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How the CIA Brought The Shah to Power

In rough outline the story is well known. How the CIA, in one of its first major clandestine operations, overthrew a prime minister of Iran and brought the young shah back to the Peacock Throne from which he was to rule with continued U.S. support for more than 25 years. The CIA operative who ran that 1953 operation, Kermitt Roosevelt, is also well known, at least in Washington; since leaving the CIA in 1958 he has been a Washington vice president of Gulf Oil and a Washington lobbyist for several foreign governments, including the Shah's. But the details of the 1953 Iranian operation have remained obscure. Roosevelt's version is told in his forthcoming book, "Counter-coup: The Struggle for Control of Iran," which McGraw-Hill will publish next fall and from which these excerpts are taken.

By Kermitt Roosevelt

AJAX was the cryptonym which had been assigned to the operation. AJAX was intended to be a cooperative venture. It allied the shah of Iran, Churchill, Eden and other British representatives with Eisenhower, Foster Dulles and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The alliance was to be formed for the purpose of replacing an Iranian prime minister, Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh. Dr. Mossadegh had already attempted

to expel his monarch, replacing him with himself, and he had formed an alliance of his own with the Soviet Union to achieve the result he wanted.

The original proposal for AJAX came from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) after its expulsion from Iran nine months earlier, when all efforts to get Mossadegh to reverse his nationalization of the AIOC failed. Their motivation was simply to recover their oil concession. We were not concerned with that, but with the obvious threat of Russian takeover.

Roosevelt, a grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, had visited Iran both as a writer and a CIA agent. He was first approached about AJAX by the British Foreign Office in November 1952. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, then CIA director, was eager to move, but Allen Dulles, who was to succeed Smith, feared that President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson were friendly to Mossadegh and would not go along. It was decided to wait until Eisenhower became president. In February 1953, a British mission to Washington met with Allen Dulles. Bedell Smith, now undersecretary of state, and the new secretary of state, John Foster Dulles.

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The British nominated Roosevelt as "field commander" for the operation. The Dulles brothers agreed, with Foster adding the condition that Roosevelt be kept out of contact with any Iranians he knew, "especially the shah."

Final approval for AJAX was given by Secretary of State Dulles on June 25, 1953. Roosevelt then flew to the Middle East, using the pseudonym of James P. Lochridge, and drove from Beirut via Baghdad, crossing the border into Iran on July 19. When he reached Tehran, he met with George Cuvier, the CIA station chief, and two other CIA agents, Bill Herman and Dick Manville, who were to play large roles in AJAX.

Bill Herman and I had already established contact with the AIOC principal representatives, Nossey and Cafron [two Iranians working for the oil company, whom the CIA agents nicknamed "Laughing Boy" and "The Mad Musician."] It was agreed that the two of us should handle all dealings with them.

I was introduced to them as Mr. James Lochridge, the name under which they were to know me for over a year. (Very soon they were calling me Jim.) There were many Persians unconnected with our operations who knew me personally, but I managed to avoid seeing them. The only three Persians who knew of my connection with the operation and my true identity were the shah, General Zahedi [father of Ardeshir Zahedi, who was to become the shah's ambassador to Washington] and Mustapha Vaysi.

With Nossey and Cafron I was dealing primarily in terms of the shah and the problem of communications with him. Now that the time had come when it was necessary that I see H.I.M. myself, I consulted them as to how I should make the approach. The answer was not too difficult: They, as well as Bill and I, had earlier discerned that, unknowingly, AIOC and CIA shared an agent — we called him "Rosenkrantz" — who had ready access to the shahanshah. So "Laughing Boy," who was closer to him, arranged that he advise H.I.M. ["his imperial majesty"] that an American authorized to speak for Eisenhower and Churchill desired a secret audience. He had, the agent was instructed to say, an important personal message from the two of them.

As "Mad Musician" translated what his associate would put to our intermediary, it did not sound too appropriate. "Little shot from the U.S. has lived up from the two BIG SHOTS in America and England. Word is, 'Pull up your socks and let's get going!'" Our Persian allies dissolved in laughter. Bill and I did not find it all that funny.

Their emissary reported back that the shah had received my message thoughtfully, but positively.

