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SKETCHES

OF

CENTRAL ASIA.

ADDITIONAL CHAPTERS

ON

MY TRAVELS, ADVENTURES,

AND ON THE

ETHNOLOGY OF CENTRAL ASIA.

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CHAPTER XI.

THE ROUND OF LIFE IN BOKHARA.

"HADJI! Thou hast, I am sure, seen many countries—tell me now, is there another city in the world in which it is so agreeable to reside as Bokhara?" Such was the inquiry with which I was frequently greeted in the Tartar capital, even by men who had already several times visited India, Persia, and Turkey. My answer upon these occasions it is not of course difficult to divine. Questions of a nature so delicate are an embarrassment to the traveller when he is in Paris, London, or St. Petersburg, just as much as when he is in Constantinople, Teheran, or Bokhara. One encounters egotism everywhere.

Bokhara, the focus of Tartar civilization, posesses beyond a doubt much to remind one of a capital, particularly when a man enters it as a traveller, coming immediately from a journey of many weeks through deserts and solitudes. As for the luxury of its dwellings, its dresses, and manner of living, that hardly merits attention at all when compared with what is to be seen in the cities of Western Asia. Still it has its peculiarities, which prevent one wondering so much

that habit and partiality dispose the Bokhariot to be proud of his native city.

The houses, built of mud and wood, present, with their crooked paintless walls, a gloomier appearance than the dwellings of other Mohammedan cities. On entering the court through the low gateway, one fancies oneself in a fortress. On all the sides there are high walls, which serve as a protection, not so much against thieves as against the amatory oglings of intriguing neighbours. In Bokhara, the most shameless sink of iniquity that I know in the East, a glance even from a distance is regarded as dishonouring! The number of the separate apartments varies with the fortune of the proprietor. The more important part of them comprises the harem, styled here Enderun (the inner penetralia), the smaller room for guests, and the hall for receptions. This last is the most spacious, as well as the most ornamented apartment in the house, and, like the other rooms, has a double ceiling, with a space between used as a storeroom. The floor is paved with bricks and stones, and has only carpets round the sides near the walls. Rectangular stones, which have been hollowed out, are placed in a corner—a comfortable contrivance enabling the owner to perform the holy ablutions in the room itself. This custom is met with in no other Mohammedan country. The walls have no particular decorations; those, however, which are nearest to Mekka are painted with flowers, vases, and arabesques

of different kinds. The windows are mere openings, each with a pair of shutters. Glass is seen nowhere, and few take the trouble to use paper smeared with fat as a substitute. Articles of furniture, still rarities throughout the East, are here scarcely known by name; but this need not excite surprise, for often have I heard Orientals who have visited Europe exclaim: "Is not that a stupid custom among the Frengi, that they so crowd their handsome, spacious rooms with such a heap of tables, sofas, chairs, and other things, that they have hardly place left to seat themselves in any comfort!" Of course meaning on the ground.

The expenditure upon the wardrobe is on a footing with the style of each house and its arrangement. Cloth is rarely met with: it serves for presents from the Khan to his officials of high rank. Different qualities of the Aladja (cotton) are employed by all classes, from king to dervish, for winter and summer. Although the Bokhariot over-garment has the form of a night dress extending down to the ankles, still it is subject from time to time to little innovations as to cut, sleeve, collar, and trimming, in accordance with the fashion of the moment, which is as much respected in Bokhara as in Paris. A dandy in the former city takes especial care to have his turban folded according to the idea in force at the moment, as an evidence of good taste. He sees particularly to his shawl, by which he binds his trousers round the loins, and to

his koshbag suspended to that shawl. The koshbag is a piece of leather consisting of several tongues, to which are fastened a knife or two, a small tea-bag, a miswak (toothpick), and a leathern bag for copper money. These articles constitute the indispensables of a Central Asiatic, and by the quality and value of each is a judgment formed of the character and breeding of the man.

