

## KHUSK-I-RASTA

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

*(Continued)*

July 27th. On the radio we heard today that Mussolini had resigned, a great surprise for us as we had no inkling of such an event before. Dalewski, who had been this way several times said that we ought to go straight through to Zahidan in one hop, crossing the Dasht i Lut at night for it is so hot in the day that a car boils most of the way and there is no water available, and of course we agreed that that was the most sensible thing. Starting after lunch we left Kerman by a short cut passing beneath a low building perched on a hill; this must have been a police or customs post at one time but it was now inhabited by a Pir. I saw a lone chukor here, the only one on the whole journey as it happened. Joining the main road we had to stop at a Gendarmerie post where the guard held us up unnecessarily long; Yacub the driver told him off and later showed his contempt for Persians as a race by pointing his finger like a pistol at a sepoy, turning to me with a grin which needed no explanation. A little further on I made similar suggestive motions "pulling back the bolt" at another wayfarer; he thought this a great joke.

Maj'id Sheik Nematullah is 36 km from Kerman, just off the main road; we had been told on no account to miss seeing it and found the turning to take as the twin minarets came into view. One enters by the first court, a lovely still pool surrounded by dark, beautiful cypresses through a cloistered quadrangle to exquisite doors leading to the shrine. They are inlaid with camel bone and "khatam sazi" work with all hinges and ironwork finely engraved. In the shrine there was nothing remarkable, I was surprised at our being allowed to enter it though. The minarets fairly towered over the place, spiralling up in blue, green and yellow tiles to small balconies, the drop from there sheer to the flags of the court below was enough for me. A dull, leaden day did not show the mosque to best advantage although it enhanced the beauty of those magnificent cypresses, so calm in stately bearing and dark symmetry. Designs in tilework on the dome might have been by the same hand as built the Masjid i Shah in Isfahan but in the days when man had the inclination, time and money to build these lovely monuments, design was largely standardized to one pattern. When leaving I was surprised when the mullah (he was more than a caretaker) refused my offering: unlike the ancient who took us up the minaret, for he complained at his baksheesh and for all I know may be doing so still.

After tea in a chaikhana which contained plenty of the cruder carpets it was high time to start on our long trip to Zahidan. At the spot where we re-joined the main road twin pillars with "V 1943" painted on them are supposed to be the work of an Italian engineer whose hospitality to officers passing that way is highly praised. It may also be he who trained the roadworkers to give the "V sign" but some of them needed further instruction although their wide grins disarmed their unintentionally rude gestures! Climbing steadily over moor-

land with scrub here and there we filled all chaguls and our spare tank at a culvert where a stream rushed beneath.

A long, steady climb parallel to a mountain range of 12,000 feet and then a descent to a river with crops and occasional mud huts took us to Awarek. Down a mountain face on our left ran ravines and, I thought, glaciers; actually the streaks I'd seen was fine scree tumbling down in the watercourses. Awarek's population was clad in rags and wretchedly poor; a miserable youth complaining of fever asked us to take him on to Bam but we had to refuse for he might well have been developing smallpox or typhus and the risk was not worth while, "heartless" you say? There was little attempt at cultivation and poor harvests had very likely reduced the people to beggary. Eventually we had to eject the youth from our lorry for he had crept into the back unnoticed.

Sunset over desert was quickly swamped by night and there was no sign of life for a further couple of hours until a light deluded us into thinking we had reached Bam; that was not to be for many miles though and finally we had to stop at a Police post on the outskirts while the barrier was raised to let us through. Street lighting in Bam consists of hurricane lamps; some were strung on ropes against high mud walls while others gleamed from low posts, with watchmen sleeping underneath to see that no thief made away with them.

This is a big date growing centre, probably the largest in East Persia but all we could see of it was the tops of palms over high mud walls in our headlights. Dates are packed in empty petrol tins and fetch 250 reals for one holding about 40 lbs.; they are said to rival some of the best in Iraq. There can be no reeds to make baskets but in tins dates would travel better and certainly be well protected from dust, not that this would be considered by the usual date eater in these parts!

