ON A PERSIAN HIGHWAY.

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I.

RAILHEAD at Quairaitu on the Persian border was like any other of the railheads of the various military systems in Mesopotamia. A barbed wire fence enclosing the army canteen, a supply dump, a field post office with babu and mail bags, several rows of dusty, badly pitched E. P. tents for the various oddments of railway personnel, and of course the inevitable Armenian restaurant. Over all this put a blistering sun and the picture of stale monotony and dreariness is complete.

It was not till 9 a.m. that the train with much clanging and banging came to a halt, and the weary engine had ceased to wheeze and splutter after its long and obviously exhausting journey from Baghdad to the edge of the Persian plateau. It was mid-August and on leaving the relatively cool darkened carriage the heat seemed to hit one a blow in the face, while the landscape rocked before the eyes half blinded by the glare. Quairaitu is closely surrounded by ranges of hills of stark naked rock which reflects the summer sun till the huddle of tents in the hollow sizzle in the oven-like heat. The journey from Baghdad had been got through during the cool hours of the night. It was 7 p.m. when we left Baghdad East, thus the depressing view of the monotonous tawny waste which stretches from the city walls to the Jebel Hamrin was toned down and made almost interesting by the soft evening light and the purple shadows that suggested rest and coolness. There is something very impressive about these great stretches of plain at night even when viewed from such a prosaic conveyance as a railway train. The sense of stillness and solitude is very real and adds to the mystery which is inseparable from this ancient land. In the crude glare of the day, however, such ideas find no place, the dominant desire is to get away from it as quickly and completely as possible, for then—in the words of Kipling:—

"The earth is iron and the skies are brass
And faint with fervour of the flaming air
The languid hours pass."

The Mesopotamian railways have never been renowned for high speed or comfort, the decrepit nature of the rolling-stock and the temporary nature of the "permanent way" combining to keep the pace at eight to ten miles per hour. Daylight found us traversing the uplands of Southeast Kurdistan, and the air was noticeably cooler and more invigorating,
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This mountain system forms the rampart between the plains and the western edge of the Persian plateau and all who wish to enter the land of the "Lion and the Sun" must cross this barrier. The appearance of the country had changed in our journey through the night, and so had that of the inhabitants. The sterile plain had given place to rolling downs stretching away to the foothills, beyond which could be seen the dim masses of the mountains of Armenia. The lean swarthy Arabs in flowing kuffyahs had been replaced by the more robust, fairer skinned Kurds with their high black kolas and bright cummerbunds.

No sooner had the train come to a standstill than a mob of coolies dashed along to the first-class carriage to seize the officers' kits and earn enough baksheesh to enable them to exist in peaceful idleness till the next train arrived. The urchin who succeeded in capturing my valise was a most amazing child in that, despite this sweltering heat, he was arrayed in a long sheepskin coat. Spreading a very tattered remnant of an army blanket on the ground he proceeded to pile on it not only my bulky kit but the kit of my orderly as well. It seemed impossible that this boy could carry away such a load, but no sooner was it settled securely on his back than off he went at a trot. The uninviting prospect of having to break my fast in the local restaurant, with the inevitable fat Armenian attendant and the no less inevitable thumb-marked poached egg, was banished by the appearance of the railway transport officer with the news that a rest camp existed some half mile away. A motor lorry was available and into it my now faintly perspiring pocket Hercules scrambled with the kit. Running through the camp is the Quairaitu Su, a small river whose clear sparkling water still rippled joyously over the pebbles despite the long summer drought. The river though so small is the dividing line between the military administrations of Persia and Mesopotamia, and those who dwell upon the farther or Persian bank are richer by eighty to one hundred rupees a month than their vis-a-vis on the other bank ten yards away. No sooner had we crossed the brook than we too were among the elect who could—and did—claim the benefits of this excellent Exchange Compensation Allowance. This all took place however in 1919.

II.

