

asm. Hope breezed through the land. But, several months later, we learned of Mozaffar al-Din Shah's death. Those who knew him as the founder of the constitutional monarchy, loved him. The Sabzevaris gathered at the congregational mosque to mourn. <...>

Several months later, when news of the shelling of Parliament spread, the people gave in to despair. Before the news reached us, my family, including my two maternal uncles Aqa Mohammad Hasan and Aqa Mirza Azizollah Khan, had agreed that I ought to go to Tehran. Considering my love of learning, Tehran with its great number of new schools was the best place for me. I was also determined to go, so finally Uncle Aqa Mohammad Hasan sacrificed his time to accompany me there. While in Tehran, he was to establish his own trading company. He had just divorced his wife (why, I don't know) and had no children. But the shelling of Parliament and news of unrest in the city caused the trip to be postponed. In the meantime, I could hardly wait for my dream to come true. Finally, during the reign of Mohammad Ali Shah—known in history as the Minor Tyranny—Uncle Aqa Mohammad Hasan and I went to Tehran. We set out one day in a coach belonging to a driver from the Caucasus called Safar Deli (Crazy Safar). It was a brand-new and clean carriage pulled by a team of four fine horses. These Caucasus people were Russian subjects and, because of the protection they enjoyed, had become quite numerous in Iran, especially in Khorasan. Merchants hired them to transport their goods because they were less likely to be robbed, and if they were, the Russians would insist that the loot be returned. Passengers favored the Russian conveyances because thieves and highwaymen refrained from attacking coaches belonging to them.

ON TO TEHRAN

Uncle and I along with Crazy Safar set out and spent the first night at Sulvand about fifty kilometers outside of Sabzevar. This Safar, true to his nickname, was unbalanced. He would be belligerent and very abusive. He would also bully shopkeepers and feed-sellers with his rage and would dismiss grooms who served us for a day or two with-

out paying them. This was why all the tradesmen and coffeehouse owners cursed him. The next morning we had only gone eighteen kilometers when we camped again because he wanted to baby his team of horses. He had coddled these animals and they had become fat. Every fifteen kilometers, he would tend to the beasts, giving them water and caressing them, speaking to them in Turkish, stopping and playing with them idiotically. Then we would set out again, but whenever he tugged one of the horses' reins, he would console it softly, whispering confidences to it. In very broken Persian, he praised his team, mumbling endearments, and would at times even sing to them. Then suddenly he would shout like a man possessed and strike the groom for no apparent reason.

In the afternoon of the second day, we reached a village called Mehr, ninety-two kilometers from Sabzevar. No one dared ask Safar why our progress was so slow, least of all I, but he did volunteer that after Mazinan, the distance between stages would be longer. We would have to go about fifty kilometers without water and feed. He wanted to travel less in the more settled areas to accustom the horses. In any case, that morning he hitched up the coach and, just as we were about to go, brutally kicked the groom and punched the coffeehouse owner, without paying either.

He emerged in that same lunatic state, but just as he was about to enter the carriage, the side horse kicked him in the head so hard that he was thrown at least two meters and seemed dead. One of the things I will never forget as long as I live is hearing the entire crowd near the coffeehouse suddenly sing the Lord's praises, thanking Him for finally giving the Godless savage what he deserved. As we had learned, one of his habits when he was in a bad mood was to curse the Lord. The Turkish driver's obscenities would typically begin "Goddamn...!"—one of the impieties he used that day. The only humanity and kindness in that brute was reserved for his four horses. With no one to help him the task of nursing Safar's wounds fell to Uncle and me, and we begged people to find someone to help. A villager with medical experience turned up to cauterize the wound and stop the bleeding, applying a felt bandage to it. They massaged Safar's

body. We melted a bit of sugar, added rose water, and fed it to him when he could swallow. The village mollah came to absolve him and pray over his body. As soon as he could speak, the first words out of his mouth was "horses." His voice cracking a little, he kept crying out to his "beloved" animals.

