

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04638-1 - Through the Heart of Asia: Over the Pamir to India: Volume 1

Gabriel Bonvalot

Excerpt

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THROUGH THE HEART OF ASIA.

(OVER THE PAMİR TO INDIA.)

CHAPTER I.

FROM MARSEILLES TO TIFLIS.

Marseilles—At sea—The Dardanelles—In a café—The school—Soldiers—Rumours of war—Recruiting—A word in favour of the Turks—The Bosphorus—Passengers—The low-lying lands—Trebizond—A naphtha city—A virgin forest—Scenery of the Rion—An old acquaintance.

BEFORE leaving Marseilles and France, we take a last look, from the summit of the Aix gateway, at that picturesque city, with its steep streets, its hills covered with houses, its quays swarming with people who gain their living out of the blue sea, upon which the church of Notre-Dame de la Garde looks down from afar. It is from the quay of La Joliette that we embark on board the *Anatolie*, a fine vessel, which is to carry us to Batum, together with tons of sugar, iron, blacking, soap, English stuffs, Marseilles coffee, nails, and what not. The *Anatolie* belongs to the company of Messrs. Paquet Brothers, who, in spite of the badness of the times, were kind enough to take us at reduced fares, for which we are glad to seize this opportunity of thanking them, as well as for the way in which we were treated while on board. The voyage was not to seem a lengthy one to us, for our captain, whose name

R

is Boschell, was a very cheery Breton, though that did not prevent him from being, as his men said, a thorough sailor.

But here we are under way. There is a slight mist along the coast. We pass the Château d'If, Frioul, and La Ciotat; Toulon lies hidden in a hollow of the coast to the left. The land gradually disappears, as if it was sinking behind the horizon. A few more revolutions of the screw and we can see nothing of France, not even a buoy. Even the gulls which have escorted us so far take wing back to the shore. We are unmistakably on our way to Central Asia, with the intention of travelling through the Caucasus, Lenkoran, Persia, Afghanistan, and, if possible, the Turkoman country and Bactriana. Perhaps we may reach the Kafiristan—unless, indeed, circumstances, which so often get the mastery of one, force us in some other direction. We are as much at their mercy as a nutshell upon the crest of a wave.

Upon the morning of March 1st, we enter the Dardanelles, having some cargo to land, and the *Anatolie* has scarcely had time to cast anchor before we are beset by a crowd of boatmen. Many of them are Greeks, and very free of speech. The Turks are more calm, and one old man, with a white beard, keeps on saying for a quarter of an hour, with praiseworthy pertinacity, “Mossou, embarcar? Embarcar, mossou?” He is imperturbable, while all the rest are shouting and gesticulating. Some of the passengers begin to bargain in a mixture of the Auvergnat, Italian, and Gascon dialects, plentifully interlarded with “Mossou” and gestures by way of explanation.

Despite the rain, we make up our mind to go ashore in one of the boats of the *Anatolie*, and, like the true land-lubbers that we all three are, we were delighted to feel our feet, muddy though the quay was.

Although we felt ourselves to be still in Europe, owing no doubt to the rainy weather, Dardanelles did not strike us as being

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a very gay sort of a place, and I can quite fancy that the officers whom we saw seated on the worn divans of the Café de l'Hellespont do not have a very merry time of it. When we went there, they were smoking the chibook, drawing long whiffs, and the only sound one could hear was the rattle of the dice they were casting in silence. One of them was reading a paper, which he handed with a smile to the person sitting next to him, and pointed with his finger to a sentence which seemed to amuse him. This was the latest piece of news about the war supposed to be brewing between Greece and Turkey. We seated ourselves at a table, drawing up some heavy chairs, coarsely stuffed and painted blue. Coffee was then served us, and while the dregs were settling down at the bottom of the tiny cups, we had a look at the gaudy drawings which ornamented the dripping walls. First there was the Sultan, surrounded by his family—a man with a tremendous stomach and orders on his breast, a pointed beard, regular features, and a fez. Then there were coloured lithographs of different Turkish functionaries, with words in Turkish and in French describing their rank. Finally, there were four stout ladies, very lightly clad, meant to represent the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. These ladies were represented in nonchalant attitudes, and smiled down from their frames upon the customers of the establishment. There was even a billiard table, with balls which had all the polish off them and wobbled about in the most uncertain fashion. I must not forget, moreover, some busts, with red paint on the cheeks and black moustaches. This is a faithful description of the best café in Dardanelles, where we waited for a break in the storm, to have a look at the town. Troy was not far off, but we had no time to go and offer a sacrifice upon the tomb of Achilles, and we walked about till the whistle of the *Anatolie* summoned us back on board.

