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ATHIRST IN THE DESERT¹

NARRATIVE OF A PERILOUS JOURNEY OVER THE
KARA KUM SANDS OF CENTRAL ASIA

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WITH PICTURES BY JAY HAMBRIDGE

EARLY in the morning we had our bowls of tea and our candied fruit,—the gift of the khan,—and set off. On the way through the bazaar I remembered that I needed saddle-bags; for I was then using a worn and dyed pair of atrocious color. So we stopped to bargain. The result of this was that we did not leave Khiva till eleven o'clock, and I had my new bags, as well as my old, stuffed with things.

Because of our late start, we did not reach the house of our former host at Ak Khalat till five in the afternoon. Here we decided to stay for the night and take the remaining six hours in the cool of the morning.

We were entertained as before, except that our host was not visible during the meal. After dinner a man came to us in the guest-room and asked us to come with him. He led us into the courtyard, where lights glimmered through a square

tent of thin white cotton. Lifting the flap, we found ourselves on a platform covered by the tent and built over the little stream that fed the pool in the middle of the court. There were rugs and cushions about, and four old men sat under the hanging-lamps, silently smoking. One of these was our host, who said that he was sick, and had not been able to do the honors at our meal.

For a while we talked, formally passing compliments, which soon put a terrible strain on my vocabulary. At last he asked me if I had any of something with a Russian name that I did not know. Kolchov, however, pricked up his ears at the sound, and told me in French that the natives were very fond of pyrotechnics, and the old man had probably asked if I had any fireworks on my person, such as he had seen at Khiva on festival-days. I regretted it, but had to admit that I

¹ See also "The New Ride to Khiva" and "Khiva from the Inside" by the same writer in THE CENTURY for September and October.

had no pin-wheels or Roman candles about me.

After half an hour in the close tent, which served to keep out the air as well as the mosquitoes, we pleaded our early start and went toward bed. It occurred to me that if the poor old man wanted fireworks, it was a pity he could not have them. So, consulting with Kolchov, who refused to waste his emperor's ammunition in such a way, I drew the balls from five revolver shells, and rubbing the powder on a damp cotton string, made a foot-long fuse. Then making a paste of damp powder, I plastered a lump on a leaf of my note-book, and, connecting it with the fuse, I hung it on a pillar in the dark. Then I called out the four old Sarts, lighted the fuse, and we watched the little red spark jerk along upward till, with a flare, it reached the powder. That was all we had for pyrotechnics, but our host and his friends seemed hugely pleased, and talked it over excitedly in their stuffy tent.

That night Kolchov could not sleep from fatigue of the day's ride, which seemed to affect him even more than going in. He was so miserable and nervous that we decided to get on as soon as possible, and, rousing Samán at half-past three, we made a glass of tea, fed the horses, and were off by a little past four.

From Ak Khalat we decided to take a route suggested by Samán, which led through a village called Ak Meched, where lived a colony of Dutch. After four hours' riding, we came to the little village. The houses were built like ordinary Sart houses, except that they had chimneys, and stood far apart and in rows, surrounded by open gardens.

As we rode up, several men came out to meet us. They spoke smilingly to Kolchov in Russian, and invited us in. The interior was a surprise, after Sart and Russian houses of the same size. Over a big fireplace of baked brick was a row of highly polished brass and pewter plates. The plain wood table was scrupulously clean, and a tidy little lady, who, except for her costume, might have stepped off the island of Marken, bustled about, making ready the samovar. A half-grown girl stowed the fat baby into a cradle, and a little tow-headed crea-

ture of indeterminable sex lugged a copper ewer up to its mother to fill the samovar.

When tea was ready, the woman served it with a serious-eyed baby on her arm, and then retired to the other room. After tea, the head man of the colony came in and greeted me cordially. He insisted on showing us through the village and explaining the pursuits of his neighbors. Among twenty-four families and a hundred and seventy odd souls, there were seven carpenter shops. In one of these we saw, half-finished, an immense and ornate chest of drawers, made of cedar, inlaid with poplar and apricot woods, which had been ordered by the Khan. They told me with pride that his state carriage had been made in that village down to its smallest bolt, after European models. Although Russian subjects the villagers were not of the Greek church, and kept up rigorously their own religion and their simple Dutch church life. The church building was bare of decoration. A plain high table, holding the ponderous Bible, stood on a little dais over a row of wooden benches without backs, and over the door was nailed a cross.

From the church we stepped into the school, where two dozen plump, flax-haired boys and girls fidgeted and giggled when we came in. We were introduced to the teacher, and through Kolchov I was asked to point out on the wall map the place from which I came. I found Boston, and followed my route with a pointer to Khiva and Ak Meched, naming the cities I had gone through. The school was breathless with wonder, and when I had done, the teacher thanked me for the valuable lesson in geography that I had given the class.

We then returned to the house of the mayor or governor, who regaled us with some grapes and four-year-old wine of his own raising and pressing. To crown all, he brought out a box of delicious cigars, which had been sent to him by a cousin in Holland. They were really good cigars from the Dutch colonies, and I smoked with delight and a most civilized feeling. Soon we had to leave the pleasant people, who, however, insisted on setting us on our way, and sent a young man with us to Petro Alexandrovsk. He was not much of a companion, even for



Drawn by Jay Hamblidge. Half-tone plate engraved by Felix Levin

“‘ADAM BAR-MA?’ (IS THERE A MAN HERE?)” (SEE PAGE 11)

Kolchov, for he could speak only Dutch and Sart, though he had been born in the village and was a Russian subject.

