ALONE THROUGH THE FORBIDDEN LAND

Journeys in Disguise through Soviet Central Asia

by

GUSTAV KRIST

translated by
E.O. Lorimer

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Translator's Note

The transliteration of place-names and vernacular words is a problem of great complexity. The most authoritative maps, based on the Survey of India, the War Office, and the Royal Geographical Society's maps, and the best foreign sources, are frequently at variance with each other and often inconsistent with themselves.

Since the majority of Central Asian place-names are significant—Red Water ('Qizil Su' in Turki and 'Surkh Ab' in Persian), Rock Fortress ('Tash Qurghan'), etc. —I have endeavoured to use such forms as would correctly indicate their original meaning, consulting for this purpose Redhouse for Turkish, Raquette for Turki, Steingass and Phillott for Persian, and in general the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

I am also deeply indebted for advice to my friend, Professor Vladimir Minorsky of London University, who is a European authority not only on Persian and Turkish but also on the geography of Central Asia.

In the case of names like Tashkent, Meshed, etc., which are well established in English usage, I have (inconsistently, but I trust acceptably) retained the familiar forms.

For fear of bewildering the casual reader I have not

usually marked the long vowels of foreign words nor inserted the signs expressing the *'ain* or *hamza* of the Arabic script, nor attempted to render the subtleties of the Turki vowel system. The list of vernacular words at the end of the book will supply the clue to most of the significant place-names.

It may be pertinent to mention, for those not conversant with oriental languages, that the difference in pronunciation between *q* and *k* is roughly similar to the difference between the English *k*-sounds in 'calf' and 'king' respectively, though in Arabic itself the sound denoted by English *q* is pronounced much deeper in the throat than the *c* of the English 'calf'.

E. O. LORIMER

Preface

Year by year sportsmen and scientists travel in numbers through Africa, Australia, South America, and the islands of the South Seas, while Central Asia still remains almost unknown. The reasons for this state of affairs are various and many. The Amirate of Bukhara, the Kingdom of Afghanistan, the Khanate of Khiwa and the Russian territories in Turkistan have been almost completely closed to Europeans. Inhospitable deserts and mountains make scientific journeys exceptionally difficult and unfruitful. Since the World War such journeys have been impossible in Russian territory. During the War the Russian Government refused on political grounds to permit any European to enter Turkistan, and the Soviets are even more scrupulous than the Tsarist régime to keep Turkistan closed to foreigners.

Bukhara is a state about three times the size of Austria. Until 1917 it was more or less loosely a dependency of Russia; when in that year it successfully shook off the Russian yoke it forbade any European to cross its frontiers. In the summer of 1920 Red troops bombarded and occupied the capital, and the fugitive Amir took refuge with relatives in Afghanistan. The new constitutions of the three autonomous states, Uzbegistan, Tajikistan, and

Turkmenistan hermetically sealed their borders, and the entry of a European was more sternly forbidden than ever before; even Russian travellers required a special permit.

Such Europeans as had visited Bukhara before the end of the nineteenth century were for the most part agents of the British, French, or Russian governments, who travelled either in disguise or under the pretext of scientific research. They seldom returned. They were usually discovered and executed, or compelled to serve as slaves. The few among them who got back to Europe confided little concerning their adventures or experiences to the public, since as military emissaries it was their business to furnish reports only to their respective governments.

As early as 1243 an Englishman, Cooley, reached Bukhara. He was followed in 1271 by the Italian, Marco Polo, who lived at the court of Timur the Lame (Tamerlane). A hundred and thirty years elapsed before Clavigo's visit in 1403. Another two hundred years passed before the two Englishmen, Stell and Crofter, saw Bukhara in 1604. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a number of Russian spies were successful in penetrating the country, and a handful of western Europeans, among whom were Vambéry, Schwarz, Lansdell, and Chanikoff; finally the two Englishmen, Stoddart and Conolly were executed in Bukhara in 1842. These were of course not the only travellers who attempted the journey, but most of the others failed to reach their goal, for the rivals Britain and Russia would inform the amirs in time of the plucky adventurers' intentions, and they were either detected and turned back at the frontiers, or taken prisoners to the capital,

whence they were repatriated, after lengthy negotiations, in return for a heavy ransom—without having been allowed to see anything of Bukhara itself. It is characteristic of the country and its government that less than fifty years ago Russia had to redeem a number of her citizens out of Bukharan slavery.

In the early twentieth century a few men, Russians and British for the most part, succeeded in gaining entry to the country and endeavoured mutually to supplant each other in the favour of the Amir; for the governments of both countries looked on Bukhara as the heart of the Muslim world—which in fact it is to-day—and were seeking there a base for the penetration and conquest of Central Asia. For the moment the Russians have won the round.

It is now merely a matter of time—and no long time—till the Soviets will have so completely altered the face of Central Asia that there will remain no memorial of the ancient empire of Timur save a few ruined buildings and scanty literary records. In mentioning Europeans in Bukhara I must not forget my fellow countryman, the Austrian Russmann, who was taken prisoner by the Russians during the War, escaped from Ashqabad, and became a cavalry general. During the War there were some forty Austrians in Bukharan service. I visited the country for the first time during the War and had the good fortune to get to know the old Bukhara—one of the most interesting countries in the world. To prevent misapprehension, I here explicitly state that the travels I am about to tell of make no pretence of having been undertaken in the interests of science. Nothing but a love of adventure incited me to force my way into a forbidden land in order to see more of it than had been

possible on my previous travels. In this spirit I commend my book to the reader.

GUSTAV KRIST

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Five of the photographs contained in this book were kindly placed at my disposal by Mr. A. Jaroljmek. I take this opportunity of tendering him my warmest thanks.

G.K.

I

A Bathing Trip and its Consequences

At the beginning of 1922 I came home from Turkistan. I had not been in Austria since 1914 and my prospects of being able to make a livelihood seemed black, for I found it hard to adapt myself to altered circumstances. At the end of the year I went out again to Persia and took service with a carpet merchant of Tabriz, in whose company I travelled through the whole length and breadth of the country.

For days my employer, Abul Qasim Qannadi, and I, with Qannadi's two servants, had been climbing steadily on our shaggy ponies through the ancient beech forests of the Elburz mountains. Some 7,800 feet above the sea we reached the watershed and began the descent towards the Caspian, which in that clear atmosphere gleamed blue in the light of the sun. We rejoiced that the day of our entry into Barfurush was near and that we should soon taste the last of the *mast*—the thick, boiled goat's milk which we bought from the mountain herdsmen—and revel in good mutton and fresh drinking water. For days past we had talked of little else than the delights of the week's rest which we promised ourselves in Barfurush. According to Qannadi, Barfurush was the Shiraz of north-east Persia, a town where milk and honey

flowed in streams. I had by now some experience of Qannadi's enthusiasms and imagined that I could estimate the attractions of the place fairly correctly. When at last we rode into the miserable little mud town, however, I had to acknowledge with a shudder that I had after all been over-optimistic.

The Chief of Police was a personal friend of Qannadi's. We pitched our felt tents in his garden and went off to the bazaar to raise some provisions. Drought and bad harvests had prevailed through the whole province of Mazandaran. The bazaar was dead. I paid a lot of money for a few pomegranates, the only kind of fruit available. There was no green fodder for the cattle so neither milk nor cheese was to be had. After much inquiry here and there I succeeded in buying a couple of dozen eggs. All the water in Barfurush being brackish and full of dirt, I boiled it before drinking, a procedure which astonished Qannadi. On the third day of our stay I decided to ride to Meshed i Sar to get a bathe in the Caspian. The twenty-seven- or twenty-eight-mile ride did not deter me, for I hoped to be able to catch some fish which would form a welcome addition to our spartan and monotonous menu. I told Qannadi that I only wanted to bathe, which rendered him speechless with amazement. The idea that any one would ride twenty-seven miles in this heat for the sake of a bathe . . . !

I trotted out of Barfurush before the sun was up, so as to escape the fierce heat of midday. The temperature was wellnigh unbearable in Barfurush, but it was a good twenty degrees hotter in Meshed i Sar, for the shore boasts no vegetation of any kind whatever. The miserable mud hovels stand in the middle of the white sand of the seashore, which reflects the heat of the sun with

redoubled intensity. The only alleviation was the clear mountain stream flowing down from the Elburz, on the bank of which the *chai-khana-ji* had erected his little tea-house. After I had had my bathe I bent a bit of rusty wire into a fish-hook and waded with it far out into the shallow sea. As I caught the fish, I threaded them on a string round my neck until I had as many as I wanted.

