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Caravanserai

I entered the immigration office through a low door, which, by its tiny size, encouraged all who entered to show their respect and bow before their host. It was almost completely dark inside, and dust filled the thin streaks of sunlight that filtered through the sheepskin drape. A grinning warrior appeared out of the shadows and took stock of the pale Englishman in front of him; I stood there in a creased blue shirt and dirty beige trousers, with a ragged army rucksack on my back.

'*Salaam alaikum*,' I said to the guard, a big man with tremendous whiskers and a curved nose that reminded me of an eagle's beak. He wore a khaki waistcoat over a salwar kameez, the long cotton blouse and baggy pyjama-like trousers favoured by men across Afghanistan and Pakistan. On his head was a *pakul,* a pancake-shaped brown woollen cap that was almost identical to the headdress worn by Alexander's Macedonians over two thousand years ago.

'*Wa alaikum as-salaam*,' he replied to my greeting, 'and peace be upon you', his right hand raised over his breast indicating harmony and friendship. The other hand firmly gripped a rusty old Lee Enfield rifle, a relic from the last time the British invaded Afghanistan. He looked at my passport with a muddled glance and seemed impressed that I had a visa. But he was more bewildered at my photograph and suddenly broke into fits of laughter.

Without bothering to stamp it he handed it back. '*Salaam*,' he bowed with another hand on his heart, still chuckling.

As I exited into the bright sunlight of the courtyard, a crowd had appeared. I sensed the gaze of a hundred Afghan eyes and suddenly felt very alone.

The crowd just stared. They stood there with expressionless faces. Turban-clad tribesmen and dirty shoeless children loitered and a few soldiers who were sitting in the shade with their AK-47s slung over their shoulders came to get a glimpse of the *farengi*. There was nothing to do except stick out my chest, adopt a stern look and head straight through the middle of them, *salaaming* where appropriate. Further on up the road, crowds of tribesmen were jostling to pass through another gate. Shepherds with herds of goats blocked the track and three colourful lorries, covered in shiny pieces of metal and painted in gaudy shades of red, gold and green, were parked at the side of the road.

I had arrived inside one of the most war-torn countries on earth, but today the scene was peaceful – at least for the time being. As I heaved my rucksack higher onto my shoulders, I suddenly felt very self-conscious and vulnerable. I wondered if I was being naive. *I am wearing beige trousers and a blue shirt with a green military rucksack. What the hell am I doing on my own in Afghanistan?*

Because of political problems and the fighting, Colin Thubron and Rory Stewart were both forced to abandon their Afghan forays and return at later dates to complete this particular section of the overland trip. In 1985, due to the Russian occupation, William Dalrymple had avoided Afghanistan altogether and taken the route south through Balochistan. Who did I think I was simply to turn up and expect to hitch through the Hindu Kush?

I looked up and stared at the desert all around. The brown wasteland continued to the horizon, where it rose faintly to disclose the faraway mountains in a pink haze. There were some white Toyota cars, old ones, with all manner of stuff tied to their roofs. It seemed like some of them were acting as taxis, so I cautiously accepted a ride with a friendly young Afghan wearing a white skullcap and a khaki kameez and we drove off towards Herat.

Abdullah spoke no English and I struggled to communicate with only a little Farsi. Nevertheless, he smiled harmlessly and pointed out villages, shouting out their names as we passed. Koh San, Tir Pol, Rowzanak. The buildings were made entirely of mud. The high-walled adobe compounds concealed entire villages. Only mysterious domes occasionally protruded from inside these domestic fortresses. Sometimes we passed by clifftop citadels and I let myself daydream that these were the very same castles encountered by Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan and a multitude of other optimistic conquerors. But, of course, it was impossible to tell. Mud ages well. Often it doesn't age at all, but sometimes after a freak rain storm it simply disappears and not a trace is left.

Solitary shepherds guided their flocks to the meagre vegetation that every so often sprouted out of the barren sand and rock. A Soviet tank, burned out long ago, lay at the side of the road as a stark reminder that this was, and effectively still is, a country at war with itself.

