

HAROLD TRAVELING LUCK 13 (ASIA)  
BRITONS

ERIC NEWBY

CHAPTER FOUR

*Pera Palace*

ELEVEN days later I arrived with Wanda in Istanbul. As we drove along the last long stretch of road, lurching into the pot-holes, the Sea of Marmara appeared before us, green and wind-swept, deserted except for a solitary caique beating up towards the Bosphorus under a big press of sail. Our spirits rose at the thought of seeing Istanbul when the sun was setting, but when we reached the outskirts it was already quite dark. We had planned to enter the city by the Golden Gate on the seaward side, for it sounded romantic and appropriate and we had been stoking ourselves all the way across Europe with the thought of it, not knowing that for several hundred years the gate had been sealed up. Instead we found ourselves on an interminable by-pass lined with luminous advertisements for banks and razor blades. Of the wall constructed by Theodosius there was no sign. It was a fitting end to an uncomfortable journey.

We left the car in the courtyard of the old Embassy and changed our money with one of the gatekeepers. We asked him where we should stay.

'Star *Oteli*, clean *Oteli*, cheap *Oteli*, good *Oteli*, *Oteli* of my brodder.'

'Is it far?'

'Not so far; take taxi, always taxi. Bad place, at night bad menses and girlises.'

'Order a taxi.'

He uttered some strange cries. As if by magic a taxi appeared. It was driven by a huge brute with a shaven head; sitting next to him was another smaller man. They were a sinister pair.

'What's the other one for?'

'He is not for anything. He is brodder.'

'They don't look like brothers.'

'He is brodder by other woman.'

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With a roar the taxi shot forward. After fifty yards it stopped and the brother opened the door.

'Star *Oteli*.'

With sinking hearts we followed him up a nearly vertical flight of stairs to the reception desk. I prayed that the hotel would be full but it wasn't. We set off down a long brilliantly lit passage, the brother of the gatekeeper leading and the brother of the taxi man bringing up the rear to cut off our retreat. The doors on either side were open, and we could see into the rooms. The occupants all seemed to be men who were lying on their beds fully clothed, gazing at the ceiling. Everywhere, like a miasma, was the unforgettable grave-smell of Oriental plumbing.

'Room with bed for two,' said the proprietor, flinging open a door at the extreme end. He contrived to invest it with an air of extreme indelicacy, which in no way prepared us for the reality.

It was a nightmare room, the room of a drug fiend or an epileptic or perhaps both. It was illuminated by a forty-watt bulb and looked out on a black wall with something slimy growing on it. The bed was a fearful thing, almost perfectly concave. Underneath it was a pair of old cloth-topped boots. The sheets were almost clean but on them there was the unmistakable impress of a human form and they were still warm. In the corner there was a washbasin with one long red hair in it and a tap which leaked. Somewhere nearby a fun-fair was testing its loud-hailing apparatus, warming up for a night of revelry. The smell of the room was the same as the corridor outside with some indefinable additions.

After the discomforts of the road it was too much. In deep gloom we got back into the taxi. The driver was grinning.

'Pera Palace!'

As we plunged down the hill through the cavern-like streets, skidding on the tramlines, the brothers screwed their heads round and carried on a tiresome conversation with their backs to the engine.

'Pera very good.'

Never had a city affected me with such an overpowering sense of melancholy.

'No.'

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'Very good Istanbul.'

'Very good taxi.' We were heading straight for a tram that was groaning its way up the hill but passed it safely on the wrong side of the road.

I asked if anyone was ever killed. 'Many, many, every day.'

'How many?'

'Two million.'

At the Pera Palace we took a large room. Originally it must have had a splendid view of the Golden Horn, now there was a large building in the way. We sent our clothes to the laundry and went to bed.

There had been no news of Hugh at the Embassy, but before sinking into a coma of fatigue, we both uttered a prayer that he would be delayed.

Early on the following morning he was battering on our door. He had just arrived by air and was aggressively fit and clean. Between his teeth was a Dunhill pipe in which some luxurious mixture was burning; under his arm was a clip board full of maps and lists. His clothes had just the right mixture of the elegant and the dashing. He was the epitome of a young explorer. We knew what he would say. It was an expression that we were to hear with ever-increasing revulsion in the weeks to come.

'We must leave at once.'

'We can't, the wagon's got to be serviced.'

'I've already arranged that. It'll be ready at noon.'

Like survivors of an artillery bombardment we were still shaking from the spine-shattering road we had taken through Bulgaria. What the pre-war guide had described as 'another route'.

'It's been rather a long drive.' We enumerated the hardships we had undergone, how we had been stripped by customs officials on the Yugoslav frontier, the hailstones as big as pigeons' eggs in the Balkans, the floods, landslips, mosquitoes, all the tedious mishaps of our journey; but lying in our splendid bed we were not objects for obvious sympathy.

'I shall drive. You two can rest.'

'You don't seem to realize,' I said, 'there's no rest in that machine, there's so much stuff in it. After a bit we were fighting

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one another to drive. Besides, damn it, we want to see Istanbul.'

'You can always see Istanbul some other time. It's been here for two thousand years.'

'You mean *you* can always see it another time.'

He looked at his watch reluctantly.

'How long do you want?'

Only Wanda had the courage to answer. 'Three days,' she said.

We grew fond of the Pera Palace; the beds had big brass knobs on and were really comfortable. Our room seemed the setting for some ludicrous comedy that was just about to begin. Probably it had already been played many times. It was easy to imagine some bearded minister of Abdul Hamid pursuing a fat girl in black stockings and garters round it and hurting himself on the sharp bits of furniture. In the bathroom the bath had the unusual facility of filling itself by way of the waste pipe without recourse to the taps. We watched this process enthralled.

'I think it's when the current's running strongly in the Bosphorus.'

'It can't be that. It's warm.'

'Why don't you taste it?'

'I can't remember whether the Bosphorus is salt or not. Besides it's a very curious colour sometimes.'

It was Wanda who discovered the truth. I found her with her ear jammed hard against the wall of the bathroom.

'It's the man next door. He's just had a bath. Now he's pulled out the plug. Here it comes.'

For the second time that day the bath began to fill silently.

By contrast the staff were mostly very old and very sad and, apart from our friend in the next bathroom, we never saw anyone. There was a restaurant where we ate interminable meals in an atmosphere of really dead silence. It was the hotel of our dreams.

