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FRONTIER ODYSSEY
Up the Khyber

by Carol Rose

When Spring-time flushes the desert grass
Our Kafilas wind through the Khyber Pass,
Lean are the camels but fat the frails.
Light are the purses but heavy the bales,
When the snowbound trade of the north comes down,
To the market square
of Peshawar town.

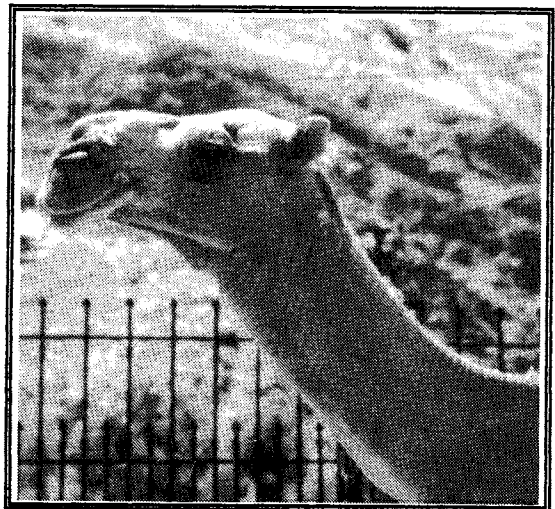
-- Rudyard Kipling

A typical summer morning in Peshawar: the mercury hovers at 110 degrees and "load-shedding" by the power company has turned off all fans, air conditioners, lights and refrigerators. Water flows hot from the tap, then dries up. An image of some inane television commercial -- of a man falling backwards into a swimming pool while holding a large glass of iced tea -- comes to my mind, then vanishes like a mirage.

Lacking a pool, I fall instead into my jeep.
It's time for a road trip.

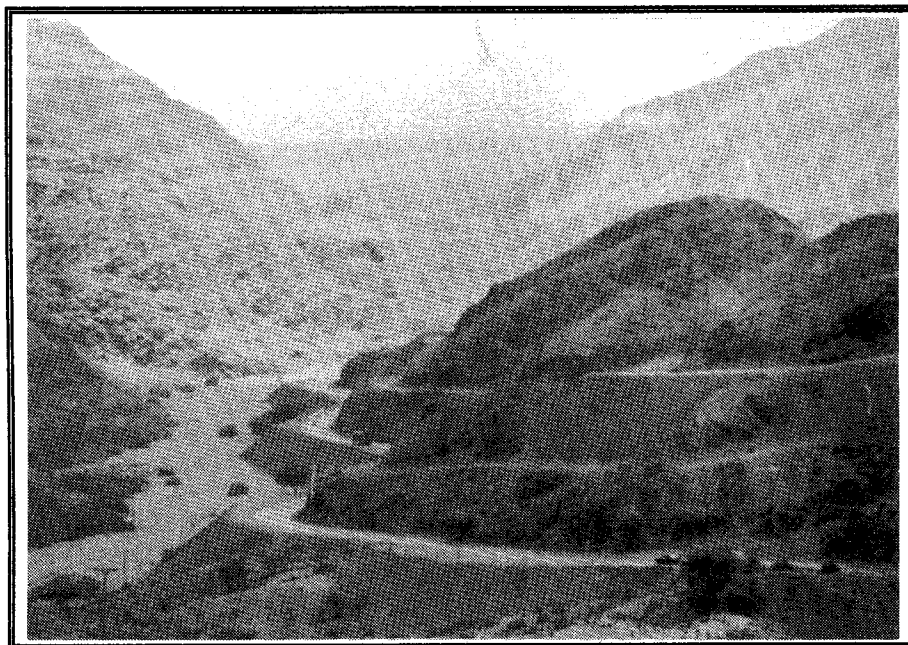
Escaping the heat is just one reason to journey out of Peshawar. Adventure is another, and there are countless places to find it in this part of the world -- provided that you are armed with permits from the local administrators and an escort of gun-toting guards. Often the most memorable moments occur on the road itself.

One of my favorite journeys in the Northwest Frontier Province is to the Khyber Pass. The narrow route to the pass cuts through the Hindu Kush -- or "Hindu Killer" -- the mountain range about 35 miles west of



Visitors to the Khyber Pass comes in all shapes and sizes.

