

*ON THE ROAD TO
KHIVA.*

BY

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LATE KHIVAN SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT OF THE "DAILY TELEGRAPH."

WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS AND MILITARY MAP.



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TO
MY FATHER,
THIS WORK IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

A FEW WORDS, PERSONAL AND PREFATORY.

THE nature of the present work compels me to preface it with a few words about myself; but they shall be as few as possible. I make no apology for the delay which absence from home and severe illness have entailed upon me, knowing as I do that no man who has been condemned unheard can ever appeal in vain to the justice and good sense of an English public. So far as I can learn, the charges against me are as follow : 1. Having concocted letters at a distance from the scene of action ; 2. Having wilfully sent false news of the fall of Khiva ; 3. Having written magazine articles subsequent to my engagement with the *Daily Telegraph*, in direct violation of my own written contract ; 4. Having filled my letters with extracts from my former articles.

To the first of these charges I reply, that the official passes given me to Orenburg, Fort No. 1, and Tashkent, General Kolpakovski's telegram to me at the latter place, with permission to visit Samarcand, and the letters written me *en route* by various Russian officers, are open to inspection. With regard to my "false

viii *A few words, personal and prefatory.*

telegram," I merely shared the general error produced by a garbled version of an actual event; and I sent the despatch only after receiving the same news from four officers in succession, whom I had every reason to believe well-informed. The articles alleged to have been written after my engagement with the *Daily Telegraph* were all written before it, that entitled, "From Sevastopol to Balaklava" being as old as February 5, 1873; but I readily admit sending home *en route* two unused papers which I had overlooked in the hurry of departure.

As to my self-repetition, I have no desire to excuse what is wholly inexcusable, but I should wish to say a few words on the subject nevertheless. What I had to do during my whole residence in the East was to sustain a very difficult assumed character, or rather series of characters, to obtain every kind of assistance and information from perfect strangers, without betraying my real object, to despatch letters and telegrams under the hourly risk of detection, and to force my way, with an English passport, into the heart of a region where the very presence of an Englishman is strictly prohibited. All this, superadded to growing ill-health, made the task of constant writing (when as yet there was little to write about) so intolerable, that I was glad to lessen the strain by using familiar words, even while conscious that I must have used them before. I had not, how-

ever, a single magazine with me; and I *did* see my "old savage" of the Crimea exactly reproduced, not merely on the Volga, but at least a dozen times in Turkestan.

With regard to the present work, it makes no pretence of being a history of the Khiva Expedition. I did my best to let at least one Englishman share the credit justly due to the brave man who represented America on that occasion; but, as events have fallen out, the honour is his, and his alone. But for the publication of my name, and my consequent seven weeks' imprisonment at Fort No. 1, I should have reached Khiva as I reached Samarcand; but although he has succeeded where I failed, I can none the less heartily wish him God-speed.

As for myself, I have as yet seen only one-half (the most important half, it is true) of Central Asia; and as soon as I have recovered the effects of my last attempt (for it is no light thing to cross one thousand three hundred miles of desert under heavy rain, with a fever and three unhealed hurts) I shall try again. In the meantime, all that I wish to do is to tell my own story fairly, and to leave among my own countrymen, from whom I have been parted so many years, some better reputation than that of a liar and impostor.

DAVID KER.

January, 1874.

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TATAR WOMAN.

ON THE ROAD TO KHIVA.



CHAPTER I.

FROM THE CRIMEA TO THE CAUCASUS.

OUR age is an age of progress, and travelling has advanced in common with everything else. Our sober grandfathers, who spent three or four years over the Grand Tour, and thought even a trip to Paris an achievement worth talking about, would be thunder-struck at the way in which their descendants dart from Mecca to Mexico, from Sydney to Spitzbergen, from Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strand, and back again. The time is at hand when the dead walls of London shall flame with advertisements of "Twenty-Five Minutes in the Brazils," by the Author of "Through Africa in Half-an-Hour." In the stupid old days, a man spent half his life in one country, and then confessed frankly that he knew little or nothing about it. We, more enlightened, traverse a whole empire in three months at the heels of an interpreter and a valet-de-place, and then write a full account of its politics, literature, history, jurisprudence, and general condition, including many interesting facts hitherto unknown to the natives themselves. *Nil mortalibus*

A

arduum est. British climbers have carved their names on the summit of Ararat, and British beefsteaks have ousted human flesh from the restaurants of Fiji; and who can tell whether the next generation may not see M. de Lesseps projecting a railway to the sun with a branch line to Mercury, or Mr Stanley gracefully doffing his hat on the summit of a lunar volcano, with a polite, "The Man in the Moon, I presume?"

Somewhat after this fashion do I moralise as the Crimean hills melt into the western sky, and the hitherto unknown Caucasus rises before me in all its splendour. For the first time since I set my face toward Khiva three weeks ago,* I am about to break new ground. On the route from London to St Petersburg, and from St Petersburg to the Black Sea, I am already, to my cost, as great an authority as the Koran of Albemarle Street. I have seen, often enough to be heartily sick of them, the tall, scraggy, coffee-pot churches, and "statues long after the antique," of hot, dusty, cosmopolitan Odessa. I have surveyed the little cluster of white houses which the Czar Nicholas cursed with his last breath as "shameful Eupatoria," and have seen the dark ridge up which Codrington's stormers went bravely into the jaws of death, looming gauntly against the lustrous sky. I have sat on the smooth green slope whence the little obelisk of stone that guards the dust of those who fell before the Redan, looks down upon ruined Sebastopol. I have seen the

* March 8th, 1873.

vineyards of Yalta crimsoning in the early sunrise, and the ruins of bombarded Kertch lying around the base of the great ridge whence the Temple of Mithridates looks down in scorn upon the showy semi-civilisation of the Coming Race.* But the Caucasus is still untrodden ground, and well worthy of being reserved to the last. There is an air of enchantment about the whole panorama—something which is neither Europe nor Asia, neither civilization nor barbarism, but a mingling of all together—such a mixture as I used to see on the towns of the Suez Canal, where Albert biscuits were sold side by side with the baked meats of Pharaoh, and half-naked dervishes mumbled their prayers under the shadow of the telegraph.

The very scenery is a blending of all countries and all latitudes—Swiss mountains looking down upon French vineyards—dainty little Italian towns nestling in the skirts of dark Russian moorlands—and Persian gardens springing up under the shadow of Swedish forests. Nor is the population a whit less cosmopolitan than the scenery. The sallow beetle-browed Russian, the gaunt Cossack, the bullet-headed Tartar, the keen, dark-eyed, melancholy Jew; the burly Turk, and the high-cheeked Persian; the handsome, knavish Greek, with the intense vitality of his race betraying itself in every line of his supple frame; the brawny English sailor, looking down with a grand, indulgent contempt upon those unhappy

* The fortifications of Kertch are only effective against an attack by sea. A force landed in the rear might reduce them at once by cutting off the supply of water.

beings whom an inscrutable Providence has condemned to be foreigners; the aquiline Georgian, and the smooth, voluptuous Imeritine; and, conspicuous above all, the sleek, tiger-like beauty of the Circassian, flaunting in all his barbaric bravery.

But, picturesque as is the panorama of the coast, that of the steamer itself fully equals it. I used to think a "pilgrim-steamer" on its way to the ports of Central Arabia, or a Brazilian coasting-packet at the end of the cool season, the beau-ideal of a picture; but the steamers of the Black Sea may safely bear comparison with either. The fore-deck alone is a study worthy of Hogarth, in its morning aspect, when the miscellaneous hash of heads and feet begins to animate itself, like a coil of snakes at the approach of spring—when high-cheeked Georgians and pudding-faced Tartars wriggle out of the heap of "yellow-haired unbelievers"—when red-kerchiefed mothers look anxiously about for the little waddling bundles of clothes that are already thrusting their round faces and beady black eyes into every place where they ought *not* to go—and when brawny peasants, taking their right-hand neighbour's elbow out of their eye, and their heel out of their left-hand neighbour's stomach, make three or four rapid "prostrations" suggestive of a drinking duck, and then fall upon their black bread and salted cucumber with a gusto which sets at nought all surrounding discomforts.

Nor is the after-deck deficient in "prominent figures." An officer fresh from Central Asia, faultlessly courteous,

but with that nameless *something* in his tone and bearing which stamps the man who has ruled men ; an enormous Russian merchant, armed to the teeth in triple fur, through which his red visage glows like a fire in a forest ; a short, square, keen-looking telegraph inspector, whose dark face bears the legible visé of all weathers, from the ice-winds of the higher Caucasus to the broiling sun of Teheran ; an unfortunate lady who " has so many children that she doesn't know what to do ; " a plump, placid German Fräulein, with the China blue eyes and treacle-coloured hair which mark Dorothea as infallibly as the rakish cap, thick, turnip-hued moustache, and huge blunderbuss pipe, characterise Hermann ; the inevitable English tourist in the inevitable plaid suit, whose efforts to arrange the strap of his telescope give him the look of an over-fed Laocoon struggling with a peculiarly thin snake ; and two or three cadets just " broken out into buttons," discussing, with the boldness and fluency of utter ignorance, all topics from the Khiva Expedition to the last new opera.

So long as we are steaming through the smooth roadstead, all goes well enough ; but, once out in the open, the terrible " Minister of the Interior " begins to exact his tribute ; and the behaviour of the different races under the ordeal is a curious study. The Russian merchant makes preparation for being comfortably ill, with a quiet dignity reminding me of the last scene of Cato ; and turns up, after every paroxysm, a vast harvest-moon visage of unruffled placidity. The Frenchman paces the deck for five minutes or so with the jaunty

step of one heading a forlorn-hope—and then suddenly disappears below. The Englishman, thrusting his hands deeper into his pockets, tramps up and down in the teeth of the wind, with that look of stern resolution worn by John Bull when dancing a quadrille, or discharging any other painful duty. The Turk pulls his turban over his broad, patient, weather-beaten face, and cowers closer into his warm corner beside the funnel; the Tartar coils himself up, and goes comfortably to sleep, with his feet in a basket of oranges and his head in a pool of dirty water; the jaunty cadets hang limply over the bulwark, too miserable to care about keeping up appearances any longer; while the little Fräulein assumes a pose of charming helplessness, and swallows dried prunes by the dozen.

But just at present I have no leisure to note the surrounding havoc, for the Russian officer (with whom, as my cabin-fellow, I have already scraped acquaintance) is now beginning to open out upon Central Asia in a way well worth hearing.

“Turkestan is to us what Algeria has been to France—a kind of training-school for more serious work. A good many of our young officers will learn their first lessons from this expedition, and be all the better for it; but, taken altogether, Asiatic warfare is hardly a good school for European soldiers.”

“Why not? no European war could well give them a rougher seasoning.”

“Yes, it teaches them to bear hardship, there’s no denying that; but, on the other hand, it accustoms them

to see the enemy give way easily, which is always bad practice. If you were to take a *corps d' armée* which had fought only with Sarts, or Khivans, or Bokhariotes, and suddenly put it face to face with a German or an English army, it would be almost as severe a trial as the first time under fire. However, this Khiva business will be a light affair; and we have made very complete preparations."

"In what way, may I ask?"

"Well, in the first place, we've got camels enough to carry not only the stores, but the infantry as well, at two to each beast. Then we have medical stores at Kazalinsk (Fort No. 1), more than enough for the whole expedition; and Dr Grimm (whom I dare say you've heard of) to take charge of the field hospital. As for the food and water, they've been measured as carefully as a dose of medicine; and along the dry river-beds, our pumps on the Norton system are sure to find more water, if need be. We've requisitioned a lot of Kirghiz, too, who are always useful on the steppes; and the march of the columns has been timed so as to get over the worst part before the change of the season."

"And what route do they take then?"

"This map will show you that. I've just been pencilling all the lines of march on it. The first column (General Verevkin's) strikes almost due south from Orenburg to the Emba Post, and thence down along the western shore of the Aral Sea,—just Perovski's march, in fact, in 1839-40. The second column (Col. Goloff's) starts from Fort No. 1, near the mouth of the

Syr-Daria, keeping southward to the Boukan hills, where it is to join column 3* (Kaufmann's), which comes eastward from Djizak—over yonder, between Tashkent and Samarcand. The fourth column (Col. Lomakin's) marches due east from Kinderli Bay (down here, on the eastern shore of the Caspian, just south of Mangishlak), meeting the Orenburg column near Cape Ourga, on the Aral Sea. The fifth column (Col. Markozoff's), moves from Tchikishliar (just north of the Attreck yonder, at the south-eastern corner of the Caspian), to strike the ancient bed of the Oxus, and march along it right into the Khanate."

"But surely the distances are very unequal?"

"Very unequal indeed. By the caravan route Khiva is 377 miles from Fort No. 1, 485 from Kinderli Bay, 535 from Djizak, 551 from Tchikishliar, 879 from Orenburg; but as our troops will most likely make several détours, you may add a little more in every case. One thing's certain, at least—if we can get across the desert without much loss, we shall make very short work of the actual fighting. The Khan himself is almost certain to run for it as soon as we get within range of him; and, besides, we've got plenty of infantry this time."

"Is *it* so much wanted, then, in such a campaign? I should hardly have thought it."

"It *is*, though. Our cavalry in the East is not worth much, as a rule; the Orenburg Cossacks, for example, are just clodhoppers on horseback; but the 'black caps' can't stand against our grenadiers—and no wonder.

* The actual junction took place much farther south.

I'll just tell you a thing I saw myself, when we attacked Djura-Bek at Kĭtab.* You know, by some mistake or other, the forlorn-hope went in before the supports were ready, and got under a fire that just burned them up like flies—a regular butchery, in fact, as bad as the assault of Kars under Mouravieff. Three times we went at it, and three times we were beaten back ; I got hit through the thigh, and Abrâmoff † in the head, and several other officers were killed outright ; and when the recall was sounded there was barely a third of the storming party left. The minute we turned to retreat, the rascals came out upon us in a swarm. Well, just beside the ditch lay one of our men badly hurt, and another (with a ball in his own hip, too) trying to carry him off, when six of the Shekhri-Sebzians fell upon them at once. What does the fellow do, but lay down his wounded comrade as tenderly as a mother, and then club his piece and fight all six of them single-handed ; and when the supports came up, they found him still standing over his friend, with four sabre-cuts beside his first wound—one Shekhri-Sebzian with his skull stove in like an egg-shell, and the five others all at bay. But when we praised him for it afterwards, he only stared, and said, 'What was I to do? I couldn't leave my comrade!'"

At this moment the dinner-bell rings, and we go down together, to face each other across an endless

* The capital of the little principality of Shekhri-Sebz, now yielded to Bokhara.

† The present Governor of Samarcand.

perspective of untenanted seats, the proprietors of which are otherwise engaged.

Our evening promenade is almost as solitary as our meal, for a furious squall of wind and rain clears the deck of all but our friend the Englishman, who, in full panoply of Macintosh, defies the storm with true John Bull combativeness, and (as Ossian has it) "hums a surly song as he walks, like the noise of a falling stream." But, as usual on the Black Sea, the next morning is one of its "special days"—a bright sun, a smooth sea, and a soft wind, putting life into the most nerveless of the martyrs below stairs, and bringing them on deck in a body.

Is there any enjoyment, after all, like being at sea on a fine day—the clear blue sky overhead, the tiny wavelets dancing in the sunlight, the fresh breeze quickening your pulse and whetting your appetite, perfect quiet all around, no post to bring you unpleasant letters or disappoint you by bringing none, and all the struggles, and worries, and anxieties of shore-life left behind like a dream. Would one be any better off, on a morning like this, in a stuffy compartment, jammed into a mass of grumbling passengers—changing one's posture incessantly, and every time for the worse, till the very sense of having a body at all becomes an intolerable grievance—awakened just as one has fallen asleep by a seemingly wanton demand for tickets on the part of an unfeeling guard—listening in sullen despair to the deep, rhythmical, unbroken snoring of your companions, with the certainty that,

next morning, they will all abuse you for "keeping them awake all night with that horrid row,"—and getting out about daybreak with an unwashed, un-combed, un-everything feeling of discomfort and misanthropy, beside which Timon of Athens would have been an absolute Peabody. Not without reason, indeed, did the brave old sailor slightly pronounce *terra firma* to be "a good enough place *for a day or two.*"

And so the great panorama rolls on. Novorossisk and Tuapsé, dotted like chessmen over the huge purple ridges that rise, wave above wave, into the very sky; dainty Soukhoun, a little nook of Italian scenery nestling in the lap of the everlasting hills, which stand over it like some weather-beaten veteran with his children at his feet; till at length, just before sunset on the sixth day of our voyage from Odessa, the long, low bank of the Rion rises above the sea like a brooding mist, and the white peaks of the Anatolian mountains glimmer along the southern sky.

The relative position of Poti and Batoum is another instance of that untoward destiny which has made Russia, turn which way she will, a spectator of advantages which she cannot share. On one side an irreclaimable morass and a miserable anchorage; on the other, a fine harbour, which, walled off as it is from the rest of Lazistan by a range of mountains, *ought* to belong to Russia. Unfortunately it happens to belong to Turkey; and the civiliziers of mankind, after eight costly and laborious years of vain effort to convert the gutter on which Poti stands into a tolerable harbour,

naturally begin to cast longing eyes upon Batoum. For more than a year the Russian journals have been repeating, first indirectly, and then point-blank, that the Turkish port must be had *colte qui colte*—a suggestion not likely to fall upon unfruitful ground among the men who, while lording it over half Asia and two-thirds of Europe, are kept under arrest in their own dominions by the shackles of the Sound and the Bosphorus.

I will not describe my exploration of the town, which even Mr Murray's Koran in red binding could hardly transform into a place "where the passing tourist may spend a pleasant hour." A blue book would probably sum it up as follows: "Local products, fever and cholera; population, frogs; revenue, varying according to the success of the overcharges; manners, none; customs, very hard to pass with luggage; chief article of use, quinine; internal communication, impossible; government, every man for himself, and the devil for all." And when, at four o'clock next morning, I tramp out under the pouring rain, along a road seemingly modelled after the Slough of Despond—fight my way to the ticket office through a spongy mass of wet Georgians and Imeritines, and get into the train splashed and dripping from head to foot, I am fully consoled for all discomforts by getting fairly away from Poti.

It must be owned, however, that the Poti-Tiflis railway, unlike things in general, shows its worst points at the outset. As far as Tcheladid, the whole country is a drowned jungle, enlivened by a "chorus of frogs"

that would have gladdened the heart of Aristophanes ; but as we advance, the ground becomes higher and firmer—long, low ranges of hills begin to lift themselves against the sky—the bright sunshine of a spring morning replaces the ghostly mist that broods over the fatal morasses of the Rion—and the genuine Caucasus rises before us in all its splendour.

Sitting at home in England, and reading of Caucasian post-roads and Caucasian railways, it is difficult to remind oneself that this quiet region, which a passing tourist may traverse as safely and commodiously as Saxony or the Tyrol, was so recently the scene of one of the bloodiest and most protracted struggles recorded in history ; but here, shut in by black broken crags of immeasurable height, with the river lashing itself into foam far below, and just space enough between the precipice above and the precipice beneath for our train to slide past, one begins to realise what the conquest of such a region must have been. The march of an army through such defiles (which are as nothing to the grisly gorges of Northern Daghestan) encumbered with wounded and pursued by an implacable enemy, with a fire-flash from behind every bush, and the whole mountain-side alive with the crack of the fatal rifles—would be grim work. To those who question the fighting power of the Russian soldier, there is one sufficient reply : “ He conquered the Caucasus.”

And so we fare on our way, amid strange alternations of scenery—now gliding under the shadow of mighty

cliffs that seem already toppling to overwhelm us, and now rushing through a quiet little green valley, dotted with tiny log-huts—at one moment looking down into a yawning chasm, and the next, catching a glimpse of some ruined castle perched above the clouds. At length we come to a sudden halt in front of a long, low, rudely-built shed, planted on the only visible piece of level ground; and here passengers and baggage are disembarked *en masse*, as if the train had been stopped by brigands. What does this mean?

It means that the line has not yet shaken itself clear of its quarterly landslip; and that this long file of cars and waggons, drawn up at the foot of the great mountain-wall, are to carry us across the twelve miles of magnificent scenery which lie between us and the second train that awaits us at Suram. Accordingly, I and three other victims squeeze ourselves into the foremost car—a rickety affair, all hoops and tarpaulin, like the skeleton of a starved cab—and go zig-zagging up the great ascent over a road which, to do it justice, can hardly be matched out of Britain. For here, as in the Highlands of Scotland and the Western States of America, men have learned that spade and pickaxe are surer engines of warfare than bayonet and cannon; and that the most warlike race on earth cannot long defend a country once fairly laid open by lines of communication.

Upward, ever upward—past green plateaus, and plunging torrents, and frowning rocks, and deserted hamlets—past creaking waggons drawn by broad-horned oxen, and flocks of pastured goats, which greet us with

a shrill cry—while, all around, the great billows of wooded mountain roll up, ridge beyond ridge, like all the waves of the Deluge frozen into forests. Far below, the thin grey streak of the railroad outlines itself amid the sombre green of the hills; and here and there a swarm of human ants may be seen creeping among the débris of the great earth-slide, like the gnomes of Swartheim “toiling in the secret places of the earth.” As we mount higher, the chill mountain blasts make themselves felt in earnest; and when at length, on the crest of the highest ridge, we reach the toll-bar which divides the Government of Kutais from that of Tiflis, there is not one of us who does not gladly avail himself of the wrappings which he laughed to scorn in the sunny valley below. But, once past the summit, we rattle down in gallant style into the quaint little village of Suram, and hasten to seat ourselves over the steaming soup which awaits us in the impromptu refreshment room.

One by one, the other cars trickle in; but night has already begun to fall before the train is ready to start. And after that, all is one dim phantasmagoria of dark mountains, and glimmering rivers, and black wastes of moorland, and stations flashing out for a moment in sudden lamplight—till at length, just about midnight, I find myself jolting through the flaring streets of a great town, and fall asleep an hour later with the comfortable consciousness that I am actually in Tiflis at last.

CHAPTER II.

PROMETHEUS AT HOME.

THERE are places which every one can imagine, but no one describe; and Tiflis is one of them. The monotonous sameness of eastern cities, or the monotonous variety of western ones, is easily sketched; but the mixture of the two at their point of intersection defies all powers of language. How are you to believe in modern times among men who gravely show you the rock on which Prometheus was bound, and the stone to which Jason moored the Argo,* or exhibit genealogies tracing their lineal descent from Solomon? How are you to revive the classic age among French bonnets, and *cotelettes à la financière*, and copies of Punch or *L'Illustration*? Five minutes' walk carries you from the nineteenth century to the fourteenth—from the Russian quarter, with its lamp-lit streets and brand-new brick houses (whose staring red and white surface gives them the look of having just been flayed alive) to the "Persian town," where you step out of one man's door into another man's chimney, and elbow your way, along narrow lanes, reeking with filth, through crowds of veiled women and bare-legged water-carriers. In this

* This actually happened to me at Kutais.

place, as in others which I am destined to visit before my journey is over, the Past has entrenched itself against the Present, and has held its ground. The traditions of Russian clubs and of Athenian lecture-rooms meet upon the same ground, and the *Arabian Nights* clasp hands with the *Invalide Russe* and the *Allgemeine Zeitung*.

In the stillness of a quiet April evening, I climb the ridge from which the ancient Georgian fortress looks silently down upon a land whence the sceptre of Georgian royalty has long since departed. At my feet the valley of the Kur lies like a map, throwing out upon its green background, now all ablaze with the western sunlight, the serried roofs, and straight white streets, and glittering church towers, and bridges black with eddying figures, of busy, modern Tiflis. And here the contrast of Past and Present becomes overwhelming. To my right a tall factory chimney flings its smoke over the bank along which the hosts of "David the Restorer" marched in triumph; to my left a telegraph line runs across the green table land once thronged by the chosen horsemen of Georgia. Just behind me, the fortress-rock falls away in a sheer precipice down to a black, narrow, tomb-like ravine, through which pours one of the countless streams that feed the Kur till summer comes to dry them; while farther along, on a less precipitous part, hangs a dainty little public garden, with a pavilion in which English porter and *limonade gazeuse* may be bought *ad libitum*. And over all this strange medley of ancient and modern, tower, far away on the northern

horizon, the eternal snows of the Caucasus, watching the advance of Russia as they watched the march of Xenophon and Alexander.

“It *is* a queer place, sure enough,” assents my host, a jolly Russian captain, when I give him my first impressions; “but what would you have? the country’s had no time to settle since Schamyl was finished off, and everything’s still topsy-turvy. It’s not so many months since we had a railway at all, and now that we have one it’s always breaking down. You see, we’re quite out of the world here; it takes ten days for a letter to get to Moscow, and in winter the post’s often stopped altogether. We are standing among vast treasures, and can’t make any use of them. Some of these Georgian princes, for example (I’ll introduce you to a few of them to-morrow, and you can judge for yourself), own mines up in the hills worth millions of roubles, which yield literally nothing from the mere want of capital to work them. It would be a fine chance for the foreign capitalists, if they knew of it; but nobody in the West knows anything of what goes on here. In fact, the Caucasus is very much like Turkestan—a good bill payable at a long date.”

But, all this time, what news of the Khiva Expedition? That the Mangishlak and Tchikishliar columns have already started—that I am too late to reach Khiva in *that* way, I have learned before this; but beyond that, all is a blank. The knot of Tiflis Athenians who meet daily “to hear or tell some new thing” in the *salle à manger* of the Hotel de l’Europe know little or

nothing. The telegrams which every now and then filter through from St Petersburg are merely the thinnest gold-leaf of news skilfully beaten out, and occasionally served up in three or four different forms. Young officers hazard vague conjectures, or make languid bets as to this or that column arriving first ; and it is strange to remember *now* that the general favourite among the five detachments was Col. Markozoff's—the ill-fated column of Tchikishliar. Meanwhile the older *militaires* already begin to pooh-pooh the whole affair, and talk sneeringly of “men going a walk through the desert to pick up decorations.”

But in the utterances of the Russian official and semi-official journals on the subject there is no lack of warmth. The conciliatory tone adopted by the St Petersburg press on the publication of Lord Granville's note respecting the line of the Oxus, is now exchanged for one of absolute defiance, significant enough to those who know the secret springs by which Russian journalism is moved. One specimen of this improved style, from the semi-official *Voice (Golos)* which I translated and sent home on its first publication, is well worth re-quoting :—

“The question, what is to be done with Khiva when subdued, can have but one answer.—Tributary independence, in the case of an Asiatic Khanate, means simply an unbroken series of murders, robberies, rebellions, and interruptions of traffic. As for evacuating the Khanate at the close of the campaign, it would be a virtual suicide. *For those who have once advanced into Central Asia, there is no retreat.* Our backs once

turned, the whole country behind us would be ablaze in a moment. The forces of Russia—let us speak plainly and boldly—cannot, and shall not be withdrawn from Khiva, when once it is in their hands. Let the sneers of M. Vambéry and his English colleagues rain upon us if they will; what does it matter? Russia is neither Burmah nor Cashmere, that she should require to secure herself by duplicity. She is strong enough to lay down for herself a reasonable boundary, and to defend it, if need be, by the strong hand.”

As time wears on, sinister rumours begin to creep about respecting the progress of the Orenburg column. It is whispered that there has been an unusual fall of snow on the steppes this year, that the march is retarded, that the beasts of burden are beginning to perish rapidly, that Khivan emissaries are stirring up the Kirghiz along the line of march—and finally, that it has been found necessary to make a forced requisition of native pioneers, at the rate of 6 per 1000 of the entire population. Such reports, attaching themselves to an expedition which is traversing the same region where Perovski and his devoted band re-acted on a smaller scale, thirty-three years ago, all the horrors of 1812, are sufficiently alarming; and the oracles of the coffee-room shake their heads solemnly, observing that they have expected as much from the very first.

Allowing for the customary exaggerations, it is probable that these *on dits* represent the actual case fairly enough; for, from first to last, the Orenburg column has a very hard time of it. The details of the march, as I heard

them, months later, from one of General Verevkin's officers—the struggle through deep snow during its earlier stages—the sudden breaking-up of the frost, turning the whole country into a sea of liquid mire—the dragging of the camels and horses by main force from the mud in which they were embedded—the wet bivouacs and chill raw nights, alternating with the terrific heat of the day—are an additional testimony, if any such were needed, to the splendid endurance of the Russian soldier, and his power (as the French wit cruelly said) of “doing his duty because he knows no better.”

Before the middle of April, it is already sufficiently evident that my original programme is altogether impracticable. The columns once started, there is no hope of reaching Khiva either from Kinderli Bay or from Tchikishliar; while to remain here, completely out of the track of news (for the little intelligence hitherto received has uniformly arrived via Orenburg) is still less to be thought of. As for the only other direct route from the Caucasus—that by steamer to Astrabad, and thence north-eastward from the Attreck valley across the Turkoman steppes—all my informants, and most emphatically the Persian residents themselves, concur in pronouncing my chance of getting to Khiva by that route to be virtually *nil*—a verdict afterwards borne out by the fate of the Tchikishliar column. There is nothing for it, then, but to try the Orenburg route—the most strictly guarded of all, and likely to be doubly so in time of war. However, anything is better than wasting time in a place where I can be of no

possible use, and where even the apparently straightforward import of my telegrams cannot wholly clear them from suspicion of their hidden meaning.* It remains for me to make the acquaintance of the resident authorities, and to hasten my preparations for the journey.

"You'll have enough to do to carry *that* safe across Central Asia," says my host with a grin, as we stuff into the one unfilled pocket of my secret belt the last rouleau of the £500 worth of Russian gold which we have just purchased (not without hot bargaining) from a money-changer in the "Persian town." "The only thing to do now is to load your revolver as carefully as your belt, and empty the first yourself before you let any one else empty the second."

"Well, I suppose it *would* be enough to set up an ordinary Kirghiz for life; or at least, to set him up as a postmaster or a tradesman, and enable him to rob henceforth in a decent and legitimate way."

"I can tell you, though, that if you do much riding out there, you'll be glad enough to be robbed, if only to get rid of the weight. I once rode across the mountains from Petigorsk with a belt of money—nothing like so heavy as yours, it's true, but still bad enough; and before I got half way, I was mightily inclined to throw it away altogether. It was just like some one hitting you hard in the wind every moment."

* The telegram which (erroneously) announced the fall of Khiva, ran thus: "Barometer lost and compass damaged; forward others at once."

A pleasant prospect, certainly, for a journey of several thousand miles! but happily, the reality is less formidable than it has been painted. My first essay of the new belt, indeed, vividly recalls Mr Ainsworth's graphic description of the "Skevington's Irons" as applied to Guy Fawkes; but, although I afterwards wore it on the road for days together, I suffered little inconvenience after the first week.

I shall not burden my readers with the details of my final preparation, which was fatiguing enough at the time to need no rehearsal. It appears to be an immutable law of nature, that every man who equips himself with particular care for a long journey, should omit fully half-a-dozen things which he particularly wants, and take with him at least as many which he does *not*. Suffice it to say, that after several days of perpetual disquiet, I find myself well enough provided to get as far as Orenburg with perfect comfort. The only remaining essentials are a complete military map of Central Asia, and letters of recommendation to the Commander-in-Chief from the resident authorities; and a week suffices to obtain both.

Two days later, my real journey commences.

CHAPTER III.

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY.

“YOUR honour, the horses are ready!”

At my elbow, as I sit over my omelette and *café au lait* in the coffee-room of the Hotel de l'Europe, stands a tall, gaunt, hard-featured man in uniform (with a trumpet as long and narrow as himself), uttering the cabalistic words which are to ring in my ears at every turn for many a day to come. I glance through the open window, and espy, amid an admiring crowd of every type, from the aquiline Georgian to the bun-faced Tartar, three rough-looking post-horses, and a nondescript conveyance like the top of a bathing-machine knocked into the bottom of a butcher's cart—the idea of any one *sitting* in it having evidently never occurred to the constructor. Often and often, during the enforced inaction of the last six weeks, have I longed for such a sight; and yet, now that it is actually here, the contrast is so glaring between the cool, shady room within, and the bare, scorching, dusty square without, that, for one moment, I almost repent.

“You're going to travel *en grand seigneur* this time,” says Captain K——, biggest and jolliest of Tiflis officers, with a jovial grin on his broad florid face; “but you

mustn't expect this sort of thing all the way to Khiva. After you get fairly out on the steppes beyond the Ural, you'll have to carry all your own food and water along with you, and go forty versts or more from one well to another, and jolt along all day on the back of a camel, and sleep on the ground with a rug over you; and if you ever come back alive, it'll be something to talk about. Good-bye—pleasant journey!"

I inwardly wonder why on earth one's friends always comfort one, at the outset of a journey, with the rehearsal of all possible accidents which may occur *en route*. But there is no time to moralise; the driver shakes his reins, the conductor performs a solo on his horn that might arouse the seven sleepers of Ephesus—

"The stones do rattle underneath,
As if Tiflis were mad"—

and away we go.

Certainly Dr Johnson had some reason on his side when he placed the acmé of human enjoyment in being whirled along by a post-chaise. Flying at full speed over a splendid military road, with the fresh mountain breeze stirring my blood like the breath of life, the rich summer blue of the sky overhead, and the glorious panorama of the Central Caucasus outspread on every side as far as the eye can reach, I have nothing left to desire. And with every hour the surrounding scenery becomes more and more magnificent. Smooth sloping hillsides at first, crested with waving trees and dappled with flocks of goats; then bolder and bleaker ridges,

rising ever higher, and steeper, and darker, with here and there the skeleton of some ancient Georgian castle hanging, shadow-like, upon the very brink of a black scowling precipice. Then, towards nightfall, a great amphitheatre of green plain, bulwarked by purple mountains, through the passes of which the slanting sunlight streams in a sea of glory; and with the last gleam of daylight, we plunge among the hills once more.

Night comes on, and my conductor—who, despite his seasoned look, is neither physically nor morally a Hercules of twelve labours—begins to drop very intelligible hints about the propriety of halting till morning at the station which we have just reached. But the vision of a late arrival and a lost steamer goad me like Io's gadfly, and I give orders, in the tone of Cæsar's "Jacta est alea," for fresh horses, and an instant departure. However, Fate ordains otherwise. The words are hardly spoken, when the gleam of a passing lantern flashes upon a moustached face and military cap, while a familiar voice shouts through the darkness—

"Is that you, David Stepanovitch?*" I thought nobody else could be so mad as to think of going on with this sky. Just look at it, and see! You had better come in and have some tea with me, instead of killing yourself for nothing."

I look up, and cannot but own that he is right. The bright southern moonlight has vanished in a huge mass of inky cloud, while the deadly stillness of the whole

* The customary address in Russia, even from a servant, is by one's own name and that of one's father.

atmosphere is ominous of coming evil. While I am still hesitating, my impatient conductor strikes in on the side of his new ally.

“Ach, David Stepanovitch! can't you listen to reason? The gentleman's right; it would be a sin to think of it in such weather. Get in quick, before it begins.”

I allow myself to be hurried into the post-house, and not a whit too soon. We are barely inside, when suddenly everything becomes bright as at noonday; the quaint little cross-beamed room, the knives and glasses on the table, the white faces of the inmates, the picture of the saint in the farther corner, the dim waste of mountains outside, are all terribly distinct for one moment, and then blotted out again. Then comes a clap of thunder that seems to split the very sky, and instantly the whole fury of the storm breaks loose. The wind howls and shrieks, and shakes the strong timbers till they groan, and the heavy bullets of rain come rattling upon the roof, and the thunder roars and bangs overhead, and flash after flash lights up the pouring sky and the tossing forest, only to plunge them into deeper darkness. And then, on a sudden, the uproar ceases, and the clouds roll away, and the full moon breaks out once more, and we harness our horses, and go forward again, through miry roads and dripping forests, while the mountain torrents, swollen by the rain, roar hoarsely far away below.

And so the night wears on, and we mount ever higher and higher, gradually leaving all trace of vegetation

behind, and beginning to wind among heaped masses of black, broken rock, and boundless fields of unmelting snow, which look doubly spectral under the cold moonlight. Despite the piercing cold and the torment of my "secret belt," which (assume what position I will) seems to have a sharp corner for every emergency, I sleep for about an hour and a half as soundly as a country policeman on duty, and wake to find myself on the summit of the pass, very cold, very wet, very sore, very hungry, and very ill-tempered.

Everyone has doubtless had experience of that inevitable crisis in a rough night journey, when one's numerous discomforts culminate in a sense of intolerable wrong—when the mere fact of one's being there at all becomes a direct personal injury, and one is ready to fall foul of the first living being who may present himself, as the undoubted cause of it all. But when we have warmed ourselves in the snug little post-house, and snatched a hasty meal, even my much-enduring conductor appears to think that there is still something worth living for, and lights his pipe with an air of stolid contentment, while I scramble on a huge mass of fallen rock, and enjoy at my leisure one of the grandest views which I have ever seen.

My stand-point is the crown of the great central ridge which forms the back-bone of the Caucasus, looking down into Europe on one side and Asia on the other. Far down the incline, the endless curves of the road by which we have ascended melt into the sea of mist below. All around me, the mountain-side is rent by

yawning rifts, marking the fall of the huge misshapen boulders which lie scattered on every side, as upon the battle-ground of the Titans. At my very feet yawns a mighty gulf of several hundred feet, from the misty depths of which comes booming up the dull roar of an unseen waterfall ; while beyond it, vast masses of black broken rock thrust themselves up against the clear morning sky, blotting it as with a rising thundercloud. And high over all, with its great white pyramid shining like tried silver in the splendour of the sunrise, towers the glorious Kazbek, lifting itself heavenward in silent, eternal prayer.

But this is no time for rhapsodising ; we have still several stages to Vladikavkaz (the half-way house from Tiflis to Petrovsk), and the sooner we are off the better. However, from this point it is all down hill, and our creeping pace is now exchanged for a brisk trot, which disposes of the two next stages in gallant style. I already imagine myself at Vladikavkaz, and am just thinking what I shall order for dinner, when, half way down a steep incline, with a sheer wall of rock on one side and a precipice on the other, the horses suddenly bolt ; and my vehicle, after balancing irresolutely for a few seconds, decides for the rock, and goes over against it with a tremendous crash, pitching the conductor one way and the driver another, crippling one of the horses, and confounding things in general. However, these little accidents go for nothing in Russia. The driver binds up his damaged wrist, the conductor mops the blood from his face, and coolly trudges back to the

station for fresh horses ; and in less than an hour we are rattling on again as if nothing had happened.

For the next hour we wind through the depths of a tremendous ravine, shut in by precipices many hundred feet in height, and swept by a foaming torrent, into which we have to dash every now and then ; for here the "road" exists only in name, consisting merely of what little clear ground landslips from above, and floods from below, have been pleased to spare us. But by degrees the great walls become lower and less steep, the narrow ravine opens out wider and wider, the path grows clearer and more level, till at length, towards afternoon, we come out upon the vast green plain on the border of which lies Vladikavkaz—a neat little town, with the straight, wide streets, and painted church-towers, and many-coloured houses, which characterise every Russian town from the White Sea to the Black.

But even here there is no rest for *us*. One hasty douche of soap and water, a dinner "against time," and we are on the road again. And then, for hours together, the vast, green, silent steppe, with here and there a Cossack hut, or a quaint little post-house with its black and white door posts—at first all ablaze with hot, cloudless sunshine, then blurred into night, then awakened by the rising moon to a ghostly resurrection. And all night long we scurry through a phantasmagoria of broken roads and pebbly streams, and horses yoked and unyoked, and bearded faces in fitful lantern light, and stalwart Cossacks brawling over their liquor, and

lonely stretches of dark prairie, lifeless and voiceless as the grave.

And then the sun rises, and the long, burning, monotonous day goes slowly on—the same loneliness, the same dust, the same heat, the same unending level—broken only by a hasty gorge of half raw meat at Khasaf-iourt, the scene of one of Dumas père's splendid impossibilities. Night comes round once more, and again we plunge into the mountains, and toil through them all night long—up and down steep inclines, over crunching beds of gravel, through plashing fords, along black tomb-like gorges—till at length, just as morning breaks, a glittering streak along the eastern horizon announces the presence of the Caspian Sea.

An hour later, we are in Petrovsk—the one tolerable port on the western shore of the Caspian, whence the colony of Krasnovodsk in 1869, and the supplies of the Mangishlak column a month ago,* made their first start. It is a queer little straggling town, crowned by the usual miniature fort, with the usual handful of men playing soldiers inside. But if the sea be here, the steamer is not; for his Majesty the Shah has just been graciously pleased to go northward in four or five steamers at once, leaving none for the common herd; so that, for four days to come, I have nothing to do but to watch the soldiers fishing off the breakwater, and to bathe morning and evening in the clear, cool, slightly

* The transport steamer from Kinderli Bay (the starting-point of the Mangishlak column) returned to Petrovsk the day after my arrival.

brackish water—trying vainly, meanwhile, to pick up any news worth sending home. At length, on the fifth morning (or, as it seems to me, about midnight), I am aroused by a gruff voice telling me that “the steamer’s in, and no time to lose;” and within an hour we are under full steam for Astrakhan.

The panorama of the deck is much the same as that already described on the Black Sea, with a larger admixture of high-cheeked Persian faces, half-buried in huge conical caps of black sheepskin, which look very much like tarred beehives. But there is one group which has a sad and sinister picturesqueness. Near the stern, a little apart from the rest, sit four stalwart and rather handsome young men, in high Cossack caps and white tunics, laughing loudly over a native game of cards, in which they seem to be getting rather the better of the four weather-beaten soldiers who are their antagonists. But whenever they move, you hear an ominous clanking, and, looking closer, espy huge rings of steel clutching both ancles, linked together by a heavy chain. They are convicts on their way to Siberia; and these friendly soldiers, who are laughing and joking with them, form their appointed guard.

At some unearthly hour on the following morning, we reach “lighthouse No. 4,” and are shifted en masse into a huge coffin-shaped barge, suggestive of Charon’s boat on a grand scale—an idea amply borne out by the fitful lamp light, the hurrying swarm of shadowy figures, and the surrounding waste of dim silent waters. The operation of towing us up the estuary is necessarily

a slow one, and we have leisure to drink in all the nauseous details of the panorama. Leaden sky, leaden sea; here and there a vast, clumsy landing-stage moored in mid-channel, or a long, low patch of mud-bank, with two or three log huts settled on it like flies, stretching along the thick, greasy stream; and everywhere a quiet, overpowering filthiness, characteristic of the place where Father Volga shakes the dust from his feet after countless miles of weary travel, before sinking to rest for ever.

Little by little, however, the scenery becomes less atrociously Mississippian, though still preserving its overwhelming desolation. Wide sweeps of barren sand—bristling reeds in rank luxuriance, alive with clamorous wild-fowl—projecting headlands, crowned with log-built hamlets—long ranges of dried fish, hanging in the sun like the tails of Bopeep's flock—little clusters of Kalmuck tents, like hives minus the industry—and, every here and there, a rudely-shaped cross, marking the spot where, between the lonely river and the infinite desert, one more unknown toiler has gone home to rest. At length, in the glory of the summer sunset, the white towers of a huge massive cathedral, and the tall spires, serried roofs, and bristling masts of a great seaport, rise along the sky; and Astrakhan, the gate of Asiatic commerce, the mart of Ivan the Terrible, the centre of a great traffic in days when Liverpool and New York were unthought of, is before us in all its fulness.

But the great city itself cannot be described here. A

C

volume would hardly do justice to its quaint, old-world picturesqueness—its massive citadel, and narrow streets, and bare, dusty boulevards, and motley population. Leisure enough have I to inspect it during the twenty-four hours that I wait in vain for the starting of the “up” steamer; but (as third-rate historians say when they wish to be impressive) “the time was coming and it came.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST DAYS OF FATHER VOLGA.

AT early dawn on the following morning the quay is like a ripe clover-field with red shirts and gaudy kerchiefs, while boxes, bags, and portmanteaus come trundling on board thick and fast. Stewards bustle about with the steaming tea-urns which, as long experience teaches them, will soon be shouted for through every part of the vessel ; ladies scream for their missing maids, or empty reticules and work-bags in fruitless search after their tickets ; deck-passengers in greasy sheepskin settle into the corners which they will never quit till the end of the voyage ; officers make a display of their buttons, and light paper cigarettes with a knowing air ; sailors survey the community at large with an air of quiet, professional disdain ; and the skipper, a broad-faced, jolly-looking old "salt" from the Baltic coast,* pulls up his coat-collar, and gets his telescope ready for action. The whistle sounds shrilly through the whoop of the rising wind, and we are off.

And now the old-world aspect of the whole scene becomes overwhelming. Acres of trees level with the

* Finland and the Baltic provinces supply the few good seamen in Russia.

water, like the tops of a drowned forest ; wide wastes of hot brassy sand, melting in a dim haze along the horizon ; boundless green plains, dotted with grazing cattle ; long reaches of dreary swamp, cut up by the endless network of the hundred mouths of Father Volga ; and everywhere a vast, dreary, silent, desolation, like that of an unpeopled world.

Nevertheless, this great sepulchre of nature is not without signs of life. Every now and then we pass a huge barge, manned by brown-faced men in sheepskin, labouring heavily against the stream ; or a waggon with a team of oxen, far away on the endless plain ; or a little log-built hamlet perched on the brink of the grey, sullen stream ; or a cluster of quaint little straw lampshades, with smoke oozing from their tops, which, on a nearer view, turn out to be Kalmuck hovels ; and, at times, the solitary mound of some nameless grave.

But it is when shrouded by the creeping mist which has given it an evil renown, that this Stygian stream assumes its most characteristic aspect. Dante himself could conceive no sight more grim and cheerless than that great waste of leaden water shut in by the blank rayless sky. A universal gloom, a damp, creeping chill, like the chillness of the grave ; no sight, no sound of life, only the plash and welter of the sullen waters, over which the half-seen steamer looms like a gigantic coffin. Amid such surroundings any shape of horror seems congenial. It needs little imagination to body from the encircling mist the grim ferryman of the shades with his ghastly freight, or the Phantom Ship

looming gauntly past, her spectral rigging gleaming like a phosphorescent corpse, and her crew, with the brand of everlasting torment on their haggard faces, glaring wolfishly at us as we shoot by.

And so we plod onward till nightfall, anchor for the night (for to run the gauntlet of the Volga shoals in the dark is beyond even a Livonian sailor), and, with the first grey of morning, are on our way once more.

Nine o'clock brings us to Tchorni-Yar, where I am met by a set of old acquaintances—the Kalmucks of Eastern Russia. We have barely stepped ashore, when I recognise the little beehives of felt and wickerwork which met me at every turn, four years ago, on the long low banks of the Don. Marching up to the nearest "kibitka," I raise the loose flap that masks the entrance, revealing an interior so like that of my former friends the Samoiedes, that I feel for a moment as if I had wandered into Lapland by mistake. The same smoky, Teniers-like atmosphere; the same welter of sacks, boxes, skins, and cooking utensils; the same wonderful omnium-gatherum of "properties" hanging to the tent-poles; the same astounding collection of unsavoury smells of every kind; the same gnome-like figures, with faces like a crushed bun, grouped, witch-fashion, round the huge caldron that simmers in the centre.

Availing myself of the stupefaction caused by my sudden appearance, I clutch the enormous, dirt-begrimed wooden spoon floating in the mess, and coolly proceed to help myself. In an instant my statesque hosts break into spontaneous hospitality. One "drags" the pot in

quest of a possible scrap of mutton, a second tugs from his capacious pocket a pasty lump of rye-bread, covered with hair and bits of straw, while a third kindly invites me to seat myself on a newly-flayed sheepskin, which he places, raw side upward, for my especial accommodation.

Thus established, I go in valiantly at the "soupe à la Calmouque"—an astounding mixture of tea-leaves, mutton-fat, rye-flour, milk, and rancid butter, sufficient to startle a dervish. However, I have seldom met a national *plat* that I could not deal with, and I do full justice to this one, though my performance cuts a poor figure beside the Homeric swallow of my hosts, who go to work as if (like Logi in the old Norse Saga) they could bolt, not merely the food, but the caldron as well. My appreciation of their cookery evidently pleases the worthy savages, who season my last spoonful with a few scrapings from a thick brown cake that looks like a square of bad tobacco, but is in reality a genuine sample of the famous "brick tea," whose weight every camel in Central Asia knows to his cost.

But when, on proffering the ladle back to the chief, I slip into it a silver twenty-kopeck piece (6½d.) as deftly as if I had practised at an election, the popular feeling changes. An angry murmur runs round the circle, and more than one voice protests loudly against such a violation of Kalmuck etiquette; but I stand my ground, and answer, with quiet confidence, that my faith enjoins the acknowledgment of one benefit by another. The honest barbarians readily accept the explanation; and, with a

farewell shake of their greasy paws, which makes me feel as if I had caught a live salmon by the tail, I dive under the curtain, and make a dramatic exit.*

For the rest of the day the scenery alternates between bushy undergrowth and bare sand, chequered towards evening by a green maze of wooded islets, so close together that we appear to be sailing through the avenues of a great garden. The sunset over the woods is very grand—the light dying away from tree-top after tree-top as the gathering dimness steals on, till all is veiled in the sombre mysterious twilight that fills the aisles of a cathedral. But already the strange contrast between the two banks, so striking in the higher stream, begins to make itself manifest. The European shore masses itself in bold ridges of steep crumbling turf, with here and there a huge cliff crowning it like a tower—the symbol of an imperfect but robust civilisation. On the Asiatic side, endless wastes of barren sand and grisly morass melt drearily into the darkening sky—fit emblem of that torpid barbarism before which all the choicest gifts of Nature have been spread in vain ; a Dead Sea of humanity, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.

As night falls, we reach the famous German colony of Sarepta, the neat houses and spotless cleanliness of which contrast very pointedly with the filthy burrows of the native population ; and so, apparently, think my Russian fellow-passengers, judging from the spiteful energy with which they puff their cigarettes and mutter

* I had several more “Kalmuck breakfasts” later on, while crossing the steppes ; but this first one may fairly stand for all.

sneers at the hated "Nyemtzi." But, sneer as they will, the fact remains; and the bitter old proverb, so often heard in the towns of the Volga, "Few German workmen, many German overseers," is merely a terse summary of one of the most momentous chapters in the present history of Russia. Not without cause did old Suvoroff, in one of his flashes of reckless humour, answer the gracious words of Catherine II. with the brusque sarcasm, "Mother Katrina, make me a German!" Since the advancing Colossus first threw its shadow across the political horizon of Europe, the men from beyond the Niemen have been her mainstay in every department. Gordon, Münnich, Benningsen, Barclay de Tolly, Diebitsch, in the army; Elphinstone, Greig, Ribas, Paul Jones in the navy; Lefort, Pfuhl, Todleben in military engineering; Osterman and Nesselrode in diplomacy—a formidable array of foreign names for an empire of such magnitude, especially with such a proportion of Germans among them. To a people of which the educated portion, at least, are feverishly anxious to make Russia self-supporting in every way, it is inexpressibly galling to be forced to admit (as the most enlightened of them *have* admitted in my hearing again and again) that as yet she is wholly unequal to the task. It is not too much to assert that the expulsion of the Germans so loudly called for by certain ultra-patriotic maniacs,* would be tantamount to removing

* It is worth while to remark, however, that the famous sentence attributed to the Prince Imperial, "If I had my way, I'd chase every German across the frontier to-morrow," is a pure myth.

the bones from a human body and expecting the flabby, gelatinous mass which remained, to stand erect as before. These, it will be said, are mere assertions; but let us look a little at the facts. The present proportion of foreigners in the Russian army is as follows:—

Subalterns and non-com-		
missioned officers,	.	42 per cent., of whom 24 are Germans.
Staff officers,	.	85 per cent., of whom 58 are Germans.
Generals	.	82 per cent., of whom 74 are Germans.

And when we add to this estimate the number of foreigners in the manufacturing class, the provincial administration, the higher bureaucratic circles, and the Cabinet itself, one can hardly wonder that the "German problem" should be a standing anxiety to Russia, or that that elimination of the foreign element which is the desire of the unreasoning many should be the dread of the reasoning few. It is not generally known that, barely two years ago, 200,000 German colonists on the Volga, fearing to be deprived of their exemption from military service, resolved to emigrate *en masse*, and actually sent several of their number to St Petersburg, in order to make secret inquiries as to the possibility of getting off to America by sea. "Of all political contingencies," as I have said elsewhere, "Russia has most reason to dread a Prussian version of her favourite 'Slavonic Protectorate,' a union of all German-speaking men throughout every land under one head resident at Berlin.* The millions that people the Baltic sea-board,

* When this was first written, the Russian journals indignantly denied it. They will hardly venture to do so now.

the hosts of industrious craftsmen that swarm in every town of the empire, may yet become an eye-sore and a loss to the country of which they are now the stay and back-bone. In the dim future the anxious eye of Russian diplomacy sees the foreshadowing of a time when the Prince Bismark of that day shall say to all Germans from the White Sea to the Black, 'Come out of her, my people!' and when they shall obey the call, bearing with them the wealth which they have amassed, and the ability which has made them rich; while the Russian peasantry, unhelped and unhelpful, sown broadcast in pestilential hovels of ten or twelve together over an area larger than all the rest of Europe combined, shall remain to cumber the ground of which every spadeful is worth a king's ransom, till they are mercifully transported by typhus or cholera to a region where there is at least no thievish bureaucracy, and no tyrannical police."

Upon the panorama of the Volga, from Tsaritzin to Saratoff (one of the best bits of purely Russian scenery in the empire), I cannot dwell here; and I must also omit, however unwillingly, the cordial reception given me by the authorities both at Saratoff and Samara. I pass at once to the time when, after so many thousand miles of rail and steamer, I plunged at length into the primeval desert, where both rail and steamer are unknown.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE WORLD.