"A car from the Palace — but not an official-looking car — will pick you up at mid-

night tonight just outside our garden, said the musician Cafron, with only a faint giggle.

It was Saturday, the first of August. At a few minutes before midnight I walked through the long garden, escorted by Bill carrying a flashlight. We opened the gate, and I went out alone. A car was already there, waiting. It was a nondescript black sedan. The driver didn't say a word. I got into the back seat. There was a blanket on the seat. As we approached the palace gates, I huddled down on the floor and pulled the blanket over me. But there was no need for extra caution. The sentry on duty silently, matter-of-factly, motioned us through.

Halfway between the gates and the palace steps, we halted on the driveway. A slim figure walked down the steps and along the drive. As the driver left, he opened the door and got in beside me in the back seat. I pulled the blanket out of the way, and moved over to provide room. There was enough light for us to see each other.

After his first quick look, the shah held out his hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Roosevelt. I cannot say that I expected to see you, but this is a pleasure."

"Good evening, your majesty. It is a long time since we met each other, and I am glad you recognize me. It may make establishing my credentials a bit easier!"

The most important point I had to make was that I was there representing President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Churchill.

"President Eisenhower will confirm this himself by a phrase in a speech he is about to deliver in San Francisco — actually within the next 24 hours. Prime Minister Churchill has arranged to have a specific change made in the time announcement on the BBC broadcast tomorrow night. Instead of saying 'it is now midnight,' the announcer will say 'it is now' — pause — 'exactly midnight.'"

The shah pointed out that, having recognized me, he needed no such confirmation. However we both agreed that it was best to establish the record clearly, with commitment on all sides.

There was not the tension, the pressure that I had expected to feel at this first meeting. It was like a meeting of friends to talk over a common undertaking — but one on which they neither of them expected any difficulty in agreeing. So after the briefest review by each of us of the situation as he saw it, we agreed to meet the following night. Same time, same place.

On the next night the driver picked me up

"I take it that your principals" — the shah smiled faintly as he chose this word — "agree with my choice of Fazlollah Zahedi to replace Mossadegh as prime minister."

We further agreed that the general would choose his own cabinet. H.I.M. had profound distrust of certain officers, beginning with the [chief of staff,] Gen. Taqi Riahi. But the great bulk of the army — officers, noncoms

and enlisted men — were, in the shah's judgment, completely loyal.

One priority — just a precaution, it seemed to me at the time — was to agree on

what course the shah should follow in case of difficulty, betrayal or whatever, in Tehran.

The shah gave the matter some thought.

"Really," he concluded, "I think this is what I'll do. Once we've made the final arrangements, and I have signed the *firmans* [royal decrees], dismissing Mossadegh and appointing Zahedi, I'll fly up to the Caspian. If by any horrible chance, things go wrong, the empress and I will take our plane straight to Baghdad. From there we can look the situation over, and decide to what place we should return."

Without further discussion, this became the plan. Neither of us really thought it would be necessary, and neither of us mentioned it again.

One thing did happen that made me nervous. Evidently the police had been tipped off that something mysterious was going on at the villa where Bill and I were meeting with Nossey and Cafron. A servant reported that in midafternoon, when any reasonable Persian would be having a siesta, there had been a surprise raid. The gates were forced open. Cars swept in disgorging armed men who made a very thorough search of the house and grounds. The servant was able to convince the raiders that he knew nothing of any clandestine meetings. But when they withdrew, he was certain they left watchers behind to keep an eye on the neighborhood.

Naturally we abandoned our garden rendezvous immediately. Thereafter we met most cautiously. Bill dropped out of contact with Nossey and Cafron entirely. The two of them provided me with a Hillman Minx taxi and a card to place in its windshield which said in Persian, "ON CALL." At an agreed time I would leave the cab inconspicuously parked just off Gohack Street, not too far from the unoccupied British ambassador's residence. Then, in my usual nondescript costume, I would walk out in the country to the prescribed meeting place.

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This development I recounted to the shah. In the meantime we continued to explore four lines of attack that had been planned. But first, to help us keep our calm, I explained one of the security practices we followed.

