

CHAPTER LVI

THE HILMEND

IN the evenings we met together comfortably in the house, while the plague raged outside among these unfortunate people, who would not be guided and advised by Europeans. In the morning we walked on the roof of the Consulate, where there was a wide view over the awfully monotonous and wearisome and yet singular country. The air was hazy, and Kuh-i-Khoja was only just visible. Besides the small, sickly gardens in the town, a strip of green was seen only to the east. All the rest was grey clay, more or less scored by wind erosion. The cultivated land lies farther south, in a network of irrigation canals from the Hilmend.

The previous year, that is, 1905, the Hilmend was very low in September, and its beds could be crossed anywhere. The large, broad, main channel was now, in April, said to be 150 yards broad at Bend-i-Seistan, and was dry for the most part, only a small, winding thread of water remaining. The rest of the bed was filled with driftsand, 2 feet deep. It was, indeed, quite impossible for me to travel across the Hilmend and through southern Afghanistan, for neither the Indian nor the Afghan Government would have permitted it under any conditions. Not even an Englishman can obtain permission; the Emir is inflexible. Nor has the Persian Government allowed Englishmen to lay a telegraph between Nasretabad and Robat, the extreme point of the Indian telegraph line in Baluchistan. The English Consulate is not, therefore, in direct telegraphic communication with Nushki; between Robat and Nasretabad