

SKETCHES
OF
CENTRAL ASIA.

ADDITIONAL CHAPTERS

ON

MY TRAVELS, ADVENTURES,

AND ON THE

ETHNOLOGY OF CENTRAL ASIA.

BY

ARMINIUS VÁMBÉRY,

PROFESSOR OF ORIENTAL LANGUAGES IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF PESTH

PHILADELPHIA:

J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.

WM. H. ALLEN & CO., 13, WATERLOO PLACE,
PALL MALL, LONDON.

1868.

[All rights reserved.]

Reprint edition 1970 by Arno Press, Inc.

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 77-115593
ISBN No. 0-405-03069-X

Russia Observed
ISBN for complete set 0-405-03000-2

Reprinted from a copy in
the Newark Public Library

Manufactured in the United States of America

central Arabia, where cultivable land is not so much wanting as industrious hands. As regards these last countries, the assertion is probably not without some truth, but it certainly cannot be extended to the deserts of Central Asia. On certain spots, as Mero, Mangishlak, Ghergen, and Otrar, there was in the last century more cultivation than at present; but, taken as the whole, these Asiatic steppes were always, as far back as the memory of man goes, howling wildernesses. The vast tracts which stretch for many days' journeys without one drop of drinkable water, the expanses—many hundred miles in extent—of deep loose sand, the extreme violence of the climate, and such like obstacles, defy even modern art and science to cope with them. "God," said a central Asiatic to me, "created Turkestan and its inhabitants in his wrath; for as long as the bitter, saline taste of their springs exist, so long will the hearts of the Turkomans be full of anger and malice."

CHAPTER V.

THE TENT AND ITS INHABITANTS.

AN able critic of my "Travels in Central Asia" wrote—"Mr. Vambéry wandered because he has the wild spirit of dervishism strong within him." On first reading this it struck me as a little too strong, and I shall ever protest against such attribution of the title of vagabond, however refined may be the terms in which it is couched. Still I must candidly confess that the tent, the snail shell of the nomad, if I may be allowed so to call it, has left on my memory an ineffaceable impression. It certainly is a very curious feeling which comes over one when he compares the light tent with such seas of stone buildings as make up our European cities. The vice of dervishism is, to be sure, contagious, but happily not for everybody, so that there is no danger in accompanying me for a little while to Central Asia, and glancing at the contrast there presented to our fixed, stable mode of life.

It is almost noonday. A Kirghiz family, which has packed house and household furniture on the backs of a few camels, moves slowly over the desert towards a spot indicated to them by the raised lance of a distant

horseman. The caravan rests, according to nomad notions of rest, while thus on the march, to become lively and busy when they settle themselves down to repose according to our ideas. Nevertheless, the elder women seated on the bunches of camels (for the younger ones travel on foot), grudge themselves repose even then, and occupy their time in spinning a sort of yarn for sacks out of the coarser camels' hair. Only the marriageable daughter of the family enjoys the privilege of being completely at leisure on her shambling beast. She is polishing her necklace of coins, Russian, Ancient Bactrian, Mongolian, or Chinese, which hangs down to her waist. So engrossed is she in her employment, that an European numismatist might take her for a fellow connoisseur; nevertheless not a movement of the young Kirghizes, who seek to distinguish themselves by all manner of equestrian gymnastics, as they caracole around the caravan, escapes her notice.

At last the spot fixed on by the guide is reached. An inhabitant of cities might imagine that now the greatest confusion would arise. But no—everybody has his appointed office, everybody knows what he has to do, everything has its fixed place. While the pater-familias unsaddles his cooled horse and lets him loose on the pasture, the younger lads collect, with frightful clamour, the sheep and the camels, which are only too disposed to wander. They must stay to be milked. Meanwhile the tent has been taken down. The old matron seizes on the latticed framework and fixes it