The journey from railhead across the mountain barrier to Kermanshah was to be done in Peerless motor lorries, a two days run with a halt for one night at Kerind, four thousand feet above our present level. This highway along which we were about to travel crosses the border mountains by the Tak-i-Gari pass, winds across the plateau to Kermanshah, then onwards and upwards over the Assanabad Pass to Hamadan, on to Khazivin and the capital Teheran. Beyond that city it passes on to the cities of inner Asia. No other highway in this part of the world is so rich in historical associations, for the record of the peoples who have passed along it is the record...
of the great empires traced from the dawn of history to the present day. The armies of Assyria, Media, Persia, Parthia, Greece, Rome, the Arab hordes of Mahomet, the Seljuk Turks, the Tartars, Mongols, Turks, Russians, and now the British have swept along it on the tide of war. But not only has this been the route of conquering armies, it has been the channel of commerce flowing from east to west, for the products of China, Bokhara, Samarcand, and the cities of India have had to pass this way to reach the Mediterranean. It is the only practicable overland route between the Indus and the Tigris.

From Quairairtu the road traverses a series of low hills where not a breath of wind stirred, the heavy air to blow away the thick clouds of fine dust billowing up from beneath the cars. We passed Kasr-i-Shirin, the palace of the beautiful princess, the fair Shirin. Legend has it that the great Rustam, the Black Prince of Persian chivalry, was out riding on the plain when he saw a most beauteous damsel bathing in a stream. So overcome was he at the beauty of the maiden that he straightway fell in love with her. Desire and possession were apparently synonymous terms to this gallant youth, for galloping up he lifted her across his saddle, leaving the scandalized companions to spread the alarm. He built a lovely palace for his lady love with beautiful gardens in which bloomed the far famed roses of Persia, and the bulbuls sang full sweetly among the trees in the scented evening air. These great blocks of stone and broken pillars near the road are all that remains of that idyllic scene.

From railhead to the camp at Sar-i-Pul is thirty miles. The camp is at the foot of the Tak-i-Gara Pass (Pai' Ta'k), and here the motor convoys halt to fill up radiators and petrol tanks, in preparation for the three mile climb up through the mountain. The making of this road for motor traffic enabled the British authorities to carry out a great scheme of famine relief by employing the destitute villagers as roadmakers. The climb through the pass was quite exhilarating after the heat and dust of the plain, while the view over the edge of the road into the ravine is decidedly thrilling. At this point the slopes of the mountains have groves of oak and walnut which give grateful shade. Until the British forces entered this part of Persia the local Kurdish tribes used this pass as a happy hunting ground for the looting of caravans passing into and from Mesopotamia. Certain picturesque ruffians, heavily armed, were lounging about, but these were merely “friendlies” employed as road guards.

III.

Kermanshah was reached after two days' journey and it was a great relief to get away from the banging and jolting of the big motor lorries and the all pervading smell of petrol fumes. The road from Kerind is not very interesting, the crops were already harvested and only a few small orchards here and there broke the monotony of the plain.

Kermanshah is a relatively important town and is the capital of a rich
agricultural province. It has a population of 50,000, mostly Kurds, and is equidistant between Teheran and Baghdad. The town is built on the sides of a gentle slope and looks over a wide plain stretching away to the north where it meets a high limestone range that forms the limit of the view in this direction. The higher parts of the town are clean, for the better class houses are built up here and all have large gardens, but the lower parts of the town are filthy. Between the main road and the town is a stretch of ground covered with refuse, and the decaying carcases of camels and donkeys poison the air with their stench. The bazaars are large, well stocked, and being roofed over are cool though somewhat gloomy. There is to be heard the usual din of the metal workers and the raucous cries of the itinerant vendors of sherbet and sweetmeats. There is to be seen the usual jostling crowd of mixed nationalities here—Persians, Kurds, Jews, Armenians, with occasional sepoys and British soldiers, all having to make way repeatedly for the incoming convoys of heavily laden donkeys and mules whose jangling bells add to the clamour in this market place. Here and there in the crowd one comes across the wild looking unkempt figure of a Dervish, collecting alms. In the quieter backwaters of the bazaar one not infrequently comes across what looks like a heap of rags till the black cloud of flies buzzing over it reveals the presence of an emaciated corpse. The Kurdish tribesmen here are dressed in the same fashion as those one sees in Suleimanyah and Halebja, with quaint high pot-shaped hats of black felt—some are of an enormous size. A bright coloured shawl is wound round the waist and those men in from the hills have their cummerbunds stocked with an imposing array of weapons, including the kanjar—a curved, broad-bladed, sharp pointed dagger. There is a steady stream of pilgrims passing down to the holy places at Kerbela and Nejef and convoys of corpses being taken down for re-interment in the great Shi-ite burial grounds. The money changers' quarter is not so interesting as that in Baghdad, but the variety of safes and cash boxes in use is considerable. The booths of the carpet merchants are great sources of attraction for the British officers, but really valuable and artistic rugs are not to be had. As is usual in these Eastern marts it takes two or three days to complete a deal. One very noticeable thing was the way in which the officers became afflicted to a greater or lesser extent with the two crazes—the exchange and carpets—but chiefly exchange. The daily fluctuations of the rupee, the kran, and the pound sterling appeared to fascinate some men and the conversation in the rest camp mess was given over largely to tales of successful "coup." The amateur financiers who had got "nipped" invariably maintained a gloomy silence, so that the degree of taciturnity prevailing was a pretty fair indication of the tone of the money market. Those who were stationed at Enzeli on the Caspian could indulge in a very orgy of speculation—in addition to their other duties—for they had at least eight brands of money to manipulate. There was the gold rouble, Czarist roubles, Kerensky roubles, the gold lira
On a Persian Highway