Arthur Conolly wrote in his journal of his entry into Afghanistan under the supervision of the Afghan army in September 1831:

> *Sixteen miles to Teerpool. The country was plain and the road ran nearly parallel to the Herirood . . . we passed through the deserted town of*

Kousan . . . only three years before the town had been forsaken on account of the constant inroads of the Toorkmans . . . the roofs of the houses had mostly fallen in, but in some of the gardens the fruit trees had not been destroyed, and they flourished among the ruins. The contrast touched even some of our party: 'Haif ust,' they said. 'It is a pity.'

Little, it seems, had changed, apart from the fact that the latest occupying forces were Americans and British, rather than marauding Turkomans. Further along, a lorry – as beautifully and ridiculously decorated as the first I had seen – lay overturned with its cargo of unmarked cardboard boxes spilled across the road. It could have been the result of bad driving, or maybe the consequences of a landmine. No one in the car seemed to pay the slightest notice.

Old men squatted together at the roadside, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Next to one such group was a man's body. We drove past slowly and Abdullah peered out of the window inquisitively. The head was covered by a blanket – presumably dead. The old men were laughing, apparently unconcerned as to the fate of their former colleague, or perhaps he was an enemy. This was a place where death was commonplace. I remembered reading about Eric Newby and Hugh Carless having a similar experience in *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*. They had been walking in the valleys of Nuristan, when one day they came across a dead body with its face caved in by a large rock. On asking for Carless's opinion as to what they should do, Newby was given the answer he hoped for. *Keep on walking.*

Before long the taxi arrived on the outskirts of Herat, a low-lying city, much of which, even as the second city of Afghanistan, was still built of baked earth. Amongst the bazaar, the Jam Hotel rose out of a menagerie of stalls selling car tyres and headscarves.

It had been recommended in an ancient guidebook and I was glad that it still existed.

'*Salaam, salaam*.' I was met by an old man who welcomed me with a toothless smile and a limp handshake that lingered for far too long. Speaking in Dari that was muffled by the escaping vowels of his calcium-free gums, he explained that he would show me to my room personally. There was something about his wink that I didn't like.

A dark corridor with dirty marble floors led to a room overlooking the bazaar. The old man followed me and closed the door behind him. He was perhaps seventy, although from what I had seen so far in this country, anyone over fifty usually looked like they had one foot in the grave. I assumed he wanted a tip, so I got out my wallet before remembering that I was virtually penniless. I shrugged and tried to communicate the fact that I had no money. He shook his head with grinning senility and went to hug me. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, but didn't want to be too rude; for all I knew this may have been the standard Afghan greeting. He held me in a lingering embrace and kissed me on the cheek.

Slowly pushing him away, I thanked him with a smile, but this only seemed to encourage the randy old geriatric. Before I had a chance to intervene, he put his right hand straight on my crotch and the other for my belt buckle. Well, by now I didn't care much for catering to local custom, so I grabbed him by the shoulders and swung him around, giving him a firm shove out of the door with a foot to his backside so there was no more confusion.

That was my introduction to the more unseemly side of Afghan culture. I unpacked my belongings and thought about what I would need for the forthcoming hitch across Afghanistan.

It was clear from the example of the old man that if I continued to look as I did, I would be inviting unwanted attention and perhaps next time my assailant might not be so decrepit. I decided to exchange my tatty trousers and shirt, which had passed very well for Russian and Iranian garb, but would not be appropriate here.

I went back into the bazaar and found a shop selling an array of *salwar kameez*. I chose a nice bland (and cheap) khaki number, which I took great trouble to dirty with a combination of dust and mud, so that it didn't look too new. I thought about Arthur Conolly, who spent his time in Herat dressed as a wandering *hakeem* – a kind of alchemist – whilst secretly noting down everything of importance about this strategically important city.

Reassured, I continued wandering around the bazaar after changing into my disguise and felt relieved that the locals didn't pay me any attention. I furnished myself with a military-style waistcoat that all the men seem to wear as a symbol of their manhood and I donated my fleece jacket to a particularly ragged child.

That afternoon I had a chance to look around the city. I walked around at ease, invisible and free. Children darted about the little alleyways, shoeless but with big smiles. One group of infants pelted stones at a stray dog too old to care or avoid the battering. It just lay there, flinching with each fresh pebble bouncing off its hollow belly. In the bazaars, musky with spices and goat meat as the Ramadan sun set, the air took on a fragrant wildness.