EASTWARD Ho! at last; the horses' bells jingling merrily in the clear morning air as we fly along; the green hill sides looking fresh and beautiful under the bright May sunshine; the tall gilded church-towers and many-coloured houses of Samara melting away in the distance; and in front of us, the long smooth waves of a "rolling prairie," surging up to greet us with the first hint of the coming Ural.

When the long projected Samara-Orenburg railway shall translate itself into fact, "the easternmost town of the Volga" will doubtless resume its former importance; but for the present it is altogether eclipsed by Saratoff, which, though much farther from Orenburg, possesses the advantage of direct communication with Moscow. The surrounding country, too, is unutterably lonely, the enormous disproportion of area and population being nowhere more glaring than here. Russia is an undermanned fortress, and can spare no men to this remote outpost. It is all barren desolation farther on; it is all fertile desolation here. Nevertheless, in this magnificent weather, the wide grassy uplands, lonely as they are, have a beauty of their own; and so, ap-

parently, thinks my driver, who is now lighting his short black pipe with the air of a man who, having got his work well in train, can afford to enjoy himself.

"Glorious weather, eh, Barin (master)? We shall make quick work of it to-day; but if you had come a month ago, you'd have found the road that deep in mud. Let alone that, you couldn't have got horses if you had offered a hundred roubles for them!"

"Why, were there many on the road then?"

"Weren't there, just? as thick as flies upon sugar! Why, what with officers going to Khiva, and couriers coming from Orenburg, and merchants passing backwards and forwards, and dogs of Jews hanging after our army on the chance of cheating Christian folk out of a kopeck or two, the whole road was just like a bazaar. Ah! we poor fellows used to take a fine lot of money *then!*"

The last remark is pointed by a sly side-glance at me.

"Which means that you would like some more, eh? Well, here's thirty kopecks for you (about 10d. English) if you do the stage within the hour and a half."

(It is a pity, by the by, that we do not follow the Russians in having a single word to express "one and a half;" that concise "poltorá" is a great economy.)

Stimulated by this unusual *largesse*, honest Ivân "puts on the steam" at an amazing rate; and the black and white posts of the little station heave in sight a good five minutes before the appointed time. Fresh horses are put to with a quickness which sufficiently

proves that we are still in Europe ; and away we go again. Half-way through the second stage our road ends suddenly in a broad, sluggish river, without either bridge or ford ; but the traditional raft is at hand, propelled by four bearded tatterdemalions in sheepskin, with the genuine *rusty* tan of the desert upon their flat heavy faces. For nearly an hour we glide slowly through a labyrinth of drowned thickets, and long low mud banks, and dainty little green islets—our boatmen keeping time with a low, dirge-like chant to the plash of their oars in the thick greasy water.

And then ashore again, and on, hour after hour, through the unchanging routine of genuine Russian post travelling. From the lonely monotony of the steppe you burst at once into a populous village, with its tall painted spire, and rough-hewn log-huts, and wide, dusty streets, up and down which you rattle till you reach the little station-house with its striped posts, and little black board marked with the distances to the last and the next station. You jump out, shaking off the hay upon which you have been lying, and give your travelling-pass (*podorojnaya*)* to the big yellow-haired postmaster in his sheepskin frock ; and he shouts for fresh horses, and asks whether you won't have a tea-urn heated, and hints at possible fresh eggs if you care to buy any. Your old driver goes off to exhibit his *pourboire* to his cronies of the stable ; and your new driver comes shambling up, struggling into

* This is quite distinct from the passport, being merely a kind of official voucher, required to get post-horses.

his tattered frock ; and the sallow low-browed villagers crowd round to stare at you, as a kind of event in their stagnant existence ; and the postmaster's children clamber about your knees, and hold up their little brown faces to be petted. And presently the horses are put to, and off you go, to repeat the same programme—steppe, village, changing of horses—*ad infinitum*.

Once in the twenty-four hours, perhaps, you decide upon a longer halt, and spend an hour or so in drinking tumbler after tumbler of weak tea, rammed home by half a dozen gritty lumps of black bread, which serve for breakfast, dinner, supper, and everything else. As to rest, it is wonderful how soon you get used to sleeping soundly even when jolting over these tremendous ruts, with your head literally *hammering* whatever may be underneath it—and to being disturbed every two hours or so all night long, on arriving at a new station.

With regard to the stations themselves, one may say with Donald M'Pherson, "The more said, the less the better!" Bouzoulouk, the only considerable place on the line of march (containing 15,000 inhabitants) is merely an overgrown village under slightly improved conditions ; and the villages themselves are—what all Russian villages have been from time immemorial. It is not too much to assert that the same description would apply fairly enough to every ordinary cottage which I have seen from the Niemen to the Ural. Along one whole side of the interior stretches an

enormous bed, which, with its patchwork quilt, looks very much like a coloured map of the world on Mercator's projection. Fully half of another side is occupied by the huge tiled stove, on the top of which the head of the family stretches himself whenever he wishes to get warm at short notice. In the farther corner, with a tiny oil-lamp burning before it, hangs the portrait of the patron saint, around whose staring gilt frame you may at times observe a pious cockroach making a laborious pilgrimage.

Beside the little window usually stand a crazy deal table and two or three rough stools, with the addition (if the host be a man well to do) of a huge iron-clamped chest, painted bright vermilion in accordance with that childish love of gay colours characteristic of the Moujik, whose very word for "admirable" means literally "bright red." The window-sill itself is tenanted by the corpulent *samovar* (tea urn) which ought to be the national blazon of Russia, with the motto, "In *tea* speravi." The blackened rafters stand out like the ribs of a whale, enlivened by the gambols of numerous spider-Blondins on tight-ropes of their own plaiting—while every now and then one of the troupe loses his hold and falls with a loud splash into your tumbler. The walls are of plank, cemented with clay and dried leaves; the floor is merely trodden earth, larded with crushed beetles and furrowed by the excavations of inquiring poultry; and the whole building, with its rough-hewn timbers and its miscellaneous crew of men and animals, might

pass for Noah's first attempt at an ark, overcrowded by a false alarm of the Deluge.

My journey is for the most part uneventful enough ; but one incident of it is not easily forgotten. A little way beyond Bouzoulouk, I come out, towards ten in the morning, upon a vast green plain, whose unbroken level looks doubly desolate after the endless ridges of the "rolling prairie." The little village in its midst is, to all outward appearance, the exact reproduction of those which I have already passed ; but at the first glance I see that there is something wrong.

The streets are unwontedly quiet ; the few faces visible wear a settled gloom which contrasts weirdly with the careless merriment usually seen upon them ; while even the postmaster appears moody and abstracted, copying my pass in a dead silence, very strange in one of his garrulous race, to whom ten minutes' chat with a passing traveller supplies the place of both newspaper and telegram. My new driver, too, takes his seat without a word ; and this universal gloom, together with the unnatural emptiness of the streets, and the dreary, plague-stricken look of the whole village, recall to me, with ghastly vividness, the aspect of Central Russia during the destroying sweep of the cholera in 1871. But here the calamity is of another kind. Just as we get clear of the village, the plaintive music of a Russian hymn comes floating upon the still air ; and I see, a few hundred yards to my right, a crowd of peasants moving in slow procession, and in their midst the long dark robe and

flowing hair of a priest, with the crucifix glittering in his uplifted hands.

“What’s all this?” ask I.

“We’re praying for rain,” answers my driver, in the dull, weary voice of a man without hope; “but it never comes. God is angry with us, and we must just suffer. What is to be, *will* be!”

“Are you fearing for the harvest, then?”

“Ah, master! how can we help fearing for it? Twice already our crops have failed, and now, this third time, there’s been no rain for weeks together, and the ground is as hard as iron. If the harvest fails again *this* year, then—God help us all!”

And then in a few simple, touching words, he tells the dismal story. Two bad harvests in succession; seed-corn becoming dearer—dearer still—and at length failing altogether; food purchased at exorbitant rates from the harpies who are never wanting to fatten upon the misery of provincial Russia; men scattering over the whole face of the country in quest of work to keep them from dying of hunger; long weeks of gnawing anxiety, sinking at length into the apathy of despair. And, all the while he is speaking, the mournful cadence of the people’s prayer rises and falls like the moan of a distant sea, and the poor creatures turn their longing eyes to the clear, bright, merciless sky which looks down upon them as if in mockery.

I would gladly say a word of comfort to him, if I knew how; but there are calamities in the presence of which all consolation is struck dumb. All that I can

do is to give him a compassionate shake of the hand and a few silver pieces, which the poor fellow receives gratefully enough, but with a settled despair in his face which is pitiful to see. And so I leave him.

As we approach the lower spurs of the Ural, the country becomes higher and more broken, with a few remnants of forest lingering along the streams that intersect the road. In one of the wildest of these jungles, in a narrow pass between wood and water, we come suddenly upon a long train of waggons, creaking under the weight of huge sacks and battered chests, which look as if they had seen service ; while beside them march file after file of gaunt sinewy men in dusty white frocks, with dark hair cropped close round their sunburned faces, and muskets sloped over their shoulders. This is one rivulet of the great stream which is pouring into Central Asia, 7000 strong, to reinforce the army of Khiva or relieve that of Tashkent ; and I am destined to have a good deal to do with it before the close of my journey. Floundering past as best we may, over fallen logs and through deep pools of water, we struggle up the steep slippery ridge beyond, and look down from its summit upon the tall white houses and glittering spires of Orenburg, standing out against the fresh summer green of the great plain below.

As the gateway of Asiatic commerce, and the capital of a distinct territory (a fact emphasised by the official division of the empire into Russia, Siberia, Turkestan, and the Orenburg district), Orenburg has a right to

some appearance of wealth and civilisation ; but, nevertheless, the first sight of it is always more or less of a surprise. The untravelled Western, to whom any part of the Asiatic frontier is on a par with Patagonia or the source of the Niger, would be somewhat bewildered at finding, in the very heart of the Eastern prairie, trim public gardens, and massive Government buildings, and well-paved streets thronged by fashionably-dressed loungers, and Tauchnitz editions of "Middlemarch" or "Poor Miss Finch" ranged behind irreproachable plate-glass. The first question of the resident officers is always, "What do you think of Orenburg?" and the sly smile accompanying the query shows how perfectly they have divined your "first impressions."

Towards sunset on the day of my arrival, I saunter up to the boulevard which overhangs the smooth stream of the Ural, and look down, in the cool of the summer evening, upon the meeting of Europe and Asia. Behind are shops, and hotels, and gardens, and four-storeyed houses of hewn stone, and spacious promenades gay with the latest fashions ; before is the great gulf of primeval desert out of which rose, in the evil days of long ago, the goblin figures of the Avar, and the Hun, and the Mongol. This is the threshold of the world, and beyond it lies our plunge into the unknown.

Two officers seat themselves near me, in front of the little refreshment room, and begin to talk—a conversation which forms a curious supplement to my own reflections.

"I tell you, my dear fellow, there can be no doubt about it. The Government has approved the plan, and Lesseps himself (or his son if *he* can't) is coming down here to see about it all. There's a chance for Orenburg at last—and high time, too!"

"And do you really think it possible, then, to make a railway from here to Samarcand?"

"Why not? There won't be a single tunnel after Orsk, and perhaps half a dozen bridges (I should hardly think more) all the way from Orsk to Tashkent. Then, after Tashkent itself, once you get clear of the branches of the Syr-Daria, there's the steppe for you again, flat as a billiard-board. Provided we can feed our workmen (which will be the real difficulty), all the rest ought to be as easy as smoking a cigarette."

"But how about the *matériel*?"

"O, for that matter, there's wood enough along the Syr-Daria every here and there; and once we get the line as far as Orsk, it'll be easy to accumulate stores *there*. That line from Odessa to Krementschug and Kharkoff was quite as bad a bit in its way, and yet we did it."

"But think of the distance!"

"Pooh! the distance is nothing to what people think it. Let me see, now; Orenburg to Orsk, 176 miles; Orsk to Kazalinsk, 494; Kazalinsk to Tashkent, 627; Tashkent to Samarcand, *via* Djizak, 186—total, 1483 miles. Well, it's 1478 from St Petersburg to Odessa, *via* Moscow, and quite as bad a country in some places."

“You’ve left out the Samarcand - Peshawur bit, though.”

“Bah! that’s no business of ours. What we want is a complete line of communication through Turkestan, so as to be able to bring up men and *matériel*, at short notice, to any amount we like.”

“And then move on India, eh?”

“Time enough for that. There’s Kashgar to be thought of first; and besides, we must make sure of Bokhara before doing anything else. Not that that would be very difficult, for we can swallow *it* any day we like.”

“But if you do swallow it, won’t England object?”

• “Let her object! who cares whether she does or not? So long as Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville are in power, we can treat England as we like. Come and have a glass of cognac.”

And the two saunter off.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAND WHERE ALL THINGS ARE FORGOTTEN.

“Do you know, really, if the Governor here had not received you and given you letters, I should have been doubtful about letting you pass? You don't call yourself an Englishman, and you don't look like one; but still you've got an English passport, and that's a thing we never admit into Turkestan.”

So speaks, the morning before my departure from Orenburg, the old *chef de police*, a fine specimen of the Russo-German official. Polite, obliging, sometimes even jocular—but, under it all, inexorable as the grave. Looking at the quiet firmness and sleepless vigilance that lurk in every line of his smooth, courteous, marble face, I feel at once that, in the event of a disclosure, there is nothing to be hoped from *him*.

“If I had thought my passport such a bugbear, I'd have managed to lose it on the road,” answer I, looking at him with a laugh, though inwardly my blood seems turning to ice. “Well, passport or no passport, I can always feel myself among friends so long as I'm on Russian ground.”

“Not *everywhere*,” pointedly remarks the man in office, bowing slightly in acknowledgement of the

implied compliment. ' There's no reason for stopping you *here*, now that you've got these recommendations ; but I shouldn't be at all surprised if they stop you at Orsk or Kazalinsk (Fort No. 1) till they can communicate with the Governor-General. You see we have to be very careful on this line, because there's always somebody trying to slip past. I remember that some time ago (I think it was the autumn of 1869), an Englishman came here with a gun, and called on me, saying that he wanted to have a run along the Syr-Daria, having heard that there was very good shooting there. So I just said to him, ' My dear sir, whoever said that must have been making fun of you ; I assure you that the shooting is infinitely better in Siberia, and I strongly recommend you to go there instead ; ' and with that I wished him good morning."

The old gentleman gives a quiet chuckle at his own shrewdness, and, handing me a signed travelling-pass across the table, says pleasantly, " If I were you I'd go by the Emba Fort and the western shore of the Aral Sea, instead of Kazalinsk ; but that's as you please. Come and see me again when you return. Good morning."

That night two or three of the officers at my hotel give me a kind of farewell supper. My preparations are already complete ; I have bought a light waggon, a complete set of cooking utensils, a three months' stock of tea, sugar, and camp-biscuit, and various other necessaries suggested by the experience of my new friends, who have all been " out on the steppes " in their

time. The list of essentials is completed by a Tartar servant, a smart, handy fellow of seven-and-twenty, who comes for his orders every morning as regularly as if he had served me from childhood. There is now nothing left to do but to start, and we make merry accordingly, as for the last time.

"It's a pity you hadn't come sooner, and gone along with one of the officers," says Captain M——, my *vis-à-vis*. "It's the *uniform* that does everything in these parts, as I daresay you've found out. However, I don't suppose you'll have any trouble till Kazalinsk; but I shouldn't at all wonder if they stop you *there*."

"And why *there* in particular?" ask I, remembering the prophecy of the *chef de police*.

"Well, in the first place it's a frontier post, and they're always stricter there; and then Colonel Goloff, the regular Governor, has gone with the Kazalinsk column, and in his place there's a certain Captain Vereshchagin (no relation of the painter, I believe) whom nobody's ever heard of. Now, of course, *his* game is to arrest somebody, or do something else very energetic, during his term of office, so as to distinguish himself a bit; and your not being an Englishman won't matter a straw to him. He'll just say that it's all one who you are, so long as he hasn't got a special order to let you pass."

"Does no one know him?" inquire I. "The Governor doesn't, and the *chef de police* doesn't; but perhaps some of *you* could give me a line to him."

"We'd do so with pleasure," says my neighbour

O——, who, having lived several years in Tashkent, is a kind of oracle upon Turkestan; “but you see he’s a new man, and his name’s hardly known yet. However, I don’t suppose any one will care to detain you long, now that Khiva’s taken.”*

“By-the-by, talking of Khiva, are the particulars known yet? All I’ve heard is that the town’s taken, and the Khan a prisoner, with slight loss to the Russians.”

“Well, that’s all that *we* heard at first; but a man came through two days before you arrived, who told us (I suppose it will be officially confirmed in a day or two) that the war party and nearly all the population had deserted the town, and that when our men got in they found no one but the Khan and a few of his attendants, who gave themselves up at once. It’s said that the runaways have gone southward towards Persia, and if so, they’re almost certain to be cut off by the Turkomans.”

“You think I ought to get through, then, in time?”

“Well, I don’t see any reason why they should turn you back, especially as you’re not a correspondent. No foreign correspondents have been admitted, and quite right too.”

“I’ve heard,” remark I, “that one of Count Schouvaloff’s reasons for refusing them leave was, that the chance of their getting hurt would be an additional embarrassment to the officers in command, and that they

* I need hardly say that this report afterwards proved to be unfounded.

would be likely to misrepresent any severe measures which might be found necessary."

"That's just it, you see. Supposing we were to burn a town and shoot the whole garrison (and such things *have* to be done, I can tell you, now and then), all Europe would instantly ring with "Horrible massacre in Central Asia"—"Civilisation worse than barbarism,"—and all that sort of thing. Then, again, supposing one of the correspondents had got himself killed, of course the English would have said at once that we had done it on purpose, to keep him from telling tales."

"You don't seem to love the English much more than we do," observe I, laughing.

"Well, what would you have? We are trying our hardest to civilise the East, and to protect our trade there; and then steps in England and says, 'You mustn't do this, you mustn't do that'—virtually encouraging the rascals whom we are trying to put down. It's true that, now-a-days, the English only threaten and never strike: but even threats count for something, so long as the Asiatics believe in them. To whom did the Khan of Khiva first turn for help? To his brother Mussulmans in Central Asia? No—to the English Viceroy of India!"

Shortly after this the party breaks up; and O——, as I take leave of him, produces his card, with fresh offers of assistance in case of need.

"If you go to Tashkent, as you most likely will," says he, "be sure you find out P—— (everybody there knows him), and mention my name. He has all the

statistics of the country at his finger-ends, and he'll be able to give you any information you may want."

By noon the next day all is ready for my departure, in the primitive fashion of Asiatic travel. My waggon (a light little thing with a movable hood) is prepared for my accommodation, by filling the bottom with hay, laying my baggage upon it in a kind of pavement, and covering the whole with a straw mattress, upon which I recline, walled in with rolled up wrappers to keep me from being absolutely battered to bits against the sides of the vehicle. In the pockets of the hood are provisions for the first few days, including a large stock of soda-powders, intended to qualify the proverbially unwholesome water of the desert. I pay my bill (which, by the bye, my honest landlord tried hard to make me pay over again on my return in September), my Tartar clambers to his perch, the driver cracks his whip, the officers shout a hearty "*bon voyage!*" the three horses break into a smart trot—and we are off!

And now the hills of the frontier begin to assert themselves in earnest. First come broad sweeps of bare upland, shelving down every here and there into the gravelly channel of a half-dry torrent; then rolling waves of steep grassy hill, growing higher and steeper with every mile; and finally the actual "*Uralskiya Gori,*" with their quaint little hamlets, and headlong streams, and deep, narrow valleys, and clustering trees perched upon overhanging cliffs, and great billows of dark mountain lapping over on either side as if to bury the road and all that is on it.

Up and down, up and down—now struggling step by step up an incline like the roof of a house, and now flying at full gallop down a modified precipice which any civilised “whip” would decline altogether. Mourad and the driver bob about like corks in a whirlpool; while I, recalling my “spill” in the Caucasus, mentally set down as a new question for the insurance offices, “Do you ever travel post in Russia?” However, our attempts at suicide are less successful than they deserve; and as we crown the highest ridge, towards sunset on the second day from Orenburg, I descry far out upon the great plain below two white spots tipped with green, and a glittering streak coiled around them. The white points are the church towers of Orsk; the bright streak is the course of our old friend the Ural.

An hour later, we rattle over the low wooden bridge that crosses it (startling a group of soldiers from their evening bath), and go dashing through the straggling streets of the queer little toy town, up to the familiar black and white doorway of the post-house. I jump out, fee my driver, pull my coat off and have a wash, order a tea-urn, and come back to get out my provisions, almost before the dust of our arrival has had time to evaporate—somewhat after the fashion of the penny novel hero, with whom “to rush frantically up and down Waterloo Bridge for half-an-hour was the work of a moment.” Then, and not till then, do I discover the havoc wrought by our passage of the mountains. My smoked sausages are “all awash” amid the fragments of a phial of castor oil, and my flask of cold tea

is standing on its head with the cork out. My biscuits are rubbing shoulders with each other to their mutual destruction; the soda powders are fraternising with the sugar, while the tea pervades everything, like an emblem of civilisation. However, this is all in the day's work, and no visions of this modern "Douglas Larder" haunt either my supper or my sleep, which I enjoy as only an open-air traveller can.

A night's halt (our last for many a day to come) puts new life into my Tartar, who has been rather shaken by his cup-and-ball practice on the box-seat, and away we go in gallant style, having bought a couple of huge hassocks of black bread, in order to "feed on the country" while the country contains anything to feed on. And so, at last, we are in Asia, and I now remark for the first time (though there *are* traces of it between Orenburg and Orsk) a phenomenon with which I afterwards become familiar enough—a line of little mounds planted along the track to keep you from losing it altogether. For in these parts the "road" exists merely from a great number of waggons having happened to follow the same track till it became well marked, and, with your eyes shut, you may go a mile "across country" without ever finding it out.

And from this point the real work begins in earnest. On this bare, undefended level the sun has full power, and the dust likewise. Towards evening, when the sun and the dust begin to slacken, the flies "take up the wondrous tale," and give you a fine time of it. At night you are penetrated by creeping damp, and knocked up

every two hours or so by the necessity of showing your travelling pass at a new station, where, after nearly beating the place down in your efforts to arouse the postmaster, you are informed, in the "serve you right" tone of a man justly aggrieved, that there are no horses!

Nor is this to be wondered at. Throughout the whole tract from Orsk to Kazalinsk, the handy Russian postmasters are replaced by half-savage Kirghiz, capable of doing anything *but* their duty; while, the stations being unprovided with fodder, the poor horses are simply turned out upon the steppe to pick up their own living, often straying ten or twelve miles from the station to which they belong. Hence, when you arrive at a halting-place, the programme is very much as follows:— The postmaster, having got your pass, steps outside, and shouts in his native Tartar, "Ot" (horses). Instantly a lanky brigand-like fellow (a Gaucho of the Pampas, minus the picturesque costume), starts up as if he had risen through the earth, and gallops off into infinite space. You meanwhile sit down in front of the door and take it easy, while little black-eyed toddlers in tattered red shirts come round to stare at you, and hungry-looking dogs sniff about you with a cannibal air, and the postmaster himself, folding his arms, looks down at you as at an unwarrantable intruder, whose presence, for reasons of state, must be tolerated yet a while. And, in an hour or two, a speck appears on the horizon, which, as it approaches, gradually shapes itself into a mounted man driving three horses before him. And then out comes the heavy wooden collar for the middle horse, and the ropes and girths for the other two;

and your new driver, pulling his little saucer-shaped cap over his shaven crown, comes shambling out to assist in the harnessing, which, with great expedition, may possibly be got over in another hour ; and away you go again.

It is precisely such journeys as these which show one what deep hollows of internal weakness lie hidden under the showy semi-civilisation of Russia. The ministers of the Czar are clever scene-painters, and can make canvass and pasteboard look like granite or armour of proof ; but the delusion can only endure while viewed from the outside. Once behind the scenes, all is known ; and hence the jealous exclusion of strangers from Turk-estan. In fact, the prestige of Russia is merely a Spectre of the Brocken—the shadow of an ordinary Power cast upon an immeasurable cloud of mystery. This is no place for a disquisition upon the resources of Russia, nor would it be well for me to enter into details which cannot be given without compromising scores of innocent men ; but as it is in Central Asia that Russia has lately presented herself to us in the guise of a possible enemy, it is worth while to inquire what Central Asia really is. Its area and population (so far as it is possible to strike a balance between half a dozen conflicting estimates) appear to be as follows :—

RUSSIAN TURKESTAN.				Sq. miles.	Inhab.
Province of Ural,	.	.	.	9,388	490,000
„ Turgai,	.	.	.	6,123	350,000
„ Syr-Daria,	.	.	.	8,800	771,500
„ Semiretchensk,	.	.	.	6,200	550,000
„ Zer-Affshan,	.	.	.	190	200,000
Total,	.	.	.	30,701	2,361,500

NON-RUSSIAN TURKESTAN.

	Sq. miles.	Inhab.
Bokhara,	3,200	1,500,000
Kokan,	1,500	600,000
Khiva,	2,100	300,000
Afghan Turkestan,	2,000	300,000
Small Khanates on the Upper Oxus,	2,700	100,000
Turkmenia,	21,100	600,000
Total,	<u>32,600</u>	<u>3,400,000</u>

The difficulty of maintaining these remote and thinly-populated dependencies, possessed of only one navigable river, and so unproductive in themselves that the forts on the Lower Syr-Daria have to be victualled from Orenburg, at a cost to the government of £3 for every quarter of flour, needs no demonstration; and the only feasible solution of the problem (M. de Lesseps' projected railway from Orenburg to Samarcand) is simply unattainable without the aid of foreign capital. In a word, our surest way to keep Russia out of India is to lend her no more money.

As we advance (for we are now heading almost due south) the heat increases to a degree which even my recollections of Yemen and the Hedjaz can hardly parallel. My Tartar, with all his seasoning, is more than once attacked by violent bleeding at the nose, to his no small terror and bewilderment; while the skin peels off my face to such an extent as to give my profile the look of an ill-cut newspaper. What a treat it is to find, at long intervals, a post-house with a little stream close behind it, into which I can plunge my gritty hands and

burning face, and be cool and clean again for a few moments! or to lift a huge jar of milk to my cracked, bleeding lips, and drink a long, long draught! Food has already lost all value, both to myself and my Tartar. With a large stock of bread and meat close beside us, we more than once remain without touching food for twenty-four hours at a stretch; but our consumption of fluid borders upon the incredible.

At times the monotony of our surroundings is broken by a passing file of camels, or a Cossack swooping past on his wiry little horse, gun on shoulder and sabre in belt, casting a hungry glare at us in passing, as if in mute protest against the iron age which compels him to pass a waggon in the desert without plundering it. But these visits are few and far between. Day after day, it is the same dreary expanse of lonely prairie and burning sky, the same heat, and dust, and thirst, and languor; the same monotonous round of halting, and going forward, and halting again—till it seems as if civilised life were but a dream, and this weird nightmare of a march the only reality.

At length, one morning about sunrise, we reach an important landmark—Fort Karabutak, one of those little *bicoques* of dried clay, garrisoned by a handful of Cossacks, which are the milestones of Russia's advance into Central Asia. At this early hour, the little cluster of log-huts, and the tiny grey fort above them, are silent as the grave—the only sign of life being the small dark figure of the pacing sentry, outlined against the bright morning sky.

And here we experience for the first time, in all their fulness, the pleasures of a regular "stick-fast." Hitherto, although we have seldom got clear of a station under the three hours, there has been no doubt about the horses being obtainable—it was merely a question of time. But *now* the postmaster has no such comfort to give. There *may* be horses to-day, and there may be none till to-morrow—the beasts are somewhere out on the steppe, he cannot exactly say where—he will send a man after them presently, provided he can find a man to send. In fact, his whole address to us is very much in the style of the "doubting philosopher:" "O blessed Madonna (if there *be* a Madonna), have mercy upon my soul (if I *have* a soul)."

There is nothing for it but patience. My first act is, of course, to order a tea-urn, the invariable panacea in cases of the kind; after which I bring out my copying-book and metallic style, and commence another of my weekly despatches to the *Daily Telegraph*; while a brace of Kirghiz, squatting in the doorway, gaze wonderingly at the great magician who can write three letters at once by scratching a piece of blank paper with a stick.

On a sudden a strange cry, like the whimper of a child mingled with the snarl of an angry puppy, draws me to the door, where I find my host's two children, sturdy little brats of three and four years old, romping boisterously with a young wolf. The little creature seems to enter into the sport as heartily as either of them; but every now and then a cruel gleam in the

narrow, deep-set eye, and a wicked display of the sharp white fangs which will one day be terribly effective, show that the fierce nature of his race is only dormant. Nevertheless, when I take him up and begin to pet him, he receives my caresses with apparent satisfaction, and licks my hand like a dog. In the midst of our fraternisation the postmaster comes out, and laughs heartily on seeing how I am employed.

“New kind of baby that, eh, master? Found him on the hills a few weeks ago—old one’s killed, I suppose: not many of them hereabouts except in winter. Great pet with the children—sleeps in their crib at night. I shall have to kill him when he gets bigger, though; the old blood’s in him still!”

By this time the urn is ready, and Mourad and I have our usual gorge of tea, looking down from our hill-top into a deep narrow ravine, through which trickles languidly the tiny thread of water which two months ago was a roaring torrent. But just as we are making up our minds to remain stationary for the day, the missing horses suddenly turn up, and it is southward ho! once more.

And now comes a dreary interregnum, in which even the primitive post-houses disappear, and are replaced by skin tents, in which grimy Kirghiz sit stewing over a charcoal fire, happily oblivious that there are such things as travellers and post-horses in the world. Not without infinite delay, and a good deal of mingled bribing and bullying, do we get over the next three stages; and night finds us at least thirty miles short of the distance which we ought to have covered.

But the night has a tableau in store for us which might compensate much greater drawbacks. Just as the falling shadows deepen into utter darkness, we crown the high bank of a small river, and see a line of fires spring up as if from the earth, right in front of us. Around them flit throngs of tall white figures, appearing and vanishing spectrally as the blaze waxes and wanes; while in front the light flashes redly on piled lances and carabines, and in the shadowy background the half-seen figures of camels and horses dimly reveal themselves. It is a Cossack bivouac of the old type, unchanged since the days when they followed Yermak Timopheievitch to the conquest of Siberia; and had I a few hours to spare, I would gladly share their hospitality, as I am fated to do many a time hereafter, on the banks of the Syr-Daria. But as it is, we have barely time to shout a passing greeting, hoarsely answered by a score of voices—and then we plunge into the river and welter through it, and the weird encampment vanishes like a dream.

NOTE.—The post-rate in Central Asia is $2\frac{1}{2}$ kopecks (a little less than *id.*) per verst for each horse; and thus the total cost (excluding food and gratuities) of the whole journey from Orenburg to Tashkent—a distance of 1945 versts, or about 1300 miles—is £20 with three horses, and under £14 with two.

CHAPTER VII.

“STUCK FAST” ON THE STEPPES.

“No horses, Master !”

For the fourth time since sunrise, the fatal words are repeated ; and I find myself stuck fast once more, amid exactly the same surroundings ; for in these lifeless wastes there is little variety. A little kennel of mud and timber, called by courtesy a post-house ; three or four Kirghiz tents sticking up like rabbit burrows from the grey, unending level ; a waggon with its shafts lying helplessly on the ground, moodily sentinelled by myself and my Tartar servant ; and over all, the bright, clear, pitiless Asiatic sky.

Were I D'Artagnan or Monte-Cristo, I should, of course, improvise a balloon, or evolve horses by the mere force of my will, or (in the words of the great master) “*courir plus vite que les chevaux.*” But the feats which are easy to a French novelist, are unattainable by an English correspondent ; and there is nothing for it but to accept the situation as it stands—which my Tartar, with true Mussulman stoicism, has already done.

“What can we do, master ? ‘It was so written for us at our birth—we must just bear it !’”

“Right you are, Mourad my boy; so let's have a mouthful of bread and meat, and then look about us.”

The Tartar's eyes glisten hungrily, and he produces the battered havresack with significant alacrity. With the one clasp-knife which we possess in common, we hack our black bread and cold mutton in true barbaric fashion—wash down the “Gothic carving” with a huge draught of cold tea (the efficacy of which I first learned on the top of Mont Blanc) and, in the words of an American friend of mine, “are ready for anything from piracy to pumice-stone.”

But although we eat like men who are under the open sky day and night, it must be owned that the situation itself is not particularly appetising. Meat running short—no chance of fresh supplies for days to come—a temperature of 120 degrees Fahrenheit—constant delays—250 miles of desert still lying between us and the Syr-Daria—and, above all, the chance of reaching Khiva before the final assault reduced to a minimum. As yet, indeed, we are not in Turkestan at all. Five stations away, the little post-house of Terekli looks down upon the wilderness of cracked, parched clay, and dried watercourses, and drifting sands, which forms the boundary of the famous province; and, at our present rate of travelling, it will be a good day's journey to reach it.

But the Desert is a good school for learning patience; and men who have lived for weeks face to face with thirst, hunger, fever, bruises, vermin, and ophthalmia, have little room for minor grievances. Mourad and I

look at each other over the half-empty havresack, and laugh aloud.

"Never mind, master! we shall get to the end somehow or other. After all, we can hardly expect to get along here as if we were on the Nikolaievski railway."*

"Hardly, my lad; but anyhow, we may just as well have a bath while we're waiting. Just see if you can find a stream or a pond anywhere about—with all that grass yonder, there ought to be water."

Off goes Mourad at the word, with unaffected zeal; for your Asiatic, as a rule, bathes more (and washes less) than any man under heaven. And, in truth, we are both much in need of it. Barely six hours have passed since I swam across the Irgiz and back, yet one may already strike a match upon any part of me; and honest Mourad's yellow face looks like a peppered omelette. Desert travelling is certainly no sinecure, and a thing hard to conceive till one has actually tried it. In cool, breezy England, men picture it to themselves vaguely as a long, hot, rather thirsty ride. The reality is widely different. The heat of a furnace during the day, the damp of a Lincolnshire fen at night; an atmosphere filled with hot prickly dust, choking your pores and making you tingle from head to foot; a quivering haze of intense heat along the horizon; lips cracked and bleeding, eyes that ache with a dull, unceasing pain, a furred leathery tongue that seems too large for your mouth; a torturing thirst, which no amount of drink can satisfy; a feverish un-

* The Moscow-St. Petersburg line, named after the late Czar.

refreshing sleep ; a constant irritation, worse than the sharpest agony ; a lassitude which makes you feel as if life itself were not worth the trouble of defending—such are the realities of desert life !

Under such auspices I naturally rejoice at the re-appearance, about half-an-hour later, of my trusty henchman, dripping from his recent plunge, and looking, if not absolutely clean, at least considerably less dirty than before.

“ All right, master ; there's not much water, but quite enough for a bath. Just follow those two cows yonder, and they'll bring you right to it.”

And, so speaking, the true believer stretches himself under a patch of shade about the breadth of a handkerchief, and goes to sleep as only an Asiatic can.

Rather a novel sensation, bathing in a desert pool with cattle for one's bathmen ; but it would be well if these were my only attendants. I have gone barely fifty yards when a sound like the striking-up of a church-organ warns me that the bush-flies are astir. At every stride fresh swarms spring up, stimulated by the unexpected wind-fall of a tolerably tender European skin ; and to a distant observer, if there were one, I speedily present the spectacle of an infuriated lunatic. Once under the water, I shall be safe from them ; but how about undressing ? Why are not one's clothes made all in one piece, like those of the circus dancers ? I make a frantic attempt at “ peeling ” as I run, in unconscious imitation of Jacob Grimm's farrier, who shod a horse at full gallop without stopping him, and

two minutes later I am over head and ears in the cool, refreshing, delightful water, sending through all my veins a thrill of life and vigour which I have almost forgotten.

What a strange sensation it is, that of being in perfect comfort for the time being after intense hardship, with the full consciousness that you must move *some* time, and that as soon as you do the hardship will recommence afresh. The courier drinking in the warm post-house after a ride through blinding snow; the sailor turning into his hammock from the "middle watch" off the Horn; the climber on the summit of Mont Blanc or the Brazilian "Sugar-loaf;" the school-boy romping out his short half-holiday; the Roman slave revelling in the brief and boisterous "liberty of December"—what a tug for them all to return to their old conditions from the enjoyable Present! And so, too, with me. Plunged in this glorious bath of Nature's making—cool, and clean, and buoyant, after the hot, dusty lassitude of the desert—for the moment I am perfectly happy, but then—!

When I get back to my waggon there are still no horses; and I must perforce open negotiations with the Kirghiz, who, sure of their prey, are patiently squatted at the tent-door, "biding their time." I take a huge draught from the bowl of sour milk in the centre, and, squatting myself on the general "felt," touch hands with the whole circle.

"Any one here got a horse?"

Most of the party look as if they had never heard of

such a creature; but the old chief, with a cunning twinkle in his small, deep-set eye, ventures to think that he "has one *somewhere*."

"Double pay if I get three within a quarter of an hour."

A bombshell could hardly be more effective. Three men instantly rush off in search of the beasts, three more in quest of harness; while the patriarch, with the air of a man who knows how to be civil even to an inferior, hands me the bowl again, bidding me drink and be welcome. I speedily make friends with every one of the gaunt brown scarecrows, and am just starting a furious game of romps with the chief's son and heir, a bullet-headed five-year-old, with black beady eyes, and a mouth like the opening of a letter-box, when up come horses, harness, and driver all in the lump, and ten minutes later the whole encampment is a mere shadow on the horizon.

Afternoon brings us to Uralsk, another little islet of human life in the great sea of desolation. Along the brow of a steep ridge overhanging the Irgiz a few scores of log-shanties cluster like limpets, crowned by a little toy fortress that would just fit into Belgrave Square, over the low mud breastwork of which one might march without changing step, with little risk from the two guns which *are defended* by it. Altogether, an unpretending, insignificant little place enough; yet it is just these tiny atoms of armed colonisation which have carried the banners of Russia from the Ural to the Thian-Shan. All the steppe forts which I have seen throughout the length and breadth of Central Asia—

Karabutak, Uralsk, Forts No. 1 and 2, Fort Perovski, Djulek—are on the same pattern, a mud wall sufficient to resist any force without discipline or cannon, manned by a few hundred seasoned Cossacks. The plan conceived a generation ago by General Obrutcheff has succeeded more fully than even he could have foreseen. A large army sent from a distance is infinitely less formidable to the guerillas of Central Asia than a handful of men encamped in their very midst, ever ready to drive off camels, beset wells, surprise camps, and cut off marauding parties. Desert warfare has no “second opportunities,” and its whole history is a fresh verification of the pithy old maxim, “He that gives quickly, gives twice.”

Our halt at Uralsk is a mere duplicate of all the rest—the production of my travelling-pass, the despatch of messengers in quest of fresh horses, the hasty gorge of food, the arrival and harnessing of the team, the payment of the posts, and then—away! As the sun sinks westward over the boundless level, we rattle down the fortress ridge, and plunge into the waste once more—this time in a literal sense. For now the thin lacquer of vegetation which redeems the northern steppe forsakes us altogether, and the genuine desert—the famous “Kara-Koum” * itself—begins to assert its presence in earnest.

“There’s no pasture for us *here*,” says the Kirghiz

* Why these names were given, it is hard to say. The Kara-Koum (black sand), Kizil-Koum (red sand), and Ak-Koum (white sand), are all of one colour, and that colour, a pale yellow.

postmaster to me at the next station, popping up from the little underground burrow which forms his only dwelling. "We have no horses nearer than an hour's ride; and as for water, that lake yonder's salt, and when we want fresh water, we have to go ten versts (about seven miles) to fetch it."

Barer and barer, bleaker and bleaker, the lifeless sands and dry watercourses outstretch themselves around under the gathering shadows of night—vanishing, at length, in utter gloom, and then rising gauntly into view under the spectral moonlight. Once and again, during a night that seems to have no end, a circle of grim faces, all eyes and teeth, flash into being around a surging fire, tossed hither and thither by the restless wind; and for a few moments, human life and human speech are about us, and then darkness and utter silence engulf us once more.

But the desolation culminates next morning at Terekli, the frontier station of Turkestan. All around the solitary post-house (the *one* sign of man's presence in this forgotten world) stretches a boundless expanse of parched clay ridges, and dry ravines, and burning sands, from which the grey powdery dust rises chokingly—not in sudden gusts, but with a slow, steady, continuous boiling-up, stifling as the fumes of charcoal. And here, at last, is the end of the Orenburg Territory, and the beginning of Turkestan—that forbidden ground which (as I am fated to read in official handwriting, three days hence) "no Englishman is permitted to enter upon any pretext whatever."

At this point, amid sands in which a horse would sink at every step, we bethink ourselves, not a whit too soon, of the "ship of the desert." With three full-grown camels harnessed to my waggon, and the midmost ridden by a Kirghiz driver, I feel master of the situation once more ; and it is with a sense of old acquaintanceship that I see (for the first time since I left Southern Arabia in 1871) the huge gaunt figures and long sinewy legs scurrying through a whirl of driving sand, and hear the deep hoarse scream which, like an Englishman's oath, expresses equally every kind of emotion. Backed by the seasoned muscles of the Djemel, we make short work of the next few stages ; and by sunrise on the following morning, I look my first upon a spot which, however familiar in name to Western Europe, is still dim and distant as a remote planet—the far-famed Sea of Aral.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OUTLAWED SEA.

A WIDE expanse of smooth blue water ; a little plateau of level sand, upon which three bearded and sunburned men, in tattered white jackets, are grouped around a steaming tea-urn ; a knot of wild-looking figures in the background, together with the huge ungainly forms of several camels, with their long necks couched upon the earth in lazy enjoyment ; and beyond all, the grey unending level of the desert melting into the hot summer sky.

This is the famous "Aralskoé Moré"—outlawed among seas as the men whom it shelters are among nations. It does not, indeed, like the Dead Sea, lie in the depths of a tomb walled in by precipitous cliffs ; but in other respects the two banished lakes are singularly alike. The same rich summer blue ; the same utter absence of living creatures ; the same intense desolation on every side ; the same lifeless and sinister beauty ; the same deadly silence brooding over all. The water of the Aral Sea, however, is but slightly brackish, and its bottom is thick and muddy ; while the little vegetation which it *does* possess is of an ominous kind—a short, coarse grass of the deepest

crimson, as if all the blood shed there in old time had risen to the surface once more, refusing to be hid.*

But picturesque as it is, a more useless sheet of water, from any but a purely military point of view, does not exist. Shut in on the east by barren sands, on the west by unbroken rocks, on the south by pestilential morasses—without a single patch of wooding on its shores, or a harbour worth calling such throughout its whole length of two hundred and seventy miles—the Sea of Aral is indeed “given up to desolation.” Even the practised sailors of the Russian flotilla bear an evil recollection of its sudden hurricanes and perilous shoals; and the very Kirghiz who straggle about its borders never remain there beyond a few weeks at a time. In fact the one redeeming point of this genuine “Dead Sea” is the supply of excellent limestone yielded by the Nikolai Ostroff (the largest of the islands, with an area of 130 square miles) an invaluable aid to the Russians in the construction of their forts.

Fresh from my bath in the lake, I am just ready for the plentiful breakfast which my two new comrades (Russian officers on their way to Orenburg from Fort No. 1) hasten to set before me. The frank kindly faces, and hearty words of outspoken welcome, with which these fine young fellows receive me—an utter stranger and a possible enemy—make me think remorsefully of all that I have said and written against the Russian army. In the heart of these dreary deserts, thousands

* I have remarked the same growth in the Inkermann Valley, appropriate there.

of miles from my own people, this little spot of kindly brotherhood is very pleasant to meet with ; but it is only one sample of the uniform kindness and courtesy which I met with from every Russian officer throughout my whole route (even during my detention at Fort No. 1) and which I might possibly have looked for in vain in far more civilised countries.

The first piece of news that I get from them, however, comes upon me like an electric shock.

“What, isn’t Khiva taken, then, after all ? Why, we heard that not only was the town taken, but the Khan a prisoner as well ; and that, too, with very slight loss to your people.”

“Ah, they must have confounded Khiva with Kungrad.* *It* was taken on the 8th (20th) May ; and we *did* lose only a few men over it. As for Khiva, it *ought* to be taken by this time ; but there was no word of it when we left Fort No. 1.”†

“Are the steppes all clear ?”

“Clear enough when *we* passed ; but I doubt if they’ll let you go on without an escort. You see, there was an officer murdered on the other side of Syr-Daria about a month ago ; and ever since that, they’ve been more careful.”

“Have you got food enough ?” strikes in the other, “We’ve got far more of this white bread of ours than we shall want ; and it’ll be better eating for you than that gritty biscuit.”

* The key of the Delta, 197 miles below Khiva.

† Khiva fell June 10 ; but the news only reached Fort No. 1, July 2.

And, in fact, the kind fellows actually force a small loaf upon me, to the huge delight of my Tartar, who has a full measure of that superstitious reverence for white bread which seems common to all his class. A few minutes later, the postmaster summons my hosts; and, with a hearty shake of the hand, we part—probably for ever.

Half an hour later, it is our turn. Fresh from our cool bath and hearty meal, we are just in the humour to appreciate the bright morning sun, and the fresh breeze which is just springing up from the lake, indescribably refreshing after the thick, torpid atmosphere of the desert. Even my Tartar henchman, who, ever since we left Uralsk, has looked as gloomy as Heraclitus, warms into momentary joviality, and strikes up a monotonous Tartar song, in which the swarthy little driver joins lustily.

Three months hence, if I but knew it, I shall be crossing these steppes once more, but in widely different guise—worn to a shadow by fever and starvation, bleeding from unhealed hurts, covered with sores and vermin, proscribed by all Russia on one side, and all England on the other, and, worse than all, with my work undone. But all this is yet in the unseen future; and for the present, with my strength still unimpaired, and Khiva still possible, I am as happy as man can be.

All that day, the refreshing breeze and clear sunny sky make us almost forget that we are in one of the sternest wastes of Central Asia; but the desert, like the sea, has its caprices, and can change its lighter mood to

grim earnest at the shortest notice. The sun is setting gloriously in a cloudless sky—the air is intensely still—all is perfect repose as far as the eye can reach—when suddenly a grey dimness rushes down over the whole sky, and in a moment there comes a rush and a roar, and we are blinded, deafened, and strangled all at once; and the whole air is one whirl of driving sand and charging storm. The camels fall flat on the ground, the driver leaps down, and lies beside them; my Tartar and I pull our shawls over our faces, and crouch into the smallest possible compass; and there we lie (for many hours, as it seems to us, though in reality it is less than one), listening to the “pirr-pirr” of the sand against our waggon, and the deep unslackening roar which seems as if it would go on for ever.

At last the uproar begins to die away, the trembling of the waggon is less and less violent, the rush of the sand fainter and fainter, till at last we venture to draw aside our mufflers, and peer cautiously forth. A pale gleam of moonlight is just shimmering through the hurrying clouds, and lights up a strange scene. All around, far as sight can reach, the smooth sand is billowed like the waves of an angry sea, the waggon looks as if steeped in lime, and our wheels are buried up to the very axle. Despite all my wrappings, my skin is literally *gritty* from head to foot; and Mourad's sallow visage looks like a half-washed potato. The warm, genial atmosphere has suddenly become chilly as a grave; for the Siberian hurricane has brought with it cold memories of unknown seas, and leagues of

frozen moorland, and half-seen icebergs drifting wearily under the polar night; and this pale grey sand, unabsorbent of heat by its very nature, is one of the coldest surfaces in the world.

However, this is "all in the day's work," and to be made light of accordingly. My driver shakes himself, and mounts his beast, as if nothing had happened; the camels break into that long shambling trot which can tire out the staunchest horse; and I, wrapping myself once more in my trusty shawl, go quietly off to sleep.

"Master, master! wake up!"

I start to my feet, and, rubbing my eyes confusedly, look about to see where I am. The waggon is drawn up in front of one of those long, low, pale-grey post-houses which have haunted me for days past; but this time there is a new feature in the landscape. A little behind, the sails of three windmills, dimly seen in the shadowy moonlight, stand out spectrally against the sky, forming a landmark which is destined to serve me for many a long week to come.

"Where are we?"

"Fort No. 1."

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPED.

“AND this is the Syr-Daria!” soliloquise I, at sunrise on the morning of my arrival. “I shall have to bathe in it before I can persuade myself that I really *am* here.”

And, indeed, the whole thing may well appear like a dream. The spot which, for years past, has been vague and shadowy as Utopia or Atlantis, lies before me in bodily presence at last. To the right, the sentry's bayonet glitters in the morning sunshine above the low mud wall of a tiny fort—the famous Fort No. 1 ; to my left, extends a wide sweep of green plain, melting at length into the dull grey of the desert. Just below me runs a thick turbid stream, bitterly contrasting with its name of Clean River (Syr-Daria), walled in by low banks of soft rich clay, like a river of cabbage-soup flowing between two interminable slices of brown bread. Beyond it, far as the eye can reach, stretches a dreary waste of sand—the far-famed Kizil-Koum itself—on the other side of which, barely 380 miles away, lies the little oasis of primitive rascality whose name is shaking the whole earth.

But, near as I am to Khiva, there is still much to be

done before I can get there ; and the first thing is to communicate with the authorities, to whom my arrival has already been reported by the accurate postmaster. Colonel Goloff, the District Governor, being absent with the army, he is for the present replaced by the same Captain Vereshtchagin of whom I have heard so much and learned so little ; and to him, accordingly, I despatch my card, with a written message that "being on my way to the army with letters for the Commander-in-Chief, I have to beg the favour of his assistance."

My messenger, a tall, rawboned Cossack, with an unpleasantly cannibal look in his long lean face, returns in about an hour with a polite intimation that the Governor will be happy to see me at six in the evening ; and, punctually at the time appointed, I present myself at the official residence. It is a place worthy of Cincinnatus. A little one-storeyed house of baked clay, squeezed into a courtyard barely larger than itself ; a huge, clumsy wooden gate, such as one sees in the farm-houses of Central Russia ; a clamorous army of poultry in council before the door ; an overturned bucket in one corner, a broken horse-collar in the other ; everything of absolutely Spartan simplicity.

I enter the first door I come to, and find myself in a small kitchen, where sit three Cossacks—active, soldierly fellows, tanned to the colour of mahogany, and with the peculiarly tough, seasoned look characteristic of their race. In these parts (more especially since the war drained off the bulk of the

garrisons into another channel) a new arrival is a rarity; and the three, delighted at finding a new listener, begin to produce their little stock of curiosities with the eagerness of children displaying their new toys. One exhibits a silver ring from Kokan—another a curiously-wrought pipe-head from Samarcand, the gift of some comrade who has been through the Holy War*—and the third startles me with a *bona fide* German almanac—"aus Berlin, 1872"—frankly confessing that he "cannot read a word, but it amuses him to look at the pictures."

"Master, the Governor expects you!"

The short, sharp summons breaks up our talk, and I follow Cossack number four into a neat little room with waxed floor and spotless walls, furnished with a sofa and table that would not disgrace a college sitting-room. On the table stands a steaming tea-urn (the traditional Russian *samovar*) and behind the tea-urn sits a tall, spare, swarthy, keen-looking man, with short black hair just inclining to grey, who greets me with a heartiness which unaccountably suggests the tone of a dentist bidding a nervous patient sit down and make himself comfortable.

I survey my future gaoler with special interest, and recognise at once a familiar and sufficiently remarkable type—the Russian soldier *pur sang*, without any foreign admixture, who has fought his way fairly up, unaided by either purchase or interest. The low square fore-

* The war of 1868, which resulted in the capture of Samarcand, and the final disablement of Bokhara.

head and iron jaw, the calm, steadfast, unflinching eyes, the attitude of quiet preparedness and unresting vigilance, are all characteristic of the man whose whole military creed is to obey orders and to hate a foreigner.

“Glad to see you, David Stepanovitch ; fine weather to-day. Sit down and have a glass of tea—the water’s just boiling.”

Two tumblers are brought, and my host fills my glass with his own hands, supplementing it by the proffer of a saucer filled with thin slices of lemon, in place of milk—a piece of hospitality which, in a region where lemons are half-a-crown each, cannot be too highly appreciated. But from all this courtesy I augur ill for the success of my mission, knowing as I do the proneness of the Russian to do good that evil may come, and to gild the deadliest pill with every kind of civility. And so, indeed, it proves. I have just finished my fourth tumbler, when the old gentleman (doubtless thinking that I am now sufficiently primed to bear the impending shock like a man) produces a huge, yellow, official-looking document (which crackles ominously as he opens it, like the warning rattle of a snake), and in a slow, judicial voice, reads as follow :—

“With respect to persons of foreign nationality—whether English, French, Italians, Americans, or what not—giving themselves out as travellers for purposes of trade or otherwise, and wishing to pass through the territory of Turkestan : It is hereby commanded to the Governor of Kazalinsk on no account to permit such

persons to pass, but to send them back at once to Orenburg.—July 14th, 1870.”

Here is a stroke with a vengeance !

For a moment, I am fairly taken aback ; but an instant's reflection suffices to set the whole thing clearly before me. With the recommendations which I carry, this man will hardly venture to turn me back on his own responsibility, and, if I choose to submit to a temporary arrest (provided my real character is not discovered), my letters may be sent through to headquarters, and Khiva be possible yet—to say nothing of the information obtainable at a frontier fortress on the Syr-Daria. I decide to put a bold face on it, and begin accordingly.

