

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LETTER XVI

ALI-KUH, *June 12.*

Two days before we left Chigakhor fierce heat set in, with a blue heat haze. Since then the mercury has reached 98° in the shade. The call to "Boot and Saddle" is at 3.45. Black flies, sand-flies, mosquitos, scorpions, and venomous spiders abound. There is no hope of change or clouds or showers until the autumn. Greenery is fast scorching up. "The heaven above is as brass, and the earth beneath is as iron." The sky is a merciless steely blue. The earth radiates heat far on into the night. "Man goeth forth to his work," not "till the evening," but in the evening. The Ilyats, with their great brown flocks, march all night. The pools are dry, and the lesser streams have disappeared. The wheat on the rain-lands is scorched before the ears are full, and when the stalks are only six inches long. This is a normal Persian summer in Lat. 32° N. The only way of fighting this heat is never to yield to it, to plod on persistently, and never have an idle moment, but I do often long for an Edinburgh east wind, for drifting clouds and rain, and even for a chilly London fog! This same country is said to be buried under seven or eight feet of snow in winter.

On leaving Chigakhor we crossed a low hill into the Seligun valley, so fair and solitary a month ago, now brown and dusty, and swarming with Ilyats and their

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

flocks, and Lake Albolaki has shrunk into something little better than a swamp. A path at a great elevation above a stream and a short rocky ascent brought us to the top of the pass above Naghun, a wall of rock, with an altitude of 7320 feet, and a very stiff zigzag descent upon Isfandyar Khan's garden, where the heat made a long halt necessary. The view from the Naghun Pass of the great Ardal valley is a striking one, though not so striking as one would suppose from the altitude of the mountains, which, however, do not nearly reach the limit of perpetual snow, though the Kuh-i-Kaller, the Kuh-i-Sabz, the great mass of the Kuh-i-Gerra, the range of the Kuh-i-Dinar, and the Kuh-i-Zirreh are all from 11,000 to 13,000 feet in height. Even on the north side the range which we crossed by the Gardan-i-Zirreh exceeds 9000 feet. The Karun, especially where it escapes from the Ardal valley by the great Tang-i-Ardal, is a grand feature of the landscape from the Naghun Pass.

On leaving Naghun we were joined by Aziz Khan, a petty chief, a retainer of Isfandyar Khan, who has been deputed to attend on the Agha, and who may be useful in various ways.

Between Naghun and Ardal, in an elevated ravine, a species of *aristolochia*, which might well be mistaken for a pitcher-plant, was growing abundantly, and on the Ardal plain the "sweet sultan" and the *Ferula glauca* have taken the place of the *Centaurea alata*, which is all cut and stacked.

A hot and tedious march over the Ardal plateau, no longer green, and eaten up by the passage of Ilyat flocks, brought us to the village of Ardal, now deserted and melancholy, the great ibex horns which decorate the roof of the Ilkhani's barrack giving it a spectral look in its loneliness. The night was hot, and the perpetual passing of Ilyats, with much braying and bleating,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and a stampede of mules breaking my tent ropes, forbade sleep. It was hot when we started the next morning, still following up the Ardal valley and the Karun to Kaj, a village on bare hummocks of gravel alongside of the Karun, a most unpromising-looking place, but higher up in a lateral valley there was a spring and a walled orchard, full of luxuriant greenery, where we camped under difficulties, for the only entrance was by a little stream, leading to a low hole with a door of stone, such as the Afghans use for security, and through which the baggage could not be carried. The tents had to be thrown over the wall. There was little peace, for numbers of the Kaj men sat in rows steadily staring, and there were crowds of people for medicine, ushered in by the *ketchuda*.

Four miles above Ardal is a most picturesque scene, which, though I had ridden to it before, I appreciated far more on a second visit. This is the magnificent gorge of the Tang-i-Darkash Warkash, a gigantic gash or rift in the great range which bounds the Ardal and Kaj valleys on the north, and through which the river, on whose lawn-like margin the camps were pitched at Shamsabad, find its way to the Karun. A stone bridge of a single arch of wide span is thrown across the stream at its exit from the mountains. Above the bridge are great masses of naked rock, rising into tremendous precipices above the compressed water, with roses and vines hanging out of their clefts.

Below, the river suddenly expands, and there is a small village, now deserted, with orchards and wheat-fields in the depression in which the Darkash Warkash finds its way across the Kaj valley, a region so sheltered from the fierce sweep of the east wind, and so desirable in other respects, that it bears the name of Bihishtabad, the *Mansion of Heaven*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Geographically this *tang* has a great interest, for the water passing under the bridge is the united volume of the water system to which three out of the four districts known as the Chahar Mahals owe their fertility, and represents the drainage of 2500 square miles. It will be remembered that we entered the Chahar Mahals by the Kahva Rukh Pass, and crossed that portion of them lying between Kahva Rukh and the Zirreh Pass, which is politically, not geographically, a portion of the Bakh-tiari country, and is partially Christian.

