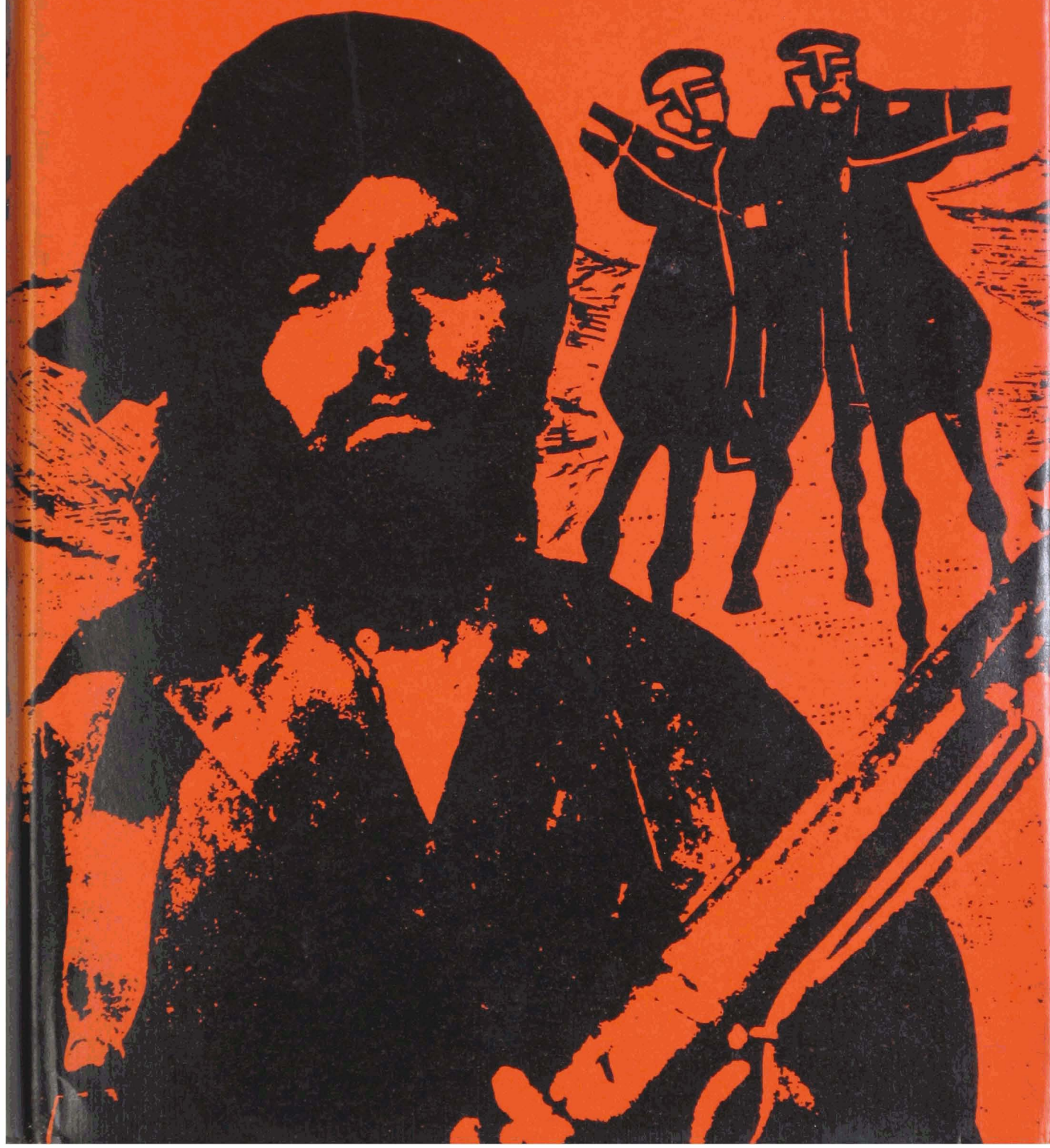


AFGHANISTAN

COCKPIT IN HIGH ASIA **PETER KING**



AFGHANISTAN
COCKPIT IN HIGH ASIA

by

PETER KING

*With 25 photographs
by the author*

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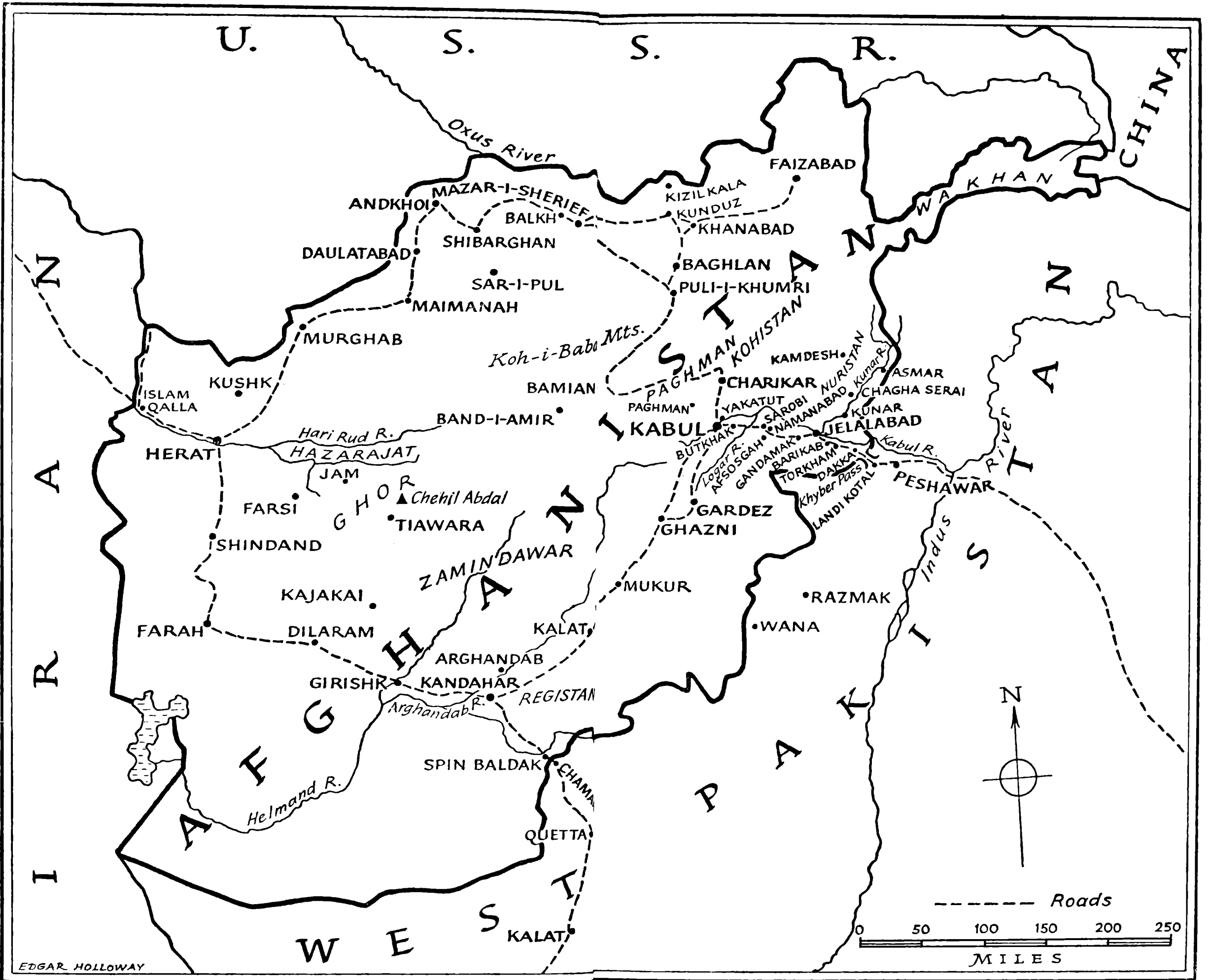
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To
Amir Sahib-i-Marhum
Khadim-i-Din wa Rasul
this book is respectfully dedicated

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CHAPTER 1

Eastwards from London

THE POSTMAN was passing by the house again. In his habitual fashion, which annoyed me, he passed by without even a glance at the handful of mail he held as if he already knew that there was never anything for No. 40. Leaning from my attic window I felt resentment. Why should my place be so moribund that not even advertising literature found its way into the letter-box? True, for the most part it was inhabited by maiden ladies, misogynists and iconoclasts, but surely even they were entitled to be showered with leaflets exhorting them to buy this or that or to rally here and there in protest against something or other. Even I, as an American, could surely be inspired to rally somewhere? As these thoughts churned through my brain I turned my attention from the errant postman to watch the antics of a haywire cat scudding across the road like a cloud across the moon, I was suddenly aware that the postman had stopped, peered at his mail more closely and was retracing his steps. Unbelievably I watched him unlatch the gate and plod wearily up the steps to the front door. Again resentment welled up within me; the steps at 38 next door were just as steep, yet he never made such a hard job of climbing *them*.

Allowing him three minutes to ring the bell and demand the letter back if he had made a mistake, I swept down the circular staircase like a vulture swooping on its prey and into the hall where, unbelievably, lay a letter, and not only that – it was addressed to me! With elaborate nonchalance I picked it up and started upstairs again. After all it was probably one of those that

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result from someone copying out the local voters' list. "You have been selected to try out the new, streamlined, supersonic, silent, swift and time-saving BLOOPER carpet sweeper," or "A number of LEADING SPORTSMEN are being invited to subscribe to a service that can bring them WINNERS every day." With reservations I opened the letter. No, it was a *bona fide* letter from a man I had known at college and had kept in touch with in a desultory fashion since. The letter asked if I would be interested in six months in Afghanistan representing an American pharmaceutical firm who were anxious to trade in that country. He had put my name forward and somehow I had been selected.

Could I be ready to leave in three weeks? Could I? I could have been ready in three hours! Afghanistan! Now that was a challenge. I knew nothing about the country nor for that matter about the products I was supposed to sell. Anyway the letter mentioned a local office there, so I supposed I was to be one of a team of travelers for them. The pay was more than adequate and my fare was paid both ways, so I had little to lose. The thought of leaving the house filled me with a momentary pang of sorrow. I would not be there to see it condemned by the sanitary inspector, to see its secrets laid bare by the wrecking cranes, to see salt scattered over where it had once stood, *à la* Carthage. I would be far away selling instant health to bearded Afghans. Brushing aside my dream world, I took my passport and sallied forth into the gathering daylight to fix up visas, inoculations and the thousand and one other things I supposed I would need on my trip to High Asia this 1962.

The next three weeks were full of excitement for me. The Afghan Embassy was cordial and co-operative and the visa presented no difficulty. Inoculations caused me a little distress as there seemed to be so many to have done. Still, I reasoned, it would not be a good example if the representative of a pharmaceutical firm were to succumb to some tropical disease. I was

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grateful that I had a certain command of the Afghan language, Pushtu. I had studied it initially as a curiosity but had soon become reasonably proficient. I gathered from a handout given to travellers to Afghanistan by the U.S. Embassy, that the Afghans were “clean, God-fearing, democratic, healthy and non-Communist” – that they were all this I was happy to learn although I had some reservations about their being as healthy as all that, otherwise I might have precious little success. Still, maybe I would be put on to selling bandages, and as long as little boys skinned their knees I would be in business.

My landlady bid me good-bye after an exhaustive examination of my palatial quarters and checking the list of contents. I was able to prove that it was a mouse and not I that had gnawed the door of the food cupboard, so I was not required to pay for it. I told her I was entering a contemplative brotherhood – a monastery – and she shook her head in apparent condemnation of such riotous society. On the way to the airport I wondered if the next tenant would believe the notice I had left in the oven: “When cooking food, bar door or you’ll never live to eat it.” It was a bit of an exaggeration, really you only got trampled underfoot.

The BOAC jet whispered into the air and after having been fed, tucked up, awakened, fed, smiled upon, fed, given papers to read, fed and smiled upon, we descended at Karachi in Pakistan, where the U.S. Embassy wearily gave me travel details to Peshawar and reminded me not to cross the Oxus by mistake and enter Russia. It seemed that recently an American and his wife had vanished near the Oxus and it was a toss-up as to whether they had been kidnapped or killed by bandits. I assured them that I was only interested in selling drugs, which left them with a feeling that I might just be telling the truth.

The Peshawar Mail Express is a train on which no one should travel. It is fast, but that doesn’t help much as it has too many miles to go. It’s hot crossing that desert. The food is piercingly

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indifferent and one's fellow passengers, whatever their nationality, seem to lose control and the thin veneer of culture is pushed aside by the pulsating magma of savage disregard for their fellows' comfort, which wells up when you are deep into the scorching desert. I must confess that the heat did not bother me as much as the appearance out of the sand dunes of aboriginal figures, burned black by the sun, who loped alongside the train and made it quite clear that if ever they got on board they would not comport themselves with dignity. It was a relief to lose them in the foothills which gave way to the outskirts of Peshawar.

The journey from Peshawar through the Khyber Pass to Kabul is one of the most over-romanticised in the world. "The Silk Road," - "The Historic Pass" are only some of numerous descriptions used in connection with this trip. They are in substance true, only one has come to wish that they would be used with a little less regularity. The novelty has worn off and now everybody who can read knows of the regimental crests cut in the stone and the frowning mountains and inevitable snipers. Years ago it was indeed dangerous to travel through without an escort. To some extent this is true today and I am sure everybody knows it.

The first step in the process is to present one's passport to the Pakistani C.I.D. in Peshawar to obtain the "Permission to cross the Frontier" stamps which they alone can issue. This is often a long-drawn-out process and needlessly so. The Pakistani authorities are within their rights, as one will be traversing a military area between Peshawar and Dakka, their last post. However, if they would grant one permission with less ill-grace it would be so much better and gain them more friends. The bald fact is that they are at loggerheads with the Afghan authorities over the future of several million Pushtuns living between Afghan and Pakistani territory and they are showing everybody that they hold the gate to Afghanistan. This way they have the say as to who or what passes through and they make this distressingly clear.



I. *Above* A Pakistani guard at the entrance to the Khyber Pass.

Below Peshawar camel serai.





2. Khan Yunus Khan on his "liberated" Pakistani horse. See p. 22.

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I applied for my permission at the main C.I.D. office and was received with suspicion by an official who sent my passport to a senior office "for signature". We engaged in small-talk for about half an hour until I suggested that the official might have signed the permission by now and would he ascertain it. He looked uncomfortable and then suggested diffidently that perhaps I was not *au fait* with the procedure that accompanied the granting of the permission. I confessed that I was not. Looking over his shoulder and convulsing his features in an expression of deep conspiracy he leaned forward and hissed in my ear that they had to consult "The List" before giving permission. The List contained the names of those considered to be enemies of Pakistan, who might be going to Afghanistan to make trouble for the Republic.

I assured him hurriedly that I had no feelings of animosity towards Pakistan and urged him to use his good offices to speed up the permission. This declaration seemed to give him courage, as he returned almost immediately with the passport duly stamped, signed and counter-signed. He seemed to be pleasurably surprised to find that I was not on the list. Warning me against the "rapacious" Afghans and their incurably homicidal tendencies, he bid me good-bye.

My next stop was the Afghan Consulate. This was merely a courtesy call, as I had already obtained my Afghan visa from their Embassy in Karachi.

At the Consulate I was received with great hospitality and entertained with green tea and grapes which I was told had just arrived from Kabul by one of the hundreds of trucks that ply between the capital and Peshawar. Afghanistan has no railways, so all her transport must be done by road.

The staff at the Consulate provided me with a schedule of the bus service to Kabul via Jelalabad and despite my protests sent a clerk to book a ticket for me, deep in the old bazaar. The buses made the trip twice weekly carrying the mail as well and always

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stopped *en route* at the Consulate to pick up the Diplomatic pouch. It was arranged that I should board a bus at the Consulate rather than try to make my way into the bazaar.

In the afternoon I wandered about the city, darling of the British Army garrisons pre-1947. Peshawar is divided into two parts, the cantonment and the city. The cantonment was built to house the British garrison and soon became a thriving town on its own. It has hotels, banks, cinemas and little bungalows surrounded by well-kept lawns and picket fences in the best traditions of the English countryside; dahlias, roses and lilacs, so dear to the heart of the English abroad, abound.

The city, on the other hand, has remained traditionally native. Its magnificent bazaars have everything from bar gold to spare parts for machine-guns. Great stalwart blue-eyed Pushtuns stalk up and down looking for bargains for their womenfolk and the latest in the renounced Khyber knife whose "in and up" thrust has made it so notorious. Here also Pushtuns come to part with their loot to discreet shopkeepers. Bright silks and embroidery abound, as the Pushtun is not exactly a conservative dresser. Black and white turbans are in favour, but red plush waistcoats with plenty of gold thread embroidery, matching skull-cap around which the turban is wound, green knee-length shirts and baggy trousers, embroidered rifle-slings, *chaplis* (sandals) worked with gold thread – this is the dress, or dream, of every Pushtun.

In the evening I visited one of the cinemas. At the back there are rows screened with a lattice-work partition. This part is for ladies who are in purdah and wish to see the film and yet be screened from the vulgar gaze. The film was a "Cowboy and Indian" epic of considerable age beloved by the Pushtuns, who enter wholeheartedly into the story.

During the screening of this masterpiece a Pushtun in one of the front rows was overcome with feelings of hostility towards the villain whose dishonourable intentions towards the heroine were

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becoming distressingly apparent. The villain lay in wait behind a convenient rock towards which the heroine innocently strolled. Overcome with passion, the Pushtun broke into a torrent of words, warning the heroine and casting appalling aspersions on the parentage of the villain. This was climaxed by a well-aimed *chapli*, which did not improve the appearance of the screen. The ambush was successful, but the Pushtun was quiet. He had done his bit. Pushtun honour was satisfied and it was up to the hero to appear in the nick of time. This he obligingly did, to the rapture of the audience who considered that they had got their money's worth. So had I.

In the morning I arrived at the Consulate ten minutes late. The bus had been held for me and the passengers were prepared to wait for up to half an hour. According to their way of thinking, I was a guest coming to their country and was thus entitled to a bit of friendly consideration. This feeling, I was to find, exists throughout Afghanistan and is one of the outstanding characteristics of a warm-hearted and honourable people.

The driver and his mate were all over me. Soon I upset the seating arrangements and was given a seat forward so that I could get a good view of their country, of which they were justly proud. Amid great handshaking and embracing we were on our way.

Contrary to popular belief, Peshawar is not exactly on the Afghan-Pakistan border but several miles away. It is the last town of the "settled districts" before one enters the "no-man's-land" over which Pakistan has little control. The area is dotted with formidable fortresses such as Jamrud and Ali Masjid. The latter commands the entry to the Khyber Pass which has, in addition, Landi Kotal and Landi Khana garrisons to defend it. The pass commences about twenty-five miles from Peshawar and lies about midway between Peshawar and the Afghan border post at Torkham.

To a person unaffected by its history it is no more remarkable

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than any other pass in Central Asia. Its strategic position has given it great glamour and many lives have been given in its defence and assault. In terms of gradient it is nothing to the Lataband and Shibar Passes in Afghanistan.

As the journey progressed, the passengers, all of whom it seemed were either related or bosom companions, howled and shouted to each other over the howled conversations of the others and generally rendered the day hideous. Sweets and fruits were passed around and my share was pressed on me in a manner which brooked no refusal. Inability to communicate with me in their brand of Pushtu meant nothing to this happy lot. They shouted their loudest in my ears, determined to penetrate my brain and bring home to me the meaning of their words. Soon I was given to nodding my head rapidly and grinning vacantly in an attempt to save my eardrums from being punctured. Some of the travellers had been shepherd lads for many a year and their voices were trained to call home errant sheep across several hills and valleys.

Then we pulled into Dakka for a last check by the Pakistanis before entering Afghan territory. A body of Pakistani troops descended on our bus and ordering everybody out proceeded to go through our baggage and the bus as well with a fine tooth-comb.

In the meantime the Pakistani C.I.D. official was expressing his amusement that I wanted to travel to Kabul. "Revolution and strife," he said darkly, "are everyday occurrences in Kabul." I agreed politely, as I had no wish to be turned back at this stage for not agreeing with a Pakistani official. The examination finished, I had not compromised myself and we were rolling down the slope that lead to Afghanistan.

A sentry removed the striped pole and waved us through with a "*Khush amadi*", (Welcome!) Just on the other side of the line we pulled up at the post to have our passports examined. The officer

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in charge spoke English so we got along famously until the blowing of the horn announced the departure of the bus.

The scenery here is not impressive. It is a parched, burnt land with no cultivation and little stock. The road was poor and rutted. The bus shook. Dust crept in through the cracks. However, in spite of all this the passengers were happy. They were home.

One of the most engaging features of the Afghan is his intense patriotism. He delights in relating the epic stories of his country's heroes and the stirring deeds of Afghan arms. He believes himself to be blessed by God and has named his country the God Gifted Kingdom. He is uncompromisingly fanatical about his religion and will defend his friends and guests quite literally to the death. He is extremely clean, believing cleanliness to be a part of Godliness. He is intelligent and physically well developed. He has a keen sense of humour and is an inveterate spoiler of children. He is a firm friend and an implacable enemy, becoming fearfully threatening and insatiably bloodthirsty and cruel when his faith or country are threatened.

Lunch-time saw us at a collection of cottages named Barikab after a spring that gushes from the rocks near by. Popular legend has it that Alexander of Macedon watered his steed at this spring on his way to conquer India. The passengers took advantage of the sparse shade of a few trees to untie the bundles and bags which held their rations. I had not supplied myself with any and was gratefully accepting offers of food when an old man came out of one of the cottages with a large bowl of stew which he forced upon me. He refused payment muttering something I could not understand. The entire bus then joined in an attempt to enlighten me.

What it boiled down to was that according to Moslem religion, a traveller was a privileged and protected person and those providing him with food would be rewarded in heaven. This was explained to me by a highly complex system of shouting, diagrams and arm waving.

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The driver took it upon himself to interpret :

“*Khuda*” (God) he bellowed in my ear, pointing upwards – this accompanied by great nodding, smiling and pointing upwards.

“*Guft*” (has said) – demonstration of speaking.

“*Musafir*” (traveller) – great pointing at me – demonstrations of walking, shouldering packs, waving good-bye, etc.

“*Nan*” (food-bread) – exhibition of food and champing of jaws.

“*Bidihed*” (give) – motions of giving, patting on back, etc.

At last it penetrated and I nodded. This was the signal for great rejoicing, general congratulations and shaking of hands all round.

After lunch, snuff, great quantities of which are used by the Afghans, was passed around. I declined and produced my cigarettes. These were highly deprecated and I was told that only children in Afghanistan smoked them. Instead a large hubble-bubble was passed around, charged with Afghan tobacco, and I was invited to try it. Observing that the smoke was drawn straight into the lungs, I applied my lips and inhaled. The resulting cataclysmic effect on my organs of respiration was too much for my audience. They rolled on the ground and pounded each other on the back. I found that Afghan tobacco is a very different proposition from Western tobaccos in that it is very dry and uncured. Its impact on the lungs can be imagined.

It was during this quiet rest that I took one of my favourite photographs. Down the road, pirouetting like an act at a wild west show came a horse and rider of statuesque proportions. Descending in the shade he introduced himself to our spellbound group as Khan Yunus Khan, Afridi and “leader of men” and his splendid horse as “the former property of a Pakistani officer from whose clutches I have liberated this fair steed”. Noting the amount of armament he carried I wondered just how much chance the Pakistani had had. Pushtuns, especially the really professional fighters like the Afridi clan, carry out wholesale raids into Pakistan

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along the whole border and are a terrible thorn in the side of the Pakistani Government.

During the recent fighting between India and Pakistan, though, Pushtuns flooded the recruiting offices in Pakistan to offer their services against Hindu India. Participation in such a war against non-Moslems would entitle them to the honorific *Ghazi* or "warrior of the Faith".

Reluctant to change our pleasant, shady spot for the bus, we needed much urging on the part of the driver before taking our places again. We met great caravans of camels carrying fruit bound for Peshawar. These caravans were escorted by Afghan nomads known as Kochis who travel the length and breadth of the country following good grazing pasture and living in Eastern Afghanistan during the winter. They were fine figures of men with crossed bandoliers and the inevitable Khyber knife. The women were every bit as muscular and were unveiled. They wore knee-length frocks with many pleats over baggy red trousers. Their tunics were sewn with scores of silver coins. This, I found later, represents the family savings, and I can readily imagine that they are as safe as in a bank in the hands of these Amazons. The women wore red trousers so that they would be distinguishable from the men to any sniper who might be on the look-out for one of the males of the tribe with whom he might have a feud. It was a point of honour not to shoot a woman, although, according to my informant, the women took part in clan warfare and were good shots.

Towards evening the bus stopped again to allow the passengers to say their prayers. This they did with a minimum of fuss. After ritual ablutions with water that they carried in little gourds for the purpose, they elected one of their number to lead the prayer. It was a stirring sight. Standing in a row on the virgin sand by the side of the road in the red light of the evening, they prostrated themselves, giving thanks to their Maker.

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As we trundled through the darkness towards Jelalabad where we were to stop for the night it was impossible to form any impression of the countryside. I noted, however, that the area seemed to be more populated, as lights from villages appeared with greater regularity.

It was nearly 11 p.m. when we finally arrived in Jelalabad, but the hotel catering for long-distance buses was open and expecting us and a three-course meal was ready. I had heard stories of Afghan trenchermanship and that this was no fable was proved to me that night. The first course was *shourwa* which is a sort of stew-cum-soup. This was enough for me, but it served as the veriest appetiser for my companions. They attacked a huge plate of *pilau*, which is fried rice and roast lamb, with enthusiasm and followed this with large bowls of blancmange-like pudding. They also ate vast quantities of Afghan bread which is about the size of a tennis racquet and about half an inch thick. They expressed themselves desolated that I had not eaten so well, and one or two of the more pessimistic prophesied that I would not last out the trip, but expire of malnutrition.

They woke me at dawn, as I had expressed a desire to see the town before the bus left. Jelalabad is an old town, the exact founders of which are lost in the mists of antiquity. It stands near the Kabul River and is an important commercial centre as it is in the middle of the sugarcane- and rice-growing areas of Eastern Afghanistan. Its climate is suited to the cultivation of citrus fruits, which grow in profusion. New strains have been brought from abroad and the oranges are remarkably sweet.

In the old city stands the tomb of Amir Habibullah, father of the deposed King Amanullah. The Amir was assassinated near Jelalabad and the people give him the status of a martyr.

Magnolia, cyclamen and orchids grow in great numbers and justify the city's claim to be the "Garden of Afghanistan".

By eight o'clock we were on the road again, crossing the

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Darunta Gorge and entering the hilly range that we must pass over before descending into the Kabul plain. This road is extremely precarious and rudimentary, being cut into the rock-face with the river a sheer drop below.

Some twenty miles farther along the road we came across one of the most significant evidences of Afghan awakening, the Sarobi hydro-electric station. This dam, whose construction was started in 1949, supplies eighty thousand kilowatts of electricity to the capital and nearby industrial centres. The builders, Siemens Shuckart, are leaving room for additional turbines which can treble the output in the future if required.

The engineer in charge told me that Afghan labour is being used, with Germans in an advisory capacity. He praised the speed with which the Afghans learned to operate quite complex machines and complained that they had been forced to set up a plant to manufacture liquid oxygen for blasting, after Pakistan refused to allow dynamite to be imported into Afghanistan.

Sarobi has a magnificent hotel, both from the point of view of service and position. Built on a rocky promontory overlooking the projected artificial lake that will be several miles in length, it is the centre of a little town that has been built by the company to house their workers and their families. Seedlings are being planted on the hills near by and Sarobi is planned to be the main holiday centre for the capital in a few years' time.

The hotel manager told me a delightful story about the building of the dam which I think demonstrates a facet of the Afghan character.

It appears that first sightings for the dam were made a few months before the start of World War II. The original surveying team sank two or three markers in the river-bed, but withdrew from the country on the outbreak of war. Now these markers were plain steel girders sunk in concrete, projecting about ten feet above the stream and soon became a well-known feature of the

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area. The years passed and the war dragged on and the dam was forgotten until a local event brought the markers into prominence again.

Two local villages enjoyed fierce competition. If one dug a new well in the market-place, the other must go one better and build one with a windmill to raise the water and so on. One day the people of Afsoghah awoke to see that their rivals at Namanabad had started the construction of a new minaret for their mosque. They watched dismayed, as day by day the minaret rose until it topped theirs by a good ten feet. There was nothing that they could do, for owing to a scurvy trick by nature, their village was affected by an earth fault and the whole place rocked with occasional earthquakes while their rivals on the other side of the river always remained unscathed. They knew that if they did build a higher minaret it would be levelled by the next earth tremor and they would be poorer and the object of scorn.

The villagers went about their tasks in gloom until an elder had a great idea. "We will find," he decreed, "a girder such as the one which the *Alman* (Germans) built into the river. It has been there three years and yet it has not suffered from earthquakes, nor from the boulders brought down in the spate, nor from corrosion. This girder we will sink in the earth to a goodly depth and build our minaret around it. Neither storm nor earthquake will shift it." At this pearl of wisdom there was great rejoicing and the whole village went to the riverside to peer into the gorge and feast their eyes upon the object which would save their collective face. Timid ones voiced doubts. "But, Grandfather, how are we to know what sort it is and how do we get to it?" Snorting at the faint hearts, the old man had the answer. "All these *Alman* objects have the name of the maker upon them. It will be on this. Once it has been discovered, money will be collected and a deputation will be sent to the capital to buy such a girder." Scorn showed as a Doubting Thomas asked if such a thing would be found in Kabul.

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“Idiot, the Palace of the King is there, is it not? Why should you, low-born oaf, doubt that girders can be bought there?”

The next problem was how to get close enough to the girder to make the examination and identify it. The sides of the ravine were steep and the current very swift. Boats were out of the question so it was decided that the best swimmer of the village would be thrown into the river at a point half a mile upstream and he was to grab the girder as he was swept along, pull himself up and note the marks. This was tried half a dozen times, but each time the wretch missed and was cast up, half-drowned and dazed a mile lower down. Spurred on by the relentless elder the villagers lowered the hapless fellow from the top of the ravine with ropes until he at last managed to grab the pillar and cling on. Since he could not even read or write Pushtu it was hopeless that he should be expected to read the German on the girder, so the ever-resourceful elder decreed that he was to stay on the pillar for a day or two to memorize the appearance of the marks so that he would know them again.

During three days and nights the hapless wretch clung to the pillar, buffeted by the stream and cold to the bone, being fed by food lowered to him. After that he was given an extra day at his post to make sure that he knew the marks, and then hauled up again.

The collection among the villagers had raised the equivalent of ten dollars, which is a lot of money to an Afghan peasant and it was decided that three of the more level-headed elders should accompany the buyer to Kabul to drive a hard bargain and not to squander the money on high living. Sarobi is thirty miles from Kabul, but they set off on foot not having the money to waste on transport when the merciful God had given them legs.

On tenterhooks the village waited until the bedraggled trio returned with a tale of woe. There were no girders like that even in Kabul. They had been offered tramlines and telegraph poles,

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but nothing answering to the description of the girder they sought. They had also spent one whole dollar on food and living and no amount of vows and oaths could persuade their fellows that they had not been having a high old time, and they were disgraced. Worse still the rival village had had a great opening ceremony of their minaret and the people of Namanabad had had to hang their heads in shame.

With the end of the war the West German consulate was reopened in Kabul and reports trickled in to them about this band and their search.

One day a German with a translator arrived at the village which was seven miles from the main road and informed them that the girder which they were looking for was being brought from Peshawar and would be arriving at the nearest point on the main road within three days. The villagers haughtily intimating that they would like future orders dealt with rather more quickly, ordered that the girder be brought right to the village. The Germans came near apoplexy, for they had already had to convert a truck to carry the immense girder and it would certainly not be able to cross the country from the main road to the village; but the people were adamant. "Cash on delivery," they said, and anyway what good was a girder to them at the roadside? It was all so logical and inexorable that the German advance crew set out and built a sort of road to the village. The villagers disapproved as they said that the existence of a road would bring all sorts of riff-raff to their village, but they were mollified by the promise that the rocks would be replaced once the girder was delivered.

At long last the huge truck groaned its way into the village square and the crew asked where it was to be put. The elders pointed to a spot alongside the mosque and announced that it was a fat lot of good just dumping it on the ground: it would have to be "planted"! By this time the Germans would not have been

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surprised if the villagers had wanted it as a rocket gantry, so they set to work with the aid of the villagers to dig a pit. This done, the girder was lowered into place and stood proudly, a dumb witness to a people's faith.

Before the crew departed, the elders produced their money, and waving aside the protests proclaiming, "We can pay, we do not want charity," counted out nine dollars to the stupefied Germans, adding fifty cents as a tip. "You have done well," they were told, "any time we want such articles in the future we will get in touch with you."

I like this story immensely and can vouch for the fact that the village of Namanabad now has a towering minaret much higher than the one across the river. It is a touching story, because it was handled with such delicacy that the people actually felt that they had ordered and paid for the girder and would have been horrified if they thought they had been "assisted" to get it.

I was to discover that there is a particular mutual respect between Afghans and Germans which is not entirely on the German side. It is certainly associated with the Afghan treatment of German nationals who were in Afghanistan when the Allies demanded that they be handed over to them for internment. This posed the Afghans a pretty problem for they were neutral and they have a deeply-rooted hospitality which does not permit the giving up of guests to enemies. The Allies delivered an ultimatum; the Government summoned the Grand National Assembly, mobilised the army, dug in its toes and said NO. The Allies lengthened their ultimatum; the Afghan Assembly voted for hostilities rather than the surrender of their "guests". Eventually the Afghan Government obtained a guarantee from the Allies that the Germans would be repatriated straight to Germany and not interned and honour was satisfied. I met some of the people working on irrigation projects, who had been repatriated and who had now returned to Afghanistan. Their gratitude was unmistakable; they

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will never forget the people who stood up for them for no other reason than they had felt honour-bound to defend their guests.

Leaving Sarobi, it was time for me to be initiated into the mysteries of the Lataband Pass, the highest pass in Afghanistan with the exception of the Shibar. The crest of the pass is about nine thousand feet above sea level and it is possible to see for a very great distance in all directions in the clear mountain air. Occasionally cars and lorries are caught in a sudden mist that encircles the summit and it is not uncommon for them to take a wrong turn on the repeated hairpin bends and land on the valley floor five thousand feet below, a sheer drop.

It took us about one hour to reach the summit, as we often had to pull into the side to allow another truck to pass. The driver drove with intense concentration. He explained to me that he had made the journey hundreds of times, but was always afraid that a less experienced driver would get into difficulties above him and crash backwards with disastrous results. The passengers did not seem to be at all put out. In fact, for much of the time they were discussing the dangers and pointing out to each other places where other lorries had gone over.

In the depth of winter this pass is snowed up and trucks are often trapped by sudden falls and have to remain there for weeks, the crew being supplied by army rescue teams.

Half-way down the other side we stopped to give alms and thanks at a wayside shrine. Irreverently I thought that the saint must be working overtime to prevent accidents, knowing as I did the state of repair of some of the vehicles. We reached the foothills without incident.

Between the Lataband Pass and Kabul the ground is hilly yet given up to cultivation much more than the flat plains nearer Jelalabad. This is made possible by the system the Afghans call *karez*, an underground system of waterways leading to huge wells from which water is pumped into irrigation channels by

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the traditional water wheel driven by a patient donkey or ox. The *karez* are cut by men linking several underground springs at a very deep level. These men take their lives in their hands as they do not shore up the tunnels, but work as fast as possible and gamble on having no cave-ins.

On the left of the road stands a huge stone pillar reputedly put up by Alexander to guide his army to India. These can be seen dotted all over Afghanistan in a rough west to east direction.

The plains to the north-east around Hadda have yielded many important archaeological treasures of Buddhist civilisation. Unfortunately this exploration is carried on in a haphazard fashion by people from Kabul whose enthusiasm exceeds their skill or knowledge and often damages vital evidence.

Guarding the eastern approaches to the capital is the fortress of the Bala Hissar, one-time palace of the Afghan Kings. It is now in ruins having been destroyed by the British in 1842 as a reprisal for the killing of their envoy. On the western slopes of the hill on which it stands has risen a magnificent military college founded by the late King Nadir Shah, father of the present ruler.

At last we entered the city itself and drove to the customs house. I was saved from having to wait for examination by the vociferous intercession of thirty passengers and after having been embraced by all and sundry and with great avowals of mutual goodwill and respect, was bundled into a horse carriage to be driven to the Kabul Hotel.

CHAPTER 2

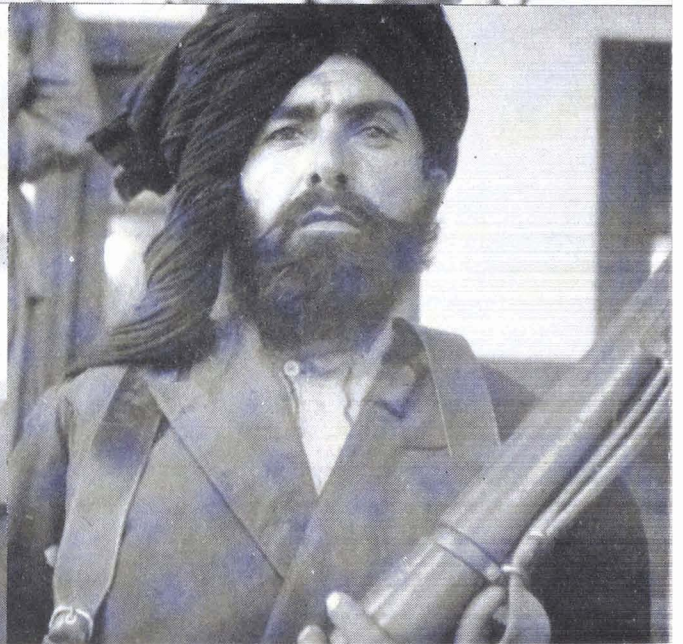
Kabul

THE CITY of Kabul is really an artificial capital. Artificial in the sense that it is a commercial, political and government centre, but not a city that holds the emotional and historical allegiance of the very feudal-minded people of Afghanistan. Even the present Royal Family do not come from Kabul, but are descendants of Peshawar Afghans. It is mentioned as being there in the fifth century A.D. by Ptolemy and by Pehlavi authors. It is an unlovely city, built astride the Kabul River, not “quaint” or “cute”, but hot, very dusty and in parts quite unhygienic. However, the main parts of the city and the new town are quite nice, although the Afghans have a habit of surrounding their houses and gardens with very high walls so that one gets the impression that the entire city is dry and dusty; while in reality, behind the frowning walls there are beautiful gardens, for the Afghans love flowers and green things. This is one aspect of the Afghan character which is taken quite seriously and sincerely. Afghans make up parties to go to each other’s gardens to advise, admire and sometimes to work if they can all agree that a particular flower-bed should be dug out.

Life in Kabul revolves around the Government ministries and the home. Most white-collar workers work for the Government and receive miserable wages. The average pay for a clerk is four pounds a month and this, although the basic necessities of life are cheap, is just enough to keep him and his family. It is said that by the grading of civil servants’ salaries the Government is able to

3. Bacha Sakao, the Brigand King (in white coat), with his brother (next to him) and the Prime Minister (on right) after they had captured Kabul.





4. *Above* A Pushtun demonstrates his sniping technique for the author.
Below Two typical Afghans.

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exercise control over the people in the most fundamental way. This, of course, is true for if a man is dismissed from Government service, he is very unlikely to find another job as his "record" will follow him wherever he goes. True, private companies do operate in Kabul, but since their licences are subject to Government approval, they are not prepared to prejudice their futures by taking on people in the Government's black book.

One can say a lot about the abuse of power in Afghanistan, about the monopoly of the high posts in the state by members of the ruling Muhammed Zai family, but one must be fair and say that it is this very dictatorship that has maintained the independence of the mountain kingdom when it could very well have been divided up between Russia, Persia and the British Indian Empire. Naturally there are abuses of power which could destroy a Western Government, but this is Asia and strength is respected.

The two men who really established the pattern of modern Afghanistan were King Nadir Shah and his brother Muhammed Hashim. They are both dead now, the one by an assassin's bullet in the '30s, and the other by natural causes some eleven years ago. Nadir Shah took the throne from a brigand, Habibullah – nicknamed *Bacha Sakao* "son of a water carrier" – who had taken it from King Amanullah. Bacha Sakao was a simple brigand who, when Amanullah's reforms, inspired by his triumphant tour of Europe in 1929, incurred the hostility of the Afghan priesthood, was quick to proclaim himself champion of religion and attack Kabul with his thousand-strong band. King Amanullah was not the first king to be unfortunate enough to have his close relations as his advisers. These courtiers pampered, inbred and effete, played down the seriousness of the threat while others of the family negotiated with the brigand to secure a deal for themselves. By the time the king awoke to the true peril of his situation it was too late. The people of Kabul were against him, his army scorned him for his own vascillatory character and the

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brigand was at the gates. Amanullah fled with Queen Soraya and the Royal Treasure, made no attempt to recapture the throne and died in exile in Italy in 1960.