the kran, the rupee, the pound and French Government bonds. The usual
rumour that drifted down the L. of C. was that capital doubled itself every
time the above series was successfully negotiated. Personally, I found the
most pleasant and least harmful variety of exchange was that of rupees for
iced "asabi" at 11 a.m. at the club.

Malaria, of a malignant type, is prevalent, and in the town where the
water channels act both as drains and drinking supply there is much
dysentery and enteric. When the Turkish troops were in possession here,
the amount of sickness and number of deaths from malaria, typhus, and
dysentery was so high that rumour credits the Divisional Commander—Ali
Hussein Pasha—with having threatened to hang one in every ten of the
medical staff unless there was a speedy improvement. Fortunately before
the work of decimation could be carried out the division had to be hurried
back to defend Baghdad.

The Governor of the province had recently arrived, in Kermanshah and
the British officers were invited to a reception at the palace. This is a big
rambling building occupying one side of the Maidan. Outside the main
gateway were lounging some of the Persian gendarmerie—a rascally crew
—in dilapidated uniforms but with numerous cartridge belts. It was of
interest to note the variety of types of ammunition carried by each man
and only a few rounds appeared to be service ammunition. Passing
through the deep archway we crossed a paved courtyard wherein the gen­
darmerie band was playing vigorously. Here we were met by an official,
a very old man in a black gown and carrying his silver-topped wand of
office. He conducted us to a small ante-room where we waited for a few
minutes, and were then ushered into the salon. Here we were greeted by
the Governor and introduced to various officials, after which tea was served.
A number of deep, snug armchairs, the delicate china of the tea service,
and the delicious tea cakes gave a touch of Western comfort to the other­
wise bare apartment. The carpets were very fine and on the walls were
many beautiful Kashans. The Governor—a prince of the royal house—
was a comparatively young man with a charming manner and a ready smile,
forming rather a contrast to his councillors, elderly men of serious
mien.

Conversation was carried on in French, and for my part I found cause
to regret that the study of the whereabouts of the pen of my aunt and
similar school-room topics should leave one so ill equipped for the easy ex­
change of Gallic witticisms in the drawing room. At the ideal moment
whisky was handed round, the diluent being fresh spring water. The
drink was of such excellence that it can best be described in the words of
Thomas Burke as "gold wrapped in velvet."

One evening an opportunity of visiting a local opium den was
presented to me. I accepted this invitation in the hopes of catching an
interesting glimpse of things behind the scenes. After dinner three of us
with a guide faded away into the dark, and were led through a complicated
series of narrow alleys each replete with a variety of smells. The guide trusted to the plan of following his nose, for the further we went the stronger the smells, but at last he halted us before a low iron-studded door. After certain soft knockings and whisperings had been exchanged with the custodian, the door creaked open. We crossed a small courtyard and passed into a low dimly lit room. The only light was that of a small spirit lamp. There was complete silence, and the air, heavy and dry, had a sickly taint of unwashed humans and opium fumes. As the eyes became accustomed to the gloom we could make out several figures lying stretched out on the floor, drugged. The owner of the establishment was squatting beside the spirit lamp preparing the pipes. These were wooden stems.