Two hours from Ak Meched brought us back to Petro Alexandrovsk and Kolchov's house, where he promptly went to bed and I took a bath in a tent over an irrigating-ditch, getting terribly bitten by mosquitoes as I did so. That afternoon Kolchov sent his younger brother to look up horses and the tarantass, to take me over the river trail to Chardjui and the railroad. He soon came back with the

report that horses were not to be had for love or money, and I must get a camel, and add two days to a five days' journey. The camel-man being sent for, demanded a hundred rubles (fifty dollars) for his beast and tarantass. This I would not give, and he could not be beaten down.

Angry at the delay, I resolved to take my own horse, reëngage Samán and his mount for the journey, and start the following morning.

That evening, with everything prepared for a start, I went to pay my part-



Drawn by Jay Hambidge. Half-tone plate engraved by G. M. Lewis

"ALL NIGHT WE TRUDGED" (SEE PAGE 12)

ing call on my former acquaintance the Natchalnik. I was ushered into his presence and he, gravely shaking hands, summoned the colonel who spoke French to act as interpreter. The first remark came like a blow in the face. He said:

"You have been to Khiva; you have been without my permission; I am not permitted to allow travelers to go into Khiva. I must detain you."

The situation was almost too ridiculous to be taken seriously, and when I thought of my difficulties in getting that permission, of Kolchov being forced upon me, and my final departure with the Natchalnik's blessing, the whole thing was absurdly inconsequent. I was able to control my features enough to smile, and to say that of course I understood it, and that it was only my stupidity that had prevented my seeing it in the first place, and I admitted that I should never have gone to Khiva.

To this the Natchalnik heartily agreed, and eagerly acquiesced when I spoke of my stupidity. Then he began a long-winded harangue, intended to persuade himself and me that I had slipped through his fingers and got to Khiva without his knowing that I had started. I agreed to it all, and fell in with his view, till he wound up with the information that I must wait three weeks for the boat, and then go up river in charge of a squad of Cossacks, considering myself under arrest.

Now, my latest news from home had been dated over two months before, and my mind for the last week had settled into a resolution that, once pointed homeward, nothing should stop me; so, one thing leading to another, I got unintentionally and undiplomatically angry, and told the Natchalnik that if he made me wait I should lay my case before the governor-general of Tashkent, and that he, the Natchalnik, would hear from headquarters.

Perhaps the prospect of a daily call for three weeks from such a visitor staggered the poor man; at any rate, he affected to consider, and finally said that, after all, if I cared to go down over the desert trail on horseback, perhaps the guard of Cossacks would be unnecessary.

This trail, he said, led down to the

railroad at Chardjui, and there were rest-houses every thirty versts, where, by means of the letter he would give me, I could get fresh horses at every stage. Also, he said, that I could get bread and pilaff¹ and water with which to make my tea, but that sugar and black tea I must take with me. I thanked him for his hospitality, and went back to Kolchov's to bed, first, on my way, leaving cards at the club for various officers I had met on my former visit.

Before light the next morning I waked the drowsy bazaar-men and bought from one a copper tea-kettle and from another some Russian tea and a "half-size" sugar-loaf, about a foot high, done up in a blue paper and hemp cord, and sealed with an immense government seal. These I put into my saddle-bags, which were strapped on behind the high cantle. On one side of my pommel was hung a stiff leather case containing my tea-bowl, and on the other two bottles covered with felt sewn by a Turcoman at Merv.

Samán had even a more ungainly load than I, for, besides his saddle-bags, he had his bowl-case and a small saddle-skin for water, made from a young kid, and behind his saddle was roped the great leather bag which I had brought to Petro Alexandrovsk by boat, never thinking but that I should come back the same way. Added to all these impedimenta, the poor jiggit or servant had the great camera slung over his shoulder. I had taken few pictures, and those, I had good reason to believe, were unsuccessful; but I was not going to give up hope till they were actually developed.

The horse I rode was a gray, with powerful shoulders, but sloping away to curiously inadequate hind-quarters. Samán had picked him for me, and had so successfully beaten down the price that I gave only ten rubles, plus my Khivan horse, instead of fifty, which the horse-dealer at first seemed to consider ridiculously low. This made him cost thirty-five dollars in all, which was not bad for a white man's bargain, but probably gross over-payment from a native point of view.

From the bazaar we rode to say good-by to the Kolchovs, and there in the com-

¹ Rice boiled with flesh or fish and spiced.

pound we found a jiggit with a note from the Governor, which I opened with some trepidation. It was not a lion in the path, however, or even an invitation to call, but merely a few compliments in

put in tea, we mounted, and rode out of the town to the southward.

