

AROUND THE WORLD ON A BICYCLE.¹

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[Our Special Correspondent]

THE UNBEATEN TRACKS OF KHORASSAN.

XXIII.

DURING the afternoon I traverse a rocky cañon, crossing and recrossing a clear, cold stream that winds its serpentine course from one precipitous wall to another. Mountain trout are observed sporting in this stream, and big, gray lizards scuttle nimbly about among the loose rocks on the bank. The cañon gradually dwindles into a less confined passage between sloping hills of loose rock and boulders, a wild, desolate region through which the road leads gradually upward to a pass.

Part way up this gorge is a rude stone tower about twenty feet high, on the summit of which is perched a little mud hut, looking almost as though it might be a sentry-box. Whilst yet a couple of hundred yards away, a rough-looking customer emerges from the tower and appears to be awaiting my approach. His head is well-nigh hidden beneath a huge Khorassani shako, and he wears the clothes of an irregular soldier. The long, shaggy wool of the sheepskin shako dangling over his eyes imparts a very ferocious appearance, and he is armed with the ordinary Persian sword and one of those antiquated flint-lock muskets that are only to be seen on the deserts of the East or in museums of ancient weapons.

Taken all in all, he presents a very ferocious front; he is, in fact, about the most ruffianly-looking specimen I have seen outside of Asiatic Turkey. As I ride up he motions for me to alight, at the same time retreating a few steps toward his humble stronghold, betraying a spirit of apprehension lest, perchance, he might be unwittingly standing in the way of danger. Greeting him with the customary "*Salaam aleykum*" and being similarly greeted in reply, I dismount to ascertain who and what he is. He retreats another step or two in the direction of his strange abode, and eyes the bicycle with evident distrust, edging off to one side as I turn towards him as though fearful lest it might come whizzing into his sacred person at

a moment's notice like a hungry buzz-saw. In response to my inquiries, he points up towards the pass and offers to accompany me thither for the small sum of "*yek kerun*," giving me to understand that without his presence it is highly indiscreet to proceed.

Little penetration is required to understand that this is one of the little blackmailing schemes peculiar to semi-civilization, and which, it is perhaps hardly necessary to explain, comes a trifle too late in the chapter of my Asiatic experiences to influence my movements or to replenish the exchequer of the picturesque and enterprising person desirous of shielding me from imaginary harm.

This wily individual is making his living by the novel and ingenious process of trading on the fears and credulity of stray travelers, making them believe the pass is dangerous and charging them a small sum for his services as guard. It is not at all unlikely that he is the present incumbent of an hereditary right to extort black-mail from such travelers along this lonely road as may be prevailed upon without resorting to violence to pay it, and is but humbly following in the footsteps of his worthy sire and still more worthy grand-sire.

The pass ahead is neither very steep nor difficult, and the summit once crossed, and the first few hundred yards of rough and abrupt declivity overcome, I am able to mount and wheel swiftly down long gradients of smooth, hard gravel for four or five miles, alighting at the walled village of Assabad in the presence of its entire population.

Some keen-sighted villager has observed afar off the strange apparition gliding swiftly down the open gravel slopes, and the excited population have all rushed out in breathless expectancy to try and make out its character. The villagers of Assabad are simple-hearted people, and both men and women clap their hands like delighted children to have so rare a

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novelty suddenly appear upon the scene of their usually hum-drum and uneventful lives. Quilts are spread for me on the sunny side of the village wall, and they gather eagerly around to feast to the full their unaccustomed eyes. A couple of the men round up a matronly goat and exact from her the tribute of a bowl of milk; others contribute bread, and the frugal repast is seasoned with the unconcealed delight of my hospitable audience.

They are not overly clean in their habits, though, these rude and isolated people; and to keep off prying housewives, bent on satisfying their curiosity regarding the texture of my clothing and the comparative whiteness of my skin, I am compelled to adopt the defensive measure of counter curiosity. The signal and instantaneous success of this plan, resulting in the hasty, scrambling retreat of the women, is greeted with boisterous merriment by the entire crowd.

I have about made up my mind to remain over night with the hospitable people of Assababad; but at the solicitation of a Persian traveler who comes along, I conclude to accompany him to a building observable in the distance ahead which he explains is a small but comfortable serai. The good villagers seem very loath to let me go so soon, and one young man kneels down and kisses my dusty *geivehs* and begs me to take him with me to Hindostan—strange, unsophisticated people; how simple-hearted, how childlike they seem!

The caravanserai is but a couple of miles ahead, but it is situated in the dip of an extensive, basin-like depression between two mountain ranges, and the last half mile consists of mud and water eighteen inches deep. The caravanserai itself stands on a slight elevation and is found occupied by a couple of families who make the place their permanent abode and gain a livelihood by supplying food, firewood and horse-feed to travelers.

Upon our arrival, a woman makes her appearance and announces her willingness to cater to our wants.

"Noon ass?"

"Yes, plenty of bread."

"Toke-me-morge ass?"

"Neis; toke-me-morge neis."

"Sheerah ass?"

"Sheerah neis."

"What have you then besides bread?"

For answer, the woman points to a few beruffled chickens scratching for grains of barley among a heap of rubbish that has evidently been exploited by them times without number before, and says she can sell us chickens at one keran apiece.

Seeing the absence of anything else, I order her forthwith to capture one for me, and the Persian gentleman orders another. The woman sets three youngsters and a yellow, tailless dog to run down the chickens, and in a few minutes presents herself before us, holding in each hand the plucked and scrawny carcass of a fowl that has had to scratch hard and persistently for its life for heaven knows how many years. One of the chickens is considerably larger than the other, and I tell the Persian gentleman to take his choice, thinking that with himself and his two servants he would be glad to accept the larger fowl. On the contrary, however, he fixes his choice on the smaller one.

