

CENTRAL ASIA: THE MEETING-PLACE OF EMPIRES.

CENTRAL ASIA is almost as little known to the external world as Central Africa is, while we want to know much more about it. The features, too, and commingled races of the former region, are in many respects much stranger and more difficult to comprehend than those of the latter. It is easier to form a picture to the mind's eye of the heart of the "Dark Continent," with its wide savannahs and marshes, its dense forests and broad rivers, and its unorganised population, than of the extraordinary commingling of lofty mountain-ranges, vast sandy deserts, and scattered oases of fertility, with a separate State and population in each, which are to be found in the secluded region which lies in the heart of the continent of Asia and Europe.

This central quadrangle of the Old World, which has so long lain beyond the pale of general interest or of civilised empire—a No Man's Land, save in part from the overflow of Chinese power—is now becoming the meeting-place of the three greatest empires of the world—greatest, at least, in population and territory. Within the last ten years Russia has been advancing rapidly into that secluded region; she now fills nearly the whole western half of it, coming in contact with Chinese power in the eastern half; and ere long her legions will have crossed the Oxus and come within sight of the snow-clad summits of the Hindoo Koosh—possibly by that time sentinelled by the red-coats of England. Public attention is turning to this little-known part of the world in anxious expectancy; and we believe it will not be unreasonable if we here sketch broadly the features of the region, and

the important events which are there in progress.

Central Asia—the region extending eastwards from the Caspian sea to the Wall-topped mountain-range which forms the frontier of China Proper—has for ages been going from good to bad, alike physically and in the condition of its people. Looking at the present aspect of the region—a vast expanse of barren deserts interspersed by isolated oases,—it seems well-nigh incredible that *there* was the early home of all the leading nations of the world; of the Semitic and Aryan races—of Celt, Teuton, and Slav, of Persians and Hindoos, of the Hebrews and Assyrians. The story of the primeval migrations from that home in Upper Asia is only told by glimpses in the Book of Genesis, in isolated allusions in ancient Hindoo literature, and also, it appears, in some of the recovered tablets of long-buried Nineveh. In Semitic tradition the region figures as the site of Paradise; while the ancient Hindoos looked back to it as the land of the Sages, and where the Brahmanical tongue was spoken in its greatest purity. In the second, but still very remote and dim stage of history, we see Balkh, the chief town of the region and the capital of an Aryan people, where the flag of the new Zoroastrian religion first waved, before the Persians came down by Herat into the Zagros mountains, and became the neighbours of the Semitic lords of the Mesopotamian valley. Again, a thousand years or more, and Alexander the Great led the Greeks back to the earliest home of their race, and at that time the region north of Persia and Afghanistan

was full of walled towns, and was still peopled by the Aryans. Even the Scyths to the north of the Jaxartes (ruled at times by a queen), who battled with the Persian monarchs, and who overran south-western Asia seven centuries before Christ, were neither Tartars nor Turcomans, but ancestors of some of the populations of modern Europe.

When Upper Asia again became visible to European eye, a great change had occurred in the population. Sixteen centuries had elapsed since the conquests of Alexander (which temporarily established European sway in that region to the banks of the Jaxartes), when the marvellous journey of Marco Polo once more revealed Upper Asia, and first brought into light the grand Mongolian empire of China. In the long interval, the Arabian conquests had extinguished the Fire-temples of Zoroaster, and established Semitic influence; and then, first the Turks and next the Tartars had swept down upon the scene from the north-east. The old Aryan peoples had disappeared,—some of them having migrated into Europe, swelling the barbarian rush which finally broke down the grand empire of Rome; and the rule of the Great Khan of the Tartars extended from the frontiers of Poland to the Sea of China. Despite the desolating invasion of Chengis Khan and the ruined condition of once-royal Balkh, flourishing cities still abounded; and Samarkand, Bokhara, Balkh, and other towns, joined in overland trade with the still more wealthy cities of China, which empire was then at the height of its material prosperity. If we look at the same region now—if we follow the narrative of travellers across the great plains through which the Oxus and Jaxartes flow, reaching from the Caspian to the mountains—

we see a land of desolation, where ruins are far more numerous than the living towns.