When I got back to the tea-shop I asked them to roast the fish for me on their little charcoal fire and while waiting I dozed happily on the bank of the stream. Far out at sea a tiny sailing-boat could be seen bearing in our direction. An hour later four Turkomans came into the tea-shop. In spite of the heat they were still wearing their fur caps and camel-hair cloaks. From their conversation with the host I gathered that they were coming from Chikishlar on the Turkistan coast and were making for Enzeli with a cargo of melons and sheep's cheese. How poor these folk must be to face the hardships of a journey of three hundred miles or so in their primitive little craft in order to sell a few hundred melons and a few batman of cheese! They might have to wait for weeks in Enzeli before they could find a cargo to take back to Turkistan, so they would often be months away from home.

While he was talking to them, the *chai-khana-ji* frequently pointed to me. At last one of the Turkomans got up and came towards me. He obviously took every European for a doctor and asked if I could help him; he had terrible pains in his back. I had often dabbled in doctoring when need arose, so I said I must first see the sore place and asked him to take his clothes off.

If I hadn't taken it into my head to bathe at Meshed i Sar, or if the Turkoman had not been ill, this book

would never have been written. I solemnly disclaim all responsibility for it. The guilt lies with the Turkoman Shir Dil, the Lion-Hearted—or more exactly with the horrible *rishta* he was unwillingly harbouring. I at once diagnosed the presence of a guinea-worm (*filaria medinensis*) and as I had myself suffered twice from the brutes, I knew what to do. I removed the rude poultice of sheep's dung that covered a ghastly sore which must have been causing him agony. I asked Shir Dil if he had ever been in Bukhara. Yes, he said, four months ago he had been there on a visit to his brother-in-law in Hazrat Bashir. I had once had a guinea-worm in my thumb and once in my neck; but I had never before seen such a giant specimen, nor one so filthy and neglected.

The *rishta* is a typical Bukharan plague, which I have never met elsewhere.[1] It is caused by a worm two or three yards long and about a sixteenth of an inch thick. It breeds in water and the microscopic larva is swallowed when drinking. It works its way out to the subcutaneous tissue and causes ugly suppurating wounds. The guinea-worm thrives in the stagnant waters of Bukhara, in tanks and *ariqs*. Its inside contains a milky white liquid composed of an immense number of minute larvae scarcely visible to the naked eye. The worm divides in the water to let the young ones free and the larva-liquid spreads. If the infected water is drunk the larva enters the body, develops, and within a few months works its way out towards the surface.

I took a razor-blade, which I fortunately had with me in my saddle-bag, and begged Lion-Heart to show himself worthy of his name and bear the coming pain as best he could. Then I made an incision, and scarcely

[1] See note, p. 258.

had the sharp instrument pierced the skin than a thick stream of black blood and pus gushed out over my hands. With my penknife I cut a splinter from one of the posts of the verandah and made a narrow slit in it. I then pressed the edges of the wound cautiously together and saw that my diagnosis had been correct, for a quarter of an inch of worm was exposed. I speedily inserted its head into the cleft of my small piece of wood. As you must wind the beast out by very slow degrees so as not to break it off—if you do, the patient is done for—the treatment was clearly going to take several days. I explained the case to Shir Dil's friends, who were sitting round, and begged them to give a couple of careful turns to the little stick every two hours. They promised to do this. I myself would come back the day after tomorrow from Barfurush to see my patient. I then bought a bundle of dried fish from the *chai-khana-ji* and started back.

As promised, I turned up in Meshed i Sar two days later. The patient was in good form and in the highest spirits; he was free from pain and overwhelmed me with thanks. The worm had already dried up so much that I was able cautiously to draw the rest of it completely out. I then washed the wound with alcohol and bandaged it up. The Turkomans fetched melons and cheese from their boat. Their excellent and juicy watermelons were a welcome treat such as I had not enjoyed for a long time.

The sight of the Turkomans re-awakened old memories of the years I had spent in Turkistan and Bukhara. I longed to see those countries once more and I decided to let Qannadi go on by himself to Asterabad and Jurjan, while I made a detour by Bukhara. I very much wanted to see what the country was like, now that it was the

autonomous republic, Uzbegistan, of the Soviet Union. The Bukhara that I knew had been an independent state under its own Amir. It had been forced to permit Russian soldiers in its frontier towns, but had successfully prevented the entry of any European into the Holy City itself. Only my earlier friendship with the Beg of Kerki, who had later become the Amir's Qush Begi or Chief Minister, had opened the gates of the city to me.

I now questioned the four Turkomans about present conditions in Turkistan and Bukhara. They gladly told me all they knew, and when the time came to bid them good-bye I asked whether they would be willing to take me with them in their boat to Enzeli, so that I might procure a passport from the Soviet Russian Consul there permitting me to travel in the new republics. The grateful Turkomans welcomed the proposal with delight and promised to wait a few days till I should return again from Barfurush.

Everything that I did, or didn't do, during the two years I travelled with Qannadi hither and thither through Persia had been a source of ever-fresh surprise to him. On this occasion, however, speech failed him when I said that the Turkomans and the guinea-worm together had awakened old memories that called me irresistibly, and that I proposed starting for Enzeli the day after next in their little sailing-boat. When the words came back I had to listen till far into the night to his reproaches. I was an ungrateful dog, leaving my benefactor in the lurch. He would be delighted to hear that the wild Bukharans had murdered me or that the Bolsheviks had flung me into the worst dungeon in Bukhara.

Next morning, however, he helped me to pack my

kit and wrote me a cheque for 300 tumans on the Enzeli branch of the National Bank of Persia. I asked him for the money because he had kindly been taking charge of my savings for me. He then adjured me not to be absent longer than a month at most, by which time he would be once more making for his home in Tabriz. If I did not catch him in Tehran I should go on ahead to Tabriz. The good fellow little guessed how long it would be before we met again!

I took a servant with me to Meshed i Sar, handed my horse over to him, and put my scanty baggage on board the boat. The wind was favourable as we set sail for the west, and before long the little port had vanished from our sight.

We had passed Langrud and were approaching Resht one day, when Shir Dil's brother Khores relieved me of the fishing line. (Plate 1.) He flung out the hook, fastened the horsehair line round his right foot, and leaned back sleepily to take his ease. Suddenly there was a sharp tug at the line and Khores began to haul in with all his might. It was clear that an outsize fish had taken the bait. I hastened to his help and saw the head of a gigantic sturgeon rise out of the water. Good-bye to hook and tackle! We could never hope to get the enormous brute into our little boat. Khores pulled for all he was worth, the fish dived for its life. Khores, as the wiser of the two, yielded a little, but slipped and plopped into the sea—with the line still wound round his leg. His brother and Abdullah tore off their cloaks and leaped in after him. For the first time in my life I saw Turkomans swimming—and maybe those chaps didn't know what they were about! When they brought Khores to the surface again he was unconscious. I dragged him

into the boat, opened his shirt and listened to his heart. It was still beating, but slowly and irregularly. With Shir Dil's help I got him out of his clothes and turned him over on his face. A jet of water shot out of his mouth. Then I turned him on his back again and began to try artificial respiration.

This procedure was entirely new to the Turkomans, and they watched me attentively. For more than a quarter of an hour I worked his arms up and down, till the sweat was streaming down my body, but Khores remained unconscious. At last his lips opened and I was overjoyed to see that his lungs were beginning to work regularly again. My *rishta* operation had won the hearty thanks of the Turkomans, but they now overwhelmed me with boundless gratitude for saving Khores' life. The proud Yomut, who had up till now considered me simply as their equal, suddenly developed a new feeling of respect. After the resuscitation of Khores, I was 'Türa' —Sir and Master.

Next day we sighted the pointed tongue of land on which Enzeli—nowadays rechristened Pahlavi—is situated. A few light gunboats and floating tanks were lying in harbour bringing oil from Baku for the men-of-war. Though Enzeli lies on the Persian coast, it was at that time still Russian territory, just as the port of Zara on the Dalmatian coast belongs to Italy. I went to the 'Hôtel Paris', which bore more resemblance to a tumbledown cowshed than to an hotel. I there booked the best room, whose sole furniture was a rickety chair and a bug- and louse-ridden bed. The chair also served the purpose of washstand, so I had to lift down an earthen basin weighing about half a hundredweight and put it on the floor whenever I wanted to sit down.