Touched by what appears to be a simple act of unselfishness, I endeavor to persuade him to take the other, pointing out that he has three mouths to fill whilst I have only one. My importunities are, however, wasted on so polite and disinterested a person, and so I reluctantly take possession of the bulkier fowl.

The Persian's servant dissects his master's purchase and stows it away for future use, the three making their supper off bread and a mixture of grease, chopped onions and *sheerah* from the larder of their saddle-bags. The woman readily accepts the offer of an additional half keran for relieving me of the onerous task of cooking my own supper, and takes her departure, promising to cook it as quickly as possible.

Happy in the contemplation of a whole chicken for supper, I sit around and chat and drink tea with my disinterested friend for the space of an hour. To an hungry person an hour seems an ominously long period of time in which to cook a chicken, and becoming impatient, the Persian gentleman's servant volunteers to go inside and investigate. I fancy detecting a shadow of amusement passing over the face of the gentleman as his servant departs, and when he returns with the intelligence that the chicken wont be tender enough to eat for another hour, his risibilities get the better of his politeness and he gives way to uncontrollable

laughter. Then it is that a gleam of enlightenment steals over my unsuspecting soul and tells me why my guileless fellow traveler so politely and yet so firmly selected the smallest of the fowls—he is a better judge of Persian “*morges*” than I.

The woman finally turns up, bringing the result of her two hours’ culinary perseverance in a large pewter bowl; she has cut the chicken up into several pieces and has been industriously keeping the pot boiling from the beginning. The result of this laudable effort is meat of gutta-percha toughness, upon which one’s teeth are exercised in vain; but I make a very good supper after all by breaking bread into the broth. I don’t know but that the patriarchal ruler of the roost makes at least the richer broth.

Thin ice covers the water when I leave this caravanserai in the gray of the morning, and the Persian travelers, who nearly always start before day-break, have already departed. Stories were heard yesterday evening of streams between here and the southern chain of mountains, deep and difficult to cross; and I pull out fully expecting to have to strip and do some disagreeable work in the water. Considerable mud is encountered, and three small streams, not over three feet deep are crossed; but farther on I am brought to a stand by a deep, sluggish stream flowing along ten feet below the level of the ground. Though deep, it is very narrow in places, and might almost be described as a yawning crack in the earth, filled with water to within ten feet of the top.

A little way up stream is a spot fordable for horses, and, of course, fordable also for a cyclist; but the prevailing mud and the chilliness of the morning combine to influence me to try another plan. A happy plan it seems at the moment, a credit to my inventive genius, and spiced with the seductive condiment of novelty. The stream is sufficiently narrow at one place to be overcome with a running jump; but people cannot take running jumps encumbered with a bicycle. The bicycle, however, can quickly and easily be taken into several parts and thrown across, the jump made, and the wheel put together again.

Packages, pedals and back-bone with rear wheel are tossed successfully across, but the big wheel attached to fork and handlebar, unfortunately rolls hack and disappears with a splash beneath the

water. The details of the unhappy task of recovering this all important piece of property—how I have to call into requisition for the first time the small, strong rope I have carried from Constantinople—how in the absence of anything in the shape of a stick in all the unproductive country around. I have to persuade my unwilling and goose-pimpled frame into the water and duck my devoted head beneath the waves several times before succeeding in passing a slip-noose over the handle—is too harrowing a tale to tell; it makes me shiver and shrink within myself, even as I write.

Beyond the stream the road approaches the southern framework of the plain with a barely discernible rise, and dry, hard paths afford fair wheeling. Looking back one can see the white, uneven crest of the Elburz Range peeping over the lesser chain of hills crossed over yesterday, showing wondrously sharp and clear in the transparent atmosphere of a more or less desert country.

A region of red-clay hills and innumerable little streams ends my riding for the present, and the road eventually leads into a *cul-de-sac*, the source of the little streams and the home of spongy morasses whose deceptive mossy surface may or may not bear one’s weight. Round about the *cul-de-sac* is a curious jumble of rocks and red-clay heights; the strata of the former inclining to the perpendicular and sometimes rising like parallel walls above the earth, reminding one of the “Devil’s Slide” in Weber Cañon, Utah. A stiff pass leads over the brow of the range, and on the summit is perched another little stone tower; but no valiant champion of defenceless wayfarers issues forth to proffer his protection here—perhaps our acquaintance of yesterday comes down here when he wants a change of air.

From the pass the descent is into a picturesque region of huge rocks and splendid streams that come bubbling out from among them, and farther along is a more open space, a few fields of grain and the little hamlet of Kahmeh. Stopping here an hour for refreshments, the country again becomes rough and hilly for several miles; the road then descends a rocky slope to the plain, where a few miles ahead can be seen the crenelated walls and suburban orchards and villages of Torbet-i-Haiderie.

Remembering my letter from the Governor-General to subordinate officials,

I permit a uniformed horseman, who seems anxious to make himself useful in the premises, to pilot me into the city, telling him to lead the way to the Mustapha's office. Guiding me through the narrow, crowded streets into the still more crowded bazaar, he descants from his commanding position in the saddle to the listening crowd, on the marvelous nature of my steed and the miraculous ability required to ride it as he had seen me riding it outside the walls. Having accomplished his vain purpose of attracting public attention to himself through me, and by his utterances aroused the popular curiosity to an ungovernable pitch, he rides off and leaves me to extricate myself and find the Mustapha as best I can.

The ignorant, inconsiderate mob at once commence shouting for me to ride. "*Sowar shuke; sowar shuke! Tomasha; tomasha!*" a thousand people cry in the stuffy, ill-paved bazaar as they struggle and push and surge about me, giving me barely room to squeeze through them. When it is discovered that I am seeking the Mustapha, there is a grand rush of the crowd to reach the municipal compound and gain admittance, lest perchance the gates should be closed after I had entered and a *tomasha* be given without them seeing.

