

CHAPTER XXVII

BY THE EASTERN MARCHES OF KHORĀSĀN

SECTION I.—FROM ASKHĀBĀD TO MESHED

Start from
Askhābād.

ON October 29th the railway brought me to Askhābād, the head-quarters station of the Transcaspiian Province. Regard for Russian frontier regulations, rendered more than usually stringent by the war, obliged me to start from Askhābād for the long journey to Sīstān, instead of making for Meshed, its first stage, by the shorter and more interesting route from Dūshak past Kalāt-i-Nādirī. A friendly recommendation from the Consulate at Bokhāra enabled me to secure, on the day following my arrival, the requisite permits for crossing the frontier. On the morning of October 31st I was able to leave Askhābād, where crowds of peasant families evacuated from Poland had seemed to bring the Eastern war zone in Europe strangely near. Otherwise the impressions produced by this important cantonment were curiously like those which one might have derived from a military station on the Indian N.W. frontier, if it had been transplanted to some modest oasis below the barren gravel glacis of the K'un-lun or T'ien-shan.

Journey to
Meshed.

While the baggage in charge of Afrāz-gul was left to follow by easier stages, I managed in a light Russian carriage to cross the range which forms the frontier and to reach the Persian border station of Bājgirān by the same evening. There the attention of the Ilkhānī chief of the Kurds settled in the Kūchān district had provided a very friendly reception as well as a mounted escort. Next day a drive of close on 50 miles carried me through picturesque valleys and over the Alamanlik pass to the town of Kūchān. Two more days' driving over dusty roads took me through the wide open valleys that descend on either side of the almost imperceptible watershed at the head of the drainage of the Atrak river, and brought me on November 3rd to Meshed.

Stay at
Meshed.

There at the famous old capital of Khorāsān I received the kindest welcome from Colonel (now Sir) Wolseley Haig, H.B.M.'s Consul-General. The necessity of awaiting the arrival of my baggage as well as preparations for the onward journey imposed a week's halt, and this was made most restful and pleasant by the hospitable reception which that distinguished scholar-diplomatist and Lady Haig were pleased to extend to me in their home. Besides being able to avail myself of clerical assistance from the Consulate Office in dealing with heavy arrears of work on official accounts, I also greatly benefited by Sir Wolseley's shrewd and most competent advice as regards the safeguards to be taken on my farther journey.

The war conditions prevailing along the western frontier of Persia and the activities of German military missions endeavouring to push into Afghānistān from Kirmān were exercising a very disturbing effect upon the outlying tracts of Khorāsān within the Perso-Afghān border. The thin cordon formed along this border by widely scattered detachments of Russian troops in the north, and of British Indian troops in the south, was unable to prevent extensive raids by large bands of robbers from the Afghān side upon the main lines of communication leading from Meshed towards Birjand and Sīstān. Their operations were necessarily much facilitated by the desert character of most of the ground on either side of the border line. The expert advice I had received at Kāshgar from Sir Percy Sykes had induced me to plan my journey from Meshed to Sīstān along a route