Whoever may wish to see the *haute volée*, the fashionable world of Bokhara, should post himself on a Friday, between ten and twelve o'clock in the forenoon, in the street leading from Deri Rigistan to the Mesdjidi Kelan, or great mosque. At this time the Ameer, followed by his grandees, in great state, betakes himself to his Friday's devotions. All are in their best attire, upon their best horses; for these, with their splendid housings, serve as substitutes for carriages. The large, stiff, silken garments of staring colours are in striking contrast with the high and spurred boots. But what produces a particularly comic effect is the loose and waddling gait which all pedestrians studiously put on. Reftari khiraman (the waddling or trotting step), which Oriental poets find so graceful, comparing it to the swaying movement of the cypress when agitated by the zephyrs, and whose attainment is the subject of careful study in Persia as well as Bokhara, to us Europeans seems like the gait of a fatted goose floundering on his way home. But this is no subject for me to jest upon, for our stiff, rapid pace is just

as displeasing to an Oriental eye, and it would not be very polite to mention the comparison they make use of with repect to us.

It does not excite less wonder on our part when we see the men in Bokhara clad in wide garments of brilliant colour, whereas the women wear only a dress that is tight to the shape, and of a dark hue. For in this city, where the civilization has retained with the greatest fidelity its antique stamp of Oriental Islamism, women, ever the martyrs of Eastern legislation, come in for the worst share.

In Turkey the contact with Christian elements has already introduced many innovations, and the Yaschmak (veil) is rather treated as part of the toilette than as the ensign of slavery. In Persia the women are tolerably well muffled up, still they wear the Tchakshur (pantaloons and stockings in one piece) of brilliant colouring and silken texture, and the Rubend (a linen veil with network for the eyes) is ornamented with a clasp of gold. In Bokhara, on the other hand, there is not a trace of tolerance. The women wear nothing that deserves to be named full dress or ornament. When in the streets, they draw a covering over their heads, and are seen clad in dark gowns of deep blue, with the empty sleeves hanging suspended to their backs, so that observed from behind, the fair ones of Bokhara may be mistaken for clothes wandering about. From the head down to the bosom they wear a veil made of horsehair, of a

texture which we in Europe would regard as too bad and coarse for a sieve, and the friction of which upon cheek or nose must be anything but agreeable. Their *chaussures* consist of coarse heavy boots, in which their little feet are fixed, enveloped in a mass of leather. Such a costume is not in itself attractive; but even so attired, they dare not be seen too often in the streets. Ladies of rank and good character never venture to show themselves in any public place or bazaar. Shopping is left to the men; and whenever any extraordinary emergency obliges a lady to leave the house and to pay visits, it is regarded as *bon ton* for her to assume every possible appearance of decrepitude, poverty, and age.

To send forth a young lady in her eighteenth or twentieth year, in all the superabundant energy of youth, supported upon a stick, and thus muffled up, in the sole view that the assumption of the characteristics of advanced life may spare her certain glances, may be justly deemed the *ne plus ultra* of tyranny and hypocrisy. These erroneous notions of morality are to be met with, more or less, everywhere in the East; but nowhere does one find such striking examples of Oriental exaggeration as in that seat of ancient Islamite civilization, Bokhara. In Constantinople, as well as other cities of Turkey, there are certain Seir-yeri (promenades), where ladies appear in public. In Teheran, Ispahan, and Shiraz, it is the custom for the Hanims, *en grande toilette*, and mounted

on magnificent horses, to make excursions to the places of pilgrimage situate in the environs of those cities. The tomb of the Said is the place of rendezvous, and instead of prayers, reciprocal declarations of love are not seldom made. In Bokhara, on the contrary, there is not a shadow of all this. Never have I seen there a man in the company of his wife. The husband slinks away from his other half, or third, or fourth, as the case may be; and it is a notorious fact, that when the wives of the Ameer pass by any place, all men are expected to beat a hasty retreat. Under such circumstances it is easy to see how society must constitute itself, and what shapes it must assume. Where the two sexes are so separated, it can never put on an appearance of gladness and geniality; all becomes compulsion and hypocrisy; every genuine sentiment is crushed by these unnatural laws which are imposed as God's ordinances, and as such expected to be observed with the strictest obedience.