In the meantime, an itinerant surgeon from Mazinan that had been sent for arrived. He opened the wound and rebandaged it. I imagine that he also had a variety of drugs with him like potassium permanganate, iodine, white bandages and forceps. We nursed Safar all day and night and he got better. The next morning, the groom that Safar had kicked hitched up the coach and took control of the reins himself. We loaded Safar into the coach with difficulty and tried to keep him stable while we proceeded at a slow measured pace. In the afternoon, we reached Mazinan where the surgeon who had joined us had his clinic. He heated some water and washed the wound. Then he sterilized some felt and spider's web and worked them for an hour until they became malleable. He cleaned the wound, stitched it and applied ointment. Safar was given some medicine. The surgeon also had them get about seven pounds of meat, cook it and feed the thick broth to him. That night while the surgeon remained with us, Safar slept peacefully. In the morning, he was well enough to take the reins himself. But we hadn't gone more than several kilometers when his pain seemed to return. Whatever it was, we noticed that he had begun to howl and curse the heavens. We had to stop about twenty-five kilometers from Mazinan at a village called Kaheh, where the surgeon treated him again. The pain subsided and he slept. Uncle paid the surgeon handsomely for the treatment and the drugs, and he gave us extra medicine, ointment, and bandages for the road. At every station Uncle with my help cleaned and rebandaged the wound as the surgeon had instructed. Finally, after twenty-four days on the road, we reached the outskirts of Tehran. When we were about fifty kilometers out, Safar began to pressure us for more than the agreed fare, which we gave him. This was our thanks for saving his life.

ENTERING TEHRAN AND ON TO SCHOOL THERE

We parted from Safar at the Jalilabad Street (today Khayyam Street) coach station. Uncle immediately sought out a Tehrani merchant named Aqa Mirza Nasrollah. We stayed with him for the first two or three days and then moved to the home of one of Uncle's acquaintances, Mirza Taqi Khani, near the Qazvin Gate. This man, who was from Qazvin, apparently had spent some time in Khorasan and had gotten to know Uncle there. Two or three days later we rented a modest house on Jannat-e Golshan Avenue. An old woman was found to be the maid. The house was an outer residence with a locked door leading to the landlord's inner quarters. We had two rooms and a very small space that served as a kitchen.

I enrolled in Tarbiat, one of the government schools with good teachers that was very famous at the time. I couldn't have been more enthusiastic and excited. Of course, there was no comparison between Tarbiat and Sabzevar-style education. There were regular classes and instruction, things that were new to me. This novel world that I had entered had real order and discipline, where the minutes and hours counted. Students knew exactly what their schedule was each day. There were four morning classes: first period, math; second, Persian; third, Arabic; and then calligraphy. School recessed at noon for lunch and resumed at two. The two afternoon classes might be geometry, algebra, art or foreign languages. They gave us homework exercises in all of the subjects. At specific points in the day the bell rang and all the students went outside. In the afternoons they had us line up.

Because to that point I was a willful child raised without discipline and indifferent to time, the orderly spirit of the school was a welcome lesson. In class, they questioned us on our lessons and a student's answers not only affected his grades, but also determined whether his peers treated him with respect or shamed him. The school had instituted a sense of friendly competition and rivalry among the students. Teachers both encouraged and chided us. They would reward us with pens, pads of paper or books. They were con-

scientious and genuinely fond of learning. During those first days of the Constitutional Period, when people's spirits were high, no group was more engaged in reforms than the teachers.

I have the fondest memories of the teachers from this school, and it is with heartfelt respect that I write about some of them here. Sheikh al-Ra'is Taleqani was a learned man of about fifty or sixty. He was single and lived at school. He appeared lofty and dignified and was a spirited man who laughed and joked freely. He wore the robe of a disheveled preacher and often kept food in his pocket, usually some bread and cheese. Before sunrise he would leave the school grounds and sit beside the gullies along Amiriyeh or Farmanfarma Avenues and have his bread and cheese breakfast. In those days Tehran had more trees than today and small streams ran beside the roads. He would return to school before the students arrived. Later they would gather round him and start poetry competitions. He would cheer on the winning teams and occasionally give pens as prizes. The poetry at these contests had to be from the greats—no unknowns were allowed. He never tolerated mistakes when we recited. Students formed two lines, one to the left, one to the right of him, and he would always root for the front-runners. One day Mahmud Khan Morshedzadeh, who was known for his prodigious memory and was virtually the leader of one side, lost. The next day Mahmud Khan challenged anyone to match him in lines from Ferdowsi that ended in “g” and defeated all comers.

Sheikh al-Ra'is taught in a clear and fluent voice, and would insist that the students speak the same way. He was very strict when he gave dictation. The maximum grade one could receive in dictations was twenty, and he would subtract one whole number for every mistake, like writing *shotor*—“camel”—with an Arabic “t.” The same applied to a misplaced dot or any other minor writing error. He allowed no exceptions; a mistake was a mistake. He instilled the habit of writing carefully and precisely in his students. He was likewise extraordinarily meticulous about reading aloud. The readers used in class consisted of a variety of texts, both prose and poetry selections. Newer

books were introduced like science, history and some translations from foreign languages.