When he gained power Nadir Shah went through the country with a fine toothcomb, jailed all the possible opposition and aided by Hashim, whom he made Prime Minister, built more jails than schools, but destroyed once and for all the danger of his country falling under the political and economic sway of its neighbours and possible eventual absorption into their territories.

Naturally most of the opposition that still exists in Afghanistan to this day stems from the earliest days of Muhammed Zai rule. Some of the family of the former King Amanullah claim that Nadir took the country in the name of Amanullah and got popular support by this means. Indeed there are printed proclamations extant which bear this out, but apart from the Siraj family – the family of Amanullah – most people in Afghanistan agree that Nadir was to be preferred to Amanullah who fled the country with the Treasury when the brigand Habibullah advanced on Kabul. The mighty Suleiman Khel clan in Kandahar offered him their support to overthrow the brigand, but, say the Afghans, he was not man enough to lead them.

Afghans complain that the tactics used by Nadir and his brothers to consolidate their rule was despotic in the extreme. It is common knowledge in Kabul that Nadir Shah sent the brigand Habibullah, who had escaped to Kohistan outside Kabul, safe-conduct written on the fly-leaf of the Koran. Now this, in a Moslem country, is inviolable yet Habibullah was hanged when he came to Kabul under the flag of truce. Whatever moral judgement one may pass, one should take into consideration that Nadir was fighting to establish a dynasty and to him, at least, the end justified the means.

He is not the first, nor will he be the last to use this convenient phrase as his mandate. He fell to an assassin in 1933 while present-

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ing prizes at a sports meeting. His murderer was the son of a servant of one of the men who paid with his life for his allegiance to Amanullah when Nadir took the throne. This assassination was the signal for another pogrom directed by Hashim against those elements who could possibly threaten the throne. Hashim was virtual king until his resignation in 1948, although Nadir's son Zahir was declared king on his father's death and is still on the throne having been able to appoint his own nominee as Premier although his cousin, Prince Daud, nephew of Sardar Hashim, became Prime Minister in the true family tradition only to lose the position by being out-manceuvred.

Yet Daud, the strong man, did not attain nor lose the Premiership easily. Though he was groomed for it by his uncle Hashim, his own father having fallen to an assassin's bullet in Berlin, he was up against the opposition of another branch of the family led by another uncle, Shah Mahmud. The divisions in the family came about because the brothers were from two mothers. Nadir, Shah Mahmud and Shah Wali were full brothers as were Hashim and Aziz, father of Daud. On Nadir's death Hashim took control and hoped that he would be succeeded by Daud, but Shah Mahmud forced Hashim's resignation in 1948 and took control himself. His years of Premiership were marked by more and more abuses, as anyone with a silver tongue and a smooth manner could get anything from him; able administrator and gifted man as he was, he had his weak points and his grasp failed rapidly during the last two years of his Premiership.

The story of his fall is dramatic and shows to the full that the grooming of Daud had not been in vain. The Prime Minister had a Press Adviser who wrote his speeches and liaised with the (controlled) Press and Radio. This man had been "got at" by Daud's party and as a result, issued the text of a declaration over Shah Mahmud's signature to the effect that he intended staying on as Prime Minister for life. While this is an accepted goal of all

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Afghan statesmen it is a thing that one just does not say. Naturally, as a pronouncement of the Premier, it was given front-page treatment and caused a furore. Daud led his party to the King and demanded the Prime Minister's resignation, which was forced out of him. Shah Mahmud went into a decline, some say purely out of pique, and withdrew more and more from public life until his death in 1959.

Surprisingly enough, to those who had discounted the power of the hereditary nobility, Sardar Daud was himself ousted from the Premiership in 1963 by a coalition composed of the King and his last surviving uncle Sardar Shah Wali Khan with a mandate from the feudal aristocracy.

It was widely held that Daud had some ideas about a republic while others opined that it was his closing contacts with the Soviet Union that brought about his downfall.

The first non Royal Family Prime Minister in Afghan history was Dr. Mhmd Yussuf, German educated former Minister of Education whose Ministry had not been outstanding in terms of efficiency. Be that as it may Dr. Yussuf forced a bill through the National Assembly to establish a new constitution to replace the one granted to the nation by King Nadir in 1930.

It was not surprising that Sardar Daud and his party fought this bill tooth and nail for it allowed for the inclusion of a constitutional ban on members of the Royal Family holding public office. The bill was passed, the new constitution was drawn up, voted into existence by the *Loe Jirga* (Grand National Assembly), ratified by the House of Nobles, received the Royal Assent and became law.

In September 1965 both men and women voted for the National Assembly for the first time in Afghan history. Several women were also elected. As yet there are no parties, all members being independent but gradually shaking down into Government and Opposition supporters.

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Dr. Yussuf resigned office in November 1965 and the King called upon Mhmd Hashim Maiwandwal to form a Cabinet.

Maiwandwal, former Minister of the Press, Ambassador to Washington and Karachi, is an able, shrewd, self-trained man. Deep in Sardar Daud's confidence he yet kept a foot in the Royal camp and has never been much out of the limelight. He is fluent in English and has a breadth of vision that augurs well for Afghanistan.

This is a brief backdrop against which Kabul operates. If you are approved by the régime, you eat; if not, you starve. If you are lucky enough to have land, you will be asked to retire there and not to weary yourself with trips to the capital. Your activities will be severely curtailed, but at least it's better than the traditional Afghan method of limiting the activities of the opposition. It is the classic technique of the *lettre de cachet* so beloved by Charles II – it's not for nothing that someone recently commented that Afghanistan is galloping breathlessly into the sixteenth century!

Apart from Big Brother the main focus of Afghan society is the family unit. Inside the four walls, Mother is the boss although she delegates matters regarding money and politics to Father. Father is quite happy about this, for Mother, being an Afghan, is an excellent mother and helpmate. She will feed him in peace and fight alongside him in war as did her mother and grandmother when the British decided that Afghanistan was becoming a little too friendly with the Czar. They learnt three times that the Afghans are friendly only to other Afghans, but it cost tens of thousands of men and their reputation in Asia to find this out.

Afghan women have only in the 1960s been allowed to come out from their houses without the all-enveloping veil which covered them from head to foot. By order of the Prime Minister they were allowed to come out bare faced. He had thirty thousand armed troops on the streets to make sure that the *mullahs* – professional religious fanatics – did not make trouble. It

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is said that one *mullah*, on the streets that day, was shot down as he went up to an unveiled girl, merely to ask the way. The Afghans laugh at this story and suggest that it was a case of *pour encourager les autres*.

I must admit that I found Afghan girls something to look at. Many of them have green eyes which go well with their European complexions and raven tresses. Needless to say I was very careful to just look and not touch because apart from the police the girls' relatives have a very, very decisive way of dealing with mashers!

My earliest days in Kabul were spent in the Kabul Hotel. This was the only hotel in Kabul run by the Government and very pleasant. The rooms and beds were clean, the food good and the staff efficient and cordial. Along with all the other Afghans I ever met they were concerned that I did not eat more. Firstly, it was just not possible for me to eat as much *pilau* as the average Afghan. They had generations of practice and the ability to eat that much must be hereditary. Secondly, I had a touch of Kabul tummy and was not really happy about all that meat. The bearer in charge of my room felt responsible for my physical welfare and called his personal physician. This gentleman had no medical degrees, although there is a medical faculty in the University in Kabul, but more experience than a Harley Street specialist. He was eighty-five years old if he was a day, spick and span with a long white beard and according to the translator of the hotel, if he couldn't cure me, then the germ I had was not an Afghan one and they would not be responsible for my death.

The consultation was like no other that I have ever experienced. The doctor sat before me, peered closely at me, looked at my eyes, felt my pulse, shook his head, got up and went out. For a moment I was panic-stricken. I had fallen under the spell of the Afghan way of life. I thought to myself, "then it is a foreign germ and I have had it", but no! the door opened and the doctor reap-

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peared with a bowl of yoghurt and a spoon. This, he intimated, would cure me if I took this quantity every day for three days. The quantity was just less than half a gallon, but I tucked in. After eating as much as I could I offered him what I thought would be his fee. He refused in a dignified fashion and intimated, through the translator, that he did not charge professional colleagues but would be glad to know my opinion about a corn which was giving him trouble. Happily I had a small bottle of corn lotion in my bag and was able to give it to him. With this the two quacks shook hands, vowed (through the translator) eternal comradeship, and parted.

The next day I made contact with my head office to find that my work in Afghanistan was to be very different from what I had imagined. It appeared that my company was interested in buying herbs and plants from Afghanistan from which medicine could be extracted. These include raw opium and asafoetida. I was to travel about the country and collect samples and make maps of areas suitable for the cultivation or extension of the cultivation of these drugs. I was to be provided with a jeep and a driver and cook and could make my own itinerary. This *carte blanche* was a wonderful surprise, for I had already decided that Kabul was not exactly typical of Afghanistan and, as a country boy myself, I would prefer the open air.

I was given a week to acclimatise myself after which I was to travel north on the first leg of my tour.

Buying an Afghan fur cap, I made my way back to the hotel to stock up on yoghurt while I explored the city a bit more.

I discovered that the old city is shunned by Westerners as far as living goes. The foreign community had their embassies, schools and homes in the new city. The Russians, naturally, ran counter to this and had a massive, red-walled embassy in the old city near the river which at this time of the year was down to a thin trickle in the centre of the bed.

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The American Embassy, true to type, occupied a position near the Prime Ministry and was air-conditioned with a busy United States Information Service library staffed by crewcut, very, very earnest young Americans who believed it their sacred mission to keep the Afghans on the road to democracy, civilisation and political responsibility. I suppressed the urge to tell them that in my few hours in Kabul I had seen more true, sincere democracy at work than I had seen in as many years in the States, and more inherent culture than the United States would learn in a generation. I introduced myself and asked for any books on Afghan botany.

I should have known better, for I received the answer that at any time, anywhere, and in any language is guaranteed to send me raving up the nearest wall: “No, we have nothing on Afghan botany, but we do have a botanical survey of the United States.” When I suggested, choleric with the effort of keeping my voice down, that I would not have specified AFGHAN botany if I had meant any other, I was given a reproachful glance and a copy of *Life*. Months later when I heard that an Afghan mob had stoned the U.S.I.S. library I wondered what *they* had asked for!

Leaving this haven of democratic endeavour, I wandered along the streets of the New City wondering in an off-hand way what lay behind the towering walls. Men were busy spraying the roads from the water channels on each side of the road to lay the dust. As I passed each of them, he would stop and politely wish me “good evening”, adding that wonderful Afghan greeting, “may you never be tired”, which is what you must say to a traveller or walker. The reply, which I did not know at the time, is “may you live long”. Afghans take the exchange of greetings very seriously. They follow a set pattern, must never be skimped and must be said with sincerity.

I had decided to stroll down to Ghazi College, which is one of the two high schools in Kabul which teach English. I had been

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told "past the Foreign Ministry, its the archway on the left, you can't miss it". So I wandered down, noted the Foreign Ministry, and turned left into an arch. I wondered momentarily at the presence of a sentry with fixed bayonet, and still more at the platoon-strong guard who stood inside the inner gate. I reflected that I had heard that one of the princes was at an ordinary school and he probably rated an honour guard, so on I wandered through the inner gate into a huge garden with a massive building in the centre. Sauntering along I was caught up by a young man in uniform who addressed me in German. German not being my strong point, I just smiled and nodded with which he saluted and motioned me towards the building.

I followed, thinking he might prefer me to make contact with one of the staff rather than wander about, especially if they had a princeling about. I had heard that the Royal Family don't take kindly to having their princes nobbled, and I didn't want to give the impression that I had even the remotest idea of doing this in case his very efficient-looking guard used me for bayonet practice without asking questions. No blue-eyed conscripts these boys. They were professionals. You could tell by the way they estimated range at a glance.

Reaching the main door I was passed through more sentries, through a massive hall, up some stairs, and into a beautifully furnished room. At the far end of the room were a pair of enormous doors before which stood the inevitable sentries although this time they looked twice as fierce as those outside. They were also at least twice my size. As I stood awkwardly, another official entered and motioned me towards the doors. I remember thinking that if the headmaster needed all this protection perhaps it was an approved school or something. As I reached the threshold, one of the giants stepped forwards and very professionally frisked me for weapons. Staggered by this innovation, I was about to say something when the doors opened and I was propelled

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inside. The room was the size of a fair-sized tennis court with a huge picture window taking up all of one wall.

In one corner was a huge desk behind which sat a youngish man dressed in what I subsequently knew to be the dark green of the Royal Guard. As I stood hesitantly, he rose and walking forward, extended his hand and addressed me in German. I stammered, "I'm sorry, I . . ." He raised a quizzical eyebrow and replied in perfect English. "I know the Americans won the war, but I didn't know that part of the victory was their right to represent Germany abroad." I stammered again, "I'm sorry, I'm not representing Germany. I'm looking for drugs, opium, I mean . . ." Everything I said made the picture worse. "Opium, eh," rejoined the figure, "well you won't find it here, I'm afraid. I only smoke cigars." "May I explain," I burst out, "I was looking for Ghazi College and I was ushered in here. I'm in Afghanistan looking for medicinal plants." "Then you're not the new West German Cultural Attaché?" "No, I was brought in by accident." He laughed. "My security must be breaking down, someone has blundered," he quoted with a theatrical leer. "Anyway, have a seat and tell me what you're doing and if I can help you."

It was a little bit unnerving, sitting facing the light before a desk behind which sat a man who was dismantling a machine-pistol on the blotter in front of him. I explained my mission to him and he made various suggestions as to where I might look. He asked me a lot about my background and political and social attitudes and I was astonished at his grasp of United States affairs, until he told me that he had done a paratroop course there. After twenty minutes or so the true Cultural Attaché arrived and I was shown out. My host told me that he would always be pleased to see me and to count on his help at any time. He added that I was to look him up if I went north to Paghman where in his words, "I have a place". After being shown out and escorted past the guards I found Ghazi College and discovered that my host had been the Colonel

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of the Guard in charge of military affairs, next in line to rule the Principality of Paghman and holding a spiritual position of vast importance due to his family's descent from the Prophet.

It appears that some of the high positions of State are apportioned among those feudal lords upon whose support the Kabul Government must rely for survival. Although the Muhammed Zai family are well and truly in power, they are there rather by default. Afghans of the old school, who are in the majority, do not consider that they have adequate right to the throne as they are a cadet branch of one of the kingly lines of Afghanistan. However, the people are prepared to support them just as long as they defend the independence of the country and do not ride rough shod over the traditions, religious and feudal, of the people.

To be fair, one must say that there are very few able administrators outside the family and I, for one, could not think of an alternative government. True, some of the descendants of the former kingly families still live in Afghanistan, but they seem to be, by popular opinion, lacking in the qualities that made their forebears great.

In any case, as in the example I have quoted, the present administration has a stiffening especially in the forces of the oldest noble families and thus are assured of the support of the tributaries of these people. It was difficult even for Hashim to break the feudal powers of the nobility and he failed with the most important ones. The cities and provinces after which they take their name of Kandahar, Paghman and Kohistan, Herat, Kataghan, Mazar-i-Sherief, Khost and Badakhshan are the strongholds of the feudal nobility whose power is in abeyance but unbroken. The Government has always played the North against the South, for these two peoples are traditional enemies. When Habibullah took Afghanistan he did it with the aid of the Northern warlords and it was logical for Nadir Shah to reconquer it with the help of their Southern counterparts and, it is widely held, with gold and arms

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supplied by a nation who viewed with considerable misgivings the unidentifiable policy of the Brigand. But that is another story!

The Kabuli civil servant is born, not made. He is bred and moulded by the regulations his forefathers made to ensure that the buck is passed as far as possible, and that no possible repercussions will be felt by him. The request for a map from the Government bookshop is met with exquisite politeness and great regret. Unfortunately the director of the bookshop is out attending his grandmother's funeral and he alone has the authority to issue one. Perhaps if I returned several days later he could fit me in, in between seeing into the grave his lamentably short-lived relatives!

Gentle pressure produced the suggestion that the Press Department, who run the bookshop, might be able to help. I trudged to the Press Department and finally ended up with an extremely well-groomed young man whose English was as excellent as his manners. He regretted that he did not have a spare copy of the map and that the President, who alone could issue an order for one to be produced from the store, was away "in Pushtunistan". Pushtunistan was a new one on me and I was unthinking enough to ask where that might be. At once I knew that I had made a false move, for Pushtunistan here is as West Irian is to the Indonesians and Kuwait to Iraq. Maps were produced and I was treated to a polite harangue as to why the seven million people of the area between Afghanistan and Pakistan were a nation and should be allowed their freedom.

The Afghan point of view is that they were forcibly incorporated into Pakistan without the chance of voting and they have been held down, jailed and bombed ever since. I was not too sure of my ground as an American, so I merely showed intelligent interest and took the pamphlets that were thrust into my nervous hand. Having been given a timetable of the programmes in English over Kabul Radio I was ushered out, naturally without my map, but it was done with such immaculate courtesy that I

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just couldn't feel mad. I noticed that the map of Free Pushtunistan included Peshawar and wondered idly if this was a way of recapturing the native city of the Muhammed Zai family.

When I returned to the hotel I found the jeep that had been allotted to me, together with a driver and a cook. Both these men had worked with Americans before and had a distressing habit of lacing their remarks with "O.K." That they spoke no English was no great stumbling-block as they had been told the mission and knew much better than I where we were going and for what we were looking. I reflected that my company would have saved a great deal of money by recruiting Afghans direct and sending them to scour the country, but I hurriedly hoped that it would not occur to them, at least until my tour of duty was over! Hakim and Gulbaz were ready for anything and I was glad to note that they did not seem like the Kabul-bred civil servants that I had encountered. Indeed Hakim was a Kandahari and had the liveliest contempt for Kabulis, and Gulbaz was a Northerner from the Bandit King's own province. As I got to know him I found that he was a firm supporter of the late bandit and always referred to him – among ourselves and with his own people – as "His Late Majesty".

In the evening, as I drank a long, cold drink with the British Military Attaché in the beautiful and so-English Embassy, I learned that the British community were faced with a trial which involved more than political acumen, but involved "face". It appeared that in an unguarded moment a junior secretary had remarked in public that the Afghans played hockey well enough, but he couldn't see them on a cricket field. Within a week the mystified Ambassador received a challenge for the Embassy to produce a team to meet the "Kabul Cricket Club" two Fridays hence. The existence of the Afghan team had been a well-kept secret, but no true Britisher could refuse and the challenge had been accepted.

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Speculation was rife as to the possible members of the team, for although the British could call on volunteers from quite a large community, the Afghans had few known players. True, a large number of prominent families had been exiled in British India from time to time and spent varying periods there, but could these scions of the nobility have absorbed sufficient ability to worship at the altar of the Great British Game? Most people doubted it, but kept their peace for the Afghans are an unpredictable people. Had not the great Amir Abdul Rahman taught his courtiers ice skating in one day? Admittedly they learned rather than die, but who knew that the same persuasion would not produce a cricket team?

The Embassy found that the Afghans were seemingly quietly confident of victory as none showed for net practice, and it was rumoured that several leading members of the Government were in the team. Could they afford to be associated with a lost cause?

I slept late the next day and after a leisurely lunch made my way towards the grounds. The approach roads were crowded with the local populace who were off to see the much advertised game of "Rounders" with the English. Cricket as such is unknown in Afghanistan, so the game was known as Rounders. I am sure that many a true Englishman felt the blood rush to his head at the description.

I had managed to get a seat fairly near the pavilion-cum-stables for this is a polo ground. Through the vast crowd circulated the usual fruit and nut sellers, small boys with water-pipes and the inevitable *kebab* sellers. There was much doubt as to the rules of the game, but the crowd was there to see fair play and many a keen eye took note of wind speed and direction in case the Afghan team should need covering fire.

The turf was green, well rolled and watered under the supervision of one whom an Englishman informed me with certain nervousness had captained Edinburgh University at cricket. If

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the Afghan groundsman had captained Edinburgh, what might their team be composed of?

British feelings of panic were dispelled when the Afghan team appeared. They were readily recognisable and included among others the Minister of Foreign Affairs as Captain and the Khan of Paghman, Chief of the Secret Police and the Lord Mayor of Kabul. The toss was won by the Embassy, who put in the challengers.

By this time certain elements of the crowd had divined that the object of the game was to strike the wicket behind the batsman with a small ball. Why, then, they reasoned, should not the ball be flung with demonic speed at the batsman so that he would fall over and break his own wicket? Alternatively, when running, why should not the English batsmen be tripped up and their wickets broken? It was quite simple!

However, without outside intervention, the game started with the Afghan opening pair digging in and waiting for the ball to lose its shine. As they started to make runs the crowd rose with every stroke and sent heavenwards their praise and prayers for the fleetness of foot, courage and skill of the batsmen. A group, more partisan yet, managed to insert a few swift prayers for the disablement by thunderbolts of the British players.

In an early over, the Khan of Paghman was struck by a rising ball and temporarily winded. There was an ugly silence during which some of his clansmen were restrained by mounted police from avenging this insult to their Khan. Was he not, after all, a descendent of the Prophet, a Khan, and the son of a Khan? Was it fitting that he should be struck in this undignified manner by a midget infidel whose father, if he were known, was roasting in hell at this very moment?

With the fall of the first wicket, a slight problem of etiquette and protocol arose. The Minister of Foreign Affairs came in. Now it was difficult for him to be got out without losing face

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diplomatically. Fortunately he was a diplomat *par excellence* and “retired hurt” after having scored one run.

During the lunch interval many a *mullah* was to be seen crossing and recrossing the pitch to sanctify it and to ensure the victory of the sons of Islam over the Infidel.

By 2 p.m. Kabul was all out for one hundred and seventy, the tail having flailed wildly at the bowling and been bowled. The reason for the tail was to be made distressingly clear to the Embassy team when they came in.

As the British opening pair took their places they found the Afghan tail positioned a few feet from the bat, blandly indifferent to their peril. They were from Paghman and their Khan had promised them his personal and undivided attention if they missed any catches – any injuries that they might sustain in their suicidal positions were incidental.

The opening pair found themselves back in the pavilion with four runs on the board and little recollection of what had happened. One remembered the Khan roaring down on him with a zig-zag run of fifty yards and yorking out his middle stump. The second had prepared to meet this appalling onslaught to be bowled by a ball that trickled down the pitch and nudged off his bails as he stood paralysed.

Apart from the fast bowler most of the damage was done by the Edinburgh Blue who bowled such slow, spinning, meandering balls that it seemed a shame to interrupt their progress until the wicket did just that. The bowlers changed with every other over. The suicidal mid-on became a fast bowler who pounded down and delivered the ball without dragging or throwing with such speed that the batsman, running a bye confidently, found himself run out as the ball had found a resting-place in the wicket-keeper's gloves. At least two batsmen experienced this until the remainder remembered that Paghmanis have a game in which they throw stones at each other and catch them.



5. Pushtun tribesmen in Gardez.



6. A little girl in national dress singing over Kabul radio.

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The runs came slowly until the crowd offered their personal small arms to the Afghans in an effort to break the stand and enliven things a little. The afternoon wore on, batsmen came and went, the scene was almost traditionally English until a glance at the scoreboard brought British hearts into their mouths. Only two wickets to fall and thirty-two runs behind. Two hours to go: could the Embassy pull through?

After the tea interval the teams take their places again. There is a slight delay as one of the umpires finds and a removes small dagger which has been left on the grass where the bowler passes – left, I expect, by a wellwisher in case the bowler might want to dispose of the batsmen in a more traditional and less conventional manner.

One more wicket falls and excitement is at fever-pitch with only fifteen runs to win, and then comes the event which will save face all round. Gently, at first, down it comes from the hills, the sand-laden, punishing wind that blinds and suffocates and which precedes a rain storm. The teams sprint for shelter and the match, an honourable draw, is rained off.

We close in to the pavilion and congratulate all and sundry. The teams are busy swearing that the other would have won, but secretly not likely to entertain the ghastly possibility.

We drive home through the thinning crowd, some are saddened by the lack of accomplished knife-play, but all are happy that their champions held at bay the British once again.

CHAPTER 3

Power Politics in Kabul

I WANTED to have a look around Kabul before I left, because by the time I was scheduled to return there would be snow on the ground and sightseeing would be difficult. Adroitly avoiding having an itinerary mapped out for me by the tourist clerk at the hotel, I wandered off towards the eastern part of the city with the idea of climbing a near hill to get an overall look at the city.

Now Kabul, like every other Asiatic city I have ever seen, has grown up around the Palace, and the central mosque and market and the streets, therefore, occur predictably so I was surprised to come across a broad highway isolating the main part of the Old City from another part built around the lower reaches of the "Lion Gate" hill which guards the eastern approaches. It seemed unusual to me that the military-minded founders of the city should have isolated one bit of the city from another, and that one of strategic importance. It soon became apparent to me, on closer examination, that this avenue, the Jadi Maiwand, named after a famous battle in which the Afghans defeated the British, had been driven through the old city quite recently. Uncompleted walls and rubble showed this, and the glaring new cinema, the Pamir Palace, horribly out of place, indicated that the construction had been somewhat hurried and possibly done by the army as it was dead straight and uncompromisingly a military highway. Later I was to discover that indeed the army had driven this road in a matter of days and quite recently. While it was a logical connection for heavy transport to get to the main markets freely without

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bottlenecks in the winding streets, I was told that it strangely enough had destroyed the walls and exposed the flank of that part of the city built against the hill-slopes known as Chindawal, the place where practically all the Shiah, or minority unorthodox Moslems, lived. In times gone by, this minority, secure behind its wall and with labyrinthine tunnels and passages, had shown a distressingly enthusiastic tendency to support British incursions into Afghanistan and it was an open secret that Premier Daud was not unmindful of the fact that this new road would leave their flank open and might dissuade them from any such activities if Afghanistan happened at any time to go to war with Pakistan over Pushtunistan.

Farther up this hill is the drum platform where the huge drum sounds to signal the beginning of the fast each day in Ramadan when the very orthodox Afghans abstain from food, drink and tobacco from dawn to dusk. In the heat of June and July this can be really torture but, I am told, Afghans observe this to a man. Anyone caught breaking the fast during daylight hours is paraded, seated back-to-front on a donkey, through the streets with his face blackened.

They tell a story about the drum, which, in former times, was also used as a signal to alert the people in case of attack or fire. It appears that in the Anglo-Afghan war of 1838-42 the signal to attack the British garrison was to be the rolling of this immense drum and the drummer, a wizened creature of some eighty summers was entrusted with the job. Somehow the wooden arm which is pulled up and down and strikes the drum broke and the old man, rather than let down the side, climbed on to the drum and by jumping up and down on it, alerted the city. With the successful conclusion of the rising the people discovered that the old man was dead of exhaustion and it was unanimously agreed that he should be given a martyr's funeral as were all those who had fallen in actual battle. I like to think that this story is true and,

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after having seen the size of the drum, am prepared to believe it!

With much puffing and blowing I managed to reach a vantage-point high up on the hill and was embarrassed to find that the platform on to which I had climbed was occupied by a young man deep in prayer. I seated myself to one side, not quite sure what one does under such circumstances, but with his prayer concluded, the man came up to me and, wordlessly, offered me a cigarette. I took it with muttered thanks and we sat there smoking and looking out over the dusty roof-tops of the ancient city. After a few minutes he asked me "American?" "Yes," I replied, "How did you guess?" He smiled and pointed at my cameras, "Only Americans carry more than one camera." It turned out that he was a medical student at the University and a graduate of Habibia College, one of the high schools that teach English. He was eager to talk and point out to me the interesting parts of the city.

To the north, hidden by the ever-present cloud of dust that hangs over the city in summer, could just be discerned the cupola of the tomb of Nadir Shah. The young man told me that the Royal Family had been rather embarrassed lately when it was discovered that the hill, Maranjan, on which the tomb had been built was an artificial one which was of pre-Buddhist times and had held both fire temples and Buddhist altars; not quite, they thought, the place where the bones of a Moslem King should lie. This illustrates the fanaticism of the Afghans; they will not associate with anything that is un-Islamic and graveyards must be beyond suspicion as regards sanctity.

The luxury of the Nadir Shah mausoleum is in outstanding contrast to the tomb of that great father of Eastern nationalism, Syed Jamaluddin Afghani, who stimulated nationalistic thought in so many countries in the Near and Middle East. Turkey and Egypt are examples of the countries encouraged to progress by his fiery oratory. When he died his body was brought home in

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great style, but consigned to a miserable tomb far from the city. Until quite recently this tomb was knee-deep in water and refuse, although above it towered a column of black marble erected by Premier Daud. It is a sad reflection that a man who sparked national consciousness in so many countries should lie neglected by the Government, although his name is enshrined in the hearts and minds of the people. His family, as his title Syed shows, were descendants of the Prophet from the Kunar valley, a cadet branch of the Paghmani Syeds.

Towards the eastern outskirts at Karta Char lies the new Kabul University, built with the assistance of the American International Co-operation administration. The university has one great drawback which, to a lesser degree, applies to education throughout the country. The lack of trained lecturers means that both the university and the high schools must employ foreigners to teach some subjects. These teachers command large salaries and are a drain upon the dollar and sterling balances of the country. It is not that there are few Afghans who have graduated abroad, there are quite a few, but with very few exceptions they have obtained higher degrees to equip them for research. Since Afghanistan has no facilities for higher research after a doctorate, they have tended to drift into the Government ministries and have concentrated on planning and advising on a theoretical basis. What Afghanistan has needed and still does need are technicians who can teach carpentry, plumbing, auto mechanics, radio repair, road building, etc., etc. A Doctor of Science in Atomic Physics is just no earthly good in a country whose electricity supply is inefficient and insufficient.

The Ministry of Education has been for too many years a political appointment. The Minister hardly ever knew educational theory and relied upon the senior civil servants of the Ministry whose abilities were never of the most exalted. Critics of the régime have always claimed that it has been in the interests of the ruling family to keep the people in ignorance. I do not believe

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that this is true, for the people are intelligent and well enough informed to know what is going on, educated or not. No, I think it was the utter inability of the educational officials to handle the situation. High officials were forever participating in international conferences while UNESCO advisers tore their hair over the crass inefficiency of the Ministry.

Talking with other Americans I found that they were all agreed that the Afghan schoolchild had a raw deal but came through the inefficient teaching with remarkably good grades. If one keeps in mind the fact that a good third of all Afghan teachers are teaching just to avoid military service (it's possible to avoid two years in the army by teaching for four years at army pay rates!), one can imagine that one-third of all pupils are being instructed by men without the "vocation" that teachers are supposed to have.

My companion, with unconscious humour, pointed out that students coming from Kabul must pass the sombre Deh Mazang Penitentiary on their way to college. Deh Mazang is the sword of Damocles that hangs over every Afghan. Once in there, there is precious little chance of getting out. It is a prison where criminals and political detainees are held after sentence. The latter are sent there as a matter of course, for their trials are so much *in camera* that Kabulis opine that they never take place at all. Really dangerous political prisoners are kept in the cells of the Commandature of Police or in the dungeons at the Palace. I had heard hints that a number of people suspected of plotting against the régime in the late '50s had vanished into the Commandature and had not appeared before any court. They had included the then Commandant, Khodjah Naim, whose name is never mentioned now but who, I was assured, is remembered and whose example may well be followed one of these days if the Muhammed Zai dynasty does not try to rule with a little more regard for the sensibilities of the people.

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In the middle of the Jadi Maiwand stands the monument to the Unknown Soldier, built by Premier Daud. It is referred to by some ribald members of the public as "Daud's tomb" but there is an undercurrent of seriousness in their voices that makes you look at them more closely. Revolution is never far from the surface in Afghanistan and can be touched off by matters that would merely cause a General Election in Europe. As I sat half-way up a hill with my young guide I could imagine the Afghan war parties storming the town, looting and burning as they had done so many times during the last hundred years.

Talk turned to religion and I was interested to discover that my companion was a member of one of the Sufi orders of Islam. I had always been interested in these philosophical paths and had long ago decided for myself that the Sufis, above all others, had gone nearer to achieving the understanding of the Infinite. Naturally I knew little of their secret doctrine, but I had known for a long time that the centre of their power was in Central Asia although their "lodges" were to be found throughout the world. I had examined Zen, Subud and the teachings of Gurdjieff but had found limitations in them all. From what I knew about Sufism I imagined that it could take one farther along the path of understanding. I was happy to accept a note of introduction from the young man to his teacher in the North. "Naturally," he told me, "you will not be able to participate in the exercises but you may be able to glean something. His son speaks good English, so you should have no difficulty."

We descended the hill and I invited him to the hotel for tea. He declined: "The Government does not encourage students to fraternise with foreigners and I have my grant to think of." This statement bore out what I had previously heard so we parted, he to his home and I to the hotel. Passing the cinema I noticed that tonight the Russian film "Circus" was showing "in full Sovkolor" so I decided that I would see how the Afghans react to Soviet

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culture. You have to book in advance, so I bought a ticket in the dress circle for half a crown and returned to the hotel to have tea and put off an hour before the performance began.

The hotel lobby was full of very short, very square men with hats pulled down over their eyes. For one moment I thought Al Capone was in town with his boys until I identified them as Russians, bound, no doubt, for one of the Soviet aid programme sites somewhere in Afghanistan. According to a handout from the U.S. Embassy, the Sino-Soviet *bloc* had poured in over 250,000,000 dollars in the past five years with the U.S. aid at 127,000,000 dollars. Military aid from the East had accounted for a third of that and the U.S. supplies no military aid to Afghanistan because Afghanistan has steadfastly refused to accept military aid from the U.S. which has strings attached. The U.S. administration ignores the fact that the Afghans are to a man anti-Communist and insists on strings. As a result the Afghan forces have MiG jets and Ilyushin jet bombers, Russian tanks, small arms and the lot. Not for the first time I wondered which side Washington was on.

Admittedly the U.S. diplomatic mission is hopelessly out of touch with Afghan public opinion due to inefficiency and the fact that not one of the staff can speak the Afghan language while more than half the Soviet and Chinese Embassy staffs are fluent at it. American Embassy staffs in so many countries live in a little self-contained, air-conditioned world of their own and then are often the last to hear that there has been a revolution or change of Government. It is a sad reflection upon the system of selecting men for the Foreign Service. The comparison between the calibre and behaviour of the American and British Embassies in Kabul shows up the glaring deficiencies in American diplomacy. The British live in a walled Embassy three miles outside the city, yet know all that goes on despite the fact that they, in turn, are watched like hawks by the very efficient secret police. They have enough reason to bear the Afghans considerable ill-will due to

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their being outfought and outmanœuvred by them on many occasions, yet no one is more charming and polite to the Afghan man in the street than an English diplomat, while the American, although brought up in the shadow of the Bill of Rights, considers them savages, and often makes this distressingly clear in his off-hand treatment of his Afghan servants or subordinates. His female counterpart dresses in a way that excites the disapproval of the conservative Afghans and makes no attempt to act in a way that reflects credit upon her country.

I have never seen Afghan men or women, from whatever class, so badly behaved in public as are the majority of Americans in Afghanistan. The Afghans have an inherent sense of dignity and the fitness of things. Americans are stuck here on a three-year tour of duty, don't like it and proceed to make it quite clear. Contrast this behaviour with the British or the Russians. The British, always the perfect gentlemen, go out of their way to retain their aloofness, which is appreciated by the Afghans, yet manage to fraternise with the people to a sufficient extent to give a good impression. The Russians mingle with Afghans on every level; at the drop of a balalaika, they will deluge anyone with samples, pamphlets and personal visits to advise on anything from rose-growing to moving mountains. Sure, it's all propaganda, but among the simple Afghans it's the human contact that counts and the Americans are well out of contact.

The impact of Communist propaganda, the effect of Soviet aid and undercover payments of gold to selected people has been surprisingly small. It would seem that the Afghans, wildly patriotic, consider that Communism is definitely OUT. Not only is it atheistic and, therefore, beyond the pale, but if it had been any good at all the Afghans themselves would have thought of it! As it is an alien product, it is obviously inferior to the home-grown variety. This is logical, in Afghanistan. You can ask an Afghan why he dislikes the Pakistanis; eats pine kernels all the

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time, eats enough *pilau* to floor an average man, honours visitors but tracks down enemies to the end of the earth and disembowels them and he will reply, without a moment's thought, "I am an Afghan you see", as if that explained everything and, by George, if you have seen Afghanistan, it does.

Afghanistan has had a six-hundred-mile common frontier with Russia for a long, long time. During the days of the Czar she was ready to fight the Russian bear, to help the Khan of Bokhara fight a desperate rearguard action when the Soviets took over Bokhara and Samarkand. Afghans swept across the Oxus and caused alarm and despondency on a large scale in the Soviet ranks. Since the 1930s she has held open house for the thousands of refugees from the "Socialist paradise" who struggle across the river. The refugees are mostly farmers and the farmers and peasants on the Afghan side know that there must be something decidedly wrong with a system that causes people like them to leave their native country and seek refuge in a foreign one, albeit a friendly one. No, the average Afghan has no illusions about Soviet equality, neither has he any need of it. Islam is the religion of equality and each Afghan feels himself equal to every other Afghan so he does not need a system that will make him equal; he has had such a system for a thousand years! It is an open secret that Soviet agents cross the river with the refugees, who have a rough passage because of the traditional Communist ploughed strip, mines, wire fences and watch towers. These agents have gold to buy the allegiance of anyone who will form a Communist cell. With singular regularity these agents are found, having suffered death as the result of falling over a cliff, fallen on a knife or cut the throat while shaving. Needless to say the gold is gone; probably he went on a spending spree before getting drunk on green tea and falling over a cliff. Still, Afghanistan must logically be high up on the Communist list for subversion, although perhaps they know that they can only take it by force and that will be something to see!

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My reverie was interrupted by the hotel interpreter who informed me that the cinema programme started in fifteen minutes. I hurried over because I wanted to see what the audience looked like and to sort myself out a good seat. I really needn't have worried for the circle was nearly empty, but a glance over the rail showed me that it was lucky that I hadn't decided to sit in the pit – it was packed. Among the audience circulated vendors selling hot *kebabs*, water-melon slices, the ever-present pine kernels and even grapes and pomegranates. The Afghans eat few actual sweets, but consume vast quantities of fruit, nuts and dried fruit, but assiduously brush their teeth after food and have, from what I saw, excellent teeth. Most of them carry a small toothbrush, for I was told that the ablutions which they perform before each of the five daily prayers include a thorough rinsing of the mouth and brushing of the teeth. I settled myself in a chair in the first row and wondered what the two huge arm-chairs in the middle of the row were for; my question was soon answered for in came none other than my involuntary host from the Prime Ministry accompanied by a remarkably unfriendly-looking soldier who was carrying enough weapons to equip a platoon. As the Khan entered, the circle audience rose to their feet and waited until he, after bowing to them, sat in one of the arm-chairs; his shadow melted into the shadows as the lights dimmed but I was sure that if a mouse stirred, with thoughts of mayhem, it would be shot to pieces before it knew what hit it. I settled down to view the film, a little bit uneasy in mind perhaps, in case somebody decided to use a bomb rather than the traditional pistol or knife; bombs are notoriously unselective and I did not want to be blown up with the strains of a Communist hymn in my ears as the film opened with a blast of sound from the massed choirs of the Young Communist Pioneers.

The film itself, one must confess, was technically very good and the artists of the circus portrayed in it were brilliant. Never have

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I seen such finesse or timing; the accent was upon skill and there were no clowns as we have been brought up to expect in American circuses, but I knew that some of those wire walkers, acrobats or horse trainers could write their own tickets in the States if, of course, they had not been, as I am sure they were, good, paid-up members of the Communist Party. Half-way through, the lights went up and the pedlars paraded in again with their goods. I wanted to smoke and, since smoking is forbidden in cinemas in Kabul, I had to go out into the hallway where the Khan was already installed with a group of friends, while his watchful hatchetman hovered well within range. As I entered I was beckoned forward and asked how I liked the show. I replied that I was very impressed. "Our cinema does not compare favourably with Radio City, of course," he said, "but as soon as the new one is built in the New Town, this will close down. In any case," he added, "it is not quite right that a cinema should stand at the gates of the Royal Palace." I looked at him quickly, but his face was poker and not a glimmer of sarcasm had showed in his voice. I agreed, as solemnly, and after accepting a further invitation to call on him, we returned to our seats to see the second half of a brilliant film. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the Khan was eating pine nuts, cracking the shells and eating the kernels with a speed that takes years to achieve. I vowed to myself that I would try to learn the art so that I would boast in the drawing-rooms of Boston, "a little habit I picked up in Afghanistan, you know".

With the end of the show I made my way back to the hotel, being briefly held back by a policeman on point duty as a long black Cadillac swept past the cinema and into the gates of the Palace near by. The policeman, who had been stiffly at the salute, turned to me and in tones of grave respect announced "Zahir Khan", giving the king the feudal honorific "Khan" rather than the imperial honorific "Shah" that his father took. The people

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reserve the title "Shah" for the family of the Prophet although they sometimes add for the really blue-blooded ones, "Syed", so if you are introduced to a man by the name of Syed Muhammed Shah, he will be what the Afghans call a "two-headed" descendent of the Prophet, meaning that both his father and mother were of the same line.

