PART IV

'Nasr ibn Ahmad, who was the most brilliant jewel of the Samanid galaxy, was equipped with every means of enjoyment. In winter he used to reside at his capital, Bukhara, while in summer he used to go to Samarkand or some of the other cities of Khurasan. Now one year it was the turn of Herat. He spent the spring season at Badghis, where are the most charming pasture grounds of Khurasan. Nasr ibn Ahmad turned his face towards Herat. It was the season of spring; cool breezes from the north were stirring, and the fruit was ripening in the districts of Malin and Karrukh - such fruit as can be obtained in but few places, and nowhere so cheaply. There the army rested. The climate was charming, the breeze cool, food plentiful, fruit abundant, and the air filled with fragrant scents. When Mihrgan arrived and the juice of the grape came into season, and the basil, rocket and feverfew were in bloom, they did full justice to the delights of youth.

For in the district of Herat one hundred and twenty different varieties of grape occur, each sweeter and more delicious than the other. So the Amir Nasr ibn Ahmad saw Mihrgan and its fruits, and was mightily pleased therewith. Then the narcissus began to bloom, and the raisins were plucked and stoned in Malin, and hung up on lines, and packed in store-rooms; and the Amir with his army moved into two groups of hamlets called Ghura and Darwaz. There he saw mansions of which each one was like highest paradise, having before it a garden or pleasure ground with a northern aspect. There they wintered, while the Mandarin oranges began to arrive from Sistan and the sweet oranges from Mazanderan; and so they passed the winter in the most agreeable manner.

When spring came, the Amir sent the horses to Badghis and moved his camp to Malin between two streams. And when summer came and the fruits again ripened, Amir Nasr ibn Ahmad said, 'Where shall we go for the summer? For there is no pleasanter place of residence than this. Let us wait till Mihrgan.' And when Mihrgan came, he said, 'Let us enjoy Mihrgan at Herat and then go'; and so from season to season he continued to procrastinate, until four years had passed in this way.

The Amir's attendants grew weary, and desire for home arose within them, while they beheld the king quiescent, the air of Herat in his head and the love of Herat in his heart; and in the course of conversation he would compare, nay, prefer Herat to the Garden of Eden, and would exalt its charms above those of a Chinese temple. Then the captains of the army and the nobles of the kingdom went to Rudaki and said 'We will present thee with five thousand dinars if thou wilt contrive some artifice by which the king may be induced to depart hence, for our hearts are craving for our wives and children.' (So Rudaki the poet composed a poem and recited it to the Amir)

'The sands of Oxus, toilsome though they be,
Beneath my feet were soft as silk to me.
Glad at the friends' return, the Oxus deep
Up to our girths in laughing waves shall leap...'

'The Amir was so much affected that he descended from his throne, all unbooted bestrode the horse which was on sentry duty, and set off for Bokhara so precipitately that they carried his leggings and riding boots after him for two parasangs, as far as Baruna, and only then did he put them on; nor did he draw rein anywhere till he reached Bokhara, and Rudaki received from the army the double of that five thousand dinars.'

-Samarqandi:Rudaki tr. E.G.Browne.

Trans Asian Express

In 1972, the Shah of Iran formally opened the last stage of the new Istanbul to Teheran railway. Theoretically, one can now travel from London to Meshed by train, with a short pause for crossing the Bosporus. I believe there was a rail link between Turkey and Persia before, but part of the railway line got swallowed up by Russian imperialist ambitions at the turn of the century, and since then one has had to go by road. Having seen the Trans Asian Highway and the Grand Trunk Road of India, I thought it my duty to try out this new communications link. As I intended taking someone with me, and that someone, Joan, had never been east before, I fondly imagined that a pleasant train journey all the way to Teheran with no problems about catching buses or getting lifts or whether the Turkish sailors were on strike, would be an easy and gentle introduction to travel in the orient. Of course, I should have known the Turks well enough to realise it wouldn't be like that at all. In the first place, we hitched across Europe, allowing plenty of time to reach Istanbul by Wednesday teatime, when the weekly train left. For some reason the hitching took longer than ever before, and we arrived in Istanbul with literally half an hour to spare, ran for the ferry, chewed our nails as the opposite shore of the Bosporus hovered over the water only imperceptibly edging nearer, and made the train just as the engine driver was getting up steam. We didn't even have time to buy tickets.

From the edge of a German Autobahn in the middle of the night as we had huddled in our sleeping bags as the juggernauts thundered past, the prospect of a seat on the Istanbul-Teheran Express had seemed infinitely desirable. Unfortunately it was equally desirable now that we were on board. Our Turkish friends had oversold the tickets at least fourfold. We had to think ourselves lucky if we managed to remain seated on our rucksacks in the corridor for any length of time, with all those mustachioed Turks continually clambering over us. A party of boys from Manchester Grammar School were also on the train, going, they said, to study rocks in Persia. They too were piled on top of their kit at one end of a carriage, though they had booked sleepers through Cooks. We had four days' journey to Teheran ahead, so we made ourselves as comfortable as possible in the corridor. At frequent intervals, ticket inspectors came along and asked for our tickets. Each time we asked to buy a ticket to Teheran but each time they could only sell us tickets to the next town, so that we accumulated a little pile of cardboard squares of various colours. There was plenty of food being sold up and down the train, but by the second day Joan's unaccustomed stomach was beginning to suffer. I kept wishing we had taken the boat as usual, until we reached Kurdistan.

The railway route runs considerably further south than the road, and among the mountains above Erzerum, in the lands where the Hittites had their kingdom, it comes to a stop at the edge of Van Golu - Lake Van, between the town of Tatvan and the heights of Nemrut Dagi. The new line has been constructed from Van, on the opposite shore, through the mountains to Sharif Khaneh on the sister Lake of Rezaiyeh. We reached Tatvan in the early afternoon, and left the train for a much more commodious white painted ferry boat. The volcanic peaks came down to meet the flat waters of Lake Van in an eerie silence, broken only when our ferry's engines chugged into life. Chai sellers came round with trays full of chai, and we went up to the bows and hung over the rail talking to the sailors.

At Van we got back on the train, and discovered some Afghans. They were going home from university in Germany, and had succeeded in commandeering a whole carriage for themselves. They invited us in. It was the first time we had actually sat in seats since leaving Istanbul, though we had spent one relatively comfortable night sleeping in the guards van after I had spoken Turkish to a guard and suitably impressed him by using the Turkish word for student instead of the more commonly used Arabic one. There is a movement in Turkey for purifying the language by using pure Turkish words instead of Arabic loan words where possible, and where not possible making up new ones. A similar movement exists in Persia, though not to the same extent. Words like 'stop-place of the iron road' and 'messenger of the sky' are at all times to be preferred to foreign borrowings.

Our Afghan friends had with them a cardboard suitcase full of inferior Yugoslav whisky. Despite the fact that it was Friday, we decided to have a party, and were all sitting round drinking the stuff out of paper cups when the Turkish ticket inspector happened along. He thought it was too good to miss, and invited himself in. So much for Muslims abhorring alcohol. He and the Afghans became very merry, and with me as official interpreter, vowed eternal brotherhood between their respective nations. 'Turkey - chok guzel. Afghanistan- chok guzel. Iran - (indescribable grimace).'

Much laughter and shaking of hands and patting of backs. 'Afghans, Turks - baradaran/arkadesh'...
Very soon our Turkish friend was in a state of collapse on the floor. We had reached the Iranian border according to my map, but it was the middle of the night and the train kept shunting up and down without actually moving anywhere. It wasn't until the small hours that the customs officials appeared, by which time one of the Afghans was fast asleep with his head in my lap, and everyone else was too drunk to fill in their immigration slips. I ended up by filling in the whole sheaf myself.

I didn't think Joan was getting a very good view of travel in the Orient, so I suggested that instead of going on to Teheran we should disembark at Tabriz and catch an ordinary, uncrowded Iranian train the rest of the way. She agreed. Our Afghan friends gave us their cards, wrote their telephone numbers in our notebooks, and begged us to call on them when we arrived in Kabul. At Tabriz we left the train and tried out our cramped limbs on terra firma. Tabriz station is an extraordinary place. A huge concrete and glass structure, reputedly designed by a French architect and built by a British firm, ever expectant of some Gold Rush yet to come. Inside is a vast, cool, echoing hall containing innumerable ticket booths, only one of which ever seems to be in use, water coolers, a tourist office, a restaurant, portraits of the Shahinshah and Queen Farah, and a model of a locomotive in a glass case. It even has public conveniences. Emerging from the 25th Shahrivar Station, one is confronted by a double row of fountains and flower beds, an equally new hotel, and then - nothing. A couple of hundred yards further on the road deteriorates into the usual potholes. To the left a couple of scruffy kebab houses and some garages are barely discernible amid the dust of which they are built, and in all other directions only trees and more dust. Where, then, is the thriving metropolis? Twenty minutes on a bus brings you to Tabriz, but I wouldn't exactly describe it as a thriving metropolis. Somebody, somewhere, obviously has plans for it - but not too soon, I hope. Tabriz is one of my favourite cities. Not too hot, not too crowded, still small enough to walk round - something like Cambridge in a Persian context.

We went into a cool chelow kebabi with white tiled walls and ordered chelow kabab - the Iranian version of fish and chips. This - the massive mound of plain white fluffy rice surmounted by one strip of meat - is the national dish that I got so bored with on my first visit. What always surprises me is the amount of rice one is expected to eat one's way through. We asked the waiter whether he knew of a cheap hotel, and he said that he did indeed - his uncle ran one in an alley just behind. We followed him out into the alley and there, sure enough, was a lopsided neon sign reading 'Pension Palas'. Having deposited our luggage in a room which actually boasted a key, we went out to have a bath. We soon found a Hamam called the 'Moulin Rouge', and spent a pleasant hour splashing water about before emerging with dripping hair into the hot sun.

I had brought a radio with me for a change, and we tried to get the BBC World Service, but only succeeded in getting a local Persian station which was playing programmes on agriculture interspersed with classical recitals on the tar. The Pension Palas had two porcelain sinks, in the passage outside our room. We washed all our clothes and hung them out in the yard. When the heat of the day had abated we went out to have a sandovich in another white tiled place, this time with a television. An American thriller was playing, but it was dubbed into Farsi and consequently all the characters had to gabble away at top speed to keep up with the action, and it was rather hard to follow. We accompanied our sandoviches with the ubiquitous and addictive carrot juice. From Istanbul to India the streets are full of stalls where men grind, press, squeeze and liquidise all available fruits and vegetables. In Iran and Kabul they all have electric blenders, wires draped out across the pavement. Grape juice, apple juice, carrot juice, melon juice, mango juice, pineapple juice, orange juice, anything that can be juiced is juiced. What puzzles me is why such a delicious habit hasn't spread to the West. Is it really only because of the climate?