Hajj Mir Seyyed Ali Esfahani taught Arabic. His textbooks were the standard grammar used in Beirut and a series of readers designed specifically for schools. Seniors studied *Moghni* with him.⁸

The French teacher was Mirza Farajollah Khan Pirzadeh, known as “Monsieur.” This man was a walking dictionary. He was a good teacher though he had a slight stammer.

The literature and composition teacher was Mirza Azizollah Khan Mesbah, who was a poet and writer in his own right. He gave us many selections to memorize and taught us writing and composition exceptionally well.

Soltan al-Khattatin taught calligraphy. Mirza Seyyed Mohammad Khan Mohandes Homayun, who is now in Tehran at the Ministry of Education, was the math, geometry and algebra teacher. There was an American called Mr. Preag and a Parsi from India who taught English. All of them were conscientious, learned and devout.

After three years at Tarbiat, I returned to Sabzevar for summer vacation. Upon my return to Tehran, I entered the Dar al-Fonun (Polytechnic), which was the most prestigious and oldest school in Tehran at the time. The Polytechnic went back to 1851, the year it was established by Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, becoming the first school to employ a cadre of European professors. It contained a kind of secondary school, a military academy, and colleges of engineering, surveying and medicine. During the two years I spent at the Polytechnic the faculty were:

Mathematics: Mirza Gholamhoseyn Rahnama;

Geometry and Trigonometry: Mirza Reza Khan Qarajeh Daghi Mohandes al-Molk.

Geography and History: Aqa Mirza Abolhasan Khan Forughi.

History: Mirza Asadollah Khan Tarjoman al-Saltaneh, famous as “Alu” (or “plum”) because he often pursed his lips when he spoke or listened.

French: Monsieur Richard Khan Mo'addeb al-Molk;
 Chemistry: Dr. Mahmud Khan Shimi (the son of Mirza Kazem
 Shimi Mahalati).

<...>



At that time Beirut was famous in Iran as a center of learning, and a number of Iranians had already been studying there. Many books published in Beirut circulated in Iran. The example of two of my elementary school classmates, Abdolhoseyn Dehqan and his brother Ali Mohammad, who went to Beirut, also motivated me to go. Both were among the top students whose accomplishments earned my respect and fascination. Moreover, my passion for knowledge was growing by the day, occupying all my senses, and I thought that were I to go to Beirut, I would reach the highest rungs of learning. Letters traveled between Tehran and Sabzevar, but I was adamant. Finally, they wrote me to come to Sabzevar when school was over and prepare for the trip to Beirut.

While I was away, my sister had reached maturity and married a man from Sabzevar named Aqa Mohammad, who owned property some fifty kilometers from Sabzevar. <...>

RETURN TO SABZEVAR

Around the end of the school year, Aqa Mohammad came to Tehran on business. When the school year was over, he and I traveled back to Sabzevar together along with a man from Kuh Mish. My maternal uncle Aqa Mohammad Hasan remained behind in the city to see to his trading business.

At that time bandit gangs were operating around Miandasht, a town between Shahrud and Sabzevar. Because of them, the caravanserais were built like fortresses. As Miandasht was a caravan stop on the road to Turkestan, most of the Turkmen attacks occurred around there. Apparently during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah,

Hoseyn Khan Shehab al-Molk Shahsavan had built a network of caravanserais and had underground channels dug to provide water. More than just safe havens for travelers, these serais served as defensive outposts in case of attack. Thanks to the channels, which surfaced in them, they had reliable water supplies. The serais also contained numerous storerooms.

All these things also made them ideal hideouts. At the time of our journey an Iranian living in southern Central Asia by the name of Hoseynzadeh commandeered the serais and with a band of thieves who at that time had styled themselves “freedom fighters” terrorized the surrounding countryside. They attacked merchants, robbing them of their goods, and then extorted money from them for the return of their property. Other bandit gangs from the region had joined forces with Hoseynzadeh. The bandit leader and rebel in his own right, Ali Khan Savadkuhi, brought horsemen from Khaar, Varamin, and other places. Savadkuhi made one of the large caravanserais his, while Hoseynzadeh took over another. The two gangs had joined to extort money from both seasoned travelers and any innocent passers-by who happened to fall into their clutches.

When we reached Shahrud, we naturally asked about security on the roads. Everyone said that they were fine—travelers had come and gone. So off we went, but when we entered Miandasht in the afternoon of the next day, Hoseynzadeh’s men stopped us and went through all our possessions taking many things belonging to Aqa Mohammad. They demanded that we buy them back, but we did not have much money. Two days later, they decided to let me go to Sabzevar while Aqa Mohammad remained behind as a hostage to be ransomed.