As soon as I had washed and shaved I dug out the Russian consul and expounded my project to him. I should like to travel by the next steamer via Baku to Krasnovodsk and from there to Samarqand. While I was talking the consul quietly drank one cup of tea after another, and bit little lumps off a sugarloaf, which he skilfully gripped in his front teeth, sucking his tea up through them. When I had finished he looked at me and said only the one word: 'Forbidden!'

Lengthy cross-examination extracted the information from him that entry into Turkistan from whatever point, for whatever reason, was on political grounds absolutely forbidden to any foreigner. Even Russians from the interior of the empire must arm themselves with a special permit from the Political Department, and such permits were only granted in exceptional cases.

In vain I reminded him that in 1922 Colin Ross crossed over from Baku and traversed Turkistan from end to end. He admitted that this was true. He had himself seen and spoken to Mr. Ross on that occasion, but that gentleman had had a special permit from Moscow, and even so he had not been allowed to move a single step to right or left of the Central Asian railway line. An official of the Cheka had accompanied Mr. Ross and never left his side, and his instructions were immediately to arrest the stranger if he attempted to quit the railway.

I then asked whether Khidiralieff, a personal friend of mine, who was now chairman of the Central Executive of Turkistan, could not procure me a permit in Tashkent. (Plate 2.) The consul said no; not even Comrade Khidiralieff could issue a permit; only Moscow was empowered to do this. I professed incredulity, since Uzbegistan was now an autonomous republic and there-

fore her internal affairs must be independent of Russia. The consul had bitten off a new piece of sugar, and he almost choked himself as he burst into a loud laugh over this ingenuous argument.

'You really must not be so childish, Tovarish!' he said. 'The Turkistan comrades are autonomous just as long as it suits us, and just to the extent that seems desirable. Get this crazy journey out of your head. Take my word for it, you will never reach Bukhara. And what on earth do you want to do there, anyway? It is just a country like any other—no better, no worse. Now let's be friends. Will you take a glass of tea with me?'

After tea I went down to the Customs harbour to find the boat with my Turkoman friends and tell them my ill luck. With one voice they offered to take me with them and land me on the coast of Turkistan. I could go ashore unnoticed, and once I had got a few miles into the desert not a soul would worry further about me. There was much to be said for this plan, but it seemed to me a shade too risky. I knew something of summary Russian justice. Once already I had almost faced a firing-squad. I might not get off a second time. To enter forbidden Turkistan without papers? I would sooner pay a call on the Devil and his Mother-in-Law in Hell.

The thought of going to Bukhara despite the Russians was, however, so enticing, that I could not banish it from my mind. How often had I had the words 'impossible' and 'forbidden' hurled at me—and yet got my own way in the end? Why should I not pull it off once again?

For a long time I pondered the alternatives. At last I remembered that I had a friend in Qizil Arwat who might be able to help me. I must get into touch with him as soon as might be. The Austrian ex-prisoner of

war, Steinschneider, had got naturalized and had settled there. He and I had, for years, been fellow prisoners in Fort Alexandrovsk and in Samarqand. As a Russian citizen Steinschneider was sure to have lots of papers; if only I could borrow some from him I would risk the journey to Bukhara. If he were still alive, and if he were still in Qizil Arwat, I knew he would be ready and willing to see me through.

I must send a letter to Steinschneider by a safe hand. Quickly I made up my mind and turned to Khores: 'Khores, would you be willing to go from Chikishlar to Qizil Arwat to look up a friend of mine?' 'Yes, sir!' he said. Khores said this 'Yes' as briefly and simply as if I had asked him to walk across a street, instead of making a journey of two hundred and twenty miles or so across the Khanbaghi Qum Desert and back.

I then arranged with the Turkomans that I should accompany them back as far as Mahmudabad—still on the Persian coast, somewhat west of Barfurush—and wait there with the Forest Officer, an Austrian compatriot, until Khores should bring me Steinschneider's answer.

A week later our preparations were so far advanced that we were able to sail. The ship had loaded up with charcoal for *manqals*. A *manqal* is a little basin to hold burning charcoal which the nomads place under their padded quilts to keep their feet warm in winter. It is the only heating apparatus which they possess to mitigate the savage cold of the desert, for in spite of its enormous area the whole of western Turkistan is devoid of timber. In the oases there are chenar trees and black elm, but these are so valuable and so essential to life that they must not be felled, and the indispensable charcoal must be brought often for hundreds of miles on camel-

back from Farghana or from the Bukhara mountains. The nomads who live on the coasts of the Caspian, or who touch it in their wanderings, have therefore for decades been wont to fetch their charcoal from the Persian shores, much to the injury of the forests in the Elburz.

Meantime I had again looked up the consul. He said he thought I was quite mad, for no sane man would set out to cross the deserts unless he had to.

I had, however, been born with a thick skull. When I said good-bye to the consul I was more than ever determined to cross the forbidden frontiers.

We sailed from Enzeli at dawn, steering for the mouth of the Qizil Uzen, after which we intended to hug the coast. A favouring wind brought us on the fourth day to Mahmudabad. Amul lies not far inland from this point and an Austrian, Moser, was acting as forest officer there, in the employ of the Persian Government. Khores was to find me there when he came back. The Turkomans again set sail for the open sea. I stood on the shore for a long time till their sails disappeared on the horizon. Should I ever see them again? Everything depended on what answer Khores would bring.

My kit had been dumped on the sand. I walked into Mahmudabad to hire a horse for the ride to Amul. On arrival I was received with open arms by Herr Moser, and I should like to take this opportunity to thank him most warmly for his unstinted hospitality and wise advice. I stayed three weeks with this remarkable man and gained an insight into local conditions which I should otherwise have sought in vain. There is only one thing I can never forgive him. On every single one of my twenty-three days he dragged his most reluctant guest

to hunt panther. Not one panther did I see, alive or dead, though the herdsmen and charcoal-burners again and again protested that they had seen the spoor of a full-grown panther within the last few days.

We were after panther again and had climbed close on 3,500 feet. It had rained hard the preceding day and at every step we sank to the ankles in clay and mud. I had slipped and fallen at least a score of times and was covered with mud from head to foot and thoroughly miserable. At noon I suggested that we should turn home. When we got back to Moser's house in Amul, there was a Turkoman sitting at the entrance door. It was Khores.

'Have you got a letter, Khores?'

'I have, sir!'

He answered, 'I have,' as calmly as if he had brought an answer from next door.

Hastily I tore open the envelope. It contained a long letter from Steinschneider with the assurance that he would do everything humanly possible for me. He enclosed a pass from the Soviet of Qizil Arwat granting Ferdinand Steinschneider permission to make his permanent residence in Bukhara and Turkistan.

My hopes had not deceived me. I replaced his photograph by one of my own.

Nothing now stood between me and the forbidden land. I decided to start at once.

When towards midnight we reached Mahmudabad and our boat, Shir Dil and his friends gave me a hearty welcome. I had scarcely taken my seat and stowed my kit before they had weighed anchor and hoisted sail. The light-laden vessel shot like an arrow through the waves. Shir Dil explained that they were heading due north so

as not to fall foul of the Russian warships, which had their base in the Bay of Ashur-ada—also Persian territory. The warships along the coast were wont to develop an unhealthy curiosity, especially at night, and sweep the sea with their searchlights to catch smuggling vessels or any fugitives from the Russian paradise.

We held our course due north until midday, then we tacked steadily towards land, keeping in about the same latitude. It was pitch dark when we came within reach of land, and the boat sailed into the Hasan Quli Bay, where the Atrak flows into the Caspian. I was terribly afraid we should be subject to some sort of inspection here. The Turkomans reassured me. The control boat had left the bay some hours ago and the native fishermen didn't bother their heads about any one. We sailed up the bay for a good four hours, and in spite of a favouring wind we were making slower and slower progress. When I pointed this out to Khores he told me that we had left the mouth of the Atrak far behind us and for more than an hour had been working upstream against the current.

Quite suddenly night changed to morning, and I saw that we were sailing the waters of a muddy, yellow desert river. The banks were absolutely flat and level, as if the Atrak were an artificial canal. As far as the eye could see there was nothing round us but the greyish yellow of the desert sand, broken here and there by a few leafless saksaul bushes (*Anabasis ammodendron*). Towards midday we came to a sharp bend in the river and Khores pointed into the desert on our left. Trees and houses could just be discerned in the distance and I learned that we were approaching the frontier fort of Yaghli Olum, where the Atrak forms the boundary between

Persia and Russian Turkistan. The helmsman steered straight for the bank, where a number of other boats of various sizes already lay at anchor. Not a human being was in sight. We might have crossed the Styx and found ourselves in the country of the dead.