In the morning we got up early and breakfasted at the corner shop. It was one of those typical Iranian corner shops, festooned with neon doughnuts, selling everything from potatoes to paraffin, and open at all hours. A stepladder led to a sort of platform above the counter, with tables covered with oilcloth and packing cases to sit on. We sat there and drank milk and ate quantities of cake, while below us people came and bought bowls of curd covered with skin and talked about business. We took a yellow taxi to 25th Shahrivar Station and filled our water bottles at the cooler along with some nomads. We took the overnight train to Teheran. Joan's stomach was worse, so to the great amusement of our fellow passengers, I mixed her a ~~thick~~

thick dose of kaolin and water in a tin cup. When we arrived in Teheran we went straight to the house of a friend of mine from Cambridge. She wasn't there, but her family made us at home with chai. They insisted that Joan should have jam in her chai as it was supposed to be good for upset stomachs. Their house was air-conditioned and painted in pastel colours, with a slightly decrepit swimming pool in the garden. In order to teach Joan the numbers in Farsi, we sat in the garden and played Bingo in Persian. My friend's father was a lawyer of some standing, and they lived in the Shemiran district of North Teheran. From the roof of their house one could see Damavand and the Elbruz, with the Hilton Hotel standing up in the haze against a mountain backdrop. In the evening they took us out to see the sights - the Old Shemiran Road, the new motorway (all five hundred yards of it), the new Shahyad monument built for the anniversary celebrations, and back down Pahlavi Avenue between a double line of oriental plane trees or chenars.

On the following day we went to Khiaban Ebnesina to get our visas from the Afghan Embassy. Joan saw her first real Afghans - not the karakul hatted, grey suited inhabitants of the embassy, but Afghans in turbans and flowing shirts and shalwar squatting outside on the pavement. In the evening we went to a famous restaurant in Shemiran and ate chuchi kebab, the speciality of the house. Chuchi kebab is made of very young chickens, roasted on kebab irons, and served with all sorts of side dishes, from gherkins to piste. We ate in the garden, and fountains played. The place was noisy and crowded with whole families of Iranians and their children, all talking and laughing. Our original plan had been to take the train from Teheran to Meshed, but my friend's father insisted that we go by TBT bus, as he knew someone in TBT and could get us tickets at a third of the usual price. TBT is the most expensive of the various bus companies. Accordingly at five o clock on Wednesday we were driven down to the TBT bus office and our cheap tickets purchased. TBT buses give free coca cola and free nougat - I had always travelled Mihantour before. We left by a slightly different route - the Haraj road that runs under the lee of Damavand was apparently blocked by landslides, so we took the Chalus road to the Caspian and then joined the familiar road through Gorgan, Gonbad-e-Kavous and Bojnurd.

The journey took twenty five hours. In Meshed we found a hotel fairly near the central circle, and wandered around looking at the innumerable Photo 'Luks' shops where pilgrims have their photographs taken against cardboard cut-outs of the shrine of Imam Reza so that they can show all their friends back home that they have made the pilgrimage. The local electricity board was obviously having problems that night, as we walked round the circle we were several times plunged into darkness while those about us cried out and the whirr of the juice extractors died. At the Afghan busyard in Khiaban Simetri we bought tickets to Taiabad, and noticed with amusement that the ticket men, unable to translate our names into the Persian script, wrote simply 'Khanome Khareji' or 'Mrs Foreigner'. We visited the hamam in the alley, and bought melons for the journey. At Taiabad we stayed at the Hotel Omid and then took a bus for Islam Qala.

Just beyond Islam Qala, the bus stopped for chai at a house in the middle of the desert. There was the usual deep well plus rubber bucket, and we poured cold water over our heads. I got into conversation with the bus driver and the man whose house it was, and we were invited upstairs for chai. With the chai came little saucers of boiled sweets, which surprised Joan. Many Afghans take sweets with their chai rather than sugar, but that year the custom was peculiarly prevalent. We later discovered that there was a sugar shortage. In Kabul there had been riots - something to do with the war between Pakistan and India preventing supplies getting through from Karachi. One shop in Kabul had unexpectedly recieved a consignment of sugar, and word had got round the bazaars. Before the shopkeeper could do anything to protect himself, the sugar hungry hordes had converged and a riot had developed. Afghanistan is very reliant on other countries for her food, and in times of war or border closure is very vulnerable. The average Afghan lives on chai and nan, with rice meat and potatoes if he is lucky. Almost all the tea, rice and sugar have to be imported, as does the wheat.

Narrow Road to the Deep North

'The wheeling heavens mirror our strivings,
The Jehun carries away our mingled tears.'
-Khayaam

In Herat we stayed at the Super Behzad. We went and had some clothes made in the bazaar, and I bought keshmesh for my favourite dish. There was a new cook in the kitchen who didn't know how to make it, so we cooked it ourselves. Joan's stomach was a little better, but I had a slight cold. I happened to mention this fact in the bazaar, and was immediately presented with a jar of some white powder which I was told to sniff while an obliging Afghan massaged my shoulders. I think it must have been opium - it certainly worked as a cold cure. We went to visit Aziz Issno Issno at the Zendevanan. In the chai khaneh there was a young Afghan with a knife wound in his thigh. They asked if I would dress it for him. It was a very deep wound, surprisingly clean - I had never seen a knife wound before and was expecting a messy affair, not the deep hole in the flesh that I saw when I lifted his shalwar. I put on some antiseptic and bandaged it as best I could, and he limped off quite happily to show his friends. What is a knife wound to an Afghan anyway? Fighting is their national sport.

I wanted to take Joan by the northern route rather than by the asphalt Kandahar road. We went to the bus station to enquire for a bus to Maimana, but it turned out to be jeep all the way. Various Turkomans and Ouzbeks in striped chapans were squatting on their haunches debating the price of tickets, but our arrival made them forget tickets and start on bride prices. They were friendly people, and although the hotel staff had, as usual, been full of gloomy predictions about what would happen to us in the north, I could instantly have trusted any of these illiterate turbaned tribesmen, bristling with knives and guns, with my life. I know I am safer in Central Asia, where Alexander Burnes was hacked to pieces by the Kabul mob, where the unfortunate Moorcroft met a mysterious death near Mazar, where Stoddart and Connolly were thrown into a 'black pit' swarming with reptiles and then executed by the Amir of Bokhara, where an entire British force was massacred in the passes, and where even today French tourists get their heads chopped off regularly; than in cold Europe.

Our jeep had two wooden benches along each side, and our fellow passengers courteously allowed us the choice of seats. We chose the two end seats, at the back where we could get some air. We left Herat at eight on Sunday morning, our first day's destination being Morghab. Sitting at the front of the jeep was a tall and very handsome Afghan who kept smiling at me. I asked him to come and sit by me, and our fellow passengers obligingly made way for him. He was wearing green shalwar and pirahan, and a carefully wrapped grey and white turban. He introduced himself as Abdul Aziz Khan, and I was very taken with him. He said he was an Ouzbek Khan, or chief, though I think he must have had some Ghilzai blood as he was taller than most Ouzbeks and did not have the high cheekboned oriental face. Apparently he was the owner of our jeep and others like it, and was going back as a free passenger to Maimana, his home town. In Maimana he owned land and also seven hundred sheep, two hundred camels, twenty five horses and the same number of rifles. He spoke Ouzbek, Pushto, Farsi, and Turki but of course no English. We had a delightful conversation in Farsi, which consisted mainly in out-complimenting each other. By the time we stopped for lunch and namas at a little robat in Badghis, we were on very friendly terms, and I had meanwhile discovered that among the folds of his shalwar he carried a loaded biretta. He had already asked me whether I spoke any of the other languages in his repertoire. My Pushto vocabulary still consisted only of the numbers, the word for camel, and the informative phrases 'I am a woman, you are a man'. The only Ouzbek I knew was what I had picked up the previous year - 'Siz Kurga Ketasan?' which means 'Where are you going?'.

We all ordered chai and sat crosslegged in the sun while the Turkomans unwound and rewound their striped puttees. The other Ouzbeks, their faces creased with smiles, suggested to Abdul Aziz Khan that since we were getting on so well together perhaps we ought to do something about it.
'Mara migiri?' I asked - do you take me?
He agreed. 'How much?' We settled on a bride price of 20,000 Afghanis plus one Russian jeep. Unfortunately there was no one he could pay this magnificent sum to, as I hadn't thought to bring a male relative along with me, so we just shook hands on the deal and Joan took our photograph.

From then on, at every chai khaneh he introduced me to the locals with 'This is my new wife, I have just taken her.' Appreciative stares and grins from the locals, who would then ask 'Does she speak Ouzbek?' 'Of course she does - listen,' and turning to me he would say 'Siz Kurga Ketasan?' to which I would promptly reply 'Mazar-i-Sharif'. Appreciative nods all round. In the evening we stopped at a caravanserai with beautiful Turkoman carpets spread all over the beaten mud floor and primitive murals on the mud walls. Here, in a little room at the back looking out onto a courtyard with a well and tethered goats, we consummated our marriage. The sun was low, and the straw in the mud walls caught the last light and gleamed. In the outer room the Turkomans were unwinding and rewinding their puttees, the Ouzbeks were laughing over something as they sipped their green tea, and the world was at peace.

When we reached Maimana, a boy ran to meet the jeep and say that someone in Abdul Aziz Khan's family had died. Of course he had to stay, while I, with my transit visa, had to go on. We took a different jeep from Maimana. Along the road to Shibarghan we passed many Kuchis collecting brushwood and they looked hungry. We had to stop many times and give water from the goatskins slung below the jeep. At the robats in Fariab province there was only bread and chai, never meat, and only occasionally rice. The winter had been exceptionally hard after the previous summer's drought, and many animals had perished. People said that the Hazaras in the Hazarajat were reduced to eating grass.In one place, just beyond Maimana, an old man, hearing of the arrival of two Farengis, came hobbling to the chaikhaneh to ask for medicine. He complained of a severe pain in his chest and I was at a loss to know what to do for him. A pain in the chest can be so many different things, from bronchitis to heart disease. I gave him some relatively harmless medicine, hoping that perhaps his faith in Western medicine would heal him, and wished desperately, not for the first time, that I had studied medicine instead of literature. He was very grateful and wanted to give me his rifle as payment - a beautiful piece, perhaps taken from the British in one of the Afghan wars. Although I knew that by refusing it I would offend him, I could not take payment for a cure I had no idea how to effect, and explained that I would not be allowed to take a rifle across the border. Before I went to Afghanistan I had always thought that a doctor's profession was most undesirable, all that poking about in other people's bodies. In Afghanistan, had I had the knowledge, I could have done anything for a sick person, however dirty the person or dangerous the disease. At the same time, it was Afghanistan that showed me that all men are not equal, that it is not in the least desirable that they should be so, and that the dignity of the individual is sacrosanct.