The thought of being a prisoner to the gang in the first caravanserai terrified Aqa Mohammad, because their leader, Hoseynzadeh, was not just a highwayman but a bloodthirsty killer. Ali Khan, though a thief, was a tribal bandit that observed certain proprieties. So we threw in our lot with him and moved to the other caravanserai. As Ali Khan’s partner, Hoseynzadeh evidently gave his approval. In any event, at daybreak on the third day I was allowed to leave on the post stagecoach and to take a trunk of schoolbooks for which the bandits obviously had no use.

At sunrise when we had gotten about nine kilometers east of Miandasht, suddenly there was the sound of gunfire, about forty or fifty shots in rapid succession. The postman Asadollah Beyg and the driver, who had experienced this before, halted the coach and began to wave white and other colored cloths in the air to signal their surrender. Then a number of Turkmen spilled out of the hills along the road and led the coach to a hill. When we reached the other side of the hill, we saw hundreds of women and men seated on the ground and several coaches, horses and pack animals. What had happened was clear: they had waylaid all the coaches traveling in either direction and secreted them behind the hill. Having robbed the passengers of their belongings, they packed up the loot and were waiting for the last haul of the day—our coach. In a split second they had our baggage on the ground and had repacked it for loading onto the horses. Some of the things they threw away, including the mail and my trunk, which were beneath their contempt.

The baggage out of the way, they stripped the passengers of their personal possessions and hung them from their saddle horns. They had the men undress down to their pants but did not remove the women's clothing. After the loot was loaded onto the coach horses, the bandits had the women (about ten in all with two or three children) ride with them. Then they ordered us to run with the pack north of the road, a dry and desolate expanse, full of thorns and desert brush. It was a sandscape, or, properly speaking, a rocky elevated plain. No matter where one looked there wasn't a road or track in sight. But the thieves, who knew every inch of the way, moved quickly forcing us to race alongside them as they cracked their whips menacingly. After about six kilometers, our bare feet and legs were covered with cuts and bruises. These wounds along with the sun, which was now scorching, sapped our strength considerably, but the ordeal had only begun. Anyone who fell behind they whipped, and soon the naked backs of the captives were covered with black lash marks. There couldn't have been a worse time for this march, but we had no choice. Because Aqa Mohammad and I had to wait for my final exams at school to end, we were traveling during the first days of

summer. The dry rockscape was especially hot, and the closer it got to noon the worse the heat became, making us even more exhausted. Thirst was also becoming an unspeakable torment.

Speaking from experience, Asadollah Beyg and his driver urged us to use all the strength we had left to run because the thieves would kill anyone that fell behind. They feared that if one of us reached the road, he would put the authorities on their trail. The postman and his driver explained, “The bandits will go about twenty-four kilometers before letting the horses have a breather. After setting up their tents and seeing to their own people, they will either kill or free us—and it seems more likely that they’ll let us go seeing they’ve brought us this far.”

Naturally, the fear of being killed and the Turkmen’s whips were great incentives. Fear of death made all the other agonies, the gashes on our legs, the exhaustion, the thirst and even the blazing sun, seem nothing. Fortunately, in that heat, the horses were also tiring. They lacked the vigor they had when galloping to the first stage. We ran until around noon, when we reached a reddish hilltop, which according to Asadollah Beyg was about twenty-four kilometers from the road. The Turkmen positioned lookouts on the surrounding hills and then unloaded the animals. After dividing us into two groups separated by a small distance, men on one side and women and children on the other, they watered the horses.

Recessed within the hill there was a sort of hollow with a vaulted ceiling, from which water was dripping. Over the centuries this dripping had formed the vault. Water collected in a rock basin at the bottom of the recess. The Turkmen kept dipping their water bags into the basin and lugging them to the horses. Otherwise, they were very miserly with the water. After the horses had had enough, the Turkmen themselves drank. Then they filled some cast iron kettles and placed them on a fire made from thorn and scrub kindling to prepare their green Turkman tea. By this time, there was nothing left in the basin for us to drink. We would have to wait hours for enough water to collect there again. Happily, I was seated close enough to the cave to dig out a few moist clods of earth, which I sucked greedily and

then rubbed all over myself to quell the blaze burning inside me. Of course, I was acting purely on instinct, as this could not possibly help.

