

**NOTES OF A JOURNEY  
FROM KASVEEN TO  
HAMADAN ACROSS  
THE KARAGAN COUNTRY**

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Notes of a Journey from Kasveen to Hamadan Across the Karagan Country by J. D. Rees

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KASVEEN TO HAMADAN

ACROSS

THE KARAGHAN COUNTRY.

BY

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CASPER

UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

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IN June and July of this year, being in Persia on leave, it occurred to me that I might test my capacity to get along, unaided, among the people, and at the same time be of some small service in another direction by travelling across one of the still numerous tracts of the country, which are blank in the latest and best maps (Kiepert's and Walker's) and which no European had so far traversed. As Colonel Ross, the Resident in the Persian Gulf, remarks in one of his reports: "There are at the present extensive tracts and districts, the extent, capacity, and even position of which are but vaguely known at the seat of Government."

Khorassan and the north-east was closed to me, unless I could get leave to return overland to India through Afghanistan or Beloochistan, and the latter country was closed in July and August owing to intense heat. The south-east an officer was at the time engaged in exploring. The south-west had been lately gone over by Major Bell. There remained the north-west, and here two tracts presented themselves, in a great measure fulfilling the required conditions, viz., that between Kom and Hamadan, and that between Kasveen and Hamadan. Both these are of a size which admits of exploration by an officer not expressly engaged on such duty and bound to return to India by a fixed and not far distant date. Both, too, seemed to promise confirmation of an impression I had received in travelling from the Persian Gulf to the neighbourhood of the Caspian, that the population of the country is under-estimated and its poverty exaggerated. Both promised to offer no more than ordinary difficulties, though it will not be forgotten that to get to Kasveen—the farther of the two starting points—a traveller has first to ride about 1,000 miles, while, when he has made Hamadan, he has before him the journey back to the Persian Gulf, or a shorter but more difficult march to Baghdad, whence also he can take ship to India.

For various reasons I chose the route from Kasveen, the old capital of Nadir Shah, to Hamadan, the ancient Ecbatana and

summer retreat of the Kings of Media and Persia. Hamadan itself has been fully described. Kasveen is known to every traveller from Teheran to Resht *en route* for Europe, but the intervening country is unknown to Europeans, so far as I could learn after the fullest inquiry at Teheran and elsewhere. An Austrian botanist (Dr. Pulak) had once gone *via* Ab-i-garm and Kabouterkhasha to Hamadan, but this left a large tract of hill and plain, due south of Kasveen and due east of the places mentioned, untouched.

Most travellers in Persia have inferred I think, or have given their readers the impression that they have inferred, that the country they have passed through is a fair sample of the country as a whole, and the travellers who have been off the postal route from Bushire to Teheran and Resht are few. Now, that route skirts the east of the great desert and is, in fact, at least as sterile, except where it passes through the plains of Shiraz, Kazeroon, and Ispahan, as any part of Persia, the desert proper alone excluded. True it is known that the Bakhtiari country and parts of Luristan present a very different appearance. Major Bell and Mr. Stack are the latest witnesses on this point. Again the beaten track from Teheran to Hamadan, and thence to the Turkish frontier, has been fully described.

Is it known, however, that away up to the Elburz range extend fertile and well-watered plains covered with corn, and vineyards, and orchards, and hills, that, unirrigated, give a fair annual return of wheat—hills which did not fail to do this even in the disastrous famine of 1870? These notes will show that such is the character of the tract I traversed, while my inquiries go to show further that the other tract referred to, viz., that between Kom and Hamadan, much resembles it. Nor is the country south of this, about Sultanabad and Gulpaigan, less fertile, while further south again the country of the Karun and the Tigris is reached, a part of what was, till war and rapine destroyed it, the garden of the world.

It has happened that many writers have, from military and other considerations, chiefly confined their observations to the country bordering on Afghanistan and Beloochistan, while that west of the main route from sea to sea has received the attention for the most part of savants who were chiefly interested in its archaeology.

At any rate it is the case, I venture to think, that the public at large, and many of the informed minority, do not appreciate in its full significance the fact that the whole country west of the beaten track from sea to sea presents a marked contrast to that



beaten track, to the country to the east of it, and to the coast of the Persian Gulf. Not that the most barren regions of Persia that are inhabited do not well support the scanty population that dwells therein.

Again, if portions of the country are shown to be more fertile and populous than is commonly supposed, and good reasons are shown for believing that others resemble them, it is, I think, a fair inference, that the number of the inhabitants of the country is proportionately under-estimated.