Soon after Maimana the road petered out and we were again crossing those bare tawny hills between Daulatabad and Shibarghan. Somewhere over the hills was the Oxus, the traditional bound between Iran and Turan, marked on my map as the Amu Darya though I never heard anyone call it by that name. Nobody even knew what I meant when I spoke of the Amu Darya - most people in those parts call it the Jehun. The Jehun which Khayaam calls 'the traces of our mingled tears', the Oxus which Arnold wrote of in 1853 as rejoicing through the hushed Chorasmian waste and which I cried over at school, in whose valley I have been, but the waters of which I have never yet seen.

Although our jeep was Russian and had about six gears, it couldn't cope with the steep hills because the soil was so sandy the wheels spun without gripping. We had to get out and walk up several hills, and on one occasion the jeep became so bogged down in the Chorasmian sands that we spent an hour collecting brush and putting it in fornt of the wheels. At Daulatabad we stopped for a meal in a kebab house with wooden tables and benches. Some Kuchi children were watching us eat and I couldn't help thinking of the Sanskrit verse:

'Hand in clasped hand and side pressed close to side,
Silently stand some children of the poor,
And shyly, hungry eyes half turned aside,
Observe the eater through the open door.'

We gave them some of our rice and meat wrapped in nan, and they made little runs to get it. The restaurant proprietor saw what we were doing and chased them away, but we saved the boiled sweets from our chai and found them afterwards hiding behind a wall. It is rare for the Kuchis to come into the towns in such numbers, but their flocks had died and they had no option but to beg from the townspeople.

In order to avoid the heat of the day, the jeep drivers would commonly start out early in the morning and drive until just after noon, when they would find a caravanserai and wait until about four before continuing. On the last day of our journey we stopped in such a place, a caravanserai with a large dusty courtyard in the middle of which an awning of tree branches had been erected over four wooden platforms spread with carpets. Here we settled ourselves crosslegged while the Bachas brought bowls of water and bowls of shorwa. I had long since learned the art of eating rice with my fingers, but how to eat soup without a spoon? I watched our fellow passengers and found that the only way to eat it was by dipping in chunks of nan. A dervish was sitting on one of the platforms, wild eyed, unkempt and ragged, a conch shaped wooden begging bowl round his neck. He did not go unfed, for the Muslim knows the rewards to be gained by giving to the poor, and especially to holy men. The jeep driver bargained for a melon and cut it into slices with his dagger, passing a slice each to Joan and I. Marco Polo thought that the melons of Shibarghan were 'the very best melons in the world' and I am inclined to agree with him.

After lunch the driver unwound his turban, made it into a pillow and went to sleep. Most of our fellow passengers did likewise, but Joan and I went for a walk. Behind the caravanserai was a small settlement consisting of one street with a flyblown butchers shop and a yard full of tethered donkeys. We played catch with a crowd of children until they spotted the camera and shouted 'Aks, Aks'. We photographed them all and they clamoured for more, even though we couldn't produce the pictures to show them. They wanted to look inside and see where the picture was. An Instamatic would have been popular. At four we all piled into the jeep again and were soon crossing the southern spur of the Kara Kum desert. How the druver navigated I have no idea, as we saw no sign of a road or track. We reached Shibarghan and the asphalt road by nightfall, and stopped to fill up with petrol. I talked out of the back of the jeep to some young Afghans dressed in western suits who were employed by the Russians on the natural gas project.

The distance from Shibarghan to Mazar is roughly equal to that from Maimana to Shibarghan, but with a metalled road we could expect to arrive in Mazar that same night. Unfortunately our driver came to the conclusion that since there was a road, we no longer needed the jeep. He arranged for us to make the rest of the journey in a taxi. Cramming twenty odd Turkomans and Ouzbeks into the back of a jeep is one thing, cramming the same number into one Russian Volga is quite another. I told him he was mad, but not until we had tried every possible combination of elbows and knees would he agree to two Volgas. Even with two cars I seemed to be sitting on three square inches of seat. Allah alone knew how many Turkomans were sitting on my luggage in the boot. The hundred mile drive to Mazar was a nightmare. We did stop at Balkh chai khaneh for chai, and Joan and I, ejected from the back seat, collapsed onto charpoys and had to be fanned by a bacha. In Mazar we stayed again at the vast, empty, still unfinished Mazar Hotel. The town was silent and dark except for the kebab house on the corner where we had supper. Here men were gathered in groups talking in low voices over their chai, while their horses shifted restlessly in the street. Talking, perhaps, of their own version of the Great Game, in which the prizes are karakul skins, or hashish from over the border, or a consignment of that equally precious commodity which is called Spinzar (white gold) - cotton.

The Great Game.

At the end of the First Afghan War the British retired to India, and Dost Mohammed returned to Kabul to pick up the threads. He reconquered Mazar-i-Sharif, Khulm, Kunduz, Qataghan, Badakhshan and Kandahar. The Sikh empire, without Runjit Singh, collapsed. After two wars the British gained control of the Punjab, and the Dost occupied Peshawar. He wanted Herat too, and the British were inclined to support him as an Afghan Herat was preferable to a Persian or Russian Herat. In the years 1853-56 the British were occupied with the Crimean War, and in 1856 the Persians occupied Herat, precipitating a three month war with England after which they evacuated the town. In 1857 Edwardes and Lawrence invited the Dost to Peshawar to sign a treaty. The Dost received one lakh of rupees per month during the war to maintain an army capable of resisting invasion from the west and north. Major Lumsden of the Guides was allowed to proceed to Kandahar, where he remained sweating during the Indian Mutiny, which broke out in May of that year. Many of the Afghan chiefs wanted to join in the Mutiny, which would have been disastrous for the British, but the Dost remained neutral. In fact, had he been a little more aggressive, Lawrence might have given him Peshawar and the lands west of the Indus.
In 1863 Herat was conquered for Afghanistan, and the Dost died. An Afghan saying runs 'Is the Dost dead that there is now no justice in the land?'

The Dost's three favourite sons, including Akbar the hero of the First Afghan War, had all died before him, so he had chosen a younger son to succeed him. This was Sher Ali Khan. However, two older brothers, Afzal Khan and Azim Khan, refused to be ruled by Sher Ali, and for six years there was civil war in Kabul. Defeated at Takht-i-Pul, Afzal's son Abdur Rahman Khan fled to Bokhara. In 1864 Afzal Khan was imprisoned. At Kalat-i-Ghilzai Sher Ali overcame the combined armies of two other brothers, Mohammed Amin Governor of Kandahar, and Mohammed Sharif Governor of Farah and Girishk. However, Abdur Rahman returned from Bokhara, and raised an army, and with his uncle Azam Khan defeated Sher Ali three times in the field. In 1866 Abdur Rahman placed his father Afzal on the throne of Kabul. In 1867 Afzal died and was replaced by Abdur Rahman's uncle, Azam Khan. When Abdur Rahman left Kabul for Mazar-i-Sharif, Sher Ali and his son Yaqub Khan succeeded in taking back the throne from Azam. Meanwhile Tsarist Russia was on the move in Central Asia. The Khan of Bokhara had become a Russian vassal. Lord Mayo invited Sher Ali to Ambala to discuss the problem of Russian advance. During the remainder of Sher Ali's reign various reforms were instituted - a national army was formed, a system for collecting revenues, a council of elders, a postal system, and the first newspaper, Shams-i-Nahar, or Morning Sun. Sher Ali's son Yaqub Khan broke with his father over the appointment of another son, Abdullah Jan as heir. He fled to Persia with his brother Ayub, later to be the hero of the Second Afghan War. He conquered Herat from Persia, and made it up with his father who allowed him to govern Herat. However, his father invited him to Kabul and took the opportunity of imprisoning him, whereupon Ayub left once more for Persia. In 1872 an Anglo Russian agreement was signed, the Persians took Sistan, and Lord Mayo was assassinated. Sher Ali, worried by the slow but steady advance of the Russian armies towards his northern borders, applied to the British for aid. The British replied that the Russians had promised to respect the Oxus as boundary.

In 1874 Disraeli became prime minister in England, and the policy of 'masterly inactivity' was changed to a 'forward policy'. The new Viceroy wanted a British Mission in Herat to observe Russian activity. Quetta was occupied and converted into a military base. The British demanded a mission in Kabul, but Sher Ali refused. He had been getting nasty letters from the Russian General Kaufmann, and the British protested to Petersburg. In 1877 the Russians were at war with Turkey, and British ships were in the Bosporus, but in 1878 the war ended and the Russians turned their eyes to the east, towards Khiva and Merv. They sent a diplomatic mission under General Stolietov from Samarkand to Kabul without even asking Sher Ali's permission. Naturally, the British again requested a British mission to counter the Russian one. While Sher Ali was thinking about this, his favourite son and heir, Abdullah Jan, died. He went into deep mourning and asked the British to wait for their decision. They could not. Major Louis Cavagnari moved to Ali Masjid, where the Afghan commanding

officer said he hadn't the authority to give permission for a British mission under Sir Neville Chamberlain to proceed to Kabul. This was taken as an insult, and an ultimatum was delivered. On November 21st British troops crossed into the Amir's territory in a three pronged attack. General Frederick Roberts advanced through Kurram, General Sam Browne (the one the belts were named after) through the Khyber, and General Donald Stewart through Quetta. St Petersburg hastily assured Britain that the Russian mission would be withdrawn. Sher Ali appealed to the Russians for aid, but General Kaufmann said that he couldn't bring troops across the Hindu Kush in winter. Sher Ali went to Mazar, crossed the Oxus and tried to go to Petersburg to plead his case with the Tsar, but was prevented from doing so. He fell ill, and died soon after at Balkh. His son Yaqub Khan, left in charge of Kabul during his absence, became the new Amir. But the story of the Second Afghan War belongs to General Roberts, or 'Bobs Bahadur' as he was affectionately known. On November 28th he and his troops marched towards the Peiwar Kotal, the pass which they had to take in order to gain entry to Afghanistan proper.

> 'The stars were still shining when we started, but it was very dark, and we were chilled to the bone by a breeze blowing straight off the snows of the Sufed Koh; towards sunrise is died away. and was followed by oppressive heat and clouds of dust. Our progress was slow, for the banks of the numerous nullahs which intersect the valley had to be ramped before the guns and baggage could pass over them.'

Reaching the Peiwar Kotal, Roberts halted and considered how best he could attack it.

> 'It was, indeed, a formidable position - on the summit of a mountain rising abruptly 2,000 feet above us, and only approachable by a narrow, steep, and rugged path, flanked on either side by precipitous spurs jutting out like huge bastions, from which an overwhelming fire vould be brought to bear on the assailants. The mountain on the right did not look much more promising for moving troops, and I could only hope that a way might be found on their left by which their flank could be turned. The country, however, in that direction was screened from view by spurs covered with dense forests of deodar.
>
> I confess to feeling very nearly akin to despair when I gazed at the apparently impregnable position towering above us, occupied, as I could discern through my telescope, by crowds of soldiers and a large number of guns.'
>
> 'I had heard that the smallness of the column was being freely commented on and discussed; indeed, people in Kuram did not care to disguise their belief that we were hastening to our destruction. Even the women tanuted us. When they saw our little Gurkhas for the first time, they exclaimed: 'Is it possible that these beardless boys think they can fight Afghan warriors?' '

Roberts decided on a night attack, and kept his plan secret from all but the commanding officers.