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The road to the Khyber Pass, looking back on Peshawar.

Peshawar, forming the most direct link between Peshawar and the Afghan capital of Kabul. Before relating my exploits in the Khyber, let me offer a brief history of this infamous sight.

Up Your Khyber

The word "Khyber" is an old Hebrew term for fortress or palace. Like many of the famous historical sights in this part of the world, no one knows for sure how the pass got its name. The guidebooks, however, say that the route was rarely used in ancient times because its narrow path was too easily open to ambush. Nonetheless, writings dating from the first century AD mention the pass as a trade route.

The pass became the subject of legends during the British rule in India, when lonely soldiers of the Raj wrote of their heroic but vain attempts to defend the narrow gorge from local Pushtun tribesmen. All but one of the British soldiers were ambushed and massacred in the pass while fleeing Kabul during the second Anglo-Afghan war. In 1878 the Khyber Rifles were formed to protect British caravans moving through the pass. To no avail: the British failed to hold the pass and were forced instead to cut a deal with the local tribes. The Pushtuns were allowed self-rule if they agreed to stop killing British soldiers. It seems to me a clear-cut case of declaring victory

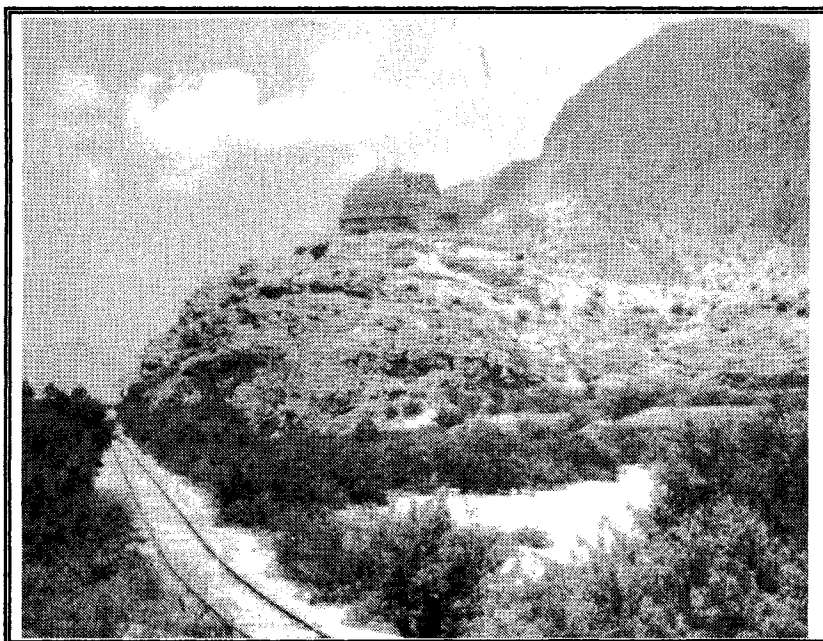
and going home. No wonder the Brits still insult one another by saying: "Up your Khyber."

The legacy of the British arrangement lingers in the present-day governance of the Khyber region, which now is one of the "Tribal Agencies" of Pakistan that stretch along the entire Pakistan-Afghan border. These tribal territories technically are part of Pakistan. But they remain semi-autonomous, ruled by tribal leaders operating through traditional councils, or shuras. The Pakistani government, like the Brits before them, controls only the roads and has little sway elsewhere in the tribal agencies. As a result, the territories generally are closed to foreigners except by special permission from local political agents.