Fairy lights lit up tiny shops selling bicycle tyres and turquoise jewellery. Fake imported watches from China had travelled across the river Oxus to find themselves pinned to wooden

boards at exorbitant prices. There were decaying shops selling plastic sandals and shiny new trainers, smuggled from India over the Khyber Pass. In the background were gaudy posters of Mecca, dangling alongside seductive images of Bollywood actresses. The picture of Ismail Khan – Herat's most persistent warlord – lingered in the dark shadows.

Old men with missing legs perched on the pavements, begging harmlessly from passers-by, but even amongst these poor wretches, there was a sense of pride. They did not pity themselves, nor ask for any. They simply looked down their hawk-like noses rattling a tin pot, demanding attention.

I wandered into the side streets. The drains were clogged with excrement and the resultant smell pervaded the air, which, combined with the aroma of diesel fumes, gave a deathly stench. Some chickens had had their feet tied together and flapped about clumsily, waiting for their imminent execution, and a goat, devil-eyed, bleated in distressed anticipation of his own fate. I walked past the clinking of metal as a blacksmith hammered an old car exhaust into some new unfathomable object.

Open doors gave brief glimpses into the private lives of the Heratis. A few women could be seen half-hidden, shrouded in their full-length blue *burqas* at the back of the rooms. Men, some turbaned and others in white or grey skullcaps, tinkered away in the rotten doorways. Back on the main road, a traffic policeman stood waving his hands around like a man possessed, blowing his whistle brutally at the flow of battered Indian taxis. I jogged across the street, narrowly missing a Toyota minibus that was speeding along with no lights on.

To the north of the old town is the imposing ruin of the ancient citadel, which sits atop a mound overlooking the bazaar. I could barely make out its dark silhouette in the moonless sky.

It is purported to be the original site of a fort constructed by Alexander the Great, but the present walls date back five hundred years to the Timurid era.

By the time of Alexander's conquest in 330 BC, Herat was already the capital of the important Aria district and was described by Herodotus as 'the bread basket of Asia'. The region grew as an important intersection on the Silk Road, and lay – as it still does today – as the western gateway to Afghanistan.

In the Middle Ages, Herat was captured by the Mongols and destroyed by Ghengis Khan in 1221, who killed all but forty of the inhabitants. One hundred and sixty years later, Timur came and ransacked what was left. Fortunately his son, Shah Rukh, was more interested in building than pillage and the city once again became a centre of wealth and commerce and blossomed from the wealth of the Silk Road.

Astonishingly, in the twelfth century Herat had more inhabitants than Paris or Rome and, perhaps because of its prosperity, the city changed hands several times over the next five hundred years. The Timurids gave way to the Uzbeks, and then there were the Persian Safavids and the Mughals. In 1710, the city fell to the Ghilzai Afghans, but was soon overrun by the Durranis who held it for over a hundred years, despite attempts by the Persians to reclaim it.

The British were instrumental in helping the Durranis to repel the Persians, who expected the fall of Herat to herald an imminent Russian invasion – British India's worst fear. Fortunately for the British, and the Afghans, the Russian invasion never came – at least not until much later, in 1979, when the city was used as a base for Soviet 'advisors'. In fact, Herat played an important role in the Soviet occupation, when, after the Afghan army mutinied against the occupying Russians, the

communist Afghan Air Force and the Red Army itself bombed the city, killing some twenty-four thousand civilians. Herat was then recaptured by the Soviet airborne forces.

The former army commander and warlord Ismail Khan became a leading mujahideen figure, and when the Soviets finally withdrew in 1989, he regained power and became the city governor. Six years later, he was forced to flee when the Taliban took control of the city, but returned in 2001 after the coalition invasion following the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington D.C.

A few weeks before I arrived, there had been clashes in the city between government troops from the new Afghan army and Ismail Khan's personal militia, the result of which was the death of Khan's son. The Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, was pressurised into sacking Khan as governor – a bold move since Khan was a very well-respected figure, but as a strange conciliatory gesture, he was appointed Minister of Energy in the cabinet. I learned quickly that Afghan politics was as confusing as its history.