It has been truly said that the great destroyer of man's works is not Time, but the ruthless hand of man himself. The wrathful passage of a Hoolagoo or a Chenghis, consigning to destruction every city that offered opposition,—even the ceaseless internal feuds of that region, where deserts and oases are intermingled, so that wealth was ever in contiguity to warlike and covetous barbarism, have undoubtedly done much to destroy this ancient prosperity. But manifestly, physical changes have been disastrously at work. Geology tells the startling truth, undreamt of a lifetime ago, that the greater part of what is now land was water,—that what are now uplands or mountain-tops, once lay at the bottom of the ocean,—and that volcanic action has effected mighty changes upon the earth's surface. We know that the Mediterranean was at one time a true inland sea, severed alike from the Euxine and the Atlantic, before the rupture of the Straits of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus; while, on the other hand, as the line of the natron lakes indicates, the Mediterranean may have been united with the Red Sea, making Africa an island-continent. We now know, also, that the stony wastes of the Sahara are the bottom of an ancient sea, which made a peninsula of northern Africa, the country of the Berbers,—which old sea, together with the other of which we shall speak presently, wellnigh realised the "ocean-stream" of Homer and other early Greek poets. But we are too prone to believe that such physical changes were confined to long ago, and have played no appreciable part within the verge of human history or veritable tradition. We

forget that, before our own eyes, Greenland is rising, and within no great time has become utterly barren in consequence of this upheaval; that the old "Green Land" of the early settlers is now covered with perpetual snow, and the icy glaciers come down to the cliffs on the sea. We forget that Norway, too, is undergoing an upheaval, noticeable for several centuries,—a fact which seems to show that that country was able to maintain a larger population in the days of the sea-kings than at present. Nay, more, the change, gradual though it doubtless was, probably contributed to the ceaseless efflux of Scandinavian rovers, who for several centuries poured not only into Britain and France, but founded Norman settlements in Italy and Sicily, and sent fleets of the dragon-headed galleys into the sunny waters of the Mediterranean.

Physical changes on a great scale have been at work in Central Asia. An old legend in the Brahmanical books tells that the parents of the Hindoos were forced to migrate from Upper Asia by a fiery serpent and snow (of which some writers may find a twin allegory in the flaming sword of the archangel that drove our first parents out of Paradise)—indicating that there was volcanic outburst and diminished temperature, consequent upon upheaval; that the now empty craters of the region then burst into action—either for the first time, or, like Vesuvius in A.D. 79, after an immemorial slumber—with the natural effect of an upheaval of the region. Geology, too, shows that in ancient times the North Sea projected southwards into the very heart of the Old World, extending along the flanks of the Ural chain to the Caucasus and the Persian mountain-range. The subsequent receding of

its waters could only have been owing to a rising, slow or sudden, of the land, such as would be produced by the agencies mentioned in the old legends. The Northern Ocean has ebbed back some two thousand miles, leaving only its deepest pools in the Caspian and Ural Lake. Deprived of this inland ocean, the region would quickly lose temperateness of climate, and also the moisture requisite for fertility. The climate, like that of all inland countries, would become given to extremes,—very cold in winter and intensely hot in summer—as it now is. The grassy or wooded plains of old times would become the waterless steppes of today. The cold, too, would lead to the cutting down of the forests for fuel—now so eagerly sought after—thereby still further desiccating the country by no longer attracting either the dews or the rain, still less preserving by umbrageous shade the moisture when it happened to fall.

An eminent writer on physical science has remarked that the formation of the great deltas of the world—those of the Nile and Mississippi—may be seen perfectly illustrated in miniature if one watches the effects of a heavy shower upon the sides of our macadamised roads, where the sandy *débris* is carried down to the gutters in tiny deltas. In like manner, but upon a much larger scale, the vast changes which have occurred in the water-system of Central Asia may be illustrated by what daily meets the eye of thousands of travellers at home, who look at leisure on the face of our country from a railway-train. As the traveller thus traverses the length or breadth of England, numerous small flats or plains may be seen, many of them level as a bowling-green, varying in length from a