To describe my mental and physical state at this time is extraordinarily difficult. I had no idea about the others and was so disoriented and distraught that words can hardly do justice to my feelings. Life, my future, existence itself, all meant nothing. The only thing that mattered in my life then was a drink of water, even a gulp of the wastewater from the sewers by the road. Just one cup, nothing more, was my here and hereafter, my now and my future, my hopes and aspirations, my desire, the object of my obsession, my very beloved. Even today, decades later, I can still taste how sweet those red clods were on my fingertips. The lovely sight of water trickling from that crack in the hill is still with me, and those damp clumps of soil that I rubbed on my chest, stomach, and arms are to this day like the most comforting, most soothing of salves.

After the Turkmen had finished their meal, they began to argue among themselves. Again we had to rely on Asadollah Beyg and the driver, a boy from a village east of Miandasht called Abbasabad, for our information. Both knew a smattering of Turkman and Kurdish. They listened to the Turkmen intently and the expressions of horror that played on their features were enough to tell us what was being said.

Who were these bandits? Thirty-three men belonged to the gang, seventeen Turkmen and sixteen Kurds from the Khorasan borderlands (around Bojnurd). The Turkmen had to be partners with the Kurds because they passed through their territory, which was on the boundary with Russia. The Kurds knew the territory well and, besides being armed, were highwaymen, too. The curious thing was that the Turkmen were enthusiastic Sunnis, while the Kurds were Shia. So to the extent that a band of ignorant and savage desert-dwellers can hold religious sentiments and beliefs, they were devout in their own way. <...>

The Kurds and the Turkmen were also debating about what to do with us. The Turkmen were in favor of keeping the women prisoners and killing the men, more than twenty people. The Kurds, on the other hand, wanted to free the men so that they could return

with money to ransom the women and children. The bickering between the two factions was getting sharper. Asadollah Beyg and the boy driver, who were eavesdropping, surreptitiously told us what they were saying. The expressions on their faces were bizarre; what they heard made their eyes dart constantly and their facial muscles twitch. Their features expressed hope then fear and anxiety, and then again surprise and resignation. I was also listening, but if you were to ask me today how I felt then, I would say that ninety percent of my attention was on the water collecting in the basin. The rest was of secondary importance to me. <...>

The bandits' discussions ended around three o'clock in the afternoon. Asadollah said a prayer of thanks as they had decided to let us go. The Turkmen packed up their baggage and headed for the desert while several lookouts stood watch from the surrounding heights. Their leader, a man called Sardar Qorban, ordered them to break camp. Left behind were some pieces of mail that they scattered about the campsite. A half-blind (one-eyed) Turkman remained with a sack of cornbread, which he was to distribute among us. He warned us that if anyone strayed from the spot before the Turkmen were out of sight and any trace of them had disappeared from the horizon, the men on the hills would kill us. He explained that the lookouts would wait until the main band got some distance away, whereupon they themselves would catch up at a gallop. We were to wait until we could not see them and then leave. They took the women as hostages, however, and said they would hold them until their relatives brought enough ransom to retrieve them at Astarabad. When the men asked whom they should see in Astarabad to ransom their women, the bandits said, "You will know when you get there. Now kiss the stirrups of Sardar Qorban and the Kurdish chief to say goodbye and thank them for sparing your lives." The "blind" Turkman even extended his hand for us to kiss and then set us free. Meanwhile each of us drank from the pool of water that grew muddier the more we crowded around it. They also gave each man a round loaf of stale cornbread. Now we only had to deal with the cuts and bruises on our feet and legs that

drained our strength. Our bodies were so numb and worn out that moving was difficult.

One of our fellow passengers on the coach was a Mirza Hasan Khan from Kashan. He evidently was an employee of the telegraph office in Mashhad. With him were his wife and eight-year-old daughter. Most of the baggage on the coach had belonged to him. This consisted of several Kashan rugs wrapped in burlap and some silk fabric also from Kashan. The Turkmen tried to get his wife and daughter onto their saddles and take them away, but his wife managed to jump off three times. The fourth time they beat her viciously and bound her feet. Her husband went over and I clearly heard him assure her in his Kashan accent, "Dear, don't worry, I'll give them what they want. Now go." There was an ineffable look of grief and terror on his face as he added to his daughter, "Go with them, baby." The other passenger was a man from Qom, whose profession I didn't know. He also had his young wife with him. This fellow was an opium addict. Along the way and even when we were camped behind the hill, all he could think of was the opium in his suitcase. He kept swearing to Asadollah Beyg and the driver that he would die if they didn't give it to him. He approached the bandits, but when they growled at him, he began to whimper and beg. His wife, on the other hand, did not seem that perturbed. She seemed to take in what was happening with the vacant gaze of someone watching a film or a play.

