dusty shops. The few inhabitants in evidence were engaged, when we arrived, in cutting down for firewood the stunted, dusty trees which gave its only shade.

We halted in the middle of the street, with the metal of the car creaking audibly beneath the merciless sun, while a pair of Persian policemen in ridiculous high-peaked caps debated whether we should be allowed to go on.

‘More schweinerei,’ said Abdul—and returned to the delights which were waiting for us across the border. The asphalt roads. The restaurants and Coca-Cola. The big new bus that was standing only a few hundred yards away in the customs yard. Such was his honest fervour that I almost believed him; and not only Abdul but the brisk

Afghan government tourist booklet *Visit Afghanistan!* full of exact information about timetables and municipal swimming-pools.

After all, I had not been in Afghanistan for two and a half years.

At last we were allowed to pass—down the street, through the great double gate marked DOUANE, into the Persian customs yard. And there stood the vehicle of Abdul's hopes: the good old Afghan bus—high-raised chassis, home-made body, no bonnet or window-glass, a deficiency of seats and mudguards, the whole thing held together with stout iron bars and painted all over with castles and flowers. Abdul overlooked it; but for myself I was rather glad.

We paid the taxi-driver the equivalent of two pounds ten, which seemed reasonable for the six-hour journey, and waited for our fellow-passengers to arrive by the post bus from Meshed. When they appeared, there was a merchant or two, a motley crew of turbaned Afghan townsmen returning from visits to Persian relatives, a platoon of women in all-enveloping calico veils. They settled on the floor of the stifling customs shed and spread out lunches of rice and fruit.

Then three Europeans arrived, with unshaved beards and all the marks of having spent the night in Yussufabad itself. The first introduced himself as Charles Abernethy, a Scotsman on leave from government service in the Persian Gulf. The others, unmistakably, were German. They wore lederhosen and scout-knives and dragged a small trolley on pram wheels.

'What have you there?'

'A collapsible canoe.'

'And where will you paddle it?'

'In the Ganges.'

They were horribly healthy. Abernethy told me later that they had mystified the whole population that morning by doing an hour of Swedish drill in the forecourt of the rest-house.

We sweated it out for the next three hours while the Persian customs officer employed on the Afghans his boundless power to demand the undoing of every poor saddle-bag and bedding roll. A late arrival—a rich young man with four veiled wives—delayed us still further. Finally, with forty-odd people squeezed in among seats for ten, we lurched out of the yard and, followed by derisory shouts from the Persian police guard, set course across the vast brown desert of no-man's-land.

It takes an unreckonable time to cross this fifteen-mile wilderness.

There is no fence, no demarcation line: only a stone which says in English

AFGHANISTAN

HERAT

and a military blockhouse where an officer and sergeant wait hand in hand to examine passports.

When we had passed them we suffered the first of those little contretemps which lift Afghan travel from the ordinary. There was a piercing shriek. We ground to a stop as quickly as our brakes would allow. Everybody struggled at once to leap out through the narrow doors and iron-barred windows. When the women, too, had been extracted, rather as an afterthought, it turned out that the bus was on fire. Someone had dropped a cigarette-end in a bundle of bedding close to the petrol cans. The fire was stamped out, the culprit belaboured, and we went on.

At six we came in sight of a group of grey buildings enclosed by high walls, which was the Afghan customs fort at Islam Kallah. As the bus came to a halt in a cloud of dust inside the gate, a crowd of turbaned porters surged forward like vultures to strip the heavy luggage off the roof. Abdul's face fell. His cases were full of those dutiable knick-knacks, like tape-recorders, wireless sets and electric razors, which the returning Afghan feels bound to bring back from Europe as presents for his family.

But whereas Abdul's problem was strictly routine—something which could be eased, if necessary, with a hundred-afghani note in a quiet corner, I had a worry of my own which was less tractable. For I had left in my suitcase my Royal Air Force maps.

They were perfectly innocent maps, bought from Messrs. Sifton Praed and Company, of St. James's Street, London. But they were rather liberally decorated with grid-lines and code letters and marked in the bottom left-hand corner: *Geographical Section, General Staff*. I had stuffed them under my shirts to conceal them from Abdul on the train. Now they lay there—six large sheets—making a conspicuous bulge.

Excusing myself rather abruptly from Abdul, I hurried to the Chef de Douane, an ascetic-looking individual in a karakul cap and gaberdine raincoat, whom I had met on my last visit. Luckily he remembered me and greeted me like a brother with a double handclasp. 'Please deal quickly with my baggage,' I begged him. 'I must go to

the lavatory.' Half a minute later my case was returned unopened to the bus and I was free to go, leaving the customs to examine Abdul's tape-recorder and work out the military applications of the Germans' folding canoe.

The possession of my maps began, from the moment of this incident, to impose on me a curious feeling which increased as the journey went on. I had not foreseen it. I had taken them quite innocently, just as I had taken the little Minox camera to supplement my Leica, with nothing more than the object of entering remote places and composing a newspaper article on Afghanistan in 1959. I had no intention of becoming a spy, even in the most amateur sense. But all the same this uneasy feeling, prompted by the friendly handshake, pursued me as I walked from the customs, out of the yard, and across the dusty space which separated it from the adjoining so-called hotel. In a way it was a feeling of guilt.

The hotel is a great long block-house of a building, for which I had a special affection. I remembered how I had entered there on my first visit, when I was travelling with my wife. It was a cold spring night. We had stood in the stony compound, watching the last pink streamers of the sunset over Persia and feeling in the vast, disturbing silence the motion of the earth, the emptiness of space between ourselves and the stars. Now it seemed as if I had never left there, as if the intervening years had not existed. But the night was hot; and my wife was three thousand miles away, in Switzerland.

I went inside. A boy scrambled up from the group in the kitchen and showed me into a room with a pair of iron beds and a rust-red carpet which in London would have fetched two hundred pounds. He brought me a pot of pale green tea and a flap of the coarse unleavened bread which is the staple Afghan diet. I ate it watching my shadow thrown by the lamplight on the whitewashed wall, and listening to a rising desert wind beyond the shutters.

After a while the Scotsman, Abernethy, came in and told me the customs were going through Abdul's things with a fine-tooth comb.

We shared a melon. He told me he had two months' leave from Qatar and had spent the last fortnight wandering round the prohibited frontier areas of Persian Turkestan. Now, after Meshed, he was going on to Balkh, and after that Samarkand if the Russians would let him. I began to like him. We compared, on a postcard with an aerial photograph, the routes by which we had entered the forbidden court of the Shrine at Meshed. I liked him still more.

Then he extracted from his shoulder sack a voluminous diary and began to make notes.

In the room across the passage I could hear the Germans moving about. Perhaps they were doing their exercises again. There was no sound of any of the Afghans. There began to encroach that timelessness and unreality which is another of the marks of Afghan travel.

Towards midnight I went to see what was happening.

As I walked over to the customs I met a shadowy figure. He halted five yards distant. '*Salamun alaikum*—peace be on you.'

'And on you be peace,' I answered, giving the return half of the greeting like a countersign. Only then would he pass me—a sentry by the look of him.

Abdul, exhausted, was watching an official put seals on his bags, for further duty to be paid at Herat. He refused to take food and said he wanted only to get away from this primitive place and on to where gentlemen existed.

At length all was ready. A soldier raised the crooked wooden pole which served as a road block, and we passed into the darkness of the interior.

Up to Islam Kallah the road had been little more than a cart-track. Now it disintegrated into wandering sand ruts, bordered by patches of desert scrub which loomed up like boulders in the headlamp beams. Not a light nor a village. Not a sign of life but the scurrying figures of desert mice, and inside the bus the dark huddled figures of our customs-wearied passengers.

Some miles further on, the ruts began snaking towards a looming black cliff. The ground opened up to the left of it and we dropped into a gorge, to cross, on a slender, ancient arch, a dark-flowing river. Two minutes later we were grinding in bottom gear through a series of miniature hills where the sand poured down in torrents, and the arid wind came full from the east like an inland gale.

I began to think of Herat, which we should reach, God willing, at daybreak.

It had been for me—from the moment I first heard its name—an enchanted city. Its ghosts had come out of history and cast their spell on me: the ghosts of those royal Timurids who, building on the ravages of their terrible ancestor, Jenghiz Khan, had raised there one of the most glorious and humane of all the world's civilizations. And

then those latter-day ghosts: of its defenders against the Persians in the nineteenth century, and the British officers—engineers and administrators—who had saved the ‘Gateway to India’ from Russian incursion from the north.

The last time I had been in Herat it was spring. I had come in from this howling desert to a city of sleepy tea-houses and fir trees and banks of white roses. Its peace was undisturbed. The dust of the years lay unruffled. The shadows of foreign agents who flitted through the bazaars were part of the natural scene: like silhouettes thrown by a Victorian magic lantern, revolving forgotten because no one had remembered to put it out.

Could it have changed? I could hardly believe it.

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice from the seat behind. I had hardly noticed its owner who must somehow have got in at Islam Kallah. He wore a shapeless trilby hat secured to his head by a large cotton shawl. The effect was vaguely Tibetan.

‘Excuse me, sir, but what is your occupation here?’

I said I was a tourist on a visit to a great and ancient land, and asked him what his own was.

‘I am a doctor of soldiers,’ he replied. ‘I must visit in all these mountains.’

The wind, which had suddenly developed a cold and biting edge, blew a sheet of gritty dust down our collars.

‘But what is your *work*?’ he demanded.

‘Writing.’

‘You will write a book about Afghanistan?’

‘I do not know yet.’

‘How did you come here . . . it must have cost much money . . . who has paid it . . . the British government?’

The questions were possibly quite innocent: the product of natural curiosity in a country where none but the richest could have made such a journey at his own expense. I mention them only because they were put to me with monotonous regularity in the next few weeks; in Persian and Pushtu and half a dozen other languages; by policemen and officers, civil servants and fellow-travellers; by the same romantic characters who appeared, with un-subtle changes of disguise, on the bus to Kandahar as businessmen, in Kabul as schoolmasters, in the wastes round Balkh as gentlemen out for a day’s shooting. And the effect was to make one defensive.

At last the cold made even speech uncomfortable. My interrogator

gave up, and I returned to guessing how far we still had to go. We bumped through a series of dried-up river beds and reached the dirt road which carried us the last twenty miles. It was a wide road, bordered by ditches, and the driver made the most of it, racing in top gear and swerving, between bouts of sleep, to avoid sudden potholes and heaps of stones.

At last in the farthest distance a single dim light appeared, slowly detaching itself from the stars on the horizon. Trees sprang up, a walled plantation, a group of gargantuan chimneys, black against the sky. Before we knew it we were slowing to a stop amid the great minarets which are Herat's landmark and survivors of its golden age.

A hurricane lamp was burning above a road block, a bleary-eyed policeman stumbled out to let us through and we went on into the town, dark and sleeping, with its shuttered shops and its fir trees.

A few minutes later, in the light of a cold, windy dawn, the bus turned into the garden of the Parc Hotel and we were deposited with our luggage beside the fish pond.

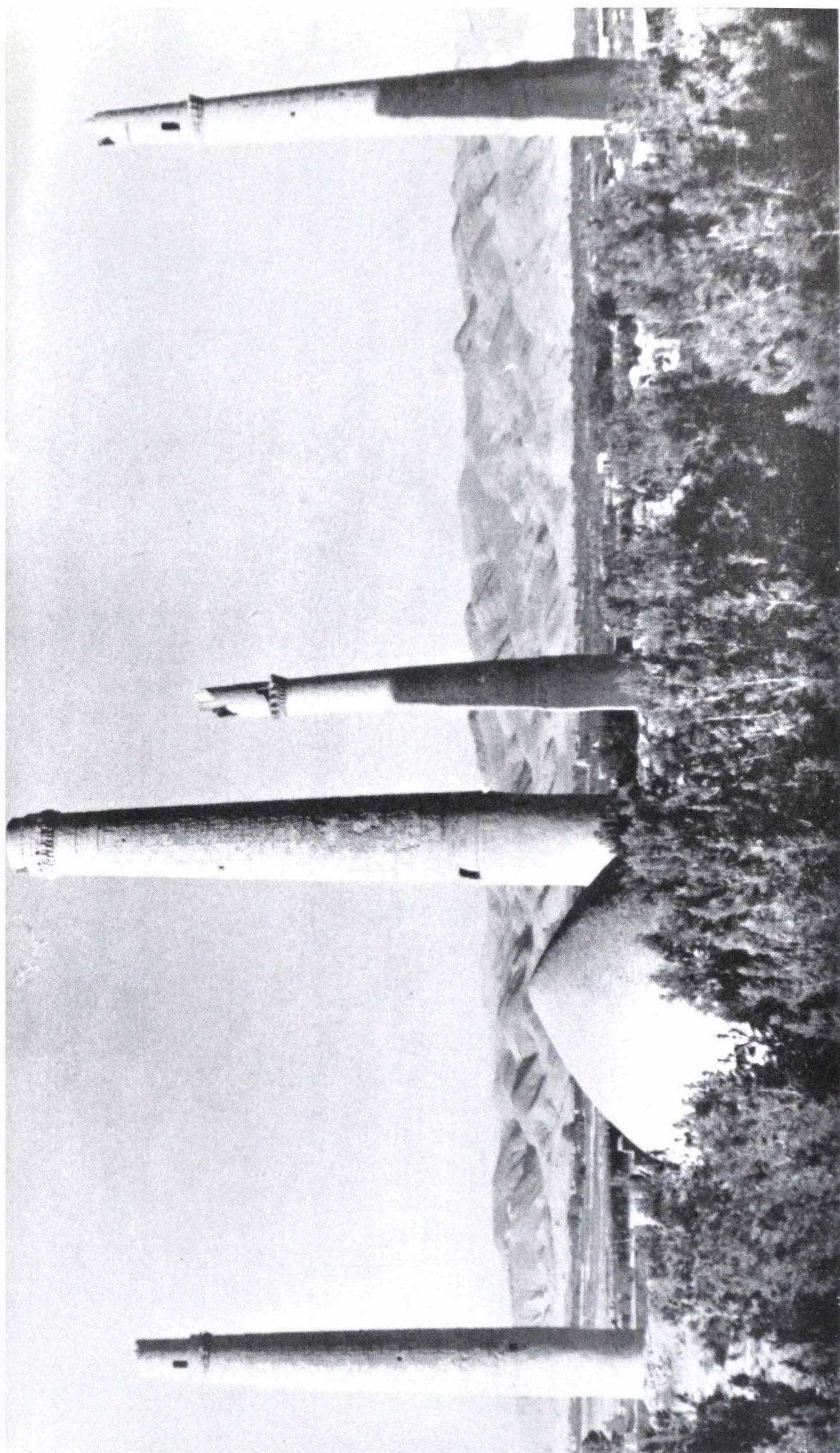
There are plenty of ways of describing Herat. One can go back to Alexander the Great, or Timur and Shah Rukh, or the Uzbeks and Uighurs who overran it. Or one can go to its geographical position, which is bound up with that of all Afghanistan, and recall that it rests between the western tip of the world's greatest mountain range and an almost impenetrable desert—that, in short, it commands the natural approach from Russia to the Indus and has seen the passage of nearly every great conqueror who has made himself master of the Indian sub-continent.

But it is five o'clock in the morning and I have time for none of these things. The stark fact is that there I stood beside the fish pond with Abernethy and Abdul and two other Afghans, tired, cold and hungry, with only one wish and that for sleep; and that between ourselves and the long bungalow of a hotel building stood a convoy of Russian-built jeeps and *Pobeda* military staff cars.

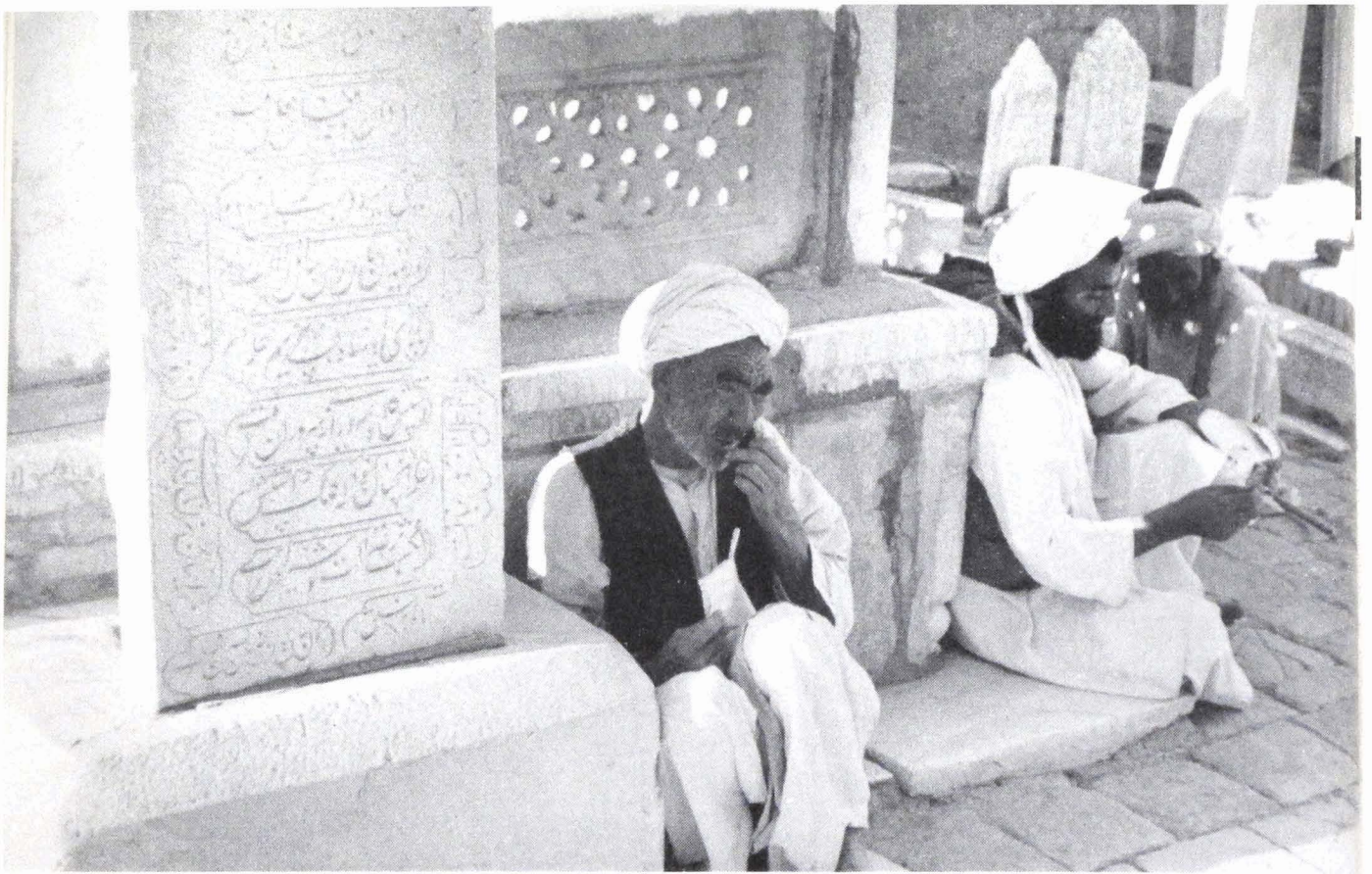
There was no sign of life. The drivers slept. The Afghan sentries slept. While Abdul went in search of a servant there was nothing to do but wait and survey the prospect.

There were seven of these vehicles. The first two—staff cars—had a triangular red sign on their sides. The others were without any sign or number plate. The last was a lorry, full of trestles.

What were they doing? The last time I had been in Herat the only



1. Minarets at Herat



2. Herat. Old men and graves

Herat. Pottery-mender



military equipment I had seen on wheels was a park of nineteenth-century field guns in the citadel: and my innocent stumbling on it had caused the whole guard to turn out.

And were they Afghan vehicles, or Russian?

The question was still unanswered when at six o'clock a sleepy youth appeared from the kitchen and told us there were no free rooms: but if we wished, we could sleep in an outhouse.

He led the way to a building beside the drive, which—to judge from the fusty air which met us as he opened the door—had not been used for a year or two.

There were two rooms. The first had three dirty mattresses on the floor; the other had a mattress and a bed. Abernethy and I took the second.

Five minutes later, unwashed and unbreakfasted, I was asleep.

I awoke at half past one in the afternoon. The wind was still blowing—the Wind of One Hundred and Twenty Days, which ravages Western Afghanistan from June to September without a stop. It had blown open the fly-speckled window and smashed an earthenware jug, spreading its contents over the dirty floor.

Abernethy and the others were already up, and as I walked over to the hotel bathroom, I was hailed by the kitchen boy. He was wringing the neck of a skinny chicken, whose five companions, likewise awaiting slaughter, were hanging from the handlebars of his bicycle.

'*Khub astin?*' he shouted—'Everything all right?'

'Fine,' I said. 'What's for lunch?'

He shook his head. 'Lunch is finished.'

'But surely,' I protested, 'you have eggs or something.'

'No eggs,' he said.

'Rice then.'

'No rice. Sorry. Only many guests and much work.'

Bewildered at this odd reception, I washed and shaved in the mildewed bathroom and returned to my outhouse to lunch off one of the twenty-four tins of German cola-chocolate which I was keeping for emergencies.

Then I took one of the little pony-carts which the Afghans call the gharis, and went off to minarets.

How can I describe these minarets? They lie astride the road by which I had entered: chimneys so tall that in the flaming light of the Herat noonday it hurts one's eyes to look at them. Four—the tallest

and thickest—were once the corners of a great theological college, built by Sheik Baikara who ruled Herat at the end of the fifteenth century. The others, with a little domed mausoleum so perfectly proportioned that it takes one's breath away, are the memorials of a woman unique in her time, and indeed in history—Queen Gauhar Shad, a descendant of Jenghiz Khan, who in 1388 married Shah Rukh, the son of Tamerlane.

Independently of her husband she held her own court, concerned herself with the affairs of state, directed an army of architects and builders to raise not only this college and musalla but also the great mosque which bears her name at Meshed. And in all this time, remarkable as it may seem, she enjoyed with Shah Rukh a marriage so happy that their love is still the subject of local ballads in Herat.

I thought of the idyll as I reached the great earthwork on the city boundary and set up my camera to photograph the minarets beyond.

I had scarcely taken a couple of exposures, when the inevitable crowd of children appeared.

When they saw I was bent on going to the mausoleum, they told me that the mullahs would cut my throat. But as I disbelieved this nonsense, my usefulness as a source of amusement gave out. Except with two boys.

The boys, aged six or seven, became a plague. They got into my bag of films and filters. They discovered the means of collapsing my tripod. They began a tireless game of rushing into every picture the moment my hand found the camera trigger. There was nothing I could do about it.

Then a new game began. They began to ask for money and to mention a word which, alas, my Persian tutor had never taught me.

When I seemed not to understand it, they made a quite unmistakable gesture and named their price: ten afghanis.

Now I had no wish to pass judgement on local customs; but there is surely a time and a place for everything. And as I moved about the site of the musalla, racing against time and a falling colour temperature to take my pictures, I grew slowly exasperated as every object which excited my interest—prayer-niche, archway, tomb or arbour—was suggested as a place of dalliance.

It was no good disclaiming interest. They merely reduced the figure, from ten afghanis to eight, and from eight to five. Finally, with sudden inspiration, the brighter of the two pulled a wallet from his trousers and thrust it before my eyes.

It contained a picture of a girl—one of those dark-eyed Indian beauties whose pictures sell briskly to frustrated males in the Afghan bazaars.

'*Khub chiz!*' he breathed hotly—a nice piece!

I was rescued from the seven-year-olds by a youth of nineteen, who wanted to practise his High School English. Together we looked for Sheik Baikara's tomb. But the place where I remembered finding it before was swallowed up by vegetable plots.

We entered the mausoleum, looking for the tombs of Gauhar Shad and some of the lesser Timurids. But there was an orgy of 'improvement' in progress, and the interior was filled with a company of workmen-squatters. The tombs, uprooted from their dust, had been turned upside down. Two of them were cracked. The rest were serving as the sides of a cooking range.

Then we came out again, and as I took a last look at it all, I had a sense that something was wrong among the minarets themselves. I looked at each in turn. And suddenly it struck me. There were only six of them.

Where the seventh should have been, there was only an empty space and the evening star glowing early over the trees.

'What happened?' I asked my companion.

'Snow and rain,' he beamed with pride. 'The winter before last. You should have seen how it tumbled!'

I drove back to the hotel in a dusty brown twilight.

When the ghari turned into the drive, I saw that the military vehicles had been increased by three more staff cars. The smoke of cooking came in clouds from the kitchen. Abdul and the other Afghans had returned from visiting relations in the town and were busy unpacking their tape-recorders. I sat on the window-sill and peeled off the plastic dust bags from my Leica.

Then two hotel boys appeared and without explanation began to dismantle my bed.

'What are you doing?'

'We are taking the bed into the hotel.'

Innocently supposing that we were at last to get rooms, I followed them.

In the hotel my way was barred by a young Afghan lieutenant. He spoke English with an American accent, acquired, as he explained, as an assistant military attaché in Washington and London.

‘I am very sorry that we take your bed,’ he said. ‘A guest has arrived. He has some wives with him. You know how it is with us Afghans.’

Indeed, I did. But as I withdrew down the corridor, past the chairs festooned with braided caps and map cases, the piles of military valises, the sturdy figures in blue serge trousers speaking voluble Russian, I could not help feeling that the lieutenant’s appeal to gallantry had been a little misplaced.

II

THERE are so many things to confuse a serious picture of Afghanistan that one shies from making explanations. One is tempted, rather, to let the country unfold itself in all its first-sight fantasy, like some fiction of Kipling or John Buchan. But I see that without recalling some facts, the loss of my bed at Herat will be out of perspective.

Twice the size of England and Wales, and with an uncounted population of between eight and fifteen million, Afghanistan lies on the cross-roads of Asia. On the east the icy Pamirs form a short border with China. In the west lies Persia. In the north, Russia. In the south, Pakistan. And of all this territory, the central feature is the east-west backbone of the Hindu Kush, which, rather than the shallow Oxus or the minor hills of the North-West Frontier, forms the natural barrier between Russia and the Indian sub-continent.

The struggle for possession of this barrier, with Herat at its western flank, began about a hundred and fifty years ago when the present kingdom was fifty years old. Tsarist Russia, having annexed the Persian borderlands of Georgia and Caucasia, began to move south across the Sea of Aral and the Jaxartes. The East India Company, meanwhile, was extending its territory northwards across the Punjab. In the next half century, Russia, breaking numerous agreements, swallowed the remaining territories and Khanates—Bokhara, Khiva, Samarkand—between herself and the Oxus, while Britain and British India, vacillating between ‘massive inertia’ and the so-called ‘Forward Policy’, stumbled through two Anglo-Afghan wars and finally reached the position of controlling Afghanistan’s external relations—without, however, maintaining any troops in the country.

In 1919, after the third Afghan war, Britain relinquished her uneasy hold and Afghanistan proclaimed her ‘independence’. One of the first countries to recognize it was the newly established Soviet Union.

From 1919 to the end of the Second World War the external affairs of Afghanistan were dormant: the country remained, by mutual consent, a neutral buffer state. And then in 1947, with the granting of Indian independence and partition, the southern prop of the delicate balance was removed. Afghanistan, reviving her old dream of expansion to the Indus, turned first to America and then to Russia for arms.

In 1955 she acquired a military aid agreement with Russia, and two years later a 100 million dollar development loan.

I arrived in Herat at a time when these Russian investments were beginning to take effect.

I intended next morning to be up early to take some more photographs of the mausoleum. But circumstances prevented me. First I was tired, which deterred me from facing the children again. Secondly I could get no breakfast.

The latter was no fault of the hotel staff. The great long banqueting table in the dining room had been cleared of the previous night's dinner and spotlessly re-laid with a clean white plastic tablecloth. At each of the twenty-four places stood a small blue teapot, a plate of flap bread, and a pair of boiled eggs.

I took the nearest chair and was about to eat when a scandalized waiter appeared.

'Sir, sir!' he cried. 'You may not sit there. This table is for the *guests*.'

'What guests?' I asked.

'The generals.'

I tried to keep my patience.

'Where may I eat, then?'

'In your room perhaps.'

'It will wake my friends.'

He stood in perplexity, torn between his orders and the duties of hospitality. Then he relented.

'Very well, I will bring you some tea. But do not stay long. The guests will be eating at eight o'clock.'

He was gone for some minutes during which I could hear the guests calling down the passage and cranking the reluctant lavatory cisterns. A pair of them opened the door, stared at me, muttered in Russian, and went out again.

The waiter came back.

'You have much work,' I said.

'*Chasm*,' he said—on my eye. 'Arriving like that at half a day's notice. Why couldn't they have warned us. At least we could have got some food in.'

'Disgraceful,' I said. 'Where did they come from?'

'Shindand.'

When I got back to my room I dug beneath my clothes and extracted two of the RAF sheets covering the Herat area. I had no idea where Shindand lay. I supposed it lay to the north where the Russians were supposed to be bringing down a highway from Kushka, the Soviet railhead in the Turkmen Republic. But I was wrong. It lay to the south, about sixty miles from Herat, towards the area of American foreign-aid operations.

Abandoning my visit to the mausoleum, I spent the morning in a broken cane chair on the lawn before the hotel reading *Visit Afghanistan!* 'Nearly everywhere one travels, one finds items of deep interest . . .' it said.

'Tourists from all corners of the world are visiting it in constantly growing numbers . . .

'Hotel accommodation is available in every large city.'

And as I sat there, chilled by the wind and warmed by the sun, I witnessed a constant coming and going. The provincial Military Governor arrived. The Chief of Police. A variety of Afghan officers in cars and on bicycles. The Russians came out to take the air on the verandah, then went off in their jeeps.

But there was no sign of the central figure to whom so much court was being paid. For that I had to wait another two days.

I spent the interval taking photographs in the bazaars.

The bazaars of Herat are unique, even in Afghanistan. The whole of life is exhibited there, the bustle and movement of a great commercial city which has scarcely yet seen the arrival of the twentieth century.

From the Parc Hotel you approach it down a wide, sleepy avenue where the houses of rich merchants lie hidden by tall walls and gardens of firs and bougainvillaea. Then, at the bottom, the view opens up on the six blue glittering turrets of the Friday Mosque, and the air is full of the dust of caravans, the clangour of ghari bells and anvils, the roar of smithy furnaces, the clack of textile and carpet looms.

The shops of these trades are open-fronted, with a hard mud floor and a kind of sill raised a little above the street. You have only to stop for a moment to watch some process of a craft and you find yourself sitting on this sill, drinking tea from the ever-ready Japanese teapot, and answering questions about yourself and the world outside.

The first afternoon I traversed the first two miles of them and reached the great fruit market with its sea of yellow melons and tawny islands of camels' backs. I had used up my stock of colour film and when I went back to re-cover the ground with black-and-white it caused such suspicion that I had to give it up.

On my way home I stopped at the Mosque. It had been rebuilt since I was there before and I wanted to photograph the result. But the moment I entered the sunlit court and set up the camera, I fell into the clutches of a madman.

Madness is identified with a kind of holiness in Afghanistan, and I was bound to humour him. Between taking pictures I managed to make the appropriate response, '*Al hamdu Illah,*' to his recitation of a long and fervid prayer.

The result was unfortunate, for he took a great liking to me and began to stuff the pocket of my anorak with sugar-coated nuts from his beggar's satchel.

Now I always kept this pocket meticulously clean for holding bits and pieces of photographic apparatus. It contained my filters, lens cap and lens brush, and the little Minox, which I kept ready for occasions when the Leica would be too conspicuous. And as he stuffed in the nuts, I could feel them grating against the optical glass, crunching and rattling with every movement of his hand.

At length I managed to shake him off and escaped down a long arcade towards an exit I remembered. But when I reached it, I found the exit had been bricked up. There was nothing for it but to go back to the main entrance, where I found him waiting for me, this time with his hands full of rose petals.

As he followed me through the forecourt garden he stuffed the petals on top of the nuts. By the time we reached the gate there was hardly a blossom within arm's reach which he had not plucked. At the gate he delivered a blessing and let me go.

'*Al hamdu Illah,*' I called back. 'Thanks be to God.'

And I truly meant it.

There was another small interlude during my visits to the bazaar, which greatly affected me by its pathos. I was walking homewards up the street of the merchants' houses, when I met a smart young man in a karakul cap and European suit. He said he was on holiday from Kabul, staying with his brother, and invited me to come into their house.

It was an unusual invitation at any time, and as I followed him through the door in the garden wall, I expected the inevitable embarrassed shuffle as the womenfolk put themselves into hiding.

But there was nothing of the kind. In the little patio a woman, evidently his brother's wife, sat sewing in the twilight at a garden table. A couple of small boys in striped pyjamas were playing at her feet. A servant woman was rocking a baby to the music of a radio in the house beyond. The brother was out on business.

The man introduced me.

I found it very difficult to keep my eyes off the woman, who was the first Afghan woman I had ever seen without a veil. She wore a shapeless print frock and half-length stockings held below the knee by elastic. But her face had a dignity which the comic costume could not extinguish. The whole effect was like that of some large-boned matron of the slums of Athens or Palermo and I had to remind myself that this was the household of a well-to-do Herati.

There were the usual questions about what I was doing in Afghanistan, and about England, and so on. And a servant was sent off to buy a melon. It was all very homely. The soft warm air, the fresh smell of plants where a gardener had sprinkled water round our chairs, the boys engaged in a wrestling match on the flagstones. When the melon arrived, the man sliced it up and we talked of ancient Herat and tales of Shah Rukh and Gauhar Shad and Tamerlane. Then, when the calls of hospitality had been satisfied, he turned to the matter which evidently had caused him to bring me there.

With an avuncular gesture he took the younger of the boys in his arm.

'Look,' he said, 'you think he's a fine healthy lad, don't you?'

And he certainly looked it, with his fresh young face and inquisitive dark eyes.

'But you're wrong,' said the man. 'This one is sick.'

To make this point he gently undid the pyjama cord.

I don't know why I should have been so taken off guard. Little

withered limbs, and sores, and malformations were nothing new to me. I had travelled once from Herat in a crowded bus with a dozen children with running smallpox sores crawling over me. But this sight made me want to turn away.

Instead of the stomach, below the navel, the lad had what appeared to be a second pair of buttocks growing.

‘We have taken him to the doctors, but they say they cannot do anything,’ said the man, after waiting for me to take in the fullness of it.

‘Do you think the doctors in Europe could make an operation?’

What could one answer?

I said I knew nothing of medicine, but the doctors of Europe were very clever men and always making new discoveries. And fastening on to this pathetic, and possibly false, shred of hope, they said good-night and begged me to come back and take a meal with them before I left.

I never managed to take up this invitation, because after this interlude life at the hotel became daily more informative and absorbing. A frequent visitor to my outhouse room was the young lieutenant. I had little doubt that he had been ordered to keep an eye on Abernethy and myself, but he always showed the greatest friendliness and was probably glad to get away from his general for a while.

‘Good evening,’ he would say, appearing in the doorway in the half-light after sunset. ‘I have fifteen minutes free and would like to speak English.’

And we would sit on my mattress while he took a cup of tea ‘out of friendship’.

Sometimes he brought some problem of English grammar; but more often he wanted to talk about the diplomatic cocktail parties in Kensington, and clean beds, and running hot water, and women.

Women presented an enormous problem. Time and again he would hark back to it; how pretty they were in London, and how *generous*, and how careful I must be in Afghanistan, where customs were different.

And then there was another theme—the problem of travelling by myself. It only came up when he discovered that Abernethy and I were not partners; and this, of course, doubled the problem of watching us.

‘It is very bad for you,’ he would say. ‘You will meet so many *difficulties*.’ But whenever I pressed him to say what these difficulties

were he would shy away into vagueness, so I never discovered if he meant bureaucratic frustrations or merely the danger of having one's throat cut.

His task was complicated by the arrival, a day or so after our own, of another western party in a Volkswagen. The first I knew of them was when he came in agitation to say there was a beautiful English lady in the hotel who was asking for 'Abdul Nasser'.

I laughed outright. But he was deadly serious and asked me to come over and speak with an Afghan colonel who had witnessed the apparition.

The colonel was a delightful person, though I had some doubt about his nationality. He had the appearance, then and always, of being slightly drunk; and he spoke in a copious mixture of French and Russian.

'What are you hiding?' he asked with an accusing twinkle. 'What are you English doing with this Egyptian?'

I was nonplussed.

'Look,' he said, taking me by the arm. 'There comes this lady. A very beautiful lady, very tall, dressed in a white muslin veil—*ponimayesh?*—and she says she wants Abdul Nasser. Where are you hiding him?'

Then I understood: the lady, whoever she might be, was asking for Abernethy.

The truth sent the colonel into paroxysms of laughter. He reminded me of my war-time squadron commander and suddenly I felt like one of his subalterns. He propelled me by the shoulder and ordered me not to waste time but to find her and 'get in first'.

The lieutenant, not to be outdone, accompanied me on the mission.

We found the lady, who proved to be a Canadian, in a tent in the rose garden behind the hotel. Her name was Betty, which the lieutenant confusingly picked up as 'Bertie', and she had a girl friend with her.

They were cooking stew on a Primus stove.

The location of the tent was a violent embarrassment to the lieutenant.

'But Bertie,' he protested, 'you cannot stay here. It is dark and cold. Soon the jackals will come. Let me take you into the hotel.'

'No fear!' replied Bertie, a girl of some spirit. 'I'd rather have the jackals than the wolves, thank you!'

The lieutenant continued to press his suit, with whispered asides to me to say how beautiful she was; but to no effect. In the end we walked back to my room, and I spent the evening bombarding jackals with empty chocolate tins from the window.

In the morning I was woken up by Abernethy who told me a curious convoy of Russian equipment was going down the road to the south. He had spoken in Persian to the policeman who was signalling them past, and the policeman had not understood him. *Ergo*, the policeman was probably a Russian soldier.

I pulled on my trousers and rushed out, but I was too late. The policeman turned out to be the friendly little man who each day, unfailingly, asked me to take a fresh photograph of himself on his little concrete podium. Only the mystery of the vehicles remained, which Abernethy described as being like 'lorries in front, and boats at the back'.

Instinctively I connected them with the presence of the Russians in the hotel. But I was wrong. The Russians in the hotel had a very different purpose, which came out that day by stages.

I was sealing up some used cassettes of film, to protect them from the moisture due to sudden drops of temperature, when I found I had a couple more exposures on a film I had used in the bazaar. I decided to take some pictures of the hotel.

As I came out into the sun, I met a homely sight. Across the lawn in the shady drive, a group of people were seated at a card table. I worked my way round, sighting the camera for different views, trying to get a better look at them.

There was the manager of the hotel—a lean, reserved person in a karakul cap; a pair of young men I had seen with the Russians; and a fourth man, who was new to me. He wore civilian clothes, but whenever Afghan officers passed by on the drive, they punctiliously saluted him.

At some point I got too close and he saw me. I think he thought I was trying to photograph him. There was nothing to do but put down the camera and go up quite openly to watch the game.

'Take a chair,' he said in excellent English. 'You play cards?'

I admitted an indifferent hand at bridge.

'This is an Afghan game, *Char nahar*. It means "four persons".' He was one of those men who seem large from mere personality. His suit and his slippers were American. He smoked cigarettes from

an elegant silver case. He had a western self-assurance which allowed him to concentrate for minutes on the game, and then, as soon as he was sure of the remaining tricks, to shoot out questions at me.

‘You are British?’

‘Yes.’

‘The other Englishman. What does he do in the Persian Gulf—work for the British Army?’

‘What kind of camera have you?’

And so on.

If I still had any doubt that this was the man I was waiting to see—the Number One of the whole party—it was settled by the arrival of my colonel of the night before. In the hotel it was the colonel whom everyone had saluted. Even majors had stood to attention when he addressed them. But now it was the colonel who stood to attention, his hands to his side like some NCO on the parade ground. He delivered a message, and the two of them went into the hotel.

‘Who was that person?’ I asked the manager.

He told me his name.

It was the Chief of the Afghan Air Force.

In the evening I dined with Abdul and his friends.

If, up to now, I seem to have forgotten them, it is because since our arrival they had been occupied from dawn to dusk in visiting their innumerable relations. There had been three main topics at these conclaves. The first I only learned later. The second was the present governor, who was responsible for the sad state of the mausoleum. The third was the goings-on of our military party—or rather the Afghan members of it.

‘These damned fat generals,’ said Abdul bitterly. ‘There you see what’s wrong with us as a nation. We pay God knows how much money to bring in these foreign experts, and move them about, and put them in the best hotels. Every day costs a fortune. And what do the generals do? They sit on their bottoms, and feed themselves sick, and have all their friends in. How will they ever build an airfield at this rate?’

So there it was: an airfield.

Abdul believed it was a civil airfield. But it was not. And as I soon discovered, it was being built not at Shindand but farther south still, at Farah, within two hundred miles of the Baghdad Pact trunk road

between Persia and Pakistan. If the Russians chose to occupy it, it would bring this road within easy range of Soviet fighters and cut by half the distance from any Russian airfield to the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

These bits of information, adding up to a whole, put me in a possession of military information which was more than I had bargained for, particularly as by the fourth day of my stay (which I had originally announced as a brief one) I was receiving polite but distinct hints that I would do well to leave.

'Herat is really no good for you,' said the lieutenant. 'Look, you have no bed. That is terrible. In England you have beds, with sheets and blankets. You will find such beds in Kandahar.'

'Yes,' said the colonel, who seemed never quite to manage the Persian 'g', 'Kandagar is very modern, very good and new. A plane leaves the day after tomorrow.'

I sat in the office of the Aryana Afghan Airlines. In *Visit Afghanistan!* the same building had been illustrated as the Herat municipal café, but it must have gone out of business. At that moment the only evidence of restauration was three of the staff who squatted on the carpet round a plate of rice.

The plane had not arrived at the airfield.

'Why?' I asked.

'Shortage of equipment,' said the dapper young airline officer, whose comings and goings caused everyone to stand up as a mark of respect.

'When is the next one?'

'The day after tomorrow.'

I remained with the crowd of turbaned merchants, wool-dealers, officials and other travellers who were waiting with their bundles in hope of something unspecified turning up.

The crowd began to break up. I bundled my bags wearily into a ghari and ordered the driver to take me to the post office, which ran the Kandahar bus.

'I'm sorry,' said the postmaster. 'All seats taken.'

'When is the next bus.'

'The day after tomorrow.'

I returned to the hotel.

My return was received with undisguised dismay.

The servant sent for the lieutenant; the lieutenant took me to the

colonel; the colonel sent for the general's ADC. And I waited among the piles of Abdul's sacking-covered luggage.

Presently I was summoned to the hotel.

'*Why* can't you go?' said the general's ADC testily.

'There are no seats on the bus.'

'Impossible.'

He cranked the telephone.

'Why did you tell the feringhi there are no seats on the bus?'

Hoarse protests from the earpiece.

'There *will* be a seat on the bus, you understand?'

He rang off.

'You will leave at five o'clock,' he said.

And, with Abdul and Abernethy for travelling companions, I did.

III

DUSK fell on the five-hundred-mile journey as soon as we left the town. The road—one of the best in the country—cuts south across the Hari River and then winds into a region of hills. The bridges are nearly all broken and one comes on yawning chasms without warning. But in summer, when the rivers are dry, it is possible to find a way across them.

It was uncomfortably hot, and the bus was airless through being divided into three compartments. The first class contained the hard, narrow bench which I shared with Abernethy and the driver. The second class, for Ladies Only, was situated in the middle and partitioned from the rest by blue windows. Abdul and his friends were forced to sit in the third.

Once during the evening the sweeping headlamps caught the slinking form of a mountain tiger; and several times foxes and deer. But it was hard to keep awake. I did so by concentrating on a problem which may seem rather unworthy: how to get rid of Abernethy, who was nodding at my side.

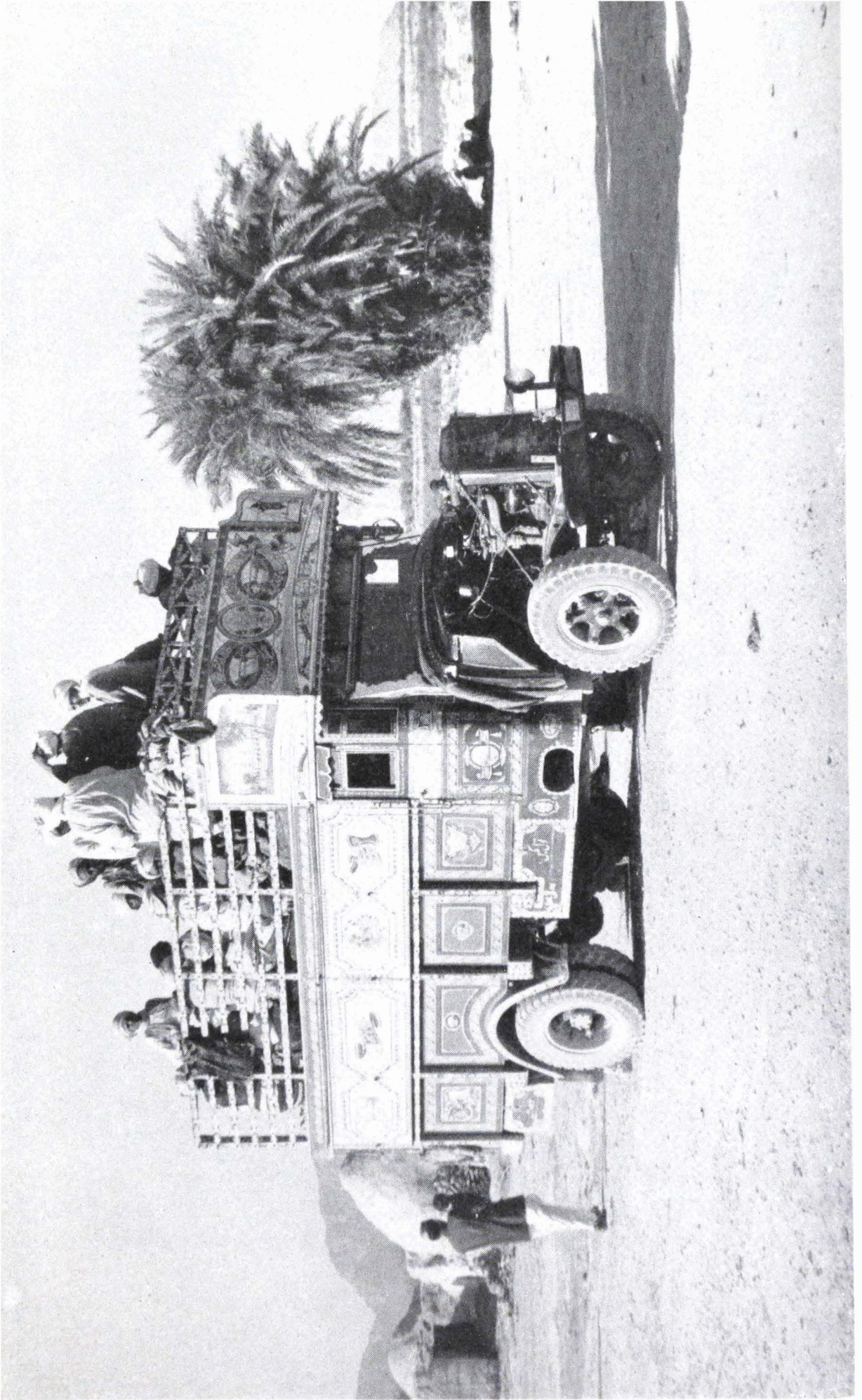
For although Abernethy was excellent company, his companionship was something I had to avoid if I hoped to enjoy the company, and confidences, of Afghans.

