

Clever People, these Armenians

CARLETON S. COON

Deep in the oven-like summer of 1951 I was obliged, for reasons that have nothing to do with this story, to forsake the cool heights of Hamadan and make a trip by bus to Tehran. I came back as soon as I was able. Now in those days, and possibly still, it was the rule for passengers to bring their luggage to the bus station at five o'clock in the afternoon on the day before departure. In this way the bus could be loaded beforehand, and no one could show up at the last moment with a couple of trunks or a sheep or two when there was no more room. Dutifully enough I brought my modest suitcase to the station at the time indicated and had it checked in.

At five the next morning I woke up, with the horizontal rays of the sun just fingering through the poplars, and dressed quickly, for the bus was leaving soon. As soon as I was dressed my hostess, an American resident of Tehran, greeted me. She bore in her hand an object wrapped in a brown paper bag.

"Oh" she said, "I wish that you would take this to Frances X (another American woman residing in Hamadan); it is a can of lard. She loves to make pies. There is no Armenian butcher shop in Hamadan at all, and no way for her to get it unless I send it to her. I'm sure it won't be any trouble."

"Is it sealed?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she said.

So off I went to the bus station, with my package in my hand.

"What is this?" asked the despatcher, "You were supposed to bring all your baggage yesterday afternoon."

"I know," I replied, "and I brought my suitcase. This is just something that came up at the last minute."

"That's all right," said the driver, "you just sit in front with me and I will put it under the instrument panel."

Sitting in front made me happy, for Middle Eastern bus drivers are a temperamental lot, fond of racing each other around curves and taking chances that no Greyhound-pilot would consider. Being in physical reach of the switch and the hand brake always gave me a feeling of relative security. Sitting there in the seat of honor, so to speak, and seeing the vast expanse of the Persian plateau unroll before me, just in the finest moment of the day, made me feel that life was worth living, and a little more.

We had not been on the road more than an hour when I noticed several of the passengers holding handkerchiefs to their noses. Sure en-

ough there really was some kind of unfamiliar odor in the air inside that bus. I drew a deep breath and there it was, the smell of that unclean animal, the common pig. It reminded me of Sunday mornings decades ago when my grandmother used to cook my grandfather codfish cakes for breakfast, with diced pieces of salt pork.

I looked down on the floor, and the rubber mat glistened with grease. We came into rolling country, and as the bus rumbled uphill the sea of hot fat swirled to the rear of the vehicle, and when we rolled downhill it flowed back under my very feet. Some of the passengers, who were wearing dainty shoes of different colors of leather, of the kind we call correspondents' shoes, were sitting with their knees to their chins, and their feet on the seats.

It is hard to imagine any single item of food in our culture that would annoy us by its odor the way that smell of lard upset the good Muslims who were my fellow passengers. Being Persians, they were exceedingly polite, but they were also exceedingly annoyed. The only point in my favor was that most of them had probably never before smelled pork fat, and may not have been absolutely sure what it was, but they undoubtedly suspected the worst.

At this psychological threshold an Armenian, who was sitting right behind me, tapped me on the shoulder and said, in English and in a loud voice, "Why do you carry vegetable oil from Tehran to Hamadan, when it is cheaper in Hamadan, and it is rancid oil at that?" In case anyone missed the point, he explained to his neighbor what a foolish and extravagant man I had been in this vegetable oil business.

The bus driver pulled his vehicle along-side the road and the cleaner—the man who rides in the door and thrusts a wooden wedge under a rear wheel each time the bus stops—used the dust cloth with which he cleaned the bus, his own valuable handkerchief, and mine as well, to mop up the floor, and tossed the greasy package out. Then he threw away all the cloths he had used, and washed his hands in dust at the side of the road.

The bus rolled on. We had a race with another bus outside of Qazvin, and barely missed crashing into a heavy truck from Tabriz. These events diverted the minds of most of the passengers, I hoped, from their recent brush with pollution. When we got down at Hamadan the Armenian passenger walked past me, and on the side of his face which I could see a faint trace of a smile flashed for a fraction of a second.