To study that part of their lives which is before the public eye, we must first pay a visit to the tea-booths, which are the resorts of all classes. The Bokhariot, and the remark applies indeed universally to all Central Asiatics, can never pass by a second or third tea-booth without entering, unless his affairs are very urgent indeed. As I before mentioned, every man carries with him his little bag of tea: of this, on his entry, he gives a certain portion to the landlord, whose business is rather to deal in hot water than in tea.

During day-time, and particularly in public places, the only tea drunk is green tea, which is served without sugar, and with the accompaniment of a relish or two, consisting of little cakes made of flour and mutton suet; for the making of these Bokhara is famous. As any attempt to cool tea by blowing upon it, however urgent on account of its heat some such process may be, is regarded as highly indecorous—nay, as an unpardonable offence—the Central Asiatic is wont to make it revolve for this purpose in the cup itself until the temperature is tolerable. To pass for a man *comme il faut*, one must support the right elbow in the left hand, and gracefully give a circular movement to the cup; no drop must be spilt, for such an awkwardness would much damage a reputation for *savoir faire*. The Bokhariot can thus chatter away hours and hours, amidst his fellow tea-drinkers; for the meaningless conversations that are maintained weary him as little as the cup after cup of tea which he swallows. It is known to a second how much time is required for each kind of tea to draw. Every time the tea-pot is emptied, the tea-leaves that have been used are passed round: etiquette forbids any one to take more than he can hold between finger and thumb, for it is regarded by connoisseurs as the greatest dainty.

They seek to find amusements of a higher kind in excursions to the environs of the city. These are made sometimes to the tombs of the saints; sometimes to the convents of certain Ishans (sheiks), in the

odour of sanctity; sometimes to the Tchiharbag Abdullah Khan, situate near the Dervaze Imam. The visit to a Khanka, that is to a dignitary of religion still instinct with life, is an act of more importance and involving greater outlay than the pilgrimage to a grave. The sainted men, whether departed or still living, have equally their fixed days for levées and receptions. In the former case the descendants of his Sanctity receive the tribute, in the latter a man has the good fortune to have his purse emptied by the holy hands themselves. On the occasion of these formal visits the Ishans are tuned to a higher pitch than ordinary, and as the holy eye distinguishes at once by the exterior of the visitor the amount of the offering that is to be received, so does that measure serve to fix with precision how long or how short the benediction is to be cut. Scenes of this kind, in which I performed my part as a spectator, or stood by, were always full of interest to me; and one, over which I have had many a hearty laugh, has made an indelible impression upon my mind. In the environs of Bokhara, I entered the residence of a sheikh to ask for his blessing and a little assistance in money. Upon the first point no difficulty was made, but the second seemed to stagger him. At this moment a Turkoman was announced as an applicant for a Fatiha. He was allowed to enter. His holiness made his hocus-pocus with the greatest devotion. The Turkoman sat there like an innocent lamb, and after being subjected to the

influences of the sanctifying breath, energetically administered, he dived into his money-bag, from which he extracted some pieces of coin, and, without counting them, transferred them to the hand of him from whom he had received the benediction. I noticed that the latter rubbed the money betwixt his fingers, and was really astounded when he beckoned to me, and without once looking at the number of pieces, handed them over to me in the presence of the Turkoman. That was real liberality, the reader may say. I thought so myself until coming to the bazaar and seeking to make a purchase from a baker, one of the coins was rejected by him as false. I tendered the others, and they were all pronounced to be bad—valueless. The nomad, as crafty as he was superstitious, had paid for the spurious ware with spurious money, and as his holiness on his side had at once detected the cheat by the touch, he had no scruple in making it over to me.

