KHUSK-I-RASTA

COLONEL P. H. BALL, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., D.O.M.S.,
Late R.A.M.C.

A month's leave to India had been granted me and my orderly, Suddar Khan, but permission to go by road was delayed until the last minute. Also I only had a couple of hours notice to meet the lorry on the 21st July 1943; luckily it turned up two hours late, arriving at my Hotel in Tehran at 8 p.m.

It was a six-ton Dodge, piled so high with sacks and bundles that I despaired of getting even a place for myself, let alone Suddar, baggage or rations. Ali, the driver then tried to fob me off saying there was sure to be another lorry leaving next day, but I proved him wrong about this and a determined effort was needed to lash the kit on. Suddar perched himself up top with a young Persian sepoy acting as our guard and I got into the cab with Ali and Faizullah; I had tried to urge the latter outside to give us more room but he had to stay for Ali said that his job was to keep him awake. I soon found out that Faizullah was a confirmed opium addict, but despite this he kept Ali on the road, even though he was dopey the whole time. Abbas the "cleaner" a lad of 18 or so was a good chap, very oily and dusty, usually with wide grin and always a smear of oil on his snub nose. He serviced the lorry at halts, checking oil, water and tyres and then swung the engine like a hero. I never saw him with time off for a meal or a sleep.

Reaching Reay, ten miles outside Tehran, the motor started to misfire and we had to take the carburettor down in a chaikhana: here I sat down to have some food with an opium smoking group, one of whom was a Policeman and chatted to them as best I could. All were unanimous that opium was "kaileh bad" but it had got such a hold that they couldn't do without it. I bought a melon and shared it with Ali and the others, they were glad of it for the repairs took some little time in the heat. Getting under way again at 11 o'clock we travelled until nearly dawn when the brakes all failed; Ali tried them prior to descending a hill but even furious pumping with the pedal had no effect and he jury rigged them at a serai (Inn) where I had a shave and a cup of tea. The massive doors of the serai were being used as dhobie boards in the pool nearby; studded with nails whose heads were the size of oranges and finely fluted. It was 6 a.m. and we still had thirty miles before getting to Qum; roadmenders held out handfuls of nuts, bolts and other oddments collected from the gravel and Ali did several profitable deals, beating the price down to rock bottom bargains. Presently the golden dome of the famous Qum maj'id was winking in the sun and our main consideration was to avoid camels, donkeys and suicidal Persians in the crowded streets of the bazaar. I left the lorry and slept at the station mess, waking at 2.30 for a meal, arriving at the garage for our departure scheduled at 5 p.m. Ali protested that it was only 4 o'clock and even if his watch wasn't right, he had had no food and besides, the brake repairs hadn't been completed. This entailed further delay but time was filled in talking to a knot of loungers in the compound. Suddar talked Punjabi to them and caused a lot of amusement for they understood very little of it; small wonder too.

It was darkening by the time the lorry was ready, with a high wind and promise of rain. The first stretch was hilly so low gear was often necessary and we crawled up the grade pinking furiously. Ali liked to make frequent stops at chaikhana for cups of tea; at one I talked to a Jew who spoke good English and ate a lot of green figs which I hoped would have no ill effects. Beyond Dilijan a halt was made for a sleep by the roadside and I was glad of the blanket which I had extracted from my bistara earlier on, at Ali's advice. Dawn broke and we had reached a chaikhana where Rao and I had stopped on a previous occasion; it had a number of good carpets amongst the coarser tribal ones. Here I met some Sepoys taking petrol to the "war" with the tribes who had caused trouble further south towards Shiraz and had tea with them. The driver of a big tanker was having trouble with repairs to a carburettor but he had made a new needle for it from a nail and he was off before us. Hereabouts I noticed six labourers digging with long handled spades in a distant field, they dressed alike, in white shirts and blue trousers and worked as a team in perfect unison with an old man who appeared to be their cheer leader. Several pairs of Imperial sand grouse were feeding near the road and took little enough notice of the lorry; I had been told that the Imperial did not occur in Persia!