few hundred yards to several miles; and in each and all of them a water-course—it may be a river, or merely a ditch—will be seen to traverse the flat; while at the lower end there is always an eminence—it may be hill or mountain, or merely a hardly-noticeable rising of the ground—through which the water-course finds an outlet. Each of those flats or plains has been the bed of a lake, where the soil brought down by the stream has gradually raised the bottom to its present level; and thereafter the stream has worn or burst a passage for its waters through the obstructing heights. Many of our existing lakes are evidently doomed similarly to disappear. Look at the upper end of each of the Cumberland lakes,—indeed of almost all our lakes,—and there will be seen a green flat which has already been silted up, and then a marshy fringe steadily encroaching upon the waters of the lake. Or look at Glencoe, and see the process wellnigh complete. In that lone valley among the Scottish mountains there is still a small lake, which manifestly used to be very much larger; but the stream which passes through it is gradually silting it up with descending *débris*, and in little more than another generation the lakelet will have disappeared, leaving only the streamlet cutting through a green flat of alluvial soil.

It is this drying-up process, and consequent desiccation of the climate, which has produced the adverse physical changes in Central Asia. That region as here defined—viz., reaching from the Caspian to the mountain-frontier of China Proper—is severed into an eastern and western part by the “Roof of the World,”—the broad and lofty mountain-chain running northward from the Hindoo Koosh, and which forms the watershed of Upper

Asia; from whence the Oxus and Jaxartes flow westward into the Aral Lake, while the far vaster rivers of China go eastward on their long and unexplored courses, and after traversing the Flowery Land, fall by many and shifting mouths into the Pacific. Beyond, or eastward of this lofty dividing mountain-chain—called in its southern part the Bolor-tag or plateau of Pamir, and in its north-eastern range the Tien Shan, or the “Heaven-seeking Mountains”—lie the fertile plains of Kashgar and Yarkand, while Kuldja is enfolded at the north-eastern part of the Tien Shan,—countries where Russia and China now meet as neighbours, and in hardly disguised feud.

For the present let us confine our view to the western half of Central Asia—commonly called “Turkestan” or “Independent Tartary”—lying between the Roof of the World and the frontier of Europe. Here we behold a vast expanse of deserts, interspersed with oases, and with two great rivers flowing in nearly parallel north-westerly courses through the region, until they both fall into the Aral Lake. These two great rivers, the Oxus and Jaxartes (calling them by their classical names, which we believe are more familiar to the public than their modern titles,—viz., the Amu Darya and the Sir Darya), have their sources in the central chain of mountains—the Oxus in the plateau of Pamir, and the Jaxartes in the Tien Shan range. In the first part of their course, as they leave the mountains, the adjoining country is well watered, and has many fertile valleys and little plains, wherein, on the Jaxartes, stand Chimkent, Tashkent, and Khodjent; while on the plains of the Oxus—chiefly to the south, between the river and the Hindoo Koosh—stand Kunduz, Balkh, and other towns—

once the site of flourishing settlements and ancient civilisation. Beyond this upper part of their course the two rivers flow in nearly parallel courses through arid deserts,—the great Kizzil Kum desert, about 250 miles broad, covering the whole land between the two rivers; another equally vast desert, the Kara Kum, extends southwards from the Oxus; while the whole region west of the delta of the Oxus, and between the Aral and Caspian, is likewise desert. But there is a third river of note in the region,—namely, the Zarafshan, which descends from a glacier in the mountains only a little to the south of where the Jaxartes enters the plains. The Zarafshan flows due westward for some 200 miles, meandering in many branches, and forming the oasis of Samarkand and Bokhara,—until its waters are at length swallowed up, just as they make a turn southward at Bokhara, as if to fall into the Oxus. This central river-course is the most extensive fertile part of the whole region—surpassing the plains around Balkh, and equalling the fertility of the oasis of Khiva, where the Oxus scatters wide its waters before it falls by numerous courses into the Aral Lake. The oasis of the Zarafshan constitutes the chief portion of the State of Bokhara (which also extends to the north bank of the Oxus), and the famous old city of Samarkand stands in the upper or eastern part of this fertile river-course.