As we could not find the petrol depot we grabbed hold of a small boy who, standing on the running board directed by us, but rousing the owner took time. While filling up another small boy with a flaring lamp had to keep at a safe distance for we filled from tins; Yacub managed quite well without a funnel but the tins would have been refused for even salvage when he'd finished with them. The petrol wallah refused to get us any oil until he had been paid for the petrol, no doubt he had been surprised by some quick "get-aways" in the past, and had no intention of being done in a similar way. Dalewski says that there are settlements of Kurds living near the coast to the south east; they live quite undisturbed for Police and suchlike would not venture so far into hostile desolate country.

In the desert, past an Arab settlement where fires burned near their matting huts, a chance flame lighting the faces of the shadowy figures sitting around them, we made a halt for dinner. Strau refused his slice of melon, our usual sweet course, as he was getting fed up with it, a mug of tea with a generous tot of whisky in it is not a bad substitute, we found! The night was wonderfully cool, we even had a few drops of rain, which is most unusual, especially in July. Suddar got into difficulties with my camp bed and had to be helped to put it up, he is an old fool occasionally over things which he knows perfectly

well; here we had some sleep but were on the road again well before dawn. I dozed off at intervals wrapped up in a blanket but woke to see distant mountains silhouetted in the first light, later floating in a pale primrose sky which deepened to violet and lined with streamers of fleecy cloud. As the light grew roadworkers' huts with their litter of empty water tins showed up along the road, with early risers plodding along still half asleep, spade on shoulder to work. The desert surface was like a hard grey tennis court and any bushes or scrub were well banked up with blown sand. All along these lonely roads the workers build tiny little shelters: sometimes of stone but more usually it is a hollow in the side of a handy karais or even a grass roof on a stick framework. In the Dasht i Lut empty petrol tins was the material of choice. Queerly enough I never noticed anyone using these shelters, even in the heat of day.

Soon the flat desolate wilderness came to an end and we ran along the edge of a salt marsh covered with tamarisk, patches of salt showing up like snowdrifts. A few broken down huts marked a disused water hole where a camel will refuse to touch the water. All water has to be brought by tanker lorry for men and animals alike in the Lut for most of the year. There must be some periods when nullahs are full, but they soon dry out in the heat.

Turning away from the marsh the long steady climb to the pass began. As the lorry pulled heavily on a wide throttle a flood of light burst over the black mountains as the sun rose; scrubby bushes casting long shadows for a brief hour and shade retreated from the heaving dunes as the sun gained power and engulfed all in shimmering haze. This climb taxed the engine severely; had we travelled in the heat of day it would certainly have boiled and it was as well we had come in the cool.

Our breakfast stop was at a shady patch of tamarisk in the shaly weathered rocks of the pass and a kettle soon boiled for tea. Suddar made some chapatis for us but they were too heavy, hungry as we were, and we had to dispose of them surreptitiously for fear of hurting his feelings: we should have accepted Yacub's offer of Persian bread in the first instance. Dalewski thought there was a well further on and while searching for it I met a small boy who led me there; he was not at all willing to help me wind up a tinful of water and I could not think why until an angry cloud of yellow hornets followed the bucket out of the well. I could not tempt him in front of the camera, even with a real, and he ran off in tears.

I scrambled up a crumbling "chimney" to get a view of the pass, and as the going got harder I wished more than once that I hadn't started the climb: however the panorama of the winding road through the cliffs was well worth it and I found an easy way down on the opposite side. Starting off again, I felt that we really were on the last lap to Zahidan still climbing between wonderfully coloured cliffs weathered into many queer shapes we passed a place where the harder rocks had been tipped into the vertical by some fault and winds had carved away the ridge to the form of some prehistoric animal's back; red and brown in all shades from pale straw to black where lay shadows as yet untouched by the early sun made the pass a vivid memory. I was sorry when it ended and the green of scattered trees and date palms, rare enough in

this arid country so far hardly compensated for the rugged palette of colour we had come through.