In the end I decided I would wait to hear Abernethy's plans in Kandahar, and when I knew whether he was taking the bus or the aeroplane to Kabul I would take the alternative.

At ten o'clock, after five hours' travelling, a cluster of lights announced Shindand. It wasn't much of a place, but it was full of life. Two arcades of lamplit tea-houses, twenty or thirty parked trucks and buses, kerosene lamps above stalls selling melons and pomegranates.

Abdul led the way into a tea-house, through a series of rooms where groups of turbaned figures sat cross-legged on the floor sharing plates of rice and lentils. In the room at the end we found a place on a





4. Painted lorry—Herat—Kandahar road

carpeted platform, ordered food and tea, and held out our hands for a boy to pour water on them from a swan-necked ewer.

There was a splendid cosiness about this place, with its press of human bodies, its warmth and companionship almost consciously pitted against the darkness of the wastes outside. From time to time, as some traveller finished his meal, he would wash his hands again and, oblivious of all around him, turn to the wall and say his prayers. Then there would be an indistinguishable cry from outside, and the complement of some vehicle would troop out of the door with its parrot cage, on their way to Herat or Farah.

We finished eating, and I went out with Abdul to the great starlit desert which is the Afghan lavatory.

‘Andreas,’ he said, with a pause he used when about to bare his soul. ‘Andreas, I am very much thinking of my wife at this moment. Do you think I dare bring her out here on a road like this?’

‘Of course,’ I said reassuringly.

‘You know,’ he went on. ‘I told her how my country had changed. And you know what she said? She said, “Abdul, I don’t care if there are *no* roads in your country, and no restaurants. I haven’t married your roads and your asphalt; I’ve married *you*.”’

‘That’s fine,’ I said. ‘That’s love. Why do you worry then?’

‘But Andreas,’ he said. ‘Will she *understand*?’

Four hours later we arrived at Farah. There was a little rest house where we bedded down by candle light and listened to the packs of jackals which roamed the town ‘square’.

In the morning the police arrived and took away our passports to be scrutinized. There was nothing much to do. Farah, indeed, was poor. The heat beat down on the meagre street of bazaar shops. The number of idle young men who lay elegantly on their string beds was excessive even for Afghanistan. Vast green water-melons, sliced open to reveal their crimson flesh, were the only splash of colour.

This idleness, however, had a happy outcome. When I went to the police station to collect our passports, the entire force of eighteen fine men got up from their siesta and stood to attention for a group photograph.

In the heat of the afternoon we left again on the second and final stage to Kandahar. There was a subtle change of scenery, a growing luxuriance that belonged to the south. Trees, when they appeared, were no longer firs but palms. The appearance of any kind of water

meant little strips of rice paddy. The saw-tooth hills which rose from the flat brown earth were like cardboard cutouts against the cloudless sky.

There was also a change among the people—a happy irresponsibility which broke out on the faces of dour Pathans as they sat drinking their tea beside crumbling tea-houses and stagnant water holes, or squatted, thirty or more at a time, on the piled rice sacks in flower-painted lorries.

In the evening we came to a place whose name means 'heart's peace'. The rest house had nothing for us to eat, so with Abdul and four or five others I walked across the desert to a little mud shack where the inhabitants of the place were gathered round a samovar.

They produced tea and bread and built up a fire of brushwood on which to fry eggs in a cast-iron pan. Once again Abdul was distressed at our sitting, as guests and foreigners, on the flea-ridden rugs, eating our eggs with greasy fingers in the open night. But it was useless trying to tell him how infinitely preferable it all was—the roar of the fire, the flicker of light on the turbaned faces, the gusts of laughter over coarse and simple jokes—to the drab inefficiency of government hotels.

He wanted at all costs to press on to Kandahar that night, and his indeflectible aim was almost our undoing.

As soon as we moved off again, the driver showed signs of drowsiness. Sleeping drivers are the peril of Central Asia. In Persia they take opium; in Afghanistan they take *nasswar*, a green tobacco which acts as a stimulant and then brings an after-effect.

The first I knew of his drowsiness was when he stopped making jokes. All through the journey he had been pulling my leg about the enormous distances still to be covered, pretending there would be no food or tea-house for hundreds of miles. Now he was silent. He even stopped taking the cigarettes I would pull out and light for him, and forgot to dip the headlamps to warn the roof-passengers that we were passing under telephone wires.

The road began to exercise a mesmeric effect. Bends and obstructions became less frequent. The headlamps leapt ceaselessly forward over a flickering washboard of small ruts and shadows.

Presently I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was a man with three wives on the bench behind.

'See, see,' he said with great interest. 'Ahmed is driving with his eyes closed.'

I looked beside me and saw, to my alarm, that he was right.

‘Ahmed!’ I shouted.

He made no move.

‘Ahmed, wake up—you’re going to sleep!’

He opened his eyes, gave a startled jerk to the steering wheel, and hunched himself up with a vacant look at the road ahead.

The talk awakened Abernethy, who was also dozing. He offered to take the camera from my lap so that I could grab the wheel when the time came.

But this was not easy. First, I was separated from the wheel by the arrangement of the gear-lever. Secondly we were going so fast, and the wooden body was so top-heavy, that a grab on the wheel would probably overturn us.

I prayed for bends and river-beds which would make us change gear and slow down. But they seldom came, and soon Ahmed was slumped across the wheel again, his forehead resting on its upper rim.

Two or three times in the next two hours we came within inches of the roadside ditch, only to save ourselves at the last moment. Then we reached a lifeless village and the bus came to a stop, as if Ahmed no longer had the energy to press the accelerator pedal.

He got out, disappeared into the dark, came back a minute later with his turban unrolled and his naked head dripping with water.

It was a little better for a while after that, but the last part of the journey was a nightmare.

Girishk, two a.m. Someone delivered the mails. Ahmed ducked his head again while we stood on a dam, looking at star-studded water and the distant lights of an American-built power station. Then down the last eighty miles, with a crescent moon and eternal lights which deceptively promised the journey’s end.

Caravans appeared on the road, taking produce to the city for the day’s market. We ploughed on into them, scattering camels, making them break their halters and stampede into the fields each side of the road.

Little groups of donkeys, trees and walls and houses; suddenly street lamps, an illuminated sign between lighted gate-posts: Hotel de Candahar.

‘Hotel!’ I shouted.

Ahmed, with a final call on his energies, managed somehow to put on the brake and before we had actually stopped was snoring against the dashboard.

What should I say of Kandahar? That it is the most fanatical city of Afghanistan; a bastion of religious conservatism; the historical source of revolt? All these things are true. But when I came there the springs of discontent which were to manifest themselves four months later in the shooting of some forty of its inhabitants by the police and army were as yet obscure.

In the long bazaars, with their flies and noise and brightly-coloured bird cages, you could judge the prosperity from the number of radio sets. The tea-houses and restaurants were filled with music and coloured paper streamers. The army conscripts were marching off in ragged, laughing platoons to the trucks waiting to take them to military training.

The only clue to the happening which was occupying everybody's thoughts and putting the whole country on the edge of convulsion was a remark passed by Abdul. We were walking back from the Aryana office where Abdul had booked himself a flight for the next day, when I asked him whether he wouldn't have to put his wife into a *chadduri*—the all-enveloping veil—when she arrived.

He shook his head.

'No, Andreas,' he said very seriously. 'I shall never do that.'

'But custom will compel you,' I said. 'She will be forced to take Afghan nationality.'

He pondered the matter for a moment, and then bent towards me.

'Listen. I will tell you something. Things are changing. I have heard it in Herat. New orders have gone out. In Kabul already there are many changes. You will see.'

The full and proper import was momentarily lost on me because we were just then embarking on another of those occasions of painful readjustment for Abdul.

He had last seen Kandahar some nine years before, and somehow he remembered it as an exemplary clean and modern city. Now, as we walked in the stifling noonday heat, past the ordure in the gutters, the yellowing meat, blue with flies, in the butcher's shops, the piles of severed goats' heads on the pavements, his confidence fell.

We looked for a restaurant, but all we could find was a suffocating tunnel where we sat on the floor eating rancid rice with our fingers. We waited an hour in an oven of a decrepit post office while he telephoned his family in Kabul. When we wanted to return to the hotel, there were no gharis: an outbreak of anthrax had killed off a thousand horses in the military stables alone.

‘Andreas,’ he said. ‘It is not thus that I remember Kandahar.’

The hotel was situated far away from all this, in the quiet New Town with its gardens and street lights and vigilant police. The beds were clean, the floors swept, the water ran for twelve hours a day. With garden sunshades and refreshment tables it could have been like one of those splendid establishments in *Visit Afghanistan!*—only the sunshades were rotting in a cupboard, and the only edible food—packets of American breakfast cereal and Italian spaghetti—was under lock and key in a show-case.

In the hall stood a bicycle with ‘Aussie’ painted in white letters on its cross-bar.

I never met Aussie in the flesh, but he belonged to the company of round-the-world bicyclists and hikers who pass through Afghanistan like migrant swallows. The last I had met was a twenty-four-year-old Finn who turned up in the middle of the night during my previous visit to Herat. He was financing a ten-year tour by selling his blood to hospitals. He spoke nothing but Finnish, his sole means of communication was a tattered exercise book in which he had written the names of the countries he had visited, from Egypt to Burma.

The day after he arrived he presented himself at the hospital. The Afghans took one look at his emaciated body and packed him off, at public expense, on the next bus to Meshed.

There were also supposed to be Americans in Kandahar. It was the centre of their biggest operations: the building of the new International Airport and the Helmand Valley scheme, which was to bring power and fertility to the great south-western desert. Both are worthy projects, which together cost a hundred million dollars. But in three days in Kandahar I never saw an American soil his feet among the people.

Apart from Aussie’s bicycle, the only symbol of foreign presence was a large map in the hotel ante-room—in Russian.

It was soon clear that with Abdul at my side I would never get beyond the barrier of Kandahar’s tawdriness to discover some things which I had very much wished to see there.

One of these things was the resting place of Ahmad Shah Durrani.

It is difficult to explain the fascination of such figures who have moved across the stage of Central Asian history. Perhaps mere distance lends them grandeur, or the dramatic swiftness of their passing, or the bareness and vastness of the stage itself. At any rate, Ahmad

Shah—‘the Pearl of Pearls’—was one of the greatest, and he left his mark far beyond modern Afghanistan, which he founded.

He came to power in Kandahar in 1747 when the Moghul empire was crumbling in India and the Persian in the west. By 1750 he was master of all the country from the Indus to the Oxus, suzerain of Khorasan and shortly of Baluchistan as well. In 1756 he occupied Delhi. In 1761 he defeated the armies of the Mahratta confederacy at Panipat, and in 1762 the Sikhs near Lahore. Finally he extended the Afghan dominion eastwards by annexing Kashmir. His empire broke up with the onset of a terrible face cancer, which caused his death in 1773.

I found his mausoleum near the centre of the town, close by the mosque containing the Shirt of the Prophet Mohammed, which he brought down from Bokhara. It was as much as my life was worth to attempt to enter the mosque; but I was determined to enter the mausoleum.

The problem was: how?

A kindly old alabaster-carver, sitting in his shop on the corner of the square, assured me that if I was a good man I had only to ask. But the moment my shadow touched the steps, I found my way barred by a rifle and bayonet.

‘Feringhi, what do you want?’

‘I wish to see the tomb of Ahmad Shah.’

‘It is not possible; you are not allowed here.’

The sound of my words with the sentry brought the corporal of the guard.

‘What’s up?’

‘He wants to go inside.’

‘Where does he come from?’

‘I think he’s an American.’

‘He looks like a Turk to me.’

‘Where do you come from, Feringhi?’

‘From Inglistan,’ I said, and promptly launched out on a little speech I had prepared about the Durrani’s great fame as a soldier and a ruler, and how I had come thousands of farsakhs in order to see where he was buried.

As usual, my enthusiasm lent wings to my words—not only about Ahmad Shah, but about Afghanistan and its past and present glories, and how the greatest of these glories was independence. Perhaps I went further than I intended. When I had finished, they

beamed with pleasure and motioned to me to take off my shoes and go inside.

Through the great double door I entered the tomb chamber with its painted honeycomb roof. In the centre of the floor was the tomb itself, sheeted with a tasselled black cloth. There were manuscripts of the Koran round the walls, and a dusty glass case containing the hero's armour: his helmet and coat-of-mail and battle axe—the axe which decided Muslim rule for Northern India.

I paid my respects to it and took some photographs.

Then I came out, dropping a note on the pile of small coins which an aged custodian, hurriedly summoned, had spread on the carpet by the door.

The last thing I heard was the words of the guard corporal. 'That's not an Englishman,' he was saying. 'No Englishman would ever talk about Ahmad Shah like that!'

The evening before we left I walked with Abdul through the bazaars again. Darkness had wrought a generous transformation, hiding the dirt and bringing out thousands of small smoking oil lamps to light the goods spread out for sale on the sidewalks. They shone on wild Pathan faces, and piles of red pomegranates, and jugs and glasses of sherbet. And in the main square, red floodlamps played on the war memorial to recall the blood of Afghan soldiers shed against the British.

I had a great liking for it all, but Abdul did not share it. He was still torn by his recent disillusionment and a sudden passion of reforming zeal.

'Oh, these people,' he said with sudden savagery. 'How can we ever change them? You know what I'd do, if I had my way? First I would make them tear down all these pictures in the restaurants; all the pictures, and paper chains, and silly decorations. And in every restaurant there would be just one picture, or perhaps two, like in Europe.

'And I'd make each restaurant have a lavatory—*Herren* and *Damen*—like in Germany.

'And then, you know what I'd do. I'd give everybody a roll of cloth, a couple of metres perhaps. And I'd order them to make a tunic and trousers. Not these silly floppy trousers like they wear now, but proper trousers, neat and hygienic.

'I'd make them put up signposts in all the streets and highways, in

European letters . . .' He paused, searching for the expression of his highest ideal.

'In four or five years we could be another *Switzerland!*'

Our conversation had brought us up the road towards the hotel. Behind, from the bazaar, we could still hear the noise of dozens of over-loud radios. From ahead, not a hundred yards away, came the hysterical laughter of jackal packs ranging in from the hills and across the gardens.

The noise seemed to check him.

'Andreas,' he said, with a sudden urgency. 'In Kabul you will come to see me, won't you? I will have everything nice for you there. I'll cook you a real German schnitzel . . .'

He left next morning by the aeroplane, and Abernethy went too. I went down the Street of the Holy Shirt to a little office frescoed with daggers and rifles and booked myself a seat on a bus leaving for Kabul at five in the afternoon.

The bus was 'unscheduled'—that is to say it was not under Post Office contract to deliver mails and could stop to enrich its payload wherever the driver wished. The passengers were all Pathans, and when I arrived at the yard of departure they were weighing their bundles on a set of scales suspended from a tripod of wooden poles. The weights, representing five, ten and twenty kilograms respectively, were a broken camshaft, a big boulder, and a cracked differential casing.

One of them, a wiry old man of about seventy, established first contact by telling me he was quite an old friend of the British, having spent twelve years in gaol in Peshawar. The others included a Jemadar in jungle-green battle dress, a beady-eyed, beak-nosed mullah, and a lad of fourteen escorting his mother and a baby.

Apart from the boy, who wore a townsman's karakul cap, they were as wild a crew as one could commit one's life to. Yet they proved the kindest travelling companions I ever met. Their hospitality was overwhelming; their conduct (with one regrettable lapse) exemplary.

Everyone assured me that as soon as we started to climb the hills it was going to become pretty *khunak*: a word which in Persia means simply 'cool', but whose Afghan connotation I had yet to discover.

We left after the usual delays and as we rolled out into the warm evening dust, the men all joined in a little prayer, stroking their

beards and invoking the protection of the Prophet against the uncertainties of the road ahead. At half past six we made our first prayer-stop, the entire company getting out of the bus to spread their shawls and prayer mats towards the reddening west. At half past seven we stopped again, this time in a village, and they prayed with the villagers in one long line, the mullah a little in front of them, their murmured responses drifting back with the wood-smoke.

I observed this ritual often enough on my travels. It happened five times a day: before and after sunset, at noon, before and after sunrise. It never failed to move me. And yet, in case anyone should be tempted to believe that religion is still the all-pervading force that it once was in Afghanistan, I should add that this was the south—and that we had a mullah with us. There were occasions elsewhere when we had no mullah, and no one prayed; and yet others when we had a mullah and half the passengers stayed unconcernedly in their seats.

Prayers over, we climbed into the bus again and set off into the night. The air turned much cooler, the road—though much better than I had been led to believe—began to climb through narrow gullies, and I began to feel cramped on my constricted seat above the back axle.

My immediate companions, a party of adolescent twenty-year-olds, said it was going to be a long night and urged me to take some *nasswar*. I had never tried it before. They carried the powder in little round tins, in whose lids were set mirrors by which to admire their handsome faces. I took a good pinch and put it under my tongue. It tasted hot and bitter, but otherwise harmless. After the prescribed thirty seconds I spat it out on the floor.

Almost at once the effect set in like a punch between the eyes. My head started swimming and I wanted to be sick.

Everybody laughed.

Then they started to sing—a long, sentimental song with extended ululations from the back of the throat. The words were in Pushtu, which I did not understand; but it was something about the Afghan snows and a rose in Babul, which is the old name for Kandahar. It must have run to twelve or fourteen stanzas before they got tired of it, broke into horse-play, and finally composed themselves to sleep in pairs with their arms round each other's shoulders.

I envied them this solace, as I did their hardihood and their cotton clothing, which apparently kept them quite warm. In my western

clothes, even with my thick duffel donkey-jacket and anorak, I was freezing to the marrow.

For a couple of hours there was nothing but their snores, the uphill labouring of the engine, the cries of the baby in the seat to my right. Then we came into the lights of a village with the usual parked truck lines and all the paraphernalia of a supper stop.

Tired and hungry, I sat down with my friends on the open verandah of a tea-house. And then a remarkably interesting thing happened. From the direction by which we had arrived came the noise of truck engines: heavy, throbbing diesel engines of a kind I had never before heard. The lamps of the trucks threw bright white beams across the hillsides, and they were travelling unusually fast.

The first one came into the village, belching exhaust smoke, throwing up dust from its six big wheels. And then another, and a third and a fourth. They raced through, almost scraping the parked bus and wagons, and vanished with an upward gear-change into the dark. On their chassis were long steel boxes, some of them rectangular, others curved upwards at the back, like the prow of a ship.

It did not take long to guess that they were what Abernethy had seen at Herat: rafting pontoons for tanks.

There were twelve pontoons altogether, and we followed them for the best part of the night. One or other of them was always breaking down, and coming round sharp bends and hillsides we would find them blocking the road, till finally, an hour before dawn, they turned off to harbour at the little town of Mukur.

Meanwhile the journey continued with excruciating cold and discomfort. We were supposed to have stopped at Mukur for sleep. But we only picked up water for the radiator. Then it was said we should sleep at Ghazni. Dawn broke and found us forty miles away.

At the prayer-stop, I got out with the others, stumbling over the grey mud ruins of a deserted village to find a place to relieve myself. The effect of the cold and the altitude, now above seven thousand feet, was something to which I had not yet accustomed myself. My hands were a corpse-like grey, and when I tried to set the camera for a photograph, I could hardly manipulate the shutter knob.

After that, one of the Afghans insisted on lending me his shawl, and clad in the soft, closely woven cotton I watched, beneath the rising sun, the unfolding of a landscape of incomparable beauty.

It is almost impossible to describe this morning beauty of the high

Afghan plateau. It is the air, no doubt: the crisp blue air, in which every shade and detail is gathered on one enormous canvas against the cloudless background of the sky. The hills, the dark green stabs of trees, the yellow villages, the scarlet poppies beside the dusty road.

But it is also something within one's self—the lightness of heart which comes from returning warmth and the great wild freedom of it all.

As the sun rose higher, gathering strength, turning the long ribbed fingers of the hills from blue to red and red to onyx, we passed sleeping melon fields and nomad encampments with their black wool tents and tethered pack animals. They were gleams of fire, rising smoke columns, Kochee women in bright red dresses preparing the camels for the day's march.

The villages were different from those of the plain; grouped in great forts with turrets at the corners, and crenellated walls and bastions. And now and again we passed a peasant with a slung rifle and leather bandolier, as Lord Roberts must have passed them on his epic march, eighty years ago, when he came down from Kabul to relieve the British garrison at Kandahar from Ayub Khan.

We stopped for prayers again; for a breakfast of tea and bread. All passed peacefully till we got just short of Ghazni and then one of those volatile incidents occurred, to which the Pathans, alas, are all too prone.

I don't know how it started. One moment my companions were talking and joking among themselves in Pushtu. The next, at some chance remark, one of them leapt across the space between the seats and took the youth opposite by the throat. In a second the bus was in an uproar. Half the occupants were shouting invectives at each other while the rest tried, belatedly, to separate the contestants.

They might as well have tried to separate two bulldogs. The assaulted one had somehow managed to get back at his assailant, and now they were locked there, with bulging eyes, in a grip that was plainly going to end in murder, with mere endurance deciding the victim.

The situation was only saved by the driver, who, startled by the confusion, suddenly jammed on the brakes. Everyone was thrown in a heap on the floor. In the ensuing muddle the two were separated, grabbed by their friends, pulled to distant seats.

The assailant continued the journey in smouldering anger.

The other took refuge in holding the hand of his friend: a youth with the wide-set eyes and smooth oval face of a Prince in a Persian miniature.

Ghazni came and went. I had hoped to see the great Towers of Victory, built by the eleventh-century soldier-king Mahmud on his return from sacking the Punjab. But there was no stopping, even for a meal. The most I could do was to wander a little along a tree-lined road, photographing a village with its terraced fields and tinkling water courses.

The country was now becoming more and more fertile—that Afghan fertility which is so deceptive because it ends within a stone's throw of the road and is quite incapable of supporting even the sparse population. There were coppices and woods of willow and alder, and later wild *nalas* and villages consisting of one long tea-house after another.

Finally we entered the western arm of a wide curving valley which leads to the Kabul River and below in the distance stretched a ribbon of faded green—the Afghan capital.

Dusty approaches, mud-brick villas, grey powdered trees. High above all else, the towering façade of the Russian-built silo. Gharis, donkeys, pink-and-blue buses. Rows of dusty shops on the asphalt street. FINEST DRY CLEANERS.

More buses—big Russian diesels. Police at the cross-roads. Sets of dead traffic lights. A hillside of shacks.

On across the bridge and a dried-up trickle of a river to pull up in a graveyard of wheelless buses: the Post Office compound and bus terminal.

While the crew unloaded the luggage I fulfilled the last of a number of medical treatments by bathing a yellow discharge from the eyes of the woman's baby and distributing aspirins to my companions who had discovered numerous illnesses during the journey.

A ghari came forward to take me to the hotel.

I was sorry to say goodbye to my Pathans, but I met them again constantly in the next few days: their hails and embraces lent moral support in an existence of complete unreality.

IV

A MORE bewildering city than Kabul can hardly be imagined. It has no heart, no shape, no style or period of architecture by which it can be characterized. Nor—except for an hour at sunset, when the silver light cascades between the two great hills which hem it in on the west—has it any kind of beauty.

If one looks for some central feature, one is thrown back on the straggling river which curves in an S-bend through the Old City. In spring, with the melting of the snows, it becomes a torrent. But when I arrived it was a series of stagnant pools in which the populace was simultaneously praying, washing clothes, watering camels, and relieving itself.

The roads of shops which run on each side of it are connected by half a dozen bridges. I looked at one of these bridges one day and detected in its construction, unless I am mistaken, the sawn-up track of Afghanistan's only railway: planned by King Amanullah to run between the capital and the suburb of Paghman, and destroyed in the revolution of 1928.

Behind the waterfront on either side is an area of dark alleys where foreigners seldom venture. They extend in a maze of covered bazaars and dusty hovels till one comes to one of the modern avenues, lit by German street lamps, which pass for the new town-planning.

That on the south runs eastwards past the blue-and-white war memorial to the concrete sports stadium and annual exhibition ground. The northern one is not so much an avenue as an oblong 'place' with roads leading off to the airport and the villas and walled gardens of the so-called New City, the Shahr-i-Nau. It is now graced with four-storeyed government offices and the new, enormous and extravagant Hotel Kabul.

The moment my ghari deposited me on the steps of the Hotel Kabul I felt I was entering a surrealist film of Jean Cocteau. There was no doorman, though every aspect of it demanded one. The vast empty foyer through which I trailed my battered luggage was furnished with a wealth of Italian 'contemporary' furniture. Fluorescent lamps poured a flood of light on the inch-thick carpet and vacant chairs. An illuminated show case contained folksy dolls of Kochee women and old mullahs and an alabaster model of a Spanish galleon.

Untroubled by the stares of any guests I approached the twenty-foot long reception desk, where a clerk in an impeccable European suit inquired what he could do for me.

I said I would like a room.

'First, second or third class?'

'What price the third?' I asked.

'A hundred and fifty afghanis—breakfast and one meal a day compulsory,' he added quickly. 'That makes three hundred and twenty.'

I said I would take it.

A porter in a white tunic appeared to carry my things. Another was waiting at the head of the stairway to show me the room. A third brought tea in a big Russian flower-patterned teapot.

When he had gone I examined my surroundings. The bed with its fine linen sheets was new and soft, the reading lamp worked, the water ran hot in the shower-room across the landing. No longer capable of doubting it all, I stripped off my malodorous dust-caked clothes and slept for fourteen hours until nine o'clock next morning.

Then the unreality recommenced.

I dressed and went down for my compulsory breakfast: down the stairs, through a lounge somewhat larger than the River Room at the Savoy, into a dining-room with seats for two hundred. A succession of waiters brought melon, fried eggs, toast and marmalade, a large Russian teapot, a copy of the British Embassy news bulletin, the United States Information Services bulletin, the German Embassy *Nachrichtenblatt*, and News of the Soviet Socialist Republics.

I read them with an eye on the door for the arrival of fellow diners, who failed, however, to appear.

After breakfast I went to the desk to sign the register. The clerk, with an engaging smile and limpid handshake, inquired if I had slept well.

I asked how many guests he had.

He told me thirty-five.

And how many rooms?

‘Two hundred at the moment—till we furnish the new north wing.’

It was good to know one would not be overcrowded.

My first need in Kabul was to visit the Embassy and collect my mail. But it had taken me four months to get my Afghan visa and I had had ample warnings that if I hoped to make use of it, my visits to the Embassy had better be scarce. So I put it off and went instead to call on the head of the Afghantour tourist organization, to whom I had written from London, asking for help in getting about the country.

His office lay down by the river, in the compound of the Pushtu Tarjaraty Bank. But before I ever got there I was overtaken by a matter of much more immediate interest.

Walking down the street I encountered groups of women without veils. They walked in twos and threes, as if for mutual protection, swiftly through the crowds.

The first group caused me no surprise. I thought they were Persian or Iraqi Embassy wives out for a morning’s shopping. But when I passed a second and a third I mentally rubbed my eyes. They were not foreigners, but Afghans.

No less remarkable was their uniform. All without exception wore an identically cut three-quarter length coat, black cotton gloves, headscarf drawn tightly round the hair, and opaque sunglasses. I remembered how three years before I had watched Afghan women, the wives of diplomats and educated men, come in from abroad in their neat Swiss tailor-mades to be forced, the moment they crossed the frontier, to return to the wretched chadduri—and now, suddenly, I understood the meaning of Abdur’s dark hints; of the whispered conversations and curious conclaves in Herat.

Here before my eyes was an event which had been shrouded in such secrecy that not a word of it had reached Europe. An event, moreover, whose parallel only thirty years before had caused a revolution and thrown Afghanistan into nine months of anarchy.

It is impossible to explain modern Afghanistan without reference to this disaster, which stemmed from the zeal of the young King Amanullah to emulate Atatürk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Persia. In his quest for ‘modernization’ he resorted to harsh and ludicrous

methods, such as forcing the great tribal assembly, the Loe Jirga, into morning dress. But it was the forcible removal of the veil—tantamount in pious Afghan eyes to the defilement of wives and daughters—which finally loosed the spring of revolt. The tribes rose up in the south and east. The army defected. Amanullah fled. From January to October, 1929, Kabul lived under a reign of terror such as the country had hardly seen since the Mongols.

Whatever had happened in 1928–9, the government was plainly taking no risks this time. For the next thing apparent on this, my first morning in Kabul, was the number of police. They patrolled in pairs at intervals of every fifty yards or so, their flat-peaked caps and ankle boots conspicuous among the baggy-trousered crowds. At every corner stood pairs of military police, with rifles and brass gorgets. Other police, in a ratio of three to one, if my Afghan informants were to be believed, were present in plain clothes.

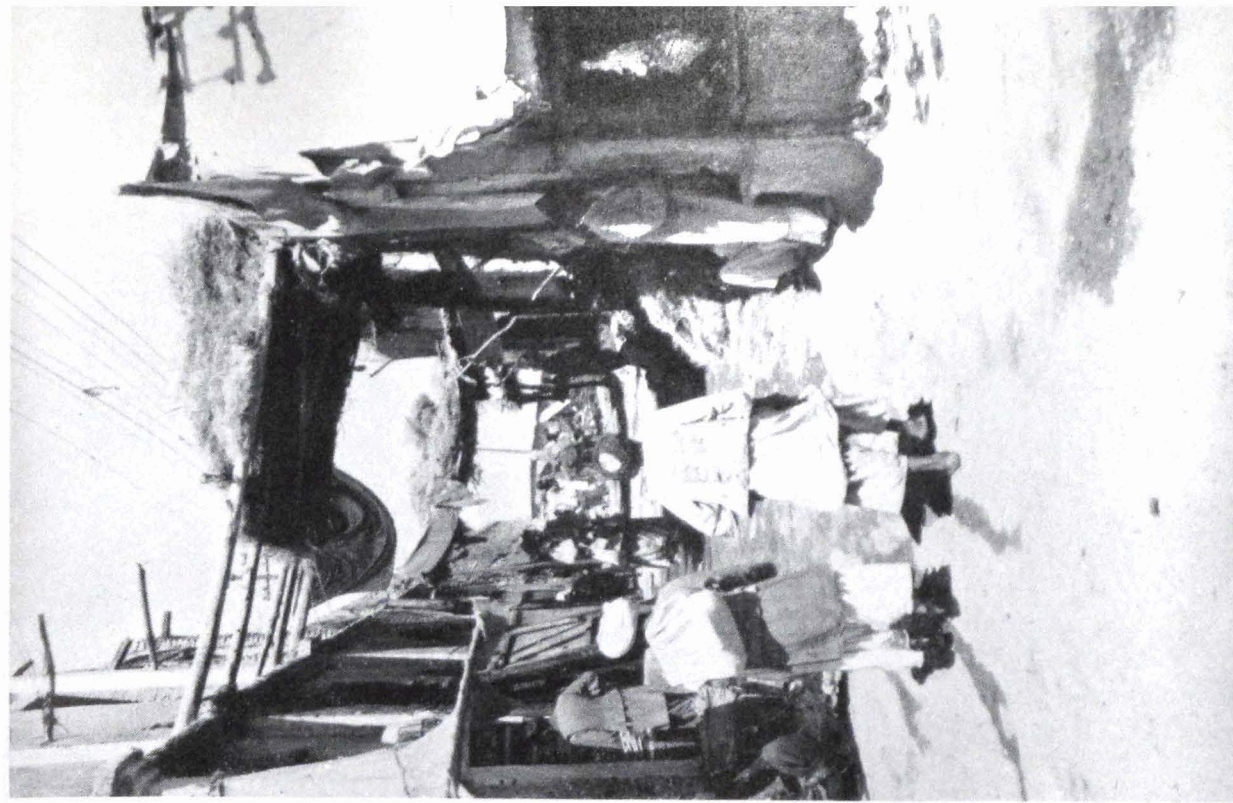
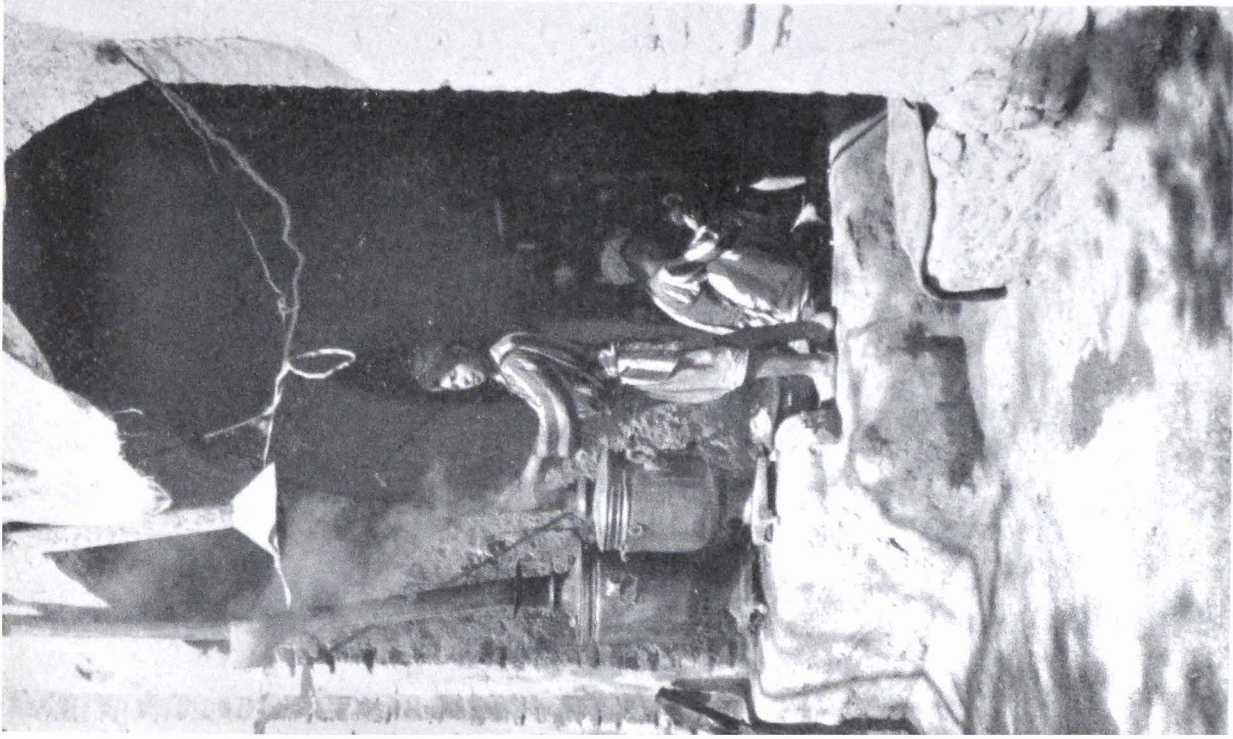
The purpose, I was told, was to see that the ladies ‘were shown no discourtesy’.

The Afghantour office turned out to be a gloomy little room up a flight of unlit stairs. Its head, Mr. Tarzi, was away in Prague, but his staff provided me with the necessary letter to effect my registration with the police and also, for a small official charge, a photographic permit.

Thus armed, I went in search of the Visa Department of Police Headquarters. The first thing that happened was that I was arrested by a police lieutenant for photographing an old man washing his feet in the gutter. He asked me tartly if I was aware that the permit was for objects of ‘scenic or historical interest’. But by obstinately refusing to understand a word he was saying I managed finally to free myself.

Police Headquarters was situated in a high-walled compound. The gates were guarded by sentries and thronged with a constant passage of petitioners, prisoners, plaintiffs and witnesses. On the threshold sat half a dozen scribes, ready with pen and paper to draw up statements and make out forms for the illiterate. The inevitable photographer with his ancient ‘tin’ camera was taking pictures for passes and permits.

I came in through this gate, past scores of civilians and police sitting apparently without purpose in the shade of dusty trees, into corridors stale with the smell of unwashed humanity and handcuffed



5. Kandahar tea-house

Alley in Kandahar



6. *Kabul. Waterfront*

Seller of old bottles



prisoners who appeared without warning from endless doors, before finally being directed to a small, detached bureau where the master of my destiny, a colonel, sat writing at a dusty, littered desk.

I never met with anything but courtesy from this officer in all my time; but from the first I felt a depressing uneasiness in his presence.

On the couch and rickety chairs which lined the wall sat three or four foreigners like myself. One always wonders what other foreigners are doing in Afghanistan—part of the same suspicion, no doubt, which infects the Afghans themselves. But the present company offered a reasonably open cross-section: a French archaeologist, a pair of German youths, a middle-aged American couple on a world air tour.

The Americans had come from Singapore. God knows what had induced them to put Afghanistan on their itinerary: the travel agency in Seattle had arranged for them to spend two days there before going on to Tel Aviv.

‘And now we find out that the flight to Tel Aviv doesn’t exist,’ the lady was expostulating. ‘We’ve been here two weeks. What can we do. . . .?’

The Germans were on their way home from Pakistan. They had got as far as Farah when their passports had been stolen ‘from under our very pillows while we slept’. They had been waiting two months for new ones. The clouds of suspicion against them were very black indeed.

The Frenchman did not speak. No Frenchman I met in Afghanistan spoke, except hospitably to offer me Gauloises. The business of archaeology was very absorbing, and some said unkindly that it saved the bother of keeping an intelligence service.

While we waited for Colonel Shimali to go through the Germans’ file, a clerk kept coming in with batches of passports which he placed in a long wire rack. Stacked there by nationalities they formed a kind of spectrum: the blue of France, and the greens of the United States and the German Federal Republic, the ochre of Afghanistan itself. There were three or four of each of these colours, and then came a wide maroon band of Soviet passports, with CCCP embossed on their jackets in bold gold letters.

I had not then started deliberately to count them, but on later visits to the police station I did. There were, on the average, thirty passports each time. Allowing two days for ‘processing’, as required for my own and other western passports, it meant the inward or outward passage of ninety Russians a week.

When at last my turn came. I handed over my passport and the letter from Afghantour.

The colonel looked at the visa and glanced down a list.

‘How long are you staying in Afghanistan?’

‘Three months.’

He smiled—a vinegary smile that raised my worst doubts.

‘That’s what you hope.’

‘But I have a visa for that period.’

‘The visa must be confirmed. For that you must have another letter. Meanwhile (he looked at the Afghan wall calendar, advertising Soviet cosmetics) you can stay twelve days.’

The colonel’s demeanour put me in a worrying position. From Kabul it had been my intention to go east or south to the country near the Pakistan frontier. I had not meant to go north towards Russia until after the fifteenth of October, the King’s birthday, when I had to be in Kabul to take some photographs of the national game of Buz-kashi.

Now I wondered if I should ever be allowed to remain that long.

The north was the country that most mattered. In the end I decided to make a dash for it and be sure. Afghantour provided the necessary letter to the Ministry of Interior for a travel permit, and I spent forty-eight hours visiting various offices in order to leave.

The bureaucracy of Afghanistan is so flatly reminiscent of the political dictatorships of Eastern Europe that one can hardly conceive its antique and anachronistic foundation. The government, from the Prime Minister, Mohammed Daud, downwards, are all cousins of the King. They are members of a minority race, the Pathans; and of this race one family, the Musahibans, command every position of authority and influence. There is a so-called National Assembly, but its decisions are subject to royal veto. The only law is the religious law of the Shariat.

I was scarcely aware, at first hand, of the burden of all this till a morning just before my departure when I was returning from the Post Office, having booked a seat on the next day’s bus. It was then that I met my first and only Afghan revolutionary.

He was poorly but tidily dressed in a cotton suit and open-necked shirt, outwardly like any other of the polite, underpaid clerks in the Civil Service. It was only when he spoke that his eyes betrayed him.

‘What is it that you do here?’ he asked when we were alone in

the tea-house. 'Book, newspaper, "tourist"? What is your duty?'

I said I was writing a book, because I had found by now that in spite of Afghantour and its booklets, nobody in Afghanistan believed in tourists.

'And you like this country?'

'Of course.'

'*What* do you like about it?'

The question defeated me. How could I tell him, when I hardly knew myself? I muttered conventional phrases about Afghan hospitality, the landscape, the people.

'And, of course, you think you're really seeing it, don't you?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'Look,' he said. 'You don't have to write your book. I can give you a book, all you need to know. I can tell you about the bloody people who run this country, the way they make Hell for us. I'm not afraid. You can even take my photograph. Do you want?'

Now, this put me in another predicament. For I was more than half certain that he was not genuine. Agents provocateurs are common enough in Kabul; and there would have been no better means of stopping my journey north than to have me discovered in a compromising political assignation.

On the other hand, if I was making a serious attempt to discover the facts of Afghanistan, this was hardly an opportunity to let slip.

'Very well,' I said. 'Afghanistan is a great country, and I wish to see all sides of it.'

We agreed to meet on one of the river bridges when he finished his work at half past four.

In the afternoon I walked out of the city to the Garden of Babur, where the body of the great Moghul was brought home to lie in its tomb against the steep hillside of the Koh-i-Sher Darwaza. And as I wandered through the terraces of petunias I was consumed by doubts. More and more I got the feeling that I was walking into a trap.

In the middle of the garden I came on the United States cultural attaché, Mr Schein, who had been in the country ten days less than I had and was diligently acquainting himself with the Afghan cultural heritage. I was sorely tempted to tell him of my worry, so that at least someone would know what I was up to. But this was made impossible by a surrounding troop of Afghan Boy Scouts.

One of them took me up to the tomb—a delicately carved marble stone beneath a small pavilion—and by the time we came back Mr Schein had departed and I was carried inexorably back to my appointment in the city.

I reached the bridge a few minutes late, and he was waiting.

‘I thought you had feared to come,’ he said; and then in a loud voice for bystanders to hear: ‘Now I will show you the beauties of our city. What would you like to see. . . .’

Propelled by his arm, I moved into the crowd, down the riverside, past the shops, the porters bent double under loads of crates and packing cases from a nearby truck yard. From time to time he stopped and waved his arm, ostensibly urging me to admire some vista.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To my house,’ he said. ‘I must take you out of this open street. We are being followed.’

It struck me as unlikely, unless it was all pre-arranged, in which case these shady manoeuvres and circuitings would be part of the evidence against me. But I dared not look back since, if he was right, I had no wish to show my face.

We cut through a series of small alleys and bazaar streets, full of beggars and donkeys, to the crowded Circle round the war memorial. There, feeling freer, he began to talk volubly in English.

It was not very good English, and I could not always understand it. But his ejaculation ‘these bloody people’ each time we passed army officers, who were just then returning home in numbers from the Defence Ministry, began to alarm me. I was glad when we finally took a side turning and he announced that we were approaching his house.

The house was newly built; but it was poor enough, and he had only a small part of it. As he waited for his wife to remove herself from sight, he dug a finger into the mud wall, whose substance spilled out in a trickle of dust.

We climbed the dark stairs and entered the apartment: two small rooms, bare of all furniture but a cheap carpet, a couple of bedding rolls, a bin with a little flour in it and another with a handful of sugar. The ceiling was a mass of dust held up by rush matting.

‘Make yourself at home,’ he said bitterly, as we sat down on the floor.

‘You know what this place costs?—Five hundred afghanis a

month. And you know what I earn by my job?—five hundred and fifty. I buy our food by doing extra duty. Only now there is no extra duty because I had a row with my chief.’

I asked him what the row was about.

He told me it happened after the *Jashum*, the week-long Independence celebrations which take place in midsummer. There had been no work that week. Most of the Ministries had paid their staff nevertheless, but his own chief had withheld a hundred and twenty afghanis from his salary. He had complained about it, and the chief had laughed in his face.

‘A hundred and twenty afghanis,’ he said. ‘To you that’s nothing. To me it’s a whole month’s flour for my wife and child. I called this man a bad name, and he said: “I will make you humble. I will stop your extra duty.”’

‘I said: “Very well, I will go to another office!” And he said: “All right. But you will not get another job”.’

‘But I had friends you see; people who wanted me, because I am an educated man and have taught myself to speak languages—not like these bloody people who rule us and cannot sign their own names.’

He paused: ‘You speak *Deutsch*?’ he said. ‘Let us go on in *Deutsch*. I am better than in English.’

He went on.

‘So I went to this other office. There was a job for nine hundred afghanis. It was all arranged. And then my friend called me and said: “You cannot work here. Your Chief has spoken to the Minister.”’

‘And then I found another job. But it was the same.’

‘*Endlich* I came back to my old office, and they took me back. But they have stopped my extra duty to make me sorry. . . .’

‘But why must you work for a Ministry?’ I asked. ‘Why not one of the foreign firms there? There are many.’

‘I worked for a foreign firm once,’ he said. ‘It was all right; they paid me. But it was not much. Anyway, the foreign firm has no place for me any more.’

‘An Embassy, then. There are more foreign embassies in Kabul than in any capital in Europe.’

‘Do you think I wouldn’t, if I could? But you know what happens if you want work with an embassy? You must go to ten Afghan government departments for a permit. To the police, to the Ministry of the Interior, to the Royal Ministry. . . . And you must sign a

paper that it is not the foreign government you will work for but the Afghan government.'

A fit of coughing overtook him. When he had recovered he had a wild and hunted look.

'The Americans,' he said. 'Why do they make such a stupid policy? Nobody loves them. They say they will help this country. And what do they do? They give these bloody people money, and all these tanks and guns.'

'But you're wrong,' I interposed. 'The tanks and guns come from Russia.'

He looked at me doubtfully.

'No, no,' he said. '*All* countries give these people weapons. They boast of it. What can we do against them without guns of our own?'

His eyes filled with moistness which was near to tears.

'Listen,' he said. 'If I were a bachelor, I would not be here talking. Even without arms I would be fighting these people. But I have a wife and child.'

'What can I do? I love them. They must eat.'

'I will show you what I do.'

He got up unsteadily and dug beneath a pile of household utensils, a copper cooking pot, a brush, his wife's empty chadduri which hung from a nail.

When he came back he carried some things tied up in a little bundle and spread them on the floor.

There was his testimonial from the foreign export company, creased and grubby. Some other testimonials. A set of monthly pay slips from his office. A trinket or two. A dog-eared book.

The book was a Russian grammar.

'You see,' he said. 'I am learning Russian now. I do not understand the Russians. But I know this. When I work for them they will feed me, they will not laugh in my face and kick me like a dog. The Russians . . . (he paused) . . . they do you *honour*.'

What could I say?

I sat there reasoning with him, trying to dissuade him from what could only end as a far more perilous game than his talking with a casually-met stranger from the west.

But as I talked, a wind sprang up in the street outside and a sudden gust blew in through the ill-fitting window, showering a cloud of dust which almost choked him.

The dust was like my arguments. Even as I uttered them, I did

not believe in them myself: that with time things might change, bringing him freedom and a chance to use his abilities. For, in truth, there was no sign that freedom would increase at that moment—rather the reverse.

And the revolution he dreamed of, even if the means were there to procure it, could only open the last closed door to the north.

So we sat there in failing light, with the wind blowing dust across the tattered testimonials, and only his tubercular cough to break the silence. And finally I went.

He did not see me to the door, because (he said) it was better that I should leave quickly. While we had been talking I had forgotten the uneasiness with which I had come there. Now it returned.

He had not been mistaken. As I came out into the street, which was swirling with eddies of dust, I saw a policeman on the corner and another a hundred yards back, the way I had come.

There was only one free exit and I took it: a narrow alley between two houses, leading to the nearby boulevard.

One of the police moved to follow me. I walked as quickly as I could, barely checking myself from breaking into a run.

Then as I came out of the alley and into the street, I saw I had not far to go.

