

FLYING IN PERSIA¹

BY WALTER MITTELHOLZER

February 24. My magnificent metal bird has carried me to-day from Teheran to the Persian Gulf, across great lakes, over deserts and high mountains, following a thousand kilometres of caravan-road trodden by traders for untold centuries. I have made the trip in six hours. It takes the fastest caravans thirty days, and automobiles — with difficulty — at least twelve days.

Six weeks have made me somewhat familiar with Persia and its weather. When my machine had been reconditioned in Teheran after its long trip from Switzerland and its slight accident south of the capital, I made several short flights with Persian Cabinet officers and postal officials in order to show what modern aviation really is.

At 8.10 A.M. this morning Bissegger and I, with a young Persian interpreter and 420 litres of gasoline on board, left the frozen capital of Persia, wrapped in the icy arms of winter, for what was to me the unknown South. I planned to reach Bushire on the hot Persian Gulf in a continuous flight. My luggage included a camera and film for 500 exposures, for the trip was made in the interest of science as well as of the Persian Postal Service, and no maps or photographs existed of a large part of the country I was to fly over.

For weeks the sky at Teheran had been cloudless. Ideal flying-weather! But it was impossible to learn what conditions were at the Gulf, where the climate is entirely different, because telegraph service is so slow that by the

¹From *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Swiss Liberal-Republican daily), *March 24, April 2, 5*

time a report arrived it was already out of date.

This morning, as I skimmed at a low altitude over the bright golden domes of the oasis of Shah Abdul Azim and crossed the red-brown desert beyond, I felt exhilarated and confident. The air was calm and clear; my motor was running perfectly. My two companions in the observer's compartment behind were seated on the floor, because it was filled with cases of reserve gasoline. Bissegger's head kept constantly bobbing up, but I never saw the Persian. Apparently he was not interested in the scenery. I soon learned why. When we had crossed 200 kilometres of salt desert and the town of Kashan was a hundred metres directly below, nestled at the foot of lofty, snow-covered mountains, I began to photograph, and in order to sweep the whole horizon made several curves. This, combined with the bumpy air from the mountains, made our plane toss about. The result was that the poor Persian became violently seasick, and remained so until we landed.

After leaving Kashan, looking very mediæval with its lofty towers and walls, I rose higher in order to cross directly a mountain-range 3200 metres high and reach the broad valley of Zindeh Rud, where the ancient capital of Persia, Ispahan, lies. The sudden change in the scenery was typical of Persia. Around Kashan the meadows and green fields, watered by mountain streams, were green as emerald, but the neighboring mountains, with their lofty ridges and plateaus, lay deep in

snow. From my elevation at 4000 metres I could see a mighty Alpine wall toward the southeast, beyond which still other mountain-ranges were dimly visible in the remote distance.

After flying southward over several villages, I found myself at 10.25 A. M. above the great city of Ispahan, which covers about the same area as Zurich. Descending to a lower altitude, I photographed wonderful buildings erected in the golden age of the Persian kings, Hasht Behesht and Chehel Situn Palaces, rose gardens hidden from curious gazers behind lofty mud walls, mosques crowned with proud, graceful domes, pigeon towers, and a labyrinth of vaulted adobe-roofs, and narrow, crooked streets and alleys. I flew over the city twice. Clusters of women with children in their arms stood on the roofs of their harems unveiled, but I caught no distinct glimpse of their faces as my metal bird sped past at 150 kilometres an hour; for I was busy photographing and steering. Not until the fleeting vision of the moment takes permanent form under the red light of my dark room shall I know precisely what I saw. That will be a second discovery. I could not linger, for a glance at my gasoline dial and chronometer cautioned me not to tarry over this fairylike city. I must reach the shores of the Indian Ocean, more than 600 kilometres away, before nightfall.