The readiest way to understand the geography of this western half of Central Asia, lying between the Roof of the World and the European frontier, is to bear in mind that originally the great inland sea (of which the Aral and the Caspian are the relics), extended over the whole region up to the base of the broad and lofty mass of mountains which bound it on the east. Thus

the Oxus, Jaxartes, and Zarafshan fell into the sea as soon as they left the mountain-region; and now that the sea has dried up, these rivers have their present course along the sandy, stony bottom of the old sea,—wandering alone and without tributaries through the desert till the two former reach the Aral Lake. The Zarafshan splits up into many branches as soon as it leaves the mountains, disappearing in the sands after turning a portion of the old sea-bottom into the fertile oasis of Samarkand and Bokhara; but the Oxus and Jaxartes each flows in a single stream—the latter until it falls into the Aral Lake, and the former till within some 200 miles of its mouth, at which point it spreads into many streams, creating the oasis of Khiva.

In ancient times, a narrow zone of fertility extended westwards from Khiva to the Caspian, following the course of the Oxus, which then carried its waters to the Caspian Sea. But some centuries ago the Khivans built a great dam across the river at a part where the country is so flat that the waters may travel either way, so that the Oxus was made to take a bend due northwards for a hundred miles, to the Aral Lake; and its old course westwards into the Caspian, still traceable, is marked by ruins, the remains of an extinguished fertility and deserted population.

The Aral lies parallel with the northern part of the Caspian, and to the south of the Aral lies the oasis of Khiva. The whole country west of the lake and the oasis, and between them and the Caspian, is an almost impassable desert; which also extends in unbroken course far eastward from the lower end of the Caspian, sweeping round by the south of Khiva and up the southern bank of the Oxus almost as far as Balkh—and forming the true geo-

graphical boundary between Central Asia and Persia. In the eastern apex of this desert stands the tiny oasis of Merv,—a place now becoming familiar to English newspaper readers as the goal to which Russia is working her way—a coveted outpost on the Afghan frontier.

Such, then, in its broad physical aspects, is Central Asia. Before treating of the new Powers that are breaking into and operating in that vast region, let us pause for a moment to consider what have been the strange vicissitudes and fortunes of the peoples who in succession have occupied this heart of the Old World. First, as to the eventful effects of one part of the physical changes above referred to, on the colonising of Europe with its present race of nations—a matter hitherto unnoticed either by historians or geographers. Consider the western boundaries of the region, while it was still the motherland both of the Semitic race and of the now diverse sections of the far-spread Aryans. Europe, which geographically is merely a peninsula of Asia, was not only the Dark Continent, but was almost, if not entirely, insulated from Asia. The peoples in the old home were girdled in on the west by a great gulf of the Northern Ocean stretching southwards to the Persian mountains,—with, in the north, the lofty Ural chain rising beyond the sea in the dim land of the setting sun. When the physical cataclysm occurred—by a sudden convulsion, according to the ancient legends, and we may still say “comparatively suddenly”—when the North Sea ebbed back, and the Urals rose out of dry land,—even then Europe was accessible only at a few points. Nevertheless, for the first time the Dark Continent of the west was opened; and rounding the shores of the Sea of Azoff, or crossing in

coracles the Bosphorus, Greek and Roman, Celt, Teuton, and Slav began their migrations from the old home into Europe,—not as races, but rather as families or small migrating bodies, which grew into nations with the lapse of centuries. So slow, scattered, and interrupted was this westward migration, that a portion of the great Gothic family still lingered in the Crimea in the days of Marco Polo. In the time of Alexander the Great, Central Asia, westward of the Roof of the World (perhaps even as far as the Desert of Gobi), was occupied by an Aryan population. The Macedonian conqueror came in contact with no strange races south of the Jaxartes, and the Scythians who lived to the north of that river were, as expressly recorded, of the same race as the European Scyths in the valley of the Danube. Thereafter the population of Central Asia underwent great changes. The Turkish race from the Altai Mountains, in the north-east, began to appear on the scene, with the White Huns as their vanguard. The Mongolian power of China then became a martial and conquering empire, and in the sixth and seventh centuries after Christ extended its arms and sovereignty across Asia almost to the shores of the Caspian; and we have books of travel written by Chinamen who about that time journeyed over the whole breadth of Central Asia, traversing its numerous deserts and surmounting the Roof of the World and the Hindoo Koosh, and finally visiting India, and returning in safety to their own country. Such a journey would make the fame of any man at the present day. But the Turkish race gradually increased in the region, and in the eleventh century the Seljooks overran even south-western Asia. Lastly came the Mongols, crossing to