We jumped ashore and set out for the standing camp of my Turkoman friends. Khores would come along next day with camels and fetch our goods and the boat's gear. Shir Dil assured me that the stuff might lie there for weeks or months and no one would steal so much as a cooking pot or a match. Such is the respect which the sons of the desert pay to other people's property—unless they are actually out on a raiding party.

II

Guest of the Yomut Turkomans

We had tramped for an hour through the sand when we came to a dip in the ground and halted. Green fields spread out before us interspersed with numerous fruit gardens, tall silver poplars and chenar trees, amongst which nestled the brown walls of the Turkomans' low mud huts and the black felt walls of their tents. Camels, horses, and donkeys were grazing over stretches of scanty grass. We had reached Qala-Qaya, the standing camp or village of the Yomut.

In contrast to the other women of Turkistan, the Turkoman women go about unveiled and do not take flight at the approach of a strange man. (Plates 4 and 5.) The two brothers took me along first to their father's tent. Alim Qul had formerly been the all-powerful Khan of Gök Tapa, which had offered the longest and most embittered resistance to the Russian conquest of Turkistan. For nearly a year the fort had been vainly besieged by General Skobeleff. After it was taken the chief was banished and all the survivors of the town had followed him into exile and founded themselves a new home on a small tributary of the Atrak.

The news of the brothers' arrival with a strange *urus*—'Russian', as any European is called—spread like light-

ning through the encampment, and when I stepped towards the door of Alim Qul's yurt I saw a fine old man in picturesque Yomut costume sitting before the tent. (Plate 3.) He was at least six foot six, and his tall, white shaggy hat made him seem even more. Uncannily shrewd, wide-awake eyes scanned the intruder. There was a peculiar power in his glance and I could easily understand that his subjects obeyed this man without question, even when he sent thousands of them to their death. For several seconds the inexorable eyes rested on me as if they would read my very soul. Meantime a hundred men, women, and children had gathered round.

Shir Dil stepped forward, bowed deeply to his father, and said: 'Father, I bring our brother to you, the man of whom I have told you so much, who saved the life of both your sons.'

The old man nodded, stood up and threw both his arms round me, clapping me on the back with his right hand. He thus created me the official guest of the camp, and I was now more securely guarded than by a regiment of soldiers. Turkoman hospitality is unexampled and unlimited. However great his poverty, the Turkoman will slaughter his last sheep for his guest, even though the guest be a despised Unbeliever. He will not only give him his last crust but he will at need defend him at the risk of his own life—even against his own relations and tribal brothers. The rights of hospitality are inviolable. The person of a stranger who commits a theft, or even a murder, in his host's house, is sacred as long as he remains within the house or camp. Pursuit may not be taken up until the miscreant is out of sight.

Many other dwellers in the *aul* had built themselves houses of reeds and mud, but Alim Qul had preferred

to make himself a court consisting of several yurts. He wanted to live and die in the surroundings in which he had been born and which are still those of tens of thousands of his race.

Alim Qul accompanied me to the guest tent, where his eldest granddaughter served me with *nan* and *chai*, namely flaps of bread and tea. This latter is green Indian tea to which salt and mutton fat have been added. Such a form of hospitality is usual amongst the Turkomans and Qirghiz, but a stranger amongst the Sarts, Uzbegs, or Bukharans would never be permitted to set eyes on the womenfolk of his host's household. How profoundly the teachings of Communism have modified these traditional customs I was to discover later.

The yurt assigned to me was a magnificent specimen of its kind. The floor and the walls were covered with glorious old Turkoman rugs—which Europe erroneously calls 'Bukhara carpets'. I thought of my friend and employer, Qannadi, and how his eyes would jump out of his head if he could see these magnificent rugs. The nights were already very cold and in the centre of the room stood a beautiful copper *manqal* full of charcoal, the fumes and smoke of which were allowed to escape through an opening in the roof of the yurt. A number of padded quilts and cushions were also provided, while a *chilim* (hubble-bubble) and two hammered brass water-pots completed the equipment.

Next evening I was invited to the Khan's tent; it was much less luxurious than the guest tent. Thick felt carpets covered the floor, a few plain hubble-bubbles stood about, and two brass water-pots for hand-washing; simple carpets hung on the walls and in front of them a whole arsenal of various weapons: guns, daggers, clubs,

bows and arrows, blow-pipes, curved sabres, and pistols, as well as a quite modern Colt revolver.

A princely meal was brought in large brass basins. Rich cuts off the breast of a fat-tailed sheep had been roasted in my honour, and a mountain of this meat was piled in front of my place. It was followed by large fishes roasted on a spit; next came the much-prized *airan*, a mixture of sour camel's, goat's, and mare's milk. Since spoons are unknown and everything has to be eaten with the fingers, I left my own spoon hidden in my boot and tried to imitate the procedure of my hosts so as not to hurt their feelings. Innumerable cups of *chai i shirin*, or sweetened tea, formed the final course.

Next day the whole tribe celebrated my coming. All the young men of the *aul*, mounted on their magnificent Turkoman ponies, assembled between the camp and the river Atrak. The old men brought me a horse and I rode out with them to see a *baigha*. Shir Dil had thoughtfully explained the whole proceeding to me the day before and I was thus enabled promptly to offer a prize of ten Persian tumans.

The Khan was carrying a newly-slaughtered sheep on the saddle in front of him. A boy then dragged the carcase two hundred yards or so out into the desert. The chief gave a shout and the riders dashed off in a wild gallop towards where the sheep was lying on the sand.

The point of the *baigha* is this: the riders try to lift the sheep off the ground and bring it back to the Khan. No sooner had one horseman secured the sheep than a dozen others hurled themselves on him, endeavouring to snatch it from him. In a moment or two the wild hunt was completely hidden in a cloud of dust and sand, while men and horses wrestled together in a savage scrimmage.

Now a man, now a horse, fell to the ground but was on his feet again in a twinkling. I had never seen a more wonderful exhibition of skilled riding. The sheep was torn into a thousand pieces and when a horseman freed himself from the scrum and rode towards us to lay his booty at the Khan's feet a dozen others followed in hot pursuit, to snatch his booty from him at the last moment, and we had frequently to take to flight ourselves so as not to be ridden down in the excitement of the chase.

When the game had lasted about an hour the Khan called a halt. Not less than four dozen horsemen dashed up, laughing and shouting, each with a bleeding piece of sheep in his hands.

Then came the awarding of the prizes. An old grey-beard, sitting on his horse held a large balance and weighed all the gory fragments in turn. The prizes were distributed strictly according to weight. Horses, bridles, fur caps, carpets, and my ten tumans were handed over to the lucky winners. The amazing thing was that with all the wild riding and falling not a single man or horse was hurt. A mighty feast concluded the show.

That evening the Khan and his two sons visited me in my yurt. I begged Alim Qul to tell me something about his own life and the history of the Turkomans.

His original name had been Muhammad Qul. While the fighting round Gök Tapa was in progress the Yomut had heard that Alim Qul, the heroic Khan of Khoqand, had fallen at Tashkent in battle against the Russians. They immediately transferred the name of the hero of Turkistan to their own young chieftain, Muhammad Qul, that the Russians might believe that their most dreaded enemy had come to life again.

The original home of the Turkomans was the Mangishlaq peninsula on the Caspian. They are now divided into several tribes: the Ersari live on the left bank of the Amu Darya (Oxus) and extend deep into Afghanistan; the Sakar inhabit the deserts and oases between Merv and Andkhui; the Sariq are found in the Panj Deh and Kushk on the Afghan border; the Salor upstream on the Murghab River; the Tekke are at home in the mountains of Kuren Dagh and the oasis of Merv; the Yomut travel through the deserts east of the Caspian and far up into the Khanate of Khiwa, while some of the Chaudor have remained in the Mangishlaq peninsula and others of them have settled in the north of Khiwa. The total number of Turkomans, reckoning all the tribes together, was at that time round about 1,000,000 souls. Their sturdy independence and unconquerable passion for freedom was tending to drive them more and more into those regions over which the Russians were able to exercise only imperfect control. The fact that the Russians had declared their country an autonomous republic in alliance with the Soviet Union had done nothing to alter their feelings. Their highest law, the Dab, is tradition and custom. They never deviate from it by a hair's breadth, so that the Turkoman of to-day lives exactly as his forefathers of a thousand years ago. If any one attempts to abrogate one of their laws or customs, or if the Russians seek to bring them in the very slightest degree under state supervision, they simply strike their tents and wander off to other places in the immeasurable wastes of the Black Sand, the Qara Qum, into which very few Europeans have as yet ventured.

