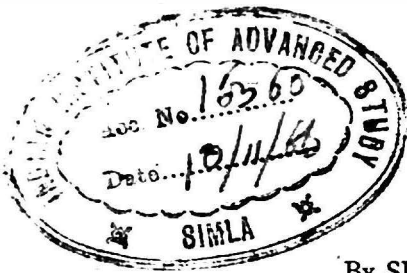


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## IRAN REVISITED

By SIR CLARMONT SKRINE, O.B.E.

Report of an illustrated lecture to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, May 14, 1958, Sir Hugh Dow, G.C.I.E., K.C.S.I., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, our lecturer today needs no introduction from me: Sir Clarmont Skrine has been a member of this Society for thirty-six years, a member of its Council for a great many years, and has lectured and shown his excellent films and pictures of his travels on numerous occasions. His expert knowledge of Central Asia has always been at our disposal and today we are to hear of another journey he has recently made to the scenes of some of his past service.

THREE years ago I told the Society about a visit I had paid to Tehran and Meshed in October and November 1954, not long after the end of the disastrous Musaddiq episode. On that occasion business which I shall explain later kept me at the capital most of the time, and I made up my mind afterwards that if I ever visited Persia again I would spend more time in the provinces than at Tehran and travel as far as possible by car from town to town. When, therefore, I found I could get away from London last February for seven weeks I planned to fly to Bagdad first, buy a car second-hand, drive it round Persia, and sell it on my return to Iraq. The point of this was, of course, that Iraq is in the sterling area and Persia is not.

The event proved very different from what I had planned. My search at Bagdad for a car and driver I could afford was fruitless and the only alternative, so far as I could see, was public transport. The prospect of weeks of travel in Persian buses was depressing, as readers of Mr. Wilfred Blunt's amusing travelogue *A Persian Spring* will understand. But there was nothing for it, and on February 15 I crossed the frontier at Khorramshahr on the Karun, six miles from Abadan, prepared for anything that might come in the way of transport. After all, even a Persian bus would be better than the interminable boredoms of travel by camel-caravan which I knew so well.

I need not have worried. I had long known Persians to be one of the most hospitable races on earth, but it remained for me on this occasion to learn the lengths to which that hospitality will go. Here I must explain that my project, though primarily pure tourism, had also a business aspect. At Tehran and Meshed in the autumn of 1954 I had been impressed by the urge I found among well-to-do parents to send their children to British boarding-schools, which they told me they knew to be the best in the world from the point of view of character-building. But they needed someone in England to find schools and holiday homes for them and look after the children they sent; and the man some of them wanted was my old war-time friend and colleague, Mr. C. W. Hart, M.B.E., who had for seven years been doing this very thing. During the Musaddiq period the number of his wards had dwindled to a dozen or so, but with the dis-

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appearance of the egregious Doctor from the scene the situation changed; Mr. Hart began to receive more applications for his services than he could cope with alone and in September 1954 he asked me to join him in his guardianship business. We started 1955 with sixteen boys and girls; in July we incorporated ourselves under the name of Mideast Guardians Ltd. and by the end of the same year the number of our wards had risen to sixty. Most of the children came from either Tehran or Meshed, where Mr. Hart and I served together during the last three and a half years of World War II. Since then Mideast Guardians has never looked back.

This, then, was the business aspect of my 1958 Persian trip which, like the 1954 one, was otherwise an entirely private and touristic venture; for the budget of Mideast Guardians Ltd. does not include provision for holidays in the Middle East for the Guardians. But thanks to the outstanding Persian virtues of hospitality and generosity to which I have referred, the goodwill earned by our small concern paid a rich dividend. For Mr. A. A. Nik-Khah of the National Iranian Oil Co., whose son aged thirteen and daughter aged eleven are wards of ours, appointed himself my Fairy Godfather from the day of my arrival on Persian soil. Not only did he entertain me royally in his comfortable bungalow at Abadan; not only did he take me on sight-seeing trips by car, launch and Piper Cub aeroplane; he crowned all by producing a "God in the Machine" who solved my main problem, transport, in truly dramatic style. It so happened that a Tehran motor magnate and his wife were staying in the house on a long visit. Hearing that I proposed to fly to Shiraz and travel thence from town to town by bus or taxi, the two gentlemen put their heads together. Two days later at breakfast my host said:

"Mr.— will not hear of your using buses and taxis. He has two cars and a chauffeur eating their heads off at Tehran while he is down here. He is having one of the cars driven to Shiraz to meet you, and it and the driver will be at your disposal. You can keep them as long as you like and go wherever you like up to end of March, when Mr.— returns to Tehran."

"Heavens!" I said, "I can't do that. It's wonderful of him, but I really must pay his firm for use of the car and the driver's wages."

"Certainly not. The car is his private property, and he would be highly offended at the suggestion."

I was flabbergasted. "Where was Mr.—," I asked? I decided on a personal appeal.

"He flew to Tehran this morning," said my host, "on business."

I found out afterwards that the business on which he went to Tehran was to see about sending the car and driver down to Shiraz, 560 miles, in time to meet my plane the following Thursday. A God in the Machine indeed!