In the morning I had noticed that Samán had not put my silver-studded bridle on the new horse, and I had asked him



Drawn by Jay Hambidge. Half-tone plate engraved by C. W. Chadwick

"FOR FIVE MINUTES HE KNELT, BOWING, RISING, AND BREAKING INTO SONOROUS PRAYER" (SEE PAGE 15)

French, and the request that I accept the services of one of his own trusted jiggits to set me on the right track. After a protracted farewell to the Kolchov family, and the present from *madame la mère* of a small bottle of apricot jam to

where it was. He replied that the throat-latch had needed repairing, and he had put the bridle in his saddle-bags, to mend at the first noon-rest, borrowing another bridle for use, meanwhile.

For two hours we rode along a deep-

cut desert trail, which finally swung to the right, and zigzagged down the cliffs to the Oxus bank. Here, after much fruitless calling across the river, which is nearly a mile wide at this point, I fired three shots from my revolver, and soon saw, by means of the glasses, four men on the other shore kicked into life by an energetic fifth, who came out of a little thatched hut. The five took hold of a tow-line and started walking up-stream with a big native *koyock*. Their slow walk along the shore took them fully half an hour, at the end of which they embarked in a leisurely manner and pushed off. Ten yards from the shore the boat was seized by the tearing current, and so far as I could see they made no headway at all, though they poled frantically. Before long they had lost all the distance gained by towing, and seemed in a fair way to sight the Aral Sea. However, an hour's poling brought them to shore half a mile below us, and they started to walk up. When they came abreast of us, no sign was made of stopping to let us embark, so we humbly walked after them, leading our horses. Another half mile was covered in this way, and then we were allowed to get in, our three horses jumping the gunwale very cleverly, and landing all four feet together in the middle of the boat. I found that these boats had extra bottoms, to stand the shock of jumping horses, and were reasonably stiff as well. The model was not unlike a clumsy imitation of one of our whale-boats, about thirty feet long, and built of hewn logs two or three inches thick.

Once out into the current, we were whirled along at a tremendous pace, four of the men poling on one side, the other vainly endeavoring to steer with a long sweep over the stern. In the middle of the stream we struck a sand-bar with such force that the horses staggered where they stood fastened to the thwarts head to tail. From this bar it took us ten minutes' hard work to push off, for none of the crew dared to get overboard to push in the rush of water, shallow though it was.

Safe on the west bank, I paid six cents for our three selves and our three horses, and rode off. At about four in the afternoon, after riding during the hot-

test hours of the blistering day, we came to the little rest-house of Ak Kamwish, the first on the list of the Natchalnik's circular letter. Kolchov had written out the names in French script, so that I could attach a name to each rest-house as I reached it.

This one had two rooms open entirely along one side, so that it looked like two stalls. In front was a well with steps cut in the walls of the shaft, so that one could go down to get water straddle-wise. An old man came forward and took our horses, tethering them in the shadow of the building. He said he had no fresh beasts for us and could give us no pilaff, but he would boil the water for our tea. This he did, and also watered the horses from a big earthenware pan, and Samán fed them with barley from our saddle-bags. I had taken the precaution to have one side of my bags and one of Samán's filled with barley at Petro Alexandrovsk, and we must have had about twenty quarts between us.

In one of the stalls we lay down on our boorkas, and I slept till eight o'clock. It was well after sundown, and only a hint of red was left in the west, with a young moon in the sky. As I mounted, I noticed again that my bridle was not on my horse. Samán said he had it, and would mend it at the next stop. But suspecting something, I dismounted, and searching his saddle-bag, found no bridle. At this I knew he must have sold it, hoping to stave me off from inquiry till we were too far on the road to go back. Much depended on the decision of the moment, for in the East, if one's servant loses his fear and respect for his master, from that moment the master's property is not safe.

Without a word, I took my six-shooter from my saddle-bag, and, emptying the chambers when Samán was not looking, I said to him: "Take this gun, ride back to Petro Alexandrovsk, and get my bridle. Ride night and day; I will wait at the next rest-house for you. The Natchalnik's jiggit will go with me as far as that. If necessary, shoot the man who has the bridle, but bring it to me, at any rate."

This seemed the only way to impress Samán and recover my bridle at the same time, and was really not such a long chance as it may appear, for I knew that



Drawn by Jay Hambidge. Half-tone plate engraved by C. W. Chadwick

"SKILFULLY ROBBING ONE OF THE CROONING GROUPS * * * HE BROUGHT
THEIR BOILING WATER AND MADE ME TEA" (SEE PAGE 17)

Samán would not dare report to the Russians without me, and I did not think he would sell the revolver, even though he had sold the bridle.

The Natchalnik's jiggit and I rode off from Ak Kamwish to the south, while Samán, with a great show of haste, galloped back in the moonlight over the trail we had just come. All night we rode at an even little jog-trot of four miles or more an hour. The trail was an easy one to follow. It was like a shallow ditch, two feet wide and six inches deep, worn by horses, and kept scoured by the winds. Sometimes, however, it would dive straight into a great *barkan*, or marching sand-dune, and reappear a hundred feet beyond. Dry bushes of saksaul were scattered sparsely over the sand, and gave out an acid sage-like smell that reminded me of our own deserts; but I looked in vain for a friendly coyote or jack-rabbit. It was like riding in a graveyard — everything deathly still. Although I had had only three or four hours' rest that day, I had no desire for sleep; a kind of nervous exhilaration, as well as the strangeness of the scene, kept me awake. After many hours of this rolling, gray landscape, the stars seemed to pale and burn less steadily, though the earth seemed no lighter; and then over the horizon came brimming up molten gold, which spilled and spread, running along the edge of the world.