Although my maps were practically worthless, the route beyond Ispahan was easy to identify, because it followed the great caravan-road to the South, which was marked by a bright line across the brown desert-sand. Immediately after leaving Ispahan it winds through a narrow mountain pass between gigantic sugar-loaves — as they appeared to be from my high altitude — and into a country as barren and crater-broken as a lunar landscape. The cliffs exposed horizontal strata

that seemed, to my layman's eyes, of comparatively recent geological formation. The dark reddish-brown peaks, weathered to a point, recalled both by their form and their material the Høltedahl Plateau in Spitzbergen, except that there flat inland ice framed the mountains, instead of flat desert sand.

After flying for half an hour at about 2200 metres' altitude, or only a little higher than the surrounding mountains, I passed the Qumisheh Oasis, and half an hour later Yazd-i-Khast, perched like a robber baron's castle on a precipitous terrace. At 11.50 I was above Abadeh.

So far the caravan-road had been free from snow and clearly visible. At this point the land rose higher and the road was lost in the drifts. Mountains 4000 metres high stood directly athwart my path to Bushire. I considered rapidly whether it would be better to follow the longer but safer caravan-route via Deh Bid and Shiraz in a big detour to the southward, or to fly straight across the half-explored mountains, where only wild nomads dwell, to the Persian Gulf. My gasoline was going rapidly, and I chose the latter course. It would save me one hundred kilometres' flying, but make an emergency landing very risky. So I gave my motor full gas and, trusting to its reliability, started on the hardest stage of the trip — two hundred kilometres across high plateaus alternating with parallel mountain-ranges. It was mid-day. The hot sun produced the air vortexes that make flying in Persia, particularly in the summer time, exceedingly difficult. We were tossed about unmercifully. I pitied the poor Persian lying flat on his back in the bottom of the compartment behind me. Keeping at an altitude of 4500 metres, I descried about an hour later the blue, snow-free coast-range to the

southward that skirts the Persian Gulf. At 1.20 a tiny silver ribbon, that grew rapidly wider, shimmered in the southwest — the sea, the Persian Gulf on the Indian Ocean! I now ceased to worry lest my gasoline give out, and descended gradually at 180 kilometres an hour from my frigid height to the warm, almost hot, air of the Gulf. At 1.40 I had final farewell to the wild, weathered coast-mountains, and keeping the Dalila river-bed on my right, skimmed over fertile lowlands carpeted with green meadows, yellow stubble, and date groves to the Peninsula of Bushire, on whose northern point the crowded white adobe-houses of the South Persian city clustered like a honeycomb.

Smoke columns, lighted by order of the Persian Government to direct me as soon as I was sighted, were already rising from the aviation field, which is excellently administered by an English personnel. After taking a photographic panorama of the town, the sea, and the lagoon from a low altitude, I landed at 2.16 P.M. A party of Persians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Germans, who had hastened out from town in automobiles, gave me a joyful welcome. The telegram announcing my departure from Teheran had arrived only half an hour before, and they did not expect me until much later.

Bissegger and I lost no time removing our heavy-felt aviation suits, for it was hotter than midsummer at home, and in contrast with the morning fridity at Teheran almost suffocating. Then I made a short flight over the town with two Persians and a couple of young Germans, who were our hosts, after which we were taken in an automobile to a country estate twelve kilometres outside the city, over a road lying between verdant grainfields and glorious palm-groves. As I write these lines I see from the verandah where I

sit the sun slowly sinking through a cloudless heaven in the west toward a deep-blue, surf-bordered sea, and my thoughts wander still farther westward to my homeland.

March 9. My sojourn on the Persian Gulf lasted longer than I anticipated. I could not get the proper gasoline for my motor, and in attempting to use a lighter quality overheated the engine and cracked a piston head. Two reserve motors were already awaiting me at Bushire, but unfortunately were sixty-five horsepower weaker than the one I had been using. This made it impossible to take our Persian interpreter with us on our return to Teheran.