Sure enough, when I descended from my Iranian Airways plane at Shiraz, there was a huge pink Chevrolet "Bel Air" saloon waiting for me in charge of a smiling young Persian chauffeur who answered to the name of Abdullah. The car was all that could be desired, both for town use and for the rough roads of remoter Persia, but Abdullah was a

treasure; skilfully and resourcefully he coped with every technical problem on the road, and off it acted as my valet, courier, guide, philosopher and friend. Together we covered 2,634 miles of main and subsidiary roads and another 938 miles running about in the cities and towns, especially at Tehran where I spent three weeks. Abdullah's local knowledge and skill in tracking down people I wanted to see were invaluable. I need only mention that I had fifty-four addresses of Mideast Guardians parents on my list, thirty-nine of them at the capital where the naming of the smaller streets and the numbering of the houses is not yet as good as it might be.

My colour-films and slides will show you some of the things Abdullah and I saw, first in the southern provinces of Khuzistan and Fars, then in the Yezd and Isfahan districts of central Iran, then at Tehran, and finally at Meshed and on the new road thither *via* Gurgan and Bujnurd. Among the scenes I filmed this time I interpolated sequences taken by me ten, twelve, fifteen, even (in one case) twenty-seven years ago. I think you will agree that the contrast between Persia "Then" and "Now" is in most cases very striking. Firdausi Avenue at Tehran on a fine spring morning in 1942, for example, with two horse-droskies and a water-cart the only traffic passing the gate of the British Embassy, compared with the same avenue today and the queue of cars which as often as not stretches bumper to bumper right up to the Shah Reza crossing. The Maidan at Isfahan in 1931, still as bare as it was when Shah Abbas watched the sons and daughters of his courtiers playing polo from his throne on Ali Kapu; now it is a park with fountains and trees which make a fitting foreground to his lovely mosque. The crowded Falakeh, the circular avenue round the sacred precincts of Imam Reza's great shrine at Meshed, lined with stalls gaily decked for the New Year, contrasted with the sea of tombs stretching right up to the Mosque of Gauhar Shad which I photographed from that very spot in 1928.

My week at Abadan was memorable. One day I was shown the mid-twentieth-century in the shape of the "Cat Cracker" or Catalytic Cracking Plant for high-octane spirit, pride of the great Refinery; on the next I saw the second millennium B.C. in the shape of Shush, the ancient Souza, where the researches of Dr. Ghirshman and his team have pushed back the known history of Iran many centuries beyond her Achæmenian greatness. I visited also Ahwaz, chief town of Khuzistan Province, as the guest of another of our "Mideast Guardians Fathers," a successful war-time contractor who, during the last five years, has spent large sums on installing three powerful diesel-powered pumps (English, I am glad to say) on the Karun River for the irrigation of 5,000 acres of rich alluvial land. This visit was a most interesting experience. The provincial millionaires of yesterday spent part of their fortunes on country houses, swimming-pools, and American convertibles at Tehran, salting the rest away in dollars or Swiss francs abroad; my host had remained faithful to his native town and his only extravagance, so far as I could see, was a Cadillac which he used like a jeep, bumping and lurching along the ruts made by his tractors among fields and orchards and stopping every now and then to pass the time of day with his Persian-Arab villagers. He is

the landlord of three different villages with which he shares the produce of their land—wheat, barley, maize, beans, melons, cucumbers—taking half in return for the water his pumps supply and the loan of oxen or tractors as the case may be. He also farms on his own, growing citrus fruits, melons and, surprisingly, lettuces which he sends by rail daily to Tehran during the season. On another day I was taken in one of the National Iranian Oil Company's six-seater planes to a 200-metre flood-regulating barrage on the Kerkha River ninety miles north of Abadan, which has recently been completed in a remarkably short time by an all-Persian team led by Mr. Nik-Khah and his Chief Engineer, another "Mideast Guardians Father."

But the trip I liked best of all was by air to the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf, twenty miles north-west of Bushire. Here construction began only last November of a deep-water port which will be connected by pipe-line with the rich oilfields of Gachsaran and Agha Jari. This is necessary because the outsize tankers of the future, monsters of 100,000 tons and more, will be too big for the existing delta ports of Bandar-i-Mashur and Bandar-i-Shahpur. My film shows the island from the air; it will be interesting to compare it in 1960 with shots from the same angles, for I was assured that work would be completed within two years. On our arrival my host and I were received by Persian administrative officials and lunched in their camp with technicians of several different nationalities, a cheerful crowd. The work is being done for the Persian Government and the Oil Consortium by a group which includes the British firms of Richard Costain (building) and Costain John Brown (pipe-line); the labour force is still small but is expected to number 3,000 when the work is at its height.

Kharg is an interesting island. It measures only six miles by three but has good water and a Persian-Arab population of 550; its rocky hills dotted with broad-leaved trees are the habitat of a peculiar breed of small wild antelope. There is a fine walled garden called the Bagh-i-Binnat or Garden of Paradise with date-palms, pomegranates, limes and banyans which unfortunately we did not have time to visit on our tour of the island in a jeep. The island had recently, I was told, been the place of exile of more than a hundred political detenus, members of the pro-Communist "Tudeh" party who were interned there after the fall of Musaddiq. All of them had been released before my visit except seventeen who preferred to stay on the island; three or four of them appear on my film, sulkily refusing to draw water from their well for the benefit of a bloated capitalist's cine-camera. One of them, I heard, was a baker who is doing better business than he ever did before he was interned; nothing, it seems, will induce him to leave his pleasant Devil's Island, not even the heat and humidity of July and August which have to be felt to be believed.