As I crossed to the hotel I saw the Khan strolling away towards the New Town and reflected that with his spiritual pedigree he would have little fear of assassination, for it would be an unforgivable sin for a Moslem to take his life. I thought too that his hatchetman gave that little extra guarantee; definitely not the type of man to meddle with!

CHAPTER 4

Trenchermanship and Religion

NEXT MORNING I drove out to the Khwaja Rawash airstrip near Kabul to see first hand the new terminal which has been built. The Afghan airline Ariana is still restricted to DC 3's and 4's, but as soon as the International Airport at Kandahar is opened, big jets will be bought. Whether they will be Russian or American is not certain, but since forty-nine per cent of the Ariana capital is put up by Pan American, the big jets are likely to be Boeings with feeder services by DC's to Kabul and other provincial centres. At present there are no Afghan personnel who can handle or service the big jets, but I dare say whoever supplies them will train the pilots and ground staff.

The guards at the airstrip were not enthusiastic about me entering the adjoining military strip where MiG fighters and Ilyushin bombers were drawn up on the tarmac. I saw no signs of the sinister Soviet pilots so often reported to be burning up the sky over Pakistan. The reports come from Pakistani sources and are picked up by a section of the Western Press, who still maintain that Soviet troops are operating in Afghanistan. From the files it would appear that these newspapers have always had a phobia about Russian penetration into the Indian subcontinent through Afghanistan. Recently they reported "heavy Russian troop concentrations in Herat" which were later shown to have been Afghan pioneer troops repairing a road. Admittedly there has always been an increase in American dollar aid to both Iran and Pakistan after such scares, so perhaps the reason for them is not difficult to find,

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but I do think that the American Government could save a little money by having an efficient listening post in Kabul!

After a massive lunch (I was beginning to eat Afghan quantities of food) I dozed in the lounge and watched the guests, of all nationalities, as they worked out their agendas, their final prices for goods to be supplied by the Government and, in the case of the multicoloured Americans, what they were going to photograph in the afternoon. One could not but admit that they made a sorry spectacle. Nurtured in a very special society, they fitted into that society only; anywhere else they were unable to blend. Charitably, one should admit that they were after all tourists and that some Americans, diplomatic and technical aid staffs, had been able to fit in better but at the same time one could not but feel a little ashamed for them; ashamed that they allowed no compromise and behaved just as if they were in Long Island on vacation. Let me hasten to add, here, that I am not the sort of American who feels it "smart" to hate his own kind, but I am the sort of guy who hates anyone of any kind who displays no respect for others' hallowed institutions or modes of conduct. The American travelling abroad wants desperately to be liked for himself and his country and not for his dollars, but very few have sufficient *nous* to pause a minute, see what makes other people tick and try to tick in unison. My feelings of antipathy include all nationalities abroad; the "Holier-than-thou" feeling I have is one based on observation and experience; I know that I am trying to fit in, but I can see others who are patently making no effort to do this. I feel in no wise superior to them, but I do feel that I get more out of my travels than many other people, not because in many cases I happen to speak the language of the country, but because by trying to understand them I can appreciate them.

It was in this critical frame of mind that I was approached by an obvious Japanese who, with great and dignified politeness and reticence, introduced himself as a sericulturist loaned to the

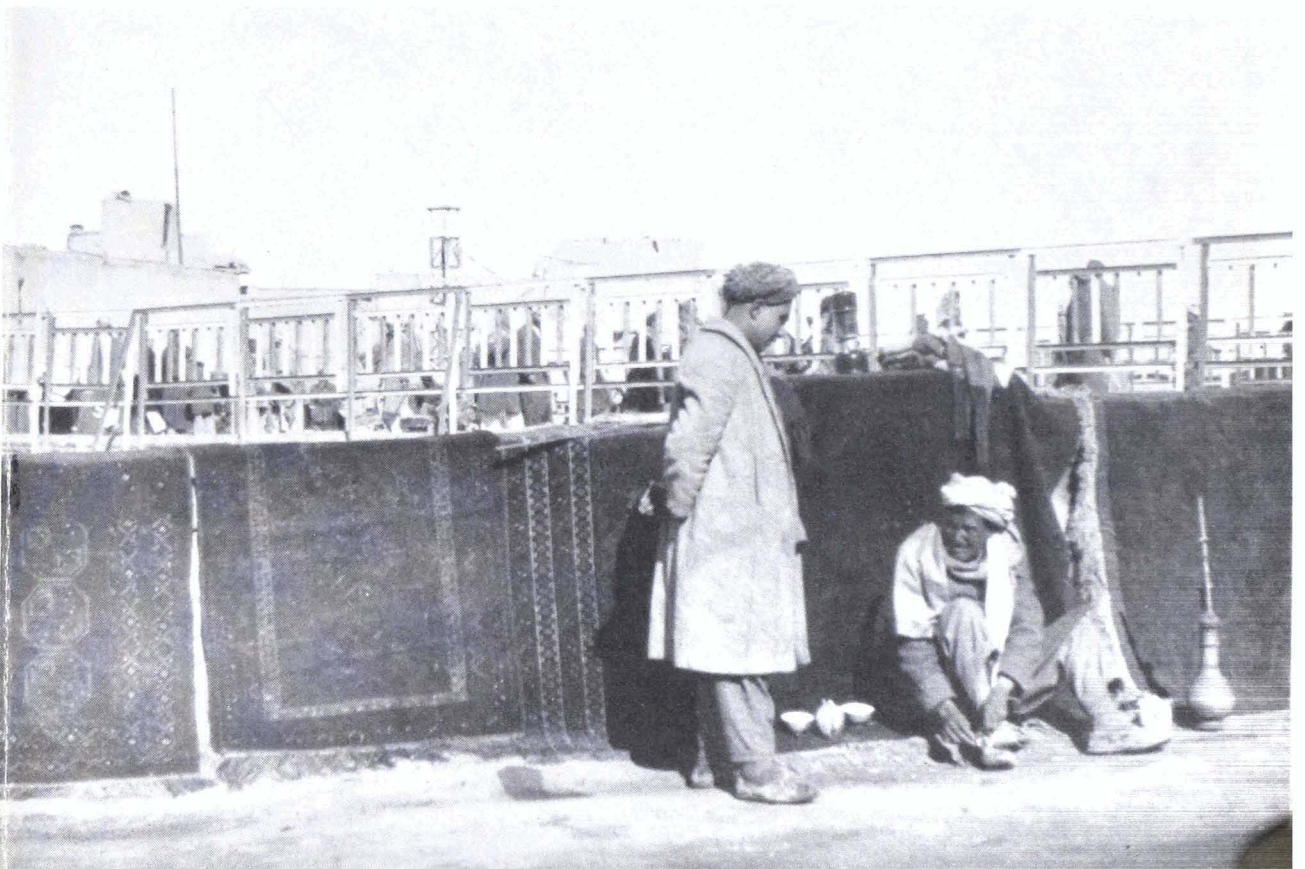
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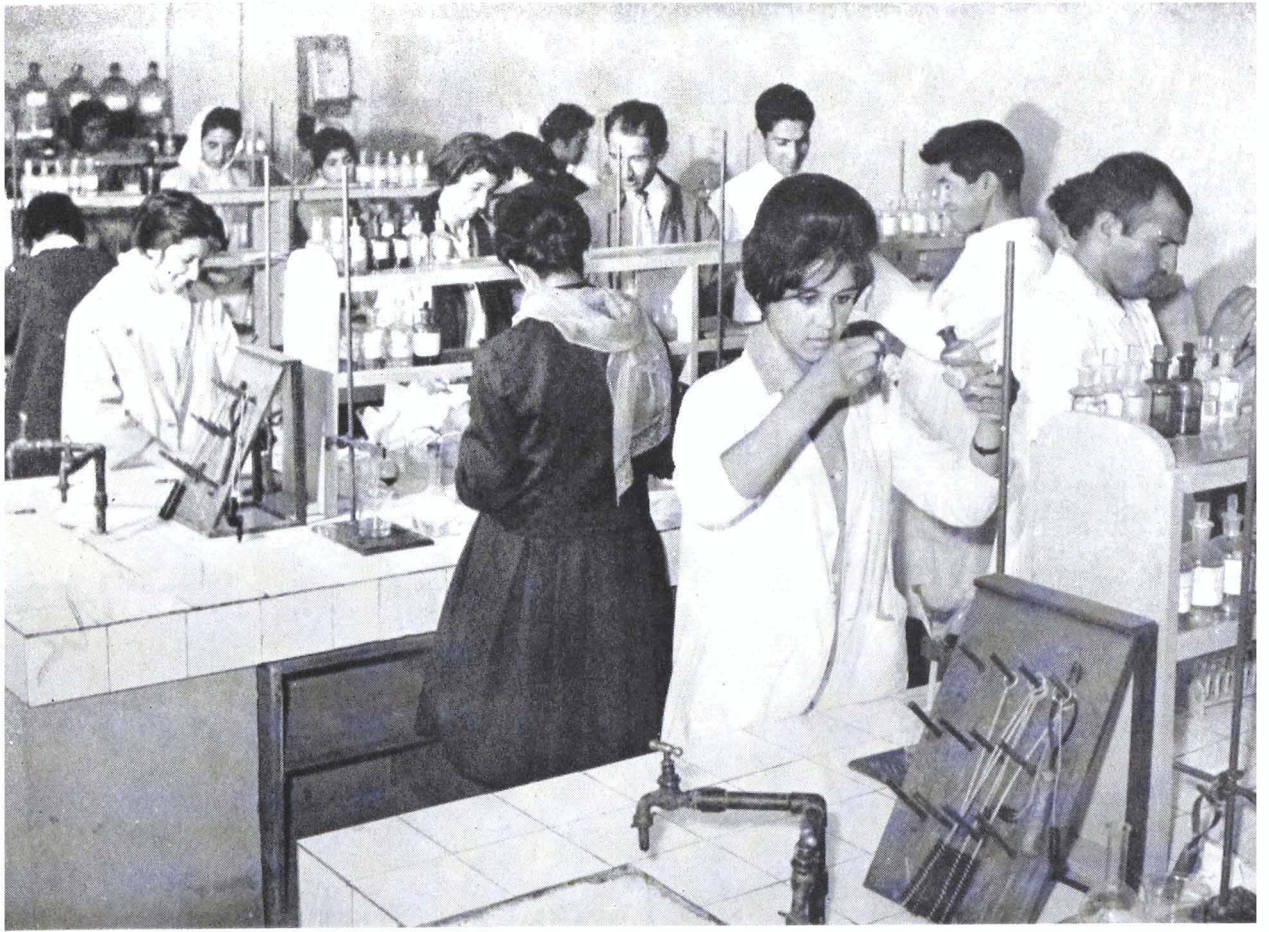
Government for the purpose of increasing the silk output of the country. Would I, he asked, consider giving such an insignificant person as himself a lift, when I left for the provinces, as he learned that I was going to Pul-i-Khumri, which was also his destination. He had been in the country for a year and knew it well, so I welcomed the opportunity of brushing up on some aspects of Afghan life. I warned him that the jeep full of baggage and two servants would be no picnic, but he seemed unmoved. "If one," he smiled, "has travelled on an Afghan long-distance truck, one can survive any hardship." During tea he told me that Afghan silk was of very fine quality and the vast areas of mulberry supplied just the right diet for the silkworm. He was of the opinion that Afghanistan would soon become one of the major exporters of raw silk and that the Government were spending large sums of money to improve the volume and quality of the output. It appeared that the majority of the silkworm breeding was done by private people, and the aim was to build huge farms which would concentrate the breeding in areas blessed with the best mulberries and climate. Understandably the Japanese got on very well with the Afghans, as the exquisite politeness of both peoples found a ready echo. The Japanese found too that the Afghans, though jealous of their traditional methods and skills, were prepared to turn to modern ways if they could be proved to be better.

After tea a stroll seemed to be in order, although the city, sweltering under the midsummer sun, was not a particularly pleasant place. I chose to head for the old Deh Afghanan bazaar, buried deep in the time-scored fringes of the old city. This bazaar is rich in the sights and smells that one associates with the real Afghanistan. The colourful stalls where the gold thread skullcaps, worn under the turbans, are stacked up, mingling with the red and gold waistcoats that the Afghans, particularly from the south, love to wear on festive occasions. I caused great amusement at one stall, where I tried on one or two and demanded a cap and a



7. *Above* An Afghan street vendor selling dried fruit. *Below* A Kabuli carpet seller. Note the tea cups and hubble-bubble to provide entertainment for customers.





8. *Above* Women in the Faculty of Medicine, Kabul. *Below* Turkoman women weaving carpets in Tashkurgan, with differing headdresses to denote social status.



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turban to match. What caused the greatest amusement was my tying of the turban, for the Afghans have a distinct way of tying theirs, which differs even from province to province. My only remembrance of turban tying was from a school play many years ago, and it transpired that I had tied for myself a perfect Sikh turban. Now the Sikhs, although there are a very very small number in Afghanistan, are by no means the most popular minority in the country and it is a matter of insult to call an Afghan Moslem a Sikh.

I was told, with great amusement, that during the Second World War, the regiments raised for the British Army in the Punjab amongst the Sikhs and in the North-West Frontier Province among the Pushtuns had to be kept strictly apart, as there were not a few cases of Pushtun troops opening fire on the Sikhs if they felt like it. Since the average Pushtun can make mincemeat out of a Sikh, one can appreciate why it was considered wise to separate them. By now a number of passers-by had gathered, for a Pushtu-speaking American is something of a novelty, and in any case there were partisan groups who demanded that I be taught to tie a proper turban. This caused no little altercation, for each group was of the opinion that their method was the better, so I had to compromise and learn both ways, promising to tie it differently on alternate days. Honour was satisfied, and I was invited to partake of the inevitable green tea and sugared almonds. Sitting cross-legged on a pile of rugs, listening to the chatter and watching the passage of caravans and bodies of nomads, it was like a glimpse of past centuries. Life proceeded at a leisurely pace there; your word was your bond and you were a member of a community, not just a number in the voters' list. If you, as an Afghan, did not turn up to the communal prayer, others from the mosque would call on you to see if you were well. If you were not, they would stand by as long as you needed them. If you were out of work and out of money, they

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would feed you until you were on your feet again. There is no dole or National Assistance in Afghanistan, for the tightly-knit community is its own Welfare State.

As I sat there thinking how pleasant life could be, a figure in sober turban and spotless white bore down on our group. I could see that he was one of the professional religious bigots that one encounters with great regularity in Afghanistan. Disdaining to contaminate himself by shaking hands with an unbeliever, he pointed at me the bony hand of condemnation and asked in tones of thunder which positively reeked of hell-fire, if I followed the helldoomed belief, as held by the "king of America" that Jesus was the son of God. This was a sticky wicket, for these men are uncompromising in their beliefs, as are all Afghans, but, as distinct from others, will attack you verbally at the drop of a hat. I knew that the Moslems consider Christians as "People of the Book" in that they have a Book revealed to them, although they do not accept the New Testament. I knew, too, that it is unlawful for Moslems to attack another man's religion, although they are morally bound to try and guide him on to the path of Islam. It happens that I was brought up a strict Methodist, but my own religious feeling has always been that God is the common denominator of all religions and that each one shorn of its panoply and ceremony seeks but one thing: to worship God as man's Creator. The Moslems, of course, affirm the Unity of God and claim Muhammed to be their Prophet, as was Jesus the Prophet to the Christians and Moses to the Jews.

I replied, "Reverend Sir, the beliefs of my leader do not concern me, neither, for that matter, do anyone's. For me religion is a very personal matter; I know what I believe and I am satisfied that there is a God, a Creator, to whom I pray and whom I worship. How I may do this is no one's affair; it is between God and myself. On the Day of Judgement I shall answer to God alone. If I have been wrong, I will suffer, but I shall not suffer because I adored

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my God in a different way and with a different ceremony than did others." This was a bit of a shocker to the priest, who, I felt sure, was about to counter with a lengthy Koranic quotation when the call to prayer hurried him off, but not without a baleful glance. My friends, too, melted away into the mosque, but not without handshakes; I gathered that they had enjoyed the priest's discomfiture.

Strings of donkeys were carrying wood and dried bushes through the bazaar, bound for the bakers' shops. Afghan bakers bake their bread in a novel way and in strange shapes and straight out of the oven it is the tastiest that I have ever had. The oven is about ten feet deep and six or seven feet in diameter, and is to be found built vertically in the floor of the bakery. The baker, during the night, burns vast quantities of wood and dry bush at the bottom of the oven, so that the lower three feet of the walls, which are made of slate, become red hot and red hot ashes fill the bottom of the oven. The loaves, which are about the size and shape of a snow-shoe, and half an inch thick, are held on a cushion about the same size, swiftly damped with a little water, and slapped on to the upper walls of the oven. The men, whose job it is to duck into this fiery furnace and slap the dough on the walls are known as the "dough throwers" and command a high salary, for they must combine the ability to stand terrific heat for long periods, good balance to avoid falling into the ovens and an unerring skill at placing the loaves so that they adhere just enough to the walls. When they are deemed to be ready – they are going in as a constant stream; as baked ones are taken out, fresh ones are put in – the baker will hook them out with a long pole with a hook on one end. The morning baking session will last from 5.0 a.m. until 7.30 a.m., then there is a lunchtime session and an evening one. These loaves cost 2d. for a one and a half pound size and literally melt in the mouth. The flour is wholemeal and is probably one of the reasons for the perfect teeth that one finds throughout

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Afghanistan. The loaves are neither “vitamin enriched”, “processed”, “filtered”, “packed” nor “sliced”, they are just good, which is more than one can say for half the “hygienic” solidified white paste one buys elsewhere these days, masquerading under the name of bread. The bushes that the bakers use are particularly aromatic and the scent of the smoke wafting on the cool night air is strangely refreshing, somehow astringent, or perhaps all the more appreciated because of the absence of petrol fumes and car exhausts in the city air. A lot of things remain in one’s memory about Afghanistan, but many more are forgotten; one which will never be erased is the smell of the ovens being fired across the city.

There is no such thing as night life in Kabul. Life revolves around the home, so people tend either to stay at home with their families or to visit or entertain their near relations at home. Afghan women rightly pride themselves on their cooking and like nothing better than to have the opportunity of demonstrating their skill. Admittedly they sometimes have to drive their husbands out of the kitchen, because it is part of the upbringing of an Afghan man to learn how to cook, and most of them do it well too. Their diet is very greasy yet there is no sign that heart conditions, said in the United States to be caused for a large part by a high fat diet, are high up on the killer list in Afghanistan. I would myself imagine that their average diet is so well balanced and with so much fruit, vegetables and meat that the system functions perfectly. I am sure that it is the artificiality of the American diet that causes so many breakdowns in the efficient functioning of the body.

In the home, in the evening, the family will settle down to traditional occupations and activities that have been long forgotten in Britain and the U.S., with the advent of the “idiot’s lantern”. Father will play chess with his son, while the mother cooks or embroiders or spins and the children do their homework. Afghans eat early, about seven, and spend plenty of time about it. There is

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no such thing as a hurried meal in Afghanistan. Perhaps that is why, according to the Ministry of Health Survey, there are hardly any cases of ulcers needing surgical treatment. The main dish is always *pilau* of mutton or chicken. Beef is hardly ever eaten, except in the form of mince, when it is made into meat balls. Side dishes will include aubergines in yoghurt, cubed mutton baked in the oven with onion, spinach and egg, Russian salad and several varieties of pickle. Puddings are not very exciting and generally consist of tapioca or blancmange with, of course, every variety of fresh and dried fruit and nuts. Vast quantities of green tea, in which pulverised cardamom has been sprinkled, will be consumed and the hubble-bubble or *chilum* is passed around. After supper the family will listen to the eight o'clock news from Kabul radio.

Kabulis are very internationally-minded and you will not be surprised to find quite informed discussion about disarmament going on in small, out-of-the-way teashops. As I went farther into the countryside I found that a high-powered short-wave receiver was a highly prized possession and people would come for many miles to hear the news from Kabul and Tehran. I was told that some years ago the Russians tried to flood the Afghan market with dirt-cheap radios that were set to receive only one station, and that was Tashkent, broadcasting in Pushtu, Afghani-Persian and Uzbeki for the Uzbek minority in the far north. My informant told me that many Kabul repairmen made their fortunes by converting them to receive Kabul only, surely with the blessings of the Government!

To wander abroad through the new city in the late evening is to invite not only the loss of one's supper at the hotel, but the attention and possible intervention of the security patrols that lurk in the shadows. It is not so much that the Government fears the activities of burglars, for each household within its walls is well prepared to deal with such intruders; no, it is because the

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new town houses many of the foreign embassies and diplomats' homes and any intrusions into these premises could be acutely embarrassing to the Government. They feel that they would lose face if such a thing happened, and, in any case, it has not been unknown for embassies to be entered by non-Afghan citizens in search of information concerning the behind-the-scenes manœuvring of the mission involved. The Government's own intelligence service is pretty good and they generally manage to get a fair picture of what goes on in most important embassies. There are very seldom any incidents involving foreign diplomatic buildings or staffs in Kabul. Those which do occur are always as a result of the Government turning a blind eye on the activities of numbers of politically-minded Pushtunistani *émigrés* in Kabul.

CHAPTER 5

The Pushtunistan Dispute

PUSHTUNS, SUPPORTED and encouraged to demand independent status from Pakistan for the seven million Pushtuns around the Durand Line, which separates Afghanistan from Pakistan, by the Afghan Government, receive their hand-outs and encouragement from the Department of Tribal Affairs in Kabul. Large numbers of influential Pushtuns are entertained there, received by the King, and given instructions as to how to disrupt Pakistani rule in the Free Lands of the Frontier, without actually taking the field against the quite efficient Pakistan army. Normally they do not make their physical presence known in Kabul apart from the odd broadcast over Kabul radio and their appearance at the annual Pushtunistan Day celebrations, but once they managed to encourage quite a large mob of Kabul citizens to attack and burn the Pakistani Embassy and the Pakistani flag. Tempers rose between the two countries and things were only smoothed over when the Afghan Government agreed to have the Pakistani flag raised with ceremony and saluted by an honour guard of Afghan troops. This was a decision which was not well received at all among the people who thought, and said, that the Foreign Minister, Prince Naim, had been too soft with the Pakistanis. Truly, this agreement was very much out of character and is accounted for, by many, as being the result of Naim's desire to show the world that Afghanistan is not a place full of wild and woolly tribesmen who pillage and burn. The Afghan people, at moments like this, pray that Amir Abdul Rahman Khan was on the throne.

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This man, a contemporary of Queen Victoria, was, even by Afghan standards, a man. Physically brave, politically brilliant and slippery as an eel in every possible way, he set a standard which has not been equalled or even approached by any of the monarchs who succeeded him. His real fame was founded on the way in which he duped the British Indian administration for so long that he was able to unite much of the country behind him, so that when the British, tired of wrangling and negotiation, decided to force the Amir to heel, they found themselves faced with a united nation and not merely the forces of the "King of Kabul" as he was referred to in those days.

Abdul Rahman had neither money to arm his country, nor the real, deep loyalty of the people that is essential for a King of Afghanistan. He was on the throne of Kabul, while various brothers ruled the provinces, independent of his rule. He had to prove to them and to the people that he was a worthy king and that, given their support, he could lay the foundations of a progressive state. The only way he could do this was to keep the British Lion from establishing effective control over the country, so that he would be able to enrol popular support for his aims. The Indo-Afghan frontier had not been demarcated on maps, and the Viceroy, the great and imperious Curzon, was determined to bring this man to heel by establishing huge British garrisons on the frontier, so that they would be an ever-present threat to Kabul and he would be able to dictate Afghan policy. Abdul Rahman used several gambits to prevent or at least delay this demarcation. Curzon, enraged, sent a military mission with a heavy escort to Kabul to demand that the Amir send some of his officers with the mission and that the disputed areas be mapped forthwith. The Amir was equal to this situation and received the mission with great cordiality, asking them to remain in Kabul for a day or two as his guests and rest while one of his own aides-de-camp made ready to accompany them. He invited them to take tea

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with him in the Palace next day, and they parted on the best of terms.

The next day the British officers, correctly dressed in full-dress regalia despite the blistering heat of Kabul in August, presented themselves at the Palace, where they were ushered into the presence of the Amir, sitting on a large balcony, overlooking the palace courtyard where, sitting on the marble flagstones and around the fountains were a large number of his retinue, richly dressed and beautifully accoutred.

The British noted that the Amir did not seem to be too happy about his own position, for all round the walls stood armed sentries. For all this, the Amir chatted amicably and tea was served with the quantities of small cakes and halva without which no tea is tea in polite society. Eventually the talk got around to the frontier and the Amir devoted close attention to the officers until a sharp sneeze came from one of the courtiers below. Abdul Rahman threw up his hands in fury, declaring that he could not even hear to think as the result of the cacophony of sound from the courtyard and ordered the Captain of the Guard to open fire on the courtiers and then remove the bodies. Before the stupefied gaze of the British Mission this is exactly what happened; no possibility of fake, the bullets were real and the courtyard was soon full of three score still bodies dying the marble flags with their blood. Satisfied, the Amir intimated that the discussion could recommence, but the British hastily excused themselves, unable, at the sight of such needless carnage, to gather their shattered wits. As they stumbled away, the Amir smiled in his beard. He had known that eventually the Viceroy would lose patience, and send a mission, and from all over the country convicts, sentenced to death, were sent to the Palace dungeons to be used for just such a purpose. The Amir knew, though, that this would not be enough to stop the map from being demarcated and that, once it was, he would be forced to sign one copy. He had

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another trick up his sleeve, but the third one would need the co-operation of some of his chiefs and he hoped he could rely on them.

The next day, the story goes, the shaken British were sitting down to breakfast in their quarters, when a servant announced "General Syed Muhammed, Commander in Chief of the Afghan Forces". Hastily preparing to accord a soldier's reception to an officer who vastly outranked them, the correct British were horrified to see the bear-like figure who stormed into their spotless dining-room. Well over six feet six inches and proportionately built, the General had a full black beard which all but obscured his face, a long fur coat with patches of what looked suspiciously like dried blood on it and great boots with wicked spurs. His chest was crisscrossed with cartridge belts, and from his belt hung pistols and knives galore, and an immense double-handed sabre with blood clotted on the handle. He carried a cat-o'-nine-tails with steel tips. Throwing himself into a convenient chair, he waved a hand, encrusted with blood and grime, and announced that he had been appointed by the Amir to accompany them and that he thought that it would be a good idea if they got acquainted over breakfast so that they could set out immediately afterwards. He apologised for not having come before, but explained that he had been very ill, was a shadow of his former self and was very weak and on a special diet. He craved their indulgence for not joining them at their breakfast, but he had ordered his cook to send him something light, cooked in the Afghan way, so that he might keep them company, although he had had a slight snack at sun-up. The British, exchanging dismayed glances, bid him welcome and tried to ignore the way in which he picked his teeth with a savage-looking knife. The door opened and a servant entered carrying a tray of *pilau*, enough to feed even three average Afghans, which he laid before the General, who rolling up his sleeves to disclose what looked like

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great patches of flea-bites, disinterred a small roasted lamb from the mound of rice and started in.

The British sat with limp jaws. This man was on a diet; he had eaten once at sun-up; he was a shadow of his former self; what must he have been like when he was himself? As he applied himself to the *pilau*, the General constantly scratched himself and pounded his chest and sides, as if to crush some offending insect. He complained loudly that some gnat or fly must have got under his shirt, and he would put paid to it once his snack was over. With the meal over, the floor strewn with bones and the British having lost their appetites a long time ago, the General wiped his greasy hands on his beard and dived under his sheepskin coat in search of the parasite. After a moment or two he produced a cobra, writhing and thrashing, and with a practised movement, blew off its head.

That the bullet had also gone through a valuable grandfather clock was lost upon the British who had evacuated the dining-room at the first emergence of the cobra. They were in a turmoil. What sort of country was this where kings massacre their court at will and Commanders-in-Chief are utter savages who are indifferent to the fact that snakes are biting them? How could they trust themselves to men like this? How could they possibly get the co-operation that they needed in the provinces if the most prominent Afghans were obviously paranoid?

It is recorded that this mission returned to Delhi as "the weather was considered too inclement at this time to map the area"! This is the first recorded contact between Syed Muhammed Shah Jan Fishan of Paghman and the British. Commander-in-Chief he was, but everything else he was not, and even the cobra had had its fangs removed. Hundreds of stories are told of Abdul Rahman, and many of them are apocryphal, because he exemplified the Afghan mentality. I think it is only fair to quote the last story of this particular series, for it shows how far he had united the feudal

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and feuding lords to support him. It appears that at long last Curzon did get the frontier demarcated, and sent a mission to Kabul to have the Amir sign the map. Abdul Rahman knew that this would be the end of the road for him, as the garrisons would move in, and he would lose face in Afghanistan, but as long as he could delay signing, without actually refusing, which would have given Curzon the excuse to invade, he could still win enough to build up his defences. As the mission approached Kabul, the Amir put his problem to six of the most important nobles in the country. "Arrange to sign at noon on such and such a day," they told him. "we will think of something before that."

Believing that nothing could save the country, Abdul Rahman received the mission with scant courtesy and arranged to meet them formally for the ratification ceremony in two days' time. The time raced past, and by the morning of the fatal day nothing had happened and no sign had come from the men upon whom he had depended. He conjectured that they had returned to their own lands, each to prepare to take the throne as he fell, discredited. With the approach of noon Abdul Rahman received the mission. He had given his word that he would sign at noon and he could not escape. With a heavy heart and after many a false start, he signed, and as he did so the doors of the council chamber burst open and in strode the men in whom he had reposed his trust. They have come, he thought, to gloat. "Abdul Rahman," they addressed him without formality, "get out and take your British rabble with you." "You are addressing your King, gentlemen," interposed a member of the mission. "Not at all," came the reply, "he has not been king since six this morning, when the nobles declared him incompetent." "But the treaty . . . the map. . . ." "Meaningless," and to prove it, the leader of the nobles tore them across. "But who is the new King, then?" asked the plaintive British. "We have not selected him yet," was the reply, "but there may be trouble, so you had better leave Afghanistan while

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you can be guaranteed safe conduct.” Thus ended the third successive, and successful, Abdul Rahman gambit. He was confirmed, of course, as Amir again, but it was a nice point of law, and he never did sign that map!

With a start I realised that my musings had taken me through the new city into the large tract of open land, now in the process of being built up, known as Sherepur. In the old days, how old I can't be sure, it must have been a jungle for the name means “full of tigers” and there have been no tigers in Afghanistan for a very long time. It was upon this plain that the ill-fated British cantonment stood, built to garrison Kabul after the British invasion of 1840. The British Resident lived in the Bala Hissar, a massive fortress that commanded the eastern approaches to the city and lay some two miles from the cantonment. When the Kabul people, massively reinforced from Paghman and Kohistan, rose in the winter of 1841-42, summoned to their posts by the throbbing of the great drum already alluded to, the British were singularly slow to appreciate the gravity of their situation. The Bala Hissar was stormed and the Resident killed, Sherepur cantonment was encircled and the keen eyed Afghan snipers raked the cantonment from the heights. After negotiation, the British were allowed to evacuate and march towards Jelalabad, where a British garrison was still in control. What happened to the British column is history. Bombarded, harried, by the regular and irregular cavalry, hounded and ambushed, it made its last stand at Gandamak, not half-way to safety. Of the massive column, only one man escaped; a Doctor Brydon, who was allowed to ride to Jelalabad on a donkey to report the destruction of the British army.

This war reflected no great credit on either side. The Afghans considered that the end justified the means and that the British had forced upon them a king – Shah Shuja ul Mulk – whom they had already rejected and so they considered themselves free to follow their own leaders to achieve their own destiny. There is no doubt

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that the Afghan leaders did break their word to the British garrison, but, in fairness, they were in the position of men who had to live in the country afterwards, therefore they could do nothing to stem the anger of their followers, without risking their own lives and futures. I doubt, really, if they could have prevented the attacks if they had tried, for the bulk of the attackers were the Ghazis (holy warriors), who arrived at the battle wearing their shrouds as turbans. These men, having made their peace with God, go into battle to kill or be killed when the enemy is non-Moslem.

Quite a lot of blame, too, must fall on the ham-handed handling of both the garrisoning and the retreat by the British themselves. They built a cantonment that could be fired into from any of the numerous hills around it. At no time did they mount pickets on these hills, although days before the actual revolt, masses of Afghans could plainly be seen erecting fire walls on the slopes. Even after it was known that the British Envoy had been killed, the cantonment was still not placed in a state of siege, and, in any case, the supplies were insufficient for a long siege. When the British column left the cantonment, they took with them incredible amounts of unnecessary luggage, even although they had hundreds of camp followers and non-combatants slowing them down anyway. After the Ghazis started their attacks, no attempt was made to close up and defend the flanks, which were left wide open. Admittedly the majority of the troops involved were Indian, who had suffered from constant Afghan invasions, and who were reluctant to cross swords with these savage hillmen, but they were fighting for their lives and, with respect to the dead, they did not give the impression that their lives were very precious. I have travelled the route a number of times and, snow or no snow, there are a thousand places where a resolute column, and one must remember that it was composed of several thousand fighting troops, could have made a stand. Surely once they saw

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that the agreement had been breached, they could have tried to make a stand and send messengers to Jelalabad for aid. No, there is blame on both sides in this, and it is difficult to assess, in the light of present-day morality, who was right and who was wrong. Naturally the British considered the Afghan leaders to be savages and blackguards, while the Afghans point out that the British were uninvited in the first place.

If Wazir Akbar Khan, the man most responsible for breaking the agreement, had been caught, then I am sure he would have died. If he had lived and acted in the same way in the 1950s, and had been caught, he would have been exiled and then grudgingly brought back and been recognised. After all Archbishop Makarios, after having been exiled and excoriated, was hailed, as President of Cyprus, as a patriot and fighter for freedom by President Kennedy. I suppose it depends on the century in which you live. To break a solemn agreement, to encourage and participate in terrorism was a sin and a crime a hundred years ago, but today it is an accolade and a recommendation for office. Morality certainly does change!

CHAPTER 6

Basis of the New Afghanistan

MY ROAD home led me past the home of the last Prime Minister before Daud, Shah Mahmud Khan, and I wondered how he must have felt to have to take a firm back seat to his nephew. After all, I reflected, in Afghanistan the eldest male relative generally sets the pace in the family, and here was a young fellow who had upset the applecart in no uncertain fashion. The creation of two distinct parties had not helped the Muhammed Zai family at all. The two brothers Daud and Naim led one faction, while their uncles Shah Mahmud and Shah Wali led the other. Shah Wali was said to be no longer the man he was and had, in the words of an Afghan friend, been resting on his laurels after having captured Kabul from the Brigand King in 1932. He liked nothing better than to be Ambassador in Paris or London and to grace diplomatic occasions in the full dress of an Afghan Marshal. His wife, Samar as-Siraj, was a sister of King Amanullah, as was the wife of Shah Mahmud, but she was reputed to be very much of the old school. The story is told of the occasion when Shah Wali entered Kabul with his troops to find his family held in the Palace by the Brigand. "Fire on the Palace, and you will kill your family," he was told. A message reached him from his wife, "Fire on the Palace", and he did. Most of the Afghans I spoke to had a great respect for her, although they were not so complimentary about her sons, one of whom had married Princess Bilkis, eldest daughter of the King. Afghanistan, it seems, runs to the general rule that great men seldom have famous children.

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Of all the sons of the five brothers who took over after the Brigand, only the sons of Aziz, Daud and Naim seem to have any of their fathers' fire in them. Aziz, probably the most autocratic of them all, was shot and killed in Berlin by an Afghan student whom he had slighted. Told that the boy was waiting to see him, Aziz, then Ambassador to Germany, refused, saying, "I cannot waste my time on the son of a salt merchant." The infuriated boy returned with a pistol and shot him. It does not pay to disparage the ancestry of anyone in Afghanistan!

Hashim, first Prime Minister under Nadir Shah, was a great and ruthless administrator. He never married, they say as the result of unrequited love, but devoted his considerable energies to consolidating the power of the Government. In his days of power, he knew the price of flour in every provincial centre every day, and people fainted with relief in the street as he passed by with his escort, without having ordered their arrest. He was a natty dresser and, after his death, more than three hundred suit lengths were found in his store-rooms, each with the lining, buttons and thread ready to be made. He and his full brother Aziz had the distinction of being the only ones of the five to score no victories over the Bandit King's forces, but they certainly made their mark on the pages of Afghan history in a more lasting fashion.

Shah Mahmud had always been susceptible to flattery and that, as has been noted, was his downfall. Previous to this, the family had suffered another heavy reverse, with the defection to Pakistan of one of the trusted tennis and billiards companions of Shah Mahmud, a man whom the Prime Minister had made "Master Scout" and who knew all that went on within the family and the Government. Pakistan took him up gladly as his defection came at a time when they and the Afghans were having the most vicious radio war; attacking policy and people alike. Master Scout commenced broadcasting from Peshawar, and the contents

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of his talks were devastating. By name, and in the smallest detail he exposed the frailties of the ruling house; described their quarrels and their expenditure; criticised their attitudes and their companions.

Much of what he said was public knowledge, for little can be kept secret in Kabul, but to hear it over the radio was a different thing. Families were even more eager to get home to hear the 9.30 programme from Peshawar, although listening to it was fraught with considerable danger. That the broadcaster himself had no immaculate moral or material record was not so important, for who has?, but what won him his audience was his ruthless exposition and publication of the indulgencies of the family who were on top of the pile. Everybody likes a bit of dirt, so they say, and the Kabulis liked a whole heap of dirt about the Royal Family very much indeed.

Kabul Radio fought back with jamming and counter propaganda. Members of the Pakistani Cabinet were singled out and attacked on every possible ground. Much of the accusations were the truth, but these revelations were not nearly so exciting as Peshawar on the Royal Family! This war went on quite a long time, until the calibre and sensation content of Master Scout's broadcasts fell. His information was not fresh and much of it was rehashed, and gradually, and then faster and faster, the tide of public opinion turned and the mud slinger was taken off the air and found himself out of a job. The Pakistanis were not clever enough to be able to make use of him further, so they left him on the beach and fought back over the air waves with vituperation, while Kabul pegged away with relentless accuracy and venom at the Pakistani Government. Shah Mahmud was somehow held responsible by the Royal Family for this man's activities; for having encouraged him and for having admitted him into the inner circle of the family. He was never to live this down, and it was one of the levers that Daud used to shift him from power.

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Shah Mahmud was pro-American and his fall was a great shock to the Americans. Naturally they were out of touch, and had expected nothing of this kind, and their file on the new Prime Minister was out of date and thin. Many of them gave him little chance to establish himself, because they did not know his strength in the country. They had not followed his career as Governor of Kandahar; they did not know that the Province considered that the sun shone out of his eyes, and whom Kandahar follows is a man to be reckoned with, for he commands the allegiance of several hundred thousand fighting men, whose allegiance goes to the grave, and, if one cares to believe the folk tales, even beyond.

That he was able to survive for the initial year that the Americans gave him was a source of wonder to them, for they felt that the old generation typified by Shah Mahmud and Shah Wali would not allow him respite to consolidate his rule. They were not well enough in touch to appreciate that Daud not only had the support of several vital areas in the country and had made common cause with some of the more important scions of the aristocracy, but was a man with utter contempt for the rest of the Muhammed Zai clan, and was unmoved by the jockeying for power of the unworthy. He is reputed to be personally incorruptible, and this is quite easy to believe, for he is a millionaire several times over as the result of the huge inheritance of his uncle Hashim, and the fact that he had all the power now that he had ever sought, and there was no further purpose to be gained by either kowtowing to other members of the family, or trying to amass more money than he could possibly ever spend.

A man dedicated to maintaining the independence of his country, he tried to make it a power to be reckoned with in Asia, at least militarily and politically. He has always been very conscious of the fact that Afghanistan, in the past, has suffered a hundred times from internecine strife, and the abuse of power by those unfit for power. He did not intend that this strife should

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split Afghanistan, so he proceeded to lay down the law himself and inform the Family that he was top dog and intended to stay such, and that his was the sole patronage. He distributed the lucrative posts to those who could not only profit from them in a manner that was not readily obvious, but would, at the same time, do at least some work towards producing some semblance of efficiency in the traditionally totally disorganised and corrupt civil service.

Daud was certainly not a man to be trifled with. For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, the one family Government produced some results in the field of economic progress. Admittedly the progress compared with India or even Pakistan was slow, but it was staggeringly fast for Afghanistan. Seemingly for the first time the Afghans have been given the opportunity of showing that they are not only good workers, but that they have considerable mechanical aptitude, and the ability to take to the new skills and techniques brought to them by the advisers supplied by the associated agencies of the U.N. The Afghans, though jealous of their traditional skills, are not slow to adapt to methods that they can see are more efficient.