in its place, spitting wildly right and left as she does so. Another makes fast the bent rods which form the vaulting of the roof. A third sets on the top of all a sort of round cover or lid, which serves the double purpose of chimney and window. While they are covering the woodwork with curtains of felt, the children inside have already hung up the provision-sacks, and placed the enormous tripod on the crackling fire. This is all done in a few moments. Magical is the erection, and as magical is the disappearance of the nomad's habitation. Still, however, the noise of the sheep and camels, of screaming women and crying children, resounds about the tent. They form, indeed, a strange chorus in the midst of the noonday silence of the desert. Milking-time, the daily harvest of these pastoral tribes is, however, the busiest time in the twenty-four hours. Especial trouble is given by the greedy children, whose swollen bellies are the result and evidence of an unlimited appetite for milk. The poor women have much to suffer from the vicious or impatient disposition of the beasts; but, although the men are standing by, the smallest help is rigorously refused, as it would be held the greatest disgrace for a man to take any part in work appointed to women.

Once, when I had, in Ettrek, obtained by begging a small sack of wheat, and was about to grind it in a handmill, the Turkomans around me burst out into shouts of laughter. Shocked and surprised, I asked the reason of their scornful mirth, when one approached

me in a friendly manner and said: "It is a shame for you to take in hand woman's work. But Mollahs and Hadjis are of course deficient in secular *savoir faire*, and one pardons them a great many such mistakes."

After the supply of milk has been collected, and all the bags of skins (for vessels of wood or of earthenware are purely articles of luxury) have been filled, the cattle, small and great, disperse themselves over the wide plain. The noise gradually dies away. The nomad retires into his tent, raises the lower end of the felt curtain, and while the west wind, rustling through the fretted wood-work, lulls him to sleep, the women outside set to work on a half-finished piece of felt. It is certainly an interesting sight to see how six, often more, of the daughters of the desert, in rank and file, roll out under their firm footsteps the felt which is wrapped up between two rush mats. An elderly lady leads this industrial dance and gives the time. It is she who can always tell in what place the stuff will be loose or uneven. The preparation of the felt, without question the simplest fabric which the mind of man has invented, is still in the same stage among these wandering tribes as when first discovered. The most common colour is grey. Particoloured felt is an article of luxury, and snowy white is only used on the most solemn occasions. Carpets are only to be found among the richer tribes, such as the Turkomans and the *Özbeqs*, as they require more skill in their manufacture and a closer contact with more advanced civilization.

The inwoven patterns are for the most part taken from European pocket-handkerchiefs and chintzes; and I was always surprised at the skill with which the women copied them, or, what is still more surprising, imitated them from memory after having once seen them.

While the poor women are fatiguing themselves with their laborious occupation, their lord and master is accustomed to snore through his noonday siesta. Soon the cattle return from their pasture ground and collect around the tent. Scarcely does the afternoon begin to grow cooler, than the migrating house is in a trice broken up, everything replaced on the backs of the camels, and the whole party in full march. This is already the second day of their journey, and yet all, men and beasts, are as lively as if they had dwelt for years on the spot, and, at length released from the talons of ennui, were delighted at the prospects of a change.

Long after sunset, while the endless waste of the desert is gradually being over-canopied by the clear starry heaven, the caravan still plods steadily, in order to rest during the colder hours of the night under the shelter of their warm felts. Quickly is their colossal *batterie de cuisine* placed on the fire; still more quickly is it emptied. No European can have any idea of the voracious appetite of a nomad.

The caravan has been scarcely an hour encamped before everybody has supped and retired to rest; the older members of the family within the tent, the younger

ones in the open air, their flocks around them. Only where a marriageable maiden lives is there any movement to be found. Among the nomad tribes of Central Asia, Islamism has not succeeded in carrying into effect its rigorous restrictions on the social intercourse of the sexes. The harem is here entirely unknown. The young nomad always knows by what star to direct his course in order to find the tent of his adored on the trackless desert. His appearance is seldom unexpected. The nomad young lady has already divined from what quarter the hoof-tramp will sound through the nightly stillness, and has already taken up an advanced post in that direction. It is scarcely necessary to observe that the conversation of the two children of the desert, in this their tender rendezvous, is not quite in unison with our ideas of æsthetical propriety; but poetry is to be found everywhere, nay, I might say, is more at home in the desert than in these western countries. Sometimes a whole company of loving couples come together, and on such occasions the dialogue, which must be in rhyme and adorned with the richest flowers of Tartar metaphor, seems as if it would never come to an end. I was at first enchanted with listening to such conversation; but how irritated I was when I had to pass the night in the same tent with such amorous society, and in spite of all the fatigue of the day could not find quiet slumbers to refresh me!

