MEMORIES OF CARAVAN-TRAVEL IN OLD IRAN

By SIR CLARMONT SKRINE, O.B.E.

I first knew Iran in 1916, when my Government sent me to Kerman as Vice-Consul. Except for a spell of leave in India the following summer I stayed there until March, 1919, so I had plenty of time to learn Persian and acquire an affection for the country and its people which I have retained ever since. The differences, economic, social, and political, between life in an Iranian province now and what it was forty-five years ago under the rule of the last Qajar Shah are many and striking; I will confine myself, therefore, to one revolution only, that of transportation.

Until after the First World War neither railway nor metalled road existed in all southern and eastern Persia. At a time when mechanical transport was already widespread in neighbouring India, the only motor vehicle of any kind that had been seen in the province of Kerman was a car which had been brought before the war from Tehran by one of the carpet firms. What you've never had you don't miss, and to me and my friends at Kerman the traditional fifteen to twenty miles a day of caravan travel seemed quite normal, unless you were in a hurry, in which case forty to sixty miles could be covered at considerable expense (on the main Tehran road only) by using the government posting (*chappar*) system. I did the journey between Bandar Abbas and Kerman four times and by three different routes, and not once did I take less than three weeks. For years now, I understand, the distance (225 miles by air, about 280 by road) can be done easily by car in a day and by Iranian Airways in an hour and a half. If that is not a revolution, what is?

In those days the roads between the larger towns were mostly passable by horse-drawn carriages and fourgons, and if you could afford it that was how you travelled. But if you wanted to save money, or your road crossed mountains or deep sands impassable by wheeled transport, you rode with a caravan, which usually consisted of both camels and donkeys. If you didn't like riding, or were ill or just lazy, you could be carried in a *kajāveh*. I never tried one of these; I had no wife to balance me on the other side of the camel, with the family samovar to make up the weight. I rode either a horse if I could get one, or a trained Baluch riding-camel, or even, once or twice, a grey Bahrain riding-donkey. My baggage, though it usually included a small doublefly tent and camp bed, pots and pans and stores as well as the usual luggage of a Western traveller, seldom amounted to more than a camel-load.

A long caravan-journey was an enterprise not lightly undertaken. Much bargaining went on between carriers, merchants, and prospective travellers before the rates of hire could be fixed—so much for a load of

about one hundred kilos for a camel or mule, fifty for a donkey—the hire paid depending on the season, the danger of brigands and the kind and value of the goods carried. The rate of travel was usually about a hundred miles a week on an average; halts of a whole day and night were frequent, for only small reserves of fodder were carried and the camels were expected to live on the country. For the same reason much of the travelling was done at night, so as to give the animals as much daylight as possible to graze by. Donkeys on the march were given a few handfuls of barley morning and evening; they moved faster than camels, I found, averaging two and a half miles an hour against the camels' one and three-quarter miles.

Starting off on the first march was always rather exciting. The hour fixed for loading has come and the loads, baled up with black goat-hair ropes, lie dotted about the big courtyard of the *serai*. Why don't the carriers come? They are late as usual, having their own last-minute chores to do and goodbyes to say. At last the sound of bells is heard and the tall, ungainly beasts are brought in, each to his appointed place between two bales. The camel is usually a dignified, supercilious person (*nafar*), but he soon loses his dignity when he is loaded or unloaded. Directly someone tries to make him sit down, he sets up the most extraordinary din of squeals and moans and bubblings, just as if he is having his throat cut. The reason probably is that he distrusts the smoothness of the patch of ground he has to kneel on to be loaded. A man who has to kneel on a bit of desert has a pair of hands with which to remove any sharp stones there may be in front of him; this facility is denied to the camel. The din subsides, the camels are on their feet again with their loads on, and they are led in strings of six down the street which leads out of the town.

Although the long marches were apt to be terribly monotonous at night, and often in the daytime too when there was nothing but blank desert to look at, I have on the whole happy memories of travel with animal transport in Persia and Central Asia. Sometimes under the stars I mused on Persia's mighty past as I rode night after night, week after week, just as the merchants did long ago who brought the silks of China to Balkh and Tūs and Reyy and Baghdad, as Marco Polo and his uncle did when they blazed the trail from Europe to Cathay. And always to me "the Road" meant escape from files and interviews and reports and the formalities of official life; it meant new country to see, new pictures for my camera, new game for my gun, new friends to make among the people of the lands through which I passed—not dashing along in a cloud of dust or hurtling through the skies far above (which is what passes for travel in these days) but gently, unhurriedly, unconfined to metalled roads and air-lanes and railway lines, using the four-footed creatures which God gave man to carry his burdens.

But I was young then.

(The above is the English script of a talk beamed to Tehran in Persian by the B.B.C. on 3.12.61.)

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