A RIDE TO KHIVA.

INTRODUCTION.

A low room, with but little furniture, and that of the simplest kind; a few telegraphic instruments scattered about here and there in out-of-the-way corners, and mixed up promiscuously with rifles and wooden boxes, some filled with cartridges, others containing provisions for a journey; two or three bottles, labelled "Quinine," on a rickety wooden table; several men of various nationalities all talking at the same time, and a Babel of different languages;—such was the scene around the writer of this work, who was leaning against the window-sill, and glancing from time to time at an old number of an English newspaper.

The host was a German gentleman, now several thousand miles from the Fatherland, which he had been induced to leave by an offer of the post of superintendent and general manager on a long and important line of recently-constructed telegraph. A graceful girl, with large dark eyes and pearl-white teeth, but whose olive complexion and Oriental dress showed that she was in no way akin to the fairer beauties of Europe, was engaged in handing round small cups of coffee to the most excited talkers of the party, an Italian, Arab, and

Englishman, the former gesticulating wildly in an endeavour to interpret between his two companions, who were evidently not at all in accord about the subject of conversation. A bright sun, its rays flashing down on a broad stream, nearly the colour of lapis-lazuli, which flowed hard by the dwelling, had raised the temperature of the room to an almost unbearable heat. It was the month of February. In England people were shivering beside their fires or walking in slush or snow; but I was at Khartoum, having just returned from a visit to Colonel Gordon, Sir Samuel Baker's successor, on the White Nile.

It may seem strange thus to commence the narrative of a journey to Central Asia in Central Africa, and yet, had it not been for a remark made by one of the men in the low square room to which I have just referred, in all probability I should never have gone to Khiva. The conversation had lulled, the Arab and Englishman having, by means of the Italian, settled the knotty point as to whether the son of Albion, an officer late in the Khedive's service, was to receive the salary due to him in its entirety or not; the Mohammedan being of opinion that the Christian ought to be paid the amount subject to a deduction, the native Egyptian officials having always to submit to this system of taxation. However, my English friend did not see it in this light: he had agreed to serve for a certain sum—that sum he must receive—and if the Arab did not pay, why, he would complain to the Khedive. This last remark having been at length translated to the official, the latter succumbed. My compatriot, the question being settled to his satisfaction, came and looked out of the window by my side.

It was indeed a picturesque scene. The Blue Nile,

here nearly half a mile from shore to shore, lay smooth and unrippled like a sea of glass almost at our feet. On its vast surface were barges and native boats innumerable, whilst many *nuggers*—the huge sailing barques of the Arabs, and much used by them in former years when engaged in the slave-trade—were anchored here and there. Gangs of workmen, black as ebony, and stripped to the waist, their well-developed muscles standing out like knotted cords, were busily engaged unloading a freight of ivory bound for Cairo. An enormous *saquieh*, or water-wheel, for irrigation purposes, was slowly revolving, put in motion by the united exertions of a bullock and a donkey. The wild yells of a negro lad, whose duty it was to goad the animals should they ever flag, mingled strangely with the creaking sounds of the ponderous woodwork.

"I wonder where we shall all be this time next year," suddenly remarked my companion. "God knows," was my answer; "but I do not think I shall try the White Nile again; if I come to Africa another time I shall select a new line of country." At that moment my eye fell upon a paragraph in the paper. It was to the effect that the Government at St. Petersburg had given an order that no foreigner was to be allowed to travel in Russian Asia, and that an Englishman who had recently attempted a journey in that direction had been turned back by the authorities. I have, unfortunately for my own interests, from my earliest childhood had what my old nurse used to call a most "contradictorious" spirit, and it suddenly occurred to me, Why not go to Central Asia? "Well, I shall try it," was my remark. "What, Timbuctoo?" said my friend. "No, Central Asia;" and I showed

him the paragraph. "You will never get there; they will stop you." "They can if they like, but I don't think they will." And this trifling incident was the first thing which put the idea into my head of again attempting to reach Khiva.

