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978-1-108-04633-6 - Across Thibet: Being a Translation of *De Paris au Tonkin à Travers Le Tibet Inconnu*: Volume 1

Gabriel Bonvalot

Excerpt

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ACROSS THIBET.

CHAPTER I.

AMONG THE LAMAS.

How the Journey was Suggested—Rachmed—At Moscow—Through the Ural Mountains—Arrival at Djarkent—Organising the Caravan—At Kuldja—Father Dedeken—Abdullah, the Interpreter—Across the Tien Shan—In the Province of Ili—Kirghis and Kalmucks—Chinese Justice—The River Kunges—Mongols—Exposing the Dead—Visit to a Grand Lama—A Lama Monastery and Pagoda—Timurlik—Kirghis Immigrants—Valley of the Tsakma—The Joy of the Desert.



RACHMED.

OF the first half of my route from Paris to Tonquin through Thibet I do not propose to say anything, because it is already pretty well known, and because I have described it briefly in a volume published about eight years ago. I shall also pass with rapid strides over the route which the travellers Prjevalsky and Carey traversed before us, speaking more in detail of the regions we were the first to explore.

It used to be the fashion to invoke the muses before one began to write a narrative, but all that is out of date; and for my own part I would simply entreat the cross-grained rheumatics and treacherous fever to be so kind as to let me keep my word with my publisher, and write with as little delay as possible the story of a journey which I undertook with great pleasure, but which, as I must frankly admit, it is much less agreeable to put upon paper.

In January, 1889, we were talking, at the house of my

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good friend Henri Lorin, as he reminded me upon my return last winter, about travel and exploration, and he asked me if I had any fresh project in view. I told him that a very interesting journey would be one from Paris to Tonquin overland, cutting out a route of one's own across the whole of Asia. And when he asked me to indicate my probable itinerary upon the map, I drew a line through Chinese Turkestan, the higher tablelands of Thibet, and the valleys of the great rivers of China and of the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Those who were looking over my shoulder thought this scheme a splendid one; but, for my own part, still feeling the effects of my journey over the Pamir, I would not allow myself to think of putting it into execution, for the good reason that when I let my fancy turn to travel, I am sure to be carried away by it.

A few months later, on coming back from the Exhibition, where I had been to catch a glimpse, as it were, of the distant lands in which I had wandered, this same friend wrote to say that there was a person desirous of travelling with me in Asia. The first thing to ascertain was whether it was someone prepared to follow me blindfold, for my intention was not to play the globe-trotter, but to explore. I was told that this was so, and, forgetting all about my resolve to take a rest, I plunged into the study of the narratives of Father Huc and Prjevalsky.

Little time was lost in coming to an understanding with the Duc de Chartres, who offered to participate in the expenses of an exploring expedition in which his son was to take part. We at once agreed that our undertaking should be a national one, and that the collections we might make should be handed over to our Museums. My future companion, Prince Henry of Orleans, was delighted at the plan which I submitted to him, though it was a somewhat vague one, for travelling has this much in common with war, that, before getting upon the ground, it is idle to commit oneself to any positive arrangements.

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THE START.

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The preliminary preparations having been rapidly completed, we left Paris on the 6th of July, just when Paris was in the full fever of her Exhibition. At Moscow, we were to be joined by Rachmed, my faithful companion during my two previous journeys, he having been found out for me in the Caucasus at the place where I had expected he would be, for I know where Rachmed prefers to live when he is not on the tramp. The worthy fellow was preparing to come to the Exhibition, by way of realising a dream he had for some time been cherishing; his ticket had been taken, and he was about to embark at Batoum, when he got my telegram, saying that if he cared to come to China with me, he was to go and wait for me at Moscow. So he went and changed his ticket for one to Moscow, not in the best of humours, for it cost him a pang not to see the Exhibition. Still he did not hesitate, being afraid, as he confided to one of my friends, of forfeiting my regard. Rachmed is an Uzbek by birth, and belongs to one of the branches of that fine Turkish race which, as I am never tired of repeating, comprises so many noble specimens of humanity.

In Russia we were treated most handsomely, and furnished with all necessary letters of recommendation to the Consuls along the Chinese frontier. Remaining at Moscow only long enough to make the many necessary purchases, we just stopped at Nijni-Novgorod, went down the Volga, ascended the Kama, and traversed the Ural chain of mountains. At Tiumen we again took boat, and landed at Omsk, whence, after making some purchases, we started again for Semipalatinsk, where we purchased the European goods which we were afraid of not being able to get at the frontier itself, and, after being very much jolted in a *tarantass*, arrived at Djarkent, the last town on Russian territory.