As we had practically no facilities to work with, the installation of the new motor took considerable time, so I was not able to test it until eleven days after my arrival. Finally, late in the afternoon of March 7, Bissegger reported that the job was finished. Eager to ascertain how the plane would act under weaker power, I made a flight alone at seven that evening. Moonlight such as one sees only in the clear transparent air of Persia cast a veil of enchantment over the exotic Southern landscape. The great sandy plain of the aviation field was almost as light as day, so that I took off without the slightest inconvenience. I started at once with full gas, and the flames shot forth with spectrelike flashes from the exhaust of the thundering motor. Rising higher and higher in cautious curves around the aviation field, gradually leaving the hot humid air at the surface for the refreshing chill 2000 metres above, I put the new engine through its paces. It worked well.

Relieved of that anxiety, I circled wider and wider over the silent, unlighted city in the silvery sheen below. Far beneath me the lagoon reflected the full moon in its glassy surface. Feathery flocks of mist drifted across

its mirror like dancing fays, and the sea itself glistened like molten silver. Far to the north I could catch the pale glimmer of distant snow-peaks through the warm pulsating air of the desert foreground. The atmosphere was absolutely quiet. Enraptured with the magic of this glorious Southern moonlight, I circled farther and farther afield, forgetful of time and place. At length a beacon fire, kindled at the aviation field by my worried machinist, called me back to the earth again.

Next day was spent thoroughly testing the motor and in ascertaining its gasoline-consumption and radiator temperature, for an emergency landing in the southern part of Persia would not only cost us the plane, but would mean weeks, possibly months, of isolation from the world.

At 6.10 this morning, when the first flush of dawn was barely visible behind the jagged peaks to the eastward, I started with Bissegger and 460 litres of gasoline on board. We rose very slowly, and I missed painfully my old and stronger motor. Although it was so early, until we passed the 1500-metre level the air was much warmer than it is in Switzerland in midsummer. The thermometer on my radiator mounted with disconcerting rapidity, and I was bathed in perspiration in my warm felt suit. I gave a last backward glance to the city, its encircling palm-groves, and the Persian Gulf, where the weekly steamer had just lifted anchor and headed for Bombay, trailing a long line of smoke behind her.

At seven o'clock we had crossed the eighty kilometres of coast desert and the first mountain-range, and were flying at a height of 3000 metres above the beautiful verdant mountain-valley that surrounds Lake Famur. I shall not pause here to describe the wild lonely region upon which we now entered. It is inhabited only by nomads,

has never been mapped with even approximate accuracy, and indeed has scarcely been visited by Europeans. My photographs will probably give the first reliable data as to its contours. On three occasions I crossed long massive mountain-ranges over 4000 metres high, separated by broad valleys whose rivers were running at full flood. Now and then I made out the black tents of nomads camped at some green spot below.

After two and one-half hours' flying, which passed very quickly while I was so busy photographing and watching the scenery, I picked up the caravan-route, distinctly visible, near Mahiar. Here I was in familiar country again. It seemed as if I had known it for years, so reassuring was it to get back to a landscape seen only once before. To the right, beyond jagged peaks surrounded by great mounds of débris, lay alkali deserts. To the northeast, as far as the vision reached, extended bright-brown barren plains, interspersed with stretches of shining white alkali. In the middle of this flat expanse of country lay a large salt lake. I was approaching Ispahan, which I intended to leave on my left in order to steer directly for Mount Damavand. But when I calculated my gasoline supply, I found it would take me to Teheran but would not permit me to make the detour over Damavand I had planned. So I decided to land at Ispahan to refuel. I flew over the city three times at a low altitude, making a successful film of the dome and minaret-crowned capital of Shah Abbas II, and landed at 10.10 A.M., exactly four hours after leaving Bushire, in front of the gates and walls of Julfa, the Armenian town, which is connected with Ispahan proper by three fine large bridges across the Zindeh Rud. I had already observed crowds hastening toward the aviation field. Before many minutes had

elapsed we were completely encircled by a great throng of curious spectators, including many heavily veiled women, who broke through their traditional reserve by coquettishly revealing their faces an instant in their eagerness to see better. Several of them were really handsome.