Across the whole city, above the scraggy skyline of grey mud buildings, the great brown pall of a dust storm was approaching.

It advanced cataclysmically, blotting out the mountains, the light, the sky. The street, as if by a miracle, began to empty. Gharis stopped running. Stall-keepers hurriedly wound their turbans round their faces, like masked brigands.

Next moment it was on us: a ripping wind, tearing up garbage, smashing the scaffolding from a half-built house. And the brown dust like chocolate, filling one's mouth and lungs, stinging one's eyes, blotting out every shape and object more surely than a London fog.

In the murk I lost my pursuer and managed to get back to my hotel.

I had changed my hotel in the meantime for something more homely. The new one was called the Hotel de Caboul, but its difference from the Hotel *Kabul* went far beyond the subtle one of name.

When I moved into it, the manager was just throwing out a couple

of Indians who had not paid their bill for a month. They must have been very poor, for rooms cost only forty to sixty afghanis a day, and meals fifteen. I could live like a lord for the equivalent of twelve shillings a day.

The only drawback (and even then the word is qualified, because Central Asian travel makes one a connoisseur of such things) was its mild decrepitude. Room Number Four—I got to know them all before I was finished—was on the ground floor back. Its dark and narrow window produced an air of dampness, and the forty-watt bulb was too dim to read by. On the other hand one could lie on one's bed in the evening, admiring the ornate wooden ceiling and tracing the octagonal pattern to where it fell away from the rotten joists in the far left-hand corner.

The sheets were mildly grey, the door had no lock, at all hours of the day one would come back to find an old man assiduously re-arranging the dust with sweeps of an old straw broom. On the other hand I never had anything stolen (here or anywhere else in Afghanistan) though I was always leaving the Leica about, and lenses and equipment worth two or three hundred pounds.

My fellow guests were two parties of Russians and a little Filipino.

The Russians were minor officials for whom there was no room in the overcrowded Soviet Embassy. They kept strictly to themselves and camped out in their rooms, which at seven o'clock each evening exuded a tantalizing smell of fried onions. The Filipino was a happy, extrovert little person hungering for companionship, above all female companionship

He worked for the American ICA programme, constructing new hangars for Kabul airport.

Unfortunately, a few days before I met him he had swooned with love for an Afghan air hostess (a new product of female emancipation) and held her hand in the passenger lounge. Now the police had forbidden him to come within a mile of the terminal buildings.

He drowned his sorrow by listening all evening to 'pop' music from Radio Ceylon, and in my room next door I had to put myself to sleep with a heavy barbiturate.

I used quite a quantity of sleeping drugs in Afghanistan. In Herat against the jackals, in the north against hunger, in Kabul against the noise. And perhaps as a result—or because of the food, or the altitude—I had frequent nightmares. Sometimes they were night-

mares of pure fantasy, or of things from the distant past, like the war. But many were directly connected with events of the preceding day, and often, in fact, mere repetitions of them.

Just before leaving, with the affair of the revolutionary still on my mind, I dreamed I was crossing the Kabul river by one of the long, dilapidated footbridges which are suspended above it on cables. It was a dark night, and as I crossed I observed how the planking formed a pattern of dark and light strips, like the black and white keys of a piano. As a childish game I made long, difficult strides in order to step on the light ones.

When I got half way across I suddenly realized that the dark strips were holes, with a drop of thirty foot into the blackness below.

In fact this had actually happened to me when I was returning, a few nights before, from exploring the alleys of the Old City. But in my dream the whole thing came somehow to symbolize that I was walking on a dangerous bridge with my whole Afghan journey.

Then next morning the nightmare and its symbol evaporated. I packed eighty rolls of film in my tartan grip, the rest of my things in an old brown suitcase, and caught the bus for the journey north.

THERE is still only one road leading north from Kabul. It was built in 1932 by the present king's father, Nadir Shah. Up to then, the only motorable way from the capital to the Oxus was a two thousand mile detour via Kandahar–Herat–Maimana. The present road follows open country northwards to Charikar, then turns west for seventy or eighty miles before crossing the Hindu Kush by the eleven-thousand foot Shibar Pass.

We left the city about nine o'clock, following the new asphalt (laid by the Russians) for nearly fifty kilometres. The bus contained at least one familiar face from my earlier journeys: that of Abernethy. Fate had thrown us together again, though I had done everything to avoid it. He told me the Afghans had refused to extend his visa, which was only for transit. He was therefore making a dash, like me, in order to see Mazar-i-Sharif and Balkh. Then he would fly on to Samarkand, for which the Russians, with surprising readiness, had offered him facilities.

All this seemed highly promising till in the middle of our conversation he made a re-reckoning of the aeroplane times and realized he would miss his connection through Moscow to London.

At Charikar he left the bus, dived into the telegraph office to cancel his £10-a-day arrangements with Intourist, and in the crush of our leaving again was not missed till we had gone half a mile down the road.

After that we travelled closer together.

The country presented a glorious aspect. Up to Charikar it had been the landscape of the plain with its great drop-curtain of mountains. Now, as the road turned westwards, we entered a long valley with vineyards and poplars and wandering streams. Side-valleys opened with terraced fields and almond orchards, herds of cattle and fat-tailed sheep. The flat roofs of houses were spread with ripening

corn cobs, orange and red against the grey-brown mud. Some had trailing vines on their verandahs, and the whole thing had an air of Northern Italy.

The beauty was all the harder to bear since we were stuck in our small, cramped seats, and the tiny windows, further reduced by panes of blue glass so dear to the Afghan heart, cut every view the moment it appeared.

At the first stop I got hold of the driver and told him we had had enough of it: from then on we would travel on the roof. He understood perfectly—he was a business-like man, elegant and commanding in his suit and shirt-tails and (sign of superiority) karakul cap—but just now it was quite impossible.

‘Why?’ I asked impatiently.

‘Because on this road Daud Khan will pass us. And as you know well, travelling on top of the bus is not permitted.’

The thought of a bus driver in terror of the Prime Minister was momentarily so fantastic that I laughed.

But I could not get round him.

‘If Daud Khan sees a feringhi on the top of the bus . . .’ he said, ‘it’ll be the end of me.’ And he went through the motion of slitting his throat.

So we travelled on remorselessly cooped up, and all the time I cursed Daud Khan, who was coming down from Doshi, for the evident length and sumptuousness of his roadside luncheon. We did not pass him till four in the afternoon: a whirling dust ball speeding down the valley, a flashing black saloon, and a jeep-full of soldiers racing after it. Promptly afterwards we stopped, and Abernethy and I climbed the iron ladder to the roof and took our places amid a pile of mail bags.

There is no way of travel in the world to compare for luxury with the top of an Afghan bus. It has its pitfalls: the trees and low telephone wires which decapitate travellers nightly, the dust which can produce a painful sinus complaint, moments when along some sharp cliff the ground disappears from beneath the wheels and the overloaded vehicle tilts precariously towards the void. But the rewards are inestimable: the vast, unhindered view of desert and mountains, the warmth of the sun, the air and changing light, the pattern of eternally winding roads through woods and valleys and startled mud villages.

We spread ourselves out on the mailbags and let the sun, which

the Afghans so abhor, warm the cramp from our bodies. There was about an hour left of it in which we watched the valley narrowing to a tiny strip of cultivation, hardly ten yards wide on each side of the road.

At five we reached Shibar village which stands at the valley's end. Police man a road block there, and the bus, as a privilege of carrying mails, made its way to the head of the queue of vehicles waiting for the signal to go on up the pass.

It came with the onset of twilight: the mauve mountain twilight which comes so early.

As we moved out and took the great zig-zag road up the mountain-side, the valley fell below us like a map. The trucks behind spread out ant-like on the road, while others from the north came down to meet us, enormous Russian six-wheelers blowing clouds of black exhaust smoke as they turned each hairpin bend.

The mountains now extending around us were not what I had expected. They were not Alpine, but great gnarled humps of cracked and dessicated earth. Only the vista was breathtaking: the endless ridges and backs of them, reaching east and west for twenty or thirty miles till they vanished in the horizonless grey.

We reached the top of the pass and, in the new lease of light which came with the height, began a gentle descent. It lasted four or five miles. Then, without warning, we entered a world of fantastic drama.

Ahead in the gathering night-shadows rose a mountain-wall which scraped the stars. A wall of serried peaks and stalagmitic pyramids.

In it was a cleft, and as we passed into it the rock rose perpendicularly on either side till its unsupported mass seemed liable at every moment to crush one.

The road quickly narrowed to twelve or fifteen feet and became littered with boulders from landslides. Other gigantic boulders hung precariously on ledges above. At every other turn we ran into great barricades of them, where Nadir Shah's engineers had attempted to blast their way forward, only to be forced aside.

I remembered the classic question asked twenty years before by a visiting British Minister of the Afghan foreman in charge of it all:

'Where are you going?'

'To Turkestan.'

'When do you expect to get there?'

'Khuda midanad (God knows). We're just going on till we do.'¹

¹ *Afghanistan*, W. K. Fraser-Tytler.

We stacked up the mailbags as a guard against the wind. It was bitterly cold. Abernethy had that frightening purple-grey pallor which I had noticed on myself on the way up to Kabul. But neither of us could bear to forsake our position and go below.

Instead, we lay on our backs and watched the twisting ribbon of electric blue, a thousand feet above, where the gorge met the sky. At times it seemed no broader than the road itself. Then it would widen to reveal great peaks, icy and starlit, three or four thousand feet higher, before closing in again, echoing the noise of the engine and the banging of the springs.

Once or twice we met trucks coming down from the opposite direction, bringing ponies for the Royal buz-kashi game: one pony to a truck, and three or four grooms. And at ten we stopped for supper in a Hazara village.

We had been in Hazara country since shortly after Charikar, but this was my first proper sight of them.

Their name means 'thousands' and comes from the Thousands of Jenghiz Khan, who were their forebears. Their narrow Mongol eyes and stocky bodies give them a sinister appearance, but one can only feel sympathy for their wretched condition.

A decade or so ago, revolting against the poverty-stricken life to which history has reduced them in the mountains, they came into conflict with their Pathan overlords. For a time there was more or less open warfare. Then the government put the army in and captured or liquidated most of their leaders. Now they are back as a despised and smouldering subject race, carrying on subsistence farming and, down in the Ghorband valley, mining the smutty black dust which passes in Afghanistan for coal.

After the supper stop the road continued through its gorge, which showed no sign of ending. It had now been joined by a rushing stream. From time to time, as the available foothold on one cliff or another grew narrow and gave out, we were forced to cross to the opposite side by stout iron bridges whose girders were buckled and bent by falling rocks.

At ten we reached Doab and turned into bed in the warmth of the small government rest-house.

At three we were wakened to be on the road again, since most of the passengers, who had remained in the bus, were unable to sleep because of the cold.

I knew there would be difficulty about resuming our places on top of the bus, but I was scarcely prepared for the barrage of dissuasion. It would be cold and dark said our companions. There would be much dust. Or was it—someone hinted darkly—that we did not like their company?

Nothing was further from the truth, of course, but it was useless to say we were waiting to see the dawn landscape. In the end I said we preferred to travel there for *hava-khuri*, a well-recognized pastime which literally means 'eating air', and with this they were pacified.

Dawn took a long time to come. Even the copious load of mail, which the labels showed was bound from Calcutta to Tashkent, was insufficient to break the biting wind. I shared out a round of cola-chocolate and observed how long cigarettes burned in the rarefied air.

At length the first lightening of the sky appeared, a blush of purple-indigo above the right-hand mountain face. It spread along side-valleys, touched with red an enormous plateau to the left. The valley began to fill with a soft grey light, mezzotinting trees and a river, rocks like gothic castles with pointed turrets and battlements.

The gorge at last was ending. Gorse and soft green grass appeared, like Scottish turf or the margs of Kashmir, a smell of peat, occasional houses and herds of goats.

And as the mountains fell back, Abernethy broke the silence into which we had fallen, by mutual understanding, since Shibar.

'Those rock faces,' he said. 'They must have been three or four thousand feet high.'

'At least,' I said.

'They were magnificent.'

'Indeed.'

'If you should care to put it in your book, you can quote the opinion of a Scot that the Hindu Kush gorge is greater than Glencoe.'

I am happy to do so. The verdict, I know, was not reached without a struggle.

The country into which we had entered was 'Russian'. One cannot make this crossing of the Hindu Kush without being conscious that from now on every stream and river will end its course in the Aral Sea instead of the Indian Ocean; and indeed that the greater

part of the population—Turcomen and Uzbeks—is racially bound to the peoples of the Soviet Republics across the Oxus.

My interest was now centred on reaching the town of Doshi, where the Russians were engaged on a project which, in a rather literal sense, would undermine this watershed. Nobody knew much about its progress or details, though it was being generally talked about in Kabul. The scheme provided for a direct all-weather highway from Kabul to the Soviet border. The southern end would start from Charikar, the northern from Doshi itself. The central section would involve a tunnel through the Hindu Kush, below the fourteen thousand foot Salang Pass. What progress had been made with this road? What kind of traffic was it being built for? Was work really serious, or only in the stage of planning?

All these things occupied me, as we bumped and rattled down the long dirt road which led from the mountains to the confluence of our stream with the River Andarab.

The journey took eight hours, and when at last Doshi came to sight, having been seven times mis-pointed out to me by friends who had followed our example and now sat among the mails, there was no opportunity to take the photograph I wanted without being conspicuous.

There was something to see, though. On the southern bank of the river lay a sizeable dump of bridge-building equipment: girders, concrete mixers, bulldozers. The water was spanned by a number of piers, and on the far bank a newly cut road disappeared towards the pass. Russian technicians with theodolites and plane-tables were directing a battalion of Afghan labourers.

The town was little more than a collection of bazaar shops and tea-houses spread out along the road. We stopped for a breakfast of tea and bread and my time was taken up by doctoring the *bacha*—the boy who acted as the driver's factotum.

The night before I had given him a treble dose of chlorodine for stomach cramps. Now he complained of a bad foot. When I looked at it, it was just cracked skin which an occasional wash and a dressing of mutton-fat would have settled, but he had developed a liking for proper medicine.

In the end I spread it liberally with insect repellent. When I met him on this same road four weeks later, he pronounced himself entirely cured.

We covered the remaining thirty miles to Pul-i-Khumri at break-

neck speed. The road had been spectacularly improved. Though not yet asphalted, it had been widened to thirty feet. Culverts and thick concrete flood walls had been built against mountain torrents. Wherever it had formerly dropped down to the river, a new section had been built by cutting into the side of the valley. Work was still in progress and was being done, under Russian direction, by gangs of Afghan soldiers.

In less than an hour the Russian-built oil storage depot and concrete silo of Pul-i-Khumri came swinging into view in the broad palm of the valley.

Here at last Abernethy and I would part, for I had in my pocket a letter of introduction to the manager of the local textile plant, asking him to let me do a couple of days' photography. In the middle of the new bazaar the bus came to a halt. I climbed down, handed over my luggage to a waiting ghari, and said goodbye.

The last I saw of Abernethy, he was stoutly defending his roof perch from an invading horde of Turcomen.

Pul-i-Khumri is a small showpiece: the embodiment of Afghanistan's industrial ambitions—a modern factory, modern building, a hospital, water, electric power. The factory is largely a monument to the Germans. It was started in 1935. But the east is moving in: the Germans' contracts are being terminated.

The ghari rattled past the post and telegraph office, over the hydro-electric dam, up the hill to 'the Club'.

'Club' for some reason is the Afghan synonym for 'hotel', and the one in Pul-i-Khumri is also called the 'Casino'. It stands above the river, overlooking a terraced garden of roses and snapdragons, illuminated at night by coloured lights. The floors are plushly carpeted. The rooms have bell-pushes and reading lamps. Balconies and shower-baths fulfil the evocations of its name. Only the appalling food, the absence of private guests, the non-functioning of the plumbing belie it.

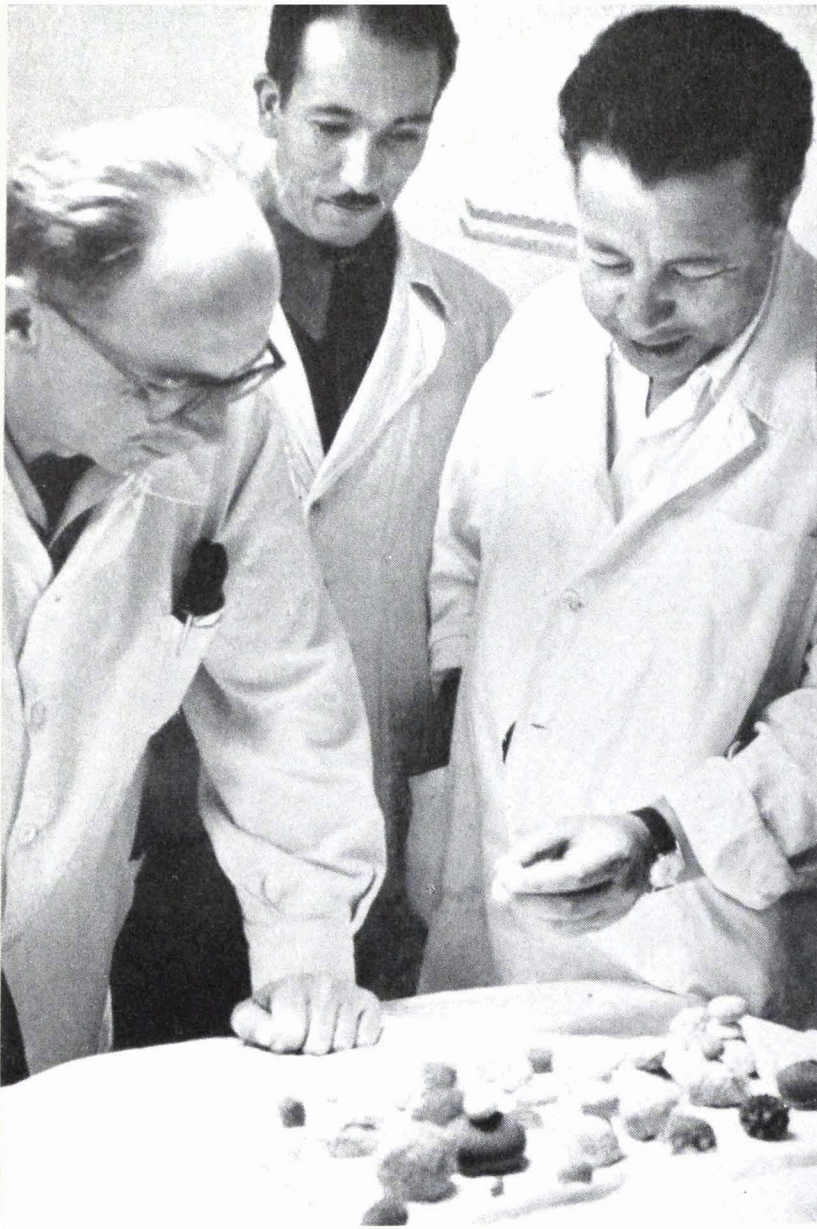
When I drove in through the smart white gate and up the gravel drive, the staff was engaged in making up the laundry list. The clerk and an assistant were seated at a wooden garden table, entering each item on a list. The launderer, a venerable bearded figure with a robust sense of humour, stood arms akimbo in charge of the proceedings. A pair of servants came forward with dark grey articles which went down on the list as sheets.



7. *The Hotel Kabul*

Kabul. Scribe writing a letter for a boy





8. *Pul-i-Khumri. Doctor and his collection of calculuses*

Aibak—the circus



I paid off my ghari and the clerk made room for me on the seat. He was an Uzbek from Maimana, though with his freckled, almost feminine face and little karakul cap, nobody less Uzbek could be imagined. He spoke Turki, Persian, Pushtu and Arabic, and a word or two of English, German and French.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked.

‘I would like a room.’

‘That is difficult. The rooms are all taken.’

‘But it’s only eleven o’clock in the morning,’ I protested.

He asked me to wait a few minutes while he finished his task and he would see what he could do.

I waited. From time to time a lady who was plainly no Afghan and whose form owed nothing to foundation garments would cross between the hotel and an annexe about thirty yards distant. The sentry who guarded the gate would ease the bolt of his rifle, which stayed aimed at my head. The launderer would call in a loud voice:

‘One sheet, very large—double price.

‘One pillow case, very dirty—double price.

‘One sheet—no, no, Hakim!—this is no sheet, it’s a tablecloth . . .’ holding up an oblong of fabric more filthy and stained than the rest.

But before he could finish another figure appeared on the scene. He came without ghari, from the direction of the town, trudging the gravel drive; his blue felt hat was pushed far to the back of his head, his clothes were crumpled and covered in dust, and in his hand was a small blue attaché case.

The stranger paused uncertainly.

‘Bed,’ he said, putting down his case and laying his head on his hands. ‘Very tired. I walked *so* far (arms extended), forty kilometres. Motor *kharab*, pistum broken. Other motors come . . . zoom, zoom. Nobody stops. Bed, please!’

An appeal so moving could hardly be put off. The clerk went to see about our needs, leaving us to share the bench amid laundry and mutual silence.

It was the stranger who broke it.

He pointed his thumb at his broad chest, visibly hairy beneath a thin cotton shirt. ‘Russki!’ he said—‘Kuibishev!’

He pulled out a pencil and drew on the table top a lozenge-shaped figure which I recognized as a map of Afghanistan. Deliberately he placed a dot in it and then drew a line from east to west.

‘North Afghanistan Russki! South—Amerikanski.’

He wagged a jovial finger: 'Here Russki!'

Despite this bilateral partition, which fell somewhat short of the facts, I liked Nikolai; I liked him for his confidence and his abandonment and his boyishness; I liked him because he wanted to be loved, and because he really believed he *was* loved.

The next forty-eight hours, which I was forced to spend largely in his company, were some of my happiest.

The same could hardly have been said of many other Russians. Soon after our introduction, we were called into the hotel where the clerk told us he had prepared two beds for us in an alcove off the dining-room. We installed our belongings there and ordered some food. And while we waited for it, Nikolai was visited by one of his compatriots.

It was amusing to observe the tenor of their conversation; the disturbance of the ant-heap by something gone amiss. Though I spoke no Russian there were sufficient references to *London, Anglia* and so on to follow the demands being put on Nikolai for an explanation of how he came to be sharing a room and sitting with me. In the end, the inquisitor gave me a frigid handshake and departed.

He appeared frequently thereafter to keep an eye on us.

Throughout our meal Nikolai conducted a hearty, one-sided conversation. Our only means of talking was in Persian, of which he knew barely a dozen words. But before we had finished, I knew that he drove an oil-drilling truck and that back in Kuibishev was a Mrs Nikolai and two small ones, Arnold and Tina. I also learned that a Russian rocket had gone round the moon, that *Mir* was better than war, and that—some shortage of vodka apart—Papa Khrushchev had made everybody happier in Russia (a condition illustrated by Nikolai's standing upright, holding his head high, and resolutely walking round the table).

Afterwards we sat on our beds comparing war wounds and finally went to sleep.

I was awakened by an enormous explosion. The Russians were blasting away the river bank to make a new power station. There were sixty of them, I discovered, living with their families in the annexe across the yard. And there were fifty more occupying the hotel itself. In addition there were eight or nine Czechs.

I met the Czechs at dinner. A party of five—three men and two wives—came in to play cards while Nikolai and I sat down to our

supper of rice and fat mutton. There were no other diners. The vast room, with its sixty-foot-long banqueting table, garlanded royal portrait, yards of curtains and carpets, remained silent except for the card-players' conversation and the clink of their glasses as they replenished them from bottles of Amstel lager.

All this was too much for the companionable Nikolai who got up, hitched up his blue serge trousers, and walked over to their table. He wanted to know what the game was, perhaps to be invited to take a hand.

But the moment he approached the table, conversation ceased. Not entirely—but all except the count of numbers and the occasional call of 'flush'.

He stood there, hands on hips, beaming benevolence. And no one spoke.

It became embarrassing.

The round ended, cards were re-dealt, glasses replenished. Still no one spoke.

At the end of ten minutes I could stand it no longer. I went up and joined him.

'What are you playing? Canasta?'

'Yes. Are you German?'

'No. English.'

'That's good.'

I took Nikolai by the arm. 'It's Canasta,' I said. 'An American game,' and led him back to the supper table to share the small melon I had bought in the bazaar.

The first job next morning was to go to the textile factory. The way lay through the garden and across a concrete catwalk spanning an offshoot of water from the dam. It was an agreeable flower-filled morning; we were still just high enough to get the clear mountain light, and the broad river, swinging on its way to the Oxus, made the whole thing as near to a modern Garden of Eden as Afghanistan could produce.

My presence in Pul-i-Khumri had been known to everyone for twenty-four hours. The Deputy Manager, an affable and educated Afghan, received me in his office and gave me some statistics of the plant, which—for his trouble—I here repeat.

100 mechanical looms (Platt Bros, and German)
300 hand looms
2,000 operatives in two shifts
Output: twenty-two million metres annually.

He then introduced me to one of his seven German technicians who was to conduct me through the shops.

I had never taken a single picture for industrial photography in my life. (Nor, for that matter, had I ever entered a spinnery, or watched one of Messrs Platt Bros machines, until here in Afghanistan.) I relied on a chapter in the *Leica Manual* hastily studied in Kabul. First I photographed in colour, coaxing puzzled Afghan workers from the martial poses into which they froze at the first sight of a camera, and simultaneously fighting to protect the Leica from the flying white fluff which filled the air from the carding room. Then I went back and photographed everything a second time, in black and white.

During this time, through the kind of conversation which photography makes so easy, I learned more of the Russian and Czech activities.

The main Russian party was engaged in building a big new hydro-electric dam. The Czechs were building a cement factory about two miles down-river. There remained a third Russian party, about fifty strong, who had arrived just before me and were the cause of my exile to the dining-room alcove. Their function was a mystery—and stayed so till after I left.

In the afternoon I photographed the textile company hospital, which lay on the other side of the river across a swinging foot bridge. The doctor in charge was a small, pixie-like Austrian. When we had been round the wards and returned to the little operating theatre with its smell of disinfectant from the day's third operation, I asked him what in ten years' employment there he had found to be the chief prevailing illness.

For answer he brought out a tray and, with the tenderness of a butterfly collector presenting his rarest specimens, laid it on the operating table: it contained some forty stones, ranging in size from peas to cricket balls.

'*Blasensteine*,' he said proudly: 'the world's greatest collection of *calculuses*, and I only thought to start saving them four years ago. . . .'

I photographed the blasensteine and asked him about malaria. 'This year, *Gott sei dank*, not a case,' he said. 'We have a World Health Organization team here now. But you know how many died of malaria while they were building this factory? Two thousand!'

By chance I met the WHO team that evening. Their territory was about the size of England and they had come down to check on the spraying of DDT. There was a Turk, Dr Kardas, his young Scots laboratory technician, Mr Rooney, and two young Afghans. They were lodging in the King's rest-house a little way up the road and came to dinner with Rooney's portable radio crackling out the BBC news.

'You think you're seeing this country?' said Dr Kardas. 'Wait till you get out into the villages.'

'You mean from the medical standpoint?'

'From every standpoint.'

'What's the mortality?'

'Infant mortality?—Seventy per cent: before one year old, of course.'

They invited me to come up and see them some day at their headquarters at Kunduz.

Then I had to return to Nikolai, who was cavorting over our bedroom furniture with outstretched arms, asking if I had ever seen the great ballerina, Ulanova.

There was one further incident at Pul-i-Khumri, which, although I could hardly take offence at it, disconcerted me a little.

From the first I had made a practice of laying a trap in my suitcase: not because I was afraid of theft—the locks had long disappeared, in any case—but because of my RAF maps and other oddments. Whenever I consulted the maps, generally in the lavatory, I put them back carefully and laid *Visit Afghanistan!* on top of them, with a thread of cotton attached to a pair of pants and inserted between pages six and seven.

When I came to open the case before leaving, I found this thread missing and the rest of my things unobtrusively disturbed. I never knew who did it: the Afghans or the Russians. But from then on I felt obliged to carry more and more in my pockets and to sleep with an embarrassing assortment of papers, films and Minox camera parts beneath my pillow.

I left next morning, Friday, for Mazar-i-Sharif.

VI

IT began very peacefully, this day. As I left for the bazaar to look for transport, the Russians were not yet up. An early-rising Czech was walking down the river bank with his fishing-rod. The inhabitants of Pul-i-Khumri, not conspicuous mosque-goers, were enjoying the Afghan equivalent of a Continental Sunday.

The first truck to turn up was a battered International, loaded with eight tons of rice and twenty-five human beings. Its age and overloading made it just the kind of vehicle I had been warned to avoid, but as this applied to nearly every truck I had ever seen in Afghanistan, and as I liked the look of the driver, I took it.

The road deteriorated immediately we left town. Apart from normal decay, it had suffered from the weight of heavy lorries taking rock from the blasting site to the Czech cement factory, which we passed after three kilometres. After that, it skirted narrowly past a rock face before fanning out into one of those broad desert roads which are smaller than they look, because vehicles following the same track marks year after year have reduced half the surface to two-foot-deep ruts.

'You drive?' said the driver.

'Certainly,' I said, with more bravado than I intended.

'All right. Take over.'

He threw her out of gear, let the engine die, and slipped out of his seat. The bacha jumped down off the tailboard and jammed a great wedge under the wheel to act as a brake.

I took over.

The foremost characteristic of Afghan trucks is a certain looseness in the steering: a play of half a turn on the wheel before anything happens. When one understands this it becomes a little easier.

The next is the absence of brakes. To stop on a hill one must crash through the five-speed gearbox, somehow slow the ramshackle

conveyance to five miles an hour and give the bacha time to jump down with his wedge.

I drove for twelve miles, contriving not to let the truck run away with me or spill the great rice sacks and crush half the passengers. Once I even reached top gear for a few hundred yards. At the end of an hour, the driver, who had used his holiday to scramble out and join the passengers in the back, came clambering in through the door again.

'Oh, but you are good. The people say you drive *well!*' he exclaimed.

I was gratified because it touched my vanity.

We stopped for lunch at a roadside tea-house, and I sat as his guest on a bed beneath the vines eating rice and a chutney of peppers: the first variation from the eternal mutton since Kabul. Then we set off again, with himself at the wheel.

The change proved timely. We had gone only two or three miles when the radiator started to boil. Out came the inevitable jerrican of water and we continued two miles more.

It boiled again, spattering the cracked windscreen with rust and steam.

By way of first aid, he got out, unscrewed the air filter and poured a half pint of oil into the carburettor.

I did not see the point of this: and indeed, when the clouds of blue smoke from the exhaust had cleared away, we were left as before with clouds of steam from the radiator.

'Fan belt?' I suggested.

He bent over the engine, struggled a minute and emerged triumphant holding two mangled circles of rubber.

For the next half hour he patiently bound them together with strands of copper wire from an old battery cable. Then he found he could not get them over the fan pulley.

I offered him a roll of adhesive tape from my medicine chest.

It would be nice to record that this saved the day. But after carrying us another three miles it came to grief and we spent half an hour removing the remains of the tape from the bearing of the water-pump.

There was nothing to do but to wait for another truck in the hope that it carried a spare.

All this time the passengers had shown the utmost high spirits: in view of what happened later, incredibly so. They had crowded round, offering encouragement, uttering 'oh's' and 'ah's' as I un-

packed tubes of toothpaste and bottles of medicine to get at the tape roll; posing in dramatic attitudes in the hope of having their photographs taken.

They replied with spirit to the taunts of some cameleers whose caravan overtook us at each breakdown.

They made a human chain to stop the first two lorries to appear—only to be disappointed.

The third to arrive, miraculously, carried a spare.

By the light of the setting sun we fitted it, started the engine, got on our way again, up the winding pass of the next hill range. Then, just as we reached the top, there was an ominous banging from the engine. We had run a big end.

'*Chist, chist?*' (what is it?) came a sibilant chorus from the crowd behind.

'Bear-rink,' said the driver.

And because no one knew what a bearing was, the seriousness escaped them.

Everyone gathered on the bank beside the road; a few took the chance to say their prayers; others produced crusts of dry bread from their waistbands and turbans.

The driver busied himself with the jack as if he were about to dismantle the engine.

As for myself, I was absorbed by the view which the top of the bank suddenly offered.

About three hundred yards away, on the summit of the small hill, was a Russian staff-car and a party of militarily clad figures beneath a white umbrella. Now I had seen such groups before, to the south of Pul-i-Khumri. I was to see them again. But this was the first time I understood what they were doing.

Scarcely had we pulled up, when a jeep arrived and discharged a pair of Russians whom I had seen at the hotel. With hardly a glance towards us, they set off up the hill towards the others, carrying map boards. The driver and an armed sentry were left behind to guard the remaining apparatus of a military survey party.

My truck driver, I noticed, had jacked up the back wheels and placed upright logs under the axle, which seemed a curious procedure for an engine repair. But I was too busy with the Minox, photographing the Russians, to ask why. The Russians, meanwhile, sat obstinately on the skyline against the fast-failing light, while someone lit a flaring stove for their supper.

The next thing I knew, the driver had disappeared.

The truck stood on its logs, the bonnet was sheeted with a tarpaulin, the tools stowed away in the tool-box.

The others at this juncture noticed it too.

In a moment their mood was transformed from its former good-nature into blind and unreasoning fury. I had seen this just once before—in a Pathan crowd in Peshawar in 1946, and there was murder in it.

They got up, advanced to the road, swarmed round the silent truck. The bacha alone remained.

‘Where has he gone, the son-of-a-dog?’

‘He has gone to do telephone.’

‘Why?’

‘He must get a new bear-rink.’

‘You lie. He has gone into the hills.’

‘With our money!’ cried an old man.

The awful truth, suddenly dawning on them, caused such an anguished uproar that all conversation was lost. Then grief and frustration turned suddenly on a scapegoat; a couple of them grabbed the wretched boy by the shoulders and began roughing him up.

‘You repair the motor!’

‘It is not possible: not without the bear-rink.’

‘Go and get one then!’

And with kicks and blows they began to drive him down the road: twenty miles to Pul-i-Khumri; or more likely, four hundred to Kabul.

At this critical moment the driver reappeared. By some instinct he had found a soldiers’ post the other side of the hill. Now, as he saw the frenzied mob advance on him, he did a neat circuit and took up a position of command on the top of the bank.

‘Why can you not repair the motor? Where is the bear-rink? Three days and nights we travel on your truck and always it’s *kharab*. Why did you take our money?’

‘Give us back our fares!’

‘Let’s make an end of him . . .’

For forty minutes he kept them at bay; by oratory, appeals for patience, ribald jokes. Once they desisted and broke into groups, arguing among themselves what to do. In the interval he slipped from his perch and begged me to go back and sit in the lorry cab. ‘It is not *good* that you stay here’ he pleaded. His earnestness made me

conscious of my difficult position. For I had no doubt of his own real danger, and if he came in peril of his life, I was bound (having accepted his hospitality) to go to his aid.

Finally I obeyed him, got out a second thick sweater from my bag (for it was becoming bitterly cold), and sat on the cab roof, nursing the open blade of my little Persian knife.

The Russians, meanwhile, did nothing. Though they could not have failed to observe the whole business, they stayed splendidly aloof on their hilltop.

It was not long before the dissidents reformed, under the leadership of an unpleasant old man who all the time had worked hard to provoke them. They advanced in a semi-circle, their features made more sinister than ever by a fire of brushwood they had built.

‘For the last time, Aziz Mohammed, are you giving us our money. . . .

‘We’ve had enough, bothers!’

‘Make an end of him!’

He raised his hand. The lives of both of us hung in the balance. Then he gave in.

‘Here, have your money. Though where you’ll get with it on this cold and dark night God alone knows.’

He shelled out the money by the light of the dying fire. They picked it up, shouldered their bundles and disappeared one by one in the darkness.

Only three remained—gentle-looking Tajiks—and together we found the shelter of a crumbling mud hut. It belonged to the soldiers. Their rifles hung on the wall. There was a dirty iron pot on a pile of charred wood and a Russian kerosene drum containing water.

‘And where are the soldiers?’ I asked.

‘Why, here,’ said Aziz. And from the shadows beyond the light of the hurricane lamp which we had brought from the truck with our luggage, three turbaned heads appeared.

Although, like the Russians, they had remained passive spectators of the *mêlée* below, they were quick to be friendly now it was over. They produced a great water-melon, which we cut in half and ate by scooping out the flesh with our hands. Then they lit a fire and spread out their mattresses for us to lie on, while I shared out my crumpled cigarettes and chocolate.

Suddenly, there was about it all a great *gemuetlichkeit*: the lamplit

walls, the fire and companionship, the darkness and the jackals beyond the door. I would gladly have gone to sleep. But they were uneasy: the eternal uneasiness of Afghans with a foreigner on their hands in wild places.

At every suspected approach of man or animal they would run to the door. Sleep was impossible.

My watch had stopped. I lost all count of time and reality. It could have been eight o'clock or ten o'clock or midnight when—long before I heard it myself—they picked up the sound of a motor. The soldiers leapt up and ran down to the road. The motor came closer, stopped at the neck of the pass amid shouts and conversation. A soldier appeared breathless at the door.

'Come,' he said. 'We take your things. There is a car going.'

When I reached the road there was a Russian jeep halted—effectively enough, by a row of boulders spread in its way. A tall figure, handsome even in the darkness, stood at the open door.

There was a momentary confusion of languages, then: 'So, *Sie sind Englisch! Ich bin Pole . . . bitte, steigen Sie ein!*'

Now, I had heard in Kabul that the Poles were engaged in this area on the construction of a road; but no one knew where.

The good fortune of the encounter was almost my undoing.

In the darkness of the jeep I paid little attention to the other occupants: a couple of Afghans and a figure whom, likewise addressing me in German, I took to be another Pole. As we raced away, I prattled on about the escapade from which I had been rescued. When I had finished, he leaned across towards me: 'I will tell you a proverb,' he said.

The proverb, with much embellishment, was taken from the book of Moses, and its tenor, so far as I could make it out, was 'evil is in the eye of the beholder'. For he evidently felt I had somehow maligned the Afghan character.

'Our friend is Afghan,' said the Pole in English. 'Be careful what you say.'

Thus on my guard, I sat back, smoking one of the Pole's cigarettes, and absorbed the full experience of our driver's driving.

The little jeep, alone of all Russian vehicles on which I travelled, was patently superior to its American counterpart. It leapt the stones and boulders like a gazelle, and when the road became impassable, raced at forty or fifty miles an hour across the bare desert. I wondered how the driver knew where he was going—for I had no idea myself.

After half an hour we joined the road again and began to pass under trees: the sign of an approaching town.

‘Where is this?’ I asked.

‘Samangan.’

I had never heard of it, which was not surprising, for on the map it appears by its other name: Aibak.

The headlamps came suddenly on sleeping buildings, a roundabout, a square, a notice board: ‘Samangan Hotel’.

‘Where are you going,’ said the Afghan abruptly as we passed it.

‘I am taking my friend to have dinner with me.’

‘It is not permitted.’

‘I will take my guest where I please.’

A minute later we came to a stop in a mud-walled street, with the headlamps illuminating a double wooden door.

As soon as we were inside, in a garden with scrubby trees and irrigation trenches, the Pole took the Afghan aside and asked him if he could get some bread.

‘Who is he?’ I asked as we entered the house.

‘A mullah—our so-called Technical Assistant. Does it surprise you?—Now you will meet my Polish colleagues.’

The house was newly built in the local style, with walls of mud and lime and raw white pole-beams cut straight from the tree. The furniture consisted of paraffin lamps and a utensil or two on rickety tables. As we entered we came face to face with a figure in a very old suit of plus-fours.

‘Dr Kowalski,’ said my host, introducing us. ‘Photographer and archaeologist. Please talk, while I prepare some supper.’

Such was my first introduction to the strangest and most unexpected company I ever met. There were four of them altogether: Zeligowski, who had rescued me; Kowalski, who looked like a fairy-story professor; Dluski, who walked with the stoop of a personal tragedy; and a young man called Puklo. They were surveying a branch extension of the Salang Highway to Mazar and leading a Spartan life such as I could hardly remember since the war.

After some time Zeligowski reappeared and invited me to join him for the meal. It was laid on a table in the upstairs room, which he shared with Puklo. He had set out glasses of tea in the Polish style, and a pan of fried eggs in mutton fat. There were no plates and he insisted on my taking the only spoon.

‘Let us talk English,’ he said. ‘I wish much to practice English.’

I asked if he had been in England and he said: 'Only for a year; but Dluski was there much longer.'

Dluski, who sat on a bed with Puklo, leaned forward. 'Yes,' he said. 'Eleven years—from 1944 to 1955. And then . . . well, then I went home.'

'What do you do here?'

'We work on a contract.'

'For the Polish government?'

'No, the Afghan.' He nodded towards the 'technical officer' who observed us from a corner, his thick-lipped puppy-dog face uneasy at the conversation in an obscure language.

'There came an advertisement in the paper in Warsaw for civil engineers in Afghanistan. The contracts were made for us by the Polish foreign trade department. We're what you might call "human exports".'

'You are happy here?'

'We get more money. And in three weeks' time we shall have our wives with us: all except Dluski; he's not married.'

They asked whether I wouldn't stay in Aibak and keep them company for a couple of days: the next day was their 'office' day, when they made up their weekly reports.

The plan was attractive: they were excellent company, and Kowalski had mentioned a curious ruin in the place—a great 'stone house' called the Throne of Rustem—which I very much wanted to see. The only trouble was that my Ministry of Interior permit made no provision for Aibak. By now I was supposed to be in Mazar.

'Don't give it another thought,' said Zeligowski. 'You know what these people are for papers.'

But unfortunately, in speaking of the permit, I had used the word 'visum'.

'Visum,' said the little mullah. 'What kind of visum do you have.'

Innocently I got out my passport with my visa and the travel permit inside it.

He all but snatched it away and took it to the light of the pressure lamp.

'So . . .' he muttered, glancing through the typewritten Persian script, which I had not even bothered to decipher. And then, with triumph, '*so!* But this paper is worthless—it has no *signature!*'

He held it out: it was perfectly true.

'How did you get it? Did you take it off the table?' he demanded.

For the first and only time in all this journey I lost my temper: perhaps because for once I was acting quite innocently—I had not even used the opportunity to ask the companionable Poles about their work.

‘Do you suppose I’m a thief?’ I snapped.

Zeligowski acted as peace-maker. But there hung about the room, with the four of them looking on, an atmosphere of embarrassed helplessness which belonged not to Afghanistan, as I had ever conceived it, but to Eastern Europe and the Iron Curtain.

‘Now,’ said the mullah, ‘I am taking this *person* to the Club.’

I said goodnight to Kowalski, Dluski and Puklo. Zeligowski, like a chaplain at the gallows, came with me as far as the hotel, where a room was waiting with an oil lamp and a basin of cold water.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘It will all be straightened out in the morning.’ And with an encouraging handshake he left me.

I had my doubts, which were immediately realized.

As soon as he had gone, the hotel caretaker, a mild puzzled little man, appeared with the mullah.

‘Please, you will come to *another* room.’

It in no way differed from the first—except that, as I quickly discovered, the door could be locked. Taking the initiative I pushed out my attendants, slammed it shut, and threw myself, more or less fully clothed, into one of the two beds.

I was desperately tired. In my fatigue, the threats and doubts of the past twenty-four hours came crowding round me in one of those nightmares of reality. I foresaw long telephone calls; the discovery of my questions at Pul-i-Khumri and Herat, my assignation in Kabul, the search of my luggage, with the Minox, maps and other things—all building up to an implication of espionage, which had not been my aim, but of which, on paper, I could hardly be acquitted, in Kabul or Moscow.

In this clouded state, with the bolted door as a kind of defence, I fell at last into a heavy sleep.

In the middle of this sleep I became conscious of a drumming in my ear. As if from a distance it continued loud and long. Whenever I turned over it started again. And then I woke up.

The drumming was on the door.

In the end I had to open it.

In the light of the lamp which I had left still burning in the room, and another which he held in his hand, stood the caretaker. In the

background was another figure, dim and undefined. It was the caretaker who spoke.

‘Afghan man sleep here,’ he said softly. ‘It is good?’

Without waiting for a reply, the Afghan man came into the room. He moved like some unearthly visitant, without speaking or turning his head. Nor had he any luggage. He took off his karakul cap, swung his legs into the blankets of the spare bed, and lay with his eyes on the ceiling, pointedly waiting for me to do the same.

So we remained until seven o’clock next morning. At daylight he got out of bed, put on his cap again, and disappeared as mysteriously as he had come.

His departure made things look better. I got up, shaved and ordered the caretaker to set out my breakfast on the verandah: if I were a spy, Aibak at least should have a look at me.

In return I looked at Aibak. It was not un-pretty. Beyond the low wall of the hotel garden stretched the town square—four or five acres of luxuriant petunia beds with a central water pool and the white-washed mosque and Governor’s residence in the background. A rotund policeman had taken his place on the podium at the roundabout, a scruffy soldier and a pair of police stood artlessly by the gate, a smiling Uzbek gardener—a being apart from the world around him—squatted diligently uprooting weeds from the irrigation trenches. From time to time a lorry heeled in to report at the police post across the road, before setting off to Pul-i-Khumri or Mazar.

After a while I decided to see what would happen if I signified my intention of leaving. The caretaker fetched the clerk, and I asked for my bill.

‘Where will you be going?’ he asked rather unnecessarily.

I said to Mazar, and he said he would find me a lorry.

An hour or two passed and when he had not returned, I went to look for him. I found him in the bazaar talking to a policeman, while a lorry which plainly could have taken me drove off before their eyes.

It did not take long to discover that I was not being permitted to leave Aibak that day.

On the other hand, I found I was free to walk through the town. I bought some cigarettes, photographed some citizens in the public square, went off in search of my Poles again.

The quest was more difficult than I expected. At once I was faced with the problem that in Afghanistan there are no house numbers or

street names: just endless mud-walled roads with blank doors and gateways. In the end I had to give up and return to the hotel.

There I lay on my bed, depressed with uncertainty and isolation, until suddenly in the middle of the afternoon I was struck by a curious music. The instruments were unidentifiable, but there was no mistaking their martial beat. I pulled on my shoes without even tying the laces and ran outside with the Leica.

On the far side of the square was a curious procession, headed by what appeared at first to be a military band. After the first few marchers, the uniforms gave out, till the tail consisted of dervish-like figures doing handstands and cartwheels.

If the phenomenon took me by surprise, it took Aibak by storm. Even while I watched, every small boy in the town turned out to follow it.

'Who are they?' I asked the hotel caretaker, who was my current custodian.

'The cirkoosh!' he said proudly.

Now, 'circus' was no Afghan word; and the nearest thing approaching it was the tradition of jugglers, contortionists and other entertainers, who hardly counted. I hurried to the roundabout to get a good look at them as they passed.

They came on, as gay and motley a crowd as one could imagine, blowing on their pipes and whistles and one of them in a tiger skin thumping with *abandon* on the big drum. The uniforms of faded green with a wealth of knots and lacing must have come from Europe. But the artists were Afghan Uzbeks. As they came level, they stopped and marked time and played me a little serenade; then with a flourish they pranced on their way again—men and boys, musicians, and acrobats, headed by an impressive drum major with a tasselled stick. I followed them through the bazaar to the entrance of an old caravanserai, in the middle of whose yard was a genuine marquee.

'And when does the show begin?' I asked.

'Nine o'clock.'

There was no longer any question of my *wanting* to leave Aibak that day.