On February 20 I bid farewell to my hospitable friends at Abadan and flew in a comfortable and punctual DC3 liner of Iranian Airways to Shiraz, 250 miles, in an hour and twenty-five minutes. I had hoped to go by car, but the direct route is impassable in spring and I would have had to go round by Andimishk, Khorramabad and Isfahan, a matter of 900

miles. But I must say it was a fascinating flight. First came a maze of muddy waterways, the delta of the Shatt-el-Arab; next, the fantastically eroded hills of the coastal belt spread like a carpet of skeleton leaves below us; ten minutes later we were skimming over the lakes and snow-clad ridges of the wild country between Kazerun and Shiraz.

At the Fars capital I stayed for five days near the famous Koran Gate at the Hotel Parc-e-Saadi which in the days of the (British) Imperial Bank of Iran was the residence of its Shiraz manager. Here I made new friends in three different Ghavami families whose children Mideast Guardians look after; they belong to the same clan as the hereditary chieftain of the powerful Khamseh group of tribes in Fars, the Ghavam-ul Mulk, a staunch friend of our country since the days of World War I and the "South Persia Rifles." Though it was too early for the famous roses of Shiraz, the weather and the fruit-blossom could not have been lovelier. Among other sight-seeing trips Abdullah and I went for a trial run in the pink Chevrolet down the Bushire road as far as Kazerun, the car successfully negotiating the notoriously rough and steep Pir-i-Zan and Dukhtar passes over which I had flown three days before. Present-day Shiraz, thanks to town-planning on a most generous scale, is notable for its many miles of broad leafy avenues, especially the Khiaban-i-Zend which was once the town's dead-straight racecourse. The tomb of Hafiz and its garden as are beautiful as ever and much frequented by young and old, but I cannot say the same of the new tomb of Saadi a couple of miles to the east, the exterior of which I did not have the heart to photograph. A redeeming feature is the interior of the tomb-chamber which is beautifully decorated with passages from the philosopher-poet's four chief works, "Gulistan," "Bostan," "Badaye," and "Taiyebat," inlaid in marble on its walls.

We left Shiraz on February 25 and after the inevitable pilgrimage to Persepolis and that most impressive of sepulchres, the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae, diverged from the main road at Abadeh and came to the ancient township of Abarquh. No trace of modern town-planning disturbs the peace of this Sleepy Hollow, above which tower precariously a pair of tiled minarets set curiously close together like those of Yazd's Friday Mosque. On a hill-top to the east is another relic of Abarquh's departed glory, the "Dome of Ali," a circular stone tower of immense solidity with an octagonal clerestory dating probably from Timurid times. Thence we crossed a belt of salt desert by a little-used track and came to the lonely village of Deh-i-Shir clustered round its medieval fortress; to the north a lofty wall of snow-peaks, the Shir Kuh range, seemed to bar our way. But the road turned south-east and ran parallel to the mountains for thirty miles passing other fortress-villages of the plain, Tatu, Fakhrabad, Gariz, watered by *qanats* fed from far-off snows. At the last-named I was surprised to find rows of neat little two-roomed bungalows of identical design lining the road; a notice in flowing script informed me that they had been built by public subscription to house the many families left homeless by a flood which drowned 500 people two years ago. Alas, it is easier to build a cottage of modern design fronting the highway for a Persian peasant than to persuade him to occupy it; very few of the

bungalows are occupied and the survivors cling tenaciously to their ancient village site.

At last the narrow gravel-road turned northwards over a low saddle among snow-peaks and brought us in the golden evening to the ancient city of Yezd. Here, in the very heart of Iran, ancestral home of her surviving Zoroastrians and of the Parsees of India, I loafed happily at a secluded guest-house attached to the "Cafe-Ristoran Roshan" on Ker-man Avenue, exploring on foot the *kuchehs* and bazars of the old town, rubber-necking its medieval mosques and chatting with its friendly inhabitants. Abdullah and I also spent a memorable day among the ice-clad peaks and precipices of the Shir Kuh, the highest massif of which, 13,370-foot Barfkhaneh ("Home of Ice"), reminded me of the Eiger. Along a twisting track which in places only just let the big Chevrolet through we climbed first to the charming hill-village of Tezza Jan right up under the very shadow of Barfkhaneh's mighty cliff, then by a long détour to the great cirque of Deh Bala, seven to nine thousand feet above the sea—surely the highest and most spectacular mountain village in all Persia? Nothing could have been more friendly than our reception by Syed Agha Rasul, mayor of Tezza Jan, who kept us an hour chatting over glass after glass of tea in his two-storeyed wood-and-plaster home. He asked anxiously after his old friends in the Church Missionary Society who used to come up every summer from their Yezd branch, now closed. I was able to tell him that only a few days before the Rev. Mr. Sharp, whom he mentioned specially, had advised me at Shiraz to see both Tezza Jan and Deh Bala and remember him to his friends there.