I started at five the next morning to follow the left bank of the Karun for nearly a whole march, sometimes riding close beside it among barley-fields, then rising to a considerable height above it. It is occasionally much compressed between walls of conglomerate, and boils along furiously, but even where it is stillest and broadest, it is always deep, full, and unfordable, bridged over, however, at a place where there are several mills. An ascent from it leads to the village of Rustam-i, where the people were very courteous and put me on the road to Ali-kuh, a village not far from the river, at the foot of a high range very much gashed by its affluents, one of which is very salt.

Ali-kuh is quite deserted, and every hovel door is open. There is nothing to tempt cupidity. The people, when they migrate to the high pastures, take all their goods with them. There was not a creature left behind who could tell me of a spring, and it was a tiresome search before I came, high upon the hillside, on a stream tumbling down under willows over red rock, in a maze of campanulas and roses. The first essential of a camping-ground is that there should be space to camp, and this is lacking; my servants sleep in the open, and my bed and chair are propped up by stones on the steep slope. Scorpions, "processional" caterpillars, earwigs,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and flies abound. It is very pretty, but very uncomfortable. The stream is noisy, and a rude flour mill above has the power, which it has exercised, of turning it into another channel for irrigation purposes. There are some large Ilyat camps above, and from these and from Rustam-i the people have been crowding in.

The wild flowers about Ali-kuh are in great profusion just now, the most showy being hollyhocks—white, pink, and mauve, which affect the cultivated lands. Three parasitic plants are also abundant, one of them being the familiar dodder. Showy varieties of blue and white campanulas, a pink mallow, a large blue geranium, chicory, the blue cornflower, and the scarlet poppy all grow among the crops.

In the course of a day's expedition to the summit of the Ali-kuh Pass large Ilyat camps abounded, and the men were engaged in stacking the leaves and the blossoming stalks of the wild celery for fodder later in the season. These flower-stalks attain a height of over six feet. These, and the dried leaves of the *Centaurea alata*, which are laid in heaps weighted down with stones, are relied upon by the nomads for the food of their flocks on the way down from the summer to the winter pastures, and much of their industry, such as it is, is spent in securing these "crops."

This Ali-kuh Pass, 9500 feet in altitude, is on the most direct route from Isfahan to the Bazuft river, but is scarcely used except by the Ilyats. It is in fact horribly steep on the Ali-kuh side. The great Bakhtiari ranges on its south-west side, and a deep valley below, closed by the great mass of Amin-i-lewa, are a contrast to the utterly shadeless and mostly waterless regions of Persia proper which lie eastwards, blazing and glaring in the summer sunshine. There is a little snow and some ice, and the snow patches are bordered by a small rosy primula,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

delicate white tulips, and the violet *penguicula* so common on our moorlands. Mares with mule foals were grazing at a height of over 9000 feet.

The Khan of Rustam-i, married to a daughter of the Ilkhani, "called." He is very intelligent, has some idea of conversation, and was very pleasant and communicative. He says the "Bakhtiaris love fighting, and if there's a fight can't help taking sides, and if they have not guns fight with stones," and that "one Bakhtiari can beat ten Persians"! I asked him if he thought there would be fighting at Chigakhor, and he said it was very likely, and he and his retainers would take the Ilkani's side. He showed me with great pleasure a bullet wound in his ankle, and another in his head, where a piece of the skull had been removed. He wishes that "the English" would send them a doctor. "We would gladly receive even a *Kafir*," he said. Mirza politely translated this word Christian. He says they "suffer so much in dying from want of knowledge." I explained to him the virtues of some of their own medicinal herbs, and he at once sent his servant to gather them, and having identified them he wrote down their uses and the modes of preparing them.

With the Khan was his prim little son, already, at ten years old, a bold rider and a good shot, the pale auburn-haired boy whom his grandmother, the Ilkhani's principal wife, offered me as a present if I would cure him of deafness, debility, and want of appetite! I gave him a large bottle of a clandestinely-made decoction of a very bitter wormwood, into which I put with much ceremony, after the most approved fashion of a charlatan, some tabloids of *nux vomica* and of permanganate of potash. When I saw him at the fort of Chigakhor he was not any better, but since, probably from leading a healthier life than in Ardal, he has greatly improved, and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

being strong is far less deaf, and consequently the virtues of wormwood have forced themselves on the Khan's attention.

The boy had suffered various things. He had been sewn up in raw sheepskins, his ears had been filled with fresh clotted blood, and he had been compelled to drink blood while warm, taken from behind the ear of a mare, and also water which had washed off a verse of the Koran from the inside of a bowl. It transpired that the Khan, who is a devout Moslem and a *mollah*, could not allow his son to take my medicine unless a piece of paper with a verse of the Koran upon it were soaked in the decoction.

