

CHAPTER LII

WE PART WITH OUR CAMELS

JUST as we were making ready to set out from Neh alarming reports reached us from Seistan, where the *nakoshi* or bubonic plague had of late raged furiously, and people were dying like flies. Officials and Europeans had fled to some *kuhistan* or highland country, and the people in Neh pitied us because we were going into this dreadful plague centre. I wished to telegraph to Nasretabad, the chief town of Seistan, for surer information, but the telegraph station was not working. In Neh we came into touch with the line which, from Seistan, runs through Birjan and Haidari to Meshed and Teheran. Wondering whether I should land in Seistan in a more critical situation than in Batum, I set out on the morning of April 1, and at a distance of one hour from Neh had an intimation that something was actually going on, for there stood a lonely quarantine tent, where travellers from Seistan had to remain five days for observation. With the five days in Bendan, there were then actually ten days' quarantine on the road to Neh. But the watch was exceedingly defectively and negligently kept, and it was the easiest thing in the world to escape quarantine by avoiding the guarded roads.

We had taken two Neh men into our service, and hired five camels from them. One of them was terribly fractious, perfectly wild, and had to be curbed by an iron chain. The two men were armed with long primitive guns, which they carried over their shoulders, but they were soon tired, and hung their weapons on the camels, and then had a less martial appearance.