Even in a place where I thought I might be looked at askance, the precincts of Yezd's thirteenth-century Friday Mosque, I was received, un-announced, with the utmost friendliness. A venerable hereditary *Khadim* (servitor) of thirty-eight years' standing showed me round and I was courteously received afterwards by the Superintendent and the Secretary of the committee of twelve who conduct the affairs of the great mosque. The buildings, remarkable for the very tall and slender twin minarets built by Fath Ali Shah to surmount the richly tiled portico added by Tamerlane's son Shahrukh in the fifteenth century, are in perfect repair and the acres of stone floor are carefully swept. In the great vaulted halls up to 2,000 worshippers, they told me, assemble weekly for the Friday prayers. The Committee administer a fund, financed half by local rates and subscriptions, half by the Central Government, devoted to the beautification and improvement of the mosque. An English-speaking, Bombay-trained engineer showed me proudly the forty horse power diesel-electric plant of British make installed a year ago for the lighting of the great mosque; it also supplements the town supply, the peak hours of which are different from the mosque's.

The town and district benefit no less than the mosque from the Tehran Government's financial assistance granted on a fifty-fifty basis for development and modernization. Yezd, once sleepest and most old-fashioned of Persia's larger towns, is awake and proud of its "New Look." Happy schoolboys race up and down the smooth asphalt of the



avenues on their American bicycles, villagers tuff-tuff in and out of town on their motor-scooters, the great *yakhchāls* which for centuries have provided ice for Yezd's blazing summers are now outmoded because with mechanical transport ice can be brought more cheaply from the mountains to the south. Strings of camels laden with grain from the less accessible villages swing slowly past a cotton mill in which ten thousand spindles rattle day and night. A big weaving factory is half-built on the north-west side of the town. Yezdis are indeed awake and at work, even at night, some of them. I shall never forget my surprise when, on an after-supper stroll in an apparently deserted quarter of the old town, I suddenly came upon a whole street of confectioners making sweets by lamplight for the forthcoming New Year festival. Boys and men of all ages, sticky from head to foot, toiled at their vats and cauldrons, chattering and singing at their work as if they enjoyed it. I thought of the sugar-famines of the war years at Meshed, when none but the well-to-do could afford even to sweeten their tea, and said to myself: Persia has come a long way since those days on the road to prosperity.

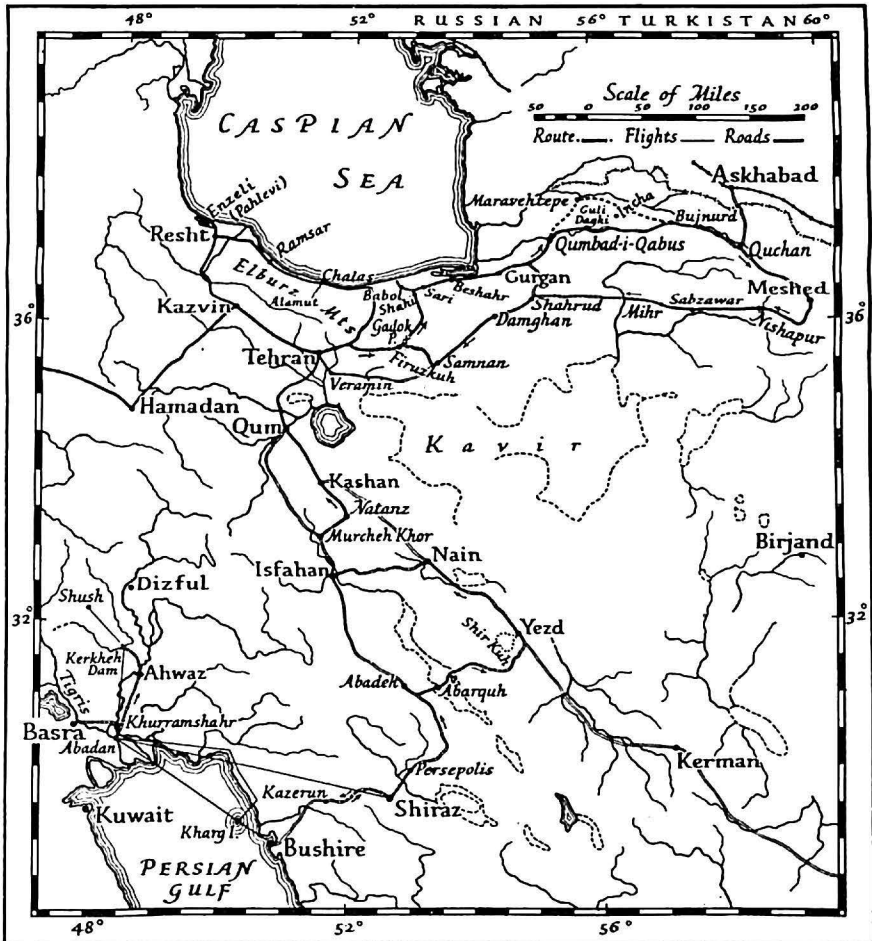
Our next halt was at Isfahan, capital of all Iran under the Safavid dynasty of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was already March; I was overdue at Tehran, and could afford only two nights at one of the hotels on busy Chharbagh Avenue. Here again as at Yezd I was impressed by the hive-like activity of the shops in preparation for the Persian New Year, still sixteen days ahead. At eleven o'clock at night on one short side-street I counted seventeen cobblers and five tailors with their assistants, all working feverishly in their shops, piling up shoes and suits to sell to an obviously prosperous public. I had been many a Nauruz season in Persia, but never saw trade so good.