> 'At 10 p.m. on Sunday, the 1st December, the little column fell in, in absolute silence, and began its hazardous march. Tents were left standing and camp-fires burning; and so noiselessly were orders carried out that our departure remained unsuspected even by those of our own people who were left in camp.
>
> The track (for there was no road) led for two miles due east, and then, turning sharp to the north, entered a wide gorge and ran along the bed of a mountain stream. The moonlight lit up the cliffs on the eastern side of the ravine, but made the darkness only the more dense in the shadow of the steep hills on the west, underneath which our path lay, over piles of stones and heaps of glacier debris. A bitterly cold wind rushed down the gorge, extremely trying to all, lightly clad as we were in anticipation of the climb before us. Onward and upwards we slowly toiled, stumbling over great boulders of rock, dropping into old water-channels, splashing through icy streams, and halting frequently to allow the troops in the rear to close up.
>
> In spite of the danger incurred, I was obliged every now and then to strike a match and look at my watch to see how the time was going.'

Of course, Roberts succeeded in taking the Kotal, and the Afghans 'fled in such a hurry that a sheepskin coat and from sixty to a hundred rounds of ammunition were left behind on the spot where each man had lain.'

Roberts marched to Khost, and eventually succeeded in occupying the whole district, although not without opposition:

> 'The night passed off quietly, but when advancing day made them visible, multitudes of tribesmen were descried collecting on the slopes of the neighbouring hills. Some friendly Natives were sent to ascertain their

intentions, followed by a Cavalry reconnoitring party, when suddenly a number of camel-drivers and mule-men, who had gone to the nearest villages to procure fodder for their animals, came rushing back to camp in the wildest terror and excitement, declaring that the enemy seemed to rise as if by magic out of the ground, and that several thousands were already in the village. No doubt some of these were the 'peacable-looking husbandmen' the patrols had encountered the previous day.'

Roberts also had trouble with his war correspondent, who used his imagination a little too freely in reporting events, and had to be sent home.

On May 8th the Amir arrived at the camp of Sir Sam Browne, and the treaty of Gandamak was signed. The British were to control Afghan foreign policy, to reside in Kabul, to control the Khyber and Michni passes, and to take Kurram, Pishin and Sibi. In return they were to pay £60,000 per annum and protect Afghanistan against foreign invasion. In July the British mission, headed by Cavagnari, was escorted to the Shutargardan Pass.

'As we ascended, curiously enough, we came across a solitary magpie, which I should not have noticed had not Cavagnari pointed it out and begged me not to mention the fact of his having seen it to his wife, as she would be sure to consider it an unlucky omen.

On reaching the Afghan camp, we were received in a large, tastefully decorated tent, where tea was served, and we were afterwards conducted to the top of the mountain, where carpets were spread and more tea passed round, while we gazed on the fine view of the Logar valley which stretched out beneath us.

On descending to the camp, we were invited to partake of dinner, served in Oriental fashion on a carpet spread on the ground. Everything was done most lavishly and gracefully, and nothing was omitted that was calculated to do us honour. Nevertheless, I could not feel happy as to the prospects of the Mission, and my heart sank as I wished Cavagnari goodbye. '

On September 5th, Roberts received the following telegram:

'One Jelaladin Ghilzai, who says he is in Sir Louis Cavagnari's secret service, has arrived in hot haste from Kabul, and solemnly states that yesterday morning the Residency was attacked by three regiments who had mutinied for their pay, they having guns, and being joined by a portion of six other regiments. The Embassy and escort were defending themselves when he left about noon yesterday. I hope to receive further news.'

Further news was that all in the British Mission had been murdered. The Second Afghan War, which everyone had thought ended by the treaty of Gandamak, was now re-opened. Once more the heliographs flickered from hilltop to hilltop, and engagements were fought at Hazardarakht (the thousand trees) and Sang-i-Nawishta (the gorge of the inscribed stone). The fighting was not without its ironies. When Kurran had been assigned to the British by treaty, the tribesmen there 'lifted for us the purdah (curtain) of their country, they became most friendly, and took a curious pleasure in pointing out to us the points of defence at which they would have opposed us, had we been advancing as enemies.'

And the Amir Yaqub was in the British camp, ostensibly craving protection but in fact sending information back to his troops. Although Roberts suspected as much, he could not very well do anything but treat his unwelcome guest as an honoured one, and it must have been gratifying when the heliograph brought news of a complete victory for the British:

'Throughout the day my friend (!) the Amir, surrounded by his Sirdars, remained seated on a knoll in the centre of the camp, watching the progress of the fight with intense eagerness, and questioning everyone who appeared as to his interpretation of what he had observed. So soon as I felt absolutely assured of our victory, I sent an Aide-de-Camp to His Highness to convey the joyful intelligence of our success. It was, without doubt, a trying moment for him, and a terrible disappointment after the plans which I subsequently ascertained he and his adherents at Kabul had carefully laid for our annihilation. But he received the news with Asiatic calmness, and without the smallest sign of mortification, merely requesting my Aide-de-Camp to assure me that, as my enemies were his enemies, he rejoiced at my victory.'

Soon after this incident Roberts arrived in Kabul and set up camp in the Bala-Hissar, where the Amir Yaqub asked to be allowed to abdicate and go to India:

'His life, he said, had been most miserable, and he would rather be a grass-cutter in the English camp than Ruler of Afghanistan.'

So Roberts became virtual ruler of Kabul, while casting about for someone to put in the Amir's place.

> 'The difficulty was to find the right man. Abdur Rahman, who I had reason to believe would be acceptable to the army, was far away, I could not find out where, and I could think of no one else at all suitable.'

Abdur Rahman was in Bokhara. The other possible contender was Ayub, and he was in Kandahar preparing to fight for the throne. Roberts meanwhile moved the troops to the Sherpur cantonment, which had been much improved and strengthened by Sher Ali, after an explosion of gunpowder in the Bala Hissar. One or two engagements were fought -

> 'The night of the 13th passed quietly, but when day dawned on the 14th crowds of armed men, with munerous standards, could be seen occupying a hill on the Kohistan road...
>
> 'I could just see a long Afghan knife appear above the ridge, steadily mounting higher and higher, the bearer of which was being concealed by the contour of the hill, and I knew that it was only one of the many weapons which were being carried by our enemies to the attack.'

By February of 1880, contact had been established with Abdur Rahman, and he was crossing the Oxus with a hundred followers. More joined him on the way, and in July he rode into Kabul dressed in Russian uniform, and was proclaimed Amir. A few days later news arrived of the devastation of a British force under Brigadier Burrows by Ayub's army at Maiwand, near Kandahar. Almost half the British soldiers had been killed, the remnants having escaped to Kandahar where they were now under siege. Roberts collected a force and decided to march with all speed to Kandahar and relieve them.

The success of the famous march to Kandahar was undoubtedly due to its speed.* Roberts dispensed with all but the essential camp followers, took no wheeled artillery, and few pack animals. Some supplies were taken, but more was purchased en route. Every morning the 'rouse' was sounded at 2.45 a.m., and 'by four o clock tents had been struck, baggage loaded up, and everything was ready for a start.' The front part of the column would set up camp again in the heat of the day, and wait for the rest of the column to come in. The rearguard was rotated daily, as they would be marching in the hottest part of the day and would not arrive in camp till evening. They also spent longer on the march because they had to round up lagging camp followers.

> 'Towards the end of the march particularly, this duty became most irksome, for the wretched followers were so weary and footsore that they hid themselves in ravines, making up their minds to die, and entreating, when discovered and urged to make an effort, to be left where they were.'

On September 1st Roberts' force met Ayub's, and defeated them. The garrison at Kandahar was relieved, and shortly afterwards the British withdrew from Afghanistan as Gladstone had taken over again in London.

Abdur Rahman, the new Amir, was quite different from the weak Yaqub, described by Roberts as having a conical head and no chin to speak of. Born in Kabul in 1844, he had spent most of his youth in Balkh with his father Afzal Khan. He had learned the arts of war from an Anglo-Indian soldier of fortune, William Campbell. Campbell had been in service under Runjit Singh, Shah Shuja, and Dost Mohammed, and died in Mazar in 1866. Abdur Rahman had already seen plenty of fighting, putting down revolts and getting his father on the throne. Known as the 'Iron Amir', he united the country almost immediately, shifting many Ghilzai Pathans north of the Hindu Kush in case of trouble from that quarter. He operated a kind of Achaemenian satrap system, with spies known as the 'eyes and ears of the King' everywhere. In his autobiography he wrote:

> 'How can a small Power like Afghanistan, which is like a goat between these lions (Great Britain and Russia), or a grain of wheat between two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being ground to dust?'

It was the Amir Abdur Rahman who converted the Kaffirs at sword-point, renaming Kaffiristan Nuristan, or Land of Light. He was a man of sardonic humour, generous but cruel. Lord Curzon, who visited the Amir in Kabul, records him as ' a strange and almost incredible amalgam of the jester and the cynic, the statesman and the savage', a man who quoted Sa'adi in one breath and ordered 'Off with his head' in the next, who strung up robbers in iron cages and punished lechers by burying them up to the waist in ice in the middle of winter so that they 'would never be too hot again!.

> 'One day an old beggar threw himself in the way of the Amir as he was riding through the streets. The following dialogue then ensued: "What are you?" "A beggar." "But how do you get your living?" "By alms." "What? Do you mean to say that you do no work?" "None." "And you have never done any?" "Never." "Then it is time that we were relieved of your

*313 miles in 22 days

presence." And the Amir nodded to the executioner.'

The Great Game, however, was not over yet. In 1885 came the Panjdeh Crisis, which almost cost Abdur Rahman several thousand square miles of territory north and west of the Morghab River, and almost caused a war between the British lion and the Russian bear. The Russians had been advancing steadily on the Oxus. In 1876 the Khanate of Khokand had been swallowed up, in 1879 the Tekke Turkomans beat off a Russian attack, in 1881 the Tekke Turkomans were swallowed up too. In 1884 Merv oasis joined its fellows, and British politicians suffered attacks of 'mervousness'. The Russians advanced to within shooting distance of Panjdeh. Their General Alikhanoff wrote to the Afghan General Ghausuddin calling him a liar, and the latter replied calling the former a thief. The Russians advanced, the Afghans crossed the Morghab, but lost Panjdeh. The news was broken to Amir Abdur Rahman Khan while he was visiting Lord Dufferin at Rawalpindi. The Russians and the British agreed to a compromise over the border, which was to run from Zulfiqar, north of Herat, to a place called Khoja Saleh on the Oxus. The Russians on the joint boundary commission then attempted to foul up the proceedings by discovering several places called 'Khoja Saleh' in the area, and professing not to know which one was meant.