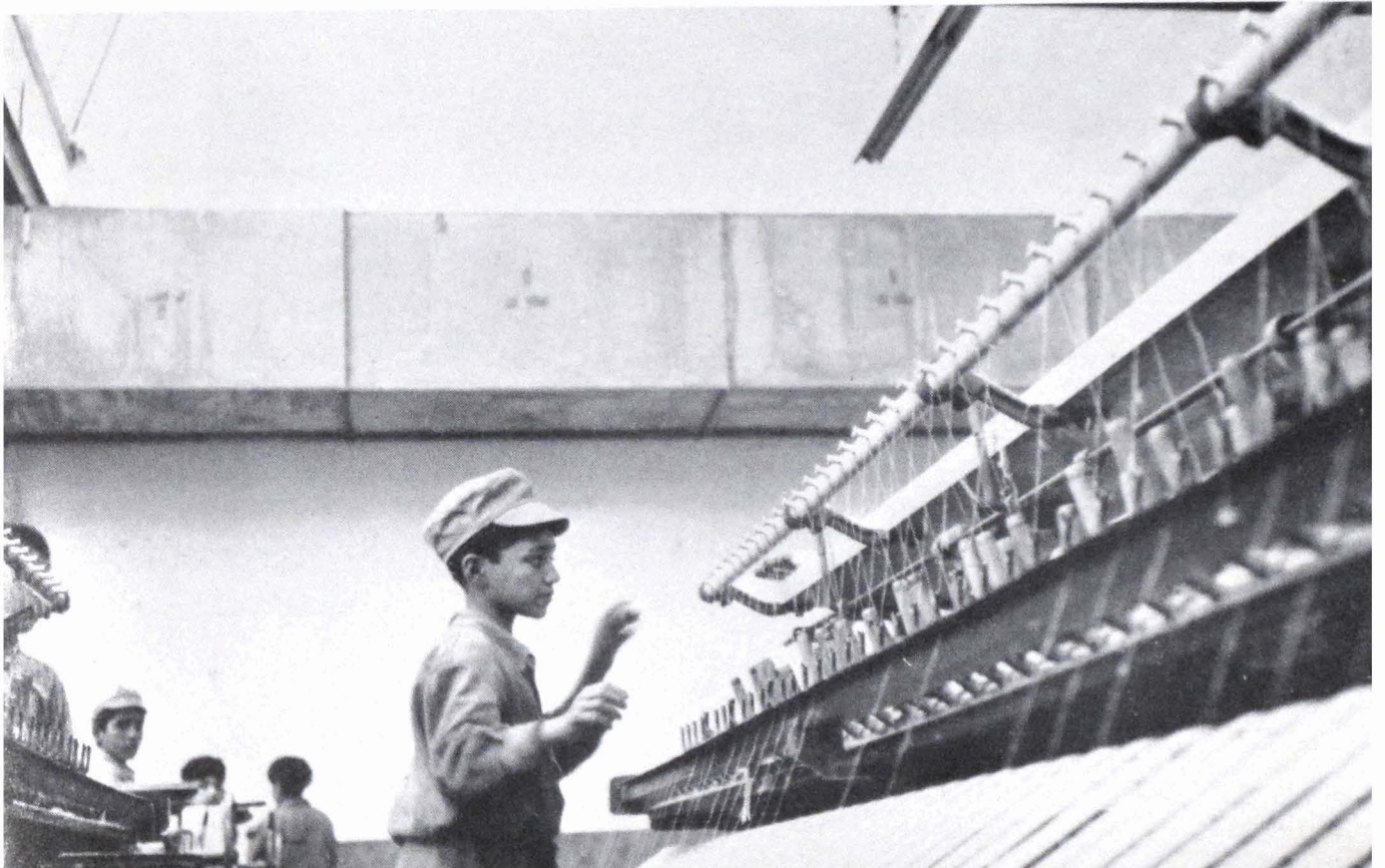
Shortly before the advertised time, I arrived at the yard and was led to the head of the queue where tickets were being sold for three Afghans.

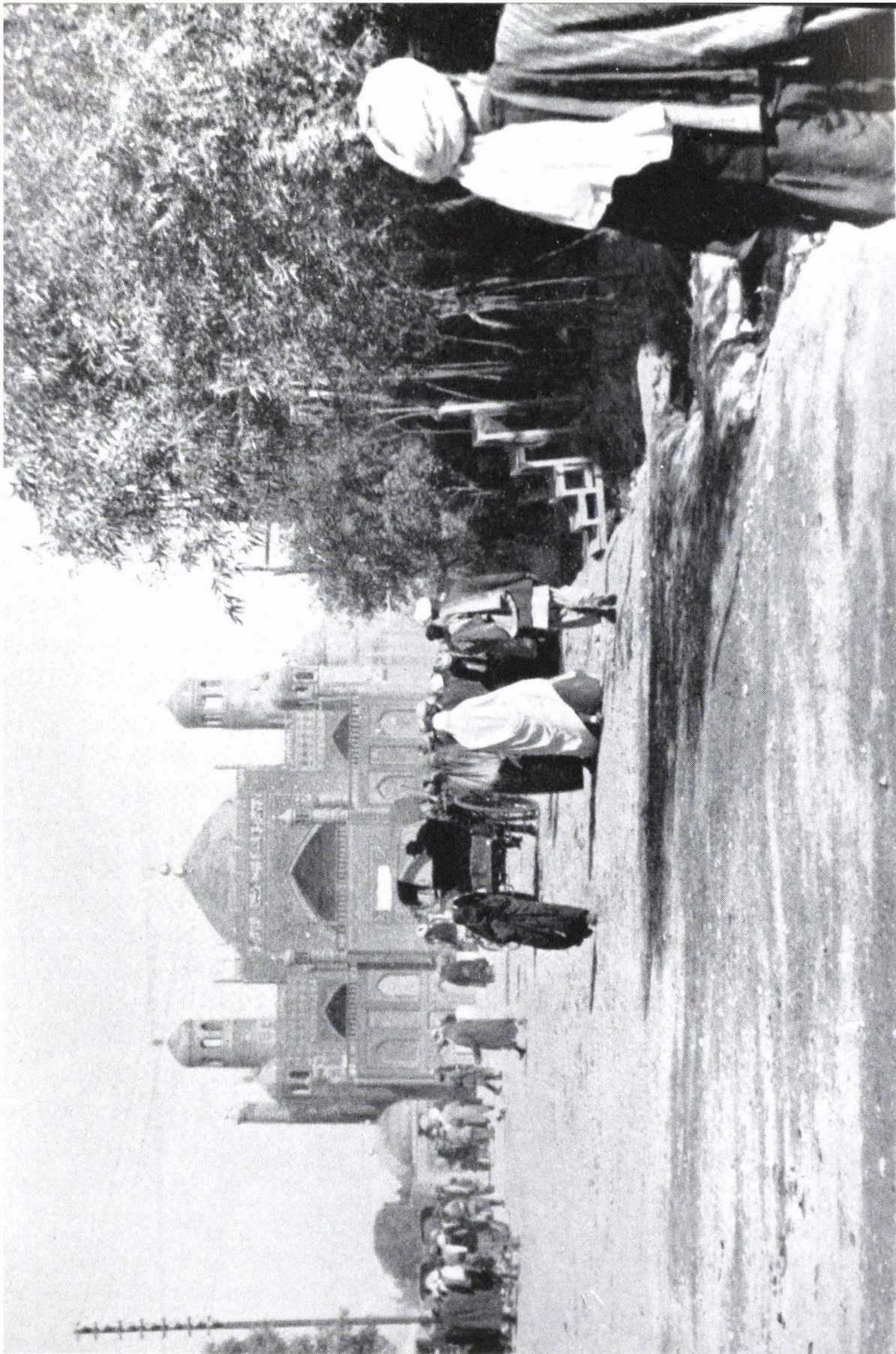
The tent was already throbbing with the band's queer music and its canvas walls were patterned with the shadows of the audience. A



9. *Kabul—new mosque in the Shahr-i-Nau*

Pul-i-Khumri. Young textile worker





*Mazar-i-Sharif.
The 'Blue' Mosque*

lad led me in, round the back of the spectators, squatting ten deep round the ring, to a seat at a small refreshment table. There were other tables adjoining it, and as I took the green tea and sweetmeats provided, I wondered for whom they were laid out.

I had not long to wait. Presently there was a general stir, the musicians brought their music to a crescendo, and in came a party of eight or nine notables led by a person who could only be the Governor. They took their seats, were served with tea, and the performance was ready to begin.

It opened with some singing and acrobatics. There was a parade of clowns in western pierrot costume, gymnastics on the three trapezes suspended from the cross-pole of the tent. My neighbour, a proud young man in shirt-tails and an embroidered fleece waistcoat, leaned over and said in perfect English: 'I hope you don't think too badly of it; it's their first performance together.'

I asked where they came from and he said from Kunduz.

Next a big wooden hoop was set on fire. The star performers—a father, brother, and three small sons—did somersaults through it and came to attention in the light of two big pressure lamps which were the principal illumination of the ring.

'Did you see the Chinese circus in Kabul?' said my neighbour. 'It was very splendid.'

There were some further acts and clowning before the performance took a turn which underlined the significance to my neighbour's remarks.

Into the ring, with a fanfare of fifes, came a series of figures. The first was a venerable gentleman with a large false beard and doddering steps. He was followed by a lad leading a pair of men disguised as women and announced as being the old man's wives. The fifth one seemed to be their servant.

The little play which followed produced some earthy jokes. The servant attempted to seduce the wives. The wives threw off their veils. The boy got his ears boxed for letting his mother appear unveiled in public. Then the tables were turned on the old man. The wives pulled his beard. They called him old-fashioned and tripped him up when he chased them. Finally he was chased round the ring by the servant, beaten with a broom and reduced to a pulp of buffoonery.

It had not been possible to follow every line; but my neighbour, when necessary, had filled in the details.

‘Do you see the point?’ he asked when it was finished. ‘It’s the women, you see, and the changes our government is making. We try to teach the people how silly these veils have been . . .’

It was difficult to gauge the reaction of the Uzbek audience to their novel entertainment. For the first three acts they had not clapped at all: and then I myself had clapped, and everyone had followed. But they did not clap now. Their laughter was reserved for the slapstick.

When it was all over and the audience was making for the exit, the company came over to the governor and asked with a bow if they had pleased him. He, too, had seen the Chinese circus in Kabul; but he graciously told them that theirs was much better.

‘*Miguyad ki khub ast ; khub ast—khub ast . . .*’ (He says that it’s good.) The word went among them like a happy breeze.

Finally he turned to myself: ‘Auf wiedersehen!’ he said, smiling. It was his only remark to me all evening, but from it I guessed that whatever telephoning had proceeded that day between Aibak and Kabul had resulted, thank God, in the clearing of my character.

Before I left I chanced to meet the Poles again—or rather, Dluski. I met him in the bazaar at sunset, as he came back in the jeep from a day’s surveying; and he took me up to Top-i-Rustem.

The object itself was of no great beauty—a dome-shaped Buddhist stupa, all of one piece with the small stone temple surmounting it—the whole thing reminiscent of some massive casemate of the Maginot Line. But as we turned back towards the car, with the twilight resting mauve on the mountains, he was moved to tell me the story of his life, which I make no apology for including here, since it stands for the circumstances of a whole community in Afghanistan more lost and expatriate than any which colonized the British Empire.

The war had brought him prison and deportation as a German conscripted worker. After three years in France he was liberated by the British two months after D-day and shipped to England. When peace came he found his home no longer existed; it had been annexed with other Polish territories, by the Soviet Union. He elected to remain in England, or rather in Scotland, working on a farm as a Displaced Person.

And then, in 1955, he went back, the pull of homesickness, of the need of a land to call one’s own, having taken ten years to assert itself. His aged mother still lived, in Warsaw, but he did not stay

with her. Instead he went to a place on the border, which was as near to his home as he could get.

‘And how was Poland after sixteen years?’ I asked.

‘It was Hell. For the first six months I could hardly bring myself to speak. I hardly ate. Everything I had dreamed about all those years—things, places, people—turned rotten. Then I got a grip on myself, and it wasn’t so bad. I took up my profession again. People were kind to me. I made a kind of peace with it all.’

‘Then why Afghanistan, why all *this*?’ I said, meaning the Spartan room, the bare walls, the epitome of coldness and impermanence, to which we had then returned.

He looked at me sadly, as if I could be so stupid as to ask. ‘When you have lived as I have,’ he said, ‘one place is very much the same as another. Except that there’s a little more money, a little more . . .’

He did not add the word ‘freedom’. But if he meant to, it could only have been in a very qualified sense.

We stayed on talking about the small French village, Aunay-sur-Odon, where he had been liberated; about the bombing and the smell of burned thatch in the Normandy of June 1944. Because these things were known to me, they somehow illuminated the rest of his story as nothing else could have done. And when I said goodbye, creeping down the dark street and expecting every minute to run into the mullah, I thought sadly of his future—the endless soldier-like existence, without home or affection or any civilized thing to call one’s own.

VII

SHORTLY before noon next day I picked up a truck—a Russian Ziss—going up to Mazar. The driver had that shifty look which one sometimes observes in Pathans, often without foundation, and it was sufficient to make the hotel clerk write down the number of the truck before we moved off.

About three in the afternoon we reached the Tashgurgan gorge. Though smaller than those above Shibar it comes into view dramatically: a great V-shaped cleft at a bend in the road. Moreover we reached it as the light was falling in soft, mysterious rays from the sun beyond the peaks. Once, as the driver slowed down to change gear, I had a vision of three great needles of rock, each one taller than the next and directly in line, rising from a waterfall of light pouring down between two crags. For a moment I thought of stopping the truck to photograph it, but then decided to wait for another opportunity. It never came. And the vision tormented me to the end of my journey.

Shortly afterwards, down a curving road past cotton plantations and a vast mediaeval mud fortress, we came into Tashgurgan.

It is probably the only city in all Afghanistan to have survived the government's 'modernization', which consists in tearing the heart out of a place and putting in a concrete arcade of bazaar-shops instead. We crawled through the crowds of carts and people in the narrow streets. The houses rose up on each side with balconies of wood and heavy verandahs; the open-fronted shops were bright with coloured cloths and piles of red peppers and green fruit.

The driver got out and returned with his shirt-front full of pomegranates. He had shown nothing to justify my suspicion of him.

As soon as we moved off, the town and its dusty vegetation abruptly ended. Beyond the transport barrier lay a landscape such as I had never seen. It was not the *sarakh*—the desert of the south and

west, with its carpet of sparse dry shrubs. It was the ultimate, unrelieved wilderness which the Afghans call *dasht*. A vast dead plain without skyline or horizon, in which nothing lived or moved but the smoking dust. The dust drifted ceaselessly from ruts and wash-board ridges, masking the sun with an ochre cloud and softening, as in a fog, the walls and foundations of dead habitations.

There was an area of these skeletons adjoining the town itself, and others appeared as we set course westwards. Sometimes they were the remains of mere villages, sometimes of whole towns, now reduced to rectangular barrows of crumbled mud and an occasional broken arch or corner wall—reminders of the time when Jenghiz Khan and the Golden Horde poured over this once-fertile country, burning and pillaging and destroying the water system.

And there were places where the action of the wind had polished whole areas of desert to a superficial hardness which mirrored the painful light. At one of these places the Ziss began coughing and died on us from a broken petrol pipe. I walked a short distance to ease my legs. The ground was like concrete, until one kicked one's heel in; then it crumbled and the hole one had made began to smoke like a miniature volcano.

The driver had taken off his turban and was sitting on the road, hammering a new length of pipe into shape. The sun was disappearing an hour before its time, a lemon-coloured disc in the dust. In order to clear the camera for next day, I decided to use up the remainder of the film I had started in Aibak.

My problem began when I had finished.

'Give,' said the driver, holding out an oil-stained hand. 'Give me my picture!'

Now this was a problem which had beset me since Herat—having people ask for their photographs as if they could be taken from the camera in the way they were produced from the cameras in the bazaars. I generally said it was a colour picture which could not be developed in Afghanistan, and that was that.

But this time it did not work. As soon as the repair was finished and we were on the road again, the driver repeated his demand.

'Come,' he said playfully. 'The picture is mine.'

I searched my mental vocabulary for Persian photographic terms, explaining that although I might tear the film off the roll, the moment the light fell on it, it would be useless. But to no avail.

His mood gave way to impatience, and though he kept up the

pretence of playfulness, I caught his asides to the mechanic, who was sitting on the far seat. He genuinely believed I was stealing his property.

He was (he said) a rich man; he had a camera of his own. Moreover he knew where he could get the film developed.

In the end I gave up explaining and was forced to practise a deceit.

‘Very well,’ I said. ‘When we reach Mazar it will be dark; I will take out your picture and you shall have it.’

He regarded me so suspiciously, however, that I was moved to add that if by any chance I should not get to Mazar, he would certainly not have the picture in any form in which he could use it.

We continued quite amicably after this. Our only other stop was to aid a solitary motor-cyclist whose machine had broken down in the howling dust-wind. He drank copiously from the oil-tin containing our emergency radiator water, and we left him to face the night.

At six we picked up an oasis-like line of trees which brought us to the Mazar transport barrier. During the inevitable altercation over customs dues I managed to wind off my film and substitute an unexposed roll of black-and-white from my pocket. Then we went on, the city emerging from the twilit dust haze, with the shrine at the top of the road glittering like a Christmas tree with the lights on its multitude of pinnacles. At the sight of it the driver and passengers recited a prayer and stroked their chins. The perilous journey was over.

In the yard of the caravanserai I gathered up my things.

‘Here,’ I said, taking the useless film from my camera and handing it over.

The driver’s gratitude made me feel uncomfortable.

‘And what do I owe you for the fare?’

‘Nothing,’ he said grandly. ‘You have given me my picture!’

I felt worse than ever.

In the end I made him take fifty afghanis—about double the usual sum—and found a ghari to take me to the hotel. The mechanic accompanied me: he had to get a chit for the safe delivery of my live body.

There is a tension and bleakness about Mazar-i-Sharif which its proximity to the Soviet border does nothing to diminish. Its mosque and shrine, containing the relics of the Fourth Caliph of Islam, make

it a holy city which for generations has been a symbol of Moslem resistance to Russian encroachments from the north. At the same time, under the present government, it has become a centre of Russian technical and military 'aid' operations.

I was thus likely to be taken by most of the population for a Russian and an infidel, and by the rest as a western spy.

My ghari carried me through dimly-lit, unpaved streets, past the fortress-like Soviet consulate, the darkened precincts of the shrine, shuttered shops and a tea-house or two with samovars and kebab over glowing charcoal. Finally we entered an avenue with dark-glinting *juis* and drooping plane trees. There was a gloomy building flanked by a pair of cannon and another with a lighted verandah where we stopped and I paid off the driver. Beside the door was a hand-painted notice: 'Bicycles may not be taken inside the hotel.'

This direction to the intrepid English bicyclists seemed somewhat amiss, for I saw no bicycles and only one Englishman—Abernethy. Or rather, the hotel manager led me into a small, bare room on one of whose beds lay Abernethy's neatly-rolled Persian blanket.

For once I was glad to see it.

'And where is Mr Abernethy himself?' I asked.

'Sir, he is in the bath.'

The word 'bath' can completely turn one's head in Afghanistan; it pursues one like a mirage, the acme of luxury which must somewhere, surely, be obtainable. And here it was. I had only to wait for Abernethy to appear, pink and steaming, so that I might get out of the stinking clothes in which I had lived and slept for the past six days and follow his example.

I ordered tea and waited.

He appeared. But not as I expected. It was the same old Abernethy who had accompanied me all the way from Yussufabad, in dusty shirt and slacks and with two days' beard—only now a little blue in the face and carrying a cold, wet towel.

When he had restored his circulation he showed me the 'bathroom'. The bath, which was fed with cold water from a *jui*, was momentarily stopped up with a pulp of decaying grapes. The wash-basin was situated beneath a trickle of water which dropped mysteriously from the sagging ceiling. The lavatory swam in a sea of liquid and was firmly blocked with pages of *Pravda*.

We had got, as always, the only available room.

Over a dinner of rice and kebab he told me he had got to Mazar a

day and a night after leaving me. He had had to fight to keep his place on the roof of the bus, because his riding with the Turcomen from Pul-i-Khumri had gravely undermined the prestige of the Pathan gentlemen below. However, he had won.

In Tashgurgan there had been another embarrassment. At night-fall they pulled into a rest-house a quarter of a mile from the town. When, after dinner, he had announced his intention of seeing the city lights, the amiable Pathans had told him there was nothing worth seeing; then that there were great dogs in the place which would tear him to pieces; finally that there were evil men who would certainly kill him. After due reflection he said he would take a chance. Thereupon five of them had formed a human chain and refused to let him pass.

The day I arrived he had been up to Balkh. The procedure was to tell the hotel manager, who would arrange the hire of a ghari for the day. You left at eight and had to be back before nightfall, when they closed the city barriers. In his own case there had also been some business with the police. The moment he had left, the manager had telephoned the Balkh police post, and when he arrived the force and its commandant were drawn up on parade to receive him. Asked what he wished to see in the place, he had said 'all the shrines'. Patiently a heavy constable had led him on a tour of some forty little mounds, each with a flag to commemorate some holy man, and only late in the afternoon had he been able to redirect the tour to the Mosque of Khaja Mohammed Parsa, which with the domes of Herat and Samarkand is one of the three surviving glories of the Timurids.

He had also been invited to lunch with the police commandant, off a large and succulent melon which was the finest he had ever tasted.

This melon was to leave its effect. Early next morning, after a visit to the shrine (where we were discovered and chased out by a custodian) I saw him off on a ghari to the airport. His programme had proved finely timed. The midday plane to Kabul would allow him just twenty-four hours to get his exit visa before catching the next day's plane for Moscow.

Three hours later, as I sat at lunch on the verandah, I heard the clip-clop of a ghari. It was Abernethy back again, grey as a corpse and in acute distress. The plane had failed to function, and as he waited on the baking runway he had been struck down with dysentery.

I dosed him with a handful of tablets from my medicine chest, and

before passing out he begged me to get through to Kabul and ask them to keep his seat reservation.

Mazar had been subjected to the same surgery of modernization as other Afghan cities. Around the mosque for some hundreds of yards in every direction lay an area of desolation as if it had been bombed. To the north and west, incongruously rising from the waste of flattened mud, were two-storeyed skeletons of reinforced concrete which workmen were desultorily filling with bricks to make shops. In front of the main entrance was a new flight of steps, while a hundred yards away stood the carcase of a steam-roller, half submerged by the dust of years, from some earlier 'improvement' which had gone awry.

The mosque, too, was being improved—a process which had plainly gone on with disastrous results through the centuries. As I stood there I counted twenty-eight domes or pinnacles, though Abernethy had discovered an angle from which he saw thirty-two. They ranged from the two main domes, not quite symmetrical and suffering from a change of colour half-way up, to the miniature chimney pots which rose irregularly from a Jacobean balustrade round the roof.

Then there were the doves. I had never seen so many, even in Venice. (Was it that which led Robert Byron to describe it as 'a cross between St Mark's and an English country house'?) They covered the courts like snow, till the muezzin made his prayer call. Then they filled the air with a thunderous beating of wings, wheeling and circling to their roosts in the *ivans* and arches—and a dozen or two decamping to the hotel where they nested in a broken skylight.

Finally there was the confusion of colour.

The mosque is called 'blue'. But nothing more remote from the translucent blues of Iran or Turkey could be imagined. The tilework is so interwoven with green and yellow that it reminded me of camouflage. Even now, without referring to my pictures, I can hardly recall its shape or size or outline; and my only clear memory of it is the way I saw it one evening at the end of my second visit, when the colour was withdrawn in the fading light, and there remained only its lamps and its presence—a building more mysterious in the shadow than ever it was in substance.

From the mosque and its surrounding desolation a wide bazaar ran a quarter of a mile northwards till it petered out in the waste

near the airport. To the usual trades was added that of the dentists, whose signboards greeted one with enormous grinning teeth, and towards the end, by the Aryana Airlines office, was the carpet bazaar. As I walked along this street, picking my way between vendors of rugs and knives, trinkets, hurricane lamps, Russian rubber goloshes and other paraphernalia spread out on the pavement, I was startled by a greeting.

Turning round I found myself looking at one of my companions on the bus from Kabul. He was sitting on the step of his shop: though to call it a shop was a euphemism. It contained no goods but a token bale of cloth. It showed no sign of doing any business. The second time I visited Mazar, three weeks later, it no longer existed. It was thus one of these mysterious things which appeared and vanished, as certain familiar faces appeared and vanished, without explanation throughout my journey.

'Peace be on you,' he said.

'And on you be peace.'

'What do you do today?'

'I am sending a telephone message for my friend.'

'How is the health of your friend?'

'He is sick after eating a melon with the police commandant at Balkh.'

'That is bad. When is he leaving?'

'Tomorrow, *insh'Allah*, if I can cure him of his illness.'

'To Moskva?'

'To Moskva and Landan.'

'And yourself?'

'I shall go to Balkh.'

He knitted his brows.

'Why do you people go always to that place?'

'To see the birthplace of the Aryan civilization.'

'But there is nothing in that place. All is *kharab*—Dasht.'

'It is also close to Russia,' I added mischievously.

'Yes.'

'Where can one go from Balkh?'

'One cannot go on. It is forbidden.'

Now, I knew there was a zone in the north from which civilians, and certainly foreigners, were excluded. Among other things, it was part of the Afghan government's precautions against political contamination coming in with Soviet arms gifts. But perhaps there was

another reason for Afghan apprehensions about foreign visits to Balkh.

It was adjacent to a fighter aircraft base.

On this base stood a squadron of Soviet Mig 17 fighters. When they had first arrived, for the training of the Afghan Air Force, they had been regularly in the sky, filling the air with the scream of their jets. They had appeared over Kabul only a month or two before my arrival, for the fly-past at the annual Independence parade. I had already seen some of their pilots, lean young men, scarcely distinguishable from British RAF pilots, shopping in the Mazar bazaar.

But not once in my stay, or Abernethy's before me, did they fly. Despite excellent flying weather, in all my time at Mazar they never left the ground; as indeed was the usual procedure when an Englishman was in the area.

Altogether my wanderings robbed the Royal Afghan Air Force of two full weeks of its summer training, for which I apologize.

When I got back to the hotel I met a pilot of another kind. In the dining-room which had been turned over to accommodate the overflow of guests, was the captain of the aircraft which should have taken Abernethy to Kabul.

He was an Indian, a man who was surely unique in the world of flying. A figure worthy of the pen of Saint-Exupéry, except that Saint-Exupéry never conceived such a character. Once a day he flew the ancient DC 3s across the Hindu Kush to Kabul, or from Kabul out to Delhi or Beirut. His job was to find runways in blinding dust storms and to navigate the passes when the cloud was on them. He flew without navigation aids, on engines serviced in the dust of the open plain, with aircraft lacking oxygen and with a bare margin of a few thousand feet to clear the lowest crests.

But all this I gathered only with difficulty. When first he spoke it was on quite different matters. 'Ah, the terrible Jenghiz!' were almost his first words when he heard I was going out to Balkh. 'The terrible Jenghiz—in seven hundred years this country has still not recovered from him!' He talked on, about the Mongols' march southwards to Multan, and westwards across Asia Minor and up the Danube Valley, till the day they stood before the gates of Vienna. 'And there, you know, they got this message, just as they were about to attack, that the Great Khan was dead—and they came back home! What would have been the history of Europe, if the Khan had lived two or three years longer?'

'You should have been an historian,' I said.

'I am,' he answered. 'I graduated as an historian. But how can one live as a professor? Afterwards I went to Pasadena, in the States, and learned to fly aeroplanes. Come and look me up sometime and I'll tell you more about it.'

He gave me a card with his address: *International Club, Kabul*. But I never did.

I met him twice again: briefly next morning, when I asked him about the Aryana accident rate and he quickly touched wood and said so far a clean record; and a few days later when he flew me to Kabul and I saw him talking with an American technical executive about the need to fit a ground filter to keep dust out of the engines during take-off.

Many weeks later, when I was already back in England, an Aryana air liner crashed on taking off from Beirut. There were two survivors. The pilot was an Indian.

The dysentery cure which I had given Abernethy had worked so well that by evening I found him sitting up in bed. To my alarm, he was also eating melon, for which he had an apparently incurable weakness.

Early next morning he was able to get up. I gave him three days' supplies of pills, and twenty rolls of colour film which he had kindly offered to take home through Russia and said goodbye. My ghari was waiting, and it was my only chance of seeing Balkh and getting back to Kabul in time for the buz-kashi.

The ghari driver wore a khaki uniform and a forage cap, which seemed to be obligatory for ghari drivers in Mazar. He also brought a friend with him. As soon as we left the city he took off his cap and trousers, revealing a comfortable pair of cotton pantaloons. Had I been suspicious, I might have supposed that his friend was a police agent. But they were excellent company, they did their duty by following me wherever I went, and the whole outing cost only a hundred afghanis and some sixty cigarettes.

The road to Balkh was not used by motor vehicles. We slipped out of the town by a hole in an old mud wall, and at once I saw the value of Abernethy's advice to take a silk scarf to protect my nose and mouth from the dust. The surface had been so churned up by caravans that at times we sunk almost to our axle. The one or two gharis we passed were mostly twin-harness, but our own was single

and although our horse was young and strong, the twelve-mile journey took nearly two hours.

After six miles we passed through the deserted town of Takht-i-Pul. No one lived there any more. The dome-roofs of the houses were all fallen in. The fortified walls, decorated with a curious domino pattern of indentations, were broken and dissolving. Sun-burned weeds made a jungle of undergrowth through acres of ghostly streets.

‘And why did the people leave?’ I asked.

‘The water dried up.’

On the far side we met a flock of karakul sheep, their fleeces daubed with red and blue markings, being driven towards Mazar. There was nothing else but the dust-river road until distantly, out of the colourless plain, a smudge of dark green appeared, resolving itself slowly into trees and a dark blue dome.

There was a certain irony in the moment; for this, as I had planned it, should have been the climax of my journey. The shrine at Meshed, the mausoleum at Herat, the mosque at Balkh: that had been the order of my ambitions till other things overtook me. Now I tried to adjust myself and recapture the interest with which I had set out.

We pulled up in a small bazaar, and I remembered there had been a move to set up a new city here. It had not got much beyond the inevitable roundabout, a tea-house or two, a block of unoccupied buildings which might have been intended for barracks. Within the roundabout stood the ruined arch of the Nawbahar Gate, towering above the little mud police post and a pleasaunce of dusty trees.

The blue-ribbed melon dome of Khaja Mohammed Parsa rose up above the greenery some two hundred yards beyond.

Followed by the ghari crew and a scruffy, friendly policeman, I spent the morning photographing and making some drawings. The mosque claimed first attention, because of the light. The words of the tourist pamphlets were horribly borne out. It was full in the throes of restoration. The dome had been re-tiled and had lost something of its shape in the process. The tiling of the drum supporting it was half removed, as was that of the panels at the side. On the ground below lay pieces of tile and delicate stone coping, thrown down by the workmen or fallen with the passage of time.

And yet I was lucky. The façade was still untouched; so was the central *ivan* with a Kufic inscription on great tile squares, and the

spiralling columns, like great twists of barley-sugar, dividing it from the two-tiered arches on either side. A mason sat in the forecourt in the shadow of a tomb decked with memorial flags, and I asked if I might see the interior.

He took me through a narrow door where three old men were squatting. It was very dark, but as my eyes grew accustomed to it, I found myself gazing at a remarkable chamber. The eight large arches, hexagonally placed to support the dome, were surmounted alternately by honeycomb windows and arched recesses, delicately proportioned and divided into smaller arches with enamelled tiles. The blue-ribbed roof rested lightly on a circle of miniature blue, red and yellow pendentives. Between the ribs it was filled with a pattern of green and yellow flowers, the whole thing rising to a central medallion, again of flowers, of the same colour.

These yellows and greens, however, were subsidiary; what gave the place its mystery and beauty was the fall of the light on the tiles of the walls. Light blue and dark blue mosaic, they caught it up and reflected it to every recess and corner, so that the whole strong pattern of shape and colour—brown and yellow, apple green and red, lozenge and spandrel and medallion—was impregnated with this dim indescribable amalgam of blue which belonged to the dust and the centuries.

It would have been pointless to attempt to photograph this colour: there was only one picture that I craved for, and that was of the small prayer niche heavily enamelled in brown and blue, with a curiously inscribed lintel. My experience of being chased out of the mosque at Mazar held me back. Then just as I was about to leave, one of the old men plucked my sleeve as if I had taken insufficient notice of it.

Thus encouraged, I took my picture and left my spectators delightedly nursing the spent flashbulbs.

When I had photographed the Nawbahar Gate also I broke off for lunch in the tea-house, which my policeman had rather grandly called the 'hotel'. It was equipped with a canopy of matting. The inhabitants of Balkh who had gathered in its shade had little to do but observe the habits of visitors. They had no desire to emulate them. When a pink and blue bus drew up and the bacha yelled to all and sundry that it was leaving for Mazar, no one stirred. It drove off as empty as it had arrived.

I put away my chocolate, paid for numerous rounds of tea, and said I would see the Old City.

It was not more than five minutes' walk away, but my escort insisted on taking their beautiful ghari with its pom-poms and tinkling bell—not out of honour to the oldest city in the world but because if some mad foreigner wanted to waste his day in all this Dasht, where everything was 'kharab', they had no wish to accumulate unnecessary dust and fatigue for themselves.

The way from Balkh bazaar to the ruin of the Mother of Cities lies up a dusty track. At the end of this track is a steep bank, so rough and treacherous that the ghari nearly overturned, and I had difficulty making them all get out and the driver lead the frightened pony up the remaining fifty yards.

On the crest I stopped and stared. Before me lay a sight for which I was completely unprepared: an enormous saucer of dust and ruin, so wide and far-extending that one could not with one glance take it in. There were no 'ruins' in the accepted sense: no broken arches, or towers, or graves. Just this great dust saucer, and on its periphery a continuous jagged, crumbling wall, enclosing some camels of a passing caravan which had been turned loose to graze on the struggling dry grasses.

As I walked, my feet turned up the dust and at almost every step some bone or piece of pottery: decorated fragments of blue and green plates, plain-baked remnants of domestic pitchers, Timurid and occasionally, if I was not mistaken, Greek—relics of the civilizations which had flourished and died here between invasions of Kashans and Sassanians, Huns and Arabs, Uzbeks and Mongols; between the founding of the Aryan kingdom five thousand years ago and the city's final decay under the later Timurids.

It was impossible not to be affected by it, the more so as the wind had sprung up again—the wind which all morning had made photography a nightmare and which now whipped up the dust clouds, smoothing and dissolving each fold of ground, piling up new ones, continuing the process of erosion which would one day wipe Balkh from the face of the earth.

Picking my way through the dust and potsherds I reached the western wall. The ground immediately below fell down to a swamp; and there was another swamp, with tall green reeds, to the east. Around these swamps for perhaps half a mile the earth had a light green texture, where the fertility of the broken water channels went

running to waste. Water glinted in the carpet of green which extended to the oasis surrounding the mosque, its blue dome rising like a mushroom from the dark green trees. For a moment it was just possible to see this country as it once had been—the granary of Central Asia, a land of milk and honey—before the Mongols came.

When I had satisfied my curiosity and taken some pictures, I sat talking with a couple of lads who had appeared, apparently in charge of the camels. Conversation was not easy, for they spoke mostly in Turki, which I did not understand; but they told me they were travelling southwards with a load of wool. After a while they found their old father and asked me to photograph him. Then I saw signals from the ghari-driver who had stayed with his friend and the policeman on the crest. I had kept him an hour beyond his time and we had to be back before the barrier closed.

Before we left, however, there was another of those encounters which punctuated my whole expedition and reminded me that I did not travel alone. As we drove back to the bazaar we were hailed by two elegant gentlemen with shotguns and polished leather cartridge-belts.

‘And what is your work here?’ asked the taller and more impressive.

‘I am visiting the ruins of your great civilization. What is your work?’

‘I am hunting quails.’

I wished him good shooting.

He was an excellent and most courteous person. I had met him once before, on the bus to Pul-i-Khumri, when he was a government official on business in Mazar. And I was to meet him again, three weeks later, in Kabul, when he introduced himself as a school-master giving private lessons in English.

Back in Mazar Abernethy’s departure left an odd emptiness. I got out my diary and scribbled illegibly the material I had gathered from my journey since Herat. When I looked at it, it didn’t amount to much. There was the Salang road, of course, but I knew nothing of its specification or how far it had progressed. There was the business of the Russian mapping parties and the hydro-electric scheme at Pul-i-Khumri—interesting enough as instances of Soviet military and industrial activity, but hardly likely to cause a stir in London. On the Afghan side I had seen the beginning of female emancipation.



11. *Masar-i-Sharif.*
Cockfighting



12. Caravan passing the mosque at Balkh

The unanswered questions before me were enormous. I had nothing on which to estimate the number of Russian technicians in the country, beyond the frustration of finding myself without a bed in every other hotel. I had no sure knowledge of the attitude of the Afghans towards them; no coherent picture of Afghan military strength, the state of the economy, or even of popular reaction to the government's reform. In short I had little enough on which to base a newspaper article; and unless I managed to get up here again, my journey had done very little good.

To fill my cup, there was a brisk knock at my door. Before I could answer the curtain was pulled aside and in walked a lithe athletic figure with a black moustache.

'I do not disturb you?' he asked with a brisk, clipped accent I had last heard on the squash-courts of Anglo-India in 1946. 'Good, that is very pleasing to me. Let me introduce myself: my name is R. V. Pandey. I am the teacher of English in this place. We have five institutions. All is excellent. Let me tell you . . .'

He continued for three-quarters of an hour. At the end I was aware that he had been in the country three weeks; that he came from Uttar Pradesh ('the "United Provinces" I think you used to call them'); and that a teacher of English must set an example to the Afghans by taking exercise.

'You will sleep now?' (Actually I had managed surreptitiously to take off my clothes and had one leg in the bed.) 'Excellent. In this country you must sleep early and rise early. Tomorrow I will tell you of the new secondary school.'

He did not tell me—then.

In the morning I was on my way to the airport. It was the eve of the King's birthday.

VIII

THERE are two civil flying routes across the Hindu Kush. The Russian Ilyushins flying between Termez and Kabul take an almost straight line. The Aryana Dakotas, without oxygen and thus with an effective ceiling of 19,000 feet, are forced to fly through the Salang pass. If they meet cloud on the pass, they have to turn back, hoping that a dust storm has not blown up on the airfield in the meantime. Between Mazar and Bagram, the military air base just north of Kabul, there are no emergency landing grounds.

At half past ten the radio-telephone in the Aryana office in the bazaar came through with the information that our plane was on its way. The manager locked up the office and we climbed into the bus for the short ride to the airport. The bus was a big Russian diesel already reduced to age-old shabbiness. My fellow passengers were a Russian technician, a couple of army officers, two or three merchants with their servants carrying carpet bales. As the ticket for the two hour flight cost only twelve dollars, I wondered how Aryana paid its way.

When I reached Mazar 'airport' I began to understand.

At the end of the bazaar we reached open country and turned off into the desert dust haze. There was no road and no feature but a bleak be-flagged cemetery. The first and only evidence of an airport was a wind-stocking taut above a stretch of hardened mud, and two small huts. Except for the presence of a half-dismantled aircraft—Abernethy's Dakota which had failed to fly—one would hardly have noticed it.

We waited on the edge of the runway, from which we were barred by a strand of wire and six armed sentries.

The plane came in from the west, where it had been making the weekly run across Turkestan to Maimana. It turned into the wind,

swept down the runway spraying clouds of brown dust from the propellers, came to rest about twenty yards from where we stood. Without any of the tiresome circumstances of European air travel, we climbed aboard and two minutes later were circling the green-brown pattern of the city and heading east.

The dust hung everywhere, covering the Oxus and the Soviet frontier, which lay on our left, with a violet-orange curtain. Ridges of gnarled hills came drifting below like rocks in a soft brown sea. The Afghan steward brought a cup of tepid coffee and I fought off the sleepiness produced by the noise of the motors and the flicker of the sun on the bright metal wing.

It continued half an hour in the direction of Kunduz, where we should normally have taken on passengers. Only this morning there were no passengers, and instead of landing we banked to the right, letting the sun stream in across the cabin, and entered a broad, flat valley running south. The view closed in with the pitted mountains which began to rise on every side.

The dust had stopped. We began to climb. I remembered the words of my Indian pilot: 'We take you up to seventeen thousand feet to get you acclimatized, and then go over the top at nineteen thousand.' So this was it. I took a deep breath, changed over the filter on my camera, and braced myself against the vague light-headedness which came with the thinning air.

We must have been somewhere over Pul-i-Khumri or Baghlan when the aircraft began to buck. The steward removed the coffee cups. The fasten-your-safety-belts notice appeared in Persian on the bulkhead. We began to cross ridges which appeared from below more quickly than we climbed. Each ridge made the bucking worse. We dropped into air pockets, hitting the bottom, revving engines, climbing again, repeating the process.

My camera case vanished beneath the seat behind.

I was now so light-headed that I supposed we had already reached the top. I watched with fascination how slowly the vast land mass seemed to move past the wing tips, and in my preoccupation I failed to notice the great central mountain chain which was marching in from the east.

Then I saw it.

Crest after crest, peak after peak, it came diagonally towards us like a wave of giant lava rocks. Far in the distance, where it reached towards China, there were humps of dirty snow. The nearer ones

were simply a vast sunlit wall: crags and jagged ridges, mercilessly clear in the thin, dry air.

Within a few minutes we were among them. The rock rose up and blotted out the view. Ledges and promontories, peaks and crags cut dizzily past the perspex window. We flew with bumps and banging like a car with a flat tyre. Then we started to come down again. The rock receded. The southern face of the range drew back in blue shadow from the veering sun.

The descent was so swift that I hardly realized we were there. A final hump, a fertile-looking valley, and we were dropping on Kabul with its twisting river and pattern of grey streets. We circled the exhibition ground, the Old Airfield (covered, I noticed, with two or three hundred army lorries), and taxied to a stop in the middle of a squadron of Russian Yak trainer planes.

When I reached the city, I found the manager of the Hotel de Caboul was as good as his word and had kept a room for me. I borrowed five hundred afghanis from him and fortified by a lunch in the bazaar went off to the Afghantour office. I was so relieved at the prospect of re-establishing my status as a tourist again that the question of whether Mr Tarzi had returned in time to get me a place for the buz-kashi fell almost into second place. But as I climbed the familiar dark stairway and entered the outer office, I knew that he was back.

I had learned all I could about Mr Tarzi in London. I had even written to him, though without receiving an answer, asking for various introductions. I knew, for instance, that he was an alumnus of my college at Oxford. That he had gained a blue at fencing. That he was related by marriage to the ex-King Amanullah and had been for some twenty years 'in retirement' before recently being rehabilitated and placed in charge of this organization, whose function was to smooth the way for the tourist through the tangles of officialdom.

I awaited my first sight of him with a great deal of interest.

He turned out to be a lightly-built person with tired eyes and exquisite courtesy. In all my conversations with him, we never once touched on politics or any matter of substance. Perhaps if I had tried, I might have penetrated the delicate defence which he arrayed about himself on such matters. But fairness forbade it. I had no wish to compromise him. Instead we talked about Oxford, while at intervals

he put through telephone calls to the various officials who allocated seats at the bus-kashi ground at Bagrami.

It was not easy to get me one, but in the end he achieved it. I was to come next afternoon at two o'clock and he would have a place in a car for me.

In spite of its prosaic name, which means 'dragging the goat', there is a grandeur about buz-kashi which safely removes it from comparison with any other sport, even polo, of which it is possibly the forebear.

Up in the north they play it in the spring with hundreds of horse-men in each team. In Kabul they play it just once a year, on the King's birthday, with only thirty; but it still takes an impressive toll of spectators. The year before they had played it in the stadium; the horses had got among the seats and killed six people. This year they were playing in the open, but everybody predicted that the score would be even higher.

The car turned out to be a splendid Bel Air limousine with wireless and air-conditioning, and I travelled with three of Mr Tarzi's senior assistants. The city, as we drove through it, was almost empty; and the few remaining citizens were struggling for places on the last trucks and buses going out to the sports ground. Beyond the gates the road was crowded with an unbroken stream of walkers, cyclists, gharis, trucks and motor-cars, hopelessly intermingled, like some great refugee exodus before a battle. We hooted our way through vendors of bread and sweetmeats, water-carriers, nasswar-sellers, all bent on arriving before the start of the game at half past three.

It was only four miles, but the journey took more than an hour.

Our destination announced itself by a hillside black with spectators and an avenue of red-and-green banners emblazoned with the Afghan crown. The crush there was almost impenetrable. We nudged forward a yard at a time, past a series of tents and pavilions, and beyond them, the open plain where lines of horsemen were beginning to form up for the game.

The King had not arrived yet, and lining the route to greet him were companies of troops and a band with gleaming instruments and the coal-scuttle helmets of Hitler's Germany.

As soon as we had reached the car park and I had been shown my place in a covered stand, I slipped away with my camera to await the Royal arrival.

There was something in the colour and excitement of it all which reminded me of a Royal Derby. The spectators on the hillside and round the edge of the plain, sitting on top of the lined-up trucks and buses. The fluttering of flags. The coming and going of police. The white painted ambulances. And, for good measure, the Kabul fire-brigade, stiffly at attention before their gleaming red tender.

And there were the women. Indians in gold-shot saris, Chinese and Arabs, Persians and Indonesians, and wives from the Western and Soviet embassies. And threading among them were wives of Afghan Ministers with their headscarves and sun-glasses. In the cosmopolitan gathering I had almost overlooked their significance. It was the first buz-kashi at which Afghan women had appeared in public.

When the last of the guests had gone into the pavilions, there remained a kind of hush, because the traffic had been stopped.

Across the road, where eight hefty policemen were wheeling off a broken-down Chevrolet, stood a line of Ministers headed by Daud Khan. He had appeared as if from nowhere, but there was no mistaking the back of that broad bald head and stocky body. And he was in excellent form, joking and smiling, betraying no care which might spring from the affairs of his patently uneasy country.

Suddenly without warning the band was called to attention and broke out with crashing cymbals into the national anthem. From far down the dusty, uneven road came a trailing cloud and the sedate outline of a Rolls-Royce. As it drew level, and almost before it had stopped, a lean, tall figure got out of it, wearing a karakul cap. Daud Khan came forward, bowed very low, shook the King's hand, and then that of the King's small grand-daughter in her white party dress.

With every policeman and soldier frozen rigidly in a salute, I crossed the road and photographed the royal progress from a couple of yards' range. The King had a royal graciousness, a gesture of the hand and a nod of the head, which looked excellent in the next day's newspapers. But the shorter, bullet-headed figure moving easily behind him left little doubt as to who was the master of Afghan destinies.

From the moment I got back to my stand I was so preoccupied with picture-taking that but for the explanations of my Afghan friends beforehand I should never have followed the tactics of the afternoon's tournament. There were four teams taking part, in a system

of elimination. They advanced in a great extended line and gave the royal salute. Then the first two separated and took up their places on either side of a marked-out ring. Onto the scene came a pair of soldiers carrying the headless carcass of an animal.

I had naturally supposed it was a goat; but when I looked more closely I saw it was a calf and must have weighed at least a hundred and sixty pounds. It was deposited in the middle of the circle, in a shallow trench, and at a signal from the Royal box the game began.

The object was to grab the carcass, carry it against the opposition of one's adversaries a mile and a half round the circumference of the field, and fling it back inside the ring. So, at least, in theory: but the first rider had not gone five hundred yards before there was a violent collision and across the field—incongruous against the fluttering standards and fur-trimmed costumes of the players—drove the white ambulance.