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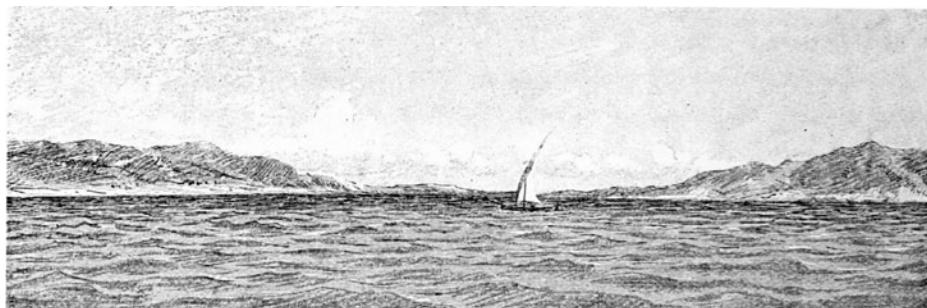
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We went in the direction of the barracks, passing on our way through the bazaar, where several of the merchants spoke our language but did not keep our goods for sale. I saw articles of English, German, Austrian and Bulgarian make, but those labelled as French were evidently counterfeit, as the mistakes of spelling proved. And when we asked the keeper of one shop to sell us something French, he offered us these imitations. We pointed out to him that even the label was incorrectly imitated, and his answer was, "I know that, but your goods cost too much." This was a reply which I was to get very often in the course of my travels.



STRAITS OF MESSINA.

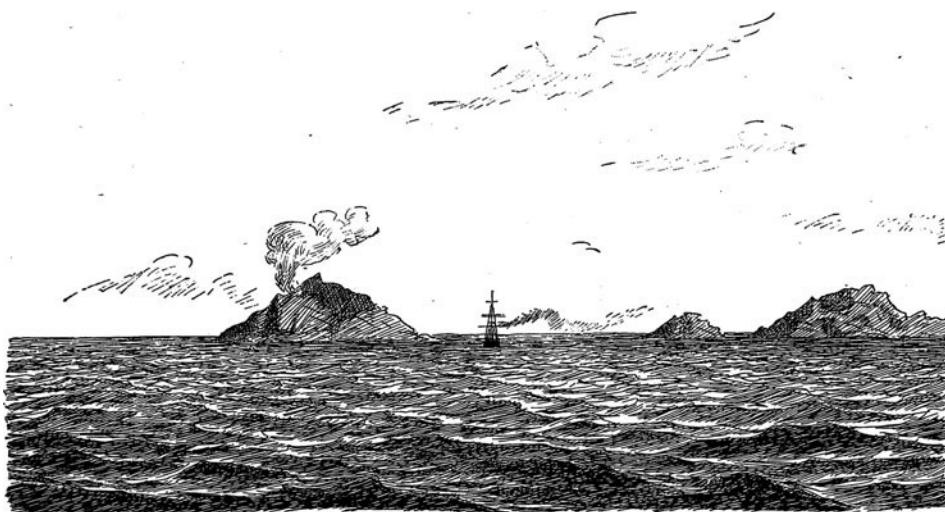
Next we see some little girls going to school in the company of their brothers, each of them with a bag of books slung over their shoulders. They all of them looked dirty and untidy, but they had honest, ruddy faces, with strong athletic figures. They went one by one through the muddy roads, lifting their feet very high, and laughing at one another when they got splashed, full of life and spirits, like all young children.

The fort did not give one the idea of being impregnable, but the soldiers garrisoned in it looked hale and vigorous. Badly clad in the cast-off garments of European clothing depôts, they had, nevertheless, a martial air, and belonged to the proud race of Anatolia.

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But our vessel sounded her whistle, and we had to go back on board, for in an hour she would have completed her cargo, and we should be continuing our voyage. Just as we are starting, an English vessel arrives from Syria with a body of recruits. The anchor is let down in a twinkling, and the cargo is at once landed. This consists of Arabs with long, thin faces ; still young, and concealing their tattered garments beneath a burnous which once was white. Some of them are to be left at Dardanelles, and they are poured out, so to speak, from the vessel into boats, where they are



STROMBOLI.

wedged in with their luggage, which is but scanty. Some of them carry a half-filled knapsack ; others have all their belongings tied up in a handkerchief, while their provisions consist of wheaten cakes, not bigger than the palm of the hand, and onions, the green stalks of which they seem to enjoy very much. Upon the deck are a number of cavalry soldiers and their horses, bound for Constantinople. When the boats make off from the side of the vessel, the Arabs utter discordant cries of adieu, raising their hands to heaven, placing them upon their mouth, pressing them to their heart, and gesticulating like lunatics ; as each boat puts off,

there is a fresh outburst of groans, and the tumult does not subside until all the white burnouses are seen to be safe on the quay.