Following along with the crowd, the compound is reached and found to be jammed so tightly with people that the greatest difficulty is experienced in forcing my way through them to the Mustapha's quarters. Nobody seems to take a particle of interest in the matter, save to lend their voices to help swell the volume of the cry for me to ride; nobody in all the tumultuous mob seems capable of the simple reflection that there is no room whatever to ride, not so much as a yard of space unoccupied by human beings. They might with equal propriety be shouting for a fish to swim without providing him with water.

The Mustapha is found seated on the raised floor of his open-fronted office, examining, between whiffs of the *kalian*, papers brought to him by his subordinates, and I hand him my general letter of recommendation. Taking a cursory glance at the contents, he gives a sweep of his chin towards the bicycle, and says, "*Sowar shuke; tomasha.*" Pointing out the utter impossibility of complying with his request in a badly-paved compound packed to its utmost capacity with people;

he looks wearily at the ragged and unruly multitude before him, as though conscious that it would be useless to try and do anything with them, and then giving some order to an officer resumes his official labors.

The officer summons a couple of *farrashes*, and with long willow switches they flog their way through the crowd, opening a narrow, but instantly filled again, passage for me to follow. Outside the compound the officer practically forsakes me and goes over body and soul to the enemy. Filled with the same dense ignorance and overwhelming desire to see the bicycle ridden, he desires to gain the approbation of the crowd, and so brings all his powers of persuasion to bear against me. Time and again, whilst traversing with the greatest difficulty the narrow bazaar in the midst of a surging mob, he faces about and makes the same insane request, shouting like a maniac to make his voice audible above the din of a thousand clamorous appeals to the same purpose. Had I the power to annihilate the whole crazy, maddening multitude with a sweep of the hand, I am afraid they would at this juncture have received but small mercy.

The caravanserai is a big, commodious affair, a quadrangular structure of brick surrounding fully an acre of ground, and with a small open space outside. There is plenty of room to satisfy their insane curiosity here without jeopardizing my own neck, and in a fruitless effort to gratify them I essay to ride. My appearance in the saddle is greeted by wild shouts of exultation, and in their eagerness to come closer and see exactly how the bicycle is propelled and prevented from falling over, they close up in front as well as behind, compelling an instant dismount to prevent disagreeable consequences to myself. Howls of disapproval greet this misinterpreted action, and the officer and *farrashes* commence flogging right and left to clear a space for another trial.

This time, while circling about in the small amphitheater, walled around by shouting, grinning human beings, wanton youngsters from the rear shy several stones, and the officer comes near giving me a header by accidentally inserting his willow staff in the front wheel while pointing out to the crowd the action of the pedals and the *modus operandi* of things in general. The officer evidently regards me as the merest dummy, unable to speak or comprehend a

word of the language, or help myself in any way—the result, it is presumed, of some explanation to that effect in the letter,—and he stalks about with the proud bearing and self-conscious expression of a showman catering successfully to an appreciative and applauding populace.

The accommodation provided at the caravanserai consists of doorless *menzils*, elevated three feet above the ground; a walled partition, with an open archway, divides the quarters into a room behind and an open porch in front. Conducting me to one of these free-for-anybody places, which I could just as easily have found and occupied without his assistance, he takes his departure, leaving me to the tender consideration of an overbearing, ragamuffin mob, in whom the spirit of wantonness is already aroused.

I attempt to appeal to the reason of my obstreperous audience by standing on the *menzil* front and delivering a harangue in such Persian as I have at command.

"*Sowar shuke, neis, tomasha caravan-serai neis; rah koob neis. Inshalla saba, guti koob rah Beerjanndi, khylie koob tomasha—kh-y-l-ie koob tomasha saba!*" is the burden of this harangue; but eloquent as it is in its simplicity, it fails to accomplish the desired end. Their reply to it all takes the form of howls of disapproval, and the importunities to ride become more clamorous than ever.

An effort to keep them from taking possession of my quarters by shoving them off the front porch, results in my being seized roughly by the throat by one determined assailant and cracked on the head with a stick by another. Ignorant of a Ferenghi's mode of attack, the preumptuous individual, with his hand twisted in my neck-handkerchief, cocks his head in a semi-sidewise attitude, in splendid position to be dropped like a pole-axed steer by a neat tap on the temple. He wears the green *kammerbund* of a seyud, however; and even under the shadow of the legations in Teheran, it is a very serious and risky thing to strike a descendent of the Prophet. For a lone infidel to do so in the presence of two thousand Musselman fanatics, already imbued with the spirit of wantonness, would be little less than deliberate suicide, so a sense of discretion intervenes to spare him the humiliation of being knocked out of time by an unhallowed fist. The stiff, United States army helmet, obtained, it will be remembered, at Fort Sidney, Nebraska, and worn

on the road ever since, saves my bump of veneration from actual contact with the stick of number two; and finding me making only a passive resistance, the valiant individual in the green *kammerbund* relaxes both the severity of his scowl and his grip on my neck gear.

After this there is no use trying to keep them from invading my quarters, and I deem it advisable to stand closely by the bicycle, humoring their curiosity and getting along with them as peaceably as possible. The crowd present is constantly augmented by new arrivals from without; at least two thousand people are struggling, pushing and shouting, some coming forward to invade my *menzil*, others endeavoring to escape from the crush. While the rowdiest portion of the crowd struggle and push and shout in the foreground of this remarkable scene, little knots of big-turbaned mollahs and better-class citizens are laying their precious heads together scheming against me in the rear. Now and then a messenger, in the semi-military garb of *farrash*, pushes his way to the front and delivers a message from the worthies, full of lies and deceit. From the top of their shaved and turbaned heads to the soles of their slipshod feet they are filled with a pig-headed determination to accomplish their object of seeing the bicycle ridden. They send me all sorts of messages, from one of but ordinary improbability, saying that the Mustapha is outside and wants me to come out and ride, to one altogether ridiculous in its wild absurdity, promising me a present of two tomans.