"There is one routine precaution we are taking. Everyone involved is assigned what we call a 'cryptonym' and also, for general conversational use, usually a nickname. For example, I've told you Nossey/Cafron know me as James Lochridge, but that is, I guess you'd call it, an 'alias.' I have also a 'pseudonym,' Steven P. Mason. That is a complication you don't have to bother with. My 'cryptonym' is RNMAKER. Yours is KG-

SAVOY. YOUR HICKBINE, WHICH I HOPE WON'T OFFEND YOU, IS 'BOY SCOUT.'

"There's no need to bother you with other cryptonyms. But you might be amused by some of the nicknames. The PM [Mossadegh] is 'the old bugger.' Gen. Riahi is 'smart ass.'

I returned to the "four lines of attack" which we were to explore.

"The first would be an alliance with the mullahs. We've had a lot of discussion about them. The British think they might be helpful, willing to work with us. But our principal Iranian 'allies,' whose names I will not give you — their pseudonyms are Boscoe One and Two — have always been reluctant to rely on them. Truly, I have not yet decided. We will keep sounding them out. So far all we got from them are demands for huge sums of money. And I'm not going to rely on anyone who will cooperate only for pay. We want patriots, not mercenaries."

The shah nodded decisively.

"That covers the first line of attack. The second is your military support. We are agreed that except for Gen. Riahi and a few officers very close to him, the armed forces are devotedly loyal to you. I brought a chap with me to handle the contacts with a small, carefully chosen, group of officers." I described Peter Stoneman in some detail, without naming him.

"Now, I've already mentioned our Iranian allies, or agents, if you wish to be more technical that they care to be — Boscoe One and Two. They're extremely competent, professional 'organizers' who have already demonstrated their competence as long ago as the summer of 1951, when Averell Harriman was here. You may remember the demonstration when he was driving into Tehran from the airport." The shah nodded. I went no further, nor did I refer to our puzzlement over where and from whom the Boescos [two

brothers, a lawyer and a journalist] had received their training.

"Well, we count on them with confidence. They have a strong team under them." — no need to say we didn't know who made up that team — "they can distribute pamphlets, organize mobs, keep track of the opposition — you name it, they'll do it. I know them personally, and rely on them absolutely." It did not seem necessary to add that I never expected to see them again, that once the job was completed I hoped they would sink into their surroundings without a trace.

"Incidentally, they seem to require almost no funds from us. We have a gigantic safe next to my principal assistant's office. It is in a big closet and occupies the whole space. This safe is jam-packed with stacks of rial notes. Your highest denomination note is only 500 rials, and your current prime minister, has driven the exchange rate down so that it's worth just over \$5. We have the equivalent of about \$1 million in that safe." (During the operation we used less than



Kermit Roosevelt.

\$100,000 worth of rials.)

Our allies and our money settled, I moved on to the fourth and final line of attack — what the Zahedis, father and son, had to contribute. The general was still hiding in the mountains east of Tajrish, just above a property the Zahedis then owned and on which Ardeshir has now built a rather grand residence, with gardens and a fine swimming pool. At that time, however, there was just one small cabin-like building. One night Mustapha Vaysi and I climbed up the steep mountainside behind it for my first meeting with Gen. Zahedi. There in a gully, which concealed his bedroll and a small lean-to, the general was encamped, with just one other man to keep him company.

Our meeting was warm and friendly. However, there was difficulty in communication. The general spoke only Farsi and some German. I knew about as much German as he did, and practically no Farsi. So much of our talk was through Mustapha, who interpreted at a breakneck pace.

Finally affairs came to their head. On midnight on Aug. 8-9, the shah and I had what was scheduled to be our final discussion. We

had agreed on all the necessary objectives, procedures, tactics — the works. The *firmani*s, I promised, would be delivered so that he could sign them the next morning. After that he was scheduled to fly to the Caspian, along with Queen Soraya, to await results.

It seemed to me appropriate that I should deliver a parting message from President Eisenhower. Since he had neglected to send one, I put into words what he must surely be feeling.

"Your Majesty, I received earlier this evening a cable from Washington. President Eisenhower had asked that I convey to you this word: 'I wish Your Imperial Majesty Godspeed. If the Pahlavis and the Roosevelts working together cannot solve this little problem, then there is no hope anywhere. I have complete faith that you will get this done!'"