I seemed to be getting used to Ramadan now and I stuffed myself with rice and lamb stew at sunset from a stall in the bazaar, and got an early night in preparation to move on in the morning. I woke up later than planned, though, as I was oblivious to the change in time zones. I asked the hotel manager, who had only one eye, to take me to where I could find some transport to the East.

On leaving the hotel, the randy old man from the previous night was still smarting from rejection, but nevertheless came to offer me a final handshake and a dirty wink. The manager led me through the bustle of the bazaar to a small caravanserai that served as the transport hub to the East. The dusty courtyard

would have been more suited to its original purpose of housing camels than the cluster of battered Toyota minivans and Land Cruisers that now clogged the square.

In Afghanistan, there is only one paved road. Highway 1 runs in a vast circle around the four main cities. It was built by the Russians in the mid-seventies, but in essence followed the same trail that had been in use for millennia. Here the traveller has always been forced to choose which of three routes to take to the East. To the north lies the long road through the mountains, by way of Mazar-I-Sharif and the banks of the Oxus. This was where the Silk Road departed for China, and was the route chosen by Marco Polo. I was warned that for now it was totally off-limits due to tribal fighting north of Kabul.

To the south are endless deserts and the lawless city of Kandahar, named like so many others, after the conquering *Iskander* – the Asian name for Alexander. This was flat and convenient for the long camel trains returning from India laden with spices. Back in the winter of 1830, it was the route that Arthur Conolly chose to take on his odyssey to India.

The southern road was not without its own dangers, then as now. Conolly talks of the violence of the people of the south and the dreadful state of the road. Nowadays it's the Taliban heartland and still completely lawless – few things have altered. In 2004, the international coalition hadn't even begun to patrol the vast wilderness and it would not be until two years later that NATO forces felt bold enough to attempt to pacify the notorious Helmand badlands.

The shortest, yet by far the most difficult road, lies directly to the east, following the course of the Hari Rud through the Central Hindu Kush to Kabul.

Conolly wrote of the notorious central route:

> *Those who have seen such places will not suppose this road to be an easy one . . . One old Moolah, who had just come from Caubul this way, when applied to for information regarding the road could scarcely do anything but groan at the very recollection of the journey . . . It appears that the inhabitants of this mountainous tract are as fanatical as they are wild.*

It appeared I had little choice. Ignoring Conolly's advice through necessity, I chose this way and it would be the last time our paths would converge. Conolly spent a further few weeks on the road before finally entering British India via the Bolan Pass on 14 January 1831. I hoped that my journey would prove as successful.

At the caravanserai, I was given the choice of attempting the road in a shiny white Toyota Land Cruiser, the best of the best as far as off-roaders are concerned (donated, it seemed from the presence of a charity sticker, by a Japanese aid agency), which cost seven hundred Afghan afghanis (every bit of my remaining twenty-five dollars). The alternative was a rather feeble minibus with no front bumper and a smashed headlight at half the price. I had no choice but to take the cheapest option. I reckoned I'd need a bit to get me through to Kabul and into Pakistan.

'We only go to Chaghcharān,' said the driver. 'If you want to get to Kabul, you will have to hitch from there.'

I passed my rucksack up to a skinny boy whose job it was to tie down all the baggage and got into the van. Despite only having eight seats, we somehow managed to absorb eleven passengers, as well as all their luggage. They were all male; there

were a couple of young teenagers and the rest men in their late twenties and thirties. They wore an assortment of baggy kameez and brown robes. All of them donned khaki waistcoats and one had a knitted fleece. Only one of the men wore a turban, the rest covered their heads with plain white skullcaps.

I didn't like the look of the driver at all, who appeared thuggish and had cruel eyes. Nevertheless, he offered me the front passenger seat, which I naively took as a compliment. I soon realised it couldn't have been further from the truth – as we drove through the withered poppy fields and across the dusty plains, I realised I had by far the least legroom and had the gear stick squarely up my backside.