“ You're not going to stop *me*, surely ? You see I've got letters to the Commander-in-Chief and General Verevkin, and half a dozen of the staff besides—here they are for you to look at. Besides, I thought every part of Russia was free to *us*. If I were an Englishman, now—” *

“ If you were an Englishman,” interrupts my host, “ you'd never have got here at all—we always stop *them* at Orenburg. It's not that I suspect you of anything wrong ; but orders are orders, you know. See here, now ; there was a countryman of yours came this way with a letter from General Krijanovski, last month, so I let him go on to Fort Perovski. The commandant there gave him a couple of guides, and put him on his

* It is hardly necessary to say that, during my whole residence in Central Asia, my nationality was an assumed one.

road across the desert.* Well, *that commandant was court-martialled.*"

Volumes could not say more. I begin to see that I have to do with a man against whom diplomacy can avail nothing, and come to the point at once.

"What am I to do, then? It's rather hard, after being so well received everywhere, and getting so near the end, to be treated as an enemy just at the last. Can't you think of *anything* to help me?"

"Well, it *does* seem rather hard," admits the old gentleman, somewhat relenting; "but what's to be done? one must obey orders, you know. I don't see any need for sending you back; but you'll have to stay here till we get orders from Kaufmann about you. Now, I'll tell you what I should do if I were you. Just draw up a petition (I'll write it for you myself in two minutes), saying that you want to get to Khiva to see the Commander-in-Chief—and send it off to-night to Tashkent, with your passport and letters of recommendation, by a special courier. You ought to have an answer in twelve or fourteen days; and if they decide upon letting you go, I shall be most happy to give you all the help I can."

No sooner said than done. Within half an hour, the petition is written, signed, copied, stamped, and sent off—an instance of despatch unparalleled in the annals of Russian officialism, and which would, of itself,

* This was the first news I got of my brother-correspondent, the representative of the *New York Herald*. A month later, his desert ride was in every mouth.

suffice to establish my foreign nationality. And now, having done all I can for myself, I hasten to thank my friend the Governor, and to bid him good night.

"Don't be cast down about it," are his last words. "They're pretty sure to let you through ; and, at all events, any evening when you have nothing better to do, come and take a glass of tea with me."

"It's not foreigners in general that you hate then—only Englishmen," suggest I laughing.

"Well," answers the veteran, unconsciously uttering the opinion of every military man in Central Asia : "you see, we've got too close now to be very good friends. Men can be friendly enough when there's a good distance between 'em ; but when they come to touch elbows, they're apt to jostle each other. When we occupy Bokhara (which *will* be the next thing after Khiva, of course), we shall come to blows with England at once ; and the sooner the better."

Over his weather-beaten face, as he utters the last words, breaks the same light of grim gladness which may have shone there years ago, when he looked the English in the face, under the death-mist of the fatal 5th of November ; and I see, for the hundredth time, the undercurrent of deep hatred that boils up against us below the smooth surface of diplomatic courtesy which deludes Western Europe.

As I step forth into the open air, the sky is clear, and the air cool ; but far away upon the horizon hovers a long low cloud, sullenly biding its time. In that sky is the future of Central Asia.

On the following day, I migrate from the post-house to "Morozoff's," the sole approach to an inn which the town possesses, and am duly installed in the little white-washed cell which my Tartar and I are fated to inhabit for seven weary weeks to come. The shock-headed servant who shows me in, after expatiating upon the beauties of the furniture (a rickety deal table and chair, with two huge, black, sarcophagus-like divans), points triumphantly to a long, low, bare-looking room just opposite mine.

"That," says he, with the air of an astronomer pointing out a new planet, "that's the very room in which our prisoners had their first dinner when they came from Khiva—the whole one-and-twenty of them."

"Were you there then?" ask I.

"Was I there? Why, I myself, with my own hands, brought in the dishes, and had a talk with them all into the bargain—upon my oath I did!"

"Indeed? you must tell me about that to-night."

And he did so; but as some of the details did not reach me till many days later, I had better give the story in my own words.

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN OF THE RUSSIAN PRISONERS FROM KHIVA.

IT is the morning of the 1st April 1873, and the little town of Kazalinsk is all in a ferment, from the three little windmills that face the northern desert to the low wall of baked clay, over which the eight guns of Fort No. 1 look down upon the Syr-Daria. Stout men in huge turbans whisper together amid the booths of the bazaar; gaunt men in white tunics catch each other by the arm upon the path beside the river. Officers, strolling about with linen scarfs wound round their forage-caps, salute each other with a knowing air; and flat-faced women, turbaned with scarlet handkerchiefs, chatter volubly in the doorways of the little mud hovels which they are pleased to call houses. Evidently some great event is at hand, the nature of which may be guessed from the conversation of this knot of big, bearded, sallow-faced Russian traders, who are grouped round their little tea-urn, under the canvas awning of one of those heterogeneous shops common in Russian outposts, where one may buy anything from a sceptre to a saucepan.

“I tell you, brothers, it's as true as the Scriptures. Ivan Feodorovitch came in just now from the bureau,

and told me that they're only a day's journey off with their escort ; and that the commandant's going to send half a squadron to meet 'em."

"There's a Khan for you ! there's a brave fellow !" cries his vis-à-vis, with righteous indignation. "So long as he's in fair weather, he robs, and murders, and kidnaps the orthodox,* and serves the devil in every way ; but once the bayonets come near his beard, and he finds himself in trouble, he sends back our brethren, and crouches down like a whipped dog."

"Well, what would you have ? he's only a heathen, you know. You can't expect a heathen to be as brave as a Christian."

"Gently there, brother," strikes in the third, a portly old greybeard, who, having once been actually as far as Moscow, is the oracle of his untravelled brethren. "There are brave fellows among the unbelievers, say what you will. It's not every one of the orthodox, I can tell you, who could have done such deeds as the English sorcerer, Dr Davidovitch Livenshtonn."

"And who was *he* ?" ask the other two in a breath.

"Eh ! have you had your ears stuffed with glue, never to have heard of *him* ! He was a great sorcerer, who turned himself into a lion, and in that shape went all over the deserts of Africa, beyond thrice nine lands" (the Russian phrase for extreme distance), "and fought with another lion and beat him, but got his own arm broken in the fight (for you see the devil helped him, being an Englishman). But at last the black sorcerers,

* The common name for the Russians among themselves.

whose magic was stronger than his, came upon him and took him prisoner, and carried him away where Makar never drove his cattle. So then, Victoria Ivanovna, the Empress of England, sent out a huge army to rescue him, under a great general named Count Stenli; and this Stenli had a magic flag (I've seen a picture of it in Moscow, all over stripes) which, when he waved it, struck all the black men powerless, like one benumbed with frost; and so the sorcerer-Doctor was saved."

"Gospodi pomilui!" (Lord have mercy) chorus the two hearers in amazement; and the narrator drains his glass with a complacent air. But a sudden trampling of horses breaks the spell.

"There go the Cossacks!" cries number one; and, sure enough, at the end of the street (if this broad dusty ditch, lined with little burrows of baked mud, can be so called) appear a long file of gaunt, sinewy, brigand-like men, whose bronzed faces look doubly dark between the linen cap and white tunic—each with his carbine slung over his shoulder, and his sabre clinking at his side. These are the famous Cossacks of the Ural, hardy and untiring as the men they are sent to hunt down—enduring heat and cold with equal indifference, and deeming it the height of happiness to lie in the shade and get drunk. Away they go, the shadows of man and horse standing out sharp as a photograph in the blinding glare—till, little by little, they melt into the vast stretch of pale dusty green that lies between the shining river and the dull brassy yellow of the everlasting desert, and are seen no more.



KHIVANS.

Chap. x.

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And then follow two days of intense expectation. Hour after hour do lean brown men, in long white robes, clamber on to the flat roofs of their little mud-burrows, and gaze southward over the unending level; while some of the more enthusiastic actually march two miles (an enormous feat for an Asiatic) to the "crossing" of Kara-Toubeh, where a huge iron-bound raft, towed by a rope slung across the stream, forms the only ferry for miles round.

At length, about sunset on the second day there goes up into the still evening air one universal shout which there is no mistaking. Far out upon the great billiard-board which environs the town, appears a cluster of moving black specks, which, on a ~~water~~ ^{water} ~~view~~ ^{view} shape themselves into the figures of men and women in full career, with the long dark robes and high top of black sheepskin, which have been the attire of Central Asia since Khiva was first built. Foremost of the throng, on a magnificent Arab horse with a ~~very~~ ^{very} ~~rich~~ ^{rich} ~~trappings~~ ^{trappings}, rides a tall handsome man of about forty, whose fresh complexion and purely European features contrast strangely with the ~~harsh~~ ^{harsh} ~~swart~~ ^{swart} ~~features~~ ^{features} of his suite.

"I know that foremost fellow," says a ~~prominent~~ ^{prominent} Cossack, scarred by the "Hungary War" of 1849, "he is the Governor of Khudjend, who was ambassador at ~~our~~ ^{our} ~~hara~~ ^{hara} the time we were there. He is a ~~good~~ ^{good} ~~man~~ ^{man} — devil take him!"

Why this postscript is ~~added~~ ^{added} ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~story~~ ^{story} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~undoubtedly~~ ^{undoubtedly}, if you wish to ~~see~~ ^{see} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~rest~~ ^{rest} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~story~~ ^{story}.

And then follow two days of intense expectation. Hour after hour do lean brown men, in long white robes, clamber on to the flat roofs of their little mud-burrows, and gaze southward over the unending level; while some of the more enthusiastic actually march two miles (an enormous feat for an Asiatic) to the "crossing" of Kara-Toubeh, where a huge iron-bound raft, towed by a rope slung across the stream, forms the only ferry for miles round.

At length, about sunset on the second day, there goes up into the still evening air one universal shout which there is no mistaking. Far out upon the great billiard-board which environs the town, appear a cluster of moving black specks, which, on a nearer view, shape themselves into the figures of men and horses in full career, with the long dark robes and high caps of black sheepskin, which have been the terror of Central Asia since Khiva was first built. Foremost of the throng, on a magnificent Arab horse with silver-laced trappings, rides a tall handsome man of about forty, whose fresh complexion and purely Uzbek features contrast strangely with the harsh, swarthy, brigand-like faces of his suite.

"I know that foremost fellow," says a grey-haired Cossack, scarred by the "Holy War" of 1868; "that's the Governor of Khodjeili, who was ambassador in Bokhara the time we were there. He's a brave fellow, too—devil take him!"

Why this postscript is added it is hard to say; but, undoubtedly, if you wish to hear real undiluted cursing,

you must listen to a Russian speaking of a Mussulman, or *vice versa*.

Following the horsemen come a number of men on foot, and the Cossack escort brings up the rear. Nearer and nearer draws the cavalcade, the spectators watching in dead silence ; and then up rises another shout, which makes the very air ring. The men on foot are in Asiatic garb like the rest ; but, close as they now are, there is no mistaking the low forehead, the broad flat features, and iron jaw of the Russian. The prisoners are come at last !

“It’s they ! it’s our brothers !” roars a big tradesman, leaping from his perch on the wheel of a waggon. “Let’s go and meet them ;” and off he runs, probably for the first time in his life. Instantly there is a rush of the whole assemblage ; and, surging over the great space that extends from the fortress-ditch right up to the long, low, warehouse-like building which does duty for a town-hall, the crowd comes rolling up in front of the latter just as the Khivan envoy draws bridle at the door. And there they stand—as motley a concourse as painter’s heart could desire. The gaunt Turkoman and the bullet-headed Tartar ; the bun-faced Kalmuck, with eyes like crushed raisins ; the low-browed Russian, the vulture-like Kirghiz ; the slim, wiry Cossack ; the stately Bokhariote, with the true Asiatic swagger in his long, slow stride ; the gnome-like Bashkir, bulky and untameable as the four-footed ancestor assigned him by tradition ; and the tall, swarthy, aquiline Khivan, with a lurking gleam in his fierce black eye, which shows

that, even under the shadow of impending ruin, the old national hatred is still unabated.

The Khivan residents of the town, 200 in number, throng around their ambassador, to kiss his hands, and offer him presents of tea and dried fruits. He enters the hall with his suite, and, reclining on the carpets provided for his accommodation, refreshes himself with tea out of a huge wooden bowl, the dregs of which he graciously passes to his subordinates.

Meanwhile the stir outside rises to a height; for the prisoners have now come up, and the excitement is universal. The captives are embraced, kissed, pulled hither and thither, overwhelmed with questions and congratulations; and many a hard face in the crowd softens strangely as the rescued men, reverently doffing their caps, cross themselves in the old fashion, which seems now like the memory of a previous existence, and return thanks for their deliverance to the God and Father of all.

In the midst of the bustle, there steps forward among them a grey-haired man, with a look of weary expectation in his sad, earnest eyes, and asks eagerly, "Is there not among you one Obvertisheff—Nikolai Stepanovitch—he *must* be here somewhere, but I don't see him?"

"No, father, he's not," answer the prisoners, compassionately, well knowing what the question implies.

"Are you *sure*?" persists the old man, imploringly. "He may have lagged behind—he may be with the Cossacks! Nineteen years ago they took him—my

brother—my only brother! Are you *sure* he's not among you?"

The prisoners shake their heads pityingly, and the crowd makes way in silence, as the old man, with a low, weary sigh that is painful to hear, moves slowly away. Nineteen years has he hoped against hope for the return of his lost brother—a hope brightened into certainty by the march upon Khiva, and the release of the captives; and now——!

But it is already wearing late, and the dinner provided for the heroes of the day at Morozoff's (the principal eating-house of the town) is still to be thought of—a matter recalled to the public attention by an officer who suddenly pulls up in front of the group.

"Dinner's ready for you, my lads; and I daresay you're ready for it; only remember that you've not been used to Russian food for a good while, and don't go into it *too* eagerly just at first, or you may do yourselves harm."

"All right, your honour—we'll be careful," answers a tall white-bearded Cossack, whose long gaunt frame looks as if it could absorb the whole banquet at one gulp, like a boa-constrictor. The prisoners close up by twos, and march up one street, down another, round a sharp corner—coming out at length in front of the "house of entertainment," a smart brick building, facing a "public garden" about the size of a flower-bed. In the midst of the garden stands the sole monument of the town, a little stone chapel commemorating the

Emperor's escape from assassination on the 16th April 1866—at sight of which the devout Russians unbonnet and cross themselves once more.

The dinner is laid in the biggest room of the house, a large, airy, tolerably clean apartment, with brick floor and whitewashed walls, looking out upon a huge desolate courtyard, where, on a thick layer of rushes, two or three disused waggons lie helplessly, like soldiers in hospital. Well knowing the tastes of his countrymen, the hospitable host has covered the table with a noble array of national dainties—boiled beef, *shtchee* (cabbage soup), caviare, cheese, black bread, salted cucumber, and, above all, *vodka* (corn-whiskey)—upon each and all of which the emancipated Russians, forgetful of the officer's warning, throw themselves tooth and nail, their friends meanwhile standing around, and flooding them with an unceasing stream of questions.

“It's Easter with us now,” remarks a big Cossack with a grin, through a tremendous mouthful of bread and cucumber; “but we've had a good long fast beforehand, anyhow!”

“Did they feed you badly in Khiva, then?” asks a bystander.

“Feed us badly? may they be fed the same way in t'other world, the accursed heathens, and sons of ——” (Here the speaker becomes unprintable for several paragraphs.) “One cake of bread in the morning, and there you were for the day! They ill-used us too, at first, as I wouldn't ill-use a dog; but when it got about that the expedition was making ready, and when the

Khan's ambassador came back from England* without doing any good, they got frightened, and began to treat us better, and to feed us better too."

"And what do you think? will they fight?"

"*They* fight? I'd like to see them! Why, their muskets are a lot of old trash that's been sent out of Russia because nobody would buy 'em; and as for powder, they've about as much as there's trees on the steppe here. They managed to fire one of their cannon on a festival day last year, and it burst, and killed a whole lot of their own people. *They* fight? why a barn-door cock would chase any ten of them!"

"And when did you leave Khiva?"

"We've been thirty days on the road; but then we went very slowly. If they'd been carrying us away prisoners instead of letting us loose, I'll be bound they'd have gone faster, the pigs! When we first heard that we were to be set free, we hardly felt the ground under our feet; but it always seemed too good to be true, somehow; and even on the road, what with our going so slow, and these dogs whispering together among themselves, we were always afraid of being turned back at the very last. But I'd made up my mind beforehand, that if we *were* turned back, I'd just kill myself on the spot; for no death could be worse than *that*."

"We weren't so badly off as the Persians, though,

* I quote this as the man said it. He probably referred to the Khan's embassy to Lord Northbrook, Cossack geography being somewhat hazy.

after all," chimes in another; "poor fellows, *they* got treated worse than dogs—it was a shame to see it!" *

"Are there many Persian slaves there, then?"

"Plenty—twenty thousand at the very least; enough to smash the whole town, if they had only weapons. But I expect the way of it will be, that as soon as our brothers get within cannon shot of the place, the Persians will up and chop the Khivans to bits."

"You're right there, Petroushka," says his next neighbour, a tall handsome lad, with a very fair complexion for a Cossack. "That's just what they'll do—and quite right too. It's high time to settle accounts with those rascals. They've gone on robbing, and murdering, and serving the devil in every way, long enough without being paid for it; but, God be praised, the scythe's hit against a stone at last." †

"And what sort of life had *you* there!" asks one of his hearers.

"Well, I wasn't so *very* badly off. They set me to work in the Khan's garden, a fine big place with plenty of fruit in it; and they didn't bully me much, though they looked very sharp after me. But for all that (and his small grey eyes glitter ominously) if I were among 'em to-morrow with a good axe in my hand, I'd make their bones fly like the chips from felled timber."

Just at this moment the door opens, and in stalks the

* In some parts of Central Asia, however, they are highly valued. The infantry of the late Emir of Bokhara consisted almost entirely of Persian slaves; and the Generalissimo was a Persian.

† A Russian proverb, answering to our Diamond cut diamond.

stalwart form of Colonel Kozireff, the Commandant of the fortress, with a cordial smile of welcome under his heavy moustache. As he enters, a grizzled Cossack of the Ural, with a nose cut clean in two by a sabre-stroke, rises from his place near the door, and silently gives him the military salute. The Commandant stops short and looks hard at him.

“Do you know me, my lad?”

“I served under your honour at Fort Alexandrovsk, a long time ago. Perhaps you may remember one night that I came in from a ride after the ‘black caps’ (Khivans) when your honour was pleased to say that I had done well, and to give me a glass of vodka.”

“Ah, to be sure! I remember you now. Sit down again and eat; you must want it.”

“Your honour’s right there. Little did I ever think to see Russian cabbage soup again; but, thank God, here it is.” And the veteran shovels away with his wooden spoon like one tossing hay into a cart.

Dinner over, the prisoners assemble once more in front of the town-hall, to be counted by the Khivan secretary, while the envoy himself re-appears for a moment in order to exchange salutations with the Commandant. The tale of one and twenty is found to be correct; whereupon the secretary formally delivers them over to the officer in charge, and re-enters the hall with his master. Meanwhile the prisoners, obedient to the old familiar word of command, form in line, the still unsated townspeople crowding round them as eagerly as ever.

“Forward—march!”

Tramp, tramp, away they go—somewhat stiffly and unready, from long disuse, but still bravely enough; and upon more than one face you can see a gleam of unmistakable pleasure at this revival of the old military feeling.

“Out of practice, eh, Vania? but we’ll soon pick it up again, no fear!”

“Never mind, brother—we’re not marching back to Khiva, anyhow!”

And away they go into the barrack—to a good night’s rest, let us hope, on this their first night upon Russian ground, among the friends from whom they have been parted so long. Poor fellows! they have indeed suffered long and cruelly; but they are now (if they knew it) about to be swiftly and surely avenged. Already, from all the winds of heaven—from Orenburg, from Kazalinsk, from Tashkent, from Mangishlak, from Tchikishliar—the avengers are converging upon the doomed city. Three months hence, this very ground shall witness another and a greater rejoicing—the *Te Deum* over the fall of Khiva; and the very men who held them in bondage will themselves be on the way to Russia as prisoners of war.* But the details of that great day of triumph, as I myself witnessed them, must be given in a future chapter.

* The Khivan Ministers of War and of Foreign Affairs were brought to Kazalinsk by the Aral flotilla on the evening of Tuesday the 8th July: the *Te Deum* took place on Wednesday the 2d.

CHAPTER XI.

LONGE AB SUIS.

IT is the 18th of June, and high summer in Central Asia. Not a cloud in the sky, not a shadow on the plain; all is one blinding, blistering glare, beneath which the endless desert looks vaster and drearier than ever. Still as death lies the little fort behind its low grey wall; noiselessly flows the broad, smooth Syr-Daria between its low banks of cracked, parched clay. Amid these tremendous solitudes, even the anniversary of Waterloo is silent and peaceful enough; yet war and conquest have penetrated even here. Yonder, against the blue summer sky, loom the masts of anchored steamers and the muzzles of planted cannon; here, where I stand, lie the bones of those by whom these things were first made and handled. A year ago, in the midst of the lonely Atlantic, I stood beside the graves of Russian sailors on the Isle of St Vincent; to-day, amid a loneliness even more utter and overwhelming, I stand beside the graves of Russian soldiers in the heart of an Asiatic desert.

It is a quiet, unpretending place enough, this graveyard of Kazalinsk—but with an impressiveness of its own nevertheless. On the verge of the desert, just where the last of the little clay hovels that form the

“town” stands looking forth into the great void beyond, you see a low dyke of dried mud, enclosing a few scores of half-effaced mounds, surmounted by rudely-carved crosses or crumbling head-stones. The epitaphs are as simple as the graves themselves—no fanfaronade of praise or regret, but a mere name and date, with a brief word of prayer—such a memorial as befits men who died in their duty, asking no recompense.

I have seen graves enough in my time; but none with a deeper pathos in them than these. Exiles in death as in life, they lie here in the heart of the wilderness, far from their own cool northern sky, among men of alien blood and hostile faith, who curse their very dust with unquenchable hatred. They have done their work, hoping for no reward; and the rough-hewn crosses planted by their comrades, and the tears of nameless mourners far away on the plains of native Russia, are their only memorial. In the bulletins and decorations of imperial conquest there is no place for *them*; but it may be that when the deeds of all men shall be summed up hereafter, many who are famous in story will look mean beside them.

Most of the inscriptions are tolerably recent, the Russian occupation itself dating only from 1853; but, recent as they are, wind and weather have already so dealt with them, that not more than one in three can be deciphered. Some are carved with knife or chisel, and these have naturally escaped the best; but the majority are merely daubed in with paint; and it is touching to see how long and earnestly the unskilled hands of these

rough soldiers have laboured to preserve the memory of those whom they have lost. The first few that I look at are all men or officers of the garrison ; but farther on, it is sad to see how many young children are already among the number ; for in this cruel climate which strains even the iron frame of the Ural Cossack, these poor little blossoms have small chance of escape. I take out my note-book, and copy a few of the epitaphs :—

“ Here lies Vladimir, child of Dmitri Popoff, born June 2d, 1867, died July 1st, 1872. May God give him the kingdom of heaven ! ”

“ Under this cross rests an infant, Alexander Avdeieff, born 18th October 1871, died 11th January 1872.”

Thus briefly is summed up the story of a human life. This poor child may have been an only son, long wished for and long prayed for, rejoiced over with great joy during his short three months of life ; and then—!

“ Here lie buried Alexander, Helen, Alexey, the children of Lieutenant Syriatoff. Lord, receive them in peace into Thy kingdom ! ”

What a history is in these few lines ! A home left desolate—a whole family swept away—no more mirth and laughter, no more music of little voices, nor clasp of tiny hands, to cheer this dismal exile in the wilderness ; only a monotonous round of wearisome duties, from which the light, and the hope, and the beauty of life have gone out for ever.

Some of the graves show marks of special care, and these are for the most part the graves of officers who

have died during the last eighteen months; but the place itself has a weird, *forgotten* look. Weeds have sprung up on every side, and the broken gate, swinging loose on its rusty hinges, seems the fit entrance of a spot consecrated to decay. I turn back towards the centre of the enclosure, and resume my copying:—

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen. Here lies the body of Nikolai Emelianovitch Perphilieff, Lieutenant in the 8th Turkestan Battalion of the Line, deceased April 1st, 1870.”

“Here rests Axinia, wife of Peter Lounin, private in the 8th Turkestan Battalion of the Line, who died June 24th, 1871, in the 31st year of her age.”

“In memory of Feodor Kirilloff, sailor of the Aral flotilla, who died by the will of God on the 2d August 1870. Lord, receive my soul in peace.”

Three weeks later this last grave is again recalled to my mind when a Finnish sailor, just escaped from the deadly ordeal of the Khivan war,* finds time on the very night of his arrival to visit and tend the grave of his old ship-mate. In truth, it is strange what pathos the common Russian, coarse and ignorant as he is, casts around every idea of death and burial. I can well remember, even now, how nearly I once gave way on hearing a Russian soldier (a rough, ignorant savage as ever breathed) entreat the comrades in whose arms he lay dying to visit his grave when it should be green and beautiful in

* The Aral flotilla comprises two steamers, the Samarcand of 70-horse power, and the Perovski of 40—both of which ascended the Oxus to within 30 miles of Kungrad.

the spring time ; or when a rude peasant, during the worst rage of the cholera in Central Russia, begged me to bury him and his wife together, for "he would not be happy yonder if he awoke and did not find her there."

Turning to depart, I catch sight of an aged woman, with a scarlet kerchief round her brown, wrinkled face, pouring water upon a grave in the farther corner—a long, low mound of grassy earth, surmounted by a plain wooden cross, on which hangs a dry, dusty wreath of *immortelles*, which she is replacing with a fresh one as I come up.

"I'm watering my poor boy's grave," she says, in answer to my look of inquiry, "and, God be praised, the grass is growing nicely upon it now, though it was terribly bare at first. It's three years last Thursday since he was laid here, but I've never missed a day coming to see to it."

"Was he a soldier, then?"

"Yes, a Cossack of the line—and a fine tall fellow as you could see anywhere. To look at him, you'd have thought nothing could hurt him ; but the fever took him in the hot season, and he just melted and melted like snow in the spring time, till he was no stronger than a child ; and so he died. Please God, it won't be very long now till I meet him again ; but in the meantime I come every day to water his grave, that it may be fresh and green when his spirit comes to look at it."

And with one more long look at the little mound, she turns silently away.

A few hours later I stroll down to the bank of the river, and see, after the gaunt loneliness of death, the hearty bustle of busy life. Scores of Cossack soldiers, bare-legged and bare-armed, with their tattered white blouses all one smear of wet clay, are hard at work in their little cabbage-gardens, digging, fencing, planting trenching little channels, or filling them with water from the river, while scraps of blunt soldierly "chaff" fly about like hail.

"Gently with that bucket, Feodor, my lad! can't you carry water without spilling it? If it were a glass of *vodka* (corn whisky) your hand would be steady enough, I take it!"

"His foot wouldn't, though," strikes in a little round-faced fellow, with an impish chuckle.

"Don't *you* talk about steady hands," retorts Feodor, a tall, raw-boned fellow with a sharp, rat-like face; "you handle that spade of yours just as if you were supping *kasha* (buckwheat porridge) with a big spoon."

Here there is a general roar of laughter; and the digger referred to, laughing with the rest, shovels a spadeful of earth over the speaker by way of acknowledgment.

"Hey, Stepan, you fool! don't you know how to plant cabbages yet? You know how to eat them, anyhow, no fear of you!"

"Hallo, Ostap! what are you staring across the river for? Do you see the Khivans coming? If they *did* come, you'd run fast for once in your life!"

Ostap grins, and *accidentally* upsets half a bucketful

of water over the jester, who replies by seizing the bucket and drenching him with what is left.

“Look at Dmitri yonder, standing in the gap of the hedge; he's trying to frighten the crows with that ugly face of his!”

“All the better for *you* if I do frighten 'em, or they'd all be down upon you in a minute; they're fond of anything nasty!”

And so the pastoral eclogue goes on, getting more and more unparliamentary every moment, with now and then a furious bear-fight between two of the rough, good-humoured, overgrown schoolboys, who seem to bear this dreary outpost life of theirs merrily enough.

Higher up the stream, and a little farther back from the bank, I find another gang busy with the construction of their summer quarters after the simple patriarchal fashion of Turkestan. Two parallel rows of forked saplings are fixed in the ground, topped with cross-pieces to form the roof; the whole framework is then covered with strong reed-matting, and furnished with two or three small embrasure-like windows made of fine gauze instead of glass. In this way I have often seen a hut big enough to contain half-a-dozen men run up between sunrise and sunset.

This one, however, is on a far more ambitious scale—at least a hundred feet by twenty, and consisting of two long compartments, opening upon a kind of porch, or rather covered thoroughfare, made through the centre. One compartment is already finished, and more than a dozen men are hard at work upon the other, laying the

cross-poles of the roof, hauling up the rush-mats, cutting spaces for the window-frames, reeving, splicing, pegging, as vigorously as if Peter the Great himself were looking on. Under the porch above-mentioned, three old women, with faces like oak carvings, are grouped witch-fashion round a huge tea-urn, which a big Cossack is filling with the water that he has just brought up from the river. Close beside them two or three grizzled elders, stretched at full length in the shade, are smoking their pipes and discussing the latest news from Khiva; while in the background lounge a group of Kirghiz (whose tents may be seen dotting the steppe a few hundred yards off) surveying the whole scene with the quiet contempt of men who fully appreciate the folly of working when it is possible to do nothing. Watching the expression of their faces, I am involuntarily reminded of the negro's answer when his master suggested that he was "afraid of work;" "*Me 'fraid ob work, massa? Why, bless you, me ready to lie down and go 'sleep close by de side ob him!*"

However, even a Kirghiz can be active enough when he likes. Pursuing my ramble along the bank, I espy a greyheaded patriarch at the door of his tent, beating his wife about the head with a mutton-bone, with the steady, concentrated energy of a man whose heart is in his work. A little further on, I come suddenly upon three more of the tribe, stark as Adam in Paradise, towing a small raft laboriously against the stream. Some way out in the shallow current, two more lathy scarecrows, in the same primitive costume, are dragging

ashore an enormous net, which, judging by its weight, must have made a very respectable haul. And at length, as I leave the fringe of undergrowth, and turn my face to the actual "steppe," I light upon a still more striking tableau.

Out in the open, barely two hundred yards off, half a dozen Kirghiz horsemen sit motionless in their saddles, aligned as if on parade. Suddenly the outermost darts off at full gallop and then, wheeling in mid career, comes like a thunderbolt upon his nearest comrade, clutching at him in passing as if to drag him down. But the assailed man avoids his grasp by a quick movement, and then, putting his own horse to its speed, attacks in his turn. Once or twice the two actually succeed in clutching one another, and a furious grapple ensues ; while the very horses, as if entering into the spirit of the fray, snap viciously at each other's ears and manes. See! the second couple break into sudden life, and are off at full speed likewise ; and there go the third pair after them, and all is one mad whirl of flight and pursuit, of dust, and trampling, and ear-piercing whoops, and wild screams of eldritch laughter, beside which the shrill neigh of the horses sounds positively human. It is a perfect hippodrome of the desert, needing only weapons to match the tournament enacted by my Arabs on the Plain of Jericho ; and the thought flashes across me, that such horsemen as these, if trained to combined action and the use of fire-arms, might be formed into an irregular cavalry more formidable than even their natural enemies the Cossacks.

It is satisfactory to recollect, looking back upon the whole scene, that I did *not* quote the Fifth Æneid with reference to it. The temptation was undoubtedly strong, for a dead country is the fittest place to parade a dead education ; but, in my opinion, it is a mistake for a man who has been buried alive to be constantly flourishing the shreds of his winding-sheet.

When I return from my stroll two hours later, I find both the gardeners and the architects working away as indefatigably as ever, and am disposed to marvel at the endurance which can stand such prolonged toil in the glare of an Asiatic sun—little dreaming that I am myself destined to go through severer labour a few days hence, under a yet more intense heat. How this came about, will be seen in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XII.

A. "STEPPE MARCH."

I HAD gone to bed rather late, after a long evening with my friend the acting Governor, who was as full as ever of the Khiva Expedition, and its recent passage of the Oxus within thirty miles of the Khan's capital. Over his evening refection of tea and lemon-juice, he triumphantly prophesies the speedy fall of the city, the occupation of the Khanate by Russian troops, and the export of the Khan and his ministers to Russia as prisoners of war.

"You might do better for him than that," suggest I ; "send him to the Zoological Gardens at Moscow, and exhibit him at a rouble a-head, till the expenses of the war are paid off."

The old soldier gives a grim chuckle. "Well, he ought to be at home there—he'd hardly meet a greater brute than himself. He's given us more trouble than he's worth, the rascal ! A thousand miles of desert—little water, and that little bad—carry your own forage and your own provisions—thermometer 145—sand knee-deep, and as hot as fire—and the wind blowing it over you in mountains at every turn—why, there hasn't been such a campaign since Alexander Makedonski."

"So M. Vambéry seems to think," answer I, "and certainly, few armies have done so much with so little loss."

"I should think so! Only three deaths in one whole column, and only one in another! You see now what Russian soldiers are made of—no other army could have done it!"

"Well, I don't know about that," object I, feeling my sensitive nationality writhe under this uncompromising stroke of "Podsnappery." "It strikes me that the English in India, and the French in Algeria, and the Turks during the Yemen insurrection, and the Americans in their last Indian campaign, did quite as much."

The veteran arrests his tumbler half way to his lips, and surveys me over its brim with a look such as Aristotle may have given to a pupil who had ventured to contradict him.

"Look here!" says he, in a tone of quiet scorn; "this is the height of summer, and yonder's the steppe; you just try a march of twelve or fifteen miles across it in the heat of the day, and see how you feel!"

It is a singular and somewhat objectionable law of nature, that whenever a man has formed a particularly praiseworthy resolution, he is instantly assailed by the strongest possible temptation to break it. After escaping a broken neck in the Caucasus, a sunstroke in the Kara-Koum desert, and a death by drowning in the Syr-Daria, I have at length made up my mind to avoid all unnecessary risks, and to behave like a conscientious special correspondent, who knows that dead men write

no letters as well as tell no tales. And here, on the very heels of this laudable determination, comes this perverse old fellow with a challenge which no man of Anglo-Saxon blood—be he Englishman or Yankee—could hear without accepting it. It is needless to say that I yield. My very dreams are haunted by a phantasmagoria of burning sand hills, stretching one beyond the other in endless perspective, amid which a crowd of ghastly figures are struggling, stumbling, and falling to rise no more; and before the sun has begun to peer into the waggon in which I am sleeping on the straw, I wake up and begin to look about me.

My first feeling on waking is a vague sense of some important duty to be performed, without exactly knowing what; but in another moment the whole thing is clear before me. Fifteen miles across the steppe in the heat of the day, without breaking down. Let us have a look at the map.

“The next bend of the Syr-Daria, where the post road joins it, seems to be about eight miles off—sixteen there and back. I think *that* ought to satisfy our friend the Governor!”

It must be owned, however, that my equipment is hardly equal to the occasion. My last surviving pair of boots are not merely too big for me, but grievously torn into the bargain, and rasp my feet at every step; while my light linen forage-cap, with its “puggree” of white gauze, though well enough under the sun of Orenburg or the Volga, is a weak fence against the sevenfold furnace of Turkestan.

"I'm in for it this time," muse I, "but it can't be helped. After all, I've made the circuit of Jerusalem outside the walls, in June, within the fifty-four minutes, and marched twenty miles up-hill, in South America, within the four hours. This thing can hardly be much worse, anyhow!"

The hottest part of the day in these latitudes being from 11 A.M. to 3 P.M., I conscientiously wait till noon, in order to fulfil the Governor's considerate stipulation respecting the heat of the day. As soon as my watch points to twelve (for the only clock within reach is usually either six hours slow or five fast, and strikes three when it means eleven), I take a final draught of cold tea, look carefully to the laces of my "double soles," draw my belt two holes tighter, and start off.

I had intended to keep up a fair "quick march" step and no more—quite sufficient on an Asiatic prairie, and beneath an Asiatic sun. But old habit is not so easily vanquished; and at the very first stride, I find myself swinging away at my old regulation pace of five miles an hour. The mud hovels and bare dusty streets of the little village, the Kirghiz tents on its outskirts, the tiny windmills that look northward into the desert, melt away one by one; and I come out at length upon the genuine steppe—a dismal waste of cracked, sun-parched clay, with a thin lacquer of prickly herbage (the camel's favourite provender) every here and there.

I have crossed many deserts in my time, both in Asia, Africa, and America; but anything which can compare with the overwhelming desolation of the Turkestan

steppes, I have never yet seen. As they were in the days of Abraham, so they are now—fruitless, useless, lifeless, unredeemed, and unredeemable. And, altogether, it is not too much to assert that the aspect of this region is without a parallel in the world. The sea is of one colour, but it has boundless life and motion. The prairie, though lacking life and motion, makes full atonement by the rich colouring of its splendid vegetation. The very deserts of Arabia draw a weird animation from the Walpurgis-dance of their whirling sands. But *here* all these are wholly wanting. The “bad steppe” has no dimpling surface, no varied colouring, no stately trees, no fresh herbage, only a grey unending level, the fit incarnation of nature in her sternest mood, vast, soul-less, conscience-less, destroying—a colossal *vis inertiae*, against whose tremendous passivity all the energies of man are as nothing.

For the first hour, however, I get on well enough. Though every stride carries me farther from the river, there is still a breath of the fresh breeze which blows over it during the morning hours; but the ground underfoot is as hot as the sky overhead, and an immense, dreary silence broods over everything like a pall. Miles away upon the endless level, on the farther side of the Syr-Daria, I can descry the low grey mound, not much bigger than a good-sized English hedge, which marks the caravan ferry of Kara-Toubeh. Were an untravelled English or American reader suddenly put down beside me, he might be rather startled to learn that he is actually upon the great highway of Central

Asia, the post-road from Orenburg to Tashkent. Yet such is indeed the case. This half-effaced wheel-track over the clay, which only the little mounds of earth planted at intervals on either side keep one from losing altogether, is the main line of communication between European and Asiatic Russia, and a fit emblem of the hopeful state of Eastern civilisation.

But as time wears on, the work begins to tell. The heat is not unusually great for Turkestan (112 deg. Fahrenheit); but those who have tried it can bear witness that, in these regions, no man can long do his five miles an hour with impunity. Half way through the second hour my actual pace is almost as good as ever; but an experienced eye would note that the elastic spring of my first start is now replaced by that dogged, "hard-and-heavy" tramp which marks the point where the flesh and the spirit begin to pull in opposite directions. Bare and dusty and immeasurable, the great waste lengthens out before me; and still no sign of the river. It needs all my Anglo-Saxon obstinacy to keep me from halting outright; but on I go, with teeth set and fists dug into my ribs, just as, fourteen years ago, I ran the last mile of the Crick Run at Rugby.

Suddenly a black spot arises far away out on the plain, broadens, deepens, approaches rapidly, and shapes itself at length into a camel with a Kirghiz rider, the beast coming steadily on with that long, lazy, noiseless stride which covers more ground than the staunchest horse, the rider's lean, brown, half-naked figure glistening in the sun like a bronze statue, and his shaven skull fenced

by an astounding headgear, very much like a half-open umbrella thrust through a doormat. He surveys me in passing with that look of quiet amazement, slightly tinged with contempt, wherewith a Swiss guide contemplates the freaks of a mountaineering Englishman ; but I retort his astonishment with a stare of defiance, and tramp steadily on. Hurrah! there at last is a shining streak breaking the endless plain, which grows broader, and brighter, and nearer with every stride, till at length, tearing my way through the encircling belt of prickly undergrowth, I come out upon the bank ; and, flinging off my clothes, plunge rejoicingly into the cool, soft, delicious water, with the same delight wherewith I swam across the Irgiz in the hottest part of the Kara-Koum Desert.

Were I near home, I would gladly lie floating for another hour ; but the eight miles of scorching steppe which lie between me and my quarters have still to be thought off. There is nothing for it but to harden my heart, and set to.

But by this time the fresh morning breeze has long since died away, and the sun is now smiting its fiercest. After an hour's marching, the bristly thicket that girdles the bank seems almost as near as when I started ; while the three little wind-mills which cut the sky-line above the still unseen village, look terribly distant. And now I begin to suffer in earnest ; for the bath which has cooled my skin has in no way quenched my thirst, the drinking of the Syr-Daria water *au naturel* being a feat not to be ventured upon by any

but a Kirghiz digestion. So on I go, with bleeding lips, and feet raw from toe to heel, and eyes that ache with a dull unceasing pain, and a furred leathery tongue that seems too big for my mouth—but still sticking to my work with the bull-dog instinct of the Anglo-Saxon.

I am still a good mile from home, when a buzzing in my ears, a red mist all around me, and a creeping numbness in the back of my neck, warn me that English athletics are not importable without paying duty; and when I at length reach the village, it is difficult to steer my way among the houses that keep jolting into the middle of the road, and dancing impishly up and down. Fortunately, the afternoon meal is in progress when I arrive, and a kettle of boiling soup stands on the fire, of which I have just sense enough left to order a liberal measure. I swallow it almost at a draught, and then drop all my length on a bench in the corner. For the next three hours I have more than enough to do in mopping up the mingled blood and perspiration which oozes from every part of my face; but nevertheless I have saved my scalp. That dose of hot soup has turned the scale, and by evening I am sufficiently recovered to jot down in my diary the notes from which this chronicle has been compiled.*

* It must be remembered that this march was done in a light summer dress, without weight of any kind. What, then, would it have been in heavy marching order?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FATE OF THE TCHIKISHLIAR COLUMN.

"MASTER," says my Tartar servant, entering with the steaming tea-urn, "how much longer do you think they'll keep us here? This is the sixteenth day already!"

"Can't say, my good Mourad—but if you were as much used to being imprisoned as I am, you wouldn't think sixteen days very long."

Nevertheless, Mourad is right. The official "Thus far and no farther" is always galling to the independent Anglo-Saxon; but when it comes to him at the end of a long and tedious journey, just as he is within reach of his *terminus ad quem*, it becomes absolutely unbearable. And such is precisely my case at present. Three hundred and seventy-seven miles to the south, the last act of the Khiva tragedy is being played out; and I, having got to the last starting-point *en route* for the seat of war, find myself suddenly pounced upon and detained a prisoner at large, "till the decision of the Commander-in-Chief shall be known"—which, as his Excellency's couriers arrive (when they arrive at all) about once a month, is rather a vague limit. Meanwhile, I am quartered in a long, low, one-storeyed building, with brick

floors and whitewashed walls, thatched with reeds five or six feet long—the famous reeds of the Aral Sea, which are to the Kirghiz what birch-bark is to the Finn, or reindeer-skin to the Samoiede.

I doubt whether life on the Syr-Daria can ever be particularly pleasant ; but in my circumstances it is simply unendurable. While we were crossing the Kara-Koum, the romance of this wild life, the sense of going *forward*, the accidents, the breakages, the strange hospitality of the nomads, the savage novelty of our surroundings,—the underground huts of the Kirghiz, starting up like rabbit-burrows from the very earth—the daily fever of unquenchable thirst, broken at times by the sudden delight of plunging your burning face into a huge bowl of frothing milk—even the attendant dirt, and raggedness, and bruises—all these things had a sustained excitement about them which kept up my strength. But this is all over now ; and there remains only a creeping depression, growing worse with every hour—a sense of failure and of restriction, the two things most intolerable to an Englishman ; and in addition to this, a mingled feeling of utter lassitude, and constant, cureless irritation. Marching, swimming, eating, sleeping—the oppression of the climate is over all. You sit still, and are beset by ants and mosquitoes ; you walk about, and get roasted alive. You care nothing for food, but drink, and drink, and drink, only to be thirsty the next moment. You plunge again and again into the river, and dress wet as you are, in the vain hope of keeping cool. You try to read, to write,

to think—but everything seems a toil, and the feeling of doing nothing is an oppression in itself. Vermin by night, scorching by day—dirt, and rags, and mosquitoes, both by day and by night—the perpetual risk of fever or ophthalmia, and the ever-present torment of an all-but-achieved enterprise now become impossible. And all this while, Europe and civilisation seem so far off, that I am haunted by a dismal, nightmare feeling of never being able to get back to them, but living on in this dreary round for ever and ever.

I am just consoling myself with a seventh tumbler of tea (the national addition of lemon-juice is not to be thought of in this wilderness, where lemons, when they can be got at all, are 2s. 6d. a piece) when a waggon pulls up before the door, and an officer leaps out. At the first glance, the face seems familiar to me ; but it is that of a man whom I should as soon have expected to meet on the top of the Matterhorn as here.

“Can it be really he?” soliloquise I ; “if so, this is the queerest adventure I’ve had yet. However, it’s easy enough to find out. Onesimus!” *

“What do you please to want?” answers the ostler, looking in.

“Who’s that officer who came in just now?”

“Adjutant M——, from Orenburg—going to Tashkent.”

To start from my seat, to rush out of the room

* The names of the peasants being mostly taken from their saintly mythology, are often very sonorous. I have met a Theodosius who could not write his own name, and a Nicephorus whose only clothing was a tattered sheepskin.

(nearly squelching Onesimus *en route*), to bolt along the corridor, and knock at the farthest door, is, as the sensation novelists say, "the work of a moment." A cheery voice bids me "come in," and I find myself facing a nondescript machine very much like the skeleton of a starved sofa, on which lies a slim, smooth-faced, but well-bronzed young man, in light linen tunic and white trousers, who regards me with a puzzled look. And well he may; for with a beard like a pasha, and a face bearing the *visé* of every climate from Syria to Brazil, I am by far the less recognisable of the two. Our last meeting was six years ago, at a children's party in the house of the Minister of War at St Petersburg; and here, in the heart of an Asiatic desert, with the Khivan war looming in the background, do we meet again.

"I see you don't remember me," begin I; "but perhaps you may recollect meeting a man of the name of Ker at St Petersburg, in the spring of 1867."

"To be sure!" cries my friend, seizing me cordially by the hand. "So it's *you*, is it? *Did* you get across Siberia to Peking, after all?"

"No, that must wait for another time; I've just come back from South America, and I'm bound for Khiva now—though just at present I don't look very like getting there."

"Khiva, eh? Why, that's just where *I'm* going—only I've got to go round by Tashkent first. But come, pour yourself out a glass of tea; and you'll find a biscuit or two in that bag yonder."

And forthwith I begin to add a few more tumblers to the seven which I have already taken. The amount of liquid which one can consume with impunity in these regions bears much the same proportion to the solids, as Falstaff's sack to his "halfpennyworth of bread." During the five days which it took me to cross the Kara-Koum, I lived entirely on one big loaf; but, *per contra*, I drank on an average eighteen tumblers of tea *per diem*, and a jar or two of milk into the bargain.

"I heard at Tiflis that you had started," says M——, filling his own glass; "but I never dreamed of catching you up. The authorities have done me a service without knowing it."

"And me too; but what on earth were you doing at Tiflis?"

"Why, you see, after I came back from Tchikishliar"—

"Tchikishliar! were you with Markozoff's column, then?"

"Yes—all the time it was out."

Here is a windfall! As yet I know nothing of the fate of this detachment, save the ominous fact of its having returned without reaching even the Khivan frontier; and here, suddenly, as if dropped from the clouds, is a man who has stood the ordeal himself.

"By Jove, I envy you! You must have seen something worth telling."

"I have, indeed. Fill your glass, and I'll tell you all about it."

"One question before you begin," interrupt I. "You

marched along the ancient bed of the Oxus, and must have had a good look at it; do you really think it possible to turn the river into the Caspian again, as some of your engineers propose?"

"Not by that channel; it would only lose itself in the sands."

"You say *that* channel; is there another, then?"

"Indeed there is, and a much likelier one. You can see it here for yourself;" and he produces a splendid military map, the very sight of which makes my mouth water. "This is the map we carried with us on the march. It'll show you everything you want to know. Here, you see, is the lake of Sari-Kamish, south-west of the southern extremity of the Aral Sea. This channel running east connects it with the Oxus, which fills it at every overflow; and another channel, running almost due south from the lake, strikes the ancient bed of the river, along which we marched. Around these two channels the soil is firmer and less sandy, and some of our engineers think it might be done that way. The best authorities, however, pooh-pooh the whole affair, saying that the river, shrunk as it is, cannot muster a volume of water sufficient to reach the Caspian; and for my own part, I quite agree with them."

Here my extempore Xenophon pauses for a moment to wash down, with a careless draught of tea, the most important enterprise in Asia, and then returns like a giant refreshed to the narrative of his own personal adventures.

"We left Tchikishliar (you see it down yonder, close

to the mouth of the Attreck) in the end of March, before the great heat had begun, though even then it was quite hot enough in the middle of the day, I can promise you. At first we headed almost due north, turning gradually east as we advanced. The Turkomans had two tries at us with their favourite trick of a night surprise, but they didn't catch us napping; we gave them a good thrashing, and only had one man hurt each time. Just at the first we were all in good spirits enough; for with only five hundred and fifty-one miles of ground to cover, and every one telling us that there was plenty of water in the wells, we hoped to be at Khiva before any of the other columns, except, perhaps, the Kazalinsk. As for Markozoff himself, of course he was doubly anxious to do the thing well after his breakdown on the very same route last November, when the Turkomans cut off his camel-train. Everything went well enough till we struck the ancient channel of the Oxus;* but *then* our troubles began in earnest."

"No water in it now, of course?" interrupt I.

"A very little here and there; but every drop bitter and undrinkable. Well, as I was saying, we began at once to get into difficulties. All along the channel the sand lay deep, and that, too, not level, but all up and down like hills, so that the labour of marching became something frightful; and when the wind blew, the whole air was just one whirl of hot, prickly dust, that

* With the other theories respecting this famous channel I shall deal later on.

got into your eyes, and nose, and mouth, and the very pores of your skin. Even the little water that we found was bad and hardly fit to drink; and more than once, when our men came up to a pool half-mad with thirst, they found it salt!

“As to the heat, there’s no describing it—it was as if earth and sky were all red-hot together, and the night was almost as bad as the day. It was different from anything I had felt before—a sort of thick, stifling closeness, more like the heat of a stuffy room than that of the open air. The horses began to drop almost immediately, and the camels soon followed; so that even before we got to Igdieh, a good part of our men were dismounted, and tramping on foot as best they might.

“At Igdieh, (as, I daresay, you’ve heard) we gave the Turkomans another thrashing, and took a number of sheep and camels; but that came too late to do us any good. For now the heat which had struck down the horses and camels began to tell upon the men likewise, and they kept dropping right and left as if mown down by shot. It’s true that (so far as I recollect) only three died outright, but the rest were good for nothing; and then we had to be always sending out parties to bring them in, which, of course, broke up the column a good deal. To do our fellows justice, they stood out as well as mortal man could do; but it got beyond *any* endurance at last. Some of them took to ways of quenching their thirst such as one only reads of in shipwrecks; and I myself missed my brandy-flask one day, and had it handed to me at

the next halt, *empty*, by a great raw-boned Cossack, who looked rather shamefaced over it—'If your honour were to shoot me,' said he, 'I must have drunk it; but (with a kind of groan) it's done me no good!'

"I can't remember when the idea first began to get about that we should have to turn back; indeed, it was less that any one man said so, than that the same thought crept into everybody's mind by degrees. It was not till we got to Orta-Kuyu, however, (the cavalry being then about a day's march ahead) that Markozoff summoned the council of war which decided everything. It was agreed that we could not reach Khiva on our own resources, and that no help was to be looked for from the other columns, while, again, it would be impossible to await fresh supplies from Krasnovodsk; so the word was given to turn back. It was time. Of the four thousand camels with which we had started, barely eight hundred were left. Three-fourths of the horses had died, and those which survived could hardly put one foot before the other. Nearly fifty per cent. of our eighteen hundred men were unfit for duty; and, with all this, we had hardly gone two-thirds of the way. The last day before we turned (April 21, O.S.) the thermometer stood at 149 degrees Fahrenheit; and I can't think, even now, how any of us got off."

"And, after all this, you mean to try it again?" ask I, looking at him with involuntary admiration.

"To be sure," answers he lightly. "I'm off for Tashkent to-night, and from Tashkent I hope to get on to Khiva by Samarcand and Kette-Kurgan. I'm only

sorry you can't come with me—it would be grand fun!"

"So am I—very sorry; but at all events, we must have a farewell dinner together, for the sake of old times. We'll drink the health of all your friends in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and you can tell them of it when you get home."

Three hours later, a battered waggon, with three rough-looking horses, and a gaunt, brigand-like Kirghiz driver, clatters up to the door; and my friend, with a hearty shake of the hand, vanishes once more into the eternal desert.

"I'm sorry to leave you in this scrape," are his last words; "but don't be cast down about it. If I can possibly do anything for you at Tashkent, you may rely upon its being done."

How that pledge was redeemed, will be seen hereafter.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEMESIS.

“WELL, is there any news yet?” ask I, putting my head into the long, low-roofed hall in which my friend the Governor and his subs. are busy with their official duties, about ten o'clock on a fine July morning.

The term prescribed for the arrival from Tashkent of the answer to my petition has already expired, and for the last three days I have daily looked in with the same question, and received the same negative answer. But to-day the first glance shows me that something is afoot far more important than the imprisonment of a stray traveller. The six broad sallow faces, usually expressionless as the gargoyles of a cathedral, wear the peculiar “what-do-you-think” look of one who has just heard a great piece of news, and feels himself master of the situation *pro tem.*; while even the iron mask of my head gaoler gives passage to a momentary gleam of excitement.

“Yes, there *is* news—news of the right sort! We've got the place at last, and the dogs are paid as they deserve. Look *here*—look for yourself!”