I asked him why the Bahktiaris like the English, and he replied, "Because they are brave and like fighting, and like going shooting on the hills with us, and don't cover their faces." He added after a pause, "and because they conquer all nations, and do them good after they have conquered them." I asked how they did them good, and he said, "They give them one law for rich and poor, and they make just laws about land, and their governors take the taxes, and no more, and if a man gets money he can keep it. Ah," he exclaimed earnestly, "why don't the English come and take this country? If you don't, Russia will, and we would rather have the English. We're tired of our lives. There's no rest or security."

It may well be believed that there are no schools, though some deference is paid to a *mollah*, which among the Bahktiaris means only a man who can write, and who can read the Koran. These rare accomplishments are usually hereditary. The chiefs' sons are taught to read and write by *munshis*. A few of the highest Khans send their sons to Tihiran or Isfahan for education, or they attend school while their fathers are detained as

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

hostages in the capital for the good behaviour of their clans. There they learn a few words of French and English, along with pure Persian and Arabic, and the few other branches of the education of a Persian noble. They are fine manly boys, and ride and shoot well from an early age. But the worst of them is that they never are "boys." They are little men, with the stiffness and elaboration of manner which the more important Khans have copied



STONE LION AND GUIDE.

from the Persians, and one can never fancy their abandoning themselves to "miscellaneous impulses."

Killa Bazuft, Bazuft Valley, June 18.—A few days ago we left the last village of the region behind, to enter upon a country not laid down in any maps. It is a wild land of precipitous mountain ranges, rising into summits from 11,000 to 13,000 feet high, enclosing valleys and gorges or cañons of immense depth, some of them only a few feet wide, a goodly land in part, watered by springs and streams, and green with herbage and young wheat, and in part naked, glaring, and horrible.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

It is very solitary, although at times we come upon Bakhtiaris in camp, or moving with their flocks, much darker in complexion and more uncivilised in appearance than those of Ardal and its neighbourhood. From these camps Aziz Khan procures guides, milk, and bread. The heat increases daily, and the hour of getting up is now 2.45. There are many forlorn burial-grounds, and their uncouth stone lions, more or less rudely carved, are the only permanent inhabitants of the region. Wheat and barley grow in nearly all the valleys, and clothe the hill-slopes, but where are the sowers and the reapers, and where are the barns? Cultivation without visible cultivators is singularly weird.

Although the Bakhtiaris expend great labour on irrigation, their methods of cultivation are most simple. They plough with a small plough with the share slightly shod with iron; make long straight furrows, and then cross them diagonally. They do not manure the soil, but prevent exhaustion by long fallows. After they come up to the mountains they weed their crops carefully, and they look remarkably clean. In reaping they leave a stubble five or six inches long. There is a good deal of spade husbandry in places where they have no oxen, or where the arable patches are steep. The spades are much longer than ours, and the upper corners of the sides are turned over for three inches.

A spade is worked by two men, one using his hands and one foot, and the other a rope placed where the handle enters the iron, with which he gives the implement a sharp jerk towards him.

In the higher valleys they grow wheat and barley only, but in the lower rice, cotton, melons, and cucumbers are produced, and opium for exportation. They plough and sow in the autumn, and reap on their return to their "yailaks" the following summer. Their rude water

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01470-0 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 2

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

mills, and the hand mills worked by women, grind the wheat into the coarse flour used by them.

It appears from the statements of the *Mollah-i-Murtaza*, Aziz Khan, an intelligent son of Chiragh Ali Khan, and others, that the tenure of arable lands is very simple and well understood. "From long ago" certain of such lands have been occupied by certain tribes, and have been divided among families. Some of the tribes possess documents, supposed to secure these rights, granted by Ali Mardan Khan, the Bakhtiari king of Persia, in the anarchical period which followed the death of Nadir Shah. Those of them who are without documents possess the lands by right of use. Nearly all the tribes have individual rights of tillage, and have expended much labour on their lands in irrigation and removing stones. A fee for the use of these lands is paid to the Ilkhani every year in money or cattle.

For pasturage there is only the right of "use and wont," and the grazing is free. For camping-grounds each tribe has its special "use and wont," subject to change by the order of the Ilkhani, but it was out of quarrels concerning these and the pasture lands that many of the feuds at present existing arose.

We left Ali-kuh in a westerly direction, followed and crossed the Karun, left it at its junction with the Duab, ascended this short affluent to its source, crossed the Gardani-Cherri at an elevation of 9200 feet, and descended 4000 feet into the Bazuft or Rudbar valley, where the camps now are. The road after leaving Ali-kuh, where the slopes were covered with pink and white hollyhocks, keeps along a height above the Karun, and then descends abruptly into a chasm formed of shelves of conglomerate, on the lowest of which there is just room for a loaded mule between the cliffs and the water at the narrowest part. Shadowed by shelf upon shelf of rock, the river shoots