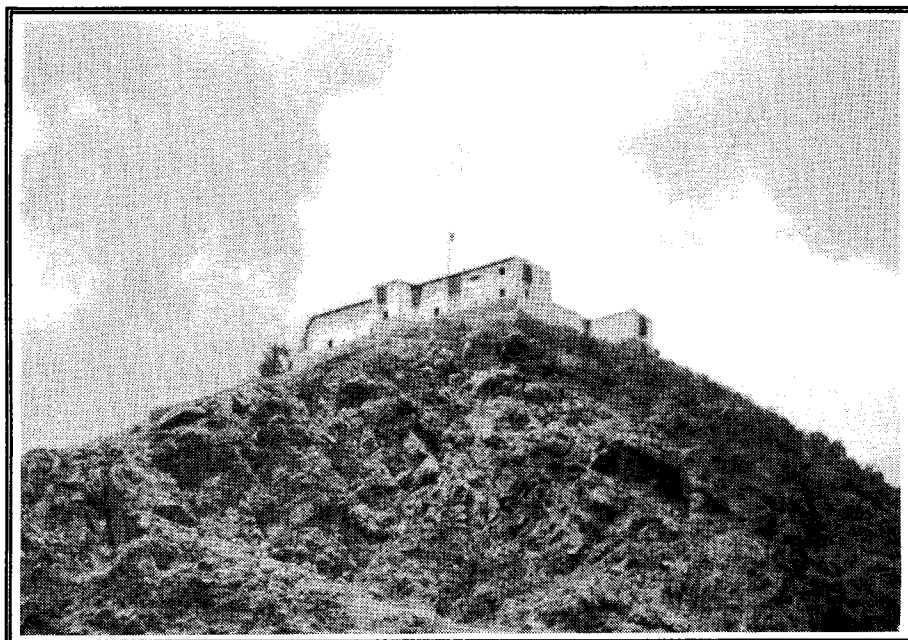
I sidestepped this prohibition when a friend obtained permission for six Westerners to travel to the region. Fortunately, the political agent didn't seem to notice when two extra people showed up and instead he loaned us two guards for the road. Thus armed, we set off on our adventure.

Mingling with Smugglers

We maneuvered our two jeeps through the dense Peshawar traffic, past the colorful roadside markets and sprawling mud-colored refugee camps. Three miles west of town, we entered the tribal territory, a border marked by two speed bumps in the road. Just inside the tribal area is an enormous shopping area, called Hayatabad, where smugglers sell their wares without paying customs taxes. There are hundreds of stores, most named after famous British outlets such as "Marks & Spencers" and



Dome-shaped ruins of a Buddhist stupa, or holy site, on the road to the Khyber Pass remind passersby that they are at the site of an ancient cross-roads.



Ali Majid fort stands bold against the sky as it guards the narrowest part of the Khyber pass.

"Mothercare." Don't be fooled by the names: the shops were grungy and filled to over-capacity with plastic wares, dishes, radios, coffee machines, air conditioners, refrigerators, clothing, cosmetics and toiletries.

These items are smuggled from Japan or Europe through Afghanistan. Electrical appliances are shipped overland on the Siberian railway from Japan to Tashkent, then by truck or mule or camel over the mountain passes of Afghanistan through the Khyber pass and on to the bazaars of Pakistan. I marveled at the thought that these items by-pass the thousands of Soviet consumers en route to Pakistan, and wondered what would happen if the Soviet populace ever had enough cash to purchase these wares for themselves. No doubt, the Japanese would increase their trade surplus.

Beyond Hayatabad the road flattened out across an expanse of desert. The only signs of life were enormous mud compounds, with walls 15 to 20 feet high, topped by flags to ward off the evil-eye and slits the size of rifle-barrels to defend against the numerous intruders who have traveled this road over the centuries. Green tree tops peak over the sides of the walls, hints of color that suggested magnificent secret gardens beyond the fortress gates.

One such stronghold, thrice the size of any others, is said

to be the home of the region's most successful smuggler. Our driver told us that beyond the towering walls the smuggler has a swimming pool, tennis courts, a movie theater, a mosque and a fishing pond. Furthermore, he said, the smuggler is a generous man who will freely open his facilities to anyone who stops and asks permission to enter. It was an offer I couldn't refuse and soon convinced my companions to attempt a visit. Unfortunately, the guards at the gate had not been informed about the smuggler's hospitality. They threatened to shoot us.

The only other danger we encountered was when we stopped the jeep to let one of our party relieve a bout of diarrhoea in some roadside brush. As we waited, a fierce-looking Pushtun tribesman appeared, wielding a stick and marching toward the underbrush after our friend. Our driver stopped the Pushtun man and explained the delicate situation. He responded angrily that the foreigner was taking a crap in his front yard! After much cajoling, the tribesman agreed to let things -- shall we say -- pass. He even laughed. Personally, I would have clubbed a stranger taking such liberties on my property.