Three days later we left Istanbul. The night porter at the Pera Palace had been told to call us at a quarter to four; knowing that he wouldn't, I willed myself to wake at half past three. I did

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so but immediately fell into a profound slumber until Hugh arrived an hour later from his modern *Oteli* up the hill, having bathed, shaved, breakfasted and collected the vehicle. It was not an auspicious beginning to our venture. He told us so.

There was a long wait for the ferry to take us to Scutari and when it did finally arrive embarkation proceeded slowly. Consumed by an urgent necessity, I asked the ferry master who bowed me into his own splendidly appointed quarters, where I fell into a delightful trance, emerging after what seemed only a moment to see the ferry boat disappearing towards the Asian shore with the motor-car and my ticket. At the barrier there was a great press of people and one of three fine-looking porters stole my wallet. It was the ferry master himself who escorted me on to the next boat, '*pour tirer d'embaras notre client distingué*' as he ironically put it. For the second time in my life I left Europe penniless.

#### CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Dying Nomad*

ON the road from Istanbul we were detained by a series of misadventures in Armenia. At Horasan, a small one-street town on the Aras river, instead of turning right for Agri and the Persian frontier, Hugh roared straight on. There was a long climb, followed by a descent on hairpin bends into a canyon of red, silver and green cliffs, with a castle perched on the top, down to a village where the air was cool under the trees and women were treading something underfoot in a river, and a level stretch under an overhanging cliff where gangs working on a narrow gauge railway were bringing down avalanches of stones. On the right was the same fast running river.

We were tired and indescribably dirty. In the last of the sunlight we crossed a green meadow and bathed in a deep pool. It was very cold.

'What river do you think this is?' Bathed and shaved we sat in the meadow putting on clean socks. Behind a rock, further downstream Wanda was washing her hair.

'It's the Aras.'

'But the Aras flows west to east; this one's going in the opposite direction.'

'How very peculiar. What do you make of it?'

'It can't be the Aras.'

With night coming down we drove on beside the railway, over a wooden bridge that thundered and shuddered under our weight, through a half-ruined village built of great stone blocks where two men were battering one another to death and the women, black-skirted and wearing white head-scarves, minded their own business, up and up through a ravine with the railway always on our left, into pine forests where the light was blue and autumnal – partisan, Hemingway country, brooding and silent – past a sealed-up looking house, with Hugh's dreadful radio

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blaring all the time louder and louder until suddenly we realized that what we were listening to was Russian, crystal clear and getting stronger every minute.

Hugh stopped the car and switched on the light and we huddled over the map, which Wanda had been studying with a torch.

'Do you know where we are?' He looked very serious.

'About sixty kilometres from Kars,' she said.

'But we're on the wrong road. That's on the Russian Frontier.'

'Not quite on it. The frontier's here' – she pointed to the map – 'on the river, a long way from the town.'

'How long have you known this?' I had never seen him so worried.

'Since we had that swim: the current was going the wrong way. I thought you realized it.'

At first I thought he was going to hit her. Finally, he said in a strangled sort of voice, 'We must go back immediately.'

'Whatever for? Look, there's a road along the Turkish side of the river, south to Argadsh, just north of Ararat. It's a wonderful chance. If we're stopped all we've got to say is that we took the wrong road.'

'It's all very well for you. Do you realize *my* position? I'm a member of the Foreign Service but I haven't got a diplomatic visa for Turkey. We have permission to cross Anatolia by the shortest possible route. In this vehicle we've got several cameras, one with a long-focus lens, a telescope, prismatic compasses, an aneroid and several large-scale maps.'

'The maps are all of Afghanistan.'

'Do you think they'll know the difference at a road block? We've even got half a dozen daggers.'

'They weren't *my* idea. I always said daggers were crazy.'

'That's not the point. You saw what the Turks were like in Erzerum. We shall all be arrested. We may even get shot. It's got all the makings of an incident. And you're not even British.'

'By marriage,' said Wanda, 'but I think you're making it sound much worse than it really is.'

We argued with him in the growing darkness, even made fun

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of him, but it was no use, he was beyond the reach of humour. On his face was a look that I had never seen. He spoke with an air of absolute certainty, like a man under the influence of drugs. Like the Mole in *The Wind in the Willows* picking up the scent of his old home, Hugh was in direct contact with the Foreign Office, SW 1, and the scent was breast-high.

It took me some moments to remember where I had encountered this almost mad certainty before, then it came to me – at the memorable interview with the man from the Asian Desk.

We were ninety kilometres from Horasan. Finally he agreed to continue to the next town, Sarikamis, and return the following day.

But the next day had brought disaster and tragedy. Towards evening we had arrived at Bayazid. 'Fortress town on the Persian Frontier; close to Ararat on the great caravan road from Tabriz to Erzerum with the Serail of Ezak Pasha on a rock.' The ancient guide to Turkey had made it sound romantic, but the splendours of the caravan road had departed and several earthquakes and countless massacres had made of Bayazid a sad, shanty town without a skyline, full of soldiers clumping down the single street in great boots, and debased-looking civilians in tattered western suits and cloth caps.

Determined to sleep in Persia we set off at breakneck speed towards the east. Night was coming on. The road was deserted; it ran through an arid plain; to the right were low mountains with, close under them, the black tents of the nomad people. All day, in the upland country about Ararat, we had seen bands of them on the march, driving their bullocks loaded with tent poles and big tribal cooking pots; vicious-looking donkeys with pack saddles, flocks of goats and sheep; the men and women on foot, the women in full red skirts with a sort of black surcoat and black balaclavas, the younger ones in pill-box hats and plaits, the boys wearing lambskin caps, the smallest children sitting, on white cushions, astride lean little horses; all moving westward along the line of the telegraph poles, each family enveloped in its own cloud of dust.

Less than a mile from the Customs House on the Turkish

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side, travelling in the last of the light, something dark loomed up on the road in front. Wanda shouted but Hugh was already braking hard. There was going to be an accident and it was going to take a long time to happen. I wondered whether he would swerve off the road and whether we should turn over when he did. He shouted to us to hold on, the wheels locked and we went into a long tearing skid with the horn blaring and all our luggage falling on us, pressing us forward on to the windscreen, everything happening at once as we waited for the smash but instead coming to a standstill only a few feet from whatever it was in the road.

There was a moment of silence broken only by awful groans. We were fearful of what we should see but the reality was worse than anything we imagined. Lying in the road, face downwards, a shapeless black bundle covered with dust, was one of the nomads. He was an old man of about seventy, blackened by the sun, with a cropped grizzled head. Something had run him down from behind and his injuries were terrible; his nose was almost completely torn off and swelling up through a tear in the back of his shirt was a great liquid bulge; but he was still conscious and breathing like a steam engine.