Fig. 1.—Tak-i-Bustan.
about a foot long, one end fashioned into a mouth piece the other fitting into a china bulb. A pellet of the drug is warmed in the flame, pressed against a small hole in the bulb, and the pipe handed to the customer who inhales the fumes deep into the lungs. The performance so far had been extremely dull and sordid and the element of absurdity was added when a hitherto motionless figure near us suddenly came to life, seized a satchel that had been serving him as pillow and from it drew out brushes, rags, tins of boot polish, and . . . a roller skate! We left in haste. Another illusion of the "Mystic East" had been shattered.

In the centre of the town is an interesting mosque to which we could get admittance. In it are numerous mural paintings showing with great detail the tortures inflicted on prisoners of war a thousand years ago. The frightfulness of the surgical operations made one's blood run cold. In marked contrast to the clamour of the bazaar and the filth of the narrow streets was the cool freshness of the gardens above the town. Turning down the lane beside the British Hospital and clambering over a crumbling wall, one entered a realm of grateful shade and murmuring streams. In the clearings a few gardeners could be seen at work on the vegetable plots near which the workers had placed their brushwood shelter, a few reed mats, and a samovar. Fruit grew everywhere in rich profusion, and with ready kindness a gardener would fill your hands with fresh plucked fruit—
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purple grapes, golden figs bursting with sweetness, and peaches warm from the sun. Deep in a thicket of evergreens beside the stream was a stretch of turf all dappled with the shadows of the tangle of foliage overhead. How soon forgotten was the noonday heat, the dust and flies, as you lay on this grassy couch in drowsy peace, gazing up with half-shut eyes at the sheltering leaves dancing in the breeze that came stealing down the valley.

Fig. 3.—Tak-i-Bustan.

IV.

The neighbourhood of Kermanshah is rich in monuments of the past greatness of Persia. Twelve miles away to the north-east you come to the pool of Tak-i-Bustan at the base of a great crag. Hollowed out of the rock are two deep arches, on the walls of which are sculptured figures of
the Sassanian kings, and the artists have carved with great skill and fidelity to nature the hunting scenes that took place in the royal parks or "paradises." These "paradises" were large tracts of fertile land, stocked with wild animals such as the boar and the stag. These enclosures were rigorously preserved, and here the kings took part in the chase.

On one of the walls is a bas-relief of the "stag hunt." The monarch—as can be seen from the photograph—is on horseback, shaded from the sun by an umbrella held by an attendant, and below him huntsmen armed with bows and arrows are in pursuit of the quarry. Near the king are musicians. It would have been interesting to have John Jorrocks's views on this form of "'unting," which, although in this case literally "the sport of kings" would have drawn some very caustic remarks from the great M.F.H.
On the opposite wall is a representation of a "boar hunt" with the monarch taking a more active part in the pig-sticking. Musicians are again in evidence. The inner wall of this arch is occupied by the huge figure of Khursu Parviz (A.D. 590 to 628)—in the upper half shown as receiving the symbol of kingship, and in the lower he is shown on horseback.

On the rock face near the arches have been carved a group of three great figures representing Ardashir I receiving the chaplet of kingship from the god Ahuramazda. On the other side of the king is Zoroaster, and beneath his feet is the body of Artaban, the Parthian monarch overthrown by Ardashir.

Tak-i-Bustan was a favourite place for picnics, and close to the pool is a huge walnut tree that gave ample shade for the luncheon. There was a chaplain at Kermanshah at this time who used to organize these outings, and his talks on the ancient monuments and history of Persia were very interesting and popular. But it is at Behsitun one finds the most historic monument—the great carving of Darius and the tri-lingual cuneiform inscriptions.

The range of hills stretching across the plain meets the Hamadan road eighteen miles from Kermanshah and ends abruptly at the road-side in a perpendicular wall of rock 800 feet high. At a height of 300 feet above the
road Darius caused to be carved the great bas-relief commemorating his victories over his enemies (521—519 B.C.). The accession of Darius to the throne was the signal for the outbreak of a series of rebellions of the governors in Babylonia, Susiana, Media, and the outlying provinces of the Empire. In two years' time, however, Darius had crushed his opponents and stamped out the fires of revolt. To the left of the bas-relief we see the figure of the great “king of kings” of a stature greater than that of his subjects and holding in his outstretched hand the bow—the weapon of the Median and Persian armies that had produced the great victories of Cyaxares, Cyrus, and Cambyses, whereby the great empires of Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt had been overwhelmed. In front of Darius are the captive rebel princes, and beneath the feet of the king lies Gaumata—his chief enemy. Over all hovers the supreme god Ahuramazda holding out the chaplet of victory to Darius. It is of interest to recall that at the death of Darius the Persian Empire extended from the Danube to the Indus and from the Nile to the Syr-darya. Beneath the bas-relief are the famous cuneiform inscriptions in Old Persian, Median, and Assyrian describing the exploits of the Achæmenian monarch above.

