

FROM PEKIN TO CALAIS BY LAND.

CHAPTER I.

GRAVESEND TO PEKIN.

“FROM China to France overland! Why, surely it’s impossible. I thought one could only get to China by sea!”

Such was the remark made by a young lady whom I had the honour of taking down to dinner a few days previous to embarking upon the voyage of which I am about to narrate my experiences. Although I trust there are not many educated persons who, like my fair friend, are unaware that Pekin and Paris are actually undivided by sea, I imagine there are but few who, if put down at Calais, and told to find their way overland to Pekin, would know how to set about it, fewer still who have any practical knowledge of that vast but comparatively unknown country separating the Chinese Empire from Russia proper, Siberia.

It had been a long-projected voyage. Lancaster, (a fellow-traveller in many lands,) and I had talked it over for at least two years before: in the early spring of 1887, we finally decided to put our project into execution, and start for the great unknown.

Unlike most voyages which in these days of travel are an accomplished fact as soon as decided upon, this one was fraught with innumerable delays and annoyances. Our difficulties commenced at the very outset, for nowhere in London, or indeed anywhere else, could I glean the smallest information respecting the journey; the only book I succeeded in finding on the subject being one written by John Bell, the English traveller, in 1788, but, as may be imagined, the information contained therein was somewhat obsolete.

Nothing more modern, however, could I procure. Jules Verne's amusing and clever book, "Michel Strogoff," deals largely with Irkoutsk, Lake Baikal, and other regions we were about to traverse, but I hardly felt justified in taking that versatile author as a travelling-guide. That we landed at Tientsin—China—and saw the sea again at Calais—France—was all we definitely knew; of

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the time it took to do, or how the journey was to be accomplished, we were quite in the dark.

About a week before our departure, however, I had the good fortune to meet a gentleman connected with the Russian Embassy in London, and to him I confided our difficulties. M. de —— was indeed a friend in need, for in less than twenty-four hours our difficulties had vanished like snow in the sunshine. Not only was the route from Pekin to Moscow clearly laid down for us, but we were provided, in addition, with a letter of introduction from M. de Staal, the Russian Ambassador in London, to the Russian Minister at Pekin. Had it not been for this, I doubt whether we should ever have got further than the celestial city.

The route (we now found) was as follows : From Shanghai to Pekin by steamer and house-boat, from Pekin to Kalgan (or the Great Wall of China) by mule litter, and thence across the Great Gobi Desert to Kiakhta, the Russo-Chinese frontier, by camel caravan. From Kiakhta to Tomsk, *via* Lake Baikal, Irkoutsk, and Krasnoiarsk by tarantass or Russian post carriage, and thence by steam communication on the Obi and Irtysh rivers to Tobolsk and Tiumen. From the latter place our

journey was easy enough. Four days' sail and seven of steam would bring us to Moscow, practically the end of our voyage. As to the time the journey would take, no one, even at the Russian Embassy, seemed to know. So much in this journey depends (as we afterwards found) upon the weather, the facility of obtaining camels at the Great Wall, and last, but not least, the state of the roads in Siberia. We were starting at a good time, however, and with luck might expect to reach Moscow in the early autumn. If detained in Siberia by floods or other casualties, we might not arrive in Europe till the new year. This was all we could ascertain, and with this somewhat scanty information were forced to be content.

The outfit question did not trouble us much. A Terai hat, two or three tweed suits, and an unlimited supply of cigars and tobacco met our requirements. Everything we took went comfortably into two small-sized leather portmanteaus. A rifle, fowling-piece and brace of double-barrelled pistols (not revolvers) were also taken, and this completed our wardrobe and armoury. I often wonder what the West End outfitters would do were it not for the yearly increasing number of Globe-Trotters.

Be it understood I mean Globe-Trotters, not travellers, for there is a vast difference between the two. I have often been amused at the utterly useless articles forced upon the unhappy G. T. by the Bond Street or Piccadilly haberdasher, who probably knows rather less of the country his customer is about to visit than the Khan of Khiva does of Pall Mall. The Globe-Trotter *pur et simple* is seldom (so far as I have seen) of high intellectual attainments, but one I met a few years ago, while on a voyage to Sydney, eclipsed everything. He had provided himself with enough thick clothes and furs to fit out an expedition to the North Pole. On asking him the reason, he replied, “Oh! we shall get to Sydney at Christmas, you know, and it will be so awfully cold after the tropics!”

Our final preparations completed, we took passage for Shanghai, and the rainy, gusty morning of the 7th of April, 1887, saw us steaming down channel with half a gale of wind in our teeth, looking our last on the white cliffs of England, while to our left was just visible the low-lying coast of France, the goal we hoped to reach in safety, before the following winter, and from which we were separated by the length of Europe and Asia.