The few women prisoners were far better off than the men. They were on horseback all the way to the encampment, and as soon as they arrived, the Turkmen fed them. So when the bandits ordered the addict's wife to share the saddle with one of the riders, she complied as though she were off on an outing to one of the Saints' shrines around Tehran. Before she left, her husband edged close to her, pleading with her to get the bandits to give him his suitcase. His wife, who couldn't speak their language, naturally said nothing. The other females, who were not among our party, were villagers with two or three children.

The men from our coach were Mirza Hasan Khan Kashi whom I mentioned before, the addict from Qom, my servant Mohammad Taqi, Asadollah Beyg and his young driver. I can't recall anyone else.

There were also several villagers and men from the small caravan that they had captured before us. The last group could think of nothing but the donkeys they had been forced to abandon by the main road.

As the Turkmen had instructed, we waited until they were out of sight before, at Asadollah's urging, we prepared to go. In the meantime we drank all the water we found and wrapped our feet in scraps of paper, sackcloth and hide that the Turkmen had left behind. But I soon realized that the rough hide and paper shoes were harder on my feet than the desert and threw them away. None of us felt like moving anyway. Kind by nature, Asadollah Beyg was particularly good to me. When he was an apprentice coachman, he frequently passed through town and had gotten to know my family. He probably was looking forward to a reward they would give him when I came home. He had no clothing or food to offer, but he did try to cheer me up by saying that at least we had escaped death. He also gathered up the mail and put it into a makeshift knapsack on his shoulder. How wonderful it was, he kept repeating to himself, that they didn't take the "government mails."

The phrase he used and others like "grand post office" and "august telegraph" were in vogue in those days. Occasionally some postmaster would even threaten the governor or military commander of a region with closing the "government mails." The deliverymen at the post and telegraph offices and the apprentice postmen proudly wore the government insignia (a lion and sun) on their caps, which were rimmed in scarlet. Earnest postal official that he was, Asadollah Beyg could not leave the government mails behind.

The return trip was downhill. The weather had cooled and, as it became dark, we even felt a chill. Asadollah Beyg warned that if we fell while traveling at night, we would die. Having escaped the Turkmen, it would be a shame, he said, to fall prey to the wild animals, the snakes and even the ghouls that lived in the desert. So he marched us along quickly to reach the road before nightfall.

Around sunset we reached a place called Kurds' Well. Here they had excavated a path that led a couple of meters below the surface to the water. Kurds' Well was a staging point where thieves stopped to drink and water their horses before attacking the main road some

seven kilometers away. Asadollah and the boy, both of whom knew the place well, drove us on with promises of water. But after descending into the well, we saw that it would be impossible to scoop it with two hands. We had to grip the roof of the well with one hand, while trying to reach some of the water with the other. This was so difficult that we only managed to wet our hands. Thank God the bandits had not taken Mirza Kashi's cap.

Tribal bandits, especially the Turkmen, are known for not overlooking any object no matter how useless and shapeless. Being the meanest and most rapacious people on earth, they won't even pass up a worn pair of shoes or a soiled, moth-eaten kerchief. One can imagine, then, how useless Mirza Kashi's cap was for them to have left it behind. It was a ragged thing, made in Iran of felt stained with patches of sweat, grime and mud. The average Iranian faced with a long, dusty coach trip would probably not choose to wear his best hat. But even supposing Mirza Kashi's cap was new when he left Kashan, one can only imagine the state it was in when we reached Kurds' Well. Picture the sweat and salt that poured from his head for days or the dust that had the misfortune to land on the thing. From this cap, now a cup, we drank as much as we could.

Poor Asadollah Beyg kept warning us in vain not to drink too much, afraid we might burst. But we survived and the incident has taken its place among my indelible memories. We then followed the path out of the well and headed for the road. An hour later we were on the main road and found that [the caravanseraï people] had brought us several horses from the stables at Miandasht. It was now about ten at night, and everyone was asleep. Asadollah Beyg obtained a pleated overshirt from the driver and the kind of shirt that goes under it for me to wear. Mine was woven in Damghan of coarse, yellow cotton that was tattered. Though it was something thrown away, the shirt proved a blessing during the scorching days and at night when I nearly froze in the cold and the wind. The only problem was that it had no buttons, which I remedied by putting holes in it and stitching the sides together with a length of rough yarn.