For many years, after Afghanistan first applied for U.N. technical aid, specialists were sent from the U.S. and other countries, whose skills were far too advanced for the primitive system that they were to replace; there existed too great a gap between the two approaches. It was not for some years that it was finally discovered that the men that Afghanistan needed were those whose abilities were in advance of Afghan methods, but not so far in advance that the average Afghan could not even imagine how these methods could be applied. The fault, of course, lay in the co-ordinators of technical aid, both on the U.N. and Afghan sides. These men had no real idea what the common denominator was in aid; they could not, at that time, conceive the idea of a foreman automobile fitter being sent to Kabul to

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train Afghan fitters; no, their ideas were much more lofty, and indicated the need for a professor of automobile engineering, who first gave the boys instruction in theory and mathematics, so they never got within touching distance of an automobile engine. It was not until very much later in the programme that the idea of professional technicians, as distinct from theoreticians, was mooted, and eventually became the essential part of U.N. technical aid.

Technical aid in Afghanistan now includes more than a score of industries and skills, as well as medicine, public health and agriculture. It must be admitted that the scope of U.N. technical aid is immense, and once the initial teething troubles were over, the amount of progress made in a score of fields of endeavour has been truly startling. It would be difficult to assess the amount of money that the country would have had to spend to achieve what it has done by the use of U.N. personnel.

Aid from the Americans has been in the fields of communications. The vast new network of roads to the south and south-west have been built by American companies with funds borrowed from the U.N., while some of the civil airfields have been constructed on the same basis. Since there are no railways in the country, roads play a vital role in the economy. It is essential for there to be a network of all-weather roads to cope with the heavy rainfalls in the winter, and the heavy icing for many months of the year. Produce must be got to market in the summer before it spoils, and passengers must be carried twelve months of the year in comfort. Up to now the roads in Afghanistan have been uniformly terrible. Apart from the fact that many of them were not built as roads at all, they all suffered from cracking in the ice of winter and the heat of summer, if they had not already been washed away by spring floods. None of them was properly faced, and suffered from horse, bullock and metal-wheeled transport.

Lately the Soviet *bloc* have been laying new roads at a great rate

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in Kabul and its environs to link up with the American-built highways. Afghans consider Russian roads inferior to those built by the Americans, and this is surprising. Not surprising that the Russian roads are inferior, but surprising that the Russians allowed themselves to be shown up in this way. By agreeing to build roads, they were in direct competition with the Americans, and their roads could be compared, and were, and were found wanting. There is more, in Afghanistan, to road building than just pouring tar and rolling in stone chips. They have to be built with expansion and contraction and subsidence in mind, and have to have a thousand and one bridges and culverts to cross the life-giving irrigation water, which nothing must hinder. They must build up gradients against overhanging cliff-faces and across the alkaline deserts with their shifting dunes.

The recently completed Mahi Pur highway tunnel on the road to Jelalabad has cut several hours off the journey to the eastern capital, but at the cost of many lives, as the tunnellers cut through the living rock, criss-crossed by faults and subsidences, yet the tunnel was driven, and the old suicidal road along the edge of the Kabul river, over the dizzy Lataband Pass and through the Khurd-Kabul Gorge, graveyard of British hopes of conquest of Afghanistan, will now be secondary to the new highway that must carry the bulk of Afghan trade eastwards.

The U.N. technical aid community in Kabul find time hanging heavy on their hands, when they spend the week-ends away from their projects. There is little to do, if you have little time, so they play bridge and visit. I found this not only boring, but time-consuming, and ached for the O.K. to come through from the Ministry of the Interior. I learned much about what makes the administration tick in Kabul, but I wanted to pry deeper into the whys and wherefores of the people of this mountain domain.

I had to have a permit for a sporting rifle that I had brought with me. This was made easier by the fact that it was not the same

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calibre as the Afghan army issue and, therefore, I was unlikely to be able to get unlimited amounts of ammunition with which to overthrow the régime, so the permit was soon forthcoming. Obtaining it consumed but half an hour, but the whole of the afternoon was spent at the office of the Police Commandant, while he and his staff talked hunting and guns with me, and advised me as to where I was likely to find the best sport. In the north I would find the great Ovis Poli – the horned mountain goat, which stays very firmly away from the haunts of men. I did not particularly want one of these, but I was informed that I could scarcely consider myself a hunter if I did not come back with a head.

Among Afghans, hunting and shooting evokes great enthusiasm; anyone worthy of the name of man has a rifle of some sort, although ammunition is expensive. Organised shooting-parties are the thing, and the game ranges from mountain goat to snipe. The King is accounted as one of the best shots in the country, which is saying something in this realm of marksmen. Aids to shooting, like the telescopic sight are frowned on. One must be able to stalk one's prey to within rifle-shot, and then use conventional sights. To appear with an automatic rifle is to invite social anathema, while to load one's own shotgun cartridges is to invite grudging respect. . . . "He may only be a benighted American, but he has the right idea. . . ." I was given a letter of introduction to a former Foreign Minister and Ambassador to London, Sardar Faiz Muhammed, with the hint that he was a great sporting shot, and would be happy to see me. As his castle lay on my way to Paghman, I hoped that I could pass a few days there in shooting and talking. He was one of the Old Guard of politicians and outspoken, so one could hope for plenty of inside information.

CHAPTER 7

The Afghan Falstaff: Sardar Faiz Muhammed Khan

ONE EVENING a thunderous knock on my hotel door proclaimed the arrival of a messenger from the Ministry with my permit. This delighted me for it was July, the city was stifling, so I arranged to leave next morning for the north and to make a round trip east-west-east taking in all the most promising areas. There was a great amount of satisfaction from Hakim and Gulbaz when I announced this, and I was led into the colourful bazaars to buy travelling goods and food.

When travelling in Afghanistan, you carry your own bedding, some of your own food, and plenty of water-cans for crossing the deserts. We bought also some saddle-bags made of carpet, which served as pillows, as well as containers for our spare clothes. At the stalls, when the sale was over, accompanied by good natured bargaining, the shopkeeper shook hands all round and wished us a safe journey. Not one of them but added a little something extra towards our comfort, without charge. Though we were travelling by jeep, we were going a considerable way, and were bound to encounter discomfort and danger and the shopkeepers sincerely wished us safe passage; they are close to nature, these people, hardship and death are their constant companions, yet life is precious to them and you never need, as I was to discover later a hundred times, lack aid and comfort on the road.

The Prophet said that man must travel in search of knowledge,

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so by travelling, you are carrying out a pious act and must receive whatever succour you stand in need of. Those of you, like me, who have stood forlornly beside a broken-down car on a busy highway and received no aid will understand what this code of hospitality means. A man will be ostracised by his village for failing to go to the aid of a traveller, no matter how good his excuse. In Afghanistan you die for your guests, if necessary, or you do not show your face outside your door ever again.

Passing through the village of Yak-a-Tut, I was reminded that this was where Sardar Faiz Muhammed, to whom I had a letter of introduction, lived. My driver knew the way and at the end of a dusty track, we came across the massive outer wall of his estate. The gateman, looking rather like Rip Van Winckle's father with a hangover, eyed us dubiously and hitching up his gunbelt rather ostentatiously, opened the gates and motioned us on. We drove through half a mile of poplar trees and rose gardens, then into the courtyard of the castle proper. The courtyard was seething with organised chaos. Horses were being groomed, saddles polished, and girths mended: groups of men polished their weapons, while women sewed and scoured their pots by the well in the centre.

I stood rather uncertainly until Hakim pointed to a group of men who were cutting up onions on a huge table and making pickles. I looked blank, and he urged me on, "the one with the black coat", he hissed. Wandering over, I found that the gentleman in the black coat was certainly in charge of operations, but who he was I could not say. I began diffidently, "I would like to see His Excellency . . ." Black Coat looked at me, replying, "yes, yes, but the onions will spoil", and busied himself with his pickling. After some minutes he came over to me and asked in English, "How can I help you, I am Faiz Muhammed?" I stammered my name and passed over the letter, which he folded and put in his pocket. "I need no letter of introduction to entertain a

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traveller," said he, seizing my hand and wringing it. I was forcibly reminded of Henry VIII, for Faiz Muhammed fitted him to a T, round and jolly with crisp white beard and powerful eyes, he even spoke as one had come to imagine Henry did. I was later to find out that he was every bit as great a trencherman as Henry too, and insisted on overseeing the preparation of pickles, as, in his own words, "So much can go wrong, when you leave matters like this in the hands of youngsters," pointing to the group of greybeards he had just left. They looked anything but helpless to me.

We went into the tower overlooking his rolling acres and relaxed over tea. Politely, he neither asked me my object of travel, nor my destination, but kept the conversation on general lines. In one corner of the room stood a rifle-rack, with a high powered sniper's rifle on it. I commented on it, and he replied airily, "I keep it here just in case, you know. Once one of my friends was stopped by a highwayman just outside my gate and naturally I had to shoot the discourteous wretch."

We talked about education and hunting until it was nearly lunch-time, when Faiz rose. "You will excuse me while I check up on the cook to make sure the food is of a quality fit for my guest," and vanished. I doubted that his cook would be anything but the best. The sounds of a fierce altercation came to my ears, and I caught snatches of threats and counter-threats of the most dire nature. From the voices I judged that it was my host and another man, having an argument about the quality of the rice. Faiz maintained that it was not fit for a goat and the other replied that Faiz, being in closer contact with goats, by the look of him, should be a better judge.

After a few minutes Faiz reappeared, flushed and angry. "That cook must go," he declared, "his food is appalling." As he spoke, servants were spreading the snowy *dastarkhan* on the beautiful rugs and laying the dishes. Afghans eat cross-legged on the floor,

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which can be uncomfortable, especially if you get cramp in your legs. Piled dishes of *pilau* arrived with numerous side dishes and pickles, and we were joined by two other senior members of the family, who morosely agreed with Faiz that the cook was losing his touch. A small boy circulated among the diners with a water jug and bowl for them to wash their hands.

Afghans claim that food tastes better when eaten with the fingers; as one of them put it, "My fingers have not been in anybody else's mouth." The food was, even to my inexperienced palate, absolutely first-class, but there was great shaking of heads and disparaging remarks about the cooking. Afghans will never complain about the food, since it is a gift of God, but they will, and do, comment on the cook's abilities. After the meal a bent and wizened man appeared and asked how it had been; this was the cook who was told off soundly and told to leave immediately. He replied, "Faiz Muhammed, I taught you all you know about cooking, and now you sack me twice a day. If you are such a good cook, why don't you cook the food yourself?" and with a haughty look, he turned on his heel. Faiz shrugged and said, "What he says is true, but it keeps him on his toes."

In all I stayed at Yak-a-Tut three days, which is the required polite minimum stay. We shot snipe and partridge and rode some beautiful polo ponies my host had bred. In the evenings, I would talk with him and others who dropped in for a chat, and gathered a lot of background information on the country. I was also fortunate enough to cull much information about medicinal herbs and their possible locations. Afghanistan, like so many other countries where people are close to nature, has a well-developed traditional herbal cure system, practitioners of which are to be found in even the smallest hamlet. Naturally a certain percentage of the cures are by faith, but the salves, lotions and creams made by these village pharmacists often do contain the crude elements of many of the outstanding medicines of the West.

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I was to see faith healing in operation at a very much later date. Herbal medicine is known as "Greek medicine" in the East, although it can be argued that there was a developed medical science, long before Hellenic contact with the East. Whereas Government clinics and dispensaries exist at frequent intervals throughout the country and are comprehensive and free, people tend to resort to them only after their traditional remedies have failed. In too many cases, of course, that means that the patient will be brought in too late, but the Afghans are a hardy people and many, who by rights and by Western opinion should be dead, make remarkable recoveries.

One refreshing thing I discovered about my companions at Sardar Faiz's place was their great knowledge of their country. Not only had they travelled it widely, but they had examined it in detail, and could discourse at length about the flowers of one province, the natural springs of another and the soil of a third. They took a lively interest in all aspects of life and were thoroughly at home discussing any topic. To say that these particular men represented all levels of society would be wrong, for they were all aristocrats, but I was to find that by and large most Afghans shared this thirst for knowledge and travelled widely to slake it. It is this facet of their character which makes them willing and able to accept that progress which they can reason will be of benefit to the community at large.

Bigots, and those whose horizons are narrow, fear progress, for in it they see a threat to their authority, yet they know that it cannot be held off for all time. The feudal lords of Afghanistan welcome the spread of knowledge and technique, for they have nothing to fear from it. With a few exceptions, they have treated their people well and, in return, the people have died for them on many a hard-fought field, not always on the side of right and justice, but always with fidelity, and perhaps there can be no more honourable death. It would not be true to say that the nobles of

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Afghanistan have always lived on the fat of the land and ridden on the shoulders of their people. True, they receive a percentage of the harvest, but in time of drought or flood, they must support the tenants and their families and rehabilitate them. This they have always done, for *noblesse oblige* finds no stronger roots than in Afghanistan. In the past if a nobleman had not behaved well to his tenants, he would find himself deposed by the people; the Afghans carry this as far as the throne as well!

The Muhammed Zais have no record of feudalism, for they did not own land in Afghanistan proper before Nadir came to the throne. And many would say that the Kandahar landlord branch of the family were not the most popular local rulers in the land. Traditions involving a landlord's duty towards his tenants die hard here and tradition is the cornerstone of Afghan society.

CHAPTER 8

Kohistan and Paghman

PAGHMAN IS an area lying to the north of Kabul, with its administrative centre, a town of that name, lying eighteen miles from the capital. Topping a rise, you see the sweep of the Paghman valley before you, stretching up to the Paghman mountains, which divide the valley from its twin, Kohistan, on the other side. Paghman was settled in the ninth century by the Arab invaders who had entered Afghanistan as early as the seventh century. Up to that point, the Afghans were staunch Buddhists, as witness the largest stone Buddhas in the world at Bamian. Carved from the living rock, these statues were the centre of Buddhist power in Asia, which was broken by the Arab conquerors.

Paghman was settled by the Arab Viceroy of Afghanistan, or Khorasan as it was known in those days, and the present rulers of the principality are his direct descendants. They are linked with the Kohistani nobility by the same descent, and together form a massive centre of feudal authority, poised to defend or attack Kabul at will. From time immemorial the rulers have made and broken kings and princes. Perhaps the greatest of them all, certainly in contemporary times, was Khan Syed Muhammed Shah Khan Jan Fishan Nakhshband, warrior and philosopher, whose support guaranteed the throne, and whose enmity meant disgrace. He lived in the nineteenth century, and his name is still honoured by friend and foe alike; he was cruel, but just, and above all, in Afghan eyes, a man among men. Not for nothing was he given the title Shah-Saz – the “King-Maker”.

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The King has a country house here and Paghman indeed becomes the summer capital when Kabul becomes too hot to stand. Villas built among lovely gardens and tall pines; clear mountain streams, teeming with trout, fed by the melting snows and a myriad of wild flowers make Paghman into a vast garden. The people are independent as are highlanders the world over, yet hire themselves out to the summer visitors as gardeners, as the Kabulis say jokingly, to keep an eye on Paghmani gardens, so that they are not spoiled by the clumsy hands of the outsiders.

Frowning over all is the castle of Jan Fishan, occupied by the man I had been interviewed by in Kabul. Its walls are turreted and crenelated, and the inevitable sentries keep a weather eye on the road from Kabul, from whence any challenge to Paghman's authority must come. In the outskirts of the town I stopped to have a cup of tea at a wayside tea-shop. Afghans drink little coffee, but vast quantities of green, unsweetened tea. Sometimes, if they feel really wild, they will hold a lump of sugar in their mouth while they drink, but that is considered rather effete!

At the tea-house, I was provided with a handleless bowl and a teapot, which had been broken and mended so many times that its original pattern was lost. The café was clean, as was the crockery, for Afghans are pernicky about cleanliness, especially where food is concerned and a café will either be shunned or broken up if it is grubby. I was told of a wayside café which used to serve chicken *pilau* and got quite a name for it until one day a passer-by saw the proprietor plucking a "chicken" which looked like a crow, as not even Afghan chickens have long black feathers! As I have said, Afghans are particular about their food and of equable temperament unless aroused, but long-distance truck drivers, of whatever nationality, are not exactly ornaments to any drawing-room and the Afghans are no exception, so they went for him with tyre-levers. When the Law arrived, the chef was much the worse for wear, and the café had somehow got hitched

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to several large trucks which were going in different directions. Afghan justice is sometimes rough, but everyone agreed that he had acted in a manner likely to bring discredit upon the country. This is the worst sin that an Afghan can be guilty of and there is no defence.

Though Paghman has treaty relations with the Kabul Government, it has a Governor appointed by Kabul. His position is not an enviable one, for he is very much out on a limb. No Paghmani will take the job, as it means working for the Kabulis, and they will not take any notice of anyone who is not a Paghmani, so you can see how difficult it is. When I was there the luckless man, whom I got to know and like, was from Herat and very much out of his element. Heratis are quiet and cultured and speak Afghani with a distinct accent. This enrages the Paghmanis, who affect not to understand what he is talking about, and speak to him in the broadest dialect, which he is hard put to understand himself.

When there is a General Election and the list of Government approved candidates goes up on the board, the elders of the area troop to see their Khan and ask him who does he want them to vote for. The Khan, to give their ruler his correct title among others, tells them, and off they go happily to vote. Everything about the candidate's lineage is taken into consideration. What he may or may not have achieved himself is of little importance; it is his father's and grandfather's military, social and religious records that make the difference. Not that the Assembly matters much anyway, except to rubber stamp the Premier's decrees, but it gives the Assembly-men a little prominence among each other, for everybody in the country is conscious of their considerable limitations.

There is an upper house, or house of lords, but they seldom meet unless there is a national emergency, in which case they convene the *Loe Jirga* or Grand National Assembly, which is

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composed of village headmen from all over the country. This Assembly pulls no punches and the Government is loth to summon it unless it is absolutely vital; they have the habit of going hammer and tongs at governmental expenditure and saying exactly what they think about various ministers!

One of the traditional rendezvous for lovers is the Public Garden in Paghman on the evening of the full moon. In the summer the sky is so clear that it is possible to read a newspaper by moonlight, or, I suppose to see the twitch of a lover's eyelash at twenty yards, which is about as near as most lovers get to each other before they are married in Afghanistan. Betrothals are arranged by the parents of the boy and girl, nowadays taking into consideration a little the likes and dislikes of the youth or maiden. Years ago the happy groom had no idea what his bride looked like until the bridal night. Nowadays science has come to the aid of the love-sick swain, and the object of his desire may send him a photograph to see if, after receipt of it, he will still pursue his suit. Very recently when the veils came off, of course things were simplified and many a young man was saved from the shock of his life. Let us face it though, most marriages are still arranged and inter-marriage between cousins is rather the order of the day. Political marriages are just as common as are those which unite aristocratic families so that they weld together adjoining lands.

Before the veils came off, of course, many a young man full of the joys of spring and intoxicated at the sight of a trim ankle beneath the all-enveloping veil, or the flash of luminous eyes from behind the net face panel of the veil, risked a knife in the ribs or a rock between his ears to whisper sweet nothings into the – hidden – ear of the object of his fancy as he passed. If he were rewarded with harsh abuse, which described his parentage, he would wander off sadly until another caught his eye. If, on the other hand, he was encouraged by tempered abuse, he would repeat the operation the next time he saw her, in the meanwhile

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alerting his sister or other female relative to find out all about the girl.

If she were really forward, she might tell him to stop bothering her as she was going to Paghman on the evening of the full moon with her father or parents, and was going to wear her new king-fisher blue dress. The young man would burn up the tarmac to Paghman on the appointed night, pushing his way through the other young gallants bent on the same errand, with, one hopes, other girls in mind. The scene in the garden would be one out of the Arabian nights; lanterns flickering among the trees and picnic parties listening to the music of radios or singers brought from Kabul. Young swains, with suitably downcast eyes, would wander the groves trying to single out the object of their fancy.

Once she had been sighted, he would show himself and wait for her to show herself, momentarily, in the light of a convenient lantern. If what he saw pleased him, then the wheels of betrothal would be set moving; he would inform his mother of his honourable intentions and a female family council would convene to consider the matter. If the girl was of good family and reputation, the mother or an aged aunt would call on the girl's mother, ostensibly to enlist her aid in some charitable activity. Inevitably, for the mother of the girl would seldom mistake the real object of the visit, conversation would get around to the girl, and the mother would be able to tell her visitor if they had someone in mind for her, or if she was "available". If she were already spoken for, then the party would break up amicably, but if not then the full complement of elderly females on both sides would meet. The boy's representative would offer a cone of white sugar, which is either broken, in which case half is kept and the boy's suit is accepted, or returned whole, which means rejection.

Acceptance of the sugar does not mean that the boy and girl can meet officially, although they generally manage to have a few moments together, because the next step is the drawing up of a

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marriage agreement, in which her rights are specified. Specific in the contract will be the provision that the husband is only entitled to marry a second wife if the first cannot produce children. She will take with her a dowry of money or goods, which must be returned intact, should she be divorced. He undertakes to provide a house, servants and to support her and protect her and the children. Between this contract being drawn up and the actual marriage several months may elapse, until a house is found and furnished and the girl and her family produce the requisite number of dresses and curtains that a self-respecting bride must have.

On the appointed day the boy appears before the massed male members of each family, and the girl's brother or father represents the girl. A Justice of the Peace questions each party as to their availability, intentions and agreement with the marriage contract. If both are satisfied, he signs, and, after a brief prayer for the couple, they are married in the eyes of the law. The same night comes the real ceremony, which goes on until the early hours. In the old days the bridegroom had to ride in to the bride's village with a few men, and kidnap her from her father, whose family put up a not exactly token resistance.

Nowadays both families crowd into the bride's house, where she and the groom are seated on a raised platform bedecked in flowers and in traditional costume. The bride still wears a heavy veil, but at the commencement of the ceremony she raises this, and the groom, who must look straight ahead, can see her in a looking-glass, which is held before them. They feed each other a few token mouthfuls of sweetmeat, exchange rings, and on the Koran swear to be faithful to each other. After this, the revelry commences and lasts into the early hours, when the bride is escorted to her new home with much ceremony. Then everybody holds their breath, for if the bride is not a virgin there will be trouble, big trouble, and the bride will be returned and the two families will view each other with the deepest enmity. As far

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as the girl is concerned, she may as well be dead, for she will be a social outcast. Perhaps that is why, in the not-so-distant past, fathers used to kill their daughters if they were disgraced in this fashion.

The Paghmanis are clannish even by Afghan standards and do not marry outside Paghman or Kohistan if they can help it. In any case, explained one Paghmani to me, "our mountain women are those most beautiful in Afghanistan, so why should we go farther afield?"

Wherever you go in Paghman, places will be pointed out to you with historical connections with Jan Fishan. His tomb, a simple one of local granite, is the scene of something approaching pilgrimage and often young men, about to leave Paghman to work outside, will visit the tomb to "tell" Jan Fishan and to ask his blessing and approval. No one would dare to ride past the tomb without dismounting and offering a prayer. You are shown the narrow mountain path, where he is said to have held the foe at bay with his great double-edged battle sword "Hawwaz" or where he jumped his horse from a precipice into the river in pursuit of an enemy. The whole area is riddled with his legend. Goodness only knows what his authority must have been like when he was alive, if it has lived this vividly for so long after him.

To the north of the valley lie the precipitous walls of the Paghman mountains, rearing into the blue sky to heights of twenty thousand feet. In the centre of these is the famous *Haus-i-Khas* or "Special Pool", which is a warm pool that lies in an extinct volcanic crater, surrounded by permanent snow. Much as I would have liked to climb it, it was impossible without a proper expedition, and I just was not equipped for the ascent.

By local tradition, the famous Koh-i-Nur comes from the Paghman range. This fabulous diamond, which is now in the British Crown Jewels, used to be the property of Shah Shuja, an

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Afghan King of the 1840's. Driven from the throne, he sought the assistance of the Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh who, knowing that Shah Shuja kept the Koh-i-Nur hidden in his turban, proposed the exchange of turbans to seal the bargain. The king was forced to accept, and the diamond passed from the Sikh ruler to the Viceroy and thence to Queen Victoria.

I am no geologist, but I was assured that there was blue clay in the mountains and since blue clay and diamonds are often found together, it is certainly possible. Perhaps one day I will go back and find out! The Afghans themselves are insatiable prospectors, although they tend to concentrate on the sands and gravels of the rivers, rather than extraction of ore from the rocks. As far back as the days of Genghiz Khan, silver was mined in the Panjsher valley, gold in the hills of Nuristan and rubies in Jagdallak in Badakhshan.

Nowadays mineral exploitation is a Government monopoly, but since some Afghans forget to inform the Government that they have found something, much of it is worked quietly. I came across an explanation for the "Golden Fleece" of Jason, and it may be the authentic one. It appears that the rivers flowing from the mountains into the Paghman, Kohistan and Panjsher valleys carry particles of gold. Some of this is deposited at the bends of the river and is extracted by passing the gravel, but a lot is lost, as it sinks to the bottom. In the valleys, the villagers take the fleece of a freshly killed sheep or goat and peg it securely to the bed of the river. It is left there for several months and then carefully lifted, dried and burnt. Tiny flakes of gold have been trapped in the fleece and are melted together by the fire and emerge as gold beads. The ashes are sieved and the gold extracted. This is quite a widespread practice, although the villagers will look at you blankly and deny it if you ask them if it goes on. They explain, if you ask them why they are burning a skin, that it was infested with fleas, and they are destroying it!

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Another fruitful source of loot are the Buddhist stupas in the upper reaches of the valleys. These funereal mounds are solidly built of brick, but they all have a chamber somewhere in the centre which contains holy relics, often contained in gold or crystal boxes. Many of the stupas that you pass show evidence of having been burrowed into, and it is possible to buy interesting things from the locals who "found them in the river". Afghanistan is indeed a paradise for archaeologists and there are always numerous Afghan and foreign expeditions at work all over the country, although the Kabul museum is a poor place, badly run and irregularly open. It is a pity, for there is so much of monumental interest discovered that it should be made available for international study, but the home-grown archaeologists have, in default, established themselves as a self-perpetuating monopoly.

Paghman is really a collection of villages scattered throughout the length of the immense valley. Most of them are walled and have at least two high watchtowers, from which a wary eye is kept on strangers. The men and women work in the fields, except in the winter when they spend their time making carpets, spinning, repairing their tools, or polishing their rifles.

Top man of the village is the *malik* or headman, who is elected by the adult males when the old one dies; his appointment is confirmed by the Khan. He deals with all matters that do not need legal opinion of an expert kind. These are referred to the *kadi* or local judge, appointed by the Khan.

A close second in authority comes the village schoolmaster, who doubles as the priest. Although there are no consecrated priests as we know them, there are those who have devoted their lives to the observance of religious practice, and who have adopted, or have been adopted by, a village as the schoolmaster because he can write, and the prayer-leader and caller to prayer. He lives in the mosque and the village is responsible for his upkeep. He cannot perform marriages, for marriage is a legal contract in

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Afghanistan, and the contract must be approved by the district judge. He does, though, officiate at burials. There are no "christenings", as we know them, in Moslem countries. As soon as the child is born, the father, or an elderly male relative will recite in its ear the Moslem articles of faith: "I bear witness that there is no God but One and that Muhammed is the Prophet of God." The name of the child is announced, and sweets are distributed. The real ceremony is a few months later when the child, if it is a boy, is circumcised and is the signal for feasting, dancing and general merry-making. The Khan will be expected to send a gift, which is usually flour, rice, or sugar, which is consumed at the party.

Although Paghman is a valley of flowers, one of the most beautiful of them all is the Tappa Garden, which belongs to the Jan Fishan family. The natural beauty of the hill has been utilised to set off the blossoms which cascade down its sides, while a waterfall and fountain fill a marble swimming-pool a hundred feet below. I took photographs of some stunningly beautiful blooms and the gardener immediately afterwards examined the blossoms suspiciously to see if my foreign activities had damaged them in any way. Relieved to find that they were unaffected, he accepted the fact that I loved flowers and motioned me into the shade of a willow and invited me to share his lunch, which he carried in a voluminous handkerchief. It consisted of goat's cheese, grapes, brown bread and *kebabs*. There was easily enough for two by normal standards, but I knew that it was only enough for one Afghan, so I offered to get some more *kebabs* from a stall down the road. Grudgingly he accepted and sent his apprentice scuddling off for more. Minutes later he returned with twenty *kebabs* on skewers, wrapped up in one of those delicious snowshoe-sized loaves and handing it to me, returned the money as well. "No, no," I exclaimed, "I will be your guest in your own home, but out here in the Garden, I insist on paying." The boy grinned.

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“The shopkeeper says that you are the guest of the Khan and therefore his guest, and he hopes you will accept.” That I had met the Khan of Paghman in Kabul and had been invited to see him when I reached Paghman seemed to be an open secret here, and I hurriedly asked the boy if he was here, so that I could pay my respects. He assured me that he was not, as he had gone on a tour of inspection of the eastern frontier where a battalion of the Guard was stationed. The boy laughed, as did the old man, as he told me and I asked him what the joke was.

He explained that relations had always been slightly strained with Persia, and traditionally, at least one brigade of Afghan troops was always stationed west of Herat, and they were always the roughest and toughest troops in the country, and that was saying something. Their job was to patrol and to carry on, unofficially, psychological warfare against the Persian frontier guards. This they did by letting their hair and beards grow, and strapping on as many weapons as possible, going as close to the frontier as possible, and glaring fiercely at the Persians, many of whom had to be relieved due to the strain. A harmless pastime, he explained, but one which was greatly liked, especially by the Paghman Brigade who were past masters at it.

The meal over, I was taken on a tour of the Garden, and marvelled at the variety and profusion of the blooms. The climate of Paghman is such that roses, dahlias, chrysanthemums and magnolias thrive, while they do not in Kabul. The Paghmanis do not go in for crossbreeding or grafting of plants. They rather feel that this is interfering with nature: a serious crime in their book.

CHAPTER 9

Mazar-i-Sherief. Persian Lamb and Carpets

REGRETFULLY, we pushed on the next day, north, on the tortuous highway towards Mazar-i-Sherief, two hundred miles away. This road is really bad, for it carries the full weight of all northern traffic to the industrial centres, and it was not much of a road when it started. Coupled with this there are two suicidal passes, the Salang and the Koashan, which are over sixteen thousand feet.

The roads in the summer are deep in dust, and to travel with the jeep doors off is to invite suffocation from the dust thrown up by the front wheels, or the vehicle ahead. On the other hand if you keep the doors on you will be suffocated by the heat anyway. I soon discovered that the only way to survive was to wrap several thicknesses of cloth around the lower part of my face, bandit fashion, and never take off my sunglasses when we were in motion. The trip is a sore trial, but it would be much worse but for the cheerfulness of the other travellers you meet and the provision of Government hotels, forty to fifty miles apart. These hotels are very clean and cheap, and food and hospitality are forthcoming at any time of the day or night. Our first real stop was at Doshi, at a mere 2,680 feet, where the hotel is perched overlooking the confluence of two rivers, the Doab and the Khawak.

Doshi is really the last well-watered stop before the desert country all the way to Mazar. A little farther north lies one of the industrial centres of the north, Pul-i-Khumri, which we missed as we were following a path slightly west of the city. It is here that

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the government plans to develop the carpet industry, silk farming and porcelain, but whether they will get the labour is likely to be their problem for in Badakhshan, Kataghan and Mazar Provinces there is already plenty of work for all. These areas are the centres of the karakul or Persian lamb breeding, carpet making and horse breeding, and able-bodied men are hard to find. Possibly the Government might be able to attract labour from other parts of the country, if there was enough incentive, but it would not be easy, for the Afghan, while he is a wanderer, tends to gravitate homeward at the least excuse, and it might be difficult to overcome this.

Driving north again, we plunged into the inhospitable desert that can spell death if you lose the road. We were well equipped with extra water in goatskins, and fortunately Hakim had driven the route before, but I must confess to a few qualms. Throughout the long day from our dawn start, we passed trucks and camel caravans going both ways, and seldom did we pass without stopping to exchange gossip about the road and conditions. Sometimes it was difficult to get started again, as the conversations grew more and more long drawn out, but both we and the others knew that it is not advisable to drive in the desert after dark and with many a prayer and a blessing, we would lurch on our way. The northern desert is not the friendly place that some deserts are. I have felt at home in some, slept under the canopy of stars, and not felt afraid, but here the stark, dusty dunes seemed to emit antagonism. It may sound silly, but I felt, for the first time in Afghanistan, unwanted in that desert, and each village, each meeting with a truck or a caravan was a welcome relief.

Through Haibak and Tashkurgan we rolled, pausing only to eat swiftly and refill our water-bags. I had promised both Hakim and Gulbaz two days in Mazar, if we got there quickly, and they were going to see that we did! At last we reached Mazar-i-Sherief – the Holy Shrine – reputed to be the resting-place of the

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fourth Caliph of Islam, Ali, cousin of Muhammed and husband of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. It is from this marriage that the Syeds or descendents of the Prophet take their lineage.

Mazar itself, lying as it does only forty miles from the Oxus and the Soviet frontier, is an important trading centre as well as a place of pilgrimage. The Afghan Government barter with the Russians much cotton, carpet and karakul for consumer goods and machinery, and most of it passes through Mazar to Kizil Kala, where a port is in process of being built to replace the old ferry. It is not wise, nor is it encouraged, for Americans to go any nearer than Amu Darya, or Mother of Rivers, as the Afghans call the Oxus, than Mazar. If you apply for permission, you are likely to be put off by a million polite excuses.

Not so long ago, the son of John Winant and his wife vanished in this area, and the disappearance has never been fully solved. It is widely held that they had been kidnapped by bandits, but there are none round about here, and, anyway, why was no one ever brought to justice for it? Most of the foreign community in Kabul, when it happened, thought they ventured just a little bit too near the river, or actually across, as it is possible to cross at some places in the summer, and were captured by Russian guards. As to why they have never been seen again, no one can explain, but then, has anyone ever been able to explain about Soviet Central Asian politics, and, furthermore, if they were kidnapped on the Afghan side it would seem that the Afghan frontier was violated and the Soviet Government know that Afghanistan would set up a howl about that. No, I, personally, am of the opinion that one day the truth will be told and it will not surprise me to find that they were taken to Russia.

Mazar is a typical Central Asian city. By this I mean different from the typical Afghan city, which has its own character. Mazar is a place of tea-shops, where Uzbeks and Turkomans drink green tea all day. I discovered why they do it when I tried the drinking

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water at the hotel. It was tepid, bitter and "flat", so I went out and ordered tea.

Most purely Afghan towns will have one, two or three mosques, which are often indistinguishable from ordinary houses, except for the minaret from which the *muazzin* calls the Faithful to prayer. In Mazar the mosques have two or more tiled domes, with the vivid green, blue and yellow tiles reflecting the blazing sun. There will often be a tiled and slender minaret at each corner, and a great courtyard with marble flagstones sometimes too hot to touch. It is not that the Afghan Uzbeks and Turkomans go in for religion in a bigger way than the ordinary Afghans, or are more religiously ostentatious, it is just that they have shaped their architecture in the styles of Bokhara and Samarkand. Since quite a large percentage of the people in the northern provinces of Afghanistan are refugees from Bokhara and Samarkand, it is not surprising that the Turki language and traditions are paramount.

After the establishment of the Soviet Union in Russia, the Khan of Samarkand and King of Bokhara were eventually driven out by the Red Army. It was a long and bitter war, which, if one is to believe recent refugees, is not over yet, with guerilla bands still fighting. Many an Afghan Khan led his men to fight for Islam and Bokhara, and it was the bonds of friendship that existed between the two peoples that led to the Uzbeks choosing Afghanistan as their refuge. Many fled to Turkey, but were not too happy there, as the news from Turkestan was stale when it got to them. Here across the border lies their old home, and many a man slips across to visit relatives, despite the usual Soviet methods of discouraging frontier crossers.

The Amu Darya, according to recorded history, has gone through a great number of changes. The Greeks called it the Oxus, the ancient geographers Vakhshu, and the Arabs the Jaihun, meaning mad. It is plain that the character of the river, though, has not changed, for it still has a mad tempestuousness, and an

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insane habit of changing its channel when it feels like it. The locals tend to call it Ilagird – the Wanderer – and say that you can only know its past and its present course, but never its future one. In its upper reaches, it is called the Vahjir, and lower down the Panj. It really starts in the Hindu Kush mountains in Afghanistan, and is composed of the Pamir, Gunt, Vartang and Vanch rivers, that are fed by the melting snows. Eventually it flows into the Aral Sea, after a tortuous journey of over fifteen hundred miles across Afghanistan and Soviet Russia. Its wanderings are due to the speed of the current, which reaches twenty feet per second in places, and the huge quantities of silt that it carries. The banks, where they are soft, yield to the pounding of the current, and overnight a part of the river changes its course by hundreds of yards, or even miles, leaving only a wide band of silt and sand to show its old bed.

During the Second World War, the Amu changed its course so drastically that the provincial capital of Kara Kalpakia, on the Soviet bank, had to be moved north to avoid the fate of the town of Turktul, in the same region, which was inundated by the river. Needless to say both the Russians and the Afghans derive a great deal of water for irrigation purposes from the Amu and farmers consider that Amu silt contributes towards the richness of their soil by virtue, I suppose, of the high mineral content, as she does flow through some highly mineralised areas. The Russians are building a canal through the Kara Kum desert, which will take enough water from the river to irrigate five million acres of land. I wonder what the Afghan authorities will think of that, for it could mean a drastic drop in the water level.

The life of the city of Mazar revolves around the karakul trade. Uzbeks have always monopolised this very paying business, although the Government have imposed an export monopoly from which they too profit very considerably. If you work out that skin production is something in the region of eight million

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pelts a year, eighty-five per cent of which are exported at an average price of nine dollars each, you can see that it means a lot of money to the Karakul Company. The sheep farmers may get something like two dollars per skin, so there is a tidy profit going into the Government's coffers. It was from the proceeds of karakul sales to the United States that Afghanistan was able to undertake the ambitious Helmand Valley irrigation scheme in the southwest.

The karakul sheep is a remarkable animal. Taller than the average European sheep, it has an enormous tail composed entirely of fat, storing nutrition like a camel's hump. These tails grow huge like water melons, and bob along behind them as they walk. Up to about a decade ago, there was a considerable market for the smooth skins without the characteristic curl. These were obtained by making the pregnant ewe jump an obstacle during the last month of gestation, and causing her to abort. Before she had time to lick the lamb, it was removed and killed. This caused great harm to the ewes, apart from the cruelty, and it was forbidden by the Government. There are a few traders who get their skins this way still, but the penalties are severe.

The immense flocks of sheep are guarded by dogs of fierce appearance and even fiercer character. They will attack anyone but the shepherd who approaches, and are more than a match for any wolf. The sheep graze on sparse grasses, and it is amazing that such huge numbers manage to survive on this diet. At one time the South Africans took some ewes for breeding purposes to the Transvaal, but the South-West African lamb is not a patch on the Afghan ones; it must be something to do with the climate and the diet, I suppose.

The second great industry around Mazar is the carpet one. The carpet was originally dictated by the life of the people. As nomads, they needed a strong, durable and colourful covering, not only for the floors, but for the walls of their felt yurts to keep out the

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piercing winds from Siberia. Peasants could always find straw or hay to sleep on and strew on the floors, but not so the desert nomad. Thus he took advantage of his twin assets; wool and nimble-fingered women and the Afghan carpet became the major craft that it is today.

Since their religion prohibited them from portraying living things in their art and paintings, the traditional patterns were born and are followed today, as they have been for a thousand years and more.

The value of the carpet is computed not only by its size and the quality of the wool, but by the way the design has been executed and the evenness of the pile. The pile is cut with huge shears and a mistake can drop the value of the carpet considerably. The face of the pile must be compact, so that it is not possible for the warp or weft to be seen: the carpet must appear as thickly grown hair, with never a variation as to thickness or spacing. This quality is given it by the number of knots per square inch: some of the best have a thousand or more knots to the square inch: and to look at them, one would think that they had been close woven in fine silk on a loom. The weavers will always make one small, deliberate mistake in each carpet, for only God is perfect and though no human product can truly be said to be absolutely perfect, by making the mistake the weaver acknowledges this.

The dyes used are prepared locally, and that is why different localities produce carpets of different hues, although the over-all bold patterns are the same. One of the dyes is derived from madder, which is as near as anything to being the Turkoman national colour, for most of their clothes are coloured thus. There are seven colours used traditionally: red, blue, yellow, white, brown, black and orange. Generally the background colour will be a deep madder red with the geometrical pattern in black, yellow and brown. These dyes never fade, and in fact they improve as the years pass. I learnt that Afghan carpets are often washed in ordinary

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soap and water, are never “dry cleaned”, nor are they cleaned by the roller brush type of vacuum cleaner. True they are not trodden on by boots and shoes caked with mud, for the Afghan will always remove his shoes before entering a room but, all the same, their quality and durability make them worth the high prices that they find even in the country of their origin.

When I visited the houses where the carpets are made, I was staggered by the speed at which the workers knotted, cut and wove; the looms follow the traditional pattern and no modern innovations have been able to improve on the speed or quality of the handloom. The weavers work to no master pattern, for they are so familiar with the usual forms that, once the pattern is chosen, it is there, knot for knot, in their minds. With a swiftness that is blurring, the fingers knot and tie, and before your eyes a carpet of intricate beauty grows to last, perhaps for five hundred years.