We wrapped him in a blanket, put a big shell dressing on the maw where his nose had been, stopped the bleeding from the back of his head and wondered what to do next. We dared not move him off the road because we had no idea what internal injuries he had, nor could we give him morphia because it seemed certain that his brain must have been injured.

Now the men of the tribe came running, attracted by the lights. They were followed by the children and then by the women. With the women came the man's wife, a windswept black-haired creature of about thirty, who flung herself down in the dust with a jangling of gold ornaments and set up a great wailing. The rest stood in a half-circle in the light of the headlamps and looked at us silently.

At the same moment a jeep arrived, full of soldiers. One of them was a doctor who spoke English. It seemed a miracle.

He lifted the shell dressing and winced. Then he saw the great blue swelling, now growing bigger.

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'You must take him to the camp.' (There was a military camp five miles back on the road.)

'But if he's moved he may die.'

'He is going to die. You see that' — he pointed at the bulge — 'haemorrhage. He may live till morning. He is strong old man but there is nothing to do.'

'You will come with us?'

'I am going to —' (He named a place none of us had ever heard of.) 'It is you must take him.'

We told him that we were going to Persia. Still we did not realize our predicament.

Then it came, like a bombshell.

'YOU CANNOT KILL MAN AND GO AWAY. THERE WILL BE INQUIRY.'

'BUT WE DIDN'T. WE FOUND HIM. LOOK HERE.' We showed him the tyre marks. They ended about seven feet from the body.

'To do such damage you must travel fast.' He pointed to the crushed offside wing, legacy of Hugh's encounter with a London taxi. 'But do not worry, *he* is only nomad. I am sorry for you.'

His men helped us place the wounded man in the back seat. When he had gone we realized that we didn't know his name.

At the camp, a few huts under the mountain, there was no doctor. Nor could anyone speak Persian, French or German — only Turkish.

'Bayazid, Bayazid,' was all they could say, waving us on. With the groans of the old man in our ears and the heartrending cries of his wife from the back seat where she supported him, we drove the fifteen miles to the town.

All night we sat under the electric light in the corridor of the military hospital, smoking cigarettes, dozing, going into the room where he was, to listen to his breathing as it became louder and louder. He died horribly, early the next morning on a canvas stretcher just as it was growing light, surrounded by judges and prosecutors and interpreters screaming at him, trying to find out what had run him down, the members of his family elbowed out by official observers.

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As soon as the man was dead, the nightmare of the day began. In a convoy of vehicles we returned to the scene of the accident. In ours was a Judge, who seemed hostile; a young Public Prosecutor, who didn't; a tall Colonel with a broken nose, hard as nails like a Liverpool policeman; a Captain, who was indifferent, neither unamiable nor amiable—nothing; an interpreter, who looked as though he had been routed out of a house of ill-fame, who spoke extraordinarily bad Levantine French of a purely declamatory kind; a number of really smelly policemen and two or three soldiers. Apart from the Interpreter, the Prosecutor spoke a few words of French but tried hard with them; the Captain not more than a dozen words of English but he was useless. All the rest spoke nothing but their native tongue. By a paradox it was the Prosecutor who seemed to offer the greatest hope. Worst of all was the Interpreter, who seemed intent on destroying us.

'*Vous êtes Carless?*' he inquired sardonically as I was getting into the car to drive to the place of the accident. With all the more important officials in our car, which had been emptied of luggage in order to transport them, it seemed better that Hugh shouldn't drive.

'*Non, M'sieur.*'

'*Il faut que M. Carless conduit l'automobile.*'

'*Pourquoi?*'

'*M. le Juge l'a dit.*'

All the way to the scene of the accident they watched Hugh like a hawk. It looked very bad for him. There on the gravel road was the long swerving mark of the skid ending practically where the body had been. The space between was already ploughed up by countless footmarks, but if we had hit the old man, the force of the blow would have thrown his body almost precisely into the position in which we found it.

The interrogation went on right through the baking noonday heat until evening. Half a dozen times we were made to re-enact the accident; the road was measured; the nomad children were made to collect stones to mark the key points; drawings were made; statements were taken. All we could say was that we had found him and that there had been no other witnesses—the

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nearest nomads had been nearly a mile from the road. It was not our fault, we said, you must believe us. But then there were the men of the tribe committing perjury, describing the accident, offering flowers to the Judge; while the Interpreter, sensing the dislike that we were trying so hard to conceal, redoubled his own efforts to destroy us by garbling everything we said. Worst of all they told us that ours was the only vehicle travelling towards the Customs House from the Turkish side on the evening of the accident.

Hugh was in a spot. The only hope seemed to be the Prosecutor, who had ordered the beating of several members of the tribe. 'They are lying,' he said, as he watched the policeman thumping them in the incandescent heat. 'I am only interested in the *truth*. And I shall discover it.' He was a remarkable man. But when we were alone we begged Hugh to send a cable to Ankara. He was absolutely immovable.

'I'm going to see it through myself,' he said. 'If it comes to a trial there's going to be the most shocking scandal at any rate. Whether they find me guilty or innocent, somebody will always bring it up. The only thing is to convince them that I didn't do it at this stage before they charge me. Besides, what will my Ambassador think if I arrive in Persia under a cloud.'

Exhausted we returned to the town. On the way one of the jeeps full of policemen broke down. The Judge ordered us to abandon them. No one was sorry, they were a brutal lot. We left them honking despairingly in the darkness; the soldiers were delighted.

But there were inexhaustible supplies of policemen; at the station in Bayazid half a dozen more poured out of the building, surrounding us.

'My God, they're going to lock me up for the night.' All day Hugh had behaved with the most admirable calmness. Now for the first time he showed signs of strain.

'*Malheureusement,*' said the Interpreter, turning to Wanda and myself and showing a set of broken yellow teeth, '*M. Carless doit rester ici mais VOUS, VOUS êtes libre.*'

'I don't need a policeman,' Hugh said. I had never seen him so angry. 'You have my word. I shan't run away.'

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'You are not arrested yet. It is to protect you from incidents. Perhaps people will be angry.'

With a policeman outside the inn shooing away the passers-by, the three of us ate rice and kebab and some very odd vegetables and drank a whole bottle of raki. We were famished, having eaten nothing since the previous night.