And he hands me across the table, with the eagerness of a young author exhibiting his first proof-sheet,

the brief, soldierly telegram which has become historical :*

“ Our troops, having manfully sustained the fatigues of the march, occupied Khiva on the 29th May (O.S.) The Khan has fled. The men are in good health and spirits.”

“ Well done!” respond I, shaking hands with him energetically across the table, to the imminent peril of his ill-secured ink bottle. “ I suppose you’ll be having a *Te Deum* for this to-night ?”

“ Of course ; I should hope it’s worth one ! If you’re anywhere near the gate of the fort towards eight o’clock you’ll find it just beginning. Good morning.”

During the day (for the great news spread slowly at first) there is no unusual excitement apparent in the little community ; but when, towards sunset, I return from the third of my daily baths in the Syr-Daria, I find the Governor’s prophecy fulfilled with a vengeance. The broad sweep of dusty plain that stretches from the fortress-ditch to the first houses of the “ town,” utterly silent and deserted less than an hour ago, is now surging like a sea with the rush of the entire population. Portly merchants with bushy red beards ; close-shaven Kirghiz, glancing wickedly through the corners of their small narrow eyes at all around them ; pale, delicate ladies, attired in the newest (*i.e.*, last year’s) fashions, which get sadly maltreated by the pressure of the crowd ; brown, half-naked, wild-looking camel-drivers,

* This copy was sent by courier, the telegraph line not passing through Kazalinsk.

tossing their shaggy hair like a mane; Russian shopmen, conspicuous in red shirts put on outside their clothes; drowsy-looking government clerks in faded uniform, puffing paper cigarettes; and round-faced children, enjoying, as only children can, the surrounding noise and bustle. A most levelling assemblage it is, merging all thought of rank and position—nay, even the national awe of anything in uniform—in the one pervading desire of getting a good view. Not without hard struggling, and considerable damage to my already tattered habiliments, do I at length fight my way into the front row, and burst suddenly upon the most striking scene that I have ever witnessed.

Just in front of me stand, formed in hollow square, the soldiers of the garrison, two hundred and eighty strong—gaunt, dark, sinewy Cossacks, in flat caps and white tunics—straight and immovable as a stone wall. In the centre of the square about a dozen officers are grouped around a little pulpit of wood, covered with an embroidered cloth. Above, the two guns which arm the western *épaulement* of the fort peer hungrily over the low massive wall; around welters a sea of many-coloured dresses and eager eyes, while far in the background extends the dull grey of the infinite desert, melting shadow-like into the crimson sky.

A sudden tap on the arm makes me turn round, and over my shoulder looks the dark face of Vereshtchagin, all aglow with the flush of an excitement rarely seen upon those disciplined features.

“What did I tell you?” says he; “isn’t it worth a

Te Deum? We are all rejoicing like one man to-day—see!”

I look around me, and see at a glance how truly he has spoken. The hard, low-browed faces are absolutely glorified for the moment by that deep religious fervour innate in the Russian peasant, and now called forth in all its fulness by a triumph which to them is not merely the victory of man over man, but the judgment of God upon the worshippers of the False Prophet. In the breast of every man present beats a throb of that mighty exultation which is this day uplifting every Russian heart from the Baltic to the Pacific; and the rejoicing of this handful of exiles is in truth the rejoicing of an empire.

“But tell me—” begin I.

“Hush!” answers he warningly; “here comes the priest.”

A dead silence falls upon the whole assembly, while the officers around the pulpit reverently make way for the grand old patriarch, who comes slowly forward, with his long grey hair streaming over the flowing robe which covers him from head to foot. As he stands alone in the centre, looking round upon the eager crowd, there breaks over his face the light of a solemn gladness, too deep and heartfelt for excitement. In his full, rich voice, he chants the customary prayers, while ever and anon the deep sonorous response of the fighting-men strikes in like the roll of a drum. And the setting sun streams over the files of glittering bayonets, and the long ranks of firm, sun-browned faces, and the

grey wall of the fort, and the rushing river beyond—and the solitary figure in the midst of all, with its grey head bowed in prayer.

Truly it is a gallant sight—such a one as England may have seen two hundred years ago, when the ranks of the Ironsides closed around the square, powerful figure and granite-hewn face of “the man Oliver,” praying his brief stern prayer to the God of battles before going forth to scatter the “godless horsemen” of Rupert and Goring. At length the old man’s voice ceases; and now the officers crowd forward to kiss the crucifix which he holds, and the guns of the fortress boom out their deep Amen, and the band strikes up a triumphal march, and all is one great burst of rejoicing.

“It’s worth seeing, is it not?” says Vereshtchagin, as the crowd begins to melt away. “I daresay you’ve seen plenty of ‘molébens’ (Te Deums) in Russia; but this is a special one. We’ve gained victories enough in our day; but this is the first time we have ever taken Khiva.”

And, in truth, of all the thanksgivings offered up by men who have fought and conquered, few have ever been more fully justified. Against the countless festivals by which Russia has profaned the name of divine justice to deeds of successful brigandage and unsparing bloodshed, may be set in atonement this one triumph, which has avenged at once her own cause and that of mankind. Generations of falsehood and insolence, of barefaced robbery and treacherous murder, are expiated to-day. For a hundred and fifty years the long debt of

vengeance has been accumulating; and it is now paid in full. The inaccessible stronghold has fallen at last—the hotbed of Turkoman brigandage, the centre of the Eastern slave trade, the source whence treason, and outrage, and cruelty have gone forth for ages over the length and breadth of Central Asia. If the passions of earth can penetrate beyond the grave, there must be a sullen joy over this day's work among the fierce spirits of those who were butchered on the shore of the Aral Sea in 1721, or who died amid the snow-drifts of the Ust-Urt in 1840, cursing with their last breath the city and the nation upon whom judgment has fallen to-day.

CHAPTER XV.

HOME FROM THE WAR.

IT is the afternoon of the sixth day from the Te Deum, and all Kazalinsk is expectant. A portion of the conquerors are already on their way home, and any hour may bring them to our doors. Day after day, men congregate on the bank of the Syr-Daria, to look wistfully down the stream toward the Sea of Aral, watching for the masts of the coming steamer against the sky-line, and listening for the boom of the signal-gun. Old Morozoff, my landlord (a Russian to the backbone), can talk of nothing but the campaign, and pours himself out in rejoicing to any one who will listen. Here he comes, lounging along the wall, with his white jacket and great bushy head, uncovered in the full blaze of the sun, and catching sight of me where I sit by the door, for the ten minutes of digestion which intervene between my dinner and march number two, plunges at once into his favourite topic.

“They’ve got it at last, the dogs! and serve ’em right. They’ve played tricks upon us long enough; but *now* they’re going to get their porridge hot! We’ve got the place, and we’ll keep it. We want the Amu-Daria (Oxus) for our trade—and we’ll *have* it too!”

“Isn't one river enough for you, then?”

“Ach, David Stepanovitch! what are you saying? Do you call this thing a river? The Syr-Daria's not fit to float a slop-bowl—all sand and shoals, and shoals and sand, just like sailing in a panful of cabbage! Now, over yonder, on the Amu-Daria, there *is* water enough—or at least there will be when we break down the dams which that (unprintable) Khan put across it to spite Christian folk. And if the water's too shallow for our steamers, we'll just do it in flat-bottomed boats without keels, with rushes tied round them—such as Alexander Makedonski had for his campaign in Bactria.”

Hardened as I am to surprises, I cannot but stare a little at hearing a common tavern-keeper, in a mud-built Asiatic village, talk so glibly of Alexander of Macedon and his Bactrian campaign. I have yet to learn (as I am fated to do later on) how persistently the ancient traditions cling to the region where the great conqueror achieved his crowning exploits.

“Let me know when the boats are ready, and I'll go a voyage in them,” answer I, rising; “in the meantime, I'm off for another walk.”

“What, a walk? You're surely not going for a walk when the steamer may come in any minute!” expostulates Morozoff, scandalised at such utter want of public feeling.

Off I go, however, consoling myself with the reflection that, having waited six days in vain, the probabilities are in favour of my risking another hour or two. But it is always hazardous to argue from pro-

babilities. An hour later, I hear, far up the river (just in the midst of my second swim), a deep, dull sound, which I have heard too often of late not to recognise it at once.

Boom !

“Just like my luck ! Now, of course, I shall miss it—the only thing worth seeing for a week. This comes of trusting to chances.”

Boom ! boom ! boom !

Gun after gun takes up the tale. There can be no doubt about the steamer having arrived ; and the only thing to do is to make speed back to the town, before the debarkation is completed. But, with all my haste, I arrive too late. The masts of the “Samarcand” stand out against the sky above the low fortress wall, but her distinguished passengers are nowhere to be seen. Returning to my quarters, I am met at the door by Morozoff, who turns upon me with an air of fatherly reproach.

“There now, David Stepanovitch ! didn't I tell you so ? You've just missed it all, and it was worth seeing, I promise you ! What do you think ? they've brought back two of the Khivan ministers prisoners, and one of them's the very rascal who stuck those dams across the mouths of the Amu-Daria ! It's the judgment of heaven upon them, the accursed, heathenish, good-for-nothing—”

And here the old gentleman, warming to his subject, goes off in a volley of curses worthy of Œdipus Coloneus.

“Who have come with them, then?” ask I, breaking in upon this characteristic commination.

“O, the whole place is full of them! I’ve got three or four here, and there are some more in the fortress, and the rest here and there about the town. Let me see”—and he begins to reckon upon his big greasy fingers. “There’s the Grand Duke Nikolai Constantinovitch,* and young Count Berg, and Dr Grimm of the field-hospital, and General Verevkin ‘(pronounced Veriovkin)’—he’s wounded, by-the-by; and Commodore Sytnikoff of the Aral flotilla—so’s he; and then there’s a German whose name I don’t know—he’s here in the next room to yours; and then there are a lot of staff-officers, half a dozen at least—they’re all up at Verevkin’s quarters in the town. As for the soldiers and sailors, they’re all over the place getting drunk.”

I congratulate my host upon his new customers, and retire to my waggon in the courtyard (where I write by day and sleep at night) in order to add these last events to my diary. But I have barely pencilled half a dozen lines, when a clear voice says close to my ear, in broken English:

“Mistare, vill you buy your vagen?”

I start and look round. Beside me stands a tall, slim, active young man (with an unmistakably military air) whose smooth face bears the legible impress of the southern desert. In the background appears my

* Son of the Grand Duke Constantine, and nephew to the Emperor.

ubiquitous Tartar, surveying him with a critical air, like a club epicure eyeing a questionable cutlet.

“You can speak German if you wish—I understand it,” answer I, guessing at once with whom I have to do.

The stranger’s face brightens at the almost forgotten sound of his own tongue, and he proceeds to explain that he is in quest of a travelling-waggon to carry himself and baggage to Orenburg—and that, if mine is to be had, he would like to buy it. The bargain is speedily concluded, and my new acquaintance courteously invites me to step in and have a glass of tea with him, at the same time introducing himself by name.

My surmise proves to be correct. It is Lieutenant Stumm of the Prussian army, the only foreign officer with the expedition, and in all probability, its future historian. Indeed, any historian might envy the admirable sketches, and not less admirable military maps, which crowd the young volunteer’s note-book from one end to the other. Spots which are now historical crowd upon me, one after the other; Kungurad from the river, Mangit, a night bivouac on the Oxus, the outer wall of Khiva, the Khan’s palace, the interior of a house in the town, and others too many to name.

Nor is this all. The great Frederic’s maxim, to “examine every position as if you were one day to give battle there,” has been followed out to the letter. Every turn of this remote campaign, through regions where the German flag has never been, nor shall be, is

illustrated with diagrams as elaborate as if destined to be the forerunners of a German invasion; while the distances from point to point, the quantity of water and forage, the character of the country and its inhabitants—even the appearance and approximate population of the towns—are all noted down with that marvellous accuracy of detail, and attention to seeming trifles, which has made Germany the first military Power of the world.

By the time we reach our third tumbler of tea, my host has already begun to launch out upon the campaign, and gives me some details well worth listening to.

“We of the Mangishlak column didn’t fare so badly as some of the others; but we had no holiday of it, for all that. One or two of the marches from well to well were very long; and the water, when we *did* get it, was black as ink. Then the weather was rather trying, too—45 degrees of Reaumur during the day, and the night as chill and damp as a marsh. However, curiously enough, we had very few sick on the way.”

“Did you get to Khiva in time for the assault?”

“O dear yes! saw it all from beginning to end. We bombarded the place for two days, and the Khan (as we afterwards found out) was for giving in at once; but the war-party stood out and wouldn’t let him. However, by the second evening, it began to get too hot for *them*. Twice over during the night they ceased firing and made a pretence of surrender; but the minute we stopped *our* fire, and came forward to occupy the town,

they began again. So at last it was decided to carry one of the towers by assault, and that settled the business; but when we burst in, we found hardly any of the leaders there. Most of them had run off into the steppe, carrying the Khan along with them; and when we entered his palace the morning after the storm, we found even the seraglio empty—the ladies must have escaped by some underground passage. Here, you see, is the great court of the palace—a very fine place in its way.”

“Did you lose many men in the assault?”

“I believe one hundred and seven; but not many killed—mostly mere flesh wounds. Verevkin was one of the worst; a fellow let fly at him from the top of the wall, as he was reconnoitring, and hit him clean through the cheek—his face is a rare sight with it, poor fellow! As for me, I haven't got a scratch.”

Having gratified my curiosity, the Lieutenant begins to exercise his own, and questions me closely respecting my object in being here, and my plans for the future. I tell him as much of the story as it is safe to tell on this side of the Ural (suppressing, of course, the fact of my being an English correspondent) and he at once proceeds to give me some good counsel.

“The steamer goes back to Kungrad in two or three days, you know, and your only chance is to get leave to go with her. I'd advise you to try Verevkin; his quarters are just on the other side of the garden yonder, and anybody will show you the way.”

I pull out my watch, and find that there is no time

to be lost. It is already close upon eight o'clock, and the General, wounded as he is, and just arrived from a journey, is not likely to sit up very late. I start forthwith, guided by Onesimus the ostler; and a few minutes' walking brings us to a large, well-appointed house (proverbially the best in the town) belonging to a noted resident trader. I send in my card—one of the few relics of civilization still left me—by a big loose-jointed Cossack who is lounging at the door; and am presently ushered along a creaking verandah into a small but very comfortable room, by far the most respectable which I have yet seen in Kazalinsk.

Here I find half-a-dozen officers (one of whom, a very handsome young fellow, has his arm in a sling) grouped round the inevitable tea-urn. The circle opens as I enter, disclosing in its midst a short, square, powerfully-built man, whose firm soldierly face is half-buried in a huge bandage, covering the spot where the Khivan bullet tore through his cheek a month ago. This is General Verevkin himself, one of the best Asiatic soldiers whom Russia has yet produced, and beyond all question the real hero of the Khiva Expedition. To him, accordingly, I report myself; but a man who has had one side of his face shot through can hardly be expected to feel very benevolent; and the General, in his trenchant military style, makes very short work of me and my errand.

“Can't do it—just going home—don't know you—try the Commodore.”

So ends our interview; and there is nothing for it but

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to trudge back again to Stumm, and report want of progress.

“Well, there’s still one chance left,” says the friendly Lieutenant, indefatigable in his zeal for my cause. “Go to the Grand Duke (he’s in the fortress, at the Commandant’s quarters), and ask him to say a word for you to the Commodore of the flotilla. He’s a very good fellow, and will be glad to help you, I’m sure.”

Off I go accordingly, while my Tartar (who has by this time got scent of the efforts making for his and my own liberation) looks after me with wistful eyes. The Commandant’s quarters are close to the Commodore’s, in the centre of the fortress, barely five minutes’ walk from Morozoff’s; but to get there is no easy matter. At every turn I hear “a sound of revelry by night,” and encounter a long line of drunken soldiers, hand in hand with still more drunken sailors, straggling across the whole breadth of the road, and roaring at the top of their voices a maniacal chorus without tune, sense, beginning, or end, and whose sole object seems to be to make as much noise as possible.

Not without careful piloting do I at length reach the Commandant’s door, and find, of course, that the Grand Duke is not there, being at dinner with the Commodore. However, a polite message comes back in answer to my card, to the effect that he will be happy to see me in half an hour. I seat myself in the Commandant’s “outer room”—a huge bare-looking place like a deserted warehouse—and prepare to “bide my time;” but before ten minutes are over, a quick

step comes through the porch, and in the doorway appear the tall slight figure and smooth boyish face of the Grand Duke, who has left his party to come to me. I have heard many things said against him, of which I know nothing ; this much I *do* know, that his reception of me, an utter stranger, without recommendations of any kind, and detained by his own people under circumstances of strong suspicion—is kindness itself.

I need not quote our conversation, which turns chiefly upon the campaign, and more especially the march of the Tchikishliar column, of which he has heard nothing till now, having accompanied that of Kazalinsk. The details which I have gathered from M— seem to interest him greatly ; and in return he gives me some experiences of his own which are well worth hearing.

“I’m much obliged to you for coming to me,” are his last words ; “and I shall be most happy to give you any help I can. Perhaps the best way will be for me to speak to the Commodore about you to-night, and for you to call upon him to-morrow morning, and ask what time the steamer is to sail.”

And, with a hearty shake of the hand, he is gone.

The next morning, as arranged, I call upon the Commodore, and am shown into a small cabinet littered with papers, in the midst of which sits a stout thickset man of middle age, across whose bald crown runs a long dark-red scar, showing that he too has “looked in the face of the Khan.” He receives me very kindly,

and tells me that the steamer will not start for several days yet, having to prepare for a thorough survey of the eastern coast of the Aral Sea, which is to occupy its next voyage. When the time comes, however, he will take care to let me know beforehand.

“By-the-by,” he continues, as I rise to take my leave, “I’ve got a few officers coming to dine with me to-night, and perhaps it might amuse you to come and meet them. I can’t promise you a very splendid dinner ; but, such as it is, you shall be heartily welcome.”

And he proves as good as his word ; for I have seldom spent a pleasanter evening. The party does indeed lack the presence of General Verevkin and the Grand Duke, who are already on their way back to Europe ; but nevertheless, the group is one which a painter would gladly copy. Tall wiry Dr Grimm of the field hospital, with a dry professional smile on his sallow face ; young Count Berg, a handsome likeness of his terrible uncle, the notorious Governor of Poland ; the topographer of the expedition, glancing his keen eyes to and fro as if about to draw a map of the company ; the broad chest and round jovial face of the old Commodore ; two or three young subalterns, looking, but for their sunburned cheeks, as fresh as when they started ; and, last but not least, the Commodore’s wife and two other ladies, delighted to get a little society at last. Looking round upon them all, I think of one whose grand forehead and calm courteous face would have well befitted the President’s chair of such

an assembly—brave old Nikolai Milutine.* I have known many a brave man and many a true gentleman in Russia, but none like him ; and it clouds even this day of triumph to remember that he who would have rejoiced over it more sincerely than all, is gone from us for ever.

Nevertheless, it is good to see the bright manly faces, and listen to the hearty unalloyed merriment, of these men who for months past have been face to face with death. To them, newly risen from the depths of the hungry desert, even this remote outpost of civilisation seems a place of luxury ; and the Commodore's apology for his rough fare is quite superfluous to these seasoned appetites, whetted by a four months' campaign through the barest region in the world. But the strongest proof of the utter isolation in which they have been living, lies in the questions which they ask about what is going on in Europe—questions such as Alexander Selkirk may have asked on returning from his desert island, or La Tude after his escape from the Bastile.

“Who's President in France now?”

“Is Bismarck dead yet? he was ill enough in March.”

“Did the Americans make that expedition against the Modoc Indians that they were talking about?”

“What's going on in Spain? have they got another king yet?”

“Is Mr Gladstone in power still? and what does he say to the taking of Khiva?”

* Brother of the present Minister of War.

“Does anybody know anything about the Tchikishliar column? we've seen nothing of it?”

And so on all the time of dinner—every one questioning, and no one able to reply.

Even I, the only one of the company who has been within reach of European news, have not seen a St Petersburg paper for more than a fortnight; and there is great rejoicing when, half an hour later, my old acquaintance Vereshtchagin, the acting Governor (now displaced by the return of his chief, Colonel Goloff) sends in a batch of newly-arrived journals, with his compliments to the Commodore.

After our coffee, we turn out into the Commodore's “garden,” if the name can be applied to a little enclosure fifteen feet square, whose dry soil has been tormented into bearing three or four consumptive-looking shrubs, which seem to go on living from sheer want of strength to die. It contains one object of note, however—a fossil tree, from which the officers proceed to hammer pieces in the most reckless style, as an addition to their souvenirs of Central Asia. I seize upon a flying morsel (which is still in my possession) and, thrusting it into the only sound pocket now left me, range up alongside of the topographer, with whom I have only exchanged a few words as yet. A fresh listener is always welcome to an old campaigner; and my new acquaintance at once begins to launch out upon his experiences with the Tashkent column.

“The fighting itself was nothing, of course. The best armed of the Khivans had old muskets which had

been condemned as useless in Russia, and then bought up by traders to sell to anybody who knew no better ; and many of them had nothing but matchlocks lighted by tinder, which took five minutes to fire, and ten more to load again. One battalion of our fellows would have beaten their whole army in a fair field ; but they were quite right in trusting to their deserts. I've seen a good deal of heat in my time, but nothing to come near what we had in the last days of the march. Once I happened to put my bare foot out of the tent-door during a halt, on to the sand, and I tell you, I fairly screamed as if I had stepped upon hot iron !”

“ It's wonderful that you lost so few men, with all that.”

“ It *is*, indeed ; I can't think how they managed to stand it. There was *one* day when the allowance of water to the *officers* was one tumbler per man ; so you may think how the rank and file must have fared. But, upon my word, it made me proud of my own countrymen to see how they bore it. Not a man flinched ; and they held themselves all the straighter and marched all the steadier, as if defying it. Now and then, perhaps, you would see a man sway about for a minute as if he were drunk, and then roll over ; but then you just took out your flask and poured a drop or two into his mouth, and up he got and went on just the same as before.”

“ Well done !”

“ Yes, there's good stuff in our army yet, let people say what they will. I wish you could have seen them

the day we got down to the Amu-Daria. We had marched a good way already from the last well, and had still 20 versts (about 13 miles) to the river, when the enemy, who had been hanging upon our flanks for some time without striking, began to press upon us, and to open a spattering fire. You should just have seen our fellows at the first sound of the firing! The weary faces all brightened at once, and the men sloped their pieces (which they had been carrying anyhow) and trimmed their ranks as if on parade, and tramped steadily forward. By and by the Khivans got closer, and then *we* opened fire in turn, and for an hour or two it was kept up pretty warmly on both sides. We advanced firing, tramp, tramp, as if at a review, pushing out the enemy's circle as we came on, till at last the smoke blew aside a little, and we saw the river just ahead of us; and *then* we all shouted together, knowing that the end was near."

From these details, my extempore chronicler proceeds to others which interest me more nearly than he imagines.

"By-the-by, I almost forgot to tell you a curious thing that happened that very day. We were just getting down to the river, and the firing was still going on, when right into the thick of it came a horseman, who didn't look much like a soldier, and, as he came nearer, looked still less like a Russian. And who should this be but an American, the special correspondent of the *New York Herald*, a Mr Mac—Mac—"

"MacGahan," suggest I.

“That’s the name—MacGahan; I suppose you heard of him on the road. Well, he had ridden right across the desert from Fort Perovski, with only a Tartar servant and two guides—a bold thing to do, wasn’t it? At first Kaufmann was rather puzzled what to do with him; but now he’s established at headquarters, and in high favour. I suppose he’ll stay with the army till the end of the campaign.”

(This conjecture was perfectly correct. When I passed through Kazalinsk again, ten weeks later, on my way back from Samarcand, I found Mr MacGahan just arrived from the seat of war, having accompanied the last expedition against the Turkomans, and been in the thick of the only really hard fight which occurred during the campaign.)

And now, the company being about to disperse, my new friend insists upon carrying me off to the steamer, in order as he says, to “show me my accommodation for the voyage,” and (a matter of course among Russians) to have a glass of tea. The tea is somewhat disturbed by a cloud of mosquitoes, beside which my Egyptian and Moldavian experiences are child’s play, though my host kindly assures me that “this is nothing to what it will be in the Delta of the Oxus;” but the steamer itself, with its clean white deck, its trim little bridge between the paddle-boxes, its well-polished engines of seventy horse-power, and two long shining carronades, which have done good execution during the campaign—is a sight worth seeing. The cabin, too, is clean and comfortable, though certainly rather small for this

climate ; but this is neither the time nor the place to be fastidious.

“This is where we shall all be,” says my companion, pointing to a number of shawls scattered along the cushioned seat which runs round the cabin. “There will be seven of us, counting you ; the Commodore, of course, has his own private cabin, and your Tartar can be stowed somewhere on deck. We were only three days this last time from the Delta ; but now, of course, with this survey to make, we shall be a good deal longer.”

“I hear you’re going to send an exploring expedition up the Oxus next spring,” remark I, as we mount again to the deck ; “but surely you can’t do it with these steamers ?”

“No—they draw too much water ; and besides, their engines are not strong enough to make way against the stream. We’re going to order three steamers from America (to be ready, if possible, by next April), drawing only one foot of water. It will be a difficult matter, of course, to have them light enough for that draught, and yet solid enough to stand the play of the stronger engines ; but I think it can be done ; and then, too, it will give time for the river to fill again. You know it has only one navigable mouth (the Oolkoon), and even that has been made so shallow by the Khivan dams, that now we can barely get within thirty miles of Kungrad. However, now that the dams are broken, it will have plenty of time to fill before April—especially as we shall most probably help it a little ; and then we

will just go right up the stream from the Delta to the highest navigable point (the junction of the Ak-Sarai near Koondooz), surveying as we go. They say the young Grand Duke is to command; but nothing's settled yet."

An hour later, I am back again at my quarters, with no particular adventure en route except being stopped by a sentry at the outer gate of the fortress; and my last recollection of that evening is that of hearing a newly-arrived soldier (one of the very few who still retain speech and consciousness) astonishing some of his old cronies with the recital of what he has seen.

"I tell you, brothers, when we got into the Khanate from the desert, it was just like being taken up into heaven out of hell. It's a shame to think of the heathen dogs having such a fine country, while we Christian folk are living out here on the bare steppe. When we crossed the river at Khanki, the country folk began to bring in fruit and what not; and there I, who speak to you, bought a water-melon as big as I could carry for a kopeck (one-third of a penny), and I saw a good-sized fowl sold for ten kopecks (3d.), and a fat sheep for a rouble (about 3s.) As for apricots, you had only to stretch out your hand and pick as many as you liked."

Some of these prices sound credible enough in Kazalinsk, where beef is twopence per pound, and mutton three half-pence; but the abundance of fruit is a new idea to us in this barren region, where no fruit is to be had except third-rate water melons. Not till long afterwards, on my way along the Upper Syr-Daria, do

I realise what magnificent fruit Central Asia can produce, barren as we think it.

After this day's work, I begin at last to think myself secure of Khiva; and Lieutenant Stumm, on hearing the whole story, congratulates me on my success, and offers me a letter to a friend at headquarters. By Thursday morning (the second day after the arrival of the detachment) he is the only man left; and at sunrise on Friday he goes off likewise, after sitting up with me all night in front of the inn, drinking tea and killing scorpions, under the dancing flashes of the summer lightning. The "Samarcand" is to sail on Tuesday morning, in order to get into the Sea of Aral (forty miles distant) before nightfall; and I now begin to prepare for my own departure, with a comfortable assurance that all is going right at last.

But, as if the ups and downs of this extraordinary journey were never to end, my new hope results in nothing but fresh disappointment. The very day before the steamer sails, I get a message from the Commodore to the effect that, having no special sanction from General Kaufmann, he dares not take me on his own responsibility—a decision confirmed with official emphasis by Colonel Goloff, the late head of the Kazalinsk column, who has now resumed his duties as district Governor. The same day that brings the message brings me also a brother in adversity—a Prussian army surgeon named Engelbrecht, just arrived from Orenburg—bound like myself for Khiva, and like my-

self, stopped short within sight of the end. There is nothing for it but just to have patience once more.

But there is no evil without compensation. Just as matters seem to be at their very darkest, there comes a gleam of comfort from a very unexpected quarter. The day after the sailing of the steamer, a courier from Tashkent, with despatches to the Colonel, brings me a letter—wofully soiled and crumpled, but legible nevertheless—which is still in my possession. It proves to be from my friend Adjutant M— (whose visit I have described in a former chapter) and runs as follows :

“ Tashkent, 26th June, (8th July) 1873.

“ MR KER,

I hasten to avail myself of the departure of a courier, in order the sooner to communicate a piece of news which will be very agreeable to you. I had an interview yesterday with General Kolpakovski,* and received from him the answer that he had already made arrangements for having you passed on to Tashkent. Your letters of recommendation will be sent on to Khiva. All particulars will be communicated to you at the proper time.

“ I would advise you, on getting to Tashkent, to apply to my friend S—, who is likely, I think, to be of great use to you in many ways. (Here follow various

* Commandant of Vernoë, and military Governor of Turkestan during Kaufmann's absence.

directions for finding Mr S——, which I need not quote.) I am very glad of this satisfactory conclusion to the misunderstanding which has existed with respect to you.—I remain, with sincere esteem,

Always at your service,

A. M——."

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE BAZAAR.

IT is high noon in Central Asia, and as hot as befits the hour and the latitude. The little mud-hovels of our village, and the low, grey, earthen wall of the fort around which it has grown up, gape with countless cracks under the blistering glare, as if opening their lips for a drink. The Commandant's thermometer (the only one within a seven days' journey) stands at 103 in the shade; it is a fortnight yesterday since I last saw a cloud, and three weeks to-morrow since I last felt a drop of rain. The fresh morning breeze has long since died away, and the still air is heavy as lead.

However, in spite of all this, the panorama is not without life and bustle. Camels and horses are passing and re-passing through the broad, dusty, sun-parched square of the bazaar; scores of "turbaned unbelievers" are screaming and gesticulating as none but the "stately Oriental" *can* scream and gesticulate; and I, in a wofully dingy forage-cap and the rags of a linen tunic, am standing at the entrance in fixed contemplation of the tableau.

All Eastern bazaars have a strong family likeness, from the stifling little beehives of Arabian cities to the

vast, shadowy, many-pillared galleries of the Great Bazaar at Constantinople; and this little Turkestan offshoot has the generic stamp unmistakeably plain. Small and dirty as it is, there is still about it that old-world, enchanted atmosphere, that savour of the Arabian Nights, which carries us back at once to the far-off days when *any* marvel seemed possible and real. Yonder, with a wicked leer in his half-shut eye, the disguised captain of the Forty Thieves is unpacking the huge oil jars in which his band lie hid. Here comes Sinbad the Sailor on his return from a long voyage, somewhat grey and weather-beaten, but hearty as ever, and bringing with him a fresh assortment of those wonderful bales of "spices and ambergris," the very mention of which seems to leave a sweetness in one's mouth. And there, with knitted brow and chop-fallen air, goes the adventurous Prince Achmet, who, having lost the Winged Horse which brought him hither, is wondering how on earth he is ever to get home again.

To give a Western reader any clear idea of a genuine Asiatic bazaar is no easy matter. Most people picture to themselves a kind of cross between the Palais Royal and the Burlington Arcade, swarming with gorgeously attired Bluebeards, and displaying every variety of costly merchandise. The reality is widely different. Imagine two gigantic honeycombs of baked mud, one within the other, with an Asiatic tradesman sitting cross-legged in every cell, and a score of camels grouped in the centre—cover everything with a thick

coating of dust, and diffuse throughout a smell as of a thousand stables—and the product shall be the thing required.

I saunter leisurely into the bazaar with the air of a man who can afford to take his time, piloting my way dexterously between a very fractious camel which is just coming out, and a lanky, half-naked scarecrow of a Kirghiz, mounted on a black cow,* who is just going in. The inner ring is in full bustle, and I, mindful of the pithy Oriental proverb, that “hurry belongs to the devil,” make the tour of it at an average rate of one step per minute. But my approach is not unmarked. The point at which I have entered is garrisoned chiefly by Russians, and the mere sight of a man looking their way a mile off is sufficient to stir *them* into instant activity; so that I have hardly time to look round, when I am overwhelmed by a clamour that might silence Billingsgate.

“Buy a spoon, Barin?† Fine wooden spoons—good to eat soup on the steppe!”

“Cakes, Barin? nice wheaten cakes—one bite last you a whole day!”

“That’s very likely,” answer I, looking significantly at the filthy paste; whereat a loud laugh circles through the group—for in this primitive region a little wit goes a long way.

“Hold your noise, you fools!” says a portly old grey-

* In Central Asia, cattle are used for riding almost as frequently as in Africa.

† Master.

beard, whom, by his solemn and venerable appearance, I rightly judge to be the greatest rogue of the lot. "The Barin doesn't want any of your rubbish; he's looking out for a good strong bag to put his provisions in—like this!" And he brandishes triumphantly a nondescript-looking thing like a burst pair of bellows.

"How much for the bag?" ask I.

"Ten roubles (about 30s.) to *you*, Barin; to any one else I'd say twelve."

"You old heathen! ten roubles for a thing that's not worth two! Are you mad, or have you not slept off your last night's drink yet?" And I turn as if to go away.

"Barin, Barin! don't be in such a hurry! One might think I wanted to cheat you!! Let us say eight roubles, then—and that'll be a dead loss, so help me Heaven!"

"Ah, you rascal! don't I know, that, whatever I give you, you'll make at least fifty per cent. profit?"

"What's to be done, Barin? you wouldn't grudge a poor trader a rouble or two, surely? You are rich, and can spend as you please; but we poor fellows must take what we can get."

"And you *do* take it!" answer I, with an emphasis which makes the audience chuckle again. "Come, four roubles—that's my last word."

The Russian groans deeply, and, with the air of a good man submitting bravely to some monstrous injustice, hands me over for four roubles an article not worth three. I sling the bag over my shoulder, and pass on, while the bearded faces behind me twinkle into a quiet grin.

But my purchases are not ended yet. I know by sad experience that any man travelling in Central Asia during the Khivan war, will be expected to bring back a souvenir of it for every acquaintance he has got ; and it is as well to get it over at once. I look about for something "cheap and durable," and pitch at length upon a heap of Kirghiz spoons and bowls of curiously painted wood, thrown pell-mell into a huge chest in front of one of the larger cells. At first I look in vain for any trace of a shopman ; but after a time, in the very inmost nook of the recess, I dimly descry a magnificent-looking old Bokhariote in a green caftan, sitting crosslegged upon a little square carpet—awake, but motionless as a statue—surveying me and my proceedings with a grand and tranquil contempt, which says, more plainly than any words, that it is all one to him whether I buy anything or not.

I dive into the chest, and turn out its contents one by one. To all appearance I might walk off with the entire lot, without making the slightest impression upon their impassible owner. At length, having fixed upon three spoons a little less dirty than the rest, and a bowl which, by some miracle, has only one crack in it, I present myself at the mouth of the cell.

"How much for the bowl?"

The automaton slowly extends the fingers of both hands, without speaking.

"Ten kopecks,* eh? And the spoons?"

Out come two fingers.

* About 3d. English.

“Two kopecks a piece? Very good.”

I put down sixteen kopecks, and move off with an uncomfortable feeling of having just offered sacrifice to some unknown Eastern idol. When I look back on reaching the other side of the square, he has not yet stirred to take up his money.

But at this point my attention is attracted by a great shouting and laughter proceeding from a crowd gathered near the entrance. I approach, and find a ring formed around two men wrestling, one of whom—a long, weedy fellow in a white jacket, is evidently a Cossack soldier, while the other—a short, brawny, Friar-Tuck-like man with a thick black beard, is as unmistakably a Bashkir. The sympathies of the spectators appear to be pretty equally divided; but I, at the first glance, pronounce for the Bashkir. They close again, and at first the Cossack appears to have the best of it; but he has put forth his whole strength too soon, and speedily begins to give way before the superior weight and muscle of his antagonist. Feeling his danger, the soldier makes a desperate effort, and succeeds in tripping-up his opponent; but the latter cleverly recovers himself, and, with a mighty heave, hoists White-jacket fairly off his legs, and brings him to the ground with a dull crash, falling heavily upon him. The native bystanders applaud lustily; and I reward the conqueror with a few kopecks, which he instantly lays out upon a thick round cake like a rolled-up copybook, sufficient to knock any civilised digestion out of time altogether.

The sound of a child's voice at my elbow makes me turn round, and I see in front of the nearest booth a little round-faced, black-eyed urchin of five sitting doubled up over a huge greasy copybook, filled with crabbed Tartar characters, which a brown, dried-up old greybeard in a villainously dirty shirt is laboriously teaching him to pronounce. Fancy copybooks and reading-lessons on the steppes of the Syr-Daria! The schoolmaster *is* abroad, with a vengeance!

Turning to leave the place (for my appetite tells me that it is already past one o'clock) I am stopped at the very gate by an old acquaintance—a big, burly man with a huge brown beard, the proprietor of a shop about a stone's throw beyond the bazaar. He is leaning lazily against the wall, bareheaded in the full blaze of the sunlight, and, as if that were not enough, with his head shaved into the bargain—confiding, no doubt, in that skull of proof which is the birthright of every true Russian. At my approach, however, he rears himself upright, and extends a hand as broad and hard as a trencher.

“God be with you, David Stepanovitch; how goes it?”

“May you be prosperous, Ivan Nikolaievitch” (John the son of Nicholas.) “You see I'm still waiting for my 'permit' to go on to Khiva.”

“What, hav'nt you got it yet? That's a pity—you might have gone with our caravan, which is to start as soon as the road's clear.”

“Why, isn't it clear now? Khiva's taken—what more do you want?”

“Khiva’s taken, but the *Khan’s* not ; he’s run away somewhere into the steppes east of the Aral Sea, with a lot of his rascals ; and a caravan would be a nice morsel for them, if they happened to meet it.”

“O, if that’s all that troubles you, be easy. I’ve just been to the Commandant, and he tells me that the Khan has come back again, and given himself up to the Russians ;* and what’s more, they’ve put him back on his throne again, only cautioning him to be a good boy for the future, and not pick any more pockets.”

“You don’t say so ? But surely they’ll leave a garrison there ? trusting a Khivan’s word is like standing on thawed ice !”

“Yes, they’re going to leave six companies in Kungrad, near the mouth of the Oxus, and possibly two or three more at Shourakhan, some forty miles east of Khiva ; so that if our friend the Khan misbehaves himself, he’ll be caught like a snake in a forked stick.”

“Bravo ! then the caravan can go off to-morrow. Thanks for your good news, David Stepanovitch ; but where are you off to in such a hurry ?”

“Home to my dinner—and I shall be ready for it, after knocking about in the sun all morning. Goodbye !”

“Till our next meeting !”

And so we part company.

* The Khan’s detention lasted only five days altogether—“just to let him feel our gripe,” as a Russian officer of my acquaintance expressed it.

CHAPTER XVII.

ACROSS THE SYR-DARIA WITH A CARAVAN.

MORNING on the Syr-Daria—a bright, glorious July morning, with a cloudless sky that betokens all too plainly the destroying heat to come. In the splendour of the early sunlight, the wide, smooth, glittering sweep of the river between its grassy banks, the broad belt of vegetation that girdles it, and the grey unending level of the mighty desert beyond, stand out sharp and clear as in a photograph. Upon most days of the year you might look in vain for any trace of man's presence in this strange panorama, save a stray tent dotted here and there upon the great waste ; but this morning it is otherwise. Around the "crossing" of Kara-Toubeh, where a huge, clumsy, iron-bound raft, towed by a rope slung across the stream, does duty as a ferry-boat, there are signs of unwonted bustle. Flat caps and white turbans, red shirts and flowing "khalats," high boots and broad-toed sandals, crowd the bank ; while the big, roomy tents dotted over the grass, and the charred circles of extinct camp-fires, show that the sojourn has been a long one. Evidently some great event is at hand, sufficing to stir even the sluggish Asiatic blood into temporary action. In the East there is but one occurrence capable of working such a miracle ; and

those who have travelled there would not need the sight of this host of camels, with their long necks couched on the earth in lazy enjoyment, to divine that the "coming event" which casts such a multiplied shadow is—the departure of a caravan.

Such is indeed the case; and here, at least, no one can apply the reproach of dilatoriness to the Russian population. It is barely six days since news came to them of the fall of Khiva, and they are already sending thither a large and well-freighted caravan! To every tradesman within hail of Fort No. 1, the fall of the Uzbek dynasty is simply a fine chance of "getting off" his wares at five or six times their market value. I remember that, just before I started for the seat of war, an English friend of mine, learning my destination, gravely asked me to bring him back some *Khivan stamps*; and the same principle seems to hold good here likewise. In fact, the genuine Russian trader is one who would have regarded the Deluge itself as a providential opening for the sale of umbrellas and macintoshes. It is not in his nature to let slip such a chance as this, and it must be owned that, for once, his proceedings have in them a kind of barbaric justice. The taxers of all men are about to be taxed in their turn, and the long outrage of the Eastern brigand is destined to be avenged by the long bill of the Western trader. The sporadic robbery of barbarism is at an end, and the systematic plunder of civilization is about to begin.

The force already mustered upon the ground is evi-

dently mere rank and file—servants, camel-drivers, hangers-on, and what not ; the generals are still to come. And here they come, sure enough, jolting along in two rickety vehicles, half gig and half wheel-barrow. At their approach, the general activity is redoubled. Ropes are knotted and noosed ; bales, boxes, and casks dragged hither and thither ; the Kirghiz drivers saddle their wiry little horses, and lead them to the front. The camels are yoked* and loaded, bale following bale and chest chest, till a short, angry grunt from the independent animal warns them to beware of “the last straw ;” and three or four brown, gaunt, brigand-like fellows who have been paddling in the river, huddle on their scanty garments, and hasten to join the throng.

Meanwhile the four conscript fathers of the bazaar dismount, and begin to look about them. All four are big, florid, jolly-looking men, with the unmistakable “trade mark” upon each and all. They are dressed in the usual way—white caps, light linen jackets, and high boots ; but one of them has actually attained the dignity of a white umbrella, by which imitation of Henri Quatre I rightly judge him to be the chief. A nearer view of him shows me the face of my old acquaintance Ivân Nikolaievitch, into whose “store” I have often dropped for a chat on the way to my afternoon bath ; and, remembering our yesterday’s meeting, I hasten to greet him accordingly.

“Be prosperous, Ivân Nikolaievitch. What are you

* In loading a camel, a wooden yoke is first placed on the hump and the load then corded upon it.

sending the Khivans? some clothes, I hope, to rig out the poor half-naked heathens properly."

"Ach, David Stepanovitch! how you talk! What's the use of sending good Christian cloth to those unbelievers, who don't know how to wear it? and where am *I* to get clothes from, who havn't an *arshin* (1½ ft.) of cloth left in my shop?"

[This postscript is for the benefit of the bystanders, some of whom may possibly wish to buy, in which case he will suddenly discover that there *is* a yard or two left, and charge double for it.]

"There's *my* cargo," he continues, in the tone of Coriolanus's "Alone I did it,"—pointing, as he speaks, to several huge casks which are just being corded upon the nearest camels.

"What's in them? water?"

"*Water!*" echoes the Russian, with all the emphasis of righteous indignation. "Ach, master, do you not fear God, that you talk of giving a Russian army *water* to drink at the end of a campaign? It's *vodka* (corn-whiskey) the very strongest I could get. They're giving three roubles (9s. English) a bottle for it just now in Khiva; so I ought to make a good profit."

"You ought, indeed; but how long will it take to get there?"

"Well, the Kirghiz drivers say they can do it in fifteen days; but I fancy it'll take a good deal longer than that. It's seven hundred versts (four hundred and sixty-seven miles) you know, by way of Irkibai;* and

* The nearer route (377 miles) is almost waterless; and hence the other is usually preferred.

then you can never believe a Kirghiz—they're all such liars that it's a shame to hear them!"

And, so saying, honest Iván draws himself up with the conscious integrity of a man who has never told a lie in his life.

Turning away to conceal my laughter, I find myself in front of a little wooden jetty, alongside of which lies the raft above mentioned, already crowded with passengers, both quadruped and biped. The "ships of the desert" step on board quietly enough; but the horses kick, and plunge, and rear, and one or two even fall into the water—while the sober camels look down upon them with quiet aristocratic contempt, like stately old ladies rebuking their ill-behaved grandchildren. At length the first boat-load is complete—the raft unmoored—and the human passengers, standing in a line along the slung rope, begin to tow themselves across.

As they now stand, a more picturesque group can hardly be imagined. Foremost of the file stands a short, broad-chested, low-browed Russian, tugging with his whole strength, and laughing and joking meanwhile with all the boyish unthinking merriment of his strangely mingled nature. Next to him figures a tall, stately Bokhariote in a green caftan, touching the rope daintily with one hand, as if conscious that it ill becomes a true believer to do any work which he can possibly avoid. Third on the list comes a squat, punchy Kalmuck in a little pointed cap, with a face resembling nothing so much as a half-baked bun with two crushed raisins stuck in the middle of it. Then follows a lean, sinewy,

keen-eyed Cossack ; and after him a hulking Bashkir, whose round puffy face and thick black hair are irresistibly suggestive of an over-boiled black-currant dumpling. Next appears a Kirghiz of the genuine desert type—long, gaunt, brown, wiry, and tough as whip-cord. His clothes (what little there is of them) are woefully ragged, displaying his coppery skin through countless rents ; but his shaven crown is amply defended by a huge shapeless headgear of grey felt, the very model of Robinson Crusoe's famous "goatskin cap." Last, and not least striking in this parade of nationalities, comes a tall, narrow-faced, brigand-like Khivan, in a high cap of black sheepskin, from beneath which his small, deep-set eyes gleam with the half cowed, half ferocious look of a hunted beast of prey. Only a few out of this cosmopolitan gathering, however, are actually going to accompany the caravan ; the rest have come merely to see it off, and to assure themselves of the safety of their goods at the outset.

In this age of railways and steam-packets, it is a strange sensation to be thus suddenly brought face to face with a mode of travelling which existed when Abraham was an unknown sheikh upon the Chaldæan steppes. Rebekah, when she came to Isaac—the sons of Jacob, when they went to buy corn from Pharaoh—were mounted and equipped precisely in the same way as the men with whom I am travelling to-day. From the dawn of history to the present time, the camel has been the one received means of communication throughout Central Asia, and, to all appearance, is likely to

remain so*—at least till the completion of M. de Lesseps projected "Orenburg-Samarcand Railway," which has been so eagerly grasped at by the Russian Government.

Nor is this to be wondered at. There is but one complete post-road through Turkestan (that from Orenburg to Tashkent), the others being mere branches; and even it (as I have found to my cost) is for the most part merely a wheel-track through the desert,† often covered axle-deep with sand. As regards the horse, he has already been tried and found wanting. The Asiatic breed, from its physical weakness, is practically useless in the transport of heavy burdens, and requires, moreover, to be fed, watered, and tended, at every turn—anything but an easy matter during the crossing of such tracts as the Batak or the Kizil Koum. The camel, on the other hand, gifted with powers of endurance bordering upon the incredible, able to find ample forage where a horse would starve, easily loaded and unloaded, and capable of travelling under a burden of sixteen poods‡ (576 lbs.) is here as warrantable a "ship of the desert" as in Arabia itself—more especially as the camel is far

* There are three caravans yearly from Bokhara to Orenburg, and vice-versâ; to Troitsk and Petropavlovsk, they run more rarely. The average rate of travel is thirty versts (about twenty English miles) a day.

† I have often seen the track marked for miles together by mounds of earth.

‡ During the Khiva Expedition, however, the maximum was twelve and a half poods; and even this was, in many cases, found to be too much. The Tchikishliar column alone lost three thousand two hundred camels out of four thousand, in little more than a month.

less liable to sickness generally, and epidemic diseases in particular, than its rival.

At this point my meditations are cut short by the bump of our raft against the landing-place on the southern shore. Men and beasts disembark, while two rough-looking fellows in tattered sheepskins tow the raft back again for a fresh load. And so, piece by piece, the whole caravan is ferried over, and musters on the southern bank its full tale of twelve horses and twenty-five camels. In the good old times, such a party would have been a mere mouthful to the Turkoman guerillas ; but the Russian occupation of Turkestan, and more especially the success of the Khiva Expedition, have wrought a marvellous change in this respect. The passage of the Kizil-Koum is now frequently made by small parties ; and I have even, during my stay at Kazalinsk, met with a man who had crossed it with a single guide—though, by his own admission, he felt anything but comfortable during the transit.

And now, all being ready, the word is given to start. The last farewells are said ; the wiry little horses go gallantly off across the smooth turf ; the camels slouch their long necks forward, and swing away with their long, noiseless stride. Far into the unending level they are still visible, man and beast standing out in the blistering glare as if carved in bronze ; till at length, the lessening cavalcade vanishes in a cloud of dust, and I am left alone—just as when, two years ago, I watched the last pilgrim caravan defiling past the Tomb of Eve

toward the purple hills behind which, barely forty-five miles away, lay the Holy City of Mecca.

Here, indeed, we have Khiva under an entirely new aspect. Hitherto it has been a source of perpetual disquiet, an ever-bubbling spring of outrage and rebellion, an ample realisation of the bitter old Russian proverb, "When the steppes smoke, there is a fire in Khiva." The long series of outrages perpetrated along the Russian frontier, the anti-Russian crusade of the Bokharian Ameer in 1866-68, the outbreaks in Southern Turkestan four years later, the treachery of Kouldja and Kokan, the attempted exodus of several hundred Kirghiz families from the Mangishlak peninsula at the opening of 1873, the Turkoman raid along the Attreck valley last February, the flight of the Yamouds to the Persian side of the river, the threatening attitude of the Eastern Khanates—are all directly traceable to the Machiavelli of the Khivan oasis, from whom all bad counsels and all unjust works do proceed. And now, it would seem, this very place is to become "the centre of Asiatic commerce," "the nucleus of a nascent civilisation." Let us look forward a hundred years, and see what kind of "special correspondence" our descendants will receive from these parts in 1973 :—

"The Industrial Exhibition of Khiva opened with great éclat on the 10th June, the hundredth anniversary of its capture by the Russians. The ceremony was inaugurated by the President of the Russian Republic, and further honoured by the presence of the Japanese Mikado, the Emperor of China, and the

English Viceroy of Afghanistan. The two former arrived by rail from Bokhara ; but his Excellency the Viceroy, still mindful of his old Eton renown, descended the Oxus from Badakshan in a Rob Roy canoe, to the great astonishment of the natives. I put up at the Turkestan Hotel, kept by a grandson of the last Khan of Khiva—a very nice, gentlemanly young fellow, who remarked to me yesterday with a knowing smile, that he, like his ancestors, levied toll on all passers-by, but that his profits far exceeded theirs. The specimens of native silk and cotton were remarkably fine, especially those from the factories recently established at Urgendj by Messrs Spinner and Yarne, of Manchester ; and a large trade in these articles is anticipated with Persia, immediately upon the opening of the railway to Meshed, which is expected to take place during the autumn. Among the curiosities of the antiquarian department were some fossil biscuits, originally forming part of General Kaufmann's commissariat during the campaign of 1873, and, I am told, but slightly altered in consistency. The mineral department contains several specimens of the gold found in the channel through which the Oxus formerly discharged itself into the Aral Sea, before its final diversion into the Caspian ;* the precious metal is said to be abundant, and a Turkoman company has already been formed for the

* Here the Correspondent of the Future must be corrected. Owing to the progressive diminution of the Oxus since its last diversion into the Caspian, the best Russian engineers pronounce the undertaking impossible. See Chapter xiii.

working of it. The statue of M. Vambéry in the centre of the refreshment room is by a native sculptor, and has just received a well-merited laudation in the columns of the *Khiva Daily Caravan*. Among the pictures, I need only mention the *chef-d'œuvre*—a large oil painting of that celebrated race between the University Eights of Khiva and Bokhara, which attracted so many sporting celebrities to the banks of the Oxus a year ago. I must not forget to mention that several commodious hotels, well supplied with bathing machines, have been established by Kirghiz capitalists along the shore of the Aral Sea ; so that Sir A. Cook's projected "monster excursion" to Khiva *via* Orenburg and Fort No. 1, and back by Krasnovodsk and Tiflis, may rely upon finding every comfort *en route*."

This will probably be the style of thing a hundred years hence ; but for the present, whenever I hear of Russia's "civilising progress" in the East, and the "attachment" of her Asiatic subjects, I straightway bethink myself of a great sea of treacle creeping slowly onward, with a few unhappy flies firmly *attached* to its surface.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A "CAMP DINNER" IN CENTRAL ASIA.

"VITE, mein friend!" shouts my fellow-prisoner, Dr Engelbrecht, bursting into the little brick-paved room in which I am sitting over my tea and camp-biscuit. "We go to dejeuner wid de voisko in de lager, and all shall be fertig in una hora!"

By this polyglot announcement, the Doctor means to intimate that we are to lunch to-day with the officers of the newly-arrived detachment. Khiva having fallen, troops are now coming up from all points to relieve the army of occupation. One of the flying columns from Orenburg has just bivouacked on the Syr-Daria, beside Fort No. 1; and to-day we are to be its guests.

"Shall I take my sauce-pan?"

"Yes, sure! and de spirit-lamp, and de bif-extrait, and all! We must have one very good essen to-day, or de officers shall say dat I know not how to cook."