Their religion is that of the Sunni Muhammadans, but they are not unduly puritanical and interpret the

Qurān with considerable freedom. They show not the slightest consideration towards their women, who are treated as slaves and expected to attend to all agricultural as well as all domestic work. The men hunt, get up displays and jousts on horseback, or indulge in raiding; otherwise they live a leisured life of uninterrupted ease. (Plate 6.) Few Turkomans live in permanent settlements. They are either nomads or semi-nomads, who use their more permanent headquarters only in winter. The most stationary are the Yomut and the Tekke, whose women make the most beautiful carpets and the richest in colouring that are found in the East. (Plate 7.) At the same time the Yomut and the Tekke are the poorest of the tribes. Their poverty is at the bottom of the notorious lust for plunder which to this day makes them greatly dreaded. This accounts also for their passion for fine horses, whose speed contributes to the success of their attacks on caravans and towns. Second only to his love of hospitality is the Turkoman's love of his horse. He may live in rags himself; his horse will be covered with costly saddlecloths, while its harness and saddle gleam bright with silver platings. The favourite horse is usually housed in the family yurt.

Alim Qul displayed not the slightest reserve in recounting robber raids which he had organized and in the most of which he had himself taken part. In such excursions the Turkomans are out not only for the cattle and movables of their victims but also for prisoners. If these cannot raise a ransom they are kept as slaves.

In their raids the Turkomans spare only fellow Sunnis and Jews. The latter are considered unclean, and the former are respected as co-religionists whom it is not seemly to enslave. Alim Qul boasted that under his rule

in Gök Tapa he had captured altogether some 70,000 Persian Shiahs, whom they had sold as slaves. He saw nothing in this worthy of comment, still less anything reprehensible.

Fights against the invading Russians had begun in 1880. Four years later General Skobeleff invested Alim Qul's fort of Gök Tapa. Not less than 26,000 well-armed Russians were opposed to approximately 8,000 Yomut and Tekke under the command of my host. The Russians had thirty-six pieces of artillery, with which they bombarded the primitive towers and walls. With incredible courage the Turkomans undertook a sortie, cut down a lot of Russians, captured two cannons, and brought them with numerous prisoners back into their fort. The natives had no idea how to work the guns and tried to compel the Russian prisoners to load and fire them. Alim Qul narrated with admiration how one Russian had behaved when the Turkomans sought to force him to use the guns against his fellow countrymen. Even after they had hacked off his toes and fingers one by one, he still refused. Finally they flayed him alive and he died in agony.

I stayed for a fortnight in the *aul* with my Turkoman friends and learned to know the people better than many a Russian does in a lifetime. I was sorry to quit this lonely desert village, but I had decided to push on to Aidin (not to be confused with the town of the same name in Asia Minor), and then to travel by rail to Qizil Arwat to see Steinschneider.

The entire population of the *aul* accompanied us far out into the desert, as I rode away with Khores and Shir Dil. We proposed to ride by Gamajiki and Ana Qurban to the *aul* Arsan Qaya, where Shir Dil was to take his

leave of us and return home, while Khores insisted on coming with me all the way to Qizil Arwat.

On the seventh day of our desert journey we came to the river Uzboi, which, at several points on its way to the Caspian, vanishes completely into the sands of the desert, to re-appear ten or twelve miles farther on. We followed the course of the Uzboi for a spell and then branched off towards the east. Eight days after leaving our *aul* we struck the railway, and two hours later saw ahead the houses of Aidin. Shir Dil now said farewell and repeatedly begged me to visit him again on my return journey.

III

Into the Forbidden Land

A train journey of just under a hundred miles brought us to Qizil Arwat. I lay low in a tea-house in the bazaar while Khores went off to find Steinschneider. They soon appeared together. I had not seen my old friend since 1919, five years before. He had in the meantime become completely acclimatized and was so much the Russian that I scarcely recognized him. I explained my plan to him in German. I wanted the loan of his identification papers and with these I would present myself to the Agricultural and Mineralogical Department in Ashqabad or Qaghan as a geologist who wished to investigate the mineral resources of the mountains of Bukhara and the possible sites of ore and coal mines. If my scheme was approved I should be free to travel to and fro through the country at will without attracting attention or being held up. If the authorities would not accept my services in this capacity, I should simply have to think out some other plausible pretext. I was quite clear that it would be unwise to proceed to the city of Bukhara unless I had express permission to do so.

Steinschneider thought my plan an admirable one and would dearly have liked to accompany me. He was only

deterred by the reflection that I should then have no papers and that duplicate Steinschneiders would be apt to excite comment. We agreed that in any unforeseen contingency he would say that his papers had got lost; and that in no circumstances would he admit that he had ever seen or known me. I promised to return, if possible, by way of Qizil Arwat and restore his documents with my own hand. We then bade each other good-bye.

Khores then set out to try to change my Persian tumans for chervonitz,[1] a business which he thought he could negotiate amongst his Turkoman friends. This proceeding was fraught with some danger, for technically only the branches of the State Bank and the co-operative societies under them had the right to deal in currency. Here in Central Asia the bank officials would inevitably ask a European very awkward questions about the source of his foreign money—a thing which I naturally wanted to avoid. In a few hours Khores returned and handed me over a bundle of greasy rouble notes, for gold chervonitz were not to be had. He came back from the bazaar with a piece of news which surprised as much as it delighted me. He had decided to come with me himself and pay a visit to his brother-in-law in Hazrat Bashir. I was only too glad to accept this offer.

That very evening I took two tickets, and Khores and I mounted the train bound for Charjui some five hundred miles away, the then capital of the Turkmenistan Soviet Republic. The incredible cheapness of travel on the Russian railways took my breath away. For a journey rather longer than from Vienna to Lake Constance I paid 31 roubles apiece, say about £2 19s., for our seats in

[1] See note, p. 260.

1. The Yomut youth, Khores, my travelling companion as far as Uch Qurghan

2. Khidiralieff, head of the Government of Turkistan

3. Alim Qul, chief of the Yomut

4. Turkoman women in front of their yurts, looking at my books

5. Turkoman women taking bread out of the oven

6. Drinking tea, loafing, and telling stories are the main occupations of the Turkoman men-folk—when not raiding

7. Nabat Khakin is one of the best makers of knotted carpets in our encampment

an express train. This sum gave us a right to a sleeping-place and indefinite supplies of boiling water for tea. Trusting to Steinschneider's identification papers I decided to break the journey at Ashqabad. This town had for some time been known as Poltoratsk, but it had been re-altered to the original name of Ashqabad after the fighting of 1920.

This oasis had been the headquarters of the fighting which for a whole year had raged through southern Turkistan, bringing devastation in its train. The English general, Malleson, coming by forced marches from Persia, brought some Indian regiments and a few British regulars to the assistance of the anti-revolutionaries. Instead of joining them immediately, Malleson first struck westwards with his troops, crossed the Caspian, and occupied the oil wells of Baku, for the moment supplying the rebels only with provisions, arms, and ammunition.

The Government of Tashkent, under the illusion that they had to deal only with a small local insurrection of a few wealthy Turkoman khans, instructed some Soviet commissars under the command of the redoubtable Poltoratsk to proceed to Ashqabad, arrest the khans and put the trouble down in a few days. Some delegates of the Turkoman tribes and of the local Russian population presented themselves, unarmed, on the platform to treat with the Government emissaries. Poltoratsk announced that he would have no dealings with rebels and counter-revolutionaries. The Ashqabad delegates retorted that in that case they would not permit the commissars to set foot in the town. Hereupon Poltoratsk flung a hand-grenade into the unarmed assembly, killing sixteen. Half an hour later the train was surrounded and the commissars were slain along with their military escort.

In the long run Poltoratsk's impetuous gesture cost the lives of 64,000 people. When autonomy was granted to Turkmenistan the first act of the Government of the new republic was to wipe the hated name of Poltóratsk off the map and restore to Ashqabad its original title.