Emerging from the mountains the road dived on to a wide plain which rolled into the distance to sweep up into hills again where the early sun mixed his colours on peak and in ravine. Here it disappeared round some shoulder in the plain or stretched out into a white thread to be lost in space; deserted but for an occasional road worker who drawing in to the side watched our passing, leaning on his spade the while, and some white clad Baluchi tending camels grazing in the scrub. We filled chaguls at a tank adjoining a road worker's hut; my good resolutions of chlorinating our drinking supply had so far gone by the board and it seemed rather late to start now—Dalewski pointed out a fine peak which he said was the meeting point of India, Persia and Afghanistan; we had a leisurely view of it for the road ran dead straight for 15 miles, measured by the speedometer. Topping a gentle rise we came to a fork posted to Meshed with a convoy of lorries forming up there and a dark smudge in the bright distance is Zahidan at last.

It was a good sight to us who needed baths, food and rest but in no way remarkable for its beauty.

The white Mess buildings were blinding in the sun as we beat the dust from our clothes and baggage. Yacub had some great joke and was roaring with laughter, maybe at our faces for I'm sure we were "sights"; he had had a long spell of driving and less rest than we in the back on our bedding rolls and boxes. We got a warm welcome, "Polski" being an old inhabitant returned. Showers, food and a drink followed but the flies in my room put a stop to sleep that afternoon. Later even the open exhaust of an electric light plant near my bed in the desert failed to keep me awake.

I was resigned to a five day's wait for the mail train to Quetta for it only goes once a week on Saturday, when someone happened to say that a goods train ran daily. I made further enquiries and found that I'd save a couple of days if I took it, provided it wasn't held up anywhere. I had to sign a statement absolving the Railway Co. from any blame in the case of accident and of course make all arrangements for food on the journey. Bully being a treat to this mess. I was able to exchange the tins which I had and one Wellborne was good enough to give me a new hurricane lamp for mine had got smashed on the way. I spent the rest of the day with John Harrison the civil surgeon who had recently arrived. I felt quite cock a hoop having come this far and on being asked "how long on the road?" I replied, "Oh about 10 days." My acquaintance commented "I did that journey from Teheran just after the Great War, took me six weeks on a camel". I was truly cut down to size. He was expecting his wife and infant there soon and I was surprised to learn that the climate of Zahidan was not too severe for families. The general air and lay out of the place reminded me of Shaiba, near Basra in Iraq which is definitely not a family station.

A guard's van had been reserved for me and that evening I saw the kit loaded on only to be told that a hold up prevented us from starting until early morning. Accordingly I left Suddar to see to the baggage and went back to

the mess where I had dinner, to return later and so to bed. The jolting of our start woke me and once again during the night I woke to find two shadowy figures trying to enter. I sent them off but they said there was no other place for them and that they were Railway officials so I let them in after a warning that one single spit on the floor would see them both walking to the next station; I know the habits of Indians only too well.

The train lumbered into a station where all the huts were made of sleepers; after breakfast and a mug of tea made with water from the engine (which added a flavour of its own) I bathed under a stand pipe in a siding where others waited for a turn at the water; luckily I had a pair of pants which even though they had seen better days covered my nakedness, without them I shouldn't have had a bath! Our two Indian travellers chatted away to Suddar, and relieved me of the strain for his Punjabi is difficult to follow and I can now read, doze or look at the scenery (such as it is) in peace. Only distant mountains relieve endless stretches of desert and the sands are seeping into our van; the breeze however is cooling off my butter, bully and a cucumber in a canvas bucket hanging outside. In places blown sand has buried the tracks and gangs clearing it had to be warned with much whistling.

At Nok Kundi I could get no eggs or vegetables, the bazaar seemed to stock little else but cloth; I wandered into some camel lines of The Baluch levies and chatted with a sepoy who introduced me to a fine looking old fellow in a black pugri. He sat me down, gave me water and a mango; he was a contractor and had been to Teheran on his travels but complained bitterly of the present tyre shortage which kept several of his lorries off the road; even he couldn't help me over the egg shortage.

The younger of the two Indians with us, a mullah as it happened, developed an attack of malaria for which I gave him aspirin and some salts, washed down with the best part of a tin of our condensed milk. He recovered by the evening and expressed his thanks with a stack of chapatis and a bowlful of hot curry for my breakfast next day. When I came to open a bottle of squash I had lost the corkscrew and was inclined to ignore Suddar's suggestion of using a wood screw but it worked; so well that I spilled a good deal of the sticky stuff over me. I heard that sulphur is mined in the Nok Kundi hills and that it is sent to Karachi but no one could tell me the purpose.