The remainder are crouched patiently beside their horses ; the anchor is weighed, and the vessel, carrying the British colours, whistles and steams off with these Asiatics, who will be hastily initiated into the first principles of warfare before the conference is ended or the Greeks have invaded the peninsula with a courage derived from Leonidas of Lacedemonia.

We start in dull weather, and heavy clouds are passing over from Europe to Troas ; in other words, the wind is blowing from the north. First we pass the fort of Dardanelles, with its guns pointed upon the strait, the passage of which is forbidden to all vessels at night. To the left is Gallipoli, which, with its white minarets, rises story above story close to the cliffs, great blocks of which are constantly slipping down into the sea. The wind brings us the strident notes of some trumpet practice. So we enter the Sea of Marmora, navigating, as we are told, in neutral waters, *à propos* of which we noticed a touching exchange of sympathies between the passengers. There was a Greek who did not like the Turks ; a Genoese who liked neither the Greeks nor the Armenians ; an Armenian who did not like the Greeks, the Armenians, or the Turks ; Turks who did not say anything against anybody, and more than one Frenchman on board who shook them heartily by the hand. And we are told that we are all brothers !

We reached Constantinople in the rain, and it was no easy matter for our vessel to get a berth in the port, which was crowded with shipping and traversed by rapid currents. I am not going to attempt a description of Constantinople, which has already been so well done. Moreover, the landscape as we saw it, between two snowstorms, was not well lighted up, as a painter would say. It is true that we got a few sunbeams, which made the Golden Horn,

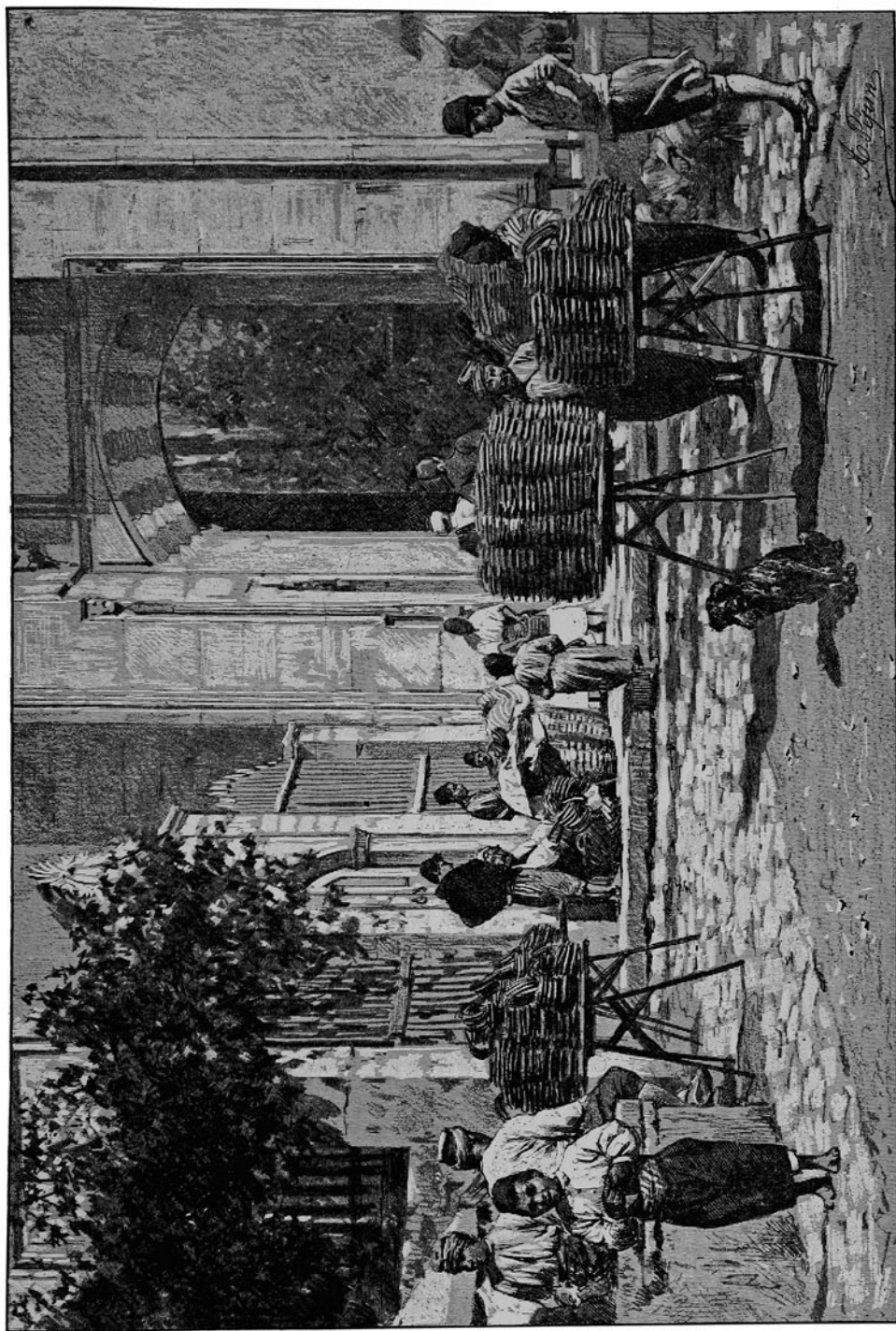
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A STREET CORNER AT CONSTANTINOPLE.