At the next table was a medical officer in battledress. He was an Armenian and had the facility with languages of his race. 'My name is Niki,' he said. After dinner we sat with him on the roof under a rusty-looking moon. 'This is a town of no-women,' he said, pointing at the soldiery milling in the street below. 'Look, there are thousands of them. They are all becoming mad because there is nothing here for them - or for me,' he added more practically.

'This is your country?'

'This was my country. There is no Armenia any more. All those shops' - pointing at the shop fronts now shuttered and barred - 'Armenian - dead, dead, all dead. Tomorrow they will decide whether you will be tried or not,' he went on to Hugh. 'If you need me I will come. I think it is better that you should not be tried. I have heard that there is a German from Tehran here, a lorry driver who has cut off a child's foot with his lorry. He has been three months awaiting a trial. They keep him without trousers so that he shall not escape.'

Next morning all three of us took pains with our appearance. The internal arrangements at the inn were so loathsome that I shared a kerosene tin of water with Hugh and shaved on the roof, the cynosure of the entire population who were out in force. Wanda, debarred from public appearance, was condemned to the inside. As a final touch our shoes were cleaned by a boot-black who refused to charge. I was impressed but not Hugh.

'I don't suppose they charge anything at the Old Bailey.' Nothing could shake his invincible gloom.

At nine o'clock, sweltering in our best clothes, we presented ourselves at the Courthouse and joined a queue of malefactors.

After a short wait we were called. The room was simple, whitewashed, with half a dozen chairs and a desk for the Prosecutor. On it was a telephone at which we looked lovingly.

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Behind the Prosecutor lurked his evil genius, the Interpreter.

The Prosecutor began to speak. It was obvious that one way or the other he had made his mind up. He was, he said, interested only in Justice and Justice would be done. It was unfortunate for M. Carless that he did not possess a Diplomatic Visa for Turkey otherwise it would be difficult to detain him. We now knew that Hugh was doomed. But, he went on, as his visa only applied to Iran, he proposed to ask for proceedings to be stayed for a week while he consulted the authorities in Ankara.

'*Malheureusement, c'est pas possible pour M. Carless,*' said the Interpreter winding up with relish, '*mais vous êtes libre d'aller en Iran.*'

For two hours we argued; when Hugh flagged I intervened; then Wanda took up the struggle; arguments shot backwards and forwards across the room like tennis balls: about diplomatic immunity, children languishing in Europe without their mother, ships and planes missed, expeditions ruined, the absence of witnesses.

'Several beatings were given yesterday for the discouragement of false witnesses and their evidence is inadmissible,' said the Prosecutor, but he was remote, immovable.

'*Malheureusement vous devez rester ici sept jours pour qu'arrive une réponse à notre telegramme,*' said the Interpreter in his repulsive French.

'*Monsieur le Procureur a envoyé une telegramme?*'

'*Pas encore,*' replied the Interpreter, leering triumphantly. I had never seen him look happier.

We implored Hugh to send a telegram to Ankara. He was adamant but he did agree to send for Niki, the Armenian doctor. It was not easy to find an un-named Armenian M.O. in a garrison town but he arrived in an hour, by jeep, round and fat but to us a knight in armour. The Interpreter was banished and Niki began translating sentence by sentence, English to Turkish, Turkish to English. Hugh spoke of N.A.T.O. and there was a flicker of interest, of how the two countries had fought together on the same side in Korea, of the great qualities of the Turkish Nation, of the political capital that the Russians would make when the news became known, that such a situation would not

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happen in England. Finally, Hugh said he wanted to send a telegram. We knew what agony this decision cost him.

'It is extremely difficult. There is no direct communication. We shall first have to send to Erzerum.'

'Then send it to Ezerum.'

'It will take three days. You still wish?'

'Yes, I wish.'

Hugh wrote the telegram. It looked terrible on paper. I began to understand why he had been so reluctant to send it.

'Detained Bayazid en route Tehran awaiting formulation of charge killing civilian stop Diplomatic visa applicable Iran only.'

Niki translated it into Turkish; holding the message, the Prosecutor left the room. After a few minutes he returned with a heavily moustached clerk in shirt-sleeves. For more than ten minutes he dictated with great fluency. It was a long document. When it was finished Niki read it aloud. It gave an account of the entire affair and expressed Hugh's complete innocence.

The last stamp was affixed; the Prosecutor clapped his hands, coffee was brought in.

It all happened so quickly that it was difficult to believe that it was all over.

'But what made him change his mind?' It was an incredible volte-face.

'The Public Prosecutor asks me to say,' said Niki, 'that it is because M. Carless was gentlemanly in this thing, because you were all gentlemanly,' bowing to Wanda, 'that he has decided not to proceed with it.'

#### CHAPTER SIX

### *Airing in a Closed Carriage*

IN Tehran Wanda left us to return to Europe.

On 30 June, eleven days from Istanbul, Hugh and I reached Meshed, the capital of the province of Khurasan, in north-east Persia, and drove through streets just dark to the British Consulate-General, abandoned since Mussadiq's coup and the breaking off of diplomatic relations in 1953.

After a long wait at the garden gate we were admitted by an old, grey-bearded sepoy of the Hazarah Pioneers. He had a Mongolian face and was dressed in clean khaki drill with buttons polished. Here we were entertained kindly by the Hindu caretaker.

The place was a dream world behind high walls, like a property in the Deep South of the United States. Everywhere lush vegetation reached out long green arms to destroy what half a century of care had built up. The great bungalows with walls feet thick were collapsing room by room, the wire gauze fly nettings over the windows were torn and the five-year-old bath water stagnant in the bathrooms. In the living rooms were great Russian stoves, standing ceiling high, black and banded like cannon set in the walls, warming two rooms at once, needing whole forests of wood to keep them going.

The Consulate building itself was lost and forgotten; arcades of Corinthian columns supported an upper balcony, itself collapsing. The house was shaded by great trees, planted perhaps a century ago, now at their most magnificent. Behind barred windows were the big green safes with combination locks in the confidential registry. I asked Hugh how they got them there.

'In the days of the *Raj* you could do anything.'

'But they must weigh tons. There's no railway.'

'If Curzon had anything to do with it, they were probably dragged overland from India.'



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On the wall in one of the offices we found a map of Central Asia. It was heavily marked in coloured pencil. One such annotation well inside Russian Territory, beyond a straggling river, on some sand dunes in the Kara-Kum desert read, 'Captain X, July, '84' and was followed by a cryptic question mark.

'The Great Game,' said Hugh. It was a sad moment for him, born nearly a century too late to participate in the struggle that had taken place between the two great powers in the no-man's-land between the frontiers of Asiatic Russia and British India.