The outstanding feature of Mazar-i-Sherief is, of course, the Rowze or shrine of Ali which gives the city and province its name. It is predominantly blue and yellow in colour with two great domes and several minarets, and is in a remarkable state of preservation. The enamelled brickwork is said to date back to the fourteenth-century Timurid rule over north Afghanistan. The claim that it is indeed the tomb of Ali is disputed by some who say that the Caliph did not venture as far east as Mazar, but there exists no other tomb which can advance a better claim. True or false, it is a grand and beautiful memorial to a great man. The tomb is the centre of the New Year fête, which lasts from 21st March – Afghan New Year’s Day – for forty days, when the red tulips, so prolific in Mazar, bloom above the carpet of melting snow.

We pushed on, for Maimanah, via Balkh, the Mother of Cities of the Orient, which is claimed to be the most ancient city of Central Asia. Today, it is just another trading centre, where



9. *Buz kashi* teams striving for the goat. See p.114.



10. Salamat Gul, centre forward of the Maimanah *buz kashi* team. His cap is made of wolfskin.

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carpets, skins and horses are traded, while the ancient ruins of a city older than time frown over the baked brick that will crumble before the decade is out. Traces of a fire temple and a Buddhist stupa are adequate evidence of the various cultures that chose Balkh, in the middle of a fertile valley then, as their centre. The ancient bazaar is unchanged and unchanging and one can well imagine the narrow, roofed alleys thronged with traders from all parts of the known world, traversing the Silk Road to exchange the goods of East and West. Opposite our hotel was a huge *serai* at which caravans from the Pamirs in the east and Herat unloaded. Strings of majestic, hugely hairy Bactrian camels knelt to be loaded and unloaded with the bubbling, grumbling roar that they give to show their lack of enthusiasm. They have, I noted, another peculiarly Bactrian way of expressing their dislike for someone, and that is by expectorating a great wad of cud over the person who has offended them!

We spent a few days here to investigate tips I had had gathered in Kabul about medicinal herbs. The country surrounding Balkh, like all that between Mazar and Herat, is semi-desert, with sand dunes, dried up beds of streams, rubble and stones swept down from the hills. Sparsely growing shrubs and twisted trees dot the arid landscape. One peculiar feature of this dead land is the midget tortoises, which occur in great numbers. It is a common sight to see a sparrow hawk plummet down out of the blue, seize a tortoise, dash it to death on the stones and then descend to feast on its broken body.

In the spring the plain is covered with vegetation, but the flowers last only as long as there is residual moisture in the sand, then the wasteland takes over again. True enough, I discovered great stretches of giant umbrella-like *asafoetida* plants. The stem is as thick as a man's wrist and the big, hard leaves stick out in a cluster on the top of the stem. A sweet juice is obtained from the roots, which looks rather like tar. The local villagers call it black

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honey, although the asafoetida, after it has been extracted from the plants, smells nothing like any honey I have ever eaten! On some hills in the region are pistachio groves, which grow wild, although they are cultivated and harvested by the people farther south.

West again we came to the town of Shibarghan, which is widely tipped to be the centre of the Afghan oil industry. In the vicinity, drilling has located oil at differing depths, while there are tar eruptions everywhere in the hills nearby. It is unlikely that Afghanistan will become a big exporter of oil, for the distances involved are too great and the political implications of an oilfield just across the border from Soviet ones might be delicate. Since the land tends to slope down towards Afghan territory, there is just the possibility that the Russians, rightly or wrongly, might suggest that the Afghans were tapping the Soviet petroleum strata. Wars have started with less reason!

One of the big local landowners, Khwaja Aftabuddin, told me that drilling on his land had shown traces of oil, but that he would not be pleased if it became a boom town, for he could lose his land and get precious little compensation and no oil royalties. When mineral resources belong to the Government, there is little future in hitting a gusher in your backyard! It is likely that the Government will contract with a Dutch or Swedish combine to exploit the oil purely to supply enough for the country's own internal needs. Since all the transport is by road, it would be a great saving in foreign currency for Afghanistan.

It was here that I saw my first game of *buz kashi* which is fascinating to watch and inviting mayhem to participate in! *Buz kashi* or the "goat game" is of Mongol origin and survives only in Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia. Briefly, it is like polo with the carcass of a goat, well steeped in oil and water to render it heavy and slippery, as the "ball". The goals are from half a mile to two miles apart and it is played by two mounted teams of from

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ten to fifty players a side. The "ball" is placed in the centre of the field by the referee, who then beats a precipitate retreat, and the two teams charge down on it from their own ends of the field. As they meet in the centre the forwards of each team will try to pick the goat from the ground, without dismounting of course, tuck it between leg and saddle and ride for the opponents' goal defended by members of his own team. All riders carry a cat-o'-nine-tails with lead tips but they are not allowed to use these on the horses, only on opposing players!

The game can last hours or even days until one team has made the requisite number of "touchdowns" in the opposing goal. Altogether an exhilarating game although not one to be played unless you were born in the saddle!

Farther along the road is Daulatabad where, Afghans opine, the best carpets in the world are made. The industry here is by no means organised; each family engaged in the carpet trade does their weaving at home in their own time, but produce rugs that, even in Afghanistan, cost upwards of twenty pounds per square foot. They are considered to be the best for their texture and colour blending, and I can honestly say that they struck me, the merest amateur, as being something out of this world. Despite their soft texture they wear like iron and are much sought after. A family will take literally years to make one carpet, and live on the proceeds of the sale of this while they are making another one. Among these people it is a labour of love as well as a job; all their rugs are perfect, except for the deliberate mistake, and they will never complete one which, in their estimation, does not come up to the standard which they have established.

The valleys around Daulatabad are more fertile than those farther east, for the town stands at the confluence of the Andkhui and Maimanah rivers, which rise in the Turkestan Mountains. The people work on the land in the same time-honoured fashion as their forefathers, but are profiting from the advice and assistance

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of experts from the Food and Agriculture Organization who have been treating their herds and chickens. Notoriously suspicious of strangers, these people have accepted the F.A.O. men after much heart-searching. It is a striking example of the wisdom of sending farmers to teach farmers. A theoretician may know better, but farmers all over the world understand each other, and the people of the Andkhui River valley have reason to be grateful to the farmers of the Middle West who are spending many months in this land.

The last main trading and farming centre before the Western capital, Herat, is Maimanah, nestling in the foothills of the Turkestan mountains. Maimanah and Bala Murghab are two cities that were established more than a thousand years ago to take advantage of the Andkhui and Murghab rivers. The latter rises deep in the Safed Koh mountains and flows deep into Soviet Russia, vanishing in the desert of the Kara Kum.

Civilisations have always existed along its banks, although this swiftly flowing mountain torrent has never been dammed by man and thus much of its water is lost. At its delta it deposits vast quantities of valuable mineral-enriched silt, which it has ripped from the banks along its seven-hundred-mile course. Afghan authorities are considering the construction of a series of dams along its course to provide hydro-electric power and water for irrigation, although the initial outlay will be enormous and, certainly, the Russians will not be happy if water is diverted from their own irrigation projects.

Standing on the delta of the Murghab, deep in the Kara Kum desert, is Merv, chief town of the Murghab, and once the richest town in Central Asia. Two thousand years ago Chinese geographers wrote of this city and the "vegetable wool" that grew in the fields of the valley. Now, of course, Soviet agriculture has concentrated on improving the quality of this cotton, and it is the Murghab that is providing water for their battle to conquer the desert.

Mazar-i-Sherief. Persian Lamb and Carpets

In the seventh century Merv was captured by the Arabs and chronicles of that time speak of the area being densely populated and highly cultivated. The population numbered several hundred thousand and there were institutions of learning to which students came from all over the world. Then came the day when all this became a memory: the attack upon the city by Tuli, son of Genghiz Khan. So in 1221 the Mongols destroyed the city, its libraries and its schools and put more than half a million people to the sword. In all the city only the huge tomb of Sultan Sanjar was left standing, and that only because it would not burn and could not be knocked down with the primitive instruments the Mongols had. Merv lay dormant until the fifteenth century when one of Tamerlane's sons, Shah Rukh, rebuilt the city, but it was a shadow of its former self and has never aspired to the grandeur that fell beneath the Mongol swords.

The trip from Maimanah to Herat is a disagreeable one, for it is through the parched alkaline desert and the foothills of the Parapamisus mountains, with all the inhospitality of a lunar surface. To be sure, the hills have an awesome beauty and the many-hued crags, stained by minerals, impress, but one feels so small in this parched wilderness. Then, over the last heights, through the village of Parwana – the Bat – and into Herat.

CHAPTER 10

The Western Capital

HERAT, THE Western capital, lies on the site of an ancient city, called Artakana, upon the site of which, in turn, Alexander of Macedon built the present city. It was the capital of Khorasan under Islamic kings, although its greatest glory was in the eleventh century, when it was a haven for poets, painters and calligraphers. Naturally it has been endowed with some buildings of great beauty, which include the Great Mosque, one of the most beautiful in the world. It was built around 1200, and has more than four hundred columns. Then there is the famous "Green Dome" with its minarets, which have withstood the ravages of time, and even the habit of some kings in the past of using the stones of one building to construct another.

Herat is a beautiful city for all that it is built in a desert. The Afghan love of gardens shows strongly here, for wells have been sunk and dams made to feed the flowers and trees that have been planted to make it truly a garden city. Through the streets run cool streams from which water is regularly sprayed on the flowers. Apart from its beauty and commercially important position as gateway of the West, it has considerable theological importance.

Some distance from the city of Gazargah, lies the tomb of Khaja Abdullah Ansar, one of the companions of the Prophet, around whose tomb has arisen a theological seminary and library of some importance. The graveyard there is full of tombstones, which are in themselves marvels of sculpture. Many Afghans have

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wanted to lie close to one of the Companions, and the graveyard reads like a roll-call of the famous.

The Herati people differ from the other Afghans in that they are influenced by their closeness to Persia. This has affected their speech, dress and activities and, as an outsider, it struck me that they seemed artificial. It was strange to hear from the lips of a hulking great bearded Afghan, the lilting accents of Irani Persian, which to the eastward is considered an effeminate affectation. Other Afghans profess a certain contempt for Heratis, although they do admit they are shrewd businessmen.

At Herat I was faced with a problem. I had provisionally planned to travel from Herat to Farah, and thence to Kandahar, via Girishk, where I would have the opportunity of seeing the great Helmand Valley irrigation scheme, which is aimed at reclaiming thousands of acres of land in the south-west Desert of Death on the Persian border. However, at Herat, I was given the opportunity of travelling to Kandahar over the Safed Koh, through Hazarajat and through Ghor, that ancient centre of Afghan culture. There was an Afghan archaeological team going straight through to Kandahar as the crow flies. It was a chance I could not miss.

There is hardly any information available about that area as normally the Afghan Government does not encourage foreigners to travel there. Admittedly there was probably nothing of fantastic interest, but the unusual attracted me, and I made all my arrangements, got permission from the Government of Herat, and broke the news to Hakim and Gulbaz, who were not terribly thrilled with the prospect. Apparently travelling through Hazarajat, country of the Hazara minority, is not considered the thing to do. The Hazaras, descendents of the garrisons left behind by Genghiz Khan, are not the most hygienic people in the world. And, even worse, they are unorthodox Shiahhs, who are anathema to good Orthodox Sunni Afghans. Hazaras find work mostly as manual labourers, even though their children receive the same

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educational chances as other Afghans. Steadily, I was told, the Hazaras are tending to leave Hazarajat and settle in the towns where their children will be near schools.

Leaving Herat early in the morning, we drove south-east with the two Land-rover convoys of the Museum group. Our first object was the town of Farsi, seven thousand feet up in the Safed Koh or White Mountains. This town is the first one encounters in the ancient area, which used to be known as Ghor, centuries ago. This entire area was flourishing agriculturally, and peaks were crowned with massive fortresses, which exacted tribute from travellers in pre-Islamic days. Now the castles are ruined and deserted, and my companions were hoping to be able to examine and chart them.

The road to Farsi, if you can call it a road, wound up through the barren foothills with sparse vegetation. During lunch I enlivened the proceedings by being bitten on the hand by a scorpion. Quick as a wink Abdul Hassan, one of the archaeologists, whipped out a knife and made a cut between the bite and the heart and sucked it clean. With such creatures about, it is necessary to keep your wits about you ; if I had been alone, I would not have had a clue as to what to do, and these black rock scorpions can cause intolerable pain and even death if the victim is very young or very old.

Totally exhausted and blinded by sun and dust, we stumbled out of our vehicles into the village soon after dark. The local people had been informed that we were coming, and there were steaming baths and masses of food at the guest-house. The Mayor sent a message to say that he was sorry he could not be there to welcome us, as he had gone to the tomb of a local saint, it being Thursday night, the day before the Moslem sabbath, and would not be back until the early morning. He was, I discovered from my companions, a member of that Moslem philosophic-occult group, known as Sufis. These men, there are few women, devote their lives to the search for God by following religious exercises,

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called *Zikrs*, and contemplating. They are not allowed by their religion to eschew the world's challenge and become monks or recluses, as the Moslems say that it is easy to get close to God when one is not subjected to the temptations and troubles of the world. They hold that it has greater merit to find God at the same time as following a profession. They call it "being in the world, but not of the world". It is a subtle distinction, but one that seemed to have a deep validity. I was told that these men develop remarkable powers and that their chiefs or *Pirs* are imbued with a force that they call *Baraka*, which can be concentrated to bring about an effect at will. The traditional chiefs of the Sufis are the Syeds, descendents of the Prophet, of Paghman. It appears that this *Baraka* is transmitted through the male line, and the eldest male of the Syeds is the effective head of the Sufi hierarchy. There are Sufi movements in all Moslem countries, and a traveller after truth can travel from one group to another and receive hospitality, aid and money, if he needs it, by the simple expedient of identifying himself. It seems to go beyond such plainly social groups as the Elks or Masons, in that their purpose is twofold, at least. The power of the *Pirs* is absolute over their followers, who are sworn to obey him in all things. There are various Orders of Sufism. In Afghanistan the Nakhshbandi Order, which holds sway, is a military order, to which belong most of the high-ranking officers of the army. It is not easy to find out about them, as they do not accept "recruits", neither do they seek to spread their beliefs in the hope of attracting converts, but the average Afghan possesses a keen respect for them, their power and their good works.

In the morning we set out to examine the immediate vicinity of Farsi for archaeological relics. Just outside the city was pitched a huge encampment of nomads in their black tents. They were on their way to the great yearly gathering at Gumab, where Kochis from all over Central Asia gather to barter, gossip and enjoy themselves.

CHAPTER 11

The Nomads

THE NOMADS of Afghanistan form a large part of the population of the country. Due to their roaming habits, an accurate estimate of their number is not possible; yet there are enough of them to justify their interests being represented by one or two members in the Grand National Assembly at the Afghan capital.

These nomad people are generally known as Kochis, and it is not without interest to probe a little into the origin of the term. The word Kochi may be a part of an Afghan-Persian verb *Koch Kardan* – meaning to sally forth, to move out, to travel far afield – and its use is not entirely unknown in India, where it denotes the movement of a large section of a population, from one location to a distant one. Not infrequently, the term has been applied to the marching out of a body of troops from one camp to another.

In the Kohistan, that is among the Lesser Highlands north of Kabul, this term Koch is often employed to designate a man's wife and his near women relatives accompanying his wife on a travel; thus, one would hear it said that "he had brought his Koch to Kabul"; or that "his Koch was going to Jelalabad". Koch would therefore signify the transference of a minimum of more than four persons from one place to another. In this group, there should be some women and children, who would be taking with them practically their entire household effects. It is, in a word, a house removing with a difference; and such shift should be to a fairly far distance. This last definition admirably fits in the case of the Afghan nomads.

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These Kochis, however, are not to be confused with other wandering people, like the gypsies. Our nomads are not related to any such tribes, but are definitely Afghan in physiognomy and tradition, and share a common language with their Afghan countrymen. To see a Kochi family on the march is an unforgettable sight. Here is a picture :

There, down the bend on the boulder-strewn road, you perceive a thin line of slow-moving humanity. A mere streak of a lumbering fashion, forming and reforming into rounded shapes, and then changing into a frail and scanty line, coming in and out of a series of grey-brown rocks far away. It is a Kochi family wending its way.

Nearer and nearer still as they come, you first spy an overloaded donkey. This beast of burden is followed by a young woman, her long black smocked frock lavishly embroidered by white or multi-coloured thread, almost touching the dusty road. Her massive jewellery of white metal with many loops and turns, her coal-black braided hair, securely tied at the back of her head in many plaits accentuate the many colours of her voluminous trousers. She may carry her boat-shaped and heavily nailed shoes in her hands, or she may even put them on, if she has not to walk fast behind the laden donkey.

In her wake, you will see the towering camel of a breed that is only to be found among the snow-clad peaks of the northern Hindu Kush range, or in the foothills of the White Mountains of southern Afghanistan. The camel carries on his back a share of the Kochi family's travelling kit – a rolled up large blanket, or a black piece of felt, to be used as part of the tent to be pitched for the night's rest. In addition, he has some poles for the tent, sundry coils of ropes, a load of goatskins and maybe a water-pitcher or two. The next camel has similar luggage, and the head of the family, quite conscious of his possessions, walks behind these two camels accompanied perhaps by another woman, a wife

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maybe. She, like the other woman, is unveiled and has more ornaments on her neck and heavy bangles upon her wrists.

The man strides with the mein of a hardened traveller of many generations, wearing a smallish turban – a turban now colourless with age and exposure – a smocked shirt, voluminous trousers, and a tunic of indifferent shape and proportions, fastened with a girdle. He may have a dagger in the folds of his *kamarband*, but you do not see it; yet his big stick is formidable.

Upon the back of yet a third camel, there is a small child, not more than a year old, securely and warmly bundled up. Only its head is visible. Its wide-awake, sparkling eyes observe everything. In its cocoon-like nest it looks cosy and pretty as a picture. One would call it a baby, but it seems to look old in experience, saying nothing, just swaying with the pad-pad of the camel. Nobody talks, as one might expect, but a rather devastating ocular measuring of everything and everyone that passes, is obvious. And yet another camel in the train comes in view. Upon it is perched a child also, the children are alike as two peas, except that the second one might be a boy, for it has tied round its neck a number of coins and charms encased in silver. These are to ward off some evil on the road. The child has no toys. It requires none. It lives in a moving world, and every minute sees something new and interesting. It has no boredom.

Behind this camel follows the great dog-guard, a special breed with cut-away ears and tail. He is behaving well at present, but passers-by had better keep a respectful distance, for the members of the caravan are under his protection. He is not only capable of defending the Kochi family against all attack and curiosity, but is known to throw himself in his master's defence upon a motor-car.

Then there are a few hens and cocks, perched swaying on the camel's back; and keeping company with yet a third child. The child takes no notice of them, nor they of it, as though they had

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reached some wordless understanding, and did not exist for each other. One guesses that the birds have enough to do to keep themselves balanced.

Behind it comes a younger woman leading a cow – a small animal, but like the other beasts of burden in the caravan, the cow, too, carries a load of bundles. Alongside the young woman, there is a boy of about eleven; a replica of his father. His eyes have the same look of worldly wisdom. In the rear come a man and a youth, driving a flock of sheep and goats. Every now and then the dog makes an entire round of the caravan, to assure himself that no animal has gone astray. There is no conversation, the business in hand, that of getting as quickly as possible to the grazing grounds, or to a field, where corn might be cut and extra hands might be wanted, allows no wasting of breath. Silently, and with determined steps, the caravan of the Kochis dips and rises from the rocky roadway; a pageant of life and colour, which is so close to Mother Earth.

When the Kochis pitch their tents, they are too tired to talk. Each member of the family knows his work: women – as women all over the world – are busy with pots and pans; youths are tending the sheep, the man his camels; the dog lies near the sheep and goats. The black tents go up in no time, felts are spread; food is eaten from wooden bowls and then a hush descends upon the Kochi camp. The dog takes the watch on for the night and, as often as not, a second dog is tied to the leash which is fastened to the arm of a man, so that its tugging might wake him, in case of danger.

Now why do some of these people adopt a nomadic life? There are two reasons for it; firstly, that these Kochis are “born to the trade”, so to speak, and it is in their blood; secondly that possessing no land for cultivation, they have adopted that mode of life. There are few of the Kochis in the second category and yet they are an important part of the economy of the country, where transport

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was chiefly carried on, till recently, through camel caravans; thus a large number of the owners of camels become carriers of goods between Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries.

Chiefly, however, these Kochis are sheep and goat breeders, and as soon as the spring months begin, which they do towards *Hoot* (March) the nomad population of Afghanistan begins to march in search of grasslands. Many of these pastures lie in the north of Afghanistan, and amongst the folds of the Hindu Kush mountains; thus the drive is northwards from the south and south-east corners of the country. Drovers of these animals are always on the move, and the longest stay that is known in any one place is said to be forty days. The speed with which the Kochi caravan travels varies from three to eight miles a day; and eight miles might be taken as a forced march. There are occasions, of course, when any given Kochi family might travel as hard as fifteen miles in a day, but that is when they pass through an enemy territory, or have to cross frontier regions, or again they might have to hasten to join others in order to make a larger caravan for a march to the uplands of the Hindu Kush.

The usual size of a Kochi caravan is fifty persons, which might mean some ten families. The largest number of nomads come from the eastern part of Afghanistan, and their spreading out takes place in a very definite fashion. Those, for instance, who fan out to the central highlands of the Hazara hills, Paghman, Logar and to Shivaki and Ahmedazi, Doulatzai, Matani, Daftani, Aka Khail, Mulla Khail and Khozak. Each of these may be called a clan or a tribe. Then there are those who have a kind of dual "field of habitation", for they are to be found in one locality in the winter months, within the Afghan boundary itself, and move to another location in summer.

The Kochis of Dastu Khail, are of that class, because in winter they tend their flocks at Surkh Rud, and as soon as the summer comes they move north-westward to Kabul and Maydan. Another

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tribe of like character is the Shaikh Mohamedyan, who are to be seen as nomads in the Jelalabad area, and in summer they spread all round Kabul valley and the environs of the capital.

The Jitman tribe winter at Laghman and join their compatriots in Kabul in the summer and spring; then there is the Nasir tribe, the Hout Khail, the Abdur Rahimzai, who all have their winter quarters in and around Laghman, but in summer sweep across to the northern areas of Kabul province, to Paghman, to Logar. The Pasni tribe of Surkh Rud go to Deh Subz; the Musazais of Shiwar to the Hazara hills, as also do the Alizais, and the Khizar Khails of the Khugani Section join them in the Hazarajat in the summer. The Tarah Khail tribe of the Eastern Province travel to Shavaki.

These eighteen tribes of the Kochi fan out in all directions with their goats, sheep and other animals from winter settlements in the southern and eastern areas of Afghanistan, and the first seven are more or less the tribes which "live" outside Afghan territory proper during winter.

By far their greatest concern is for the wool of the sheep; goats are generally sold for butchers' meat and hide. Camels are not reared for sale, but for transport. The Kochis are sometimes termed *Maldar* – possessors of wealth; and wealth, or their assets are reckoned according to the head of cattle, or number of sheep, which any one person might own. The sheep are, as a rule, mated towards the end of September or the beginning of October. This wool trade is not to be confused with the karakul lambskin trade which is so flourishing in the northern plains of Afghanistan. The Kochi rarely, if ever, go in for the raising of the curly-haired variety of sheep for which Afghan Turkestan is justly famous.

Quite apart from the care which the Kochi himself bestows upon his flock, he often has to employ a shepherd, for the minimum number driven by any one person is two hundred sheep. The sheep are counted as *Burda*; so many "head of *Burda*", ten

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sheep are counted as one *Shuppa*; thus in the Kochi terminology it would be said that such-and-such a person has so many *Shuppa Burda*.

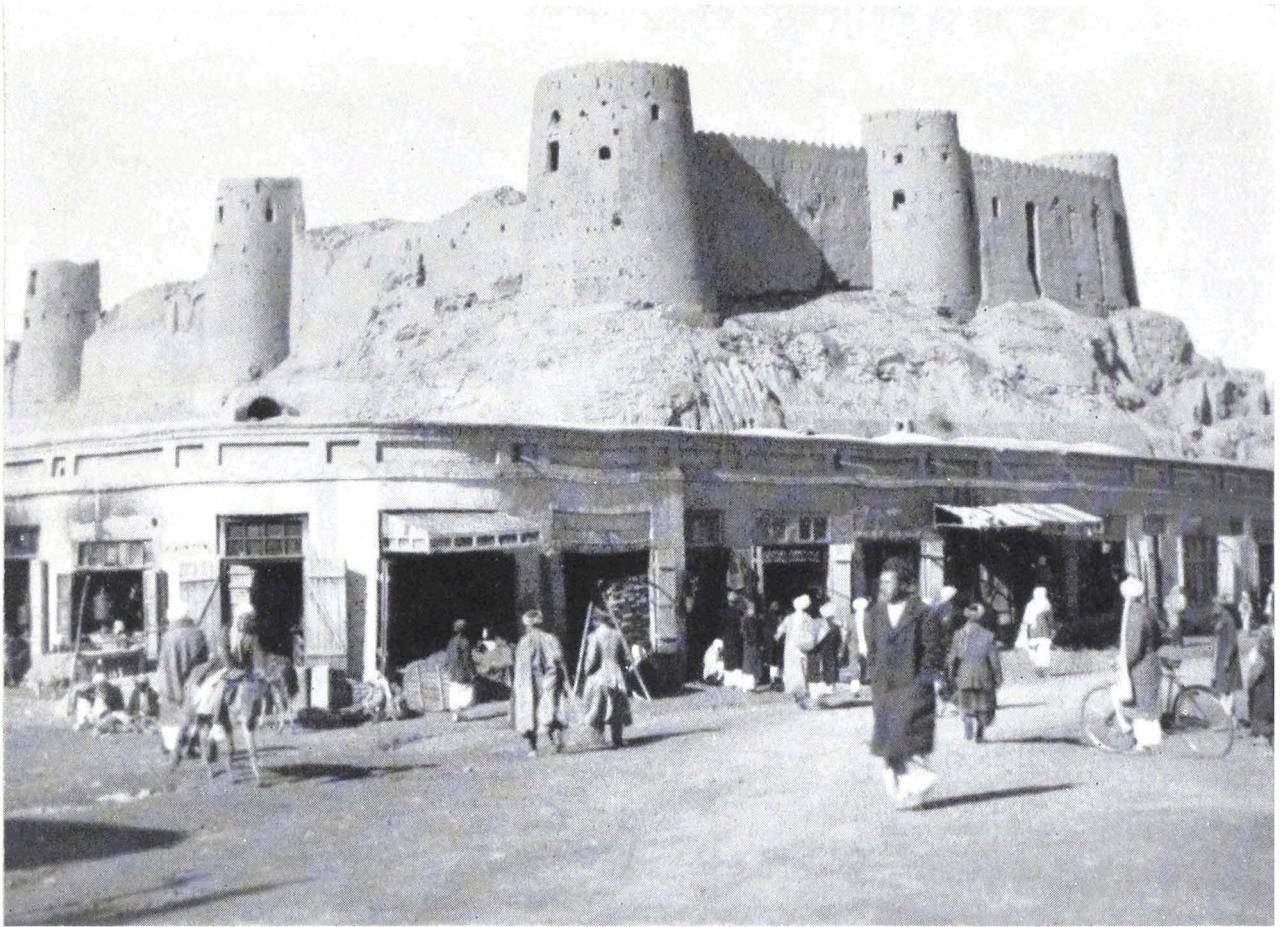
The shepherd is either paid in money, or a few sheep are given to him as his seasonal wages, in addition to his clothes and food. As often as not, these men rear their own dogs, which are not unlike the well-known breed of the Scottish sheep-dogs.

As can be imagined from the earlier part of this narrative, the life of the Afghan nomads is of the simplest type. They are travelling for most of their days, and at night all that they need is to have just enough sleep and rest to be able to graze their sheep, and then move on. It is for this reason that the Kochis live, all their lives, a tent-life. Their tents are sometimes like the dwarf tents of the Arabian Beduins, but one frequently comes upon tents of quite respectable shape and texture. The roof and the sides of these tents, however, are made up of thick black woollen panels, raised above the ground by means of short staves of four to five feet; the flooring is provided by very thick felt of their own making. They use pillows and even mattresses, which are all stuffed with wool. Ropes that are employed to steady the tent too, are made of wool. These contraptions, or shelters are variously named in Kochi terminology; the one, for instance, erected by means of five to seven pieces of blanket is known as *Wargani*. In some parts of the country, a sort of *Dari* (cloth) is also woven by Kochis for flooring their tents, from the wool of their goats, and it is known as *Da Kord Kumbala*. After this piece of coarse wool has done its duty as a floor covering at night, during the day, when there is a halt, it is thrown over the rolled-up bedding of the family as a protection against dust, rain or even theft.

The food of the Kochis, like their dress and mode of living generally, is simple, but wholesome; for it consists of just those items which their flocks of goats or sheep can furnish. Meat is provided by killing a goat, sheep are milked, and from goats' milk

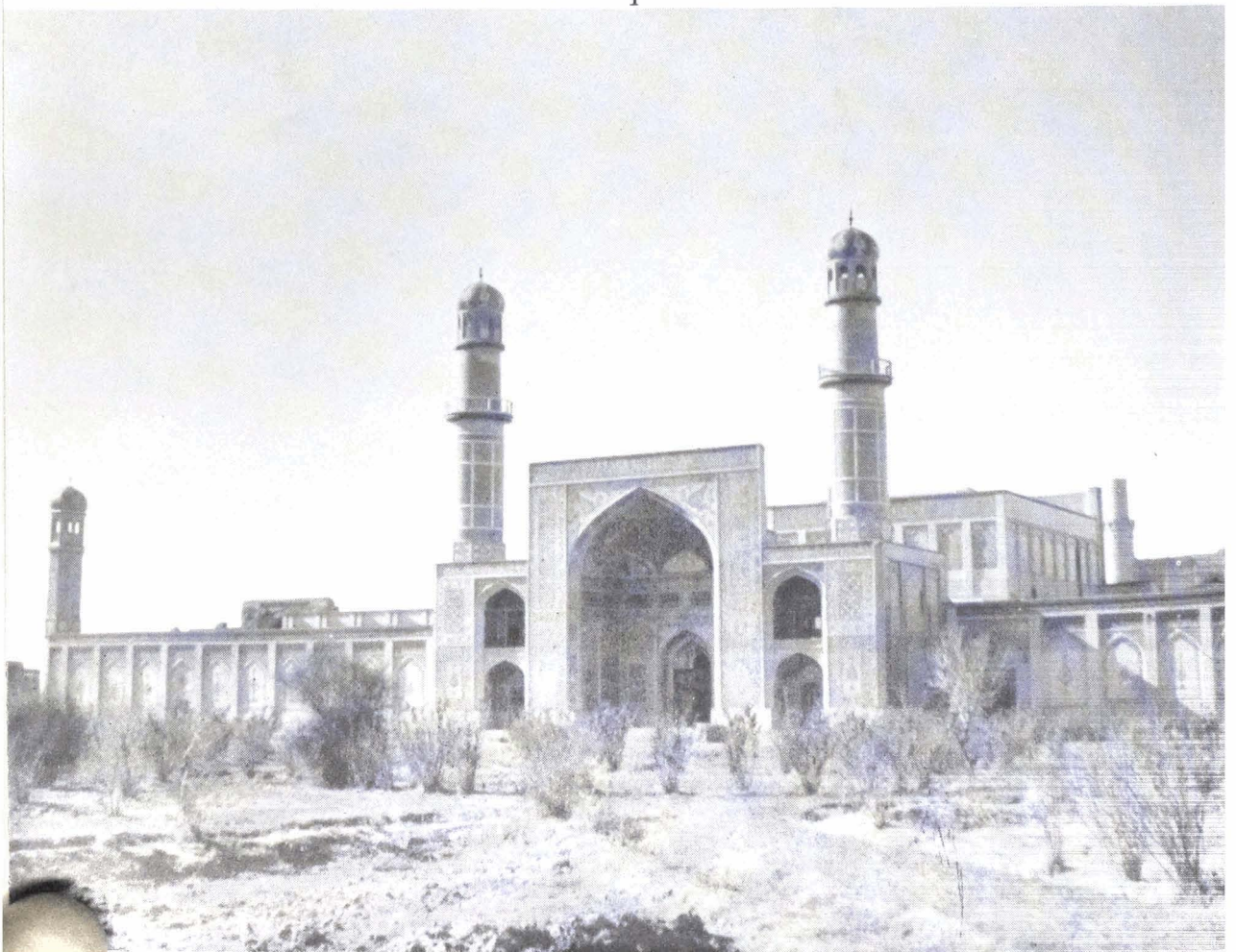


11. Mahmud Bai, centre forward of the Mazar-i-Sherief *buz kashi* team. His well padded clothes protect him against the whips of his opponents and the bites of their horses.



12. *Above* The citadel of Jan Fishan at Paghman.

Below Herat Mosque.



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a sort of cooking fat is made, and a refreshing milk drink is prepared by mixing fresh milk with a curd known as *Khariri*. There is, of course, both soft and dried cheese. They do not eat much wheat flour, but a mixture of millet and wheaten flour is made into a stiff dough, which is baked in various ways, and these breads are variously known as *Doudah Khamiray*, *Doudah Patirahay*, *Kak*, *Bay shaili*, *Supti* and *Takuni*. Bowls made of wood and large wooden trays are used for putting food upon and a tablecloth of goat hair is spread on the ground, around which the family sits and partakes of its meals. In place of water, milk is the usual thirst quencher. Recently the tea-drinking habit has also been acquired by these nomads, and in such regions as Kandahar, Herat and Ghazni, a tea decoction is prepared, but in the Mazar-i-Sherief, tea is still drunk in the old Uzbek fashion – that is, without sugar. They have not the habit of eating much dried fruit, except the berries of a tree named *Khumjuk*, which are dried and reduced to powder, pounded with raisins and eaten with bread, while in other cases this powder, known as *Shini*, is dissolved in boiling water and then eaten with bread.

The hospitality, which is accorded to a Kochi, especially when alone, is of an especial nature of its own. A stranger in a village goes straight to a rest-room – a room which is attached to a mosque. There he rests, and it is customary that practically every person who comes to the mosque looks into the rest-room to see whether there is a wayfarer in it. Immediately the fact is made known to all and sundry, and whatever anyone can spare is sent to the rest-house for the Kochi guest. The other method is that the head of the village keeps a rest-room near his house, upon which he mounts a short banner, signifying that it is where every wayfarer is welcome. The nomad travellers can stay there, and would be the guest of the elders of the village, where food and all means of comfort would be provided for him. No stranger is ever asked his name, his destination, or the duration of his stay; or the

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purpose of his travel. He is under the protection of the entire clan, should he even be a refugee.

In some communities, more blessed with worldly goods, the nomad traveller fares even better; because in such regions as those inhabited by the Wazirs, a lamb is killed for the guest. First of all, the head and the feet of the animal are roasted and brought for the guest as a delicacy; then follows the rest of the meat. It might be mentioned here, that the Kochis do not break the bones of a slain animal, but bring the roasted meat upon the whole shanks. Roasted meat is most commonly given, but in places, gravy is also served for the guest. These ceremonies are obtained both in the settled as well as in nomadic settlements, whether for the Kochi or non-Kochi wayfarer.

Should a Kochi arrive at the encampment of another nomad, he is entertained in the manner described above, and the law of protection of the guest is most rigidly practised, for should the guest of a Kochi tribe come to any harm while a guest, then the entire host clan is disgraced. Such tales survive for generations together, and are unforgivingly related from one end of the country to another. The mount of the guest too is regarded as a guest, and fodder and grass are provided for it.

The wedding ceremonies of the Kochis have their own zest and significance. The female population of the Kochis is said to be smaller than the male; thus, to secure a wife, a Kochi young man has a hard task before him. No marriages are made in tender years, as in some other countries of Asia, and when a woman is found for a bridegroom, it is a matter of considerable magnitude for the Kochi family, and the father of the lad does not stint spending lavishly upon the many festivities that should follow an engagement.

As a rule, the bride is taken from one's own clan, but not infrequently girls from a different Kochi clan are sought, for it is wisely thought that in this manner the defence value of a clan

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increases. In exchange for a bride, the man or his father has to give a}“compensation”, which, as often as not consists of a number of sheep, and this recoument is called the *Dalour*. A widow must remarry in the same clan, or else the father of the widow is liable to “pay back” two brides from his clan to the clan of the deceased husband. The idea being, of course, that a certain part of the wealth of the clan, which has been invested, should be returned to the clan. The marriage contract is usually arranged by the parents of the bridegroom.

The first of the wedding ceremonies begins with the bridegroom’s folk visiting the parents of the bride, where a Divine blesses the marriage. From the religious point of view, this is sufficient and valid, but there are traditional functions to be performed, one of which is that after the religious marriage, which is called the *Da Shamal* or *Gardeni* ceremony, it is incumbent upon the bride’s folk to give a turban to each of those persons who had accompanied the bridegroom’s parents. It is permissible to pay the price of such turbans in cash, so that the wearer may select his own turban at a bazaar. To the women who thus visit the bride’s house, a head-shawl is to be given. Much rejoicing takes place on this occasion, when choice food is served to the visitors; wrestling matches, horse racing and like competitions enliven the function.

The marriage ceremony over, the bridegroom is expected to remain in his father-in-law’s encampment for a time. At the first night’s feast much fun is enacted by the younger members of the clan, for the bride’s female friends try to see that the first morsel of food is taken by the bride and not the bridegroom. The young man’s women relatives try the same innocent fun, and there is a veritable tussle at the food table. The superstition is that if the bride takes the first bite, then the man will always be a hen-pecked husband; conversely, should the bridegroom succeed in putting a piece of bread in his mouth first, he will be “undisputed

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master in his house". There are other tricks played upon the bridegroom. For example, if he goes to sleep before the song-stresses finish their interminable songs, then the younger women of the clan sew him up in the blanket in which he wraps himself. The dowry is payable on the day of marriage, or at least a substantial portion of it has to be surrendered immediately, otherwise the bridegroom remains as a hostage in his father-in-law's settlement at night, but is allowed to go to his father's clan during the day. Every night, however, he is obliged by the traditional law to remain with his father-in-law, and cannot take away his wife until the balance in sheep is fully paid, as stipulated in the marriage contract.

Not only must the bridegroom pay a dowry to the bride, the bride's parents, too, are obliged to undertake to provide the bridegroom with a stipulated number of suits of clothes and sundry articles of household use.

Prior to the marriage, the parents of the young people generally settle among themselves how many guests are to be invited to the wedding. The number might be several hundred. The food has to be provided by the young man's parents, and a day or two beforehand groceries, such as flour, butter, cooking fat, rice, sugar and the like are sent into the house of the father of the bride for that purpose. Those clansmen who are wrestlers, great horsemen and others skilled in many games, such as sword-dancers and crack rifle-shots, who can amuse the guests, are in much demand.

The procession of the guests to a marriage ceremony should never be missed as a spectacle of colour and rustic life; for here one sees a whole line of horsemen galloping towards the encampment, with rifles held aloft, yelling and shouting, as if on a raid. The body of horsemen arrive at the bride's encampment at a gallop and fire at a target, set up for the purpose, to herald their arrival. The thudding of kettle-drums, the shrieks and laughter

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of the horsemen and the hurrah of the welcoming hosts depict a scene of barbaric gallantry of other days. A Kochi's son is not wed noiselessly!

At the entrance of the encampment incense burns in a copper bowl as a gesture of greeting to the cavalcade, and it is necessary that the bridegroom's friends should throw some coins into that incense bowl as a token of good luck.

When the brief marriage ritual is in progress, the din of hundreds of voices is hushed to a murmur out of respect for the religious character of the ceremony. Then it rises like a stream in flood; there is laughter and song, there is the firing of a salute to the newly wed, and shortly afterwards they sit down to a feast of many dishes; roast meat, stacks of bread, mounds of rice and dried fruit. Gallons of goat's milk and tea are drunk. Then on with the merry-making!

The dark night comes to life; men split into small groups, playing the flute, the *Rubab*, and a small drum keeps time with a song of love and battle, and of glorious vistas far away. Nor do the women guests lag behind, for they too, garlanded, whirl and dance the national dance – a dance so reminiscent of the old, old English dance of Ring-a-Ring-O'Roses.

In another part of the encampment, torches are ablaze, a twenty-foot square pit of sand is prepared, and handsome men, stripped to the waist, grab each other in a wrestling match; wrestling, which someone described as "a supreme motion of unrest". Every muscle is exerted, every trick employed, to ground a rival wrestler; first one tries to lift the other off his feet; the adversary resists it; then one entwines his leg round the other's, and pushes him to and fro. The other wrestler combats this, but pulling his rival forward with a jerk has the better of it, till down they fall on the soft sand, all in a huddle, and the winner mounts upon the chest of his rival. Another, yet another, pair of contestants enters the lists. Excitement knows no bounds among the spectators.

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More torches are lit, more full-throated hurrahs fill the air, till the wrestlers have long passed the midnight hour, and the bridegroom's father has presented a handful of silver coins to the winners. Then they sleep, the sleep of the most exhausted, till the morning call to prayer awakes them and tea is partaken, mounts found and the guests depart to their several encampments, shouting good wishes to the newly-weds as they ride away.