In 1891 the Russians tried to explore Wakhan, the mountainous area north of Badakhshan, which would give them a common frontier with British India. The British held negotiations with Russia, and forced Abdur Rahman to accept control of the area, now known as the Wakhan corridor (or Marco Polo highway). Abdur Rahman said he had enough problems with his own people, without having to deal with Kirghiz bandits. A further joint boundary commission fixed the borders, though it wasn't until 1964 that the Chinese and the Afghans finally climbed up among the glaciers and fixed the frontier line on the ground. In 1893 the Durand line was fixed dividing Afghanistan from what is now Pakistan. Many of the Pathans in Swat, Chitral, Dir and Bajaur had already informed the Amir that he had no control over them. This was, and is, the strangest of frontiers. Many villages were split by the line, in some cases the fields were on the British side while the houses were on the Afghan. In 1901 the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan died, having succeeded by several months in his ambition to outlive his contemporary Queen Victoria. The Great Game moved east to the mountains of Tibet, and Abdur Rahman's eldest son Habibullah became Amir of Afghanistan.

The Street of the Carpet Dealers.

Bia ke berim ba Mazar, Mulla Mumad Jan,
Seili gule lalezar, Wawa dilbar jan.

Az inja ta ba Kabul, kheili rah ast,
Amma dar ab-e-kuh sang-e-siah ast.

Come, let us go to Mazar, Mulla Mumad Jan,
And look at the flower gardens, my love.

From here to Kabul the road is very long,
But in the waters of the mountains is a
black stone.

-Afghan popular song.

Mazar-i-Sharif is a strange place, full of suggestion. It is easy to imagine the bazaars of Mazar seething with spies in the best Kipling tradition. There is something shut away, as it were, about Mazar, which impinges on the borders of consciousness as one walks in the gardens of the mosque, or through the narrow streets and back alleys. Perhaps it is also the closeness of Russia that one feels, and the presence of what was once Bokhara some distance to the north, all the more intrusive because it has been suppressed. Of course the town is full of those who have escaped across the Oxus. Many thousands of Turkomans and Ouzbeks crossed into Afghanistan in the last century, before the rising tide of the Tsarist army. More came in this century to escape the regimentation of the Soviets. If you ask them about their brothers on the other side they will tell you that those left behind are reduced to eating tortoises, and that one can see heaps of tortoise shells beside their huts. These were refugees, however, who were an asset to Afghanistan. They brought with them their karakul flocks and their carpets, and karakul and carpets are now Afghanistan's most important exports. The Russian influence is everywhere in Mazar, on the surface at least. The shop signs are more likely to be in Russian than in English, people tend to greet a foreigner with 'Strastvy' rather than the 'Hello, come into my shop please' of the south. Many of the words are Russian too, papyros for cigarettes for example.

But Mazar is also the home of the supposed shrine of Ali, from which it takes its name - Mazar-i-Sharif, the Noble Shrine, - and so a magnet for all sorts of strange people from dervishes to fakirs. In the bazaars of Mazar one mingles with an assorted crowd of Arabs, Persians, Pathans, Tajiks, Hazaras, Kirghiz, Turkomans, Ouzbeks, Indians, Kashmiris, Nuristanis, Armenians and Jews. There are exiles, traders, smugglers, fakirs, mullahs, pilgrims, beggars, nomads, government officials, shopkeepers, jeep drivers, soldiers, dervishes, snake charmers, acrobats, itinerant musicians and storytellers, carpet sellers, horse dealers, and very likely spies. Perhaps because of the cosmopolitan nature of the town, even the farengi is able to walk the streets without anyone paying the slightest attention, and nobody seems to mind if an infidel wishes to visit the Holy Shrine. Which I did, because, being an architectural illiterate, the Mosque at Mazar-i-Sharif is my favourite group of buildings. The purists can keep the perfect ivans and courts of Isfahan, I prefer a little asymmetry and a flamboyant conglomeration of styles. All roads in Mazar lead to the mosque, and one is constantly coming upon it from different angles in gharry rides to and from the bank or the bus office. The brilliance of the turquoise and lapis lazuli is a visual draught in the surrounding waterlessness. Spread around the domes and minarets is a carpet of grass from which rise at intervals flocks of sacred white doves.

Opposite the mosque is the street of the carpet dealers. Their shops are at first dark, cool recesses from the blinding glare of the sun, and then, as you sit down to chai with the proprietor, caves of colour. Piles of carpets are spread on the floor, and rolls of carpets are stacked all around. There are Saruks, Mauris, Charchangus, Kizzilyaks, Pendes, Tekkes, Bokharas, Baluchis, and elephant's foot Filpoys. The predominant colour was that deep red for which the desert is the best foil, but there were also golds and blues and browns faded to various depths by the sun. The proprietors of the carpet shops will unroll and lay out every carpet in the shop for your inspection, take them out into the sun and point out the flaws, send for innumerable pots of chai, and never press you to buy for they know that if you fall for a carpet you will buy. My eye was caught by a Bokhara with a particularly silky texture. I looked at all the other carpets

in the shop, thanked the shop keeper and left. I walked all the way down the street stopping in every other shop, and even combed the back alleys. But every other carpet that was unrolled for my inspection looked nothing in comparison with the Bokhara. I went back. More chai was brought. I carefully asked the prices of several carpets, not wanting to show my interest in the Bokhara. The price of the Bokhara was 15,000 Afghanis. Far too expensive for me - about £60. Sadly, I gave up all thought of buying it, but I didn't think it would do any harm to bargain a little over chai. I suggested 10,000 Afs. The shop keeper came down to this price with such rapidity that I began to realise I had quoted too high. In Kabul one can only hope to cut a carpet price by about ten per cent in bargaining, but in Mazar where there are not so many tourists and which is in any case nearer to the centres of production, one might bring a price down by as much as sixty per cent. We had some more chai, and started again. We took the carpet out into the street to look for flaws. Here the carpet had been mended, here it needed mending, the fringe was rather worn, one end was considerably more faded than the other. The irregularities in the colour simply attested to the vegetable nature of the dyes, while those in the pattern were a reminder of its human origins. This time I deliberately started with a ridiculously low price, and we finally settled at five thousand Afghanis. With the rolled up carpet on my shoulder, I returned to the hotel.
'Bought a carpet?' said the hotel people
'Let's see.' I spread it out on the floor.
'But its old' they exclaimed, 'Why didn't you buy a new one?'
Just as well for me that the theory of the antique hasn't reached the north yet, as it has the south, or the carpet would have been much more expensive. In the south it is not unknown for carpets to be 'aged', and there is reputedly a factory devoted to the forging of Greek coins. However, whatever the hotel staff's views on the old versus the new, I had got myself a bargain. It was a beautiful carpet, with a ground of deep red, and guls of blue and brown. I was reliably informed that it was a Turkoman Chorposh Panjdeh Bokhara, and probably about seventy years old. I never managed to find out what 'Chorposh' meant, though it was evidently Turkoman. Presumably Bokhara referred to the market and Panjdeh to the centre of production.

As I had paid for the carpet in dollars, I had to go to the bank to change a travellers cheque. Sitting in the Da Afghan bank filling in forms while the tellers counted out the ragged notes, I looked up to see the carpet dealer walk in. He had evidently shut up shop and come straight round to change his dollars. Probably he hadn't sold a carpet for some time, and needed the money. That evening we went to the restaurant on the corner of the street where they make keshmesh pilau, and tried the spinach ravioli known as Ashak, which is said to be a national dish. The spinach bore every resemblance to grass, though the yoghourt was good. Back at the hotel, we sat on the balcony looking out over the closed-in silence of Mazar, while from a nearby street the sound of music floated up. A policeman came round and took away our passports for the night, warning us not to go out until daybreak. I thought of Kunduz, not far to the east, where various European travellers were detained and robbed in a similar way. Rosita Forbes visited Mazar in the nineteen thirties, and I don't suppose it has changed much since then -

> 'George and I walked home. We turned into a bazaar we did not know. The booths were closed. Pencils of light, escaping between cracks in the shutters, accentuated the general darkness. For the roofs reached together shutting out the sky. We stumbled over stones and heaps of rubbish. Dust silenced our footsteps. Soon we lost sense of direction. The bazaar ran out between high walls and a dog howled. Then we ceased to talk, for Mazar-i-Sherif became suddenly immense and secret. As in Jellalabad, I felt the presence of innumerable human beings without being able to see them. I heard movements and suppressed voices. It was as if the blind mud walls held back a tide which beat helpless against them. Unconsciously, we quickened our steps. "Uncomfortable," said George. "What?" '

In the morning we went to the bus office for the Kabul bus. It was very early, but the paprika potato sellers were out with their trays, and we even found nan and chai in a shop down the street. Before the bus left, bread was broken over the engine and divided among the beggers. We passed through Tashkurgan where the thirteen year old Abdur Rahman had experimented by not collecting the taxes and angered his father by smoking hemp, ignored the turn off to Kunduz ('If you want to die, go to Kunduz' is an Afghan proverb) and veered south towards the Haibak gorge. Again we crossed the Indus/Oxus watershed by the Salang Pass, again we ate kebabs

kebabs by a fast flowing stream, and again we stopped in the mulberry groves of the Panjshir. At Charikar, of course, everyone had to buy themselves new knives. We breasted the rise between the Koh-i-Daman and the Paghman range just as dusk was falling, and lights were beginning to come on in the dusty bowl of the Kabul valley.

At the busyard someone handed us a card which read
'SHAMSHAT HOTEL
Chicken Sale Street
Shar-i-Naw, Kabul, Afghanistan.
close to Pak, Indian & Iranian
Embassies.
Car Parking, Camping, Green Garden,
Fresh and boiled water for drinking.'
I knew the place. We duly booked in at the Shamshat, signed the register, and went off for a meal. Chicken Street is so called because it is lined with cages full of scraggy chickens and baskets full of eggs. It is the street where you go to buy chickens, eggs, milk, butter and cream. Most of these outlandish commodities were bought by the foreign embassies and their camp followers. At the end of Chicken Street is a street containing the Aziz Supermarket and the Kamran Restaurant (surely not named after that wicked son of a wicked father from Herat?) which specialises in porridge. Beyond that is the Bost Hotel, a marvellous vegetable and flower market, and a street of bakers who learned their trade as servants to foreign embassies and produce delicious apricot sponge and apple pies. Beyond that is the Shar-i-Nau Park, the Marco Polo Restaurant, the Park Cinema, the Kindergarten, and the International Club. And by now you are in Sherpur, which is where the old 'Folly of the Plain' cantonment stood, and where Lady Sale hid behind the chimneys and watched them forming squares.