Apart from Hugh and myself, everyone inside the Consulate firmly believed that the British would return. In the morning when we met the old man from Khurasan who had been in the Guides Cavalry, the younger one who had been in a regiment of Punjabis and the old, old man who was the caretaker's cook, I felt sad under their interrogation about my health and regiment. To them it was as though the Indian Army as they had known it still existed.

*'Apka misaj kaisa hai, Sahib?'*

*'Bilkul tik hai.'*

*'Apka paltan kya hai?'*

I had acquired Urdu rapidly sixteen years before. It had vanished as quickly as it came. Soon I dried up completely and was left mouthing affirmatives. '*Han, han.*'

'For God's sake don't keep on saying, "*Han, han*". They'll think you're crazy.'

'I've said everything I can remember. What do you want me to say. That we're not coming back, ever?'<sup>1</sup>

With all the various delights of Meshed to sample it was late when we set off. Driving in clouds of dust and darkness beyond the outer suburbs the self-starter began to smoke. Grovelling under the vehicle among the ants and young scorpions, fearful of losing our feet when the great American lorries roared past, we attained the feeling of comradeship that only comes in moments of adversity.

1. In 1957 the British Government allotted a sum of money for the repair of the Consulate-General. It is now used by the British Council.

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The starter motor was held in place by two inaccessible screws that must have been tightened by a giant. It was a masterpiece of British engineering. With the ants marching and counter-marching over me, I held a guttering candle while Hugh groped with the tinny spanner that was part of the manufacturers' 'tool-kit'.

'What does the book say?'

It was difficult to read it with my nose jammed into the earth.

'The starter is pre-packed with grease and requires no maintenance during the life of the vehicle.'

'That's the part about lubrication but how do you GET IT OFF?'

It was like trying to read a first folio in a crowded train. I knocked over the candle and for a time we were in complete darkness.

'It says: "Loosen the retaining screws and slide it."'

'There must be a place in hell for the man who wrote that.'

'Perhaps you have to take the engine out first.'

Late at night we returned unsuccessful to the city and in the *Shāri Tehran*, the Warren Street of Meshed, devoted to the motor business, hammered on the wooden doors of what until recently had been a caravanserai, until the night watchman came with stove and lantern and admitted us.

In the great court, surrounded by broken-down droshkies and the skeletons of German motor-buses, we spread our sleeping-bags on the oily ground beside our vehicle. For the first time since leaving Istanbul we had achieved Hugh's ambition to sleep 'under the stars'.

Early the next morning the work was put in hand at a workshop which backed on to the courtyard. It was the sort of place where engines are dismembered and never put together again. The walls of the shop were covered with the trophies of failure, which, together with the vast, inanimate skeletons outside, gave me the same curious feelings of fascination and horror that I still experience in that part of the Natural History Museum devoted to prehistoric monsters.

The proprietor Abdul, a broken-toothed demon of a man, conceived a violent passion for Hugh. We sat with him drinking

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coffee inside one of the skeletons while his assistant, a midget ten-year-old, set to work on the starter with a spanner as big as himself, shaming us by the ease with which he removed it.

'Arrrh, CAHARLESS, soul of your father. You have ill-used your motor-car.' He hit Hugh a violent blow of affection in the small of the back, just as he was drinking his coffee.

'Urggh!'

'What do you say, O CAHARLESS?'

Hugh was mopping thick black coffee from his last pair of clean trousers.

'I say nothing.'

'What shall I say?'

'How should I know.'

'You are angry with me. Let us go to my workshop and I shall make you happy.'

He led us into the shop. There he left us. In a few minutes he returned with a small blind boy, good-looking but with an air of corruption. Abdul threw down his spanner with a clang and began to fondle him.

'CAHARLESS!' he roared, beckoning Hugh.

'NO!'

Presently Abdul pressed the boy into a cupboard and shut the door. There followed a succession of nasty stifled noises that drove us out of the shop.

Later, when we returned, Hugh was given a tremendous welcome.

'CAHARLESS, I thought you were departed for ever. You have come back!'

'You still have my motor-car.'

To me he was less demonstrative but also less polite, snatching my pipe from my mouth and clenching it between his awful broken teeth in parody of an Englishman.

'CAHARLESS, when you take me to *Englestan* I shall smoke the pipe.'

All through the hot afternoon he worked like a demon with his midget assistant, every few minutes beseeching Hugh to take him to England. After two hours the repairs were finished. Now he wanted to show us how he had driven to Tehran in fourteen

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hours, a journey that had taken us two days and most of one night.

In breathless heat he whirled us through the streets, tyres screeching at the corners. We were anxious to pay the bill and be off. Never had we met anyone more horrible than Abdul, more energetic and more likely to succeed.

'How much?'

'CAHARLESS, my heart, CAHARLESS, my soul, you will transport me to *Englestan*?'

'Yes, of course.'

'We shall drive together?'

What a pair they would make on the Kingston By-Pass.

'Yes, of course, Bastard' (in English). 'How much?'

The machine almost knocked down a heavily swathed old lady descending from a droshky and screamed to a halt outside a café filled with evil-looking men, all of whom seemed to be smitten with double smallpox.

'CAHARLESS, I am your slave. I will drive you to Tehran.'

'Praise be to God for your kindness (and I hope you drop dead). THE BILL.'

'CAHARLESS, soul of your father, I shall bring you water. Ho, there, Mohammed Gholi. Oh, bring water for CAHARLESS, my soul, my love. He is thirsty.'

He screamed at the robbers in the shop, who came stumbling out with a great *chatti* which they slopped over Carless.

'Thank you, that is sufficient.'

'CAHARLESS, I love you as my son.'

'This bill is enormous.'

It was enormous but probably correct.

A little beyond Meshed we stopped at a police post in a miserable hamlet to ask the way to the Afghan Frontier and Herat. I was already afflicted with the gastric disorders that were to hang like a cloud over our venture, a pale ghost of the man who had climbed the *Spiral Stairs* on Dinas Cromlech less than a month before. Hugh seemed impervious to bacilli and, as I sat in the vehicle waiting for him to emerge from the police

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station, I munched sulphaguanadine tablets gloomily and thought of the infected ice-cream he had insisted on buying at Kazvin on the road from Tabriz to Tehran.

'We must accustom our stomachs to this sort of thing,' he had said and had shared it with Wanda, who had no need to accustom herself to anything as she was returning to Italy.

