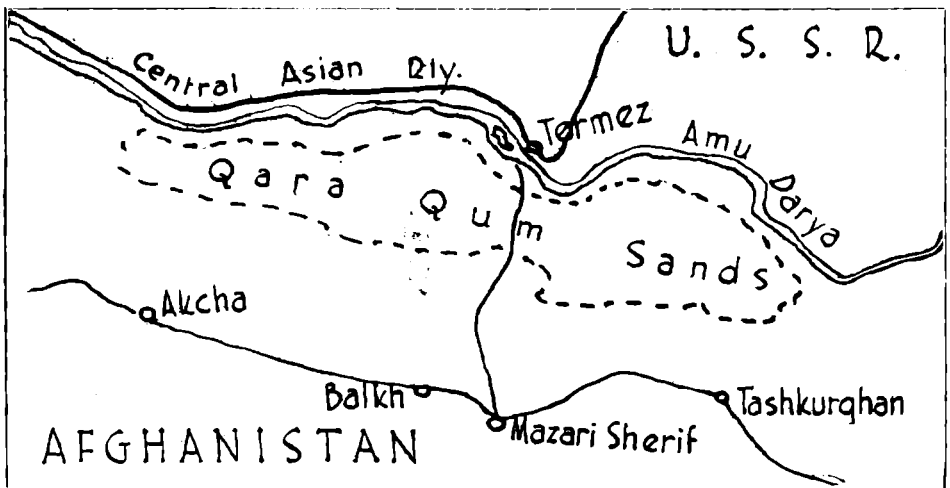


A TRIP TO THE OXUS

By H.R.H. PRINCE PETER OF GREECE

WHILE in Afghanistan last summer, on a round trip through the country, I was fortunate enough to get permission to visit the Oxus from Mazar-i-Sherif, capital of Afghan Turkestan. This was by no means easy, for, as the late Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* will testify, all kinds of obstacles are usually put in the way of the would-be traveller to that famous river, which for a long distance is also the frontier with the U.S.S.R.

The Governor of the province, the *Naib i Hukumat*, H.E. Gul Ahmed Khan, categorically forbade me to proceed there, and it was only by apply-



ing directly by telephone to the Prime Minister, H.R.H. Sirdar Mahmud Shah Khan, in Kabul that I got that decision reversed.

We started out, six of us—two *maimandaran* (foreigners' escorts), one policeman, a driver, a caterer and myself—in the 15-cwt. front-wheel-drive Dodge truck I was driving, on August 17. It was a very fine, cloudless day, luckily not too hot, as it can be very often in summer in this desolate part of the world.

We drove away from the Government rest-house where I was staying, down Mazar's ill-metalled central street, turned left where the bazaars begin, passed the *Roza*, or Ali's tile-covered modern mosque, and were soon outside the built-up area, moving over an extremely rough, white and dusty track, through desert bushes and coarse grass, heading north towards the low-lying horizon of the flat Turkestan plain. We bumped along, regardless of the discomfort, all of us, Afghans included, enraptured with the idea that we were really going to see the Oxus.

I kept an eye on the mileage meter. It was the only way to discover what the distance was, as the map could not be relied on. It looked like thirty miles, but it turned out to be fifty. There were, first, twenty-eight

miles of rough, hard track. It was a bit monotonous, although not difficult to find the way, as, except for a few alternative routes, there was only one to follow. We passed many mounds and the remains of ruined cities, mostly deserted, but some partly inhabited by wandering Uzbeks and Turkomans, whom we stopped to make sure of the correctness of our direction. They were dressed in loose cotton *chapans* or long coats, and, on their heads, in spite of the summer heat, great sheepskin caps, grey at the crown and black all round. They gaped at us out of their round Mongolian faces, unable to understand the Persian in which we addressed them. Occasionally we passed a patrol of two Afghan soldiers riding sturdy, white, local horses, smartly turned out in their khaki uniforms, with their rifles tucked under one thigh against the saddle. They saluted us as if they had been warned of our coming.