We went to the Green Door Bazaar to buy a postin for Joan. On the way back we discovered we had been given a dud 100 Af note in the change. The two halves stuck together with sellotape had different serial numbers. I wanted a leather bag to carry my carpet in, so we bought one, and paid for it with the dud note. As soon as we got out of the bag shop we sprinted round the corner. I suppose it was a mean thing to do, but I have no doubt that the bag shop proprietor was easily able to pass it off on some poor unsuspecting tourist. We went to stay with Beth for a while, in her house in Kart-i-Char (Quarter Four) on the other side of the Demazang gorge from the main part of the town. While we were there, we climbed up the hill to look at the noon gun. After watching the old man fire the cannon, we scrambled down the hillside and walked through the Demazang gorge into the old town. Past the Pamir Cinema, we entered Jadi Maiwand, and I showed Joan the hotel I had stayed in on my first visit. As far as I can make out from old maps of Kabul, this is very near the spot where Alexander Burnes had his house, and where he was murdered. Behind, on the hillside, is the Qizilbash quarter. Opposite, the tangle of bazaar streets is the Bagh-e-Umumi containing the unfinished tomb of Timur Shah, son of Ahmed Shah. Further along Jadi Maiwand is the Shor Bazaar, where the old Char Chatta bazaar stood before it was demolished by Pollock's army of retribution, and where MacNaghten's limbless body was paraded. At the crossing of Jadi Maiwand and Nader Pushtoon Street, which leads to the mosque, the river, and the Khyber restaurant; is the Maiwand monument, set up to commemmorate Ayub's victory over the British. At the other end of the town, Jadi Maiwand emerges onto the Chaman (meadow) where the Royal Buzkashi is held during the Jeshn celebrations. Facing the Chaman are the Kabul carpet shops.

On the other side of the river most of the bazaars lead to the central Zarnegar Park. To the east is the Khyber restaurant, the King's Palace, the Lycee Esteqlal (freedom) and the Russian built Hotel Kabul. To the west are the Spinzar Hotel, the Pashtany Tejaraty (trade) Bank, and the unSurfaced road which leads to the British Embassy at Parwan Mina. To the north the Shahr-i-Nau, to the south the jumble of bazaars, the tinsmiths and the tailors, and the river.
In Zarnegar Park the snake charmers and the cock-fighters hold audiences of turbaned Pathans. Small boys splash in the jubes and eat mangoes. In Zarnegar Park is an Indian looking green domed edifice, somewhat faded - the tomb of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan who ruled with an iron hand. Lycee girls in black scarves and black stockings walk about in groups among the women in chadors, the fortune tellers and the scribes, the bent Hazaras carrying enormous loads on their backs and shouting 'Khabardar, Khabardar' with voices made hoarse by the dust.

I took a bus out to Darulaman, sad, rusting memorial of Amanullah's enthusiasm. It was to have been a beautiful new town, with all the western amenities. He never finished it, and now it is used as a museum. We also went to his gardens at Paghman, with Rasoul and Wakil. Paghman was laid out by Amanullah as a summer residence, up in the forested slopes of the Paghman hills above Kabul. Zahir Shah gave Paghman to the Afghan people, and now it is filled with picnicking families of Kabulis. In Paghman village one can buy the largest and most delicious apricots in the world. I bought a kilo and gorged myself. There was also a chai khaneh, and Joan and I immediately climbed onto the wooden platform, seated ourselves crosslegged, and ordered chai. Rasoul and Wakil, being of that strange breed, the Westernised Afghan, were horrified. No they wouldn't sit down with us - how could they, there weren't any chairs. No, they wouldn't drink the chai - how did we know it wasn't made from jube water? Well it probably was, but to one who has drunk the stuff straight what harm can there be in boiled jube water?

The air was cool and pleasant in Paghman. Babur probably came here in the hot weather, for he wrote

> 'From Kabul you can go in a single day to a place where the snow never falls, and in two hours you can also reach a place where the snow never melts, except at times in a particularly hot summer.'

He also mentioned the apricots.

Rasoul introduced me to an Afridi outside the Ministry of Finance, and he stood up very straight and addressed me in British Raj English. He was an old man with a white beard, and shook hands with me gravely. I was unable to find out whether he had spent his life guarding the Khyber Pass against us, or fighting on the British side. And one day in the bazaars behind Timur Shah's tomb, we were watching the salt grinders at work and got into conversation with them. When they heard we were British, they fetched a very old man out from a back room to shake hands with us. He had fought us many times, and evidently enjoyed himself immensely. He couldn't stop shaking our hands and clapping us on the back, and soon a huge crowd had collected, all with twinkling eyes and grinning faces. I had long since ceased to be surprised by the evident good humour with which Afghans seemed disposed to treat their erstwhile enemies, but I think Joan was a little taken aback. But then fighting, of any kind, is sport to the Afghan provided it is evenly matched. Of course all the historians of the North West Frontier comment on this, and I quote from Philip Mason:

> 'the extraordinary part about these wars is the spirit in which they are fought; death is real enough, exhaustion, hunger, thirst and above all courage, but across this harsh and bitter landscape will flash suddenly a jagged lightning-streak of humour. It is a game - a contest with rules in which men kill without compunction and will die in order to win, in which kinship and friendship count less than winning - but in which there is no malice when the whistle blows and the game is over. And the transfer of an important player may be arranged at half-time while the lemons are being sucked. This odd spirit grew over the years, as the Pathan tribesmen and the British on the Frontier came to know each other better. Each side defended its own interests but the players admired the same things - courage above all, loyalty to the side on which a man happened to be fighting at the moment, personal honour. Frontier officers were a rather special breed of the British and they were sometimes almost converted to the Pathan's sense of honour and usually to his sense of humour...
>
> The same kind of stories recur whenever people talk about the Frontier; they remember, for instance, the Zakka Khel men in 1908 crowding round Roos-Keppel, once their political agent, when the expedition against them was successful and the fighting over. 'Did we fight well?' they asked and he replied:'I wouldn't have shaken hands with you if you hadn't.' They recall the tribesman who has been in the army but is now engaged in sniping at his old friends and trying to kill them. They too are trying to kill him, but they are firing low and he does not like to see good ammunition wasted, so he stands up from behind his rock and signals them to raise their sights as though he were on a rifle range.'

General Roberts mentions a typical incident in his Forty One Years in India:

> 'The expedition was an admirable school for training men in outpost duty. The Pathans and Gurkhas were quite at home at such work, and not only able to take care of themselves, but when stalked by the enemy were equal to a counter-stalk, often most successful. The enemy used

to joke with Brownlow's and Keyes's men on these occasions, and say, 'We don't want you. Where are the lal pagriwalas?(As the 14th Sikhs were called from their lal pagris - red turbans) or the gora-log (the Europeans)? They are better shikar (sport)!' The tribesmen soon discovered that the Sikhs and the Europeans, though full of fight, were very helpless on the hill-side, and could not keep their heads under cover.'

The King who Tried too Hard.

In 1901 Abdur Rahman's eldest son Habibullah succeeded to the throne of Afghanistan. He was the son of a Wakhi slave girl, Guriz, and himself had four wives and thirty five concubines. In Habibullah's time the North West Frontier Province was created, and tribal raids across the border increased. Lord Curzon sent word to Habibullah that the treaty drawn up between Britain and Abdur Rahman was purely personal, and therefore another would have to be negotiated. Curzon, in fact, wanted another war, but was restrained by his seniors. Habibullah, however, thought that if the treaty wasn't valid he wouldn't bother to keep it, and proposed diplomatic exchanges with Britain, Russia, Japan, Turkey, Germany, Persia, China, Egypt, USA and other countries. Curzon was outraged, and sent a mission to Kabul under Sir Lewis Dane. The British wanted to extend their railheads, now at Jamrud, Dargai and Thal, to Kabul and Kandahar; and also to restrict Afghan trade through British India. Habibullah wouldn't agree to such terms, and in the end the old treaty was signed. In 1905 Lord Curzon resigned and Lord Minto took over. A boundary was drawn up between Persia and Afghanistan in Sistan, but in 1906 Persia announced that she did not accept it, and never has done since.

In 1907 a convention was signed in St Petersburg. Persia was divided into two spheres of influence- the north Russian, the south and east British. Both parties agreed to recognise Chinese control of Tibet; Russia agreed that Afghanistan was out of her sphere of influence, while Britain agreed not to occupy Afghanistan. The final article stated that Habibullah had to agree,to make the whole thing legal. The Amir refused, as he had had no say in the matter. He wanted the British to join him in an attack on Russian Turkestan to recover land lost in the 1880s. Britain refused, and Habibullah continued to ignore the convention. Finally, the two parties in St Petersburg changed the treaty so that it was legal without Habibullah's signature.

The First World War was the next event to have its repercussions in Central Asia. When the Turkish Sultan entered the war he called for Jehad against the allies. Propaganda pictured the Kaiser in Arab dress and referred to him as Hajji Wilhelm. Habibullah, somewhat puzzled, wrote to Enver Pasha enquiring whether it was Russia or Britain he should attack to support the Ottoman cause. In September 1915 a Turko-German mission arrived in Kabul, which was a little embarassing for the Amir. He could only procrastinate. The Germans offered the Amir 100,000 rifles, 300 cannon, and £20 million in gold. Habibullah signed the treaty, and even hinted that he might attack India, but only when the victorious German armies came marching into Kabul. Worried, he wrote to the British in India. Two Indian nationalists and revolutionaries had been included in the mission. Their plot was to cause uprisings in India and at the same time in Tsarist Central Asia by the Muslims, who would then free all the German prisoners of war and march with the Afghans into India, thus creating another Durrani Empire. Habibullah had not been impressed by the plan, and in any case the British intelligence system uncovered the plot and arrested all the ringleaders in India. In 1916 the Germans left Kabul with their meaningless treaty. Three years later, Habibullah was murdered by unknown assailants while on a hunting trip. The Russians immediately accused the British, and later the supposed British agent was arrested in Turkey and confessed to the murder along with a plot to kill Ataturk. Various scapegoats in Afghanistan were executed for the murder.

The throne was now taken by Amanullah, third son of Habibullah, and married to Soraya, daughter of the educated and influential Mahmud Beg Tarzi. In May 1919 Amanullah declared war on Britain with the words 'Ya marg ya esteqlal' - death or freedom. A column of the Afghan army under General Nadir Khan marched as far as Thal, another past Dakka in the direction of the Khyber. Many Pathans of the Frontier Scouts deserted to fight for Afghanistan, and many tribesmen joined them. The British were completely taken by surprise, but moved in the R.A.F., intrepidly flying World War I aircraft over the mountains. Kabul and Jalalabad were bombed, and both sides then initiated peace moves. A treaty was signed in Rawalpindi, and that was the end of the Third Afghan War.