The victim of the encounter proved the day's only casualty, though not from want of spirit or any slavish adherence to the rather basic rules.

The chief item of equipment in the game was each player's splendid whip, which he carried between his teeth. Whenever the carcass-carrier was intercepted, which happened all the time, a scrum would form and into play would come the whips—not on the horses but against one's opponents. The horses were fully capable of giving their own punishment. In the press round the fallen carcass there would be a living radial of heaving rumps and furiously waving tails. For a moment it would be a matter of finesse, each rump moving sideways to dislodge its neighbour. Then in impatience some horse would rear back its head, land its teeth squarely on the rump of its neighbour, and in a flash the scrum would open, allowing a rider to streak with the carcass towards the perimeter.

Sometimes a pair of riders emerged, struggling for possession of the carcass as they rode. The carrier would hold it across his saddle with part of it jammed under one leg; the other would lie flat along his horse's back and fight to wrench it away from him. By the time it reached goal, the carcass was a sack of broken bones.

At the end of an hour, when the play had consumed four carcasses and the mounted umpires had ridden many times to the King for a decision, the first game was given in favour of the Uzbek team from Maimana. The teams rode off and new ones entered the field.

One of them, from Kataghan, were the favourites of a crowd of

army officers who filled the enclosure on the right of me. The officers were the great *afficionados* of the game. At every finesse they drew a common breath or burst into roars of cheering; and the Kataghan captain, thundering down to direct his strategy, would give them a salute. The cheers were rewarded. At the end of a second hour, Kataghan won.

There followed a lengthy conference at the Royal box, and the captains of the winning teams were called to select fifteen riders for a final contest.

It was the climax of the day. The sun had sunk till it almost touched the hill behind us. Its reddening light diffused the great dust cloud stirred up by the hooves and battle. The play was fast and furious. Time and again the carcass was snatched away, only to be dropped as teams and riders collided. Time and again the Maimana Uzbeks in their embroidered jerkins and fur-banded caps lined up against the orange padded coats and bright red sashes of Kataghan. It seemed as if it would never be decided. Then finally a Kataghan rider made a break for it, streaking round the field, beyond the outlying pennants, coming in like an arrow through the opposition and dropping the carcass in front of the King.

Amid the cheering and the presentation of prizes which followed, I made my way out to the road where I was to rendezvous with my friends. They had planned to leave before the general rush. But in this they were defeated.

Nobody could go before the King.

The King was giving a tea party for the diplomatic corps. While twenty thousand people were held back from using the road, palace footmen in incongruous uniforms of blue and gold braid shuttled back and forth from a big marquee with plates of sweetmeats and baskets of fruit. It took nearly an hour. When finally the King appeared he was guarded, as he had not been before, by a four-strong detachment of the Royal bodyguard, peak-capped and inscrutable, carrying Russian sub-machine guns. There was another guard stationed on the hill, as I only now noticed, of mounted police with carbines. Silhouetted against the sunset, they watched the descending crowds, till the Rolls had vanished in its dust towards the city.

My hosts had been extremely kind to me. As we drove back in the wake of the twilight traffic they asked solicitously if I had been able to get my photographs and insisted on taking me all the way home to the hotel. And thereby hung the day's unfortunate conclusion.

As I got out of the car, I remembered too late that between the kerb and the pavement was a three-foot deep jui. A second later I plunged to my waist in stinking slime and barely managed to save the camera.

Everybody was mortified. But it was bound to happen sooner or later. It was a normal hazard of Kabul life.

From the Wednesday of my arrival to the following Monday my passport remained with Colonel Shimali at the police station and I savoured Kabul life to the full.

My new room at the Hotel 'de' was more palatial than the one before. I had three comfortable beds, a good carpet, and heavy curtains which I drew at night in an effort to keep out the noises of the street. The first one started regularly at nine o'clock: a singer beneath my window. He kept up his ululations for nearly an hour till silenced by an outburst of angry shouting.

From ten to midnight there were comings and goings of motor cars, blowings of horns, barking of dogs, hammering on doors by the police. After midnight came wedding processions.

One of them woke me on the night of the buz-kashi. It was announced by beating drums and the music of reedy flutes. Slowly it came into view in the lamplight. Pairs of clowns in dunces' hats, preceded by somersaulting children. Then a man with a tray full of flowers on his head and women with veils pulled loosely over their faces. Every hundred yards or so the procession stopped and the clowns did a dance by the light of oil lamps. Half an hour after they had passed, I could still hear the music, far in the distance, as I took another sleeping pill in hope of getting some rest.

In the daytime I wandered in the bazaars, drinking tea or eating in the two places which had caught my fancy on account of their food and the interesting company. One was the Café Zenith, where beneath Victorian oleographs one could breakfast off a kind of pancake fried crisp and brown in hot fat. The other was a large restaurant in an alley towards the river. One entered through a blanket tacked roughly over the door. Inside there was a choice of a bare-boarded upstairs room or a seat on the long verandah round a square of dusty earth. The appearance was vaguely like an Elizabethan theatre, with a charcoal kebab grill where the stage would have been.

No Westerners ever came there, but it was well patronized by

Asians and Russians, and by Afghan officers with their Russian machine-gun manuals.

Here and elsewhere, particularly among the Afghan and Asian guests who lodged in the Hotel 'de', I began to understand the matters which occupied everybody's attention and to pick up the crop of rumours and reports which were running through the city.

The chief topic was the Reform, of course.

The first hint of it had occurred, as I now learned, at the *Jashum*. During the celebrations at the Kabul sports stadium the wife of the Foreign Minister had been seen to leave the Royal enclosure without her chadduri. A few days later the wives of other Ministers had been invited, without chadduris, to a reception. Other receptions had been held in army and civil service circles, making plain the government's intention to the whole of the upper and middle classes. There had been no public announcement, no decree, no compulsion—at least, not officially.

The classes most affected appeared to have accepted it. But there was a current of indignation among the people, and bitter resistance from the mullahs. Before the Reform took place a number of arrests had been made; and more had taken place in the meantime. Some said that ten mullahs were in the city gaol. Others, forty. Some senior officers were also involved in the resistance, including the former general officer commanding the Jalalabad district, and members of his family in Kataghan. They had declined their invitations to the receptions and had simply disappeared.

All this was so bizarre, and so potentially dangerous for the future, that I was on tenterhooks lest some news agency correspondent should fly in on one of his periodical visits from Karachi or Peshawar and get out the story before I did. I tried to get pictures of the uniformed New Women, using the Minox with a mirror attachment which enabled one to photograph sideways. But there was a snag I had not foreseen. Time and again I positioned myself in front of the Institute of Technology or some other innocent object, waiting for a group of women to come at right angles up the street. Then just as they were near enough another female party would steal across the view I was supposedly photographing to the front.

Next I arranged to go out with my Filipino friend in his jeep, from which I could use the Leica and make a quick getaway. But this fell through.

Finally I mounted the Leica with a telephoto lens behind a hole in the mosquito mesh of my bedroom window.

Between the world of the bazaars and the society which accepted the Reform lay a gulf between two nations: the Afghanistan of history, occupied with tribal and religious issues, and the new Afghanistan of social and economic awakening. I was made sharply aware of this when I heard one evening that there was an excellent play to be seen at the Ladies' Welfare Institute in the Shar-i-Nau, a centre hitherto reserved for handicraft training and female entertainment.

It had not been advertised that men would be admitted, but when I got there I was nearly killed in the rush to get tickets.

The foyer was filled with middle-class wives and husbands, as well as with numbers of ardent bachelors of all kinds and classes bent on the Kabul equivalent of a saucy strip-tease. Having fought my way through the latter, I presented my ticket and was shown into a seat in the third row of the stalls.

The curtain went up on a delightful comedy called *Shahri va Dihati* (Townspople and Country-folk). The scene was a Kabul middle-class drawing room: the home of a well-to-do gentleman and his 'modern' son and daughter awaiting the arrival of country cousins with whom a double marriage was being arranged.

The countrymen arrived: father, sons and shy young daughter. The men wore magnificent turbans, constantly spat out nasswar, embarrassedly sat cross-legged on the unaccustomed chairs. The daughter, coyly veiled with the head-veil of country girls, blushed with confusion at the city informality.

In a first, uproarious act, the principal parties made it clear that they had not the slightest intention of accepting their prospective partners, and derision was heaped on the mincing little clerk who had come to draw up the marriage contract.

During the interval I looked round at the audience. In the rows all around me were women, and it was as if in the privacy of the theatre they had suddenly found the freedom to be themselves. The dark glasses were gone, the gloves taken off, the headscarves had slipped further and further to the back of their heads, revealing Paris coiffures and a classical beauty I had seen only in Rome.

In the rows behind were the bachelors: bachelors in karakul caps, bachelors in turbans, and in the middle of them all—fêted and catching all the glances—the wild fur-clad Kataghan buz-kashi

team, who ever since the birthday game had been living it up as heroes.

Down the aisles and at the exit doors, to supervise this lusty body of manhood, were police. There must have been a dozen of them. Every few minutes, to assert their authority, they would walk down a row of seats and tap some wild character to make him remove his headgear.

In the second half of the performance the play took a different turn. The couples having asserted their independence, suddenly discovered an attraction for each other. They flirted, chased one another, edged coyly together along couches, even stole kisses. Finally, when the clerk had been thrown off the stage by the wild young countryman and his brother, true love triumphed and the piece ended up with a betrothal ceremony and dance.

The audience applauded wildly, as well it might. The performance had been polished and professional to the last degree. It also happened to be the first time since Amanullah's disastrous experiment that men and women had sat together to watch men and women act together on the Afghan stage.

The other matter being talked about was more difficult to pin down.

There was some trouble afoot in the south and east: the provinces of Paktya and Nanaghar, which lie against the Pakistan border. What it was nobody would say. Even explanations of the causes differed. Some said it was the reactions of the tribes against the Reform. Others that it was economic; that the government was building new motor roads which would kill the local livelihood from the caravan traffic. A third rumour had it that the tribes were up in arms against the Government's flirtation with the Russians, and that the Government was using Soviet tanks and fighters to keep order.

Finally there was a report that things were going wrong with the distribution of funds for the Pakhtunistan campaign—the move by which the government had sought, since 1946, to promote an independent state among the eight million Pathans living on the Pakistan side of the Afghan–Pakistan border. Some months before the governor of the frontier town of Kharma had been murdered with two of his bodyguard. The Director of Pakhtun Affairs in the area was now said to be in gaol in Kabul.

All this was hearsay, but when I took a long-delayed chance of going to the British Embassy, I found the rumours were not unknown.

There is a splendid national character about the chief western embassies in Kabul. The American has a wide unwallled garden, as if to proclaim 'open diplomacy, openly conducted'. The French is a neo-Renaissance villa with a 'Maison Française' echoing folk music from a gramophone. The British is simply what Lord Curzon intended it to be: 'the most splendid in Asia.' It stands about a mile outside the city, and the first thing one sees as one comes up the dusty road is the large Union Jack flying tautly from the Ambassador's white residence, surrounded by a half-mile long circular wall.

I arrived about four in the afternoon, when the Afghan police agent who normally watched the entrance was absent. A Pakistani servant conducted me inside, and ten minutes later I was taking tea and eating walnut cake amid an atmosphere of chintz and silver flower vases.

It was not my job to exchange information, but I soon understood that the movements of the Embassy staff were much more restricted than my own. They could seldom travel; their journeys, as a matter of protocol, had always to be announced in advance to the authorities. They travelled in vehicles with conspicuous C.D. number-plates. Almost the only regular journey was that made once a fortnight by the armoured van which went down through Jalalabad and across the Khyber to pick up mail and rations from Peshawar.

In spite of these disabilities I was glad to supplement my picture of recent events through eyes which were obviously more expert and informed than my own. I stayed on for dinner and until nearly midnight, making the most of the interlude of civilized comforts. And by the time my host drove me back into the town and dropped me at an anonymous bazaar junction, I had made up my mind that if only the Afghans renewed my visa, I would take the first chance to go down towards the Khyber.

IX

ON Tuesday I walked for the fourth time that day over the dusty hump of a road which crossed the Koh-i-Asamai between Mr Tarzi's office and police headquarters. In my pocket was a letter to Colonel Shimali, confirming my function as a tourist, and another to the Ministry of the Interior asking them to give me a permit to Jalalabad where I was to photograph the parks and villas of the winter capital.

At the vista section I waited and counted passports while the colonel finished lunch. He arrived in an excellent mood, hung up his pistol, read the letter, and asked if I had enjoyed the buz-kashi. To my intense relief he handed me my freshly stamped passport without question, and I was able to get the travel permit the same afternoon.

Next morning, at ten o'clock, I was on the Khyber mail bus.

It took more than an hour to pass through the city customs and other formalities before getting on the road. Most of this time we spent near the Royal Palace, overlooking the grounds of the Ministry of Defence. On the far side of the wall Afghan gun crews were at weapon drill. The guns were much larger than those I had seen in press photographs of the annual Independence parade, and looked like Russian 162 mm.

We finally got away about noon. A few miles from Kabul the road passed into a defile and began its four thousand foot descent through the Kabul river gorge. It was a new road, built to replace the old one to the south which wound and circled through the hills by Lataband. The echoing rocks, the tunnels and precipices, the hairpin bends cut precariously above the rushing stream below, made it sufficiently exciting. But there was the added hazard of faulty engineering.

While the Americans were patiently asphaltting it from the Pakistan border upwards, the western sector was already falling away.

The reason for this had been put to me by my Filipino.

Three weeks before he had taken a drive along it with some friends, till their jeep was held up by a repair gang. While they poked about, who should arrive but Daud Khan.

Daud Khan: Do you know something about roads, Filipino?

Filipino: I know what is wrong with this one, Sir.

Daud: Tell me.

Filipino: It has no step-foundation.

Daud: What is that?

Filipino: It is the invention of the Englishman Thomas Telford. Before you build a road against a hillside you must excavate a step to carry off the drainage water.

According to the Filipino, Daud had turned to his entourage and asked why nobody had known about this. Everyone present had looked sheepish and had blamed the Polish consulting engineer.

Whatever the authenticity of this episode, the step-foundation was plainly missing. Half a dozen times, as we made the steep descent, we were forced to get out and walk ahead while the bus negotiated its precarious foothold. Twice we had to clear boulders which had fallen from the loop of the road above, and once we took cover from a rock fall.

We dropped three thousand feet in a little over an hour and a half. At each turn the air grew warmer, losing its crispness, till we reached the frothing river in its rock-bed. Twice we met Pakistan lorries with North-West Frontier Province number plates coming up for the fruit trade, but I was told the Pakhtunistan trouble had severely cut their number.

At two we reached Sarobi, the site of the German Siemens power dam which generates the Kabul electricity supply.

There was no mistaking it when one got there: the lake formed by the dam and the road skirting round it made a view which belonged to Europe rather than Asia. There were even lakeside eating-places, all balconies and verandahs and trailing plants, which looked like the real thing until one went inside and found the usual mud floor and flies and dirty carpets—and mutton fat and pilau instead of schnitzel and wine.

Perhaps my thought of wine had a telepathic effect, for the bus-driver, who had earlier shown patriotic diligence in demanding to see my photographic permit, leaned across the string bed on which we were sitting and asked if I hadn't a little 'wine' in my suitcase. He meant whisky, of course, and when I admitted that I had a small

flask, he said he would be honoured to call on me in the hotel at Jalalaland that night.

Beyond the dam the road followed the river through another small gorge before reaching open country. There were open spaces beside the river entirely occupied by black felt tents and tethered camels. They belonged to the advance guard of the Kochee nomads who were already on their long trek south, leaving the upland snow plains for the winter warmth of the Indus valley. They lived a life of their own, disregarding frontiers and despising the bus as a symbol of organized authority. Their men looked up with a kind of proud defiance, and their handsome women went indifferently about their work with a jingle of silver ornaments.

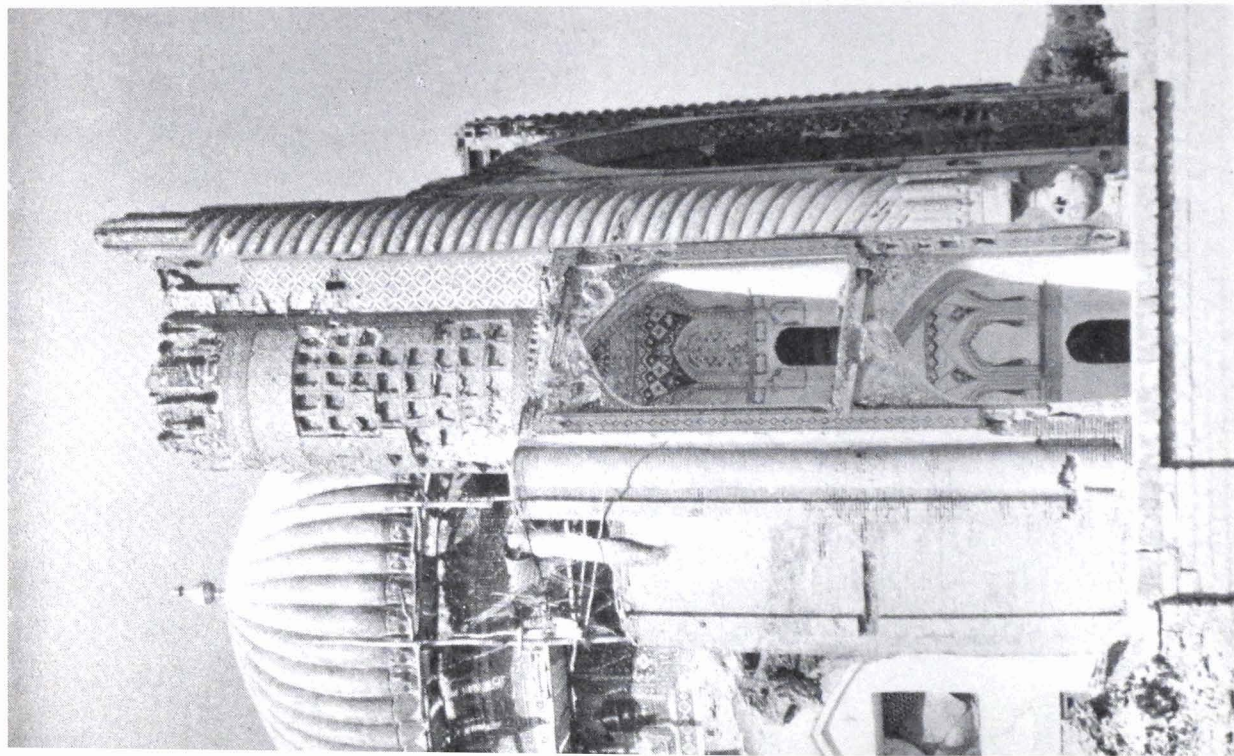
Late in the afternoon we passed the suspension bridge leading off to the orchards and banana plantations of the Laghman valley, where Habibullah Khan, King Amanullah's father, had been assassinated in 1919. Our own road, meanwhile, bumped on across the plain to pass the sugar-beet factory and enter the city which a hundred and sixteen years before had received the sole survivor of the greatest disaster of British arms in Asia.

The story of Doctor Brydon limping in to Jalalabad to tell of the slaughter of four thousand five hundred fighting men in the Khurd-Kabul defile had obsessed me since childhood, when a sombre print of it had hung in my parents' house under the title 'The Remnant of an Army'.

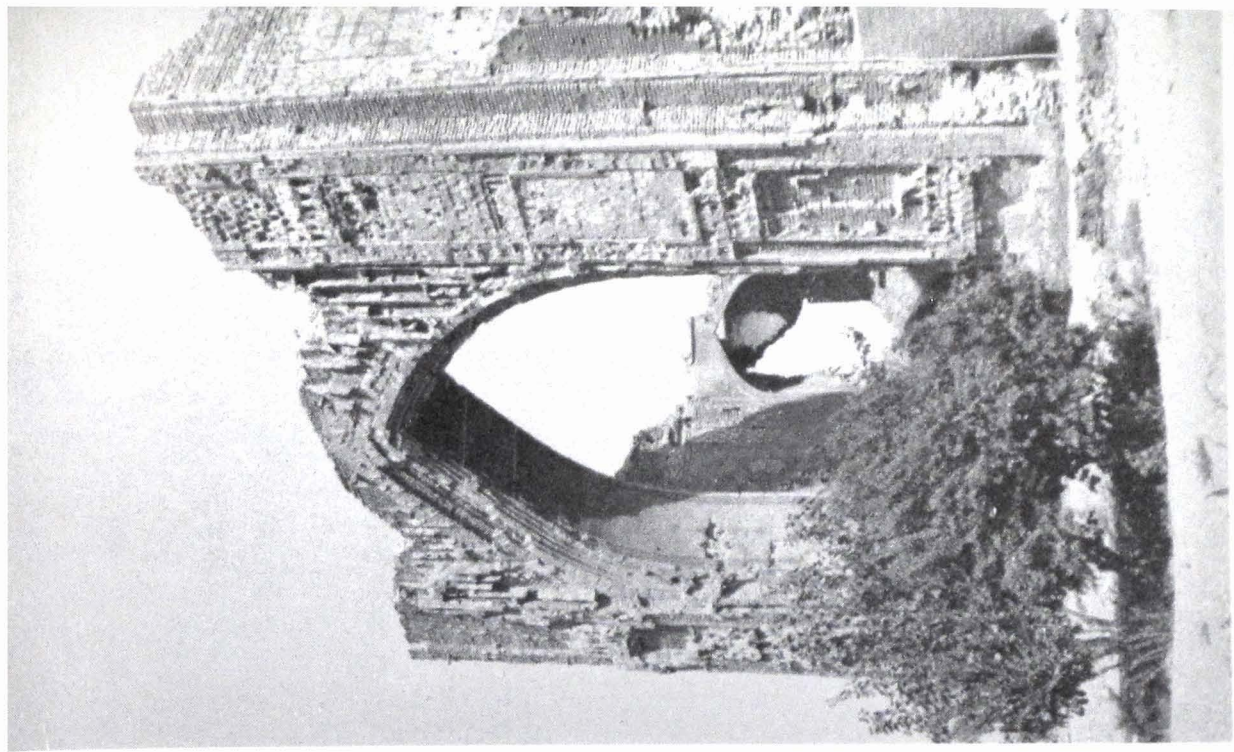
Despite its gloomy associations, however, Jalalabad proved a pleasant surprise. Far from being bleak, it was a green and rather exuberant place; and as we drove in through parks of pines and plane trees, its softness and humidity were further increased by the sun-down ritual of sprinkling the streets with shovelful of water from the juis.

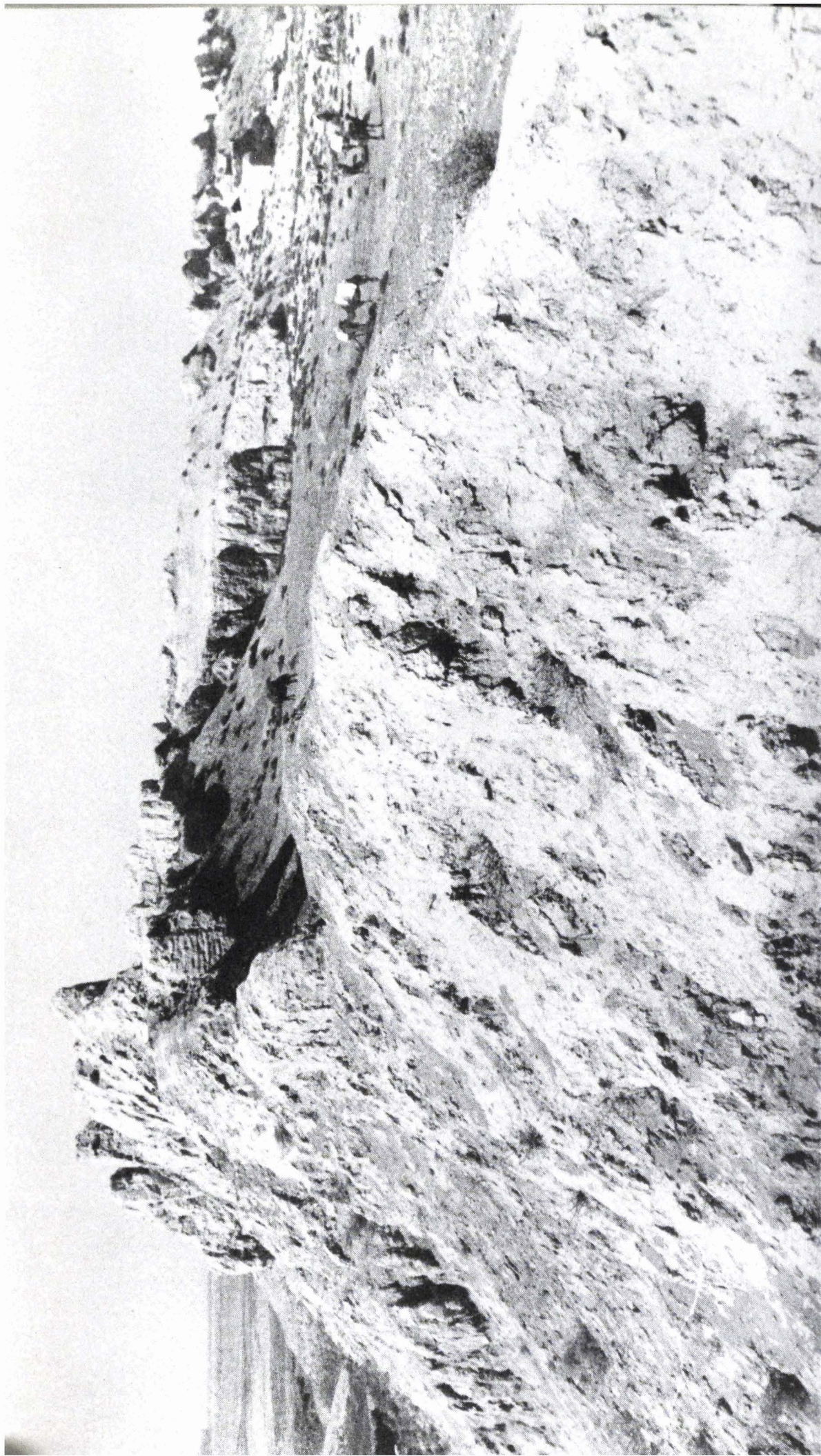
The hotel had an air of British occupation, perhaps from the night-stops of Embassy people on their way to Peshawar, sixty miles away across the Pass. The rooms with their little verandahs were furnished with the same heavy furniture which Indian contractors used to hire out to British army officers. And there was an hygienic orderliness about it all, which went oddly with the patriotic paintwork in the Afghan national colours of red, black and green.

The person responsible for this orderliness was a little bird-like man called Ahmad Shah. For four days I thought he was in sole charge of the place. He cooked my meals, made my bed, cleaned the



13. Balkh. The mosque
Balkh. Nambahar Gate





14. Balkh—ruined wall of 'the Mother of Cities'

room, insisted on giving me a daily massage, gave me an enormous dressing-down whenever I left my door unlocked or my camera lying about. It was only when I left and went to pay my bill that I discovered another bungalow in which lived the real manager and the rest of the four staff. Ahmad Shah merely happened to be the lowest in the hierarchy, and so did all the work.

The evening I arrived, he took off my shoes, produced soap and water, clean towels and toilet paper, and when I was ready, a dinner of rice and mutton, garnished with some raisins and shreds of red pepper. Afterwards I sat at the open window, listening to the sounds of the radio, which carried from the bazaar a quarter of a mile away. It was stiflingly hot; the thermometer showed ninety degrees; all the breath of India came stealing through the gardens from the south.

My fellow guests sat talking on the verandah of the bungalow on the right. They spoke in Pushtu, which I did not understand. Then at last they stopped. A figure came crunching across the gravel and took up a position ten yards from my window. It was the first time I had slept with an Afghan sentry in such close proximity, but his bayonet in the moonlight was a comforting sight after Ahmad Shah's dark hints about 'wicked boys' in the bazaar.

Breakfast appeared, as if by magic, at eight o'clock next morning, and there was a coolness in the air which begged to be used before the day became too hot.

I spent the morning taking photographs. In the park adjoining the hotel was the burned-out shell of Amir Habibullah's palace with its Grecian pillars and twisted plumbing. Beyond it were other parks, with which the town abounded. Finally there were the villas of the present King and Ministers who come down to Jalalabad from November to April to escape the Kabul winter.

In the quarter of the villas I found a road, and the road took me down to the river.

It was the season of low water and the scene possessed a beauty which belonged, once again, not to the aridity of Afghanistan but to the great rivers of India. One stepped from the street of villas into a path through tall green reeds, and immediately the air, from the dust and heat of the town, became cool and moist. The reeds formed a jungle down the length of the river north and south, and continued on the further bank to the foot of a rose-coloured cliff. When one reached the edge of it past marsh flowers and creepers, the water

spread out like a mirror, broken only by the ripples of rising fish and the wading of peasants who crossed the ford with water-jars.

I stayed a while talking with a pair of youths who held hands on the bank; then I went back to explore the bazaar. Of all the Afghan bazaars except Herat it was the gayest and liveliest I had seen. The Indian atmosphere was heightened by the textile shops, rich with silk and imported rayon turban cloths and owned by the Sikhs who for generations have made their home here. The tea-houses were vulgarly bright with colour-prints of saucy ladies from Delhi. The wireless sets blared music from Indian records or the Pakistan Radio at Peshawar.

Beyond the last grocer's shop, with its splash of red capiscums strung up to dry in the sun, the bazaar ended and there was the inevitable open waste, where houses had been demolished to make way for a projected New Town. Where the line of demolition ended were balconied mud houses with lines of drying washing and an air of fiesta. The street was partially blocked with lumps of giant machinery, including two grinding wheels and the rusty remnants of a light railway. At first I thought they belonged to the building work; but when I asked I was told they were part of the original sugar factory, imported by Amanullah and destroyed on arrival by the revolution which had swept him off the throne.

Making a detour I came face to face with a further barrier. An array of paper flags had been strung across the street to a central pole like a maypole. A crowd of some thirty or forty—men and children—were clustered round a house, from which came sounds of celebration and music. When I got closer, I saw that it came from a trio of musicians who sat in the doorway playing on harmoniums. All were young men, of gypsy-like appearance, with gold rings in their left ears. From time to time one of them would get up from his rug and burst into song.

'Come to the wedding,' said someone in the crowd. A bed was brought out, and before I knew where I was, I was sitting on this bed with a pot of green tea before me and a succession of children bringing sugar-coated almonds and cobs of sweet boiled corn.

It had been in progress for twenty-four hours and was due to continue a day or two more. There were no women; for the women's side of the ceremony was taking place inside the house. From time to time, when I chanced to look up, a female face would be looking down inquisitively from the wall on the top of the roof: and at once

it would disappear. The sight of these appearances was the signal for whoever was singing to throw himself into a trance-like ecstasy, closing his eyes and throwing up his face as if to let the notes come flooding from his throat. Then he would sink exhausted, and another would take over.

The effect of this music with its incessant, mystic beat was intoxicating and soporific. My energy ebbed quietly away; I reclined with increasing stupidity on my couch; my camera became buried in a mounting pile of maize stalks. When I returned to my senses, it was mid-afternoon. I made my excuses and hurried back to the hotel, where Ahmad Shah was waiting with my lunch of rice, mutton, raisins and peppers.

In the afternoon, I decided that half an hour's rest would help me regather the strings of the mis-directed day. I lay down on my bed. Ahmad Shah appeared.

'I will give you a massage, Sir.'

I tried to protest, but he rolled me on my face and started to pommel my back in a restful, rhythmic motion. I felt sleepy again. He rolled me on my back and worked my legs up and down, then my arms. I felt drowsier still. I felt so drowsy that when he reached my fingers I merely heard the distant sound of my knuckles cracking.

I slept for two hours.

In the evening I went to the river again.

And I went next morning. The lovers, it seemed, were always in the same place. Nothing changed.

I went to the bazaar. I had a hair-cut—two hours patient trimming with all the luxuries the barber could offer. Dirty cotton wool in the collar of my shirt, a dressing of lemon juice and jui water. When it was finished, I caught a sight of myself in the cracked mirror. I looked like a Chinese—or a Russian. The barber refused to take money 'because you are my guest'.

During this time I listened as best I could for any hint of the rumoured troubles. I talked with soldiers, sat in tea-houses choosing Indian records to be played on the gramophone, shopped in the bazaar for fruit and trinkets, used every chance to turn conversation towards the Pakhtunistan question or the Reform.

But it was no good. The Reform had not yet come to Jalalabad, and the Pakhtunistan question became deader and deader as a topic

of conversation the further one moved from Kabul. All I did was to confirm the news from Kharma and to hear that the army had recently closed part of the frontier area to the east.

Then, on the third day, I had a curious encounter. Coming back to my room I found a big Chevrolet jacked up with one of its wheels off beside the adjoining bungalow. Three grease-stained servants were renewing the brake linings under the direction of a sharp-eyed Afghan who turned out to be the owner.

Ahmad Shah, who had my room key, was not to be found; so I accepted the gentleman's offer of some tea and sat on his bed to watch the engineering proceed. He told me he was greatly travelled and had worked for some years with the General Motors Corporation in Bombay. Having thus established the approach of a man of the world, he inquired rather obliquely if I carried a little whisky—not, he added hastily, that he drank 'wine', but he happened to carry a bottle of tonic and had found that with dilution its restorative powers were enhanced.

He produced a hacking cough and expectorated loudly to reinforce the point.

The appeal was difficult to refuse. I smuggled him my flask, and after dinner he came into my room, returning it empty with a great show of stealth from the folds of his clothes.

'What is your work here?' he asked.

'I see the sights and eat the air,' I said. 'And yours?'

'I inhabit these parts,' he answered, with a vague wave of his hand towards the frontier. 'I travel to and fro. I have fruit trees.'

'What kind of fruit?'

'Oranges, lemon, bananas. . . . It is very good. You should see my fruit, I would take you there, in the Kunar valley.'

I thanked him.

'The medicine was very good. (He cast his eyes round the room.) You do not perhaps have some other medicine. I am not at all well.'

I got out a bottle of TCP.

'You drink it?'

'No. It is a throat disinfectant.'

He took it with an effort to hide his disappointment.

Next day, when I was making plans to leave, I met him again in the heat of the afternoon. The car repairs were finished. His servants were asleep. I sat on the verandah and shared out my cigarettes.

'Look,' he said, presently. 'I will show you something.'

We got up and went to his room, where he carefully shut the door and pulled from beneath the bed a large steel box. With a key from the folds of his clothes he undid the lock and began to remove the contents. A bale of cloth; a shot-gun. A bale of cloth; a Smith and Wesson revolver. A bale of cloth; a pair of Weber automatics. The box was far from exhausted. He gave me the weapons so that I could admire their smooth action.

‘All right?’ he said.

‘What about ammunition?’

He dug in the cloth again and produced a couple of cartridge belts.

‘Ten Afs a round.’

‘And what are they all intended for?’

‘*People*,’ he said.

I could draw him no further. I was supposed to go for a drive with him later, but when the time came, he excused himself by saying he was feeling unwell and simply disappeared with car, servants, guns and everything—as mysteriously as he had come.

I left next morning for Kabul.

My host and companion for the journey back was a Chinese silk-worm expert. His arrival was fortunate, for he had a jeep and the only permission that day to go up north. The road had been closed to everything but jeeps because of a landslide.

We left at ten o’clock.

I liked Doctor Ki from the moment I called in on him, eating a solitary supper, in the room into which he had moved, next to mine. He was seventy-five and travelled with a copious larder of tinned pork sausages from the United Nations commissariat. He told me he had come down to make a report on the prospects of setting up silk production in the Nanaghar, and all being well, they would start in spring.

On the journey he gave me the benefit of his ten years’ work with the Afghans—and as he was the first foreign ‘expert’ to say anything but bad of them I listened with some attention.

‘They learn,’ he said. ‘They learn quickly—once you convince them that something works; but it’s no good if you don’t. That’s what went wrong in the Helmand Valley scheme. But then, again, you need patience; patience to bear with all the red tape and muddle in the government. Three times I’ve been home to Hong Kong to get people to train here to take my place. There are lots who want to

come—young men, good at their job, but used to western efficiency. If I took one half of them, they'd pack up in six months—or start having rows and making everything impossible.

'You British,' he said. '*You* had patience, that's why you were good colonizers.'

We were passing the Kochees again, and he told me to stop the car whenever I wanted to take photographs. When we reached the end of the Sarobi gorge we both got out, told the driver to wait, and walked up the road towards the dam taking pictures. It was a perfectly innocent pursuit—I merely needed something to illustrate technical progress in Afghanistan—but I felt all the time like a criminal.

A hundred yards from the powerhouse we came under the scrutiny of a sentry and I had to stop.

At the tea-house, where we shared his sausages and a great red pomegranate, a delicacy from Kandahar, they told us the road was now completely blocked and we should have to take the old road by Lataband. It would add two hours to the journey, but as it was about to be 'put into decay' I was glad of this last chance of going over it.

We pulled out from the flies and friendly squalor of the tea-house, past the decomposing corpse of a savaged sheepdog, and began to ascend a track of boulders more bone-shaking than anything I had seen.

It was wild country, and once again I wondered at the endless variety of Afghanistan; at how there could be so many variations and beauties in mere waste. Sarobi fell behind us; the lake and the dam, the rough winding road going down to the 'highway', the valley spreading out and diminishing in the distance as we rose high into the hills. They were not 'identifiable' hills with crests or peaks to command a name, but a vast frozen sea of lapidary waves, taking their changing colour of grey and powder blue from the cloudless sky. The driver, who knew the road, kept saying that we should come to the crest; but we seemed never to do so: only to wind round yet another shoulder and find yet another vista of stone stretching far above and below us.

And there were Kochees. The ones we had seen on the road below were a sprinkling by comparison. Here we had hit their main exit route as they came down from the plateau; one group after another of them, with their camels and flocks and the aura of blue smoke from their cooking fires. There were supposed to be two million of

them in the country, and I wondered how on earth anyone had counted.

About three o'clock we came to a place which was really the crest—nine thousand feet—where the road was crossed by the pylon line bringing power from the dam to the capital. I took a picture of the driver on a pinnacle of rock, squatting against a pylon and the cobalt sky, and we began the descent. It did not take long, for we dropped only three thousand feet, and by constantly re-pumping a slow-punctured tyre we managed to reach Kabul about five.

It was that rare hour of beauty, when the city spread out in the mysterious silver-gilt light after sunset. The bazaar streets, the river, the sight and sounds and smell of it all had the unexpected familiarity of 'home'. Mr Ki put me down and helped me to carry in my luggage to the Hotel *de*.

The manager was having his afternoon tea. With an almost automatic movement he reached for his wallet and lent me a five hundred afghani note.

X

ONE of the first things I did when I got back to Kabul was to look up Abdul. I had left it up to now because it seemed almost indecent to intrude on his chagrin at finding Kabul as it really was. But I had to make good my promise or he would think I had let him down.

In the morning I went to the office where his brother worked, presented one of my Persian visiting cards, and a few minutes later was being taken by a messenger through the Shahr-i-Nau. My quest would have been hopeless without the messenger, for apart from the problem of his having no address, Abdur was unconnected with elevated circles and had not yet adopted the new-fangled device of a family name.

The messenger knocked on a door, which was opened by a woman-servant. She hastily pulled tight her veil and asked me to come back in two hours' time.

Next time the door was opened by Abdul himself. But instead of asking me to come in, he came out into the road. He took my cigarette without, for once, saying 'out of friendship'.

'Andreas,' he said. 'It is good to see you. Let us walk a little.'

A little way from the house he apologized for not inviting me inside.

'You know how it is,' he said. 'When we come home our relatives come to see us. It goes on and on. We get no peace. Sometimes it goes on for two months.'

I begged him not to worry.

'And just now the house is full of women with veils.'

'In *veils*?'

He sighed—a sigh which came right from the heart.

'They change the customs, but they cannot change my family. It is not what I expected.'

We turned back towards the house again.

‘Forgive me that I cannot ask you in, Andreas. But I have another house where we can meet. When will you come to see me?’

It was arranged that I should come next evening, to dinner.

I met him by arrangement on a street corner. When we reached the house it was a respectable middle-class villa, single-storeyed with French windows looking on to a dusty square of garden. But it had an almost puritan bareness which I could not help comparing with the colour with which in one way or another the people of the north filled their homes. The furniture was upholstered in sombre green plush; the walls had no decoration but one or two severely framed photographs; the whole place was colder than merely the chill of the autumn evening could account for.

We were alone. The only evidence of any other occupants was an occasional movement at the curtained window which separated us from the kitchen, as some female took a look at me or tapped on the glass to signify the progress of the cooking.

‘And how do things go with you, Abdul?’ I asked.

‘Andreas, they go badly.’

‘You mean your family are shocked at your marriage?’

He gave a frightened start and put his fingers to his lips.

‘*Hush*. I have not yet told them about it. It has not been opportune. You are the only person in Kabul who knows about it.

‘You have not told anybody?’ he added anxiously.

I told him I had not, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

‘But what are you going to do?’ I said. ‘Soon your wife will follow you.’

‘Perhaps I shall wait. Perhaps I shall go back to Germany and finish my study for my doctorate.’

He had never spoken about continuing his studies before and I asked him what he meant.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘it is like this. I have six months more before I make my doctorate. My family sent a letter to me telling me to come home because the government had a post for me, a post of the first quality, a professorship in the university. They said ‘Come home and engage yourself for this job while it is going’. So I came home. Only since I arrived I have found there is no professorship: only a post as a factory manager. A *factory manager*! And for what do I do all my work in Germany if it is only for that!’

‘So when will you go back?’

'Next month perhaps. As soon as I have arranged things. First I must see the Education Ministry, to get them to continue my study grant.'

'And if they do not continue your grant?'

'Then I must pay for myself. That means getting foreign currency. It is not easy. But my wife will help me.'

'Have you heard from her?'

'She writes to me every third day. We use the address of a friend here.'

A tap came on the window and we went in to dinner.

Throughout the meal he was absorbed with the duties of a host. It was not the promised schnitzel, for which he apologized; but a meal of splendidly Afghan proportions and dishes I had never seen during my hotel and tea-house existence. The *pièce de résistance*, on a table overflowing with salads, eggs and crisp brown bread flaps, was a dish called Arshak. It consisted of pastry envelopes like outsize ravioli, filled with mutton and river fish and astringent herbs. The whole thing swam in a rich white sauce.

At the third helping my Afghan manners deserted me and with the best grace I could muster I had to refuse any more.

We finished with a vast bowl of pomegranate seeds and the inevitable green tea. It was nine o'clock, and if I was not to arouse suspicion by knocking up the hotel door-boy I had to leave.

'What will you do next?' he asked.

I said I hoped to go north again and promised to see him as soon as I came back.

The timing of my visit north, if I managed to bring it off, began to cast a shadow. My stay in Afghanistan was already half up. I had booked a seat on a Pan-American plane from Istanbul to London on November 14th, and before that I had to get back across Persia.

Returning from Abdul I passed the Keller Travel Agency office and decided there and then to throw up my Istanbul plan entirely and go home, like Abernethy, through Russia. The Keller Agency is something of a phenomenon in Kabul, like a mirage come to reality. A modern office staffed by smart young Swiss who at the flick of a timetable can fix you a flight to San Francisco or give you the next passage steerage from Calcutta to Pusan.

They told me I could fly by the Soviet Aeroflot to Moscow and London for seventy pounds sterling.

The explanation of this absurdly cheap fare, less than half the cost to London by any other airline, was simple. One changed one's dollars or European currency into afghanis at the free-market exchange rate of forty-three to the dollar, making a saving of half on the official exchange rate. Then, taking advantage of the official *Soviet* exchange rate, which favours the afghani for political purposes, one bought one's ticket at one afghani to two roubles.

The great thing, however, was that as a transit passenger I had no need of a visa. I would not have believed this from anyone but the Swiss who served me. But I took his word. I sent three registered letters to my wife, who was then travelling between Switzerland and Germany, asking her to place seventy pounds in the agency's account in Zurich or Frankfurt. And another two letters, duplicated for safety, to Teheran and Istanbul, cancelling my flight booking with Pan-American.

By burning my boats from Istanbul I had added two weeks to my available time. I only hoped that at least one of my letters would get through and that before I got back to Kabul my wife would have sent off the necessary telegram saying that the money was deposited.

I spent the next few days working out my plans and taking photographs.

Photography was becoming more and more difficult. It was an effort of will to take out the camera. Twice after awkward incidents in the bazaar I had had to clear out quickly, and once my pass had been taken away from me by the sentry at the Ministry of Defence. On the whole it was best to go out at daybreak when one could also take advantage of the horizontal light and dust-free air.

One morning I walked through the empty streets, past the ancient fortress of Bala Hisar and up the winding road to the hill of Nadir Shah's blue-domed mausoleum. Half-way up the hill I got tired of the road and cut up the stony slope to the crest. At the top was a natural platform leading to the mausoleum itself in a little garden of walnut trees.

It was a magnificent solitude. The city spread below me in diamond-sharp detail against the mountains. Across the ridge, towards the buz-kashi ground, the valley was layered with a charcoal morning mist. On the platform of the mausoleum paced a sentry.

I shot off some pictures in black and white, smoked a cigarette till the sun lost its redness, then took a number of colour photo-

graphs. By then the effect of too many cigarettes was playing tricks with my empty stomach. I hastened to get back to the substantial breakfast I had promised myself.

As I came over the ridge to the road-head I walked straight into the parade ground of a small fort. Before I could put away my exposure meter I was surrounded by as wild-looking a party of soldiery as one could hope to meet, some without caps, some without boots, but all with rifles and aggressively fixed bayonets.

I produced my pass, taking care, by now, not to let it out of my hands, and managed with some back-chat to calm their suspicions. Frowns relaxed into smiles, and when it was pointed out to me that such a fine body of men might look well on a photograph when I got home to Inglistan, I duly took half a dozen martial poses against the little mud fort with its look-out tower and battlements.

'To the road!' they commanded when I had finished, with some grim insinuations as to what would happen if I deviated from it. We parted with feelings of mutual respect till I had gone about two hundred yards down the hill and felt reasonably sure I was hidden by a bend.

Below me lay a parade ground, bordered by a line of mud huts, where a company of conscripts was doing physical training. An Afghan company doing P.T. seemed a usable magazine picture, for they had a precision which would have done credit to the Brigade of Guards in London, and their elongated shadows on the dusty earth made a satisfying pattern.

Scarcely had I raised the camera, however, when I was frozen in the act by a torrent of shouting. When I looked over my shoulder I was staring up the barrels of twelve unpleasantly steady rifles, on whose triggers, quite plainly, lay twelve very itchy fingers. I did not look back or touch my camera again.

A few paces on, where I had left the road on my ascent, was a backward-facing notice inscribed

INTERDI TEZONE

I worked out the anagram some days later. Though why it should have been directed at the French was beyond me.

My plans for the north took shape in accordance with the needs of my article. I would go up via Pul-i-Khumri to Kunduz, which was the centre of the cotton industry and lay on the chief Soviet entry

route into Afghanistan. From there I would travel westwards, have another look at Mazar, and follow the Soviet border into Turkestan, where the Russians were supposed to be drilling for Afghan oil.

There was one stage of the itinerary which caused me thought, and that was the last. Turkestan had always seemed a little sinister since an incident which occurred when I was in Afghanistan three years before: the disappearance of a young American and Swedish girl, travelling between Mazar and Andkhoi.