Before entering China, we had to organise our caravan and recruit the staff needful for carrying out our project, but I will

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spare the reader an enumeration of the details and trouble entailed by these preliminaries of an exploring party. Let me, however, say that the thorough organisation of a caravan for a journey which is to end Heaven knows when or where, is the most difficult part of an explorer's work. In the Asiatic countries we were about to traverse, vehicles are not used, and the rivers are not navigable, being obstacles instead of means of communication as they are elsewhere. It is imperative, therefore, neither to forget anything nor to take a single superfluous article. So one tries to think of everything, and to foresee all contingencies ; but, after having eliminated as much as possible, it is astonishing to find how heavy the load is.

Meanwhile, we had to recruit our men at Djarkent on the frontier of Siberia. This was most difficult, for here we could only secure men very much below the mark, and not at all built for a long journey. Rachmed inspected them first, and, in presenting them to me, his unvarying observation was, "They are of no use for the road." I could see that he was right. There was not one of them who had respectable antecedents ; they were a pack of lazy and penniless fellows who were anxious only to get across the frontier in our wake. Among them there is not one of those adventurers, vigorous and ready for anything, who have already looked death in the face, and would go through fire after the leader whom chance had given them, provided that leader had succeeded in attaching them to himself by a mixture of good and of bad usage. How much we regretted not having our base of operations in Russian Turkestan—at Samarkand, for instance, where there is no lack of good men. It is true we had three Russians who would suit us very well, but they made it a condition, when they took service with us, that they should not go beyond the Lob Nor.

September 6.—We left Djarkent on the 2nd, and, marching by short stages, reached Kuldja to-day, and were most hospitably

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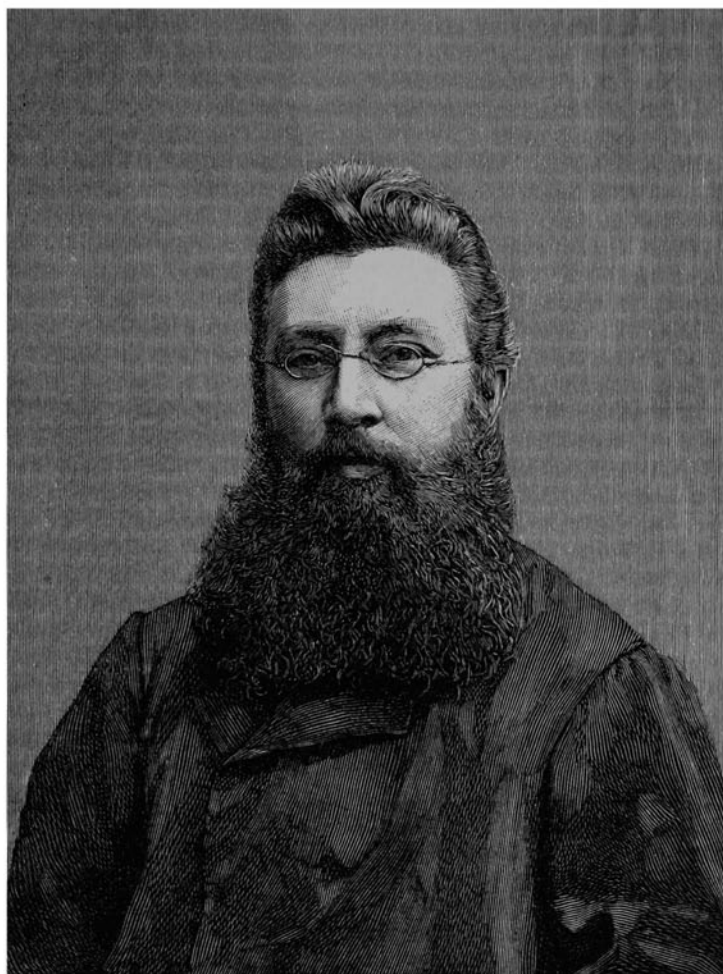
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AT KULDJA.