Occasionally a dervish holds aloft the fantastic paraphernalia of his profession, battles his way through the surging human surf, and with his black, ferret-like eyes gleaming with unconscious ferocity through a vision of unkempt hair, thrusts his cocoa-nut alms-receiver under my nose and says, "*Huk yah huk!*" or "backseesh!" Shouted at, gesticulated at, intrigued against and solicited for alms all at the same time, and with brain-turning persistency, the classic halls of Bedlam would, in contrast, be a reposeful and calm retreat. Driven by my tormentors almost to the desperate resolve of emptying my six-shooter among them, let the result to myself be what it may, the sun of my persecutions has not reached the meridian even yet. The officer who an hour ago inconsiderately left me to my own resources, now returns with a large

party of friends, bent on seeing the same wonderful sight that has seemingly set the whole city in an uproar. He has been about the place collecting friends and acquaintances for the purpose of treating them to an exhibition of my skill on the wheel. The purpose of the officer's return, with his friends, is readily understood by the crowd, and his arrival is announced by a universal roar of "*Sowar shuke! tomasha!!*" as though not one of this insatiable mob had yet seen me ride.

Appearing before the elevated porch of the *menzil*, he beckons me to "come ahead" in quite an authoritative manner. The peculiar beckoning twist of the presumptuous individual's chin and henna-stained beard summoning me to come out and "perform" reminds me of nothing so much as some tamer of wild animals ordering a trained baboon to spruce himself up and dance for the edification of the circus-going public. Signifying my unwillingness to be thus made a circus of over and over again, the officer beckons even more peremptorily than before, and even makes a feint of coming and fetching me out by force.

As may well be believed, the sum of my patience is no longer equal to the strain, and jerking my revolver around from the obscurity of its hiding place at my hip to where it can plainly be seen, and laying a hand menacingly on the butt, I warn him to clear off, in a manner that causes him to wilt and turn pale. He leaves the caravanserai at once in high dudgeon. It has been a most humiliating occasion for him to fall so ignobly from the very high horse on which he just entered with his bosom friends; but it is no more than he rightly deserves.

Shortly after this little incident the proprietor of a *tchai-khan* not far from the caravanserai, proposes that I leave my *menzil* and come with him to his place. Happy in the prospect of any kind of a change that will secure me a little peace, I readily agree to the proposal and at once take my departure. A few stones are thrown, but fortunately without doing any damage, ere the *tchai-khan* is reached; but once inside, the situation is materially improved.

It soon transpires that the speculative proprietors have conceived the bright idea of utilizing me as an attraction to draw customers to their place of business. Two men are stationed at the door with clubs, and admittance is only granted to likely-

looking people who have money to spend on water-pipes and tea. A rival attraction already occupies the field in the person of a Tabreez Turkish *luti* with a performing rib-nosed mandril and a drum. Now and then, when the crowd with no money to spend becomes too clamorous about the doorway, the *luti* goes to the assistance of the guards, and giving the mandril the length of his chain, chases the people away.

These wandering troubadours and their performing monkeys are common enough all over Persia, and one often meets them on the road or in the villages; but the bicycle is quite a different thing, and the enterprising *khan-jees* do a roaring business all the evening with customers pouring in to see it and myself. The bicycle, the *luti* and the mandril occupy the back part of the large room, where several lamps and farnooses envelop this attractive and drawing combination with a garish and stagy glow, so that they can be seen to advantage by the throngs of eager visitors. My own place, as the lion of the occasion, is happily in the vicinity of the samovar, where liberal-minded customers can treat me to cigarettes and tea.

Ridiculous as is my position in the *tchai-khan*, it is, of course, infinitely superior in point of comfort and freedom from annoyance, to my exposed quarters over at the caravanserai. The *luti* sings doubtful love songs to the accompaniment of finger-strumming on the drum, and the mandril now and then condescends to stand on its head, grunt loudly in response to questions, spin round and round like a dancing dervish, and otherwise give proof of its intelligence and accomplishments. Its long hair is shorn from the lower portion of its body, but its head and shoulders are covered with a wealth of silvery-grayish hair that overlaps the nakedness of its body and gives it the grotesque appearance of wearing a tippet. The animal's temper is anything but sweet, necessitating the habitual employment of a muzzle to prevent him from biting. Every ten or fifteen minutes, as regular almost as the movements of Father Time, the mandril's bottled discontent at being made to perform seems to reach the explosive point, and springing suddenly at his master, he buries his nose viciously among his clothing in a determined effort to chew him up. This spasmodic rage subsides in horrible grunts of disappointment at being unable to use his teeth, and

he becomes reasonably tractable again for another ten minutes.

The *luti* himself is filled with envy and covetousness at the immense drawing powers of the bicycle; and in a burst of confidence wants to know if I am an "Ingilis *luti*," at the same time placing his forefingers together as an intimation that if I am we ought by all means to form a combination and travel the country together. About ten o'clock the *khan-jees* make me up quite a comfortable shake-down, and tired out with the tough journey over the mountains and the worrying persecutions of the afternoon, I fall asleep whilst yet the house is doing a thriving trade; the *luti* singing, the mandril grunting, kalians bubbling and people talking, all fail to keep me awake.

The mental and physical exhaustion that makes this possible, does not, however, prevent me from falling asleep with a firm determination to leave Torbet-i-Haiderie and its turbulent population too early in the morning for any more crowds to gather. Accordingly, the morning star has scarcely risen above the horizon ere I turn out, waken one of the *khan-jees*, pocket some bread and depart.