They had set out from Mazar, travelling in a bus or lorry of which nobody took the number, and had simply failed to arrive. Afghan police and teams from the American embassy had covered their whole route, vainly interrogating drivers and tribesmen. The Afghans suggested that they had wandered into Russia. But ultimately the truth was all too manifest—they had been murdered.

As a precaution, I risked another clandestine visit to the Embassy to tell them where I was going.

Next day I called at Mr Tarzi's office and filed an application for the journey, saying I wished to visit Kunduz to see something of the WHO anti-malaria work being done by Dr Kardas and Mr Rooney and to go on to Turkestan to photograph the carpet-weavers of Andkhoi and Maimana. The latter must have had a conspicuously hollow ring about it, for—as I later discovered—carpet-making was about the one thing one would *not* see in Andkhoi and Maimana, though both give their names to some of the finest carpets in the world. But fortunately the Afghans of Kabul are loath to travel in the wilder parts of their country, and it passed without notice sufficiently for me to get the necessary letter to the Ministry for my pass. Thus armed, I watched the process take its way, and the pass was forthcoming in a couple of days.

On October 26th I went to the Post Office and booked a bus seat on the first stage of the journey to Kunduz the following day. My last act meanwhile was to call at the Planning Ministry on a visit made possible by an introduction from Mr Tarzi.

I had always been in a dilemma about dealings with government departments. It had seemed that I could make my exploration of Afghanistan in two ways. Either I could do so on the respectable level, going from department to department, interviewing ministers, accepting the official treatment and hospitality I was fairly certain would be forthcoming. Or else I could do it the way I had. Time

alone made the two incompatible, and I chose the latter as likely to reveal more facts.

However, there were a number of questions about the national economy, and particularly the current Five Year Plan, which I could hardly hope to answer by myself, and it seemed logical at least to try to get an official answer.

With Mr Tarzi's introduction I called on the departmental head of the Planning Ministry, Mr Shalizi.

He received me courteously but with suspicion. For a long time I thought he would never come down to the matters in hand. He recalled a number of books which had been written about Afghanistan, and the scandalous things they said about it, particularly 'our customs'. I wondered what he was getting at. Then he mentioned juvenile prostitution.

'These stories are just untrue—pure invention,' he declared.

I thought of Herat and wondered whether to accost him with it. But perhaps I had been victim of an unusual circumstance. Anyway, I wanted to get on.

I produced the first of my questions, based on the targets of the Five Year Plan as they had been described in an official booklet two years before.

He held up his hand.

'Please,' he said. 'For that we need some time. Perhaps you could let us have the questions in writing.'

I felt I was being fobbed off, but there was nothing I could do about it. Late that night, when I had finished packing, I got out a sheet of foolscap and set out my questions in copperplate handwriting.

Are the targets of the Plan still valid?

What progress has been made with the six important dams at Kunduz, Kokcha, Sardeh, Paltu, Kharwar, Machalghu?

What has become of the irrigation canal and dam to be built at Jalalabad?

How much oil has been produced from the efforts of Soviet prospectors in the northern oilfield?

What has been the cost in foreign loans and credits?

Then, having woken up by chance in the middle of the night, I got out of bed and inserted two other questions:

How many kilometres have been completed of the Salang road and tunnel?

What progress has been made with the new Oxus river ports of Qizil Qala and Kilift?

The last were things which every military attaché in Kabul had been seeking to learn for the past twelve months and would probably cost me my freedom of movement if the matter caught up with me. But I took a chance, sealed up the packet for delivery, and added a note that I would be back in two weeks to collect the answers.

At nine o'clock next morning, at last without Abernethy and thoroughly alone, I set out by bus for Pul-i-Khumri. In my bags were my last four tins of cola chocolate and the little Persian knife which, as always, was my only weapon.

XI

THOUGH the sun was as hot as ever, the farthest mountains as we came up the road to Charikar had a powdering of snow. And the sky was flecked, for the first time, with traces of fluffy white cloud. There were other signs, too, of the approaching winter. The forests in the foothills had turned, since my last visit, to a vast waving carpet of yellow and copper, and the little tea-houses where we had stopped in the Ghorband Valley were closed. Even the last of the Kochees seemed to have left.

Just before Shibar I met a party of four Japanese, festooned with cameras, coming back in an Afghantour Landrover from visiting the Buddhist statues at Bamyán. They wrung my hand and assured me that it was good to meet a western face.

When they were gone we ran into a succession of heavy Russian trucks coming down from the border with cable-drums and radar equipment; the continual pulling into the roadside to let them pass put us back an hour, and by the time we reached the foot of the pass it was dark.

It was decidedly cold, and inwardly I cursed the pair of sentries who were holding up the traffic with loaded rifles. At seven we were allowed through the road block. As we climbed bend after bend, I got out my small thermometer and watched it drop from forty degrees to thirty-five, and from thirty-five to freezing. I read the mercury by the headlamps of the truck behind us. The last time I had a chance to see it, it was down to twenty-nine. We were still climbing, and even in my gloves my hands grew too numb to hold it.

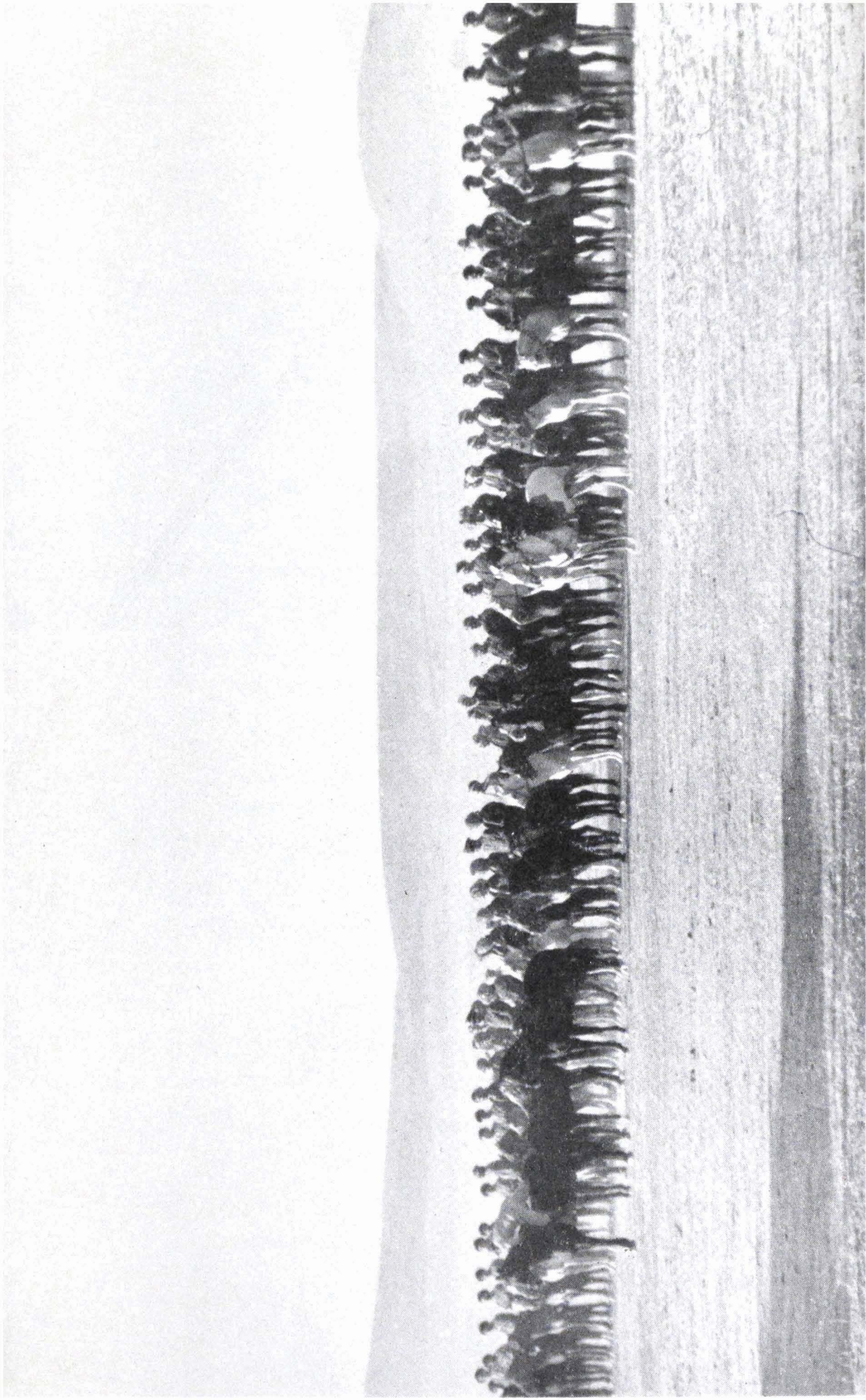
The gorge beyond was filled with an icy wind. The sky, which before had been lit with stars, was a solid black. The roadside stream had risen to a roar which was audible above the engine. We continued to pass the Russian trucks, their throaty engines roaring and reverberating against the rock walls ahead of them. More often than



15. *Buz-Kashi.* Afghan band (in German uniform) waits to greet the King.



King Zahir Shah (and grand-daughter) arrive for the match



16. Buz-Kashi. Teams lined up for the beginning of the game

not, there was no room to pass, and since they would not give way, we were forced to reverse in the darkness, the bacha waving his storm lantern as we moved perilously on to the loose edge of the road above the chasm.

All this I observed from my roof-top seat, where I kept company with the bacha and shared my cigarettes with him. And my thoughts returned to the question which had exercised me often enough in Afghanistan: what did the Afghans really think of their pressing northern neighbours? On my previous journey when I had broached the subject, I had generally met with the bland assertion that 'all peoples are our friends—except Pakistan'. Or sometimes, if there were not too many people about, a venerable old man who had migrated from the Soviet Republics during the religious persecutions of the 1920's would murmur darkly about the Russians being 'no friend of the Mussulman'. That, indeed, was the attitude which prevailed throughout the north, if I was to believe what I was told in Kabul. But it was not enough to go on, and I looked for some way of penetrating Afghan defensiveness and learning the truth at first hand.

The problem, however, was temporarily shelved by a rather unnerving encounter.

At nine o'clock, just when I felt my body would never thaw out of its stiffness, we pulled into a village about forty miles short of Doab. I could hardly contain my relief as I pushed aside my blanket and climbed unsteadily down the iron ladder to the ground. Of the three available tea-houses I chose the smallest. The walls were painted with jolly red frescoes on the single-minded motif of rifles and daggers, and in the centre of the floor an iron stove was roaring on a diet of resinous pine wood. Of the fourteen or so people sitting round the walls, half were Hazaras.

Taking the place that was made for me close to the stove, I ordered a plate of fried eggs, which was all that could be offered. It was brought by a lively-faced Hazara lad who hovered round, adjusting the fire, throwing in bits of wood, keeping close to so interesting an exhibit as myself. There was also a young Hazara girl, about twelve years old, who sat with her father—evidently the owner of the place—on a platform opposite. She too stared at me through the firelight and lamplight, with narrow Mongol eyes in a small, round face.

These children, between them, fascinated me with their beauty. The other occupants of the room sat turbaned and facing the fire, so

that I was hardly aware of them; or even of the newcomer, who came in, took his place beside me, squatting on his haunches and lighting a cigarette.

'Eggs?' said the boy. 'It's all we have. With a little fat or with much?'

'Much fat,' said the man, showing off his affluence.

I knew his voice. As he threw back his turban-tail, the firelight caught his face and he was looking full at me.

It was my driver of the Ziss to Mazar—the possessor of twenty blank exposures of Leica film.

There were few things for which I was less prepared. And his whole demeanour, equivocal at the best of times, raised every kind of doubt. Had he yet developed these films?

'Your health,' he asked. 'It is good?'

I returned the interest.

'Where do you go?'

'To the north.—And you?'

'To the south.'

'It is indeed strange that we meet at this place.'

'It is happy and fortunate that we do so.'

'And have you,' I could not forbear asking, 'yet visited Kabul?'

The answer remained tantalizingly in abeyance, for just then the boy appeared with a pan of eggs, swimming in an inch and a half of fat.

For the next five minutes he was fully occupied with mopping up the eggs and fat with great hunks of bread.

When he had finished, he gave a burk, called for a pot of green tea, and accepted one of my cigarettes.

'My friend in Kabul tells me that my photographs are ready,' he said. 'The day after tomorrow I shall be at his shop to collect them. They will be good photographs?'

'I hope so,' I said.

'You have your camera. You would not like to take some more?'

But just then from the road came the bacha's departure cry of *burru barkhai!* I had never been more glad to hear it.

'God be with you.'

'And with you. One day we may meet again.'

The thought of it pursued me for days like a nightmare, but in the event we never did.

Soon after leaving we passed a big recess in the rock face where

forty or fifty lorries were withdrawn into a kind of laager for the night. They did well to stop there, for the road was black and treacherous and shortly afterwards, coming round a bend, our headlamps lit on the wreckage of an accident. A truck had gone over the edge of the road and dropped forty feet down the bank.

It had happened a few nights before. It had come round the bend without brakes or lights, with eight people riding on the load of grain sacks. In the somersault down the rocks they had all been killed. The driver (as generally happens) had bolted into the hills, leaving the little bacha to extricate and bury the bodies, whose graves now stood there, eight stony mounds caught briefly in the light, with a scrap of burial flag torn by the bitter wind.

The sight remained chastening, till we reached the warm security of the Doab rest house. There I shared a room with an elderly merchant of great charm and courtesy, who was travelling with his ten-year-old son. He was the kind of figure who showed Afghanistan at its best. Before going to bed he said his prayers; the lad climbed into bed with him, and they slept like saints till the morning sun came beating through the window and it was time to be off.

The late start began a disarrangement of my schedule which multiplied in the days ahead. But it gave me a view of this northern part of the gorge, which I had formerly missed in the darkness. Great pink escarpments rose up on the left in the cool morning air, like dinosaurs rising and stretching their backs on some primaeval day of creation. Then with the sun climbing high above us we passed through the valley of margs and bracken and batted down the dusty road to Doshi.

As soon as I saw the roofs of Doshi in the distance, I got out the Leica. But once again I failed to get the photograph I wanted. The merchant's son had joined me and was prancing about, thinking I was taking his picture. Just as we reached the Russian bridging site, he lost his balance and nearly fell off the bus. By the time I had grabbed him and hauled him back, the photograph was lost.

We did not stop, as formerly, in the bazaar near the bridge, but raced on a mile or so further till an electrical fault caused the driver to pull up at a wayside tea-house.

As the fault would take an hour to repair, I used the pretext of needing some cigarettes and walked back to the shops.

It was a lengthy walk, and I was dogged towards the end by an Afghan officer. But the view from the bazaar was worth it.

There had been quite spectacular progress on the bridge since my last visit. In particular heavy girders had been laid across the first three piers. They were about three feet in cross section. And the road appeared to be getting a solid base of concrete, which I could not help comparing with the ramshackle engineering of the road to Jalalabad. It looked, in short, like a road which could carry a good deal more than lorry traffic.

We reached Pul-i-Khumri about three in the afternoon. I had intended to look for a truck and go on to Kunduz at once. But the lateness of the hour and a queasiness in my stomach, which was beginning to revolt at the endless mutton fat, persuaded me to stop the night.

I brought down my luggage, said goodbye to my friend the merchant, and took a ghari to the 'Club'.

As I came over the dam, I was welcomed in by another enormous explosion from the blasting operations.

The hotel, however, had an air of desolation. There was no sign of my Uzbek clerk, nor of the mapping party, who by now had gone on. The permanent Russians, the Czechs and Germans were out at work. A scruffy servant conducted me with pride to a room in the main wing.

I had not seen this side of the hotel. It was finished, like the exterior, in pre-war German style, with a wealth of wrought-iron work and bare pinewood. There ought really to have been some hunting trophies and beer barrels about, but the best that could be done was a fancy rope to serve as a handrail up the stairs.

My room had a small verandah with a magnificent view across the gardens and river to the hills. The twin beds had table-lamps. In the adjoining bathroom one could take a cold shower.

An evening in so much luxury, without even Nikolai to keep me company, was more than I could bear. Stopping only to shave and change my dust-caked shirt I went off to the factory where I managed to find one of the Germans from my earlier visit. He was a pleasant young man, about my own age, and struck me, like most of the Germans I met in Afghanistan, as an excellent advertisement for his country.

He invited me to spend the evening with him.

I also fell in with a sturdy middle-aged Rhinelander, who walked with the gait of a ship's engineer and wore a jaunty cap above his

boiler-suit. I asked him how he found his Afghan pupils. His verdict conflicted somewhat with that of Dr Ki, and in fairness I must quote it :

‘Man, I have worked all my life in the Orient; in Africa, Egypt, India, Arabia. And believe me, a dumber, more thick-headed butter-fingered lot than the Afghans doesn’t exist anywhere in the world—even in the Yemen. How they manage, God only knows.’

I felt sorry for him. It was not given to everybody to exercise patience. He longed for sausage and sauerkraut, and morning, noon and night he was obliged to dine in dreary solitude on a rotation of eggs and rice.

Hans, to give him a name (for his real one, like many others, was ripped out of my diary when I left to come home through Russia) had a room in the ‘Russian’ block of the hotel: the annexe across the courtyard, which I had seen on my first visit. It was a bleak room basically, but he had transformed it with *gemuetlichkeit*. The walls were hung with cover pictures from *Vogue*, the lamps discreetly shaded with raffia and coloured paper, the chairs made bright with Turcoman kelims. The masterpiece was the high bare ceiling, which he had masked with a framework of bamboo.

Over a bottle of schnaps, for which we were joined by one of his colleagues, our talk touched on topics which before had been impossible.

Pul-i-Khumri, it seemed, was a far from happy home for its Czech and Russian residents. The groups never spoke to each other, never set a foot in each other’s separate social clubs. When the Russians held a film show, the Czechs stayed stonily away. The same cold shoulder was given by the Russians to ‘experts’ of other nationalities—chiefly Polish and Rumanian—who used Pul-i-Khumri as a staging-post.

The Rumanians were helping with the exploration of the Turkestan oilfield; and thereby hung a curious history. The exploration had been started by a Swedish concern under contract to the Afghan government. Two years before, just when the chief oil-bearing areas had been located, the Afghans had thrown out the Swedes and brought in the Russians. From that time forward, in spite of the vast propaganda surrounding it, not a single strike had resulted in the production of a barrel of oil for the market. The circumstance had given rise to a rumour (not unknown to worried Afghan government officials) that the oilfield was an extension on a southerly decline of

the newly-developed Soviet oilfield above the Oxus, and that to exploit it commercially would amount, in the end, to pulling the plug from the Soviet basin.

At some point in the evening I happened to mention the rumours that were flying through Kabul about the Reform.

‘It’s a pity you’re leaving tomorrow,’ said Hans’ friend. ‘You could have photographed an historic occasion—the arrival of the first women workers at the Pul-i-Khumri textile plant.’

I nearly spilled my drink.

‘Women *workers*?’ I said. ‘How many?’

‘It’s a modest start. Only two of them, and they’re rather young.’

‘How young?’

‘Eleven and twelve years old.’

I laughed.

‘Wait till you get up to Kunduz,’ he said. ‘You’ll find they’ve been going a fortnight.’

But there was more to it than that.

The Reform had been pressed rather hard at Pul-i-Khumri. Ghari-drivers had been threatened with a fifty-afghani fine if they carried a woman passenger in a chadduri. And women in veils were being refused service at the factory workers’ co-operative where they bought their flour and other small necessities on a cut-price coupon system. The men had said they would rather shop elsewhere than have their wives ‘dishonoured’.

All this, which the Germans had got from their workers, went far beyond the policy of ‘non-compulsion’ supposedly laid down by the government, and perhaps it explained why I never saw a woman in Pul-i-Khumri, veiled or otherwise.

I said goodbye to the Germans at midnight, promising to look them up if I ever came back there. But it was hardly likely. Their contracts were shortly coming up for renewal and they were going to be replaced by Czechs.

Before I left Pul-i-Khumri I had a chance to realize another small project. I had the figures of the Russian and other technicians at Pul-i-Khumri, Doshi, and one or two other places. But I needed something more on which to base an estimate of the total throughout Afghanistan and check it against the passport figures.

Plainly I should never have time to go round all the sites of the various projects. The only way open was to get some firm figures of entries and exit by road.

Pul-i-Khumri was ideally suited for this purpose; for it stood at the junction of the two chief entry routes from the north—the old route coming down from Termez and Mazar, and the new road from Qizil Qala and Kunduz. Anyone making this journey was more or less bound to put up at Pul-i-Khumri for the night.

Also, in obedience to Afghan bureaucracy, all were obliged to sign the hotel register with its manifold columns for name, nationality, profession, business, place of origin, final destination *et cetera, et cetera*.

After breakfast I managed to get possession of this fascinating volume for half an hour.

My first instinct was to go back to the entry of my own name twenty-six days before. It involved the turning of a fair number of pages. In the interval, I noticed, the hotel had witnessed the passage of eleven Russians bound for Kabul and thirteen for other destinations.

In the full month, there had been thirty Russians; fourteen assorted East and Central Europeans; three Frenchmen, one Turk (Dr Kardas), and three Englishmen, Mr Rooney, Abernethy and myself.

I had got back to February when I was interrupted by one of the servants who asked if I wished to pay my bill. But I had seen enough to establish that the Russians, Czechs, Poles and Rumanians were coming in southwards at just under thirty a month. I received my change, signed myself out, and in answer to a request to write something in the 'remarks' column, entered my opinion that the Pul-i-Khumri Club was the Claridges of Central Asia.

I was sorry to leave. Had I brought a plumber and a hamper of my own provisions, it might well have been true.

The Kunduz road forks off in the bazaar to follow the river on its eastern bank. I went across the dam again to the place where the trucks pull in. There were three or four waiting, all headed north, while their drivers lounged in a tea-house. For once I had a buyer's market so far as the fare was concerned.

It cost twenty-five afghanis (about four and sixpence) for five hours' journey with seat in the cab and everything *grande luxe*. I chose a big petrol wagon going to re-tank at Qizil Qala, whose driver was more convincing than his rivals in his promise to be the first to move off.

'*Shoravi?*' he asked off-handedly. 'Russian?'

It was not the first time it had happened. In the north, I was taken for a Russian almost automatically. So much so that since my deliberations on the way up, and my concern about what the Afghans thought of the Russians, I had played with the idea, which seemed rather foolhardy, of passing myself off as a Russian in an attempt to discover the truth.

The question thus caught me at an unguarded moment. Before I had reflected on the possible consequences, I nodded my head and said yes. The thing was settled and there was no going back on it.

'Well,' he said. 'Let us go.'

The *grande luxe* was not what I had bargained for. The tank was empty and we bounced like peas in a whistle. The driver's mate preferred to stand on the running board, clinging to the door in a position which threatened every moment to throw him under the wheels.

Some way out of the town we passed some Czechs working on a giant grading machine for the cement works and tipping quantities of gravel from their big Tatra trucks. Then it was open country.

Apart from its stony surface the road was a fair engineering job, five metres wide. From time to time we passed groups of Russian surveyors in trilby hats who were quickly pointed out to me as my compatriots. Construction gangs were further improving the road, lifting it up from the nearby river, and building concrete flood courses. This, and not the Mazar road, was obviously getting priority as the approach route to the Salang.

'What is your work in Kunduz?' asked the driver.

'Photography,' I said, trying to explain away the camera and gadget bag which anywhere else would immediately have labelled me American.

'For the Russian newspapers?'

'No. For a book—on modern Afghanistan.'

He approved of it.

'You should see the road to Qizil Qala,' he said. 'It is even better than this one—all the way.'

After an hour we came to Baghlan—a quiet tree-lined town with a cotton plant built in the earlier industrial period, long before the war. We took on petrol and, much to my regret, another passenger—a middle-aged man, a Pathan like the driver, who nursed an armful of new teapots and obliged me to sit practically on the gearbox.

We stopped only once again, at a tea-house about fifteen miles



17. Buz-Kashi riders
fighting for the 'goat'



18. *Buz-kashi team leader*

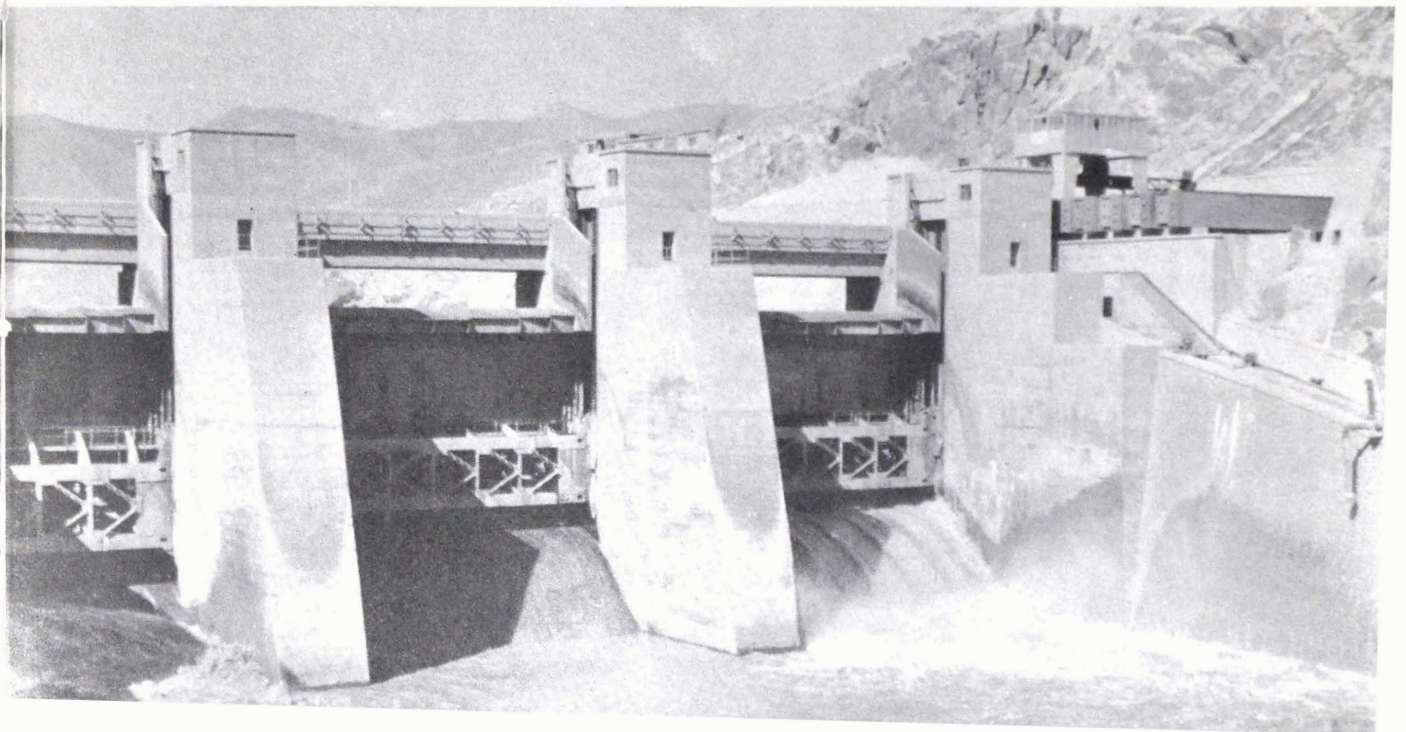
Blocked road to Jalalabad





19. *Road from Kabul to the Khyber Pass*

Sarobi. German-built dam





20. *Sarobi. View from a tea-house*

Jalalabad. Watering streets at sunset



further on, where the country had blossomed into snowy-white cotton fields and women were picking the bushes. We got out, and in answer to the inevitable questions the driver introduced me as a Russian. It was my first time in the part and I wondered how it would go.

The result was surprising. Contrary to what I had been led to believe in Kabul, I met no dark looks or hostility. The moment I sat down I became the centre of a crowd of onlookers more friendly and curious than any I had encountered as an Englishman. One man in particular attached himself to me: the driver of a truck going south.

‘Russki?’ he said, and pointed his finger at my thermos flask. ‘You drink vodka?’

‘*Kam, kam,*’ I said, unconsciously imitating Nikolai’s sing-song Persian.

He laughed. ‘*Kam, kam* nonsense! You drink *much* vodka. Vodka makes you happy.’ He gripped an imaginary steering wheel, waving his head and body in a charade of intoxication. ‘Vodka very good—for the Shoravi. But the Afghan no. The poor old Afghan gets nothing.’

He pulled a sticky brown bottle from his clothing and leaned forward. ‘Now I have here some tonic . . .’

We left an hour later and after making a detour round a Russian construction camp reached Kunduz at three in the afternoon. The town was dominated by the buildings of the cotton factory. A wide bazaar street led down past the mosque till we turned in by a flourishing tea-house and entered a big truck yard.

The driver unroped my suitcase from the chassis and I wondered how long my ‘Russian’ adventure could continue.

The first problem was to find a hotel. The ghari-driver looked puzzled when I asked him to take me there. Then with a shrug he jerked off through the bazaar, back past the factory, into a cantonment of pine trees and villas.

At the end of a dark avenue stood a building with a wrought-iron gate. KUNDUZ COTTON COMPANY HOSTEL it said in English. But the boy in the lobby addressed me in German.

‘You want a room? *Entschuldigen Sie*, we have none.’

It was not as bad as it seemed, however. The German community had come in to say goodbye to some colleagues whose contracts were

being terminated. As soon as they had slept off the after-effects, I would be able to move in.

Meanwhile I went in search of Kardas and Rooney.

The hospital where they had their headquarters was about a quarter of a mile away, and on the way I met a young man in a karakul cap.

‘Whom do you seek?’

‘The Turkish malaria doctor.’

‘I will take you to him—I am a medical assistant.’

‘You live here?’

‘No, I am from Pakistan—and as soon as I can I shall go back there.’

‘Why?’

‘These people will not let me work unless I take Afghan nationality.’

‘How did you come here?’

‘I came without passport across the hills; it is not difficult. There are many interesting things I could tell you about this country.’

He was personable enough, but there was something a little too facile about our way of meeting which made me distrust him. At the hospital gate I bade him goodbye.

Dr Kardas was working at his microscope, in a little United Nations laboratory effectively screened from the public eye by the *Afghan* malaria office.

‘Welcome!’ he said. ‘I thought you would not come.’

For the next three days, or rather nights, I was the recipient of Dr Kardas’ overwhelming hospitality. Every evening when he returned to his bungalow his servant—a former cook at the Turkish Embassy in Kabul—produced sumptuous meals of orange soup and yoghurt and stuffed vine leaves. And over coffee and whisky he talked of the poverty in the valleys and plateaux where he went with Rooney by Landrover and horseback on the unending task of extending the malaria map.

I would have given a great deal to go there, but their fieldwork had ended the week before and now he and Rooney were going through the slides, making up the annual report to be forwarded to headquarters at Delhi.

There were places where they were the first Europeans to enter. Areas where even the local governor had no idea of the number of

villages. Villages without names, three miles from water. Communities where money was unheard of and the currency was bowls of solidified mutton fat. Perhaps, after all, this was the Afghanistan I should have visited: but I had to take Kardas' word for it and let him be my reporter.

In the daytime, from breakfast to supper, I plied the bazaars of Kunduz, keeping up my Russian nationality in which I was helped by the lucky chance that nobody had asked me to sign the hotel register.

It was predominantly a Turcoman and Uzbek town. Its people were friendly. Its life centred wholly round the factory. The trucks came in daily with their great black sacks of raw cotton. Morning and afternoon in two shifts, the people went to the factory to process the cotton for shipment to the mills. And by Afghan standards it was well-to-do.

There were plentiful butchers' shops, with their piles of goats' and sheep's heads; dusty patisseries with trays of sugared mutton-fat cakes; shops of the industrious Turcoman drapers rich enough to overlay the local bales of cloth with the more glamorous stuffs of Russia, India, England and Japan. And there were the Tajik tea-houses. Whenever I entered them their wireless sets were blaring out the heady music of the Soviet Tajikstan radio across the border.

Once in the evening I entered a dusty little grocery in search of cigarettes.

'Shoravi?' said the shopkeeper. 'You would like to hear Moscow music?' And he tuned in with a flick of his hand to a powerful European Russian station relaying a string quartet.

What was I to make of such friendliness?

First, I had to admit that I was probably unlike other Russians. I walked alone, more freely and happily than the inevitable pairs I had seen in the bazaars at Mazar and Kabul. And then there was the natural Afghan hospitality; was I just a recipient of this, as I would have been as an Englishman?

Later, when I was back in Kabul and tried to put it all in perspective, I wondered about it. Till I remembered the questions.

From the very outset of my brief career as a Russian I was bombarded with questions. They ranged from the size of Russian corn-cobs to the erotic pleasures of Moscow. From the ease of divorce in Soviet courts to the rainfall in Tashkent and Termez. They imposed a double strain I had not foreseen: first on my

imagination, since I had never visited Russia; and secondly on my conscience. For in this curious game I felt strangely bound to do credit to my adopted country.

‘What do the Russians think of the Americans?’ I was suddenly asked as I sat one day at the truck-yard tea-house throwing crumbs to the moulting parrot. ‘Do the Russians want Peace?’ ‘Are you our *brothers*?’ ‘How many mosques do you have in your country?’

It was not easy to produce the answers, and might well have been impossible had not the phrases of oratory—‘world peace’, ‘co-existence’, ‘sputnik’, ‘lunik’—been served up to me by my questioners themselves. But with a little improvization I did not make too bad a job of it.

Perhaps I even overdid it a little.

‘And what has become of the good *Agha Bulganin*?’ asked one of my questioners slyly, recalling the visit of Bulganin and Khrushchev four years before.

What, indeed? I hung my head. *Agha Bulganin* was not the good man we had innocently supposed. He had gone where he could reflect on his errors.

Inevitably the truck-yard tea-house became my ‘base’. I was forced into it by the rain, which started one morning when I woke up to find a kind of twilight with the sun withdrawn behind a blanket of cloud.

While I was dressing the first heavy drops fell, stabbing and dissolving the hard, dry mud of the hotel compound. A minute or two later it was rattling on the roof, streaming off the eaves and forming great pools in the barren irrigation ditches.

I watched it dispiritedly, quite unprepared, till I found a ghari to take me to the tea-house where a handful of locals sat damply huddled round the communal bubble pipe.

From where I sat there were two views of interest. The first was what might be called, without nicety, the town convenience. It was no *Clochemerle*: just a simple square hole in the middle of the road, in line with the jui which crossed underneath at this point. In each direction, upstream and downstream, was the open trench where people washed their feet, hands and faces, dishes, babies, gharis, bicycles and cooking-pots. Gentlemen queued up to use it, loosened their trousers, squatted with only their heads above the road; and all the time the ablutions in the self-same water continued unabashed.

The other view was that of Russian trucks arriving.

Kunduz was the Afghan drivers' tea-stop as they brought down materials for the Salang tunnel project. Every half hour or so the great articulated lorries would come lumbering in from Qizil Qala to park outside the tea-house while the drivers refreshed themselves. They carried their loads in great wooden crates with stencilled labels indicating the part of the object for which they were intended.

Most of them—from the condition of the road beyond Doshi or from Afghan driving—were in a state of disrepair far in advance of their age. They came in with punctured tyres, broken springs, erratically firing engines. Attempts to repair them were made in some confusion. They would be jacked up, and when the repair had been made and the driver moved off again, he would as often as not forget to take the jack down and it would buckle some part of the chassis.

At length a truck arrived, a Ziss diesel, staggering in with injector pump trouble. And the inevitable happened. I was asked to diagnose what was wrong. The parts were dismantled: blower fan, fuel filter, injector unit.

'Is it *kharab*?' asked the driver, holding up a piece of apparatus I had never seen before in my life. It *looked* *kharab*: chances were equal that it was. As a Russian I would lose all face if I didn't know.

'*Kharab*,' I said with decision. 'You must send up to Qizil Qala for a new one.'

He thanked me profusely and went off to see about it.

It struck me that I ought soon to move on.

But before I left Kunduz there was something else I wanted to see—and if possible to photograph. For the reports at Pul-i-Khumri about the progress of the Reform were outstripped by the reality.

I had scarcely arrived when I heard that no less than twenty women were working at the factory. They were not 'working women', however: but wives of management officials, who had been ordered 'to set a national example'. Feelings, as might be expected, were running high about it.

To get into the factory I took my camera, dropped my assumed nationality and presented myself at the office of the manager. No one could have been more hospitable. There were, he explained, four factories in one: the cotton plant, the oil plant, the soap factory, and the china factory. I could photograph all I wished, and he would put me in the hands of his technical adviser, Herr Kychenthal.

Herr Kychenthal turned out to be a German of the old generation.

With his Panama hat and tropical jacket he stepped from a world that had vanished—the world before Hitler, and Soviet expansionism, and I C A. He had been twenty-seven years in Afghanistan, since 1932.

He showed me over everything from the old Russian steam press to the latest German electrical equipment for extracting cottonseed oil. The latter had been shipped up the Baltic to Leningrad and overland to Qizil Qala. ('Better and quicker than via Karachi,' said Herr Kychenthal—though he had never been allowed up there.) There was a businesslike chemical laboratory and a newly imported machine for making the first Afghan toilet soap. But the *pièce de résistance* was the china factory, run under the direction of two Japanese.

'I think this will interest you,' he said in his sure deliberate English as he led me towards it through the compound. 'We have here the first women workers in Afghanistan.'

We entered a shed with two long lines of benches and throwing wheels, so gloomy that at first I scarcely realized where we were. It was mid-afternoon and according to the timing of the shifts it should have hummed with activity; but it did not. The ladies (and who could blame them?) were all withdrawn in a side-room, drinking tea. They wore an overall version of the New Uniform, and stared at me far more unabashedly than I ever dared at them.

Only one, solitary and devoted, remained at her wheel with the application of an arts and crafts student. The only man in the place—a young foreman—stood five yards away from her, demonstrating how to fit a handle to a pot.

He hurried over and held a whispered conversation with Herr Kychenthal. As I understood it, Herr Kychenthal was anxious that I should photograph the ladies at work. The foreman would have liked this too, but feared the repercussions. In the end I set up the camera on its tripod and went through the motions of taking a picture of the foreman at work, while the lens, unknown to himself and Herr Kychenthal, was focused on the lone Stakhanovette.

I left Kunduz at two in the afternoon, in a cold drizzle, cramped in a truck for Mazar. I was stuck on the narrow seat between the crew of two and the owner's agent. It was precisely the kind of truck I had been warned against: with patched tyres, visibly loose steering, badly overloaded. No one had taken the number of it. I was also feeling sick as a result of Dr Kardas' hygienic cooking, for which quite obviously my stomach was unprepared.

At the first opportunity I took a stiff dose of chlorodine and sank into a stupor from its opium content. In this stupor I heard my companions discussing me. The driver and his assistant were Pathans; the owner's agent was an Hazara.

The role of the Hazara surprised me. But there is a custom in the north to employ them as stewards because of their honesty and business sense. This one sat almost shyly in the corner of the cab, speaking only to decide whom we should pick up as passengers.

It had been my aim to travel to Mazar along the desert road fifteen miles south of the frontier. But the rain had turned it into a quagmire. Instead I found myself travelling down to Baghlan again.

As we went on my sickness increased. By the time we reached Baghlan I was almost fainting. There was a hotel there built in wedding-cake style—a little rotunda on an artificial mound, with a spiral road running up to it. As it came in sight my resolution left me and I vowed that at the police barrier I would tell them I was sick and spend the night there.

The barrier came. I got out, sat on a sodden bench, holding my head between my hands to fight off an attack of vomiting. It lasted so long that the business with the police was over and finished before I could get out a word. As people started back into the truck again I managed to say weakly that I was feeling unwell and would like a ghari.

'Ghari?' said the policeman. 'Why a ghari?'

'I will go to the hotel.'

'There is no hotel.'

'But I saw it.'

'You must be mistaken—it is time to go!'

Beyond protest I was bundled back into the truck and driven off into the rain-lashed twilight.

When I came to, we had pulled into the side of the road thirty miles from Pul-i-Khumri. It seemed we were waiting for another truck behind us. Presently we got tired of it, the mechanic got out, picked up a handful of stones, and laid an arrow pointing off the road to a wretched track running westward across country.

All this looked ominous; and as I was now a Russian again, it suddenly occurred to me that Russians might logically be subject to the same risks as an Englishman.

The immediate dangers proved physical rather than personal, however.

We bumped off the road into the darkness of the wilds. The track all but vanished and before we had gone a mile the dynamo stopped charging. Without headlamps we crossed a narrow bridge and stopped on the further hillside for repairs. They were not very effective. Every five minutes afterwards we stopped to clean the armature by the light of a glimmering hurricane lamp, at the same time making little cairns and arrows to guide the truck behind. The track climbed up and up, circuiting hills and depressions, branching into indistinguishable forks, becoming for long periods completely and utterly lost.

‘And where shall we get tonight?’ I asked the mechanic as we broke down for the fourteenth time in the dark and the rain.

‘Kismetabad,’ he replied.

I had not heard of it; it appeared on no map. And then I saw his fatalistic joke. Kismet-abad—the place God wishes. A nice touch, something one might almost apply to Afghanistan as a whole as it groped through the night of uncertainty to its unknown political destination.

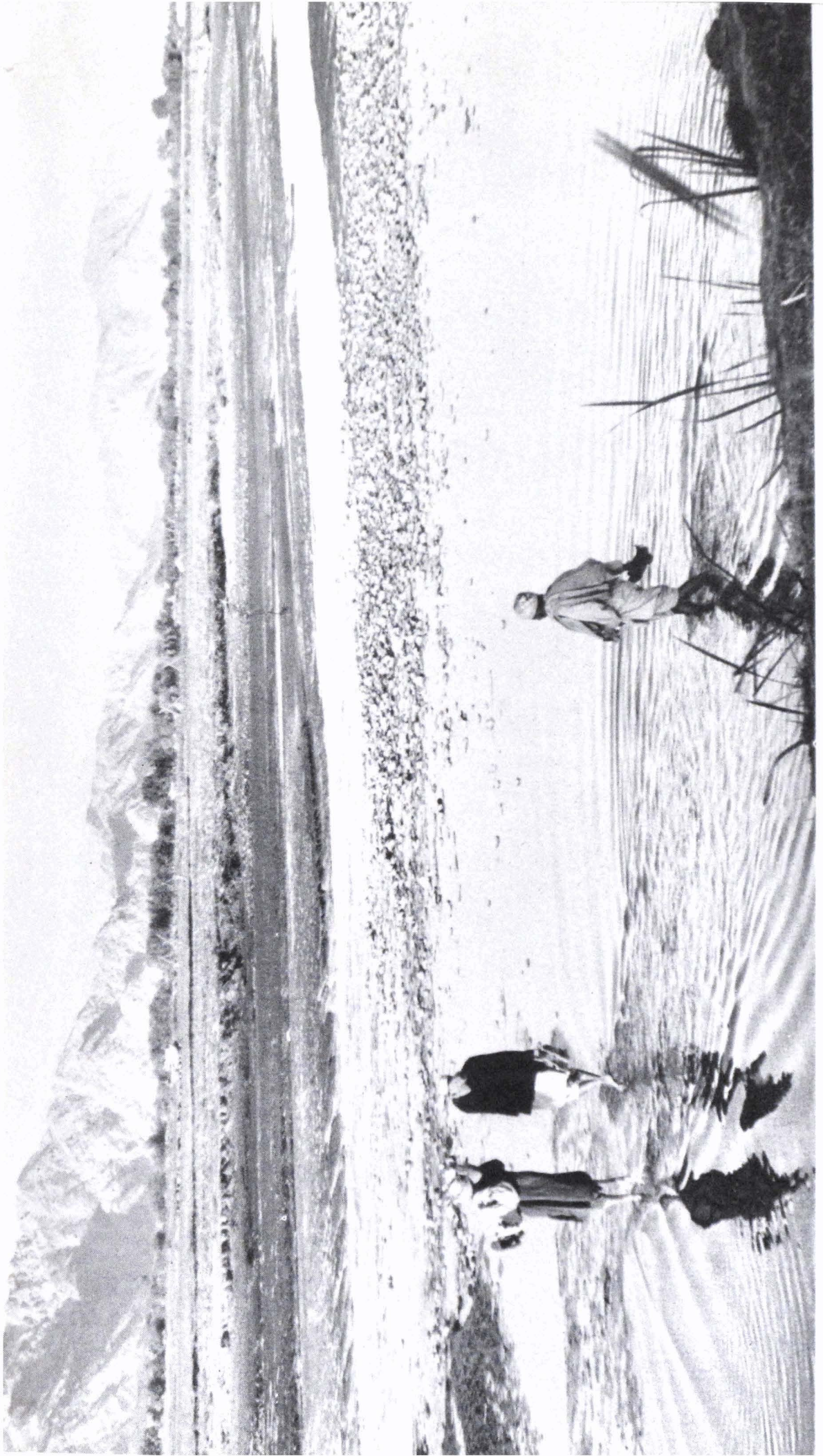
Kismetabad turned out to be Tashgurgan, which we reached at three in the morning. Before then we had a number of further breakdowns and one impressive ‘scene’. We had pulled up long after supper time at a massive tea-house, shortly after joining the North Road. It was a great barn of a place, with platforms stretching down each side of it for about two hundred feet. On the latter sat the elders of the place, regarding me coldly.

The old men, indeed, proved to be the sole exception to the general friendliness I enjoyed as a Russian—for which I could hardly blame them.

I passed it off as best I could, ordering successive pots of tea while my hungry companions ate bread and fruit, which was sold by a ragged old man on the floor. The tenseness continued till it was suddenly broken by an outburst of shouting in the yard outside.

The mechanic, who in the face of the old men had suddenly become protective towards me, sitting at my side and offering me handfuls of pomegranate seed, was up like a flash and ran out through the door. I took my chance and followed him.