Ashqabad, with some 80,000 inhabitants, is to-day the second largest town in Turkmenistan and is renowned for its Turkoman carpets and for its sweet melons. In the centre of the oasis rise the lofty mud walls of the fort, which commands a view of the entire city. Near it is the palace of the Turkoman khan, Shir Ali, now in ruins, but once famous for the wonderful mosaics with which it was adorned. After a two-day halt in the Hôtel Swerdloff—which might have been an elder brother of the Hôtel Paris in Enzeli, for it was if possible even dirtier and more tumbledown—we continued our journey eastwards. Most of the *qishlaqs*, or villages, which lay in the oasis near the railway line were now represented solely by heaps of mud, for the Turkomans who had inhabited them had defended themselves to the last man and their houses had been blown to pieces. At Lutfabad the railway approaches within a few miles of the Persian border, which is formed by the steep rocky cliffs of the outliers of the Küpat Dagh and Ala Dagh ranges and the Kuh i Mirabi. Every now and then you can see at one and the same time, planted on the mountains, the flag of the Soviets with its star and the Persian flag with its lion. After Dushaq the train crosses about 330 miles of the Qara Qum, the Desert of Black Sand, which name, however, is a misnomer, for the colour of the sand varies from light yellow to greyish brown. There are only two oases in this long stretch.

After a run of five hours the train drew up in the oasis

of Merv, which, like the oasis of Tejen, is amply provided with water from the numerous branches of a river. (Plates 8 and 9.) The Murghab rises in the Band i Turkistan Mountains of Afghanistan, is joined at Panj Deh by the small tributary of the Kushk, and after passing through Merv loses itself, like the Tejen (the lower course of the Hari Rud), in the wildernesses of the Qara Qum.

It was from Merv that I had started my flight out of Turkistan, in 1916, which was to lead me through a sector of northern Afghanistan and through the whole of Persia. My feelings were deeply stirred as I saw the station again and thought of the contrast between then and now. Then, I was flying out of the country by stealth; now, I had entered it again, no less by stealth. While I stood there sunk in thought, a Turkoman gendarme suddenly accosted me and demanded my identification papers. This was the first time since I had set foot in Turkistan on the banks of the Atrak that anyone had asked to see my papers; now I was to test whether my friend's documents would pass muster. Not without some quickening of the pulse I drew them out and handed them to him. He examined them with care, thanked me, and handed them back; and the stone that metaphorically rolled from my heart was assuredly as big as the mountain massif of Paropamisus which gleamed rosy red across the frontier of Afghanistan.

The oasis of Merv is entirely surrounded by the waterless Qara Qum, and thus for centuries remained impregnable. Though the robber raids of the Turkomans frequently called for the vengeance of Persians, Afghans, Bukharans, and Khiwans it was seldom that a hostile army succeeded in penetrating to Merv. The sand of the desert served the Turkomans better than any fortification.

The first brush between Russians and Turkomans occurred in 1859 on the east coast of the Caspian Sea. The Russians were again and again repulsed and the fight for Merv lasted a good quarter of a century, till the Russians at last gained possession of it in 1884.

I was anxious to explore some part of the Qara Qum while I was in Merv and to achieve this ambition I joined a caravan that was setting out for Khiwa. I proposed to ride with it as far as the wells of Qoyun Quyu, and wait there for a caravan coming in the opposite direction, with which I should return to Merv.

We left Merv in the early morning. Slowly and with dignified circumspection the camels planted their feet in the muddy morass formed by the seepage of the river, which floods the whole country in autumn and spring, and makes it one of the worst malaria-breeding places in Turkistan. The camel bells tinkled in the thin air of morning and made that magic music which is inseparable from the very thought of a caravan.

After we left the marshes the sand dunes began, at first occasionally broken by the yellow-green grass of the steppes. As we advanced farther and farther from water the grass disappeared completely. The sand glittered in the sun as if it were composed of microscopic spangles. The spangles are in reality minute salt crystals, which are often so numerous that the landscape recalls the salt tracts of Persia.

Our course lay along one of the oldest caravan routes of Central Asia, by which the armies of Alexander had travelled from Khiwa southwards on their all-defying march to India. (Plates 10 and 11.) Our first halt was in the middle of the desert. The bales of goods which formed the camel-loads were in a trice built up into

walls to protect us from the wind. We had brought firewood along with us and soon camp fires were flickering on all sides, and basins of green Indian tea were circulating, while the *chilim* passed from mouth to mouth. The leader of the caravan, who had been trekking across the desert, winter and summer, for eight and twenty years, told us of his experiences, and while he was still describing his battles with desert robbers one fire after another went out. We rolled ourselves in our bedding and soon the only sound to be heard was the grumbling of a few restless camels.

I lay long awake staring into the cloudless sky, lit by the brilliance of uncounted stars. From the middle of April till the end of October the sky of Turkistan is pure and clear. Not a drop of rain, not a cloud, is seen during these six months, so that every journey or excursion can be planned six months ahead, without a fear that the weather will play false. Old, experienced travellers like my caravan companions make an art of unloading their camels quickly in the evening and loading up with equally magic speed for the morning's march. (Plate 12.) When the leader, Yulji Cholbaieff, woke me at sunrise the animals were already saddled and loaded. I hastily drank my tea, munched a few raisins with it—our only substitute for sugar—and rolled up my felt blanket. Then I settled myself in the saddle of my riding camel, and the animal's motion soon lulled me again to sleep. I would wake with a start every now and then, just as I was on the point of falling off.

We reached the well of Shaikh Mansur, where we pitched our second desert camp. I was awakened in the morning by the trampling of many camels, and jumped up in alarm, thinking our caravan was already on the

march and I had been forgotten. A Qirghiz caravan had just arrived at the well on its way to Ashqabad. It had been already thirty-six hours on the march and was short of water. In great excitement the exhausted beasts were crowding round the well.

The Qirghiz decided to halt by the water till next day, and set about unloading and unsaddling their pack camels and horses. Just beside me a horseman lifted the shapeless saddle off his pony and when he took off the felt blanket that had been underneath I was shocked at the ghastly bleeding flesh that was revealed. I was just going to reproach the man bitterly for letting his horse get into such condition when I realized that what I had taken for wounds were in fact thin strips of raw meat which the rider had put under the saddle to prevent chafing. When I inquired about the matter I learned that the Qirghiz and Tartars are in the habit of thus protecting the places where the pressure of the saddle comes, and that by this means an incipient wound is cured before it develops. My horseman had been unable for a long time to unsaddle his pony, so he had shot a gazelle as he came along and laid the fresh flesh on the pony's back under the saddle. It is this practice, perhaps, which has given rise to our school-book legend that the invading Huns who came from Asia used to ride on their fresh-killed meat to make it tender.

IV

Across the Qara Qum to Samarqand

The rest of our journey to the well of Qoyun Quyu was extremely heavy going, for this part of the desert consists of sand-dunes ninety feet high and more, the ascent and descent of which is most laborious for camels. Their long legs sink almost to the knee in the fine sand. I dismounted to make things easier for my camel by relieving him of my weight, but I soon gave up the attempt to plunge along through the burning sand, for I should have infallibly got left behind and should soon have perished of thirst if my disappearance had not been noticed.

I was hardly well in the saddle again before I saw a long cloud of dust and sand slowly approaching us from a considerable distance. I was soon able to distinguish details. There were about a hundred camels, every second one carrying a rider on its back. (Plates 13 and 14.) Unladen camels were such a rarity that I asked the caravan-*bashi*, who was ahead of me, whether these could be the celebrated desert highwaymen. I was already rejoicing in anticipation of an exciting adventure. The riders proved, however, to be the exact reverse of what I had supposed; they were a detachment of the camel corps of Desert Police and they presently drew up alongside us.

While they cross-questioned our leader about our whence and whither and examined his papers, I had a chance to study them. (Plate 15.) They were one and all young men of magnificent physique and keen features, dressed in light, pale-brown khaki, their flat, plate-like caps, with the Soviet star in front, jauntily pushed back from their forehead. All of them, including the commandant, were of the Sariq tribe of Turkomans, a race renowned in Turkistan for its good looks. Mauser rifles, heavy pistols, and long-handled hand-grenades dangling from the belt, seemed to be the usual equipment amongst them. Some of the riderless camels were carrying light machine-guns, while the others were laden with water-skins and tents.