On the occasion of their excursions to the environs of the city, persons of wealth are in the habit of taking with them their tea-things, and a servant to prepare tea. Those who are not so well off have recourse to establishments that are to be found at these places of resort. Visitors evince just as much desire to hide themselves, where possible, in the booths, as they do to avoid encamping close to the road. As it is the approved custom to invite every passer-by, be he of what rank he may, to take some refreshment of food or

drink, each host entertains an apprehension, not unjustified by experience, lest those whom he accosts, not content with returning for answer the ordinary word expressive of gratitude—khôsh (well)—may actually close at once with the invitation. Still, not to give it is everywhere regarded as a mean sin. Conditional acceptance only is usual in some places. These rules of hospitality so exaggerated, and at the same time so specious, operate oppressively and unpleasantly, both on him that takes and him that gives; and the confounded, I might almost say the aghast, air of the host who is taken at his word always produced upon me the drollest effect.

Tha spectacle which these private parties of pleasure generally afford is one of no great gladness, they rather seem to produce a deadly-lively effect. The significant joke, the peal of laughter, the loud cry are, it is true, none of them wanting on these occasions; but where the crown of society, woman, is absent, all is in vain, and never can life assume its real aspect of genuine enjoyment.

If I do not err, it is the Tchiharbag Abdullah Khan that still preserves most of the characters of a public place of entertainment. It is a spot well shaded by lofty trees; a canal flows through it, to whose banks the pupils of the numerous colleges and the young men belonging to the wealthier classes, resort generally on Friday afternoons. The inevitable tea-kettle is here again in requisition, and tea is the article for

which the place is renowned; but not the only one, for the combats of rams are here celebrated also. The savageness with which these sturdy animals rush against each other when irritated, the fearful shock of their two heads, particularly when they struggle to push their antagonists back, present a spectacle very attractive to the inhabitant, not only of Bokhara, but of every part of Central Asia. What the bull-fight is in Spain, and horse-racing in England, these combats of rams are in Turkestan. The rams are trained to this sport, and it is really surprising how these brutes support with obstinacy often as many as one hundred charges. When they first make their appearance on the avenue, the bystanders begin to wager as to the number of shocks their chosen champion will support. Sometimes the weaker combatant beats a retreat; but very often the battle only ends with the entire discomfiture of one animal, consequent upon the cracking of his skull. It is a cruel spectacle; still the cruelty does not seem so great in the middle of Tartary as some of the sports in which so many civilised nations of the West still find amusement.

Let me now attempt to portray in the following slight sketch the external mode of living in Bokhara. In the morning—I mean by the term before sunrise, as by religious compulsion every man is an early riser—one encounters people, half-asleep, and half-awake, and half-dressed, hurrying one by one to the mosques:

any delay in arriving not only entails reproach, but is considered as meriting punishment. The stir made by these devotees in running through the streets rouses the houseless dogs from their lairs in the out-of-the-way corners or upon the heaps of dung. These famished, horrid-looking animals—yet contrasted with their Stambouli brethren, presenting a princely appearance—are crying proofs of the miserly nature of the Bokhariots. The poor creatures first struggle to rear their gaunt frames, mere skin and bone, from sleep; then they rub their rough, hairless carcases, against the mouldering walls, and this toilette at an end, they start upon their hunt for a *dejeûner à la fourchette*, for the most part made up of a few fleshless bones or carrion, but very often of kicks in the ribs administered by some compassionating and charitable inhabitant of Bokhara. At the same time as the dogs, awake the hardly-better lodged Parias of the Tartar capital—I mean the wretched men afflicted with incurable and contagious skin diseases, who sit at the corners of the streets *en famille*, and house in miserable tents. In Persia they are met with, remote from cities and villages, on the high roads; but here, owing to the absence of sanitary regulations, they are tolerated in the middle of the city. Their lot is far the most terrible to which any son of earth can have to submit, and unhappily they are long livers too. Whilst the mother is clothing her other accursed offspring with a scanty covering of rags, the father seats himself with

the most disfigured one amongst them by the roadside, in order to solicit charity and alms from those who pass. Charity and alms to prolong such an existence!