In one village we met the 'bus which had stopped us asking for petrol the previous night; it seemed to be broken down and I found that it had run a big end but now packing had been put in the bearing and all was well and the driver was replacing the oil; running a big end was a small event to these drivers and I've no doubt that the rough and ready repairs done would last until the body of the 'bus fell off, a not too distant accident judging by the look. In the roadside stream were small fish and a fountain in a nearby chaikhana contained some of them, a small boy caught one in his hand and showed it to me and it seemed some kind of dace. I chatted to a Polish soldier who was on his way to Isfahan to see his children, all that was left of his family for his wife had died in Russia, poor fellow.

Mid morning we passed the Kuh Imamzadeh, a fine conical peak rising out of the desert at a turn on the road to Isfahan and after this crops on both sides with harvest almost over while the cream coloured brickwork of the many pigeon cotes rose above dark leaved trees. These cotes are slightly cone shaped, the top tower circled with small battlements pierced with holes for the birds, and the central tower perhaps 30 feet from the ground; most of them are deserted now. Arriving at the Town Major's office I found a lorry was to leave for Zahidan that afternoon so I arranged with the two Poles to whom it belonged to accompany them, having left word for Ali that I was leaving him. Previously I had been advised to keep his weighbill, without which he couldn't move, thereby preventing him from leaving me somewhere in the lurch. He was amused when I seized it so I thought he was fairly honest but I would not leave him such an opening. A good night's rest with the following day free to explore Isfahan would have been very pleasant but as Ali's lorry was to drop me in Kerman, where I would have to get another through a Captain Hassan, the offer of a lift straight through to Zahidan was not to be missed, so with time for a hurried lunch and none for a tidy up I was on the road again with Dalewski and Strau, two members of the Polish Red Cross. The former was based at Zahidan while Strau was on his way to Bombay.

Passing the lovely old bridge going out of Isfahan to the Yezd road we came to a village with a number of pigeon cotes and melons glowing golden in dark leaves on the roadside fields. Depending on time we were stopping either at the top of a pass dangerous for late travellers on account of bandits or at Naif if the light held; the road wound up a wide valley past ruined villages and we had topped the pass before I realized it: from here it was a straight run down to Naif across the desert with drifts of sand over the road. On the edge of Naif we came to a serai which reminded me of some French Fort in "Beau Geste" and pulled in to stop the night. No washing place could be found in the dark so, dusty as we were and dinner over, our beds were laid out on a raised platform in the middle of the compound and the stars watching our settling down. Even the chatter of the idlers in the nearby tea shop failed to keep me awake to I must have been really as tired as I felt.

On 24th August, tiring of rations I bought eggs for us all and fried them in camel ghee. This looked like honey and was better tasting than I'd expected. We left the serai at 7 a.m. and said goodbye to the fine mosque outside gleaming in the sun. The road had a good surface and wound in easy curves over desert and dry nullahs; Dalewski told me that in winter this part is covered with either snow or wide sheets of water and that he had had to make wide detours on one occasion, nearly being forced to turn back; we saw no water for many miles, or any way-farer. At Aghdan one can get water from the unusual looking "abambers" underground water storage tanks filled by winter rains or snow water. A dome all in patterned brick rises straight from ground level with three, sometimes four, wind shafts spaced equally at the circumference and towering above the summit of the dome; a graceful arch covers the steps leading down to a row of taps below ground; those in Yezd were more elaborate but all are built on the same lines.

We switchbacked for the next 12 miles to Ardakhan accompanied by lines of karais on either side. I noticed pairs of flags at intervals and thought that they must be some kind of survey marks to help the karais digger in his levels. Most of the karais are unproped, but here and there I noticed several oval shaped pipes for linings where the ground might cave in. It would be interesting to know when the Persians adopted oval section channels for their karais, I remember from school days that this type is best for drains as the silt is washed along the narrowing ellipse. After taking photos of the abambers I thought my camera had gone out of order and was inclined to blame Suddar for he had dropped it on the floor. He was quite pathetic and presented me with a safety razor to "make-up". After some fiddling around I discovered that all was well and took back what I'd said to him so he was all smiles again.

