

**HIGH ROAD
TO HUNZA
BARBARA MONS**

High Road to Hunza



BARBARA MONS

THE TRAVEL BOOK CLUB

121 Charing Cross Road

London W.C.2

*First published in mcmlviii
by Faber and Faber Limited*

© *Barbara Hilda Mons*
1958

*Printed in Great Britain by
Lowe & Brydone (Printers) Ltd., London, N.W.10*

To our friend
MOHAMMED JAMAL KHAN
Mir of Hunza
with respect and gratitude

Contents



1. THE IDEA	page 11
2. ISTANBUL	15
3. ANATOLIA AND CILICIA	22
4. GOATS IN ALEPPO	26
5. HAMA TO DAMASCUS	33
6. OVER THE EUPHRATES	40
7. TO ISFAHAN	50
8. SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS	55
9. THE GRAND TRUNK ROAD	70
10. THE GREAT NORTH ROAD	74
11. HOUSE WITH A VIEW	86
12. LOOKING BACK	90
13. HOME LIFE IN HUNZA	98
14. CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE	108
15. FESTIVAL	119
16. A QUIVER OF ARROWS	128
17. HUNZA CRAFTS	135
18. THE BEATEN TRACK	147
INDEX	153

Part of Chapter 4 is reproduced by courtesy
of the Editor of *The Times*

Illustrations



The Mir of Hunza
Looking up the Hunza Valley from Maiun
Baltit Fort, ancestral home of the Mirs of Hunza
The school below Baltit Fort

MAPS

I. The Journey Out	<i>page 20-21</i>
II. The Hunza Valley	73

CHAPTER 1

The Idea



Hunza lies in the heart of the world's greatest concentration of high mountains, where the icy peaks of the Karakoram meet those of the Hindu Kush. An autonomous state within Pakistan, it extends from just north of Gilgit to the Pamirs and the borders of China. Its inaccessibility is part of its allure and the cause of its uniqueness.

The celebrated trade route from Gilgit over the Mintaka Pass (15,600 feet) to Kashgar in Sinkiang runs along the cliff-ledges of Hunza: this is the Great North Road—in places less than two feet wide—by which since time immemorial Chinese merchant caravans have brought silks, tea and porcelain to India, and returned laden with jewels, spices, ivory and gold.

Hunza is ruled by a royal family whose ancestral seat, the white fort at Baltit, is at least six hundred years old. The origins of the people are wrapped in mystery and legend, but all historians agree that this fair-skinned, well-built race, markedly Aryan in type, has remained undisturbed for centuries. Major Biddulph, the first Englishman to visit it (in 1876), writes in his *Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh*: 'They probably present the spectacle of a race

THE IDEA

living under almost the same conditions now as their forefathers did fourteen centuries ago.' There have been changes among the people of Hunza since Biddulph wrote, but the spectacle they present in the twentieth century is no less remarkable.

I had wanted to go to Hunza ever since, in 1940, I read Mrs. Lorimer's *Language Hunting in the Karakoram*. Sixteen years later the opportunity arose. The following pages tell the impressions of myself and my husband, Peter Mons, during our journey to Hunza in the spring of 1956 and our stay there as the guests of its ruler, Mir Mohammed Jamal Khan.

We had written to the Mir early in 1955, expressing our wish to visit his territory, and had received an encouraging reply, written in English, saying that if we could get permission from the Government of Pakistan to enter Azad Kashmir (Free—i.e. non-Indian—Kashmir) he would be delighted to welcome us to his state. Though we immediately set the ball rolling by all possible means, this permission was not readily forthcoming. A glance at the map shows that Hunza is in a highly strategic area. Thinking our permit might never come, and being determined to have some fun in any case, we decided to travel out in a Land-Rover. Time was limited and Europe was covered by snow and floods, so we shipped the car, and went by train ourselves, as far as Istanbul. From here we motored out to Lahore and thence up to Rawalpindi, from where the journey onward to Hunza was made by aeroplane, jeep, horse and foot.

Despite the fact that this motor trip is now often done, it proved absurdly difficult to obtain in London any reliable information about the state of the roads, the availability of accommodation or the vagaries of climate.

THE IDEA

At the Persian Consulate they provided us with a poetical pamphlet entitled 'Henceforth Iran' and some statements suggesting that all the roads were perfect and most of the hotels in the first class. At the Jordan Consulate they were only concerned to know whether we were Christians. (Had we obtained visas for Israel, our Jordan visas would have been automatically cancelled.) Nobody we were able to meet had driven the whole way by the route we proposed to take. All the books I read were written by men, men who were young, strong and tough. I therefore think it worth while to describe the journey out for the benefit of women who may be thinking of doing it and who, like myself, possess none of these advantages.

The one essential qualification for a passenger on such a journey (I say a passenger, as the vital skills of driving and repairing the Land-Rover were entirely my husband's—I do not drive) is a talent for making oneself fairly comfortable almost anywhere. The comparatively untired condition in which we reached the end of a long day's drive was mainly due to the carefully thought-out arrangement of Dunlopillo cushions that we sat on, leant against, and used as arm-rests. My travelling bed consisted of three of these zipped together into a single cover, while my husband chose to take a Lilo. The Land-Rover was the long-chassis type, fitted with a tropical body, a front winch, and storage for 32 gallons of petrol, and having in the back an extra floor of removable boards, upon which we could have slept, and under which we stowed the supplies that were not wanted on the way out.

For a time we harboured fantasies that stoves, air beds, dried bananas and even a Land-Rover might be

THE IDEA

presented to us for the sake of advertisement, but nobody was remotely interested because we were not an Expedition. However, certain firms were kind enough to lend us the reports written for the guidance of their employees who are obliged to live in the countries through which we were to pass. 'Serious health hazards, no hospitals, no sewage disposal, no alcoholic drinks, only buffalo milk available, temperatures rising to 116° Fahrenheit, cultural life non-existent, amoebic dysentery rampant, scorpions frequently met with, hold-ups not unknown . . .'—it seemed that we must be mad to go there voluntarily. But on so quick a journey most of these perils could be avoided, and the experience more than compensated for the discomforts.

CHAPTER 2

Istanbul



The Simplon-Orient Express began as a very dashing train, with superb French food. When it came out of the Simplon Tunnel the food became Italian and rather less tender. Next day we were in Jugoslavia, going slower and the food indifferent; and when we passed Niš and started off in the direction of Bulgaria, we had quite ceased to be an express and there was no food at all.

Nowadays everybody except us goes to Istanbul by air. Only one carriage went all the way, and the only other English passenger after Venice was a nice Queen's Messenger bound for Sofia. At every junction we got hitched onto a new train, so that it proved impossible to apply the maxim, 'Never lose sight of your luggage'—or the van that you put it in.

It appeared that it was unusual to travel through Bulgaria without a diplomatic passport. But everyone was nice; in fact, in Sofia there was quite a charming little incident. It was the evening of the third day and we had nothing left to eat, having been given totally wrong information in London about restaurant cars. We alighted at the station and made our way to a food stall with the

ISTANBUL

Bulgarian money we had been given in exchange for £1. We chose two rolls of milk-bread, two bars of chocolate and two cakes, and put down our money. The man indicated that it was not enough. As we were trying to make clear that in that case he must take back the cakes, a poorly-dressed spectator stepped forward, paid for them, shook hands with us warmly and made off. (I remarked how nice it was to see that everybody loves the English. Peter pointed out that the only language he had spoken on the station was German.)

The snow which covered western Europe changed to floods, dramatic in extent; large areas of northern Greece were under water. It transpired that ours was the first train to run through for three weeks. For several hours before Istanbul the line passes through country of appalling monotony: hundreds of miles of absolutely featureless plains. The train stopped at every station and a crowd of locals crushed into all the carriages except ours, to alight at the next station where a handful of houses was dimly visible. This went on for hour after hour. The heating on the train ceased to function. We had almost given up hope when at midnight, 86 hours after leaving London, we saw the lights of Istanbul. You enter it by the old quarter where the high narrow houses press in upon the railway line.

Our rooms at the Park Hotel looked over the Bosphorus. On the table was a telegram from Mr. Ikramullah, Pakistani High Commissioner in London, saying: 'Your visit to Hunza approved.'

Next morning at 9 o'clock we were waited upon by a Turkish acquaintance, Mr. Ismail. He walked us the length of Pera, took us in a quaint underground train one station (it only goes one station), then on foot by Galata

ISTANBUL

Bridge over the Golden Horn to the railway station to collect our registered luggage, which we had last seen at Victoria and which was supposed to have arrived with us on last night's train. It had never been heard of. At the British Consulate they told us unhelpfully that we were unlikely to see it again for the next month, if ever, especially as we had been so unwise as to travel via Sofia. The Swedish steamer that contained our car was anchored, but it was probable, owing to a hundred causes, that they would not start unloading her for DAYS.

While we were at lunch, the indefatigable Mr. Ismail—who had taken things so much to heart that he refused to have any lunch—rang up to say that he had found the luggage, which, to everyone's astonishment, had arrived by the train after ours.

The next morning at ten, after interviews in half a dozen offices at the docks, we were told that our car would be delivered in ten minutes. After an hour Mr. Ismail said to Peter: 'Can you read the Koran that I see in your pocket?' Peter got it out. Mr. I. said: 'I do not want you to read aloud to me. I go now to the Authority and tell them that the Doctor is sitting reading the Koran and praying to Allah that his car will be speedily delivered. I ask you to read only so that I shall not tell a lie.'

Allah delivered the car at 2 p.m. The lighter that brought it alongside was a size too small, so that it was almost impossible for the crane to extricate it. After nearly two hours' struggle, with Peter on board the lighter doing more work than all the rest put together, it finally touched earth with the side-lights, the rear-light, the driving mirror and one or two other things wrenched off. During this time Mr. I., clutching a woollen muffler round his neck, was no comfort. Ex-

ISTANBUL

pecting at any moment to see Peter in the Bosphorus with the car on top of him, I said feebly: 'Do you think it is all right?' He replied: 'I do not think so. If I may say so, madam, you must remember that you are not now in the British Isles.'

After another hour the car was pushed by six hooligans out of the docks into the street, where I guarded it (unnecessarily, I am sure, but Mr. I., almost dead of agitation by this time, insisted that if we left it for two minutes, even though locked and under the eyes of a policeman, everything, the very car itself, would instantly be stolen in the most un-British way) while Peter went to find the Rover agent. No vital part was injured, and we proceeded to the station to get our luggage.

The Director of Customs was large and fat; surly at first, but with a disarming smile. He offered us coffee 'as his own personal guests'. We bowed, and said (through Mr. I.) that we had never been treated with such courtesy in any Customs in the world. He bowed also. He and Mr. I.—who we hoped was telling him what important people we were—talked together. Mr. I. then said: 'Doctor, the Director of Customs has a favour to ask.' Peter indicated that there was no favour he would not grant the Director of Customs. Mr. I. translated: 'He is a big man, a big strong man with much muscle. But he lose control of his temper. He says, why is it that he remain calm and polite for many hours, then suddenly, at home, he goes up—pouff! The Director says, he generally goes pouff! on an occasion when his wife does not see his point of view.' Peter explained, adding that men in England have good tempers because they let out their aggression hitting balls at golf (gesture), tennis (gesture), or football. Mr. I. translated. The Director was

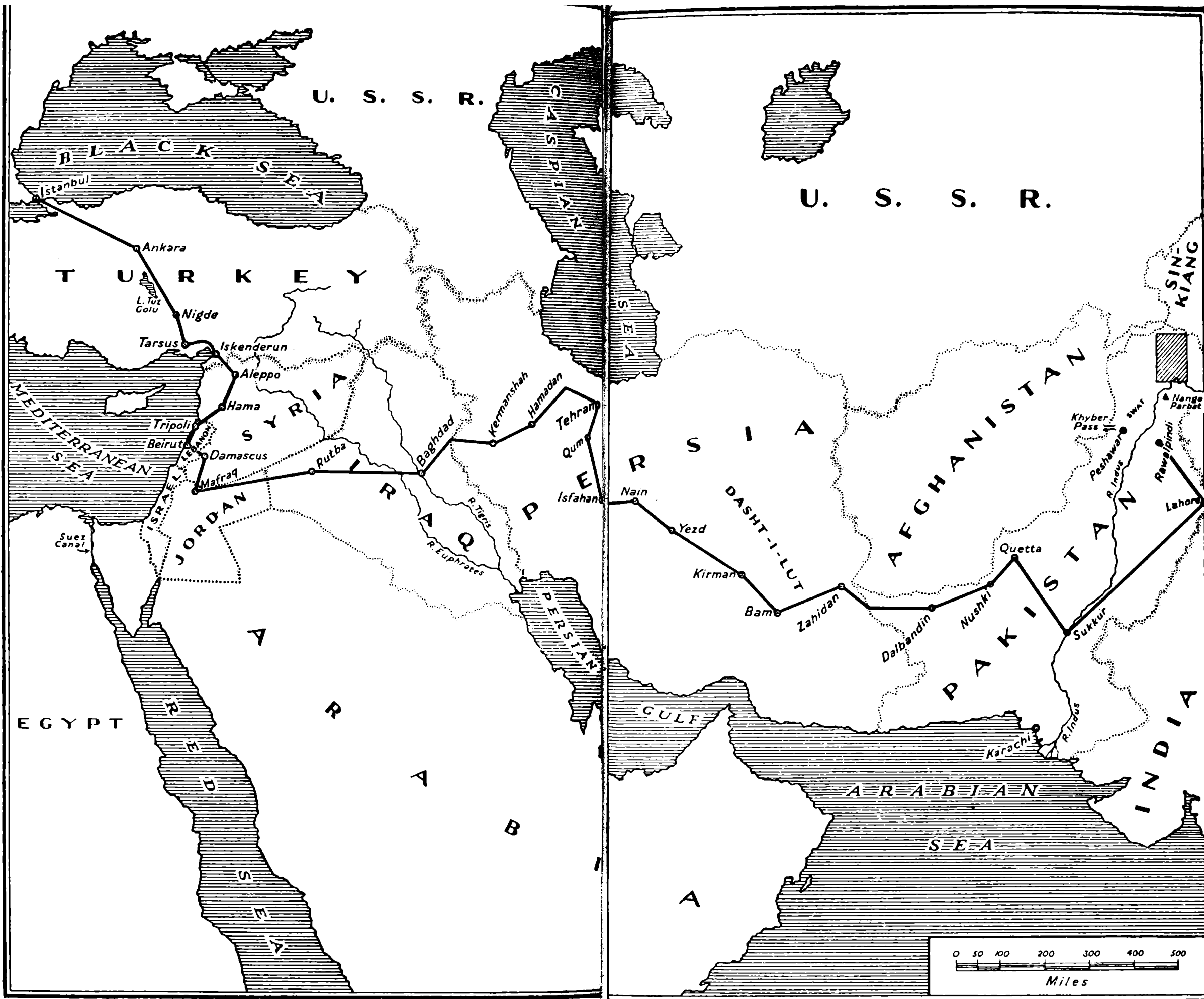
ISTANBUL

much impressed, as he recollected that before his weak heart stopped him playing *futbal* he went pouff! much less often. He passed all our luggage without looking at it.

During four days in Istanbul we only had time to skim the surface of its pleasures. Snow fell, but the sun shone when we were taken by a charming Turkish girl, Aysel Bati, for a drive up the Bosphorus to within sight of the Black Sea, lunching on sole and fried mussels at an open-air restaurant at Buyukdere. On the return drive we visited the new little mosque at Sisli: very gay and uplifting, with a fountain playing in the middle of it and lovely indirect lighting. My most vivid memory of that day is of the Blue Mosque—the Sultan Ahmed—with its piled domes and six soaring minarets glinting gold in the setting sun. In Santa Sophia, neck craned backwards, I felt happy to have been brought up on the chapter on it in Lisle March Phillipps' *The Works of Man*, and to echo the words of Procopius that are quoted there: 'The dome does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from Heaven.'

On the last day I lunched with Aysel at Istanbul University, where we were joined by a young man who had recently spent three years at the London School of Economics, after which he drove himself back to Turkey in a London taxi. I remarked to him what a pity it was that one meets so few of the foreigners like him in London. He said: 'Oh, you don't live in the right part. Why don't you hang around South Kensington Station?'

We promised ourselves a return to this city at a period of our lives when time would be no object. Now the Land-Rover stood, mended, at the door, and Hunza beckoned. At dawn on March 7th we set foot on Asia.



MAP I. The Journey Out
 Hunza lies in the small shaded area that is covered by Map II.

CHAPTER 3

Anatolia and Cilicia



The ferry deposits one on the pot-holed cobblestones of Scutari. Two kind Americans in an army truck led us through a maze of suburbs out to the open road and all the way to Ismit, where they parted from us with cries of 'Tons of luck, Doc. Waal, ma'am, I sure wish you a good trip.'

Asia Minor can seldom have looked more bleak. From Istanbul to Ankara is 290 miles. It was comparatively easy as far as the long pass that leads to Bolu. Thereafter mud, snow, ice and slush alternated; the road was only just passable and frequently indistinguishable from the surrounding fields. The four-wheel drive got us through. Villages looked alpine in all but the minarets that replaced the church spires. Much of the way might have been Switzerland, with tinsel Christmas trees and a wonderful alpenglow on the mountains; but often one could imagine oneself in Siberia. In the middle of a vast white plain 40 miles before Ankara, as darkness closed in, with freezing fingers we had to scrape the mud off the head and tail lamps where it had frozen into a thick crust. The lights of Ankara were visible from far off, and very comforting they were.

ANATOLIA AND CILICIA

The next morning icicles hung on the Land-Rover. The weather was so menacing that we decided we must proceed south by the shortest and, so far as we could judge, the easiest route. We chose that described by the A.A. as 'a modern lonely strategic highway'. Ankara-Aksaray-Bor.

Lonely it certainly was. It might have been the Arctic Circle. The immense landscape had a strange fascination: no vegetation anywhere, the lake of Tuz Golu a smooth sheet of pale blue silk merging with the colourless sky. I have never experienced cold so intense. Hungry though I was, I could not keep my hand out of its woollen glove long enough to butter my bread for lunch. We passed a very occasional human being, a lorry or a string of camels, and at long intervals a cluster of adobe houses that sometimes attained the status of a village by the addition of a tiny mosque.

At Bor, after more than 200 miles, we turned north for a short distance in order to spend the night at Nigde (pronounced Ni-ide), an attractive little Anatolian town full of Seljuk mosques and tombs. It lay on a rise surrounded by snowy hill-country that looked, in the evening light, like coffee mousse covered with smooth cream. In a small square that seemed to be the bazaar of the fruiterers, we climbed steep stone steps into a little hotel of the kind which the *Guide Bleu* describes as 'rustique mais propre'—a kind I particularly favour. The hospitality was delightful. We were given two bedrooms, each with a roaring wood fire in an iron stove, in front of which a pair of old felt slippers was put ready. The only washing facility was a sink on the stairs common to all, but I washed happily in my bedroom in my small canvas bucket (an invaluable travel accessory). Several men had

ANATOLIA AND CILICIA

beds on the wide landing, where they sat round a large stove playing cards with the genial proprietress. No food was available at the inn, but we dined well and cheaply at the nearby *lokanta* on soup and chicken, yoghurt and local wine. Here we also breakfasted, on bread and goat's cheese, stewed figs, and sweet milkless tea poured into little tumblers from dolls' teapots.

There followed a splendid drive through the snow-covered Taurus, past the Cilician Gates where, at the narrowest part, there is chiselled on the face of the rock a Greek inscription reminding the traveller that Alexander passed this way. As we descended the southern slopes to Tarsus in the plain of Cilicia, our senses were gladdened by warmth and by green. The Mediterranean climate and flora were a sudden delight.

The River Cydnus, now called Tarsus Çay, flows through Tarsus. Alexander is said to have bathed in this and to have caught a chill from it which delayed his advance to the Battle of Issus; and three centuries later Cleopatra came floating up it to a rendezvous with Antony. Lying beneath a gold-bespangled awning, fanned by ostrich plumes, surrounded by the marvellous odour of Egyptian incense, she received him clad in the robes of the Goddess Venus. In the mean streets of today's Tarsus, three miles removed from the sea, it is hard to conjure up this vision of the Queen of Egypt. Its most famous citizen fits in better. Paul would have approved of the female inhabitants, who—deaf to appeals to be Modern Turks—hide their charms under all-enveloping garments of material like grey check dusters, giving them the appearance of people dressed up as spooks.

We went through Adana, Turkey's fourth city and the principal market town of the Cilician plain. Ancient of

ANATOLIA AND CILICIA

origin, it lies by the sleepy brown River Seyhan; but impressions of its peaceful waterfront are wiped out for me by those of the startling confusion of traffic in its streets. We escaped only after going round in circles several times. Slipping imperceptibly from Asia Minor into the Middle East, we came in the evening to Isken-derun (Alexandretta). Here hotels are modern, and we dined at a good restaurant on the palm-fringed sea-front, where white yachts, sails furled, swung gently at anchor. The next morning we went inland in a south-easterly direction, and after fifty miles crossed the frontier into Syria.

CHAPTER 4

Goats in Aleppo



The Turks were pleasant while we dealt with exit formalities, but the Syrians completely charming in their welcome. All the way to India we were to meet this law of the frontier: the country you are leaving treats you with amiable indifference—the one you are entering, with eager hospitality.

Almost at once we saw our first example of that extraordinary phenomenon of these parts, the beehive village. From a distance it presented such a puzzling appearance that it was not until we were quite close to it that we were able to recognize it for what it was. All the villages around Aleppo are of this type. They are entirely composed of conical, windowless huts of sun-baked clay, in rows, and more or less uniform in size. We drove the Land-Rover off the road towards it, and were immediately surrounded by some forty children and several handsome young men in Arab dress. The village schoolmaster restored order and took Peter off to see the school—the only non-beehive building—where he said he had 180 boys with five teachers, in three tiny rooms.

Aleppo looks intriguing even from far off. It rose out of the plain in the days, so legend has it, when Abraham

GOATS IN ALEPPO

milked his cow upon the summit of the hill where the citadel stands. The citadel is magnificent. The Hittites and the Assyrians used it; in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it was transformed into the imposing mediaeval fortress one sees today. Concentrically around it spreads the city, oldest first, then newer, until it becomes a French town with arcaded modern blocks and alarming motor traffic. I had expected its hotels to be fusty and antiquated, but in the New Ommayad, where we stayed two nights, there was modern comfort and contemporary décor in unmistakable French taste. In the entrance hall an Arab girl of about fourteen, with pensive black eyes, operated the switchboard next to an up-to-date lift.

From the days of the Seleucids, Aleppo has lain astride the desert caravan routes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries its wealthy merchants built fine private houses and great warehouses or *khans*, some of which survive today. While the needs of the more sophisticated are now catered for in the glass-fronted shops, the Arabs still trade in the *suks* at the foot of the citadel. The romance of the city lies here. You plunge into a vast warren of covered alleys pierced by an occasional shaft of sunlight. Grass grows and sheep graze on the roofs of this extraordinary hive of business, which dates in part from the thirteenth century and covers an enormous area. Narrow as are the ways, donkeys and horses carry goods along them. The shops are small caves, mysteriously lit, the owners sitting cross-legged on carpets pursuing their various callings. There are goldsmiths and silversmiths and coppersmiths at work, vendors of Arab clothing of every degree of quality, of red-leather slippers fashioned by hand under your very eyes, of great sheepskin coats

GOATS IN ALEPPO

and water-skins and belts and saddles, sherbet, Nescafé and Kolynos and powders of strange odour and unimaginable purpose,

*‘ . . . Indian carpets dark as wine,
Turbans and sashes, gowns and bows and veils,
. . . rose-candy, spikenard,
Mastic and terebinth and oil and spice,
And such sweet jams meticulously jarred
As God’s Own Prophet eats in Paradise.’¹*

There were no trippers, yet no one noticed us as we mingled with the crowd. Or almost no one. A charming quiet Arab helped us by speaking French and then attached himself to us in a dignified way, so that we were scarcely aware of it, and led us around, conducting all the bargaining, translating, carrying our parcels, so unobtrusively that we became the possessors of several articles, such as Arab head-dresses and slippers, without really noticing. Finally, I expressed a tentative desire to look at the camel-hair rugs which I had heard were obtainable here.

The words were no sooner uttered than our escort, his wide robes billowing like black-and-white banners, led us swiftly by a devious route and up a staircase to quite a different kind of shop—in fact, a modern store, stacked to the ceiling with plates and vases and embroidered tablecloths, cheap jewellery and ash-trays and inlaid cigarette-boxes, rugs and carpets and bales of material. It was owned by a man in an expensive European suit and a tarboosh. As he came forward bowing, we knew that we were in the den of a shark. But Peter’s two years’ experience of carpet-buying in India was going to be quite adequate to deal with anything the Syrians

¹ *Hassan*, by James Elroy Flecker.

GOATS IN ALEPPO

could think up. Anyway, he is a psychiatrist, so you can't fool him.

The first thing is to look at anything but what you are looking for. That is why we became the owners of two rather ordinary plates with Koranic inscriptions. Of course, it had been fun getting the original price down to half. It was easier to resist the embroidered tablecloths, although the tarboosh told us a heartrending story about the women in prison who fed their children on the proceeds of this work. He plied us with Turkish coffee and had got nicely into his stride, when I refused to look at any more stuff we had no intention of buying. This was the cue our Arab had been waiting for. He mentioned camel-hair rugs.