July 30th. Last night's rest—wasn't; my well tried camp bed broke and short of re-covering it, useless; this added to the heat kept me awake until an early hour. While crossing mile after mile of hard baked "put" without a trace of vegetation on it I asked Suddar "when do you think the crops will be ripe?" this was for the benefit of a Baluchi youth who had joined us. "Oh," says Suddar, "not for another two months yet, but what crops they will be" and started to enlarge on the corn, rice, vegetables and fruit until the youth could stand it no longer. "Nothing grows here in the desert" whereupon Suddar told him to consult a Doctor about his eyesight and he was almost believing us when we let him into the joke.

In the evening we stopped at Amedwal. Here a stand pipe again served as bathroom but in full view of the populace who used it for the same purpose,

in addition it supplied their drinking water. I managed to find half a dozen eggs at a bunniah's shop (a Police sepoy boiled them for me), and a melon. Both were treats although food had not been difficult so far. Crops and farming always interests the sepoy and so we passed the time until the eggs were done. I shared dinner with two pi dogs and a goat! Suddar suggested that as it had eaten our food we should make meat of it and flourished his knife at the goat. The boy in charge of it was not at all scared but thought it a good jest. As we settled down for the night a guard told us that the van was being slipped and that we must transfer to a third class carriage, nothing else being available. It seemed full of Indians, Baluchis with their bundles and other baggage. The heat, a narrow wooden bench and the incessant chatter were all accessories to the murder of sleep but a stroll down the line cooled me and it was quiet by the time I returned. Early next day I washed at a tank on a hill above the station; it wasn't a very elaborate wash for I had to keep one eye on the train in case I had to run for it. The tank had larval eating fish in it so the possibility of malaria is recognised here.

At Nuski there is a custom's post but no official appeared even to question us. Four bottles of whisky in the yakdan were four good reasons for a sigh of relief, and I had been anxious about my new camera going through! Beyond Nuski the tracks climb steeply; at times the engine was hard put to make the grade and the stoker was breaking coal in the tender all the time. At Kishingi, which has a name board worthy of a larger place. I spoke to the station master about reserving a berth on the Quetta Mail; his telegraph had broken down so I could not wire but he assured me that I would get there in time to catch it. I hoped so. I was impressed by the weathered hills through which the track wound one cone of rock in many colours towered above us, and then we were 5,000 feet above sea level. Water supply in these parts is mainly by tanker truck and in nearly all stations we saw at least one being filled. Rail side huts are all built of sleepers, usually with a melon patch at the front door; there are no crops and no fruit but the thorny scrub must suit camels for all we saw were sleek and well fed.

In the carriage there is a notice to the effect that it can hold up to 54 passengers; there are now 16 and it seems quite full enough. Several contractors, the majority are Sikhs probably connected with road construction. A Sikh doctor who whipped out a syringe to give an injection to a young fellow at a short halt and then tucked into a large slice of juicy melon. An old fellow with long walrus moustaches bellows at unseen friends at most stations, never gets any reply but seems quite satisfied. A Baluchi youth of a mongolian cast of face in his gilded kulla and white pugri, sleeveless waistcoat over a white shirt and baggy pyjamas ending in curly pointed slippers. Three well to do men, probably bunniahs or contractors carried on their conversation in a shout which drowned the noise of the train. "Jabber, jabber, feefy par cent, chatter, chatter" it affected me so much that I asked politely if they couldn't carry on their business transactions a little more privately and they did quieten down. Later one of them gave me a cup of tea and an apple which rather disarmed me!

At Mastung Road patches of wheat were being thrashed by teams of bullocks; harvest would naturally be late at this altitude. I talked to the guard here. "There is a flourishing smuggler's business in clothes, watches and shoes on this line. In East Persia these things, shoes in particular are very scarce, in fact at one time, trains were boarded by the local inhabitants who asked passengers to sell the clothes they stood up in" as he told me. I can well believe it for none of these necessities are produced further east than Isfahan, or possibly Kerman.