Some 10 kilometres from Yezd we passed under the Qum-Yezd railway which must surely be the longest in the world without rails. It is complete with stations and signals and was I believe intended for pilgrim traffic: war conditions have held up the supply of rails and it won't be finished until it is all over. Sand had banked up along the walls of many ruined villages on the outskirts of Yezd, the dunes rippling and heaving to engulf the lower standing parts. Jagged hills closed in on Yezd and the more distant had snowy crests. I was struck by the air of cleanliness

and order in the town itself and more particularly by the forest of wind shafts which are a feature of almost every building. They are gracefully proportioned, square in section with rough poles which looked like pigeon perches going across the mouth of the shaft and the inside whitewashed. Searching for the petrol pump we passed several beautiful abambers all in cut brick, glowing a creamy pink in the sunlight; the facades were decorated with inscriptions and mosaic and cool entrances cast in deep shadow by lovely overhanging arches. Ugly aluminium tanks shining against the dark hills, marked the petrol pumps, while filling up we were told to be careful if our intention was to push on to Kerman that night: asking the reason, the manager replied that four lorries had been robbed that very night in a pass beyond Kermanshahan and that two other places were dangerous. Thanking him for his timely advice we decided to see the Consul who promised to give us an armed guard for part of the journey. He insisted on our having tea with him despite our dirty faces. He said that it would take him a day to fix up the guard so we had time to spare and found a small hotel on the main street where a room was hired. It did not run to a bathroom so the goldfish pond in the little tiled garden had to do instead; we managed to have a glorious bath there but had to take care to stop soapy water running back in case it killed the fish! After lunch and a sleep, Dalewski and I went for a walk through the fields to a picturesque ruin near which a team of labourers were digging: like those seen near Isfahan they dug in time together with an old fellow who seemed more interested in his pipe than his job of cheer leader. I gave him some of my tobacco to try and he liked it better than the chopped hay they all use. We returned with a huge melon we bought for a few reals from a youth tending a patch of them and at the hotel a deputation met us; it turned out that they were the unfortunates who had been robbed at Kermanshahan. One was returning with all his savings from his work on a desolate and arid part of the Zahidan road where the pay was good and was left almost penniless; another had smuggled 200 English sovereigns into the country from India, and of course he lost the lot; worth at least £1000 in Persia at the present price of gold. I noticed a third wearing a wrist watch and asked him how he had saved it. "I put it down my sock when we were threatened was his explanation.

In one lorry were two women teachers, no harm came to them, but they lost some possessions. Later, I met an Armenian in the hotel bar and had a couple of drinks with him, neither of us understanding the other in the least but we parted on the best of terms.

At 10 p.m. a lorry drew up outside, bringing our armed guard of "amneihs" in charge of two Persian officers, one a Captain, the other a Subaltern: we followed and had not gone far outside the town when we stopped and all the amneihs disappeared into the darkness. "They've gone to get some melons for their rations" we learned, and presently shouts and a waving lantern indicated that they had found the field and woken the watchman. They returned in ones and two with sacksfull followed by the irate watchman who demanded payment on the spot. I can see the old chap now, in the gleam of his lantern brandishing a heavy steelyard, with a beak like an owl on his round angry face; finally he was placated with what I thought was a small sum for so large a haul and he vanished into the night.

Having gone a further 30 miles we stopped for the night at a chaikhana where large chunks of melon were handed round; as we ate the young subaltern loaded up magazines, holding 25 rounds each, for the light machine gun which he said he hoped to use on the bandits. Our beds were made amongst the litter of melon skins outside and we slept till dawn when I was woken by a lorry drawing up. Our amneihs had come back; possibly they had been out on an early recce for the bandits but the lorry had come from the Yezd direction!

While putting on my topi, I found the crown smashed in and Suddar said that one of the two girls whom the Persian Captain entertained in the chaikhana last night had trodden on it! We soon moved off and later, passed the two dangerous places, but the amneihs took no precautions at either so there was obviously no danger now. At Kermanshahan, a dignified name for such a place as it was only a low chaikhana and a stable, I had breakfast with the two officers and wished my Farsi had been fluent for they delighted in the few words I knew. The Captain and havildar held a long, animated discussion with much pointing at the distant hills from which I gathered that the robber band had moved on. The pass, scene of the dacoity was an ideal spot for a hold-up; steep hills narrowed the road with no space for turning quickly, and quite deserted. On the far side our amneihs waved us on and then sent a section off into the desert. Unless they had inside information I'd say the bandits were perfectly safe in the hills, the guard might track them down at their water holes of course. Apparently the lorries were held up in the early morn, the bandits adopting their usual ruse of a road block at a bend, with armed men all around it and camels waiting in a handy spot to carry away the spoil. Anyone who travels at night is just "asking for it".