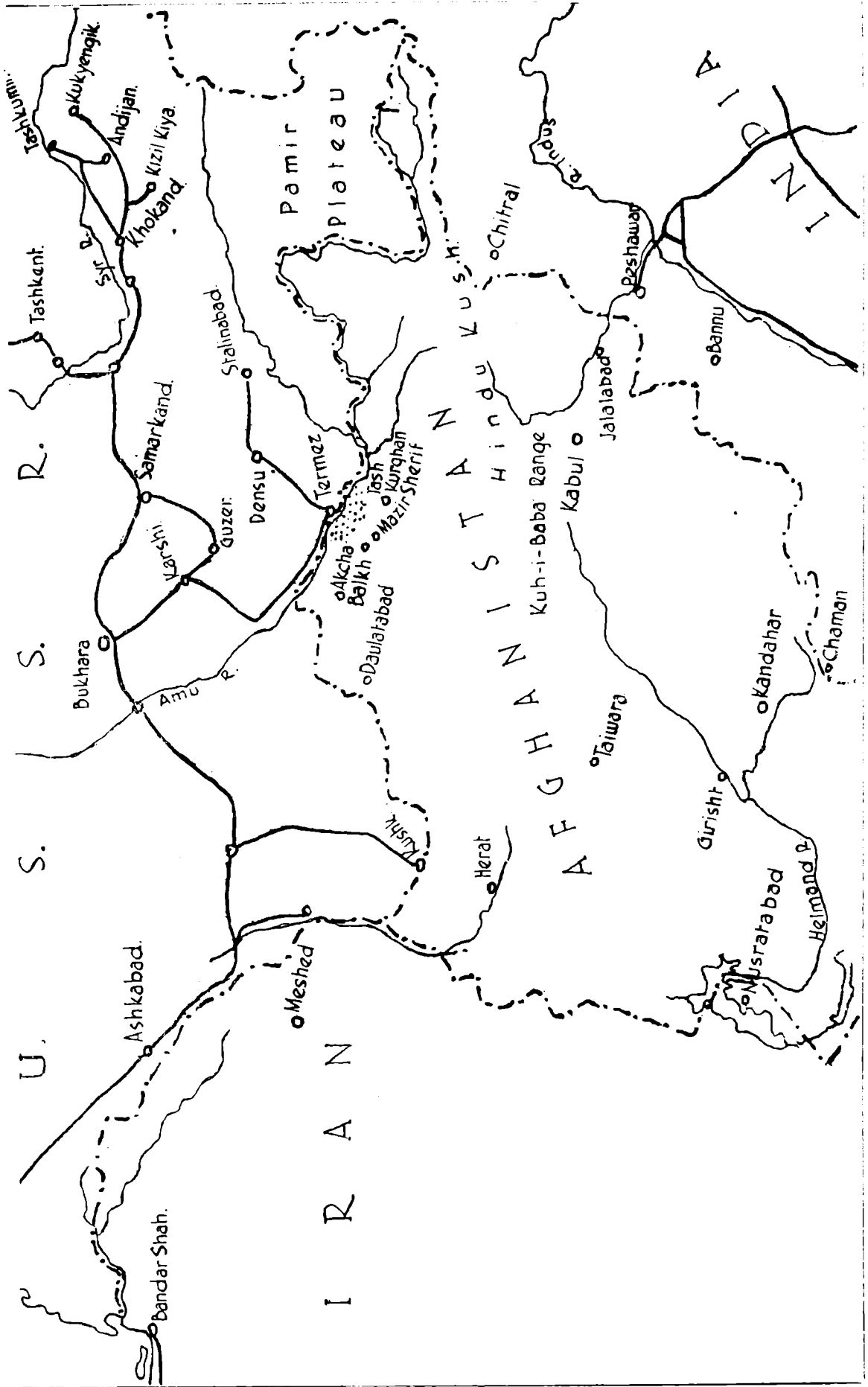
After two hours we reached a fortlike building on our right—*Askar k̄hanah*. Sand dunes were visible beyond, and I realized we had reached the difficult part of our trip—the Kara Kum desert's extreme easterly jutting-out tongue. The rough track took us up to the door of the fort, and a sentry in cavalry high boots and spurs raised his hand for us to stop.

The Afghans with me motioned him to come over to us, and after a short, shouted colloquy he was told to get into the car to show us the way onwards through the trackless sands. This he did, and we started off again, seven of us now in the truck.

There followed twelve miles of moderately undulating country. The dunes were never higher than about 80 feet, but some of them were so steep that I was obliged to get out and reconnoitre a way round them with the aid of all my passengers. It amused the latter immensely to be thus travelling over usually impassable ground, and their chattering and laughter was quite deafening. My Afghan driver, whom I thought I was well inspired not to let drive after we had got over a particularly difficult dune which we had slid down sideways three times in repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to get over before finding a passage round it, exclaimed with great gusto: "This isn't a car; this is a theatre!" Obviously they were all having a wonderful time.