the Altai mountain-chain from their original home in eastern Siberia, on the plains of the Amoor river,—conquering Russia in the west and China in the east, and establishing a gigantic dominion, extending from the frontiers of Poland to the Pacific, and also southwards to the Levant and the Persian Gulf. So complete was the sovereignty of the “Great Khan,” and so orderly the condition of Central Asia, that the golden tablet given by Kublai at Peking “franked” Marco Polo throughout his whole journey from China to the Levant. Even in the time of the Polos, the old Aryan population of Central Asia existed to a larger extent than at present,—the Tajiks, a remnant of the old Persian race, sparsely scattered throughout the country in the upper Oxus and in some of the trading towns, being now the only remnant of the original population.

Not only in Asia Minor, which of old was peopled by the “Yavans,” or Hellenic tribes, but throughout a still larger region in Central Asia, the Aryan race, who in Europe have become the leaders of the world, have been vanquished in their old homes and expelled by Turks and Tartars belonging to that Mongolian race whom it is now the fashion of Europe to despise. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Europe, the western peninsula of Asia, became settled by its Aryan peoples in much the same way as the “ancient Britons” and the remnants of the earlier prehistoric tribes are now found in Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, and such outlying corners of our continent. Indeed, for several centuries one entire half of Europe, lying eastward of a line drawn from the Baltic through Warsaw and Vienna to the head of the Adriatic Sea, was occupied by the Mongolian Tartars

and Turks; while the other Asiatic race, the Semites, ruled supreme over Spain and the islands of the Mediterranean, besides occupying the whole of northern Africa.

The tide of conquest has now wholly turned. The Aryan races of Europe are making their way back into the old continent of Asia; and while England has occupied India, and fringed southern Asia with her settlements, Russia is rapidly extending her dominion over the northern and central parts of that continent. For many generations past the Czars have claimed dominion over Siberia,—the vast semi-arctic and thinly-peopled region which extends across the north of Asia, from the Frozen Ocean to the Altai Mountains, which chain, with its eastern and western prolongations, separates Siberia from Central Asia. But to the south of that boundary—that is, in Central Asia—the progress of Russia has been quite recent; indeed, almost the whole of it has been made during the last sixteen years.

The Ural Mountains form the boundary of Siberia on the side of Europe; and the great highway from Russia, following the natural configuration of the country, on leaving the Volga at Samara (anciently the seat of the “Golden Horde”), crosses the great plains to Uralsk, and thence eastwards along the Ural river to Orenburg, which is situated at the southern extremity of the Ural chain, and from which town the routes branch northward into Siberia, and southwards into Central Asia. Orenburg was for long the most easterly post of Russia; and, as will be shown by-and-by, it was from this quarter that Russia has made her great military advance in recent years. Orenburg stands on the Ural river, which thence runs due westward for 200 miles to Uralsk,

at which town, turning at right angles, it runs due south for some 300 miles to the head of the Caspian Sea, at Guriëff. Thus the Ural river—from Orenburg to Uralsk, and thence to the Caspian—bounds the north-western corner of Central Asia; and the remainder and larger part of the western frontier of Central Asia is formed by the Caspian Sea, which (some 750 miles in length) extends southwards to the Persian mountains.