Doctor Chah, meaning the "Virgin's spring" as it is obviously a corruption of the Persian, is a halt in a plain ringed by sandstone hills and the track went through a cutting perhaps 150 feet deep which reminded me of a ham with one slice removed. I thought there was maize growing in a field nearby but Suddar said "No, it is bajra" (millet with a rounded head) and then explained in detail the difference between that and jowar which looks like a bulrush although it is a kind of millet also. I always mix up the two. I realized how unusual it was to see farmcarts once again. There are none in Persia as all produce is loaded on donkeys. We reached Quetta on the 31st evening and there I gave Suddar a 'chip' for coolies to transfer my kit to a compartment on the Karachi mail; presently he approached me rather apologetically saying the coolies weren't satisfied. They scattered like snipe when I went to question them.

I have not mentioned distances in miles or kilos for this kind of travel is measured by days; however Teheran to Zahidan is 1200 miles and Quetta a further 400 by road, presumably much the same by rail.

I left Dalewski and the others at Zahidan and have not said anything about them yet. Dalewski was a fine broad muscular fellow with a mat of black hair and spoke excellent English; also fluent Russian which he learned while a prisoner. He started as a tractor mechanic when he was well treated on account of his high work output and finished up with a position in the Embassy in Moscow. Finally he was set free and brought his old parents with him to Teheran. Originally he had intended to make a career in the Polish Army as a doctor but short sight prevented this and he specialised in bacteriology. He was mad on any sport with speed in it. Flying, yachting, motor biking, skiing and bob sleighing. He had one hair raising tale about a certain run on a "skeleton" when it left the track and was smashed to bits against a tree. Strau was a small quiet man and knew so little English that I couldn't get much more out of him than "zank you". Yacub, our Armenian driver was a real tough: with his cap at the slouch and a cigarette hanging from his lower lip uncovering his remaining three or four front teeth he was a sight to scare any Persian, a race which he held in the heartiest contempt, and an almost active dislike! His mate, also Armenian whose name I never knew spent most of the time asleep on our luggage while travelling, his face tied up in a checked duster. He was a cheerful rogue and constantly engaged Suddar in wordy battles. These would finish with "thik hai" the only two words of Urdu he knew and both of them roaring with laughter.

The rest of my journey to Rawalpindi, changing at Rohri where one crosses the Indus, and again at Lahore needs no description other than "thirty six hours in a train through the Punjab during the hot weather" and so, my tale is done.

(FINIS)

#### SENIOR APPOINTMENTS

**Brigadier J. Lapper, Q.H.S., M.B., Ch.B., D.L.O., M.F.C.M., M.B.I.M.**, was appointed Director of Medical Policy and Plans, Ministry of Defence, in the rank of Major-General. This is a new appointment.

**Colonel J. P. Crowdy, M.B., Ch.B., F.F.C.M., D.I.H., D.T.M.&H.**, was appointed Director of Army Health and Research in the substantive rank of Brigadier, with effect from 3 March, 1978, in succession to Brigadier W. S. Millar, Q.H.P., L.R.C.P., L.R.C.S., L.R.F.P.S., F.F.C.M., D.P.H., who has retired.

**Colonel R. G Robinson, MB, Ch.B., M.F.C.M., D.T.M.&H.**, was appointed Director of Medical Supply in the substantive rank of Brigadier, with effect from 27 February, 1978, in succession to Brigadier J. Lapper, Q.H.S., M.B., Ch.B., D.L.O., M.F.C.M., M.B.I.M.

#### ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

<b>F.F.A.R.C.S.</b>	MAJOR R. J. HARGREAVES, M.B., Ch.B., R.A.M.C., MAJOR R.N. PACKHAM, M.B., B.S., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., R.A.M.C. MAJOR C. C. SPANSWICK, M.B., Ch.B., R.A.M.C.
<b>M.R.C.P.</b>	MAJOR J. R. HEDGES, B.Sc., M.B., B.S., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., R.A.M.C.
<b>M.F.C.M.</b>	CAPTAIN R. N. MILES, M.B., B.S., R.A.M.C.
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