For many years the population was given in official returns at less than 5,000,000, though Mr. Binning in 1850 estimated it at 8,000,000. Within the last four years it has been raised to 7,653,600 from an estimate made by an officer in the Shah's Government of admittedly the roughest possible character. No one perhaps is more competent to guess than the officer referred to, but a guess is a guess, and until all the unknown tracts have been traversed and described it is futile to make an estimate. A small and well-populated tract will make up for a large patch of desert. It is quite possible that another five millions, and not two and a half, should have been added to the old estimate. The Persian officials have no ideas on the subject, and supply no data on which reliance can be placed. As an instance of the trustworthiness of such estimates as have been made, I may mention that the average population is considered to be 7 per square mile now that the total population is estimated at 7,653,600, just as it was when the estimate was 4,400,000. Such instances might be multiplied. How can the population of the villages be set down at 3,780,000 when villages without number have never been visited by any official above the grade of a menial servant? Till 1881 it was as confidently asserted that the inhabitants of villages and country districts numbered 1,700,000. Is it probable that the country population should be so small as 3,780,000 in a country of such enormous extent—that extent, too, being probably under-estimated—where the necessities of life are so cheap that large flat flaps of excellent bread form the table of the poor as well as their food, and where want is, the rare seasons of famine excepted, absolutely unknown? With these prefatory remarks as to impressions received before I left the road and confirmed on my journey, I proceed to note down the observations made on the way. I had a prismatic compass, a watch, and an aneroid barometer with me. Scanty materials for the roughest survey, yet I am informed on the best authority that much of the existing map of Persia rests on observations taken in this manner. A thermometer could not be obtained in the capital of the Shah, and I have in consequence

no readings by which my barometrical observations can be corrected. I have given the estimate in feet corresponding to the degrees marked. The heights given are mere rough approximations. I shall enter the mileage in the margin so as to preserve an uninterrupted narrative, the observations taken being more clearly shown in the map annexed to these notes and in the itinerary, and I will now ask my reader to imagine himself with me at Kasveen after having been jolted in a tarantasse over the 98 miles that intervene between that place and Teheran. This is fortunately the only stage in Persia that can be done on wheels. A so-called carriage road has been lately made from Teheran to Kom also, but happily this was under water when I journeyed up. A carriage road is, I fear, in Persia only an excuse for taking off the post-horses and making the traveller drive, to his excessive discomfort and at an exorbitant cost.

Kasveen was well known in old crusading times as the nearest town to the mountain retreat of the Chief of the Assassins, the Old Man of the Mountains, in later times as the capital of Nadir Shah, and in modern times as the birth-place of Zareen Taj, the Crown of Gold, the ill-fated Hypatia of the Babees.

It has often been described, and I have nothing to say about it, but that an official of the place who had just returned from Mashad told me that even in that stronghold of Islam a large proportion of the people were Babees at heart, and that I met a Russian there who had travelled all over Persia and Turkey (at whose expense was not clear) and who was now a Mussalman and a servant on some Rs. 20 a month to the Governor of Kasveen. The head-man of one of the divisions of the town told me much about the Babees, and said, with reference to the recent diplomatic differences between Russia and England, that in Persia it was commonly believed that the English had set the Afghans up to fight the Russians. "In fact," he said, "پلتیک کردند" (*paltik kardand*). This was obviously the English word Politics. Asked what it meant; he said he understood it was the equivalent of *دروغ* (*dirogh*), a lie.

No one here had travelled more than a *parasang*\* or two south or south-west, and I experienced much difficulty in hiring two horses, one for myself and another for my modest effects and a man I had picked up at Teheran, who professed to know something about the country. I had yet to learn that, during the month of Ramazan at any rate, wholesale bribery and offers of absurdly high remuneration will often fail to procure beasts of burden or

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\* Or farsakh, 4 miles.

induce a muleteer to move. With Ramazan impending, his heart begins to harden. Along a caravan track a muleteer is a servant; off it a capricious and unreasonable despot, who has to be coaxed and bribed to move a mile in any unknown direction. One man, after the contract was arranged, disappeared. After waiting a day I found he had no intention of coming. He told another, not myself, that he would not come. He had seen a look of violence in my eye at Kasveen. I might kill him in the unknown country. I was warned that the people were fanatical, and recommended as a companion "a butcher who could knock down ten men." This did not seem to me the way to deal with fanatics, and I declined his services. Supplies would be most difficult to get: there was no fodder for horses; no Farangi had been across the hills of Ramand before; Dr. Pulak had gone with a caravan by Ab-i-garm; therefore I should.

However in the end we started, and, contrary to all custom, made a march instead of loading and mounting, riding through the city gate, and unloading and dismounting to see if anything had been forgotten.

Yet another word by way of preface.

If my observations as to the condition of the people have any value, it is to be attributed chiefly to the fact that I travelled absolutely without official aid and countenance and associated on terms of absolute equality with any one and everyone I met. I had a letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs which I carefully concealed, and of the existence of which I kept my Persian attendant ignorant. Its use would have frozen up the fountain of confidence and have entitled me to camp anywhere without paying my way. Once let the possession of such a document be known and it is useless to attempt to pay your way. The money never gets to the owners of the things supplied you and the houses in which you sleep. They do not expect it in such a case. It is the custom of Iran for the officially protected to batten on the people, and a man who does not pay his way is at least as little liked among the grasping Persians as elsewhere. As a mere friendless traveller you learn more though you fare less well. Hence I determined to keep my letter for a serious emergency should any such occur, and, during my little exploring trip, to sleep where I could and eat what I could get, and trust to my knowledge of Persian and the Persians to see me through. Short though this little expedition was, it needed for its accomplishment all the experience I had gained in more extended travels over better known portions of the country.