The sole person to take pity on me was Aqa Mohammad, whom I saw at a distance, but he had nothing, no food, no money, to offer. It didn't take long for them to hitch up another coach and we prepared to go. Because this coach had no cargo but us with our bruised feet and legs, the resident thieves ignored it. They even had the nerve to express their sympathy with the hypocritical submissiveness of a person without self-respect. I asked Asadollah Beyg to stop at the place where we were captured and retrieve my books. When we got there, he gathered the books in the battered trunk and loaded it onto the coach. When we arrived in Abbasabad, some villagers acting out of charity and the duty to feed travelers gave us milk, tea and bread. Asadollah Beyg was determined to move on, explaining that his only thought was to restore me to my family. That afternoon we reached Mazinan where one of the local hajjis brought us some grapes. Though they were unripe, I have never enjoyed anything more in my life. After the agonies and the privation of the last few days, each grape was like a precious jewel. The same humane hajji also lifted our spirits considerably with tea with milk and some bread and butter. That evening when we started up again, Asadollah Beyg said that he had planned to enter Sabzevar the next night to spare me the embarrassment of appearing in town barefoot and bareheaded in a derelict undershirt. I declined the offer, saying the sooner we arrived the better. In any event we reached Sabzevar the next afternoon. I left the coach at the station and went home, having told Asadollah Beyg to send my trunk along later.

When I reached my door and knocked, a servant girl answered and asked what I wanted. I told her who I was. When I stepped in, she ran away and a coachboy appeared. He announced to the rest of the household that the Aqa had returned. When my mother, sister and the rest of the household saw my condition, they immediately had a bath prepared. But before cleaning up, I insisted that they photograph me as I was. In those days camera equipment was not as available as it is today, so we had to wait for a time. Eventually I was "divested" and bathed. They had found some of my uncle's clothing for me to wear. His oversize robe made me look like one of those old-

fashioned accountant's assistants. A few days later I came down with a high fever, which lasted two months. It may have been the result of a tick bite or something like that. In any event, it left me very weak and worn out.

In the meantime, the family took steps to ransom Aqa Mohammad. Money was sent through intermediaries to Ali Khan Savadkuhi, who set him free. But by this time things had gotten so bad between the two gangs, Savadkuhi's and Hoseynzadeh's, that they had posted sentries on their respective caravanserais expecting an attack. The conflict grew worse by the day, so when they released Aqa Mohammad, Hoseynzadeh decided to make an example of him that would teach people they could do nothing without first getting his approval. The gang ambushed Aqa Mohammad's coach and dragged him out. Then they tied him to a telegraph pole and shot him, burying him in the desert where he fell. The news of his death created an uproar, throwing the entire household into mourning.

My first education in how miserable life in Iran can be came through incidents such as these. One must be an Easterner, an Iranian, and have spent some time in that world to realize how deprived Iranian society is of the requisites of human existence. It is impossible for someone from Europe or the West in general to appreciate it. Normally people do not have the power to conceive something that is entirely alien to them. Our imagination cannot derive from nothingness; it is composed of sensations and experiences from the world around us. The average Westerner, especially one that has never been to the East, cannot imagine such deprivation.

I remember in 1924 when I was the Iranian delegate to the International Conference of the Red Cross, General Paux, the head of the French Red Cross, invited representatives from various countries to a dinner at the General Secretariat in the Interalliée Building. Hundreds of guests sat ten or twelve to a table. I found myself next to Mademoiselle Heget, the daughter of famous Belgian scholar Professor Heget. She was around twenty or twenty-two years old and had accompanied her father to Paris where he was the head of the Belgian delegation. During dinner, she was the typical student, full of

curiosity and questions that I duly answered. I mention two of them here as they illustrate what I mean by imagination and experience.

“Dr. Ghani,” she asked, “do the women of Iran have the right to vote?”

“No, Mademoiselle,” I said, “Persian women don’t have the right to vote for representatives of Parliament.”

“So,” she concluded, “they are just like the women of France and Belgium who are still denied the right to vote.”

I agreed and she was satisfied, having enlightened herself on this point. But I immediately saw how hard it is for people to understand one another fully. Those who imagine that this is merely a matter of language are mistaken. We both knew French. The question she posed was also simple, but the conclusion she reached, namely that Iranian women were the same as the French and Belgians, was absurd. How, I asked myself, could she conceivably compare herself to us? Iranians did not even have the right to a life that can be called humane, let alone the right to vote. The Mademoiselle, of course, would have been raised in Brussels by Professor and Madame Heget, in a milieu befitting her father’s social position. Her surroundings would have been predictable, orderly, a place where rights and justice existed. The best and most refined things society had to offer enriched every stage in her short life, her childhood, adolescence, education, and social life. What could she possibly know about a woman like Mirza Hasan Kashi’s wife, or about people like the addict from Qom? How could she appreciate Sardar Qorban, post coaches or “the government mail”? Kurds Well and Turkmen? The Abbasabad Gap? What would she make of the mauser-toting thief Hoseynzadeh and the homicidal beasts known collectively as murderous highway-men?