Out in the yard was being enacted one of those curious rows, inseparable from Afghan travel, of which even the participants had often only the haziest comprehension. The centre of it was the little

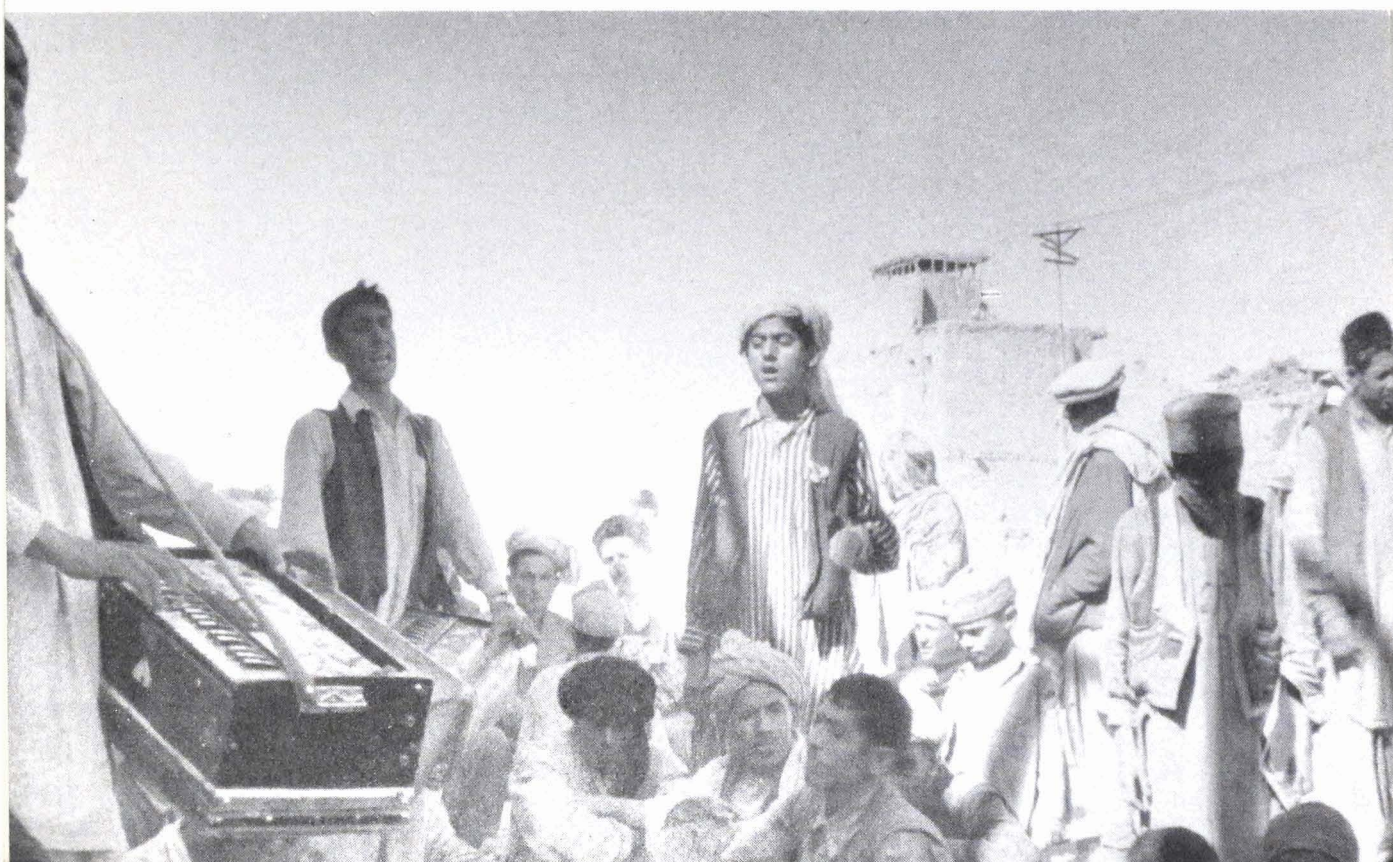


21. Jalalabad. The river



22. *Jalalabad. Fiesta*

Jalalabad. Wedding musicians



Hazara agent, who had taken the chance to collect the fares from some passengers picked up on the way. One of them now pretended that he had thought the truck was bound for Pul-i-Khumri and refused to pay. 'Do you think I'm going to be ordered about by a dirty little Hazara!' he was shouting. 'Get out of my way!' And he thrust him aside and began to drag down his baggage from the tail-board.

The reaction of the Pathan mechanic was equivocal, to say the least. He made little effort to help the Hazara and merely acted as an ineffective peacemaker.

Then the row was reinforced by the recalcitrant's friends. The shouting brought even the elders from the tea-house, till the driver arrived and pinned the man's arms while the agent took the money from his shirt.

'Come, let us drink more tea,' said the mechanic, as if suddenly ashamed that I, a Russian, should witness such unworthy goings-on, and we left the business to smoulder out amid the insults and mutterings by which everyone mended their self-respect.

We slept from three to seven in the Tashgurgan *serai*. For the first and only time on this journey, I kept my open knife beneath my pillow. But there were no disturbances. The assassins against whom Abernethy had been warned were not in evidence. Nor were there any formalities. One could travel the length and breadth of Afghanistan by using serais, and never be called on to declare one's identity on those tell-tale hotel forms.

When I awoke a cold grey light was penetrating the ramshackle door. I felt around the mud floor, checked the presence of my possessions, got up. My limbs were stiff, my body itched with flea-bites, my neck and wrists were sore from the chafing of the dust. But I was no longer sick. Across the yard, deserted now except for our truck and a solitary camel nosing in the dirt, the smoke of a breakfast fire rose appetizingly from a tea-house.

I joined the others with a pot of black tea and a round of Turcoman bread. This bread was quite different from the bread of the south; beneath the grey crust it had a centre of fluffy dough which eaten hot was more delicious than any French croissant or brioche. The night's sleep had put everyone in excellent spirits, and the whole of this morning, with its leisurely progress to Mazar, was one of the most pleasant of my whole journey. The mechanic, in particular, had

taken a liking to me, and now that my sickness was over I was in a better mood to reciprocate it. He began to ask me about my homeland and what I did there and how much I earned. Could I take a picture of him perhaps?

Warned by my previous mistake, I took twenty altogether and handed him the whole collection. Just in time I remembered to wrap it in some silver paper and conceal the English carton.

Finally I decided to have a picture of myself in Tashgurgan. I gave the camera to one of the bystanders to press the trigger. At the last minute my friend dashed into the picture, held my hand, and so provided me with a keepsake more colourful than I had intended.

Our beautiful relationship, thus cemented, came to blossom on this road with the quickness of a desert shrub.

But it would be wrong to infer that it was purely amorous. He was an Afghan and I was from Russia. For him I *was* Russia, the giant of the north, whose fascination on the younger Afghan mind I now saw fully and completely in all its power. How could it be otherwise? Whatever mistakes the Soviet Union had made by the pogroms and Islamic persecutions of the past were now overlaid by the glamour of industrial and economic progress. And with this break-through came the echo of Soviet propaganda phrases which mullahs and frontiers were plainly unable to arrest.

‘What about your trucks?’ I asked, seeking out the one thing which throughout Afghanistan I had found to uphold the western name for worth and efficiency. ‘This American Internaional, which is always breaking down; is it as good as our Russian *Ziss*?’

‘The American truck is *better* than the Russian truck,’ he said. ‘This truck is old; you mustn’t judge by its breakdowns. The Russian truck doesn’t last so long; it goes *kharab* in the hot weather.’

My face fell.

‘But don’t you worry,’ he added with concern. ‘In five years time you will be building a better truck—like your big new aeroplanes and sputniks!’

We stopped for tea.

‘How will you go back to Moscow?’ he asked.

‘With the big jet-ship.’

‘And how long will it take?’

‘Four hours.’

‘One day,’ he said, ‘you invite me to Moscow? Then you come back and be *my* guest in Afghanistan!’

‘Of course,’ I said; and we took a final picture with him standing by a horse in a pose beloved of the Pathan heart.

As we got nearer to Mazar I thought of the difficulty which would confront me when I arrived. Several times already I had narrowly escaped disaster when we passed Russian trucks and working parties and my mechanic had tried to hail my ‘friends’. I was now so far committed that if he were to discover my true nationality I would be in very bad trouble indeed. Mazar was full of Russians. It was more than likely that we should run into a party at the transport barrier. The caravanserai was opposite the Soviet consulate. Worst of all, I remembered how previously the mechanic of the Ziss from Aibak had insisted on coming to the hotel in order to get his chit for delivering me.

Could I get away with it?

We got to the barrier and waited our turn behind a couple of petrol trucks. A policeman came up, glanced over our load, demanded the number of passengers.

‘Ten.’

He looked into the cab.

‘And one *feringhi*.’

‘Feringhi’ was enough; he inquired no further. And as the usual argument developed about customs dues, the mechanic occupied me with a long discourse about the petrol refinery the Russians were building. He called it ‘fabrika’—factory; and I wondered where the oil was coming from.

‘And what are we building there?’ I asked, pointing to some huts in the desert.

He seemed to mistake the direction of my finger for something much further distant ‘A harbour,’ he said; and I could only suppose that he meant they were starting the second projected river port, at Kilift.

At last the argument came to an end; there was the usual stuffing of a dirty ten-afghani note into the pocket of the policeman’s uniform, and we went on.

To my great relief, we did not enter the caravanserai but continued into the city: past the Mosque, past the roundabout, into the narrow streets of the bazaar.

There we stopped.

‘What do you bring?’ cried an eager shopkeeper.

‘Wheat!’ I shouted—‘From Kunduz.’

While buyers crowded round the truck, the mechanic found me a porter.

‘I come with you,’ he said, ‘I take you to the hotel.’

My heart sank, but there was nothing I could do: he had to get his chit.

As we went in procession through the streets—the porter bent double beneath my case, the mechanic behind him, myself in the rear—I sought anxiously for a stratagem which at least would prevent me from being unmasked in his presence. For not only would it be less compromising that way, but I could not bear to see the cruelty of his disillusionment.

When we reached the path to the hotel, I stopped. My porter, with an eye on my wallet, stopped too.

‘Go ahead,’ I said to my friend. ‘I will settle with this man.’

And he went joyfully in, proclaiming the safe delivery of one live Russian, while I fumbled with my change, hoping he would come out again before I came face to face with someone who knew me.

He came. I paid off the porter.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘Goodbye. One day we shall meet again. You will come and be my guest.’

We shook hands, touched our hearts and bowed.

In the gloomy corridor the manager bore down in welcome and with the briefest flicker of puzzlement (surely he must remember that last time I was lodging with Abernethy?) announced that he was fortunate in being able to accommodate me with a ‘friend’.

He disappeared into the Russian-occupied end of the building, the end of the lavatory and the pigeon loft.

Then my mechanic reappeared. He had forgotten his chit in all his excitement. ‘For the *baladia*,’ he explained—‘the authorities’.

‘Here,’ I said quickly. ‘I will write your chit.’

‘It should be from the manager.’

‘He’s not about. Look, won’t this do?’

I took the scrap of paper he held and scribbled an illegible sentence.

He tried to read it for what seemed an eternity. ‘What does it say?’ he said.

‘Arrived Mazar-i-Sharif Hotel—Wilson.’

‘And the date?’

It was November 2nd. By the Persian calendar it was Aban 10th. But what was it by the Afghan calendar?

Rescue came from the fly-speckled wallsheet, giving Afghan and Western dates beneath unrecognizable portraits of Daud Khan and the King.

‘There,’ I said, just as I heard the manager’s returning footsteps. ‘Now be off to the baladia. God be with you.’

‘And with you. You are the nicest Russian I have ever met.’

The room into which I was shown was almost identical with the one I had had before, but barer. On the bed of my ‘comrade’ was his kit—the usual frugal luggage of the Russian in Afghanistan—toothbrush, razor, a spare pair of underpants. A plastic-backed mirror hung on the wall. There was a bottle of medicine on the windowsill.

I sat on my bed, wondering about my next move and feeling like Goldilocks awaiting the arrival of the bears.

I had not long to wait.

Two minutes after my arrival the door curtains parted, a young blond face peered in, addressed me in Russian—and promptly vanished.

The warning was too timely to ignore. Foreseeing the arrival of others, I knew that at all costs I must not let them find me till the mechanic was out of the baladia office and lost in the turmoil of the bazaars.

I executed my manoeuvre by going to the lavatory. Only those who have visited the lavatory of the Mazar hotel can appreciate the tenacity it required. Balanced on two bricks which provided the only island in a sea of liquid, I breathed through a handkerchief with my face to the little window. Only my watch persuaded me to remain there.

At the end of ten minutes there was a hammering at the door.

‘Food is ready,’ said a voice from beyond.

I stayed another five minutes, till nausea forced me to give up.

In the room stood a curiously assorted pair of officials. The first, a donnish young man with fair hair and myopic eyes addressed me in Russian. When I showed no sign of understanding, the other came forward. He was seven feet tall; swarthy, broad-chested and exaggeratedly imposing in a brown karakul hat like a tea-cosy. He could have been Afghan or Russian: one of those people who populate both sides of the frontier.

‘Who are you?’ he asked in Persian.

‘Good morning,’ I said in English, seizing on a pretended ignorance of Persian as my one thin chance of passing off the present

situation as a result of misunderstanding. 'Good morning. Do you speak English?'

'English, not!'

'Deutsch?'

He looked back blankly.

'Français?'

His face brightened.

'Who are you?' he said in French.

'An Englishman—How do you do?'

With a certain unwillingness he shook hands. The other one stayed in the background, asking for an interpretation, refusing my offered cigarette.

'Where do you come from?'

'From Kunduz.'

'How do you come into this room?'

'I was shown here. Is there anything wrong in that? It is an hotel, n'est-ce-pas?'

'It is the room of a Soviet citizen.'

There was a long pause for translation and a sombre conversation in which the word 'automobil' came up. I tried to guess how far my mechanic had got towards the bazaar.

Finally the tall one turned towards me again.

'You may not stay in this room. The government forbids it.'

'Whose government?'

'The government of the Soviet Union.'

When they had gone a hotel boy came and without a word began to carry my belongings to a room like a prison cell with a solitary window high in the wall. The floor was littered with cooking pots and melon rinds. On the clothes peg hung a limp cotton suit. On a cluttered table stood a Primus stove and small brass holder for incense sticks.

I felt a sense of gloom, like that which had enfolded me on my ill-starred arrival at Aibak.

Was I about to become a prisoner again, and if so, whose?

XII

FATE, which spared me from both Russians and Afghans, made me prisoner for the next twenty-four hours of R. V. Pandey. For the room was his.

I had scarcely recovered enough to wonder what I was supposed to sleep on when I felt his voice like a slap on the back. 'Honoured Sir, a pleasure it is! They have put you in my little dwelling—please be at home. I have all the day: let us talk!'

He got a bed from somewhere and I unpacked my wash things while answering a flood of questions about the activities of the British Council in providing scholarships for students of the 'mother-tongue'. Somehow in the middle I managed to escape to the bathroom and scrape off, with cold water, three days' growth of beard.

'How many days will you sojourn?' he asked on my return.

I told him as few as possible; that I was leaving on the first available transport for Andkhoi and Maimana.

'To Western Turkestan? I have heard that is a wild place. I too will travel, but to civilized countries. Germany I will see, and Paris, and London. Tell me now, how much money must I have to come to London?'

I made a calculation for him, jotting down the items on a piece of paper. When it was finished he suggested that we should walk. 'Every day, morning and afternoon, I take exercise! Thus I keep healthy and a strong constitution! Also a master must set an example!'

We went as far as the mosque, where I left him to make what his arm described as a short stroll through the mountains fifteen miles away. Then I turned back to the place in the bazaar where transport could be got for the west. There were three vehicles standing there. Two were trucks and looked unlikely to last the journey. The third was a trim little bus, greatly beautified with scroll-like designs and

long strips of mirror glass in its dark green panels. It was being loudly recommended by an old man in a turban.

‘Andkhoi, Mai-i-i-i-mana!’ he shouted. ‘Andkhoi, Mai-mana-a-a-a!’

I asked when it would leave and he declared, if God willed, at six o’clock in the morning. I pointed to the seat beside the driver’s, gave him some money and told him to be sure it was mine in the morning.

A couple of hours of the afternoon still remained to me, and I wandered in search of entertainment.

Now Mazar, unlike any other Afghan town, had struck me from the first with an air of unfriendliness; a kind of withdrawn and inner hostility, revealing no secrets, making no confidences, jostling one aside from its crowded pavements. Yet I was unwilling to accept this appearance, which I had found long before in its Persian counterpart, Meshed, another ‘holy city’ whose pleasures and *gemuetlichkeit* were there, when one discovered them, for the asking.

For half an hour I wandered through the bazaars, threading my way through carpet sellers and nasswar sellers and the piles of trash on the pavements, till dust and sore feet made me look for a tea-house.

There were no presentable tea-houses on the chief boulevard, till I happened to glance up, and there, with open windows and balconies overlooking the road, pouring out a flood of conversation and music, was one of the most inviting establishments I had seen.

I climbed the dark stairs and found myself on the threshold of an enormous room divided by pillars and lined with recumbent tea-drinkers round the walls. The music came from three or four loudspeakers. The ceiling was festooned with streamers and electric lights. But the centre-piece—the presiding spirit as it were—was a large stuffed leopard, which glowered with illuminated green eyes from a platform suspended from the ceiling at the far end.

Beneath its stare I took a place on a moth-eaten carpet, where I could observe both the room and the door. Presently a policeman entered, glanced round questioningly, took a place about twenty yards away, and sat down to watch me from behind a pillar.

But scarcely was I settled when my presence was noticed by the proprietor of the place, a genial prosperous person who sat behind a ramshackle desk with his abacus. With hurried concern he came

flapping across to me and begged me to take a more worthy place on the thick, soft carpets near the Leopard.

'Black tea,' he asked—'or green?' with the air of offering white champagne or pink.

I chose the green, with sugar.

My immediate neighbours had stopped to look at me—but presently they continued their conversation and I fell into the background where I could observe the pleasures and customs of Afghan tea-house life with a benign eye.

What was this life?

Its attractions had long eluded me. In Jalalabad I had begun to get some insight of it, and in Kunduz. Once, on the road, it had been summed up for me in the phrase of one of those passers-in-the-night: 'You are always doing things, Feringhi—but laziness is sweet also!'

But taking away all those things which make laziness sweet to the Westerner—the arts, women, the detached observation of life and affairs, the stimulation of alcohol—it struck me not so much as sweet but as empty—as idleness *faute de mieux*.

Now as I sat there drinking nothing more stimulating than my pale green tea and observing the intricacies of a great Turcoman rug, worn and spattered with the stains of tea and nasswar, the indolent companionship of the place began to work a spell on me. Or perhaps it was the green-eyed leopard which worked the spell, or the ceaseless music—Indian harmoniums and twanging Afghan *tars*. Suddenly I found myself imbibing the great superiority of this existence, its geniality, its vast scorn for effort of mind or body.

Even the very tawdriness of it all began to be transmuted into a kind of splendour. What was the genius of art and building and physical endeavour—the Classical achievements of Europe, or even of the Timurids out at Balkh—when a string of coloured bulbs and a moth-eaten leopard could construe in a mouldering mud barn a bower of love and euphoria?

My foot began to beat time to the music. A young man opposite, momentarily releasing the hand of his friend, broke off his conversation to push a spittoon towards me and give me a smile.

'Khub astin?'

'Bisyar Khub.'

When I had finished my third pot of tea, I got up, leaving my policeman in a state of puzzlement, and stopped at the door to pay what I owed.

‘Sir, you owe nothing. You are a guest here.’

‘You are very kind; but guests are your business—I must pay you for what I consume.’

‘Your presence is my reward. Put your money away and come here often!’

Back in the hotel R. V. Pandey was in bed. It appeared to be his normal way of passing the evening, for the room had no heating and the dimmest electric light. I went without the hotel’s miserable supper—which I had discovered was merely brought from the bazaar, allowed to cool, and sold at double its original price. From six till nine I was called on to explain the English Public School system, the policy of the British government on South Africa, the National Health Service, the meaning of ‘anastigmat lens’ in the brochure of a Soviet camera which one of the Russians had offered to bring him back from Moscow.

‘And do you see much of the Russians?’ I asked.

‘They wish it,’ he said. ‘Always they are saying ‘come and eat with us’; and twice I have been just to take tea out of friendship. But I shall not accept the camera. One must be careful here. One must set an *example*.’

Early next morning he was up at five o’clock to set an example and do early morning exercises. I borrowed the hurricane lamp, cut myself shaving, and presented myself at the bus place at six o’clock.

The temperature had dropped disconcertingly. There was a bitter wind which stung one’s face and made one’s eyes water, and the snow had moved down to cover the nearest foothills white and luminous against the black dawn. The bus stayed empty and sheeted—as I knew it would. The handful of intending passengers, market population, layabouts and bystanders were crouched in the flying dust with their turbans spread like shawls to keep out the wind. The old man of the previous day was nowhere to be seen.

I found a place in one of the tea stalls which was beginning to open and bought a pot of curds from one of the small boys who was hawking his wares from a basket.

For the next three hours, experience alone sustained my confidence that the bus would eventually leave, and prevented my spirits of the previous evening from being entirely dissipated. It was Afghan life at its lowest ebb. No one spoke, for the combination of dirt and

cold made every movement an excruciating discomfort. Bread-sellers appeared, setting up their baskets and sitting miserably at the cross roads with turban cloths enveloping their frozen faces. A butcher suspended a freshly-killed goat, the wind blowing blood on my clothing.

After an hour and a half some fresh activity was manifest. A pair of Russians, who had appeared in front of the Medical Laboratory with a truck and a bridging pontoon, drove off as I took their photograph. Small knots of locals foregathered, certainly not travellers, observing me from different points of vantage across the street.

Their interest was disconcerting, till it suddenly dawned on me that they were my farewell committees. In one group—the Afghan police party—I recognized my trailer of the tea-house. A second, more diligent party, could only be from the Russians. In the third I thought I detected the hand of Mr Tarzi's Afghantour, present to take the bus number and see that I came to no harm.

So much attention could only be encouraging.

Shortly afterwards my prognosis proved correct.

'Sir,' murmured a serpentine voice in my frozen left ear, 'I am your driver, Gul Mohammed. We shall go to Maimana. See, if you want me, I am taking some tea with my friends!'

We left, in the end, at noon. The past two hours had been occupied in trying to fill the remaining seats. When this proved impossible we drove to a kind of combined garage and junk yard—the establishment which passes in Afghan handbooks as a 'motor repair factory'—and loaded up a pile of metal cylinders. Their nature puzzled me, till I realized they were cracked cylinder linings of Ziss lorries. I never understood why there should be so many—I gave up counting at about a hundred—or what was to be done with them in Maimana. But they caused endless discomfort to all the passengers, around whose feet they were thrown like a load of beetroots.

There was a final halt to get petrol, and at half past twelve we were rolling out of Mazar across the vast plain which is the western end of the Oxus valley.

Beyond the crumbling mud barracks which masked the entrance to the military airfield, the mountains fell away on the left and the country opened up in a wintry landscape which reminded me of the Romney Marsh. It was something quite strange in Afghanistan, this boundless plain with lines of poplars marking the water-courses on

their way to the sluggish river; and I was puzzled by the absence of the 'desert' which the map showed. The sun, too, appeared, weakly and briefly to light it with a curious sea-light, sharpening the villages and faint undulations of the ground.

At three we reached Ag Chah, a new bazaar street and half-finished petrol station, against the herring-bone pattern of a clouded sunset. A shabby policeman, quite out of place among the dark-eyed Turcomen with their sashes and knee-boots, presented me with a slice of melon he had bought with his customs bribe, and waved us on into the dusk.

It was now quite certain we should not reach Andkhoi that night, and my diary reminded me that this was already the day on which I was due to collect my answers from the Planning Ministry in Kabul. But the interest of the journey prevented me from caring. We were entering the area of the oilfield, which filled so many paragraphs of the Five Year Plan and about which I had heard such sinister rumours. Shortly after dark, the headlights lighted on a roadside notice-board with a directional arrow and three symbolic oil derricks. There was nothing to be seen, however, till some miles on when a curious erection appeared.

Had I not known, I would have supposed it some mirage of the Eiffel Tower, miraculously transposed into the desert. Its girders were lit by electric lamps which glittered brightly in the clear desert air.

'Benzin,' said Gul Mohammed, with worldly wisdom, as if such things were to be found every day. 'Fifteen kilometres!'

It looked much closer but we took nearly half an hour to pass it, swinging away from port ahead to port astern, like some light on a lonely sea.

When it dropped finally out of sight we came into trees and finally into a town. 'Shibarghan,' said Gul—the destination which had appeared against numerous names in the Mazar hotel register.

We stopped in the usual bazaar street, lit by paraffin lamps and the squares of light from the few open shops, and began to unload for the night. It was not unwelcome, The tea-house had its samovars going and pilau warming in great copper pots on the range. The floor was carpeted as the floors of serais seldom were. A boy was fanning charcoal to place on the bubble-pipe. But all this cosiness was to be denied me: the farewell committees of Mazar had done their work, and before I could even unload my camera a peaked cap had appeared

among the Turcoman turbans and a voice was inquiring for the feringhi.

For a minute the inquirer withdrew in conclave with Gul Mohammed to be joined by the mechanic and the tea-house keeper. The gist was that Gul and the others were sure the feringhi would prefer to lodge with themselves—and indeed they were right. But the law had its way.

I managed with some difficulty to insist on having my supper. But as soon as it was finished I was hauled off into the darkness in the direction of the invisible 'hotel'.

My little policeman was as courteous as he was conscientious and insisted on carrying my bag. 'You are our guest,' he said—a phrase which was becoming almost monotonous.

By the last of the town's street-lights, a hurricane lantern tied to a tree, he stopped and took out his notebook, as if to get down my particulars before I escaped in the outer darkness.

'What did you say your name was?'

'Wilson,' I said.

The word presents difficulties in Persian, because of the 'W'. He struggled manfully till I thought to cut it short by handing him my Persian visiting card.

'Where do you go to?'

'Maimana.'

'What is your business.'

'Tourist.'

'Where is your visa?'

When he had written it all down and I had re-pocketed my passport, travel permit, photographic permit, knife, money and other belongings we got going again, and I promptly fell into a two-foot deep pit, winding myself and nearly breaking a rib.

'Here we are making a new city,' he said. 'Follow close behind me please.'

I fell into another pit.

'One day you must be our guest again, and see this new city . . .'

The voice went on ahead, while I laboured over bricks and boulders, towards the darkness, the jackals, the hotel.

The hotel proved better than I expected, with a hygienic military cosiness coming from the hurricane lamps and lime-disinfected latrine. From eight of the ten rooms came sounds of Russian and what I took to be Rumanian.

At six next morning, having passed a sound night in the sagging iron bed, I left a twenty-afghani note on my dressing-table and re-joined the bus without ever having a chance to see the register.

On the way I passed a jolly round-faced mullah who was one of our party, off to say his prayers.

While we waited for him to finish, a truck bore down from behind us and braked in a cloud of dust. Out jumped a dozen splendid figures in Russian fur caps, descended on a fruit-stall, and raced back to their truck, each one holding an enormous water-melon—the oil-explorers buying their lunch for the day.

It was a splendid photograph, just the kind I needed for Press purposes, and earlier in my journey I would have taken it without hesitation. But after weeks of being under suspicion and of brushes with the police, I balked at using the Leica and tried the Minox instead. The light was too poor, and before I could rectify my mistake the party drove off.

The failure rankled.

From the moment we set off, the road of the previous day deteriorated. Even in Shibarghan itself, which straggled out westwards into a great sprawling village of mud-domed Turcoman houses, the surface degenerated into ruts and dust baths from which there was no relief for the next sixty miles.

The sun came up, lighting a landscape as flat as before, with the exception of a curious solitary hill. Its summit was capped by a small white shrine, which perversely reminded me of a Tuscan cavalry. Something told me that when we passed it after five or six miles the torture of the ruts would be ended and we should find a proper road again. But the light played tricks and my estimate of the distance proved half of what it was. For hour after hour we came scarcely any nearer; and when at last we managed to draw abreast of it, my expectations were shattered. It marked the beginning of the worst road I had ever travelled, and the worst, I venture to think, in all Afghanistan. Six days later, when I travelled back on it, I was to look forward to our Shibarghan rut-path as if it were an autobahn.

It began deceptively with a thinly gravelled track beside a small canal—one of the curious watercourses which still spring from the desert here before the dry steppe gives way to the utter deadness of *Dasht*. The track was in the course of being built. People from a nearby village, whose presence was marked by the numbers of grazing flocks, had been called out to work beneath their headmen.

Along the canal for two or three miles they stretched out in parties of a dozen or so, spreading the stones, sluicing them with water to bed them in, bringing up supplies with trains of camels.

The men were in the splendour of their brightly coloured cummerbunds and boots and turbans, which fitted them to their work as little as did their horses tied up to staked shovels along the wayside. But the whole scene, with its constant movement of brightly-clad figures against the desert and sky, was as breath-taking as one of those vast Canalettos of Venice.

And then at the limit of the village's responsibility, the work ceased. There was no more canal, no further village, no further labour, only the Dasht.

The track forked out into half a dozen rutways, where drivers had sought to avoid the dust beds created by others. Gul took the middle one, changing into second gear and setting the engine boiling under the now fierce sun.

We had gone about four hundred yards when one of the wheels began slipping; he raced the engine in a desperate attempt to get moving again, but the bus came solidly to a stop.

There was no conversation; by a pre-arranged drill the mechanic and a couple of bachas climbed up to the roof and threw down two long poles. After digging and scraping with shovels, they got them lengthways between the tyres of the double rear wheels and we lurched forward to the next soft patch.

All went well, with stops about every five minutes, till we reached a kind of cutting where the traffic had ground away the surface to a depth of four or five feet. As we came out of it a view appeared which filled me with despondency. Ahead was a long, rising slope, littered with bogged or abandoned vehicles for a distance of a quarter of a mile.

It reminded me of some strafed wartime convoy, caught in a defile.

There was no going back; no exit to the side. Gul changed down to first again, and in less than a hundred yards we sank to the axles in sand.

Everyone dismounted, brought out melons and crusts of dry bread from their bundles, and settled down to eat while the bachas dug with their long-handled shovels. It took half an hour.

No one stirred when the engine was re-started, for the bus just moved forward the length of the poles and promptly subsided as before.

After two or three attempts, with a nice calculation of progress everyone got up, walked to the top of the rise, and sat down to await the arrival of the bus in the comfort of the breeze.

In every direction there stretched a vast silence, broken only by the periodical starting of the motor and the grinding of another vehicle, somewhere out of sight, which was making its way from the opposite direction. A bearded, elderly Turcoman came and sat on a sand dune next to me. I looked at the tiny patterns disturbing the dust.

‘*Mus-ha,*’ he said, seeing my interest.—Mice.

‘And that—the big one?’

‘Jackal.’

He was joined by some young companions. They talked in Turki, which I did not understand, pointing to my camera; and I found them—in contrast to the old man himself—rather disturbing. My isolation, away from Gul and his mechanic down with the bus, began to dawn on me. I would have been glad to see the mullah; but even he was absent—saying his prayers somewhere.

What was my position if, all unknown to me, the protection of Mr Tarzi had been suddenly withdrawn; if the farewell committee at Mazar had merely been seeing me into oblivion? Sooner or later the various departments of the Afghan government must collaborate to discover that I was not quite the tourist of *Visit Afghanistan!*

Nothing would be simpler than to let me wander on—without track or record—into the mercies of the Turkmen.

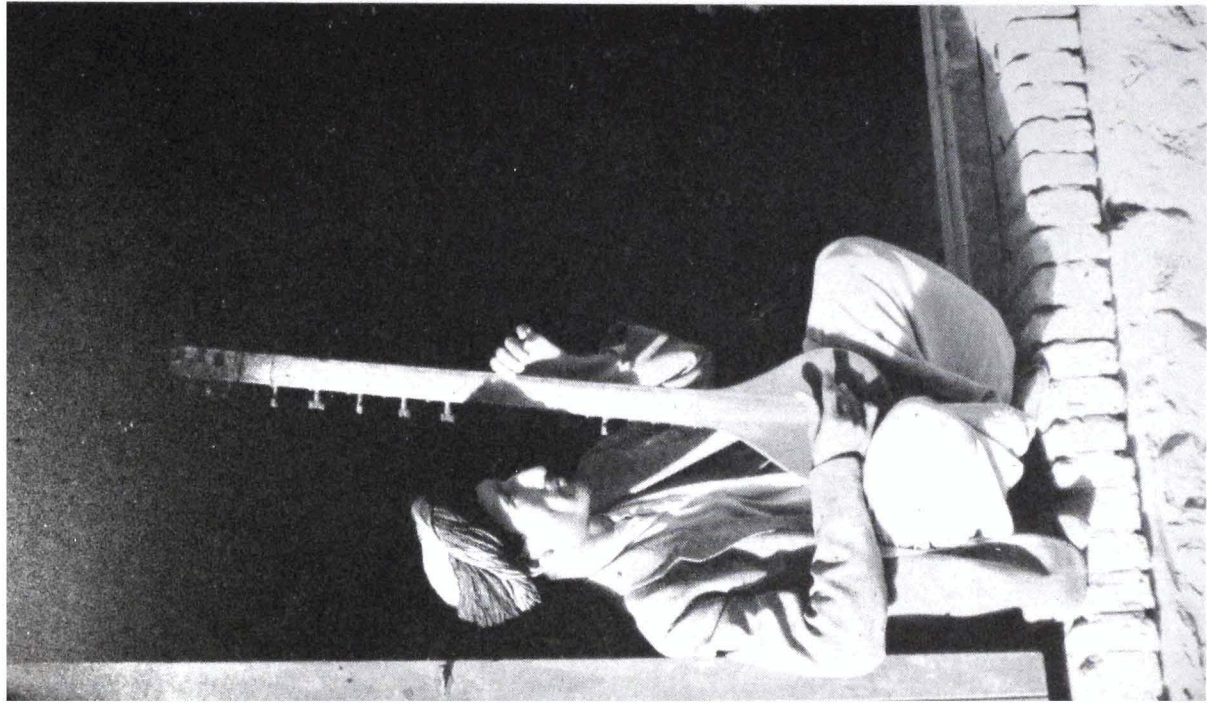
After a minute I put these unworthy thoughts out of my mind; but I could not help feeling that I had come close to the circumstances of the young American’s disappearance. I had, indeed, been thinking quite a lot about young Winant and his girl friend that morning. The shrine on the hill, for instance: I had been certain that they must have looked at that shrine, as I had, with the same kind of hope—and have been filled with the same dismay when its promise proved empty.

I knew too well the uneasiness which must have burdened him by the time he had travelled this far with not just a camera but a girl at his side. The nudged insult, the fantastic temptation of a girl in shorts and shirt-sleeves in a country where a woman fetched a price of thirty pounds.

Had I known the ultimate fact of the story I would have been less quick, perhaps, to put away my uneasiness at the young men.



23. Jalalabad. Small girl
Jalalabad. Hair-cut



24. Musician—Kunduz

The truck-yard tea-house

But I did not discover it till I passed here again on my return.

By ingenuity and persistence Gul Mohammed had managed to get half-way up the hill. The poles were splintered and by now were being laid in separate pieces. Someone had the bright idea of treading down the sand ahead of the wheels and we faced one another in two lines, stamping with our feet and moving slowly uphill in a little dance for which the mullah set the lead.

In this way, by slow degrees, the climb was completed. It had taken us nearly three hours to cover six hundred yards.

For the next two miles we walked, letting Gul drive on ahead with the bachas running beside him to throw in the wood whenever it was needed. When we caught up with him, the mechanic was having a fight with a soldier who wanted to use the remains of the poles to unbog his water-lorry. It was the only time I saw anyone fail to help out another on the road, but the logs were a matter of survival to us and could hardly stand much more.

We reached Andkhoi, which we should have made the previous night, at four in the afternoon. There was not much left of it, though it must have been impressive in its day. Half the town had been rudely demolished for a new bazaar. Only the crumbling mud citadel remained to its glory—and an apron of domed houses and little mud mosques, receding in decay from the grim main street with its line of iron telegraph poles.

The telegraph duly carried news of my arrival, and after a meal of cold meat in which a quantity of dead flies were congealed, we drove off into the wastes again.

Gul had used my presence to get permission to take a new road they were building. It lasted a couple of miles with a grit surface and a plethora of triumphal arches for its forthcoming opening by the Governor, and then gave out. We laboured through sand again, and got to the hills.

I did not see this country in daylight until my return; but with nightfall it became highly dramatic. We began to twist through high banks of growth like reeds. Shadowy cliffs reared up, driving us further and further to the left. Eyes appeared in the headlamp beams—foxes and jackals, going in the direction of nomad encampments, whose fires glowed occasionally in the distance.

Then the road went *kharab* again, and Gul made a cut for it, swinging out on to the hard desert earth in a wide detour. It was an

exhilarating and alarming experience. For the first time that day he reached top gear. As he pressed up the speed, monstrous desert shrubs and bushes came rushing towards the headlamps, only to go down beneath our pounding wheels. He was doing about fifty miles an hour, and I began to wonder if he knew where he was going. He seemed to aim at rejoining the road at the end of a wide arc. But when I took out my compass, the needle showed us veering too far south.

All at once, in a nightmare vision, I saw the shrubs cease to come towards us and there was nothing ahead but a yawning void.

With a wrench of the wheel he threw the bus to the right. The cargo of cylinder liners rolled sickeningly across the floor. The right wheels lifted and poised in mid-air as the whole top-heavy conveyance described a delicate balancing act on the brink of a ravine. Finally we touched ground again and went bumping off on a (tangential course).

A lesser man might have stopped, lit a cigarette, done something to steady himself. But Gul merely pointed to the seven beadwork bags containing prayer-texts which swung from the top of the wind-screen, and asked if he hadn't done well to carry them.

Driving back more slowly, but not so slowly as to show loss of nerve, we hit in succession upon another ravine, a village, the road.

Then we had engine trouble.

First it was the ignition. One of the bachas got under the bonnet and put his finger on each of the sparking plugs in turn, while Gul pressed the starter. When we reached number five he got no shock any more. We fitted a new distributor lead.

Half an hour later it was the *pipe-e-tank*. It had split below the fuel pump. As soon as it was diagnosed, Gul took off his turban, ran a wire to one of the ornamental lanterns decorating the front mud-guards, bent the light downwards and began the repair.

It was not a repair I had seen in any automobile handbook or been taught in my Driving and Maintenance course at Sandhurst, but perhaps it will interest the Landrover brigade of travellers.

Pulling a wad of stuffing from his seat cushion, and a handful of raisins from an old Coca-Cola can, he placed them together on the flat edge of the jack handle and beat them together with a spanner. After a while they formed a kind of putty. Then he lovingly sculpted the mess round the torn pipe and bound it round with string.

It served its purpose—except when going uphill, when the bacha

would have to jump off and throw in a wedge to stop us rolling backwards.

At ten o'clock we limped with a coughing engine down the lamp-lined street of a village called Yaq-aq. The houses were darkened, the tea-houses closed. When we roused one to open, the only food available was a mess of cold pilau. Yet I can remember Yaq-aq only with friendliness. After eating, we sat on the floor drinking tea and passing the bubble pipe to one another. No one was in a hurry to sleep. Someone asked me if we had tea-houses in England, and what was the cost of kebab. Had I seen New York, asked another. And Moscow? Which was the greater?

And was it true, asked Gul Mohammed slyly, what they said about Paris? Were the *khanum-ha beautiful*? How much did they cost?

It was so much easier to talk of Paris than of Moscow that I let myself go a little. Somehow the Folies Bergère, translated into its nearest Persian, 'the House of the Shepherdess of the Golden Hours', sounded rather more romantic than the original; and perhaps in Yaq-aq it struck a blow for democracy to equal the Soviet TU 104's and Luniks.

When I had finished, there was a move towards the old string beds which the Indians call charpoys and the Afghans 'thrones of sleep'.

Gul invited me to take the throne next to his own, which he had spread with an embroidered quilt. The mechanic insisted on my taking his purple cloak as an additional blanket. The tea-house keeper provided an electric torch with which to light my way to the lavatory.

'And where is the lavatory?' I asked.

He waved his hand in a generous circle.

'The village is all your honour's,' he declared.

When the door had been bolted and we were tucked up on our thrones, with the lowlier members of the company on the floor, we still did not sleep but continued smoking and drinking tea by the light of the flickering lamp.

Gul, with his turban removed and his head resting pasha-like on his elbow, was retailing epics of the road: fights with wolves and robbers, broken back-axles and crankshafts. Somewhere, when he was surrounded by wolves with a broken *pistum* on the Shirbar Pass, I fell asleep. And I dreamed that I travelled on an endless road with

Gul at my side: through a world where London and the daily round of work and the commonplace things of Europe no longer existed.

When I woke up, the room was flooded with light from the open door. Softly, from its blue and gold cupboard on the wall, the wireless was playing Tajikstan music. The company sat in a wide circle, sipping tea and waiting with unconcealed amusement for the feringhi to open his eyes.

My first instinct, as always, was to reach for my camera which I would loop with its strap round my arm and conceal beneath my pillow.

It was not there.

Everyone laughed, till Gul got up and produced it from under his own pillow, where he had kept it for greater safety.

I rubbed my eyes, accepted the cup of scalding sweet tea and a hot Turcoman loaf. 'Time to go,' said the mechanic. 'In three hours from now we shall be in Maimana!'

I pulled on my shoes and said I was ready. But before leaving, there was something I wanted them to help me with.

The day before I had managed to get some colour pictures of a nomad camp with a couple of women in the foreground. In my enthusiasm, I had overwound the film, breaking it off the spool. The only way to save it was to improvise a darkroom in which to open up the camera.

I tried to explain all this. They nodded sagely, without understanding, except that I wished for the loan of all their cloaks—the striped garments like dressing gowns which are called chapans.

I knelt on my bed with the Leica in front of me, and showed where I wanted the chapans to be placed. One by one, they put them on top of me, covering my back and face. Long after the last ray of light was excluded, the chapans continued to weigh on me down till I nearly suffocated. From the laughter which managed to penetrate, it was plainly a very great joke.

I worked with feverish haste, gasping for air and afraid of the drops of sweat which poured from my face on to the film; but at last I managed to rewind it.

'Khub astin?' asked the muffled voice of the mechanic outside my 'darkroom'.

'Yes,' I said weakly.

They pulled off my covering and with a newly loaded film I got

one of them to take a picture of Gul and myself holding hands in front of the bus.

The last stage of the journey was across a range of bare, rounded hills, whose ridges and shadows formed yet another of those endless patterns of the Central Asian land face. At the final breakdown of the pipe-e-tank I wandered off to the summit of one of them, ignoring Gul's teasing about the danger of wolves, and far in the distance was a valley of trees which I guessed was Maimana.

I was sorry that this journey was ending; the companionship of the road was the one sure way in Afghanistan of breaking through the barriers of urban reticence, but this had been something more. When, at ten o'clock, we came down across a dried-up torrent bed and up to the crumbling barnyard which was the serai of a place which ranks on the map with letters as large as Bristol or Boston, my loneliness and lost-ness was complete.

'God be with you,' said Gul. 'Tomorrow I return to Mazar. If God is kind, we shall meet again.'

We did.

But already I was firmly in the hands of officialdom, offended at having received no word by the telegraph at our stop at Yaq-aq.

XIII

WITH a porter carrying my bags, the fresh young policeman led me down from the serai, through the wide market place, drenched with the morning sun. I had given up looking for antiquity by now, and accepted the destruction, the regimented arcades and telegraph poles with loudspeakers, as they came. I didn't have to ask to know that the carpet weavers, whose trade had been the official object of my visit, were not to be found in the 'city' but out in the villages, a tour requiring some days, which I no longer possessed.

At the bottom of the main bazaar was a space of cleared rubble. In its centre, raised Acropolis-like on a tall mound of earth, was an enormous red building which so little consorted with the rest of Maimana that I had to look twice to take it in.

'Is it not excellent?' said my policeman with pride. 'It is our new cinema!'

I was so obsessed with it, and kept looking back in fascination, that I nearly tripped over the steps of the municipal football pitch.

The second and only other building of note was the Hotel. Smugly suburban behind its neat brick wall, decorated within and without in tasteful shades of blue and grey, it surpassed that of Mazar in every respect and would have rated three stars in any Guide Michelin for care and cleanliness. Except—it was disconcertingly cold. A spruce young man in a spotless turban led me down the echoing corridor and showed me my room with its bed and table-lamp, and the bathroom next door with its chromium shower and silent German water closet.

'And have you many other guests?'

'None, Sir. It is late in the year.'

'No Russians?'

'One or two in the summer. But we hardly see them.'

So Maimana was out of the Soviet orbit. When I looked at the register I saw that what he said was true: the only entry in the past month was that of the British military attaché and three French archaeologists.

I took lunch on the verandah, sitting in the scorching sun which contrasted with the cold of my blue-washed room: an excellent lunch of curried meat and raisins, followed by a big bowl of curds, which were better than any I had tasted in Afghanistan or Persia.

I washed out my shirt and underwear and hung them in the sun to dry.

I got out my diary and began leisurely to stake out the timetable for my return to Kabul.

Then suddenly I stopped in my counting with a shock: according to my barest calculations, if I was to reach Kabul by the post bus, I should have left Maimana three days before.

To add to my consternation, when I dug into my pocket for money to buy cigarettes with which to think out this problem, I found I possessed a total of only thirty afghanis, fifteen dollars, and six hundred Persian rials. Unless I could find a bank in Maimana to change them I had not even the cash to buy a place on Gul's bus in the morning.

I called to the hotel boy who throughout my meal had sat watching me from the doorway and asked him where the bank was.

The boy fetched the clerk; or rather the young man whom I had taken for the clerk in the morning. (When I met other people who had used the hotel, no one could remember a clerk of that description, or anyone like him; and I was forced to the conclusion that his function was somewhat different.)

After some thought the clerk recalled that there was an office of the National Bank in the old bazaar and said he would take me there. We found it in what had once been the courtyard of a mosque; the back, indeed, was still a mosque, with two small minarets. In a dusty office an apologetic cashier expounded on the ease with which, normally, he could have accommodated me. But today the manager was absent: and only the manager, alas, knew the exchange rate.

Perhaps the Aryana office.

'The office is shut,' said my attendant. 'The planes have stopped flying. It is late in the year.'

'The bazaar?' suggested the cashier.

In the end I found a pharmacy, and taking advantage of Maimana

being on the northern route of Herat, changed everything, including the disintegrating paper rials, at a rate more favourable than in Kabul. The deal was conducted in the presence of a figure reminiscent of Mr Aristotle Onassis, complete with dark sunglasses, who in the course of it gave a thumbnail survey of a three-volume literary work he was producing. It was called, if I remember, 'The Greatest Stories in the World', and embraced such matters as the tragic death of Mary Queen of Scots and his own efforts to promote culture as the Provincial Director of Education.

'Excuse my not inviting you to my home,' he said darkly on parting. 'We are called to a *reception*. Please convey my regards to the British Ambassador.'

By the time we reached the serai, work on the buses was packing up for the day. Gul was not there; someone said he had changed his mind and gone on to Herat. But another bus—a modern and excellent vehicle—would be leaving for Mazar at six o'clock sharp in the morning.

I reserved a place on it.

Across the town and the hills beyond a great red sunset was spreading its wings above Herat, and beyond Herat above Persia. There was a pull in the sight of it, for when first I planned this journey I had meant to take that road—the road which Robert Byron took, and, back in history, the Uzbek and Turkish and Mongol invaders had taken on their way to plunder the plains of Khorassan. I had only to go down it—so short it seemed—and in two or three days I should be in Meshed, instead of facing the long journey back across the mountains, and the unknown complications of Termez and Moscow.