From Isfahan we left the beaten track once more and drove *via* Murchkhor to the old town of Natanz which nestles at the eastern foot of 12,700-foot Mount Karkas. My hopes of photographs were disappointed; the weather, which had been perfect since I entered Iran, broke that day and Karkas's tremendous peaks and precipices were veiled in mist and rain. We left the blue-domed shrine of Rukia Banu and the other antiquities of Natanz unvisited beneath a lowering sky and headed for Kashan, a much bigger town famous for its silk rugs and for the great cypress avenue in the sixteenth-century royal garden of Fin. On the 170-mile road to Tehran next morning we edged our way unobtrusively through the crowd of Ramazan pilgrims that thronged the streets of sacred Qum where Bibi Fatima, sister of Meshed's Eighth Imam, lies buried. Heavy clouds hung over the gilded domes of the shrine and I prayed in vain to the Bibi for sun to make them shine like jewels against the blue as they did when last I filmed them twelve long years ago.

Soon after leaving Qum we crossed a mile-wide patch of strangely blackened earth. Not a bush, not a plant lived; the country looked like the dried-up bed of a prehistoric lake of ink. It was indeed a dry lake-bed, but of oil, for it was here that last year the Persian Government's oil drillers struck a "gusher" which flooded the countryside before it could be stopped by experts flown specially from America. This entirely new find of oil less than 90 miles from the capital may one day be of

immense importance to the country's economy, but as yet the drillers have made no further discoveries in the neighbourhood.

After this hideous blackness came a lovely apparition of purest white. Far to the north the perfect cone of Demavend, Persia's highest mountain, towered like an iceberg above the desert sea. A couple of hours later we were scudding past the rather tawdry domes of Shah Abdul Azim's famous shrine and soon the traffic of the crowded streets and avenues of the capital engulfed us.



It was now March 6 and I had only a fortnight in which to do my Mideast Guardians business before Persia's New Year's Day, March 21, and the holidays which follow it. I was lucky to get, with Embassy help, a room with bathroom at the Hotel Naderi on the avenue of that name. The comfort and service at this quite small hotel was typical of the change that has taken place in Persia's living standards within less than a generation; what a contrast it was to the decayed and odoriferous establishment



my wife and I were taken to when we arrived by car from India in 1931! The numbers and opulence of the cars on the streets of Tehran compared with even ten years ago astonished me. Most were American models like Atlantic liners but there were many Volkswagens and Opels and quite a number of big Russian Zis and smaller Pobeda saloons. It was nice to see that most of the taxis were still British makes in the 1,000-1,200 cc. class, Hillman, Standard, Ford, Morris, Austin, Vauxhall. Persian taxis are sensibly painted on a uniform design, green for the front and rear portions of the body, white for the middle. Traffic congestion must have increased still further since I left with the arrival of a fleet of 250 double-decker London buses which some business friends of mine were importing on behalf of the Municipality. I wish I could have been there with my cine-camera when they first appeared on Stamboul Avenue!

The vast increase in traffic is but a symptom of Persia's worst demographic problem, the concentration of population in the capital. When I first saw Tehran in 1931 its population was estimated at a quarter of a million; in 1946 it had grown to a million and last year the official figure was 1,650,000. For an agricultural country as big as France and Germany put together with about 20,000,000 inhabitants this is not yet an unduly high figure, but it soon will be if the present rate of increase is maintained. Whole new suburbs have been built during the last four years along both the avenues leading to Gulhek and Shemran, while to the north-east of what used to be the Mazanderan Gate has appeared a regular "subtopia" of uniformly built and colour-washed villas called Tehran Park. These developments are a sign of Persia's new prosperity, but in the interests of her economy as a whole it is to be hoped that urbanization will not get quite out of control. It should be remembered that Tehran is an artificial capital with a good situation and water-supply but no port, few industries, no mines and therefore no industrial *raison d'être* for a disproportionately large population.

I could not return to England without one more look at my official home during three and a half years of the Second World War, the British Consulate General at Meshed, especially as two new ways of getting there have been opened during the past year. These are the six-hundred-mile-long Khorasan branch of the Trans-Iranian Railway and the motor-road *via* Firuzkuh, Gorgan and Bujnurd. The latter runs close to the frontier of Soviet Turkmenistan and only became possible for ordinary cars in May 1957 when the Gumbad-i-Qabus—Bujnurd section, 147 miles, was completed and used by H.M. the Shah when he visited Meshed to inaugurate the Tehran-Meshed railway service. One does not go to Persia to travel by train, and I had an ambition of many years' standing to fulfil; during the war I had camped among the "Flowery Mountains" in the Turcoman country west of Bujnurd and in 1948 I had motored as far as Gorgan from Tehran, 217 miles, but I had never been right through. Now, thanks to the kind owner of the Chevrolet which was still at my disposal, my chance had come.