Into the Pass

After 15 miles of open desert, the road began to climb steeply as we entered the mountainous entrance to the Khyber pass itself. We sped past crumbling Buddhist ruins and lonely British forts. Camels sauntered alongside the road, a sign that nomads were nearby. We seemed to be going back through history itself. The rust-colored mountains rising around us had witnessed a thousand battles in as many years. Hidden within their stone-silent walls were stories of empires won and lost, of camel trains and nomadic adventures, of soldiers glorious in battle and massacres brutal beyond the imagination.

On a distant hill I saw the Ali Masjid Fort, which I recognized from British engravings made in the last century and now stored in the dusty archives of the Indian Institute at Oxford. The Fort guards the narrowest point in the pass -- 30 meters -- as well as the graves of the British soldiers killed in the Second Anglo-Afghan war of 1878.

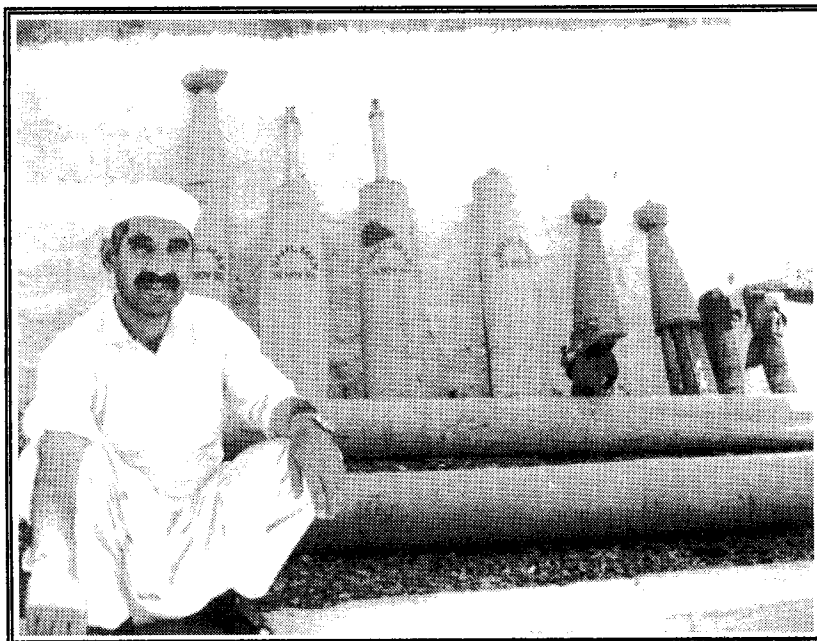
Red sandstone and granite walls loomed ever higher on all sides as the road sank into a gorge. Soon the route began to zig-zag along a dry stream bed, becoming a narrow ledge beneath an enormous rocky overhang. Craning my neck to look up, I could see the tiny silhouettes of people looking down on us from the cliffs overhead. I could not imagine a more terrifying place to be caught in an ambush.

To the Land of Heights

Gradually the pass widened again and we pulled into the Khyber Rifles' Regimental Headquarters, a modern low-set building with a massive green lawn. Here we were treated to cold sodas and a tour. The lush grounds seemed wonderfully incongruous amid the rocky desert surroundings. So did the building filled with photographs of famous visitors, mostly British royalty and American presidents. Every visiting dignitary was pictured in the same pose: sitting on a folding chair surrounded by a cadre of Khyber Rifle officers. There were snapshots of presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Carter. Margaret Thatcher posed for a shot, as did the queen, the queen mother, Prince Charles and even the Shah of Iran. My favorite photograph showed Jackie Kennedy wearing a mini-skirt, pill-box hat and a forced smile that suggested she wished she were anywhere but at the Khyber Pass.

Just off the reception area was a lime-green bedroom suite. Our host proudly explained that the room had been built in just 24 hours when Princess Anne paid a surprise over-night visit to the Khyber. I doubt if anyone had slept there since, at least not with permission.