We had nearly got to the end of the dunes when a police officer and two soldiers, all mounted, appeared in front of us, the soldiers each leading a saddled and bridled horse. We stopped, and they told us they had been ordered to come and help us through the sand belt. They seemed extremely surprised we had managed to get through in a car, and said it had never been done before. On hearing from them that we were not far from our destination, I climbed a dune and, sure enough, there was the historic river, broad and shining in the midday sun, wending its way through the desert, its banks affording green and fertile relief for a few hundred yards right and left. On the other side of it, in the distance, a town with smoking factory chimneys was to be seen—Termez in Soviet Russia. I felt elated at the sight and also with the feeling that I had succeeded where so many others had failed.

The police officer galloped off ahead, saying he would show us the way to the Afghan frontier post. We followed leisurely in his tracks,



watching him and his mount getting hotter and hotter through their exertions. In another couple of miles we had reached the belt of vegetation and turned left parallel with the river. Here our guide met a patrol of his men and, beckoning to them, exchanged his steed for one of theirs. He galloped on in this manner for another ten miles. We passed meadows in which cows and horses were grazing, small clumps of mud houses whose inhabitants ran away and hid at the unfamiliar sight of our car, groups of trees and narrow lanes whose drainage ditches were bridged in a primitive way with boulders and logs. Finally, we reached Tash Guzer, and our police officer dismounted, sweating and panting, from a white mare which was practically exhausted.

This place was no village of any size. There were only five buildings—a tower, from the top of which a sentry watched the Soviet border, and four reed-and-mud houses comprising the Customs and police offices and their occupants' dwellings. The officer called out the guard of five men, got them to present arms, and himself stood at the salute, perspiration pouring down his red, congested face. I noticed he had an English whistle dangling from his left breast-pocket engraved with the trade mark *The Thunderer*. The Customs official, in European plain clothes and an Afghan fur cap, came and shook hands, and, leaving the car in the shade of a tree, we all went along to the river edge.

The path leading there was a narrow little lane between high reeds growing in the marshy, damp bank. At the end of it the Oxus, a quarter of a mile wide, yellow, swift-flowing, its waters full of drifting refuse, separated us from Russia's Central Asian possessions we could see opposite. That other side was barren and deserted except for a tower similar to the Afghan police one, and in which no doubt some member of the Uzbek Socialist Soviet Republic's armed forces kept a lookout. Not a soul was to be seen.

Upstream the smoke of Termez's factories caused one of my *maimandars* to expostulate indignantly against what he called the backwardness of his own country, when, as he put it: "Over there, there are progress, industry and railways."

These remarks were characteristic of the present trend of opinion in Afghanistan, a reawakening of ex-King Amanullah's spirit of reform which may well bring about many changes in the near future.

I enquired about crossing, and heard that travellers arriving or leaving Afghanistan by the Russian train opposite were taken over in small rowboats. No regular ferry service existed and contacts over the border were discouraged. The last arrival this way had been the first secretary of the U.S.A. Legation in Kabul, Mr. Patterson, who had come from the American Embassy in Moscow by rail, over Samarkand and Bokhara last May. He had reached Mazar-i-Sherif by *tonga* through the sand dunes and by car from Askar Khanah onwards. The rowboat had made several trips all day to get his luggage over, a laborious proceeding, as the river's current made it necessary to land each time far downstream.

After scribbling my name and the date on the walls of the Custom house in seven different languages (Greek, Danish, English, French, Russian, German and Italian) in order to perpetuate the memory of this

first reaching of the Oxus at Tash Guzer by car, we ate a cold lunch in the police officer's room and immediately after took our departure.

We got back quite easily, the trip this time made less difficult by our previous experience and by the fact that we could follow our own wheel tracks through the sand. Some fifteen miles before Mazar we stopped to inspect a curious tower built of stone and encased in huge unbaked bricks; we had noticed it in the morning, but had left it for our return. Unknown and unrecorded by archæologists, I should say it was an ancient Zoroastrian fire temple modified by some Moslem architect. Known as the *Tower of the Middle* by the local inhabitants, it is used now as a police outpost; we found it garrisoned by three armed but un-uniformed *askaris*.

All this region, which was formerly the Bactria of the classical authors, is little known and partly unexplored. In conclusion, I can only express the wish that the Afghan Government may gradually relax the strict regulations which make it so difficult to travel in this part of the country at the present time. By thus enabling us to widen our geographical and historical knowledge of so interesting an area, Afghanistan would certainly be rendering a very great service to everyone concerned.