After the sun has looked long enough upon this miserable spectacle, the city in all its parts begins slowly to assume animation. The people return in crowds from the mosques; they are encountered on their way by troops of asses laden with wood, corn, grass, large pails of milk, and dishes of cream, pressing from all the city gates, and forcing their way in varied confusion through the narrow and crooked streets. Screams of alarm from the drivers, the reciprocal cries issuing from those who buy and those who sell, mix with that mighty hee-haw of the asses for which Bokhara is renowned. To judge by the first impression, it might be supposed that the different drivers would be obliged to fish out their wood from milk, their grass from cream, charcoal from corn, silkworm-cocoons from skimmed milk. But no, nothing is spilt, nothing thrown down; the drivers are wont to flog each other through in right brotherly fashion, till in the end all arrives in safety at its destination.

At an hour after sunrise the Bokhariot is already seated with his cup of Schirtschaj (milk-tea): this beverage is composed of tea made from bricks of tea in the form of Kynaster, and abundantly flavoured with milk, cream, or mutton fat. This favourite drink of the Tartars, in which large quantities of bread are broken, would be more rightly described as a soup;

and although the treat was highly commended to me, I had great difficulty in getting accustomed to it.

After tea begins the day's work, and then one remarks particular activity in the streets. Porters loaded with great bales hurry to the bazaar. These goods belong to the retail dealers, who every evening pack up their shop and transport it to their own house. And then a long chain of two-humped camels that have no burdens are being led into the Karavanserai, destined to convey the produce of Central Asia in every direction. Here, again, stands a heavily-laden caravan from Russia, accompanied on its way by the prying eyes of the custom-house officials and their cohorts, for those long bales contain valuable productions of the industry of the unbelievers, and are destined accordingly to be doubly taxed. Merchants of all religions and from all nations run after the caravan; the newly-arrived wares find customers even before they are unpacked, and at such moments Afghans, Persians, Tadjiks, and Hindoos, seem to get more excited than is the case even with the heroes of the Exchange in Paris, Vienna, or Frankfort-on-the-Maine. The Kirghis camel-driver, fresh from the desert, is the quietest of all; he is lost in astonishment, and knows not whether most to admire the splendour of the mud huts, the colour of the dresses, or the crowds swaying to and fro. But the greatest source of amusement to me was to observe how the Bokhariot, in his quality of inhabitant of a metropolis,

jeers at these nomads; how he is constantly on the alert to place the rudeness of the sons of the desert in relief by contrasting it with his own refinement and civilisation. Whilst the bazaar life, with all its alarm, tumult, shrieks, cries, hammering, scolding, and knocking, is in full force, the youths greedy of knowledge swarm about the numerous Medresse (colleges), there to learn to extract from their useless studies lessons of a more exalted kind of stupidity and a more grovelling hypocrisy.

The greatest interest attaches to the primary school posted in the very centre of the bazaar, and often in the immediate neighbourhood of between ten and fifteen coppersmiths' workshops. The sight of this public school, in which a Mollah, surrounded by several rows of children, gives his lessons in reading, in spite of the noise, is really comical. That, in a place where sturdy arms are brandishing hammers, hardly a single word is audible, we may readily suppose. Teachers and pupils are as red in the face as turkey-cocks from crying out, and yet nothing but the wild movement of the jaw and the swelling of the veins indicate that they are studying.*

In the afternoon (I speak here of summer-time, for of the winters I have no personal experience), there is more tranquillity both in bazaar and street. On the

* Schools thus placed in the middle of the bazaar are also met with in Persia: these are the cheapest schools for children, still it is incredible that the Orientals should suffer such a stupid practice to exist, and that they do not remove these establishments for instruction to some less disturbed situation.

