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Afghan Boundary Commission; Geographical Notes.

By Major T. H. HOLDICH, R.E., Commanding Survey Party,
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Quetta to Nushki.—From Quetta to Nushki the route taken by the Boundary Commission is the same as that followed last year by Sir R. Sandeman on his mission to South-west Beluchistan. For the first six miles or so it follows the direction of the old Kandahar road through the Gajaband Pass till it turns the shoulder of the mass of hills south of Quetta, of which Chiltán is the dominant peak. Thence it runs straight and even through the length of a narrow valley, overshadowed by the spurs of Chiltán, through Gird-i-bagh, where there is a good supply of excellent water, to Kának, a mud-built village (as indeed are all the villages of Beluchistan) 36 miles from Quetta, on a slight rising sandstone mound surrounded by a patch of irrigated land. The soil seems poor, and the cultivation scanty, water-melons alone being abundant, and such necessary supplies as wood and *bhúsa* (chopped straw) difficult to obtain even for a small force. From Kának to Panjpai, and from Panjpai onwards to Kaisár, another 45 miles, it is difficult to describe the general appearance of poverty and desolation offered by the country we passed through. The road traverses a succession of small valleys, hedged in by barren sandstone hills, across which every now and then it was necessary to pass from one valley to the next. A small stunted growth of shrub (chiefly wormwood and camel thorn) everywhere covered the dusty plain, trees being very scarce, and water in good supply only at Panjpai. Panjpai appears to have been a place of some pretensions in former times. The ruins of an old village closely adjoin the present site, and the crumbling towers and walls betoken a position of strength. It is, however, chiefly remarkable for about a dozen trees fringing the banks of the irrigation canal, a feature which in any part of Beluchistan could not possibly escape attention. Between Panjpai and Kaisár (a distance of 31 miles) water is only to be found at a place called Singbúr Chaman, a narrow little green oasis in this generally sterile wilderness, where five or six wells have been sunk and water reached about 9 or 10 feet below the surface, slightly brackish but drinkable. A curious feature about all this region from Quetta to the Helmund—a region always considered specially difficult to traverse from want of water—is the facility with which water can be obtained by well-digging. The karez system of irrigation (which is merely an underground canal constructed by sinking shafts at intervals and connecting them by a continuous channel) is common at least as far as Nushki, and the karez system is of course inapplicable to any country where water is not found tolerably close to the surface. Between Nushki and the Helmund wells have been specially prepared for the Commission party by the

Amir's agents. There is probably no part of that almost waterless plain where water could not be raised by Norton's pumps in the course of an hour or so. From Singbúr Chaman to Kaisár was a trying march of 25 miles over ground always rough and stony, and occasionally steep and difficult for laden camels, where the narrow path crossed an occasional watershed. This march was accomplished at night, and it speaks well for the efficiency of the transport (locally raised), and the fitness of the escort, that there were no sore backs and no falling out for hospital treatment at the end of it. The climate is specially trying at this time of the year; the intense heat of the sun by day is unpleasantly balanced by bitter cold nights, the extreme range of temperature in the course of twenty-four hours being quite abnormal. Add to this the effect of constant clouds of fine white dry dust—a dust which penetrates to the inmost recesses of all things, blinding and suffocating, and which must be swallowed by the pint; and it is clear that these early days of the work of the Commission are not all pleasure and pic-nic. Night marching will be the regular order of progression, at any rate till the desert is passed and the banks of the Helmund reached. Kaisár, though only a halting-place, was a charming change in the weary scene of desolation afforded by the monotony of dust-coloured sandstone hills overlooking dust-covered sandy plains. The Kaisár stream has formed a wide channel for itself, filled in with a jungle of tamarisk (occasionally mixed with a species of *clematis*) which fringes the banks, and marks the progress of the river with a really good solid-looking growth of vegetation. Here *chikór* and *sisi* (both varieties of the red-legged partridge), with other small game, were found by the sportsmen of the party, and bagged for the pot, regardless of the usual sporting conventionalities which give every bird a chance on the wing. The truth is we cannot afford to waste powder and shot. The last 10 or 12 miles from Kaisár to Nushki follow the bed of the stream till within a mile or so of the village of Nushki itself. All this line of route, together with a wide tract on either side of it, has either been already mapped by the survey officers who accompanied Sir R. Sandeman last year, or will fall within the regular course of operations of the Beluchistan survey party. Already (28th September) two of the surveyors with the Commission (Captain Gore and Lieutenant Talbot) have pushed on ahead along two lines of route, half-way to the Helmund, and have carried on continuous mapping to that distance. The geography of Beluchistan will be fairly complete, and an excellent start will be obtained for continuation along the line of the Helmund; but further than that it is impossible at present to predict what may be practicable.