'Ah!' said the tarboosh, 'I can see you want the best. Nowhere else in the city will you find what I have here. But first look at this!'—and with a single gesture he spread upon the floor something he had torn from a pile behind his back. 'This is goat-hair. You must never, never, NEVER buy goat-hair. Why? I will tell you. The moths, they come running when they smell goat-hair. And they eat it—so!' And he pulled out handfuls. 'I will now show you the real camel-hair, the rarest camel-hair. The moths, they like it not.'

He flung the treasure at our feet. We thought it looked exactly like the other. He noticed our expressions.

'Feel the softness! No goat ever felt like this. But you must also smell'—holding the rug under our noses—'*That* is camel. Now smell the other.'

We sniffed the moth-eaten one. Unmistakably goat. But where had we smelt the camel smell before? We could not place it. But there was no doubt that by the smell you could tell a camel from a goat.

GOATS IN ALEPPO

We let him pull out every rug he had in the place before deciding which was the nicest of the camel-hairs. We smelt each one. Then the bargaining began. He asked 80. We offered 30. He looked pained. As a favour he would give us the rug and the plates together for 95. We pointed out that this was an increase and not a reduction. He talked about the price of false teeth and the absence of perambulators in the *suks*. He unfolded our chosen rug with tenderness and ruffled the coarse brown hair, declaring that he would give it to us for nothing rather than sell it at so fantastically low a price. Did we not know its value? Allah!

We apologized for our ignorance and said his magnificent wares were obviously beyond our means. He replaced the rug by a smaller one, all white, reverently called Baby Camel. As we had yet to see the numerous white camels in the desert, we could not argue about the scarcity value of Baby White Camels, but shook our heads. The price of the first one went down to 75.

We reminded him that Allah is all-compassionate and all-merciful and would send him richer clients. There followed a discussion on the Al Ikhlas of the Koran, our guide contributing the third and fourth verses which state that God remained a bachelor and did not lead the promiscuous existence of the Greek gods. The price went down to 70.

We said it was the most beautiful rug we had ever seen and that if we did not eat for a week we could perhaps scrape up 35. He invited us to spend a week in his humble home as his guests, and—as we were now old friends—he would disclose that he had paid 65 for the rug and we could inspect his ledger. We replied that we would not dream of involving him in a loss and that it

GOATS IN ALEPPO

was clear that we were wasting his valuable time. He assured us that he was scarcely interested in the side-issue of a possible sale, but was relishing our excellent company. The Duchess of Westminster was in the habit of never passing through Syria without buying from him. He had her address. Would we like to see it? He rearranged the rugs in a new pattern.

We talked of his father's rheumatism. He offered us four of the smaller rugs for 200. We thanked him and reminded him that we were poor. He said he had become so fond of us that he would give us the one we wanted for 60. We countered with an offer of 40, on the same grounds. The game had now lasted an hour.

He said his old father would starve.

We rose and said we were sorry we had not been able to come to terms. His warehouse was like the cave of Ali Baba and we could not aspire to its treasures. If we offered 45 . . .

Our Arab got slowly to his feet and murmured something in his own language. The tarboosh seemed to ponder, then bowed to us and said: 'I accept. A cheque, if you do not have it in cash.' He kissed Peter's hand and pressed it against his brow. We were a little disturbed. This was the gesture of a petitioner upon whom largesse has been bestowed; of a man delighted, a winner.

The parcel was thrust upon the Arab, who received it with perfect dignity. The tarboosh accompanied us to the hotel, where we were to give him a cheque. His manner was now urbane, a man of the world. As we watched the two of them leave together, we wondered what our Arab's cut would be at the shops where we had bought. And why could we not rid ourselves of the suspicion that the Syrian had somehow got the better of us?

GOATS IN ALEPPO

The bargaining had flowed in traditional channels.

And then it dawned upon us. There is no hair on a camel. Only very fine beige wool. Our rug was goat, like the moth-eaten one. The smell of the one we had bought was D.D.T.

CHAPTER 5

Hama to Damascus



I felt slightly ill next morning, as goats give me asthma.

We left Aleppo on the road southward and drove across the undulating plain, the Alawi Mountains a faint blue line on the western horizon: a plain of beehive villages, fine horses, no trees, very green crops, bright brown or purple soil under a pale sky; and so to Hama on the Orontes.

As you enter the town you are immediately aware of its most characteristic sight and sound, the gigantic wooden water-wheels on the river. They are fifty or sixty feet in diameter and, turned by the current, creaking and groaning to Heaven in every joint, they spill water into aqueducts that carry it to orchard and garden and field. It seems they have been doing so since Roman times.

I had read of Hama that here the West had penetrated less than in any other large town in Syria, and that the inhabitants were notoriously hostile to strangers. We were taken possession of by three nice boys aged around seventeen, eager to practise the few words of English they had learnt at school. They were most friendly, and

HAMA TO DAMASCUS

the West had so far penetrated that a radio screeched from a loud-speaker in the main square. However, we were soon away from this and walking with our companions in the quiet cobbled streets. With their help we found the Azem Palace, which was built in the first half of the eighteenth century by the same Pasha el Azem who was responsible for the better-known but no more attractive palace in Damascus. The one in Hama is now used as a school, and our visit created a happy diversion for the pupils, delighted to stop learning while we admired their little carved, painted and gilded class-room. Then, crossing the river by an old, humpbacked, stone bridge, we followed the boys through a maze of pitch-dark passages beneath ancient buildings and up a staircase into a cool, half-empty house. Dating like the palace from the Turkish period and added to at various dates, it is still privately owned, we were told, by the Keylani family. Its wooden balconies overhang the water, whose reflections ripple upon the walls of the quiet rooms that seem outside of time.

Without the boys we should probably never have discovered that a building in the central square, looking like some sort of dingy casino, was in fact a hotel, an amenity which we had been reliably informed did not exist in Hama. Our young friends trooped in, suggested which rooms were the best and helped us to understand the proprietor, who wished to consult Peter (whose passport discloses that he is a doctor) about heart trouble, complete with X-ray photographs. One boy pressed us to dine at his parents' house, an invitation we felt obliged to refuse. Later, alone, we drank beer on an open-air terrace by the Orontes, where the other customers, dressed to a man in black-and-white robes, played dominoes, sipped

HAMA TO DAMASCUS

sherbet, or indulged in the pleasures of idleness. We went to bed to a cacophony of howls from wireless, cinema and water-wheel. But only the water-wheels continued all night, as they have done since Hama emerged into history.

Early the next morning we made a side-trip to the Assassins' castle of Masiaf, in a westward-winding valley leading to the flanks of the Alawi Mountains. The Assassins were members of the Muslim sect known as the Ismailis (to which Hunza belongs) that now acknowledges the Aga Khan as its spiritual head. After their loss of the Fatimite Caliphate in Egypt, the Aga Khan's ancestors moved across Syria and the Lebanon and established a remarkable stronghold in Persia on the crag of Alamut in the Elburz Mountains. (See Freya Stark's *Valleys of the Assassins*.) Here legend and history mingle in the fantastic tales of their succession of Chiefs, each known as the Old Man of the Mountains, of the extraordinary uses to which they put the drug hashish—from which they are supposed to have derived their name—and of the political murders ('assassinations') which were their especial art. In Syria at the time of the Crusades they conveniently quarrelled with other Muslim sects and adopted the role of allies of the Crusaders. The castle of Masiaf was one of the fortresses they built after the Frankish pattern. Its ruins stand impressively upon a bold rock.

Back at Hama, after shopping for bread and some of the little cakes that could be bought anywhere in Syria and made a pleasant addition to our usual lunch of tinned meat from London, we continued on the road south for thirty miles to Homs. By the wayside were wild rock gardens of poppies, small white, mauve and yellow

HAMA TO DAMASCUS

flowers and, most memorable of all, the blood-red anemone called the Adonis, the manifestation of that legend which had its birth here, of Venus sprinkling nectar on the spilt blood of Adonis, drops of which sprouted into this flower.

Half-way between Homs and Tripoli is the Krak des Chevaliers, held by connoisseurs of castles to be the most perfect castle in the world. Of all those built by the Crusaders it must be by far the most impressive. It was created by the Knights Hospitallers in 1142 and continuously occupied by them for a hundred and fifty years. It was absurdly difficult to find. After wasting much time and petrol, in a village some miles before the Lebanese frontier we finally took on board a young local as guide; there was no lack of volunteers for this simple and remunerative way of spending half the day. It was five miles across country over the worst track in Asia. The final approach was up a steep, stony hill where our boy, grinning, pointed to the knobs of the four-wheel drive. A narrow iron ramp led to the small main gate, where a competent official guide took charge and conducted us up a long vaulted passage to the great halls and the twelfth-century chapel, which are so well preserved that one expects to hear the echoes of a chanted Mass and the tramp of mediaeval feet. Kestrels wheeled over the empty keep high above the dry inner moat. As we returned to the car, children from a nearby village arrived to sell us 'finds', including a fifty-cent piece of 1906.

It was dark by the time we reached Tripoli, and we put up at a hotel called the Hakim which might have stood in any back street in Paris. Our morning departure was delayed by the chef who, dressed in white with a red fez, was discovered roasting a mountain of coffee

HAMA TO DAMASCUS

beans in an iron drum right in front of the car in the tiny yard where it was parked for the night.

Ten miles south of Tripoli, behind the houses of the village of Enfeh, there is a little rock peninsula that was the site of the small Crusader castle of Nephin. Little is known of its history and almost nothing now remains of it except the foundations; but it is interesting to see how, for better defence, they painstakingly made it into an island by cutting two deep trenches in the solid rock right down to water-level. This is a pleasant place to linger in. The Lebanon is full of enchantment. We came next to Byblos, which is, so far as is known, the world's oldest living small town. Here history extends over so large a tract of time that the mind boggles at it. Archaeologists are still busy in the ruins, which cover much ground and are now enclosed for protection. One enters beside the square keep that dates from the twelfth century when the Crusaders held this entire coast. For greater strength, they incorporated into their castle walls some of the Hellenistic columns that lay to hand when they built. A row of these still stands upon a nearby rise, and cheek-by-jowl with them is the 4,000-year-old royal cemetery with its curious well-tombs, in one of which was found a sarcophagus—now in Beirut Museum—bearing an inscription thought to be the first example of the use of an alphabet. There are the grass-covered remains of no less than seven rows of town walls. In the chalcolithic part that dates from before 3000 B.C., we almost stumbled over newly excavated skeletons still lying where they were buried underneath their houses. The most strange sight of all is the primitive Obelisk Temple: a small enclosure containing rough-hewn monoliths in rows, none higher than about ten feet. In the centre

HAMA TO DAMASCUS

is a square block of granite that appears to have served as an altar, with a central well for the ashes. Near by stands what must have been the ritual slaughter-table. At bright noon, amid sweet-smelling grass where meadow-orchids grew, it seemed an innocent enough place; but even the least psychic of us might hesitate to spend the night here. Lying just apart from the ruins is a peaceful little mediæval church, where banana fronds brush the Gothic stone-carving. Beyond, the slope leads down to blue water, to where, five thousand years ago, a small harbour welcomed Egyptian galleys that came in search of cedar.

The way south to Beirut leads first over the Dog River (Nahr el Kelb) where, on the rocks of the gorge, are carved in hieroglyphics, cuneiform, Greek, Latin, Arabic, French and English, the names of every conquering army that has passed this way from the days of Rameses II to 1941: a vivid testimony to the saddest activity of man. Then the road crosses the mouth of the Adonis River. Byblos and its surrounding regions were the centre of the cult of Adonis and Astarte (Venus-Aphrodite), and the rites peculiar to this, supposed to compel the fertility of Nature, were enacted until as late as the fifth century upon the green sward at the source of the Adonis River in the high Lebanon.

At Beirut we went to the expensive Hotel St. Georges and drank coffee in a technicolour setting on the terrace by the sea. Here we got enough drinking-water, reputed to be drinkable from the tap in Beirut, to last us till Tehran. We carried three plastic bottles holding half a gallon each. This was enough. The supply we took on in Tehran lasted till Lahore.

It is a fifteen-mile climb to the top of the road over the Lebanon Mountains; thence you descend into the great

HAMA TO DAMASCUS

trough that is the Bekaa, on whose far side is the long, low rampart of the Anti-Lebanon. At the village of Shtaura we turned north for Baalbek, 25 miles up the valley. These Roman ruins, the pride of the Lebanon, are so famous that one might expect to be disappointed. No one could be. The six pillars that remain of the great Temple of Jupiter—the tallest pillars in the world—are so startling that they rivet the eye and steal the limelight from the neighbouring Temple of Bacchus, but this also is a jewel of the first order. The huge enclosure that contains the ruins was surrounded with apricot trees in blossom. A tiresome guide not only bored us with his praise of the local hotel, which had profited the previous day from the visit of 300 G.I.s, but also led us in circles in the hope that we would stay at it if he delayed us till night-fall. In this he was mistaken, as he only succeeded in making us glad to escape back to the little hotel at Shtaura for the night.

The Hotel Massakbi could have been a seaside boarding-house. Dusky guests were knitting in the lounge. Mothers and aunts, severely dressed in black silk, sat on divans against the carpets that covered the walls, while children played with toys on brass trays supported by Arab turnery. The looks with which these regulars appraised us fitted perfectly into the atmosphere.

Early next morning we were on the road to Damascus. It is an easy run over the Anti-Lebanon, where black- and-white sheep graze on brown slopes, and Fords and Cadillacs speed by, filled invariably with five or six incongruous sheikhs in full Arab dress. You pass from the Lebanon back again into Syria. The Barada River appears by the roadside and you follow it down to the oasis that it creates, the *Ghouta*, the oasis of Damascus.

CHAPTER 6

Over the Euphrates



Though Damascus lies on the hem of the desert, the traveller arriving from the west receives no immediate impression of this fact. It is dramatically evident from the air, as we were to notice when we flew home.

We spent two days here, staying in luxury at the Orient Palace Hotel. Some of the time had to be given to repairs, such as getting the car overhauled, replenishing our larder, and having my hair washed by a coiffeuse who spoke only Arabic, plied me with sticky sweets and boiled the water in kettles, to the accompaniment of high Arab wailing in the compartment next door. But most of the time was devoted to pleasure.

The *suks* of Damascus, though less beguiling than those of Aleppo, have an authentic appeal, particularly the vendors of camel gear and the alley of the tinsmiths and coppersmiths all banging rhythmically. There was one form of female dress we saw nowhere else but here: ankle-length, frilly, early-Victorian drawers. Every now and then, in the modern parts of the city, one sees a well-dressed man who is quite superb: a hawk-nosed face with piercing dark eyes beneath a head-dress white as

OVER THE EUPHRATES

snow, and a jet black or navy blue cloak, embroidered in gold across the shoulder-blades, held draped with careless *chic*.

At the Great Mosque, emerging from the immense, low, sumptuously-carpeted interior into the courtyard where fragments of mosaic glitter in the arches, we saw a white-bearded patriarch who might have been Abraham. In flowing brown robe and pale blue head-cloth, leaning on a long staff, he walked very slowly over to the ablution fountain and, after washing, prostrated himself in prayer. Would his ancestors have looked at all different twelve hundred years ago when the mosque came into being during the great days of the Ommayad caliphate? One comes straight out of the clamour of the *suks* into this calm and spacious court. When the mosaics, depicting formal landscapes, were whole, it must have been ravishing. Robert Byron, in *The Road to Oxiana*, says of it: 'Even now, as the sun catches a fragment on the outside wall, one can imagine the first splendour of green and gold, when the whole court shone with those magic scenes conceived by Arab fiction to recompense the parched eternities of the desert.'

Around the mosque and the white-domed tomb of Saladin the streets are narrow and tortuous, with sunken doorways and grilled windows on the upper storeys; but there are wide new streets where the big hotels have arisen. The Museum is to be found a short way from the Orient Palace, and it is well worth a visit. Single treasures are displayed against dark velvet in glass niches with concealed lighting. There is a re-erected third-century synagogue from Dura Europos, and—not to be missed—the sculptures from one of the subterranean mausoleums of Palmyra.

OVER THE EUPHRATES

As I was taking a photograph in the Street called Straight, the camera was almost struck from my hand by a youth who assumed a menacing posture and threatened to call the police. This was the third time I had such an experience in Syria. The modern Syrian wishes to appear 'civilized' and therefore desires one to photograph the Cinema, the Post Office, and people in European dress. Though this feeling must be common in such countries, I have never met with such interference elsewhere. It is evidently a way of gaining merit with the authorities.

Apart from the first two days in Turkey, our daily run so far had been easy. Beyond Damascus the going was tougher. With little choice of stopping-place, time and distance became important.

March 16th DAMASCUS TO RUTBA 352 miles

We set out at 6 a.m., just as the sun rose, in good weather, deteriorating into rainstorms and a biting wind. Rolling, fertile, treeless country. It is 70 miles to the frontier of Jordan.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan comprises the Biblical lands of Gilead, Ammon, Moab and Edom. At the moment there was an up-to-date nationalistic crisis in full swing. Glubb Pasha had just been expelled from the country. In the frontier post a hefty, heavily-armed official scrutinized us and our passports with a frown (the exception to the rule of Welcome at the Frontier). There was a longish pause. Then he pushed across the table a bundle of green tickets and intimated that we should buy some. We proffered an English pound note. He gave us two tickets, smiled, and handed back our passports. As

OVER THE EUPHRATES

we drove off I studied the tickets and saw that they were in aid of Arms for Jordan.

Nobody had asked whether we were Christians.

Twenty-five miles farther on, at the village of Mafraq, you turn east for Baghdad (530 miles) along the pipe-line road. The pipe-line is a slight, irregular mound, hardly noticeable, running beside the telegraph poles. The road was tarmac, good at first but getting gradually worse until, a couple of hundred miles on, we were nearly shaken to death. (I write 'was' in the case of a road, because the condition of surfaces, in all except the most advanced countries, depends upon whether or not you strike them when they have been newly repaired. For instance, we had been told by people who had been over this road less than a year ago that it was very good indeed; and, conversely, that the first road we had to take in Pakistan was almost dangerously bad, whereas we found it in perfect shape. It is now clear to me why that excellent institution, the A.A., cannot be expected to supply accurate information on any road east of Belgrade.)

For the first hundred miles the road passes through a limitless expanse of black stones, each one roughly the size of a football. Round about the pumping station of H4 (128 miles) the sand desert begins. You are suddenly aware that you can no longer see the telegraph poles, which is disturbing if you have not been warned that in places they diverge from the road. The black tents of the Bedouin appear, pitched singly or in pairs, and always a long way off—the loneliest-looking dwellings imaginable. There were many camels, a lot of the baby ones pure white, and at least one of each group deciding to wander across the road just as the car approached, head in the air like a particularly silly *débutante*. Dust devils

OVER THE EUPHRATES

rose, and there were numberless mirages, even seas with yachts floating on them. In the late afternoon steep escarpments came in sight, and for many miles the desert assumed extraordinary shapes, pyramids, cones, flat-topped rectangular hills. Just as the sun set we reached Rutba.

We had expected nothing, and found with amazement a rest-house, opened the previous year, a polite manager saying, 'Welcome to Rutba!', two simple but perfectly adequate rooms, and dinner. You would have to see Rutba, which is more or less nothing in the middle of nothingness, to know how wonderful this was.

March 17th

RUTBA TO BAGHDAD

273 miles

Dawn came swiftly. The wind continued. I looked out of my window at an uninterrupted ocean of sand. Just in front of the house a few flowers grew bravely, planted in neat rows, but not a blade of grass.

We were in the car by 6.30 a.m., but not off for an hour, owing to the difficulty of getting petrol. The pump-owner said he was in Iraq, and would not accept the Jordan money given to us on the other side of the road by the rest-house, who said they were in Jordan.

The desert is full of birds: invisible on the ground, rising in unexpected clouds almost from under the wheels: hoopoes, carrion crows, light grey falcons, pigeon, black grouse. The real desert now closed in upon us. There was much blown sand and many drifts across the road, necessitating awkward detours. Sand, sand, sand . . . in your eyes, teeth and hair. After 190 miles of this you see what you think is another mirage, date

OVER THE EUPHRATES

palms this time, and you hardly bother to look: and suddenly it is real: the miracle of water—the Euphrates, carving its way down from the north, its banks a thin green line of cultivation, of life. This is Ramadi. In a muddy yard outside the Iraqi customs, where the officer begged for medical advice about his eyes, we were given sweet tea that tasted like nectar, in delicate little glasses, the boy who brought it refusing a tip.

After Ramadi the desert began again in earnest, and the road ceased. There were signs of a road in course of construction, but for the present each vehicle took the course it fancied for this mesopotamian lap, and there were lorries as far away as a mile on either side of us. The telegraph poles led us to Baghdad.

Modern Baghdad is a straggling, unkempt city and the romance of it is hard to find. One is less aware of the Street of the Coppersmiths or the gilded domes of the Mosque of Khazimein than of the shoddy bazaars at the poor end of Rashid Street and, at its better end near the big hotels, showrooms selling expensive cars, and at least one grocer's shop that might be in Brompton Road, overflowing with Peek Frean, Crosse and Blackwell, and Huntley and Palmer. There were no tourists, only business men of all nationalities carrying large brief-cases and thinking about Oil. We were thinking about motor tyres, as we had burst one that morning and were obliged to spend a lot of time and money buying another. This was the only place on our journey where we had difficulty in finding somewhere to sleep, ending up in tiny and windowless rooms in the Hotel Semiramis. But for breakfast there were tables in a quiet garden at the edge of the Tigris.

Most of the morning was spent in the Iraq Museum,

OVER THE EUPHRATES

looking at the treasures found by Sir Leonard Woolley in the royal graves at Ur. I recollect an astonishing gold ceremonial wig; a magnificent gold dagger with haft of lapis-lazuli and filigree gold sheath; and the heads of female attendants sacrificed in the death pits, preserved in exactly the condition in which Woolley found them, jewellery and ornaments crushed by the weight of the earth.

In the afternoon, while storks circled against an azure sky, we meandered out to Ctesiphon, 16 miles along a good road to the south-east. The celebrated arch, a barrel vault with a span of eighty-six feet and entirely composed of mud bricks, is all that remains of the palace of the Sassanian kings who seized power from the Parthians in A.D. 226 and made Ctesiphon their capital. In the eighth century its ruins supplied building material for Baghdad. It now houses a kiosk selling lemonade and coca-cola. As we stood gazing at the span, an urchin threw a pebble against the wall behind our heads and walked innocently away while the stone rebounded onto our heads.

March 19th BAGHDAD TO KERMANSHAH 256 miles

We were on the road by 6 a.m. It was just over a hundred miles to the Persian frontier. There was a modern road, across a plain for most of the way, then rising between earthy mounds; and as we descended again we got a distant view of snowy mountains beyond hills that were waves of blue and violet.

The weather was perfect as we crossed the frontier, and Persia gay and beautiful and seeming at once—as all

OVER THE EUPHRATES

of Persia seems—different in colour and contour from any other landscape. There were vivid green splashes, a few bushes already blossoming in pink and white, and extraordinary cliff formations, rock strata in fantastic pattern. It was pleasant, smiling country, with an easy road over the 5,600 feet Pai-Taq Pass, tinkling streams, white-tipped mountains rising sheer out of the plain. The usual search for a picnic-place was unusually successful, and we lunched in a warm hollow where green grass grew. Here we wasted much time stalking something which, from the glimpse we had of it, we were convinced was the peculiar Persian lizard called the buz-majjé.

It was cold when in the late afternoon we reached Kermanshah and put up at the only hotel we could find. Here we almost froze and were half-starved. My chief memory of the evening is of sitting in my top-coat by a stove that had gone out, holding a tiny chicken-bone in my fingers and tearing at it to get the last morsel.

March 20th KERMANSHAH TO HAMADAN 121 miles

The worst possible weather. In piercing cold and pouring rain we stopped just outside Kermanshah to have a look at the Sassasian rock-carvings of Taq-i-Bustan. In the circumstances I did not appreciate them, and in fact was scarcely aware that I had seen them, until they sprang into my mind a year later when I was looking at the exquisite Persian hunting carpet in the Museum of Applied Art in Vienna.

We crossed the Asadabad Pass (8,680 feet) in impenetrable cloud and reached Hamadan in a snowstorm. Hamadan lies on the site of Ecbatana, the capital of the

OVER THE EUPHRATES

empire of Cyrus. It boasts what must be the best hotel in Persia, recently opened: the Bou Ali. Its elegance knocked us over, but enjoyment was tempered by the fact that we nearly died of heat. The central heating definitely out of control. There was a beautiful bathroom, but it was so like an oven that I was unable to stay in it long enough to wash.

March 21st

HAMADAN TO TEHRAN

244 miles

We left at 6 a.m. with no breakfast, as the hotel surprisingly could provide nothing at that hour—in appalling weather into a desolate landscape. The road consisted of mud and holes. On the Aveh Pass (8,600 feet) conditions were about as bad as they could be. We had to guess where the road was. Fresh snow covered everything, so that previous wheel-tracks showed scarcely or not at all. But we could generally make out that blessed invention, the telegraph pole, about twenty yards to our left. Unlike yesterday's pass there were no hairpin bends nor, so far as we could see, any precipices. Quite a number of lorries loomed out of the clouds, several of them stuck or broken down. We blessed the Land-Rover's four-wheel drive.

The other side of the pass, and all the way to Tehran, the road was unspeakable. On one occasion, had we chosen the right fork instead of the left (they looked exactly the same), we would have gone not only into a river-bed but over a waterfall.