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Stamboul, Pera, and Galata to sparkle, but the magic spectacle scarcely lasted a moment.

We passed most of the time at our disposal wandering about the picturesque streets of Stamboul and exploring the bazaars. We noticed there strong men carrying enormous loads which bent them to the very earth. They would stop now and again and lean up against the wall to catch breath, then going painfully on their way, slipping upon the wet pavement, clogged by the thick mud, the sweat pouring from their foreheads, and yet, as soon as they had got rid of one load, going back to fetch another. There was no sign of discouragement to be read upon their placid faces, and they had in their eyes the same resigned and fixed look that may be seen in the eyes of the oxen yoked to heavy cars. They were very thin, and most of them spoke in Turkish. Other men, fat and well-liking, seated at ease in the shops, watched, chibook in mouth, these beasts of burden go by; some of them conversing in all kinds of languages; the majority with hooked noses, knit eyebrows, and sallow complexions. The first feed upon onions, cucumbers, rice, bread, and water; they live and die poor. The others are the foreign dealers, who have a well-spread table and grow rich. Eager to amass wealth, they lead a life of uneasiness and feverish agitation. They are unanimous in admitting that the Turks are honourable and trustworthy people, full of energy for work when they are sure of being paid. This is, in brief, typical of all Turkey.

Are we as much entitled as we fancy to reproach with lack of initiative, idleness, and sloth these Turks, who work to pay the debts of extravagant sultans, whom the tax-gatherers would not leave enough to live upon were it not that the raias must be kept alive to supply the treasury of the European bankers? If the bankers are justified in demanding repayment of the sums they have advanced, are the raias of Asia Minor to be blamed

if they are content to live from hand to mouth? Have we not ourselves experienced lassitude of the same kind, less than a century ago? Can we blame a man for not caring to cultivate a field, the produce of which will not repay him for the toil of ploughing and sowing it? We are so in the habit of "letting the Turk have it" that I feel almost compelled to apologize for having in some measure spoken in his defence.

We leave Constantinople at daybreak. The clouds have cleared, and the city stands out in the sunlight. We pass in front of palaces reflected in the water, and rising upon the shores of Stamboul like screens put to hide some dirty object, like a rich and gorgeous mantle covering rags. The sun gives a smile to all this, but it is the feigned smile of sorrow. We indulge in these 'metaphors as we follow the windings of the Bosphorus, with its well-wooded shores, where the cypress and the pine tree form a mass of verdure around the palaces and villas of the rich. The channel winds about, so that one imagines one's self to be first in one lake and then in another. Right and left, we see villas and palaces, meeting steamers which emit guttural cries, and barks with sails swelling like the wings of white swans, and long boats with many oarsmen gliding through the water like a spider moving its legs by automatic short strokes. Then there are the ruins of fortresses, the white tents of the soldiers, and retrenchments above which the cannon stretch their long headless necks. As we emerge from the Bosphorus we can feel the swell of the Black Sea, angry and agitated, lashing the shore with its waves. We make eastward, and the continent seems to open out to our left, and then the coast is lost in mist to our stern. Upon our right is the land of Asia Minor, parallel with which we are steaming, with undulating mountains of no great height skirting the shore, but here and there a snowy peak behind them piercing the clouds. We have some fresh passengers on deck—shepherds