The above is but a faint picture of the life of the

nomads during the more agreeable portion of the year. In winter, especially in the more elevated regions, where severe cold prevails, this wandering life loses everything which can give it the least tinge of poetry in our eyes. Even the inhabitants of the cities of Central Asia marvel that the nomads can support life in the bleak open country, amid fearful storms and long weeks of snow. Indeed, with a cold of 30° Réaumur, it cannot be very pleasant to live in a tent; still even this occasions no serious inconvenience to the hardy child of Nature. Himself wrapped up in a double suit of clothes, he doubles the felt hangings of his tent, which is pitched in a valley or some other sheltered spot. Besides this the number of its inhabitants is increased, and when the *saksaul* (the root of a tree hard as stone and covered with knobs) begins to give out its heat, which lasts for hours, the want of a settled home is quite forgotten. The family circle is drawn closer round the hearth. The daughter of the house must continually hand round the skin of *kimis*. This favourite beverage opens the heart and looses the tongue. When, furthermore, a *bakhshi* (troubadour) is present to enliven the winter evenings with his lays, then even the howling of the tempest without serves as music.

When no extraordinary natural accidents, such as sand-storms or snow-storms, break in upon his regular course of life, the nomad is happy; indeed, I may say, as happy as any civilization in the world could make

him. As the nations of Central Asia have but very few wants, poverty is rare among them, and where it occurs, is by no means so depressing as with us. The lives of the inhabitants of the desert would glide peacefully away, were it not for the tendency to indulge in feuds and forays—a leading feature in their character. War, everywhere a curse, there draws after it the most terrible consequences which can be conceived. Without the smallest pretext for such violence, a tribe which feels itself stronger often falls upon the weaker ones. All who are able to bear arms conquer or die; the women, children, and herds of the fallen are divided as booty among their conquerors. Often does it happen that a family, which in the evening lay down to rest in all the blessedness of security, find themselves in the morning despoiled of parents, of freedom, and of property, and dragged into captivity far apart from one another!

Among the Turkomans near Khiva I saw many Kirghiz prisoners, who had formerly belonged to well-to-do families. The unfortunate creatures, who had been but a short time before rich and independent, and cherished by parents, accommodated themselves to the change of their fortunes as to some ordinary dispensation of nature. With what honesty and diligence did they attach themselves to their masters' interests! How they loved and caressed their masters' children! Yet these same masters were they who had robbed them of their whole property, murdered their father,

and branded them for ever with the opprobrious title of "Kul" (slave.)

Buddhism, Christianity, Mohammedanism, have one after the other attempted to force their way into the steppes of upper Asia. The first and the last have succeeded to some extent in making good their footing, but the nomads have, nevertheless, remained the same as they were at the time of the conquests of the Arabs, or of the campaigns of Alexander—the same as they were described by Herodotus. I shall never forget the conversations about the state of the world which I had with elderly Turkomans and Kirghizes. It is true that one can picture to oneself beforehand a specimen of ancient simplicity, but that is still something quite different from seeing before you one of these still standing columns of a civilization several millenniums old.