The central route has never been popular with travellers, and Herat has always been a kind of junction in the road. The centre didn't have much to offer. The mountains were high and its people were feared and barbarous. Some of the passes are fourteen thousand feet high and the ancient travellers worried that their camels would perish on the way. In the winter, temperatures plummeted and the route was often impassable due to the snow. As a result, the centre of Afghanistan remained largely unknown.

Few foreigners had ever followed the course of the Hari Rud (Rud being the Dari word for river) from Herat to the east. Almost constant civil war and foreign invasion have combined with geographical inaccessibility to make it an unattractive choice. The most famous account of the journey made in recent times was by Rory Stewart eighteen months before I arrived.

Stewart was the first foreigner to walk the entire distance between the two ancient capitals of Herat and Kabul, perhaps since the Middle Ages. Even the locals never made the journey, because of their inherent distrust of their neighbours. He travelled on foot, accompanied in part by suspicious security guards

from the newly formed Afghan secret service, as well as a toothless mastiff that he acquired from a village *en route*.

On his travels, Stewart found himself at the mercy of the locals; some of whom were Taliban sympathisers, others being supporters of al-Qaeda. But the majority were simple farmers, abiding by the Muslim code of hospitality, who treated the eccentric pedestrian with a combination of awe and wary generosity. I was fortunate enough not to be walking, at least for now.

We set off eastwards, following the winding course of the narrow river. At first the landscape was flat and unrelenting desert, the same as it had been since leaving the Khorasan plains of Iran. The tarmac road diminished as soon as Herat was out of sight and the track grew increasingly poor, at times unrecognisable from the wilderness around us.

A hot haze obscured the distant horizon, but the mountains to the north rose beyond the sand dunes to an impregnable magnitude. There was barely any vegetation and only the hardiest of shrubs poked through. The earth was a fine dust, rather than sand or rock, that engulfed the vehicle whenever we accelerated, and because some of the windows were jammed open, we were soon all covered in a thick layer of grime. The Afghans muttered incoherently to themselves as we bounced around inside the sweltering vehicle and I saw in the mirror that they were staring at me. The hotel manager had told the driver back at the caravanserai that I was a *farengi* and the passengers were curious.

'Where are you from?' asked the swarthy driver. His face was marked by a huge purple birthmark that covered his right cheek and forehead.

Remembering Conolly and the other Great Game explorers travelling incognito, I replied, 'Inglistan.'

'Ingees, Ingees,' I heard repeatedly from behind.

'Is that far?'

'Very.'

'Further than Hindustan?'

'Yes, it is beyond Persia and the land of Iskander.'

Ahead, walking parallel to the left-hand side of the track, a lonely tribesman was leading three camels. They munched nonchalantly at invisible grass as the dust flew into their weary eyes. As the morning matured, we gained height. The mud villages became less frequent and the road worsened. At best, it would be four feet wide with deep ruts, and at its worst it was nothing more than a winding footpath around the huge boulders that lay strewn at the bottom of the cliffs – deadly reminders of the threat of landslides. Sometimes the trail ran perilously close to a vast ravine. The drops were terrifyingly sheer and disappeared into the barren, quarry-like nothingness below. There were no fences or barriers here.

The van somehow carried on, sometimes assuming almost impossible angles, where I was convinced it would have to tip over. The wheels clung on with an air of self-preservation, but soon the mountains closed in around us. We had left the vast plains behind now. The midday sun shone above, illuminating the bronze valleys and causing the hill to radiate a faint glow. As the road grew worse, so did the number of times we had to stop. On two occasions the tyre burst and so the driver replaced it with one of the many spares kept on the roof. Several times there was a disturbing amount of smoke emanating from the engine and we pulled over while he examined the damage. Boulders had to be shifted from the track after they had fallen from the cliffs above. Other times, the wheels became so stuck in the dust that we all had to get out to push.

When we did stop, some of the Afghans immediately lay down at the roadside and fell asleep, using their brown woollen blankets as a pillow. Some of them prayed. Others would squat on their haunches, feet flat on the ground. It struck me as a position virtually impossible for Westerners, except perhaps yoga practitioners, and no matter how much I tried to emulate them I never got the hang of it. The men gazed into the distance, apparently unaware of time or space, offering me only fleeting glances.