It was four hours or more after sunrise when we saw the little rest-house of Pit Nyak in the distance, and rode toward it gladly, thinking of refreshing tea and a chance to stretch out in the shade. As we rode up the place seemed deserted, and when I called out "Adam bar-ma?" ("Is there a man here?") no one answered.

The jiggit dismounted, and went to the well with a water-jar that stood under the shelter of the open shed-like house. When he reached it I saw him look down and then walk away. I rode to the edge, and, looking over, saw a dry shaft with a parched bottom. This was not very cheering, but, still, our bottles and saddle-skins were full, and when Samán came, we could push on. The jiggit tethered the horses and watered them, using almost the whole of one of the

saddle-skins to do so. When he came back and lay down by the fire of saksaul roots that I had started for boiling water, I questioned him about the place, but he became at once stupid and sullen. Why was there no caretaker? Why no change of horses? Above all, why no water? To all these questions except the last he gruffly said that he did not know, and to that gave the enlightening answer that there was no water because the well was dry.

After tea we both felt better, and ate the last of Mme. Kolchov's jam on some of the blanket-like Sart bread. Then I slept for a couple of hours, to be awakened by the jiggit, who said that he was going now, and that Samán would come soon. I laughed, and told him that he stayed with me till Samán came, and longer, if I required him, or he would be held responsible to the Natchalnik.

Again I slept. When I woke I found it was afternoon. The jiggit was building a fire, and we had half a dozen bowls of hot tea and a little bread.

Samán woke me from my next sleep by laying the bridle at my feet, along with the revolver. I asked him how he got it, and he replied that he was a brave man, and got it from the bazaar pig who had stolen it, quite losing sight, in his new artistic creation, of his old story of the broken throat-latch. I am afraid the bazaar pig to whom he sold the bridle got little satisfaction when Samán returned for his property, full of righteous indignation and flourishing the gun. I rather think Samán got the bridle and kept the money, too.

Giving Samán's horse a couple of hours' rest we started at about six o'clock, after giving the Natchalnik's jiggit the princely present of three rubles, and seeing him start back for Ak Kamwish.

This night was like the last, only it seemed interminably long, my eyelids kept dropping and my horse swinging off the trail to the left. The moon rose and then stood still in the heavens. The Dipper stuck at an uncomfortable angle, or would slip back a little every time I looked away from it. Our horses walked with a shambling flabbiness that irritated me. I got off, and putting the bridle over my shoulder, pulled at the poor beast's head for a mile or so, but,

tiring suddenly, I mounted again. The sunrise came after an interminable time, and when I had almost forgotten to expect it. The phenomena may have been the same as those of the day before, but to me they meant only more heat and cruel dryness. I did not take the trouble to watch the colors, for I was busy with my own thoughts. What if the next well were dry? It could not be. But what if it were? The tedious question went over and over in my mind.

The sun was up now, and, to divert my mind, I took out a little Réaumur thermometer that I had purchased at the Petro Alexandrovsk chemist's, and took the temperature by swinging it on the shady side of my horse. It registered something that I later figured out to be over a hundred and twenty, but on the sunny side it stretched over the scale, and, either from expansion or rough treatment, soon broke.

Some hours after sunrise, at a time when I was so thoroughly immersed in my thoughts that I had forgotten where I was, Samán spoke and pointed ahead. With my glasses I saw a little rest-house on the trail in front, and by the list I made it out to be Sar Divar. We rode to it and called, as I had done before, "Adam bar-ma?" but there was no answer. Dismounting, we walked together to the well-shaft and looked down. It was also dry, and we walked back and sat down in the shade.

There remained to us two quart-bottles of water, a little tea in the tea bottle, and about a square foot of the sheet bread, and for the horses a good deal of barley and a small sheaf of what had been green alfalfa-clover.

While Samán made the fire for tea, I wet my handkerchief, wiped out the frothy mouths of the horses, and set the alfalfa before them. They sniffed at it wistfully, and even mouthed it a little, but ate none. Then we had a bowl of hot green tea apiece, without sugar; the other jiggit had apparently taken that. Refreshed by the tea, I rolled over on my boorka and meditated. Should we start at once, in the terror of noon-heat, and reach the next well before morning, perhaps without our horses, or should we wait till night, and then be able to push ahead faster and with less danger? In

the second course we should be a longer time without water, but part of that time we could sleep, and all of the bread was not gone. While thinking it over, I fell asleep, and the problem was settled. When I awoke, Samán was moaning and rolling about in his dreams. I aroused him, and asked him if he wished to start. He sat up, gazing at me reproachfully, and said it was as I wished.

So I said, "We will wait till sundown," and he seemed content. But the sleep I had counted on did not come a second time, and I was forced to sit up in that dark oven-like stall and listen to the blood churning in my ears, and watch the horses standing with drooping heads and with tongues hanging from the sides of their mouths.

The one bottle and a quarter of water left us was not enough to help the horses, but could keep us for a time, if the need came.

About five o'clock we wiped out the horses' mouths again with cooled tea, and mounted them regretfully. We had not gone two miles, however, before Samán's beast became evidently too weak to continue, and we dismounted, and putting the bridles over our shoulders, towed the horses along. When the sun went down, the heat was not so direct, but our thirst became so bad that we finished the tea.