Three miles beyond the Khyber Rifle's headquarters we stopped at Landi Kotal, a frontier town whose name means "Land of

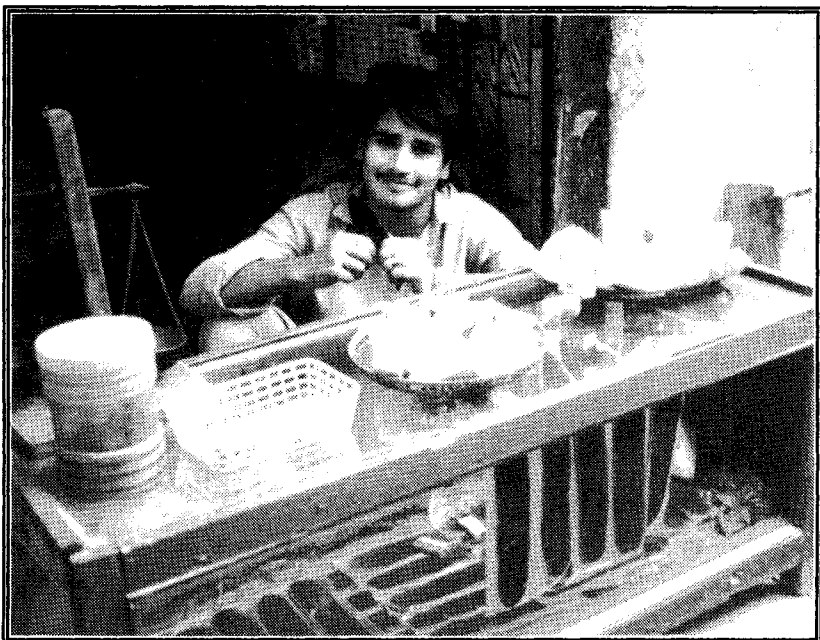


A man from the Afridi ethnic group sits by Soviet rockets that have landed in the Khyber area during the war in Afghanistan.

heights." Landi Kotal is infamous throughout South Asia as a smuggler's paradise and heroin production center. Letting our curiosity get the better of our fear, we crept down a series of stone steps into the covered market of the Landi Kotal Bazaar. It reminded me of the Old City of Jerusalem, with its canopy-covered corridors of shops and stone-paved paths.

Men wearing enormous turbans

sat on rope-woven beds, called *charpoys*, as they sipped tea and exchanged gossip. In addition to the usual bazaar bric-a-brac, dozens of stores were cluttered with weapons -- kalashnikovs, rocket-launchers, pistols, holsters, and bullets of all shapes and sizes. Shop keepers offered to fire off a few rounds for interested buyers. We declined.



A young man displays hashish strips at the Landi Kotal bazaar.

Other vendors had constructed glass display cabinets filled with hashish. The resinous marijuana-derivative was available in a variety of shapes: dark-green bricks, leathery strips, or tightly-wound coils that looked like "play-dough." A two-foot ribbon of hash was priced at 20 rupees, or about 80 cents. We declined.

As we wandered through the narrow streets of Landi Kotal, dozens of children gathered around to stare at us. As usual, they were barefoot, dirty, and adorable. In contrast to children in Peshawar, the youngsters of Landi Kotal didn't ask for money or candy. Instead, they stared at us with intense inquisitiveness -- a look I used to think was hostile but now realize is one of curiosity. It doesn't help to stare back. Instead, I smiled and offered a few phrases in greeting, eliciting nervous giggles from some and even more intense stares from others. A few of them fled in fear. I imagined their thoughts: "The foreign devil-lady speaks!" I hope they didn't lose sleep thinking that I had put some sort of curse upon them.

A Case of Mistaken Identity

Safely back in the jeeps, we drove ahead to the Michni outpost, from where we could gaze over the border into Afghanistan. The Michni fort is constructed of stone with doors built high above the ground. These second-story entrances were equipped with retractable ladders so that British soldiers could



Doors set high off the ground at the Michni fort enabled British soldiers to imprison themselves each night in defense of attacks by local tribes.

we were an official foreign delegation schedule to visit from Islamabad that day. We thought it best not to correct his error insofar as he seemed to be enjoying the presentation. Not only that, we had consumed all of the sodas on the premises. We passed the true official delegation as we left the Michni outpost, and I had to laugh when I imagined the Major's startled look upon their arrival.

A Tale of Tribal Justice

During his lecture, Major Bangesh described the four Pushtun tribes of the region, warning us that the most dangerous are the Shinwaris. "If you see a snake at your foot and a Shinwari at 100 paces," he quoted from the Pushtun proverb. "Shoot the Shinwari first."

imprison themselves each night in defense against an ambush. I shuddered to think how frightened and far from home those soldiers must have felt alone among those rocky slopes and warring tribes.