In September 1919 the bolshevik Michael Bravin arrived in Kabul to negotiate over Panjdeh. He was hoping to get the Afghans involved in civil war in Central Asia. In 1920, Pratap, one of the Indian revolutionaries

who had been on the German mission, was in Kabul with his provisional government. Mahmud Tarzi led a delegation by train to Mussoorie from Jamrud, and the train was not allowed to stop in stations en route in case of riots. In 1920 Bokhara fell to the Russians, and the Amir fled to Kabul, where he died in exile in 1956, the last surviving Manguit Ouzbek ruler of Bokhara. The Basmachi, or Muslim freedom fighters, had been fighting in Central Asia under the guidance of Enver Pasha, but in 1922 Enver Pasha was killed in battle and the Pan-Turanist movement broke up. In the same year, permission was granted to French archeologists to start digging in Afghanistan. The Lycee Esteqlal was founded, also the Ghazi School (British Indian) and the Nijat School (German). Paghman Royal gardens were laid out, and Amanullah also started work on a dream town at Darulaman, never completed. In 1923 Amanullah changed his title from Amir to Padeshah. In 1927, against the advice of Tarzi, he went on a world tour. He visited India, Egypt, Italy, France, Germany, England, Moscow, Turkey, and Iran. He also signed treaties with Latvia, Finland, Liberia, Poland, Switzerland and Japan. While he was away, however, the mullahs began spreading rumours that his reforms were designed to uproot Islam. Photographs were passed round the bazaars showing Queen Soraya unveiled at European receptions. Some said that Amanullah was bringing back machines to make soap out of corpses.

Amanullah came back overland, in a Rolls Royce which he had been given. He was inspired by what he had seen in the west, and thought he could turn Afghanistan into a Western nation overnight. Almost as soon as he got back, he summoned the Loya Jirgah, all representatives to be dressed Western style. His proposed reforms were: to abolish purdah, to start co-educational schools, to educate the nomads, and to prohibit the wearing of any clothing other than western in the city of Kabul. A voting system was to be established, as was military service, and government officials were to be restricted to one wife each. Resent grew. In November 1928 Shinwari tribesmen took Torkham and Dakka, burned down the British consulate in Jalalabad and the King's Palace in Kabul. An illiterate Kohistani bandit known as Bacha-i-Saqao (son of the water carrier) happened to be with the tribesmen, and noting the defenceless condition of Kabul,went back to Kohistan, gathered a robber band, and attacked Kabul. The Kabul army surrendered, and the Bacha took the throne. Amanullah abdicated in favour of his brother Inayatullah, took the treasury, and fled by Rolls Royce to Kandahar. Inayatullah and the six hundred foreigners living in Kabul were evacuated to India by air. A four seater Junker aircraft appeared over Kandahar. It had been chartered by one Larry Rue, reporter for the Chicago Tribune, in hopes of an exclusive; and with Rue was a Persian Colonel come to offer his condolences and asylum in Teheran. Tarzi and Soraya flew to Teheran, while Amanullah crossed into India and took a ship at Bombay for Italy.

Many people thought that the Bacha's revolt had been engineered by the British, who didn't like the friendly way Amanullah had with the Russians. Pravda, Izvestia, the Deutsche Tagezeitung and the Journal des Debats openly accused the British. At the time Lawrence of Arabia had been stationed at Wana in Waziristan under the name of 'Aircraftsman Shaw', acting as a secret agent, and shortly before his flight Amanullah had publicly offered a reward for the capture of that 'arch-spy of the universe'. The Bacha was only to remain lord of misrule for some nine months, however. Far away on the French Riviera, three brothers read the newspapers with especial interest. They were Nadir Khan, erstwhile General of the Afghan army; Hashim Khan, and Shah Wali Khan - all Mohammedzais. They had gone into voluntary exile during Amanullah's early reforms. They headed east at once, and on reaching the North West Frontier, contacted a fourth brother, Shah Mahmud. With a horde of Mangal tribesmen, they attacked Kabul, captured the Bacha with no difficulty, and had him and his friends publicly executed.

Many people thought that Nadir would bring back Amanullah, but the army insisted on Nadir becoming king. In 1930 the Loya Jirgah proclaimed Nadir Khan king, and purdah was brought back. Nadir Khan was not so popular with the people as Amanullah had been, partly because he was not in the direct line of descent from Dost Mohammed. He wasn't too popular with the Russians either. In the same year, the Soviet army crossed the Oxus and violated Afghan territory, ostensibly in pursuit of a rebel leader, Ibrahim Beg, who had been waging guerilla war in Central Asia and falling back across the river when pursued. Shah Mahmud led the army north and drove Ibrahim Beg into Soviet territory, where he was captured and executed.

A constitution was drawn up and the monarchy made hereditary. In 1933 Nadir Khan was assassinated by a sixteen year old student, for personal reasons. The Germans rather lost prestige after the assassination, as the student and his family were all german educated, and another member of the family had murdered the Afghan ambassador (Daoud's father) in Berlin.

As the monarchy had been made hereditary, Nadir's nineteen year old son Zahir Shah became king on his father's death, and ruled with his uncles as regents. Many pepple still cherished hopes that Amanullah would return, however. Robert Byron arrived in Herat soon after the assassination, and records the following conversation:

'Later I called on the Muntazim-i-Telegraph, who speaks English.
"Where is Amanullah Khan?" he asked suddenly, glancing out of the window to see that no one was about.
"In Rome, I suppose."
"Is he coming back?"
"You ought to know better than I do."
"I know nothing."
"His brother, Inayatullah, is in Teheran now."
The Muntazim sat up. "When did he arrive?"
"He lives there."
"What does he do?"
"Plays golf. He plays so badly that the foreign diplomats avoid him. But as soon as they knew King Nadir Khan had been assassinated, they all telephoned inviting him to play."
The Muntazim shook his head over this sinister information.
"What is golf?" he asked.'

The Land of Lost Content

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the Land of lost content
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.
(Housman)

Before leaving Afghanistan, I wanted to go once more to Bamyan and Band-i-Amir. I made enquiries and found that buses for Bamyan left regularly at two a.m. from a serai behind Timur Shah's tomb. Accordingly, we bought tickets for the Monday morning bus. At the time, we were staying at Beth's house in Kart-i-Char. On the Sunday I was taking a shower when I heard strange noises. Going out onto the roof my suspicions were confirmed - it was raining. Now it is unheard of for rain to fall in Afghanistan in the summer, but it had been a year for freakish weather all over the world. The Kabul river was fuller than I had seen it in previous years, and there were reputed to have been floods in the Rajasthan desert. It rained steadily for about half an hour, with some thunder and lightning. People came out of their houses and looked up at the sky in an aggrieved manner. And then it stopped, and we thought no more about it. In the evening we went down to the bazaar, found the Bamyan Serai among the rubbish heaps and timber yards behind Timur Shah's tomb, and sat drinking chai with a lot of raggedly dressed Afghans until two a.m., when a driver appeared and everyone piled into the ramshackle Bamyan bus.

We drove out between the lights of Parwan Mina, past the British Embassy, and along the dark Charikar road until we reached the turn off for Bamyan. Dawn was just breaking, and we stopped for namas. By the time everyone had completed their ablutions and prayed to Allah, it was light. All morning we drove up the Ghorband valley, until we sighted some sort of commotion up ahead. A couple of trucks were stopped and we could hear angry voices. It soon became apparent that the bridge across the Ghorband river had been partially washed away by the rain, and nobody could get across. Our bus driver, more optimistic than the others, decided to drive straight through the river. Of course he got stuck in the middle and could move neither forward nor back. We got out and waded to the bank through the swirling water, and everyone sat around looking helpless. A jeepdriver on the opoosite bank suggested giving us a tow, so we waded around fixing tow ropes. It was useless - by now the back axle was deeply embedded in several feet of mud. Although the jeep strained forward, wheels spinning, and although we all pushed from behind, the bus wouldn't move an inch. Eventually we saw that the only way out was to dam the flow of water in whose line of fire the bus was, dig a channel behind it, and hope that we could then extricate ourselves. For hours we paddled about in the heat of the day, picking up boulders from the river bed and laying them across the flow. Soon the level of water round the bus had appreciably fallen, and by late afternoon we were able to pull the bus out.

By the time we reached Bamyan I was feeling distinctly ill, and I also had a raging toothache which was unfortunate as I don't suppose there was a dentist for miles. I thought perhaps I had a touch of sunstroke from heaving rocks around in the sun all afternoon. I went to the one and only pharmacy in Bamyan bazaar and described my symptoms - mainly nausea. The man in the pharmacy gave me four largactil tablets wrapped in a screw of paper. I thought four largactil tablets would just about kill me, so I only took one. It knocked me out, and for the rest of the day I lay on a charpoy in the bazaar hotel with an unpleasant sensation of total paralysis. I had to get up to visit the loo, which was out back in the stable, and I only made it back by sheer will power. On the following day I was perfectly well. Even the toothache had vanished. Joan had paid her respects to the Buddhas during my semi-consciousness, so we got on another ramshakle bus and made for the lakes.

To reach Band-i-Amir from Bamyan, the bus crosses the Nil Pass, a bare windswept hill devoid of habitation and vegetation apart from the usual brown grass and distant Kuchi caravans. Halfway along the pass is a small

robat, a kind of last outpost in the treeless wilderness, and here we stopped for chai. We were also served with little shell shaped cakes which tasted delicious, and I enquired as to the recipe. Kaymak (cream) and honey were the main ingredients. In the early afternoon we came to the head of the pass, and there, far below, was the incredibly blue water of the main lake.

Since my last visit, a 'hotel' had sprung up, consisting of a group of tents. We had brought sleeping bags, and simply paid for the hire of a tent. Another tent served as the chai and kebab house, and all day long a smell of roasting kebabs hung over it. With our kebabs we drank sheeps' milk, which was delicious. Of course we hired horses and went riding up to the smaller lakes, and a dashing Pathan took me up behind him and insisted on galloping down steep inclines. The main lake had a kind of solidified calcite rim, which could be reached by climbing up the cliff. I never could resist a climb, and spent hours trying to find more and more difficult ways of getting up. Along the rim ran a narrow path, with shallow pools of clear drinkable water, and great fishes gliding between the fronds of the water plants. One night we left the camp and climbed up among the rocks at the head of the lake to look at the stars. I have never seen the constellations so clear and bright and close. At such a height there was not even dust between the stars and the ground. A satellite passed over, red and blinking.