While I was lost in these thoughts, her next question took me totally by surprise: “Dr. Ghani, do you still travel by caravan in Iran?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle,” I said, “most of the time we travel that way.”

Now she was all excitement and enthusiasm. Though speaking gracefully, she could hardly contain herself as she congratulated me on the life I led traveling by caravan. This naïve young girl had seen

camels and donkeys with the finest saddles at the zoo. In her mind were the fully groomed horses and donkeys decked out in bells and ribbons at amusement parks. She probably thought all the roads in Iran were just like the trails in European parks, except for added heaps of roses, Persia's national flower. She had read the novels of Western writers who raved about the beauties of desert tracks in the moonlight, under the stars, and the crystal skies of the Orient. Mounted on those camels, donkeys and horses, a few fortunate boys and girls would ride alone or by twos, seeking answers to life's problems.

In the expressions and sayings of any people are certain covert truths that reflect the reality of their lives. Outsiders, those who live different lives, cannot appreciate such expressions. In Arabic one says, "Travel is part hell." The Easterner equates travel with the horrors of hell because of the hardships involved in going from one place to another. The Arabs also say, "The traveler is like a lunatic." The average traveler in the East has a right to his insanity, for he cannot be certain that he will reach his destination alive. In Persian, we speak of the "pain of travel" and the "journey's tortures." There are a thousand such expressions. About to leave Shiraz, Sa'di wrote:

As I turn to go, my heart twists like my feet;
The more I load up, the more I am weighed down.

All the benedictions we say when setting out to travel or the lucky charms and the thousands of other superstitions we have are part of a reality in the East not experienced on a trip from New York to Washington or on Mademoiselle Heget's journey from Brussels to Paris.

All the celebrations and singing, the animal sacrifices and the offering of sweets that one sees when the traveler returns reveals a bitter truth. Until several years ago, caravan leaders would go about Mazandaran and Astarabad crying that they were taking travelers to Mashhad and would guarantee their chances of returning safely at fifty percent. Another would up this and announce sixty percent. Of course, this was not the guarantee that European insurers make. Rather, even if everyone were to perish, the caravaner could cover his

losses with such phrases as “tragedy from heaven,” “will of God” or “it was their time.” He might also quote the Qur’an: “O mankind, you know not when death will come.” But this hue and cry itself tells the story of what it was like to travel in the East. <...>

Only in a country like Iran, a cradle of disease, epidemics, bands of thieves, and chaos, can one find these and other such expressions. When I returned to Iran from Europe once, I went to Sabzevar. Mirza Ali Akbar Arabshahi, who had never set foot out of town, paid a call and asked whether the places I had been to were safe and secure. I told him that they were. He was silent for a bit and then asked, “So, in those parts there was no famine—plenty of rain?” “Yes,” I said. The amazing thing is that despite the regularity of tragedy, the inhabitants of Iran believe that their particular town is heaven on earth, with fine weather, few diseases and plenty of elderly people. Though there were rumors one year of cholera, their particular town remained immune or less vulnerable than other places.

Sabzevar is a town of scorchingly hot summers and many fierce dust storms. Varying in severity from year to year, these afternoon wind storms begin around the second month of spring. There is little rainfall, which makes farming like drawing blood from a stone. Because the lands to the south of town are very saline, few plants and trees can grow. Sabzevaris, however, say so many good things about the town’s climate, about its “blessings,” and voice their satisfaction with life in so many ways that they defy description. One of the town’s Sufis, Hajj Sheikh Emad al-Din, would go on in this vein and his audience would agree automatically as though he had stated the absolute truth. The confirmation of his scholarly opinion gave the Sheikh considerable pleasure. He said something like this: “There is no question that Iran enjoys the most temperate climate and most plentiful riches in the world. And the foremost province in the country is Khorasan, with its superb crops, cotton, fruits and water. And Sabzevar is the queen of Khorasan’s cities, excelling all others in climate and natural gifts. Sabzevar, in fact, is heaven on earth.” With this everyone issued thanks to the Giver of those bounties.