The sun came out feebly as we approached Tehran, and we could see the long line of the Elburz Mountains to the north. We had much difficulty in locating the

OVER THE EUPHRATES

British Embassy—where we had been invited to stay by Sir Roger and Lady Stevens—as we had failed to note the words in Persian, and policemen were only irritated at being addressed in English, French, German and Urdu. An American rescued us. The Embassy is an enormous walled compound, not easy to miss when once you know it. We looked pretty wild by this time, but the man at the gate had been warned and so did not turn a hair when, clad in muddy trousers and a bush shirt, my hair like rusty wire, I said, ‘We have come to call upon the Ambassador.’ One of life’s unforgettable moments was of seeing tea laid in front of a real fire in an English-country-house bedroom, and of sinking into a large, soft, chintz-covered arm-chair and devouring sponge cake and thin bread-and-butter and strawberry jam. After dinner we sat around in the drawing-room discussing Sussex, and Kermanshah faded onto another planet.

CHAPTER 7

To Isfahan



We stayed two days in Tehran, for which we were deeply grateful, as they were badly needed for rest and reorganization. But one disastrous circumstance had intervened: it was No-Ruz. No-Ruz is the Persian New Year's Day, the Vernal Equinox, March 21st. We had known that this would be a public holiday, but what came as a shock was to learn that the holiday lasts for thirteen days. It is worse than a perpetual London Sunday. You cannot see anything, do anything, nor get anything done. By a miracle a German hairdresser was persuaded to wash the desert out of my hair. More important, the Embassy's Transport Overseer, a Rolls-Royce-trained engineer, was so kind as to spend hours on the Land-Rover, with the most satisfactory results. It rained ceaselessly.

Early on the third day we left for Isfahan.

March 24th

TEHRAN TO ISFAHAN

260 miles

The clouds had lifted, giving us an ethereal glimpse of the Elburz in the early morning light.

TO ISFAHAN

For ten hours we drove across the strange Persian plateau. Hills are chiselled into shapes I have never seen elsewhere. There are white salt swamps. Cliffs are streaked in pink and green, like veined marble. Often the whole landscape looks as if it had been brushed over with verdigris. The domed adobe houses of the villages lie in compounds surrounded by high mud walls, over which appeared fruit trees just now beginning to burst into blossom.

The road was tarred as far as the holy city of Qum, where we looked across the river at the golden dome and four blue minarets of the Shrine of Fatima. Thereafter the surface was gravel, with corrugations but not pot-holes. We found that on these corrugated roads 35 m.p.h. was the only comfortable speed for the Land-Rover. The monotony of long stretches of such roads had the well-known effect of sending the driver to sleep, and Peter would say: 'For Heaven's sake TALK to me!'—to be maddened by the invariable reply of a not normally silent woman: 'I can't think of anything to say.'

The weather was phenomenal. We lunched in the middle of a vast empty steppe, with brilliant sun shining, a gale blowing, snow tearing horizontally across the bonnet, and icicles running down the windscreen. The ground was alive with dried tufts of camel-thorn that were blown about like balloons. We sat in the cab munching epicurean duck sandwiches from the Embassy, and it was like being at the cinema.

For the last few hours before Isfahan the straight road led across a succession of great shallow bowls ringed by hills. Visibility was exaggeratedly clear: more than once we mistook an object such as a petrol tin for a house several miles away. As we neared the end of the day, the

TO ISFAHAN

horizon retreated into jagged layers of mountain in marvellous shades of blue, from azure to the deepest midnight.

There was no room in Isfahan's only recommended hotel, the Irantour, so we settled for two nights in a humbler one called the Jahan. This was in the principal avenue, the Chahar Bagh, and was alongside a cinema—but opposite the eighteenth-century theological college, the Madrasa Madar-i-Shah, which has a turquoise blue dome that, rising above the garage where we put the car away, looked too good to be true.

In our hotel there was no indoor sanitation or running water, but the staff were most considerate. They brought a rusty old oil-stove, for it was cold: Isfahan is 5,300 feet above sea-level. There were carpets on the stone floor. A tin basin and jug stood on a wash-stand by the iron bedstead. We were in an annexe at the bottom of a white-walled garden in which there was a rough table where, next day, we were fed on mounds of chicken and rice, unleavened bread and beer. We dined the first evening at the Irantour on wild duck and excellent red wine.

I had waited a lot of years for the next morning's moment when we drove round a corner and into the Maidan of Isfahan. The Maidan is a great rectangular space, over a quarter of a mile long by 150 yards wide, that was created in the heyday of the Sefavid dynasty, in the reign of Shah Abbas at the beginning of the seventeenth century. At the southern end of it is the Masjid-i-Shah (Mosque of the Shah), a blaze of colour, of blue, that assaults the senses. On the east side is the pale coffee-coloured dome, inlaid with dark blue and ochre, of the smaller mosque that Shah Abbas named after his father-in-law, Sheikh Lutfullah. As we entered the main chamber of this, an abstraction of colour and pattern

TO ISFAHAN

magically enfolding space, I was reminded of a sentence of Robert Byron's, written actually of the Mosque of Gohar Shad in Meshed: 'It was as if someone had switched on another sun.'

Opposite the Sheikh Lutfullah, on the edge of the gardens of the palace of Chihil Sutun, stands the Ali Qapu, a royal pavilion from which Shah Abbas viewed the spectacles in the Maidan. This contains, on several levels, numerous little rooms and alcoves enchantingly adorned with painted stucco and with bright tiles on which birds and animals chase each other through the stylized foliage. On the side overlooking the Maidan is the great *talar* or open hall, with a marble water-pool in its centre and a flat roof supported by tall slender wooden columns that provide a frame through which to gaze at the shining dome of the Mosque of the Shah. On this balcony Shah Abbas received foreign envoys who came in state to pay homage to the King of Kings; and here he sat in splendour to watch the pageantry, the polo, the wild-beast shows, the wrestling and other displays of valour that were provided for entertainment. Today the emptiness of the Maidan itself is cluttered up with uninspired modern gardens. But for my part I find it easy—too easy—not to see what I do not want to see. Incidentally, it is an interesting illustration of change of taste that the English travellers who visited Isfahan in the last half of the nineteenth century noticed its buildings scarcely or not at all; I have yet to come across an author of that period who so much as mentions the Mosque of Sheikh Lutfullah.

Except where the two mosques and the Ali Qapu break the line, the Maidan is surrounded by low white houses whose arcaded fronts are continuous. At the northern end

TO ISFAHAN

a triple archway leads into the old bazaars, in whose labyrinthine passages you wander in the Middle Ages. Here, a stone's throw from the motor buses, there is, we were told, a sort of dungeon where two aged camels lope round a grinding-mill in the half-light. We failed to find them owing to a language muddle: two helpful Persians, having understood that we required a press, spent a long time escorting us to a printer's where a man was setting up type, and half an hour was wasted while they all waited for us to place an order. By that time the camels were asleep for the night.

Beyond the bazaars, difficult to find, is the Masjid-i-Jami (the Friday Mosque) that dates from the eleventh century, a total contrast to the tiled mosques. With its pure lines and deceptive simplicity, its arcades of pointed arches of brownish-grey brickwork, its great brick dome, it creates a rare sense of peace. We climbed to the roof and stood there a long time looking over the rooftop life of the city to the far-off snowy hills, while somewhere below us a disembodied voice chanted the ninety-nine names of Allah.

When darkness fell we walked up and down the Chahar Bagh, indulging in that old and enjoyable pursuit of travellers: shopping. Having absolutely resolved to buy nothing breakable on this journey, we now became possessed of a large jar, two bowls and a pottery oil-lamp, and two tiles showing endearing mediaeval types playing polo.

How greatly one profits from a gradual approach to a remote place! From crawling to it over the earth, of whose changing face one becomes a part, instead of being transported by air. I would be happy to fly to visit Isfahan a second time, because nothing can wipe out the impression of the first arrival out of the desert.

CHAPTER 8

Singing in the Wilderness



March 26th

ISFAHAN TO YEZD

200 miles

We went east out of Isfahan, after casting longing glances at Shah Abbas's remarkable bridge that crosses the river, the Zayand Rud, and carries the road to Shiraz.

There are many ways in which the Persian scene is extraordinary. For instance, the numerous walls enclosing nothing, serving no apparent purpose; the deserted, tumble-down houses and even whole villages, looking like a child's sand castles after the sea has begun to wash them away; and even among the buildings that are whole there is a variety of strange and, to the uninformed eye, meaningless shapes. In my rough diary, jotted half-illegibly as we jolted along, I wrote: 'I see a huge beehive with 20 doors and windows . . . now an elephant house 30 feet high with no windows at all . . . and what are these freak mounds like Australian anthills? No life anywhere. . . .' But there *was* life, some of it unexpected, such as groups of men working on the road's upkeep by shovelling gravel over it. Camel caravans passed, with bells tinkling. We saw two eagles sitting on the ground.

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

In the hills before Nain, where the road turned southward, we ran into a snowstorm.

It was not pure desert. All day it was spattered with harsh little dots of yellow, and an occasional bright green plant like a bunch of parsley. We were seldom out of sight of the mounds of earth like giant molehills that denote the shafts of *qanats*, the subterranean water channels by which Persia is so skilfully irrigated. This system has been known since Roman times, and has been practised to a certain extent almost throughout the Middle East. A Persian *qanat* may be twenty-five, thirty or more miles in length, and as there is a shaft—for clearance work and ventilation—about every 150 feet, it is not surprising that they are a characteristic feature of the landscape. The making and clearing of *qanats* is a highly skilled occupation not without risks, and the men engaged in it, called *muqannis*, are much esteemed.

As the day advanced, the scenery became more dramatic. The mountains, separate rock peaks, each one rising straight out of the sand, lit by an occasional supernatural-looking shaft of sunlight, might have been a painting by Salvador Dali. It is impossible to convey in words the other-worldly impression they create. It arises in some way from a trick of perspective, the smooth floor at their feet resembling a stage prop running up to the backcloth at slightly too steep an angle to look real. Between them, each illuminated sand-valley, sometimes seeming to change into a Mer de Glace flowing towards us, was disturbingly alluring. You felt that if you yielded to the temptation to explore them you would never come back. Once Peter, looking slightly mad (he now declares this incident never happened, but it did), exclaimed: 'We *must* go there', and drove the car off the

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

road. Sanity, I am sorry to say, prevailed; we regained the road and continued on our way. The colour scheme was all in tones of mouldy chocolate.

If you ask in respectable quarters in Tehran whether there is a hotel in a place like Yezd, you will probably be told that there isn't; but there is. It may not be a hotel by sophisticated standards, but it will be somewhere to lay your head. We were, of course, equipped to sleep in the Land-Rover, but it was too cold (and later too hot) to do so from choice, and we never had to.

In Yezd we put up at the village inn for the first time in Persia. We climbed straight out of the street up a very steep and narrow stone staircase to an uncovered balcony where several people were cleaning their teeth. When I complained of this, Peter crushed me with the remark that I ought to be glad to know that at least they cleaned them. Eight rooms opened off the balcony, most of them apparently housing whole families. We made clear to the proprietor by gestures that we would like the three young men who were asleep on beds in our room to move out before we moved in. Nobody seemed to think this disagreeable of us, and the men all got up obligingly, picked up their bedding and even their beds, and moved out onto the balcony; whereupon rough but clean sheets were put upon the two remaining beds, and we were settled. There was a large carpet, some nails on the wall, two chairs and a table. One could wash under a tap on the balcony, but there was rather a queue for this. The lavatory was one of the oddest, a small hole at the end of a passage with no door (but no odder than many in the Balkans). We got our mediaeval (?) Isfahan lamp out of a rucksack and stuck a candle in it, which was romantic, but electric light came on with the street lamps.

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

We went out and looked at the fifteenth-century mosque whose tall portal with two close-set minarets rises astonishingly out of what looks like a bomb site. With some difficulty we bought beer—which was very expensive, but saved the drinking water—oranges and cigarettes, and returned to our room for food. We thought we would have to picnic with our own stores, but they brought a meal: plates piled high with rice and lamb kebab, and vodka.

Yezd was an old city when Marco Polo visited it in the thirteenth century and said of it: 'Yasdi is a good and noble city and has a great amount of trade'—a description that hardly fits it today. It was easier to muse upon the Yezd of seventy years ago, when that celebrated traveller in Persia, Edward Granville Browne, came here. Browne's book, *A Year Amongst the Persians*, published in 1893, has long been for me one of the most fascinating of travel books. He achieved a unique intimacy with the Persians, as his main delights in life were the metaphysical discussions and poetic thinking so dear to their hearts and so much a part of them. Indeed, he came to be so well loved by those amongst whom he lived that his friend, Sir Ellis Minns, could write in 1949: 'Even now, to speak of Browne to a Persian, to say that I really knew him, is to meet an instant response of wonder and delight.' Yet he spent only one year (1887–88) in Persia, and the rest of his life in scholarship at Cambridge where, until his death in 1925, his home was a centre for Persians who came to England. He rode through Persia on a horse, accompanied by his servant, Haji Safar. When he came to Yezd and stayed there for three weeks as the guest of the town's leading Zoroastrian merchant, who lent him a garden, he found there were, in Yezd and Kirman,

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

seven to ten thousand followers of Zoroaster, dressed in yellow robes that distinguished them from the followers of Mohammed; and a number of temples where the sacred fire burnt perpetually, exuding an odour of sandalwood. He also reports that his nights were disturbed by scorpions and tarantulas 'of horrible nimbleness'. These must still exist, but we saw none—nothing bit us, either here or anywhere else in Persia. As for Zoroastrians, there are a small number still living here and in Kirman; otherwise, save for its modern adherents the Parsees of India, this ancient religion has practically died out.

March 27th

YEZD TO KIRMAN

232 miles

The funny thing is, you see quite respectable-looking people emerging from these peculiar rooms: both our neighbours left for the office carrying brief-cases.

Breakfast consisted of the usual cups of sweet milkless tea, of which we had by now become very fond, six tiny soft-boiled eggs on a saucer, and about three-quarters of a yard of knitting which, on closer inspection, turned out to be the bread.

We started in fairly fine weather. At 11 o'clock we ran into a sand-storm. This went on all the way to Kirman and raged till 9 o'clock in the evening, so the idea of hiding your face and waiting till it is over (which I had rehearsed a lot in London) is definitely *vieux jeu*. The road on this stretch had patches which at the best of times must be difficult to distinguish from the surrounding desert; in these conditions I was especially grateful that Peter could read the occasional milestone which said reassuringly: کرمان. The exhaust pipe fell off about thirty

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

miles from Kirman, and we rattled into the town in fine style.

Following advice given us in Tehran, we uttered the mystic words 'Point 4' several times, and finally after much confusion a policeman guided us a hundred yards down the road to the American Aid Post, for which service he demanded a monetary reward. This was the only time we ever had such a shocking experience with a policeman. It appeared that the Americans—there were only two—were not prepared to put us up because we carried no official standing, but one of them led us to an obscure 'hotel' which we might never have found by ourselves. We were given a large room with two beds (on which we put our own bedding), opening onto a courtyard with a pond in the middle and a water-tap in one corner, and high walls that kept out the storm. By the time we went to bed, after a meal similar to last night's, the wind had dropped and the stars were dancing on the surface of the pool.

March 28th

KIRMAN TO BAM

118 miles

The American had rather grudgingly promised us an introduction to someone in Bam, where there was said to be no hotel of any kind. We did not really expect to see him again, but we did him an injustice. Just as we were leaving in the morning he turned up in a jeep, bringing a Persian called Mr. Ameri, who gave us his card, upon which he wrote a message, and told us that if his father's garden at Bam had been vacated by the Governor-General of Kirman, to whom it had been lent, he was sure we could use it.

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

Soon after we started the sand began to blow a little, and there were one or two drifts across the road. Kirman is not many miles west of the dreaded desert known as the Dasht-i-Lut. To the south-east of the town the Jupar Mountains rise, with dramatic suddenness like all Persian mountains, to a height of 13,000 feet. After twenty miles we came to the village of Mahun, whose pride is the lovely blue-domed Shrine of Niamatullah. This stands in a peaceful walled garden, where ducks were swimming on a long pool bordered with cypresses. Just beyond Mahun the other end of the exhaust detached itself from the engine. After half an hour's struggle, during which we were luckily sheltered from the sand by a slight hill, we mended it with a wire clothes-hanger from Davis the Cleaners. This held till we reached Lahore.

The sand gusts diminished, but about twenty miles before Bam we ran into floods; then a violent rainstorm hit us. As we approached the town, making our way between vivid green crops where there was virtually no road but only mud and water, the old fort appeared suddenly lit up by a gleam of sun, plumb beneath the centre of a rainbow. Bam is the last town of any size before Baluchistan, and its fort once guarded the road to India. It is an oasis of date palms, which are said to yield the best dates in Persia. As a town it was most intriguing, with very high mud walls presenting blank faces to the wide space along which we entered. We finally came to a roundabout where there was a policeman, who put his arm in through the window and shook hands with us both warmly. I don't suppose they have many visitors in Bam. We gave him Mr. Ameri's card, and he sent us off following another policeman on a bicycle.

We were led into a mysterious lane with walls at least

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

fifteen feet high and many turnings, only just wide enough for the car to pass, and came to a halt outside a white porch. This was Mr. Ameri's father's house. There was no one in residence except the servants, who looked at the card and seemed to take our arrival as a matter of course. Why the absentee landowner made a habit of this philanthropic gesture to passing strangers, we never knew.

They took us through an outer courtyard into an absolute paradise of a garden, of date palms and orange trees thick with fruit and blossom. At one end of it was an entrancing white pavilion with four pairs of columns reflected in a large square pool. They gave us a room, furnished with a very pleasant Kirman carpet, a table and a big earthenware water-jar; they fetched some chairs and one bedstead. Several other rooms opened onto the loggia, but these were all locked. The keys were kept under our carpet, and once when a servant had opened a door we went in. It was a large room, empty save for a beautiful carpet, chairs set stiffly all round the walls, and over the fireplace photographs of Reza Shah and of Mr. Ameri, our unknown host. There were indeed many rooms we could peer into, in a number of low white buildings, but most of them were empty except for carpets. Away in the middle of the garden was a little blue-tiled summer-house, surrounded by cypresses and beds of mauve and white stocks. It was the secret garden of one's childhood imagination, the world completely shut out by high walls, and the scent of literally hundreds of orange trees was almost overpowering.

We made coffee with our primus and had a picnic supper. When I went to wash my clothes in the pool, frogs, quite tame, stuck up their heads and croaked. When it got dark we sat out under a palm tree with

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

Peter's guitar. To the tune of *Waltzing Matilda* the moon rose, full, behind the palm fronds, so bright that we could scarcely look at it. The night was utterly still. I could not resist sleeping out with the moon shining on me; but after a few hours a strong gale arose, and I had to retire with my sleeping-bag to the Kirman carpet.

We could not go on next morning, as we had run out of money, having been dogged by No-Ruz and closed banks. At the National Bank of Iran in Bam's main street, the manager stated categorically that he had no authority to cash Traveller's Cheques, nor could he have anything to do with the Pakistani rupees we offered—we must go to Zahidan. Useless to explain that we could not go to Zahidan, or go anywhere, without petrol: he merely shrugged his shoulders. (Though we were equipped to carry 32 gallons, it was not considered necessary to take more than 20 except on the lap between Zahidan and Quetta.) After three hours of argument, with a shopkeeper as interpreter and seven policemen controlling the crowd, a man in the street changed our rupees at considerable profit to himself; but at least we had some money and could redeem the wrist-watch we had left with the garage-owner the night before.

In the afternoon we went for a walk towards the old fort, down endless blank-walled lanes with a very occasional glimpse of a garden. Two of the nicer boys took possession of us, doing their best to protect us from the rabble who became rather annoying; and on the way home they escorted us to the hotel—so there was one!—for tea, as one might drop in to the White Hart. The sight of it made us more than ever grateful to Mr. Ameri. However, it was quite fun there. We climbed the usual steep stone stairs to a balcony, off which opened several

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

rooms containing an assortment of company. We were ushered to a table in one of them in which a man was lying on a bed in pyjamas. Glasses of very sweet tea were produced—we prayed to Allah that the water had been boiled—and upwards of a dozen men and boys gathered to watch us drink it. One young man, who spoke a few words of American, was excessively handsome in the toughest Hollywood style and said he intended to be a film actor. After second cups had been drunk our boys led us proudly away, and we just made our sanctuary as a thunderstorm burst.

March 30th

BAM TO ZAHIDAN

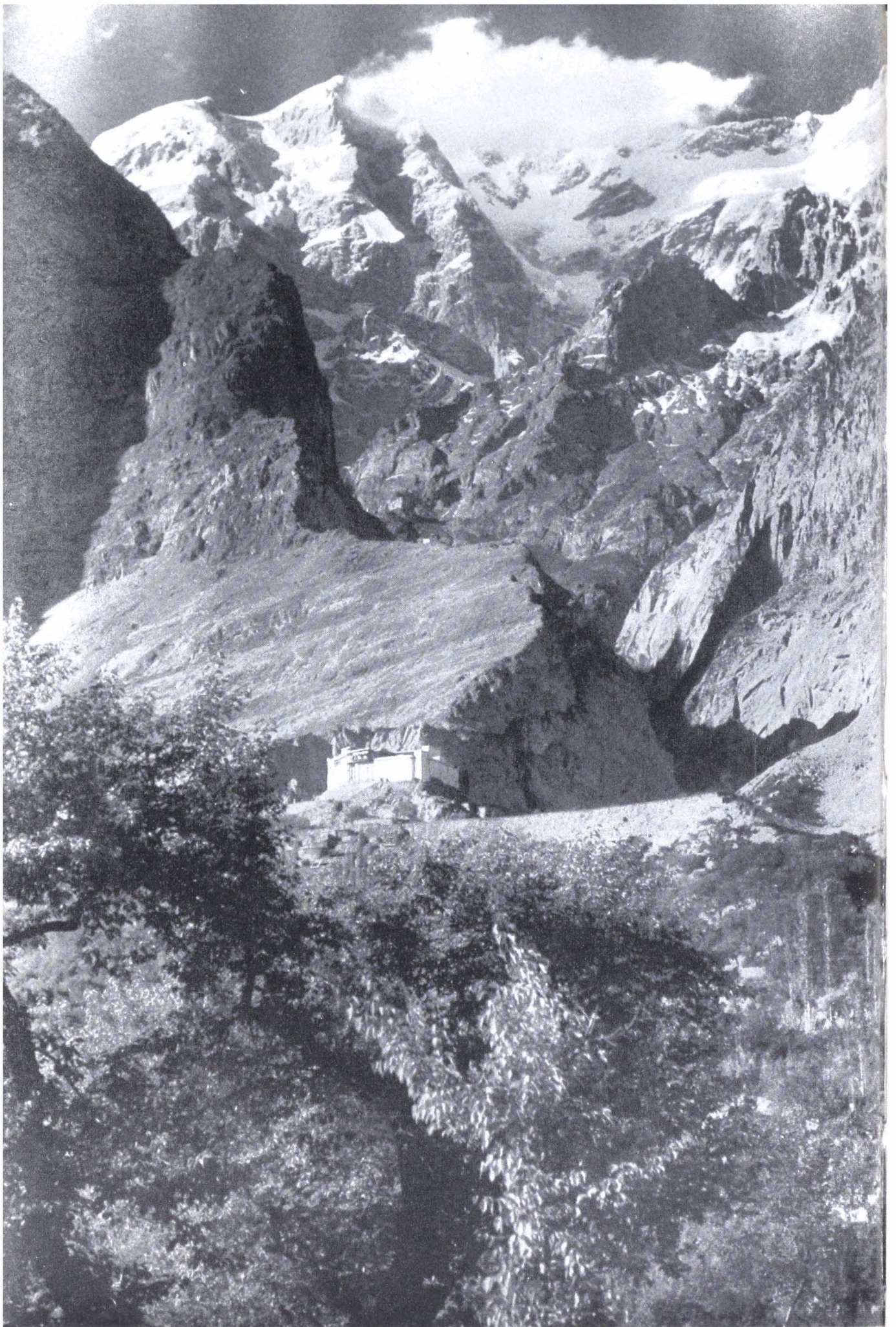
200 miles

Though it looked a perfect morning at 6 o'clock, we had learnt that this means nothing in Persia. This was the only lap of the journey of which we had been reliably warned in Tehran that we might not be able to get through.

There was a good surface and we made excellent progress for the first seventy miles, though the sand had already begun to blow. We were skirting the southern edge of the Dasht-i-Lut. To the north of us on my large-scale map appeared the words 'Hard salt crust', 'Heavy sand dunes', 'Bare gravel desert'; on both sides of the road, *Kavir* (Salt Desert); and a few miles away, north and south, the word 'Unsurveyed'. I was pleased to see that the word *Dagg*, meaning 'Swamp after rain', was somewhat off our route. The car smelt deliciously of orange blossom. At the seventy-first mile we topped a slight rise and ran straight into a sand-drift many feet deep. Surprisingly, four men were on the spot with



The Mir of Hunza



Baltit Fort, ancestral home of the Mirs of Hunza

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

shovels with which they dug us out, and an old piece of metal to put under the wheels while we reversed. Then, while three of them went out into the desert to show the best way, one got in beside me and piloted us in a wide circle and back onto the road. They assured us that the road ahead was 'khob, khob!' (good). So it was for a while, when we could find it; but there were no cairns, posts or milestones to mark which *was* the road, blown sand wiped out previous wheel-tracks, and when visibility was reduced to a few yards we were pretty well stumped.

Next time we got into trouble there were no men to help. Peter got out to reconnoitre. It was like an arctic blizzard when a man is invisible a few steps away. He thought that we should have gone the other way round the great hill of sand and that the road was over *there*. With the four-wheel drive he just got out backwards by the skin of his teeth, then took as it were a running jump for it—and he was right. I had been quite certain that the road was in the opposite direction.