However, in the morning, before the more important of the guests and elders, another ceremony is enacted. This is the "showing of presents"; that is to say, those items which the father of the bride gives to the young couple when they are setting up house for themselves. Item by item they are brought forward; a pair of horse saddles, some articles of clothing, a gun or two, several tents, and pots and pans. At each exhibit the gathering lifts its voice in praise of the donor: "May thy house flourish", they say to the bride's father. Slowly, carefully, these presents are rolled up and mounted on camels or donkeys, ready for the bridegroom to take away with his bride. The hundred-odd sheep, which were a part of the bride's share of the dowry, being already driven away by the bride's relatives.

All being well, in the early forenoon the bride is mounted on a camel, followed by the bridegroom and his gifts, and the newly-weds take a road to their new abode. Three days later, a number of male and female relatives of the bride visit her, and they are fed and housed according to the economic capacity of the bridegroom's people. But whatever their status, each of the visiting women is given a head-shawl, and each man a turban, as a gift from the young man's father. Not infrequently, however, the bride's folk take with them groceries, which are accepted, without any uneasiness of conscience, by the bridegroom's people.

These are matters one might consider normal but there are, too those which are unorthodox. Marriages are arranged by the parents of the young people, but sometimes it so happens that

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some bolder spirits take the matter into their own hands. A woman for instance, might just call to a man whom she "fancies". It would be regarded as highly bold, but she has a right to do so. In that case, the man is bound to accept the offer, whether he likes it or not, or there will be trouble amongst the tribes. The man, likewise, has the same right. He is at liberty to go to the encampment of his lady-love, and standing in front of her tent he can fire a gun in the air, thus signifying his love for her. The right ends there, and the girl has the right to refuse; yet the intention of the young man is made manifest in that way.

The Kochi tribal administration is positive, for each tribe has a hereditary elder or headman, but he is not a dictator, and must work through the advice of other elders of the tribe. All contact with the Government of the country is through this headman of the tribe, and should a Government official arrive at an encampment, he is the guest of the headman. To the extra "administrative" expenses of the headman – usually called Khan – each member of the tribe has to contribute one twentieth of his produce in kind, such as wool, butter, cheese, or any other item that a Kochi's stock yields. Several tribes may belong to one clan; thus there is a Head Khan, who is elected from amongst all the other Khans.

In case a dispute between two persons of the same Kochi tribe takes place, the Khan, attended by the elders of that tribe, settles the case, but if a difference between two neighbouring tribes should arise, then a third tribe from a distance is invited to judge the case. In the event of the disputants belonging to one and the same tribe being called up to fight for the defence of the tribe while their dispute is still unsettled, it is a matter of honour with them that they will not attempt to attack or harm each other during the course of their tribal defence war, and personal disputes are put in abeyance till the common danger is over, and this period and act of "suspension" is termed in the Kochi language

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Tazza. This pact is also undertaken between two tribes when they are attacked by a third. Likewise this rather elastic term of *Tazza* has again and again been used and its injunctions obeyed, when Afghanistan has been attacked by a foreign nation, when all tribal quarrels have been set aside, and the entire Kochi population mustered its strength to fight for Afghanistan.

All Kochi tribal matters are, generally speaking, to be settled according to the Kochi traditional laws, and although in some cases the Government has to lay down the law, yet it is an applied condition that the wrongdoer shall ask forgiveness of the aggrieved person, or the tribe, even though the punishment has been inflicted upon the criminal. So important is this begging of pardon from the aggrieved party, that in most cases, when money compensation is legally accepted, this seeking the forgiveness of the wronged person is nevertheless an essential condition of settlement. The Kochis consider that the pride of their race is much greater than any monetary consideration, for the conception of the crime is that it was committed, not against a person, but against the whole tribe, and thus the honour of the tribe has to be vindicated.

A call to arms is sounded by drum beating and by the playing of a shrill note on the flute. Hearing this call, the shepherds have to hasten with their flocks to the fold, men have to leave off their work, shoulder their guns, and betake themselves to the appointed field ready for battle, while the womenfolk get busy preparing food for the fighting men. Nor is this all, for the women's task is not finished with merely cooking the food, and taking rations to their men in the trenches, but they have to sing warlike songs to encourage the fighters; if needed, younger women join the ranks of the fighting men as combatants. One of the most inviolable rules of Kochi warfare is that the victors treat the women, children, and older men of their foes with considerable regard and respect, and never harm them. They are treated as "guests" of the victors.

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No booty is taken, nor are the men bearing the wounded, or the dead maltreated in any way.

These Afghan nomads passionately like their mode of life, and though every effort is being made to settle them in the reclaimed areas of the Helmand valley, and a large number have actually taken to the life of agriculturists, yet, by and large, no Kochi, who is a wanderer at heart, settles down to the sowing and reaping craft.

Apart from the rearing of sheep for wool, which is sold to the wool merchants in the larger Afghan towns, the Kochis have certain cottage industries; one is felt-making. Its manufacture is primitive, for sheep wool which is not good enough for the market is first of all sprinkled with water, and in this damp condition is combed and laid upon a large mat. There it is arranged in layers, and the Kochi women trample upon it for a whole day, and then it is left outside, under the starry sky. In the morning they begin to roll it, and continue to damp the mess. Again it is exposed to the night air, and during the next two days it is rolled and rolled again until it has a cohesion and form; within the next twenty-four hours, it is said to be set. Most often this felt is coloured with some herbal dye prepared by the Kochis.

White felt is used to make greatcoats for winter, for men. Another use to which the better type of sheep's wool is put is the spinning of a kind of thick wool fabric called *Barak*, which is sold to the townspeople for overcoats. Then there is the *postin*, a greatcoat of sheepskin; the wool being inside and the outside highly embroidered in yellow or red silk. This work is executed on the yellow skin; this yellow colour being obtained by dyeing with the skin of the pomegranate. With the finest sheep's wool, the Kochis make small or large carpets, and rugs as well, many varieties of which are highly priced, even in Afghanistan.

Socks and gloves, too, are made from the better kind of sheep's wool; and patterns that are executed are not unlike those done in

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the Scottish Highlands, or amongst the Bakhtiari tribes of Persia. Although the Hazaras of the central Afghan Highlands are more skilled in this regard, the Kochi women's knitting is by no means crude or unattractive. The whole point is that the entire work, from the cleaning of wool to a finished pair of gloves, is done by the Kochi women in their encampments, and even the dye for these articles is made by them from the herbs of the areas that they traverse.

From the lambskins they make sandals, which are similar to the ones made in Peshawar, with the difference that the Kochi sandals (known as *Gauli* or *Charghi*) have a heel-covering and the Peshawar variety have none. Fox and wolf skins, also, are tanned by them, and fur is used in diverse ways, as they do not trap a large enough number of these animals to embark upon any kind of fur trade.

In addition to livestock raising, the Kochis also perform the function of inland transport, with their camels and other beasts of burden. The activity is undertaken for themselves, as well as for others. Large stocks of cotton are accumulated in the north of Afghanistan, awaiting transport to the markets of Pakistan, or to be carried to the Afghan factories in the south; or dried fruit might be sent to Quetta from Kandahar for the Indian or Pakistan market, and where motor transport is not available, the Kochis carry the merchandise to these distant points. Contrary-wise, they buy cotton piece goods from the bazaars of the neighbouring countries, notably from Pakistan, and sell them in the outlying villages, and sometimes even hold their own market days in remote valleys of Afghanistan, where cheap imported goods are sold to the farming communities. They are interested in investing their money in agricultural enterprises also, for they are known to help out a farmer in lean years, and have their loans paid back gradually in easy instalments in kind.

Physically, the Kochis are considered to be the healthiest folk

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in all Afghanistan, for their open-air life and hard work keeps them very fit, but they have their share of illness, notably malaria, because, as their winter habitat is in the south and south-east of the country, they are not always free from the scourge of this disease. They do not use the ordinary remedies for the fever, but drink a decoction of two herbs known as *Tarkha* and *Gungu*. These desert herbs are said to grow in the stony waste-lands of eastern and southern Afghanistan. The taste of the decoction is intensely bitter, but it is a powerful diaphoretic, and I have seen the felt of a patient in the morning to be so wet with the night's perspiration, that one would think he was soaked in water. The decoction is administered as hot as can be taken, and in three days the fever disappears, and the victim is ready to march with the rest again. As he is rendered palpably weak by the malarial attack, he is given a seat on a camel for a day or two. For all digestive troubles, the usual medicine is the powdered root of a herb, known as *Ghurust*, but for ordinary indigestion a weak solution of black pepper with chicken soup is said to be effective. They prepare a kind of ointment with white of egg, sheep's fat and unrefined sugar. This is applied to all wounds or sores. In cases when a bone has been broken, after setting, the limb is plastered with white of egg, when a thick coating of *Gur* – unrefined sugar – is applied; over this several layers of sheep's wool are wrapped. This bandage is kept on according to the age of the patient; for instance, if a person is twenty-five years of age, his wound must be wrapped up for twenty-five days.

Then a time comes, when the Kochis must depart for their winter quarters. It is generally in the middle of October, and the signs of snow are visible upon the high spurs of the Hindu Kush. Their various jobs are over. The new lambs arrived some months ago, and have grown fat on the grass of the deep Hindu Kush valleys. Young goats and camels have been added to their stock, and many of these are sold. Sheep wool has earned a satisfactory

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sum. Some small babies will be making their first journey eastwards, and one or two of the older members of the tribe will be left behind, with nothing to mark their last resting-place, save a heap of stones.

The day of the departure arrives. Everybody is up extra early. Nothing must be left to chance. All details must be worked out. There is no noise and little talk. Each member, man or woman, can turn a hand to any work to be done at the encampment. The animals are attended to last, segregated, while the household wares are collected. The children, never having had any toys, need no placating to keep out of the way. They know that they are expected to behave and do so. There is a hush of expectation over the whole settlement. Whatever is in the mind of each member about leaving and excitement at striking a new camp he keeps to himself. They are too accustomed to moving to show any emotion over it.

Each member is made responsible for knowing where some particular part of the camp equipment is packed. Each one is dressed for the long journey which lies before them, being particularly careful with regard to the security of the charms and amulets, which ensure their safety from seen and unseen evils on the road.

The mothers are never too harassed or too occupied to tie the blue beads round the new baby's neck and ankles. Perhaps, if it is a son after many daughters, she will make assurance doubly sure by dressing the infant in girl's clothes, so that any marauding evil might mistake his sex.

As the caravan gets into train and leaves the camping ground, and the camels, horses, cows, sheep and goats, men, women, children and watch-dogs file out on to the road, one is fascinated to watch the moving of a section of as hard-working and honest a community, as the great far-flung kingdom of Afghanistan can produce. They are nomads, but with a difference : one respects them.

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On a spur near the encampment, we found the remains of a castle with two walls standing to a height of ten feet and traces of a central citadel of some size. My companions estimated that it must have been one of the chain of forts defending the approaches to Ghor that were stormed by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, nine hundred years ago. In those days the Ghor or Sur dynasty ruled in Ghor and in Muhammed Suri, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi found a worthy opponent whose dynasty, in time, was to overthrow his own. The fort site was choked with debris of walls, clay and rubble, and I left my companions digging happily while I dozed in the sun; they were Afghans and used to uphill treks in the hot sun, but I was an effete American, brought up on ice-cream, hot dogs and air-conditioning! They awoke me at lunch-time and, burdened with sacks of specimens, we started down again for our hotel and lunch, but were ambushed by the nomads, who insisted on us lunching with them. They had watched the digging with interest and over lunch indicated a dozen similar ruins along the route we were following to Kandahar. They were a warm-hearted and delightful people, these Kochis, whose indulgence towards their children, common to all Afghans, borders on worship while they are still toddlers.

CHAPTER 12

Ghor, Home of the Champions Witchcraft and Superstition

I WOULD prefer to draw a veil over the trip from Farsi to Tiawara, centre of Ghor. We followed tracks that were indistinguishable from the rocky hillsides; in fact they *were* the hillsides!

We crossed a ridge over twelve thousand feet with a combination of luck, prayer, blasphemy, pushing, pulling and temporary insanity, brought upon by the rarefied atmosphere, I swear. Time and again the vehicles rolled backwards or tilted dangerously, and everyone had to leap out and steady them. One person had to walk behind each Land-rover with a baulk of timber to drop behind the back wheels at the first sign of slipping. From time to time we rested, but were in no condition to admire the majestic beauty of our surroundings, with gay clumps of red flowers dotting the slate-coloured hillsides. Practically every peak bore traces of ruined castles. As we surmounted each height, there was another facing us until we were reduced to robot-like trances. Then we reached the top and, unbelievably, everything lay below us. To the north, the Suri mountains and the east, the ruins of the huge castle of Pasangan, and below us lay the Yakhan Valley and Tiawara.

Ghor is dry and parched, for though the Farah Rud rises and is fed from the tributaries in the valleys around Tiawara, the valleys are steep, the rivers low and swift, and little can be done to channel water to fields that lie often on a higher level than the rivers.

As we descended, we happened upon a small stone cairn which,

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on examination, proved to be the grave of someone who had doubtless died on the road. Afghans usually like to be buried in their native part of the country, so it is possible that the dead man had been a nomad, and his clan were far from home. Talk got round to ghosts and hauntings, as we sat over our lunch. Hakim told me, for the others of course knew the folk tales, of the *madariall* or witch-vampire that haunts ruined places and deserted buildings. After death she rises from the tomb and inhabits a convenient ruin from which she preys upon the unwary. Since, according to the story, her feet are on backwards, and her eyes are set vertically instead of horizontally, she can't be difficult to identify.

Apparently she will jump on to people as they pass in the darkness, and once she gets her claws into them they die. No Afghan will pass through a deserted street, or near a ruin in the darkness, without a pious invocation for protection. Another Afghan ghost is the *shishak* who seems to have the distressing habit of attacking people and eating their liver with, naturally, fatal results.

Afghans, on the whole, believe in the existence of evil spirits and most of them carry a *tawiz*, a charm, which is usually a chapter from the Koran, or some holy relic, like a piece of the curtain that covers the Kaaba in Mecca. There are plenty of old men to be found in each town who write these charms and exorcise houses. Most of the magic is white magic, although there are those who practise the black variety. They court death by doing this, for villagers will kill them by stoning if discovered. The magician generally sells charms for love or death, but how much is due to the belief in his powers and how much to his actual powers I cannot say: I never needed the services of a wizard in Afghanistan for either of these purposes! An amusing story is told about the tradition that at a certain time on the "special night" in the month of Ramadan the whole of creation pays homage to the Creator; a flash of lightning lights up the world and at that time

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all prayers, made then, are heard and answered. They say that an old man, lying awake one night in Ramadan, saw a flash of light across his window and prayed fervently for a flock of sheep. In the morning he was overjoyed to hear a huge flock of sheep outside, so he quickly dressed and drove them into his yard. Unfortunately they belonged to a clan of passing nomads who showed, in no uncertain fashion, what they thought about sheep stealers. To complete his disillusionment he found that the flash of light was from the lantern of a neighbour returning home late!

That night we spent in the valley before Tiawara under canvas and I never slept better. Perhaps it was the tiredness of physical labour, or the pure air of the mountains, or the heavy supper, but I know that I leapt out of my sleeping-bag as the sun rose, ready for anything.

At Tiawara we elected to pitch our tents alongside the local governor's office, as the hotel could only offer us limited accommodation. My indefatigable companions wanted to examine the rosy coloured mountain of Chehil Abdal, a few miles from the city, and to climb it in the hope of finding something interesting. I had to remind myself that my original reason for coming to Afghanistan was to search for medicinal plants and here I was, a camp follower of an archaeological expedition. No, I said to myself sternly, I will spend the afternoon looking for these elusive plants in the low foothills around Tiawara. There was plenty of scope for my search, for the town lies in the centre of a valley formed by the waters of the Yakhan river. The valley is wide and fertile where the countless floods have laid down deep layers of rich silt. Flowers bloom in abundance and wild birds of every shape and size sing and cavort, seemingly unmindful of the proximity of human dwellings.

The relief of the area produces some contrasting colours. To the north lie the frowning black mountains of Tangi Chak and

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to the east are the Safed Koh or White Mountains. As I studied these ranges with a view to selecting a promising area to search, again and again my errant gaze was drawn to the cone-shaped peak of the Chehil Abdal, lying some miles from the town. The rocks that compose the peak are distinctly red in colour and for that reason alone they would stand out even if the peak were not the great height that it is.

I knew that my companions would be climbing this, so, excusing myself on the basis of the fact that there might be medicinal plants to be found there too, I followed with the intrepid Gulbaz trailing along behind. Normally he was not too interested in climbing, but he expressed himself ready to climb Chehil Abdal as it has a considerable aura of sanctity due to the Forty Hermits after whom it is named and who were said to have lived there. The peak itself, I was told, rises to a height of nearly 13,000 feet and the sanctuary is to be found on the very top.

The climb was hard but not dangerous, for the slope is gradual, and the rock face firm. Naturally, since Tiawara itself lies at a height of over ten thousand feet, I had only three thousand or so to climb until I met up with my companions eagerly digging in the ruins of a small building. Pausing only to thrust a small spade into my hands, they dug on and, perforce, I had to follow. Thinking to pay them back for their lack of sympathy for my exhausted state, I pretended to have found a small statue which I threw away with an exclamation of disgust. "Only marble," I said, "nothing precious." On hearing this they uttered cries of dismay and begged to know where I had thrown it. I promised to tell them if I could be excused digging for the rest of the day. They agreed, so I showed them a spot where I had flung the stone I had pretended was the idol. Feverishly they set to work raking and sieving while I laughed inwardly. For all that I was paid back, for soon afterwards they discovered a number of coins on the very spot, which they felt was sufficient recompense for having lost the idol.

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During the tea-break they told me an amusing story connected with the mountain. It appears that long ago a number of villagers decided that a glistening streak that could be seen on the precipitous side of the actual cone might be gold. The only way to ascertain was to lower one of their number down from the top for him to examine the vein. This was duly done and, as he was being pulled up again, he shouted out to them. "Brothers, it is gold, we have found gold." At this the village headman, not widely remembered for his penetrating intellect cried out, "Give thanks, brothers, to God. We are rich men." This was a noble sentiment indeed, except that it involved the raising of hands heavenwards and the releasing of the rope which held their companion. His fate on the valley floor some thousands of feet below was mercifully swift and, as a result, it is said that the anger of the forty saints will be vented upon anyone trying to exploit the gold.

Excused from my labours, I lounged on the hillside and swept the area below with my glasses. Throughout the wide valley small stone forts are dotted among the fertile fields. Nature's tableau is indeed colourful with the green and golden crops rising from the predominantly red soil. Here and there yellow melons dotted the auburn soil while stately poplars waved over the myriad of burns that criss-cross the valley floor. It is not surprising that the Yakhan Valley was one that was settled by the Aryan migrants from ancient Bakhtar some four thousand years ago. It was they who gave the area its ancient name of Ghor or Sur, meaning sun or heat. Afghan historians point to the famous Hill of Ghor which was the centre of sun worship, when the first Arab invaders entered Afghanistan.

Ghor must have indeed been the breeding-place of warriors *par excellence* for the legendary figures of Bastam, mentioned in the *Avesta*, Amir Krore, Amir Fulad and Malik Shams were born here in the shadow of Chehil Abdal. It was from here, too, that

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the Suri dynasty rose to take all Afghanistan and extend its borders far into India.

My archaeological companions, learned in the ancient history of their country, dwelt long upon the legendary warriors Sam, Zal and Rustam. According to legend the wife of Sam bore him a son in the shadow of the mountain upon which rested the next of the Simurgh or phoenix. The son had white hair, and the father abandoned the baby on the slopes of the mountain where it was found and reared by the phoenix. After some years Sam saw in a dream that his son was alive and, regretting his action, set out to find him. Arriving at the foot of the mountain, he asked the phoenix to return his child which it did, giving him a feather to protect him. The son, named Zal was the father of Rustam, the legendary hero of ancient Ariana.

Sitting in the sun, on a mountain that had a recorded history going back four thousand years, it was easy to imagine the mailed legions of ancient Ghor riding out from these forbidding peaks and smiling valleys to colonise and conquer.

Regretfully we descended at nightfall to our tents, which we discovered to be piled high with fruit and sweetmeats by the villagers. The people of the valley eat a cake known as *talkhak*, which is composed of equal parts of dried walnuts and dried mulberries pounded together into a hard cake. This, I can vouch, is very sustaining and must be bursting with protein and energy. It is very much in favour with local shepherds who must spend days and nights on the peaks during the lambing season, without being able to get any cooked food.

After our evening meal with the Governor who, in deference to my nationality, tuned in to the Voice of America broadcasting from Ceylon on his high-power short-wave receiver, we played chess far into the night. The chess played in Afghanistan is the Eastern or original version, which differs slightly from the game played in the West. I was beaten by everyone while the Governor

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beat everyone, although confessing he was regularly beaten by his wife. He described how his mother had selected his bride after having seen a nomad girl subduing a wild camel, and decided that this was the sort of girl who could keep her wayward son in check. "By God," he swore, "she did make a man of me, although she ruined me in the process!"

Early the next morning we turned out to watch a local fisherman netting fish in the placid waters of the Yakhan. The net is round, about fourteen feet in diameter, with small weights at regular intervals around the outer edge. The net is folded in segments, rather like a closed umbrella with a rope attached to the centre. The fisherman walks into the water up to his waist, then throws the net in such a way that it opens out fully just before it makes contact with the water. It sinks slowly to the bottom, trapping fish under it, and the fisherman walks to the bank pulling it gradually, so that the weights slide along the bed of the stream and the net is drawn up on to the bank with the fish secure inside. In still waters, the pulp of certain bulbs is scattered on the water and the doped fish rise to the surface to be netted or speared. Salting of fish is unknown, although there is considerable smoking done. On the whole though, Afghans prefer to get fish freshly caught and grilled.

We had decided to set off after lunch on our way, so my companions made a last foray up the mountain to collect specimens, while I wandered in the ramshackle bazaar of the town. By this time I had acquired more fluency in spoken Afghani Persian and was able to pass the time of day with the locals. They did not seem to be at all surprised at a foreigner knowing their language with reasonable fluency. As one old man put it, seemingly ingenuously, "After all, doesn't *everybody* speak Farsi? *Everybody I know* does!"

Just after lunch a message came from the Governor that the archaeologists were to make for Kandahar, instead of pursuing

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their way through Hazarajat. Apparently something of interest had been discovered near the city and they wanted details. There were a few long faces pulled at this, but on the whole no one was very much put out as it was certainly an easier journey and a more interesting one from my point of view. This meant crossing the headwaters of the Helmand River on the lower reaches of which the massive Helmand Valley Authority irrigation projects had been built by the American company Morrison-Knudson (Afghanistan) Limited.

CHAPTER 13

Zamindawar and Kandahar

THE AREA between Tiawara and Kandahar is known as Zamindawar. This could be loosely interpreted as “flat land”, and if this is indeed what it means, then it was named by someone with a very twisted sense of humour, for it is all up and down, and any flat spot is purely accidental. We reckoned three days’ easy going, but as it turned out, it took us five very hard days to get our Land-rovers over the mountains and rivers to Kandahar.

It’s not really necessary to dwell on the toll of those days nor was it pleasant enough to recall. Had it not been for the warm companionship and constant encouragement of my Afghan companions, I am sure I would still be there, stuck on some mountain peak, or my bleached bones would lie in some precipitous valley, mute witness to the softness of the West! Along suicidal tracks, across bridges composed of a couple of trees, through swirling sandstorms we ploughed, past stone forts, clay houses and black tents, at all of which we received open-handed hospitality and ministrations. Never were guides scarce; despite all the hardships there was always someone to accompany us, even although it meant a long and lonely tramp home. Never would one accept any reward, except perhaps some chocolate or a gaudy coloured handkerchief for a favourite child. Finally, thankfully, we struck the valley of one of the upper tributaries of the Arghandab and, following its twisting course on a road perched high on the hillside, debouched eventually into the Registan or Land of Sand that lies to the south-east of Kandahar. We

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camped in this howling wilderness overnight, so that we might make some sort of a respectable entry into the city the next morning. With five days' growth of beard, we looked like a bunch of pirates very likely to be received with a volley of fire from the local militia. I do not use the word "howling" to describe the desert in any poetical sense; we were, in fact, surrounded by hyenas, who howled and yapped like demons all through the night. I did take a couple of pot-shots at their shadowy forms, but did not score a hit in the dancing light of our camp-fire.

The next day we entered the city to find it decorated and beflagged in anticipation of the arrival of the Prime Minister later in the day. By an unfortunate series of coincidences a young officer, far on the outskirts, mistook our convoy for the Prime Minister's and saluted, and before anything could be done, unit after unit presented arms as we roared past. To our horror we saw that the units which had been passed by were now falling in on the road in preparation for return to barracks. The joke had gone far enough, so we had to stop and explain to a more senior officer, who sent a messenger scurrying back to pull the troops into place again. From then on we drove slowly so that we could be easily identified. Being saluted by an entire garrison is nice, but being held responsible for the collapse of the P.M.'s visit was a very different matter.

Kandahar is a city of great antiquity yet, apart from the old citadel, most of it is newly constructed, clean and orderly. I was told that the old, straggling, overcrowded city had been destroyed when Premier Daud was Governor. Indeed the broad, straight avenues and treelined squares made this an attractive oasis in the wilderness of mountain and sand that encloses the city on all sides. The water that transforms the area comes from the Arghandab river, one of the two great rivers in the area which make up the Helmand Valley Authority which has transformed

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the South Western Desert into many square miles of arable land : fertile for the first time in thousands of years. The clock has been turned back, for in bygone days, this was the granary of Asia, but changes in the water table and the invasions of the Mongols under Genghiz Khan transformed it into desert.

Apart from its importance commercially, for it stands at the head of the Khojak Pass into Pakistan and the Pakistani railhead at Chaman, Kandahar has a very great religious importance, for in a shrine there lies the cloak of the Prophet Muhammed enclosed in a silver casket.

How the cloak got to Kandahar is lost in the mists of antiquity. Many tales are told about it and it is quite conceivable that it could indeed be such, for the Afghans of old were not people to take things at their face value, especially things of religious value. No non-Moslems have ever seen the cloak, indeed it is only taken out in times of grave danger or national emergency and then only by male descendants of the Prophet. The building in which it is housed is one of the few remaining *busts* or sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Anyone fleeing from the law or from vengeance who claims sanctuary inside the four walls of the building is safe from all harm. People say that if a man seeks this sanctuary he must be innocent, for no guilty person would dare to enter. Be that as it may, the Government does not much like this, as there are several political refugees inside the building whom they dare not touch.

My travelling companions left me to go to the Provincial Archaeological Department to see what they had been called to examine, while I wandered in the bazaars. I came across a group of people listening avidly to a professional story-teller, who was reciting a tale of the valour of one of the legendary heroes of the Province: Ahmad Shah, who had delivered Kandahar from Persian rule in the seventeenth century. You could tell that the listeners knew the story well, but this is always the same in

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Afghanistan. People will always listen to a story however well they know it. As I joined the group the man was ending the story with a vivid account of the battle between the hero and a Persian champion. He was playing both parts magnificently and we were all enthralled. When he came to an end, he passed round the hat. I dropped in a few small coins and congratulated him. So overjoyed was he to find a foreigner who not only spoke the language but enjoyed the stories, that he announced that he would tell another one free! This he did and, much to everyone's amusement it was a long-drawn-out tale of a foreigner who was mistaken for an Afghan, and, as a result, had to undergo rough and ready treatment by local quacks because they said he was so pale that he must be ill.

The story was not ill-meant and I enjoyed it and afterwards, while I was being chaffed by the locals, I noticed a disturbance on the edge of the crowd which fell back to allow a young man through, whom I recognised as the Khan of Paghman. He was accompanied by a burly man in the uniform of a full General and, of course, the omni-present bodyguard. I was introduced to the General who was the Governor of the Province and apparently related to the Khan. "I saw you in the crowd," he related, "and thought I would have a word with you. How do you like Kandahar?" I replied that I had only just arrived, but was impressed by what little I had seen. Together we walked slowly through the main avenue with an occasional man or woman rushing out to kiss his hands and ask his blessing. As we talked his hands played incessantly with a string of green prayer beads that most Afghans affect. It was only subsequently that I discovered that it was composed of ninety-nine emeralds, although ordinary ones are amber or polished pebble.

He asked me if I had seen the famous *Chehil Zeena* (Forty Steps), which is a prehistoric fortress cut out of the living rock on a peak commanding the city. Later, he explained, this had been

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made into a gun platform, where a minute gun signalled noon each day and gave the signal for the beginning and end of the fast each day during the month of Ramadan. As we parted he asked me to dine with him at the Governor's palace the same night.

When I joined my companions at lunch at the Kandahar Hotel, a very clean and pleasant Government-run hotel, they asked if I minded eating with them, as I was accustomed to such exalted company. I replied that as long as they minded their manners I would not report them!

In the afternoon I sought out the Post Office as I had not written to anyone for so long, they must have thought that I had been captured by the brigands. The clerks were amiable and helpful when I asked for stamps of all denominations to festoon my letters, for I knew that Afghan stamps would be welcome in many of my friends' collections. One young fellow told me an amusing story of the days when stamps were first introduced into Afghanistan in the reign of Sher Ali Khan, a contemporary of Queen Victoria. It appears that an old man wanted to send a letter from Kandahar to his son in Mazar-i-Sherief and applied to the Post Office for the new "amulet" that he was to affix to his letter to protect it from evil spirits on the way. When told the price, he protested that amulets only cost half that in the bazaar and that he would affix one of those. Told that the bazaar amulets would not be accepted, he was enraged, but was mollified when told that the King's "amulet" protected the letter, even against the highwaymen who frequented the roads. "It must be powerful indeed for several of my letters, protected against flood and landslide though they were, were taken by robbers." Sher Ali's stamps were made from dies cut out of immense rubies, which are still to be found in large quantities in the mountains of Badakhshan. The dies are still preserved in the Post Office Museum and I made a mental note to see them when I returned to Kabul.

Part of the old citadel contains a covered bazaar where cloth is

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sold. It is like a veritable Aladdin's cave with heaps of silks and satins and the arresting gold thread embroidered cloth, *arakchin*, at which Afghan women excel. It is interesting the way, in the East, crafts tend to concentrate together, and for very good reasons. For instance near the main gate of the citadel are to be found the engravers all together in one short lane. This stems from the days when conscripts arrived in batches and were admitted to the main citadel through the Great Gate, where they were issued with their pay-books. Since the vast majority of them could not write, they had to equip themselves with a cheap signet ring to sign for their pay and equipment. Similarly stationers and letter writers are to be found near courts of justice to write applications and to read judgements to the illiterate masses. Carpet merchants will be found in any city near the gateway nearest to the north of the country from whence the carpets come. They station themselves there in order to meet the caravans bringing the carpets and to buy them on the spot in order to avoid having to pay transport costs from the centre of the city to their shops.

Some of the best fruit in Afghanistan – and that means some of the best in the world – comes from Kandahar. Pomegranates are the size of small cannon balls and weigh, on an average, easily three pounds each. Afghans eat them by squeezing them softly all over, then making a small cut and sucking out the juice. Having tried it this way, I can witness how refreshing they can be. Peaches, apples, grapes (of which there are seventy-eight varieties in Afghanistan), melons and watermelons are abundant and dirt-cheap. One buys a melon in Afghanistan “by knife”. This means that a small segment is cut out so that you can taste whether it is good or not. If it is not to your liking, you do not have to buy, but can select another and the process goes on until you find one you like.

Kandahar is a much more typical Afghan city than Kabul. It retains its old-world character, despite modernisation, and the

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people are more friendly and forthright. The streets reverberate with the traditional cries of pedlars that have not changed in centuries. For instance the knife-grinder still calls, "Swords, sharpen your swords, for the enemy is approaching", and the pepper seller, "It bites, friends, it bites but it's good!"

It gets very hot in the city in the early afternoon and for that reason most houses have a *zer khana* which is, in effect, a cellar with an interesting arrangement of air ducts, so that only air which has been cooled by passing over blocks of ice enters. The hotel did not have one, so I spent an hour before tea bathing in the marble pool which is fed by a mountain spring and is cold and bracing in the heat. Other guests at the hotel included another American, who was for ever asking where the Afghan women were as he had seen so few of them. He seemed to consider that he had a right to see them! I think he had a fixation about them because he had bought a long veil costume and was photographing an American woman wearing it. It appeared that he was a former foreign correspondent, had been an anti-Communist propagandist and had written a book about Communism. He was typical of the pushing type of American who put up the backs of people everywhere. He tried to interest me in a trip to the Helmand Valley to see the dams, but I politely declined as I could see that he was unpopular with Afghans at the hotel and I did not want this unpopularity to rub off on me.

Tea in Afghanistan is a proper meal, rather like English "high tea". Eggs, cakes, biscuits, fruit, pudding and "elephants' ears" are forced on you. Elephants' ears are wafer-thin biscuits, about six inches in diameter, sprinkled with powdered pistachio nut. My companions had returned from a site where a bulldozer, cutting a drainage ditch, had uncovered some marble slabs with inscriptions on them. They were very excited, for they hoped to find possibly a tomb, or even the traces of a temple of Graeco-Buddhist origin. They were hoping that they would be allowed

to work the site themselves and had asked Kabul for permission. They were afraid that the French archaeological mission, working in the south-west "Desert of Death" might trespass. They thought little of the French whom they described as "popular" archaeologists who invited socialites and journalists to visit them on their digs. The Afghans harked back to the days when the great Hackin was digging in Afghanistan and Professor Codrington of London was roaming the country, hot on the track of sites vital to the archaeological history of the country.

I learned that in the field of archaeology, too, civil service red tape and the intrigues of self-made experts in Kabul had had a stultifying effect. For many years a small select group had dominated archaeology in the country and these men, devoid of degrees or experience, prevented even such notable experts as Codrington from working there. They quoted as an example the fact that the wretched Kabul Museum had practically nothing, although great and important discoveries had been made. No one knew for sure where the relics had gone, although most of them had a shrewd idea. It seemed a pity that these young enthusiasts, trained abroad, were not able to get governmental authority to supervise work that they had been trained at Government expense to do. When I expressed these sentiments they laughed. "This is the Afghan way," they said ruefully, "valuable men are wasted." A top-notch irrigation engineer is made an ambassador, while the Helmand Valley Authority is in the hands of the Provincial Director of Agriculture, who used to be Director of Foreign Publications of the Press Department. A man sent to Germany to become an expert on potatoes and the extraction of alcohol from them is walking the streets unemployed. The last Minister of Education was a bacteriologist of great ability, yet there is no faculty in the country for studying bacteria or producing vaccines. The Minister of Mines was an electrical engineer, relieved of his post in the Afghan Government Electricity Monopoly. When I

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interjected that surely all this was not important since Ministers are the official heads of the Ministries and do not necessarily have to be experts, they disagreed. In Afghanistan the Minister is the effective head of his Ministry and makes and implements policy. If he does not know anything about the work of his Ministry, how can it function efficiently? It appears that while the Prime Minister has the last word in matters of importance, the individual Minister has a considerable measure of independent authority which can be used for good or ill depending on his ability and grasp of the work of his Ministry. They spoke bitterly of their own field. "Officially we come under the Department of the Press whose Head, surprisingly enough, is a former journalist and although that helps the Press, it hinders our work."

Suddenly I remembered my date with the Khan of Paghman and had to rush and dress before the Governor's car came to collect me. It was only a few steps to the Governor's palace but I had a full escort, for as my friends subsequently explained I was the guest of the Khan and as such was entitled to the consideration traditionally afforded to his guests. On arrival I was very conscious of my crumpled "drip dry" suit among the smart uniforms, but the Governor put me at my ease, having evidently noticed my embarrassment, by telling a story from *The Subtleties of the Incomparable Mullah Nasruddin* who, invited to a banquet, went in his everyday clothes but was rebuffed at the gate by the guards who did not recognize the shabby figure. He went home and dressed in all his finery and was admitted with honour. During the dinner he was seen to be eating one spoonful and pouring another over his clothes. After this had gone on for some time, his host asked him the reason for this strange behaviour. He replied, "Since it was my robe that got me entry, it is only just that it should have its share."

The food that was served that night was the most delicious that I had ever eaten anywhere. Every sort of meat from venison to

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snipe was represented and the mounds of food gave way to mounds of fruit and reduced me to a state bordering on the moribund, so much did I eat. At last it was over and we adjourned to a vast room where green tea was served and musicians performed. The orchestra, playing of course traditional instruments, played requests, and at one point there was a great burst of laughter as one of the Khan's suite with a wicked smile called out the name of a song. Intrigued, I asked my neighbour the reason for the merriment and he told me that the Paghman war song had been asked for. Now this is the unofficial anthem of Paghman and it makes quite clear that Paghman only recognises the authority of Kabul out of convenience, and details remorselessly exactly what Paghmanis think of the Kabul Government of whatever time. The playing of this was not liked by the Government and placed the Governor in an awkward position. For although he was a Paghmani himself, he did represent the King. As it happened, he was equal to the occasion for he quietly removed his insignia of office and joined wholeheartedly in the roaring anthem. That the entire group were Paghmanis could not be doubted by the fact that one or two of the more independent stood to attention. From some of the lines that I caught I can understand how the Government feels for they included phrases like, "O Paghmanis, now's the time, Kabul is a rich prize." Each line ended with the phrase roared out with a will, "It's up to us." It has a catchy rhythm and I can still hear it ringing in my ears.

During a lull in the conversation I asked the Governor if he had met my fellow American guest at the hotel. He made a gesture of distaste. "I prefer to think of pleasant things," he replied. "The man is full of pomposity and pride. I wish someone would remind him that he is a guest in our country." I was uncomfortable for I felt that it reflected somehow on me. Fervently I wished that either he or I were a thousand miles away. Besides this, the evening passed most pleasantly and I was happy to accept the invitation

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to visit the Helmand dams the next day with the Governor after the departure of the Khan. The escort duly took me back to the hotel and saw me installed safely in my room. If I had come to harm while in their care they would have suffered dire penalties. It appears that if they have to escort someone for a long distance and hand him over to someone else they get a receipt. "Received Mr. Z alive and in good health," which clears them.

The next morning I was awoken by pounding on my door after what seemed to be a couple of hours' sleep. It was, in fact, 6 a.m. and the Governor was due to leave at 6.30 to get his tour of inspection over before the midday heat. Hurriedly, I dressed and shaved and was escorted, this time by the Governor's men, to the Palace and seated in a Land-rover which was to be the gubernatorial chariot. Punctually at 6.30 the General appeared and we roared off in vast clouds of dust for the first dam, the massive Arghandab, some twenty miles north-east of the city.

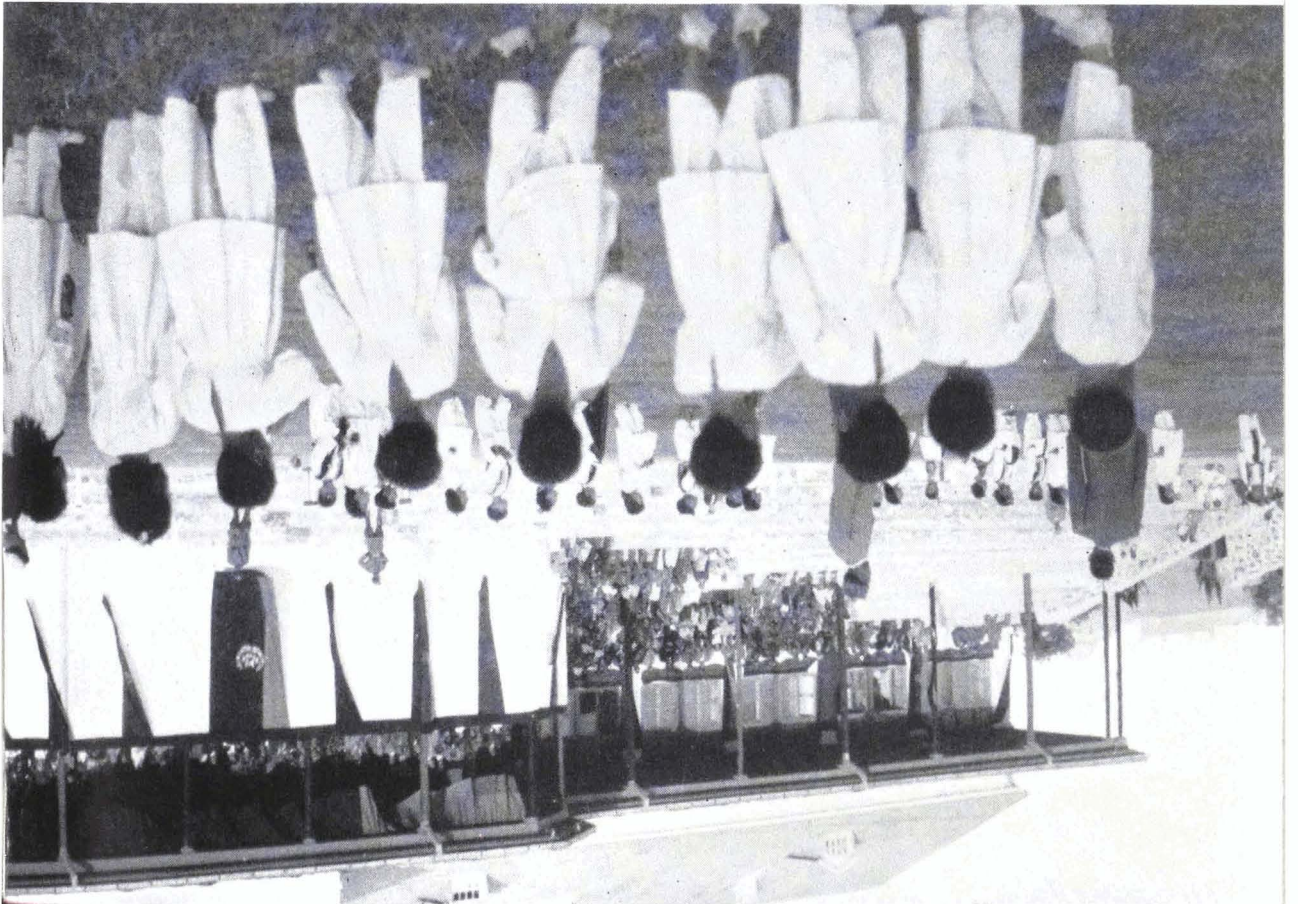


13. *Above* Sardar Sultan Yar Muhammed Khan, a nomad chief. *See p. 164.* *Below* A nomad family camps in their traditional black tents near their new home.