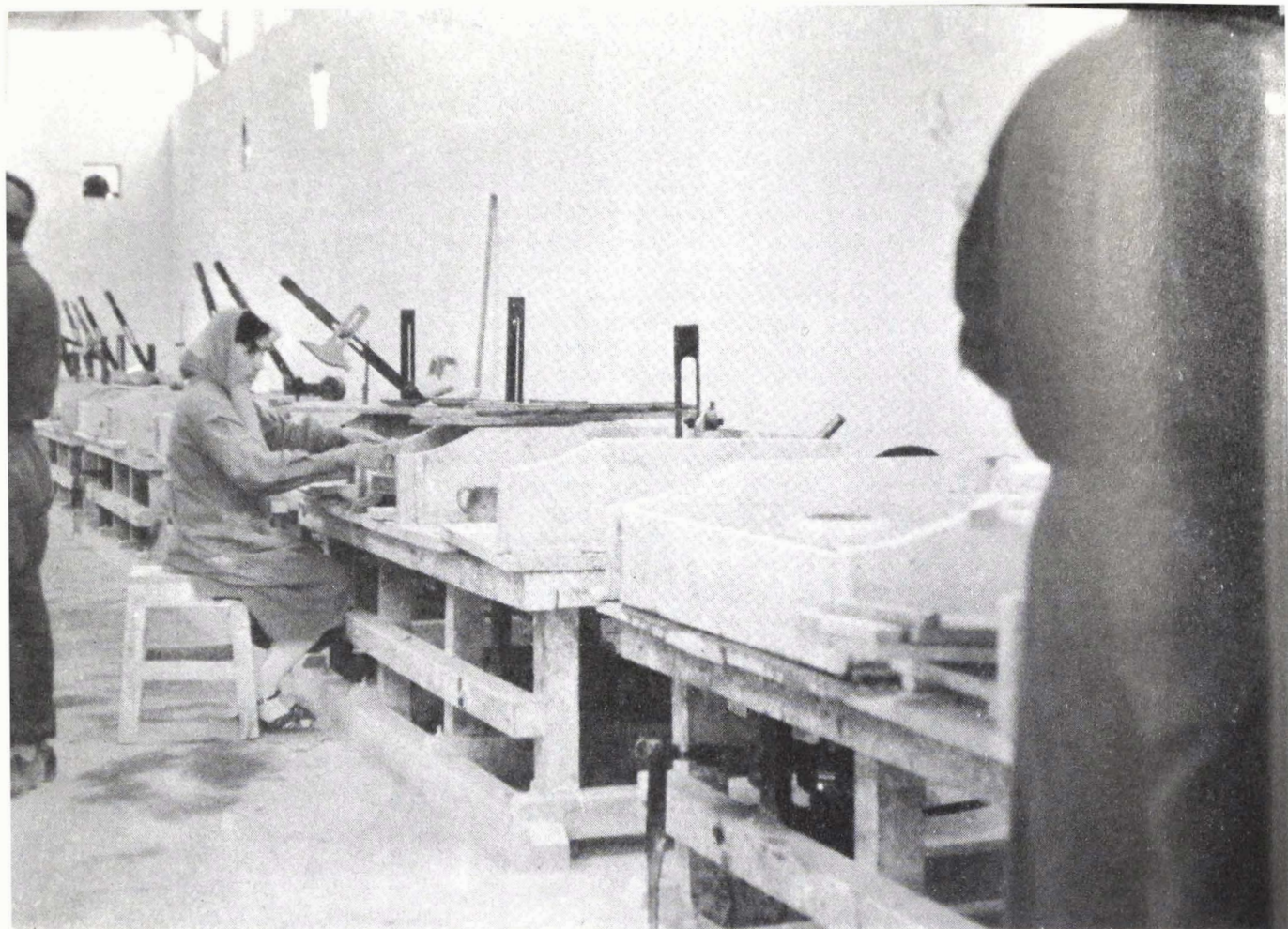
There was also another thing which drew me.

A year before a rumour had come into Persia that a Russian force was stationed in that area, commanding the pivot of the Persian-Afghan strategic situation. And though it had been convincingly denied, I should have liked to say I had travelled that road and found nothing to it. But now there was no time, and it was another of the gaps in the picture of Afghanistan which I should have liked to draw in its entirety.

In all this time the 'clerk' had stayed close by my side. On the way back to the hotel I asked him what one did in the evening in Maimana, and he pointed to the cinema. The film they were showing was

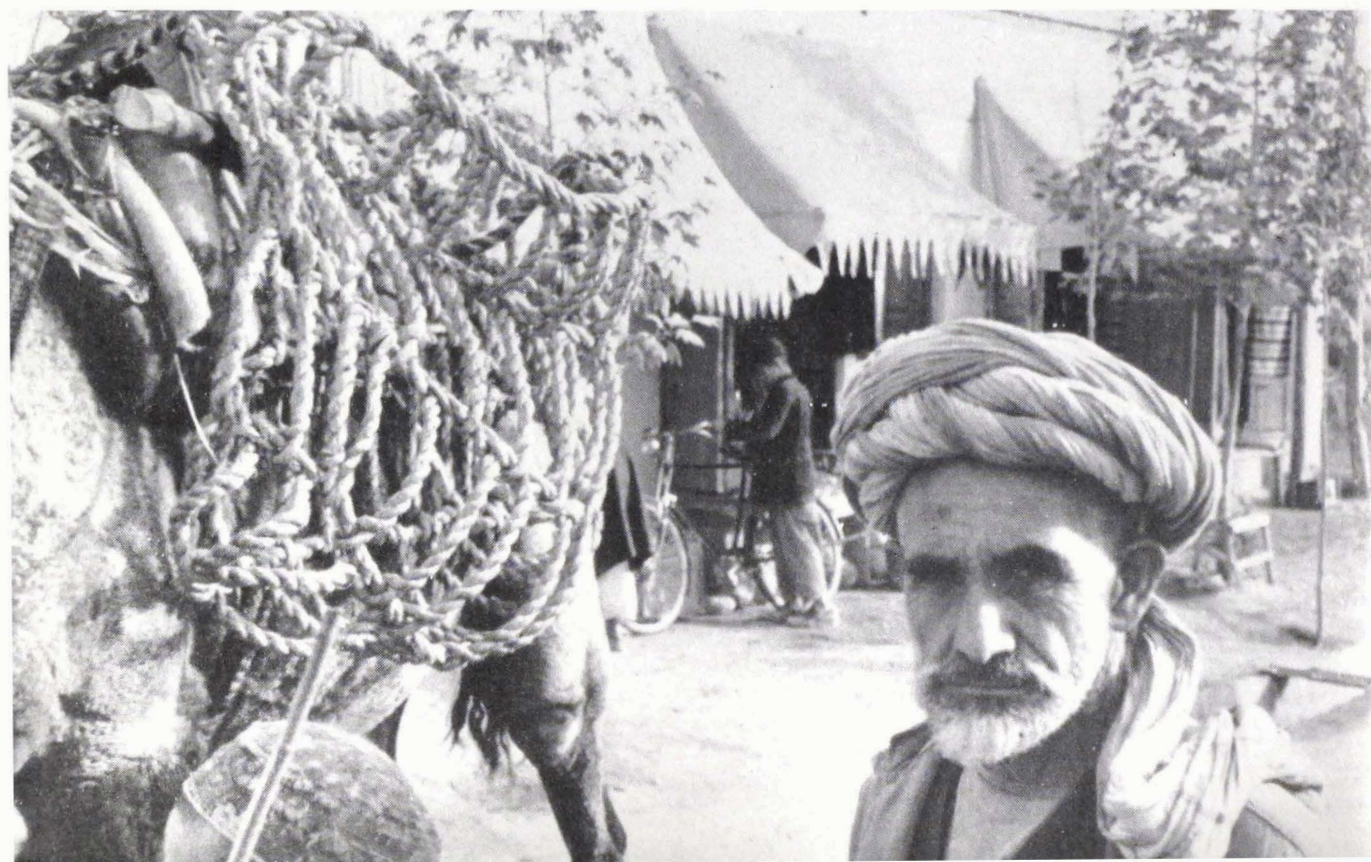


*Russian equipment for
the Salang project—
Kunduz*



26. *The lone Stakhanovette—Kunduz*

Cameleer—Kunduz





27. *Gul Mohammed—bus driver*

Taking nasswar





28. *Turcomen on the road to Andkhoi*

Un-bogging the bus to Andkhoi



said to be Tajik, an import from the Soviet Union, and he assured me it was very good.

I said I would like to see it.

‘In that case I shall accompany you.’

I ate my supper sitting wrapped in two sweaters and my donkey-jacket, and at half past seven he knocked on my door. Together we walked across the rubble of the half-built town to the earth mound. It was bitterly cold. A plume of smoke—the first domestic fire I had had seen in Maimana—was coming from the cinema chimney. I bought our tickets at a cubby-hole next to the stove house and we climbed the blue- and white-washed stairs to the circle.

The house was not very full: only about half the concrete floor, above and below, was set out with chairs. But there was a patient air of expectation about the place, of people determined to be entertained, and shortly after we arrived, who should descend on me, stepping with flowing robes across the seat backs, but Gul Mohammed. He pressed my hand, ignoring my custodian, and just then the red and blue lights went out in the alcoves.

The screen lit up to announce in bold letters ‘THE SPHINX’, made—if the flickering titles which followed didn’t deceive me—in Bombay. In the general sense of what followed, the name was an apt one.

Without ado, a blinding sun lit up above the dust of a desert caravan and changed, as abruptly, to a moonlit scene in—could it be?—a harem. A dozen houris, with veils and cymbals, danced out towards the audience of Tajiks and Uzbeks who audibly expressed their delight.

Scarcely had the last two cleared the rostrum—with a couple of cut-aways to a lovelorn Valentino reclining among aspidistras—than the restless camera had moved to a lady with riding whip and tam-o’-shanter, full in the throes of a lyric of love or jealousy.

Or rather I do the camera an injustice.

Under the body-blows of the twenty or so love lyrics and song-and-dance numbers which followed, I began to detect the hand of the Afghan film censor. There is a splendid ruthlessness about film presentation in Central Asia. In Persia they stop the reel every five minutes and fill the screen with a long résumé of what has been happening. In Afghanistan they simply cut everything except the music—or, to be accurate, the women.

I should very much like to know the plot of ‘The Sphinx’. It must

have been an epic in its entirety. Emasculated to snatches of female song, it moved from the lady of the tam-o'-shanter and whip to a dancer in a Balinese night club; to a servant girl with glycerine tears singing a long, sad song among samovars; to a bevy of sari'd Brahmin daughters daringly wooing an otiose young man in a drawing-room; to a sexy but impoverished young lady singing a dirge about her blind old father and being given a coin by a sweeper; to the bevy of Brahmins, this time dressed in American sailor-suits and doing the Black Bottom; to endless love-calls and (female half) duets from hill-tops, dungeons, temples and oases.

And all the time (since without interrupting the sound track, one cannot dispose of what in the business they call 'cut-away shots') there came tantalizing glimpses of angry fathers in Bombay police uniforms, doors being burst open, fierce cuckolded sheiks fingering scimitars, and once—startlingly—a sweating young lover confronted with a skeleton in a bottomless pit.

About half-way through the house lights came on again, and a jolly figure walked into the auditorium selling flat round loaves of Turcoman bread. I turned to Gul, who was offering me a cigarette.

'How do you like it?' he asked.

'Magnificent,' I said. 'And you?'

'Ah . . . *bisyar khub*—very good indeed,' he sighed; and with a gesture which all through our journey had endeared him to me, he rocked his head from side to side, cradling his hands round his ears, and smiling the smile of a friendly snake up his full curved Tajik mouth and long, straight nose.

An electric bell announced that we should put our cigarettes, and the screen came to life again.

If the first half of the performance had justified the film's title, the second outdid it. The Brahmins were dancing in what looked, in the light of the failing projector carbon, like Victorian nursemaids' dresses and poke-bonnets, when all of a sudden a Frankenstein monster leapt horribly towards us with a flaming torch. In his wake we were confronted with a blazing Teutonic castle. The fire crept unerringly along the battlements and dislodged a large backcloth turret. Then by some mechanical failure I cannot yet understand, first a Dutch windmill, and secondly one of the Brahmins, became diagonally lodged in the film frame. While the projectionist prised them free, I wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to our long-awaited import from Russia.

I had not much longer to wait.

The castle reappeared, blazing from every loophole. A pair of hooded riders galloped endlessly with coconut shell noises down moonlit roads. In the wheel house of the windmill a pair of Monte Cristos fought a fifteen-second duel. Then suddenly the film took on a tint of rich sepia and a well-proportioned lady—announced by a soft-spoken Russian sound-track as Lydia Popovska—was performing rhythmic exercises on parallel bars.

It lasted two minutes: she wore black tights and a skin-tight jumper. In the darkness I felt Gul Mohammed's hand on my knee, and I knew he was deeply moved.

The final scene brought us back to the servant girl whom we had seen ten reels earlier, now singing in a broadcasting studio with a flock of colonels, bearers, sweepers and rich young men listening hungrily in front of their radio sets. Up went the house lights and a final title announced boldly and curtly

Artistes

AMAR NATH

Out in the night, the loudspeakers were filling the frosty air with what sounded like the screech and roar of dive-bombers. No one was abroad but our fellow cinema-goers, scurrying for the cover of their homes. Gul came with me and to the scandalized suspicion of the 'clerk' accepted an invitation to my room, where we sat on the floor sharing a farewell meal of left-over bread and curds.

When he had gone, the lights dipped three times in warning and I lit the hurricane lamp to complete the last pages of my diary.

At seven next morning I arrived at the place of departure and found the driver to Mazar sitting on a dirty rush mat, dismantling a propeller shaft. I half guessed that it belonged to our bus, and I was right. The propeller shaft was to be our Achilles' heel.

We left at noon.

In the interval I was overtaken by an orgy of spending, laying out all but my last six hundred Afghanis on a pair of brightly woven saddle bags and two large flamboyant donkey collars with woollen tassels of yellow, black and green. I had no clear idea what I would do with them. Indeed, my string of donkeys in Inglistan, which I described in some detail to the genial harness-maker, grew into something of a liability as I came to reckon what all this would cost

me in excess air luggage. But I felt I had to own something tangible to remind me of this country where the man-made colour of everyday things—carpets, harness, the stark red splash of girls' and women's dresses—stood out as a triumphant and glorious gesture against the poverty of the dust and somehow, too, as a symbol of its natural freedom beneath the dowdy western gloss being spread from the capital.

As we were leaving, we were joined at the last moment by an important looking individual in a western suit and karakul cap, who turned out to be the Provincial Director of Medicine. He took a seat next to the driver, but I did not speak with him till late that evening when the cold persuaded me to come down from my open-air place on the roof.

'So you speak German!' he said, when I introduced myself. 'They told me you were from London, so I thought you spoke only English.'

All the time as we bumped through the darkness to Andkhoi he regaled me with a flow of pseudo-philosophy which is the penalty, sometimes, of German railway travel, but which embellished with Afghan overtones is well-nigh insufferable. I suffered it by force of habit, and patience had its reward. After three hours of Schopenhauer and Maeterlinck ('It has been my life's mission to marry *die alte Philosophie mit der neuen Wissenschaft*') I steered him to talk of his medical work. He had three doctors under him, including the head of the district military hospital. But the tenor of our conversation was unexpected—the link was mesmerism.

'And do you, then, employ mesmerism in your treatment?'

'We have an excellent mesmerist in Kabul.'

'For what?'

'For the treatment of impotence.'

'Is impotence so prevalent?'

'It is very prevalent, especially here in the north.'

'Why?'

'Well, first, you understand, our young men have no *experience*; it is the purdah system. And then . . . (he coughed politely) . . . we have this homosexuality. I have written a small monograph on the subject—"*Die Homosexualitaet und der Marxismus*".'

I had difficulty in following his theory, but took the chance to relate my experience at the minarets in Herat. I asked him point-blank if I could possibly have been mistaken.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Herat—unfortunately is worse than our other cities for that thing.’

So much for Mr Shalizi and his indignant protests.

During the journey the Medical Director was a source of information on various lay matters also, including the local architecture.

All the way between Mazar and Maimana I had been puzzled by the alternating style of house building. In Mazar the dominant style was the conventional square house with wooden cross beams and a flat roof. In Andkhoi it was tea-pot domes. In Maimana it was beams again. At first I had thought it was due to the availability or otherwise of timber. But a closer look at the landscape disproved it. Then I put it down to natural tradition—Andkhoi was Turcoman and Maimana Uzbek. But here, too, I was mistaken about the reason.

‘It’s the termites,’ said my companion.

We got to Andkhoi at nine in the evening, and I faced the hotel problem. Ever since the cosiness of Yaq-aq, and my frozen night at Maimana, I had determined never again to set foot in a roadside hotel. But I underrated the System.

In lowering darkness, with the lights of the city only a quarter of a mile away, we were waved to a stop from the roadside.

‘*Hotel ast,*’ said the driver.

‘I will not sleep in any hotel,’ I said sternly. ‘I will sleep with my friends in the tea-house.’

‘But the tea-house is *bad*,’ said the Medical Director. ‘It is dirty. There are no proper beds, sheets, blankets.’

‘I do not want a bed. I want company.’

I made a point of speaking in Persian. The effect was successful. Acquainted with the argument, everyone in the bus was on my side.

‘Why should the *feringhi* be forced to sleep like a Pasha when he doesn’t want to?’ said an old man.

‘Quite,’ I said, ‘when all I want is a good pilau, and talk, and a place on the floor.’

‘But there will be *bad* people in Andkhoi. It is not *safe*.’

I asked the Director where he himself would be sleeping. But the question misfired. I might have guessed it. He was staying with friends.

‘Look,’ I said desperately, turning to the hotel clerk, who peered through the door with mortification and puzzlement. ‘Have you a good pilau? Have you a samovar brewing? Have you sweet melons in your larder?’

He hung his head. 'Pilau and melons, no,' he said. 'But we have eggs. All this evening since I heard you were coming, I have had the eggs ready—and tea, too.'

I gave in.

With the bus disappearing towards civilization, he carried my bag up an earthen mound like that on which the Maimana cinema was built. As at Maimana I was the only guest. The great frozen room was ventilated on three sides by ill-fitting French windows. The wind howled up a broken chimney through which I could see the sky.

He brought my supper—three fat-drenched eggs, a round of stale bread, and an aluminium rack holding two painted tumblers of heavily sedimented water.

'Khub ast?' he said disarmingly. 'Did I not speak the truth?'

Early next morning the sun poured in through my windows, which were open to view in every direction like the sides of a bird cage, fifty-feet high above the plain. With a boy to carry my bags, I walked into the city, photographing old mud houses with ibex horns embedded above the doors.

The bus was waiting. We started almost at once and within an hour we reached the beginning of the 'dust bowl'.

Last time I had been so preoccupied with the mechanics of un-bogging, and then with my Turcomen, that I had failed to recognize its proper geographical position. Now, having looked at my maps again, I had a new interest in it.

When everyone dismounted and the bachas began their pole work I went off a little ahead and found a high dune from which I could see far in every direction. I was standing on what was virtually the Soviet frontier. Behind me lay the Afghan sarakh—the occasional scrub, the skyline trees and the smoke of unseen villages. North was the deadness of the Dasht and shortly, as I now knew, the Russian watch-towers and patrols.

I had only to move ten yards further and I would be finally lost to sight from the road; lost among the dunes, at the mercy of any accident without the chance of crying for help above the buzzing of the wind in the sand.

To test the position I took three or four steps forward.

Scarcely had I done so when I was assailed from behind by an

anguished shout. Standing on the last visible dune, the mechanic was gesticulating like a semaphore.

‘Why do you go there?’ he cried almost angrily. ‘Come back. You stay by the bus please!’

I obeyed, but refused a further demand that I should actually get into the bus, which was just then canted so steeply in a rut that it almost overturned.

‘Why all this fuss?’ I said. ‘What’s up?’

‘Please,’ said the driver, ‘you are in this place where three years ago a young American disappeared with his *khanum*. *It is a very bad place*. Now do you understand?’

When we reached the better part of the road, we stopped for a lunch of bread and melons while the engine cooled. Scarcely had we re-started, however, when we forced to pull in by a convoy of Russian Ziss oil-drilling trucks. They were led by a pair of six-wheel derrick lorries with half a dozen other vehicles bringing up the rear. The drilling crews sat in the caravan-like bodies on which were mounted hose drums and winches.

This time I was determined to get my picture and used the Leica in a cloud of choking dust.

Just as I finished and started to put it away, I was disturbed by the *bacha* beside me. ‘Lorry,’ he said excitedly: ‘lorry *kharab*.’

Lorries were always being *kharab*.

‘What about it?’ I said impatiently.

‘*Bisyar kharab!*’ he shouted.

Then I looked up.

He had not exaggerated.

We were coming to the bridge across the canal from Shibarghan. A six-wheel derrick truck had gone over the edge and lay overturned with its cab in the water. Everybody leapt down from the bus and ran towards the wreck. I braced myself for the grisly sight inside.

The Medical Director, I noticed, had grabbed the canvas grip containing his instruments.

Then we stepped over the tangle of the drilling boom and the hole in the bridge where a rotten log had given way.

Standing on the upturned chassis was a sturdy Afghan in a leather jerkin, struggling to open the door of the cab.

‘How many people inside?’

‘No one.’

‘What about the driver?’

‘I am the driver.’

He managed to open the door, reached down with his foot and touched the starter button. The engine coughed briefly into life.

‘It goes!’ he said proudly.

One had to yield the palm to Russian engineering.

By the time we got by and reached Shibarghan the day was ending. We pushed on and reached Ag Chah about eight o’clock. Once again, I was hauled to the hotel about a quarter of a mile from the town.

In the morning I dressed by lamplight and came out onto the surrounding mud maidan. A more desolate place could hardly be imagined. The mechanic, who had offered to fetch me a ghari, was nowhere in evidence: the only living persons were a couple of gesticulating figures who introduced themselves as the mayor and the local contractor.

I asked what I could do for them, and they asked if I could give some advice on the best make of cinema projection equipment.

Such was the unreality of it that I answered automatically ‘American—Western Electric.’

Carefully the contractor inscribed it in his notebook, in Persian.

‘And how big is the cinema?’ I asked.

The mayor stepped back, extended his arms to make a line from the road to a jui, and from the jui to a lonely, wind-bent pinetree. ‘*Very* big,’ he answered proudly. ‘It will be the biggest building in all the town!’

It was bitterly cold, this last morning, and I waited with more than usual urgency for the prayer stop in order to relieve myself. Then the sun came up, warming my back through the dirt and dust and bathing the landscape in all its spaciousness of light and beauty.

It was curious how the fall of the sun, coming from the opposite direction to that when I had passed here before, made everything emerge with a new clarity. The endless dark tree lines, the vast Turcoman villages of four or five hundred domed huts at a time, running off in long lines like barracks, the flocks and herds, the slow-moving caravans swinging out of the haze and vanishing like goods trains towards the hills, the blue scalloped mountains marching down towards Mazar.

I had had to abandon my scheme for re-crossing the Hindu-Kush by road, and this was the very last day I would sit on a bumping bus roof, enduring the bruises but also the freedom of the air and sun. I was exhilarated and saddened by it, and I wondered if I would ever really be able to recall this freedom. Everything about it was precious to me—even the adolescent conversation of my current companions, continually plaguing me with their requests to know the time and teasing me that I should not catch the plane I was hoping to find at Mazar.

Twelve miles short of the city we fell prey to an attack of propeller shaft trouble, which delayed us for a couple of hours. Then we were held up by a caravan of camels, filling the narrow road with their unwieldy sacks of cotton. Finally the customs made a fuss about our cargo and spent thirty minutes looking for opium. We rolled into Mazar at half past one, to find that the plane had left twenty minutes before.

XIV

ALL afternoon and evening I kept looking to the south, watching anxiously for the clouds on the pass which could prevent the next day's flying, or indeed all flying for a week. Meanwhile I resigned myself to a twenty-four hour wait in the forbidding hotel. The Medical Director had gone to stay with friends: there had been no room for him. I myself was only accommodated through the kindness of R. V. Pandey. I found him at the door of his room, anxiously searching for the key of his padlock, which must have fallen out of his pocket during 'exercise'. He was also sick.

In the end we had to break the hasp. Its replacement would cost him the price of two days' meals, and I would have liked to do something to recompense him. But my sole assets were five hundred and eighteen afghanis. When I had bought my flight ticket, I had eight left. I kept five for the ghari in the morning and spent the rest at the Leopard, spinning out a pot of black tea and munching flap-bread—my only food that day and all I could expect till I reached Kabul and the Embassy. Then on the way home, searching for a match to light my last cigarette—a crumpled tube of paper from which most of the tobacco had long since vanished—I found two halves of a five-afghani note and bought a melon.

Pandey was in bed, shivering with fever. The cold invaded the room as if it were a dungeon. But his worries—which were plainly written on his face—were other ones.

He had never quite given me his confidence on my previous visits, but now he made a clean breast of it: his money worries, his tax worries, his troubles with the hotel manager, his trouble with the former governor.

The last was the worst: Pandey's predecessor, an Indian like himself, had been dismissed on a charge of corruption—or, more truthfully, because he failed to pass the governor's son through the final examination which would take him to college.

Now, every Friday, Pandey was invited to the great man's house. 'Mind you,' he said, 'I take care that there are other persons there; and I do not always accept these invitations. But on Friday no one works, and it is all very difficult. This man makes me gifts—fruit, for instance.' And he pulled a bag of apples from the litter of books and vegetables beneath his bed. 'What shall I do? A teacher must set an example—also the Indian government pays me a supplement that I should do honour for my country here.'

Then there was the matter of his salary. 'First, when I came here, they gave me an advance—three thousand afghanis. But my monthly cheque does not come from Kabul. . . . Last month I had to pay my taxes. It was more than a month's pay altogether. . . .'

'How long is your contract?'

'Four years I must stay here—then I go back to my wife and my children in Uttar Pradesh. Unless (he added hopefully) this British Consul gives the scholarship you talk of. . . .'

I dosed him with aspirin but he declined the melon ('It is not the hour: it disturbs the routine; routine is the rule of health.') and went on talking of the governor.

'Last week they held a reception. All the big officials must come with their wives. The week before it was army officers. Next week it will be the Education staff. That is good. At first the governor wanted to forbid the women to come with chadduris to the bazaar, but wise men dissuaded him. . . .'

It all sounded so familiar: the little world of exile, of small events made big, the intrigue and uncertainty, the Russians and Afghans pursuing their alien purposes around his Hindu loneliness.

First thing in the morning I went out to look at the mountains again. They still stayed clear, and I dressed while Pandey said his prayers at the untidy table. The smoke of his incense stick drove out the vegetable smells and his chant wafted out to the corridor, where the Afghan hotel-boy squatted on the dirty floor, seeming not to hear, or perhaps hearing and despising him.

When he had finished, at the end of half an hour, I made him a present of all my remaining medicines, except for a final bottle of chlorodine. It seemed very little, and I felt an enormous pity and admiration for him, leaving him here to endure the fast-approaching winter with his example and exercise, his wretched room, his presents from the governor, while I went back to London to sit by

my gas fire and look at this world like some curious, unreal dream.

The plane left at ten. We waited on the apron, watching a speck come out of the brown-blue haze. It was an Afghan Air Force Ilyushin, flying on to Termez with its cargo of officers, or perhaps some of those 'special' Soviet personnel whose entry formalities, I had discovered, involved no passports any longer. Our own plane came ten minutes later, touched down briefly while we hurried up the steps, and was airborne before I could fasten my safety-belt. Among my fellow passengers was a wealthy land-owner who had disturbed us half the night by telephoning police posts for news of the three-ton truck containing his luggage. Now he sat back with his entourage, smoking State Express cigarettes and wearing a tea-cosy karakul hat like that which had been worn by my Soviet interrogator.

The coffee on which I had relied to make my breakfast was not forthcoming: the steward had switched off the coffee machine and sat in the rearmost seat holding hands with the landowner's secretary.

The flight to Kunduz, where we were to pick up passengers, took us close along the frontier and I watched for some sight of the Oxus—that elusive great river which gave its name to the country over which I had travelled but which every device of security had prevented me from seeing. The foothills spread their fingers, we climbed a few thousand feet to avoid them, the haze parted briefly in the distance to the north. And there for a short minute spread a wandering snake of green. Before I could be sure that I had seen it, the haze closed in again. We crossed another river—the Kunduz—and were gliding down to a sunbaked landing-strip with a solitary hut and wind stocking.

We left the plane, which the moment it touched down became a glistening oven. Ten minutes later we were off again. The climb was steep, and when we levelled out we were skimming about two thousand feet above a ridged and barren waste.

The bucking began, which marked the last climb to the Salang. And then, all at once, I beheld the sight which all through this journey I had waited to see. Since I had last crossed the pass the snow had fallen. From westward came a wall of snow-clad summits, endlessly, silently, rising and falling, lifting up their tents in the bright clear air, dropping to ice-blue shadow where the sun cut diagonally from ridge to ridge.

We jerked and slithered, climbed with pounding motors, seeking the gap which, hidden from view by the crew compartment, was somewhere emerging from the crags.

As they came closer, the snow fell thinly from razor-edged rock, piled against pinnacles, spread out below in blinding, skimming fields. Suddenly the snow-walls were at our wing tips, the summits sped past us, swinging like cartwheel spokes, till the wall fell back and we planed across the last white hump to Kabul.

The snow had fallen around Kabul also. Such was the transformation that but for the street-pattern I would hardly have recognized it. North and south, dominating the whole plain of the capital, the arid brown hills were turned to white. Even the trees were different; dark and deliberate against the cool, clear pattern of white and blue. We followed the river, circled the azure dome of Nadir Shah's mausoleum, bumped to a stop before the familiar control tower.

When I got out, I breathed an air which had nothing to do with the Kabul of before. It was like coming to the city for the first time. All the tones and colours which had composed the Kabul of my imagination were there in reality, clear and alive.

I realized with a new weight on my mind that my photography of four weeks before was now no good. I would have to retake almost everything I had photographed.

At the hotel I was greeted with the news that President Eisenhower was to visit Kabul in three weeks' time. Like the coming of the snow, the reception of this news—which obliged me to get my article to London as quickly as possible—completely exhilarated and enervated me. So that when I went off with the manager's every-ready loan to the Saadat Restaurant, my appetite suddenly vanished, and I sat there picking at my pilau, scarcely able to wait to get down to my writing and feeling helpless at the quantity of things which prevented it.

The first was a call at the travel agency, where I found that the money for my fare had been paid to the bank account in Germany and the fact duly telegraphed to the cryptic address: Swiss Agent, Kabul. Though I had never doubted my wife's ability to raise it out of nowhere, her efficiency—as always—astounded me. The departure of the plane from Kabul had meanwhile been postponed to Saturday morning, giving me an extension of eighteen hours.

Elated, I walked through the Shah-i-Nau to the British Embassy.

Everywhere the trees were clad in their autumn russet colours, washed of their dust, and crisp against the blue-white mountain backcloth. There was a smell of woodsmoke in the air, which quickened my step, perhaps because it reminded me of England.

At the gates of the compound the Pakistani gatekeeper saluted with a smile of recognition and led me through the ordered drives and lawns, the rose beds and borders, to where the host of my previous visits was superintending the filling of anti-freeze solution into his car.

He looked up.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘So you’re back and alive. Come and tell me all about it.’ And we sat in his office, behind the iron grilles on the doors and windows, and I related this story, as hereto told, consuming tea and Scotch pancakes while the darkness came down from the mountains.

That night, and the following night, I sat in the dimness of Room Number Five, drafting my article and tearing from my diary the pages and names which might compromise myself and others on my journey home through Russia. In the daytime I grew footsore from walking the city with my camera. I photographed its beauties and curiosities—the blue and white rococo of the Ministry of Information, the New Mosque, the river. I climbed the scaffolding of the new hotel (to which a third storey was hurriedly being added in time for the Presidential visit) to lean precariously over the parapet and photograph the interior of the Royal Palace. I photographed beggars and the Independence Memorial.

But the greatest problem was the women.

Since my first arrival nearly two months before the uniform had already begun to depart from its puritan beginnings. The gloves were disappearing, and the glasses; and the headscarves were creeping further and further to the back of the head. But all this made the question of photography no easier. In the end I left it to my very last day, and then photographed quite openly, holding the Leica in full view of my subjects and preparing to defend it against the assaults and stones of the crowds.

The result was more peaceful than I ever expected—entirely without incident, even an exchange of words, till the occasion of the very last photograph I took.

The day was ending and the reading on my light meter was almost below the level of usefulness, when I was overtaken by two

girls, about eighteen or nineteen years old, laughing and chattering with all the gaiety of their age. They were both so pretty and full of life that I couldn't help following them—torn between fascination and abhorrence of the cold-blooded effrontery of taking them full face.

In the end I gave it up, and walked briskly by with merely a side-glance to remember them by.

Suddenly I stopped, and unable to believe my ears, turned round. 'Aks-e-mara?' said the elder of them. 'Won't you take our picture?'

She stood arm-in-arm with her companion, laughing with her dark rebellious eyes. Miss Afghanistan, 1959.

I took the picture and vanished into the twilight. The female revolution, in Kabul at least, was complete.

The other matter which weighed on me was to say goodbye to Abdul.

The first time I called at the door of his house there was no reply. The next time it was answered by a servant, but Abdul was 'not at home'. And then as I came from the Best Dry Cleaners with my donkey jacket cleaned for the journey and reeking of Russian petrol, I ran into him coming from the mosque.

'Andreas!' he cried, 'Andreas!' as if fearful I should miss him in the traffic.

When he stopped smiling, I saw for the first time how much thinner he had got. His suit was like a sack. There were pouches beneath his eyes which had nothing to do with the shadows thrown by the street lamps.

All had gone worse than he, or I, could ever have dreamed. It was no longer a question of his going back to Germany at his own expense. It was no longer a question of his going at all. He had been refused an exit visa.

As we walked slowly towards his house, he told me about his visits to the Ministry, the days of waiting, the final blank refusal; and the shadow of the Police State began to close in on me also, in a way that it had never achieved with the petty bureaucracy of permits and travelling restrictions and brushes with the Security organization.

I seemed to have made this walk before; this shadowy, half-suspicious promenade in dimly lit streets, listening to the heart-cry of an imprisoned human being—and then I remembered: it was in

Communist Czechoslovakia, on a visit to mid-winter Prague, in 1954.

We did not go into his house, for reasons I could well appreciate, but continued to walk through the streets of the Shar-i-Nau, talking in whispers, avoiding the glances of people.

‘And are you the only one in this situation?’ I asked unkindly.

‘The only one?’ he laughed bitterly. ‘There are hundreds. *‘Mensch, wissen Sie was dieses Land ist? Es ist ein Dampfkessel!’* (Do you know what this country is? It’s a pressure cooker.) ‘One day if these big fat fools don’t unscrew the valve, there’s going to be an explosion.’

At the corner by the New Mosque we said goodbye. It was a sad parting, for there was nothing adequate I could say to him; and all my words sounded hollow, even to myself. There was however, an unexpected service I could render.

As he walked away, I was suddenly aware that a policeman had been following us. Now he stood there looking between Abdul’s back and myself, and I realized his quandary. At all costs he must not trail Abdul to his house.

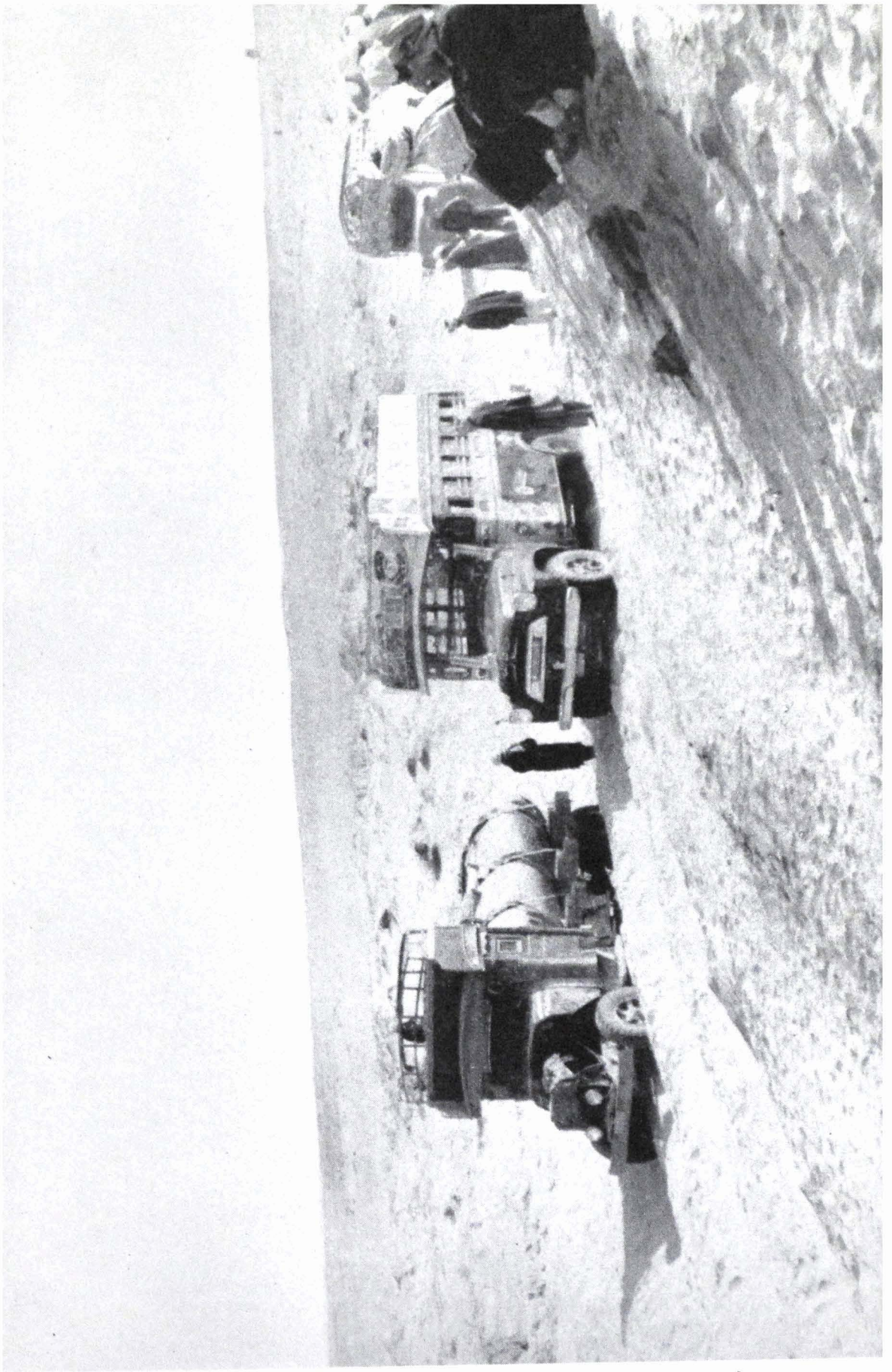
I found a match and struck it close to my face. The light was enough to attract him.

He followed me as far as the entrance to the American Embassy, where I found a ghari and managed to throw him off.

In my room I sat with the folio on which were written the answers to my questions to the Planning Ministry. I had picked them up in the morning, from a young Cambridge graduate who worked as Shalizi’s assistant; and we had talked about England like a pair of exiles, so difficult was it to believe he was really Afghan, except for that extreme, deliberate politeness which I had found in Mr Tarzi and others on my way.

The answers were extremely frank and honest. They told me not only the facts about the Salang road, which nobody had known before, but also about the hindered progress of the Five Year Plan, which, when I looked at it, struck me not so much by its muddle as by its courage.

That was the other side to Afghanistan—the opposite of Abdur’s side. Or rather but one of half a dozen sides, all contradictory, mutually confusing, each one lending itself to a stark and sure pic-



*Vehicles abandoned
in the northern
sands*



30. Russian oil-exploration truck wrecked near the Soviet border



31. *Air-view : entering the Salang pass*



32. *Turcomen—a study of reactions to a photograph*

'Miss Afghanistan'



ture, till one paused to consider the others and all one's fine picture disintegrated in a dust-storm.

What was I going to give as my verdict?

As I looked at it, I saw a country fighting for its survival, hemmed in by poverty, split by divisions of race and geography, spurred by the presence of richer lands around. A country pledged in debt, financial and political, which in its quest for some share of the progress of the outer world had opened its doors, to an extent it hardly realized, to its neighbour in the north.

For the moment this neighbour was quiescent: it had nothing to gain from internal propaganda amongst a people whose outlook excluded political theory, whose need of food and progress made them look for material results. A country whose formal acquisition would be little more than a burdensome deficit, and a threat to Soviet relations throughout the Muslim world.

But what if conditions changed? If Russia took fright at western aid to Persia and Pakistan? If she thought for a moment that the Central Treaty bases there were about to be occupied by western troops or planes? Or again, if looking ahead, she saw in the advance of her Chinese partner on the borders of India and Nepal the threat of a rival domination of the Indian sub-continent?

If any of this happened, as well it might—or if Afghan tensions resulted in a breakdown as they had only thirty years before, in the reign of Amanullah—then Russia had Afghanistan in the palm of her hand, its economy dependent on her machinery and barter deals, its people awed by her progress, its cities and airports open to her armies and air fleets which waited above the Oxus.

There were those who claimed that Russia was entitled to seek a strategic bastion in Afghanistan. And others who with cold and accurate appraisal saw the Hindu-Kush as the northern defence line of Pakistan and India, and would be content to accept Afghanistan's partition for the sake of a surer barrier against the East.

But what was the merit of yet another Iron Curtain? One could not make a journey such as I had made, even as a spy, and remain unaffected by human contacts. Where would Abdul be, and Gul Mohammed, and Mr Tarzi, and my friend the hotel manager, swallowed, in the name of military logic, in the amorphous, bourgeois anonymity of a communist state?

My only conclusion—then, as now—was that if they were to survive, a new attempt must be made to resolve the difference between

Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Pakhtunistan question; an attempt to restore to Afghanistan, with all its blemishes and corruption, some freedom of manoeuvre—to re-open the door to the south and west before it was too late.

And I wrote it at the bottom of my page, and closed the book.

XV

Tue bus for the airport—true to tradition—never came. Fifteen minutes from flight time I disregarded the protests of the waiting Aryana officer and grabbed a taxi. It wouldn't start. When it did, it had a soft tyre. The wheels nearly fell off. We got to the airport entrance with four minutes to spare. An Afghan porter slung my suitcase on the worn-out scales, registering a bonus of ten kilos minus, and I hurried behind him to the waiting Ilyushin, clasping the saddle bags which I had tied beneath my coat.

I was sufficiently unused to such things to be excited at entering Russian aircraft, and it overlaid my doubts about the reception I would get if word of my antics in the north had gone ahead of me and was waiting in a dossier for some awkward confrontation in Termez or Tashkent.

I was the only Western passenger, and the last to arrive. I slumped into my seat. My last live Afghan—a policeman—put my passport back in my hands. A pretty round-faced hostess showed me how to use my oxygen mask, and we were revving the engines, swinging into position at the head of the runway, the burnished wings with their red CCCP identification letters shimmering and vibrating against my last view of the city.

Two minutes later it fell behind us, and we were alone with the snow and sun.

There was a curious thing about this flight—my third and last across the Hindu-Kush—which distinguished it from the others. Though we carried the equipment for a 25,000-foot ceiling, we clung obstinately, frighteningly, to the ground. For half an hour we yawed and climbed up the snow-slopes, their spiny ribs slipping fast beneath the engine nacelles, till at eighteen thousand feet I followed the example of the others and put on my mask. The rubber bag at my

mouthpiece inflated and deflated with a lazy rhythm. Beyond the scratched perspex the mountain walls closed in on us, the bumps and lurches announced the approach of the Salang.

And then something unnerving happened. A broad wisp of cloud cut the view for a moment, opened briefly, closed again, completely obscuring the propellers.

We lumbered on at four hundred miles an hour, and I had the queasy sensation of rushing at night into one of those treacherous fog banks on an English road: the sickening moment when one knows there is a bend ahead and brakes in blind hope that one is not already on top of it. But here on the Hindu-Kush there was no braking. We blundered on with a curious sound in our motors.

Suddenly a great black rock, like some storm-beaten cape, rushed out of the mist not ten yards from the wing tip. Then there was the whiteness again. Then another rock.

I saw death in this moment, more clearly than ever in the war. The plane racing on in a narrowing valley to its inevitable destruction on the final rock we should never clear. Perhaps my companion across the gangway had seen it too, for he sat back with tightly closed eyes, gripping the seat in front of him and waiting for the end.

And then, with a gargantuan heave, I felt the floor lifting under me; with a blinding flash of light we broke from the cloud above a chasm. The plane heeled over, banked against the sun, the crest wheeled below us, and the engines were throttled back for a descent.

There was an altimeter mounted in the cabin, above the door to the crew compartment, and with great curiosity I watched it fall. Eight thousand metres, seven thousand, six . . . My ears began to burst with the quickly rising pressure. Five thousand, four . . .

For another disquieting moment I thought we were searching for an emergency landing place. There was none in sight: only the hard-ridged rock. And then we were climbing again, hedge-hopping the next ridge of hills and descending the glacis to the Oxus valley.

Why did we hedge-hop? To keep out of fighter lanes? To avoid making patterns on Soviet radar screens? To avoid the fate of a Soviet plane which had recently been shot down here by an over-zealous Afghan fighter? It remained a mystery.

For an intriguing moment we flew low above a town, and in the walls and ruined fortress I recognized Tashgurgan with its transport barrier. Then we were speeding a wheel's breadth from our shadow across the flat, smoking dust of the Dasht.

Half-way to the river we entered a dust-storm, which was far more terrifying than the cloud had been. The pilot lifted us a couple of hundred feet. But the dust rose higher still, enveloping us in ochre twilight. I cursed the conditions which would once again make me miss the Oxus.

Then all at once we hit it.

We hit it in a way I had never intended, almost literally—at zero feet. A wide grey ribbon of water. Reeds. Sandbanks. Looming from dust and vanishing in less than ten seconds.

In the suddenness of it I somehow managed to get a photograph. Before I could even re-cock the camera I was lightly gripped by the shoulder. The stewardess regarded me with a hurt, stern frown: 'Camera away, please. We are now above the territory of the Soviet Union!'

Beneath a great portrait of Lenin, surrounded by horsehair furniture and immaculate glassware I breakfasted, for the second time that morning, off cheese and crème fraîche, a pile of coarse bread, and a tall steaming glass of lemon tea. Half an hour later we were airborne again.

From the air, the face of Russia was as different from Afghanistan as the earth from the moon. The tin roofed buildings, the neat squares of farms, the pattern of roads. Then the desert re-asserted itself: a desert of small gnarled hills without skyline or horizon.

A ridge of mountains appeared—the end of the Pamirs marching in from the east. A solitary oil derrick. A bank of grey cloud, growing slowly larger. Climbing to the sun. Somewhere below us the Aral Sea. Perhaps I fell asleep. The next thing I knew we were circling the Tashkent radio tower. Rain on the perspex. Dull gleams of water. Smoke of a railway train. On the runway eleven TU jets, twenty Ilyushins, fourteen helicopters. Bearded Turkmen driving luggage trolleys.

Breakfast of crème fraîche again, in a great airport dining-room with glass chandeliers, red plush curtains, heavy mahogany. Bewildered Chinese, in transit to Peking. Bewildered Indians, in transit to Delhi. Bewildered Englishman, transit to—where?

In a state of bewilderment I entered the TU 104 which was to take me to Moscow. It was all unreal. Afghanistan faded, and England was still too remote. I lived in a half-world, watching without seeing, as the great face of Russia drifted past through the cloud gaps, eight miles below. Fields and forests. The silver Volga, winding

to eternity. Blood-red sunset at three in the afternoon, sinking on Moscow, cold and crisp with frost.

The following frost-bound day as I passed my thirty-six-hour wait for the connection to London, I coaxed a matronly female Aeroflot officer into changing me, illegally, my last forty afghanis, and took the bus into the city. But still it was unreal: the gargantuan housing blocks; the fetid air of the Gum department store; the sugar-pink spirals of the churches; the University building rising like a wedding cake, cold and disembodied above the Moskva mists. I found myself in the Kremlin. What was I doing there, behind the East German trade union sightseers? The police had my passport. I had no visa. I was supposed to be in the transit hotel . . .

Twenty-four hours later I stood on the concourse of London Airport, lost and bewildered. The refreshment bars and neon signs, the ranks of cars and taxis, belonged to a world in which I seemed to have no part. I stood there trying to comprehend it. I wanted to grab the well-fed, smartly dressed people who passed me by and shout: What do you know of a country where they live off bread and tea? What do you know of a country where three-quarters of the children die before the age of one; where wealth and order begin at a bleak Russian airstrip?

Then through the dusk I saw the single dim lamp of my wife's aged car approaching. It would not have been out of place in Yaq-aq. My lost-ness left me. I threw in the case with my donkey harness and saddle-bags, and we made the Swiss Cottage transport barrier by six o'clock that night.



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