And, stimulated by this awful possibility, the Doctor hurries off to the post-house to procure a "trap," while I hasten to fish out my cooking apparatus, not forgetting the "bif-extrait"—*i.e.*, Baron Liebig's famous invention. In an hour, as my comrade prophesied, all is ready; and away we go in gallant style, over a series

of ruts, holes, banks, and pools of water, that might shake the nerves of a Tipperary carman—till at length we come out upon the great plain beyond, wind our way deftly among the countless tents with which it is studded, and finally pull up in front of a more pretentious "canvas" than the rest, at the door of which the Russian regimental doctor (a long, lean, dried-up old fellow, with a lancet-shaped face and castor-oil complexion) stands ready to greet his confrère.

And now, is not this a gallant sight? Just below the fort, the river makes a wide bend to the south, enclosing a broad sweep of grassy turf, usually tenanted only by a few stray cattle, but to-day humming like a hive with the bustle of twelve hundred fighting men. From the outer ditch to the brink of the Syr-Daria, the whole plain is alive with the glitter of lances and bayonets, the flitting of white uniforms, the neighing and pawing of horses, the shouts and laughter of the rough, good-humoured, overgrown schoolboys, who chaff, and halloo, and play tricks on each other, without a thought of what is to come. The river, where I bathed in utter solitude two days ago, is now dotted with scores of sunburned faces; and the wild-fowl are scared from their reeds by the smoke of countless fires, upon which bubble iron pots, whose savoury steam allures the Kirghiz dogs from any distance to sniff hungrily around them. In a word, the whole tableau is an admirable specimen of one of the most picturesque sights on earth—a real Cossack camp on the steppes of Central Asia.

But at present we have no leisure for admiration. The day is wearing towards afternoon, and our meal is still to be cooked ; so to work we go in earnest. The soldiers make a fire of dried manure, wood being as rare in these parts as honesty or clean linen ; our host sends his servant to the river for water ; I take upon myself the keeping up of the fire and the stirring of the soup-kettle ; while the German doctor, turning up his sleeves with a professional air, begins chopping meat as heartily as if he were taking off a leg. And so, for the next two or three hours, the work goes on vigorously, Dr Engelbrecht every now and then tasting the soup with the air of a connoisseur, and giving his orders with the calm dignity of superior knowledge. At length all is ready ; and while the *chef* and his aides-de-camp are serving up, I take a hasty stroll through the camp, in order to appreciate more fully its picturesque details.

The bivouac forms a kind of irregular oblong, on three sides of which the horses are tethered and the arms piled. The fourth faces the river ; and here, enjoying the cool breeze that blows across it, are to be found all who are not otherwise engaged. To my right, as I pass by, an eager circle is gathered round a grey-haired Cossack, who, between the puffs of his short black pipe, is spinning an amazing yarn about some forgotten campaign against the Turkomans. To my left sits a hulking lad astride of a half empty biscuit-chest, while a comrade, standing behind him, is vigorously *chopping* off his hair with a pair of scissors big

enough to serve a gardener. Close beside me, a dozen pair of huge dusty boots suddenly protrude themselves from beneath the cover of a "dog-tent" (a sheet of felt fixed upon forked poles three feet high), showing that the sleepers are uncoiling from their afternoon's nap.

A little farther on, a long, gaunt, Don Quixote-like fellow, squatting cross-legged on the grass, is tailoring his nether garments with a dexterity which Poole himself might applaud. On the bank itself, a grim veteran, with a broken nose, is watching a simmering camp-kettle, while half a dozen others are paddling about in the river, and splashing each other amid roars of laughter. And yonder, behind a pile of boxes, apart from all the noise and bustle, a tall, handsome, smooth-faced lad, with a very fair complexion for a Cossack, is sitting bent forward over a soiled and ill-written letter—perhaps from his mother, perhaps from some bright-eyed Natalia or Tatiana far away on the slopes of the Ural—whose contents, misspelt and blotted as they are, suffice to make the brave fellow's eyes glisten in a way of which he would be sorely ashamed, did he dream that any one saw him. Let us leave him in peace, and pass on.

"Hoy! where were you? Come!"

It is the stentorian voice of Dr Engelbrecht, making itself heard from the distance; a warning that dinner is served, and that I must hasten back. And a most original dinner it is, the "gipsy style" in its fullest development. Chairs are replaced by chests, barrels, or camp-bedsteads; wooden ladles do the duty of knife, fork, and

spoon; instead of plates we use saucers, canisters, wooden bowls, and what not, each, as he finishes, washing out his dish and passing it to his neighbour, till all are served. Only one tumbler is to be found, which we unanimously vote to the president, contenting ourselves with horns or pewter mugs. But what matter such trifles in a place like this? Every fresh deficiency only provokes a fresh shout of laughter; and, despite our scanty commisariat and ragged uniforms, we are probably the merriest party assembled this day between the Aral Sea and the Himalaya. At any rate, there is no trace of discontent or *ennui* in the full-mouthed chorus, in which we all join, when our youngest member strikes up the famous old camp song which I learned years ago from the veterans of Nicholas in the heart of Central Russia:—

THE SOLDIER'S FAMILY.

- “ ‘ Soldiers, soldiers, lads of the Czar,
Who are your fathers, say ?’
‘ Our fathers are battles whose fame rings loud,
They are our fathers, they !’
- “ ‘ Soldiers, soldiers, lads of the Czar,
Who are your mothers, say ?
‘ Our mothers are tents standing white on the field,
They are our mothers, they !’
- “ ‘ Soldiers, soldiers, lads of the Czar,
Who are your sisters, say ?’
‘ Our sisters are sabres whetted to smite,
They are our sisters, they !’

"Soldiers, soldiers, tell me once more,
Who are your brides, I pray?
'Our brides they are guns well loaded for fight,
They are our brides—aye, they!'"

"You won't find such cookery as this in Khiva, I'm afraid," remarks the young subaltern on my right, with a broad grin.

"I suppose not," answer I, "that is to say, if I ever get there; but thanks to these scrupulous local authorities of yours, the way thither seems rather a hard road to travel."

"I should think it was!" growls Dr Engelbrecht from the other side of the table. "Look at me, for instance; I've got vouchers enough to set up a whole medical staff, and yet here I am!"

"And look at *me*," chime in I; "I've got private letters of recommendation to the commander-in-chief himself, and yet here *I* am!"*

"And look at *me*," strikes up the officer on my left; "I'm worse off than either of you. I'm a Russian born, and ought to have gone along with the expedition, and yet here *I* am!"

"In fact, here we all are," remark I; "and no great harm either, since it has given us this pleasant meeting to-day. The authorities have done us a favour without intending it. Here's to the health of the Russian army!"†

* At the time I speak of, my imprisonment had already lasted five weeks.

† This toast was appropriate enough, the rate of sickness during the whole war being fully 50 per cent lower (except in the Tchi-kishliar column) than in any previous campaign.

All echo the toast enthusiastically, and, as if in answer to it, a tremendous cheer from without comes rolling along the prairie like a peal of distant thunder.

"What's that?" cries Dr Engelbrecht, starting up.

"Only the Russian army returning thanks," suggest I.

"It's the Commandant coming to review the column!" whispers the senior officer, putting his head out to reconnoitre; "we must all get to our posts, gentlemen, and the quicker the better!"

Just at this auspicious moment it is discovered that our worthy host, the regimental doctor, has taken rather more than is good for him, and is beginning to wax uproarious. All our efforts to quiet him only serve to make him doubly noisy; and, as if out of *malice prepense*, the Commandant at that very minute pulls up not a hundred yards from our tent.

"Hush, my dear fellow—here's the Commandant!" says Dr Engelbrecht, with the whisper of the "second murderer" in a tragedy.

"Who cares for the Commandant? I'm as good a man as he is, any day. Let's have a look at him!"

And before we can guess what he would be at, he suddenly darts through our circle, and standing outside the tent, with a look of imbecile good humour on his long, narrow face, begins to sing a comic song by way of doing honour to his commanding officer. For an instant we all stand petrified; then, with one accord, we rush upon him and drag him in by main force. But he—"tenacem propositi virum"—keeps darting out

again every now and then, and finds us in full exercise for the remainder of the evening.

Meanwhile the inspection goes forward in good earnest. The regimental kits are certainly in anything but first-rate order, and the general "get-up" of the detachment would agonise a critic from Potsdam or Aldershot; but the men themselves are in fine form, tough and well-seasoned as leather, and with hardly a sick man among them, notwithstanding the presence of two doctors. Certainly the camel is not more truly made for the desert, than the Ural Cossack for Asiatic warfare. Light, active, wiry, tough as whipcord, and gifted with almost incredible powers of endurance, he is more than a match for the Turkoman at his own weapons. It is with such men as these, dotted in little bands of two or three hundred over the boundless emptiness of Central Asia, that Russia is slowly but surely conquering all that lies north of the Himalaya. On a pitched field, undoubtedly, against the armies of civilised Europe, the spearman of the steppes would have little chance, but as an irregular he has no equal upon the face of the earth; and, could he but be kept sober (which he never can), his effectiveness would be perfect.

The sun goes down before the parade is ended; and this last scene is the most striking of all. The last rays stream upon the long, even line of white uniforms, standing up like a stone wall, and upon the wild figures of the mounted Cossacks, rushing at full gallop over the prairie with levelled lances, as their forefathers rushed over the same ground a thousand years ago.

Under the fast-falling darkness (for in these latitudes night comes on like the fall of a curtain) the great plain looks vaster and drearier than ever; and, before this sudden sense of the mighty desolation encompassing us, the presence of these many hundred men is blotted out as if it had never been. The fortress and its garrison, the town, the bazaar, the war-steamers in the river—all seem but a little speck of human life in the boundless sea of desolation; and it is a kind of relief to find myself back in my quarters once more, with my little tea-urn steaming on the table, and my Tartar servant standing obediently beside it.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CIRCULATING LIBRARY IN CENTRAL ASIA.

"AND you've really been five weeks in this horrid place?" says Captain P——, as we sit over our evening tea and black bread, "They may well say that the Anglo-Saxon breed can bear anything. If I had been in your place, I should have simply gone stark mad."

And in truth my present "surroundings" are not particularly enticing. A little cluster of mud hovels, one storey high, flanking broad dusty ditches, called by courtesy "streets;" a small, dirty, cell-like room, with uneven brick floor and whitewashed walls, upon which the squelched carcasses of countless mosquitoes hang as trophies of my "Arabian Nights' Entertainments;" boots with three holes apiece, and a coat that would have fallen to shreds long ago, but for the mud which plasters it; a temperature of 100 in the shade, and all around, as far as the eye can reach, an unpeopled desert; such is the situation.

"Oh, I've seen much queerer places than this in Arabia and Brazil," answer I, with a would-be stoical air; "and as for going mad, what with walking about, and writing my journal, and taking sketches, and exploring the steppes, and talking with the soldiers, and swimming across the Syr-Daria, I've had plenty to do."

"And have you really swum across the Syr-Daria?"

"Yes, and back again. What of it?"

"Why, only that you're lucky to be alive to talk about it, that's all. But, to be sure, you've had one *passempts* that I forgot—the library."

"What library? I didn't even know there *was* one."

The captain opens his eyes to their fullest extent.

"Five weeks here, and never heard of the library! Well, you *do* astonish me."

"So it appears. But, if there is one, where's it to be found? A Central Asiatic circulating library must be something worth seeing."

"Well, I don't know that I can give you the route exactly. You see, I always send my servant for the books; but you have only to ask the first man you meet—everybody knows it."

I thank my informant, not without some secret misgivings, having remarked, in the course of a long and varied experience, that the hardest places in the world to find are those which "everybody knows." However, as a strong-minded friend of mine used to be always saying, "when a thing has *got* to be done, done it must be;" so, the very same evening, I despatch my Tartar servant in quest of this mysterious place, with instructions not to come back till he has found it. Two hours later, honest Mourad returns, and, mopping the heat from his lean, swarthy, brigand-like face, reports himself as follows:—

"Master, they told me at first that it was in the fortress, and it wasn't; and then they told me that it

was near the post-house, and it wasn't ; and then they told me it was close to our lodging here, and it wasn't ; and then they told me it was beside the police office,—and there, praise be to Allah, it *was!*”

“ And did you see the librarian ? ”

“ I *would* have seen him, master, only he wasn't there ! ”

“ Well, that certainly *might* be a hindrance,” remark I, sarcastically. “ And what did you do, then ? ”

“ I went to his house, master—but he wasn't there either ! ”

“ Hm—that's pleasant ; first hunt the library, and then hunt the librarian. I see how it is—I must just go myself.”

Early next morning I make good my words, but with as little success as my henchman. The same afternoon, the invisible librarian returns the compliment by coming in search of *me*, just as I have gone off for my afternoon swim in the Syr-Daria. And so, for two whole days, this game of hide and seek goes on with unabated vigour.

“ I went to Taffy's house, Taffy wasn't at home,
Taffy came to my house, and found that I was gone.”

At length, on the third day, I begin to tire of the sport, and despatch Mourad once more, with orders to “ find the man and bring him here, if he takes all day to it.” Off goes the obedient Mussulman accordingly, returning in about three quarters of an hour with the glad tidings that the librarian is “ coming directly.” And,

sure enough, *directly* (i.e., an hour and a half later), there comes a hesitating tap at my door, and in sidles a tall, stalwart fellow with a bluff sunburned face—evidently a retired soldier, limping slightly from a wound received in some forgotten skirmish with the Turkomans, but still upright and active enough to make many a younger man envious.

Our conference is brief and business-like enough.

“Are you the librarian?”

“Yes, your honour.”

“Come along!”

Short as the distance is between my quarters and the library, a tithe of it would suffice to show the most unobservant stranger into what an utterly new region he has penetrated. At every turn, we are met by some object never seen in Europe, and one glimpse of which in a London thoroughfare would suffice to draw a larger audience than either “School” or “Richelieu.” Lean, dark, wiry Cossack soldiers, in white forage-caps and linen tunics; mud-hovels thatched with reeds, and surrounded by every imaginable kind of filth; huge plate-armoured lizards darting in and out of the crevices in the clay walls; bare-footed women with scarlet kerchiefs knotted around their broad, flat, copper-coloured faces; and a motley population of lumpy Bashkirs, hook-nosed Kirghiz, high-cheeked Khivans, bun-faced Kalmucks, stately Bokhariotes, low-browed Russians, and bullet-headed Tartars. On this side, a passing camel, with slouched neck and long, noiseless stride, glancing slyly at us from beneath his

huge overhanging eyebrow ; on that, a gaunt, half-naked Kirghiz, with a skin cap as big as a coal-scuttle, riding on a cow—no uncommon sight in this primitive region, where the natives, rather than walk, will ride upon anything from a dromedary to a drum-stick. Under the scorching heat of mid-day, the very cock-roaches seem to crawl more languidly than usual ; and the lean, piratical-looking dogs coiled up in front of the houses are too much “done up” to bark, but merely show their teeth as a matter of form.

At last we emerge from the labyrinth upon a vast open space, bounded on the left by the long, low, many-windowed frontage of the police-station, and extending on the right down to the very brink of the marshy, almost dry moat that girdles the wall of the fortress. To the left of the police-station, behind one of those little reed palisades so common in Central Asia, appears a kind of abridged parody of it—equally long, low, and many windowed, but barely a third of its size, and entered (like Virgil's Hades) by two doors. My guide goes straight to the further of the two, enters, and, unlocking a small door on the left with the air of Louis Quatorze showing his palace, motions me in.

At the first glance, I am involuntarily reminded of those wonderful descriptions of the weird old chambers in the Inns of Court, which haunted my dreams for many a night after my first reading of “Pickwick.” And, certainly, the two “interiors” have much in common. The small, narrow, low-browed window, overgrown with cobwebs and dirt ; the cross-beamed

roof, which, flecked with lingering patches of whitewash, looks unpleasantly like the ribs of a giant skeleton ; the bare walls, the dingy floor, the rough deal table littered with bundles of dusty papers—are all identical ; even the damp, chilly, back-kitchen atmosphere is there likewise.

The impression deepens as I glance along the shelves, piled high with worm-eaten military order books, with official documents written years ago, with huge metal cases painted with the half-effaced inscription : “Reports of the 8th Turkestan Battalion for 1868—1869—1870—&c.” Everything has an ancient, remote, uncanny look, an atmosphere heavy with forgotten events and with men who have been long dead. Amid such surroundings, I should hardly be surprised to see the lid of the huge padlocked chest in the farther corner raise itself slowly, with a long creaking groan, and reveal a skeleton in the mouldering remnants of a bridal dress, pointing its bony finger in hideous mockery.

But my stout conductor, whose mental organisation is as thick as the skull that encases it, troubles himself with no such fantasies. To his practical mind, this Bluebeard’s Chamber is simply a place where he has to give out books and to receive money ; and he proceeds to business forthwith. Drawing a second key from his capacious pocket, he unlocks a small armoire standing in a recess on the farther side of the room, and, waving his hand over the contents as if he were blessing them, bids me “look through them and help myself.”

And a most miscellaneous collection they are.

Several dozens of old magazines, bound all wrong, and, in some cases, carrying their spirit of brotherhood so far as to exchange covers; two or three tattered volumes of Pushkin, the champion poet of Russia; a number of well-thumbed romances by native celebrities of the present day, including (as I am glad to notice) those of the Russian Thackeray, Ivan Turgenieff, whose towering figure and lion-like grey head seem to look down upon me as I read. There, too, are a few fragments of Alexander Dumas, père—that wonderful man who served up impossibility with such piquant French sauce as to make it taste like Truth, and gracefully bowed Fact and History out of his way wherever he went. Then come translations of various Anglo-Saxon worthies—jolly Captain Marryat and picturesque Fenimore Cooper, photographic Dickens and earnest Charles Reade—old friends with a new face, receiving honour thousands of miles from home, in a strange language, and among a people whom they never saw nor shall see.

There is, however, *one* drawback to this admirable collection—not a single work appears to be complete. The first volume of one, the second of another, the last of a third, are nowhere to be found, the library being apparently composed (like that of the chief hotel at Beyrout) of odd volumes dropped by passing travellers. It suddenly flashes upon me that here is a new torture, unaccountably overlooked by the Inquisition,—to shut a man up in an awfully dull place, with an intensely interesting book of which the last volume is missing!

Having chosen a few books at haphazard, I am

turning to depart, when my eye catches a Swedish newspaper pasted on the wall, and the first thing I read is—

“ Lord Erlistoun,
En kärleks Historie,
Af förf. till ‘ John Halifax.’ ”

This is all that time and dust have spared ; but it suffices to call up a very pleasant remembrance of a gentle, kindly face, and cordially outstretched hand, which once greeted me at the door of an English country house, in days which now seem like the memory of a previous existence. Such recollections are worth reviving in the heart of this Asiatic desert ; and as the door closes behind me, I freely forgive the library all its deficiencies.

CHAPTER XX.

EASTWARD HO!

WEEKS have come and gone, and, little by little, the summer is beginning to wear away. The periodical shrinking of the Syr-Daria (coinciding with the rise of the Oxus) has left broad patches of mud festering in the sun where, a fortnight ago, I stood ankle-deep in water. The destroying heat of June and early July is gradually softening into a mild, genial warmth, which makes it a treat to be out of doors. The mosquitoes which have haunted us so long are beginning to disappear—though replaced by another scourge almost equally intolerable—a plague of flies of every standing and denomination, from the adventurous youngster who pops into your glass just as you are going to drink, or into your eye just as you are beginning to write, up to the huge barytoned bluebottle who keeps blundering into your face with the perseverance of a bore who cannot understand that he is not wanted.

My bivouac in the courtyard is becoming chillier and chillier, and of late I have taken to sleeping indoors altogether. Old Morozoff, my host, tries to frighten me by shaking his great shaggy head with prophecies of terrible cold to come, and quotes with a chuckle the favourite

native legend, that there was no winter here twenty years ago, but that the Russian conquerors have brought their own cold along with them. If so, they must have brought a bountiful supply. The Syr-Daria freezes for three months (from the end of November to the beginning of March) and the Lower Oxus itself for one; while the cold Siberian winds make themselves terribly felt on the great central plain even as early as autumn. I myself, when I returned across the Kara-Koum in September, had one foot completely frozen; and this is by no means an exceptional case, though I may perhaps have been more liable to it from my previous loss of blood.

Colonel Goloff, the late commander of the Kazalinsk column, has resumed his duties as District Governor, my old friend Vereshtchagin having been transferred to Fort Perovski; and, once or twice every week, I amuse myself by strolling down to the Colonel's meek little house (only distinguishable by the sentry at its door) and watching him dispensing justice. The room itself is a picture. Low roof, brick floor, whitewashed walls; two small windows looking out upon a tiny garden, which has run sadly to waste during its master's absence; the usual big couch along the wall, the usual rickety chairs and deal table, littered with papers of every kind; picture of patron saint in one corner, painting of "John the Baptist's head in a charger" in the other; photographs of various friends and one or two of the Grand Dukes, unframed and fly-spotted; and in the midst of all, the bulky figure, broad full

face, and heavy cuirassier moustache, of the Governor himself, with the inevitable glass of tea and sliced lemon at his elbow.

Nor are the visitors a less curious study than the room itself. Now it is a lean, sunburned, Cossack soldier in a dingy white tunic, charged with some outrageous breach of the peace, and meeting all questions with a stolid "I know nothing about it, your Excellency—I was drunk." Then bursts in a gaunt, robber-like Kirghiz, burning for vengeance upon the miscreant who has appropriated *a whole foot* of his land, and astonished that the Governor should take it so quietly. After him comes a well-disciplined clerk from the bureau, with papers which have just arrived from Tashkent; and then an overseer to complain that his workmen are shirking their duty—no uncommon offence in these parts. Or perhaps, once in a way, two or three officers drop in to hold a council over the despatch of a steamer with fresh stores for the troops holding the Delta of the Oxus, and the preparation of winter clothing for them; or, it may be, to cut a few threadbare jokes upon the Khivan Khan's chance of paying his indemnity—a payment likely to be strictly exacted in this accurate age, when the world's motto appears to be: "Let no man owe you anything, save to hate one another."

But, all this time, my own prospects are growing blacker and blacker. Khiva has already become all but hopeless, and Tashkent now begins to appear equally so. M——'s cheering letter has borne no fruit.

The Russian officers evidently regard my extradition to Orenburg as a mere question of time. My Tartar, having by this time lost all confidence in my lucky star, and all hope of visiting his brother at Samarcand, begins to turn his thoughts homeward, and to talk querulously of "the good place that he left at Orenburg to come out into the desert for nothing."

Once, indeed, I fairly consider the game lost—on the morning of the 27th July, when a tall, gaunt, hard-featured man in uniform stalks into my room, and, presenting me with a formidable-looking official document signed by the Governor of Tashkent, begs me to read it, and to note on the margin that I have done so. I obey, and find it to the effect that, my passport being an English one, I cannot be allowed to proceed; and that, should General Kaufmann's decision be unfavourable to me, I am to quit the province forthwith. This I at first regard as a final blow; but, on re-reading it, I perceive that it can be temporised with, and temporise with it accordingly.

Nevertheless, I can no longer disguise even from myself that my cause is as good as lost. It is evident to me (though, not having seen an English paper for three months, I, of course, know nothing as yet of the publication of my name by the *Daily Telegraph* on the 31st May) that *some* adverse circumstance has nullified the effect of my recommendations; and although I still continue to write and post my weekly despatches to the *Daily Telegraph* (under cover to my agents in Russia, in order to avoid suspicion) it is with the feeling of a condemned criminal meting out his few remaining days of life.

Such is the state of affairs, when, one Sunday morning (the 3d August, if I recollect right) there comes a cautious tap at my door, and a short, heavy-looking man slinks in, with an unpleasant twitching in one side of his fat yellow face, and a small, deep-set, restless eye, which seems to see everything without looking straight at anything.

“What do you want?” ask I, somewhat taken aback.

The Unknown answers not a word, but noiselessly shuts the door, walks to the window and closes it likewise, lays his cap on the table as carefully as if it were a torpedo, and then, drawing a chair close to mine, at length breaks silence.

“Nobody listening, is there?”

“Nobody,” answer I, wondering more and more.

“Listen, then,” says he, in the same hoarse whisper. “You want to get to Khiva, don’t you? and they won’t let you go?”

I nod assent, beginning to guess what is coming, and resolved to be on my guard.

“Look here, then; I’m going to send a caravan there in two or three days, and to go with it myself. Now, nobody can prevent me from taking a clerk with me if I choose, and no one’s likely to ask who the clerk is, when he’s once dressed up and put in the middle of the caravan. We shan’t be many days in getting to Khiva; and when we *do* get there, you won’t mind giving a little towards the expenses of the journey. You understand?”

I do understand, indeed. The scheme which, in

vague outline, haunted me before leaving England, is now offered me as an actual fact ; and of its feasibility there can be no doubt. All that is needed is a moderate bribe. For a few hundred roubles (a mere nothing to the amount still left me) I can end all my difficulties at one blow, and make the success which I have long since despaired of, not merely probable, but certain. For a moment, I must confess, I *do* try to imagine some way of reconciling the two incompatible courses ; but, happily, no amount of thinking can ever make it seem right for a man to break his word. Having once bound myself to await the decision of the authorities, there is no other way out ; and I decline the offer with thanks. My strange visitor stares blankly, and shambles out of the room, evidently thunderstruck at my unaccountable refusal.

But such temptations, though they may be resisted, cannot be forgotten ; and the thought of the treachery which I might have perpetrated, will not be driven away. Two days more, or three at the most, and all would have been well ; my way once more clear before me—Khiva no longer unattainable, but a mere question of a few days more or less—and all this dreary watching, and waiting, and hoping against hope, at an end for ever. All this, and more, haunts me unceasingly all the rest of that day ; and when, early the next morning, I am aroused by the same spectre in uniform who disturbed me eight days ago, I start as if detected in a crime.

“Be so good,” says he, in his dry measured voice,

“as to read this paper, and make a note to that effect on the margin.”

The tone, the words, the man's bearing and attitude—in fact, every detail of the scene—is so perfectly identical, that for a moment I feel as if the past week with all its troubles, including the haunting interview of the day before, were only a dream, and I were still hesitating over the unwelcome message of the 27th July. But the official crackle of the paper recalls me to myself, and I begin to read. It is a long official letter, in a hand not over legible ; but one paragraph shapes itself before me clearly enough :—

“And with regard to the foreigner David Ker, it is hereby ordered to let him pass safely to Tashkent, without let or hindrance, and to give him the necessary vouchers.” And above it, in full official clearness, the seal of the Turkestan Administration.

“I'm very glad of it, for your sake,” says Colonel Goloff, when I call upon him an hour later. “I always thought it would come right in the end, though it's a pity you've lost so much time. I'll just see about your safe-conduct and travelling-pass at once, and you can get off to-morrow.”

I have my doubts about the last clause, the post being due on the following morning, and several officers about to start likewise ; but this matters the less, inasmuch as a Russian pass is never ready at the time appointed. I make my acknowledgments, and return home to announce the good news to Mourad, who is

smoking at the door with his now habitual look of sullen resignation.

"Well, Mourad my boy, we're loose again at last: so you can begin packing up for Tashkent as soon as you like."

It is a brave sight to see how, at the very sound of a coming change of place, the restless Tartar spirit is awake once more. The dark face lights up joyfully, and the despondent look, which has haunted it so long, falls off like a mask.

"Are we really going, then, Master? Allah be praised! I thought we should never get any farther, after all this. And you'll go to Samarcand, won't you, David Stepanovitch? you *promised* that I should see my brother, you know!"

"So you shall, my lad—and I'll see him too, if he's there. Now, just sit down and write a line to your mother, telling her that you're all right, and just starting with me for Tashkent."

The letter is soon written (such a letter as will be eagerly devoured by the lonely widow far away on the western slope of the Ural) and posted, half an hour later, at a little whitewashed cottage thatched with reeds, which, with its green letter-box, painted double-eagle, and staring inscription of "Kazalinsk Town-Post," tries to look as imposing as possible. As I drop the letter in, I catch sight of the corner of a post-card (an invention universally popular in Russia) sticking up from the mouth of the box, and find, on examination, that the poor thing has slipped between the outer and inner box, and remained there for a week!

Two days later (the flood of posts and passengers having begun to subside), a little wicker-work car, without covering of any kind, draws up at our door; and my landlord brings me a white roll and a cup of splendid coffee, as his parting gift for the road. A few minutes suffice to stow our baggage, of which, indeed, the remains of the provisions bought at Orenburg form by far the largest part. I pay my bill, which is still among my souvenirs of Turkestan; big Onesimus extends his broad trencher-like hand for the final "tip;" the driver shakes his reins with a wild screech, and—Eastward Ho!

It was the 17th June when we entered Kazalinsk; it is the 7th August when we leave it. Words cannot tell what that time really was; but for the sake of one-half the insight that it gave me into Russia's real position in the East, I would gladly do it all over again.

CHAPTER XXI.

UP THE SYR-DARIA.

FREE at last! and with the whole east of Central Asia before us. Glorious August weather, just pleasantly softened from the destroying heat of June; a fresh breeze, which stirs our blood like the springing of a new life; full permission to go straight up the river for six hundred miles and more, without let or hindrance; and possibly (who knows?) a chance of getting to Khiva after all, in the track of Kaufmann's couriers. In any case, the rumoured disturbances in Kokan, or Bokhara, or wherever it may be, will be worth looking at if one can get a sight of them; and, after the long torpor of the last seven weeks, any exertion is a pleasure.

Not unnaturally, at such a moment, am I reminded of a certain famous passage, which I translate for my Tartar's benefit: "I wish them horses had been three months and better in the Fleet, sir," said Sam, addressing his master. "Why so, Sam?" asked Mr Pickwick. "Why, sir," answered Sam, "how they would go if they had!" Honest Mourad fully appreciates the joke, and laughs over it with a heartiness very un-Asiatic.

Our route, for several hundred miles to come, lies along the Syr-Daria; and, at the very outset, we come

suddenly into a new world. There are, indeed, snatches of unutterable desolation every here and there, such as I have already described in the account of my march across the steppe ; but the general aspect of the country, even in this earlier stage between Fort No. 1 and Fort No. 2, is a refreshing contrast to the overwhelming barrenness of the Kara-Koum. For miles together we are in the midst of green pastures, and thick clusters of undergrowth, and forests of reeds swaying with the swirl of the river, and droves of grazing horses, or camels, which turn their long necks to stare at us as we scurry by. And sometimes, at long intervals, a group of horsemen come swooping past at full gallop, with their long lances glittering in the sun, and their white fangs lighting up the gaunt brown face with an ugly grin.

But, despite all these, this strange country has a dreariness of its own which is hard to describe. It is the lifelessness, not of a region which has never lived, but of one which has lived with a boundless intensity of life, only to perish at once and for ever. In the wildest and loneliest spots start up strange relics of a forgotten civilisation ; vast canals, half-choked by drifting sand ; pyramidal tombs, upon whose massy walls the storms of five centuries have beaten in vain ; ruined fortresses, looking blankly down at us through their gaping walls with a fixed unseeing stare, like the eyes of a corpse ; and, at times, whole acres of crumbling buildings, over which the wind passes with a dreary moan. These are the things which *have been* ; and the presence of such

multiplied signs of busy and populous life in the heart of a region now "given over to desolation," has an effect indescribably weird and unearthly.

With such evidence, it is not difficult to believe the eloquent descriptions given by the Mussulman historians of what Central Asia once was, till her forests and those who planted them fell together before the unsparing sword of Timour. Ages have rolled over her unredeemed desolation; and now, in the fullness of time, Russia is come to build upon the ruins of the fallen empire, and to fill in, with slow and laborious touches, the grand outline bequeathed her by Alexander the Great.

For the first day we get along well enough, meeting with only one delay worth mentioning—a halt of four hours at the fourth station from Kazalinsk, which we reach about midnight. Under the glorious southern moonlight, the broad sweep of the Syr-Daria stands out like silver from the dark plain around; but along its shadowy bank twinkle countless fires, and the still air is stirred by a sound like the distant cawing of a thousand rooks.

"What's all this?" ask I of the postmaster, who comes tumbling out in his greasy sheepskin, lantern in hand.

"It's a column of Cossacks on the march to Tashkent, devil take them!" answers the poor fellow, with the concentrated rage of an injured man, hopeless of relief. "They kept me awake all last night, and they're not gone yet. Just hear them now! as bad as a bazaar with a lot of Jews in it!"

About four in the morning we get off again, and thenceforward go along briskly enough. As we approach Fort No. 2 the soil becomes lighter, and I see for the first time a phenomenon which afterwards recurs pretty frequently—a layer of boughs trodden into a kind of pavement, in order to solidify the deep soft sand which covers the road. Just as we halt at the last station before the fort, up come three men on horseback, and three others on foot, the latter moving with a shuffling gait, as if some one were clutching them by the ankles. They come to a halt in the shade of the post-house, and one of the men on foot, shambling up to where I sit, holds out a lean hand with a petition for alms. I look at his feet, and see the tell-tale fetters.

“They’re prisoners on the way to Siberia,” whispers my Tartar, who has been exchanging a word or two with the mounted escort. “Their keepers let them beg as they go along; but they get little enough, poor fellows!”

I search my pockets, but find nothing. The payment of the posts has exhausted my small change, and no Russian post-master has ever been known to have any since roads first existed. The only thing I can think of is to cut him a huge slice of bread and water-melon, in which the poor fellow buries his thirsty lips with a look of gratitude that says more than any words. Then, remembering his two comrades, he breaks up his portion, and is about to divide it with them, when I forestall him by serving them out a slice each. The mounted men look on approvingly, and suggest to

them to sit down and eat at their leisure, Mourad and I joining them while the horses are being harnessed. And then the biggest of the three horsemen begins to shake himself together before remounting, and the chains clank heavily as the poor creatures rise from their little breathing-time of rest, and go forth once more upon the dreary march toward their place of punishment.

A little after mid-day we reach Fort No. 2, and find that, of course, there are no horses to be had. Three waggons are at the door as we come up, and their occupants—men, women, and children—are all crying, scolding or swearing at once, without producing the smallest effect upon the stoical post-master, who answers all alike with a shrug and a quiet, "What's to be done? if there aren't horses, there aren't!"

Fortunately both Mourad and I are too thoroughly hardened by this time to all possible trials of our patience, to be much disturbed by this one. Having indulged in a bathe, and (as I need hardly say) an unlimited "brew" of tea, we proceed to make ourselves comfortable—Mourad going quietly off to sleep, while I amuse myself with a stroll about the environs.

But, except one or two picturesque old tombs which make me wish myself an artist for the moment, there is really very little to see. The little cluster of mud-hovels which clings to the skirts of the fort can hardly be magnified into a village; while the fort itself is barely one-fourth the size of Fort No. 1, with five rusty guns, and a dry moat in which not even a frog could find shelter.

Coming back to the post-house, I am startled at seeing a real *bond fide* book lying among the pots and saucers on the window-sill, one of the little paper-covered "popular issues" which have begun to deluge Russia within the last few years—"The Story of the Great Champion Yeruslan Lazarevitch, printed at Moscow, 1872."

Partly for the sake of old times, and still more from the memory of the famous opera which one of the greatest of Russian poets has moulded out of this quaint old legend, I take up the tattered three-pennyworth of impossibility, and read it through from beginning to end. And it is worth reading—far better worth it than the dapper little tomes of duodecimo iniquity with which France has stocked the libraries of St Petersburg. With all their prolixity and extravagance, the Russian traditions breathe a spirit of quiet courage, and uncomplaining obedience, and simple trust in God, characteristic of the nation which produced them ; and so long as Russia can take pleasure in the setting forth of such qualities, there is hope for her still.

Night comes on, and with it come the mosquitoes, settling down to their work in thousands, with the steady, business-like assiduity of long practice. Forthwith our community, which has been eating, drinking, smoking, or playing hide-and-seek, in rash security, resolves itself into a committee of self-flagellation—children crying, women scolding, men cursing, the unfeeling post-master and his aides-de-camp laughing consumedly :

“ Continuo auditæ voces, vagitus et ingens,
Infantumque animæ flentes,”

but all in vain. From this point, for more than a hundred miles to come, the swamps of the Syr-Daria assert themselves in earnest ; and any unfortunate who may be condemned to bivouac within reach of them, is, in the forcible words of my friend, Lieutenant Stumm, “ ein verlorener Mensch.” This, however, is all in the day’s work, and cannot be grumbled at. My Tartar is already sleeping too soundly to be disturbed by anything ; and I, wrapping myself in my plaid, lie down in the bottom of the car, and have a comfortable nap in defiance both of dews and mosquitoes.

But about sunrise comes a sufficient awakening for us all—a rumble of heavy wheels, and a measured tramp of many feet, and the shrill neighing of horses, and the deep sonorous chant of hundreds of voices, keeping time to their march with an old national song. I start up, and see, a few hundred yards off, rolling along the road like a river, a long train of white-coated horsemen with long lances, and dusty footmen with sloped muskets, and waggons crammed with chests and flour-sacks, upon which sit red-kerchiefed women and brown-faced children, delighting in the bustle and motion. It is a Cossack detachment on its way up the river—one of many which we are destined to meet before reaching Tashkent ; and when we get off an hour later, we pass it on the road, half-buried in a floating dust-cloud of its own raising.

And now comes a stage which is to the traveller

through Turkestan what the "middle passage" once was to the Guinea trader. From Fort No. 2 right up to Fort Perovski, a distance of one hundred and twenty-three English miles, the country and the postal arrangements are both equally bad ; or, as a Russian officer whom I meet mid-way tersely expresses it, "No horses, no drivers, no food, no shelter, no nothing." The post-houses are mere underground dens, such as I have described in a former chapter ; and at each in turn there is a delay of several hours, losing us in this way the best part of the afternoon. To crown all, a dark mass of cloud which has haunted us all day, discharges itself a little after nightfall in a torrent of rain, contemporaneously with the arrival of the usual cloud of mosquitoes—the two pests not in the least interfering with each other, but appearing to act in perfect and noisome harmony. Mourad and the driver take shelter under the waggon, while I entrench myself in wraps ; and there I lie, hour after hour, listening to the patter of the rain upon my waterproof, and the shrill "ping, ping" of the mosquitoes as they seek for a crevice in the line of defence.

Towards midnight the rain ceases, and we go forward again, slowly and painfully enough ; for the horses on this section are the worst on the whole line, and difficult to keep even at a quick walk—a *trot*, of course, is not to be thought of. Wearily we plash onward through the darkness, over the drenched and miry ground ; till at last, just as we begin to hope that we are nearing the next station, it is suddenly discovered that we have lost our way !

Even by daylight, this semi-existent "road" which makes such a figure on the Russian maps is by no means easy to follow; but in the darkness of a stormy night, even the hero of "the long rifle" would find his "Hawk-eye" of little use to him. We cast about fruitlessly for the lost track, just as we used to do at Rugby when thrown-out on a paper chase; but here there is no "scent" to direct us, and we are just debating the advisability of camping till daylight, when suddenly, through the depth of chill blackness, comes a sound of plashing hoofs. My driver lifts his voice in a shrill scream, which is as shrilly answered; and a momentary gleam of moonlight shows us the wild figure of a Kirghiz horseman, making straight for us. Almost before we can explain our difficulty, he is off his horse and questing about the prairie like a blood-hound—finds the trail almost instantaneously, and rides alongside of us till we reach the station.

Arrived there, we find that, for a wonder, there *are* horses to be had—for those, at least, who like to go out on the steppe and catch them; and in another hour and a half we are off again—but this time with a team so superlatively bad, that all which have gone before seem hopeful beside it. To say that we go at a snail's pace is nothing:

"Snails contemptuous, as they go,
Look behind and laugh at Joe."

At length our continued want of progress kindles my Tartar's hot blood to such a degree, that (having mutely consulted me by a significant gesture) he

suddenly wrests the whip from the driver, literally *shovels* the astonished man out of his place as one would toss a child, and, leaping into the vacant seat, arouses the horses with a sweeping lash, and an ear-piercing yell that makes my head ring for the next ten minutes. Away go the beasts as if possessed by a demon; while my startled driver, thus forcibly recalled to a sense of his duty, catches by the harness and scampers alongside, keeping up howl for howl with Mourad all the way—till, between the shadowy moonlight and the great background of unfathomable gloom, the rocking car and flying horses, the swarthy faces of my comrades seen by fitful gleams of light, and the diabolical yelling, our whole turn-out might pass for Pluto's chariot taking a morning drive in the world below. Just about daybreak, we reach the next station (the fifth from Fort No. 2) and warm our benumbed limbs with a steaming jorum of tea and the heat of a Kirghiz camp-fire.

“Cheer up, brother! only three more stages to Fort Perovski!”

“Yes, Master—but if they're like these two last ones, how long do you think they'll take?”

Indeed, this night's work, taken altogether, was the hardest on my outward journey, though afterwards surpassed by a similar one on the way back, when want of food was added to other discomforts. Nor, even on this first occasion, did I escape wholly scatheless. The hurts which I had received at Kazalinsk, and which had never fairly healed, now inflamed afresh, and began

to bleed again ; and (there being no time to attend to them) my condition grew steadily worse from that day, till it culminated a month later in the fever which overthrew me at Samarcand.

It is needless to describe the final stages of our journey to Fort Perovski, which were equally tedious with those already described—though happily the weather, after this one misdemeanour, appears to have bound itself to keep the peace with us.

I must not forget, however, to chronicle my first meal of boiled camel, a dish to which even my Arabian campaign two years ago had not introduced me. Close to one of our halting-places is pitched a Kirghiz tent, with a fire sputtering in front of it, surmounted by an iron pot, the contents of which I should be at a loss to identify, were it not for the shank-bone of a camel sticking gauntly up out of the mess, like a broken sign-post. I beg a piece from the lean, brown, half naked goblins who are sitting round the fire like an illustration from Robinson Crusoe ; and cannot, for the life of me, distinguish it from beef, as far as flavour goes. Its consistency, however, is like that of a wire rope ; and all that I can do is to clinch my teeth upon it and tear, tear, tear, it being a toss up whether my teeth or the meat give way first. The "kindly barbarians" look on approvingly, and a little four-year-old toddler, with a small coin fixed upon its forehead, opens its round eyes wonderingly at the spectacle of an unbeliever eating the sacred beast of the Prophet.

Perhaps the greatest curiosities on the Syr-Daria, fertile as it is in ruins and antiquities, are the post-stations themselves. You halt, as it seems to you, out on the bare desert, with no sign of human presence except a great litter of straw about the road. While you are wondering what all this can mean, a man suddenly pops up through a hole in the ground, like the ghost in a tragedy, and holds out a grimy hand for your pass. Having got it, he gives a howl as if it had burned his fingers, whereupon up starts another hobgoblin, and dives into a similar hole on the opposite side of the road, reappearing presently with a pair of horses. Many a jolly half-hour have I had in these underground dwellings, and many a tea-urn have I drunk out, glass for glass, with the subterranean postmasters; but, on the other hand, many a weary hour have I sat outside of them, waiting for horses that never came, while luckier wayfarers, "travelling on Government business," went off before me.*

Lonely as it is, however, this region is anything but a desert. From the Vladimirovskaya station all the way to Fort Perovski, the coarse grasses run thick and high; while, as we again approach the river (which has been removed from us ever since Fort No. 2, by a wide sweep toward the south) long patches of bushy undergrowth begin to foreshadow the abundant vegetation which is to meet us farther on. Every now and then

* Travelling-passes are of three kinds: 1. Courier; 2. On Government business; 3. Private; and the facilities of the route observe the same proportion.

we come upon traces of cultivation and irrigation, with here and there an unwontedly industrious Kirghiz at work upon a little plot of reclaimed ground ; and, altogether, we may safely conclude that we have now taken our final leave of the desert.

The sun is setting as we leave Dmitrovskaya, the last station before Fort Perovski ; and now the hush and dimness of approaching night come down upon the great plain like a pall. As if by common consent, we are all three perfectly silent ; and the jingle of our little bell is the only sound that breaks the universal stillness. Suddenly there flits athwart the red sun, now just dipping below the horizon, a vast column of wide-winged living things, coming on swiftly and surely, in the ranked order of an army arrayed for battle. Mourad and the driver shake their heads meaningly ; for they, as well as I, have seen it too often not to recognise at a glance the destroying march of the locust. File after file, so long as we are within sight, the endless host sweeps on ; and amid the dreary loneliness of the fast-falling night, the passage of this great mass of living destruction has a weird impressiveness of its own which is not easily forgotten.

It is long past ten o'clock, and dark as pitch, by the time we reach Fort Perovski ; which, however, matters the less, since (there being, as usual, no horses to be had) I have plenty of time to examine the whole place next morning. It is merely Kazalinsk on a larger scale — a straggling mud-village with a fortress in the middle of it ; but here the Asiatic aspect is more decidedly

prominent, for, even before its occupation by the Russians, the "town" of Ak-Metchet (White Mosque) was a noted place, thanks to its commanding position, and the comparative fertility of the surrounding country. The fort itself (named after the ill-fated hero of the last expedition to Khiva) is equal in size to Fort No. 1, but with few guns, and its moat completely dry on one side. The trees, however, which encircle it, are a salutary alternative after the barrenness of Kazalinsk and Fort No. 2; and altogether (especially when looked at from the east) it has rather a picturesque effect.

To me, for the moment, the place is chiefly interesting as the starting-point of my brother-correspondent's adventurous ride into the desert; but, viewed in connection with the future history of Central Asia, it has a deep and sinister importance. When the Russians stormed it, years ago, it was stoutly though ineffectually defended by a soldier of fortune named Yakoub Beg. Years passed on, and the unknown adventurer, seizing with ready audacity the chance proffered him by a strange turn of fortune, seated himself on a throne. The nameless soldier of Ak-Metchet is now Yakoub, Sultan of Kashgar, concluding treaties with Russian Governors-General, receiving Anglo-Indian embassies, and carrying fire and sword through the richest provinces of Western China. For him, too, waits a bolt from the same armoury which has already smitten all Asiatic kinglings from Kouldja to Khiva; but the time is not yet.

And now, there being nothing more to describe about Fort Perovski, I may as well take advantage of our prolonged halt there to slip in a parenthetical chapter (a very dry one, I admit) upon the Syr-Daria and its famous companion, in their bearing upon the future of Central Asia.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FUTURE OF THE OXUS.

CENTRAL Asia, barren as we are accustomed to think it, is remarkably well watered in certain regions ; and it is these districts, and these alone, which constitute the real strength of Russia in the East. The first explorers can hardly have viewed the turbid, shoal-impeded, progressively diminishing streams along which they journeyed, in the light of future commercial highways or strategic communications ; but they saw clearly enough, what all their successors have likewise seen, that in Central Asia water is not merely a necessary of life, but life itself. All that lives between the Ural and the Thian-Shan, whether man, beast, or vegetable, is concentrated upon the basins of the great rivers. The other tracts—the Kara-Koum, the Kizil-Koum, the Ak-Koum, the Moïoun-Koum, the Desert of Khiva, the Turkoman Steppes—form part of Central Asia merely as the rind forms part of the apple ; and to attempt any colonisation of *them* would be simple insanity.

Hence the whole history of Russian conquest in the East is the history of a fight for the possession of certain watercourses—the conquering party securing them by an ever-lengthening chain of fortified posts, and

gradually pushing back the conquered farther and farther into the desert, till no alternative remained but starvation or submission. "Flocks and herds must drink," said a Russian General to me years ago, who had himself practised what he preached with terrible effect. "Flocks and herds must drink, and so must men; cut them off from the water, and you have them."

And this method is still looked to by Russia as a sure weapon for the work that remains to be done. More than once, during my journey from Tashkent towards the Bokhariote frontier, I remarked to the officers whom I met on the way, "You will have easy work with Bokhara when you *do* invade it," and the answer was always the same; "We shall never need to invade it; we have only to cut off the water (which runs from us to them) and they must give in without firing a shot."

But when we come to consider the rivers of Central Asia not merely as feeders of life and vegetation, but as future highways of traffic, the question assumes a widely different aspect. On the map, indeed, they make a goodly show; the Zer-Affshan, upon which stand Samarcand and Bokhara; the Tchoo and Sari-Soo, dividing Siberia from Turkestan; the Ili and its six brethren, which, draining the wild and almost unknown region between Lake Balkhash and the Thian-Shan Mountains, give to that district its name of Semiretchensk or Seven Rivers; the Syr-Daria with its countless tributaries, traversing the whole breadth of

Turkestan from the south-east to the north-west ; and, lastly, the magnificent Oxus, now made a Russian stream by the successful issue of the Khiva Expedition.

But from this imposing list very large deductions must be made. The Zer-Affshan is utterly unnavigable. The Tchoo and Sari-Soo traverse, with a sorely diminished volume, a thinly-peopled and comparatively unprofitable region. The Ili, apart from its formidable rapids, is wholly out of the present track of Asiatic commerce.* Even the Syr-Daria, in which many intelligent Russians have seen the river of the future, cannot justly lay claim to that title.

At the first glance, indeed, it has undoubtedly several points in its favour. It is far richer in wood-fuel, and infinitely more accessible from European Russia, than its great southern counterpart. The obstacles interposed by its rapid current, and pernicious tendency to waste itself in minor channels, might be overcome by time and labour ; but it has one fatal drawback, which would alone suffice to ensure its "plucking" by a conscientious board of engineer examiners. Throughout its whole course from Fort Perovski to Fort No. 2, the great river degenerates into a noisome swamp (emphatically called the Djaman-Daria or Bad River) whose main channel, so far as it can be said to have one, is barely one foot deep, except in the flood time of June and July, when it rises to three feet. Thus, for ten months out of the twelve, the

* The contemplated revival of the old caravan route through the Chinese frontier town of Tchugutchak appears to be purely theoretical.

Upper and Lower Syr-Daria are separated by a break of more than a hundred miles, converting them into distinct and unconnected streams, and completely isolating the steamers upon them.

There remains then, the Oxus; and in its favour there is much more to be said. In the first place, it connects two very important territories—Bokhara, the acknowledged centre of commercial activity, and Khiva, the acknowledged centre of the nomadic population. Moreover, the swiftness of the current, though considerable, is not such as to be of serious moment; and the ease of the downward navigation is sufficiently proved by the fact that a Russian officer of my acquaintance, starting from Samarcand last July to join the army, reached Khiva on the tenth day—striking the Oxus a little below Tchardjuy, and descending it by boat.

The Oxus, again, is wholly free from that constant branching-out which fritters away the strength of its great rival. From its highest navigable point at the junction of the Ak-Sarai (near Koondooz) down to the very apex of the Delta, the broad, smooth, greyish-red stream is wholly undivided; while its numerous ferries (three in the Khanate of Khiva, and six more higher up the stream) show that, although lying between two of the most desolate regions in the world, it is not beyond the range of caravans. Finally, the mouths of the river (though only one is navigable at present) are not so thoroughly blocked but that a little well-applied labour, following upon the removal of the dams by which the Khivans have tried to obstruct them, will

completely open up the Delta, and give the Russians a substantial *terminus a quo* for new enterprises.

Granting, then, that Russia has now made herself virtual mistress of the Oxus, how is she to utilise it ?

For the present (as will be seen in the next chapter but one), the trade of Turkestan is in a very unpromising condition ; but the country itself possesses boundless resources, needing only proper development to make the province one of the most valuable dependencies in the world. The prologue to any such development, must, of course, be the providing of the rich local products with efficient means of transport. Two substitutes are offered by the future for the slow and precarious caravan-transport of the present day—the railway projected by M. de Lesseps from Orenburg to Samarcand, and the establishment of steam navigation on the Oxus—enterprises which, if fully carried out, will in the end play into each other's hands most effectively.

The first step in the latter undertaking is naturally the making a complete survey of the river up to its highest navigable point ; and this it is intended to do by means of the expedition to which I have already alluded in Chapter XV., as designed to be sent up the Oxus in the spring of 1874. This once achieved—the course of the river learned by heart, and the difficulties of the navigation thoroughly examined,—it remains only to demand from Bokhara (which is in no position to refuse), the grant of a convenient spot on the higher stream for the establishment of a trading port, and steamer terminus. Such

a spot might be found in the neighbourhood of Tchardjuy, which lies on the left bank of the Oxus, within easy reach of the city of Bokhara itself.

The port once established, and furnished with light steamers of strong engine-power (which may be ordered from America, and sent in detached parts from Orenburg to Kazalinsk, there to be put together and launched)—all this, I say, being done, the more remote future teems with brilliant possibilities. Coal may be obtained in abundance from the rich beds of anthracite in the hills that border Kokan, of some of which I received a plan and description, while at Tashkent, from one of the proprietors. Silk factories may be established at Khodjent, and the splendid material produced there exported in large quantities. The embryo post which is just beginning to run once a month between Samarcand and Bokhara, may be exalted into a regular caravan service—the distance along the Zer-Affshan to Bokhara being only one hundred and fifty miles, and that from Bokhara to Tchardjuy barely eighty more. The commercial relations of Russia with Kashgar and Western China, at present vague and precarious, may be consolidated and expanded. Finally, when once the Orenburg-Samarcand railway shall have reached its half-way house at Kazalinsk, the goods brought down the Oxus may be carried up the Syr-Daria to meet it there, and to reach Orenburg (taking the average rate of steam travel in the East, and allowing for the time occupied in landing), within nine days from their leaving Tchardjuy.

All this may sound chimerical; but it is probable that the first explorers of the Mississippi considered *it*, with its countless sandbanks, its formidable "snags and sawyers," its unwholesome Delta, and the intolerable heat of its lower course, as little promising for navigation as the Oxus appears now. To draw to herself the entire trade of Central Asia, while closing the country against her formidable competitor, England—this is surely a stake worth playing for on the part of Russia. If she can once establish a line of steamers upon the Oxus, and a railway along the basin of the Syr-Daria—maintaining at the same time her policy of exclusion—there are no limits to her possible success. Left unmolested by us, she may put all nations under her feet from the spurs of the Himalaya to the shores of the Frozen Ocean; she may see embassies from Washington and Peking defiling through the gates of Tashkent; she may watch capitalists out of every land fighting for shares in the "Oxus and Sea of Aral Navigation Company, Limited," and invite all the ends of the earth to send their merchandise to the Great Industrial Exhibition of Samarcand.

