FROM PERSIAN UPLANDS

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ASKABAD, 15*th August* 1913.

DEAR M.,—You are wondering, I suppose, what has happened to me since I left London on the 7th: whether I missed the train at Victoria, or took the wrong one at Flushing: whether I dallied in Berlin, or was held up in Warsaw: how, knowing no Russian, I contrived to get over the long journey through Southern Russia to Rostov, and so along the northern side of the Caucasus and down the western shore of the Caspian Sea to Baku, the port of outset for the Middle East.

That five days' orgy of locomotion, with the delightsome twelve hours' crossing to Krasnovodsk in a clean well-equipped steamer, and the final twenty-one hours in a leisurely journey southeastward by the Transcaspian Railway that brought me here to Askabad, come back in snatches like the brief inconsequent episodes that stand out from a night's dreaming. Isolated pictures rise up and glide past in memory: the glint of the sun on the chestnut backs of a ploughing team in Westphalia—the conversation in the dining-car as we dashed along through birch groves in Hanover—the cosmopolitan women of a

Berlin café, and the rotund, spectacled gendarmes of the Friedrichstrasse—little bowler-hatted ill-shaven men in the streets of the Polish capital, and the poor at the doors of the half-eastern churches there—in Russia, the heavy-booted and belted giants of railway officialdom, the close-cropped heads and great beards of the men, the blank rusticity of the pale-faced blue-eyed country girls at the countless little railway stations where the engines are watered and the passengers refreshed—and again, the lifeless immensity of the plains on a Sunday, with great stretches of wheat and oats and maize relieved by the golden stream of field on field of sunflowers with their heads bowed eastwards.

Impressions of personalities, too, detach themselves here and there from the confused memory of strange types and foreign tongues. Brief acquaintances formed on the basis of a common speech are recalled with grateful interest. On the way to Berlin I met an English schoolboy off to Vienna for his holidays, and his cheery talk made me home-sick, for I was not to hear the like of it for another five years. For two whole days of travelling in Russian trains I had the company of an American, whose terse reflections on things in general, and on Muscovite methods of agriculture in particular, did much to alleviate the discomfort of a sooty and ill-lighted sleeping-car. On the Caspian, too, I was lucky enough to meet

a Russian officer who spoke French. I had always imagined that French was a second language to most educated Russians, but on both my journeys across their southern country I met with only two or three who had a knowledge of any tongue but their own, which can hardly be called an international speech.

As a matter of necessity, of course, the ordinary routine of travel calls for very little linguistic effort. One has but to put a childlike trust in porters, railway officials, and hotel servants, whose intelligence is equal to most occasions. If, however, a hitch occurs, then the trouble commences. A man who loses his luggage, or takes the wrong train, or falls into a like predicament and cannot explain himself out of it, will quickly become a mere source of amusement, or even a ridiculous object. A lady, travelling alone and in similar case, will of course have as much compassionate attention and generous service as she cares to requisition.

Luckily I had no hitches, so here I am, deposited at Askabad by the long leisurely train that is taking Russian mails, Russian officers and soldiers, Russian tradesmen, and a nondescript motley of yellow-skinned people with narrow glistening eyes and high cheek-bones, eastward to Bukhara and Samarkand, those towns of a wondrous past.

I should like to go with them, but the mountains of the south are there in wait for me. To-night, as I sit in a moonlit garden of palms, acacias, and

willows, discussing the latest Paris news with a little old spectacled Frenchwoman, the pleasure of the hour is made piquant with regrets and speculations. To-morrow, before the sun sets, I shall be in Persia again.

When you asked me whether I was really glad to go back, I shrugged my shoulders or made some equally neutral reply. A man must make a living, and that, after all, is the main argument. The rest is a matter of pros and cons, and when you have summed them up the account pretty well balances. The home life pulls hard, especially at times of leave-taking. So much of tradition and environment have to be given up; so much of the sensible pleasures and perceptions that have made up your early life seems to be lost when you go among a race that has none of those things you take delight in. One cannot go to the opera in Persia, or hear a Beethoven symphony, or visit the Academy, or dance at a country ball, or take a punt on the river, or discuss the burning questions of the day over a snug fireside. Of what use, in the Middle East, is a liking for French poets or English county history? Of what service is the study of socialism, let us say? Side interests of this kind do not constitute a man's character? Well, perhaps not, but they are a big part of his personalty, to use a lawyer's word, and except in so far as they recur pleasantly in memory these things are so much loss to the life