Somehow the messenger carrying the firmani s failed to reach the palace before the shah left for his retreat on the Caspian Sea. The plotters had to find Col. Nematollah Nassiri, commander of the shah's palace guard, and have Nassiri fly the documents north to be signed by the shah.

The signed decrees were brought back to Roosevelt at Bill Herman's house outside Tehran on Wednesday night, Aug. 12. The plotters now had to have the decrees delivered to Mossadegh and to Gen. Zahedi. This was set for Saturday night, Aug. 15.

Saturday seemed to take forever in arriving. As the time grew near when we were to proceed downtown, we went to the house of colleagues nearby in Tajrish for a final conference. There being nothing meaningful to confer about, we had another vodka-lime and played the record of "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" from "Guys and Dolls," which immediately became our theme song for the occasion.

On the way into the city, we drove right by Gen. Riahi's house, without seeing any indication that things had gone wrong. When we reached Bill's headquarters, it was still light, although curfew was about to begin. There were no visible troop movements, ominous or otherwise. We settled down in his office, prepared for a long vigil, which — hopefully — would be ended by a phone call from Col. Nassiri reporting successful delivery of the *firmani*s to Mossadegh and to Zahedi.

As time passed by, we grew increasingly nervous. Early on we were alarmed because there were no signs of activity. Later we became alarmed by such signs. We could hear the clank and clatter of moving tanks. These continued for some time, then stopped completely. A telephone call should now have come, assuring us that everything had proceeded according to plan. But no call came. It was by then well past midnight. In spite of the hour Bill began to tel-

phone friends whose houses or apartments looked out on the main thoroughfare, Takht-i-Jamshid. Most of them had nothing to report, but one told Bill that he could see tanks and other vehicles, filled with soldiers, lined up outside Mossadegh's house. Of course he could not distinguish whose tanks they were. At first we were optimistic, but an hour passed and we heard nothing from those who were supposed to communicate with us; we grew increasingly depressed.

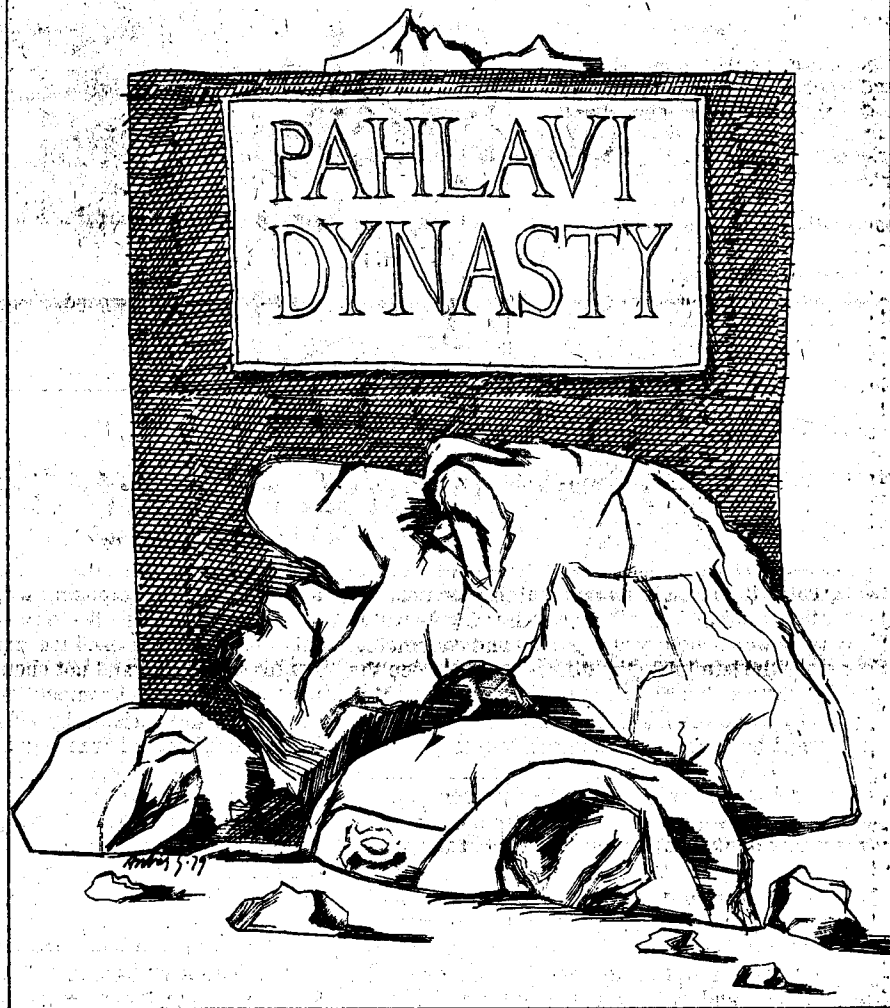
Dawn came, and we turned on our radio. At 6 there was no sound from it. Then at 7 o'clock the radio came to life. There was a blare of military music, and an announcement in Farsi in which we thought we could distinguish the word "Mossadegh."