Soon after this three men materialized out of the blinding storm crying 'Ab! Ab!' (water—one of the five Persian words I knew. The other four meant 'Is the bank manager at home?' but they had not been a success). We gave them some: not our best from Tehran, but our second quality, kept for cleaning teeth and washing-up, sterilized with tablets from Boots the Chemists. Then we found ourselves driving along a cosy track in what must once have been a river-bed, protected by rocky cliffs in subtle shades of purple, yellow and lime green. This lasted for a few delectable miles, and then we were out in the sand again. We met a jeep and four or five lorries. It was not exactly difficult now to find the road, but we

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

felt a sort of claustrophobia, being unable to lift the blanket that pressed upon us. If we got out, we were almost blown over.

In Zahidan, while we filled up with petrol and changed oil, it seemed that the whole town must soon disappear beneath the sand.

We set out to call upon the Pakistani Consul, with a small boy on a bicycle as guide. We thought he must have mistaken our request, as he led us out into the wilderness. He soon had to abandon riding the bicycle and push it, while we floundered after. Sure enough, the Pakistani flag loomed ahead, on a bungalow in a compound that looked like some forlorn outpost of the Foreign Legion. We were shown into a prim sitting-room and after some time the Consul entered, a stocky little man, formally polite and very correctly dressed. We sat on stiff chairs, and tea was brought—such a welcome sight that it was difficult not to grab, but luckily the servant returned four times with the teapot to refill our little glasses. The Consul said he deeply regretted that his guest-room was occupied by ladies whom his wife was entertaining; they were all out now at some women's function in the town. He might have been speaking of Stoke Poges on a nice summer afternoon. When I tentatively said, Was not the weather a little trying? he looked surprised and said it was always like this. It seemed rude to have mentioned it. He remarked that the last European female who had passed through did not look at all nice and was so dressed that he was not at first sure whether she was a man or a woman.

For half an hour he gave us his views on the international situation (it must be wonderful to have someone to talk to in Zahidan). When our next day's drive was

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

mentioned, he said it was sure to be a delightful outing. Any reference to sand was ignored. At the close of our visit he very kindly sent a boy to guide us to the hotel, which he spoke of as 'the best hotel', as if there were quite a selection. It was a smaller edition of the one in Kirman, indeed the humblest imaginable; but the people were very attentive, a woman bringing a large basin and HOT water to wash in, the first we had seen since Tehran. The soup for supper was so good that we had two helpings.

March 31st ZAHIDAN TO DALBANDIN 240 miles

The Consul was right. It was an easy run of fifty-two miles to the Persian frontier post at Mirjawa, where we crossed over a dry river-bed into Pakistan. The Pakistani Customs is eighty-five miles farther on at Nok-Kundi. There was a perfect gravel surface on which we were able to travel at a comfortable fifty.

At Nok-Kundi soldiers saluted politely, and we were pressed to stop at the rest-house for a meal. As we were obviously the only customers that day it seemed unkind to refuse, so we left the car on a spot in the desert marked CAR PARK, and went in for lunch. The news spread that a doctor had arrived, and at one moment I looked through to the back of the car and saw nine turbaned, bearded faces bent in trustful delight over the medicine box. A father brought his little boy, a brown cherub aged six, to be examined 'because he wouldn't eat enough'. Peter could find nothing wrong with him (he looked the picture of health), gave him something nice to take, and said he would eat more when he was seven.

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

The good road continued, through featureless desert, nothing in sight but the railway line which had been with us since the frontier. Today we met no other traffic at all. At Dalbandin there was a good rest-house of the kind well known to travellers in India, where a charpoy—the simplest form of string bed—is provided for your own bedding and there is a wash-room attached to each bedroom. There were no other clients, and the head servant knew how the English liked things done, so we were given a drawing-room (for five o'clock tea) and a dining-room (for dinner). Three vases of flowers were brought in—where they grew, the Lord only knows. The dinner-table was carefully laid, and the dishes handed round with great decorum. We provided the food for them to cook: chicken noodle soup, sausages and baked beans. This was, as a matter of fact, the best rest-house we found in Pakistan.

I went to bed with nostalgic thoughts about the British Empire.

April 1st

DALBANDIN TO QUETTA

218 miles

They gave us breakfast of large plates of porridge, two fried eggs each, hot toast and marmalade. The teapot was covered with a tea-cosy embroidered with a lady picking lavender, such as you might see at a church bazaar in Kent. Persia receded.

When we had gone seventy miles we met a lorry, the first vehicle since Zahidan, 310 miles before. The weather was perfect, the sand very yellow and the vegetation, when there was any, very green after last night's rain. To the north were hazy mountains on the borders

SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS

of Afghanistan. After the town of Nushki the landscape changed from the desert that had been with us since Tehran to mountain valley sprinkled with poppies and oleander bushes. The going was rough in places, and it was late in the day when we got to the top of the last pass and began the long descent into Quetta. I felt as if our journey were already at an end when we drew up that evening in a street called Gloucester Road.

In the next three days we went south-east through Baluchistan—on a difficult road, much damaged by last year's floods—into Sind; then, turning north at Sukkur, up to the Punjab. On April 4th, exactly four weeks after leaving Istanbul, we reached Lahore and the hospitable home of our friend Manzar Bashir.

CHAPTER 9

The Grand Trunk Road



April 10th found us in Rawalpindi, the guests of Nafisa and Mahmud Ahmad, with our eyes turned towards the north.

To reach Hunza you must fly from Rawalpindi to Gilgit; there is no other way, except the jeep-track over the Babusar Pass that is open only for a short time in the height of summer. The flight is short—an hour and a half—but the route is such (it is considered the most dangerous of all scheduled flights) that they don't take off if there is, so to speak, a single cloud in the sky. You fly up the gorges of the Indus.

We had to wait, first, for our written permit to come from Karachi. Life was a round of parties in the gay circles of the Pakistan Army. We went up to Peshawar and over the Khyber Pass to the Afghan frontier and back again. Telegrams were exchanged with the Mir of Hunza. The permit arrived, and we began to wait for good weather. There were several unnerving false starts. We would rise at 4 a.m. and be out at Rawalpindi Civil Airport at dawn. Luggage would be weighed and loaded on board the small Dakota of Pakistan International Airlines that was warming up on the tarmac. As we drank

THE GRAND TRUNK ROAD

cup after cup of tea with the pilot, wireless messages from Gilgit would be brought to him saying that cloud had descended to 10,000, 8,000, 7,000 feet. . . . He would decide it was not a fair risk, and once more Nafisa would drive us home for breakfast.

We went up to the Malakand Agency and over the Malakand Pass and so to call upon the Wali of Swat; back again, to be met with renewed bad-weather reports at the aerodrome; then off down the Grand Trunk Road to India for a week.

The temperature at Agra was 112° in the shade. We cooled off at the hill-station of Mussoorie where, at dawn, one's astonished eyes are greeted by a panoramic view of the distant Himalaya: Nanda Devi, Dunagiri, Badrinath . . . an Indian identified them, and I suppose I saw them, but I could not quite believe it even at the time. As the heat haze grows over the intervening jungles, they fade out; but there is a moment, just before sunrise, when the frieze is sharply etched.

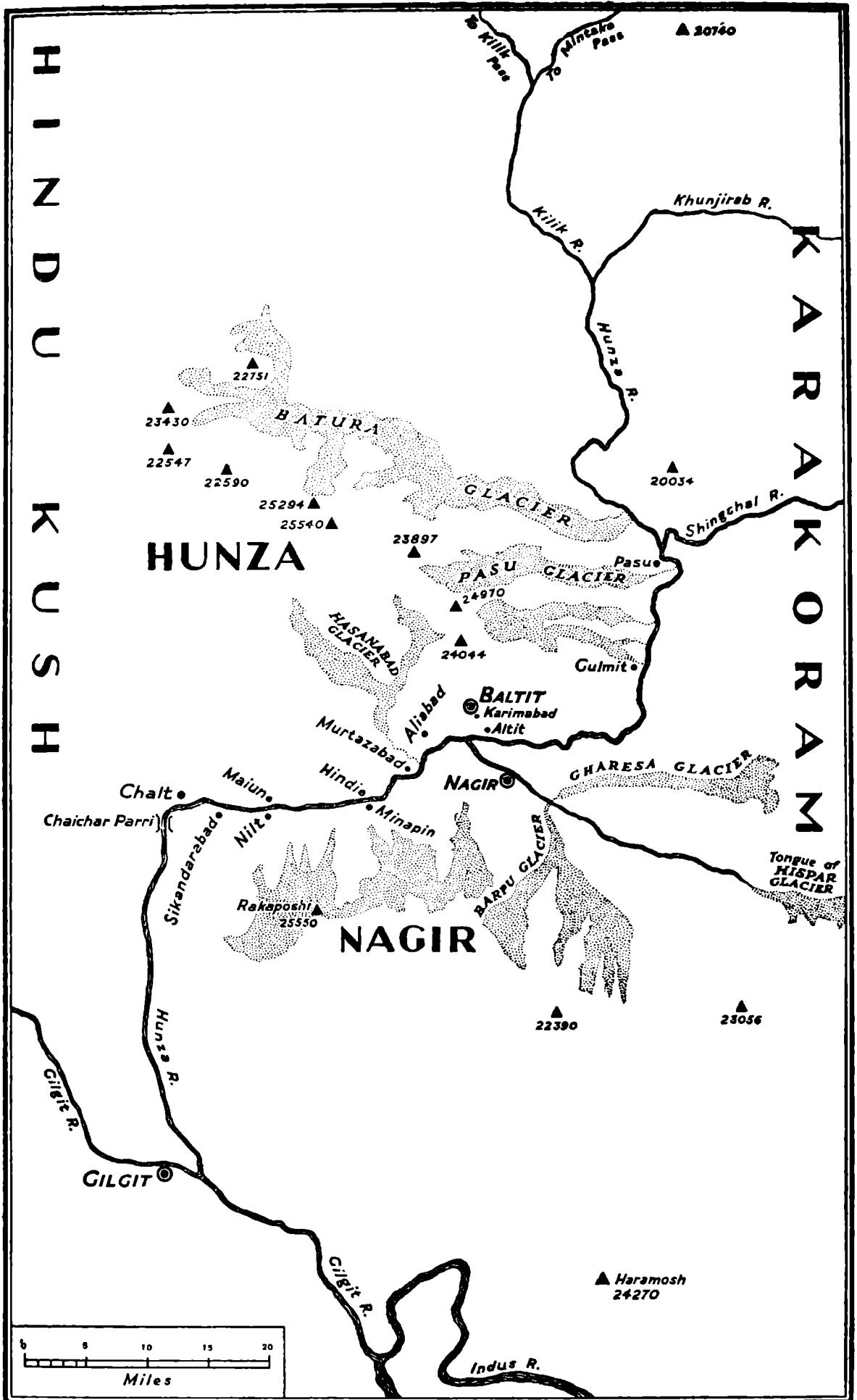
As we serpented down again to the plains, the heat came out and struck us speechless. Our quick dash back to Rawalpindi remains in my memory as a continuous thirst, and wondering-if-the-ice-would-last till we reached the next railway station, where we could be fairly certain of refilling the thermos and of drinking glass after glass of iced fizzy lemonade—a thing I would not normally be seen dead with, but which seemed like the drink of the Gods at Ambala, Jullunder and Amritsar. On account of much reading of *Kim* in my youth, these stations anyway held a certain appeal for me.

Motoring, perhaps understandably, is not a popular pastime in India and Pakistan. When it gets really hot, it is wise to emulate the buffalo in the water-lilies and to

THE GRAND TRUNK ROAD

wrap yourself from head to foot in soaking wet bath towels. I did this with success when, much later, we had to get the Land-Rover down across the Sind Desert to Karachi to ship it home. In summer it is best to be on the road only between sunset and 10 o'clock in the morning; but our advice would be, if you can't achieve this, don't despair: we survived—contrary, I think, to the expectations of some of our friends. What other mad dogs and Englishmen would say, I don't know, as we never met any.

Now we were in a hurry, as the weather looked hopeful for Hunza. Sure enough, back at Rawalpindi the clouds had lifted. Once again the Dakota purred on the airfield. This time we took off. It was 5.30 a.m. on May 2nd.



C*

MAP II. The Hunza Valley

CHAPTER 10

The Great North Road



The aeroplane is for freight, Gilgit's only source of supply, and passengers fit in where they can with their feet muddled up in the net that secures the bales. The others were six rugged men of the mountains, returning home. To my surprise I was ushered into the cockpit and put into the fourth seat beside the wireless officer. I had got a special permit from the Director of Civil Aviation in Karachi to photograph Nanga Parbat. When it came into view the second pilot vacated his seat and gave it to me, and Peter was invited into the cabin.

We flew at about 11,000 feet. The Indus glistened below in its barren gorges, and Nanga Parbat, 26,629 feet, the westernmost peak of the Great Himalaya, rose immediately on our right. The north face, that rises out of the Indus Valley, is the greatest mountain wall in the world. The river-bed is here only 3,000 feet above sea-level, so the summit of the mountain is over 23,000 feet above it.

The wireless officer dispensed tea and Madeira cake.

Haramosh came in sight, with a white plume of cloud, then Rakaposhi. Then the pilot was saying in my ear,

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

'The Hunza Valley ahead'; and in a matter of minutes we were down on Gilgit air-strip.

We extricated ourselves and our seven pieces of luggage, and I sat down, weak with excitement, on a packing-case marked 'Gift from the U.S.A.' The scene was startlingly familiar to me from photographs: the Gilgitis in their round white 'Hunza hats' unloading the plane under the watchful eye of the Northern Scouts, very smart in shorts and grey shirts, with the badge of ibex horns on the front of their hats. We had come down into a new world where the air sparkled and the landscape was on so tremendous a scale that it was difficult to take in.

News in these parts seems to get about by bush telegraph. Though we had not warned the Political Agent of our arrival, his secretary, Humayun Beg, was soon greeting us and his private jeep speeding us along the narrow lanes of Gilgit to the Agency house, where a large bedroom was ready for us. On the dressing-table were vases of lilies-of-the-valley. Within half an hour of our landing we were sitting down to a breakfast of corn-flakes and poached eggs on toast. The Political Agent was General Kiani, to whom we brought a letter of introduction from General Shahid Hamid, Master-General of the Ordnance in Rawalpindi. The house was so well known to me from travellers' tales that I seemed to recognize the yellow roses that trailed over the veranda and the English china from which we drank our tea. The drawing-room was adorned with splendid heads of markhor, ibex and *ovis poli*.

We had scarcely washed when Humayun Beg whisked us off in the jeep to see the Kargah Nullah with its famous fishing stream—a tributary of the Gilgit River—in

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

which trout were planted in 1918 by Colonel Cobb, the British P.A. of that time. We were accompanied by Rhabar Hassan, the Hunza 'tiger' who has the distinction of having led the porters to Nanga Parbat with the Austro-German expedition that culminated in Hermann Buhl's extraordinary solo ascent to the summit on 3rd July 1953. We started off with four in the jeep and ended with seven. They all had perfect manners. Humayun Beg told me that he himself is of the family of the Humayun Beg who was the great Wazir to Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan, Mir of Hunza from 1892 to 1938. When he discovered that I knew a lot about Hunza, possessed all the books he most coveted, and actually had with me Mrs. Lorimer's *Language Hunting in the Karakoram*, excitement in the jeep knew no bounds. He spoke very pretty English. At one point he remarked to us: 'Do you not think there is a rather enchanting fragrance?' He spoke to Rhabar Hassan, who nodded appreciatively; turning back to us, he said: 'I was just explaining to him the difference between smell and fragrance.'

The jeep-ride was a joy—rather like a trip on the Big Dipper at Battersea Fun Fair with the most intoxicating scenery thrown in: fields of ripening wheat, shoots of rice just beginning; little watercourses everywhere; poplar, willow, eucalyptus, cypress, chenar, a dozen kinds of fruit tree in spring foliage; Persian lilac, banks of iris; the green uncommonly vivid in the clean air, the bare brown crags rising two or three thousand feet into a clear blue sky. High up, one gets a glimpse of coniferous forest. Gilgit lies at an altitude of less than 5,000 feet. Every man and boy has a flower, usually a rose, stuck in his hat. Jeep-driving along the paths bordered with stone walls is a somewhat ruthless procedure, horses and cows—who

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

must regret the Good Old Days—being literally pushed out of the way.

The Kargah River is a mountain torrent of the nicest kind. Peter had an opportunity to fish in it the next day, as the Mir of Hunza had told General Kiani that it would suit him best if we could wait another day before setting out, as he had only just arrived home from a tour of his dominion and wanted time to get ready.

I explored Gilgit under the wing of Rhabar Hassan. He spoke a little English. In my diary I wrote: 'He got up to 24,000 feet on Nanga Parbat.' He said: 'Once I stayed seven days in a luxury hotel in Karachi. That was my dream.'

I said to the General at dinner, idiotically, *re* the track to Hunza, 'I don't suppose many people fall over?' He replied firmly, 'Nobody EVER falls over' (which is not true); so I went to bed comforted by the thought that if I did get there I would be unusual and that if I didn't I would be really quite remarkable.

We started at 10 a.m. Ignoring Peter's remarks about people getting themselves up like Christmas trees for what real travellers would regard as a stroll, I hung on my belt my clasp-knife and a flask of water, round my neck my two Leicas and my exposure meter (which broke); and stuffed into the six deep pockets of my trousers and bush shirt the principal necessities of life, in case the pack-horse lost its head: a comb, a lipstick, powder, a nail file, a tube of Savory & Moore's Glacier Cream against sunburn, a pair of sun-glasses, a pencil, a note-book and six films.

The first stage of the way was a jeep-drive from Gilgit to the village of Sikandarabad, thirty-seven miles up the valley. The General kindly lent us his own jeep and

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

driver. Rhabar Hassan perched on top of our rucksacks, chattering to a crony from Hunza whom he picked up in Gilgit bazaar.

You leave Gilgit by a narrow suspension bridge over the Gilgit River, which you follow until the Hunza River joins it three miles down. Here you turn north into the Hunza Valley, though this is not yet Hunza territory. The track, where it runs on the flat, is for the most part composed of thick grey sand which only a jeep could push through. Where it passes over the cliffs it is very ingeniously constructed, often under-propped with poles. My side of the jeep was more than once poised on a ledge over space. The Hunza River runs below, a chalky, glacier-fed torrent. The drop may be anything from 300 to 600 feet. The drive took three hours.

At one point the track crosses a tremendous cliff known as the Chaichar Parri, which is swept every year by landslides. Before we left, the General made a point of impressing on us that here we must get out—he sent Rhabar Hassan with us to say when—and walk across the destroyed lower road. He preferred not to be responsible for our remaining in the jeep while it went over the top—‘it is too dangerous . . . many backings’. I promised willingly. But when we got to the Chaichar Parri Rhabar Hassan was so busy gossiping that he forgot to tell us when we should have got out. When we were three-quarters of the way up and the jeep was reversing at a hairpin bend—a complete U with a gradient of one in three—he suddenly said in an agitated voice: ‘Sahib, I think it is better that you walk.’ But this was hardly the moment for a change of plan, so we stayed in. I was lost in admiration of the driver’s skill and nerve. Immediately after this traverse you descend upon Chalt, a

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

large green oasis where the road is bordered with willow trees and the little streams with purple irises. From here we crossed by a fine suspension bridge to reach Sikandarabad, the jeep-head, where the Mir of Hunza's men were waiting for us with four ponies.

Sikandarabad is in the state of Nagir, which is, as it were, the twin of Hunza on the other side of the gorge. Surprisingly, there is no friendship between the two peoples, who do not even belong to the same sect of Islam. Though the royal families intermarry, the common people have no social intercourse whatsoever. Travellers who have visited both the principalities are unanimous in their opinion that Nagir lacks the charm of its neighbour across the river. The difference in temperament is often attributed to the effect of living respectively on the sunny and the shady side of the valley. Though richer and greener, watered by the inexhaustible glaciers of Rakaposhi, the north-facing slopes of Nagir scarcely see the sun in winter. The village of Nagir, the capital, is five miles down a nullah opposite the Hunza capital of Baltit. The territories are joined there by a rope bridge of the kind one has to cross in nightmares.

After some discussion as to the distribution of loads, the two pack ponies were ready; we mounted the other two, waved good-bye to the jeep and set off. Another, brand-new, suspension bridge—the ponies were a bit nervous of the swaying of this and we crossed on foot—led immediately back again to the other side, and at this point we set foot on Hunza soil for the first time. The valley now ran east.

Today's short ride of four miles was absolute bliss. There were one or two cliff paths, but for the most part it was along narrow, stone-walled lanes where fruit trees

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

brushed one's face and shy children peeped from the flat roof-tops. At one corner three young men stood with plates of the traditional Hunza offering of dried apricots. 'Us-salaam-o-alackum' (Peace be on you), they said, as we put the delicious fruit into our mouths. In a village two elders, tall fine-looking men in ankle-length cloaks of unbleached wool, greeted us courteously and asked permission to accompany us as far as Maiun. They were on their way to present a petition to the Mir, and walked at the head of our little cavalcade with the even step of the mountaineer, deep in conversation.

All the way, the views across the river were superb. As we neared Maiun, the halting-place for the night, the shoulder of Rakaposhi gradually came into sight between the shimmering poplar trees. We reached the Mir's little rest-house at five, after two hours' ride.

Maiun is opposite Nilt, where a famous battle—to which I shall refer again—was fought in December, 1891, between the British and the people of Hunza and Nagir. It was fascinating to study the layout through field-glasses, as from my school-days I had known the story from Knight's rousing book, *Where Three Empires Meet*.

The rest-house was a small white hut with a floor of hard-beaten earth. A jug of washing-water and a long-spouted pewter can of cloudy drinking-water had been placed ready for us. There were two charpoys, and under a young walnut tree stood a table and a deck-chair covered with an old piece of blue Chinese carpet. Apple and mulberry trees and vines grew upon this tiny shelf, with a sheer drop into the river which was so far below us that the sound of its rushing water was inaudible. A number of men and boys sat about in our little compound for the rest of the evening. One had got hold of a cock

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

which he slew and cooked for us on a fire in an outhouse. We had brought a tin of salt all the way from Sainsbury's in Marylebone High Street for just such an occasion, and made the cook's eyes shine until, after a fruitless search, we had to confess that it had been left behind in Rawalpindi. Here salt is more valuable than gold, for the latter can be found in the Hunza River.

A boy was playing with a wooden bow that had two strings kept apart by thin blocks inserted near the ends. In the middle was a skin strip into which we thought an arrow might have fitted; but we were to learn that these bows are used as catapults, with which small stones can be directed with great accuracy after a straying goat.

As we ate our supper under the stars, a touch of fantasy was produced by our headman announcing that the Sahib was wanted on the telephone. It was the Mir on his private line, saying that he hoped his arrangements for our journey were working smoothly.

It was a perfect night. The waning moon rose, chased by woolly clouds, above the tree-tops. I slept outside, which was not as quiet as I intended, as two of the men lay near by and chattered like magpies. But around midnight all was silent save for the little runnel of glacier-water by the orchard wall. If I opened my eyes they rested, as in a dream, upon the moon-washed ridges of Rakaposhi. In the morning I was woken by the sounds of one man making a fire and the other saying his prayers. At 5 o'clock the sun caught the topmost pinnacle of the mountain, which glowed with a pure intense whiteness above the unlighted world.

We were off by six. There are over twenty miles of tortuous track between Maiun and Baltit, and the Mir was expecting us at two-thirty.

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

It has been truly observed that no man could penetrate very far into the Hunza Valley unless he were welcome. The way is sensational. At some spots there was a shifting surface, a continuous slight landslip of scree; at one such place there were two men with shovels to level the necessary eighteen inches for our horses' feet as we passed over it to the sound of stones clattering down the rock face to the river several hundred feet below. The horses are all stallions and not quite so docile as I would have liked. They refuse to walk other than on the extreme outside edge of the path. When I stopped to take a photograph one bit another rather viciously, so I only stopped once. Mine had a loose shoe and once or twice stumbled badly, but luckily not on the eighteen inches. Fear was swallowed up in wonder. The view of Rakaposhi increases in beauty all the way from Maiun to Hindi, where it reaches a climax. It is the only mountain that rises straight out of cultivated fields to a height of 25,550 feet. The Nagir village of Minapin (opposite Hindi), which lies at the foot of it, is at just over 7,000 feet, so what you see here is 18,500 feet of mountain from base to summit. From one part of the track we had a good glimpse of the snout of the Minapin glacier which, like many of the ice-streams of Hunza, is said to be rapidly retreating.

The villages lie at much the same level as the cliff galleries, on alluvial fans above the walls of the river. Wherever the mountains recede a green oasis appears. These terraces or shelves are apparently the remains of glacial deposits, and are irrigated for cultivation by water obtained from the side ravines. Water cannot be got from the main river, which is everywhere isolated by deep earth-cliffs. The sloping surface of the shelves is levelled to prevent the soil from being washed away. Each tiny

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

stone-walled field is a model of neatness; each compact little house looks cared for, every path is swept and tidy.

Beyond Hindi, where the gorge makes a dramatic curve, the rocks are studded with garnets. Some are immature forms, mere dark spots that can be scraped off with a knife; but there are larger ones, dark red, some lying in the dust along the track where the rain has washed them. They are not pure enough for jewellery, though an occasional one gives a glimmer of a ruby spark when held against the sun. The practical people of Hunza have found other uses for them: Colonel Durand, who led the British forces at the battle of Nilt, was seriously wounded by a bullet made of a garnet enclosed in lead.

