

CHAPTER XLV

THE ROAD TO NEH

ONE of our camels, which had borne no load all the way from Tebbes, had, during the latter days, delayed and hindered the caravan, and he was parted with in Ser-i-cha to a dealer who offered us 10 tuman for the beast. The camel had no blemish, but it would have been too much to expect that he, tired and worn-out as he was, should keep up with the others. He had cost six times as much in the first instance, but he had three months of faithful service behind him. It seemed like a slave-dealing transaction to separate him from his twelve comrades, and perhaps he felt like old Uncle Tom when we handed him over. He stood in the open square of the village when we set out, and followed the receding caravan with wondering eyes. What his thoughts were remained his own secret, for we men can hold no communication with animals, but can only torture them. The others did not even glance at the solitary animal, but marched quietly eastwards to the ring of the bells.

We left without regret the miserable village, the most squalid we had hitherto seen, flat and colourless, and with narrow dirty lanes between grey decrepit walls. Even the fort, picturesque in some villages, was here represented by the ruins of a wall. Its moat was filled with salt water, but in summer, it seems, it dries up altogether. Our road passed the village Aliabad with an open pool, where the carcass of a camel lay stinking. The village Ambari we passed out of sight on the left. The ground consisted of yellow clay, often white with salt or made slippery with branches