Fortunately soldiers were on the spot. As soon as I showed my credentials from the Ministry of War they placed guards around the machine. A moment later, to my delighted surprise, I heard myself called by name, in genuine St. Gall dialect, by someone in the crowd. It was the wife of the English Director of Telegraphs, who rushed forward and greeted me and the plane with the enthusiasm of a homesick exile. To her surprise I took out of my cardcase a tiny packet — a Christmas gift that her parents had given me shortly before I left Zurich, and that, in spite of all my delays, now reached her before the letter announcing its dispatch.

Naturally I was made at home by her and her husband. She remembered me well as a schoolboy. In fact, we had been confirmed at the same time — a strange coincidence. Her husband, who had resided in Persia for many years, was enthusiastic over my mission, believing that air transportation is destined to revolutionize life in this isolated country. The two could scarcely convince themselves that I had come from the Persian Gulf to Ispahan in four hours. Last autumn they spent thirty-five toilsome days on the road making the same journey — and had to fight bandits in addition.

March 10. In spite of the high altitude of Ispahan, 1600 metres above the sea, the night was mild. A great crowd has gathered at the aviation field to watch our preparations for the start. The sun beats down upon us with surprising force as we work. A slight haze

in the atmosphere cuts off our view of the lofty mountain-range to the north that I plan to cross, but the city, lying at the foot of the elevation on which the flying-field lies, and the neighboring mountains present an enchanting scene.

We say good-bye to our hospitable hosts, our plane speeds a short distance down the bumpy declivity, and at 8 A.M. we are in the air. Below us in the vast, glistening marble courtyard of the great Masjed-i-Shah Mosque hundreds of the faithful are prostrate in their devotions, when our great metal bird with its roaring motor skims over their startled heads. Passing the ruins of royal palaces and a sea of domes, minarets, and walls, I am a moment later above green grainfields and scattered villages. These quickly make way for the illimitable desert, and little by little the outlines of the Kargiz Mountains, more than 4200 metres high, define themselves against the low horizon ahead. Forty minutes after leaving Ispahan the highest of their peaks is beneath my feet. Reddish-brown, horizontally stratified precipices extend northward until they end in the weathered cliffs that border the great salt desert. Since I passed here fourteen days ago the snow has vanished, but no blush of vegetation has taken its place.

To the north the air is gray and misty. My eyes seek in vain the proud snow-pyramid of Damavand, which was such a glorious vision even 250 kilometres away when I approached it before. My hope of being the first to circle its virgin summit sinks, for the sun grows dimmer and dimmer behind a tenuous cloud-curtain.

Descending in a long glide from my 4500-metre level, I pass at a low altitude at 9.05 A.M. the city of Kashan, which I film as we sweep past. Then I follow the caravan-route toward Kum,

in order to visit the famous Shiite place of pilgrimage, with its gold-domed mosque. At times we fly not more than ten metres above the road, overtaking caravan after caravan and secretly enjoying the wild confusion produced by our roaring motor. The camels merely lift their heads in the air with stoical composure, but the mules stampede in all directions, leaping over ditches and holes and scattering their heavy packs behind them. This amusement does not last long, for the country soon grows rougher, and prudence bids me seek a higher altitude. Half an hour later, when I am flying at about the 3000-metre level, I descry in the gray mistiness ahead a glistening, almost symmetrical triangle. At first I fancy it is an optical illusion. A few minutes later, however, its identity is clear. It is the topmost peak of Damavand projecting above her veil of mist. Shall I risk the adventure upon which my heart is set? I estimate that I am still about ninety kilometres south of the mountain, and giving my motor full gas I rise until I emerge from the cloud layer into the dazzling bright sunshine above. At half-past ten I reach 5000 metres. Below me rolls a billowy cloud-sea, the heaven above is a black-blue, and in front of me stretches a chaos of snowy summits overtopped at least a thousand metres by the mighty crater of Damavand. Here and there through a break in the clouds I catch short glimpses of mountain villages perched like swallows' nests in narrow canyons between white cascades and green declivities.