All night we trudged on, leaning on the bridles of the reluctant horses. For hours the country glistened white with salt, and our boots broke through a crust of crystal that sparkled like snow in the moonlight. There was not so much as a bush in sight; the land seemed cursed. I remember thinking of a scene in Doré's pictures of the Wandering Jew, and being transported back to the room in my grandfather's house where I used to look at the great portfolio. The illusion was so perfect that I could smell the leather of the big sofa on which I lay curled, and as I twisted at a sofa button, to my dismay it came off in my fingers! Then the portfolio slipped and slid till it fell with a shock to the floor—and I picked myself up, with my face covered with salt and sand, which burned the cracks in my lips.

I know that night was the longest I ever spent, but it is so subdivided into

year-long periods and states of mind that I cannot form any consecutive idea of it, and find myself mixing it up with other parts of the ride. Morning came, but light brought nothing grateful to us beyond the mere change of aspect from night to day.

At this time our pace must have been about two miles an hour. The horses retarded us somewhat, but the support of leaning forward on the bridles was not to be despised. With light came flies in great numbers—common house-flies that sat on our skins undiscouraged by an occasional brushing-off. Also, for the first time, we had horse-flies nearly an inch long, which settled on the bellies and necks of the poor beasts till they groaned with pain, though they did not try to kick or rub them off. Samán said these flies were deadly, and that among the Turcomans it was believed that twenty bites would kill a horse. By the middle of the afternoon the water was reduced to half a bottle. I caught myself wondering how we were to get out of it all. Curiously enough, the question never seemed to be *if* we would pull through, but merely *how*.

The sun was near the horizon when the rest-house which my list called Danee Shair came in sight, perched high on a mirage near a grove of mulberry-trees. Samán pointed at it, and said with a grim smile: "Perhaps the house is real, O Bayair, but the trees are false." It was some time after sundown when we reached the little shed which stood alone in the desert, with nothing taller than saksaul bushes to represent mulberry-trees. Why part should be false and part true in the same sky picture, I cannot imagine. As we came up, Samán cried huskily the regular formula, "Adam bar-ma?" When no answer came, he turned slowly to me and said gently, as if he were breaking some sad news to a sick man, "Bayair, Adam yoke" ("There is no one").

It was too dark to see down the well, so Samán, straddling the shaft by the niches cut in the walls, went down with some difficulty. There came no sound from below, and I called, "Su-bar-ma?" ("Is there water?") and up from below came hoarsely, "Su yoke, Bayair" ("There is no water, Bayair").

When he climbed to the mouth of the shaft, he was too weak to get out, and lay half over the edge of the well till I gave him a hand. As he was getting a fire ready he said, "Bayair, there is a little water, but it is bad, very bad."

Somewhat cheered by this, I went down the shaft, and found at the bottom some green slime, wet and oozy. I brought up what there was of it in my hat, and squeezed from it into the teapot fully half a pint of water, which we set on to boil for our tea.

It was now nearly two days since the horses had eaten anything, and when the tea was made and Samán and I had strung out the luxury of our single sugarless bowl as long as we could, I soaked a piece of bread in the tea and gave it to my horse, who accepted it eagerly, mumbling it with his lips, but finding it hard to swallow. We had converted all our water into tea.

Between nine and ten o'clock we decided to leave, as staying at Danee Shair would do us no good. Without even an attempt to mount, we started off, heading a little south of east, with the moon rolling up from the horizon on our left. That night seemed bad enough, but for some reason it had not the horror for me that the night before had had. It was immensely long, and we walked on through an interminable morning. I fell down several times where the wind had made ridges in the sand, and once Samán's horse lay down and very quietly prepared to die; but Samán, roused to fury, beat such a tattoo on its ribs and back that it was discouraged in its plan and came along with a rustling whistle in its breath that sounded like wind down the chimney. We did not care to leave the horses behind to die, even though they could not carry us, for we did not know for what purpose we might need them soon.

About noon we sighted the rest-house named Jigger Bent ahead on the trail. I did not use my glasses: I knew just what to expect—two clay-daubed stalls, with a fireplace in front of them. When we walked up to it an hour or so later, it was as we had expected. We dropped our bridles and came up to the well-shaft. We looked down, and seeing that it was dry, led the horses to the shade of

the building, and sat down in one of the stalls. After an hour or so we took a drink from our tea, thankful that it was not necessary to stir about and make a fire to boil the water.

Before long I suggested that we start toward Dargan Attar, the next stage, and Samán gravely acquiesced. Now both of us were sure that we could not walk another night and part of a day; but we also knew that staying here meant longer without water and a gradual ebbing of our strength. When I began to reflect on the chances of the Dargan Attar well being full and of our reaching it at all, I gained so little by the thought that I systematically shirked it and kept my mind on our present state of affairs.

It was about three in the afternoon when we left Jigger Bent and took to the trail again. My feet were so painful in my riding-boots, that I had not dared ease them in the rest-house for fear I should never get my boots on again, and now as I began to walk I felt the blood come at every wrinkle in the leather. As we moved along, my single drink of water disappeared from memory, and it seemed impossible that I had tasted it only a few hours before. Thirst in the mouth was not our only trouble; a grinding cramp in the stomach had been gripping us all day.