My solitary reflections were interrupted by a warm greeting from Major Talim Bangesh, of the Khyber Rifles, who acted thrilled to have visitors to his lonely station. "Welcome, welcome," he said as he ushered us to a set of folding chairs placed beneath a canopy. The major was impressive in full-dress uniform, displaying a chest full of medals and wearing the black beret of the Khyber Rifles. Using a stick to illustrate his points on a giant relief map, Bangesh proceeded to lecture us on the history of the region, as his assistant served tea and sodas.

Amid this generous display of hospitality, we soon discovered that Major Bangesh mistakenly assumed

I appreciated this story because my driver, Noor-ul-Amin, is a Shinwari and also a very nice guy. Of course, Amin's family in Landi Kotal has a typical (for these parts) middle-class family cache: two rocket-launchers, four kalashnikov automatic weapons, and three pistols. Amin assures me that he has used the rocket launcher only twice. Once, he said, he blew up a mountain. I'm not sure why he did that, but he keeps using the word "flat spot" when we talk about it. I think he is referring to the mountain.

Another time, Amin said, his family blew up a bridge separating his home from that of a neighbor with whom they were at war. The "war" started over the mugging and murder of Amin's uncle in 1979. Six years later, Amin's neighbor became suddenly rich. His mysterious wealth was evidence enough to suggest he was the "killer-man," said Amin. A feud ensued.

Two deaths and two serious woundings later, the family agreed in 1985 to call in a *jirga* -- a sort of tribal court -- to mediate an end to the war. The *jirga* announced a truce and sealed the peace by ordering both families to give two of their daughters to the other family in marriage, an exchange known as *wata-sata*.

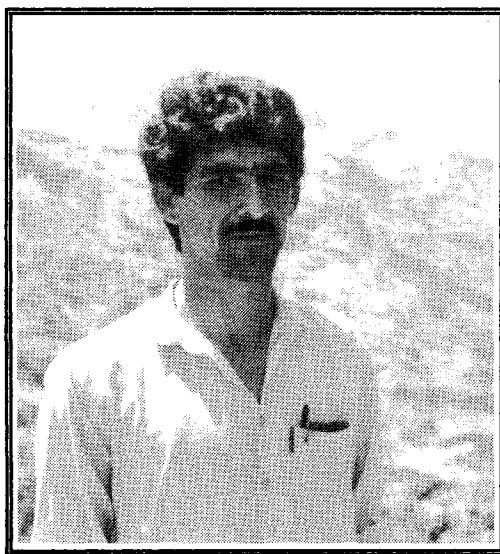
So far, the truce has held. But Amin's older brother now is refusing to give his beautiful 13-year-old daughter to his arch-enemy, sparking fears that the war will start anew. The situation makes me think of the Shinwari version of a Robert Frost poem: "Good rocket launchers make good neighbors."

Beyond the Frontier

Back at the Michni outpost, Major Bangesh pointed out the Durand Line, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan drawn in 1893 by Sir Mortimer Durand, the British foreign secretary of India. The line cut straight through the Pushtun lands, and has been pretty much ignored by the locals ever since.

Gazing through binoculars, I watched a group of nomads camping by a stream below the outpost. Their camels were heavily laden with cloth and dishes, perhaps to be sold in Landi Kotal.

Beyond the river I could see Torkhum, the last town before the



Noor-ul-Amin

Afghan border. Torkham is empty now. Trade shifted west into Afghanistan, or north along the border. Half a kilometer off the road to Torkham, camels are loaded with everything from food to air conditioners to sneak across the border free from customs taxes.

In another part of the riverbed below I saw enormous cement blocks, protection against a possible Soviet tank attack. A display of Soviet rockets at the Michni outpost was further testimony to the war that has ravaged Afghanistan for the last decade.

On the distant hillocks three military pickets were isolated against the blue sky, monuments to the soldiers of the Raj. The setting was desolate, violent, and strangely beautiful. Suddenly I felt as though I had reached the edge of the world.

As I turned toward home, I noticed that someone had posted on the fortress wall a stanza of a poem written by the Pakistani poet Hafeez Jalandhery:

"Neither the grass grows hither
nor the flowers bloom
But even the skies bow down
to kiss this highland plume."