On March 17 Abdullah and I took the road once more and were soon spinning north-eastwards with the lofty ridges of the Elburz, still snow-

clad, on our left. The road joins the Trans-Iranian Railway at Firuzkuh and follows it over the Gaduk Pass down to the Babol road-fork at Shahi on the coastal plain of the Caspian. It is a regular "autobahn" now as far as Roudchen where a branch to the left goes up to Tehran's spa and winter-sports resort, Ab-Ali; from there to Shahi it is gravelled and in places rather rough but much broader and better-engineered than ten years ago when I last saw it. The contrast is greater still with 1931 when my wife and I paid the Caspian a visit on our way from India to Europe in an Austin Sixteen tourer. In those days the railway was in the blue-print stage and the road had only been made possible for motors the year before; picturesque Mazanderan was quite unspoilt and its primrose-carpeted woods unravaged. Coming back over the Gaduk Pass we had to follow the stream-bed the last five miles up a slope of one in six and the old car, loaded with luggage on both running-boards as well as the back carrier, only just made it, boiling furiously. Then, we took thirteen hours from Barfurush (now Babol) to Tehran, 172 miles; this time we reached Shahi, ten miles short of Babol, in five hours' running time from Tehran. From Shahi to Gorgan the road is asphalt again and good on some stretches, on others badly worn, but the big Chevrolet had no difficulty in keeping up an average of thirty-five miles an hour.

The Mazanderan countryside showed welcome signs of economic recovery. Whereas in 1948 one seldom saw a man or a woman on a horse, now there were almost as many villagers ambling on their ponies along the grassy verges as in 1931 when my chief impression had been of a mounted peasantry. Cattle, too, were much more plentiful than ten years ago, though tractors have already begun to replace draught-oxen on the fields. In the little towns along the road, Shahi, Sari, Behshahr, Gorgan, Gumbad-i-Qabus, improvements can be seen, new boulevards, new schools, new mills and factories for processing cotton, sugar and tobacco. Workmen and schoolboys crowd the sidewalks after hours, better clad and in greater numbers than of old. At Gorgan in the late evening we were misdirected to an old-fashioned little inn frequented chiefly by lorry-drivers in big round Turcoman hats of black lambskin. Here we spent an uncomfortable night only to find next morning that the "Park Hotel" we should have patronized was on the roundabout two hundred yards further on. Next day's run, however, and the hospitable welcome we received at Bujnurd made up for it. On a glorious Spring morning it was exciting to find myself in Central Asia once more with Gumbad-i-Qabus, the one great Persian monument I had never seen, ahead of me and the seldom-visited "Turcoman Steppe" beyond.

A few miles short of Gumbad we passed our fourth wrecked commercial vehicle since Shiraz. The first three had been huge eight- and ten-wheeled lorries; one lay on its side on a perfectly straight and flat stretch of highway between Yezd and Ardakan, another had buried its nose in a steep rock-face near Dehbid on the Isfahan-Shiraz road, a third had tumbled off a causeway near Sari. This one was a bus upside down in a deep ditch, the banks of which were spattered with blood. A local man who was guarding it said that the driver had escaped but his cleaner and two of the twenty-one passengers had been killed and most of the

rest injured. He had travelled a bit, my informant, had been to Pakistan, and he had a low opinion of his fellow-countrymen's fitness to handle large and expensive motor vehicles. It certainly looked as if the standard of driving had not improved since my day. Four roadside wrecks passed in eight days on the highway! Even in 1943-45, when we were trucking six and seven thousand tons of military supplies a week to Russia in civilian lorries by the 800-mile Zahedan-Ashkhabad road, the accident rate was nothing like this.

The Gumbad-i-Qabus did not disappoint me, except that its base is so cluttered up with unworthy modern buildings, brick-kilns and so on that it is impossible to get an undistorted "still" picture of the whole of it unless one has special equipment for architectural subjects. The perfection of Seljuk construction in brick is amazing; after eight centuries the vast circular tower with its conical cap soaring above the ground looks as if it had been built last year.

From picturesque but dirty Hajiler village at the foot of the mountains twelve miles east of Gumbad the road to Bujnurd, 133 miles, is a new one constructed last year specially to enable H.I.M. the Shah to drive through his "Golestan Royal Game Reserve" to Meshed. For about fourteen miles in the Tang-i-Sera it passes through some fine beech-forest, but the scenery is on a small scale compared with the tremendous forest-filled gorges of Mazanderan. On this section the road is in bad repair, in fact in some places it looked as if it would be cut through by the very next flood. It will be a pity if this is allowed to happen, for the next ninety miles over the plateau to Bujnurd are splendidly engineered and in good condition except for a few miles east of Badralu village.