Anar was a tiny picturesque village, round roofed huts with one spindly tree where the road curved into the desert to dwindle to a pin point in the dazzling distance. Outside the village we saw a cloud of bright yellow locusts rising from the fields at the roadside, either they had cleaned up all the greenery or had been disappointed on arrival for there was little to support them that I could see.

Our next stop was at Bahramabad, famous for its pistachios, and we bought pounds of them. Lunched ravenously off bully, masth and round cakes of coarse barley bread; I finished a whole loaf, maybe a pound of it! The landlord of the chaikhana had laid carpets for us in his mihman-khana and while sleeping off our lunch, Captain Hassan came in to see us. I was to have contacted him about transport in Kerman had I not come with the Poles and he invited me to stay at his house on the way through. Out in the village street I watched a man operating on a large turnip watch with "Aossa" on its face; he said "made in Greece" but I thought that Italy was more likely: I wouldn't have trusted an Ingersoll in his hands. A small girl, a cripple crawled up to us, begging; poor little creature she had to drag herself along on her side, for hands and feet were too twisted to be of any use: I suppose she got just enough food from charity but it is pitiful to think that there is no organisation which cares for such cases. Suddar had to be severely told off for washing my two drinking mugs in the filthy stagnant nullah by the main street; dust of the journey must have clogged his usually none too active brain.

The evening run to Kerman was dusty for the wind followed us down our

Valley. Kerman is a fine old town with wide avenues lined with firs and cypresses. Still pools mirrored the trees at road crossings. Reaching the Kampsax building at the far end of the town, passing a high ruined wall and the old castle perched above it, we had a warm welcome from one Maitre, a French engineer who was the only inhabitant. He arranged really hot baths for us, even more appreciated than the meal eked out by our rations. As we were unexpected guests it would otherwise have been mutton, and mutton for pudding. I was in bed under the stars by 9 p.m. with the wind stirring in the poplars and the vine leaves over my head.

In the morning we plodded up the steep path cut in the rock face up to the castle ruins, only the walls stand now and it was impossible to imagine the original layout; it must be many years old but a very difficult place to storm for the path was wide enough for one at a time only and the walls on one side were sheer down to a precipitous cliff. The city lay at our feet with coloured domes and dark spires of cypress dotting the huddle of mud buildings. The ruined wall must have encircled the city at one time and had huge abambers built along it. They resembled old fashioned bee skeps, but with rings round them. Glowing colours of tile and mosaic work decorating the gate of Jum'a Masjid attracted us; it was particularly finely proportioned and designs in mosaic most delicate. Immediately above the arch were two peacocks coloured from nature in faience and at the sides of the porch we found a date, 1319 but according to the Moslem calendar, of course. The twenty foot high arch had a whorled edging of pale blue glaze, made in one piece; I cannot imagine how it was fixed into position without breaking and Dr. Schafter, quite an authority in Isfahan could not explain a similar edging on the Masjid i Shah in that town.

Approach to the bazaar is through an avenue of cypresses spaced with pools and beneath a fine arch into the crowded, dim alley lined with shops and stalls. I was impressed by certain fleeting views from the main thoroughfare. Here a fine air-shaft seen through a graceful arch pointed to the cloudless sky and there a lovely spiral stairway in deep shadow wound to some roof top. A ragged old crone crouched over a collection of junk, everything from old pipe stems to rusty locks, but I spotted one of the green glass bottles with a snake coiled round the neck and finally gave her five reals for it. I know they are not uncommon but it is rare to find one in as good condition as my "find". Dalewski after a good deal of bargaining bought three carpets, of a kind and he sold me one. Small, cream coloured with a delicate pattern in blue and red in a design typical of Kerman. Coming to the end of the covered part of the bazaar we emerged blinking into the brilliant sunshine to mingle with crowds wandering in the vegetable market and loaded ourselves with large melons and pounds of small green grapes. Very sweet and juicy with no seeds whatever, we found later.

(To be continued)