I had intended to go there some few years ago, when the Russians were about to invade the country. I had even started on my journey, meaning to try and find a way into Khiva, *viâ* Persia and Merve, and, if possible, be with the Khivans at the time of the Russian attack. But this project was never realised. A typhoid fever, caught as I was rapidly travelling through Italy, laid me for four months on a bed of sickness. My leave thus was spent in a very different manner from that originally intended, and I had, as it is commonly termed, a much closer shave for my life than I believe would ever have been the case even if I had been taken prisoner by the most fanatical Turkomans in Central Asia. But the campaign was over. There would be no fighting to see. Our statesmen had learned how to appreciate a Russian's promises at their true value. Samarcand had been annexed to the Tzar's dominions, the Black Sea Treaty had been repudiated, and Russian troops were quartered in Khivan territory.*

According to some politicians Khiva was a long way from India, and it really did not signify to England whether Russia annexed it or not. Again, it was urged by others, if Russia does eventually reach our Indian frontier so much the better for England. We shall have a civilized nation as a neighbour instead of the barbarous Afghans. A third argument brought

* See Appendix A, The Russian Advance Eastward, and Appendix D, The Treaty with Khiva.

forward to defend the action of the Liberal Government was, that India did not signify so much to us after all, that she was a very expensive possession, and one which we should very likely have taken from us, but one certainly not worth fighting for. This was the opinion of some men who were high in office, and who thus lightly valued one of the brightest jewels in the British crown. The majority of our rulers did not trouble their heads much about the matter. India will last my time was the remark; Russia is still a long way off; and our grandchildren must look after themselves. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof; and after me the Deluge. Thus the question was allowed to drop, and the minds of our legislators were speedily engrossed in studying the important question as to which would be the better course to pursue—to allow Englishmen to go into public-houses after eleven o'clock at night, or to send them thirsty and supperless to bed.

The following autumn the Carlist War was going on, so I went to Spain. After a time my thoughts were no longer occupied with the state of affairs in Central Asia. It was only when my friend, in reply to my observation, had observed, "You will never get there; they will stop you," that it occurred to me to ask what possible reason the Russian Government could have for pursuing a line of policy which, easily understood when adopted by a barbarous nation like China, was a singular one for even a semi-civilized power. It was the more remarkable, as, from the days of Peter the Great, the regenerator of Russia, his successors have invariably encouraged the inhabitants of Western Europe to visit and freely circulate throughout the Imperial dominions. If it were not for the German

element, which is so largely diffused throughout the governing classes, Russia would never have arrived at even her present state of advancement. Of all the Tzars of Muscovy during the last 200 years the present Emperor is perhaps the sovereign most keenly alive to the advantage of raising the standard of civilization throughout his dominions, by admitting foreigners, particularly Germans, to every office in the empire. The repressive order to which I have alluded, thus absolutely cutting off Asiatic Russia from almost all contact with the more civilized inhabitants of Europe, was in striking contrast to the line of conduct which had previously characterized his reign.

There was, then, something behind the scenes—something that it was desired to hide from the eyes of Europe.

What could it be?

Were the generals in Central Asia treating the inhabitants of the conquered districts so cruelly, that the fear of this reaching the Emperor's ears—not through Russian sources, as this would be impossible, but through the medium of a foreign press—was the origin of the order? Or could it be that though no absolute cruelty had been shown to the people in the recently-acquired territory, they were being badly governed, and that the bribery and corruption which goes on in Western Russia had taken deeper root when transplanted to the far-off East? Or was it that the authorities in Turkistan, the enormous territory acquired by Russia within the last few years, were afraid of letting Europe know that instead of having raised the tone of morality amidst the inhabitants of Central Asia, the latter had in many instances brought the Russians down to an Oriental level, and that the

vices and depraved habits of the East were actually being acquired by some of the conquerors?

Judging from the accounts* of the few travellers who have succeeded in making a way into this comparatively speaking unknown country, any of the hypotheses above alluded to might have been the origin of the order. But I could not help thinking that there was something more behind the scenes than the mere wish to blind the eyes of Europe to these matters, or to appear as the apostles of Christianity—one of the pleas put forward by the Russian press to defend the system of annexation so steadily persevered in by the Government. There was something beyond all this; and in that something I felt convinced that the interests of Great Britain had a share. Peter the Great's will, or rather wishes, have not been forgotten by his successors. The proof of this is best shown by looking at a map of Russia as it was in his days and as it now exists; whilst in a recent staff map of Turkistan, 1875, the compiler has not even dotted in the boundary line from N. lat. 39°2′, E. long. 69°38′, to N. lat. 44°40, E. long. 79°49¾′, thus showing that the boundary line, in his opinion, has not yet been reached. When will that limit be attained? When is the Russian advance to be barred, and where? By the Himalayas, or by the Indian Ocean? This is a question, not for our grandchildren, nor our children, but for ourselves.