We met five men slowly rolling a large millstone held by two stout poles. There is only one place where the rock on both sides of the river is considered suitable for millstones, and the millers of Hunza and Nagir come to cut their stones on the spot. Should one attempt fail, they select another rock and start afresh. Discarded millstones are a common sight.

We stopped to let a family pass on their way down to Chalt; the man was leading a horse on which his wife sat with a baby. Two young men rode by carrying bundles of polo sticks. We were on a much-used highway. In the narrowest part of the gorge, where the cliffs rise sheer out of the river-bed on both sides, we saw on the Nagir side, on the pin-scratch that was the road, a cavalcade of seven or eight horses bearing a colourful company of women, whom our men studied through the field-glasses to see if they were the family of the Mir of Nagir returning home. Their bright clothes were a surprise, as the women of Nagir are reputed to dress in black.

Before midday we were off the austere ledges and in

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

the village of Murtazabad. As you top a rise where the river bends, you get the first view of the valley that is the heart of Hunza: of the village of Aliabad where Colonel and Mrs. Lorimer lived, and of the great mountain of Ulter behind Baltit. Now the road, though no longer difficult, was for some way too steep for riding, and we had to dismount and walk first up and then down, to cross the Hasanabad Nullah by a bridge where the torrent from the great Hasanabad glacier cuts in to join the main river. By this time every muscle was in torture, and there was no escape from the relentless sun. At Aliabad our men stopped to eat some lunch; I could hardly take the necessary step up to sit on a wall under a tree. Four miles remained to be done. All along the way people rose as we passed and put two fingers to their foreheads in greeting. Pretty children, smiling enchantingly, gazed from every roof-top and from over the walls. The red caps of the women, as they weed in the green, green wheat, look like so many poppies. The miniature terraced fields, every inch of ground used to the best possible advantage, are a joy to look at. Rakaposhi, blinding white at noon, presides over all.

The path was devious and boulder-strewn, and a further two hours had passed before we turned the last bend. We could see a little deputation drawn up at the entrance to the grounds of the Mir's new palace. Our headman indicated that we should dismount and do the last hundred yards on foot. As we reached the group the Mir's private secretary, who is his younger brother Prince Ayaj, stepped forward and shook hands, welcoming us—in English—to Hunza, and then said, 'May I present the Crown Prince?' A charming little boy shook hands decorously. He was immaculately dressed in a grey

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

tweed suit with a pale blue tie, and looked for all the world like an English boy at a preparatory school. We advanced towards the house where a man was waiting by the steps. The secretary said, 'His Highness!' and we found ourselves warmly shaking hands with that, to me, almost legendary character, the Mir of Hunza.

CHAPTER 11

House with a View



The Mir led us up the steps to where his wife, Her Highness the Rani, was waiting to receive us. She wore Pakistani clothes—a simple white shalwar and yellow dupatta—and, to our great loss, spoke no English. The Mir wore well-cut European clothes. I apologized for being so dishevelled, and she took me to wash in a proper bathroom with a real bath in it, the first one we had seen in a private house since the British Embassy in Tehran. We were almost dying of thirst, and were overjoyed to see thermoses of water and bottles of fruit juice ready on a table. After we had drunk several large tumblers and conversed somewhat haltingly, Prince Ayaj conducted us over to the little guest-house adjoining the palace. Here tea and cake were brought to us by a servant in white with grass-green breastplate and cummerbund, brass buttons, and the Mir's coat of arms with lion rampant embroidered in the middle of his chest. The tea-set was of English china, with a really beautiful red-and-white Russian teapot.

The guest-house was built in 1925 by the present Mir's grandfather, Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan. It is a tiny chalet perched on an enormous granite boulder beside

HOUSE WITH A VIEW

the orchard, where now the last blossoms lingered on the trees. The outer walls are curiously adorned with carved stone animals of heraldic type, and with horns of ibex and *ovis poli*. By means of an outside spiral wooden staircase we ascended to the balcony, off which opened a sitting-room and a bedroom, a wash-room and an ordinary lavatory. The furniture was of European kind, the sitting-room having plenty of yellow brocade cushions on the chairs and two glass-fronted cabinets whose shelves were lined with pages from the *Illustrated London News* of 1942. There were vases of fresh lilac, and many photographs of the Aga Khan. Our rooms, like the palace, were lit by a noisy little electric-light plant, the pride of Prince Ayaj, Court Electrician, who turned it on at seven and off at ten.

We returned to the palace for dinner at eight, Peter in his white dinner jacket. (But after this first evening he only wore the dinner jacket for parties, as the Mir sent over a little note saying, 'No formality for dinner, please, just informal dress, feel at home.') The steep wooden steps on the outside of the palace led directly into a sun-room, pleasantly designed, one curved wall all glass, through which the Mir could survey his kingdom. Through a circular opening one entered an inner sitting-room, which led into another that was divided in two, the back half being the dining-room. The rooms were informally furnished with a lot of bright colour, English books, and a number of photographs that included the Aga Khan, the Begum lovely in a Hunza hat, the Queen, the Shah of Persia's brother, and Mr. Jinnah. Before dinner there was Black and White whisky and a cut-glass decanter of Hunza *pani*, the wine that some travellers describe as having an alarming effect upon

HOUSE WITH A VIEW

them; but we found the Mir's vintage excellent, though when too new, or perhaps differently stored or from indifferent grapes, it can taste like rancid cheese. It may be either red or white. The polished dinner table was set with table mats and red candles in silver candelabra. We had soup in delicate Chinese rice bowls, sardine *soufflé*, curry, pears and jelly, and afterwards green tea in exquisite little Russian cups. The Rani sat at the head of the table and managed most tactfully—as she did during the whole of our stay—never to look bored while the Mir and Prince Ayaj talked with us in English.

Next morning, while Peter was bathing and I was still in my dressing-gown eating an omelette, our servant announced that I must come out on the balcony as His Highness had called. He was attended by several people, including the schoolmaster, Sultan Ali, whom he introduced to me and who spoke some English and was to be our friend and guide and constant companion. His charming face appears opposite page 96. All the excursions described in the following pages were made in his company.

For the first day or so we lazed—and there can be few better places to laze in than the eyrie the Mir gives his guests. We looked straight up, north, to Ulter, a superb rock fortress rising to 23,000 feet; half-way down one could just see, before it plunged into the ravine, a white triangle of the almost inaccessible glacier that feeds all the water channels of central Hunza. Further to the west, behind the slopes of the near mountains, rose the tremendous granite needle known as Princess Bubuli's Peak. One's eye, travelling round to the south, would rest upon the north face of Rakaposhi. No mountain could be shaped more beautifully. At sunset the pink

HOUSE WITH A VIEW

clouds streamed off it as if it were on fire, and the summit ridge, bare rock too steep for snow, stood out like a sword-blade against the pale green sky.

South-east of us across the river, somewhere above the Barpu Glacier, one snow mountain, owing to its special position, held the sun the longest. I like to think of it (this may well be true) as sloping to a valley where man has not set foot. Just as one summer, in our chalet above Chamonix, I used to wait every evening for the minute of the particular square green shadow cast on the Dôme du Goûter at sunset, here I waited for the short moment when all light had faded except for the golden glow on this, so far as I know, untouched peak.

CHAPTER 12

Looking Back



Tradition relates that the original inhabitants of Hunza were descended from three soldiers of Alexander the Great, who married beautiful wives in Persia, were left behind ill when Alexander campaigned along the Oxus, discovered this happy valley and settled here. Though they are by no means the only people to whom such a legend adheres, there could well be truth in the story of the Hellenic ancestry of the Hunzakuts,¹ for in looks and in temperament they have nothing of the Oriental about them. What seems probable is that the royal family did not spring from the same stock as the ordinary people, but came from Persia at some unrecorded date.

In the nineteenth century Hunza and Nagir caught the attention of the outside world because of the trouble they caused. I quote from *Where Three Empires Meet*, written in 1893 by E. F. Knight, who was with the British forces at the battle of Nilt:

‘In name they were tributary to Kashmir, the King of Hunza paying a yearly tribute of twenty ounces of gold-

¹ Hunzakuts, which is both singular and plural, is the term for a native of Hunza.

LOOKING BACK

dust, two horses and two hounds, the King of Nagir a certain quantity of gold-dust and two baskets of apricots. . . . But till now both States have been practically independent; for though the Kashmir Durbar made repeated efforts to reduce them to submission, these proved entirely unsuccessful. . . . For thirty miles up the valley the forts of Hunza face those of Nagir, the defences being evidently intended as against each other; whereas, at the strong position which forms the gate of their country, by Nilt and Maiun, a strong line of fortifications faces down the valley, ready for resistance to an invader from below. Hunza and Nagir, though they were at other times almost constantly at war with one another, always united their forces against a foreign enemy.

‘These Hunza-Nagiris . . . have for centuries been the terror of all the people between Afghanistan and Yarkand. Inhabiting these scarcely accessible defiles, they have been in the habit of making frequent raids across the Hindoo Koosh and earning their livelihood by a well-organized brigandage, the thums, or kings, of these two little States deriving the greater portion of their revenue from this source. . . . The royal families of Hunza and Nagir are descended from two brothers who lived in the fifteenth century, but they trace their ancestry further back, to a divine origin. The Thum of Hunza, whom we were now about to depose, for his part boasts of being the descendant of Alexander the Great—a common claim hereabouts—by a fairy of the Hindoo Koosh; certainly a very respectable pedigree.’

(Some ten years later a Frenchman, Prince Louis d’Orléans, describing his visit to the next ruler, Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan, wrote: ‘A mes côtés, sur un

LOOKING BACK

superbe arabe, caracole le Mir. Son aisance à cheval, la grâce de ses moindres gestes, le distinguent de son entourage encore plus que son costume. Il fait penser aux aïeux légendaires dont il se réclame: Alexandre-le-Grand et la fée complaisante des neiges himalayennes.)

In 1889, following an appeal for protection against their piratical neighbours by the nomadic Kirghiz tribes, Captain Younghusband was asked by the Government of India to go and investigate the state of affairs. The then Mir of Hunza, Safdar Ali, had got his throne in time-honoured Karakoram style by shooting his father, Ghazan Khan, and rolling two of his brothers down precipices. He announced his accession to the Maharajah of Kashmir in the following euphemistic terms:

‘By the will of God and the decree of fate, my late father and I recently fell out. I took the initiative and settled the matter, and have placed myself on the throne of my ancestors.’

Captain Younghusband, who had been exploring in the Pamirs, made his way down from the north. Hearing that Safdar Ali intended to receive him in state upon his arrival at the village of Gulmit, he put on his full-dress uniform and instructed his Gurkha escort to do likewise. He remarks that they found these costumes very inappropriate for crossing the ‘nasty glacier at Pasu’. ‘I rode up through the village lands towards a large tent, in which the chief was to receive me. Thirteen guns were fired as a salute, and when they ceased a deafening tomtoming was set up. . . . I dismounted from my pony, and advanced between the lines to meet the chief. I was astonished to find myself in the presence of a man with a complexion of almost European fairness, and with reddish hair. His features, too, were of an entirely European cast, and,

LOOKING BACK

dressed in European clothes, he might anywhere have been taken for a Greek or Italian. He was now dressed in a magnificent brocade robe and a handsome turban, presented by Colonel Lockhart. He had a sword and revolver fastened round his waist, and one man with a drawn sword and another with a repeating rifle stood behind him.¹

In spite of this ceremonious beginning the meeting was a failure, Safdar Ali asserting that he had a perfect right to make raids and to keep the profits. He intended to do just as he liked, particularly as he was under the impression that the Empress of India, the Tsar of Russia and the Emperor of China were all clamouring for his friendship. To disabuse him, the British Government stated firmly, through their agent, Colonel Durand, at Gilgit, that it was their intention to hold these territories and that, so long as British rule in India continued, British control of these parts would not cease. Colonel Durand had previously explained, at a personal meeting with Safdar Ali at Baltit, that his government had no wish to conquer or occupy these valleys, but only wanted the road kept up, free passage of mailbags to Kashgar, and Hunza to have no further dealings with the Russians: in return for which the Government undertook to pay a small yearly subsidy to the Mir.

One of Safdar Ali's brothers, Mohammed Nazim Khan, had been left alive. Safdar Ali persisted, against Mohammed Nazim Khan's advice, in flirting with the Russians, and received Colonel Gromchevski, who arrived at Baltit accompanied by twelve Cossacks. This officer, whom Mohammed Nazim Khan thought very good-looking, stayed a week, and presented Safdar Ali

¹ *The Heart of a Continent*, by Captain Frank Younghusband, 1896.

LOOKING BACK

with some silk, a pony and two breech-loading rifles. He was evidently an attractive personality, as Captain Younghusband was quite taken with him when they met in the Pamirs. He told Safdar Ali that he had come from the Tsar, as it was rumoured that there was a danger of Hunza coming under the sway of the British; to prevent which happening, the Mir must be friendly towards Russia, who intended establishing a military post at Baltit with three hundred rifles, two guns and a Russian officer to train the men of Hunza in the latest developments of warfare. He insisted that it would be unwise to show any hostility towards the British until these plans had matured. (This is related in detail in the unpublished memoirs that were dictated by Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan in later life.) But Safdar Ali was not a wise man, and shortly after this he refused the passage of a British letter: whereupon Colonel Durand, realizing clearly what was afoot, prepared an expedition against him. Safdar Ali announced that he had given orders to his followers to bring him the Gilgit Agent's head on a platter.

By December 2nd (1891) the British forces had threaded their way up the gorge as far as Nilt, which they found to be a formidable fortified village enclosed within two walls, the inner fifteen to twenty feet high and twelve feet thick, the outer eight feet high, and both loop-holed for musketry. The whole was surrounded by precipices save at one point, where there was a narrow approach to the main gate. Safdar Ali had boasted that his men could hold out here for at least a year: Colonel Durand, already short of water, decided to capture it by assault in a few hours. Under the concentrated fire of the entire garrison a handful of Gurkhas, led by Lieutenants

LOOKING BACK

Boisragon and Badcock, rushed the outer wall and hacked its wooden gate to pieces. Into this breach dashed Captain Aylmer, accompanied by his Pathan orderly, to place slabs of gun-cotton at the foot of the main gate and ignite the fuse. Shot in the leg at so close a range that his clothes were burned by the gunpowder, he retired to the shelter of the wall to await the explosion. Nothing happened: so he returned to the gate, lit a match, and after several attempts relighted the fuse, one of his hands being crushed by a stone hurled from above. This time a tremendous explosion followed, and before the dust had settled the three officers and six Gurkhas were within the fort. In the ensuing confusion those outside the wall could not immediately locate the first breach, and Lieutenant Boisragon went back alone and re-entered at the head of a small force. Although, as Knight describes it, the tribesmen 'defended themselves like fanatical dervishes', the fort was soon swarming with their attackers, and the day was won. Both Captain Aylmer and Lieutenant Boisragon were later awarded the Victoria Cross.

But that was not the end of the story. On the far side of the fort the way ahead was barred by the Nilt Nullah, the precipitous ravine whose vertical sides we had been so interested to study through our field-glasses from Maiun. Colonel Durand had intended to rush forward across this and seize the breastworks on the other side; but this plan was found to be impracticable, as the track had been cut away and watercourses, diverted over sloping rock faces, had frozen into smooth walls of ice, while the cliffs were studded with enemy marksmen perfectly placed either to fire or to start an avalanche of rocks. Indeed, so skilled and so determined was the defence that

LOOKING BACK

eighteen days passed before the British were able to win through. Their ultimate victory rested upon the daring idea of a young Dogra of the Kashmir Bodyguard Regiment named Nagdu who, after a number of attempts made at night, found a way to scale the opposing cliff face.

A careful plan was laid. 'On the evening of December 19th a small force led by Lieutenant Manners Smith descended the near wall under cover of darkness and concealed themselves at the bottom of the ravine. At dawn their comrades on the ridge above (of whom E. F. Knight was one) began a concentrated fire upon the enemy blockhouse on the other side. After this had continued for half an hour, the signal was given for the assault upon the far cliff, a climb stated by Knight to be 1,200 feet. Lieutenant Manners Smith led with fifty Gurkhas, closely followed by Lieutenant Taylor with fifty Dogras. At 800 feet they met an unscalable precipice and had to turn round and retrace their steps to the bed of the ravine. Manners Smith was not a man to be easily deterred: he started up again by another route, the right one this time. Knight, who is not given to overstatement, remarks: 'It was a fearful thing to watch from our side.' Complete success was achieved, one strong-point after another being completely overpowered in hand-to-hand fighting. For his part in this remarkable adventure Lieutenant Manners Smith was also awarded the Victoria Cross.

The enemy now retreated in disorder. Consternation was rife in Hunza—it was the first time they had ever been defeated—and Safdar Ali fled to China. The British installed in his place his brother, Mohammed Nazim Khan, who was to prove a staunch friend to them and a wonderful ruler of Hunza for forty-six years. Under his



Looking up the Hunza Valley from Maiun (see p. 80)

LOOKING BACK

eighteen days passed before the British were able to win through. Their ultimate victory rested upon the daring idea of a young Dogra of the Kashmir Bodyguard Regiment named Nagdu who, after a number of attempts made at night, found a way to scale the opposing cliff face.

A careful plan was laid. 'On the evening of December 19th a small force led by Lieutenant Manners Smith descended the near wall under cover of darkness and concealed themselves at the bottom of the ravine. At dawn their comrades on the ridge above (of whom E. F. Knight was one) began a concentrated fire upon the enemy blockhouse on the other side. After this had continued for half an hour, the signal was given for the assault upon the far cliff, a climb stated by Knight to be 1,200 feet. Lieutenant Manners Smith led with fifty Gurkhas, closely followed by Lieutenant Taylor with fifty Dogras. At 800 feet they met an unscalable precipice and had to turn round and retrace their steps to the bed of the ravine. Manners Smith was not a man to be easily deterred: he started up again by another route, the right one this time. Knight, who is not given to overstatement, remarks: 'It was a fearful thing to watch from our side.' Complete success was achieved, one strong-point after another being completely overpowered in hand-to-hand fighting. For his part in this remarkable adventure Lieutenant Manners Smith was also awarded the Victoria Cross.

The enemy now retreated in disorder. Consternation was rife in Hunza—it was the first time they had ever been defeated—and Safdar Ali fled to China. The British installed in his place his brother, Mohammed Nazim Khan, who was to prove a staunch friend to them and a wonderful ruler of Hunza for forty-six years. Under his



The Little Blue House (left)

LOOKING BACK

wise guidance the people of the valley were led to devote all their energies to the arts of peace. It was at the latter end of his reign that Colonel and Mrs. Lorimer spent a year in Hunza, 1934-5, living in the little house in Aliabad in which the state's only doctor now resides. The Lorimers knew the Hunzakuts as no other European has known them before or since.

Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan, K.C.I.E., K.C.S.I., died in July 1938. His son, Ghazan Khan, died after seven years, and the present Mir, Mohammed Jamal Khan, his grandson, succeeded in 1945.

I have often been asked, 'Why did you want to go to Hunza?' There were a number of reasons, the first being that, scenically, it is one of the most spectacular strips of the earth's surface. The second was the desire to spend a while in a country where a wheeled vehicle was unknown and where you could pass a lifetime without ever handling money. Such places, like dream-islands, have attraction for almost everyone. Though a lot of them exist, it appears that there are few, if any, where the inhabitants have so much charm, so many virtues and so few faults. In support of this seeming exaggeration I would like to quote what that great mountain explorer, Mr. Eric Shipton, wrote in his book, *Mountains of Tartary*:

'Ever since I first saw it in 1937, I have thought of the Hunza Valley as the ultimate manifestation of mountain grandeur. . . . It is difficult to describe this fantastic principality without indulging in superlatives. Both to look at and in character the people are worthy of the unique setting.'

CHAPTER 13

Home Life in Hunza



When you want to build a house in Hunza, you set to work with your wife and children, and call in the help of your neighbour. The help is cheerfully given and will be repaid in kind next time your neighbour is in need. Though there are now certain specialists, such as carpenters skilled with plane and saw, everyone is capable of building a house without them if he has to.

The distribution of houses is dictated by the outcroppings of rock suitable for their foundations. As these rocks follow the general slope of the terrain, very little levelling can be done. In the comparatively new settlement of Aliabad, where the cultivable shelf is much wider and less steep than elsewhere, there are many quite large flat sites, and here most of the houses are of the new, so-called Wakhi, pattern. But in Baltit they are essentially mountain houses of the old Hunza type. We went to see one that was just being finished, and found the owner with his family, including several small children, and three or four friends, all hard at work.

We entered by a little walled courtyard measuring twelve feet by nine. As usual, there were no windows,

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

but a veranda, securely roofed over, ran the whole length of the house on the lower floor. Two men were engaged in completing an upper wall of undressed split stones by fitting them carefully together without any binding material, while a third applied a layer of mixed clay and sand to the surface, patting it flat with his hand. When we came to the entrance we found the owner helping the carpenter to put finishing touches to a poplar-wood door that was not rough-hewn with an adze as it might have been in the past, but properly panelled by a craftsman. The frame of darker mulberry-wood was carved with a geometrical design. Such luxury requires tools that not every household possesses, as well as a knowledge of dovetailing. Nevertheless, it looked very much the hand-made job it was. We gathered that we had interrupted a discussion of the respective merits of wooden swivel pins and iron hinges. Where every scrap of iron has to be imported from the outside world, a man does not depend upon metal parts. Sixteen to twenty poplar trees go to the making of a house.

Everybody crowded round to show us the place. On one side of the yard was a tiny stable housing half a dozen of the miniature Hunza goats that seem tailored to fit. The main room was about fourteen feet square, and was divided into a central sunken space and a surrounding platform by the four wooden pillars that supported the ceiling. The floor was of hard-beaten earth, scrupulously swept. A Hunza house rivals any Swiss home for order and cleanliness; there is a total absence of unpleasant smells. In the exact centre was the hearth, a shallow hole bordered with a stone kerb, and directly above this was a square opening which admitted the only light and served as chimney. Four large chests occupied the four corners

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

of the room, and the intervening spaces of the platforms were used for sleeping, men one side and women and children the other, each person having his own set of homespun blankets. At the back was the principal store-room, where the supplies for the whole year are kept: sacks of grain, baskets of potatoes, dried mulberries, dried apricots, apricot oil, apricot kernels, wool, wine in jars: all the necessities of life, which it is the duty of the housewife carefully to ration throughout the twelve months. The wooden key to this room hangs at her waist. Nothing is wasted, not a twig or a leaf or a pat of cow-dung. Hunza has been aptly nicknamed 'The Land of Just-Enough'. They have just enough for their own essential needs, but not enough to make anybody else want to take it away from them. Indeed, this hidden valley has reached a point of precarious balance between acquaintance and non-acquaintance with the benefits of progress that reminds one of Milton's exhortation to Adam and Eve before the Fall:

". . . yet happiest if ye seek
No happier state, and know to know no more."

We returned to the yard where a crude ladder with widely-spaced rungs had been placed against the wall, the only means of access to the upper storey. A boy with a goat in his arms nipped up this as if it were a staircase, while we, poor victims of a higher civilization, accepted the support of outstretched hands. This floor was almost a replica of the one below. There were the same four pillars supporting the roof, but the opening above the centre was larger, giving the impression of a four-sided veranda. It was explained that the family would move up here during the hot summer months. A ladder led to the

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

flat roof, which is used for drying apricots and other fruits; if it is surrounded by a parapet at all, this will be only a few inches high, to prevent the fruit being blown over the side and to direct the rain-water into a butt placed for the purpose.

As we prepared to leave, having shaken hands all round, the owner came with the biggest of his black goats: since we had honoured his home with our presence, we must accept this small gift from him. Sultan Ali translated our thanks and excuses. We had come unprovided with presents and these were never expected, but that evening we sent up a token of some soap and safety pins.

We were later invited to the dwelling of a good-looking man who had the distinction of having held the rank of havildar in the army. Quite a number of young men now leave Hunza for a time for the purpose of joining the army, but it is the exception for one not to return when his service is completed. The women, of course, never leave their native valleys. The havildar owned a charpoy and two deck-chairs, which put him into a somewhat superior category. We climbed a very stiff ladder to his roof, from which we could see into the living-rooms of the houses below through the holes in their roofs, while we were looked down upon by spectators on the balconies next up the slope. Most houses, unlike the new one we visited, have the balcony on the upper floor, the ground floor often being the stable. Every inch of space between the buildings is used for little terraces of fruit trees.

The discipline of the household is taken for granted. We never heard a screaming child or an upbraiding parental voice. If a child has a difference of opinion with

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

its parents it is free to run away, probably to its grandmother in the next village up the gorge; it will return cheerfully that evening or the next, and no fuss is made. As Mrs. Lorimer remarked twenty years ago, there are no anxious mothers crying, 'Don't go near the edge, you will fall!' Hunza is made up of edges—roofs without parapets, fires without guards, streams and reservoirs without railings, not to speak of the cliff tracks: no doubt Nature has by now weeded out the stocks that were prone to accident. Up to the age of two or three the infant is protected as a suckling; then he is put on his feet and considered old enough—with the help of the other children, who look after him as a matter of course—to deal with the everyday hazards of life. Hunza children are delightful. They hold your hand, look up at you confidingly, and call you 'Mother'; yet, if you tell them to go away, they do so at once. Courtesy seems as natural to them as the air they breathe: a striking testimony to the value of example, good manners being an outstanding characteristic of the adult Hunzakuts. The boys who might be facetious or tiresome in other countries here never deride a peculiar foreigner covered with cameras trying to climb up a wall, but greet her charmingly and step forward to help. Once when I tripped and fell ignominiously, two tiny tots spent much time in carefully brushing my skirt. Yet they have a wonderful sense of fun, and react immediately if you so much as wink at them. One is never long out of the sound of laughter.

Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan states: 'Marriage is not allowed between near relations, and whenever possible people marry into a clan different from their own. Child marriage is discouraged, and tribal customs have been moulded to conform to modern ideas since I became

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

Mir.' While child marriages do not now take place, both sexes normally marry before they are out of their teens. Although there is no courtship in our sense, the young people will probably have played together in childhood, and unhappy marriages are said to be rare. All weddings, except royal ones, take place on a certain day, decreed by the Mir, in December, so as not to take people's minds off the vital business of working their land. Babies are spaced at intervals of two to four years, so no woman is worn out with child-bearing.

The women, who are often extremely pretty, dress in long baggy trousers under a rather shapeless, shirt-like garment that falls below the knees. They all, without exception, wear little round pill-box hats which they embroider in the finest cross-stitch in elaborate designs of bright colours, no two alike. This captivating headgear is worn always, even by the smallest girl-children. Married women do their hair in two long plaits that hang down in front, but small girls (and boys) have the centre of their heads shaved, leaving a neat fringe all round to show beneath their hats. As a girl nears marriageable age, she begins to grow her hair to shoulder length. The boys wear the woollen, sausage-brimmed hat of the men. Except for their hats and cloaks, the men's clothing can only be described as nondescript. Both sexes wear the *choga* in winter. On a tall, fine-looking man this cloak of homespun cloth can look really splendid; its graceful folds are seen to advantage in the photograph opposite page 96. Many of the Baltit men now possess ready-made shoes imported from outside, but the home-made jack-boot is still often worn, particularly on a journey. It gave, I thought, a pleasantly swashbuckling air to the men who accompanied us on the rides up and down.

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

Hunza women have long enjoyed a freedom unknown to most of their Muslim sisters in Pakistan. They do not throng the paths, or mix with men in crowds, but their frank and cheerful bearing is evidence that they are not downtrodden. They were openly friendly towards myself, a total stranger from another world. A woman helps her husband in all the lighter jobs on the land, and a man does not think himself too grand to spin or to carry the baby. This sane relationship between the sexes may not seem so remarkable when one comes from the West as it might to a visitor from Lahore or Karachi, where it is still not uncommon to see the male walking five paces ahead of his wife, who trundles behind carrying his shoes and most of the luggage.

Old age is not dreaded, as age is much respected. Its main drawback is that, when you live at the top of a ladder and paths are composed of boulders, you cannot get around much. But at least you are wanted. The Hunzakuts is an empiricist. The tested recipe is the accepted one. His parents have lived longer than he has, therefore they have tested a lot. The young seek the advice of the old on matters of agriculture and housewifery, and are heard to utter such remarks as 'Our mother is still with us, Praise be to Allah!'

In the fairly recent past a number of published statements have appeared on the subject of the long life and perfect health supposed to be enjoyed by the people of Hunza. Some of the writers have never been to Hunza. Colonel and Mrs. Lorimer made no such claims. More than one European doctor has looked to Hunza for the secret of a panacea. Hunza has one doctor, Safdar Mahmood, a Pakistani. As he showed us over the little hospital that is maintained by the Pakistan Army Medical

HOME LIFE IN THE HUNZA

Corps in Aliabad, he spoke as if he were ready for anything; I do not think he was in the least aware that he was expected to find in the Hunzakuts a special breed of man, a medical curiosity. They undoubtedly have fine physique and exceptional stamina combined with temperamental equanimity. It is not surprising therefore that they should excite interest and conjecture among those who have to deal with the problems of more advanced and less happy races. But that they possess a mysterious immunity to disease is not true. It has even been declared by one English writer that appendicitis is unknown among them. In the Aliabad hospital we were shown the operating table and it was explained to us how the light was fixed for an appendectomy. Dr. Safdar Mahmood recently sent my husband an analysis of all the cases of illness he had treated during the past year: it contains, among a sprinkling of most ordinary human complaints, 348 cases of dysentery, 1 of typhoid, 734 of other intestinal diseases, 290 of malaria, 113 of rheumatic fever, 426 of goitre. (We did not see anyone with goitre, which is said to be commoner among the people of Nagir.) The population of Hunza, which is rising, is somewhere between twenty-six and thirty thousand. In 1894 it was stated by Lord Curzon to be 6,500.

It is clear that the people are beginning to trust the ministrations of the doctor and to come to him when they are ill instead of relying upon their parents' remedies. The goldsmith in Baltit remarked to us that in the past he had frequently been called upon to pull out a tooth with his pliers for customers who preferred not to go to the hospital. In any case the availability of proper medical attention is quite recent. When Mrs. Lorimer arrived in Aliabad in 1934, she says: 'We passed a smart

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

set of new little buildings which are the dispensary, built by the Mir. There is a resident Assistant Surgeon here, an Indian with a certain amount of medical training, who is able to render first aid and keeps a stock of simple drugs.' Helpful though he was, he seems to have been very much less than an assistant surgeon, as when her husband fell seriously ill she refers to the absence of a doctor. In these circumstances it was obviously impossible to record how many people in Hunza were ill, or exactly what they suffered from. That they are abnormally long-lived is impossible to prove, for the simple reason that no record is kept of the date of a child's birth. They do not know how old they are.

Nevertheless, that they are a fine people is beyond dispute. It is interesting to note that the early travellers all bear witness to their striking qualities, especially in comparison with the inhabitants of neighbouring valleys, who are usually described by such adjectives as 'fickle, avaricious, puny, cringing'. Even E. F. Knight, who is more critical of them than other writers, thought them 'fine, sturdy-looking men, with frank, fearless mien'. Captain Younghusband, who in 1892 lived among them for over two months, found them 'particularly attractive . . . a manly race . . . undoubtedly the pick of the frontier'; while Prince Louis d'Orléans describes them as 'beaux hommes, actifs et intelligents, portant sur leurs visages clairs une joie perpétuelle' and goes so far as to say: 'Toute leur personne dénote les représentants d'une race supérieure.' Their only fault in the eyes of the Frenchman was an incorrigible intemperance of language, which he found most trying to the nerves! I quote these opinions, not to pay compliments to the Hunzakuts, who need no bolstering up, but because they are the more

HOME LIFE IN HUNZA

interesting for being expressed in the days before western Europe developed the present-day sophisticated taste for the wilds.

The doctor, an intelligent young man who aimed at reaching Guy's, occupied the bungalow next to the hospital. Originally a rest-house, it was enlarged to accommodate an Assistant Political Agent (which post was then found to be unnecessary) and contained several good-sized rooms, one with a bow window looking over the little watercourse that ran beneath mulberry trees. His mother lived there with him. She provided us with a delicious meal of tea and biscuits, curds and potato crisps, stewed apricots and innumerable hard-boiled eggs; but she spoke only Punjabi, so we had to smile at her mutely. The doctor told us that, disliking riding, he frequently walked thirty miles a day in the ordinary course of his practice. In his spare time he bred pigeons, flew kites, and shot chikor on the slopes above.

CHAPTER 14

Custom, Faith and Language



The Mir and the Rani have nine children, of whom one, the second son Amyn, was away at boarding school at Abbottabad in Pakistan. There are three sons: Mirzada Ghazanfar Ali Khan, the heir, who was about fourteen; Amyn, six to seven; and Abbas, the baby of the family, aged about three. The six daughters, whose ages ranged from about eighteen down to five, are: Princess Durri Shahwar, who was about to be married to Prince Sherzad Khan of Yasin; Princess Nilofar, who was engaged to a prince of Chitral; and Malika Hassan, Mari, Fouzia and Uzura. With the exception of Amyn, the older children were taught by an American tutor, Winston Mumby, who had been up in Hunza for long periods during the past five years, and lived with his wife Carol and two small children in a little house behind ours. We had first met him in Lahore when he was trying to find a suitable home for a snow-leopard that had recently been taken in Hunza.

The royal family has one custom I have never heard of elsewhere: directly a royal child is born it is given to foster-parents and remains with them on and off for an unspecified number of years. The purpose of this is not,

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

as one might imagine, to save the Rani the trouble of feeding, but is to integrate the ordinary people more closely with the royal family. This it must certainly do, as the tie with the so-called milk-family is never broken. These families are, of course, carefully chosen for the honour, which means that they will be in a more or less cushy position for the rest of their lives. The Mir has built a row of little cottages for them behind the palace, where they are fed from the royal kitchen, though I understand that they still retain their own land in their home villages. When we were at Altit, the next place up the river, we were followed round by a boy carrying a little girl dressed in dungarees, and, not having then heard of the custom, I was most surprised when Sultan Ali said: 'That is His Highness's youngest daughter, the Princess Uzura, with her milk-brother.' The present Wazir of Hunza, Inayat Ullah Beg, is the Mir's milk-father.

Durri Shahwar's milk-father was the primary school-master. I suppose his house was rather a superior one, as it had two or three tiny rooms with windows and some furniture, but it was in a chilly hollow in the Shumal Bagh, the garden up by Baltit Fort, and the yard in front of it was a mud patch when I called on the Princess, who was staying there for the few weeks before her wedding. She sat on her bed on the porch and a chair was brought for me. Our host disappeared with a bundle of branches into an outhouse, from which smoke presently issued, and tea was produced on a tray, the Princess pouring out. After her marriage she would ride away to her new state which she had never seen and which lay across the mountains to the west, between Hunza and Chitral. I have before me an engaging letter from her, written in English on a typewriter, beginning 'My dear Sister', and

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

saying she will be pleased if I will come to Yasin, which is 'a beautiful little place, just like Hunza'.

The royal family has wide ramifications, and forms a class or tribal division by itself, called the Thamo, subdivided into the Kareli, the royally-born on both sides, and the Arghundaro, of common origin on the female side. Inside this group, marriage takes place with the Mir's approval or at his choice. The life of the people is based on the family, and then on the village-unit, inside which there survive the names of six or seven tribal or class distinctions. It is hard to discover how far these classes play a significant part in the communal life of the present day. In both Hunza and Nagir supreme power resides in an autocracy exercised by the Mir. The two royal families derive from a common source and are inter-related by subsequent marriages. They claim to have been established in their respective states for at least six hundred years.

Some time in the fourteenth century a ruler of Hunza called Ayesho married a daughter of King Abdar Khan of Baltistan, who sent five hundred workmen to build Baltit Fort as part of her dowry. All the Mirs have resided there until a few years ago when the present ruler built his new house. It was never captured or occupied by any outsider till after the battle of Nilt in 1891, when the British took up their quarters there and systematically looted it. When I remarked upon this sad fact to the Mir, he replied courteously that he was sure it was not the British but the Dogra troops under their command. However, in *Where Three Empires Meet*, Knight leaves us in no doubt. Under the chapter-heading, 'Loot in the Thum's palace—a Treasure-Hunt', he says:

'This massive fortress, which has been for hundreds of

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

years the secure stronghold of the robber kings, inviolate until this day, stands boldly out, set in the midst of a sublime landscape . . . Twigg, Boisragon and myself took up our quarters in the most comfortable chamber we could find, which we soon discovered to have been the apartment of the ladies belonging to the Thum's harem. It was surrounded by a low, broad, wooden divan, on which our bedding was laid. Pillars of carved wood rose from the edge of the divan to the carved beams of the roof, blackened by the smoke of ages. . . . A fire was lit in the open fireplace at one end of the floor, the smoke escaping through a square hole in the roof. Save for the Oriental pattern of the wooden carvings it was just such a hall, I imagine, as King Canute might have lived in. . . . We enjoyed a delicious night's rest after our late fatigues.

'We were up betimes on December 23rd, and proceeded to rummage all the nooks and corners of the deserted palace. We had heard that the treasures of many a pillaged caravan . . . were stored here, so the search was an exciting one. The tribesmen had been informed that, provided they gave up their arms, their property would be respected by us. . . . But the possessions of the fugitive Thum were declared to be forfeited, so we set to work to collect together all the valuables that were to be found in the place, individual looting being of course forbidden. . . . We were informed that the Thum had made all his preparations for flight long before his defeat at Nilt, and . . . had carried off the bulk of his wealth with him across the Hindoo Koosh. . . . Still, they had not taken all, and we raked together a curious and miscellaneous collection of odds and ends scattered about and secreted away in the various chambers and cellars.'

It is a fascinating building, wonderfully situated on its

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

rocky eminence, protected on two sides by abysses. At the time of our visit it was the home of the widow of Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan. We toiled up the steep and boulder-strewn path where two golden orioles were chasing each other, past the polo ground and the Wazir's house, until the white walls towered above us. A steep zigzag ended in stone steps that led to the portal, where we were greeted by the havildar whose house we had visited, and by a homely woman who was the old Rani's servant. We entered through a low, rough-hewn, weather-bleached door, inside which a shaft, now closed up, had formerly risen to the guard-room above, whence an intruder could be crowned with a boulder. Through a second opening we arrived at the foot of a flight of well-worn steps, clinging precariously to the edge of the usual square hole and having, unusually, the trunk of a young poplar for a rail, polished by many generations of hands. From a tiny court above we climbed another ladder, this time without a hand-rail, and found ourselves on the lower roof, where fine ibex horns decorated the wooden posts. A door opened into three of the rooms, and the havildar led us through.

The first was hung with bucklers inlaid with brass, and swords and shields of fine workmanship, some lacquered in black and gold with Koranic inscriptions arranged in decorative pattern. In the second, which had a carved ceiling, I was delighted to see the one and only object I had always remembered from travellers' tales of Baltit Fort: a large coloured picture of Queen Victoria, with a calendar for 1899 at the bottom of it, and bearing the legend: MELLINS FOOD FOR INFANTS AND INVALIDS—UNTOUCHED BY HAND. It must have hung there undisturbed for fifty-seven years.

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

In the third room there was a magnificent view from the curved window, facing which were drawn up in a prim row four small chairs upholstered in chintz. The bay was a step lower than the rest of the room, like the front seats at a theatre, the spectacle here provided being all the comings and goings of Baltit against a million-dollar backdrop. There were carved shelves on which stood pewter jugs, a cloisonné coffee-pot of uncommon workmanship, and two Chinese blue dragon rice bowls which the Mir later presented to us. In one corner was a three-foot arrow with a barbed warhead one-and-a-half inches long, its shaft feathered for nearly a foot; and a superb Chinese matchlock gun, six feet long, richly decorated with silver and gold and bearing the date 946 A.H.

We mounted by a further ladder to the highest roof, where the door-lintels are interestingly carved, and where there is a small prayer-house for the use of the royal family.

As I said earlier, the people of Hunza are Ismailis (sometimes called Maulais) in religion. Islam is divided into two main sects: the Sunnis—who constitute the majority of Muslims—and the Shias, of whom there are several sub-divisions, the Ismailis being one. The Sunnis hold that the religious authority held by the Prophet Mohammed came to an end at his death. They believe, as do all Muslims, that he was the last of a succession of prophets illuminated by divine grace: Abraham, Moses, Jesus and all the prophets of Israel. As there has never existed any Papal Encyclical to sanction his dogma, the Muslim is free to add to this list the sages of other civilizations, such as Confucius, Socrates, Buddha and the prophets of India. The spiritual power of Mohammed

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

derived from direct communication with God, recorded by him in the Koran, which declared that he himself was God's final messenger. In the view of the Sunnis there could therefore be no question of a spiritual successor: they elected Abu Bakr as his secular successor or Caliph (the Arabic word *kalifa* means 'successor'). The Sunnis are so called because they are the people of the *Sonna*, or tradition. Their profession of faith is: 'There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the Apostle of God.'

The word Shia means a stream or a section. To the above profession of faith they add: 'And Ali, the companion of Mohammed, is the Vicar of God.' The Shia school of thought maintains that, while direct divine inspiration ceased at Mohammed's death, the need for divine guidance continued, so his successors inherited his spiritual as well as his temporal authority. The Shias differ from the Sunnis not only in their conception of the function of the Caliph, but also as to the actual line of succession to this office. They claim that, while he appointed no official heir, Mohammed had declared that his cousin and son-in-law Ali, husband of his beloved daughter Fatima, would be to him as Aaron was to Moses, the disciple in whose children the Prophet's own blood would flow. The Shias therefore regard Ali, who was not raised to the Caliphate until 655 A.D., twenty-three years after Mohammed's death, as the first rightful Caliph, the previous three—Abu Bakr, Omar and Osman—being usurpers. They hold that Ali was the first Imam or spiritual leader of the faithful, and that his authority passed only to his lineal descendants.

The sub-divisions in the Shia world came about through disagreement as to who in fact were the true descendants of Ali and Fatima. The Ismailis are that sect

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

who believe that the Imamatus was inherited in the sixth generation by Ismail, from whom the Aga Khan claims his descent. Today the Aga Khan¹ is the unquestioned spiritual head of his people, who number from ten to twelve million. He speaks of the Prophet Mohammed as 'my Holy ancestor'. His connection with his followers, who regard him with the utmost veneration, is very real: for instance, he pays for all education in Hunza, even the salary of the Crown Prince's tutor. Sultan Ali showed us a letter sent by the Begum Aga Khan to thank the people of Hunza for their prayers for his health, a charming letter beginning: 'My dear Hazar Imam's spiritual children.' Ismailis being scattered over half the globe, he deposes his religious authority to his representative on the spot, always impressing on his people that it behoves them to be loyal temporal subjects of the state to which they belong. This local leadership may reside in an Amir, as in Syria; a member of a certain family, as in Afghanistan, Russia and Chinese Turkestan; a local chief; a Vizir. Sometimes it is hereditary, sometimes not. Only rarely is it vested in a secular king, as it is in Hunza.

'The people of Hunza', says Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan, 'were originally idolators, and they became Shias when intermarriage with the ruling family of Baltistan was arranged, and later, when my great-grandfather Shah Salam Khan was on the throne, most of the country became Maulai. . . . When I became Mir I declared to the people that they could adopt what religion they would, which annoyed my advisers, who said that a country with

¹ The third holder of the title Aga Khan (which was bestowed upon his grandfather by Queen Victoria) has died since this chapter was written. The forty-ninth head of the Ismailis, he had held the Imamatus for nearly 70 years.

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

many religions was bound to fail. I said that religion had nothing to do with ruling, and have proved myself right in that there has been no religious strife in the country since that time.' In 1891 Knight commented: 'One has no religious fanaticism to contend with when dealing with this liberal-minded people.' But while ritual observation sits lightly on their shoulders, Allah is very much in their consciousness. 'Insha Allah!'—'If God will!'—this guides their attitude towards most events, particularly death. The dead are reverently buried, but afterwards decorations or visits to the grave are not practised. Only on the tombs of saints fly triangular banners on long poles. But, though the perishable body receives no further attention from the living, the memory of a beloved parent evokes this pleasing response: beside the paths one sees wide niches in the walls, sometimes of rough slabs, often of granite beautifully cut and finished: these are for the passer-by to rest his load upon, and each one is a memorial to a parent who has died. Sometimes, instead of such a resting-place, there will be a small shelter to welcome the traveller in a storm.

The weather-beaten little Shia mosques of earlier days are gradually being replaced by new Ismaili Assembly Halls or Prayer Houses. Their disappearance is a pity, for as buildings they have much charm, and some of the only good wood-carving in Hunza is to be seen in them. The Prayer Houses are, so far as we could ascertain, used only on special occasions such as the Harvest Thanksgiving, when the service goes on all night. Then a scholarly man is needed to lead the prayers, and for this purpose the Mir appoints in each village men who are called kalifas, who can read the Koran, and who can be sent for to solemnize a betrothal. These are regarded as ordinary men of the

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

people, wear no special dress to mark their calling, and for the rest of the time work their fields like everyone else. No one could describe Hunza as a priest-ridden land.

Boys at school are taught the Koran, but education is mainly practical rather than abstract. Everybody must be able to *do* everything, so that every family can ply its own essential crafts, every individual enjoy the self-respect that comes with independence. However, around Baltit a boy can go to school if he wants to, and learn from books. When we were there, there were in the Baltit school about sixty pupils under four masters, Sultan Ali being Master of the Middle School. He proudly escorted us on a visit of inspection as one of our first outings. The three other masters—Haji Qudrat Ullah Beg, Thara Beg and Sangi Khan—were waiting to receive us. None of them could remember when they had last seen an English-woman. The pupils, who were seated in two rows facing each other on the long narrow balcony, rose to their feet, and I passed between them to the end and back, like the Queen inspecting a guard of honour. One boy was chosen to step forward and read aloud to us in English. ‘When we are born’, the little voice chanted, ‘we are having no teeth. Our first teeth are called milk teeth. . . . If we lose our second teeth they will not be growing again. Therefore it is our duty to care well for our teeth. . . .’

They are taught Urdu, Persian and English. Their native language, Burushaski, is not written, which is perhaps as well, as it has the most complicated grammatical structure. It seems to be a strange language-island, found at the exact meeting point of the Indo-European, Turkish and Tibetan groups but not related to any of them. It is not spoken throughout Hunza, but only in a limited central position. In his book, *The Burushaski*

CUSTOM, FAITH AND LANGUAGE

Language, published (in Oslo, 1935) by the Norwegian Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, Colonel Lorimer says that we may picture it 'standing at bay—a language which has once covered a much larger area and has gradually been driven in on its least assailable territory, or has been displaced and pushed back to a final refuge'. Those who speak it are called the Burusho. In the north of Hunza above Gulmit the inhabitants, who are few, are mainly Wakhi immigrants from Afghanistan, speaking Wakhi, an Iranian tongue. The Burusho, the people of central Hunza, do not care to live in these high, treeless valleys where their beloved apricots will not grow. In two of the villages below Baltit, Hindi and Maiun, the primary language is Shina, which is said to have a close relationship to Sanskrit and the modern Indian vernaculars. In Nagir there are no Wakhi-speakers; Burushaski is spoken down to Minapin, and below there the people are mainly Shina-speakers. Though the Wakhis are known to be a totally distinct stock from the Burusho, the exact relationship between the Burusho and the Shina-speakers, and between the Burusho of Hunza and the Burusho of Nagir, appears to be uncertain. The only extant dialect of Burushaski, called Werchikwar, is spoken in Yasin.

CHAPTER 15

Festival



When we had been in Hunza a short time, the Muslim fast of Ramazan ended in the festival called Eid-ul-Fitr, which, from the social point of view, resembles our Christmas Day. Only the royal family kept the fast, but fasters and non-fasters shared with equal enthusiasm in the celebration, feasting and exchange of presents.

The fast ends at the moment when the new moon is officially sighted. In Hunza, needless to say, it is up to the Mir; and at sundown on the evening of the twenty-eighth day he was on the palace roof with field-glasses. Our servant, Ghulam Rasul, borrowed ours and sat immobile on the balcony staring at the horizon. Nobody had much idea at what time or in which direction they should look. Later in the evening Prince Ayaj called up to us that no one had seen it, but 'it said on the wireless' that it had been seen in Karachi, so Eid would be tomorrow.

The band struck up at 6 a.m., after which sleep was impossible. On drums, pipes and clarinets, they had played for an hour every evening for the past week to herald the approach of Eid, so it will be some time before

FESTIVAL

we forget the special noise they made. At breakfast we gave Ghulam Rasul an old army clasp-knife with which he seemed much pleased. He was a model servant, and we felt sorry that we could not accede to his request that we should take him back to England with us. His sole duty was to attend upon us, and when not busy he used to sit cross-legged outside the door. One never had to tell him anything twice. Every day he carried out a touching process of washing and ironing our clothes. The latter business he did with painstaking care on the balcony, getting a low table and spreading it with many layers of cloth, then heating an enormous charcoal iron and taking hours over each garment.

After breakfast we went over to the palace to pay our respects to the Mir and Rani and to wish them a Happy Eid. The Rani was in white and emerald green, and the Mir in the Pakistani dress of shalwar (baggy trousers) with the tie-less shirt worn outside, topped with a very *chic* check waistcoat and a jacket that looked as if it had come from Savile Row. (It had.) Prince Ayaj wore an elegant sherwani of gold Benares brocade. The Crown Prince was very well dressed in a tussore silk suit, with a tiny gold charm pinned to the lapel. Seeking Hunza folklore, I asked him what this was. He replied: 'It is a replica of the Eiffel Tower.'

Today the family circle included Captain Shah Khan, the Mir's uncle, though about ten years the younger of the two. He was on leave from the Scouts at Gilgit. I thought him outstandingly good-looking—he is, as it happens, completely European in appearance—and was interested to realize later that he was the same person who was nicknamed by Mrs. Lorimer 'Little Lord Fauntleroy' because of his beauty as a thirteen-year-old

FESTIVAL

boy twenty-two years ago. Three little princesses came in, all with black hair cut short and worn with a fringe; they sat on the floor in a row and never spoke a word. They were joined by their elder sisters, also silent. The Wazir, Inayat Ullah Beg, sat on the carpet, leaning against the wall, with his *choga* draped about him and his white sausage hat on his head. His eyes twinkled as he kept the family amused with stories of his three-year-old son. Though his age had been given to us as anything up to ninety-four, with his virile looks it seemed impossible that he could be over seventy. The Mir remarked to us that there was nothing the Wazir liked better on occasion than a tumbler of neat Scotch whisky.