Hastily summoning our nearby interpreter, we listened to the broadcast. Mossadegh came on the air himself and announced that there had been an attempt by the shah, encouraged by "foreign elements," to displace the prime minister. Mossadegh was therefore "obliged" to take all power to himself.

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By Andras Goldinger for The Washington Post

What had happened, though it took us some days to fill in all the details, was just what we had feared: betrayal. Some young officer — we never did identify him — went to Gen. Riahi's house on Saturday afternoon. I do not believe that he was part of our group; Peter Stoneman insisted vehemently that he could not have been. But at the very least one of Peter's recruits had talked unwisely, and to the wrong man. In any case, the informant was able to tell Riahi enough to alert him immediately. The general sped down to the city to assemble all the forces he could get together. They were simply told that an upstart colonel was going to seek to overthrow the prime minister. He should be arrested and brought to the general's office at once.

The true sequence of events was this: Our Col. Nassiri set off with his small force of tanks from Saadabad Palace at about 10:30 in the evening. It was 11 when he reached Riahi's house. No one, not even a servant, not even an orderly, was there. Mystified, concerned but undaunted, Nassiri proceeded along his planned course. That he had been unable to arrest Riahi before delivering the *firmans* dismissing Mossadegh did not in any way deter him. But when he arrived in front of the prime minister's home, he found all the troops that Riahi could gather lined up to receive him. If they had obeyed Riahi's orders literally, Nassiri would have got no further. But when he announced that he had a royal *firman* to deliver, under the shah's orders, to Premier Mossadegh, there was some indecision among those confronting him. Finally they decided to let him deposit his *firman* before arresting him. This compromise was all he needed.

Marching boldly up to Mossadegh's residence he pounded on the door. A servant answered. Nassiri demanded to see the prime minister. The servant answered that he was asleep, could not be disturbed.

"Then take this decree from His Imperial Majesty to Dr. Mossadegh immediately," Nassiri insisted. The servant, appearing to be somewhat flustered by the demand, took the *firman* and vanished, shutting the door firmly with Nassiri still on the outside. Finally the servant returned.

"The prime minister says to go away," he said in a faintly quivering voice.

"I want a receipt," Nassiri replied.

"I'm to give you one myself, if you have something for me to write it on."

Nassiri took a piece of paper from his pocket. On it he wrote: "Received from Col. Nassiri of His Imperial Majesty's royal bodyguard: one *firman*, ordering the dismissal from office of Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, until now prime minister to H.I.M. Signed on behalf of Dr. Mossadegh, . . ."

The servant signed.

Events now unfolded rapidly. Nassiri, . . .

who was to become . . . the shah's secret police, was arrested by Gen. Riahi before he could reach Zahedi with the shah's second *firman*. After hearing Mossadegh's radio speech, Roosevelt drove to the apartment where Zahedi was staying and took the premier-designate, under a blanket in the back seat of his car, to the house of another CIA man, Fred Zimmerman, where Mossadegh and Riahi could not reach him. Iranian Communists, "with strong Russian encouragement," took over the streets of Tehran with pro-Mossadegh demonstrations. The plotters instructed their allies, the Boscoes, to start pro-shah demonstrations on Wednesday, Aug. 19; they had copies made of the shah's decrees for distribution by the Boscoes and for army commanders who they hoped would send troops to Tehran from other cities to support the shah. An Iranian associate named Mohsen Tahuyi was to arrange for news of the shah's dismissal of Mossadegh to be broadcast over Tehran radio.