The germs had been so virulent that she had been struck down almost at once; only after three days in bed at the Embassy with a high temperature had she been able to totter to the plane on the unwilling arm of a Queen's Messenger. I had rejected the ice-cream. Hugh had eaten it and survived. It was unjust; I hated him; now I wondered whether my wife was dead, and who would look after my children.

I had succumbed much later. In the fertile plain between Neishapur and Meshed we had stopped at a *qanat* for water. The *qanat*, a subterranean canal, was in a grove of trees and this was the place where it finally came to the surface after its journey underground. It was a magical spot, cool and green in the middle of sunburnt fields. There was a mound grown with grass like a tumulus with a mill room hollowed out of it and a lead into which the water gushed from a brick conduit, the *qanat* itself flowing under the mill. In several different spouts the water issued from the far side of the mound. It was as complex as a telephone exchange.

'Bound to be good,' Hugh said, confronted by the crystal jets. '*Qanat* water. Comes from the hills.'

It was delicious. After we had drunk a couple of pints each we discovered that the water didn't come from the *qanat* but from the conduit which came overland from a dirty-looking village less than a mile away.

'I can't understand why you're so fussy,' he said, 'it doesn't affect me.'

Now, as I sat outside the police station brooding over these misfortunes, there was a sudden outburst of screams and moans from the other side of the road, becoming more and more insistent and finally mounting to such a crescendo that I went to investigate.

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Gathered round a well or shaft full of the most loathsome sewage was a crowd of gendarmes in their ugly sky-blue uniforms and several women in a state of happy hysteria, one screaming more loudly than the rest.

'What is it?'

'*Bābā*,' said one of the policemen, pointing to the seething mess at our feet and measuring the length of quite a small baby. He began to keel; presumably he was the father. I waited a little, no one did anything.

This was the moment I had managed to avoid all my life; the rescue of the comrade under fire, the death-leaper from Hammersmith Bridge saved by Newby, the tussle with the lunatic with the cut-throat razor.

Feeling absurd and sick with anticipation I plunged head first into the muck. It was only four feet deep and quite warm but unbelievable, a real eastern sewer. The first time I got hold of something cold and clammy that was part of an American packing case. The second time I found nothing and came up spluttering and sick to find the mother beating a serene little boy of five who had watched the whole performance from the house next door into which he had strayed. The crowd was already dispersing; the policeman gave me tea and let me change in the station house but the taste and smell remained.

Five miles beyond the police post the road forked left for the Afghan Frontier. It crossed a dry river bed with banks of gravel and went up past a large fortified building set on a low hill. After my pointless immersion I had become cold and my teeth were chattering. It seemed a good enough reason to stop the vehicle and have a look. Only some excuse such as this could halt our mad career, for whoever was driving seemed possessed of a demon who made it impossible ever to stop. Locked in the cab we were prisoners. We could see the country we passed through but not feel it and the only smells, unless we put our heads out of the window (a hazardous business if we both did it at the same time), were the fumes of the exhaust and our foul pipes; vistas we would gladly have lingered over had we been alone were gone in an instant and for ever. If there is any way of

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seeing less of a country than from a motor-car I have yet to experience it.

The building was a caravanserai, ruined and deserted, built of thin flat bricks. The walls were more than twenty feet high, decorated on the side where the gate was with blind, pointed arches. Each corner was defended by a smooth round tower with a crumbling lip.

Standing alone in a wilderness of scrub, it was an eerie place. The wind was strong and under the high gateway, flanked by embrasures, it whistled in the machicolations. Inside it was a warren of dark, echoing tunnels and galleries round a central court, open to the sky, with the same pointed arches as on the outer wall but here leading into small cells for the accommodation of more important travellers. In time of need this was a place that might shelter a thousand men and their animals.

The roof was grown thick with grass and wild peas, masking open chimney holes as dangerous as oubliettes. The view from the ramparts was desolate.

The air was full of dust and, as the sun set, everything was bathed in a blinding saffron light. There was not a house or a village anywhere, only a whitewashed tomb set on a hill and far up the river bed, picking their way across the grey shingle, a file of men and donkeys. Here for me, rightly or wrongly, was the beginning of Central Asia.

We drove on and on and all the time I felt worse. Finally we reached a town called Fariman. A whole gale of wind was blowing, tearing up the surface of the main street. Except for two policemen holding hands and a dog whose hind legs were paralysed it was deserted. Through waves of nausea I saw that Hugh had stopped outside some sort of café.

'I think we'd better eat here.' To my diseased imagination he seemed full of bounce.

'I don't think I can manage any more.'

'You are a funny fellow; always talking about food, now you don't want any.'

'You forget I've already eaten.'

He disappeared for a moment, then I saw him in the doorway

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semaphoring at me. With my last remaining strength I tottered into the building. It was a long room, brilliantly lit, empty except for the proprietor. He was bald, but for a grubby-looking frizz of grey curls, and dressed in a long, prophetic sort of garment. Hanging like a miasma over him and everything else in the building was a terrible smell of grease.

'*Ovis aries*, fat-tailed sheep, they store it up in their tails for the winter.'

'I've never smelt a sheep like this, dead or alive.'

'It's excellent for cooking,' Hugh said. Nevertheless, he ordered boiled eggs.

I had '*mast*'. Normally an innocuous dish of curdled milk fit for the most squeamish stomach, it arrived stiff as old putty, the same colour and pungent.

While I was being noisily ill in the street, a solitary man came to gaze. '*Shekam dard*,' I said, pointing to my stomach, thinking to enlist his sympathy, and returned to the work in hand. When next I looked at him he had taken off his trousers and was mouthing at me. With my new display of interest, he started to strip himself completely until a relative led him away struggling.

That night we huddled in our sleeping-bags at the bottom of a dried-out watercourse. It seemed to offer some protection from the wind, which howled about us, but in the morning we woke to find ourselves buried under twin mounds of sand like dead prospectors. But for the time being I was cured: sixteen sulphaguanadine tablets in sixteen hours had done it.

Full of sand we drove to the frontier town, Taiabad. It was only eight o'clock but the main street was already an oven. The military commander, a charming colonel, offered us sherbet in his office. It was delicious and tasted of honey. Hugh discussed the scandals of the opium smuggling with him. 'It is a disgraceful habit,' the Colonel said. 'Here, of course, it is most rigorously repressed but it is difficult to control the traffic at more remote places.' (In the Customs House the clerks were already at this hour enveloped in clouds of smoke.) 'You are going to Kabul. Which route are you proposing to take?'

We asked him which he thought the best.