Samán asked, "Are you very dry, Bayair?"

"Yes," I said.

To which he replied consolingly, "When your tongue is so dry it cannot move, then, O Bayair, you die."

This remark seemed so unnecessary that I let it pass in silence.

By the middle of the afternoon our bottle was empty and our only hope lay ahead on that blistering trail. The hours of that afternoon were, for the most part, slowly consumed in shuffling along in such a bent position that the queer, hauling, stretching grind which seemed to be at work with our intestines should be least aggravated. My feet were bleeding no longer, but every step made me aware of the torn skin and the dried blood that stiffened my stocking.

The horses were pulling back determinedly now, and the breath whistled in their nostrils and down their long, stretched necks, pulled taut by the

bridles. Still, I could not make up my mind to leave them, for the use that we might soon be forced to put them to. Why they kept up so long I cannot imagine, with none of the hope or spur that kept me and Samán putting one foot beyond another in that pitiless southwest trench.

The sun was dipping to the desert's rim when I, who was ahead, came to a cross trail leading from the east at an acute angle with our own.

Samán said it came from Khalattá, and dashed my hopes by saying that there were no wells that he had ever heard of on it, and that the caravans all came by camel, and carried their own water, making Khiva from Khalattá by the sixth day. When I asked how often caravans traveled the route, he did not know, but thought four or five a season. I asked him if it was at this time of year, and he said he thought so. During this conversation we had been sitting in our horses' shadows, where the two trails crossed, and for some time after we had stopped speaking I could see no reason for moving on.

The sun rolled down level with the horizon and began to sink, when I heard a guttural exclamation from Samán. Turning to where he sat behind me, I saw him pointing to the east, down the Khalattá trail. In a moment I saw what he meant—a golden glow, like a puff of yellow smoke. Lying down on the ground, I took my glasses from their sling over my shoulder, and I remember deliberately wiping the dust from their lenses, and adjusting the focus; then, with my elbows on the sand, I held them up to look. They seemed to sway a good deal and to be hard to balance. The cloud was plainly enough dust, and through the dust I could see the high legs of a camel! Then as the trail curved and the caravan came broadside to, I counted five of them. This I told Samán, and the poor old fellow stroked his gray beard with a shaking hand and smiled at me.

After a silence he said, "O Bayair, when you are thirsty in the desert and see camels, then is there no talk of robbers."

Then going to his horse, he took the saddle carpet, and spreading it carefully on the sand, faced the setting sun and

Mecca. Claspings his hands, he touched his forehead to the earth. For five minutes he knelt, bowing, rising, and breaking into sonorous prayer. When it was done, he folded the carpet and replaced it on the saddle. By this time the sun had gone down and the caravan was not in sight. We could have lessened the distance and our time of waiting if we had got up and walked to meet them, but for some reason neither of us did. For myself, the dryness and cracking of the mouth was perfectly bearable, and not even so very painful, but the cramp and grinding sensation of the stomach made motion difficult.

Evening was well begun and the stars were shining when those five blessed men came swaying out of the east on their tall camels. Samán got up and spoke to them first, expatiating on my greatness with a crackling voice. But he was interrupted by the first man's making his camel kneel and dismounting. He came smiling over to me, and I stood up, and we shook hands, with the greeting:

"Salaam laikum" ("Peace be with you").

"Alaikum salaam" ("And with you, peace").

Then hurrying back to his kneeling camel, the man brought a little saddle-skin that chuckled and gurgled as he walked. Samán took up my tea-bowl from the horse, and the kindly stranger poured it full of white kumiss, a drink I had hitherto despised. I drank off the sour stuff without tasting it, and held out my bowl for more; but he gently refused, saying:

"Chi bar, chi yachshi, Bayair" ("There will be tea, and tea is better").

So I waited while the five merchants—for such they proved to be—made a fire, boiled water from the little kegs, and made me green tea, into which they put real sugar. I can taste that tea now—fragrant and pleasantly acid in the mouth. After the first two mouthfuls a feeling of complete change in mind and body came over me, and after the second bowl my parched frame was sweating violently, and a new feeling of power flowed pleasantly into my limbs.

Meanwhile the horses were being fed with green alfalfa and watered. It was good to hear the poor beasts sucking

loudly at the lukewarm stuff, and to see them paw the earth and kick each other in their efforts to get at it.

We sat, seven in number, about the embers of the cooking-fire, and Samán told of our being set on the trail by the Natchalnik at Petro Alexandrovsk, and much more that I could not understand. They were grave sedate people, and though perfectly friendly, were not communicative. All that we could find out about them was that they were bound for Khiva to trade, and their camels seemed to be loaded with bolts of cloth. After a few hours' rest and more bowls of hot tea, the kindly people left us, but not before they had filled our bottles and saddle-skins and given us green tea and all the bread they could spare. Not a kopek would they take for it all, but smilingly refused my grateful offers. Only at the last, when we had taken almost a whole camel-load of green alfalfa for the horses, and had packed it in two huge bundles behind our saddles, did they allow us to give them one ruble, since they had just bought it in the fields outside Khalattá.