banks of the water reservoir and of the canals, the true believers are engaged in performing the holy ablutions. Whilst one man is washing his feet from their layer of sweat and dirt, his neighbour uses the same water for his face, and a third does not scruple to quench his thirst with it. Water that consists of more than one hundred and twenty pints is, according to the texts of Islam, blind; which means that filth and dirt lose themselves therein, and the orthodox have the privilege to enjoy every abomination as a thing pure in itself. After a service in the mosques, all becomes again animated; it is the second summons to work during the day, for a period by no means so long. The Mussulman population soon begin their evening holiday, whilst Jews and Hindoos still remain busy. The former, who are for the most part employed in the handicraft of silk dyers, move stealthily and timidly through the streets, their spirits broken by their long and heavy servitude; the latter run about like men possessed, and their bold bearing shows that their home is not far off, and the time not so remote when they also had a government of their own.

It is now within three hours of sunset. The élite of society betake themselves to the Khanka (convent), to enjoy a treat, semi-religious and semi-literary. It consists in the public reading of the Mesnevi, which is declaimed at that time of the day by an experienced reader in the vestibule of the Khanka. This masterpiece of Oriental poesy presents in its contemplations of

terrestrial existence much elevation of thought. Versification, language, metaphors, are, in reality, full of charm and beauty; but the audience in Bokhara are incapable of understanding it, and their enthusiasm is all affectation. I often had seated at my side on these occasions a man who, in his excitement, would emit deep-drawn sighs, and even bellow like a bull. I was quite amazed; and when I afterwards made enquiry as to his character, I heard that he was one of the meanest of misers, the proprietor of many houses, yet ready to make obeisance for even the smallest copper coin. No one is at all inclined to adopt the sentiment he hears there as the rule of his life, and still it is regarded as becoming to be deeply impressed by the beauty of the expression. Every one knows that the sighs and exclamation of his neighbour proceed from no genuine emotion, and still all vie in these demonstrations of extraordinary feeling.

Even before the last beams of the setting sun have lost themselves in the wide waste of sand on the west, the Tartar capital begins to repose. As the coolness commences, the stifling clouds of dust subside. Where canals or water-reservoirs are near at hand, they are rendered available—the ground is watered and then swept. The men seat themselves in the shade to wait for the Ezan (evening prayer); that heard, an absolute stillness ensues, and soon all are seated before the colossal dish of pilau, and after they have well loaded their stomachs with this heavy and greasy meal,

any desire they may have felt to leave the house is quite extinguished. Two hours after sunset all the thoroughfares are as silent as death. No echo is heard in the darkness of the night but the heavy tread of the night-watchman making his rounds. These men are charged to put in force the strictest police regulations against thieves and seekers of love adventures; they scruple not to arrest any man, however honourable his position, if his foot crosses his threshold after the beat of the tattoo has issued its order that all the world should sleep.

What in this mode of town life so pleases the Bokhariot—what makes him give so marked a preference to his own capital—is not difficult to divine. His mind has become familiarized with a simple mode of living, in which, as yet, little luxury is to be found, and which, in externals, admits not much perceptible distinction between ranks and conditions of men. A universal acquiescence in the same poverty, or to use a more appropriate expression, the absence of different degrees of visible property, makes Bokhara, in the eye of many Asiatics, a favourite residence. I once met a Persian in Teheran who had been a slave in Bokhara fifteen years. And there, in the middle of his fatherland, and surrounded by his relatives, he sighed and pined for the Tartar capital. At the outset he was delighted with the bazaars, filled with articles of European luxury; he contemplated them with childish delight; but later he saw how the wealthier alone made their purchases,

and how all despised a man like him, clad in a cotton dress, the costume of the poor. No wonder his wish carried him again back to the spot where, at the time unconscious of his happiness, he was permitted to share great physical comfort, without a thorn in his eye or a pang in his heart.