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FATHER DEDEKEN.

received by the Russian Consul and his secretary. We spend a few hours very pleasantly with the members of the Belgian mission, one of whom, Father Dedeken, has completed his engagement, and is about to return to Europe. As he has an appointment at Shanghai, he will go with us to the coast, and perhaps accompany us to Europe. He speaks Chinese, and as he is a man of strong will, we are glad to have our party reinforced

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by him. His Chinese servant, Bartholomeus, who is to accompany him, is honest—which few Chinese servants appear to be—but very obstinate, which, on the contrary, seems to be very common in China.

Prince Henry, Father Dedeken, Rachmed, Bartholomeus, and myself form the nucleus of the expedition. We have, too, an interpreter named Abdullah, who speaks Chinese and Mongolian, and who accompanied the celebrated Prjevalsky. He seems to be an honest sort of fellow, but his vanity, his boastfulness, his talkativeness make us very uneasy.

His account of what he went through in the Tsaïdam alarms our followers, and he seems bent upon dissuading us from undertaking anything out of the beaten tracks. It must be added that the Russian Consul at Kuldja is not much more encouraging, and when Prince Henry tells him we are going to try to reach Batang, he smiles incredulously, and advises him not to be lured on by that idea. He points out to us that we have no escort, no felt tent, no Chinese passport. But experience has taught us that one can get on without either of these three things which he regards as indispensable. As regards the passport, I must say that the main cause of our success was our omission to give notice of our journey to the Tsong li Yamen at Peking. By asking for a passport to travel in those parts of China which have been little visited, we should have excited the attention of Chinese diplomacy. The mandarins would have given us the warmest letters of recommendation, and then, as soon as our itinerary was known, would have sent orders for every sort of means to be used to stop us on the road, and compel us to turn back. Such has been the lot of all travellers in China, from the late Prjevalsky down to Richthofen, Count Bela-Szechny, and so many others who have been stopped in their journeys by various devices.

After having completed our caravan as best we could at Kuldja, all we wanted, in order to continue our journey, was the

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THE VALLEY OF ILI.

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authorisation of the Chinese governor of the province. This was granted us after a visit in which etiquette was very carefully observed, insomuch that we were offered three cups of tea and a bottle of champagne; and the Governor gave us two safe-conducts to take us to the frontiers of the province of Ili.

September 12.—To-day the small European colony kindly escorts us to the gate of the town, and cordially wishes us a safe journey and happy return home.

And so at last we find ourselves in the saddle. We first make in an easterly direction, but change our course as soon as we have crossed the Tien Shan, as it is Tonquin that we have in view. Shall we ever get there, and if so, by what route? There is all the old continent to cross, the least known portion of China, Thibet and its highlands, the deserts, and the deep rivers, to say nothing of the human beings who look upon every stranger as an enemy. All this I might have said to myself, and to these reflections might have added that we were only five or six to face an unknown situation, before which so many others better equipped and prepared had quailed. But I must confess that I had not one of these rhetorical thoughts in my head when once I found myself fairly started, abandoning myself to the pleasure of being in the open and looking about me with the eager curiosity of the traveller whose eyes, almost starting from their orbits, scan the horizon like a hungry hawk in search of prey.

After getting quit of the dust which reminds me of Turkestan, the soil, the landscape, and the cultivation of the plain recall the neighbourhood of Samarkand and Tashkend. The beardless faces, the sunken eyes, and the long dresses of the men show that one is in China. The fertility of the valley of Ili is remarkable, so that for the last few years its population has been growing very rapidly. A great many of the Tarantshis who had fled to Russian territory are coming back to the places

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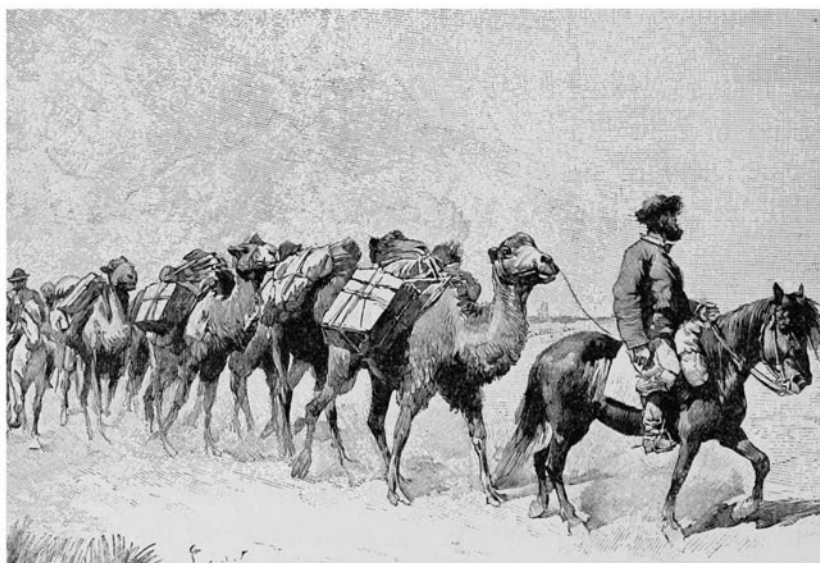
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which their forefathers had cultivated, and a number of emigrants come from Kashgar, and even from Eastern China; but it will be a long time before the inhabitants are numerous enough to cultivate to the full extent this region, which would feed hundreds of thousands.