I was very disappointed to find that the new alignment did not, as I had hoped, take me over the Goli Daghi or Flowery Mountains. This area, described by the late Colonel Kennion in *Mountain Lake and Plain*, is in what is known as the *Sahra-yi-Turkmen* or Turcoman Steppe. In 1944, by favour of the Governor of Bujnurd and with the help and guidance of the Kurd chief, Mir Ardeshir Khan Shadlu, I camped for three days near Incha, headquarters of the nomad Goklan tribe of Persian Turcomans. The rounded hill-tops and ridges of the Goli Daghi do not rise more than 6,000 feet above the sea and seem to be covered with rich humus to their very summits, for in summer they are clothed with wild flowers waist-high, pink, blue, yellow, white according to the season. I was there in July, too late alas for the glories of May and June, but even so my 1944 film shows my escort riding along a ridge-top through a forest of tall hollyhocks. In the folds of the hills are copses of immense oaks and beeches and other deciduous trees; these are the habitat of the "Bujnurd Stag" described by Kennion and the big long-haired manul or Pallas's cat, of which we kept a fine specimen for three years at the Meshed Consulate General during the war. The Shah's new road passes well to the south of the Goli Daghi which is best reached by jeep from Bujnurd. The Goklan Turcomans reminded me very much of the Kirghiz of the Chinese Pamirs; they are true nomads and live almost entirely on their flocks and herds, moving their round felt-covered tents from camping-ground to camping-ground according to the season.

At Bujnurd, which we reached without hurrying in six hours' running time from Gumbad, we were most hospitably entertained by the Mayor, Mir Aslam Khan Shadlu, son of the chief who took me to the Goli Dagli in 1944. Like his father, the Mayor is a loyal friend and admirer of our country; his son, a student at one of our Polytechnics, is with us here this afternoon. I was agreeably surprised at the improvement in this remote town of some 22,000 inhabitants compared with fourteen years ago. Then, wide avenues had been laid out and left unpaved, the trees planted along them had died for want of water, whole streets had been demolished and nothing done to re-house the occupants, trade was stagnant and the people poor and dispirited. Bujnurd today is a really attractive town with miles of asphalted and well-drained avenues lined with flourishing willows and acacias, its streets clean and well-lit, its hospitals properly equipped and staffed and its schools flourishing.

Three hours' driving along a narrow and twisting gravel road brought us to Quchan on the Meshed-Ashkhabad highway, Persia's sole link with Soviet Transcaspia. From there the ninety-mile road to Meshed is almost straight and quite good, though only the last twelve miles are asphalted. I was made welcome and very comfortable by old friends, the Rev. Mark Irwin and his wife, at the American Mission which is no longer, as it was in my day, accessible only by a narrow and crooked lane but fronts a fine new boulevard. During my three days' stay I found the same crowds and bustle and general air of prosperity as at Tehran and Isfahan and, to a less extent, at Yezd and Shiraz. All the main streets were decorated for Nauruz, banners and streamers galore, side-walk stalls gay with rugs and embroideries and packed with promenaders and shoppers. Signs of Russian influence are nowadays conspicuous by their absence and the Soviet Government no longer maintains a consular post. But it is American, not British influence that has replaced Russian. There is a flourishing U.S. Consulate headed by an energetic and popular young officer, Mr. Schott, whereas the fine old British Consulate General has not been re-established. It is no longer, however, derelict as when I last saw it; an excellent and most conscientious Punjabi clerk, Mr. Hansraj, acts as caretaker for the Foreign Office and with his Persian wife hospitably entertains British travellers, doing his best meanwhile to keep the place in repair on a very small maintenance grant.

British trade, I fear, is losing ground. I had personal experience of this. A prosperous Meshed agriculturist who entrusted his fifteen-year-old son to me in October 1954 was then an importer of British farm equipment in a big way; it was to study British mechanized farming that he sent his son to England. We had the boy taught English and after a year working at farms and two years at an agricultural college in Shropshire he has passed his exams with flying colours. But in the meantime his father has been persuaded by his American friends that cotton is a more profitable crop than cereals or sugar-beet, and when I saw him this time he informed me apologetically that he had decided to send his son to California University where he could learn about cotton better than in England. Future imports of agricultural machinery for Khorasan will

doubtless be from the U.S.A. In 1954 there were no less than sixty-five Americans working for "Point Four Aid" in Meshed and the villages of the province; now all but five have been withdrawn, but their work and the trade connexions they created remain.

There is talk of selling about half of the large and centrally-situated compound of our Consulate General and letting the rest to the British Council for the establishment of a cultural centre in Khorasan. It is devoutly to be hoped that this scheme will go through, for no better use could possibly be found for the very large sum which the land to be sold should fetch. Meshed will in future be more than the stronghold of Shi'a Islam it has been for a thousand years; it is to have a University. I interviewed the Rector-designate, Dr. Samirad, another "Mideast Guardians Father." He told me that there is already a College of Theology attached to the great Shrine of the Eighth Imam; a Medical College is to be housed in what is now the Shah Reza Hospital, to replace which a bigger and better hospital is under construction; and the fine modern building in which I saw the Rector is to be the College of Arts. From every point of view, cultural, commercial and political, it will be a thousand pities if Britain makes no effort to recover at this crucial time the goodwill and respect earned for her by the British Consulate General during the sixty years of its existence.

Three years ago I told the Society of Meshed's new avenues and asphalted streets; great progress has been made since then and the city is now, with its 250,000 inhabitants, worthy of the great Shrine to which it owes its fame. Above all, the completion of the railway link with Tehran has given Meshed new life and new hope. There is a daily passenger service all the year round and it is doubled at pilgrimage seasons; the single journey takes twenty-two hours and the fares are 840 rials (£4) first class with couchette, 540 rials (£2 11s. 6d.) second class and 340 rials (£1 12s. 3d.) third. Though the trains are usually packed (I saw one start with something like a thousand passengers aboard) the branch must be heavily subsidised, for it is 600 miles long, terminates at Meshed and serves no heavy industries. But then the whole Trans-Iranian system, beloved child of the late Shah, is a burden on Persia's economy; its value is political rather than economic, and the same applies to the Khorasan line. I saw the foundations of what is to be Persia's most splendid railway station, its frontage two hundred metres long, far surpassing Tehran's; from it three avenues will radiate, one of them to the Shrine whose turquoise and gold domes and minarets at the end of the vista will be a dream of the Arabian Nights.