It is just 11.46 A.M. when, at an altitude of 5700 metres, I skim over the rounded summit of the Damavand scarcely thirty metres above its highest point, heading directly north into the misty beyond. I remove my hand from the steering gear a moment to take my camera, which Bissegger has just

reloaded, when we are suddenly thrown from our seats and the plane plunges headlong downward. It is several seconds before I regain control, during which the mountain seems to have shot skyward behind me. A glance at the barometer shows that we have been sucked down to 5500 metres. During this quick descent the motor stops two or three times because the gasoline floods the carburetor. As a result we plunge and pitch violently — a decidedly uncomfortable situation. How much simpler and safer it would have been with my old full-power motor! With that it would be mere child's play to rise to 6000 metres, where there is no danger of encountering sudden down-currents.

On the north the mountains descend rapidly with wooded canyons to the rice fields of Mazandaran and the Caspian Sea, whose coastline is dimly visible. I make a great curve to the left and again to the north, fly back across Damavand, this time at a respectful distance, and bend southwestward over several long ranges toward Teheran. In the remote west three snowy ranges more than 4500 metres high rise clear and well defined from the surrounding sea of mountains. I make one more circle to feast my eyes for the last time on the magnificent panorama. Then I say farewell.

At 3600 metres I pass through an aperture in the cloud-blanket where we are again tossed hither and thither like a bouncing ball, and reach a lower stratum not far from Teheran. Already a touch of spring is in the air. It is agreeably warm, and green is visible in the gardens of the capital where all was bare and brown when I left two weeks ago. Nearly four hours after leaving Ispahan I land easily, at 11.50, on the field in front of Kazvin Gate.

This unforgettable flight ends my aviation experience in Persia. I have

not done all I planned to do, because my unexpected delay in Smyrna cost priceless time. I am due home. My plane has been accepted by the Persian Government, and in the hands of its new German pilot will, I hope, make many a successful and important jour-

ney. In a total of seventy-one flying-hours, during the middle of winter, when we aviators in Switzerland are usually forced by foggy weather to stick to the house, I have covered approximately 11,000 kilometres, over land and sea, in two continents.

ON DISLIKING DICKENS¹

BY A. B. WALKLEY

BELIEVE me, I would as soon damn the equator as speak a disrespectful word of Dickens. I wish to live on terms of good comradeship with my fellow men, or at the least to preserve a whole skin. But this much common honesty compels me to admit: I am but a tepid Dickensian. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I look round my bookshelves and I see twenty volumes of Balzac, stout fellows, but only one of Dickens. It is a cheap, ill-printed little *Pickwick*, which I once bought at a railway book-stall to verify a quotation about the retired government servant, the crumpet-lover, who lived at Kensington. The truth is, I am constantly getting into trouble with my friends for confusing the 'crumpets' of Sam Weller's anecdote with muffins. My excuse is that Dickens *generally* refers to muffins, rather than to crumpets. His departure from his usual practice in Sam Weller's anecdote is a 'catch' for the unwary. Hence the little *Pickwick* volume. But stay! I see a *David Copperfield* and a *Little Dorrit* high up on a top shelf. I had forgotten I possessed them! They are dated, I see, 1850 and 1857 (Heavens! *Can* they be First Edi-

tions?), and came to me by inheritance, on which account I ought the more tenderly to have cherished them. Still, as Mrs. Flora Finching says, 'T is distance lends enchantment to the view, at least I don't mean that, and if I did I suppose it would depend considerably on the nature of the view, but I'm running on again. . . .' Anyhow, I have said enough for you to see with half an eye, without my admission, that I am but a tepid Dickensian. I have read him all through, 'slap-bang through, Mr. Boffin,' in my youth, when one reads everything; but now I find I am content to take him as read.

My apologies to all whom this statement will offend. There must be a good many of them. I know what they will say. 'It does n't matter a brass farthing whether *you* care to read Dickens or not; we can let that pass with a sigh of pity. What offends us is the outrageous indecency of your publishing your shame. It is as bad to us as brawling in church.' For your true or hard-shell Dickensian deifies his idol. He has all my sympathy. You love the writer of your choice as you love a woman, as unreasonably, with the same touch of madness. What indeed would become of literature were it not for its passionate

¹ From the *Times* (London Conservative daily), March 25