I will not inflict a description of the voyage out upon the reader. It would be superfluous in these days of travel, when a man secures his berth for Sydney or Yokohama with much the same indifference as twenty years ago he took a ticket for Rome or Vienna. The life on board a P. and O. ship is familiar to most of us. Suffice it to say that our fellow-passengers were of the usual kind: the Colonial bishop, who buried himself in a deep theological work before we had cleared Land's End, only to emerge from it at Colombo; the Hong Kong merchant and his family living on the usual terms of armed neutrality with the Indian Civil Service official and his wife, an Indian Major-General, a sprinkling of bank clerks and coffee-planters, two or three soldiers rejoining their regiments, and a pretty grass widow, returning to her husband, an Indian Judge. These, with half a dozen more or less uninteresting young ladies "going out to be married," completed our party. The ages of the latter seemed to increase in proportion to the distance they were going. The one whose fortunate fiancé resided at Hong Kong must have been fifty at the very least. I had almost forgotten a nearly perfect specimen of the Globe-Trot-

ter, who joined us, resplendent in purple and fine linen, at Suez; a young gentleman somewhat inclined to take more wine than was good for him, and who was going abroad for the good of his health—presumably also for that of his friends and relations at home.

There is a very false impression existing among those who have never travelled in one, as to the delights of a voyage in a P. and O., and the endless gaiety and amusement on board these floating hotels. I have made at least a dozen voyages by this particular line, and must confess that the gaiety and amusement, if it ever existed, has escaped my observation. Perhaps I have been unfortunate, but I must own that I have invariably found the life on board these ships deplorably dull. The mere fact of being cabined, cribbed, confined, with three score of one's fellow-creatures, the majority of whom have not a thought or feeling in common, is surely sufficient to account for a lack of enjoyment. At the same time, to the casual onlooker, who is wise enough to keep out of them, the petty rows and scandals on board ship are amusing enough. How Major-General Jones has had the audacity to take the seat next the captain at dinner, instead of Commissioner Brown,

who, as everybody ought to know, if they don't, always takes precedence of him at Brandypore; and how Mrs. Commissioner Brown has felt compelled to cut Mrs. Major-General Jones in consequence. How the wife of Surgeon Squills, of the Bengal Staff Corps, has forbidden her daughter to speak to the third mate, and that matron's subsequent mortification on discovering that the tabooed officer is the second son of an Earl. How, in our case, one of the future blushing brides (the Hong Kong one) only wished that poor dear Judge could see how his wife went on, although to unbiassed eyes, that cheery little lady's sole crime consisted in being more than pretty, and absurdly good-natured. How the Globe-trotter overcome by (let us say) the heat in the Red Sea offered to fight the captain for a dozen of champagne on his own quarter-deck,—all this could I descant upon at length, but fear lest I weary the reader, forgetting that a good joke at sea is but a sorry jest ashore.

Light and favourable winds favoured us to Malta, that shadeless, bustling rock so happily christened by Byron "The little Military Hot-House." A few hours here allowed of a stroll ashore and a visit to the mess of that cheeriest and best of regiments, the

“Black Watch.” Then, after dinner at the club, and a chat over old Cairo-days, off again in the moonlight to the *Bombay*, and, three days later, Port Said. Here an unexpected delay awaited us. The P. and O. S.S. *Rome* had gone ashore (the commencement of a series of disasters for the Company :) which meant a detention of five days, at least, at the glary, unsavoury canal port.

Small-pox was raging in this den of publicans and sinners, and several cases having occurred on the homeward-bound P. and O. ships, we were requested by the captain not to land, if we could possibly help it, during our stay. A prospect of five days cooped up in an atmosphere of coal-dust and sand, to say nothing of the noisome odours off the shore, was anything but inviting, and eight o'clock the next evening saw us sitting down to dinner in the cool, comfortable dining-room of Shepherd's Hotel, Cairo.

There is a charm about Cairo peculiar to itself. Nowhere else do we find that strange mixture of western civilization and eastern barbarism that exists in the Egyptian capital, which seems, by the way, to be yearly increasing in popularity as a winter resort. Everything in the place is original

and therefore charming, and, although surrounded with every European luxury and comfort, so utterly unlike Europe.

A telegram was received during our stay here, announcing the total loss of the P. and O. *Tasmania*, and the drowning, among others, of her captain, poor Perrins, than whom no more popular commander or smarter sailor ever lived. We were continually seeing or hearing of wrecks on our voyage out. Besides passing three lately sunken vessels in the Red Sea, we got news at Colombo of the largest ship in the Nord-Deutscher Lloyd line having gone down off Cape Guardafui; at Shanghai of the sinking of the M.M. Steamer *Menzaleh* between that port and Japan.

We had a favourable passage through that exaggerated bugbear the Red Sea, which, by the way, I have found cooler three times out of four than the Indian Ocean. Aden was not touched at, and a quick run of nine days brought us to Colombo, where we bade adieu to the *Bombay*, which was proceeding to Calcutta, and embarked on board the *Piacenza*, a vessel considerably smaller but as comfortable in every respect as the leviathan we had left.

Twenty-four hours here gave us time for a run