The Central Asiatic still speaks of Rome (Rum, modern Turkey) as he spoke in the days of the Cæsars; and when one listens to a grey-beard as he depicts the might and the greatness of this land, one might imagine that the invincible legions had only yesterday combated the Parthians and that he was present as an auxiliary. That his Rum (Turkey) is a state of but miserable proportions in comparison with old Rome, is what he cannot believe. He has learned to associate with that name glory and power. At the most, China may be sometimes compared to Rome for might and resources; although the legends that are told of this

latter empire dwell rather on the arts and the beauty than on the valour of the Chinese people. Russia is regarded as the quintessence of all fraud and cunning, by which means alone she has of late years contrived to effect her conquests. As for England, it is well known that the late emir of Bokhara, on the first occasion in which he came into contact with the British, was quite indignant "that the Ingiliz, whose name had only risen to notice within a few years, should dare to call themselves *Dowlet* (government) when addressing him."

Extremely surprising to the stranger is the hospitality which is to be found among the nomads of Central Asia. It is more abounding than perhaps in any other portion of the east. Amongst the Turks, Persians, and Arabs, there still linger faint memories of this old duty, but our European tourists have had, I believe, ample opportunity of satisfying themselves that all the washing of feet, slaughter of sheep, and other good offices, are often only performed in the hope of a rich *Bakhshish*, or *Pishkesh*, (as they say in Persian.) It is true that the *Koran* says, "Honour a guest, even though he be an infidel;" but this doing honour is generally the echo of orders issued from some consulate or embassy. Quite otherwise in Central Asia. There hospitality is, I may say, almost instinctive; for a nomad may be cruel, fierce, perfidious, but never inhospitable.

One of my fellow-beggars went, during my sojourn

among the Turkomans, on a round of begging visits, having first dressed himself in his worst suit of rags. Having wandered about the whole day he came at evening to a lonely tent, for the purpose of lodging there for the night. On entering he was saluted in the customary friendly manner; nevertheless he soon observed that the master of the poverty-stricken establishment seemed to be in great embarrassment, and moved hither and thither as if looking for something. The beggar began to feel very uncomfortable when at last his host approached him, and, deeply blushing, begged him to lend him a few *kran*s, in order that he might be able to provide the necessary supper, inasmuch as he himself had nothing but dried fish, and he wished to set something better before his guest. Of course it was impossible to refuse such a request. My comrade opened the purse which he carried under his rags, and when he had given his host five *kran*s, everything seemed to be satisfactorily arranged. The meal was eaten amidst the most friendly conversation, and when it was ended, the softest felt carpet was assigned to the stranger as his couch, and in the morning he was dismissed with the customary honours.

"I was scarcely gone half an hour from the tent," so my friend related his adventure subsequently to me, "when a Turkoman came running towards me, and with violent threats demanded my purse. How great was my astonishment when I recognised in the person of the robber no other than my host of the pre-

vious night! I thought he was joking, and began to address him in a friendly manner; but he grew only more and more serious. So, in order to avoid unpleasant consequences, there remained nothing for me but to hand over my purse, a few leaves of tea, my comb, and my knife, in one word, my whole property. Having so done, I was about to proceed on my way, when he held me back, and opening my—that is to say now his—purse, and taking out five *krans*, gave them to me with these words:—‘Take my debt of yesterday evening. We are now quits, and you can go on your way.’”

CHAPTER VI.

THE COURT OF KHIVA.

THE courts of oriental princes have been frequently and variously described. Beginning with the shore of the Bosphorus, where Dolma Bagtsche, Beshiktash and Serayburun furnish the first pictures in the panorama, and ranging as far as the palaces of Peking and Yedo, we have read again and again of the love for ostentation and empty splendour, the glitter of gold and diamonds of oriental life. But to complete the series, a few sketches of life at the court of Turkestan sovereigns are wanting, and the description of such may not, therefore, be deemed superfluous.

My readers must not expect either to be dazzled, or to have their amazement and admiration excited, and yet it will repay the trouble to accompany me through the tortuous streets of Khiva and the bazaar with its vaulted roof to the Ark (the Royal Castle.) Like all the residences of sovereigns in Central Asia, this castle is strangely fortified and surrounded by a double wall. Through a narrow gate we enter into the first court, which is crowded with the royal body-guard and other soldiers and servants. Near the entrance two cannons