At the end of the week we went back to Bamyan on the bus, spent the night on the hotel floor, and rose early for the five a.m. bus to Kabul. There were several Europeans on the bus, and as the inside of the bus was crammed with Afghans, we farengis opted for the relative comfort of rooftop travel. However, more and more Afghans kept coming, and the roof was getting pretty crowded. So much so, that one of our number could find no place to sit but on the back of an unfortunate goat which was tethered to the roof rail. This caused an irreparable injury to the goat, and it had to be taken down and slaughtered at once in the approved manner. Blood poured from its throat all over the dusty road, and I felt sick. An Afghan on the roof started singing as we left Bamyan, and I recognised the song. It was 'Bia ke berim ba Mazar', the song beloved by Radio Kabul that summer. 'From here to Kabul the road is very long; but in the waters of the mountains is a black stone.' We stopped in a small village for chai and apricots, and when we left I decided to ride inside for a change. I found a place on one of the wooden benches surrounded by greybeards, and soon got into conversation with them. The man in front of me was taking his small son to the hospital in Kabul, and had a letter from an English doctor explaining what was wrong with the boy. As he himself didn't know why he was taking his son to Kabul, at great expense, he asked if I could translate the letter. I looked at the grubby and much folded talisman. It said: 'This boy has an undescended testicle, and I feel an operation is required.' How to explain this, not knowing the Farsi for 'testicle'? I tried by reference to seed, but the Afghans evidently had little knowledge of biology. So I tried by drawing a diagram and pointing out the Kir. But they still didn't understand, either because not being Hindus and Lingam worshippers they didn't recognise the pictorial representation, or because they didn't think I, a farengi, would know such a word and thought I must mean something else. In desperation I pointed out that every little girl has a cus and every little boy a kir. (Hence the Greek ambassador to Teheran once who bore the unfortunate name of Kiryakos was ostracized by all.) Light dawned. The greybeards roared with laughter, clapped me on the back and said 'Ofarin, Ofarin.' Soon the whole bus was rolling about in the aisles as the take was told down as far as the driver.

When we reached the Ghorband river the bridge had been rebuilt, and what was previously a foaming torrent was now only a slow trickle between the stones. It was growing dark, and when we reached the Charikar road the driver told us all to duck down so that the traffic police couldn't see how many he had aboard. There are regulations on overloading, but I daresay a ten afghani note in the right place takes care of them soon enough.

Soon after our trip to Bamyan Joan went on to India. I had been going too, but for some reason I changed my mind. I wanted more of Afghanistan. We went down early in the morning to the river, beside the Mosque of the Two Sworded King, where the Peshawar buses left from.

The crippled cigarette seller was there, in his wheelchair shop, and boys selling sweet bread. When Joan had gone, I went to stay in the Helal hotel, on Nader Pushtoon street. One morning after I had gone down very early to the street of the tailors to collect some new clothes, all the Europeans in my room were given something strange to drink which sent them all into a deep sleep. When they woke up they found that all their passports had been stolen. I spent an illuminating day taking them round to their various embassies and to the Ministry of the Interior. All the embassies told the same tale - the number of passports stolen in Kabul is phenomenal - there is obviously a thriving black-market in passports. Now these poor unfortunates had no visas, and therefore could not leave Afghanistan. They spent days sitting in various ministries waiting for notification from the border, only to find that the official form, when returned to Kabul from Islam Qala, was without a proper signature, or in some other way not valid. This is a favourite game of the Afghans, and is called 'sending a man to buy black peas'. They were still trudging around the ministries when I left Kabul, gradually losing hope of ever getting back to their respective motherlands.

I had decided to fly from Kabul to Teheran, by way of a change, and Beth told me an amusing story of two Pathan truck drivers from Paktya. These truck drivers along the frontier make millions by smuggling and gun running and so on. Having heard of that fabled land across the sea called America, two Pathan brothers decided to visit the place. They presented themselves at the American Embassy in their best turbans and with their bandoliers gleaming, and asked for visas. As they had already managed to obtain visas for Britain, had more than enough money to meet the visa requirements, and were able to offer their trucks as security for return, the American Embassy had to give them their visas, and they went. I often wonder about their fate. Stepping off the plane at London, unable to speak a word of English, bristling with guns and knives which they would undoubtedly resent having confiscated, and not knowing anything about the mysteries of western loos or the art of eating with knives and forks.

I left Kabul on a hazy day, and we were soon flying miles above a strangely red corrugated desert. Somewhere among those corrugations were the faceless Buddhas of Bamyan, staring out over the valley. Somewhere below, too, slept Babur and Ahmed Shah and Abdur Rahman, while in the streets of Kabul the porters shouted 'Khabardar' and the fortune tellers laid out their little carved sticks in the dust.

****

GLOSSARY

Aks: Photograph
Bacha:Boy, servant
Buzkashi: Game played in Turkestan on horseback, similar to polo but with a dead goat instead of a ball and with virtually no rules.
Chador: Iranian form of purdah
Chai: Tea
Chai Khane: Teahouse
Chaman: Meadow
Chapan: Striped silk quilted coat worn in North Afghanistan
Charpoy: String Bed
Charshaf: Turkish form of Purdah
Chelow: Cooked rice (Iran)
Chok Guzel: Very good (Turkish)
Chorba: Soup
Crore: 10 Lakhs
Dal: Lentil soup
Dhoti: Indian male apparel, similar to loincloth
Dishdasha: Arab male apparel, similar to long nightshirt
Esteqlal: Freedom
Farengi: Foreigner, usually European
Fayton: Horse drawn carriage (Turkey)
Gadi: Ditto
Garam (Garm): Hot
Ghaliam : Pipe, hookah, bubble pipe
Gharry: See Gadi
Goda: Ditto
Gumruk : Customs
Hammam: Bath
Hissar: Fort — Hodudu : border
Jadi: Avenue
Jeshn: Independence Celebrations (Afghanistan)
Jezail: Antique Afghan Gun
Jirgah: Meeting, usually tribal
Jube:Ditch, Gutter
Kaymak: Cream
Keshmesh: Raisins, sultanas
Khabardar: Look out
Khakh: Dust
Khareji: Foreigner
Khanom: Woman, Mrs
Kizil:Red
Kotal: Pass
Lakh: 100,000
Lokanta: Restaurant
Loya Jirgah: Afghan Parliament
Marg: Death
Mast: Yoghourt
Munshi: Secretary
Namas: Prayers
Nan: Bread(Unleavened)
Ofarin: Bravo ← Pilao: Cooked Rice
Pirahan: Shirt
Piste, peste: Pistachio nuts
Postin: Sheepskin coat
Qala: Fort
Qizil: Red
Rabab: Afghan musical instrument, stringed
Robat: Staging post
Saray: Palace
Serai: Place, as in Caravanserai, where caravans stop.
Shahr: Town
Shalwar: Loose trousers
Shorwa: Soup
Sutlac; Rice pudding — Tamam: OK
Toman: Ten Rials
Tonga: Another horsedrawn carriage (India)
Tufan: Storm

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Not far from the peeling white walls of the old University, down one of those crooked streets of shuttered houses where thin cats stretch in the sun and thin Turks sit on their haunches twisting prayer beads in their hands, is a green door. An enormously fat Turkish woman in baggy trousers and a headscarf opened it to me, and since she spoke no English and I, as yet, no Turkish, nodded and smiled at me while she made up a bed. I was on my way to India, and here in Istanbul I felt that my journey was at ;ast about to begin. I had already been four days on the road, but although I had hardly left England before, and although the strangeness had begun perceptibly as soon as I had crossed the Alps, it was only here, in Istanbul, that I felt myself to be on the brink of a different world. A world too, which despite the geography books, I had never really believed in. I had come on the Stamboul train, sleeping on the luggage rack, through the early morning flatness of Belgium and the forests of Germany.My only impression of the Alps had been as a sort of unseen bulk through which we had passed in the night along with dimly lit station halts and the voices of porters unloading mail bags. I had woken, stiff and aching, in Jugoslavia. By mid morning it had already become uncomfortably hot. By afternoon we had left the chasms and gorges and passed into the immensity of flatness that runs south into Greece. I had seen my first peasants, walking their cows on strings. At Beograd I had seen gypsies playing with old car tyres against the drab background of rectangular apartment blocks, and after Beograd maize and more maize until at Nis the rocks returned and we entered Bulgaria. On the morning of the fourth day I had awakened in Greece. Oxen carts were moving off in a light dust to work in the fields, small children herded pigs and goats, and a man walked up and down the line while we waited for passport control, selling black tea, or chai. I had breakfasted on an envelope of bread containing meat and peppers. Towards the Turkish border the land had become less cultivated, scrubby and arid. We had crossed a brown muddy river by an iron girder bridge, where soldiers were exercising and a dog lay in the sun. Rushing down the deep cut river valleys I had the impression that the sea, like a presence, was always just over the brow of the hill. It seemed that nothing had changed since the barbarian tribes had pushed down into Greece from the north. Just before Istanbul I had caught a glimpse of the inmost sea of all the world - what the Turks call the Ak Deniz. A dark blue inlet, crowded with boats and wooden landing stages. And then we had arrived at Sirkeci station, and what followed was my initiation to the great Eastern crowd, compared to which a Western crowd is sparse indeed. A great crush of Turks in cheap suits and shiny Italian shoes had travelled in the train from Germany, migrant workers back from the car factories. They all bore huge bundles and bursting cardboard suitcases which appeared to contain nothing but tape recorders and transistor radios. It had seemed like hours before I had emerged from the customs sheds into the dazzling glare outside the station. A mass of cars, all hooting and shrieking, had converged on the station and was now unable to move in any direction. Their drivers had been shouting obscenities at each other while the sun glanced off the bumpers and windscreens and blinded me. Above the noise of car horns had come other sounds - the cries of the street vendors and the general hum of the city. With the heat rising from the tarmac and the sun like a hammer on my bare head, I had climbed the cobbled street to find a hostel, passing the shoeshine boys with their rows of brass stoppered bottles, and the porters bent nearly double with pads on their shoulders carrying massive rolls of linoleum or huge wardrobes.

And now I was sitting on my bed in the hostel, out of the heat and the noise, wondering what to do next. I had in my poeket a piece of paper. 'Assume you have already arrived at the Old or New Gulhane Hotel in Istanbul' it said. 'You can travel by bus for about 2 dollars to Ankara, and then to Erzerum for another 2 dollars.' But it didn't say anything about where to buy the ticket, or how to ask for it without speaking a word of Turkish.

So for several days, that brown scrub which was Asia just sat there on the other side of the Bosporus, while I wandered round the bazaars and occasionally stood and looked across apprehensively. I visited the Blue Mosque, and Aya Sofie which impressed me with its heavy sad atmosphere. Light filtered down from high in the dome, where hung black cricles inscribed with golden Islamic script. In Topkapi Palace, or the Old Saray, I saw the robes of past sultans, and the soft shoes they had worn as children. The Courts of the Sun, I found, were untidy with blocks of stone and unpruned rose bushes. On the Galata Bridge men sold plastic combs, and placards advertised 'Buzdolabi' - refrigerators. Under the Galata Bridge are

a series of floating platforms where one can eat fresh fish or buy an English newspaper, all the while gently rocking up and down on the litter strewn waters of the Golden Horn. It was here that I discovered the quay for ferries to the other side. At last I plucked up courage, queued at the right gate, and bought a ticket to Haydar Pasha. I even found myself picking up the odd word of Turkish, and what had sounded at first an uncouth babel to my ears was sorting itself out into recognisable sentences.

From Haydar Pasha I took a train to Ankara, sleeping again on the luggage rack. Ankara was a disappointment after Istanbul - too Western - and I did not stay. I took a Dolmush (stuffed taxi) to a point on the road out of Ankara where I might reasonably hope to hitch a lift.