Beyond the streams and villages about Torbet-i-Haiderie, the country develops into a level desert, stretching away southward as far as eye can reach. The trail is firm gravel, the wind is favorable, the morning cool, and the fresh, clear air of the desert exhilarating; under these favorable conditions I bowl rapidly along, overtaking in a very short time night-marching camel-riders that left the city last night. Traces of old irrigating ditches and fields in one or two places tell the tale of an attempt to reclaim portions of this desert long ago; but now the camelthorn and kindred hardy shrubs hold undisputed sway on every hand. During the forenoon a small oasis is found among some low, shaly hills that give birth to a little stream and consequent subsistence to a few families of people; they live together inside a high mud-walled enclosure and cultivate a few small fields of grain. The place is called Kair-abad, and the people mix chopped garlic with their bread before baking it, or sprinkle the dough liberally with garlic seeds.

About two p. m. is reached a much larger oasis containing a couple of villages; beyond this are diverging trails with no one anywhere near to as the way. Choosing the one that seems to take the most

southerly course, the trail continues hard and ridable for a few more miles, when it becomes lost in a sea of shifting sand. Firmer ground is visible in the distance ahead, and on it are seen the small, black tents of a few families of Eliautes. Considerable difficulty is experienced in getting through the sand; but the width is not great, and the dim trail is recovered on the southern side with the assistance of a chance acquaintance.

This chance acquaintance is an Eliaute goat-herd whom I unwittingly scared nearly out of his senses, and whose gratitude at finding himself confronting a kindly-disposed human being instead of some supernatural agent of destruction, is very great, indeed. He was slumbering at his post, this gentle guardian of a herd of goats, stretched at full length on the ground. Surveying his unconscious form for a moment and carried away by the animal-like simplicity of his face, I finally shout, "Hoi!" Opening his eyes with a start and seeing a white-helmeted head surveying him over the top of a weird, bristling object, the natural impulse of this simple-hearted child of the desert is to seek safety in flight. Recovering his head, however, upon hearing reassuring words, he adopts the propitiatory course of rushing impulsively forward and kissing my hand.

Spending his whole life here on the lonely desert in the constant society of a herd of goats, rarely seeing a stranger or meeting anybody to speak to outside the very limited members of his own tribesmen in yonder tents, he seems to have almost lost the power of conversation. His replies are mere guttural gruntings, as though the ever-present music of bleating goats has had the lamentable effect of neutralizing the naturally superior articulation of a human being and dragging his powers of utterance down almost to the ignoble level of "mb-b-a-a-a."

My small stock of Persian words seem also to be altogether lost upon his warped and blunted powers of understanding, and it is only by an elaborate use of pantomime that I finally succeed in making my wants understood. He possesses the simple hospitable instincts of a child of Nature's broad solitudes; he leads the way for over a mile to put me on the now scarcely perceptible continuation of the trail, and with a worshipfully anxious face he begs of me to go and stay overnight at the tents.



"HE MOTIONS FOR ME TO ALIGHT."

My road leads right past the little cluster of black tents; several women outside collecting stunted brushwood greet me with the silent, wondering stare of people incapable of any deeper display of emotion than the animals they daily associate with and subsist upon; half-naked children stare at me in a dreamy sort of way from beneath the tents. Even the dogs seem to have lost their canine propensity to resent innovations; the result, no doubt, of the same dreary, uneventful round of existence, in which the faculty of resentment has become dwarfed by the general absence of anything new or novel to bark at.

The tents of the Eliautes are small and inelegant as compared with the tents of well-to-do Koords, and the physique and general appearance of the Eliautes themselves is vastly inferior to the magnificent fellows that we found loafing about the headquarters of the Koordish Sheikhs in Asia Minor and Western Persia.

The trail I am now following is evidently but little used, requiring the tracking instincts of an Indian almost to keep it in view. It leads due southward across the broad, level wastes of the Goonabad desert, the surface of which affords most excellent wheeling even where there is not the faintest indication of a trail. Much of the surface partakes of the character of bare mud-flats that afford as smooth a wheeling surface as the alkali flats of the West; the surface is covered all over with

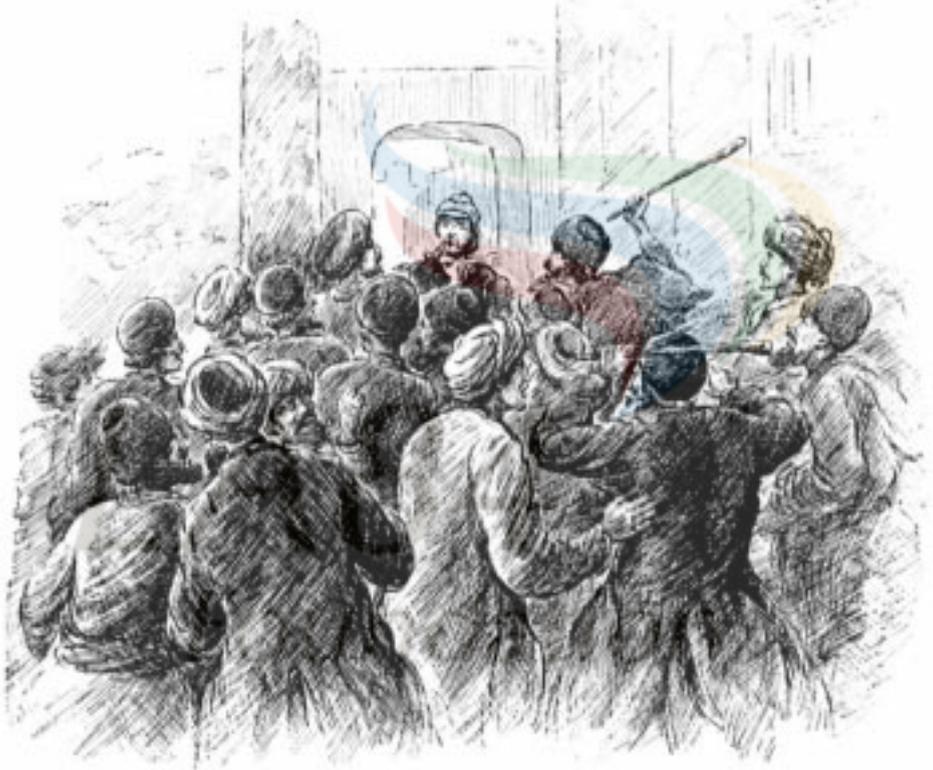
crisp sun-peelings—the thin, shiny surface of mud, baked and curled upward by the fierce heat of the sun, and which now crackle like myriads of dried twigs beneath the wheel. Occasionally I pass through thousands of acres of wild tulips, and scattering bands of antelopes are observed feeding in the distance. The bulbous roots of a great many of the tulips have been eaten by herbivorous animals of epicurian tastes—our fastidious friends, the antelopes, no doubt. The flags are bitten off and laid aside, the tender, white interior of the bulb alone is extracted and eaten, the less tender outside layers being left in the hole. It is a glorious ride across the Goonabad desert, a ten-mile pace being quite possible most of the way; sometimes the trail is visible and sometimes it is not. With but the vaguest idea of the distance to the next abode of man, or the nature of the country ahead, I bowl along southward, led by the strange infatuation of a pathfinder traversing *terra incognita*, and rejoicing in the sense of boundless freedom and unrestraint that comes of speeding across open country where Nature still holds her primitive sway.