As the Tehran radio droned dully on quoting the same old grain prices, our radio operator came up from the bowels of the building we had moved him to. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he handed me a message. It was from the undersecretary of state, Walter Bedell Smith "Beedle," did not want the Americans' hand exposed, particularly in failure. He assumed that no word from me was bad word. "Beedle's" message said in effect, "Give up and get out." Mine responded: "Yours of 18 August received. Happy to report R. N. Ziegler [the pseudonym for Zahedi] safely installed and KGSAYOV [the cryptonym for the shah] will be returning to Tehran in triumph . . ."

shortly. Love and kisses from all the team."

By now the crowd of demonstrators, including many uniformed soldiers and police, was streaming past our chancery. Its vanguard had already reached Mossadegh's house, some half a dozen blocks beyond us. The crackle of rifles, and the boom-thud of an occasional mortar, could clearly be heard. There was nothing I could contribute and I was getting ravenously hungry. So I walked into the embassy compound to the counsellor's house. He and his wife were old friends of mine. Discreetly, they asked no questions about what was going on, but gave me the drink and the lunch I so obviously needed. Their radio, I noticed, was still stuck on those damned grain prices. Surely Mohsen would be changing that soon.

In fact someone else beat him to the radio station, someone — I never discovered who it was — who had exactly the same idea and friends to help him carry it out. The first signs were odd. The tempo of the price quotations slowed, as if the announcer were falling asleep. Gradually, agonizingly, the sound grated to a halt. For what seemed an

eternity, there was dead silence. MY HUSBAND and I stared at each other in puzzlement. Then a voice — not that of Mohsen — came on the air. Once again we heard the shout "Zindabad shah! Long live the shah!" And, alternating Farsi and English, our unknown speaker came out with the well intended lies, or "pre-truths," which Mohsen had been planning to broadcast.

"The shah's instruction that Mossadegh be dismissed has been carried out. The new prime minister, Fazlollah Zahedi, is now in office. And His Imperial Majesty is on his way home!"

Getting to my feet, I believe I thanked the counselor and his wife most politely for an excellent lunch. What I *know* is that I was on my way to pick up Gen. Zahedi, to deliver him to whatever point from which he thought he could best assume command. As I hurried along a sudden thought struck me, and made me hurry even more. Why had the man who took over the radio station "translated" the essential words of his declaration into English? That was not a normal thing to do. I doubted even if Mohsen Tahuyi would have done it. But a Boscoe brother could well have told the broadcaster to include those few words just to make sure that I got the point — and got moving. I moved.

Arriving at Fred's compound I went directly to the cellar. There I found the legal — about to become actual — prime minister of Iran sitting in what looked to me like his winter underwear. His uniform was draped over a chair beside him. Once again we communicated in our poor German, but I had no difficulty in getting my message across. He rose immediately, and started pulling on the uniform over his heavy wool-

ens. Just as he was buttoning up his tunic we heard loud rumbling and clanking in the courtyard above us. Men were cheering, and there was much Persian chatter. The door to the cellar burst open.

There was barely time for me to conceal myself behind the basement furnace before a stream of shouting Iranians came tumbling down the steps. At the sight of Zahedi they roared and rushed forward, embracing him, lifting him on their shoulders and pounding up the staircase to the yard. Apparently there were two or three tanks — I couldn't tell how many — revving their motors in the yard. The crowd draped themselves all over them, holding Zahedi high on one, and went clattering through the gateway straight onto Takht-i-Jamshid. As they appeared on the avenue I heard a great shout from the crowd, which followed them tumultuously as they headed off in the direction of Mossadegh's residence.

At this point there was nothing I could think of to do to be helpful. So I forced my way through the crowd, which was notably cheerfully friendly, back to our headquarters. We were no longer occupying the radio shack, but had moved again into Bill's small office. There he, Dick and I poured ourselves small celebratory drinks (the supply of vodka in Bill's office seemed inexhaustible) to toast impending victory. Actually, to all intents and purposes, it was no longer impending, but won. Our colonel from the west would not reach Tehran until evening, but the rumor of his movement had given us all we needed. The actual arrival of his troops simply added more enthusiasm to a town already drunk with victory.