Before taking my final leave of this part of the subject—for with the Oxus in its *military* aspect I shall have much to do later on—a word must be said in passing with respect to the former course of the river, and the question of turning it once more through the forsaken channel into the Caspian Sea. The reasons which have disposed the best Russian engineers

to regard this undertaking as impracticable (a conclusion amply borne out by Capt. Kostènko's admirable summary of the question, in his recent work on Central Asia), I have already quoted in the narrative of Adjutant M—— (Chapter XIII); it remains only to mention a theory propounded to me by a Russian officer at Samarcand during our after-dinner chat, which has at least the merit of boldness, starting as it does with the hypothesis that what *we* call "the former course of the Oxus" was in reality not produced by the Oxus at all!

"If you look at the map," said he, "you will find the channel, set down by geographers as 'the ancient bed of the Oxus,' running in a slanting direction from S.W. to N.E., across the Turkoman steppes, starting from Krasnovodsk Bay on the Caspian, and debouching upon the existing river almost due east of Kounya-Urgendj, between Bend and Khodjeili. Pursuing the same direction across the steppes beyond the Oxus, you come upon another channel of the same kind, wholly dry at its southern extremity, but containing water enough farther on to pass for a branch of the Syr-Daria, under the name of Djani-Daria. Crossing the Syr-Daria, and still bending to the north-east, you meet the river which divides Turkestan from Siberia, known to us as the Tchoo. Now, I have come to the conclusion, after a good deal of study, that this Tchoo, as we now have it, is merely the residue or spectrum, so to speak, of a mighty river which once traversed the whole breadth of Central Asia from N.E. to S.W.,

falling into the Caspian at Krasnovodsk Bay ; and that the so-called beds of the Oxus and Djani-Daria are in reality parts of its channel."

Such, as I noted it down at the time, was my friend's theory. What amount of truth there may be in it, is for wiser heads than mine to determine.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AUT CŒNUM, AUT CŒLUM.

THE next morning it is the usual programme—half a dozen men helping each other to do nothing, and several precious hours lost to no purpose. Two Russian officers who are in the same plight as myself, having vainly exhausted themselves in anathemas, have gone into the big, bare, dingy room reserved for travellers, in order to smoke themselves into oblivion ; while I, returning from my tour of inspection to find matters no farther advanced than before, am standing disconsolately in the doorway, when a well known voice suddenly greets me.

“David Stepanovitch, sure enough! So you've got loose at last, then! How are you?”

I turn round, and see beside me a tall, gaunt figure in uniform, surmounted by the iron features and bushy grey moustache of my old gaoler at Kazalinsk.

“Captain Vereshtchagin! this *is* a strange chance! What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I'm here for good now. They've made me district governor, and I only hope they won't court-martial me, as they did the late commandant. However, they can't say that *I've* let any one pass without leave. I kept *you* pretty close, didn't I!”

“ You did, indeed ; and your postmaster here seems inclined to follow your example.”

“ What ! won't they give you horses ? ” cries the old gentleman, in a flush of righteous indignation.

“ Apparently not. I've pulled the postmaster out of bed, slanged the clerk, pitched into the stable-men all round, but they won't go a bit faster, do what I will.”

“ Oh, they won't, won't they ? We'll just see about that directly. Just you come along with me.”

And, striding into the post-house, he begins to fulminate in true official style, with a vigour and fluency which makes the poor little clerk shiver in his boots ; while my Tartar, awakened by the noise from a disconsolate nap, grins with delight at seeing his tormentors “ getting it ” in their turn.

“ What the devil do you mean by not giving this gentleman horses, eh, you good-for-nothing ? Is *this* the way you do your duty ? ”

“ Please your honour, the postmaster's gone off to the next station, with the gentleman's travelling pass in his pocket, and we can't do anything till we get it back.”

“ What does that matter, you fool ? Let the gentleman go on, and meet the postmaster on the road. Sharp, now, or I'll know the reason why.”

The terror of this official intervention works wonders. Within an hour and a half the wheels are greased, the baggage stowed, the horses brought out and harnessed, the driver accoutred, and I, seeing one of the Russian officers above mentioned coming out with a dismal face

(for *he* wants a cart as well as horses, which cannot be got), offer him a seat in, or rather *on*, my car, where, by holding tight, he seems to think he can maintain himself. The driver cracks his whip, and away we go, the mud of the recent shower flying up around us like spray.

About three miles from the fort, we cross a man at full gallop, and recognise the defaulting postmaster, who, with a torrent of apologies, tugs from his pocket my forgotten travelling pass, considerably dirtier than before. This incident gives an opening to my new guest (who is still smarting from his prolonged detention) for a furious tirade upon the iniquities of the postal system.

“It’s not so bad when you have your own waggon—*then* you have only to wait for horses; but when you’ve got to change your cart at every big station, five times between Kazalinsk and Tashkent, very likely losing several hours each time, it *does* come rather hard upon one. As for these postmasters, I’d have ’em all flogged, every man of them. Most of them don’t care a bit whether you’ve got a Government pass or a private one; and even when there *are* horses, it’s as likely as not that some fellow with plenty of money just gives a rouble of drink-money to the postmaster, and gets ’em before you. Now this next station, for instance, Biroubai, that we’re just coming to, you always have to wait for horses there, whether you’re going up or down. Since it was first established, nobody’s ever got horses at once; and it’s become a kind of proverb on the road. You’ll just see, now, when we get there.”

His words are fatally verified when we reach Birou-bai two hours later; but, as a compensation, he meets some friends at the post-house, who at once offer him a place in their comfortable travelling-waggon—a great relief to the poor fellow, after his perch on the corner of a chest in my unsheltered carriage. Meanwhile I, having plenty of time on my hands, turn out to have a look at the surroundings, which are picturesque enough.

About a hundred yards off (with its farther shore fringed to the water's edge with green thickets), winds the northern channel of the Syr-Daria, the self-willed river having, as usual, scooped itself out another course farther south. All along the hither bank extends a belt of smooth green turf, now dappled far and wide with white-frocked Cossacks, bivouacking on the march to Tashkent. Tents are springing up every here and there, and the air is alive with the crackle of camp fires and the buzz of countless voices; while the groups that fill up the background, drinking, smoking, talking, or paddling in the shallow water, would make a study for Teniers.

But my tour of inspection is suddenly and disagreeably cut short. A long low cloud that has been hovering upon the horizon unfurls itself suddenly over the whole sky, and down comes a deluge of rain, compared with which the performance of the last night but one is as nothing. Mourad and I have just time to snatch our baggage from the car and rush with it into the post-house, where the rest of the community are already assembled; and now the storm has free course. The

thickets sway like reeds under the lashing wind, and the dark river whirls along in one great sheet of foam, and the fresh green turf bubbles into brown plashy mire, and across the deepening gloom and blinding rain comes flash after flash of lightning, by which we catch momentary glimpses of struggling figures out in the open, trying vainly to secure their flapping tents, or to find shelter under the dripping bushes. And right overhead volleys the quick, sharp cannonade of the thunder, crash after crash, at which the two barefooted little girls who compose our host's family hide their faces in my lap, and ask plaintively "when it will stop?"

However, the genial sky of Central Asia soon recovers from its transient fits of rage; and by the middle of the afternoon (we having amused ourselves meanwhile with a prolonged orgie of tea) the sun is as bright, and the ground almost as dry, as in the morning. Towards nightfall the Russian officer goes off with his party, having acknowledged my hospitality by the gift of a grey "caftan" with a hood to match—a nondescript affair, not unlike a Capuchin's frock, but fated to do me good service, in a very unexpected way, on the return journey.

About sun-set (having refreshed myself with a swim across the river, and a mouthful or two of black bread) I scramble again into my cart, and prepare for a quiet study of my Russian map of Central Asia. But I have reckoned without my host. Regarding anything which he has not seen before, the Cossack is eager and curious as a child; and I have hardly unfolded the map, when

I become aware of a large-limbed fellow with a bronzed Salvator-Rosa face, stealing up behind me, and peering over my shoulder. His exclamation of wonder and delight suffices to attract three or four who are lounging about ; and they in turn are followed by others, and others still, till I am literally hemmed in by a wall of wild faces and struggling forms, like a traveller suddenly assailed by banditti. Seldom has any geographical professor had a more attentive audience ; and I begin my lecture with a certainty of success.

“ Well, brothers, do you want to look at it? look away, then ! ”

“ What’s it a picture of, father? we can’t make it out ! ”

“ It’s not a picture at all, my lads—it’s a map of Turkestan, and you can see upon it all the road you’ve marched, and all that you’re going to march as well.”

Sensation in the crowd, and visible looks of incredulity exchanged.

“ What? all our march on that little thing? How can it be ! ”

“ I’ll show you in a minute, brothers. Where did you start from ? ”

“ Orenburg,” answer a score of voices, while the sun-burnt faces press closer and closer.

“ There it is—right up at the top ”—and I point to it with my pencil.

“ So it is—I can read it ! ” shouts a lithe, sharp-looking fellow on my left, happy to have a chance of displaying

such a rare accomplishment. "O,R,E,N,B,U,R,G, Orenburg—so it is! Wonderful, brothers, wonderful!"

Signs of approval from the audience, who are evidently convinced at last. And now begins a cross-fire of eager questions and comments.

"Where's Uralsk? we halted there on the way down."

"Is this the Kara-Koum Desert? it's painted like sand, somehow."

"Yonder's the Aral Sea, brothers—that big blue bit in the middle! See, there's the name on it as plain as can be—Aralskoë Moré."

"Is that the Syr-Daria down there, twisting in and out like a snake?"

"Show us Kazalinsk—we remember *it* well enough; and Fort No. 2—and Fort Perovski."

And at last comes the great question of all—put by a thickset, hard-featured old moustache, who may have seen the storming of Ak-Metchet and the foundation of Fort Perovski.

"Father, can you show us the very place where we are just now?"

"To be sure I can, my good fellow. Here's the river, you see, just as you have it yonder; and there's Fort Perovski, which we have just left behind; and see, this little black spot is the very post-house itself!"

Here the popular enthusiasm becomes uproarious, and for a minute or two the map is in considerable danger. When the excitement has a little subsided, I proceed to show them Khiva and the route of the five columns, with unbounded applause from my audience.

“ And Bokhara, father—show us Bokhara ! ” pleads a hulking fellow from the Ural, with a long scar across his tanned forehead. “ That'll be our next place after Khiva, when it shall please Father Alexander Nikolaievitch ” (the Emperor).

I point out Bokhara, and then Samarcand and Tashkent, adding a slight sketch of M. de Lesseps' projected railroad, which electrifies my entire audience. The performance is still in full swing, when our séance is broken up by the sudden arrival of the post-master with my long-delayed hores. Mourad and the driver scramble to their places, the circle opens to let us pass, and the simple, good-natured savages fling a boisterous chorus of good wishes after me as I vanish into the darkness.

It would be tedious to chronicle all the details of the succeeding stages, which run very much in one groove ; the same heat, and dust, and flies, the same slow progress, the same constant delays. Every now and then there is the faint excitement of a linchpin coming out, or a trace snapping, or a horse trying to kick the front of the cart in, or the cart itself tipping over and sending us all flying ; but on the whole our journey is monotonous enough. The road is still merely a deep sandy ditch, which even the constantly recurring layers of straw and boughs cannot solidify enough to allow of our “ putting on the pace.”

But in the aspect of the country itself there is a great and ever-increasing improvement. We are now in a thoroughly cultivated region—surrounded on every side

by tilled fields, and artificial water-courses, and at times even by little clusters of mud-hovels thatched with rushes, whence lean, wolfish-looking dogs come barking furiously after us. And the sun glows in a cloudless sky, and scores of pheasants (so tame that they will hardly get out of our way), whirr up from the long grass; and the broad shallow river comes creeping up to our path every now and then, as if inviting us to a bath, which we are glad enough to take whenever occasion offers, if only to get rid of the crust of sand which makes us a living realisation of Mr Charles Reade's "little pigs clad in crackling."

Still, despite the heat and the dust, which have now full play at us, perched as we are like sparrows on the top of an open cart, this glorious weather, to which clouds and storms seem unknown, is a great boon after the blinding sand-storms of the Kara-Koum, or the drenching rains of the Lower Syr-Daria; and under its genial influence, even my saturnine Tartar expands like a sun-flower.

On the afternoon of the second day after leaving Fort Perovski (having been nearly thirty-six hours over the last seventy-three miles), we espy far away to the east, on the border of the great plain which we are crossing, a dark mass of vegetation, from the midst of which rises a single point, bright and tapering as the head of a spear. Little by little, this strange landmark shapes itself into a church-tower, while a long grey wall begins to define itself below. The horses quicken their pace as if already scenting the stable—

the driver shakes his reins with a triumphant whoop—we scurry over the smooth level, dash at full gallop through a gateway barely wide enough to admit us, and are within the walls which surround alike the village and fort of Djulek, the fourth of the Syr-Darian fortresses.

The interior of the enclosure is the exact figure of a huge billiard-board, the fort representing the spot, and the village the line, while the cushions are formed by the Syr-Daria and the three sides of the boundary-wall. The fort itself is of moderate size ; the moat, as usual, perfectly dry, and some of the buildings manifestly in want of repair ; but the wall is unusually strong and high, faced with gabions along its inner side, and with six mounted and two unmounted guns.

As for the "village," it consists merely of a few wretched mud-hovels, reeking with filth and buzzing with stinging-flies ; but the post-house itself is snug enough. For we are now far past the region of "Zemlianki," as the Russians call the underground houses of the Lower Syr-Daria ; and the post-houses are now little one-storeyed buildings of baked earth, with one big room set apart for travellers, and thick carpets spread upon the low stone seat that runs along three sides of it. Here I burrow into a corner, and, wrapping myself in a plaid for propriety's sake, hand over my tattered nether garments to the all-accomplished Mourad, who is as good at tailoring as at everything else, and might sit for an illustration of

the old nursery formula, "Soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, apothecary, thief."

During the progress of the repairs, I devote myself to a jar of milk, or as much of it, at least, as the flies are pleased to leave me; for every spoonful is literally black with floating carcasses, till I begin to have a dismal recollection of the western molasses-eater who "swallowed so many flies that his mouth looked just like a sheet o' close print." Just as my *plat aux fines mouches* comes to an end, in burst two officers, in whom I recognise Col. B——, my companion from Fort Perovski, and Capt. P——, whom I had known during my detention at Kazalinsk.

"What, our 'Wandering Christian' again!" shouts the latter, recurring to my already received nickname. "Who'd have thought it? Getting your clothes mended, eh? We all come to that on the road, sooner or later. Handy fellow, that servant of yours; lucky you got him. Where are you bound for now?"

"Tashkent—and I'm off as soon as the horses are ready. Would you like to join me? there's always room for one."

"Thanks, I think I shall stay still to-night; I hav'n't had a good sleep since I left Kazalinsk, and it's about time to begin."

"And you, colonel?"

"I'm just starting this minute; but I daresay you'll catch me up on the road, and then we'll go neck and neck; I want to hear some more about Arabia and South America. Have a cigarette? Ah? beg pardon—I forgot you don't smoke!"

“Nor drink either,” chimes in Capt. P—, with righteous indignation,” and that after travelling so long, too! You’ll never be a proper traveller, Mr Ker, till you learn to do both!”

“So much the worse for me, then; for when a man has been five years at a university without learning either to drink or to smoke, he may be said to have lost his last chance in this world!”*

“So I should say, if Moscow and St Petersburg are to be taken as samples,” assents the captain, with a broad grin. “But come, you must have some white bread and fruit with us, at all events. We’ve got plenty of both.”

The good fellows produce their stock of provisions, and we make an *al fresco* supper at the door of the post-house, under the declining sunlight. Meanwhile my Tartar, having finished his tailoring, goes off in search of a Cossack who has offered to sell him a gun, and returns in triumph, half an hour later, to display his purchase—a huge, rusty, lumbering affair, suggestive of a pre-historic post-pillar, and, like Captain Do’emwell’s “trade muskets,” warranted to kill three men at a shot—the firer himself and his right and left hand neighbour.

By the time we get off it is already dark, and for the first hour or two we go along at haphazard, through a

* This must not be interpreted into a skit upon Oxford. I bear as warm a heart as ever to my old university, and I am glad to learn that it has not quite forgotten me.

blackness like the inside of a tunnel. When the moon at length condescends to rise, it shows us great masses of dark thicket on either side of the road, in which a whole army might lie ambushed ; and whether it is that this idea occurs to Mourad and myself at the same moment, or that the possession of his newly-bought weapon suggests visions of battle, it is certain that, towards midnight, he begins to wake up surprisingly, and to look about him as sharply as if expecting an attack every minute.

“Mourad !”

“What is it, master ?”

“Suppose we were to be attacked (and it’s a good place for it here), would you fight ?”

“I *have* been a soldier, David Stepanovitch, though I never saw a battle yet ; but if there’s any fighting to be done, I’ll stand by you.”

His voice sounds firm enough ; and, indeed, there is as little of the “white feather” about Mourad as about any man in whom the old Tartar blood is still strong. But at that moment, as if to put his courage to the proof, a tremendous crash is heard a little way ahead of us, and then flashes of light glance among the trees, and there is a sound of scuffling, and a deep guttural voice swearing frightfully, and a high, clear one shouting lustily for help.

“Is *this* a fight, master ?”

“Sounds like it, my lad. Out with that gun of yours, and come along. I’ve got my revolver.”

We jump off the cart, and scamper towards the scene

of action, guided by the shouts, which, as we approach, seem to me to have a familiar tone in them. Bursting through the bushes, we catch sight of a tall white figure, which seems to be struggling violently with some one or something which we cannot distinguish.

“Who’s there? This way, quick?”

“What is it?—robbers?”

“No; we’ve got stuck fast in the thicket, and upset, and the driver’s hurt himself upon a stump. Lucky for me you came up when you did. Just help me to get the horses up, will you?”

At this moment a stray gleam of moonlight falls through the trees full upon the speaker’s face, and I recognise Colonel B——, whose prophecy of my catching him upon the road has come true sooner than he expected.

NOTE.—These overturns are of such constant occurrence, that few travellers by post think of starting without a spare shaft, or at least a rope and a piece of wood, in case of accident. Both the Russian and Kirgiz drivers are very skilful in contriving these “make-shifts.” On my return journey from Samarcand, my left wheel came off in a lonely place at midnight, several miles from Khodjent, and, within ten minutes at most, the damage was repaired, and we were going as fast as ever.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE THINGS THAT WERE.

By the light of the colonel's lantern we set cart and horses upright again ; while the driver, having luckily fallen on his head, is not a whit the worse, except a gash across the place where his forehead ought to be. But a very slight examination suffices to show us the grand compound smash which the cart has sustained on its left side ; and there is nothing for it but to cut a branch from the nearest tree, produce a coil or two of rope, and resolve ourselves into a committee of repairs. Thus do I find myself engaged in a complicated job of carpentering at one in the morning, in the heart of an Asiatic jungle, with a Russian, a Kirghiz, and a Tartar to make up the party.

But all comes right in the end, though not without considerable labour. The colonel and I get back into our respective carts, and the word is given to go forward again—keeping together in accordance with my friend's suggestion.

“This break-down won't matter a bit for me,” he remarks, philosophically, “because I can change my cart at the next station ; and it won't matter for you either, because you'll go all the easier from having me with

you. There's nothing like a uniform to get you along in these parts, especially now, in time of war."

Onward we go, then, over the broad, dusty road, which stands out white and bare in the moonlight, between the dark masses of forest. They are a grim sight, these black, mysterious woods, under the cold moon, with their dim depths of floating shadow, and their rustling leaves, which seem whispering to each other some tale of horror. But, despite our ghostly surroundings, and the drawback of lying doubled up like a foot-rule, with the sharp corner of a chest tucked neatly into one's short ribs, and driven home by a tremendous jolt every other minute, we sleep as if on the best bed at Dusaux's; and when we awake again, the sun is already above the horizon.

And now we come upon a wide belt of open country, fringed with bushy undergrowth, and undulating like a rolling prairie, in forewarning of the coming hills which are still hidden behind the northern horizon. From Djulek right onward to Turkestan,* the range of the Kara-Tau (Black Mountain) runs parallel with the Syr-Daria, protecting its valley against the bitter winds of the north, and sending down into it countless small streams, which help to maintain this last stronghold of vegetation.

Our road still runs close to the river, the fresh breeze from which is a perfect cordial under this burning sky.

* The name of this town must not be confused with that of the province. I have never been able to discover which of the two has the prior right to it.

As my friend prophesied, we now begin to get along more rapidly, and dispose of the next two stages in gallant style; but at the second station—a queer little pigeon-cot perched on the top of a precipitous bank, as if to secure itself against the intrusion of any traveller not remarkably fresh, and practised in mountaineering—the colonel suddenly calls a halt.

“There’s no special hurry for me to get to Turkestan, so I think I shall just take it easy here for an hour or two; and, if I can’t persuade you to stay and rest too, you may just as well have some tea with me before starting.”

I readily assent; and over our tea and lemon-juice (for the old campaigner has brought with him a phial of lemon extract, which he produces with the complacent air of a man who knows how to do things properly), we compare notes upon our respective travels, and spin yarns like the Ancient Mariner or his brother-tar Sinbad.

Change the surroundings, substituting the coffee-room of some famous European hotel for this little kennel of plank and reed, and we should talk just in the same way, sipping our tea with the same lazy satisfaction. In fact, I doubt whether one ever *really* enjoys a journey of this kind till it is over. The glorious novelty of your surroundings is kept at a distance, so to speak, by that inner lining of personal wants and habits which, being always the same, encircles you, even amid utterly new scenes, with an every-day and commonplace atmosphere. In Cairo, in Djeddah, in Rio de

Janeiro, in Jerusalem, one thinks more of the dust and the mosquitoes, the pinching of a tight boot, or the galling of an uneasy saddle, than any splendour of scenery and association. It is only when you can go over the whole panorama by itself, apart from all disturbing influences, that you can say with a full consciousness of its meaning—"I have travelled."

"I'll tell you what you must do when you get to Samarcand," says B—— at length; you must go and see the cloisters of the Emir's palace in the citadel, where a lot of us lay wounded during the siege. I can remember, as if it were yesterday, lying there for four days and nights, listening to the uproar outside, with my revolver beside me, meaning to kill as many as I could when they burst in, and then keep the last bullet for myself."

"What! were you at the defence of Samarcand?" shout I, starting up.

"To be sure I was—all through it. What then?"

"Just tell me about it, then. I've hunted that story up and down ever since I started, and not got it yet; I won't go till I've heard every word of it!"

The colonel laughs pleasantly; and, in his simple, soldierly way, tells the grand old story (worthily illustrated lately, as I am glad to hear, by M. Vereshtchagin), the details of which I shall give later on, when I come to deal with the place where it occurred. Just as it comes to an end, we are startled by a Babel of confused sounds from the road below—men shouting, oxen bellowing, dogs barking, children crying,—and, high above

all, the hoarse scream of the camel, which even Central Asia can produce nothing bad enough to match.

“Do you have menageries in this country?” ask I; “for, if so, I should say that one of them has just broken loose upon an infant school.”

“It must be a caravan of some sort,” says my companion, getting up. “Come and have a look at it.”

We step outside, and, from our vantage ground on the crown of the bank, look down upon a very unexpected scene—one which Virgil would have seized as an illustration for his first Eclogue, or Goethe for his “Hermann und Dorothea.” The whole road is moving with waggons, horses, oxen, men, women, and children, all blent together in one hot, dusty, heaving mass; while half a dozen camels, driven aside by their advance, look viciously on from the roadside. Men of all types, from the broad yellow-haired Russian to the gaunt, swarthy, aquiline Cossack; sun-burned women, with gaudy handkerchiefs round their hard wooden faces, perched uneasily upon the rocking waggons, or trudging barefooted, with tucked-up skirts, alongside of them; round-faced children, packed together in scores under the parching heat and blinding dust, and swaying with every jolt of the wheels.

All have evidently had a long and hard journey, and have suffered sorely on the way; but the poor children most of all. It is sad to see how wistfully the poor little faces, black with flies and worn by thirst and fatigue, look round for some one to help and comfort them. Of all the grievous sights

that earth can produce, the worst is that of a child's suffering when you cannot relieve it. I have seen strong men die in agony, with none to help them; but *they*, at least, knew what was in store for them, and faced it like men, neither pitying themselves nor asking pity from others. But a child cannot tell why it suffers, nor why its suffering cannot be removed; and it looks instinctively to you for relief, unable to conceive that you are not powerful enough to help it. I have seen such things more than once; I pray God I may never see them again.

"These must be some of our colonists going east, poor fellows!" says B——, compassionately. "I must just have a word with them." And down the bank he scrambles, I following.

The poor fellows salute timidly at sight of the well-known uniform, evidently expecting some piece of official bullying; but his kindly voice soon reassures them. There are persons who have the gift—and a precious gift it is—of going straight to a man's heart with the first word, in a way which others, equally accomplished in other points, never attain; and my new friend is evidently one of the former. Before he has said a dozen words, every face within hearing looks brighter than it has done for many a day past.

The story is simple and touching enough. More hands are wanted for the untried soil of Semiretchensk, at the north-easternmost corner of Turkestan; and these poor fellows have been drafted off like beasts of burden, to try the experiment, and succeed or perish as

chance may direct. Such a prospect to approach—and such a journey to reach it! They have come, just as we see them now, all the way from the Government of Astrakhan! Fancy setting a gang of English workmen to tramp from Ostend to Constantinople in the heat of summer, carrying all their belongings with them! And this is far worse than that. Hundreds of miles still remain to be traversed, over a wilder country than this, by these worn men and jaded beasts, who have already suffered every extreme of hardship. They have been scorched by the sun and drenched by the rain, spent with long marches, and tortured by unquenchable thirst; “but,” adds the spokesman, with a ray of simple affection lighting up his dull grey eyes, “we are still all together, thank God!”

We give them a trifle “to buy sweets for the children,” which they will doubtless do at Turkestan; and the caravan goes labouring on—so slowly and heavily, that when I start myself half an hour later (after taking a hearty farewell of the colonel), they are not yet out of sight.

Towards afternoon, the long ridges of the Kara-Tau begin to rise blue and shadowy along the northern sky; while the country, gradually losing its rich vegetation, becomes broken and ridgy, increasing the jolting of our waggon tenfold, and making my unhealed hurts (which are inflaming more and more with every day) smart intolerably. Mourad, whom nothing seems to escape, eyes me keenly for a minute or two; and then, suddenly

folding up the shawl upon which he is sitting, places it dexterously under my hurt limb, offering me at the same time a huge slice from the remains of his last melon.

"But *you'll* want these things presently, my lad—you mustn't make yourself uncomfortable for my sake."

"You've been good to me," answers the Tartar, turning his keen black eye full on my face. Volumes could not have said more.

In truth, the devotion of this man, whom I had dragged from an easy and comfortable post into the heart of the desert, to hardship, and suffering, and imprisonment—was as undeviating, from first to last, as his brother's later on. How the elder brother stood by me through all the dreary journey back from Samarcand—how he watched over me when I lay helpless and delirious in a jolting waggon upon the steppes of the Upper Syr-Daria—how he tried to force his last biscuit upon me, with a thirty-six hours' fast staring us in the face—is not within the compass of this book to relate; but it is pleasant to remember that, in the time of my sorest need, these two untaught savages, who had been slaves for the best part of their life, were willing to risk any peril for my sake, because "I had been good to them."

Towards evening the thickets disappear altogether, and are replaced by a great sweep of sandy plain, gapped with grisly scars by a yawning ravine every here and there. Except the little post-houses (which can be seen from an almost incredible distance) there

is no sign of life ; but, just about nightfall, we meet with a startling proof that life *has* existed here on a grand scale.

The sun is already half-sunk below the horizon, and the shades of coming night are stealing over the prairie, when suddenly a deeper and darker shadow springs up right in front of us—misty and impalpable at first, but growing more solid with every moment. As we approach, it shapes itself into a vast oblong wall, broad, and high, and massive—a stronghold within which an army might lie encamped, and from whose gates one might fancy Timour or Genghis spurring forth with all the pomp and circumstance of Eastern war. But over the whole place hangs a dreary silence, an atmosphere of lifelessness and decay, contrasting weirdly with its grand proportions. As the last rays of the sun flash it into sudden light, we can see that the huge walls are gaping with unnumbered rifts—that the gateway itself is well-nigh blocked with heaps of ruin, and that, throughout the whole of the vast interior, there is no living thing. And then, in one moment, the sun rushes down, and the ghostly fortress vanishes from our sight for ever.

Night has already set in before we reach the last station from Turkestan ; and just as we sight the glimmering window of the post-house, a shout is heard from behind, and up comes a waggon at full speed, in which sits my friend Colonel B—, who has overtaken me as unexpectedly as I overtook him before. As a matter of course, we celebrate our meeting with another

tremendous gorge of tea, upon a carpet spread in front of the door; and are beginning to be very jolly, when up comes the postmaster, who informs me, with an austere face, that there are only two horses to be had, and that the Colonel, by virtue of his official travelling-pass, has the prior claim to them.

At this announcement, my Tartar (who is frantic to reach Tashkent as soon as possible) makes a terrible grimace; but the Colonel, in his usual hearty way, cuts the matter short by declaring that he is in no special hurry, and that, if I wish to go on at once, the horses are quite at my service. After a little discussion, the matter is arranged—the horses make their appearance in a trice, and the Colonel and I, with a hearty shake of the hand, part company—this time not to meet again.

Away we go, then, into the darkness; and I—whether jolted to rest by the bumping of my cart, or lulled by the jingling bell and the howls of my driver—fall into a deep and dreamless slumber, from which I am roused at length by a rough shake, and a hoarse shout close to my ear—

“Master, master! stir up! we’re there!”

“Where? Turkestan?” ask I, jumping up and staring at the indistinct perspective of huge buildings looming before me in the shadowy moonlight.

“Yes—and the postmaster says there are no horses, and won’t be till morning!”

“All the better. We shall have more time to see the place. Go into the house and have a good sleep—you must want it.”

"But you, David Stepanovitch, what will you do?"

"I shall sleep in the cart. Good night."

In fact, I have long forgotten how to live in-doors, and infinitely prefer a berth *sub Fove frigido* to the stifling atmosphere of these little dog-kennels, filled with "indigenous *creepers*" not nameable in society. I stretch myself upon the cart, and, pulling my plaid over my face to keep off the moon, fall asleep in the middle of the road with the comfortable assurance that any one wishing to plunder the baggage will have to awake me first.

When I wake again, the sun is already above the horizon, and the indistinct panorama of last night has assumed form and substance. The town is of the regular Asiatic type—a big garden with an inhabited dirt-heap in the middle—and differs from Djulek or Ak-Metchet only in being much larger and infinitely filthier. But high over the bare, dusty streets, and the low, mud-walled houses, and the huge, clamorous, noisome bazaar, towers the glorious Azret-ez-Sultan (the first of Timour's mosques which we have yet met with) lifting itself above all else like a king, and seeming, in its grand contrast to the surrounding squalor, no inapt symbol of Asiatic history. For, indeed, there is as wide a gulf between Baber or Tamerlane and the coarse savages whom they ruled, as between the stately mosques, with their vast towers and shadowy recesses, and the loathsome dens out-

spread beneath, in which man and beast huddle together amid stench, and smoke, and darkness.

I pass through the citadel, which is an exact reproduction of our spectral fortress of the previous evening. Without, one of those huge, grey, earthen walls which are characteristic of Asiatic fortification; within, one great mass of ruin, untouched in all probability since the Russians stormed the place in June 1864. Clambering over mound after mound of crumbling débris, I at length come out in front of the grand old mosque, reflecting the sunlight from its coloured mosaic in every tint of blue, and green, and white—the two great towers rising starkly up on either side of the vast lancet-like archway, through which, like the roar of a distant sea, rolls the sound of many voices blended in the deep sonorous chant of Mussulman prayer.

“Fine place, isn’t it?” says a long, loose-jointed Cossack soldier who is lounging in front of the door, enjoying the mere pleasure of *living*—like a true Eastern—in this fresh morning air and cloudless sunshine. “The heathens knew how to build in those days, which is what they don’t know *now*,” he adds, with a contemptuous look at the remains of the poor old citadel.

“But what are all those beams doing up there, along the sides of the archway?”

“O, that was all done in the time of the repairs, two years ago. You see, the front of the place began to get shaky, and we had to steady it a bit; but it’s firm

enough now. You see that farthest beam, up in the right-hand corner? Well, it was off there that one of the men fell, just the day before the works were finished."

"Killed, of course?"

"Of course; Iliia Murometz* himself couldn't have stood a fall like that. I was standing just where you are now, when flop! down he came at my very feet, and squelched like an egg. Well, we must all die when our time comes!"

And the humane narrator settles into a shady corner with the complacent air of a man who has told a good story, and told it well; while I turn slowly out of the court, and stroll back to the post-house.

During my tour of inspection, Mourad has been out foraging in the bazaar, and now returns in triumph with a brace of splendid melons, and something which looks at first sight like a roll of law-parchments, but proves to be in reality a batch of the famous "Lepeshki," one of the standard dainties of Turkestan, thin cakes of unleavened flour, about the size of a dinner plate, light and limp as a pancake when first baked, but soon becoming crisp as biscuits.† My first essay of them gives me the novel sensation of eating a

* The Russian Hercules, whose adventures form the subject of several of the finest national legends.

† The cheapness of these and other local necessaries makes Central Asian travel much less expensive than is generally supposed. My entire journey to Samarcand and back, lasting from March 8 to Oct. 17, cost £323.

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CITADEL OF TCHMKENT.

CHAS. ANW.

newly-printed copy-book ; but long before we reach Tashkent, I take to them as readily as Mourad himself.

I need not detail our journey from Turkestan to Tchemkent, which is a mere reproduction of all that has gone before. The same heat, the same dust, the same flies, the same jolting, the same uneasy posture and ever-growing pain ; the same wide waste of rolling prairie, broken by occasional ravines. But we now take our final leave of the river ; for both Tchemkent and Tashkent stand on tributaries of the Syr-Daria, eastward from the main stream ; and our next sight of it will be when we cross it at Tchinaz, on the way from Tashkent to Samarcand. And as we leave it, it is curious to see how instantaneously the natural desolation of the country breaks in, the vegetation falling away, and the sand gaining upon it, till at length, towards afternoon, the panorama is almost as desolate as in the Kara-Koum itself.

About two o'clock the next morning, in the full splendour of the magnificent Asiatic moonlight, we enter Tchemkent, and see the quaint old town at its best. The filth, the disorder, the unsightliness, are all hidden ; the massy ramparts, and clustering trees, and sparkling rivulets, and vast breadths of floating shadow, come out in full relief. Many of the houses are entered by ladders, the drawing up of which cuts off all access from the street. Large spaces within the town are occupied, according to Asiatic custom, by gardens and even plantations, which are kept constantly fresh by

the abundant supply of water; and high over the dreaming streets rises the great wall of castellated rock, along which the ruins of the citadel loom gauntly against the sky.

For a wonder, the postmaster is up and busy; for a still greater wonder, he seems inclined to do his duty; and within an hour of our arrival, our wheels are greased, our horses changed, our posts paid in advance up to Tashkent, and away we go. Our departure, however, arouses the hostility of a swarm of prowling dogs, which break the dead stillness with a clamour surpassing that of either Damascus or Constantinople, and which would of itself suffice to remind me that I am in an Asiatic town. But this barbaric impression is suddenly counteracted by the appearance of an unmistakable engine of civilization. As we pass out of the gate, I look up, and see above me, clearly outlined against the moonlit sky, a high pole with lines of wire branching off from it to right and left. We are once more on the track of the telegraph, which here shoots itself down from Siberia into the heart of Turkestan—already completed as far as Tashkent, and designed to be extended to Samarcand as soon as there shall be time enough to see to it.

By sunrise next morning we are fairly among the hills, and the broad sunny slopes with their yellow grass, rising one beyond the other like the domes of a great mosque, are pleasant to look upon after the boundless monotony of the steppes. The second station from Tchemkent is a picture in itself. On the

brow of an overhanging cliff rise the low round tower and massive boundary-wall of a regular hill-fortress, in the shadow of whose pointed archway a dozen white-frocked Cossacks lie sleeping side by side. From the surrounding hills the morning mists are rolling off like the smoke of a battle, ridge after ridge catching the light till all above and below is one blaze of glory. Far down the gorge, a waterfall plunges from rock to rock, with a muffled roar, which is the only sound that breaks the universal silence; and the whole place, with its old-world aspect, its sleeping guards, and its atmosphere of intense stillness, might pass for a spell-bound castle awaiting its appointed deliverer.

But, despite this apparent loneliness, we are plainly entering upon an inhabited region. As we advance, our track is crossed by huge lumbering native carts, and laden asses or camels, and turbaned wayfarers trudging manfully on foot, with their little wallets slung over their shoulders; while in one place we actually come upon a Kirghiz Paul and Virginia breakfasting beside a stream—the gentleman, one of those bold, black-eyed, Calabrian figures whom I know so well, lying on the bank, and lazily dipping his bread in the water, while the lady (a little shrivelled creature, not unlike an over-roasted snipe) bends down again and again to drink, regardless of her over-heated condition. Before every post-station clusters a knot of “Central Asian politicians,” exactly realising M. Vereshtchagin’s admirable picture; and, altogether, it is evident enough that we are really nearing the great city at last.

R

So, indeed, we are. The morning is still young when we crown the highest ridge, and rattle down curve after curve of rough gravelly road into the great plain of Tashkent. The mass of dark glossy vegetation that fills it hides from us, as yet, all trace of the capital; but the increasing number of passers-by, the long files of loaded carts, the sunburned horsemen who come dashing past us, the houses that spring up thicker and thicker on either side of the road, tell how near it must be. And well for me that it is so; for, about half way through the last stage, two of our linchpins come out at once, as if by agreement; and thenceforth Mourad and my driver are kept in a state of constant activity, one running forward after the front wheel, and the other running backward after the hind one.

At length, through all the surroundings of the genuine East—massive walls standing up white and bare in the blistering sunshine, turbaned greybeards squatting in the shadow of low-browed archways, and tapering trees outlined against the blue summer sky—we reach a great rampart of baked earth, pass through the gate, and are in Tashkent. It is Friday, the 15th August, and I am four thousand miles east of England, having travelled, one way and another, seven thousand four hundred and forty miles since I left London on the 8th March.

We rattle up and down half-a-dozen hot, dusty streets, all exactly alike—scurry past the Governor-General's beautiful garden, with its dainty shrubberies and miniature water-falls, and its high central ridge, upon which the band plays on stated evenings every week—landing

at length in the courtyard of a dismal hotel, very much like a deserted stable. The "house of entertainment" proves to have no food, no drink, no furniture, and no means of washing; so that I am glad to fall back upon my own stores. Later on, having taken counsel with a big merchant who occupies the next stall to mine, and insists on treating me to about a bucketful of tea, seasoned with some very curious information upon the present condition of Central Asia, I decide upon migrating elsewhere; and do so forthwith.

The first thing to be done next morning is to rush off to the post in search of letters, of which (Tashkent having been my only postal address for months past) there ought to be a good many by this time. And there they are, sure enough—a round half dozen of them, with the old familiar English postmarks, which look strange enough in this remote corner of the earth, where the very presence of an Englishman is forbidden. For four months I have not had a word from home; and here at last is a whole budget at once. I snatch up the first letter, and tear it open. A couple of newspaper extracts fall out.

There are presentiments of evil as well as of good. Before I have had time to glance through the first paragraph, I already realise that my reward for six months of anxiety, illness, imprisonment, and subterfuge worse than all—is the credit, in my own country and among my own people, of being a liar and a villain.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN TASHKENT.

I HAVE no wish to dwell upon that moment, though I shall not easily forget it. My first impulse (any man's first impulse, I should think, in the same position) is to return home as fast as post and rail can carry me ; but a moment's reflection shows me the unfairness of throwing away the chance of obtaining important information, and perhaps reaching Khiva even at the last, for the sake of redressing a purely personal wrong. I decide upon attempting to return by Samarcand and the line of the Oxus, and the same evening send off another despatch to the *Daily Telegraph*, containing, in addition to the latest news which I have been able to pick up, a short answer to the charges against me.*

Returning to my hotel from the posting of my letter I am accosted in the corridor by a tall, slim, black-haired man in spectacles, who politely asks whether I speak English. I look closer, and recognise a familiar face—one which I had last seen in St Petersburg, on the morning of Christmas, 1872, turned eastward toward the

* The gist of this answer, and of the enlarged copy which I wrote for the *Daily Telegraph* on my return, will be found in the preface.

Siberian steppes and the frontier of China. Up to this point each of us has believed himself to be the only Englishman in Central Asia; and, meeting thus unexpectedly in the very heart of the forbidden ground, we may well stare at each other in undisguised amazement.

“Ashton Dilke, by Jove!”

“It *is* you, then? I thought I knew your face; but how on earth did you get here?”

“Come and have some tea, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

And we sit up till nearly two in the morning, eating bread and water-melon, sipping weak tea, comparing notes upon our respective travels, and discussing plans for the future. Before the symposium breaks up, it is settled that we are to start for Samarcand together (if the authorities permit), and, meanwhile, to “do” Tashkent as thoroughly as possible.

But before relating our farther adventures, I must go back a little.

Immediately on my arrival the day before, I had gone to ask council of Mr S——, whom my friend M——’s letter had mentioned to me as likely to be of service.* M—— spoke of him as a man “whom everybody knew;” but such men are always hard to find, and my new acquaintance is no exception to the rule. Not without a prolonged hunt (the streets of Tashkent being as much alike as their inhabitants) do I at length present myself at a queer little door embedded in a high clay wall, and am admitted by a long, dismal-looking servant,

* See Chapter XV.

who eyes me as the warders of the Tower may have eyed Guy Fawkes. Behind the wall is a big garden ; in the middle of the garden there is a small pavilion ; and inside the pavilion sits a man, writing, with a glass of tea on one side of him, and a perfect Himalaya of papers on the other. On hearing my name, he rises and greets me with a curious mixture of habitual courtesy and irrepressible amusement.

“Mr Ker? the gentleman mentioned by my friend M——, of course; delighted to see you. So *you* are the man who threw us all into a panic last June! You may boast of one thing at least—having disturbed the Tashkent administration more than any other man in Central Asia.” (Here he laughs outright, to the great scandal of the funereal servant).

“How so?” ask I, inwardly wondering whether I am a Khivan propagandist, or an assassin sent by the English Government to “remove” General Kaufmann.

“Well, you see, this was how it happened: When you sent that special courier from Kazalinsk with your papers, *that* of itself sufficed to attract attention; but, of course, we couldn't open the letters of recommendation to Kaufmann and Verevkin, so the only thing left to do was to find out what we could from your passport. It happened that there was only one man in Tashkent who understood English, so, of course, we set him to translate it, and he did so most carefully, from the flourish at the top, to Lord Granville's name at the bottom. But whether he made too much of the signature, or whether our people didn't read it right, it's

certain that the impression *they* got was, that you were Lord Granville himself, come in person to look at Central Asia!"

Here the orator becomes incoherent from excess of emotion.

"And what did you do then?" inquire I, as well as I can speak for laughing.

"Well, then, there was a fine to-do. No one knew what to say or think; and of course, the great question was, what we were to do with his lordship, now that he *was* here. Some were for sending you back at once, others for keeping you as a hostage; while a few ventured to suggest bringing you on here and treating you civilly, in order to conciliate the English. However, after a time they began to see how the case really stood; and then they simply decided to do nothing at all, but just let you and Kaufmann settle it between you."

I recall the first of the two official communications which I received at Kazalinsk, and begin to understand the situation.

"Altogether," resumes S——, "it was a most comical affair; but I doubt if you'd get anybody at home to believe it—it's only in a place like this that such a thing could happen. However, I'm glad you've got here at last; and if I can be of any use I shall be most happy to help you. By-the-by, do you know P——?"

"He was recommended to me at Orenburg by a man named O——."

"Ah, to be sure! they're great friends. Well, I'm just going to see him now and if you like to come with

me, I'll present you, and he'll tell you all you want to know about the state of the country. He knows everybody here, so I daresay we shall meet some rather remarkable people."

And so it proves. We have barely entered the snug little parlour, and exchanged greetings with Mr P—(whose laborious journeys through Bokhara have left little trace on his compact figure, and firm, intelligent face), when my eye catches a tall, swarthy, muscular man, seated apart on a low divan beside the window. His dress is perfectly simple—a plain blue robe and white turban, such as any workman in the street might wear; but there is a nameless *something* in his look and bearing which rivets my attention at once. It is the face of a great man—but of a great man fallen from his former greatness; the face of Timour wandering upon the mountains, of Yezdegird flying before the armies of Amrou. In the large dark eyes there is a shadow of deep melancholy; but they still seem as if years ago they may have flashed fiercely in the press of battle, or looked without flinching in the face of death. Before I have even heard his name, I already guess that this man must have a strange history.

"Mr Ker," says our host, stepping forward, "let me present to you an old friend of mine, whom I daresay you have heard of—Djura-Bek, the former Chief of Kitab."

There comes back to me, like a flash of lightning, the story told me by the Russian colonel on the Black Sea*—the bloody repulse of the first assault upon Kitab,

* See Chapter I.

the havoc wrought among the officers, the grenadier's gallant defence of his wounded comrade ; and thus unexpectedly do I find myself face to face with the principal hero of the tale. I grasp the long sinewy hand which was once dyed to the wrist with Christian blood, and, through Mr P——'s interpretation (the Bek speaking no European language), exchange a few words with him.

The momentary lighting up of his face at my mention of the colonel's name, and the eagerness with which he inquires after his old enemy, are very characteristic of the man ; and, looking at his fine expressive features and noble bearing, I can well believe the many stories which I have heard of his unblemished good faith and heroic submission to his untoward destiny. One of these is well worth quoting, if only as a foil to the black treachery of the Asiatic chiefs in general. When the Crown Prince of Kokan visited Tashkent in 1871, ostensibly as a friend, but with the secret purpose of giving aid to the rebellious party among the native population, he applied to Djura-Bek as a man of known ability, offering, as the price of his adhesion, full reinstatement in his former rights, and a large sum of money on the spot. To these offers (of all temptations the most irresistible to an Asiatic) the brave man—at that time in very straitened circumstances—simply replied, "I have lived among the Russians, and accepted help from them ; I will never help to do them wrong !"

We are still talking, when the outer door opens again, and in waddles a short, squat figure in flowing Eastern robes, which our host seems to recognise at a glance.

“What, back from Kokan already?”

“It was time, I can tell you,” replies the other, in very tolerable Russian. “They’re killing everybody just as you’d kill sheep, and I doubt if they’d take time to ask who one was, first. The night before I left, I saw thirty-eight men beheaded in ten minutes; and they were not the first, nor the last either. Before another week’s out the Khan will be either running for Tashkent, or cut into kabobs by the rebels.”

And then he goes on to tell us that the insurgent Kirghiz are already masters of two-thirds of the Khanate, that the capital itself has just fallen into their hands, that the Khan’s few remaining adherents are being massacred by scores at a time, and that the direct route through the Khanate is utterly impassable for the time being.

“This will interfere with your travels, I’m afraid,” says Mr P——, turning to me. “If you’re bound for Kashgar, your road lies right through Kokan. If you’re only going to Samarcand, it doesn’t so much matter.”

“I suppose it will hurt the local trade a good deal,” suggest I.

“*Trade!*” echoes my host, with intense scorn; “do you believe in the trade of Turkestan, then? It’s all very well for people at home to talk about ‘the ever-increasing stream of Asiatic commerce,’ because it won’t do to let Western Europe know that we’ve made so little out of a country that costs us so much; but, in reality, Turkestan has no trade at all. What with the English underselling us in Bokhara, and Yakoub-Beg

blocking us out of Kashgar—what with the cost of our garrisons, and, the want of money to trade with, forcing us to work on credit—we have a yearly deficit of several millions, which is always on the increase. Talk of establishing steam communication on the Oxus and Syr-Daria! Why, the two together wouldn't furnish trade enough to keep one steamer running for a month."

How fully this verdict was borne out by the information which I afterwards got from the resident merchants, will be seen later on ; but even at the moment, such an opinion, uttered by the first statistical authority in the country, carried conviction along with it. On taking leave of Mr P——, I begged the loan of his treatise upon the commerce of Bokhara (having already seen a copy in Tiflis), from which it is worth while to make a few extracts :—

“The central point of Asiatic trade at present—the great market of both Russian and Anglo-Indian goods—is unquestionably Bokhara. The annual trade of the town is already considerably over 40,000,000 roubles (between £5,000,000 and £6,000,000), and is steadily increasing. Its sphere of commerce already comprises all the Mohammedan Principalities from Khiva to Kashgar, and is now fast extending itself even beyond the Hindoo-Koosh and the Himalaya. . . . Unfortunately we know little or nothing of the statistics of the trade between Bokhara and India, which is rapidly pushing out our own ; but it is not difficult to foretell the result of a contest between our own fatal ‘laissez-faire’ and the persevering energy of our competitors

Our neglect of Bokhara may easily give the whole trade of Central Asia in the hands of the English and their allies the Affghans; and, that once done, it will be too late to repent it."

Before proceeding to describe Tashkent itself, I may as well sketch our own immediate surroundings. Our quarters (Gromoff's Hotel, should any future traveller require the information) stand close to one of the town gates, in one of the newest streets of the town, within easy reach of both a bazaar and a cab-stand—for the march of civilisation has already flooded Tashkent with the little arm-chair-like vehicles which swarm in every town of European Russia. The hotel itself is a long, low, one-storeyed building, neatly whitewashed, and with an interior formed by two broad flagged passages at right angles to one another, each containing four "apartments"—small, bare, stone-floored rooms, not inferior to any cell in Newgate. Their furniture consists of three or four paralytic chairs, and a table on which an experienced waiter *may* set a tea-urn without its going right through; while our plaids do duty as bedding, the hotel kindly providing a wooden frame to lay them on. The floor is innocent of washing, save when we empty our slops upon it "to lay the dust a bit;" and the flies (for happily not a single mosquito is to be seen) come in swarms through the open window, attracted by our prodigal display of water-melon.

But in this glorious climate, where houses are merely a possible shelter in case of rain, the style of indoor

accommodation matters nothing ; and the hotel-garden is in itself an ample atonement. Along a gentle incline of more than an hundred yards extend mazes of shrubbery, and thick bosquets which even the mid-day sun cannot pierce, and dainty pavilions, and neat gravel-walks ; while at the foot lies a spacious tank, beside which, at any hour of the day, you may find two or three gorgeously attired natives drowsily puffing their long narguilehs. On one side is a trim little summer-house, on the other a high mound overlooking the road, crowned with a bench and table for the lovers of open-air tea ; and under the overhanging trees ripples a tiny brook, forming the boundary of the garden.

For the first three days (except for a flying visit to the authorities, to report ourselves) our programme has little variety. Up early, and out for a glorious cold-bath in the stream at the end of the garden ; then breakfast—from our own stores, *bien entendu*, the hotel avowedly supplying nothing but hot water. After breakfast, a long walk, or rather saunter ; for under this soft voluptuous sky even the headlong energy of the Anglo-Saxon speedily degenerates into confirmed lotus-eating. Our stroll usually ends in the purchase of unlimited grapes (at 1d. per lb.), and a halt under the clustering trees which meet us at every turn, to make a leisurely meal. Between one and two, my Tartar brings our dinner of clear soup and cutlets from the Officers' Club, the greatest stride towards European civilisation which Tashkent has yet made. After dinner, stroll number two, winding up with more

grapes, and a second bath in the brook. Towards sunset, we have an open-air tea in the garden, on the mound above-mentioned ; and then a prolonged talk under the stars, enlivened by occasional slices of water-melon, and often lasting till past midnight. This last, however, has to be done in the dark, a passing police-inspector having objected to candles in the open air at such an hour.

In abundance of water and vegetation, Tashkent surpasses any Asiatic city which I have yet seen. The streets are like well-planted avenues, alive with the trickle of running water ; and, for hundreds of yards together, the little houses peer out at you from a nest of embowering shrubbery. Indeed, the whole town is like an enlarged edition of the Sleeping Beauty's Palace, fenced about on every side by acres of luxuriant vegetation, till it is hard to tell when you are inside the walls, and when outside. The width of the streets and boulevards, the whitewashed houses, and the numerous public buildings of hewn stone, give to the Russian Quarter an appearance of greater civilisation than it actually possesses—more especially as many of the streets have some attempt at a pavement, and a very fair sprinkling of oil lamps. But the general panorama of the city is beyond description. It is the strangest conceivable mingling of country and town, of cool dreamy seclusion and hot, dusty, clamorous bustle. At one moment you pass a smart Government office, with the Double Eagle flourished on its whitewashed front ; the next, you are face to face with a huge fragment of

the ancient city-wall, sentinelling a dark cleft through the depths of which a foaming torrent, undried by the summer heat, rushes roaring to join one of the countless rivers that intersect the oasis. Shady alleys debouch upon dusty, sun-scorched plains; spacious boulevards, leading apparently to the centre of the town, suddenly land you outside of it altogether; thick bosquets of wooding tempt you with a promise of seclusion, and then leave you in the middle of a dirty bazaar crowded with bawling costermongers. In fact, the whole scene is an exact realisation of Hood's country churchyard, which was "crowded with young men striving to be alone."