Twice I wheel past the ruins of wayside *umbars*, their now utterly neglected condition and the wellnigh obliterated trail points out that I am traveling over a route that has for some reason been abandoned. A variation from the otherwise universal

level occurs in the shape of a cluster of low, mound-like hills, whose modest proportions are made gorgeous and interesting by flakes of mica that glint and glisten in the sunlight as though the hills might be strewn with precious jewels.

The sun is getting pretty low and no signs of human habitation anywhere about; but the wheeling is excellent, and the termination of the lake-like level is observable in the distance ahead in favor of low hills. Between my present position and the hills the prospect is that of continuous level ground. Imagine my astonishment, then,

form on the barren, brown bosom of mother earth and dream the dreary visions conjured up by the clamorous demands of unsatisfied nature; for the sun has well-nigh sunk below the horizon. Clambering down the almost perpendicular bank, I succeed, after several attempts, in discovering a passage that can be forded, and so wrapping my clothing, money, revolver, etc., tightly within my rubber coat, I essay to carry the bundle across. All goes well until I reach a point just beyond the middle of the stream, when the bed of the stream breaks through with



"SEIZED ROUGHLY BY THE THROAT."

at shortly finding myself standing on the bank of a stream about thirty yards wide, its yellow waters flowing sluggishly along twenty feet below the surface of the desert. The abrupt nature of its banks and an evidently unpleasant habit of becoming unfordable after a rain, tells the story of the abandoned trail I have been following. Whether three feet deep or thirty, the thick, muddy character of its moving waters refuses to reveal, as, standing on the bank, I ruefully survey the situation.

No time is to be lost in idle speculation, unless I want to stretch my supplerless

my weight and lets me down into a watery cavern to which there appears to be no bottom. The bed of the stream at this point seems to be a mere thin shell, beneath which there are other aqueous depths, and fearful lest the undercurrent should carry me beneath the crust and prevent me recovering myself, I loose the bundle and regain the surface without more ado. The rubber covering preserves the clothes from getting much of a wetting, and I swim and wade to the opposite shore with them without much trouble,

To get the bicycle over, however, looks

a far more serious undertaking; for to break through in this way with a bicycle held aloft would probably result in getting entangled in the wheel and held under the water. It would be equally risky to take that important piece of property apart and cross over with it piece by piece, for the loss of any part would be a serious matter here.

Several new places are tried, but this one is the only passage that can be forded. My rope is also too short to be of avail in swimming over and pulling the bicycle across. Finally, after many

the second bottom is here but a matter of inches below the first shell, and I am able to recover myself without dropping the bicycle; and the southern bank is reached without further misadventure.

No trail is visible on the cracked surface of the mud-flat across the river, as I continue in a general southward course, hoping to find it again ere it becomes too dark. Soon a man riding on a camel is descried some distance off to the right, and deeming it advisable to seek for information at his hands, I shape my course towards him and give chase. Becoming



THE BABOON AND THE BICYCLE.

attempts, I succeed in finding a ford immediately alongside where I had broken through, and after thoroughly testing the strength of the crust by standing and jumping up and down, I conclude to risk carrying the wheel. Owing to the extreme difficulty of following the same line, it is scarcely necessary to remark that every step forward is made with extreme caution and every foot of the river-bed traversed tested as thoroughly as possible, under the circumstances, before fully trusting my weight upon it. Once the crust breaks through again, letting me down several inches; but, fortunately,

conscious of a strange-looking object careering over the plain in his direction, the man surveys me for a moment from the back of his awkward steed and then steers his ship of the desert in another direction. The lumbering camel is quickly overtaken, however, and the gallant, but apprehensive rider makes a stand and threateningly waves me away. Observing the absence of the familiar long-barreled gun, I persist in my purpose of interviewing him regarding the road, and finally learn from him that the village of Goonabad is eight miles farther south and that the trail will be easier followed

when I reach the hills. Had he been armed with a gun, there would have been more or less risk in approaching him in the dusky shades of evening on so strange a vehicle of travel; but before I depart he alights from his camel for the characteristic purpose of kissing my hand.

A couple of miles brings me to the hills, where my riding abruptly comes to an end; the hills are simply huge waves of sand and dust collected on the shore of the desert and held together by a growth of coarse shrubs. The dim light of the young moon proves insufficient for my purpose of keeping the trail, and the difficulty in trundling through the sand compels me to seek the cold comfort of a night on the desert, after all.