The teenagers, on the other hand, stared directly at me. One of the boys was wearing a woollen hat, which had the Nike logo sewn badly across the front. It was a cheap import from China or perhaps a donation from some Western charity. I smiled, but they didn't respond. I wondered what exactly the hotel manager had told them. Eventually, whilst we waited at the foot of a huge mountain for the driver to fix a tyre, one of the men approached me to break the silence.

I had already made a mental note of this individual as soon as I got on the bus. He came across as the most confident of the bunch and had the distinctive aura of a pirate, with a huge black beard and rotten teeth. Around his neck he wore a black scarf that looked a little like the Palestinian *keffiyeh*.

'*Salaam*. I am Daoud,' the pirate announced in guttural Dari. 'Where are you really from?' he asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

'Inglistan,' I repeated.

Daoud raised an eyebrow and shook his head.

'No. We think you are Pashtun. You are a Taliban spy.'

I was shocked. I had been called many things, but never a Taliban spy.

'No. I am a tourist from England.' And to prove it I took out my camera, and let the scruffy rogue look through its viewfinder.

'I came to take pictures of Afghanistan.'

At this there were murmurs all around and Daoud was very much impressed and insisted that I took his photograph. This seemed to satisfy him that I was not a neighbouring insurgent, but as he went over to speak to the driver I overheard him ask who he thought I was.

'Oh, it's just some foreigner who comes to fight with al-Qaeda.'

The people here had barely heard of England. 'Inglistan' rang a vague bell for some of them, especially the older ones, who remembered stories from their grandparents about British rule in the early days (the third Anglo-Afghan war was in 1919 and British troops were stationed on the Khyber Pass until Indian partition in 1947). Unsurprisingly, everyone knew about the USA. Most had heard the name George Bush. To them he was simply a beardless mullah from a distant land. They did not understand why the coalition had bombed Afghanistan or why foreigners from strange countries (Portugal, Denmark, Estonia) were rummaging around their villages. They just accepted the latest violence as part of an endless string of foreign intervention.

Everybody, of course, knew of the Taliban, and despite being a predominantly Tajik area, the Taliban had ruled here as severely as in the rest of the country and had left a deep impact. The peasantry lived in fear of the radical mob, but also accepted their presence as a necessary evil. The Taliban brought some semblance of order from the regional and tribal infighting. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, to the average Afghan, was seen as another belligerent foreign influence – albeit a Muslim one.

When the driver fixed the tyre, we continued the journey for another thirty kilometres or so before breaking down again and

going through the whole rigmarole once more. At sundown, we pulled over and the Afghans quickly prayed before producing from their bundles of cloth some delicious flat bread and black *chai*, which they shared with me generously. We drove a little further to find a village. It was pitch black and there was no moon yet; the driver must have been exhausted.

At a place called Chest-i-Sharif, at the outer limit of Herat province near the boundary with Ghor, we knocked on several doors but were turned away. Perhaps other vans had got there first or maybe the villagers didn't like the look of us.

We drove on, up and up through the shale and lime hills, following a narrow and winding path that led over a high mountain pass. In the cold night air and clear sky, it felt as if we had reached the roof of the world. The horizon ceased to be obscured by mountains and stars filled the panorama and reached down to ground level. I didn't know how high we were, but the temperature had plummeted to below freezing. Puddles were covered in ice and a thin layer of sparkling frost clung to the grey boulders.

Inevitably we broke down. A clanking noise had continued since the last repair job, but this time it appeared more serious, and the driver gave a look of solemn concern. With the help of Daoud and one of the boys he removed the front wheel, but to no avail. Something had snapped. The rest of the Afghans merely squatted and stared in complete silence. A couple of hours passed whilst the trio fiddled with greasy axle oil and tied bits of rag around the chassis in an effort to keep things in place, and finally the driver managed to get the wheel back on again.

If not for the cold, it would have been pleasant to bed down in this surreal crater on the mountain top. But by now the temperature had dropped so low that a nearby stream had frozen

solid. The heater did little more than suck in the dust from the outside, so we all wrapped up in our brown shawls and shivered together, until continuing the descent from the mountain. This was the Shotor Khūn, the 'camel's blood pass', so named because the ancient travellers thought it was so high that their camels would get nose bleeds.