Sultan Ali joined the company, very smart in white trousers, shirt with tie, and a green blazer with the royal coat-of-arms embroidered on the pocket, his white hat on his head as always. While we were all talking the Mir disappeared for a minute and reappeared clad (to my complete surprise, and I nearly broke my neck rushing home for my camera) in a magnificent black velvet cloak thickly encrusted with gold, and his Persian ceremonial hat with an aigrette and a great slab of jewels in front. He had two swords of state brought for us to see. One, a family heirloom, was a hand-forged scimitar set in gold, with a large flat pommel of exquisite workmanship. Its royal blue velvet scabbard, bound with gold, had a sheath for an ivory-handled eating-knife. The other, in an emerald green, gold-encrusted scabbard, was the Sword of Honour sent from India to his grandfather, Mohammed Nazim Khan, by Lord Kitchener after the Commander-in-Chief had paid a personal visit to Baltit. It was mounted in gold and engraved with the cipher of Edward VII. Carrying the English sword, the Mir

FESTIVAL

descended the steps and walked slowly along to the durbar court, his subjects bending to kiss his hand as he passed.

After an hour we were sent for to join him and watch the dancing. Today the royal divan was adorned with a grand purple velvet covering bordered with crimson and embroidered in gold. To the right of it were six chairs for Peter and myself, Winston and Carol Mumby, Shah Khan and Ayaj. The little Crown Prince sat on the purple velvet beside his father, the Wazir on the ground at his feet. The Mumbys' little girl sat on the Mir's knee. The square was surrounded on three sides by men ten deep, in their best apparel, the oldest and most respected nearest to their ruler. On the fourth side was the path to the palace, above which, in a grove of young poplars, a tent had been pitched for the Rani and her women relatives. Though she recently came out of purdah to the extent that she mixes freely with guests of both sexes inside the palace, and even, at the Mir's suggestion, allowed me to photograph her, she does not walk abroad in her own state and is not on view to the crowd. On the walls below her, in gallery seats so to speak, sat the ordinary women spectators, quite separate from the men, but as gay and excited as a flock of bright birds. Along the path moved a convoy of boys carrying food for the feast that the Mir provides for his subjects at Eid. To our amazement a laden camel ambled past—one of several, we were told, in the possession of His Highness. We felt thankful we had not met it on the ride up.

The band, seated on the ground, now speeded up the tempo, seven men stepped into the arena, and the dancing began. Only men and boys take part. It is said that in the past, when an intoxicating spirit was distilled from mul-

FESTIVAL

berries, men and women used to foregather in a dance that ended in an orgy, with the result that the Mir forbade the spirit and frowned upon the custom of the two sexes dancing together. This ban still survives, in that dancing is considered unseemly for women. To our western eyes this is no great loss to them, for the steps have little rhythm, being mainly of the hop-skip-and-jump variety. The most interesting feature is the arm-work, the long pink and green embroidered *choga* sleeves giving picturesque effect to every gesture. Unfortunately, nowadays, not everyone is clad in traditional Hunza style: I prefer to draw a veil over the sartorial pot-pourri affected by a few of the performers who had been abroad as far as the Gentlemen's Outfitters in Rawalpindi.

Each village presented a separate dance, the audience shouting teasing remarks and the band working itself into a frenzy. Among some of the dancers the Hunza *pani*, saved for the occasion, had obviously been circulating somewhat freely. The Mir sat cross-legged, smiling good-naturedly at the jokes, acknowledging each salute with the air of one who has seen the same thing a good many times. Every now and then, as he took another cigarette from the gold case he bought at Aspreys, he would turn to me and say politely: 'I hope you are not boring?' After an hour or so he stood up, beckoned to us to follow him, and in a moment the crowd was on its feet, making a lane for us to pass through on our way back to the palace.

In the afternoon there was a polo match—the famous Hunza polo with six a side, no rules, no intervals and no change of pony. Polo is a passion with the men of Hunza. The little boys all possess miniature polo sticks with which they are for ever practising. No one knows when

FESTIVAL

it was first played here. Polo originated in Persia before 500 B.C., and spread from there westwards to Byzantium and eastwards to China and Japan. Tamerlane is said to have played it, using the heads of his slaughtered enemies as balls, and the great Mogul Akbar was reputed to be so fond of it that he even played with luminous balls at night. The word 'polo' comes from the Tibetan name for the willow root from which the ball was made. In the nineteenth century the British discovered it in two outposts of Empire: in Manipur, to which it must have come from China, and in the valleys of the extreme north-west, including Hunza, where it had doubtless arrived from over the Hindu Kush. And thus, as Lord Curzon puts it: '... the immortal game burst upon India and the world ... from the clear sky of the border ranges, whence no one had expected any particular good ever to come'.

It is amusing to note that another game, also of some antiquity and this time hailing from Scotland, was once introduced to the people of this part of the world. Knight relates that in 1891 on the march up from Astor to Gilgit, 'We took our clubs and balls with us and established links at every halting-place on the Gilgit road during our march to the front. As we passed through this rocky mountain region we contemplated and discussed the country solely from the point of view of its golfing capacities. A spot suitable for a putting green would arouse more enthusiasm in us than the far more common sight of some sublime mountain peak. As may be imagined, it was rare indeed that we found any comparatively flat space where the game might be attempted. Whenever we came to a village polo-ground, we used to impress the little boys as caddies, and their fathers stood by smiling and wondering at our strange pastime.' And

FESTIVAL

later, on the way up the Hunza Valley to the battle of Nilt, when baggage had to be cut down to a minimum, 'one had to limit oneself to one's sleeping-bag, a spare flannel shirt, and such-like absolute necessities, which included, so far as Beech and myself were concerned, a few golf clubs, as we intended to complete the conquest of the country by the introduction of that absorbing game.' In view of the golfing capacities of the countryside, it is perhaps not surprising that native interest was confined to standing by smiling. Polo remains the national sport.

Let other people play at other things:

The king of games is still the game of Kings.

We set out in a procession from the palace. I usually sat down for several rests on this particular climb, but today with the Mir and his team riding behind me I had to do it in one. The assembled crowd rose as we reached the ground and walked down the middle, Prince Ayaj and Sultan Ali with us on foot, the little Crown Prince on a small roan pony, and the Mir—in English polo rig—on a good-looking grey, followed by Shah Khan, Winston Mumby, and Ayub, the Prince's milk-father, who were all to play on the royal side. The best of the horses have a strong strain of Arab. Wicker chairs had been placed for us under a chenar tree above the low stone wall that surrounds the ground. On both sides every available inch of space was packed with spectators, the men in front, and the women like beds of tulips up the slopes behind, their lovely little hats draped with red and yellow veils for this festive occasion. The band, seated on the wall opposite to us, was ready to play for all it was worth during the whole course of the game.

FESTIVAL

The size and shape of each Hunza polo ground depend upon the amount of flat space the village in question has at its disposal. The Baltit one is 250 to 300 yards long, but only about 35 yards wide. Two white stones at either end take the place of goalposts. The game begins in a spectacular fashion: the opener—in this case the Mir—starts off at a gallop from one end, holding stick and ball together in his right hand; as he reaches the centre of the ground, he throws the ball into the air and hits it as it falls. Prince Ayaj kept the score. The game goes on till one side gets nine goals, which may take an unconscionable time, but was achieved today by the royal side in just over an hour. At the end, in accordance with custom, dances were performed in the centre of the ground by members of the two teams, the winners dancing first and then the losers. (In the past it was only the losers who had to dance. Writing of 1894, Lord Curzon says that in Chitral, where the same custom prevailed, ‘. . . it was the particular pleasure of the Mehtar . . . to select as captain of the opposite team to himself, which was invariably beaten, an old gentleman who had previously made an unsuccessful attempt upon his life, and upon whom it amused him to wreak this playful vengeance’. But maybe the old gentleman had the last laugh, as the Mehtar was finally murdered.)

Preceded by the band, the Mir then led our little procession back to the palace. On the way down, admiring the Crown Prince in his beautiful tussore suit, I remarked to Ayaj: ‘Ghazanfar is not at all like the other royal children,’ to which he replied: ‘That is because he was fed on Glaxo, so he looks European.’

That night we all gathered for a grand buffet supper at the palace. Two tables were loaded with dishes of rice,

FESTIVAL

chicken, spiced meat balls, jelly, fruit and chappatties. The party included the elder children and several female relatives of the family whom I never saw again, and with whom, to my lasting regret, I was unable to exchange anything but giggles.

CHAPTER 16

A Quiver of Arrows



On the 31st December 1952 a London daily newspaper, reporting that the Queen had received the Mir of Hunza at Buckingham Palace, described him as 'The King of Utopia'. This was during the only—and very short—visit that he and the Rani and Prince Ayaj have paid to Europe. The compliment is not inappropriate. The customs that govern the lives of the Hunzakuts seem very nearly ideal for them.

Every man possesses enough land to grow the necessary grain for himself and his family. This is generally owned outright, passing from generation to generation, but can be on lease from the Mir, in which case a small rent is paid in kind once the ground is producing. On the death of a father the inheritance is arranged with characteristic common sense. The sons may continue to work the land together, or they may divide it, deciding, with the advice of neighbours if need be, the relative worth of the wheat field and the apricot orchard, the poplar and the willow. If a widower with grown-up sons marries again, his share of the property is henceforth the same as that of his sons; if he has sons by his second wife, they rank as grandsons. As a woman is not expected to plough, or to

A QUIVER OF ARROWS

do heavy work in the fields, she cannot inherit land; she can, however, inherit trees, usually apricot, which may also form part of her dowry. If she is still unmarried when her father dies, it is the duty of her brothers to provide for her.

Family disputes can be brought to the Mir for discussion in private; but contentions are normally resolved at the Durbar, or Parliament-cum-Court-of-Law, held by the Mir every morning in the courtyard at the entrance to the palace grounds. Here not only the headman of each village has access to his ruler, but any person who has a problem or a grievance. The Mir reclines on a large square wooden divan while the men sit on the ground in front of him, and the atmosphere is one of informality. The state has no police force or soldiers, and no lock-up where the anti-social individual is maintained in idleness at the expense of the law-abiding citizens. A persistent evil-doer can be banished for a few years to a higher and less hospitable valley where he has to work harder to live—surely the ideal deterrent.

The Mir governs the distant parts of his realm by the telephone that has been installed since his accession. Twice a day, morning and evening, he rings up the headman of every village. Prince Ayaj, the archetype of Lord High Everything-Else, is Court Telephonist and Wireless Operator. I think it would be pretty well true to say that almost nothing happens in Hunza that the Mir does not know about. This feudal, patriarchal set-up is accepted as a natural state of affairs. For instance, I said to Sultan Ali, who had only been married a short time and whose wife and five-month old son were away up the valley at Gulmit: 'You must be longing to see your wife and baby. When are they going to rejoin you?' And he replied:

A QUIVER OF ARROWS

'When His Highness says. I await His Highness's orders.' And the Mir is no arm-chair ruler: twice a year he tours his territory, thus following in the footsteps of his grandfather who, in 1931, when the difficulties of the road were suggested as an excuse by the Maharajah of Kashmir, retorted: 'What are princes, if they do not go and see every part of their domain?' The Rani also, for all her inactive life and soft appearance, is an intrepid traveller; she is one of the very few women who have been up to the borders of Sinkiang.

In April, while it is still fairly cold, the valley is carpeted in apricot blossom. While we were there in May the climate was perfect, warm days and cool nights. In July the temperature can rise to 105° in the shade. The intense cold of winter lasts from mid-December to mid-February. Every autumn the Mir goes up the valley to his country house at Gulmit for the shooting. A great number of geese arrive at the lake there between October 12th and 15th; Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan speaks of shooting 245 in a few days, and the Mir writes that this year he and the Political Agent from Gilgit shot 65 geese and 250 duck in one day.

Baltit lies at 8,000 feet. Whereas pines are plentiful on the north-facing heights of Nagir, the upper slopes of Hunza are bare of trees; but in the 'residential areas' poplars grow to a height of sixty or seventy feet. In front of our balcony stood a giant specimen, used by the Mir as a wireless mast. Twice a year these are climbed and pruned of all superfluous branches, every twig being carefully collected from the ground. Wood is so scarce that fuel in winter is a serious problem. There is a complete absence of needle woods, but the chenar grows to a considerable size, and willows and walnuts are interspersed

A QUIVER OF ARROWS

between the fruit trees. There were few flowers to be seen, but purple irises flourished around the Mir's swimming pool. The fields yield two crops a year. Wheat and barley are grown, as well as two or three kinds of millet, buckwheat, peas, broad beans and potatoes, and lucerne for fodder, the rotation of crops being most carefully planned to get the utmost benefit from the soil. Climate and soil seem specially to favour the apricot, which attains perfection.

The only wheeled conveyance that had ever been seen in Hunza was a kind of wheelbarrow, used for levelling fields. Mrs. Lorimer mentions it, and even photographed it. I suppose there were several, but we only saw one, and that in exactly the place where she photographed it in 1934. It consisted of a wicker basket of the shape used for carrying loads on the back, wedged upright between two strong poles seven feet long, held apart by three cross-pieces. Between the poles, near the front of the contraption, a rough disc wheel turned on a wooden axle.

Not many animals can be spared for meat, so the régime is of necessity mainly vegetarian. There is a definite limit to the number of animals the land can support. Grass is a rarity, and even where it grows it is so sparse that the cows put on no fat, nor is there any fat content to speak of in their milk, of which in any case they produce so little that it cannot form part of the regular diet. Fresh butter is unknown. The local butter, called maltash, is made from goat's milk, rolled up into a ball and stored in a cool damp place for an unspecified length of time—the longer the better, though E. F. Knight's statement that it was frequently kept for one hundred years should perhaps be taken with a grain of salt. It is in short supply and much valued. Our demands

A QUIVER OF ARROWS

did not upset the market, as it is, I am afraid, an acquired taste.

On the rare occasions when an animal is slaughtered, nothing is wasted. Every scrap of meat is eaten, the skin utilized to the last inch, the bones ground for fertilizer, the gut dried for bow-strings, sewing-thread or the strings of a zither. (The Mir has sent us his splendid old bow, the inside of which is made of two strips of ibex horn and the outside of willow wood, bound together with what he describes as 'the big muscles of the feet of the bull'.) If the meat is tough, so are the excellent teeth of the diners. Salt is a great need; a little of it in a peculiar form can sometimes be washed from the earth. Fruit, their source of sugar, is an important item of diet: apples, peaches, pears, cherries, mulberries, grapes, walnuts and, above all, apricots, of which even the kernels are ground into a sort of flour and made into cakes. With luck and good management the dried apricots last all through winter and spring. When we were there the new crop was not quite ripe, and everyone was finishing last year's store. Before the British introduced the potato, near-famine after a bad season was not unknown.

The water system is quite remarkable. It was devised about four generations ago. With no precision instruments and no implements except wooden shovels and picks of ibex horn—iron being then practically unknown—they created channels that perfectly distribute the water from the Ulter glacier, central Hunza's life blood. Four channels now run like arteries through the valley: the Murku, at the highest level; the Barbar, which waters Baltit; the Dala—the longest—which waters Karimabad (the promontory where the Mir's new palace stands) and all the land as far as Aliabad; and the Hamachi, which

A QUIVER OF ARROWS

serves the little cliff-edge village of Ganesh. These channels are effectively regulated by the accurate placing of large slabs of stone that can easily be moved to alter the flow. The water is cloudy, full of silt, to the extent that overnight it leaves a half-inch deposit at the bottom of a jug. It can be very dark grey in colour, like the water in which one has just washed the dirtiest possible curtains, and I was surprised each time my hair, my clothes or anything else came out of it clean. The Mir gets fairly clear drinking-water for his guests, but he himself, like everyone else in Hunza, drinks pale-grey silty water with no ill effect, and in fact prefers it. Apart from the silt the water is pure, but the supply, even with strict regulation of its use, only just meets the needs of the valley. Every person knows the days and times when their channel will be diverted to feed another village. Each community has its small, stone-sided, open-air reservoir in which the people may store water for use during the hours when they have not got access to a stream. Water for drinking is kept in smaller tanks, approached by a few descending steps and roofed so that animals are prevented from polluting it.

Everyone has a personal interest in any public project ordered by the Mir, such as the making of a new water-channel, and no one in his right mind would think of not contributing his fair share of labour. Once on the way down from Baltit we passed a man carrying a single large stone up the path. "Whatever is he going to do with one stone?" we asked Sultan Ali. 'Oh, that is for the new Prayer House,' he replied. 'Everyone coming up brings a stone when he can.' Life is lived in public and, while serious crime is very rare (Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan states that only two murders were committed during

A QUIVER OF ARROWS

thirty-nine years of his reign), misdemeanour, such as carrying on an affair with somebody else's wife, is practically impossible. This results in a healthy morality being more or less taken for granted. No one is idle, no one overworked. A little money filters in from outside, enabling the more fortunate to buy sugar and salt, but no one earns a wage. The whole community understands that its prosperity depends upon the special skills of its members being used to the public advantage. The word Hunza—or *huntze*—means 'arrows' in Burushaski, and the land was so called because the people were said to be united like arrows in a quiver.

CHAPTER 17

Hunza Crafts



The first Hunza craftsman we watched at work was the weaver.

We had ridden over to Altit, the next village up the river. We were a little delayed in starting, as Sultan Ali, in his second capacity as Postmaster, had suddenly been called upon to sort the mail. A regular service is now maintained with Gilgit, and was operating roughly twice a week. On days when it was expected, a number of boys would wait around the little house that was the Post Office; a surprising amount of people receive something from outside occasionally. When we sent out letters, Sultan Ali would let us postmark them ourselves: 'Experimental Post', on an ordinary Pakistani stamp—not, unfortunately for collectors, the Mir's portrait. Today he kept us waiting quite a while—a fact for which he apologized again in a letter six months later—and the sun was high by the time we got on the Mir's two good grey horses. The well-kept leather saddles felt like swansdown after those we had ridden up on, which were curiously shaped and made of wood. One walks *down* the steep places, but the horses carry one up, taking one enormous boulder after another in clambering style, their backs

HUNZA CRAFTS

nearly vertical. Altit was only a mile and a half distant, but the Great North Road is rough and we were glad not to be on foot in the heat, especially as there was a zigzag drop of three or four hundred feet to start with, and climbing this on the way home would have been trying. The path was thick grey dust mixed with grains of mica that shone like diamonds. Sultan Ali strode easily beside me: he thinks less of walking the sixty-seven miles to Gilgit in one day that I do of walking upstairs.

The houses of Altit fringe a pleasant duck-pond and pile up to the old fort which stands on a mighty rock with a sheer drop into the river. This is one of the few spots where the plateau is edged by solid rock instead of earth-cliffs, and the perpendicular wall facing Nagir must have formed a natural fortification in bygone days. On the landward side there is an unusually large stretch of fairly level ground, which partly explains why Altit was settled and cultivated much earlier than Baltit. Its fort is said to have been in existence for seven hundred years. Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan records a conversation between himself and the Maharajah of Kashmir, when he informed the Maharajah that his ancestress, the Balti princess for whom Baltit Fort was built, had found the one at Altit 'far too small'. It is certainly smaller and simpler than Baltit: a tough little stronghold of undressed stone blocks crowning the rock and commanding a splendid view from its several roof levels. On the top floor the carpenters had recently put the finishing touches to a new suite of rooms for the use of the royal family. These were empty, and looked like a little modern penthouse in comparison with the primitive quarters down below. The Mir comes into residence at Altit every February for the ceremony of the initiation of spring: the

HUNZA CRAFTS

festival of the Bopfau, or Barley Seed-Sowing, when, dressed in robes of state, he scatters seed mixed with gold-dust. We waited, chewing apricots, while Sultan Ali delivered some medicine the Mir had sent over for one of the households; then, just outside the village, we called upon an expert weaver.

His workshop was a hollow in the earth in a little stone shelter four feet high and open in front. The weaver crawls under the flat roof and gets his legs into the oblong pit, on the edge of which he sits all day, his right hand towards the outside so as not to impede the throw of his shuttle. Before him is the loom his great-grandfather made after the pattern of his ancestors. On his lap lies the roll of cloth he has so far woven. His feet operate the warp threads, which at the far end are loosely coiled and guarded by his assistant, who winds the bobbins for him.



The Weaver

HUNZA CRAFTS

His left hand works the trimming comb, his right the clumsy shuttle of mulberry wood that empties every few minutes. The loom is made of wood, entirely devoid of metal parts; it is fifteen inches wide, but the gentle pull reduces the width of the woven cloth to less than fourteen. He weaves three qualities of cloth—the best very good and thick—all of a faint herring-bone pattern, of the natural undyed wool. It takes him two to three days to weave a length of about fifteen yards; but he works with care, for time is of no account. A man's *choga* needs nine yards, a woman's seven. The women of each household cut and stitch these garments during the icy days of winter, when people do not go out-of-doors unless they have to.

As we rode out of Altit along the polo ground (the largest in Hunza), we were accompanied by one boy with a flute and another with a drum. A third carried a ceremonial plate of apricots all the way back to the palace: we thought they must be for the Mir, but no, they were for us. We gave him a penny whistle, which he seemed to think more than adequate reward—not that he looked for any.

The second craftsman we visited was the blacksmith. The blacksmiths all belong to a certain tribe called the Bericho, the only group in Hunza that forms anything like a caste in the Indian sense of the word. Long ago a prince of Hunza rendered some service to a ruler of Bal-tistan, and was told to name his recompense. He asked for the most valuable thing he could think of: a few families of artisans. These were duly presented and were allotted land in Hunza on condition that they continued to serve the community with their particular talents. Today they are the blacksmiths and the musicians. Every

HUNZA CRAFTS

household contributes a small annual tax to the Bericho, who tour the villages making and mending whatever implements are required, and provide the music for all festivals. But they live in their own village, which is just below Karimabad, and until the time of the present Mir were regarded almost as Untouchables. They even preserve their own language, Dumaki. The Mir told us that he had recently had to put a stop to the Bericho sending their boys to the school, not from snobbery or race bar, but because it had been observed that when they started being 'educated' they ceased to want to be blacksmiths and musicians: and upon the first of these two professions the very life of the community depends. Before they can go to school, the social stigma must somehow be removed from music and blacksmithing. The Mir has a deep understanding of the problems of his people. Hunza's delicate economic system needs a wise and devoted ruler to keep it in balance, and it would be an impertinent outsider who presumed to advise him.

Visiting the Bericho village meant an immediate descent of several hundred feet down a track only suitable for mountain goats. Steadying oneself by the walls on either side, one leapt from boulder to boulder, often across a little stream of water carefully channelled down the middle. Then the ground levelled out into green, tree-shaded terraces, and in what might be called the main street we came to the workshop of the chief blacksmith. It was an open-fronted stone shelter like the weaver's, but larger. In the centre was a shallow pit of charcoal, kept glowing with a pair of goatskin bellows worked by the customer whose shovel was being mended. A leather bag of small instruments, three hammers and a pair of tongs, lay beside the blacksmith, who squatted behind a hunk of

HUNZA CRAFTS

old machinery which served him as an anvil. He made up in skill for what he lacked in equipment. While he was dousing the hammered-out shovel-head in a clay trough at his feet, he allowed us to admire a shotgun-barrel he had just completed. Fashioned out of a crow-bar obtained from Heaven knows where, the bolt-action breech admitted a twelve-bore cartridge. The only part he was unable to make was the steel spring. Such a gun, we were told, lasted about two hundred rounds, and the owner faces its eventual bursting with equanimity.

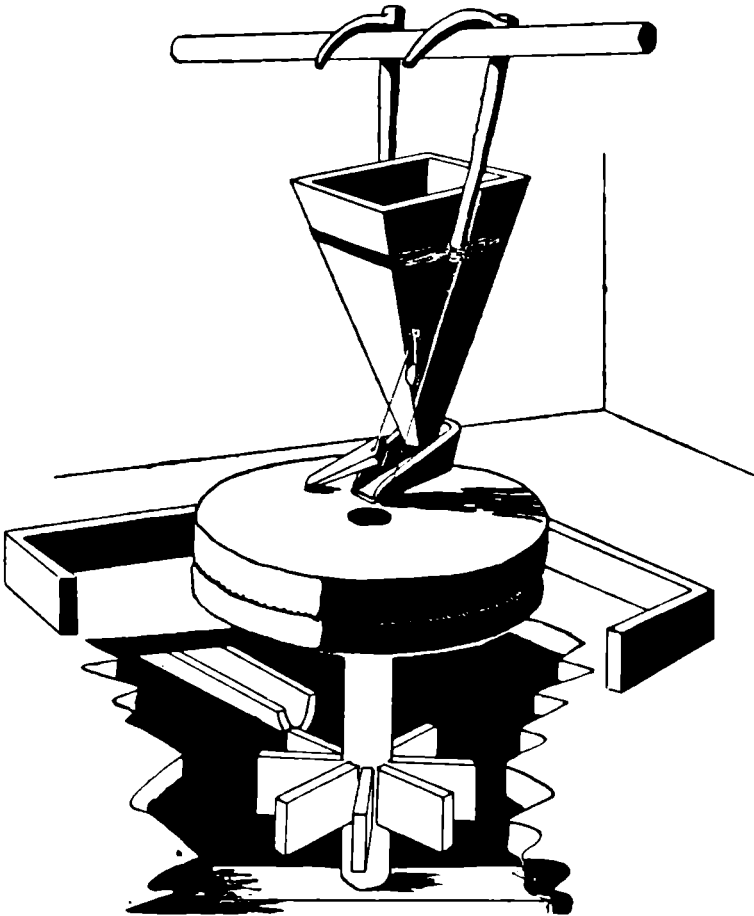
Near by was the wood-turner, who had no shelter, but worked in the open in, as it were, the village square. A small space of ground had been flattened and a trench dug, two feet deep and eighteen inches wide. A rough wooden frame surrounded the top. Across it lay the lathe pole, a thin piece of tree-trunk three feet long, one end of it having three sharp iron prongs onto which the turner rammed his block of willow wood with a rounded stone. A boy then sat on the edge of the trench, inserted his bare feet into the loops of two thongs that were wound round the pole in opposing directions, and with a treadle action revolved the pole back and forward. The turner took an iron instrument ending in a flat hook with two cutting edges, and made the chips fly. With that primitive chopper he finished a bowl within twenty minutes. We bought that one for one rupee and asked for three more, of apricot and mulberry wood, which he produced a couple of days later. All four are different in shape and size, and the two-way action of the lathe adds a slight lack of symmetry that is very appealing.