I got into conversation with some of the police and promised that I would send them to Charjui a few of the photographs which I had taken. This won their hearts at once, and they invited me to join their party for the rest of my journey. They were making for Yantaqli spring, and thence for Qabaqli on the lower Amu Darya. I had time enough to spare, and such an excellent opportunity of travelling safely would be unlikely to recur. I therefore accepted their invitation with alacrity. The only difficulty that presented itself was the question of mounts for Khores and myself. But the Sariq police solved it by offering us two of their reserve camels.

I paid the caravan-*bashi* the hire of the two camels we had been riding, we packed our scanty kit on to the new camels, and after cordial and oft-repeated 'Insha' Allah's' we bade farewell to our previous companions, who quickly faded into the desert.

The riding animals of the Desert Police were carefully chosen. Never, before or after, have I ridden so amen-

able a camel as that which now was lent to me, or one whose pace was so smooth or foot so sure. For the first half-hour I was conscious of a disturbing feeling of unrest for which I could not account. Only later did it occur to me that the police camels carried no bells. The melodious tinkling haunted my ears so persistently that at first the deprivation was definitely painful. The police naturally ride without bells, for they have no desire to advertise their coming before they are in sight, and the wind carries the sound of bells to immense distances in the thin desert air.

There was only one person who was dissatisfied with the alteration in my plans. This was Khores, who had the most profound contempt for the Sariq as tools and hangers-on of the hated Soviets and Russians. As soon as we could talk to each other without risk of being overheard he reproached me bitterly, and only my assurance that we should part from our Sariq in six days at most calmed him a little and restored his normal good temper.

Sahiyaieff, the commandant of the detachment, assured me that so far as he knew I was the only European who had ever crossed this part of the desert. The tracts between Khiwa and Merv, on the one hand, and between Khiwa and Krasnovodsk on the other, had frequently been covered by Europeans, but never the eastern section of the Qara Qum which we were now traversing.

Sand, and again sand, and nothing but sand as far as the eye could see. We proceeded at a good pace, but not until we neared the well of Qoyun Quyu did a few isolated saksaul-trees appear. We were suddenly surprised by a herd of gazelle, which dashed immediately across our path. Before I could get my rifle to the ready several shots resounded and two gazelles crashed to the ground.

They furnished us with a magnificent supper. The nearer we drew to the well the thicker became the yellow desert grass growing between the sandhills that stretched away to the far horizon.

Next morning we quitted the caravan route we had hitherto been following, and bent our course north-west. The desert was if possible even more inhospitable in this direction. The sand was deep and fine, the unfortunate camels sank deep at every step, and we made but slow progress. The heat was murderous, the drinking water we carried was practically boiling and strongly salt, and I could not master my terrible thirst. I admired Khores and the Sariq, who never touched a drop of water the livelong day. When I complained of thirst one of the police gave me a pebble, of which he had several in his pocket. As soon as I felt it in my mouth my thirst diminished and became tolerable. My new travelling-companions told me that there were some places on the lower Amu Darya where there are piles of flattish pebbles of a convenient size and shape for carrying in the mouth. No caravan which crosses the river passes these spots without laying in a stock of them, partly to replenish their own store and partly to serve as presents to other caravans whose course does not take them to the river and who are grateful for the gift.

Towards evening a light wind arose, carrying a lot of sand with it and making riding a perfect torment, for in a second eyes, mouth, and nose were choked with it. It grew stronger and stronger and the blown grains of sand larger and larger. We were riding into a regular *buran*, such as I had encountered nine years ago in Uch Aji. In such weather there was not the slightest hope of making Yandaqli that day, so the soldiers decided to

pitch camp early for the night. The saddles were hastily snatched off and built up into a screen from the wind. The storm was by now raging so fiercely that cooking was not to be thought of, so we rolled ourselves in our felt blankets and huddled under the couched camels for protection. When I woke, the storm was still raging and my blankets were crushing me under an intolerable weight. I endeavoured to get free and rolled over till the blanket opened. When I crept out of it, I saw that the sleeper beside me was buried under a layer of sand nearly four inches thick. So that was the weight that had been oppressing me; I shook my blanket free of sand and quickly crept into it again under the shelter of my camel.

Not till ten o'clock next forenoon did the *buran* abate. One after another we shook ourselves out of the sand, and fires were soon ablaze. The huge tea kettles were put on and we gratefully swallowed the hot drink. In spite of every effort to get clean, it was not till I was able to get a bath in the Amu eight days later that I finally felt my body completely free from sand. I cannot conceive how the Qirghiz manage with their horses and donkeys in such a storm. The camels are masters of the art of crouching in such a way that their heads are as far as possible protected from the driving sand. But horses and donkeys have no such skill, and they are terrified by the driving sand. I asked Sahiyaieff about this, but he had no idea what the Qirghiz did, for he had never been with one of their caravans in a sandstorm.

That afternoon we at last reached the well. Its waters were, however, so thick with sand and so salt that we could only water the camels, but had ourselves to refrain from drinking. We had been looking forward eagerly to the taste of fresh water, for the water we had with us in

sheepskins was already eight days old and had been all the time exposed to the direct rays of the burning sun. To make matters worse, the skins were only crudely tanned and they imparted a strong smell to their contents, which were brackish to start with. One gulp of this liquid was enough to make one feel deadly sick. These considerations decided Sahiyaieff to give up his original destination of Qabaqli on the Amu in the north-east of the Qara Qum; for he was afraid that the sand-storm would have made all the springs on the route undrinkable. He therefore swerved east and made for Iljik, in the hopes of reaching fresh water sooner. Though both we and the camels were in sore need of a longer rest, we pushed on at once. By night the temperature was somewhat less intolerable and thirst eased off a little. I crouched on my camel, tired and dead to the world, and every now and then dozed a few minutes as I rode. Even when the ball of the sun rose burning red over the edge of the waste, Sahiyaieff would not allow a halt. We had ridden all through the night with only an hour's halt during which we had made the last of our drinking water into tea. If we could not reach the Amu before sunset we should perish to a man.

That day was the most terrible that I have ever lived through. Palate and tongue were so utterly dried up and saliva so entirely non-existent that even the faithful pebble in my mouth could not coax forth the tiniest drop of moisture. After some hours everything suddenly went black before my eyes and I began to rock helplessly to and fro in the saddle. I tried to hold tight and steady myself, but crashed to the ground and knew no more.

When I came to, I found myself drenched from head to foot and heard the voices of many men round me. I

opened my eyes and saw Khores and a lot of Qirghiz standing round. A few yards from my bed of reeds a huge river was rolling its mud-yellow flood towards the north. I was lying on the banks of the Amu Darya, to which the Sariq had carried me. They themselves had started off again long since, and were well on their way downstream towards Qabaqli.

For four days I lay in the reed-tents of the Qirghiz, accumulated a mass of lice, and caught a full-size attack of malaria, which declared itself a few days after. Qannadi would have greeted my conduct with benevolent comment, for I drank gallons of the river water without boiling it. I simply could not swallow enough of the muddy mixture, so incomparably sweet it tasted—water free of salt. While I had been lying unconscious the Qirghiz had got their magician medicine-man to treat me. He poured water over me again and again, leaped round me to drive out the evil spirits from my body, and beat his magic drum the while with incomparable perseverance. (Plate 16.)

On the fifth day the steamer called at last, took us on board, and brought us upstream to Charjui. On the way we watched Russian fishermen hauling their catch ashore. (Plate 17.) Khores somewhat cynically remarked that we could have reached the same goal considerably more cheaply and with less fatigue if we had taken the train from Merv! Our old tub made but slow headway against the current, less because of the speed of the river than the strong resistance offered by the sand with which it was laden. At Deinau on the left bank we were unable to draw in to shore, so much sand had piled up against the bank. Some Qirghiz passengers who wished to land had to be sent ashore in boats. We did not reach Khoja

Qala till next day, after circumnavigating several islands in the river. This is the first Bukharan frontier fortress on this stretch of the Amu Darya. The river is about a mile and a quarter across at this point, but widens further before Charjui to about two and a quarter. To avoid the dangers of floods, Khoja Qala is built a mile or so inland on the top of a hill, and numerous canals from the Amu irrigate the land round the fort, which boasts a population of about a hundred.

On account of the moving sandbanks the captain resolutely refused to stir at night, and we cast anchor opposite the fortress. Our steamer got under way again at daybreak. The river flows through dreary barren desert, and past many fortress-like but ruined buildings which the people of Bukhara built in former days as a defence against the Turkomans. Towards midday we saw the first cultivation, and in the late afternoon we tied up at the narrowest part of the river, not far from the steel bridge of Charjui, which is well over a mile long.