14. *Above Children's Day in Kabul. Below Boys selling flags for the Red Crescent, the Afghan equivalent of the Red Cross.*



CHAPTER 14

Water for the Thirsty Land

THE DAM has transformed the countryside. Prior to this the waters of the Arghandab flowed into Persian Seistan and were lost to Afghan agriculture which was in any case practically non-existent in the south-west. With the coming of this dam, a vast lake has been piled up in a deep canyon stretching for a score of miles and feeding a number of canals and irrigation systems in the parched wilderness.

One of the earliest activities had been to “leach” the soil free of its high alkaline concentrate that prevented the growth of anything but sparse bush. The top soil, engineers told me, is of great depth and in places where the leaching has been successful, crops of great wealth have been raised. When I was there, I was told that more than six hundred thousand acres were under cultivation as only the first step in the programme. It is eventually hoped to irrigate more than ten times this amount.

The distant view of the Arghandab dam is breathtaking. It rears up from the sombre black walls like a white giant with the lake stretching away behind into the distance like the giant’s train. Twin plumes of water roar from the face where water is led off from the main reservoir to keep the level. Turbines will be set in these orifices to provide gigantic supplies of electricity for the entire national grid.

With the building of these monsters, among the largest earth dams in the world, protests came from Iran who relied upon the Arghandab and Helmand waters for her agriculture in south-

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east Iran. Tempers ran high because Iran had got used to having all the water and she had somehow forgotten that the rivers rose in Afghanistan and thus Afghanistan was entitled to the lion's share. An international commission, asked for by Afghanistan, adjudicated that three-fifths of the water should be Afghanistan's and the remainder for Iran. The Afghans accepted this decision but the Persians still grumble. They should consider themselves lucky for, so the story goes, in the days when Hashim Khan was Premier of Afghanistan he diverted the waters completely from Iran and even stationed men along the banks to scoop the water out with buckets rather than allow it to flow over the border.

The American construction company that had built the dam had also built quite a sizeable town for their workers and this is now inhabited by Afghan officials and workers of the Helmand Valley Authority. The running of the irrigation is now entirely in the hands of the Afghans who have adapted themselves remarkably well to this science new to them.

Spending a couple of hours there caused us to drive hell-for-leather to Kajakai on the Helmand, another sixty miles farther on. We arrived in time for a massive lunch laid on by the engineers. The food, as usual, left me feeling like an anaconda after a particularly succulent goat, and it was all I could do to keep up with the Governor's party as they toured the site. Kajakai is bigger and taller than Arghandab and has a lake of greater length backed up against the dam.

I was amused to see a "No Hunting" sign in both English and Persian on the approach road to the dam. I did not realise the full significance of this until I reached the top and saw the myriad of ducks and other water birds including a blue crane on the edges of the massive lake. Afghans are insatiable hunters and were it not for the prohibition, there would be mayhem on the placid waters. American engineers are proud of the fact that to build this dam they actually removed a mountain piecemeal that stood in the way

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of the construction. Water from this dam will be carried far and wide by a new network of canals – the Boghra and Nadir Shahi – which will indeed, in the words of American water men, “bring water to the thirsty land”. Afghanistan paid millions of hard-earned dollars for these dams and there are some who bemoan the expense but surely it was an investment in the future of the country for landless peasantry and nomads are being settled on the reclaimed lands in large numbers and the standard of living of the south-west will rise out of all proportion to the size of the initial investment when finally the hydro-electric power flows forth, for industry and new crops swell the markets of the four corners of this land.

At Kajakai too the former American town had been handed over to the Afghans who were naturally overjoyed at the modern kitchens and their wives were enraptured by the washing machines and spin driers that you cannot use in Kabul because of the weak electric current.

We spent the night at Kajakai. After supper I went for a walk along the top of the dam and gazed on the little township whose lights were mirrored on its silvery surface. The ever-present sentry fingered his rifle. Whether he was afraid I might hurl him into the water two hundred feet below or whether he was debating if he could get away with a little poaching, I don't know.

Once again, at the crack of dawn, we started back to Kandahar where we arrived in time for lunch. The Governor was bemoaning the fact that we had not passed any gazelle, which abound in the desert. He told me that once, while travelling in a closed jeep, he had been so excited by a herd crossing his path that he had smashed the windscreen in order not to waste time getting out to fire.

My archaeological friends had received instructions to stay in Kandahar for a month and investigate the new site. They were very bucked because no mention was made of the French. I

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decided to push on to Kabul in leisurely stages via Ghazni and Mukur, and Gulbaz was once more in his element. During the past few days he had been kept rather in the background and he felt it keenly.

On the road once more we passed great Kochi caravans maintaining great discipline despite their wayward and unruly herds.

Later that day we stopped at an encampment for water and were not allowed to proceed until we had been fed with hot loaves and fresh milk. The headman would not, of course, have accepted payment but he did allow me to take his photograph. I promised to send it on to him and asked his name. "Sardar Sultan Yar Muhammed Khan," he replied. Now both Sardar and Sultan are titles of considerable importance, somewhat out of place in a Kochi caravan. When I queried this, his companions laughed. "His father had nothing to leave him so he gave him two great names." I solemnly promised to send the photographs to him which I did. I often wonder if the "Paramount Grand Duke Yar Muhammed Khan, c/o the Caravanserai of the Thousand Camels, Kabul" ever got them.

Mukur, first big town between Kandahar and Kabul is only really a halting-place for caravans. It is a sprawling town built around the massive citadel and has few redeeming features. We had a quick snack at a clean hotel as we wanted to make Ghazni that night and the road is pretty awful. During the day I had been doing some of the driving and my eyes ached from concentration and my arms felt leaden. How these long-distance drivers keep it up day after day I will never know.

We made Ghazni just after midnight ready to fall into our beds in the excellent Government hotel. The manager had been warned of our arrival by telephone and had steaming baths ready for us. I had refused food, but after I had bathed and felt a bit recovered I regretted my hasty refusal and was ushered into the dining-room where soup and great bowls of yoghurt awaited. The manager

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had had previous experience of the efficacy of a hot bath on a weary traveller.

Ghazni, lying at nearly eight thousand feet, commands the last pass between Kandahar and Kabul and is of considerable strategic importance. As in all Afghan cities, the town is built around the central fortress which is of immense size. Its proud boast is that it has never been taken, and looking at the walls some eighty feet in height and sixty feet thick, practically untouched by time, I was not surprised. Some writers have called Ghazni the birthplace of the great Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni who invaded and held India some eighteen times in the eleventh century. This is not so, because the town takes its name from the area and not vice versa.

Sultan Mahmud was known throughout Asia as *But Shikan* or "Idol Breaker" for he roamed far and wide with his invincible armies seeking out idols and breaking them. They tell the story of the idols that he took from the great Hindu sanctuary of Somnath, together with the ivory gates. It appears that the gold and the jewels from this temple alone needed sixty camels to transport it. The Hindu priests asked for their idol back and Mahmud kept them waiting months without giving an answer. Eventually he informed them that they had eaten their idol as he had had it ground down and fed to them in their food. From this event stems the habit of orthodox Hindus of hawking and spitting first thing every morning as if to rid themselves of the awful sin of having consumed their deity.

Ghazni is important too as it is the nearest town in Afghanistan to the turbulent tribes of Waziristan and Tochi who have always been a thorn in the side of the British and are now turning their malevolence on the Pakistanis. With the independence of Pakistan, the Karachi Government declared that it was withdrawing the army garrisons from Wana and Razmak, formerly British cantonments, as a gesture of goodwill. The ensuing upsurge of

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anti-Pakistani feeling called for a full-scale war against the Waziris and the use of aircraft before the forts were regarrisoned.

Over lunch, the local director of the Press, whom I had met while buying one of the famous ankle-length embroidered fur coats made locally, laughed and shared the joke with his friends when I asked him what the phrase "*Shahr i Kharbuza*" (City of Pumpkins) referred to. I had heard this phrase repeated over and over again apropos of inefficiency or delay. He explained that there is a mythical city in Afghan folklore in which everything is topsy-turvy and is alluded to by Afghans when they want to refer to anything of surpassing inefficiency. He told me the famous story of this city which illustrates the point :

The Sultan had ordered the construction of a ceremonial arch of marble through which he would be able to ride. When the arch was finished, he rode through, but his turban was knocked off by its lowness. He was enraged and ordered the Chief of Police to bring the builder to the palace yard where a gallows had been set up. When asked if he had anything to say before execution, he pleaded that it was the fault of the mason who had provided him with marble blocks smaller than he had ordered. The builder was released and the mason brought before the Sultan. He in turn blamed the carpenter who he claimed had made him a faulty rule, so the carpenter was arrested but insisted that he was not to blame as the Sultan himself had approved the new rule. The people called for the execution of the Sultan so he was led on to the gallows, but the rope was too short to go round his neck. There was no more rope so a search was made for a man who was tall enough to reach the noose. The Chief of Police was the only man tall enough so he was hanged. Thus, if you comment that it is strange that a hydro-electric engineer should be appointed Afghan Ambassador, people will shrug and say "*Shahr i Kharbuza!*"

From Ghazni to Kabul the road is not too bad considering one

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passes over the Kabul river which rises in the heights of Hazarajat. The road bridge is regularly swept away and rebuilt because the waters in spring are reinforced by the melting snows until eventually a tidal wave sweeps down the half-empty channel carrying all before it. Until some form of flood control can be established on the higher reaches of the river, this will continue to happen.

The telephone line follows the road, a miserable double line subject to the attention of wind and weather and the unwelcome interference of beasts and men. Stationed at intervals along the road in miserable huts are telephone linesmen whose duty it is to see that the line is operative at all times and in all weather. There is an army line too which works more efficiently, but this is only used for military traffic. I was told that your ability to speak to Kandahar or Herat depends on your status. If you call from Kabul and are told the line is engaged, you inquire who is using it. If your rank is higher than his, then you order the operator to cut him off and connect you and so it goes on. Sometimes the line is so bad that your message must be passed on from linesman to linesman until the garbled message arrives at its destination. The classic story is told of the time that Hashim Khan when he was Prime Minister phoned Herat to ask what the news was. The reply which reached him by linesman relay was, "30,000 cabbages being cooked tonight", although it had started out as, "The Governor is leaving on a tour of inspection tonight". We are not told of Hashim's reaction to this but I am sure it was violent.

CHAPTER 15

Education and Upbringing

A FEW MORE ups and downs and Kabul was in sight. We were entering the city from the south-east through the new suburb of Carta Char, past the new Kabul University and the tomb of the great Afghan thinker and politician Syed Jamaluddin Afghani. Past the Afghan Alcatraz – Deh Mazang – and through the narrow pass between the mountains of Sher Darwaza – the Lion Gate, and Azmani – the Cloudy, and into the Jadi Maiwand, thence to the hotel to be greeted with affection and goodwill.

Afghans show sincere relief when greeting friends returning from long journeys. Perils are very real on the road and it is indeed a relief to see one's friends back safe. I was put up in my old room and regaled with all the Kabul news. So-and-so had married and so-and-so had been dismissed and such-and-such a new article was on sale in the bazaar. One choice bit of news was that the Minister of Finance, General Abdul Malik Logari, had been dismissed for corruption and suspected activities against the Government. This was big news for Kabul because the General had been handpicked by Premier Daud for the job, although he was not a popular choice. General opinion was that he had been a bit too high-handed and Daud saw in him a possible threat to his despotic rule. The stigma of treason meant that no trial was necessary and he could be jailed for a long period without trial. The new Minister was to be Ghulam Muhammed Sherzad, former Minister of Mines and closely related to the Prime Minister. The new Minister of Education was to be Doctor Popol who had a degree

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in Education from Germany and who had been Under-Secretary for Education for some years. Opinion was expressed that he could not certainly be a more indifferent Minister than the old one who was appointed to Japan as Ambassador despite his degree in bacteriology.

I decided to write a long report to my employers, after interviewing the Department of Agriculture, to supplement my own meagre notes. If I had known what I know now I would not have wasted my time, but asked a few old greybeards whose store of knowledge would certainly have been in excess of that of the Department of Agriculture.

The Department is situated near the University and is, to put it mildly, incompetent, unrealistic and disinterested. Primarily they are interested in increasing the reports, figures and useless drivel that is supplied to them by their provincial representatives. They know nothing of statistics, crop control or rotation, and as far as giving advice or encouragement to farmers they are hopeless. Officials of the F.A.O. Mission to Afghanistan avoid the Department like the plague, as their slightest request is bogged down, delayed and even sabotaged by the clerks and petty officials to whom their job is merely a sinecure and not a profession, nor is it even of interest to them.

My request for information on medicinal drugs was met with open-mouthed amazement and then wise nods. Yes, there were such plants in Afghanistan. Where and in what quantity and of what sort, they did not know. No, they could not suggest an alternative source of information. Perhaps the Ministry of National Economy could help. I knew perfectly well that they could not, but that the Department just wanted me off their hands. It was depressing even to remain in the building. I breathed a prayer that these people would exercise no control of the Helmand Valley Authority when it was completed. The havoc they could wreak would be truly appalling.

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This state of affairs is typical in too many departments in Afghanistan which have no trained experts or administrators. Slowly, trained men are being introduced, although this innovation is being fought, naturally, tooth and nail by the entrenched ineffectuals.

Fortunately I was able to find out a lot by just gossiping with traders in the spice bazaar and the medicinal herb sellers, deep in the old bazaar. These men had a profound store of knowledge and prescribed for the numerous ills of the poor. Although the Government clinics and dispensaries treated the sick, there were always plenty who preferred to take their own time-honoured remedies rather than submit themselves to the unknown value of foreign medicines. It was from one of these men, a white-bearded, venerable old Jelalabaddi, that I learned of the existence of leprosy among the Hazaras in the central massif of Hazarajat. It appears that although this disease is not widespread, the unhygienic conditions in which they live does contribute to its spread. He told me that the disease is greatly feared and once the characteristic "lion face" symptoms made the condition quite clear, the sufferer would drown himself in one of the deep mountain pools. The unclean habits of this minority, plus their heretical religious beliefs, explain why the average Afghan does not relish contact with them. It was only a hundred years ago that the power of these people was broken by the terrible Amir Abdul Rahman. Before that time they raided out of the mountains and generally made a nuisance of themselves.

My contacts with this man and his friends who often dropped in for tea and a chat gave me an interest in visiting Nuristan which lies in the north-east of Afghanistan to the north of Jelalabad. This province, up to the last years of the nineteenth century called Kafiristan or Land of the Unbelievers, was renamed Nuristan (Country of Light) after a punitive expedition against these fanatic mountain people, again by the indefatigable Abdul Rahman.

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The history of the Nuristanis is shrouded in mystery. Their religion, before their conversion, was a form of animism and included such ceremonies as libations with wine, semi-worship of the dead and the deification of national heroes. They are a blond people whose folklore tells of a great migration of most of their people westwards. This has led many travellers and anthropologists to consider that they could be the original Aryans. They provide a fertile subject for study, for their own language, Pashai, has been unaffected by outside contact and they do not marry outside Nuristan.

One of the greatest soldiers of the past half-century in Afghanistan was General Wakil Khan, descendent of one of the great Khans of Nuristan. I was fortunate enough to meet one of his sons, Ibrahim, an officer in the cavalry. When I expressed my interest in Nuristan he immediately invited me to accompany him there the next week as he was going on home leave. This was a heaven-sent opportunity, as normally the Government will not allow foreigners to enter Nuristan officially because it is a military area on the border of Pakistan. A secondary reason is that the people are now such fanatic Moslems that they might kill an unbeliever. However, if one is sponsored by a Nuristani, especially one as prominent as Ibrahim, one would have no difficulty. I agreed to use my jeep and he asked me if I could ride. When I replied that I could, he smiled. "You will have plenty of opportunity of proving your ability."

The next few days I devoted to making out a massive report to New York with a detailed map. Pompously I added a long string of "recommendations" which I hoped I might be given the task of implementing. They included the subsidising of farmers in certain areas to produce medicinal herbs and a guaranteed purchase price. I also asked for a mandate to negotiate with the Department of Trade a barter agreement under which a company would be set up by Afghans to exploit medicinal herbs in

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Afghanistan, export them to my company and receive consumer goods, machinery or what have you in exchange. I knew that the Government prefers to barter than to allow businessmen to bank foreign currency abroad. I hoped that if such an agreement were implemented, I might be able to make a more permanent home in the country that I had come to like so much.

Although I had been in Afghanistan quite a short time, I had seen much of the country and met people of different races and positions in society and quite suddenly it dawned on me that I liked them very much, respected their attitude towards life and felt happy in their presence. I am not talking, again I must stress, of the "professional" civil servants in Kabul who are probably among the world's most devoted procrastinators. No, I am speaking of the country people, the shopkeepers and the ordinary people with no political affiliations or prejudices but with deep and unaffected piety and sincere patriotism. It is an interesting phenomenon to discover that you are looking at things from an Afghan point of view, thinking how new world events will affect Afghanistan and feeling righteous anger at any affront to Afghanistan's dignity. I suppose the more uncharitable will say it is an indication of having "gone native", but if this is going native, it suits me. I did not have to lower my hygienic or moral standards nor partake in any savage rituals or revolting meals. In fact I had to pay conscious attention to my manners, my actions and my conversation to avoid giving offence even to those of low social position. Afghans are a people of great natural dignity and politeness and one must mind one's P's and Q's while in their company. Loud conversation, insincerity, untruthfulness, pushfulness, in fact any "unsocial" activity, marks you as a boor whose company is not sought.

Children are indulged until the age of about seven when they are gradually taught "behaviour" which gives them a sound basis for life. There is none of the nonsense as we have in the

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United States about the upbringing of the child and in Afghanistan there is no – repeat no – juvenile delinquency. In the United States a murderer and rapist can get off with a light sentence if he is under twenty and his psychiatrist can be persuaded to testify that he only behaves in this way because at the age of two and a half he was denied a lollipop by his grandfather's second wife and so he developed a "trauma". This sort of nonsense has demonstrably undermined the moral fibre of the United States and made her less fit to fight the battle of survival. I do not advocate the torture or beating of children but I do believe that discipline, applied gently at an early age, can and does produce a better citizen conscious of his responsibilities towards society.

CHAPTER 16

Nuristan, the Home of the Aryans

THE JOURNEY to Nuristan, in common with most journeys of any length in Afghanistan, was hard but rewarding, for the breathtaking beauty of the mountains, capped even in summertime with snow, was its own reward.

From Kabul one takes the great east highway to Jelalabad, then north-east up the Kunar valley, birthplace of Syed Jamaluddin Afghani, to Chagha Serai. The valley leads upwards all the way and Chagha Serai lies at a height of twelve thousand feet, perched over the rushing waters of the confluence of the Kunar and Chagha rivers. This is as far as one can go by jeep. From here on to Kamdesh, our destination, we had to take horses. Nuristani mountain ponies have minds of their own, iron mouths and, I swear, suction pads on their hooves. They can walk up and down practically perpendicular surfaces all day without any sign of fatigue. The saddle in use in this part of the country has a high back and pommel which takes much of the backache out of long trips.

The tracks in Nuristan are mostly along narrow valleys which give way to pleasant pastures and quite large forests of mulberry trees. Those parts of Nuristan which are not mountainsides are intensively farmed and a plenitude of water increases the yield. The people's houses are made of wood with rock foundations and they thus differ from the usual countryside dwellings which are of mud and brick. Nuristan is the only place in the entire country where the dead are buried in wooden coffins. Usual Afghan practice is to bury the dead in stone-lined graves clad only in a

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shroud, but in these hills the dead are buried with considerable ritual and I wondered if this was a remnant of the old beliefs.

The furniture in their houses, too, was different. While other Afghans sit on piles of cushions on their floors and eat on table cloths spread on the floor, the Nuristanis have always used wooden chairs and tables while their doors and door-posts are carved and stained with local dyes.

Nuristan is full of game birds which the people hunt with bows and arrows and slings. I saw some men using the sling and was astounded by its accuracy. Some of them were hitting wild ducks with large pebbles at a range of some sixty feet.

Ibrahim told me that in the winter the people play a game on ice similar to the Scottish curling, although the winter is generally so severe that they practically hibernate in their hillside homes. He explained that the people were divided into two main clans, the Red and the Black Nuristanis, although they are the same linguistically and racially. Their clothes are made mostly from sheepskin or chamois leather, for the chamois abounds in the mountains. They wear ankle-length boots of soft leather with a thong bound round the instep. You can tell a man's clan by the colour, either red or black, of his boots. They don't wear the usual Afghan turban or karakul hat but a woollen cap rather like a rolled-up Balaclava helmet which protects the ears in the winter.

Arrival at Kamdesh was something of an occasion, for Ibrahim, being a member of a prominent family, had to be ceremonially greeted. As the town elders and *mullahs* eulogised and supplicated for blessings to be showered upon him, I noticed an old man quietly pouring away the contents of a bowl containing milk on to the ground. I reflected that Islam may have come to Nuristan but here was one old man who thought he would offer a libation to be on the safe side.

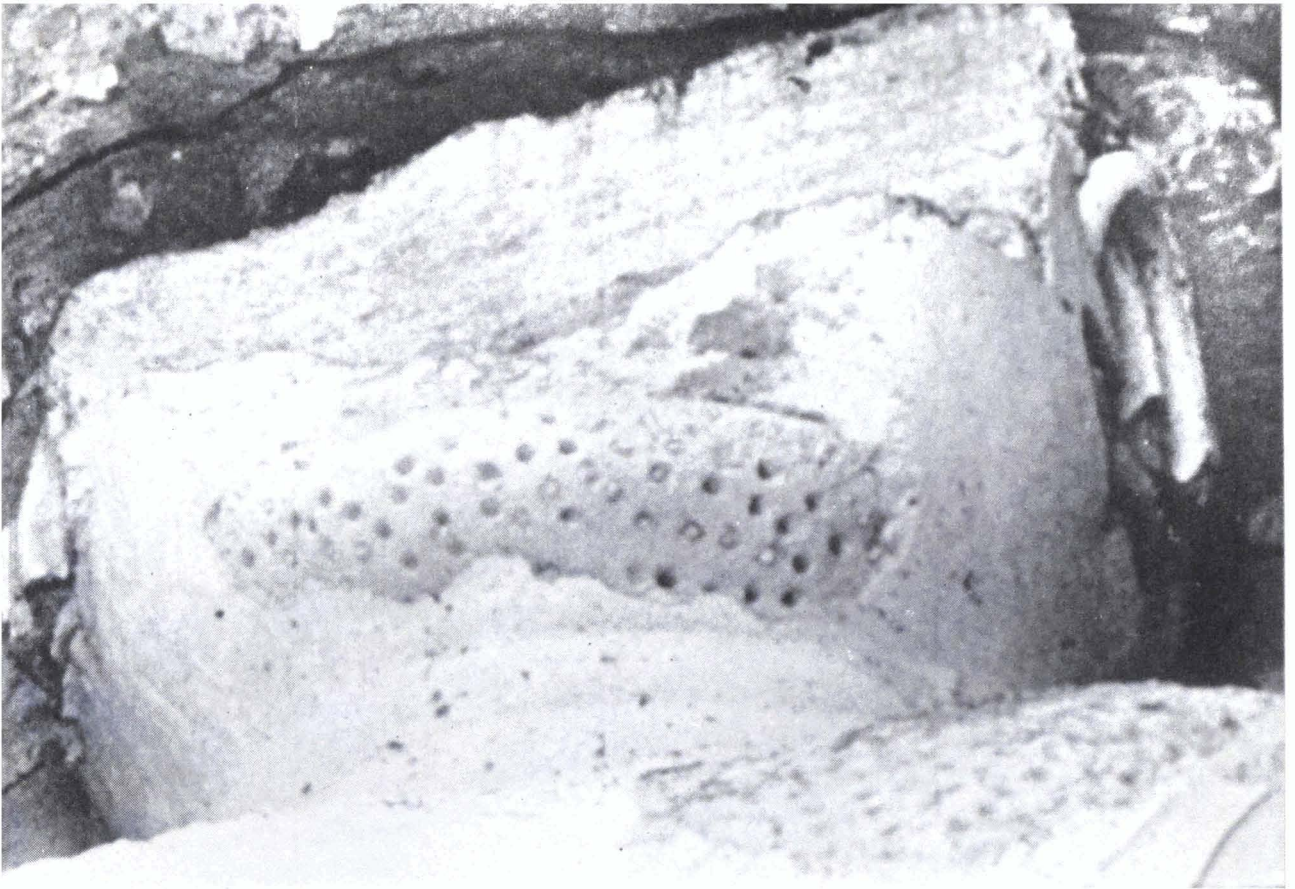
With great ceremony we were conducted to the ancestral home where as usual a huge meal had been prepared. After the

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long and tiring ride I did full justice to it and the delicious mulberries that were carried in on great trays packed in snow. After lunch a constant stream of callers arrived to pay their respects and I was able to see that indeed the Nuristanis are an ethnic type quite different from the other Afghans. Blond hair, red hair, blue and green eyes were much in evidence while their complexions were several shades lighter than Afghans generally. The visitors were not too sure of me until Ibrahim told them that I was not a Kabuli, after which they became quite friendly and brought me samples of their arts and crafts and embroidery to examine.

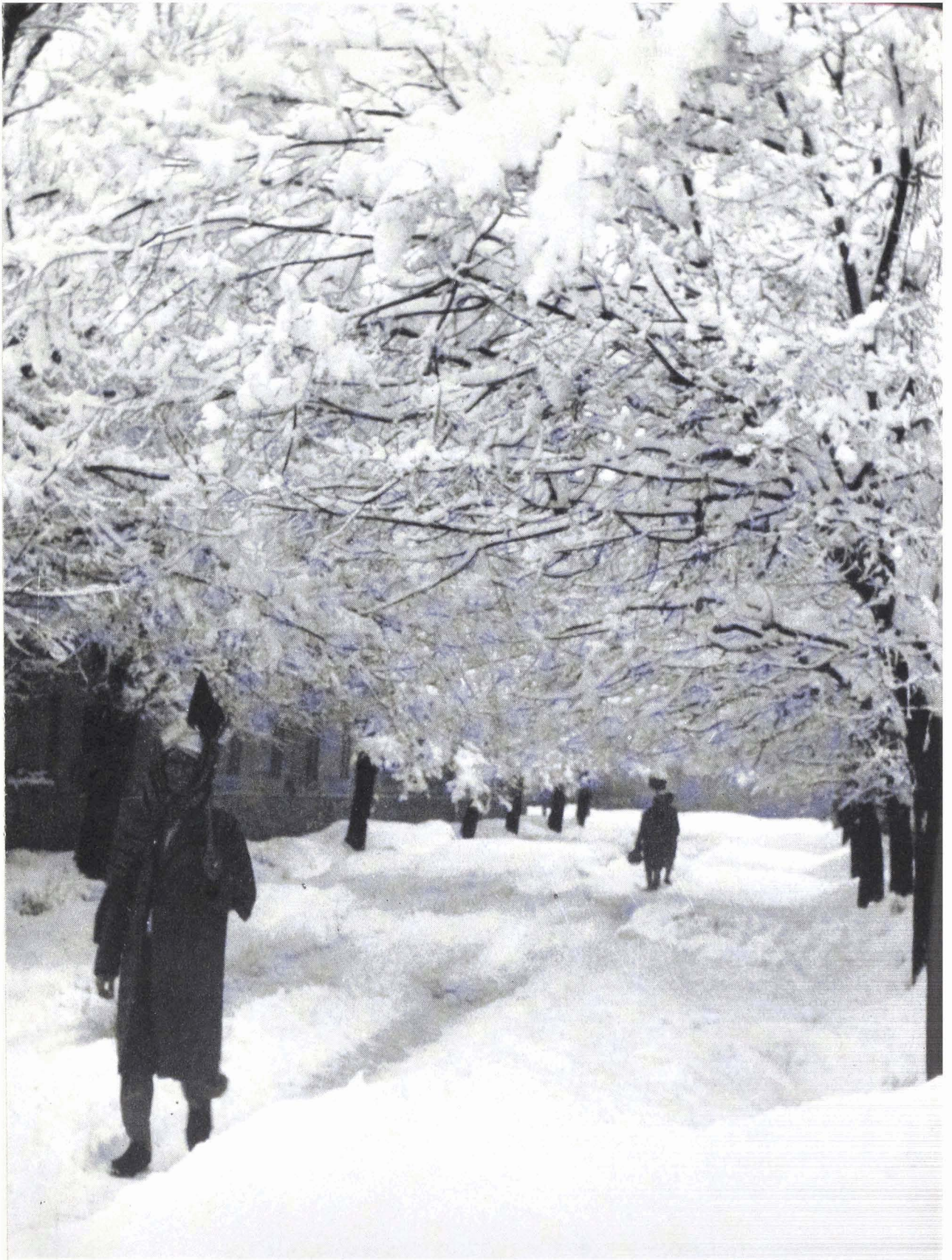
They were all quite different from Afghan goods. They did not, however, work with metal and indeed during my stay I saw many people working with stone knives and axes of great keenness. Ibrahim explained that they take their produce, mainly milk, butter, cheese and eggs, to Jelalabad and barter them for cloth, nails and tools. I was very interested in taking their photographs but had to do it when they were not looking, otherwise they struck impossible attitudes which would have looked awful. They pride themselves on their military prowess and were forever rushing home to bring an ancestral sword or blunderbuss to show me. Indeed, Abdul Rahman's campaign to bring them within the pale of Islam was one of the bloodiest in all Afghan history and that's saying something. The conquest was made easier by the Amir's marriage to a Nuristani girl, a practice which was followed by both his son and grandson and even by the former Prime Minister Shah Mahmud who also had a Nuristani bodyguard.

Nuristanis are a clannish lot and like other Afghans do not settle outside their ancestral home. They may spend short periods outside for trade purposes but they always return to marry and settle down. Under the law they are not liable for conscription but they often enlist in the army for three to six years in order to save up to marry. They hardly ever cross the northern Hindu Kush mountains into Wakhan, the tongue of land stretching through



15. One of the giant Buddhas at Bamian carved out of the living rock. *Above* a close up of the head showing Arab mutilations. *Below* the size can be judged by the man in the foreground. Traces of the original gold leaf covering can still be seen behind the head.





16. Snow in Kabul. The men with shovels hire themselves out to clear paths and flat roofs.

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the Pamirs to China. They tell various tales of the snow bear that haunts these fastnesses, tales which are remarkably similar to the stories of the Abominable Snowman. No one has ever seen one face to face and the shadowy figures that they have seen in the distance could have been bears.

Nor is the legend of the Snowman the only mystery in Nuristan. Somewhere in these mountains are to be found the hidden monasteries or training centres of what Afghans refer to as the People of the Tradition. These people, about whom one can learn little, are supposed to be the custodians of the Secret Traditions which are the bases of religion and man's development. In the most inaccessible spot of all is said to be the *Markaz* or "powerhouse" of the People. The Sufis in Afghanistan are closely associated with these "People" but no one will tell an outsider anything more than that these monasteries and the "powerhouse" exist. They say that the only outsider to have penetrated into the outer ring of monasteries was a Russian-Greek, George Gurdjieff, whose contacts enabled him to be accepted as a pupil. This is the same Gurdjieff who had some success with a form of philosophical teaching in the United States and Europe in the '30s. Said to have been trained by Bahaudin Nakhshband, one of the "outer masters" Gurdjieff mastered some of the teachings and tried to teach them in the West. This teaching did not really catch on and after his death his converts carried on in a desultry fashion and introduced some things to freshen up the image of the Gurdjieff teaching. It was not, apparently until the 1960s that a group of his former students re-established contact with the original source of the teaching. This was both a shock and an ecstatic experience for them for they found that the dervishes did not accept all the important successors of Gurdjieff as being worthy of being taught let alone to teach.

This caused schisms and heart-burning and resulted in Gurdjieff's "main line of succession" trying to find a source that would

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recognise them! Their veiled hints of the “hidden masters” and “centres in Nuristan” are now rather debased coin!

The hills of ancient Kafirstan, are indeed full of mystery and wealth, for gold, precious stones and minerals are to be found there. The mines are said to be worked out now, so that Nuristanis search farther afield.

Years ago they used to penetrate into Badakhshan and search for the famous rubies that are found in the crystalline limestone near Jagdallak. Mineralogists have assured me that the Afghan rubies are weight-for-weight superior to the Mongok rubies of Burma, but Afghanistan has never exploited the deposits in an efficient fashion so the output is small. For many centuries men have tunnelled into the rock-face following the ruby distribution and now the whole area is honeycombed with tunnels. The usual method of extracting the ruby-rich rock was to build huge fires against a promising bit of wall and when it is thoroughly hot, dash cold water against it. This caused large pieces to crack off which were then taken outside and methodically broken up into small pieces in the search. This haphazard method is still used, though secretly, for the exploitation of minerals is a Government monopoly.

From time to time, since the establishment of Pakistan, the Nuristanis have been encouraged by the Pakistanis to throw in their lot with Pakistan, since Nuristan abuts on Pakistan. The Nuristanis have always returned the disdainful reply that, “the lion does not mate with the donkey”, which shows pretty clearly what they think of the idea. Having been incorporated religiously and geographically into the Afghan State, they are as fiercely patriotic as are the other Afghans although they privately do think themselves to be something a little special.

It was a little chilly at night in these mountains and I was glad of the great sheepskin rug that had been put on my bed. The food that was provided contained a larger proportion of dairy products

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than is found in other parts of the country and I was shown cows and goats that were better than I had seen anywhere in Afghanistan.

The last day of our stay Ibrahim took me on a tour of the higher reaches of the Kamdesh valley which had to be climbed on foot. These hardy mountaineers bounded up and down the slopes with agility while I climbed slowly with heart pounding and lungs gasping in the thin air. High up in the clefts of the hills overlooking the town were the former idol temples which had housed the great wooden figures of their gods. Ibrahim told me that the idols were almost all of mounted men and entirely different from any idols found anywhere in Asia. The Nuristanis had fought fiercely in defence of these idols, many of which now repose in the Kabul Museum.

I had told Ibrahim that I wanted to see the huge statues of Buddha, largest in Asia, which are carved from the living rock in the Bamian valley north-west of Kabul. The day we left Kamdesh he broke it to me that we were going to cross the Panjsher mountains to the west of Nuristan and then travel down the Panjsher and Ghorband valley to Bamian. I greatly appreciated this, for I knew that he was doing it for me. I sent a message to Gulbaz at Chagha Serai to return to Kabul and wait for me there and we set out with a large band of Ibrahim's followers who were coming along for the ride.

During the trip over the mountains, part on horse and part on foot, I had plenty of opportunities for shooting. The rocks were alive with partridge and I was able to earn my keep by feeding the party with game, although they had plenty of other food with them. The final ridge before the Panjsher valley is over sixteen thousand feet and we had to pick our route with care to avoid landslides that thundered down from the upper heights. To the Nuristanis, however, this was all part of the fun but I did not feel like playing "Russian Roulette" with boulders the size of houses.

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The Panjsher river, which joins the Kabul river near Sarobi is one of the great rivers of Afghanistan and makes the Panjsher-Ghorband area fertile and green. The river is supplemented in winter and spring by melting snow from the mountains and all the year around manages to keep a pretty fair volume of water. This factor was important in the selection of Jebel-es-Siraj, north of Kabul, as the first hydro-electric power station in Afghanistan in the 1930s. This dam supplies Kabul and the industrial belt around Kunduz with power, but it is insufficient for the increasing demand. That is where Sarobi will come in.

At Salang we came across one of the newest Afghan development projects, the Salang Highway, which greatly facilitates trade between Kabul and the industrial North. Before the construction of this excellent road and the tunnels which punch through mountains, the road had been a winding and dangerous one ever prone to undermining, snow blockage and landslides and often became blocked for weeks at a time in winter.

From Salang a reasonable road followed the river down the valley to Bamian and the remarkable natural lakes of Band-i-Amir.

The valley of Bamian is of enormous width with the two mountain walls some four miles apart. The constant flooding of the river has laid down vast quantities of rich silt which is exploited to the full by farmers. It is indeed a garden valley but it owes its fame to the two great Buddhas that stand side by side cut from the mountain wall.

These two Buddhas are of immense size, one hundred and one hundred and fifty feet in height and proportionately massive. Though cut out of the solid rock they stand in carved niches like silent sentinels overlooking the valley. The flanking mountain faces are honeycombed with tunnels and rooms and were monasteries inhabited by Buddhist priests thousands of years ago. The two standing Buddhas used to be covered in thin sheets of gold, but this was soon removed by the Moslem conquerors who also

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disfigured the faces to show their hatred for graven images. Ibrahim told me that ancient geographers told of a third Buddha in a lying position which was made of solid gold and was said to have been rolled into a massive pit to save it from desecration. If this is so, then the greatest thing since the Klondyke is awaiting some Afghan farmer if he digs a well in just the right place!

During the heyday of Buddhism, Bamian was the most important centre in Asia. Indeed, throughout Afghanistan one can still see the stupas and remains of stupas dotted all over the country bearing witness to the importance of this country. Afghans became adept in digging into these stupas at exactly the right height to get the precious relics buried therein and most of the stupas excavated today had been pillaged centuries ago. The province of Jelalabad is especially rich, the part known as *Bhut Khak* (Dust of the Idol) having given up archaeological treasures of unsurpassed value, yet the surface has hardly been touched. Begram, in the same area, is only now being properly searched although it was pinpointed by such men as Professor Codrington many years ago as a site of great value.

It is possible to climb to the top of the great statues by means of a precipitous staircase cut in the rock. The view from the top is breathtaking. In all directions mountain walls rear up to the sky, black and forbidding, while at ground level all is green, dotted with stately poplars and black patches of newly ploughed land.

A few miles away are the fantastic chain of man-made dams which have produced the entrancingly beautiful lake at Band-i-Amir. This lake owes its beauty to the fact that it is of deep blue, framed in white crystalline rocks. In some parts the water is shallow enough for underwater rocks, some vividly coloured by mineral deposits to show and catch the light presenting a remarkable play of refracted colours. Some of the much smaller lakes were built with great coloured slabs of rock built into the banks which, too, enhance their beauty.

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As I gazed over the jagged hills I suddenly remembered hearing that the first American ever to visit Afghanistan, in 1838, had fired an artillery salute to his flag on the Kharzar Pass not so very far from where I stood. The story is an interesting one, for the man, Josiah Harlan, born in Chester County, Pennsylvania in 1799, was a man of many parts. In 1823 he gravitated to India and became a doctor in the army of the East India Company; not that he had ever studied medicine, but that seemed to be unimportant in those days. Tiring of a sawbone's life, Harlan journeyed to the north-west of India where various warring factions employed him in differing capacities. He served under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in his war against Amir Dost Muhammed Khan of Afghanistan and later joined the Amir's forces after they had defeated the Maharaja. Rising to command a brigade, Harlan soon became a trusted member of Dost Muhammed's circle and was made a general and entrusted with the disciplining of various hostile elements within Afghanistan. It was on one of these expeditions that he unfurled the Old Glory and gave it a salute of twenty-six guns on the highest pass of the frozen Afghan Caucasus (Hindu Kush).

This remarkable man on his return to the United States recommended that the United States Army should import camels from Afghanistan to equip the U.S. for operations in the deserts of the West. This proposal was actually considered by the Senate, but found unworkable: although a number of camels were imported from North Africa by the American Camel Company, chartered by the New York Legislature in 1854. These beasts were used for some time in mining camps but did not find universal appeal.

With the Civil War Harlan raised "Harlan's Light Cavalry" which he led until the end of the war, surviving to set up medical practice again until his death at a ripe old age. I regretted that I had not a cannon with which to salute my country, but I loved it, I am sure, as much as Harlan although perhaps less demonstrably.