From Meshed we returned to the capital in two days by the historic but monotonous Nishapur-Shahrud-Semnan route. The drive and my last five days at Tehran before flying home on March 28 were spoilt for me by an acute attack of catarrhal sinusitis brought on by a Meshed chill and I shall not linger over them. They gave me time at any rate to ponder over what I had seen and heard during the past six weeks. Everywhere I had been impressed by signs of a new prosperity. More flocks and herds grazing, more cars and lorries on the roads, more villagers riding ponies, more ploughs and harrows at work on the rain-irrigated up-

lands than at any spring season in my long Persian experience. Why was this? What new factors had brought about this change in Persia's fortunes?

It was obvious that the interest taken by the Western Powers in Persia's well-being and their efforts to set the country on its feet after the Musaddiq fiasco had been a major factor. The injection of American and British capital and technical know-how into the Persian economy has had a tonic effect. But this is by no means the whole story. What has really made the difference is, firstly, the strong lead given by the Shah and his Ministers in the direction of wise planning and honest administration and, secondly, the energy and skill with which key men in industry, agriculture and administration have availed themselves of the opportunities offered.

These facts were impressed on me by a talk with one of those key men soon after my arrival in Tehran. The direction of Persia's development drive is centralized in the *Sazeman-i-Barnameh*, generally known in English-speaking circles as the Seven-Year Plan Organization. Its Director, Mr. Abolhasan Ebtehaj, is well known as one of Persia's ablest and most dynamic personalities who made his name before World War II as the first Head of the National Bank of Iran. The Organization's activities are financed partly from the oil revenues, sixty per cent. of which estimated at £40.6 million has been allotted to it in the Budget for the current year (March 22, 1958 to March 21, 1959). Expenditure is, or at any rate was at the end of March last, expected to be £68.9 million including £13.6 million on agriculture and irrigation, £7.3 million on industries and mines, and £8.3 million on development in Khuzistan for which a special Authority has been set up on the model of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Separately from its own budget the Plan Organization finances the activities of various industrial and agricultural companies for sugar, weaving, cotton, building materials, mines and so on with a total turnover of £19.6 million. Large sums are set aside for the encouragement of development by local authorities in the Provinces, who receive aid on easy terms up to fifty per cent. of their expenditure on approved schemes including town-planning, irrigation, public health, water-supply and light industries. In this important sphere the Plan Organization co-operates with the U.S. "Point Four Aid" administration which has done so much for Persia since the war.

The Director asked me for my impressions of Persia during my travels. I told him that I had found a new spirit in the Provinces, a new optimism and confidence in the future which I had not seen before in Iran. People were buying hard, selling hard and working hard.

"What you say interests me," said Mr. Ebtehaj, "because only last night I was talking to one of the Directors of Burma-Shell and he said that most of the change you describe has happened in the last year, which is quite true."

"How do you explain that?"

"It is the fifty per cent. aid we give to towns which want to develop. At first nobody believed we meant it. It was too good to be true. Tehran had always taken money from the provinces, not given or lent it to them.



At last it got round that help was really to be had, and there was a rush. Now we are subsidizing no less than 227 towns and townships."

It must be admitted that in some towns the expenditure on asphalted boulevards and ambitious public architecture seems disproportionate to the size and wealth of the population served. But the value of such things in terms of public morale and of civic pride and self-respect is not to be underrated. The *drang nach Tehran* and consequent deterioration of the provincial towns has been for decades a regrettable trend; there are signs that it has been halted. The success of the Central Government's development policy, however, is not to be measured only in terms of town-planning and public works. Its effect upon enterprise in the private sector is even more valuable. Hundreds of new businesses have been started, ranging from pump-irrigated farms and small factories making consumer goods for the local market up to full-scale textile mills and whole estates being developed on modern lines. You have heard about my contractor friend at Ahwaz who in five years has brought 5,000 acres of land under intensive cultivation by pumping water up from the Karun River. At Meshed I heard what another wealthy war-time friend has done at Jangal, a remote village close to the Afghan frontier. Most of Jangal's arable land depends on a dam which has not held water for many years; the landlord has repaired the dam at a cost of several million rials, built a model village complete with avenues and roundabouts, restored the picturesque old castle and made a new motor-road connecting Jangal with Turbat-i-Haidari on the Zahedan-Meshed highway.

The point is that neither my Ahwaz friend nor the Meshed magnate would have risked capital on this scale if they had not been tolerably sure of enjoying a fair proportion of the profits. Until not so very long ago such rashness would have attracted the attentions of a horde of rapacious officials and bosses. With security and encouragement at home and generous help from abroad the profit-motive comes into play and the energies of an intelligent and virile race are turned into productive channels.