Charjui itself lies over three miles from the river. I at once announced myself to the river customs officer on the bank and begged him to order me a cart for the drive to the town. First he asked to see my *bumaga*, or papers, which I produced without misgiving after my reassuring experience of their acceptability in Merv. But this almighty man declared that they were not sufficient; I needed a permit from the Soviet of Charjui before he could allow me to land. He would not understand that I had come to Charjui expressly in order to get one. When, however, I expressed my willingness to leave Khores and my baggage in his charge, he consented to let me ride to the town, and even lent me his own horse for the purpose.

V

In the Lion's Den

The Soviet had set up its offices in the house of the wealthy tea-merchant Arghamanoff, who had been killed in the rising of 1919. A huge red flag at the entrance and a notice which in five languages—one of which was German—summoned the proletarians of all countries to unite, immediately proclaimed the house to be the seat of a Government department.

It was by no means an easy task to secure admission to the presence of the Chief Commissar, Comrade Uranyaiff. The dignified officials, who were almost without exception Turkomans, could not understand what a European who wore neither uniform nor revolver could possibly want with the chief. Not until I hit on the expedient of whispering mysteriously into their ears that my business was highly confidential, not to say 'secret', could I induce them to send my name in to the omnipotent one.

He was drinking tea and smoking a hubble-bubble when I came in. He received me and pointed to a chair. I sat down without further ceremony, and the following is the gist of what I told him: 'Comrade Uranyaiff! In the mountains of the frontier districts of Turkmenistan there are unquestionably large quantities of undiscovered

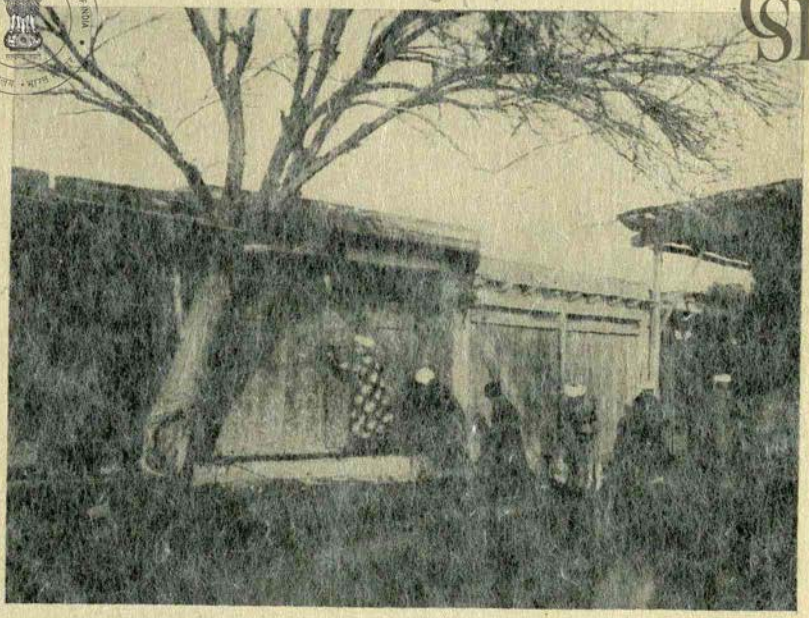
treasure. I do not mean treasure such as the bourgeois capitalists of former times might have buried there; I mean metal ore, coal, or salt. I am a geologist by profession and I have hitherto been working in the Soviet interests in Qizil Arwat. But I have come to think that I can be of more use to the Soviets if I use my expert knowledge to locate these treasures and help to make them available for use. I can of course only hope to do this if you will entrust me with full powers to travel freely through the districts where I suspect these riches to be concealed. If you will supply me with the necessary documents, riding animals, and technical equipment, I am prepared to work in the sole interests of the Soviet of Turkmenistan and to reveal to you all the mines or deposits I may discover, without asking any reward for myself.'

'Tovarish Steinschneider, I am delighted that you are willing to undertake the labour of this task. But I cannot come to a decision on my own responsibility alone. I shall call a committee and give you an answer in the course of the next week.'

'Tovarish Uranyaiff, that is extremely kind of you. But the customs officer on the river was unwilling even to let me enter your town, and would not accept as valid the identification papers which I hold from the Town Soviet of Qizil Arwat. I must beg you therefore to grant me an authorization to remain here while I await your reply.'

'That priceless idiot of a customs officer! Of course you shall have the necessary *bumaga* at once. Just excuse me a few moments.'

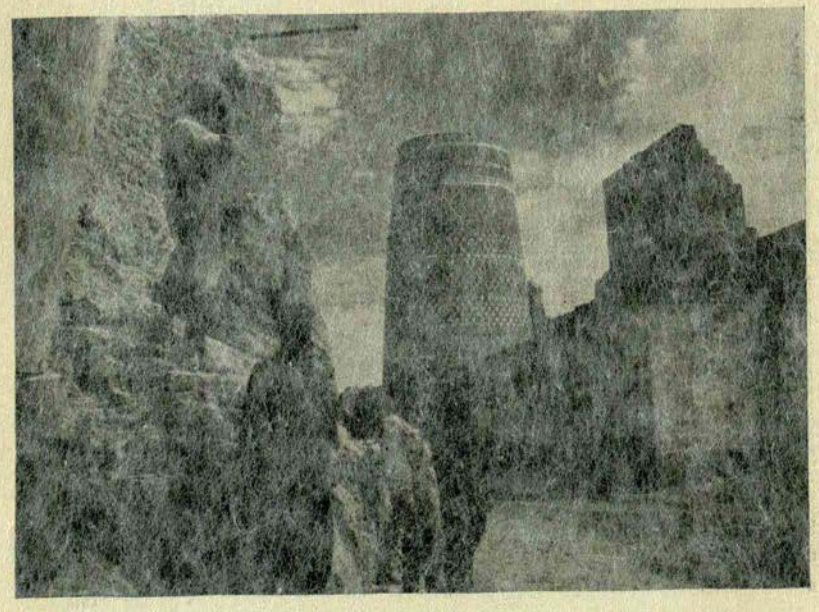
I breathed again. Everything was working out according to plan. After the wait of what really *was* only a few



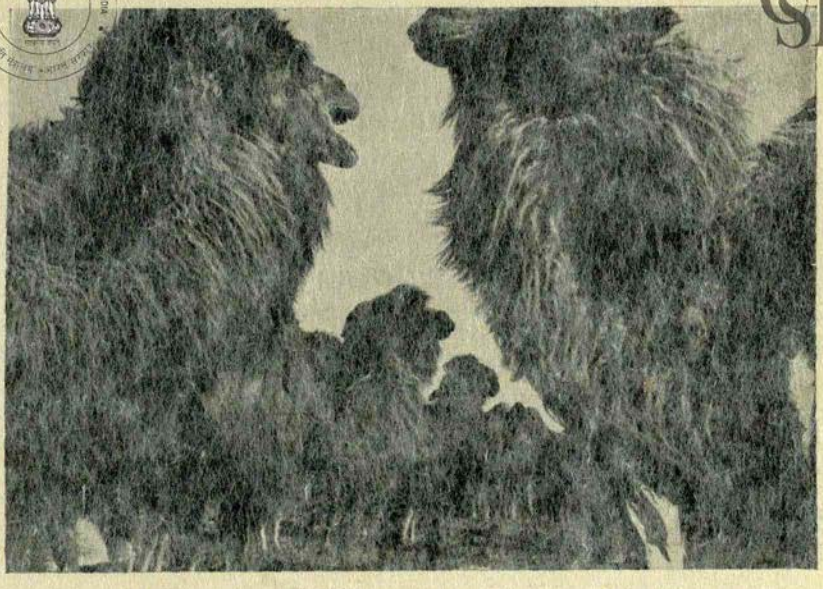
8. After an autumn fall of rain in Merv you must clamber along close to the walls of the houses—or drown in the middle of the street

9. The melons of Turkistan are famous the world over. The most famous of all come from Merv

10. The age-old Juma Masjid in Khiwa contains 213 halls of prayer



11. Rebellion broke out in Khiwa in 1924. Soviet soldiers after the re-occupation of the town



12. Camels are liberally watered before the start of the caravan

13. The advance-guard of the Desert Police approach our caravan