Throughout that night we slept at the cross-roads of the two trails, and, when the sun rose, we watered the horses, and mounting, started on a fast walk to the south. The beasts were in much better condition than I could have hoped, and though we did not trot, we must have covered over three miles an hour. Before sundown we came to Dargan Attar, where we found the well empty, except for a little damp, green slime, and, as usual, no living object. Here we slept till almost midnight, and then started under the stars and a brilliant half-moon.

We mounted at the start, but soon found that it was too much to expect of the horses, and were forced to walk. A crystal layer of salt made walking easier than before, and we crunched along with reasonable steadiness at first, with the reins over our shoulders. But before long the exhilaration of our rescue and the relief to mind and body began to wear off, and our pace became slower. My boots hurt, and the cracks in my lips widened and bled. Little things now seemed unbearable, and the everlasting black night would not lift.

When day came, clouds of flies settled

on us. One crawled out of the sun into the grateful shade of my ear, where he walked about on the drum till I nearly yelled with nervousness. When at last I was able to make Samán understand my trouble, he pulled my head to one side, with that ear up, and gave me a few ringing whacks from below, which excited the fly into a sort of breakdown on my ear-drum. The next expedient was a stick, which Samán whittled from a saksaul-bush. He jabbed with it, and forced the poor insect hopelessly down. I gathered that his position was that of a child in a tantrum, lying on the floor, and hammering with feet and fists. Then I sat down and thought, my whole head feeling like a machine-shop. The result of the thinking was that I made Samán gather saksaul and warm a little water. When this was tepid, I lay on my side in the sand and poured drop after drop into my ear. At the first drop the hammering stopped abruptly; at the next, I fancied I could feel my assailant floating off the drum; and when the ear was entirely flooded with the warm water, out came a tiny black object about as big as a gnat.

The distance between Dargan Attar and Goo-Ger-Ji-lee must have been less than the other stages, for we reached it about noon. Here there was nearly a foot of brackish water in the well, so we made use of it instead of that in our bottles and saddle-skins. We slept till late in the afternoon, and set out just before sundown. During the night the horses were strong enough to carry us for five or six hours; but I did not care to tax them longer, and for the last part of the night and through the early morning we plodded along in dreary file.

It seemed to have been centuries that we had been crossing the Kara Kum Sands, and I could hardly remember a time when life did not consist of walking over white-hot dust, through long alternate stretches of stifling nights and blistering days.

When the sun had been up two hours or so, a rest-house appeared, high-mounted on a cloud to the east. The list made it out to be Dia Khateen, and we reached it after two more hours of travel. We had at last learned not to expect water in these wells of the desert, and great was our surprise to find here a fair

supply and not so brackish as that at the last station. We reveled in the water, using it to wash off the horses' backs, to soak our hands and faces, and to make bowl after bowl of steaming weak tea in which to soak the hard bread.

Before we slept, Samán made an elaborate prayer, looking like a venerable patriarch as he knelt on his carpet in the glare of the noon sun, bowing his forehead to the dust. All the tea that we had drunk could not keep us awake, and we slept the sun under the west. Before we started, we had more tea, I drinking from my old crackled Persian bowl of corn-flower blue. Then, though it seemed a criminal waste, we emptied our saddlebags and bottles of the water, which had begun to "rot," and filled them anew from the well.

This night we were able to ride all the time, though our progress was barely faster than when we had walked the night before.

Before morning we came unexpectedly to the little rest-house of Kaba Khlee, where the well was dry. We did not stop, but rode on till the sun was up an hour or so. Then in the open we drank tea and watered the horses, but made no further halt till noon, when we stretched our boorkas on the ground, and propping up the corners on small saksaul bushes, sheltered our heads and fell asleep, sweating after half a dozen bowls of tea.

When we had slept a short three hours I awoke Samán, and told him to get the horses ready. The desire to finish the journey had grown to a fever, and I could not keep my mind off the letters and news that I expected to receive at Baku. Day and night I went along the trail, aware of the minuteness of single steps, yet realizing that without an almost infinite number of them I never could get out. Poor Samán suffered for my impatience; but he never complained, and he obeyed orders like a dog. The sun went down on our right, and before long the moon rose; but still we plodded on, swaying in the saddle as the horses walked, and jerking roughly at the slack bridles when they stumbled.

By midnight we came to Tashah Kur, and found the same empty, stall-like chambers, the same abandoned fireplace, and the same open shaft of the well, all

standing, as it were, in the center of a huge, rolling sand horizon. The place might have been any of the stations at which we had stopped for the last thousand years, and I was seized with terror lest all the time we had been traveling in a circle, and, after all, were no nearer home. But this idea was only part of the dream-feeling of the whole ride—a feeling which seemed to dull mercifully the real dangers and greater pains, but to exaggerate petty discomforts and impossible fears into staring facts.

The well had water in it, but only enough for the horses. We made tea, and slept till about two hours before morning, when we mounted and rode off. I decided that we had not been eating enough to sustain us, and so broke a piece of bread with the butt of my pistol, and proceeded to eat it without softening in tea. The consequence was that the whole side of a back tooth broke off, leaving it sensitive to the least motion. Every step of the horse seemed to be set directly on the nerve, and even sounds gave extra twinges. However, the pain was an effective counter-irritant to my thoughts, which had been poor company of late, and had taken the habit of running in exasperating circles, without beginning or end.