Leaving the valley of Ili to our right, as far as Mazar, built upon an affluent of the Kash, we followed a very good road, frequently coming upon villages which have been abandoned by the Tarantshis, who, having taken part in the massacre of the Chinese, fled when the province of Ili was transferred from Russia to China. The houses are falling into ruins, and are gradually disappearing amid a growth of willows, poplars, and vines; weeds choke up the gardens; the irrigating canals are dried up, and the fields are fallow. Deserted though the soil is, however, it has not ceased to be generous; it is arrayed in verdure, and its aspect is bright and cheerful.

One of our men recognises the house in which he was born.



THE CARAVAN ON THE MARCH.

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The roof has fallen in, the door has been carried off—for fuel no doubt—the walls are all cracked, and there are patches of barley growing at the extremity of the hearthstone. The Tarantshi was overcome with grief at the sight of the place all in ruins, and recalled how happily he had lived there with his parents, what fine crops they grew, and how cheap the food was.

I asked him why he had not remained there.

“We killed too many Chinese, Solons, and Sibos,” he replied, “and upon the Chinese returning we fled.”

“Now that you have crossed the frontier, will you return to Djarkent?”

“Heaven preserve me, no! The soil is not good, and water is scarce. I shall go to Kashgar, where the family of one of my wives lives.”

“Were you not married at Djarkent?”

“Yes, and I had a child as well. He died the day before I came to offer you my services, and I gave my wife back to her father. I am quite free.”

The facility with which this Mussulman abandoned his wife surprised me, but in this country it appears to be quite common.

What this Tarantshi told me about Ili was repeated to me by many others. Most of those who live in Russian territory are on the look-out for a chance of slipping across the frontier. The Chinese mandarins have the wit to entice them; they do not ask them for papers. They let them settle on the uncultivated lands, and do not bother them about the past.

In the province of Ili, beyond Mazar, we meet a great many Siberian Kirghis, whom the excellence of the pasturages along the affluents of the Ili has attracted. They have kept the chiefs whom they had elected being Russian subjects. By order of the Chinese mandarin, and with the assent of the tribes, these chiefs will transmit their powers to their descendants.

Side by side with these very wealthy Kirghis we see some

very poor Kalmucks. The rich pastures and flocks belong to the former, while the latter are relegated to the less fertile tracts, which they cultivate without gaining a sufficiency. These Kalmucks are certainly not taking in appearance. They are frail, badly fed, badly housed, badly clad, and have a placid rather than an energetic and intelligent air. Nevertheless, they have for some time been entrusted with the defence of the country, and they must not leave the place assigned to them without asking permission from their chief. They are not only bound to the soil, but are liable to be requisitioned for police or orderly duty, and must have in readiness the sabre, the flint-lock gun, or the bow. Their "banners," to the number of twenty, distributed over the Tien Shan, play more or less the same part as those families which in Austria were established in the south of the empire in the region of the "military frontiers," as they were styled. Their neighbours do not appear to hold them in high esteem, for a Kirghis to whom I observed how mild a physiognomy these Mongols have, replied with a laugh—

"That is true. They are as mild as cows."

"In what way?"

"Because they can be milked without any trouble."

It appears that the Kirghis, who are daring, well armed, and unscrupulous, do not think twice about cheating and pillaging these Mongols. As the plunderers are Mussulmans, they can easily settle matters with their consciences, seeing that the victims are Buddhists, that is to say, people who have no "book," neither a Bible nor a Koran, and so are of no account.

The Chinese authorities intervene but rarely to mete out justice to those who are aggrieved; the offenders are nearly always out of reach in the mountains, where they find it so easy to hide, and then again it is easy, in this case, to obtain from their family or tribe either a tax which may be in arrears or a present which in ordinary times would be withheld. But when