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In the middle of the valley lies a rocky spur with the remains of what seemed to be a considerable fortress. I pointed this out to Ibrahim who explained that this is the Shahr-i-Gholghola, destroyed by Genghiz in 1221 in revenge for the death of his favourite grandson at the hands of the defenders. So awful was the penalty exacted by the Mongol Khan that the site was never built on again, because the local people swore that the plateau was haunted by the unquiet spirits of those who had perished barbarously.

On my return to Kabul I made a point of visiting my friends in the archaeological survey to get a little more information about the Buddhas. They told me that the earliest mention of them in their pristine golden condition was made by the Chinese pilgrim Huien Tsang who visited the valley in A.D. 630 and mentions the existence of ten monasteries and many thousands of monks. It is estimated that the smaller figure is older and was begun in the second century A.D., probably in the reign of Kanishka, the Kushan King whose sway extended over all Central Asia and India. The larger figure was probably made in the fifth century A.D. The niches were originally embellished with frescoes, traces of which still exist. Archaeologists are of the opinion that Buddhist thought and teaching travelled through India to China and Japan from the rich fount of Buddhist knowledge in Afghanistan.

I regretted having to leave the peaceful valley for the inhospitable hills and dusty road back to Kabul but go I had to, and Ibrahim too had to report for duty. The one hundred and thirty-odd miles back to Kabul were made in an Afghan long-distance bus alone with Ibrahim, for his Nuristanis had gone back the way we had come and I wished them well. The bus was old, overcrowded and noisy, but the companionship made up for all its shortcomings. Tales were told, songs were sung and experiences were related, punctuated with stops for the ritual prayers of the day. On this journey occurred a happening which shows the

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exquisite politeness of the people. I was the only non-Moslem traveller. Yet, so that I would not feel left out or awkward, one man always sat and talked with me while the others prayed, and when they had finished and returned to the bus, he in turn slipped away to pray. What finesse from these fierce sons of the hills!

CHAPTER 17

Settling in Kabul

KABUL WAS hot and dusty. For all the efforts of the water sprinklers, clouds of dust arose from the parched verges with the passage of each vehicle. Doggedly I fought my way through each miniature dust storm to reach the Department of Tribal Affairs which I had been planning to visit. The President, Syed Shamsuddin Majruh, whom I had met at a reception, had promised to give me the lowdown on tribal matters if I dropped in on him. My recollection that his department was surrounded by a huge garden was an added inducement to see him. His welcome was cordial and, as I had hoped, we sat in the cool shade and were plied with fruit juice and cakes.

The function of the department is to look after the interests of Pushtuns, living in the no-man's-land along the Afghan-Pakistan border, who do not recognise Pakistani authority over them. This, of course, is part of the Pushtunistan problem which looms large over Afghan policy. While the Government will never admit it, the Tribal Department is instrumental in arming and financing the clansmen and, claim the Pakistanis, directs acts of terrorism by them against Pakistani garrisons. The President was cordially vague about these matters although admitting that the department would exercise no restraint upon clansmen wanting to embarrass Pakistan. In the compound of the department were a large number of clansmen who are put up and fed there. They all sported very modern arms and there was

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no lack of ammunition. Some of them even carried Bren guns made in the frontier area itself, while others affected sawn-off shotguns.

I asked Majruh if I might be permitted to visit the frontier. He replied that I was welcome to accompany any of the clansmen to their villages but he would not guarantee my safety in case of Pakistani aerial bombardment, which he said was now part of the Pakistani watch and ward on the frontier. I was shown a great number of photographs of villages destroyed by aircraft and listened to the stories of tribesmen who had been eye witnesses. It is impossible really to differentiate between propaganda and truth in Kabul, for the administration is so firmly wedded to Pushtunistan that they probably even talk themselves into believing anything.

From the financial point of view the Pushtunistan project is an enormous drain on the national budget. Huge bribes have to be given out. Arms, ammunition, clothes and food must be supplied to the tribes who are in all probability receiving the same treatment from the Pakistanis. Throughout the history of Afghanistan the Pushtuns have profited from internal struggles, selling themselves to the highest bidder and securing the throne for him. Their morality is not attractive. I have met more than one Afghan who would like to see the Pushtuns put in their place very firmly so that once and for all their say in Afghan affairs might be minimised. They pay no taxes, nor are they liable for military service I was told, yet they have to be paid to behave. It was capitalising on this that won Nadir Shah, father of the present king, the throne in 1930. He played the South against the North and won. Even today the members of the ruling family, in the name of Pushtunistan, continue the subsidies that weaken the exchequer but keep them on the throne. Politics in Afghanistan is a dangerous game. Ministers of the outgoing Cabinet land in jail as often as not; yet one minister has kept his ministerial rank through

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several changes. Even the fall of Shah Mahmud and Sardar Daud saw him still in the Cabinet, although in not such an exalted position.

There are, of course, no political parties in Afghanistan. They are not exactly forbidden by law but it would take a brave man to start one. In any case even if he achieved the impossible and got a majority in the House of Representatives, everybody knows that the Prime Minister takes no notice of the Parliament in any case. The only body he is really scared of is the *Loe Jirga*, the Grand National Assembly, which he calls as infrequently as possible. Other power is vested in the feudal nobility, but they are generally too occupied with their own local squabbles to unite against the Government. Not that they have no say in the running of the country, for witness the Khan of Paghman, but they tend to stand on the sidelines and only interrupt if the game becomes too foul. At that moment they seemed content to watch and see that Premier Daud did not lead the country towards ties with the Soviet Union that would give the Communists any say in the governing of the country. In this way the balance of power was maintained, although the administration did not seem happy to have this curb on their activities, not so much because they want to communise the country but because they resented any curb on their unlimited power. Political experts were of the opinion (later borne out by events) that not even as resolute a man as Daud would risk a showdown with these feudal princes. Kabul might have to rely upon their goodwill for survival if the Pushtuns were all bought over by Pakistan.

Another stop I made was the Ministry of Mines, housed in a crumbling *serai* on the fringes of the old city. There I met Afghan experts whose duty it is to map and exploit the considerable mineral resources of the country. Dr Ahmad Popol, brother of the Minister of Education and in charge of the technical side of petroleum exploration, told me that deposits had been mapped

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in the extreme north-west of the country and test drillings had been favourable. It was likely, he told me, that Dutch or Swiss experts would be employed to extract the oil, as the Afghans had no trained technicians of their own and the Russians would certainly object to non-neutral Western technicians so near their border.

The Afghan experts include two trained in Japan, two in Germany and one in Russia. At the moment they are only mining coal, salt, lapis lazuli and small quantities of chromite. The coal is of poor quality and has to be briquetted in Kabul after its arrival from the pits. Salt is very admixed with sand and gravel, yet no steps are taken to refine it, and it is only on sale for domestic consumption. Some of the better salt is produced from brine evaporation, but this too has a lot of impurity. Lapis lazuli has always been mined in Afghanistan and has been an article of Afghan trade for probably thousands of years. It is finding more and more sale in Western Europe although the export of it is a Government monopoly and the company handling it is not renowned for its efficiency. This semi-precious material is classified along with rubies and sapphires, and the Government is not prepared to allow a private company to exploit and export these gems. Thus, the stultifying effect of red tape hits the export trade.

Recent discoveries of chromite ore in the Logar valley in East Afghanistan promised a rosy future for mineral exports but the position of the deposits, far from roads, meant that unless it was exploited on a very large scale, the profit margin would be too low. A private company would be prepared to stand a loss for a few years provided there was a chance for expansion, but a Government department in Afghanistan cannot do this. All ministries are supposed to operate severely within the limits of their budget, which accounts for the penny-pinching attitudes encountered. To make sure that ministries do not exceed their

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budget, each one had a Control Officer placed there by the Ministry of Finance to pare down all expenses. Needless to say his reputation is enhanced by the savings that he makes, invariably at the expense of efficiency, and so the vicious circle goes on. Apparently the only ministries immune from this are Foreign Affairs and Defence, whose budgets are flexible and the ministers involved have direct access to the Prime Minister's ear if they need more funds.

Americans were not very popular in the Ministry of Mines, I discovered, since an American mining engineer, retained a few years ago to plot ore deposits at a fabulous salary, did hardly any work and, the story goes, passed on what information he did discover to foreign interests. I am unable to vouch for the accuracy of this story, but it does seem that his years in the ministry produced significantly few reports of anything worth while, while the Afghan experts receiving a fraction of his salary did compile some very useful information including the charts of the oil fields in the north. The present minister is, for a change, a mining engineer, who put the Afghan coal mines on their feet. There is still much to be done but I am sure the men in the ministry, given enough funds, will not be found wanting.

Kabul Radio is another place which operates by faith and dedication rather than by governmental interest and assistance. True, it is part of the Ministry of Information, but it is run by men who have not the slightest idea of what a radio station should do and the part it should play in the education of the people and the external propaganda of the country. The internal service is devoted to long religious, political or social diatribes which have an impact only on those who can understand the multi-syllables used. Rather than pitch the programmes lower so that the average man can be gradually interested in more lofty things, the authorities keep the programmes for the most part far above his head. True, there are long musical programmes but they are mostly light music and do

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not take advantage of the great volume of classical Afghan music that is available. The young singers and musicians model themselves more and more on the popular Indian singers which I think is a great shame for a people who have a different musical heritage.

On the short waves, Kabul Radio broadcasts in English, Russian, Arabic, Urdu and Baluchi for short periods every night. With the possible exception of the Arabic programmes, most of the content is blatant propaganda about Pushtunistan, laid on so thick that the treacly programmes stemming from Radio Moscow about the delights of Communism sound acid in the extreme. There is no finesse. Still, the radio, as an instrument of propaganda, is new to the Afghans and I expect they will develop. Atallah Khan, Technical Chief of the radio, told me that when the new shortwave transmitters are installed, Kabul will be on the air for much longer times in foreign languages, and by that time they hope to have trained announcers and commentators back from abroad to run the station. For all their shortcomings, the technical and studio staffs do a good job within their limits and I would be the last to belittle their obvious sincerity.

My jeep had developed a clutch slip and Gulbaz diagnosed it as being in need of a clutch plate so we went to the Service Company which has the monopoly of importation of motor spare parts and tyres. This is a private company run by Khodja Mahtabuddin who is accounted one of the richest traders in the country. Since all Afghan transport relies upon him for tyres and spare parts, I am not surprised. He was said to like Americans, so in the hope of facilitating the purchase, I presented myself at his office and was greeted with open arms. His English was extremely rudimentary and somewhat complicated due to his habit of pronouncing words backwards. I suppose this was due to his own language being written from right to left so he, in the early stages of his study of English, read English similarly.

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The inevitable tea was served and the polite formalities of asking after one's health and happiness had to be fulfilled before the subject of the clutch plate was mooted. Certainly a plate would be supplied immediately, meanwhile would I not sit comfortably and give him the pleasure of my company? Such a request was difficult to refuse, so we sat and talked of Afghanistan and America. I found out that most of the huge, long-distance trucks in the country were International ones which had their bodies built on in Kabul. Russian ones had been imported and were found to be very strong and reliable but not so convenient for very long distances. Russian spare parts, too, were scarce and not well produced, so many had to be sent back for replacement. Somehow the subject of the Bandit King, Bacha Sakao, came up and without moving a muscle, Mahtabuddin informed me that he had come from one of his family's villages and that furthermore his (Mahtabuddin's) father had been Lord Mayor of Kabul during the bandit's rule. He only survived the purge of the bandit's men when Nadir Shah took Kabul because he had prevented the bandit from forcibly marrying some of Nadir's female relatives to some of his followers. For this he was pardoned and given a grant of land in Koh Daman in the north.

Walking back to the hotel, leaving Gulbaz to fix the new clutch, I decided that it was time for me to have a new fur cap made. Now this is not as simple as it sounds, for first the skin or skins must be bought and then taken to a cap maker who cuts the skins up into small pieces about two inches square and then matches the curl, sews the patches together, lines the cap and then "sets" it. How the setting is done I don't know and no one would tell me. However, it means that the cap is shaped to suit the size of your face and after setting, does not lose its shape. I wandered far and wide in the skin *serai*, finally choosing a jet black skin with tiny curl which I was assured would be enough for one cap. It cost me seven pounds and no bargaining. This is an average price for a

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black skin. Grey skins cost fifty per cent more and the very rare golden skins range up to forty pounds each.

Having got the skins, one must find a cap maker prepared to make the cap for one. These men are very independent and will only work on skins of which they approve. Needless to say, the king's capmaker will only work on golden or first-class grey skins, so I had to be content with the services of a less exalted hatter. Considerable time was spent in his shop while he and his assistants debated as to how the skin was to be cut and what shape of hat would be best for me. The Afghan karakul cap is shaped rather like a trilby without the brim but the important factor is the height of the crown at the front. Once the hatter decides what shape he thinks it should be, this is the shape he makes it. What you think is incidental.

The business over, we had a round of tea and the hat was promised for a week hence. It cost three pounds to have the hat made. Better class hatters charge ten pounds upwards, but in their cases the hats can be washed again and again by a special process that removes the dust and perspiration that discolour the skin. Cheaper hats can be relined, but they are usually not finished in such a way that the curl can take it. Certain senior regiments wear the black karakul cap with the badge on the side. They refuse to wear the heavy, German-style coal-scuttle helmet in battle, as they fear they would lose their individuality. The danger of losing their heads seems to them a small price to pay for tradition.

I had been hoping that my company would reply quickly so that I could look for a house if they accepted my plan. I had already decided that I would try the older part of the new city as the houses there were more matured and with better gardens. Some of the newer ones, built farther out were inclined to be a little jerry-built although they tended to have more modern fittings than the older ones. I wasn't worried about heating for I had

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already decided to install a *sandali*, an Afghan heater, and bath-water I would heat in one of those enormous coppers that the Afghans use. The people don't like taking baths, as we do in the West, in bathtubs, they like shower baths or, failing these, the lading of hot water over themselves after each lathering. The Moslem religion demands a minimum of one bath a week and this is rigidly observed by all classes. There are municipal bath houses but most houses have the old-fashioned Turkish-type steam baths followed by cold water showers. It is very invigorating I'm sure in summer, but in winter . . .

Since the city is prone to earthquake shocks, most of the older houses are one storey and cover a large area on three sides of the large garden. I had my eye on the guest-house of one of these large houses, which was separated by a wall from the main building. The rent was four pounds a month unfurnished, four rooms, kitchen, bathroom, servant's bedroom and boxroom. There was a pleasant garden with apple-trees and a grape vine. I was to be responsible for the grape vine, a charge which I was happy to accept. The gate to the garden had a bolt four feet long on it and was itself a good nine inches thick. When Afghans want to keep people out, they go about it in a workmanlike way. When these houses were built, you never knew when your home might become a fortress, so you planned accordingly.

Furniture is somewhat of a problem. You can either buy it from the Hajjari Najjari Company which makes beautiful stuff which costs a fortune, or you can have it made by smaller craftsmen – which takes an age. Or you can have Afghan furnishings which means dozens of carpets, rugs, bolsters and small tables. The carpets and rugs will cost you a fortune and the tables, always marble topped, will have to be bought from Hajjari Najjari. Fortunately I had heard of an American couple who were leaving and selling their furniture so I decided to furnish my bedroom and dining-room Western style and have the sitting-room Afghan

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style. In the middle of all this thought came the letter telling me to stay another six months at least while negotiations went on. I was overjoyed as there was also a handsome cheque for furnishings and expenses. By United States standards it was not much, but it enabled me to furnish as I had planned.

I had a grand house-warming for all my Afghan and foreign friends and my choice of Afghan and Western styles was approved. Many of the guests brought small things for the house, including those marvellous carpet saddle-bags that double as cushions. I had had the temerity to invite the Khan of Paghman, rather more out of politeness than in expectation of his coming; because after I had sent the invitation I realised that if he came, my Afghan guests would be embarrassed and would freeze. Diplomatically, I thought, he sent his regrets and a beautiful Mauri carpet which I wanted to hang on the wall but which my guests insisted would improve by being trodden on, albeit without shoes. I had borrowed the cook of the Service Company and the meal was a great success for he was indeed a master chef even by Afghan standards.

Time had passed quickly and imperceptibly the nights were drawing in and there was a hint of frost in the air. Kabul began to prepare for the winter which can be severe indeed. Snow begins to fall in about October and continues on and off until early April. Day after day the streets resounded with the cries of the wood merchants while roofs were inspected and repaired and the fur coat sellers brought out the goods that they had been making all summer. I bought a *postin*, which is an ankle-length coat of sheepskin with a high collar and intricate yellow and red silk patterns all over. These are the answer to any degree of frost. The only trouble is that one is loath to take them off.

I was snug as a bug in my *sandali* and noticed, with considerable smug satisfaction I confess that many others in the foreign community were installing them. A *sandali* is a typically Afghan heater.

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It is composed of a pan of glowing charcoal covered by a layer of ash placed under a wooden frame over which huge quilts are draped. The frame, like a low coffee-table, can be of any size and in large or wealthy families may need several heating pans and large quilts.

CHAPTER 18

Snow, Suffragettes and School

ONE MORNING I awoke to find a white city. During the night, three inches of snow had fallen, the temperature had dropped to only one degree above freezing and the city settled down philosophically to the winter siege. Drivers of horse buggies rough shod their animals and there was a rush for snow chains. Hazara porters made hay hiring themselves out to clear snow from the flat roofs and one had to walk in the middle of the road to avoid great chunks of snow being shovelled from all sides. The winter snow beautifies the frowning mountains to the east of the city and hides many of the eyesores that are inevitable in Eastern cities anywhere. The cold snap also deprives one of the unwelcome presence of flies and mosquitoes, but it does mean that you have to be a little careful getting into your *sandali*. If you have scorpions in the house they will seek the warmth there too.

With the first snow, the schools shut for the winter. This release does not bring universal joy, for the children have a lot of home study to do and Afghan parents make sure their children do it. It also means the end for the scores of wild dogs that roam the outskirts of the city, for the municipality sends out teams of men to shoot these strays, as they are not above attacking lone humans when hunger drives them into the city.

Air services are shut down during the winter for the airfields are too snowed up and the heavy clouds, dangerously low, hide the jagged peaks that reach up into the skies. Road transport is often seriously affected, especially from the north, although army

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rescue teams patrol the main highways and try to keep them open.

Snow falls heavily during November, sometimes as much as three feet in a night. After such a night, Kabul stays at home and waits until the roads have been cleared. No one goes out after dark except in a car, for wolves have been known to invade the city with disastrous results for anyone unfortunate enough to meet them. The police night patrols are reinforced by armed troops whose job it is to hunt down wolves if they put in an appearance. If you happen to have to go out, you can be sure that a patrol will pick you up and escort you to your destination.

During the long nights I often used to invite friends in for chess or bridge, although it was sometimes a little difficult as my Western guests would like something to drink and the Afghans, being Moslems, were teetotallers. It was not that they were offended by the presence or sight of alcohol, but they were afraid that they might be accused of visiting a foreigner's house for the purpose of drinking. To safeguard both parties, I made a point of bumping into the Chief of Police who was a neighbour of mine and mentioning that he need not be afraid of my serving drinks to Afghans. He smiled and told me that they were already satisfied that I did not and that he knew all the foreigners who did give Afghans alcohol. There is little that goes on in Kabul that the Government does not know. Very probably my own servants were asked to report on irregularities.

Another delicate point is the position of women in Kabul society. Although they go about freely and unveiled, they must not, by convention, visit the house of someone not closely related to them, alone. This applies even more strongly where foreigners are concerned. Public morality is high in Afghanistan. A morally loose woman will often meet with an "accident". From what I could learn, there are very few prostitutes in Kabul and no brothels, for both the law and society are geared to destroy them.

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There is the usual amount of moral laxity among the foreign community, but the Government takes no notice of this unless Afghans are involved. The only real scandal that occurred while I was in Kabul was an affair between a member of the United States Embassy and a typist on one of the United Nations projects, and that was hushed up successfully.

Afghans who marry foreign girls when abroad do not altogether have a happy time in Kabul. If they are army cadets or members of the Foreign Service, they must be transferred to other ministries. While the girls usually settle down well, the boy's relations are generally unhappy over his choice, as they would have preferred him to marry an Afghan girl. Some of them cannot stand the constant opposition and leave Afghanistan, with or without their husbands. If the girl is of Eastern origin it is easier for her to be accepted, but somehow Afghan men attract Western women more. I must say in this context that Afghan women attract certain Americans. This, of course, is impossible, for no Afghan girl can marry a non-Moslem and they very very infrequently marry foreigners although they are much sought after by Persians and Pakistanis. These two nationalities have as much chance of marrying into Afghan families as they have of growing wings. This utter prohibition is found in all sections of the community. An acquaintance of mine, a former Afghan ambassador, with three daughters told me that he would never consider allowing his daughters to marry non-Afghans.

There are a number of people in Kabul who are pointed out to foreigners as object lessons. Some have opposed the Government and have spent years in jail, others belong to the Amanullah family and, as such, are politically suspect, while others are just "unreliable". I am sure that they are allowed out of jail just for the purpose of being a reminder of the absolute power of the Government and the fate that can await "unreliables". These people eke out a marginal living from land they own or some sort of charity that

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they receive from their relatives. From time to time some of them are reinstated and given jobs where they can do no mischief.

The latter category include the sons and daughters of the brothers of the late Amanullah Khan (referred to by the present Government as "His Highness"). For many years after Nadir Shah came to the throne, these families were in exile in Iran and were only allowed back about ten years ago. They could never be a threat to the Government as they have inherited the vacillatory tendencies of Amanullah which lost him the throne. The elder brother of Amanullah lived in Kabul throughout the early years of the present royal house but since he was more interested in food and bridge than power, he was allowed to remain free. One of Amanullah's nephews was Director of Foreign Language Publications of the Press Department which produced a daily, duplicated sheet of local news. Hardly a position of responsibility. He was widely held to be an ineffectual with a domineering wife so he was not likely to pose a threat to the security of the State.

Said to be one of the original "suffragettes" in Afghanistan, is the daughter of an Afghan father and Russian mother. Up to about five years ago, all Afghan women wore a head-to-foot veil when they left their houses, but this girl refused to do so. Since her father was Afghan, she was really obliged to do so by custom rather than by law or religion. In her case, however, the *mullahs* managed to influence the Government to force her to remain at home if she did not want to wear the veil. Her father was at that time serving a long jail sentence for suspected espionage, so she was prevented from leaving the house unveiled. Her father is now out of jail, but can get no Government job and ekes out his days by writing paragraphs for the papers. His suspected Shiah (unorthodox) leanings do not help matters. Shiahs were recently dismissed from both the army and the Foreign Service, some by the pressure of the Khan of Paghman in his capacity of son of the paramount orthodox churchman of the country.

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They say that everything has to come to an end, but I must say it was a shock to me to hear from my company that they had decided that the Afghan resources did not warrant a full-time representative in Kabul so would I please make preparations to leave as soon as possible. I realised that the blow hurt even more as I had been happy in Afghanistan and I did not really want to leave. My Afghan friends expressed their desolation and suggested that I might offer my services to the Ministry of Education as an English teacher in one of the high schools. This I hurried to do and was overjoyed to be offered a position for six months to teach the lower grades the basis of English. The pay was not very much, but with slight economy, I could live quite well, better than my Afghan colleagues.

Teaching in an Afghan school is quite an experience. Firstly, because of the respect accorded to the teacher by the pupils and secondly, because of the remarkable assortment of ages in each class. One of my junior classes had an average age of twelve if you did not count a hulking brute of nineteen who never seemed to pass his finals to the next class. He had had time off to get married, time off for a honeymoon and even time off for the Afghan equivalent of a christening of his firstborn. He was not flung out because his attempts to learn were quite sincere, but his intellectual development left much to be desired. In any case he was the class monitor by virtue of seniority (and size I suspect) and helped me quite a lot if any of the smaller ones became boisterous.

I had large classes of up to forty-five boys, always fully attended for playing hookey is a pretty bad crime in Afghanistan. Not only does the child get a leathering but the parents are fined too, so they make quite sure that the kid goes to school. Cheekiness or answering back is unheard of and there is a lifetime respect by children for their teachers. One must confess, being one of them, that there are few really qualified teachers in Afghanistan. True, many are being turned out by the Teachers Training Colleges but

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they have only been really taught the subject they are going to teach and not the best methods of getting the message across. This is a pity as the average Afghan schoolboy or schoolgirl is very anxious to learn and it is a shame that they should have to do with second-rate teachers.

The Habibia College, where I taught, is the senior of the two high schools teaching English. Habibia boys are at daggers-drawn with those of the Istiklal College, the French high school, where the Royal Princes and many of the aristocrats are educated. The Royal Family is very Francophile and likes to prepare its youngsters for higher education in France. This tradition was started by the present King who was educated in France. Prior to this, the Afghan kings have always preferred Germany.

The educational system suffers from this too, for some of the high officers of the Ministry were educated in Germany and some in France. The latter insist on curricula based on the French system, while the former, more wisely I feel, think that a modified form of the German system would be best. These two warring factions need a firm hand in the Ministerial chair to keep the educational programme functioning efficiently. For many years they have not had this.

Without wishing to sound biased, I must say that the calibre of English teachers provided by the British Council to Afghan schools left much to be desired. Most of them were obviously misfits who could not get jobs in England, most of them spoke English with such broad regional accents that they were almost incomprehensible. As to their degrees – it would appear that the British Council consider that a degree in dyeing technology from a provincial university is sufficient recommendation for a man to head the English language faculty of a Kabul high school. I do not pretend to be an educationalist myself but I can safely say that my pupils did not suffer from my ministrations.

Leaving Kabul for the last time was a wrench. I sold most of my

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furniture to friends and gave the rest to my servants. It was a woebegone little group which gathered at my house early one morning to say good-bye to an equally woebegone traveller. I had hired a car from the Service Company but had been prevailed upon to travel by mail lorry – “So much friendlier and safer” I was told. As the mail truck rolled up, each of my friends took it upon himself to explain to the driver and the other passengers that I was a good friend of the Afghans and that I was to be looked after. They bewailed the fact that I was travelling through Iran to catch my plane from Tehran. They had little faith in Persian hospitality. At last, with many an embrace and a prayer for my safety, I was reluctantly allowed to climb aboard and we were off. It was an emotional parting, but one full of sincerity.

CHAPTER 19

Westwards to Persia

THE ROAD from Kabul to Herat via Kalat, Kandahar and Farah is probably second to none in terms of ruggedness and for the overwhelming natural beauty that it passes. No other vehicle in the world, short of a tank or a tracked carrier, can traverse its length as can these mail trucks. The drivers know every pothole and bend and keep the truck rolling at a good fifty miles an hour with a consequent appalling hammering being inflicted upon the tyres and springs. Despite all its discomforts, it is the only way to travel in Afghanistan. The friendliness of the other passengers makes one feel secure and the attention that one receives at each wayside tea-shop can be equalled nowhere in the East. Stops are determined by prayer times, meal times and the sight of a particularly attractive orchard or flower garden. To stop at an orchard is to be given *carte blanche* – “enter, welcome you are to eat as much as you can and to carry away as much as you desire” – and dare you offer a cent in return.

Mukur came and went and then Ghazni with its massive fort guarding the road. At each of these places is a Government hotel which provides clean beds and good food at a nominal price. At Kandahar we stayed a day and I paid a courtesy call on the Governor who insisted that I join him in a hunt. This was a peculiar hunt, for the quarry was the Afghan hound which runs wild in packs in this part of the world. Since these hounds are incredibly fleet of foot and the idea was to capture and not kill, it was an exhausting day. The Afghan hound in its natural habitat hunts

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the desert gazelle but is terribly scared of humans. If you come upon a pack and shout "boo" at them they are off like greased lightning. The only way to catch them is to drive them into a pen or a cul-de-sac of a canyon and even this is not easy, for they are as fleet-footed climbing mountains as they are on the flat.

By jeep and horse we followed a pack and by evening had managed to capture five, which satisfied the Governor. He wanted them as presents for his son's new bride, and of the five, he selected three and set the rest free. They fled with terrific acceleration into the night to rejoin the pack who were mournfully sitting on a rocky crag a mile away undoubtedly waiting to hear the dying screams of their mates as they were eaten alive by the savage humans. I would have liked to have one of these *taxis*, as they are called in Afghanistan, but their export is forbidden and the perfection of the wild ones put me off the interbred, pampered show types one sees outside the country.

The next morning we set off on the long haul to Farah, the last stop before Herat. Farah lies north-west of the south-western Desert of Death which saw one of the last great pitched battles between the Afghans and Persians in the early nineteenth century. It appears that the intrepid Khan Muhammed Shah Jan Fishan was paying a State visit to the Khan of Kalat, in the then British India, when a motley horde of Persian tribesmen crossed the border into Afghanistan bent on plundering anything and anybody. At first nobody in Afghanistan believed that this was possible because no one disturbs a sleeping lion and the Persians are not renowned for their valour but gradually it became apparent that the Persians actually were there and had plundered a few caravans bound from Kandahar to Herat. This was more than the old war lord could stand, so with a hundred and fifty picked Paghmanis he made a forced march across the desert. It would have taken normal men twelve days at least, but the Khan of Paghman was no ordinary man and he did it in five and fell upon

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the serried ranks of the Persians without even a pause for rest. They say that a third of the enemy surrendered at the terrible sight of the sand encrusted cavalry, another third when the Paghmani battle flag of the black eagle was unfurled and recognised, while the remainder were cut down to a man. It was on this field that Jan Fishan is said to have made his classic remark which has infuriated the Iranis ever since: "O God, were there no death or pain, how brave the Persians would be!"

Farah itself is a dull, frontier town with little to recommend it to the traveller save the traditional Afghan hospitality. It is an important communications and administrative centre and that is all.

From Farah the road leads due north through Sabzawar and the foothills of the Safed Koh, sparkling in the sunlight with a new mantle of snow, and on to Herat, the eastern frontier.

Travel from Herat to Meshed is effected by taking an Afghan mail bus across the border to the Irani frontier post of Turbat-i-Sheikh Jam. This post lies some twenty miles inside Irani territory and from there one takes a Persian bus to Meshed, shrine of the ninth Caliph of Islam, Imam Al Reza, from whom the Khans of Paghman are descended.

Passing through the Afghan customs and immigration stations at Islam Qalla posed no problem, for I had been given a *laissez passer* by the Governor at Kandahar at the mere sight of which the Afghan officials begged that I might give them a letter to the Governor that I had received every consideration from them. This I was glad to do, but felt sad to see the Afghan flag over the post disappearing into the distance as I crossed into Iranian territory.

The chief of the Iranian customs took exception to my cameras, saying that he would have to seal them and I could not use them until I reached Meshed and obtained permission. The charge for sealing them was ten riyals. He sealed them and I gave him a

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twenty riyal note from which I received no change. Another customs official demanded that I strip in case I had contraband taped to my skin. A packet of American cigarettes persuaded him that this was unnecessary. By this time I was very very near blowing my top, but I knew perfectly well that in this remote corner of the kingdom these men were a law unto themselves and I had no desire to stay longer than necessary if they became more obstructive, so I shut up and was released to the Meshed bus.

CHAPTER 20

Persian Escapades

SINCE CROSSING the border into Iran, I had peered hopefully from the dust-encrusted window hoping to espy the gleaming tarmac of a civilised road. My fellow passengers had assured me with many oaths that Iran was criss-crossed with super highways and thus I could look forward to a smooth passage from the border onwards.

Alas, I was not rewarded by the sight of a modern road although many set up a rapturous cry on seeing in the distance the golden dome and minarets of the second most holy shrine of the Shiah Moslems, the tomb of Imam Reza in Meshed.

Then, upon entering the city limits, there was a bump and we were soon bowling along the first of the great Irani *autobahns* that pass through the cities and end at a respectable distance outside. I was visited by my companions who came to pat my back and shake hands and point out that their prophecy was correct. They went into raptures over the excellence of the surface and their imaginations baulked at finding a suitably magnificent adjective to do full justice to its glissine character.

As our bus drew up in an appallingly disreputable caravanserai I was besieged by luggage porters. They flexed their arms, pounded their chests and ringingly proclaimed to the near-hypnotised passengers that they had been trained from childhood to unload luggage with a maximum of care, expediency and speed. Some of them were not above adding with a considerable amount of disparaging detail that if they were to be selected they would not

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maliciously damage the traveller's trunks, although such was the common practice among other porters.

Engaging the least evil-looking of the pack I managed to have my luggage conveyed to an incredibly old horse-drawn carriage a few yards away. For this superhuman effort the porter demanded the "present" (as all habitual overchargers in Iran were wont to term their loot) of the equivalent of two pounds. At my indignant refusal he went into a torrent of explanation as to how he had strained himself terribly in ensuring that my bags were not damaged. He added that he did not think that he would live after such exertion. I gave him ten shillings and the driver whipped up his horse. The infuriated porter trotted alongside, his highly developed sense of injustice having apparently given him a new lease of life. Feeling acutely embarrassed, although no one in the street took any notice of the spectacle, I attempted to chase him off with a few well-chosen phrases. This was to no avail and it was not until the cabby lent weight to my words with his whip that he fell behind still howling and gesticulating.

Arrival at the Bakhtar Hotel, the only one of any respectability and cleanliness in Meshed, was the signal for another verbal battle. This time with the cabby. This scabrous character believed himself to be, divinely it would seem, entitled to receive, in addition to the thirty shillings he claimed as his fare, one pound extra for having driven off the porter. Leaving him in the hands of a belligerent-looking doorman whom I fondly hoped was on my side, I went upstairs to unpack and wash.

Descending later to the restaurant I was met by the doorman who claimed two pounds. One for the cabby and one for himself as a "reward" for having rid me of his presence. Realising that this sort of "chain reaction" could continue indefinitely, I called the manager with the devout hope that he would not ask for a "present" too. Fortunately the manager settled the matter in my

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favour and the doorman received 17s. 6d. with which he seemed greatly pleased.

The next morning I awoke just in time to make a hurried breakfast and catch a cab to the bus station. I had left myself time before the stated departure time of 8 a.m. but the bus station looked suspiciously quiet. When buses leave in Iran, the entire neighbourhood generally turns out to see them off and any number of free fights, conjuring turns and beggars appear. My worst suspicions were confirmed. The bus had left. It had left before schedule at 7 a.m. with my luggage on board. No, I could not get a refund. No, there was no way to stop the bus as it had passed the last of the company check points.

I sat there baffled. Not only would I lose my fare and possibly, knowing Iran, my luggage, but I would have to wait another week for the next bus.

Then the taxi driver took a hand. The bus was only about twenty-five miles away and he would catch up with it as his car was speedy and strong. He would make the journey for three pounds. Wasting no time I hopped aboard and we rocketed away. After fifteen minutes he stopped in the low foothills outside the city and declared that he could go no farther as he had not enough petrol. By this time my temper was at boiling point and I was advancing on the driver with intent when a new gleaming Pontiac drew up and being acquainted of my trouble, offered to take me to the bus. The passenger, it appeared, had also missed it and was indulging in what I later discovered was almost a national pastime, that of "catching the Benz". Hastily I transferred my luggage and my expressions of gratitude were cut short by the calculating look on the face of the car owner as he summed me up. This look presages every act of robbery in Iran and I unconsciously felt for my wallet. There was to be no Good Samaritan foolishness here, just honest-to-goodness down to earth commerce. I needed transport to reach the Benz. He had it; therefore, Q.B.D., I would

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have to pay. Ten pounds was his price and there was no alternative. I stifled the homicidal feelings that welled within me, and paying the taxi driver 10s., we rocketed away in a cloud of dust, the macadam surface having given way to the natural surface.

The owner was most amicable. He has good reason to be, I thought bitterly. I had paid his expenses and a bit over. He offered me fruit and sweet cakes that are standard equipment for all travel in Iran. A man will forget to take his road map but not his box of meringues. I took several, gulped them down and eagerly surveyed the road ahead. Onward we swept at a suicidal rate up steep hills and down steeper ones, but as far as I could see the road was empty.

At last the Benz stood at bay and was overtaken. With a great blaring of horns we overtook and stopped a little way ahead. The driver inquired tenderly why I had missed it. He did not seem at all perturbed by my remonstrances. Taking a fond farewell of our driver I mounted, sank into my seat and looked forward to Tehran.

Since entering Iran I had noticed with some amusement that in every conceivable place on the sides of the road there had been placards, posters and chalked slogans, attesting to the medicinal value, taste, bouquet, quality and reasonable price of "*Chai Jahan*" which literally means "World Tea".

Thinking to appear discerning and knowledgeable, I ordered tea adding that I would prefer *Chai Jahan*. I then spent fifteen minutes explaining to the waiter that it was the name of a brand of tea. The next ten minutes were spent in refusing to purchase large packets of "Flower Tea", "Lovely Tea", and "Oilman's [*sic*] Tea" ("very well thought of in Abadan"). They seemed to be under the impression that I wanted "all the tea in the world", for since they had never heard of "*Chai Jahan*", they thus translated my words.

Rolling forward again through the parched hills we came on

Persian Escapades

a section composed of a series of hairpin bends. That there was a sheer drop of about three hundred feet on one side did not contribute to the mental wellbeing of the passengers. They proceeded, before each danger point, to chant prayers loudly beseeching their Saints, Hassan, Hussein, Ali and Abbas to give the driver good eyesight and strong hands. Their incantations reached a crescendo as the danger point was cleared and died away to a mutter until the next bend. It was a nerve-racking experience to be penned in with a bus load of sometimes screeching, sometimes petrified humanity, but the driver seemed to derive great comfort from it. He occasionally cried out for an extra fervent effort, apparently when he felt his eyes and grasp weakening. The passengers obliged with a will, the driver adding his bit as if to make survival more of a certainty. No one thought of asking him to decrease his speed.

The spectacle of a forty-seat diesel Mercedes Benz coach careening around the bends with a load of shrieking passengers must have been worth seeing, certainly some of the villagers we passed seemed petrified, whether with horror or awe, I don't know, although I suspect it was the latter.

Surmounting the last rise, the driver gave a cry of triumph, and with scant regard for any highway code, removed one hand from the wheel, turned completely around in his seat and informed us that Tehran, Pearl of Cities, was in sight. Hurriedly assuring him that they too had noted this and were drinking in its distant beauty, the passengers suggested more care at the wheel. Hurt, the driver turned back to his wheel and reduced his speed to the extent that we could have been overtaken by the most reluctant hearse.

He kept this up for several miles until one bright passenger – may he be rewarded with Paradise – shouted that they were now, thank God, nearing the end of their journey and would all join him in a prayer for the good fortune, wealth, health, success,

Afghanistan: Cockpit in High Asia

family, home and hearth of their intrepid and courageous driver. All were prepared to pray for the Devil himself if it would speed them on their way and an ear-splitting invitation to the Deity rose to the Heavens. As the prayer grew in length and fervency so did the speed of the bus increase until we attained our original maniacal progress.

Soon we bumped off the great Meshed-Tehran highway on to the beginning of the macadam of Tehran, and the brightest jewel in the crown of the Shah was safely reached.

Tehran disappointed me for I had been told of the glories of the Imperial City, but I could find few. True, there were long, broad avenues with fountains and statues of the father of the present Shah, but little else. The shops were full of cheap trash or expensive imported goods and the touts, procurers and beggars made life dreary.

The New City of Tehran is flooded to a depth of two feet during the rainy season and the malaria incidence, understandably enough, is very high.

After a morning's walk I decided to change my plane reservations, if possible, to the Pan American flight that night. I had seen enough of the Pearl of Cities to last me a lifetime. This I was able to do and decided to spend the day roaming a little and got to the Mehrabad Airport at least two hours before the flight to obviate the slip-ups that seemed to be part and parcel of Iranian life.

I had a large lunch in a clean restaurant, was heavily overcharged, spent the afternoon feeding pigeons and walking through the colourful and filthy arcades of the cloth and copperware bazaars and got to the airport at five in the evening.

Epilogue

As THE great jet wailed its way into the skies from Mehrabad Airport, I felt a pang of sorrow at the unceremonious departure. Certainly I was not sorry to leave Iran, but this flight meant a severing of physical ties with Central Asia. I had been happy there and I had been fortunate enough to realise how happy when I was there and to be able to revel in it. Each little incident was still vivid and I knew that I would be able to fan the embers of remembrance at will when the twentieth century became too much for me. Pipe dreaming? – perhaps, but a lasting tribute to a mountain people who had not stinted their warmth nor drawn back from the proffered hand.

One can be accused of blowing the trumpet of a particular people, race or religion because of one's own favourable experiences, but as far as Afghanistan is concerned, there is more in it than that. I have never met nor heard of anyone who has had an unhappy experience in that country, provided – yes, there is a reservation – that he or she went even a little way to return the warmth of the people. If you are standoffish, so will they be. If you are sincere, you can find no people better prepared to mirror your sentiments.

One day, God willing, I will return to the God Gifted Kingdom and of this I am sure – that whether I enter palace, mansion, cottage or caravanserai, there will be friendship, warmth and brotherhood in their words of greeting from the heart. “*Starai Mashai, Orora*”, – “Brother, may you never be tired.”

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