Galicha, October 13th.—From Nushki to Kwaja Ali on the Helmund there is choice of three routes, which may be called respectively the Gazchab, the Chagai, and the Pishak. The two former converge at Mamu, after following approximately parallel lines about 14 to 20 miles

apart. The third, which is the most southerly of the three, and consequently describes the longer arc, is the most direct line to Rudbar. The Gazchah, or most northerly route, was the one selected for the march of the Mission, on account of the greater facility for procuring a sufficient water supply. But the Chagai route is quite feasible, involving only one or two marches longer than is convenient for an infantry escort. Both these routes will be surveyed, and as points on each are easily inter-visible, it is hoped that the connection will be kept up throughout. But there is a troublesome strip of absolutely waterless desert, bordering the Helmund on the south, and as this 50 miles or so must be accomplished by the party almost without a halt, it will be a serious obstacle to survey progress. The first march out from Nushki by the Gazchah route was an easy 10 miles over open plain with a surface consistency very like the *put* of the frontier, hard and level and excellent going in every way. The plain is covered with a low growth of tamarisk affording good grazing for camels. At Sanduri five or six wells afforded ample water supply. Water here is reached at 25 to 30 feet below surface level. And it may be remarked that this is by far the lowest depth of any well between Nushki and the Helmund, five to six feet is about the average for the rest of the distance. Sanduri to Band, about 15 miles, affords very small variation on the previous march. The same wide expanse of limitless plain, the same stunted undergrowth, and occasional sand-ridges (or drifts) of a few yards only in width, but deep and shifting in character, taxing for a minute or so the muscles of camels and mules. At Band (as the name implies) a *band* or dam has been constructed across the bed of a nullah in which a very considerable quantity of water is retained. In quantity indeed there was no lack, but the quality of standing water when it is a desert focus for all the living creatures of earth and air for many a mile round, always leaves much to be desired. Careful straining got rid of some of the worms and larger animalcula, but neither boiling, filtering, nor even alum, would render it entirely palatable. It should be remarked that the name of a halting-place simply denotes the position of water. As a rule, not a vestige of habitation is found even near the wells. An occasional *ziarat* or the dwelling of some desert fakir, is the only sign of humanity. Both *ziarats* and huts possess all the grotesque features common to Biluch constructions of the same nature all through the country. They may be described as rough inverted birds' nests of sticks, the upper ends of which are adorned with quaint devices, worked roughly on cloth, or more commonly with mere pieces of coloured rag, and the horns of animals (often of remarkable size and rarity) are constantly brought as offerings to a shrine, and, like the coloured rags, applied to the purpose of outward ornamentation. The interior is usually well filled with the offerings of devotees, offerings which speak strongly of the desert from whence they come. Stray scraps of quartz, or bits of coloured rock,

chrysolite, and serpentine, amongst which may be found curious mineral specimens, are quaintly mixed up with small domestic utensils, and ingeniously constructed little cradles, telling a tale of the hopes and wishes of such of the gentle sex as "love their lords," wishes which are common either in the desert or the city. Some of the ziarats have, however, one unusual feature. Probably as a protection against the prevalent winds which gather unusual force over these unbroken tracts, they are partially burrowed—a long ramp leading down to their floor level, some three or four feet below the ground surface.

At Shah Ismail, half-way between Nushki and the Helmund, is a ziarat of some distinction. An eminent saint who has left his name to the place where he was buried, died here about the time of Nadir Shah, and round about his grave are now collected many other graves of good Mahomedans, who have been carried here to be buried. The saintly tomb is enclosed within a mud-built crenellated wall, overshadowed by two stunted specimens of tamarisk, and adorned with the usual bundles of poles and sticks set up close by with gay streamers and coloured rags fluttering from them in the desert breeze. At the ends of some of the longer pennants or streamers are small bells attached, the musical tinkling of which is carried far across the uninterrupted waste around. An unpleasant peculiarity about these ziarats is the supposed possession of the "evil eye" by one or more of the fakirs residing in them. Certain it is that a failure to present a suitable offering to the shrine results in the sudden death of camels for which it is difficult to account by the usual supposition of poisonous plants or herbs.

From Band (25 miles from Nushki) the next four halting-places are Umarshah (10 miles), Zaro (8 miles), Kahni (19 miles), and Gazchah (14½ miles), in all of which there was a fair supply of well water found a few feet only below the surface. The physical aspect of this part of the desert is much the same as that already described, a flat, hard surface of *put*, bearing indications of occasional heavy rainfall and flood, and occasionally unmistakable signs of snow; the same somewhat scanty growth of shrub (chiefly a low species of tamarisk), and the same sudden occurrence of sand waves or dunes always suggesting the same query, Why are they not blown away by the strong prevailing winds? There must be some core to them, some obstruction on the general level of the open plain on which they formed in the first instance, and which retains them afterwards. That they are fairly permanent is evidenced by the growth of tamarisk brushwood, which is rather thicker and stronger on them than elsewhere.