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'The northern is very long; the centre, through the Hazara country, is very difficult; the way by Kandahar is very hot. We are still awaiting the young American, Winant. He set off to come here by the northern route in May.'

'But today's the second of July.'

'There was a Swedish nurse with him. Also he was very religious. It was a great mistake – a dangerous combination. Now we shall never see them again. In some respects it is a disagreeable country. Unless you are bound to go there, I counsel you to remain in Iran. I shall be delighted to put you up here for as long as you wish. It is very lonely for me here.'

We told him our plans.

'You are not armed? You are quite right. It is inadvisable; so many travellers are, especially Europeans. It only excites the cupidity of the inhabitants. I should go by Kandahar. Your visas are for Kandahar and that is the only route they will permit anyway. That is if anyone at the customs post can read,' he added mischievously.

Reluctantly we took leave of this agreeable man and set off down the road through a flat wilderness, until we came to a road block formed by a solitary tree-trunk. In the midst of this nothingness, pitched some distance from the road, was a sad little tent shuddering in the wind. After we had sounded the horn for some minutes a sergeant appeared and with infinite slowness drew back the tree-trunk to let us pass and without speaking returned to the flapping tent. Whatever indiscretion the Colonel may have been guilty of to land himself in such a place as Taiabad paled into utter insignificance when one considered the nameless crimes that this sergeant must have been expiating in his solitary tent.

After eight miles in a no-man's-land of ruined mud forts and nothing else we came to a collection of buildings so deserted-looking that we thought they must be some advanced post evacuated for lack of amenity. This time the tree-trunk was whitewashed. As Hugh got down to remove it, angry cries came from the largest and most dilapidated building and a file of soldiers in hairy uniforms that seemed to have been made from old blankets poured out of it and hemmed us in. As we marched

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across the open space towards the building, the wind was hot like an electric hair dryer and strong enough to lean on.

Inside the customs house in a dim corridor several Pathans squatted together sharing a leaky hubble-bubble. They had semitic, feminine faces but were an uncouth lot, full of swagger, dressed in saffron shirts and *chaplis* with rubber soles made from the treads of American motor tyres. In charge of them was a superior official in a round hat and blue striped pyjamas whom they completely ignored. It was he who stamped our passports without formality.

The customs house was rocking in the wind which roared about it so loud that conversation was difficult.

'Is it always like this?' I screamed in Hugh's ear.

'It's the *Bād-i-Sad-o-Bist*, "the Wind of Hundred and Twenty Days".'

'Yes,' said one of the Pathans, 'for a hundred and twenty days it blows. It started ten days ago. It comes from the north-west, but God only knows where it goes to.'

After the half-light of the building, the light in the courtyard was blinding, incandescent; the dust in it thick and old and bitter-tasting, as if it had been swirling there for ever.

We were in Afghanistan.

Now the country was wilder still, the road more twisting, with a range of desolate mountains to the west dimly seen in the flying sand of the *Bād-i-Sad-o-Bist*. The only people we met were occasional roadmenders, desiccated heroes in rags, imploring us for water. To the left was the Hari-Rud, a great river burrowing through the sand, and we pointed to it as we swept past, smothering them in dust, but they put out their tongues and waved their empty water skins and cried, '*namak, namak*' until we knew that the river was salt and we were shamed into stopping. It was a place of mirage. At times the river was so insubstantial that it tapered into nothingness, sometimes it became a lake, shivering like a jelly between earth and sky.

At Tirpul the road crosses the river by a battered handsome bridge, six arches wide, built of brick. We swam in a deep pool under an arch on the right bank that was full of branches as

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sharp as bayonets, brought down by the floods. Nevertheless, it was a romantic spot. The air was full of dust and the wind roared about the bridge, whipping the water into waves topped with yellow froth that falling became rainbows. Upstream a herd of bullocks were swimming the river, thirty of them, with the herdsman astride the leaders and flankers, urging them on. Beyond the river was Tirpul itself, a small hamlet with strange wind machines revolving on mud towers, with an encampment of black nomad tents on the outskirts and a great square caravanserai deserted on a nearby hill.

Out of the water, we dried out instantly and were covered with a layer of glistening salt. Hugh was a wild sight crouching on the bank in Pathan trousers, *shalvār*, far removed from the Foreign Office figure conjured up by the man at the Asian Desk. Here Hugh was in his element, on the shores of the Hari-Rud, midway between its source in the Kōh-i-Bāba mountains and the sands of the Kara-Kum, its unhealthy terminus in Russian Turkestan which holds the secret and perhaps the bones of the enigmatic Captain X whose name endures on the map in the Consulate at Meshed.

Sixty miles farther on we arrived at Herat. On the outskirts of the city, raised by Alexander and sieged and sacked by almost everyone of any consequence in Central Asia, the great towers erected in the fifteenth century by Gauhar Shah Begum, the remarkable wife of the son of Timur Leng,<sup>1</sup> King Shah Rukh, soar into the sky. Only a few of the ceramic tiles the colour of lapis-lazuli, that once covered these structures from top to bottom, still remain in position.

In the city itself the police stood on platforms of timber thick enough to withstand the impact of a bus or a runaway elephant, directing a thin trickle of automobiles with whistles and ill-tempered gestures, like referees.

In the eastern suburbs, where the long pine avenues leading to the *Parq Otel* were as calm and deadly as those round Bourne-mouth, the system became completely ludicrous. At every intersection a policeman in *sola topi* drooped in a coma of boredom until, galvanized into activity by our approach, he sternly blew

1. Tamerlane.

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his whistle and held up the non-existent traffic to let us pass.

The *Parq Otel* was terribly sad. In the spacious modernistic entrance hall, built in the thirties and designed to house a worldly, chattering throng, there was no one. Against the walls sofas of chromium tubing, upholstered in sultry red uncut moquette, alternated with rigid-looking chairs, enough for an influx of guests, who after thirty years had still not arrived. On the untenanted reception desk a telephone that never rang stood next to a letter rack with no letters in it. A large glass showcase contained half a dozen sticky little pools that had once been sweets, some dead flies and a coat hanger.

Besides ourselves the only other occupants of the *Parq* were two Russian engineers. We met them dragging themselves along the corridors from distant bathrooms in down-at-heel carpet slippers. They had gone to pieces. Who could blame them?

While Hugh washed in one of the fly-blown bathrooms, I went to photograph the great towers. Maddened by gaping crowds, fearful of committing sacrilege, I drove the vehicle off the road on to what I took to be a rubbish dump. It turned out to be a Moslem cemetery from which there was an excellent view but the camera refused to wind the film, and as I struggled with it, the sun went down. From all sides the faithful, outraged by my awful behaviour, began to close in. Gloomily I got back into the car and drove away.