It was the discovery and decipherment of these inscriptions by Sir Henry Rawlinson that revealed the meaning of the Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions. This pioneer work of Sir Henry Rawlinson at Behsitun was the foundation stone on which the whole structure of Assyriology has been erected. The life of this great soldier, ambassador, and assyriologist, as set out in the “Memoir of Sir Henry Rawlinson,” by Canon Rawlinson, makes most interesting reading. From the “Memoir” we learn that Rawlinson, at the age of 17, arrived in Bombay in 1827, and was gazetted to the 2nd European Infantry Regiment, then to the 7th Native Infantry, and later to the 1st Bombay Grenadiers. At the end of six months he had passed his Interpreters’ examination in Hindustani, and at the end of the year the examination in the Maharatta dialect. While at Poona (1830—33) he was an outstanding personality in the social life of the station and in all sports. He excelled in steeplechasing, shooting, and pig-sticking. His most renowned sporting achievement at this time was a ride against time which attracted much attention both in India and at home. The terms of the bet were: “To ride from Poona to Panwell in four hours—the stake to be £100—a forfeit of one hundred rupees to be paid for every minute over the four hours, and the same amount to be guaranteed to the rider for every minute under that time.” Rawlinson started out from Poona at 5.10 a.m. and arrived at Panwell at 8.17 a.m. He therefore covered the distance of seventy-two miles in three hours seven minutes. He also passed a first-class examination in Persian.

In 1833, at the age of 23, he was selected as one of eight officers of a military commission that was being sent to Persia to re-organize the Shah’s army. After some time spent at Tabriz and at Teheran he was nominated by the Shah to proceed to Kurdistan and assist the Governor of the
province—the Shah's brother—who resided at Kermanshah. Rawlinson was in this district from 1835-7, and during that time his duties were many and varied. He had to raise, equip, and drill a force of 3,000 Kurdish levies, subdue rebellion, and assist in putting the finances on a sound footing. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society for his explorations in Luristan. He was intensely attracted by the cuneiform inscriptions at Behsitun and made many visits to the rock to attempt to scale the cliff. Until he arrived in Persia this young officer had never seen cuneiform writing, and was entirely ignorant of the values of the wedge-shaped signs. While on his journey from Teheran to Kermanshah Rawlinson had seen the cuneiform inscriptions on Mount Elwand at Hamadan, and to quote from the "Memoir": "...here he was able for the first time to make a leisurely examination of cuneiform inscriptions, and was induced to copy them and ponder over them and endeavour to penetrate their meaning...They had already been partially deciphered by those eminent scholars (Burnouf, of Paris, and Lassen, of Bonn), but the results of their labours were wholly unknown to the young Englishman, who commenced his own study of the Elwand inscriptions without any acquaintance with any similar previous researches."

It was not till 1847 that Rawlinson was able to obtain accurate casts of the Behsitun inscriptions. This was accomplished by the daring of a Kurdish shepherd boy. By a close study of the wealth of material thus obtained, "a chapter of the world's history that had been almost wholly lost once more made known to mankind."

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Echoes of the Past.

A CHRISTMAS KALEIDOSCOPE.

By Colonel S. F. Clark (R.P.).

On Christmas Eve, 1904, I embarked on the R.M.S. "Walmer Castle" for a tour of service in South Africa, and next day I mentioned to a civilian fellow-passenger that, since I had joined the service I had hardly spent two consecutive Christmas days in the same place. He remarked that no words of mine could have brought home to him more vividly what life in the Army meant. Now that my movements are more under my own control, the remembrance of this conversation has led me to trace my whereabouts on that great festival for each year that I was on the active list, and others may like to follow up the idea for themselves. They will doubtless agree that the R.A.M.C. officer has few opportunities of spending Christmas at his parental home—even if it is still in being on his retirement.

December, 1886, was the first Yuletide on which I wore uniform—as a Surgeon on probation at Netley. About a dozen of us, whose homes were