Goonabad appears to be a sort of general rendezvous for wandering tribes of Eliautes that roam the desert country around with their flocks and herds; the tent population of the place far outnumbering the soil-tilling people of the village itself. A complete change is here observable in both the climate and the people; north of the desert the young barley is in a very backward state, but at Goonabad both wheat and barley are headed out, and the sun strikes uncomfortably hot as soon as it rises above the horizon. The men affect the long, dangling, turban end of the Afghans and the women blossom forth in the gayest of colors; the people are refreshingly simple-hearted and honest, as compared with the knowing customers along the Teheran-Meshed road.

Sand-hills, scattering fields and villages, and a bewildering time generally, in keeping my course, characterize the experience of the forenoon. The people of one particular village passed through are observed to be all descendants of the Prophet, wearing monster green turbans and green *kammerbunds*; the women are dressed in white throughout—white socks, white pantalettes, and white shrouds; they move silently about, more like ghostly visitants than human beings. Distinctly different types of people from the majority are sometimes met with—full-bearded, very dark-skinned men, whose bared breasts betray the fact that they are little less hairy than a bison.

Beyond the sand-hills, the villages and the cultivation, is a stony plain extending for sixteen miles, a gradual upward slant to a range of mountains. At the base of the mountains an area of dark-green coloring denotes the presence of fields and

orchards and the whereabouts of the important village of Kakh. Beautifully terraced wheat-fields and vineyards and peach and pomegranate orchards in full bloom gladden the eyes and present a most striking contrast to the stony plain as the vicinity of Kakh is reached, and another pleasing and conspicuous feature is the dome of a *mesjid* mosaiced with bright-colored tiles.

The good people of Kakh are inquisitive, even above their fellows, if such can be possible, but they are well-behaved and mild-mannered with it. After taking the ragged edge off their curiosity by riding up and down the main thoroughfare of the village, the keeper of a little mercantile affair locks the bicycle up in his room, and I spend the evening hobnobbing with him and his customers in his little stall-like place of business. Kakh is famous for the production of little seedless raisins like those of Smyrna. Bushels of these are kicking about the place and our merchant friend becomes filled with a wild idea that I might, perchance, buy the lot. A moment's reflection would convince him that ten bushels of sickly-sweet raisins would be about the last thing he could sell to a person traveling on a bicycle; but his supply of raisins is evidently so outrageously ahead of the demand, that his ambition to reduce his stock obscures his better judgment like a cloud and places him in the position of a drowning man clutching wildly at a straw.

Considerable opium is also grown hereabouts and the people make it into little sticks about the size of a carpenter's pencil; hundreds of these also occupy the merchant's shelves. He seems to have very little that isn't grown in the neighborhood except tea and loaf-sugar.

Ryots, who were absent in their fields when I arrived, come crowding around the store in the evening, bothering me to ride; the shop-keeper bids them wait till my departure in the morning, telling them I am not a *luti*, riding simply to let people see. He provides me with a door that fastens inside, and I am soon in the land of dreams,

Early in the morning I am awakened by people pounding at the door and shouting, "*Aftab, Sahib, aftab!*" It is the belated ryots of yesterday eve; thoroughly determined to be on hand and see the start; they are letting me know that it is sunrise.

A boisterous mountain stream, tearing along at racing speed over a rocky bed a hundred and fifty yards wide, provides Kakh with perpetual music, and furnishes travelers going southward with an interesting time in getting across. This stream must very frequently become a raging torrent, quite impassable; for although it is little more than knee-deep this morning, the swift water carries down stones as large as a brick, that strike against the ankles and well nigh knock one off his feet.



"I SHAPE MY COURSE TOWARD HIM AND GIVE CHASE."

Beyond Kakh the trail winds its circuitous way through a mountainous region, following one little stream to its source, climbing over the crest of an intervening ridge and down the bed of another stream. It is but an indistinct donkey trail at best, and the toilsome mountain climbing reminds me vividly of the worst parts of Asia Minor. Towards nightfall I wander into the village of Nukhab, a small place perched among

the hills, inhabited by kindly-disposed, hospitable folks.

Having seen the unhappy effect of the Governor-General's letter of recommendation at Torbet-i-Haiderie, and desirous of seeing what effect it might, perchance, have on the more simple-hearted people of Nukhab, I present it to the little, old, blue-gowned Khan of the village. Like a very large proportion of his people, the Khan is suffering from chronic ophthalmia; put he peruses the letter by the glimmer of a blaze of camelthorn. The intentions of these people were plainly most hospitable from the beginning, so that it is difficult to determine about the effect of the letter.

Willing hands sweep out the quarters assigned for my accommodation, the improvised besoms filling the place with a cloud of dust; the doorway is ruthlessly mutilated to make it large enough to admit the bicycle; *nummuds* are spread and a crackling fire soon fills the room with mingled smoke and light. The people are allowed to circulate freely in and out to see me, but only the Khan himself and a few of the leading lights of the village are permitted to indulge in the coveted privilege of spending the entire evening in my company. The village is ransacked for eatables to honor their guest, resulting in a bountiful repast of eggs, *pillau*, *mast* and *sheerah*.

Away down here among the mountains and out of the world, these people see nothing more curious than their next-door neighbors from year to year; they take the most ridiculous interest in such small affairs as my note-book and pencil, and everything about me seems to strike them as peculiar.

The entire village, as usual, assembles to see me dispose of the eatables so generously provided; and later in the evening there is another highly-expectant assembly waiting around, out of curiosity, to see what sort of a figure a Ferenghi cuts at his evening devotions. Poor benighted followers of the False Prophet, how little they comprehend us Christians! Suddenly it seems to dawn upon the mind of the simple old Khan that, being a stranger in a strange land, I might, perchance, be a trifle mixed about my bearings, and so he kindly indicates the direction of Mecca. When informed that the Ingillis never prostrate themselves towards Mecca and say, "Allah-il-allah!" they evince the greatest astonishment; and then the

strange, unnatural impiousness of people who never address themselves to Allah nor prostrate themselves towards the Holy City, impresses their simple minds with something akin to the feeling entertained among certain of ourselves towards extra dare-devil characters, and they seem to take a deeper and kindlier interest in me than ever. The disappointment at not seeing what I look like at prayers is more than offset by the additional novelty imparted to my person by the, to them, strange and sensational omission.