By the time we left Herat it was dark. All night we drove over shattering roads, taking turns at the wheel, pursued by a fearful tail wind that swirled the dust ahead of us like a London fog. If it had been possible we should have lost the way, but there was only one road.

Until midnight we had driven in spells of an hour; now we changed every thirty minutes. It was difficult to average twenty miles in an hour and trying to do so we broke two shock absorbers. It was also difficult to talk with our mouths full of dust but we mumbled at one another in desultory fashion to keep awake.

'The aneroid shows seven thousand.'

'I don't care how high we are, I'm still being bitten.'

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'It's something we picked up at that tea place.'

'Perhaps if we go high enough they'll die.'

'If they're as lively as this at this altitude, they're probably fitted with oxygen apparatus.'

Finally even these ramblings ceased and we were left each with the thoughts of disaster and bankruptcy that attend travellers in the hour before the dawn.

The sun rose at five and the wind dropped. We were in a wide plain and before us was a big river, the Farah-Rud. As the owner of a tea-house had prophesied, the bridge was down. It was difficult to imagine the cataclysm that had destroyed it.

We crossed the river with the engine wrapped in oilskin, the fan belt removed, and with a piece of rubber hose on the exhaust pipe, to lift it clear of the water, led by a wild man wearing a turban and little else, one of the crew of three stationed on the opposite bank. In the middle the water rose over the floorboards and gurgled in our shoes.

It was a beautiful morning; the sky, the sand and the river were all one colour, the colour of pearls. Over everything hung a vast silence, shattered when the ruffians on the other side started up a tractor.

Because we were tired, having driven all night, we had forgotten to discuss terms for this pilotage. Now, safe on the other bank, too late we began to haggle.

'This is a monstrous charge for wading a river.' It was necessary to scream to make oneself heard above the sound of the tractor.

'It is fortunate that we did not make use of the tractor,' said the man in the ragged turban. 'It is rare for a motor to cross by its own power. With the tractor you would have had greater cause for lamentation.'

'That being so by now you must be men of wealth.'

Back came the unanswerable answer.

'But if we were not poor, *Aghā*, why should we be sitting on the shores of the Farah-Rud waiting for travellers such as you?'

The walls of the hotel at Farah were whitewashed and already

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at six o'clock dazzling in the sun. Breakfast was set in the garden: it was a silly idea of our own: runny eggs and flies and dust and hot sun all mixed inextricably together in an inedible mass.

We passed the day lying on *charpoy*s in a darkened room. Hugh was out completely, like a submarine charging its batteries, naked but for his Pathan trousers. Except for a brief interval for lunch, mildly curried chicken and good bread, he slept ten hours.

I could not sleep. I tried to read but it was too hot. Outside beyond the shutters the world was dead, sterilized by sun. At a little distance, shimmering in the heat, were the turreted walls of old Farah. I longed to visit it but the prospect of crossing the sizzling intervening no-man's land alone was too much. This was the city that Genghis Khan had captured and vainly attempted to knock down in the thirteenth century, that was re-occupied in the eighteenth and finally abandoned voluntarily in the nineteenth, so miserable had life within its walls become.

The sun expired in a haze of dust and the long, terrible day was over. In the early evening we set off. To the left were the jagged peaks of the Siah Band range; there were no trees and no sign of water, but by the roadside wild melons were growing, and we halted to try them but they were without taste. As we grew sticky eating bought melons from Farah, using the bonnet of the vehicle as a table, two nomad men passed with a camel, followed at a distance of a quarter of a mile by a youngish woman who lurched along in an extremity of fatigue. Neither of the men paid the slightest attention to her but they saluted us cheerfully as they went past.

It seemed impossible for the road to get worse, but it did: vast pot-holes large enough to contain nests of machine-gunners; places where it was washed away as far as the centre, leaving a six-foot drop to ground level; things Hugh called 'Irish Bridges', where a torrent had swept right through the road leaving a steep natural step at the bottom; all provided a succession of spine-shattering jolts. Whereas the previous night we had only met two lorries in the hours of darkness, there were now many monster American vehicles loaded with merchandise

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to the height of a two-storied house, each with its complement of piratical-looking men hanging on the scramble nettings, who jumped off to wedge the wheels on the steep gradients, while the passengers huddled together, making the crossing on foot groaning with apprehension.

Sticky with melon we arrived at a town called Girishk on the Helmand river. There, under a mulberry tree, squatted the proprietor of a *chaie khana*, a long-headed, grey-bearded Pathan, chanting a dirge on the passing of a newly founded civilization, no new thing in this part of the world.

'There is no light in the bazaar. The Americans brought light when they came to build the great dam' (the Helmand River Barrage) 'but when they left they took the machine with them and now there is no more light.

'There is no more light and I am alone in the desert' (this was an exaggeration - Girishk has eight thousand inhabitants) 'with nothing but these tins and a teapot. Once I worked in a German woollen mill but now I am poor; we are all poor.'

This was not the first time we had listened to those sad night intimacies of the tea-house. Nevertheless the old man's lament was strangely impressive. Perhaps because of the time - the unearthly hour before the dawn; because of the outlandish noises - the cries of shepherds calling to one another in the open country beyond the town and the barking of their dogs, like them, bolstering their courage in the darkness; but most of all because of the place itself - the tea-house that was nothing but a rug under a tree with a fire of yellow scrub to warm it, round which lay sleeping figures wrapped like sarcophagi, with their feet pointing towards the flames. All these, together with the heaps of empty tins that were the proprietor's inheritance and the giant fleas that invested us immediately we sat down, are not easily forgotten.

We asked him about the dam, that vast scheme of which so much vague ill had been spoken all along the way.

'It is all salt,' he moaned, 'the land below the American Dam. They did not trouble to find out and now the people will eat *namak* (salt) for ever and ever.'

The oil lanterns that were tied to the mulberry trees and which

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illuminated the street began to flicker and go out one by one.

We rose to leave.

'You will be in Kandahar in two hours,' he went on. 'The Americans built the road; they have not taken that away.'

It was as he said. The road was like a billiard table. The following morning we arrived at Kabul and drove down the great ceremonial avenues, newly asphalted, past Russian steam-rollers still ironing out the final bumps, to the principal hotel. We were five days late. It was Friday, 5 July. In a month we had driven nearly 5,000 miles. Our journey was about to begin.