"This is all very well, you know," says my companion on the third night of our researches, as we sit over our water-melon upon the moonlit mound, with the shadowy trees whispering below. "This is all very well in its way; but it strikes me we've had just about enough of it. *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.* I don't call *this* 'seeing Tashkent,' you know. I came here to see Central Asia, not Europe in Asiatic binding."

"Asia in Russia-leather binding you mean," answer I. "However, you're quite right; there's far too much of the 'say you've been there' about our present style. I once went up Mont Blanc with a fellow who fell asleep from sheer exhaustion at the foot of the last *arête*, and was dragged up and down again like an ox to the slaughter. When he got back to England, he at once delivered a lecture upon the ascent and the view

from the top ; and when I ventured to remonstrate, answered coolly, ' You see, I just asked my guide what I *would* have seen if I hadn't fallen asleep, and wrote it down from his dictation ! ' "

" Well, I'll tell you what we'll do ; we'll just order a cab to-morrow morning, and lose ourselves for a whole day in the ' native town,' till we've seen all we want. What do you say ? "

The motion is carried *nem. con.* ; and, directly after breakfast on the following morning, we start on our voyage of discovery, with my ever-useful Mourad as interpreter—our knowledge of the local tongues being as yet only rudimentary. For me, at least, this sudden return to barbarism is appropriate enough. My comrade still preserves some appearance of civilisation ; but I, in my dusty puggree and tattered white tunic, red goatskin trousers, and long Bashkir boots of soft skin, embroidered along the edges—look like nothing but an Eastern version of Robinson Crusoe, with Mourad for my Man Friday.

With a tolerably fresh horse and a Cossack driver, even an Asiatic street may be traversed pretty rapidly ; and we are not long in reaching the bridge, which (like another Al Sirat) divides the old world from the new. Once across it, we are in an utterly new region. No more wide squares and leafy boulevards, no more well-appointed shops and smart public buildings. At the very first stride, we plunge into a deep, narrow, sandy ditch, on either side of which great masses of baked mud, which we dimly perceive to be meant for houses,

tower up as if to crush us in their fall. We look around in righteous indignation, and are just beginning to fulfil zealously the first duty of every true Englishman—that of pouring contempt upon everything foreign—when a blast of thick dingy smoke and stifling heat effectually changes the current of our ideas.

“A fire, by Jove!” shouts my companion, with unfeigned rejoicing. “We’re in luck—here’s a sample of native industry at the very outset. Let’s go and have a look at it!”

We jump off the drosky, and are instantly swallowed by the wave of turbaned nastiness which is surging towards a little mud-hovel about fifty yards ahead of us, the flat roof of which is all one red, roaring blaze. By the time we reach it (our drosky following) “the fun,” as my friend humanely remarks, “is in full swing.” The dried grass piled upon the roof is flaring like a volcano, despite the perfect stillness of the air. Water has already been brought up, and the buckets are skipping from hand to hand with very un-Asiatic alertness; while three or four gaunt, brown, half-naked scarecrows, who have clambered upon the roof, are dimly seen through the whirling smoke, tearing down the still unburned grass, or kicking great heaps of red ashes down into the street, regardless of the throng which fills it.

One of these bouquets lights full upon the nose of a passing camel, which lashes out furiously on every side; and now things go on in the style of the old nursery rhyme. The camel upsets a horse, the horse spills a

cart, the cart bumps against our drosky, our drosky squashes half a dozen people—and in an instant there is a grand compound “block” all across the road, while fresh showers of hot ashes, varied at intervals by a misdirected bucket of dirty water, come down upon us like a new eruption of Vesuvius. However, the pace is too severe to last. The roof is speedily cleared of everything combustible; the flames are beaten down by a constant deluge of water; the wedged mass of men and animals blocking the street slowly melts away; and my companion, with the look of a man unjustly balked of his lawful enjoyment, mutters that “the heathens can’t even burn a house properly,” and tells the driver to go on.

And on we go accordingly, through dust, and heat, and dogs, and offal, and all the loathsome minutiae of a genuine Eastern town. Every now and then, in the interminable cobweb of grey mud, we chance upon the many-coloured roof, and frescoed walls, and massive architecture of a mosque, into which we penetrate notwithstanding the scowls and muttered curses of the unsociable Believers who haunt the entrance. Deeper and deeper plunges our adventurous pilot into the unknown region; and the streets grow darker, and narrower, and dirtier, and noisier, and more and more crowded; till at last, turning a sharp corner, we are whirled at once into the Maelstrom of the Great Bazaar,

And here, at last, we begin to believe in the population of Tashkent. Hitherto, except in the markets, we have never seen anything worth calling a crowd;

and during the day, at least, the desolation of the public places is such as amply to warrant my comrade's travesty of the official census into "a town *empty* of eighty thousand inhabitants." But in this great artery of local traffic, there is no want of circulation. Men, boys, and even women—camels, horses, asses, carts, litters—are all mingled in one roaring swarm; while ever and anon an enormous waggon, with wheels seven feet in diameter, comes ploughing through the throng, like the car of Juggernaut, bearing down all before it.

Quitting our drosky (which can make no headway at all in such a whirlpool of conflicting currents) we plunge into the welter of strange figures—gaunt dervishes, with the brand of the desert still upon them; veiled women, imprisoned in close-fitting umbrella-cases of blue cotton; greasy pastry-cooks, over whom the flies swarm with a comfortable assurance of congenial pasture; shaggy porters waddling under huge baskets; brown paunchy children, in the minimum of clothing, and the maximum of dirt; and bare-limbed water-carriers, poisoning their bulging skins on their brawny shoulders, like caricatures of Atlas.

Even on foot, however, it is no easy matter to thread such a chaos. More than once we escape the rush of charging wheels only by leaping bodily into one of the little booths around us, without in the least discomposing the stolid occupants, who sit as placidly as if being crushed into paste by a lurching cart, or trampled upon by an intrusive Feringhee, were all in the day's work.—"Kismet—and who can avert

it?" Meanwhile Mourad, who is quite at home in these living jungles, slips through the mass like a lizard, looking back every now and then, with the calm contempt of superior science, upon our fruitless attempts to keep up with him.

But after a time we begin to get used to the turmoil, and are able to form some idea of the bazaar. As among the Russians (who, indeed, probably borrowed the fashion from the East) the place is portioned off according to the different trades, each craft having a street of its own—the tailors' row, the fruiterers' row, the hardware row, the silk row, and so on. In the facial panorama of the tradesmen there is not much variety, the native element being here paramount—for the Russians, as a rule, confine themselves to the smaller markets in their own quarter of the town. Here and there, indeed, one may espy the long, narrow visage and high cheek-bones of the Persian, or the handsome, scornful, aquiline face of the Bokhariote, or the keen black eyes of the Jew gleaming under his high square cap; but the predominating feature is the heavy, bloated, sensual mask of the Sart. Looking at the endless line of lumpish, expressionless faces, and flabby, nerveless limbs, one begins to understand how so many thousands of them have been put to flight, once and again, by a handful of Russian grenadiers. Of them, as of all like them, Herodotus' bitter definition still holds good, "Many persons, but few *men*." If such creatures are a fair specimen of Central Asia, it is full time for her to be purged by foreign invasion.

But, despite all drawbacks, the interior of the bazaar is a wonderful picture. Thanks to the roof of light matting, every avenue of the great catacomb is flooded with a rich summer gloom of shaded sunlight, lending a new picturesqueness to the motley swarm below. Nor is the merchandise itself by any means to be despised. The carved pipe-heads, the glittering embroidery, the curiously worked slippers, the silver-mounted pistols and damascened yataghans,—above all, the magnificent collection of native silks—might have tempted Elwes himself to extravagance; and notwithstanding Albert Smith's warning that "you can buy nothing abroad which you will not get cheaper in London," I make a bid for two silk scarfs of Bokharian manufacture, Mr Dilke immediately following my example. Thereupon the true believers (who have already begun to take considerable interest in our proceedings) surround us in a body, and criticise, with remarkable freedom, our intended purchase and general appearance, ceasing only when the bargain is concluded.

Now, whether our morning's work has really given us an appetite, or whether the Duke of Burgundy was right in asserting that "Never was Englishman who loved a dry-lipped bargain," certain it is, that at this stage of our proceedings we begin to feel startlingly hungry, and to look keenly about for some kind of provender. A few years ago, the bare idea of the food to be met with in an Eastern bazaar would probably have sent us both into hysterics; but travel is a

wonderful teacher, and in our present state we are ready for anything.

Nor have we far to look. Barely ten yards off, a thick onion-scented steam marks the whereabouts of a "cook-shop," a dingy little nook, very much like the bottom of a burnt-out stove, the only habitable part being the farther corner, where a sheet of grey felt masks the black shining greasiness of the floor. Upon this extempore carpet we squat ourselves, under the eyes of a wondering crowd (the shop being completely open, and not more than six feet square), while the proprietor, recovering from his first stupefaction, timidly offers us a brace of hot pies which he has just fished up from a kind of miniature coal-hole in the pavement, and then retires precipitately, as if apprehensive of the possible consequences to himself. Hardened as we are, we look doubtfully first at the viands, and then at one another.

"Well, I'll risk it!" says my comrade valiantly; "it can't be worse than some of the things I used to get in that Chinese restaurant at Kouldja; and after all this crush, I need something to stuff me out—I'm as flat as a fashionable novel."

"Or the Yankee officer when the rock fell upon him," suggest I. "You remember, 'Underneath the mighty stone, when they lifted it, lay a kind of human pancake, not more than two inches thick at any part. It was I. They raised me upon a shovel, and bore me slowly and mournfully away.'"

With the last word, down goes my pie,—a little

tennis-ball of chopped meat and onions, lacquered with a thin paste. The result is satisfactory; and, to the unspeakable delight of the gazing crowd, we immediately order a whole dish. The proprietor briskly produces ten more pies on a tray, with a bowl of vinegar to dip them in, and a couple of sharp wooden toothpicks to harpoon them withal; and we fall to in earnest.

Meanwhile the mob outside continues to increase, attracted first by the novel spectacle of two Giaours eating native food with unmistakable relish, and next by the astounding appetite which we display. Just as we are finishing the first batch, my henchman Mourad, who has been out of sight altogether for the last half-hour, suddenly turns up in the thickest of the press, and, catching sight of us, begins to enliven the public with a full detail of who and what we are (doubtless with some embellishment of his own), which is listened to with marked interest. But when, having despatched our first relay of pies, we order a second, and finally a third, the popular enthusiasm rises to a height; and I begin to fear that, in gratitude for our liberal encouragement of Asiatic commerce, we shall be carried round the bazaar in triumph, or stuck up on a cart, and done sacrifice to, "as the manner of the Scythians is."

And certainly, if we wanted originality, we have got it; for, in any part of the world, I have seldom made a stranger meal. The heart of an Asiatic desert, four thousand miles from England; a town which (if report may be trusted) only one other Englishman has reached

since the Russians first occupied it ; food such as the piemen of Bagdad sold in the days of "the good Haroun Alraschid ;" a swarm of goblin figures in quaint Oriental garb, and not a European face within an hour's march of us.

Dinner being over, the next thing is to pay our bill, which, for the thirty-two pies and their concomitant seasoning, is thirty kopecks, or about ten pence English.

"Well, I'll tell you what," says my companion, with the air of a discoverer, "we'll just dine *à la Sart* so long as we're in Tashkent. They may say what they like about the Officers' Club, but this is quite good enough for me."

"And for me too."

Having thus decided, we regain our drosky (which, by some miracle, has kept within hail all the time), and turn our faces homeward once more.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FROM UNDER THE SWORD.

THIS alternation of busy sight-seeing and voluptuous inaction brings us pleasantly enough to the end of our first week in Tashkent ; but our life, enjoyable as it is, lies none the less under the sword of Damocles. Mr Dilke being known for an Englishman, and I strongly suspected of being another, the authorities may "come down" upon us at any moment ; and our constant wonder is that they have not already done so. At every hour of the day—eating, strolling, bathing, chatting, or doing nothing—the ever-present consciousness is with us still ; and we take our pleasure with much the same feelings as M. Jules Verne's three voyagers to the moon, making themselves comfortable inside the projectile of the Gun Club, with four hundred thousand pounds of fulminating cotton just about to ignite beneath them.

One hope, indeed, still remains, though a poor one. I have already telegraphed to General Kolpakovski (who is now far away to the north-east, at Vernoë, between the Ili and Issik-Koul) for permission to visit Samarcand ; and with *his* permit in our pocket, we may

defy the municipal authorities and all other powers of darkness. But how if they send us orders to leave the country before his answer can arrive? or if the answer be unfavourable? And, with all this in our minds, we sit down to tea, on the evening before our visit to General Euler, the municipal governor, with the air of men about to lead a forlorn hope.

“I think I know *now* how the Spartans felt on the eve of Thermopylæ,” remarks my companion, with his mouth full of bread and water-melon.

“Let us make good cheer, then, my friends,” answer I, paraphrasing Leonidas, “for to-morrow we shall breakfast with General Euler!”

However, we did *not* breakfast with him, nor indeed see him at all; for the poor old General was taken suddenly ill, and could not receive us; so that, after all, the terrible interview ended in nothing, and we had a kind of reprieve—“like finding a dentist not at home,” as I bitterly remarked, on finding myself once more outside the meek little wooden house which contains the head of the administration.

But even here the theory of compensation asserts itself once more. Just as we are settling to our never-ending tea in the garden (which gives me a haunting memory of that of the Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse, as seen by Alice in Wonderland) my Tartar comes up with an important air, and hands me a telegram, which I translate verbatim from the original:

"Vernož, 10th (22d) August 1873.

"To Mr Ker, Tashkent.

"Leave granted you to Samarcand for two weeks. Show this telegram to the Governor.

"KOLPAKOVSKI."

The next morning Mr Eugene Schuyler, Secretary of the American Legation at St Petersburg, turns up all on a sudden from Bokhara, and gives us various useful hints respecting our road to Samarcand, more especially the passage of the Syr-Daria at Tchinaz. He also tells us that the insurrection in Kokan (mentioned in my last chapter) has resulted altogether contrary to the general expectation; that the Khan has returned, defeated the rebels, retaken his capital, and is now (in accordance with immemorial usage) beheading every one whom he can lay his hands on. "So," concludes the narrator, "I'd recommend you not to try that road, but just to be content with Samarcand."

Later on in the same day, I am agreeably surprised by meeting two or three of the officers who had entertained me at Orenburg, whose freely-expressed astonishment at finding me here sufficiently proves how thoroughly their secret conviction belied the hopeful assurances with which they sent me on my way. The city authorities seem to be much of the same way of thinking; but the telegram works wonders, and we are officially assured, to our no small satisfaction, that our travelling-passes shall be ready for Samarcand within two days at the farthest.

Meanwhile I pay another visit to General Euler, who, happily, is by this time well enough to be seen. We look at each other with a not unnatural interest—I at the man whose influence has cost me a seven weeks' imprisonment, and all but driven me out of the country; he at the mysterious traveller who seems to have no nationality, and who has slipped into the forbidden ground, no one knows whence, and no one knows how. But, to do him justice, his reception of me bears no trace whatever of our past relations. Very wan and worn looks the fine old face amid its many-folded wrappings; but neither pain nor illness can subdue the quiet, dignified courtesy which marks the soldier and the gentleman—not a whit abated by the fact that he has already gone through all the statements and mis-statements of my case borrowed by the Russian papers from those of London—and, if he does not actually know the whole story, knows at least quite enough to form his own opinion. He says a few kind words to me, and then wishes me good speed, with a cordial shake of the hand. So ends our first and last meeting. I doubt whether I shall ever see him again, in the face of the sweeping changes which are now impending over the Turkestan administration; but it is pleasant to remember, looking back upon it all, that even the man whom I had most reason to account my enemy, parted from me as a friend.

During our two days of expectation, Mr Dilke and I amuse ourselves by taking wide sweeps around the city wall, surveying it from either side, and wondering

(as well we may) that, with such defences to back them, the native stock made no better fight of it. The mud walls of Tashkent are certainly inferior to the huge rampart which girdles Samarcand; in some places, indeed, they are less than double the height of a man; but, nevertheless, in their old completeness, they would have been (if well defended) a very tough morsel for any force not possessed of a strong artillery; and the few light pieces carried by Tchernaiëff's flying column, which took the place in June 1865, were hardly worth counting.

"It just shows what duffers they are, these Asiatics," says my comrade, in a flush of righteous indignation. "Put twenty thousand English, or twenty thousand Germans, into a place like this, and see how long they'd hold it against all comers! Fancy what cover you'd have for skirmishers among all these trees! Why, even when the walls were down, the riflemen in the gardens would keep any force at bay, unless they were actually shelled out of their cover."

"All that's possible enough in European warfare," answer I; "but the Sarts have no Todleben, or a very 'mute inglorious' one indeed. So far as I'm acquainted with Asiatic strategy, it seems to consist in running out at one gate just as the Russians run in at another."

It was in the course of one of these strolls that we witnessed a scene which I cannot persuade myself to leave out. There is a peculiar stillness and softness in the evenings of Southern Turkestan, which tempts every one into the open air, and this is the time which we,

filling up the scorching day with mere lounges, choose for our more serious voyages of discovery.

On the evening in question we have been specially fortunate. Having scaled a broken part of the wall, we look down from the high ground upon which it stands, over the whole city at once. Far and wide, the great sheet of dark glossy green lies outspread below; and in its midst, outlined as on a map, appear straight, wide streets, and low white houses, and glittering streams winding in and out, and broad, open spaces, on which the passing groups of promenaders look like swarming ants; while far away along the horizon extend the purple ridges of the distant hills, framing the picture. Just below the spot where we stand, a deep ravine shelters a smooth dark pool, in which two or three native women are washing their clothes. Behind us, again, outside the wall, stretches a broad sweep of dusty road, flanked by a high wall of baked clay, above which long ranks of clustering boughs wave in the evening breeze, and over all streams the golden transparent splendour of the Asiatic sunset—a sea of glass mingled with fire.

Suddenly a horse and cart come briskly up a lane at the back of our position, with an ear-splitting creak of wheels which makes us face about as if by word of command. Having reached the foot of the bank on which we stand, the horse comes to a dead halt, and begins to look about him as if asking his way. In an instant the driver—a fat, lumpy Sart, whose ill-shaven crown looks like a worn-out scrubbing-brush—leaps

down and clutches his beast's right fore-leg as if he meant to pull it off, the animal surveying him meanwhile with an air of mild wonder. Thereupon three or four lathy, copper-coloured vagabonds, yelling like demons, rush from behind an angle of the wall, and fasten like leeches upon the other fore-leg—the poor horse staring first at them, and then at us, in mute protest. And now, as if the madness had become contagious, at least ten more hobgoblins start up all at once from nowhere in particular, and fly upon every part of the poor beast that is still unoccupied—hind-legs, tail, ears, mane, harness—all pulling and hauling in different directions, with cries and gesticulations which might appal the stoutest lunatic in Hanwell. And, to crown all, in the very height of the uproar, comes sweeping by a long procession of cows, two and two like a boarding-school, stepping daintily and noiselessly along, and surveying the Laocoön-group in the middle of the road with a quiet, aristocratic contempt which is worth going a mile to see.

What they wanted to do with the horse, or where they wished him to go, I have never been able to find out; and the brute himself seemed equally mystified. At last, as the most effectual means of resistance, he coolly lies down in the middle of the road, with all his assailants upon him. This unexpected move evidently puzzles the aggressors, who relax their hold and stand at gaze; whereupon the liberated horse rises, shakes himself, looks about him, and quietly trots back again along the same road by which he came, leaving his per-

secutors staring at each other as blankly as if from maniacs they had suddenly become idiots.

At last comes the morning of the 25th August, the day of our departure for Samarcand ; and a busy day it is for us all. Our passes are brought in from the Bureau of Police, sealed, signed, and in order. Mourad is despatched to the post-house to see about horses ; while we, meanwhile, go manfully to work at the packing of our baggage. Mine, however, needs little packing, consisting merely of a tarpaulin camp-bed rolling up into a bag, and containing my entire kit, photographs included—a large stock of which latter I have laid in since my arrival. A little after noon we have our farewell meal of “pilmenn,”—little cocked hats of dough filled with chopped meat, and served up hot in the water that boiled them. Just as we finish, up to the door rattles one of those little clothes-baskets on wheels which I already know to my cost ; and the hangers-on of the hotel, to whom an arrival or a departure is always a kind of fête, rush to assist in the stowing of the baggage. Piece after piece is wedged in, like a Chinese puzzle ; and then a huge sheet of grey felt is drawn tightly over the top, giving the whole concern the look of a gigantic egg, with nothing to hold by, and very little to sit upon.

“This is pretty much like putting a man upon the dome of St Paul’s, and telling him to sit firm,” remark I, ruefully, as we perch ourselves upon the inclined plane. “After this, I shall begin to believe in the

aeronaut who 'greased his pants and slid down the rainbow.'

"We ought to be roped together, Alpine fashion," remarks my comrade, with an air of experience. "This thing's every bit as slippery as a glacier, I'll take my oath; and as for crevasses, I'd as soon fall down one, any day, as into one of the ruts about here."

But his suggestion is cut short in its very utterance. The throng clears away from before us—Mourad clambers to his place beside the driver—there is a yell, and a crack, and a snort—and we, sitting *across* the cart, with faces turned in opposite directions, find ourselves launched into space once more.

Once clear of the town, the dust (bad enough inside) becomes outrageous. Our hair is powdered like a footman's; every fold of our dress becomes an impromptu hour-glass, ever running and never spent. Mourad's round black head looks (as the classic wits said of Cornelius Sylla) "like a mulberry sprinkled with meal;" and the whole firmament appears like a gigantic pepper-box with the lid off. Little by little, the labyrinth of gardens, entrenched behind their high, blank walls of baked earth, melts away behind us; and the open country (at this stage one great flood of luxuriant vegetation wherever the water has gone) outstretches itself on every side. Here and there we come upon a group of men winnowing corn, or a turbaned elder asleep in the shadow of the trees, or a knot of recumbent camels, with all their limbs packed away under them in that curious fashion which recalls Mr Hibb's comparison of

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“a long nigger in a short bed.” Every now and then a broad sweep of smooth green meadow, dappled with substantial-looking haystacks, carries one back for a moment to dear Old England; but the next moment the strange vegetation, and reed-thatched huts, and grazing camels, and swarthy men in Eastern dress, destroy the illusion again.

Up to the first station, all goes well enough; but there we are suddenly brought to a stand-still by a rather important deficiency—the want of a cart! For on this line, as we now learn to our cost, it is the rule to change carts, not merely at all the main points of the route (as upon the Lower Syr-Daria), but at every station, great or small. The old postmaster, who, apart from his atrocious calling, seems a jolly fellow enough, greets us with a cheerful grin, and the consolatory assurance that, even if there *were* a cart for us, there are no horses, the Samarcand mail having just taken them all; and that, after all, we shall only have to wait six or seven hours at the most. We look at each other for a moment, and then burst into a loud laugh, in which the postmaster joins lustily.

“Kismet—and who can avert it?” remarks my companion, philosophically, seating himself in the shade. “I shouldn’t wonder if I turn Mussulman myself, one of these days—it’s a very comfortable kind of creed. The best thing we can do now is just to order a samovar (urn) and have some tea.”

We get out our provisions—including a sheaf of the thin wheaten cakes already mentioned, together with

two splendid melons which have survived, as if by miracle, the crushing exactness of our stowage—and, half an hour later, are drinking tea on a scale that might have moved the envy of Dr Johnson. It is hardly credible what an amount of fluid one can absorb in these regions, without inconvenience or even satiety. I have seen a man drink twenty-three tumblers of tea at a sitting, with no apparent effect beyond that of making him look supremely happy. I have seen another man empty two tea-urns in succession (with very slight assistance from me), and then eat a large amount of fruit by way of qualifier; and I could quote from the history of the Khiva Expedition feats more extraordinary still.

Tea being over, and Mourad having, as usual, gone fast asleep, despite the countless flies which blacken his upturned face, we scramble up the huge posts which fence the gate of the big, dusty yard, and, seating ourselves upon their rounded tops, begin to converse.

“See how the fellows yonder are staring!” says my comrade; “they’ll be worshipping us for saints, if I don’t light a cigar to destroy the illusion. It’s a pity *you* don’t smoke, for then the picture would be complete—two ‘salvage men’ fumant upon a gate argent, with the motto, ‘In Nubibus!’”

“And a greater pity I don’t drink, according to the Russians; but I should hardly stand this work so well if I did.”

“Likely enough. I say, wouldn’t it be a joke to go right across to India, now that we *are* here? Fancy

what a reception we should get at Peshawur! and it can't be such a tremendous way from Samarcand."

"About four hundred and sixty miles, I believe, as the crow flies; but skirting the Hindoo Koosh, as we should have to do, would make it at least six hundred."

"Well, that's nothing out of the way, provided the country's anything like decent. Just fish out your map, and see what the Russians make of that terrible 'Pamir Steppe,' which our geographers praise and *magnify* for ever?"

"Well, they don't seem to make much of it—it's just marked as a little table-land among the spurs of the Bolor-Dagh."

"Just as I thought; most likely the whole route has been a good deal exaggerated, just because nobody's ever done it yet. What do you think? shall we try it?"

"I'd try it in a minute, if this money in my belt were my own instead of the *Daily Telegraph's*; but I'll do it later on, or I'll know the reason why."

And, before long, I hope to have a chance of keeping my word.

Later on, we have a bathe in a neighbouring stream—in this abounding region there is always a stream within reach—followed by a fresh brew of tea; and by nine o'clock we are on our way once more, through a half-seen chaos of dark ridges and shadowy thickets, with the hoarse rush of an unseen river coming up to us ever and anon through the darkness.

“ No sleeping, mind—or off we roll, as sure as a gun ! ”

“ We'll see about that when the time comes—I'm not a bit sleepy yet.”

But as midnight draws on, we find it, despite all our valorous resolutions, very hard to keep awake. Once I fairly doze off, and, losing my balance, am only saved by my companion's strong hand from an ugly fall ; while my Tartar, contriving in some wonderful way to sit on two square inches of plank and hold on to nothing, is sleeping as if at the Opera. In a state of semi-consciousness, we go jolting and creaking along, till, between one and two in the morning, we become dimly aware of lights springing up on either side of us, and long, low, black masses looming through the darkness ; while, ever and anon, a stronger gleam flashes upon little hovels of dried mud, and thick bosquets of dark undergrowth, and carts drawn up in snug corners, and black tunnel-like lanes branching off into unknown space.

“ By Jove ! ” cries my comrade, starting erect, “ it strikes me we've arrived somewhere ! ”

“ I'm very much of the same opinion ; and what's more, I shouldn't wonder if that somewhere should turn out to be Tchinaz ! ”

Tchinaz it is, sure enough ; and, ten minutes later, we jolt into the yard of the post-house, pull up beside a big creaking platform of crazy planking (the distinguishing feature of a post-house “ exterior ” in these parts) and drag into a dingy little room, very much like

a lock-up, our entire stock of baggage—one's only chance of preserving property in the East being to imitate the Colorado men, who "took in their stone-fences over-night." By the light of one spectral candle, which confuses us infinitely more than utter darkness, we contrive to grope out our provisions—swallow three or four junks of bread and melon, as if we had eaten nothing for a week—and then, throwing our plaids on the floor, and ourselves upon them, are asleep almost before we can say Good-night.

"Time to get up!"

"Hang it all, why did you wake me? I was dreaming that I'd got across to Peshawur, and they were just going to give me some iced claret-cup!"

"Have some tea to make up for it, then. It's getting on for six, and the old fellow ought to be up by this time; I'll just go and order a samovar."

Breakfast over, we stroll out to look about us, leaving orders to Mourad to follow us with the cart and baggage down to the ferry; for this is the famous "crossing" of the Syr-Daria, and, according to Tashkent authorities, its highest navigable point. The great river lies before us in all the freshness, and brightness, and beauty, of a clear autumn morning. On the farther side, beyond the forest of reeds fringing the shore, stretches the grey, lifeless, eternal desolation of the "hungry steppe;" on the nearer bank, just above where we stand, are gaunt walls rising amid heaps of ruins, and masses of crumbling earth, and

roofless hovels gaping shell-like, and all the dismal relics of what was once Tchinzaz.

“Multiply this by a thousand, and you have just what I saw at Novaya Kouldja,” says Mr Dilke, as we halt to look around us. “It’s the most utter smash you can imagine, ever since the Dungans made their sweep. If Russia’s going to patch all this together again, she’ll have enough to do.”

But, true to Asiatic instincts, there still survives amid the universal ruin a tiny bazaar (composed of about a dozen little shanties of reed and sapling) in which we buy two of the finest melons I ever saw for about twopence each, and add them to our stores in the cart, which comes jolting up at this moment, with Mourad perched on it in triumph. At the same moment, three or four long, wiry, cut-throat looking fellows, with the piercing black eyes of the genuine Turkoman, jump up out of a huge clumsy barge that is lying alongside the bank, and run to assist in unyoking our horses. The cart is dragged on board after them, and we swing slowly out into the stream.

Of all our Asiatic panoramas, this is perhaps the most characteristic. The huge ungainly raft, such as those on which the spearmen of Genghis and Octai crossed this same river six hundred years ago; the gaunt, wild-eyed, half-naked boatmen, unchanged in every feature since the days of Timour, bending to their oars, with the toughened sinews starting like cords under their brown, leathery skin; the great waste of dull grey water, flanked by the ruined village

embowered in clustering leaves, and the endless prairie melting into the hot southern sky. For a moment, the Present is utterly swallowed up in the Past. The very earth seems still shaking with the march of ancient conquerors; and one would hardly wonder to see Alexander's Macedonians coming with steady tramp across the boundless level, or low-browed Attila, with the light of a grim gladness in his deep-set eyes, waving on five hundred thousand horsemen with the sweep of his enchanted sabre.

But the bump of our raft against the bank scatters my day-dreams; and, five minutes later, we are fairly on our way into the "hungry steppe."

NOTE.—These ferries are at present the only means of communication between the two banks of the Syr-Daria, the river possessing only one bridge—that at Fort Narinsk on the Thian-Shan, a little way from its source. I found a second bridge, however, well towards completion at Khodjent, when I passed through the town on the 4th September, on my way back from Samarcand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE "HUNGRY STEPPE."

OUR first plunge is into a forest of reeds, which rise above our heads as we sit in the cart—a fine cover for the big game, and (if local tradition speak truly) not altogether without them.

"This is one of their great places for tigers, now I think of it," remark I, "and the jungle around Fort Perovski is another; but as I didn't see any there, I don't expect to see any here either!"

"There's no knowing," says my companion oracularly, "it's just when you're not expecting them that they *do* come. I once came upon one rather suddenly on the Ili, and at pretty close quarters, too."

"And did he show fight?"

"No, he didn't; and, on the whole, I was just as well pleased, seeing I had nothing with me but a revolver. Well, it's one comfort, that no tiger of any discrimination would think us worth eating as we are now."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, either, though I *do* remember once seeing a vulture flop down on a starved camel, and then dart off again with a look of unmistakable disgust, as much as to say, 'Is *this* the sort of thing to put before a gentleman?' Still, there's no knowing

what a beast of prey may or may not do, when he gives his mind to it. You remember that Cossack story of the wicked stârosta ('village bailiff') who was returning home with a great sum of ill-gotten money, when the wolves fell upon him, and they devoured the horses, and the driver, and the money, and himself, and then they tore the sledge to pieces, and gobbled *them* up too; and then the wolves began fighting among themselves, and devoured each other—and the last one swallowed himself!"

"And very wise of him, too, for you'll hardly get any one else to swallow all that!"

"Very likely not. Ai-dah, yemshtchik!" (go along, driver).

The reeds are soon left behind, and now the famous "Golodnaya Steppe" opens before us in all its desolation. This dismal region—which well merits its name of "hungry"—is in reality the eastermost angle of the Kizil-Koum Desert, thrusting itself between the fertile basin of the Syr-Daria to the north, and that of the Zer-Affshan to the south. And certainly it does not disgrace its origin. I almost imagine myself back in the deserts of the Aral Sea, amid this blinding dust, and devouring heat, and grey interminable sand, and overwhelming stillness, beneath which our cheery talk first flags, and then ceases altogether, as though it were a kind of sacrilege to intrude any sound upon a region so utterly given over to silence.

Yet even the "hungry steppe" has memories of its

own—memories which neither painter nor historian would willingly suffer to die. On this very plain, not many miles east of our present route, lies the famous battlefield of Irdjar—the Poitiers of Central Asia—where, only a few years ago, eighty thousand Sarts were put to flight by seven thousand Russians, and the then Commander-in-Chief received the credit of a victory which was wholly due to his two subordinates. Along this very track which we are now following, General Kaufmann's "Tashkent column" marched southward to Djizak last spring, over the first stage of their long struggle across the desert to Khiva. And, half way across the desert, we come suddenly upon a souvenir more striking than either.

It is just mid-day, and earth and sky are all one great furnace of heat, when suddenly a dark spot defines itself against the hot brassy yellow of the desert, and, growing larger as we approach, shapes itself, little by little, into the pillared arches and shadowy depths of a magnificent Asiatic sepulchre—one of those strange relics which start up ever and anon in the loneliest wastes of the Far East, as if the Past, retreating before the advance of the Present, had fled into these solitudes to preserve unimpaired the memory of what the men of that age could do. This is the far-famed "Murzarabat," the most perfect specimen of its kind which I have ever seen, to which even the splendid photograph of it which I bought at Tashkent does scanty justice; but horses are now stabled in its shadowy cloisters, and a group of Cossacks are laughing boisterously around their little

tea-urn, in its cool, crypt-like interior. Mr Dilke and I produce our bread and water-melon, and hasten to join the party ; but we have barely sat down, when both ourselves and our provisions are one black, buzzing swarm of flies from top to toe.

“ I wonder what on earth these brutes find to live upon,” says my companion meditatively. “ There can't be much pasture for them hereabouts, surely ! ”

“ They're probably a nomadic tribe, like their friends the natives,” answer I. “ Depend upon it, whenever they come to a station and find nothing to eat, they just settle upon the next traveller who passes, and get taken on another stage, carriage free.”

And so, hour after hour, the long, burning, monotonous day creeps slowly on. The very post-houses are established amid the ruins of fortresses, whose very name is forgotten ; and the sight of living creatures in this great sepulchre of nature comes upon one with a kind of shock. Towards afternoon, however, the leaden sameness of the journey is broken by one incident well worth chronicling. Just as we are leaving one of the stations, a little dog, which happens to be an especial pet of our new driver, seeing his friend thus suddenly snatched away from him into the desert, actually sets off in pursuit, and follows us for nearly two miles with unflinching pluck, despite the deep sand and overpowering heat. The driver at length pulls up for a moment, and, greeting him with a kind word or two, points back to the station, and orders him home. The little creature

looks wistfully up in his friend's face for a moment, and then apparently re-assured, wags his tail and sets off home again as swiftly as he came.

The sun is already setting, when the grey walls of Djizak rise before us like a brooding mist, and the purple ridges of the Sanzar-Tau begin to marshal themselves along the sky. And here again, as at Tchinzaz (though on a much larger scale) we are struck with the aspect of utter ruin and desolation which seems to haunt this whole region like an evil spirit. Street after street of tumble-down mud houses, gapped, roofless, falling to pieces, stretches on every side under the gathering dimness of the twilight ; while, ghostlier than all, the huge crumbling wall of the citadel looks mournfully down at us through the deepening gloom, like the grave of the old Tartar dominion.

"It's a pity some one can't photograph this, and exhibit it in England," remarks Mr Dilke ; "it would save the next traveller in these parts an immense deal of repetition. All these towns are exactly alike, and all the people in them are exactly alike too. You should just see some of the places I came across on the Chinese frontier—great lumping clay walls thirty miles round, with corn fields, and plantations, and all sorts of things inside. Whenever there's a war out there, the people just shut themselves up in these places, and begin raising corn, and hold out as long as it lasts. Then the first year there's a bad harvest, they run short, and have to surrender."

Mingling with the last word comes a tremendous

crash ; the cart goes over on one side ; I ram my head with surgical accuracy into the pit of my companion's stomach, and Mourad and the driver come to the ground in a kind of composite ball, while the horses, kicking and plunging like fiends incarnate, raise a cloud of dust which, for the moment, blots out everything.

“What's the matter, Mourad ?”

“Only a wheel off, master.”

“Oh, is that all? All right.”

The damage is quickly repaired by a “make-shift,” sufficient to carry us as far as the big courtyard, or rather paddock, in which stands our post-house. And here, before entering upon our night journey through the hills, we refresh ourselves as usual with an unlimited “brew” of tea, sitting under the trees upon a long wooden divan which the postmaster has obligingly placed there.

“Fancy a commons of bread and butter on each side of the table,” suggest I ; “and a wine going on next door, and this the night before an exam.”

“So it is, I expect, for we shall have to show up at the bureau of police when we get to Samarcand tomorrow, to say nothing of Abrâmoff afterwards. However, with the wonderful way in which you, and I, and the two Yankees have got blurred up together in the official mind, any attempt to identify us will be like tracing a cuttle fish !”

“Rather—especially as the general belief is that I never got into Central Asia at all, but was sent back from Tiflis. In fact, with their uncertainty as to whether

it was I who went through the Caucasus to Persia, or the American Secretary who rode across the desert to meet Kaufmann, or Lord Granville who was imprisoned at Kazalinsk, or you who wrote for the *Daily News* from Tiflis, it's my opinion that the Governor and his staff will all go mad as soon as they have an hour to spare."

"Or despair of keeping the country closed any longer, and throw it open to the world. After all, we may be said to represent England as far as the two 'Varsities go—you for Oxford, and I for Cambridge."

"At all events, we are probably the first 'Varsity men who have got here."

"I suppose so—except, indeed, H——, the man I mentioned the other day at Tashkent."

"By-the-by, what *was* the story about him? He did get as far as Tashkent, didn't he?"

"Indeed he did,—went from Orenburg with an officer (just the way *you* wanted to do), so that he didn't need to show his passport till he got to Tashkent; but at Tashkent Kaufmann spotted him, and told him he must go back at once. So then H—— just took a drosky, and drove round the town as hard as he could tear, to see as much of it as possible; and when he got back he found his travelling-pass waiting for him, and the cart at the door."

"And when did all this happen?"

"The year before last, if I recollect right."

"Well, I have the pull of him in one way, seeing I've got to Samarcand; but, on the other hand, he was

spared my seven weeks' imprisonment, which was not exactly the pleasantest thing in the world."

"And you've got little enough thanks for it, either, if all I hear be true."

"Bah! what of that? When I go back and tell my own story fairly, I'll answer for it they'll believe me. A man who has been pilloried in his absence can always count upon a fair hearing in England, if he only chooses to ask for it. I shall just write the whole story exactly as it happened, and then let them judge for themselves."

"Taking as a motto, 'Such is the lot of heroes upon earth.'"

"No, I've got a better one than that: 'I awoke one morning, and found myself *infamous!*'"

"Hear, hear!"

The moon is just rising behind the slopes of the Sanzar-Tau as we start again, over a road which seems to be the chosen playground of a whole school of young rivers, each with its own deep, narrow bed, and its own outlying sheet of gravel. Jolting, crunching, bumping, splashing, on we go—the low hills on either side rolling up, as we advance, to a height which, compared with the dead level over which we have been creeping all day, appears gigantic—till at length they culminate in the famous gorge which has been so aptly named "The Gate of Tamerlane" (Tamerlânoviya Vorotá).

It is the misfortune of this splendid pass, that no photographer has yet succeeded in giving both sides of

it at once. The current illustrations do full justice to the grandeur of the right or left-hand cliff, but the general effect is wholly lost in them. As we now see it, however, under the glory of the full moon, with all its grand details visible at once, it forms a matchless picture. Vast, solid, massive, as the wall of a fortress, the great cliffs tower up on either side, like the twin giants who guarded the Valley of the Shadow of Death; and between them the road runs deep and narrow, and the streams which cross it sparkle like silver in the moonlight, and over all broods a grand, solemn silence, like the hush that fills the interior of some great cathedral.

From Djizak right onward to Samarcand, we are in the region of wood and water once more; and the night-panorama (could we but stay awake to look at it) is one of perpetual vegetation, well watered and cultivated. But the Gate of Tamerlane is barely past, when we both fall into a sound sleep, from which we are only roused at length by a tremendous hallooing, to find ourselves lying "promiscuous," and Mourad's dark face peering down at us by the light of a lantern.

"What's the matter now?"

"A wheel broken again."

"And what do you mean by disturbing us for a trifle like that, you fool? Fix it up again, and go on as soon as it's ready."

The abashed Tartar obeys in silence, and we go to sleep again almost before his back is turned—so soundly, indeed, as to be wholly unconscious of another break-

down (the third within twelve hours) which occurs a few miles farther on. It is true that we can only sleep from stage to stage, for at every station we must up and out, to show our passes and make our arrangements. But, as I have already said, it is wonderful how soon one gets used to this kind of work ; and when, about six in the morning, we reach the last station before Samarcand, we are still as fresh and unspoiled as if we had slept eight hours at a stretch, in the snugest room of an English country-house.

“Another month or two of this, and we should make first-rate couriers,” remarks my companion approvingly, as we start again. “I used to think that kind of work impossible ; but it seems easy enough now. You remember that fellow who rode to Moscow with despatches at such a pace that his sabre clattered against the mile-posts like a stick drawn along a railing.”

“He must have been a brother of the New York gig-driver, whose shadow came up five minutes later to ask which way he had gone. I say, isn't that rice growing yonder?”

“So it is, by Jove—just the sort of thing I used to see on the Ili. The soil looks rich enough, anyhow.”

“And here come a lot of carts with stones to mend the road ; and there are hedgerows along either side. Looks like England, doesn't it?”

“Well, this last mile would just do for a bit out of the Midland Counties, if it weren't for the rice. I dare say Kingsley's right—the other end of Nowhere is a good deal like this end of Somewhere, after all.”

The soft, wet, low-lying fields, fenced in by their tall hedgerows, cling to our road for several miles ; and we are nearly half-way through the final stage when they suddenly break off, and we come out upon a wide, bare, gravelly plain—once covered, no doubt, by the waters of the Zer-Affshan. A shining streak far away in front marks the present course of the river, running fiercely and turbidly as ever in its narrowed channel ; while beyond it, surging up against the clear morning sky in one great wave of green and purple, looms the ridge of Tchepan-Ata, eight miles from Samarcand, upon which the Bokhariotes made their last stand in 1868 for the defence of their Holy City.

As I look up at it, the whole scene comes before me again. Far and wide, the broad sunny slope is alive with the gay dresses and glittering arms of the heathen host, entrenched behind the countless guns that peer hungrily down into the valley below, waiting to devour the little handful of men gathered upon the opposite bank of the river. The Zer-Affshan, swollen into full flood, rushes roaring along the foot of the ridge, grinding the great stones together with a rumble like the rolling of war-chariots ; and beyond it lie the steep hillside and the embattled host, five times the number of their assailants. There are no braver men than the Russians ; but how can any man, however brave, surmount a task like this ?

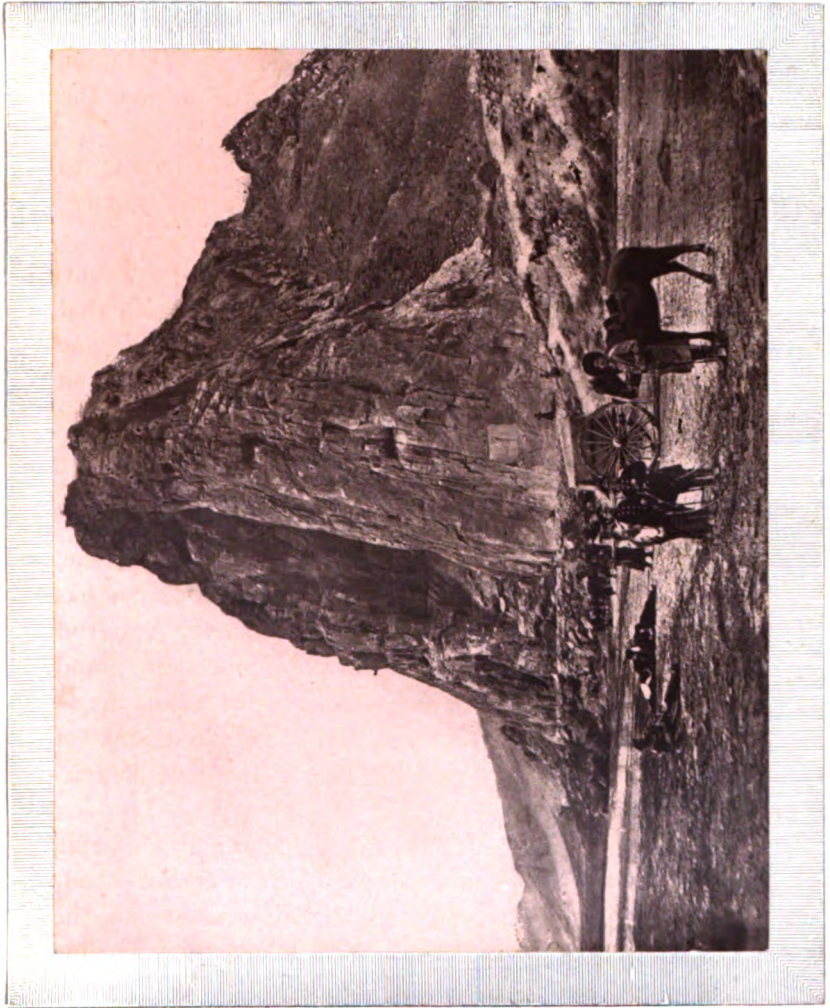
Then steps forward a solitary figure—the man chosen to lead the assault—and looks round upon his

men with a look of quiet confidence, as one who knows what they can do. In that dead hush of expectation, his calm, stern voice falls upon the still air like the measured beat of a drum :—

“Lads, our father the General has ordered us to storm those heights, *and therefore it must be possible.* Forward !”

Like one man, they dash into the boiling current, pressing hard together to stem the mighty rush that bends every man like a reed. And then, in one moment, the slope above them breaks into fire, and thunder, and billowy smoke ; and down comes the hail of shot, lashing the water into foam on every side. Shoulder to shoulder, like brothers, with their muskets held high overhead to keep the charge dry, the brave fellows struggle blindly on—death in front of them, death all around—knowing only that their leader has given them work to do, and that *done it must be.* And here, at last, thank God, is the opposite shore ; and before us, as the blinding smoke whirls aside for a moment, are not merely senseless cannon, but ranks of living men—men who can be hurt and killed like ourselves. Forward all !

But it is not mere pith of arm, or weight of metal, that turns the scale of a pitched field ; it is the ascendancy of the stronger heart over the weaker. To the nervous, impressible Asiatic, there is something terrible and unearthly in the deadly composure of this handful of men, coming grimly on, one against five, as if certain of victory. Already the glittering line begins to waver



GATES OF TAMERLANE.

Capt. xvii.

—it trembles, it surges back—and then parts asunder like a broken wave, and melts into a confused whirl of flight. Up through the hot, sulphurous air rises the native "Hurrah" of the Russian, as the charging column bursts into the undefended batteries; while the last remnants of the beaten host ebb sullenly away over the hill-top, and flow downward toward lost Samarcand.

"We must get out here, David Stepanovitch!"

The shrill call sweeps away my visions, and I look up to find myself in front of a tiny hut—alone amid the wilderness of gravel—beside which three or four wild-looking men are grouped around a huge native cart (the real traditional *arba*) distinguished by its immense breadth of beam and gigantic wheels, seven good feet in diameter, and possibly (like Harold Hardrada) "a few inches more."

Mourad hastily explains that to ford the Zer-Affshan in our little post cart will be certain destruction to our baggage, and that we had better migrate to the *arba*—a vehicle which, light, strong, and (thanks to its breadth) almost impossible to overturn, seems made for a Turkestan road as the camel is for the desert. The transfer is soon effected, but it takes some time to secure our packages against the tremendous shaking which awaits them; and our careful henchman goes over his whole work three times before he can persuade himself to let it go. But the reckless Bokhariotes, who care little if we and all our belongings go to the bottom, provided

they get their money, cut him short by leaping on to the front of the huge tray, and heading right down upon the river.

We make five or six lesser crossings before coming to the real one, the Zer-Affshan (like Central Asian rivers generally) being given to wasting its strength in minor channels; but even these run with a force and swiftness which show us what we have to expect. At length, after a comparatively long interval of bare gravel, the two Bokhariotes suddenly plant themselves back to back, with their feet against the sides of the cart; the arba halts for a moment, as if to gather strength for its final leap, and then rushes into the stream.

And now comes the tug of war. The wheels have barely made three turns in the water, when the huge machine trembles under a shock like the collision of a train; and, to our bewildered eyes, the current appears to be standing still, and we ourselves to be flying backward with the speed of an express. Deeper and deeper grows the water, stronger and stronger presses the current. Already the little post-cart (which follows in our wake) is all but submerged; and the water is battering against the bottom of the arba, and splashing over our feet as we sit. More than once the horses stop short, and plant their feet firmly, to save themselves from being swept down; and the roar of the chafing pebbles comes up to us like the tramp of a charging squadron. In the midst of the din and hurly-burly, the lashing water, and the blinding spray, a terrible thought suddenly occurs to me.

"By Jove! all my sugar's in the bottom of my chest! It'll be all melted, to a certainty!"

"Shouldn't wonder," remarks my friend, with that air of fortitude with which men are wont to bear the misfortunes of other people. "However, you can get some more at Samarcand; and, after all, a trunk lined with sugar will be worth exhibiting in England, if you ever get there."

For the next few moments, it is "touch and go" with us; but, even among Asiatics, nothing can be spun out for ever. Little by little, the water grows shallower, the ground firmer, the strain less and less violent, till at length we come out upon dry land once more, decant the contents of the arba back again into the cart, reward our pilots at the rate of sixpence a-piece—and are off again.

Just behind the Tchepan-Ata hills, as we know, Samarcand must lie; but as yet there is no sign of its presence. The steep, sandy path that winds round the elbow of the ridge is lonely as the heart of an American forest; and only at long intervals does the solitary figure of a turbaned "believer," trudging behind his laden donkey, break the sameness of the hot, dusty, never-ending climb.

Even in these few stragglers, however, the remarkable change of facial type which has already begun to strike us, displays itself more markedly than ever. We are now well within the limits of what was once Bokhara, till General Kaufmann's bayonets pricked out the fron-

tier anew in 1868; and the broad, heavy, lumpish features of the Sart population of Tashkent are replaced by the long oval face, handsome aquiline profile, and sombre dignity of the Bokhariote.

"Is this confounded road never going to end?" growls my comrade, as we crown the second ridge, with no view beyond save a third and considerably higher one. "We might be following the Flying Dutchman, instead of Samarcand! It's as bad as that drunk fellow in the story, who slipped his wooden leg into the hole of a turn-cock, and walked round and round all night, thinking he was going home!"

But his complaints are paralysed in their very utterance. For now our driver, putting his horses to their speed, rushes at full gallop down the incline and up the further slope, from the crown of which we burst upon a scene that no words can describe.

From the point where we stand to the distant hills along the horizon, extends a vast basin many miles in breadth, filled to the brim with green, glossy vegetation, through which, every here and there, runs the glittering thread of a tiny river. To right and left, the sunny slopes of the Tchepan-Ata curve round as if framing the picture. Far away along the southern sky, the great yellow masses of the Shekhri-Sebzian hills stand out in the burning sunshine, like a wall of polished brass, while in the centre, high above the sea of foliage, rise grey ramparts, and mighty domes, and vast towers bright with many-coloured mosaic, and all the barbaric splendour of ancient Samarcand.



"We've done it for once," says my companion, drawing a long breath, "if we never do it again."

"It is well worth the trouble," answer I.

And Mourad, secure at last of meeting his long-absent brother, forgets his habitual stoicism, and gives a boisterous hurrah.

On we go at full speed (for it is all down hill now) over a narrow, shelving road, with an overhanging ridge on one side, and a little stream, half hidden by trees, on the other. Crunch goes one wheel against a projecting bank—thump goes the other into an overladen donkey—while our off horse makes hash of a basket of water-melons, and very nearly of the owner likewise. But who cares for accidents now? Foot-passengers begin to swarm along the road—houses look down from the top of the bank, or peer up at us through the trees below. The road broadens, the houses thicken on either hand, and suddenly we are in the midst of a roaring street, filled with the buzz, and swarm, and strangely mingled filth and finery, of an Asiatic bazaar. The street ends in a vast open space, beyond which looms the huge, grey, battered wall of the famous citadel; and we look around us, and feel that we are really in Samarcand at last.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE "EARTHLY PARADISE."*

"VERY sorry, gentlemen—but what's to be done? You see, there's only one room for travellers, and it's taken. Perhaps you could make yourselves comfortable in this room for to-day—the other people won't be here long."

"This room," as the worthy postmaster poetically calls it, is a corner just behind the doorway, in which there is barely space enough to stow ourselves and baggage, so as to avoid being trodden upon by every one who comes in. We pile the "traps" into a sort of mound, and, seating ourselves upon it, look blankly at each other. Are we to remain sitting night and day upon our luggage, like a hen hatching eggs, till Mourad (who has gone to hunt up his brother), shall be able to find us quarters? and supposing he cannot find them, what then?

"Well," remark I at length, grasping in my bewilderment at the one idea which, in these parts, you can never go wrong in suggesting, "let's have some tea, anyhow. Hollo there! quick with the samovar!"

The samovar is soon ready, and by the time we have washed down the last of our bread and water-melon,

* The name given to Samarcand by the Persian poets.

back comes Mourad, triumphant at having "found his long-lost brother." We leave him in charge of the baggage, and go off to report ourselves to the police; after which, the next thing is to charter a drosky (for wheeled vehicles have penetrated even here, in the train of Russian conquest), and drive across the town to leave a card upon General Abrâmoff.