* See Appendix B, Report of Mr. Schuyler, and Appendix C, Russian Immorality in Central Asia, Extract from Major Wood's "Sea of Aral."

CHAPTER I.

Information about Khiva—Cold in Russia—East Wind—Russian Authorities—Count Schouvaloff—General Milutin—Christianity and Civilization—Anglo-Russian Railways in Central Asia—Preparations for the Journey—The Sleeping Bag—Cockle's Pills—Arms—Instruments—Apparatus for Cooking.

HAVING once resolved to go to Central Asia, the next question was how to execute my intention. On returning to England from Africa I eagerly read every book that could be found, and which seemed likely to give any information about the country which I proposed to visit. Vambéry's "Travels," Abbott's "From Herat to Khiva," and MacGahan's "Campaigning on the Oxus," were each in turn studied. Judging by the difficulties that the gallant correspondent of the *New York Herald* had to overcome before he carried his project of reaching Khiva into execution, I felt convinced that the task I had laid out for myself was anything but an easy one.

The time of year in which I should have to attempt the journey was another obstacle to the undertaking. My leave of absence from my regiment would only commence in December. I had already, in previous journeys through Russia, discovered what the term "cold" really means in that country. After reading of the weather experienced by Captain Abbott when travelling in the month of March, in a latitude a good deal to the south of that which seemed to me the most practicable, I felt certain that very careful prepara-

tions must be made for a ride through the steppes in mid-winter, or that I should inevitably be frozen. The cold of the Kirghiz desert is a thing unknown I believe in any other part of the world, or even in the Arctic regions. An enormous expanse of flat country, extending for hundreds of miles, and devoid of everything save snow and salt lakes, and here and there *saksaool*, a species of bramble-tree, would have to be traversed on horseback ere Khiva could be reached. The winds in those parts of Asia are unknown to the inhabitants of Europe. When they grumble at the so-called east wind, they can little imagine what that wind is like in those countries which lie exposed to the full fury of its first onslaught. For there you meet with no warm ocean to mollify its rigour, no trees, no rising land, no hills or mountains to check it in its course. It blows on uninterruptedly over a vast snow and salt-covered track. It absorbs the saline matter, and cuts the faces of those exposed to its gusts. The sensation is more like the application of the edge of a razor than anything else to which it can be compared.

There was, besides this, something else to be taken into consideration. I was well aware that no assistance could be expected from the Russian authorities. They might not content themselves by indirectly throwing obstacles in my path, but might even stop me by sheer force if they found all other ways fail. The account of the prohibitory order which I had seen published in the English journal was, I had every reason to believe, correct. Should I not find, after crossing the Ural river, and entering Asia, that my long sleigh journey had been to no purpose, and have to retrace my steps through European Russia? These were my first impressions on arriving in

England; but on talking the matter over with some Russians of my acquaintance, they assured me that I was entirely mistaken; that, on the contrary, the authorities at St. Petersburg would readily permit English officers to travel in Central Asia. It was observed that the order to which I had alluded referred only to merchants or people who tried to smuggle contraband goods into the recently-annexed khanates.

A few months later I had the honour of making the acquaintance of his Excellency Count Schouvaloff, the Russian Ambassador in London, and formerly the head of the secret police at St. Petersburg. He was excessively kind, and promised to do what he could to further my plans, but in answer to a straightforward question as to whether I should be permitted to travel in Russian Asia or not, his reply was, "My dear sir, that is a subject about which I cannot give you any answer. The authorities at St. Petersburg will be able to afford you every possible information." It was a diplomatic answer—one which bound the Count to nothing—and I went away charmed with the tact and affability of the Russian Ambassador. Apparently there was nothing to be learned officially from Russian sources; but unofficially, and one by one, many little bits of information crept out. I now first learned that General Milutin, the Minister of War at St. Petersburg, was personally much opposed to the idea of an English officer travelling in Central Asia, particularly in that part which lies between the boundaries of British India and Russia. According to him, a Russian traveller, a Mr. Pachino, had not been well treated by the authorities in India.* This gentleman had

* This I believe to be incorrect, as also the other statement—that Mr. Pachino was not permitted to enter Afghanistan.