On its western or European front Central Asia is covered by a bulwark of almost impassable steppe and desert. Its north-western corner—an almost quadrangular space 300 miles square, extending from the latitude of Uralsk, Orenburg, and Ormsk, in the north, to the head of the Caspian and Aral seas—consists of a waterless steppe, wholly unfit for settled habitation, but which in the spring and early summer, moistened by the melting of the snow, furnishes rich pasturage for the roving Khirgiz tribes. But to the south of this steppe a vast sandy desert spreads eastward from the shores of the Caspian. At its narrowest point—between the Caspian and the Aral seas—this desert averages nearly 200 miles in breadth; while eastward of the Aral, the desert begins again, and extends for some 600 miles up to the lowlands at the foot of the Roof of the World. To the south of the Aral, between the Caspian and the oasis of Khiva, the desert is about 350 miles in breadth; and to the south of Khiva again, the Caspian desert unites with the Kara Kum (lying to the south of the Oxus), extending inland in an unbroken waste of sand beyond Merv, which is distant from the Caspian nearly 500 miles. Thus the oasis of Khiva, although the nearest or most westerly of all the fertile and settled districts of Cen-

tral Asia, is separated from the Caspian by fully 350 miles of pure desert—a physical obstacle which might appal even a daring conqueror.

Thus shrouded, as well as protected, by deserts, Central Asia was for long a *terra incognita* to its European neighbours. The first tidings of Khiva was obtained by the Cossack tribes, who, in one of their plundering forays, captured some Persians, who told them of a very rich and fertile state beyond the deserts. Allured by the prospect of rich booty, the Cossack horsemen on two or three occasions made a long and rapid march across the deserts from the Caspian,—and with some success at the outset; but on each occasion they were overtaken, when recrossing the deserts with their plunder, by the Khivan cavalry, and were cut to pieces.

Peter the Great was the first Russian monarch who cast a covetous eye upon Khiva. Inspired by a far-reaching ambition, and possessed of extraordinary political genius, Peter gave his whole thoughts to freeing Russia from the physical fetters by which, in his day, it was isolated from the rest of the civilised world. He forced it forward to the Baltic at St Petersburg; he conquered a southern outlet for his dominions on the Sea of Azoff and Euxine, with Constantinople as the goal; and in like spirit he resolved to open Asia to his people and his power. A Khivan merchant who came to his court told him all about Khiva—that fertile state beyond the deserts,—how the sands of the region yielded gold,—and of the mighty stream of the Oxus, which now flowed into the Aral Sea, but formerly had traversed the western desert, and carried its broad stream to the Caspian. Strange as it may

seem, the dominating thought that arose in the mind of Peter was, "By this route I shall be able to reach India!" India was then, as long before, fabled for its stores of gold and silver and gems, for splendid fertility and vast accumulated wealth. And to Peter—as to every Russian of the present day—Central Asia was coveted, not for itself, but as a highway to the golden world of India. Peter with his own hand drew up orders for establishing a military post at Krasnovodski, on the eastern shore of the Caspian, at the point nearest to Khiva, and close to the ancient mouth of the river Oxus. He then despatched a military expedition to Khiva under Prince Bekovitch Tcherkassky,—professedly on a pacific mission, but really to conquer that state. The desert was successfully traversed; but, owing to incompetent generalship, the Russian troops were ultimately massacred by the Khivans, who employed the same treachery which had been designed against themselves.*

This was in 1717. Peter then saw that the physical obstacles to an advance upon Khiva in this quarter could not be successfully made until the Turcoman tribes of the desert were brought under Rus-

sian influence, so as to facilitate the long march through that waterless and desolate region. A long pause ensued. Although the Emperor Paul arranged with Napoleon for an expedition to India from the southern shores of the Caspian, no renewal of the advance upon Khiva was made until our own times.

When the Russian Government resumed its activity on its eastern borders, attention was turned to the northern part of the Caspian, with the view of traversing the desert to the shores of the Aral Sea; for if this could be accomplished, it would be thereafter easy to reach Khiva, by marching southward along the shores of the Aral Sea to the mouth of the Oxus, and thence through the delta of that river to Khiva. This part of the desert—namely, lying between the Caspian and the Aral seas, and even somewhat further southward—is known as the Urst-Urt steppe or plateau. It must have been an island in those primeval times when the Caspian and Aral seas were part of the Northern Ocean. It is bordered all round by what in India would be called Ghauts—a scarped cliff (known by the name of "the Tchink"), very steep, and rising to the height of some 400 feet.