When we said good-bye to the Bericho they pushed forward a little boy of about eight, dressed all in white, to see us away with due ceremony. By a strap round his

HUNZA CRAFTS

neck he carried a pair of small kettledrums, with which he played us up the precipitous path. Solemnly climbing a few paces ahead of us, he beat a short repetitive rhythm on the right one, followed by three deep booms on the left.

There are half a dozen flour-mills around Baltit. The first one we examined was just below the fort. From outside it looked like the usual square stone house, until one noticed that the stream that gushed down the steep path disappeared under it, to reappear lower down flowing more smoothly. Inside, where there was barely room to



The Flour-Mill

HUNZA CRAFTS

stand up, was a shallow kerb of boards enclosing a square yard of space round the revolving millstone. A wooden hopper hung above the centre, tapering to a narrow nozzle from which the grain dripped onto a sloping tray. By an ingenious arrangement a suspended peg tapped against the tray, so that the grain splashed down into the hole in the upper stone. A thong held the tray in place and regulated the fall of the grain. Through a hole in the floor the dark water could be seen rushing past. An eight-bladed water-wheel of the simplest type received a strong jet of it, and turned the axle which reached through the nether millstone into the facing cut for it in the upper. The flour collected along the edge of the stone, slowly filled the surrounding trough, and was shovelled by the woman in charge into a goatskin bag: stone-ground, whole-wheat flour—a contribution towards the good health and sound white teeth of the Hunzakuts.

We had sent word to the goldsmith that we would like to visit his workshop, for which we set out one morning along the upper reaches of Baltit. After a long climb we came to a group of houses on both sides of a narrow boulder-track. Children shyly followed us, Sultan Ali smiling happily at them and saying, 'Shabash, shabash!' (Well done, well done!) to each one who greeted us politely in the way he had taught them at school. The goldsmith worked in a room about eight feet square, with plastered walls and—sign of his superior trade—it not only had a rough bench along one side for his customers to sit on, but also a sort of dresser with drawers and shelves. All the light came through a small square hole in the centre of the flat roof. Under the hole was a tiny charcoal fire which he blew with bellows made of a

HUNZA CRAFTS

goatskin with the hair on it. Sitting there on the earthen floor in the half-light, he fashions delicate jewellery. He was handsome in a European way, and his manner had the peculiar dignity of his race, a hundred miles removed from the effusiveness of the Syrian trader.

A very small quantity of gold is washed from the Hunza River, so little that nobody takes much interest in it, and gold-washers are not greatly regarded. I have a decorative ring made of it and set with a green stone, given to me by the Rani. The goldsmith regretted not being able just then to show us anything made of gold, but there were a number of silver trinkets that had come in for repair: brooches, ear-rings, pendants, medallions of filigree work discreetly set with coloured stones. The silver content in this metal is so low that it does not tarnish. The bulk of his work occurs in early winter, for the weddings in December. He presented me with a ring, a cornelian set in silver, saying it gave him pleasure to do honour to His Highness's guest.

As we were leaving we observed thrown away in a corner a dusty piece of ibex horn with a dozen round hollows in its upper side. This was the matrix that had been used in the past to mould the metal; since the recent advent of the bronze block with engraved designs, the goldsmith obviously had no further use for it. We coveted it. To please us, the Mir later sent up for it, and as I type this it is in use as a paper weight on the table beside me. It would be interesting to know how many generations of craftsmen it served before flying to London.

Several of the villages now boast a tiny shop, just big enough to turn round in and entered by scaling a rough ladder or a notched tree-trunk. We were told that

HUNZA CRAFTS

the men of Nagir come over on occasional shopping expeditions, as they lack such amenities at home. When I try to remember what was on sale, I can think only of a few lengths of material, salt, a little tobacco, and stout thread. The exception was the Karimabad store which, being in the royal precincts next to the Post Office, was twice as large and on ground level, and housed, beside some flowered teacups, certain bales of exquisite Chinese silk.

Beyond the goldsmith's workshop lay higher pastures leading to stony slopes at the feet of mountains. From up there, they said, one could look right over into the heart of Nagir. Tempted, we toiled laboriously upward, only to find that 'up there' must have meant the top of the cliffs, for however high we went the rival Mir's capital remained concealed behind the great ridge that rises from the river-bed on the other side. But the view was worth the effort. Baltit from below looks like a series of revetting walls one above the other, separated by thin lines of green; from above, it becomes an expanse of green with thin grey lines of wall making a contour map of it. One's gaze was drawn over the immense cleft that the river has carved, beyond the dark near hills of Nagir, to the ice-clad peaks. Where the foreground fell away in a deep V, there lay the white tongue of a glacier leading to areas of the map that lured the imagination.

'They asked me where my kingdom was, and I replied that it touched on the borders of China.'—Thus Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan to the Indian Rajahs at a Delhi Durbar. In 1894, (five years before, as Lord Curzon, he became Viceroy of India) George Nathaniel Curzon paid a visit to Baltit, and then, accompanied by the Mir, continued on up to the top of the Kilik Pass on the Tagh-

HUNZA CRAFTS

dumbash Pamir—no mean feat, especially as the river had to be forded in several places and he had a bad leg and could not swim. It is on record that, after taking the elevation at the summit of the pass and finding it to be 15,870 feet, he sat down on a rock and wrote a letter to *The Times*.

The local name for the Pamirs is the Persian Bam-i-Dunya, or Roof of the World. E. F. Knight was delighted to be told, in reply to an inquiry in Hunza as to the whereabouts of the absconding Safdar Ali after the battle of Nilt, that he was last seen going over the roof of the world.

The first people to explore much of the wild region north and east of Baltit were a Dutch couple, Dr. and Mrs. Visser, still vividly remembered by our friend Humayun Beg of Gilgit, who met them when a boy. In 1925, accompanied by the Swiss guide Franz Lochmatter from Zermatt, they penetrated the far northern valleys of Khunjirab and Bara Khun, then went up the Shingshal Valley and surveyed the three great glaciers at its head: the 32-mile-long Khurdopin, the 26-mile Verjirab, and the 23-mile Yazghil. They found the Yazghil fantastically beautiful, there being 'not one spot from beginning to end where its towering pinnacles and crests of frozen waves sink to a flat unbroken surface'. Mrs. Visser writes further: 'Although all of us had seen many different mountain countries . . . from the familiar playgrounds in the Alps and Norway to the snowy slopes of Kasbek and the great Himalayan giants, we agreed that the Verjirab and the Khurdopin outdid in terrible grandeur anything we had ever seen before, the reality here surpassing all one could dream of mountain majesty and frightfulness. . . .'¹

¹ *Among the Kara-Korum Glaciers*, by Jenny Visser-Hoof, 1926.

HUNZA CRAFTS

On the other side of the Hunza River Dr. Visser succeeded in ascending the entire length of the 37-mile Batura glacier, the fourth longest in the world outside the polar regions.

The Hunza River is born some fifty miles north of Baltit, at the place where the Kilik and the Khunjirab rivers meet and mingle. Thence it eats its way south, fed by many side-streams, by the Batura, the Pasu and the Hasanabad glaciers, by the Shingshal and the Hispar rivers and the glaciers of Rakaposhi. It finally merges with the Gilgit River, which flows into the Indus, and so ends up in the Arabian Sea.

CHAPTER 18

The Beaten Track



From our balcony we had a dress circle view of all the activities around the palace. One morning there was an unusual amount of coming and going, and when I went down to investigate I found that deputations from the villages were bringing presents in honour of the forthcoming marriage of Princess Durri Shahwar to the Prince of Yasin. The Mir invited me to sit next to him in the loggia where he was receiving them. They brought coffee-pots and sheep and ponies, hats and plates and rolls of material, teapots, goats, rifles, tiny bags of gold-dust from the river, and hundreds of rupee notes which were counted by one of the retainers helped by the Crown Prince, while Prince Ayaj, Court Scribe, worked very hard entering it all in a large red book. There was an atmosphere of great good humour, many of the men, after kissing the Mir's hand, making little speeches which were listened to with murmurs of approval. One was translated to me as: 'You think of her only as your own daughter, but we each feel as though our own daughter were being married. You look after us and help us in times of trouble; now we share with you in your joy.'

All the morning a golden-headed lammergeyer circled

THE BEATEN TRACK

overhead. Sultan Ali said this was a lucky omen. His remark was exceptional, for there is a refreshing absence of superstition in Hunza. They are not afraid of spirits or of the Evil Eye. Small amulets sometimes hang from the children's caps, but it seemed that they were not taken very seriously. Certain rituals are, of course, observed, such as those connected with the spring seed-sowing and the slaughtering of sheep at the ceremony of Eid-uzzuha in July.

An unusual rite is recorded as having been enacted on the occasion of the coming-into-being of the Gilgit Scouts. This corps was first enlisted in 1913 to replace the inadequate, half-trained fighting levies that existed up to that time. The new plan was suggested to the Mir of Hunza by the Political Agent, Major Macpherson, and was formally sanctioned by the Government of India. The first two companies, each of eighty men, were raised from Hunza, only men of good family and high character being chosen, and put in charge of the Mir's son, Ghazan Khan (the present Mir's father), who was to hold the rank of subahdar major under a British officer. Sir Mohammed Nazim Khan says:

'I had asked Major Macpherson if we might observe the old customs and he had agreed, so the following ceremony took place, an old ritual that had always been gone through when the men of Hunza marched out to war. Eight stanzas of an old song were sung, a male goat was slaughtered on the drum and the head carried round the circle formed by the newly enlisted men so that all could see the blood. My bodyguard and the locals there then fired a salute, and the flag of Hunza and the Union Jack were waved over the heads of the men to revive their martial ardour.'

THE BEATEN TRACK

We in England have tribal rites no less odd.

The day approached when we were to leave. There was fresh snow on the mountains. On the nearest cliffs it was lying only a few hundred feet above us. There was a report that the road was cut by a landslide between Hindi and Maiun.

On the last evening a man appeared on our balcony with a pile of apricots and a large loaf of freshly-baked bread. We did not immediately recognize him as one of the men who had accompanied us on our journey up, and for a moment thought he had come to sell us something. Embarrassment overcame us when we realized that he had walked the whole way from the village of Ganesh to bring us this parting gift.

At our farewell dinner party we were given many presents, to which we could only respond by giving Peter's guitar and hunting-knife, and by taking back to London a long shopping list that began with 'Mountain boots like yours from Lillywhites; fountain pen; brief-case from the Burlington Arcade; new inside for electric light plant; tin of Pascal's boiled sweets.' The Mir said touchingly: 'I think we have been having a very good time with you,' and pressed us to return and accompany him on his autumn trip up the valley to Gulmit. He is a wonderful correspondent, and the letters that flash between Hunza and Harley Street have kept us constantly in touch with him since we came home.

We departed next morning at seven, Sultan Ali—who presented me with a silver ring—walking a long way beside us before saying good-bye and seeming quite moved at our going. The day was overcast, and Rakaposhi not visible, but it was less tiring without the sun.

THE BEATEN TRACK

At midday we stopped at Hindi to eat some lunch of cold meat and potatoes; we sat on the porch of the little rest-house at a table we found there with two chairs, as if on a stage, and a concourse of men sat in a ring below and watched.

The Mir had said that just beyond Hindi, where the landslide had occurred two days ago, we would have to make a slight detour—no trouble at all—on foot, and pick up fresh horses on the other side. As horses are a good deal more nimble than I am, I did not like the sound of it. As we approached the place we could see a cloud of dust rising like smoke. We thought it was caused by men shovelling there in the process of mending the break; but it was from the still-active mountainside where the surface had not ceased sliding down into the river. The yellow dust rose in great gusts hundreds of feet into the air, an alarming and extraordinary sight. To get beyond the break, which was about two hundred yards, we had to climb above it, several hundred feet at the steepest possible angle up a chaos of earth and stones, and down again to where the road restarted. All our baggage had to be unloaded and carried across by our sturdy followers, who thought nothing of shouldering our bed-roll—which, with the Mir's gift carpet in it, weighed at least 60 lb.—and nipping over this place where I could scarcely keep my feet. But nothing was so calculated to drive home my incompetence as the astonishing sight of a woman in the garment of total purdah (bright blue—but my colour camera was out of reach) calmly negotiating the passage: I say calmly, but I see it is easy to look calm when one's face is invisible. Where she came from we could not imagine, as that preposterous get-up is unknown in these parts.

THE BEATEN TRACK

While riding I had bad cramp in the calves of my legs all the time, not helped by the stirrups being too short in the last hole. I meditated upon Freya Stark who, writing of long hours in the mountains with blistered feet in heavy boots, says: 'We were so well trained in endurance, that I had never even thought to complain.' When we dismounted after eleven-and-a-half hours on the road I had a black-out and had to be laid out on the two-foot path. But I recovered in five minutes, and Maiun was only a hundred yards away.

A chicken was slain as before and, Lord! was it tough! While we ate we were rung up on the telephone by the Mir and Sultan Ali, and by Humayun Beg from Gilgit. The night was stormy. The trees waved and the raindrops fell on my sleeping-bag on the porch. My pillow kept falling off on top of Ghulam Rasul, who slept on the floor at my head.

We set out at dawn to ride the easy four-mile stage to Sikanderabad to meet the jeep. The jeep wasn't there. We sat on the ground and waited three-and-a-half hours. It arrived at midday. It was a 'taxi', driven by a man of at least seventy-five with a long white beard. This time we walked under the Chaichar Parri—nonchalantly explaining that we wanted to see what it was like down there—while he went over the top. Six miles from Gilgit we had a blow-out; and as, maddeningly, he had failed to bring a spare tyre, we had to sit on the red-hot sand while he mended it. The only compensation, a remote one, was a view of Nanga Parbat through a gap in the hills to the south. Humayun Beg, furious with the driver for being so unaccountably late, had lunch waiting for us at Agency House when we arrived in the middle of the afternoon. There was another guest—an American,

THE BEATEN TRACK

the advance guard of a team who were contemplating a Cinerama film of Hunza, to be entitled *In Search of Paradise*.

Next morning the weather was perfect for flying. We landed at Rawalpindi airport at 8.30 a.m.

That night we went to a grand reception and dinner given by the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group at the Officers' Mess at Chaklala. I met a Pakistani Colonel, a tough and wiry little man. Our conversation went like this:

Colonel S.: If you'd asked my advice before you went, I'd have sent you to Skardu, not Hunza. Too many people go to Hunza.

B.M. (*timidly*): I thought it was very interesting in Hunza.

Colonel S.: You should have gone to Skardu. There you've got something worth seeing. Fifty peaks over 20,000 feet, all at a day's march.

B.M.: I thought there were very nice mountains in Hunza.

Colonel S.: I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. But for your next holiday you really ought to make an effort to go somewhere off the beaten track.

Index

- Abbas, Prince (son of the Mir), 108
Abbottabad, 108
Adana, 24
Adonis River, 38
Afghanistan, 69, 91, 115, 118
Aga Khan, the, 35, 87, 115
Aga Khan, the Begum, 87, 115
Agra, 71
Ahmad, Mahmud and Nafisa, 70
Akbar (the Great Mogul), 124
Alamut, 35
Alawi Mountains, 33, 35
Aleppo, 26, 27, 33, 40
Alexander the Great, 24, 90, 91, 92
Aliabad, 84, 97, 98, 105, 132
Altit, 109, 135, 136, 138
Ambala, 71
Ameri, Mr., 60-3
Amritsar, 71
Amyn, Prince (son of the Mir), 108
Ankara, 22, 23
Anti-Lebanon, 39
Asadabad Pass, 47
Assassins, the, 35
Aveh Pass, 48
Ayaj, Prince (brother of the Mir), 84, 86-8, 119, 120, 122, 125, 126, 128, 129, 147
Aylmer, Captain, 95
Baalbek, 39
Babusar Pass, 70
Badcock, Lieutenant, 95
Baghdad, 43, 45, 46
Baltit, 79, 81, 84, 93, 94, 98, 105, 113, 117, 118, 121, 130, 132, 133, 136, 141, 142, 144-6
Baltit Fort, 11, 109-13, 136
Baluchistan, 61, 69
Bam, 60-4
Bara Khun, 145
Barada River, 39
Barpu glacier, 89
Bashir, Manzar, 69
Bati, Aysel, 19
Batura glacier, 146
Beirut, 38
Bekaa, the, 39
Bericho, the, 138-40
Biddulph, Major, 11, 12
Boisragon, Lieutenant, 95, 111
Bolu, 22
Bor, 23
Bosphorus, the, 16, 18, 19
Browne, Edward Granville (A

INDEX

- Year Amongst the Persians*, 58, 59
 Buhl, Hermann, 76
 Bulgaria, 15
 Burushaski (language), 117, 118, 134
 Buyukdere, 19
 Byblos, 37
 Byron, Robert (*The Road to Oxiana*), 41, 53

 Chalt, 78, 83
 China, 11, 96, 124, 144
 Chitral, 108, 109, 126
 Cilicia, 24
 Cleopatra, 24
 Cobb, Colonel, 76
 Ctesiphon, 46
 Curzon, Lord, 105, 124, 126, 144

 Dalbandin, 68
 Damascus, 34, 39-42
 Dasht-i-Lut, 61, 64
 Dog River (Nahr el Kelb), 38
 d'Orléans et Bragance, Prince Louis (*A Travers l'Hindo-Kush*), 91, 106
 Durand, Colonel, 83, 93-5
 Durri Shahwar, Princess (daughter of the Mir), 108, 109, 147

 Elburz Mountains, 35, 48, 50
 Enfeh, 37
 Euphrates River, 45

 Fouzia, Princess (daughter of the Mir), 108
 Ganesh, 133, 149

 Ghazan Khan I (great-grandfather of the Mir), 92
 Ghazan Khan II (father of the Mir), 97, 148
 Ghazanfar Ali Khan (Crown Prince of Hunza), 84, 108, 120, 122, 125, 126, 147
 Ghulam Rasul, 119, 120, 151
 Gilgit, 11, 70, 71, 74-8, 93, 124, 135, 136, 145, 151
 Gilgit River, 75, 78, 146
 Glubb Pasha, 42
 Gromchevski, Colonel, 93
 Gulmit, 92, 118, 129, 130, 149

 Hama, 33-5
 Hamadan, 47
 Haramosh, 74
 Hasanabad glacier, 84, 146
 Himalaya, 71, 74
 Hindi, 82, 83, 118, 149, 150
 Hindu Kush, 11, 91, 111, 124
 Hispar River, 146
 Homs, 35, 36
 Humayun Beg, 75, 76, 145, 151
 Hunza:
 blacksmith, 138-40
 catapults, 81
 children, 101, 102
 climate, 130
 clothes, 103
 dancing, 122, 123
 darbar, 129
 education, 117
 flour-mill, 141, 142
 food, 131, 132
 garnets, 83

INDEX

- goldsmith, 105, 142, 143
 health, 104-6
 houses, 98-101
 land and crops, 128, 129, 131
 language, 117, 118
 marriage, 102, 103
 millstones, 83
 polo, 123-6
 post office, 135
 religion, 113-16
 royal family, 90, 108-10
 shops, 143, 144
 water system, 132, 133
 weaving, 137, 138
 wheelbarrow, 131
 wine, 87, 88, 123
 women, 103, 104
 wood-turner, 140
 Hunza River, 78, 81, 143, 146
 Hunza Valley, 75, 78, 82, 97,
 125
 Hunzakuts (meaning of), 90
 Inayat Ullah Beg, Wazir of
 Hunza, 109, 121, 122
 Indus River, 70, 74, 146
 Iraq, 44
 Isfahan, 50-5
 Iskenderun, 25
 Islam, 79, 113
 Ismailis (or Maulais), 35, 113-15
 Ismit, 22
 Istanbul, 12, 15-19, 22, 69
 Jordan, 42-4
 Jugoslavia, 15
 Jullunder, 71
 Jupar Mountains, 61
 Karakoram, 11
 Kargah Nullah and River, 75,
 77
 Karimabad, 132, 139, 144
 Kashgar, 11, 93
 Kashmir, 12, 90
 Kashmir, Maharajah of, 92, 130,
 136
 Kermanshah, 47, 49
 Khunjirab Valley and River,
 145, 146
 Khurdopin glacier, 145
 Khyber Pass, 70
 Kiani, General, 75, 77
 Kilik Pass and River, 144, 146
 Kirman, 58-61, 67
 Kitchener, Lord, 121
 Knight, E. F., 80, 90, 95, 96,
 106, 110, 116, 124, 131, 145
 Krak des Chevaliers, 36
 Lahore, 12, 38, 61, 69, 104, 108
 Lebanon, 35-9
 Lockhart, Colonel, 93
 Lochmatter, Franz, 145
 Lorimer, Colonel David, 84, 97,
 104, 118
 Lorimer, Mrs. David, 12, 76, 84,
 97, 102, 104, 105, 120, 131
 Macpherson, Major, 148
 Mafraq, 43
 Mahun, 61
 Maiun, 80-2, 91, 95, 118, 149
 Malakand, 71
 Malika Hassan, Princess (daugh-
 ter of the Mir), 108
 Manipur, 124

INDEX

- Manners Smith, Lieutenant, 96
 March Phillipps, Lisle (*The Works of Man*), 19
 Marco Polo, 58
 Mari, Princess (daughter of the Mir), 108
 Masiaf, 35
 Milton, John, 100
 Minapin, 82, 118
 Mintaka Pass, 11
 Mir of Hunza, the, 12, 70, 77, 80, 81, 85-8, 97, 108-10, 113, 119-23, 125, 126, 128-30, 132, 133, 136-9, 143, 147, 149-51
 Mirjawa, 67
 Mohammed (the Prophet), 59, 113-15
 Mohammed Nazim Khan, Sir (grandfather of the Mir), 76, 86, 91, 93, 94, 96, 97, 102, 112, 115, 121, 130, 133, 136, 144, 148
 Mumby, Carol, 108, 122
 Mumby, Winston, 108, 122, 125
 Murtazabad, 84
 Mussoorie, 71

 Nagir, 79, 80, 83, 90, 91, 105, 110, 118, 130, 136, 144
 Nain, 56
 Nanga Parbat, 74, 76, 77, 151
 Nephin, 37
 Nigde, 23
 Nilofar, Princess (daughter of the Mir), 108
 Nilt, 80, 83, 90, 91, 94-6, 110, 111, 125, 145
 Nok-Kundi, 67

 Nushki, 69

 Orontes River, 33, 34

 Pai-Taq Pass, 47
 Pakistan, 11, 12, 43, 67, 68, 71, 104, 108
 Pamirs, 11, 92, 94, 145
 Pasu glacier, 92, 146
 Persia, 35, 46-67, 90, 124
 Peshawar, 70
 Princess Bubuli's Peak, 88
 Punjab, the, 69

 Quetta, 63, 69
 Qum, 51

 Rakaposhi, 74, 79-82, 84, 88, 146, 149
 Ramadi, 45
 Rani of Hunza, the, 86, 88, 108, 109, 120, 122, 128, 130, 143
 Rawalpindi, 12, 70-2, 75, 81, 123, 152
 Rhabar Hassan, 76-8
 Rutba, 44

 Safdar Ali (great-uncle of the Mir), 92-4, 96, 145
 Safdar Mahmood, Dr., 104, 105, 107
 Scutari, 22
 Seyhan River, 25
 Shah Abbas (of the Sefavid dynasty of Persia), 52, 53, 55
 Shah Khan, Prince (uncle of the Mir), 120, 122, 125
 Shahid Hamid, General, 75

INDEX

- Shingshal Valley and River, 145,
146
- Shipton, Eric, 97
- Shtaura, 39
- Sikandarabad, 77, 79
- Sind, 69
- Sind Desert, 72
- Sinkiang, 11, 130
- Sofia, 15, 17
- Stark, Freya, 35, 151
- Stevens, Sir Roger and Lady,
49
- Sukkur, 69
- Sultan Ali, 88, 101, 109, 115,
117, 121, 125, 129, 133, 135-7,
142, 148, 149, 151
- Swat, Wali of, 71
- Syria, 25, 31, 33, 35, 39, 42,
115
- Tamerlane, 124
- Taq-i-Bustan, 47
- Tarsus, 24
- Taurus Mountains, 24
- Taylor, Lieutenant, 96
- Tehran, 38, 48, 50, 57, 60, 64,
65, 67, 69, 86
- Tigris River, 45
- Tripoli, 36, 37
- Tuz Golu, Lake of, 23
- Ulter, 84, 88, 132
- Uzura, Princess (daughter of the
Mir), 108, 109
- Verjirab glacier, 145
- Visser, Dr., 145, 146
- Visser, Mrs., 145
- Woolley, Sir Leonard, 46
- Yasin, 108, 110, 118, 147
- Yazghil glacier, 145
- Yezd, 57-9
- Younghusband, Captain Frank,
92, 94, 106
- Zahidan, 63, 66, 68
- Zayand Rud, 55
- Zoroaster, 59