The ancient Greeks called it *Paropamisus*, 'peaks over which the eagles cannot fly', and saw the mountain range as an important frontier; it was the edge of the known world. Until the conquests of Alexander, beyond here was an anonymous and uncharted wilderness. Sometime after midnight we made it over the pass, and at the bottom of the mountain found another village called Shartak, where the driver pleaded with the headman for half an hour to let us stay.

'We have driven all day from Herat. We have been travelling for fifteen hours,' begged Abdul.

'Who are you?' asked the headman.

'Tajiks from Chaghcharān. We are coming from Herat. With us is a foreigner,' interrupted Daoud.

'What kind of foreigner? Is he dangerous?'

'We don't know, he doesn't speak our language. He says he is from Inglistan, but he looks very poor. But we are bound to show him hospitality and so must you.'

The elder glanced sceptically at my dusty rags and brown blanket, but he invited us in anyway. He was a wizened old Aimaq with clear Mongoloid features, a descendant of the Temuri tribe – followers of Timur's Mongols, who had settled in the highlands eight hundred years ago. He agreed to let us sleep on the floor in an upstairs room. He must have been quite wealthy, because two-storey houses were rare outside of the main towns. His house was well built and he led us inside the compound, where the only

light was a flickering candle in the downstairs room. Some steps led us to a room built of hardened clay on the roof.

'You can sleep here,' said the elder, before scuttling off to make tea. He was clearly annoyed at having been woken up, but he fulfilled his duty regardless. I was glad to discover an ancient carpet filled the floor space, though I needn't have worried about being cold. The old man lit a fire in the room underneath and by convection our floor soon became pleasantly warm. I waited to see what etiquette was involved in sleeping with ten Afghan men on a rug, but it was immediately apparent that there wasn't much fuss made. You simply wrapped your blanket around you and lay down to sleep wherever there was space. I was so exhausted that I passed out straight away and slept through the breakfast reveille at four a.m.

There are three main tribes in Afghanistan. The Pashtun are the most numerous and are dispersed across the south and east of the country. The Tajiks are the second largest and make up the population of Herat, the western desert regions, and some parts of the central highlands and the Transoxiana. They are of old Persian stock and speak Dari. The rest of the centre of the country is made up of Hazara, flat-faced descendants of the Mongol horsemen. The majority of them are Shia Muslims in a predominantly Sunni country.

Then of course in the north, things get even more complicated. There are the warrior Turkmen, the beardless Uzbek herders and silversmiths, nomadic Kirghiz, Ismaili Wakhis, Nuristani mountainmen, not to mention the diaspora Arabs, Baluch, Qizilbashi, Brahui, and the Jat.

But now we were in the land of the Aimaq, a semi-nomadic, historically loose entity related to both the Tajik and the Hazara. Both groups inhabited the wild central mountains and

because of their ancient enmity with the Pashtuns, were generally against the Taliban and welcomed the recent shifts in power. It had let people such as our current host prosper, when perhaps only five years ago he would have been in hiding, scared of being persecuted by the brutal regime because of his ethnicity.

I woke up at five-thirty to the sound of munching. One of the Afghans was finishing off some flat bread. I went outside to the back of the house to go to the toilet, and walking around the garden wall, I found the driver squatting on the ground and wiping his bare arse with a handful of sand. I had been surprised when I was shown to the fields in Afghanistan and had never been given a jug of water with which to clean myself. The Afghan method was now clear and I could see why town dwellers like Daoud so proudly displayed their pink toilet paper from their breast pockets.

The morning drive carried on in much the same way as the day before; dusty, hot and suffocating. We entered the valleys of the Hazara people, traditionally herdsmen and farmers, some of whom had been allies of the Russian invaders, whilst others were staunchly opposed to the Taliban, and many were both. These days they made their money smuggling opium on donkeys through the mountains. Finally, as the sun was almost directly overhead, we ascended a ridge and the town of Chaghcharān came into view in a wide valley with the Hari Rud running through its centre. By now I was almost faint with thirst and like my Afghan compatriots, I could not contain my excitement at the prospect of arriving at this remote town.