From Gazchah onwards a marked geographical change occurs. A region of barren trap hills is entered—hills bearing all the same fantastic features common to those that crop out of the great plain between the Kojak and Kandahar, of which both their general strike and geological construction show them to be but a continuation. The first march out

from Gazchah follows the line of a broad watercourse for about 12 miles to a kotal or open pass (water being found on the surface close to this kotal), which debouches on to what is rather a plateau of rolling trap hills than open plain, the plateau rising to upwards of 4000 feet above sea-level, a height which is maintained to Galicha, from whence there is a gradual fall of at least 2000 feet across the waterless strip of 50 miles to the Helmund. The line of march from Gazchah to Safia ($18\frac{1}{2}$ miles), Shah Ismail (18 miles), Salihan (15 miles), Mazhda (11 miles), Mamu (15 miles), and Galicha (12 miles), is a mere track winding and twisting over the successive waves of rolling stone-covered plateau hills, with the line of distant rugged peaks to the south; a few scattered isolated hills on the northern horizon, and one or two remarkable conical peaks rising straight up from the plain, forming a peculiarly definite line of landmarks for the marching force. The direction at night was indicated by fires kept up all through the night at intervals of a few miles. By day it was hardly possible to miss the track. In a country where there is but one road signposts are unnecessary.

The Malik-dukán is perhaps as remarkable a peak as any in Southern Afghanistan or Beluchistan, and it most conveniently marks the site of Galicha, the halting-place for the last water before crossing the veritable desert. The Malik-dukán is a straight up and down conical peak as inaccessible in appearance as it is said to be in reality, of the invariable trap formation common to this part of the desert and containing mineral deposits worth examination. The strips of white alabaster decorating the graves about the ziarats, the blocks of light emerald-green chrysolite, occasionally streaked with red, and approximating to the many-coloured serpentine, are all said to come from this hill. Unfortunately time was wanting for a complete examination. The Malik-dukán is now reduced to the position of a survey point—a point too of great value—while a peak adjoining has been appropriated as a survey station. So far as the survey work is concerned, the difficulties of the desert have been surmounted. Plane-table surveys have been carried through two routes, and points already fixed on the Helmund which will secure a fresh base and a good start from Kwaja Ali and Rudbar. But beyond that? Are there hills to help us along or not? Time will show. Taking a general view of the map displacement, it may be said that the Beluchistan mapping of this desert has hitherto been about 20 miles in error westward, i. e. the sites of identified places have to be shifted by that amount to the east.

Between the large area of Beluchistan covered by the mapping of Lieutenants Talbot and Wahab last spring with Sir R. Sandeman's Mission, and that now completed by Captain Gore and Lieutenant Talbot (for my order to join the Commission came too late for me to be able to assist them in this first long link of the journey), North-east Beluchistan is now fairly complete in all essential points of geographical information.

One always interesting feature about deserts of this description is the water supply. As far as the trap formation water has always been found at moderate depths (from 10 to 30 feet) by well-sinking, and excavation has been an easy process; but after passing on to the trap it is a noticeable feature that whereas the water (on this higher level) is nearer the surface, it is not so easy to reach. The surface of all this rolling country appears to be either what is known in India as *kunkar*, or some hard deposit very much allied to it. This crust is not thick, varying from a few inches to a foot; below it comes moist sand and water immediately. This water supply is probably due mainly to the annual snowfall in the neighbouring hills, and also to the condensation of moisture given off from the vast flat plains to the east and south, where an occasional heavy rainfall converts them temporarily into wide-spread lakes.

GEOGRAPHICAL NOTES.

Major Serpa Pinto's Expedition into Central Africa from Mozambique.—This important Portuguese expedition appears to have encountered the usual difficulties with regard to native carriers which beset similar undertakings on a large scale in Africa; and this notwithstanding the powerful support of the Colonial Government at Mozambique. It has been delayed for several weeks near the coast for want of men, and a large number of loads have been sent back. This has necessitated a change of route. Major Serpa Pinto has now decided to take the coast-road to Pomba Bay, and if he can obtain there the carriers he requires, (about 250) he will make it his starting-point inland towards the Meza Mountains. His route to Pomba will probably be that taken by Captain Elton, in his journey from Mozambique to Ibo, in 1876, and he expects to be a month on the road. At Moosuril, where he has been detained, he has taken 178 observations for latitude and a number for longitude, the former of which fix the place as being 1° to $1^{\circ} 5'$ south of its present position on the charts.

The Upper Niger.—The exact position of the French on the upper portion of the Niger at the close of the year 1884 is not quite understood. A paper by General Faidherbe, late Governor of Senegambia, published in the *Revue Scientifique*, Paris, Nov. 15th, 1884, gives us authentic information. The fort of Bamaku on the Niger was occupied in April 1883, and the last mail from St. Louis has brought the news that a small steamer, sent from France in sections, has been forwarded to Bamaku, where it was put together, and now floats upon the Niger; on the 11th of September it travelled down stream *en route* to Timbuktu, which is 300 leagues from Bamaku, with no obstacle of any kind at