By noon of this day, our tenth on the trail, we came to a little rest-house, with a dry well, not mentioned on my list, but which Samán said might be Ees Bos. In three hours more we came to Sultan Ak Su Kul. Here, too, there was no water, in spite of the name, which means "Sultan White-water Lake."

In the shelter of the little shed-like building we rested a few hours, and then taking up the trail again, slouched along on our weak-kneed horses for an endless time. At last, when I knew by the Dipper that it could not be much after midnight, we came under the shadow of a long wall and rode up to a big gate—the gate of Dinau.

We thumped till the gate was opened, and then rode in to a scene that I shall not soon forget.

It was a great square courtyard sprinkled with twinkling fires and groups of squatting men. A pleasant, confused murmur filled the place—the baaing of sheep and the quavering falsetto of

Oriental song, with the contented tinkle of dulcimers punctuating the whole. Samán and I rode in and picketed our horses in the middle, finding some difficulty in choosing a place where they would not be attacked by the other stallions tethered near, which strained at their lines and screamed at the newcomers.

Two jiggits conducted me to a little raised dais at the end of the court, on which was a low corded bedstead. Here Samán threw my boorka and saddle-traps, then, skilfully robbing one of the crooning groups that squatted round a fire, he brought their boiling water and made me tea.

That night I slept so soundly that the courtyard was half-empty when I woke, and I had heard none of the preparations for going, the screaming stallions, or the bleating sheep.

Samán was nowhere to be seen, and having sent several men after him, none of whom returned, I began to think that I was not receiving the attention due to a great bayair, and decided to assert myself Russian fashion. Strapping on my holster, I stood on the bedstead, stretched, yawned, and roared fiercely: "Beg bar-ma? Beg kereg!" ("Is there no head-man? I wish the chief!")

The effect was instantaneous: men came running to me from all sides, while others rushed off to find the Beg. Some brought me tea, and some bread, which they hoped might pacify me.

At last, in rode the great man, and hurling himself from his horse, came up to greet me. We sat on the bedstead, drinking tea, and passing compliments that stretched my Turcoman almost to the breaking-point. Meanwhile, I asked him for fresh horses with which to go to Chardjui, but he said he had none. Then thinking of the letter from the Natchalnik, one side written in Turcoman, and one side in Russian, I produced it; and the Beg, donning an immense pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, examined the signature with the air of a handwriting expert. The letter he did not attempt to read, but the signature having satisfied him, he said I should have his own horse, and pointed out the black stallion on which he had galloped in.

After more compliments, the Beg drew

from his finger a huge ring of silver set with a lump of semi-translucent stone that looked like a moistened cough-drop, and put it on my finger, and I gave him my two worn horses, explaining that they were poor beasts, but would soon grow fat.

Then Samán was found and mounted on a horse mysteriously produced from nowhere, and I got on the great black beast that stood squealing and pawing in the middle of the compound.

That ride was an exquisite joy. The morning was still early enough not to be uncomfortably hot, and after half an hour of desert trail we came to the river-side, and the two hours between Dinau and Chardjui I covered in a high-stepping, sidewise canter that was delightfully refreshing after eleven days of a stumbling shuffle. Even the tooth did not jump quite so badly, and when we came in sight of the great steel span of the Oxus bridge, with the cluster of houses at one end that meant the railroad

and news from home, I broke into song.

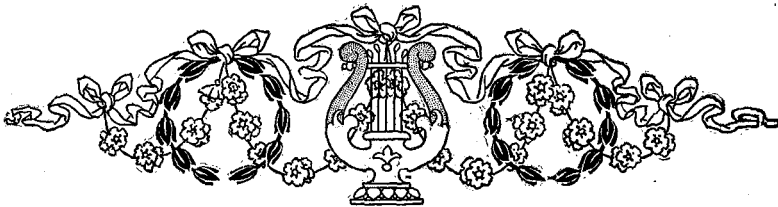
On looking back, I saw the ever-respectful Samán smothering a smile; but, then, he could not be expected to appreciate the sentiments of "A Hot Time in the Old Town To-night."

We rode down the main street of the town, lined with blessed shade-trees, under which ran little brooks of blessed water, and stopped in front of the cool, white little "numero," or hotel. Here I paid Samán eleven rubles salary and ten rubles present, besides giving him the felt-covered bottles and the two saddle-skins.

We shook hands, and exchanged the pleasant Turcoman "Saül," which means either "Good-by" or "Thank you," and often has the flavor of both. Then I stood and watched the patient old man trot off on the Beg's black stallion.

This was the last of him, and if ever a man comes over the trail through the Kara Kum Sands, may it be his luck to have as good a servant to go with him as Samán.

THE END



"FAME IS A FOOD THAT DEAD MEN EAT"

BY AUSTIN DOBSON

(TO EDMUND GOSSE)

Fame is a food that dead men eat,—
I have no stomach for such meat.
In little light and narrow room,
They eat it in the silent tomb,
With no kind voice of comrade near
To bid the banquet be of cheer.

But Friendship is a nobler thing,—
Of Friendship it is good to sing.
For truly, when a man shall end,
He lives in memory of his friend,
Who doth his better part recall,
And of his faults make funeral.