Away we go—at first over a long stretch of bare, dusty road; then in through the city gate (our post-house being quite in the suburbs), and under the huge wall of the citadel, thirty-six feet high, in which the great struggle of 1868 has left many a grisly scar; then on across the vast empty space that encircles it, ploughing our way through a clamorous throng of turbaned costermongers—till at length we plunge into an endless cobweb of low, round-shouldered, clay houses, between which there is at times barely room for us to pass.

It must be owned that, apart from its matchless situation and glorious mosques, the actual town of Samarcand is anything but ornamental. A walk or drive through it gives you the exact impression (unromantic as it may sound), of a countless number of disused brick-kilns; and it certainly requires all the profusion of colouring thrown into the picture by the gay dresses of the native population, to relieve the dull, muddy, unchanging greyness of the houses.

To-day, however, the grand old city looks its best. It is a bright, clear morning—tolerably cool for the season and latitude—and every one is abroad. The streets are one whirl of blue robes and crimson girdles, yellow

scarfs, and embroidered caftans, long veils, and white turbans, and black sheepskin caps; while ever and anon a line of white-frocked soldiers come by with measured tramp, or a mounted officer, with his silver buttons glittering in the sun, dashes past amid a whirling cloud of dust—the pavement of Samarcand being a thing of the remote future.

Fallen as it is from its former high estate, the city of Timour still ranks high among the commercial centres of the East. Merchants come to it from distant countries, and among the motley throng in its marketplace you may notice at times the slim, graceful, high-bred Arab, or the pliant limbs and smooth obsequious face of the Bengalee. European goods of every kind are largely imported, and skins, knives, carpets, silks, embroidered saddles, &c., exported in vast quantities. The city itself is surrounded by a massive wall, containing six fine gateways, and enclosing an enormous space of ground. With respect to the population, I am inclined to regard the official estimate of thirty thousand inhabitants, made at the time of its capture in 1868, as an under-statement; but it is always difficult to ascertain the population of an Asiatic city (especially one so fluctuating as Samarcand), with any accuracy.

And now we leave the streets behind, and turn into a deep, sandy, moat-like road, shut in by those high, blank walls of baked clay, which, with the green boughs that cluster above them, form the leading feature in the environs of these "garden-cities." Dropping my

card at the General's gate, I make all speed back to the cab-stand in front of the citadel, where, dismissing my drosky, I start on foot, like another Haroun Alraschid, in quest of adventures.

Nor have I long to wait, in this wonder-abounding region, for something worth looking at. After wandering for some time in a labyrinth of dirty lanes (the Minotaur being represented by a solitary camel, which makes a vicious bite at me as I pass), I come out suddenly into the "Great Square of Three Mosques"—an entirely new scene to me, and undoubtedly the most splendid tableau which even Samarcand can display. But to describe the panorama, with its overwhelming profusion of gay colours, and mingled uproar, and ever-moving life, is simply impossible. The best way to imagine it is to take a paved court about the size of Portman Square—wall it in on three sides with St Paul's, Westminster Abbey, and the front of Christchurch, painting all three with every colour of the rainbow—cram into this space the entire stock in trade of Covent Garden—people it with the Shah's suite, the Japanese embassy, and the last caravan from Mecca—fill in the picture with a rich southern sky, and a temperature of 93° in the shade—and the product shall be a faint outline of the thing required.

I seat myself under the grand archway of the Tiliah-Kari Mosque, and endeavour to analyse the enormous mass of bustle and uproar which eddies around me like a sea. On one side, a sallow, vicious-looking boy in a striped tunic is ranting out passages from the Koran,

grimacing frightfully all the time; on the other, in the midst of an eager circle, two brawny fellows in blue caftans are going through a kind of theatrical performance, the dialogue of which must be specially comic, judging from the shouts of laughter which it excites. Just in front of me, a couple of Sarts are chaffing over a bunch of splendid grapes, which would be cheap at a shilling in Covent Garden, but here go for about a farthing. Close beside them, a sly-looking greybeard in a huge green turban is exchanging some Russian silver for a handful of those quaint little knobs of battered brass, covered with crabbed Eastern characters, which figure in every Asiatic town from Khiva to Kokan; * while, a little further on, two or three Cossack soldiers, with black hair cropped close round their bold sunburned faces, are bandying some rough, good-humoured "chaff" with a big, jolly-looking native merchant, just arrived from Bokhara.

But the day is wearing on, and I must think of returning. I make a hasty meal of hot' dumplings (an exact fac-simile of that described in Chapter xxv.), and start homeward by a circuitous route, making a long detour along the outer wall, and getting entangled midway among a flock of "fat-tailed sheep," whose huge square lappets hang down like those of a broad-skirted coat. On reaching the post-house, I find Mr Dilke talking with a Russian officer, who introduces himself as Lieutenant M——, and delivers an invitation

* Half-a-dozen of these coins (very fair average specimens) still remain with me.

to dinner for the following evening, on the part of General Abrámoff.

"It can't be very comfortable for you to be stuck in a corner like this," pursues the hospitable Lieutenant ; "you had better just shift over to my quarters, which are close by. There's only one man there beside myself, so there'll be plenty of room for you both. I'll just go and get all ready for you, and then take you over with me."

No sooner said than done. Half-an-hour later, we are snugly ensconced in a long, low, deliciously cool room, in the angle of a little one-storeyed house on the skirts of the suburb. A waxed floor, with a piece of carpeting in the middle, four or five good-sized windows, tables and chairs in abundance, a sofa a-piece to sleep on, and a cook shop within easy reach. What more can traveller's heart desire? After our experience of Russian post-houses and Kirghiz tents, this new "interior" is absolute luxury.

And even more luxurious do we feel on the following evening, as we enter the General's spacious garden, shaded with clustering trees, and with a dainty little summer-house in the centre, open on both sides, and serving alike as a cabinet and a reception room. Dinner is served in a similar pavilion a little further on, and a first-rate dinner it is. A well-spread table in the shade, with the fresh evening breeze flitting around it ; a *menu* that would not disgrace the best hotel in Vienna, filled with dishes to which we have long been strangers ; half-a-dozen officers, brimful of good stories

and campaigning anecdotes ; and at the head of the board, the short, square, muscular figure and florid face (surmounted by the black skull-cap that masks the wound received at Kitab) * of General Abrâmoff himself, one of the pleasantest hosts and most thorough soldiers whom it has been my good fortune to meet. In a word, we seem like old friends welcomed to some hospitable country-house near Moscow, instead of unlicensed intruders into one of the most barbarous regions in the world.

Seldom have I spent a more enjoyable evening. Among these thorough-going *viveurs*, the conversation never flags for a moment. Anecdotes of former campaigns, recollections of exploring trips in Kokan and Bokhara, jokes upon the Khiva Expedition, and speculations as to its probable result, follow each other in unbroken succession. Our healths are drunk with all possible heartiness ; and when we at length rise to depart, the brave old General's hand-shake is as cordial as if the possibility of his having to send us out of the country to-morrow, under an armed escort, were a thing wholly undreamed of.

And so, for two or three days, our life in Samarcand goes pleasantly enough. We explore the city from one end to the other ; we make the circuit of its great wall, and lose ourselves in the maze of little gardens that cluster at its base. We experiment upon Bokhariote cookery, and revel in unlimited fruit. We go to dine at the

* See Chapter i.

"camp" outside the town with Colonel T—— (to whom I owe the startling theory respecting the Oxus which closes Chapter xxii.), and survey in their cantonments under the walls of the only mosque which I have not visited, a good portion of the "seven thousand bayonets" which are one day to be levelled at Herat or Kashgar.

On the third day of our sojourn we endeavour to revive our English athletics by a forced march over the eight miles of steep, crumbling ridges which lie between us and the summit of the Tchepan-Ata, being rewarded with a magnificent view of the Samarcand valley on one side, and the plain of the Zer-Affshan on the other, overspread as with a silver net by the countless channels of the river. On our way back (but little cooled by a bath in one of the innumerable streams, and still looking eagerly out for refreshment), we espy an old Bokhariote coiled up on his little carpet by the roadside, almost hidden from sight behind a huge basket of grapes.

"This looks like what we want," remark I, crossing the road, and squatting myself on the carpet. "How much do you think there is there?—ten pounds?"

"There-abouts," answers my comrade, poising the basket.

"That's just a fair three pennyworth, then ; we'll give him ten kopecks to let us eat as many as we can."

The old gentleman assents at once, and, pocketing his money, goes to sleep again with a philosophic indifference as to the result. When he wakes an hour later, the basket is *empty*, and his two customers are walking quietly off as if nothing had happened.

“There’s no such thing as cholera,” says my companion, with the air of a philosopher who has just attained the solution of a great natural problem; “if such a thing had existed, we should both have died of it long ago. Cholera is a myth;* and the good people in England ought to be grateful to me for the discovery.”

In fact, all recent travellers in Central Asia bear testimony to the wonderful healthiness of the climate, and the great amount of fruit which can be consumed with impunity. Many of the poorer natives live entirely on fruit and wheaten cakes; but the diseases prevalent among them arise, not from this cause, but from their own filthy habits, and the extreme dampness of their clay houses during the wet season.

* The Samarcandians will hardly endorse this theory after the terrific epidemic of 1872, which almost depopulated the city.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GRAVE OF TIMOUR.

"Now, Mr Ker, here's a day's sight-seeing for you at last," says Lieutenant M——, entering the room where myself and my comrade are at our usual occupation of overeating ourselves with grapes and watermelon; "and if you have no objection, we'll begin with the grave of Timour."

"What? is Timour down here, then?" ask I; "the last time I heard of him, he was up at Otritah, on the road from the Syr-Daria to the Chinese frontier. Perhaps that may have been the tomb he had when he was a boy, like the skull of Oliver Cromwell."

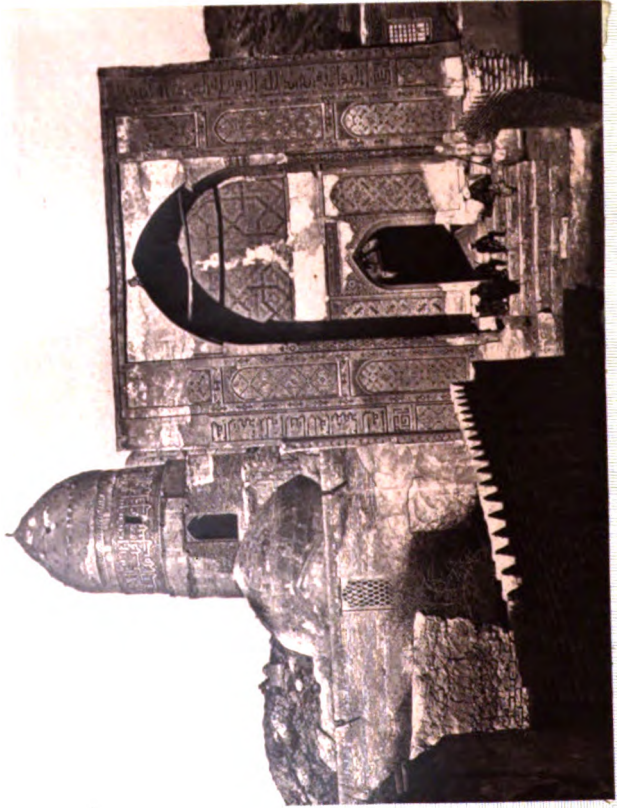
"Well, he *was* there, but he's been transplanted, like Napoleon and one or two other great men. After all, where would you have him buried but in his own capital, the Holy Place of Central Asia?"

"The 'Earthly Paradise,' where grapes are a farthing per pound, and you can't throw out your arm without hitting a camel or a pilgrim. Well, I shall be glad to see him, for he was always a hero of mine, though I suspect we have no one else to thank for the present prostration of Central Asia. So, if you're ready, let us start."

And away we go accordingly—the Lieutenant in all the glory of his silver buttons and spotless white uniform—my comrade, like a true John Bull, in black coat and well-starched collar—and I in my *best* suit (*i.e.*, that which still shows some symptoms of holding together, and the colour of which may yet be guessed by looking closely under the buttons). Our vehicle is a nondescript affair, consisting entirely of one long narrow seat, astride of which, we look not unlike the crew of Ulysses spitted by Polyphemus. So far, however, as being seen by the passers-by goes, we might be anything we please. Our career from first to last is one unending sandstorm; for in these parts the dust—bad enough upon the Lower Syr-Daria—is absolutely portentous. Even in the shallowest part, no foot-passenger can hope to ford a street without getting over the ankles, while any attempt at driving or riding instantly produces a simoom which might have scared Mungo Park himself. Under such circumstances, our conversation naturally consists for the most part of coughs, grunts, sneezes, and stifled execrations in English or Russ—the latter being retorted with interest by the luckless foot-passengers whom we blind and smother at every step as we roll along.

And yet, if one could but see it, few panoramas are better worth looking at. Above us, blotting the bright morning sky like a thunder-cloud, looms the huge grey wall of the ancient citadel, still scarred by the breaches which, in 1868, were the scene of a defence as heroic as that of Thermopylæ.* Below, the whole street is like a

* It is now about to be reduced to one-half its present size, in order to render it more easily defensible.



TIMURID PALACE AT SAMARKAND

ripe clover-field with turbans and dresses of every colour—green, blue, red, white, yellow—and with all types, from the tall stately Bokhariote to the heavy, mean-looking Sart. Lumpy Bashkirs, and gaunt, keen-eyed Cossacks ; portly Russian merchants from Moscow, and slim Arab traders from Damascus, elbow each other amid the ever-flowing stream ; brown half-naked children jostle veiled women in long, straight blue dresses, which give them the look of exaggerated slate-pencils ; while ever and anon the tide is parted for a moment by a huge *arba*, with its seven-foot wheels (“like a velocipede run mad,” as my English friend spitefully remarks), or by a long string of camels tied nose and tail together, making the air ring with a hollow cadence of mingled grunting and squeaking, suggestive of a pig shut up in an organ-pipe.

Farther on, around the little reed-thatched booths that cluster beneath the shadow of the huge gateway, appear black-faced hobgoblins, all eyes and teeth, sitting over piles of grapes and water-melons—greasy *pilmendjis* (piemen) scooping up their savoury little cocked-hat-shaped dumplings from the Black Hole of a Bokhariote oven—white-jacketed soldiers chaffering with true Russian gusto over the thick, dusty, hassock-like loaves that heap the surrounding stalls,—and, asleep in the full glare of noon, like true sons of the desert, a few native cabmen (fancy a Samarcand cabby!) with their flat greasy faces literally black with flies and midges.

Through all this chaos we work our way at length to the great market-place—one of those immeasurable

spaces, big enough to manœuvre an army in, only possessed in perfection by Russian and Asiatic cities. Amid that great wilderness of parched dust, the little cabstand, with its swarthy satellites, looks indescribably pigmy; while even the buzzing swarm of chaffers around the booths a little farther on appear (as I once heard a north-country engineer observe in the Red Sea), "as silly as a ha'porth o' treacle in a two-gallon jug." Just opposite the latter concourse, a sign from the Lieutenant brings our driver to a sudden halt.

"We shall have to leave our cab here," explains the former; "for the good people who built this part of the town didn't allow for the institution of wheeled vehicles. Our friend Timour, like many other great men, is rather unapproachable."

We dismount accordingly, and dive into a labyrinth of dingy lanes, so complicated that I inwardly wonder how we are ever to get out again. For a good five minutes do we dodge about like assassins among mud walls and heaps of rubbish, till on a sudden we burst upon a vast paved court, on the farther side of which rises one of those magnificent pointed archways, all ablaze with gorgeous mosaic, characteristic of the holy places of Central Asia.

At the shout of our guide, there issues from behind a projecting corner a tutelary genius well suited to such a place—a venerable old Bokhariote in a long blue robe and white turban, with a grey beard, long and bushy enough to have suited the dervish who helped Prince Bahman up the Hill of Black Stones. Indeed, the

whole man looks as if he might have been here, dressed exactly as at present, ever since the days of Timour himself; and, looking from him to the grand old gateway of which he appears to be the warder, I begin to wonder whether he is about to introduce us to the retreat of the Fairy Pari Banou, or to the enchanted palace in which the Second Calendar had such a jolly time of it. But the old gentleman nips my day-dream in the bud by turning away from the great door, and unlocking a little postern-gate leading into a small dark chamber, the farther entrance of which opens directly upon the mausoleum itself.

It has always been considered beneath the dignity of an Englishman to allow himself to be impressed by any foreign building whatsoever; and certainly, if swaggering through continental cathedrals with one's hat on, and carving one's name on the graves of the slain before Sevastopol, can steel a man against solemn impressions, we may confidently set all such weaknesses at defiance. As for me, I am cosmopolite enough to own without shame that the first sight of the famous sepulchre impressed me in a way hard to describe. There is no lavishness of ornament about it—none of that profuse and gorgeous decoration which dazzles one in the great mosque of Mehemet Ali at Cairo, or that of St Sophia at Constantinople. The carving of the domed roof, the fretted tracery of the recesses, are the sole visible efforts at adornment; all is grandly simple, as befits the last resting-place of the man "whose throne was the saddle, whose palace was the tent." Amid the rich summer

gloom of the shadowy chamber, a small enclosure dimly asserts itself, containing only a few long, low, massive tombstones, that of the Sultan himself being distinguished from the rest merely by its being of black or dark green marble.* At his feet lies his vizier, his children and moollah being buried on either side.

The old man rattles his keys with an air of triumph, and points out each in turn ; but it is evident from his manner that there is still something more to see.

“ These are only monuments, you must remember,” says the Lieutenant, with an air of fatherly experience ; “ the actual graves are in the vault below, and we’ll just go down and have a peep at them, to satisfy our consciences.”

Down we go accordingly, as if descending into an oubliette of the Inquisition, the old man, with his long dark robe and swarthy face, lighted by the glimmer of the candle which he holds above his head, being sufficiently suggestive of the formidable Tomàs de Torquemada. And suddenly, out of the surrounding blackness, there grows up spectrally around us a small, dark, vaulted chamber, such as mediæval painters loved to people with ermined councillors or bearded men in mail.

The chamber contains an exact facsimile of the enclosure above, with the marble tomb and its attendant satellites identical in every point, but all looking

* For the benefit of those who like every book of travel to be a mere table of weights and measures, I may state that the enclosure, as I paced it, measures 27 feet by 18, and that the tombs themselves are 2 feet 6 inches high.

indescribably weird and spectral under the blue gleam of our solitary taper. Our survey, however, is a short one ; for about the whole place there is a chill dreary deadness, a creeping, unutterable desolation, which is not good to endure long. Juvenal himself could have pointed no sterner or deeper moral than this ghostly sarcophagus. There is a grim irony in history which loves to reduce the world's conquerors to their humblest level ; and the "seven feet of land" allotted to fierce old Hardrada have a sad significance still. Hannibal had the burial of an outcast and a slave. Cortez found not even a tomb in the empire which he conquered. Edward the Third died lonely and neglected, robbed in his last moments by those whom he had loved. The bones of Cromwell were disinterred to rattle on a gibbet amid the jeers of all London. Napoleon's world-wide conquests gave him only a barren rock to die upon. And so, too, with the man whom we now look upon. Thirty-five years of conquest, triumphs unparalleled in history, millions of slaughtered enemies, the throne of Central Asia, the homage of half the world, have left him only this narrow cell in an obscure corner of the city which he made the wonder of the earth :—

" A little spot sufficeth him whom not sufficed all,
The small is now as great to him as once the great was small."*

And over his dust, the descendants of the men whom

* A similar epitaph was written upon Alexander the Great :—

" Sufficit hic tumulus cui non suffecerat orbis,
Res brevis huic ampla est, cui fuit ampla brevis."

he conquered march in triumph, trampling out, foot by foot, the last remnants of the race which swept their forefathers from the face of the earth.

To me, at least, there are few pictures in the whole gallery of history more touching than the last scene of the great destroyer. Persecuted and hunted like a wild beast, the indomitable man has triumphed over all opposition, has returned victorious from thirty-five bloody campaigns, and wasted Central Asia with fire and sword, till "a child may carry a purse of gold unharmed from the east to the west." From the shores of the Bosphorus to the peaks of the Himalaya, the name of Timour is a terror to all that breathe ; but all this is not enough. Aged, wounded, broken, lame of one hand and foot, with twenty-seven crowns trampled in the dust beneath him, the terrible guerilla is still untamed and untameable. Yonder, behind the peaks of the Thian-Shan, lies ancient China, with its rich rice-fields still unwasted, and its three hundred millions of population still unmassacred. Forward with the Tartar standards !

But, swift as is his march, the flight of Death is swifter ; the blue hills of the Syr-Daria are still in sight, when the great conqueror falls to rise no more. At the touch of that cold hand, a momentary twinge of repentance flits for the first time across the fierce spirit. Slowly and wearily, the hand that once hewed down men like thistles traces its first and last confession of remorse :—" It may be that Allah is wroth with me for what I have done ; wherefore I would fain have

expiated my sins *by exterminating the idolaters of China.*" What a picture! The mightiest intellect of the age, dimly conscious of something higher, something better, than it has ever known, and seeking a cure for its restless longings after the Unseen only in fresh murder and fresh devastation. Peace be with him. He has learned, long ere this, *what* it was that he sought in vain upon earth; and it may be that He whose mercy is high as the heaven above the earth, has had pity even upon *him*.

CHAPTER XXX.

FALLEN TITANS.

"SO much for the Gour-Emir," says M——, as we emerge again into the sunshine. "Let's look at the programme, and see what we have left."

He produces his written list (which lies before me as I write, sorely tattered and stained, but still legible) and cons it over: "Koktash Stone—that's in the citadel; Mosques of Tilliah-Kari, Shir-Dar, and Ooloog-Begi—those are all in the great square; Mosque of Bibi-Khanam, &c. Well, I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll take the mosques first, one after another, and keep the citadel to the end."

Ten minutes later, we debouch upon the Great Square (described in Chapter xxviii.), and see above us the great masses of the three mosques glowing like rainbows in the splendour of their gorgeous colouring, under a flood of burning sunshine. Following our pilot, we pass through the mighty archway of the Tilliah-Kari, and find ourselves in a *bond fide* "college quad," peopled by the university men of Samarcand.

"They don't learn much," says M——, who has a thoroughly Russian contempt for the native stock, "only scraps of the Koran, and such like trash. You'll

be able to see their way of life, however ; but though it's certainly a curious sight, I can't call it very attractive."

And well may he say so. Imagine a man unlocking a disused cellar, and surprising there a gang of ambushed thieves, and you have an idea of the sight which presents itself in every cell that we enter. Filth, darkness, discomfort, beyond all description ; dens which, if everything were put to its right use, should belong to a college of wolves, presided over by a common room of gorillas. And the tenants are worthy of their abode. One or two among the countless faces show some vestiges of intellect and manliness, but the majority are of a low, grovelling, bestial type, sufficient of itself to confirm the hideous stories everywhere current respecting them. Faugh ! let us pass on.

"The motto of *that* university," remarks my comrade, as we turn away, "should be 'Nihil humani.'"

"And I would certainly say with regard to every member of it, 'A me alienum puto.' It's too bad to call them beasts. What have the poor beasts done to deserve it ?"

From the Tillah-Kari we cross over to the Shir-Dar, and ascend the easternmost of the two towers—the stair of the other being choked with rubbish. In some points the view from it surpasses even that of our first arrival ; for now the bold outline of the Tchepan-Ata comes in to complete the encircling life-guard of mountains ; while the details of the city itself, now lying right beneath our feet, are all perfectly visible.

It is Damascus over again—but Damascus on a grand scale, with all its splendid features intensified. From that tremendous height, the swarming streets of the town, the files of camels creeping like mice over the broad white surface of the "Citadel Plain," the battered walls of the fortress, the vast many-coloured towers of the other mosques, the sea of vegetation around, and the great bastions of naked mountain that shut in the landscape—are all clear as on a map; while, in the magnificent transparency of the atmosphere, the farthest ridges seem almost within reach. From the point where we stand, one might let fall a plumb-line two hundred feet and more, into the thickest crowd of the great market-place; and the mingled clamour from below comes up to us like the roar of a distant sea.

One by one, the mosques are disposed of. After the Shir-Dar comes the Ooloog-Begi; after the Ooloog-Begi, the Bibi-Khanam and its companions. All are very much of one type—the type of the Azret-ez-Sultan at Turkestan, as described in chapter xxiv.; two tall funnel-shaped towers, flanking a huge pointed archway. But over each and all hangs the mournful interest attaching to the last relics of an extinct dynasty and a forgotten civilisation. These are the graves of an era—the monuments of the Titans who reigned here in days when Russia was cowering behind the Volga, and paying tribute to the ancestors of those who tremble before her in these streets to-day. And now the Titans, in their turn, are dethroned by the boy-Jupiter of Russian conquest, in the insolence of his young might,

and superhuman enginry, and destroying thunderbolts, against which all the strength of numbers and brute force is as nothing :—

“ Sed quid Typhoëus aut validus Mimas,
Vel quid minaci Porphyriion statu,
Quid Rhoetus, evulsisque truncis
Enceladus jaculator audax ? ”

But there is one of our afternoon “sights” which must not be omitted. As we enter the Bibi-Khanam, our guide points to a couple of massive pedestals in the centre, supporting a huge, square, marble slab, set at an angle of forty-five—the whole affair exactly suggesting a gigantic reading-desk.

“What do you think of that ?” says he, triumphantly. “This is the mosque built by Timour’s favourite wife, who was a Chinese. She had a copy of the Koran laid here—a good big one as you may think, to fit the slab—and a Moollah in attendance to turn over the leaves for her ; and then she would sit at that window,” (pointing to one which looks out of the wall on the opposite side of the court), “and *read the Koran from thence*, so as to do her devotions without appearing in public.”

“And where is the Koran now ?”

“Well, it was sent to St Petersburg as a curiosity ; but the slab is still held in great reverence by the natives. They have a belief, that any one who creeps under it, and passes out between the two pedestals, will be cured of whatever disease he may happen to have at the time.”

In the next mosque that we visit, there are private

chapels built by two more of Timour's sultanas ; and at the far end of the main interior, we come upon a dark nook fenced off by an iron grating. This (as we are informed by an old Bokhariote who seems to haunt the place) is the holy of holies, into which no outsider is ever admitted.

"I suppose that would suffice to set us upon breaking into it forthwith, if we understood our duty as British tourists," observes my companion. "John Bull has a natural appetite for places where no one is allowed to go."

"So it seems. You remember that fellow at Rome, when they showed him the lamp in the underground chapel, telling him that it had never gone out for several centuries ; whereupon the good fellow gave it a decisive puff, and remarked with quiet satisfaction, ' Well, it's out *now*, anyhow ! ' "

I must not linger over our visits to the great boulevard, the town hospital, and the old custom-house. Chapters might be written upon each ; but I have no space for them here. It is towards evening when we at length rattle through the gate of the citadel, and, struggling up the steep slope within, halt at the gateway of what was once the Emir's palace—now turned to a very different use.

"This is where our wounded lay during the siege of 1868," says the Lieutenant, ushering us into a large paved court surrounded by cloisters, not unlike a college quadrangle. "That fountain in the middle is the place where criminals used to be beheaded in the presence of

the Emir ; and yonder, at the far end, is the Kok-Tash stone."

There it is, sure enough, that mysterious symbol of Bokhariote royalty—a huge grey block, twelve feet long by five broad, and three in height. In the palmy days before the Russian conquest, no coronation was considered valid till the future Emir had been placed in state upon the Kok-Tash. Now, it serves the Cossacks to spread their jackets on !

Turning away from the stone, I notice several figures pacing up and down the cloisters with the fierce restlessness of caged beasts of prey. Two or three of them turn round as I approach, disclosing faces which, with their swarthy complexion, their sharp white teeth, and the gleam of lurking murder in their deep black eyes, are enough to haunt one's dreams.

"Criminals awaiting sentence," explains M—, with the complacent air of a naturalist exhibiting his collection. "They'd make a good photograph, wouldn't they?"

At this moment my attention is attracted by a man who is striding unevenly to and fro in a corner by himself, crooning a discordant tune. I have barely time to notice him, when, sudden as a flash of lightning, he throws himself upon his nearest comrade, seizing him by the throat with a grasp beneath which the other (a sturdy fellow, two inches taller than his assailant) bends like a reed, his face instantly becoming swollen and purple. Another moment of that gripe, and he is a dead man ; but just in the nick of time, three or four

others fling themselves upon the aggressor, and lash him with cords (not without exerting their whole strength) to the nearest pillar.

“The fellow’s mad,” says M——, as coolly as if nothing had happened; “he got a wound in the head a while ago, and he’s been that way ever since. In general, he’s a quiet fellow enough, only he *will* walk about and sing in that queer way; but every now and then he gets troublesome, and they have to tie him.”

The sun is setting as we leave the palace, and its last rays light up a monument on the highest part of the ridge, with a brief, simple epitaph in memory of those who fell here in 1868. Beside it are a gun taken at Kitab, and a grave inscribed with the name of Colonel S——, one of the officers killed there—fit memorials for a place like this, consecrated by the memory of a deed as heroic as any that has been done since the last of the Three Hundred fell at Thermopylae. But the story of that famous martyrdom must have a chapter to itself.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TO THE DEATH.

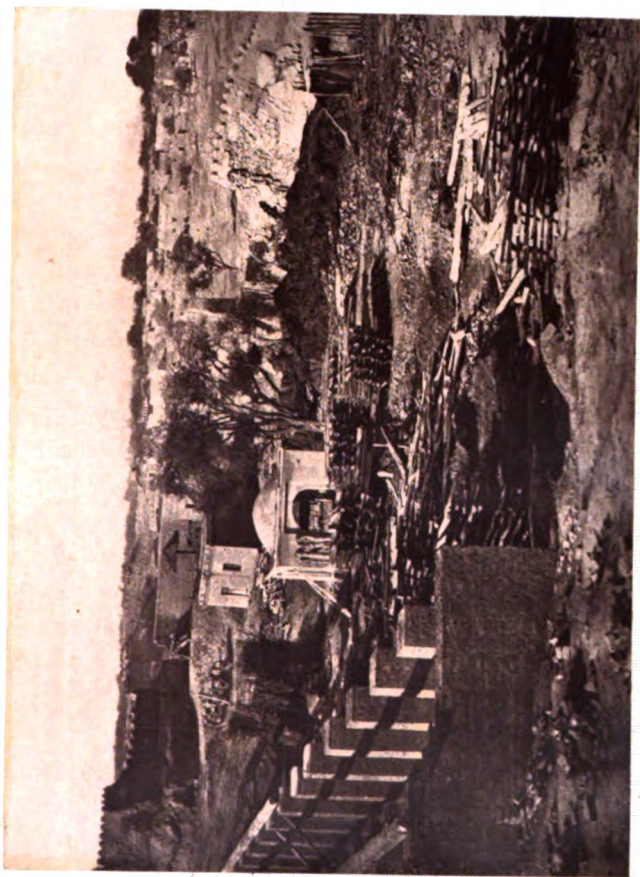
IT is the 1st (13th) June 1868; and the Russian garrison of Samarcand is in its glory. The battle of Tchepan-Ata has been fought and won; the Holy City is taken, and the power of Bokhara broken once and for ever. General Kaufmann and the bulk of the army marched away this morning, leaving everything, in his own words, "perfectly secure;" and of the six hundred and eighty men left here in garrison, there is not one in twenty who does not agree with him. The unbelievers have got what they deserve; and the valley of the Zer-Affshan is henceforth Russian territory—another milestone on the road to Herat or Kashgar. Over their evening vodka, the soldiers cut rough-hewn camp jokes upon the Bokhariote's unmatched power of running away; while the young subalterns, in the smoke of the few cigarettes still left them, see visions of a Russian flag unfurled beyond the Hindoo Koosh, and a Russian army pouring through the Khyber Pass into Northern India.

It is true that this feeling of satisfaction is not universal. Certain grizzled veterans, who remember the first assault of Ak-Metchet shake their heads

ominously, and mutter strange things to each other. The walls of the citadel are two miles in circuit, and gapped with half a dozen wide breaches. The supply of water is scanty and bad. There are houses running almost up to the base of the wall, affording excellent cover for the advance of an enemy. Out of six hundred and eighty men, nearly one-sixth are in hospital. The main army is already distant, and getting farther and farther out of reach with every hour. It is, no doubt, very unlikely that the heathens will have heart enough to attack us, especially after the thrashing which we have just given them; but still, if such an unheard-of thing *were* to happen, should we not be in rather a bad way?

But such warnings (like the better judgment of the world in every age), pass wholly unheeded. The majority laugh at any thought of danger. What unbelieving dog would dare to face a Russian? and even if he did, are not six hundred orthodox bayonets a match for anything that wears a turban from the Syr-Daria to the Oxus? And they betake themselves to rest in perfect security.

The sun rises on the morning of the 2nd as brilliantly as ever; but to the few who are astir within the citadel, he shows a very unlooked-for spectacle. On every side, the hills which encompass the town have broken into sudden life. Every hill-top is one creeping swarm of white turbans, and embroidered dresses, and fluttering pennons, and gleaming steel. It is a living sea of war



—and a sea which flows, not aimlessly hither and thither, but straight downward, from every side, upon the doomed city. The heathens *have* got heart enough to attack us—and they are come!

But the commandant, though no tactician, is a brave soldier, and in no haste to despond. Preparations for defence are made with all possible speed. The guns are withdrawn from the ramparts, and planted in the breaches, which are hastily obstructed with whatever comes to hand; while two parties are sent out, one to reconnoitre, the other to attempt the destruction of the houses lying nearest the wall.* At the same time, several loyal natives are sent off to recall the main army.

But, towards afternoon, the leader of the reconnaissance returns in haste, and with a very grave look on his bronzed, manly face, tells his tale of evil. The enemy have entered the town, and occupied the gardens in such strength as to be dislodged only by a large force; while strong bodies of them are actually pushing forward toward the bazaar in front of the citadel, which they will undoubtedly seize before it can be destroyed. There is nothing for it but to recall the working party at once; and then comes the brief, stern order:

“Shut the gates!”

The siege of Samarcand is begun.

Before evening the bazaar is already crowded with

* In consequence of this terrible lesson, the ground has since been cleared to a considerable distance around the citadel.

the enemy, whose gay dresses cluster like bees among the little clay hovels that mask their advance. The main point of attack is evidently the "Bukharski Prolomm" (Bokhariote Breach)* a huge gap in the eastern face of the wall, close to one of the city gates; and to meet the threatened assault, two guns are planted in the breach, supported by a body of forty picked men. The nearest houses are within easy range of the citadel; but the grey old wall is silent as the grave, grimly biding its time. And the trees whisper in the evening breeze, and the birds flutter overhead, and the sky is bright with the glow of sunset, and all is calm and beautiful; but in the midst of this peace and beauty, the carnival of hell is about to begin.

It is close upon six o'clock, when a sudden movement shows itself among the dense masses in the bazaar. Horsemen are seen riding to and fro—fierce cries come up from the heaving throng—and along its outer edge runs a spattering fire of musketry. Then suddenly there is a forward heave like the surge of a stormy sea, and up to the skies goes the Mussulman war-shout, "God is victorious!" and the horde of tigers, all breaking loose at once, rush to the slaughter.

"Fire!"

Why do they not fire? Gracious Heaven! the cannon are ill-loaded, and will not explode!

"Never mind, lads!" shouts the officer in command, with a ring of stern gladness in his voice; "we'll give

* This breach is still visible.

them the cold steel like Russians. Steady now, and let them come in!"

But the last words are drowned by the charging roar, and the next moment all around is a sea of bright robes, and dark fierce faces, and whirling weapons. There is a flash and a crackle of musketry, and a red gap yawns in the living mass, to be filled instantly by new thousands rushing blindly on. And now it is hand to hand, and the whole breach is one whirl of slashing sabres, and stabbing bayonets, and pounding musket-butts, while the blood spurts up like rain, and the wounded on either side are trampled to death as they fall.

And now, from the other side of the fortress likewise, comes the din of assault; and the battle rises to a height. Six hundred men against twenty thousand—how long can such a struggle last? Two hours, perhaps three, we may hold out; and then —? But this is no time to think what must happen *then*. To hold his ground; to die where he has been placed, striking hard and deep to the last—this is what the Russian can do, and he does it.

But in a prolonged struggle of this kind, the Asiatic is always at a disadvantage with the European. It is the battle of the Frenchman and the Englishman over again—the fiery, dashing *élan*, soon hot and soon cold, against the grim, dogged courage that grows only more stubborn as the danger thickens. Little by little, the fury of the assault begins to flag. Had they attacked in force on all sides at once, the place must have fallen

by sheer weight of numbers; but it is the fate of Asiatic leaders never to learn that war is a science; and their sporadic attacks give the defenders time to shift their strength from one point to another, and beat off the assault in detail. By midnight all is still again, with the stillness of utter exhaustion; and the cold moon comes silently over the dark hills around, lighting up the stern white faces of the dead. The beaten hosts ebb sullenly back to their outwork in the bazaar, and Russian Samarcand has one day longer to live.

All the next day the fight rages; it is one long assault, fiercely made and as fiercely repelled. Nearly a fourth of the officers are already struck down; and of the men at the breaches, there is hardly one left unhurt. But no one flinches. Worn, weary, blood-besmeared, grimed with powder, and fainting with thirst, they fight doggedly on. The Russian blood is fairly up at last, and all sense of pain and weariness, of certain defeat, and the deepening shadow of death, vanishes in the fierce feverish enjoyment of the greatest pleasure on earth—a hard hand-to-hand fight.

So ends the second day.

Not a man of the garrison has now any hope of escape; all that remains to do is to kill and be killed. But even now (if they knew it), influences are at work which may save them yet. An Asiatic army which has made *one* vigorous attack without being victorious, is already more than half-beaten; and dissensions follow as a matter of course. So it is now. The chiefs

fiercely upbraid each other with the failure of the assault, or squabble about who shall be lord of the city when taken; and at daybreak on the third morning, the weary watchers in the citadel see confused movements going on in the besieging host, and hear strange, angry cries, which are not like the shout of battle. What does this all mean?

It means that this heterogeneous mass of Sarts, Bokhariotes, Shekhri-Sebzians, and Persian slaves, is already falling asunder like an unbound faggot. The rising sun glances upon the tall spears of a great column, filing away to the southward, and leaving the citadel behind. The Shekhri-Sebzians have abandoned the siege in disgust; and with them goes the life of the besieging army. The enemy, thus deprived of their best soldiers, lose heart, and turn the siege into a blockade; and that day and the next pass quietly enough.

But, all this time, what has become of our messengers—the loyal natives whom we sent out to recall the army? The question has been asked again and again during the four terrible days; but it is now destined to have a speedy and unlooked for answer. On the fourth evening, the enemy display triumphantly along the front of the bazaar, a row of bloody heads, fixed on spears—and ask tauntingly, “whether the Russians know their messengers?”

This is a grievous blow; but mingling with the horror comes something even harder to bear—the re-

action of a possible hope, following upon utter despair. *Eight* messengers have we sent out since the siege began, and here are but *seven* heads. Where is the eighth? Has he got through? and, if so, may not the army return even now in time to save us? Two, three days more of inaction on the part of the enemy, and we may still escape. But it is not to be. On the sixth morning, there are signs without, which show, only too well, that the bloody work is about to begin again.

Then, over every face in that doomed band, comes the set, grim look of the Northman when fairly brought to bay. In stern silence, they take their places on the breach; and with them are sick men tottering from weakness, and wounded men with their unbandaged hurts oozing blood, and everything that has strength to stand up and be cut down. This is no time for choice. If the enemy break in, there remains only a death of hideous torture for us all; better die at once, like brothers, fighting side by side to the very last.

I will not attempt to describe that last assault. To those who fought there, it is like the confused remembrance of a nightmare; and, indeed, the men who do these things are always the least able to describe them. Little space is there for thought, with one's brain reeling amid the smoke and uproar as with strong wine, and the wild-beast longing to tear and kill tingling to one's very finger ends. Of all the enemy's attacks, this is the most furious, and the most nearly successful; but it is also the last.

For now there come upon the besieging force terrors

of which those within know nothing. Rumours are afloat—at first vague and doubtful, then unmistakably clear—that the Russian army is coming to the rescue ; and all now hangs upon the success of this final assault. With its failure, the chances of the assailants become desperate—more desperate, indeed, than they are themselves aware. For, late on the seventh night, there steals into the citadel, under cover of the darkness, a gaunt, haggard, dust-begrimed spectre, who, revived by the food which is hastily set before him, tells to listeners as ghastly as himself a strange and stirring tale. He has reached Kaufmann's army, with the commandant's despatch sewn up in the heel of his sandal ; and is now sent back to tell them that the general is advancing to raise the siege, and will be here, at the latest, by the day after to-morrow. Then up into the still air goes a mighty shout, rolling through the dreaming city like a peal of thunder. We are saved !

Saved, indeed, we are. On the following day there is a confusion visible in the enemy's camp, which, after the tidings of last night, is not hard to interpret ; and on the ninth morning, the great host rises from its lair, and stalks sullenly away. Before the dust of its march has subsided, an answering cloud rises upon the northern sky, and along the ridges of Tchepan-Ata bristles a glittering line of Russian bayonets.

So ended the siege of Samarcand.

I have not told the story as I could have wished to tell it, for the sight of the place itself told me more than

any words ; but such a tale is worth repeating, however inadequately. And whatever may be our future relations with Russia, or however I myself may one day fare at her hands, I am still glad to remember that I have had so many friends among the men who did these things, and among the nation which produced them.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COMING STRUGGLE.

MY story draws to a close ; but before concluding, I must say a few words respecting the present attitude of Russia in Central Asia, and the results which that attitude is likely to produce. My opinions must be taken for what they are worth, as the fruit of a necessarily hasty and superficial survey of a region into which no Englishman is ever admitted ; but the subject is worth venturing upon, even at the risk of failure. The Khiva Expedition marks the point at which the action of conflicting forces in Central Asia ceases to be purely internal, and becomes complicated by influences from without ; and the importance of the events which the next few years may witness, can hardly be exaggerated.

In the first place, then, it is worth while to remember what many of us seem rather apt to forget, that, in Central Asia as it now exists, Russia is met by no counterpoise whatever. One by one, the independent powers of the East have fallen beneath her blows, till she now stands idle from sheer lack of antagonists. The campaign of 1865 broke the power of Kokan ; the campaign of 1868 overthrew Bokhara ; the campaign of

1871 annihilated Kouldja ; and all three (though the two former are still permitted to keep up the farce of an independent sovereignty) are in reality mere vassals of the Czar. *One* truly independent power still survived—the little oasis of Khiva, the acknowledged centre of the desert guerillas, the last stronghold of Mussulman fanaticism, the rallying point of all that still preached and battled against the “Western unbeliever.” Khiva has now fallen in its turn ; and, from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the borders of China, there is but one Governor-General, and the *Turkestan News* is his prophet.

But conquest is not always subjugation ; and the Russians are established in Central Asia merely as the Normans were in England after Hastings. It has been repeatedly asserted by Russian journalists, and believed by many who ought to know better, that the Russian rule has been accepted in the East not merely with submission, but with absolute joy. Few statements have ever been wider of the truth. The real feeling of the Asiatic tribes to their new masters may best be gathered from a brief glance at recent events :

1870.—Secret agreement set on foot between the Ameer of Bokhara and the Afghans, by which the latter pledges himself to dismiss the Russian Ambassador on condition of the support of ten thousand Afghan troops in the event of a war. (This compact fell to the ground only through the timidity of the Ameer himself.)

1871.—Khan Zadeh, Crown Prince of Kokan, while on a visit to Tashkent, secretly distributes large sums

among the Mussulman priesthood, and foments Anti-Russian intrigues. Later on in the same year, dangerous riots occur at Khodjent and Kette-Kourgan, in which a Russian doctor is killed, and several officials seriously hurt. About the same time, several hundred native families desert their homes in Russian Turkestan, and emigrate to Bokhara.

1872.—The Ameer of Bokhara agrees to admit the Afghans into the town of Koolab and the fortress of Kerki (the key of Southern Bokhara), in order to strengthen himself against an expected attack on the part of the Russians. In the autumn of the same year several Russian posts are attacked and plundered.

1873.—In February, several hundred Kirghiz families migrate from the Mangishlak Peninsula to Khiva; and prayers are offered up in Tashkent itself for the success of the Khivans against the Russian expedition. A month later, the Yamouds settled along the right bank of the Attreck migrate *en masse* to the Persian side.

From all this it will be seen, that Russia's "march of civilisation" in the East is merely a path over cooled lava, and that any strong impulse from without would suffice to rekindle the flame. In this respect, her position is curiously analogous to our own. To the south of the Himalaya stands British India, with her heel upon the throat of the Sepoy; to the north of it stands Asiatic Russia, with her heel upon the throat of the Turkoman. One blow, dealt well home, by either conqueror upon the other, would free the fallen adversary, and change the fortune of the day; but, for the

present, we can no more get at Russia than Russia can get at us. Which will be the first to begin?

But before considering this phase of the coming struggle, it is worth while to consider the alternative.

It may safely be assumed that nations do not, like individuals, single out the strongest of their opponents in order to test their own prowess. On the contrary, the game of annexation, when systematically played, is always played by choice with antagonists of inferior calibre; and it needs but a glance at India and China to discern which of the two is the stronger. In the one scale lies a living and progressive civilisation, walled in by mighty ranges of mountains, guarded by the men before whom Russia fled eighteen years ago, and girt about with a vast belt of neutral territory, any invasion of which would at once arm against the invader the whole strength of Mussulman fanaticism; in the other lies a huge mass of torpid semi-barbarism, helpless from ignorance, festering with corruption, bled to death by intestine warfare, cut down (according to reliable estimates) to one-half its former population within the last twenty years. It surely needs no shrewd Bassanio to "choose the right" in such a case as this.

Granting, then, that Russia's true policy in the East is to plant a firm grasp on Western China before striking at us, how is this object to be attained? Clearly by establishing herself in force on the borders of the moribund empire, and skilfully availing herself of its growing weakness and unending dissensions. This is precisely what she has already done, and is still doing,

favoured by circumstances which seem deliberately to combine in her favour. The Dungan insurrection of 1862 rendered the provinces west of the Great Wall virtually independent of the Court of Peking, and opened a new and boundless field to the ambition of Russia. Into this new ground she has made her first stride by the annexation of Kouldja in 1871, which gave her a new province of considerable extent and great intrinsic value, a docile and hard-working population of more than one hundred thousand souls, and, more than all, an open road into Western China. This last advantage she is now securing by making practicable roads through the Thian-Shan, the most remarkable of which is the wonderful highway constructed by Colonel Kolokoltzef's soldiers in the summer of 1872, from the Bouam ridge to Fort Narinsk, through the precipices of the Djuvan-Arik—undoubtedly Russia's greatest engineering exploit in the far East. China lies open to the masters of Tashkent and Kouldja; and what the next move will be needs no prophet to divine.

Let us suppose, then, that some years have elapsed, during which Russia will have had time to raise two or three more foreign loans, to consolidate her new acquisitions in Turkestan and Western China, to connect her Khivan annexations with the Caspian seaboard by a chain of steppe fortresses, and to perfect her communications by establishing a line of steamers on the Oxus, and a railway along the Syr-Daria. Meanwhile the bitter commercial rivalry, which is to actual warfare

what the pilot-fish is to the shark, gradually rises to a height. The three trading powers of the world—America from the east, Russia from the west, and Britain from the south—stand forth as competitors for the traffic of Asia; and the efforts of the “man in possession” to keep the ground clear are met by correspondingly vigorous struggles for admittance on the part of his rivals. Somewhere in the future, then, we may conclude that there lies a day when Russia will discover, and proclaim in the consecrated pages of the *Invalide Russe*, that “the best interests of civilization, and the cause of humanity itself, demand the expulsion of the English usurper from the country which he has so long oppressed.” How is this to be effected?

In the event of her attempting an actual invasion of Afghanistan, Russia’s obvious course would be to despatch a force from Samarcand to Merv, and down the valley of the Moorgh-Ab——, to be joined before Herat by another army ascending the Attreck from Tchikishliar, and passing through Meshed. In moving upon Herat from the north, the only real difficulty lies in the first stage of the route from Samarcand to Merv. That once past, the fifteen “marches” from Merv to Herat traverse a well-watered and perfectly easy tract, abounding in forage, and practicable enough for artillery to satisfy even the First Napoleon. As for the other route (that up the Attreck to Koochan and Meshed) it contains no natural obstacle which could impede the advance of a regular force for a single day.

As for any armed opposition on the part of the

natives, Russia is tolerably safe. More than a third of the route from Samarcand lies through the vassal kingdom of Bokhara; very nearly the whole of that from the Caspian lies through the friendly territory of Persia. The "ten thousand Turkomans that guard Koochan" merely represent so much transferable stock, to be made over to Russia whenever she chooses to bid for it. In a word, it may safely be predicted that a Russian army advancing upon Herat from either the north or the west would reach the Afghan frontier without firing a shot.

It is needless to observe, however, that in order to support such an undertaking, even for a few months, the resources and appliances of Russia in the far East must be immensely multiplied. At the present moment, the total number of troops in Turkestan (maintained at a ruinous expense) is twenty-six thousand of all arms; and this force is not more than sufficient for the mere garrisoning of the province. How many additional tens of thousands would be required in order to push across Afghanistan, with any hope of success, is a question for more experienced critics than myself to decide.

But this matters little; for Russia's habitual policy is to have her game played for her by her enemies; and among men divided by countless factions, and wholly devoid of attachment to any one form of government, there is a boundless field for the application of her favourite system of welding the conquered into a weapon for the conqueror. In every age,

aggressive warfare in a semi-barbarous region has employed this method with complete success. It was with the help of the Latin and Hernican cavalry that Rome destroyed the Samnite and the Gaul. It was from the ranks of his foreign captives that Bajazet drew the staple of the terrible brigade which taught Europe to shudder at the name of the Janissaries. The subjugated mountaineers of Tlascala were the lever where-with Cortez overthrew the throne of Montezuma : and the best soldiers of British India are the descendants of those who fought against Lord Clive and Sir Eyre Coote.

And now Russia, in her turn, has inherited the fatal science of her predecessors ; and “the slayers of all men are being slain with their own swords.” Intestine quarrels are never wanting in Central Asia ; and no one knows better than the diplomatic Muscovite how to foment them to his own advantage, and to the destruction of both combatants. “All that we have to do in Central Asia,” said the elder Count Berg to me years ago, “is to give each of the lesser Khans a few thousand roubles and a few hundred Cossacks—let them cut each other’s throats for four or five years—and then march over their bodies without burning a cartridge.” This is no empty boast. The feuds of Afghanistan have more than once offered a tempting opening to Russia ;* and the growing unpopularity of

* The rebellion of Abdul Rahman Khan—Mohamed Isa’s attack upon Sherabad—and other instances of the kind, will occur at once to those who have studied the subject.

Yakoub Beg among his own people of Kashgar is holding out to her, at the present moment, another chance of the same kind.

It may be taken for granted, then, that when Russia at length considers herself strong enough to attack us, her final advance will be heralded by a skilfully fomented civil war in Afghanistan, and a dexterous propagandism among the malcontents of Northern India. It is upon this last weapon, indeed, that she mainly relies; and it must be owned, not wholly without reason. Had Russia been near enough in 1857 to give a hand to Nana Sahib and Tantia Topee, we should have lost India; and, to this day, our disaffected vassals look to her advance as the great Avatar which is to inaugurate their second, and (as they fondly hope) decisive struggle for independence. Barely two years ago, the native population of a large town in Northern India, near which a review was being held, ascribed the firing to "a battle between the English and the Russians." Russian journalists garner up every obtainable scrap of information respecting the temper of our native subjects; and at least two Russian travellers, to my certain knowledge, have started within the last sixteen months with the intention of making a prolonged tour in Northern India. These, it will be said, are trifles; but even trifles become important in playing against antagonists who never make a move in vain, and who excel all the children of men in the great art of saying one thing and meaning another.

But all this is still in the future; and, for the present,

there can be no question that Russia is doing good service to humanity. Her motives for reorganising Central Asia are, no doubt, selfish and exclusive; but her reorganisation has been none the less complete. She has done her best to keep us out of Turkestan; but she has also done her best to keep brigandage, and misrule, and cruelty out of it likewise. And the work, though laborious and still far from completion, is ever advancing. Slowly but surely, across the waste of years, approaches the great day when barbarism shall be driven from this its last stronghold, and when men of every nation, ceasing to revolve in an aimless round of traditional usage, shall stride forward to the accomplishment of a fixed purpose. When I stood, years ago, on the banks of the Jordan, and watched its dark current rushing headlong into the pulseless crystal of the Dead Sea, I saw an apt type of the two great human families. The history of the European races flows like a mighty river—turbid, indeed, violent, dark with war and revolution, but still fertilising, full of life, for ever moving onward. The Semitic world lies like a tideless lake—vast, deep, beautiful to look upon, but inert and useless as a buried treasure. That the two may perform their appointed work, they must thoroughly amalgamate; but the time for such fusion is not as yet.

Here my story must end; for my visits to Oura-Toubeh and Khodjent, with the information which I gathered respecting the country bordering the Chinese

frontier, do not come into the sphere of the present work ; while the narrative of my homeward journey would be only a monotonous bead-roll of hardships, aggravated by illness and loss of blood. I have no wish to make an appeal *ad misericordiam* simply because I happened to encounter various sufferings in the course of my duty ; and if what I have said suffices to show that (whatever errors I may have committed) I at least did my best to accomplish the work for which I was sent out, I shall be more than repaid for all.