They seem greatly disappointed to learn that I am going away in the morning; they have plenty of *toke-me-morge*, *pillau*, *mast* and *sheerah*, they say—plenty of everything; and they want *me* to stay with them always. Revolving the matter over in my mind, I am forcibly struck with the calm, reposeful state of Nukhab society; and what a brilliant field of enterprise for an ambitious person the place would be. Turned Musselman, joined in wedlock to three or four sore-eyed village damsels; worshipped as a sort of strange superior being, *hakim* and eye-water dispenser; consulted as a walking storehouse of occult philosophy on all occasions; endeavoring to educate the people up to habits of all-round cleanliness; chiding the mothers for allowing the flies to swarm and devour the poor little babies' eyes—all this, for *toke-me-morge*, *pillau*, *mast* and *sheerah*, twice or thrice a day! Involuntarily my eye roams over the gladsome countenances of the eligible portion of my female auditors, as though driven by this whimsical flight of fancy to the necessity of at once making a choice. There is only one present with any pretense to comeliness; and embarrassed, no doubt, by the extreme tenderness of the stranger's glance, she shrinks from view behind an aged and ugly person whom I take to be her mother.

Everybody stops to see what I look like *en deshabille*, and when snugly sandwiched between the quilts provided, they gather about me and peer curiously down into my face.

An enterprising youth is on hand at daybreak making a fire; but it is eight o'clock before I am able to get away; they seem to be mildly scheming among themselves to keep me with them as long as possible.

The trail winds and twists about among the mountains, following in the train of a wayward little stream, then leads over a

pass and emerges in the company of another stream, upon a slanting plateau leading down to an extensive plain. Rounding the last spur of the hills, I find myself approaching a crowd numbering at least a hundred people. Hats are waved gleefully, voices are lifted up in joyous shouts of welcome, and the whole company give way to demonstrations of delight at my approach. A minute later I find myself surrounded by the familiar faces of the population of Nukhab—my road has followed a roundabout course of six or seven miles, and our enterprising friends have taken a short cut over the hills to intercept me at this point, where they can watch my progress across the open plain. They have brought along the kind old Khan's *kalian* and tobacco-bag, and the wherewithal to make me a parting glass of tea.

Eight or ten miles of fair wheeling across the plain, through the isolated village of Mohammedabad, and the trail loses itself among the rank, dead stalks of the asafetida plant that here characterizes the vegetation of the broad, level sweep of plain. The day is cloudy, and with no trail visible, my compass has to be brought into requisition; though oftentimes finding it useful, it is the first time I have found this article to be really indispensable so far on the tour.

The atmosphere of an asafetida desert is among those things that can better be imagined than described; the aroma of the fetid gum is wafted to and fro and assails the nostrils in a manner quite the reverse of "Araby, the blest." The plant is a sturdy specimen among the annuals; its straight, upright stem is but three or four feet high, but often measuring four inches in diameter, and it not infrequently defies the blasts of the Khorassan winter and the upheaving thaws of spring, and preserves its upright position for a year after its death. The thick, dead stems and branching tops of last year's plants are seen by the thousands, sturdily holding their ground among the rank, young shoots of the new growth.

Mountainous territory is again entered during the afternoon, and shortly after sunset I arrive at a cluster of wretched mud-hovels, numbering about two dozen. Here my reception is pre-eminently commercial and business-like, the people requiring payment in advance for the bread and eggs and rogan provided.

A nonsensical custom among the



THE BICYCLE IN DANGER.

people of Southern Khorassan is to offer one's food in turn to everybody present and say, "Bismillah," before commencing to eat it yourself. Although a ridiculous piece of humbug, it is generally my custom to fall in with the peculiar ways of the country, and for days past have invariably offered my food to scores of people whom I knew beforehand would not take it. The lack of courtesy at this hamlet in exacting payment in advance would seem to naturally preclude the right to expect the following of courteous customs in return. In this, however, I find myself mistaken; for my omission to say "Bismillah" not only fills these people with astonishment, but excites unfavorable comment.

The door-ways of the houses here are entirely too small to admit the bicycle, and that much-enduring vehicle has to take its chances on the low roof with a score or so inquisitive and meddling goats that instantly gather round it, as though revolving in their pugnacious minds some fell scheme of destruction. Outside are several camels tied to their respective pack-saddles which have been taken off and laid on the ground. Before retiring for the night it occurs to my mind that the total depravity of a goat's appetite bodes ill for the welfare of my saddle, and that, everything considered, the bi-

cycle could, perhaps, be placed safer on the ground; in addition to regarding the saddle as a particularly toothsome morsel, the goats' venturesome disposition might lead them to clambering about on the spokes, and generally mixing things up. So, taking it down, I stand it up against the wall, and place a heap of old pack-saddle frames and camel-trappings before it as an additional precaution. During the night some of the camels break loose and are heard chasing one another around the house, knocking things over and bellowing furiously. Apprehensive of my wheel, I get up and find it knocked over, but, fortunately, uninjured; I then take off the saddle and return it to the tender care and consideration of the goats.

Four men and a boy share with me a small, unventilated den, about ten feet square; one of them is a camel-driving descendant of the Prophet, and sings out, "Allah-il-allah!" several times during the night in his sleep; another is the patriarch of the village, a person guilty of cheating the undertaker, lo I these many years, and who snuffles and catches his breath. The other two men snore horribly, and the boy gives out unmistakable signs of a tendency to follow their worthy example; altogether, it is anything but a restful night.