* The orders given to Prince Tcherkassky, in the Czar's own handwriting, were as follows:—

- "1. To construct a fort for 1000 men at the former mouth of the Oxus.
- "2. To ascend the old bed of the river in the character of ambassador to the Khan of Khiva, and to ascertain whether the mouths opening into the Aral Lake can be closed, and if so, by what means, and with what amount of labour.
- "3. To examine the ground near the existing dam, and to take measures for erecting a fort there, and for building a town.
- "4, 5, and 6. To incline the Khan of Khiva to fidelity and submission, promising him hereditary possession and a guard for his services."

The seventh clause of the Czar's order directed Prince Bekovitch to ask the Khan for vessels, "and to send a merchant in them to India by the Amu-Daria (Oxus), ordering the same to ascend the river as far as vessels can go, and from thence to proceed to India, remarking the rivers and lakes, and describing the way by land and water, but particularly the water-way to India by lake or river, returning from India the same way; or, should the merchant hear in India of a still better way to the Caspian Sea, to come back by that, and to describe it in writing." The merchant was to be provided with letters to the Khans of Khiva and Bokhara, and to the Mogul. Besides the veritable merchant, a naval officer, Lieutenant Kojur, with five or more " navigators," was to be sent to India in merchant's attire.

Count Borkh and other Russian officers have at various times made expeditions across the plateau; a line of wells has been sunk, but as these are nearly 200 feet in depth, they are difficult to work; and this part of the desert, as well as the more southerly portion between the Caspian and Khiva, has proved insuperable as a line of military advance, except to one of the small columns despatched from the Caspian to co-operate against Khiva in 1873.

This western or Caspian front of Central Asia having been found impenetrable, owing to the broad zone of deserts by which it is covered, the Russian Government and generals have made their great advance from the north (from their Siberian frontier), and mainly from the north-western corner of Central Asia at Orenburg. The prospect which lay before them was not tempting. From Orenburg eastwards, along the northern front of Central Asia, bordering on Siberia, there was nothing but an expanse of sandy wastes and sterile mountain-ranges (to this day mostly unexplored). The advance must proceed south-eastward by the Jaxartes river, along a diagonal line through the region from Orenburg to Tashkent and Khokan—the latter place being in the heart of the great mountains, adjoining the sources of the Jaxartes. And nearly a thousand miles must be traversed from Orenburg before the region of towns and fertility could be reached, lying among the well-watered valleys and little plains at the western base of the central mountain region. From Orenburg, at a distance of 600 miles, the first point to be reached was the north end of the Aral Sea,—the intervening country being an inhospitable steppe only fit for nomadic pastoral life. For miles around this northern end of the

Aral, the soil is impregnated with salt,—as indeed is the case generally around the shores of this gradually-drying-up sea. Since the Oxus was turned into it three centuries ago, the southern end of the Aral has been silted up for fifty or sixty miles, forming the marshy delta of that river; while the Jaxartes has been doing a similar but less extensive work at its north-eastern corner, and also covers the land far and wide with its autumnal inundations, which become sheets of ice during the winter months.

It was here, at the point where the Jaxartes river debouches into the Aral Sea, that the Russians built their military station of Kazalinsk (commonly called Fort Number 1); but, although the whole trade of the country beyond passes this way to Orenburg, there is only a mere village, consisting chiefly of the *kibitkas* or tents of the Turcomans. Arrived at this first halting-place, what was the prospect which lay before the Muscovite invaders? To the south, covering the whole region between the course of the Jaxartes and that of the Oxus, lies the great Kizzil Kum, or Red Desert,—from 300 to 400 miles in breadth, and spreading eastwards from the Aral Sea for some 600 miles, up to the watered district adjoining the foot of the great mountains. From Kazalinsk, as the crow flies, 300 miles of desert have to be crossed before reaching the north bank of the Oxus opposite to Khiva, which lies on the south bank of the Oxus; so that Khiva was still as inaccessible from the north as it was from the Caspian. But the Russians had reached the Jaxartes river, which is navigable by steamers; and although deserts lie both to the north and to the south of that river, along its course the Russian legions could advance, secure of that main desideratum in those regions, a supply of water.